Beer, Spaghetti, and Pharmaceuticals

by Kirbywow

Summary

What do you do when you're a college drop out trapped in a life of monotony with no real direction? More importantly: What do you do when Isaac Hanes, your least favorite person on the entire planet, offers you the opportunity of a lifetime?

- Inspired by Escaping the Monotony of Life by Kirbywow
When did life get so bleak?

This was a question Alice Black repeatedly asked herself, but she found herself asking it even more as she peeled the soggy napkin from her brother's beer can filled kitchen counter. How could someone who once had so much potential, so many aspirations, find themselves trapped in the monotony of working a dead-end, minimum wage waitressing job? Being a doctor at one point seemed like a possibility...or at least the creator of the new hot social-media application. Unfortunately, at the age of 25, it appeared reality stomped out those dreams.

"Alice, get me a beer," barked Alice's brother, Simon, as he button-smashed his video game controller from his living room.

Soggy napkin in hand, she scowled as she observed the filth around her. Fruit flies hovered above the sink, something must have been rotting in the garbage, and pizza boxes were strategically piled as high as the refrigerator. Hands on her hips, she marched towards her brother. "It's two in the afternoon. You don't need a beer."

"Oh, let the man have a beer, he's heartbroken," said Mark, her ex-boyfriend and brother's roommate, making himself comfortable on the couch with a large bag of potato chips. "Live a little!"

God, he was so cute. With his shining green eyes, dark shaggy brown hair, a trail of freckles sprinkled along his nose... and those dimples! Despite their insanely complicated and drawn out relationship, she still found herself having trouble being stern around him...she wanted to appear cute and happy-go-lucky.

But Simon needed *someone* to keep their house afloat. Mark certainly wasn't doing the best job.

"Have either of you seen the state of this house? If your landlord stopped by you would be evicted," she said as her foot stepped in a sticky puddle on the floor, causing her to grimace.

Simon shrugged. "Doesn't really sound like your problem."

Choosing to ignore the statement, she asked, "When are you planning on going back to work? It's been a month."

Reluctantly, he tossed the video game controller to the ground, squaring his shoulders to her. Jamming his thumb into his chest with each syllable, he said. "I'll go back to work when women stop breaking my fucking heart."

Crumbs of chips flew out of Mark's mouth as he laughed, clasping his hand on Simon's shoulder. "You might be waiting a while, buddy."

"You need to go back to work, man," Alice said, taking a seat next to Mark. She hated being a nag but Simon was getting ridiculous. "You need some form of structure. Pizza and beer isn't going to make you happy."

"Pfft, like you're one to talk," said Simon. "You're the one who dropped out of school. Eight months
away from having your computer science degree, but nope, you couldn't handle it."

"I dropped out because I couldn't afford it! It had nothing to do with not being able to 'handle it',' she shot. After all she was doing to help him out he had the nerve to rub her biggest insecurity in her face? "Either I finished my degree or I would be homeless. Besides, at least I have a job."

"I have a job, too," Simon said as he crossed his arms. "I'm just taking an indefinite leave of absence."

Knowing she wouldn't win the battle, Alice surrendered the conversation to resume cleaning up her brother's mess in silence. She loved her brother, she really did, even if he was being a miserable jerk these days.

When Simon and Alice both graduated high school, their parents sold their family home to travel through America in a tiny RV, meaning Simon was the only family Alice had in Calgary, Alberta. Because of their close age, Simon being only a year older, they were especially close. In fact, Alice was a little ashamed to admit that her brother was one of her only friends since dropping out of university. The only other person she hung out with was Mark or her best friend, Emily, from high school. Even so, friends, siblings, whatever; after spending nearly every day for a month trying to help him get back on his feet while Mark sat there enabling him, she started to feel very unappreciated.

However, when Mark turned on the news and the anchorman announced the headlines it was evident that Alice's company was necessary.

"...Isaac Hanes of Hanes Pharmaceuticals, a true hero, has graciously donated 100,000$ to the children's hospital today..."

CRASH.

SMASH.

An empty beer bottle shattered against the wall, followed by Simon shouting, "FUCK YOU!".

"What the hell is your problem?" Alice asked with wide eyes as she rushed back into the living room. With both of his middle fingers pointing at the blonde man on the screen, Simon cursed even louder. Her eyes darted accusingly towards Mark, who looked completely un-phased by the sudden chaos. "Why are you letting him watch this!?"

"Oh, I guess I should turn it off..." Mark mumbled as he switched off the television.

"Do you know what that man has done to me, Alice?" Simon asked as he furiously paced around the room with his voice raising. Oh, god, not this again...she thought to herself. This had to be the third time that day.

"Yes, I'm well aware of – "

"That scumbag has fucked not only one of my fiancées," he lifted a single finger before continuing, "But two of my fiancées." He lifted the second.

"Trust me, we all know," she said, picking broken shards of glass from the floor.

"That man has single handily ruined my life twice," His stained vintage carpet was going to be worn to the cement by the time he was finished stomping around, "and yet, he is on the news being praised as a god damn hero!"
"I hate him, too, Simon," she said. "The moron made my life hell all throughout high school. Don't worry, no one in this room thinks he's a hero."

"I don't fuckin' get it," Simon said as he slumped back into his chair. "Why do I deserve this? It was bad enough when he had the affair with Susan when we were 18. I got over that alright, I guess. Life went on..."

Mark squeezed a pillow over his face to conceal his loud moan. If anyone had heard Simon retell the story more than Alice, it was Mark.

Simon continued his rant, "...But why would any god put me in the same city as that ASSHOLE whose only purpose in life is to RUIN MINE? I loved Chelsea...we were getting married in two months..."

Mark ran a hand through his hair and said, "I don't know, man..." It was evident he was beginning to run out of consoling responses.

"The worst part is that she hasn't even talked to me since..." said Simon, resting his chin fist as he stared gloomily out the window. "All she said was, 'Simon, I'm in love with Isaac Hanes and I'm leaving you. Goodbye.' And then she left...forever..."

"That's brutal, man," Mark said. "I mean, when I broke up with Alice, at least I least still talked to her all the time."

"Yeah, but it's kind of weird, honestly. And can't be healthy at all..." she said, reflecting on her and Mark's long drawn out relationship.

They were the epitome of an 'on-and-off-couple.' They dated when she was 16 until she was 19, until he rudely broke up with her on their first days of college. Not long after the break-up, which caused many nights of eating ice-cream right out of the bucket while crying over her *Algorithms For Beginners* textbook, Mark confessed he still loved her but couldn't deal with commitment while in college.

This prompted the next three years as being an emotional rollercoaster; Alice anxiously waiting for his text messages, hoping he would pay her a visit to her dorm, and Mark getting wasted in fraternities until he dropped out of school to work on the oil rigs. Once he quit college their relationship actually improved, and for a while, Alice thought maybe it would work out. Until one night completely out of the blue he ended things for good without any clear reason, thus creating the weirdest dynamic ever. Him being her brother's best friend and roommate and her being forced to spend every social occasion with her ex-boyfriend over the next three years. Let's just say, past nine years have been filled with tremendous heartache.

But she still couldn't help but feel like they were maybe meant to be. Can't have that much history and have it not mean something, right?

Mark interrupted her thoughts, "Oh, come on. I think we are lucky to be friends with everything that happened."

"Yes. I'm sooo blessed to have the boyfriend who dumped me so he could hook up with hotter chicks in college live with my brother. So damn lucky."

"If it makes you feel any better I never did find anyone who was hotter."

"Th-that," she stammered, trying not to blush. She must be getting desperate for male attention if that sad excuse of a compliment made her feel all tingly. She cleared her throat before saying, "I really
"Can we please go back to focussing on me?" Simon groaned.

Alice glanced at her watch quickly and gasped. "Agh, sorry, Simon! I've actually gotta go to work."

"I have to take a shower, anyways," Simon said as he dragged his feet to the bathroom. "Time to drown my sorrows, I guess…"

When the water from the shower could be heard from the living room, Mark walked towards Alice, who was frantically searching the room for her work uniform. He ran his hand through his shaggy dark brown hair and said, "You know I'm just messing with you when I tease you, right?"

"Yes, Mark. I know," she said, barely looking at him. "Trust me, I've gotten used to being the human pin cushion around here."

"You're doing a great job with Simon," he said, sheepishly smiling down at her. His dimples made all previous annoyance disintegrate. "I don't know how I'd handle him without you. Lord knows what he would have done."

"Well, you know me," she said, throwing her tacky red polo t-shirt over her tank top, "Nothing I love more than shutting down binge-drinking escapades and cleaning up pizza boxes."

"That's not true," he said, his hand reflexively brushing a strand of her red hair from her eyes, making her attempt to hide her blushing cheeks. "No one parties harder than Alice Black."

"Considering the closest thing I do to partying anymore is drinking cheap wine while watching cheesy sitcoms, I think that saying can be revoked," she said, feeling depressed that that had become her reality. "Anyways, I've gotta head out. Make sure Simon doesn't off himself."

Later that night, Alice stood behind the bar of the empty restaurant polishing wine glasses. It was yet another quiet night at work with no tips. Oh, how she wished she had been hired at a busy nightclub, even a pub would have been nice. Unfortunately, Sally's Spaghetti House, a locally owned family restaurant months away from being shut down, was the only place to hire her.

It was no surprise to Alice that she was denied from the lively nightclubs and bars. She was cute enough to work at a spaghetti house but she sure wasn't hot enough to work at a nightclub. Her dark brown eyes were nice, but they didn't have the sexy allure that attracted business. The long red hair that fell down her back was unique, but it lacked the bouncy volume that men seemed to love. Really, the only feature that attracted people was the light dusting of freckles on her nose, but they only attracted the creepy dads who ogled her as she served their children spaghetti.

"Hey Alice," her manager, Kathleen, walked towards with a stack of dirty dishes. "Unless we start getting some tables you'll be sent home early."

Alice's heart sank as she stared pleadingly at her dark-skinned boss. "No, Kathleen, please…I need the hours."

"Sorry," she shrugged, "Tammy's closing tonight."

"What? But…but she's been closing all week," She didn't mean to make her voice sound so whiny, it just happened. "I've been working here a year longer. Th-that's not fair."

"She's better at upselling, Alice. It's business." Ouch.
When Kathleen turned her back on her, Alice swooped in front of her, making a last-ditch attempt to sway her mind. "I promise I'll get better. Trust me, I will force spaghetti down their throats!"

"As tempting as a lawsuit would be," she stepped around Alice and gave a cold smile, "you don't care about this job. It's obvious that you think you're wasting your time working here. It shows in your work ethic."

_Sorry I don't have a passion for spaghetti_, she thought to herself, refraining from rolling her eyes.

Kathleen continued, "Listen, we've been waiting over a year for you to show a little more ambition. We all like you, so don't worry, you still have a job. But...you can't be surprised when people who show a little more incentive begin reaping the rewards."

Quickly, Kathleen turned on her heel and sped away from Alice before she could argue anymore. Biting her tongue from saying anything inappropriate to her boss, she searched her apron to grab all the tips she made that night. She counted everything, all the way to the nickels, subtracted her cash to remit, tip out to the kitchen...that left her with...

Seven dollars.

She made seven dollars that night.

Feeling weighed down by the pressure, her elbows slumped to the counter and she grabbed her face, rubbing her eyes until she saw stars. _Rent, phone bill, electricity, water, student loan payments_...she groaned to herself. _Great, with these seven whole dollars, I'll have enough to cover a third of my payments._

How did this even happen? How did she end up at a point in her life where she was punished for not caring about _spaghetti_? It was hard to believe that merely three years ago she was a passionate and enthusiastic student at the top of her computer sciences program. For fun she would create simple smartphone apps, in her spare time she would volunteer to help her friends with their website designing, she would do math to relax...

And now she was serving spaghetti. What a twist.

She folded her hands together and stared at the ceiling. Neither religion nor spirituality was her thing, but as the daunting bills piled up and the thought of being homeless became more of a reality, she prayed. She didn't know what she was praying to...she was just begging for some miracle. Something to get her out of this financial hole. _Anything._

"Can I get a scotch and soda?"

Excited to finally have a customer, she put on the happiest smile she could muster and spun around. Then her stomach flopped.

_No, no, no, no, no, no_, she thought to herself, _NO._

Standing right in front of her was the man who made adolescence so miserable. The man who had been the topic of discussion in her brother's house for the past month. The man she hoped she would never see again. With his neatly styled blonde hair falling effortlessly in front of his piercing blue eyes, straight white teeth, and a Rolex watch that probably cost just as much as his suit, he leaned against the bar.  

It was Isaac Hanes.
He was annoyingly attractive.

"No," she blurted out after an awkwardly long silence.

"No?"

"No."

Smirking, he scanned the room with his eyes as he made himself comfortable on the bar stool. "This is quite the establishment. I like the little meatballs with happy faces."

She could only gawk at him for his blasé attitude.

He continued his thought, "But, you know, I always thought you'd be a scientist or something by now. What happened?"

*What an* asshole, she thought.

How dare he come into her place of employment and ridicule her? And to ask her to rehash the worst experiences of her life to him? She hated the way his smile that didn't seem to weaken despite her cold glare. Even more, she hated that besides a few laugh lines around his eyes and a bit of facial hair on his cheeks, he looked the exact same as he did in high school. In fact, his aging characteristics only made him look more sophisticated. A very deceiving trait for such a moron.

Finally, she said through gritted teeth, "What are you doing here?"

"I happen to like spaghetti."

"What?"

"I like spaghetti."

Unbelievable. He actually thought she was going to serve him. She pointed to the door. "Get out."

"So, how have you been lately?"

What the hell is wrong with this guy?

"I told you to get out."

"Oh, I've been great. Thanks for asking."

"I'm not going to serve you."

"Would you like to get a drink tomorrow night?"

She nearly fell over. There was no way he was asking her out on a date. No way. Even Isaac, the most pompous person on the planet, must know better that. Anger boiled inside of her and she slammed her hands on the bar. Trying to keep her voice quiet, but venomous, she hissed, "What is wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with two old peers going out for a casual drink?" he asked. She quickly fantasized about slapping the grin right off his stupid, smug face.

"You know what's wrong with it," she said, putting her hands on her hips. "You know what you did to my brother."
"I think there's a misundersta –"

"I have the right to refuse service to anyone," she shouted louder than intended. "For the last time, get out."

"But I'm a paying customer," he said with a fake angelic face. His gaze fell behind her shoulder to the stack of coins behind Alice. "How much did you make tonight? Looks about, what, about nine dollars?"

Furious that even as he was trying to make a mockery of her income he still managed to overestimate, she stomped her foot to the ground. "Get out right now or I'm calling the cops."

He rested his elbow on the bar and tapped his index finger on his lips. "No you're not."

"GET OUT!"

Finally, the cocky smirk faltered and he stared at her as if trying to find a fallacy in her words. Tension rose as they both waited for the other to make the next move, but when she took a single step towards the phone he raised his hands to show he surrendered.

"Fine," he said with a tight-lipped smile. "Thank you for the wonderful service."

Instead of responding she turned her back on him, pretending to be enthralled by polishing wine glasses. Once his footsteps sounded further away, signaling he was nearly gone, she quickly glanced at him. As if on cue, he turned his neck just in time to send her one last grin before walking out the door.
Two

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Two

Dark Centre of the Universe – Modest Mouse

"Oh, you did not just send away a customer."

Kathleen was leaning against the counter with crossed arms and a stern look on her face. *Fuck, she was listening the whole time*, Alice thought, smacking her forehead with her palm.

"No, you don't understand. That was – "

"I don't care if that was Hitler, you do not send customers away."

"But that was Isaa – "

"Go home, Alice," said Kathleen with nothing but disappointment dripping from her voice.

"Wh-what?"

"You just said you would work on upselling then you kick out some fancy ass businessman?" Her finger was waving in Alice's face. "Finish up your side duties then go home."

Alice groaned. God damn Isaac Hanes. Maybe her brother was right; maybe God did place Isaac on this earth to ruin their lives. As she pulled out a cutting board to begin cutting limes she reminisced about her worst memory from high school.

She was your typical awkward gangly teenager sitting in biology next to her best friend, Emily. Leaning over, she whispered, "I'm sooo nervous about this presentation."

Emily rolled her eyes. Her dyed pink and black hair fell into her blue eyes which were barely visible through the thick layers of black eyeliner she painted on every morning. Reaching into her oversized hoodie which read "My Bloody Valentine", she grabbed a chocolate bar and handed her a piece. "Here, chocolate will make you feel better."

A quiet giggle escaped her lips and she accepted the chocolate. Despite Emily constantly complaining about being overweight, she always seemed to have chocolate on her. "Thanks, but I don't think it's gonna help."

"You're the token nerd, Alice," she said, quickly finishing the rest of the chocolate. "You're not going to fail. It would go against the status quo."

"You mean the status quo, right?"

"Yeah, that's the one," she said, adjusting one of her spiked wristbands. "Our cruel society would crumble if people didn't fall into our little perfectly labeled niches. I blame the government."

Alice narrowed her eyes. "You're fifteen. You barely know what the government does."

"I know enough to know it's corrupt."
"Alice Black?" called their bored sounding teacher. "You're up."

Alice gulped and nervously walked to the front of the classroom with wobbly knees. She loathed public speaking. Even if she was smart, it didn't make up for her social anxiety. Her eyes quickly scanned the classroom; all the students were slumped over their desks with drooping eyes, clearly not paying attention to the presentations. All but one person.

Isaac had his hands clasped behind his head and snapped a piece of gum loudly with his mouth as he watched her with a cheeky grin. Leaning over to his friend Blaise, he whispered loudly, "I hear their family is so poor they're only allowed one shower a week."

A quiet hum of laughter came from all the students. It was obvious he said it loud enough so everyone could hear. Blood ran to her face making her skin crimson but she refused to let it get to her. She needed this presentation to go well, she only got an A- on her last exam; if she didn't get an A+ on this presentation she would lose her 4.0 GPA. Swallowing hard she began the presentation, trying to direct the attention of the class to the PowerPoint slides, not her false lack of personal hygiene.

"The dopaminergic neurons of greatest interest to neuropsychopharmacologists are found near the base of the midbrain in the substantia nigra and – "

Isaac wasn't finished yet. Once again he leaned over to Blaise's ear, barely trying to whisper, "I bet you their whole family is ginger because they're all incest."

"Shut up, mate," Blaise said in his British accent that all the girls fawned over. His nose was pressed against his paper, scribbling down notes. "I'm trying to pay attention, this is cool."

"Would be cooler if someone half decent was talking…"

Turning her back to the class, she choked back tears. Why did he always have to do this to her? They had been in the same school since Kindergarten and it seemed like the moment they met his goal in life was to make her life hell. Couldn't he just give her a break for one day? With a shaky voice, she continued the presentation, "Umm…the neurons in the substantia nigra send their axons to the striatum, thus – "

"I bet she's gonna die alone," he said, interrupting her once again. "Hundred dollars says the sequel for 'The 40 Year Old Virgin' is about her."

A scoff escaped her mouth and she turned to the teacher hoping he was aware of the bullying taking place in his classroom. But no, he seemed perfectly absorbed in his Microsoft solitaire game. She looked at Emily who gave her an uncertain shrug, mentally telling her she didn't know how to deal with the situation. Scowling, her eyes fell back to Isaac. Hands still behind his head, he did the most pompous thing he could do. He winked at her.

Biting the insides of her cheek, she returned to her presentation. "This pathway plays an important role in the control of movemen – "

Isaac faked a loud sneeze to disguise the very obvious "Fat ginger" from his voice.

She gasped loudly and stomped her foot to the ground, shouting, "I'm not fat!" Quickly, she glanced down at her thin frame, as if ensuring that she hadn't suddenly gained fifty pounds.

"That's nice," Isaac shrugged, faking a confused expression. "No one said you were."

"Miss Black," her teacher said, finally taking his focus away from the solitaire game, "Detention for
the rest of the week for disrupting the class."

"What?" Tears were now swelling in her eyes and she gaped at the teacher. "B-but Isaac started it…"

"Is that true Isaac?"

"No, sir." Isaac folded his hands innocently on the desk. "I don't know what she's talking about."

"Detention it is, then," the teacher said.

So much for zero tolerance for bullying. As the tears began freely flowing from her eyes, she knew she had to get out of the classroom. Without excusing herself, she stormed away. But of course, not before Isaac could get one last jab at her. As she tried to quickly breeze past him he subtly stuck out his foot, catching her ankle, causing her to fall flat on her face. The whole class erupted in laughter.

With the wind completely knocked out of her, she craned her neck to meet Isaac's eyes with her tear soaked face. All he did was smirk and give a small, "Oops", before returning to his innocent smile.

The knife slipped and she cut the side of her finger, snapping her out of the nightmare. Lime juice oozed into the wound making her wince even more in pain from the burning sensation. Deciding she had cut enough fruit for Kathleen, she cleaned up and clocked out. A whopping three-hour shift and seven dollars in tips. What a baller.

As she put on her coat she fantasized over the bubble bath she would have at home. She wanted nothing more than a glass of cheap wine, bubble bath, ice cream, and to put this horrid day behind her. Tomorrow would be a fresh start.

The smell of the city engulfed her nose as she walked out the door. Autumn leaves and exhaust from vehicles: two of her favorite smells. She craned her neck up to the sky, marveling at the majestic skyscrapers looming over her. God, she loved the city. There was nothing more beautiful than the city skyline at night. But what she loved even more about urban life was the ability to be as anonymous as she wanted. So long as she avoided his side of the city, she would never have to see Isaac Hanes again.

Or so she thought.

"…Greg, don't send that shipment to Toronto. There was a bad batch of Strattera, we'll get sued."

The familiar voice came from the alley on the side of the restaurant. There was no way it was him. It couldn't be. It's been over an hour. There was no logical reason why he would be there.

But apparently, logic was nonexistent today.

Her mouth fell open as her eyes rested on Isaac sitting on an upside-down milk crate. He looked quite comical, actually, being at least six feet tall in his swanky suit, slumped on the crate talking about being sued in a dark alley. But she was in no mood to laugh.

"Are you stalking me?" she blurted out.

His neck snapped towards her and he smiled, putting up his index finger motioning her to wait a second. "Hey, Greg, let me call you back, okay? No – don't send it. Ugh, give me an hour. I'll call you." He ended the call and smiled even wider at Alice. "Hey, how's it going?"

"Are you stalking me?" she repeated slowly. This was a literal nightmare.
"No, why?"

"You're sitting in an alley waiting for me."

"I thought that was charming, not stalker-ish."

Completely out of patience for his nonsense, she turned on her heel and stomped off. If she just kept ignoring him he would eventually go away, right?

"Where are you going?" He asked, trailing behind her.

"Home." She sped up.

"Can you just wait a minute?"

"Why are you here?" She asked without turning around. "How do you even know where I work?"

"I told you. I like spaghetti."

"That's bullshit," she said. "You were looking for me." The thought hadn't even crossed her mind initially, but after seeing him wait for her it was blatantly obvious.

"Fine," he said. "Today, yes, I was looking for you. But I didn't track you down or anything."

"Then how do you know I work here?"

"As I said, I like spaghetti so me and my friend came here last week," he explained, still rushing to keep up with her quick pace. "I saw you working and I thought it was weird. Because, you know, I figured you'd be doing something a little...better. No offense."

"I'm taking offense to everything you say."

"And after a week I decided to come talk to you."

"Well, you're wasting your breath." She took a sharp turn in a desperate attempt to lose him.

"You don't even want to know what I wanna talk about?"

"Nope."

"Why?"

She stopped abruptly, just long enough to send him a nasty glare and say, "Are you really that dense that I have to explain it?"

"Apparently," he said. "Come on, one quick drink tomorrow night."

"Go away."

"Why?"

She groaned loudly in frustration and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Because, Isaac, you're the fucking devil."

"Well, now that's harsh."

"You screwed both of my brother's fiancées," she spat. "That is quite the track record. You know,
most people only screw one person's fiancées in a lifetime, but nope. You're Isaac Hanes, a *true* over-achiever."

"Kay, listen," he said, swooping in front of her to finally block her path. He put a hand on her shoulder but she immediately swatted it away. "The first chick, yeah, I did that on purpose. I'll admit it. But Chelsea was a total accident, I swear."

"So your dick 'accidentally' slipped into her?"

"Pretty much."

She scoffed and shoved him out of her way, continuing her march. It would have been smarter to stay silent and ignore him but for some reason, she continued the conversation. "So, you only deliberately slept with one fiancée. Do you expect a medal or something?"

"No, but I think I deserve to give an explanation."

"Fine. Explain why you screwed the first one."

"I kinda meant I would explain what happened with Chelsea…"

She stopped and pivoted to face him. "No, let's hear it. Why did you sleep with Sarah?"

He awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck, trying to string together a proper argument. "I dunno… your brother was kind of a dick. I thought it would be funny."

"Wow…" She said flatly, nodding her head slowly. "That's very compelling."

"Honestly, who the hell gets engaged in high school anyway?" He asked. "It was doomed from the beginning."

"That doesn't make it your responsibility to end it!"

"I know, I know," he said, raising his hands in defense. "My buddies bet me that I couldn't do it, and honestly I didn't think I could either. But…when we went to Jason Hart's birthday party I gave it a whirl. Turns out she was exceptionally easy, I did your brother a favor, honestly."

"You really are a *true hero*.

"But Chelsea," he continued, "she came on to me. I had *no* idea she was with your brother. If I knew I probably wouldn't have done it. Not gonna say for sure, because she was a smoke show, but my conscience definitely would have kicked in."

"You don't have a conscience," she said. "Besides, how did you not know they were getting married? The wedding was two months away."

"She wasn't wearing a ring." His smarmy grin finally slipped off his face. As he kicked a rock with his foot, avoiding her eyes, he actually looked a little guilty. "I was at Barlow's grill. You know, on 87th ave? I was just having a drink, minding my own business, and this blonde woman wearing a red dress with her tits hanging out came up to me. I mean, Alice, you could totally tell she was down to fu – "

"Just, continue the story, Isaac."

"Fine. So…we have a few drinks. She says she's single, and I had no reason to doubt her, so we went to my apartment," he explained. "Then the damn woman wouldn't leave! She was there for
days. I kept telling her all the clichés like I had to get up early and shit. But she wouldn't leave."

Alice nodded. That week was clear in her mind. Poor Simon was frantically searching for his missing fiancée, calling everyone they knew trying to find her. It wasn't until the following week that she showed up. "So, then what happened?" she asked.

"After a few days she finally admitted that she was engaged," he visibly cringed when he said it. "And I mean, I knew this chick was crazy. Total stage five clinger. But the sex was fucking fantastic."

"Charming."

"But…a few days later the damn woman shows up to my apartment telling me she left her fiancée for me and that she loved me and all that shit. I was already ready to kick her out at that point, and then…" He inhaled deeply and gazed up at the stars. It seemed to literally pain him to tell the story. "Then she mentioned Simon's name and everything clicked. I realized I actually fucked two of his fiancées. Like you said, one is more than enough. Sooo, I kicked her out. Called her a crazy bitch and proceeded to deadbolt my door so your brother wouldn't murder me."

It was impossible not to giggle a little at the story. As terrible as it was, and as awful as she felt for Simon, there was something comedic about Isaac trying to get rid of Crazy Chelsea. She never did like her. Once she got over the humor of the situation she reverted to her cold self. "So, what? Are you looking for forgiveness? Do you expect me to convince Simon to tell you there's no hard feelings?"

"What? No. I don't care about what that idiot thinks of me," he said. "I told you, I want to talk to you. Let's go out for drinks. I'll make it worth your while."

She rolled her eyes and turned her back on him, continuing to speed away. Only Isaac would think that he could tell a story about having an affair with her brother's fiancée, proceed to insult her brother, then ask her out on a date. "No."

"Why?"

"Because you're disgusting," she shouted, now being several meters ahead of him. "Are you that arrogant that you honestly think you can sleep with my brother's fiancées and his sister?"

"If you honestly think I'm trying to sleep with you," he drawled, "you're even more arrogant than me."

She paused. Now she was really confused. "You're not?"

"God, no."

"Then what do you want?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow when we go for drinks."

"Why can't you tell me here?"

He shrugged. "Because I don't want to."

She groaned and rubbed her forehead, nursing the pounding headache that was emerging. All she wanted was a normal day at work and to have a nice bubble bath. Nothing prepared her for this. What could possibly be so important that he would put in this much effort tracking her down? As far
as she knew, Isaac didn't put in this much effort for any woman, even if sex was on the line. But god, she hated every speck of him.

As if he read her mind, he said, "Listen, if you don't want to, I get it. You won't hear from me again. But trust me, you won't regret it."

The city was unusually quiet that night. Any other night sirens were typically blaring, or at least a few drunken teens stumbling down the sidewalk. But that night there was an ominous emptiness in the streets. Only Isaac and Alice were in sight, standing parallel to each other, squaring each other up. Her nails dug into her palms as she narrowed her eyes, trying to gauge his intentions. He lazily slipped his hands into his pocket, patiently waiting for her response with an unreadable nonchalant expression.

The human embodiment of evil stood a mere meter away with what could only be an invitation to hell, and yet, she found it difficult to refuse. Her curious mind was getting the best of her. But there was no way she could accept the invitation. She couldn't do that to Simon. Hell, she couldn't do it to her own self-respect. Then again, wouldn't it be disrespectful to herself if she deprived herself of knowing what he wanted? And even more important, wouldn't it be disrespectful to herself to let Simon dictate even more of her life after he seemed so unappreciative of her help? Yeah...it would be self-respectful do it, right?

*Wow, Alice, that's quite the justification,* she thought as she rubbed her temples, *don't do it. Run away. Go home.*


Relief washed over him, making her even more curious. "Are you serious?"

"I guess so."

"Great," he said smiling. "You won't regret it."

"Mhm."

"So, can I get your number so I can send you the address?"

"I'm not giving you my number."

"What? Why not?"

"Because you've already practically stalked me tonight," she said. "The last thing I want is you calling me all the time."

"Listen, I know you think I'm a huge asshole and all," he said, rolling his eyes, "but you're the one who's being kind of a prick right now."

She scoffed and swatted his shoulder. "You can't call a girl a prick!"

He cocked his brow and asked, "How come?"

"Because...I don't know," she said, "because it's not very feminine."

"Well, now that's a little sexist, don't you think?"

She ignored him and turned back on her heel, walking away.
"Fine," he called out. Grabbing a pen and paper from his pocket he scribbled down and address. "Meet me here at 8 o'clock."

"Fine."

"Good."

They stood in an awkward silence just staring at each other. After spending nearly an hour shouting at each other it seemed neither of them knew how to leave the conversation. Finally, he cleared his throat and said, "Hey, I would offer you a ride home but I take it you don't want me to know where you live."

"You're very observant."

"Alright, well, take care then," he said, giving a small wave as he sauntered off. "Don't forget – 8 o'clock."

As she watched him disappear around the corner, her head began spinning. What had she just agreed to? Oh god, her brother was going to murder her if he found out. She wished she had gotten his number simply so she could promptly cancel. Instead, she pulled out her obsolete LG flip phone and texted her best friend Emily.

**HEY, Where are you?**

Alice leaned against the side of the building and tried to patiently wait for a response. After a few minutes without a new text she decided to spam her friend.

**Hellooooooo?**

**Emilyyy?**

**EMERGENCY!**

Much to Alice's relief, her phone vibrated with a notification.

**I'm breaking a sweat at the Jim.**

**You mean at the 'Gym'?**

;) **Nope. I mean at Jim's. Hottie I met at the gym lol.**

Alice giggled. It was just like Emily to manage to pick up some hot guy at the gym, even if she was sweaty. She contemplated leaving her crisis alone and letting Emily have her fun, but when she remembered Isaac's blue eyes piercing through her she knew she wouldn't be able to sleep.

**Can you meet up in a bit? Something really weird happened tonight.**

**What happened? Jim wants to make me vegan tacos. Idk if I can turn that down.**

**I'm going out for drinks with Isaac Hanes tomorrow.**

**OMG! I'll be over in an hour.**

Chapter End Notes
Weeeoo! Let me know what you think, guys! Would love to hear some opinions. Constructive criticism is HIGHLY welcomed. Tear this shit apart, if you'd like haha. Have a wonderful night! :)

Three

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Three

Mister November – The National

This had to be the longest day of Alice's life. Any other day she would find herself spending some time at her brother's, go to work, then come home to a glass of wine, ice cream, and cheesy sitcoms. On this particular Thursday, however, it was already eleven o'clock at night and she wasn't even done socializing. Deciding to forego glasses entirely, she grabbed the full bottle of wine pressed it to her lips before lying flat on her back in the middle of her living room floor.

She lived in a tiny little house with horrible pipes in the impoverished residential area of Forrest Lawn. In other words, it was the neighborhood parents warned their children about. From the outside, the house looked a bit like a meth lab. Cracked siding, barred up windows from previous renters, and a broken fence gave the house that nice "quick-speed-walk-past-this-house" touch. But after living there for nearly five years, the inside had actually turned into something quite cute and cozy. Candles and oil diffusers were found on most surfaces, framed band and movie posters hung on the mauve walls, but her favorite part was the small balcony in her backyard which housed many drunken nights between her and Emily. Overall, her place wasn't amazing, but it was cheap and it had become her home.

As she clutched the bottle of wine to her chest, wondering how the hell she found herself in this predicament, her front door flew open. The familiar women's voice filled her ears. "Ahh, it's a straight out of the wine bottle night, I see."

"Yup," Alice said, propping herself up view Emily. Emily was...fascinating. After spending her entire high school career trying to convince the world that she was 'emo' or 'punk' or whatever, she finally swapped her dyed black hair for her natural platinum blonde locks. Her chocolate addiction had been replaced with an addiction to yoga and cardio, which naturally turned her once chubby body into a skinny, delicate, perfect temple that every man in her presence fell for.

Emily grabbed the bottle of wine and pressed it to her lips, taking a seat next to Alice on the ground. Her dazzling green eyes, which matched her emerald green crop perfectly, stared at Alice's lifeless body and she frowned. "By the looks of it, I think I had a better night than you."

"He was sooo hot, Alice, oh my god," Emily groaned, throwing her face into her hands. "A total Greek god. I want to make a little home on his abs and live there for the rest of my life."

"You gonna see him again?"

Emily shrugged. "I'm not sure. He said he's going to start taking my yoga classes...seriously hoping
he doesn't. He was a little dumb…not to mention a little clingy," she said. "But, if he wants to have another strict sex-only-marathon I probably wouldn't object."

Alice took a swig of the wine as she giggled at her friend's views on relationships. Honestly, Alice admired Emily for her lack of desire to ever have a relationship. They had been friends since they were babies, practically sisters despite having very little in common besides their love for each other and dry sense of humor, and throughout that time Emily never had a monogamous boyfriend. Ever. After her parents got divorced when she was 14, along with turning into the epitome of an angsty goth teenager, she also swore she would never fall in love. That's a pretty huge oath to give at the age of 14, but she seemed to happily stick with it, finding all the intimacy she needed from casual hookups. Having a bangin' body helped as well.

Alice would be lying if she said she never felt envious of Emily's sex appeal. Sure, Alice didn't think she was an objectively unattractive girl. She may be a little plain, gangly, and broke out in acne far too often for a girl of her age. But she had some redeeming features, like super white teeth and long eyelashes. However, standing next to Emily she would become instantly invisible. Far too many times she would be flirting with a boy at the bar, only to have Emily waltz up to them, suddenly creating a wall of invisibility around Alice as the boy drooled over Emily. It was difficult not to get a complex. But she loved her nonetheless! Best friends forever and all that jazz.

"I wish guys with six packs wanted to have sex-marathons with me," Alice thought out loud, flopping back down to the floor. The wine bottle rolled away from her, knocking her dusty old record player that hadn't played music in years. "Instead, I get douchebags like Isaac harassing me at my work and cornering me into going for drinks with him."

"Well, Isaac is sexy. I would have sex-marathons with him."

Alice's eyes shot towards her. "You did not just say that."

"I mean, if he hadn't mercilessly made fun of you for twelve years and had an affair with Chelsea, I would," she said defensively. "So, was he asking you on a date or what?"

"Nope," Alice said flatly. "In fact, when I asked him if he was, he got the most perfect look of disgust on his face and proceeded to call me arrogant."

"Sounds like Isaac, yep," Emily sighed, grabbing the drifting wine bottle to hand back to the irritated Alice. "Why are you going out with him if it's not a date?"

"I have absolutely no idea," she said. "He won't tell me until tomorrow. Curiosity got the best of me. He's probably going to do something embarrassing like stand me up or something."

"You really think he's still that immature?" Emily asked. "He's a CEO and the youngest millionaire in the city. He's probably got more important things to do than mess with your life…"

"I don't think he's immature. I think he's evil."

"Soo, whatcha gonna wear?" Emily asked, desperate to change the topic.

"I dunno…jeans and a hoodie?"

"You can't wear jeans on a date with a millionaire!"

"It's not a date. And I can if I hate him."

"No, no, no, Alice," Emily said, standing up from the floor. She held her hand out to Alice, helping
her off the ground. "Two arguments: First, he's probably going to take you to some ritzy, glamorous restaurant. They won't even let you inside if you're wearing jeans. Second, you have the chance to look sexy as fuck for Isaac. Show him how much of an idiot he was for being an asshole to you all those years."

"But I'm not sexy." Alice glanced in the mirror and frowned at her lanky frame. It was easy for Emily to preach about looking sexy when she was a curvaceous walking sex-symbol, but for Alice, it felt hopeless.

"Shut up and stop being so insecure for once. It's not attractive," Emily demanded. "I have to teach a yoga lesson at four tomorrow, I'll pop by and give you a classic makeover. It'll be like in the movies!"

"I dunno…"

"It wasn't a question."

"But – "

"Alice, you bitch," Emily snapped and Alice's eyes widened from being startled by the sudden harsh words. "You're a god damn babe when you're not drowning yourself in hoodies. Embrace your body for once. Show the world what they're missing."

"Ugh – fine."

Emily was right. When she dressed herself up, she really was kind of a babe. Maybe she should try it more often.

Unfortunately, it was quickly apparent that this was not an occasion to dress up.

When the taxi pulled up to the bar at 7:50, Alice frowned. It wasn't a ritzy glamorous bar at all! In fact, it was a grungy worn down pub with broken windows with a drunken man slumped beside the door. She glanced down at her wardrobe and cringed. She was way overdressed with a little black lace cocktail dress and high heels. Her push-up bra giving the illusion of cleavage made her feel a bit like a hooker, given the state of the establishment she stupidly agreed to meet at.

With a loud groan, she looked at her watch. She couldn't be early and overdressed. That would make her look desperate and she didn't want to give the wrong idea. Cursing her social awkwardness, she paced back and forth, trying to decide whether to go in. The drunk man on the verge of passing out grumbled at her, saying she was making him dizzy. Finally, at 7:58, she casually breezed inside the bar with her best confident face.

She spotted him immediately. There he was, sitting at the bar with his dark blue suit jacket draped over the back of the chair, tie lazily undone, and a plate of spaghetti in front of him. A chuckle escaped her lips. He wasn't lying. Apparently, he really did like spaghetti. Slowly, she walked towards him and said in a voice five octaves too high, "Hey."

"Wh-what?"

"I saw you wandering around outside," he pulled out a bar stool for her, "thought you were gonna
"Oh…you saw that," she said, turning bright red. She took a seat at the sticky bar and looked at her folded hands. "I just didn't want to be too early."

"Well, you're here now. That's all that matters," he said. His voice was way too chipper for Isaac. It didn't even sound sarcastic. She gave him a hesitant look as she scanned his face for any malicious intent. Instead, his smile grew even wider and he motioned to his food. "You should try the spaghetti here. It's the best in the city. Much better than your restaurant's spaghetti."

"Do you spend your days seeking out the best spaghetti in the city or something?" she asked with a raised brow, looking skeptically at the plate.

"It's a bit of a hobby of mine, yeah," he said before slurping a noodle. "Don't tell anyone, though. I put it on the company credit card. It wouldn't be too professional. Can I get you a drink?"

"Umm, yeah. Vodka soda, please," she said, desperate to have the drink to dull her nerves. She rubbed her hands together nervously as she examined the inside of the pub. Every television set was covered with a thick layer of dust, presumably untouched in months. The pool table had a large scratch on the cloth and the dart boards were hanging crooked. Staring at her own outfit once again, she grimaced, mentally cursing Emily. Jeans and a hoodie would have been much more appropriate. As if he read her mind, he passed her the drink and leaned over, politely saying, "You look very nice tonight."

Taken aback by hearing Isaac compliment her, she quickly asked without thinking, "Are you serious?"

"Yes? That would be a pretty lame joke."

"Oh, well, thank you then," she mumbled, looking at her lap. It felt weird making eye contact with him. "I – um, I assumed it would be a nicer restaurant that's why I'm so dressed up…" She winced at how rude that sounded. Even if she despised the guy, it would be wiser to keep things civil until she figured out what he wanted from was thankful when instead of taking offense he laughed.

"Well, this place has better food than all those snobby rich restaurants. I swear, they charge 80$ for a plate of pasta that's the size of my fist. I need to order five of them to be full," he said, scowling gravely at the sheer thought of small portion sizes. She tried to hide her smile when she noticed just how seriously he took spaghetti.

He continued, "Plus, I figured you would prefer being somewhere more private so that no one sees you and tells your brother."

That was surprising. What a relief. Who knew Isaac would be that aware to think of that? It hadn't even crossed her mind. "Well, thank you. That's unusually thoughtful of you."

"I'll take that as a compliment," he said cheerfully. "Although, there's another selfish reason why we are here. This is my favorite pub because the main demographic of customers are typically drunk old men who begin drinking at noon…I'm pretty unrecognizable here."

"Are you trying to tell me that you don't enjoy getting praised by the public?"

"Not really, no," he said, giving a half shrug.

Despite being confused by his nonchalance towards his stardom, she decided to ignore the potential
topic. She was here for business. Taking a large sip of her drink, enjoying the burning trickle down her throat, she said, "So, why are we here? What do you want to talk about?"

"We'll get to that later," he said brushing her off. "Let's catch up. I haven't seen you in years, after all. What has my old peer Alice Black up to these days?" He rested his chin on his fist, exaggerating his intrigue. This was too weird. He had to be messing with her.

"Why do you care?" she asked, narrowing her eyes at him. "No offense, but I'm not really interested in being buddy-buddy with you."

"I'm genuinely curious. You seem like a very interesting person."

"Who are you?" she asked, completely dumbfounded. "You didn't seem to think I was very interesting in high school when you put grasshoppers in my locker..."

"It could be argued that I only teased you because I thought you were interesting."

"And was it?"

"Nah. I was just an asshole," he said. Alice laughed a little. At least he was being honest. He continued, "So, tell me. Why did you drop out of college?"

"How do you know I dropped out?"

He gave a half shrug. "You're way too smart to be working in a spaghetti house if you hadn't dropped out. I put two and two together," he explained.

She sighed, tracing the lip of her glass with her finger. "Do you really want to know? Because it's a really, really stupid story." He nodded. Why, oh why, was she about to tell him one of the most intimate details in her life? There was something about his engaged stare that made it spill out.

"Fine," she said. "When I was in my third year I went through a bit of a party phase. The day before one of my finals I..." she trailed off. Pursing her lips, she stared at the door, briefly wondering if she would be able to make a clean escape. "I got absolutely hammered and wrote the exam hung over. I still got an A-, but not getting an A put my grades just below the 3.8 GPA mark. So...I lost my scholarship."

"So, that's it? You lost your scholarship and dropped out?"

"No, no, not quite." A cynical smile pulled at her lips and she motioned to the grouchy looking bartender for another drink. "I took out student loans and continued to finish my last year. But...oh my god, it's the stupidest string of unfortunate events."

"I'm all ears."

"Fine," she said. "When I was in my third year I went through a bit of a party phase. The day before one of my finals I..." she trailed off. Pursing her lips, she stared at the door, briefly wondering if she would be able to make a clean escape. "I got absolutely hammered and wrote the exam hung over. I still got an A-, but not getting an A put my grades just below the 3.8 GPA mark. So...I lost my scholarship."

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"I um... I had my loan money. And everything was fine. But then my house got broken into. They stole my TV and my Xbox and a few other things. I was pretty pissed off, but I decided to make the stupid decision of using my loan money to replace it." She bit her lips nervously, wincing at the memory. She inhaled deeply as she continued. "So, that was fine. I spend about 800$ replacing everything, all I would have to do is be frugal for the rest of the semester and it would be okay. But then..."

"But then?"

"It's so stupid." She let out a cold laugh and ran her hand through her red hair. It had been almost
long enough that there was a bit of humor in the situation. "But then one day I took out a bunch of cash to pay my landlord rent. I had 700$ in my backpack along with my 4000$ laptop which was absolutely required for school, because, you know, I was a computer science major. And then I just…forgot it on the train. And it never turned up again."

Isaac let out a small gasp and a laugh. It wasn't a mean laugh, though. It was the laugh that she typically heard whenever she told the story. "You're kidding me."

"I wish," she said, raising her drink to her lips. "I couldn't do my school without the laptop, I literally lost pretty much all of my money in the span of two weeks, and so…I dropped out so I could work full time and afford to have a house and food. I meant to go back after a year but life kept getting in the way." She said sadly, staring at her hands. "It's crazy how these small, seemingly insignificant moments can change your life forever."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," he said, taking a sip of his beer before a devilish smirk grew on his face. "I guess that explains why you're so bitter."

"I'm not bitter!"

"You seem a little bitter."

"If I seem bitter to you it's because you make me bitter," she said. "I've spent the past month taking care of my brother because of what you did. Sorry if I'm not the most welcoming."

"Relax, I was only joking," he said, raising his hands in the air. "Believe me, I'm aware of how much of an asshole I am."

"Good."

"So, if it weren't for you dropping out, what would you like to be doing right now? Career wise?"

A wistful smile pulled at her lips. She didn't really like to think about it because it only depressed her, but once again, it all kept spilling out. Good ol' alcohol. "I guess I'd want to be an app developer. I used to do that for fun all the time, but then you know, lost the laptop."

"That's very fascinating."

He focused his eyes on her, looking deep in thought. His index finger tapped his lips and she felt a little uncomfortable by his strong gaze. The musty fumes from the bar filled her nose when she noticed she was breathing heavily. Finally, he broke the stare. "So, are you still with Mark then?"

"What!?" She choked on her drink. God, maybe she was arrogant thinking he wanted to sleep with her. Here he thought she had been dating Mark this whole time! Then again, infidelity didn't seem to stop Isaac.

"You two were dating for a long time, right?"

"Yeah, but we haven't in like…years. I mean, we've hooked up a few times, and we were on-and-off for a long time, and it was super complicated, but — " she winced and flushed bright red. Why did she just tell him that? Talk about oversharing. Maaaybe she should slow down on the liquor. "Ignore that. No. We are not together."

He laughed at her blushing. "That's good. He's kind of an idiot anyways. You could do better."

She furrowed her brow at him, wondering why he would think highly enough of her to believe she could do better than Mark? Even if he did seem unusually kind that night, it seemed unrealistic that
he would have suddenly gained a newfound respect for her. Deciding to change the subject from her lack of love life, she asked with a drawl, "So, what about you? What has the great Isaac been up to since graduating?"

"Not a lot. Life is pretty boring."

Tilting her head, she smirked and tossed her hair over her shoulders. "Yes. I'm sure the man who I see on the news at least once a week leads a very boring life."

"It's true, I do," he said. "I got my master's in economics and once my father passed away a few years ago I inherited Hanes Pharmaceuticals –"

"I'm sorry for your loss," she said frowning.

"Oh, don't be. He was a prick," he said, waving his hand to brush it off. "Anyways, now I work, come home, apparently wreck a few potential marriages, but other than that...life is dull."

They both laughed together and Isaac ordered a third drink. So much for no more alcohol. There she was, downing her third. Typical Alice.

"See, now this isn't too bad, is it?" He asked, sending her a wink which made eyes roll.

"I would probably prefer doing anything else in the world..." she said. "But sure. Considering I'm having a drink with you, yeah, it could be worse."

A genuine smile appeared on his lips and for a moment she forgot who he was. This didn't seem to be the same Isaac who tortured her for years. He seemed sort of nice and funny. But Alice wasn't a naïve little girl ready to fawn all over him. She wasn't going to fall for his charm. Being charismatic was part of his job; he literally got paid millions of dollars to woo people. He couldn't have changed. He just became a better actor. Time to get back to business.

She cleared her throat. "So, why are we here, Isaac? Sorry, but I wouldn't mind getting home kind of early."

It appeared he ignored the question because instead of answering, his eyes focussed behind her head and waved to someone. "Over here, man!"

Alice's stomach twisted as she slowly turned around on the bar stool. There was no indication that there would be others joining them! When her eyes finally met the new familiar guest, her mouth dropped. Things could not get any weirder.

"You remember Blaise Shafiq from high school, right?" Isaac asked.

She sure did. He was one of Isaac's little cronies who moved to Canada from London when they were 14. All the girls swooned over his British accent, high cheekbones, dark skin, and large hazel eyes. She remembered being surprised by how easily he fit right in Isaac's gang of jerks because unlike them, Blaise always seemed to be fairly nice - at least in comparison to the rest. Even their outfits they seemed to contrast each other; Isaac dominantly wore suits while Blaise was more casual, wearing a nice leather jacket with a sweater underneath and converse sneakers. But nice or not, why on earth was he there?

"Ahh, Alice Black." He waltzed towards her, grabbing her hand for a firm handshake as his eyes scanned her little black cocktail dress. "You look fantastic. Why did you let this bloke bring you to this dive?"
"We've already discussed it, Blaise," said Isaac with an impatient tone.

"Wh-what's going on?" she stammered out, her brown eyes bulging out of her head.

"Shall we go to a larger table to discuss the proposal?" Blaise asked. Alice's eyes got even larger. A proposal? Her mind was racing. What kind of proposal?

She felt Isaac's hand on the back of her waist to guide her to a small table in the corner hidden from the rest of the customers. Her eyes shot towards him warningly, and he jolted his hand away. After pulling a chair out for her to sit, Blaise and Isaac sat on the opposite side of her. What began as friendly drinks was quickly beginning to feel like a business interrogation. Still gaping with confusion, she asked again, "What's going on?"

Blaise piped up, "Do you remember me being in your Data Structuring and Algorithms class?"

"Huh?" she asked. "You were in my program?"

"No, I only minored in computer science. I actually have my Ph.D. in Psychology, but we'll get to that later," he said. "You probably don't remember me in the class. It was huge. But I remember you."

She leaned back in her chair, her eyes darting back and forth between the two boys nervously. "Okay?"

"You made that smartphone app. It was so cool. You set it up so everyone in the class was able to choose their strengths and weaknesses before the midterm, then anonymously message the people who were strong in their weaknesses, asking them for help," Blaise said, leaning forward as he spoke intently. "That thing was brilliant. I would have failed the class without it. Do you remember that?"

"Of course I remember it," she said. "It was really easy, honestly. I just used a simple coding structure and inputted the algorithm to match people — "

"Gonna cut you off right there," Blaise said, smiling. "That's all a different language to me. I barely passed any of my computer science classes."

"Okay?" she said. "So, you guys wanted to get nostalgic about college or something? That's why I'm here?"

"Not quite," Isaac said. "Listen, you're probably gonna get all spazzy when I ask what I'm about to ask. Can you try to…contain yourself until we are done?"

She folded her arms and scoffed, "I'm not spazzy."

"Sure. Whatever," Isaac said. With his hands clasped together, he exchanged looks with Blaise. Before he rested his eyes on hers he licked his lips nervously. For the first time their entire meeting he looked cold and serious, the way he always looked on TV. "I want you to work for me."

Her mouth could have hit the ground. "Excuse me?"

"I want you to design a smartphone app for our company. It has the potential to be revolutionary. We want you to be able to confidentially talk with trained psychiatrists over the smartphone, whether it's texting, phoning, or face-timing. Whatever they want. And they'll be specifically matched with psychologists based on their needs," he explained.

Pressing his fingertips together, Isaac continued. "So many people don't receive the proper mental
health care because they don't have the time in the day or are too ashamed. This is discreet and people can fit it into their busy schedules. If they're having a bad day and need a quick vent session with a therapist, they can quickly chat them up in their car."

Blaise piped up this time, "And if you're wondering how the psychiatrists get paid, we are planning on charging people 100$ for five hours. It's a great deal because people often spend 100$ for an hour in person. But, because all of this is over the phone, the psychiatrists we hire are able to continue working their regular high paying jobs, but also make some extra money on the side. It's a win-win for everyone."

Alice was positive she had never looked so confused in her life. Nothing would have prepared her for this. Instead of bolting to the door like half of her wanted to, she said, "I don't get. Online therapy is becoming pretty common. How is this revolutionary?"

"Excellent question, Alice. I'm glad you asked!" Blaise said, snapping his fingers. "See, we have the upper hand. We are with Hanes Pharmaceuticals. What will set us apart from everyone else is that we will allow people to get prescribed medications through their psychiatrist, then they can order the prescriptions through the app, and they will get it delivered to their door. Every step is taken care of without leaving the house!"

Alice sat and absorbed everything. "Holy shit, that is brilliant."

"Right? It's so simple. I don't know how it doesn't exist yet," Isaac said. "So, do you think you can make the app?"

"Oh..." she bit her lip nervously. "I mean, yeah. It would probably be pretty easy. But I can't do it. I can't work for you."

"Why not?" asked Blaise, tilting his head. Poor guy was probably naïve enough to think she would be jumping all over the opportunity.

"While I do appreciate you being charming all night and all," she said, glaring at Isaac, "I can't work for you. I've got a little something called pride and I'm kind of offended you assumed I would after everything you've done."

An arrogant smirk danced on his lips as if he had been expecting that response. Slowly and precisely, his elbows leaned closer to her, fingers still pressed together, with his blue eyes piercing through her. Their faces were unusually close and the faint mixture of beer and peppermint from his breath made its way to her nose.

Finally, his eyes flickered away and slowly he said, "Starting salary is 90,000$ a year plus a percentage of all sales."

"WHAT?"

The sound of her hands slamming to the table echoed throughout the pub and for a moment the intoxicated patrons peered at her wide-eyed and paled face before getting bored and retreating to their beer.

90 thousand dollars a year... that changes everything. That's four times, if not more, than what she made now. That's double than what she would probably be making if she hadn't dropped out of school. Once she calmed her heaving chest, she asked, "But... why me?"

"Because you're smart," Blaise answered simply, shrugging his shoulders as if it was the most obvious answer.
"No, that can't be why," she said. "I don't even have my degree. Even if I'm smart you know that you could hire someone who does have their degree and could make just as good of an app, if not better, than me. So, why me?"

Isaac shifted uncomfortably in his seat, taking a sip of beer. His previous arrogance seemed to falter when she finally asked him a question he wasn't expecting. Rubbing the back of the neck he answered, "I dunno. I guess I felt kinda bad for you, stuck working that dead-end job. I mean, sure, I could give the job to some old guy who's already wealthy and successful. Or I could give it to someone young who hasn't had the best luck. Give them the same opportunities that I've been privileged with."

Although it was obvious the speech was supposed to tug at her heartstrings, it hardly made Alice bat an eye. "In other words, you want to relieve your conscience and I'm the charity case?"

"If that's really how you want to look at it, then sure."

Her dream career was laid out on a silver platter, all she had to do was sell her soul in return. It would be so stupid not to take the offer. She would never get an opportunity like this again. But Simon's face materialized in her mind with a disapproving stare. Even if she could look past her own history with Isaac in exchange for 90 thousand dollars a year, Simon would surely disown her. Slowly and reluctantly, she reached into her purse to grab a twenty-dollar bill, placing it on the table. Even though it was the hardest thing she had ever done, she stood from the worn leather chair and looked at the two men professionally. "I appreciate the offer but I can't. I'm sorry."

As she quickly scurried away she heard Blaise ask in the most appalled voice, "Is she really serious?". But she ignored it and walked outside. Her head was spinning but the crisp late September air was refreshing on her warm skin. With crossed arms and a tense body, she rushed down the sidewalk far away from the bar. God, she wished she had never agreed to meet Isaac. If she had refused she wouldn't have known what she was missing out on and life would have gone on the same...mundane and monotonous. But easy.

"Alice, wait!" Blaise's voice rang through Alice's ears at least a block away. Despite wanting to continue marching away, her body froze. When he reached her he keeled over, clutching his chest as he panted. "Bloody hell, I'm out of shape. Why do you have to walk so fast?"

"What do you want?" She asked, tightening her arms around herself.

Continuing to gasp for air, he reached into his pocket and grabbed a lighter and a pack of cigarettes. He motioned the pack to Alice and asked, "you smoke?"

"No."

"That explains the fast walking, then," he said as he lit his own cigarette. It was silent for a moment as he took a long drag, with his palm on his forehead. Shaking his head at her he asked with absolute confusion, "What are you doing, mate?"

"You don't understand, it's complica – "

"I get that you're a proud person. It's admirable, really," he said.

"But Isaac is – "

"And I get that you think Isaac is a huge prat. He is a pretty big prat, but he's not as bad as you think."
"Yeah, but my broth – "

"And I know, I know. He shagged your brother's wife or whatever she was." He took another long puff from the cigarette. "But that sounds like his problem. You can't just turn down nearly 100 thousand dollars because you're a good sister. If he really loves you he'll learn to accept it and be happy for you…eventually."

She leaned against the cold brick wall and eyed up the cigarette in his hand. It looked so seductive, glowing in the dark. Besides a few drunken times at the bar, she had never smoked. But there was something so appealing about it at that moment… "Actually, can I have a drag of that?"

He smiled and passed the cigarette over, continuing his argument. "And really, you won't be working with Isaac directly. You'll be working with me. I'm the psychologist and you're the programmer. We'll be partners. And we don't always have to work at the office, most days we can work from home."

"Blaaaaaaise," she groaned, lightly banging her head on the wall. "You're making this sound too tempting."

"Good! Because I don't want to be stuck working with some fifty-year-old bloke without a sense of humor, we could have so much fun working together," he said, gazing at the lit-up skyscrapers looming overhead, blocking the light from the moon. He looked so genuine, there was no need to decode his words for hidden maliciousness. "Hey, remember that presentation you had to do in tenth grade? The one where Isaac was an asshole and made you cry?"

"Despite the many years of trying to forget it, yes. I remember."

"That was what got me into psychology," he said. A bashful smile beamed on his face as he stared at his shoes. "I thought it was so cool. I was so mad at Isaac for ruining it."

Now that's a speech that pulls at her heartstrings. Working alongside Blaise wouldn't be so bad. It would actually probably be really fun. And like he said, Simon would eventually learn to accept it. It's not like she was dating Isaac, he would merely be signing her extremely luxurious paycheques. She would probably barely see him. If Simon was in the same position he would have a hard time turning the opportunity down as well.

"Hey, Blaise?"

"Yeah?"

"I'll do it."

Chapter End Notes

To any lone soul who may be reading this - let me know what you think! :)

Also - to anyone else who is completely dead from final exams...the end is near. I'm probably 90% caffeine right now omg.
Alice's phone would not stop ringing.

It was Monday, her scheduled day shift at the Spaghetti House. Yet there she sat on Simon’s sofa, certain her fist which her cheek had been resting on for over an hour was leaving an imprint. Kathleen had been calling for over an hour, probably frantically running around the restaurant asking if anyone knew where she was. Yes, it was wrong to quit a job without any notice, not even a phone call. That level of irresponsibility was something Alice always judged people for. Then again, she also judged anyone who fraternized with Isaac, and there she was. Days away from being Hanes Pharmaceuticals' newest employee. Apparently, it was hypocrite week.

"Alice? Did you hear me?" Mark asked, snapping his fingers in front of her face.

"Huh?"

"I asked you if you worked today," he said. "About four times, now."

She blinked her eyes, snapping her out of her thoughts. Concern shined on Mark's face as his green eyes scanned hers as if trying to perform telepathy. How didn't she notice he was talking to her? All that was on her mind was Blaise and Isaac giving their business proposal in the grungy pub two nights ago. With the most casual, happy face she could muster she lied, "Nope. Day off today."

"Cool," he said, flashing his pearly white smile at her. "Wanna go to the movies with me and Simon?"

"Yeah, that would be great," she said quickly, barely thinking what she was agreeing to.

Without a hint of doubt in his eyes, he flopped on the sofa beside her, dropping his arm lazily around her shoulder. He was so cute with his light dusting of freckles across his nose and cheerful dimples. Normally she would melt into his touch, wishing they would finally rekindle their previous romance. Instead, every muscle in her body tensed at the familiar touch and a pang of guilt surged through her stomach at the thought of how oblivious they were to her backstabbing actions. The only person she told was Emily and it was going to stay that way for as long as possible.

"Are you alright?" he asked. "You seem a little out of it today."

"Huh? Oh, yeah." Her eyes stayed focused on the television, unable to lie to his face. "Just a little tired. Works been busy."

Simon walked into the living room, looking proud, with a large green bong in hand. "Guess what time it is!"

"Took you long enough," Mark said hopping over to Simon, looking hungrily at the glass ornament. Yet another one of Mark's actions that normally would have made her react differently. On an average day, she would have been disappointed at how quickly he ignored her for weed, but that day, she was relieved he left her presence. The knots in her stomach loosened and a breath she didn't realize she was holding escaped her throat.
"I thought you couldn't smoke because of work?" Simon asked as he lit the bowl, making the living room smell like every dorm room she had ever entered. "Aren't you going out to the rigs next week?"

"Meh. If they drug test me I'll just steal someone else's piss," he answered, inhaling a cloud of smoke. Almost immediately his eyelids drooped over and a cheeky grin grew on his lips. Mark's job on the oil field required regular drug tests, something Mark never took seriously. Somehow he managed to avoid getting caught every month despite constantly being stoned. "Alice, you want a hit off this?"

But Alice wasn't listening again. This time it wasn't because she was lost in thought. It was because for the millionth time that week Isaac's face took over the news broadcast. Her eyes were glued to his eloquent manner as he addressed the swarm of reporters around him. Every action he made was so formal...much different from the Isaac she witnessed the other night. But Isaac's formalities weren't what caught her attention. What did catch her attention was something she never noticed before. Her eyes zeroed in on his right hand, semi-covered by the podium he was speaking behind; it was compulsively squeezing a bright yellow stress ball with what appeared to have a happy-face stamped on. It was strange and looked entirely out of place with the suave persona he seemed to put on.

"...I would like to publically apologize for the contaminated shipments of Strattera," Isaac spoke in the microphone shoved in his face, flashing cameras illuminating his pale features. "We have successfully recalled all the orders from our partnered pharmacies before it hit the public, but if anyone has been negatively inconvenienced by this event please do not hesitate to contact us. We will do whatever we can do – "

"Alice?" Simon jumped in front of the TV, blocking Isaac's face and interrupting her thoughts. "Why are you listening to that dick?"

"I-I wasn't," she muttered quickly, her eyes quickly flicking to a pair of dirty socks on the ground. "Sorry, I'm not really all here today..."

"Yeah, I can tell," he laughed before turning to the television himself. "God I hope that guy gets a lawsuit or something. I would love to see him in prison."

"Heh, yeah, me too..." she said, biting her lips. Simon and Mark became quickly entertained by drawing crude pictures on Isaac's face with whiteboard markers, giggling like schoolgirls as they passed the bong back and forth. But her eyes remained transfixed on her new boss. The way he worked the crowd was impressive. All the reporters, men or women, appeared charmed by his charisma and flashy smile. It wasn't surprising; there were a couple times she found herself almost charmed by him couple nights before. Any accusation against him by the reporters was quickly followed by a well thought out rebuttal, sometimes even a wink. All while subtly squeezing that obnoxious yellow stress ball. She wondered how many of the reporters noticed the weird habit.

"Will you answer your damn phone?" Simon shouted as he completed the drawn phallic image protruding from Isaac's mouth. "It's been going off all day."

Since Kathleen had been calling her all afternoon she had completely tuned out the ringing. Who knows how long it had been going off that time. Sighing, she figured the least she could do was tell her she quit. She looked at the phone and frowned. It wasn't Kathleen calling.

Her eyes darted towards the TV, then back to the ringing phone, then back to the TV. "Umm... guys? Is this live?"
"Yeah, why?" Mark answered.

Because Isaac's name was on her caller ID.

Heart racing, she excused herself and ran to the kitchen. Still watching the TV, half expecting Isaac to pull out his phone in the middle of the conference, in a hushed nervous voice she answered the call. "Hello?"

"How ya doin', baby?"

She let out a huge breath when she recognized Blaise's distinct accent. "Why are you calling from – erm – his phone?"

"My phone died and I'm waiting for him to be done his boring speech thing."

"Yeah, I see him…"

"Oh, you're watching him?"

"Yeah." She was trying to be vague as Simon peered around the corner. "Um, why are you calling?"

"Cause we're coming over to your place once he's done."

"What!" she shouted loudly. Simon's brow raised suspiciously, as he pulled himself away from drawing on the television. "You can't. I'm not home right now…"

"But we have preeeeeseeennts," he sang. "Where are you? We'll pick you up."

"No!"

"Alice, who are you talking to?" Simon asked nearing closer, running a hand through his messy red hair. She backed away, nearly knocking a beer bottle with her elbow with her hastiness.

"Just the electric company, Simon," she said innocently before speaking back to the phone as nonchalant as she could with her heart pounding. "Um, sir. I'm sorry but you've caught me at a bad time. I'm at my brother's right now and will not be home until late."

Blaise laughed over the speaker. "You're very subtle."

"Yes. Very sorry, but we'll have to discuss this matter tomorrow."

Blood rushed to her cheeks with every second that passed. Simon's eyes narrowed sharply as if every heartbeat echoed in his ears. She was not doing a good job at being discreet.

"Sorry, mate. Can't wait," Blaise said. "We've got some business to discuss."

"But that was not part of the arrangement," she hissed abruptly into the speaker. If that didn't ruin the cover she didn't know what would.

Simon crossed his arms tightly, trying to press his ear to the speaker and asked: "Alice, what's your problem?"

"Tell your brother to fuck off and mind his own business," Blaise said.

"Did the electrician just tell someone to fuck off?"

She face-palmed. There was only one way out of this. "Yes, sir. That sounds like quite the
emergency. I'll be there in an hour."

"Love yooOoo --," she hung up the phone before she could hear the rest of his weird high pitched singing.

"Why are you acting like a psychopath?" Simon asked accusingly, his suspicions evidently growing.

"Uhhhhhh," she cringed, trying to think on her feet as beads of sweat trickled down her neck.
"There's an electrical fire at my house. I gotta go. Sorry guys, I'll have to take a rain check on the movie."

"That's how you speak to your electricians?" Mark asked, leaning against the door of the kitchen. She didn't even notice he was listening the entire time

"This one, apparently," she muttered under her breath, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"But you haven't gone out with us in forever," he whined. The same stab of guilt ran through her but she bit her tongue and ignored it. God, she couldn't believe she was actually bailing on Mark to spend time with Isaac and Blaise. She loved going to the movies with Mark…they would always share a bucket of popcorn, their hands brushing against each other's, making her feel like she was back in high school. She was only a little pathetic. It was okay.

Halfway out the front door with her coat only half on and boots in hand she said, "Yeah, I've got to go. It's an emergency. I'll talk to you tomorrow!"

"Wait!" Simon called out. The bong was back in his hand, apparently over the 'electrician' incident. Thank god, she couldn't handle explaining that anymore. "I haven't even told you my good news."

"Oh?"

With a triumphant grin, he pressed his thumb to his chest. "This guy is going back to work next week!"

"Oh, Simon," she said, dropping the boots to joyfully clasp her hands together with an elated smile tugging at the corners of her lips. That really was great news! "I'm so happy for you."

"Yeah," he said bashfully, his hazel eyes staring at his shoes. "Figured it's been long enough. I just wanted to thank you for helping me so much the past month... I don't know what I would have done without you. You're the best sister in the world."

Her stomach sunk. No, wait. Her stomach ached as if an ulcer was quickly burning its way through her organs. The floor suddenly became a very interesting place to look, too afraid to meet her brother's eye. After a month of him barking orders and rude comments at her, this is when he decides to show a little gratitude? Right when she was in a web of lies? She could not feel guiltier.

He continued talking. "So long as nothing else goes wrong I think I'll be okay. Really, though, what else could go wrong? Isaac's already screwed two of my fiancées. How could it get any worse than that?"

"Heh...yeah..." she said, still unable to look him in the eye. Did he really have to word everything as if he secretly knew exactly what she was up to? She wanted to stay and congratulate him more, but her nerves got the best of her and she quickly said, "I've got to go. Fire in my house! BYE!"

With that, she turned on her heels and ran to the train. Her mind raced as she watched the skyline zoom past the window. Normally watching the skyscrapers travel past her eyes or the river
peacefully reflecting the beautiful autumn trees would relax her, but that day her anxieties took over. She couldn't work with Isaac. There was no way. It was an amazing opportunity but she couldn't do that to her brother. It would crush him. He would start doing meth. He would jump off a bridge. He would definitely single handily murder Isaac which would get him sent to prison. Basically, there was no way around it. Working with Isaac would ruin Simon's life. She was a selfish, crazy, stupid, little girl for thinking this would be a good idea.

As her breath quickened she rubbed her eyes so hard her fingers were covered in black mascara. Once she arrived at her house she would simply tell them they had to leave and never talk to her again. Sure, missing out on all the money sucked, but if she ripped it off like a Band-Aid and never thought about it again it would eventually become a dream-like memory. She would call Kathleen and beg for her job back. She would go back to daydreaming about Mark. Everything would be fine.

The transit ride dragged on as her brain swarmed with every anxious thought, but finally, she found herself outside of her house. Sure enough, Isaac and Blaise were in the parking lot, leaning against a black luxury car. She didn't know anything about cars, but she figured it was some sort of Dodge 300 or a Ford Audi or some other expensive car Mark and Simon always drooled over. Before they noticed her, she took a deep breath and decided to end the business agreement right there. "Sorry, but I can't – "

"Hold that thought," Isaac cut her off. He looked particularly douchey that day, wearing Ray Ban sunglasses, spinning his car keys around one finger, and a case of beer in his other hand. It looked like he left all his professionalism at his press conference. "Let's go inside. We've got something for you."

"A case of beer?" she asked, scowling at the case in his hand.

"Yes," Blaise answered, flicking his cigarette onto the street. "The present that we drove an hour in rush-hour traffic for was a case of beer."

Begrudgingly, she let them inside her house despite her repeatedly trying to inform them that she was quitting. Anytime she tried they would cut her off. She rolled her eyes and wondered why she surrounded herself with men who consistently cut her off.

The state of the house made her cringe as she realized she forgot to clean up the several empty wine bottles takeout containers scattered around the living room. One of her bras lied overttop her worn-out vintage sofa; living alone made the entire building her bedroom. She blushed and kicked the bra under the couch, positive they noticed. But they didn't seem to mind. Isaac pulled clipped his sunglasses on the collar of his shirt and scanned the room with his hands shoved in his pockets, clicking his tongue. "I like your house."

"Oh, please," she said. "It's a mess and the size of a shack."

"So?" he said examining her framed Pixies poster on the wall. "It's got character."

"I guess…"

Blaise was bouncing on the balls of his feet, reminding Alice of a five-year-old. Gotta love his enthusiasm. "Cooome on. Stop talking about her flat and give her the damn present."

"Oh, right," Isaac said, taking his eyes away from the poster. Instead of reaching for the present he grabbed a beer. "You want one?"

"It's Monday," she replied.
He raised his brow at the empty bottles of wine. "And yesterday was Sunday."

Touché. She grabbed the beer and began nervously pulling off the label. Taking another deep breath she began speaking again, "Listen, I don't think I can do this. I don't think I can work for you."

Blaise groaned and pulled the plastic bag from behind Isaac. "Just shut up and open the damn present before you say anything."

Rolling her eyes, she hesitantly grabbed the plastic bag from his hands feeling positive nothing would change her mind. But much to her surprise, a loud gasp escaped her lips when there in her quivering hands sat the newest model of the MacBook Pro. "What the hell is this?"

Isaac smiled, pulling off his suit jacket and setting it beside him on the couch. "I knew you didn't have a laptop. You'd be pretty lousy app developer without one."

"B-but this..." her hands grazed the raised lettering of the shiny box. "This is too much. Do you know what this is?"

"A laptop?"

"No. This isn't just a laptop," she flipped the box over to read the details. "This has a 3.1 gigahertz Intel core i7 processor! And 2 terabytes of SSD storage! Do you have any idea what that means?"

"Not at all." He shrugged. "Just that it's the highest-grade laptop on the market."

"This must have cost over 6000$..."

"What was it?" Blaise asked. "7000$ after tax?"

"Something like that, yeah," Isaac answered. "You like it?"

Her mouth gaped at the laptop as she hurriedly opened it up. It had been so long since she had a computer. A familiar fiery passion was lit in her heart as her fingers traced the smooth keyboard. Finally, the hole in her life felt filled after so many years. But, painfully and reluctantly, she closed it, and pushed it away. "I love it. But I can't accept it."

"God, you're so annoying," said Isaac, driving his palms to his forehead.

"How am I annoying?" she folded her arms.

"So damn stubborn. Can't ever just go along with anything."

"B-but...this is so expensive. If I accept this, you'll practically own me."

"See?" Blaise said. "I told you she would react that way."

"Thank you, Blaise."

"That's why I added my own personal touch," he snatched the laptop from Alice and flipped it over, pointing to a platinum engraving on the bottom. "See? Got it specially engraved just for you. 'Property of Alice Black. Future Baller'. Can't return it even if you wanted to."

Her heart swelled as she traced the engraving with her fingers. This was the nicest thing anyone had done for her...ever. For her entire life, she felt taken advantage of. Simon would take advantage of her kindness, Mark took advantage of her availability, Kathleen took advantage of her passiveness at work, but never had anyone...paid her back. And there in front of her, the two least expected men
were offering her the world. For no good reason either, just that they had some weird unwarranted faith in her. Even if this was a ploy to relieve Isaac's conscience… at least he was trying to make up for his past rather than just keep taking from her.

"Listen, you don't have to make this weird," Isaac said. "This isn't some scheme to make you indebted to me forever. Money isn't an issue and I can't have my app getting made on a Dell or an Acer. I have some class."

She giggled, still gripping the precious computer in her hands, never wanting to let it go. Blaise grabbed a beer and sat beside her and asked, "So? Are you still wanting out?"

"Huh?"

"You were saying you can't work with us," he said. "You can keep the computer even if you want out."

"Oh... This was it. The moment of truth. Shifting her eyes between Blaise, Isaac, and the computer she finally nodded. "No, I'll stay."

"Thank god," Isaac said, letting out a huge breath of relief. "I've put more effort into trying to get you to work for me than I do courting women."

"Alice is a woman," Blaise said. "You're basically courting her."

"Yeah. But usually after dropping 7000$ on a woman I at least get a blowjob."

"You're so gross," Alice said, shivering even at the thought of giving Isaac a blowjob. Yuck. But she also kind of accidentally laughed... just a little, though. Isaac's chauvinist sense of humor was actually sort of funny. Maybe one day she would get used to it.

She sat cross-legged on the floor, exploring her new laptop as the two boys chatted away. There was a weird sense of comfort in the house as they practically made their selves at home. Never would she expect to be in her living room, minding her own business, with them on the couch, and no sense of awkwardness. At one point Blaise even found a deck of cards and began a game of Texas Hold 'Em. After staring at the computer for so long, installing all the required software to create the smartphone app, she looked up at Isaac just in time to see him reach into his pocket to grab a blue prescription bottle. As he popped a pill in his mouth, Blaise snatched the bottle away.

"How many times have I told you to stop taking those, mate?" Blaise said in a demanding tone. "You're going to get early onset Alzheimer's."

"Shut up," Isaac hissed, his eyes shifting nervously towards Alice as he ripped the bottle back from Blaise's tight grip.

Alice furrowed her brow. "What is that?"

"It's Ativan," Blaise answered matter-of-factly and Isaac nudged him in the ribs.

"Don't tell her!"

"Why? She's going to find out eventually."

"Not necessarily... just screw off."

"No," he said. "How many milligrams have you taken today?"
Isaac sighed, taking a sip of his beer. "Not that it's any of your damn business, I think I've had four?"

"You've taken four milligrams today? It's 5 pm and you're drinking. You know that the daily recommended dose is typically no more than 3 milligrams, right? And you're not supposed to mix it with alcohol! Ever!"

"Relax," he said, sounding irritated as if he was getting scolded by his mother for not cleaning his bedroom. "I'm only taking it to counteract the Adderall."

Blaise shot his arms into the air exasperatedly before snatching the bottle back again. This must have been the last straw for Blaise. "Why the hell are you taking Adderall, you moron!?"

Isaac sent him a sheepish, playful smirk. "I hate Mondays, man."

"Everyone hates Mondays but you don't see them taking bloody speed!"

"Uggghhh," he groaned, rubbing his eyes. "I was just nervous about the conference today. I wanted a little bit of an upper to get me through it."

Alice tilted her head as she watched the banter unfold. Apparently, this was a frequent debate among the two. The way Blaise was so concerned about Isaac's health was pretty adorable, but she still wasn't exactly positive if she knew what was going on. Once she found a second in between their bickering, she asked, "Wait. Are you a pill popper?"

"I am not a pill popper."

"Yes, he is," Blaise said, pointing his finger at her looking extremely frustrated. "The fucker is always high."

"I'm not always high," he argued. "I just…enjoy taking advantage of running a pharmaceuticals company. It's one of the few perks."

Blaise folded his arms disapprovingly. "You're such a fucking git. You make millions of dollars a year and you're trying to tell me getting doped up is one of the few perks."

"Yes."

"And I'm supposed to feel sympathy for you?"

"No." He ran his hand through his hair and slumped further into the couch. "I would just appreciate not being judged for what I choose to do with my body."

"I am specifically trained in helping people avoid getting addicted to prescription drugs," said Blaise, "yet I'm expected to just idly sit by and watch my best mate do it."

"I'm not addicted to anything," Isaac said. "Besides, like I said, I'm avoiding the opiates. That's the worst stuff."

"You also said you were avoiding amphetamines…that lasted a long time."

"At least I'm not a smoker."

Blaise scoffed. "That's completely different."

"Is it?"
"Uhhh…yeah."

"How is it different? Cigarettes are the worst thing you can put in your body."

"Because I'm not self-medicating when I do it!"

"Whatever," Isaac said, glaring at Blaise, mentally pleading that he would drop the subject before it got deeper. When Blaise tightened his lips but gave him a small, curt nod, Isaac shifted his eyes to Alice who was still watching with sheer amusement on the floor. "Do me a favor and don't tell anyone about this. It would look terrible for the company."

She raised her hands. "Hey, trust me. No one besides Emily even knows I'm talking to you and I won't tell her."

"Emily?" Blaise asked.

"Yeah…Emily Barnes? From high school?"

He threw his head back and shook with laughter. "You still hang out with that freak?"

Alice gasped at the uncharacteristically rude comment to come from Blaise's mouth. "She is not a freak!"

"Yes, she is," Blaise said, slapping his thigh as he continued to laugh. "God damn emo. Every day she would wear that stupid 'My Bloody Valentine' jumper and say she's an anarchist. It was embarrassing! Oh god, Isaac, remember when she painted her face white?"

Isaac was rolling with laughter and wiped a tear from his eye. "Oh my god, that was so gross. You two were quite the duo."

"You guys are such assholes," Alice huffed, becoming increasingly annoyed and defensive of her best friend. "I'll have you know she's way hotter than either of you, now."

Blaise snorted. "Yeah right. That'll be the day."

"At least we didn't get a jolly from picking on anyone who wasn't as 'popular' as us," she said, sneering at Isaac who was still clutching his ribs with laughter.

"That's because no one was less popular than either of you," Isaac said smugly, and Alice huffed loudly, shooting daggers with her eyes. Her body was visibly tensing as her mind swirled with a string of insults, trying to handpick the perfect one to use as a rebuttal. Before she could think of one, Isaac calmly said, "Relax, Alice. We're just messing around. I am sure Emily is a beautiful young woman now – "

"I don't," Blaise said under his breath and Alice swatted his shoulder.

"You're going to be eating your words," Alice said warningly to both the boys. "Emily is a babe and you're going to be feeling mighty stupid when you realize that."

"Whatever, fine, I'm sorry," Blaise said, but Alice just rolled her eyes at his sarcastic tone. He slapped his hands on his thighs and stood up from the couch. "I've gotta go home, guys. Don't wanna get too drunk on a Monday. Wanna come, Isaac?"

"Huh?" he said. "Oh…I dunno. Alice, wanna have a couple more drinks?"

"Uhhh…” What the hell? Isaac wanted to hang out with just her? Even after she just repeatedly
called them both assholes? "No… I should probably get to bed early…"

"Oh, come on," Isaac said, widening his eyes a bit like a sad puppy. "You don't work tomorrow. It'll be fun."

Blaise tutted his tongue. "You're such an alcoholic."

"No, I'm not," he said, a little louder than he intended, clearly frustrated by the topic of his substance use. "Just a couple drinks, Alice."

She bit her lip and stared at the shredded label on her beer bottle. A couple drinks wouldn't hurt too much, would it? "Sure, I guess?"

"Peachy," said Blaise. "Alright, well, I'll see you on Wednesday then, buddy." He fist-bumped her before putting on his coat. Just before walking out the door he turned to Alice and said warningly, "Hey. Don't let that bloke take any more drugs. He's gonna kill himself one day."

Isaac threw a pillow at his head which he expertly dodged by walking out the door. As soon as it was just the two of them she immediately regretted her decision. The comfortable environment left with Blaise and instead a veil of awkwardness enveloped the room. She avoided his eyes and played with the ends of her hair, desperately trying to think of a conversation topic. Anything. But all that swarmed her mind was 'Why the fuck am I alone with Isaac in my house?'

"You don't have to make this weird," he said, leaving the couch to join her on the floor. The awkwardness must have been radiating off her. He inched closer so he was only about a foot away, leaning against the wobbly coffee table and passed her another beer. "We are gonna be spending lots of time together. Shouldn't we try to get along?"

A smirk twisted on her lips as she answered, "You know, I agreed to work for you mainly because Blaise said I would rarely be working with you."

"And you won't be," he said. "But Blaise and I hang out… pretty much any moment we aren't at work. And you'll be working with Blaise a lot. So naturally, you'll be seeing a lot of me."

"Oh, joy…"

"Ahh, shut up, Black," he said, matching her own smirk with a much more arrogant one. "You're gonna learn to love me."

She giggled. "I dunno about that. But maybe I can learn to tolerate you. Maybe."

"It's a start, I guess," He raised his beer to hers, clinking it together. "Cheers to the beginning of a wonderful professional relationship."

"I don't think it's very professional to drink with your employees on their living room floor."

"Yeah, I guess not…" he said. He tapped his finger to his lips and glanced at the ceiling. "You know, I'm not very professional in general. I guess that's what happens when you have a 26-year-old CEO."

"Makes sense."

"Please don't… ever tell anyone at work about what I do outside of the office. Besides Blaise, I don't really associate with anyone there unless it's business related, so as far as they're aware I'm the perfect human."
"Damn," she said. "They must be pretty naïve."

He shoved her shoulder and they smiled at each other. The awkwardness seemed to slowly evaporate as they sat in a serene silence. She put on some music and grabbed them both another beer, the buzz from the liquor getting stronger. Without intending to, she found herself observing Isaac. He looked so content and relaxed as if he was truly enjoying himself, just bobbing his head to the rhythm of the music. Although, maybe he only seemed relaxed because he had been popping pills all day. There was a steady drumming from his fingers on the coffee table, not quite to the beat of the music, and it reminded her of something she noticed earlier.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" she said.

"Go for it."

"Were you…squeezing a stress ball today because you were like…messed up on drugs?"

"The hell are you talking about?"

"I was watching your conference today…about Strattera. I noticed you had a stress ball in your hand the entire time."

"Oh…you saw that…" his cheeks flushed a little and he stared at the ground. For the first time in all the years she knew him, he looked a little vulnerable. "Fuck. Normally I'm able to hide it from the cameras."

"So…was it?"

"Unfortunately, no," he said frowning. He sat up straight and turned his shoulders to face her. "Kay, don't make fun of me, alright?"

"I think by now it's warranted that I make fun of you a little."

"Fine, do whatever you want," he said and pulled out the same bright yellow squishy ball, its happy-face ironically smiling back at her. "But, well, I always have this stupid thing."

"Why?"

He took a deep breath as if trying to decide if it was worth telling her.

"Because my biggest fear in the world is public speaking. And pretty much anything that requires social interaction with anyone outside of Blaise. I'm kind of a fucked up, anxious mess unless I'm drunk or high, honestly."

She couldn't help but laugh, feeling thankful she didn't agree to not making fun of him. "Yeah right! I'm sorry, but I refuse to believe that Isaac Hanes, the Homecoming King, has social anxiety."

He shrugged, his cheeks turning even more pink as he turned his face away squeezing the ball tightly in his hands. "Yeeeeeah…I know. It's a little weird."

"You're serious, then?"

"Yep." He nodded. "I dunno when it happened, exactly. I think when my dad got diagnosed with cancer and I knew I would be taking over the company my brain just kinda went…haywire."

She frowned realizing he was being honest and felt sort of bad for laughing at him. "But – and I don't mean to compliment you – but you seem so…charismatic whenever you're on the news. And
"Well, thank you," he said smirking. "I guess I'm good at faking it. And good at popping Ativan. And good at drinking. And good at finding weird ways to deal with it…like constantly squeezing a stress ball anytime I'm in public."

"That's very fascinating," she said, finding herself very intrigued by the conversation. "I never would have taken you for a real human being."

"I guess that means I'm doing my job well then," he said with a hint of sadness in his voice. The nurturing side of her tried to reach out and comfortingly touch his shoulder, but she fought the urge and instead asked a new question.

"Umm…this whole past week you've seemed completely fine around me. I-I would never have guessed that you've got all this going on. In fact, you seemed like quite the pompous prick."

"Damn, you sure know how to charm a man."

"No, I just – " she giggled at her failed attempt at getting her point across and started over. "I was just wondering why you seem so…chill around me? Even though it's pretty obvious you're not my favorite person in the world?"

"I dunno," he shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe it's because we are the same age? Or maybe I can tell that deep down underneath the irrational hatred – "

"It's completely rational, Isaac."

"Maybe I can just tell that you're a good person and wouldn't judge me for this. You might judge me for everything else I do…but not this," he said, his eyes looking warm and tender. She felt a strange flip-flopping in her stomach but quickly ignored it. "Plus, maybe it's comforting to know that you already hate me so much I can only go up from here. It's pretty refreshing spending time with you compared to the businessmen across the world who's dicks I'm practically trying to suck in hopes of making a business deal."

"Oh…" she said, giggling a little at the surprising and bizarre compliment. "Well, thanks. I guess that's true."

"Hey, don't tell anyone this, okay? Once again, only Blaise knows anything personal about me."

She felt a little touched that he shared such an intimate detail with her, even though the conversation clearly made him a little uncomfortable. Right there in the middle of her living room floor, listening to music on her brand new 6000$ laptop speakers, Isaac Hanes showed a little vulnerability and opened up to her. Maybe, just maybe, all the Simon-drama aside, maybe Isaac wasn't so bad. What a weird fucking life she was living. "Don't worry. Your secret is safe with me."

"Cool," he said. "So, what do you say? Do you think we can try to get along?"

She tutted her tongue as she thought about it. So long as Simon didn't find out there was nothing wrong with gaining new friends, right? "Sure. Why not?"
Five

Paradise Circus – Massive attack

For the first time in years, Alice was truly happy. Finally, her life held a purpose. No longer was she stuck in a monotonous routine of serving spaghetti, cleaning up after her brother, drinking bottles after bottles of wine with Emily, only to repeat it all the next day. Instead, she was pursuing her passion alongside Blaise, creating the best damn mental health app in existence. So many late nights spent coding on her fancy new computer with Blaise sitting beside her, frantically researching new psychological components to incorporate into the design.

It was truly remarkable, the ways their dynamics were quickly changing. Two long-term enemies spending nearly every night together…and enjoying it. That's how life had become with Alice and Isaac. Over the month of October, the three of them became inseparable. Initially, this irritated Alice to no end. Not only did it go against all her principles to spend time with her former bully, but her inner introvert also wept as her free time was overtaken by two young men who bickered more than an old married couple. But before she knew it, she found herself looking forward to their company.

So many nights were spent going out to various restaurants, where Isaac would religiously test their spaghetti, and driving around in his swanky car while Blaise sat in the back moaning about Alice and Isaac's music tastes. On a typical day, they would end up back at Alice's house, simply drinking in her living room, discussing life's philosophies, their work, or even arguing about politics.

Her and Blaise were quickly becoming the best of friends. Never did she think she could meet a more compassionate, empathetic, and kind-hearted person. Besides him making fun of Emily any time she got brought up in conversation, he had the best heart. Psychology was perfect for him. So many nights when Isaac would be off on a date or in a sleeping-pill induced coma, she and Blaise would stay up late, discussing their insecurities and anxieties over life. Well, more like Alice discussed her insecurities while Blaise listened intuitively. It was like she suddenly had her own personal free psychologist who was available 24 hours a day. Score.

And Isaac…well, Isaac was an interesting character. More interesting than the one-dimensional asshole she viewed him as her entire life, anyway. Often her and Isaac would butt heads, her getting irritated at him for his arrogance and him getting mad at her for being stubborn. One night they got into an irrationally heated argument while they had a few too many drinks when Isaac stated that beer is the superior alcohol and that anyone who drank vodka was trashy. Alice, an avid vodka drinker, got so riled up she argued with him for hours until somehow the argument transformed into a political debate regarding whether welfare recipients deserved more money or not. To this day, neither of them know how they got there.

But the arguments were always in good fun, and the more Alice got to know Isaac the more fascinated by him she became. There was a lot of depth to him. He wasn't lying when he told her he was a fucked up anxious mess. One day, Alice and Blaise sat in her new office, casually watching through the glass windows as Isaac shook hands with some foreign investors. He radiated confidence, giving firm handshakes, with a self-assured smile as he bid them farewell. Slowly, as the foreign men disappeared, Isaac nonchalantly walked inside Alice's office. In a robotic trance, he slowly closed the blinds to the windows before immediately running for the trash bin beside her feet, throwing up all his stomach's contents. This was followed by twenty minutes of his knees pressed to his chest on the floor, talking about how much of a fraud he is, how he's an imposter, and how he's in way over his head as Blaise calmly brought him down to reality. Whose wise idea was it to leave a twenty-six-year-old in charge of a pharmaceuticals company? Oh, right. His late father. Bad call.
There was no more denying that Isaac was becoming a close friend of hers. Even just the other night, her, Blaise and Isaac watched *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown!* together. Isaac, who was messed up on his latest favorite cocktail of scotch and Valium, slowly fell asleep on her shoulder. And she didn't even mind. In fact, for a brief moment she thought he was even sort of cute; The way his blonde hair fell in front of his eyes, how his nose would twitch every few minutes, how innocent he looked all snuggled up to her. That is until he began drooling on her shoulder and she promptly woke him up, telling him to sleep on the floor.

This day, Alice found herself happily typing away on her laptop, in her new office which overlooked the beautiful Calgary skyline, wearing a professional pencil skirt and blouse, and a new set of confidence she didn't think she had. Blaise had his own office, but because of them working on the same project together, he moved most of his stuff inside hers. Thankfully, he didn't even mind Alice's constant song-mantra she was singing:

"I aammm a fancy business womaaannn," she sang as she typed away, "and I'm coooddinng on my new laptop!"

"Aaand I'm BlaaIIiissEEee. I haaave my PhD liike a fuckin' boooOooOOssss," he would sing back completely out of tune. It was hard to believe that these two young adults were working on something so revolutionary because based on outside appearances alone, they seemed like morons. But they worked long and hard, often into the wee hours of the night, and they were damn good at it. Maybe they weren't so crazy for hiring her despite her lack of completed education.

"And with that…" she finished typing out her last line of code, "I'd say I am done for the day!"

"Have you inputted the section on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy?"

"Yep."

"And what about the section on mindfulness?"

"Uh-huh."

"Great," he said, checking off a box on his clipboard. "Tomorrow I'll have the questionnaires regarding the patient's symptoms ready, aaand…" He tugged the pencil behind his ear and glanced over the clipboard one last time, "it appears we are right on schedule!"

"Excellent," she said swiveling around in her chair to face the large windows overlooking the city. The sun was beginning to set, creating pink highlights in the sky giving the city a mystical atmosphere. When she was in university she would always tell people that one day she would work in one of those tall office buildings, drinking her overpriced Starbucks coffee while admiring the city from above. That goal seemed absolutely impossible a mere month ago, yet there she was. A serene grin pulled at her lips as she sighed. "I can't believe this is my office. Everything is so beautiful up here."

"Meh. The novelty wears off after a while."

"Don't ruin my fun," she said, leaning back in the leather chair with her hands clasped behind her head. "I'm so happy I took this position."

As if on cue, her phone vibrated, telling her she received a text message from Simon.

*Hey! Are you mad at me?*

She groaned. Sure, she was having the time of her life. But she was also guilty of completely
neglecting Simon and Mark. Even Mark had been messaging her lately, asking her to go over to their place to get stoned and watch movies. While it made her heart soar that he was thinking about her, even if it was just to have a stoner buddy, she was always busy with her new friends and would make up an excuse. Not to mention, the raging sea of guilt inside of her made spending time with them grueling. Yep, she was going to hell.

She grabbed the phone to type her response.

Of course I'm not mad at you lol! Why would I be mad?

Cuz it seems like you're avoiding me. We miss you.

I promise I'm not mad! Just very busy with work. The restaurant is so crazy! I'll try to stop by sometime this week. Love you xoxo.

She banged her head on her desk and moaned. Blaise tilted his head and raised his brow. "Brother texting you?"

"Yup."

"When are you going to tell him what you're doing?"

"When hell freezes over."

"Yeah, I'm sure he won't ever question your sudden overabundance of money."

She propped her face up with her elbows and rubbed her temples. "My plan is essentially to hold off until I no longer can. I dunno when that'll be, but it sure as hell isn't today."

"Fair enough," he said. "Do you really think he'll be that mad?"

"Mad is an understatement," she said, still slumped over her desk. "I'm thinking more along the lines of murderous."

"Hmm, yeah. I can see the hesitation, then," he said, throwing his own laptop in his messenger bag. "Isaac should be finishing up shortly. Wanna see what he's is up to?"

As they walked down the long cold grey hallways, Alice smiled widely as she passed her new coworkers. She waved happily at Dave, the timid 40-year-old accountant who was petrified by Monica, the terrifyingly assertive marketing executive. Even though Alice would never want to be on the receiving end of Monica's strict lectures, she had to admire her for being a cold-ass-bitch. Alice loved all the clichés of working in an office – the lame water cooler talk, the gossip that spread around when someone was late for work, the weird stereotypical mysterious janitor that didn't speak a word so everyone created their own backstories for the man.

One thing she didn't love, however, was the side-eyed glances she would receive when she would casually waltz into Isaac's office for no business-related reason. He wasn't lying when he said he had no relationships with his employees outside of the office. So, when Alice, a newbie college drop-out, strolled into Isaac's office on her third day after being invited to lunch, some people were less than thrilled. Little did they know it only took a decade of being patronized by him to see some receptiveness.

Blaise and Alice walked into Isaac's office where he was found pouring over paperwork, the stress ball in hand, with a frantically tapping foot. Blaise swooped behind him and peered at the papers, "Rough day, mate?"
"No."

"This is how you look on a good day?" Alice asked, crossing her legs over the armchair across from him. Bookcases lined the walls, home to intriguing gadgets, impressive awards, and hundreds of books. It looked more like the office of a 50-year-old, not someone in their mid-twenties. But again, he was basically only an actor.

Isaac's eyes raised to meet hers, nose still pressed against the papers on the desk, and drawled, "I'm having a great day, thanks."

"Alright, alright," she said, throwing her palms in the air. "Mind if I see that little ball of yours then?"

His fingers tightened on the yellow ball and he sighed exasperatedly, slumping back in his plush armchair which resembled a throne more than anything. "If you must know, even though it doesn't affect either of you," he started with his eyes shifting in between her and Blaise, "our numbers for this quarterly budget are all fucked up and I'm trying to figure out who I'm going to be firing."

"Well, that's harsh." She frowned.

"That's business."

"This guy is a buzzkill," Blaise said, motioning his thumb at Isaac. "We should have stayed in our office. Wanna get a drink?"

"Hang on, hang on," Isaac said. "Give me twenty minutes and I'll be done. This doesn't have to be finished for a couple days, anyway."

Blaise snatched the ball from Isaac's hand and he and Alice began playing catch, nearly knocking the back of Isaac's head several times. Without any respect for Isaac's concentration, they both chatted loudly.

"I'll only have time for one drink tonight," she said, passing the ball back to Blaise. "I've got plans with Emily later."

"Lame," Blaise said with a sour face. "Ditch her and chill with us."

"I don't get you," she said, throwing the ball with more force, deliberately aiming for his nose. "Your irrational dislike for Emily is like this huge character flaw."

"Hey, watch it!" he exclaimed, catching the ball before it smashed his face. "What do you mean 'character flaw'?"

"You're a genuinely nice guy. There isn't a mean bone in your body," she said. "But the second Emily is brought up you turn into…well… you turn into Isaac."

"Hey!" Isaac looked up from his paper with narrowed eyes but they both ignored him.

"She's just…so - ugh. I dunno," he said. "Always talking about death and our corrupt government when she doesn't know what she's talking about. It's annoying."

"Dude, we were in high school," she said. "She's like a completely different person. She's a yoga instructor, for fucks sakes."

Blaise shuddered. "Bloody hell, I would not want to see that teach yoga."

"You're such a dick."
Isaac slammed shut his folder full of paperwork and relaxed into his chair. "Done."

Blaise threw the stress ball at his face, smacking his eye. "That's for taking so long and forcing me to get lectured by Alice."

"I was fifteen minutes." He rolled his eyes before turning to Alice. "Have you checked your bank account yet today?"

"Pfft, hell no," she said. "I avoid that thing like the plague."

"Well, it's payday so you should probably check," Isaac said with a smirk.

She completely forgot about pay-day! Working at Hanes Pharmaceuticals was beginning to be so much fun, and Isaac paid for all their food and alcohol, that she almost forgot getting paid was even a thing. Quickly she reached for her cellphone to log into her online banking and –

"HOLY FUCK," she shouted. "THAT IS A LOT OF MONEY."

Blaise peered over her shoulder and shrugged. "That's not that much money."

"Are you serious?" she asked. "This is literally four times the amount of money I would make at the spaghetti house."

"What?" Isaac smirked. "You mean Sally's Spaghetti House didn't pay as well as us? Who knew…"

She rolled her eyes but the smile remained plastered on her face as she repeatedly counted the zeros in her bank statement. She could afford rent, her bills, and have a ton left over for new clothes! Wearing the same two business appropriate outfits was getting old really fast. She looked up at the two boys. "We need to celebrate. You guys should come over and hang out with me and Emily."

They both exchanged unenthusiastic glances. Blaise piped up, "Ahh. I dunno, Alice, I've gotta do laundry…"

"I've got to…wash my hair…" Isaac mumbled.

"Oh, sorry," she said. "Didn't realize you two were twenty-year-old women trying to get out of a date."

"It's not an excuse." Blaise shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged. "My laundry is out of control right now."

"Cooome on," she pleaded. "I've been talking to her about you guys all month. She would love to see you again, too. She thinks it's crazy that I'm hanging out with you and is interested to see just how much the school's biggest douchebags have actually changed."

"Well, when you put it like that…" Isaac said sarcastically.

"Please?" She said, pressing her palms together. "It would be nice, too, if you guys would see that she's changed. She's my best friend, you're gonna meet her eventually."

"Fine," Blaise said, pulling at his face. "But I swear to god, if she puts some weird voodoo hex on us I'm suing her."

Later at her house, Isaac and Alice made themselves comfortable on the couch watching the hockey game as Blaise cooked a package of instant ramen in the kitchen. "Alice, why don't you have anything to eat other than this cardboard?"
"Because until today I only had pennies," she replied without taking her eyes off the game. "I told you if you were hungry you should pick something up on the way over."

"Usually when someone says they don't have food they at least have a damn banana or a piece of lettuce..." he grumbled under his breath, taking a seat on the ground slurping the noodles. "You god damn Canadians and your hockey. Put some football on if you're gonna watch a sport."

"Fine," Isaac said and picked up the remote control, flipped through the channels, and put on the American NFL game. "There's your damn football."

"Not this garbage!" he cried. "Oh, just put your hozer game back on."

Knock, Knock, Knock.

"That must be Emily!" Alice sang as she skipped towards the door. She was so excited for Emily to spend time with her new friends. It would be so nice incorporating a bit of her old life with the new. After putting in so much effort hiding Isaac and Blaise from Simon and Mark, it was going to be a refreshing change to at least hang out with Emily as well.

When the door opened, the beautiful Emily walked in. Wearing tight yoga pants and a crop-top that showed off her perfectly toned midriff, her long blonde hair flowing elegantly down her back, she shivered. "My god, I am not dressed for this weather!"

"Yeah, girl," said Alice, tilting her head. "Wear a coat for once."

Alice didn't even notice the boys both hop off the couch, their postures suddenly tall and proper, hands rushing to flatten any wrinkles in their shirts. As Emily slowly swiped a thin layer of rose-pink shiny lip gloss over her plump lips, a dream-like trance overtook them.

"Bloody hell..." Blaise muttered. "Who the hell is that?"

"Guys, you remember Emily, right? From high school?" Alice said, unable to contain the cheeky grin on her face. She knew they would both be shocked by Emily's transformation. The chubby goth girl from their memories was no more.

"Y-you're Emily?" Isaac stammered out. "But...how...?"

"Yoga," she replied, flashing a flirty wink, knowing full well the effect she had on them. Imagine how satisfying it would be to have two of the most popular guys in high school drool over you nearly a decade later...

"Emily, you remember Bla – "Alice started, but Blaise cut her off by swooping in front of Emily.

"Blaise Shafiq. You're Emily. Wow, you're actually Emily. A pleasure to see you again." He said, delicately grabbing her hand, placing the other overtop. "Really, such a pleasure."

"Of course I remember you." She giggled. She turned to Isaac and a playful smirk grew. "You as well, Isaac. I've heard so many things about you from Alice."

"All about how much of a gentleman I am, I'm sure,"

"Something like that," she said, looking at the hockey game on the television. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything. I know how serious people take this game."

"You're not interrupting anything," Blaise blurted out. It's funny how quickly Blaise went from
whining about the reunion to being the most chivalrous man on the planet. "Like I always say, the more the merrier!" Uh-huh, sure, Blaise. "Can I get you a drink?"

Alice's eyes narrowed. "Blaise. This is my house."

"Alice. It's called being a nice guest."

"You never offer us anything when we're here, though..." Isaac said, and Blaise shot daggers in response.

Emily gently touched Blaise's forearm, making even his dark skin flush. "Sure, I would love a drink."

When he left for the kitchen to fetch a drink, Alice stood in between Isaac and Emily smiling proudly at her accomplishments. What an excellent idea! They're all getting along wonderfully. Finally, she wouldn't be the only girl in their little group. How fun would it be having drinking nights, just the four of them, playing beer pong with Blaise clearly swooning over Emily? It would be so great! Emily would surely love Blaise...

But then something happened.

With the grace of a runway model, Emily strutted past Alice to reach Isaac, twirling her platinum hair around her finger. Every muscle in Isaac's body visibly tensed underneath the touch of her hand on his shoulder.

"So, Isaac Hanes," she said with her long, thick eyelashes fluttering. "You've sure grown up since high school."

He cleared his throat nervously. "Y-yeah. You too. You look...incredible..."

Wait, what? Were Emily and Isaac flirting? That wasn't supposed to happen! No way. She didn't know why it wasn't supposed to happen, it just wasn't. Alice's jubilant smile was slowly faltering as she watched the scene unfold.

"Lots of time at the gym and a vegan diet will do wonders for anyone." Emily cooed, her hand sneaking over his shoulder to his biceps. "Ooh. Looks like someone else works out."

"Erm – yeah. Few times a week, maybe," he said, not being able to take his eyes off her hand. It took all Alice had not scoff out loud. She had been spending nearly every night with Isaac and his physical exercise did not extend past past walking from the door to his car.

"Alright!" Blaise shouted, rushing back to the living room with various beverage containers overflowing from his arms. Emily's hand shot off Isaac's shoulder like she was caught doing something wrong. "I've got beer, wine, orange juice, apple juice, and water. And I think I saw some diet Pepsi in the back, as well, if you want."

She giggled and slowly walked towards him. Alice bit the inside of her cheek when she couldn't help but notice Isaac's eyes trailing behind Emily's tight yoga pants

"I'll take some wine if you don't mind."

"Alright, now that introductions are over," Alice said clapping her hands together to grab their attention, overcompensating with peppiness to hide the irritation in her voice. "Shall we continue watching the game?"
But no one was listening to her. Emily stole Alice's seat in the middle of the couch and Isaac and Blaise sat on either side of her, listening intently to every word that spilled out of her mouth. They both showed every tell-tale body language sign of interest. Knees pointed towards her, palms facing up, mirroring all her actions...she could even swear their eyes were dilated. What was this, the jungle kingdom? Begrudgingly taking a seat on the floor, Alice poured a glass of wine right up to the rim and tried to tune them out.

"So, Alice says you're a yoga instructor?" Isaac asked, his elbow on his knee and cheek resting on his fist. "That's very intriguing."

"Yes, oh, it is so rewarding," she said. "It's so nice giving back to the community."

Alice had to quickly disguise her cold burst of laughter as a coughing fit. Giving back the community? How? Her lessons were overpriced and reserved for the business elites.

"Wow," Blaise said in awe. "That's incredible. Maybe I could attend a lesson some time?"

"I could arrange that," she said, though immediately turning her neck towards Isaac. "You could come too if you'd like."

"I would love that."

Alice pressed her knees to her chest and slugged back the wine, trying to focus on the hockey game. Why was she feeling so bitter, anyway? Obviously, Isaac and Blaise were going to fall for Emily. Every waking man in the world fell for Emily. She was perfect. What was she thinking? And why did it even matter? Blaise was her buddy and Isaac...well...Isaac was a chauvinist pig. If Emily wanted him, she could have him. Didn't matter to her.

Emily suddenly piped up with a lightbulb over her head. "Oh! I'm not sure if Alice told you, but I'm having a Halloween party on Friday night," her eyes quickly shifted to Isaac, "I would love it if you could both come as well."

"I would love to," Blaise said so quickly he nearly stumbled over his words.

"I think I could probably pop by," Isaac said, smirking. Of course he would go the 'hard-to-get-play-it-cool-route'.

"Great. So, you guys wanna see some yoga poses?" Emily asked and Alice choked on her wine. Definitely couldn't hide that one, but thankfully Isaac and Blaise were too entranced to notice. Could Emily be any more obvious? Why, oh why, didn't they stick with the original plans of having a girls' night?

"Yep, I would love to see some yoga," Blaise said, bopping his head in the air. "Alice, why the hell have you been keeping this gem from us?"

"I have no idea why." Another large gulp of alcohol down the hatch.

And then the three of them proceeded to watch Emily perform her flexible unique yoga moves, Isaac and Blaise drooling as Alice tapped her foot impatiently watch the time fly by. Nearly thirty minutes had passed. Once Emily had performed the standard downward dog poses, which naturally the boys loved, she moved on to the more impressive and erotic poses. When she put her foot behind her neck Isaac and Blaise cheered. Like, literally applauded. It was surreal. And Emily was soaking up every second.

"Isaac, come here," she said. "Let me show you how to do something."
"Oh, I dunno...I'm wearing a suit..."

"Please?" she asked, puffing out her bottom lip and sitting on her knees. If that wasn't the most sexual plead, Alice didn't know what was. The girl sure had the art of seduction down.

Alice turned her head to Blaise, who was somehow completely oblivious to the major flirting between Isaac and Emily. His eyes were too transfixed on Emily, appearing to be in a daydream. Poor guy.

When Isaac hesitantly stood up from the couch and walked to meet Emily, she rubbed her hands sensually down his ribs, telling him to relax his muscles. He shivered at her touch and something lurched in the depths of Alice's stomach.

"I need to use the washroom," she announced, but once again, no one was listening.

She leaned over her bathroom sink, the glass of wine still in hand, and fought the urge to throw up. You're only feeling this way because you drank too much too quickly, she told herself, yet took another large sip of wine knowing full well that was a lie. Why was her body reacting to crazily whenever Emily touched Isaac? It felt like her stomach was physically trying to reject a virus that was growing inside of her.

You're just jealous because you were getting used to all the attention, she told herself. For the first time in your life, you were getting real genuine attention from two very attractive men...it's natural to feel jealous now that Emily has taken it away. Yes, that must be it! For years, she had barely talked to any men besides her brother or ex-boyfriend. Of course, she loved the new attention...who wouldn't? She would like getting that much attention from anyone...them being attractive was just a bonus. Isaac is so attractive...

WHAT? No! Alice, Isaac is the worst! She mentally shouted to herself, pressing her palms to her eyes. She wouldn't let herself think like that. Isaac's objectively good looks had nothing to do with these foreign sensations.

Maybe she liked Blaise? Yes! Liking Blaise wouldn't be that bad. He was cute, smart, kind, funny, honestly...Blaise was the total package! Much better than arrogant, douchey Isaac. She squeezed her eyes shut and begged for her stomach to grow butterflies when she imagined herself kissing Blaise...nope. Nothing. Instead, it made her more nauseous. Not daring to imagine herself kissing Isaac, too scared of it confirming any disturbing fears, she resolved that yes, she was just jealous of the lack of attention. It sucked being forever ignored by every guy the second Emily strolled into the room. Turns out along with being a horrible feminist, feeling this rejected by being ignored by some guys, she was also a huge attention whore. But that was totally okay! Much better than the alternative of feeling some strange jealousy about...nope. Don't even touch that subject anymore.

She took a large breath and an even larger gulp of wine before returning to the living room. Instant regret. She should have stayed in the bathroom.

Blaise was nowhere to be seen, but in the middle of the living room Emily was doing a bridge pose, her cleavage and pelvis pushed up towards the ceiling. With his hand on her abs, Isaac sat right beside her staring with admiration.

"See?" Emily asked. "Do you feel how tight my abs are?"

"Oh, yes, I sure do," Isaac replied, practically licking his lips.

Dear god, when did her house turn into a porno set? This could be the plot of XXX Yoga Babes 12.
"Where's Blaise?" Alice asked, sounding more curt than she intended.

"Huh?" Isaac muttered, barely looking at Alice. "Oh, I think he's smoking on the balcony."

"Great." She turned on the heel to find Blaise.

He was leaning against the railing of the balcony, cigarette in hand, and a dazed smile dancing on his face as he stared at the moon. It was a hazy night, the light pollution from the city hiding most of the stars, but the nearly full moon still illuminated the sky. "Emily is so amazing, mate. Beautiful, too."

"She sure is," she said grimly. "Can I have a drag?"

He passed the smoke to her, unaware of Alice's glum attitude. Apparently, the presence of hot chicks blocked Blaise's usual psychological intuitiveness. "Why didn't you show us a bloody photo of her or something? Instead of letting me bash her all month? I could have prepared myself!"

"Oh, I dunno," she said. "Guess I didn't think it would be too ridiculous for you both to simply trust what I had to say?"

"Yeah, but – argh. I feel like a prick." He groaned with his face in his hands. "Never doubting you again."

"Good." As the nicotine rushed through her body, she felt her tense muscles relax. After a couple more large puffs she passed it back.

"How does that even happen? When did she get so beautiful?"

"Dunno," she answered. "Sometime between graduation and now."

"Wow, she's so nice too," he said staring up at the sky longingly. "And a yoga instructor. Can't get any better than that, can you?"

Yeah, who needs brains when you can do a sick goddess pose.

"Mhm."

"I think I'm in love."

She visibly winced but was thankfully veiled by the darkness.

"Do you think I've got a shot with her?"

No, because she's already got her claws sunk in Isaac. Wait, Alice, no more thinking about that.

"Yeah, maybe…"

"Great. I think I'll ask her out at the Halloween party."

Ugh, bad idea, Blaise. Why wasn't she telling him it was a bad idea?

"Worth a shot, I guess."

"I can't believe just earlier tonight I was calling her a freak," he said with a goofy grin. "Thank you so much for forcing me to hang out with her again. Best decision of my life."

"Yep," she muttered. "Hey, can I have another drag?"
"Sure," he said before narrowing his eyes. "Hey, are you alright? You seem a little…tense."

"I'm great."

"You sure?"

"Uh-huh."
"So, how do I look?"

Somehow, even Emily could make a tacky store-bought French maid outfit look like it belonged in a magazine. Alice gaped in admiration, the mascara wand in hand nearly stabbing her eye, as she sat in front of Emily's full-length bedroom mirror. Black silk fabric clung off Emily's hips, the off-the-shoulder sleeves and (fake) diamond necklace giving her defined collarbone a look of elegance, and her tall black stilettos made her legs appear a mile long. It took skill to wear a French Maid outfit and still maintain a sense of class while still being totally sexy, but Emily had done it.

"You look incredible," Alice breathed out honestly, giggling when Emily tickled her nose with the feather duster.

Even though Alice was pretty excited for the Halloween party, a weird sense of dread followed her the entire week leading up to that night.

The past few nights she had the same weird reoccurring dream. In the dream, she would walk into her office only to find Emily half-naked on her desk, her bare legs wrapped around Isaac's waist, with Isaac turning to Alice and winking.

"Hope you don't mind–this is going to be happening a lot from now on." Dream Isaac would say.

"No, no, not at all," Dream Alice muttered, adjusting her laptop to not get in the way of their thrusting motions. For some reason, Dream Alice was more concerned ensuring their comfort rather than the fact that her two friends were banging on her desk. "Hey, Emily, wanna maybe go for lun – ?"

"Alice, we–are–kind–of," Dream Emily panted, "In the middle of–oh!–something."

"Yeah, why are you even here?" Dream Isaac asked without even looking at her. "Didn't you know Emily took your job?"

"Wh-what?" she would stumble out as both Isaac and Emily laughed maniacally, every high-pitch note echoing through her ears.

Blaise suddenly barged into the office on a unicycle, wearing a bright purple tuxedo with a dozen red roses in his hands. "Emily!" he shouted, wheeling around the office on the unicycle. "I got you these flowers; each petal is a symbol of my undying love for you."

"Just–put–them–oh god–on–the–desk."

Just when things couldn't get any weirder, Mark waltzed in the room wearing an elegant three-piece suit. Butterflies rippled through Dream Alice's stomach when he ignored the raging sex-scene and unicycle performance, eyes only for her, and kneeled on one knee by her feet. Tears sprung to her eyes as he pulled out a small velvet black box, gently grabbing her hand.

"Oh, Mark," she whispered softly, lightly stroking his cheek as tears freely ran down her face. The commotion in the room seemed so far away with Mark around. Her heart rose when he slowly opened the box, but quickly, it plummeted when the jewelry box was completely empty.

"I just wanted to remind you that we are never, ever, going to be together again," he said, but with a sickeningly affectionate tone that perfectly contrasted the venomous words. The happy tears stopped
and instead her body felt petrified when Mark's hand rested on the bare knee uncovered by her skirt. His lips found their way only an inch away from her ear to whisper, "But don't worry. I vow to always be part of your life as a constant reminder of what you'll never have."

A loud distorted growl came from Dream-Isaac; his face was turning dark and bubbles boiled underneath his skin as he morphed into something terrifying. His platinum hair looked like it was on fire as it slowly turned the same shade of red as Alice's. When the transformation was complete, Isaac no longer stood at Alice's desk, but instead, it was Simon. Still inside of Emily, with dark dead eyes, he turned his head, glaring at her with the most menacing look her fucked up imagination could come up with.

Every night, Alice would wake up drenched in sweat and with a racing heart before Simon had a chance to speak. Definitely the worst nightmare she had in years.

So, yeah. It was a weird week.

"I love your costume, you look so adorable," Emily said, thankfully snapping Alice out of her distorted thoughts to admire her own costume. Miss Frizzle from the Magic School Bus. Could you get any sexier than that? Yes. Yes, you could. At least she chose a planet-covered dress that showed off a little cleavage? Maybe she would borrow a pair of stilettos from Emily and pray she doesn't fall down the stairs. That would make it a little better. And really, she had red hair. Can't turn down the golden opportunity. Emily added a few more strokes of mascara to her lashes as she continued, "It's so nerdy! Totally suits you.

"Oh, thanks," Alice said, scrunching her nose in the relationship. Obviously Emily meant that as a sweet compliment, but damn, she would love to be seen as something more than adorable and nerdy.

Emily lied on her bed, crossing her legs and dangled the black stiletto off her foot. She kind of looked like a pin-up doll, just oozing sex appeal. "So…how would you feel if I were to hook up with Isaac?"

Alice's stomach lurched forwards. She had been waiting for that question to pop up all week. As hard as she tried to ignore the inevitable reality of Isaac and Emily getting together, it was made impossible by Blaise bringing up Emily as much as possible. Even with Alice gently nudging him in the opposite direction, trying to politely tell him not to get his hopes up, he insisted that one day, he and Emily would be together. Quite the ambitious task; courting someone who has sworn off monogamy and clearly infatuated with Isaac.

Isaac seemed surprisingly indifferent about Emily. It had to be an act though considering he couldn't stop drooling over her last week. Every time Alice's better judgment was overtaken and she would casually ask, "So, what did you think of Emily?" he would simply shrug and give an uninterested expression.

"She was pretty cool."

"Just 'pretty cool'?"

"Uh-huh."

Clearly, that was code for 'I want to bone your best friend.' He must just prefer to keep his romantic life quiet, that was all. Even if he was uninterested, there was no way Emily would fail at seducing him during the party. What if they actually dated? What if Isaac was Emily's first real boyfriend – oh god. What if they fell in love and got married? It would make sense. Two incredibly beautiful and single people meet and fall in love…Alice could be a wonderful pawn in the future love-story they
tell their grandchildren.

Shut up, Alice. Stop thinking about this. It doesn't matter if Isaac and Emily get married and have children. Hell, they could have a million kids for all she cared! Made no difference to her.

So stop acting like a god damn lunatic and answer Emily.

"Wh-why would I care?" she finally answered, probably sounding a little bitter.

"Well, you two have a pretty messed up history. Not to mention, all his history with Simon," Emily said, "and he's your boss and all."

"Oh, right. All that." She let out a sigh of relief. Part of her was worried that Emily had picked up on Alice's weird jealousy that she was desperately trying to smother. But no matter how much bargaining she tried with her subconscious, the strange feelings kept creeping up to the surface.

"Umm...well, it's none of Simon's business who you sleep with and I obviously don't care at all. But..."

"But what?"

Alice bit her lip, unsure of whether her next comment made her a good friend or a manipulative one. "What do you think of Blaise? Umm...I think he likes you."

"Good," she said happily, hopping off her bed try on different earrings. "It always feels so nice knowing the people who ignored you in high now have a crush on you."

Yeah, it probably does. "So...you're not interested then?"

"Nah. He's not my type. A little too...nice. You can practically see the commitment in his eyes."

"And that's a bad thing?"

"Now, Isaac, on the other hand," she sighed just from saying his name, "he's soo sexy and mysterious. And rich! I would not mind being that guy's arm candy if you know what I mean."

"He's alright."

"Oh please, Alice," Emily said with her hands on her hips. "I get that you two have a bad history but you can't deny that he's hot as fuck."

"Yes I can," she said, despite knowing that it was a lie. Isaac was hot. And interesting. Maybe even a little mysterious and surprisingly a little nice. Even though she denied it to Emily, she couldn't deny it to herself. But he was also a crude, rude, arrogant, pill-popping, neurotic nutcase. Yeah, focus on those traits, Alice!

"Blaise is a sweetheart, don't get me wrong. But he doesn't seem like...much of a man, you know?" She said and Alice's stomach dropped. Poor Blaise, he was going to get hurt if he continued to go after Emily. "Now, Isaac, he's a man. He has so much power and money...the guy could take over the world and he knows it, too! So much confidence."

"So, in other words, you prefer the arrogant assholes over the nice guys," Alice said, smirking at Emily.

"Pretty much," Emily said, winking at Alice. "If you like the nice guys so much why don't you go out with Blaise?"
"Because he's my friend and that would be weird," Alice said quickly. "I know it's shocking to just be friends with guys."

"Yeah…what's that like, anyway?" Emily laughed and grabbed Alice's hand. "Come on, let's get some pre-drinks in us before everyone shows up!"

After a few hours, Emily's house quickly filled with dozens of strangers. The kitchen had been transformed into a beer pong station, Halloween streamers that covered the walls were now scattered along the floor, and orange and purple Jell-O shots were passed around in every direction, which Alice was happily chomping down.

She should have slowed down on the Jell-O shots. They were sneaky little buggers. One minute sober, the next minute passed out on the floor or stripping off your bathing suit while running through Eric Browning's pool party. Or even worse than all that, saying something really stupid regarding your uncomfortable and uncertain feelings about your new friend/boss hooking up with Emily. But as the house filled with all of Emily's beautiful gym rat friends, she needed some liquid courage. Everyone happily chatted about their latest favorite exercises or high-protein vegetarian diet while passing out a disgusting pumpkin spice flavored vodka. Who the hell drank pumpkin-spiced vodka, anyway?

Both her and Emily kept absentmindedly watching the door, awaiting Blaise and Isaac. While Emily was anxiously anticipating their arrival, Alice was low-key hoping they wouldn't come. Then everything could go back to normal. There wouldn't be any fear of being the maid-of-honor at their future wedding…

But naturally, that didn't happen.

Through the crowds of people, she spotted the top of Isaac's blonde head standing next to a figure covered in a bedsheet. She giggled at what must have been Blaise's 'creative' costume and snagged a few Jell-O shots, racing towards them before Emily would get there.

"Hey guys!" she exclaimed, handing them each a shot. "Let me guess, that's Blaise under there?"

"BoooOOo0," he said from under the sheet. "I'm a ghost!"

"You're so cute," she said giggling. She turned to Isaac, who wasn't wearing a costume, just his typical properly fitted dark blue suit. "Let me guess, you're Christian Grey?"

"Christian Grey?" he asked looking confused. "Oh, he's that guy from those creepy S&M movies, right?"

"Yeah. He's a bit of a sociopath."

"Well, all the girls seem to think that guy is hot," he said, "so sure. I guess I dressed up for Halloween this year."

"I can tell you put in a lot of effort," she giggled. A smile curved on his lips as their eyes met and her stomach flipped a little. Damn Jell-O. Don't do that.

"And who are you?" he asked eyeing up her costume. She could swear she noticed his eyes linger on her for a second longer than socially acceptable for a friendly question, but just as she was about to answer, Emily swooped in and linked her arm around his.

"I'm so glad you made it, Isaac," she said, pecking his cheek with her lips, leaving a pink stain on his face. She twirled around and the skirt of her dress fluttered in the air. "Do you like my costume?"
Blaise piped up from under the sheet. "You look amazing, Emily!"

"Oh, Blaise," she said, taken aback by the voice under the sheet. "I didn't see you there. You're a … ghost I see?"

He pulled the sheet off his head to show off his crooked smile. "Figured I'd be festive. Great party you've got here!"

"Thanks," she said bluntly and Blaise's smile fell a little. Looks like he was finally clueing in. She turned to Isaac and asked, "So, what are you supposed to be?"

He shrugged. "Alice called me Christian Gray, so I'm gonna roll with that."

"Mmm," Emily purred, biting her lip. "Well, I've always thought Christian Grey was super sexy so I guess that fits."

Alice must have been spending too much time with Isaac because she immediately recognized the expression he would make when someone said something stupid but he didn't want to be rude; a quick stare at the ceiling while pursing his lips together, probably trying to hold in his laughter. "Well, it was Alice's idea and she called him a sociopath, so I'm not sure how great it is to be compared to him." He quickly winked at Alice and she had to bite her knuckle to contain her own laughter. Was Isaac messing with Emily right now?

"Oh…" Emily said awkwardly, looking like she was stumped on how to respond.

"Hey, Emily," Blaise said after being quiet for too long. "Wanna go get a drink?"

"Oh, umm..." she bit her painted fingernails, "Actually, I was going to offer Isaac a tour of the house."

"Can we come?"

"Maybe later," Emily said, pulling Isaac away before he had a chance to answer. Isaac turned his head to send a sympathetic shrug to Blaise but followed Emily up the stairs to her bedroom.

"They're gonna shag, aren't they?" he asked with rejection written all over his face.

"Probably." She nodded. "Wanna get fucked up on Jell-O shots?"

The rejection was immediately replaced with glee as he put his arm around her shoulder, guiding her to the kitchen. "See? This is why I love you."

Shots after shots after shots. Lost beer pong games after lost beer pong games. With the help of their trusty friend, alcohol, Blaise and Alice quickly turned the night around! Who cared if Isaac and Emily were screwing? They had pumpkin-spiced vodka. The single greatest alcohol in the world. Well, it was tolerable when you were drunk enough.

Blaise and Alice were crumpled over each other, giggling hysterically as they watched a provocative fairy throw their drink in the face of the grim reaper who tried to cop a feel. The room was spinning and they both clutched onto each other in fear of falling off the world, but still not ready to stop drinking. In fact, she just got a momentous idea. With her flushed face and voice several decibels too loud, she shouted, "We are soo fuckin' cool, Blaise! Why aren't we trying to find people to snog?"

"Did you just say snog?" Blaise asked. "That's not your native lingo."
"I've been spending toooo much time with youu," she slurred, spilling her pumpkin liquor on the floor. "The fuck is with these damn hipsters and their pumpkin stuff, anyway?" One of Emily's friends glared at her as they walked past her.

"Let's get back on track, Alice," he said, shaking her shoulders. "I liked your logic! We are two damn attractive blokes and we don't need Emily or Isaac."

"YEAH!" She raised her glass in the air. "We are blokes!"

"Attractive blokes. Not just blokes," he face-palmed. "Let's get fuckin' laid tonight! It's Halloween mate, I'm not goin' home alone. Fuck Emily!"

"Yeah!" She smashed her glass against his. "And fuck Isaac!"

"Wait," he said, poking her ribs. "Does little Alice have a crush on Isaac?"

"Fuck that noise!" she shouted. "I just wanna get laid, mate. Why should they be the only ones getting some action?"

"Kay, you're not fuckin' British," he said but couldn't help but laugh at her disinhibited state. "New goal: let's wheel some bitches. Or men or whatever you're into."

"Cheeeers to getting' laid!"

And they both separated to pursue their latest goal! This would be an easy task. Alice was cute enough and drunk enough, how hard could it be? She might be a little rusty, seeing as it had been nearly a year since she actively tried to pursue a random stranger, but hey, the liquor would guide her. She spotted a man dressed as the character from Top Gun and tapped his shoulder and with a flirty smile, channeling her inner Emily, said, "Hi. I like your costume."

"I'm looking for my girlfriend," he grunted.

She raised her hands in the air, "Woooh, buddyyy, just making conversation!"

Alright, so the first one didn't go so well. She looked around the room, unconsciously trying to spot Isaac in the crowd. Nope. He was probably roleplaying in Emily's room; the classic French made and rich dude scene. Or whatever you want to call it, if that was even a thing. Instead, she spotted a lone shirtless firefighter who must go to the gym with Emily because his arms were jacked. Even though he was way out of her league, she was filled with determination. Not only was she going to sleep with someone, she was going to sleep with someone way hotter than Isaac. Hell yeah.

She adjusted her push-up bra and quickly applied a layer of chapstick and made her way over to him. "Hey."

"Oh, hello," he said politely. Nice, he didn't immediately shut her down.

"Havin' a good Hallows Eve?" she slurred. Shit, try not to seem too drunk, Alice.

"Well, it's gotten a lot better now." His eyes trickled down her dress. Scooore. She was totally in. "What's your name?"

"I'm Alice Black," she held out her hand. "I'm Emily's friend."

"Oh, nice. I'm Greg Farmer," he said shaking her hand firmly.

"Ohhh, so you're not a firefighter then?" She said, laughing at her own lame joke.
"What?"

"I mean, you're a farmer. Not a firefighter."

"I'm neither. I'm an accountant." He was scowling. Pull back, Alice!

"I was just joking," she said, taking a large gulp from her drink, quickly thinking of some damage control. "An accountant, though, really? That's very fascinating. Tell me more."

"Well, let's just say I make a lot of money. I take the women out on the best dates," he said, snapping his suspenders. Thankfully she was just looking to get laid so she was able to ignore that incredibly annoying and arrogant comment that she would usually make fun of someone for. "What about you? What do you do for work?"

A smile lit up on her face. Finally, she would be proud to tell someone her career! No more judgemental glares when she would tell people she worked at a spaghetti restaurant. "I'm an app developer for Hanes Pharmaceuticals."

Unfortunately, she didn't receive the response she was hoping for. Instead, a scowl emerged on his face. "Oh, wow…that's pretty intense, isn't it?"

She shrugged. "It's not too bad. I like it."

"But you have to be, like, really smart, don't you?" He was quickly losing focus, his eyes landing on a sexy cat.

"I guess…but I'm not that smart, I swear," she said, her inner-self cringing for selling herself out for a one night stand. The things people do for sex. "I'm not nearly as smart as an accountant."

This seemed to boost his ego. "Yes, I am quite intelligent, if I do say so myself."

"I bet you ar – " but her sentence was cut off by a large hand clasping her shoulder from behind. She spun around. All the Jell-O shots nearly came out her mouth when she met Isaac's blue eyes. "What are you doing here?" she asked sharply.

"I haven't seen you all night," he shrugged. Did he leave Emily to come looking for her? That was actually really cool. Terrible timing, though. "Figured I'd come say hi."

"You're cock blocking me, Isaac," she hissed through her teeth, motioning to the shirtless man beside her.

Greg the accountant/firefighter slowly walked away. "Nahh, sorry, I don't date businesswomen."

She gasped and narrowed her eyes as he ran away to the pretty girl in a cat costume, immediately striking up a conversation. "Fuckin' ridiculous! I spend YEARS feeling like a loser cause I'm a damn server, now I'm a god damn success and I'm still a loser! The second I said I had a real career he got all weird and sketchy."

"Then you're too good for him," he said simply and she felt herself smile, feeling less irritated about being rejected. "Were you wheeling him or something?"

"Maybe…"

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, anyone who dresses as a firefighter for Halloween usually has a small dick."
She choked on her drink with laughter. "That's a very good observation, Isaac."

"So, how's your night?" he asked, leaning against the wall so close to her their shoulders were touching. "You're looking very drunk."

"I'm sooo sober, man," she slurred, gripping her pumpkin drink tightly. "What about you? How's your –"

But once again she was interrupted; this time by Emily snaking her arms around Isaac's waste. "There you are, Isaac. I've been looking for you."

Alice would have felt a little irritated about getting interrupted by Emily for the second time, but seeing Isaac's eyes dramatically roll as he grabbed her hand and followed her out the kitchen made it worth it. Besides, she was having a blast with Blaise! Though, she couldn't help but feel a little dejected from both the firefighter and how easily it was for Isaac to walk away from her, even if he did look a little annoyed by Emily's newfound neediness. But, who cares about little ol' Alice when you've got bombshell Emily, right?

Feeling her mood begin to drop by the negative thoughts, she decided it was a good time to find Blaise and see how his conquests were going. She found him leaning against the wall looking glum as his eyes fell on Emily and Isaac snuggled up to each other on the couch. Her bare legs were drooped lazily over his lap, her arm around his neck, and he was whispering something in her ears. Whatever it was that he said, it must have been hilarious, because Emily giggled profusely, making her body fall even closer to his.

Her stomach lurched as Isaac's smile widened as he looked her in the eye. They looked so cute together…

She slumped up against Blaise. "Sweeeet party, huh?"

"Mhm," he mumbled. "Wanna go for a smoke?"

"Fuck yaasss."

They walked onto the balcony, taking a seat on the cold wooden stairs. The crisp autumn air was sobering and cool against Alice's bare shoulders. When she shivered, Blaise wrapped his ghost-bed-sheet around her arms to warm her up. He lit up his own smoke and passed it to her to take a drag.

"Um…could I actually have a full one?" she asked and Blaise chuckled.

"You'd better not be turning into a real smoker," he said, but passed one to her anyways. "It's a slippery slope."

She lit it and inhaled deeply, slowly falling in love with the familiar taste. "I'm not. Just a little drunk…and stressed or something. I dunno."

"Yeah, I hear that," he said. "I'm so tired of this shit."

"What shit?"

"Isaac always picking up all the girls," he said, resting his chin in his hands. "I don't even care about Emily, well, I obviously do a bit. But it's always like this with every girl ever. I get it. He's rich and blonde. I mean, I'm black. I'm already at such a disadvantage living in Canada, let alone being his best friend." He took a large drag off the smoke. "Just gets old really fast."
"But black guys have big diiicks, right?" she said, giggling.

"You're funny when you're drunk," he said, laughing. "Even so, it's not like I can just walk around with my dick hanging out."

"What a pitiful society we live in," she said, tutting her tongue.

"No point in moping about it, though," he said. "Negativity gets you nowhere in life!"

"Yeah…" she said. "I know what you mean, though."

"Oh?"

"I feel the exact same with Emily," she said. "I'm tired of living in her shadow. Just once I wish a guy would pay attention to me. I know it's stupid and I should be a strong, independent woman who needs no man and all that shit. But sometimes I feel so invisible…"

"So you do like Isaac, then?"

Her neck snapped towards him. "No. I do not like Isaac."

"So then wha – "

"It's just a little stupid, you know?" she said, her voice getting louder. "I mean, I've been hanging out with you guys for weeks and not once have I ever gotten the same reaction from you that she gets. It's a little insulting, you know? Am I that hideous?"

"You're not hideous," he said, nudging her shoulder. "You're just…more like a sister. I dunno, you're my bro."

"I'm tired of being 'the bro'," she sulked, feeling immature from her pettiness. "Just once I want someone to lust over me. Not just be seen as little ginger Alice Black who's apparently too smart for any guy to find me attractive."

"Who said you're too smart to be attractive?"

"Stupid firefighter in the party…"

"Hey," he said. "You're brilliant. Someone's gonna realize it eventually."

"You too, Blaise," she said, smiling at him. "You're honestly one of my favorite people in the world. You're gonna find the right girl."

"Thanks. In the meantime, I guess it is pretty fun being a bachelor."

They sat in silence, only the sound of their cigarette inhales being heard. Once Blaise finished his he flicked it off the side of the balcony. "Alright, I'm gonna go find some more liquor and hopefully a girl to pump up my fragile ego."

"Hey, can I get another smoke?"

"Fine, but this is the last one tonight," he said warningly, but hesitantly handed her the smoke. She lit it and coughed, regretting the decision to chain smoke, but decided to keep going anyways. Staring up at the stars, she cringed at how mopey she was being. She really had to get her insecurities in check if this was how she was going to feel every time she saw Emily and Isaac together. More importantly, she had to get her feelings, or whatever they were, for Isaac under control. There was no
way she could let herself go there…but the way her stomach stung as his fingers brushed against Emily's knee made her scared…

"You're not turning into a smoker too, are you?"

Her head spun around to find Isaac with his hands shoved in his pockets and her head swirled a bit. He took a seat beside her on the step and her body tensed from his close proximity. The smell of his cologne filled her nose and it bothered her how good he smelled. "What are you doing here?"

"Like I said earlier, I've barely seen you all night." he said, grabbing the smoke from her fingers and pressing it to his own lips. Damn, he looked cool when he smoked. All those high school ads saying "smokers are jokers" would have a hard time arguing that with Isaac. "Wanted to see what you're up to."

"Oh."

"I like your costume, by the way," he said. "I haven't had a chance to say that. You're Miss Frizzle from Magic School Bus, right?"

"Yeah." She was thankful it was dark so he couldn't see her blush. "But it's dorky and lame. Should have been a nurse."

"It's not lame," he said. "I think it suits you. You look nice."

"Why aren't you with Emily?" She blurted out, feeling embarrassed by how upfront and pouty that sounded. Damn Jell-O shots and pumpkin vodka.

"I dunno," he said. "Why should I be?"

"Because you like her," she said, snatching the smoke back from him. "And she's perfect."

"Well, maybe I like imperfect people."

Her eyes met his and she felt dangerously close to him. What was that even supposed to mean?

"I find it hard to believe that you like anything less than perfection."

"Why would you think that?"

"I dunno," she found herself playing with a loose thread. "Cause you're Isaac and you're a prat."

"Didn't realize drunk Alice turned British." He laughed. "Way too much time with Blaise."

"Yeah, that's what I've been telling him."

"Can I let you in on a little secret?" he asked, grabbing the smoke back from her.

"Sure."

"I'm an arrogant, home-wrecking, anxiety-filled, pill-popping asshole." He took a large drag. "Besides the fact that I have money I really don't have anything going for me."

She giggled but her throat tightened as she looked him in the eyes again. He looked so sincere…and humble. For someone who was openly so pompous, he actually wasn't afraid to show a little humility once in a while. It was one of the things she was growing to really like about him the most.
"Just so you know…I'm not gonna hook up with Emily or anything."

Her heart jumped into her throat. "Wh-what? Why?"

"I dunno…she's not really my type. And its obvious Blaise is super into her and I don't wanna hurt him," he said before looking back into her eyes. "And I figured it would bother you."

"Wh-why would it bother me?" She asked quickly. Oh no. He totally picked up on her vibes all night. He knew she liked him. No! She didn't like him. Shut up, Alice.

"A few reasons, I guess. For one, I know I'm not your favorite person in the world and I imagine it would suck for if you had to hear about me from her all the time. Not to mention, I know you're not ready to tell Simon about you working for me, but he would probably start asking questions if I began dating Emily," he said, passing the cigarette pack to her. "And I've already done so much to fuck with your life…it would suck if I like, dated your best friend and broke her heart, too. It wouldn't be fair for you to have to pick up the pieces for another one of my fuck ups. Plus, like I said, she's not my type."

She was speechless. All those facts were true and she hadn't even thought about them herself. Isaac had actually put in more thought about this than she had. At least, regarding the things that mattered. Sure, she had been obsessing over whether she was secretly jealous or not, but she hadn't even considered the Simon thing! Ugh, why was she so stupid and self-absorbed sometimes?

"Why were you all over her at my house last week if you're not into her?" She asked suddenly as the question popped into her head.

"I dunno. Reflex?" He shrugged. "When a hot chick starts flirting with you by making you do yoga you kinda just roll with it."

She giggled and tossed her cigarette away. Fair enough. Suddenly, he stood up and she quickly asked, "Where are you going?"

"I'm gonna go find Blaise," he said, heading to the door. "Pretty sure he's pissed at me. Gonna let him know I'm not gonna hook up with Emily."

A smile grew on her face as she watched him almost disappear into the house, but just as he was about to close the door behind himself, he stepped back out again.

"One more thing – Emily is far from perfect."

She raised her eyebrow. "How so?"

His face twisted into a look of pure, unfiltered annoyance. "If I had to hear about her god damn vegan diet for one more second I was going to lose my mind," he said, before looking absolutely appalled. "And the chick doesn't even like spaghetti! I mean, what the hell is up with that?" He shook his head in disbelief before finally disappearing inside.

She sat there in awe of the conversation for nearly an hour, enjoying the silence and cool air as she tried to organize her thoughts. A sense of relief overtook her body. For the first time ever, a guy didn't like Emily. And that same guy went out of his way to inform her of this…very interesting.

Would it even be so bad if she liked Isaac? Sure, he was a dick to her for years, but he's clearly changed…it would be nice to crush on someone who wasn't Mark. Then she remembered Simon. Yes. Yes, it would be very terrible. But even so, even if the tiniest part of her did like him, there's no way he would like her back. Even if he obviously liked her as a friend there was no way he would
ever have feelings for her. He could have anyone he wanted… and if Emily wasn't even his type, Alice sure as hell wouldn't be.

She went back inside, deciding to find Isaac to spend some time with to try to figure out exactly how big this 'tiny' part of her that liked him was. Almost immediately, a slightly manic laugh left her lips.

There in the hallway, tangled up with a tanned sexy witch in the middle of a makeout session, was Isaac. Looks like he found his imperfect person, after all. She stood there and smirked, noting that her stomach didn’t have the same stabbing sensation that it was when he was with Emily. Relief flooded through her and she could have cheered. She must not actually like Isaac otherwise this would crush her! She must have just been jealous of Emily, after all!

She turned to the other side of the living room to find Emily lip-locked with the same shirtless fireman Alice tried to hit on earlier. Of course, she was. Oh well, good for Emily for getting some action after all that work with Isaac. How strange that she only got jealous when Emily was interacting with Isaac, but not the firefighter…but that was not a mystery Drunk Alice felt like solving that night.

She found Blaise by the Jell-O shots, eating them one at a time. "Well, at least she's not with Isaac, I guess," he said.

"Yep," she said. "Hey, I think I'm gonna take off."

"Yeah, me too."

"I've got some Halloween candy and horror movies at home?" she suggested. "Wanna come sleep on my couch and have a movie date?"

"Sounds like a plan."

And the two stayed up late, drunkenly laughing at the stupid horror films and getting a sugar high off the candy. Eventually,

Blaise passed out in a pile full of candy wrappers and Alice covered him up with a blanket and placed a glass of water with Advil next to his head before retreating to her own bed.

"Maybe I like imperfect people…"

What a great Halloween party.
Chapter Notes

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR THE KUDOS GUYS! Nice to know some people are reading! ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 7

Sunlight poured into Alice's room as she groggily peeled her eyes open, hissing at the burning beam. Her head throbbed and her tongue felt like a sponge, soaking up every ounce of liquid in her dehydrated body. What the fuck happened last night? The taste of the tangy, thick, orange Jell-O still lingered in her mouth making her swear off the fruity gelatin forever. Pulling the blanket over her head, she begged for more sleep; and for water to miraculously appear on her side-table.

Then she heard something she wasn’t expecting. To the left of her was the steady breathing of another person. Her body froze. Oh my god, did she sleep with Blaise? No way. No, no, no, no. She clenched her eyes shut before slowly turning her body over, terrified to see who the mystery person was.

With a very wrinkled dress shirt, his tie flopped over his face, and drool dripping from his mouth, laid Isaac. Her mouth dropped open. What the hell?

Without a second thought, she hopped on her knees and punched him in the throat. His eyes shot open, wheezing and gagging as he searched for breath. "What the fuck is your problem?"

"WHY ARE YOU IN MY BED!?"

"Stop shouting," he groaned, rubbing his red throat. "Your voice sounds like knives."

"What are you doing here!?"

"Calm down, calm down," he said, rolling off the bed to his feet as Alice tightened her fist, ready to strike again at any moment.

"You get one more chance to answer the question," she warned, following him off the bed with the same threatening glare.

"Your house was closer than mine, so I walked here after the party," he said. "Blaise let me in."

"That doesn't explain why you're in my bed."

"He was sleeping on the couch so, I dunno…" He rubbed the back of his neck and avoided her eyes. "I just sorta ended up here and passed out."

"You could have slept on the floor," she said, trying to refrain from punching him again. "Who the hell just waltzes into someone's bed?"
"I'm a CEO of a multi-billion dollar company. I'm not going to sleep on the floor," he drawled. "You really need a second couch."

"You are so fucking ridiculous," she said, pulling at her hair. A horrifying thought came into her mind, "What if I was sleeping naked?"

A mischievous smirk pulled at the corner of his lips. "That would have been pretty cool."

She slugg[ed him in the gut.

"My god, woman," he coughed, keeling over in the bed. "You're psychotic."

"Excuse me?" she shrieked. "I wake up to find you lying in my bed without any warning and you call me psychotic?"

"Relax, all I did was pass out," he said. "Listen, I'm sorry that I invaded your privacy. I was drunk and it seemed like a good idea at the time. Clearly, it wasn't."

"Clearly!" she shouted. All the screaming was making her head pound. She was way too hungover for this shit. She collapsed back to the bed and dragged her pulsing head back to the pillow, glaring at him. "Why didn't you sleep at that chick's house you were making out with?"

Isaac sat on the edge of the bed, knitting his brow as if trying to recall which girl she was talking about. Finally, he laughed loudly, "You don't wanna know."

"Why not?"

He rubbed the corners of his eyes, wincing as if whatever he was going to say was causing physical pain. Finally, he followed suit and pressed his face back to the pillow, groaning loudly. "She had a boyfriend."

She elbowed his shoulder.

"Jesus Christ, Alice," he said, grabbing a pillow as a shield. "I'm gonna call the cops soon for assault."

"You are honestly the worst person I have ever met," she said. "Have you ever hooked up with someone who wasn't in a relationship?"

"Once or twice," he smirked before covering his face with the pillow in fear of Alice's clenched fist nearing him. "I'm joking, I'm joking! I had no idea! She came onto me and when I found out I bailed the party. She just…waltzed up to me in the hallway and started kissing me. I felt quite taken advantage of, to be honest."

"Aren't you a poor victim," she said, rolling her eyes and slumped beside him. *What the hell was wrong with her the past week, actually thinking she had feelings for this guy?* In the span of ten minutes, she was reminded of every prick-ish thing things he's ever done…the list was too long.

"Are you done hitting me?" he asked, lowering the pillow.

"Depends," she said, crossing her arms. "Any other shitty things you did last night?"

"Umm," he looked up at the ceiling, tapping his fingers to his lips. "I think I threw up in Emily's flower pot outside. But don't worry, I'll get her a new one."

Okay, that was pretty funny. Alice rolled with laughter, knowing Emily was going to be furious
upon finding that. "Well, she sure isn't going to be fond of you after that."

"Yeah, Jesus," he said putting his hands behind his head. "That chick was fucking horny last night. Is she always that needy?"

"Nope. Haven't seen her chase a guy that much in years." She propped herself up on her elbow, smiling at his hangover-induced tired blue eyes. "I guess you're just special."

"I really am, aren't I?"

She briefly contemplated hitting him again, but decided he had endured enough abuse for one morning. Instead, she rested her eyes and tried to remember the night before. Everything was so hazy…there was something about a firefighter, her having a heart to heart with Isaac, and the vague feeling that she was being mopey for at least half the night. The more she thought about it, the more she realized that nearly every conversation she had with Emily involved her giving some snippy retort. So stupid and immature. Emily straight up asked Alice if she had a problem with her trying to hook up with Alice, and Alice said no. Then, she proceeded to act like a mopey 15-year-old.

"I gotta take Emily out for supper or something tonight."

"How come?"

"Ahh, it's complicated," she said, brushing him off. It was easier than explaining she had a temporary lapse in her sanity and started to believe she had feelings for him. "But I was kind of a bitch to her last night. It's no big deal."

"I should probably do that with Blaise. I feel like such a dick," he said, staring sadly at the ceiling. "I apologized to him and all, and he said it was “all good,” but I shouldn't have even talked to Emily. He's been crazy about her all week and I wasn't even interested. What's my problem?"

"Yep. You are kind of a dick."

He darted his eyes towards her. "You could at least pretend to be sympathetic."

"I prefer being honest, thanks."

They laid on the bed side by side in a comfortable silence. *What a weird morning.* Sure, if he ever slept in her bed again she would single handedly murder him, but it was kind of fun for the time. She liked hanging out with Isaac. Even if he was a huge prick, they had some solid banter. As she absently braided her red hair, Isaac let out a low chuckle making her eyebrow raise. "What's so funny?"

"Just thinking."

"What about?"

"About how pissed off your brother would be if he knew I was lying in bed with you."

This time, she kicked him.

"Oh what, you don't like that?" He asked, a smile playing on his lips. "Come on, let's take a selfie and send it to him." He grabbed her wrist and pulled her into his shoulder, pulling out his phone to angle it above them. She giggled hysterically, trying to pull away from his grasp, but he tightened his arm around her waist. "Smile pretty for the camera!"
"Go away, Isaac!" She screamed in between fits of laughter. Finally, she swatted the phone out of his hands. "I will murder you with my bare hands if you do that."

"You're sure violent in the mornings," he said, smirking down at her, his arms still around her waist and her head resting on his shoulder. *Why wasn't either of them moving away?* "I pity whoever you marry. They'll wake up with a black eye every day."

"No one I marry will piss me off as much as you do," she said, her body relaxing even more into his touch. What an odd conversation to have with someone you're practically cuddling with. The feeling of his thumb gently tracing circles on her exposed hip made her shiver. *Does he realize what he's doing, or is it just an unconscious twitch?* When butterflies overtook her stomach, she rolled away from him. It was safer at this distance.

"Oh, so Mark never got any black eyes?"

"No," she said. "Mark is a gentleman."

"Mark is a tool."

"You think anyone who isn't you is a tool."

"That's not true," he said. "I like Blaise. Adam in marketing is alright."

"Wow," she said, clicking her tongue. "Two whole people."

"You're alright too, I guess." He flashed her a smile and her gaze lingered on his lips for a second longer than she meant to. "So, do you still like Mark?"

She blushed furiously, taken aback by the blunt question. "That's none of your business!"

"I'll take that as a yes, then."

"No, I don't."

"Do you like Blaise?"

"What?" she asked, scrunching her nose. "Obviously not."

"You didn't blush when I asked that," he said, grinning smugly at his keen observation. "So, why aren't you with him?"

She huffed, not wanting to discuss her romantic life with Isaac of all people, but he had her cornered. Well, not really. It wouldn't be too hard too hard to simply leave the bed…but that would mean the ending of this bizarre, enjoyable morning. Plus, she failed her conquest of getting laid the previous night. May as well enjoy the perks of waking up with a hot guy in her bed.

"It's not like it's entirely up to me. Kind of has to be a mutual relationship."

"So, what? He won't ask you out again?"

"Nahhh," she sighed sadly. "After we broke up he kind of dicked me around for a few years. Was all…wishy washy. 'I love you!' 'No I don't!'. And now…"

"Now what?"

"I dunno, now he seems to just see me as a dorky little sister," she put her arm behind her head and
gazed sadly at the ceiling. "Don't really know what changed. Dated for three years, messed around with my head for a few more years, and now apparently he's lost all interest."

Ugh. She knew it was stupid to still like Mark after everything he's done to her, but she always had this nagging feeling that they were meant to be. Not to mention the fact that he was the only guy she had ever been with that treated her semi-decently…not that there was much competition.

"Well, you guys have fucked, right?"

Her neck snapped towards him and she gasped at his bluntness. "You're very invasive today, you know that?"

"Yes."

"Obviously, we've had sex. Why does that matter?"

"Then he doesn't think of you as a sister."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Well, besides the obvious taboo aspect," he said, "if you guys have slept together then, that means he's picturing you naked when you're around."

She let out a cold laugh. "Well, seeing as that doesn't seem to have any effect on him, I guess I must not be that impressive."

His eyes flickered down her body, lingering on the part of her midriff exposed from her shirt lifting. "I highly doubt that."

Okay, what the hell was with all the roundabout flirting? Sure, it wasn't the most abnormal thing for a guy to be affectionate in the mornings. But even with them spending nearly every day together, he never acted remotely close to this before. Her body grew warm, feeling secretly flattered, but she still pulled her blanket around to pretend it didn't. "You're such a fucking creep right now."

"Just being honest," he said raising his hands. "All I'm saying is he still probably wants to at least screw you. Now, I don't understand why you would want to screw him, but that's your prerogative."

"Mark is sweet, and kind, and funny and – "

"And a lame ass stoner."

She raised her brow judgmentally. "Says the guy who's probably going to snort Ritalin in a few hours."

"Hey, I don't snort things." He pulled his hands towards his chest in defense, "But yeah, I'll probably pop a few uppers today."

"You're so messed up."

"You love it."

"Wouldn't say that."

"Wanna do some with me?" He gave her an excited grin, propping his face up with his fist. "Come on, we could organize my fridge together? It'll be so fun!"
"That sounds horrible," she said. "I think I'll pass."

"Your loss."

"So," she said, tracing circles on the bedsheet coyly. At some point, the space between them once again narrowed and their noses were only a few inches away. "Seeing as you've had the pleasure of asking me embarrassing questions all morning I think I get to ask you one."

"Didn't realize this became a game."

"You started it." She twirled the ends of her hair. "Who'd you lose your V-Card to?"

He groaned and rubbed his face with his hands. "I'm not telling you that."

"Yes, you are."

"You're a pain in the ass."

"Answer the question, Isaac."

"FINE," he shouted, pulling the blanket over his face. "I lost it to Sarah Stillwell."

"Sarah…?" Her mouth dropped as the realization set in. "As in Simon's first fiancée, Sarah?"

"Yep."

"But…but you didn't have sex with her until you were a senior…" A manically excited grin twisted on her face as the realization dawned on her. "Isaac, were you a virgin until you were eighteen?"

"…Yes."

She rolled around in laughter, unable to contain herself. Sure, there was nothing wrong with waiting to have sex, but she had a feeling Isaac wasn't the type to stay a virgin by choice. He hid deeper in the blankets when he peered his eye out just in time to catch her wiping a genuine tear. "So, you're telling me, that I, the girl you ridiculed for years, actually lost my virginity before you?"

"Well, most people fuckin' did, so probably," he mumbled from underneath the blanket.

"This is too funny," she said in between laughter. "Is that why you were such a prick in high school? Because you were secretly sexually frustrated?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"And you were such a cocky piece of garbage!" she exclaimed. "And it was all unwarranted!"

"Fuck off, Alice," he whined. "Not everyone is blessed to be with someone as amazing as Mark."

"Isaac the Virgin," she said. "It has a nice ring to it."

"Well, I'm not one anymore," he said, pursing his lips together. "Any other stupid questions or are you done embarrassing me?"

"Oh, I'm sure I could think of another," she said, biting her fingernail when suddenly a flashback from the night before crept into her mind. "Umm…last night you said that Emily wasn't your type."

"Uh-huh."
"So…what is your type?" she asked. "Besides girls in committed relationships, that is."

"I dunno," he said, putting his hands behind his head looking deep in thought. "I guess I hope I can one day find someone I can be myself with. All these girls I hook up with…they all just see me as this, I dunno...status symbol or something. Like I'm supposed to act as this rich, dominant character or something. And I do…I don't know why, but I just fall into the stupid role and it gets exhausting. Half the time I barely know who I am." His gaze slowly fell on her eyes and for the first time, for a fraction of a second, she saw a genuine pain in his eyes. But as quickly as it came, it left, and he said, "Long story short, I wanna find someone who I can hang out with and who makes me laugh."

"Yeah, me too," was all she could say, nodding her head in agreement.

They sat in the same comfortable silence for a few minutes, both lost in their own thoughts. That day she saw a different side of Isaac, a side of him she was sure not many people had the pleasure of seeing. Real, raw…maybe a little lonely. She no longer minded the fact that he invaded her bed because damn, talk about an information overload.

Isaac was a pretty cool guy.

"Well, as scintillating as this weird, sexless pillow-talk has been," he said, clapping his hands together loudly before hopping off the bed. "I'm starving. Wanna wake up Blaise and get some brunch? I'd kill for a mimosa."

"And you wonder why girls treat you like a rich bitch."

"Fuck off, Alice."

“I don’t get it,” Emily huffed as she stabbed her beet and kale salad. “Why doesn’t he like me?”

“Who?” Alice asked.

“Isaac, obviously.”

“Oh.”

Alice hoped the question was rhetorical and took her time chewing the bacon cheeseburger before answering. As divine as the trendy restaurant’s avocado toast or spicy lentil stew sounded, the residual hangover still lingered over Alice and the only thing that would cure it was a nice greasy burger. Or, maybe it would put her in a food coma. Who knows? When Emily was staring at her expectantly she realized she couldn’t delay any longer and swallowed the burger.

“Because you don’t like spaghetti,” Alice said. It wasn’t a total lie.

“Excuse me?”

“You don’t like spaghetti.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Don’t ask me,” Alice shrugged. “He’s got weird standards, I guess.”

“Really? That’s what he told you?” Emily squeezed the slice of lemon into her water with so much pressure the juice nearly squirted into Alice’s eye. “He said he doesn’t like me because I don’t
like spaghetti?"

“More or less, yep.”

Pushing her salad away, Emily banged her forehead on the table, groaning loudly. “I’m so embarrassed,” she cried. “I threw myself at him all night. I wore that stupid maid outfit. Ugh – you should have seen what I did to him in my room!”

Alice’s face fell with horror. “Dear god, what did you do to him in your room?”

“Nothing that bad.” Emily lifted her face from the table long enough to scowl at Alice’s widened eyes. “But I like…lay on my bed and was all ‘Hey, why don’t you come join me over here?’ and he was like, “maybe we should see what Blaise and Alice are up to.’ URGH. I’m so stupid.”

“You’re not stupid,” Alice said, gently patting Emily’s arm. “You put yourself out there and it didn’t work out. At least you tried! Besides, most people get rejected at some point, anyway. You get to join the Average-Human-Club.”

“Lucky me.” She slumped back in her chair. “I should have listened to you. He’s an arrogant prick.”

“Yeah…” Instead of eating the french-fry between her fingers, Alice stared at it blankly, temporarily distracted from the conversation and eating the delicious greasy food. “Maybe he isn’t so bad…”

_Shit. That wasn’t supposed to be said out loud, Alice._

Emily narrowed her eyes. “What did you say?”

“N-nothing.”

“You said he wasn’t that bad,” Emily’s finger was now shoved in Alice’s face. “It’s been obvious you didn’t mind him this whole time, but since when have you been admitting it?”

“I dunno,” she said, rubbing her shoulder and becoming enthralled by the floor. “This morning when we were in bed he was – “

“What?” Emily slammed her hands and on the table and her eyes bulged from her face. “When we were in bed?”

“No, no, no. That sounds so much worse than what happened” She threw her face in her hands feeling her whole body turn red. Where did her filter go? Telling Emily about spending the morning with Isaac in bed was _not_ on her agenda. Not because she felt like she had anything to hide…it was just such a boring and unimportant topic, there was no reason to. “Nothing happened, I swear. He passed out in my bed after I was asleep and I didn’t even know he was there until the morning.”

Emily nodded slowly, but continued to measure Alice up with her eyes. “So, you’re saying that the guy who rejected me last night…and continuously asked me about your whereabouts all night… somehow drunkenly ended up in your bed?”

“Erm…I guess so,” she said, biting her lip, still avoiding her sharp gaze. “I hope you’re not mad, Em. I swear, I wouldn’t have let him in my bed if I was awake. I know you like hi – “
“Alice, calm down.” She gently put her hand on Alice’s arm with a huge grin on her face. “I’m not mad at all, trust me.”

“Oh, thank god,” Alice said as relief flooded her body. The last thing she would want was Emily to be mad at her because Isaac couldn’t properly find his own damned bed.

“I’m more so intrigued…”

“What do you mean?”

“No reason.” She smirked and grabbed the menu from the table. “Wanna share a green tea sorbet? I hear it’s delicious here.”

“Emily…” Alice said warningly. “What’s intriguing?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Emily said, and stopped the waiter walking past their table. “Excuse me? Can we get the green tea sorbet, please? Two spoons?”

Alice crossed her arms but resolved to drop the discussion. It was obvious what Emily was hinting at, and quite frankly, Alice didn’t want to discuss it that much either. Instead, she would simply continue to silently look back fondly on that morning…and remember the gentle stroking of Isaac’s thumb against her hip…

Later that week, Alice sat beside Blaise at her desk, staring at a meek young man. He couldn’t have been much older than her and Blaise, but his oversized suit and messy long hair displayed a certain air of immaturity- especially for someone on a job interview. The least you could do is get a haircut.

Blaise held the man’s résumé and tapped his pen on the desk. “I see you volunteered at the crisis hotline for a year. That’s an excellent association. Did you enjoy it?”

The man rubbed the nape of his neck and barely opened his mouth when he mumbled, “Umm. It was fine.”

“I see,” Blaise said, massaging his temple with one hand. Alice thanked her lucky stars she didn’t have to deal with the interviews on her own, yet. The only reason she was there was to gain experience for when she would interview people to assist in maintaining the app, but that wouldn’t be for months. Hopefully, the technology people she would eventually interview are more competent than the future psychiatrists Blaise was stuck interviewing, because damn, some of these people seemed dense.

Blaise cleared his throat and asked, “Alright. So, what has been your most positive experience in the field of Psychology?”

“Ummm…”

Alice and Blaise exchanged stumped looks when the man continued to tap his lips in deep thought. Blaise shook his head in disbelief and tightened his lips; his patience was growing thinner by the minute.

The man sighed deeply. “Can I pass?”

“Erm,” Blaise looked at Alice skeptically and she shrugged in response. “Sure. I guess. What was your worst experience?”
“Like…ever?”

“…Yes.”

The man’s eyes lit up and he straightened his posture, looking more lively than he had throughout the entire interview. “Well, there was one time my friends and I took a bunch of Acid. And it wasn’t kicking in fast enough, so we took another tab. And all of a sudden – “

“I’m sorry,” Blaise interrupted, his eyes clenched shut and fingers pinching the bridge of his nose. “Why are you telling me this?”

“You asked for my worst experience.”

Alice had to cover her mouth with her hand to hide her growing smile and prayed her shaking body wasn’t that obvious. Even if this guy was an idiot, she should still try to be professional. Blaise was struggling, but he appeared far less amused than her with his clenched jaw and flaring nostrils.

“You’re right, I did ask that,” he said between gritted teeth. He set the résumé on the desk and slammed his notebook shut before standing from his chair. “I think that’s all the questions I have for you. Thanks for coming in.”

“So…” The man stood up and shoved his hands in the pocket. “Did I get the job?”

Blaise had to immediately turn his back to him to hide his silent cussing, but wasn’t able to refrain from banging his forehead on the window. This seemed like a good time for Alice to step in and save the man from getting strangled by Blaise. She strolled over to the door of the office, guiding the man towards it, and said, “We’ll call you.”

“Great!” He said enthusiastically. “Thanks a lot!”

“Yeah, okay, bye.” She slammed the door on his face and Blaise immediately let out a cry of anguish.

“This is hopeless,” he groaned. “We’ve interviewed at least twenty people and we’ve only hired three. We are never going to find enough.”

“Don’t worry, buddy,” she said, patting his shoulder. “We’ll get there.”

“Dear god, I hope so,” he said and pulled out his pack of smokes, lighting one right in the office. Alice gasped.

“You can’t smoke in here!”

“Why?”

“Because it’s illegal and we’ll get fired!”

“I have a pretty big hunch Isaac isn’t going to fire us.”

“Still – it’s wrong.”

“You want some?”

She tilted her head and admired the seductive smoke swirling in the room. It had been a particularly stressful week…and these interviews were really dejecting. Things were beginning to feel a little hopeless…
“At least open the window.”

They both sat beside the window, puffing out the smoke. Alice would never become a smoker. Smoking was a nasty, expensive habit that only caused disease. Nothing good came from it. She was just stressed, that was all. Work had been busy. She deserved the occasional drag to ease her nerves.

“You guys can’t possibly be smoking in here.”

Both their necks craned to slowly to meet a very disapproving Isaac with his arms crossed tightly. They hadn’t even heard the door open.

“Don’t be a nark, Isaac,” Blaise said coolly.

“I’m the boss,” he said. “I don’t think bosses are narks.”

“Wow, now he’s on a power trip,” Alice snickered, exhaling the smoke.

“And why the hell are you smoking again?” he said, pointing his finger at Alice. “It’s stupid and Blaise is a bad influence.”

“Whatever, mom,” she said, passing the smoke back to Blaise.

“I’m serious, put that shit out,” he hissed, slamming the door shut. “If someone knew I saw you smoking and didn’t do anything they’d file a damn grievance!”

Blaise tossed the smoke out the window. “Alright, alright. I’m sorry.”

“Fucking idiots,” he cursed under his breath, slumping in the chair the idiotic interviewee previously sat. One hand reached for his yellow stress ball and the other rubbed his temple.

“Are you alright?” Alice asked with concern, stepping towards him to put her hand on his shoulder. She felt his body relax but he continued pulsing the ball, sighing loudly.

“I just had to fire a pregnant woman for having an affair with a high profile client in Toronto.”

“Ooooh, that’s rough,” Blaise said, wincing. “Sorry, mate. About that. And the smoking.”

“I feel like the devil,” he said. “She’s single and seven months pregnant. The kid won’t stand a chance.”

“Well, in all fairness,” Alice said, “She probably shouldn’t have been screwing the guy…it’s not really your fault…”

“I fucking hate my job. I ruin lives,” he grumbled, avoiding both of their eyes. “She was crying and everything. What am I supposed to do? Can’t really…ignore the affair.”

“Don’t beat yourself up,” Blaise said, narrowing his eyes at Isaac pulling his pill bottle from his pockets but refrained from commenting. “You’re just doing your job. She’ll figure it out…”

“Maybe I’ll send her an anonymous cheque or something.” He was bobbing his foot anxiously in the air, his jaw clenched. Alice frowned. She hated seeing him so stressed. He was way too young to have a job of this calibre…

Suddenly, her phone vibrated. Simon’s name lit up on the screen.
Hey, Where are you?

She raised her finger to Isaac. “Hold that thought, gotta text my brother.”

Just at work! :) What’s up?

No you’re not.

“What the hell?” she said out loud.

I’m at the Spaghetti House.

Kathleen said you stopped showing up over a month ago.

“Oh fuck. Oh fuck. Oh fuck.”

What the hell is going on?

She tossed the phone to the ground and screamed, her chest tightening quickly. “NO!”

“What’s her problem?” Blaise asked with a raised eyebrow and Isaac shrugged.

“Simon knows I’ve been lying,” she said between gasps. “I have to tell him the truth.”

Chapter End Notes

LET ME KNOW WHAT YOU THINK! Thank you to ElisionEditing for being my amazing editor from here on out.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 8

Alice crouched behind a wooden fence at the end of Simon’s block, smoking the cigarette she stole from Blaise’s pack. Despite the beads of sweat rolling down her neck and her spinning stomach, her mind was completely blank. She was not prepared to have this discussion today.

She always had an image of how this scenario would play out in a perfect world. Once the app was complete, and she would no longer spend sleepless nights working alongside Blaise and Isaac, she intended on simply showing him the app. She would say, “Hey! Look what I made!” By then, she hoped enough time had passed since Isaac slept with Chelsea, and that maybe because the app would already be finished, he would decide there was no point in being angry. Maybe she would buy him a hot tub, or maybe buy them each a trip to Europe. They always wanted to go together…

How gloriously naïve of her. Of course, if she spent the five weeks being distant with Simon he would eventually seek her out. That’s just what Simon did; he was the protective older brother. She got so caught up in her selfish and new exciting life filled with handsome boys, copious amounts of alcohol, fancy offices, and thousands of dollars to barely even think about Simon. She deserved a gold medal in being self-centered.

She flicked the cigarette onto the street and briefly thought about packing a backpack and flying to Thailand. It was pretty affordable over there; by the time she returned everyone will have forgotten about everything.

As tempting as the thought was, she quickly found herself outside of Simon’s door. As she let herself in herself in, her nose wasn’t hit with the usual stale beer and weed. Instead, her nose was engulfed with the lemony clean scent of Pine Sol and Pledge. He did it. He really cleaned. He was back on his feet. And she was going to do literally the second worst thing she could do; the first being her running off and marrying Isaac.

“How lovely to see you!” Simon breathed out when he turned the corner of the hallway. The bowl he was drying with a towel smacked the back of her head when he threw his arms around her neck. “I was so worried when Kathleen said you quit! I thought you had gotten kidnapped or something.”

“Nope,” she said, clenching her eyes shut as she embraced the tender hug. This will be the last hug you get for a while… “I’m very much here and alive.”

“Have you been smoking?” he asked, sniffing at her coat.

“Of course not,” she said quickly. One more lie couldn’t hurt.

“Well, come on in, then,” he said, guiding her to the living room. Mark sat on the couch with a joint in his hand. His bright green eyes lit up when they landed on her and Alice winced. The entire way over, she prayed Mark wouldn’t be in the house during this…he would never look at her the same again.

“Alice!” Mark exclaimed, shifting on the couch to make room for her. She was too afraid to be near him, though, and sat in the armchair beside the couch. “You’re alive!”
“Sure am…”

“Want a drink?” Simon called from the kitchen.

“Anything with alcohol,” she said. Simon handed her a beer and traded a beer for Mark’s joint. Alice silently hoped he would be too stoned to react to her news.

“Want some?” Mark asked with a crooked smile.

“No thanks.”

“Not smoking anymore?”

“Not really.” She shrugged. “Haven’t gotten high in a while, I guess.”

“That’s too bad…” he said, leaning back onto the couch. “Remember all those times smoking in the back of my truck?”

“Heh, yeah…” Her eyes watched Simon take a seat on the chair across from her and gulped.

“Are you done?” Simon interrupted and Mark nodded. “So…what’s going on? Why did you quit the restaurant?”

Both faces curiously rested on her. Simon’s hazel eyes were vacant of any anger, but her fingers still trembled as she peeled away at the beer label with her foot tapping vigorously. “Because I got a new job,” she mumbled at the ground.

“That’s great, Alice!” Mark said before taking another hit off the joint.

“Yeah, congratulations. You hated that place,” Simon said, but his brows knitted together. “I don’t get why you didn’t tell me though…why have you been lying?”

She leaned back in her chair and rubbed her sweaty palms on her jeans. “I think you should sit down for this.”

“I am sitting down,” Simon said.

“I know,” she said, resting her chin on her fist looking away from his eyes. “I’m just delaying.”

“What’s going on?” Simon asked, sounding more concerned now.

She sighed loudly and took one last lovingly glance at Simon and Mark. It was now or never.

“Because my new job is….” She glanced out the window and quickly wished she could have a cigarette. “My new job is developing a smartphone application for Isaac Hanes and working alongside Blaise Shafiq.”

Simon’s beer shattered on the floor, his jaw following closely behind. The lit joint in Mark’s hand was slowly burning a hole in the sofa, but his eyes didn’t break away from Alice’s increasingly shrinking disposition. Silence overtook the room. A buzzing fly from the kitchen was uncannily loud in her ears. Simon’s face was ghostly white in comparison to his bright red hair.

“What did you just say?”

“Before you react, please just give me a chance to expl – “
“You’re working for WHO?” He jumped to his feet, his feet heavily stomping towards her with a snarl growing on his lips. She gulped, slumping even further into the chair.

“I’m so sorry, Simon,” she pleaded. “I don’t know how it happened. I mean, I do, but like…it all just happened so quickly and they gave me such an amazing offer I couldn’t – “

“You’re working for ISAAC HANES?” He shouted, jamming his finger to her chest. “Do you know what he’s done to me?”

“Oh my god, yes,” she groaned and pulled at the ends of her hair, but immediately bit her tongue. “I’m sorry. Of course I know what he’s done. Believe me, initially I wasn’t forgiving. I mean, I’m still not forgiving per se, but – “

“You forgave him!?” He roared. His face looked like it was transforming into an exaggerated political caricatures as he stormed around the living room. “How could you fucking forgive him?”

“I didn’t forgive him!” she cried. “Will you just let me explain? I swear, there’s a rational explanation for all this.”

“There’s no rational explanation you could give me,” he said.

“Are you fucking him?” This time it was Mark who spoke; his pupils were pinholes and his voice dripped with disgust.

She gasped and hopped off the armchair with her hands shoved on her hips. “I am not fucking him.”

A lightbulb lit over Simon’s head as the fictional realization dawned on him. He held his forehead in his hands and a twisted grin pulled at his lips and he quietly muttered, “Yes, you are. Of course, you are. This makes so much sense.”

“How does that make any sense!?”

“Because what else would ruin my life any more than what he’s already done?” he said with a manic laugh and quickened his irate pacing. “He’s already screwed Sarah and Chelsea, now he’s got to check off my little sister!”

“I promise you Simon, nothing has happened between us and nothing will happen between us,” she said, trying to grab his arm, but he simply shoved her away. “You have to believe me.”

“Maybe not yet,” Mark said, joining Simon in pacing around the floor. “But the second he gets you alone he’s going to make a move.”

“That’s ridiculous,” she said flatly. “We are alone all the time.”

That was definitely the worst thing she could have said. Both Simon and Mark resembled a bottle rocket that was ready to burst as they glared at her in silence. Finally, Simon opened his mouth.

“You’re alone with him?” he bellowed, throwing his arms in the air. She had never seen him so angry and it took all she had to convince her feet not to run away. “So, what? You two are all chummy?”

“We aren’t chummy…” she said quietly, biting at her nails. “We just…sort of get along…”
“And you expect us to believe you’re not screwing him?” Mark asked, shaking his head in disapproval. “That man fucks anything that moves!”

“Well, he doesn’t fuck me!” She shouted. “You need to believe me.”

“It’s only a matter of time,” Simon said. “He took advantage of Chelsea after all. Next on the agenda is my naïve, stupid, little—”

“Okay, you know what, I’m going to stop you right there,” she said, raising her hand at him when he tried to cut her off. “You don’t know the whole story. Chelsea didn’t even tell him she was engaged. As soon as he found out she was engaged to you, he kicked her out of his house because he felt so guilty!”

Simon’s face was practically purple. “So, what? You expect me to feel sorry for him?”

“No, that’s not what I mean.” She slapped her forehead with her palm. “There isn’t an ounce of me that expects you to feel anything but hatred towards him. All I’m saying is that he’s not some weird, creepy predator who’s going to seduce your naïve and stupid little sister just to piss you off.”

“I would have expected more from you, Alice…” Mark said, tutting his tongue. Just like that, nearly a decade’s worth of pent up heartache, rejection, and anger boiled over and she turned her seething eyes towards him.

“No offence, Mark,” she snapped, “But none of this involves you. Even if I was screwing him, which I’m not, quite frankly it wouldn’t fucking concern you so you can go screw off.”

Mark’s anger faltered for a split second as backed away from her harsh words. Not once had she ever shouted at him before. Even when he repeatedly stomped on her heart, she simply nodded her head and told him she understood. But finally, a chord was struck.

“He’s not leaving,” Simon said. “At least he hasn’t betrayed me.”

“Oh, just shut up for two seconds,” she screamed. “I’m getting paid ninety thousand dollars a year. Can you honestly tell me you would turn that down if you were in my shoes?”

“Yes, I fucking can,” he said, stomping his foot to the ground. “I would never betray you.”

“Really?” she asked with a cold laugh. “What about you living with Mark? What about you sitting idly as you watched him continuously shatter my heart for six fucking years? What did you do then, huh? I didn’t see you stepping up to him!”

“That’s completely different – “Mark began, but Alice cut him off.

“You shut the fuck up!”

“Don’t tell him to shut up, you bitch!” Simon shouted.

Alice gasped as tears began shining in her eyes. “Do not call me a bitch!”

“Why not?” he asked, jabbing her chest with each following syllable. “That’s what you are, after all. You’re a lying, conniving bitch.”

“Holy shit,” she said to no one, turning her back on them to rub her eyes and try to regain composure. “I can’t even talk to you right now.”

“Well, I can hardly look at you so I guess we are on the same page,” said Simon. It was silent
for a minute besides the sounds of Simon pacing and Mark’s heavy breathing. Finally, Simon stopped in his spot and crossed his arms tightly. “You need to quit that place right now.”

“Excuse me?” She asked completely dumbfounded.

“Quit,” he said flatly. “Quit today. Don’t talk to him anymore.”

“That’s not happening.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No. It isn’t.”

“If you don’t cut contact with him I’m never speaking to you again.”

“Oh my god.” She threw her face in her hands. “You’re so fucking crazy.”

“I’m crazy?” he asked, laughing. “I’m not the one sleeping with the enemy. Don’t you remember all the evil things he did to you in high school?”

“I’m going to choose to believe that ‘sleeping with the enemy’ is a figure of speech.”

“It isn’t.”

Her nostrils flared as her chest heaved; her knuckles were quickly turning white from clenching together so hard, but she continued. “Of course, I remember all the stupid shit he did to me in school. But I am making the personal choice to move on because – like I said – NINETY THOUSAND DOLLARS.”

“So, what? Money is more important than our relationship?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying, stop twisting my words,” she groaned as tears once again sprung into her brown eyes. “But I’m truly happy again. My life has direction. It has passion. I’ve been so…stagnant for years. I thought I was going to die homeless in a ditch!” She stared at them pleadingly, hoping to spark a bit of empathy. “And now, I don’t know… I have purpose again. It has nothing to do with Isaac. I wish you could find a way in your heart to understand that and try to be happy for me.”

“Why would I be happy that you’re associated with the slime-ball who ruined my life?”

“Argh!” She collapsed back in the armchair; her legs too wobbly to stand on their own. “Like I said: It. Has. Nothing. To. Do. With. Isaac.”

And they continued shouting for hours. Nothing was even making sense anymore. So many nasty things were said from all areas of the room. Never did she think her brother was capable of saying the harsh words, but then again, she didn’t know she was capable of saying such harsh things to her brother. And stupid Mark stood there the entire time, backing up Simon at any opportunity. Once the sun was setting and their voices were raw from shouting, Simon pointed at the door and said, “You need to leave.”

“Are you serious? We shouldn’t leave on this note, Simon,” she said, trying to put her hands on his shoulders but he swatted them away.

“Get out of here,” he said between gritted teeth and venom dripping from his tongue. She blinked back tears before turning to Mark desperately, trying evoke the tiniest bit of sympathy from
him. After all those years together, he had to know that she wasn’t evil…that she was just pursuing her dreams. Maybe a small part of him thought Simon was being unfair.

But instead he looked at the ground and muttered quietly, “I can’t believe you, Alice…I really thought you were better than this…”

“Fine,” she said, throwing her hands in the air before marching to the door. “Call me when you can have a mature conversation about this.”

“That won’t be happening,” Simon hollered down the hallway. “I’m so disgusted with you!”

“Well, I’m a little disgusted with you right now, too,” she shouted, pulling on her boots at the door. Just before she was about to exit the house, she spun around and marched towards Mark.

“And you, too, Mark.” She narrowed her eyes at him and shot up her middle finger. “Go. Fuck Yourself.”

Mark’s eyes widened in response.

“You’re dead to me!” She heard Simon shout but she had already slammed the door behind her.

She stormed down the sidewalk and hailed a cab around the corner, sobbing the entire way home. When the cab driver asked if she had just been dumped, she couldn’t even respond. Somehow she managed to keep the tears relatively controlled during the argument, but now the water gates opened and there was no stopping them.

As soon as she arrived at her house, she crawled onto her couch in the fetal position and sobbed. The sun was completely down and her stomach grumbled; she hadn’t eaten anything all day. But she felt too weak to move, so she continued to cry. Tears pooled in the crevice of the couch and she knew she should drag herself to her bed, but that seemed like an impossible task with her shaking legs and spinning head.

Simon hated her. She had no family left. At least not in Canada, but she was never that close with her parents anyways. It had always been her and Simon.

Memories flashed before her eyes. When she was 8 years old they would play cops and robbers at the playground. When no one asked her to dance at the 7th grade Halloween dance Simon stepped in and danced with her. When Isaac poured orange soda down Alice’s white shirt in 9th grade, Simon tripped him while he was walking down the stairs, giving him a broken arm. God, she did betray him. She was terrible. He would never do that to her. Not for any amount of money. She was selfish. And evil.

Then the memories of them both baking Christmas cookies every year flooded her brain. Oh god, what was she going to do for Christmas this year? It was just around the corner. They always spent it together, just the two of them, watching cheesy Christmas specials and getting stoned. She always made the turkey, but he always made the best mashed potatoes. He would put cream cheese in them to make them extra rich and they were so good…

But she fucked all that up now. It was gone.

She ruined her only family tie.

For stupid fucking money.

She was going to hell.
As if on cue, her heart began racing even faster. With every negative thought that rattled through her brain the more she hyperventilated. She finally shot up from the couch for the first time in hours, clutching her chest. The room was spinning. Her hands were tingling.

“Oh my god,” she said out loud. “Am I having a heart attack?”

Her vision became distorted. Everything developed a green tinge and the walls appeared to be breathing in sync with her racing heart. Her whole body went numb; frozen like she had been outside in the snow for hours. “You’re not having a heart attack, Alice,” she told herself, trying to calm down her racing breaths.

There was a knock on the door. She let out a loud whimper and pulled her arms around her knees, still clutching her heart. It had to be a motorcycle gang there to murder her. Definitely a motorcycle gang. Wait – why would a motorcycle gang be trying to murder her? It didn’t matter. All that mattered was that it was definitely going to happen.

Then the door opened. Fuck, she forgot to lock it. Clenching her eyes shut, she awaited her impending doom.

“Hey, Alice?” Isaac’s familiar voice rang through her ears. “I texted you a dozen times but you weren’t answering. I left my – Woah.”

When he turned the corner to see the distraught Alice, grasping at her heart with tear streaked skin, he paused. His eyes darted to the door, then back to Alice, then back to the door.

“What are you doing here?” she croaked out in between heavy breaths.

“Uhh…I left my portfolio and I need it for a meeting tomorrow…” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing!” She cried, and shoved her face in the couch’s pillow trying to hide her bloodshot eyes. “Just leave. I’ll give you the portfolio tomorrow morning.”

“Erm – okay…” he said, and Alice waited to hear the door closing behind him. After a minute without any shuffling footsteps or doors closing, she peered from the pillow to find him a few feet closer to her.

“What are you still doing here?” She asked, and his bright blue eyes were wide and his lips pursed together. It seemed he wasn’t too sure of that answer, himself. His eyes shifted to the door again, and he cursed silently under his breath, but his foot took a step closer to her.

“Um – are you okay?” he asked hesitantly, taking a seat on the coffee table in front of her. She shoved her face back in the pillow.

“I’m fucking peachy, Isaac,” she said with her voice muffled. “I’m pretty sure I’m having a heart attack, and I think a motorcycle gang is trying to kill me, and my arms are so numb they’re going to fall off, but yes! I’m doing great.”

“…What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Go away, Isaac.”

“I’m not gonna go away after you tell me you’re having a heart attack…and that there’s a motorcycle gang after you?” He looked over his shoulder to ensure there wasn’t a murderer behind him.
“Why not?” she asked. “You’re just stupid Isaac Hanes who’s just trying to manipulate me for some stupid high school revenge or something.”

“Hey, what the hell, Alice?” She felt his hand gently touch her back and she clenched her eyes shut as more tears poured out. “You know that’s not true…”

“I don’t know anything! I’m stupid and naïve and selfish…” she whimpered. “Can you just leave me alone so I can die in peace?”

“Fuck,” he said, and she felt his hands reach her head, gently weaving his fingertips through her hair. She couldn’t deny it was comforting. “I forgot you met with Simon today. Sorry.”

“You don’t need to be sorry. You can just leave.”

“Like I said, I’m not going to leave someone who says they’re going to have a heart attack,” he said in a gentle, hushed voice, his fingers still trailing through her red hair. “Can I ask you a question?”

“No.”

“Is there a history of heart disease in your family?”

She craned her neck towards him and gave him a sideways glance. “What the hell kind of question is that?”

“Just answer it, Alice.”

“No. There isn’t.”

“And there’s no reason for a – erm – motorcycle gang to be after you?”

“…Well, you never know…”

“Good,” he said, standing up go to the kitchen but his voice still rang through her ears. “The good news is that I really don’t think you’re having a heart attack. You’re not exactly the prime demographic.”

“What do you mean?”

He walked back to the coffee table and set a glass of water down, continuing to rub her back. “Alice, you’re a 25 year old woman of an average weight who doesn’t smoke – “

“But I am a smoker!” she cried, turning her head towards him for a split second before shoving it back in the pillow. “I’ve had three cigarettes this week.”

“I’m sure Blaise has had three cigarettes this hour and he’s not having heart attacks. Relax,” he said, and it sounded a bit like he was trying not to laugh at her dramatics. “If you really think you’re having one I’m taking you to the hospital. But I think you’re having a panic attack.”

“Well, whaddya know? We’ve got Doctor Isaac over here,” she said to her pillow and the sound of him laughing felt soothing. “I’ve never had a panic attack before…”

“Yeah…they suck,” he said. “Things with Simon didn’t go too well, did they?”

“Wow, now you’re a detective. Talk about a Jack of all trades.”
“It’s nice to know you’re sarcastic even when in a moment of crisis,” he said. “Come on. You should go to bed.”

“I can’t move…”

“I’ll guide you,” he said propping her up against her will and grabbing her hand. Her knees shook and she leaned against his shoulder the whole way to her bedroom until she collapsed on her bed. “My god, you’re shaking like crazy, woman.”

“I haven’t eaten all day…” she moaned. “Starving…”

“It’s almost 10 o’clock!” he cried. He pulled out his blue pill bottle and set it on her side table. “Here – if you want some Ativan, you can take one. Don’t tell Blaise…but it’ll definitely help.”

“Isaac?” She asked, staring at him weakly from her bed. “Why are you so good with all this?”

“Because I deal with this about once a week. Anxiety is a bitch,” he said, covering her up with a blanket. “Blaise has pretty well taught me a fool proof system so I guess you could thank him.” He turned on her television and switched the channel from the disturbing news to Seinfeld. “Between your impending sense of doom regarding the motorcycle gang and your numb arms, not to mention the fact that you just went through a traumatic experience, it was pretty obvious it was a panic attack.”

“Oh…” she said, and popped an Ativan under her tongue hoping it would relieve her of her current state. “Hey, don’t tell Blaise about this, okay?”

“I won’t, don’t worry,” he said, setting his stressball beside her. “I’m gonna get you some food, okay? Play around with the ball. I’ll be right back.”

“Thanks, Isaac…” she whispered but was sure he didn’t hear it. Even though it was the last thing she would expect, she was relieved Isaac showed up. She squeezed the ball in her hands. Isaac was surprisingly nurturing…who would have thought. It couldn’t have been the medication taking effect already, but she felt a warm, comforting tingling in the depths of her stomach. After about ten minutes, Isaac returned and sat beside her. Her nose was engulfed by the smell of eggs and toast and she smiled warmly at his gentle eyes…his features were unusually soft.

“I’m not much of a cook,” he mumbled. “But you need some food.”

She grabbed the plate and nibbled on the toast. She couldn’t take her eyes off him…the way his blonde hair fell in front of his eyes and how his smile grew when she accepted the food made the warming sensation in her stomach grow.

He cleared his throat. “Um…do you want to talk about it?”

She shook her head. “Not really…”

“Allright,” he nodded. He stood up from the bed and paced around the room with his hands in his pockets, and still, she couldn’t take her eyes off him. He paused and stared out her window, taking another deep breath before saying, “Listen – um. If you want out of the business, it’s fine. No hard feelings. I…I don’t want to cause a rift between you and Simon.”

She nodded, but remained silent. This was her out. She could leave the company scotch free and mend her relationship with Simon. But then she would be giving up everything she had been working so hard for. And she would be giving up her friendships…
She shook her head. “No. I want to stay working for you.”

His smile grew so large his blue eyes crinkled at the corners. “Great – good. I’m glad.”

“Isaac?” she asked, swallowing hard. He nodded, showing that he was listening. “You’re a pretty huge dickhead sometimes. And you really piss me off a lot. But…you’ve got a pretty good heart.”

His cheeks turned pink and he pursed his lips, staring at the ground. “Thanks, Alice.”

“You don’t seem like the kind of person to do this…you could have just left…”

“Don’t make it weird,” he laughed, pointing his finger at her. “Hey, umm. So, that pill will probably be kicking in pretty quick. Do you…want me to go? Or I can stay? It doesn’t matter.”

She bit her lip. “Um – you can stay. Or you can go. I don’t care.”

“It’s up to you,” he chuckled.

“Okay…” she fiddled with the stressball in her hand and smiled at the happy face printed on it. “You should stay…at least for a bit…”

“Okay, cool,” he smiled and nodded and sat on the bed, as far away from her as possible. But she was happy he was there. She set her plate on the side table and cuddled into her blankets, feeling soothed by the warm coziness. Her eyes became heavy as she was lulled to sleep by the sounds of Isaac quietly laughing at the television. She was really happy that he was there.

“Hey, Isaac?” She slurred out while on the brink of sleep.

“Yeah?”

“Mark is an idiot.”

He let out a low chuckle. “Told you so.”

Quickly, her remaining anxious thoughts faded and she was carried away into a dreamless slumber.
"Bloody hell, I love blondes."

"Thanks, man."

"Not you, you prat," Blaise said with a mouth full of hashbrowns. "Her."

Alice turned her face from her sausage and eggs to trace Blaise's gaze to a beautiful blonde waitress pouring coffee at a table with tired parents and a crying baby. She glowered at Blaise and returned to her breakfast, continuing to ignore the boys' conversation.

Isaac shrugged. "She's alright."

"Just alright?" Blaise asked looking dumbfounded. "That girl is a ten."

"Not my type."

"Then what is your type?"

Isaac's eyes scanned the retro breakfast diner until they landed on a tall, curvy woman with long wavy red hair laughing at a table with her friends. "That girl is pretty hot."

Blaise twisted around to observe the woman with raised eyebrows. "Damn, Isaac. Didn't realize you liked red heads." He turned back to smirk at Alice. "Did you hear that, Alice?"

"Mhm," Alice grunted with her cheek on her fist, not looking up from her plate even though her frizzy, unwashed hair was falling into it.

"I don't like all red heads," Isaac said, rolling his eyes. "I just like that specific red head."

"What's your type?" Blaise asked and nudged Alice in the ribs, receiving a scowl from her.

"Oh, jeez, I don't know," she said and stabbed her sausage fiercely with her fork, splitting it into small, mashed up chunks. "Maybe 'my type' is guys who aren't shallow enough to base their entire preference on something as meaningless as hair colour."

"Damn." Blaise frowned, slowly leaning away from her. "Why are you so pouty today?"

"I'm not pouty."

Isaac's eyes widened at the poor, demolished sausage. "You seem a little pouty."

"Fine." She slammed her fork on the table and squared her shoulders with Blaise. "I guess I'm pouty because it's seven in the morning on a Saturday and I'm already stuck listening to you two objectify women."

"Woah, relax. We are just joking around," Blaise said, raising his hands in the air. "Besides, you're the one who suggested we meet up early to get work done."

"Yeah, but the only reason I suggested it was because you insisted on spending last night watching movies at Emily's instead of working."

"Not to mention the fact that you barely spoke to her all night," Isaac said, trying to contain a quiet
"Hey, come on," Blaise said, tilting his head. "I tried talking to her but she ignores everything I say!"

"Maybe it's because you act like a moron around her," Alice mumbled bitterly and Blaise shot her a glare.

"I'm not that bad."

"Yes, you are," she said. "Anytime she walks into the room you turn into this babbling idiot and it's cringey."

"Fuck that's cold, Alice," Blaise said, rubbing his chest.

"Well, it's true," she said, dipping her toast in her sunny-side-up eggs. "I don't get it either. I've seen you talk to other girls and you're perfectly normal. The second Emily shows up you follow her around like a sad puppy."

"Well, if it makes you happy, I'm officially done with that shit," Blaise said before raising his hands in the air. "Sweeping declaration: I am officially over pursuing Emily Barnes."

"Thank fucking god," Alice mumbled. "You were embarrassing."

"Okay, what the hell is your problem?" Isaac set his coffee mug on the tabled and narrowed his eyes at Alice. "I know you're not a morning person, but this is ridiculous."

"Hey, I'm just being honest." She shrugged. "Do you disagree with me?"

"No, I completely agree that Blaise has been acting like an idiot -- "

"Hey!"

"- But what is with the hostility?" he asked. "There's definitely a better way to go about telling him."

"You're right, you're right. I'm sorry." She groaned and put her face in her hands. "You're not embarrassing, Blaise. Or an idiot."

"Thank you," he said proudly. "So, what's going on?"

Alice slumped over and rested her forehead on the table. "Simon is still ignoring all my calls. It's been ten days and he still hasn't talked to me. I've left him a million voicemails but he won't answer." She banged her forehead on the table a few times. "He hates me."

"Hey, hey, hey," Blaise said, putting his arm around her shoulder. "He doesn't hate you...he probably just needs some space. He'll come around eventually."

"No, he won't," she peeled herself off the table to poke at her battered and mutilated sausage now scattered around her plate. "He hates me and I deserve it."

"No, you don't," Isaac said and stretched out his arm to gently touch her wrist. "All you've done is accept a job. You haven't done anything wrong."

"Umm, yeah, okay." She rolled her eyes. "All I've done is accept a job, and spend all my free time with you, and lied about it for weeks. But sure, Isaac, I've done nothing wrong."

Isaac threw his hands in the air. "Well, I tried."
"And stupid fucking Mark accusing me of sleeping with you." She began viciously stabbing the remains of the pulverized sausage again. "That dickhead didn't give a fuck about me for three years but suddenly he thinks he has a say in who I sleep with."

"Okay, okay, calm down," Blaise said, slowly grabbing the fork and knife from her. "No need to ruin every sausage in the world just because one is a git."

"Whatever." She grabbed a napkin and crumpled it in her hands harder than necessary before slamming it on her plate. "It's done. I'm over it. Moving on."

"You sure about that?" Isaac asked, knitting his brow. "Because it's some pretty heavy stuff, it's alright if you're not ov – "

"Yep. I'm over it. I don't want to talk about it anymore."

"Alright then…" He said frowning at her as he grabbed his wallet from his pocket. "Well, I'm gonna go pay the bill then we can get to work."

Back at Alice's house, the three sat around her kitchen table in silence, each working on their individual tasks. Alice was coding at a mile a minute, Blaise poured over boring articles about 'behavioural activation' with a cigarette in hand, and Isaac was sending emails about...whatever it was that Isaac even did. Alice's eyes drooped as she spooned a teaspoon of milk and brown sugar in her sixth coffee of the day. Her foggy and exhausted brain was not in sync with her jittering leg. In an attempt to stay awake, she reached out and grabbed Blaise's cigarette without asking. Isaac slowly shook his head at her, but tightened his lips and said nothing.

Blaise sighed exasperatedly and set down his articles. "I'm fucking bored."

"Mhm." Alice and Isaac mumbled in unison without looking up from their task.

"Hey, Alice, question for you," Blaise said and she looked up from her laptop. "Would Simon be alright with you working for us if you agreed to spend less time with Isaac?"

Isaac shot him a glare, but remained silent. Alice, however, groaned loudly. "I thought I said I didn't want to talk about this anymore."

"Just the one question then I'm done, I promise."

"Even if I did agree to that," she said before smirking and pointing her thumb at Isaac, "this guy is gonna follow me to hell at this point."

Isaac winked at her.

"Good point," Blaise said, grabbing the cigarette back from Alice. "Isaac is quite the needy friend."

"I'm not needy," he pouted.

"Oh, really?" Blaise asked leaning towards Isaac. "Then pray tell; why is it that you are choosing to work here, with us, when you've got the keys to an entire office building, not to mention an incredibly luxurious apartment."

Isaac shrugged. "Moral support?"

"You're needy, mate."

Knock, Knock, Knock.
"Oh shit," Alice cursed, hopping off from her chair to run to the door. "That's probably my neighbours. I completely forgot to water their plants when they were on vacation!"

When she opened the door, she noticed the familiar giant red diesel truck parked in the driveway before she noticed the bright green eyes and crooked smile she spent nearly a decade lusting over.

It was Mark.

She blinked three times.

Just as he opened his mouth she slammed the door in his face.

Her eyes were as large as saucers as she gaped at the door, her body paralyzed, as she waited for the sound of leaving footsteps.

*Knock, knock, knock.*

She cursed at the door but begrudgingly opened it and mustered all the willpower in her body to refrain from shoving him into his stupid truck. "What do you want?"

He shoved his hands in his pockets and drove his toe into the ground, staring sheepishly at her welcome mat. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Is Simon still mad at me?"

"…Yes."

"Buh-bye."

She tried to slam the door shut again, but before she could he wedged his foot in between the crack. "Come on, Alice. Give me five minutes."

"Why should I?" She asked. "So you can accuse me of sleeping with people as if it is any of your business?" She tapped her finger against her jaw thoughtfully. "Oh wait, no. I bet it's so you can call me stupid and naïve for pursuing a real career, right?"

"N-no," he stumbled out. "I wanted to apologize. After having some time to think about it I've realized I was kind of a jerk…"

"How shocking."

"I think we both, Simon and I, overreacted a little." He ran his hand through his dark shaggy hair. "Well, maybe not Simon. I don't know. He obviously has his reasons for being mad, but both of us should have given you a chance to explain. We shouldn't have flipped out so much."

"And Simon isn't having any of these ground-breaking revelations?"

"No…" His eyes darted away from her and back to the ground. "He's pretty much locked himself in his room. But he's still going to work, at least?"

"Well, that's good," she said and leaned against the doorframe, folding her arms. Despite her cool exterior, it really was a huge relief. She was worried he was going to go on another month long drinking bender.

"Yeah…so umm, I was hoping maybe we could talk?" he said hopefully. "Do you think I could come ins - ?"
"Aaaaliiice," Isaac called as he strolled into the living room and Alice winced. Anything that followed would surely be uncomfortable. "You're all out of coffee and Blaise is fading fast, we gotta go get so – Oh." He stopped dead in his tracks when he noticed Mark, his jaw slowly dropping. "Hi, Mark."

Tension filled the room as both Mark and Alice's eyes bored into Isaac, anticipating his next move. Isaac stood frozen, his eyes shifting between Mark and Alice, as if he himself did not know how to respond to the awkward situation. When Mark's shaking hand slowly balled into a fist, finger by finger, Isaac's lips curled upwards. With one last look at Alice, who was clenching her jaw and slowly shaking her head at him, Isaac casually leaned against the other side of the doorframe.

Just as any professional would do, he politely held out his hand and said, "Good to see you, Mark. How have you been?"

Mark responded by glaring at the friendly handshake with contempt. His eyes flashed red with anger and Alice briefly wondered what was making him more mad. Was it the fact this was the first time he had seen Isaac since what he had done to Simon? Or was it because he truly believed him and Alice were sleeping together? Regardless of what it was, Alice was sure Mark's fingernails had to be cutting into his palms because his knuckles were completely white.

After too many moments of rejection passed, Isaac pulled his hand back and gave a curt nod. "Alright, then. Good talk."

Mark turned his shoulders to Alice so he couldn't see Isaac and asked, "Is he actually here all the time?"

"No, no, not all the ti – "

"All the time, man," Isaac said and swooped behind Alice to maintain eye contact with Mark. He rested his elbow above Alice on the doorframe and his body loomed over her, almost protectively. He was deliberately trying to give the worst impression.

Not in the mood to stir the pot any more than it had been, she elbowed Isaac hard in the ribcage, and shoved him a foot away from her. "Blaise is here, too, Mark. Seriously, all we do is work."

Mark swallowed hard and tightened his jaw, but reluctantly, he slowly nodded his head as if showing the faintest understanding.

Isaac strutted back to her side and nudged her shoulder, giving her a coy smile. "Well, come on now. We drink a lot, too."

"Will you just fuck off for, like, two seconds?" she snapped between gritted teeth, grasping the air with her hands.

Isaac sighed loudly but threw his palms in the air to surrender. "Fine, fine. All I was trying to do was say hello to an old peer, but apparently, I'm not welcome."

"No. You're not," Mark spat the first words he addressed to Isaac since their reunion.

Isaac's smile tightened and wheels spun above his head as if he was deciding whether to continue the quarrel or not. Slowly, he lowered his gaze to Alice, who's face had transformed from a warning glare to a frown; her brown eyes wide and pleading. He shifted his eyes back to Mark for one second before bowing his head and said, "Well, have a great day, Mark."

As soon as Isaac disappeared into the kitchen she let out a huge breath of relief and joined Mark outside, closing the door behind her to ensure their privacy. She felt her cheeks get even warmer and
she pulled the ends of her hair. "Oh my god, Mark. I'm so sorry. He's such an asshole."

"That's what we've been trying to tell you," he said with a relieved tone.

"No. I've known all along," she said flatly. "My tolerance has simply grown."

"Um…alright."

She rubbed her shoulder as she stared at the loose threads on his worn out sweater with his company logo printed on the front. The bitter morning air was cold enough that you could see both their breaths from their mouths, and it reminded her of smoke. She looked at her door longingly, imagining Blaise sitting at her kitchen table smoking, and tried to brainstorm an excuse to get out of the uncomfortable situation.

"Alice, I want to take you out for dinner. Tomorrow."

Her neck snapped towards him so fast her head hurt. "Huh?"

"I want to hear about everything. Your new job, your life, I – I'm really happy for you."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes," he said, putting both hands on her shoulders and stepped a little closer, a small grin pulling at his lips. "A really fancy place, too."

"Umm…" She slowly peeled his hands off her shoulder and stepped away, knitting her brow. "Why?"

He sighed loudly and shoved his hands in his pocket, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. "Because…because you yelling at me last week made me realize how god awful I've treated you for so long."

"You don't say."

"And it made me realize how badly I don't want to lose you," he said. "I need you in my life, Alice. You mean everything to me."

Woah.

Her eyes widened and the air got trapped in her throat as she leaned against the door, wishing it was a chair. She rubbed her temples firmly but she couldn't take her eyes away off him, as if she was unsure his emerald green eyes were just a hallucination that would disappear at any second.

There in front of her was the man who she shared her first kiss with, who she lost her virginity to, the only person she's ever said 'I love you' to…and he was finally saying exactly what she wished he would say for years.

But something wasn't right.

She bit her lip and quietly asked, "Are you sure you're not just jealous of Isaac?"

"What? No!" he said. "This is about me and you. Doesn't involve him at all."

*There's no way that's completely true.*

She stayed silent and stared at the ground. Why was this so hard to answer? Sure, she may have been
angry with him earlier, but that didn't erase a decade's worth of feelings. Even if it took being jealous of Isaac to cause Mark's revelation, it wasn't like she had never tried to use jealousy to make Mark want her before. It just so happens that this specific unintentional time was what worked.

"Well?" he asked as his foot began tapping impatiently and his body started to shiver.

"I'm thinking."

Regardless of the weird uncertain feeling in her stomach, going out with Mark would be good. She would be able to tell him how innocent her work is, stress the fact that her and Isaac are completely platonic, and Mark would reiterate everything back to Simon. Yes! If Mark believes that Alice isn't on a train to the dark side then Simon will, too. Or, at least there's a better chance he will. There was just one small thing…

"Umm," she started, "is it okay if we just go as friends?"

His smile faltered for a split second but quickly returned. "Sure, yeah. Anything, Alice."

"Cool," she said. "Thanks."

"I'll pick you up tomorrow at eight, then?"

"Yeah, sure."

When he pulled Alice in for a hug, which she hesitantly returned, it evoked the strangest feeling of unsettled butterflies. Half of her wanted to maintain the metre distance between them, but the other half never wanted his hands to leave her waist…

She watched him hop into his truck and drive down the street before she closed the door. Sighing, she leaned her back against the door and closed her eyes, trying to figure out what the hell just happened. Her knees felt wobbly. Mark just asked her out on a date. She should be thrilled. What was going on?

The sound of laughter from the kitchen snapped her out of her thoughts, and her confusion was quickly replaced by anger. She stomped into the kitchen and glared menacingly at Isaac, who had his hands clasped behind his head as he leaned back in his chair, unaware of her presence.

"…you should have seen his face, man. He was so pissed off."

She stormed behind him and smacked him upside the back of his head, causing him to jump up from surprise, and she screamed, "What the hell is wrong with you!?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked, rubbing the back of his head and Blaise snickered quietly, folding his hands as he watched with amusement.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about," she said, shoving his shoulders. "Why did you have to do that?"

"I don't know what you mean," he said sweetly. "I believe I was a perfect gentleman. He was the one being rude."

"Oh, fuck off, Isaac," she spat with her hands on her hips. "You were purposely egging him on."

"I was being polite."

"Do you have any idea how bad that makes me look?" She pressed her fingers to her chest. "I'm
trying to convince them that they have nothing to worry about, then you come sauntering up all, 'Ohhh, hurr hurr, I'm Isaac and we get drunk all the time.'"

"What can I say?" he said, propping his feet on a chair, leaning back further in his seat. "I'm a firm believer in honesty."

She turned her back to him and pinched the bridge of her nose. "You are such an immature prick."

"Okay, so, before you murder Isaac and I'm stuck burying the body," Blaise said, smirking at Isaac. "What did Mark even want?"

"Oh, nothing," she said, shaking her head and plopping down on the chair beside Blaise. "Just that he doesn't want me out of his life or some stupid thing like that. We are going out for dinner tomorrow."

"Wait – what?" Isaac said as he pulled his feet off the chair, sitting up straight with his cocky grin growing even larger. "You're going out with that tool again?"

"Okay, first of all, he's not a tool," she said, glaring at Isaac. "Second of all, I'm not 'going out with him'."

Blaise's hazel eyes lit up as he laughed, "If you're going out for dinner with him, you're going out with him."

"Well, yes, technically I'm going out with him. But it's not a date or anything," she huffed, sliding deeper into her chair.

"Aww," Blaise said, leaning over to pinch Alice's cheeks. "Alice has a date!"

"It's not a date!" She swatted Blaise's hands away from her, shooting a dark scowl in his direction. "Trust me. I told him we were going as friends. It's not a damn date."

"Oh please," Blaise said. "If you have to tell someone you're going just as friends, you know it's not just as friends."

"That's not true," she said.

"Yes, it is," he said. "When you go out for supper with Isaac and I you don't specify it's just as friends, because it really is just as friends."

"I can't believe you're going out with him," Isaac said, tutting his tongue as he shook his in disbelief. "What ever happened to the whole 'Mark is an idiot' speech you've been spouting all week?"

"Seriously, Isaac?" She asked, raising an eyebrow. "You are literally the last person in the world who should be judging me on who I choose to forgive."

"Oh, no, no. I'm not judging." Isaac stood from his chair to grab a glass of water before leaning against the fridge, shrugging his shoulders. "I think it's adorable."

"You do?" Blaise and Alice both asked at the same time.

"Oh, yeah, I can see it now." He raised eyes to the ceiling with a dreamlike smile on his face. "You'll be sixty years old, rolling his joints for him because he will have burnt up all his brain cells by then."

"Oh my god, shut up," she said. "The only thing you ever hold against him is that he smokes weed and he doesn't even smoke that much."
"Now that is adorable," Isaac stepped behind her chair to squeeze her shoulders. "Standing up for your lover. How romantic."

Blaise's body was shaking with laughter when Alice's face was steadily growing more red. She tilted her head to meet Isaac's eyes shining brightly down on her, his hands still on her shoulders, and the corners of his lips curled upwards in anticipation of her response. Instead, she bit her tongue and decided not to feed into his argument anymore.

"So, when's the wedding?" Blaise asked, rubbing his hands together and showing all his bright white teeth. Alice's neck snapped towards Blaise with daggers in her eyes, but once again chose against replying and instead jumped off the chair, grabbing a cigarette from Blaise's pack. His smile slid off and his forehead crinkled. "Hey! You're gonna have to start paying for your own, soon."

"No. I'm not a smoker until I start buying my own packs."

"Sure. Please, continue bumming all the smokes you want from me," Blaise said, shoving the rest of the pack towards her. "So long as you don't identify as a smoker, that's all that matters."

"I bet Mark doesn't like cigarettes," Isaac said, shaking his head disapprovingly. "Better quit before he finds out."

"Argh!" Alice cried before stomping towards her patio doors. She turned her neck towards them with blazing eyes and sternly said, "I am taking a twenty minute uninterrupted break from both of you. Please leave me alone."

Blaise whispered loudly enough so she could hear, "Bet ya she's gonna text Emily to gush about her date."

"It's not a date!" She screamed one last time before slamming the glass doors behind her. She lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply, feeling her body loosen for the first time since Mark showed up. Finally, she had some peace and quiet and could reflect on everything that happened.

She exhaled, watching the smoke peacefully blow away in the wind.

Mark did hate cigarettes.

She should quit.

As her mind briefly envisioned herself sitting across Mark in a candlelit restaurant her stomach fluttered. She glanced at the elegant, barely smoked cigarette between her fingertips, and smiled fondly before tossing it in an empty beer can. Fresh air was just as nice, too.
Hi guys! Thanks so much for all the kudos! If you like it, please leave me a review and let me know what you think. :) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Eight o'clock was approaching far too soon.

Alice was wrestling with a lacy white dress she hadn't worn since her second year of college. She hopped up and down, sucking in her stomach as tightly as she could, and stretched out the bunched up fabric around her waist.

"Please fit. Please fit," she pleaded, jumping in the air. She gave one last forceful pull, and, "Oh, thank god."

A huge breath of relief escaped her lips when the dress's material relaxed down her hips, falling just above her knees. She smiled victoriously in the mirror. Even if it meant holding her breath for half the evening, she still fit into her college clothes!

She ran her fingers along the delicate lace and frowned. Was this dress too much? It certainly wasn't something she would wear to a simple dinner with a friend. She scrunched her nose and leaned closer to the mirror, examining a patch of acne that appeared overnight. She tutted her tongue; twenty-five years old and still dealing with acne. If Mark was just a friend, she shouldn't care.

She grabbed her powdered foundation to brush along the inconvenient blemish and sighed. No matter which way she spun it, Mark was not just her friend. Her entire dating history, with the exception of a handful of random hookups, could be summarized in one word: Mark. For the first time ever he was the one pining after her…she had all the power. Even though this was something she had dreamed about; she was quickly realizing she did not like this kind of pressure.

She spritzed a third layer of hairspray in her long red curls.

"Oh, shit! Way too much!" she whined, scowling at the perfect combination of greasy and crunchy curls. "What am I doing? Why didn't I invite Emily over?"

Quickly, she ran her fingers through her hair, trying to create that tousled, effortless, beachy look she was never able to perfect.


She yelped and turned to the clock. It was only 7:40. Mark was twenty minutes early.

Her fingers were knotted in her hair and she cursed at her reflection. She was not physically or mentally prepared for this. He knocked again and she rushed to untangle her fingers from her hair. She shouldn't have tried to fix it; now it looked like a rat's nest.

She quickly grabbed a pair of matching white flats from her closet as he knocked. Since when did Mark get so impatient?
"Coming!" she yelled, even though she knew he wouldn't hear. She rushed around her bedroom in search of her purse. She had just seen it two minutes ago. When she shook her purple duvet in the air, her purse and a black worn out zippered sweater tumbled out. She paused to run her fingers along the small rip at the edge of the sleeve. She had never seen it before…it looked cozy, though. Maybe she should wear it. She already looked like a train wreck, may as well go all the way.

The repeated knocking at the door snapped her out of her thoughts. She threw the sweater on the closet floor before running to the door. Before opening the door, she took one last deep breath and smoothed out her hair. This was it.

She opened the door with a chipper smile on her face.

The smile slid off her face and she threw her hands in the air exasperatedly.

"Oh, what the fucking hell, Isaac?"

Wearing an uncharacteristically baggy grey sweater and black sweatpants, looking more pale than usual; he sighed in relief upon seeing her and breezed right past her saying, "Thank god. You're here."

He immediately walked down her hallway to her bedroom. She cursed at the air and slammed the door shut before quickly following his lead to her bedroom with her hands on her hips.

"Isaac, seriously, what the hell?"

On his knees searching under her bed, he pulled out several dirty socks and bunches of loose paper. She quickly picked up the socks and tossed them in another pile of dirty laundry, briefly wishing she lived a more organized lifestyle. Although, she wasn't prepared for Isaac to be sifting through her belongings. Once again, much louder, she asked, "Isaac. What. Are. You. Doing?"

"I left my stress ball here."

She gawked at him. "You've got to be kidding me."

"No, why?" He finally looked at her for more than a second and she had a chance to notice his blonde hair sticking up in all directions. Dark circles traced his eyes and it appeared as if he hadn't gotten a wink of sleep all night.

Combined with his disheveled outfit, he kind of looked like shit.

"If I don't find it, I'm going to fuck everything up," he said.

When he avoided her eyes by staring at the floor, she realized Isaac wasn't in the right state of mind. She wanted to comfort him, tell him everything was going to be okay...but the clock was ticking. It was 7:45

He gave up searching under the bed and began opening her dresser drawers, to which Alice stormed over to slam shut, hissing, "Jesus, Isaac, have a sense of privacy."

"Sorry," he said, messing up his hair even more before running to her pillows, tossing them in the air in distress. "I know I left it here that day you went crazy."

"The day I went crazy?" She asked pressing her hands to her chest. "You should look at yourself right now."
"I know, I know," he said, sighing loudly when he discovered the ball wasn't hidden in the bed. "I need it for tomorrow. I've got this huge meeting and I...I just need it, okay? Have you seen it?"

"Erm..." she bit her fingernails and looked away from him. "No...not since that night."

"You lost my ball?" he cried, resembling a young boy who just dropped his ice cream cone.

"I-I didn't lose it!" she said. "I'm sure it's here somewhere...but can't you just buy a new one?"

"No. This one was lucky."

She slapped her forehead.

"Isaac, you're hardly a superstitious person," she said, beginning to search her own drawers for the ball. The quicker they found it, the quicker he would leave. "There's no such thing as a lucky stress ball."

"This one is, I'm telling you!" He argued from the other side of the room, sifting through her box of vinyl records from her closet. He paused to pull one out and examine it. "Huh. You like Radiohead?"

"Yeah. They're one of my favorites."

"Cool. They're up there for me, too," he said, shoving the record back in the box and beginning to search the rest of the closet. "But as I was saying, this ball is fucking lucky. Since I bought it only good things have been happening."

"Yeah, but it's been lost for nearly two weeks and you've been fine without it," she said, shoving him aside, so he wouldn't be searching through her dirty laundry.

He turned his head to her and shrugged. "I've had backups."

She paused with her arms full of laundry and raised her brow. "You have backup stress balls?"

"Yes."

"You're so weird," she said in disbelief.

"And you're completely normal." He rolled his eyes.

"So, why can't you just use one of your backups if they've worked so well all along?" she asked, returning to the search.

"Because this meeting is important."

"Aren't all your meetings important?"

"Not really."

She began rifling through a different laundry basket. She frowned when she pulled out a large pair of men's dress pants. "Are these yours!?"

"Oh, hey," he said, grabbing the pants and grinning widely. "I've been looking for those!"

She gaped at him and shook her head, but continued the search while talking. "Why are your pants in my bedroom?"
"I dunno," he shrugged. "I change my clothes here a lot."

"Ugh, whatever," she said, deciding to choose her battles and focus on the first topic. "So what makes this meeting so important?"

He sighed and sat on the ground, pressing his palms against his eyes. His foot was uncontrollably fidgeting and a few beads of sweat were dripping down his neck. "I'm not supposed to tell you."

"Why not?"

"It's confidential, and I'm your boss. I shouldn't be sharing any information with you."

"Alright, well, that's fine then," she said and glanced at her clock. It was 7:48. "You don't have to tell me. Let's just find your ball and get you out of here."

"Fine, I'll tell you," he said, as if Alice dragged it out of him, making her shake her head. "The meeting involves your app. Basically, I'll be meeting with the representatives of the public health care system, and they're deciding if they will allow ordering prescriptions through the app or not. So, basically, this meeting determines whether this app will even be happening."

She sat on her knees beside him, her eyes bugging out of her head. Without thinking she slapped him on the arm. "Isaac, what the hell!?"

"What?" he asked, wincing as he rubbed his arm.

"Should I be freaking out about this, too?"

"What? No!" he said. "Don't worry, I have this all under control."

"It doesn't look like it," she said, returning to her closet to dig through the mess, desperately hoping to find that stupid yellow ball. "Can't you just pop a Xanax beforehand and woo them like you always do?"

"It's not that simple."

"Yeah, probably not when you're in this state!" She said. "Lord only knows what you're on right now."

"Oh, shut up, Alice."

"Seriously, have you slept at all since I last saw you?"

"Umm…" he rubbed the corners of his eyes, "Maybe twenty minutes on the cab ride over?"

"Well, that's not helping anything. At least you were smart enough not to drive," she said and glanced at her clock again. It was 7:55. "Isaac, I'm sorry. I want to help you, I really do. But Mark is going to be here any second and I need you to leave."

"Ohh, right." For the first time since he arrived a smirk pulled at his lips. "Forgot about that."

"Yes, and you cannot be here when he is, I'm sorry." As a last-ditch attempt, she grabbed him by the cheeks so his lips were smushed together, pulled his face close to hers, and their noses were nearly touching. With the most authoritarian voice she could muster, she said, "Isaac. You are the single most charismatic and charming human being I have ever met. You have seriously charmed the hell out of me, and I hated you more than anything else in the world. You. Don't. Need. That. Stupid. Ball."
His eyes were wide in shock of Alice's sudden assertiveness and he gulped hard. Just as it looked like he was about to nod his head in agreement, his eyes lit up and zeroed in on a spot underneath her dresser. He dove for it, shoving his arm through the narrow crevice. After a couple grunts and curses, he pulled his arm out with glory. He squished the yellow happy-face ball in his hand, holding it triumphantly over his head. "I got it!"

"Great, congratulations," she said, pulling him up by his hand. "Really, I wish you could stay to celebrate, but you need to get the hell out of here. And please go to bed at some point."

He appeared to not match her sense of urgency, and instead, smiled fondly at the ball. "Wanna hear something cool about this thing?"

"Maybe some other time," she said, trying to guide him out of the bedroom.

He looked down at her and held the ball between two fingers just under her nose. "I bought this on the day I convinced you to go for drinks with me," he said, biting his lip to contain his growing smile. "Been lucky ever since."

Aww, that's actually really sweet.

But it was 7:58.

*Please be late, Mark.*

"Well, thanks for your help," he said, bowing his head. "I'd better let you get to your date."

"For the millionth time --" she said and her nostrils flared as she stomped the ground. "It's not a date!"

"Hmm." He stepped towards her, tapping his finger against his chin. "If that's what you wear when you're not going on a date," she could have sworn he licked his lips before smirking, "then I would kill to see what you would wear on a real date."

7:59

"ARGH!" She screamed and ran to her closet, digging through her clothes until she found the same ugly, but comfortable, black sweater she found earlier and pulled it on. She held her arms out wide and said, "There! Is this better?"

Isaac covered his mouth to stifle a growing laughter, but kept his eyes wide and nodded. "Mhm. That's perfect."

"What the hell is so funny?"

8:00

He gently ran his fingers down her arm until they reached the rip at the edge of the sleeve and smirked. "That's my sweater."

She gasped and stomped her foot on the ground, folding her arms tightly across her chest. "Why can't you be like any other normal person and leave your clothes at your own damn house?"

"I don't always leave them here!"

"You leave everything here!" She lifted her fingers up and began checking them off. "You leave your portfolios, you leave your beer, you leave your ties, one time you even left your damn car here for like a week before picking it up! That's fucked up, dude!"
He chuckled and she huffed loudly, not in the mood for his apparent amusement. He moved his hands up her shoulders and leaned his lips to her ear, whispering ever so quietly, "It's because I like your house."

8:01

She kept her arms folded and her scowl was still permanently fixed. He pulled his face away from her ear and she stared into his blue eyes with contempt. But when they flashed that mischievous sparkle they always seemed to do, she couldn't help but smile a little. His fingers moved from the sleeves of the black sweater and quickly rubbed against her bare shoulders, creating goosebumps down her arm. She wondered if that was an accident or on purpose. Cinnamon was coming off his breath and she remembered how much she liked that smell.

His eyes trailed down to her lips and –

"Ahem."

8:02

Alice almost threw up when Mark was standing in her bedroom doorway. She glanced down at Isaac's hands, still firmly pressed on her shoulders. He didn't have the same sly, amused look he had yesterday upon seeing Mark; instead, his eyes were bulging out of his head and it appeared he was at a loss for words. She shoved him away with all her force and clasped her hands behind her back, batting her eyes in an attempt to appear innocent.

"M-Mark," she stammered out. "H-how long have you b-been here?"

Mark was eerily deadpanned as his eyes scanned the torn apart room; clothes, pillows, and blankets littered the floor. Rather than clenching his fists, or even asking why her room was destroyed, he simply shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Five seconds?"

She let out a breath of relief. Five seconds wasn't too bad.

He cleared his throat and raised his eyes at Isaac. "Am I interrupting something?"

"No, no, no!" Alice said, running to Mark to look him straight in the eyes. "Isaac was just…"

"I was looking for this," Isaac interrupted and lifted the stress ball from his pocket. "Sorry. I...I forgot you guys were hanging out tonight. I wouldn't have come over had I remembered."

Alice melted a little at Isaac's sincerity. This would be the perfect moment to try to get under Mark's skin, but instead, he stood several feet away from the two, politely biting his tongue.

Mark didn't appreciate the great stride Isaac was taking. He scoffed, "You came over here to look for a toy?"

"Well, it's not exactly a toy…" he mumbled, looking away, probably to refrain from rolling his eyes.

"Yeah, he just popped by fifteen minutes ago," Alice said, trying to steady her breaths. "But, now umm…"

"I'm gonna go," Isaac said, and Alice sighed in relief that he was being cooperative for once.

"Probably a good idea," Mark said.

As Isaac walked towards them to leave the room, Mark’s eyes followed every move he made. So,
when Isaac stopped right in front of Mark, unsurprisingly, Mark reverted to the clenched-jaw-balled-fists-Mark she was seeing way too much of. But even she was glowering at him. *Come on, Isaac, you're so close. Don't be a dick now...*

Isaac clasped his hand on Mark's shoulder and pointed his finger at him warningly, with a playful grin pulling at his lips. "Now you treat this girl right, you hear me?" he said. "She's a fuckin' delight."

And with that, he strolled out her bedroom. Mark knitted his brows. He was preparing to knock Isaac out for saying something derogatory, not be lectured as if Isaac was a stern father. He gawked at the spot where Isaac was once standing but shook his head to ground him back to reality.

Alice let out a huge breath and gently touched his forearm. "Mark, I'm genuinely so, so, so, sorry. I swear, he wasn't supposed to be – "

Mark held up his hand. "Alice, It's fine."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I don't care," he said, running a hand through his shaggy brown hair. "I don't understand why he was here, but quite frankly, I'm not about to let it ruin my evening with you."

She looked at him through her lashes, as butterflies overtook her body. Maybe Mark was truly showing some form of understanding towards her friendship with Isaac.

"Thanks, Mark," she said while biting her lips, trying to hide her giddy smile.

"So, should we get going?"

She nodded and he guided her out the house with his hand on her lower back. After they hopped into the truck, he looked down at her outfit and smiled. "You look very beautiful tonight."

"Oh, thanks," she blushed. Mark was the only person in the entire world who had ever called her beautiful. Even though she heard it from him a thousand times, it always made her blush.

"I like the sweater," he said, smiling as he shoved the keys in the ignition. "It's very...Alice."

Her eyes widened in horror as she remembered she was still wearing his sweater. She couldn't wear Isaac's sweater while going out with Mark! That had to be some kind of terrible omen. But at the same time, she couldn't just take it off right now...that would look suspicious. Or was she just being paranoid? She sighed and tightened the sweater around herself. Later on, she would subtly take it off and maybe even throw it in a garbage can. It would serve Isaac right for leaving his clothes lying around her house.

But for now, she snuggled deeper into the sweater. It really was cozy.

"Thanks," she said before rubbing her hands together excitedly. "So, which fancy restaurant are you taking me to?"

"Actually, change of plans," Mark said, shooting her a wink. "I've got an even better surprise for you."

Chapter End Notes
Please review and follow! I'm your typical millennial who craves validation!
"Are you planning on murdering me, Mark?" Alice asked as she twirled her hair, smiling brightly at Mark. They had just driven past the outskirts of the city, venturing into the endless sea of golden canola fields glowing in the sunset. He smirked down at her, but kept his mouth shut. If she had been on a date with anyone else and they "surprised" her by taking her on a road trip out of the city, she would be terrified for her life.

"I promise I'm not going to murder you," he said. "Too many people know we are together; I would have no alibi. I'd be the number one suspect!"

"Well, I'm thankful I can depend on the law to protect me," she said, giggling back at him. She opened the windows of the truck and breathed in the fresh, clean air. Sure, she loved the city. She loved the fast paced lifestyle, the anonymity, the endless amounts of late night food...but it was so nice to escape once in a while. To inhale air that wasn't smoggy and to remember that there are natural trees; not the trees in the city that are planted after making specific calculations to maximize their authenticity.

Mark turned up the volume on the radio; a loud, twangy country song panged Alice's ears and she scowled. "Are you ever going to get tired of listening to this stuff?"

"Are you ever going to learn to love it?" Mark asked, flashing his crooked smile. "No, sorry. I should correct that; are you ever going to learn to love it again?"

She stuck out her tongue. "Nope."

"Aww, come on," he said, nudging her shoulder. "I'll never forget you standing at the very front of the rodeo, wearing that red cowgirl hat, singing along to Toby Keith…"

She giggled. "What can I say? I've grown out of that phase of my life."

"That's a shame, because you're going to be hearing a lot more of it from now on," he laughed and turned the volume louder. She sighed and rolled her eyes, but couldn't stop from smiling to herself. *Hearing a lot more of it from now on, eh?*

"So, seriously, where are you taking me?" she asked, peering at her unfamiliar surroundings. They had already passed all the recognizable landmarks and the city had turned into a distant speck in the distance.

"If I tell you, it'll ruin the surprise," he said. "Don't worry, we are almost there."

She relaxed into her seat and inhaled the combination of men's body spray and weed. While the smell was inherently unappealing, it gave her a nostalgic comfort. She craned her neck to observe the back seat and smiled. Way too many good memories took place on those seats…

He turned left onto a gravel range-road and travelled for a few more minutes before stopping. She scrunched her nose at the surroundings. All there was were some trees, a couple hay bales, and a broken picnic table that had been slowly disintegrating from the seasons. He pulled out the keys and hopped out of the truck, quickly running to her side, to open her door and hold out his hand.
"M'lady," he said, bowing his head as he delicately grabbed her hand. She laughed and hopped down the steep jump from the seat to the ground.

"I feel like I'm in a redneck fairy tale," she said with a wink. She didn't let go of his hand. "So… where are we, exactly?"

"You don't remember?"

She frowned and shook her head, hoping she wasn't going to offend him. Thankfully, he simply laughed and pulled her over to one of the oak trees. "Do you remember this?"

She shrugged and shook her head.

He smiled and pulled her closer, grabbing her hand, and resting it upon a worn out engraving on the tree. She gasped. It was faded, but still legible; a carved heart with the initials 'A + M' with a bow going through the heart.

"Oh my god, this is still here!?" She said in awe, leaning closer to examine the small details. "We were, what? Eighteen when we made this?"

Mark leaned against the oak tree, smiling warmly at Alice. "Yep."

She traced the heart with her finger tips and giggled. "God, we were so lame."

"I don't think it's lame," he said. "I think it's romantic."

"Well, of course it's romantic," she said, sticking her tongue out at him. "But in that cheesy, high school, puppy love kind of way."

"Well, that's what we were," he said, putting his arm around her shoulder.

"Yeah, I guess we were," she said, leaning into his arm, tracing the heart one last time. She admired the rest of the area through different lenses. She gasped and ran towards the battered picnic table. "Oh my gosh, and this is where you set up all those tea lights and we had a picnic! That was for my birthday, wasn't it?"

Mark nodded with his hands behind his back. "Sure was."

"Aww…" she brushed off a layer of dust off the table with her palm. "You used to bring your guitar out here and sing me songs..."

"I could still do that, you know," he said hopefully, massaging the nape of his neck.

Her stomach lurched. God, this was definitely a date. Stupid Blaise and Isaac being right. She felt a shiver go down her spine and she cuddled into the warm sweater – Oh fuck, why am I still wearing Isaac's sweater? Oh, well, too cold to take it off now…

Thankfully, there was a prime moment for a conversation change. Her eyes bugged out at a flattened patch of soil and ran towards it. Grinning mischievously, she scooped up a pile of dirt in her hands, letting it slowly seep out like an hourglass. "Hey, Mark?"

"Yeah?"

"Is there where we…you know…for the first time?" She wiggled her eyebrows and Mark laughed, skipping towards her.
"Sure is," he smiled fondly at the patch of dirt. "I mean, I was a gentleman and put a blanket down, but yep. This is the spot."

"Wow," she said, taking a seat on the ground, not caring about dirtying her polished white dress. The sun was almost completely set and a few stars began shimmering through the clouds. God, she missed the stars. The light pollution from the city made it almost impossible to catch a glimpse of the constellations. She vowed to leave the city at least once a month to stargaze; maybe Isaac would want to go. And Blaise, of course.

Her eyes scanned the once foreign area, but now, she was overwhelmed with nostalgia. She sighed and tightened the sweater for warmth. "This place has so many memories. I can't believe how often we came here."

"Well, it was either that or being sneaky in my parent's basement," Mark said and she immediately turned bright red.

"Ugh!" She threw her face in hands. "Do you...do you remember that time when your mom walked in on me giving you a blow job?"

Mark's whole body shook with laughter and he wiped away a tear. "How could I forget? Even though I got grounded for a week, it was still one of the funniest things ever."

"Maybe for you!" Alice cried. "She hated me after that."

"Oh, my mom always loved you."

"Not after that, trust me!" She argued while smiling. "She wouldn't look at me for months. I remember one Thanksgiving, instead of asking me to pass the gravy, she literally stood up from the other side of the table to grab it herself. Just to avoid speaking to me."

"Yeah...I guess mom was always a little uptight."

"Just a smidge," she said, pressing her thumb and index fingers together.

"I've got another surprise," he said before rushing to his truck. She felt relaxed around Mark. All the nerves she previously felt had disappeared. She hadn't even thought about smoking once!

Wait, she just did.

*Let's just ignore that...*

Mark came rushing back with a picnic basket and a large quilt blanket and her jaw dropped, and she squealed, "You actually packed a picnic!?"

"Figured it would be fitting with overall theme of the night," he said, spreading the blanket on the ground and urging her to sit. Her heart fluttered as he pulled out sandwiches, fruit, vegetables, and best of all – a bottle of champagne! Because they were adults now; champagne is always required on a picnic when you're an adult.

She beamed at the effort Mark put into this evening. He didn't cut corners on anything; he even put Siracha and bacon on her sandwich, just the way she liked it. She swallowed hard and stared at her lap as she said, "Mark...this is all amazing. Thank you."

"You deserve it," he said simply. "I should have done something like this years ago."
"Better late than never, I suppose," she said and graciously accepted the flute of champagne, clinking it against Mark's as they both said "Cheers."

They happily began eating their sandwiches and Mark lit up a joint, puffing happily on it. She shook her head in refusal before he had a chance to ask if she wanted some. The bubbly champagne would suffice.

Mark set down his sandwich and brushed his lips with his napkin before clearing his throat. "So… about this business…"

Alice's body tensed. She almost forgot that this was a mandatory discussion. She emptied her glass of champagne and thankfully Mark refilled it immediately. "Umm, what about it?"

"What is it exactly that you do?"

"Umm…do you want the nitty-gritty details or a brief summary?"

"Umm…a brief summary would be ideal. When you go into your coding talk it sounds like a different language."

"Alright," she set down her sandwich and sighed, "so, basically, the short story is that Blaise and I are creating this smartphone app that allows people to speak with therapists via texting, facetime, or over the phone. And, if this meeting that is happening tomorrow goes well, then the customers will also be able to order their prescriptions and get it delivered to their front door," she said, taking a deep breath after the long ramble. "Essentially, it's a great way for people to take care of their mental health in a discreet, convenient, and affordable manner."

"Wow, Alice…" Mark said with wide eyes. "That sounds incredible."

"Yeah, it's not too bad," she said, pulling a piece of bacon from her sandwich to her mouth. A smile grew on her face. "I actually love every second of it."

"I'm really happy for you," he said, resting his hand on hers. She smiled, but subtly pulled hers away to brush her hair behind her ears.

"I wish Simon could be happy for me…" she said sadly, pulling her knees to her chest.

"Maybe he will one day."

"Strong emphasis on 'maybe'," she said, taking a sip of the champagne.

"So, um," Mark started and ran his hand through his hair. "You mostly work with Blaise then?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "He's my partner, I guess. We practically share an office at this point."

"Cool," he said before smacking his lips. "And you two get along pretty well?"

"Erm – yeah? I love Blaise."

"You love him?" Mark asked with a raised brow.

"Oh my god, eww." Alice shrieked and grimaced at Mark. "If you're trying to ask whether Blaise and I are screwing you can stop right there."
"Well, I was just wonder – "

"So disgusting."

"I mean, you can't blame me for being curious?"

"Just…no," she shuddered. "I love him like I love Simon. Don't be gross, Mark."

"S-sorry," he stammered. "You've got all these new guys in your life and it's…weird."

She shrugged. "It's not that weird."

"Maybe weird isn't the right word…I'm just used to you only hanging out with Emily."

She shrugged again. "Things change."

"Yeah…"

An awkward silence enveloped them. She drummed her fingers on the quilt and began scanning their surroundings to avoid his eyes. In the corner of her eye, she could see Mark's mouth opening and closing, clearly trying to organize a sentence. He let out a loud breath.

"And what about Isaac?"

She winced. It was only a matter of time until Isaac was brought up. Without thinking, she snuggled deeper into the sweater.

"What about Isaac?"

"Like…I get that he's your boss so he's going to be in your life, but…why is he always at your place?"

"I wish I could tell you."

"Isn't that a little inappropriate?" he asked, fiddling with his thumbs. "Your boss always hanging around you?"

"I guess so."

"It's…it's actually very inappropriate, Alice" he said and she narrowed her eyes at him for the condescending tone. "What? It is! Give me one good reason why he should be spending all this time with you? If he's not directly working on the project with you, he shouldn't be getting drunk with you, or losing stupid toys in your bedroom."

Mark's voice had raised towards the end of his rant and Alice felt herself get annoyed. This was supposed to be a nice friendly reunion, not an interrogation. She pursed her lips and looked the other way as she mumbled, "It's not a stupid toy…"

"Yeah, you two keep saying that," he said. "What does that even mean?"

"It's complicated."

Mark sighed and his green eyes bored into hers. "You didn't answer the question. Why does he spend so much time with you?"

"Ugh – I dunno," she said, huddling even deeper into the sweater, getting a small whiff of Isaac's
cologne. Mark wasn't wrong. It was an incredibly inappropriate relationship. There was no good reason for her boss to spend his weekday nights, drinking on her balcony. Or for them to venture around the city, eating different spaghetti sauces. There was no rational reason for her boss to pass out in her bed, to walk her through her first panic attack, to call her to rant after he's had a frustrating meeting, to text her funny jokes, to grab her a coffee anytime he's getting one himself...She looked down at the sweater and sighed. There was no good reason for her to still be wearing her boss's sweater. Except for one reason…

"Because, Mark," she said, matching his own piercing eyes. "He's my friend."

He broke the gaze and tightened his lips before saying, "That makes no sense to me."

"What about it doesn't make sense?"

"Because, Alice, he's an asshole," he said much louder and she gritted her teeth. "He fucked over Simon and he treated you like dirt for years. How could you ever be friends with someone like that?"

She licked her lips and closed her eyes, trying to keep her breath levelled. Isaac's blue eyes flashed before her mind; him staring at her calmly as she hyperventilated and he brought her back down to earth, handing her the yellow stress ball and Ativan pill, as he gently ran his fingers through her hair.

She swallowed hard.

"Because he cares about me, and I care about him..." she said, scrunching her nose with every word; it was the first time she ever put that much thought into it. "He respects me as a person and like...he believes in me. And for some weird reason...he wants the best for me."

"Yeah, but, I don't trust h – "

"Mark," she snapped. "Isaac is my friend. We are just friends, but we are friends. If this is something you cannot accept, please let me know now so we don't have to waste more time on this."

He clenched his fists and turned his face away from her, gazing towards the hay bales in the distance. She could see the wheels spinning over his head. His face was so tense; it was as though she was asking him to choose between drinking a glass of lava or cutting off both his arms. Finally, he reluctantly turned his eyes back to her and nodded.

"I can accept it."

"Good!" She clapped her hands together and smiled brightly, relieved the conversation was over. "So, how's work at the oil field treating you these days?"

Mark chuckled but began filling her in on the details of his life, the comfortable atmosphere slowly returning. After a bit more champagne, the laughter returned as they reminisced on old memories. They pointed out star constellations, creating narratives for each one, as Mark eagerly tried to find a country song that Alice would like. To each one, she shook her head and covered her ears.

After some time, Alice was shivering. The degrees must have dropped below zero because a thin layer of frost was shimmering on Mark's windshield. The champagne was successful in keeping her warm for a while, but finally, the chilly November air won.

"Should we head back to the city?" Mark asked and Alice nodded her head eagerly. He held out her hand, to help her off the ground. However, he didn't let go. He bit his lip and looked into eyes, brushing away a strand of red hair behind her ear. "I've always loved you freckles."
She blushed and looked at her feet.

This was it; the night had been leading to this moment.

_Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit._

She stayed silent and staring at her feet; her heart was beginning to race.

"Alice, like I told you yesterday," he gently grabbed her chin, directing her eyes to his, "I never want you out of my life."

In a split second, something triggered Alice's memories. She took a large step away from him, nearly tripping over a tree branch. _Stupid champagne._ Her head began swirling and she leaned against the truck, trying to look casually balanced. Confusion shined in Mark's eyes as he hesitantly stepped closer to her.

She looked at the ground when she spoke. "Mark, can I ask you something?"

"Yes, of course."

"Umm…" she bit her nails. "If you say you never want me out of your life…what exactly happened three years ago when you broke up with me with no explanation?"

Why did she ask that? Even though the question had eaten away at her for years, it wasn't a question she necessarily wanted to know the answer to. Mark's face paled; clearly, he was caught off guard. He rubbed his hands together, either because of the cold or nervousness.

"Jeez, Alice, that was so long ago…"

"So?"

"Everything is way different now."

"Mark," she said, swallowing hard as she looked into his eyes. "Please answer the question."

"Alright." He let out a deep breath and paced in a circle, rubbing his chin, before answering. "Basically…when you dropped out of school you got super depressed. And, I don't know, you were kind of miserable to be around…"

Her eyes widened and she turned her back away from him so she could silently curse him for being an asshole. Although, she remembered that period of her life. She was a depressed mess. No one really wanted to be around her…

_But fuck that._

She turned her face back on him and folded her arms. "Mark, you broke up with me three weeks after I dropped out."

"Was it only three weeks?"

"You couldn't handle three god damn weeks of me being upset that my whole future shattered before my eyes?" she shouted, and with every slow deliberate step she took, Mark cowered away. "You never once asked me if I was okay or if I wanted to talk about what was going on!"

"I know – "
"So, what? I'm not fun for three weeks and you just drop me like I'm nothing?" she asked, pressing her hands to her chest. "People get fucking depressed, Mark! It happens! If you love someone, you're supposed to support them through it!"

"Yes, I kn –"

"So, what happens if I get depressed again, huh?" She was stomping around now. "Are you gonna leave?"

"What? No!" He rushed over to her and tried to grab her hand but she pulled it away. "Alice, I can tell you've changed now. You're so confident and happy now…"

"Yeah, but I'm still a fuckin' human!" she yelled, throwing her hands in the air. "Look at how Simon deals with life when it gets rough! He locks himself in his room for weeks at a time. There's probably some damn genetics involved. We both struggle with it. I might be happy right now, but fuck, I can almost guarantee you at some point in my life something is gonna get messed up and make me depressed again." She didn't even notice tears beginning to swell in her eyes. "How can I trust that you'll stick with me through it if it does happen?"

He rested his hands on her shoulders and bent his knees so their eyes were on the same level. Her chest was heaving but Mark remained stoic as he said, "Alice, I've matured a lot since then. I promise I will never leave you for something stupid like that. You're amazing, Alice." He swallowed hard. "You're the only girl I've ever felt comfortable with. The only girl I can just relax with…and laugh with…"

Her stomach dropped when she remembered hearing that similar phrase from Isaac; Lying in her bed, wearing his wrinkled dress shirt after Emily's Halloween party: "Long story short, I wanna find someone who I can hang out with...someone who makes me laugh…"

She clenched her eyes shut and shook her head.

Don't think about Isaac right now, Alice.

"Alice." Mark snapped her back to reality. "Please…give me another chance. It'll be real this time. I won't be that flakey guy who could never commit. I want the real thing."

She bit her lip and looked at the ground. She had never felt so confused in her life.

A cigarette would be amazing right now.

Mark tipped her chin upwards. His eyes looked watery, as if he was holding back tears himself. He must be genuine about this. This is what you've always wanted, Alice…

"Can I kiss you?"

Her heart dropped, but she slowly nodded. His hands moved to her cheeks and he lowered his lips to hers. Nostalgia took over her; he tasted exactly the same. Except, her heart didn't flip-flop like it used to and her knees weren't wobbly. That must be something that happens with age, though. Yes, as you mature, chemistry naturally falters, of course.

He shoved her against the truck and she relaxed into the kiss, her hands beginning to pull him closer to her. His hands grasped on her bare thighs under her dress, and she moaned, roughly pulling at his hair.

He pulled away panting. "Are you sure this is okay?"
Without a word, she grabbed the back of his neck, pressing her lips hungrily to his.

She was going to make chemistry, dammit.

The next morning, she woke up much earlier than usual, bright eyed and bushy tailed. When she sat up straight, stretching her arms above her head, her duvet slipped down her chest. The cool air against her naked body surprised her and for a split second, she forgot what happened.

She looked to her right and beamed. Mark was snoring soundly beside her, a small amount of drool dripping from the corner of his mouth. He looks so cute when he's asleep… She traced her fingers along his chest and bit her lip. It must be all the physical labor he does in the oilfield to keep in shape. For a stoner who eats a bag of Doritos a day, damn, he looks good.

She licked her lips staring at him. Sure, she was happy she was back together with him and they seemed to have sorted out their issues…but there was one thing that made her happier than anything.

She hopped out of bed and glided to the shower as if little birds and squirrels were following her.

*Alice Black finally got laid!*

It wasn't even 7am when she danced into the office, an hour earlier than she would normally show up. With an extra-large, full fat, vanilla latte in her hand to celebrate, she waved happily at all her groggy coworkers, who all scowled at her peppy attitude.

She sat at her desk and opened her laptop, before examining the beautiful sunrise illuminating her office. Alice felt rejuvenated; things were going to be different from now on. Everything was going great. She had an amazing career, her and Mark finally worked out their issues, Mark would surely help rekindle her relationship with Simon.

Life was good.

"What the hell are you doing here so early?"

She snapped her neck from the alluring pink sunrise to her office door. She laughed when a very ghoulish, sleep-deprived Isaac leaned against her door with a muffin in hand.

"Jesus, you look like you've aged ten years over the weekend," she said, zeroing in on the dark bags under his eyes.

"Hmph," he grunted before yawning. "Thanks."

"Get any sleep last night?"

"I dunno. Maybe an hour or two," he said. "Every time I drifted off, something would creak in my apartment and I'd be up for hours."

"That sucks," she said, frowning. "Nervous for the meeting?"

He shrugged. "Ah, I don't really wanna talk about. Makes me wanna throw up."

"Fair enough," she giggled, returning to her laptop.

"So?" Isaac asked again, picking a small bite off his muffin.

"So, what?"
"Why are you here so early?" he asked. "Last time you were awake at this time you nearly killed Blaise and I."

"Oh," she said with a huge smile. "I don't know, I just feel really…refreshed. And motivated." She clapped her hands together and cheered, "Ready to get some work done!"

"Hmm, yeah," Isaac said, scrunching his nose and turning his back to her. "You're way to chipper for me to deal with right now. I'll talk to you later."

Just as the door almost shut, she called out, "Isaac, wait!"

"Ugh – what?"

"What kind of muffin do ya got there?" She stared at the muffin hungrily, licking her lips.

He gasped and shielded his breakfast. "Get your own damn muffin!"

"Pleeease?" she whined. "I'm so hungry. I forgot to eat breakfast and my stomach is literally going to eat itself."

"Well, that's a little over dramatic," he said, but begrudgingly tore away half the chocolate chip muffin and handed it her. "There. Don't say I never do anything for you."

"I never would," she said, smiling angelically. He nodded and gave a small wave before retreating to the door.

"Isaac, wait!"

"My god, woman," he groaned but flopped on the chair across from her. "Did you come into work early just so you could pester me?"

"Maybe," she stuck out her tongue. "No, actually, I just wanted to let you know that I haven't had a cigarette in two days."

"Wow, for someone who swears they're not a smoker, that's quite the accomplishment," he said. Despite the sarcasm, he gave a serene smile. "Good job, though. You've got nice teeth, don't mess them up."

She pressed her fingers to her teeth. "Thanks, Isaac."

"Mhm," he mumbled. Suddenly his eyes lit up, and a wicked grin pulled at his lips. "Ohh, right. You had your little date with what's-his-name last night, didn't you?"

"You know his name is Mark." She tilted her head and scowled. "But yes, I did."

"And?" he asked, popping a chocolate chip in his mouth.

"Umm," she felt her face heat up, "it was really good, yeah."

"I don't hear you denying it was a date," he said with a smirk.

"Nope," she suddenly became fixated on stacking a loose set of papers into a perfect pile. "No more denying from me."

"Oh," he said. "Cool."
"Yeah…"

She wasn't sure if she was imagining it, but she could swear the tension in the room began to stiffen. He seemed to be looking everywhere in the office besides her. "So, are you two back together then?"

"Umm, yeah, I guess," she said. Her previous feelings of bliss were fading away. Why is it so hard to tell Isaac this? She flicked her wrist and continued, "I mean, we haven't had the official "Hey are you my boyfriend?" talk yet, but umm…yeah, I think we are back together."

"Cool. Great. I'm…I'm happy for you," he said with a tight-lipped smile. She saw his hand slip into his right pocket and she wondered if he was fiddling with his lucky stress ball. His mouth opened and closed, then he looked at the ceiling for a second, until his eyes finally rested on her. He leaned forward in his chair, with his hand still in his pocket, and his lips twisted to a smirk. "I can't say I'm too surprised…it's obvious Alice Black and Mark Williams were destined to be together."

His eyes didn't match his smirk or joking tone.

Goosebumps travelled under her skin as his eyes pierced into her. It was as if he was mentally urging her to deny it. To tell him it was just a fling, a one night stand, or that she slapped Mark and told him to never talk to her again. His Adam's Apple bobbed in his throat, and she felt the instinctive desire to tell him she wore his sweater all night…

Instead, she nodded politely and pressed her fingers to her keyboard. "Yeah. I guess we are."

"Cool!" Isaac said quickly, clapping his hands together and hopping off the chair.

He was sure saying 'cool' a lot.

"Well, I've gotta go prepare for the meeting…" he said.

"Y-yeah, totally!" she said. "I'll umm…I'll stop bothering you."

"Great," he said, and awkwardly bowed his head. "Well, take care then."

"Yeah, umm," she said, "good luck, today."

"Yeah, you too!" he said before smacking his forehead. "I mean, not good luck. Just umm… have a good day…"

"You too, Isaac."

She watched him give a quick wave before rushing out the door. She puffed out her lips and exhaled, slumping deep into her chair.

That was fucking weird.

Chapter End Notes

Weeeooo ! Do you guys hate me? ;)

I'm really curious as to what you guys think of the characters, specifically Isaac and Alice! Also, thank you so much for all the kudos, guys. I only have like 44 views or
something, but 16 kudos...I actually quite enjoy that ratio! Keep it up! I'm so happy people are enjoying this story, it's basically my baby.

Anyways, thank you so much. Have an amazing day <3 Love you all!
GUYS! Oh my god, thank you SO MUCH for all the kudos I have received. Seriously, like, I'm not even remotely upset about the lack of comments I've gotten (not saying don't comment, but, you know), because holy shit, that is a lot of kudos. Like, I am shocked. Exactly 50.98% of you who have read have given this kudos. That is a CRAZY good ratio. Thank you so much for reading this story. It’s my basically my baby and I am so happy that it is getting well received. It took a long time for this story to gain any momentum on this website and I was feeling very dejected, but now I am over the moon.

Hope you enjoy the chapter!

“So, I went out with this big-shot lawyer last night,” Emily said as she stirred a spoonful of honey into her green tea. A mischievous smile curled on her lips as she licked the remaining honey off the spoon.

“Oh really?” Alice asked taking a seat across from Emily at her kitchen table, pulling her knees up to her chin so her fuzzy slippers rested on the chair. She leaned forward eagerly; there were few things Alice loved more than hearing about Emily’s Friday night conquests. “How was that?”

“It was, like, the craziest Friday night of my life,” she said, flicking her hands with every syllable she spoke. “Let me tell you, Isaac might be fun to party with because he’s a CEO and all…but you have not partied until you’ve partied with lawyers.”

“Considering all we do when we ‘party’ is get drunk in random dive bars or on my couch, I don’t think that’s too hard to beat,” Alice giggled, spreading cream cheese on her blueberry bagel. “What about it was so amazing?”

“Oh my god, okay, so, first we went out to this new super trendy club with all his lawyer buddies. And they were all so fuckin’ hot, I felt like I was in a sea of models,” she said, and pressed her hands to her chest, letting out a small moan. “I almost regret going there with Andy, because he was hot and all, but some of these guys…Oh my.”

“Sounds fun,” Alice said, raising her eyebrows. “Do you like any of them?”

“Sure. I like looking at them.”

“No - I meant, you know, do you want to date any of them?”

“Alice, let’s be real, here,” she said, tapping her finger against her red lips. “It was a group of hot rich lawyers. You don’t date them. You simply let them treat you like a queen for a night then you never see them again.”

“Well, hey, you never know,” Alice said, raising her palms in the air. “Some people can be hot, rich, and dateable.”
“Regardless, these guys were not. They were your stereotypical, cigar-smoking, scotch-drinking, toss-hundred-dollar-bills-at-strippers lawyers,” she said. “But that’s not the point of the story.”

“What else happened?”

“We went to this after party in a penthouse apartment, and oh my god – it was so beautiful. It had the best view of the city that I’ve ever seen…” She paused to stare dreamily at the ceiling before continuing. “Anyway, there was this giant hot tub on the roof, so Andy and I decided to go skinny dipping… Alice. I got laid in a hot tub on top of a skyscraper in November. It was literally the most magical moment of my life.”

“Awh, fuck,” Alice said, slumping into her chair. “That does sound magical.”

“Good morning, ladies.”

Alice perked up and smiled widely as Mark entered the kitchen, his hair still wet and messy from the shower. He swooped over Alice’s shoulders to press his lips on her cheek before walking to the refrigerator. She touched the spot where he kissed her and licked her lips as she admired Mark’s muscular arms. Even if she wasn’t getting laid in rooftop hot tubs, she was still pretty happy to wake up next to Mark every morning.

“Hey, Mark,” Emily said, smiling sweetly and giving a small wave.

“Hope I’m not interrupting anything,” he said as he poured a glass of orange juice.

“Oh, nothing, just boring girl talk,” Emily said and winked at Alice.

“Sounds exciting,” he said, leaning against the fridge. “So, what’s on the agenda for the two most beautiful women in the city?”

Alice stuck her tongue out at Mark. She tilted her head back and gave a small, tired groan. “Unfortunately nothing too exciting. Blaise is coming over soon then we’re gonna work.”

“On a Saturday?” Mark asked.

“Ain’t no rest for the wicked…” she said sadly, picking at her bagel. “What about you?”

“Gonna play video games with Simon.”

“Oooh, have you convinced Simon to stop being a dick to Alice yet?” Emily asked as she took a sip of her tea.

“Erm – working on it,” he muttered, staring at his feet.

“Emilyyyy,” Alice groaned. “It’s way too early to talk about that angsty, sad excuse of a bro-”

“ - Fine, fine. We won’t talk about Simon,” Emily interjected and placed her hand upon Alice’s before flashing a pearly white smile. “So, what are we doing tonight?”

“Uhh, I’m not sure.” Alice tried not to wince at the question. She had very specific plans of having a bubble bath and enjoying an empty house once Blaise left. Mark had stayed at her house every day that week, and while she adored his company, she was exhausted. All she longed for was a solo night of moderately priced wine and a charcoal facemask. “Probably going to take it easy…”

“What!?” Emily slammed her palms on the table. “It’s Saturday and we haven’t had a proper
night out on the town in weeks!”

“But I’m so tired…”

“I’m not taking no for an answer! Ever since you got this job I never see you anymore.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll do it,” Alice said, mentally wishing her lonesome plans goodbye. Although, it would be fun going out with Emily. She wasn’t exaggerating when she said they rarely see each other anymore.

“Ooo, we need to invite Isaac,” Emily said, rubbing her hands together.

Mark choked on his orange juice and after a brief coughing attack he asked, “Why does he need to be there?”

Alice and Emily both raised their eyebrows at Mark’s scene. The guy sure wasn’t sure at hiding his jealousy. Choosing to ignore Mark, she turned to Emily and asked, “Yeah, you’re not still going after him, are you?”

“God no. Never, ever, ever, again,” she said, shuddering at the memory of being rejected. “But he is hot and he pays for our drinks. It’s always better to have him around than not have him around. You can come if you want, Mark.”

“Fuck that. You couldn’t even pay me to hang out with that guy,” he said before clearing his throat. “Uh, Alice, are you sure you don’t wanna hang out here and watch movies?”

Just as Alice was about tell Mark she wanted to go out with her friends, Emily pointed her finger at Mark warningly and interjected, “Mark, don’t you dare take her away from me just because you’re jealous.”

“I’m not jealous…” he mumbled staring at his orange juice.

“Don’t worry, I’m probably going to be passed out by midnight anyway,” Alice said which seemed to satisfy Mark a little.

Her front door shot open and slammed shut, quickly followed by the banging of Blaise’s shoes getting kicked into the wall. “Alice, holy shit, Alice!”

He must have ran into a couple walls on the way to the kitchen because a few subsequent bangs echoed through the room.

“I have the best news ev- “ He slid into the kitchen on his socks, but latched onto the wall and froze. “Oh, hi Mark.”

Blaise’s dark eyes shifted across the kitchen before widening and his cheeks flushed. “And Emily…” He turned to Alice. “Damn, you’ve got the whole gang here, don’t you?”

Emily gave a half wave and turned to her cellphone.

“Ahem,” Mark cleared his throat and held out a tense hand to Blaise. “Good to see you, Blaise. It’s been a while.”

Alice’s heart soared. He was making an attempt with Blaise! Baby steps…

Without a moment of hesitation, Blaise grabbed Mark’s hand joyfully. “How are ya doing, mate? Haven’t seen you since high school.”
Mark’s body visibly loosened and he matched Blaise’s smile. “I’ve been really good, yeah…”

“Great, well, we can catch up later,” Blaise said before hopping back to Alice, grabbing her shoulders and shaking her body back and forth excessively. “I. Have. The. Best. News. Ever.”

“Oh my god, Blaise,” she said, pulling away from his grip. “You’re going to give me whiplash!”

“I don’t care, and after you hear this news, you won’t either.”

“Well, what is it then?”

“Just got off the phone with Isaac,” Blaise said, “and bloody hell, that guy is such a git sometimes. Drives me crazy.”

“Is that supposed to be news?” Alice asked, cocking her brow.

“No, no. But that idiot talked about spaghetti for twenty minutes before he finally told me this epic news,” he said, and Alice and Emily both giggled. Typical Isaac. Mark stood confused.

“Basically, his meeting last week went well and the health board approved our app last night!”

Alice gasped and hopped on top of her chair so she was now a foot taller than Blaise. She tossed her hands above her head, and after a few seconds of incoherent squeals, she shouted, “Are you serious!?”

“You know it. We fuckin’ did it. This shit is so happening.”

Alice threw her arms around Blaise, jumping at him with full force, nearly knocking him over. After he caught himself, he proceeded to spin Alice around before setting her back on the chair. Emily and Mark gawked at the enthusiastic scene.

“You have no fucking idea how stressed I’ve been over this all week,” Alice said, trying to keep her excited breaths steady. “I’ve been mentally preparing to be unemployed any day, now.”

“I was mentally preparing myself beat the shit out of Isaac for making us waste three months of our lives,” Blaise said, grabbing at his face. “But we fuckin’ did it!”

Mark tilted his head at Alice and said, “You didn’t seem that stressed this week?”

She shrugged but gave a chipper smile. “I guess I don’t get too stressed when I’m around you?”

That, was a giant lie.

All week Alice had been one step away from experiencing her second panic attack, but she kept it to herself when she was around Mark. When they were cuddled in her bed watching movies, her hands were sweaty and her mind would be racing. You’re gonna get laid-off. You fucked everything up. You joined this company for nothing. Everything is ruined.

When Mark would ask her if everything was alright, she would smile sweetly and say, “Of course it is, babe.”

Why was she lying to Mark about something that had such an impact on her life? The first time she told him about their situation with the app, she did show her anxieties. He was her boyfriend now and she was determined to make sure he could handle her at her worst. Sure enough, he comforted her and said all the right things that a boyfriend should say…
But she could have sworn she saw him smile when she said she could potentially lose her job. He seemed relieved, almost as though he was secretly hoping it would happen.

And that stung.

So, she vowed to simply bottle all her anxieties regarding her job when around Mark. Instead, her and Blaise would spend their days screaming in their office and hyperventilating into paper bags.

“Well, I think I’m gonna take off,” Mark said, glancing at his watch. He walked towards Alice and put his hand on her lower back, pulling her lips towards his. *His lips are always so soft...* “Congratulations on the good news, babe. You too, Blaise, seriously.”

Blaise shook his hand again and smiled widely at him, before nodding and watching him exit the house. As soon as Mark was pulling out of the driveway, Emily clasped her hands together and cooed, “You guys are so adorable. I can’t believe you’re back together.”

Alice blushed and pursed her lips together. “Yeah, it’s pretty great.”

“It kind of freaks me out, honestly...” Blaise said, taking a seat beside Emily.

“Why does it freak you out?” Alice asked.

“Just...I dunno...” he fiddled with his thumbs, “you having a boyfriend and all is weird.”

Both girls gasped and Emily slapped his shoulder.

“Is it that hard to believe that I can get a boyfriend?” Alice asked, crossing her arms tightly around her chest.

“No, no!” Blaise said quickly. “There’s nothing weird about you having a boyfriend, you’re just all...giddy and blushy now. I’m used to you being my apathetic home-girl. It’s weird.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Alice asked. “We’ve spent the entire week freaking out over this damn meeting! I haven't been giddy.”

“Yeah, but when you’re not freaking out you’ve always got this quaint little smile on your face...like everything is perfect in the world.”

“Well, I’m sorry for being happy,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“No! I’m really happy for you,” he said. “So long as you’re happy, I’m happy. It’s just different.”

“I think it’s great,” Emily said. “You guys are practically soulmates. May as well get married at this point seeing as it’s destined to happen eventually.”

Alice’s stomach lurched forward. “Dear god, please do not mention marriage for at least...I don’t know...ten years?”

“I’m just joking,” she said. “All I’m saying is that after everything you two have been through, you still keep coming back to each other. That says a lot.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Alice said biting her lip. Her foot began jittering and her hands started to feel clammy, just as they had felt all week. Her heart jolted when she noticed Blaise’s eyes narrowing on her with a curious glimmer.
“So, anyways,” Emily clapped her hands together, snapping Blaise’s neck to her, and Alice let out a breath of relief.

Emily only looked at Alice when she continued, “Alice, when should we meet up with Isaac for drinks?”

Blaise scoffed and pressed his hand to his heart. “Umm…hello?”

Emily stared at him blankly. “…Hi?”

“I’m sitting right here.”

She blinked at him three times. “I know?”

He sighed loudly and his eyes rolled in his head. “Am I invited?”

“Oh!” Emily said quickly, shaking her head as she tried to regain a casual composure. “Um, of course you are, Blaise.” She flipped her long blonde hair over her shoulder and grazed his forearm with her perfectly manicured nails.

He scrunched his nose at her touch. “Uh-huh.”

Alice was trying to hold back her laughter as she watched the awkwardness unfold, but eventually said, “I guess once Blaise and I are done working. You should set it up, Blaise. I’ve hardly talked to Isaac all week.”

“Yeah, I know,” Blaise said. “I think he misses his favorite ginger.”

She felt her ears turn red and looked at her slippers.

“Alright, well I’ve better head to the yoga studio,” Emily said, picking up her coat and purse. “Text me when you figure out the details?”

“For sure,” Alice said. They gave a quick hug and Emily headed towards the door.

“Bye Emily!” Blaise called out obnoxiously.

The door slammed shut with no response.

“Bloody hell,” he said, squaring his shoulders with Alice and stretching his arms across the table to almost reach hers. “Be real with me, Alice. Am I a ghost?”

“Huh?”

“I swear to god I feel like I’m completely invisible around her.”

She sighed and rested her chin on her palm. “Thought you were over her?”

“Oh, I am. Trust me,” he said. “But still, she could treat me like I’m a real human being.”

“I know,” she said, shrugging her shoulders before wincing. “I guess she’s just not into you.”

“Believe me, I’m used to people not being into me. Just as I’m not into many people,” he said. “But even though you’re not into someone, that doesn’t mean you don’t have treat them with respect.”
“You’re right. I don’t know what’s up with her…she’s weird with guys,” she said. “Take it with a grain of salt. You’re not the first guy she’s snubbed. She likes douchebags or something.”

“Ha. No wonder she went after Isaac,” he muttered with a cheeky grin and pulled out a cigarette, pressing it to his lips.

“Don’t you dare light that in here!” Alice yelped, swatting the cigarette from his hands and accidentally crushing it on the table.

“Woah, calm down!”

“Sorry! It’s been a week now without smoking,” she said, wiping the scattered tobacco off her table and into the garbage can, “It’s not as easy as I thought it was going to be…”

“Oh, shit, sorry. I completely forgot,” he said, shoving the crushed cigarette back in the package. “I’ll smoke outside later.”

“Thank you,” she said, politely folding her hands.

He tapped his fingers on the table and stared at the ceiling, smacking his lips for a few seconds. Alice looked at him skeptically and asked, “What’s on your mind, Blaise?”

He turned his face back to her, a small smirk pulling at the corner of his lips. He continued drumming his fingers when he said, “Can I ask you something?”

She slumped deeply into her chair, narrowing her eyes at him. “…No.”

“Come on.”

“Not if it involves me.”

“Are you actually happy with Mark?”

She sighed. This was exactly what she was afraid of him asking. “You’re a bad listener, you know?”

“Come on, you’re my bro,” he said. “I just wanna make sure you’re getting treated properly.”

“Well, if that’s what you’re worried about, Mark treats me like gold. He’s a perfect gentleman.”

“Well, that’s good,” he said. “So what was with your minor internal freakout when Emily brought up all that soulmate talk?”

“Ugh,” she groaned, pulling at her hair. “Stop psychoanalyzing me.”

“I’m not psychoanalyzing you!” he said. “Anyone who has even a remote understanding of body language could figure it out.”

“Fine,” she huffed. “Don’t worry, I am very happy with him. This past week has been great…it’s just…”

“Just?”

“Even though he said he would be accepting of Isaac and I being friends, he gets all weird and…tense…anytime he gets brought up.” She stood up from the table to pour herself a coffee and tossed Blaise an Earl Grey tea bag. “Like, he doesn’t say anything specifically. Actually, he doesn’t
“say anything at all. He just goes silent and moody and it’s pretty annoying.”

“Yeah, that does sound annoying.”

“Well, and the worst part is, is that I feel like I can’t talk about our work as freely as I would like because he associates everything I do with Isaac,” she said as she filled her kettle with water. “So, it’s kind of like I have to hide this huge part of my life from him and it sucks. And I’m not used to it! When we dated before, I was the jealous one and he didn’t give a fuck about what I did. But now that the tables have turned, I feel like I’m having to learn this new dynamic and yeah…it’s annoying.”

Blaise frowned at her impromptu rant. He clicked his tongue and stared at his hands for a moment before replying. “Okay, I’m not trying to put ideas in your head or sway you in anyway, because like I said earlier, so long as you’re happy; I’m happy. But…I guess you could say I completely disagree with Emily when she says it must ‘mean something’ for you two to keep coming back to each other.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that while it’s great that you two keep ‘working things out’, maybe the fact that things keep…not working out is a bigger, more important sign that you two should focus on,” he said. “Even though you two do have a lot of history…maybe it wouldn’t be the worst thing to leave it as history.”

She nodded and handed Blaise a mug of hot water. “I get what you’re saying, and believe me, I’ve been thinking about it a lot lately. But, I don’t know, I really want to give it a solid go. Aside from all the Isaac stuff, he does treat me really well and we have a great time together. I promise you, I am happy. I feel like I need to do this…it doesn’t work out this time, then I guess I’ll know for sure.”

“Fair enough,” he said, putting his teabag in the water. “Isaac sure doesn’t like him very much.”

Her eyes shot up from her coffee. “D-does he talk about us – I mean – Mark at all?”

“Oh god, that’s all he’s been talking about all week,” Blaise groaned.

“What does he say?” She felt her heart start to race and she opened the refrigerator, pretending to search for something so Blaise wouldn’t see her face redden. Why she was curious about Isaac’s opinion of her boyfriend in the first place, she didn’t know. But she definitely wanted more details.

“He keeps complaining about how Mark’s always at your place so he can’t hang out here anymore.”

Alice snorted. “That fucking guy and his obsession with my house.”

“Yeah…the house,” Blaise said, and Alice was relieved her face was still in the fridge. “And he keeps saying he’s a moron and shit.”

She finally closed the fridge and placed some coffee creamer on the table, taking a seat across from him. “Well, they never did like each other in high school. It really doesn’t surprise me that they’re not too fond of each other now.”

“Yeah, because high school rivalries can never end, right?” Blaise smirked and she flicked her wrist in the air.
“Isaac and I were completely different,” she said. “It’s a lot easier to get over a rivalry when they’re offering you a ton of money.”

“That is a great point,” Blaise said snapping his finger at her. “Anyway, what do you say we knock out some work so we can get absolutely plastered tonight?”

“I like your thinking. We deserve to celebrate,” she said happily, relieved that the conversation was finally on something other than her love life. Who knew others could find it so interesting?

She stared at the clock and her stomach flopped a little thinking about the night ahead of them. She had barely seen Isaac lately; it would be nice hanging out with him.

Chapter End Notes

Woooo, they're gonna have a fun night.

This chapter is a bit of a filler chapter, I know. Unfortunately, a little bit of filler is necessary once in a while. But I am so fricken excited to post the next chapters. You guys are gonna love them.

Don't forget to kudos and comment! Even though I'm over the moon about the kudos, I would love to hear what everyone thinks of this! I would love to hear who your favorite characters are! Or least favorite.

I would especially love to know what everyone's opinion of Isaac is so far! He's an interesting bloke who you either love or hate.

Have a wonderful weekend my friends <3
Thirteen Part 1

Chapter Notes

GUYS! Oh my gosh! I am at a 61.4% ratio of kudos to views! That is CRAZY! You're all making my day so much!

This chapter is my FAVORITE ONE so far, however, it's super long soooo...I'm breaking it up into two parts and posting them back to back. :) So, you basically get two chapters in one night, woo!!

Please let me know what you think! Keep them Kudos coming!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first snowflakes of the year gently fell on Alice’s eyelashes as her and Blaise strutted to Isaac’s favorite grungy hole-in-the-wall. One arm lazily linked through Blaise’s, while her free hand grazed each worn down brick building they passed. Blaise nudged her side and handed her the flask of Fireball Whiskey, which she accepted eagerly. She twisted the cap off and slurped back a generous gulp, welcoming the warming cinnamon down her throat, and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

“Drinking while working was an excellent decision,” she said as she stumbled over her own feet, leaning her head on Blaise’s arm.

“Probably the best decision we’ve ever had,” he said, finishing the remains of the alcohol in the flask. “But definitely the worst decision in terms of productivity…we didn’t really get much done after our third beer, did we?”

“Ahhh, fuck productivity,” she slurred, waving her hand in the air. “We’re celebrating!”

Blaise stopped in front of the familiar grungy wooden doors and unlinked his arm from Alice’s. “Alright, here we are,” he said. “Let’s try not to act too drunk, okay? I’m not sure if Isaac would appreciate us working on his biggest investment while under the influence.”

“Isaac can fuckin’ suck it if he has a problem with us drinking,” she said, but when she noticed the way her vulgar words meshed together, she realized Blaise had a point. Her cell phone buzzed in her pocket and Mark’s name lit up.

“Have fun tonight! Let me know when you’re on your way home xoxoxo,” the text message read. She smiled, but felt her fingers were too sloppy to type out a proper response, so she put the phone back in her pocket.

Loud classic rock and chatter from the drunk patrons filled their ears as they entered the unusually bustling pub. They spotted Isaac immediately sitting alone at a four-person table, his eyes were glued to the dusty television screen as he idly traced the lip of his pint glass. Alice took a second to admire the way his tie loosely hung down his neck, and how he still managed to hold an air of professionalism even with the top few buttons of his crisp white dress shirt undone. She didn’t know when she began to appreciate how attractive men could look in suits. It must have started when she began working in an office setting; before she preferred the hoodie and jeans look on men.
She shook her head to snap her out of her thoughts. Okay, Alice. Don’t act drunk. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, trying to remember how a sober person acts. When she opened them, Isaac’s shining blue eyes rested right upon hers. His hands shot to his shirt, smoothing out any wrinkles that could be found and he straightened his posture. In the corner of her eye she could see Blaise smirk.

When a small, almost serene, smile crept up his lips, Alice’s prior intentions of acting sober flew out the window.

“Isaac!” She squealed and lunged her entire body weight around his shoulders, hugging him tightly. “You’re my herooo.”

Blaise slapped his forehead.

“Woah!” Isaac exclaimed as he tried to retain his balance as Alice’s body drooped down his. “What are you talking about?”

“You won the meeting!” She said several decibels too loud and grabbed his cheeks with her hands. He rolled his eyes, but a light shade of pink crept up his face. Slowly, he grabbed her wrists and gently peeled them away from his face.

“I don’t think you can ‘win’ meetings,” he chuckled. “But sure, you can call me a hero. That’s fine.”

“Is it really that heroic to do your job?” Blaise teased, setting his black leather jacket on the chair across from Alice.

Isaac scowled and was about to reply, but instead his nose scrunched. His eyes darted across the room and his nose sniffed the area around the table, until he got inches away from Alice’s mouth. He tilted his head and sniffed again. “You smell like…Valentine’s Day.”

“Huh?” Both her and Blaise asked with furrowed brows.

“You smell like…those little cinnamon hearts,” he said, holding his index finger and thumb an inch apart. “The ones you get as kids for Valentine’s Day.”

“Oh,” Alice said blushing and clamped her lips shut to ensure no more scent would escape from her mouth.

Isaac’s eyes shifted between Alice and Blaise. “Are you two already drunk!?”

Alice burst into the loudest laughter, as if she had been holding it in for hours. She clutched her ribs and shook in the chair, unable to choke out a response.

Blaise raised an eyebrow at Alice and shook his head. “Well, I wouldn’t say I’m sober, but I’m definitely not as drunk as her.”

“You’re drinking Fireball?” Isaac laughed. “What are you? Two fourteen-year-old girls sneaking liquor from your parent’s cupboard?”

“Don’t judge us,” Alice said, shoving her finger in his face and accidentally poked his nose. “You’re just jealous that you weren’t invited.”

“First of all, I’m not judging. I’m simply concerned about what sort of drunken content is going to be hidden in this app after I spent all week kissing ass to get it approved,” he said sternly. Blaise
and Alice both frowned. Guilt churned in Alice’s stomach; it was super irresponsible of them.

Just as Alice was about to apologize, Isaac folded his arms and continued, “And as a matter of fact, yes. I am jealous that I wasn’t invited! I spent my day cleaning my damn oven; I would have gotten drunk with you guys.”

Alice burst into laughter again and sat on her knees to get enough height to snake her arms around his shoulders, her forest-green felt skirt creeping dangerously high as she slumped into body. “You’re my favorite boss, you know that?”

“And you’re my favorite drunk app developer,” he said, awkwardly patting her hand with his as he quickly scanned his surroundings. “But, I’m gonna be honest – the bartender is staring at your ass. Might wanna sit down…”

“Oh, shit!” she hissed, taking a proper seat and smoothed out the skirt with one hand, the other still resting on Isaac’s shoulder, before sending the bartender a venomous glare.

“Emily!” Blaise shouted to no one, and immediately covered his mouth to hide his enthusiasm. He cleared his throat and put on an aloof smile as Isaac and Alice smirked back. “Erm – Emily just walked in. I think. Doesn’t matter.”

Sure enough, seconds later Emily’s high heels clicked behind Alice and Isaac.

“Hey guys!” She waved happily as she removed her black pea coat, taking a seat beside Blaise. She clapped her hands together and said, “Oh my god, I just had the most amazing chickpea and lentil stew at – “ She paused when she noticed Alice’s bright red nose and arm hanging off Isaac’s shoulder. “Are you drunk?”

“No, I’m no – “ she started.

“Yes, she is,” Blaise and Isaac both interrupted.

“I thought you wanted to have an early night,” Emily giggled and she leaned over the table to grab a dried leaf that somehow embedded itself in Alice’s messy red hair. “Doesn’t look like that’s going to happen.”

“I dunno,” Isaac shrugged, glancing at Alice. “Being smashed by eight o’clock seems like a pretty sure-fire way to have an early night.”

“Oh, shuddup, Isaac,” Alice said, messing up his hair until he swatted her hands away.

“How are you this drunk already, anyway?” Emily asked.

“Erm…” Blaise said while pulling at his collar. “Well, we had the brilliant idea of getting beer at three…then haven’t really stopped since then,”

“Hmm,” Emily smacked her lips together. “Well, that’s a shame for you guys.”

“Why?” Blaise asked.

“Because, I just had an amazing day at the yoga studio, and am now in the mood to get absolutely fucked on tequila,” she grinned at Blaise, “and if you’re already drunk…well, good luck.”

“We are not doing tequila,” All three answered abruptly. Alice immediately appeared a few notches more attentive as she sat up straight, putting her most assertive face on. Blaise and Isaac’s
eyes were both wide in horror.

“What? Why not?” Emily asked. “Come on, it’s my favorite!”

“Who the hell wants to celebrate a good yoga session with tequila?” Alice asked.

“Alice, come on, don’t you remember the last time we drank tequila?” She said while batting her eyelashes. “It was so much fun!”

“Emily. We stripped all our clothes off at a playground in the middle of December,” Alice said. “That’s not what I call a fun time. That’s what I call hypothermia.”

“You know, on second thought,” Blaise quickly said, holding his pointer finger in the air, “I could go for some tequila.”

“Yeah, me too, actually,” Isaac said, nodding his head joyfully. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“You guys are so gross,” Alice said in disbelief, shoving Isaac’s shoulder.

“They really are…” Emily said flatly before a cheeky grin grew on her face. “But hey, three against one. Sorry, Alice!”

“Oh, waiter!” Blaise called out to a grumpy balding man serving a plate of deep-fried pickles at a nearby table. When the man dragged his feet to their table he grunted an inaudible greeting and Blaise folded his hands and beamed. “We’ll need a round of drinks and four tequila shots, please.”

Chapter End Notes

PART TWO IS COMING RIGHT UP! What do you think is gonna happen!!??
PART TWO!!!!!!! NOT WASTING TIME! ENJOY!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

None of them needed tequila.

No one ever needs tequila.

A nearby table of elderly drunk men obnoxiously sang to AC/DC when Emily drove her finger into the table. Her face was flushed, but her emerald eyes glared dangerously at Isaac. “Essential oils are the greatest health-trend to date.”

“I just don’t get what’s so ‘essential’ about them,” Isaac shrugged, taking a large swig of his beer.

“Are you joking me?” She laughed. Her usually perfectly smooth hair was getting messier with every shot she took. “Everything is essential about them. You’ve got lavender for stress, peppermint for headaches, and cinnamon is a great natural anti-inflammatory. They’re all amazing!”

“You can keep listing them off all night,” Isaac said, “but at the end of the day the only oil I care about is olive or vegetable.”

“God,” Emily huffed and folded her arms, finally peeling her eyes away from Isaac. “I can’t believe I actually liked you at one point.”

“Yes?” he said. “What’s so funny about that?”
“You don’t really seem like the tattoo kind of guy…”

“Oh come on,” he said, resting his elbow on the back of the chair and leaned towards her. “Can’t you picture me with a giant green dragon on my back?”

She threw her head back and shook with laughter before placing her hand on his shoulder. “Please, for the love of god, get that tattoo.”

“Oh, or what about a nice little butterfly on my wrist?” he asked, placing his fingers where his imaginary tattoo would lie. “I was thinking maybe bright pink and purple?”

“Oh!” she said with a mischievous flicker in her eye. “I’ve got a marker in my purse. I can give you a butterfly tattoo if you want.”

Isaac held out his wrist and shut his eyes tightly, clenching his teeth together as he said, “Just don’t hurt me too much.”

Giggling, she excitedly snatched the marker from her purse. She grabbed his hand and rested it in her lap before gently tracing her fingers along the veins in his wrist. His skin is really soft...his hand twitched and she snapped her eyes shut for a second. Stupid tequila. She slowly raised her gaze to meet his and noticed the redness surrounding the bright blue of his eyes. A small smile played on his lips when she stroked the same area. “Is this where you want it?”

“Yep.”

She held the marker close to his wrist. “Are you sure you’re ready?”

He clenched his fist shut and squinted his eyes, taking a long, deep breath. “I’m ready.”

Just as her marker touched his skin her phone vibrated on the table. Mark’s name glowed on the screen and she sighed, setting the marker down the check the text message.

“Hey!! :) What are you up to lol? Heading home soon lol??”

Apparently, adding ‘lol’ at the end of each sentence makes everything so much more casual.

She rolled her eyes and flipped her phone over, grabbing the marker again. It was only 9:30. Of course she wasn’t going home any time soon. As she grabbed Isaac’s wrist, she lifted her eyes to catch him quietly chuckling at her.

“Looks like it’s passed your bedtime.”

“Fuck off, Isaac.”

“What are you two – hiccup - doing?” Blaise asked when Emily headed to the washroom. Alice snapped her hands away from Isaac as if she was burnt and folded them quickly in her lap.

Isaac simply laughed and nudged her shoulder. “She’s giving me a tattoo.”

“A tattoo?”

“Uh-huh.”

Blaise raised his brows at Isaac knowingly. “Nice, mate.” He rubbed his hands together and licked his lips. “Time for more tequila!”
It’s funny how much better tequila starts to taste after the fourth shot.

The pub was quickly becoming busier with each passing minute. An elderly couple slow danced in the corner to a fast-paced song and a table a few feet away cheered excitedly as they raced to chug their beers the fastest. Isaac’s wrist still laid in Alice’s lap as the butterfly turned into a magnificent piece of art.

“You’re good at drawing.”

“Thank you.”

“Alice!” Emily interrupted, making Alice look up from the drawing, “You and Mark are soooo cute,” she said, her words slurring together as she slumped her cheek on her fist. “Seriously, once you guys get to know him you’re going to love him.”

“We went to high school together,” Isaac said, without his eyes leaving his wrist as Alice added the fine details on the butterfly’s wing. “We know him pretty well.”

“Nooo, but like, once you see how cute he is to Alice you’ll love him!”

“No offence,” Blaise said before facing Alice, “but I don’t really want to see the ‘cute’ things Mark does for you.”

Alice giggled, pausing her drawing to take a sip of her drink. “Don’t worry, we aren’t really into the cheesy stuff anymore.”

“Do you remember when he played that one Wilco song on his acoustic guitar for you?” Emily gushed. “At our grad party?”

“Obviously, I remember that!” Alice said and stared at the ceiling, smiling fondly at the memory of Mark strumming his Fender guitar in front of a group of girls, his eyes only shining for her.

“God, everyone was so jealous of you,” she said, running her hands through her dishevelled blonde hair. “It’s every girl’s dream to be serenaded by a guy…”

“Pffft,” Isaac scoffed. “That’s such a cliché.”

Alice rested her fingers on his wrist but glared at him intently. “What do you mean?”

“The whole acoustic guitar act,” he said. “It’s cliché. If you give a homeless man an acoustic guitar and tell him to sing a love song, a flock of girls are going to come flying over. It’s a cliché.”

Blaise scoffed and took a large swig out of his pint.

“I am not!”

“Yes you are!” he laughed. “You’re a rich, white, CEO with a drug problem who only wears suits and you constantly find yourself in compromising romantic situations, such as engaging in random affairs. This is probably because of your total lack of communication and deep seeded daddy-issues that you rather ignore and drink away rather than dealing with. Total. Cliché.”

The table went silent at Blaise’s impromptu analysis. Emily looked impressed as she nodded her
head at Blaise. Isaac’s mouth twitched as he struggled to come up with a snappy retort. Finally, he silently reached over to Emily’s empty glass to grab an ice cube, flicking it at Blaise’s nose. “Screw off.”

Blaise smiled smugly and leaned back in his chair. “Just bein’ honest, mate.”

“SHOTS!” Emily shouted and scurried away to the bar.

As the clock drew closer to midnight and the table became littered with empty shot glasses, each member of the party was sufficiently intoxicated. Isaac proudly showed off his new ‘tattoo’ to a group of girls at a nearby table and Blaise tried teaching Emily and Alice how to play darts, but it turns out that alcohol seriously decreased their aiming abilities.

As they all returned to the table, Emily squealed and clapped her hands together. “Ohmigosh, I totally forgot to show you guys my pamphlet for my new yoga class!”

“Ohh!” Alice said. “You’re starting a new class?”

“Yeah!” Emily said as she rifled through her purse for the pamphlet. “I’m super excited about it, too. It’s gaining a lot of publicity in the upper-class groups, and I’ve heard there’s even a couple models interested in joining.”

Emily handed all three a pamphlet.

“This is amazing, Emily,” Alice said as she flipped through the pamphlet. Realistically, her vision was far too blurred to try to comprehend the small cursive font, but there was a pretty girl meditating in front of an ocean on the cover dressed in tight white yoga pants. The pamphlet definitely gave an impression of peacefulness. “Congrats!”

Isaac idly glanced at it and gave a quiet, “looks cool.”

Blaise, however, was reading the fine print intently with his fingers resting on his lips and brows furrowed in silence.

Emily prodded Isaac’s hand. “You should tell your coworkers about my company! They seem like the prime demographic my classes cater to.”

“Um, maybe,” he mumbled. “I don’t really like talking to them about stuff that isn’t work related.”

“Ugh, you’re so lame,” she rolled her eyes. She finally turned to Blaise and nudged his shoulder. “Well, I guess you could help me promote it! What do you think of the pamphlet?”

“Huh?” Blaise said, quickly shoving the pamphlet in his pocket.

Emily narrowed her eyes. “What do you think of it?”

“Think about what?” His gaze shifted back and forth.

“The pamphlet…”

“Oh…” Blaise twiddled his thumbs and stared at his lap. “I dunno…”

“Blaise,” Emily said, growing impatient. “It’s a pretty simple question.”

He took a deep breath and glanced at Isaac and Alice who both shared the same curious expression from Blaise’s strange hesitancy.
“Well,” Blaise said, “It looks nice and all…but I think it’s, um, I think it’s pretty terrible…”

Emily leaned away from him in offense. “Excuse me?”

“It’s…I dunno, it’s not good…”

“How is it not good?”

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, visibly regretting his decision to say anything. “It’s full of some false, dangerous information that I feel should be reworded in a way to make it…better…”

“Umm,” Emily said, puckering her lips as if she just ate a lemon, “How exactly is it ‘dangerous’?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Blaise said, trying to brush it off. “We don’t have to talk about this. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No,” she said. “I want to hear what exactly is so awful about it.”

Alice and Isaac leaned back in their chairs with amused grins on their faces.

“Argh, fine,” he said and pulled the pamphlet from his pocket. “Like I said, the layout looks really great – “

“- I don’t care about the layout. I want to hear what you think is so terrible about it.”

He puffed out his cheeks as he exhaled, scanning the pamphlet with his eyes before resting his fingers on a box of text. “Alright, look right here. You say ‘Unleash yourself from harmful toxic medications and embrace the natural mindfulness of yoga – the best medication for mental health.’”

“Yeah? What about it?” Emily asked.

“I dunno,” Blaise said and took a sip of his beer. “Don’t you think it’s kind of…misleading to advertise that your classes alone are able to cure mental disorders?”

“it’s not misleading,” she said. “Yoga has been proven to help people’s mental health.”

“Yeah, but, it gives the impression that you only need yoga.”

“But many people are able to treat their depression and anxiety with just yoga.”

“Yes, I know. I’m not arguing that it’s very beneficial for some people. Yoga is a great therapy,” he said slowly, as if he was explaining it to a toddler, “However, some people need medication, even if they’re doing yoga. It’s just…it seems like false advertising.”

“But popping pills can be toxic,” she snapped before quickly turning her head to Isaac. “No offense.”

Isaac, who’s amusement turned into sheer discomfort, was now shrinking in his seat alongside Alice. He tilted his head at the comment. “Erm – none taken?”

“I know popping pills can be toxic,” Blaise said, “Especially if you’re a fuckin’ dolt like Issac – “

“Well, now I’m going to be offended.”

“ – But you’ve got to understand that I’ve literally devoted my life to studying these ‘toxic drugs’ and how beneficial they can be for some people,” he said, clenching his jaw. “I’m not going to sit here
and say that yoga is the cure for mental illness. I don’t even want to argue this with you. You asked for my opinion and I gave it. That. Is. All.”

“There’s nothing that exercise and a healthy vegan diet can’t cure – “

“Oh my god!” Blaise cried, throwing his face in his hands. “Enough with the god damn vegan diet already! No one cares!”

“Guys,” Alice piped up, putting her hand on Blaise’s forearm, “can’t we all agree to disagree?”

Emily ignored Alice’s comment. “There is nothing wrong with having a vegan diet.”

“No. There isn’t. Eat whatever the hell you want,” Blaise said, raising his palms condescendingly. “Just don’t tell the bloody world about it. No. One. Cares.”

“Oh my god, this is so stupid,” Alice groaned, putting her face on the table.

“I know, but I can’t look away,” Isaac whispered in her ear.

Emily huffed and looked away from Blaise. “Let me guess. You’re one of those people who don’t believe that the food industry is a corrupt abomination that is slowly killing our environment?”

“What the fuck does that have to do with anything?” Blaise shouted in exasperation.

“It has everything to do with everything!”

“What are you talking about!?”

“Answer the question, Blaise,” she egged him on, her eyes piercing through his.

“Obviously I think it’s corrupt!” He said. His blood was boiling in his face but his eyes wouldn’t leave hers. “I just don’t care. I’ve grown accustomed to the food that I have available. I don’t want it to change.”

Isaac leaned over to Alice’s ear and whispered. “I can’t believe Blaise is standing up to her.”

“I know,” Alice replied. “It’s actually pretty incredible.”

“How can you be so selfish?” Emily asked with disgust written all over her face. “Don’t you care about the environment?”

Blaise let out a cold laugh and leaned back in his chair, rubbing his eyes. “Yes, Emily. I’m so selfish because I don’t pretend to care about issues that I have no control over.”

“You are! Look at your coat!” She shrieked, pulling at the sleeves of his black coat. “It’s leather!”

“Wow, yep. You’re right, you got me there,” he said, nodding his head exaggeratedly. “Wearing the coat that my father gave me before he died makes me selfish. I’m so damn sorry.”

“Fine,” she huffed. “That doesn’t make you selfish, I guess. But it’s stupid that you don’t care more about these environmental issues.”

“Well, what the hell are you doing to correct them? Getting drunk on tequila and doing yoga seven days a week isn’t exactly saving the ozone layer!”

She slammed her hands on the table, causing all the glasses to rattle. Her nostrils flared and her
glazed over eyes seethed; every word spoken dripped with contempt. “Just because I wouldn’t sleep with you doesn’t mean you have to argue everything I say.”

Woah.

Ouch.

Blaise’s jaw dropped. He looked down at his pint and shook his head in disbelief, a quiet menacing laugh bubbling from his throat. “Oh, Emily, Emily, Emily…” he tutted his tongue. “Thank you so much.”

She narrowed her eyes. “F-for what?”

His cold laugh continued and he wiped away fake tears from his eyes. “For not sleeping with me. Seriously. Thank you.”

“Wh-what?”

“Sure, I made the mistake of falling for your initial sweet little, ‘Oh, look at me, I’m such a hot yoga instructor act!’ But trust me, that is aaaaalll gone now. This whole thing you’ve got going on,” he swirled his fingers around her face, “is nothing but a fake-crazy-wannabe-hippie-chick-charade. Quite frankly, I think I dodged a bloody bullet. So really, from the bottom of my heart, thank you, Emily. Thank you for not sleeping with me.”

Emily clamped her jaw shut and swallowed hard, her knuckles turning white from grasping her drink so tightly. Alice contemplated calling Blaise out for being so rude…but at the same time Emily was pretty rude first. Instead, she bit her fingernails and lightly leaned back into Isaac’s arm which was lazily draped over the back of her chair, as they both anticipated the next move between Emily and Blaise. Blaise’s eyes had manifested the coldest, most bitter gaze as he smirked, egging Emily on.


Blaise wiggled his eyebrows and the corner of his smirk raised even higher. Slowly he leaned closer to her, and with more arrogance than Blaise had ever shown before, he said, “Thought you liked assholes, baby.” And he winked.

He actually fucking winked.

In a split second, Emily’s hand shot in the air, inches away from Blaise’s face. Her chest heaved as she glared at him menacingly, her seething eyes penetrating his own and her hand quivered. Alice gasped, clamping her hand around her mouth, waiting through squinted eyes for the inevitable harsh slap that would soon strike Blaise’s face.

But Blaise didn’t even flinch. He bit his lip, trying to contain the frosty grin as his eyes dared her to do it. Quickly, he licked his lips and gave her the smallest nod, insinuating that she should continue.

And in one swift motion, faster than any of them had ever seen, instead of her palm making contact with his cheek it grabbed the back of Blaise’s head. She gave him one last glare and shook her head before pressing her lips firmly upon his.

Blaise’s eyes shot open wide, finally losing his air of aloofness. This had officially caught him off guard. Emily pulled him in closer, hungrily kissing his lips, until finally Blaise wrapped his hands around her waist pulling her into his lap. Her hands eagerly pulled at his black hair and the collar of
his shirt, anything she could grasp. Public displays of affection clearly bothered neither of them.

Isaac and Alice both sat there gaping with their eyes bulging out of their heads, both in shock of the entirely unprecedented scene. Isaac tilted his neck, quietly muttering, “how in the fuck…?” and Alice could only shake her head in response, completely speechless.

Finally, Emily unlocked her lips from his, completely breathless. Her eyes poured into his with her hands wrapped around his neck and asked hurriedly, “Do you want to come back to my place?”

“Y-yes,” he stammered out, his previous arrogance completely evaporated. She nodded, and without a word, slid off his lap and waltzed out the door. Slowly, Blaise craned his neck to Alice and Isaac, who both remained completely flabbergasted. His brow furrowed as if he was desperately trying to comprehend what had just happened. Touching his lips lightly with his fingertips, he nodded and turned to his friends to say, “Alright. Well, goodnight then.”

Alice remained at a loss of words and Isaac managed to weakly say, “Have fun, man.”

“Blaise!” Emily called from the door. “Are you coming or not?”

Blaise hopped off the chair, completely leaving his leather coat behind, and scurried after Emily into the snow leaving Isaac and Alice alone, both in complete awe of the situation.

Isaac finally cleared his throat and turned to Alice. “Um…want to stay for a couple more drinks?”

She had felt her phone vibrating in her pocket throughout Blaise and Emily’s argument but she continued to ignore it.

“Yeah, sure.” She nodded.

Tequila makes people do crazy things.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh! Were you expecting that at all or what!? Are you happy for Blaise or mad at them??? What do you think is gonna happen next? The nights not over ;)

Please let me know what you think! And kudos! And have an amazing night :) Also, idk why it keeps indenting really weirdly. I'll fix it soon haha, too sleepy tonight.
Hey guys! Guess what my fricken' kudos percentage is at?!?! It's at 75.86% !!!!! This is getting crazy! I didn't even think the ratio could get that high on this site! Thank you all for reading, giving kudos, and to the lovely user who has been making my day with her comments. <3

Here is another two-parter, guys! It's definitely my favorite that I've written so far. Please let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Isaac leaned forward in his chair; his blonde hair flopped in his eyes and Alice smelled the liquor emanating through his teeth. One elbow rested on the back of his wooden chair while the other was perched in a puddle of sticky Jägermeister from the shots they ordered after Blaise and Emily gallivanted out the door.

His eyes shifted behind his shoulder before tilting his mouth towards her ear. In a hushed voice, he said, "Hey, have I ever told you about the bartender?"

She snapped her neck to face him. Her brows knitted, but a curious glimmer sparkled in her eyes as she met his.

"No," she said. "Tell me."

"Well," he craned his neck behind him to glance at the burly bartender. The man's scarred hands clutched onto a tattered rag as he polished a pint glass; his dark beady eyes scanned the room, keeping a watchful eye on the remaining drunk patrons scattered throughout the pub. Isaac turned his face to hers and covered the side of his mouth. "They say that he used to be the leader of this gang that was basically the equivalent of the mafia. Apparently, a few years ago a bunch of ex-members stormed into the bar, like ten of them at least, and tried to attack him for something."

"Oh?"

"Yep. But all by himself, with only his hands, he tied up them to a bunch of chairs and..." he looked behind his shoulder and lowered his voice before slowly raising a pinkie finger, "chopped off all their pinkies. Apparently he kept them, too."

She pulled her head away and tilted her neck. "That's bullshit."

"No it isn't."

"He would be in jail."

"I don't think gang members turn to the police for justice."

"Well, if that's true," she said with her straw between her teeth, "then why do you keep bringing me to this dangerous establishment?"
"What can I say?" he said, leaning back in his chair, swirling the beer the around in his glass. "I live for the danger."

She immediately cracked up at his exaggerated, suave demeanor to give a snappy retort. To try to stifle her laughter, she stared at his brown leather oxford shoes. In the corner of her eye, she watched him rest both his elbows on the table and gaze at the bartender with a distant look in his eye. He gave a long, wistful sigh.

"I want his life."

She snapped her neck towards him.

"You want to be in a gang?"

"Wha - ? No!" he said with his eyebrows nearly hitting his hairline. "I meant that I want his job."

"Oh...you wanna be a bartender?"

"I wanna own my own bar," he said and stared dreamily at the ceiling. "That's the dream."

"Oh my god, why does every guy in existence want to own their own bar?"

"Well, I can't speak for every other man in the world," he said. "But do you have any idea how fuckin' nice it would be to not worry about a lawsuit just because someone ordered the wrong amount of fries?"

"I can't say I've ever thought about it."

"Fuck, it would be great," he said. "I would sell the best spaghetti..."

"Oh, god," she scoffed as she flipped her red hair over her shoulder, "you would totally open a spaghetti themed bar or something, wouldn't you?"

As soon as the idea hit his ears, his eyes bolted open in sync with his widening grin.

"You've never thought of that, have you?"

"That would be perfect," he laughed and grabbed her shoulder, huddling his head closer to hers. "Come on, it'll be great. I'll take care of the finances, Blaise can cook the spaghetti, Emily can be the hostess, and you – "

" - Isaac Hanes, I swear to god, if you finish that sentence with me being the waitress, I'll hit you. Hard."

He clamped his mouth together, staring cross-eyed at her finger which was dangerously close to his nose. Slowly, he pushed her finger to her lap and said, "As a matter of fact...I was about to say that you can be the bouncer."

"The bouncer?" she said. "I can be the bouncer of a spaghetti bar?"

"Hey, I've heard those places can get pretty wild," he said. She let out a breathy laugh and shook her head, staring at the dartboards in the corner of the pub. Isaac chuckled and looked at his beer before saying, "Nah. Something tells me there isn't much business in a spaghetti bar." He gave her a sideways glance. "What about you? What's your dream job?"

"Oh shit," Alice said, pulling her chin into her chest. "I have no idea."
She leaned over the table and tapped her fingers as she pondered what could possibly be her dream job. There were so many options: a scientist, a doctor, a videogame designer, a professional millionaire...

"Honestly?" she finally said. "This job – working with you guys - is probably my dream job."

"Pfft," he scoffed. "Yeah right."

"What? This job is a dream!" she said. "I get paid a shit ton of money and I get drunk at work, I couldn't ask for anything more.

"Hey," he said sternly. "You...you shouldn't do that anymore. Or at least don't tell me about it."

"You're such a stress case." She rolled her eyes. "But fine, fine. Blaise and I won't tell you when we drink on the job."

"That's all I ask."

She played with the ends of her hair, briefly examining a fried, rusty-red split end. Her gaze fell to her lap and she gulped, as if trying to swallow the words that danced on the edge of her tongue.

"Hey, umm..." she started as her eyes remained fixed on her lap, her teeth biting her bottom lip, "I'm not sure I've ever properly thanked you for setting me up with this job. My...my whole life has changed, for the better, and...yeah. Thank you."

With her nose still facing her knees, she lifted her eyes high enough to see Isaac hesitate before pressing his beer to his lips, just long enough to show a small, surprised smile.

"Erm, you're welcome," he said as he sat down the beer, a small trace of the grin remaining on his lips. "It's...it's been pretty cool since you got there." He scrunched his nose. "I still hate it, though."

"I don't get why you hate it so much," she said, taking a sip of her drink. "You're rich as fuck and you have a shit ton of prestige. If you just chilled out for once, you would have, like, the perfect personality for it."

"And what kind of personality would that be?"

"Hmm," she tapped her finger against her lips. "Arrogant, cut-throat, willing to manipulate if it's necessary to make shit happen, you're pretty smart..."

"Wow," he bobbed his head as he leaned back in his chair. "I guess half of those can sort of be considered positive traits."

"Oh, no!" She laughed loudly, as she waved her hand, her face slowly becoming more flushed. "You have other good traits, too! What I was trying to say, is that...I don't know, when you're at work you fit the part well."

"Thanks," he said before he tightened his lips, and leaned over the table. "I feel like a fraud, though. Blaise calls it 'Imposter Syndrome'."

She saw the way his shoulders slumped over, as if a brick permanently rested on the back of his neck. Despite the lingering hint of sadness hidden in his voice, he forced a grin. When he opened his mouth, presumably to make some joke, without thinking she tapped her fingers on his forearm.

"Isaac, you're...you're good," she said. "You're not a fraud; you're good at your job. Trust me."
He sighed as he stared down at her, his smile faltering. He opened his mouth, about to say something, but instead, furrowed his brows and glanced at the ceiling. As his head began nodding slowly, and a smile slowly crept up his face, he turned to her and drove his finger into the table.

"You know, I am fuckin' good at my job!" He jabbed the table again. "I am just as good, if not better, than my dad was."

"There ya go," she said, raising her drink to the roof. "That's the cocky Isaac I'm used to."

"Seriously, though," he said, talking with this hands, "since I've been in charge our sales have gone up by 10% and we get sued waaayy less. It's pretty cool, actually."

"See? Just remind yourself of that when you're feeling like a fraud!"

"Yeah, you're right, it's just," he swallowed hard and shook his head. "I don't really know why I'm talking about this..."

"Tequila?"

"Yeah, that didn't help," he said. "Let's just...let's talk about something else, okay?"

"Alright. Yeah, that's fi – "

" – It's just that no one there takes me seriously because I'm so young!" Isaac interrupted.

"Oh."

"I feel like..." he tightened his lips as his foot started tapping the floor repeatedly. "I feel like I need to work five times as hard to earn their respect. It's exhausting."

"Oh, come on Isaac," she said. "They respect you."

"No they don't. And I can't blame them," he said. "Some of those people have been working there for...fifteen, maybe twenty years, and suddenly this twenty-five-year-old kid shows up and starts telling them what to do. I wouldn't respect me, either."

Her lip pouted as she tried to think of some consoling words, but instead, she sighed. "Yeah...I guess you've got a point."

"I mean, it's fine," he said. "I'm sure it'll get better once I get more established. But...the first few years are gonna kill me."

"Well, for what it's worth," she said, quickly tapping his knee with her fingertips, "I think you're doing great."

"Thanks, Alice."

A gentle, serene smile pulled on his lips when his eyes met hers, and for the first time ever she noticed the faintest dimple on the right side of his lips.

Then Alice's phone vibrated in her pocket.
PART TWO IS COMING RIGHT UP! <3
Alice's phone vibrated in her pocket.

"Fuck," she muttered and peeled her eyes from Isaac to grab her phone. It had been hours since she last replied to Mark. The letters of the message scrambled around the screen and she squinted to focus her vision.

Finally, she decoded the riddle.

"Hellooo?? I thought you weren't going to be out late?? It's past one....lol."

"God, leave me alone," she groaned and shook her head as she expertly and elegantly tapped her fingers across the screen to type, "Soory bab lool!!! J Emly wanted anther round b home soon <3 <3."

It was only a partial lie. There was a point during the night where Emily did indeed want another round. She flipped the phone over on the table and raised her gaze to find Isaac stifling a laugh.

"Trouble in paradise?"

"Shut up, Isaac."

"I'll take that as a yes."

"No, no. Everything is fine," she said as she leaned her elbow on the table and rested her chin on her palm. A small pout formed on her mouth and she let out a long, drawn out sigh, before exploding.

"I don't get why he's so paranoid and clingy and weird now," she said. "When we dated before he didn't give a fuck about what I did..."

"That is truly an ideal trait in a partner."

"You know what I mean," she said before glancing at the clock. "He's right, though. I should be getting home. It is late."

"Yeah, it is..."

They sat there in silence, both staring at their hands clutching onto their glasses. Isaac's fingers drummed the side of his pint right and his foot began to twitch, bobbing his knee up and down. Alice glanced out the windows, watching the snow elegantly falling to the ground. She didn't really want to leave, but she knew it was the right thing to do.

Just as she moved her arm to grab her coat, Isaac scrunched his eyes shut and brushed his hand
against her wrist. "Hey, can I ask you something?"

She dropped the coat.

"Sure."

"Why are you dating him again?"

Groaning, she slumped into the chair. "Oh my god, I do not want to talk about this with you."

"Why not? It's an honest question."

"Yeah, but it's stupid because nothing I say is going to make a difference in your opinion of him."

"That's true," he said. "I think the guy is an idiot, and nothing is going to change that. But maybe you can help me understand why you're so smitten with him."

"Why does it matter?"

"It doesn't matter," he said. "But I'm curious. Maybe I want a better understanding of the female's mind. Please, enlighten me."

"God, you're annoying," she said, rolling her eyes. "But fine. He's nice, and attractive, we have a lot in common — "

"- Like what?"

"Well, we both like..." she trailed off and bit her lip. She and Mark had tons of things in common! Alcohol was merely blurring her memory. "We both like watching movies."

"Holy shit, Alice." He slammed his palm on the table and laughed. "You'd better lock that down 'cause there's no way you're gonna meet anyone else who watches movies."

"Oh, fuck off," she said, staring at the door, suddenly feeling more eager to leave. "You don't need to have things in common to have a good relationship. Opposites attract, right?"

"You know, I kind of think that saying is bullshit," he said. "I've dated a lot of girls who weren't anything like me and it always ends with them getting pissed at me for...doing the shit I do."

"That's because you're an asshole sometimes, Isaac," she said slowly, patting him on the shoulder as if she was talking to a child. "I doubt they're getting mad at you because you don't have things in common. They're probably pissed because you're being a dick."

"Well, fine, if that's the logic you wanna go with..." he said. "Mark treated you like garbage for so long. Why did you go back to that?"

"Oh, please," she said. "You probably treat girls like garbage way more often than he does."

"Well, yeah, most likely. But that's only because of the sheer volume of women I date compared to him. I mean, come on," he smirked as he puffed out his chest, motioning his hands to his entire body. Alice scoffed but he continued, "but I can safely say, without a fucking doubt in my mind, I would never expect any of the women I may have hurt to come back to me."

"He didn't expect me to go back to him," she argued. "I chose to go back to him."

"Oh, please," Isaac said. "No offense, but can you honestly tell me that you truly believe Mark
hasn't been aware of how you've felt this entire time? And that he hasn't just kept you on the backburner until he felt ready?"

Her heart began to race and she narrowed her eyes before reaching for her coat again. "You're kind of being a dick right now."

He pressed his palm to his forehead.

"Fuck, you're right. I am being a dick. Sorry," he said, pinching the bridge of his nose with his eyes closed. When she relaxed back in the seat he said, "Let me rephrase what I'm trying to say."

"Fine."

"Okay, so, you two have been involved with each other for what...nine years?" She nodded. "Alright, so...why haven't you tried, I dunno, dating someone else in that time?"

"Well, it's not like I haven't tried," she cried as she slumped into her seat. "I've been on dozens of dates."

He turned his knees towards her. "Then why haven't you stayed with any of them?"

"It's not my choice. None of them ever like me or call back..." she frowned as she stirred her straw around her drink. "I'm ugly or something..."

"Pfft," he scoffed. "Fuck off."

She narrowed her eyes. "What?"

"You're not ugly."

"Thanks, but I don't need your pity compliments."

"I'm being serious!" he said. "You're pretty."

She huffed and looked away from him. "Whatever, Isaac."

"Oh, come on. I've made about a hundred comments insinuating that I find you pretty."

"Yeah, but," she fiddled with her fingers, "you say them...ironically."

"No I don't!"

"Yes, you do."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do --"

"Alright, thanks, Alice, for informing me of when I'm being ironic," he rolled his eyes. "Clearly, you know everything."

"I do, don't I?" she said and sat up straight, smiling smugly.

"For the record though..." his elbow slid closer to hers and he wiggled his eyebrow, "I would totally fuck you."

"Wow." She let out a loud, cold laugh and her eyes opened wide. "My ego is finally restored
because Isaac Hanes, who would fuck anything that moves, would do the honour of sleeping with me."

"I don't fuck anything that moves. I have standards," he said and took a sip of his beer. He set the glass down and put his elbows on his knees, and raised his hands in the air as he spoke. "What I mean is that if I were to see you at a party, and I had no idea how annoying you can be sometimes, I would actively go out of my way to pursue you."

She scowled at him, trying to find a trace of deceit in his eyes. When his blue eyes held contact with hers, and he didn't even blink once, she huffed and stared at the ground. "Well, thanks. I guess."

"You're welcome," he said. They sat in silence for a few moments. The music had gone from hard, classic rock to slow, bluesy country, probably in hopes the remaining drunk people would get the hint to leave. Isaac cleared his throat. "I don't get why you're so insecure..."

"Excuse me?" she gasped and clutched her hand to her chest. "You don't understand why I'm so insecure?"

"Not really, no," he said hesitantly, leaning away from her piercing eyes. "You're such a prick," Alice breathed out as she slowly massaged her temples. "Maybe I should just go home..."

She raised her eyes to see Isaac's brows knitted together, his eyes filled with confusion. She sighed. "Maybe I'm so insecure because some asshole I went to high school with called me a 'Fat Ginger' for years."

The blood in Isaac's face drained immediately. Any trace of smirk dissolved and he muttered something inaudible under his breath. He stared at the ceiling and tapped his foot vigorously against the leg of the chair. "Okay – I'm gonna say something but you have to promise not to make it weird."

"Why do you always tell me not to make things weird?"

"Because you always make things weird."

"No, I don't."

"Most of the time you do!" he said. "Whenever I do something even remotely kind you're all, "Ohhh, Isaac, why are you being so nice to me?" as if it's completely impossible for me to have the slightest bit of a heart."

"Well, it is a little weird!"

He groaned and threw his face into his hands. "Do you want me to say what I'm going to say or not?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

She sat and watched him stare at the grimly bartender, his mouth opening and closing repeatedly, and his knee jittered against hers. After a few moments of him tapping his hand against the wooden table, he finally puffed out his cheeks to let out a huge breath.

"There was – no, sorry - there is nothing inherently wrong with you that warranted me being such
a piece of shit towards you for so many years.

Her eyes bulged out of her head and she nearly dropped her drink. "Wh-what do you mean?"

"I mean – fuck," he pushed his palms to his eyes, every word he spoke causing him agony. "I mean that I was just this sad, insecure, virgin who was constantly pissed off at the world because my dad was constantly pissed off at me, probably because he was miserable working the same job I am now. And you..."

"And I?"

When he peeled his hands away from his eyes the surrounding area was red from the pressure he inflicted upon himself. His Adam's apple bobbed in his throat as he met her dark brown eyes, a regretful glaze in his. "You...you were a weak link, I guess."

She scoffed and shot daggers at him. "A weak link?"

"Yeah!" he said. "Like, you were a perfectly normal, nice, super smart girl who I always honestly thought was cute...but you always, without fail, reacted to every little thing that I ever did. Every single thing I did would make you so angry, and – fuck, I'm such an asshole."

"Yes, you are," she said with her arms crossed. "But continue."

"For those few brief moments of you getting mad at whatever I did to you...it would," he pursed his lips together swallowed hard with his eyes closed, "it would boost my stupid, pathetic, fragile teenaged ego. Making you feel like shit made me feel better about myself. That's all it was."

"Oh," was all she managed to sputter out. She stared blankly at her forest green pencil-skirt as she tried to comprehend the new information.

"I don't know why I did it. If I could take it all back, trust me, I would. I was so fucking stupid back then, Alice," she could feel his eyes pressing into her, but her gaze remained focussed on her skirt. "I'm genuinely, from the bottom of my heart, sorry for what I did to you. And I'm sorry that it caused you problems as an adult...you shouldn't feel insecure about anything. You're the coolest girl I know."

This time she was staring at her lap to hide her increasingly red face. She bit her bottom lip to contain the grin that was desperately trying to peak out.

"Thanks, Isaac," she said quietly.

"No problem," he said. "Thanks for...giving me a chance, or whatever."

Finally, she found the courage to meet his sparkling eyes and a coy smile grew on her lips. "And thank you for signing my pay cheques."

He laughed and took a sip of beer, the tension slowly dissolving.

She slid her elbow closer to him on the table, twirling her red hair around her finger exaggeratedly. "So..."

Isaac narrowed his eyes and pulled his neck away. "So?"

"You thought I was cute in high school?" she asked with her tongue between her teeth.

Isaac groaned and threw his neck back in exasperation. "See? There you go making things weird
"Oh, it's not that weird," she argued. "I could have said, 'Wow, Isaac, that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me.'"

"Both are weird."

The mischievous glimmer in her eyes egged him on.

"I'm not getting out of answering this, am I?"

She shook her head.

"Fine, yes," he hissed between his teeth. "I thought you were cute since like...I dunno...seventh grade?" He had to pause to allow Alice to finish giggling. "It's not a big deal. I wasn't in love with you or anything I just..." he raised his hands to his lips and motioned around them, "I dunno, I've always liked your smile."

When he lowered his hand back to his knee, and his thumb gently brushed against Alice's bare thigh, something shifted in the room.

The loud music and drunken chatter quickly evaporated, and suddenly, she felt like she and Isaac were the only people left in the bar. Her eyes fell to his hand and for the first time she noticed her knees were intertwined with his; her right leaned on his inner left thigh while the other rested again the outside of his left knee. When the hell did that happen?

His thumb twitched against her thigh. The most innocent, little twitch, but it sent an electrical current throughout her body. Before she could stop it, she imagined how it would feel if Isaac's hand were to move up her bare thigh, sliding all the way up her dark green skirt. She thought about his large, strong hands grasping her wrists, holding them high above her head, as he pushed her hard against a wall. One hand slowly making its way to her stomach, teasing her as his finger traced her hip bone and -

What the fuck are you thinking about, Alice?

She closed her eyes and shook her head, desperately trying to escape her thoughts. She opened her eyes, and this time they rested on his perfectly pink lips and his dimple appeared again. How had she never noticed that before? She swallowed hard, and her imagination quickly stole her from reality again.

The imaginary Isaac brushed the crimson hair off her shoulder and his breath on her bare skin sent a shiver from her spine all the way to the ground. His soft lips kissed her collarbone and every grain of stubble on his chin that tickled her threw her senses into overdrive.

Alice! Seriously! Stop it!

Back in reality, she finally looked through her eyelashes to meet his gaze. There was an unreadable, serious look in his eyes piercing through her. He had never looked at her that way, before. An indent formed between his eyebrows as he stared down intently. Is he mad? Is he confused? Is he picturing me naked, too?

As Alice drowned in his gaze with her heart audibly pounding, trying to read his mind, she realized she had never noticed how beautiful his eyes were. They weren't only blue, they had these grey flecks blended in, as well. They looked like the afternoon sky, except right before a thunderstorm, when you see the storm clouds rolling in and –
Suddenly, Isaac closed his eyes and stretched his arms high above his head, letting out a loud, obnoxious yawn.

Time started moving again and the sound of music washed over her. What the hell just happened? Her mouth was dry as she blinked repeatedly, gawking at Isaac who had the most friendly, the most platonic, grin on his face. He was either completely unfazed or completely unaware of what had just happened.

"I'm fuckin' tired," he said, letting out another loud yawn. He stood up and pulled out his wallet, setting a few bills on the table. "Wanna share a cab home?"

She remained silent, blinking at his tie.

"Alice?"

"Wh-what?" she asked.

"Do you want to share a cab?"

"N-no!" she said. "I'm...I'm gonna walk."

"Are you sure?" He knitted his brows. "It's fuckin' cold."

"Yeah, I'm sure," she said quickly, staring at the floor instead of his face. There was no way she could trust herself alone in a taxi with him. She could hardly control herself in the middle of a busy pub. "I like the snow."

"Suit yourself," he said. "Hey, are you okay? You look a little pale."

"I'm fine." She blurted out, forcing herself to meet his stare to appear more convincing.

"Alright." His forehead crinkled as his eyes lingered on her for another second before tapping his wallet on the table. "Tell Mark I say hello."

"Who?" She snapped her head up to meet him frowning at her, looking more concerned than ever. Mark! Your boyfriend, you idiot! "Oh, right! Mark! Sorry, I thought you said someone else..."

"Okay..." his eyes shifted to the door and back to her. "Are you sure you'll be okay?"

"Uh-huh! Yep, I'm perfectly fine."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Alright. Have a good night, Alice."

"You too, Isaac."

She watched him until he disappeared through the doors and into the snowy abyss, her chest still heaving to every breath. Until he was guaranteed out of the area, she remained frozen in her seat, her legs feeling like they were weighed down by bricks. After what felt like ages, she leaned her head back and gave a low groan.

"Fuck," she muttered under her breath.

Standing up from the chair, she finished the last sip of her drink before grabbing the coat Blaise left behind. When the icy air hit her body and the snow fell on her face, she rifled through Blaise's
pockets. Relief washed over her when her hands grabbed the familiar rectangular box. She thanked the gods and clutched the cigarettes to her chest for a split second before eagerly sliding on out.

Her phone vibrated.

"Babe, seriously? Where are you lol? It's 2..." Mark's text message read.

"Sorry! On my way home! <3" she replied.

When she lit the long, seductive cigarette between her lips, she inhaled larger than she ever had before. Every muscle in her body relaxed, and ironically, she could breathe again.

As she leaned her head against the brick wall of the dungy pub she visited so often, smoking the cigarettes she said she would never smoke again, she silently made a resolution to herself.

She promised to stop spending time with Isaac and focus all her attention on Mark.

Chapter End Notes

Welllll, what did you think!? Looks like Alice has lost her head a little bit :) 
I would love to know what you thought of this chapter, especially part two! It was my favorite thing to write (so far).

Kudos and comment and all that stuff, guys! I love you all and appreciate every one of you for reading! <3
The sound of the clock ticking in sync with Alice's dripping kitchen tap drilled through her skull. The cup of coffee that sat on the table in front of her grew cold when Alice couldn't bring herself to take a sip. A homemade tinfoil ashtray sat beside the mug, nearly overflowing with cigarette butts. She glanced at Blaise's package of smokes and slid out the second last cigarette. After a quick apology to her precious lungs for smoking more than she ever had in her life, she lit the cigarette and leaned her neck back, watching the swirling smoke reach her ceiling.

She didn't get a wink of sleep since leaving the bar.

Every time she closed her eyes she would feel Isaac's hands on her skin, his voice in her ears, his stupid ocean-like eyes filled with desire as he tilted her chin upwards, licking his lips...

She let out a loud uncensored scream as she slammed her forehead on the table.

"How did this happen?" she asked herself out loud, her words dripping with agony.

That question plagued every cell in her brain. Was it a slow, gradual progression of feelings? Or was she that desperate for validation that it really only took a guy saying, "I would fuck you" and "I like your smile" to send her whole body in a fritz?

But it didn't matter how it started. All that mattered was that it ended.

Her stomach squirmed, feeling less like butterflies and more like an angry wasp's nest inside. Thankfully, most of the actual alcohol-induced nausea had subsided after spending the rest of the night hanging her head over the toilet. Instead, all that remained in her stomach were the feelings of guilt, shame, and disgust building a nice little nest inside her.

Without thinking, Alice tapped her spoon against the porcelain mug in sync with the ticking clock and dripping tap to create an ear-grating symphony. Perhaps it was the sleep deprivation, but Alice couldn't mentally process how annoying the kitchen sounds were. She felt detached from her body. It was as if instead of sitting at her kitchen table, she was actually permanently trapped in time, floating near the ceiling of the grungy pub, silently judging herself interact with Isaac.

So many brushing knees, tapping of the hands, and that idiotic tattoo.

She pulled her feet on the chair and hugged her legs, driving her eyes into her knees.

She had a boyfriend. A boyfriend whom she cared about dearly. A boyfriend whom she's been waiting half a decade to be with. A boyfriend who predicted this exact thing happening. Thankfully, that boyfriend's boss asked him to work out of town for a couple days so she could mull this shit-show over without his company.

Knock, knock, knock.

Slowly, she turned her neck to face the gentle rapping at the front door, but the rest of her body remained still. If it was anything important, whoever it was would have called or texted me before. Her phone had been dead in the bottom of her purse since she got home.
Turning her neck back to her now ice-cold coffee, she took the last few drags off the cigarette before crushing it in the mountain of the rest. It was when the aggravating dripping and ticking finally registered in her brain that she got a new thought. A thought she hadn't thought about all night and morning.

Maybe she was being too hard on herself.

She didn't actually do anything wrong. Sure, she was a little flirty. Maybe she told a couple of white lies to Mark to avoid him making a fuss. And yes, she may have imagined Isaac's naked body over a hundred times since leaving the pub. But that was all!


"Okay, I'm coming!" she shouted, even though she knew it was rude to try to ignore someone at the door.

When her hand touched the doorknob, she froze and her heart leaped into her throat.

What if it's Isaac?

Her stomach fluttered at the thought of opening the door to find Isaac casually leaning against the doorframe, giving her that playful wink she always secretly liked, ready to make some snappy comment about how it took her too long to answer the door...

No, Alice. You weren't being too hard on yourself. You suck.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNO –

Alice flung the door open. Even though her heart sank, she also let out a huge breath of relief upon seeing Emily.

"What the hell took you so long!?" Emily cried as she marched past Alice. Stale liquor radiated from the same outfit she wore the night before and her grimy, matted hairstyle matched her smeared silver eyeshadow perfectly. By the looks of the dark circles tracing her reddened eyes, she barely got more sleep than Alice.

Without giving her a chance to answer, Emily stormed down the hallways, slamming every door open while yelling, "Is Mark here!?

Emily's aggressive enthusiasm pounded through Alice's bones, immediately wearing her dehydrated, mentally, and physically exhausted body down. Instead of following her, she let out a weak, "No," and slumped down the side of the couch to sit on the grey shag carpet. Seconds later, Emily ran down the hallway and expertly slid across the carpet on to her knees directly in front of Alice.

Emily gripped Alice's shoulder, her whole body vibrating and eyes unblinking.

Alice's eyelids drooped and she contemplated asking Emily if she could have a quick cat nap before doing this.

"Alice..." Emily said slowly and deliberately.

Alice yawned loudly.

Emily gulped and tightened her grip on Alice's shoulder.

"I slept with Blaise!" Immediately, she covered her face and threw her torso away from Alice.
With the speed of a slug, Alice blinked three times. "I figured."

"Why didn't you stop me!?"

"Because you were a consenting adult who seemed to be on a mission?"

With a loud groan, Emily flopped on her back and spread her fingers along the carpet, staring at the ceiling as if her entire soul got sucked from her body.

"I'm never drinking tequila again," she said.

"Yep," Alice said as she dragged herself to join Emily on the floor. She had been sitting at the table for so long it felt nice to stretch out her spine. "Me neither."

A temporary silence enveloped the two girls as they both bathed in their respective shame. Alice wrestled with the idea of telling Emily about the foreign feelings for Isaac, but when the words reached the tip of her tongue, she found herself unable to let them out.

Emily scrunched her nose.

"Were you smoking?"

"Yep."

"That's really dumb."

Alice let out a huge sigh. Of all the stupid things that happened in the past twenty-four hours, smoking again was probably the stupidest of all.

"I know."

"ARGH," Emily shouted and rolled onto her stomach, hiding her face in her arms. "Alice, it was fucking weird."

"What was?"

"Sleeping with Blaise!"

Quickly, her mind caught up with the conversation and she shot upwards, covering her ears. "Dear god, Emily. I don't want to hear about all the weird shit you and Blaise did together."

"Huh?" Emily asked, rolling back over and sitting upright. When she saw Alice's horrified face she quickly blurted out, "Oh, no! No! The sex was perfectly normal! Not weird at all." She paused and tilted her head upwards. "You know, the sex was actually really good. Blaise is pretty hot."

"So why in God's name are you freaking out so much?"

Emily stood from the ground and paced the room, biting at the dark purple polish on her now chipped-away manicured fingernails. Whatever got her so shaken up must have been big, because Alice hadn't seen Emily this frantic since high school. Her eyes lazily followed her friend trek around the room until finally, Emily stopped in the center of the room.

"We talked about my feelings."

Alice's mouth dropped to the ground.
"You did what?"

Emily resumed her frantic march around the room and tossed her arms in the air as she spoke.

"We talked about everything!" she cried. "We talked about my parents' divorce, and how I don't like opening up to people, and we talked about how upset I was when no colleges accepted me. We talked about stuff I've never told you – stuff I've never even said out loud!"

She finally stopped stomping around and dropped to the couch, her skin pale as she stared at the air with disbelief. All Alice managed to do was gawk in silence.

"And like..."Emily said. "He talked about himself, too, and I listened. He's a pretty private guy, but from what I heard, he's lived a surprisingly wild life."

"He doesn't really talk about himself, does he?" Alice asked as if she was talking to herself instead of Emily. "He just asks us questions all the time..."

"Oh trust me, I know," Emily said. "I'm never sleeping with a fricken' shrink again. He got in my head, Alice!"

"Is that really such a bad thing?"

"Yes," she said simply and put her head between her knees. "Do you have any Advil or anything? My head is going to explode. I can't tell if I'm hungover or if my brain is just drowning in shame."

Alice scoffed at her but still stood up to grab the pill bottle above her microwave. From the kitchen, she said, "Seriously, what is your problem with Blaise? I get that you don't like talking about your feelings and all, but you've been pretty mean to him since you two met."

Emily lifted her head from her legs and her bloodshot eyes drove into Alice.

"Do you really want to know what my problem is with Blaise?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Slowly, she pointed at both her eyes.

"His eyes...they fucking sparkle with monogamy." She said. "Like, you just know that little prat wants to settle down and have a family. Maybe buy a nice little home with a swing set in the back..."

"Yeah..." Alice said. "What an asshole."

"Listen, Blaise is a nice guy," she said. "He's gonna make some lucky woman very happy one day. But..."

"But?"

"I just know I would end up hurting him," she said. "When he looks at me it's like he sees someone who he wants to commit to and...I'm not girlfriend material. So, I've always thought it was better to simply avoid him altogether. It would be pointless to do anything with him."
She paused long enough to narrow her eyes at the black sweater hanging over an armchair, judging it as if it were herself. "Then, of course, the second that look in his eyes leaves, I go and sleep with him. What is wrong with me?"

Alice frowned and handed her the Advil bottle. She felt bad for not having more consoling words, but the lack of sleep was quickly catching up to her. When she took a seat beside Emily, she felt her eyelids droop. It would be so easy to fall asleep...

She imagined Isaac's fingers trailing up her thigh.

"Whatever," Emily said, thankfully shaking Alice from her thoughts. "I'm sorry, but I don't think I can hang out with you guys anymore. I can't see him again."

Alice gave a loud sigh before saying, "Don't worry. I don't plan on having any group outings with them for a while, either."

Emily turned her neck to face Alice, a peculiar look growing on her face. "How come?"

"Ugh," Alice groaned, and leaned over the couch to fiddle with the leaves of her tacky fake palm tree. She wasn't ready to look anyone in the eyes to share her news. "Isaac and I...we had a moment. Or, well, I had a moment. There was a moment."

She could hear Emily gasping behind her, but she wasn't ready to turn her body to see what expression she held. Would it be disgust? Fury? Disappointment?

The gasp quickly turned into a high-pitched squeal.

"Oh. My. God. Alice, tell me everything."

Alice crinkled her forehead and snapped her body towards Emily. "Excuse me?"

"Tell me what happened!"

"Why are you so...happy?"

"Well, you see, last night Blaise told me that he thinks Isaac likes you – "

"Wow, you two really did talk about everything, didn't you?"

"– And after talking to him, I've got to say, I agree," she said. "I've always kind of thought he had a bit of a thing for you, but Isaac's so...weird that it's hard to tell what's going on in his head."

"Yep." She said before groaning, "Urgh - I knew that's what Blaise was getting at the other day."

"So, what happened?" Emily asked looking more chipper than she had all morning. "Did you two kiss?"

"What? No!" Alice cried. "What's wrong with you?"

"What?"

"It's Isaac," she said. "And I'm with Mark."

"So?"

Alice glared at her before saying, "Okay, nothing happened. We had this... weird talk where he
apologized for being so mean to me in the past and he called me pretty. Nothing happened, I basically just eye-fucked him for eternity. But now – urgh – I can't stop thinking about him!"

"How the hell did these two boys totally fuck over our heads in the past twenty-four hours?"

"I dunno," Alice said. "But I don't like it."

"What did Isaac do?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said you had 'a moment'. Did it seem like he had 'a moment', too?"

"I have no idea," she said, throwing her head back on the couch exasperatedly. "I mean, on one hand...he really does not like Mark, at all. That's what started all this – Isaac basically saying that I shouldn't date Mark. But on the other hand, he's all friendly and buddy-buddy with me, I don't know."

It felt good getting these thoughts out. Even though she was sure she wasn't making much sense, the more she spoke, the more she felt her chest loosen.

"He obviously likes you, Alice."

"Oh please," she said. "If you and Blaise hadn't fallen in love and talked about your feelings, you wouldn't be saying that."

For the first time all day, Alice giggled at Emily's seething gaze at the mention of 'love'.

"Never. Say. That. Again."

All Alice could respond with was a cheeky, exaggerated grin. Smiling felt nice.

"Anyways," Emily said through gritted teeth, "he likes you."

"And what are your sources?"

"Well, for one, he listens to you."

"What do you mean he listens to me?"

Emily sat up straight and held out her hands, as if she was getting ready to give a presentation.

"Like, he listens to you. Whenever I talk to him it seems like his eyes glaze over and he immediately starts thinking about anything else," she said. "But when he talks to you...I don't know, he's zoomed right in. It's like tunnel vision."

Memories of Isaac flashed before her as she tried to recall the way Isaac paid attention to her, but to Alice, Isaac was just Isaac. It didn't seem like he treated her any differently. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely!" Emily said. "There have been so many times where he's been on his phone texting, and the second you open your mouth he immediately puts it down and focuses on every damn word you say. That's pretty fuckin' rare, Alice."

"Huh," she said. "I never noticed."

"Is this the first time you've ever felt this way towards him?"
Alice's stomach dropped and she felt the blood drain from her face. Slowly, she turned her body away from Emily, once again fiddling with the fake palm tree. "Well...there was this other time..."

"Really?"

"I don't wanna talk about it."

"Oh, come on!" Emily said. "You can't say something like that and drop it."

"It's stupid..."

"This is stupidity hour," she said. "Everything that has been said since I've gotten here has been stupid."

Alice groaned and put her forehead on the couch as she quietly mumbled, "It was on Halloween."

"Wait – what?" Emily asked with her brows knitted together. "But on Halloween...I was..."

"Yep."

"Alice, what the hell?" Emily cried. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it was dumb and didn't mean anything," she said. "I thought I maybe liked him for a day, but I'm not even lying, after Halloween I haven't thought about him that way at all."

"What happened on Halloween that changed that?"

Alice felt the blood come rushing back into her face, her whole body growing warm and she turned her back towards Emily even more. "It's so dumb."

"Just tell me!"

"Fine," she huffed. "As soon as I saw him making out with that one friend of yours, I dunno, it stopped. So, I guess I summed everything up to..." she pressed her face deeper into the couch to muffle her words, "me being jealous of you."

"Jealous of me? For wanting to hook up with Isaac?"

"No, not really," she said. "I mean, I thought that's what it was at first. But I think I felt jealous of all the attention you get from guys...as soon as Blaise and Isaac saw you I felt invisible."

"Oh my god, Alice, you should never be jealous of me." She pressed her hands to her heart. "I'm the one who's jealous of you."

Alice shot her head up. "What? Why on earth would you be jealous of me?"

"Umm, I don't know. Maybe 'cause you're like, good at everything?"

"Oh, please," Alice said. "You're the one who has guys flocking all over you the second you walk into a room."

"Umm," she said again, "there's more to life than getting boys to like you, Alice."

"I know, but –"

"No, shut up," she said and Alice pulled her chin back. "Even if you do want to compare the
attention we receive from males, guys fricken' fall in love with you."

"Pfft, Mark is the only person who has ever fallen in love with me, and even that is pretty fleeting."

"Yeah, but that's just because he's the only guy you've dated," she said. "Alice, you're fucking cool. Even if it's just because you're filled with crippling self-doubt, you're the most humble and down to earth person I know. You're the girl that the guys want to actually be friends with, the ones they fall for."

Emily paused to scowl at her own body. "When guys look at me all they see is boobs, and ass, and makeup, and hair, and... They don't care about me," she pointed to her head before motioning her hands up and down her body, "they only care about my body."

Alice lowered her gaze and a small smirk pulled at her lips. "Blaise doesn't look at you that way."

"Don't go there," she said waringly before relaxing her face. "I'm sorry that I made you jealous..."

Alice turned to Emily, who was staring sadly at the couch. She felt her lip tremble as she watched her friend trace somber shapes on the cushion, and suddenly, an overwhelming urge took over her. She threw her arms around Emily's neck, pulling her into a bone-crushing hug. She wasn't much of a hugger, but at that moment, she couldn't contain herself.

"I love you, Em," she said, choking back overemotional tears. She really needed sleep.

Emily was taken aback by Alice's sudden burst of affection, but within seconds, she wrapped her arms around Alice tightly. Sharing the same emotional tone as Alice, she said, "I love you, too, Alice."

After a few moments, they pulled away. When Alice met Emily's eyes, they both broke into a fit of giggles. Emily threw her head back on the couch and said, "God, that was corny."

"Right out of a teen movie."

"We gotta hug more often."

"I agree. Feels good."

"So," Emily clapped her hands together. "What are you going to do about Isaac?"

"Umm...nothing?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm gonna do nothing." She stood up and stretched her arms in the air before walking to the kitchen, finally grabbing her cold coffee. She took a sip and welcomed the aromatic flavors even though caffeine was the last thing she should be consuming. When she walked back to the living room she said, "Why are you so supportive of this, anyway? You're the only person in my life who is 'Pro-Mark'. You're the supportive one!"

"Listen, I love Mark. I think he's great. We've been friends for a long time and I'm totally supportive of you two being together," she said. "But at the end of the day, you and Isaac are like, really close. I think it'd be cute."

"No, it wouldn't," Alice said. "What am I supposed to do? Break up with Mark so I can have one night of meaningless sex with Isaac? It's not like Isaac is the relationship type."
"You know, you guys always talk about Isaac like he's this big womanizer," Emily said, "but since you guys have been hanging out...he hasn't really hooked up with anyone, has he?"

Alice's stomach dropped when it dawned on her that Emily was right. The thought of Isaac being a huge player had been drilled into her brain since the beginning; he did sleep with Simon's fiancée, after all. Aside from the girl at Emily's party, however, Alice was pretty much the only girl he talked to.

"No. I – we – it's not happening with us." Fluttering butterflies took over her stomach and she shook her head viscously. "It's too complicated, everything that's happened with Simon and...this all means nothing. This is just some stupid drunken inspired crush that's going to go away as soon as Mark gets back to town."

She wasn't sure who she was convincing.

When Emily remained silent, only replying with a doubtful frown, Alice said, "I just need to distance myself with him. Everything will go back to normal."

"It's your call, I suppose," Emily said and shrugged her shoulders. "Whatever, screw these dumb boys. Can we just like, watch a movie in bed and die until this horrid day is over?"

Alice nodded enthusiastically, thanking the gods for blessing her with those heavenly words. When Emily walked into the bedroom, Alice hung back for a second. The black sweater hanging off the back of the armchair called her name, and slowly, she was drawn to it. She traced her fingers to the small hole in the sleeve and bit her lip. Before she knew it, the sweater was pulled tightly around her arms as she made her way to her precious bed.

Emily giggled away at the television and Alice collapsed on the bed. The sweater's comforting, soft fabric hugged her as she was whisked away to dreamland where she chatted happily over dinner with Simon and Mark.

Chapter End Notes

GUYS! <3 <3 You're all so amazingly incredible! I hope you all love my random ratio gushing haha, BUT i"M CURRENTLY AT 76%! And honestly, throughout the week there have been times where it's bounced up to over 80%, but then I assume people would see how many kudos this is and check out the story, thus lowering it. WHICH IS AWESOME! Because that means new readers are showing up! Share this story around guys! and don't forget to comment and kudos! I Would LOOOOOOVE to hear what you think of Emily in this chapter! I know I paint her in a bad light so it's totally A-OK to hate her! but I looove writing her haha. She's so nuts and dramatic.
"Alice, it was amazing," Blaise said as he poured himself a cup of the hot coffee that faintly smelled of mildew. The bright fluorescent lighting of the office's small breakroom washed out his tanned skin as he stirred a spoonful of sugar into the coffee, but it didn't take away from the dreamy smile that was plastered on his face.

Alice leaned against the shaky round table and rolled her eyes for what felt like the millionth time since meeting up with Blaise that morning. "Yeah, I heard. You've mentioned it a couple dozen times in the past three days."

"Really, though," he started, "I don't think you have fully grasped how amazing it was. Have you ever hooked up with a yoga instructor?"

"Nope. Can't say I have," she said flatly as she blew on her own piping hot coffee.

"Well, let me tell you," he said. "Her legs could go everywhere. I didn't think human bodies could bend like th –"

"Blaise, shut up," she groaned and threw her head back, not wanting to hear any more details about her two friends in the bedroom. "Do you get this annoying every time you sleep with a new girl?"

"No, never!" he said. "Flexibility aside, we had a bloody connection, I'm telling you. Even if she says that she's never going to speak to me again, she fuckin' loves me. I can tell."

"Is that so?"

"Yep," he said, puffing his chest out. "Mark my word: one day Emily and I are going to date. We are going to date harder than...I don't know...Mr. and Mrs. Santa Clause."

"Wow. That is officially the weirdest relationship goal I have ever heard."

"You know what I mean, though," he said. "Like, we are destined to be together forever like Mr. and Mrs. Clause."

"As much as I love your confidence," she said, "I wouldn't get your hopes up too much. She seemed pretty adamant about avoiding you for eternity."

"Meh. One of these days she's going to come marching into your house while I'm there, and you'll see, fireworks are going to fly," he said. He leaned against the counter across from Alice and tightened his lips, his cocky swagger diminishing for a moment. "But...for all intents and purposes, seeing as you are her best friend...do you think I have the slightest shot with her?"
Alice sighed and tutted her tongue slowly as she watched Blaise subtly grip the edge of the countertops, fearfully anticipating the response. If there was one thing Alice had learned from this ordeal, it was that she hated being the middle-man between Blaise and Emily. Blaise was so happy and sure of himself – she didn't want to be the bad guy to crush his hopeful thinking.

The memory of Emily's sad eyes as she opened up about her insecurities flashed before Alice's mind and she let out one more deep breath. "You really want to know what I think?"

"Absolutely," Blaise said, his eyes widening eagerly.

"You're positive?"

"Yes!"

"Fine," she said and gloomily shook her head, staring at Blaise's converse sneakers. Slowly, she raised her eyes to meet his and a small grin pulled at the corners of her lips. "Yes. I think you have a shot. Don't ask me how the hell you're going to get there...but yeah. There's a chance."

Blaise's eyes illuminated and he threw his fists in the air, mimicking a football player who scored a touchdown. It was impossible to deny that his enthusiasm was contagious. Even if it was barely nine in the morning, Alice was beginning to feel energized. She was ready to start the day with no distractions.

Blaise lowered his fists and looked at his watch. "Oh, nice. Isaac is going to be here, soon. He had something to tell me before we get to work."

"What?" Alice asked quickly, feeling her face pale. It had only been a few days since their hormone-fuelled interaction at the pub, and Alice had successfully avoided Isaac completely. She considered it a victory. Every moment she spent away from Isaac, the closer she was to completely erase the lingering feelings that plagued her imagination.

Immediately, she scrambled to collect her briefcase and escape the room. "I just remembered I have an important email to send out. I'll see you – "

Her lies were interrupted by the door clicking open.

Fuck.

In hindsight, it was foolish to expect to avoid your boss forever.

When Isaac walked through the door, Alice's heart raced as if it was the first time she had ever laid her eyes on him. She felt hyper-aware of every mundane movement he made; The way his long fingers grasped the doorknob forced her to envision those same fingers brushing a loose strand of hair from her dark eyes. The way his blonde hair swayed when he peered down the hallway to ensure no employees were behind him made her wonder what that hair would look like after jumping out of the shower, glistening beads of water dripping down his forehead...

When the hell did you turn into such a nymphomaniac, Alice?

"Hey, mate," Blaise said and Alice thanked the gods for being snapped out of her perverted thoughts. Who knows how long she could gawk at Isaac.

Isaac shut the door and turned to face them, his cheekbones nearly hitting his eyes from the beaming smile that overtook his face. "Guess what!"
"What?" Blaise asked as Alice wondered if Isaac used a new toothpaste that morning because his teeth looked extra white.

Isaac pumped his fists in the air and his glimmering eyes shined with glee, rounding like rainbows as they crinkled at the corners. "I'm going to New York tonight!"

Relief washed over Alice like a tsunami. If Isaac was going to be in New York that meant she wouldn't even have to try to avoid him. This was perfect! With this news, she didn't even have to fake the smile that had overtaken her lips.

Blaise was evidently not as enthused.

"Really? That's what's so important?" he asked in a deadpanned tone. "You wanted to brag to us about your extravagant life a little bit before the day started?"

"You know it," Isaac said, snapping his fingers as he walked towards the coffee pot. "I've got a conference to go to which is sort of boring. But I've got this fantastic hotel and tickets to a stand-up comedy show afterward."

_Ugh. He likes stand-up comedy. He's so cool._

She frowned to herself.

_Mark likes stand-up comedy, too, Alice._

"When are you getting back?" Blaise asked.

"Friday evening," he said as he filled the porcelain mug with the black sludge. He leaned against the counter next to Blaise and nodded his head to Alice, who was focussed on the refrigerator's magnets a foot away from Isaac. "Why are you so quiet today?"

"Huh?" Her eyes darted towards him, making eye contact for the first time since the pub. The lurching feeling in her stomach was so strong, she had to clench onto the table to ground her feet.

"You haven't said a single word," he said. "You're just...staring at things."

"No I'm not," she blurted out, feeling her cheeks heat up.

"No I wasn't." "Yeah, you were chatty five minutes ago," Blaise said and Alice wished she could telepathically tell him to shut up.

"No there wasn't." "Yes, you were," he said. "You were chatting away about baking for a good twenty minutes earlier." "I wasn't just talking about baking," she said, rolling her eyes, "I was talking about how I almost caught my kitchen on fire while attempting to bake."

"Even so," Isaac interjected and took a step in between Alice and Blaise, "Why are you so quiet now?"

"I'm just..." she started and glanced up at the ceiling, "I'm really busy with work."

"You're not that busy," Blaise said and shrugged his shoulders. Alice never wanted to punch Blaise more than she did in that moment.
"Yeah, relax," Isaac said and before she had a chance to register what was happening, he took three large strides towards her, joining her against the wobbly breakroom table. When the sleeve of his light grey suit jacket brushed against her elbow, she jolted her arm away as fast as she could.

It was a shame that she was holding her uncovered coffee mug in that hand.

"Shit!" she shouted as the steaming hot contents splattered all over her brand new white blouse. Blaise tossed her a handful of napkins as she turned her back to Isaac, cursing at the white shirt becoming more translucent every second. Why, oh why, did she choose to wear a bright red bra with a white blouse? Even if the fabric was thick enough to hide the lingerie on a typical day, it didn't combat the new extreme-klutz trait she developed overnight.

"What is wrong with you?" Isaac asked, gawking at the scene unfolding in front of him.

"N-nothing!" she squeaked. "Y-you startled me."

"How?" he asked, completely dumbfounded.

"I don't know," she said, blotting the stain with the soggy napkins. "I wasn't expecting you to be there."

"You watched me walk over."

She huffed and turned to face him. "Whatever! I wasn't thinking."

Isaac smirked, cocking his neck at Alice's transparent shirt. "Damn. Nothing like a little 'Girls Gone Wild' to start off the morning."

Alice's face was as crimson as the lacy bra which she attempted to cover with her arms and she shot daggers at Isaac. Only a quiet snickering was heard from Blaise as he took off his blazer and handed it to Alice. "Here. You can borrow this for the day."

"Thank you, Blaise," she said cordially before resuming her glare at Isaac. "See? That's how a mature gentleman acts."

"Hey! You didn't give me a chance to offer my coat."

"Well, maybe if you weren't ogling my chest you would have!"

"I wasn't ogling your chest. I was merely making an observation."

"Well, maybe you should observe something else."

"Maybe you should learn how to hold a coffee."

"Maybe you should –"

"Oh my god, shut up," Blaise interrupted and threw his hands in the air. "You two bicker more than an old married couple."

"No we don't," both Isaac and Alice said in unison.

"Whatever," Blaise said. "I've gotta meet the new lot of psychologists and find out if they're as daft as you two are."

Alice pulled on the oversized blazer as she watched Blaise exit the room. The blazer wasn't very
professional, but at least she didn't look like she was stepping onto the set of a porno. She picked up her briefcase and sent a cold look to Isaac before muttering, "I need to get to work, too. Have fun in New York."

Just as she was about to walk out the door, Isaac called, "Alice, hang on."

"What?" she huffed.

"Umm...I'm sorry." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I didn't mean to...erm...make you uncomfortable. I was just joking."

_The only thing that made me uncomfortable is that I wished you would stare at my chest more._

..._Girl. Get your shit together._

"It's fine," she said, staring at the floor so he wouldn't see her scowl at her own demented thoughts.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah," she said, wanting to escape the room as fast as possible. "You're right. I should probably learn how to hold a coffee..."

"And I should probably learn how to not make comments that would fall under the sexual harassment clause," he said, laughing uncomfortably.

"Oh, please," she said. "I'm positive you've said worse things."

"Yes, probably. But I typically say them outside of the office."

Alice's brain decided that was the perfect time to stop working. Unable to think of any snappy retort, she awkwardly tapped her hands on her thighs. She could barely hold back her cringe as she blurted out, "Alight. Have a good trip!"

"Wait!"

"Oh my god, Isaac," she groaned. "You're my boss. You should want me working, not wasting my entire morning in the coffee room."

"I was just going to ask if you and Blaise wanted to go for drinks when I get back?" he said, wiggling his brows. "It's Friday night and I'll probably have a couple souvenirs."

"Umm," she mumbled, biting her lips as she avoided his bright blue eyes. "I can't. I'm going figure skating with Mark."

"What about Saturday?" he suggested. "We could get brunch?"

"Can't. I'm visiting Mark's parents."

"What about Sund – "

"Honestly, Isaac," she interrupted. "I'm actually really, really busy for the next couple of weeks. Mark and I have a lot of things planned."

Guilt instantly took over her body when Isaac pulled his neck back, his eyes quickly filling with a cocktail of hurt and confusion.
Why was she being such a cold bitch? It wasn't Isaac's fault that she wanted to have sex with him on top of the counter right next to the coffee maker. At the end of the day, he was still her friend...

But the less time she spent with him, the sooner her feelings would leave, and the sooner she could resume her platonic friendship.

Isaac frowned and put his hands in his pockets. "Is everything alright? Did I...did I do something to piss you off? Besides the coffee incident, that is."

"No, everything is fine," she said, waving her hand in the air to brush him off. "I'm just...stressed or something."

"Well, if you ever need to talk, you know you can talk to me," he said and pulled his hand from his pocket to gently touch her shoulder. Her whole body tensed and she briefly imagined telling him the real thoughts that had completely contaminated every cell in her brain.

"It's fine, Isaac," she said, and peeled his hand off her shoulder.

"Alright," he said and shrugged his shoulders. "I guess I'll see you next week."

"Sure. Yeah," she said quickly and turned on her heel, leaving Isaac confused in the doorway. Every step she took down the hallway left her heart heavier. She was disgusted with how terribly she just treated him...if he did have feelings for her, they were surely going disappear if she kept that attitude.

When she reached her office door, she froze.

What if she simply explained that she was developing feelings for him and that she needed to take a step back from their friendship? The mature thing to do as an adult is to communicate, right? He would surely understand. It would be better than him thinking she suddenly hates him.

A new surge of adrenaline overtook her body and she pivoted on her feet to rush back to Isaac.

The sound of her heartbeat thumped in her ear and her stomach fluttered. She was going to tell Isaac. She would rip it off like a band-aid, throw it out in the open, and then proceed to move on like it never happened.

Her pace quickened as she passed each office to the break room. She couldn't believe what she was about to do, but in that moment, it felt there was no other option. She would simply march into the room and say, "Isaac. I've recently been having these weird feelings for you, and because I'm with Mark, I need to step away from our relationship for a bit."

And because Isaac is an arrogant idiot, he would likely say something along the lines of, "It was only a matter of time before you fell for this piece of meat."

But what if he doesn't say that?

Even Alice could barely argue with Emily's arguments. It was practically confirmed that he shared some of the same feelings as her.

What if he slammed his coffee mug on the table, and rushed over to her, passionately grabbing her by the waist as he said, "Alice, you shouldn't be with anyone besides me"?

She didn't know what she wanted.

She reached the doorway to find Isaac still standing alone in the breakroom. His eyes were glued to
his cellphone, unaware of her presence. She stared at him; her thoughts bounced around in her head as she quickly debated whether this was the single stupidest thing she could ever do. Before she could stop herself, she quickly opened her mouth and croaked, "Isaac?"

His eyes shot up from the phone, and a grin spread across his face as if he was relieved to see her return. Her knees wobbled and she was amazed when she discovered she actually had a voice.

"I need to tell you something."

"Yeah, sure. Anything," he said, immediately shoving his phone into his pocket and walked closer to her.

She gulped and licked her lips, staring at the sleeves of Blaise's blazer instead of Isaac's face as she spoke. "Umm...lately I've been – "

"Mister Hanes?" Camelia, the busty brunette secretary peered around the doorframe. "There's an urgent call on line one for you. Something about a New York conference?"

"Oh, yes. I'll be right there," Isaac said and Camelia nodded, disappearing down the hallway again. He turned back to Alice, the same grin wide on his face. "Sorry about that. What's up?"

"Don't you need to take that?"

He shrugged. "They can wait."

"Oh, umm..." The air felt like it was trapped in her throat as the realization of what she was about to do dawned on her. Camelia interrupting the conversation was a blessing in disguise; a clear signal from the heavens that this was a god awful, terrible idea.

"I just wanted to apologize if I seemed rude earlier," she squeaked out. "I really hope you have fun on your trip."

"Oh...thanks," he said, his grin faltering slightly. "Well, I'd better take this call. See ya, Alice."

"Bye, Isaac."

Chapter End Notes

Don't forget to vote and comment!!!! love you all!!! <34
Seventeen

Chapter Notes

HEY GUYS!!! So sorry for the long wait!! My Archive of our Own account got logged out of, and then I forgot my password ahaha. Then I got carried away with university and kind of ....forgot about anything fun in the world.
Until I got a lovely comment from KawaiiHime (I think that's it) reminding me to post, SOOO i just got my password figured out, AND I"M BACK!

And as a surprise for waiting so long, I'M POSTING TWO CHAPTERS TODAY!!!!!! Wooooooo.

If Alice had to hear one more country song she would lose her mind.

"I've got a pick-up truck with a shovel in the back..."

Throwing a rock through her own window was never an idea Alice thought she would have, but as she glared with contempt at the open bathroom window, the temptation was undeniable. The sound of Mark's shower muffled the ear-grating twang, but as Alice froze on her balcony in the early December air, the irritatingly catchy harmonies sounded clear as day through the screen.

She peered behind her shoulder one last time before lighting her cigarette.

The only good thing that came from hearing that damn song was that Mark listened to it every single morning during his shower. The song was 4 minutes and 36 seconds long and without fail, the moment the song ended the shower would shut off. That left Alice with 86 seconds to toss the cigarette in the hidden ashtray under the barbecue, spray herself with perfume, and pop a piece of gum in her mouth.

It was a flawless plan.

Sure, she was an adult and should be allowed to smoke if she wants to...but it would be better if Mark didn't know about it.

"I'm gonna dig a hole to hide the beer can I held when our eyes first met..."

She mentally noted that she had two minutes left while she watched the grey smoke swirl into the equally dreary sky, reflecting on the past few weeks with Mark.

Things were...fine.

It would be a lie to say that she was blissfully happy, but really, who is in any relationship? Not to mention she knew exactly what was making her unhappy, and the blame couldn't be placed on Mark. She was willingly depriving herself of her friendship with Isaac. She had successfully avoided Isaac for the past two weeks since he returned from New York, reducing their conversations to formal small-talk about the weather.

Her plan was working, though. Every day she was imagining Isaac shoving her against the buttons
of the elevator, his hand slowly sliding up her skirt, less and less.

Evidently, Alice avoiding Isaac wasn't Mark's fault. He had no idea Alice had consciously resolved to spend less time with Isaac, but it was undeniable that he was thrilled regardless. With Alice seemingly finished with her friendship with Isaac, Mark smothered her with all the time and affection he could give, planning their elaborate dates days in advance.

Alice knew she should have been thrilled about the snowy sleigh ride through the city's Winter Wonderland they attended the previous night, but instead, she felt suffocated. As if a giant cork had been shoved in her progression to being a self-actualized, thriving, individual the moment she started dating Mark again. She didn't know who to blame for this. Was it her fault or Mark's fault?

Did it even matter whose fault it was?

Does blame need to placed to create a solution to the problem?

"Are you smoking?"

She was so lost in thought that she didn't hear the song end.

Instead of exhaling the large cloud of smoke that rested in her throat, she gasped, inhaling the toxins deeper into her lungs, sending her into a coughing spree. She hacked and wheezed, tears forming in the corners of her eyes as she struggled to catch her breath.

As a last-ditch effort, she threw the smoke in the snow, crunching it with her slipper before slowly facing an appalled Mark. With an innocent, cheeky grin she raised her shoulders and wheezed, "No?"

"Alice. I just saw you," Mark said with his arms crossed tightly across his chest. "Since when have you been smoking?"

"I haven't been!" she said. "I mean, this is my first one."

"Your first cigarette ever is at seven in the morning on a Tuesday?"

"Well, you know it's not my first cigarette ever," she said. "Remember that time when we went camping and I chain-smoked half a pack after shooting straight vodka? And I threw up on the campfire?"

Mark's disappointment evaporated for a moment to give a fond chuckle. "Oooh yeah...I remember that. That was hilarious!"

"Right?" Alice laughed and exaggeratedly slapped her knee, silently hoping the nostalgic memory would alleviate some of the tension.

As quick as the humor came, it left.

Mark's face darkened and his emerald eyes grew foggy with distaste as he stepped towards her. When he reached her, he grabbed her hands, his thumb rubbing against the small hole of the black sweater she found herself wearing whenever she could. He sighed; his judging eyes beading down on her despite the gentle touch of his hand.

"Seriously, Alice," he said. "How long have you been smoking?"

Reflexively, she pulled her hands away and turned her back to him. With her hands shoved in the
sweater's pockets, she kicked an icicle hanging off weathered patio chair.

"I don't know..." she mumbled to the ground, "I've been on and off for about three months now."

"What a coincidence," said Mark. "That seems to line up perfectly with when you started hanging out with your favorite duo."

"Yep," she said between gritted teeth, remaining fixated on the mound of snow building on the chair. "Quite the coincidence."

"Alice," he started with venom dripping from his tongue. "Who the hell are you?"

"Excuse me?"

"I don't even know who you are anymore," he said louder than before, slamming his hands against his sides.

The bitter winter air may have chilled her to the bone, but it didn't stop the red-hot flames of fury from being lit inside the depths of her stomach.

"What are you talking about?" she spat. "I'm still Alice. Just because I have the odd cigarette here and there doesn't change who I am."

"It's not just the smoking. Although, that is quite the cherry on the cake," he sneered. "Everything about you is different. You're so distant all the time. Anytime I talk to you it's like you're only half listening to me – "

"- That's because you're always talking to me!" she said before she could stop herself.

_Congratulations, Alice. You've won the award for the worst possible thing to say to your boyfriend._

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Mark shouted as he paced back and forth, his arms animatedly thrown in the air. "I'm so sorry that I enjoy talking to my girlfriend. I must be such a burden to you."

"I didn't mean it to sound so bad," she said, throwing her neck back and pulling at the ends of her hair. "I just mean that...you're always here. You're always around, and planning these elaborate dates, and it's sweet, Mark. It's so sweet and I appreciate it, but it's too much sometimes. I need my space."

"Why? So you can go hang out with Isaac?"

"Are you serious?" she cried. "haven't you noticed me practically cut him from my life?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I have," he said. "But clearly he's gotten so deep into your head that – "

"- That what?" she said. "That the only plausible reason for me wanting to be an independent human away from my boyfriend is because Isaac has somehow corrupted my poor, innocent mind?"

"Well, the old you loved it when we would hang out all the time!"

"Enough with referencing the "old me", Mark," she said, using her fingers as quotation marks. "The "old me" loved a lot of stupid things. The "old me" also lacked any shred of confidence and self-respect, not to mention tolerate you being a piece of sh – "

"I get it, Alice," Mark interrupted. "I sucked back then. You've made that crystal-fuckin'-clear. But at least I'm trying to make it up to you by being a great boyfriend now, but apparently, me
even *talking* to you is driving you away."

"You talking to me isn't driving me away," she said weakly, knowing this argument could go in circles. "But we shouldn't feel like we need to...overcompensate on everything. Why can't we just be our natural selves and co-exist as two selves who happen to be romantically involved with each other?"

"What are you even talking about?"

She groaned and rubbed the corners of her eyes, wishing she could turn back time and never smoked the cigarette in the first place.

"What I'm trying to say is that," she took a huge breath, "I feel like we are both trying to force ourselves to have the same relationship that we used to have. But that's impossible because we are two different people now. If we truly care about each other as individuals, we shouldn't have to try to wedge us into our former selves...we should just...be who we are. And let things fall into place."

"I disagree."

*Jesus Christ.*

"What do you mean you disagree?"

I don't think I've changed at all," he said. "You're the one who has changed. Ever since meeting Isaac you're this completely different person and I don't like it."

"Wow," she said with a cold chuckle, shaking her head in awe. With the cold, menacing laugh still dripping from her mouth, she reached into the sweater pocket and pulled out the cigarettes. With a biting smile still on her lips, she stared maliciously at Mark's widening eyes and pressed the cigarette to her lips.

"You're not really going to smoke that."

She flicked her lighter along the edge and inhaled.

"Yep."

"What the hell is your problem!?"

"What is *my* problem?" she cried. "Mark, you keep blaming Isaac for turning me into this alleged terrible person, when in reality, all he's done is give me the tools to make my life successful. So, if you want to blame him for anything, blame him for making your girlfriend happy. It's sure as hell better than anything you've done!"

She turned on her heel and breezed past Mark, making sure to blow a puff of smoke in his face as she passed.

"Where are you going?" Mark called as she opened the balcony door.

"I'm going to work," she said sharply. "You know, to the job that I fucking adore and couldn't possibly have anything to do with the changes in personality."

"Alice, come on, we can't leave like this." He swooped in front of her and put his hands on her shoulders, his eyes softening as he looked down at her. "I'm sorr – "

"No, stop," she snapped. "You're not sorry. You're not sorry about anything! You're sorry that
you've pissed me off enough to stand up to you, but that's it."

"Alice, come on – "

"And you know what, Mark?" she said, backing away from him. "I do want to hang out with Isaac – "

"Alice, are you seri – ?"

"And you know what else?" she asked, nearly out of the kitchen, only a few meters away from her front door. She opened her arms out wide before motioning to her torso. "This is Isaac's sweater."

Mark's mouth fell and his flushed skin instantly paled. "What?"

"Yep," she said with a fake smile on her face. "This is Isaac's sweater, and I miss hanging out with Isaac, so you know what I'm going to do today after work, Mark?"

Mark responded by making his lips ever tighter.

"I'm gonna go hang out with my friend," she said. "Because apparently, even after cutting him from my life, I'm still just a corrupted shadow of your previous weak, perfect little girlfriend. May as well dive right into the pool of sin, huh?"

"Alice, wait – "

"No, Mark," she said, her voice cracking as she stared at the ground. "I need to go to work."

"We aren't...we are still...together, right?"

Slowly, she raised her eyes from her slippers to meet his green eyes. The smallest pools shined in the corners and she felt her heart sink. This morning wasn't supposed to go this way.

"I don't know... I guess we are. Just..." she bit the insides of her cheeks and glanced out the window, needing to break the eye contact. "I need a few days to myself. Can you please, please try to think about what I've said with an open mind?"

"Yes, of course, Alice," he said, rushing towards her to envelop her in a bone-crushing hug. She felt herself slightly relax into his touch, but her muscles remained tense. "Anything for you."

She pulled away and wiped away the couple tears that had crept up and nodded in acknowledgment. She kicked off her slippers and replaced them with a pair of knee-high black boots. With one last glance at Mark, she nodded and exited the door wearing a tattered pair of jeans and Isaac's sweater. It certainly didn't meet the business casual standards, but she didn't care.

As she marched down the sidewalk to her bus stop, she only had one thing on her mind.

She was going to visit Isaac the second she got to work.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT CHAPTER COMING RIGHT UP! Love you guys! Thank you so much for all the continued support! <3
Also - I'm unsure if this story is bordering on making smoking look cool or gross.......I'll clear it up for you. It's gross. If you're gonna agree with Mark on anything, let it be this.
Eighteen

Chapter Notes

AS PROMISED: Here's the second chapter of the day!!!
ALSO !! The ratio of votes to hits is at 83.67%!!!!!!!!!
Thank you so much everyone! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alice was on a mission as she marched down the hallways of the office building, her clunky boots echoing off the walls with each step. Her heart still raced from her fight with Mark which certainly did not help the dramatics.

The coworkers she passed scowled at her sloppy attire. Isaac’s sweater nearly reached her knees, causing her to look like she belonged in a gang rather than an office building. Tomorrow she would wear a ball-gown to compensate for today’s haggardness.

Without even making eye contact, she ripped passed Blaise talking to Camelia next to the water cooler.

"Hey, Alice. What's u – "

"Can't talk now, Blaise."

She heard Camelia ask Blaise what was wrong with her, but by the time Blaise responded, she was well out of ear-shot. His response wouldn't have mattered, anyway. The only thing on Alice's mind was how mad she was at Mark and that, for some reason, she wanted to see Isaac more than ever.

It was ridiculous to try to smoothly cut someone from your life in the blink of an eye. Especially when that person means a great deal to you. Who cares if she had a silly crush on Isaac? Despite what her unconscious mind tried to tell her, she wasn't some animal. She could control her desires around him. Same with Isaac. If he harbored the same feelings, he was a grown man who knew how to inhibit them.

They weren't the first friends in the world to develop feelings for each other. They also weren't the first to manage to put those feelings behind them.

Finally, she reached the gold-plated plaque that read "Isaac Hanes" in capitalized, stoic, powerful letters. Without wasting a second, she pushed the door open and stormed into the room, ready to say her speech.

"Isaac, I – "

She paused in her step when she noticed Isaac talking on the telephone. His grip tightened around his stress ball as his eyes narrowed on Alice.

So much for the dramatic entrance.

"H-hang on, Tom, I've got to put you on hold," he said and clicked a button before resting the phone on the receiver. He folded his hands together, tilting his head as his brows knitted tighter. "Can I help
"I need to talk to you."

"I'm on the phone."

"I can wait."

His eyes fell down her outfit and his eyes widened at the sight of the familiar sweater. "Why are you wearing that?"

"Umm..." Embarrassment began creeping up her spine as she realized how foolish she probably looked. "It was a heat-of-the-moment thing..."

"Erm – okay?" Isaac said and nodded to show some mock-understanding.

When Isaac returned to his phone call, discussing taxes, investments, and other jargon words Alice didn't understand, she aimlessly strolled around his office. She had spent many hours in that room, but she never took the time to fully admire the various books and trinkets that decorated the shelves.

Her fingers trailed along a row of books on the shelf. They rested on a series of Plato's philosophical books, ranging from Symposium to The Republic. She paused to wonder whether Isaac had actually read those books or if they were merely decorative to give the impression of sophistication.

Her gaze fell to a picture frame on a lower shelf, nearly hidden behind a marble hourglass. Without thinking, she grabbed the photograph and smiled. It was black and white, but the family of blondes was indistinguishable. A baby Isaac perched on a woman's lap, smiling brightly at the camera. Alice smiled at the adorably innocent Isaac, wearing miniature overalls and a tiny Calgary Flames sports hat. The man, who must have been his father, didn't share the same enthusiastic grin. Instead, his chin was raised and his knuckles clenched near his sides, a permanent sneer resting on his face.

The woman who held Isaac was mysterious. Even in high school, Isaac never mentioned his mother, but this had to be her. They all may have shared the same platinum hair, but Isaac had her eyes. They looked sad and tired. The mischievous glimmer that Isaac's eyes usually held was vacant from hers; instead, they were empty. As if she was staring at a black void rather than a camera.

After examining every detail of the picture, she set it back on the shelf.

Not without knocking the marble hourglass on the floor first, of course.

The clattering of the heavy ornament was enough to distract Isaac, making him pull the phone away from his ear. He covered the mouthpiece with his hand, and hissed, "Don't you have some work you need to do?"

She shrugged. "Yeah."

"Well?" he asked impatiently. "Don't you think you should be doing that?"

"Nah."

He sighed exasperatedly but pressed the phone back to his ear. "Sorry about that, Tom. I have a pesky employee getting on my last nerve." He gave Alice a quick wink, to which she responded to by poking out her tongue. "What was it that you were saying?"

Another twenty minutes passed and Alice found herself sprawled across the oversized leather
armchair, her legs dangling over the side, tossing Isaac's happy-face stress ball above her head. Just as she was about to wave her white flag, Isaac finally set the phone down.

Neither of them spoke. Instead, Isaac folded his hands together and tightened his lips, slowly cocking his neck to the right.

In a fake, sweet voice, he asked, "Alice. What are you doing?"

"I have something to ask you," she said, pulling her legs from the arm of the chair so she faced Isaac properly.

"I can tell."

"Do you want to hang out tonight?"

Isaac's shoulders fell but his eyebrows raised. "What?"

"Do you wanna hang out tonight?"

"You're telling me that you've wasted," he leaned over to his telephone and pressed a couple buttons, "56 minutes just to ask me something that you could have easily texted?"

"Uh-huh."

He leaned across his desk a little, his eyes zeroing in on hers. "You're not going through...some sort of... mental breakdown, are you?"

"What?" she asked. "No. Why?"

"Because you marched into my office after barely looking at me for weeks, wearing jeans with what I hope is white paint on them along with my gross sweater, just to ask if I want to hang out."

"Yeah...so?"

"It seems a little out of character, that's all."

"Do you want to hang out with me or not, Isaac?" she asked, growing impatient by Isaac not immediately jumping at the opportunity.

"Well, I would love to, Alice," he said, slamming his binder shut to rest his elbows on top. "But I can't tonight."

Her forehead crinkled. "Why not?"

"Because," he clicked his tongue three times, "I've got a date."

Her heart jumped into her throat, but her brain didn't quite compute the information yet.

"Wh-what?" she stumbled out. "Y-you have a date?"

"I know it's absolutely shocking that the rest of us have as scintillating of a dating life as you and Mark," he said with a hint of bitterness, "but yes. I have a date."

Alice remained silent for an uncomfortably long time. Anything more than ten seconds was too much, but she must have reached closer to sixty before she strung together a semi-coherent sentence.
"Th-that's great," she sputtered out, putting on her widest, fakest smile even though her heart felt like it was on fire. "Who are you going out with?"

He became interested in his paperwork again, not even looking her in the eyes as he replied, "Fiona Banks."

She scrunched her nose.

"Who's Fiona Banks?"

Rather than answering the simple question, Isaac pulled out his cellphone and began scrolling. Alice crossed her arms disapprovingly; it was so rude to pull out your phone in the middle of a conversation! Just as she was about comment on how impolite he was, he set the phone down and slid it to Alice.

"This is Fiona Banks."

And that was the distinct moment that the crushing reality smothered Alice's fantastical, somewhat-erotic, imagination.

The closer she pulled the phone to her nose, the more her heart sunk to the floor.

Of course she knew who Fiona Banks was. She was only the highest paid model currently on the market!

Alice gawked at the promiscuous advertisement on the cellphone. It appeared to be selling perfume, but it was difficult to say. All the advertisement showed was Fiona Banks sprawled across beige satin sheets, her long honey-brown hair covering her perfectly round naked breasts. Her tiny waist curved inwards, resembling a human hourglass, and the only evidence that it was a perfume advertisement was the heart-shaped bottle strategically placed where her underwear should be.

She was the sexiest woman Alice had ever seen.

How stupid could she be? How did she think she ever had a shot with Isaac when he could date *models*? And to go as far as to cut him out of her life so she could prevent herself from ever sleeping with him? Ha! As if she had a chance in the first place!

Thankfully she was still holding the stress ball; hopefully squeezing it would prevent the physical effects of this ego-crushing realization from showing.

She was just average, boring, nerdy, Alice. Isaac would *never* have a crush on her. Sure, he said he would have sex with her. Whoop-de-fuckin’-do. So would 75% of the boys she knew, so long as they were drunk enough. That meant nothing. Isaac was a rich, handsome, CEO. Why wouldn't he be dating celebrities? Compared to Fiona, Alice was just an insignificant blob in his life that he happened to enjoy talking to.

The humiliation was eating away at her stomach.

"You alright?" Isaac asked and she darted her eyes away from the phone, slamming it back on the desk in front of him.

"Uh-huh, yep," she mumbled. "Yeah, I recognize her. She's...cute."

Isaac smirked and gave a small chuckle, looking at the picture himself. "Yeah. She's cute, alright."
"Umm..." Her hands were growing sweaty and she regretted ever deciding to speak to Isaac today. She should have continued to avoid him. She shouldn't have fought with Mark. She wished she could go back in time. Feeling confident that she could have sex with Isaac, but was merely choosing not to, was a much better alternative to realizing she never had a chance at all.

"How did you two meet?" she asked, trying to remain casual even though she didn't want to hear the answer.

It seemed that Isaac was thrilled to speak about it though, because his eyes lit up like fireworks.

"It's a really funny story, actually," he said. "I met her a few months ago at a banquet. Right after you started working here, actually. She was beautiful, so naturally, I struck up a conversation. We hit it off pretty well and exchanged numbers, but I never got around to calling her."

A dreamy look overtook his eyes as he continued, "But then, after my conference in New York, I popped down to the hotel's bar to have some supper before the comedy show. I look up from my spaghetti, and sure enough, Fiona is sitting across the bar from me. We spent the entire trip together, and now she's staying at my place until the Holidays."

"Wow," Alice said quietly as she absorbed the romantic information. The thoughts of Isaac and Fiona tangled up in his crisp white hotel sheets made her skin crawl. They probably screwed everywhere in the hotel; the shower, the balcony, hell, they probably got it on in the elevator.

She sure would have if she was Fiona.

But you'll never be Fiona, Alice.

"I'm really happy for you, Isaac," she lied.

"Thanks, Alice," he said sincerely.

She fiddled with the edge of the sleeve on Isaac's sweater and immediately wanted to throw it in the garbage can. Quickly followed by pouring a gallon of gasoline overtop and igniting it.

Suddenly, a new thought came to her head and she tutted her tongue, leaning back in the chair to create the illusion of swagger.

"Only you, Isaac Hanes," she said. "Only you would get the most beautiful woman in North America's number and wait three months to contact her."

With his nose still pressed to his papers, he raised his eyes.

"I guess I was a little distracted."

His stony blue eyes pierced through her, and she felt frozen in her spot as she tried to find any hidden message in his eyes. Just as she was about to decipher whether there was a subtle coldness in his voice that perfectly correlated with a secret longingness in his eyes, she was interrupted by Blaise opening the door.

"There you are, Alice," he said, sounding both irritated and relieved. "What's wrong with you today? You look like a train-wreck."

Before she could practice any self-control, she hopped off the chair and pointed her finger at Isaac while looking at Blaise. "Did you know he's dating Fiona Banks?"
She could hear Isaac quietly snicker behind her, but her glare remained fixed on Blaise, who was slowly backing away to the door.

"Erm...yes?"

"Why didn't you tell me?" she hissed, cornering Blaise into the wall. He shot a frightened look to Isaac, who was now watching the scene with his hands behind his head.

"Erm...I didn't think it was important?" he said. "And...I don't know...it never came up?"

As much as she wanted to hit Blaise for withholding the information, she couldn't blame him. Any time he tried to mention Isaac in conversation, she would immediately change the subject. Sometimes, if the situation allowed it, she would even walk straight out of the room.

Maybe she was losing her mind a little bit.

"Alice," Isaac said from behind her, and she pivoted to face his desk. "Why does it matter if I'm dating Fiona or not?"

She could swear he was biting back a smirk.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "I just hate being kept out of the loop!"

"Well, I hate to be that guy," he said, stacking the loose papers on his desk. "but if you weren't so determined to spend every free second with your boyfriend, you probably would have found out by now."

_Fuck these guys and being so logical._

Suddenly, the most ludicrous, but amazing, idea popped into her manic mind.

"We should all go out for drinks," she said firmly, stomping her foot to the ground.

Isaac furrowed his brow. "Erm, okay? But like I said, I already have plans tonight..."

"No. Not tonight," she said. "On Friday. All of us. You bring Fiona, and I'll bring Mark."

Both Blaise and Isaac's jaws dropped as if Alice had turned into a ghost. After a few moments of dead silence, Blaise piped up.

"That is the worst idea you've ever had, Alice."

"What? No it isn't," she said. "Come on. Just because I'm dating Mark doesn't mean I should abandon you guys. It'll be great!"

"How in God's name would it be great?" Isaac asked, dumbfounded.

"Because! Mark's biggest issue is that he thinks you secretly want to bang me. And that's just insane..." she trailed off before slowly raising her eyes to meet Isaac's. "Right?"

"Right."

_Ouch._

"Exactly! So this way, maybe if he sees that you're all happy with your new girlfriend – "
"Woah, woah, woah," Isaac interrupted. "We've only been dating for two weeks, let's not drop the girlfriend bomb, yet."

"Regardless, you're with this smokin' hot babe. Obviously, you're not a threat to him anymore," she explained, even though every word she spoke felt like acid was burning through her stomach. "If he sees that, then maybe, I dunno...maybe we will all get along and things don't have to be weird between us anymore."

"Alice," Blaise said. "I repeat: this is the worst idea you've ever had."

"I can bring Emily."

"This is a fantastic idea."

Isaac rolled his eyes. "Even if we were to agree to this abomination of a reunion, do you really think you can convince Mark?"

"Absolutely," she said confidently. "See, we are currently in a fight...so I can get him to do anything I want."

"That is manipulation, Alice Black," Blaise said with one hand on his hip and the other shoving his finger in her face. "You are exploiting his hurt for your own personal gain."

"And I don't care," she said smugly, pulling his finger away from her nose. "He pissed me off today so he can shove it."

Blaise tutted his tongue before shrugging and looking at Isaac. "Well, I'm in. What do you say, Isaac?"

"Not a chance in hell."

"Pleeease," she begged, leaning over his desk and clasping her hands together inches away from his face. "Come on. I miss you guys. It'll be fun. I promise."

Isaac tapped his pen on the desk as he stared at her pleading eyes. The quicker the tapping got, the tighter his lips became, until finally –

"Fuck, I can't believe I'm agreeing to this."

Alice gasped and she jumped away, clapping her hands like a hyperactive toddler. "You're really gonna come!?"

"I know I'm going to regret it," he said with a clenched jaw. "But fine, whatever. Let's do it."

She squealed and once again leaned over the desk, this time to wrap her arms around his neck. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," he said, patting her back. She didn't realize how much she missed his touch. "You're lucky that, for whatever reason, I have a soft spot for you."

"Great!" Blaise said, clapping loudly to grab their attention. Alice slid away from Isaac, still vibrating from her insane plan being put into motion. "Now that that's settled, can we please get to work? We've been here for nearly two hours and haven't done anything."

"Oh, right. I forgot we're at work," she giggled to herself.
"I haven't," Isaac muttered under his breath.

She waved goodbye to Isaac and followed Blaise out of the office. Just as she was about to close the door, she heard Isaac call her name.

She paused to face him. "Yeah?"

"You look nice in that sweater."

With a quick, flashy grin and a wink, he returned to his paperwork.

Before he could see her crimson face, she turned on her heel and rushed after Blaise.

She definitely deserved a cigarette break after this stressful work day.

Chapter End Notes

I KNOW YOU GUYS PROBABLY HATE ME SO MUCH!!
I don't know why I do this to my poor characters ahhhh! poor alice!!

What do you guys think of this little twist?!?! Let me know in the comments! Don't forget to kudos and review!! I'll hopefully have the next chapter up this weekend! <3
Thanks for all your patience!
"Alice, this is the worst idea you've ever had," Emily said as her stiletto heels angrily clicked against the sidewalk. "Why are you making me do this?"

"For the millionth time, this is not a bad idea!" Alice argued. "This is the best way to relieve some of the tension between everyone. Trust me, it'll be great."

"Forcing six people who don’t want to see each other in the same room is never a good idea," she said. "I can't believe you're making me see Blaise after I said I was avoiding him forever."

"I know, I know, I'm sorry," Alice said, sending her friend a sympathetic look. "But it was the only way Blaise would agree to it, and there's no way Isaac would come without Blaise...and Mark probably wouldn't have agreed to it if you weren't coming either."

"Great," she said. "So, I'm the key to making this god-awful atrocity happen. I'm so thrilled."

"I'll make it up to you, I promise," Alice said, widening her eyes, silently begging for Emily's forgiveness.

Emily looked down at Alice's puppy-dog eyes and huffed. "Whatever. At least I'll get to meet Fiona Banks. God, I admire her work so much."

"Please don't say that," Alice groaned.

"What?" Emily said, throwing her arms in the air. "I'm sorry, but if you're dragging me to this, I'm allowed to get a little star-struck by one of my favorite models."

"Fine," Alice sighed. "I'm sure she's a lovely person..."

They paused in front of the wooden doors of the grungy pub Isaac once again insisted on. It made Alice feel a little better that, even for Fiona, he made no effort in upgrading to a fancier establishment.

Both girls stared at the looming doors as the snow gently fell on their hair. Alice felt her mock-confidence falter as her palms grew colder from the increasing sweat against the chilly December air. It wasn't too late to turn back now...

"Should we wait for Mark?" Emily asked, looking down the street anticipating Mark's truck to pull up any moment.

"Nah, he said he's gonna be pretty late," Alice said. "I assume he's aimlessly driving around the city hoping he gets in an accident so he can avoid all this..."

"Yeah, how the hell did you manage to get him to agree to this, anyway?" Emily said before nudging Alice's ribs and winking. "Do you have a magical mouth or something?"

Alice giggled and swatted Emily away.

"No. Well...maybe." Alice winked back. "But seriously, I just explained to him how important this is
to me and how much happier I would be if we could all bury the hatchet."

"Yeah, I don't buy it," Emily said flatly. "I'm going with the magical mouth."

Alice rolled her eyes and grabbed the doorknob, taking a huge, deep breath. "Are you ready?"

"No."

"I'll take that as a yes," Alice said and pulled the doors open, bracing herself for what was about to come.

The pub was busier than usual, and not filled with the usual old, drunk, patrons struggling to keep their eyes open. It was a surprisingly younger crowd, everyone bustling around, forcing Emily and Alice to squeeze through the groups of drunk young adults, hollering obnoxiously to *Paradise City*.

Alice stepped on her tippy-toes, attempting to spot Isaac and Blaise through the crowds, but had no success until –

"Woah," she heard Emily say, and as she turned her neck to face the same direction, it became immediately apparent why she said it.

Sitting in the same seat Alice sat when Isaac innocently brushed her knee, causing Alice's brain to go haywire, was Fiona Banks.

The two girls stood meters away, gawking ridiculously at the model in front of them. Alice heard a random boy whisper to his friend, "Dude, is that Fiona Banks?"

"If it isn't, she's definitely as hot as her!" the friend replied.

Alice watched as she ran her fingers along her long, soft, perfectly wavy, honey-brown hair, and instead of the Guns 'n' Roses song playing in the pub, all Alice could hear were the pounding beats that would be found in every single porno.

*Bow-Chicka-Wow-Wow*...

It was like she moved in slow motion; every movement she made was sensual and oozed with sex-appeal. Even in the dim lighting, her perfectly bronzed skin glowed angelically, and her dark blue eyes...she must have been wearing some mystical makeup, because no human eyes naturally sparkled that way.

Alice's heart pounded in her ears as Isaac draped his arm over her shoulder, leaning closer to as he listened intently to every word that slipped out of her lips.

Those lips.

Every model always had a signature feature that made them unique. To make them stand out from the rest of the boring, normal people. It was evident that Fiona's signature feature was her plump, pouty, dark red lips. From the way Isaac's eyes continued to flicker towards them, staring hungrily, it was clear they certainly grabbed Isaac's attention.

Obviously, Alice wasn't the only one with a magical mouth.

Isaac must have said something hilarious, because Fiona's entire skinny, curvy, body was shaking with laughter. She threw her neck back, exposing the plunging neckline of the silk, dark purple floor length dress that was far too extravagant for the pub, but she somehow managed to pull it off.
Alice glanced down at her plain blue jeans and a tight V-neck black t-shirt that she thought was cute and flattering. It even showed a little cleavage.

But it was nothing compared to Fiona.

*This was a terrible fucking idea, Alice.*

"Emily!" Blaise, who was looking bored next to the beautiful couple, shot up from his chair at the sight of Emily. Isaac's eyes finally left Fiona's lips to meet Alice's, and his lips curled into a small smile.

Just as Emily was about to open her mouth to reply to Blaise, Alice grabbed her wrist.

"We need to use the washroom," she said hurriedly, and before anyone could respond, she was dragging Emily through the crowds of drunk people and into the filthy woman's washroom.

"Alice, what the hell?" Emily hissed as Alice pulled her into the washroom.

"I...we need to switch clothes," Alice blurted out as she paced in a small circle, pointing at Emily's short silver, sequined dress.

"Excuse me?"

"Or...or you need to do my makeup, or something, anything!" Alice said, her mouth growing drier with every heavy breath that she struggled to make.

Emily stopped Alice in the middle of her frantic pacing by grabbing her arms tightly, bending her knees to be at eye level.

"Alice, what the fuck is your problem?"

"This was a terrible idea!" she cried, trying to repress literal tears that were fighting to make their ways up to her eyes. "This was so stupid! I'm so stupid!"

"Hey, shhh, shhh," Emily said, pulling Alice into her shoulders, gently rubbing her back. "What happened?"

"Didn't you see what happened?" Alice asked, pulling herself away from the nape of Emily's neck.

"No?"

"She's beautiful!"

"Well...yeah," Emily said, biting her lip and looking at the floor. "But we sort of knew that coming into this, right?"

"I saw pictures of her, but I kept telling myself that she was just photo-shopped to look that beautiful!" She was once again pacing the bathroom with her face in her hands. "She's even more stunning in person. And look at me!"

"You're beautiful too," Emily said comfortably but Alice scoffed.

"Oh, please!" She motioned her hands to her shoes. "I'm wearing checkered Vans slip-ons. What am I? A fourteen-year-old boy?"

"Alice, you need to breathe, okay?"
"I'm breathing!"

"No, you're hyperventilating," Emily said and grabbed Alice by the hands. "She's a model, Alice. She's supposed to pretty...why are you panicking so much?"

"Because I like him, Emily! I like him so fucking much and I hate it!" Alice felt her eyes sting as she leaned over the cracked porcelain sink, gawking at her reflection in the mirror. "Oh my god, I don't think I've ever said those words out loud before."

"Well, it's about time, honestly..."

"And I saw the way he was looking at her...like she was the only person in the room and, ugh!" She roughly pulled at her hair, ruining the curls she tried so hard to perfect all afternoon. "I'm such an idiot for ever thinking he liked me...he has never looked at me like that before."

"Yes, he has," Emily said, running her hands stressfully through her own blonde hair. Alice's anxiety must have been wearing off on her. "Isaac likes you...or he at least liked you at some point. I don't know what's going on in his head now but he has definitely looked at you that way before."

"No he hasn't."

"Kay, Alice, I hate to be the one to say this, but..." She bit her fingernails quickly before continuing, "What did you expect? I mean...you're dating Mark...he was bound to move on eventually..."

"No, because he isn't moving on. He's not moving on from anything because there was never anything to move on from in the first place," she said. "Like, he wouldn't even date you and you're one of the most beautiful people I know! Apparently, all he goes after is models and I'm just – "

"Oh my god, you need calm the fuck down right now," Emily said sternly, grabbing her shoulders once again, but this time digging her nails into her shoulder.

Alice gulped.

"You're smarter than this, Alice," she said, "Fiona is paid to look good. She has professional makeup artists, personal trainers, stylists...her life is literally devoted to being beautiful. If you had the same luxuries as her, you would be just as stunning."

"But – "

"And you are just as stunning! Sure, you might not be runway-ready twenty-four-seven, but there's nothing about you that makes you objectively less attractive than Fiona, or me, or any other woman in the world," Emily said, her nose so close to Alice's they were nearly touching. "If you had a little confidence for once, you would realize this! God, you've even got naturally red hair, I bet you anything Fiona is secretly jealous about that. And you're tiny without even trying!"

"Yeah, bu – "

"Alice, I work out for three fucking hours every single day to look the way I do. I haven't had a cheeseburger in six years," Emily said, her nails pressing so deep into Alice's shoulders they would probably leave a bruise. "Stop acting like you're not pretty. Self-depreciation is not attractive. Go strut on out there like I know you can, give Fiona that adorable smile of yours, and let's get this fucking terrible night over with."

Alice stared at Emily's stilettos, sniffing lightly, but overall proud that she managed to keep the threatening tears unshed.
"Fine, you're right," she said. "I just...I don't know how I'm gonna look at her and smile. And, oh my god, Mark is going to be here soon. If I'm acting weird he's gonna know something is up..."

"Yeah, what exactly is your plan regarding Mark?" Emily asked, tapping her fingers against her lips. "You've definitely got to sort some stuff out with him..."

"Oh, god, I know. I can't even think about that right now, though," she groaned, slumping against the sink. "What if I say something rude to Fiona, though? Or Isaac? I don't feel mentally stable enough to have a filter right now, and if I say something stupid, Mark is gonna get pissed, and then Isaac will get pissed, then – "

"You're not breathing normally, again, Alice," Emily said before sighing loudly. "Kay, how about I make you a deal?"

Alice darted her eyes towards Emily.

"What kind of deal?"

"How about...I act super bitchy towards Fiona so that you can be super nice. My bitchiness will overcompensate for all the things you want to say to her, while still keeping all your dignity."

"But..." Alice started, looking at Emily with the utmost love and respect. "But you said that you admire Fiona's work... I can't let you be rude to her just to make me feel better."

"Oh, whatever." Emily brushed her off. "I'm a bitch and I love it. Realistically, I would probably end up being bitchy regardless, may as well go into this with the right intentions."

"I love you so much, Emily," Alice said, sniffing as she leaned in to give Emily a hug but Emily pushed her away.

"Nope, no hugging," she said, pointing her finger at Alice. "You're dangerously close to crying right now, and I know you. The second you hug someone when you're like this you break down, and you have to go out there and show that model you're a sane human being."

"You're right, oh my god," Alice said, letting out a breath of relief. "What would I do without you?"

"Fuck if I know." Emily shrugged and looked towards the bathroom door. "Are you ready for this?"

Alice sighed loudly but nodded.

"Let's do it."

As they walked out of the bathroom, Alice mustered up every ounce of confidence she had inside of her. She channeled every moment she ever felt beautiful; her graduation day when she wore an emerald green halter dress that complimented her hair perfectly, the time a handsome bartender gave her his number instead of all the other drooling girls, the first time she wore lingerie for Mark...and she strutted towards the table.

She strutted in her silly checkered slip-on shoes and she didn't give a damn how ridiculous she looked.

She was Alice-Fuckin'-Black. A self-sufficient twenty-five-year-old app designer who didn't need to be a model.

When her eyes rested on Fiona, her brain immediately tried to counteract her positive thoughts, but
she shut it down. She wasn't going to let her corrupted mind talk her out of this one.

"Oh, hey guys!" She said cheerfully and casually as she reached the table, a permanent, fake smile plastered on her face as she looked directly into Fiona's sparkling eyes.

"What was that all about?" Isaac asked, frowning at Alice and Emily with his arm still glued around Fiona's shoulder.

"Oh, just girl stuff," Emily said before turning her neck. "Hey, Blaise."

"Hey, Emily," he said, standing from his seat. "You look gorgeous."

"Thanks," she said and narrowed her eyes at his outfit. "Are you wearing a suit?"

"Y-yeah, I figured I'd dress up a little," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Erm...you like it?"

"Yeah, I guess," She shrugged. "You look hot."

It was a miracle Blaise's head didn't explode based on how wide his eyes grew.

Isaac stood from his seat and pulled Fiona up by her hand before clearing his throat.

"Erm, Fiona, this is my good friend, Alice," he said and Fiona held out her hand.

When Alice grabbed it, she noted that her hands were a little dry. This small, insignificant flaw made Alice barely have to fake her smile that had overtaken her face.

"It is so great to finally meet you, Fiona," she said and looked down at Fiona's dress. "I adore your dress. You look stunning."

"Oh, thank you so much," she said, her voice dainty and feminine, exactly how Alice imagined. "I...I like your shirt."

Alice looked down her plain black t-shirt and beamed. "It is pretty fricken' great, isn't it?"

Isaac knitted his eyebrows at Alice, immediately knowing something was off.

Thankfully, he shook his head and turned to Emily. "Fiona, this is my other friend, Emily."

Fiona held her hand out to Emily and smiled sweetly. "It's great to meet you."

She raised her eyebrow at Fiona's hand but didn't shake it.

"Uh-huh," Emily muttered ignoring the handshake and taking a seat across from Blaise. Fiona and Isaac both frowned at Emily's attitude but respectively returned to their seats. As soon as Alice took her seat across from Isaac, the waiter appeared at the table asking for their drink order.

"Can I get a quadruple vodka soda, please?" Alice asked the waiter sweetly.

"Erm...we legally can't serve more than triples," he answered.

"Can I have two at a time?"

"I guess..."

"Great, thanks," she said, handing him forty dollars in cash. "Keep the change."
Emily turned to the waiter. "Is it also illegal to have a whole bottle of wine to yourself?"

"What is wrong with you two?" Isaac asked, but they both ignored him.

"It's not illegal if someone else at the table has at least one glass," the waiter replied.

Emily turned to Blaise. "Want a glass of wine?"

"Yeah, umm...I guess?" Blaise said, despite the full pint of beer sitting in front of him.

When the waiter disappeared, Isaac rubbed his hands together and cleared his throat once again. Alice leaned back in her chair and smirked at his apparent nervousness.

"So," he started. "I'm not sure if I told you, but we are having a company Christmas party on the 21st. You're all invited, of course. Umm...you can bring Mark."

"That sounds great, I can't wait," Alice said before turning to Fiona. "I hope you're able to make it, too."

"Oh, I wouldn't miss it for the world," she said, and gently ran her hands through Isaac's hair while looking directly at Alice. It took all the strength Alice had to not make a very rude comment, but instead, her lips simple pulled even wider.

"Are you gonna come, Emily?" Blaise asked when the waiter returned with the bottle of red wine, pouring a glass for her.

"Uhh, couldn't tell you," she shrugged. "I guess if I have the night free I might make an appearance."

"Well, you'll have to save me a dance if you do."

Emily rolled her eyes, but even she was unable to conceal her small grin. "Yeah, I can probably arrange a dance."

"Cool."

"So, I've got to ask," Fiona said, swirling her straw around her drink with her perfect French manicure, "why exactly is this meeting so important?"

Isaac's lips tightened, and just as he reopened them to reply, Emily piped up.

"What?" She snapped, crossing her arms. "Do you not want to meet Isaac's friends?"

Everyone's necks turned towards Emily. Fiona's nose was scrunched with displeasure, Isaac looked as confused as a young boy doing algebra, and Blaise had his head tilted, but a knowing smirk rested on his lips as his eyes darted between her and Alice.

Alice tapped Emily's knee and leaned over to whisper in her ear. "You can probably tone it down a bit."

"Fine," she said and took a large swig of her wine. "So sorry, Fi-oh-nah."

"It's...okay?"

Isaac ran his hand nervously through his hair and looked at Fiona to answer her ignored question. "It's important because Alice here wants her boyfriend to 'approve' of us working and hanging out together. For some reason, I'm not his favorite person in the world."
Alice giggled. "Yeah, I don't know why. You're always so charming towards him."

"You know it," Isaac said, chuckling back at her. His eyes rested on hers and for the briefest moment, it was as though Fiona wasn't in the room.

"So," Fiona said, sliding her elbows on the table closer to Alice. "You must all be really close then, huh?"

Alice stared into Fiona's dark, dazzling eyes, noting that there was a certain coldness behind them as she spoke. Maybe Emily was right; maybe Fiona could get jealous as well.

"Yeah, I guess we are," Alice said and stared at her lap, needing to break the eye contact. Tensions were growing alarmingly fast and Mark hadn't even arrived yet. "So, have you guys been up to anything fun since you've been in the city?"

"Actually, I showed her that art museum Blaise had been badgering us to go to," Isaac quickly said, looking relieved that the conversation had changed.

"Yeah, this fuckin' twat," Blaise said, slamming his hand on the table. "I've been nagging you both for weeks to go, then he brings Fiona without even inviting me."

"Sorry man," Isaac shrugged. "You're not pretty enough."

"You're a real piece of work," Blaise said tutting his tongue.

"But yeah," Isaac said, "it was great. I also showed her the view of the skyline from – Oh, what the fuck."

The color in Isaac's face immediately drained as he cut himself off midsentence. Alice tilted her head as she saw his hand instantly reach into his pocket, seemingly grasping for his stress ball, his jaw slowly dropping to the floor.

Next, Blaise's eyes shot wide open and he leaned back in his chair, slowly saying, "Hoooooollyyy shit."

Alice, Emily, and Fiona all exchanged confused glances at the boys' sudden change in behavior. Finally, Alice slowly craned her neck to view what was so horrifying behind her shoulder.

For a split second, Alice's vision when completely black, and she was positive she was going to faint. Instead, her body immediately went back into hyperventilation mode.

Mark was looking cowardly with his hands behind his back, staring sadly at the ground, desperately avoiding Alice's eyes. Although, it wasn't Mark who caused everyone to become petrified.

Wearing the same jean jacket he had owned since he was sixteen, his hands shoved in his pockets, smacking a piece of bubble gum loudly as he smirked maliciously at their table of friends...

It was Simon.

Chapter End Notes

WHAAAAAT!!!???? SIMON!!!!??? Le gasp!
THANK YOU SO MUCH EVERYONE! <3 I'm hoping to hit 100 kudos by the end of the month, so anyone who hasn't kudos'd this but love it, hit me up!! :) 

As always - thank you for all the support and encouragement. <3

ALSO - if this story had a soundtrack, the song "Creep in a Tshirt" by Portugal The Man would be playing! :) Check it out and let me know what you think! Or what do you think about Simon showing up!? Any predictions from anyone!? How do you like Fiona!?

Have a great week guys <3
This cannot be happening.

Everyone at the table remained paralyzed as they fearfully watched Simon looming over them, smacking his bubble gum as maliciously as one could. The coldness from his aura felt like it was radiating off his body because Alice felt goosebumps crawl up her spine, despite the beads of sweat trickling down her neck. Her hearthammered irregularly; for a few seconds, it would race as fast as a victim of cardiac arrest, next it would drop to the speed of a flat liner on their death bed.

Finally, after the ominous silence, Simon's smile cracked open wider.

"Hey, guys."

Besides a small whimper from Emily's throat, the two words were not enough to evoke a response from the table. Although, despite the pluralization of his words, the way Simon's dark eyes dug through Isaac made it obvious he was only addressing one person.

Isaac's jaw was glued shut as he stared back at Simon, gripping his pint glass so tight it was a miracle it hadn't shattered yet.

There was, however, one person at the table who wasn't experiencing the same state of distress.

Fiona's eyes shifted between Isaac and Simon with a raised brow, not even attempting to hide her confusion. Finally, she turned to Simon and raised her hand to give a half-hearted wave.

"Umm...hi?"

Somehow, Fiona's words finally triggered Alice and before she knew it, she was storming towards Mark. Without taking a second to try to stifle her aggression, she grabbed the sleeve of his sweater, and harshly pulled him so she could venomously hiss in his ear, "Why the fuck did you bring Simon here?"

"I...he – I didn't," Mark stammered out, but it appeared he was too terrified by Alice's flaming eyes to formulate a proper sentence.

"Relax, sis," Simon interjected coldly, smacking Alice's back harder than a friendly sibling would do. She glared at him with contempt and stepped away from him as he continued speaking, "Mark simply told me about this fantastic high school reunion, and I figured it was about time I met up with an old peer."

Once again, his eyes fell on Isaac.

"Simon," Alice said between gritted teeth. "You need to leave right now."

"Don't you tell me what to do," he said stepping closer to Alice, shoving his finger in front of her
face. Shoving her hands in her back pockets was the only thing to stop her from breaking Simon’s nose.

At some point, Blaise had jumped off his chair and rushed over to Simon and Alice. He mustered up a peaceful smile, and gently rested his hand on Simon's back. "Hey, mate, why don't we discuss everything outside? It's loud and busy, people are trying to have a good time, and – "

Simon slapped Blaise's hand off his back. "Don't touch me, you fuckin' British twat."

Blaise raised his hands in the air and backed away back to his chair, muttering, "Yeah, okay, fuck you too..."

"This is happening," Simon said and pulled out Alice's former seat so he was sitting directly across from Isaac. "Right here. Right now."

Alice gave Mark one last look of disgust before begrudgingly taking a seat next to Simon. Much to her displeasure, Mark followed to the seat next to her. He gave her a silent, pleading look, and a gentle, apologetic tap on her thigh.

Without skipping a beat, she ripped his hand off her.

Simon clasped his hands together, resting them on the table as he leaned closer to Isaac. A snarl that could rival the devil's manifested over Simon's face as he gave a small nod. "Get me a drink, Isaac."

Isaac remained silent at Simon's power move. His knuckles were nearly vibrating from the tight grip around the pint glass, and his chest was heaving in sync with his flaring nostrils.

But his stormy eyes did not leave Simon's.

"Did I stutter?" Simon asked, leaning closer to Isaac.

This time Isaac closed his eyes for a split-second, and when they reopened, they were piercing through Alice.

If looks could kill, Alice would have two daggers made of ice stabbed through her heart.

Her shoulders weakly slumped down and her bottom lip trembled as she tried to telepathically convey how much she did not want this to happen. As his eyes continued to drive into her, she finally got the courage to silently mouth the words, "I'm so sorry."

Isaac closed his eyes once again and took a deep breath, quickly licking his lips before resting his glare back on Simon and asked, "What are you drinking?"

"Jack and Coke."

Isaac stood from his seat and lifted his half empty pint to his lips, polishing off the remaining beer, before slamming the empty pint on the table so hard it rattled Emily's wine glass. "Be right back."

Alice glanced at Blaise who was staring at her; his forehead crinkled and his eyes shined with sympathy as he shook his head slowly and dumbfounded.

"Okay," Fiona said, folding her hands together on her lap, "what the hell is going on?"

Simon turned his neck towards her, rubbing his chin as he said, "You look really familiar...have we met?"
"Oh, I'm Fiona Banks," she said, flipping her hair over shoulder before holding out her hand to Simon. "I'm a model so you've probably seen me all over the internet."

"A model?" Simon asked, grabbing her hand firmly with a beaming smile. "And you're here with Isaac?"

"Yes?"

"Are you two dating?"

"Umm...yeah. I think so."

"Brilliant," Simon said under his breath, on the verge of breaking into a fit of laughter. "This is just brilliant."

"Simon," Emily said sweetly, gently brushing her fingers over his wrist. "We don't have to do this like this...we can go back to my place and discuss everything calmly."

"I really like you, Emily," Simon said, returning her pleasant smile as he rubbed his fingers along hers. "So don't piss me off like the rest of these assholes have."

She snapped her hand back and grabbed the wine bottle, filling her glass to the top, looking as far away from Simon as possible.

When Isaac returned, he set Simon's drink far away from him, before sliding it roughly across the table as if hoping it would fall into his lap. Unfortunately, Simon's quick reflexes caught it before it plummeted.

He took his seat and turned to Fiona, giving her a weak, desperate glance before saying, "I am so sorry for what is about to happen."

She furrowed her brows and pursed her lips, but remained silent.

"Oh, you should be sorry," Simon said. "Although, I don't think that'll cut it. I've got a feeling you won't be dating this pretty girl for much longer after tonight."

"What do you want, Simon?" Isaac asked. "Just say whatever you have to say and let's get this over with."

"What do I want?" Simon asked with a bitter laugh. "You're asking me what I want?"

"Yes," Isaac said. "Did I stutter?"

Simon continued chuckling under his breath, shaking his head at the ground, before raising his eyes back to Isaac.

The smile slid off his face.

"I want to know why you're ruining my fucking life."

"I'm not ruining your li –"

"You've got to be kidding me," he said. "I always knew you were a real piece of work, but would it kill you to be a little accountable for your actions?"

"I am not ruining yo –"
"You fucked two of my fiancées," Simon snapped, his voice raising past his eerie calmness for the first time since he arrived.

Fiona gasped and she folded her arms tightly across her chest. "You did what?"

Isaac stumbled over his words, his mouth gaping like a fish as he struggled to respond, but he was interrupted.

A handsome young brunette man suddenly appeared at the edge of the table beside Emily, completely unaware of the growing tensions. He smiled suavely at Emily and said, "Excuse me, I hope you don't mind me interrupting..."

"Not at all," Emily said eagerly.

"But I saw you when you walked into the bar, and I've just got to say," his eyes flickered down Emily's shining, silver dress, "you are the most stunning woman I've ever seen. Can I buy you a drink?"

"Yes!" Emily said abruptly, hopping off her chair before he even finished asking the question. She linked arms with the handsome brunette and smiled widely at the table. "Well, have fun, kids!"

Blaise gawked at the couple scurrying away from the table. "Are you serious? I'm way hotter than that guy!"

Isaac turned away from Fiona to give Blaise a sympathetic glance. "Sorry, man."

"Ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous."

Simon was quickly growing impatient by the off-topic interruption and turned to Fiona.

"You heard what I said," he said. "Your charming boyfriend had the pleasure of screwing the only two women I have ever loved."

"It's not like I actively went out of my way to sleep with Chelsea to ruin your life," Isaac said with a clenched jaw. "She came onto me. I had no idea you were together."

"She looks so bored," Blaise said. "She's not even laughing. I'm way funnier than that bloke."

Simon's eyes burned into Isaac.

"Oh, well in that case, all is forgiven," he said. "Don't worry, Isaac. Your hands are washed clean of any guilt. You can go back to getting praised for being the devil."

"Chelsea was looking for someone to sleep with," Isaac said, his voice slowly growing louder. "If I hadn't been at the bar that night, she would have gone after someone else."

"Why the fuck should I believe that?"

"Because it's the truth," Isaac shot. "Maybe instead of blaming me, you're the one who should be a little accountable. You must be quite the winner if two of your fiancées cheated on you."

"Fuck you," Simon snapped. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Really?" Isaac asked, leaning back in his chair. "Because she sure loved talking about her aggressive and neglectful fiancée a lot after sucking my -- "
"Isaac," Fiona hissed, elbowing Isaac hard in the ribs.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

"Fine," Simon said, folding his arms. "If that's how you want to play it, then let's bring the second issue on the table."

"And what is that?"

"Your fucking obsession with my sister."

Alice, who had her face in her hands the entire time, desperately begging for the pub to catch on fire so they were forced to evacuate, darted her gaze to Fiona. Her once sparkling eyes were dark and cold, as she tutted her tongue at Alice.

_Fuck._

"Simon," she said, pulling at his sweater, "please don't do – "

"Shut the hell up," he said, ripping his arm away. "You are such a little – "

" - don't you dare finish that sentence, Simon," Isaac snapped as he slammed his beer on the table, ignoring Fiona's now appalled glare.

"See?" Simon laughed at Fiona. "He's obsessed."

"I am not obsessed with your sister," Isaac said. "Just because I happen to respect her does not mean that I'm obsessed with her."

"Bullshit," Simon said. "Mark has told me everything. How you stay out late with her, how you're constantly texting her, that your god damn ugly eyes light up when you look at her."

"Mark!" Alice turned to the incredibly silent Mark at her side. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"What?" he asked. "It's true!"

"You told me you were trying to get Simon to get more comfortable with all this," she said, shaking her head in disbelief. "Not tell him that load of bullshit!"

"I'm not going to lie to my best friend, Alice."

"So you'll lie to your girlfriend?"

"He has a right to know."

"This none of his business!" she cried and turned her eyes to Fiona. "None of this is true, Fiona. We've barely talked in weeks."

"Uh-huh," Fiona said, her scowl burning into Alice.

"Emily is way too good for that git." Everyone continued to ignore Blaise.

Simon's eyes returned to Isaac.

"Mark told me she has turned into a completely different person since she's started working for you," he shot. "You're brainwashing her!"
"I'm brainwashing her?" Isaac said, unable to hold in his laughter. "I'm not brainwashing her. She's just happier now! If you two weren't so selfish, you would see that for yourselves!"

"She's not different in a good way," Mark said smugly, diving into the discussion for the first time. "She's smoking now."

Simon paused.

Slowly, he leaned across the table to look past Alice so he could make eye contact with Mark.

"Why the hell do you care if she's smoking?" he asked. "You're always smoking at work."

Mark's face turned white as snow and Alice gasped at him.

"Excuse me?" she asked and slapped his shoulder. "You smoke?"

"I mean...not really...just sometimes..."

"I could strangle you right now."

"Regardless, I don't even smoke," Isaac said, raising his hands defensively. "Blaise is the one who got her on that."

"Huh?" Blaise asked, paying attention to the heated debate for the first time. "Oh. Yeah. That was my bad, sorry."

"I don't care if she smokes or not," Simon said, rolling his eyes in irritation. "What I care about is the fact that you've corrupted my little sister. She's not the same person that she used to be. Mark and I are the ones who love her and want what's best for her - "

"What is wrong with you? Can't you hear yourself right now?" Isaac shouted. "Do you really think what's best for her is working some crummy waitressing job for the rest of her life?"

"It's better than working for you!"

Isaac paused to pinch the bridge of his nose, taking a deep breath before he continued.

"Alice is a great girl and she deserves this opportunity," he said, trying to keep his voice level. "She's smart and talented, there's no reason why she shouldn't be doing something she loves just to make you happy."

Suddenly, Simon stood from his chair and slammed his fists on the table.

"So, what?" he shouted. "You've been hanging out with my sister for what, three, maybe four months, and suddenly you know her better than I do?"

Isaac also stood from his chair to match Simon's towering posture.

"Maybe I do!"

Fiona smacked her forehead.

"No, you don't," he shot. "You're just pretending to be the nice guy so she'll choose you over her own brother."

"You're so fucking delusional."
"I'm not delusional!"

"Do you have any idea how much you hurt her?" Isaac asked, pressing his palms against the table, inches away from Simon's face, his dishevelled hair falling in front of his eyes. "She was so fucking distraught after you two fought. You're not the only victim here."

"Clearly it wasn't enough if she's still talking to you!"

"Can we please just stop fighting?" Alice pleaded, gripping her nails into her chair.

"No, Alice, we aren't going to stop fighting," Simon said. "Not until I figure out why you're so determined to spend all your time with this asshole!"

"How am I the asshole?" Isaac asked. "Listen, I'm sorry that I slept with Chelsea. I can't go back in time and change it. But with Alice..."

He trailed off and his eyes fell on her with a sad, distant look before returning to Simon.

"I care about her. I just want her to be happy."

Alice gulped as she looked up at the fuming Isaac, standing up to Simon, protecting her honour. Never had she wanted to hug Isaac so badly...

"That's bullshit!" Simon roared, interrupting Alice from her thoughts.

Isaac briefly turned his back to Simon, throwing his face in his hands as he groaned exasperatedly before facing him again.

"What's the point of even trying to talk to you?" Isaac asked. "You have no logic at all!"

"Well, it's impossible trying to have a conversation with someone who is obviously full of shit!"

"No I'm not."

"You're just saying this stuff to get in her pants!"

"I'm not trying to get into her pants!"

"More bullshit!"

"You're bullshit!"

"EVERYONE SHUT THE HELL UP RIGHT NOW."

The table immediately went silent and all eyes fell on Blaise who was now standing at the end of the table, his eyes seething as his palms pressed into the wooden tabletop. His chest was heaving as his words dripped with contempt.

"You're all acting like bloody children right now," he snapped with his eyes shifting between everyone at the table.

"Don't talk to me like th – "

"Simon, no. You don't talk to me like that, you self-entitled, selfish, waste of skin," Blaise shot and Simon actually withdrew. Alice's mouth dropped and her heart tingled warmly as she gazed up at Blaise. "Do you honestly think you have any say over Alice's life? You keep acting like you know
what's best for her, and that you know her, but I've spent nearly every day with her for months and if there's one thing I've learned is that she's going to do whatever the hell she wants."

Blaise's entire body was shaking as he spoke, fuelled entirely by frustration and rage. In fact, he was so angry that he didn't even notice Emily slowly walking towards him, biting her lip, and twirling her blonde hair around her finger...

Blaise reached for Simon's Jack and Coke and slugged back the remaining contents, staring Simon right in the eyes as he wiped his mouth of the residue before continuing his rant.

"She's a fuckin' adult, mate," he said. "You have absolutely no say in what she does with her life. Stop acting like you do."

"But I'm her brother – "

"Yeah, you are her brother!" Blaise said. "And because of that, and because Alice is a nice person, she's probably going to still miraculously love you even after doing this. And for that, you'd better be grateful and kiss her god damn feet. Because all you are is her brother...someone who should be supporting her in whatever she chooses. Stop acting like you have any power over her."

"But I – "

"Nope. Don't want to hear it. I'm tired of your voice," Blaise said, holding his palm in front of Simon's face. "If you'd like, I'd be happy to refer you to one of our top psychologists, because Jesus buddy, you need some major, major therapy. But otherwise, you're done talking."

Simon's forehead crinkled and he opened his mouth to respond, but promptly shut it.

Isaac, on the other hand, stood smugly. He folded his arms and smirked at Simon, as if he had won the war.

Blaise turned to Isaac and shoved his finger in his face. "And you..."

Isaac's face fell. "What did I do?"

"Get your fuckin' shit together, mate," he said, ramming his finger in Isaac's chest. "You're here with this beautiful woman and you've spent the entire night fighting over Alice as if she's not even here. Sort your fucking shit out before you hurt someone."

Oh my god.

Alice watched as the colour completely drained from Isaac's face. He immediately turned to Fiona for the first time in ages to find her leaning back in her chair, her arms folded, and shaking her head venomously at Isaac. Turning back to Blaise, Isaac clenched his jaw, but nodded begrudgingly.

"And Mark..." Blaise turned to the silent Mark and narrowed his eyes. "You're just pathetic. Everything about you is pathetic. That's all I have to say on that."

Emily, who was now only a few feet away from Blaise with her hands clasped together under her chin, couldn't retain her small giggle.

Mark simply lowered his head and stared at his lap.

"And Alice, Fiona," Blaise said and both girls stared at Blaise in fear of what he would yell at them. "I want to formally apologize on behalf of these gits. Alice, I'm sorry that this night didn't go the way
Both Fiona and Alice nodded at Blaise, showing their appreciation. Alice made a mental note to buy him breakfast on Monday.

"Alright, on that note, I'm going home," Blaise said. "I really hope all of you choose to do the same."

They all watched Blaise walk away from the table without turning his back, still unaware of Emily standing behind him in awe.

"Blaise!" She finally called out and rushed behind him, linking her arm with his, smiling widely at him. "Blaise, that was so amazi – "

But Blaise brushed her off, peeling her arm from his. "Go away, Emily."

"Wh-what?"

"Just...just go shag that guy," he said bitterly, but his eyes exhausted eyes didn't match his tone. "I know you want to."

"N-no..." Emily said weakly, but before she could say anything else, Blaise walked out the door. Her forehead crinkled and she stared at the floor as she slowly walked towards Alice.

"Emily, are you okay?" Alice asked, grabbing her hand.

"I'm gonna go home..." she said, still looking at the floor with her knitted brow, as if desperately trying to comprehend what happened. "I'll call you tomorrow, okay?"

"Do you want me to walk with you?" Alice asked, trying to meet Emily's eyes but she wouldn't raise her gaze.

"No...no...I'll be fine," she said quietly, and before Alice could say anything else, Emily walked out the door in a trance-like state.

Alice returned her focus to the remaining people at the table. Simon and Isaac were still standing parallel to each other, but the anger and tension seemed to be relieved. Instead, Simon was staring at his feet, his mouth opening and closing, attempting to formulate a sentence.

"Whether you did it on purpose or not," Simon croaked out, his eyes still not leaving his feet, "because of you, I've lost everything that's important to me..."

Isaac's shoulders immediately fell and his eyebrows drooped. "I'm...I'm sorry..."

Simon rubbed his eye and shook his head before turning on his heel, not even glancing at Alice as he rushed out of the bar.

"We are leaving," Fiona said, standing up from her chair and grabbing Isaac by the wrist. She glared at Alice for a second before turning to Isaac. "You have so much explaining to do."

Isaac silently nodded and placed a few bills on the table before following her out the door.

Only Mark and Alice remained.

Tapping his hands against his jeans, Mark gave her a crooked smile. "So...should we head back to your place?"
Alice scoffed and pressed her palms to her eyes. "You're kidding me."

"What?"

She silently stood up from her chair and started walking to the door.

"Where are you going?" Mark called out.

"Honestly?" She turned around and threw her hands in the air. "I'm going to go apologize to Isaac for you ruining this entire evening."

Mark stood from his chair and rushed towards Alice.

"You're really going to go talk to him after all this?"

"Oh my god!" She pulled at her hair, trying not to rip it out. "I can't even look at you right now."

"Come on, Alice," he said, grabbing her arm but she immediately pulled away.

"Just...go home with Simon," she said. "I'll call you sometime this week."

"But Alice –"

She was already out the door before she could hear the rest of his sentence.

When she walked into the frosty outdoors, she looked down the road, and thankfully spotted Isaac and Fiona several meters ahead of her.

"Hey, Isaac!" She called out and sprinted down the road hoping she could catch up to them. "Isaac!"

Both Fiona and Isaac stopped in their steps and turned around. Upon seeing Alice, Fiona crossed her arms and puckered her lips as if she were sucking on a lemon.

"Isaac," Alice said, ignoring Fiona. "Can I talk to you?"

"Umm..." Isaac looked at Fiona who sent him a menacing, warning gaze. "Sure."

Fiona huffed and stomped her heel to the ground, but nodded at Isaac, signalling that she would wait for him.

Alice led him down a dark alley, far enough from Fiona that she wouldn't hear. She gulped as she looked at Isaac, leaning against the brick wall, his face void of any emotion. She opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out.

Isaac tightened his lips and shrugged his shoulders before saying, "Well?"

"I...umm..." she rubbed the back of her neck nervously. "I just wanted to apologize for everything. I'm so sorry...I'm sorry if Fiona hates you after this..."

"Well, it's not your fault, but thanks."

He turned his back to her and began walking back to Fiona.

"Isaac, wait," she said, clenching her eyes shut as her heart beat echoed in her ears.

Isaac stopped and sighed. "What?"
She fiddled with her thumbs, squinting at the ground as she said, "Why did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Stand up for me so much..." she said. "You didn't have to do that. You could have just...left or something."

She heard Isaac curse under his breath and he ran a hand through his hair, making it even messier than it was before. He looked back in the direction of Fiona before returning his gaze to Alice.

"I don't know, Alice," he said and kicked a small pebble across the dark alley. "You're my friend and I care about you. I'm obviously going to stand up for you when I can."

Alice nodded and her feet pulled her a few steps closer as if she were magnetized. She stopped when she was close enough that if he took one large step and extended his arm, he could grab her waist.

"Just friends..." she said. "Right?"

The moonlight illuminated Isaac's face as he stared at the stars. He shoved his hands in his pocket and rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet, pursing his lips tightly together.

Alice's heartbeat quickened with every second that passed.

He lowered his eyes to her lips.

She took one small step towards him.

He took one small step towards her.

Finally, he looked at his shoes and cleared his throat.

"I think we should get back to our significant others now," he said. "We wouldn't want to keep them waiting."

Chapter End Notes

AGH! So much DIALOGUE. This chapter was seriously SO HARD and so EMOTIONALLY EXHAUSTING to write, oh my WORD. I really hope you enjoyed it. I'm super insecure about it just because it was the most difficult think i've ever written and I don't know how it turned out...... PLEASE LET ME KNOW WHAT YOU THINK!

ALSO ! the ratio of votes to hits was something like 82% or something!!!! <3 LOVE YOU GUYS! Please keep voting and commenting and all that jazz! So sorry the updates have been few and far between - school is KILLING ME. But in just a few weeks I'll be graduated university, wooo!!
Alice pulled her purple blanket over her head, groaning as she ignored her vibrating cell phone. Mark had been calling her all morning, probably to grovel for forgiveness after the previous night's extravagant shit-show starring Simon.

There were a lot of awkward ways Alice envisioned that evening going...but nothing prepared her for that.

Immediately after the vibrating ended, it started up again.

"Go away," she moaned into her pillow before reaching for the phone to turn it off. It would be at least a couple days before she would feel ready to talk to Mark. Considering all the years of inconsiderate actions Mark had done to Alice, it was impressive that she finally found a winner for the worst. Inviting Simon and feeding him with inaccurate stories about her and Isaac took the cake. He really outdid himself this time.


She shot up from her pillow and froze.

"That fucker had better not be at my house," she said before jumping off her bed to find her new favorite black sweater to cover her bralette. Before exiting her bedroom, she glanced in the mirror to grimace at the growing black circles under her eyes. She reached for her concealer to dab the makeup under her eyes but paused.

"Fuck Mark," she said and set the makeup back on her desk. "He's not worth getting prettied up for."


She sighed and trudged to the door, every footstep weighing her down as she dreaded seeing her lovely boyfriend's idiotic face.

Much to her delight, when she opened the door it wasn't Mark. Instead, it was a glum-looking Emily, her blonde hair pulled back in a messy bun, leaning her face against the doorframe.

"Hey," she said, her bottom lip trembling as she traced a small heart on the door.

"Hello," Alice said, tilting her head and frowning at Emily's somber aura. "You alright?"

"No..." She sighed loudly and dragged herself into Alice's living room, flopping on the couch and immediately shifted her body into the fetal position. "I ate a whole pizza last night."

"Huh?" Alice followed Emily to the couch, taking a seat beside her feet.

"And then I ate a whole pint of Ben and Jerrys ice cream," she said in a slow zombie-like voice. "And then today I had waffles."

"That sounds...delicious?"
"No," Emily said. "It sounds like over 8000 calories."

"Calories are delicious."

Emily glowered at Alice. "I haven't binged like this in years, Alice! This is a travesty. I've gained thirty pounds in a night."

Alice giggled and patted Emily's ankle. "You haven't gained thirty pounds overnight. You're still looking as hot as ever."

"Lies, lies, lies," Emily moaned, shoving her face into the couch's cushion. "I'm a whale."

"Yeah, okay," Alice snorted. "If you're a whale then I'm Jupiter."

"I hate everything."

Alice cocked her neck at Emily and shifted so she could rub her back. "Okay, what's going on?"

A stream of incoherent curse words flew from Emily's mouth, muffled by the cushion.

"Come again?" Alice asked.

Emily pulled her face up from the couch and turned to Alice, wincing before she even said, "I like Blaise. A lot."

Without skipping a beat, Alice's face cracked into a beaming smile. "Emily! That's amazing!"

"No it isn't," she hissed before flopping her cheek back to the sofa. "I screwed it all up. I missed the boat. He hates me..."

"Oh, come on," Alice laughed. "There's no way Blaise hates you. I'm sure if you just told h – "

"No, he hates me," Emily said. "Didn't you see the way he looked at me when he shut me down? I've never seen him look at anyone that way before! Like I was completely dead to him."

"You're not dead to him, trust me," Alice said in the most nurturing voice possible. "Last night was just a tense mess. He was probably so hopped up on adrenaline after going all hero-mode that he wasn't thinking clearly."

"God, that was so fucking hot what he did," she said. "The way he stood up for you...and totally bitched everyone out...why did it take me so long to realize how cool Blaise is? He's so smart, and funny, and nice, and clearly, he's more of a man than I ever imagined!"

"I've been trying to tell you th - "

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I get it. I messed up because I'm a shallow dumb ho."

"Oh god, that is not what I was implying at all, Em, come on," Alice said, moving her whole body so she was practically spooning Emily on the couch. "You're not a shallow dumb ho. Believe me, you haven't messed up with Blaise."

"You don't get it, Alice," Emily said. "I don't deserve to be with Blaise. I've treated him like dirt since the minute I met him, I completely ignored his existence after I slept with him, and I was arrogant enough to think he would still be interested in me after I went off and flirted with that guy right in front of him! Like, I wouldn't want to be with me, either. I suck."
"Hey, remember when you said self-deprecation is an unattractive trait?" Alice said, nudging her ribs.

Emily scoffed. "Does it look like I'm trying to be attractive right now?"

Alice shrugged.

"What is happening to me?" Emily cried, turning her body so she was now facing Alice on the small couch. "First Isaac totally shuts me down, then I gave my number to this hot bartender and he never called me, and now Blaise has also completely shut me down!" She looked at the ceiling and rested her arm on her forehead, staring solemnly. "My poor, fragile ego..."

"Welcome to the rest of humanity," Alice giggled. "Trust me, Em, you're still the same, beautiful and amazing person you've always been."

"Yeah, more like beautiful, selfish, narcissistic, slu - "

"Stop being so mean to yourself, girl!" Alice slapped Emily's shoulder. "This isn't going to help you at all!"

"I'm not being mean. I'm being honest."

"Kay, listen," Alice said and stood up from the couch to loom over Emily with her hands on her hips. "What are your intentions with Blaise?"

"Didn't realize you were Blaise's late father..."

"I'm serious. What do you want to gain from this?" Alice asked as her face grew more authoritarian. "Do you just want to sleep with him a few more times? Do you just want the attention? Or do you actually want to like...be in a committed monogamous relationship with him?"

She stayed silent for a minute, staring blankly at the air in front of her.

Finally, she let out a large breath she had been holding.

"Don't freak out," she said. "But...I think I want to give the whole monogamy thing a go."

"Holy shit!" Alice squealed and hopped up and down three times. She ran to the calendar hanging on the wall and scribbled on today's date. "This is a monumental day!"

"What are you writing over there?" Emily called from the couch.

"Sunday, December 16th, is officially 'National Emily Wants A Boyfriend Day'."

"Oh fuck off, erase that, please," Emily groaned. "I do not need a constant reminder of how I ruined the one chance I've had with a genuinely nice boy."

"No, Emily, I have a plan," Alice said, rushing back to the couch. "Next Saturday, December 22, is our staff Christmas Party. It's a big extravagant thing where we dress up and get all pretty. You're obviously invited and Blaise is going to be there. Just apologize and ask him to dance or something, I promise you he will be all over you."

"Don't make promises over things you can't control."

"I can't control it, but I'm positive you haven't ruined things as much as you think you have."
Emily let out a loud moan, broken up by various curse words.

"Fine," she finally said. "I'll go and I'll try to fix things. I think you're being a little optimistic, though."

"Well, I think you're being a little pessimistic, so I guess we balance out."

"Blah blah blah I'm Alice and I always know what I'm talking about, blah blah blah," Emily mocked in a high-pitched voice and Alice rolled her eyes and giggled. "Can we talk about the bigger issue at hand now?"

"And what's that?"

"The fact that Isaac is completely fucking in love with you."

Alice's face paled. Emily's turmoil had been a nice distraction from her own problems.

"He's not in love with me," she mumbled under breath.

"Yeah, okay," Emily said. "I could hear the stuff he was saying. You all were very loud. And I can safely say that guys don't defend girls like that, in front of their model girlfriend, if they're completely platonic."

"Yeah, well, Isaac's a weird guy..."

"Still! Did you see Mark defending you?"

"Ha!" Alice let out a cold laugh. "Mark defending me? That's rich."

"Regardless, get your head out of the mud and look at the damn signs," she said. "He. Wants. You."

"No he doesn't," Alice said, this time a little harsher. "You want to know how I know that?"

"Lay it on me, girl."

"Because I basically asked him after everything went down if he liked me."

"Did he say no?"

"Well, no..." she said. "He gave some stupid vague answer about needing to go back to Fiona. But he sure as hell didn't say yes!"

"So Fiona was waiting for him?"

"Yeah, she was just around the corner."

"Well, what do you expect, Alice?" Emily asked. "Do you really think Isaac is going to confess his feelings for you when Fiona is right there? No! Isaac is a bit of an idiot, yes, but he's pretty respectful...most of the time. He wouldn't do that to her."

"Maybe you're right..." She bit her fingernails as she contemplated Emily's logic. "But even so, he's dating Fiona Banks. She's a total babe and honestly, even though she's not my favourite person in the world, she handled that ginormous shit show pretty elegantly...maybe she's not so bad."

"Yeah, but Isaac genuinely cares about you," Emily said matter-of-factly. "Fiona is just a distraction from the fact that he can't be with you."
"I doubt it," Alice said and Emily glared furiously at her, causing her to throw her hands in the air in defence. "But sure, sure, maybe you're right."

"I am," she said smugly. "So...what about you and Mark?"

"Fuck that guy."

"Things are going well, then, I see."

"Ugh."

"Are you two still dating?"

"I have nooo idea," Alice said, slumping onto the couch. "I mean, I'm pretty sure he wants to keep dating. But..."

"But?"

"I am so mad at him on so many levels I don't think we can ever come back from this," she said. "Like, just thinking about him repulses me right now. But the idiot keeps calling me."

"I feel like if you're repulsed by your boyfriend that's usually a good indicator that you should break up..."

"I know, I know," she said. "It's just...if we break up now, we are done. Forever. Like, a decade worth of history down the drain in an instant. I...I really need to think it through before I do it."

"Well, while you're debating on whether you want to stay with him or not, please just remember how even though you might not believe it, Isaac likes you. Really keep that in mind."

"Yeah, I guess so..." Alice sighed and looked at the clock. "I'm starving. Wanna get some lunch?"

"Please! While I'm currently in eat-everything-in-sight mode, let's go to that burger place down the road that puts nine pieces of bacon on everything," she said excitedly, practically vibrating with excitement. "And then let's get milkshakes!"

"You read my mind."

The following week was uneventful. Alice had barely seen Isaac since the night with Simon and she wasn't even avoiding him on purpose anymore. She couldn't quite figure out if he was ignoring her, though. Anytime she would enter the same room, he would conveniently get an important phone call and have to leave. A part of her wondered if he was faking calls, but overall, it was a nice break from all the drama that happened.

It was a relaxing Friday night and Alice had just nestled on her couch with a bowl of ice cream, ready to search Netflix for a cheesy romantic comedy. Mark had insisted on going over that night but she still wasn't ready to see him. She knew she should just dump him. There's no way things would improve. Their relationship was already on the rocks even before the Simon Incident, but now she could barely trust him. He fed Simon the ammo to completely lose it on Isaac when he was supposed to be helping Alice. How do you come back from that?

You probably shouldn't.

Over the week, Alice found herself living in a foreign dream world. Whenever she had a few minutes to herself she found herself imagining her life if she were to date Isaac. He was one of her
best friends, they had so much fun together...life with Isaac would be unpredictable, but it excited her. She didn't realize how quickly she and Mark fell into the Netflix-Rut when they started dating again. Although it was comfortable and pleasant, it was... boring. There were no butterflies. No passion. When she envisioned her future with Mark, it was exactly how it is now. No more surprises.

Just the thought of Isaac was enough to send goosebumps down her spine.

However, she had to continuously remind herself that Isaac was in a relationship. It wasn't the matter of her choosing which boy to be with. She would have to dump Mark then wait for Isaac to be single and hope he never marries Fiona. The perfect Fiona...Alice wouldn't be surprised if they did get married. Why would anyone choose Alice over Fiona?

She finally settled on a movie when -


"Jesus Christ, do I live in a sitcom?" She grumbled to herself, begrudgingly pulling herself off the couch. "Doesn't anyone call before coming over?"

She opened the door and her heart jumped into her throat and goosebumps scattered over every inch of her body.

"Hey," Isaac said, his platinum hair blowing in the wind as he casually leaned against the doorframe. "I was in the neighborhood and was wondering if you wanted to hang out."

Alice couldn't contain the ginormous smile overtaking her face.

He fuckin' loves you, Alice.

With Mark and Fiona suddenly the last thing on her mind, she nodded her head.

"Sure."

Chapter End Notes

SUP GUYS! I know it's been SO LONG since I've updated! Life has been craaaaaazy!!!

HOWEVER GUESS WHAT! I'm in the middle of Finals week right now, and after these finals are over, I AM A UNIVERSITY GRADUATE WITH HER PSYCHOLOGY DEGREE WOOOOO!!!

Also, as a very special reward, EVERY DAY for the next....I dunno...6 or 7 days or something? I'M GOING TO BE UPDATING! Everything is all written and edited and ready to go. The next 6 or 7 chapters I've always felt should be read in a row, as if it were a published book, otherwise I know you guys will hate me (hehehe). So, I've got everything ready to post, so keep your eyes out on this story! It's gonna be crraaaazy!

Thank you so much for all the comments and kudos and everything <3 I can't believe how much momentum this story has gained on this website. Seriously, I love you all so much. Ahhhh.

Let me know what you think! Also, if you notice it's late in the day and I haven't
updated yet, spam my inbox yo remind me and I definitely will!
"No, Alice" Isaac said as he and Alice strolled along the side of the frozen pond. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Excuse me?" Alice scoffed so hard a puff of condensation flew from her mouth and she pulled her fingers to her chest. "I don't know what I'm talking about? You're the one who is so clearly wrong."

"I don't get why you can't be reasonable about this."

"Because you're wrong!"

"You know, I really expected better from you." Isaac tutted his tongue as he shook his head in disappointment at Alice. "Selena Gomez is obviously hotter than Miley Cyrus and I don't know why you won't just admit it."

"Because Miley Cyrus is a goddess!"

"She's so crazy, though. Sure, she's pretty, but it does not make up for how insane she is."

"Whatever. You can have fun with your PG-rated Selena Gomez, and I'll go party with Miley."

"Hey, fine by me," Isaac said lifting his hands in the air for a second before shoving them back in his pockets for warmth. "How did we start arguing about which former Disney stars were the hottest, anyway?"

"I have absolutely no idea," she giggled and took in the view of the scenic park she often strolled around when the weather permitted. Despite the mountains of snow on the ground, the sky was a gorgeous, cloudless blue and the bright warm sun reflected off the heaps of snow, making both Alice and Isaac permanently squint. It was the perfect day for a long walk through the park.

A young boy skating on the ice must have taken a hard tumble, because the air was suddenly vibrating with an ear-shattering scream.

"Aww, did you see that?" Isaac stopped in his step and nudged Alice's shoulder with his elbow. "That little guy just tripped over his hockey stick."

Alice turned her neck, and sure enough, the mother of the wailing child was rushing onto the ice wearing only her sneakers, slipping so much she vaguely resembled Bambi trying to skate. As soon as she reached her son, the high pitched shrieking came to a halt.

Isaac's lips turned into a pout as he watched the scene with his neck tilted. "Poor guy. Hope he's okay."

As bad as Alice felt for the hurt boy, rather than focussing on the mother and child, she stood gawking at Isaac with her mouth practically touching the snow.

"Isaac Hanes," she started, "do you like kids?"

Isaac peeled his eyes off the skating rink to face Alice and shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. They're alright. No one likes seeing a kid get hurt, though."
"D'aww." Alice brushed her fingers along Isaac's black double-breasted peacoat and smiled brightly in mock admiration. "You're a total softie."

"What?" Isaac said. "Just because I don't like seeing some kid fall on the ice doesn't mean I'm a softie."

"Yes it does."

"Do you not think it's sad?"

"Well, of course, I do!" She said defensively. "It's just strange that you think it's sad."

"Typical Alice," Isaac said and clicked his tongue. "Always making things weird whenever I remind her that I'm not a heartless statue."

"If it's any consolation, I'm starting to get used to it," she said, smiling up at his ivory skin, noting that his cheekbones immediately raised despite not looking at her.

"Thanks," he said and continued walking once the young boy seemed to be happily licking a lollipop. A comfortable silence overtook them and Alice breathed in the crisp, winter air, marveling at how nice it was to spend time with Isaac. It was as if the past month had never happened. As if Alice hadn't deliberately avoided him until he stumbled upon Fiona.

"So," Isaac said, lightly kicking a clump of snow that Alice was about to step on away from her. "How are you and Mark after our weekend Armageddon?"

She threw her head back and gave a loud, unfiltered, "Ha!"

"I see," Isaac said, nodding in fake understanding.

"Things...things could be much, much better," she said and looked up at the sky. "I kind of hate him a little bit right now."

"Really?" She could see Isaac smirk in the corner of her eyes. "But he was such a delight the other night."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. Mark sucks. You were right," Alice said and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Those are my favorite words to come from a woman's mouth," Isaac said before promptly receiving a swift slap on his arm. "But really...umm...are you two still together, then?"

"I have no idea," she said, turning her eyes to her boots. "I guess technically...but I don't know. I don't think we will be together much longer."

She shifted her gaze just in time to catch Isaac's quick grin which he immediately covered with his hand, seemingly scratching his lip. The butterflies in her stomach fluttered.

"I take it he won't be going to the Christmas party tomorrow?"

"I highly doubt it."

"I'm very sorry to hear that," he said in the most insincere tone, still concealing his mouth.

"I'm sure you are," Alice said with a small laugh, admiring the way the way the corners of his eyes were continued to crinkle. As they crossed the street to slowly make their way back to Alice's, a question plagued Alice's brain that she knew she couldn't refrain from asking.
"What about you and Fiona?" she asked without looking at him. "How did you two fare after the Simon-strocity?"

"Ahh..." Isaac's hand reached for the back of his neck, massaging it as he formulated a sentence. "As good as it could have, I guess. She forgave me, so there's that."

"Oh, cool," Alice said, casually ignoring the icy blade that just pierced through her chest. "Umm...how is she, anyway? I didn't really get a chance to talk to her much, 'cause, well, you know."

"Oh, she's great," Isaac said and the blade wedged itself deeper into her heart. "She's obviously stunning, actually very intelligent, nice enough...but..."

The blade loosened.

"But?" Alice asked a little too eagerly.

"I don't know...she's really serious all the time."

"What do you mean? Like, she's mad?"

"Nah, she's never really mad..." he said and scrunched his nose. "She doesn't really joke around, though. And like...she is really intent on having all these annoying deep, emotional conversations. It drives me a little crazy."

"What kind of conversations?"

"Like..." He clicked his tongue as he searched for an example. "She'll ask stuff like, 'Oh, Isaac, why are you so emotionally closed off to me?' and – And!" Whatever Isaac was about to say next must have really irritated him because he animatedly stomped his foot in a deep snow bank but didn't even seem to notice.

"She asks me all this stupid personal stuff, like, 'Why don't you ever talk about your mother? What happened to her? Stop prying, that's private!' He said, his voice growing slightly louder and Alice had to tighten her lips together to stifle her laughter. "I get that we're dating and all, but we've only been together a little over a month! In a way, she's basically a stranger!"

"Do you often sleep with strangers?"

"Fine, she's not a stranger," he said. "But really, I'm sorry, but I don't think that I should have to disclose every intimate detail about myself just because I'm dating her. Then she gets all pouty when I tell her that I don't want to talk about it. Is it so hard to just...have fun?"

"Why does everyone always want to be serious?" Alice asked. "That's like Mark. God. I can't remember the last time he said something genuinely funny."

"Honestly, I thought he was pretty hilarious when Simon called him out for smoking," Isaac said. "Don't get me wrong, I will die happy if I never see your brother again, but that was great. Mark looked like a fish out of water trying to explain that one."

"Oh, ha-ha, yes that was hilarious," Alice said and rolled her eyes. "He's an idiot."

"He sure is."

"Umm..." Alice quickly lipped her lips before asking the nagging question in the back of her head, "I
know I shouldn't ask this after what you just said, and feel free to not answer it, but...why don't you ever talk about your mom?"

"Do you really want to know why I don't talk about my mom?" Isaac asked.

Alice nodded.

"Honestly?"

She nodded again.

"Fine. I don't talk about her because it's a boring story and it has no impact on my life anymore. That's why I don't talk about it."

"Fair enough."

"I suppose you want a few details, though?"

Alice tilted her head to smile at him angelically. "Well, if you're offering..."

"Alright, get ready to be bored to tears," he said and Alice giggled. "Basically, I was seven when she left my dad. I was too young to really know what was going on, but I was old enough to know that she was always...sad. She definitely suffered from depression and my father treated her terribly."

"Your dad sounds like a winner."

"Oh, you have no idea," he scoffed. "He would always neglect her for work. I remember she would try to have the normal husband-and-wife small talk. You know, 'Hey, honey. How's your day?' and he would completely ignore her. He would seriously pretend she didn't exist when she would be standing in front of him. And he would get really drunk all the time and while he never hit her, he would scream at her. Really vile stuff. So...one day she left us in the middle of the night."

"Oh my god, Isaac," Alice gasped, clutching her hands to her chest as her eyes shined with sympathy. "That's not a boring story at all! That's...that's a very sad story. Why didn't she take you with her?"

A small, cold chuckle escaped his throat and he shook his head. "I don't know. That does sting a little, but, I assume she didn't want anything that reminded her of my father. And she always said I was just like him." A shiver crawled up his spine as he finished the sentence.

"I've never met your father," she reflexively reached to brush her fingers along the exposed skin on his wrist that wasn't hidden in his pocket. "but you don't seem anything like him from what I've heard."

"Thanks. It's my life mission to avoid being anything like him," he said. "Sadly, this job will most likely turn me into him. It's only a matter of time."

"That's impossible," Alice said. "You've got too good of a heart."

The faintest shade of pink crept up his pale skin.

"Thanks. Glad you're finally admitting it."

"Have you seen your mom since?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose and groaned. "Ahh...yes. Once. But if I tell you, you have to
promise not to act all sad for me. No consoling, no emotions, no apologizing, we will just move on with our conversation.

"Fine. I promise."

"Alright." He took in a deep breath before speaking. "When I was about ten or eleven...I was with my friends and I saw her at the grocery store. And she had another kid...she couldn't have been more than two or three. I have no idea if it was her kid or not, but...my mom saw me. I know for a fact that she saw me and she recognized me because she looked petrified. And..."

His voice made the slightest cracking noise.

"And I remember I smiled a little, and I raised my hand to wave at her, but," he swallowed before finishing his sentence, "but when I went to wave she ran out of the store. Grabbed the little kid she had, left her grocery cart and disappeared. Again. And that was the last time I ever saw her."

Alice gasped and lifted her fingers to her mouth. "Oh my god, Issac, I'm so sor – "

"Hey, no," Isaac said warningly and pantomimed zipping his lips shut. "You promised you wouldn't do it."

"Fine, that's just..." if she hadn't promised not to get emotional, she would probably have a few tears bubbling in her eyes, "that's so sad, Isaac. You honestly should talk about that more...not necessarily with me or Fiona, but like...you shouldn't keep that in."

"Why not?" He shrugged his shoulders. "It happened so long ago, I honestly never think about it anymore. Sure, as a kid, yeah. I hated her for it. But...I don't know, I'm not angry anymore. I have no desire to ever see her again, but I truly hope she's happier because her previous existence with my dad was not one worth living."

Alice stayed silent as she slowly walked beside Isaac with a heavy heart, using all her willpower to refrain from reaching out and stroking his cheek...

"Talking about her only brings up feelings that I don't want to feel anymore. I've felt them enough growing up, there's no point in bringing them back to the surface if I'm perfectly content with my life the way it is," he said. "Besides, I still grew up incredibly privileged. It's not like she abandoned me on the streets. Billions of people have it infinitely worse than I did. It sucks what happened, but it is what it is. No one has a perfect life."

Alice nodded her head. "I guess you're right. You seem to have a pretty good attitude about it, at least."

"I try," he said and smiled. "Regardless, umm, even though it's definitely not a conversation I want to have often, thanks for listening. I don't like talking about it, but it is nice simply...sharing something about myself with people I care about."

"Anytime, Isaac," she said and their eyes met, sending an electrical current from her spine to the ground. Much to her disappointment, they made their last turn, and before she knew it they were standing in front of Alice's house. The time had flown by so fast, she hardly realized the sunset, the bright blue sky now replaced with a backdrop of glistening stars and an unusually large bright white moon.

She quickly scowled at her home for not being further away, but quickly replaced the scowl with a bright smile and held out her hand to Isaac. "Well, Isaac, thank you for the lovely walk. I had a lot of fun."
Isaac grinned and enveloped her hand with his and gently shook it, making her mentally note how surprisingly warm his hands remained despite the cold. "Me too, Alice."

Even once he stopped shaking, he didn't remove his hand.

His eyes stayed focused on their knitted hands, and she watched as he quickly licked his lips, as if trying to desperately organize his thoughts. She knew they were about ten seconds away from this prolonged hand holding to become awkward, but she didn't want to be the first to pull away.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket.

"Fuck," she muttered and tried to reach her phone with her free hand while still holding Isaac's with the other, but unfortunately, that made everything more awkward and she begrudgingly pulled away. She opened the phone screen on her phone to read Mark's text.

"Hope you're having a relaxing Friday night, babe. <3 xoxox. I care about you soooo much and just want you to be happy. I hope you can forgive me soon. <3"

She cringed and shoved the phone back into her pocket without a word. A flaming pit of annoyance burned through her stomach and she felt the urge to call Mark up and tell him to leave her alone forever.

But she didn't want to ruin the moment standing in front of her.

She glanced at her house and a devilish smirk crawled up her lips.

"Hey, I've got a bunch of beer in my fridge," she said and Isaac's eyes lightened up, and it appeared he let out a small breath she didn't realize he was holding. "Wanna help me finish it?"

"Thought you'd never ask."

Chapter End Notes

YAYAYA Next chapter will be up tomorrow!!! Shit is gonna get wiiiild!!
Thank you so much for all the comments guys!! <3 I've been receiving more than ever and am just absolutely thrilled!!
You're all amazing! <3
Alice's heart thumped in her chest as she raced around her house, discarding any loose pieces of trash that were scattered throughout her house. It wasn't the first time she and Isaac were alone in her house, but for some reason, she felt as if she was stepping into virgin territory.

"Um, make yourself at home," she squeaked, cringing at her attempt to be a good hostess.

"I always do," he said, taking a seat at her round kitchen table, absentmindedly sifting through an old newspaper she left out.

When Alice opened her refrigerator to grab the beer, her phone vibrated again and she cringed. "Still hoping you're having a relaxing night babe but I would love it if we could talk sometime tonight. I would love to take you to the Christmas party tomorrow xoxoxo."

She swallowed the urge to throw up. It was unclear whether her sudden nausea came from the thought of enduring an entire night with Mark at a formal event that Isaac was also attending, or if it was because the guilt was slowly eating away at her stomach as she knew she was willingly entering a very uncharacteristic and adulterous zone with Isaac. She ignored the phone, grabbed two beers, handed one to Isaac, and took a seat across from him at the table.

She smiled pleasantly at Isaac despite the fact that beads of sweat were quickly growing on the back of her neck, and her knee would not stop jittering, bobbing up and down so much that the beer bottles rattled from her hitting the bottom of the table.

"Cheers," Isaac said, seemingly unaware of Alice's sudden shift in neuroticism, and clinked his bottle against hers.

"Cheers," she replied. "So, you're bringing Fiona to the Christmas party, right?"

"Yeah, she's pretty excited," Isaac said. "Nothing she loves more than dressing up for an event."

"Well, I suppose that'll happen when you're a model."

"Yeah, that's true," he said. "You should see how long it takes that woman to get ready in the morning. At least two hours, and in my opinion, she looks basically the same as she did before getting ready!"

"Well, that means she's doing makeup right," Alice said. "The goal is to look effortlessly natural as if you wake up looking that way."

"Then what's the point of wearing it at all?" Isaac asked, completely dumbfounded. "Why not just...wake up and continue and continue your day looking actually natural?"

"You say that now, Isaac," she said, "but trust me, you would definitely notice and be very disappointed if every girl in the world stopped wearing makeup."

"Yeah, you're probably right," he said and chuckled. "How long does it take you to get ready in the morning?"
"Ummm," she pondered, tapping her lips with her finger. "Anywhere between five minutes and sixty minutes, depending on how pretty I want to feel that day."

"If it makes you feel better," he said and slid his elbows on the table so he was a little closer to her, "I think you look great regardless of how much time you spend."

She felt her cheeks turn crimson as she admired Isaac's sincere eyes, the way he seemed to be unable contain his smile every time he looked at her, the fact that even though they sat on opposite sides of the table he seemed to be inching closer and closer.

*He wants you so bad, Alice.*

Her heart began beating even faster as she realized the reality that she was stepping into.

"I need to smoke," she blurted out without thinking and jumped from the table to grab the spare cigarettes she hid behind her tin of coffee.

She also made sure to grab a breath mint.

"I can't believe you're still doing that," Isaac said, tutting his tongue. "Very disappointed."

"Yeah, okay, Mark," she said, rolling her eyes and Isaac's face fell.

"Please, never, ever compare me to that guy," he said and Alice giggled as she pulled on her coat and walked to the balcony. Much to her surprise, Isaac followed.

"You can wait inside, you know?" she said, brushing the snow off her patio-sofa and took a seat.

"Nah, I'll keep you company," he said, handing her another beer, and took a seat surprisingly close to her, despite his distaste for the smell of cigarette smoke.

Thank god it was dark outside so he wouldn't be able to see her blush when their knees brushed against each other...and when he didn't move his away.

Isaac gazed at the stars and a quaint peacefulness filled his face. "It's really beautiful out here."

"Yeah, it is," she said, as she absentmindedly twirled her hair with her finger. "In the summers I practically live out here...I could look at the stars for hours."

"Me too," he said, not moving his eyes from the galaxy. A peaceful silence overtook them both as Alice enjoyed her cigarette, feeling thankful that it seemed to calm her anxiety. Just as she was about to open her mouth to start a new subject, Isaac said, "Do you ever just look at the stars and think about how insignificant we all are?"

She snapped her neck towards him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, all of this," he said, motioning his hands wider at the stars. "All of us. We all have our own lives, our own dreams, our own problems, but in the grand scheme of things, in the entire universe, we are just tiny insignificant specks that live and then die. Nothing matters."

"Wow, Isaac," Alice said with wide eyes. "That is very apathetic of you."

"I think it's liberating."

"You find it's liberating to feel insignificant?"
"Kind of, yeah!" he said with a light laugh. "I know I probably sound like a nut job – "

"Little bit, yeah."

"But I mean it. I obviously have some issues with anxiety and substances and...life," he said. "But it kind of helps me let go of everything. When I start getting in my own head I try to remind myself that I'm simply one in 7 billion specks on this earth, trying to figure out how to live our lives to the fullest, but none of us know what the hell we are doing. We all just kind of wing it, and sometimes things work out, and sometimes they don't."

Alice took the final drag off her smoke and tossed it in the snow, nodding in understanding at Isaac.

"Like, even though I have this prestigious career here and have a big name," he started, "if I really wanted to, like if I really fucked everything up somehow, I could easily just quit and move across the world where no one knows who I am. Sure, it would screw up the company for a few months, I wouldn't be able to get a job in this field again, but I would eventually just get replaced, and life would go on. Soon enough everyone here would forget about my existence and carry on with their own lives, because at the end of the day, I'm just one in 7 billion small insignificant specks," he said and smiled fondly at the clear sky, but Alice couldn't take her eyes off him as he said, "It was a liberating and humbling realization."

Alice couldn't help but gawk at him.

"Wow, Isaac, I never expected you to be such a philosopher," she said slyly, leaning back on the sofa so that their shoulders were touching.

"See?" Isaac said, turning his face to Alice's. "These are the type of conversations I can't have with Fiona."

_Oh my god._

And just then, Alice became astutely aware of how close they were.

The moonlight illuminated his perfectly symmetrical face, his white teeth shining in the darkness as he stared into her eyes. If she moved her face two inches towards him, their noses would be touching. Her eyes fell to his lips.

This is it. This is the moment.

She waited for a second to see if he would turn his head or start talking again, anything that would signal he wasn't feeling this moment too, but he didn't. The magnetic field between them was pulling her closer.

_He's practically asking for it, Alice! It's now or never!_

Before she could talk herself out of it, she rested her hand on his upper thigh. The smile on his face slowly slid off as his eyes left hers for a quick second to glance at her fingers lightly brushing against his jeans.

_No turning back now!_

Her stomach fluttered as she let her eyes flutter close and the last thing she saw was Isaac's eyes widening slightly. She propped herself closer with the hand on Isaac's thigh and gingerly pressed her lips upon Isaac's velvety soft lips, his scruff tickling her chin as she felt the warmth of his mouth, expecting him to immediately grab the back of her neck and pull her towards him, ecstatically
embracing every second of her touch...

Instead, the second her lips brushed against his, she felt his entire body abruptly jolt away.

Her eyes shot open to find Isaac inching as far away from her as possible, his eyes wide with horror, and his face even paler than usual.

She felt her vision turn a shade of green as she tried to comprehend what was happening.

"Alice, what the hell?" he finally managed to sputter out as he hopped off the sofa, walking backward as far as possible until his back hit the railing of the balcony.

"I'm – I'm so sorry!" She stuttered, her eyes bulging out of their sockets as she, her mouth gaping at her own drastic error. "I'm so drunk!"

"What?" Isaac said, narrowing his eyes. "You've only had two drinks..."

"Yep, uh-huh, I'm so wasted right now," she lied, trying to steady her breath and choke back the vomit that was trying to make it's way up her throat.

"Listen, Alice, I'm so sorry if I mislead you in any way..." Isaac said running a hand through his hair, seemingly trying to contain his own panic. "But we can't – this can't – happen."

"No, I know!" she said, twelve octaves higher than any human on earth. "I was just...messing around?"

"Are you okay?" he asked, sounding genuinely concerned by her face growing even redder than her hair.

"I'm great, honestly!"

"Are you sure?"

"Never better."

"Should I go home?"

"Umm...maybe?" she said, wincing, knowing that it was obvious she desperately wanted him to leave. "Yes. I guess."

"Umm...okay, yeah," he said, shoving his hands on his pockets and rocking on the balls of his feet. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow night, then? For the Christmas Party?"

"Uh-huh! Can't wait!" she said with the fakest smile plastered on her face.

He stared at her sadly for a moment, her cheesy grin not faltering for a second, until he nodded and let himself out of her house.

Alice sat in that spot, slumped back in the cushions on that cold winter night, for what felt like hours. The blank stare that was imprinted on her face felt permanent, as she continuously replayed the horrifying scene in her head. Each time it replayed, the more embarrassed she grew, feeling like she would be permanently cringing until her death. She glanced at the stars and wished she could feel like nothing but an insignificant speck, because at that moment, she felt like the world's largest idiot.

Finally, her feet dragged her to her bathroom. The entire way she cursed Emily for convincing her Isaac liked her, she cursed Blaise for insinuating it, she cursed Isaac for leading her on, and most of
all, she cursed herself for ever thinking Isaac would go for someone as pathetic as her.

She stripped off her clothes and jumped into the shower, feeling the warm water melt her frozen skin, but unfortunately, it didn't wash away her shame, embarrassment, and unquestionable heartbreak.

She took a seat in the shower underneath the running water and tried to cry, but no tears would come. Instead, she would be left with the mortified feelings building up until they ultimately consumed her.

Chapter End Notes

GUYS OH MY GOD DON'T HATE ME.
THIS IS WHY I'M DOING THIS DAILY CHAPTER THING.
BECAUSE I COULDN'T JUST LEAVE YOU GUYS HANGING FOR WEEKS AFTER I DROPPED THIS ON YOU.

I PROMISE THERE IS A LOGICAL EXPLANATION.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sunlight beamed through the window as Alice's eyes fluttered open. A wide smile grew on her face as she heard the gentle dripping of melting snow, signalling it would be a warm, beautiful day. With a triumphant yawn, she stretched her arms high above her head as she pondered what she would do on that lovely Saturday. Maybe she would finally tick off some of those errands she had been putting off, or maybe she would go for a walk down by the pond –

"Listen, Alice, I'm so sorry if I mislead you in any way..."

"Nope," she said as Isaac's voice echoed through her ears. "Fuck this."

Without skipping a beat, she threw the blanket over her head, letting the bricks that filled her stomach weigh her down to the mattress. She clenched her eyes shut and begged for sleep to take over; there was not a single ounce in her body that was prepared to deal with the events from the night before. As the ghostly memories of Isaac backing away from her, wide-eyed, disgusted, and terrified, filled her mind, she drifted off into a restless nightmare.

Three hours later Alice begrudgingly opened her eyes, cursing the sunlight for being so damn warm that it melted the snow, causing that pestering dripping that woke her from her sleep. With the blanket still covering her head, she massaged her eyes and forehead, trying to remember what she had to do that day. There was something important, and it wasn't just chores...

"I guess I'll see you tomorrow night, then? For the Christmas party?"

Alice snapped up from the pillow with her eyes bulging from their sockets, the urge to throw up growing so quickly she had to remind herself she didn't get drunk the night before.

"No. God, no, please, no," she pleaded, now gripping her skull with her fingernails. "I can't do this."

Somehow, she had completely forgotten about the Christmas party. As a stream of curse words flew from her mouth, she hopped from her bed and began pacing her room, frantically biting her fingernails.

There was no way she was going to that party. Not a chance. If she had it her way, she would never see Isaac again. At least not for a very, very long time. Ideally, after Isaac was well into his senior years and his memory had begun degenerating.

"Oh, god dammit," she hissed. "What about Emily?"

Apparently, Alice's memory was already quickly degenerating, because she had completely forgotten she invited Emily along so she could properly seduce Blaise into a monogamous relationship. She couldn't leave her best friend hanging like this...not after she reached such a momentous milestone in her life. What kind of friend would she be?

Although, these were special circumstances.

Alice stopped her pacing and dove to her bed, digging through her blankets in search of her cellphone. All she had to do was explain to Emily what happened...they could make a new plan to seduce Blaise in the near future.
She found her cellphone and swiped to Emily's contacts, smashing every key with determination.

"EMILY I SCREWED UP SO BADLY."

Alice re-read the text message as her thumb hovered over the 'send' button. The thought of explaining that Isaac shut her down so embarrassingly filled her body with dread. The second she said the words, it would become a reality that she couldn't pretend didn't exist. She would have to relive all the details—the feeling of Isaac's soft lips on hers for that split second before he ripped them away...

She erased the message and typed out a new one.

"Hey, girl! I've come down with an awful flu and won't be able to make it to the Christmas party tonight! Have fun without me. <3"

She pressed 'send' before re-reading the message and resumed pacing as she anticipated Emily's response, praying her friend would be understanding. Less than a minute later, her phone vibrated, causing Alice's face to fall as she could practically hear Emily screaming at her through the text message.

"WHAT? NO YOU BITCH YOU ARE COMING TO THIS PARTY!!!!"

One second later another message followed.

"I NEED YOU THERE SO I CAN TELL BLAISE HOW I FEEL!!!!"

Followed by another.

"I WILL KILL YOU IF YOU BAIL."

One more.

"I NEED YOU ALICE."

Apparently ditching the party was out of the question.

Alice reluctantly typed out her response, saying she would indeed be attending the party. It was a good idea in theory, but of course, Alice wouldn't be getting out of this awkward situation so easily.

She glanced at the clock and groaned, realizing she only had four hours to get ready. With the three hours required to drown herself in self-pity, she had better get a move on. Her feet dragged her to the shower and she slipped out of her clothes, stepping into the warm water.

She tried to repeat positive mantras.

*It won't be so bad, Alice. Just pretend nothing happened.*

*Isaac is a mature guy. He won't make it weird.*

*You're such a fucking idiot. Why did you kiss him?*

Thankfully the sound of her ear-shattering scream was drowned out by the water so her neighbors wouldn't think she was getting murdered.

She reached for her shampoo and conditioner bottles and held them in front of her face, parallel to each other.
She waved the shampoo bottle as if it were pacing back and forth, and in a low, masculine voice she mockingly said, "Oh, look at me. I'm Isaac. I'm a rich douchebag and I like to make my good friends think that I'm romantically interested just to humiliate them later and make them feel like worthless garbage. Hurr hurr."

She raised the conditioner bottle, and in a high-pitched, squeaky, voice she said, "Oh, hi, Isaac! I'm Fiona! I'm the most beautiful person you'll ever meet. I'm not very smart, but who needs brains when you're beautiful, right? Tehe, want to make-out?"

Half-way through making the two bottles pretend to kiss each other, complete with exaggerated 'Mwah' sounds, Alice paused and hesitantly set the bottles down on the ledge. Slowly, she took two steps away from the bottles and looked at her empty hands.

"Okay, Alice," she said to herself. "You might be an idiot, but you're not a maniac. Don't act crazy."

After washing herself without any more manic outbreaks, she hopped out of the shower and wrapped a fluffy white towel around her body. She wiped the steam off her mirror and stared at the reflection of her naked face. Without any makeup, her freckles stood out brightly against her pale complexion and her large brown doe-eyes looked sad...but pretty. She looked pretty. Without any makeup.

And that was when she got an idea.

She wouldn't show up to the party wearing the same plain outfit she wore the same time she met Fiona. No. If she was going to force herself to attend this travesty, she was going to going to pull out all the stops. She was going make herself look like a goddess; never again would she feel average compared to Fiona, and on top of it, she was going to show Isaac exactly what he was missing.

Filled with a new sense of determinism, she marched to her closet and pulled out a hanging garment bag hidden in the back of her closet. She moved the bag to her bed, carefully unzipping it to reveal the shimmering emerald green silk. Confidence filled Alice as she gingerly stroked the delicate fabric and she sighed in relief. She bought the dress with Emily months ago, shortly after her first paycheque with Isaac, for the sole reason that she looked hot in it and that she had the money to afford it. She never thought she would actually have a reason to wear it, until then.

Hours later she stood in front of her mirror and smiled vibrantly. The emerald silk clung to her hips, fitting her like a glove, and the plunging halter neckline complimented her cleavage impeccably. After watching several YouTube tutorials, her long crimson hair fell down her back in almost-perfect curls; certainly an improvement from any hair-style her friends had seen her sport before.

She clasped her hands together and beamed at her reflection.

"I look so fucking good right now."

Taking a quick glance at the clock and noting that she only had twenty minutes before the party started, she grabbed a pair of heels and her purse and headed towards the door. Right as she was about to call a taxi to pick her up, there was a knock at the door.

 Weird. I thought I was meeting Emily at the party.

She opened the door and stomach immediately sunk.

"Oh..." she said. "Hi, Mark."

Alice. You completely forgot you have a boyfriend. Congratulations on your one-way ticket to hell.
Mark stood gawking at Alice, his eyes wide as they trailed up and down her body. 

"W-wow, Alice," he stammered, obviously trying to direct his eyes anywhere other than her prominent cleavage. "You look...I've never seen you...you look incredible."

Her eyes narrowed at Mark's outfit. "And you're...wearing a tuxedo?"

"Yeah," he said, nervously running a hand through his dark brown hair that looked as though it had been trimmed that day. "Can I come in?"

"Umm..." she said. "Sure, I guess?"

She opened the door wider to allow Mark to enter and slowly followed him to the couch. She was happy that she was behind him so she could temporarily hide the look of horror that had taken over her face.

*You're in a relationship and you tried to cheat on him last night. Now he's here in a tuxedo. What the hell is wrong with you, Alice?*

Mark took a seat on the couch, finally facing her, and she promptly replaced the look of horror with her best attempt at casual aloofness.

"What's up, Mark?" she said and leaned against the wall with her arms folded, as if she had no idea what the following conversation would entail. Mark took a few seconds to twiddle his thumbs before speaking.

"I'm so unbelievably sorry, Alice. For everything," he said, barely looking at her. "I've been controlling and unsupportive of you, I know. I shouldn't have brought Simon and I shouldn't have told him anything. I've been trying to act like I'm not jealous, but I am. Or, I was..."

He stood from the couch and walked towards Alice, grabbing her small hands in his, and tried to stare into her eyes but she stared at the carpet instead.

"I'm not jealous anymore, Alice, I promise," he said and squeezed her hands. "I trust you completely. If you say that there's nothing going on with you and Isaac, I need to respect that."

Her stomach stung with guilt and she had to refrain from wincing from the physical pain.

*Well, nothing is going on, but that doesn't make you any worse of a person, Alice.*

Mark's fingers grazed the bottom of her chin, directing her eyes to finally meet his. "I understand if you don't want to forgive me yet. I've been an awful boyfriend. But please, let me take you to this party. Give me one more chance to prove that I'll be better. I can't lose you."

She felt her knees buckle under the gaze of his green eyes, and she wasn't sure if she was swooning or if the guilt was now eating away at her bones. The sincerity in his eyes was plain as day; she hadn't seen him look so genuine the entire course of their relationship.

Standing right in front of her was a man who genuinely wanted to be with her. He showed up at her house in a tuxedo, offering his forgiveness, and simply asking for her to give him one last chance. He wasn't giving her mixed signals only to shut her down, effectively shattering her ego in the process. Stability stood in front of her and Isaac was nowhere to be seen.

*Isaac doesn't like you, Alice. He never will.*
Realistically, she wouldn't want to go to the party without a date, anyway.

She ran a hand through his freshly cut hair and gently pressed her lips to his, and to her delight, his didn't rip away from the touch of hers. They were familiar, comforting, and stable.

She pulled away and looked at Mark through her eyelashes and nodded.

"Come on," she said, intertwining her fingers through his, "we don't want to be late."

Chapter End Notes

I was a little late posting this!! But here it is!! Don't worry! Answers will be revealed this week!! I LOVE YOU ALL SO MUCH! <3 Sorry I haven't been able to reply to each comment! Finals are killing me! But sooooooo much appreciation, I can't even begin to express it!
Twenty Five

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alice had never been to such an extravagant party in her life.

Both she and Mark paused at the entrance of the festive ballroom, marveling at the scene that surrounded them. At least two hundred people mingled in the giant area, each person dressed in the classiest formal attire, making Alice feel lucky that she had the epiphany to dress to impress rather than her original plan of wearing a random skirt and nice top.

A man behind Alice accidentally bumped her shoulder as he walked passed, reminding Alice that she and Mark should start moving. They made their ways through the crowd, trying to spot Emily in the sea of tuxedos and ball gowns. As they sifted through the chatting people, they found themselves in front of the dance floor.

Mark slipped his hand around Alice's waist as he watched the big band orchestrate the music for the singer who resembled a young Frank Sinatra, singing the lyrics to 'Let it Snow'. She smiled up at Mark, suddenly feeling very grateful that he accompanied her to the party. Maybe getting rejected from Isaac was a sign from the universe that Mark was who she should be with. Sure, he was flawed, but so was she...

Then something caught her eye that made her heart sink into her stomach, despite the faintest laugh leave her mouth.

Sitting on the shiny silver platters carried by the caterers were the tiniest, little balls of spaghetti, with an even smaller miniature meatball placed on top. Paired with the expensive china and chopped parsley for garnish, the informal food looked like a perfect piece of juxtaposition in an array of glamour.

It was so Isaac.

She reflexively shut her eyes and lowered her head as she tried to recompose herself, trying to ignore the nagging thoughts running through her head. Who else knew that Isaac loved spaghetti so much? Did anyone else realize that Isaac probably wasn't concerned about the decorative aspects of the party so long as he got to make his special request to the food menu? More importantly, if Isaac’s love for spaghetti was common knowledge, how many people cared? How many people in this room thought it was the most unusual and endearing quirk they had ever seen in an individual?

A lump formed in her throat as her eyes stayed glued to the floor, but she swallowed it down. She felt Mark nudge her side and she peeled her eyes from the ground to meet his, a glimmer of concern hiding in his gaze.

"You alright?" he asked.

No.

"Yeah," she said and grabbed his hand. "Come on. Let's find Emily."

She led him by the hand, taking deep breaths through her nose as she navigated through the crowd, trying to desperately think of a quirk of Mark's that she found endearing.
Stop comparing Mark to Isaac, Alice, it doesn't matter anyway.

It was when they reached the bar, a likely place to find Emily, that she saw him.

About ten feet away stood Isaac and Fiona; Isaac smiling gracefully as he listened to a short, plump balding man yapping enthusiastically. His right hand remained loosely by his side, waving in the air at all the proper conversational cues, but his left hand remained in his pocket and Alice wondered if he was gripping his stress ball.

Does Fiona know about that stupid ball?

She clenched her teeth together.

Probably. She's his girlfriend. Not you.

Just as Alice was about to pull Mark in the other direction, Isaac's eyes shifted from the plump man to Alice, and the air got trapped in her throat as she watched the happy smile fade from his face. It looked as though the entire conversation drowned from Isaac as his eyes fixated on Alice, quickly flickering down her emerald dress, and back to her face.

The same shiver she had felt so many times before raced down her spine, and she couldn't pull her gaze away from his. Even though he was at least ten feet away, and only a few seconds had passed, it felt as though they were mentally communicating. Except that Isaac was speaking a different language that she couldn't understand, instead, she was left trying to decipher his riddle.

It wasn't anything new.

Isaac's eyes darted to Mark and back to Alice, and she could swear she saw him give the subtlest shake of his head. She returned it with the coldest gaze and the tiniest nod.

Screw you, Isaac.

Isaac finally pulled his eyes away from Alice to resume his conversation with the man, and Alice got a rush of oxygen back into her lungs as she finally regained her breath. She didn't know what the hell that longing, extended glance meant, but she did know three things. The first was that Isaac was with his beautiful girlfriend who he was clearly very fond of. The second was that he brutally rejected her not even twenty-four hours ago. The last, and most important, was that she had to act like a normal human being and not like someone who was constantly engaged in a mental dilemma.

Forcing a smile on her face, she turned to Mark and smiled, relieved that he didn't appear to notice anything strange.

He did, however, motion his neck towards Isaac and Fiona.

"Come on," he said. "Should we get this over with?"

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"Talk to Isaac," he said. "Let's just...try to get the awkward hello over with. I need to apologize, anyways."

"N-no," Alice said, her eyes growing wider. "We don't have to do that. Not tonight."

"Come on, Alice," he said, rubbing his thumb along her hand. "I need to be okay with you two hanging out and the first step is apologizing."
Oh, god.

So many feelings swirled through Alice's body; hurt, guilt, embarrassment, confusion, anger...and all she wanted was to crawl back into bed and ignore them all. She was not in the right mental state for this.

The short man left Isaac and Fiona and Mark pulled her towards the happy couple. As they walked closer, Alice could see Isaac quickly raise his eyes to the ceiling and mutter something, presumably a curse word, under his breath. The look of displeasure was replaced with a cordial smile by the time they reached them.

Mark held out his hand first.

"Hi, Isaac," he said politely. "I wanted to apologize, to both of you, for how the other night went."

Isaac squinted his eyes at Mark's hand but reluctantly shook it and cleared his throat before saying, "It's fine. Erm...thanks."

A stiff silence enveloped the four of them until Fiona piped up in her angelic voice, "Well, I personally love the theatre," she giggled. "I've got to say that was the best live show I've seen in ages."

Each of them laughed awkwardly, even though none of them seemed to know how to react in such a strange situation. After a quick scan of the room, hoping to see Emily or Blaise so she would have an excuse to escape, she turned back to Fiona and admired the elegant black dress she wore. It was stunning; a sweetheart neckline and a slit riding up her thigh, giving the perfect amount of allure. Alice couldn't help but gawk. "Fiona, your dress is beautiful."

"Oh, thanks. It's a Valentino classic," she said, flipping her hair over her shoulder. "Your dress is cute as well. And who are you wearing?"

"Oh," she said, biting her tongue as she tried to think of a lie. Alice had no idea what brand her dress was. "Umm...it's Dior."

Fiona narrowed her eyes at the dress. "That doesn't look like Dior."

"It's Dior," Alice said firmly. Fiona raised a brow and smirked at Alice before sliding her hand through Isaac's arm.

"That's funny, because I could have sworn I saw that same dress at Sears a couple months ago," Fiona cooed.

It wasn't that comment that made something snap inside Alice. It wasn't even Fiona's hand rubbing the nape of Isaac's neck, as if she were dangling Isaac in front of her.

No, it was the fact that Isaac stood with his lips zipped shut, staring at his shoes as he let his girlfriend do something that was clearly hurting her. She knew it was irrational to expect Isaac to react any differently. Fiona was his girlfriend, who was evidently showing her own insecurities regarding Isaac defending Alice to Simon, it still filled her with a bubbling rage.

"You know what, Fiona?" Alice quickly snatched a flute of champagne from a passing caterer and took a huge gulp. "You...you are so beautiful."

"Oh," Fiona's eyes lit up with a smile as she pulled her fingers to her chest. "Thank you."
"And you, too, Isaac," Alice with a laugh and turned to Isaac, shoving his shoulder a few notches harder than playful. His jaw tensed and his eyes narrowed, shifting them quickly towards Mark and zeroed back in on Alice. She watched him shove his left hand in his pocket and she smirked before saying, "You are so beautiful, Isaac. And you and Fiona make the most beautiful couple in the room."

"Aww," Fiona said, patting Alice's shoulder and beaming brightly. "That's so sweet of you."

A certain pride flowed through her body, knowing that she managed to keep her voice civil and peaceful enough that Fiona believed it was a genuine compliment, although, in the corner of her eyes she could see a small, confused scowl grow on Mark's face. Unfortunately, she couldn't stop even if she wanted to, and her eyes stayed glued to Isaac. The entire conversation, since Isaac's small interaction with Mark, his lips stayed sewn shut and Alice briefly wondered whether his tongue was bleeding from biting it so hard.

Finally, she unlocked her eyes from his and beamed at Mark before lifting her champagne flute.

"Cheers," she said. "To the most amazing couple in the city."

She clinked her glass against their flutes and shot back the entire contents in two gulps. When she wiped her mouth of any remaining residue, she found Mark staring down at her with concern, and she suddenly became acutely aware of awkward she just was.

"You okay?" Mark asked.

"Yep," she said and quickly grabbed his hand, taking one last glance at the uncomfortable Isaac. "Come on. We gotta find Emily."

Mark gave a small nod to Fiona and Isaac as a farewell, and he and Alice turned on their heels in search of finding Emily, until –

"Friends!" Emily's voice was heard behind a group of entrepreneurs, and soon her platinum blonde hair came bobbing through the crowd. Practically skipping towards them in a floor-length lavender dress, Emily clapped her hands together when she reached the group. "I've been looking all over for you!"

"Fuck," Alice quietly muttered under her breath before grinning at Emily, who immediately waltzed to Isaac.

"Great party, Isaac," Emily said, tapping his wrist with her fingertips. "I've never seen so many rich people in one room."

"Yeah," Isaac said as he rubbed the back of his neck, his voice sounding hoarse from keeping his mouth shut for so long. "Thanks...thanks for coming."

Emily gave a quick glare at Fiona before smiling at Alice. "Oh my god, you look amazing. I'm so happy you're feeling better. I can't believe you weren't going to come!"

Alice felt her cheeks heat up as Isaac's gaze instantly fell on her.

"You weren't going to come today?" he asked and Alice lowered her head as she tried to come up with an excuse.

"Well, I – you know – I jus – "
With perfect timing, Emily linked her arm through Alice's and whispered in her ear, "Have you seen Blaise at all?"

"No, I haven't," Alice said, feeling happy the conversation had been interrupted. "But we should go look for him. Like, right now."

Emily took a deep breath as she nodded. "Yes, plea – "

"Hey guys," Blaise's distinct voice breezed through the group as he walked towards him, his hands lazily in the pockets of his suit jacket.

"What the hell?" Alice quietly hissed to herself as she watched Emily's face light up with nervous excitement when Blaise strolled between Mark and Isaac.

With a cocked eyebrow, Blaise turned to Mark, then to Isaac, then back to Mark. "So...are we all...getting on, then?"

"Apparently," Isaac said with a shrug and Mark gave a small nod in agreement.

"Brilliant," Blaise said and rubbed his hands together before stepping in the middle of the circle to focus on the girls. "Well, don't you ladies look lovely this evening."

"You too," Emily blurted out and quickly bit her lips shut.

"Thanks, Blaise," Alice said, unable to keep herself from smiling at Blaise's blissful ignorance to the bizarre situation he walked into. Emily twirled her blonde hair around her finger and took a coy step towards him.

"Hey, Blaise, I was wondering if you would want to get a – "

"Hold that thought, Emily," Blaise said before pivoting to face Isaac and leaned towards his ear, but barely lowered his voice. "Have you seen Camelia tonight?"

"As in my secretary?"

"Yeah. She is on fire tonight," Blaise said, clapping Isaac on the back. "I think I'm going to go chat her up."

"You do that," Isaac said.

"Sorry, what were you saying, Emily?" Blaise asked and Emily's shoulders were slumped to the ground as she swallowed back her words.

"N-nothing," she said, shaking her head. "Good luck."

Blaise gave a half wave and brushed by Emily, leaving her dumbstruck as she watched him saunter over to the busty secretary in a golden dress.

Alice rubbed Emily's forearm and gave her a weak smile. "Sorry, Em. I'm sure he just doesn't realize...maybe if you tried getting him alone?"

"Pfft, nope." She scoffed. "There is no way I'm throwing myself at Blaise all night just to get turned down."

Despite Alice knowing Emily's efforts likely wouldn't go in vain, she would be a hypocrite if she tried to convince someone to willingly set themselves up for rejection considering she vowed she
would never get in that situation again. Instead, she nodded and gave a quiet, "Alright. That's cool."

Emily snatched a flute of champagne from a passing caterer before quickly adjusting her bra. "Fuck it. I'm gonna go woo some rich banker. Take care, kiddos."

Alice let out a giant sigh of relief as she and Mark could finally escape Isaac and Fiona. Isaac must have had the same mindset because the moment Emily disappeared on the dance floor he said, "Alright, well, Fiona and I had better go make some rounds. Enjoy the party."

Alice watched as Isaac practically dragged Fiona away from them, her giving a small wave before letting Isaac lead her to a different group of people.

Finally, Alice was alone with Mark, and she could breathe again. She looped her fingers through his and frowned when she noticed Mark looking confused. Right as Mark opened his mouth, presumably to ask why that entire interaction was so tense, Alice cut him off.

"Want to dance?" she asked with a wide, innocent smile which he returned, hiding all traces of confusion.

"Absolutely."

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys!! Totally forgot to update yesterday! It was my boyfriend's birthday and i accidentally got waaaaaayyyyyy too drunk hahahahah. Posting two right now! :D :D
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Hours had passed, and Alice was swaying with her chin on Mark’s shoulder to the band’s rendition of ‘O Holy Night’. She eyed up the caterer carrying a tray of champagne, pondering if she should sneak away to quickly gulp down a glass, but decided against it as her efforts would have been wasted.

That night was one of those magical nights where no matter how much champagne you tossed back, it was impossible to get drunk.

She turned her nose towards Mark’s neck and inhaled deeply, taking in his woodsy cologne and let her eyes flutter shut. The second she saw only blackness, she felt her knee buckle and she snapped her eyes open.

Realistically, she was probably drunk. It was more that no amount of alcohol could dull the cocktail of confusing emotions that had invaded every neuron in her brain. She glanced at the clock hanging on the wall and sighed in relief when she saw it was nearly eleven. That was a respectable time to leave. All she wanted was to crawl into bed and sleep for a month. Only twenty-four hours had passed since she and Isaac were stargazing on her balcony. Along with Simon losing it on Isaac the weekend before, Alice felt as though she had hit a new level of emotional exhaustion.

She felt Mark’s phone vibrate against her thigh in her pocket and she moved away so Mark could grab it. He grimaced when he glanced at the caller and said, "Ugh. It's my boss. Sorry, I've got to take this. I'll be right back?"

Alice nodded and Mark left, leaving Alice to learn that standing alone in the middle of the dancefloor was awkward so she trudged to the bar. Even though she knew she shouldn't, she ordered a vodka soda from the bartender, and leaned against the wood, scanning the dancefloor.

Emily was stumbling with a man who was handsome, but also at least ten years older, and Alice made a mental note to collect Emily before she and Mark left. Her eyes moved to the other side of the room and naturally, they rested on Isaac and Fiona. They didn't have the same staggering choreography that Emily had perfected, but they did have their own hint of glamour.

Alice felt her chest clench as she watched Isaac dip Fiona so low, the ends of her golden-brown hair tickled the mahogany floor. When Isaac lowered his lips to gently brush them against Fiona’s neck, Alice folded her arms and rolled her eyes.

Gross.

"Sup, Alice?"

Alice turned her neck and smiled at her friendly visitor.

"Hey, Blaise."

After quickly ordering a scotch from the bartender, Blaise leaned beside Alice. "How's your night going?"

"Oh, it's great," Alice lied. "But I'm pretty tired. I think Mark and I are going to leave soon."
"Ah, that's too bad," Blaise said before motioning his neck towards Emily, whose exaggerated laugh was bouncing off the walls, as she crutched over with her hand on the shoulder of the man who must have said something hilarious. "You should probably take drunky home with you, huh?"

"Oh, definitely," Alice laughed. "Trust me, I will not be leaving here without her."

"Good," Blaise said and tutted his tongue as his eyes stayed fixed on Emily, who was bobbing her head back and forth, a little too sensually for the classic Christmas carol. "What does she see in those blokes?"

Alice groaned and reached for her temples, massaging them as she said, "Oh my god, Blaise. You're being an idiot."

"What?" Blaise snapped his eyes from Emily to Alice. "How am I being an idiot?"

She threw head back and let out another groan. "I shouldn't tell you this..."

"Shouldn't tell me what?"

"Because Emily would be soo mad if she knew I did..."

"Tell me what? Tell me what?" Blaise was practically bouncing up and down.

"Okay..." Alice took one last look at Emily before smiling at Blaise. "She likes you. A lot. That's...that's kind of why she's so drunk right now."

Blaise's eyes shot wide open as he gawked at Alice. "No fucking way."

"Yep," Alice said. "She wants you bad, man."

"You're kidding me."

"Nope."

"Shit. Shit," Blaise cursed and as he threw his hand to his forehead. "I think I was a proper ass to her earlier."

"Little bit, yep."

Alice's eyes drifted away from Blaise and landed on Isaac's hands gripping Fiona's waist tightly and she winced.

"I've...I've got to go talk to Emily, I gotta tell her that I – Hey." Blaise slowly removed his hands from his head as he connected the dots between Alice's eyes and Isaac's hands. "Hey, are you alright?"

"Hmm?" Alice looked up at Blaise and nodded her head. "Yeah. I'm great."

"No you're not," Blaise said. "You've got that vacant, longing look you always get when you're sad about something."

"I don't look like that right now," Alice huffed. "I'm fine."

"You know, saying that you're fine, doesn't actually make anything fine."

"I know."
"So, what's up?"

Alice pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed loudly. There was no way Blaise was going to let her get away with not telling him the truth.

"Well...last night I kissed Isaac..."

Blaise quickly gasped and fist-pumped the air. "What!?"

"But he...he kind of..." Alice bit her lip and turned her face away from Blaise. "He kind of turned me down and ran away from me. Or rather, revolted away from me."

Blaise lowered his hands and slowly turned his craned his neck to Isaac, his eyes narrowing venomously. "...What?"

"Yep," Alice sighed and threw her back against the bar, folding her arms. "And that's that."

Before she had a chance to register what was happening, Blaise had grabbed her wrist and was dragging her across the room. "Blaise, what the hell?"

"We're smoking."

"But...but I don't want to," she said, trying to loosen her arm from Blaise's grip. "Mark's here and I don't wanna deal with that..."

"Who fuckin' cares about Mark?"

"I do!"

"Well, then, fuck," Blaise said as he pushed Alice through the doors of the balcony. "I need a smoke."

Alice rolled her eyes but welcomed the refreshing cool breeze on her skin as she admired the view. She walked towards the marble ledge of the elegant balcony and peered over, discovering that the balcony overlooked the same park she and Isaac explored the previous day. With the backdrop of the city's skyline, the view was breathtaking, but she couldn't help but wish she could go back in time and tell Isaac she didn't want to go for a walk with him that day.

"That fucking git." Blaise's voice snapped Alice from her thoughts and she turned her back to the pond, watching Blaise angrily flick his lighter at the cigarette crammed in his mouth. "What the fuck is his problem?"

"Well, it's not like there's a law saying you have to kiss everyone who kisses you," she said. "In fact, it's quite the opposite."

"No, you don't get it," Blaise said now pacing back and forth. "He fucking likes you."

"Okay, seriously, has he ever explicitly said the words, 'I like Alice' to you?" Alice said. "Because I've had a lot people tell me that Isaac likes me, but honestly, after last night, it's not really seeming that way."

"Yes! Okay, no, he hasn't outright said it," Blaise said now pacing back and forth. "But he does. I've known the bloke for over ten years, I know how he is when he likes someone because it sure doesn't happen often, and I know for a damn fact that he likes you."

"Well, I don't know what to say." Alice shrugged. "I'm definitely not putting myself out there again,
"That god damn fuckin' – urgh!" Blaise shouted before taking a large drag off the smoke. "Why the hell has he been leading you on all these months if he's just going to shut you down? I mean, I thought he was just being a pansy because you were dating Mark, but I figured if you eventually made the move, he would be all over you!"

"Well, apparently not."

"No, that's bullshit. He has no right to – urgh I thought he was getting better – fucking asshole!"

Just as Blaise kicked a block of snow into the ledge, the balcony's door creaked open. When Blaise turned around to see Isaac stepping out the door, his hands immediately balled into fists straight by his side.

With his hands deep in his pockets, Isaac took three large, slow steps as his gaze darted between Alice and Blaise. "Heeeyy, guys..."

"Hey, dickhead," Blaise blurted out and Alice had to shelter her face with her hair to hide her snickering when Isaac's shoulders slumped and he raised his eyebrows at Alice.

"Fuck," he whispered under his breath and pressed his palm to his forehead. "Blaise, can I talk to Alice alone – "

" – You can screw off, that's what you can do," Blaise said and Alice let out an audible snort, making Isaac scowl.

"Seriously?" Isaac asked.

Blaise rammed his finger into Isaac's chest. "You emotionally stunted moron, you fuc– "

"Kay, get away from me," Isaac said, dodging Blaise's fingers and trying to back away, but Blaise stalked him like a hawk. As Isaac sheltered the back of his head from Blaise's attempts to smack him, he shouted, "I might have 'emotional' issues, but you have anger issues!"

"I don't have anger issues!" Blaise bellowed and Alice officially lost it, then gripping her sides as she keeled over with laughter.

"Guys, seriously, calm down," Alice said in between fits of giggles as Blaise tried to get Isaac in a neck lock.

"Fine, fine," Blaise said and threw his palms in the air to surrender, but still remained glaring at Isaac. "I'm calm. I'm good."

"Thank you," Isaac said, scowling at his wrinkled suit. "I'd rather not be dragged away by security at my own party."

Blaise responded by lifting the middle finger.

Rolling his eyes, Isaac turned to Alice. "Okay. Alice, can I please talk to you?"

Alice nervously bit her lip as she looked away, trying to decide if it was worth it. On one hand, she was really interested to hear what sort of justifications Isaac managed to come up with. But on the other hand, she really didn't want to endure listening to Isaac list off all the reasons why he didn't like her. On the third hand, Mark would be looking for Alice any minute.
Two hands against one hand is usually a good indicator of what to do.

"No, I do –"

"BLAISE!"

Emily's voice screeched through the air as she stumbled through the door holding a champagne bottle over her head.

Isaac threw his face into his hands and groaned, "Oh my god, we are all way too young to be at a party like this."

"Blaise," Emily repeated and stomped towards Blaise, whose previous rage had been replaced with an anticipatory joy, with her finger waving in the air. "I gots somethin' to tell you."

When she reached him, her knee buckled and she grabbed his shoulder for balance, staring him right in the eye.

She quickly looked at the ground and covered her mouth, pausing for a second to swallow before looking back in Blaise's eyes and said, "You're...you're so weird."

The heavenly smile slid off Blaise's face and he pulled his neck back. "Umm...okay?"

"You're sooo weird, and, and," she swayed far to the left and would have tipped over had Blaise not propped her up. "And you're so bloody nice all the time."

"I disagree with that entirely," Isaac mumbled but Emily ignored him.

"And I..." Emily threw her head back and gave a small groan, rolling her eyes at herself as she said, "I like you. And I want to date you. And I want to have lots of sex wi –"

"Okay, okay, they don't need to hear that," Blaise hushed and put his hands on her shoulders, bending his knees to be at eye level. His face had cracked into such a massive smile it was amazing his face didn't shatter. "I like you, too, Emily."

It was unclear whether it was the effects of the alcohol or if Emily literally swooned, because when she clapped her hands to her chest, she tipped over into Blaise's arms. She stared into his dark brown eyes for a few seconds before wrapping her arms around Blaise's neck and planting her lips on his.

Alice squealed and clapped her hands together as Blaise tightened his grip around Emily's waist. Even Isaac couldn't contain his pleasant smile as he watched his best friend finally get the girl he had been chasing.

Emily slowly pulled her lips away from Blaise and placed the back of her hand on her forehead. "Oh my god, I think I'm going to be sick."

Blaise's face drooped. "Am I that bad?"

Without answering, Emily rushed to the side of the balcony just in time to throw up a few gallons of champagne.

"Are you serious?" Isaac threw his hand in the air. "I repeat: we are way too young to be here."

Blaise ran over to Emily and immediately held her long blonde hair and rubbed Emily's back as she cried, in-between sobs and streams of vomit. "I...Like...You...So...Much."
"Shh, shh, I like you too," he said, patting her back, and looked up at Alice. "I'm going to take her home. Are you gonna be alright?"

Alice nodded. "Yeah, of course."

"Alright," Blaise said, lifting Emily from the ledge once she appeared to be done puking. As he guided her towards the door, he paused in front of Isaac and flicked his shoulder. "Don't be a dickhead."

Alice watched Blaise and Emily disappear through the door and turned to Isaac, who was standing a few meters away with his hands in his pockets. He tilted his head and quickly licked his lips before taking a step towards her.

"Alice, please," he said with a tiny crack in his voice. "I really need to talk to you."

Chapter End Notes

ALRIGHT GUYS! Next chapter, aka TOMORROW, we are going to see what Isaac has to say!!!! STAY TUNED!
Let me know what you think! As always, thank you so much for the support and Kudos! I can't believe how many I've received, it's actually MIND BLOWING! Every time I scan the original works pages, I'm almost always the highest one and it seriously makes me want to cry of joy. Couldn't do this without you all! <3
Alright guys...here we go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Alice, please." Isaac croaked as he took a single step towards Alice, making the wide gap between them slightly smaller. "I really need to talk to you."

"No," Alice said and folded her arms, pivoting her feet to stare at the door rather than face Isaac's deep blue eyes piercing through her. "I'm cold."

A low rattling sigh came from Isaac followed by the shuffling of fabric.

"Here," he said, and her eyes rolled in her head as she squared her shoulders with Isaac's, to find him holding his suit jacket out at arm's length. Once again, she faced the door and turned her nose up in the air.

"I don't want to you wear your coat."

"Alright," Isaac said in a tone that sounded like he was struggling to remain patient as he slowly pulled the jacket back over his shoulders. "I guess that confirms that you're mad at me."

Without pausing for a second, Alice dropped her arms like they were deadweight and glared at Isaac through squinted eyes as if he told her the sky was purple.

"No, Isaac," she said in a monotone voice. "Why in God's name would I be mad at you?"

"Because I was a huge jackass last night?"

"Wow," Alice said. "You really know how to put two and two together."

Isaac stayed silent with his hands in his pockets, lowering his head as if trying to handpick the perfect arrangement of words that would suddenly void him of any wrongdoings. Impatience ran through Alice; she had watched Isaac with his mouth clamped shut enough that night, and as her foot began to reflexively tap the ground, she told herself Isaac had ten seconds before she walked away.

With one second to spare, he raised his head.

"You...you look really nice tonight," he said. "You always look good in green."

"Alright," she said and turned on her heel. "Have a good night, Isaac."

As she made her way to exit the massive balcony and find Mark, Isaac rushed behind her with a sense of urgency. "No, Alice – come on – "

"Sorry, Isaac," Alice said, reaching into her bra for her phone to call a taxi so she wouldn't have to waste an extra second at that party. "Your little compliments aren't going to make everything better this time."
"Alice, please," Isaac said in desperation as he trailed behind her. "Just give me a minute to explain -"

"No offence," Alice said, raising her voice as she looked over her shoulder, not slowing her pace. "But I'm not really in the mood to hear you explain why you don't like me."

"Alice -"

"I get it, Isaac. It's fine."

"Come o -"

"I'm going hom -"

"Alice, I like you so fucking much."

Alice froze in her steps so fast, it felt like her brain smashed against the sides of her skull, making her blink the stars away. She looked down at her hand, which was already extended to grasp the doorknob, and lowered it before slowly turning her body to face Isaac.

"What?"

Isaac's chest heaved with every deep breath he took, looking at her with the same indescribable expression she recognized from earlier at the party when he stood next to Fiona. However, in that moment, she had no trouble describing it.

Weariness.

Except this time, the weariness wasn't concealed by the need to remain stoic and professional in front of his many guests. Instead, it was this unadulterated weariness that was sad, tired, and pure.

"I like you so much," he repeated, slowly taking two steps closer. "And if I had it my way, I would go back to last night and kiss you. A million times over."

"I...I don't understand..."

"But I can't. We can't."

"Why not?"

His entire body slumped over and he looked at her as if he was desperately willing her to read his mind to say it for him. When she stayed silent, gesturing for him to continue talking, he opened his mouth and clamped it shut again before smacking his hand against his thigh.

"I'm your boss, Alice."

"Oh."

Reality washed over Alice, and she immediately lowered her eyes to the ground with her fingers against her lips, her pulse vibrating through body, as she absorbed the information.

_Oh my god, Alice. He's your fucking boss._

Through the corners of her eyes, she saw Isaac finally move from where his feet were planted and began walking a short invisible line back and forth.
"I'm your boss," he repeated with the frustration growing in his voice, except it wasn't directed towards Alice, it appeared to be directed at everything. "I mean, I've fired people for less than this. And...and...Alice, you're an amazing worker, don't get me wrong. You are an incredible asset to the company. But with your lack of qualifications entering the job, you are... very, very overpaid."

"...Oh."

"And if someone found out about us, it would turn into this huge investigation, and you would definitely lose your job, and I would probably lose my job, and... I don't know, you don't want to lose your job, do you?"

She snapped her head up and took a step back as if he just asked if she wanted to touch a burning metal rod. "No. Of course not."

"Exactly," he said. "Us hanging out all the time, our relationship as it is, it's already so inappropriate. We are right at the boundary of what is acceptable behavior and what isn't...we can't go further."

She nodded her head slowly, but her nose scrunched the more confused she became. "Wh-why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know," he said. "What was I supposed to say? 'Hey, Alice. I know you're with Mark, but just in case you were wondering, I'm your boss so we can't ever date'?"

"Well, you could have said something," Alice said with her voice rising. "Slip it into conversation somewhere! You're smart, you could have figured it out."

"I did!" he said. "I've told you about firing people for similar cases. And so many times Blaise would tell me to ask out some attractive new employee and I would say, 'No, Blaise. I'm her boss'. right in front of you."

Alice folded her arms and scoffed. "You have not."

"Yes, I have," he said, rolling his eyes. "At least a dozen times. And even so, you signed a bunch of paperwork when you first started working here, agreeing that you wouldn't participate in any romantic relationships with the staff. I know we're friends and all, but that stuff still applies."

"Oh, please," Alice said. "No one actually reads that stuff."

"Well, you're supposed to!"

"Fine then, why didn't you say something last night instead of looking at me like I was a monster?"

"Because I'm a fucking idiot," Isaac blurted out loudly and Alice's face softened. Right after the words left his mouth, he snapped his mouth shut and immediately looked over his shoulder to ensure no one heard him. A low growl sounded in his throat and he brought his palms to his eyes for a second before turning back to her.

"I don't know what the hell I'm doing! I've never been in a situation like this. Last night I went home and spent hours trying to decide whether I should go back to your house, or call you, or...something, but instead, I accidentally got wasted and passed out before I figured it out. See? Fucking. Idiot."

The cold marble of the balcony's ledge grazed Alice's back, but she barely felt it through the hot blood pumping throughout her body.

She wasn't crazy. She wasn't misreading Isaac's signals. At least she could find solace in the fact that
she wasn't arrogantly assuming he would ever be interested in her, but it didn't take away from the now visible anguish Isaac had been clearly been experiencing. A small ache in the depths of her chest formed when she watched Isaac run his hand through his hair, gripping the back of his head as he closed his eyes.

"I never expected this to happen," he said. "When I first hired you, sure, I thought you were cute. But I never in a million years thought I would fall for you."

She couldn't help but give a single soft chuckle. "Yeah, I know that feeling."

"But I did. I don't know how or when it happened, but it did." The last word trembled and he took a second to clear his throat before continuing. "I don't know, maybe because you hated me so much right off the bat, I never felt the need to try to impress you. No matter what I did, I figured it couldn't get any worse than what I've already done. So, for the first time in my life, I was able to actually...be myself."

The vibrating of Alice's phone whispered through the air, but Alice didn't peel her eyes away from Isaac for a second.

"And I know I've probably been a confusing asshole, I know I've been giving mixed signals," he said. "But I can't help it. Whenever I'm with you I lose control over any rationality. I always find all these stupid reasons to sit next to you or touch you. Or I'll tell you these private things about myself, things I wouldn't tell anyone, and as I'm saying it, I'm yelling at myself, 'Stop it, Isaac. You can't do this, she has a boyfriend, you can't even date her, you'll only hurt her, just fucking stop it.' But I can't stop it – like right now. Everything spills out the second I'm alone with you."

Throughout Alice's life she figured that when someone you had feelings for expressed that they shared the same feelings, it would be an exclusively happy occasion. Not the melancholy, heartbreak that overtook her body.

"And it hurts, Alice," Isaac's voice cracked. "It hurts so damn much seeing you with Mark. But I have no right to be upset over it. You're free to date whoever you want, I know I can't ever give you what you need, and at the end of the day, you deserve to be happy. But it does hurt..."

"I know," She lowered her head and said barely above a whisper, "It hurts to see you with Fiona..."

"I know, and I'm sorry," he said, beginning to slowly drag his feet along the cement. "She's just a distraction. That's all it is."

A cold wind glided through them, and Alice became aware that she had been standing in the freezing weather in a sleeveless dress for nearly thirty minutes. She rubbed her shoulders and shivered.

"Hey, Isaac?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I borrow your coat now?"

He stopped walking and looked at her, the somber frown quickly turning into a relieved smile, as if Alice asking for his coat signaled forgiveness. He pulled it off his shoulders and walked towards her, finally closing the gap between them, and wrapped the jacket over her bare shoulders. His eyes hovered over her lips, and his hand slid from her shoulder to her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. The warmth from his hand felt tender, and she never realized how much she took the simple action of hand-holding for granted.
Before Alice knew it, Isaac was pulling her by the hand to a stone bench on the other side of the balcony, and made her sit down while he stood in front of her, still holding her hand. A lump formed in Isaac's throat and he took one last sad glance at their held hands before dropping them, taking a seat as far away as he could on the bench.

"And Alice, the things I used to care about before I hired you...I don't care about them now," he said, turning his knees to face her, but his eyes staying focused on his lap. "Fiona...six months ago Fiona would have been the perfect woman for me. She's everything I would have wanted. Now when I'm with her, I'm always thinking, 'Oh, Alice wouldn't do that. Alice would love this. Alice this, Alice that,' – Urgh!"

Alice watched as he rested his elbows on his knees and hang his head in his hands. It took all she had not to reach out and console him, but based on his distance from her and the way he continuously watched the door, she knew it was safest to remain at a distance.

"But...I didn't even think you liked me. For the past month you've barely talked to me, and when you did, you'd be going on and on about how happy you and Mark are," he said. "So...I don't know, I figured it was time to move on."

"I was," Alice started, but her voice was so hoarse she had to swallow before continuing, "I was just trying to convince myself I was happy..."

"Yeah," Isaac said, "I know how that feels, trust me."

A silence overtook them and they both looked up at the luminescent constellations hanging high above their heads, and Alice couldn't help but smirk. Twenty-Four hours earlier she was stargazing with Isaac, and there they were again, admiring the constellations together, but under drastically different conditions.

Isaac lowered his gaze from the heavens to the ground.

"I wish, more than anything in the world, that we could give it a try. I mean, we wouldn't even necessarily live happily ever after or anything, but be able to...to do what Blaise and Emily get to do, you know? Give it a whirl and see what happens," he said and Alice nodded. "But this stupid, fucking job really screws that all up."

"It's okay..." Alice whispered. "I understand."

"Good," he said, and stood up in front of her, rubbing the back of his neck. "Because you need to know that you're such an incredible person. You're...you're so forgiving and kind, arguably to a fault because you tend to let people walk all over you – "

Alice snorted. "Yep. Can't argue with that."

"And you're so smart, and you laugh at my stupid, dickish jokes, and...you're so fucking pretty, Alice. I know you don't realize it, but you are. I couldn't take my eyes off you all night," he said. "But you being pretty is just a fragment of how great you are as a person."

"You're...you're really great, too, Isaac."

"Thank you," he said. "You're basically my best friend, Alice, I think you make me a better person, and...because of that, I needed you to know why I did what I did last night. I'm so sorry that I hurt you, that was the last thing I ever wanted."

She nodded and raised her eyes from the ground to Isaac, taking a mental snap shot of the moment. If
someone had told her six months earlier that she would one day listen to Isaac Hanes practically pour his soul out to her as he confessed his heart-rendering feelings for her, she would have sent them to a mental institution.

Yet there they were. The two most unlikely people, intertwined by the strangest circumstances, found a spark between them that they were forced to ignore.

"I should probably get inside," Isaac said. "People are going to be looking for me soon."

"Yeah, me too," Alice said and stood up from the cold stone bench, pulling the jacket off her arms. When she handed it to Isaac, she immediately missed the warmth and musky scent of Isaac's cologne.

"We're good, right?" Isaac asked.

"Yeah, we're good." Alice smiled at Isaac's cute dimples that appeared and took a step towards him, holding out her hand. "Friends?"

Isaac stared at Alice's hand with a furrowed brow before slipping his warm hand through hers.

Her smile grew and she slowly shook his hand, but in an instant, Isaac ripped Alice towards his chest and enveloped her arms around her shoulders. As Isaac's heartbeat pounded in her ears, she wrapped her arms around his waist and squeezed as hard as she could. A burning sensation crept up her throat and she had to clench her eyes shut to keep it choked back.

They had hung out nearly every day for months, worked in the same office, and they had even slept in the same bed on a couple occasions, but that was the first time Isaac ever hugged Alice.

Fingers drove into her back and Alice physically felt the emotions and months of built-up tension release through his fingertips. His chin was resting on top of her head, but when he shifted so that his nose brushed her hair and inhaled deeply, Alice let out a quiet whimper despite her eyes remaining dry.

That hug was more powerful and meaningful than any kiss she experienced in her life.

Slowly, Isaac pulled away, rubbing his nose as he peered at the door which miraculously remained closed for the entire scene.

"I've got to go in," he said. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah." She nodded. "I'll be in in a minute."

After she watched Isaac disappear through the door to put on a happy face and pretend everything in the world was grand, she slumped back to the bench and stared back at the moon, trying to comprehend what had just happened.

A deep sadness washed over her body. Except it wasn't melodramatic or devastating. It was a raw sadness that she knew would never fully consume her, but it would linger. It would linger in the back of her mind and creep up during the nights that she sat on her couch watching television alone, reminding her that if things were just a little different, she could have a companion by her side who made her life a little brighter.

However, there was another feeling that flowed through Alice.

That feeling, even paired with the deep lingering sadness that invaded her body, was exactly what
she had been searching for. There was no doubt in the feeling, no second guesses; it was pure and honest.

And she didn't want to settle for anything less.

Even if she couldn't be with Isaac, she knew it was infinitely better to be alone than to be with someone who didn't make her feel the way she felt at that exact moment. It didn't matter if she had to wait another five years to meet someone else who made her feel this way, or maybe it wouldn't even happen, but now that she experienced it there was no way she could settle for anything else.

It wouldn't be fair to anyone involved. Everyone in the world deserves to feel what she was feeling. Every second spent with someone who isn't capable of feeling that way towards them would be depriving each other of all the opportunities to meet someone who could.

Alice lowered her eyes from the moon to a steel candleholder perched beside a large bay window. She watched the flickering of the candlestick, barely illuminating its surroundings, and she lost herself even deeper in thought.

At one point that candlestick stood tall; its small majestic fire glowing brightly in the winter's night. But it had since been reduced to nothing more than an ember, desperately clinging onto the threads of the wick for a few last breaths of life.

"Hey."

The flame went out.

Chapter End Notes

Ummm........soooo.... yeah. that happened. This was so fucking sad to write you guys. But this was honestly the very first scene I EVER thought of, and I've been building this story all around this scene. I dunno...sooooo nervous about posting it, but umm...yeah. I hope you guys enjoyed it despite the obvious sadness? I do love me some bittersweetness, obviously.

ALSO, DON'T WORRY. This story is not close to being finished!! I totally underestimated how long this story would be. Like, when I wrote a loose outline for this story, I thought this was going the be the ELEVENTH CHAPTER. Not only that, I thought the past four chapters would be ONE CHAPTER. I don't mean like...one super long chapter. i mean everything that has happened in the past four chapters crammed into one 3000 word chapter. That would have sucked hahahaha.

SOOOO YEAH. Don't worry. There's still a ton of stuff to happen to these characters.

Please let me know what you think! This chapter was the hardest thing I've ever written and I would love any feedback!
"Hey."

Alice whipped her head around to find Mark standing behind her. An aloof air hung around him as he watched her quickly turn away to dab her eyes, ensuring that they had remained dry throughout her conversation with Isaac. One of his eyebrows slowly raised as Alice turned back to him with a bright grin on her face, casually resting her hands on her hips.

"Hey, Mark," she said. "What's up?"

"What's up?" He scoffed. "I've been looking for you for nearly an hour, that's 'what's up'."

"Oh..." she shifted in her spot, taking a quick peek over the ledge of the balcony and frowning when it was too high to safely jump. "Yeah, sorry about that."

Mark gawked at her, raising his palm to motion for her to continue. When she stayed silent, awkwardly rubbing her shoulder to keep her hands busy, he let out a disgruntled sigh.

"Well? Are you going to tell me what's going on?" he asked. "I know it's shocking, but being left alone at one of Isaac's parties isn't exactly my idea of a great time."

A certain sensation bubbled through Alice as she stared into Mark's green eyes looking bitterly back at her. It was this strange, somber excitement; impatient even. Even though she knew it would wise to wait to have this conversation when they were in the privacy of her home, she couldn't wait. She didn't even think she could make it out the door without the words exploding through her mouth.

She took one last look at the extinguished candle and gulped.

"Mark, umm..." She lowered her eyes to her shoes and took a steadying, deep breath. "Mark, I don't think this is going to work out..."

"What isn't going to work out?"

She clenched her eyes shut.

"Me and you..." she said. "I...think we need to...break up."

An eerie silence overtook the balcony, and with her eyes still shut, she was secretly praying Mark
had gotten so furious he immediately left without a single word. Through her squinted eyelids, she took a quick peek, and much to her dismay, Mark remained in front of her with his nostrils flaring in sync with his chest.

"You're joking, right?"

"Erm...no. I'm not joking."

Right then, Alice realized she had never been the one to ever break up with someone before. She was always the dumpee, not the dumper. Despite all the heartache she would accumulate from getting dumped, as the awkward stiff tension filled the gap between her and Mark, she almost wished she could trade places with him. Besides, she was a veteran at the Mark-Alice-Breakups, she could handle it.

Sadly, it didn't appear Mark was on the same page as her.

Mark threw his hands in the air. "Then why the hell am I here, Alice? Why am I all dressed up just for you to break up with me?"

"Well, I didn't exactly invite you to come," she muttered, trying to keep her voice quiet, but based on Mark's loud scoff, he heard. "Listen, Mark, I'm sorry but...it sort of had to happen eventually, right?"

"How can you say that?"

"I dunno, we can barely tolerate each o - "

"Alice," Mark cut her off and took four large strides to meet her. His fingers grazed her bare shoulder as he gently brushed a strand of her long hair; Alice noted the complete lack of fluttering inside her. The eruption of emotions from Isaac's arms wrapped tightly around her was still in her mind, but with Mark, she felt like stone.

"Alice," he repeated, bending his knees so they were at eye-level. "I love you."

What the fuck.

She took a step back from Mark, her eyes as wide as saucers, and she had to quickly cover her mouth to hide the reflexive cold laugh that tried to escape.

"You... love me?"

"Of course I do," Mark said, taking a step towards Alice but she took another step back herself. "You know I love you. I always have."

"You have not told me that you love me this time around," she said pointing her finger at him. "You do not love me."

"How can you say that?" He asked. "Alice, after everything we've been through, how could I not love you?"

"Oh, jeez, I don't know, Mark," Alice said, throwing her hands in the air. "Maybe because we are crazy dysfunctional? Because we can't go more than a week without fighting?"

"We can get better, though," Mark said as if trying to make a compromise. "You just...you need to go back to how you used to be..."
"But I don't want to."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm happy with how I am now, Mark!" She didn't care if anyone heard this. "We've had this conversation before; why should I try to revert back to my old self?"

"Because! I don't know!" Mark's hand was running through his hair as he tried to form an argument. "Because...it would make me happy?"

This time Alice didn't contain her laugh.

"Okay, so, let me get this straight," she said. "So, you want me to sacrifice my own happiness, my own personal growth, so that you can be happy?"

"It sounds worse when you say it like that."

"No, but that's what you want, right?" she asked. "If you could live in a perfect world, that perfect world would have me basically depriving myself of everything that has turned me into the person that I am today so that you would be happier, correct?"

"Well...yeah, I guess..."

"Then you don't love me!"

"Yes, I do!"

"No, you don't. You love someone who doesn't exist anymore," she said with her patience running incredibly thin. "You may as well go...I don't know, try to fuck a ghost at this point."

"Huh?"

"I don't know," she snapped, brushing the air with her hand as if erasing the imaginary words in front of her. "My point is, is that if you genuinely, truly loved me...you would...you would want me to be happy. You would prioritize my happiness above yours, just as I would do for you if I loved you. Like what Isaa – no. Never mind." She quickly paused to ensure Mark didn't catch that near slip-up. "Mark, this isn't going to work. There's nothing left here anymore."

Mark lowered his head and she could hear his faint, heavy breathing. "How long have you felt like this?"

"I...I think I've felt it for a long time," she said. "It just took me until now to realize it..."

The sound of his breathing was still heard despite the fact that Alice had now walked almost as far away from him as possible. For a second she nearly thought he was crying until -

"This is about Isaac, isn't it?"

"What?" She spat.

"It is," Mark said. "It has to be. Otherwise you wouldn't do this..."

"No, Mark. This has nothing to do with Isaac," she lied, but before she could stop the words, they came out. "Okay, maybe it is a tiny bit to do with Isaac."

She winced and mentally kicked herself for choosing that time, of all times, to practice her honesty.
Before Mark had a chance to react, she blurted out more of her rant.

"But, Mark, this has to do with me and you," she said. "Nothing is ever, in a million years, going to happen between Isaac and I, so get that through your head, please. This would have happened even without him because...because we just aren't compatible. We have no chemistry, no similar interests, nothing...this isn't a sustainable relationship. If you really want to blame Isaac for this, go for it, I guess. But it's useless because this isn't an Isaac problem, this is an Alice and Mark problem. All Isaac did is speed up the inevitable."

"You're wrong."

"Fine, fuck," she yelled and pulled at the ends of her hair. "I guess I apparently don't know anything about my own relationship, so what's the point of even trying to have a discussion about this, because everything I say is wrong."

"It is."

"Okay, picture our lives five years from now, Mark," she said. "What do you see?"

He massaged the back of his neck. "I don't know...I guess we'd probably be married, I guess..."

"Yeah, okay," she said. "Married, huh? I guess I could see us being married, too. Except along with that marriage would be countless of stupid fights about you getting pissed off anytime I'm working late at the office and Isaac is there, or if I need to go on a business trip, or doing basically anything that doesn't involve me sitting by your side boosting up your ego."

"Fine, Alice," Mark shouted and clamped his hands together in the air. "I get it. We are over, you don't fucking love me, I get it."

"Good."

Even though that seemed like the best time for Mark to angrily storm off, he stayed rooted to his spot, watching Alice. When he didn't seem to be leaving anytime soon, Alice huffed and plopped down on the stone bench and sighed. When she noticed Mark's slumped over shoulders and sad, distant gaze in his eyes as he looked at her, she realized that while she was feeling this urgent epiphany to not waste any more time with the wrong person, Mark was experiencing something entirely different.

She rolled her eyes at the annoying guilt flooding through her body.

"Mark, listen," she said. "You're...you're a really great guy. You really are. I...I wouldn't have been so obsessed with you for so long if you weren't. But we've outgrown each other. We're grasping at something that doesn't exist anymore. You're going to make some other woman so, so, happy one day...I'm just not that woman...I'm sorry."

He pursed his lips and nodded. "Apparently not."

_God, I'm going to miss his passive aggressiveness._

"Apparently not," she repeated.

Without a word, he pivoted his feet and marched towards the exit and Alice watched as he reached for the doorknob, only to pivot back to face her.

"This is your last chance, Alice," he said, driving his foot to the ground and pointing his finger at her. "Once I walk through this door, we are done. Are you sure this is what you want?"
She tightened her lips together and gave a slow nod, hoping that he would simply leave with that. When he didn't, she said, "I promise you, this is what I want."

Mark puckered his lips like he was sucking on a lemon and whipped the door open before saying, "Fine. I hope you and Isaac are very happy together."

With that, he bolted through the door and slammed it so fast, he didn't see Alice throwing both her middle fingers in the air after him.

"Stupid dick doesn't listen to anything I say," she mumbled to herself and began sifting through her bra to grab her cell phone. "Good fucking riddance."

She opened her phone and went to Emily's contact to send her a quick text:

"Hope you remember that you're dating Blaise when you wake up tomorrow morning."
Alice's nose nearly brushed the gingerbread man in front of her as she hunched over her kitchen table, delicately swooping a green smile made of frosting on the sweet treat's head. Marveling at her creation, she sat up straight, letting out a breath of satisfaction. "There. Isn't he cute?"

Grinning widely, she proudly held the cookie in the air to show Blaise, who was focussed on his own gingerbread man. When he glanced at her creation he gave her a quick thumbs up and returned back to his masterpiece. Slowly, she leaned over the circular table to peer over Blaise's shoulder and frowned when she saw the poor gingerbread man had two large X's for eyes and a tongue hanging out of his mouth.

"Blaise," she whined. "You killed him!"

"What?" Blaise said with a cheeky grin. "It's funny!"

"It's not funny, it's morbid." Her bottom lip puffed out as she slumped back into her chair. "Now my gingerbread house is going to have a dead guy on the front lawn."

"It's an unwritten rule that when you make a gingerbread house after the age of twelve, you have to make it as inappropriate as possible," he said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Either I made a dead guy, or there'd be certain phallic images scattered along the roof. What would you have preferred?"

The bottle of merlot in the middle of the table was nearly empty, but she filled her wine glass regardless, and leaned back in her chair, tapping her finger against her lips.

Dead guys or penises...dead guys or penises...

"You know," she said, "a penis probably would have looked pretty cute with a little Santa hat on top."

The cheeky grin slid off Blaise's face and he set the tube of frosting on the table, frowning at the deceased gingerbread man in front of him. "Dammit. You're right."

"Oh well." Alice reached over to grab one of the Santa hat shaped candies and placed it on top of Blaise's cookie. "There. Now it's a dead Santa Clause. It can be a symbol of the spirit of Christmas dying from consumerism...or something..."

Blaise rested his chin on his palm and stared at Alice. "Damn, that's deep, Alice."

"What can I say?" she said. "I'm a modern-day Socrates."

"I think that would be more along the lines of Marx..."

"Whatever," she said and rolled her eyes. "It's Christmas Eve. Not philosophy class."
"I can't believe it's Christmas Eve already," Blaise said as he poured the remaining wine into his glass. "I vote we make this a tradition."

"What?" Alice asked. "Debating which way we should forever ruin the innocence of gingerbread houses?"

"Yeah!" he said. "Or, well, at least getting drunk off wine and doing something festive. Maybe next year we can see who can eat the most advent calendar chocolates?"

"Sounds good to me." Alice smiled and popped an M&M into her mouth before sighing. "It's too bad Emily has to visit her dad in Vancouver."

"Believe me, I know," Blaise said and slumped over the table, staring wistfully at the snow drifting through the night's sky. "I miss her already..."

"You're so lame," Alice said and flicked an M&M at Blaise's face, making him scowl at her.

"Sorry, Miss Bitterness," Blaise said. "While I understand that you're going through a rough time right now, I think I deserve to be a little happy over the scarce luck in my dating life for once."

"Hey, trust me, I couldn't be happier for you two," she said before winking. "Doesn't change the fact that you're lame."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Blaise said pulled the pack of cigarettes from his pocket and he smirked when Alice's eyes lit up. "Are you back on these again?"

She shrugged. "I've got no one to impress."

"Fair enough," he said and passed her the cigarette and leaned over the table to light the end with his silver Zippo. After she inhaled the smoke and relaxed into her chair, Blaise fidgeted in his seat. "Hey, umm, Isaac is my best mate and all, but...but I think he's absolutely mental."

"Yeah, well, that's Isaac for you."

"I can't believe he's going to New York to spend Christmas with Fiona's family," he said. "How daft can you be?"

"Apparently very daft."

"Seriously though," Blaise said. "He practically admitted to you that he doesn't even like her because he's all infatuated with you and whatnot. Why is he spending the most important holiday of the year with her family?"

"Couldn't tell you."

"And I don't understand why he didn't simply tell me that you two couldn't be together," he said, puffing on his cigarette faster than before. "I could have at least reiterated back to you - "

"Blaaaise," Alice moaned and threw head over the back of the chair. "I don't know and I don't care. Isaac and I can't be together, and that's that. Why would he dump Fiona if nothing is going to happen anyway? He's still a man with urges, after all."

"Yeah, but it's wrong," he said. "He should know by now that he shouldn't give misleading signals..."

"It's fine," she said. "Can we please talk about anything else? It's Christmas, and I'm miserable"
enough knowing that tomorrow is going to be the first Christmas I've ever spent alone. My parents are off in Arizona and they currently don't even have cell phone service, and Simon probably hates me more than ever now that Mark and I broke up. The last thing I need is to be reminded that the guy I want to be with is off in New York having sex in the Empire State Building."

"I don't think they're going to be having sex up there..."

"Whatever, you know what I mean," she said and threw her cigarette in the empty wine bottle before pulling her slippers on the chair and wrapping her arms around her knees. "It's fine."

"You are literally the reason why girls are stereotyped as always saying things are 'fine' when they aren't."

She shot him a glare through her wine glass. "I just don't want to talk about it, okay? I'll talk about it when I'm ready. For now, I just want to drink my wine and eat some gingerbread, maybe have a bubble bath, and just wait for New Years Day so I can put this fucked up year behind me."

"Hey, don't talk shit about this year," Blaise said pointing his finger warningly at her. "If it weren't for this fucked up year, we wouldn't be hanging out right now."

"I didn't say it was necessarily bad," she said. "It's just...fucked up. And while I appreciate everything that has happened, between our job, our friendship, even...even falling for Isaac, I'm ready for a fresh start. I need to work on myself...maybe get a hobby or something."

"What sort of hobby?"

"I dunno," she shrugged, "maybe I'll ask Emily to teach me some yoga, or - "

"You and Emily should absolutely do yoga together."

She raised her brow at him and shot him a deadpan stare, but chose to ignore him.

"Or...maybe I'll get into baking, or learn how to play the piano, or maybe even try to make some dumb video game app and make some extra money on the side," she said. "All I know is that I've spent the past decade of my life obsessing over boys...I need to focus on myself for a while."

"Look at you, all wise and mature," Blaise said, leaning over the table to nudge her shoulder. "Break ups do you good."

"Hmm," she mumbled. "Thanks."

"Have you talked to Mark at all?"

"Pfft," she scoffed. "I don't think either of us will be talking to each other any time soon."

"That's a shame." Blaise sighed and swirled his wine around in his glass. "I really liked that guy."

Just as Alice was about to touch the glass to her lips she paused and furrowed her brow at Blaise. "Excuse me?"

"Yeah," he said. "He was great. Excellent sense of humor, completely respected your independence, overall just a fantastic human being, honestly."

Alice blinked at Blaise three times with the wine glass still frozen at her lips.

"You're fucking with me."
"Obviously."

Rolling her eyes, she flicked another M&M at Blaise's head but he swiftly dodged it.

"Alright," he said yawning loudly and looked at the clock. "Before you waste any more candy on me, I'd better get home. It's nearly midnight and I need to be at my grandparent's by eight in the morning."

Watching Blaise yawn made Alice yawn and she instantly felt her eyes grow tired. "Yeah, I've got a long day of sleeping tomorrow. I'd better rest up for it."

Blaise chuckled at Alice and stood from the chair before reaching into a bag that was resting against the wall. He pulled out two misshapen and terrible wrapped gifts and handed them to Alice. "Hey, here are some presents from Emily and I. Except you can't open them until tomorrow. You need something to look forward to on Christmas."

Alice's heart swelled and she felt her throat heat up as she admired the wrapped presents in front of her. When Blaise sent her a quick wink, she stood from the chair walked towards him to pull him into a tight hug.

"You guys are too amazing," she mumbled into his shoulder before sharply pulling away with a look of horror on her face. "But I didn't get you guys anything!"

"Don't worry about it," he said. "They were...erm...spontaneous gifts. You'll see. And don't mind the layers of duct tape around the wrappings...I'm not very good at that stuff."

She giggled and gazed happily at the silver tape surrounding the 'Happy Birthday' wrapping paper before turning back to him. "Thank you so, so much for everything, Blaise. From the bottom of my heart, I'm so happy you and Emily managed to finally get together."

"Thanks," he said with a dreamy smile, as if he had just remembered it himself. "Anyways, Merry Christmas, Alice."

"Merry Christmas, Blaise."
Hi, guys.......sooo.... I have some bad news.

While I am not abandoning this story, I have decided that I will no longer be posting updates on Archive of our Own. I will only be posting the updates on Wattpad.

HERE IS THE LINK IF YOU DON'T WANT TO HEAR MY GIANT RAMBLE OF EXPLANATIONS FOR WHY I'M DOING THIS.

SPOILER WARNING:

There are new chapters posted there, so please, START ON CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT on Wattpad to avoid getting spoiled!! Whatever you do, DO NOT jump to the last chapter posted on there because there are immediate spoilers!! I have been slacking on updating on this website so hard! I'm so sorry!

LINK:


If for whatever reason that link doesn't work, the title is still Beer, Spaghetti, and Pharmaceuticals! And my username on it is AshleyKetchum_.

ANYWAYS, if you guys want to hear my ramble as to why I'm not posting on Archive of our Own anymore, here it is!

I am SO SORRY for this huge inconvenience, but I do have a few legitimate reasons for doing this! I have been posting this story on three different websites (this one, Fictionpress, and Wattpad), and as this story comes along, the more serious I'm getting about actually publishing it. I have been reading a ton of horror stories lately about author's works getting stolen online and I just really, really don't feel comfortable with having my entire finished story posted so many different places online. Like, oh man, I would be so devastated. That is seriously one of my biggest fears! This is definitely my biggest reason for doing this. Also, having your work published online is already kind of a no-no in the publishing world, let alone having it on multiple websites, sooo...I think narrowing it down to only one is a smart idea.

Another reason is that it is actually a lot harder than I thought to manage this story on so many different websites! I know it sounds sooo stupid, but with trying to balance real life,
writing, and giving proper replies to comments and stuff, I get so frazzled and end up forgetting about this website until I log in and see I have so many comments from you beautiful readers ughh!!!

Also, Wattpad has an AWESOME app that makes it sooooo easy to edit, update, read, and interact with all the readers and writers on there! Also, it is much harder for your work to get stolen on there, there's a better chance to get noticed by publishers, it has a much better credibility with publishers, and I'm just addicted to the website haha. So, for these reasons, I have decided to only post it on Wattpad.

Seriously, I'm so sorry for this! I appreciate your readership SOOO MUCH, and I really hope you continue reading! There's actually about 5 or so new chapters on there that haven't been posted here yet, because I'm seriously the worst and honestly just kind of forgot about this website!! Not that I have forgotten about you amazing readers, I'll just quickly post it on Wattpad immediately after writing, then fall asleep instantly or something, then a few days later when I'm in an inconvenient situation I'm like, "CRAP!!! I FORGOT TO POST IT ON ARCHIVE OF OUR OWN! MUST DO THAT AT HOME!!"

So, yes, I really hope you jump on over to Wattpad to continue reading the adventures of Alice and Isaac! There's some amazing stuff that has happened that I'm sure you'll all love! If you guys just like....absolutely HATE me for this and completely refuse to use Wattpad, let me know in the comments and like...I'll think about continuing to post it here. But like....suuuuper scared of ruining my chances of being a published author and having my work stolen. I hope you guys understand!! I seriously appreciate you all so much!!

Anyways, I'll stop begging for forgiveness now. I hope to hear from you guys over there!! Thank yooooooooo!!

Ashley xoxoxoxoxoxo

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!