



The Rival

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Description: Rivals-to-lovers gets an academic send-up in this charming and irresistible romantic comedy from Emma Lord, the bestselling author of *Tweet Cute* and *Begin Again*.

At long last, Sadie has vanquished her lifelong academic rival — her irritatingly charming, whip smart next door neighbor, Seb — by getting the coveted, only spot to her dream college. Or at least, so she thinks. When Seb is unexpectedly pulled off the waitlist and admitted, Sadie has to compete with him all over again, this time to get a spot on the school's famous zine. Now not only is she dealing with the mayhem of the lovable, chaotic family she hid her writing talents from, as well as her own self doubt, but she has to come to terms with some less-than-resentful feelings for Seb that are popping up along the way.

But the longer they compete, the more Sadie and Seb notice flaws in the school's system that are much bigger than any competition between them. Somehow the two of them have to band together even as they're trying to crush each other, only to discover they may have met their match in more ways than one.

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“Why do you sound like you’re being chased by a zombie horde?” Christina asks in mild alarm.

“McLaren Hall,” I gasp into my phone. “Where is it?”

“Uh—I’m assuming not where you are?”

I can count the number of times I have been late on one finger. The day I was born—end of list. Ever since I came into the world a week overdue, I have been so reliably on time that I wouldn’t be surprised if clocks started resetting themselves around me.

Turns out I’m making up for it now, because I’m not just late, but late.

Thankfully, Christina’s gorgeously manicured nails are clacking on her keyboard on the other end of the line, where she is no doubt still starfished on her bed in our dorm where I left her ten minutes ago. “So there’s a McLaren Hall and a McLaren Hall II across the street from it. Do you know which one you’re looking for?”

No, because it did not occur to me that somewhere in the universe there exists a college campus architect nefarious or lazy enough to do such a thing. “Shit shit,” I squeak.

“According to my good friend the internet, the zine meeting is in the OG McLaren, which is the one next to the fountain,” Christina informs me.

I do an absurd pivot like I’m auditioning for a musical, finally spotting the fountain

across the street from me. “Angel human,” I wheeze gratefully. “Goddess among mortals.”

“Okay but like. Sadie. Take a beat, okay?”

“I’m out of beats,” I say, looking both ways for cars and booking it across the street. “I’m so late I have negative beats to take.”

“It’s an interest meeting, those always start late. And this is like—your big dream zine, right? You can’t go in there looking frazzled.”

“I’m not—” I glance down at myself and see that not only is one of my sneakers untied but my carefully chosen floral blue first-day-of-college dress has pit stains deeper than most emotions. The first building I was trying to get into was locked at every entrance, but that sure didn’t stop me from sprinting multiple laps around it to make sure. “That frazzled looking,” I concede.

“One beat,” Christina insists.

I take a breath and stare at the wide brick building, a small thrill working its way up my spine—not fear, but anticipation. I earned this opportunity. Every test I pulled all-nighters studying for, every school newspaper deadline I raced the clock to meet, all so I could get into Maple Ride University and have a chance to try my hand at getting a staff position on Newsbag, arguably the most famous college zine in the country.

Maybe I should be scared. It’s taken me years to get this close to the thing I want most, but now I have to prove myself all over again.

“You’re at your dream school. You’re finally away from your family drama. You’re hot as hell and have the best roommate in the world.” I roll my eyes at Christina’s pep talk but bite down a grin. “And you—how did you phrase it? ‘Vanquished your

nemesis at long last.’”

By “nemesis” she means Sebastian Adams, whose favorite and only hobby growing up was one-upping me at every turn. It only got worse in high school when we both clearly took an interest in journalism. I’d get the editor position on the school paper, but he’d become the school’s most beloved writer. Seb would get a coveted recommendation from our recluse of an English teacher, and I would win the year-end student departmental award. The competition was so absurd that we started competing in every other way we could, forcing the school to declare the first-ever tie for salutatorian—our GPAs and mutual accomplishments were such a dead tie that nobody could decide who won.

But I broke the cycle. I got into Maple Ride. Seb didn’t.

I breathe back out, decidedly grounded again. “You’re right,” I say, nodding into the phone. “Thanks. You’re right.”

And she is. At least until five seconds later, when a boy rounds the corner at top speed, lets out a surprised, “Shit, sorry, shit!” before colliding right into me, depositing half his smoothie on my human form.

Naturally, I open my mouth to say “sorry” right back, a reflexive smile already poised on my lips. Avoiding conflict is quite literally in my DNA. Or at least I assume it is, since my sisters seem to have absorbed all the conflict-creating genes, leaving me to play family peacekeeper more often than not.

But then I glance up into the wide, apologetic brown eyes directly in front of mine and realize this is not just any boy. This is the aforementioned archnemesis, looking distinctly unvanquished in the late August sun.

“Sadie!”

A grin cracks across Seb's face—that trademark wide-open-sky one that somehow only got more dazzling in the last few days. There's a dusting of new freckles on his newly tanned skin, and his dark-brown hair is even more tousled than usual, like it's still salty from the beach trip I know he took this past weekend. He looks like he should be recruited for a billboard for an all-inclusive, family-friendly resort.

Unfortunately for Seb, I'm immune to every inch of it.

“What, no hello hug?” he asks, extending his arms out in a gesture made more absurd by the fact that he is also now covered in smoothie.

In lieu of answering him I stare briefly up at the sky as if it's going to explain to me why Seb Adams is two feet in front of me instead of clear across Virginia at Blue Ridge State University. Unsurprisingly, it does not answer. Worse still, when I lower my head, Seb is still standing there.

“I really am sorry,” he says, reaching out as if he's going to help with the disaster zone that is my dress and clearly thinking the better of it. “Shit. I got you good.”

I sigh. At least the smoothie will distract from the pit stains. “What on earth are you doing here?” I demand.

“Enriching my young mind. Widening my cultural horizons. Trying to figure out where I'm going to drink tonight.” He looks me up and down again, slower this time—apology mingled with mischief. “You should wear green more often. It suits you.”

“You should shut your mouth more often. It suits you,” I say, plucking what remains of the smoothie from his hand.

I take an experimental sip. Something with banana. It's not half-bad.

“This is mine now,” I inform him, knocking the remaining inch of green goop back.

Seb’s grin is back in its usual insufferably effortless way, but his eyes linger, widening with surprise. “You got a haircut.”

More like a hair eviction. Two days ago when my parents dropped me off I had strawberry-blond locks that fell to my waist. Now they’re ten inches shorter and curling up so aggressively in the humidity that I’m pretty sure this lob thinks it’s a bob. Not that it really matters—the cut was less about vanity and more of a “lean into a full main-character cliché” of shaking off my old hair and my past right along with it.

But now the past is upsettingly present, in the form of Seb saying “It’s very you.”

I have no idea what the hell that’s supposed to mean, but that doesn’t stop my face from flushing. I use it as motivation to move faster.

“So where are you headed?” Seb asks.

Maybe if I just keep walking he’ll disappear. He’s just a panic mirage, is all. The ghost of academic rivals past.

“Apparently hell, if you’re here.”

“Satan does make a killer smoothie.” Seb gestures at the backpack slung over his shoulder. “I’ve got a sweater in here you can borrow.”

I’m too fixated on Seb following me into the building to consider the offer. “I’ve got a one-way ticket out of my sight you can keep.”

“I hope you can get a decent refund, then,” says Seb, taking a few quick paces ahead

of me to open the door. “I just moved all my stuff into my dorm.”

He’s holding open the door for me, but I’ve suddenly forgotten how to pass through it, like a vampire that needs to be invited in.

“I am begging you to unsay every single one of those words.”

Seb leans in close, his hand braced on the door. He smells the way he always does—a salty honey sweetness. Equal parts nostalgia, irritation, and something loud and warm in me that doesn’t deserve any kind of name.

“No can do,” he tells me, with enough glee that I know he imagined this moment long before now. “I got off the waitlist. You’re looking at a fellow Maple Ride Sweetie,” he says, referring to our school mascot.

I close my eyes. The thing is I am largely a good person. I dutifully babysit Christina’s pet rat Blorbo every summer she goes on her annual family trip, despite clear evidence of him needing an exorcism. I eat all of my mom’s alarmingly crunchy mashed potatoes on Thanksgiving with a smile on my face. I even managed to remain cordial with our next-door neighbor Pat when she said she “wasn’t that big of a fan of Harry Styles.”

All of which is to say, I cannot think of one thing I have done in the eighteen years of my Seb-addled existence to deserve this fate.

Seb’s voice is close to my ear and wry as ever. “Please, Sadie. Try to contain your joy. I’m embarrassed.”

My eyes pop open, right into his smug, tanned face. “When did this even happen?”

His eyes brighten. “Two days ago. Plot twist, right?”

I'm too dumbstruck to move, but Seb makes himself useful for once by settling his hand on the small of my back and nudging me forward. I surge ahead out of his reach, and just like that I'm snapping back into a familiar pattern: I best Seb and he bests me right back. It's second nature, like riding a bike or periodically asking Blorbo to please not curse my family line.

But there was never a moment I entertained this particular scenario in the ongoing saga of "Sadie versus Seb." Maple Ride has historically only ever let in one student from our high school each year. As in, one of us had a shot at Newsbag, and the other was old news.

"Since this is a waking nightmare that's only getting worse by the minute, I assume you're also here for the interest meeting," I say.

Seb is a half pace behind me now, the two of us following a neon-pink sign taped to the wall that says NEWSBAG NEWBS THIS WAY!! with a badly drawn arrow. "Still sharp as ever."

"Aren't you majoring in engineering?" I demand.

Seb's head tilts to meet my eye. "Yes, but surprisingly, I'm still allowed to have hobbies."

"Is your hobby ruining my otherwise perfectly decent life?"

"Aw. I've missed this," says Seb, gesturing at the air between us.

My nostrils flare. "It's been seventy-two hours."

Seb's pace slows, and I can't help stopping, too. It's an annoying magic trick of his, how you can't help naturally wanting to do whatever Seb is doing. He's got the kind

of magnetism that makes parents say things like “If all your friends jumped off a bridge, would you?” It’s my theory as to why his Instagram account Adams’ Apples is so popular—sure, the ridiculous memes and TikToks he rounds up for it are funny, but don’t get half as many likes as when he posts a photo of himself being goofy and hot. Seb turned himself into a damn billboard for wholesome internet nonsense.

Which is to say, I respect that Seb uses this power of his for good, not evil, but right now he is using it to make us perilously late.

“No, I mean this. ” His eyes may be smug but his smile has gone soft at the edges. “The real Sadie.”

I point at my banana-clad self. “This is the angry Sadie.”

His smile quirks back up like it’s on a fishing line, and as usual I can’t help feeling caught in it. “Whatever you say.”

He reaches up unexpectedly then, his hand just under my chin, his thumb warm just under my lip. Despite our lateness I go entirely still, like he’s accidentally pressed a small nerve that’s radiating all over my body.

“You’ve got a little something,” he says, swiping his thumb across what must be a splatter of smoothie still on my chin.

The brown of his eyes flecks the barest of gold where the late-summer light is streaming in through the window. I blink but don’t pull my face away.

“No,” I say. “I’ve got a big something. A five-foot-ten something I can’t seem to shake off. And if you think you’ve got a shot of getting a staff position over me, I will make it a personal mission to shave a few of those inches off.”

Seb pulls his hand off my face, slowly and deliberately. Every now and then we get into each other's space like we're playing a game of chicken. Like we have to prove how little of an effect we have on each other.

I know we don't. My heart is only hammering because I'm stunned to see him. My skin is only tingling because yet again I've let him get under it. But still, these are the only times in our lifelong competition that I'm never sure who wins.

"Or maybe we could both get staff positions, bury the hatchet, and work together in peace and harmony at last."

His eyes are glinting again, the way they always do right before we're about to try and mercilessly decimate each other. The way they did before he won the school spelling bee after I fumbled the word "coccyx" in fifth grade. The way they did before I laid his mock-debate strategy to ruin in AP Lang junior year. The way they did the day we were supposed to get our admission decisions back from Maple Ride, and my email ended up a whole lot longer than his.

I straighten up my spine and smooth out my dress. "That's a cute little self-insert fan fiction you've written for us. Maybe you can submit it for your first piece."

He's laughing softly as he opens the door to the classroom, which is mercifully full of chattering students who don't even look up at our lateness. I do a quick scan, unsurprised not to recognize anybody save for the two people at the front of the room. One is an upperclassman half draped on a desk and looking effortlessly cool in a pair of drawstring sweatpants, a bright-pink crop top, and a row of fruit-shaped earrings popping from the dark skin of her ear. The other pale lanky upperclassman is sitting upright on a stool typing into a laptop, clad in a white T-shirt tucked into a pair of jeans so crisp they look ironed, rocking black combat boots and matte black-painted fingernails. They can only be Amara and Rowan, the coeditors of Newsbag, whose articles I've been diligently reading since they became staff writers when they were

freshmen themselves.

“Oh, shit,” I murmur to myself, because this just got real.

“Hmm?”

I nearly jolt. For two blissful seconds I had forgotten about the Seb of it all. Naturally, he’s already slipping into the chaos of the room with the same ease he’s had pretty much since the day he was born. I would know—I met Seb at the ripe age of three days old, when my mom plopped me into his bassinet. See, the frosting on the “I can’t stand Seb Adams” cake is that our dads were best friends growing up, then married two women who became best best friends, and somehow this culminated in them moving into identical houses next door to each other in our small town and having weddings and kids within days of each other.

As a result I have more early pictures and videos of myself with Seb in the frame than not. Baby Seb and Sadie getting pushed around the block in identical strollers for our dads’ Sunday-morning eighties pop-themed jogs. Toddler Seb and Sadie trying to yank the beard off an unsuspecting mall Santa’s face. Kindergarten Seb and Sadie running around the town’s Fourth of July parade scooping up candy thrown from the floats, the two of us wordlessly swapping his Twix for my Skittles, his Reese’s for my Sour Patch Kids.

Safe to say that none of those versions of us would recognize the two mortal enemies side-eyeing each other in this room today.

“Oh yikes,” says Rowan, taking in the sight of our smoothie carnage. “I’m scared to ask.”

Amara evidently isn’t, her dark eyes widening as she glances between us. “Did we miss a rave at Jamba Juice?”

I'm not expecting it to hit me sideways, the strangeness of seeing the two of them in real life after reading their work for three years. Amara especially, because I've read every single word she's published in Newsbag. She writes the gut-bustingly hilarious "Maple Mishaps" column from the perspective of Sweetie, a made-up student at Maple Ride who keeps accidentally stumbling into the most absurd gossip the school has to offer, like an undergraduate Amelia Bedelia. Amara is the kind of quick, understated, bitingly funny that's headed for sitcom writing rooms or the SNL stage.

Then there's Rowan, who made a name for themselves before they even got to Maple Ride by writing for Newsbag as a high school correspondent, chronicling the absurd lengths students were going to in the overly competitive admissions process. (I wish I could say I didn't buy into it, but the mountain of SAT study guides under my bed say otherwise.) They wrote about the school's policies with a lens so critical that everyone reading was holding their breath to see if they'd get in, and when they did they were offered a coveted staff position at Newsbag on the spot. They've been writing the more hard-hitting topical pieces about the school and larger community ever since, and manage to do a ton of freelancing for major websites on the side to boot. At the rate they're going, it's only a matter of graduating before they're hosting an NPR podcast or launching an edgy site of their own.

Seb shifts his weight between his feet, clearly giving me the space to answer first. I'd appreciate it, except then something utterly ridiculous happens: I freeze. It's like I've imagined being in this room in front of these writers I've idolized for so long that there's no room in my brain to process it in reality.

"Well," I start, certain that if I get that far, the other words will follow.

The other words that follow are, unfortunately, shit. Shit shit shit. Because the thing is, I'm not like Seb, who's so charming he could walk into a bank heist and make friends with everyone in the room. I am only a medium amount of charming, which is doing precisely nothing for me right now.

Then Seb's head tilts beside me, a silent but familiar signal. Not to rescue me, but to decide between our well-established modes of being. There's Parental Mode, which is when we're mildly polite to each other, even downright thoughtful, in front of our families. There's School Mode, where we're absolute parodies of Best Friends Ever, nearly sickening half the student body with how well we get along.

This situation feels like it's outside of both those universes, but in my panic, School Mode prevails.

"Seb and I are from the same high school, so we wanted to match in solidarity," I say, easing into our old rhythm but shooting Seb a wide smile that he knows to interpret as "The instant we're out of here I'm going to figure out a way to launch you into the sun."

Seb beams back at me with "Not if I get you on the first ship to Mars" eyes and says, "I don't pull it off half as well as Sadie does, though."

Amara's brows twitch in amusement as she catches my eye. That's when I realize we may have slipped too close to our third and rarest mode: Lawless Mode, when we're safe to drop the friendship facade and let the claws out.

But if Amara happened to see those claws, we're interrupted by some sympathetic laughter before she can say anything.

Most of the nerves are rattled out of me as we all start to take our seats. At least they are until Rowan slouches against the desk at the front of the room, pauses for effect, and says ominously, "Welcome to what may very well be the last Newsbag meeting in history."

Amara bats them lightly on the back of the head. "Don't scare the baby starfishes."

“They’re in a polluted, underfunded ocean now,” says Rowan. “They were going to learn soon enough.”

Amara seamlessly reaches for the front pocket of Rowan’s jeans to liberate the pack of bright-pink gum poking out. “What my favorite cynic here is trying to say is that the school has been less than generous with funding as of late.”

“Funding we need for the web domain, for printing, for the faculty member who”—Rowan makes a big show of peering around the distinctly faculty-free classroom—“‘oversees’ us and approves our drafts before they go to print.”

Amara pops a piece of gum into her mouth. “Anyway, scratch all that and pretend we started this meeting like normal humans. Hi. I’m Amara. I use she/her pronouns and I’m coeditor of Newsbag with this nerd, who I am incidentally dating, despite their inability to start a single conversation without griping about capitalism.”

Rowan raises their eyebrows at her gamely. “That would make me Rowan, they/them pronouns, fellow coeditor. And to be fair, I occasionally start conversations by talking about cats.”

They both launch into the legacy of Newsbag then, which I tune out only because I know it all and then some. It started back in the seventies as what I can only describe as prehistoric Gossip Girl, essentially rounding up funny and scandalous news on campus and getting everyone’s bell-bottoms in a twist. It evolved over the decades to include other sections and become the larger, somewhat chaotically organized zine it is today, but what really put Newsbag on the map—enough that they’re well known far beyond the reach of campus—was the writing talent. They’ve been selective from the start, only taking on the funniest, edgiest, and most innovative writers the campus has to offer.

In other words: bad news for a very large chunk of the “baby starfishes” in this room.

“We have one spot open this year for a new staff writer,” Rowan tells us. “We’re always willing to consider outside pieces, but those would be on a case-by-case basis—only staff members get guaranteed stories in each edition and get their names printed on the masthead.”

What they’re not saying: only staff members get to put this on their college résumé and use the name recognition of Newsbag to open all kinds of doors after graduation. Doors to internships at quippy websites like Hub Seed and Fizzle, or assistant positions in newsrooms and publishing houses, or chances with podcast producers willing to work with newbies, because that’s how well known Newsbag is in the outside world. This zine may be small and campus-oriented, but its alums are notorious.

And if I play my cards right, I could be one of them. I could get my own start in comedy, and open a door to a world that sometimes feels so impossible for me to fit into that I haven’t told a single person other than Christina about it.

A world that just got a Seb-shaped obstacle planted right in front of it.

“An email will go around with more details, but basically we’ll have three themed assignments for you over the course of the next few weeks,” Rowan explains. “We’ll have a point system for ranking, and the winner of each challenge will get their piece published in the next edition of the zine.”

It’s not just me leaning forward like an animal at a very dry watering hole, but every single freshman in the room.

“That said, all our meetings are open,” Amara adds. “You’ll find that to be the case with all the student-run orgs here. We are all extremely wacky and deeply underfunded and have to stick together to survive. So everyone is welcome, all the time always, even if you’re not on staff. Even if you’re not competing for a spot.”

“Even if you’re just here for vibes,” says Rowan.

They give a brief overview of the challenges then: one that focuses on student organizations on campus, another on student relationships, and a third that Amara describes as “a giant question mark! Go ham! Or the vegetarian alternative of your choice!” and Rowan clarifies as “an original idea of your own, something we haven’t already done in Newsbag. ”

“Sign-up sheets are in the back, but you have until the end of the week to decide if you want to join the fray,” adds Amara. “And on that note, we made you all some ‘sorry we’re about to put you through it’ cookies back there, too. We’ve got the room until the end of the hour, so feel free to hang out. Mingle with the competition. Start a local Hunger Games chapter.”

“Could you maybe wait until after I get into law school to incriminate yourself?” asks Rowan wryly.

Seb lingers, casting his eyes toward me as people start milling out of their seats, but I pointedly ignore him. I’ve had eighteen years of my fill of Seb, and I came here to make new, well, frenemies, for the time being. I stand and do a quick scan of the room to assess the rest of the competition, but that’s a difficult thing to do when an entire person is suddenly cutting right through your line of sight to say loudly, “Wait, shit. You’re that kid from Adams’ Apples, aren’t you?”

Ah, yes. The one scene in the movie of my life that keeps accidentally skipping back like a glitch. I already know the script. An Instagram follower makes a big deal out of seeing Seb out in the wild. Seb is his usual embarrassed self about it, reminding everyone he doesn’t actually make the memes, just curates them after getting permission from the creators, but nobody’s listening by then because Seb has a chronic case of “everyone wants to be my best friend” that has no cure in sight.

Except this time the script changes. Because this time, Rowan and Amara overhear the commotion, and their interest is clearly piqued.

Within the next minute Seb has beaten out Amara's cookies as the most interesting thing in the room. Amara has her phone out looking up the account; Rowan is wondering out loud about Newsbag's failed attempt at an Instagram years back and curious if they should give it another go; and Seb is holding court with a crew of freshmen so fascinated they don't even have the common sense to realize that if we really are in a polluted ocean, he's the friendly dolphin about to eat them all alive.

It hits me then, the full magnitude of it: Seb isn't just here, but here. Another four years of competing neck and neck, exhaustingly matched in everything except for this one contest I always lose: the popularity one. I may have plenty of friends, but you could put Tom Hanks and Seb in a room of strangers and Seb would still win out every time.

And judging from the belly laughs Seb's already gotten from half a dozen strangers, I won't even be in this race long enough to lose.

"Dark-chocolate cherry with sea salt. Damn. They really outdid themselves this time."

I blink. I've migrated toward the cookies and the sign-up sheet, and now there's a cookie in my hand, courtesy of the stranger who just spoke to me. Introduce yourself, says the rational part of my brain. Get the fuck out of here and scream so loudly into a pillow that the cheap stuffing explodes, says the much louder part of it.

The only sound way to neutralize them is to take a giant bite of cookie. It is, in fact, delicious, and snaps me out of my thought spiral long enough to acknowledge the boy who gave it to me with a quick thanks.

“Do you think you’re going to try out?”

If he says something else, I don’t hear it past another kid wandering to the sign-up sheet. “Well, damn. If Seb Adams is in the running, we’re all screwed.”

“Yeah, no shit,” says someone back.

I blink again and I’m back in the spiral—back to countless student-newspaper meetings, where everyone hung on Seb’s every word and resented me for editing their pieces. Back to junior high, when classmates started to not-so-casually ask me to ask Seb if he might want to go out with them sometime. Back to the year we turned four, and my own infant sister would cry for Seb over me.

The boy shifts his weight between his feet, waiting for an answer. I should give one. I’m the master not just of smoothing over awkward situations but avoiding them at all costs. Apparently I hit my limit on that approximately ten seconds ago, because all I manage to do is blurt, “I’ve gotta go.”

And that’s precisely what I do. I take my fancy cookie and bolt for the door.

“Sadie?”

I don’t stop at the sound of Seb’s voice or the unmistakable concern in it. I was wrong to say there were three modes between me and Seb, because there’s a fourth persistent one that’s louder than all of them combined: the one where Seb perpetually wrecks my damn life.

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“About how fast do you think I could get myself expelled?”

Christina glances up from the bed on her side of our dorm, which is—and believe me when I say this is a charitable description—a disaster. To be fair, we only moved in two days ago. To be less fair, when that move-in happened, her parents diligently helped her organize her entire side of the room so there were designated spaces for studying, sleeping, and snacking out of the minifridge they stocked up with Yoo-hoo bottles and her mom’s delicious kaju katli in all its cashew melt-in-your-mouth glory.

Now there is just a designated space for chaos, and Christina in the middle of it, somehow managing to stream Succession on her laptop despite lying on her back with her legs kicked all the way up resting parallel to the wall.

“Depends,” Christina says, closing the laptop and interrupting the scene of a grown man lawlessly chucking water bottles at a tall cowering man. She yanks at her long dark hair in its messy bun to retighten it as she rights herself into a sitting position. “How many fire alarms do you think you can pull in under a minute?”

“Asks the cross-country star.”

“You know I’d help. But let’s table it for now because my entire plan for surviving the season hinges on stealing your snacks.”

Thanks to the number of miles she runs, Christina is, in fact, a human furnace and burns through food about as fast as she eats it. She also burns through whichever neural pathways were supposed to remind her to pack extra snacks, so I’ve been tucking away chip bags and energy bars in her backpacks since she and I met at

summer day camp when we were eight. A task that's more imperative than ever now that she's here on a full-ride cross-country scholarship.

I walk over to Christina's perch to better show off the full extent of the fruit massacre on my dress. She tugs on a lock of my hair, which is, sure enough, crusted with goop.

"Do I even want to know?" she asks.

"No. Saying it out loud will make it real."

I take a few steps to flop back on my own bed, which has the same pastel strawberry duvet cover I've had for years. My side of the dorm is pretty much just a capsule version of my room at home: same photos of my sisters and friends hanging from the fairy lights on the wall, same stack of darkly funny memoirs on the nightstand, same crusty Bluebeary on the bed, who now looks less like a teddy bear and more like something Blorbo the rat ate and regurgitated.

"By 'it' do you mean Seb? I try not to eavesdrop but I was a smidge concerned when our call ended with some colorful swearing. Some of it sure sounded like him."

Christina would know, because by virtue of being my best friend, she's attended enough gatherings and celebrations to know Seb as well as she knows the rest of my family. So also by virtue of being my best friend, she is the only person on Earth who knows that Seb and I are secretly mortal enemies in a ruthless, perpetual competition of our own design—the only person who's ever seen us in our third mode and lived to tell the tale.

I turn my head so my voice is muffled by my pillow. "He got off the waitlist. He's going for the same staff writing position I want. My life is a joke and Seb is the punch line."

“Huh,” says Christina, in a tone more thoughtful than sympathetic.

I tilt my head toward her indignantly. “Huh?”

She shrugs. “Just trying to decide if it’s worth it for me to keep paying for all these streaming services when I’m about to have the world’s most ridiculous ‘will they, won’t they, dear god, just kiss already’ show playing out right in front of my eyes.”

I throw Bluebeary at her. She does not even attempt to catch him.

“Feel sorry for me,” I demand.

“Why should I? You’re already ticking boxes off our bucket list and the semester hasn’t even started yet.”

I peer past the crime scene of Christina’s side of the dorm to the poster she has shamelessly taped to the wall, titled **CHRISTINA AND SADIE MAKE MAPLE RIDE THEIR BITCH!!** in shimmery purple ink. Christina’s side of the list is admittedly larger than mine, including things like **SCORE AN INVITE TO THE ALPHABET PARTY** , **CHECK OUT THE HINDU STUDENT UNION** , **brEAK 5K PR** , and **KISS MULTIPLE HOT (PREFERABLY NERDY! WITH A HEART OF GOLD! AND ACCESS TO A CAR!) BOYS** .

My side may be smaller, but that’s because I only came here with one real goal in mind: Newsbag, end of list.

“I’ve actively unticked a box. Everyone’s already got giant heart eyes for Seb and his stupid Instagram account and I just—panicked,” I admit. “I didn’t even sign up.”

Christina’s eyebrows lift. “But you’re still going to compete for the spot.”

I hesitate. Christina chucks Bluebeary back at me.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” she demands. “After everything you did to get here, you’re gonna wimp out over a meme lord?”

The strange thing is, the “everything” I did to get here has been behind the scenes. In some ways the whole “Sadie secretly wants to work in comedy” thing was inevitable. My parents were always pretty fast and loose with things like bedtimes and media consumption. As a result I was up late watching SNL and checking out Tina Fey’s and Mindy Kaling’s memoirs from the library while scribbling badly drawn comics about my family’s antics before I even hit double digits.

I didn’t think of it in terms of a potential career, because back then it was less a hobby and more of a survival strategy. My family is—well, for lack of a better word, dramatic. My parents love us to pieces but constantly talk and bicker at a volume more appropriate for a full-stadium Taylor Swift concert than, say, my elementary-school dance recitals. My older sister Marley has made it her personal mission to aggravate them by doing pretty much the opposite of anything they ask her to do, and my younger sister Hadley is so sensitive that she starts bawling at the drop of a hat.

I love them. It’s just—a lot. Especially being smack-dab in the middle, where I was always anticipating the next squabble / meltdown / miscellaneous shenanigan, and how to mitigate before people noticed “that family” getting into it again. So I peace-kept in the outside world and made little jokes in my inside world.

That was how the shift started. The more peacekeeping I did, the more I became “responsible Sadie,” “quiet Sadie,” “dependable Sadie” in the real world, and the more I pushed down any desire to do comedy, because that wasn’t what anyone needed from me. Making a little quip about the situation or pointing out the absurdity of it was only ever going to make matters worse.

And, yeah. By fourteen I was self-aware enough to be like, wow, this is going to come up a lot in future therapy if I don't take the reins of my own life and do something about this. So I did—or at least, I tried. When I got to high school I signed up for the school paper, which at the time was run by my older sister Marley's friend Anna. The paper wasn't Newsbag by a long shot, but it did have a few voice-y writers on staff, and it was the closest I could get at that age.

The issue was Anna expected me to be the same old “responsible Sadie.” I turned in the pieces she assigned me on the cafeteria-menu changes and Parents' Night, and she told me bluntly, “I can't run these. You're editorializing way too much. I gave these to you because you'd take them seriously, not goof around.”

Which was why the first semester kicked off with Seb's replacement piece about the cafeteria on the front page of the paper, where instead of making jokes like I did, he interviewed students and staff—less of a humor piece and more a compelling piece of journalism. I didn't manage to even get a piece published for three months, because that was how long it took to beat the urge to “editorialize” out of me. Apparently I did too good a job, because by the time I was a junior, I was the new Anna, in charge of the operation and guiding the staff on their pieces.

Save for one part of the paper that accidentally—blissfully—was entirely mine.

“I didn't take you for a chickenshit, Jerry, ” says Christina, narrowing her dark eyes at me.

I slide off the bed, miserably picking up Bluebeary from his perch on the ground to hug his mangled limbs to my chest. “Jerry's dead.”

Christina sharply shakes her head. “Jerry is alive and well and about to get a sharp kick in the metaphorical pants.”

“Jerry,” to be clear, is a figment of my high school’s imagination. It was an inconsistent anonymous column that popped up in the school paper whenever someone had entertaining grievances to air about our school but didn’t want to go on the record about it.

And boy, did “Jerry” have a good run my senior year. Jerry came up with a list of increasingly more ridiculous Halloween costumes to wear to school to avoid breaking the school’s new strict dress codes. Jerry ranked every hallway in our ancient building from most to least haunted, with absurd backstories explaining each one. Jerry even had a stint as a water-fountain sommelier, detailing the tasting notes of the various questionable ones installed throughout the school.

Jerry was my comedy playground, but by graduation Jerry was more than that. Jerry had become an icon. A collective best friend. One that finally made me proud of my writing and gave me that extra push I needed in the finish line to give my application to Maple Ride everything I had.

The trouble is I can’t exactly put Jerry on a résumé. Nobody aside from Christina, who went to the high school across town, ever knew it was me.

Unlike Seb, who has always been loudly talented and beloved. The Instagram he started junior year almost felt like a cosmic joke when it blew up. Everything Seb touches turns to gold.

“It doesn’t matter.” I pull up the Adams’ Apple account on my phone, flashing the screen at her. It has nearly a hundred thousand followers. “How am I supposed to compete with that?”

Christina barely acknowledges it. “Easy. Seduce him to distract him.”

Bluebeary is too fragile to survive three chuckings in a row, so I spare him, but just

barely. “Wow. Maybe you really do need to stop watching Succession.”

“Oh, come on. You said you wanted your first kiss to be all fireworks perfect, and the two of you already have enough badly repressed chemistry to light campus on fire. Don’t tell me you haven’t thought about it.”

Of course I’ve thought about kissing Seb. We’re up in each other’s literal and figurative space way too often not to have had those kinds of thoughts. But I know better than to think that attraction is anything more than a symptom of biology—for one thing, there’s the constant proximity. I paid enough attention in AP Psych to know about the mere-exposure effect, which is to say, familiarity makes a person more attractive to another person. And for another, the adrenaline of constantly trying to tear each other a new one can easily be confused with the heart-pounding, blood-rushing effects of attraction.

Also yes, Seb is objectively hot. Hence the long line of classmates asking me about his relationship status, like I was a bouncer for his club. Seb didn’t date much in high school—a few weeks with Janie, a fellow writer on the paper with us, and a few months with Roger, a guy from Seb’s calculus study group—but that sure didn’t stop everyone from trying. I’d have to be in alarming levels of denial not to acknowledge the appeal of Seb—equal parts affable and cocky, with the broad, infectious kind of grin that sticks with me long after he’s out of sight.

But the absurdity of Christina’s “plan” aside, she’s right. I’ve never actually kissed anyone. It shouldn’t even be that big a deal, except the circumstances made it one. Every attempt I have ever made at kissing or being kissed has ended in unmitigated, preposterous disaster. If I am going to risk yet again experiencing the mortal humiliation that came with the first three encounters, the last person I’m going to chance it with is Seb. It would be like sending the universe a handwritten invitation to wreck my life.

“If I’ve thought about it, it’s just my brain overcorrecting. Friends close, enemies closer, et cetera,” I say dismissively, ignoring the flush of heat in my cheeks. “And I’m not wimping out. It’s just that this feels like backsliding.”

It settles in a different way, then. Not just the shock of Seb being here, but the permanence of it. I lean back against the edge of my mattress, slumping my shoulders.

“How do you figure?” Christina asks.

“Like, I came here to be someone new.” I touch a hand to my hair, relishing the unexpected drop of space where more of it used to be. The lightness of it bouncing on my shoulders. “Separate from my family and from all the stuff I was expected to do in high school and—separate from Seb. And now I’m finally here, and the first thing I have to do is compete with him all over again?”

I’m starting to feel like Sisyphus. Except instead of lugging a boulder up a hill I’ve been trying to shove Seb off a cliff. And now somehow I’m the one back at the bottom of it, farther down than I thought it could go—not just having to prove myself all over again but unprove him in the process.

“Well, the way I see it, you were always going to have to compete for the spot. That’s what we came here to do, isn’t it?” She points back toward the sign. “Make Maple Ride our bitch.”

I let out a sigh of acknowledgment.

“And you were already someone new. That’s what Jerry was, right?” Christina is uncharacteristically serious, meeting my eyes so intently I can’t look away. “But now you’re Sadie again—no hiding, no smoke and mirrors. And if there’s anything Sadie can do well, it’s kick Seb Adams’s ass.”

I press my palms to my cheeks, burying my face in my hands.

“So own it already,” Christina demands. “You didn’t vanquish Seb by getting into Maple Ride over him, because you didn’t do it as yourself. You did it as good little Sadie who did everything she was supposed to do and hid behind a character. But now’s your real chance to beat him, this time with everything you’ve got. So go out there and finish him off once and for all.”

I pull my hands away to blink at her and the effect of her “I was captain of a high school cross-country team that went to nationals” voice in its full force. It’s undeniably effective. I hate that there’s a flame igniting low in my ribs right now—hate how deeply innate it is, that I already know I have no choice but to follow it. That some part of me knew I would the moment I locked eyes with Seb on campus; that an even deeper part of me knows I would have been lost without that flame to follow in the first place.

“Yeah.” I nod to myself once and then a second time toward her. “You’re right. High school was my Avengers. This is my Endgame. ”

She leans back, satisfied. “Go email them and get your name on the list, then change out of that dress. I want to get to the dining hall before everything vaguely edible is gone.”

She flips Succession back on, leaving me to open my own laptop and start typing. Subject line: “Staff Writer Submission—Sadie Brighton.” Email: “Hi! I’m emailing to put my name in for the staff position. Excited to get cracking!”

Unwritten words: Seb Adams, watch your irritatingly hot, talented back.

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By the end of the first week at Maple Ride my biggest foreseeable problem with college is that I might never leave. Just fully unsubscribe from the real world and live forever in this place where I get to wear sweatpants whenever and wherever I want, and not focus so much on my grades because I actually enjoy the classes I'm taking. This place where I can study in the sunshine by day and stay out late at parties with other kids on our floor by night and get to live in a perpetual sleepover with my best friend.

A best friend who is now at my side on the quad, where I'm scoping out the different groups at the Student Organization Fair to figure out which one might make a good subject for our first submission to Newsbag. It's due in two weeks, so I don't have a moment to waste. Which Christina is clearly not considering when she raises her arm up in the air and yells, "Sebastian 'Middle Name I Don't Know' Adams!"

Despite the sea of curious freshmen and transfers packed into the maze of booths, Seb's head immediately bobs up at the sound of Christina's voice. I haven't seen him since the ill-fated Newsbag meeting, but he's still sunkissed and breezy in his white shirt and jeans, with a new green Maple Ride baseball cap slung over his tousled hair that does nothing to detract from the boyish brightness in his eyes when he spots us.

"She's a runner, she's a track star," says Seb, raising his hand up to high-five Christina. "Never got to say congrats on the scholarship."

Christina high-fives him with gusto, because, incidentally, my long-running rivalry with Seb has done nothing to deter the two of them from enjoying each other's company.

“They had me in conditioning here the whole summer,” says Christina, jutting a long leg out and flexing like a cartoon character. “And hey, congrats on getting off the waitlist.”

Seb beams and then, of all things, leans in and wraps me into a hug.

His grip is warm and soft, and my voice is anything but. “Excuse you,” I say, as if avoiding not a hug but a sneeze.

“Admit it,” he says, close to my ear, “I’m a good hugger.”

Irritatingly, he’s not wrong. It’s rare we’ve ever had a reason to hug, but those moments stick out enough in my mind that I’m already anticipating the way he shifts his arms up slightly, the way he scratches lightly at the base of my neck.

Usually I stay still and unfazed, per our usual game of closeness chicken. Only this time my skin tingles and my own arms lift reflexively, almost hugging him back. Seb leans into it, but I catch myself just in time, stepping out of his grasp.

“Save your strength,” I tell him curtly. “I think the Hugging Club is back that way.”

Seb steps back, too, eyes vaguely amused and trained on my hand, which is now clamped to the back of my neck. “I’ve got another mission to accomplish this afternoon,” he says. “But you already knew that.”

Seb’s smile sharpens, and I can’t help getting caught on the edges of it. This past week is the longest we’ve gone without seeing each other since—well, ever, come to think of it. I could never miss him as a person, but as a fixture it’s only logical. Like missing a pillow or a toothbrush. Just part of a routine.

One I’ve decided to shake up a bit now, because Christina’s right. I’m not good little

conflict-avoidant Sadie anymore. I'm new-haircut out-for-blood Sadie, and I do whatever the hell I want.

And what I want this morning is to throw Seb off so fully that he loses the entire plot on his mission here. If he thinks he can knock me off my game with a friendly hug, I'll do him one better than that.

"Let's join forces, then," I offer.

It's Seb's turn to be surprised, but even as his eyes widen he doesn't miss a beat. "Thought you'd never ask."

"I'll leave you two to it," says Christina. "I heard the Apocalypse Club is handing out stickers with Pedro Pascal's face on them. Priorities and all."

She books it for a booth across the quad, and Seb and I fall into step with the rest of the freshmen and transfers milling around. This is in some ways a "two birds, one stone" situation. I FaceTimed my parents last night—or rather, I watched the screen get yanked all over the house like a rag doll as various members of the family took turns picking me up and setting me down in random places—and they spent no less than half the call over the moon that Seb was at Maple Ride and demanding that the two of us "stick together." My mom even had the audacity to say she "feels so much better" knowing that the two of us are here "looking out for each other."

And I plan to do exactly that. With one eye open, even when I sleep.

"So how was your first week?" I ask.

I keep my tone deliberately neutral so Seb can make the call on whether we're in School Mode or Lawless Mode. He apparently can't decide either, because he shoves his hands in his pockets and says back just as vaguely, "Oh, you know. Math-y."

Apparently I'm steering the ship today. Lawless it is.

"Right. Because of the engineering major you decided to take on, despite what I thought was a lifelong allergy to math."

Seb perks up, leaning in conspiratorially. "You know how it is. Can't stay away from things that don't like me. Speaking of, you never told me what you were majoring in."

"Communications, with a minor in avoiding boys prone to spilling smoothies all over me."

Seb's eyes are gleaming when they meet mine. "Oof. Let's hope they're grading on a curve, then. You're already failing spectacularly."

He looks me up and down, and only then do I realize we're more or less in the same outfit—I've got a white tank top tucked into denim shorts and an almost identical blue version of the baseball cap he's wearing. Embarrassing.

"Free jelly bean?" someone offers, thrusting a bowl of them at us. "If you guess the flavor correctly you win a free key chain."

We turn then to see a brightly decorated booth for the Jelly Bean Appreciation Society, which is just one among many delightfully ridiculous booths I've already passed this morning. There's the Starbucks and Target Club, which apparently meets up on Sundays to do just that for what they've dubbed their "weekly church." There's Random Acts of Chaos Club, which apparently involves taping flyers that just say things like EGGS??? all over campus and putting glittery HAVE A DAY!!!! stickers on strangers' backpacks when they're not looking. There's even a Paranormal Investigation Club, which is handing out flyers in the shape of ghosts and offering free haunting assessments for dorms and apartments.

Seb takes a jelly bean from the bowl. I follow suit and regret it immediately. The only discernible flavor I can think of is “absolute abject misery.”

“What is happening to me,” I say flatly.

It’s sharp and foul and somehow warm at the same time. I can feel some baseline evolutionary instinct demanding I spit it out before the poison spreads to every organ in my body, but I’m too stubborn—I am yet again in a competition with Seb, however petty and small, and I can’t back down now.

Seb chews his own with similar disgust, his tan face blanching, and says, “Nothing good, that’s for sure.”

The collective jelly bean society looks a little too pleased with themselves at our reactions. “Any guesses?” one of them asks.

“Death?” I wonder out loud. Because I feel like this just shaved a good ten to twenty years off my life.

They cackle delightedly. I make a mental note to never ever pass a Jelly Bean Appreciation Society meeting at night.

Seb swallows his theatrically, then asks, “Rotten... plant?”

“Mold! Close enough,” says our new enemy, handing Seb a key chain. It’s a bright purple jelly bean with a deceptively happy smile on its face. “You earned it.”

“At what cost,” I say under my breath, making Seb laugh as he pockets the key chain. “Can’t believe I just rubbed that close against my mortality and I don’t even get a consolation prize.”

“C’mon,” says Seb, hooking his arm through mine. “I saw a Cookie Monster Club farther down. Maybe they’ll get the unholy taste of this out of our mouths.”

I let him lead me only because the jelly bean broke my brain, and also because it’s not an unpleasant feeling, being the person on Seb’s arm. We may want to destroy each other, but I’m not above indulging in the occasional smugness of letting strangers think I have a hot boyfriend.

“But will they be able to give me a tongue transplant?” I ask. “Scratch that club off the list for the first piece. We’d never make it out alive.”

“So you’re competing for the spot after all.”

If I’m not mistaken, Seb sounds strangely relieved. By the time I glance over at him, though, his eyes are glinting in that way they usually are when we’re about to have it out over something.

“Scared?” I ask him.

“Mortally,” Seb says, without missing a beat. “But I wasn’t sure whether I should be, the way you booked it out of the meeting.”

I turn my head, pretending something from the Sad Bitch Book Club caught my eye. “Yeah, well. I had places to be. No time to waste.”

“You’ve got an idea of what you’re writing already?” Seb asks.

I do and I don’t. I know the kind of tone I want to strike, but I don’t know which organization I’m going to focus on—hence this scouting mission. I haven’t written so much as one word.

But Seb doesn't need to know that. "Sure," I say. "You?"

"No clue," he admits candidly.

I slow my pace. "Since when do you want to write for Newsbag anyway?" I ask. It's the closest I can come to asking, Why are you trying to make my life a living hell? without giving him the satisfaction of knowing he is, in fact, doing just that.

Besides, I'm pretty sure I know the answer. Odds are he decided he wanted to write for it around the same time I did, back when one of our high school's alums came and did a whole talk about Newsbag with members of the school paper freshman year. She was fresh off a summer internship with a sketch-comedy group in New York and was so sharply funny and at ease with herself that I remember just staring at her, riveted, like I'd spent my whole life trying to figure out what lock fit the key of me. And then suddenly: click.

This is it, I remember thinking. All these funny little thoughts I had no direction for, all this pent-up energy in me that didn't have an outlet yet. This is what I want to be.

I raised my hand in a trance at the end of it and asked if she had any advice. It was simple. "Read, read, read," she told me. "Every issue of Newsbag. Any funny thing you can get your hands on. And then write as much as you can until you find your own style. And read some more."

So that was exactly what I did. I read myself into a comedy black hole—memoirs, articles, movie scripts, and of course, the zine. If every back issue of Newsbag written in the last four years was lost in a fire, it would still solidly live inside my brain. Not just because I want so badly to write for it, but because I genuinely, earnestly love it. The distinct voices. The ridiculous articles. The chaotic way they blend to make something irreverent and impactful at the same time. It's honest and expressive and real—all the things I wanted to be but couldn't quite manage yet.

Which is to say, I know why I'm here. I just didn't realize it had that much of an impact on Seb, too. And if I'm really planning on bringing him down a second time, I should probably figure out why.

But Seb's answer is uncharacteristically vague. "I love writing."

I tighten my grip on his arm as if to remind him we're not in our first two modes. We're in the one where we're brutally, irritatingly honest with each other, so he might as well tell me the truth. Except Seb doesn't take the hint, his eyes grazing the booths.

"Yeah, but Newsbag is like, a big commitment," I press on. "And isn't engineering one of those majors that eats up your whole life?"

Seb is back now, his expression amused. "Aw. Are you trying to scare me off?"

I straighten my back. "Please. I've got a whole lot more in my arsenal to scare you than that. "

"Don't I know it," says Seb appreciatively.

It occurs to me that he really does. We didn't just compete, but actively tried to sabotage each other. I'd swap out his typed-up debate speech against me with a transcript of a SpongeBob episode. He'd swap out the gym uniform I needed to crush his eight-minute-mile time with a banana costume. It was all done without uttering a single word, but from the smug looks we'd give each other in the half, there was never a doubt in our minds who was behind the pranks. I think the only reason it never escalated enough for our friends to notice was because we were hyperaware of that one spot at Maple Ride, and the stakes were too high to risk doing anything that might get us in trouble.

I wonder how wild it might have gotten if either of us knew we'd both end up here just the same.

“And anyway, I could ask you the same thing,” says Seb. “You barely ever wrote for the paper by the end. Why do you want to do Newsbag?”

It strikes a nerve, but not an unexpected one. It's a fair question. But he's not getting an answer he wouldn't give himself.

“I love writing,” I parrot back at him.

I feel his eyes on me, wry and knowing.

“Well, then,” he says. “Seems like we've both got our work cut out for us.”

What Seb failed to mention about the Cookie Monster Club booth is that it's right next to the one for Newsbag. I slide my arm out of his just before Amara looks up and spots us. She seems to be strategically straddling the two clubs, one foot with the booth full of people eating off plates of random cookies of all shapes, sizes, and frosting ratios, the other with the booth full of Newsbag staff writers.

Thankfully I'm too distracted by my taste buds getting laced by the grim reaper to be appropriately nervous.

“Oh, hey,” says Amara, who—thank every god in every pantheon ever to exist—immediately hands us cookies off the plate closest to her. “These ones are mine. Cinnamon marshmallow sweet potato.”

Before we can so much as say hello, Rowan plops another cookie into each of our hands on top of hers. “Mine are matcha walnut with dried fig.”

They're both watching us so expectantly then that I can't help asking, "Oh, shit. Is this a test?"

"Yes," says Amara gravely. "And if you choose Rowan's over mine, you're both out of the running for the position."

"Oh, what a coincidence," says Rowan, stepping slightly in front of her and crossing their arms. "If you choose Amara's over mine, you're also both out of the running for the position."

Another student pipes up from behind them. "And then we have zero contenders for the role, and Newsbag's future is even more doomed than usual."

It's the boy from the interest meeting, the one who handed me a cookie and probably was attempting to introduce himself before I fled the room like my carriage was about to turn into a pumpkin. He smiles warmly when I meet his eyes. Now that I'm actually looking at him I can tell he's not a freshman like the rest of us in the meeting—he's wearing a worn-out Newsbag shirt, looking entirely at ease leaning against the booth.

"Sadie, right?" he says.

"Yeah," I answer, surprised. I take in his distinctively shaggy brown hair and earnest smile, but I don't recognize him from anywhere outside the meeting. "How do you..."

"Joey. I'm our entertainment writer. And cookie mediator." He points at my open cookie-filled palm. "Eat Rowan's first, then Amara's."

Seb doesn't need telling twice, immediately taking matcha to the face. I do the same as Joey explains, "And I know your name because the two of you just made Newsbag

history. It's the first time we've only had two people going for one role."

It is a testament to how good Rowan is at baking that the cookie doesn't go to ash in my mouth. "You're kidding."

"Nope," Joey says cheerfully. "There were four, but one of the applicants transferred out and I guess you two scared the other one off."

More like Seb did. I take a bite of Amara's cookie next, attempting to process, but no amount of delicious sweet potato is going to make this go down easy.

Seb snaps his fingers ruefully. "It must have been those smoothie stains all over us. Intimidation tactics 101."

I blink, because we're shifting back into School Mode again—cheerful banter, "friendship!!!" on full-volume blast. The smile that locks into place is so practiced and reflexive I could pull it out in a hurricane.

"It's true. We frequently covered ourselves in fruit to incite fear at our old school," I add.

"Also I swear I'm not saying this to butter anyone up, but damn," says Seb, who now has a cookie in both hands and is alternating between the two. "These are delicious."

I nod. "I'm seconding that to butter you both up, but also because it's true."

Amara beams appreciatively as Rowan leans in, brow furrowed.

"Is it going to be weird?" they ask. "Competing for the spot, I mean. I wasn't sure if it might get a little, you know. Personal."

My brain skips a beat, wondering if they might have overheard a few of the choice words Seb and I have exchanged since we got here, but they seem genuinely curious.

“Nah. Seb and I go back so far that it’s old hat, trying for the same stuff,” I recover. “We wouldn’t know what to do with ourselves otherwise.”

Seb nods. “Yeah. It’s lucky, really. You’d think we’d get competitive, but really we just push each other to be better.”

Even I have to admit he might have gone a little too Nick Jr. with the wholesomeness of that sentiment. I raise my eyebrows at him and he raises his back, but before either of us can say anything, Amara tilts her head at us and says, “Huh.”

Seb and I both stop midchew, but Amara just keeps staring like she’s running a diagnostic.

“What?” Joey prompts her.

She doesn’t take her eyes off us. “I’m curious. How long have the two of you wanted to kill each other?”

I blink, but Seb cackles, turning to me.

“I dunno,” he says. “Ten years, give or take?”

Oh, shit. So we’re doing this. In that case, I’m not going to let him catch me off guard.

“Has it really been that long?” I ask mildly. “You’d think I’d have made more progress knocking down your ego by now.”

Seb's eyes meet mine, crackling and electric. It's oddly like breaking the fourth wall of a scripted Seb and Sadie sitcom we've kept going for god knows how long. It feels like a weight has been lifted. Like watching those ten inches of hair plop to the floor.

"Must have gotten sidetracked marveling at how impressive I am," says Seb cheekily.

I wince. "Ah, buddy. You mispronounced 'pitiful.' But no worries, I know how you get with big words."

Seb aims a grin so broad and deliberate at me that it feels for a thundering second like we're alone on the quad. Like we aren't just shifting between modes the way we usually do, but there's a larger under-the-earth kind of shift happening between us now. The impact of it knocks some of the air out of my lungs, and I almost forget which one of us is supposed to speak.

"Well, shit. This is going to be fun," says Rowan, snapping us out of it.

"Fun for us, to be clear," says Amara. "For you two—yikes. Here. Have some more cookies."

She gestures at the rest of the table, which is so overwhelmingly full I wouldn't know where to start. But I don't get a chance to, because before I can move Rowan says, "So I'm following Adams' Apples on Instagram now. Impressive stuff. How long ago did you start it?"

"A few years back. It's all aggregated, though," says Seb, politely refusing to take the compliment the way he always does when it comes to the account.

"Sure, but how do you find it all?" Rowan asks.

Seb scratches the back of his neck. "I'm way too online, is the thing. I'm just a

glorified meme butler.”

This earns him a sharp laugh from Amara. “Meme butler! I have to tell you that one about school lunch pizza killed me. I don’t know how much experience you’ve had with our dining halls yet—”

“Oh, god,” says Seb, already laughing, “I’m terrified. I swear I saw someone drop a slice last week and it bounced back up like it was trying out for the soccer team.”

Amara leans over to Rowan. “See? I told you not to eat that stuff.”

Rowan shrugs. “Just because it’s terrifying doesn’t mean it isn’t delicious.”

Seb says to Amara, “You know what, joke’s us on when they get powers from the toxic runoff in that pizza and we’re still sitting here as the side characters in their superhero arc.”

It’s not just Rowan and Amara laughing now, but most of the Cookie Monster Club and Newsbag booths. I step back, taking this as my cue to leave. I may be able to compete with Seb for the writing role, but I have no interest in competing with his charm. But just as I’m about to turn, Joey lifts up my palm with his to put another cookie in my hand. I glance up at him in surprise.

“I heard a rumor that these oatmeal chocolate chip ones are top-notch,” he says, almost shyly.

My lips tug back upward. “Just a rumor, huh?”

His eyes crinkle happily. “It’s my mom’s recipe, so I can’t really take credit. But hey, let me know if you have any questions about campus or anything. I saw your major on your application. I’m in communications, too.”

“Oh. Yeah, thanks,” I say. “I, uh...”

Am not exactly sure how to ask if that might be a conflict of interest. Joey must see the thought cross my face, because he adds quickly, “Don’t worry, I’m not on the judging panel or anything. I’m only a sophomore. But my email is on the list of Newsbag writers they sent over, so feel free to hit me up whenever.”

My smile is genuine now. I’ve never had trouble making friends, but it’s always felt a little harder to do when Seb is around. But maybe that was just the old Sadie’s way of thinking. Now that I’m fully in this new Sadie Does What She Wants Instead Of Being The Nice, Responsible, Boring One era, it might just be a whole lot easier than I thought.

“I will,” I tell him, and strangely, it’s that exact moment I feel Seb’s eyes on me. “Thanks.”

That seems like the most graceful opportunity for an exit I’m going to get, so I nod and duck out of the booth. I catch Seb’s eyes before I go, planning on raising my eyebrows at him gamely, but he’s busy looking over at Joey. I almost stop, because for once Seb looks uncertain.

Something Amara says catches his attention then, and the twitch in his brow is gone as fast as it came. He’s probably just confused that someone might want to talk to me over him, is all. What a concept.

I stash Joey’s cookie in a napkin and put it in my tote bag before I throw myself back into the fray of the quad, moseying around the rest of the booths and eventually locating Christina. Only later that night, when Christina laments that we didn’t smuggle any dessert out of the dining hall, do I remember the cookie. I tell her if she wants to split it, she can help herself.

Not a minute later, Christina pauses, her hand still in my tote bag. “What on earth is this?”

I feel that same electric crackle from before, only this time it’s less shocking and more grounding. Because, sure enough, when she pulls her hand out of my tote bag, she’s holding one cursed jelly bean key chain that somehow snuck its way inside.

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By Sunday I'm not not panicking about what direction I want to take the first assignment. Between cheering Christina on at her first official race with her favorite MOVE FASTER, BITCH sign, attending a Disney villain-themed party with one of the theater kids on our floor, and the impressive workload from our first week of classes, I haven't had a solid chunk of time to think about my options.

Hence this long solo walk around campus, during which I've decided it's high time for a long-honored moment of WWJD: What Would Jerry Do? The difference being that this time, I'll get to do it as me, myself, and (decidedly procrastinating) I.

By the end of the walk I've decided that instead of just picking one of the student orgs to cover, I'll go full immersion and attend one of their events. The Dorm Food-Off run by the Foodie Club seems promising, both for the sake of compelling journalism and the sake of "I might get free food." I'm about to do my due diligence by finding a bench to jot down potential headlines when I get an incoming FaceTime call from Hadley.

I swipe, and a second later I see the side of my little sister's wild curls, her hair the same strawberry-blond color as mine.

"Hey, squirt. How's it shaking?"

Hadley turns toward the screen and my stomach instantly lurches; her eyes are red-rimmed from crying. This is a daily occurrence but still one for concern, because I never know if it's the nine times out of ten she's crying over something ridiculous, like an actor she has a crush on dating another actor she doesn't like, or if it's the shitty tenth time when someone's legitimately wronged her.

But then those same eyes widen comically, enough that I figure we're in the clear.

"I forgot about your haircut," says Hadley, holding the screen closer to her face as if to get a better look. "Badass."

I run a hand through the top of it, feeling especially vain since one of our hallmates let me use her fancy hair-drying brush this morning. "Thanks. What are the sad eyes about?"

Hadley bites her lower lip. "I just—was wondering when you're coming home?"

Gut, meet punch. "Why? What's wrong?"

She shakes her head. "It's just—Marley got another parking ticket on Dad's car and Dad's losing his marbles over that cat parade and Mom won't stop Phil Dunphy-ing. I feel like if you were here then maybe it wouldn't be so—I don't know." She pouts into the screen. "We could go get ice cream or something."

After eighteen years of existing, I have a loose scoring system of Brighton Family Drama in my head. It scales from the range of "one" being "everyone's finally asleep" to "ten" being "one of these four people I'm related to is about to break the sound barrier and/or get us kicked out of this Taco Bell." I typically don't intervene for anything less than a six anymore, and this feels like a four.

But a four feels entirely different from a hundred miles away. I slide my hand out of my hair, which feels strangely heavy again.

"I know," I tell her. "I wish I could."

She seizes onto the words so hopefully that it isn't just a gut punch but a full-body squeeze. "Maybe next weekend?"

I know it's well within my rights to set a boundary here. That I'm eighteen and entitled to space from my family, especially in the first literal two weeks of school. But there's no real precedent for this in my family either. Not just for their resident peacekeeper moving away, but anyone moving away. Before Marley bailed on school to start a photography business with her friend, she was taking classes at the local college she had a scholarship for, so she's never even left home. It only heightens the guilt I have not just for leaving, but the absurd relief of it.

"I have something due," I say, which isn't a lie. I have multiple things due. Anyway, time for another classic Brighton Family Conflict Avoidant Strategy, which is a quick pivot. "Are you excited for freshman year?"

Hadley's eyes well up like I said the precise words to conjure them.

"Oh, Hads."

She shakes her head, sniffing. "It's just I got my schedule and I have no classes with any of my friends."

It's practically autopilot, the way I iron my voice out, keeping the words low and soothing. I have a different tone for counterbalancing every member of my family, and thankfully Hadley's is a quiet one. "You hardly get to talk to people in classes anyway. Get people to switch lockers with your buddies so you can hang out with them in between."

"And all my teachers have either had Marley or you, so they're going to think I'm, like, a party animal or a total Goody Two-shoes—"

"Hey—"

"—and I don't even know what I am. Or what to wear. Or how long it's going to be

until someone takes me out for ice cream. So you should come home.”

I take a deep breath, trying to steady my resolve. As if summoned to crack it, I hear my mom yelling in the background, “ Move, I think it’s gained sentience, ” which can only mean that by “Phil Dunphy-ing,” Hadley meant she’s been messing with the knockoff Roomba again. Not a beat later there’s a muffled thunk noise and the sound of Marley snapping, “Are you kidding ? How the hell am I supposed to talk the judge out of this ticket tomorrow with my best jeans covered in cat dander?” Right on cue my dad calls from another room, “It’s not Meowtwo’s fault you keep refusing to learn how to parallel park.”

Hadley just stares at the screen, nostrils flaring but her face otherwise deadpan, her eyes reflecting an unspoken See?

There’s another thunk and the sound of my parents cackling, but Marley’s voice easily drowns them out. “This isn’t funny, you absolute monsters—Dad, if you eat my last pancake I swear I will graffiti ‘adopt me’ all over Meowtwo’s parade float—”

“You’re having pancakes?” I blurt.

Hadley’s brow furrows. “Well, yeah. It’s Sunday.”

My throat is suddenly thick. “Yeah. Of course.” I clear the thickness out and ask, “So Seb’s parents are there?”

“If they’ve survived Doomba’s attack,” she says, eyes cast on the door to her bedroom. The one that, only two weeks ago, I used to share with her. “They got here an hour ago.”

It’s a ridiculous thing to catch me off guard. Our families have been doing Pancake Sunday since before any of us were born, and they must have done it last week when

I was gone, too. But there's something about being on the sidelines of it—something about seeing my empty bed in the background of my screen, surrounded by my bare wall—that makes me suddenly ache for their chaos in a way I didn't think was possible. I miss their noise, I miss their complete lack of regard for personal space. I miss the way our parents poured rainbow sprinkles all over Seb's and my pancakes, because they did it the weekend we both turned three and we were so excited they never stopped.

“Want me to pass you around?” Hadley asks.

I consider it for a moment, but I know how it'll go. If I get passed to one family member I'll get passed to them all and have to go through variations of this over and over. The excitement and the anxiety of the undone assignment already has me feeling like I'm in a pressure cooker—I can't be the calm, placating Sadie they need right now.

For a brief moment I consider telling my parents about the zine, like it might relieve some of that pressure, for them to know. But I unconsider it just as fast. They don't know about Jerry or the comics I wrote or the wry running monologues I've had in my head. I have no doubt they'd support me, but no amount of explaining I could do between now and that assignment deadline would make them understand. It could only shake me. Make me feel like more of a fraud than I already do. Seb's curious words echo in my ear: You barely ever wrote for the paper by the end. Why do you want to do Newsbag ?

I shake my head.

“Nah, I'd better get a move on,” I tell Hadley apologetically. “I'll call back later tonight. But hey, I bet you could convince Marley to take you thrifting before school starts. And you're not supposed to know what you are yet. Nobody does. That's the whole point of high school. You're gonna be fine.”

Hadley twists her lips to the side, unconvinced, but nods. “Tell Seb I said hi?” she asks. “Maybe he can come back for a visit, too.”

Oof. Hadley may be the entire reason Seb and I even have our second mode for our families in the first place. She glommed onto Seb the moment my mom propped his four-year-old elbow under a pillow and let him hold her for the first time. I’d take it personally, but it’s hard when he has a knack for wresting a smile out of her even in her most melodramatic “Sadley” moments.

All of which is to say, it would break her heart if she had any idea that Seb and I have been in an all-out academic brawl for most of the time she’s spent on this earth.

“I’ll tell him,” I say, because odds are I’ll run into him sooner than later. “Talk soon, Hads.”

I blow her a kiss, and she blows one back, and I sink into the bench after we hang up, uneasy and unable to fully articulate why.

“Oh, hey, future Newsbag writer.”

Joey plants himself on the bench, yanking off his headphones and keeping a healthy distance because he’s covered in sweat. I must have missed him jogging past.

“Hey,” I say reflexively, and then when I process his words I shake my head. “And we’ll see about that.”

Joey smiles widely. “Eh, I’ve got a good feeling.”

That makes one of us, but I’m not about to go fishing for compliments from someone who’s never even seen my writing.

“Thanks again for that cookie,” I tell him. “I meant to take you up on campus recs, but turns out the first week of college is nuts.”

Joey hikes one of his legs up on the bench with the restless energy of a kid just let out for recess. “No expiration date on that offer.”

“In that case, do you know a good place to get pancakes around here?”

I’m not even sure what possesses me to ask. What am I going to do, sit alone in an IHOP marinating in my weird feelings?

But then Joey narrows his eyes like he’s sizing me up. “Depends. How thick is your skin?”

I raise my eyebrows at him. “If you met my family you wouldn’t be asking me that.”

Joey laughs, then leans in conspiratorially. “Well, in that case, you know the alley off Main Street? The one behind the bookstore?”

I tilt my head. “Are these like, black-market pancakes?”

“No, no, it’s cool.” He seems to ponder his own words for a moment, then adds, “But also, uh, if Betty asks who sent you, I had nothing to do with it.”

Somewhere in the last five seconds this became less about the pancakes and more about the breakfast crime ring I may have just accidentally uncovered. “Who is Betty?”

Joey just shakes his head at me. “It’s best to experience Betty with an open mind. Anyway, follow the alley, and there’s a little place at the end of it with a blue awning that may or may not be open, depending on Betty’s mood.”

I search Joey's face. Once I'm satisfied there is zero carb-related murderous intent in it, I say, "All right. I trust you. But also if nobody hears from me again, I guess you'll be the only one who knows what happened."

Joey pulls himself off the bench. "I'm not worried," he says, looking pleased with himself. "I'm counting on hearing from you again."

Joey's smile gets all close-lipped and shy like it did back at the fair, but he salutes me and takes off before I can read too much into it. A few minutes later I'm off campus and walking on the stretch of the town's main street just beyond it, where there is a cluster of cafés and local businesses and bars. Today it's crowded not just with students but families pushing strollers and window-shopping side by side, the noises of campus now cut with the sounds of babies and scurrying feet and parents calling in every direction.

The ache is back then, so pronounced that by the time I reach the little alley off Main Street I am in perilous danger of opening up Christina's infamous "Feeling Sorry for Myself" Spotify playlist. I force myself to shake it off when I find the blue awning. Or rather, my confusion swallows it. There's a window with lacy curtains and a door that's propped open slightly, but I can't see much of the inside. Only with a fair amount of squinting do I manage to decipher a tiny white sign propped in the corner of the window, which says PANCAKE IT OR LEAVE IT in dainty blue script so small it almost seems like an accident.

Well. Joey's alive to tell the tale of whatever this is, and no offense to him, but he doesn't look like he'd make it past the first ten minutes of any blockbuster horror movie. If he can handle it, so can I.

I slide through the open door, relieved that it does appear to be some kind of establishment. The space is small and cozy with a certain retro flair, with a few clusters of empty wooden tables and chairs with little pink-and-blue tufted seat

cushions tied to them. By the front door there's a small grill behind a partition, where a tall, large, and decidedly imposing woman in her forties is standing, her scowl entirely at odds with the bright-pink floral apron that says BETTY in the same neat script as the sign outside.

When she doesn't so much as look up, I take a curious step forward. The buttery warm smell of cooked pancakes wafts so miraculously in my direction that I have to shut my mouth before I start drooling.

"Hi?" I manage.

Her answer is immediate, her voice low and gruff. "'Hi' isn't on the menu, kid. Say what you want or scram."

My eyes scan the space until I find a piece of paper taped to the side of the grill. It just says PANCAKES .

"I'll, uh—have the pancakes?"

Within seconds she has slung four generously sized fresh buttered pancakes onto a plate with one hand while deftly drizzling maple syrup on them with the other. She pushes the plate on the counter in my direction without a word.

I should probably ask how to pay or where I should sit, but instead I blurt out, at my own peril, "Do you have any sprinkles?"

This is what finally makes Betty deign to look at me, only so she can aim the full force of her scowl in my direction. She even sets her spatula down as if she needs full use of her body to absorb my audacity. I should probably be scared—now that she's lifted her head I can see that her baseball cap literally says MEAN OLD BITCH in embroidered cursive—but the pancakes smell so good I've forgotten all my survival

instincts.

“The hell is wrong with this year’s new lot?” she demands. “That punk in the back asked the same thing.”

I turn even though there’s no doubt in my mind who a sprinkles-requesting punk might be on this particular day, on this particular campus. Sure enough, there’s Seb, watching me from a back table with a cheeky grin.

“Delicious habits die hard, huh?” he says, using his foot to pull out the chair opposite him.

My cheeks warm at the sight of him. It’s strange to think I was prepared to go weeks without seeing Seb, now that I know how strange it feels not seeing him for a few days at a time.

“I don’t fraternize with the enemy,” I say just the same.

“We’re so fraternized we’re practically Gorilla Glued.” He tilts his head at the seat. “C’mon. It’s tradition.”

I set my pancakes in the empty spot across from him. Once we’re both settled in, we wordlessly lift our forks, me to put one of my pancakes on his plate, him to spoon more syrup onto mine. It’s just for practicality’s sake. It’s been too many years for us not to have each other’s syrup-to-pancake ratios memorized.

“Surprised to see you alone,” I say, tilting my plate to swish the syrup around. “Where are all your fans? You ran out of insufferable charm this early in the semester?”

Seb shrugs, not taking the bait. “I thought I’d do some wandering. Get the lay of the

land and all. I stumbled on this place yesterday and wasn't sure if they'd be open, or I'd have given you a heads-up."

It's rare to see Seb anywhere without a cluster of friends, but this also tracks. He's got this habit of disappearing down rabbit holes and popping back up at random. Our families vacation together every summer, and by now we're all used to Seb seamlessly inserting himself back into the pack to report on a hole-in-the-wall secondhand bookstore he thinks Marley will like or a hot-dog stand with wacky condiment options we should all go to for lunch.

"No worries. Joey told me."

I'm mostly saying it to intimidate Seb—he's not the only one who can chummy up to the other writers at Newsbag —except Seb smirks into the fork aimed at his mouth. "Oh, did he?"

I spear my own pancake with gusto, not even bothering to cut it up before I lean in to bite a piece off. "Is that a trick question?"

Seb shakes his head, watching me go full caveman with amusement. I have no shame, and nor should anyone eating these. They're melt-in-your mouth delicious, sweet at the tip of your tongue and warm and buttery at the edges, like my mouth just entered a new dimension of pancake existence beyond our mortal realm.

"Holy shit," I say, my mouth still full. It's unfortunate for all my future hopes and dreams that achieving them probably won't stand out in my mind half as vividly as that first bite of pancake just did.

"Damn straight," Betty agrees from the front.

Seb waits until I've finished making a scene, then says, "What I mean is Joey clearly

has a little crush.”

I frown. “What would make you think that?”

Seb really does laugh then. “Sadie, for one of the most observant people I’ve ever met, you’re deeply oblivious sometimes.”

My cheeks burn not because of Seb’s words but the way he delivers them. There’s a strange weight in his tone, in the way his eyes linger on mine before he directs his attention back to his plate.

I settle back into my chair and consider this, but my brain has other ideas. That’s the problem with never having been kissed, is it does this unhelpful thing where sometimes in my waking state it just—cuts to commercial. Like it’s advertising different future versions of my life. And in these highly specific commercials, I envision what it might be like to kiss the person I’m thinking about.

So naturally in this particular commercial break, I try to envision kissing Joey. The set isn’t particularly creative. The neuron directing the scenario takes us back to the bench where I was not twenty minutes ago. Instead of getting up, he smiles that bashful close-lipped smile and leans in. He closes his eyes and I close mine. He still smells of salty fresh sweat, his energy eager and kind. There’s a quick flutter under my ribs. A good sign.

But then the commercial abruptly shifts in tone. No cheerful “this prescription will fix one annoying thing and destroy all your other organs” music lightly playing in the background, but heightened perfect silence. He reaches up and cups the back of my neck, his fingers weaving into the thick waves of my new hair, and pulls me in so fiercely that for a moment, both in the commercial and the waking world, I forget to breathe.

But then there's a playful little scratch on the back of my neck, and I realize it's not Joey I'm imagining. It's Seb.

I shake my head abruptly. "No," I blurt.

Then actual Seb is in front of me again, blinking back at me with the same warm brown eyes that a split second ago were inches from my imaginary face. "Nah. I call them like I see them. Joey's got it bad."

I believe him only because by now Seb has enough experience with people crushing on him to get it endorsed as a skill on LinkedIn. "Huh."

We both busy ourselves with our pancakes then, the conversation hitting a rare dead end. With anyone else I'd feel responsible for filling the silence, but it's never been that way with Seb. Third mode means there's no ordinary decorum required, which is why I know he's actually curious and not just being polite when he speaks up a few minutes later.

"So have you decided the topic of your first piece?"

"Sure have," I say cheerfully. "You?"

"Same. I was thinking—"

"Whoa, whoa, slow down there, buddy."

Seb raises his eyebrows at me. I raise mine back.

"It's bad enough that we have to take each other down all over again." I point my fork at him. "Don't go willingly giving me ammo to sabotage you. That's not how this works."

Seb rolls his eyes. “We both know you’re not going to sabotage me.”

“Says who?” I ask. I nudge his shin under the table with my sneaker. “Maybe I’ve just spent the last few years lulling you into a false sense of security.”

He nudges right back, only his foot lingers against mine. “Or maybe my ‘insufferable charm’ is finally starting to rub off on you, and you’re starting to hate me a little less.”

My answer is immediate, almost reflexive. “I don’t hate you.”

The words weren’t meant to be particularly profound, but Seb goes very still at them. For a moment Pancake It or Leave It feels even emptier than empty.

“You don’t?” he asks.

There’s something in the way he’s watching me that makes my face warm enough for Betty to use it as a backup grill. “Do you hate me?”

I’m half joking when I ask it, but suddenly his answer matters to me, too. Thankfully it comes just as fast.

“No,” he says. “Of course not.”

I shift in my seat. “Well, okay.”

And then for the first time I can remember there’s a silence between us that neither of us knows what to do with. Not hating each other doesn’t change our current predicament, which is the same one we’ve had for years: the other one existing.

“Well, then—since we’ve established a mutual unhatred—maybe this time around we

don't worry about taking each other down?" He's biting down a wry, self-conscious smile, like he's already prepared for my full-thesis statement on why there's no way in hell I'll agree to that. "We just... do our best and have fun with it?"

"Have fun," I repeat, my voice deadpan.

Seb's sneakered foot is still resting on mine. He taps it lightly. "Like we did back in the day?"

I open my mouth to protest, because none of this was ever fun. Or at least, the stress of it almost always outweighed the thrill of our little triumphs over each other.

But when I meet Seb's eyes again they're missing their usual spark of mischief. There's something soft in them, almost sad. Something that makes me understand that "back in the day" goes further back than most of them—back to a time when we weren't just pretending to be friends in front of our classmates but actually, genuinely were. When we pranked each other not for spite but for sport.

We were pint-sized in those days. I shouldn't be able to remember it so well, but our whole worlds revolved around those little pranks. Our parents were in on it, too, happy to take us to the dollar store every other weekend to stock us up on a whoopee cushion for me to slide under Seb's living-room couch or a cheap funnel for Seb to replace my toothpaste with cake frosting. I'm not sure how it even started—one of the countless little understandings with Seb I don't know how to explain, because they were built into me the same way breathing was—but I sure know how it ended.

It was the end-of-the-year talent show in our third-grade class, and what would be our first and last friendly competition. Seb decided to learn a series of "Is this your card?" types of tricks to play on our classmates. He wanted to win like nobody's business, practicing to the point of obsession, but I felt especially smug because he refused to show anybody aside from me the secrets behind them.

But I was also especially nervous, because after sneak-watching so many live comedy shows while my parents were distracted with the new baby, I'd decided I was going to stage a sketch of my own. I wrote my very first "script" by hand with little jokes I'd come up with in my head. I got my teacher to help me use the hot-glue gun to make sock-puppet characters with googly eyes and felt. I rehearsed it in my room every night for a week. I didn't care about winning the way Seb did, because even at eight years old, the sketch was rubbing up against something too personal for me to worry about prizes. I was just worried about what people would think.

The stakes already felt perilously high for my little-kid brain, but I was calm when I crouched behind the barrier I'd made out of two chairs, my script at my feet. That is, until I lifted my tiny puppeted hands, moved my thumb, and heard a sharp squaaaaawwk.

I frowned. Tried moving the puppet again. Another awful, ridiculous squawk!!! came out of it, and then an identical one out of the puppet in my other hand. Later I would discover Seb had rigged them with his dog's squeaker toys—which he counted on me being able to feel in the puppets and pull them out right away—but it didn't matter. Everyone was already laughing, the volume only kicking up every time one of the puppets sounded off. I wasn't going to be able to tell my jokes. I already was the joke.

I didn't just cry. I had a full-on snot-rocketing, tail-spinning meltdown. When I didn't calm down after a half hour the teacher didn't know what to do except call home. I'll never forget the way both my parents busted into the front office in complete abject panic, my mom still wearing her "I'm in the coding zone" blue-light glasses and my dad with baby Hadley strapped to his chest. They were so worked up and loud with their concern that half the staff was on their feet before my parents even reached me. It was the first time I remember feeling that itch of discomfort, the awareness of everyone's eyes on us. Of understanding that my parents weren't quite like other people's parents—they were twice as much and twice as unaware of it.

Later they'd make fun of themselves for the commotion. "Sadie was always such a quiet little thing!" my mom would laugh when she recounted the story over dinner with the cousins or the Saturday afternoons we hosted her D&D group. "We figured if the school was getting in touch with us that the sky had fallen down."

"Only time she ever gave us trouble. Unlike those two," my dad would joke, pointing at my sisters. "We've never had to waste money on a gym membership. They keep us on our toes."

It was a dynamic that wouldn't fully cement itself until we were older, but the day of Squawkgate I understood enough to lay the foundation for it: acting out scared my parents. Acting any kind of way other than quiet good little Sadie knocked the whole Brighton family out of orbit. So from that day I was careful to be what my sisters weren't, to be what my parents expected me to be. No more theatrics. No more commotion.

And absolutely no more games with Seb. Not if he cared about winning more than he cared about me.

The rest of the details are hazy in that little-kid way, where I don't know how much of it is actual memory and how much of it is the story I started to tell myself about it. I know this much: I ignored him when I came back to class. I stopped helping him with his math homework, and he stopped helping me in gym. Eventually we were both so stubbornly not talking to each other that competing for the same things almost felt like a cheat code: neither of us was conceding, really, because competing meant we had to talk. We had to be on the fringes of each other's lives.

Somewhere along the way, we adapted. The three modes were created. There was chaos but not without relative order. At least until high school, when the friction was so pronounced that it got personal. Suddenly we didn't just want to best each other for the sake of making a point but because there were actual goals on the line. Club

positions. Grading curves. Maple Ride.

And now Newsbag.

“Hadley misses you,” I say.

Seb looks momentarily disarmed. So am I, really. I think because what I almost said was I miss you. What I almost said was that I’ve missed him for a long time. But that’s ridiculous. He’s sitting right in front of me. He never went anywhere.

He ducks his head, and when he looks back up his smile is soft at the edges. “Yeah. I miss her, too.” And then, after a quick beat, “And a lot of things.”

We both glance down at our pancakes. The ache I felt earlier wasn’t just mine. It feels strangely like it led me here—not to this place, but to someone who felt the same kind of lost I do. The weird limbo of not quite knowing where you’re headed but knowing it’s too early to look back.

“All right,” I agree. “New era uploading. One of mutual unhatred. One where we attempt... fun.”

Seb’s shoulders lift noticeably, blinking the cloudiness out of his eyes. “Perfect. I can finally hit ‘order’ on the matching ‘Seb and Sadie have decided to tolerate each other’ shirts I designed.”

“A trial run for our matching pancake tattoos.”

Seb grins widely. “Don’t tempt me. Betty’s pancakes deserve a whole sleeve.”

“Leave five bucks each on the table,” she says in response, without looking up from the back.

We both lean into the table, muffling our laughter. Our eyes meet and there's that same crackle from the fair—the same one that's been quietly humming in me ever since, the volume pitched.

“So later can we run our piece ideas past each other?” Seb asks. “It'd probably help us both. We're taking them in very different directions anyway.”

He's not wrong. Seb's style is far more fact-based and people-oriented than mine. He loves to dig into little stories in broader topics, loves to throw himself into research and interviews and even the occasional peer-reviewed study for context. A blend of analytical and personal.

My writing, on the other hand, can be loosely compared to an unleashed chaos gremlin. No two pieces ever have quite the same format, because most of the time I've spent writing was on a whim between classes or late at night when the Brighton family scale was down to a “one.” It's how I've written for so long that I don't know any other way.

He must be referring to my editing abilities, then. I can be detail-oriented when the situation calls for it—they didn't put me in charge of the paper for nothing.

“Fair warning that you have no idea what you're getting yourself into,” I tell him. “Hell, you don't even know if I can write.”

Seb just leans back in his seat looking somehow, impossibly, even more smug than usual. “Sure I do,” he says. “Jerry.”

“What?” I blurt, barely managing not to choke on the last bite of pancake stuffed in my mouth.

“Sadie. C'mon.”

If anything Seb almost seems disappointed I had to ask. I swallow hard, wondering how long he's known. If he found my notes lying around our house on a Pancake Sunday, or I left something up on the school desktop.

But then he leans in and says, "You write just like you talk."

My throat is thick then, because we both know that's not true. Jerry was blunt. Jerry was funny and honest and didn't care what people thought. Jerry said all the things I didn't say to anyone else.

Well, anyone aside from Christina and Seb.

"And even if I didn't figure that out from the first damn column, I overheard a drunk Scar yelling, 'Move it or lose it, Jerry!' at a drunk Hades flagging down the bus outside a certain party over the weekend," Seb adds, a teasing glint in his eyes.

Ah. That would be me and Christina in our makeshift Disney villain finery.

We both pull cash out of our wallets to pay for the pancakes, my face still warm, my body strangely light. A tension and a relief at the same time. The friction of being seen and the comfort of knowing I was recognized not just by anyone but by the person I—however begrudgingly—have always respected most.

But there's one part of this I need to make explicitly, uncompromisingly understood.

"Hey," I say on our way out the door. "To be clear, just because we're playing fair doesn't mean we're playing nice. I'm going for this with everything I've got."

Seb leans in so close that I can't see his slight smirk or the bright mischief in his eyes, but instead hear them in his voice, the soft heat of his breath tickling my ear. "I wouldn't expect anything less."

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On the bingo card of “things I thought I’d get up to in college on a Wednesday night,” lugging a semistolen communal microwave from my dorm to a random lecture hall was not on the list. But when I arrived half an hour early for the Dorm Food-Off—journalistic responsibility and all that—the Foodie Club was in the midst of planning a heist to get enough microwaves for the competitors from the teachers’ lounge. Seeing as my dorm is next door and I can get inside without committing a low-grade crime, I volunteered to grab ours.

“I wash my hands of this,” says Christina, watching me try and fail to find a logical way to hold it. “When you get murdered tonight by someone who had to eat a raw Hot Pocket because of you, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“There’s another microwave downstairs,” I protest.

“Good. Because the Raw Hot Pocket Murder was, in fact, going to be perpetrated by me.”

“That would have made for a fun Wikipedia page,” I lament. “And also at least I would have gotten to hang out with you for however long it took you to watch the light die in my eyes. I haven’t seen you all week.”

Between Christina’s regular practices, conditioning, and the races she has to travel for, I knew she wasn’t going to be a fixture in the dorms. But this might actually be the longest conversation we’ve had since our tipsy villain arcs over the weekend.

Christina sighs. “Yeah, tell me about it. Also you should know, someone finished all the granola bars under your bed.”

“They didn’t quite,” I say cheekily. “There are more in the inside pocket of your duffel.”

She leans in and grabs my head ungently to plant a kiss on my temple. “Beautiful angel human,” she says.

I am decidedly less of one a minute later, when I am making a full spectacle of myself lurching across campus with an armful of microwave. I’m unsurprised when someone swoops in to grab the other side of it to help me, and already opening my mouth to profusely thank them when I realize the person is, in fact, Seb.

“I’m good,” I tell him.

The microwave decides it isn’t, though, because when I pull back from Seb it starts to slide off my hip. Seb raises his eyebrows at me, hands still poised under it.

“You look good,” he says.

There’s a delirious split second when I think he’s complimenting my looks and not responding to my lie. It trips me up just enough that I don’t have a comeback. At least, not one I can conjure before the microwave lurches again, and Seb deftly reaches in at the last second to catch it.

“Where, may I ask, is your new friend here headed?” he asks, amused.

I begrudgingly shift to let him take more of the weight. “The Dorm Food-Off. I figured it would make a good jumping-off point for my piece.”

“Ah,” says Seb, pressing his lips into a wry smile.

I nearly drop the microwave in exasperation, because I know that face. We can only

be headed in the same direction, with the intention of covering the precise same event.

“Really?” I demand. “You realize this is like, a fun thing. Not fodder for one of your hard-hitting investigative pieces on the leaky ceiling in the art room or the rising cost of student parking.”

Seb shrugs. “Couldn’t help myself. We’re all so desperate for non-dining hall food that we’d eat off the sidewalk. I swear tonight’s ‘French fries’ crunched like apples.”

I shudder. “At least you didn’t try the spinach-lasagna situation. It made me miss that moldy jelly bean.”

“You know, if you’re still feeling squeamish, maybe you’re the one who should sit this one out,” says Seb in mock sympathy.

I nudge more of the weight of the microwave toward him. “You’re the one who’s going to be squeamish when I crush you in the first challenge,” I say. And then add brightly, per our agreement, “You know. In a friendly way.”

Seb lets out a biting laugh. “Yeah. I’m feeling the love.”

When we arrive at the lecture hall we set the microwave down on the long table full of other questionably obtained appliances. The space is packed with clusters of students now, each of them made distinct with different colors of construction paper taped somewhere on their person declaring the student organization they’re representing, their name, and their pronouns. Someone from the Rainbow Maple Ride Alliance in an oversized computer-science hoodie waves at Seb in recognition, and he waves back. Someone from the Jelly Bean Appreciation Society waves at me, and I step behind Seb like a human shield.

“It’s like the lunch tables from Mean Girls, except nobody’s crying,” I say.

“Well, the night is young,” says Seb. “And the Knitting Club does look pretty menacing over there.”

I rib him with my elbow. “If you’re scared, it’s not too late for you to hightail it out of here, copycat.”

Seb’s eyes gleam. “And miss seeing Jerry in her element? Where would be the fun in that?”

I’m not sure what I was expecting from a Dorm Food-Off, but it certainly wasn’t this—a turnout not just from the Foodie Club but at least a dozen others on campus. Amara and Rowan weren’t exaggerating when they said the student-run organizations stuck together. Even the previously subdued Sad Bitch Book Club looks ready to fuck up a microwave in their matching aprons.

The student from the Rainbow Maple Ride Alliance who waved at Seb walks over, with the name ANGIE on her team sign.

“You should have told us you were coming!” she scolds him, swatting at his shoulder. “The team limit is five, but we could have split into two.”

The RMRA must have already had their first meeting then—Seb was a pretty active member in our high school’s version of it, too. When he came out as bisexual in freshman year he was one of the few boys in our school who was out at all, but he never took any leadership roles in the club, instead helping organize events and do outreach with other schools. His parents were so eager to help that they still have an entire shelf in the basement with disposable rainbow cups and plates for parties that we’ll all probably be eating off when we celebrate retirement.

Seb waves Angie off, then says in a put-on academic voice, “We’re just here to observe.”

“Well, that’s a shame. We could’ve used you.”

We both startle at the sudden appearance of Amara, who is also taped up with blue construction paper on her shirt declaring a Newsbag team. Just a few feet beyond her are Rowan and Joey, who appear to be in a deep philosophical conversation until I hear the words “We did that last year—we can’t just keep putting Oreos in it every time” and Rowan’s heated reply of “ Watch me.”

“We’re not technically part of Newsbag, though,” says Seb.

Amara waves us off. “It’s like we said in the interest meeting—everyone’s welcome.” She jerks her thumb back at Rowan and Joey. “So do you care to join forces?”

I take a breath for a “thanks, but no thanks,” because I know myself too well. I’ve been neck and neck with Seb for so long that I have this inconvenient, if not effective, reflex: drop me into any kind of time-based competition, and I will go from reasonable human to soul-eating machine in ten seconds flat. If I’m going to write about something tonight, I can’t afford the distraction.

Then Rowan steps between us, brow furrowed as they hand Amara their phone. Amara peers at the screen, scowls, and says, “Those absolute chucklefucks.”

“What’s wrong?” Joey asks, and then lights up in surprise at the sight of me and Seb. “Oh, hey!”

“They messed with our funding again.” Rowan looks to me and Seb to explain. “We have to pay the printers for the physical copies of the zine using a card the school assigned us, and the guy who does our printing says it’s been declined.”

Amara's nostrils flare. "The zine's funding is a drop in the bucket compared to the school's bajillion-dollar sports budget, but that's just it. They don't care about anything that isn't making money for them. They probably forgot our paperwork again."

Rowan glances at the time on their phone. "The office is open another half hour. We can make it over if we book it."

"Way ahead of you," says Amara, whose tote bag is already secured across her shoulder. "If we run fast enough maybe they'll mistake us for jocks and actually give us our damn funding."

Rowan plants a hand on my shoulder and the other on Seb's. "All right, then. We're tapping you kids in. Make Newsbag proud."

They give us both a squeeze before they let us go, then follow Amara out the door, leaving me, Seb, and a newly abandoned Joey in their wake.

"Um," says Joey, taking a step as if to chase after them. Seb takes a step forward like he might, too, and I realize that if there is a Seb-friendly story topic here, it might have just walked out the door. If I play my cards right, maybe I can convince Seb to write about the funding issue and reclaim the Dorm Food-Off for myself.

My scheming hopes are dashed by someone on a loudspeaker calling the room to order. Both Joey and Seb turn to attention as the president of the Foodie Club welcomes us all, reminding us that this event is semisponsored by Pickle Princess, a pickle stand that's open in the farmers market downtown on Saturdays, and that the prize is a giant jar of sour pickles and a crown.

"A refresher on how this works. In a few minutes, as a group we will walk—calmly! in an orderly fashion!—to the 7-Eleven on Main Street," the Foodie Club president

explains. “You will then have approximately two minutes to gather your ingredients and get in line. Your ingredients cannot exceed ten dollars. After that we will meet back here, where you are allowed to use one microwave-safe dish to bring your creation to life in five minutes or less.”

Unfortunately, somewhere in the last thirty seconds I got emotionally invested against my will, and if I don’t walk out with a jar of pickles in my hand and a crown on one of these boys’ heads I will simply not be able to live with myself. I turn to Seb only to see the same irrational fire starting to spark in his eyes.

“This year’s panel of judges include members of past winning teams—please give a warm welcome to Jenny of the Ultimate Frisbee Club and Aman from the Starbucks and Target Club. We’ll head for 7-Eleven now—if you have any questions, Foodie Club members are in orange. Some of them might also be easily bribed with aged cheeses, but you didn’t hear that from me. Onward and out!”

We all start filing out of the lecture hall when Joey hands me a sheet of paper. “They were handing these out earlier,” he says. “It’s the scoring system.”

I feel the warmth of Seb’s cheek hovering close to mine before I hear his voice in my ear, reading it out loud. “So we’re getting scored on originality, taste, and... drunkability.”

I squint down at the asterisk on that last one, because underneath is a italicized clarification: *Drunkability*: a loose term to encapsulate the ease with which a drunk person, or drunk-adjacent person (i.e., neurons compromised by studying, crying about studying, or watching TikToks about unlikely animal friendships) might be able to create the dish, and whether it would be enjoyable to said drunk or drunk-adjacent individual.

“Okay, the bad news is that Amara accidentally walked out the door with a bag full of

our microwave-safe dishware options,” says Joey. “But the good news is we’re passing my dorm on the way to Main Street, so I’ll run up and grab a mug. We just have to decide really, really fast what we’re putting in it.”

“Something sweet,” I say. “Like a mug cookie or a mug cake.”

Seb is shaking his head before I even finish my sentence. “We have to go savory on this one. Trust me.”

I feel a not-unfamiliar twinge of irritation, but keep my expression even. “Trust you?” I laugh. “Seb, your mom’s a chef. Your idea of dorm food probably has truffle aioli on the side.”

Seb’s cheeks pinken. “And I once saw you light a microwave on fire trying to make nachos, if we’re keeping score,” he says. “And speaking of scores—mug cakes are about as boring as it gets.”

I feel the heat rising in my own cheeks. “Well, I know for a fact Jenny was lingering by the Cookie Monster Club table the day of the fair, so we’d have at least one judge in our corner.”

“How can you be that sure it was the same person?” Seb asks, shaking his head. “You were talking to Joey the whole time.”

Joey clears his throat behind us, and we both startle. The embarrassment is so immediate that I drop any attempt at politeness.

“You were probably just too busy talking about yourself to notice,” I snap right back.

Joey stops on the sidewalk then, pointing hesitantly toward his dorm before he splits off. Shit. My face isn’t just burning now but searing.

“Um—are you two good?” Joey asks.

Cue the School Mode smile, or at the very least a fun house–mirror version of it.

“Fine,” we both say, way too brightly, through our teeth.

Because we may have miscalculated this whole mutual-unhated thing. Rome wasn’t built in a day, and apparently the magical friendship bridge between Seb and Sadie can’t be either. Joey gives us an awkward wave before dashing off, leaving us to walk toward 7-Eleven as the only group that might have just made negative progress on coming up with a plan.

“Sorry,” we both mutter at the same time.

“No, I’m sorry,” I insist, just as Seb says over me, “No, I’m the one who’s sorry.”

We have no choice but to laugh at each other then, so sharp and full-body that we’ve shaken off the tension in the next few steps.

“Well, shit,” I say candidly. “Turns out we might be worse at working with each other than against.”

Seb shakes his head. “I think we’re just both—maybe—a smidge competitive.”

“Smidge and a half,” I agree.

Seb’s voice is lighter when he talks again, his expression open—less like he’s telling me what we should do and more like he’s asking. “Well, here’s what I’m thinking. Aman is a TA in one of my classes and basically lives off Cheez-Its, so that might be a savory vote in our corner. But I might be leaning toward savory only because we have pretty limited ‘drunkability’ experience, and I’ve just gone for nachos every

time.”

I pat Seb on the back consolingly. “That’s only because you’ve never had one of Christina’s fluffernutter Oreo stacks at two in the morning. But we can fix that later.”

Seb’s eyebrows quirk in interest. “Maybe there’s some way we can do... both?”

“Savory and sweet, you mean?” I clarify. “I don’t know. Sounds perilous. Has anyone ever attempted such a feat?”

“We’ll be pioneers,” he jokes. “The first two humans to ever combine salt and sugar.”

I consider our options. “We need a good base, then. Something hearty. A reliable canvas.”

We pass the alley that leads to Betty’s then, and the moment is kismet. We turn to each other, eyes so bright and intent that we already know we’re about to say the same thing when we blurt, “Mug pancake.”

“Yes,” I say. “Something that’s sweet, but we can add some oomph to.”

“A cheesy mug pancake!” Seb exclaims.

I grab him by the arm to keep him out of the middle of the Dorm Food-Off pack. “Yes. Yes. But keep it down, genius,” I tell him.

Seb leans into me with a broad grin, using my momentum to grab me by the shoulders and lean in close. His eyes are a warmer brown cast in the evening light, his skin near glowing. My breath catches in my throat, and without my permission, my brain starts another one of its ridiculous commercials. One where Seb uses the crackling energy I can feel between us, where his firm hands meet my shoulders,

where his thumb is digging slightly and almost possessively into my collarbone, and pulls me in to kiss him.

“Too bad neither of us likes pickles,” he says, “because we’re about to be swimming in them.”

I laugh and we break apart, but the commercial doesn’t quite go to black. I’m still humming all over—the skin his fingers touched, the lips he didn’t kiss.

Jesus. If I get this revved up at the idea of a boy shoving a mug of cheese into a microwave then I needed to get my first kiss over with yesterday.

Thankfully the carnage of the timed two-minute 7-Eleven run snaps me right out of it. It’s slow-motion war movie “directed by Steven Spielberg” levels of orchestrated chaos. The Sad Bitch Book Club dives for the individually wrapped Reese’s like they’re tickets to the last spaceships off a meteor-stricken Earth. The Trivia Club nearly knocks out half of the admittedly frail Bird Watching Society reaching for mini tortillas. Someone from the Knitting Club flashes me a look in the dairy aisle that legitimately makes me fear for my life.

We make it through the store relatively unscathed, Seb picking up a small bag of instant pancake mix, me grabbing a bag of shredded cheese. We’re still under budget. There’s a small shaker of rainbow sprinkles in the baking aisle. I pick it up, tilting an eyebrow at Seb.

His face bursts into a grin entirely incongruous with someone in the next aisle shouting, “Your children’s children will feel the Kickball Club’s wrath!” He nods and we get in line with seconds to spare before the timer buzzes, wedged between the Cookie Monster Club and the Paranormal Investigation Club.

“We’re in agreement not to speak a word of this to Betty on Sunday?” says Seb. “She

hates us enough already without knowing we're making a mockery of her art form."

I nudge my shoulder into Seb's. "Who says I'll be at Betty's on Sunday?"

Seb hums, then instead of answering reaches for the hand I've got gripped around my wallet. For a ridiculous moment I think he's going to hold my hand, but instead his fingers skim the jelly-bean key chain I attached to the edge of my wallet with my keys.

"I use it to ward off evil spirits," I explain.

"Ah," says Seb, for some reason looking entirely too pleased with himself. "Is it working?"

I press a finger to his chest. "Not well enough, if you're still here."

He takes a step toward me, and then it isn't my finger pressed to his chest but my open palm. He is warm and solid under my touch, and the feeling of his heart against my hand is so disarming that I don't move.

Seb raises his eyebrows, his words low and deliberate. "You think you'd be used to that by now."

I draw my hand back, swallowing hard. A moment later Joey comes running up the sidewalk with his Spider-Man mug, which reads WITH GREAT COFFEE COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY . I duck my head to hide my inexplicably warm cheeks while Seb and Joey launch into a heated discussion over which of the three movie Spider-Men is hotter, which thankfully comes to the peaceful conclusion of "all of them, in their own separate ways" by the time we reach the lecture hall and are assigned our microwave.

Mere moments later, the Foodie Club president announces that the five-minute timer is about to begin with a loud “On your marks... get set... go !”

The room instantly erupts in a clamor of mixing spoons and clanging bowls and commotion. Seb rips open the pancake mix as Joey measures out the water and I peer at the instructions to try and guesstimate a cook time.

“Let’s try a minute,” I decide.

Seb nods as he starts mixing, and we both duck our heads in mutual concentration so intense that we look less like we’re bastardizing breakfast food and more like we’re trying to defuse a bomb.

Joey, on the other hand, is cheerfully immune to the pandemonium. “I meant to ask—did you swing past Betty’s?”

“Oh, I did!” The shredded cheese bag is not cooperating, so I rip it open with my teeth. Joey blinks in mild alarm. “Best food I’ve had since I got here. I should hit you up for more recs.”

“Well, if you’re a sweets person you have to try the strawberry-lemonade pie at the farmers market. Maybe we could go this weekend?”

“Yeah, sure,” I say quickly, both because what kind of monster says no to pie, and also because the faster I answer the more I can focus my attention on the task at hand.

Which is proving necessary, because Seb is frozen with his finger above the number keypad of the microwave.

I snap in his face. “Seb! Start button! Go!”

He startles. “Right,” he says, tapping the microwave on. We watch our little Spider-Man spin through the door until the pancake looks semicooked, pull it out and top it with cheese, and stick it back in for another twenty seconds.

When we pull our fluffy, cheesed-up glob of pancake out, Seb hands me the sprinkles shaker.

“All you,” he says. Despite the pressure of the situation, his hand lingers for a moment when my fingers graze his to take it. I look up to meet his eyes, but he’s already focused on whatever the Trivia Club is yelling about a few feet away.

“Huh,” says Joey, as I tip the shaker into our concoction. “I can’t decide whether to be alarmed or impressed.”

The buzzer goes off and everyone steps away from their microwaves then, leaving us to watch the official scorings as the judges go down the line. The Sad Bitch Book Club has come in hot with a remixed s’mores that swaps giant potato chips for graham crackers and Reese’s for chocolate. The Ultimate Frisbee Club flew too close to the sun and attempted a Rice Krispies treat knockoff that looks like it might have been actively on fire at one point. The Bird Watching Society filled tortillas with Nutella and bananas—a decent choice, but too safe.

It’s all well and good until we’ve reached the Knitting Club, who somehow got their act together to create a spicy mac and cheese with a crushed Cinnamon Toast Crunch crust on it.

“Oh,” I say, watching Jenny take a whiff and then put a hand to her chest like she’s going to swoon. “We’re fucked.”

Seb’s already got his best graceful-in-defeat expression plastered on his face. “It was an honor to operate this stolen microwave by your sides.”

Joey tilts his head at us. “It’s okay, guys. We can just get some pickles on Saturday.”

Seb lets out a laugh before he can stop himself, one with an un-Seb-like edge to it. Joey blinks in surprise, leaving me to explain.

“Oh. Oh, Joey,” I say, patting him on the shoulder. “We don’t care about pickles. We just care about the rush of unrepentantly crushing the competition and the sweet, sweet taste of victory.”

Choice words, because we do get to taste victory in the end—we take second, and our prize is that we get first dibs on claiming leftovers. I score some of the mac and cheese for Christina—turns out I’m too petty to eat any of it myself—and we all three disperse to the different clusters of students, trying the Rainbow Maple Ride Alliance’s delicious mix of buttered popcorn, Nerds, and Sour Patch Kids, the Trivia Club’s mini cheeseburger pizzas, the Bird Watching Society’s tortillas. By the end of the hour all the groups are mixed together, lawlessly sampling each other’s creations and trying to make new ones with the leftover ingredients.

“You trust me?”

I’m going to make some kind of crack like I usually do, but when I turn to see Seb behind me, eyes bright and conspiratorial, the laugh catches in my throat. For a moment, looking at the mischief streaked across his face feels like looking in a mirror—something I’ve seen so often that it’s almost as if it’s every bit as much my feeling as it is his.

“Sure,” I say.

Seb’s eyes gleam, his hand lifting a spoon. “Close your eyes,” he says.

I do, trying and failing not to laugh, my head bobbing with the effort. He sets a hand

on my elbow as if to keep me in place. It works. I go entirely still, smiling into the spoon at the taste of warm chocolatey pudding—the cheap boxed kind that’s somehow better than any other version, nostalgic and overly sweet.

A little more overly than I was bargaining for, because when I bite down and there’s a splash of citrus in my mouth, I realize it is, in fact, chocolate pudding full of jelly beans.

Seb is already cracking up by the time my eyes fly open, and I shove at him, indignant and trying not to laugh with my mouth full of pudding.

“You’re a monster,” I accuse. I glance back at the Jelly Bean Appreciation Society. “No— they’re the monsters.”

“But you kind of like it though, don’t you?” says Seb.

I lick the flavor still stuck to my teeth and genuinely can’t decide. “I need to collect more data,” I say, reaching for the paper cup of pudding in his hand.

He deftly moves his arm behind his back. “Admit it’s delicious.”

I catch him by the elbow and tug, but he’s so immovable that I end up stumbling forward instead, my shoulder grazing his chest. “Admit you’re a monster.”

He tugs his elbow back, pulling me closer to him so that his face is mere inches from mine. A flutter rises up in my chest, giddy and ridiculous.

“Admit you’re going to lose this Newsbag competition,” he says right back.

What I lack in strength I have in speed. I drop his elbow and prime my body to dart behind him. “Admit you’re scared I’ll obliterate you,” I say.

“Scared? Nah,” he says. “Even when you do it’s always a good show.”

The words catch me just off guard enough that my sneaker snags on the floor and I end up nearly landing on top of him. Seb catches me by the arm just in time to stop us from falling, but not before we end up pressed against each other, chest to chest. I think of his heartbeat earlier, steady against my hand. Now my own is too loud to know if it’s his I’m feeling, or mine.

I step back, all too aware of Seb’s mirthful eyes on me.

“Well. I’d be careful if I were you,” I tell him, clearing my throat. “Never know when jelly beans might find their way into your next unsuspecting meal.”

Seb holds his hands up in a peaceful gesture. “I only thought maybe this would write over the mold memory,” he says. “So you can stop associating jelly beans with evil.”

I shake my head. “It’s a nice thought. But that one bean will haunt my mouth until I die.”

“Maybe the strawberry-lemonade pie will finally wash out the taste on Saturday?”

We both startle at the sight of Joey, who I thought was helping with an ill-fated attempt at a “cheeseburger in a cup” on the other side of the room. He’s collected his Spider-Man mug and is looking at us with an almost apprehensive smile, like he’s the odd one out even though we’re the freshmen.

I feel a pinch of guilt. “Here’s hoping,” I say.

“It’s like a mile walk to get there,” says Joey. “Want to meet on the quad at ten?”

“Yeah, ten works for me. How about you?” I ask Seb.

Seb blinks at me and then bites down a smile. “Uh, you know. I think I’m busy.”

Joey’s expression dims a bit, and my pinch of guilt becomes a twist. Somehow the Dorm Food-Off became a spin-off episode of the Seb and Sadie show, and I don’t want Joey to feel left out. Maybe I can get Christina to come.

The Dorm Food-Off ends for the night, with Seb getting the contact information of some of the organizations for a potential piece and me doing a lap to get one last potato chip Reese’s s’more for the road, which incidentally came with a link to a list of “Books That Will Make You Blubber.” Seb is laughing to himself and shaking his head when we lug the microwave back to the dorm.

“What’s so funny?” I demand.

“Nothing,” he says, amused.

I narrow my eyes but don’t take the bait. Now that we’ve stepped out of the lecture hall I’m realizing that I did a lot of things tonight, but none of them were deciding on an angle for my piece.

We walk the rest of the way to my dorm in relative quiet. Seb must be in the same—well, for lack of a better word, pickle. At least nobody tries to commit a beloved nineties snack-themed murder when we return with the microwave.

I let out a sigh after we plug it back in. “Well, back to eating like we’re prisoners on a distant planet that never quite mastered Earth food.”

“Curious to see the dining hall’s interpretation of French toast sticks tomorrow,” says Seb. “And by curious I mean terrified.”

I walk him out to the hall, where already a few curious hallmates are lingering in

doorways and the windows of the common room to get a good look at Seb. T minus twenty seconds before I have to start fielding questions about his relationship status again: “single, but probably not for long.”

“The sad part is most of this is way cheaper than the slop they’re serving in the dining halls,” I say in the meantime.

“Yeah.” Seb tilts his head down the hall. “And way subtler than you and Christina using your sweatshirt pockets to smuggle out midnight snacks.”

This time I feel the crackle before we both stop on a dime, before our eyes snap on each other’s. At the precise same moment, with the precise same resolve, we blurt the words, “I have an idea.”

For a charged, breathless moment, neither of us says anything. Like it isn’t just the crackle stunning us into place, but something larger and deeper brimming just under it, something we briefly lit up in the flash of our ideas. Something that makes my pulse race and my skin flush in a way that thrills me just as much as it scares me, until I push it back down.

“What’s yours?” I demand.

Seb blinks as if coming back to himself, then lets out a cocky laugh. “You tell me yours.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “I asked first.”

If Seb wants anyone on our floor to think he’s single, he certainly isn’t doing himself any favors right now. Not with the way he’s leaning toward me, so close that I feel my body drawn to the heat of his like a magnet. Not with the slow way the smirk is curling on his lips, aimed at me so deliberately that not one person would dare get in

its cross fire.

“How about this?” says Seb, his voice low. “We both finish our pieces, and then show them to each other at the same time.”

I tilt my head, angling my face up to better meet his gaze. Whatever is happening right now doesn't feel like our usual game of chicken. Now the challenge isn't how close we can get before one of us pulls away. The challenge is seeing just how close we can get before one of us crosses the distance.

So I lean in close, and closer still. Seb's eyes widen, flickering to my mouth. Only at the last moment do I turn my head to the side of his, my lips close to his ear.

“Seems fair,” I say, feeling a flutter of satisfaction in my chest when Seb lets out a slight but clear shiver of surprise. “Let me know when you've got something halfway decent to share.”

This time it's Seb who opens his mouth but can't think of a proper comeback in time. I pull back, casting him one last smirk before I head down the hall to my room. Maybe the rules are changing, but one thing will always stay the same: I will not lose.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:20 am

Marley wasn't exactly the most involved older sister. The advice I got from her was limited to a few random moments, like when I was set on wearing black satin gloves with a navy-blue dress to prom ("over my dead body"), or when Christina and I decided to try alcohol for the first time last year and she snatched the expired vanilla birthday cake vodka out of our hands and replaced it with White Claws. So I'm at a bit of a loss on who to turn to for anything Maple Ride-related, like if it would be weird to download a dating app when there's a small but real chance of running into my mortal enemy on it, or how long is too long to avoid coming home.

Or, say, what to do when you find your roommate's entire body flung like a starfish across a row of washing machines in the dorm's laundry room on a Friday night.

"Um, I'm pretty sure there's a perfectly good mattress with your name on it upstairs."

Christina cracks an eye open from her metal perch. Her messy bun is even messier than usual, and the circles under her eyes rival my mom's after pulling a coding overnighter. She blearily holds up her phone, emblazoned with an aggressive HYDRATE OR DIE-DRATE , to check the time.

"If our fellow students don't want to do their laundry wondering whether or not a corpse is in their midst, that's a personal problem," Christina grouches.

I tilt my head to get a better look at her horizontal self. "Speaking of personal problems... are you good?"

She presses her palms to her eyes to wake herself up. "Peachy. I love going to two practices a day and only ever sleeping on the smelly travel bus. I'm wild about having

to somehow maintain a GPA in Gen Ed classes I low-key hate to keep my scholarship. My favorite part was getting a call from the school concerned I haven't declared a major yet because apparently scholarship students have to decide by midsemester."

"Oh, shit," I say candidly. "Well, do you have any contenders?"

"Yeah. I'm majoring in Leave Me Alone with a minor in Is It December Yet?"

Ah, yikes. Between her practices and my series of rewrites and tweaks to my Newsbag submission, I haven't seen much of Christina these past few days. I didn't realize she'd gotten into "Feeling Sorry for Myself" Spotify-playlist territory, and from the looks of it, it's more than justified.

"Are you having fun at cross-country at least?" I ask. This is yet another Brighton family-management strategy: attempting to find the bright side of a situation.

Christina's level of sleep deprivation may be too far gone for that, though, because her first attempt at an answer is swallowed by a yawn.

"I mean, yeah," she says at the tail end of it. "But everyone there is always so intense. The whole point of trying to get into the Hindu Student Union was making friends outside of cross-country. With this schedule, I feel like I can't make any new ones."

"Ah, bummer," I joke, trying to lighten the mood. "I heard all your old ones are crap."

She sticks her tongue out at me, then blearily pulls herself up to sit, dangling her legs over one of the washing machines.

"But legit, I haven't crossed off a single thing on our Bitch List," she says—a new

shorthand for the “Christina and Sadie Make Maple Ride Their Bitch!!” list that has mildly concerned a few of our hallmates, who seem to fear becoming a “bitch” on said list.

I hike myself up on the washing machine next to her, setting down my laptop and my laundry basket on the other side of me. “I’m sure it’ll be fine once you get into the swing of things. We’re like five percent of the way through the semester.”

“And all the way through the parts that count, ” says Christina miserably. “Like, I already missed the interest meeting for the HSU, so nobody told me they moved the council election day, so now I have no idea which person to suck up to if I want to get on the event-planning board, which might be a moot point anyway because what can I even go to? And fat chance of me ever looking hot at a party again. The Disney thing was fun and all but our coach kicked our asses the next day.” She runs a frustrated hand through the top of her hair, blinking the exhaustion out of her eyes. “And the only kissable boys I’ve been within a ten-foot radius of are other athletes in the student gym, and I’ve done multivariable calculus equations less complicated than trying to figure out a way to make our schedules fit.”

Ah. We’ve skipped straight from sad playlist Christina to mandatory nap time Christina. I haven’t seen her since our college app deadlines last fall, so her appearance was probably overdue.

“Well, how about you sleep upstairs, and I babysit this situation,” I say, gesturing at the dryer she set her laundry bag on. “I’m stuck down here for the next hour with my own stuff anyway.”

Christina shakes her head. “It’s gonna be done in a few minutes. Also you promised me you’d let me see your Newsbag piece.”

“And I will. After you sleep for like, ten hours minimum.”

Christina ignores me, reaching over my lap to commandeer my laptop and type the password to open it. (We're in mutual agreement that we wipe each other's search histories if either of us dies—Christina for the Game of Thrones fan fiction, me because I don't want Seb to have the satisfaction of knowing I use a burner Instagram to look at Adams' Apples, even after I've left this mortal plane.)

“‘Choose Your Own Adventure: Drunk Snacks Edition,’” Christina reads out loud. “Oh, shit. A quiz. So I'm a guinea pig.”

“The first ever,” I tell her, which reminds me: if this really is due in two days, I should have a few other people take a crack at it.

“It's like my dear old friend Jerry is right here in the room with us,” she says fondly. “First question: ‘What kind of drinking did you do tonight? Option A: Seltzer Sweetie; you've consumed enough to belt One Direction but not reveal that you once kept a life-sized cutout of Harry Styles in your bedroom. Option B: Beer Buddy; you're willing to listen to an econ major in the bathroom line talk about game theory but not self-aware enough to stop yourself from making ‘help me’ faces at anyone who passes. Option—’”

I squirm. “You can just—take it and tell me what you get.” For some reason hearing my writing read out loud to me feels like someone holding up one of those upsettingly well-magnified mirrors that let you see all your open pores.

“On it,” says Christina.

I find another way to torture myself by watching her carefully as she scrolls through the quiz, accounting for every twitch of her lip and chuckle under her breath. Finally she leans back and narrates out loud, “‘Congratulations. You're a Potato Chip S'more, a beautiful, unrepentant hot mess. Like if a disco ball gained sentience, and the first thing it said was “SHOTS?” You deserve the majesty of a post-party snack

every bit as dazzling and chaotic as you are.’” She points a finger to the text under it, where there’s a recipe and a credit to the Sad Bitch Book Club. “Oh, that’s cute.”

“Cute?” I ask nervously.

Christina tilts her head to bop it into mine. “Fresh. Funny. And definitely unexpected.”

I try not to look too pleased with myself. “Yeah. They’ve never done anything in this format before, but I figured, go weird or go home,” I say. “I already know Seb’s got me beat on the traditional stuff.”

That assessment has nothing to do with my confidence in my ability to write news—it’s just the truth. When it comes to straight writing, Seb’s a stronger journalist than I’ll ever be, and far more detail-oriented and thorough about it. I know from writing as Jerry for so long that I’m not half as interested in that kind of writing. Even being in charge of the school paper was just something I felt like I had to do to win.

“Well, he better be pulling all the stops out, because this is good shit. No way you don’t take this round.”

I tilt my head to bop her back. “Okay, let’s not get carried away. You have best friend goggles on.”

“Nah. I lost those with my last brain cell sometime in the last week.”

Her dryer buzzer goes off then at the precise moment my phone starts to ring with an incoming FaceTime from my dad. We both jolt and nearly knock each other off the washing machines.

“Make your family take the quiz, too,” says Christina, nodding at my phone as she hops down to grab her clothes. “I can’t rest tonight without knowing if Papa Brighton is a Cheesy Mug Pancake or Rainbow Popcorn Mix.”

I roll my eyes. “They don’t even know I’m going out for Newsbag. ”

“Oh, right,” says Christina wryly. “Because they’re so famously strict and unsupportive.”

It’s a joke but also a bit of a dig. Christina’s own parents are plenty supportive, but my parents are so offbeat and open-minded that anyone’s look strict in comparison. Which is to say, Christina’s parents don’t know that she drinks and would probably be less than pleased by most of the contents of the Bitch List.

“Point taken,” I say, before swiping to take the call.

My dad’s face appears on the screen, or at least three quarters of it does, because he appears to be in a deep negotiation with Meowtwo to unhand one of Marley’s scarves. (Meowtwo: one million; Marley: still zero.) When he sees me he cracks a quick, easy smile, leaning in way too close to the screen for a Gen Xer who really ought to know how to use an iPhone by now.

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite second daughter,” he says.

“If it isn’t my favorite first dad,” I say right back.

My dad blinks and then throws his head back laughing in clear surprise. My cheeks flush. I guess I don’t banter with my family very often, or with anyone outside of Seb and Christina, really. That’s been changing since I got to Maple Ride two weeks ago. It didn’t feel like that big of a shift until now, because that wasn’t even a passable joke and I don’t think I’ve ever made my dad laugh so hard in my life.

I clear my throat to play it off. “So what’s up?”

“Nothing much, just calling to say hi before you’re off to do whatever you wild college kids get up to on Friday nights.” He makes a show of peering into the phone. “They’re holding raves in laundromats now?”

“Still just plain old laundry,” I say, holding up one of my dirty socks. Responsible Sadie. Predictable Sadie. The Sadie he knows.

“Well, what’s kept you busy? You didn’t call yesterday.”

I consider, for a moment, telling him about Newsbag. My dad would probably be the safest person to broach the topic with by virtue of being the least “!!!!!!!” person in our family. His contribution to the family chaos is more excitement-based than volume-based; when he gets into something, he gets very very carried away. Which is to say, nobody on our block had heard of a “cat parade” or seen a ten-foot inflatable Jack Skellington perch in a front yard from September 1 to the end of the year before our family moved in.

“Well, I’ve been working on something,” I start.

“Oh yeah? For your classes?”

Christina’s watching me carefully from the dryer. I meet her eyes and really consider it for a moment, telling my family about Newsbag. Asking Marley and my parents if they want to take my ridiculous quiz. I can’t get much further than that, because my brain starts imagining myself pulling off some kind of mask to reveal I was never the daughter they thought they knew, but a jokester all along.

But that Band-Aid is going to have to get ripped off eventually. I came here to launch a career in comedy. Newsbag or not, I’m going to make it happen, and it’ll be even

harder to explain when I'm spontaneously moving to New York or LA after graduation than it would be to get it out in the open right now.

"Actually, it's a—"

Right on cue, the door bursts open behind my dad. Like a scripted scene of a show I've watched too many times, Marley runs in panicking about not being able to find a lens for her camera, accusing my mom of moving it with the rest of her tools. My mom is two feet behind her and seemingly unfazed, poking around the room to look for the lens but still adding to the noise by singing an off-key show tune to herself. Before I can even start to score the situation on the Brighton scale, Hadley also bursts in, near tears because her favorite shirt got stained with ketchup at her friend's house. The grand finale is my dad dropping the phone, because somehow twenty-two years of helping create the loudest family on the planet has not familiarized him to noise.

It's a solid four, but I'm not going to be able to talk to anyone if I don't bring it back down.

"Turn my volume up?" I ask my dad once he finally scoops the phone up again. "Marley, did you check the glove compartment of Dad's car? I thought I saw you put a few camera-related things in there. Hadley, that'll come out with a toothbrush and the fabric stain spray in the kitchen. Mom, aren't you guys supposed to meet Seb's parents to walk around the track in a few minutes?"

There's a cacophony of "Oh, right!" and "Really?" and "Oh, shit, " and then the living room is empty again. My dad runs a hand through his hair and shakes his head, amused.

"See, Sadie? Can't go twenty-four hours without you," my dad teases. "We're animals without you keeping us in line."

I laugh weakly, and then just like that I can imagine what happens after I send them that quiz. Their surprise and their confusion. Maybe even their hurt. Why is this the first we're hearing about this?

They don't have room for the real Sadie right now, and this is too important to me to let it get stuck in my family's loud cross fire. It'll only rattle me right before I submit it, if I have to handle their feelings about it, too.

"I'll let you get back to it," says my dad. "You gonna hang with Seb tonight?"

It's a testament to how flawlessly Seb and I executed our second Parental Mode over the years that my dad thinks that's a reasonable question to ask. "Oh, I dunno," I say noncommittally.

"Do you two get to see much of each other?"

My family is a lot of things, but subtle is not one of them. Which is to say, I've answered a version of this question every time we've been on FaceTime this week, so something's up.

"A bit. Why do you ask?"

My dad peers over at the door and shrugs. "I don't know. Seb's parents were worried about him getting lonely over there."

Now it's my turn to laugh in surprise. "Seb?" I ask. As in, Seb who has enough Instagram followers to form a sovereign nation? Seb who was so popular he somehow got more votes for prom king than there were students in our school? "I think he's doing just fine."

"Yeah, but you know how he gets, keeping to himself sometimes. You always have a

knack for snapping him back.”

My brow furrows. Sure, Seb has a tendency to wander off on his own every now and then. I figure it must be exhausting even for Seb to be the world’s universal best friend. But as far as I know, he’s never come back on my account.

“I don’t know about that.”

My mom calls for my dad from the front hall that they’d better get a move on. My dad doesn’t move to leave yet, his expression thoughtful.

“Well, I know we joke about you two sticking together, but it makes us feel better, too. Go find Seb. Have some fun, huh?” he teases. “So maybe next Friday you’re not FaceTiming your dad from a washing machine? I mean, c’mon, kid. Embarrassing.”

I smile despite myself. “I’ll take it under consideration.”

“Atta girl. Talk to you tomorrow.”

He hangs up on the third or fourth attempt. Christina shudders from her washing machine. “I forgot what animatronic Sadie sounds like,” she says.

I mime throwing the dirty sock at her. “Go to sleep so she can haunt your dreams.”

“I’m afraid my upcoming history test is already the star of my nightmares, but I’ll consider her as an understudy. Let me know how the test run for the rest of the quiz goes.”

After I get my load of laundry in, I open my laptop back up to look at my handiwork. I could easily walk upstairs and ask a few of my hallmates to take it, but my dad’s right—it’s a Friday night. Anyone who would actually want to take this quiz is

probably out in the world actively living a version of it.

Then again, there is one person I know for a fact won't be out tonight, because he's the only person on campus in my same boat. Also the only person I know will be fully honest with me—Christina may not have best friend goggles, but there's definitely a bias in her prescription contacts. Seb and I are too historically brutal to each other to lie.

So really, it's not me texting him on a Friday night. It's me making the most strategic move I can play.

Do you trust me?

I hit Send on the Google Doc link to the draft and focus my attention on my laundry, but his reply comes within the minute. Another Google Doc link. It opens to his own article, which doesn't have a title yet. I smirk. Even when we were freshmen that was always the one thing that gave him trouble; he'd write the catchiest, most engaging pieces and then have no idea what to call them.

This piece is no exception to the rule—not quite a deep dive but definitely a snorkel-level dive into the cost of the dining hall in our overall tuition, comparing it against food students could just make themselves in the dorms. It's part cost analysis, part commentary, with just enough of Seb's subtle wryness and a few funny quotes from people at the Dorm Food-Off that I find myself smiling as I read.

Seb's text back comes before mine. Well shit. About time you actually played to win. And then, a beat later: I mean, a bummer that your efforts will be wasted. But it's making this a whole lot more fun for me.

Big words coming from a Cheesy Mug Pancake.

Have some respect. I'm a Mini Cheeseburger Pizza.

Keep dreaming. Anyway, not bad, Adams. Not enough to beat me, but not bad. Just take care of that one typo and you're good to go.

Seb's little dots pop on the screen and then disappear and then pop up again. I sit back against the row of dryers, grinning into my phone.

You monster , Seb types back when he realizes there's no typo to be found.

I'm cackling to myself when I finally open the Newsbag page and hit Submit.

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I'm fuzzy on the details of what Pavlov fed the dog in that experiment, but I sure do feel a kinship with him when I wake up on Sunday morning and my brain immediately goes, Pancakes. My eyes are not even cracked open and the compulsion is so strong that my feet might just carry me to Betty's without one other logically formed thought.

I squash the urge only because I know Seb will be there, and I'm not entirely sure where we stand. Or rather—I'm not sure I want to right now, when we're both on edge and waiting for a decision to come down from the Newsbag fates. Better to know how things shake out.

Two things eventually change my mind as the morning goes on: the first is that I genuinely have no interest in investigating our dining hall's less than artistic interpretation of a chili egg bake a second time over. The second is that I've been thinking about what my dad said on and off all of yesterday. "You know how he gets." It reminds me that for all the friends Seb has, he doesn't have a best friend—not a Christina to keep his secrets or tell mindless inside jokes or keep him in line.

Well—nobody aside from me.

So then the guilt just kind of spirals from there. Because if the person closest to Seb is also the one most hell-bent on destroying him—well, I'm no psychology major, but that feels less than healthy. And also it makes it extra shitty that I'm avoiding him for no real reason other than "I don't know where we stand." Five minutes eating pancakes with him isn't going to kill me.

So I yank on some bike shorts and my oversized T-shirt from our block's annual Spaghetti Bonanza (yet another one of my dad's and Seb's dad's delicious ideas) and head over to Pancake It or Leave It. The curtains on the window are open enough today that I can see a few other customers inside, a mix of families and university students. It only takes me a second to find Seb sitting by himself at the same table, seemingly deep in thought about something.

I knock lightly on the window. He jumps a bit in his seat, and the instant his eyes connect with mine I see the same uncertainty in them. It takes us both a beat to smile, like we're waiting for the other's cue. A far cry from the brazen, almost smug version of ourselves the last time we saw each other.

In lieu of asking what I want, Betty just hands me a plate when I walk in the door. Today's pancakes are full of giant, juicy blueberries, as are everyone else's in the place. Seb kicks the chair out for me, his smile small but at ease again.

"Look who's here to gloat," he says.

I set my pancakes down. "About what?" I ask. "Being superior to you in every way, or pulling off this look better than you could ever dream?"

Because naturally Seb is also wearing his Spaghetti Bonanza shirt, the green one from the year before mine. He looks down at his chest and laughs. "I think we both know spaghetti's more my color than yours. And no, I meant about Newsbag. "

He better elaborate and fast, because I just caught a whiff of the blueberry and I don't know if I'm going to be a coherent human after taking the first bite. I barely have the wherewithal to swap out a bit of pancake for Seb's syrup as it is.

Seb nudges my foot under the table. "Check your phone."

I narrow my eyes at him. I know better than to think this is actually good news for me, if he looks so pleased by it. But when I open my email to the subject line of ROUND ONE WINNER , it's my name in the message.

"Holy shit," I say.

"Watch your damn mouth," says Betty from the grill.

"Holy shit, " I say anyway, unable to help myself. If I'm not mistaken I hear Betty let out a quiet snort.

"Congrats," says Seb, without a trace of irony. When I look up he's leaning back in his seat and watching me with this knowing look that almost seems proud. It knocks me off-kilter, kicks up a flutter under my ribs.

"No. Don't 'congrats' me," I protest. "Then I can't be a jerk about winning."

Seb's close-lipped smile deepens enough that I can see the small dimple on his left cheek. "You have my permission to be a jerk. You earned it. You're going to have your first byline in Newsbag next week."

It really hits me then, the magnitude of it. Not just a byline but one with my actual name on it. Not just my actual name but printed in the zine I've been dreaming about getting published in for so long that I was worried I might jinx it, for hoping too much. I have to blink because my plate is swimming in front of me, so overwhelmed that my eyes are genuinely threatening to leak.

Seb snaps me out of it by tapping my plate lightly with his fork. "Eat your victory pancakes," he tells me. "And enjoy this while you can. You've got a reckoning coming your way."

“Is that so?” I ask, digging into my plate.

“I’ve got big plans for Round Two.”

I don’t doubt that. The topic of “relationships on campus” may be broad but definitely lends itself more to Seb’s skill set with interviewing and more hands-on reporting than mine. Especially since they’re giving us three weeks for it instead of two, implying that they want us to be more thoughtful about it.

Still—“If you think I’m gonna coast on this win, you’ve got another thing coming,” I tell him through a mouthful of pancake.

“Oh, I’ve got a lot of things coming,” says Seb. “I’ve already started writing.”

“Me too,” I shoot right back.

Which is only kind of a fib. I haven’t started writing, but yesterday in the aftermath of the FaceTime with my dad and the strange, unresolved guilt I’ve had about leaving home since I got here, I decided I would focus on family relationships—specifically freshmen leaving home for the first time, and how different family dynamics affect how students adjust on campus. It’s going to have to be more specific than that, I know, but it’s a jumping-off point at least.

Seb leans forward in his seat. “Speaking of relationships on campus—how was your little date with Joey yesterday?”

The blueberries are too ripe and juicy to turn sour in my mouth, but they metaphorically do. I take my time answering, mostly because I know I can’t actually lie to Seb without him catching me out on it. And the truth is if the near-imagined kiss with Joey was a commercial break, then Saturday at the farmers market was a full blooper.

“It wasn’t a date,” I say carefully.

Seb nods. “And this isn’t a pancake joint.”

I roll my eyes. “It wasn’t—I mean. I thought we were just hanging out, is all, and then...”

It’s not like I did anything cataclysmically awkward. It’s just that I didn’t exactly pick up on what Joey was putting down, so to speak. In retrospect I should have realized something was up when Joey cheerfully started telling me his dating history and politely asking about mine. He seemed unfazed by my explanation that it was pretty much summed up with “nonexistent,” and we moved on to talking about Newsbag and our sisters and funny stories about the school baseball team, where he’s a scholarship athlete like Christina. I didn’t think it was anything more than friends making conversation until later when we were wandering around the farmers market looking for a bench to try the pie on and Joey said, “Next time we go out, we’ll just go to a place with actual tables and chairs.”

Which, of course, prompted me to say, “Next time?”

Joey faltered. “I mean, if you want to go out again.”

And then, in a moment of mild humiliation that might just take the top spot in the Awkward Things Sadie Has Said hall of fame, I blurted, “I didn’t even know we were going out right now. ”

I must be making quite the face at the memory, because Seb laughs. “Damn, Sadie. Only two weeks on campus and already breaking hearts?”

“That’s your job,” I remind him. He pulls a face of his own like he’s going to interrupt, but I’m in no mood for Seb underselling his hotness right now. “And no. I

don't—I mean, we might go out?"

We left on a good enough note, at least. Joey got my number and said if it was okay he'd text me a few options to grab lunch or something this week. I haven't thought about it much since, mostly because I've been too anxious waiting for the email from Newsbag to worry about waiting for a text from a boy.

"Aw." Seb's tone isn't mocking, but it's a close cousin to it. "You like him."

"He's nice," I say, unsure why this conversation is grating on me so much. Maybe it's the knowing gleam in Seb's eyes. Like he's already peered into the future and knows that Joey and I won't work out.

The thing is, I recognize that feeling. Even when Seb was dating Janie and then Roger, I had this undeniable, borderline smug understanding that neither of them would last. I never said as much to Seb, but it's impossible to know someone as well as I know him and not be able to clock that kind of thing. Seb was happy with them—was thoughtful and funny and all the things a committed boyfriend should be—but I never saw that spark. Not the quiet kind you can see between my parents when they thoughtlessly kiss each other on the cheek, or the loud kind when Marley makes public displays of affection after getting back together with her very nice and wholesome boyfriend Ken (whose only real flaw is owning too many khakis for a twenty-two-year-old to justify).

Which is to say, I was unsurprised by Seb's amicable breakups. And I guess Seb has the right to be unsurprised by me and my apparent misfire with Joey, too. But I don't like the idea that the future is already set in stone, even if it's just in Seb's mind. Maybe I will feel that same spark with Joey if I get to know him a little better. I've never dated anyone, or how else would I know?

Before either of us can press the point, both of our phones buzz. It's the group chat

that has Seb's parents and my whole family on it, and the text that comes in is a picture of everyone gathered around my family's kitchen table with a mountain of pancakes. Hadley is still in her pajamas, Marley is rocking some major bedhead, and most of our parents' heads are cut off because my dad thoroughly miscalculated the angle of his selfie-taking arm.

"We can do them one better," says Seb, and holds his phone out and turns on the front-facing camera.

I lean in and at the last second spear one of Seb's pancakes, biting into it and holding it between my teeth like a dog. Seb lets out an indignant noise and that ends up being the shot—both of our eyes crinkled in laughter, me cheesing at the camera, Seb grinning at me.

Seb hits Send, and I find myself wishing, suddenly, that I'd made him retake it. The shot pops up on my own phone then, and I see why—this picture captures something I've felt but never actually seen. Not just that crackle of electricity between me and Seb, but a version of myself that my family hasn't seen in such full force. That I've never seen in full force.

It's too late now, though. Within seconds the group chat lights up again with texts back from our parents: Cute! And Looks delish! And Where is that?? The last one comes from my dad in a separate thread between the two of us—just three smiley-face emojis. Dad Speak for "You've done good."

I feel a pinch of guilt, because I didn't join Seb on my dad's account, but now I'm feeling the instant gratification of parental approval just the same. It's even more ridiculously potent now that I haven't been in the house for my usual daily hit.

I glance over at Seb, but he's scrolled back up the thread to stare at the picture of our families. His expression is the same kind of distant it was when I saw him through the

window.

“The audacity of them to enjoy themselves without us,” I joke.

Seb blinks himself back. “Yeah. You homesick yet?”

The question catches me off guard only because nobody’s asked me that point-blank since we got here. Like all the freshmen are posturing because we know that admitting we’re homesick when it’s barely even September would be admitting some kind of weakness that would weed us out, like the collegiate version of natural selection.

But mostly it catches me off guard because I’m not sure of my answer. Sometimes the ache of missing them is so intense that I’m afraid to let myself fully feel it, like it’d be pressing down too hard on a fresh bruise. But I can’t tell if some of that ache is just guilt, because as much as I love them, I can’t help my relief.

“Kind of,” I say after a moment.

Seb frowns. “Only kind of? Hell, I miss your family more than that.”

“I’m sure your eardrums don’t,” I joke. I don’t mean to say anything else, but now that someone has scratched the surface of the feeling, I can’t help it. “It’s just—nice, sometimes. To have a little space to be someone new.”

“New,” Seb echoes, like he doesn’t follow.

“Or just to get to be like, fun and spontaneous about things,” I say. “Hard to do when you’re living in a circus tent. Already too much chaos going on.”

I’m expecting Seb to riff off me like he usually does, but he just tilts his head at me

curiously, like he's waiting for me to elaborate. And I could, but not without embarrassing myself. Not without explaining that I don't think I've ever been fully myself around my family, or anyone back in high school, really—that even in these two weeks of having space from that reality, I feel like a different person. One who cracks jokes and goofs off instead of worrying about keeping other people's strings pulled together. One who goes to parties and accidental dates and ridiculous food competitions. One who gets a shiny new byline in Newsbag.

It's not explaining myself that's embarrassing, I realize. It's embarrassing because Seb already knows I've been pretending. A theory that's all but confirmed by the way Seb nods, his brow furrowing like he has a follow-up question.

“Are you homesick?” I ask, before he can voice it.

Seb pauses, a corner of his lips quirking. “Is it cheating if I steal your ‘kind of’?”

“As your former editor, I'll let this flagrant act of plagiarism slide,” I joke.

“Appreciated,” he says.

“It's just that I didn't realize how relieved my parents were that I didn't get into Maple Ride until I got off the waitlist.” He glances out the window self-consciously.

“They were so thrown off when I decided not to go to Blue Ridge State.”

“Thrown off?”

“Like, disappointed,” Seb admits.

I search Seb's face, only because he seems reluctant to meet my eye now. At first I think maybe it's because he doesn't want to flex that he got into Blue Ridge, which is so well known for its academic standards that it's even harder to get into than Maple

Ride. Hell, when he got the acceptance letter from them a week before Maple Ride's decisions came out, I worried I was tanked—if he got a spot at Blue Ridge, it seemed like there was no way I'd beat him out for the spot here.

But I did. It seemed like a tidy ending. I may have won, but since Seb had Blue Ridge, he didn't technically lose. Except right now he looks a little bit like he did.

“Well, your dad did go to Blue Ridge,” I say, lightly probing.

Seb nods, his teeth grazing his lower lip. “Yeah, and he's—you know. A little more into the whole academia thing. And there's only one of me, so. I guess that made it more important. The whole ‘rah rah, continue the legacy’ cliché.”

It's something that doesn't come up often, that Seb doesn't have any other siblings. My mom mentioned to me once that it was hard enough for Seb's parents to have him—our parents meant to have their first kids at the same time. My parents had Marley, but it took Seb's parents another four years to have him. I think the reason it hardly comes up is that we all grew up in the same fenceless shared backyard, so Seb was always part of the mix just the same.

Still, that's not the part my brain snags on.

“But they're okay with you being here now?” I ask carefully.

Seb's lips thin out. “They're okay with me majoring in engineering,” he says after a moment. “That's always been the plan.”

I raise my eyebrows, waiting him out. Sure enough he ducks his head and says, “My dad has this—thing. Blue Ridge has the better engineering program. He's making me apply there again, on a midyear transfer.”

There's a flash of hurt that comes so fast that I can't figure out what's driving it: the fact that Seb is putting me through the paces of this competition even though he's going to ditch me, or that he's ditching in the first place.

"Why are you competing for this spot if you're just going to leave?" I demand.

Seb lifts his head again, and something cracks just wide enough in Seb's eyes for me to understand.

"If you don't get the spot in Newsbag, he's going to make you leave," I say slowly.

Seb immediately shakes his head. "He would never make me leave," he says. "But the idea of me having a backup plan made them okay with the last-minute switch. Blue Ridge has the better engineering program."

I know Seb's parents are paying for school, and that they'd never cut him off based on which one he was attending. But I also know that Seb's family loyalties run as deep as mine. In ways I probably can't understand, even, because I may have been the "good kid," but I was never the only one. So maybe Seb's dad won't make him do anything in the traditional sense. But Seb loves his parents too much to disappoint them.

"You actually turned in a transfer application, then."

It comes out flat, and I feel like I'm deflating, too. At the core of what Seb just told me is an inescapable truth: if I win, I won't just edge Seb out of Newsbag. I might edge him out of the whole school.

Seb swallows hard. "I mean, yeah. I said I would," he says. But then he catches sight of my face, and something in it makes him firm his resolve. "But I'm here now. This is where I've always wanted to be."

The words are implied but louder than the ones he actually said: Don't you dare go easy on me over this.

I never would, of course. But that doesn't mean I don't care about what this means to him. That I'm not stuck on what it means for me, too.

He gives me this definitive smile then, the kind that means he's moving the conversation along. I take his cue and say, "Well, good. Even if it means I have to go to the trouble of taking you down all over again."

Seb's smile eases up then, smug as ever. "You like having me here."

I let out an indignant scoff. "Oh, sure. Let me list all the reasons why."

Then I lean back in my seat, utterly silent, and cross my arms over my chest. The seconds tick by until Seb's smile hitches into a smirk and he leans forward to cross the distance I made.

"I gave you that idea for the quiz," he says, raising his eyebrows.

"Right after I gave you the idea for your little cost-analysis piece," I say right back.

"And where did that get me?" Seb gestures to his phone. "You're the one getting published. Seems like you're the one getting the better end of the deal here."

I snatch up my fork and take the last bite of pancake off his plate, per tradition. "I'd send a thank-you note but I don't think the postmaster general recognizes 'pain in my ass' as a formal address."

"I recently changed it to 'Wherever Sadie Least Wants Me,' which is probably what got me off the waitlist in the first place," he says.

“Eh. At least I have these pancakes to ease my pain.”

We meet each other’s eyes then, the conversation coming to a natural close. Usually a conversation between us only ends when there’s a clear victor. Now it’s just ending with a calm that somehow makes me uneasy, because I don’t know where we go from here.

Seb sets my empty plate on top of his, and we wordlessly start rooting for the cash in our wallets to set on the table.

“So what is the number two–ranked staff writer candidate up to the rest of the day?” I ask him.

“Other than devising ways to thoroughly crush you in the next round?” He tilts his head toward some vague direction outside the window. “I was going to hit up the theater department’s interactive play.”

I shudder at the words “interactive” and “theater” being used in the same sentence. “What for?”

Seb’s eyes flicker with amusement, but his tone is thoughtful. “I caught up with Rowan the other day about the funding issue. Apparently all the campus orgs are dealing with some version of it right now. They seem to think that if we show up for each other as much as possible, we can show the administration how important they all are.”

If that’s the case, I’ve got plenty of other ways to support. I’m already two chapters into the Sad Bitch Book Club’s pick for September, and our utter ruthlessness during the Dorm Food-Off got me recruited for the next informal Kickball Club game.

“Well, godspeed,” I tell Seb in the meantime.

“Care to join?” he asks, a challenge in his voice.

I keep my eyes on his and say deliberately, “I don’t know what sounds like worse of a nightmare—the threat of getting pulled onstage, or the idea of getting stuck in a theater for two hours with you.”

Seb stands and settles his warm hand in the juncture between my shoulder and my neck, squeezing lightly. “Well, that’s not very fun or spontaneous of you, New Sadie.”

The smile is creeping back onto my face despite myself. Usually I don’t like for him to have the satisfaction, but it feels like it doesn’t matter as much anymore. Everything is open season now.

“Hmmm,” I say, pretending to mull it over. Less because I’m thinking and more because I like his hand there. It’s strangely grounding.

“I’m headed over there right now. You’ve got ten seconds to decide.”

I’m going to say no. I only hesitate for a moment because of my parents—my mom asking about Seb earlier this week, and my dad sending those emojis just now. They’d be upset with me if I didn’t go with him, especially because it’s clear from the way he hasn’t mentioned anyone else that he’s going alone.

He squeezes my shoulder again before letting me go, and I realize that’s only part of it. The other part is that Seb is right. There’s a part of me that does like having him here. And the last thing I want to do is dig any deeper into that when I have one real goal this semester, and it might push Seb out of my life for good.

So I take a breath to say no, but end up wasting it.

Betty decides for me. “I ran out of patience for this fucked-up rom-com vibe of yours about ten smirks ago. Go nauseate someone else.” She juts her chin toward the door. “Those theater punks are national treasures. You’re going. Now scram.”

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My history with theater is brutal but abrupt. It was fourth grade. I was asked to play a tree in the school-wide production of *The Wizard of Oz*. Well, “asked” is a generous word. I was told, and when I nearly cried because I didn’t want to be onstage at all, let alone photosynthesizing on one, I was commanded. Apparently there is no free will in the public school system when it comes to impressing parents with how very cute their kids are in an effort to get as much donation money as possible. (Do I even need to mention that Seb was playing Toto the dog? That alone probably funded half the school’s new gym equipment.)

But I was good Sadie, quiet Sadie, so I did what I was told. My job as a dancing tree was basically to swing left and swing right and then spin in a circle, and then do that three more times. So that was what I did. Until the third and final night, when I tripped, fell into the backstage curtain, and the student teacher playing stage manager startled and fell back into a lever that brought down the curtain not only on the tiny trees but on the head of the girl playing Dorothy, whose wig was subsequently flung into the audience directly onto one of the school’s most prolific donors.

The whole incident would have been more life-scarring if it hadn’t come with the perk of never ever being forcibly cast in a school production again.

It turns out my luck could only last so long, though. Because not ten minutes into the interactive show, a beautiful wood nymph stops serenading us to pull a name out of a bucket, smile winningly, and say, “We’d love to welcome our first lover to the stage... the incomparable Sadie Brighton.”

It’s okay, because this is a nightmare. I’m going to wake up any second. That’s what Seb must be doing now, nudging me in the arm, rousing me from this very vivid

hallucination.

“That’s you,” he says gleefully.

I shake my head. “No. I legally changed my name to ‘No.’”

“Go go go,” he chants, way too loudly.

I lean in and grab him by his shirtsleeve. “If you say one more word, Seb, I swear on all that is holy, I will bury you. I will pretend to look for you. I’ll shed pretty tears at your funeral and die in bed eighty years from now peacefully and without regret.”

“Sadie Brighton?” calls the nymph, who looks worried enough to break character.

Little do they know I have a whole lifetime of experience keeping my trap shut. The only thing that’s getting me out of this chair is someone yelling “Fire!” And even then, I might just stay an extra minute for good measure.

Once it’s evident that no Sadie is willing to step forward, a water nymph clears his throat and steps in. “Maybe our mysterious Sadie will join us onstage once our second lover of the afternoon inspires some bravery,” he says, pulling another name. “The unparalleled... Sebastian Adams.”

Oh, all right. At least that clears it up. I’m not just unlucky; I am a cosmic joke.

Seb’s on his feet in an instant, and the audience cheers with clear relief. Then Seb turns to me and offers his hand, a winning smile on his face. To anyone watching, it would look like a gallant, romantic gesture. Which it could very well be if Seb didn’t say, “Come on, you coward.”

My mouth drops open. Apparently nobody respects a decent murder threat these days.

“Do it, Sadie!” yells someone—nay, my newest enemy—from the audience. “He’s so cute!”

“Can I pretend I’m Sadie? Damn,” says public enemy number two.

Seb’s cheeks go pink, but he doesn’t look away from me. Good. That way I can look him square in the eye with every inch of my potential wrath when I say, “Absolutely not.”

Seb leans in and makes a show of tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “Eh, you’re right,” he says, his voice so low that only I can hear. “I’d probably kick your ass at it anyway.”

That’s it. I’m up on my feet so fast that if it were anyone else, I’d have accidentally decked them. Seb, on the other hand, dodges me like it was a choreographed routine, then wraps a firm hand around mine and starts pulling me toward the stage. To my absolute mortification, the mildly tipsy post-brunch matinee audience is cheering like it’s the halftime show at the Super Bowl. Which especially does not bode well for me, because if this show is as interactive as it promises, they’re the ones about to be in charge of my fate.

What happens over the course of the next hour is anybody’s guess, because the plot immediately goes off the rails. The nymphs carry out a scene around us that seems to imply that we are on the run in their woods because of our “forbidden love,” at which point the audience gets to decide why our love is forbidden. It’s clear the performers are expecting a reasonable answer like “their families are in an ancient feud!” or “they work for competing taverns!” Instead they decide it’s forbidden because Seb is an alien, and his poisonous spores might kill me if we make contact for too long.

The sky nymph blinks out at the insistent audience and then says, “Yeah, okay. Let’s roll with it.” Then comically snaps back into character to step away from Seb

dramatically and yell, “His spores! Oh, god! They burn!”

National treasures indeed.

Whatever they’re putting in the coffee and mimosas at the restaurants on Main Street, I’m a fan, because the audience only gets more lawless from there. When the audience is asked where we’re lodging for the night after a storm rolls in, they decide it’s a White Lotus –themed hotel, prompting the nymphs to pretend to plot to kill us in exceedingly ridiculous, ineffectual ways. When they’re asked what our secret skills are for vanquishing our enemies, they decide mine is telekinesis, and Seb’s, for some reason beyond me, is to morph into a porcupine, which he manages to do with zero dignity but surprising flair.

I am so terrible and Seb is so committed to every bit that every now and then the nymphs have to shout over the raucous laughter from the crowd. Eventually the hijinks get so anarchic that I forget we’re even onstage in the first place—that is, until we’re nearing the end of our adventure through the woods, when the resounding opinion of our audience is that Seb should “kiss her already!”

This sentiment is contagious, apparently, because before the embarrassment of the request can settle in, it becomes a full-on audience chant. “Kiss her, kiss her, kiss her.”

Seb raises an eyebrow at me. I raise one back. The water nymph breaks character to say, “Only if you want to. I mean, you guys are dating, right?”

And then I see what the rest of the audience must have been seeing, which is two deeply in sync humans wearing matching T-shirts on Sunday afternoon, and Seb every so often grabbing my hand to nudge me to different corners of the stage when I floundered. They thought we were dating the entire time. The thought makes me suddenly more self-conscious than I’ve been all day.

But Seb, who only recently was unporcupined, says reassuringly, “I’m not gonna kiss you.”

I should be relieved, but if I am it’s not half as loud as the surprising bite of my irritation. “Right.”

Seb lets out a breathy laugh, searching my face. “I mean, you don’t want me to kiss you.”

“Of course not,” I say, and then because apparently all we do is steal lines from each other, onstage and off, I add, “I’d probably kick your ass at it anyway.”

Seb rolls his eyes in such affectionate exasperation that I’m in no way prepared for what happens next. For the sudden heat behind his momentum when he pulls me in by the elbow, cups my jaw between his hands, stares me directly in the eye. For the sudden oh my god, this is it. It’s happening. My first kiss, with my—what even is Seb to me?

Hell, what isn’t Seb to me? Lifelong enemy. Childhood friend. Unparalleled rival. And now—

Now settling his thumbs firmly against my lips and pressing his lips to the tops of his own fingers, pulling our faces away so it looks like a genuine kiss.

He holds me there for a beat as it sinks in—the swell of anticipation and the crush of confusion. The rush of a runaway car and the slam of an emergency brake. The happy roar from the audience and the dead silence between my ears as Seb pulls away, looking just as breathless and thrown as I do, even though he was the one who initiated the whole thing.

My brain is a vacuum after that save for one indignant, ridiculous thought: He didn’t

want to kiss me. He didn't want to kiss me. I try to disrupt the loop. It's not like I wanted to kiss him either. But then my brain disrupts the loop with an even less helpful one: Christina a few weeks ago, pestering me about my "chemistry" with Seb, like the kissing was just inevitable. Don't tell me you haven't thought about it.

Maybe it's self-important of me to be so stunned. The thing is, I never let myself think about kissing Seb in any intentional way, but if I did I would never have imagined him rejecting me. Or rather, I never imagined it would matter so much to me if he rejected me.

And it doesn't. I've collected myself by the time we take our bows, buried the surprise and the weird sting of hurt. There's no room for it anyway. It's probably just another distraction tactic, is all. Seb finding some creative new way to get in my head.

Only Seb is beaming at me so genuinely when we hop off the stage that I know it isn't—especially when his expression dims a bit as he registers mine. We're both swallowed up by the audience then, who rib us and take pictures and tell us all the plotlines they had ideas for if we had more time. I don't bother correcting them when they say what a cute couple we make, and neither does Seb. I know I'm doing it out of embarrassment; I wonder what he's doing it for.

But not enough to stick around. The first moment I get to myself, I use to head for the exit. Seb is so close on my heel that there's no way he didn't have one eye on me the entire time.

"All right, have at it," he says, once we've walked out of earshot.

I pull my hair up to put it in a ponytail, an old tic when I'm flustered, only there isn't enough hair to do that anymore. "Excuse me?"

“You’re pissed. But we had fun!” he says. “A good story for your future memoir. You know, the ‘What It’s Like to Be Seb Adams’s Friend’ one.”

“We’ll workshop that last word in the title,” I say.

“Fair,” says Seb. “It has a sneaky way of changing on us over the years, huh?”

It does, and now more than ever. It feels like it’s been in flux ever since we got here. I don’t know if I like it—Seb has always been a thorn in my side, but an easy and predictable one. This I’m not sure what to do with.

“Where did you learn that thumb thing?” I blurt.

Seb’s brow furrows. “Oh, you mean stage kissing? Mrs. Carl had us do all our kisses like that for high school productions. Oldest trick in the book.”

I forget sometimes that Seb’s tiny Toto was just the beginning of his thespian career. He never took it all that seriously, but theater was his elective all through high school. We each had a little thing that was safe from the other—Seb with theater, and me with the book clubs the librarians kicked off every year.

“Oh. A trick, then.”

Seb lets out a reflexive laugh. “Are you—upset I didn’t kiss you?”

“No,” I snap.

Seb is quiet for a moment, then lets out one of those irritatingly knowing “hmmmm”s of his. Then he glances over at a bench, pulls his backpack off, and sits.

I stand there. He pats a hand on the bench for me to join him. I scowl. He tilts his

head up at me and says quietly, all traces of teasing gone, “Sadie. I wasn’t going to let your first kiss be some gag onstage.”

It feels like ice water rushing through my veins. “Who says that would have been my first kiss?”

Seb just watches me patiently, not even bothering to humor my half lie. I’m not sure why I bothered, either.

“It’s not like I’m—it’s not a big deal,” I insist, my cheeks burning and spreading the heat fast. “I just was busy in high school, is all.”

By “busy” I actually mean “cursed.” The few times I did get close to kissing someone, it was nothing short of a shit show. It started in ninth grade, when a boy in our book club leaned in to kiss me between the stacks in the library. I immediately tripped on his foot and knocked him into a shelf, causing a small avalanche of books and nearly concussing him with Jane Austen’s collected works. Then came the summer before eleventh grade, when Christina’s cousin tried to kiss me when we were kayaking, and in my eagerness I somehow managed to flip us both over into a lake. By the time twelfth grade rolled around and I set my lab partner’s coat sleeve on fire during yet another doomed first-kiss attempt, I figured it was time to pull myself out of the game before I accidentally benched a whole damn team.

Seb is just watching me, so I add, “I’m not like—scared of it, or a prude, or something.”

Dear god. That came out so magnificently awkward that maybe it’s for the best if AI really does hijack our brains.

But Seb is unfazed, lifting his hands up. “I don’t think that. And to be clear, it wouldn’t be a problem if you were. Everybody does stuff like that in their own time.”

He pauses then, and I realize he's waiting for me to sit down. I relent, and he waits until I'm settled to add carefully, "But it's allowed to be a big deal, you know. It doesn't have to be, but sometimes it is, and that's fine."

Some defensive coil in my chest wants to snap that I don't need Seb's little after-school special to tell me that, but my curiosity beats out my pride.

"Was it a big deal for you?"

The instant I ask it I worry it might be too personal of a question. Until the Joey situation neither of us ever talked about dating beyond the surface level of him being like, "This is my boyfriend, Roger" at family hangouts, and me adding Roger to the list of humans to try not to resent for their mere association with my mortal enemy.

Now I'm wondering if some quiet part of me wasn't just insecure about Seb opening up a whole new part of his life that I hadn't even opened the door to myself.

But Seb nods, happy to have been asked. "It felt like one. And I was lucky, because it was a good kiss. The right person at the right time." He waits until I meet his eyes, which I didn't realize I was avoiding. "So, yeah, I didn't want to kiss you like that. You never know who it's a big deal for or not. At least, not unless you talk about it."

The crush of relief at hearing him say that comes with its own embarrassment, but at least it feels better than the rejection did. I cast my gaze back at my shoes.

"Well—no need for us to talk about that," I say.

Seb goes very still at those words, processing like they have more weight than I meant to put behind them. I clear my throat.

"I mean, odds are I'll never be dodging your poisonous spores onstage again."

“I don’t know. Life is long,” says Seb. He leans back against the bench. “It’s funny. This actually ties into what I’ve been writing about for our second piece.”

“Sexually inexperienced communications majors making fools of themselves in front of a hundred strangers?” I ask, leaning into the whole “humor as a defense mechanism” bit like it’s my job.

He nudges his shoulder into mine, a quiet stop that. “Nah. More like how unprepared a lot of us are for this kind of stuff in college, or just at our age in general. Like obviously the public school education system dropped the ball, that’s nothing new. But I’m not even talking in terms of sexuality—just, like, the basics of how to be emotionally healthy about getting into all this stuff. Especially now. All of a sudden you have all this independence and all these options and like—no road map for what to expect or how to cope with any of it.”

Seb is equal parts methodical and passionate in the way he speaks, the way he always gets when his whole heart is in a piece that he’s writing. These were among the few times in high school we weren’t at each other’s throats, when he was pitching a piece like this to me for the school paper. Truth is, he probably never needed to pitch in the first place. He has impeccable instincts for choosing his topics and an innate sensitivity in his writing about them, and this is no exception.

But even at the heights of our irritation with each other, what I liked most about these pitches was watching Seb get in the zone. I still do. The way his hands move in this tight, precise way to punctuate his points, the way his eyes brighten like there’s something burning behind them. The way Seb is a person who never does anything halfway.

“Yeah,” I agree, mulling over his words. “I didn’t really think of it that way. More like—some people were just naturally more confident about that kind of thing, and I kept missing the boat, you know?”

Seb nods effusively. “I think that’s just it. The boat never came. We were all just kind of—swimming.”

I slouch deeper into the bench. “Well, in that case, I’m barely treading water. But at least I know how to wrap a banana in a condom in ten seconds or less.”

“Vigilantly keeping bananas safe from the perils of the open air since freshman year.” Seb knocks his shoulder into me again, gentle and reassuring. This time after it lands against mine, he doesn’t move it away. “And you’re a plenty good swimmer. I think it’s just a matter of deciding when you want to get farther from the shore.”

Despite the solidness of the bench under me and Seb’s warm shoulder next to mine, I feel wobbly for a moment. Like I didn’t know how badly I needed to hear those words until someone said them to me. After a lifetime of trying to be a certain way, I know how rare it is to feel thoroughly seen by someone; it’s something else entirely to be seen by someone before you see it in yourself.

“You’ve thought about this a lot, huh?” I ask.

Seb’s nod is slower this time as he considers. “Well—part of it is I just sort of had to? Like, good luck being queer and having questions in sex ed about anything other than how to not get someone pregnant.” He angles more of his body toward me. “But I’m lucky. I mean, you know my parents. They were always supportive and like, super blunt about everything, whether it was over a silly crush or full-on sex. The instant I came out they did all this research, so by the time I had questions, they were ready to fill in the gaps we never learned in school the best they could.”

I think of all those rainbow plates stacked diligently in Seb’s basement and smile to myself. “Yeah, they’re pretty cool.”

“These days a lot of parents are. But I think even the most well-intentioned parents

are kind of reluctant to talk about stuff like this with their kids.”

I ruefully recall the copy of *The Period Book* under my bed, and a few stilted, awkward conversations I had with my mom about sex that I attempted to ask Marley about later. Somewhere between my mom’s mechanical description and Marley’s rambling one (it came with a whole lot more commentary about her exes than actual information), I pieced together some idea of what to expect when it comes to dating.

Not that it mattered much in the end. Even with the few crushes I had, I was more focused on crushing as a verb—namely, of one Seb Adams, in every academic capacity possible.

“Or at least, that’s the impression I’ve gotten talking to other students. Particularly in the Rainbow Maple Ride Alliance,” says Seb. “So I think that’s what I’m going to focus on for the relationships angle. The way we’re all coming at them from different lenses depending on how we were raised, and what we were taught or not taught. And how you can still have a personal timeline with it that has everything or nothing to do with any of that.” He smiles, scratching the back of his neck self-consciously. “It sounds pretty broad right now, but I’ll find some way to narrow it after I’ve talked to enough people, I think.”

He’s very still for a moment, his eyes on me with a strange kind of apprehension. It’s not just that it matters to him what I think—I’ve always known it has. We’re each other’s best and most honest critics. But it’s clear that this is the first time an article hasn’t just mattered because it’s important; this time it’s personal.

There’s a warmth in my chest so soft that I can’t help the way I look at him then, with a tenderness and a strange, misplaced pride. Seb watches the smile that curls on my face like he’s hooked to the edges of it, and I don’t mind. I want him to know. I can tell that he does.

Which is why I have no problem following up the profundity of the moment by blowing out a breath and saying, “Well, shit.”

“What?” Seb asks, already amused.

I knock the heel of my shoe into the cement. “This is going to be a really fucking good piece, huh?”

Seb laughs out loud. “That’s the idea. Better bring your A game.”

For once I don’t even have the remotest urge to rib him back. “I mean it,” I say sincerely. “I think it’ll be helpful for people to know they’re not alone. If you don’t win this round, I hope people still get to read it.”

Seb blinks into his lap like the praise was every bit as unexpected as it was appreciated. When he looks up, though, his eyes are gleaming the way they do before he’s about to gloat. I hold in a sigh and decide to let him. He did suffer the humiliation not just of losing to me but of becoming a spore-infected alien/porcupine, after all.

Only Seb doesn’t gloat. Or at least, not in any way I’m expecting him to. Instead he leans in and says unabashedly, “Just so you know—if it ever seemed like I was the right person at the right time—it would be an honor to be your first kiss.”

For a moment I’m too stunned to react. I cycle through my familiar options: Counter him with a sarcastic remark. Don’t say anything at all, so he doesn’t have the satisfaction of thinking his words meant anything. And then a third unfamiliar option: Kiss him.

It’s an option I don’t just feel in my head, but all over my body. Maybe not an option at all, but a demand. Ghosting on my lips, tingling in my arms, fluttering in my chest.

“Duck!”

We’re too busy staring at each other to register the word, and both end up getting chucked in the head by balled-up pieces of paper.

“What the—”

“Have a day!” someone clad in an entirely silver outfit calls from behind a tree, before making a break for it so fast that we might have imagined them.

Seb looks as bewildered as I do. Even more so when we look down to see the papers balled at our feet are both tied together with silver ribbon.

“Every time I think this day can’t get weirder,” I say, reaching for the one in my lap.

Seb unties his, too, uncrumpling them to find that they’re both in the shapes of an “S.” Written in squished handwriting around the curves of the letter are the words, You and a guest are chaotically invited to this year’s Alphabet Party. If you are not dressed as something that starts with the letter “S,” you will be swiftly stopped, speedily sequestered, surely sorry. Just under it is an address and a day and time next week.

“Dare I even ask what this is?” Seb asks.

“My ticket to being the best fucking roommate on the planet, is what it is,” I say gleefully.

Christina mostly put the Alphabet Party on the Bitch List as a pipe dream. Nobody knows how to get invited because there’s no rhyme or reason to it. The Random Acts of Chaos club commits to the bit.

But I can cross this off the list for her, and maybe it'll help make up for all the ones she's had to put off. I'm so pleased with myself and full of the strange adrenaline of the day that this time I'm the one who leans in and grabs Seb's face, pressing my thumbs to his lips and loudly smacking my fingers. It's a quick, cheesy version of what he did earlier, but as I pivot and start making a break for the dorms, I swear the tips of his ears are pinker than I've ever seen them.

"So I'll see you then?" Seb calls after me.

"Surely, stupendously, and sincerely!" I call back.

If I'm still thinking of those pink ears of his on the way home, that's nobody's business but my own.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:20 am

“I hate to be so redundant with the way I start these meetings, but we’re doomed.”

I’ve been to four Newsbag meetings now—the interest meeting, a one-on-one meeting with Amara for a few tweaks to tighten the quiz, the meeting where we all finalized the layout for the issue coming out next week, and today’s meeting where they’re going over ideas for the next one—so I know that this is the part where Amara bats Rowan lightly somewhere on their person to discourage the doomsday talk.

Today, though, Amara sighs deeply enough to make me marvel at her lung capacity.

“Ruh-roh,” says Colby, the current Style writer, her face hidden behind her bejeweled hands.

Amara reaches across the desk at the front of the room to grab Rowan’s coffee cup and take a pull of it with the energy of someone shotgunning a beer. “Same story, different day. The athletes are royals and we are mere peasants fighting for scraps.”

“Hey. That’s not fair,” pipes up Joey from the seat next to mine. His voice is lighthearted as always, but just under it is a clear shade of hurt. “We’re not seeing any of that money. They’re practically hanging us out to dry.”

“Is that so, baseball boy?” says Genevieve, the current Local News writer. “Last I checked those new locker rooms were looking swankier than any building I’ve stepped foot in on this entire campus. One of those plush towels probably costs half the price of printing Newsbag alone.”

Joey's face reddens. "It's not like any of us asked for that. Unlike the student-run groups, we don't get to decide where any of the money goes."

"Can confirm," says Colby. "I know you all conveniently forget that I'm a tennis jock, because unlike Joey here, I don't dress like I've been trapped in an Under Armour warehouse for the past decade, but we are all work and no pay. They get to run us ragged, but most of that money is probably going to the football coaching staff so they can twiddle their thumbs with caviar."

Joey is so plainly relieved at Colby's support that I almost chime in, too. Thanks to the cross-country team's antics and the pressure of keeping her scholarship, Christina is a light breeze away from losing her mind. When I presented her with the invitation to the Alphabet Party, she didn't hug me or high-five me but burst into sleep-deprived, happy tears.

Which is to say, I've got even more eyes on her than usual. But at this specific moment I have another more pressing concern than Christina or even the imminent peril of the zine, which is that Seb's not here.

"Okay. So in summation, every single one of us is fucked, athletes and nerds and hybrids included," Amara concedes. "Which leads us to our leading item for today, which is that the school wants to cut our funding in half."

"Which would mean either losing the site or losing the physical version of the zine," says Rowan.

I don't need any elaboration for why either of those things would have catastrophic implications for Newsbag. They can't lose the physical zines without losing the entire heart of what Newsbag was in the first place. But on the other hand, without the web presence, there's no permanent searchable archive of what's written—meaning those of us who are hoping to use Newsbag to leverage opportunities beyond Maple Ride

are fucked.

One of the freshmen who has been attending the meetings as a potential freelance writer raises her hand. Rowan bites back a smirk at the formality and says, “You have the floor.”

“What if we printed something in Newsbag about all of this? Called out the administration?”

I resist the urge to press an impatient finger to the bridge of my nose. It’s a nice thought, but an unoriginal one. If she’d been reading even the past few months of the zine, she’d see all the work Rowan has done questioning the administration’s use of its finances—a natural extension of the work they were doing on the admissions process before they even got in.

Sure enough, Rowan’s lips form a tight smile. “I think we’re going to need to try something a little louder than that at this point.”

Their eyes scan the room then, and I know they’re looking for Seb. Underdog narratives like this are precisely Seb’s beat. I wouldn’t be surprised if Seb caught up with Amara and Rowan about the funding issues after the debacle the night of the Dorm Food-Off, or even before then.

But I can’t be irritated with Seb for that without a physical Seb to project said irritation on. So I pull out my phone and do something I’ve only ever done a handful of times, and text Seb of my own free will.

?????

Seb has his read receipts on, but they don’t pop up right away. My stomach does an unpleasant little lurch that I attribute to today’s dining hall lunch, a concoction bold

enough to call itself chicken tenders.

“Which is why we’re starting this meeting with an unconventional ask, which is basically, does anyone have any ideas for bucking the system here?” Amara gives us all a grim smile. “At this point we’re at the end of our rope.”

Another freshman starts to raise his hand and then at the last second thinks better of it. “What about our alums?” he asks. “Don’t we have people like—writing for Netflix and Hub Seed and doing copy for celebrity booze brands? They can’t donate?”

Unlike me, Rowan does not resist the urge to press their fingers to the bridge of their nose. At least they can play it off as fiddling with their glasses.

“We can’t actually stipulate where any school donations go,” they explain patiently.

Amara nods. “Or else the Knitting Club would be in charge of not only the school but possibly the entire planet.”

Joey’s fists are flexing open and closed on top of the desk, lost in some thought. Rowan takes notice and says, “Hey, no bad ideas. You got something?”

Joey’s head snaps up, his expression apologetic. “I just—wish there was some way for the athletes and student orgs to work together for this. But I don’t think there’s a lot of crossover.”

Amara frowns. “There are plenty of athletes in student orgs.”

Joey shakes his head. “I mean in terms of, like, what we need. The athletes have too much money but no control. The student orgs have some control but no money. I’m not sure how we could team up and somehow ask for all of it at once. It’s just all kind of complicated.”

Something clicks into place then, like my brain has been churning since the beginning of the semester and finally has just the right ingredients to form a plan. The Dorm Food-Off meets the interactive-theater improv meets the Random Acts of Chaos club, and when I put it all together it might solve the student orgs' and athletes' issues.

"Maybe we just go full chaos then," I say.

Two dozen sets of eyes swivel to look at me. I should be used to it from all the time I spent leading the school newspaper. But this is more eyes than I've ever had on me when I'm about to say something that is the antithesis of Good Responsible Sadie. I feel another lurch in my stomach.

But then Joey sits up a little straighter on one side of me, and one of the freshmen leans in on the other, and I remember this isn't about me but all of us.

"Define 'full chaos,'" says Amara, already intrigued.

I press my palms flat to the top of the desk in front of me, grounding myself. Even then I can't help flitting my eyes toward the door as if Seb might miraculously emerge from it. It's strange, voicing this without him. Usually we're witness to each other's power moves. I've gotten used to the irritating way we build off each other, always compulsively finding ways to make the other's ideas even better and being entirely too smug in the process.

But Seb and his smugness are nowhere to be found. I just have to rely on myself.

I take a quick breath to steady myself and lock eyes with Amara. "Last week at the Dorm Food-Off you said something as a joke—about how if the administration mistook us for jocks they'd fund us."

Amara nods carefully. "I stand by it, even if I only believe in running shoes as

decoration.”

“So maybe we spend a day doing that. Pretending to be student athletes. All of us, across the student orgs. We all dress up like we’re going to practices, carry basketballs and tennis rackets around, ask the university to sign waivers for us to miss classes for travel games and generally make ourselves mild nuisances for an entire day.” I clear my throat. My phone lights up then with a text back from Seb, but I can’t look at it now—I’m on a roll. “So then when the administration asks what the hell we’re up to, we say we’re not categorizing ourselves as organizations anymore, but sports. So they have to fund us, too.”

My little monologue is met with a resounding silence that at first I don’t know how to interpret. Which is fine, because I’ll probably die of whatever was in those “chicken tenders” before the embarrassment can get to me anyway.

“So basically just like—a ripple. So everyone on campus knows about the funding issue. Not just the people reading Newsbag or the ones directly affected by it,” says Joey.

I turn, so relieved I could hug him. “Yes. Exactly.”

“You did say you wanted something unconventional,” says Colby from behind us.

When I finally hazard a glance at Amara, her eyes are bright like a little kid who just figured out how to tip over a cookie jar. “Okay. Keep saying things.”

“It could be like the Dorm Food-Off,” I say, the idea forming in my head as I go. “We get all the student orgs involved. We get the athletes involved, too.”

I look over to Joey and Colby, who both nod their enthusiasm. “We could help supply the equipment,” says Colby. “Not my usual version of styling people on campus, but

you know what? I bet a bunch of us would be down.”

Joey’s expression has lost all of the unease from earlier. He looks energized enough to start shoving baseball hats and mitts onto the entire Newsbag crew immediately. “Then we could have the student orgs try to register themselves as sports, with an athlete there to ‘vouch’ for them so they can get the funding.”

“There would have to be something in this for the athletes, too,” says Rowan, who evidently already has a solution to that. “One thing we’re able to do that they’re not is we can see how the funding is divvied up between the student orgs. Full transparency.”

“Imagine that,” says Colby wryly, inspecting her nails.

Rowan pulls their laptop off the desk and starts typing into it as they speak. “So the jock in each pair would try to get them registered, and when they say no, the student-org rep could ask to see the school funding again. Ask why we only get to see where our money is going, and not the athletes’.”

“Only after a healthy amount of making a spectacle on campus all day,” says Amara. “We want to get their attention first. So far the stuff we’ve been publishing or quick stunts we’ve been doing haven’t worked. We’d need to fully commit.”

I just manage to stop myself from blinking in surprise then, because it’s clear we’re not just considering my idea but that Rowan and Amara are full-on running with it.

“And we’d need people to represent each club and be willing to go to the administration. I could do it for Newsbag, ” says Rowan. “But I’d have to reach out to the others, see what they’re thinking.”

“Yes, yes,” Amara agrees. “Okay. Shit.” She shoots me a wide grin. “I like where

your head's at, Sadie. Let's hammer out some more details for this at the end of the meeting, and see if we can't get other orgs and athletes on board."

We move on to discuss topics and pitches for the next zine then. I'm trying not to look like someone happy enough to catapult themselves to the damn moon when Joey leans in, clearly about to say something, only to get interrupted by Rowan asking, "Joey, where are we at with that film club event? Did they decide on a theme?"

When I glance back down at my phone there's a reply from Seb. I covertly swipe my screen.

Engineering stuff. Tell my future fellow staff members I say hi

I wince on Seb's behalf. Then unwince. Because yes, that's bad for him, but good for me, right? At least that's how the scale always used to tip in my head. Now it feels like it's on the fritz.

Too late—already told them you're back on your home planet, spores and all, I text back just the same.

Seb hasn't texted back by the end of the meeting, which we finish up earlier than expected. We're all talking fast now, building on the idea of what we're now calling Jock for a Day and brainstorming little ways we can cause a commotion without causing a disruption—basically, get the attention of the administration without getting in the way of classes.

We can only get so far with the idea before we see how many people are willing to get on board with it, so we end on a high note, with Rowan, Amara, Colby, and Joey agreeing to get in touch with the people who run the student orgs and the captains of different teams to see what the vibe is. Joey catches up with me on the way out the door.

“Hey, that idea of yours? Badass.”

I try not to smile too hard and reveal how borderline smug I am about it. “Well, only if it works,” I point out.

We fall into step easily, the same way we did at the farmers market just before I revealed that I am, in fact, the most oblivious human alive. We’ve texted back and forth a few times since then, but both got swept up in tests we had to study for, so the decision of whether to go on a date has conveniently been tabled for now.

Which is a relief, because if I’m being honest, I haven’t given much thought to it at all. My entire frontal lobe is just the second Newsbag piece with, like, two other brain cells devoted to checking in on my family.

“Why wouldn’t it work?” Joey asks.

I shrug. “I mean, there’s no saying the jocks will want to get in on this anyway.”

“‘Jocks,’ huh?” Joey teases.

“I may have watched a fair amount of High School Musical: The Musical: The Series,” I confess. “I’m conditioned.”

“No, I like it. Makes us sound cool,” says Joey, shifting his shoulders into a cool-guy slouch. “And I actually think the ‘jocks’ would be more into it than you think. I get the impression the other teams on campus are worked up about all this, too. It’s just we’re not like the student-run orgs—we’re kept totally separate, so it’s not like we can be, like, ‘Hey, are you also feeling like the school is sucking you dry?’”

“Yikes. It’s that bad?”

Joey's lips tilt to the side. "Yeah, it's not great. Spring semester was total whiplash last year. Zero sport-life-work balance, especially for the scholarship kids, you know?" He gestures vaguely in the direction of our school's monstrous stadium on the other side of campus. "No matter where the money's going, there's a lot of pressure for all the teams to keep up our winning streak, so practices are off the rails sometimes. Maple Ride has a rep to protect."

It makes me think of Seb's piece on how unprepared a lot of us are for sex and relationships after finishing high school—how the sudden independence doesn't come with an instruction manual or, really, any tangible support.

"It sounds like you guys need some kind of advocate. Like a neutral third party."

"Guess we'll be each other's advocates for now. Sweeties unite."

I snicker despite myself. "It's never not funny to me that we call ourselves 'Sweeties' when most of us had to crush our entire high schools to get in here."

"I like it. Keeps the other schools on their toes," says Joey. He turns to me suddenly, eyes crinkling. "Also, dibs on dressing you up as a baseball team member. Colby will try and get you in tennis gear, but trust me. The baseball crew is where it's at."

I sidestep the part where that means I'd likely be wearing Joey's jersey all day, because that feels very girlfriend-adjacent. "Joke's on you when I start singing 'Take Me Out to the Ball Game' at the top of my lungs all over campus," I say instead.

"So we're throwing in a free concert, too?" Joey quips. "Anyway, if you really want to fit in you'll have to learn how to do our 'jock' handshake."

"Oh, yeah? How does that go?"

Joey stops on the sidewalk, then gamely lifts a hand up for a high five. I raise my eyebrows at him but lift my hand to his. He seizes it, weaving his fingers through mine. “It’s like this,” he says, and then in slow motion pulls me in so we knock elbows and bump chests. “Except, you know, all fast and macho, with an excessive amount of grunting.”

“Gotcha.” I pull my hand out of his. “Okay, try me again. If I’m gonna be a jock, I’ve got to go full Method.”

Joey grins, and this time when we seize hands we work up enough momentum to thud into each other. “Rah! Jocky jock! Sportsball team,” I exclaim, adding a series of grunts. Joey laughs and we stumble into each other, nearly knocking foreheads before we find our footing again.

“Perfect,” he says, with a happy lilt in his voice. “Welcome to the sportsball team.”

We’re still laughing when I turn to get us on the main path back to the dorms, where someone is fully stopped and staring at us. Not, not someone—Seb. He looks as if he’s suspended midmotion, the way rabbits do on the edge of the sidewalk when they hear you coming and don’t know which direction to run.

“Oh, shit,” says Joey. “You just missed the meeting, but I think there are still a few people in there.”

Seb opens his mouth to answer Joey, but his eyes are on me. “Right,” he says after a moment.

“Rowan made smoked-butterscotch cookies,” I add. What I really want to do is ask why Seb is acting like he just fell into a wormhole and got spat back out in this exact spot, but it feels like too personal of a thing to ask in front of Joey.

I'm reconsidering, though, when Seb takes a step back and says, "I'll just read the catch-up email."

"You sure?" Joey asks. "I bet they could use your thoughts—Sadie here came up with an awesome idea to get more eyes on the funding issue."

That seems to rattle Seb back into his body a bit. "Oh, did she?" he asks.

His tone is just wry enough that I'm expecting him to rib me about it. In fact, I'm kind of hoping he will, because this Seb is worrying me a little. But before Seb can say anything else, Joey wraps an arm around my shoulders and pulls me in.

"Sure did," says Joey, giving me a quick, proud squeeze. "It's going to be epic."

Seb's eyes lose that gleam of mischief, and instead look between me and Joey, settling on the space where I'm half-tucked into him. I'm so unused to the expression on his face that there's a split second when I wonder if Seb could actually be jealous.

But then Seb smiles. It's not a particularly bright smile, but it's a firm one. "Well, good," he says. "Yeah, I'll, uh—I'll go check in. See if I can't help with anything."

"Sounds good, man," says Joey, releasing me to give Seb a cheerful wave.

Joey angles himself toward the main path, but I don't move just yet, watching the back of Seb as he walks into the building.

"Huh."

I don't realize I've voiced that nonthought out loud until Joey asks, "What?"

I shake my head and start walking.

“Oh—I dunno. Seb and I have this thing where we usually, like, lightly eviscerate each other for sport,” I explain.

“Yeah, I noticed,” says Joey. And then, after a beat, “We all did.”

“I’m worried he’s been body-snatched,” I say. “Who knows what I just sent in to talk to Amara and Rowan?”

Joey shrugs again. “Or maybe you’re both just growing out of it. Becoming real friends.”

I half choke in my effort not to laugh. Joey looks mildly concerned, but I don’t even entertain the idea of explaining it to him. I don’t think I could explain what Seb and I are to each other in any singular word, but friends certainly isn’t it. Whatever we are, it goes so deep that the word feels too flimsy for it. Like there should be a new word, something as crackling and maddening and inevitable as we are.

“Maybe,” I say instead.

But I still feel uneasy, and then uneasier still the longer the day goes on. A feeling I can’t find the root of until it’s time to set my alarm to go to sleep, and I realize Seb never texted me back. No, that’s not the realization—it’s that I wanted him to, and my disappointment is just one more thing about Seb I can’t fully explain.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:20 am

I've spent so many years dreaming about getting a byline in Newsbag that I practically astral-projected myself into the fantasy of it. In said fantasy, I'd be walking on campus on a bright sunny day in one of those swishy "cast in a Netflix rom-com getting released on Valentine's Day" types of dresses with a copy of the zine tucked under my arm, calling my family to laugh about the best jokes I managed to land, checking my Instagram to see how many people liked my post about it.

What happens instead is that I get profusely rained on while clad in one of Joey's baseball jerseys, a pair of Christina's running shorts, my Maple Ride baseball hat, and a fanny pack full of Colby's old tennis balls, and the current state of my human body could be roughly described as "someone tried to drown Frankenstein's jock."

Thankfully, that does nothing to lessen the emotional impact of seeing my name in print. Sadie Brighton, hot off the press.

"Are you going to cry? Because the shorts you're wearing are actually super absorbent," says Christina.

I carefully set the soggy copy of the zine down on my desk. Christina was up for an early morning practice and when she saw copies being delivered on the back of some kid's bike, she used her powerful legs to somehow outpace him and demand a copy to bring back to me. Which is how I woke up to a zine actively dripping rainwater two inches from my face, and am now partially soaked because I hugged a waterlogged Christina hard enough to wring her out like a sponge.

"It's just—look at that fancy blue ink. That custom Newsbag font," I nearly blubber.

Christina pats me on the back. “Times New Roman could never. So how are we celebrating?”

“By becoming a public nuisance,” I say, gesturing to my outfit. “Jock for a Day commences in one hour.”

“Ugh. Of course it’s the day I have two tests stacked one after the other. But we should do something this weekend.” Christina gazes longingly at her bursting closet. “I lugged five different hot girl outfits here and they’re collecting dust.”

I reach up and lightly knock on her forehead with my knuckles. “We’re already going out this weekend. The Alphabet Party?”

“That’s this weekend?” Christina exclaims. “Oh, dear god, I have completely lost the plot on my entire life. Okay. Friday. Alphabet Party. I’m going to Sharpie that to my forehead and everything should be fine.”

I squint at her face. “A better friend would stop you, but I feel like you could pull it off.”

Christina’s already halfway out the door, but she quickly leans in and hugs me hard. “I’ll clear out so you can FaceTime the fam. I love them, but it’s too early in the morning for me to handle those decibels.”

She’s out the door before the words register, first with an uneasy lurch and then a thunk. I never told them about the quiz; I still haven’t even told them about Newsbag. In my defense it’s always hard to get a word in edgewise when I’m getting passed around my family members like a hot potato, but it’s not like my parents haven’t asked what I’m getting up to here. It’s just—it feels like there are more reasons not to tell them than to tell them.

It's not just the complication of explaining myself anymore. It's that I've had a taste of what it might be like, close enough to this dream to rub up on the edges of the reality of it, that I don't want it with the ache I used to have—I want it so badly that it feels like it's leaking into my bones. Like my structural integrity will be compromised without it, and I'll fold like a cheap Halloween skeleton.

Which is to say, if I lose, it will be the biggest disappointment of my life. I don't want to have to deal with their feelings about it, too, especially when they're always so much louder than mine.

And if that's not enough to stop me, then Seb's parents are. Telling them about Newsbag only complicated his life. I never would have predicted his dad would be so adamant about engineering, about Seb keeping Blue Ridge open as an option, with it all hinging on Newsbag . If there's a plot twist like that on the horizon for me, well—better not to find out.

So I don't call home. I leave the zine safely on my desk beside my laptop and ignore the new ache that's blooming in me—the one that wants to call my parents, that wants to know they're proud. Not just for something I did to impress them, but something I finally did just for myself.

Thankfully, there isn't much time to wallow in this particular brand of self-inflicted misery. Within the hour we're all assembled in the same lecture hall where we held the Dorm Food-Off, only this time it's twice as packed and 1000 percent more athletically inclined. The place is a sea of field hockey sticks settled across desks and basketballs rolling on the floor and at least four members of the crew team in an earnest knockdown argument about which flavor of Gatorade reigns supreme.

I'm not worried about finding the members of Newsbag in the crowd because my Seb sonar is as spot-on as ever. Once I decide to scan the crowd for him, it takes approximately point two seconds for me to find a familiar head of just the right

amount of messy brown hair with—you guessed it—the same baseball cap I have on my head, also slung backward. He looks up and spots me at the precise moment, his eyes bright, shifting so I can see he’s wearing his roommate’s soccer uniform.

A uniform so tight on Seb that it does not leave much to the imagination. I blink to look away—to look away, I remind my brain firmly, when my eyes completely fail at the task—but the damage is done. I’ve seen the way the lanky muscles of his arm flex against the sleeve, the way his shoulders shift under the back of the shirt.

I brace myself for my brain to cut to commercial. It does not. Instead it just—short-circuits.

Perfect. Great. It’s not like I was using it to help commandeer an entire campus-wide stunt with implications that will affect the zine I’ve pinned all my hopes and dreams on, and subsequently my entire professional future, or anything.

I’ve collected myself by the time I cross the maelstrom of student orgs and jocks and “hybrids,” as Amara dubs them. Seb’s grin is back in full force, to my relief. I caught some shades of it when we accidentally on purpose met each other to eat peanut butter banana pancakes at Pancake It or Leave It on Sunday, but even that was short-lived. Somehow the prep for Jock for a Day got us on the topic of a field day competition from middle school, where we derailed an entire relay race by trying to steal each other’s batons and chuck them over the fence on the last leg. We spent so much time smack-talking each other about it that Betty told us to “take our repressed hormones somewhere else” because she “didn’t have enough insurance on this place to handle the fallout.”

Despite the grin, I don’t miss Seb’s eyes flickering to the back of my jersey, emblazoned with FORREST , Joey’s last name. His face doesn’t shift at all when he looks back at me.

“Sadie, we have to talk. It’s embarrassing how badly you want to be me. Everyone here can see you’re trying to cop my style.”

I reach up and knock the brim of his hat so it ends up sideways on his head. It’s unfortunately even more endearing than before.

“What’s embarrassing is how much better I pull it off than you,” I counter.

Seb’s eyes look me up and down, so fast I nearly miss it. I certainly don’t miss the part where he doesn’t disagree.

“Well, live it up while you can. You’re going to have to start wearing clothes more befitting of a published Newsbag writer now. Or at least for the next two weeks.”

He nudges me lightly with his elbow, which feels strangely like higher praise than if he’d congratulated me again.

“You’re that confident your piece is going to beat mine out?” I ask.

Because, yes, Seb may be tackling a nuanced, deeply personal topic, the kind that few writers at his age would have the sensitivity and experience to do justice. But that doesn’t mean I’m not still coming at this competition with everything I’ve got. I put a callout in our dorm to see if anyone wanted to talk about their relationships with their families both before and after coming to Maple Ride. I don’t necessarily have a concise peg I’m going to center the story on yet, but I’ve talked to enough people to understand that when it comes to the heart of it, we’re all in the same strange tug-of-war with ourselves: the relief of being away from home, and the guilt of the relief; the ache of missing people, and the shame of feeling needy about it. We’re all swerving on one end of that rope or the other, and judging from the conversations I’ve had, it changes by the hour for everyone else, too.

“What can I say?” says Seb. “I’m moving the goalpost. Out of your league. Really on the ball. Settling the score—”

“One more sports pun and I’m calling the whole thing off,” I threaten.

Seb grins. “I suppose I should save some. We do have a long day of jock shenanigans ahead of us.”

I turn to look at the sea of humans in mismatched athletic gear and various degrees of awake just as someone in the crowd holds up a phone blasting “Eye of the Tiger.”

“Hell, right,” I say. “Let’s go out there and make Ted Lasso proud.”

It’s been a week since I first pitched the idea, but since then all the student clubs and participating athletes brainstormed and agreed on a collective plan—one that involves converting each student-run org into a “sport” for the day. Within a half hour, we’re assembled. Newsbag is now a Hacky-Sack team; the Rainbow Maple Ride Alliance is now a badminton team; the Foodie Club is something called a “Cheese Tossing Team,” which seems to involve several wrapped mozzarella balls and perhaps more eating than tossing, power to them. Then to give a united front between the student orgs and the jocks, each of our teams has one or two “jock representatives,” most often members of their own clubs, to act as captain of their sport.

After that, we commence Phase One: causing light pandemonium during the rush between classes on campus by staging impromptu games on the edges of sidewalks, close to the main doors, near the statues where people eat lunch. Essentially taking a page from the Random Acts of Chaos Club by causing a distraction but not actually getting in anyone’s way.

Then later in the afternoon, Phase Two: we escalate things a bit by doing the noisier, more attention grabbing “sports” closer to Main Street, giving the entire

neighborhood a view of the Knitting Club's low-key bloodthirsty game of capture the flag and the Jelly Bean Appreciation Society's admittedly impressive flash mob dance to "I Want Candy."

Throughout both these phases, anyone not participating in the sports bits (read: the entire Bird Watching Society, bless their terrified hearts) follow close behind handing out flyers to curious passersby explaining the bit. That we're all in "practice" right now to form our own sports teams, so we can reregister our clubs as athletic organizations and get the money we need to maintain our official statuses on campus.

Then, of course, the grand finale of Phase Three: a giant game of dodgeball. Not just any game, but a massive one on the quad outside the school's main office, which happens to be scheduled to start precisely five minutes before the biannual meeting with their most important donors lets out.

By the time we're all lined up for Phase Three with our various items to dodge—badminton birds, dance sweatbands, flags, and literal cheese balls included—everyone is in a happy, delirious, post-jock high. In the little Newsbag huddle we're readying our hacky sacks and swapping stories, everyone's eyes bright, half on the crowd and half on the office where the meeting is underway.

"I think the badminton bit awakened something in half the members of the Rainbow Maple Ride Alliance," says Seb. I glance a few feet away to see Rowan and Angie with two other members, holding up their rackets and posing like Charlie's Angels for the camera. "We may have lost them to the jocks for good."

"The whole damn town is jocks now, by that definition," says Colby. "Johnny whipped out the playlist after the flash mob. I haven't seen that many people attempt the Macarena since my great-uncle's second wedding."

Off the confused looks of the freshmen, Amara explains, "Johnny owns the bar-diner

downtown. The playlist is like—legendary. Elder millennial meets TikTok generation meets karaoke hits. Very potent. Must be used sparingly.”

Joey slides in, unapologetically sweaty and grinning, and throws a casual arm around me and Seb both. “You didn’t hear it from me. But Betty didn’t not help the Knitting Club cheat at capture the flag with a mere flick of her eyes.”

“We’ll keep your secret only because I fear your life might depend on it,” I say solemnly.

Seb looks out at the quad. “Question is, will the rest of this crowd? Sadie’s got half the school roped into this now.”

Sure enough, the crowd of students is at least twice as large as it was this morning. It’s loud. It’s raucous. And suddenly, when I notice Amara, Rowan, and a few of the senior athletes head to the top of the steps on the quad to get our attention, I feel a familiar dread pool in my stomach.

It’s pronounced and sudden enough that I have to take a step back from the cluster of the Newsbag team. It doesn’t make the noise or the commotion any less wild. I glance around, my head reeling through a familiar loop—distract them; compromise with them; find the magic words to put a stop to it, fast—

“You good?”

Joey is in front of me, Seb a step behind. The mood is still light, their faces still lit with laughter. The only one panicking here is me.

“Yeah,” I manage. “I was just—”

Trying to figure out how to tell a group of people I actively riled up to shut

themselves down.

“Just what?” Joey asks.

I flounder. I should brush it off, but the feeling in my gut demands that I don’t.

“Worried about things getting out of hand,” I say, trying to keep my voice even.

“Nah,” says Joey easily, looking back out at the crowd. “People are just having a good time, is all.”

“Right. Of course. But...”

My cheeks flood with embarrassment. But it’s my job to stop the noise.

Hasn’t it always been? I’ve spent so much of my life trying to smooth the loud edges of my family, trying to make us stick out less. Making little negotiations with my sisters to stop them from bickering with our parents. Constantly taking the temperature of the room and everyone in it so I’m never surprised by an outburst. Making excuses for them whenever we were in public and they were over the top.

That meant being a certain kind of Sadie, one I haven’t really been since I got here. But now that Sadie is trying to claw her way out of me because she knows, she knows that all this clamor is my fault. Seb said so himself. For once, I’m not on the outside of chaos looking in; I’m the one who instigated it.

I’m not sure why it’s hitting me sideways now when it hasn’t all day. Maybe it’s just that we’ve reached a fever pitch. Or that I know there’s a potential for us to get in real trouble, depending on how this goes, and with that comes the guilt of knowing it won’t be only my future on the line.

“Hey.”

Seb’s voice is close, and somehow the others are farther away. That magnetism of his is impossible to ignore even mid–nonsense spiral.

He waits until I meet his eye, then crouches down a few inches, making a show of examining my face.

“What?” I demand.

“Nothing. Trick of the light, I think.” He steps back, his expression wry and challenging. “It’s just for a second there you looked like a person who might be having doubts about this.”

I dig the heels of my sneakers into the grass. “I’m not.”

“Good.” He reaches up then to adjust my baseball cap, planting it more firmly on the top of my head. “Because I think ‘new Sadie’ is ready to embrace the chaos.”

Jesus. I must really look some type of way if my mortal enemy feels the need to pull me aside for an emergency pep talk. I try to use that damning realization to snap out of it, but if anything it only makes it worse. Seb doesn’t just see me. He sees me. Even if I try to play this off, we’ve got to see the rest of this stunt through. There’s nowhere to hide.

“I’m not new Sadie,” I say “I’m just—old Sadie.”

Seb shakes his head. “This has got all versions of Sadie written all over it.”

I duck my head but keep my eyes on the crowd just beyond us. “What, forming a small army of loud, sweaty coeds who keep using ‘cheese ball’ as a verb?”

Seb says the words so plainly and deliberately that it's clear he doesn't want me to miss a single one. "Making people laugh," he says. As if on cue, a small cluster of students erupts in laughter at "You turned this into something fun. Now people want to be a part of it. It's good chaos."

Good chaos. I feel some reluctant part of my heart squeeze around those words. I've been avoiding any kind of chaos for so long that leaning into this feels like it's rattling every instinct I have.

Seb's voice is low but firm. "Amara and Rowan wouldn't have roped everyone into this if it weren't a good idea." He doesn't give me a beat to respond. Just tilts his head toward the crowd like there's no room for argument. "Now, come on. I have a hacky sack to accidentally on purpose throw at your head."

"We're on the same dodgeball team!" I remind him.

"Ah, sorry. Couldn't hear you over the sound of all these new jocks you created," says Seb, making a show of rubbing an ear.

I hold up my own hacky sack. "Better hope you've still got those improv reflexes ready, theater kid."

"Do your worst, book club."

It does take a minute or so to calm everyone down enough for Rowan to talk out the rules to the crowd, which are essentially 1. Make as much noise as possible, and 2. Don't make anyone cry, but otherwise goes without a hitch. Seb takes my side when we line up with our half of the two randomly divided dodgeball teams, and Joey takes the other, only just noticing that the Knitting Club is on the other side.

"Tell my roommate I tolerated him," says Joey grimly.

Rowan cups their hands over their mouth, then, and yells out to the crowd, “On your marks... get set... DODGE!”

If I thought the race for ingredients at 7-Eleven the other week was a scene, this is a full-on production. The two sides come at each other not unlike we’re re-creating a dweeby collegiate version of the Peloponnesian War, which is all well and good except that nobody thought to find a way to differentiate between the two sides. Within a minute we’re all just hollering and lawlessly chucking various lightweight items and cheese at each other while the Bird Watching Society adds to the noise with literal birdcall whistles and the Random Acts of Chaos Club, for reasons beyond us all, starts blasting a playlist of random themes from John Williams scores.

It doesn’t take long for the meeting to let out, or at the very least for the dean to let himself out of it. He’s wearing a suit and looking like a deeply irritated version of the Monopoly man, and only looks less pleased when Rowan, Amara, and the two senior athletes cheerfully come up the steps to meet him. I pause mid-mozzarella throw to try and catch what they’re saying.

“... permission for this?”

“Oh, we did,” says Rowan. “Since student-run organizations aren’t able to reserve campus space without filling out all that paperwork you keep losing, we got the track team here to do it for us.”

“Well, consider it unsanctioned by the school,” says the dean, his voice clipped and threatening. “Break this up.”

“What’s all this about?” asks a well-dressed woman emerging from the building, tilting her head at the quad in confusion and mild amusement.

A few others are close on her heels—a group so similarly well-dressed and confident

in their “I definitely have a second property on a beach somewhere” postures that they can only be the rest of the donors.

“Hi,” says Amara with a winning grin. “What you see here is sports ! We were just student organizations this morning, but since the dean said the funding is all tied up in the athletic department, we thought we would make it easier on him. We’re all athletes now!”

“We’re actually on our way inside to register all our teams,” says Rowan, gesturing at the sign for the student-activities office.

One of the athletes, a member of the crew team, chimes in, “A bunch of student athletes even came out to help them, since it’s their first time being sports teams and all. And while we were inside we were hoping to see where all the funding for the athletes goes. Since you let the student orgs see where their pennies are going.”

It’s well rehearsed, biting, and absolutely perfect. They don’t have just the donors’ attention but their indignation.

And a whole lot else from the dean, who looks sweatier than most of the students still running amok on the quad. “This is not the appropriate place or time to have this discussion,” he says through his teeth.

Amara’s voice is sweet as honey. “And where would be the appropriate place? Seems like you’re out of the office whenever we try to lock down a time to speak.”

He opens his mouth to protest, but one of the donors interrupts. “No, I want to hear them out. Let’s go inside.”

The dean turns to the group with a tight smile. “I’m sure we don’t want to take up any more of your valuable time today,” he says. “And besides, they need to break up this

little stunt of theirs before I'm forced to figure out who's responsible for it and decide the appropriate consequence."

My blood almost freezes then, but Amara and Rowan don't even flinch.

"I don't see a stunt. I see kids who want their voices heard," says the first donor who walked out, her jaw set. She tilts her head at Amara. "Let's see if we can't get your 'sports teams' registered, hmm?"

"Sounds marvelous," says Amara.

She lets the donors lead the students inside, turning at the last second to shoot me a wink. I feel the impact of it like someone just shot glitter into my veins.

"Holy shit," says Seb from next to me. "Holy shit. "

I turn to him in similar shock, a grin cracking across my face. "Tell me we didn't just hallucinate that."

"Nah. Watching your little plan work is probably the least surprising thing that's happened today," says Seb.

I shake my head. "I didn't do anything."

"Sure," says Seb. "But to be clear, I'm only letting you criminally undersell yourself because it'll help my odds at winning this."

I nudge his shoulder with mine. "Nobody's winning anything if we're all in detention for the rest of our lives."

"Ah, yes. Detention. That punishment they famously dole out in college institutions

to legal adults,” Seb teases. Then he rocks back on his heels slightly, shaking his head as he looks up at the front steps to the office. “Man, I can’t wait to hear you tell this story at Marley’s party. Nobody’s ever gonna believe you’re a little rabble-rouser now.”

The words knock me off-kilter. “Marley’s party,” I repeat, because it sounds odd coming out of Seb’s mouth when I’ve barely heard anything about it from Marley herself.

“Assuming nobody blows the roof off your house before then,” Seb acknowledges. “Hadley told me about the vacuum-robot uprising.”

I blink. I thought the latest debacle of Doomba (which did, in fact, attempt to escape through the patio door one night last week to inflict god only knows what kind of punishment on its creators) was privileged Brighton-family information.

“She did?”

“We’ve texted,” says Seb, tilting his head at me like he’s surprised I don’t already know that. “Mostly theater stuff, since she’s thinking of trying out.”

I blink again. “She is?”

My question gets swallowed up by the sudden surge of the Jelly Bean Appreciation Society lining up for an encore of their flash mob, which they’re now attempting to do in slow motion to the theme from Jurassic Park.

I sidestep both them and Seb, trying to process. Of course I was planning to go back for Marley’s twenty-second birthday, but I didn’t realize he was, too. That judging from the genuine excitement in his eyes, he wants to. And yes, I knew Hadley was planning on joining some new clubs, but I’ve been so busy examining family

relationships for this piece the past few days that, ironically, I haven't had much time for my own. Yet here's Seb, picking up where I left off, filling in the gaps.

But none of that is half as surprising as another revelation. The thing is, I've spent my whole life alternately embarrassed about my family, or embarrassed to be embarrassed about them. Trying to reconcile the way I love them just the way they are with the way I'm scared that the rest of the world won't. How people might misunderstand them—Hadley's sensitivity, Marley's impulsiveness, my parents' passion—and how they might treat them for it.

But then there's Seb, who has always loved them just as they are. Seb, who is quietly taking care of them, too.

And even though I'd sooner launch myself into the sun than admit it, that matters more than anything that's ever come between us. The competitions and the sabotages, the pranks and the fights. Like the gratitude I have for Seb in this moment is enough to push all the hurt of that away, to make room for something else.

Something that's been trying to make room for a long time. Something I can feel in that quiet crackle between us when our eyes meet just before a challenge, or when he nudges my foot under the table at Betty's, or when we somehow spot each other in a crowd of hundreds at the same precise moment.

Something I think I know the name of, but wish I didn't. Because even if there could be room for it in me, there's no room for it anywhere else—certainly not here, where Seb was never meant to follow. Where he is the one thing standing between me and the dream that has defined me for so long, I don't know who I am without it. Old Sadie, new Sadie, or some lost version stuck in between.

I turn to look over at Seb, half-afraid he'll see it in an instant and half hoping he will. But he's been Seb-napped by the Rainbow Maple Ride Alliance to pose for more

badminton pictures. He's still clear on the other side of the quad when Amara and Rowan break the news to the leaders of the other clubs: the administration isn't going to do anything overnight, but they're open to talking more, and the donors seem committed to helping facilitate it.

We're still feeling triumphant as we disperse the quad, picking up our various sport props as we go. Joey passes, holding his hand up for another jock handshake. We bump chests and make the kind of guffawing, grunting noises that seem to alarm the Bird Watching Society enough that I'm starting to wonder if they are all, in fact, a bunch of pigeons stacked on top of each other under those leggings and Maple Ride tees.

"So how are you going to celebrate?" Joey asks.

"Oh, I don't know," I say, turning to scan the quad one last time before we head out. "Work on my next piece, probably."

Speaking of—I need to find Seb. The solution to this weird feeling is very clear. I will find him, and we will ruthlessly make fun of each other, and I will quickly, efficiently pop the bubble on this whole "feelings about Seb" thing before it blows up in my face instead. Being cordial with our banter was fun and all, but it's gone too far now. Better to shut it down and hurt each other now than possibly hurt each other a whole lot worse later.

Responsible Sadie may not have come in handy for this stunt we just pulled, but I need her now. She knows how to make a loud feeling as quiet as possible. She knows there isn't a choice, with Newsbag on the line.

"So... what do you think?"

I shake my head and turn to look at Joey. "Think about what?"

Joey's brow furrows. "I just asked if you wanted to get some celebration pie this weekend. Maybe hit up the farmers market again?"

Suddenly, responsible Sadie has exited the building. Because the logical good thing to do here would be to say yes. To go out with this earnest, kind, floppy-haired boy who has a smile for everyone he meets.

But even if I could unfeel the way I do about Seb, I can't make myself feel something I don't in its place. And whatever it is I was hoping to feel about Joey, I simply don't.

"I'd love to," I tell him. "But would it be okay if we went as friends?"

Joey's lip twists to the side for a moment, not quite disappointed, but definitely unsurprised. "Yeah. Of course."

"It's okay if you don't want to anymore," I add quickly.

He rubs the back of his neck sheepishly, his expression lightening up. "No, I figured. That's fine. We were always gonna have to be friends either way, what with you joining Newsbag and all."

"I don't want you to think it's anything to do with you. You're great."

Oh, dear god, I might as well have eaten breakup-trope cereal for breakfast this morning. Thankfully, Joey cuts me off by pulling a face.

"Oh, we don't have to do that whole thing, it's fine." He laughs self-consciously, pulling his hand off his neck. "I mean, I did think I had a shot for a minute there. But then Colby started that betting pool about when you and Seb were going to 'just kiss already' and I figured it was time to throw in the towel."

The only reason I don't blurt out What the fuck with god and half the crew team as my witness is that I'm too stunned to remember how.

Joey leans in and adds, "That's jock for 'give up,' to be clear."

Somehow, against all odds, I manage to suck in oxygen. Unfortunately my brain doesn't know what to do with it except stammer, "I—Seb and I aren't—we would never—"

But we could, says some tiny unhelpful voice in my head. But we might.

I shake my head hard enough to nearly dislodge my baseball hat. "Betting what ?" I finally manage.

"Don't worry about it," says Joey. His eyes crinkle with his smile again, so I know he means it. "I'm pretty sure you win either way."

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I have to admit, a few days ago when Christina woke up in the middle of a micronap, sat up, and used the words “sexy” and “Shrek” in an otherwise incoherent sentence before conking out again, I had my doubts. But she had a vision, like all great misunderstood artists do, and now that she’s brought it to life I could not be more proud.

Or concerned. Because as a result, our dorm room definitely looks like the Grinch, Kermit the Frog, and Yoda got into a fight that ended badly for all three of them.

“Be honest,” says Christina, staring at herself in the mirror. She’s in a brown lace-up crop top, plaid leggings, and a pair of green ogre ears, with every inch of her exposed skin painted green. “Am I peaking sexually? Will I ever be hotter than I am right now? I’m just worried that it’s all going to be downhill from here.”

I move to pat her comfortingly on the shoulder but think the better of it. “Don’t worry. You have so many years and Alphabet Parties ahead of you. Gorgeous Gollum. Juicy Jabba the Hutt. The world is your disturbingly arousing oyster.”

Christina pretends to wipe a tear just under her greenified eye. “Thank you. That means a lot.” She turns away from the mirror to look me and up and down. “What’s your costume, anyway?”

“Oh, I’m waiting until I get there to put it on,” I explain.

Christina raises a furry Shrek-ified eyebrow. “Do I get a hint?”

“Yes. It’s my worst nightmare.”

“Hmmm.” Christina mulls it over as she grabs her purse. “Snack shortages? Slenderman? Spontaneous space storms with the power to wipe out the world as we know it?”

“Worse,” I promise. “You’ll see.”

“I hope so. But I might be running late, so don’t wait up for me if you want to bounce early,” says Christina.

I’d be concerned about the cross-country pregame she’s attending with a few teammates before the party, but apparently they’re all just chugging Gatorades and downing bagels to refuel after a week of practices so intense that Christina informed me she is drawing up her will and leaving Blorbo to me.

A few minutes later I shove the few pieces of my costume into a tote bag and head to the Alphabet Party, which this year is taking place in a student-rented house not far from Main Street. I figure I’m heading in the right direction when I pass Snow White, Sailor Moon, and Simba in one cluster, and someone who appears to be covered head to toe in Silly String across the street.

I take the opportunity to twist my hair up and hide it under my baseball cap, tape the paper I printed at the library to the back of my Maple Ride shirt, and open my Instagram app.

Once I reach the door, I flash my crumpled S-shaped invitation at the Random Acts of Chaos Club’s version of a bouncer, which is a student dressed as SpongeBob SquarePants and eating out of a pillowcase-sized bag of sunflower seeds.

SpongeBob takes in my noncostume with a hint of skepticism. “What are you?” he asks.

I show him my phone, which is open to the Adams' Apples Instagram page, and adjust the baseball cap on my head. "I'm Sebastian."

His head tilts, less skeptical and more bewildered. "Are you by any chance here with Sadie?"

"Huh?"

"I've just never seen people dress up as other students before, is the thing."

Before my brain can catch up to those words, I see myself approaching. Or rather, myself interpreted by one Seb Adams, who is wearing a short red-haired wig reminiscent of The Parent Trap under the same baseball hat I'm wearing and a blue shirt from one of my old book clubs that disbanded two years ago, and holding a cat-shaped mug identical to the one Meowtwo "gave" me for my birthday last year.

Seb takes one look at me in my getup and immediately starts cackling. "Wait, turn so I can see what the shirt says," he says.

I'm too busy gaping at him. He maneuvers his head to see the paper I've printed out and taped over the original COMMUNICATIONS DEPARTMENT font to so it now reads ENGINEERING DEPARTMENT, FOR SOME REASON, EVEN THOUGH SADIE CAN KICK HIS ASS AT MATH .

"Aw," says Seb. "You should keep that shirt after graduation. Make yourself more employable."

I reach out and grab his sleeve. "How did you get a shirt and a mug that looks just like mine?" I demand.

Seb just shakes his head smugly as he steps closer. "Sadie, Sadie, Sadie. Or

rather—Seb,” he corrects himself, looking me up and down. He stops once he’s half a foot from me and says, “Don’t you know by now I only play to win? These are your shirt and your mug.”

My jaw would hit the floor, but it’s already too sticky with mysterious booze to risk it. “You went all the way home to torture me?”

“Nah.” Seb bites his lower lip as if to try and contain his glee, but the grin is already bursting on his face. “I called in reinforcements. Hadley got your parents to send them.”

The mischief dancing in his eyes is electric and entirely at odds with the irritation building up in me. That he knows me so well that he isn’t just pulling details from my life but that he’s made himself welcome in it.

But the hook of his grin is so contagious that I’m smiling now, too. Like it’s pushed past the irritation to something just under it, something it’s been protecting. Something that crackles between our matching smiles, like we can touch it.

“Those traitors,” I say, just the same.

Seb takes another small step toward me, and oh my god. Christina’s lucky she finished drafting that will of hers, because I am going to end her for letting Seb use my lavender body spray.

“That’s what they thought you’d say. They also sent you some Starbursts and Skittles and Sour Patch Kids to lessen the blow.”

I take another step toward him, just close enough for him to finally notice I’m wearing precisely one small hoop earring on my left ear. It’s a callback to an incident when Seb pierced his own after losing a bet with one of his buddies—a bet that

promptly stirred the small army of classmates who had crushes on Seb to such a degree that I was working overtime on my “Is Seb seeing anyone??” duties. It only stopped when the piercing got infected and the school nurse made him take it out.

The way Seb is staring at it in my ear now reminds me a little of the way our classmates were looking at him. Or maybe I’m just imagining that and pretending to be Seb has already made my ego inflate to twice its regular size.

“And where, may I ask, might those be?” I ask him.

“Who’s to say?” says Seb. “Anyway, this is your five-second warning that I’m going Method. I intend to be Sadie Brighton for the rest of the night.”

I raise my eyebrows at him, settling a hand on my hip. “And what exactly does that entail?”

The five seconds have apparently passed, because in that moment Seb stands up a whole lot straighter, frowns into his (my!) cat mug, and says loud enough for every S-costumed person in a twenty-foot radius to hear, “Does anyone have any mango White Claw I can put in here? I’d settle for lemon but I’m feeling adventurous tonight.”

Oh, so that’s how it’s going to be. I fiddle with the brim of my baseball cap, slouching slightly and pushing out my hips as I shove my hands into my pockets. “Does anyone have a gallon of apple juice I can put precisely half an ounce of booze into because I have the alcohol tolerance of a baby seahorse?”

“Actually I better skip that Claw,” Seb says loudly. “I might have the sudden urge to demand the Wi-Fi password and start doing my homework in the middle of this party.”

In my defense that was one —okay, two—all right, maybe it was three or four times. Yeesh. Old Sadie needed to get a life.

“You know what, same,” I say, even louder. “I might have to take an emergency selfie to post for my fans on Instagram. Heaven forbid they go an entire five minutes without seeing my face,” I say, holding my phone up and opening the camera.

Seb swerves to get right behind me just as I take the picture, throwing up a peace sign the way Christina and I used to do during a phase in middle school. I shove him out of the frame, but he pulls my hand and says, “Come on, Seb. If you’re really committing to this there’s only one place at this party you can be right now.”

Ah. I may have miscalculated my ability to carry out Seb cosplay. Because if there is “one place” Seb Adams is going to be at a party, it’s in the middle of a dance floor, jumping up and down like everyone’s lives depend on it.

And if there is one thing Sadie Brighton is going to do at a party—well. It’s not that.

Which, come to think of it, may be my one and only way of getting out of this. “So you’re coming to the dance floor, too? That’s not very Sadie of you.”

Seb only persists in tugging me toward the stairs. “Goading Seb into doing something is extremely Sadie of me, actually. Keep up,” he says.

Not hard to do, because Seb is expertly weaving us through the costumed coeds drinking Sprite and sangria and shooters. Except Seb’s not doing a very good job of being me at all—he keeps looking back as if to check I’m still there, the grin on his face so unabashed that even over the rising pulse of the music I can feel my heart fluttering all the way up my throat, can hear that little voice is in my head again: But we could. But we might.

But we won't. In fact, this is strategic. We'll spend the entire night roasting each other until we're charred and that will cure me of this, will shut up that little voice in my head once and for all. Hit the Reset button on Sadie and Seb and get us back to where we belong: safely in our three modes and safely resenting each other in every single one of them.

So really, walking into the basement full of people jumping up and down to "Scream & Shout" with Seb's hand still wrapped around mine is just the responsible thing to do. Inserting ourselves into the middle of the crowd so packed that we're nearly chest to chest is just pure ice-cold calculation. And continuing to hold Seb's hand to steady myself while jumping up and down and making a complete fool of myself on the dance floor—a signature Seb style that goes as far back as our preschool days, when our dads let us jump around on the sidewalk during their eighties-themed runs—is really just part of a larger plan.

Seb, to his credit, doesn't jump, but does commit to doing this awkward bopping thing with his head while periodically sipping from my mug.

"What is that move?" I demand.

"What, this?" Seb asks, bopping his head more aggressively. "The Sadie head groove. Whenever you study with your headphones on it's all—" Seb pauses then to better demonstrate, looking not unlike a chicken trying to learn how humans dance.

Curse Christina's "Low-Key Lo-Fi Bops" playlist for going so hard.

"Well, at least I don't make this face when I study," I shoot back. It's not easy to rearrange my features to look like a terrified puppy while also maintaining a steady jumping pace, but I somehow manage.

Seb's mouth drops open in amusement. "I have a perfectly ordinary study face."

“You look like the live-action adaptation of those orphaned cartoon Disney animals,” I insist. “Especially when you’re doing math.”

“Spin,” says Seb.

“Huh?”

And then he takes the hand he’s still holding and uses the space the girl dressed as the Starbucks siren just left to push me out and pull me back in with a satisfying spin. The sad “I’m about to sing about my tragic, adorable past” look is all but knocked off my face by the time the back of me lands against Seb’s chest, his head tilted to look down at me. Something flickers in his eyes that I haven’t seen before. Not just a potential energy but an intentional one. It hums between our joined fingers, warms the back of me pressed against his front.

“That’s uh—definitely not a Sadie move,” I point out.

Seb hums. “I dunno. Isn’t Sadie all—‘fun’ and ‘spontaneous’ now?”

I roll my eyes but don’t quite peel myself away from him. “You’re never going to let me live that down, are you?”

“Not really our style,” he agrees.

ABBA’s “SOS” starts playing then, and it’s too loud to hear each other or enact any part of my “squash these feelings about Seb so far down they hit the molten core of the Earth” plan. So instead we just—dance. We dance through “Shake It Off” and “Sorry” and “Single Ladies,” boogie with someone dressed as a spendthrift who keeps throwing board-game money and someone dressed as a Stepford Wife who keeps short-circuiting as her signature dance move, and lose ourselves so thoroughly to the dance floor that I feel more than just fun and spontaneous. I feel loose. I feel

carefree.

But there's still one thing I'm all too aware of, which is that through every single song, Seb and I have something connected. He's got a loose hand on my shoulder, or I've got one steadying myself on his elbow. I remind myself it's just to keep track of each other. Keep your friends close and your lifelong academic rivals you've imagined kissing multiple times against your will closer. It's all just a part of our years-long game.

At some point the noise reaches such a fever pitch that we glance at each other, both clearly in need of a break. Seb leans in and has to shout into my ear to be heard.

"Well, Seb, I'm going to go upstairs and talk to way too many people about my Pokémon Go obsession."

He releases me, but his hand grazes my forearm as he makes his way off the dance floor, clearly expecting me to follow.

Which I will. For the purposes of destroying him, of course. I'll get a handle on that just as soon as I catch my breath.

"That was one summer, " I protest as we hit the stairs and can actually hear each other again. "You're just pissed you didn't run fast enough to get that Charizard."

"Yo, Sadie!"

At the top of the stairs is one of my hallmates, Freddy, who extends his arms out to show me his costume—a ton of fruit-flavored cans in a portable ice bucket around his neck.

"I'm a Seltzer Sommelier," he says by way of explanation. He looks at Seb's hand.

“Can I refresh your friend’s... cat?”

“I’m good for meow,” says Seb.

Freddy takes in my costume. “Should I know what this is?”

“Hi. I’m actually Seb,” I tell him, lifting my hand for him to shake. “I know the Wicked soundtrack well enough to understudy Elphaba, refuse to wear socks that match, and people are so allergic to not liking me that my ego is in constant danger of exploding any room I’m in.”

I turn to Seb, expecting to see him make that same jolted, determined look he makes after I tear him down and he’s about to take his turn, except—shit. That wasn’t exactly a teardown, was it? That’s okay. The night is young. I’ll regroup.

Seb extends his own hand for Freddy to shake before I can. “I’m Sadie. I bite directly into string cheese like an absolute heathen, am laughably terrible at predicting plot twists in movies, and am actually pretty cool, but only, like, two people know it because I pretend to be very boring and responsible.”

Freddy blinks at us both. “Huh.”

It’s not the first time we’ve semibroken a classmate’s brain and likely nowhere near the last, so we politely dismiss ourselves and start heading toward the snack table, which appears to be stacked with everything from snickerdoodles to SunChips to strawberries.

“Hans should rot for what he did to Anna,” I say close to Seb’s ear.

“Matching socks are for people with way too much time on their hands,” Seb counters.

“And biting is more efficient,” I add. “Maximum cheese, minimum wait time.”

Seb points a finger at me. “Wicked is a national treasure and you should be ashamed of not knowing the words to ‘Defying Gravity’ by heart.”

We arrive at the snack table, which is disappointingly picked over.

“It’s okay,” I say. “If I’m really Seb now that means someone’s going to come by and offer me free food any second. Being irritatingly, universally beloved has its perks.”

“Plenty of people don’t like me,” says Seb candidly.

My brow furrows like Seb’s just gone rogue on a familiar script. By now we have our whole schtick down to a T: I’m supposed to say something snarky and Seb is supposed to say something cocky and I’m supposed to knock him down a peg and he’s supposed to be cheeky about it, rinse, repeat.

“Sure they do,” I say dismissively. “I’m not even going to bother citing evidence because your tens of thousands of Instagram followers already covered it.”

Seb shakes his head. His eyes are still bright from dancing, but his tone is thoughtful. “That’s not me. That’s just—you know.” He gestures at my phone. “The idea of me.”

I roll my eyes. “Right. I forgot what a burden it must be, being a celebrity,” I say. I don’t mean to say anything else. It’s just now that Seb has knocked the banter cycle off, it’s almost like I have to knock it to match him. “Not that I’d know, because I’m not ‘actually pretty cool’ by anyone’s standards.”

Seb rolls his eyes right back. “Sure you are. You’re just very selective with who you’re cool around.” He does a quick up-and-down of my ridiculous Seb outfit again, laughing to himself. “Although not so much lately.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I demand.

“That Christina and I aren’t getting to gatekeep you anymore. Now everyone’s going to know you’re cool.”

Damn it. I can’t tell which one of us is sabotaging my plan worse, me or Seb. Honestly at this point, the lines between which of us is Sadie or Seb are so blurred that it might be impossible to tell.

I narrow my eyes at him. “If you think you’re going to soften me up before Round Two of this competition by being nice to me, you are in for a very rude awakening.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. I’m Sadie now. I’m more ruthless than ever,” he says, grinning with more teeth. “And just as unable to take a compliment.”

I cross my arms to distract from my face, which has in fact been burning in a way I can’t blame on the dance floor. “I can take one better than you can.”

“Always a competition with you,” says Seb, with an unmistakable affection that lands somewhere warm in my chest. “Are we going to have to out-compliment each other now?”

I take a step closer to him, never one to back down from a challenge, no matter how patently ridiculous. “Like you need anyone to wax poetic about your ridiculous beachy hair and your big brown Pixar eyes.”

Seb laughs outright, taking another step to bridge the gap between us in the process. “Good, because I had absolutely no interest in saying anything about your cute smirk or spouting any clichés about the sky-blue color of your eyes.”

Naturally we’re right up in each other’s faces now, because that seems to be the

theme of my night: failing utterly and spectacularly at the one thing I came here to do. I feel a strange kind of impact at the sudden closeness, like we've come so full circle on our rivalry that it's slammed into us from behind.

I can't let it push me any further. There's only one direction it can go.

"I'm hungry," I blurt, stepping back so abruptly I almost stumble. I play it off by gesturing at the snack table. "And this place is snackless. So."

Seb clears his throat, also stepping back to examine the table. When he meets my gaze again his expression is so mirthful that it's like the awkward past few seconds never happened. I'm not sure whether to be disappointed or relieved.

"Well," he says, "I have it on good authority that there's a bunch of candy addressed to Sadie Brighton in my dorm room, if you want to swing by and grab it."

I pull off my baseball cap just enough to let my hair slide out of it again. "In that case, I'm Sadie again, and if even one of those bags have been compromised I am going to eat my way through your entire Chips Ahoy! stash in revenge."

Seb smirks, pulling his atrocious Sadie wig off. He tilts his head toward the exit to leave and—shit. Hold on. This was the opposite of everything I am trying to do.

But it is my candy. And those sour patches are just kids, after all. I can't leave them alone with a boy who can't even be bothered to keep track of his socks. Who can't be trusted with the aux cord on a road trip without going full Elphaba with god and everyone within earshot of the open window as his witness. Who is ridiculous enough to think people like an idea of him when he's one of the most genuine, compelling, kind people I've ever met, and god damn it. There goes my brain again. Someone has got to shut her down before she gets us both in trouble, she's been useless all night.

“You coming?” Seb asks. He shifts his weight between his feet, watching my face carefully. “Or do you have plans to meet up with someone else?”

“Christina’s with the cross-country kids,” I say, grabbing my tote bag from the couch where I ditched it earlier. Which, come to think of it, is the perfect excuse. I’ll backtrack. Say I’m going to meet up with them. Collect my candy tomorrow after I find wherever my common sense fell out of me on this campus.

But then Seb presses his lips together. “I meant—if maybe—I know you and Joey have been hanging out.”

He’s only just barely meeting my eye. He’s embarrassed. I wait for that near-primal instinct in my blood: Use this. Seize on it. Twist it to my advantage.

But I won’t. I can’t. It’s already twisting me.

“We platonically eat pie on Saturdays now,” I say. “You should come with us next week.”

Seb bursts into a grin so absurd it could stop traffic. “Yeah,” he says. “I will.”

And just like that, I’m following that absurd grin right out the door.

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We make it approximately fifty feet out of the Alphabet Party when Seb slows his pace and turns to me with wide eyes. “Do you smell—”

“Pancakes,” I murmur, drawn over to the alley off Main Street like the smell of sizzling butter is my brain’s one specific siren call.

Sure enough, despite the late hour, the lights are all on at Pancake It or Leave It. We reach the outside of the half-open door, where the smell of pancake is wafting out into the street, but neither of us takes another step.

“I don’t want to die,” I tell Seb plainly.

He speaks for us both when he says, “But.”

“But,” I acknowledge. “I also will die if I don’t have that pancake.”

Seb nods grimly in agreement. “Here lies Seb and Sadie. They died as they lived: too lazy to cook their own damn pancakes.”

“Get inside, you melodramatic brats.”

Betty kicks the door the rest of the way open for us. We glance at each other like we both just watched a wardrobe open up to Narnia, then step inside, bracing ourselves. But there’s no Betty to be seen. Just a cheerful blond woman with ombre Barbie-pink tips, dangly sun-shaped earrings, and a color-block outfit so bright that it probably gives us both more vitamin D than a year’s worth of sunshine.

“Hi,” says the woman, happily spearing herself some pancake. “I’m Daisy.”

“We’re Seb and Sadie,” I say, because Seb has noticed the small mountain of pancakes next to Daisy and appears to have lost all power of speech.

She looks between us. “Oh, I know you. ‘Nick Jr. and Netflix fed scripts to a bot and it wrote a cursed rom-com, and made Pancake It or Leave It one of the sets.’ That’s about what you said, right, honey?”

“This is my wife,” says Betty, who has emerged from behind the grill. She leans down to press a quick kiss to Daisy’s temple. “And yes, except you left out the part where I’m looking into suing them for scaring off my customers by arguing about the best font to draft in.”

Betty sets two empty plates not on our usual table but on the one Daisy’s eating from, and tilts her head at us to indicate they’re ours. “Hit me with your font opinions,” Daisy demands as we sit down.

“Seb’s not even allowed to call his an opinion,” I tell her. “He just uses the preset Arial size eleven on all his Google Docs like a robot who doesn’t know how to feel.”

“At least I don’t draft in Comic Sans like I just escaped the circus,” says Seb.

Betty groans as she walks back behind the grill.

“Comic Sans?” asks Daisy, leaning in with genuine intrigue.

“It’s one of those tricks I saw on the internet,” I confess. “If you have writer’s block or you’re worried you’re going to mess up, you just start writing in Comic Sans. Takes the pressure off. And brings justice to an unfairly maligned font that’s just trying its best.”

“Maybe some of us don’t need tricks to write,” says Seb, raising his eyebrows at me.

I raise mine back. “Or maybe you just don’t need to use Comic Sans because your writing’s already a joke.”

Daisy cackles. “Honey, you’re right,” she calls back to Betty. “They’re an adorable little shit show.” She points her fork at me. “And I’m going to steal that drafting thing.”

“You’re a writer, too?” I ask.

Daisy nods. “I used to work full-time for Hub Seed, but I freelance now. Makes it easier to pick and choose the kind of writing I want to do, which is more like, deep dives into niche topics. Plus I get to travel more for assignments. I only just got back.”

Seb and I both lean in so comically fast that Daisy blinks in alarm, but it can’t be helped. She just tapped two very specific nerves for us—me at the mention of Hub Seed, a site full of biting cultural commentary and some of the funniest, most poignant writers on the internet, and Seb because of the traveling and topic deep dives.

“What story were you traveling for?” Seb asks.

Daisy’s eyes light up. “All right, so—there’s this parenting Facebook group for a neighborhood a few hours from here in absolute shambles over a stolen baby name, and it’s escalated into a full-out neighborhood war. It’s the most passive-aggressive bougie upper-middle-class nightmare I’ve ever seen. Sabotaged tomato gardens. Stolen backyard gnomes. The local businesses have started taking sides. The coffee shop has two tip jars so you can contribute to which ‘team’ you’re on.”

“What’s the baby name?” I ask immediately.

Daisy’s smile hooks up into a grin not unlike the one Seb makes when he’s chasing a good story. “That’s the question of the hour, isn’t it? I haven’t decided if I’m going to say in the article. Wait until the middle of the piece for a good time to drop it or just leave it a mystery altogether.”

“That’s genius,” Seb blurts, almost like he’s mad at himself for not thinking of it when we were only told about the story eight seconds ago.

Daisy shrugs happily. “We’ll see how it shakes out. I take it you two are writers?”

I nod. “We’re actually competing for the same position in Newsbag right now. It’s a student-run zine.”

“Oh, I love Newsbag, ” says Daisy. “I graduated from Maple Ride but I’d still read every issue if I didn’t. They make some good shit.”

“Did you write for it at all?” Seb asks.

“Nah. I didn’t realize I wanted to be a writer until way after college.” She points at us with her fork. “You two are lucky you’re starting out early. Getting your foot in the door and whatnot. It’ll make it easier to find writing gigs after graduation.”

“For me, maybe,” I say. “Seb here is majoring in engineering.”

Daisy’s eyebrows lift in surprise. “Well, good for you,” she tells Seb. “Someone’s gotta build those bridges, I guess.”

Seb shifts in his seat, his eyes briefly grazing the table before popping back up. “Yeah. I’ll have to give the first one I build the same baby name from your piece just

to really rattle those parents,” he says.

Daisy laughs, standing from the table. “Well, I’m going to hit the hay. Good luck being the testers for Betty’s batch tomorrow. She still hasn’t told me the flavor.”

Betty is somewhere in the back working on the batch, so we settle into the quiet of the empty room. Seb’s eyes are back on the table. It isn’t hard to guess at what’s on his mind. I nudge his foot under the table.

“Why are you majoring in engineering?” I ask. “You spent most of high school writing for the school paper and doing theater and amassing a giant meme collection. And then suddenly you just got good at math and decided that was that?”

Seb’s lips quirk upward. “You know, my math talent is kind of your fault.”

I sure hope not, considering how much of a thorn in my side he was about it. “How do you figure?”

“Well, you stopped helping me with my math homework when we were kids. So then I had to actually—you know. Try. ” His smile is teasing, but there’s a faint sadness in it. “So I got good at it. And then I got really good at it. And now...” He gestures vaguely at campus. “Engineering.”

I’m surprised he remembers our math origins as far back as I do. He really had zero natural aptitude for it when we were kids, even just the early basics. Or maybe he just plain wasn’t interested. But I was. I liked the natural order of it. The way rules built up to fit neatly into other rules, and as long as you understood them all there weren’t any surprises.

But I guess math did come with one surprise, which was Seb coming out of left field in the middle of high school and suddenly getting very, very close to crushing me at

it. I may have ultimately had the better scores, but that didn't stop him from getting elected president of the math honor society senior year.

It's funny—the math thing always felt so personal. The only reason I could think for him to get that good at it was to find some other way to rile me. I can't help feeling a little smug, now that he's just short of confessing he did.

But that's always been the trouble. How personal these competitions get. And none so much as the one we're in now.

“So you really don't need Newsbag at all,” I point out.

Seb's expression falters like a flickering light, but his voice is steady. “It's not like I just gave up on wanting to write because I'm doing math.”

“Then why aren't you majoring in journalism, if you want to write so badly?” I demand. At least this bid to further ruin my life would make sense. “I know you've got some deal with your dad about Blue Ridge's program, but say you do win the Newsbag spot, and you don't transfer out. What then? You still major in engineering here?”

He lets out a grim, breathy laugh. “I mean—I don't know. I'm still thinking. But yeah. My dad thinks coming to school for writing would be a waste of my time and their money.” Seb presses his lips together, and then seems to correct himself. “I mean—he didn't say it in those exact words, but I'm the only kid. I know how to read the room on that kind of thing by now.”

I'm not even their kid and I know how to read that room, too. Seb's dad has always been competitive. Supportive, yes, but also unapologetically ambitious—he has to be, working in corporate law. Seb didn't get his taste for ruthlessly competing with me in a vacuum, that's for sure.

Which is why I'm less surprised about the pressure Seb's parents are putting on him than I am that Seb is giving in to it.

"So—what? You're just going to let him decide your whole future?"

Seb shakes his head. "No. I just want to tread carefully, is all. That's what I'm trying to do with Newsbag. I'm hoping if I get the role then I can show him I'm serious about it. That he'll see what we're doing on Newsbag and the level I can write at and it'll—I don't know. Legitimize the whole 'I want to be a writer' thing." He winces to himself. "And if my dad still doesn't come around—well, at least if I'm on Newsbag, I'll have enough experience writing that I won't be doomed in the job market after graduation."

It's then that I understand it—not just from the words he's saying, but from the determined set of his brow and the unwavering tone of his voice. He doesn't just want this. He wants it as badly as I do.

It should probably rattle me, but if anything it comes as a relief. It was unsettling, the idea of competing this intensely with someone who didn't want it half as much as I did. The idea that maybe Seb was just choosing this to rile me the way we did to each other all the time back in school.

"So you definitely want to be a writer," I say.

Seb nods slowly. Thoughtfully. "Yeah. I mean, I will be. I think it's just—" He works his jaw like he's trying to decide how much he's going to say. I can feel the decision being made in the moment he turns his head to look me square in the eye and says, "I love writing. I love meeting new people and going into weird rabbit holes and watching a story take shape in my head. But it's more than that. It's that writing is the only thing that feels like it's just mine, you know?"

We both know I do. I wouldn't have hid behind "Jerry" this entire time if I didn't. But Seb was never hiding behind anything; in fact, between his Instagram and theater and that "instant popularity, just add humans!" effect he's always had, I'd say he was doing the opposite.

"You've got plenty of things that are yours," I say, hoping that I don't sound defensive. I'm just genuinely curious what he means.

Seb's smile is rueful. "Yeah, I know," he acknowledges. "But most of that comes with like—a certain kind of pressure. Like I have to put on a performance. Meet some kind of expectation. And writing on my own I get to take my time and form my own thoughts without anybody watching or judging, you know? At least not until after the writing is done, and it's exactly how I wanted it to be."

Suddenly that throwaway comment from earlier feels anything but.

"So they're judging the real you, and not the idea of you," I say, echoing it.

Seb's eyebrows lift, not in surprise but in a relief of his own. The relief of not having to explain.

"I never have to worry about that with you, though," he teases. "You judge the hell out of the real me."

His eyes are lit up again like he wants me to rise to the bait and do just that, but there's a strange ache in my throat that stops me. A secondhand kind of sadness for Seb. My dad's words have been rattling in my head for the past few weeks: You know how he gets, keeping to himself sometimes. You always have a knack for snapping him back.

Seb's got a knack for something, too. He can put other people at ease. He can make

people feel seen and heard. He's always been surrounded by people who have needed that from him but not necessarily people who see or hear him right back. Not even because they don't want to—but because Seb's not always good at letting them.

It's Janie and Roger and a whole slew of other people who were into Seb who I think of then. How I used to feel smug, thinking how I knew him better than anyone else did; how I knew at the beginning of any relationship or near relationship that it wouldn't last. Now that I understand it had less to do with me understanding Seb and more to do with Seb not letting himself be understood, it just makes me sad.

“Have you ever thought about just—worrying less about the expectations part?” I ask him. “Like in real life. Not just your writing.”

Seb's eyes cut back to mine with a wry slant to them. “Well, if that isn't a choice suggestion coming from you, Jerry.”

“Well, it's like you said. I've been more—myself, here. Whoever she is. But I don't think that's the case for you.” I shake my head, trying to find the right words. “I'm not trying to say you're putting on an act or anything. I just think you're good at being needed. But kind of like—not great at opening up about stuff you need.”

Seb is quiet, like the words have momentarily stunned him into it. I don't bother wondering if I've overstepped. I know I'm right. But he stuns me himself when he says, “Maybe. But you always seem to have a sense for it anyway.”

“Me?” I say, only just managing not to laugh.

Seb nods, and I see the truth of it in the expression settling on his face—the same one he'd make when he came back from wandering off on his own. The one only I'd see, because he'd find me first before he found everyone else. I think I've always understood the quiet meaning of that face, even if right now is the only moment I've

tried to explain it—like he’s hovering somewhere in between himself and the rest of the world, and I’m his middle ground.

It’s a strange thing, feeling the weight of a responsibility I wasn’t sure I had. Whenever Seb came back we’d usually just pick up our conversations where they left off; the tone of them just shifted in that natural way they always did when one of us was in a strange mood. I never thought of it as being something Seb needed, because that ebb and flow was built into us so early that it never felt like something worth noticing. Like the way your blood just runs under your skin.

I clear my throat, but the faint ache of guilt is still there—the guilt of Seb crediting me for something I didn’t try at nearly hard enough to deserve.

“If I do, it’s only because I’ve made it my personal mission to exploit your every weakness,” I say.

But Seb isn’t interested in that particular bit of our history anymore. He leans back in with curious eyes. “Why do you want to write for Newsbag?”

I draw in a breath that I would use to dismiss anyone else, but it’s Seb. I want him to know this means every bit as much to me as it does to him, especially with what he has at stake.

“I want to work in comedy.” It feels so good to say those words out loud for the first time that I can feel the power behind them, so viscerally that it feels like fanning a flame in me. “I don’t know what kind yet—maybe a writing room or for something like Hub Seed or some medium that doesn’t even exist yet. I want to push boundaries. I want to make people laugh. I want to do more of whatever the hell we just did with Jock for a Day on an even bigger scale, and that scares the hell out of me sometimes, but I—I just do. I know it would surprise pretty much everyone we know, but I just do.”

I'm breathless at the end of it, my fingers tingling in a way that makes me feel absurdly like I can ball up the hope and the bone-deep resolve of it and feel it glowing in my hand. My heart is racing like I've finished a marathon; my head feels clear enough to see into a future that's nowhere near happening yet.

But when I turn to look at Seb, he looks calm as he's ever been. Calm and proud. Like he's been waiting longer to hear me say those words than I have.

"Well, I'm not surprised," he says. "But yeah. I bet a lot of people back home will be."

He continues to stare at me, with a look more pointed now, giving me the space to explain. As much as I hate to admit it, he made it easier by going first.

"In keeping with our complete inability not to copy each other, I think—it was the same for me," I tell him. "Writing has always been the thing that's just mine. Somewhere I can just be blunt and weird and not worry about potential consequences."

"The consequence being... people knowing that you're funny as hell?"

My face flushes. Apparently the theme of the entire night is getting inadvertently flustered by Seb.

"The consequence being..."

I have to pause, then, because it's hard to explain. Not just to Seb, but to myself. It sounds so trivial put into words but feels so uncompromising in real life.

"I think I've always known the kind of funny I want to be doesn't quite work with my family. They're—you know how they are," I say. "The kind of family you can't help

noticing, usually for the wrong reasons. Loud and messy and wild.”

“And you feel like you can’t be?”

My brow furrows. I’ve never really thought of it in terms of wanting to be like them. Most of my childhood was focusing on whatever it took to counteract them.

“They wouldn’t be able to handle that version of me. And even if they could—someone needs to balance them out. Keep an eye on them so they don’t get too carried away. There’s just never been any room for me to be like that, too.”

Which I’m starting to understand is exactly what I am. Loud and messy and wild enough not just to write silly articles as Jerry or the quiz that got me published but enough to get hundreds of strangers to run around campus slinging hacky sacks and handing out flyers and wage a dodgeball war on the quad loud enough to piss off the administration. Enough to cause chaos of my own.

Seb’s right. I have been more “myself” since I got here, and in the first few weeks of it I’ve already caused more chaos than I have in every year of my life combined. And just like that, there are two competing thoughts swimming in my head: Who knows what else I’m capable of? And then a nervous undercurrent just behind it: Who knows how bad things might have gotten for my family if I’d let myself be like that all along?

Then Seb says something that stops both thoughts in their tracks. “It can’t be easy, pretending to be something you’re not all these years with the people you love most.”

My eyes sting and the room goes blurry so fast that I don’t even have time to be embarrassed about it. It’s just happening. I blink it back, not because I don’t want Seb to see, but because there’s so much else I need to say and nobody else I want to say it to.

“Well. That’s just the thing. I love them. I want—to make things easier. They expect me to be a certain way the same way your dad does.”

I put my hand up to stop him as he pulls in a breath, because I know he’s going to push back against that the same way I did for him. But Seb and I really are two peas in a fucked-up pod, because just like him, I have a plan to deal with it. Maybe not a good one, but an existent one.

“And yeah. Maybe once I have a chance to grow into myself here, I’ll be able to be that way around them, too. Figure out a way to bridge the gap between their Sadie and this one.” I’ve collected myself by the time I glance over at him, a small but genuine smile on my face. “But in the meantime I’ve got my writing, just like you. It’s always been a safe place to be myself.”

“Not the only safe place,” Seb says quietly. Self-consciously.

I let out a wet laugh. “If I’m my ‘real self’ around you, Seb, then I think that just makes me a vengeful monster.”

Seb’s smile kicks back up, like the beginnings of mine stirred it back into place. “Well, yeah,” he agrees. “But you’re also funny as hell about it. And honest. We never have to pretend or worry or overthink. We just—get each other.” He pauses then to tilt his head down, to really level with me. “I think if that weren’t the case, we would have stopped making each other’s lives hell a long time ago.”

I knock my knee into his under the table. “Are you implying that you enjoyed getting repeatedly crushed by me all these years?”

Ever my mirror, he knocks mine back with his. “Well, yeah, some of the time. Specifically the times I was crushing you.” The mischief is back, but our usual bite is gone. His voice softens when he adds, “But I mean—it did keep us in each other’s

orbits. I don't think it was an accident that we were always competing for the same things. We're alike, but not that alike."

I put my hands on the table, weaving my fingers together as I narrow my eyes at him to make a show of looking like I'm deep in thought. "So you think all this metaphorical bloodshed was just an excuse for us to be near each other."

Only Seb doesn't tease back this time, his voice quiet and steady. "Wasn't it, kind of?" he asks. "I mean—we've known each other from the beginning of everything. Who else was going to understand us half as well?"

My eyes are in danger of stinging again, but not out of any sadness. Not out of confusion or hurt or any number of feelings I've had about our little rivalry over the years. I'm just overwhelmed by the plain truth of it finally being spoken out loud for the first time.

"Yeah," I manage. "We're a little bit stuck that way, huh?"

If I'm not mistaken, Seb's own eyes start to mist up, but then we both startle at the abrupt reappearance of Betty, who dumps a large stack of pancakes on our plates.

Not just any pancakes, but pancakes covered every inch with rainbow sprinkles.

"Betty," says Seb in a noticeably choked-up voice. "I'm worried about you serving these tomorrow. People are going to think you like us."

Her scowl only deepens. I make it worse by adding, "If I weren't terrified of you, I would hug you right now."

Betty shudders. "I have no idea what you're talking about," she says, already halfway across the room. "Eat your damn pancakes and make sure you shut the door on your

way out.”

I’m not really sure what happens after that. I take a bite and then I’m just—gone. Back in my blue-and-green striped party dress and standing on top of a chair because I’m too happy to sit, my dad on one side of me making sure I don’t tip over, Seb on the other side of me hoisting himself up to stand on his own chair, because neither of us ever did anything without the other. People are singing “Happy Birthday,” and Seb and I are blowing out candles on a massive stack of rainbow-sprinkled pancakes, and Seb’s mom is telling us to make a wish, and Marley’s telling us not to tell anyone what the wish is if we want it to come true, but Seb and I are looking right at each other and laughing because we know we’re going to tell each other what we wished for anyway.

Half my plate of pancakes is gone by the time I manage to speak, not even sure what I’m going to say until it’s out in the open air. “Remember the first time we had these?”

Seb laughs like there was no reason to ask in the first place. “You ate yours face-first like a dog. Your mouth was all rainbow-streaked the rest of the day.”

I grin and dip my head into the plate, catching a cut-up piece with my teeth. “Maximum pancake, minimum wait time,” I say, voice muffled with pancake.

He laughs again, but it’s a soft enough sound that I know he’s still back there, too. Not just back to the Sunday we first ate those birthday pancakes, but to a time when we could share them without years of friction and hurt and confusion heavy in the air between us.

“That puppet prank started all of this. I didn’t think—” He sets his fork down, his body suddenly very still. “I mean, I only ever meant for it to be funny.”

I nod slowly, putting down my own fork. “I overreacted.” I consider apologizing, but think the better of it, suddenly defensive. “I mean—we were eight.”

All those defenses crash when Seb speaks again, his voice just above a whisper. “We were best friends.”

The words land even harder than he meant for them to, because we both know we were more than that. Even when we were little there was an inevitability to us. Not one that could be defined by friendship or family or romance, but was undeniably, permanently shared.

My own voice is shaking, but I square my shoulders.

“The thing is—my parents—they really freaked me out that day, because I freaked them out. I hated that feeling. Of letting them down.”

I wait until I have Seb’s eyes on mine again, and do something we’ve never done before. I reach out and put my hand on top of his. He instantly flexes his fingers to wrap them around mine, like we’ve done it a thousand times.

“It wasn’t about you, really,” I go on. “I was angry, but I was also just—really determined from that moment on not to be a ‘problem kid.’ To be easy to handle. And in my little-kid brain that meant staying away from you, because you were the reason I freaked out in the first place.”

Seb nods, staring down at our hands. “Why did you, do you think?” he asks. “I mean—we’d pranked each other before.”

It’s a conversation we couldn’t have had even a few days ago, I realize, because I’m only just starting to understand the full depth of what happened. I’m only just starting to examine the full depth of my own self.

“I was so nervous,” I tell him. “It was the first thing I’d ever written, and I was sharing it with everyone I knew. That, and—you wanted to win so badly. It felt like you did it to make sure I wouldn’t.”

Seb’s eyes meet mine and I see every bit of the regret in them before his gaze drops again. “I did want to win,” he confesses. “I think that was around the time I started to feel the pressure. I was already falling behind in math, and only skating by because I had your help. I wanted a win.” He squeezes my hand. “But I hope you know by now that the prank wasn’t supposed to be anything other than that.”

Of course I know. The same way we both know that all the “pranks” that happened after it were meant to be sabotage. That we may have been innocent in the way we mishandled each other once, but we weren’t in all the moments after that.

“Well, not to steal wisdom from Elsa. But the past is in the past,” I say.

But for once, Seb and I aren’t on the same page. He isn’t willing to bury it the way I am, shaking his head.

“It changed everything. Our friendship. The way you act with your family. The way I act with mine, even. Because after we stopped talking, I was so upset that I really started to fall behind—not just in math, but everything. It was the first time my dad was ever disappointed enough to sit me down and talk to me about it, and I hated that feeling, too.”

His hand is still in mine, the squeeze of it less intense but somehow more affecting.

“It made me double down on everything. To be the best I could possibly be.” He lifts his hand and mine and presses my knuckles to his forehead. “And for better or for worse, there was only one other person who could always keep up.”

We're suspended like that for longer than we've ever been—so still that it feels like we've reached some kind of equilibrium. Like we've spent our whole lives in a race, and in this moment finally settled into the sensation of being exactly ourselves and exactly enough.

“It did change everything,” I acknowledge, my throat thick. “But in some ways I think—the stuff with our families was always going to shake out that way. I think maybe it's why we had that incident in the first place. You wanted to live up to your dad's expectations. I was too scared to be myself with anyone, let alone my family. Maybe it was only a matter of time before some catalyst set us off.”

What I don't say but I know Seb hears: Maybe it was only a matter of time before something brought us back together.

Seb squeezes my hand one last time before releasing it, his eyes brightening. “Oh, so it's all our parents' fault,” he says. “Perfect. Problem solved. Rivalry over. Peace throughout the land.”

I lift a congealed sprinkle and toss it at him. “He says, shaking in his sneakers now that both our Round Two articles are about to be submitted for Newsbag 's judgment.”

Seb snaps his fingers in an “aw, shucks” defeat. “It was worth a shot.”

Everything feels lighter then. Our voices. The air between us. It's pronounced enough that I know I mean it when I say, “You know, the weird thing is—I don't regret any of it.”

Seb's eyes are steady enough on mine that I know he feels it, too. Still, he raises his eyebrows, a familiar challenge in his voice. “You once called me the human equivalent of an unpopable zit.”

“Was I wrong, though? Especially because, if I recall, you had only just told Allie Zimmer that I couldn’t dog-sit for her that weekend because I had fleas. ”

“You’d just decimated me in the neighborhood bake-off. I deserved a weekend with Chewy way more than you did.”

“You filled our entire sugar canister with salt to fuck up my whole first batch!” I counter. “It’s been eight years since my mom has gone near any kind of cake batter because of you.”

Seb grins smugly, but whatever he’s going to use to counter me, he lets it go.

“You were saying,” he says instead, “about the lack of regrets.”

I ease back into my chair, my bones humming, the kind of relaxed I don’t remember being in a long, long time. “I just mean—there’s this universe we’re in, where you and I drove each other up the wall. But there’s also a universe where we maybe just never spoke at all. And maybe it’s just the rainbow-sprinkled pancakes talking. But I think no matter what we are to each other, our lives are better with each other in them than without.”

Seb is quiet for a while. We both are. But I know better than to say anything, because he’s staring at his hands in the way he does when he’s lost in a thought he’s trying to make fit in the real world.

“You know what the first thing I thought was, when you got in and I didn’t?” he asks.

The question takes me by surprise but not so much that I can’t immediately answer. “How can I put Sadie in a crate headed for the Bermuda Triangle and make it look like an accident?”

His smile is instant but aimed at the floor, like he's still working himself up to say something.

“Want to know the second?”

He's looking right at me now. I nod, and he holds my gaze and says, “I'm really going to miss her.”

Earlier in the night it felt like something was hitting me from behind, but those are the words that hit me squarely in the chest. The words that settle there and make a home. Like there was always a space right there in me for them to fit, whether I wanted it or not.

Just then the lights in the room next to the restaurant space turn off. Betty must be turning in for the night, too. We wordlessly get up from our perch, carefully turning off the main lights in the room and shutting the door behind us before heading back out into the night.

It's strangely quiet for a Saturday. Or maybe it's just that my heart is so steady in my ears that I don't want to hear anything beyond us. Like I already know his heart is in sync with mine, the way we usually happen to be.

“You should tell your parents about Newsbag,” says Seb, when we reach the street of our dorms.

“It would only complicate things,” I say. “I mean, look what happened with your parents knowing about it.”

Seb shakes his head. “I think there's a reason why you focused that second piece on how your relationships with your family change when you come into your own,” he says. “You already know it's time.”

I steal a move from Seb and hum in acknowledgment. He wraps a light arm around my waist to pull me into the side of him, a quick but grounding gesture.

“And because they deserve to have a chance with ‘real Sadie,’” he says, tilting his head to look at me. “I think they’ll get along with her just fine.”

I don’t protest. I don’t duck my head. I like where I’m at right now—comfortably against Seb, slowing our pace, his hand light against the side of my waist.

We come to a stop outside his dorm, and I shift to face him. It’s one of those magic hours of the night where everyone is already in bed or out, and we’re the only ones in the street, suspended in our own kind of limbo. Seb’s gaze flickers to my lips and back to my eyes again, and I feel my own lips part almost as if in anticipation. But we could. But we might.

I’m half wondering if Seb will pull away like he did onstage, but he doesn’t. He just settles his gaze on me not with intent but curiosity. It occurs to me then how strange it is to know everything there is to know about Seb except for this one thing. Except for something as simple as putting his lips on mine. The urge to tilt myself forward almost feels like some scale balancing to correct itself, like of course I should know about that, too, since so much else of Seb is already mine.

Seb smiles then, this careful, bright kind of smile I’ve never seen before. Somehow self-conscious but certain at the same time.

The voice in my head changes: But we will.

I lean in closer, tilt my face toward his. There’s no cut to commercial. I’m so presently with him that in my next breath it feels like there is nothing else. Nothing but the heat between our bodies, the kind that burns hot enough that I can see it blazing in his eyes. That scorches past our tangled history, our pretenses, our doubts.

I shiver in anticipation. We're already so close that our noses brush, that I can feel his breath against my lips, warm and inviting and—waiting.

Waiting for me to decide.

For years, kissing felt like it was only a rite of passage and nothing more. Something I fixated on like a finish line everyone else had reached. But I understand now what I didn't understand then. Those other near kisses weren't sabotaged by the universe. I could have made them happen, if I wanted. I chose to brush it off every time.

Seb is waiting now, but I've been waiting. Whether I knew it or not, I've been waiting for this. Long enough to know that the wait isn't over. Maybe a first kiss never felt important. But kissing Seb does.

So I stop another kiss, one last time. I step back. Seb watches me carefully until I speak.

“When I kiss you,” I tell him, “it won't be during a months-long mission to eviscerate you.”

Seb's fingers press lightly just under my ribs. He raises his eyebrows like he's trying to be smug, but the relief in his voice is so plain that he can't pull it off. “When?” he asks quietly.

And then come the words neither of us want to say—that there might never be a “when.” Not if I win. Not if Seb leaves. My smile flickers, and Seb doesn't miss it, leaning in again. I press my forehead into his collarbone. He moves his hand up to the back of my neck and squeezes lightly. We've never been this perfectly still, this terminally close. The feeling of his warm, firm body against mine is enough to make me dizzy with want, to make me come dangerously close to forgetting the odds stacked against us.

Us. For the first time, it's not me against Seb. It's the two of us against everything else. I've never been so overwhelmed by such a quiet understanding before; it's the smallest shift in the ground under us, but it's changed the whole view.

Seb lets me go, and for the first time, I dread the end of this competition. There is no way to win it without losing, too.

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If our dorm room looked like a cage match between green cartoon characters when Christina left the night of the Alphabet Party, it looks like a full dismemberment of them now. Which is truly saying something, because it's been a full week and not one shade of the green carnage has faded from her sheets, her side of the wall, or poor Bluebeary, who was unwittingly caught in the green cross fire and may now need a legal name change for it.

The worst part is, Christina is still in a funk about what happened—her cross-country pregame went disastrously wrong. Well, by any college kid's standard, at least. Apparently she and her teammates were so exhausted that after consuming their bagels and popping on a quick episode of Parks and Recreation before they left, they all just fully conked out. Christina didn't wake up until sometime around three in the morning, which was when I subsequently was woken to a sobbing, sexily clad Shrek who spent the better part of the next hour crying snot and green slime into my shoulder.

"Are you sure you don't want to come home with us this weekend?" I ask, hoisting the plastic bag of our green-stained clothes into my backpack. Neither of us wanted to inflict the slime on our hallmates by attempting to put them through the laundry here. "There's gonna be Funfetti cake."

Christina shakes her head forlornly, watching me from her perch under a mountain of textbooks on her bed. "It's our only weekend without a race and I'm so behind. If I get within a fifty-foot radius of either of my parents they'll be able to smell the overdue assignments on me."

"You sure?" I ask. "We can have a little study session before the party if you're

worried. I think you could use a weekend at home to regroup.”

I can’t be entirely sure of what was said the night of the Shrekoning, because it was hard to discern much of anything through the fully clothed shower we had to get her into around four in the morning to scrub the swamp paint off her. But I think the gist of it was “this isn’t what I thought it was going to be like” and “I’m so fucking tired” and “this is the least Shrexxy I’ve ever been.”

I tried to bring it up with her a few times this week, but she’s been adamant that she “got it out of her system” and is fine now. Which, judging from the bags under her eyes and the fact that the wall by her bed is still so green that you could project a weather forecast on it, I don’t remotely believe to be true.

“I’m sure.” She kicks her foot out in my direction, nearly toppling the precarious homework pile. “Also since when are you and Seb taking weekend getaways together?”

I turn my face so it’s angled away from hers, worried that my cheeks might flush. That is apparently an ongoing symptom of this whole “I have designs on kissing Seb” situation. So far, nothing seems to be able to mitigate it. Every time I’ve walked past Seb on campus or seen him in the dining hall this week—boom. Cheeks.

And then, unfortunately, boom, brain. Which has been spending some deeply unproductive spells imagining kissing Seb, and then imagining a whole lot else. For someone who has zero experience in that realm, it turns out I can get real creative real fast.

All this to say, I’m going to have to start investing in a personal fan and quite possibly a calendar so I can pencil in “STOP THINKING ABOUT SEB’S HAND ON YOUR WAIST” for every hour until the Newsbag competition is through.

“Seb has a car, is all,” I tell Christina. “Enduring his company is a small price to pay to get out of taking the bus.”

Christina nods like she doesn’t believe me, either. “I’m just concerned now that you’ve both turned in your second pieces. For him, to be clear. A road trip gone wrong is a perfect way to disappear a whole boy.”

My brow furrows. “Maybe we need to hit pause on your HBO subscription.”

Christina waves a lazy hand. “Nah, that’s coming from my own vengeful brain. I haven’t been able to watch a single onscreen murder or psychologically unhinged power struggle between two Strong Female Characters in weeks.” She sighs. “Bring me back some cake?”

I finish zipping up my backpack and sling it over my shoulder, doing a last scan of the room to make sure I’m not leaving anything vital behind. “Can do.”

“Oh! And tell me how it goes, telling your parents about Newsbag. ”

I pause with my hand on the doorknob. “Right. Can also do.”

The Sunday after the Alphabet Party, I ended up taking Christina to Pancake It or Leave It with Seb, who candidly informed her that I would be telling my parents about it this week. I chugged a good third of his coffee in retaliation (in my defense, after the night we’d had, I certainly needed it more) but didn’t correct him. The two of them assumed I would talk to my family about it this weekend.

But the piece was due Friday. I didn’t want to tell them about it while Seb and I were under identical roofs, waiting for the same email that would decide our fates. That, and—Seb’s words about my piece stuck. I realized what was missing from the draft: my own feelings about being away from my family for the first time. I’d stepped out

of the narrative like an anthropologist, like it had no relation to me, but it does.

And I didn't even understand how much until I was FaceTiming my parents and told them about Newsbag. There was no surprise. There weren't even any questions. My dad said, "Well, good for you, getting involved on campus!" and my mom said, "Oh, that sounds fun," and then they were interrupted by Marley yelling that Meowtwo had knocked a LaCroix onto her laptop keyboard.

I've been feeling off-kilter about it all week. All this time bracing for a big reaction, only to get... almost the opposite of one. From two people who have never done one subtle thing in their lives, no less. I can't tell if it's because they don't understand it's important to me, or if they just were too distracted to take notice altogether.

It strangely did help with the piece, my unease with the whole situation. Not to tell my own story, but to infuse that same off-kilter feeling we all have when telling other people's stories. I felt more connected to the piece by the time I turned it in, the way Seb always does with his. Less like I was trying to tell a story and more like I was letting the story tell itself.

But I was embarrassed enough by making such a big deal out of what was essentially a non-deal in the end that even though I sent the draft of the story to Seb before our deadline, I never mentioned telling my parents about Newsbag to Seb or Christina. I'm not even planning to mention it when I get home. Everything will just be business as usual. Nothing to worry about.

Except cheeks. Because Seb pulls up to the dorms in his dad's old pickup truck, and there they go again, heating up like they're trying to light an emergency flare.

He lowers his sunglasses to look at me, and dear god. Between the tousled hair and the white shirt and the lazy way he's got one hand wrapped around the bottom of the steering wheel, he looks like something out of a country-music video.

Then he makes it even worse, and smiles.

“Your Uber has arrived,” he says.

I open the door to his car, proud of my last functional neuron for managing to do it without tripping. This has been an especially confusing week for just about every organ in my body, because the thing is—nothing about Seb has changed. Those are the precise same tanned forearms lightly flexing under the wheel; that’s the precise same curl of his hair over his ear when he’s overdue for a cut; that’s the precise same smile I’ve seen aimed at more people than I can count.

But it’s like almost kissing Seb broke some dimension in my brain, and now I’m noticing all of him in angles I’ve never let myself consider before. Angles that my imagination is now treating like a jungle gym, bouncing from thought to thought. What it would be like to hold that hand he’s flexing or run my hand through that overgrown curl or press my lips into that smile.

“So I have an idea,” says Seb.

I blink. We’ve fully left campus. Great—I’ll go ahead and add “complete dissociation” to my new list of Seb-related symptoms.

“Why do I have a feeling it has to do with the Wicked soundtrack cued up on your phone?” I ask.

“That’s not an idea, that’s a lifestyle. No, I meant—I have an idea for a follow-up for Jock for a Day.”

I’ve been so distracted with the finishing touches on my piece that I haven’t had much time to worry about the aftermath of our stunt, but we’re having another Newsbag meeting about it soon. Apparently the administration is still giving the

student orgs the runaround because they need time to “look at the existing structures” and “hear back from athletic suppliers” and “insert uncreative excuse here.”

It’s clear that they think we pulled all the stops out already and don’t have any other leverage. And maybe that’s true. But Amara and Rowan want to keep the momentum up and find some leverage, fast, while everyone is still stirred up from our jock antics.

“If you wanted to be pelted by more random objects so badly, I’m insulted you didn’t just ask,” I tell Seb.

He turns on the car and taps his phone, flooding the car with the sound of jubilant Ozians celebrating Elphaba’s demise. It’s just not a good week for the green people in my life, I suppose.

“Nah,” says Seb. “I have another idea to really put the heat on them.”

A few more bars of upbeat, vaguely threatening singing pass.

“Are you going to share with the class, or...?”

Seb shakes his head, looking both pleased with himself and apologetic. “I want to make sure I can pull it off first. It’s a little—borderline.”

“Like illegal?”

“It’s not... not.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “You don’t trust me.”

It’s a joke, but it also isn’t. He sent me back a Well fuck! text in response to the draft of my piece—high praise that made me feel confident enough to hit Send on the final

version—but this time he didn't send his piece back. We were pretty close to the wire on the deadline, but still. It seemed a little strange.

But Seb takes one of his hands off the steering wheel to bat me lightly on the shoulder. "More like I don't want to implicate you."

I scowl. "So you're just going to get implicated without me?"

Seb laughs. "It might not even be a thing. We'll see."

I settle back into my seat. "Well, good. You'll need something to distract you from the embarrassment of losing to me a second time."

"Ah. But will either of us even be able to feel an emotion as human as embarrassment when we're both leaving this mortal plane?"

Seb is referring to Marley's birthday party, which has two themes. The first is "Resurrection Mystery Party," which is, by her definition, "the opposite of a Murder Mystery Party." We all get assigned characters who are actually ghosts, and we have until the end of the night to figure which one of us secretly came back to life and was just pretending to be a ghost the whole time. I'm not sure what the motivation is to solve this particular mystery if there's no technical crime involved, but I'm less concerned with that than I am with the second theme of her party, which is "If Anyone Plays Taylor Swift's '22' At This Party, I Will End Them On Sight."

Safe to say that Seb and I are planning to rig the playlist to blast it at random no less than sixteen times, so we might actually be ghosts by the end of the night.

"I'm still unclear if we're making our own backstories or if we're getting assigned them," I say.

“I think assigned,” says Seb. “But we should have back -backstories, too.”

I pinch my chin with my fingers as if in thought. “Oh, I know. Maybe our characters are in a not-so-secret rivalry that escalates to the point of absurdity over the course of a decade, all leading up to a climactic competition that will determine their entire futures.”

“Huh,” says Seb, nodding in consideration. “A little out of left field, but I dig it. What happens to them next?”

I smirk, leaning farther into my seat and pressing my knees against the dashboard. “What, you’re going to make me write the whole story on my own?”

“Nah,” says Seb. “I’ve got a few endings in mind.”

“Happy ones?” I ask wryly.

Seb smiles, his eyes still on the road but the intent of them clearly somewhere else.

“I’ll have to run it past my editor. She’s a real hard-ass. But yeah—if I have my way.”

That flutter under my ribs kicks up again, a warmth spreading in my chest that lingers the whole rest of the ride home. At least until we round the corner to our neighborhood, and I’m sitting up at attention, strangely anxious to get there faster and anxious to get there at all. Like I’m desperate for the touchstone of home and irrationally scared it won’t feel like one anymore.

But then we pull into Seb’s driveway to find all four of our parents sitting on my porch with lemonades, waving and cheering as dweebily as possible, and the knot in my chest loosens. I scramble out of the car and am scooped up into a hug by both my

parents before I even make it off the lawn.

“It looks even cuter in person!” my mom exclaims, grabbing the ends of my hair.

My dad pulls my backpack off my back and does the same bit he always does, pretending it’s too heavy to carry. “Did you adopt a bunch of pet rocks?”

Seb is similarly greeted by his own parents—his mom grabs his hair, too, and right on cue says, “Well, look at our little hippie!” the same way she always does when it grows out. His dad pats him on the back and starts giving a status report on the various large plants in the house, all of which Seb named at some point.

“Please, everyone come inside,” says my mom, motioning to the front door. “We’ve prepared a charcuterie board for the arrival of our esteemed guests.”

Marley slinks out then in her combat boots and a minidress, high-fiving both me and Seb in turn before turning back to her phone.

“Charcuterie” could mean any number of things in my house, so I don’t have any expectations when I walk in. Even if I did, nothing could prepare me for what we find on the kitchen table—a truly unholy collection of snacks, all of which Seb and I immediately recognize. Potato chip s’mores. Mini cheeseburger pizza. Cheesy mug pancakes. Even the cursed jelly bean pudding.

I wheel around in surprise. My parents look positively gleeful, holding a fresh copy of last week’s Newsbag between them.

“We took your quiz,” says my mom. “We were laughing too hard to score ourselves properly, so we just made all the snacks.”

“You took my quiz,” I bleat out. It’s all I can manage, because I feel like I’m in one

of those very bizarre dreams you have when you're not fully asleep or awake. And in this particular dream, my parents are positively beaming, my dad turning through the pages of the zine to open it to my quiz.

"Did you manage to get any extra copies?" my dad asks. "We could only get four sent to us. One of them is on the fridge, but I thought it'd be nice to have one for every member of the family."

"Oh." I look at the fridge and sure enough, there it is again: my byline. In my house. On my fridge. Where everyone can see it. "I, uh—yeah. Yeah, I have more copies."

I'm smiling so hard that my face is aching and my eyes are threatening to fill up. I'm so overwhelmed I don't know what to say or where to look.

"Bring them next time. I want to give some to our D&D friends. This is gold," says my mom.

My dad reaches out and jostles me on the shoulder. "Who knew you had it in you? The quiet ones are always the funniest of the bunch, huh," he says.

I laugh outright, too relieved to even think about explaining myself. "Thanks," I say. "I can't believe you guys did all this."

"It's not every day your kid gets their name in print," says my dad.

I feel a familiar pinch of guilt then that I know is only going to get more pronounced later—that I made all these assumptions about them, not just before I told them but after, and they're this supportive. I turn to Seb, whose face is set exactly how I knew it would be: a little bit smug and undeniably proud. I take an unconscious step closer to him, but Seb's mom beats me to him, holding a copy of the zine.

“I didn’t see anything of yours in here,” she says, concerned. “Aren’t you both competing for the spot?”

Seb nods, the smile going static on his face for a moment.

“Well, that’s how the competition works. Sadie’s piece beat mine, so it got published.”

Seb’s dad pores through the copy of Newsbag my parents left on the table. “I thought you were more interested in serious writing anyway,” he says, frowning at the contents—Colby’s “Please I Am Begging You, Do Not Bring Back Headbands, Some of Us Have Flat, Flat Heads,” and Amara’s latest “Maple Mishaps” column where Sweetie tries to get brunch with her pals and accidentally discovers the football coaches frying up the donor checks meant to go to student-run organizations and eating them for breakfast.

“I am,” says Seb. “I have a piece that’s—I mean, I have some drafts, if you want to read them.”

His dad nods, still scrutinizing the zine, but doesn’t actually say anything. Seb shifts uneasily. I open my mouth to vouch for him, but Seb shakes his head just once next to me and I close it.

“You hear from Blue Ridge in a few weeks, right?” his dad asks.

Hadley busts into the kitchen then, and immediately beelines for Seb, throwing her arms around him hard enough to visibly knock the air out of his lungs. “I got the part!” she crows.

“Oh, hell yes,” says Seb. “You did that monologue we practiced? With the big scream at the end and everything?”

“She sure did,” says Marley wryly, hiking herself up to sit on the edge of the kitchen counter with a mini cheeseburger pizza. “I have two broken eardrums from all the practicing she did to prove it.”

Hadley pulls away from Seb to level Marley with a scowl. “Says the loudest woman in the state.”

“It’s my birthday month. I’m allowed to be any volume I want.”

I extend my arms out to Hadley. “Hello, hi. It’s just me, the actual sister you haven’t seen in weeks.”

“Hi,” says Hadley, leaning in to hug me next. It’s not the same wild welcome Seb got, but she squeezes tight and doesn’t let go for a few long seconds. I realize that her head is higher up on my shoulder and genuinely get a little emotional when I exclaim, “Did you get taller ?”

“Turns out the pipsqueak wasn’t done growing,” says Marley.

Hadley beams. “If it keeps up I might end up taller than both of you.”

“Only physically,” says Marley. “Emotionally? Never.”

“Congrats on landing the part,” I say into Hadley’s hair. “Can’t wait to see you onstage.”

She dashes off then, not before shoving Seb out of the kitchen to show him the cast list and ask which kids he knows. The adults already wandered off to the living room because Meowtwo had something in his mouth, so it’s just me and Marley left behind.

“You seem... different,” says Marley. “Not just the haircut. Did you get taller, too?”

She searches my face in a way I’m not used to her doing. I love Marley, but we’ve never exactly been close. She was a wild child from the start, and a busy one, at that. Sometimes growing up with Marley was more like having a chaotic roommate who occasionally dispensed questionable advice than an older sister.

Marley slides off the counter and steps over to me, putting a hand on her hip. “You’re dating Seb, aren’t you?”

Luckily I already finished off my most recent bite of cheesy mug pancake or I’d have choked on it. “Excuse me?”

She just nods smugly to herself, as if either it’s true or she has willed it into being by deciding it is. “Huh. So are you gonna tell Mom and Dad or what?”

“We’re not dating,” I blurt. And then, because I can’t help myself, “Why would you think we’re dating?”

“Because I’ve seen the way Seb looks at you for years. And for the first time you’re looking at him the same way.”

The heat rises up in my cheeks faster and wider than it ever has before.

Marley nods to herself, taking another bite of pizza. “Yeah. That face,” she says. “The parents are all going to be thrilled. You know they low-key always wondered if you two hated each other?”

Apparently we’re just dropping truth bombs left and right. “Oh,” I say in a choked voice. “Well. We don’t. And we’re not. Dating, I mean.”

Marley gets right up in my face then, lips twisting like a detective's. "Yet," she decides. "Don't wait too long. Life is short. And also—it's Seb. Someone's gonna try and snap him up if you don't."

I laugh nervously. Not because I'm actually worried about that. Yes, Seb could walk out on the front porch and be dating a stranger in the next five minutes, but I know better than to think he wants to. I know better about a lot of things regarding Seb now.

But Marley does have a point. Life is short. Too short for me to be hiding who I am from my parents all these years, and too short for me to waste more time denying my feelings for Seb. I decide right then that I'm going to tell him this weekend—here on our home turf, the place where we grew up beside each other and then grew apart. We'll bring it all full circle, then, and go back to school not as the new version of ourselves but the same ones with a new start.

I wait for the thought of telling him to scare me, but it doesn't. The thought that comes after does. Maybe we aren't wasting time. But with Newsbag's and Blue Ridge's decisions on the horizon, we sure may be borrowing it.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:20 am

I look Seb square in the eye from our perch under the dining room table and say, “You and that weed better not mess this up for us.”

“Excuse you. Bernard Junior is an aloe-vera plant.” Seb eyes the full skirt of the bright-pink ball gown I’ve only just managed to hide under the tablecloth. “And I’m more concerned about all that fluff messing this up for us, personally.”

A factor that has put a little wrinkle in our birthday playlist–sabotage plan is that not only did Marley assign us all characters, but costumes were not optional. According to my character card, I’m a debutante named Elsie who was murdered shortly after the ball because I impersonated my own twin to go with her beau, and when she escaped from the room I locked her in she accidentally shoved me out of a third-story window, where I landed directly on my head. According to Seb’s character card, he’s a pioneer in botany named Bernard who set out on an expedition to an island to study a rare plant that then hypnotized him into killing his fellow researchers to offer as human sacrifices, resulting in his own death when the guilt drove him to jump into the sea and he was abruptly eaten by a sea dragon.

Which is to say, I’m now dressed like I’m a knockoff live-action Cinderella in one of Christina’s old Halloween costumes, Seb is carting around a succulent he brought from home, and we are both trying very, very hard not to let either of those states of being stop us from smuggling Seb’s old laptop under the table and committing our first coprank in—well, possibly ever.

Once the laptop sputters back to life we pull up Seb’s Spotify. Seb wastes no time copying and pasting Marley’s public “Resurrection Mystery Playlist,” which is currently playing from the speakers, onto a new playlist on his account, then

searching Taylor Swift's name to add "22" a lawless number of times.

"Okay," says Seb, leaning back from the laptop and pushing it over to me. "Hook it up to the thingy."

I frown. "Were any of those words supposed to make sense?"

"I'm not, like, a tech guy," says Seb.

"And I look like one?" I ask, trying and failing to locate any feasible Bluetooth connection on the laptop to hook it up to the "thingy."

"Oh, no," says Seb. "Are the two of us just—genuinely useless in anything we didn't compete over?"

"I hope not, for Bernard Junior's sake."

"Are you guys making out under there?"

We both startle so abruptly we nearly knock heads, which does nothing to give the impression of "two people who are definitely not making out under this table." But it's only Hadley, who yanks up the tablecloth to stare at us, the laptop, and Seb's young plant son in bewilderment.

"Do you know how to connect an old laptop to a Bluetooth device?" I ask her.

Hadley has apparently grown both her literal and figurative backbone in my absence these past few weeks. "For five bucks, I do."

"What if I told you it was in service of annoying the hell out of Marley?" I counter.

“Oh,” she says, taking a seat on the floor. “In that case I’m happy to pay you.”

She assesses the playlist situation, lets out an approving “nice,” and then has the laptop connected to the speakers in the next two seconds. There’s only a brief pause in the music as it kicks Marley’s laptop off the Bluetooth, but after that we’re golden.

“How did you do that?” I ask.

“With my brain, you boomers. This is embarrassing for both of you,” says Hadley. Which are honestly choice words from someone who is wearing a full-on clown costume (Marley decided Hadley’s “death” was a circus act gone wrong; with the new level of sass she is demonstrating, I’m not sure she doesn’t deserve it). “You can get back to making out now.”

There’s a beat where neither of us will look at each other, until in a very boomer-like fashion, Seb says, “Welp.”

“Welp,” I agree.

I add nothing else, only because if I’m going to have a potentially life-altering talk with Seb tonight, it’s sure as hell not going to be under my parents’ dining room table while Evanescence’s “Bring Me to Life” plays faintly in the background and an anthropomorphized succulent looks on.

Once we’re sure the coast is clear, we follow Hadley out, leaving the old laptop under the dining room table. We spend the next hour trying to be as unsuspecting as possible, which is hard to do when you’re the only two people in the room who know you’re playing a game of playlist roulette, but not hard to do at a party with such a ridiculous theme. We go through the motions of interacting with the other “ghosts”—all four of our parents were eaten by the same tiger named Meowtwo, who escaped from the zoo; Marley’s various friends were in a pop girl band who died on

an island one by one after surviving a Lost -esque plane crash; Marley's boyfriend, Ken, is obligingly wearing ten different hats as a dead hat salesman, which is apparently something my sister is very, very into and I'm choosing not to examine too closely tonight.

But every time one song comes to an end, Seb and I quietly find each other's gazes from across the room, eyes gleaming with the same mirth and terror.

In the end it takes a full hour for the first "22" to drop. The only reason we are not immediately eviscerated upon the first guitar strums is that Ken—poor, sweet, hat-clad Ken—immediately starts to bop to it. One of Marley's dead-pop star friends dives to stop him while the other dives for Marley's laptop, but both efforts are thwarted. Ken's avalanche of falling hats prevents anyone from getting close enough to save him from his own fate, and Seb and I hide Marley's laptop behind the breadbox in the kitchen.

"No!" says Marley, pointing her finger at Ken like a misbehaving puppy. "Stop dancing! Defend my honor! Who did this?"

A question immediately answered by Seb, whom I forgot cannot commit to a prank to save his own life. He lets out an unsightly snort from trying not to laugh, the kind that makes everyone in the room turn out of concern that he needs medical attention.

Everyone except Marley, who turns with immediate designs on his murder. Like hell I'm going to let Seb take all the credit for a Taylor Swift-related crime.

"Run!" I yell, grabbing him by the hand and yanking hard.

Which prompts Marley—who is, incidentally, dressed as a dead goth mermaid—to rip off her glittery black tail fin and let out a menacing "There's nowhere to run !"

Unfortunately for Marley, this chase has now triggered a bone-deep fantasy I never knew I had of starring in my own Taylor Swift music video—which is to say, running at top speed with a glittering skirt billowing behind me with a boy holding my hand. We're just one slow-motion panorama shot away from being Grammys eligible, if we survive the night.

Marley gains alarming ground on us, but at the end of the hall Seb surges ahead and yanks me into the room I share with Hadley, using the momentum to deposit me and the extremely fluffy skirt onto my bed. He slams the door, locks it, and then covers it with his back for good measure. The instant the two of us make eye contact—him covered in loose soil from Bernard Junior, me with my updo half blinding me—we erupt into breathless laughter.

Marley pounds a fist on the other side of the door. "You cretins are lucky you're already dead!" she calls.

"That's not very happy, free, confused, and lonely of you, Marley!" I call back.

Someone in the main room has figured out how to turn the speakers up to full volume, drowning out the rest of Marley's threats. Seb's laughing so hard he collapses back-first onto the mattress beside me and I turn my body toward him, curling into myself and practically wheezing, knocking my knees into his.

He turns his head toward me, too. "Good chaos?" he says.

I'm so light and giddy I feel like someone replaced my body with a balloon. "Good chaos," I agree.

Our faces are so close that I can see the flecks of gold and brown in his eyes, can see the slight lingering crease between his eyebrows from the expression he makes when he's most focused. All this week of my imagination running wild about this kind of

closeness does nothing to prepare me for the most surprising feeling of all—the warm calm. The way my heart is pounding in my chest, but it feels deliberate and sure.

Our phones make the exact same ping! noise at full volume, and we both freeze.

“Shit,” I mutter.

“We don’t have to look,” says Seb.

My hand is already in the pocket of the dress. I pause, staring at Seb warily.

“We could just—check tomorrow,” he says.

Because we both know that ping can’t be anything other than the email from Newsbag coming in to let us know who won this round. I consider him carefully—his expression is earnest, almost nervous. I want to press my thumbs on his cheeks, want to smooth that deepening crease between his eyebrows.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him. “I can’t.”

I pull my phone out and open my email. My stomach doesn’t drop; my throat doesn’t tighten. There’s a faint disappointment, but the kind I can’t feel the full impact of, because just like Seb, I can’t help feeling proud.

“You won,” I tell him. My smile is small but genuine. I want this for him. At least, the part where he has an article published in Newsbag, one that he can show his parents. One that will help his dad trust Seb that this is what he was meant to pursue in school and beyond it.

Seb’s eyes flicker with clear relief, the kind that’s immediately chased with guilt. “Yeah?” he asks.

I reach out and press my hand into his shoulder. We're so close that my forearm ends up against his arm. "You earned this one. Congratulations."

Seb swallows hard. "So that means Round Three determines everything."

I almost nod, but stop myself. "Well, not everything."

Only then does Seb relax, a real smile curling on his lips. Then he shifts off the bed. "I got Bernard Junior's soil all over Christina's dress," he says. A sentence that would have made approximately no sense two hours ago, but this is Marley's undead world and we're all unliving in it. "I'll grab a towel."

Thankfully the bathroom is attached to the bedroom, so we can safely hide in here until it's time to scam cake. Seb shifts off the bed and I scroll down the email to the draft of Seb's piece.

I blink at the title. "'No Need for Us to Talk About That': The Sex Education Gap." The thing is, I'm used to Seb writing titles we spent hours arguing about, workshopping them to be catchier, easier to digest. But I'm stuck on this one because I'm not reading it in his voice; I'm reading it in mine. I remember the conversation we had about my lack of experience too vividly not to remember every word I said and not to recognize them right in the title of the piece.

I skim the article. It has all of Seb's usual thoughtfulness, his usual unique slant. But it has a whole lot else in it that it doesn't usually have—namely, me.

It isn't just the influence of family and the gaps in their sexual education that students have to contend with, but larger cultural assumptions that come with the timing of their experiences. The word "prude" came up in one of my conversations on campus, and was a recurring theme in many others—largely, the concern of being judged for not seizing on the newfound freedom that college offers. The shame students feel

about this seems to be such a driving concern that it doesn't make room for what might really be going on behind the scenes. Some just aren't ready for physical intimacy yet; others might find that they're disinterested in it altogether; some are so far from even knowing their own selves that they're not ready to be with someone else in a romantic capacity, emotional or physical, and would likely benefit from focusing less on relationships and more on the work they need to do for themselves.

"Okay, I think the worst of it was on the sleeve," says Seb.

I look up at him and whatever expression he sees on my face makes him immediately lose the color in his.

"What?" he asks.

My blood feels cold. Like someone sucked all the late-summer warmth out of the room. "I wondered why you didn't send me your draft," I say, more to myself than to him. Because it makes sense now. Of course he wouldn't want me to see it. Not when I would have every opportunity to send it back with a What the actual fuck?

Except Seb doesn't sound apologetic in the slightest. Just concerned and confused. "One of the people I interviewed put me off until the last second." He sits down next to me on the bed, leaning to look at my screen. "You okay?"

I shake my head, which isn't hard to do. Most of me is already shaking. "I wasn't one of your interviews, Seb. I thought we were talking as friends."

I can't see Seb's face, but I can feel him go very, very still beside me.

"Of course we were," he says. "I just—that conversation felt like the heart of a lot of what I was getting at, so I mentioned it in the piece. But I didn't name you or anything."

“Forget naming me. You went ahead and fully psychoanalyzed me.”

It’s almost worse, in a way I can’t explain. Like someone opened my chest and showed everyone the messed-up insides of me, parts of myself I haven’t even looked at yet. Parts I trusted Seb with, only to get them broadcast to the whole school and beyond.

My hands are flat on the bed, trying to ground myself. Seb puts a hesitant hand on top of one of them, his voice low. “I’m sorry, I—I mean, I should have run it past you. I see that now. But I really didn’t think you’d mind.”

I curl my fingers into my palm, moving my hand out from under his. “You told the whole world what you thought of me—which is apparently that I’m some walking existential crisis you couldn’t touch with a stick!—and you didn’t think I’d care?”

Because that’s what this is, isn’t it? A rejection. I don’t know why I’m surprised. He already did it once, when we were onstage. It’s not just that Seb doesn’t think I’m ready—he thinks I need to do more work. He thinks I don’t know myself.

Which, shit—maybe I don’t. Because I’ve never been so wrong before. A minute ago I was thinking of telling this boy I had feelings for him, certain that he had them, too. He might as well have written in that article that he doesn’t.

Maybe this was meant to happen, then. This article was supposed to come out to stop me from making a mistake that would embarrass me even more than this. A prerejection before I had to live through a real one.

“Shit. No. Sadie.” The distress in Seb’s voice is so palpable that I can’t help looking up and meeting his eyes, which are wider than I’ve ever seen them. “That’s not at all what I think. Can we just—take a beat here?”

I shake my head again. I can already feel my heart twisting, and every thought trying to twist even faster to stay ahead of it. To stanch the tears, to stomp out the ache. To strategize, like this is just one more of the countless things I have to win over Seb. To hurt him more than he just hurt me.

Except this time it doesn't matter. I've already lost. Not just the idea of Seb seeing me as more than a friend but even being a friend.

I stand up abruptly. "It's just always going to be like this, isn't it?" I ask, pacing over to the door. "We're so close to each other that we just can't help but use each other."

Seb follows immediately on my heels. "That's not true."

"It is. Like you said earlier, with the tech thing," I say, nearly laughing at the absurdity of it. "We're shit at stuff we never competed at because the only things we bothered to learn were out of spite. Of course it was only going to lead to this."

I unlock the door and move my hand toward the knob, but Seb shakes his head with a pleading expression. "To what? Us understanding each other?" he asks.

I fully turn from the door to look at him. "To us exploiting each other," I say, my voice pitching with anger, with hurt. "I mean, look at this competition. We got our ideas for our first piece from each other. You used one of the most embarrassing things about me to write your second one. We've never had an original damn thought in our heads because every single one of them has revolved around screwing each other over and hating each other, and this—this is too far."

"I'm sorry. I really didn't mean for it to—I didn't think it would be embarrassing. I just didn't think," he says, his voice breaking.

Seb's eyes are red-rimmed and watering, and the sight of it suctions something in my

chest. I step toward him unconsciously, the anger momentarily forgotten, but he shakes his head and clears his throat to speak.

“Give me a chance to fix this, okay? You’re my—” He pulls in a shaky breath and tries again. “You’re my...”

He hesitates, almost like he’s asking for permission, and that’s all it takes for the anger to snap right back. Not just for this, but for years we spent digging too deep, charting each other’s weak spots like a map. I’m angry at myself and angry at Seb and utterly humiliated at the idea of him sitting down and typing those words about me, and it feels like it’s all about to explode when suddenly it all funnels into a sharp, crystallized edge.

“I’m not your anything, Seb.”

My hand is on the doorknob again, but Seb’s voice stops me, quiet and thick with hurt.

“Sadie,” he says, like my name is a plea. “You can’t mean that.”

I don’t. Fuck. But that’s just it—Seb knows that because Seb sees me. Better than anyone in the world. And it’s just a searing, brutal reminder that what he wrote about me in that piece is exactly right. I don’t even know who I am. In a way that doesn’t make me fit to date or even to be a decent friend. I only managed it with Seb for—what? Three weeks, tops?

So Seb’s article is more right than he knows. It’s not just that I have “work I need to do on myself.” I’m a fuckup, through and through. I need to leave now, before I make this any worse.

Except when I open the door, I discover I already have. Hadley is on the other side of

it, and I can already tell from the tears swimming in her eyes that if I don't do something to fix this fast, we're about to skip straight to a "ten" on the Brighton family disaster scale.

"You guys hate each other?"

I sew up my own hurt with such brutal practiced speed that it feels like I'm squeezing my own heart into submission. Seb straightens up behind me. I hate myself a little more then, because despite every awful thought screaming in my head right now, the one that overrides it is practically evolutionary instinct: Parental Mode activated. Just like that, Seb and I are back to another version of pretend.

"No. Of course not," I say. "Seb and I were just—"

Jesus. Here come the tears. I didn't realize I was this close to crying myself, but it doesn't matter. I can swallow it back. Be good, responsible, quiet Sadie and push down all of these feelings, tell Hadley everything's fine, and go downstairs with a smile on my face.

Only for the first time in memory, it doesn't happen. I flounder. Hadley's chin wobbles, staring at me expectantly, and I can't summon a single damn word.

Seb steps forward. His voice is still uneven, but it's firmer than mine. "We were just talking about the writing competition we're in. I did something stupid and Sadie's upset, but I'm going to fix it."

I close my eyes and blow out the rest of the breath in my lungs. I wish he was right, but there's nothing left to fix. He broke something, maybe, but judging from the stricken look on Hadley's face, I may have just shattered it beyond repair.

Sure enough, Hadley shakes her head, looking at me and then looking at Seb. "I heard

you. Marley always said you guys hated each other, but I didn't believe it." Her eyes settle on me, watering enough now that they're starting to spill. "But I heard you."

"Hadley," I start again, not sure how to finish. My own hurt is still too big to deal with hers.

She shakes her head, pushing past us both. "Can you get out of my room?" she says. "You don't live here anymore."

The words slide between my ribs, sharp and unexpected. I stand there for a moment, stunned, and Hadley whips around and says, "I mean it. I want to be alone. Go away."

The next breath she pulls in is deep enough that we both know she's going to start yelling if we don't. Seb steps out first and I follow, letting him shut the door behind us. The noise of the party comes back into focus—loud laughter, pulsing music, the clink of glasses and plates. I pull in a breath to ground myself, but it doesn't work. Everything feels slippery and out of my control. My feelings about Seb. My hopes for Newsbag. Even my own room—without it there's nowhere to hide from this. Just like that, it feels like there isn't one solid thing tethering me to my own life.

Seb takes a step toward me, filling up the space between us. "I really am sorry. And I will fix it. I'll edit the piece."

I shake my head. "Don't."

"It doesn't matter to me half as much as—"

"Don't say that," I say quickly. Because if he says it, the guilt already brewing in me is going to get worse. If he says it, I'm going to hate myself even more, because I don't know what's worse—the idea that I'm really ruthless enough that I might never

say the same to him, or the idea that Seb might matter to me more than this competition, too.

Someone starts chanting the word “cake! cake! cake!” from the living room. Marley pops her head toward the hall and says, “You can come back now, you cowards.” Seb won’t take his eyes off me, and I won’t take mine off the floor.

The truth is, I shouldn’t have said anything. I shouldn’t have read it in the first place. What I should have done was keep my eyes on the prize and not let myself get distracted by Seb at all, but I did. And that’s on me, not on Seb. Seb didn’t change when we got to school. I did.

I clear my throat. “Don’t change the piece. It’s fine.”

“It’s not.”

“I’ll be angrier if you change it. Don’t,” I tell him, leaving no room for compromise. I don’t want to do anything to affect his odds. When I win this, it’ll be fair and square.

And if I’m being honest with myself—Seb didn’t do anything wrong, really. I’m not upset about what he wrote. I’m upset that he saw me before I did. That he always has. It makes it all the more personal, understanding that he knows me exactly how I am—that I know him for exactly who he is—and it’s still not enough for him to think we’re ready.

It’s still not enough to change the fact that even if we were, there will always be some kind of Newsbag -like wedge between us. We’ve never been able to get close to each other without getting too close, without knocking the other one down.

Our moms start singsonging our names to summon us for cake, the mood so happy and light in the world beyond the hallway that I already feel myself instinctively

blinking the last evidence of tears, pressing my shaking palms to my dress. Seb goes through the same motions, taking a deep breath and quickly pressing a palm under his eyes.

“We’ll talk later,” says Seb.

I shake my head and finally look at him. Even in the dim light of the hallway his expression is more raw and open than I’ve ever seen it. If anything, it only firms my resolve. I’m every bit as much a distraction to him as he is to me.

“Let’s just get through the competition,” I say quietly. “Finish it up fair and square.”

Seb doesn’t say anything for a long moment. “That’s what you want?”

No. But it’s what we both need.

“Sadie! Seb! You have ten seconds to get your traitorous asses in here or I’m feeding your cake to Meowtwo!”

Like mirrors of each other, we both shake ourselves loose, set practiced smiles on our faces, and walk out of the hall. But for the first time I can remember, he isn’t matching pace with me. He surges up ahead, and it’s every bit as devastating as it is a relief. He doesn’t see a thick tear slide down my cheek, as searing and silent as the hurt in my heart.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:20 am

“I let you out of my sight for—thirty-six hours, give or take?” Christina asks, squinting up at a cloud. “And things between you and Seb got this fucked?”

I wince, not sure how to answer that question. Christina and I have been studying for so long this afternoon that our brains feel more like Silly Putty than functioning organs. Or rather, Christina has been studying—I mostly spent the few hours staring at the same page and reliving yesterday’s blowup conversation with Seb in my head, alternately punishing myself for the conclusions I leapt to and justifying them. Like it’ll make the whole thing easier if I can assign a bad guy to the argument, make it black-and-white and easy again, the same way it was when we were competing before.

But that ship sailed a long time ago. Now there’s no bad guy, but two deeply confused people and no script for what happens next.

“Well, when you put it that way, it’s almost impressive,” I say. “Nobody can say I slacked off in the screwup department.”

Christina tosses an empty Tupperware at me. True to my word, I brought back two giant slices of Marley’s birthday cake, which is why we are now starfished on the grass on the quad in a Funfetti-induced coma.

“Be serious a sec,” she says. “This is obviously a big deal or you wouldn’t have fled your own home like a ghoul to avoid him.”

That wasn’t exactly how it went down. Seb was going to drive us both back later in the day, but Christina thought we were coming back earlier and asked if I wanted to

study with her this morning. When I texted back a yup be there in two hours!! she didn't know that that was the approximate amount of time it would take me to book the earliest morning bus back to campus, kiss my parents goodbye, and slink over to the bus stop a mile away like the cowardliest coward in the history of Maple Ride.

Time that I also spent on the bus reading Seb's draft in full and hating myself a little bit more for the way I reacted to it with every line.

I let out a sigh deep enough to inflate a hot-air balloon.

"Okay. If I'm being serious—it's a great piece. Like, nuanced and empathetic and genuinely helpful. You'll see when it comes out." I start talking too fast then, spurred in equal parts by guilt and pride. "He interviewed so many people for it. Just really captured how everyone feels in over their head about romantic relationships in college, and the whole end of the piece is about resources and tactics to help. He even talked to one of the psych professors on campus."

And if I'm being honest, once I read the piece—once I saw how he worked our conversation in not just as something personal but as a key example to frame a larger whole—the piece felt like a balm for me, too. The understanding that I wasn't alone in the confusion of navigating these feelings. That none of us were.

Naturally I've gone ahead and used it as a springboard to feel even more alone than I did before.

"Sounds like a kick-ass piece. But I don't care about that," says Christina. "I care about you. And it sounds like you're pissed at him."

"I'm not. Anymore," I amend. "I'm just—upset in general. Because I think..." I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment, because it feels like I'm tugging at something essential in myself, saying it out loud. "I think I really like him."

When I open my eyes, Christina has a hand on her chest. “I, for one, am shocked.”

The sun comes out from behind a cloud. I shove my forearm over my eyebrows to block it. “Ha ha,” I say miserably.

“If only a best friend could have seen this coming from a hundred miles away.”

I let out a groan that’s interrupted by Christina’s phone pinging and then pinging again.

“You wanna check that?” I ask.

“It’s just the cross-country group chat popping off again. We’ve been having a heated debate about what’s worse, leg chafing or boob chafing.” Christina sighs. “Well, I say he’s not fully off the hook for not giving you permission.”

“He apologized. Like a lot.” I squeeze my eyes shut again. “And I said some things I shouldn’t have.”

Christina lets out a doubtful noise but humors me anyway. “So what are you going to do?”

If that isn’t the question of the hour. I’m so unused to being the source of drama that I don’t even know where to start when it comes to fixing it.

“Damage control all around, I guess. I’ve texted Hadley like five times today. She’s still not talking to me. My parents definitely know something’s up, which means Seb’s parents know something’s up.”

There’s so much else to do that saying it all out loud will only make it worse. I have to stop Seb from editing the piece. I have to apologize for some of what I said. I have

to somehow make enough space in my brain to start thinking about what on earth I'm going to do for this third miraculous, out-of-the-box, unbeatable piece that's due for Round Three in a few weeks.

"I mean about the fact you're in love with Seb."

I pull my forearm off my face to turn my head and gape at her. "Put all those words back where they came from. I said I like Seb."

"You said 'really.'"

"Well, that's the end of me using adverbs ever again, then."

Christina puts her hands up as if in surrender, still smirking. I feel a now-familiar dread crawl back under my skin when I actually answer her. "And anyway—I'm not going to do anything."

I stare back up at the sky, indulging in a little self-pity to take the edge off all the guilt. "He thinks I'm a mess."

"He knows you're a mess," says Christina without missing a beat. "So is he. And I'd say so am I in solidarity, but I feel like I get a free pass because I found some green paint in my armpit this morning and need to pump myself up."

I laugh despite myself, and Christina elbows me.

"That's eighteen, though," she says. "Being a mess."

She was on a roll until that last bit, which she delivers with an air of defeat I'm not expecting, her gaze cast at nothing in particular. She seemed to be in better spirits this morning after getting some sleep and studying done, but I know better than to think

that's going to fix anything long-term. Our Bitch List was still ominously unchecked when I got back to the dorm this morning.

"If that's true, I'm a little bit worried about yours," I tell her.

As if on cue, Christina's phone goes off again. "Ugh," she says. "I have to be talented and smart and popular? What a racket."

She shifts to prop herself up on her elbows and read the texts. I stare back up at the sky, mulling over Christina's "everyone's a mess" theory. Particularly about Seb. It's strange—I've never considered Seb capable of being a mess. Not because I haven't seen him in weak moments, but because I haven't let myself fully acknowledge them. Like Seb is a measuring stick I'm constantly holding myself to—like I should be able to keep it together as long as he is, and if he isn't I should look away before the weakness gets me, too.

Last night neither of us kept it together. It rattles me now, to think of how much inadvertent power I had over Seb in those moments, to nearly make him cry. To understand we've always had that power over each other but just innately known never to use it. There was always an uncrossable line.

Now that line is more tangled than ever, and I'm tripping over it headfirst.

"Did you know about this?"

Christina's sitting upright again. I sit up, too, leaning to look at Christina's phone, which is open to the Newsbag homepage. Instead of the splashy custom font rotating the headlines from the most recent issue, there are just a bunch of dollar signs and very, very large numbers.

"What are these?" I ask, taking the phone from her and scrolling.

“Newsbag got ahold of the school’s finances and published the athletic budget line by line.”

I scroll further and see that it isn’t just the budget for the athletic department—including all kinds of extras and ridiculous expenses that don’t seem to be going to the students in any way, shape, or form—but for all the student orgs, too, with visuals showing how little money it takes to keep them running. Newsbag is among the highlighted ones that the school is threatening to shut down.

There’s a note at the top of the page: “The athletes wanted transparency about their budget, and so did we. Looks like we’re all being taken for a Maple Ride.”

“Holy shit.” Despite everything, a grin starts blooming on my face. “I didn’t know. But shit. I wonder if they’re real.”

“They are.” Christina takes the phone from me slowly, her expression strangely flat. She pulls back up her group chat and does something I’ve never seen her do before and tilts her screen away from me. “That’s what everyone has been texting about.”

“Your cross-country group chat?”

Christina shakes her head. “I’m in another group chat with the scholarship students. They, uh—said we all got an email. Something about how we shouldn’t worry about our scholarships being jeopardized by this.”

I do a quick skim of her face. She’s too distracted to meet my eye. “That’s good, right?”

Christina purses her lips. “Some of them are nervous. I guess it’s just a little weird that they felt like they had to email us that on a Sunday. Like, why would we have any reason to think they were jeopardized in the first place?”

“They’re not,” I say, frowning. “Of course they’re not.”

She picks at some grass, still staring at her phone. A few more texts come in. She turns to me.

“I know a lot of the athletes are happy about this. Unlike me, some of them managed to find time for student-run stuff, so this is a double win for them.” She considers the broken blades of grass in her palm. “But I just—I hope you’re all being careful about how you play this, is all.”

She sounds so somber that I assume it’s just a bit, and I let out a breathy laugh that I immediately regret. Christina just looks at me, tired and unmoved.

“Christina, they’re not going to do anything about your scholarship,” I tell her. “I mean, look at these numbers. They’re swimming in money.”

Christina hikes up her knees closer to her chest, making herself small. “That they’re using on media support and coaches for football and the other big-draw sports,” she says. “Cross-country isn’t one of them. If they’re going to make a show out of pulling funding from the athletes, I’m just nervous that...” She runs a hand through her hair. “I don’t know.”

I take a beat and try to put myself in Christina’s sneakers. She’s tired. She’s stressed. And she doesn’t have any context for this aside from that email and the other people worrying about it. No wonder this is getting under her skin.

“I get it. I do. But this is going to be good for all of us,” I tell her reassuringly. “Now that they’re exposed it would look way worse for them to pull money from other sports. That’s why we’re teaming up with the athletes in the first place. So we can all protect each other.”

I don't know the specifics of everything Amara and Rowan have been talking about with the more senior athletes, but I do know that's the gist of it—not looking out for just the interests of the less-publicized sports but the well-being of the students in them. There was talk of trying to push an agenda for more resources to take the pressure off the athletes, and I have no doubt the scholarship kids would be the top priority for that.

I pull in another breath to tell her so, but Christina stands abruptly.

“Right. Well, speaking of that scholarship thing, I'd better get back to studying.”

“I can come with you,” I offer.

She shakes her head, already pulling her headphones back over her ears. “I'm going into full lo-fi-bops mode. I'll see you at dinner.”

I uneasily watch her go, trying to decide if I should press the point. My own phone pings before I can: Emergency Newsbag meeting @ McLaren. All hands on deck.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:20 am

It turns out the only thing more unnerving than Rowan starting a Newsbag meeting declaring that we're about to get axed is Rowan starting a Newsbag meeting by opening their mouth and saying nothing at all.

“Oh, god. They're broken,” says Joey nervously on my left.

On my right there's an empty desk where Seb should be. He must still be on the road. I'm nervous for Newsbag's sake, but I can't help that despite everything I've still got one eye on the door.

“Is Newsbag getting shut down?” asks one of the freshmen.

Colby lets out a sharp laugh. “Love to see those assholes try.”

Amara nudges Rowan, and Rowan clears their throat, blinking themselves back into the room. “Sorry. I just, uh—discovered the power of the dean's full lung capacity over the phone. It is safe to say he isn't pleased by our latest stunt.”

There's some murmuring throughout the room that's hard to interpret—some of it confused, some indignant.

“Yeah,” Joey says carefully. “Was that—something we were going to discuss as a group, or...?”

That gets the attention of all the freshmen. I assumed that was something they discussed. Some kind of closed-door meeting with just the staff members. But the way the murmuring pitches in agreement after Joey asks, it's clear we're all

surprised.

Amara winces. “It was. But the athletes we were working with got wind that they were finalizing the budgets for next semester by the end of the day. If we just let it happen they were going to pull our proposal for mental-health advocates for the athletes, and some of the student orgs would have been axed completely. So we thought about it all morning, and ultimately decided to just pull trig.”

Joey nods, frowning thoughtfully, and the murmurs kick up again. There’s a slight movement by the door, and in the slim window I see Seb’s face peering in, his eyes immediately meeting mine. We both go very still.

“We understand if people are surprised or frustrated,” says Rowan.

“How’d we even get our hands on those numbers?” Colby asks.

Rowan looks to Amara, who gives a bare nod.

“I don’t want to take credit for anyone else’s work here—so if anyone asks, make it clear that Amara and I were the ones who decided to post them,” says Rowan firmly. “That’s on us.”

Seb still hasn’t moved from the door, but he’s not looking at me anymore. He’s staring at Rowan and Amara, his face pale and his lips pressed tight.

“And to be clear, they haven’t shut us down. At least not yet,” says Amara. “But we wanted to get everyone together so we could get on the same page about this and decide how to move forward as a group. So for the next however long it takes, this is an open forum for questions, ideas, discussion, the whole nine yards.”

Amara might as well have opened a floodgate, the way every one starts talking over

one another at once. Everyone but me, because I'm glancing back at the window, where I don't see Seb's face anymore.

I turn to Joey. "I'll be back in a bit."

"Bring snacks," he says. "I have a feeling we're going to be here awhile."

Thankfully Seb hasn't gone far. He's leaning against the wall by the door, head down and staring at his shoes. He startles at the sight of me, blinks hard, and immediately says, "I'm sorry. I know I said it already, but I am. I just wanted to get that out there before I say the rest of it."

My heart cinches because he looks about as shitty as I feel—eyes red-rimmed like he stayed up half the night overthinking everything we said, too.

"Do you want to go outside for a bit?" I ask.

Seb's eyebrows lift in surprise, looking at the slightly open door and back at me. After a moment he nods and I lead the way out of the building, finding a bench for us to sit on just outside of it.

"I'm sorry, too," I tell him. "I should've just—taken a beat."

"You don't have anything to apologize for," Seb insists. "I'm the one who didn't talk to you about it when I should have. I'm the one who's sorry."

It's entirely the wrong time and place for it, but I find myself biting down a smile. Seb's eyes widen warily, but I just shake my head.

"Seb. I'm going to stop you right there because knowing the two of us, we're going to start an Apology Olympics that only ends when we're suffocating on this bench."

The relief that floods through Seb's face is so palpable that I feel my own shoulders loosening. Some small amount of order has been restored, and even that much makes all the difference. My next breath feels like the first full one I've taken all day.

"Okay. I won't apologize again." The slight laugh in Seb's voice tapers out when he turns to look at me, plain and sincere. "But I will promise I won't ever involve you in anything like that again without asking first. Because I hope—I hope we'll be involved in a lot of things together." The tips of his ears redden, but he adds quickly, "So I want you to know that you can trust me, like you did when we first had that conversation. It should have occurred to me that writing about it would have been breaking that trust."

I nod slowly, because I can't help seizing on the words that have the least to do with the promise and the most to do with the hope still pressing against the inside of my chest. Involved in a lot of things together. He could mean writing-wise. But he could also mean just about anything else.

And this right here is the opportunity for me to tell him the whole truth: that I wasn't just upset to be taken by surprise. That I was upset because it felt like he was counting me out. That I'm not sure where we stand even now.

But if I do decide to tell Seb how I feel about him, it won't be on the heels of the worst conversation we've ever had. If there's ever a right time to tell him, I want it to be a moment that stands on its own, separate from the lingering hurt from last night and the confusion of today.

So I nod. "I appreciate that," I say. "And for what it's worth—I do trust you. I always have. I don't think we could have sustained our whole frenemy thing for so long if we didn't, you know?"

The push and pull of it couldn't have worked if we weren't always pushing just hard

enough not to let the other fall, pulling just enough to keep the other one in. An inherent balance, even when we were using it to make each other miserable. I'm prepared to cite my evidence, but after a moment, Seb nods, too.

"In a weird way—yeah," he says.

Satisfied, I add, "And if I ever get righteously pissed at you for something again—"

"When," says Seb quietly, with a wry look in his eyes.

"When I get pissed at you again," I say with a slight smirk, "we'll talk it out. And I won't say things I don't mean."

"Like that we're not anything to each other."

The words hang in the balance between us with a weight that neither of us quite knows how to hold. Like the shape of it isn't finished yet, even after all this time.

"You know, I don't know what we are," I say candidly. "I don't know anyone like us. But what I do know is that you're important to me. You always will be. And for better or worse, we're stuck with each other."

It's not a love confession—not the entire truth—but the one that rests under all the others. The one that matters most.

"You make it sound so terminal," Seb says, half teasing and half not.

I knock my knee into his. "Yeah, well. I'm hoping."

Seb finally smiles then. It's exhausted and slow and nothing like the ones he aims at our classmates to set them at ease or the ones he aims at me to put me on my toes. It's

soft, with no intent behind it. A smile just for us.

He leans farther back into the bench and for a stretch we just watch the lazy Sunday afternoon of campus roll by—the students shuffling around with textbooks in their sweatpants, holding to-go boxes from the sandwich shop on Main Street, laughing over pictures from whatever they got up to over the weekend. The quiet is so easy and so ours that I forget about the rest of the world for a few moments, feeling the same kind of relief I felt when the car pulled up to our parents' house two days ago; the relief of being home.

A burst of commotion from the open window where the Newsbag meeting is still underway stirs us back, but neither of us moves.

“Have you gotten Hadley to talk to you yet?”

The guilt comes seeping back before Seb even finishes asking. “No. But don't worry,” I assure him. “Taking care of that is on me.”

But Seb just blows out an exasperated breath. “You know I'm not worried about—‘taking care of it.’ I'm worried because I care about Hadley, too.”

The guilt is no longer a seep but threatening to become a stream again.

“You guys have always been close,” I say, an apology in my voice.

Seb's shoulders sink, and he ducks his head for a moment in thought. “This is going to sound so ridiculous, but—I miss your whole family,” he admits. “I was reading your draft before we got home and just thinking—shit. I miss them as much as my parents.”

“You miss my family?” I ask, laughing. “What about them, the drama or the noise or

the complete and unabashed chaos?”

I’m joking, but Seb isn’t. “All of it,” he says, looking me right in the eye. “I miss—having people around. The kind I can just be myself with.”

It clicks for me then in a way it should have a long time ago. The way my parents check in on Seb just like they check in on me. The way I found Seb at Pancake It or Leave It every Sunday, filling up the same ache. The way I’ve always been dismissive of Seb’s friendships and relationships in a way that couldn’t just be explained by our rivalry but by the simple fact that I knew him best, because I knew the Seb who was running around the backyard with Hadley’s water balloons and helping my dad bake cookies for my mom’s Dungeons how easily and enthusiastically my parents digested my Newsbag piece. How Marley recognized a difference in me but immediately swung into the new groove of it. How Hadley didn’t even miss a beat in helping plan our prank, which she’s never seen me do in her entire existence.

How Seb is right—my family is a lot of things. And that’s probably why they have no problem accepting people just as they are.

I offer Seb a grateful smile. “Yeah, well. Some dead botanist with a grudge against sea dragons convinced me to open up to my parents.”

Seb’s eyes light up with their usual mischief. “Huh. Do I know him?” he asks. “Is his hair beachy? His charm insufferable?”

I push against him with my shoulder, then ask a question I’ve had in the back of my mind since I left this morning. “Did you get a chance to tell your dad about the piece at all?”

I almost regret asking when his eyes dim again. “No. I, uh—was distracted.”

“Right,” I say ruefully.

“No, not by—I mean, yes, by our conversation.” Seb glances back at the building.

“But also because of this whole— Newsbag thing.”

“You mean the numbers?” I say. “I’m not worried. They can’t shut us down without looking like cartoon villains. Besides, they don’t even know who did it.”

Seb’s lip twists to the side just as the logical part of my brain wakes back up and makes a connection it should have made a full hour ago, when the numbers first dropped.

“But you do,” I say quietly.

Seb goes very still, which is all the confirmation I need.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Seb,” I say, exasperated. “I’m implicated. Just tell me.”

Seb is so tightly wound that he can’t even seem to shake his head properly. “I don’t want anyone else to get in trouble. Rowan and Amara are covering for me already—”

“They’re covering their own asses. They made the call to hit Publish, not you.” My brow furrows. “If anything, they should be the ones worried about putting you in a weird spot for that.”

Seb doesn’t disagree, looking uneasily at the building again. We can still hear voices carrying out from the open window. I’m suddenly as indignant as they are, but for Seb’s sake over anyone else’s.

“I don’t know.” Seb runs a hand through his hair and then leaves it on top of his head, stuck on a thought. “I was the one who gave it to them and said to do what they

wanted with it. I didn't ask them to protect me or anything, but I also didn't think they'd just—full-blast it like that.”

“Yeah. Shit.” I still feel like I haven't fully caught up to this enough to say much more than that, but one thought occurs to me. “How did you even swing it, mister ‘not exactly a tech guy’?”

That wrestles a small laugh out of him. “I have friends in tweeby places. They didn't hack the files, but they talked me through how to do it. Less people involved the better.”

“Sebastian Adams, Instagram influencer by day, international superspy by night.”

Seb shifts on the bench to face me, a sincerity in his expression that catches me off guard. “I know we said no more apologies, but—I'm sorry about this, too,” he says.

I wave my hand at him. “It's fine. If I thought it'd get you in trouble, I wouldn't have told you, either.” I pause. “Well, at least not now that we're out of our Blatant Sabotage Era.”

But the worried crease in Seb's brow only deepens. “No, I mean about— Newsbag being under fire like this.” He shifts his head to level his eyes with mine. “I know how much it means to you. And I know if this shuts us down, I'll have messed up your chances of writing for them forever.”

My hand is on Seb's shoulder before I've even made a conscious decision to touch him. He ducks his head like he wants to accept the comfort of it but can't. I lower my voice, the words coming so easily to me that I have no doubt in them and leave no room for him to doubt them either.

“First of all—let me assure you,” I say. “The reason I love Newsbag is because it

pulls shit like this. Neither of us would be here if we didn't want to be a part of that."

He gives a minute nod but still won't look at me. I give his shoulder a bare squeeze, sliding my hand farther down his arm, the warmth of his skin at odds with the slight goose bumps against my palm.

"And Seb, when you're a journalist, there are going to be a lot of moments like this. The truth always comes with consequences. It's up to you to weigh them out."

Seb relaxes his shoulder into my touch almost as if he can feel the weight of decisions that haven't even happened yet. My throat is so tight I have to pause for a moment, because this —this is the real reason why it's impossible to stay out of Seb's orbit. He cares. He cares so much that you can sense it on him like gravity before you even see him. He cares so much it makes him easy to trust and easier to love.

For the first time I feel painfully protective of it. Just like the truth, it comes with consequences, too.

"But you've got a good head and a better heart," I go on. "You wouldn't have done it if you didn't know that it's ultimately going to help more people than it hurts."

Seb lifts his head slowly to meet my eyes again. I know the words aren't a magic wand that's going to fix him up right now, but I can tell from the resignation in his expression that he's taking every one of them to heart.

"I don't know if I'm ready to weigh it out just yet," says Seb. "I don't know what to do."

I sit up straighter, because if there's one thing I'm an expert at, it's bossing Seb Adams around.

“Well, fortunately for you, I’m still your self-appointed editor. So I’ll tell you what to do. Trust Rowan and Amara. Stay the course and don’t tell anyone you were involved.” He starts to waffle, but I don’t let him. “If the administration is trying to shut Newsbag down, it’s only because they’re scared of what we’re capable of doing. It’s only because we’re doing our job right.”

Seb’s lips press into a grim but grateful smile.

“If that’s true then I learned from watching you,” says Seb. “You were the one who put this whole thing in motion.”

I’ve officially given up on trying to stop my cheeks from burning. I’m just going to be a pot left on low simmer for the rest of the damn semester, at this rate.

“Careful, Seb, or I’m going to start thinking you enjoy implicating me.”

“Hard not to enjoy most things with you,” says Seb, so easily that it takes a beat for the words to register, for the cheek burn to escalate to a flame. “But I mean it. You supercharged this whole thing. I know you’ve spent a long time trying not to rock the boat. But you’re funny and clever and it’s about time you started letting yourself make waves.”

I pull in a shaky breath. I know he can tell the words hit home, the same way mine did for him. And I also know that if we keep this up, we’re going to be entirely useless to a group of bickering Newsbag writers and hopefuls who need as many wave-making, data-hacking minds in there as they can get.

“Stop that right now before my ego gets as inflated as yours, huh?” I ask.

Seb grins, then, and grabs my hand, squeezing it. “Don’t worry. I’ll keep you tethered to the earth.”

I look at our hands, which slot together so easily that it feels like they've done it countless times before. The only thing reminding me they haven't is the way my heart kicks up, happy and light in my chest.

"Is that a threat?" I ask.

"A promise," says Seb, who doesn't let go of my hand when he moves off the bench, using the momentum to pull me up in turn. "Like you said. For better or worse, we're stuck with each other."

I follow his lead, hoping with every step that it isn't for the worse.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:20 am

If Marley's calling it's either because she's butt-dialing or because everyone in the family has been picked up on charges for disrupting the peace of the local movie theater by intermittently yelling Marvel fan theories and/or loudly crying over the death of a CGI creature. I pick up on the first ring.

"Hey, so what the fuck?"

Ah. Nothing like the warm, welcoming voice of your older sister to take the edge off what has been a spectacularly anarchic week. I finish taping the flyer to the side of McLaren for the third—fourth?—time today, knowing full well someone hired by the administration will have it pulled down within the hour. At least doing the rounds to replace them means I'm getting some fresh air.

"Which fuck are you referring to?" I ask.

Marley's stunned into silence for a moment. I forget that she's not fully used to campus Sadie yet. But I've leaned so far into my boat-rocking waves this week that I couldn't turn off campus Sadie if I tried—the last five days have demanded it.

Five days. It feels almost like I got yanked through a wormhole, they went by so fast—just a blur of underground organizing with the athletes and student-run groups, giving the administration the runaround about where we're meeting to decide how to respond to their threats.

Of which there are many. It's not just Newsbag on the line anymore but a bunch of other student organizations the administration is claiming were "borderline" but are all too willing to axe now because of the "lack of respectful dialogue." Not that we

were offered any kind of dialogue in the first place.

So now we're split up into two groups. Rowan is leading one, trying to work with the donors we could get ahold of and staff members who want to help so we can propose a restructured budget and transparency policy of our own. Amara is leading the other, rounding up all the student groups to see who's on board with defending it, and when and where we plan to do it.

Seb's been off with Rowan's team and I've been off with Amara's so I haven't seen much of him this week, or anyone outside of Newsbag, really. Even hearing Marley's voice feels a bit like getting pulled off another plane of existence.

"The one where you've ghosted the whole family group chat and haven't called home once this week," says Marley.

I frown. Marley barely even acknowledges me on either of those mediums, or anyone, for that matter. "I've been busy," I say, a tad defensively.

Marley does not pick up on the subtle "pot calling kettle" vibes. "Well, I hope whatever it is, it's more important than Hadley's world imploding."

For once my heart doesn't lurch in my chest, my spine doesn't snap to attention. It's not that I don't care. It's that I'm exhausted, and I have an armful of flyers and another mile of campus to canvas, and I'm assuming from the sass and liberal use of hyperbole that this isn't actually that big of a deal.

"Over what?" I ask.

"You don't even know?"

Hadley still hasn't deigned to talk to me or Seb. I'm used to the occasional silent

treatment from her, but the past week just slid out from under me so fast that I've stopped measuring time in hours and started measuring it in the snacks the Foodie Club hurls at us to keep us going.

"I don't," I admit.

"She's freaking out over this school play thing. Keeps freezing in rehearsals and coming home bawling about her stage fright. Her face is a goddamn Slip 'n Slide."

"Shit," I mutter, half about the Hadley situation, and half because the wind just picked up out of nowhere and jostled a few of the flyers out of my hand.

"Yeah, that about covers it. So can you come down from your coed cloud for half a second and talk to her already?"

I pause, letting some of the flyers get away. There's an edge in her tone that's sharper than usual, one she's aiming with precision. I tread carefully but can't help the twinge of irritation in my voice.

"Have you tried talking to her?"

"You're the one who knows how to fix her when she's like this," she says, like she's scolding a misbehaving dog.

The wind picks up again and I hug the stack of flyers to my chest, trying to turn my back to the gust.

"Because I'm the only one who tries," I say. "You're her damn sister, too."

Oh, shit. I didn't mean for it to come out like that. I wait for the crush of guilt, but curiously, it doesn't come. I feel lighter, like some valve in me sprang a leak and let

some of the pressurized air out.

“Excuse you?” Marley snaps.

“Fuck,” I mutter—the wind came at me from the side and now the flyers are scattering all over the quad.

“What the hell is going on with you?”

The valve in me gets lawless then, because it just—snaps. Like the pressure’s been building for so long that suddenly it has nowhere to go.

“I’ll tell you what’s going on with me,” I say, kneeling down in the mud to grab the flyers. Might as well be a figurative and literal mess. “A whole lifetime of always being the one who has to fix things.”

Maybe it’s because I’ve startled Marley with the sudden appearance of my backbone, but she lets up a bit. “Yeah, well. You’re good at it.”

Unfortunately for Marley, I’ve already burst and now it’s all just blowing out of me. “No. I’m just the only one of us not going buck wild all the damn time. So I’m always the one who has to fix things, who has to keep the peace, who has to go out of their way to convince the rest of the world that our family has a modicum of normalcy in it, which you know what? Is no easy task. I’m tired of it, Marley. I’m tired. Can’t you solve one damn problem yourself?”

By the end of my little rant I am basically putting on a one-woman show in the middle of the quad and can feel the curious eyes of students passing by. I’m tempted to pull a face at them, to snap something like Enjoying the view? Tempted, ironically, to cause the kind of scene I’ve actively been trying to stop my family from causing for years.

And fuck. It feels good.

“Damn, Sadie,” Marley says with a bite. “Tell me how you really feel.”

I let out a frustrated groan, apparently so theatrical that I manage, against all odds, to drop even more of the damn flyers. “Forget it.”

I’m assuming she will only because it’s been easy for her to do it before. Marley has two modes: causing drama or slinking away from other people’s, not unlike the family cat she’s been in a years-long feud with.

But apparently I’m not the only one full of surprises today.

“No, I won’t. Because you’re wrong,” says Marley, her voice surprisingly firm. “We’re not like—cavemen over here. We’re loud and opinionated and honest about our feelings, and if that embarrasses you enough that you feel like you have to ‘fix’ us, well, tough shit, Sadie. Because from the sound of it over there, turns out you’re just like us.”

“Maybe because it’s the first time I’ve been allowed to be,” I say, my throat suddenly tight. “There’s no room for me to be anything else at home, and you know it. Everyone’s just—so much all the time, and if I don’t step in, who the hell will?”

“If you could hear yourself right now.”

“Are you hearing me ?” I snap back. I turn my back to the least populated part of the quad as if lowering the witness count will do me any favors, but it’s too late for that. “I mean shit, Marley. You’re on my case about being there for Hadley this week—when the hell were you ever there for me all these years?”

Marley surprises me by letting out a sharp laugh. “You never needed me. You made

that pretty clear.”

My eyes really are watering now, but the anger is welling up in me so fast that it knocks two tears out and won’t allow for anymore.

“Of course I needed you,” I tell her. “You’re my sister. I had questions—I still have questions—shit I can’t come to Mom or Dad about, but you were always off doing your own thing or caught up in some drama and I had to just figure everything out for myself.”

There’s more to it than that, but while I apparently have no issue blowing a gasket on the quad, I draw the line at yelling, “I have a deeply inconvenient lack of understanding about sex and relationships for someone whose sister is so damn blunt about them!” at the top of my lungs. One or two of my standards will remain upheld this afternoon, damn it.

“Well, that’s fucking it,” says Marley, her throat thick. I’m entirely certain I’m going to hear the faint vacuum of the call being dropped or at the very least the Marley Meltdown to End All Meltdowns. Instead I hear the jangle of her keys. “We’re not having this conversation over the phone. I’m coming to get you.”

I blink, holding up my muddy flyers and staring out at the quad in shock. “You’re what?”

“I’ll drive you back after dinner. Be outside your dorm in an hour.”

And there’s the vacuum of a call dropped.

I stand there for a few moments, half-stunned and half-warmed and fully unsure what to do with myself. Eventually I finish up my flyer-posting with the few that don’t look like they joined a mud-wrestling team and head back to the dorm, still unsure if I

made that entire conversation up.

When I let myself in, Christina is sitting on her bed with her laptop propped on her knees, her hair wet from a post-practice shower. She's already in her pajamas despite it barely being five o'clock. Unsurprisingly, it's the first time I've seen her sit still all week.

"Where are you going with a backpack on a Friday night, Dora the Explorer?" she asks when I pull mine out, putting a change of clothes into it just in case.

"Home, for a hot second. For dinner and back. You want a ride?" I ask, hoping she'll take me up on it. "We can drop you off at your parents."

"Maybe. What's shaking?"

I toss my keys into the backpack, considering. "The SparkNotes version is I think Marley and I just got into like—the worst but best fight of our lives?" I explain. "Fair warning, she's coming up here to either resolve it or kill me with her bare hands. Jury's still out."

"What's all this?"

"Oh." I hand her the least-mucked-up flyer in the pile, which is declaring an open gathering on the quad tomorrow to rally anyone interested in supporting the athletes and the student-run organizations with getting the school to restructure the budget. "The Foodie Club is bringing treats. But unless you feel like flirting with your own mortality, avoid anything the Jelly Bean Appreciation Society tries to hand you at all costs."

Christina doesn't laugh, handing the flyer back to me. "This is what you've been busy with all week?"

That and trying to keep Seb's damn mouth shut. He got it in his head that if he confessed it was him who found the numbers that maybe the dean would stop coming down hard on the student-run organizations as a whole. Rowan and I have been taking turns talking him down by reminding him that the administration is not like a pantheon that will be appeased by a freshman sacrifice and will come after us all regardless.

"Yeah. Some of us are grabbing lunch together after, if you're coming."

"Pass."

I cut a quick glance at her, but she is very determinedly not looking at me.

"Everything good?" I ask.

Christina works her jaw, still staring at her laptop screen. "I just—we've only been here a few weeks. But you seem really, really confident you know what you're doing, bucking the system like this."

I pause in my packing for long enough that Christina finally looks up at me, her eyebrows raised and her eyes sharp.

"I'm not confident I know what I'm doing," I say carefully. "I'm not calling any shots here. I'm confident because all the seniors and team captains and other athletes are involved."

She tilts the laptop screen down. "Yeah, well, I'm not the other athletes. I'm your best friend, and you've hardly asked me what I think about this at all," she says. "And if I'm worried, don't you think the other scholarship students are, too?"

It's the first time we've touched on this since we were on the quad last week.

“You’re worried about the scholarship?”

My own valve burst on the quad an hour ago, but the look Christina gives me is just short of nuclear. I brace myself, knowing whatever this is, it’s long overdue.

“When am I not ?” She gestures widely and sharply enough to nearly topple her laptop off her bed. “My entire college career is going to be spent worrying about this damn scholarship, apparently, and all this delay with the budgets isn’t helping. You know they have to confirm our funding every semester? That’s why that email went out. They’re refusing to confirm until they’ve solved this, especially now that the donors are pissed off and getting involved again. You guys are throwing a wrench into everything. ”

I don’t doubt for a second that this is true. The other scholarship kids—Joey included—must have calculated the risk, then, in conversations on Rowan’s end that I’m not a part of. So all I can do is be honest.

“I’m sorry. I had no idea,” I say. “You didn’t say anything.”

Christina is scowling in that way she only does when she’s trying not to cry. “I haven’t had time. And you—you’ve been running around taking classes you actually like and getting fired up about Newsbag and living out a ridiculously cute slow-burn rom-com with Seb, and I don’t even have enough time to sit down to eat at our terrible dining hall anymore.” Her eyes are swimming with tears but locked on mine, clearly not finished. “You think you have to be perfect Sadie all the time, and I get it. It’s a lot. But I have to be more perfect than perfect. Because I’m not like you, with your parents paying half your tuition. If I fuck up, I’m out of here.”

The words hurt to hear, but in some way I’m almost relieved—it’s been weeks of trying to check in with Christina, and at least now she’s being fully honest about her situation. I only hesitate to answer because I’m not sure if she’s got more to say, and

sure enough she lets out a dark, wet laugh.

“Honestly, I might as well be,” she says, standing up on the bed to glare at the “Christina and Sadie Make Maple Ride Their Bitch!!” list still taped above it. “It’s not like I’ve gotten to do one goddamn thing I came here to do other than run and study, study and run, and even that’s not going to be enough to undo this.”

“But that’s exactly what we’re trying to push for. Less of this stress on the athletes. That’s where we’re trying to reallocate the budget for—Christina, wait—”

Too late. She’s pulling the Bitch List off the wall. It’s not lost on me that not a single item on it was checked off for either of us. She crumples it, or at least attempts to—she’s shaking too hard. She drops it and it doesn’t go down with the satisfying thud either of us are expecting but flutters and takes its time hitting the floor.

I pick it up carefully. By the time I look up at Christina, she’s sitting back down on the bed, tears streaming down her cheeks.

I lean in and hug her hard, but it’s not like the night of the Alphabet Party. There are no gulping sobs or green carnage. She is stiff as a board and then gets up so abruptly that I stumble letting her go. She stands at our window with her back to me, her arms crossed over her chest, every part of her rigid.

I take a hesitant step toward her, feeling a new tension ripple through the room.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her quietly. “I should have checked in with you more.”

She just shakes her head. Her voice is as quiet as mine but edged with steel. “You did,” she says. “And you still went through with all of this without even considering how I’d feel. It’s hard enough that the school doesn’t seem to give a shit about what I need, but you’re my best friend. I thought at least you would.”

The guilt wraps around my ribs so tightly that it's hard to speak. Christina and I have gotten into plenty of squabbles before, but this is different. It isn't some passing, trivial thing we'll get over by dinner. It's been building long enough that I should have understood the depth of it long before it burst.

"Tell me what you need," I say. "Please. We'll figure this out."

She tilts her head just enough for me to see her jaw twitch. "With Newsbag's little budget revolution?" she says flatly.

"No," I insist. "We as in you and me. We're in this together."

Christina whips around then, her cheeks flushed under her bruised, exhausted eyes. She doesn't come any closer, but she doesn't have to for the words to hit their mark.

"No, we're not," she says through her teeth. "You're in this for you. You're in this to make sure you get everything you want, and it doesn't matter who stands in your way. Not me and not even Seb, apparently."

"That's different," I blurt, and I know it's too fast, too defensive, because Christina's eyebrows nearly fly into her ponytail. "Seb and I have always competed, but you and me—we're on the same team. You know that."

Christina's eyes are wet with unshed tears, but it does nothing to shake her resolve. "I know he's leaving the school if you beat him out for that role. But you don't care about that the same way you apparently don't give a shit about what this does to me. You're more loyal to a damn zine that you're not even a part of than the people who love you."

The words tilt my reality so fast I'm almost dizzy with it. I've been so tunnel-visioned on this goal for so long that it's startling to see what it looks like from the

outside. That it would make Christina doubt even for a second how much our friendship matters to me.

“That’s not true,” I plead, but her words have me by the throat. She’s right. I haven’t let myself fully consider the consequences of this. Not for her, and not for Seb, either.

And then it hits me. The real reason why I’ve been holding back with Seb. It isn’t that we’re competing or that we might be long-distance on the other side of it. It’s that I am scared deep down that this is who I am: somebody who will always have to choose between success and love, and get it wrong.

Because Christina’s right. Seb has more to lose here than I do. At the start it didn’t matter, because at the start I knew that if our roles were reversed, he’d do the same thing I did and fight tooth and nail to win. We respect each other too much to back down from a challenge, to give anything less than our best.

But enough has shifted that we both understand it wasn’t just respect. It was love before we could make sense of it. And now that I have, this much is crystal clear: I know winning will push Seb out of my life, and I’ve never once considered backing down. Is that fair, then? For me to put any kind of claim on him, when I’m chasing a dream that can’t come true without hurting him first?

Christina and I both flinch at the sound of a car horn squawking below loud enough to wake the dead. She jerks her head for me to leave, settling back on her bed.

“This is important to me,” I insist. “ You’re important to me.”

Christina shakes her head, her face pale and resigned. “I have to sleep.” She sinks into the mattress, her eyes practically half-shut already. “I’m so fucking tired. Just go.”

“I can have Marley wait,” I say, as evenly as I can. “If you want to go home with us.”

“Just go, ” Christina snaps.

She throws the covers over herself, blocking her face from view. Shaking, I shut the door carefully behind me, pausing for a moment to take a breath. Seb is right. I can make waves. I just didn’t think about people getting caught in the undertow.

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I've never been a cowboy in a western before, but I imagine a showdown in it is something like this: all three Brighton sisters standing around the kitchen table, Hadley armed with a box of tissues, Marley with the same large pack of bubble gum chewed throughout the mostly silent drive back home, and me with the last functioning brain cell in my head after this long week.

I know what I would have done a few weeks ago. I would have lowered my voice into a calming, easy lilt and suggested we all sit down. I might have suggested we all have some tea. I would have neutralized everyone's feelings and laid out some constructive talking points and offered advice.

"You know what?" I say instead. "Fuck it. Backyard."

Marley's brows raise in surprise, and Hadley blurts "Why?" before seemingly getting mad at herself for breaking her vow of silence.

"Because we're taking this to the haunted house."

Among my dad's pet projects that should perhaps have never seen the light of day is his attempt at building us a playhouse in the backyard. "Playhouse" is a generous word for what is more like a condemned pile of loosely constructed planks that looks so haunted that ghosts have probably looked into leasing it—hence, the haunted-house moniker it got ten years ago, the first and last time any of us bothered to go inside.

Meowtwo looks very miffed to be disturbed from his perch when I open the "door" (also a generous word) to let us in. I do a quick scan and decide that despite looking

like the scene of a crime in a show about a suburban murder, it is structurally sound enough for us to sit.

“Park it,” I tell them.

I can tell Hadley wants to complain but is still stubbornly freezing me out. Marley dusts off a plastic chair and gingerly sits.

“First order of business: Hadley, you’re pissed at me and Seb. Have it out.”

Her cheeks go pink, and she crosses her arms, stubbornly tilting herself away from me. I take a step toward her so I’m directly in her eyeline again.

“Nope,” I tell her. “You’ve got about ten seconds before I get the ghost that haunts this place to start rattling it out of you instead.”

She blinks, stunned by either the bluntness, the ridiculousness, or both.

“Sadie’s in bad-bitch mode now,” Marley explains. “I’d listen to her if I were you. She’s not fucking around.”

Hadley scowls, turning to me and then Marley and then back to me before blurting, “You lied to me. You let me think you and Seb were best friends when you hated each other the whole time.”

“Oh, please. They didn’t lie,” says Marley. “People living on space stations could see their mutual hatred from orbit.”

“Helping or hurting?” I ask pointedly, before turning back to Hadley. “Seb and I don’t hate each other. We had some— issues with each other, and we’re working on them. But you know what? I’m not going to be sorry about not telling you, because

we didn't tell anyone, and what goes on between me and Seb is frankly nobody's business but ours."

"Ooh, spicy," Marley says.

"How is that not my business?" Hadley demands.

"Because not everything is your business, Hadley," I tell her firmly, refusing to yield. I know her well enough to know that whatever is going on with me and Seb isn't the real issue here, and the less I entertain it, the faster we'll get to the heart of it. "And not to give a cliché 'child of divorce' talk here, but we both love you very much and that will never change, even if one of us ends up banishing the other in a rocket to that space station."

Hadley's scowl is still fixed on her face, but wobbling. "I just don't like not knowing things," she says.

I let myself soften, plunking myself into the plastic chair next to her, which by some mercy doesn't crack in half and drop me on the ground.

"I know," I tell her. "High school is a big change, and jumping onstage for the first time probably feels like an even bigger one. But you've got a whole lot of really great things in your life that aren't going anywhere."

Hadley finally looks at me again, and this time I can tell the near tears are genuine. "What if Seb does?" she asks in a small voice.

"Oh, Hads," I say, wrapping an arm around her. She leans into it all at once, like she was just waiting for an excuse to let her guard down all week. "I promise you. If there was something I could do to scare Seb off this family, it would have happened a thousand times over by now."

She lets out a sniffling laugh. Marley surprises me then by shifting her chair to be on Hadley's other side, wrapping an arm around her and settling it on top of mine.

"Can confirm," she says. "When they were in middle school I watched her direct Christina to change his laptop settings so any time he typed the letter 'n' it automatically spelled out the words 'NEVER GONNA GIVE YOU UP, NEVER GONNA LET YOU DOWN' right before their final papers were due."

"Aw," I say fondly. "He was humming that song against his will for a month, poor little dude."

Hadley pulls in one of those breaths that's on the verge of a sob and leans into us both. "It's weird with both you and Seb gone."

I use my free hand to push her wild curls out of her face before they get snotted up. I know a big cry coming when I see one. But before I can say anything, Marley gives Hadley a little squeeze.

"Yeah, well. You've still got me, pipsqueak," she says.

Hadley cuts a doubtful glance at me, one that Marley doesn't miss. Marley takes it on the chin and doesn't let Hadley go.

"I'm not full of nuggets of wisdom like Responsibility Barbie over here," she says. "But I'm here to listen. And/or help you get revenge on enemies."

"Maybe we table that for now," I cut in.

"Bethany called my flower jeans babyish," says Hadley.

Marley nods solemnly. "Bethany's on notice."

I decide to brush past that mildly concerning development for now and turn to Hadley. “Text Seb, okay? He’s having a rough week and he misses you, too. All of us, for some reason.”

Hadley nods, sitting up at attention at once like a girl on a mission. “I’m gonna call him right now before dinner.” She bounces up to her feet. “Am I excused from the haunted house?”

“Class dismissed,” I confirm.

Hadley leans in to hug me, squeezing me hard. “You know, I don’t mind bad bitch Sadie,” she says into my ear.

“Um...”

Marley shrugs. “She’s fourteen. She’s allowed to say ‘bitch’ in the haunted house.”

I nod. “Fair enough.”

Hadley exits through the “door,” but neither of us makes a move to get up.

“So you knew about me and Seb the whole time, huh?” I ask.

Marley leans back in her chair, a little rueful and a little smug. “Yeah. I also knew the two of you were going to come to your senses and start making out eventually. How’s that going?”

I wince. “Oh. It’s not. Going, I mean.”

Marley leans forward, propping her elbows on her knees and making a “come at me” gesture with her hands. “Okay. I don’t know how well I’m gonna do this whole

‘sisterly advice’ thing, but hit me and I’ll give it a shot.”

I want to. I really do. The guilt of my revelation about Seb has been hanging over me like a heavy curtain all through the drive home and this entire talk. But it feels too raw to say it out loud. I have a feeling that whatever answers I need, they’re the kind I have to find on my own.

“Actually, I think—I’m good on that front.”

Marley nods, blinking fast but not fast enough to cover up the quick streak of hurt. I’m used to her being so distant that in my eyes, she was always bulletproof. It’s strange to be here one-on-one with her, close enough that I can see the cracks in her, that she can see mine.

“But I was wondering—there’s this thing with Christina.”

Marley’s eyes are back on mine fast, the relief in them as quick as the hurt, but unmistakable. “Yeah?”

“I’m part of this movement on campus to try and restructure the budgets for student activities—better resources and more transparency for the athletes, and more money for student-run things in general. Christina’s really upset because she thinks it might affect the scholarship students.”

“Well, will it?” Marley asks.

“I really don’t think so. But it’s more than that. She’s just—so stressed. And I think if we manage to get this restructure, it’ll help her in the long run. But I don’t know how to help her right now.” My hands are practically in a knot in my lap, I’ve been wringing them so much. I imagine my face looks every bit as tangled when I look over at Marley and admit, “What’s worse is we kind of got into it before I left. And I

guess I was wondering—well, you were a scholarship student, too. And I know things were rough for you. So if you had any thoughts about how I could help without—shoving my foot in it again, I guess.”

Marley is quiet for a long moment, considering.

“Well, I hope your budget thing works out. Because I would have appreciated having people in my corner when I was going through this,” she says frankly. “I mean, I don’t regret quitting school. I love running my own business. But shit. They worked us to the bone. Sucked the fun out of the whole thing until it felt like I didn’t have a choice but to leave, or I’d just hate making art forever.”

My memories about that time are hazy. I was busy trying to adjust to freshman year of high school the same time Marley started her art classes. Or maybe it isn’t that my memories are hazy, but that she just plain wasn’t around much for me to remember. Even living together, Marley’s presence has always been a punctuating one—rare and loud and striking, then gone again.

But I do remember when my parents let me and Hadley know that Marley decided to drop out of school and that she didn’t want to talk about it. I remember being surprised, maybe even a little jilted, that something so monumental happened in the family that quietly—that it was fully handled without me even knowing about it.

“I think the best thing you can do is just listen and be there for her, and not offer too many opinions on the whole thing. Give her some space to decide what she wants to do without worrying what you’ll think.” Marley hesitates. “And maybe like, not mention the budget stuff for now. At least not until they’ve actually managed to do something.”

I bite my tongue before I say what I’m thinking, which is that I have been listening. I have been there for her. It’s just plain not enough.

She seems to see it in my face, though, because she adds, “Trust me. It may not seem like it’s helping, but it is. At some point or another she’s going to have to evaluate this whole thing for herself, separate from you or anyone else, and she’s just going to need you to support her either way.”

I nod. “Yeah,” I agree. I hadn’t gotten that far down the line in my head—to the part where Christina might have to make a choice. I’m so used to being able to fix things in the moment that it’s unfamiliar territory, trying to lay the groundwork for something that I can’t have a direct hand in. “I just wish...”

Marley claps an abrupt hand on my back, like she’s not going to let me follow the thought down. “I know. But you can’t go trying to hold the whole world up for everyone, you know?” she says. “You can just be in their worlds while you’re holding up your own. That’s enough.”

It isn’t lost on either of us that we haven’t been much a part of each other’s world. The understanding goes unspoken but not set aside. Our eyes meet meaningfully, and she twists her lips to the side, a quiet kind of apology. I twist mine back. Something feels settled between us then in a way it’s never been, in a way I didn’t realize was missing until I had it. In a way that feels more like being someone’s little sister than I ever have.

We retreat to the kitchen after that, where my parents horrify and delight us with a full-on cheesy-pancake casserole as an homage to the mug version. It’s terrible enough Hadley spits it out on the first bite, and when the mouthful lands on the floor even Meowtwo, notorious food snatcher, refuses to acknowledge it.

“Someone please save us from ourselves and get the pizza place on the phone,” says Marley.

I bounce up to get the coupons we keep on the fridge, but the landscape of our fridge

magnets has changed again. It's not just my Newsbag article on there anymore, but clips from our high school newspaper. Specifically clips from Jerry.

"How did you...?"

My throat tightens, because I know how. The clips are folded in a precise way that I've seen Seb fold study guides a thousand times. At some point either before or after Marley's party he must have told them and then given them these clippings.

Clippings I have another version of in my dorm, tucked away in my desk. Clippings I had no idea Seb was keeping, too—that go far enough back that there was no way he didn't know I was Jerry from the start.

"Oh, those?" my mom asks, a gleam in her eye. "Have you heard of Jerry, too? Very funny writer."

"Went to your school!" my dad chimes in.

My mom grins, ribbing me as she keeps up the bit. "I think in your year? You might have had some friends in common."

For a moment I'm too overwhelmed with a strange blend of relief and pride that I don't know what to do with it. Even then I'm bracing myself, waiting for the inevitable—the Why didn't you tell us about this before? I no doubt deserve. But my parents just come up to the fridge and start quoting all their favorite lines in a froggy-sounding "Jerry voice" they've clearly adopted in the past week until Hadley says, "Oh, god, please make them stop, I can't listen to another whole night of this," and Marley calls out, "If someone doesn't order pizza soon I'm going to eat Meowtwo," and then, as if on cue, Meowtwo leaps onto the nearby counter and scatters my mom's Lego flower bouquet into a zillion pretty pieces.

We spend the rest of the night on the kitchen floor eating pizza and reconstructing new Lego flowers, talking through Hadley's lines for her play and whether Marley wants to expand her photography business into weddings, cackling over our backstories for Jerry that get more and more bizarre with each iteration. It's loud and it's messy and it's wild, and it's imperfectly, perfectly mine.

“Shit shit shit.”

If I had a dollar for the number of times Amara has said the word “shit” today I would never have to eat at our dining hall again, but the tone of these is distinctly more panicked than usual. She tilts her screen to show me an email that went out to the entire Newsbag team just now.

To the students of Newsbag —

I think we can agree that this situation has gotten out of hand. I am willing to overlook Newsbag ’s involvement in the leaking of confidential information if someone steps forward to take responsibility for obtaining it. Otherwise, you will all stand before a jury of the administration and your peers to decide whether every member of your organization will face suspension, expulsion, or another suitable punishment.

It’s from the dean, and clearly no accident that it was sent right before the rally set to take place on the quad in half an hour.

“He’s full of hot air. He won’t actually do it,” says Amara, changing her tone when she senses the ripple of panic in the room. “Nothing to worry about.”

I wait a few moments for the chatter to kick back up before walking over to her, lowering my voice to ask, “That said—is someone on Seb Watch right now?”

Amara nods, glancing up to make sure nobody overhears. “They’re all squaring away the last of the restructure proposal with the athletes, in case we get an audience.

Rowan will stop him from doing anything stupid.”

This statement is less comforting than she thinks, not because I don’t trust Rowan, but because I don’t trust Seb. At least not when it comes to his mile-wide guilt complex, which seems to be expanding with every passing day since the numbers dropped.

A few minutes later Amara sets down her phone and aims a sigh so unmistakably in my direction that I look up again from the sign I was filling in with marker. (MAPLE RIDE = SWEET, CORRUPTION = SOUR is maybe not my first choice, but the football team is earnestly trying their best.)

“What’s up?” I ask.

Amara leans in, making a bubble of us in the room full of other Newsbag members and volunteers setting up for the rally. “I’m sorry about the timing of all this. I mean, I’m glad to have you on our side for it. But I also haven’t really had a chance to talk to you about your writing or what you’re hoping to do with it long-term. That’s my favorite part of being here, watching the newbies grow into themselves, and I fucking love your writing. It’s hilarious.”

Oh, shit. It’s every Maple Ride dream I’ve ever manifested happening to me all at once, and I can’t hold it all in myself. At least, not without terrifying a good half of the people in this room.

I clear my throat. “That means a lot, coming from you,” I say. The understatement of the century but at least one that I can stand by.

“Aw, shucks,” she says cheekily.

“I mean it. I’ve been reading your work since you started,” I tell her. I don’t let

myself go any further than that only because I don't want her to think I'm angling for anything this close to the end of the competition. "And I appreciate it, but— Newsbag means the world to me. I'm glad to get to be a part of this."

Amara smiles, considering me.

"Good," she says. "Because that brain of yours has been quite the secret weapon. But when this is all worked out, you and I are going to schedule coffee or something and sit down and talk writing. You'll bring your clips." She lowers her voice again so the rest of the room can't hear, and says, "I can't say I know how the competition between you and Seb will work out, because you're both talented as hell. But I do know you're a hell of a writer and you're going to do some badass things with it one day."

Between this and my parents' praise, it will be a miracle if I manage to get through this day without turning into a puddle.

"Thanks," I bleat out. "I'd say more but if I do I'll start blubbering and make an embarrassment of myself."

"No such thing here." Amara's phone buzzes again, and her eyebrows lift. "So, uh. Seb's not with Rowan anymore."

My eyes fly to meet hers.

"You think you can beat him to the main office?" she asks.

I roll up my sleeves, already headed to the door. "I've been crushing Seb since we were eight," I tell her. "I don't think. I know. "

I tear out of McLaren and route the campus out in my head. If Seb was at the school

gym, where they've been using space for strategizing with the athletes, it would make sense to take the main path to the office. But Seb is in international-superspy mode now and odds are if I know he's left the building, he knows it's only a matter of time before I come to find him. Sure enough, I find him on the narrow, less crowded path, walking with clear purpose toward the main office.

"Hey!" I call out, indignant.

A mistake on my part, because then the situation reaches peak ridiculous. Seb turns and sees me coming toward him, digs his heel into the cement, and runs.

"Abso- fucking -lutely not," I mutter to myself.

There is no world in which I should be able to beat Seb Adams in a footrace. This I know for a mortifying fact, because I gave it my all in every gym class and field-day event that pitted us up against each other, and lost vital shreds of my pride every time. But for once I'm not running with just my pride on the line. I'm running with Seb on the line. And he is about to make a calculated error, underestimating just how much that's about to do for my endurance and speed.

We're on the edge of the quad when I manage to get a few feet behind him. He turns and then does a double take. I open my mouth to threaten him, but my lungs are so preoccupied that nothing comes out aside from a wheeze.

Another calculated error on his part—he slows for half a step to make sure I'm not about to keel over, and his concern is immediately rewarded by me not grabbing him but leaping like a flying squirrel and bodily launching myself at his back. We're both in a heap on the grass in an instant, thudding and rolling, making such a spectacle on the quad that despite the early-afternoon hour someone starts yelling, "Fight! Kiss? Fight and kiss!"

I'm not sure who says what after that because we've somehow come to a stop with Seb fully on top of me, elbows braced on the grass on either side of me. His face is mere inches from mine, breathing right into me, warm against my cheeks, my lips. And then, because I'm an established cosmic joke, that is the precise moment the sun comes out full blast from behind a cloud, illuminating the back of Seb's head and lighting up every soft curl of his hair so breathtakingly that the universe might as well be screaming, Kiss his ridiculous face! Do it right now!!!!

But then his ridiculous face is scanning mine, and he's scrambling to his knees, doing a nonsensical patdown of my shoulders like he's trying to account for me.

Once he's satisfied, he demands, "What is the matter with you? That could have broken all of your bones."

I sit up and get right in his face again. "You better hope yours are sturdy because I will do it again if I have to," I say through my teeth.

"Fight and/or kiss!" someone yells.

Seb shifts to get up again. I deadpan, "Ow, my leg," and yank him by the arm to keep him there.

I feel a little bit bad when Seb's eyes flicker in genuine concern. Then he realizes it's a bit and says, "You can't stop me from going."

"Sure I can. I just did. And I'm going to continue to fake various injuries until you sit down and talk to me."

Seb shakes his head. "I appreciate what you're trying to do here. But this isn't your call," he says, shifting again.

“My other leg!” I call out flatly.

Seb rolls his eyes but stays put.

“Sorry, I’m no theater kid,” I say. “But I do know the names of all my limbs, and you’re going to look really bad if I get through the whole skeleton with you walking away.”

Seb lets out a resigned sigh, then settles himself next to me on the grass. “You have five minutes. But after that I’m going.”

Five minutes is more than enough for me to stall for time. People are going to start rounding up for the rally any minute—if I can’t talk sense into him by then, someone will.

I turn my body toward him and gesture out toward the main office. “I’m going to run a scenario with you,” I tell him. “One where I let you give yourself up. You tell the dean it was you. You get expelled from Maple Ride and never, ever have a shot at writing for Newsbag, after everything you did to save it. The administration makes an example out of you to scare the shit out of everyone coming to the rally, and we lose momentum and our school’s only Instagram-meme celebrity in one go.”

Seb is quiet for a moment, and then says, “All right. Then I get to run a scenario, too. The dean follows through with that email. We’re all suspended. There’s nobody to run Newsbag at all, so it shuts down, and we don’t just lose momentum but the entire publication.”

I frown. “You can’t possibly think there’s a world where he makes good on that threat.”

“Look at how fast this all escalated. I think he absolutely will,” says Seb, his voice

resigned. “And if he does, that means a ton of people who weren’t even remotely involved in getting those numbers are punished.”

“So let Rowan or Amara come forward. They published it. They’re responsible, and they know it,” I insist. “They would never let it come to that.”

Seb shakes his head. “You said yourself the truth has consequences. If I run from mine now, what kind of journalist could I ever be?”

Goddammit, past me and her supposed nuggets of wisdom. I blink, trying to recalibrate, but I keep losing the thread. Like my head is trying to parse something my heart is too tangled in to let it.

My five minutes are still ticking by. I take a chance and let my heart take the lead.

“Okay. We run your scenario again.” I swallow hard, looking Seb in the eyes. “You get kicked out, and I’m just—here without you.”

For a moment we’re both very quiet, letting the words settle between us. Not just the weight of what they mean now, but what they might mean for the future. Seb smiles, slow and sweet and rueful.

“I might be leaving anyway,” he reminds me.

My stomach drops. I’ve been so occupied trying to convince Seb we’re a team that I almost forgot that in one important way, we’re not.

“You wouldn’t,” I insist. “If you don’t get the role, you wouldn’t just leave after all this.”

I’m not talking about Newsbag anymore, and he knows it. I can tell because of the

regret I see shining in his eyes, and the unexpected pang of surprise in my chest. Seb really hasn't counted Blue Ridge out. Everything we're fighting for here isn't important enough to make him stay.

I'm not important enough to make him stay.

Another stretch of quiet, but it feels like one outside of time. The clock isn't ticking anymore. I'm afraid to move, like it might unsettle this moment that feels entirely grounded but fragile at the same time.

"My scenario again," he says quietly. "This matters to you."

I nod. "And you matter to me."

There's the tiniest crack in Seb's expression, but he doesn't yield. "I mean it," he says. "I can't let this be something I take from you. We've stood in each other's way for so long."

And there it is—the thing I was most afraid to know. It's not that Seb doesn't care enough about me to stay. It's that he cares so much that he'll step aside. He cares about me enough to sacrifice something I'm not willing to sacrifice for him.

The guilt is so searing and immediate that I duck my head, but Seb doesn't let me. He's got his thumb just under my chin, gently lifting it back up so my eyes meet his. It strikes me that this is the kind of thing we used to do to test each other. Getting just enough in each other's space to see what the other would do about it, like magnets attracting and repelling, wondering just how close we could get before something did or didn't happen.

We haven't played that particular game in a while, and in this moment, it's anything but. In this moment we are both entirely still, like we know precisely what is going to

happen. I lift my eyes to meet his and see the intention behind them. Can feel us both leaning so slowly, so deliberately, that there is no doubt what we're leaning for.

I want this. I want him. So much that it finally clicks for me. It's not that I don't care as much as Seb does to step aside. It's that neither of us should have to, and we've been too stuck in our old rhythms to understand that we never did.

"You know that's not true," I tell him. "Maybe it started out that way, but when I look back—we were always just pushing each other to be better."

He still has a full breath poised to argue, so I double down.

"One of us will win and the other one will deal with it. You can talk to your dad and make him see how important writing is to you. How important Maple Ride is to you." My eyes blaze into his, refusing to let him look away. "We're not done yet. Not with Newsbag or all the things we're going to be here."

Seb slowly pulls his hand off my face, settling it back into his lap. There's a sinking sensation in my chest before he even speaks.

"Sadie—I'm not writing for Newsbag. "

My brow furrows. "We'll figure out our ideas for the third piece after things calm down."

Seb shakes his head slowly, patiently. Like he's waiting for me to catch up. "I mean I'm pulling myself out of the running for the position."

"No, you're not," I say, without missing a beat.

Seb just levels me with a look. "You know full well that you're better for this role

than I am.”

The indignation is so immediate it feels like a live wire in me, the shock of it jolting my back straight. I felt guilty at the idea that Seb might step aside, but I’m infuriated at the idea that he’d just give up.

“Fuck that,” I say. “I’m not going to win this by default. That’s—you’re not doing me any favors here, Seb. I want to earn this fair and square. You don’t get to take that from me.”

But Seb doesn’t rise up to match me like he usually does. His face is set with an infuriating calm.

“You already did earn it,” he tells me. “Sadie, you’ve been earning it. You’ve been writing pieces on par with Newsbag all through high school, and you’ll only get better from here. And honestly, the kind of writing I want to do—I don’t think Newsbag is quite right for it.”

I’ve been shaking my head through everything he’s said, but stop at that last bit, stunned. “You literally just won the second round. How do you think you don’t fit ?”

Seb isn’t just calm when he speaks, but certain. Like he’s been thinking about this for a while.

“I feel good about my piece, but I think we all know it’s not the right medium for it. I want to write more in-depth pieces that dig deeper and take longer to write. Pieces like Daisy’s. Like I did back when I was on the paper with you.”

I open my mouth to protest again, but he puts up a hand for me to hear him out.

“You’re right. I do need to make my dad understand how important this is to me. And

I'll only be able to do that if I'm writing the kind of pieces I'm meant to write. Whether I'm doing it here or I end up at Blue Ridge—I want to hold out for something else. Take a risk, like all the ones you've been taking lately."

My eyes are stinging again. I'm empty of comebacks. It makes sense, and I can't pretend it doesn't when I've read more of his words than anyone he knows.

"All right," I concede. "As long as you're doing what you want. Not something for your dad or even for me."

Seb's relief is plain in his face. "It's got everything to do with me, and nothing to do with you."

A knot loosens in my chest, like his relief is contagious. Maybe nothing will end up the way we thought it would, but for the first time I'm hopeful that we're better off for it. That maybe we won't get everything we thought we wanted but end up getting what we need.

Seb is watching me carefully, waiting for my cue before we let the tension ease. I raise my eyebrows at him. "Except for the part where you're now denying me the visceral joy of crushing you," I point out.

"Would it help if I admitted defeat out loud?" says Seb. "Because you're a much funnier writer than I am."

My lips tug into a near smirk. "Well, it doesn't hurt," I say.

He leans back in, that gleam back in his eye. "And a much better dorm food connoisseur."

I lean in to close the gap between us. "If you think you're going to distract me with

compliments so you can make a break for it and tattle on yourself, keep dreaming.”

There’s an easy hook to his smile again, my favorite kind of smile. The one that isn’t to set anyone at ease but meant to rile. “And most definitely better at calling me out.”

We’re so close that I know exactly what’s going to happen, almost as if the current that’s been crackling between us all this time led us exactly here. I can see it there, electric in his eyes reflecting mine. I can feel it humming in the ground beneath us as it nudges us closer and closer still.

“I’d list more,” he says, close enough that our lips are near brushing, “but you’re an overachiever, Sadie. Too many good things to count.”

I’m the one who crosses the distance, who catches his lips with mine. It feels like catching sunlight, warm and sweet, simmering through my whole body. There’s a split second when I’m stunned by the effect of it, by the way I want so much of this, so much of him, that I have no idea where to start. Then Seb pulls in a sharp breath through his nose and slides his hand around the back of my neck, the two of us easing into an imperfect rhythm, smiling into each other’s mouths.

We pull away, and the sunshine isn’t just in my body but gleaming in the few gold flecks in his eyes. Like we’ve lit each other up from the inside out.

“All this time I’ve wanted to kiss you, and that’s all I had to do?” Seb asks, breathless and grinning. “Admit you’re better at something than I am?”

My face flushes. “You might be the better kisser.”

His hand is still on the back of my neck, squeezing reassuringly. “You have too much experience keeping up with the competition to believe that.”

“I could use some more,” I say, leaning in and grazing my nose against his.

Seb hums in acknowledgment before leaning in to kiss me again. We’re steadier this time, learning each other’s beats, finding one all our own. I slide my hands under his arms to settle them on his back, to push my fingers into the steady warmth of him. He eases in to press us closer together, but I break the kiss, keeping my forehead pressed against his.

“Wait—you said ‘all this time.’ Since when did you want to kiss me?” I ask, bewildered.

Seb surprises me by laughing. “Only since we were fourteen.”

I only bite down my smile because if I don’t, it might burst. “I’m glad I finally caught up.”

He tilts his head, pressing a kiss to the side of my mouth. “I think this was the kind of thing where we had to run our own races.”

“Yeah, well. One hell of a finish line.”

He wraps his arms around the back of me, holding me to him. “Finish line, huh? So you’re done with me now?”

I shake my head against his. “New race. Better view.”

He presses his smile against my own, but before we can sink into another kiss there’s an abrupt thump at Seb’s back, jarring us both.

“My bad!” says one of the soccer players, whose ball hit Seb.

We blink and notice that in the few minutes we spent sitting in the grass, the quad has started to fill with students—some in athletic gear, some sporting T-shirts from their groups, a good number of them holding signs. Even twenty minutes out from the start, the crowd is already bigger than the one we assembled for the dodgeball game by a long shot.

I turn to Seb. “How about this—we get through the rally, see how it goes. We talk it out with Rowan and Amara. Nothing has to be decided this second. We’ve got time.”

Seb answers by leaning in and kissing me again. “I’m going to catch up with Rowan about the final proposal,” he says. “I’ll see you after the rally.”

I watch him walk away, too light and dizzy with happiness to realize that wasn’t an answer at all.

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I don't think anything of it when I don't see Seb at the rally, because it ends up big enough to fill up the school football stadium. In fact, I don't think anything of it until I get to Pancake It or Leave It on Sunday morning and realize our table is distinctly Seb-less.

"Where is he?" I ask out loud.

"Do I look like your keepers?" Betty demands, handing me a plate of cinnamon apple pancakes. "He better get his ass here fast, though, unless he wants to eat leftover grease."

The side door opens and Daisy's head pops out of it like a mouse, her eyes immediately finding mine. "Shit. I just heard."

"Heard what?" I ask.

"About Seb getting suspended."

I blink. "Seb's not suspended."

Daisy is fully in the shop now, clad in her sweatpants and a messy bun and pulling out her phone in confusion. "I'm friends with some Newsbag alums. They caught wind that a kid named Seb got suspended for hacking the school records and making the allocations of the donor money public. That they're going to make a decision soon about whether to expel him. Is that not your Seb?"

I nearly drop my pancakes. "What the fuck, " I blurt.

“Language,” says Betty, before swearing colorfully at a dropped spatula.

I pull out my phone with my free hand, as if there will miraculously be some text from Seb explaining himself in the past thirty seconds, but I don’t have any notifications. No emails, either.

Your Seb. Apparently Seb isn’t my anything, if he went behind my back like this.

“He wasn’t supposed to turn himself in,” I say into the screen. “He hacked to get the numbers, but he wasn’t the one who shared them. And we agreed he wouldn’t—fuck.”

We sure didn’t agree, it turns out. I set the pancakes down and head for the door, but Betty kicks it closed with her foot.

“You will not disrespect fully cooked pancakes in my home. Sit down.”

“But I can’t kill him from here,” I say through my teeth.

Daisy grabs herself a plate of pancakes and sets them at Seb’s usual seat. “No. But you might be able to help him.”

“Your pancakes are life-changing, but not the kind that can break the Seb-space-fuckup continuum and undo whatever he just did,” I say.

“And what’s your big plan, storming out of here on an empty stomach?” Betty counters.

I cycle through the possibilities. I could go find Rowan and Amara, but there’s no way they aren’t fully on top of this by now. I could go to Seb myself and try to get him to take it back, but Seb must have taken his damn car with him, and the bus

doesn't leave from campus on Sundays. I could march down to the office myself and tell them it wasn't him, it was me, just to really fuck with him for pulling one over on me, but before I can follow that thought through, Betty puts a firm hand on my shoulder and presses me back down into my seat.

"Eat your damn breakfast and listen to Daisy."

This feels like a terrible plan, because Daisy seems remarkably calm about the whole situation, and I don't need calm. I need all cylinders firing to get Seb back and subsequently fling him into the next dimension for this. I stare down at my pancakes, then across the table at Daisy's, and suddenly the anger evaporates and I'm biting down the urge to cry.

We kissed yesterday. We shifted an entire eighteen-year-long narrative in one beautiful, ridiculous, heart-stopping moment out on the quad, one I haven't stopped thinking about since. And now he's just— gone.

And if he really is expelled, he'll be gone for good. They might even reject his application to Blue Ridge, too. He isn't just compromising his dream here. He's compromising his entire future.

Daisy taps my plate with her fork. "Eat while I think."

I obey, but even the buttery, sweet spice of the fluffy apple-cinnamon pancakes can't do anything to quell the storm in me. I'm not just angry—I'm embarrassed. I know Seb better than anyone. How the hell did I not see this coming? Was the kiss actually just some distraction to keep me from stopping him?

I know better than to entertain the thought, but I'm already jarred at being so wrong about reading him before he left. Who knows what else I'm wrong about?

“So,” says Daisy, putting down her fork. “I think I’m mostly up to speed. I went to your rally yesterday. Excellent snacks, by the way.”

I mumble a thanks, because the Foodie Club really did a masterful job throwing those trail mix balls into the crowd.

“And it was great for getting people on campus riled up and spreading awareness,” says Daisy. “But I’m guessing you still haven’t had a chance to show anyone the restructured budget plan, huh?”

I shake my head. If we did, I don’t know about it yet.

Daisy nods thoughtfully. “They’re not going to listen to students alone. Your leaders are all graduating next year anyway. And you’re not getting enough attention outside of this town—I think one of the keys here is going to be reaching people in higher places. Not just donors with money but people with influence. Putting the pressure on the administration by getting wider coverage.”

I nod, even though I don’t have the faintest idea of how to do that. We’ve already been working our asses off trying to spread the word. It’s like trying to turn a spark into a wildfire—there’s only so much we can do to make it spread before it peters out and we’re right back where we started.

Daisy isn’t finished. “What I can do on my end is float the story as an interest piece to the publications I work for. I saw how ridiculous that budget was—it’s certainly got a good hook with something as well-known as Newsbag on the line,” she says.

“You’d really do that?” I ask.

“I mean, yeah. Zany underdog stories, mental health advocacy for athletes, blatant school corruption—that all blends into some good pitch sauce, and thanks to you

kids, I'll be beating everyone to the story." She points her fork at me. "But there needs to be another big thing on your end, I think. Something to get people outside of the community involved. Not just making noise but making waves."

I give her a rueful smile. "Someone told me I was good at making those recently," I say.

Daisy seems satisfied by this answer, pushing her chair from the table to stand. "Well, then, you've got your work cut out for you. I'll give you my number if you want to talk at all. And give me Seb's, so I can be in touch with him about the story." She pauses, tapping the table by my plate. "And by the way—there is one-hundred-percent magic in those pancakes. I bet you get a banner idea by the end of the day."

I don't doubt her, but as I'm chewing and thinking after we exchange numbers, my phone buzzes with a text. I grab for it, certain that it's Seb, but it's Amara.

Hey friend—wanted to keep you in the loop before we send out an email. We tried to tell the dean it was me and Rowan, not Seb, but he won't meet with us—we're still working on it. But after the rally he revoked the school's recognition of us as a student group. Newsbag is officially shutting down.

I blink, bracing myself for the impact of it. My dream is gone. Everything I worked toward in high school, everything I expected to set me up for success in life. It should be flashing in my mind like a film reel—the pieces I want to write, the shows I want to help create, the worlds I want to build, the Newsbag alums I want to follow to big cities all over the world.

At that last thought, I feel an entirely different impact. One that makes me certain that the magic of the pancakes is already working. I grab my phone and send a text back.

So what you're telling me is... we don't need a faculty sign-off for any copies of

Newsbag to go to print

Amara types back instantly, That is a factual statement. That big brain of yours got any more ideas?

I smirk into my screen. Meet me at McLaren in ten?

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The entire rest of the morning is a blur, and the afternoon even blurrier. Once I'm back in the dorm, I don't come up for air from my laptop even once, existing off the stack of extra pancakes Betty sent me with ("Eating his breakfast is the best revenge") and listening to Christina's lo-fi playlist on repeat for so long that I don't even register the sun starting to go down. When I hit Send on the final draft of my piece, Christina opens the door to the dorm room to find me slouched over my laptop like a feral raccoon in the dark.

I've felt the ghost of the tension we left in this room ever since I got back, but now I feel it in full force. Christina ended up going home for the weekend, but that text from her was the last I heard. Even in the chaos of everything that's happened, our fight has weighed on me, left a faint ache in my chest that tightens now that we're finally together again.

Christina flicks on the light. I pull off my headphones. We both open our mouths like we're trying to remember our lines, but we've never fought like this before. We've never fought to the point of dead silence, which suddenly feels so thick that I'm scared we can't come back from it.

Then Christina tilts her head. "I have some questions, but first of all, what on earth are you wearing?"

The relief would be enough to knock me over if I weren't already sitting down. I have to stop my eyes from tearing up as she steps closer, examining me. I examine her right back, glad to see her looking more herself than she has in ages. She's in a favorite pair of jeans I haven't seen her pull out all semester, her face is bright from sleep, and her hair is tucked into a braid so tight that I know her mom must have done

it before she left. She's even sporting a fresh claw mark on her hand that can only be evidence of Blorbo's love.

I unslouch myself from the laptop so she can see the handwritten sign I've taped to my sweater. It reads SORRY FRIEND .

"Oh," says Christina, bewildered. "Is this a hip new thing we do in college now? Communicate via sweatshirt?"

I shake my head. "It's my costume. We're doing a mini Alphabet Party, you and me." I pull out the candy stash my parents sent Seb for me, adding Snickers, Symphony bars, and strawberry sours. "S-themed candy. And we can watch one of your favorites, Stranger Things or Succession. And then we can finally cross one of your things off the Bitch List once and for all."

Christina's eyes well up. "Dammit, Sadie. I thought I cried myself out yesterday, and you had to go do something this adorable?" She leans in and hugs me hard. "Thank you. I love this. Sit tight while I grab the green paint."

I shudder as she releases me. "Too soon," I tell her. "Anyway, I just wanted to say I shouldn't have assumed I knew what was best for your situation. And I'm here for you whenever you do decide what's best."

She plops down on the edge of my bed, nodding. "I'm sorry if I came unglued at you a bit." She fiddles with the end of her braid. "Probably for the best, because it made me finally go home."

"Did it help?" I ask.

"Yeah. After I woke up from a thirteen-hour nap, that is." She starts unwrapping a Snickers, splitting it to offer me the other half. "It was good. Opening up to my

parents about it. They knew something was up because I wasn't calling much, so it wasn't like, the biggest shock. But they were pretty upset hearing about how intense the schedules were and all the academic hoops they were making us jump through."

I take a bite of my Snickers half. "Did they not know about all the GPA stuff?"

Christina sighs, leaning back to prop herself against the wall. "Yeah, no. I didn't really get into it with them at the time. I didn't want them to feel weird about me needing a scholarship to come." She tongues some chocolate off her teeth, considering. "I think it's that they're not big into sports, so I get the sense they were like, guilty about me running? Like they thought I was doing it for the scholarship. When really I just love to run and it was cool that I got good enough at it to qualify."

I find myself smiling, remembering a tiny Christina zooming up and down the playground at summer camp. "Yeah. I remember when you first started out. You were so happy," I say. "And I was sitting there thinking to myself, I can't believe I'm best friends with someone who keeps running on purpose. "

Christina laughs. "I think that was a reminder I needed, too. That I love running. Just not like this."

I want to ask her what the plan is, but I hear Marley's voice in my head reminding me not to put too much pressure on the situation. To just listen when she decides for herself. So instead I ask, "Are you going to be okay for the rest of the semester?"

She takes another bite of Snickers, considering. "I hope so. This is dweeby, maybe, but—my mom is going to talk to my coach." She aims a small smirk in my direction and says, "She says even if you and crew actually manage to score us mental health advocates that she's still going to be the first in line to be mine."

I find my own eyes welling up at that. We've both been stubborn in our own ways

about letting our parents in, about worrying we'll let them down. The last few weeks have knocked us around in separate ways, but at least we both understand now that even though we've left home, we have soft places to land.

"That's sweet," I say.

She rolls her eyes, but I can tell she's genuinely relieved. "But yeah," she goes on. "I might do some reevaluating after this season. I don't know yet."

"Well, I'm here with snacks in the meantime. I hope it works out."

I leave a space open for her to say anything else she wants to get off her chest, but I can tell she's talked this whole scenario inside out and backward with her parents this weekend already. She nods, and I can feel the conversation come to an easy close when she says, "Me, too. Can you imagine me having to find another hobby after all this?" She gives a theatrical shiver. "I might end up in that bird-watching club."

"Poor things could use a jock in their midst."

She shifts herself on the bed, then, so we're sitting beside each other, moving my laptop so it's halfway between to cue up Netflix. Then for the first time in weeks, we get to live out our quintessential college-roommate dreams: sitting in our sweatpants eating candy and watching TV, not one study guide or practice schedule or catastrophic email from the dean in sight.

We pause after the first episode for a snack refresh break, and Christina says, "You didn't tell me how the rally went."

I blink only because I realize that in the brief time Christina was gone, she missed an entire cursed three-act play's worth of drama, romance, and pancakes.

“It went well,” I start.

Christina narrows her eyes at me. “You’re making a face.”

She’s not wrong, because in an attempt not to make a face, I’ve made an even weirder one. I also realize if I don’t say something now, I’ll be in Best Friend Jail for withholding later.

“So I kissed Seb.”

“What?” she demands, sending several Skittles flying. “And you’re just sitting here with me watching middle schoolers get psychologically scarred in the woods? Where is he?”

“Home,” I say, bracing myself for more projectile candy. “He got suspended. Possibly expelled.”

It’s the unsuspecting Sour Patch Kids this time. “What? ”

“It’s fine. We’re working on it. You’ll see tomorrow,” I tell her, my hand hovering back over the space bar to start the show again. If we dip even one toe into the bajillion-step plan I set in motion today, we’ll be here all night. “I have a good feeling it’ll work out.”

And strangely, I do. We’ve got weeks of work building up to this, a ton of good people on our side, and one hell of a Sadie-wave on the horizon about to shake things up. Jury’s out on whether I’ll be banished with Seb in the suburbs or here at Maple Ride by the end of it, but that’s something the old Sadie would have worried about. This one isn’t avoiding fights, because she’s not going down without one.

“Except for the part where you were body-snatched and have way too much chill

about this. I need details, ” she says, swatting my leg.

I nudge my leg into hers in protest. “I’ll tell you. But I think—I want to know how this plays out first,” I tell her. “With Newsbag and with Seb. Everything’s up in the air right now, and I think what we’ve got up our sleeves tomorrow is big.”

Christina’s brow furrows like she’s deciding whether to press the point, but the misadventures of latchkey eighties kids must win out. “All right. This is all very mysterious and intriguing of you,” she says. “Except for the part where you and Seb are the most inevitable thing that’s ever happened on planet Earth, and I legally am allowed to say ‘I told you so’ with any and every breath I take until the day I die.”

I sigh deeply. “As is your unfortunate right,” I say, mostly to stop myself from saying the truth. That I’m more confused about this situation with Seb now than ever, enough that I can’t let myself think about it or it’s going to consume me. I can’t let it—not if I’m going to get him back at Maple Ride, where he belongs.

I settle back in then, one eye on the kids outrunning Demogorgons, one on my phone. Around the time Steve and Nancy are necking as Barb gets dragged into the Upside Down, I finally get the all-clear email from Amara I’ve been waiting for.

Your piece is phenomenal. Everything is ready for the printer. Link will go live at 7am, graphic attached if you want to post on social. Fair warning next time I see you I’m going to hug you so hard your eyes bug out of your head.

I give myself a quiet moment to savor the relief, then I save the graphic and open a new text addressed to Seb. It’s the first one I’ve sent him all day. Mostly because once we started setting my loose plan into motion, there wasn’t any time. But also because I can’t help being angry with him. He didn’t lie, but he didn’t tell me the truth, either. He just went radio-silent.

It would have been upsetting on its own. It's something else entirely that it happened on the heels of that kiss.

I draft a few versions of a text. A Hey what the actual fuck?? A sincere Why would you ruin your chances like this? A borderline pathetic What am I supposed to think when you KISS ME and then DISAPPEAR INTO A SUBURBAN BLACK HOLE , because of all the texts and calls I've been fielding today, not one of them has been from Seb.

In the end, all I write is This is going live at 7am, if you want to put that Instagram of yours to good use.

Then I send him the link and the graphic and settle back onto my pillows. Joyce Byers is frantically chasing Christmas lights by the time Seb's response comes in.

I know this could only be your idea. Good chaos written all over it.

That night when I come back from showering, Christina has put the Bitch List back up on the wall. There's a glittery check mark under her name for the Alphabet Party, and a check mark for a new line item directly under my name: BE THE BIGGEST BADASS MAPLE RIDE HAS EVER SEEN .

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:20 am

It turns out I get to use nearly every one of those text drafts the next morning, when I emerge from the dorm and there, standing outside of it, is Sebastian Adams, sleepy-faced and wary in the early morning sun. His eyes immediately widen when he realizes I am not walking toward him with purpose but coming at him with a whole lot more than that.

“What the actual fuck?” I demand.

Seb hesitates. “Hi,” he says after a moment.

“Oh, you better reach into that brain of yours and find a better word than ‘hi’ if you’re planning on surviving this conversation,” I say, stopping short of him when I’m mere inches from his face. I don’t lower my voice even one decibel when I add, “What were you thinking?”

Seb works his jaw. “You know what I was thinking.”

“Apparently not, or I might have seen that coming. I mean, shit, Seb,” I say, gesturing wildly out to the campus. “You could be ruining your chances. Everything you worked for—and I know better than anyone how hard it was, because I practically had your GPA tattooed to my eyelids—and for what? So you could have some numbers off your conscience and play hero?”

Maddeningly, Seb is not giving an inch. “So I could hold myself accountable for my actions,” he says. “And you can be mad all you want, Sadie, but tell me you wouldn’t have done the same thing.”

“No. I wouldn’t have kissed you and then cleared off the damn campus without so much as a word,” I counter.

Seb’s eyes flicker with remorse but nowhere damn near enough of it to placate me. “You were only going to try and stop me—”

“Hell, yeah, I was,” I say, “because I love you, you stubborn, ridiculous jerk, and if it’s someone’s job to stop you from wrecking your life, you damn well know it’s going to be mine.”

That stuns Seb into an immediate silence. I give him two seconds to recover, and then one more, and then decide that’s more than enough.

“Well?” I demand.

Seb blinks. Laughs to himself. I am about to ask what on earth he could be laughing about at a time like this, but he stuns me into a silence of my own by closing the small gap between us and firmly taking both my hands in his. When he speaks, his voice is low and sincere, weighted with calm.

“It wasn’t about the numbers. It wasn’t about playing hero,” he tells me. “It’s that—I’ve seen how hard you’ve worked, too. And I’ve seen you come into your own even in a few short weeks because of Newsbag. If there was a chance that turning myself in might save it, I was going to take it. Because I love you, too. You stubborn, ridiculous person.”

“Oh,” I say, disarmed by the warmth in my chest, the happy ache in my throat. It felt easy to say, but it has a strange magic, hearing it back.

“Oh,” Seb echoes, his voice teasing.

He squeezes my hands lightly, and I can't help squeezing back. The look in his eyes so tender and so familiar—a shade of love that's always been there, that was just waiting to be cast in the right light—that I nearly forget myself. I nearly lean in and kiss him, because the most absurd part of these past two days is that no amount of chaos has stopped me from thinking nonstop about doing just that.

But life-changing, earth-shifting, heart-stopping confessions aside, this conversation is far from over. I don't let go of his hands, but I take a step back.

“You disappeared on me,” I say quietly.

Seb nods. “My parents were—upset. And confused. I had a lot of explaining to do.”

I can't say I didn't worry about that myself. We're lucky to have parents who trust us enough to let us make our own choices, but “I willingly gave myself up to get suspended after hacking a mainframe” is probably one none of them saw coming.

I skim my thumb over the top of one of his hands. “I guess this wasn't a great way to soft-launch the idea of you switching to journalism to your dad,” I say.

Seb shakes his head. “Actually, it kind of helped. I don't think he understood just how seriously I took writing until I was willing to get so involved in Newsbag. We spent a long time talking it out last night. He's not like—thrilled. But he seems to respect it more now, seeing what we're doing.”

I nod, smiling down at our shoes. It's a relief, but not a surprising one. I hope it means that his dad will be open to more conversations about it in the future. If nothing else, maybe my parents' newfound aggressive enthusiasm for all things Newsbag will help.

“What about staying here at Maple Ride?” I ask quietly.

Seb is quiet for a moment. “He’s not happy about that. But he’ll come around.”

I look back up, so stunned it nearly knocks the smile off my face. “So you’re staying? No matter what happens with Newsbag?”

Seb squeezes my hands again, softer and steadier about it. “Maybe we don’t know how this ends, but everything I’ve done this semester—with the others and with you—it’s enough for me to know this is where I belong.”

“Good,” I say, so choked with relief I can’t think to say anything else. “I just wish you’d called.”

He pulls in another breath and hesitates before he uses it. “There was something else. I knew the dean was planning to shut down Newsbag before he told the others. He told me when I turned myself in.” His eyes are apologetic on mine. “I was trying to think of what we could do to save it, and I just—it’s ridiculous. I know. But I just wanted to have some idea for fixing it before I could get in touch with you, but I couldn’t think of anything good enough.”

“You should have called me,” I insist again. “Not just because of what happened. But because we’re a team. I don’t need you to protect me from things like that. We can figure it out together.”

Seb has the audacity to smirk then, shaking his head at me. “Seems like you did just fine without me. Better than. Shit, Sadie. Your article blew everything Jerry did out of the water.”

He lets my hands go then, only to pull his phone out of his pocket. The piece is already pulled up on his screen. Even though I’ve seen it plenty of times refreshing the Newsbag website by now, my face flushes. I skim the words he’s scrolling with his thumb—my words, right on the home page next to a reader tally that’s amassing

more and more clicks by the second—and feel another small swell of pride.

REPORT: Maple Ride Solves Every Problem It's Ever Had by Suspending Some Kid

Local Maple Ride students woke on Sunday morning to clearer skies and edible dining hall food and absolutely zero historic misuse of university funds, all thanks to swift action on the part of the administration to suspend some kid.

“I thought maybe we needed mental health advocates to assess our unsustainable work-life balance as student athletes, a quarter of which end up quitting their sport from burnout,” one soccer player shared. “But we got rid of some kid and we all feel much better now.”

Another student attests, “I read somewhere that over half the donor budget was going to the football coaches and media strategy while student-run organizations vital to our sense of community on campus were getting shut down, but when some kid left campus I realized that only happened in a dream, and felt quite silly indeed.”

The rest of the piece goes on in a similar vein, highlighting all the unresolved issues on campus with the student-run organizations and the administration with more and more absurdity until Seb's removal isn't just responsible for restoring order to Maple Ride but to the known universe and the cursed dining hall chili.

At the end of it is a brief paragraph explaining what actually happened to Seb for context, along with an email and phone number for the dean's office for anyone who wanted to “thank” him for his heroism.

“Every time you do something ridiculously cool you have to go top it with something cooler, huh?” says Seb. “Thank god we're not competing anymore or I'd really be toast.”

“Thanks, ‘some kid,’” I say. “But really, all of this depends on how the rest of our little stunt goes.”

Seb’s smirk only deepens. “I’d say pretty well, if Instagram is any indication.”

Seb opens the app to show me the main grid of Adams’ Apples, where he posted the same graphic that the rest of the Newsbag team did this morning, and a ton of other students have since. The one declaring “NEWSBAG’S FINAL ISSUE: THE GREATEST HITS.”

We spent the entirety of yesterday scouring the archive of decades’ worth of Newsbag issues, curating them to find the best pieces, many of them from alums who went on to writers’ rooms and publishing and comedy notoriety. We carefully slotted them all into the issue along with my piece, posted the graphic all over social this morning, and tagged as many of the former writers in the posts as we could.

The twist? Even though there are dozens of former Newsbag writers and countless faithful readers it’s amassed over the years, there are only twenty physical copies of the “last issue” in existence. Ten of them will be available by random lottery, and ten are up for auction, the proceeds of which will all go to funding for student organizations.

Meaning it’s going to be a veritable Hunger Games for anyone to manage to snag a copy, whether their old pieces were published in it or not.

Still, if we were hoping that would spread the news about the situation, I don’t think we could have predicted what’s already happening—Seb’s Instagram post alone has enough traction that I can see at least five verified accounts have commented under it, all of which seem to be from former writers: They can’t shut down newsbag! That’s the only reason i’m insufferable on the internet instead of working in my dad’s law firm!! And Point me to the villains responsible for this. Not on my watch. And Holy

shit just saw the digital version—they SUSPENDED a kid over this?? What is going ON over there?? Under them are hundreds of other comments from readers who found the post, all of them shades of indignant and outraged and angling to get their hands on a “last issue” themselves.

“I posted it right before I drove back this morning, and by the time I got here, it had already been shared on a bunch of Instagram stories, too,” says Seb, scrolling to show me. “Daisy went ahead and got in touch with some of the former writers who commented, so they can talk to her for the article.”

“Shit,” I say, feeling a swell of hope and pride so intense that it feels like there isn’t room for it in me. “This might actually work.”

“You sound surprised,” says Seb. “But in my experience, if there’s something Sadie Brighton wants, she finds a way to get it.”

I take a small step back to look Seb up and down. “Lucky you,” I say cheekily.

Seb grins, but his own response is soft, his eyes steady on mine. “Lucky me.”

The future may be more of an unknown for us than ever, but something deep in me feels settled then. Something that’s been waiting for peace further back than the rest of this, as far back as Seb and I go. It’s a feeling that used to rattle me—used to irritate me to no end—used to tangle in my dreams and bite at the edges of the world when I was awake. But this is all it wanted, in the end. To love and to be loved.

We lean in, and my eyes start to slide shut, feeling the hum of that peace in my bones, the electricity between us quietly crackling as we close the distance between us. My lips are nearly on his when we’re stirred by the sound of students clamoring out of the dorm for morning classes, and someone who recognizes Seb yelling, “Quick! Hide! It’s ‘some kid’!”

Seb laughs, but I startle.

“Wait,” I say, probably way later than I should have. “Are you unsuspended, then?”

Seb laughs harder. “Our guess is that the administration got very, very nervous when Daisy started calling to fact-check her piece. She was put on hold for a long time before, gee, I was miraculously allowed back.”

I’m so relieved I’m laughing, too. “We owe her some quality maple syrup. It was her idea to pull one more stunt to get more eyes on this.”

“Sure,” says Seb. “But you’re the one who came up with a way to make it happen.”

“We all did,” I say, and not because I’m trying to be humble about it. Everything about it was a group effort. Me coming up with the idea; all the Newsbag writers going through the back issues and bringing the contenders to Amara, who meticulously combed through them and put them in order; Rowan essentially pulling a Batman by getting the copy together to send to the printer by cloak of nightfall, so we’d have the physical zines ready in time; Seb for having the Instagram clout to get things moving faster this morning than we imagined.

Seb shakes his head slightly, like he’s not going to humor it, but doesn’t press the point. Instead he steps closer and says, “Do you have any other grievances to air?”

I lean in close, tilting my head up to his. “Yeah. That you haven’t kissed me yet.”

Seb corrects that particular situation in the next second, dipping his head to meet me. I feel my toes curl in my sneakers as I arch myself to meet him back, feel that warm crackle start to spread just under my skin the instant his lips are on mine. I sink into him until our chests are pressed to each other, my hands coming around his back again to pull him in closer. He settles a hand just under my jaw, his thumb stroking

my cheek with a carefulness so at odds with the intensity of the kiss that I feel my sense of self melt with it, the edges a happy blur.

It feels impossible to me that we haven't done this before; it feels impossible to me knowing that I'll get to do it again and again and again. When we finally pull apart, I'm still straddling that line, somehow more grounded and more delirious than I've ever been.

Seb keeps his hand just under my jaw, holding me there and searching my face. I quirk my lips self-consciously.

"I want to remember this moment," he explains. "It's a perfect one. But I've already got so many with you that it's hard to keep track."

I almost laugh and make a joke of it. It would be too easy; in the pie chart of good and bad moments we've shared, most of them are in the red. But even those were perfect in their own way, if they led us here. It seems silly looking back that I ever thought anything but.

So I lean in and kiss him lightly, like I'm sealing the edge of the moment with it. "Well, that's going to be tricky, seeing as there are going to be a whole lot more."

I'm honestly not sure how long we end up making out in full view of half the campus after that. Long enough that at least one person from Newsbag passes and says, "Goddammit, I lost the bet," and long enough for Christina to return from morning practice and catcall us so colorfully that Seb and I end up laughing into each other's mouths. We are only persuaded to stop by the mutual need for oxygen and the fact that my phone is buzzing in my pocket with a call.

"It's Amara," I tell him. "Maybe we've got an update."

When I pick up the phone, Amara doesn't wait for a "hello." Instead she says, "Hey, are you free right now?"

"Yeah, what do you need?"

"Can you meet me at the stairs at the top of the quad?"

"For sure. I'll be there in five." I turn to Seb when I hang up. "Shit. They're going to be so happy to see you."

But Seb is just shaking his head, an unmistakably fond look on his face. "I'm not coming," he says.

I pause midstep toward the quad. "Sure you are."

"I'm not," he says, eyes gleaming with amusement.

"Why?"

Seb leans in and kisses me on the temple, then says very patiently, "Because they're meeting you at the top of the quad."

Only then do I remember that Newsbag has a ritual for initiating new writers. One that starts in a specific spot on the quad where the first Newsbag writers used to sit and meet to read each other's work. One I hardly even let myself think about, because it would feel like jinxing everything, letting my imagination go that far.

I blink back happy tears, so overwhelmed with relief and pride that it feels like it could tip me over. "Do you think that means— shit —does that mean we saved Newsbag?"

Seb shrugs merrily, then takes me by the shoulders to pivot me back in the direction of the quad. “Only one way to find out.”

I stare out at the main path I’ve taken so many times, knowing that no time will be quite as sweet as this one. I want to soak in every second of it; I want to sprint down it like a little kid. I want to press yet another perfect moment into my heart, but my heart is already way ahead of me, thrumming with all the moments to come—the joyful and the scary and everything in between—knowing that so many of them started right here, in the arms of the boy I love, with a future full of infinite possibilities at my feet.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:20 am

Nobody's at the quad when I reach the bottom of the steps, or at least I think that's the case until Joey emerges from behind one of the pillars at the edge of it. He looks simultaneously pleased and dubious, a grimace attempting to be a smile on his face.

"You good?" I ask.

He shifts his weight between his feet, then stops walking halfway to me. "Okay, so—the thing is—I'm supposed to put this paper bag on your head. It's a news bag! Get it?" he says, holding up said paper bag, which, sure enough, has news articles glued to it. "But um—that feels very strange of me, a very tall individual, to be doing to a much shorter individual in broad daylight—"

"Joey, for fuck's sake! We talked about this!" calls Amara from behind the quad's very large rock.

Joey holds the paper bag aloft, looking stricken. "Um—all right. Yeah, sorry, this is my first ever writer-napping, so I'm not sure how these are supposed to go—"

"Well, get with the program!" Amara calls. "You were the most recent writer brought on, this is your job!"

Joey lowers the arm holding the bag and says hopefully, "Can't one of you kidnap her?"

"I'm the one who gets to spin her around while we do the song. Don't take that from me," calls Colby from another rock.

“And I lured her here!” Amara protests. “Must I carry the entire weight of Newsbag on my back?”

I walk over to Joey, teeming with so much excitement and uncertainty that I can feel myself shaking. “I will put the paper bag on my own head under one condition,” I tell him.

Relief floods Joey’s face. “Name it.”

“Tell me. Is Newsbag safe?”

Joey’s face bursts into a wide grin. “Not officially,” he says. “But unofficially? I think we’re good.”

I take the paper bag from him, my own grin so wide I’m half convinced my face won’t fit in the bag anymore. “All right,” I say, placing it over my head. “Writer-nap me.”

The paper bag smells like the breath of a hundred Newsbag writers before me; Colby’s rendition of the “Maple Ride Sweetie Song” is so terrible that it should be used as the soundtrack to a horror movie; the collective attempt of the Newsbag staff to get me back to McLaren Hall, with each of them taking me by the elbow to quiz me about the different “eras” of Newsbag’s existence, is so disjointed that I nearly step on a squirrel.

It’s anyone else’s nightmare—and the most thrilling half hour of my life.

It ends back in the room we’ve held all our meetings in since the first, where I’m greeted with cheers and applause and Rowan and Amara’s latest batch of cookies, a celebratory Maple Ride Sweetie recipe made with maple syrup and candied pecans that allegedly goes back to the early Newsbag days of yore.

I stand there feeling like one of those award show clichés who are too busy trying not to cry to remember to give a speech at the podium. Joey helpfully prevents this by putting a cookie in my hand with the same ease he did on the first day, and Colby by thumbing under my eyes and saying, “We don’t let perfectly good mascara go to waste.”

I am hugged by no less than a dozen people when I finally reach Amara and manage to say, “I didn’t even do the third round.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” says Amara. “That piece you published this morning did more for Newsbag than all the alum articles in it combined. People are laughing, and people are pissed. ”

Rowan’s eyes are brighter than I’ve ever seen them, enough for them to look downright optimistic for once. “And your idea for a last limited-edition zine is generating so much buzz that the dean emailed us three times in a row asking to meet and ‘resolve the misunderstanding.’”

“A meeting we are taking our sweet time setting up, so Daisy can get her article published and really turn on the heat,” says Amara. “We’re gonna have the people in charge of the donor budget on their knees. ”

“God, I love it when you talk dismantling the administration,” says Rowan, snaking an arm around Amara’s waist.

Amara grins wolfishly. “Then you’re about to have one hell of an excellent semester ahead of you.”

While they’re making out I wander over to grab another cookie. Around me everyone is sharing links to the coverage we’ve started to get from other outlets, funny comments people are making in Instagram captions, the names of different notable

writers and comedians who have gotten involved. I'm standing there soaking in every second of it, my heart full of joy and my mouth full of cookie, when Joey and Colby approach.

"She looks bewildered," Colby says to Joey, analyzing me like a specimen.

The smile on my face wilts just enough that neither of them miss it. I have to ask it now.

"Am I only getting the role because Seb dropped out?"

Joey shakes his head immediately. "Nah. We didn't even see his email resigning from the spot until later. We were getting inundated with stuff about the budget numbers."

Colby positions the Newsbag hat on top of my head, fashioning it so it doesn't come over my eyes. "You got this fair and square. Also we have big meetings about each writer before we bring them on staff. Four years is a long time to be stuck with someone, you know."

I bite down a Seb-related smirk, because boy, do I ever.

"We wanted to get stuck with you even earlier, though, so we all held back last night after the zine went to print," says Joey. He lightly bops my makeshift hat. "Unanimous decision."

My throat is thick by the time I finish my bite of cookie. "Well," I manage, trying not to get too sappy but failing spectacularly. "Thank you. I've wanted to write for Newsbag for so long. I'm probably going to need all four years to believe this is actually happening."

Amara comes up from behind and hooks an arm around me so firmly that it's clear

she was eavesdropping. “It’s not just your writing. You’ve clicked into this place. You’re open and empathetic and know how to connect with people, make them feel like they’re part of a larger whole.” She gestures out with her other arm to the room, where the excitement is still so palpable I can feel it like a charge in the air. “I mean, shit. I think the results speak for themselves.”

The words feel like they’re uncurling some last part of me I held in reserves. Like I’ve spent this entire time growing out of the boundaries I made myself fit into in high school, and now I’m finally feeling myself bloom. Now I’m not just myself, but proud to be—every part of me. The loud and disruptive and messy and wild. The things that make me a Brighton through and through, and the things that make me just Sadie, a person I’m learning more about every single day.

We all have to disperse a few minutes later for classes and to continue coordinating all the alums and other news outlets reaching out for quotes. Amara tells me to keep my phone charged and at the ready, because people are already starting to ask about my piece. I still feel like I’m walking on a sunbeam that carries me all the way to Pancake It or Leave It, where I can see Seb chatting animatedly with Daisy in the window. He turns the moment I come into sight, already grinning before his eyes fully land on me, like he sensed me coming from half a mile away.

I only saw him an hour ago, but that doesn’t stop the flood of relief when I walk through the door and he’s already standing to meet me. It isn’t just that he’s back on campus and we’re on even footing again. It’s that from now on, we always will be. That every time I pass Seb on the main path or sit next to him in the library or find him in Pancake It or Leave It, I can look at him and just— be.

Seb was wrong before, is the thing. We weren’t always our true selves around each other. There was always one thin protective barrier between us. The pretenses and the competitions and little white lies we told ourselves, always at odds for the sake of keeping each other close. For the sake of keeping us from being the people we are

now: unabashedly, ridiculously happy to see each other, for all the reasons in the world and no reason at all.

Daisy grabs her laptop and switches tables with a quick wink as Seb steps forward to wrap his arms around me. “Hey, you,” he says into my hair, unmistakably proud. “I see you survived your kidnapping.”

“Hey,” I say back, squeezing him hard. “That I did.”

Seb pulls away just enough for me to see the gleam in his eye. “Well, as the official winner of our harrowing Newsbag competition, I can offer you one of two prizes: an ‘I crushed Seb’ victory kiss to really stick it to me, or an ‘I feel sorry for Seb’ pity kiss to help ease the blow.”

I lean in and kiss him. It’s soft and sweet and feels less like I’ve won something and more like I’ve finally laid my armor down. From now on, whatever Seb and I get up to, we’ll be doing it together.

Seb’s eyes are so warm and open when we pull away that I can’t help basking in it like a plant reaching for the sun. He tucks a loose strand of my hair behind my ear. “So which one was it?” he asks.

I raise my eyebrows at him. “You’ll probably have to kiss me again to find out.”

He laughs and does just that, grabbing me by the waist and dipping me slightly, a victory of his own. It’s a swooping, breathtaking crackle of a sensation, but when we pull apart, I’m the one laughing.

“Hmmm,” says Seb. “Do I want to know the punch line of this joke?”

I lean in, setting my forearms loosely on his shoulders, clasping my hands around the

back of his neck. “I was just thinking about the last time I allegedly defeated you, and you popped up on campus anyway,” I tell him. I’m close enough to see the faint crinkles of his smile just under his eyes, close enough to that familiar gleam of mischief that I almost lose my trail of thought. “I can’t believe it was only a few weeks ago I was crossing my fingers for a wormhole to open up on the sidewalk and spit you back home.”

“Aw, c’mon,” Seb teases, tilting his face closer to mine. “You didn’t want to kiss me even a little?”

My cheeks start burning despite the fact that I have, in fact, kissed him plenty of times this morning and plan to do so many more. But before I have to cop to anything, Betty lets out a sigh so long-suffering it could knock one of the walls to Pancake It or Leave It down.

“I thought your whole ‘just kiss already’ bit was a pain in my ass,” she mutters, turning back to her grill to plate a round of pancakes. “Turns out this is ten times worse.”

Daisy looks up briefly from her laptop. “Be nice to the emotionally charged teens.”

“She likes us, deep down,” says Seb, nodding toward Betty’s grill. “See? Betty made these to celebrate your new role out of the sheer goodness of her heart.”

When I take a step to peer over the grill, it looks like a Funfetti cake was murdered on it. Sure enough, there’s a massive stack of sprinkle pancakes on the side, freshly buttered and about to be drowned in syrup.

That doesn’t stop Betty from leveling Seb with a look that could cut someone in half. “I made these because he made a ridiculous puppy dog face at my wife, who then made a ridiculous puppy face at me.”

I put a hand to my chest. “Betty, I’m touched.”

“Yeah, yeah. Congratulations to all three of you for being big fucking nerds,” she says, gesturing to us and to Daisy, who is typing at record speed with a faint smirk. Betty plops two plates in front of me and Seb with a graceless clatter, then points the spatula at us menacingly. “You better eat every last bite of these. Damn sprinkles are making my restaurant look like it’s run by circus clowns.”

We spend the next few minutes following that directive to a T—it turns out getting kidnapped is in fact very appetite-inducing business—but once we start to slow, I notice Seb glancing down at his phone. It’s a text from his dad. An innocuous one, judging from the quick answer Seb gives, but I don’t miss the look on his face—determined, hopeful, and a touch uncertain.

“So now that you know you’re staying—what’s the plan?”

He moves his phone to the side. “Well, first of all. Switch my major. Turns out I don’t particularly like math when I’m not using it to taunt my local nemesis,” he says with a pointed smirk.

“Math was the real villain all along,” I agree. “And then?”

“And then—maybe start something of my own.” Seb is watching me carefully, like my reaction means enough to him that he doesn’t want to miss a flicker of it. “Not a zine like Newsbag, but an online presence of some sort. A place where students can share stories and find resources and get more of a bird’s eye view on everything happening on campus. But not university-affiliated, so we don’t have to rely on their resources. I’m thinking—part friendly ear, part human interest, part watchdog.”

I can tell from the way the words gather speed that even if he hasn’t been thinking about this a long time, he’s thought about it hard. In true form, when Seb has an idea,

he throws his entire heart into it.

As Seb talks about it, I'm already envisioning it—the two of us working side by side, chasing separate dreams and supporting each other along the way. This feels like the natural conclusion we should have seen coming all along. We always pushed each other to do our best to crush each other. Now we can push for the sake of each other.

“Careful,” I say. “You might do something wild, like piss off the dean.”

Seb lets out a dry laugh. “I’ll take my chances.” He nudges my foot under the table the way he has so many times, but keeps his sneaker on top of mine, the light pressure of it grounding and sweet. He lowers his voice to ask, “So what do you think?”

He must already know from the way I’m smiling, but I tell him anyway. “I think I’m going to be very proud to see it come to life.”

Seb ducks his head, endearingly, bashfully pleased. “Well, good,” he says. “Because honestly—I wouldn’t have had the idea for it if it weren’t for all the stunts you helped pull off. And I’d hope when you’re not busy being a Newsbag rock star that you might want to contribute, too.”

I grin. “Sure. And if I’m not available I’ll see if Jerry’s got time on her calendar.”

Seb leans toward me with a conspiratorial grin. “You know, Jerry’s good,” he says. “But Sadie’s a whole lot better.”

I almost laugh again, thinking of all the scenes I’ve caused in my few weeks here. Flying mozzarella and Alphabet Party jumping, having it out with Marley on the phone and tackling Seb in broad daylight. Laughing harder than I ever have and feeling deeper than I’ve ever felt and reaching in to find courage I always knew I had

but never knew how to harness.

“Sadie’s just a whole lot,” I counter.

Seb grins. “Lucky for us, you’re only going to be a whole lot more.”

There’s a strange new thrill in the way I don’t just seize on those words but want to live up to them. I spent so much of my life stubbornly certain that my role was to be quiet and responsible, to smooth out other people’s angles. To be easy and predictable, steady and good, and always, always trying to control anything around me that wasn’t. I blended into crowds. I made myself fit. But I’ve never been a part of communities like I am now—not just in Newsbag, but the entirety of Maple Ride. With the family I finally opened myself up to, and the family I’m starting to build here, one day at a time. With my own heart that I’ve tried to ignore the rhythm of for so long that it’s a relief to finally let it lead me, to let other people hear the beat of it, too.

And with this boy who was always a home to me, even in the moments we were determined to knock it down. Moments we always knew the shape of each other better than all the shapes we were pretending to be and never let the other hide for too long. Moments that brought us both here, standing on the edge of four years and an entire lifetime of dreams we aren’t racing against anymore, but running toward.

Seb reaches out across the table and takes my hand, squeezing it lightly. “So what’s the plan for the rest of the day?”

A few weeks ago the answer to that question might have terrified me. I have to call my family and tell them about what just happened with Newsbag. I have to help navigate this viral stunt I pulled that’s only spreading more and more by the second. I have to talk to my heroes both on campus and beyond it to make sure this home within my new home is safe, and face an angry administration, and start working all

over again to make sure we don't lose momentum just because we've won the figurative battle and not the war.

But now the question makes me smile. I reach across the table and snag Seb's last bite of pancake, grinning as I tell him, "Good chaos." Grinning because I know that's not just the plan for the day, but every single one to come.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:20 am

Christina frowns at the group chat. “Going as a cat would have been a total cop-out.”

“No, Seb was going to go as Cats, the entire musical,” I explain.

We are currently in a very long thread with Seb and Joey discussing our failed costume ideas for the Alphabet Party, which is starting in approximately twenty minutes. Some of the costume ideas were more cursed than others.

“Well, that’s just irresponsible,” says Christina. “There are innocent people at that party. People with families to come home to, dreams to achieve.”

She sets her phone down, adjusting her Cookie Monster costume in the mirror. Well, more like adjusting the fuzzy blue crop top alleging itself to be a Cookie Monster costume. I don’t think anyone’s going to squint too hard, considering she has three fanny packs alternately full of Chocolate Oreos, Chips Ahoy!, and Circus Animal Cookies to distract them.

“Fortunately the large boas he needed for the costume were delayed in transit,” I tell her. Unfortunately for me, Seb already learned the lyrics to “Memory” by heart. We spend so much time attached at the hip these days that I am also ready to understudy for Grizabella at a moment’s notice.

“I’m sure there will be more than enough cats there for him to get whatever nearly possessed him out of his system,” says Christina. “Also, chug your Coke and down your Cheetos. This year I am showing up the precise moment they open the doors, dammit.”

We were luckily yet again struck by the Random Acts of Chaos Club to score an invite to the Alphabet Party, “C” edition. Or rather—Christina and Joey were, when they were out “just getting sandwiches” for the purposes of “touching base about Seb’s recent article about scholarship athletes” in a strictly journalistic, not at all googly-eyed way. If they happened to be sharing AirPods and a protein smoothie and all of their inner feelings about what they wanted out of a hypothetical relationship, that was all just, in Christina’s words, “bro stuff.”

Which is to say, for someone who made fun of my “will they, won’t they” with Seb for years, Christina and Joey sure are putting on a master class in it with their sequel.

“Also, wait, what are you going as again?” Christina asks.

“You’ll see when we get there,” I tell her.

Christina raises her eyebrows. “Ooh. Look at you, all edgy and mysterious ever since you came back from New York.”

I stick my tongue out, nudging her out of the way of the mirror to put on mascara. “Careful, or I’m going to start dressing in all black and converting all your beloved Spotify playlists to vinyl.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just remember to thank me in your Emmys speech, huh?”

I grin at her reflection in the mirror. It’s not like I was doing anything particularly award-worthy during my brief two-month-long internship at Hub Seed over the summer, but it was an early taste of what might come, and I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it since. Our little Newsbag stunt and my article got me on the radar of one of the hiring managers who runs the internships and fellowship programs up there, and she reached out, encouraging me to keep it up and apply for the summer term. I wrote a satirical piece about academic rivals trying to one-up each other as a commentary on our obsession with academic success that won them over. It earned

me an entire summer of living in temporary dorm housing with six other interns, dabbling in podcasts and humor writing and scripted shorts and even a television show in its early stages of development.

It was both helpful and unhelpful in that I have no idea what I want to do in this field, and have come to the conclusion that I'm just going to try and do it all. I brought that same chaotic energy back to campus—as a result, Newsbag is launching its very first podcast at the end of the week, with the first episode chronicling the tryout process for the next round of writers and featuring some deeply hilarious interviews from the writers in question. I'm glad I won't have to be part of the staff deciding until next year, because it's going to be a tough call.

“Thank you to the Academy,” I say to the mirror, using my mascara wand as a microphone. “I owe everything to Cookie Monster.”

“You do, after that cookie tour we went on. I did some extensive TikTok deep dives to ensure you ate like a king that afternoon,” says Christina, adjusting a pair of heels so high that they'd definitely turn some heads on Sesame Street.

“It worked,” I say. “I can still feel the power of those cookies going to my head.”

That was just one of many tourist-adjacent excursions I ended up taking, because it turns out when you're living in New York, just about everyone you know who isn't in New York will make a point of finding you there. Seb came up most weekends when he wasn't scheduled to work helping the summer-event coordinator at the community center in our hometown, crashing at his aunt's West Village apartment to avoid the wrath of all five and a half interns (one of them we saw so infrequently I worried she was a ghost). His aunt said “the more the merrier” and held him to it, so Christina came up one weekend and my sisters on the other. It was a summer of grilled cheese picnics with Seb, Central Park exploring with Christina, and discount Broadway tickets with Marley and Hadley.

And now it's a fall when I'm very grateful to be back at Maple Ride, and determined to do even more with Newsbag so I can apply for the fellowship on the next round and do it all again next summer.

Christina pushes a final Cheeto into my mouth and all but yanks us out the door after that, walking with the kind of purpose that inclines me to remind her that I do not possess cross-country legs or lungs to match pace.

"Maybe you should join a team then, huh?" says Christina. "Now that it doesn't come with a side of sleep deprivation and existential despair."

"Please stop trying to trick me into becoming a jock," I beg her. "I'm still recovering from that hike we took in tenth grade."

"We'll get you eventually," says Christina, skipping ahead.

Not likely, but I am deeply and perpetually relieved by the results of our ongoing campaigns for Maple Ride to adjust its priorities, for the sake of both the athletes and the student organizations. After Newsbag started making headlines and Daisy published a damning investigative report of her own a few weeks later, the donors hired a third-party team to assess the use of their funds. It hasn't been an easy year, and we've been shut out of plenty of the conversations despite our best efforts, but this much is true: all the coaches of nearly every team rallied in their athletes' defense, and now practice schedules are less rigid, the scholarship students don't have nearly as strict academic requirements, and we're in final talks to hire mental health advocates that specialize in athletics.

As a result, Christina has been able to do all kinds of things in this fall semester that she couldn't in the last. Things like finally be a more active member in the Hindu Student Union's planning of the recent Diwali celebrations and fundraising bake sales, and take classes she's actually interested in, and yell at me that it's "NOT FLIRTING, JOEY IS JUST BAD AT BALANCING ON THE BOSU BALL SO WE

HAD TO HOLD HANDS.”

And all of us have been able to join other student organizations and clubs without fear of them shuttering out from under us. Donors are now allowed to designate a portion of their money specifically to student-run organizations, so they’re as solid as ever. Joey is an avid member of the Bird Watching Society and delights in pointing out blue jays and cardinals anywhere he goes. Seb is testing the limits of human taste buds with the Foodie Club’s “Hot Sauce Death Match” and “Cheese and???? Pairings” nights. I recently got put in charge of next month’s pick for the Sad Bitch Book Club. Christina has joined the Knitting Club and somehow has become more cuddly and terrifying by the day.

Speaking of, I realize Christina wasn’t just skipping for the sake of it but in fact has spotted Seb and Joey, who are both emerging from McLaren. They don’t see us right away, the two of them in avid conversation about something they’re looking at on Joey’s phone that makes them cackle.

My heart cinches at the sight of them—Seb’s face lit up in a genuine, dweeby smile, the kind that swells so much in his cheeks that he has to close his eyes for a second. The kind of smile I didn’t realize I only ever saw on his face when we were safe in the bubble of our families and not at school with our friends. In the past year he’s been loosening up in his own way—less posturing and performing for everyone else’s sake and more letting himself just be in the moment.

It’s meant less Instagramming and more goofing around, less pressure to be what people expect and more freedom to let them accept him as he is. He doesn’t shift to make himself fit but lets himself be in his own space. It has been as much of a relief to watch him come into himself as it’s been to feel myself coming into my own. We may have been the only people who knew the “real” versions of each other in high school, but the same can’t be said now, and we’re both much better for it.

Seb waves when he spots us, his face brightening with a grin in my direction and

Joey looking bashfully pleased as ever to see Christina. But before either of them can so much as utter a hello, Christina is demanding, “Wait, are neither of you in costume yet?”

Joey unsuccessfully tries to bite down a smile. “Sure we are. We’re going as cool kids,” he says, wrapping an arm around Seb and jostling him.

Seb shoots me a conspiratorial look. “Cool cats, one might say.”

“Careful, before you’re all alone in the moonlight,” I warn as we approach.

“First of all ‘cool kids’ don’t forget to take off their blue-light glasses,” says Christina, tweaking the bridge of Joey’s nose. “Second of all, if you seriously don’t have costumes, neither of you are getting a single cookie from me this entire night.” She puts on a frankly horrifyingly accurate Cookie Monster voice and says, “‘C’ is for canceled.”

Joey blushes like Christina didn’t poke just his nose but the core of his soul. “Nah, we have costumes. We’re just going to change when we’re there,” he says, releasing Seb.

Seb swoops in and settles a hand on the back of my neck to pull me in for a quick kiss. “Hey, you,” he says, his eyes roaming every inch of my face the way he always does, despite knowing it better than anyone by now. “Long time.”

Because we are maximally insufferable now, I take in every inch of his face in turn, accounting for every tiny freckle on his nose and fleck of color in his brown eyes. “The most harrowing three hours of my life,” I joke.

Christina starts showing off all her cookie-filled fanny packs to Joey ahead of us, and Seb and I fall into step with the same easy rhythm we’ve always had, even when we pretended we didn’t.

“You ready for tomorrow?” Seb asks me, eyes bright against the dim evening and the newly lit streetlamps.

I raise my eyebrows. “The readiest.”

“Not you turning readiness into a competition,” says Seb slyly, stepping so close we’re nearly shoulder to shoulder. “How very unlike you.”

I smirk, stopping him by cupping my hand under his jaw to pull him in for another kiss, deep and slow. It’s only been three hours since we’ve seen each other maybe, but it’s been a week of absolute mayhem. Between Seb preparing for the launch of “Sweet Everything’s”—the name he decided on for his online publication, a play on the school’s mascot, Sweetie—and me preparing for the launch of Newsbag’s first podcast episode, we’ve barely had time to see each other. Even yesterday, when our families came to visit for a launch dinner at Johnny’s diner, we barely got to do much more than swap our sweet-potato and curly fries across the table.

I release him, my hand lingering on his face for a few moments. It’s absurd how I will never tire of staring at it. I’m every cliché rolled into one.

“I’d do that whole ‘I missed you more’ thing, too, but someone would have to mercy-kill us before we declared a winner,” I tell him.

Seb takes the hand I’ve dropped and curls his fingers into mine. “Yeah. It’d be worse when both our headstones read ‘No, I do.’”

I shake my head. “No headstones. I may love you, but never enough to trust font-related decisions.”

Seb squeezes my hand. “Whatever you say, Comic Sans.”

I tilt my head, because that wouldn’t be a bad costume idea for tonight’s Alphabet

Party, then register a faint smirk on Seb's face because he's thought precisely the same thing. However, we are humans on an adorable ridiculous mission tonight, courtesy of Joey. Our costumes were all his idea. Well, inspired by mine and Seb's last year, but his idea nonetheless.

Which is why, approximately ten minutes later, we are emerging from the various bathrooms in the Alphabet Party house dressed in identical cross-country outfits, holding identical blue Gatorades, and sporting the same HYDRATE OR DIE-DRATE sticker on the backs of our phones.

Christina's mouth drops open at the sight of us. Joey just barely rescues an entire sheet of Chips Ahoy! before they hit the floor.

"Did you all... dress... as me?" she squeaks.

Seb feigns confusion, looking down at himself. "Huh?" he asks. "I'm a cross-country competitor."

I also shake my head. "I'm a granola bar connoisseur."

Christina is half laughing, half blubbering, like she is too overcome by this course of costume events to process emotions. "And your excuse?" she says to Joey.

Joey takes a step toward her, his face flushed but determined. He opens his mouth like he is going to say something rehearsed, then laughs a little like he's about to say something else entirely.

"I'm cool and clever and courageous and captivating," he says, so earnestly and quietly that we can barely hear him over the sound of "Call Me Maybe" blasting from downstairs. "So yes. I'm Christina."

Christina pulls in a stuttering happy breath. "You're corny, is what you are," she

accuses, taking a step toward him in turn. “Cheesy. Campy.”

“And completely certain,” he counters, his eyes never once leaving hers.

I could not tell you, for the life of me, what changes in that moment to make it different from all the other moments Christina and Joey have just about circled the drain of all of our patience. But whatever it is, it possesses Christina to grab a fistful of the collar of Joey’s cross-country shirt and pull him down to her and say, “How certain?”

Joey swallows hard, but says, “The most certain.”

And then they’re making out like their lives depend on it. It goes from zero to sixty so fast that if I hadn’t seen them in action on their respective race routes and fields, I’d be deeply worried about their stamina. Seb and I hoot and holler and generally make a scene out of what already is one, until Christina and Joey separate, staring into each other’s eyes in mutual astonishment.

“Oh, god,” Christina finally says. “I just made out with myself.”

Joey bites his lower lip. “I hope you liked it enough to do it again.”

Christina blinks. “Again, sure. And again and again and—fuck. That broke my brain. We’re going to kiss again, though, right? And a lot of times after that?”

Joey grins, apparently so endeared to see Christina be the more awkward of the two of them for once that he’s forgotten how to speak entirely.

“Might as well,” says Seb, wrapping an arm around my waist. “Because it’s about to get worse. You’re about to watch yourself make out with yourself, and then watch both of those selves make public spectacles of themselves on the dance floor.”

Christina still can't take her eyes off Joey, so she's only barely acknowledging us when she says, "None of us are psych majors. Who knows how long it will take me to unpack this?"

I point over at the corner. "Count Chocula over there is a psych TA."

The words are lost to the wind, because they're already making out again, so intently that Seb takes my hand to pull me down to the dance floor. We dance to "Cheap Thrills" and "Can't Hold Us" and "California Gurls"; we eat chips and chicken wings and coconut cake; we eventually find Joey and Christina in the precise spot we left them, still making out, and convince them that they require sustenance and sleep to survive long enough for future makeouts, at which point we wander in the direction of Pancake It or Leave It.

We are unsurprised to find the lights on and Betty at the grill, doing tomorrow's test batch. She grunts in acknowledgment when we walk in, and Daisy swoops in and hugs all of us in turn, delighting at our matching outfits and peppering us with questions about the party.

Betty deposits some cinnamon chocolate burnt-caramel pancakes in front of us, which we were told, in no uncertain terms, when we got a peek at this week's test batch flavors, had "nothing to do with that ridiculous alphabet nonsense," and if Seb didn't stop smirking the "pancakes weren't the only thing about to get burnt." Which we would have humored if Daisy hadn't been one of the original creators of the Random Acts of Chaos Club, and Betty didn't have a soft spot for us the size of the moon.

"Your families came by yesterday on their way out of town," she informs us now, accepting Christina's offering of a slightly mangled Circus Animal Cookie.

I tilt my head in surprise—we told our families about Pancake It or Leave It but didn't give them any precise directions. Or warn them about Betty. Or, for that

matter, warn Betty about them.

Betty bites the head off her cookie animal. “I knew instantly who they were, because the only people I’ve ever seen cause a ruckus like that in the first five seconds of sitting down are you two.”

Seb and I flash matching broad grins. I feel a swell of pride, not just to be a part of my loud family but recognized for it. These days it’s happening more often than not.

“Surely not,” says Seb with a cheeky smile. “We’re as quiet as they come.”

“You cretins brought in a goddamn army last weekend,” says Betty, turning back toward the grill. “I shudder to think of the turnout tomorrow.”

Another delicious, happy development of the past year—Seb and I have both taken to inviting people we meet in our clubs and classes to join us on our Pancake Sundays. Particularly anyone who seems lonely or adrift or as homesick as we both were when we got here. Turns out there’s something to warm carbs and companionship to help make a strange place feel like home, even if that home includes a near-six-foot-tall woman who uses a spatula to threaten people as often as she uses it to cook.

“It’s not us,” I protest. “It’s the pancakes. They’re too delicious for our mere mortal friends to resist.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” says Betty.

But evidently it gets me somewhere, because I get the extra “test” pancake that comes with cherry sauce. I share a few bites out of the goodness of my heart, and also because I’m worried without the extra post-makeout fuel that Joey and Christina will pass out.

It’s past midnight when we finally leave, emerging into the cool September air.

Christina giddily tells me she's going back to Joey and Seb's apartment to "study." So Seb takes the rare opportunity to come back to my dorm with me, knowing Christina will be out.

"It's officially launch day," he says, nodding at the giant clock on Main Street, displaying the time.

I smile, leaning my head onto his shoulder. "I'm proud of us. But it's weird, because—I know this is just the beginning. Tip of the iceberg. We're going to do so many big things, you and me."

Seb nods, his eyes misty but set on mine. He grabs my hand the way he did earlier in the night, only this time the squeeze of it is soft and grounding. "The 'you and me' part is the best of it all."

I nod into his shoulder without saying a word, because he already knows what I'm thinking. That the sweetest part of this beginning is that it isn't a beginning at all, the same way we'll never have a true end. The two of us began before time was something we could measure, and we will be fully known to each other no matter how that time stretches and spurts and changes us. A steady constant thing in the flux we're choosing; an ending already decided, with a middle full of all kinds of beautiful, terrifying, infinite unknowns we'll face together, one day at a time.

The giant clock moves forward. I close my eyes, squeezing Seb's hand in the precise moment he squeezes mine, and lean in to kiss him, long and sure and slow. I may not know which future we're headed toward, but I trust this love to ground us; I trust our good chaos to lead us wherever it is we need to go.