Lighthouse

by eldiantrash

Summary

Through all the storms life may throw at you, there will always be a lighthouse to guide you through. Or, how Hitch Deliss made her way through her first year of art school.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Maiden Voyage

The first year of art school was probably one of the strangest, toughest, and stressful years of my entire life. But in the storm of all the weeaboo animation students, the hipster graphic design majors, and the architectural design bros is a lighthouse that shines through the thunder and fog to capture your attention. It acts as something to keep you focused, to keep you looking forward. It took me a while to find mine, mainly because it guided me into a few storms I never wanted to find myself in. But in the end, my lighthouse did what lighthouses are meant to do: it helped guide me home.

That first day of art school was an adventure in itself. My parents both had made inflexible appointments for today - my mom an antique dealer, my dad a bishop - so I had to lug all of my belongings to my dorm room by myself, and meet with an anonymous roommate in a city that I had no prior experience in. All at seven in the morning. I was barely functional, but I assured them that I would make it by myself in one piece, and not to worry.

I, despite being late, was the first one to my room. It was barren, except for two naked beds, two dressers, two desks, and two wardrobes. Between our beds was a window with tattered white blinds that looked out onto a green hill. I opened the window to let some sunlight in before beginning to unpack my things.

After I fit the bed with a purple-striped comforter and taped some photos and posters onto the wall, I took a step back and stared at my side of the room. It was as cozy as could be, given what I started with — boring wooden furniture, boring white cinderblock walls, boring white tiled floor. I couldn’t see standing it here for a week, let alone an entire semester, but I was forced to make do. I sighed and stared at the bed. It looked cozy, and my eyes were gradually getting heavier. I became a victim to sleep, disregarding the rest of the stuff I needed to unpack.

When I woke up later, my mouth had that dry, disgusting feeling you always get after taking a nap. I checked my phone and realized that it was three in the afternoon. A quality nap. I turned to my right and nearly screamed when I noticed the figure sitting in the bed across from me, her nose in a book. Her side of the room was neatly organized already while my boxes were still scattered all over. I eased myself out of bed and stretched my arms, yawning. She turned to face me with her icy blue eyes, but she didn’t say anything. I figured to make this first impression as pleasurable as possible. I put my hands behind my head and continued to stretch as I sang, “Good morning!”

“Hello.” She said, folding the corner of the page in her book and getting off of her bed, as if talking to me was a hassle. I outstretched my right hand for her to give a curt shake. “Annie.”

“Well, I’m Hitch.” I stopped stretching to stand up and start working on unpacking the boxes, as much as I didn’t want to. There were just so many. And it was so much work. I ended up just sighing and putting my elbows on top of the boxes. “So many boxes.”

I turned towards Annie, who was back on top of her bed, reading. “How long did it take for you to unpack, Annie?”

“Three hours.”

“Three?!” I whined, glaring at the ceiling.
“A lot of people finished a while ago.” She looked out the window. “Everyone is out doing the orientation activities.” I ran and pressed my nose against the glass, staring out at the scene below me. There was only one person - a kid with messy, sandy hair. He had a blank canvas on top of his lap, with a box of paints and a pair of mugs by his side. I sighed. “I’m so excited to meet artsy boys. Can I skip unpacking and just go meet artsy boys?”

“Well, you can unpack and then meet ‘artsy boys.’” Annie shrugged. I bit my lip and grabbed my purse. I fished through it for my brush, which I ran through my tangled hair. Determined, I announced, “I think I’m gonna meet artsy boys first.”

“Promise you’ll unpack when you get home.” She stared daggers at me, daring me not to. I merely smiled, throwing my purse over my shoulder and saying, “Oh, don’t worry, I will.” Eventually. But for now, boys.

I came from a very religious family which meant no boys, no parties, no fun. I’m surprised my parents let me go to college in the first place, let alone art college. Public school was a disaster - I remember being taken out of class in the third grade to go sit in the library and do work because I couldn’t watch the “satanic, witchcraft-oriented film” the rest of my class was watching. (That awful, devilish film was *Howl’s Moving Castle*. Stop laughing.) My parents complained about something in the curriculum every other week, and I never really thought anything was wrong with it until I discovered the glory that was the Internet when I was thirteen. That was also when I gave up my Mormon beliefs, but I kept up appearances for the sake of my parents. I still went to church every Sunday with them and kept up traditions, but I always felt like a liar in their house. I never had any pleasure or heart in anything I did with them, and the person I really was had to kept secret on a blog that I kept under lock and key. To add, at my small school, I felt like my reputation as the “weird Mormon girl” was set in stone, and I couldn’t escape it as much as I wanted to. But coming to this school meant I wasn’t sheltered anymore. I was a caged bird, freed for the first time. I just couldn’t wait to explore what the world had laid out for me.

I walked outside of the dorm and out to the back, where my window looked out. It was a particularly dark area, shaded by both the trees and the building. My first target was the kid sitting on the hillside with his painting. I skipped up to where he was and sat on the hill in front of him with my legs crossed. “Hello.”

I looked up at him, though his face was obstructed by his canvas that he had propped on his thighs. I don’t think he even looked up at me when he said, “Hey.”

“You paint?” I asked, watching him as he shook his brush in the mug of water that sat to his left. It was white, with the word “PAINT” crudely written on the side in black. There was a matching one on his right side, which was labeled “COFFEE.” He didn’t respond to my question. He merely straightened out his legs, lowering the canvas and revealing an unamused scowl. He raised his eyebrows, wordlessly asking, “Really?”

I could only throw my head back and laugh, pushing a lock of hair behind my ear in an effort to combat the awkwardness between us. “Obviously, you do. Are you painting the hill?”

I turned to look at the trees that bordered the residential campus. The breeze, as gentle as it was on my skin, was snapping the leaves from the trees and sending them flurrying to the ground in massive numbers. One even fell in the boy’s palette. As soon as that leaf hit the blue pool of paint, he promptly tossed it onto the grass without even looking at it. It must’ve been rehearsed. Again, silently, he flipped his canvas around. I blinked at the picture. It was still mostly a pencil sketch, with the background being the only thing colored in. The picture was of a pair of stubby, young legs acne’d with band-aids. The feet were wearing a pair of golden gladiator sandals. On the front of the
sandals was a gem, emblazoned with the image of a girl with red, curly hair. “Oh…?”

“Sketched it during the summer.” He said curtly. “Painting it now.”

“Whose legs are that?” I laid on the grass, folding my arms and placing my chin on top. He grabbed a three tubes - brown, white, and red - and began to mix them on his palette as he replied, “My sister’s. She likes princesses.”

“Oh. Cool.” I turned to lay on my back. “What’s your name?”

“Jean.” He replied, mixing the paints in his palette with his brush before putting them on the canvas. I held up my hand as if I were reaching for the clouds, and waited for him to take my hand. “I’m Hitch.”

He never did take my hand, so I retracted it, and rested it on my breast while watching the clouds. He narrowed his eyes and asked, “Hitch?”

“Yeah?” I tilted my head slightly.

“Really?”

My friendly grin devolved into an offended frown. “It’s a family name. Shut up.” I slapped the smile back on my face. “So, what are you majoring in?”

“Fine art. You?”

“Graphic design.”

“Ooh. Fancy you.”

My hands fell to my sides, and I sprawled out like a starfish. I can’t stay still for long. I probably looked stupid. I prayed he thought it was cute. “I’m so excited. I never came to the city before. Let alone to live here.

“Really?” He lowered his canvas to actually look at me. He then turned back to his painting. “I’ve lived here forever.”

“I’m from Sina.” I laughed. “It’s in the middle of nowhere. I wanted to go somewhere more exciting.”

“Interesting. Well, this is certainly the place for it.” He put more paint on his canvas. I flipped myself over and trudged up to sit next to him, watching him fill in the legs on his painting. He picked up his paint mug, but immediately put it down and reached for his coffee mug instead. I smirked, “Is that why you have them labeled?”

He grunted, refusing to answer. I merely giggled. I watched him fill in the rest of the legs with the basic color, asking him questions about his sister (her name was Madeline, she was eight years old, and she loved playing princesses) and art (he’s been painting and drawing for a few years now, his favorite medium is charcoal, and he wants a job restoring older paintings). After he filled in the legs with that peachy tone, he washed his brush in the paint mug before stuffing it in his pocket and dumping the dirty water on the grass. He took his coffee mug and downed the remainder of that before exhaling and looping his hand through the handles of both empty mugs. He handed me his canvas and said, “Hold this for a minute.”

I took the canvas and admired the piece further as Jean put his thumb through the palette. He looked
like the artistic Wolverine with two mugs and a palette all in one hand. He grabbed the canvas from me, carrying it along with his paints, and muttered a “thanks” before half-running down the hill.

I followed and asked, “Where are we heading now?”

“We?”

“I mean, you’re interesting, Jean…?”

He nearly hesitated to complete my statement. “…Kirschstein.”

“Jean Kirschstein. Right.” I beamed and caught up with him, walking alongside him as he carried his supplies at his sides. I asked, “You need help with that?”

He pouted in thought, shaking his head. “No, I’m pretty good, actually.”

“Okay. Just making sure.” I crossed my arms and said, “So, why’d you come here for school?”

He closed his eyes for a moment and said, “You’re very persistent, aren’t—fuck.”

He stumbled over a branch that had been lying on the grass, nearly dropping his painting. Hitch to the rescue. I grabbed his left arm, saving him from plummeting to the ground and from utter disaster.

He stood back up and looked back at the branch that had wronged him before muttering, “Thanks.”

“You owe me for saving your life.”

“That’s a little extre—“

“You owe me.”

He sighed, turning on his heels towards the entrance of the hall. I asked, “So, why did you come here for school?”

“Close to home, and they offered me a shitton of tuition money, too.” He got to the door and gently put the canvas on its side as he attempted to fish his ID out of his pocket. I grabbed the canvas for him, and he said, “Thanks,” as he clumsily swiped it to gain entrance. He opened the door and used his foot as a doorstop, letting me walk in first with his wet canvas. He followed, and I held out the painting for him to take from me, which he did. I continued to trail him, hanging onto his every word.

“Don’t you have anything better to do than to follow me?”

“I still have to unpack all my shit upstairs.”

“Jesus. Really?” He cringed and turned forward again. “Get to that. You already helped me through the door. Go help yourself and get settled in.”

“Don’t you have another door to get through?” I raised my eyebrows. I got him cornered. He looked down at his painting and muttered, “Shit.” I giggled in delight. I don’t know why I think teasing people like this is fun. Probably because with some people, especially Jean, it’s cute to see them lower their guard and have to admit their mistakes. It’s easier to get through to someone when they’re vulnerable like that. I couldn’t pin the reason why I was so fascinated by this kid. I’d thought that I’d probably drop him like a hot potato when I see the next guy, though. This one was kind of a loner. One of those mysterious types. He was probably harboring some dark secret.

Or he didn’t want to talk to me.
Nah. I did everything right. I was cute, I was social, and I literally helped him up when he was down. I was doing everything like a girl should be doing.

We climbed up the stairs to his dorm. He lived on the floor above me - floor three. Our hall was co-ed, with the sexes separated by floor. We opted to take the stairs - Jean said that elevators were for the weak, I said stairs were for the stupid - and we came up to his door. It had a tiny whiteboard on the front. One side had an adorable cartoon version of Jean, and the other side had a cartoon boy with black hair and freckles dotting his face. Between them in impressively neat print was: “Jean & Marco.”

“Is this your roommate?” I grinned, pointing towards the drawing but being careful not to touch it. He simply nodded, digging his keys out of his pocket. It was attached to a silver Swiss Army Knife, with a purple and blue sticker over top of the Swiss cross. “What’s the sticker?”

He groaned. “My sister’s idea.” He wiggled the key inside of the door, kicking it in with his foot so it gave way. He placed his foot in between the door and its frame, taking the canvas from my hands and walking inside his dorm. I held open the door for him, refusing to follow him in. I wasn’t going to go in without an invitation. I wasn’t raised in a barn.

“Need anything?” I asked, and he shook his head, putting his art supplies on his desk. I bit my lip and said, “Okay. I’ll see you around then.”

He gave an upwards nod - the “bro” nod - and placed his hand on the door, ready to shut it. “See you.”

With that, he shut the door, leaving me in the hall alone. That went...slightly worse than expected. But not terrible. I gave a half-hearted fistpump before turning back and heading to the elevator and back to my room. Annie was still there, as if she were a statue, reading her book.

An hour later was the “convocation,” where the faculty came out in their graduation robes and we heard “inspirational words” from the dean to induct us into the school. I sat next to Annie so I wasn’t totally alone, but she didn’t offer much company or entertainment. The ceremony itself was basically an hour-long sedative, and I struggled to keep my eyes open. Plus, there was no phone signal, so I couldn’t do anything more interesting online. Ho-hum. Tetris could only entertain me for so long.

I yawned, tapping my finger on my thigh as I observed the room. My fluttering eyes stared aimlessly at the back of the chair in front of me. The words that were coming from the dean’s mouth turned to garbage, and I felt like I was literally going to fall asleep in the middle of convocation. How embarrassing.

I was saved by a low, yet honeyed, yet familiar voice ringing from behind me. I didn’t turn to see who it was. I already knew. He scoffed, “Oh, Jesus. What’s he doing.”

“Shh. He may be going somewhere with this.” A humble, worried voice politely chided him. I glanced up at the dean, who was digging his phone out of his chest pocket. I cringed and looked back down at my lap, refocusing on the conversation that was unfolding behind me.

“He’s taking...a selfie?”

“Jean, shh. Are you even listening? He’s talking about being innovative and inventing new approaches to things.”

“A selfie video? That isn’t innovative. It’s called a Vine. And this whole thing is pandering.” His
voice was muffled. I could hear the disappointment in his voice. “Trying to connect with youth. It’s so embarrassing. This is fucking dumb, man. I wanna go back to the dorm.”

The shutter sound effect rang out through the auditorium, inciting a hearty chuckle out of half of the audience. I sank further into my seat. The dean’s voice boomed, “Hello to you, four years in the future! I’m taking this ‘selfie video’ at the convocation! This...is our incoming class. And what a wonderful, promising class it is.”

The soft voice mumbled, “Aww.”

“Uugh.” I could hear him sink into his seat.


“Woo!” The low voice sardonically muttered, followed by a soft, muffled thump. “Owww…”

“You deserve it. Don’t interrupt.” The unfamiliar voice mumbled.

“I don’t deserve to have to listen to the dean rattle off the majors. I already know what they are.” There was another thump. I giggled quietly. “Seriously though. What is this?” I expected to hear another thump, but the other person just sighed.

“I don’t know. I’m starting to feel embarrassed, honestly.”

“See?” I could hear the smile in Jean’s voice. “This is why you gotta be as cynical as me. So you’re never disappointed.”

“Jean, if I were as cynical as you, I’d always be disappointed.” The voice countered. There was another thump, but judging by the pitch of the whine, Jean had landed the hit this time. There was an air of familiarity to their interactions that I envied. Jean intrigued me, and I was going to get to know him, damnit. Whether he wanted me to or not.

The walk from the gymnasium to the residence halls only worsened the pain that my feet were experiencing. Walking, walking, and more walking. That’s all I did today. My ankles and the bottoms of my feet were the home to five new blisters in total, each dealing me an extreme amount of discomfort. The only shoes that were comfortable for me were my sneakers, but they weren’t cute. I was facing a real conundrum with my footwear.

When I finally got to my room and was able to kick off my shoes, I took notice of how sweltering hot my room was, and how grimy I felt. The climate here was muggy and humid, and the intensity of the summer sun didn’t help. As soon as I shut my door, I peeled my clothes off and swapped them for a fresh towel and a pair of old sandals. I needed a shower pretty badly.

I left my dorm and walked down the hall to the communal bathroom. I found myself surrounded by minute white tiles, and on the back wall was a line of showers. It seemed everyone was struggling with the summer heat, so most of the showers were taken. I hopped inside, leaving my shower caddy outside on a metal hook. Once I was inside the shower with the curtain drawn, I tossed my towel outside the door and ran the water, turning it all the way towards “hot.” Finally. Some relief. The communal shower wasn’t totally glamorous - I had to wear flip-flops inside, and I was paranoid that somebody would steal stuff from my caddy (if I didn’t have toothpaste or shampoo or whatever, I
would). But, nothing could replace the feeling one gets from a nice, hot shower.

The only problem was, even after several moments of waiting, the water never got warm in the slightest. I tested the water every few seconds, but I flinched away each time. All the warm water was probably gone because all the showers were being used, but then again, why would everyone be taking cold showers?

“Why is the water here freezing?” I called out, running my hand through my hair as I sighed. I pouted, crossing my arms. I just wanted a shower. If this is how I’m expected to live for the rest of the year, I was going to be so angry. “I’m going to die of hypothermia. If you don’t help me, you’ll have to deal with the blood on your hands.” A laugh came from the stall to my right.

“Try turning the handle around twice.” The girl called. “And we won’t have blood on our hands even if you did die! We’re in the shower. The drain will take it to the ocean.” I smiled at that one, and took the advice. My face turned a bright shade of red as I felt the hot water rush over my skin, and it wasn’t due to the heat. “Thank you.”

“My name is Sasha!” The girl informed me, wiggling her foot underneath the stall barrier and scaring me half to death.

I gently backed away from her foot. “I’m Hitch.”

“ Weird name.”

“Finally someone said it.” I started scrubbing at my scalp. “People are usually too scared to say that.”

“Have you had dinner yet?” She asked, and I wrung out my hair. I shrugged, though I realized she couldn’t see me doing it. “I haven’t, and I need someone to sit with me.”

“Oh, uh, no. I’m not that hungry, though.”

“Aw, but, do you wanna come anyway? Just get some water or something?” She whined. “We can go scope out people if you’re feeling that.”

That sounded good. Scoping out boys, judging people, swapping gossip (though I didn’t have much to offer on that front). “I feel it. Where should we meet up?” I heard Sasha’s shower turn off, and a few seconds later heard the rustling of a plastic fabric and the scraping of the rings holding the curtain to the metal bar.

“Stick your head out of the shower for a second.” She said. I rinsed the last of the shampoo out of my hair and did as I was told. A few feet away, a girl with dark, tuscan red hair was poking out of her shower, water dripping onto the floor. She waved. “Nice to meet your face.”

“Th-Thanks?”

Sasha grabbed the fluffy bathrobe hanging from her hook before she retreated back into her shower. “I’ll meet you by the third floor lounge in half an hour. That should give you enough time to finish your shower and everything.” She emerged wearing the robe. “That’s around, what, 6:15? I’ll see you then.” Sasha waved, picking her caddy off of the hook, the sound of wet flip flops squeaking and echoing off of the tile walls.

I sped through the rest of my shower at lightning speed. I wanted enough time to get dressed and look pretty. She may have connections, and she seemed sweet enough, if not a little odd. Besides, it was easier to approach strangers with a second party backing you up.
After I scrubbed my legs and shaved, I was done with my shower. I dried off quickly before rushing to my dorm to brush my hair, throw on a pair of leggings and a t-shirt, and make my way towards the lounge.

“So, I kind of have the eating schedule of a hobbit.”

“A hobbit?”

“Yeah.” We were both walking to the dining hall. I spun my lanyard in my hand as Sasha was talking towards the sky. “Have you not seen The Hobbit or the Lord of the Rings? Or read the books?”

I didn’t feel like explaining why I’ve been sheltered from nearly everything pop culture. “No. Not the geeky type.”

“2014 and you haven’t seen the Hobbit. Well, anyway. I am the ‘geeky type.’” She put her finger to her chin in recollection. “Uh, hobbits eat like 7 meals a day. Like two breakfasts, supper, and dinner. Don’t be scared of the sheer quantity of food I’m about to ingest.”

“I’ll try not to.” I nodded, as we finally entered the dining hall. The whole building was shaped like a giant donut, with a courtyard in the center for outdoor seating. The hall was an all-you-can-eat buffet, which would be great, if the food wasn’t so subpar. Sasha didn’t seem to mind though. I took a small salad and a glass of water to be polite, while she filled up two plates with a mountain of pasta, some bread, a scoop of vegetables, crazy amounts of cheese, mashed potatoes with gravy dripping down the sides, and a taco from the build-your-own-bar. She balanced a mini mystery pie on top of her taco so it wouldn’t get covered in gravy. I had to hold her drink as she navigated to the check-out. We set up camp at the nearest table, due to the fact that if I had to walk another foot carrying a plate and two small drinks, I would drop one of them. And if that happened, it may as well be social suicide.

“So, I should’ve asked this earlier.” I took a sip of water before I asked, “What’s your major?”

Sasha swallowed a mouthful of mashed potatoes and replied, “Animation.” Her now-dry hair was tied into a ponytail, bobbing with every syllable that came out of her mouth.

“Oh, cool. My parents were...weird and strict, so I really haven’t seen many cartoons or animated movies.” Sasha’s eyes went as wide as her appetite as she swallowed a bit of her taco. She took a deep breath and said, “Girl.”

“Hm?”

“I need to get you caught up.” She pointed at me with her fork between bites. “Eighteen years of living. No Disney movies. No Ghibli movies.”

“I saw the Little Mermaid--”

She furrowed her brow. “Slightly better. But not by much. We gotta catch you up.”

“Sounds fine--ooh.” I spotted a certain Kirschstein in the distance. His plate held a cheeseburger and a colossal amount of fries. housed I watched him as he walked to his table, his eyes glued to his phone as he somehow dodged the people walking around him and the various tables planted into the ground. I was pretty impressed. He sat down at a table on the other side of the dining hall with a boy with dark hair who was facing away from us. Sasha noticed my awkward stare.
“Who you watchin’?” She took another bite of potatoes.

I tried to make my voice sound venomous, when in reality, I was more annoyed than anything. "That kid with the stupid undercut."

"Oh, you mean Jean?"

I nearly choked on my salad. "You know him?"

"Yeah! We went to high school together. He's...interesting."

"Interesting?"

"He tries really hard to be cooler than he actually is. He's a huge dork, and generally a sweetie pie. Kinda grumpy though. You know how people try to reinvent themselves at college?"

A little too well. “Yeah?”

“I guess he’s kind of this dorky caterpillar trying to transform into a majestic, hipster butterfly.”

"Hm. So not cool at all?" I shrugged. I guess the “cool, mysterious persona” was mostly a cover story. “Kind of a bummer.”

"He is cool.” Sasha grabbed my shoulder. “Don’t let that deter you, that wasn’t the way I should’ve worded it--he’s cool, just not in the way he wants to be. He and my boyfriend are pretty close.”

"Oh, you have a boyfriend?"

"Mhm.” She blushed, trying to hide it with her hand. “His name is Connie. He's an architecture major. I'd eat dinner with him or whatever, but he commutes so he’s at his house alone. Like a loser.”

"Whatever. I'm glad I met you, Sash.” I smirked, biting my fingernail. “It’s nice to be able to get a read on the different people here.”

She returned the grin before her eyebrows widened. “If you want to know another thing about Jean, ask him about his tattoos.”

“He has a tattoo?” I nearly choked on my salad. Tattoos were my forbidden fruit. I’ve always wanted one, but knowing my parents, they would be so angry and ashamed if I had ever gotten one. I always did Photoshop mock-ups of how tattoos would look on my skin, but they were nothing but silly fantasies.

She smirked. “Two.”

Sasha somehow wolfed down two plates of food in the same amount of time it took me to eat my salad. It was admittedly a little gross yet very impressive to witness firsthand. It must’ve been some world record. We both gathered our plates and I glanced at Jean another time before Sasha poked me on the shoulder.

“Remember. Tattoos.” I nodded, and she said, “C’mon. Let’s go get seconds.”

After chilling with Sasha and exchanging phone numbers and Facebook information, I headed back to my room and collapsed on my bed. It screamed whenever I turned, and the room was way too hot. Annie was already in bed, near the end of her book. She mumbled a low “hello” without looking up at me.
So far, my college career wasn’t half bad. Met a cute boy, and a potential friend with connections. I wasn’t completely awkward or lost, which exceeded my expectations for how I thought I would be. But tomorrow came the hard part of college - the classes. My first class ever was writing, at noon. After taking out my contacts and exchanging my outfit for a comfy t-shirt, I lied in bed, rolling myself in the covers as I wondered about how tomorrow would go down.
Abel Brown

Chapter Summary

I've got some rum upon the shelf,
Cried the fair young maiden.

Me throat is long, an' me thirst is strong,
Sez Abel Brown the sailor.
What if you roll from off the shelf?
Cried the fair young maiden.

I'll bounce on the floor an' ask for more,
Sez Abel Brown the sailor.
What if police should come to the house?
Cried the fair young maiden.

I'll take 'em on in two's or three's,
Sez Abel Brown the sailor.

Chapter Notes

Just warning y'all, there's references to date rape drugs in here, but no actual rape. I would literally hate myself if I wrote a rape, but in case the use or reference of any of those drugs skeeves you out, I just wanted to give a warning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I woke up way earlier than I planned to today. It wasn’t like I got a good night’s rest anyway. My eyes kept fluttering shut, but I couldn’t fall back asleep. When I woke up for good and got out of bed, Annie was just leaving for her 8:00 class. I kept thinking about how nervous I was for class today. I did my makeup, got dressed, and slung my backpack over my shoulder with an hour left till class started. I looked out the window, and as expected, Jean was on the hill, continuing his painting. I turned the handle on my window and pushed it out as far as it could go, holding into it for support. “Hi, Jean!” I shouted.

I could see him flinch before surveying the windows to look for me. I waved, making sure to catch his attention. He locked eyes with me and smiled warmly before flipping me off. I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted, “Fuck you too, Jean!” He turned back to his painting, reaching into his pocket and taking out a phone with headphones wrapped around it. He uncoiled the wire and put his earbuds in his ears. The universal code for “stop talking to me.” I shrugged, and shut the window.
I would spare him for now. Maybe this friendship thing was a lost cause. I tried to push that out of my mind for now, and focus on getting my shit together for my first class: writing. It was a required course, which meant I was in the company of people from a myriad of different majors.

I had arrived early to the lecture hall, mainly because I ran out of ways to dick around at my dorm. I couldn’t find anyone that I wanted to get to know better. They all looked...plain. Vanilla. Boring. I didn’t want to be near someone who was just “eh.” I took a leap of faith and chose a seat near the middle of the room, praying that somebody interesting would sit next to me. Time passed, and many students began to filter in. One of which was a guy with a strange haircut and a crooked nose. He looked indubitably strange, yet at the same time, intriguing. One of those artsy types. He carried a MacBook in his hands, with a drawstring bag hanging off of his back. He slid the laptop onto the table in front of me and dropped the bag onto the floor besides his feet. He was all business. You could tell. But that wasn’t fun. I’d make him loosen up. As soon as he got comfortable, I quickly tapped his shoulder with my pencil. He swatted his shoulder, and when he turned to face me, I was spinning the pencil in my fingers.

“Hi!”

He rubbed his shoulder and rose an eyebrow. “Hello.”

I extended my hand. “Hitch.” He took it and gave it a curt shake before nodding.

“Marlowe.”

“Nice to meet you.” I smiled as warmly as I could, but it wasn’t so warmly received. Marlowe turned back to face the front of the hall. My smile faded, and I glanced up at the clock on the wall. Class didn’t start for another five minutes. Could he not spare five minutes of conversation? I guess that was a sign to turn up the charm. I quickly primped my hair, leaning forward and bringing my elbows together just a bit to accent my chest. I leaned forward, continuing to fidget with my pencil. “What’s your major?”

“Film.”

I pouted. “Do you always answer in less than three syllables?”

“S’pose.” He flipped open his Macbook, and started it up. I figured I may as well do the same. I reached into my computer bag, and took out my laptop to unfold it, letting the apple on the front glow. After glancing at Marlowe’s computer again, I realized we had the same model. “Psst. Marlowe. Look.”

He turned, unamused. I pointed to my laptop, to his, and back to mine. I only had this computer for a week or so. My parents never wanted me to have a computer I could password protect, hide, or use for “nefarious purposes.” But for college, you couldn’t get around the computer requirement. “Same computer!”

He rose an eyebrow and glanced around the room. “So does everyone else.”

I turned my head to take a look around. Except for maybe two kids, everyone’s laptops were aluminum, with a glowing apple on the front. Just like mine.

“Yeah, but we have Macbook Pros.” I smirked. “We’re professional.”

He groaned, turning back towards his computer to unlock it. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that.”
“Hear what?” I asked innocently. Anything to keep him talking.

“Your shitty pun.”

“Don’t pretend you don’t think I’m punny. I am the queen of puns. I’m punbelievable.” That was one thing I was good at. Family friendly puns. A lifetime of Mormon humor can do that to a girl. It was one thing I was thankful for in my upbringing, so I owned that shit. A sense of humor was something that every relationship, romantic or not, needed. I intended to be the one that brought it, especially to this grumpy bowlcut.

“Oh, you’re un-fucking-believable, alright. Now shush. Class is starting.” Total lie. Not like I’m blind. The professor wasn’t even standing at the front of the room yet. But I could tell when I wasn’t wanted. I could do better than a film student with a bowlcut anyway, but God, I found it impossible that he could do better than me. I vowed to try again the next time class met, and shut my mouth...after one last pun.

“You just don’t punderstand, Marlowe. I’ll make you punderstand one way or another.” He grunted. I fell back in my chair, getting my Macbook ready to take notes when class eventually began. The lecture itself was pretty dull. Nothing more than a syllabus and some basic notes. Halfway through the lecture, I became a typing machine: I would listen to the words that spilled from the professor’s mouth without even thinking about it. I instead focused my energy on the back of Marlowe’s head.

What a dumb haircut. God, it’s like he put a salad bowl around his head and just cut around it. And what a dumb personality. He could have the opportunity to meet face-to-face with God herself and he would probably turn Her down because “he had better things to do.” How goddamn pretentious.

Why did I want him to like me so badly?

After the class ended, I stuffed all of my stuff into my bag, which I then slung over my shoulder. My next class, a design lab, was two hours from now. I had plenty of time to kill between now and then. I decided to spend it killing time in the lounge. Our five-story hall had two lounges - one on the third floor and one on the fifth. I took the elevator to the third floor. When the doors opened, I spotted Jean leaving his dorm. He had his palette, his “PAINT” mug, and his paints in one hand. In the other was the canvas from yesterday. I figured, well, the lounge wasn’t going anywhere, so I hastened my pace and came up to his side. “Hi.”

He was wearing a muscle tank, and what was that peeking out from underneath? His right upper arm was covered in brown, blue and black brushstrokes. I wiped my finger over the strokes, which incited a “The fuck?” out of him. I was surprised that they didn’t come off. Sasha was right about the tattoos. I figured I’d take her advice and see how it went. “You have a tattoo?!”

“Yeah!” This was the most excited I’d seen him, though it still wasn’t much. He stopped walking, put his art supplies on the ground, and snaked his arms through the sleeves of his tank top so his shirt hung around his neck like a scarf. He pointed towards his tattoo, which I could now gleefully observe in its full glory. It was an interpretation of “Starry Night.” Jean’s finger traced around the brushstrokes, spiraling around the mountain and circling the yellow stars that were inked on his arm and right pec. “I got it done for my birthday last spring.”

“van Gogh?” I asked, putting my finger to my chin.

“Yeah. I got another one, too.” He said before he turned on his heels and pointed towards another tattoo in the middle of his upper back. It was a simple line drawing of a woman with straight yet full
lips and somehow daring eyes. In her long hair was a flower crown of what looked to be baby’s
breath. “Picasso did these sketches. This one is called War and Peace.”

“I like it.” I beamed. Before I was done admiring the Picasso piece, Jean looped his hands
through his tank again, pulling it back down over his torso. I blinked as he picked his art supplies up
again and continued to follow him out of the building. “Painting again?”

“No shit, Sherlock. You’re just on your game today.” I pouted, crossing my arms and looking
forward again. He returned to the same spot he was at yesterday on the hill. He plopped down and
sighed, taking the brush from his pocket and tucking it behind his ear as he mixed the paints in his
palette with a palette knife.

“What part are you working on today?”

He started stirring the paint his palette and replied, “Shadows on the legs.”

He mixed together a shade of brown, just slightly darker than the color on the girl’s legs. he started
painting the little dents and curves on her kneecaps. He dabbed the brown on another section in his
palette, adding a crimson color.

“What’s that for?”

He mixed together the brown and crimson, lightly dotting her knee with it. “Scrapes on her legs.”

I frowned, resting my cheek in my hand. “Why are you giving her all these cuts and bruises?”

“Uh, we don’t have a yard where I live.” He finished dotting the scrape, stirring the water in his mug
with his brush. He wiped the bristles on his shorts and spun them around in the puddle of brown
paint, continuing to paint in the shadows on the legs. “City living, you know. So, whenever she goes
outside, she plays on the sidewalk. Scrapes up her legs really bad sometimes.”

“That’s so weird to think about.” I combed the grass below me with my fingers. “My house is
completely surrounded by grass.”

“You live on a farm, right? In Sina?”

My eyebrows came together and I put my hand on my breast. “I do not live on a farm!”

“You live in Sina, sweetheart. That’s farmland.” I blushed at the pet name. “You live on a farm.”

“What defines a farm?” I folded my arms and rose my eyebrow. He balanced his brush on top of his
palette and began to count on his fingers.

“You have at least one acre of land.”

We had a little over three. Our expansive yard was fenced by a cheap, split-rail fence, but it didn’t
take up even a quarter of our property. Actually, most of our land was wooded. I squinted my eyes,
and averted my gaze.

“Name another one.”

He smirked, and counted off another finger. “You have a barn.”

“Well…”

He broke into laughter. “Oh my God, you have a barn.”
“But!” I pointed at the sky with a cheeky grin on my face. He refocused on his painting, his smug smirk still on his face as I explained, “It was from the last people who lived there, and we don’t have any animals. It’s absolutely empty.”

“You could probably throw some good parties there.”

“I could.”

His smile widened as he sloshed his paintbrush in his mug. “Alright. No animals?”

“Nope.”

“No, like, crops or anything?”

“Nothing besides my mom’s garden.”

He shrugged, his grin still on his face. “I guess you don’t live on a farm after all.”

I nodded curtly with my arms crossed proudly. I sighed, turning up to observe the cottonball clouds gliding across the sky. We sat in silence for a little bit. I could faintly hear the bristles of his brush gliding across the painting before he sloshed them in his mug of water, washing them off. Then, the cycle would repeat. It repeated a few times before Jean finally spoke, and when it did, it sent a shockwave through my spine. “Why don’t you bring something to do? Like a sketchbook or something?”

I sat up, digging the heels of my palm into the grass to keep my balance. “Hm?”

“A sketchbook? Like, put a pencil to paper and make pictures appear? This is an art school.”

“Oh! I’m a design major! Remember? I sketch, but, you know, mostly computer stuff.”

“Didn’t you have to draw for your portfolio to get admitted here in the first place?”

“Yeah, I did a few pieces. One with colored pencil, one with graphite. The rest of it was digital art and photography. That stuff just comes easier to me.” I shrugged, and looked around at the trees around us. “And I’m not bringing my Mac out here. Gross.”

“You could get better if you practiced,” Jean suggested. “Instead of sitting here talking to me and doing nothing, you could do something.”

“I’m caught up on all my work right now, thank you very much.” Jean snorted. “Cause your stuff takes like, no time at all to do.” He rinsed off his brush, adding more scrapes to the girl’s shins. “My roommate finishes projects in like, an hour and a half.”

“What did you say?” I nudged his leg. I tried to sound annoyed, but I couldn’t. “I’ll have you know, my stuff can get really fucking complicated. I’d like to see you work your way around photoshop.” Apparently my remark worked, ‘cause Jean grimaced.

“My roommate is a photographer. Trust me, I’m familiar with how it works.” A pause. “Sort of. I don’t have a clue how to work my way around it. It’s fucking confusing.”

I crossed my arms and smirked. “Don’t tell me ‘it takes no time to do.’” Jean held his hands up in surrender.

“You win.” He lowered his hands, but not before pointing at me accusingly. “But that still
doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be doing something *productive* with your off-time.”

“This *is* productive. I’m making friends.”

“With who?”

“You, asshole.” I pointed back and forth between us, a smile on my face. “We? Yeah, we are friends.”

“We are?”

“Yes, we fucking are. You have no say in the matter.” I insisted. I crossed my arms and raised my chin up ever so slightly. My word was now law. Jean sighed, but I could see a tiny smile flit across his face.

“Fine. We’re friends.” I noticed something minute on his tongue flash white, like a satellite in the sky. “But not until you meet my best friend—*what are you doing.*” I got real close to his mouth, examining the source of the shine.

“You pierced your tongue?”

“What? Oh, yeah.” He stuck out his tongue to show me before it snapped back into his mouth. Sasha told me about the tattoos, but this? This was a *surprise.*

“Your best friend?”

“My roommate. He’s...an interesting guy. Fucking awesome. And adorable and perfect in every single way.” My eyes widened. Well, there goes that boy. I liked him regardless though, so I offered up my services.

“Oh, cute. If you’re going to make a move, I could be your wingwoman.”

“What?” Jean asked, confused. “*Oh.* No. I don’t like him like that. He’s adorable in this weird puppy, kid brother sort of way. You’ll understand when you meet him.”

“That’s an interesting way to describe your best friend.” I said, not quite believing his “no homo” sort of attitude. But I didn’t judge.

“Yeah, I know, but saying that Marco is adorable is like calling the sky blue. Really just kind of a fact.” I remembered the cartoon of Marco on the whiteboard outside of their room. If the drawing was at all accurate, adorable was probably a good word to describe the guy. But anyway, I decided it was probably a good time to turn the subject back to me.

“Am I adorable?” I asked, batting my eyelashes and twirling my hair. *Hella* cute. Jean glanced back at me, brushing his hair back with an airy chuckle before sweetly answering: “No.”

Wait, what? “Jeaaaaaan.”

“Sorry, Hitch. I call ’em as I see ’em.”

“Fine. But *I’m* not the one who just smeared red paint all over my forehead.” He frantically wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, but it only smeared the paint. He grimaced at his crimson-stained hand and muttered, “Shit.” All I could do was laugh at his misfortune.

“Here.” I licked my index finger and tried to rub the stain off of his forehead, but he recoiled away from my touch, nearly sending his canvas into the air. “Ah!”
“Would you rather be walking around with a stupid paint stripe on your forehead?” I sighed. He tried again to wipe the stain off of his head, spitting on his own hand using it to wipe the paint off. It didn’t help much. He hissed, “I don’t want your fucking spit on my face. What are you, my mother?”

“No, just an adorable friend concerned about her friend that looks like a total moron.”

“I’d rather look like a moron than have your spit on my face.”

“I feel like that sentence sums you up as a person a little too well.”

“What does that even mean?” He furrowed his brow. All I could do is laugh. Shit, that’s all I seemed to be doing. I’ve just been laughing a lot. Jean probably thought I was insane, but I couldn’t bring myself to care.

I checked the time. Twenty minutes till my next class. I lifted myself off the grass with an “oof” and said, “I’m headed to class.”

“Which one?” He continued adding details to the legs.

“It’s at the design center. It’s a lab.” I answered.

“Ah, I know where that building is.” He slowly nodded before looking back to his painting. “I’d walk you there, but I’d kind of rather finish this.”

What a gentleman. I brushed my hand through his hair. Before he could complain, I was jogging down the hill towards the design center. I sang, “Don’t worry! I won’t get lost.”

“Are you sure? It would make my day.” Jean called back, smile in his voice.

“Bye!”

The design lab was two hours and fifteen minutes long. The email that was sent to us by my professor said to only bring a pencil and a notebook, but I brought my Mac to be on the safe side. A design lab would be a breeze, or so I thought.

Our teacher handed out the syllabus, which I took with a smirk. However, it faded as I continued down the list of assignments. It was all drawing, collaging, sketching and...what? I had been working with a pirated copy of Photoshop for the past few years, and thanks to countless tutorials and lessons, I was extremely good at it. In fact, it basically carried my portfolio into college. My drawings were...decent, but there were only two that the school looked at. And they took a year to finish. Having to finish all my drawing assignments within a week was intimidating to say the least. Maybe Jean could be bribed.

Our first assignment was to draw any two geometric shapes from three different angles. That was easy enough, and it happened to be a beautiful day. I was inspired to scour the plastic tub of snacks in my dorm for a can of soup and a box of granola bars to turn into a still life. Outside the hall were a trio of square tables with umbrellas. One was occupied by a pair of talkative girls, so I took one of the open ones to work on the still life.

A box and a can. A rectangular prism and a cylinder, once you really got down to it. Simple as that. I put the pencil to the paper and began sketching the outlines of each shape, but they just didn’t look...quite right. I erased them and restarted. I must’ve restarted three times.
How the fuck did I do this before? How do you even fit each piece on the page? You could try to fit each shape on the page, but it would be too small. You could then try to draw big, but you would risk cutting a piece off. Like, I would draw the can perfectly, but it would be so big that I couldn’t fit the fucking box on the page. Then I would erase that disaster, and try to draw it smaller, but then it would be too small. The cycle would repeat. This was why I wanted to do digital design. I can’t fucking draw.

I placed my sketchbook on the bench next to me and put my elbows on the table, wiping the underside of my eyes with my forefingers. This was probably going to take a week. I would spend half an hour working on my drawing each day before erasing my work and tossing my sketchbook underneath my bed. Drawing was stupid. I mean, why would you draw or paint something when you can just take a picture of it? It’s the twenty-first century.

I felt something tap my head. When I turned to look for who fucking did it, I saw Jean walking away from me, his hands stuffed in his pockets as he snickered. I shook my head and cried out, “Come back and help me!”

He turned on his heels to come help me, just like that. No argument. I scooched over, making room for him to sit next to me. “Don’t you ever have any classes?”

“Drawing 101 in half an hour,” He replied curtly, disregarding my invitation, and sitting on the bench to my left. I sheepishly returned to my prior position and put my sketchbook back on my lap. He continued, “I got ten minutes.”

“Really?” I blinked at him and turned back towards my already abused sketchbook paper. “I’d think you’d be past Drawing 101.”

“Yeah, I thought I’d be too. It’s required for everyone.” He leaned back to sit up straight and crack his back. “Mmf. What do you need help with?”

“Everything!” I whined. “It doesn’t look right.”

He sighed and leaned over to see my drawing, which I put on the table for him to survey. “Well, you don’t have anything on your paper.”

“I erased them all. They looked weird.”

“Draw it. Make it quick; draw something.” He snapped his fingers, and I spurred into action, carefully making each line on the box straight and even. He said, “You don’t have to get it perfect on the first try, sweetheart. Just draw the loose shape of it.”

“But then I’ll have to fix it later.” I grumbled. He sighed, cupping his hand over his mouth before chopping the air with his hand. “Okay. Okay, okay, okay. I know. But it’s better to spend thirty seconds on a good outline, than five minutes on a shitty one.”

“Thirty seconds for this entire thing?!”

“Christ, Hitch, just...just do a quick outline. Whether it takes thirty seconds or thirty hundred, just draw light, and try not to think about it too much. Try to get the basic outline.”

“Ugh, fine.” Jean watched as I hurriedly drew a couple dozen sketchy lines for the box, trying to capture the right angles. After I was done, I raised my eyebrows and turned to him for approval.

He nodded and said, “‘S good.”
“You’re just saying that so you can get to class soon.” I blurted out. His right foot was facing the direction of his class, so he could probably stand up and be on his way at the drop of a dime. He merely shook his head and said, “No, I’m serious. Just...focus on getting the angles right before you start putting in dark lines like that. You’ll fuck up your paper.”

“So, you think this is okay for the box?” I asked, and he nodded.

“Now try the can.”

“Think I have enough room for it on the paper?” I bit my lip. Jean shook his head, unfazed by the question.

“Absolutely.” I sketched in the lines for the can. An asymmetrical scowl appeared on Jean’s face. “A little too skinny.”

“Aw!” My shoulders sank, and I furiously started to erase the error. Frankly, I’m lucky that I didn’t tear the paper in half.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. Christ.”

“But I have to be good at this.” I groaned.

“You’re not going to start out good, just--” He sighed, and stood up. I glimpsed at Jean standing above me. “Hey, listen, now from there, just draw over those sketchy lines and make them as straight as possible, okay?” He was slowly backing up as he relayed more information to me. “If you need anything, just ask me--or your professor. Or you can Google it. Or whatever. Okay. Bye.” With that, he turned around and started walking to class.

I turned back to my sketch, a scowl on my face. I figured I’d try to work from here, despite how impossible it seemed. I was afraid I was going to royally fuck up my drawing from how far I’ve come. I didn’t know the next step in “Jean’s process” after “draw over the sketchy lines.”

I grabbed a darker pencil out of my bag and began going over the light sketchy lines on my paper with darker, cleaner, and certainly straighter ones. But, halfway through, self-doubt crept into my mind. I was going to royally fuck up this drawing somehow. Jean did offer his advice. I would have to take him up on that. I took a picture of the still life before returning my phone to my bag, and shutting my sketchbook. For now, I needed dinner. I was sure Sasha would love to accompany me, so I sent her a quick text.

“hey im headed to get food, wanna come with”

I waited idly, alone at my table, before my phone chimed. “YASS okay where are you”

“outside the hall”

Mere moments later, Sasha hustled out the hall doors and towards my table. “Ready?”

I stood up, cracking my back and stuffing my art supplies into my bag before I slung it over my back. “Yeah.”

“So, there’s this frat house right off campus.” Sasha said on our journey to the dining hall. “Connie said that his brother said that they throw literally the best parties. There’s one this Saturday, if you want to check it out.”
“Really?” I smirked, putting my finger to my lips. Going to college and not attending a party seemed like going to a steakhouse and just ordering a salad. Besides, I’ve watched so many scenes in so many movies about parties and Red solo cups, I thought I was ready for the chaos. I was always a stranger looking in, and I wanted to immerse myself in it. “We may have to.”

“They’re themed,” Sasha warned. “So we have to dress up.”

“What’s Saturday’s theme?”

“I should give you a fair warning.” She laughed sheepishly, bending her forefinger to crack it as she shrugged. “Their themes used to be genius. Conquistabros and Navahos, Barbarians and Librarians. This year, they gave up and the theme is just Dinosaurs and Sluts.”

“Charming.”

“Don’t you think it’s unfair, though?” Sasha pouted, “The guys get to go as these sick-ass dinosaurs and we have to dress like whores.”

“Dress as a slutty dinosaur whore. A dinowhore.” I suggested. “Best of both worlds.”

Sasha nodded, pointing to me as she bobbed her head. “That’s thinkin’ outside the box. Would you care to join me on that?”

I shook my head. “Slut or bust for me.”

Sasha nudged my shoulder. “Aw, come on.”

I crossed my arms. “Nope. I wanna make an impression.”

“Oh, fine.” Sasha sighed, looking towards the dining hall. “So, I heard they were having chicken fingers today, and I’m beyond excited…”

Sasha’s words were being tuned out by my own erratic, excited thoughts. My first college party. Excitement was bubbling in my gut. But first things first, I had to buy a new outfit for the occasion. This was a make-or-break moment for my social life, and I couldn’t wait for it.

That week, I went shopping at a little boutique on Main Street. I blew most of my cash on a short, form-fitting, yet adorable black dress with gold short sleeves. I couldn’t dare spend money from my debit card on it - my parents monitored that card, and if they saw it was used at a boutique, it would probably raise some questions. The dress was absolutely worth the price, though, for the details on the back. The fabric was tuckered into two large bows, showing three generous panels of skin. After buying the dress, golden bangles, and a pair of black pumps, I had about three dollars and a handful of change left in spending money.

When I got back to my dorm, I ignored Annie - on her computer, typing with intense focus on the screen - and changed into my outfit before I primped my hair. I stood in front of my mirror and started posing - hands on my hips, fluffing my hair, whatever. *Damn*, I looked fucking cute. I heard Annie ask, “Are you going somewhere?”

“Saturday.” I turned, twisted my head as far as I could to see how the dress looked from the back.

That Saturday came way too slow. Whenever I was bored in class, or when I was taking a break during homework, I would daydream about how I wanted it to go. I wanted to stand out. I wanted to be the fucking belle of the ball.
I wondered if Jean would be attending, but it never came up during our art session. We met on Thursday to work on our pieces - me on my still life, and Jean on his painting. He would lean over and give advice on how to fix mine, and I would tell him his work was coming out good. It was all the advice I could offer. By the time we were done working on our stuff, I had outlined the shadows for my still life, and began shading the box. Jean had finished the legs on his painting, and was in the middle of the sandals.

When Saturday finally came by, Sasha asked that we meet up at her dorm after I got primped up. The dress looked even better with my makeup done. God, I was cute. This party was going to be great. I strode towards Sasha’s dorm and knocked on the door. After a moment of waiting, Sasha opened the door and said, “Hi!”

She was wearing a baggy dinosaur onesie, complete with a spiked tail and hood. She even had matching mittens with claws. I crossed my arms. “What happened to the dinowhore?”

“I came up with a better idea.” She grinned, arching backwards and calling, “Connie! Come on, we’re leaving.”

Sasha’s boyfriend was a few inches shorter than her. He was wearing a white t-shirt, tied into a knot to show off his midriff. He was also wearing cut jean shorts - presumably Sasha’s. He extended his hand. His wrist was covered in bangles made from gold and turquoise. “’S me. Nice to meet you!”

“Hitch.” I took it, and he gave it a curt shake. “Nice to meet you too.”

Sasha and Connie exited the dorm, and Sasha gave the door a quick tug to make sure it was locked. “Okay. We’re all good!”

“Are we walking there?” I asked as we approached the elevator, pulling down my dress. I only took five steps and my dress was already beginning to ride up. I could only look good when I was standing still, which was fucking annoying. I was a person, not a mannequin.

“Nah, Connie’s driving.” Sasha held open the elevator for us, swiping her card and hitting the button for the ground floor. Oh, thank God. I didn’t know how I was going to survive at the party just standing there like a post, but I guess I would cross that bridge when I got to it.

Connie led us all to his sedan. I was trailing behind slightly, pulling my dress down every two steps. Sasha claimed shotgun, and I sat in the backseat. I wasn’t looking forward to getting out of this car in such a short dress. Shit.

As soon as Connie got into the car, he groaned. “These shorts are so uncomfortable.”

Sasha merely wrapped her arms around her torso and said, “Really? I’m pretty cozy.”

“Ugh.” Connie turned to face the lot behind him, pulling out of his parking spot. “The shit I do for you. Just so you can dress as a dinosaur.”

Sasha pinched Connie’s cheek, causing him to grimace as she said, “And I love you for that.” Awww.

The car ride to the party was pretty short. The frat house was maybe two blocks away from the residence hall, and across the street. Connie drove the sedan up the makeshift dirt driveway towards a large house with three Greek letters painted in the windows on the top floor. On the wooden porch, cigarettes glowed like fireflies, and the silhouettes of the smokers could only be seen thanks to the little light that was streaming from the windows on the ground floor. I got out of the car as gracefully
as I could, pulling my dress down as I began the shuffle towards the porch with Connie and Sasha.

When we got into the house, we were hit by a terrible heat. There were a lot of people crowded together here, their conversations clashing to form gibberish. Music was playing in the background, but nobody was dancing to it. Almost everyone had a red cup in their hand, and were casually sipping whatever was in them. Good God, it was like a movie. I turned to Sasha, who was being led through the crowd by Connie. He was a man with a mission who seemed to know exactly where to go. I grabbed Sasha by the wrist.

"I'm going to go take a look around." I announced.

"Have fun!" Sasha grinned, allowing herself to be led by Connie as she struggled to get out the last of what she had to say. "Find me if you need anything! Get it, girl!"

Sasha finally turned to face forward, and she was promptly swallowed by the crowd. I regretted not following, but parties are no fun when you're a third wheel, anyway. I turned towards the sea of strangers, my fists holding my dress down as I navigated the room. The kitchen was flooded with people, and I could see Sasha's head bobbing up and down as she struggled to get inside. I grinned, turning back towards the living room. There were no open seats, of course, so I stood in the center of the room like a fucking loser. I wasn't even drinking anything. I didn't want to even attempt to get into the kitchen to get anything.

"Hey." I felt a tap on my shoulder, and I turned to be face-to-face with this kid in jeans and a dinosaur t-shirt. He smiled down at me, his hand cupped around a white can. "How are you doin'?"

He was okay-looking. He seemed like a cookie-cutter suburban white kid, but he was nice enough, so I didn't dismiss him quite yet. "Good. You?"

He continued speaking, and at first, I was listening. But, I soon began getting bored with his personality. His words turned to mush, and I just...God, he was just so boring. And you don't want to waste your time with that kind of person. Sure, I wanted to meet a lot of people and make a lot of friends, but I wanted people I could spend ten minutes with without getting bored. Everything this kid was saying was going in one ear and right out the other, and I felt terrible for that. I didn't want to continue wasting my time, nor his.

"Oh, cool," I blurted at whatever he was saying, and started walking towards the kitchen. "Well, I'm gonna go get a drink--"

"No, hey!" He grabbed my wrist, and met my stare with a grin. "I'll get that for you. You just sit tight here, okay?"

"Okay." I smiled, leaning against the wall. How nice. "Thank you so much."

He nodded, and turned to shove his way towards the kitchen as I waited in the same spot. I mean, I didn't want him to lose sight of me. But damn, did it feel awkward.

After a few moments of waiting, I wondered if it was normal for someone to take that long. I guess the kitchen was a little swamped, but still. He was taking forever. I mean, it was probably only like, a five minute wait, but it felt like half an hour.

When he finally did come back, he grinned sheepishly, extending a can to me.

"Sorry for the wait. I already opened it for you. Cheers!"

Aw. How sweet. I took it and brought it to my lips, taking a long sip--oh fuck, that's
disgusting. I nearly spit it back up into the can, but I forced it down my throat with a grimace. The kid merely laughed. “First drink?” He asked. I coughed, nodding. “The uh, benefits outweigh the cost. Trust me.” I did, and I forced another sip.

We ended up leaning against the wall, continuing our boring small-talk. He was a...design major. *Something* design-y. I honestly forgot. When he told me he was a sophomore, my ears perked up. But then he told me he didn’t have a car so I lost interest again. My sips were getting longer.

“Hey, so, I was wondering if you wanted to leave?” He scratched the nape of his neck.

Well...not really. Why would I want to leave? I only got here like, an hour ago. I just got my drink ten minutes ago. I was *just* starting to feel it, too. “No. Well, I mean, I’m good here. Chillin’...with you.”

I looked around for any more interesting boys, but I couldn’t find any that weren’t already talking to somebody else. I took another sip, and he said, “No, I mean, like, I’d come with you, maybe show you my place.”

A stray piece of hair fell in front of my face, which he promptly tucked back behind my ear. I rubbed the underside of my eye with my finger. “Eh, I d--” Someone had shoved their way through the crowd to stand next to me, disregarding the boy in the brontosaurus shirt. Jean, in a ratty sweatshirt featuring the image of a T-rex, had his hands in his pockets.

“Hey, Hitch, do you feel like getting out of here?” He asked.

I examined Jean’s face. His mouth was indifferent as usual, but his eyes were slightly widened. He looked *interested*. Did the outfit actually work, or was I really bad at picking up signals beforehand? I mean, when I was little, whenever boys would tease you and call you names, people always said it was because in reality, they liked you. All of the looks, all of the *sass* was probably because Jean liked me. That’s why he was being...not-so-charming when we first met, but that’s why he’s so willing to take me back to his dorm now. That sentence just changed the course of the entire night for the better, and I could not fucking wait. I swallowed and nodded, smiling as I supported myself on the wall behind me. Brontosaurus Boy be damned, it’s Kirschtime. “Oh my God, yeah. Sure.”

The kid in the brontosaurus shirt turned to Jean to mutter, “Aye--” before Jean wedged his hand in between my side and the wall, leading me towards the front door.

“Did you bring a coat?”

I shook my head, sipping my drink again as he tossed open the rickety, wooden screen door. Brontosaurus Boy chased after us, tapping Jean’s shoulder. “Hey, I was kind of in the middle of something.”

“Yeah, well--” Jean started, walking onto the wooden porch, but I interrupted him when I grabbed onto the door and called, “Bye!”

Giggling, I shut the door, still clutching my can. I was still in shock. I couldn’t believe *this* was happening, and this fast? Going to this party was hands-down the *best* decision I’ve ever made. I turned to Jean as we began our trek back to campus. I wrapped my fingers around his bicep, and *ooh fuck*. Lean muscle. I liked it. He shivered a little bit at that, pulling away from my grip.

“Eh, not now.”
As we trudged towards the sidewalk, Jean grabbed my can out of my hand. “Let me see that.” He inspected the label for a moment before promptly turning it over and pouring its contents out onto the dead earth. My giggling fit stopped.

“Why did you do that?” I ran my hands through my hair. I was wobbling on the dirt path, struggling to catch up with him in my heels with my hands by my side, trying to keep my fucking dress down. He turned back to me and actually waited for me to catch up, and once I did, he continued walking with me. “I was *drinking* that! You’re going to invite me back and ruin my be--”

“Listen, Hitch, I had a bad feeling about that kid. Okay?”

That’s when I stopped walking and just began to yell. “He was *nice*!”

“Christ, look at you.” He spat, taking his hand out of his pocket to gesture towards me with an open palm. “You’re falling over.”

His face looked blurry, like a painting that somebody smeared with their fingers. I felt like I was standing on stilts - those fucking heels - and I shook my head to argue. “Because I was *drinking*. This happens when you fucking drink. God, I’m here to have fun and you have to take me awa--”

“No!” He scoffed.

“Because you just want me in your room, don’t you? You just want to *sleep* with me; you don’t car-”

His hands were balled into fists. “No, I don’t, I’m trying--” He sighed, exasperated. “Jesus, aren’t you tired?”

The question caused my eyes to become very heavy, and now that I was thinking about it...yeah, I was a little tired. I was *a lot* tired. I nodded once, and Jean did the same. “Alright. Thought so. I’ll bring you back to your dorm, okay?”

I nodded, brushing my bangs out of my eyes and continuing my trudge to the hall. He muttered with a hint of irritation in his tone, “And I promise we won’t do anything.”

The walk took about fifteen minutes. It would’ve taken fourteen if I didn’t slip and scrape the shit out of my hands on the fall. Ugh, I prayed that Jean didn’t see anything. As soon as I regained my footing, I pulled my dress down again and continued the walk. I was actually pretty lucky I didn’t break my ankles in those impossible shoes.

We arrived at the dorm and Jean led me to the elevator, holding the door open as I walked through, leaning against the elevator wall. God, I was so fucking *tired*.
The car ascended to the second floor. As soon as the doors opened, Jean held open his empty palm to me. He bent his fingers twice. “Keys.”

“Oh.” I grabbed my purse, which was hanging off my shoulder. I fished for my key, and when I finally found it, I slapped it into his hand. He held up the brass key to his eyes and muttered something under his breath before saying, “Alright. Let’s go.”

He led me to my dorm, wrestling with the lock before tossing the door open and holding it for me. The light from the hallway was shining on Annie, and she turned over in her bed to shield herself from it. I walked inside, and immediately plopped down on the bed as Jean tossed my keys on my nightstand before he surveyed the room in the dark. His sleeves were pushed up to his elbows, and ugh, those forearms just about killed me. He pushed his hair out of his face and put his fingers to his lips as he searched for something.

“Hey, Jean?” He grunted in acknowledgement before I whispered, “Look. Don’t you like my dress?”

“Lovely.” He continued feeling around the room silently before asking, “Do you have a fridge?”

“No.” I pouted, slipping my heels off of my feet and kicking them off of the edge of the bed. Pay attention to meeew.

“Any water?”

“Check under the bed.” Wink wink, nudge nudge. Ugh, did I have to spell it out for him? He got on his knees on the floor next to me, and began to search for the case of bottled water I had stashed under there. I threw my hand over the side of the bed, combing his hair with my fingers. He ducked, however, escaping my grasp and leaving my hand to dangle. I heard the sound of crinkling plastic, and a loud thump as he hit his head on the bed. “Fuck!” He stood with a bottle in one hand as he rubbed the back of his head with the other. He untwisted the cap of the bottle and put it on my nightstand. “I’m gonna go. Drink water and get some rest. Night.”

“Wait, you’re not going to stay?” I yawned, and Jean stopped halfway out the door. I wiped my brow.

“If you need anything, ask your roommate. Just drink water, and try to fall asleep.”

“Ugh.” I fell back on my bed and sighed. “Bye, Jean.”

The light in the room diminished, and the door shut with a click. I lied on my back, still in my dress and frankly, too lazy to take it off. Drink water, and try to fall asleep. I felt my nightstand for the bottle of water and brought it to my lips, taking short sips as I stared at the ceiling.

He was so fucking weird. This whole situation was so fucking weird. I put the bottle back on the nightstand and dug the cold heels of my hands into my eye sockets.

Chapter End Notes
I still have a blog.

I still have a kickass editor.
Rope Yarn

Chapter Summary

"Rope yarn" is a period when a tailor boarded a vessel in port. The ship's crew was excused from traditional duties and had light duties, such as mending uniforms and hammocks. These periods offered more social time for the crew. Since rope yarn was used for mending, these relaxed periods became known as rope yarn Sundays.

Chapter Notes

trigger warning: as with the last chapter, there's a mention of rape/date rape, so be cautious if that's a trigger for you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Waking up was weird. When I did, it took me a few minutes to process the fact that I was actually conscious. When I finally built up the energy to open my eyes, I snapped them shut again to shield them from the morning sun. I rolled over to face the blank wall, slowly adjusting to the light. I couldn't face the sun this early in the morning. I still felt like I should be asleep, even dead, but I couldn't fall back if I tried. I smacked my dry tongue against the roof of my mouth. I needed water badly.

My eyes were burning, and I realized that it was because I left my contacts in. The burning sensation became too aggressive to ignore, and I frantically sat up and took them out. After they were both out of my eyes, which were both burning like hellfire, I grabbed my glasses and my water bottle off of my nightstand. I couldn't stand my glasses - I wouldn't be caught dead outside my dorm wearing them - but I couldn't think about putting my contacts back in right now. The glasses had thick, tortoise-shell frames with thick glass. They must have made my eyes look ten times bigger than they really were. I pressed the corners of my shut eyes, trying to relieve some of the burning before opening them up again.

When my eyes finally felt okay, I put my glasses on my face and looked around my dorm. The first thing I noticed was that Annie was gone. I don't know where she would be on a Sunday morning, but it wasn't here. I then noticed my unusual choice in pajamas - my dress from last night, which had ridden up so far, it looked like a shirt. I wiggled out of it, tossing it on the floor and sinking back into my bed. I picked my phone off of the nightstand, checking the time. One in the afternoon. Ouch. I also noticed I had four Facebook notifications.

My life on social media was kept under lock and key, and the people I trusted enough to friend on Facebook usually texted me if they wanted to talk. Facebook messages were highly unusual.

Friend request from Jean Kirschstein. I remembered spending time with him yesterday, but I didn't remember doing anything. In fact, I was ninety-nine percent sure we didn't do anything - but this still seemed unusual. He didn't seem to be the Facebook type. The other three notifications were messages from him that went as follows:
“hey message me when you get this, wondering if youre ok”

“got your fb from sasha”

“hope thats not weird”

I immediately accepted his friend request. Now I had to craft a message. How should I type this out? Good grammar could look like I’m thinking too hard about what to say, but poor grammar may make me look lazy. I wonder if he’d be the type to judge someone if they use emoji. God, this is so frustrating. I figured I’d play it safe and meet in the middle, with light emoticons. “hi :) i’m good! just tired lol”

I eased myself up, rubbing my eyes with my hand. I got a response from Jean surprisingly quick. “ok nice do you remember anything”

Did I? I remembered talking to a kid with a dinosaur shirt. I realize that could’ve been anybody, but that’s all I could remember. I remembered leaving with Jean, and I vividly remembered touching his hair. I remembered it being really soft. He put a lot more work into it than I had thought before. “yeah i remember hanging with a kid in a dino shirt then you and me went back to the hall.” I added, “your hair is soft btw lol” and immediately regretted it.

His response: “if youre feeling better you can come over and ill tell you what happened. you wont like it but it’s very important”

Another message: “we can go get breakfast or something i figure you’re hungry”

Oh thank the Lord. I was starving. I was equally thankful he didn’t react to the fact I just called his hair soft. I pushed myself out of bed, my only motivation being the promise of food. The struggle now was whether or not to dress cute. Yeah, I felt like shit, I was starving, and if I could’ve gone to breakfast in sweatpants and a t-shirt that reads, “I AM DONE,” I would have. But I was going to be with Jean, so I wanted to wear something just a little nicer. A t-shirt and leggings would do.

I got my purse and locked the door before I went to Jean’s floor. I found the familiar whiteboard fixed to their door. I knocked and took a big step backwards. After a brief moment of waiting, the door finally swung open. Jean was there, and before I could take a shameless look inside his room, he had already stepped into the hallway and locked the door.

“Hey.”

“Hi.” I looked around the hallway, unsure of what to say now. I don’t think either of us knew exactly what to do. “So, uh, did you have a place in mind?”

“Place on Main Street.” He led the way to the staircase.

“Am I driving?” I really didn’t want to, because parking in the city, especially Main Street, was hell. But if it meant getting breakfast, I would do it.

"Nah, we’ll just take the bus.” He shrugged, and my pace slowed a little bit. Urban public transportation. I’d heard the horror stories from my parents. I was just about to nope out of this situation and run to the dining hall.

“Uh, are you sure? I mean, I have my car.” I would definitely drive now if it meant avoiding the bus.

“Sitting with a group of strangers for five minutes won’t kill you.” He said curtly. I sighed. He plunged his hand into his pocket, and took out a single silver token. He held it out towards me, and I
plucked it from his fingers, curling my hand around it. “You’ll be fine. Hey, I’m even paying your fare.”

We walked out towards the sidewalk, where a lone bus stop sign was standing next to an old bench. Jean checked his phone and said, “Next one comes in three minutes.”

I sat on the bench, my purse in my lap. “Are you sure that’s the right one?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure.”

I scratched my head and stared out at the street. The winding road was framed by giant trees, and every time I saw a car come by, the knot in my stomach got a little tighter. I absolutely did not want to be on a bus right now. Or anywhere near other people. Or outside at all. I remembered why I was here in the first place when my stomach rumbled. I glanced over at Jean. He was tapping his foot, watching the street dutifully. Sure enough, a moment later, a bus came barrelling down the street, slowing and screeching to a stop directly in front of us. Jean sat up, cracking his back. “Still have that token?”

I held up my fist and opened it to show the token sitting in the center of my palm. He nodded and stepped back, allowing me to take the first reluctant step onto the bus. “Well? You go ahead.”

I nodded slowly and stepped onto the bus, making sure not to touch the railings. I didn’t want to catch anything, like a cold or the plague or something. I stood at the front of the bus, biting my knuckle as I mulled over where to sit. I tensed up when I heard Jean say, “Just pick a seat.”

The bus’s engine roared back to life. The bus took off faster than I expected, and the force propelled me forward. I caught myself on a nearby pole. I hissed, but I had to hold onto it if I didn’t want to fall flat on my ass. Looked like I was doomed to the plague after all.

“Well?” Jean asked from behind me.

“Well, what?” I shot back. I was still considering my options. If I sat near the front, yeah, I’d be near the front, but that’s where a handful of other people were sitting, too. Then again, if I sat in the back where there was nobody...it was skeevy, a little shady, and it had a weird smell that I could faintly smell from where I was standing. It smelled musty, as if the air had weight to it.

“Are you going to sit down?” My knuckles were turning white as I clenched the metal pole. I felt a slight push on my back. I turned to glare at Jean, whose eyes kept darting between me and a nearby pair of seats. I finally gave up with a sigh, sitting in the seats that Jean had chosen for us. I sat up straight, but he made himself real cozy real quick. He leaned back, twisting and wiggling his back in an effort to make himself comfortable. He sank into the seat with a heavy sigh, crossing his arms and staring straight ahead. I, on the other hand, had my legs crossed, and my posture was perfect.

“You’re not being very gentlemanly right now.”

“I’m taking you to breakfast and paying your bus fare.” He reminded me. “What more could a girl want?”

“I offered to drive you in the comfort of my own personal car.” I reminded him. “What more could a guy want?”

“That’s out of the question. You feel awful, don’t you?” He asked that as an actual question, but I think the bags under my eyes and the raspy undertone in my voice answered it. Though that wouldn’t stop me from lying.
“I feel fine. You keep underestimating me.”

“I think I’m estimating you just fine.” He chuckled to himself, but only once, before a smirk crossed his face. “You’ve just never driven with a hangover before. It’s terrifying.”

“Oh, really? How did that go?” I could drive with a pounding headache, sensitivity to light, and a lack of makeup. It wouldn’t be enjoyable, but it would certainly be doable. I doubt it was as terrifying as Jean would describe it to be.

He merely shrugged. “Could’ve been better.” There was a short pause. “Would’ve helped to have a license, though.”

“What?” My eyes narrowed. I was trying to comprehend what Jean just said. If Jean was kidding, he would be smirking or something. Instead, he looked just as confused as I was, as if I was overreacting. “Did you...you know, get back alright?”

“No, I tragically died in a freak accident.” He paused before saying, “Yeah, it was fine. For the most part, I mean...I nearly hit this girl walking her dog.”

“Christ.”

“But, If I hypothetically did hit her, she probably wouldn’t have died! I mean, I was going like, 15 miles per hour.”

My palms were together as if I was praying. I may as well have been praying for this child. He seemed to act like he was doing me favors, and that I was a bigger fuck-up than he was, but then he dropped weird bombshells like this, and it made you really wonder what else he had left to surprise you with.

“But...why?”

“I was sixteen and starving?”

“Whose car did you even drive?”

“Not important.” He coughed. “Anyway--”

“No, no, no.” I wagged my finger before poking his cheek. He scrunched his nose at that and recoiled as I nagged, “You don’t dance around the question that easily.”

“Why does it even matter?” He groaned. “It was two years ago, with people you don’t know and will probably never have the displeasure of meeting. Why does it matter so much to you?”

“Well,” I shrugged, “Why did you help me out last night?”

He scoffed. “That’s a totally different topic. I was present at your situation. There is nothing that you can do about something stupid I did that long ago.”

“What if I get ahold of a time machine?” I countered, smirking. “I could go back in the past and tell you not to be such a dumbass.”

He sat up straight in his seat, clearing his throat and explaining, “Well, if you do that, you’ll create a paradox, and that won’t be good for anybody. You see, if you keep me from doing that, you could potentially change the course of my entire life. Like, if you stuck your nose into my sixteen-year-old business, I might not even be at this school right now. I could be a completely different person.”
“Where would you be if I did?”

He paused for a moment. “That’s not the point. The point is, if you did tamper with my business, I wouldn’t be on the bus with you right now. And you wouldn’t know to go back and intervene in my business. You’d create a paradox. So, what happens next? You fuck up big-time, Hitch. You tear the fabric of time with extra-sharp sewing scissors, and ruin the entire universe as we know it.”

“Oh, wow, Jean.” I said apathetically. “Good thing you’re an expert on time machines.”

“It really is.” He folded his arms and looked up at the ceiling, his words trailing off. “I’m really prepared for the future when everything goes, you know, all Star Trek and shit…”

“You like Star Trek?”

“Well, it’s more of an expression.” His words were going faster than his thoughts. “Like, I say Star Trek to mean the typical bastardization of how everyone thinks the future is going to look, you know, uh, chrome everything, teleporters, spaceships--”

“You definitely watch Star Trek, don’t you?”

“Occasionally.”

“You nerd.”

“Listen, you were about to ruin the entire fabric of the universe.” He said, his eyes bugging out as if I committed some cardinal sin. “I can’t have the blood of billions on my hands because you wanted to stop me from getting hangover food two years ago.”

“You’re still a nerd.”

“You wound me deeply, Hitch. I’m insulted. See?” He asked, pointing at himself. “This is my insulted face. Just because you are so above science fi--wait, hold up.”

He leaned over me, and the subtle smell of cheap soap filled the air around me. His arm was outstretched in front of my face to pull the yellow rope to my left, and with a curt tug, the “Stop Requested” sign at the front of the bus lit up with a “ding”. Jean gripped the seat in front of him. As the bus slowed to a halt, he got up and announced, “This is our stop.”

I hustled off of the bus and onto the cobblestone sidewalk of Main Street. I took a quick note of all the nearby shops until my eyes settled on the flashy, chrome-plated diner in the near distance. Noting the shiny exterior of the restaurant, I pointed to it and asked Jean, “Is this what you think the future is going to look like? You did say chrome everything.”

He groaned, refusing to reply to my wit. We walked side-by-side towards the diner. There was a flickering neon “OPEN” sign hanging crookedly in the window. As soon as we entered the restaurant, I could smell strongly brewed coffee and crackling bacon. The waitresses seemed apathetic and snarky, and the food didn’t look exactly gourmet, but greasy diner food was what I needed right now.

We were seated in a booth by the window, with a perfect people-watching view. Jean got a cup of coffee while I got a glass of water. When it came time to order, Jean’s request sounded complicated but delicious: a pepperoni and jack cheese omelette with porkroll and shredded hash browns on the side. I opted for a plate of pancakes topped with tropical fruit along with a side of white toast, and the intention of mooching off of Jean. He didn’t find it funny when I tried to order the mooching, and neither did our waitress.
After the waitress had left with our orders, Jean took a handful of creamers from the middle of the table, and snapped the lids off of each one and pouring them into his coffee. He then added several packets of sugar before he threw all of his trash into messy pile. As he stirred his coffee, it turned from a chestnut brown to a sandy color. He took a sip of his coffee before taking the menus featuring the specials from the edge of the table and propping them up, creating a partition between us and the rest of the diner. I bit my lip, glancing between the menus and my tapping fingers. Jean just looked at his mug and noted, “Damn fine coffee.”

“Or what’s left of it.”

“Hm?”

“Nevermind.”

Jean took another sip of coffee, sighed, and ran his fingers through his hair. “So...uh...fuck, Christ-- anyway...”

“Do you remember that kid you were talking to?” His voice was hushed.

I sipped my water, trying to think of what he looked like. All I could see was this faceless body in a stupid dinosaur shirt. I shook my head. “No.”

“I kind of do.” Jean scratched the back of his head. “T-shirt, jeans, uh...that’s all I can remember...wait!”

“What?”

“Brown hair.” He ruffled his own hair before immediately, almost anally, fixing it up again.

“Oh, I think we’re onto him now.” I waved my arms sarcastically.

“No, shhh, shut up, I’m serious.” You could tell he was. He was pointing, and his stupid signature smirk was replaced by a very stern stare. “He got you your drink?”

“Yeah?”

“Was it open when you got it?”

“Yeah?”

A pause. He looked shocked, as if I wasn’t human. I glanced around the diner, drinking in the kitschy decor, clueless as to why he was giving me that look. Before taking a long sip of coffee, he said, “Yееееah, don’t do that again.”

“Why not?” I took another sip of my nearly empty glass of water. I tried to push my discomfort out of my mind and drink in the atmosphere instead. “This place smells really good, smells like--”

“Shit, you don’t take an open drink. That’s like the first rule of college.” He wiped his brow, clearly exasperated. “Well, not the first. Maybe, like, the third. But still, didn’t anyone tell you that?”

“My parents--” My sentence was interrupted by the waitress dropping off our meals and topping off our drinks. “Thank you. Anyway, Jean, my parents don’t think I’m the ‘party type.’ At least, they keep telling me not to be. They don’t want to tell me what to do if I do go to one. They just try to nip it in the bud. You know?”

“Well, that guy obviously put some weird shit in there. Just...be careful.” His voice tapered off as he
refilled his mug with more cream and sugar. Despite the influx of confusion and disgust I was feeling, I smiled and reached forward to pinch Jean’s cheek. He immediately recoiled.

“Awww. You care about me!”

“I just don’t want to see some girl get date-raped. Fuck.” That term sent a shiver through my spine, but it was followed by a sense of warmth and relief. I was here, I was safe, and I was eating ambrosia disguised as a stack of pancakes. I had to live in the present to avoid reflecting on the past, so I made my sincerest effort to do just that.

“Thank you, though.” I reached over with my fork and took a bite of his omelette. He raised an eyebrow at me as I reached for a second bite. “Ooh. Tastes like pizza.”

Before my fork could meet his plate, he pulled it away so my fork met the table. He merely smirked until I pushed my plate forward. “An eye for an eye?”

He shrugged, sloppily slicing off a bite-size chunk of my pancakes with the side of his fork and stirring it in a pool of syrup. After taking a bite, he chewed the pancakes thoughtfully. There was a spot of whipped cream stuck to his lower lip, but I didn’t point it out. “S good.”

“Here.” I pushed my plate forward and pulled his back so they were both in the middle of the table. I started prodding at his omelette with my fork. “We’ll share.”

“This is the most selfish way I’ve ever seen anyone ‘share.’” Jean noted, but in the end, he shrugged and took another bite of my pancakes. “You’re forcing me to share.”

The knot in my stomach unraveled over our shared silence. As we kept eating, fully conscious of each other’s presence, I never felt like I was obligated to make conversation. Small talk wasn’t one of my stronger points. Nothing worth talking about is small, in my opinion. I always felt like in order to get more comfortable with a situation, especially one that came from such an unwelcome situation, someone had to be talking at all times. Usually stuff that nobody ever really wanted to talk about, either. The weather, their classes, their professors. Just something to fill the empty air.

That wasn’t the case here. Here, I was relaxed. I felt like I could breathe, and think. Whenever I started to get anxious or sick, I just took another forkful of food or watched Jean stubbornly attempt to cut the rest of his food with the side of his fork. Or how whenever he cut off a chunk the pancakes, he would rub it in the syrup on the plate. He wasn’t satisfied until he dragged it over every part of the plate, and it was dripping with syrup. He wasn’t exactly a prince, but based on last night he had the chivalry part down.

“How was last night for you?” I asked as he stubbornly tried to cut his porkroll with his fork, before admitting defeat and picking up a knife to cut through the meat. “I mean, I never got to ask you about how your night went.”

He furrowed his brow and responded, “Uh, not great? I had to take you back home, which…”

“Oh.” I bit my lower lip and turned back towards his plate, stealing a bite of sweet potato hash. “Sorry.”

“No, I don’t–” He put his elbow on the table, and rubbed the inside of his eye with his finger. “It’s not your fault. I’m sorry that it happened in the first place, and really, really fucking disgusted. And, uh, besides, I wouldn’t want to go back there anyway. Skeevy.”

I slid a piece of mango across my plate, but I didn’t want to eat it. He stabbed it with his fork, pulling it away from me and bringing it to his mouth. Right as he finished swallowing, he opened his mouth
to add, “‘S not your fault you got ridiculously unlucky at your first party.”

“Do you go to a lot?”

“Eh, not really.” He shrugged, turning back towards the food. “Seemed like everyone was already buddy-buddy, so that sucked. I kind of just wandered around with Marco.”

“Oh, shit.” I hope he didn’t have to walk back by himself. “How did he get home?”

“He got a ride back with Sasha.” He took another bite of hash browns and said with his mouth full, “Probably still asleep now, though. He sleeps like a freaking log.”

“Is he like, the party type?” That caused Jean to nearly choke on his food. After a struggle to swallow it, he started laughing heartily, throwing his head back.

“No.” He continued to laugh. “Oh, God no. That was like, his first one ever. He’s a fragile flower.”

I went to take another bite of pancakes, but my stuffed stomach protested vehemently. I wiped my mouth with my napkin and threw it onto my plate. “I can’t eat anymore.”

“Yeah.” Jean took a final bite of pork before looking back down at his plate, pushing it away. “I think I’ve hit my limit.”

I sighed. I felt ten pounds heavier. I never wanted to move again. The comfortable silence I reveled in before returned as we took small sips of our drinks. Halfway through a sip of coffee, our waitress placed a faux-leather checkbook onto our table. Jean put his cup down and sat up and asked, “Could I have two slices of cherry pie, actually? To go.”

The waitress glared at Jean before taking back the checkbook and mumbling an apathetic “sure.”

“How can you eat so much and still take a slice of pie home? Two slices of pie? This early? Unless the one is for me—”

“It’s not.” He said quickly. “‘S for Marco. You can get your own if you want. Besides, it is never too early for pie.”

I groaned. I couldn’t even think about having more food. I averted my eyes when the waitress returned with a styrofoam take-out box and a new check. Jean grabbed the black checkbook and read the final total before putting it back on the table and sighing. He began to dig into his pockets. I grabbed the check and said, “Hold on, how much were the pancakes?”

“No, I got it.”

“Mm-mm.” I furrowed my brow and shook my head, taking my wallet out of my purse and combing through the bills inside.

Jean scoffed, unfolding his leather wallet. “No, you aren’t.”

I unfolded a ten from my wallet and slid it across the table, to which Jean groaned.

“As much as I love boys buying me things, I think I can handle buying my own breakfast. Besides, you paid my bus fare.”

“Alright.” He grinned and threw his share onto the table, along with a few extra bucks. “I got tip, too.”
I grinned in triumph, quickly snapping my wallet shut and dropping it back into my purse before leaving the diner.

The bus ride back wasn’t nearly as bad as the ride there. Jean, once again, gave me a token to pay for my fare. We sat in the same seats we were in on the last bus, patiently riding this one out until we got back to campus.

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

That was Sasha’s first reaction after I told her everything that had happened. I brought her to my dorm to talk over a bag of microwave popcorn to see if she had any information that Jean and I lacked. She unfortunately did not.

“No, I mean, it’s not your fa--”

“I mean, I know that, but I still feel awful.” Her legs were crossed on my bed, staring solemnly down at her socked feet. She rapidly looked up at me with her ponytail bouncing to suggest, “Let me make it up to you.”

“What? No. You really don’t have to.” I really didn’t want her to feel guilty. That was the last thing I wanted, actually. Mostly I just wanted to get everything off my chest to a third party.

“No, I want to.” She shook her head. “I still feel so bad that we didn’t give you a ride or any help. C’mon. We’re going to Main Street for lunch.” She unfolded her legs and climbed off of the bed. “”

“I already went out for breakfast!” I fell back on the bed. I was still full from that stack of pancakes and half of that omelette. I wondered how Jean was faring with that pie. “I’m not hungry.”

“Shopping, then. We’re going shopping.” Sasha smiled proudly, turning towards the empty bed near me. I guess there was no arguing with her. Besides, the more I thought about going out, the more I thought it would be a good idea for me. I could get comfortable with my surroundings again, try to get back on track for college. Learning the area would probably do me well, too. I nodded towards Sasha.

“Wanna invite your roommate too?” She asked.

Come to think of it, I don’t think Annie and I exchanged more than twenty words since move-in day. “I don’t think she’d be much fun.”

“Oh come on, it won’t be too bad. Call her! Call her!” Sasha chanted. I eventually gave in. It would probably help Annie and I bond a little more if we spent some time together. “Do you have her number?”

“Uh, yeah. I think this is it.” I dug out my phone from my pocket, searching through my contacts. I tapped her name, glancing over the number again.

“You think it is?”

“We literally don’t talk at all.” I tapped Annie’s name and rose the phone to my ear.
“How do you not communicate with your roommate, that’s absolutely craz—”

“It’s ringing! Shh!” I hissed, and Sasha snapped her mouth shut as I waited patiently for Annie to answer. After about three and a half rings, a voice answered, “Hello?”

I was kind of shocked to hear some background noise. She was in a place with people. I could hear a booming laugh and a meek voice tangling together into a mish-mash of unintelligible garbage. I didn’t think Annie had friends, especially this early in the school year. Hell, I was lucky I had Sasha. And Jean (sort of).

“Hey! Annie, I didn’t know if you were doing anything—” She was, “—but I was going to go out with Sasha Braus? You know her?” Probably not. “Anyway...we were going to go to Main Street probably—”

“For what?” Her voice wasn’t curious. Her voice was curt, dry, and most annoyingly of all, monotonous. If you had to put it on a canvas, it would be greyscale.

“We’re not exactly sure?”

“For like, lunch or a store, or…?”

Sasha caught my attention as she nodded furiously at the prospect of getting food, but my still-full stomach vehemently opposed the idea.

“Just shopping,” I amended, before I mouthed towards Sasha, “You can hear?”

There was a pause. I heard her voice, her words mostly incomprehensible. “What?...I mean...hm…” Her voice came back on the receiver and she said clear as crystal, “Okay.”

I nearly choked on my own spit. “Really?”

“Yeah, really. I’ll go.” She coughed. “Meet me outside the hall in twenty minutes, then we’ll leave.”

“Oh, alright, well, I’ll see you then.” I hung up the phone, placing it on the nightstand to charge. She was certainly demanding, but I could appreciate a girl who knew what she wanted.

Twenty minutes and a costume change later, true to her word, Annie was standing with her hands in her pockets, outside the entrance. I skipped towards her and smiled. “Ready to go, then?”

“Mm-hmm.” She turned on her heels, away from the door and towards the edge of campus. “Main Street, correct?”

“Yup.”

I offered to drive this time to Main Street. While the food on Main Street was good, it was the shopping that really set it apart. The boutiques, while expensive, had adorable clothes. We entered one that specialized in refurbished vintage clothes. Not my style at all. I mean, if I was paying money for something, it better be brand new, but I think Sasha was interested. While she trailed off to God-knows-where, I decided to tag along with Annie, who was slowly and carefully analyzing each piece of clothing.

“So, do anything exciting this morning?” I asked.

She coughed into her elbow before returning to the clothing rack she was looking through, her fingers dancing over the hangers. “Nothing exciting.”
“Fun?”

“Somewhat.” She was silent for a moment before deciding she didn’t like anything on the rack. Her attention turned to a shelf of sweaters, which she began to leaf through. “How about you? Anything happen last night?”

I turned pink, feigning interest in a nearby rack of collared shirts. “Nothing exciting.”

“That kid with the weird haircut had to bring you back.” She reached the bottom of the pile of sweaters. She frowned and moved on to the next stack. “That’s kind of exciting.”

I went on the defensive, rolling my eyes and sighing. “First of all, he didn’t have to bring me home. He wanted to. Secondly, there’s nothing exciting about a person platonicallly walking you home and platonicallly grabbing you a bottle of water, for you to platonicallly drink before he goes back to his dorm room at what, eleven o’clock? I wanted to leave early, and he was kind enough to walk me back.”

She coughed before looking at me. Her eyes were trying to look through me, but I made sure my serious, stoic face didn’t falter under her icy gaze. She turned back to her stack of sweaters and mumbled, “Mhmm.”

She was silent after that, except for a few coughs here and there. She eventually stopped near a trash can and used the opportunity to take a handful of tissues from her jacket pocket. She blew her nose with one, and the sound caused me to squirm. After she was done, I asked, “Hey, are you sick?”

She glanced over at me and raspily answered, “No.” She cleared her throat and answered much more clearly, “Just allergies.”

I couldn’t risk being with a person who was obviously sick. I gave a curt nod and kept the lookout for Sasha, who was by the checkout counter. I nodded in her direction and hustled right up to her in a strange attempt to avoid getting coughed on by Annie.

After Sasha had made her purchases we left the store, and walked back out onto the street. Sasha looked down at her bags and whined, “I’m hungry.”

“You’re always hungry.”

“My stomach literally hurts.” Sasha looked down at her stomach, grimacing. She started rubbing her stomach, pouting as she was approaching Annie. “Hear his cries.”

Oh, God, Sasha. I reached to calm Sasha down before Annie stopped me in my tracks.

“Food could be okay.” Annie shrugged, sidestepping gracefully away from Sasha. I watched Sasha assume a hugging stance, though she apparently decided not to go for it at the last minute.

“There’s a small German pub at the corner.” Sasha pointed in that direction, already on her way. “They have pretty good pretzels. Sound good with you?”

I wasn’t going to get anything, so I didn’t answer. I glanced over at Annie, who merely shrugged before coughing into her elbow.

“Would a pretzel be good for your throat?” I asked.

“Yeah.” She said, before of course, coughing into her elbow again. I shrugged, turning my attention back towards the sidewalk in front of me. We eventually came across the stand. It was a little tiny
place with just an “in” and “out” window, and the cheesiest Oktoberfest decor I’ve ever seen. The sidewalk was full of people holding cheap plastic steins filled to the rim with foamy and presumably cheap beer. We went up to the window where Sasha ordered a cheese-stuffed pretzel from an apathetic teenager in lederhosen. Annie got a pretzel and lemonade, and in a spur-of-the-moment decision, I got a root beer in the spirit of faux-Oktoberfest.

We copped a cramped little picnic table on the sidewalk to eat at, with Sasha on one side and me and Annie on the other. The conversation was light due to the raincloud over Annie’s head, and the fact that Sasha’s mouth was too busy eating to talk for the first few minutes.

After she quickly downed her pretzel, I asked Annie, “So, where were you this morning, by the way?”

She looked at me and responded, “Breakfast with a few friends.”

“Ooh.” I had no clue who these friends could be. “Anyone I know?”

“I doubt it.” She took a sip of her drink before setting it on the table.

“Well, what are their names?” I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. I took it out to look at the screen. Jean had Facebook messaged me a humble “hey”.

Oh, boy. I really wanted to pay attention to Annie, but I also had to carefully construct my answer back. Just...had to be chill. And casual. “hey, how are you?”

Annie answered my previous question. “Uh, Bertholdt Hoover. And Reiner Braun?”

“Oh, yeah…” I thought for a second, before deciding that I definitely didn’t know them. “Not familiar. Sorry.”

Jean replied. “good. side hurts. otehr than that, i’m good. you?”

“im out with annie and sasha” I think Sasha knew “Bertholdt” and “Reiner,” because she was now talking like crazy. I couldn’t focus on them.

Before I could ask what happened to Jean’s side, he said, “you busy? shit sorry”

“no no you’re good. what happened with your side…?”

“marco pushed me off his bed. on the floor. nbd. would it be easier to text?”

I bit my finger and nodded, until I realized he couldn’t see that. I messaged back my number, along with an “absolutely, here you go”.

I put my phone on the picnic table and sighed. I went to take a victory sip of root beer, but when I tried, I tasted the sour tang of lemon instead. Wrinkling my nose, I put the drink back on the table, and scrambled to grab my own drink instead. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Sorry, Annie.” I said, before taking a long sip of root beer.

She brought her sleeve over her hand and wiped off the straw, as if my germs were the dangerous ones. “‘S fine.”

I kept drinking root beer, and staring at my phone waiting for a text. When my phone finally lit up, I snatched it up and read the text. “hey, it’s me”
I contemplated how to make myself sound cooler than I actually was. “sorry but name? gave my number to a few different people”

A moment passed, and I got a response. “bitch shut up you know exactly who’s texting you”

My phone buzzed again. “*HITCH*

And again. “FUCK SORRY AUTOCORRECT”

“mmhmmmm sure sure sure” I smirked, placing my phone back down on the table.

The conversation around me had died down, and I only looked up from my phone when I noticed that Sasha had gotten up to throw out her trash. She put her hands in her pockets and bounced on her heels, asking, “Are you two ready?”

Annie gave a single nod and got up from her seat. “Ready.”

I nodded, picking up my phone. It had just vibrated again. We started walking, and Sasha teased, “Don’t worry, Hitch, I’ll make sure you don’t walk into traffic while you’re texting Jean.”

“You don’t know who I’m talking to.” I locked my phone, redfaced.

“But it’s Jean.”

“It’s Jean.” I confirmed. That even got a smirk out of Annie.

“I think he likes you.” Sasha said, her voice even more bubbly than usual.

I looked at my phone and smirked. “Yeah, maybe.” I paused. “I think it’s more him being nice than anything.”

“Ha! Jean Kirschtein doesn’t pretend to do anything for anybody.” Sasha poked me in the ribs. “Most honest person I’ve ever met. He doesn’t play around, babe.”

“Pretending’ to be nice?” I bit my thumb. “I mean, he was a dick at first--”

“He’s like that sometimes.”

I nodded, straightening my back. “Yeah. Yeah, I think he does like me.”

“Why wouldn’t he?”

Well, why wouldn’t he? I smiled, shrugging. “I couldn’t tell you.”

Damn. Less than a month into college and I already had a boy interested in me. This was going smoothly, like hot butter on a stack of tropical pancakes. I couldn’t hold back my smile. Sasha grinned along with me. While Annie’s mouth didn’t move, her eyes softened, and she nudged me with her shoulder.

“Good job.” She took a sip of her lemonade and refocused on the sidewalk ahead of her. “He did bring you home last night. It’s obvious he cares about you.”

I smiled, but when I turned back to my phone, my grin disappeared. “Oh, God. What do I do now. Oh, God.”

Sasha beamed. “Just act natural! You got this far.”
“Not gonna lie - my natural instinct is to go back to campus and tell him I’m interested.” I paused. “And to make out with his face.”

“Don’t do that.” Annie said, but Sasha gasped and exclaimed, “Do that!”

“Should I do that?” I asked. I thought about it for a minute. What guy wouldn’t like a girl coming to their room and being like, “Surprise! You’re extremely attractive!” and offering a celebratory make-out session? I grinned, turning back to my phone eagerly. “Oh, my God, guys, I’m doing it.”

I sent out a text: “are you going to be in your room in twenty minutes?”

I waited impatiently for a reply. When it finally came, Sasha, Annie and I were in my truck. Sasha was sitting shotgun, with my phone in hand. She said, “Oh! He answered.”

“What’d he say, what’d he say?” I exclaimed, my hands gripping the steering wheel tightly. Even Annie was leaning slightly away from the backseat, hoping to find out.

Sasha cleared her throat and read, “‘I dunno, probably.’”

“Tell him to stay there!” I responded.

“Exactly like that?”

“Well, it has to sound a little...calmer.” I swallowed, thinking of a more eloquent reply. “‘Well, I want to visit you around that time. Is that alright with you, or should I come by later?’”

“I’m just writing, ‘i wanted to stop by then.’” Sasha said. Before I could ask, she added, “Yours was a little too formal.”

“Ooh my God, tell me what he says.” I held my breath for a minute. God, I was excited. The only thing stopping me from doing a very-embarrassing-but-very-appropriate happy dance was the fact that I had a gas pedal under my foot.

We drove in silence for a bit, anticipating a reply. When I heard the phone vibrate, I freaked out a little. “Sasha! Read it!”

“‘that’s fine.’”

I nearly pulled my steering wheel out of the car frame. I was pumped. “Yeah! Tell him we’re making out!”

“Yeah!” Sasha cheered, but Annie interrupted and said plainly, “Don’t say that.”

“Aw, Annie, you’re right, that’s weird.” I cleared my throat and said calmly, “‘Cool.’”

“Just cool?” Sasha asked.

“Just cool.”

“‘Cool.’” Sasha repeated. “Any emoji?”

“Sunglasses emoji.”

“That’s pretty cool.” Annie agreed. If Annie agreed, then it must be cool.

“Okay.” Sasha said. “I sent it. Are you ready?”
“Really ready.” I nodded. We arrived back on campus with ten minutes before I was supposed to be at Jean’s. Despite my protests, Sasha and Annie insisted that I looked fine. My stomach was turning, and I couldn’t just sit in my room and relax for ten minutes just to go back up to Jean’s. After getting out of my truck and bidding Sasha and Annie goodbye, I texted Jean apologetically. “hey i’m gonna be there 10 min early surprise haha heading up now”

I straightened out my back and took a single deep breath before locking the truck and heading up to Jean’s dorm. I knocked on his door. There was no response. What? I stood there staring at the door in confusion. Was he in the middle of something important? What if I overstepped a big boundary by being this early? What if–

A hand tapped me on the right shoulder, but when I turned to see who it was, nobody was there. I looked ahead, and Jean was already standing there, snickering, and unlocking the door with one hand while holding a toothbrush in the other. I was too angry at myself for falling for that dumb trick to be angry at him.

“Hey.” He said, twisting his key in the door before throwing it open. “Sorry, it’s a fucking mess in here.”

It was indeed a disaster. There were a few half-finished canvases leaning against one of the beds, with shoes and shirts thrown all over the place. Jackets (plural, jackets) were hanging off of the chairs, and a camera bag was lying on the floor, dangerously close to the door. I navigated through the mess and I climbed on top of the bed that supported the canvases, making myself right at home. I kicked my boots off of my feet and onto the messy floor with a thump. I knew Jean wouldn’t do anything about it, and I further pressed my luck by asking, “Do you have anything to drink?”

He hopped onto the bed too, putting his hands behind his head and reclining against the pillow. He sighed. “Check the minifridge.”

"But Jean!" I whined, leaning against the wall before melting onto the bed. “I’m so comfortable.” I kicked the mattress for emphasis. “C’mon, don’t make me get up. You should be a good host.”

“You should be a good guest!” He shot back, before closing his eyes and sighing in defeat. He grinned and said, “Fine. Fine, I’ll get you something.”

I scooched against the wall as he opened his mini-fridge. “I have water, and a half-empty bottle of Coke.”

“Water’s fine.” I shrugged.

“Good,” he mumbled, taking out his Coke and a bottle of water from the fridge. He got comfortable next to me, reclining back and putting his arms behind his head. He muttered, “That’s the last time I’m getting up.”

“You’re so lazy.” I scoffed, but my criticism fell on deaf ears. He turned towards his nightstand to glance at it. On it was a small spiral-bound sketchbook, a black pencil and a lamp. His phone charger and a video game controller were on top of the sketchbook, the wires hanging off of the edge like jellyfish tentacles. He asked, “Do you wanna play Mario Kart?”

“Huh?”

He sat up and grabbed the controller, handing it to me. I didn’t know what to do with it. I didn’t grow up with video games, so I stared at the hunk of purple plastic with a furrowed brow. With a grunt, Jean leaned over and grabbed the silver controller that was on the nightstand next to his. The
wire was coiled around the silver plastic, and Jean slowly unraveled it. He glanced back at me and asked, “What are you waiting for?”

“What are we doing?” I asked. He motioned towards the purple box on the table at the edge of his bed. It was situated just under his TV. He shrugged, as if my question was ridiculous. “We’re going to race karts. Go on, plug in the controller.”

He handed me the end of the silver controller’s wire as well and said, “Get mine, too.”

“Okay.” I took the controllers and stared at the four corresponding holes on the front of the box. “Just any one?”

“No, the first two.” He poked the small of my back with his toe. “It’s like this is the first time you’ve done this.”

“Because it is.” I hastily plugged in the two controllers.

“Nuh-uh.” Jean shook his head.

“Yeah-huh?” I looked at him like he was dumb. “My parents were crazy strict about that kind of thing. Have I never told you this?”

“No—hit the button in the bottom left.” Jean said, and I followed his instructions. “Take the gold disc out and put the one with the checkers on it in.”

Jean took the remote on the floor beside him and turned the TV on, and instructed me to do the same with the console. I sandwiched between Jean and the wall again. He led me through the very beginning of the game - picking a character and a course and whatnot. I chose the princess characters for reasons that should be obvious. However, he hesitated to actually start the race itself. He wrinkled his nose before putting his controller in his lap, facing me and asking, “Tell me more about your crazy strict childhood.”

“You wanna hear about it?”

“Yeah.” He straightened his back. “Sounds, uh, interesting.”

I cleared my throat. “I grew up in a Mormon house. Like, strict Mormon house.”

“Like, the three wives and shit?” Jean asked, a slight smirk crossing his face. I nudged his thigh with mine.

I raised my voice at him. “My dad didn’t have three wives!” All he did was laugh.

“Jesus, chill.” He said. “Didn’t know you were still one of them.”

“Well, I’m not. When I hit maybe 13, I started, uh...teaching myself with the help of the Internet.” I shrugged. “I still doubt that my parents understand it.”

“What happened when you were thirteen to change your mind about that whole thing?” Jean asked, raising an eyebrow. His smirk kept growing and growing. “Introspective walk on the beach? Kiss from a bad boy who changed your life? Porn?”

“No,” I said. The answer was actually a lot more embarrassing. Instead of physically looking embarrassed, I took it with as much pride as I could muster. I said matter-of-factly, “I really wanted to watch The Little Mermaid. So I downloaded a copy of The Little Mermaid. That was like, the
worst thing I’d done to that point. I could never watch it because of the magic, it reminded my parents of witchcraft—“

He melodramatically gasped, putting his hand to his mouth. “Scandal!” This was followed by an uncontrollable peal of laughter.

“Shut up! I wanted to see it.” I whined.

“I’m sorry, but that is the best—thing—you ever told me, holy shit.” He calmed down and asked, “Is that still the ‘worst’ thing you’ve ever done?”

“Before I came here, yeah.” I blinked. “I mean, no boys, no Satanic rituals, I mean...I’m a clean slate. I was a slave to the Christian side hug, Jean. I wasn’t allowed to hug boys like a normal person. I don’t want to be like that anymore, but I’m still pretty...pretty sheltered, as much as I hate to say it.”

“I mean, personally, I wouldn’t fuck with any bad bitch that would pirate The Little Mermaid.”

I whined again. “Shut up. Shut up, and teach me how to play this.”

“Okay, okay.” He pointed to each button and briefly told me what it did.

“What about these two gray ones on top?” I asked, pressing them both down with my forefingers. He brushed them off. “Ignore them. Are you ready for your first race?”

“Yes. Let’s go.” I tightened my grip on the controller, watching the screen with determination. He turned to me and rose his stupid eyebrow again.

“Think you can beat me?”

“Sure.” The countdown started, and my thumb hovered over the A button in anticipation. When it was time to start the game, I found that racing wasn’t exactly my forte.

“Jean?” I asked, struggling to turn my kart around. I found that I had somehow made a wrong turn and was going the opposite way on the course. He grunted in acknowledgement, his eyes focused on the screen. Jesus, he was in first place and he didn’t even look like he was struggling. I asked, “Can you teach me the controls again?”

He glanced down at my half of the screen and chuckled. “Holy shit, you’re bad at this.”

“Because I never got a proper introduction to Mario Kart!” I complained, pounding the Start button to pause the game. “I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing.”

“Okay. You’re right,” he muttered. “Even though I would’ve won.” I flicked his jaw for that. He winced and said, “C’mon. We’ll just do one player for now.”

“Who’s the one player?” I blinked.

He scoffed. “You. I’m gonna teach you how to play.”

He wrapped his right arm around me, bringing his fingers over top of mine. I was all too comfortable with the feeling. I found myself blushing as we took out everyone in our path in a flurry of green shells and banana peels. We came in second, and only because we skidded out on an aptly placed banana peel in the last lap. After that race, he let my hands go, and took his arm out from under me. He gave a curt nod. “Alright. Try this next race on your own.”

Jean taught me that in the game, if you hold on the A button too long before a race starts, your car
will burn out and you'll get a slow start. I may or may not have done that on purpose so he would put his arm around me again. I wouldn’t admit it if I did. He hastily did what I expected, wrapping his arm around me and saying, “Oh, fuck. Now you need to catch up.”

He pressed his finger down on one of those grey buttons at the top—the one that he said “didn’t do anything.” I turned to him, our noses millimeters apart, and demanded, “The fuck was that?”

He recoiled a bit before turning his attention back to the screen. “Drifting.”

“You told me it didn’t do anything!”

“I did.”

I angrily turned back towards the screen, my hands immobile as he played for me.

“Why?”

“Because I really didn’t want you to beat me.” He shrugged. “Wouldn’t matter anyway, but I kind of wanted to ensure a victory.”

“So you think I could beat you?”

He shook his head at that and said, “Not yet. Just come on. You have like, two tracks left.”

“Can we race after we finish those tracks?”

“So you can kick my ass at Mario Kart?” He rose an eyebrow, dubious of my ability.

“Yes!”

He gave a sly smirk that made my face go pink. “We’ll see.”

With a newfound determination to kick Jean’s ass at Mario Kart and make him eat his words, I found that sheer passion and determination really didn’t get me that far. After doing the first few tracks as practice, Jean picked up his controller again, and we started another race. I was exponentially better than I was before - I came in third place in the first race - but I was still nowhere near Jean’s level. I was beginning to get frustrated. How come I can drive a real car with no hassle, yet figuring out how to drive a pixelated go-kart was like rocket science? Probably because driving down a street in reality didn’t involve throwing turtle shells (“Koopa shells!” Jean would correct me) or banana peels.

He glanced at me and said, “I still can’t believe you’re from such a crazy family.”

“Why is that so surprising?”

He looked up at the ceiling and mumbled, “Well…” as he collected his thoughts. “To start, you swear a lot.”

“Internet.” I curtly answered, not taking my eyes off the screen.

“You do cool shit like this.” He continued.

“Like?”

“I don’t know. Just hang out, for the sake of hanging out. You talk a whole fucking lot, though.”

“Oh, wel—“
“Don’t worry, you’re funny.” I sank deeper into his bed, leaning my head against his shoulder. Finally, he said, “You don’t look like a Mormon either.”

“Explain?”

A silent smile crept on his face before he released his tension with a chuckle. “You have a nice face.”

“A nice face? This is what separates the—“ I wiggled my fingers and crooned in a spooky voice, “Mormons—and the average man?”

“But wait! There’s more.” Jean said, and I could feel my face getting as red as his was from that awful joke. “Erm, you don’t dress like a Mormon. Like, I’m imagining long skirts and bonnets, but you’re like—“

I nudged his leg with mine. I guess the tights and the snug, striped t-shirt I found just lying around in my dresser were marginally sexier than what Jean dubbed the “typical Mormon uniform.” Not that I planned it, though.

“I’m Mormon, not Amish.” I joked, and nudged his leg again.

He stopped talking there. I think he knew that I got his drift. He didn’t return my leg nudge, though. I was mildly disappointed.

After another round of racing — I came in second this time around — Jean asked, “You need anything?”

“Any…?”

“Sustenance, blanket, whatever.”

“Jean Kirschtein, have you overcome your laziness?” I shot him a sly grin, which he refused to meet. He looked away, but couldn’t help but laugh. He got out of the bed, and I scooted over to sit where he had been sitting. It was extremely warm. I curled on top of it like a kitten.

He walked over to the door and said, “I’ll be back, I’m going to the bathroom.”

He shut the door, leaving me in his dorm alone. I was alone in a boy’s room. This could be my moment. If I could just get him to fall in love with me. Or kiss me, and then fall in love with me. Either or. I guess it was up to me to initiate. Jean seemed to think that “flirtatious and obnoxiously outgoing” was just my default personality. Well...it was my personality, to a T, but that still didn’t nullify my feelings or desires. I bit my lip. What do boys like? College boys. I had to be sultry, but not slutty.

I ended up pulling my bra strap down off of my shoulder and folded my legs in a way that my toes faced my left. I was ready to seduce.

The door handle turned, and I straightened my posture as I pushed a stray strand of hair behind my ear. My voice was breathy. “Jean—”

Someone who was definitely not Jean walked into the room, taking me by total shock. I could feel my face get hot as I went to pull my bra strap back up under my shirt--but wait! He was cute too. He was taller than Jean, with a broader build. His hair was parted perfectly in the middle, and on his face was a constellation of freckles. I connected the dots--not the ones on his face, but the ones in my mind--and realized that this was Jean’s roommate. This was Marco.
He stopped halfway through the door, studying me with wide brown eyes.

“Jesus Christ, Jean, what happened to you? How did you manage to turn into a girl?” After a second, the fake surprise melted from his face, and was replaced by a shit eating grin. He started laughing at his own stupid joke, his face reddening. From embarrassment or sheer happiness, I wasn’t sure, but God, Jean was right. He was adorable.

“I’m guessing you’re Marco?”

“Yup,” He chirped, tossing his bag onto his bed. “Sorry, I don’t...know...you? I don’t have your weird psychic powers. Or your name on the door.”

“I’m Hitch.” I said, extending my hand and a smile. Marco shook my hand twice and then plopped down next to me.

“Uh, nice to meet you. Hitch. You playing Mario Kart with Jean?”

“Yep. He’s teaching me.” I admitted. Marco scoffed.

“Teaching you? You’ve never played before? Don’t let Jean teach you. He’s awful.” Marco insisted, picking up the abandoned controller. “I’m going to teach you how to play, and then you are going to be able to kick Jean’s sorry ass.” He laid down on the bed as if it were his. “He’s probably withholding information so that he wins.”

I was surprised by the accuracy of that statement. “He is. Sore loser?”

“The sorest. Other than Eren, but...I doubt you’ve met.” Marco spaced out a little bit before shaking his head and looking back to the screen. “You ready for this, Hitch?”

“Hell yeah!” I turned back towards the screen. A playful look crept across Marco’s face, before he laughed and turned towards the screen. His lips curled into a warm grin.

“We’re going to get along just swimmingly.” He said, before making a comment on one of the control combinations. When Jean came back from the bathroom, he found us sitting close together, focused on the game with deadly intent.

“I see you met Marco.” He commented. I saw his eyes flicker down to the GameCube, only for him to frown and sigh. Since Jean’s bed was a little over capacity, he fell onto Marco’s instead, his arms sprawled like Jesus on the cross as he stared at the ceiling.

“She did meet Marco,” Marco said. “And she’s getting apprenticed by the Mario Kart master.” Jean groaned in reply.

“No. Marco? You couldn’t let me have one person I could beat?” He whined.

“Oh my God, you are a sore loser.” I widened my eyes in shock before I broke into a fit of snickering.

“Marco, were you talking about me? I’m offended.” Marco didn’t reply, his eyes focused on the game. Jean added to his statement, “Hurt, even. I’m hurt.”

Marco and I finished our race, and the pity party Jean was throwing for himself was crashed by Marco throwing up his arms in celebration and saying, “That was so close!”

“What?” Jean asked, trying to peek at the screen from Marco’s bed.
“That was a way better time.” I blinked, grinning at the controller in my hands. “Still can’t beat you, though.”

“You came close though!” Marco grinned, and I could hear Jean whine.

I waved the controller and dared Jean to join me for another round. He accepted. He took Marco’s controller from his hands and plopped down on the bed, sitting uncomfortably on Marco’s lap. After a moment or two of awkward sitting, Marco groaned.

“Okay, that’s enough. You’re too fat to sit on top of me.”

“I’m not fat,” Jean quickly retorted, easing his weight so Marco could slide out from underneath of him.

“Nah. Just...have you ever had almost six feet of guy sit on you? It’s heavy no matter what, Jean.”

“I could probably sit on Marco,” I bragged.

“Yeah,” He shrugged. “You probably could.”

The bed was severely lacking in space, so Marco ended up dragging his computer chair over to sit besides us. He said, “I’d rather sit here, though.”

“Fair enough.” I looked at Jean and grinned. “Are we starting our race, or...?”

“Yeah.” He quickly hit the start button, and I scrambled into get into position. “See you in hell.”

“Jean,” I batted my eyelashes. “I just told you my entire, tragic backstory. I think it’s safe to say I’m not going to hell.”

One race later Jean’s pride had crashed and burned, much like his kart. He stared at the screen, but I couldn’t tell if he was in disbelief or annoyance. I turned to Jean, debating what to say next.

“I...guess I won’t be seeing you in hell after all.”

“Not just yet. Next round.” He persisted, beginning the next round.

He began the next round, which he lost. He lost the next round, and then the one after that. He ended up losing the entire prix. He also lost the one after that, the one after that, and the one after that. After the second prix, Marco stopped watching and offering his support, and instead retired to his own bed to do some work on his own. Nothing could take Jean out of his zone, however, despite how badly he was doing. With each loss, his eyes got heavier and more focused. But no amount of focus could have him come in first place. Eventually, he stretched his leg out and clumsily hit the power button with his toe. “That’s enough for now. My hands hurt.”

“Not until you say I’m better than you.” I teased, sitting up straight.

“No.”

“You quit because you’re sick of losing.”

“I quit because my hands hurt.” He held up his hands, and as he slowly clenched them into fists, he facetiously groaned, “Ow.”

“So you’re not tired of losing.” I suggested, “You’re quitting because you’re a little bitch.”

Marco snorted from his bed, choking on his own laughter. As soon as he collected himself, he...
glanced back at me. I was smiling, finding his laughter adorable and somewhat charming.

“Fine.” Jean sat up, hitting a button on his remote. The screen changed from blue to a title screen. “I quit because games get boring when you keep losing.”

I couldn’t argue with that. I looked over at the TV and asked, “So, are we watching a movie now, or...?”

“Uh, sure, if you want to.”

“I want to.” I said, focusing on the paused screen. “What are we watching?”

“Eh, I don’t really think you’d be interested in this type of thing.” He cringed, grabbing his nearly-folded laptop from the foot of his bed. I realized then that it was hooked up to his TV. He went to close out of the screen before I grabbed his shoulder, tugging him back and encouraging him to lay back down. “No! C’mon, I mean, you already started it–”

“Barely.” He ran his hand through his hair. “I mean, I’ve already, uh, seen it…”

He’s cute when he’s at a loss for words. He has this crooked grin, and he stutters, and...it’s just so funny being in control of someone who is usually so adroit, always so quick on his feet. “And...?”

He stopped making that stupid face. The asymmetrical aspect of his smile remained, but it had a frustratingly snarky undertone. “And yeah, that’s it. I’ve seen it before.”

“How many times?” I asked. He pressed down on his trackpad with his toe, starting the movie up again. Even for someone as sheltered as I was, I could recognize the iconic opening credit sequence. “Oh, God. You fucking nerd.”

“Not quite sure.” Jean replied, finally getting himself comfortable. “At least three times.”

“Three?” I sighed. This fucking Star Wars nerd. Sasha did say he was a dork, but I did not expect such a high level of dorkiness, and for it to come out so soon in our relationship. If he was this nerdy now, imagine how he’d be when we’re dating. Or engaged. Or married. Let it be said that I am a girl with ambition and goals, and I feel my ambitions transcend that of a college dork who has seen Star Wars more than once, willingly.

I deserve a C.E.O.

I began to doubt this whole relationship--no, connection--that Jean and I had, but then I looked at him again. I brushed his hair forward, making sure it looked good. He wrinkled his nose at that, but I didn’t pay it any mind. With his hair back in place, I remembered why I was still here. There were some awkward patches over the course of the film, like when he would talk over the movie to give me trivia I could have gone my whole life not needing to know. (Did you know the guy who played Han Solo was a carpenter at the time of filming? I did not.) But other than that, I enjoyed spending that time with Jean, feeling his warmth against my side and hoping that at some point he would put his arm around me. He asked if I liked it about three quarters of the way through. I didn’t want to tell Jean that I liked the movie, because no way in hell would I admit to that after teasing him. I told him, “Well, I don’t hate it.”

He was lucky he asked then, because by the end of the movie when all the heroes got their little medals, I looked over at Jean to say something, but instead found him asleep. His chin was tucked into his chest, with his arms folded across his torso. I looked over at Marco, not really sure what my next move should be, but he was asleep too. His mouth was hanging open, and his laptop was still illuminated, whirring as usual. Some blinking lines surrounded a selection that Marco had made on
photoshop. I couldn’t tell if he made it before falling asleep, or with the arm he had flung over his keyboard.

“Losers,” I whispered - not loud enough to wake them up, but loud enough for them to hear if they were at least semi-conscious. “It’s fucking seven o’clock.” Nope. No response. They were out.

I had to figure out my next move. I glanced at the door. I *kind of* wanted to leave, but I was pretty cozy where I was. Plus, I didn’t want to disturb Jean’s sleep. I simply shrugged, eased back into the bed, and waited for sleep to come to me, too.

Chapter End Notes

oh my god i delayed on this so much~ art school is hard and stressful and i cry a lot ok

my blog: at-tofpeople.tumblr.com
thank you corey for editing~ follow her here: corey5268.tumblr.com
and thank YOU
In Ordinary

Chapter Summary

"in ordinary": An 18th- and 19th-century term originally used to refer to a naval vessel out of service for repair or maintenance, later coming to mean naval ships in reserve with no more than a caretaker crew.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

When I woke up, I wrinkled my nose at the tickling sensation on my chin. The air smelled like spearmint, and there was heat radiating from my shoulder to my waist. I tried to scratch at my nose with my hand, but I accidentally hit a head of hair instead. My shoulders tensed, and my eyes shot wide open. I glanced down to see Jean’s head on my shoulder, and his arm draped lazily over my waist. My hand was still lingering on Jean’s head, and I reacted by brushing my fingers through his hair. He let out a light sigh. The whole scene was relaxing for about ten seconds until Jean fidgeted out of my loose grasp, sat up, and started coughing crazily into his elbow.

I cleared my throat and asked, “Are you okay?”

He just shook his head, still coughing madly. “N--” He coughed again. “-- No.”

I glanced over at Marco’s bed. The sheets were a mess, and Marco’s bag was missing from the floor. I swallowed, trying to bring relief to my scratchy throat. Jean kept coughing until he eventually leaned over the bed, and hacked a wad of phlegm into the nearby wastebasket.

Okay. This was getting real gross. I wanted to get out of bed, but I couldn’t muster the energy to. Even when I processed the fact that it was Monday and I had class, I couldn’t bring myself to sit up and check the time. I just turned over in bed and said, “I think I missed my class.”

Jean grabbed his phone from his pocket. He fell asleep with it still inside. “It’s two.”

“Yes, I definitely missed my class.” I groaned, pulling the blanket over my head again. I missed design. I wish I could say I was upset. There was no point in getting my shit together now, especially since I felt like shit.

“Have anything due?” He asked. I shook my head, but I doubted he saw.

“No, that was last Wednesday.” That project with the three-dimensional shapes for drawing, as easy as it sounded, nearly killed me last week. “We’re just getting a new assignment today.” I felt Jean shuffle around next to me and whack something hard and flat against my hipbone, causing me to wince. Felt like a laptop. Who would just use their thousand-dollar laptop as a weapon?

“Email your professor.” Jean advised. I blindly reached around to grab whatever hit me, and as I guessed, it was his computer. I took it under the blanket, and opened it. At least it was warm there while I waited for it to boot up. I sniffled, and wiped my nose with my sleeve. I was disgustingly sick. My nose was dripping like a broken faucet.

“I don’t feel like it.”
“Just get it over with.” He grumbled. “The semester just started. It’s too early to be fucking up.” I stared at the blinking cursor. My mind was as blank as the screen.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You can figure it out.” Big help.

“Well, it’s the second week of classes and I’m already sick. I’m already fucking up, and it’s too late to stop me.” I pinpointed my sickness back to Annie. It had to be Annie. I mean, she looked sick before yesterday when she germed up Main Street. I probably caught whatever bug she had from breathing her air, and transferred that to Jean. Fuck.

“Just...spend your time doing something productive.” He leaned back against the wall, waiting for me to finish my emails. The room was silent, except for the sound of clattering keys, sniffling, and coughing.

As I finished my email, I mumbled, “O-Okay, I think I’m good--”

He ripped the blanket off of me and took back his computer, apparently to scan over my email. Before I could ask, he said, “I’ll send it for you--oh... Oh , you really don’t know what to say.”

I groaned, wiping my eyes. “Well shit, Jean, what do I do?”

“Just make it sound more professional.” He lamely suggested. I groaned, trying to revise my email to fit Jean’s impossibly high standards. I used the online thesaurus to make every single word I typed sound fancier. I sent it with an obnoxious push of the “enter” button. I turned to Jean and shoved the laptop in his direction. “Happy?”

“Yes, I am.” He took his laptop back eagerly. He took his earphones, which were hanging from the nightstand, and placed one in each ear. “I have to watch this thing for homework.”

“O-Okay…” I didn’t want to get out of bed quite yet, but I didn’t want to sit here like an idiot while Jean did work, either. “I mean, I’d do my drawing homework, but I don’t have any--”

That was a lie. I really didn’t want to do my drawing homework. Ever. I was hoping Jean would procrastinate with me, but before I could finish my sentence, he reached into the space between his bed and his nightstand and grabbed a huge sketchboard. A soft-cover spiral-bound sketchbook was clamped into it. He took the book, turned to the back and ripped out a few blank pages. He put the sketchbook by his side, and clamped the loose sheets into the board for me.

As much as I appreciated the gesture, I was now being watched as I did the one thing I hated the most. The one thing I hated more than homework was being judged while I did it. I didn’t even start it, and it was due tomorrow. Oops. But then I remembered the prompt. “Well, for our assignment, we had to draw ten natu--”

“Ten natural objects?” Jean grabbed a freezer bag of leaves from underneath his bed. God fucking dammit. “So did I.”

“Mm.” I brushed my hair out of my face and looked at his bag. I grabbed it and unzipped it before asking, “Can I just take any one?”

“Go ahead.”

“Thanks,” I said, grabbing a handful of leaves and twigs. After drawing for a solid two minutes and struggling with getting the shape of the leaf right, I sighed and put the pencil down on the board. “I
Jean didn’t even bat an eye when he said indifferently, “You have to.” His expression eventually softened when he took note of my discouraged pout. He shrugged and said, “Once you get the lines in, the shading is easy.”

“I don’t want to draw.”

“I don’t want to shade.”

“And why not?” He flatly asked.

“I was going to, but,” I sighed. “I’m not good at it. It looks cheap. And smudgy.” Every detail of my leaf blended together, and if I made the shading more defined, it looked way too unrealistic. I couldn’t find a happy medium, so I figured I wouldn’t attempt to shade the ten. It’d be easier that way, especially on my ego.

“Well, if you weren’t working on these the day before they were due, maybe you’d have time to put effort into them.”

“Sorry that this isn’t exactly my highest priority.” I rolled my eyes. If he was going to give me an attitude about my art and my work ethic, I wasn’t going to have it. “Sorry that I absolutely hate what I’m doing, and I can’t be the perfect art student like you. Sorry that I can’t exactly recover and focus after the worst weekend of my life.”

“How am I a ‘perfect art student’ for planning my work?”

He completely missed the point. “Sorry I can’t go back in time, erase the events of my weekend, and spend it alone drawing in my room.” I really was, but his attitude was so grating, I couldn’t take it. “Sorry not everything I do can meet your standards, and you are doing nothing to help me get better.”

“Then stop asking me for help and trying to meet my standards.” He grumbled, putting his earbuds in again. He said, slightly louder, “I’m not going to bother helping you anymore.”

Lower my standards. I flat-out could not fucking draw. He was talking as if I knew how to “sketch out the shapes” and “get the proportions right” and “shade well” in the first place. How could I lower my standards when I had no fucking standards? Hasn’t he ever struggled with this field before?

I spotted a small, black sketchbook from his nightstand. Maybe his stuff wasn’t as good as I perceived it to be. Maybe the stuff I saw was his absolute best? I had to see Jean’s failures and mistakes in order to feel better about my own. I let my curiosity take over control, so I reached for the book. It obviously wasn’t meant for the large pieces he does for school. It was probably full of what I was looking for - doodles and experiments. Shitty scribbles with lines crossed through them, and little smiley faces drawn in the margins. The color disappeared from his face when I grabbed it. I knew something strange and embarrassing had to be in there, and I really wanted to find it and rub it in his face. He lowered his laptop screen and reached to stop me, but I stretched out my legs and kept him at bay with my feet. Once I safely had it in my hands, I turned over to lay on my back. I held the book above my face, ready to open it.

“Well, let’s just see how good you are—oh, that’s not...oh.” I think I turned bright red. The first five pages, back to back, had no doodles or experiments or loose sketches. It was all of the same girl. The first sketch was just of her sitting on a bed with her legs crossed. They escalated quickly in intimacy. The next was of her laying down with her legs crossed against the wall as she was on her phone. Another one was of those same legs entangled with that of the artist - I safely assumed that would be Jean. While some were nude, most of them weren’t. But they were all equally intimate in a way that
no “friend” or “model” could be. My stomach got tight, and I started coughing to buy me enough
time to comment on these sketches. I needed something to say besides, “Who is she?” or “When is
this from?” or “Literally who is she?”

I cleared my throat, shutting the sketchbook tight before handing it back to a flustered Jean. He
dropped it into the deep, dark recess between the wall and the bed. He fell back on his mattress, his
arms crossed and face flushed. He opened his computer again, wanting desperately to ignore the
elephant in the room and get back to his work.

“Um…” I felt like I dragged it out forever thinking of what the hell to say. “So…?”

He inhaled sharply. You could almost hear the cogs in his head turn. “So...sorry, about all that.”

“How recent are those?”

“Like, three years old.”

“Oh.” I sighed, partially out of relief. I mean, I shouldn’t be jealous, whether the sketches were three
years old or three hours old. He had every right to see other girls if he wasn’t settling for this
girl. The world won’t stop for me and cater to my needs, although it should. I think I was a lot prettier
than the girl in the book. Who knows? Maybe she had a wonderful personality, but-- fuck, why am I
envious of a pencil sketch? The worst part was, I couldn’t help but be jealous, and a little offended,
but I was more curious than I was jealous, so I pressed further. “So, tell me about this mystery
woman.” He groaned. I sighed and poked his side. “Jean.”

“No.”

I leaned over to poke at his jawline. His shoulders tensed up. “Jean, we’re friends.”

“Yeah.”

I was a little surprised he didn’t contest that. “Tell me. I wanna know.”

Sighing, he closed his laptop halfway. I grinned, knowing I’d won. “We dated in high school. Due
to some gross and illogical misunderstanding, she thought I was French, and she liked me, and we
got out. But I guess I got too overbearing, and uh, I wasn’t French.”

“That’s so anticlimactic.” I pouted, but he seemed to agree with that statement. “Is that it?”

“Basically.”

“The entire story?”

“It’s a synopsis.” He coughed. His voice turned scratchy. “It’s a long story.”

He coughed again, trying to get his voice to return to normal. I kept pressing him to satisfy my own
curiosity. “Why did she think you were French?”

"My homeroom teacher freshman year said I was.”

“But you’re not.”

“My family traveled around a lot,” He said, “like, we didn’t move around, we traveled around.
Before we kind of settled here, we were just coming back from Paris. I basically never got to stay at
my own house for more than a month because we were always just somewhere else.”
“Wait, so you were like, constantly on vacation…?”

“Not exactly,” he shrugged. “I mean, it was for me and my mom, but my dad was going on a lot of business trips, and...well, it’s not really relevant.”

I put my elbow on my drawing board, supporting my head with my hand. I was way too eager to hear more. “I feel like it’s very relevant.”

“Dude, you have work to do.” He opened his computer up all the way again, leaving me hanging. Also, I kind of hated the fact that he just called me ‘dude,’ and I wanted to hit him.

“I can’t work,” I contested. “I’m not inspired.”

“Inspired.” He grunted, closing his eyes. “How do you get inspired?”

“I want to see more of your stuff. Show me what you did for this assignment.”

“You can’t copy my leaves.”

“I’m not copying your stupid leaves,” I said, somewhat offended. “I just want to get an idea for what to do. Where’s the sketchbook you use for homework and stuff?”

“Right here.” He grabbed the book right next to his lap. He flipped it open to the first page. It was a lazy drawing of a dried up maple leaf. The shading was sketchy and loose, but you could still make out the details of the leaf.

“It’s good,” I noted. My critique was bland, but I don’t think he needed any help from me. “I’m surprised this is your first drawing in your sketchbook.”

“I have other sketchbooks.” He flipped to the next page. “This is just the one I use for class.”

“How many do you have?”

“Actively? Just these three.”

I looked down at his second sketch. It was a piece of loose tree bark. This was starting to get boring. My search for inspiration ended, and I continued my procrastination. I sat back, coughed, and said, “Nevermind. I don’t wanna look at your leaves anymore. Get out your third sketchbook.”

“The third one?”

“Yeah. I wanna look at that one now.” I smiled and sat up. He groaned, cleared his throat, and leaned back.

“Naw.”

“Why naw- t?” I pouted. I tried crawling over to reach between his bed and his nightstand, but he kept be at bay by outstretching his legs and using them as a barrier. “I already saw your weird sex journal. I don’t think it can get much worse.”

“It’s not a sex journal—” He stopped himself there. “It’s just none of your business. It’s all like, plants and elves and shit.”

“Ah! Now I really wanna see it!” I grinned. Elves. That’s so dorky. I loved it already. “Oh, c’mon. I’m sure it’s all really good. I really wanna see it.”
“You’re gonna say it’s dorky or something.”

Ha, yeah, I totally will. “I promise I won’t.”

He inhaled and pressed his lips together tightly, before deflating and reaching back down to grab another sketchbook. He put it on my lap and sat up, closing his laptop for good. He was watching me open this book intently.

The first page made me laugh pretty hard. It was a simple sketch of a pair of denim jeans with an enraged expression, and a caption in small chicken scratch: “How not to pronounce ‘Jean.’”

I covered my grin with my hand and gushed, “You’re such a nerd.”

“You said you wouldn’t—” He reached for the book, but I held it just out of arm’s reach.

“I promised I wouldn’t say they were dorky.” I argued, blushing. “But there’re plenty of other synonyms.”

Jean groaned. The sketches on this page were quite primeval - wobbly line sketches of fruits and a frustrated attempt at drawing smoke. “Jean, how old are these?”

“I dunno.” He shrugged. “A year at the oldest?”

“Have you gotten better at drawing smoke?”

He pouted. What a fucking baby. “No.”

“Hm.” I flipped to the next page, and after hearing Jean’s explanation of his drawings there, I flipped again. Each drawing was accompanied by a brief backstory to each sketch and doodle, or a mortified excuse about why he has a drawing of a scantily clad fairy princess or whatever. His descriptions were always curt until I glanced between him and his book, wordlessly urging him to explain more. Most of the explanations he made were for the sake of avoiding judgment, but his efforts were always fruitless.

“I don’t think anyone’s ever been this interested in my doodles before.”

“I like them.” That wasn’t a lie. They were bizarre and geeky, but they were interesting at the same time.

“S nothing I would show off.” He was a little red.

“That doesn’t mean I can’t like them.” I flipped to the next page.

He laughed to himself under his breath. “Okay…”

I got to the last drawing, which was halfway through the book. I flipped through the few empty pages and Jean said, “And…I guess…that’s it.”

I started flipping back. I could already hear Jean complain under his breath “No…” The sketch I liked the most was of this girl with pointed ears. It was comprised of only three colors - the white of the paper, the dark grey of a graphite pencil, and a really sharp shade of gold. She had these really piercing, hazel eyes, with all of these creatures crawling all over her body. Snakes, centipedes, beetles, what have you.

“This one is my favorite.” I pointed at it, placing my finger on top. Jean inhaled through his teeth, gently picking my hand off of the piece by my wrist.
“Ehhh, don’t touch it.” He cringed. “You’ll smudge it.” I didn’t smudge it, but I refrained from touching the piece again.

I pointed at what I was talking about and said, “You should fix it. The face is a little wonky. Like, right here. And make her hair look less flat.” It felt kind of nice to be able to critique Jean for once, but I knew that this was still better than anything I could manage to do.

“I know,” He whined.

“I mean, with how good you are now, it wouldn’t be a problem to fix it up.” I suggested. I was blushing a bit. “Your painting so far is really good, too. The one you were working on outside?”

He stared blankly at the canvas peeking over the foot of his bed. “Shit, I still have to finish that~”

“Well, don’t rush it.” I grinned. “It’ll be perfect. Eventually.” I probably looked really cute, sick or not. I was smiling, my legs were crossed Indian-style, and I was tucking my hair behind my ear. Unfortunately, he didn’t seem to appreciate my efforts. I raised my eyebrow at him and sighed, resting my chin on my fist. “I thought you would love all of these compliments coming your way.”

“No, it’s not that.” He grinned, taking his sketchbook and putting it on his nightstand. He coughed before he leaned back on the wall. “I just have a hard time believing them most of the time.”

I tried real hard to think of something to say. I didn’t know what to say, for once. He didn’t say it in anger, or irony. It seemed like something out of my control, and I truly could not think of what to say besides, “Well, it’s true.”

I grabbed Jean’s drawing board and started drawing. Seeing his stuff actually did end up inspiring and relaxing me. Okay. Practice makes perfect. This is all practice. While I was focused on getting set up, I asked, “Do you show your sketches to a lot of people?”

“No,” he said, opening up his laptop again and getting ready to restart that thing he had to watch. He sniffled. He started to sound extremely congested. “Not many.”

I coughed, and started drawing using Jean’s drawing board. That was enough deep, soul-searching conversation for one day. I was feeling the motivation to draw. It was so rare, so I had to take advantage of it and just start sketching. Eventually, the sound of his fingers clicking against the keyboard faded into white noise. His entire presence became nothing more than something warm to lay my feet on while I drew and erased and drew again. After I finished my second object, Jean unplugged his headphones. Music started blasting out of his laptop, causing me to flinch and make a mark on my paper. I glared at him from my drawing board. He blinked, looking almost apologetic. “I’m sorry. Do you mind?”

I chewed the inside of my lip and erased the mark. “No.”

He looked back down at his computer and kept typing. I kept drawing. The music soon turned into mush, too. Not before I made comments on it though.

“I like this. I didn’t think you’d like this stuff.”

“What did you think I would like?”

“I don’t know. Death metal.”

“Jesus,” He muttered. He cleared his throat and sniffled. “I have music for two activities: self-loathing or focusing.”
“God, you’re depressing,” I muttered back at him, wiping my nose with my arm and going back to drawing. “Self-loathing.”

I felt at ease, if anything. My shoulders felt lax. My nose was still stuffy, and my throat sore, but the rest of my body and mind was at peace. I don’t know when it was, but at some point, Jean pushed himself out of bed, groaning. My legs complained that my source of heat was gone. He cracked his back, and sniffled.

“Listen, I’m gonna take a shower--?”

I blinked, and reluctantly sat up. The sky was a deep blue, with the last remnants of the day peeking over the tops of the trees. I had finished six drawings, and I wasn’t even tired. He was digging through his closet for towels or a shower caddy or whatever. I’ve already been here for like, an entire afternoon. I didn’t want to stay any longer if he was going about his day. We both had stuff to do, and I didn’t want to get Jean’s roommate sick either. I was still freezing though, so I threw Jean’s blanket around my shoulders, keeping his drawing board, too. I looked like a beggar. “Okay, I’ll go then.”

He took a bottle of shampoo or body wash or whatever from his closet and turned to me with a roguish smirk and suggested, “You could always join if you wanted.”

My eyes grew wide. I...didn’t know how to respond. I’m sure he was joking, but then again, I feel like our day together was pretty intimate, even if it was mostly spent in silence. But if he was serious, wouldn’t he sound more nervous? You can’t invite someone to shower with you all cool and collected unless you had impossible amounts of charisma and confidence. However, it took a lot of confidence to agree to a shower, too. Fuck it. Fuck it, fuck it, fuck it. I’m gonna do it. I’m gonna fuckin’ do it. I bit the bullet and took a deep breath before pulling the comforter tighter around myself. I wore it like armor. “Yeah.”

He laughed pretty awkwardly, and turned back to the closet and rifled through it some more. “I was kidding.”

Oh, Jesus. Oh, Jesus fuck ing Christ. I fucked up. Pretty badly. I shoved my feet in my shoes, wrapped the blanket around me somehow even tighter, and gathered the remainder of my belongings. “Ah-Ahaha, I was--me too.” I turned around to note, “You’re such a pig.” Saved some face there. I guess.

"Hm.” That’s all he hummed to himself, still looking through his closet. I shuffled across his room and towards the elevator as fast as I could without dropping all of my stuff. You know that scene in E.T. where he’s wearing a robe after drinking like, five beers and awkwardly stumbling around the house because his legs are too short and he’s too discombobulated and slimy? That was me, carrying around this huge board and a blanket that was dragging on the floor that wasn’t even mine. I hoped nobody important saw me.

I wrestled my room key out of my pocket and went inside. Annie was sitting on the bed, sipping something out of a Solo Jazz cup from the dining hall. It looked like orange juice. She glanced up at me, before staring back down at her socks.

“You’re alive.”

"Did you go to class?”

“Yeah.” She looked down at her backpack on the floor. She looked back up at me, waiting for an answer. I shook my head. I gently placed Jean’s drawing board on the bed before dropping the rest
of my shit onto the floor. I tossed his comforter next to the board on the bed before hopping on it myself.

In the middle of my struggle, Annie said, “Sorry I got you sick.”

“Thanks.”

I reached under my bed for my pencil box. I shook the rogue pencil shavings inside of it into my wastebasket. Then, I put the somewhat-cleaner box on top of my nightstand, put my headphones in, and got back to work on my drawings.

Nothing really exciting happened for the rest of the night. I got a late night quesadilla, even though the cheese and the grease did nothing for my health. I finished my drawings at about two in the morning, with an achy back, a sore right hand, and a graphite-covered left hand. I took a quick shower just so I didn’t go to bed smelling like death, carefully placed my work in front of my dresser, collapsed on my bed, and wrapped myself in blankets like a little burrito.

The next morning, I woke up still wrapped inside of Jean’s blanket. It didn’t even occur to me that I basically stole it off of his bed without his permission, though I was wondering how he fell asleep last night without it. He didn’t object to me taking it. He surely saw me take it, but it was too late now. The damage had been done.

Usually, I would be heading to calculus, but since I missed yesterday’s class, I opted instead to skip and go to my design professor’s lecture. She said it would be the same material she covered in class yesterday. I was pretty confident with math, so I figured I could afford skipping that class today. I was always pretty comfortable with math. My parents thought I was gonna be some scientist or mathematician when I was growing up. I wondered what they thought now, about me wanting to do design. I wondered if they worried about me. I was tempted to give them a call, but I had no idea what to say. I never really do. I scrapped the idea quickly.

Design started in just an hour and a half, so I quickly sprayed the blanket with air freshener before lazily folding it up, and getting dressed. I took some time trying to cover up the redness in my congested nose, and the circles under my eyes. I looked rotten, but I didn’t feel that bad. Besides the fatigue and the gross phlegm, the cold was more inconvenient than debilitating. I threw my bag over my shoulder, and grabbed my sketchbook along with Jean’s blanket. I hopped in the elevator and took it to Jean’s floor.

I walked over to his door and gently knocked. I hope he was awake by now, or else this would be very uncomfortable. After I had knocked, I held the big, plush blanket to my chest and waited for someone to answer. It ended up being Jean’s roommate, Marco, who answered the door instead.

He was obviously still getting ready for class. His shirt was half-buttoned, his belt was unbuckled, and his feet were bare. He looked down at the comforter I was hauling, his eyes still glassy from sleep. “Oh, that’s where that went.”

”He wasn’t mad, was he?” Marco moved out of the way for me to poke my head through. Jean was sprawled out on his bed face down like Jesus on the cross, still asleep. There was a pillow on top of his head.

“Nah, just confused.” Marco said, quickly buttoning his shirt and glancing over at the Keurig machine. “Want coffee?”

I shrugged. I picked a caramel macchiato cup and the only clean mug in the room, which was on Jean’s desk. I handed them both to Marco, who started on making my coffee.
I threw the blanket over Jean, letting it gently envelop him. I gently tucked him in, because I’m cute as hell. The scent of cheap lavender air freshener filled the air, and even Marco commented on it, whispering, “Ooh, that smells nice.”

The Keurig started brewing my coffee, making an ungodly noise. Marco tried to shush a piece of machinery. Jean’s grip around his pillow tightened, but he still remained asleep. The scent of earthy caramel mixed with that of light lavender, and the room smelled disgusting. I let my coffee cool while Marco finished getting dressed. Then he showed me where he and Jean kept the sugar packets they stole from the dining hall. I took three packets, and a shot of half-and-half from the fridge.

“So,” Marco took one of his three cameras off of his dresser. It was a small, black camera with two crude metal rings attached to the sides. Marco tied a nylon rope to each of the rings to make a primitive yet practical camera strap. He picked up the camera and started doing some weird shit with one of the knobs on top of it - he was cranking a lever, making the camera’s innards click and snap - until it opened up. He then took out a canister of film. I was impressed, yet confused.

“I didn’t know people used film.”

“I didn’t either. But, it’s what my professor wants, so I’m using film.” Marco grabbed his bag off of the ground and put the canister in the front pouch before zipping it back up. “Are you headed to class?” I straightened my back. My bag was getting heavy weighing on my shoulder.

“Is there any other reason I’d be up this early?”

“True. What do you have?”

“Design.” I put my coffee down to cool while I stretched my arms. My day hadn’t even started yet, and I was already achy. “How about you?”

“Photography 101.” He answered, putting his film camera into a little case and placing it in his bag. I furrowed my brow. I took a sip of my coffee. Excessively sweet; just the way I like it. I didn’t remember where the photo labs were from when I took a tour of campus. Hell, I didn’t remember where anything really is except for where I could get food, and where my classes were. “Where even are the photo labs?”

He threw his backpack on and double-checked his hair in the mirror. “Second floor of the architecture hall.”

I cringed. “You mean that old brick building all the way in the back of campus?”

“Yeah.” He didn’t seem to mind the building’s location. “It’s a little out of the way, but there are these huge windows that face the woods, so the view is pretty nice.” A pause. “Not from the dark rooms though, because you have to keep them dark to develop photos, but…” He trailed off.

“Why don’t we walk together?” I suggested. “You pass the labs, don’t you?”

“I pass literally every building on the way to class.” He smiled. I looked back at Jean, who was still sleeping soundly, now curling into his comforter. I finished my coffee, and awkwardly put the empty mug on Jean’s nightstand.

We got all of our stuff together and left. Marco was careful to shut the door as quietly as he could. I was kind of dreading not only class, but having a one-on-one conversation. Usually I can get a read on people and evaluate how to talk to them, but I couldn’t figure out Marco yet. He was way too nice, I mean...he had to be hiding something, right? I resolved to find that out today on our walk.
When you’re too busy dreading assignments and worrying, you really forget to look around at your surroundings. This campus was small, yet beautiful. The leaves on the trees were starting to turn brilliant shades of crisp apple red, burnt umber, and sunshiney yellow, before falling and fading into an eyesore. The flowers that bordered the concrete trails that ran through campus were shaking in the chill of a fast-approaching autumn, but their vibrancy persevered. The morning sun was peeking over the sleek, sandstone student center, trying to breathe life into the pseudo-zombies that were commuting to class. I had to actually shade my eyes from the brightness.

However, none of it compared to Marco. He had a skip in his step, optimistic eyes, and a constellation of freckles on his complexion that made him look so young and enthusiastic, but not naïve. It was just pure, inspiring excitement for all the good that was sure to come that day. I tried to match him with a smile, but my face felt weird when I tried. Too sick. And too early.

"So, why do you like Jean so much?" Marco asked, kicking the dead leaves on the sidewalk and watching them fly into the air. They were magical, just for a moment, until they fell back down to earth.

I winced. I did like him a lot, but I hope I didn’t read as desperate. While I want a boyfriend, I can survive without one, just as I can survive without Jean being my boyfriend. I really didn’t want my first impression on anyone to be “thirsty.” I swallowed and sighed. My fingers were fidgeting in my coat pockets. “Is it that obvious?”

“No! Nobody can tell.” Marco immediately said, but I think he was lying. “People tell me I’m really perceptive. I pick up on a lot of little things.”

“What?”

He turned pink, stuttering, “A lot of little things...that’s what I meant.” He laughed at himself. “Besides, you two haven’t really spent any time around anyone else, right? Nobody’s around to tell.”

Much better excuse. “Well, no. I guess you’re right.”

"Thought so." Marco’s new smile was a bit forlorn. “Jean doesn’t make many friends.”

“Well, how did you two become so close?” I coughed. Frustrated, I grabbed a cough drop from my purse and ripped off the wrapper, tossing the hard candy into my mouth. I hated this feeling of being slightly sick so much.

“Uh, we did that roommate quiz thing the school set up?” Marco remembered, biting his thumb. “We got like, a 100% match.”

“Are you kidding?”

“No!” He insisted. “Like, honest to God, a hundred percent. But, like, I remember over the summer looking through his Facebook and everything and being like, ‘Nah. Something’s wrong, I don’t think this is the best possible roommate for me.’ But, you know, here we are.”

“I still have to go through his Facebook.” I realized out loud, before making a mental note.

“Isn’t that the first thing people do when they have a crush on someone?” Marco grinned, getting out his phone. “Stalk them on social media to make sure they really are as good as they look?”

“Usually,” I said. Things have been so hectic the past few days, and I didn’t really know Jean well enough to feel comfortable adding him on Facebook when I first met him. I guess I had a lot of
research ahead of me.

My phone buzzed in my coat pocket. I took it out and checked the screen, before quizzically looking at Marco. “Did you just add me on Facebook?”

“Yes!” He beamed, poking me in the arm as well as online. “Stop holding out on me and accept it already.”

“You’re so weird.” I grinned and did as he asked.

We continued walking to class. “So, how do you know that Jean isn’t a serial killer?”

“What?”

“Like, how do you know why you like him so much?” Marco asked.

“Oh, he was the first person I saw on campus.” I nodded. Oh, that sounded a lot worse than it sounded in my head. “I mean...he was, but I haven’t really met anyone I like that much just yet.”

“Well, what traits do you like about him?” Marco prodded.

“Hmm...well, I appreciate his honesty.”

“Really?” Marco’s eyebrows rose. He wondered aloud, “Some people find it...off-putting.”

“I have thick skin.” I started brainstorming some more. “He’s really artistic...I mean, obviously. He can be a dick most of the time, but you can tell there’s more to him, you know?”

“He’s just very...cautious.” Marco was fumbling over his words. “He picks the people he spends time with very carefully, and he puts a lot of effort into this ‘image’ for everyone else…”

“You mean, like, he’s a poser or something?” I felt lame for using the word “poser,” especially unironically.

“No, no!” Marco panicked, “Not at all! I’m saying...he’s just not as brash and intimidating as he wants you to think, is all.”

"I know that.” I recalled what Sasha said about Jean being some dorky high school caterpillar trying to evolve into a collegiate hipster butterfly. “It’s just annoying that he doesn’t know that I know that.”

“Jean’s whole schtick is impressing people. Not making himself likable, or making friends--” I felt that Machiavellian shit deep in my soul. What’s better than having a ton of friends and being really popular? Having a ton of people wanting to be your friend and being really popular. Needless to say, my endeavors haven’t been going so well. But, after I get used to this college thing, I think I’ll be right back on track.

“Marco, what’s your shit?”

That question almost fried Marco’s brain. He raised his eyebrows before looking at his feet, as if his shoelaces would answer my question. “I don’t...I don’t have one?”

“Oh, come on, everyone does,” I insisted. “Mine is probably making people really jealous of me?”

“Oh, boy.” He mumbled as he simpered. He started playing with his freckled hands as he deliberated over his response. “I guess...being happy? And keeping other people happy?”
“Is that it?”

“I guess that’s ‘it.’” He seemed content with that answer, until his slight smile devolved into a look of puzzlement. “I mean, it’s a short answer, but there’s a lot more to it, you know? It’s about being kind, and having patience, and all that kind of stuff. It’s a lot harder than it looks, you know?” I got a little sad. I was coming up on the design lab, but I wish I wasn’t.

“Aren’t you as happy as you look?”

“Oh, yeah!” Marco panicked, again. “I’m sorry if that made you worry, I mean, it’s all about—I mean, you can’t go your entire life pretending you’re happy. You always have to come first. I mean, it’s your life, and you deserve to find satisfaction and meaning during your life, right? You need to find contentment. And once you find it, you start helping others find theirs.” I mulled that over for a bit before Marco joked, “Everyone thinks I’m really caring and I always put other people’s needs before mine, but secretly, I’m the most selfish person in the world.”

“There’ve been worse.” I got on my tip-toes to ruffle Marco’s hair before I went to class. I really did enjoy his company. He was nice, and super friendly, but not overly so to the point where it was annoying. I made a mental note to get to know him better. I turned on my heels and called, “Hey, I should get your number.”

“You should.” He took out his phone and walked back towards me. After giving him my phone number, I awkwardly shuffled towards the design labs. It was hard to say goodbye without looking like you wanted to leave. I just pointed to the design lab and said, “Well...text me later, bud.”

“You got it, pal.”

“See you later, friend.”

“Have fun in class, champ.”

I turned back towards the design lab. The grin on my face was impossible to hide, but being around Marco made me not even want to bother worrying about it. I guess his attitude had rubbed off on me, even when I had a boring lecture about color theory awaiting me.

As the professor was monotonously discussing complementary colors, I heard my phone vibrate in my coat pocket. Unable to resist my curiosity, I checked out who it was from. Jean. “just woke up. thanks for washing my blanket”

I didn’t correct him.

After that mess of a lecture was over, and I was given the tedious task of recreating the color wheel for homework, I got a text from Sasha the minute class ended. “Come drop by the animation studio! ”

Another one. “The room with the animation desks, not the computer lab”

Another one. “ASAP”

Another one. “Now. Come now.”

Another one. “I promise it’s important”

I guess I was going to the studio building. It was one of the few buildings on campus that hasn’t been knocked down and rebuilt. It had no reason to be. While it looked out of place compared to the rest
of the campus’ modern architecture, it served its purpose well. It was this old building from the
seventies that featured large, open working spaces for anybody to use, except during when classes
were being held. The fine art, fashion design, industrial design, architecture, and sculpture studios
had large windows with tons of natural light, quality curtains for those who wanted a controlled light
source, and concrete floors stained with years of paint, ink, and dye spills. The white cork walls were
acne’d with holes from thumbtacks.

Each studio space had its own specific materials - pottery wheels were in one, mannequins in
another, easels in the next. The animation studios were no different, except for their lack of windows.
Their space was in the basement. The only window they had looked out onto the hallway, and it was
decorated with hand-drawn cartoon characters. They had a room full of animators’ desks and
lightboxes to work with. Across the hall was the computer lab, a large dark room equipped with
about fifteen Macs, three large printers, and a table covered with a large cutting mat. It was a space
shared primarily between the graphic designers and animators.

Walking into the traditional animation studio, I felt like a fish out of water. Everyone
looked so focused and intent on their work, and I was struggling to close the door (which squeaked,
goddammit) without making too much noise.

I could see Sasha’s ponytail in the corner of the room. She was scribbling away with her headphones
in. She sat on a stool with her feet crossed as she sketched. The stool next to her had a tray of
cookies on top. I got my hopes up. I hustled on over to where she was sitting and yanked out one of
her earbuds. “Whats up?”

She quickly turned back to me, smiling and taking out her headphones.

“Guess who made you cookies!” Sasha picked up the tray of cookies off the stool and thrust it in my
direction. “Figured you’d need some cheering up after being sick.”

“I’m surprised you had the self-control not to eat them.”

“Well, I made two batches,” She told me, scratching behind her ear. “So this one is for you.”

“Oh boy.” Now I was responsible for all these cookies. I had to drop them off to my dorm before
getting something substantial to eat, and catching up on the work I missed yesterday. I thanked Sasha
and complimented her sketch before nearly coughing up a lung. I would have hugged her since she
seems like the type, but I didn’t want to chance her resistance to Annie’s plague again. I popped a
cough drop in, and hastily made my exit so I could catch up on everything.

After I went to my room to drop off the cookies, I got an actual lunch (chicken Caesar wrap with a
side of baked potato chips) and continued going to my remaining classes. I spent the better half of
drawing class not working on our new assignment, but worrying my lip between my teeth as I
watched my professor grade my work. My head ached, and my sniffles got considerably worse every
time I looked at my sketchbook. We were starting to draw hands and the contours within them. I
wanted to vomit so badly. I perfected the outline of all the hands I’m expected to draw, but that was
it. I would feel proud, but everyone else had already done that, and completed one hand. I really
needed to start going to the studio, but I couldn’t do that with a dry throat and snot running down my
nose. I had to stick inside of my room until I could breathe normally again without the aid of a
humidifier, and when I stopped coughing on fucking everything.

After I finished my last drawing class, I threw all of my stuff on the floor of my room and collapsed
on my bed. I wanted to see Jean, but my head felt like it was going to pop, and he would be no
better. What was there to even do on a weekday night? They were always boring for me. They were
usually full of late-night cramming, procrastinating, or sleeping. Usually the latter two. For Annie,
she usually put in her headphones and did something on her laptop with that everlasting stoic glare (well, she smiled once in a while). Sometimes, she would go to the studio to work on her sculpture projects. This was one of those nights.

These nights were my favorite because then I had the entire room to myself, usually for hours at a time. Sure, I still felt like shit, but having the room to myself made me instantly feel so much better. Maybe Marco’s good luck just rubbed off on me. I kicked off my shoes, digging my toes into my sheets and playing my music out loud. Just me and my laptop, and a plate of cookies. Dieting be damned.

I switched on the humidifier. My nose needed to clear, and my throat needed to feel better before I could get any work done. I pledged to start working on my drawings tomorrow instead of cramming last minute, but for now, I would work on my color wheel. It was an easy enough assignment. I could just zone out and mix colors. No proportions, no shading - just blotches of color. Jean would be so proud of my responsible decision. Maybe if you didn’t start this the day before it was due ...ha!

Speaking of Jean, we’d been Facebook friends for a while now - okay, only a few days, but that was an eternity in Internet time. I still hadn’t thoroughly stalked him. I didn’t know too much about his past. Whenever I asked about it, he would answer in curt, one-word sentences. Not out of anger or annoyance, just...short. If I pressed any further, that’s when he would get grumpy. It apparently wasn’t any of my business, so I didn’t ask for many details. What I did know didn’t sound too bad.

His family sounded rough, but by no means intolerable. He had parents (or a parent? Legal guardian? Pack of asocial wolves?) that loved and supported him enough to get him to college, and a little sister, who also loved him. While Jean loved his kid sister, his attitude towards his parents was a little more complicated. I didn’t know what was “wrong” with them, except for the fact whenever I brought the topic up, he got especially quiet.

In regards to schooling, Jean didn’t like high school at all, at least in retrospect. He was involved with a girl for some time, but it obviously left a bitter taste in his mouth and he didn’t want to revisit that. He loved her enough and was obsessed with her enough to draw her a million times in a million different ways, but now he had trouble looking at those sketches again. Intimate drawings of her lying down with her legs against the wall, straddling his thighs, or using his chest as a pillow, were treated like nuclear waste. Whether he was embarrassed, angry, sad, or too remorseful to revisit them, I don’t know. But the subject always got him to bite his tongue, and let me change the subject to anything other than that. He didn’t have many other friends in high school. He went out a lot, which worried his mom, but other than that, he didn’t have any intimate moments with anyone other than his girlfriend.

After they broke up, Jean turned inward. His temper grew shorter. The amount of trust he had for other people shrank. Even when we first met, he sounded annoyed from me simply saying “hello.” He was scared of new people, but too proud to admit it. And he masqueraded that fear with sarcasm, curtness, and apathy. His discomfort with social interaction didn’t excuse him from being a dick, but it was at least an explanation.

Welp, enough analyzing. Without further ado, I clicked on his profile. It was pretty bare. Nothing too interesting besides his mom tagging him in so many vacation photos, and one picture from a girl who was “saying goodbye and good luck to her best friend.” I guess she wasn’t as close to Jean as she thought she was, because I never heard of her. I wondered if Jean mentioned me to his other friends, if he had any.

His profile picture was from when he got his second tattoo. It was pretty candid. He was in a tattoo artist’s chair, smiling as he maneuvered his head so he could stare at his raw, red, and freshly-inked
shoulder. There was no way to tell who took the picture, though I’m sure it wasn’t his mom, because she had commented, “i cant believe u got another one!!!!!!” The next comment was also from her: a slightly disappointed emoji.

In the past five months, he’d barely posted anything. No status, no shares, no nothing. What a dull kid. I clicked on his pictures to see what other people were posting of him, since he wasn’t posting anything himself.

There was one photo of him walking in his graduation robes. He didn’t have any of his piercings in. He looked so... normal. It was just so off, and it made me uncomfortable. I hit the “next” button fairly quickly.

Baby Jean. Baby Jean. BABY JEAN. I said it audibly, stuffing another cookie into my mouth: “Baby Jean.”

He was the pudgiest baby in the fucking galaxy. He was like a mini Michelin man. There were probably, like, a million rolls under his blue shirt and overalls. He had these tiny little sausage fingers pressed up to his chubby little cheeks, and his eyes were squeezed shut due to the big smile on his face. There was a little brown tuft of hair on his head, and a teeny pair of blue Converse on his feet. There was literally nothing wrong with this picture. This was Jean’s magnum opus. No picture of him could ever live up to this one, because it was so perfectly precious. My eyes were actually filling with tears due to how goddamn cute he was. If the picture wasn’t posted two years ago, I would’ve liked it. I would’ve shared it to my wall. I would’ve printed it out and mailed it to my parents. I would’ve sent it to Staples and made it into a poster to hang in my room. Instead, I saved it, and sent it to Sasha with approximately two dozen exclamation points.

I went to the next picture. Soccer Jean. Two pictures in, and this was already a roller coaster of emotion. 17 year-old Soccer Jean. It was another picture from his mom. It didn’t show anything of Jean actually playing. He didn’t have the piercings in here either, but it didn’t bother me as much. Maybe because he looked a little different? The only difference was in his weight, but it was still noticeable. Instead, Jean was standing on the field - seemingly walking? - and pulling his jersey up to wipe at his mouth, showing his stomach. It was a little less flat than it was now, but still impressive. His brow was drenched in sweat, as well as the nape of his neck, his hair, and his exposed stomach. He didn’t look annoyed as much as he did bored, and exhausted. He didn’t seem to be enjoying it. Sportsmen usually weren’t all smiles, but they at least looked determined, like they wanted to be there. Jean didn’t. And I guess that’s why he never mentioned the soccer.

The pictures before this suddenly got much older, and in higher numbers. Some were even posted by Jean himself. It was a lot of blurry selfies at parties, mostly with other people. He looked radically different - much younger, much rounder, but much happier. If it wasn’t for the long face or the haircut that hasn’t seemed to change in four years, I wouldn’t have recognized him.

Nothing on his page was really answering my questions. Social media stalking was useless when the person you’re stalking hates to use it or barely bothers with it. No “burning questions” were answered. It was just a whole lot of sad, comparing the chubby little high schooler with the lonely college student who spent his Friday nights inside painting.

I finished another cookie and shut my laptop. I looked up at the ceiling - Jean’s floor - and then looked down to stare at the foot of my bed.
Chapter End Notes

first update in like a trillion years lmao?? its all just background info and character building so maybe it took a while because its some stuff i struggle with, but chapter 5 is almost done... but honestly with college and procrastination and my job and freelancing, idk when exactly it'll come.

My blog and my friend who helped me edit's as well.
banyan (n.) - a traditional Royal Navy term for a day or shorter period of rest and relaxation.

Today, I took the first breath through my nose that wasn’t completely congested. Nothing smelled sweeter than my drab dorm after a week of sniffles and sore throats. I assumed Jean’s recovery went as well as mine did, albeit a little slower. Neither of us did much of anything socially, besides the occasional breakfast at the dining hall and texting. Nothing substantial enough to write home about. Sasha came to my dorm on Friday to make sure I hadn’t died, before inviting me to go pumpkin-picking with her, her boyfriend, and anyone else who could fit in the car.

I declined, mainly because the patch was an hour and a half outside of the city, but also because I felt weird asking Jean to come with me. A girl asking a guy on a date. Wouldn’t that come off strange? I thought so, until about twenty minutes after Sasha left for the patch. Then I regretted not going and not asking Jean and not picking out a cute little pumpkin of my own. I decided the rule that boys should ask girls on dates was antiquated, and I asked if he wanted to do something on Saturday instead. Not as cute as picking pumpkins, but something still fun. Turns out he went home Friday evening after class. I couldn’t have invited him pumpkin picking anyway, even if I mustered up the courage to. I wondered if he would delay or cancel his plans if I had asked, but I didn’t think about it for too long. It only frustrated me.

I mean, if he was sick, maybe he wouldn’t go with me. I wondered if he would turn me down nicely and regretfully, or if it would be a clean, bitter rejection. Again, I didn’t want to linger on it too much, because the thought of the second option annoyed the hell out of me. Jean said he thought going home would help him feel better, but when he got back on Sunday night, he said his “mom’s nagging” and his sister’s endless array of questions only stressed him out and made him sicker.

But this Friday, he knocked on my door when the sun had just set. I should have been working on my new assignments after just finishing the old ones, but I let them gather dust in a corner while I painted my nails, and debated going to get dinner or not. The few nails that I had painted were still wet when he knocked, so I had to carefully plan how I was going to exactly open the door. When I did, he and Marco were standing there, and quite awkwardly so. Marco looked slightly more relaxed with a smile on his face. He was dressed pretty comfortably in a hoodie, jeans, and a beat-up pair of sneakers.

Jean, on the other hand, was dressed a little bit nicer. However, instead of looking effortless, he looked pretentious instead. His hair was messy, but not too messy, and the top buttons of his green canvas jacket were unbuttoned just enough to show the collar of his t-shirt and his collarbones.

He inhaled sharply. “Hey. I know you have work to do over the weekend, and I don’t want to pressure you to come out with us, but--”

I shrugged, looked at my nails, and blew on them. “Not that I’m doing any of it. What’s up?”
“Uh…” He peeked inside my room for a second, looking over at Annie’s side.

Marco nudged him on the shoulder. “You have to stop being so nervous about it–”

“I’m not nervous,” He snapped. “I just don’t know what the reaction would be.”

“That’s what nervousness is.” I went back to my desk and continued to paint my nails. They were still standing at the door, their toes planted firmly at the doorway. They were almost afraid to come inside. “You guys can sit on the bed if you want.”

Jean walked in first, urging Marco to follow. They both sat on the bed, their postures nearly perfect. I took my eyes off of my nails for a moment to say, “You look so fucking awkward. Relax.”

“Uh, we weren’t planning really to stay long.” Marco said. I raised an eyebrow and started painting the nails on my other hand.

“Yeah.” Jean added. “We were wondering if…uh, we could smoke in your car.”

“Don’t say it like that.” Marco chided, almost embarrassed. “That sounds so selfish!”

“Well, we wanted to invite you with us.” Jean corrected himself, smiling. It didn’t make him sound any friendlier, or the offer more appealing. “We have options, I mean, we don’t necessarily have to use your car if you’re worried about the smell and all of that, and you’d still come with us even if you didn’t want us to use your car, I’m sorry--sorry I sounded like an asshole–”

I shrugged. I didn’t ask why they needed to smoke in my car. I didn’t even know they smoked. Maybe they needed the car because of it was starting to get cold out, and they didn’t want to stand outside. Regardless, I don’t think cigarette smoke would linger too long. I mean, it’s nothing an air freshener and some Febreeze wouldn’t fix. I blew on my wet nails, finishing them up as hastily as I could without making them look messy. “No, that’s fine with me.”

That alleviated Jean’s tension immediately. Him and Marco both stood up. Jean sighed, “Okay, great. And you’re sure?”

“Yeah, of course.” I offered my warmest grin towards them. I couldn’t do it as well as Marco could, though. When they weren’t looking, I smiled at myself in the mirror to see what it looked like. I looked like I was scheming. Egh.

“As long as you’re absolutely okay with it.” Marco added. They both tried not to watch me as I struggled to get my jacket on without ruining my nails. It would’ve been real fuckin’ cute if Jean helped me get my jacket on, but instead, he stood from five feet away and just watched the shitshow unfold. Marco helped instead like the kind soul he is.

Once my stupid jacket was on and I had grabbed my keys, we made our way out of the dorm. I didn’t know exactly where we were going, and to be honest, I don’t think they did, either. “So, are we driving somewhere or just sitting in the parked car?”

Marco and Jean looked at each other and blinked. Marco shrugged, “Er, I think it wouldn’t be the best idea to do it on campus.”

“Campus police is doing their rounds.” Jean pointed over to a campus security car, cruising through the parking lot at a painfully slow rate. He watched it roll for a minute, its driver intently focused on keeping his pace of five miles per hour. “Tch.”

“Do you really think they’d care?” I asked.
Marco frowned and chewed the inside of his lip. “I mean, I really don’t wanna risk it...I’d say drive somewhere else, but I have no clue where to go.”

I didn’t see what the big deal was about cigarettes, but I didn’t want to ask. Chances are they knew more about the subject than I did. Jean shrugged, visibly mulling over his options. “I mean, there’s parks and shit we can go to. We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

“We are at that bridge. Right now.” Marco said. “Name a place. Quick.”

“Uhhhh...Blue Bell Park.” Jean shrugged, throwing the name out. He then put his hands up, absolving himself of the suggestion in case we didn’t like it. “Fuck it. It’s the closest one. Blue Bell.”

Marco turned to me, the corners of his mouth perked into a smile and contorting the shapes of the freckles that dotted his nose and cheeks. “Hitch, are you okay with that?”

I was okay with it, as far as I knew. I still had no clue what Blue Bell Park was. Or why we were leaving campus to smoke a fucking cigarette. You could smoke in hospitals in the nineties. Did it become so taboo where we had to leave to do it? I had so many questions, but I didn’t want to delay the progression of the evening. The conversation was going by so fast, and I could navigate the city like a fish could navigate a desert. “I mean, sure--”

“Great!” Marco stopped fidgeting with his hands to put them in his pockets, and turned towards Jean. “You got everything, right?”

He nodded in response, and looked towards me. His excitement was contagious, even if I was confused. “You ready?”

I took my keys out of my pocket and led Jean and Marco to where my car was parked, and boarded inside. Jean immediately took note of the little pendant hanging from my rearview mirror and looked at me, waiting for an explanation. "LDS?"

I felt obligated to give him one. “It’s from my parents...to ’keep me in the right direction, no matter which way I go.’”

"Holy fuck, I love it."

Marco called shotgun, throwing his drawstring bag on the car floor to mark his space. That didn’t exactly work out with Jean having to give me directions. He made the best of it, however, sitting in the backseat and leaning forward over the center console. Shortly after we had pulled out of the parking lot and were on the road, Marco turned to me and said, “Well, I’m gonna safely assume you’ve never smoked before.”

I shook my head. “I haven’t. I know my grandma does, though.”

Marco unsuccessfully tried to stifle a peal of laughter. “What?”

“Jean, am I turning?”

“Uh, go right.” He replied, glancing at Marco and then turning back towards me. “So, how do you know your grandma smokes?”

“She...does it on our front porch?” I furrowed my brow, nearly incredulous of their ignorance. “Why would she hide it from me?”

“It’s illegal? Not a lot of people are okay with it? Especially in a house as strict as yours--” Jean
guessed. I just got more confused. “Is--Is that okay with Mormons?”

“Cigarettes?” I asked, trying to clear up the confusion.

Marco leaned back in his seat and sighed, “Oh, wow, um...I should’ve said this earlier, but we’re not smoking, uh, cigarettes, and you’re probably gonna say ‘no,’ and that’s okay--”

“Wait, wait…” I briefly thought about that reply. “Is it weed?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh yeah, that’s fine.” I grinned. This was so college. I remember having to watch this ancient video in health class called “The Blunt Truth.” Trying to scare you out of smoking it. *It causes excessive laughter! Increased appetite! People will call you ‘Smokey McBongwater!’* It just looked so...fun. Maybe not being called Smokey McBongwater, but then again, anything was better than “that Mormon chick.” I laughed, “I’m actually really excited now. I thought you two were crazy. This whole...situation makes a lot more sense.”

“Are you sure it’s okay?” Marco asked. He was just so nice. His personality was pure, yellow sunshine. It could make flowers grow.

“I’m sure.” I smiled. “Now Jean, where do I turn?”

Jean directed us into a small park not too far from campus. It had a long, winding road that went through it, passing by its main points - a playground, a baseball field, and a thick, wooded area. It wasn’t the most lavish or unusual park, but it served its purpose for now - it was empty and unpatrolled. I parked by the woods for the sake of the spooky scenery, especially since Halloween was coming up within the week. As soon as we stopped, I turned towards Jean in anticipation. However, it was Marco who reached into his drawstring bag and pulled out a smaller Ziploc bag, placing it on the center console. Jean used the console as a surface to lean on as he placed a pipe with a swirling blue pattern on top of the bag, along with a metal cannister. He looked up at Marco and asked, “Would you like to do the honors?”

He stuttered, “I-It’s your bowl!”

“Your weed.” Jean shrugged. He picked up the plastic bag and turned it over in his fingers. “Who’d you even get this from?”

“Some girl in my math seminar.” Marco responded. Nobody was moving, and everyone was waiting for the weed to magically put itself in the pipe. Jean took it upon himself to give in and start preparing everything as Marco continued, “I mean, I haven’t done this in two years...all I remember is that I liked it? So I figured, this could be a test run of sorts. See how this stuff is, so at least we’ll know *somebody* on campus for later?”

“Don’t think this’ll happen often, bud.” Jean noted. “‘S expensive. How much does she charge?”

“Oh, she only charged thirty-two the first time.” Marco recalled.

“That’s a pretty specific number.”

“I was kind of, uh, nervous about buying it, and I only had thirty-two bucks on me, so...she cut me a deal.”

We both turned our total attention to Jean, who was taking the first hit. He exhaled a slow-moving cloud of smoke from his lips, only to inhale it back into his system through his nose. Jean noted our
intrigue, and shrugged nonchalantly, passing the pipe to Marco before picking the baggie off of the console again. “This is a damn good deal for thirty-two bucks.”

Before Marco could take his hit, he furrowed his brow at the bag, inspecting it carefully. “Is it?”

“Yeah,” Jean nodded. “Did you smoke it with her? How is it?”

“No, we’re not that close.” Marco tried to take his hit again, but couldn’t get past Jean’s blank stare. “Oh God, should I have?”

“Yes!” Jean smiled. “That’s common courtesy. She gave you this for thirty-two dollars.”

“Oh, God.” Marco stared worriedly at the bowl, probably internally debating if it was moral to smoke it anymore.

“Oh well.” Jean shrugged, handing Marco the lighter that was previously sitting on the center console. “Just offer next time.”

Marco was still debating the morality of hitting the bowl until Jean groaned and pet his hair, ruffling it up. Marco didn’t seem to mind. Jean kept trying to convince him to take the hit before the bowl burnt up. Just when I thought Jean was gonna give up and pass it to me, Marco took his hit quickly, and ended it with a cough.

He handed it to me. My time has come. I lifted the bowl to my lips and tried lighting it, but I nearly set my thumb on fire. “F-Fuck, how do you--”

“Here,” Jean leaned up and held the bowl and lighter himself. “Let me hold that for you. Okay. Inhale...exhale through your nose, and inhale again.”

I choked back my coughing fit, but my breathing was getting fast and my eyes were starting to water. I coughed up a puff of smoke, nearly doubling over before I covered my mouth as I coughed my lungs out. I handed the pipe to Jean, who took his hit while keeping his eye on me. “You alright?”

I nodded, but it wasn’t convincing since I was still coughing. I was surprised I wasn’t coughing up blood. I felt like a hole had burned through my throat.

After the first bowl had turned to ash, Jean took it and opened the car door, emptying it on the ground. He closed the door again, and reclined back. We were all just kind of sitting there, waiting for something to happen. Or maybe something happened with them, and it just didn’t hit me yet.

After a few moments, Marco asked, “...You have any music?”

“I have cassettes.”

“Ooh. Vintage.” Marco took his phone and said, “‘S okay. I have some on my phone.”

“Why did you ask if you had it on your phone?”

“Common courtesy.” He pulled his hoodie over his head. “I’m apparently really bad at it.”

“Marco, shut up.” Jean groaned. “You didn’t know your manners. Nobody is mad at you. You were nervous.”

“I have a glass heart.” Marco lamented. He tugged the strings on his hoodie, hoping to disappear into the fabric. “I feel like a jerk.”
“You know...in Germany? It’s considered rude to eat pizza with your hands.”

Silence. I took it upon myself to break it. “Fuck does that mean?”

“It means,” Jean explained, “who the fuck knew you had to eat pizza with a knife and fork in Germany? Who the fuck knew you were supposed to smoke with that girl? You have to calm down. You have to chill out.”

“I think it’s gotten to you,” I noted. “The weed…”

“I’m an absolute meaner.” Marco kept whining. He pulled his hoodie strings tighter until he couldn’t see, and then tied them taut. Jean pulled himself forward, slowly and cautiously packing another bowl. It was smaller than the first one, but still a bowl. After it was done, he put it in Marco’s hands, on account of him being unable to see.

Marco held it up to his mouth. Jean walked him through the steps, lighting his pipe for him as well. “Pull. And inhale.”

After Marco took his hit and erupted into a coughing fit, Jean handed the bowl and the lighter to me. He pet Marco’s head, being as comforting as he could be. “Shhh. Shhhh. Shut up.”

After Marco had significantly calmed down, I took my hit. We passed the pipe around a few more times until that bowl kicked too, and we tossed it out onto the pavement. I leaned back in my seat, closing my eyes. But as soon as I did, I felt like I was floating. The sensation bothered me so much, my eyes snapped back open. I made a point to try not to blink. Oh, God.

Before I knew it, I heard Jean ask, “So, how do you guys all feel?”

I paused. What do I say. “...Good.” I swallowed, trying to sound really okay with what was happening.

Marco replied, “I feel...at ease.”

“Nice.” Jean nodded.

I felt obligated to make small talk now and seem normal. “So, Jean. Did you finish your painting yet?”

“Which one?”

“Of your sister’s shoes.”

“Oh,” He laughed. “No.”

“Your stuff is...so good. Like, really good.” I noted. “You must have had really...really, really good art classes in high school.”

“Nah. I just spent the past two years doing nothing but.”

“Nothing but drawing?” That sounded fucking horrific. Just drawing and painting constantly. “Ew--oh no I’m sorry--W-Why would you spend all of your time drawing?”

I didn’t mean to say “ew,” it just happened, and I hoped Jean wouldn’t be offended or notice. Luckily, he didn’t bring it up. “Junior year, my mom never let me leave the house. You think I’m exaggerating, but no—she never let me leave the house.”
“Oh, poor baby.” I pouted, putting my hands over my chest. I really played it up. Maybe if I distracted myself with my own melodrama, I won’t feel slow-motion. “Your entire junior year?”

“Don’t act like it’s not a big deal.” He warned me.

“That was my life for eighteen years, you baby.”

“Yeah, but you’re used to that garbage,” He laughed. “I lost my girlfriend that year, and my social life, and I mean, in regards to you, it doesn’t suck as much to lose something you never had.”

I glared at him. For once, I struggled to say something back. Was it a good comeback, or was I high? “Well, why was it only during your junior year? Literally one year? Out of your whole life?—”

“I don’t fuckin’ know,” He scoffed. “I don’t think my mom liked how often I was going out?”

“Like, how much?” What was the word? “How many? How most?”

“Uh, the weekends?”

I thought about it for a second. “I don’t...see the problem with that—”

“Exactly!” He exclaimed, relieved that I seemed to get it. “That’s what weekends were made for...I mean, granted, I managed to sneak out a few times, but it was still annoying.”

“I could’ve snuck out,” I defended my choice to be a high school hermit. I did it a lot. Honest. “I just had nowhere to sneak out to. I ran away once, too.”

“How old were you?” He looked at me quizzically. “To run away from home?”

“Well, it wasn’t like a ‘I hate you, Mom, I’m running away!’ type of deal,” I scratched my ankle with my foot, “It was more of a, ‘We’re very disappointed Hitch, and if you can’t live by our rules, you don’t live with us at all’ thing.”

“Oh, shit,” He ran his hand through his hair. “Why?”

“Detention,” I rolled my eyes.

Marco started laughing, turning to face me and ask, “How did you get detention?”

“Cutting class. Uh, bear with me.” I had to explain this from the beginning. “Back home, at my family’s church, there were two types of kids—”

Marco smiled, clearly entertained already, and a bemused grin appeared on Jean’s face right before he sighed. “Hoo boy—”

“I said bear with me,” I chided them. “Anyway, there are two types. There are the really good ones, like the kids who go door-to-door, wear matching outfits with their parents...like, a goodie-two-shoes to the max. The second type is...the devil. The devil. Like, their parents want to be strict, but just...can’t manage their shit kids.”

“Which category are you?” He challenged me with a raised eyebrow.

I hesitated. “I...am my own elite category.”

Marco looked down at his feet, giggled, and said under his breath, “You’re the first type.”
Jean joined in with Marco’s laughter. “No can do, nerd.”

Anyway,” I brushed him off, “I was best friends with these girls from the first category when I was little. Like, we got along at church, but that was the extent of our relationship. I didn’t see them regularly until high school. And, you know, ideologies change in those couple years. Uh, well, the Church of Latter-Day Saints preaches--"

“Oh, Christ,” Jean mumbled. I quickly turned around and punched Jean in the arm. “The Church of Latter-Day Saints, Jean,” I cleared my throat, “preaches universal acceptance, and to love thy neighbor as you love yourself. That is one of the two greatest commandments a Mormon has to follow...” I paused as Jean stifled his laughter and a quiet “nerd” -- “...but I guess they forgot it.”

A devilish grin crossed Jean’s face. It was one that begged for gossip. I groaned, and said, “They’re just...I don’t know. I only go to church to do right by my parents. You know that, right? My dad’s the bishop. Kind of the head of the local congregation. Uh, well, I started a series of little rebellions against my parents. Sophomore year was when I started like, bringing an extra change of cute clothes to wear to school, and I cut my hair and put on my make-up during homeroom--”

“What, is there a Mormon uniform?”

I wish he were joking. I recited, “No low-cut tops, no exposing your stomach, no exposed shoulders, no exposed kneecaps, no tight clothing...” I aimlessly reached back, blindly finding his ear. I flicked it, and guessed where his shoulder would be so I could maladroitly poke his tattoo. “...No more than one pair of earrings, which are for girls only, and no tattoos.”

“Brutal.”

“You must keep your standards high,” I recited almost from memory from Sunday School. “A young man and a young woman must protect each other’s honor.”

Jean and Marco chortled. “What?”

Anyway...” I was sure getting sick of all of these interruptions. “Uh, these girls took notice. And they didn’t really take kindly to me disobeying all these rules, especially when my dad kept showcasing me as like, the ideal Mormon young woman. Went to the altar with him after every mass with my mom, to talk to some of the more involved members. Shook people’s hands. You know, being the bishop’s daughter and all.”

“We know.” Jean said. “Your dad is a bishop.”

“Anyway,” I reiterated. Marco just giggled. “We got placed in history class together in my sophomore year. They were really passive-aggressive with me, threatening to tell my parents about my ‘behavior,’ and my ‘secret life’, shit like that. Stuff that would make my dad really upset. Stuff that would make him even stricter. So I...just didn’t go to class.”

“That was your best solution?” Marco laughed. He laughed and smiled stoned as much as he did when he’s sober, but this time, I didn’t like it.

“They were annoying!” I whined. “I was like, fifteen. Cut me a break. Any-fucking-way, you two, they told the fucking principal I was cutting class. And then the school told my parents, and...”
Jean narrowed his eyes. “Was it really that big of a deal?”

“For the school, yes, truancy is a big deal, but for my ‘friends,’ no...anyway, so, yadda-yadda, I ran away to live off the land--”

“The land?” Marco giggled to himself.

“The woods outside my house.” I explained. “Like, forage some berries and stuff to make it through the night so I could find a way to come up here to the city in the morning.”

“Oh my God.” Marco and Jean laughed hard, like, enough to wake the dead. Marco asked loudly, “What were you going to pay with? Trade your berries for a bus ticket?--”

“I don’t know.” I remembered back to that night. Years of frustration built up and culminated in me trying really, really hard to change the direction of my life. I wasn’t thinking, because when I tried to think, I couldn’t think of a reasonable solution, and it made me upset. I couldn’t just leave the Church. With my dad in such a powerful position, it wouldn’t look very good. Besides, the process of leaving was long, complicated, and handled by the one person on the face of the planet that would be devastated to have me go. I resolved to resign as soon as I moved out of the house for good, hopefully by the time I told my mom I’d go on my big mission. Just not now. Not until I’m out of that house and that town for good. “I didn’t get that far. My parents called my cell phone at like, seven in the morning asking where I was and if I was going to school...fuck...I need to cut my hair.”

I couldn’t suppress my thoughts anymore. It was like...a filter was missing from my brain. All my thoughts were just spilling out of my mouth like water.

“You cut your own hair?” Marco asked.

“I used to--I mean, the first time, just not the second...third...times.” I played with my split ends and loose curls. That was another thing I did because I thought it would make me feel better, and change the direction of my life. It was before I tried running away like the baby I am.

I can still remember the day I did it. I was considering doing it for a while, but I finally resolved to do it. I took a garbage bag and cut it up, laying it in front of the mirror so I didn’t have to vaccuum up my hair later. My parents were home, so I had to be quiet. If I made too much noise, they would wonder what I was up to before I could cut up my hair, and probably stop me. I put my headphones in so the silence wasn’t so goddamn deafening. I stared at myself in the mirror. My stupid braid. My stupid face. My fidgeting fingers. My ugly nails bit down to the nub. Glad I broke that habit.

I took my braid tight, pulling it back, and took the scissors with my trembling hand. I swallowed deep, and brought the blades through the middle of the braid. The tight grip I had on my hair let loose. I brought my hands into view. One had the scissors, the other the braid, its ends fraying and coming loose. I put them on the garbage bag. I was afraid to look at myself in the mirror. I inhaled, and slowly turned up to look at my reflection.

God, I wanted to cry. It looked like shit. I actually did start tearing up. I ruffled up my hair and took the scissors again, snipping off pieces to make it look better. I remember cutting off a big, uneven chunk of hair just below my left ear, and I ended up slicing through my earbud. I sighed and cut through the other one, too. That silence was back, and it was making me tense up again, so I rushed the rest of the work that was left to be done. I stopped cutting it when it was just below my chin. I ruffled my hair again and shook some extra strands off of my shoulders. I had a good cry for a little bit, to see all my hair on the floor. Eventually, I stopped crying and just started sobbing, trying to swallow the lump in my throat. I wiped my cheeks and my nose. I looked at myself the mirror again, and I felt okay. I felt like a phoenix reborn. I couldn’t stop staring at myself. I tossed the scissors to
the side, stood up, and gathered up the garbage bag to toss it out. And that was that.

Jean smirked, probably laughing at what a mess I currently am, and got cozy in the car, staring out the window to watch the leaves of the towering trees sway in the wind. I said on an exhale, “So, Jean...your mom.”

“My mom?” He faced me, waiting for me to finish my statement.

“You said she was mad about you going out all the time and stuff, but how was your dad with it?”

“I never heard you talk about your dad, Jean.” Marco noted.

“My dad?” Jean blinked. “My dad wasn’t there.”

“Is he, like...” I didn’t want to say dead, but I was hesitating on the word. *You can’t just ask if his dad is dead, Jesus Christ.*

“He’s,” Jean laughed at me. “He’s not...*dead.* He’s out...on business. Forever.”

“Did he leave you?” *Fuck, why would you say it like that? He probably thinks you’re an ass. You can’t just ask if his dad is dead, Jesus Christ.*

“He says he didn’t,” Jean looked down at his fingers as he cracked his knuckles. “My mom says we left, but...he basically did. My parents separated because Dad was always on business...and like, my mom didn’t like that. She wanted me to grow up like a normal person and go to a normal school and shit. He couldn’t come with us.”

“That sounds reasonable.” I observed. “Growing up with other kids. It’s healthy. ‘S good for you.”

“It happened right before my sister was born,” He complained. “And like...he visits every summer. We go over to his house every summer for a week. And we join him on one of his trips somewhere, like we used to when I was little. But...it’s not the same. Not even close. I got to grow up with my dad and I liked it. I got to see him every day. It was fun. You don’t notice that you don’t have any friends when you’re always in France. Or Italy. Or California.”

“How adventurous,” Marco innocently noted with music in his voice.

“Then you move...*here.*” Jean spat like the words tasted bad. “And your dad’s gone. And the only time he can Skype you is late at night or early in the morning and your mom won’t let you stay up till three in the morning to talk to him on a school night while he’s in Japan, and you have to settle for a voicemail instead. And your mom won’t let things go back to how they were. No matter how much you want them to.”

Words weren’t forming on my mouth. It felt like forever until I said something. Japan? What was he doing with all this *Around the World in 80 Days* bullshit? Jean continued, “He’s been done with a lot of his traveling now that his brand is a lot more popular, so why don’t we move back home? Why doesn’t he just live with us?”

*What brand? Who is this person?* I wanted to ask that as articulately as I could. I felt like I was just spitting out invasive rudeness. I needed to get a handle on myself. I needed to just calm the *fuck* down, but...“Wh-Who-Wha-Wh-Wh-What the *fuck*, what does--did--does he even *do*?” *Smooth.*

“C.E.O. things.”
“C.E.O. of what?”

He laughed to himself, and then it hit me. Kirschtein. His dad must be Kirschtein too, so--Eliot Kirschstein? That was a Fortune 500 name. God, I’m so stupid. I sharply inhaled. I nearly had an aneurysm. I forced myself into an upright position fairly quickly, maybe too quickly since I got a headrush. I was fighting my stinging headache and my panic. Jesus. Jesus. “Your dad is Eliot Kirschstein?”

“Wait, who’s Eliot Kirschstein?” Marco asked, confused. “Your dad?”

“You have so much money!” I shouted. Stop. Stop, stop, stop, stop. Stop talking. “You--” I finally started paying attention to myself and swallowed back my freakout. “--Mnnngh.”

“Yes,” Jean answered, unimpressed. His hazel eyes turned to gold, his canvas jacket into Benjamins. “That’s my dad.”

“Marco,” I said, trying to find the words to explain. I felt like I was spitting out the first thing that came to my mind. I lost one of the filters in my brain. I wasn’t thinking before I said things. “Marco, Marco, what the hell, he’s famous, he’s fucking Eliot...Eliot Kirschstein, he made...he made music--”

Jean obviously knew more about this subject than I, and could handle his hits a lot more easily than I. He took the reins for me. “He like, made software that could make files smaller without losing their quality. So you could fit more onto a laserdisk or whatever the fuck they used back in the nineties. Laserdisks? And then, he started focusing on music...he made a music player that would compress and organize your files...then he broke into the MP3 business...and then computers...and then phones...and, hey, here we are.”

“So, what, he’s like, Steve Jobs…?” Marco asked.

“Tütone!” I reprimanded him. “His company is Tütone. They hire some of the best designers in the world!”

“My dad places a lot of emphasis on aesthetics and ergonomics and shit.” Jean said. “He wants his stuff to be the most comfortable to use.”

What do I say. “Jean, you’re so fucking rich.” Not that. The stakes were even higher now. Jean had to be my boyfriend now. He had to be my husband now. I love money. And if I could marry a rich guy who wasn’t a geriatric, I would seize that opportunity immediately. “How much money do you have? Like, a guesstimate.” Stop. Shut up, Hitch.

“Oh, no,” Jean corrected me, somewhat sarcastically. “My mom didn’t want me and my sister to grow up dependent on ‘daddy’s money.’ So that’s why we live in a shitty rowhome. That’s why we treat visiting my dad like some vacation to Disney World.”

“Your house is in the nicest part of the city and you haven’t had to work a day in your life,” Marco laughed, still staring into space. “Shut the fuck up.” That kind of took me by surprise. I never heard Marco curse before.

“I got my money elsewhere,” Jean quickly said, before scoffing, “And when your father owns a massive mansion with a pool and multiple acres of land, every other home is shitty.”

“You’re such a brat,” I laughed. “I want your life so badly.”

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore.” Jean announced. I could hear a gavel banging in my brain. He instead sat up in the backseat and placed his chin in his hand, leaning over the center console and
staring at me with a smirk on his face. He was very cute. And very wealthy. The stakes have never been higher. I said it again in my head, in capital letters: THE STAKES HAVE NEVER BEEN HIGHER. He was gonna talk to me. He was talking to me for the past...long time, but now, he was gonna talk to me. “Hitch...middle name unknown, Deliss.” It was Emma, but he’d learn that soon enough.

“Jean middle name unknown Kirschstein.” I coolly-but-not-really shot back, raising an eyebrow, but actually raising two, because I was a wreck. I had to focus all of my energy on his eye, a single eye, to make myself feel normal and not like I was high as fuck. I was high as fuck. Oh God.

“I spill my family skeletons. You give me yours.”

“Family skeletons?” Marco asked, to which Jean groaned. “What? Bodies? What are your family skeletons, that your dad has money?”

“No, Marco. Facts! And secrets!”

“Your gold-plated skeletons—”

Jean turned back towards me and said, “Describe the Delisses. You haven’t really talked about them as people, besides being very religious.

“Well.” He was putting me on quite the spot here. “They’re Mormon.”

“I knew that!” Jean scoffed at me and emotionlessly demanded, “Next.”

“They’re really strict.”

“Knew it! Next.”

“My dad’s a bishop--”

“Knew it,” Jean bragged.

“And my mom is an antique dealer.”

“How quaint,” Marco chimed in.

I turned back towards Jean. “If they knew you touched me, they’d ground me.”

He narrowed his eyes. “I never touched you--”

“No, I mean touching like this.” I took the opportunity to platonically squeeze his arm before muttering, “You sicko.”

“Are Mormons really that strict?”

“Well, not all of them.” I thought about the people in the Church I knew. “You can date. As long as you’re at least sixteen. And they usually want them to be double dates. And you shouldn’t go on multiple dates with one person.”

“What?”

“They want you to ‘find your eternal companion,’” I groaned. “One that meets your ‘high standards,’ because if you don’t get married, you don’t get to get into heaven. They don’t want you to settle, basically.”
He blinked. “Do you even want to get married?”

“No. Not to a Mormon guy. I don’t want to be like my parents.”

“In general? Not even to a guy who’s...y’know, average?”

_To you? Or…? Because you’re not average. You’re not just average._ I sighed. I couldn’t speak with my subconscious running wild like this. _Shut the fuck up, Hitch._ “Who knows?”

“You should.”

“Well, I don’t fucking know.”

“You can’t say the word _fucking_,” Jean corrected, snarkily, like a younger sibling I’m glad I never had. He leaned in a little closer to me. “That’s _not allowed in a good Christian home._”

“Hey, if my parents knew I _thought_ about actually _fucking_, they would _kill_ me.”

“Ha, ew,” Marco interjected. I ignored him. I don’t think Marco was really here right now. I think he was in his own little universe. He only listened to us when it was convenient.

Jean said in response to me, “What a bummer. I actually don’t know if mine know--”

I rolled my eyes, cringing. “I don’t want to hear about you and some girl.” Let’s keep this conversation about _me_ and _how great_ I am. Woman on a mission. _Mission Possible_. I glanced over at Marco. _Mission Slightly Implausible_. “Or guy, I guess--”

“Girl!” He said, almost angrily. “T’was a girl. My girlfriend. Ex-girlfriend. The one I mentioned earlier. And I think the only thing keeping us together by the end of that was that, like...sexual appetite.”

I put my hands over my ears. “La, la, la, la!”

“I’m done talking about it.” He grabbed my wrist, and I cautiously removed my hands from my ears. After a pause, he wondered aloud. “Though, I think it was really the art that drove the final stake through our vampire relationship.”

“Art? Vampire relationship?”

“Is that the expression? ‘Drove a stake through a vampire’?” He paused for a moment before sitting up straight. “When people say _drive a stake through_, it’s vampires. I’m saying it right?”

“Sure. How did like..._drawing_ make you break up? What is your _life_?”

“Hitch, a girl can’t make me choose between her and my passion.” I scoffed. _Passion_. I said it again in my head, with more gusto. _Passion!_ What a drama queen. “I mean, I love seeing the world visually.”

“We all see visually, Jean. That’s the _point_.” I furrowed my brow, and in response to that, Jean pushed the car door open and started to climb out.

“No, _fuck_--follow me, I’ll show you.” He shut the door behind him, and I got out of the car too, with my keys in hand. He was staring blankly across the parking lot before turning around and facing the car again. “Look. At. _That_.

“The car?” I paused, and then I cringed. A wave of panic washed over me. “Oh God. I think that we
locked Marco in.

“He’ll live, he’s not a dog or a child.” Jean said. How do you know that? That car is probably full of...weed smoke. What’s the slang for weed smoke? Will Jean make fun of me if I call it ‘weed smoke’? I pretended that Marco was okay. “Anyway. I mean, look how that lamp is exploding with light. Like a star exploding. Whatever that’s called. Supernova? I don’t know, man. I don’t know space, just...you know what I’m talking about.”

My eyes widened. I could see the light escaping from the confines of the street lamp. It was radiating outwards like sunbeams. I squinted, and widened my eyes again, changing the size of the beams. “Yeah.”

“Look how the light is leaking out. Blowing up. And its destruction is being reflected onto the top of the car. Look at all the contrast of colors, Hitch. The dark blues and blacks because it’s dark. And you put that next to a blinding yellow?”

He ran his hands through his hair. “Wow.” A pause, followed by a whisper. “I wonder if this is what van Gogh saw. On Starry Night. Doesn’t this remind you of that? Starry Night? But there’s too much light pollution to see a Starry Night. On account of urbanization.” Jean nodded proudly. Big words.

We kept staring at the truck. We moved our heads around to see how the starburst would slightly change shape. I ended up looking at the pavement, and all the little pebbles and rocks that were in the ground. I eventually realized I wasn’t mesmerized by the visuals anymore. I was just bored. I looked over at Jean, who was still staring at the truck. “Wouldn’t that be cool? An urban Starry Night? But with modern objects, like cars? Skyscrapers? Using loose, organic brushstrokes...to paint something that, in reality, is hard and crisp?”

Alright, this was getting lame. “I’m going back in the car. And waiting to sober up so we can drive home.” I announced, heading back. Or leave now, before a cop sees you...what would be better? Waiting it out, sitting suspiciously in a weed-smokey car? Or driving in a weed-smokey car, and getting home in a safe spot as soon as you could? What would get you less arrested?

“Heh heh heh.” Jean fumbled getting his phone out of his pocket. “I’m gonna take a picture. This is inspiring.”

“Write a note, too.” I suggested. “You’re gonna be confused in the morning with a picture of a light and a truck...and make it quick.”

We mosied on up to the truck, and sat for a little while longer until I could think clearly enough to drive home. The paranoia was still there, but when I closed my eyes, I still felt grounded. I was no longer floating. Now, I was just worried. Driving was the hardest part. I panicked every time I saw red or blue. Stop signs, library signs, red cars, blue cars. Just anything but a cop, please. When we got back, I genuinely praised God for the first time in years. Jean was still gushing over his next project, staring at his phone with bloodshot eyes. Marco was just dead asleep. Jean and I both poked him to make sure he was alive, and sure enough, he let out an obnoxiously loud snore. We gently shoved his shoulder, waking him up so we could get him back inside the building without being questioned by security. I worried what they would do if they suspected - or knew, because let’s face it, it was pretty obvious we were coming off of something - that we had something like that.

Jean’s eyes were pretty red, Marco couldn’t talk without giggling, and I was scared shitless. We’re gonna get arrested. Everyone’s gonna know. We’re gonna be the school druggies. It’s so obvious.

When I got to the sign-in desk, I nervously scanned my student ID before making a bee-line for the
door. The receptionist just shook her head and chastised me, “You gotta do it slower. Di’nt take.”

“Yes, sorry--sorry, m’am,” I muttered, scanning my card at a fraction of the speed as before. I’m usually never this polite. Hopefully, if she smelled weed on me, she would think twice about reporting such a nice young lady.

“That’s more like it.” She sat back in her chair. “Have a good night, dear.”

“You too!” I smiled real big for good measure, and let myself into the hallway. Jean and Marco both swiped normally, not saying a word. I’m sure if Marco would’ve said anything, it would’ve fucked everything up, for sure. I waited for them to enter the hallway, too. Once they did, and we were behind closed doors, away from the guard, we burst into a giggling fit. But Jean and I stopped after we heard Marco’s stoned laugh: a poorly-stifled, “huehuehuehue.” It was the ugliest laugh I’ve ever heard. It just made Jean and I giggle even harder.

“Okay--Okay.” I regained control of myself. I was home free. I made it. I am still a free woman. “I’m going to go back to my room.”

“Okay.” Jean smiled. He was looking at the ground, thinking of what to say, before he looked back up at me. “That was fun.”

“Really?”

“That was really, really fun.” His mouth was pressed into a thin smile. “Thank you for driving us.”

“You’re welcome.”

“That was--I’ll call you. Well, text you.” Jean grimaced at his own words. “Calling is...weird. Gross. No. I’ll text you. Tomorrow.”

“Jean, c’mon--” Marco yawned. “You have the key.”

“You also have the key.” Jean reminded Marco, who just laughed again.

“I don’t feel like getting it out of my bag!”

“Okay, okay--” Jean laughed, going to go up the stairs, before turning back to me for the last time. “Tomorrow. Texting you. Okay?”

“Yes! Go to bed.” I got giggly again. They lumbered up the stairs, giggling and whispering until I couldn’t see or hear them anymore. I sighed.

I danced down the hall until I came to my room. He likes me. I think he really, really likes me. He sounded so excited to text me. Like he couldn’t wait till morning.

Or he’s just very high.

Or I was giving him butterflies. Would he really tell anybody the stuff he was telling me? I bit back a grin. He liked me!

He couldn’t even scan his I.D. without laughing. He doesn’t like you, he just liked tonight. With his weed. And your car. And his best friend

But he talked to me! The whole night, basically! We learned so much about each other. We spent some time outside of the car. Marco didn’t do that. Marco was just...sitting there. His physical form was an empty shell as his soul traversed the galaxy. I laughed again. He likes me.
I got to where my room was when I noticed the name tags on the door. I furrowed my brow. I’m not Daz. Annie wasn’t Phil. I wasn’t Phil, and Annie wasn’t Daz...I forgot to walk up the stairs.

“Fuck!” I whispered, speed-walking towards the staircase. The hallway was empty, but what if people were watching me through their peepholes? I’m an idiot. Second floor, second floor, you live on the second floor…

When I got to the correct room with the correct nametags, I opened up the door and stumbled inside. Annie was in bed, her blonde hair spilled across the pillow. I shut the door and locked it, gently putting my things on the floor and kicking off my shoes.

“You smell like pot,” she mumbled into her pillow. I didn’t answer. Jean was really, really stoned. You’re really, really stoned! He doesn’t like you. He just liked tonight. “Who’d you go out with?” She asked.

“Nobody.” Jean didn’t like me. I learned a lot about him, but that was because we were both high. Would I remember any of this in the morning? I sure hoped so. I guess Annie saw I didn’t want to talk, so she stopped asking questions. Or, she just didn’t care anymore. Either way, I stripped down and threw on a big t-shirt to sleep in. Heaven knows I needed rest.

Chapter End Notes

as always fam here's the blog links
Boatswain's Chair

Chapter Summary

boatswain's chair (n): A short board or swatch of heavy canvas, secured in a bridle of ropes, used to hoist one aloft or over the ship’s side for painting and similar work. Modern boatswain's chairs incorporate safety harnesses to prevent the occupant from falling.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Walks to class with Marco became more frequent, and eventually, a routine. Whichever one of us got ready first ran to the other person’s room to meet up. Whoever was ready last had to pay for coffee. If we met in the middle of the hallway, we called it a tie. Today, it was Marco’s turn to pay for coffee. We left the coffeeshop with a piping-hot latte each. I had peppermint, he had vanilla. We were walking towards the design building when Marco stopped dead in his tracks, putting his arm in front of me to prevent me from taking another step. “Hitch, look.”

There were a bunch of dogs in the courtyard. There was a sign: “Free Puppy Petting! De-Stress From Midterms With The Help Of Some Furry Friends!”

Before I could respond, I saw his jaw set in determination while his eyes locked onto a golden retriever. Marco was dead-set on petting a puppy. He handed me his latte and made a beeline for the pups. I reluctantly followed. Dogs ...well, they were cute from a distance. Cats were a different story, but dogs? Jesus Christ. Up close, with that stench, and that fur, and the slobber...I shivered. I mean, after only fifteen seconds, Marco was already coated in pet hair. He had three puppies yearning for his attention. What was it about him that attracted nearly every walk of life? I stood about five feet away from him, waiting until he was all puppied-out so we could get to class. A husky pup that was trying to climb onto Marco’s lap sneezed. Marco tried biting back an “Awww!” He failed.

I grimaced and wrinkled my nose, taking another step away from the mess. Marco picked up the little golden retriever pup, who was panting and smiling. “Hitch, look at ‘em!”

“I see him.”

“Look at how much he likes tummy rubs!” Marco exclaimed, petting the puppy in circles. The pup stretched out its little furry neck, extending its head forward, trying to sniff Marco’s hand as he kicked his little hind legs. “C’mon!”

“No thanks.” I forced a smile, looking away from the scene. I stared forlornly at my design class. The one time I actually want to go. “I don’t really like dogs.”

“How can someone not want to hold a puppy?” Marco pouted, picking up the puppy and holding it next to his moue. Oh, he’s adorable. “Look at this cute face.”

“Which one?” I joked, making Marco blush and smile before putting the puppy down for more tummy rubs. The husky got jealous, and trotted away to search for affection elsewhere. “What’s your
favorite animal then, if you don’t even like dogs?"

I sat down across from him, still keeping a careful eye out to make sure that I wouldn’t be approached by any hairballs. That one pup was pretty keen on Marco, though. He was about to die and go to heaven with all of the gracious petting. I hoped if any dogs came this way, they would approach Marco instead of me. “As a pet, or in general?”

“In general,” Marco said, scratching the little dog behind the ears. Its tail was wagging like mad.

“Uh.” It was a genuinely hard question. What animal did I like the most, or, what animal did I want to be the most? Anybody can say they like puppies or kittens or hamsters because they’re “cute,” but that answer lacks character. A real answer, your real favorite animal has to be your spirit animal. Something that resonates with your soul, a hundred percent. An answer that has pizzazz. I mulled over the reply for a bit before I said, “A deer. But a male deer.”

“Specifically male?”

“Yeah. With the antlers and shit.” I put my hands on my head and pretended they were horns.

“Why?”

“I mean, they’re really gentle looking and all,” I explained. “Like, they run away if they see people. Have you ever seen one?”

“Yeah.”

“There was one by my house that lived in the woods,” I said. “I mean, where else would it live? Anyway, I was taking a walk one day and I saw ‘em. He just stared at me for the longest time. He had these antlers. They weren’t massive, but they were big enough. And he just stared at me. For a minute, I was actually kind of scared. That’s weird to say now, but I was. I mean, can you imagine those antlers just skewering you? Like a piece of meat?”

“Jesus—” Marco shifted uncomfortably on the grass.

“It was just staring me down; I thought it was gonna charge at me, but, I took one step forward, and it just ran away in the opposite direction.” I smiled. I liked the idea of looking intimidating. I wanted strangers to look at me and get nervous over talking to me, even if I don’t think they should be. I wanted people to make up rumors about me, good and bad, because they can’t quite make sense of me. I wanted to be hailed as the queen of the forest, even if I didn’t deserve it. I wanted to be thought of as important, without having the responsibilities of being important.

Marco nodded, before looking back at the puppies. “I like dogs.”

“You seem like a dog person.”

“They’re really soft.” Marco said, scratching the lab behind the ear. “And there’re stories of them walking hundreds of miles to find their owners. They’re just very compassionate animals.”

Well, now I felt like a downer with that whole elk deal. I nodded and turned back towards the pups. There was one little puppy with fluffy, light brown fur, and a fiery look in his eye. It seemed that his favorite things to do were prance, sneeze, yelp, and climb onto other dogs to get attention.

“Doesn’t that dog remind you of Jean?”

Marco shrugged. “I don’t see it.”
“I mean--their hair is the same color.”

“Is that it?”

“No, I mean...don’t their eyes look the same?”

Marco frowned. “I--No, I’m sorry. They don’t.”

I sighed, pulling grass out of the earth. I don’t know why I liked Jean so much. When he texted me on Saturday, we didn’t do anything exciting. I was making no progress with him. He wasn’t trying to sweep me off my feet. We just got a quick cup of coffee and then we sat in a gazebo and looked at the leaves and talked about color theory and all the stupid shit we said when we were stoned. We went home literally as soon as the coffee ran out. We didn’t hold hands or cuddle. I felt like if I had tried to do any of that, he wouldn’t have let me. I was scared to initiate, because I was sure he would overreact. He’d yank his hand away or scooch away from me or something. I was stuck in some sort of purgatory between friendship and relationship, where I felt like I really had a chance, but at the same time, there was always a little nagging voice saying that ‘maybe it isn’t meant to be. Maybe there are better people out there for you?’ The only thing more frustrating than class right now was boys.

“You really do like him, don’t you?” Marco asked, seeming to have read my mind. I nodded, a little embarrassed to look at him and admit that maybe I’m a little lovesick.

“Don’t worry! It’s cute.” He tried to reassure me, gingerly patting my back with the hand that wasn’t still holding the puppy. I cringed a little bit. I don’t like being patronized. I don’t like having crushes that don’t lead anywhere. They remind me too much of high school. “Aw, come on.”

“I’m trying not to be clingy.” I tensed up. “Nobody wants a clingy girl. And I don’t want to have to rely on boys all the time. I wish I didn’t think about him so goddamn much, because every time I do, my stomach hurts and I feel really pathetic. And every time I try to focus on my work instead I just think about him, too.”

“Why?”

“Because whenever I have to paint or draw, I think of how good he is at it, every time I have to do math I think of how bad he is at it, every time I do anything, I just think of how good he is at it, every time I do anything, I just think about him so goddamn much!” I was starting to get so frustrated that I was shaking a little. “I just want to either get with him already or get over it.”

Marco called over the brown puppy and held out his hand, letting the dog get his scent. The dog sniffed his knuckles for a moment before gently gnawing on them instead.

“I can try to get through to him. If you want.”

“Just don’t...come right out and say it.”

“Just drop hints?” He picked up the puppy, and put it in my lap. For whatever reason, I didn’t even care if it was shedding all over my thighs.

“Subliminal messaging.” I smiled. “That’s the preferred method.”

“Right.” Marco nodded. “I’ll be really sneaky about it.”

_Fist pump_. I’m glad we’re on the same page. This is gonna make things much easier, and hopefully give some exclusive insight into how this relationship was gonna go. I was really lucky that Marco
was Jean’s roommate.

After Marco (unwillingly) parted ways with the puppies, he walked me to my classroom before heading to his. It made him a little late, but he insisted that was okay.

One very boring, exhausting class later, I grabbed a quick bite to eat. I had a lot of work to do, and I needed to get myself on a roll, and punch it all out. First on the list was figure drawing. Yeesh. I cringed thinking about it, but I had to do it. I got back to my room and decided to get it done while Annie was at her studio class. I didn’t like doing things I was uncomfortable with while she was in the room. I felt like she was judging me, even though I knew she wasn’t. Yeah, I know professor had “strongly advised” using a real model, but I couldn’t ask anyone to sit still for hours while I tried to sketch them out. I’d feel even worse if the drawing didn’t come out good and I had to show Annie my portrait, all embarrassed. The last person I wanted to have model for me was Annie, so I convinced myself that the doll would work just fine. Probably.

I sat the doll on my desk, opened my sketchbook, and sighed. I promised myself I would not move from this desk until my sketch was done. I posed the wooden doll to look like it was reaching for the sun. Time to buckle down. No more distractions, no more dilly-dallying. Just me, myself, and my work--

Knock knock knock.

I groaned and put my pencil back on the desk. I wiped my eyes. It was two hours until Annie’s class ended. Maybe she got out early? I don’t know why she would, but it was possible. She probably couldn’t be bothered to open the door. It was heavy and nearly impossible to open. I could understand her impatience with it, but come on. “Just come in.”

A curt thump filled the dead air, followed by three more knocks. “I said you can come in.”

Three heavier knocks. More like bangs, actually. Jeez, someone was impatient. I groaned again, pushing myself out of my chair before dragging my feet towards the door. So much for being “distraction-free.” Whatever - all I had to do was open the door, and get right back to work.

I sighed and threw open the door. I choked on whatever air was in my lungs because on the other side of the door was Jean motherfucking-dripping-wet Kirschstein in nothing but a towel.

“Oh...uh...” How do you even respond to something like this? Just...I was so confused. I couldn’t even say hello. Jesus, just say hello. “Ehhhhhhhh?” Close enough.

Jean walked into my room, his sandals squeaking with every step. He sat at my desk, and honestly, I was too flustered to ask him to get up.

“Do you have any pants?” I asked instead.

“If I had pants, why would I be in my fucking towel?”

“Excellent point.” I conceded, apparently beginning to regain the ability to make sentences come out of my mouth. I mean, it took all of my effort not to say that without throwing up out of nervousness, but I managed it. However, two words weren’t going to be enough to dispel the awkwardness in the room as I stared – thankfully more confused than anything – at Jean in his towel. He stared back at me...and oh, fuck. I was hanging around the room in my underwear and a t-shirt.

I suddenly became extremely self-conscious of the shape of my thighs. I was never self-conscious of my body before, but I don’t know what came over me now. I love wearing shorts that showed off my legs, wearing skirts so tight I had to keep them pulled down so they didn’t ride up on me. Why
would being around Jean make me feel any different? I had thought that being with him under similar circumstances would be nothing but arousing, but so many different emotions were piling up in my brain that I couldn’t even think straight.

He cleared his throat. “You wear glasses?”


“Whatever. Can I use your phone and call Marco?” I nodded and handed my phone over. Jean put my phone to his ear, tapping my desk as the phone rang. I sat on my bed patiently and played with my thumbs.

“He’s not answering.” He handed the phone back with a sigh. It was slightly damp. He ran his hands through his hair, and Jesus. Male model status over here. “I swear, he should be back from class, he got back…”

“Hm.” I mumbled, my mind turning away from what he was saying and towards his body instead. His tattoo looked really cool as he gesticulated in frustration. I was staring. I was flat-out staring at the lines that were swirling around his shoulder, following his muscles down to his forearms--

“What are you doing?” He raised an eyebrow, and leaned back in my chair.

“Huh?” I blinked at him. Back to reality. Stop staring. I was acting like a stranger in my own room. In what universe does that make sense? I coughed into my hand, and laid on my bed, trying so hard to get comfortable and look really okay with the fact that Jean was nearly nude in my bedroom.

“Nothing.” Nailed it.

“You know, I’d really appreciate it if you’d put some sweatpants on. Someone in this room should be wearing pants.”

“D-Don’t tell me what to wear!” I sat up. “How dare you! This is my room, I’m like, the queen of this room--”

“My towel’s not s--”

“Actually, you don’t ever tell me what to wear,” I decided, crossing my arms and laying back down. I actually couldn’t look at him. I’d get carried away. I’d drool, or lunge for him, or both. I flipped myself over so I was laying on my stomach. I physically could not handle looking at him. Jean chuckled, and walked up to the side of my bed. I could hear his sandals squishing against the floor. Did he know what kind of effect he was having on me? I didn’t even want to look at him or else I’d melt. I couldn’t handle this.

“E-Ever,” I asserted, totally not sounding even a little nervous.

“You said you’re the queen of the room?”

“Y-Yeah. Because I am!”

The motherfucker sat on my legs. “What about Annie? Doesn’t she have as much right to rule as you do?”

“Annie is nothing. And you shouldn’t act like a dick when you’re looking for a place to stay.” I grumbled and faced the wall.

“Arrest me.”
I turned red. Luckily, he couldn’t see that. *Taunting the queen is a punishable offense, Kirschstein.*

“Fine. Go stand in the corner, Jean.” I tried to sit up, but Jean’s weight kept me down.

“What, not going to call your military police to cuff me?”

“Do *you* keep handcuffs in your room?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“No.” He took his weight off of me, letting me flip myself over and sit up. There was a pause. He was failing to cover the pink blush slowly spreading across his cheeks.

I stopped teasing him and asked incredulously, “Oh shit, do *you*?”

Jean didn’t even reply except for a quiet, “I’ll go stand in the corner.” I decided that it was a bad idea to think too hard about what that meant in terms of an answer to my question. Probably not the best for my mental health. Or my libido. *Could you imagine getting handcuffed by Jean?* I blinked. I couldn’t, actually. He was certainly intimidating, even almost-naked, but I couldn’t imagine him being so dominating. Tying me up or pinning me to the bed or the floor or some rusty old radiator or whatever. I couldn’t picture it. Even after he kept my body against the bed, I couldn’t picture him doing it in a sexual context. Maybe he was one of those types who are completely different in a bedroom setting than they are in real life. Who knows. “Do you dress like a cop when you use them?”

“No, I don’t dress like a cop!” He snapped. The impact was somewhat lessened by the fact that he was still standing in the corner. “And it’s *none* of your business!”

“You dress like a cop.” What a nerd.

He was quiet for a really long time. Whether it was out of boredom, or embarrassment that I now know he probably likes cop roleplay, I didn’t know. While he wasn’t quiet long enough for me to figure out how to draw that *fucking* doll, it was enough for his blush to subside and for his complexion to revert back to its usual, pale-ish shade. When he broke the silence, it actually startled me a little bit. “What are you drawing over there?”

I couldn’t resist the opportunity to make him feel even more uncomfortable and watch that embarrassingly tomato-like complexion return to his face. “You, as one of those stripper policemen with the cuffs and the nightstick.”

Jean choked on his own spit. I grinned, erasing one of many mistakes. “I’m kidding. I finished that yesterday.” I laughed again when Jean thumped his head against the wall. I chewed on the end of pencil as I stared at my sketchbook.

“Just drawin’ this doll.” Drawing postures was so difficult, especially when using a creepy, faceless wooden puppet. My professor was right. It had this weird, long head, and ball-joints. It was a little too lanky to truly be proportionate.

I looked back at Jean. I was half-convinced to ask him to pose for me instead of the doll. Just drop the towel, reach up, and just sit there for hours. His muscles already looked so good, being just ever so slightly damp and shining in the light. There was still a few droplets on his collarbones, one slowly making its journey down his chest and oh my God, “What’s on your nipples?”

Jean looked down to make sure we were seeing the same thing. He smiled, lifting his head and exposing more of his neck as he leaned back against the wall. “Barbels?”

“Why...Why are they there?” *Distracting me.* I swear to God, the light was catching one of them
and making it so impossible to ignore. Why was I so entranced by nipple piercings?

His face turned even redder as he parted his lips, breaking eye contact with me to look down and pick at the loose threads on his towel. “Stop staring at my nipples, and start drawing again.”

My toes curled. Before my staring got creepier, I turned back to my work. “I never noticed how red you get when I embarrass you,” I said once I was safely looking away.

“What do you mean?”

I turned back towards him. It was like someone had put a tomato on a pike. “I mean, your face is so red, but the rest of you is so pale...I never noticed it with your shirt on.”

“Hmph.” He turned back towards his towel. His blush was desaturating. Unfortunately for him, I couldn’t let that happen.

“I still can’t believe you have handcuffs.”

“Never said I have handcuffs.”

Ignoring him, I asked, “So, do you have just the handcuffs?”

“What else would I have?”

“So you do have handcuffs.”

“Not necessarily.” Jean scratched his chin. “Just the handcuffs? As opposed to what else?”

“Like, gags or whips or anything.”

“Get bent.” His defense was swift and sharp. “Where did Little Miss Mormon learn all this?”

“Google.” I hummed. It was hard to relish in Jean’s embarrassment with this drawing business going so poorly. I furiously erased the piss-poor representation of the doll’s awkward arm. “Like everything else.”

“Your parents didn’t stop you from googling what BDSM is, but they kept you from everything else?”

“We only got a computer out of necessity.” I explained. “I couldn’t watch TV, I couldn’t listen to new music...not because of the Mormon thing, it’s just how they are. You know.”

“I don’t. I don’t know your parents.”

Just then, the tip of my pencil snapped. I groaned and rolled my eyes. “Christ, I hate this.”

“Erm.” While I was pressing my fingers into my closed eyelids, trying to soothe my burning eyes, I guess Jean started to feel a little uncomfortable under arrest. “Can I leave the corner now?”

I started adding the finishing touches onto the doll’s outline. I went over all the light, sketchy lines with darker, finer ones. I could really do without him acting like a smartass, but I kind of liked having Jean in the corner. Just the knowledge that he was there because I told him to go there. It sent me on a weird power trip that gave me some confidence that I had been desperately needing. “No. You can’t.”

He broke out of the corner anyway to lean over my shoulder and watch me draw. It was more than a
little distracting. I tried to focus on my art, but it was proving to be very difficult. I could feel his body heat radiating, warming my ear. I winced when he asked, “How are you doing?” I was afraid to breathe too heavy, or else my face would be touching his. I could feel his chin drawing dangerously close to my shoulder with each syllable.

“I really can’t be distracted.” I swallowed, trying not to focus on how close his mouth was to my ear. He could simply just whisper and I’d hear him just fine. It’d send chills down my spine if he did, though.

“Want me to go back to the corner?” His smirk was clear in his tone. It was simultaneously my most and least favorite thing about him. “Or can I get promoted to sitting on the bed?”

“Now you’re definitely in the corner.” I took a deep breath, and started work on turning these wooden joints into flesh, but the attempts were all fruitless. I quickly realized what a big mistake this was. This doll was frustrating me to the point where I wanted to just draw a big X over my sketch. I took another deep breath, but it failed to calm me down, even a little. How was I supposed to draw a person from this? It was so abstract and...weird. I grimaced. I should have just bit the bullet and asked Annie. Or...

I turned to Jean. I inadvertently scratched my head with my pencil. I was so nervous, I forgot that this pencil was not an extension of my hand. “C-Can I draw you?”

“What if I say no?”

“I’m not a resident,” Jean rolled his eyes. “I’m a refugee. I don’t live here, and ideally, I wouldn’t be here right now.”

“Wanna get kicked out of my dorm? I will deport you.” Press your luck, Jean. I’ve already gotten my eyeful of his muscles - okay, that was a lie, I could stare at them all goddamn day. But I needed him to keep posing for me, with his dumb muscles and his myriad of piercings, especially those nipple piercings, Jesus Christ. How can boys be so beautiful? How can they make sharp edges and broodiness look so good?

“F-Fine.” He peeked around me to look at the doll on the desk. “Like that? Because I’m not standing. My towel’s gonna fall off.”

“You can sit.” I reassured him, swallowing thoughts I felt dirty for even thinking. “I just need your upper body.”

“Your arms, chest, and face are just fine.”

Whoa, boy. I bit back ugly cackles, coughing to mask the sound. Oh, no. You don’t look fat. Christ. Your arms, chest, and face are just fine.”

He cringed, stretching out his arms. “Please don’t draw my face.”

What? Like, well shit, Jean, what am I supposed to draw in place of your face? Should I just leave it blank? Should I just tell my professor you don’t have a goddamn face? I rolled my eyes and mouthed
an unsympathetic and reluctant, “Okay.” It was a lie, of course. I brought my pencil to my paper and got to work. God, putting a pencil down on paper was agonizing work. I was doubting every stroke my pencil was making.

Twenty minutes and a shitton of scribbles later and he asked, “Are you drawing my face?”

I didn’t answer, because I was definitely outlining the shape of his nose. He groaned. “I’m gonna make faces so you don’t.”

“I’m just gonna draw you with whatever dumb face you pick.” I said, focusing on his tongue and the little metal stud pierced through the center of it. “Your stupid, ugly face.”

“It’s not ugly.”

He was right - it wasn’t. But maybe his nose was a little too long and a little too thin. He had grey bags under his eyes, physical proof of how exasperated he was right now. “A little.”

He glared at me. “You don’t talk about my face, or I’m leaving, and you’re fucked.”

He was right about me being fucked if he left. I swallowed back my next jab - something about all the metal in his one ear weighing it down or something, I don’t know; I’m glad I didn’t say it; it was stupid anyway. “Fine. But you should learn how to take a joke, you know.”

“Say one more word, and I’m leaving.” He spat. “I’m serious.”

I couldn’t really press him any further if I wanted to get this assignment done. But then again, where was he going to go? I could press my luck a little bit if I wanted to. Just put that on the record. Instead, I gave a short nod, and got to work. I just wanted to get the damn assignment done.

I sketched, erased, and repeated for about thirty minutes until Jean groaned. “Can I get like, a five minute break?”

“Is it really hard just sitting there?”

“Yes.” He whined, arching his back with a crack. God, the sound was horrific. “Your muscles get tense.”

I cracked my own back too, turning back towards my desk to sharpen some pencils in during the break. “You’re good to sit for another half hour, correct?”

“Yeah, sure, sure…” I heard another crack, an exhale, and then, a scuffle. “Fuck!”

“What did you do this time?” I asked.

“Dropped my towel--” Hello. I turned around, only to find a flustered looking Jean clutching his towel for dear life. “Why did you look??”

“I--” Fuck. How was I gonna get myself out of this one? “I thought you got hurt.”

“Yeah, I’m dying. Thanks for being so concerned.”

“You’re the one cracking all your fucking joints!” I complained. I am too kind to be getting this type of attitude from him, thank you very much. “I thought your back gave out or something!”

“I’m not eighty, my back isn’t gonna fucking give out!”
“Your break’s over.” I stopped the argument before it got too intense. I couldn’t let him leave. He took a deep breath before posing again.

“Is this the right pose?”

“Looks right. Okay, now stay still.”

When I started drawing, and the dust settled from our conversation, it got really silent. I could hear him breathing, and I could see his chest rising and falling. It was actually bothering me that he was moving so much, and yet so little. My time with Jean was filled with lots of silence, sketching, erasing, and hushed exclamations of “stop moving!” But once it was all over, I was holding one of my best drawings. Everything in proportion! Perfect shapes! I could actually recognize him!

“I got the sketch done!” I exclaimed, holding it up proudly. The smile on my face was irreversible.

“I just have a few problems with it.” Boom. My smile had been successfully reversed. “Can you put a shirt on me? Or make me look... better?”

“But it looks just like you,” I argued. “It wouldn’t be a good drawing if it didn’t resemble you.”

“Yeah, but--c’mon, just do this one thing. Just make my stomach more defined or change my face up. Something.”

“Christ, have a little more self-confidence.” I glanced at my picture. I don’t know, I was pretty proud of it. I didn’t think his body was that bad in the first place. What a fucking perfectionist. I’m not gonna make him look like some Greek god just so he feels better. This is for my grade and for my self-confidence. “And say something good about it, too. You know how much work I put into this.”

“Well, the colors are nice.”

“Then I’m not going to change it.” I turned around, my face glowing with joy.

“You gotta. My stomach rolls up when I sit down.” He grimaced, his shoulders tensing up. “I look like the Michelin man.”

“The tire thing?”

“Yeah. That’s me, when I sit down.”

It wasn’t worth arguing. I turned back towards my desk. I was proud of my drawing. I’m not fucking with drawing a shirt. It was perfect, and I didn’t want to fight about risking ruining one of my favorite drawings of all time. “I’m gonna call Marco.”

“Oh yeah.” I heard Jean sit up. “He’d be back by now, right?”

Well, I certainly hoped so. I dialed his number on my phone, and held it to my ear.

“Hello?”

Oh, okay. Oh, thank God. “Hi! Marco! Are you back at th--”

“Did it work?”

I blinked, trying to process what that meant. “What is ‘it’?”

“The subliminal messaging.”
“What do you--”

“What were you two up to, you know...three hours?” He was practically nudging my shoulder through the wire.

Oh my God noooooooo. “No! Nothing! That was not su--” I started to chide him, but I realized I couldn’t talk about my plan to seduce Jean in front of Jean. I cleared my throat and started to whisper my complaints. It was so hard to go off on someone while whispering. “That is not what you were supposed to do.”

“It didn’t work?”

“There is--” I sighed. “Just keep the door open, I’ll talk to you later.”

I hung up and looked over at Jean. He looked towards the door, and then asked, “Well?”

“So, uh, Marco unlocked the door.”

“Really?” Jean stood up and started to gather all of his shower stuff before I could even say goodbye.

“Yeah, but Jean, I have a question?”

“Yeah, ask it.”

“I--” I swallowed the feeling in my gut, unsure of how to word this question. “Uh, so, I’m not done the shading or the coloring, obviously, so--”

“If you need a picture,” he growled, obviously discontent with what he knew I was going to ask, “just delete it when you’re done with it.”

“Understood.” Usually, I’m not the type of person you would trust with shirtless, brooding pictures. I would normally make that my wallpaper on everything. I’d frame it and hang it in my room. Probably next to the one of Fat Baby Jean. But this time, I mean, I was pretty indebted to him for letting me do this. I couldn’t fuck him over by gawking over his photo. That wasn’t fair. It was a breach of trust. It was wrong, ethically and morally. And that was saying a lot, coming from someone who tended to ignore ethics for her own personal gain.

...But, like, art and design is always about taking old work and improving it. Technically, you’re never done with a piece. I was gonna keep it, but I promised myself I wouldn’t gawk.

“Are you leaving now?” I asked him after I took the picture.

“Yeah. As soon as I can.”

“I’ll walk out with you. I’m gonna go somewhere else to finish this.”

“Why?”

“Annie’s studio time is over in like, half an hour.”

He shrugged, confused. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Don’t you get, like, weird when people watch you draw stuff?” I grimaced. “I don’t know, I feel like she judges me.”

“You watch me draw all the time.” Jean got his shower stuff together and went to the door. Before
he opened it he said, “It’s really no big deal.”

I had a million things to say to that, because it’s certainly a big deal for me, but he was peacing out before I had a chance to say them.

“Hey,” I called before he had the chance to bounce. “Thank you again. Like, a lot.”

“Just draw a shirt on me.” He said before leaving and shutting the door behind him. Once he was gone, I took the deepest sigh of my life. As much as I liked Jean, his presence could be exhausting.

With him gone, my task was now to put on an actual outfit, and head somewhere quiet to finish up. Maybe the café would be a better place to work. I’d just leave my computer at home, take only my sketchbook, my purse, and a little bit of money, and go into the coffee shop to work. No rich boys! No half-naked boys! No Jean!

Our professor insisted that we color our figure drawings in all sorts of abstract colors, like cerulean blues or sharp shades of chartreuse. Something unnatural and unseen in humans. All I had so far was the pencil outline, and even that took forever, due to unforeseen obstacles and circumstances. Worse yet, we had to shade it in with greasy oil pastels that stained your fingers and skin when you touched them. I was putting that off for as long as humanly possible, but for now, I couldn’t afford to procrastinate anymore.

I took all my supplies to the cafe, and managed to snag the only available table in the whole joint. I wiped a puddle of sand-tinted coffee and a number of crumbs off of the table so that it was suitable to rest my stuff on. I put my sketchbook and my pencil case down on the table, with my purse on the opposite chair. I ordered my coffee - a large original roast, with three sugars and half-and-half. Once it was ready, I immediately sat back down and decided to get to work.

Let’s start on the lighter colors. My professor said to experiment with colors. Don’t be afraid not to replicate the still life’s colors perfectly. She just said to fuck around with it and see where it goes. Let’s start off slow - let’s make the skin “cadmium yellow” instead. Once I put down the base color, I started adding grassy green shadows. I was still hesitant about continuing, but if color experimentation was what she wanted, color experimentation was what she would receive.

I glanced around the cafe. Even though I was at an art school, I was the only one here working in a sketchbook. It was a little embarrassing, being the only one in the whole building doing artwork. Everyone else was typing away on their laptops, or scrolling through the content on their phones. It was a little strange and very “middle school” of me to be so self-conscious, but I couldn’t help it. Especially when I felt like some toddler with this dumb, big paper and an expensive, dumb purple crayon in my hand. I turned up my music and focused entirely on my drawing. I tried to ignore the stares that were on me.

I finished the shading on the arm, got bored, and decided to continue onto the facial features. It was already a mustard yellow, but fuck it, let’s make it green. A mossy green, with pale, mint green highlights and bloody red shadows. I started shading in Jean’s face with green. After I was done shading his cheek, I looked down at my work and suddenly felt like a big baby. I was drawing with crayons, and I wanted to sleep and eat and relax but my only instinct was to cry. I felt so dumb.

Except for the occasional glance at my coffee, my eyes were glued to my paper. That is, until the coffee shop door opened and Jean walked on through. Because who else would it have been? I wouldn’t have even looked up if I didn’t spot his pierced ear from the corner of my eye.

I kinda started to hate how I saw him everywhere. I could not go an hour without seeing him. It was either a sign, or a side effect of going to a relatively small school. Probably a mix of both.
He looked around the café quickly for any open seats. The only one in the whole shop was across from me. It was apparently that kind of day. I quickly and obnoxiously used the open chair to prop up my feet, one on each side of my purse. A part of me hoped his coffee was to-go. If not, my plan to be distraction-free would fall apart yet again. Seeing the lack of empty seats and the smug smile on my face, he dropped his shoulders and glared at me. He turned back towards the counter and approached the barista with newfound annoyance. I think pissing off Jean was my speciality. Maybe I could change my major to that.

I just finished filling the body with its base color when Jean came up to the table with two coffees - one large, and one small. He looked down at my feet. After a brief moment, he asked, “Well? Are you gonna move ‘em?”

“No,” I answered bluntly, not taking my eyes off of my work. I hooked my feet around the base of the chair so he couldn’t pick them up and move my legs.

He released a groan, but it sounded more like an annoyed, muffled scream. He put his coffee cups on the table and jostled his backpack off of his back and onto the floor. He grabbed my purse and carelessly dropped it onto the floor, letting some of its contents spill onto the floor. He sat right on top of my feet, straddling my legs. I could feel him starting to give me pins and needles. I really dug myself into a hole here, just for the sake of being petty. “Jean.”

“Oh, look, it’s me.” He said to my drawing, cringing. He reached into his backpack, unzipping the front pocket and taking out a handful of paintbrushes. The bristles were stained with pastel colors. They were well cared for, but still weathered. “Why are you drawing in the middle of the cafe?”

“I need someplace quiet.”

“Oh, God, why are you drawing my barbells?”

“Because they’re there.”

“Why aren’t you in the studio?”

“That’s where everyone goes!” I groaned. “Do you have any other questions?”

“People go to the studio for a reason ,” He groaned, trying to melt into the chair. I could be offended, but this was actually pretty flattering. It meant that my sketch was so good, he was easily recognizable. Now everyone in my class and in this coffeeshop would know he has his nipples pierced, and that they look hot as fuck. Everyone wins! Except for Jean. “You’re so fucking weird, it was literally made to draw in.”

“I don’t want people looking at my stuff. I’ll feel so out of place .” I smushed the oil pastel against the paper, sticking out my tongue. “I’m not an art major. Don’t you get judged if you’re there and you’re not good?”

“No?”

“Are you telling me that when you see someone in the studio and if their stuff isn’t good, you don’t like, judge them or make fun of them?” I asked. “Even if it’s all inside your head.”

“Okay, maybe you do that, but that’s not what’s going to happen.”

I groaned. I am a little judgmental. I can’t help it. It’s the nature of the beast. “That’s besides the point. I mean, if this was a graphic design piece like I want to be doing, and were in the design lab, where I want to be, it would be different. But I hate drawing. And I hate these crayons.”
“Oil pastels.”

“Whatever.”

“So instead of going to the studio, you’re going to do your project in a room that probably has the worst lighting in the country, on a grimey, small table.”

“Precisely. It smells like coffee, and I feel safe here.” Or, at least I thought I could comfortable here. The “being-watched” feeling plus the weight of Jean on my shins wasn’t exactly the most comfortable position I could be in, but I wanted to prove a point, so I had to pretend this was so, so great.

“You’re so irrational.” He groaned. He looked at my piece again and narrowed his eyes. “And why the fuck did you give me jaundice?”

Oh, that is not the reaction I wanted to this drawing. “Uh--”

“Was it on purpose?”

“Yeah.” I narrowed my eyes. Of course it was on purpose, what’s that supposed to mean? “I know you don’t have jaundice. My professor told me to experiment with the color.”

“Then you should fuck with it more and use weirder colors,” He said, taking a careful sip of the larger cup of coffee.

I took another sip from my cup, stained with rainbow fingerprints. “I’m still iffy on the changes I made.”

“You’re not putting this in the MoMA, Hitch.” He took a pad of watercolor paper out of his backpack and ripped off a sheet. There was a line drawing of an elk on it, in deep brown pencil. He put it onto the table and took the lid off of the smaller coffee. “Relax and have fun with it.”

“I should make something I want to be in the MoMA,” I said back. “And how can you have fun with something like this?”

“Well, I can’t think of what else to tell you than to just fuck with it.” He said bluntly. I suppose that was my cue to stop asking for advice. I put my earbuds back in, and continued with my pastels. I fixed up some of the shadows when I glanced up at Jean’s work. He was dipping his brush into the small cup of coffee, filling the lines with a light, sandy brown shade.

What the fuck. “Why--”

“It’s a thing.” He curtly explained. “It’s not weird.”

“Wow, Jean, why don’t you go to the studio to paint?” I asked.

“Stop.”

“You’re so self-conscious too. Wow.”

We sat in comfortable, focused silence. I didn’t ask any more questions about the coffee painting, but it smelled heavenly. Most importantly, I felt a little less strange in the shop. At least I wasn’t the weirdo dipping paintbrushes into his cup of coffee.

When I say he looked like a weirdo, I truly meant it. His hair was slightly damp but incredibly messy. His dark, minute pupils looked trapped in his amber eyes. He had a ton of piercings that
looked really painful to someone without any. He looked like some sort of human voodoo doll. He had on a crappy, overworked flannel that looked like it maybe cost him six cents at the thrift store, despite having an unreleased TüPhone in his chest pocket that was probably worth more than my tuition. One hand held a paintbrush while the other one was tapping on the table, but not to the beat of the music that was playing in the coffeeshop. He was so scary-looking for someone who was using coffee to paint a picture of a forest critter. The fine strokes on his page were done with a great amount of affection and care. The best part was that he was making little faces as he was painting. He would put a line down, and smile if it was right. If he slipped up, he would furrow his brow and slam a napkin against the paper to soak up the mistake. The amber in his eyes would lighten or darken accordingly, like a bizarre, handsome mood ring.

Shit, this is what I meant by needing to escape certain distractions. I’m supposed to be doing work and I’m being distracted by some stupid boy’s eyes. I looked at how I drew his eyes on my paper. I needed to make them stand out like his did. They had to be commanding and intimidating, but also enticing and pretty. Perhaps an obnoxiously vibrant magenta would do.

I went to sketch in his cold eyes, but I was hit by a horrible draft coming from the front door opening. When did it get so cold out? My hair was actually blowing in the wind, and one of my pastels nearly rolled off the table.

“This place is freezing.” I pointed out the obvious, using my cooling coffee as a handwarmer.

“Do you want my flannel?” Jean asked, putting his phone on his table before he began to unbutton his shirt. Hnnng.

“Yes please.” I sat up and extended my arms, waiting. To my great disappointment, Jean had a white v-neck under his flannel. His collarbones were poking out of his shirt, sharp and pale like the rest of his features. They had goosebumps all over them, and I felt a little guilty because it was cold as fuck in this coffeeshop and he was just sitting there in a t-shirt. The tattoo on his shoulder was peeking from underneath his sleeve, and his shirt was so thin and clean you could faintly see the rest of its details from underneath his shirt. Chriiiiiiiiiiiit. I caught myself staring at it. My eyes traveled from the details of his tattoo to the outline of his shoulder and back towards his collarbones. They just looked so angular and aggressive and I didn’t know why I liked them so much. They were clean and pale and sharp like knives, except for a little freckle on the right one. I just wanted to lunge for his neck and nuzzle it or kiss it or something because I was so cold and so disgustingly thirsty.

“Here.” He broke my trance by throwing his flannel in my face. It was still retaining heat, and it smelled like a mix of fresh laundry detergent and musky cologne. It was strange and eclectic, but it was so warm and cozy and Jean. I wanted to punch myself for letting myself get trapped in this boy-obsessed maelstrom, but his shirt was just so soft and warm and goddamn, he was so nice for giving it to me. I couldn’t get over that. As I was buttoning it up and henceforth claiming it as my own, he cut my train of thought short and mumbled, “That’s my favorite shirt though, so you’re gonna need to give it back.”

“Oh.” I fixed the collar and wrapped my arms around my torso. “Well, okay. Eventually.”

“Yeah.”

“How long is it on loan for?” I never wanted to give it back. It was weathered from years of use, but it was also warm like a freshly baked cookie. It wasn’t just comfortable, it was comfort ing. I hoped he would forget I had it so I could keep it.

“I dunno, librarian. How long do you let people check out books for?”
“HE REMEMBERED I WORKED AT A LIBRARY OH MY GOD. I calmed myself down, swallowing back an excited gasp. Remembering what you do is not that impressive. “Two weeks.”

“Then you’re giving it back by then. Or I’m hitting you with a fine.”

“But if I show you a valid I.D. after those two weeks are up, can I borrow your shirt again?”

“Not at this library.” He smirked, and that was just the last nail in the coffin. I felt so gross feeling this way about a boy. But how could I stop? Usually I would engross myself in my work, but I made the dumb mistake of letting him model for me, so now he’s omnipresent. I should make new friends. I had to get out of there so I could finish that stupid portrait and pass my class. Not that I wanted to leave, but...

“You’re so selfish.” I groaned, buttoning the flannel up to the very top. “Can’t even spare one shirt? Can’t you just buy a million more of ‘em?” Perhaps I could pretend to be really annoyed and justify leaving, as much as I didn’t want to.

“If I was really selfish, I would’ve never lent you my shirt in the first place.” He dipped his brush back in his coffee to continue painting before he looked at my collar. “Actually, give it back. Right now. I’m getting cold, too.”

He held out his hand, waiting for me to give it back. My grip on my flannel tightened. “But--”

“What?”

“I’m freezing! You can’t just take it back right after you give it to me.”

“I can, and I am.”

I sighed and sunk into my seat, refusing to give it back. He hesitated and pulled his hand back just a fraction. The coffeeshop door opened again, sending a rush of air towards my face. I quickly popped the collar and pulled it up to cover my face. I could feel my lips losing feeling. “Even when you’re trying to be nice, you’re still an asshole.”

Groaning, he put his hand back on top of his lap in defeat. “For two weeks.”

“Library rules?”

“I guess that works.” He shrugged. “Can’t damage it. Can’t keep it. Can’t deface it in anyway.”

“What if I do?”

“You get a fine.”

“Fair enough.” I had to get out of here as soon as possible if I wanted to finish this by midnight. I had so much left to do but I had finished so little of it. And if I stayed around Jean any longer, I’d probably find something even dumber to gush over, like his spleen or something. I was not going to dig myself deeper into this weird, obsessive hole. “Hey, you gotta let me up.”

“Why?”

“I need to find someplace warm.”

“Then return the flannel.”

“Library rules.” Speaking of, maybe that was a good place to drop by next. Jean rolled his eyes, but let me move anyway. I stood up, stretching out my legs underneath his weight. “Jesus, you don’t
look heavy, but you are.”

“Fuck off.” He sat back down with a slight pout on his face. “Where are you going?”

“Not telling.”

“So you can’t follow me.”

“You’re going to the studio.”

“You want to work on your drawing but you’re not going to the drawing studio?”

“Yeah?”

He swallowed, and looked back to his drawing. “Alright.” I scraped all of my purse’s spilled contents back in, and gathered together the rest of my supplies. “I’m gonna go to the...somewhere else. I’ll see you later.”

“Good luck.” He said absently, already dipping his paintbrush back into the coffee cup.

I started trudging towards the library, until something dawned on me. The tables there were too small to draw on. Maybe the studio was a better idea. If Jean ended up there too, I was gonna quit drawing. I didn’t want him to have the satisfaction that he may have been right. I reluctantly stopped walking, turned on my heels, and headed towards the studio instead. I got inside the building, and walked up the staircase to the studio. There were a few artists inside, so I opened the door as quietly as possible. There was a light dusting of violet chalk on the floor. With every step I took inside, a small purple puff rose from the paint-splattered hardwood. I quietly set up an easel, trying desperately not to bother the people around me. They were all intently focused on their work as if reality didn’t exist. I would feel like such an idiot if I dropped something and broke that focus. Despite my efforts, here I was, bumbling around, trying to open an easel and adjust it to my small stature.

My easel was still too tall, so I just found a tall stool to match. I pulled myself up onto the stool that was obviously made for basketball players, laid out all my stuff, and sighed. I had to...get into the zone. I sighed, staring at my work and sighing. How could I possibly get lost in this piece.

Well, it was a little easier than I would like to admit. Instead of gushing over Jean’s eyes or his weird two-tone hair, maybe I could gush over the strokes or the composition. I had to fall in love with my work and not the subject. I had to love the colors and the shape and the shading and just make it lovable.

What do I love? I love pink, and I love drama and flowers and didone typefaces and girly things. How could I mix that with Jean, a person who loved grey and stillness and stones and messy handwriting and quiet, manly man things?

I stared at it for a little while. I just shrugged. Fuck it. You know what I like? Flowers. You know what I was gonna draw by his feet and his shoulder? Flowers . And maybe a little cat, too. I didn’t give a fuck. I sketched some more practice irises and peonies and ferns and daisies and Siamese cats on the back of my paper before getting a smidgen of confidence - enough to draw them blooming around his body. His skin looked less like jaundice and more like the sun, radiating energy and heat and beauty and fuck . I found myself so engrossed in blending the colors of the flowers and the vibrancy of the flora, I had to think about whether or not I blinked in the past forty-five minutes.
When I looked up, there were three different people than when I came in, with another person having left.

Is this what loving art was like? Getting yourself just lost in your work? Just getting obsessed with your stuff? I tried not to think about it much. If I did that, I probably wouldn’t be able to find that groove again.

Chapter End Notes

hooray college is over here's my blog
Lay Day

Chapter Summary

lay day: An unexpected delay time during a voyage often spent at anchor or in a harbor. It is usually caused by bad weather, equipment failure or needed maintenance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The walk of shame from the studio. When it’s one in the morning, and your wrist aches too much to move, and your back is so sore from hunching over the easel, and your eyes hurt from staring at the canvas so long. I didn’t know if that experience was universal but fuck, that’s how I felt. It was about eleven o’clock, and my body was aching me.

I was at the vending machine at the bottom of the staircase getting a bottle of water. In addition to being absolutely miserable, I was also parched. I rested my head against the machine’s glass but just...for...a minute...

A voice rang out from behind me and made me flinch back into consciousness. “Hey!”

I turned to see Marco, hustling to catch up with me. Plastic bags were hanging off of his arm like tire swings on a tree branch. He asked, “You’re up late, aren’t you?”

I yawned, smacking my dry lips. I stood up straight in order to combat the hunchback I may have gotten while drawing. “I know. I’m finally going home now though, so...I’m excited.”

“I’ll walk back with you.” He smiled. He clumsily zipped up his jacket and said, “It’s dark out.”

“Oh, yeah.” I wiped at my eye, ruining my old eye make-up, and leaving an ashy smear on my hand. “Augh.” Like Marco said, at least it was dark out and nobody could see what a mess my face was.

We started our way out. I looked at the bags hanging off of his arms. Why he was here at all was curious. There were no dark rooms in the studio, and there wasn’t anything interesting to photograph - at least, I didn’t think there was. But then again, where was his camera? Why was I so suspicious in the first place? I literally, physically, can not mind my own business. “Why were you at the studio?”

“Picking up fabric from Mikasa.”

“Who?”

“She’s a fashion major.” One of his bags was slipping down his arm, so he jostled it back up into the nook of his elbow. “I paid her to pick me up some fabric and give me some scraps.”

“Oh...okay.” I had a lot of questions, but not the energy to ask them. “So, what are you up to tonight?”

“We’re pulling an all-nighter for midterms.” Marco said. “Neither one of us is allowed to fall asleep.”

“Sucks for you.” I smiled. “I got done all my drawing. I’m so ready to take all my make-up off and
“Your drawing is your only midterm work?” Marco blinked.

“Well, I have my design critique. But I don’t have to hand anything in. I just have to show up.”

“No tests, no papers?” He scratched his chin.

“No tests, no—” Writing. I have a bigass essay due. Oh my Christ. Through all my worrying about drawing and design, how could I let that slip? I swallowed. I got half of my outline done in class; a little research here and there. If I worked nonstop through the night, I could probably finish it by eleven. Hopefully. With wide eyes I turned to Marco. “Fuck.”

“Wanna come over?” He asked. I nodded quickly, swallowing back my rapidly-beating heart. I can’t believe I let so much slip under my radar. When we got back to our building, I grabbed my laptop and followed Marco back up to his room to start the long night of work I had ahead of me.

Once we got to Marco’s door, he swung it open. I followed him in as he called out, “Hey, Jean.”

“Hey—” Jean snapped shirtlessly, startled silent as he was also shirtless. He went back to painting without a shirt. Did I mention he was shirtless? Because he looked really good without a shirt.

I smiled, amused by the fact he could get so flustered over something so stupid. “How are you?”

“Hitch is here.” Marco announced, a little too late. “She’s staying up, too.”

“What, do you need help with drawing?” Jean asked. He didn’t sound annoyed or anything when he did. Just wondering.

“No, an essay.” I made myself comfy on his folding chair and kicked off my shoes, digging my toes into his carpet. “So I’ll be pretty quiet for the night.”

“W-Well, good.” He turned back to his canvas and coughed. “Glad to hear.”

“Uh, let’s see—” Marco dropped all of the fabric on his bed, carefully laying each specimen out. The larger piles came with a sticker with whatever specifications a fabric needed. The scraps came with a sticky note from Mikasa. Marco read each one out loud. “Canteen Brown polyester silk...perfect, that’s for the shirt…” He scribbled something on a sticky note and stuck that on the pile, too.

He picked up a mustard scrap. “Oil Yellow silk?” He looked at his phone, then back at the fabric, then back at his phone. “I guess it’s close enough...I’ll mark that down for the ‘shirt...cuff...detail…”

Jean yawned, wiping his eye with his clean hand. The amber in his irises looked duller. I guess they shined brightest when he was most awake. Like some sort of battery. I smirked at that thought as I stared at the blinking cursor on my screen. The environment was a little distracting between the music, Marco’s mumbling, and Jean’s lack of shirt.

I pulled up some potential sources to cite in my paper, but as I skimmed through them, I noticed there was a growing disconnect between myself and my work. Was coming here to “focus” on my paper really such a good idea? Was listening to Jean’s lovesick Spotify playlist and Marco’s incessant fabric names really helping me right now? To top it all off, Jean was shirtless and I couldn’t afford the time to fucking look at him. God was so cruel.

Okay. Back to the paper. We had to write about an ethical issue that we picked out of a hat. I ended up with whether or not the government should continue funding National Parks. I was a little
disappointed that I seemed to draw the most boring topic. I mean, of course the answer was yes. It was hard to find scientific evidence to prove why. And I didn’t want to sound preachy either, talking about nature and junk. This was going to be a long night.

“Oh, fuck, I can’t do it.” Jean hissed to himself. He grabbed a hoodie from the end of his bed and threw it on. “Fucking freezing…”

I was disappointed, yet relieved. For my paper’s sake. *Fuck* ...just when I think I’m ahead of the curve with design and school, my Gen Ed classes just have to sneak on in and fuck my day up. Or night, in this case.

My cursor was still blinking. “*National Parks: [Insert Pun Here]*”. I was truly stuck. At this rate, I was going to be staring at a blank screen until sunrise. Unless Jean gets *really* ugly or Marco shuts up, I would never get any work done. I needed a third party to diffuse the situation. Someone that wouldn’t be afraid to put my focus back on my paper. I started typing out a text to get in touch with Sasha, who got back to me almost immediately.

“why are you up so late” She sent another one. “on a SCHOOL NIGHT? (◠‿◠)” *What the fuck is that supposed to be.*

I looked up and asked Jean and Marco, “Can I bring Sasha over?”

“Would she mind sitting on the beanbag chair?” Marco frowned, glancing at the sad sack in the middle of the floor. A hockey jersey was draped over it.

“Trust me, she’d love it.”

Jean looked up from his painting, his reflexes slow. “Sasha Braus?”

“Yeah.” I looked back at my laptop towards my paper, not wanting to waste anymore time. Marco took a break from his fabric to put away all the junk that was cluttering the beanbag chair.

Jean frowned, turning back to his painting. He mumbled, “I guess.”

“What’s wrong with her?” Besides the creepy face. “Play nice.”

“I’ll play how I want. It’s my room.” He spat.

“God, it’s like you want to be unlikable.” I groaned, looking at my phone again and texting back.

I typed out, “*it’s almost midnight, thats not that late. And what the fuck is that? is that a face?*”

“*it’s a winking face. open ur eyes (☉Ⱔ☉)*”

“*stop sending me those stupid faces. or i’m not inviting you over*”

“(˘﹏˘)”

“*FUCKING STOP*”

“*FINE. FINE. OKAY. are you at your room*”

“*jean’s*”

“(()][(--) get itttttt”
“they're not cute you have to stop”

After about ten minutes of waiting impatiently for her to come and save me from this awkward tension, there was a knock on the door. I leapt up to open it, despite this not being my room. My savior.

Sasha was standing in the doorway with a stack of papers and a handful of pencils. She started her walk in before seeing Marco, who was staring at her quizzically. She smiled and said, “H-hey, I’m Sasha.”

“I didn’t realize you two never met.” I remembered. Sasha balanced all of her materials in one arm and extended her other. Marco took Sasha’s hand as I completed my introduction. “Sasha, this is Marco. Marco, Sasha.”

“What’s that?” Jean said, looking at the materials Sasha had stacked in her hands. I noticed he didn’t say hi back to her.

“I was planning on waking up early tomorrow morning and getting these done before class tomorrow.” She yawned, setting up her work on the floor. “But we all know that’s not going to happen.”

Sasha had two pieces of transparent paper stacked on top of each other. When I asked, she said they were frames for her animation midterm. She lifted the top paper up and put it back down again to see how it looked so far. Swish...swish. Then, she sketched some detail into the frame and looked again. Scribble...swish. “Not quite...”

I was getting swept up in the small sounds and nuisances that had mixed together into music. The lyrics of Jean’s music turned into mush, and the snare drum in the beat leapt out at me each time it sounded. Tap...bum, tap...

“Natural burlap... for...the...apron. After Dark wool suiting ...”


I stopped contributing to the melody when I stopped typing out my essay. My eyes were burning to the point where they felt raw. I shut my eyes to feel some sort of relief. Then, I didn’t want to open them.

“Hitch.” His voice broke through my trance, and suddenly all the sounds that were just overcoming me got quiet. I opened my eyes and looked right at him. He wasn’t painting anymore. He wasn’t staring at it like he was for the past few minutes.

“Huh?”

“Agh, come on. You can’t fall asleep--”

“We agreed we wouldn’t!” Marco chirped.

I rubbed my eye with the heel of my palm. “I--Fuck. I didn’t fall asleep.”

“It’s only midnight. Christ.” He stretched his arms up towards the ceiling. His midriff peeked out from underneath his hoodie. I pouted. What a fucking tease. And he doesn’t even know it. He glanced over at me, and I had to pretend like I wasn’t just staring at his waist, and that the ceiling was very, very interesting. I think he noticed, but I hoped that he thought he imagined it. I swallowed, waiting for him to either say something stupid, or call me out in front of Marco and Sasha. He got off
his bed, stretched again, and said, “I’ll brew up some coffee.”

“Oh. Okay”

“Regular? Caramel? Vanilla?”

“Caramel.”

“Cream?”

“A little.”

“Sugar?”

“All of it. If that’s possible.”

“All of the sugar...in the room? On the Earth?”

“In the universe .”

“Please.” He laughed to himself, rolling his eyes as he poured water into the coffeemaker. “The Trade Federation of the Galactic Republic is long gone.”

Marco smiled in the midst of his fabric counting. Sasha just looked up at him and fought back a grin before turning back to her animation. I scoffed, “Nobody wants your Star Trek bullshit in this environment; Jean, please.”

“Star Wars .” He corrected me sternly. “Star Wars , Hitch.”


As soon as my coffee was in my hand, I decided to check the progress of my paper. I had some research done and a loose introduction, but nothing really else. That was pretty disappointing. Hopefully this coffee would give me the energy I needed to actually get something done.

After I finished gathering some more sources, Sasha ducked out of the room. She left her animation on the floor, abandoned. As soon as the door slammed shut, Marco turned to ask, “Did...did she just leave?”

“If she left all her shit here overnight, I’m gonna be pissed.”

She came back shortly after Jean said that with bags of greasy, great-smelling food. “Surprise...I ordered out.”

“Oh,” Marco blinked, watching Sasha’s grease-stained paper bag intently. I think he was surprised because he was out-nice’d. “That’s nice of you.”

Jean stood up and cracked his back. “What did you get?”

“Um, let’s see.” She put the bag on the ground, opened a styrofoam container, and said, “These are the chicken nuggets--”

“I’ll be taking the nuggets.” He grabbed the box, climbed back on top of his bed, and put them by his side. “Thanks.”

“T-They were for everyone--” Sasha stuttered, debating whether or not an argument over chicken nuggets was worth the energy. It apparently wasn’t. “Fine.”
“Did you get any dipping sauce?”

“Honey mustard,” She grumbled, arranging her take-out containers on the floor, opening each one to see what was inside.

“Did you get any barbecue sauce?”

“No.”

“Oh.” He shrugged, rolling his eyes as he opened the honey mustard packet. “I prefer barbecue sauce.”

Ignoring his woes, Sasha went through the rest of the food. She got buffalo wings, french fries, and mozzarella sticks, along with a huge bottle of Diet Coke. Okay, I figured, I’ll take a real quick break to have some wings and fries. I mean, I had all the sources I needed now. That was something to celebrate. But after that, it would be right back to work for me.

After I got my coffee, wings, and fries down, it didn’t give me the immense amount of energy I needed for this paper. If I stared at it any longer, I would go crazy. I decided to take a peek at Jean’s canvas. I wiped my hands on my pants like some sort of animal because the delivery man forgot to give us napkins, and made my move. Silent, I sat next to him on his bed, gently nudging him closer to the wall so I could sit comfortably. He was simply radiating exasperation.

On his canvas was this hefty, orange woman lying in a red void. She was lying on her side, her arms covering most of her face. One eye peeked out at the viewer. Little shading was done, and it was done in light blue paint, and it was dizzying to focus there. It was unpolished, and the strokes were chunky and heavy. There were no brushes on his palette - just plastic palette knives, each topped with a thick chunk of paint. “What’s the story behind this?”

“It’s supposed to be a painting that reflects something more than reality, to make a story about the model through color and stuff.” He explained. “So I’m painting my ex.”

Ugh, her again. How many times did I have to hear about her? What was even her fucking name? Who was she? “Is this the same one that you said you were too overbearing with? And somehow you liking to draw ruined everything? And thought you were French?”

He looked pretty perturbed by that comment. “Yeah.”

"How'd she think you were French?" I asked. “You never told me.”

“It was a misunderstanding.”

“You told me that much, but what was it?”

"My teacher said I was a French exchange student." He sighed. "I was visiting France before going to prep that fall."

"Ooh, prep," I smirked. "You call your high school prep?"

“Yeah?”

“That sounds so fancy. Like you had uniforms or something.”

"A lil' fancy." He grinned, dunking another nugget until it was drenched in honey mustard. After he ate it, he sucked the remaining mustard off of his fingertips. “Our Lady Rose Catholic High School. And yes, we did have uniforms.”
“How did drawing ruin your relationship or whatever?” It sounded dumb when I said it out loud. I was probably misremembering.

“She got jealous because I started prioritizing myself in front of her. Visiting museums. Spending weekends working on my artwork. You know.” He shrugged. “I drew her a lot when we were together, though. On some Titanic shit.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Jesus, it’s like talking to someone who’s been trapped in a basement since…” He stopped talking when he noticed my pout. “I-I’m sorry. Anyway. Outside of spending time with her, all I really did was work on my artwork. I didn’t like going to parties anymore. It seemed vapid, and she ran out of things to talk to me about. And our dates to the art museum weren’t good enough for her. Apparently all the time I spent studying her for my sketchbook wasn’t intimate enough.”

Yeah, lying naked with some guy staring at you, his hands all over a canvas instead of you... real intimate. I guess. But this wasn’t the time to disagree. Jean just ran his hand through his hair and laughed, “It was a lot of time wasted. I could still probably draw that girl from memory if you asked me to.”

With the way he talked about her, with such contempt and distaste, you’d think she killed his sister or something. “I’m guessing the break-up wasn’t amicable.”

“I thought getting a girlfriend would make me happy.” Was that a warning for me? “I thought that and being popular was all I wanted to be in high school, but that’s not fulfilling. You can’t depend on finding passion in other people.”

“I think you can.” I think people are capable of bringing out the best and worst in other people, like emotion, motivation, and inspiration. Like, I think alone, I’m capable of a lot of different things and I have a lot of different skills, but if I didn’t have the parents or friends I did have, I think I’d be a completely different person. Perhaps I’d be a worse person. My parents who sought to keep me following strict regulations and ideals had me thinking outside of the box, and motivated me to think about what I wanted. My friends today were helping me grow as a designer and as a human being. Where would I be without any of them? But, once again, this was a time to listen. Not to argue or preach. “But I guess it’s different for different people.”

“Well, I find solace and creativity in art, so that’s what I chose over her. This is the first time I’ve painted her since…” He didn’t have to finish his sentence for me to understand what he was getting at.

“Ah. Yeah.”

“It’s not like I’m still into her, though. It’s just a lot of raw emotions, and it’s easy to put that on canvas.” He took a deep breath, washing his brush before picking up another color. He swallowed and looked back at his canvas. “I should paint you sometime.”

I smiled. I liked the idea of being a muse. And what type of raw emotions did he feel about me? Instead of asking that question, I stupidly wondered, “Did you finish the one of your sister?”

He leaned back against the wall with a thump and shut his eyes, exhausted. I wouldn’t be surprised if he fell asleep instantly. Instead, he said on an exhale, “I might drop it.”

I frowned and whined, “Why? You should finish it.”
“I don’t know, I can’t get it the way I envisioned it--”

“Jean, she’s gonna be so sad if you don’t.” I never met his sister, but I would think she would be excited to be in a painting? Right? “You can’t disappoint a kid, can you?”

He groaned, wiping the underside of his eye. “Just more and more shit I have to do…”

“Good. You have to finish that one.” I looked at his canvas. “Well, maybe this one is more pressing.”

“You think?” He grabbed his palette knife and started adding more splotches to the figure.

“What are the colors and stuff supposed to mean?”

“It’s art.” He said. In a mocking tone, he added, “It’s supposed to be whatever you want.”

“Well,” I bit my lip. “The areas with the blue paint are kind of hard to look at.”

“Vibrating colors.”

“Sure,” I pretended to understand. “It hurts to look at her.”

“Okay.”

“The face looks a little wonky, too. She’s covering her face like she’s hiding, but she looks...like, really angry. I don’t know if you messed up her face or what. But her face doesn’t match--”

“Don’t you have a paper to write?” Sasha interrupted with her mouth full. She was polishing off the last of the mozzarella sticks.

“Yeah, but--”

“Write your paper, Hitch.” With that, I decided to take her advice.

Jean swallowed as I hustled into my chair again and said, “Thanks for your help, though.”

“Anytime.” With all this progress made on Jean’s work, I think it was time I revisited my own. I looked at my progress so far and got back to work. I think taking a break and rereading my essay with a fresh set of eyes really helped. I spat out a lot of words in the span of an hour and a half. By three-thirty in the morning, all I needed to do was tweak the formatting, add my citations, and give it another reread. Hopefully after that, I was done. First, I had to get an outsider’s opinion. Maybe they’d see something I forgot.

However, while I got a lot of work done, it seemed that the wee hours of the morning had taken a toll on Marco and Sasha. Marco was slumped over his fabrics, cocooned by yellow silk and green polyester. Sasha somehow found comfort on the tiled floor, resting her head on her arm, her animation looking unfinished. Yikes. I didn’t want to bother either of them - perhaps they needed a nap more than they needed to finish their work. At least for now. That meant my only option was Jean, and I felt like I’d been bothering him all night - all year, actually, but that was irrelevant. I needed to pass, most importantly, and he was the only man that could do it. I got up and stood by his bedside.

“Psst. Hey. Can you read my essay?” I whispered. He looked at my laptop and released a deep, disappointed sigh.

“But--” I peeked at his canvas. The figure was still pretty flat. Besides the thick blue outlines
underneath her right boob and on her shins, there was very little shading on it. “I have a lot of shading left to do...she looks very Matisse-esque right now.”

“Haha, yeah, totally.” I agreed, turning my laptop away from his view so I could Google “who is matisse?”

“Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine. You do have a lot left.” I reluctantly admitted. I got off of Jean’s bed and started carefully tip-toeing over Sasha and towards Marco. Once I was close enough, I nudged his shoulder to carefully take him out of his sleep. I whined, “I’m so sorry...wake up...”

“Ack!” Marco rubbed his eyes. “I really wanted to...finish cutting out my pattern by tomorrow!”

“Your pattern? For what?”

“This whole thing!” Marco laid his brown fabric on the floor, carefully avoiding the Hungry Sleeping Beauty. Puzzled, I peeked over my laptop to see exactly what Marco was up to. He was laying out a few pieces of freezer paper, each one cut into a different, bizarre shape. I asked, “What class is that even for...? Sewing?”

Marco blinked, confused. Suddenly, laughter. “Oh, no! It’s for Halloween.”

“Your Halloween costume?” I blinked. “But it’s so far away.”

“Only a week. It’s coming up fast...Hitch, have you not gotten a costume yet?”

“No?”

“You should get on that then.”

“Stop being a dick,” Jean broke in. “Mormons don’t celebrate Halloween.” After a pause, he turned to me and asked, “Th-They don’t, right?”

“We do.” I bit my thumbnail. I had to dress up for Halloween! In a costume that I chose, with no restrictions. Modest Halloween was over, I wanted to go as a slutty-anything. Sluttty police officer. Slutty tax collector. Sluttty linguine. I don’t care. For the first time in my life, for one night of the year, I could dress up as scandalously and crazily as I wanted, and I would take that opportunity. “Just gotta think of a costume.”

I turned to Jean. Maybe we could coincidentally, accidentally, go as the same thing. “What are you going to go as?”

“I’m not.”

“If depression was a person, it would be you.” I frowned. Marco bit back a grin. “Just one night. One night you get to dress up and have fun, and you don’t want to do it.”

“Get back to your paper.” He said, dotting something on his canvas.

“You’re right.” I sighed. “Marco?”

He put his scissors and pattern-making supplies down on the floor before standing up and rolling his sleeves to his elbows. He had really nice arms. Almost like they were sculpted by Michelangelo. For such a big softie, he had one of the best figures I’d ever had the pleasure of looking at. I’m
surrounded by temptation. Quickly realizing what I had just thought to myself, I averted my gaze, and handed him my laptop. We both sat on his bed as he read through the essay, highlighting and pointing out anything that looked “strange.” I refused to look at him, for my own sake. After about an hour of reading and lots of “uh-huhs” and “oh, okays,” he handed me back my laptop.

“Uh, so I think you’re pretty good.” Marco yawned, standing up to stretch.

“Just some grammatical snags here and there. You need to cite your sources, too...oh, and you need a title. Every essay needs a title.”

“Ugh ,” I groaned. Titles are the worst . I don’t know how to title things without relying on puns. I sat back in Jean’s folding chair, frustrated. “If either one of you can make a joke about national parks, I’d love to hear it.”

“Oh...how about this? So, park can mean two things, right?” Jean laughed to himself. “Like...you can go to a park or park a car. Get what I’m saying?”

“I guess.”

“ Park Your Car and Go to a Park . Eh? Because everyone’s...you know, commuting. They never go to parks. Eh? I mean, when’s the last time you’ve been to a park?”

My hometown had enough farmland and plant-life to resemble a park. I wasn’t really hankering to visit one any time soon. “Egh. You don’t have to help me anymore.” I groaned. He just rolled his eyes and went back to his painting.

All I had to do was come up with a title, and then I was done. I didn’t want to overthink it because really, how many points could I lose on a title? Let’s just half-ass this one thing. I just googled “rhyming dictionary,” punched in the word “national,” and worked off of the first (and only) result. Rational Parks: The Necessity of Protecting America’s Natural History . Heh. Rational parks, instead of National ...whatever. I thought it was just peachy, especially with it being six in the morning. I yawned and cracked my back. Despite being stiff and wildly uncomfortable, the thought of sleeping in my dorm never sounded so sweet.

But, I had to still add in my citations. Ugh . Then I had to go to the library to print the damn thing out! Ugh! The citations alone took me a good chunk of my time, having to make sure they were in the right format, and parenthetically cited in the right places. Boy, what a pain in my ass. Why can’t you just like, pinky-promise professors that you didn’t plagiarize? Can that be a thing? I wouldn’t break a pinky- promise. A regular promise, probably. But not one sworn on a pinky. There’s rules.

Once I added my citations, I woke up Sasha and made my exit and headed towards the library. As soon as the essay was printed, the paper hot and the ink still wet, I lazily grabbed it, stapled it together, and tossed it in my purse. While I was at it, I printed a cheapo calendar for the months of October and November to hang in my room. Maybe I would remember due dates from then on so this mess didn’t happen again. Now , my essay was done and I could rest easy. It was finally time to go home and take a nice, long nap.

Unfortunately, my nap wasn’t as relieving as I thought it would be. I got a whopping two hours of sleep, but I woke up wanting more, and most importantly, I wanted to die. I gathered my laptop and essay together before heading to writing class. I wasn’t looking forward to it. I knew it was going to be dangerous. The professor was always so boring, and I was in actual jeopardy of falling asleep. His monotone voice could put anyone to sleep, like hypnosis. The second I got comfortable in my seat, sleep threatened to take me over. Fucking yikes.
Our professor walked in with some big fucking smirk on his face. I had my paper already out on the table, ready to hand it in and peace out. He simply put his messenger bag on the floor and gingerly took out his laptop. He put it on the podium, but he didn’t open it just yet. He stood there, tapping his fingers on the wood podium. As the class filed into the room and took their unassigned seats, he continued the tap-tap-tap of his fingers. I wanted to snap his digits like twigs. As soon as the clock on the wall struck eleven, the tapping stopped, and he rubbed his hands together. I could still hear that goddamn tapping ringing in my ears, though. The Tell-Tale Tap.

“Before I come around and collect your work, I’m going to let you in on a little secret.” My professor coyly grinned. He said, “Your final papers are due when we meet on Friday.”

It seemed the entire class let out a sigh. Most of them, perhaps out of relief. But me? I was annoyed. Exasperated. Exhausted from a night of feverish writing, rewriting, editing, and self-doubting. Pulling an all-nighter for a rough draft wasn’t okay. I stayed up until I-want-to-fucking-kill-myself o’clock to finish that goddamn essay so he would take it. I’m going to shove it down his throat if I have to. The jagweed continued to speak as he handed out a packet of papers. “Take these few extra days to review what this school expects from you as collegiates. Go through this checklist and make sure your paper fits all of the requirements.”

I’ll go through that checklist when I’m dead. I didn’t stay for the rest of class. I don’t care if he thinks I’m an asshole. I just needed a nap more than I needed to hear about this stupid essay.

After I left the class prematurely, I checked my phone. Marco had texted me. “Sale at the Halloween store on columbus- thought you’d like to know. :)

Halloween was pressing, sure, but I was worried more about my midterm critiques that were coming up this week. I didn’t have anything due besides my paper for writing, and just to show up to my design critiques.

My first one on the table was drawing, which I was hella nervous about. When I got to the classroom later that week, all my work was hanging on the wall with thumbtacks. Seeing all of those messes up on the wall like that hastily hung with thumbtacks...it looked worse than I thought. When they were displayed side-by-side, it looked like we were in a Hooverville MoMA.

My professor just stood with me, staring at the wall for about thirty seconds. She finally took a deep breath and sighed, “Well...it seems you’re struggling—” How perceptive. Please continue. “--with finding a voice and a style.”

“Well, uh.” I was always taught to be proud of and stand by your work, but after looking at my first few attempts - with the smudged graphite and the wonky, failed attempt at perspective - I couldn’t. “I am.”

She was about to say something, but bit it back and replaced it with a sigh. “Well, let’s talk about your latest piece.”

“Oh. Okay.” Ah, yes. The one I actually really, really, loved and worked my ass off on. Let’s see how this goes.

“I really like it.”

“Oh, really?”

“It’s an interesting contrast,” she noted, “between masculinity and femininity. Is that what you were going for?”
I swallowed. If she liked it, then the answer was, “Yes.”

“This is a good direction.”

The most five beautiful words I’ve ever heard! “Do you think I’m getting better?”

“Certainly. But, if I can be frank, it just seems like you took your time with it.”

As if I hadn’t been taking my time on anything else? As if I hadn’t been losing sleep and skipping other classes to stress about this one? I stood there for a while, tapping my foot trying to find a polite response. “I have been taking my time, though.”

“Well, did you like to do this last piece?”

“Uh…” I never really liked to draw. But this one went better than my other pieces. “I guess so, yeah.”

“And it shows.” She said. “I’ll be the first to admit that drawings of cubes and pyramids and stuff isn’t the most exciting assignment, but you make the most of it. You just have to find passion in your art. Alright? Like you found passion in this one.”

I gave back a meek “okay.” That crit was just another blow to my self-confidence. To make matters worse, my design critique wasn’t any better. I got chewed out for “craftsmanship.” Sloppy lines, uneven coats of paint, the works. It wasn’t surprising to hear, but it was still disheartening. So far in all of my creative classes, I had D’s. D’s! I’ve never been so academically behind in my life. Super spooky nearly-failing grades, just in time for Halloween. Haha yay.

Once I got back to my room, I dropped my stuff off at the door and commenced my moping session. Annie was sitting on her bed, silently reading a book while ignoring my presence. I sighed aloud, and waiting for a response. No recognition whatsoever. I dragged my feet towards my bed and sighed again, louder this time. Annie looked up from her book and asked, “What?”

“Annie, I’m so sad.”

She turned back towards her book and unenthusiastically replied, “I am very, very sorry to hear that.” I sighed again. Now I was truly on my own. I just opened a sketchbook and tossed it on my bed. I put my face on a pillow, smashing a pen against my sketchbook. I just kind of moved my arm in random shapes like a broken seismograph. Once I had drawn a nice, big scribble, I grabbed my colored pencils and started sketching in the shapes formed by the lines.

my room was silent, except for the sounds of scribbling and sniffling. It was like that for I don’t know how long, until there was a knock on the door. Annie asked, “Do you wanna get that?”

“It’s probably for you.” I mumbled into my pillow. I was now one with the bed. I physically couldn’t get up without feeling sick and tired.

Annie sighed, stood up, and dragged her feet towards the door. She opened it and said, “Oh, hey.”

I was too sad to look at our guest until he asked, “Er, is this not a good time?”

“Jean.” I quickly wiped my eyes and coughed, looking back up at him as if things were okay. “Hey.”

“You didn’t talk to me at all today.”
“I didn’t?”

“I texted you twice.”

I know he did but I was too sad to answer him. “You never text me.”

“Yeah, well, today was different.” He moved my legs and sat at the foot of my bed. “What have you been doing all day? Sitting around like a hermit?”

“I got my assignments back, finally.”

“oh yeah? All graded?”

“Yeah.”

It was quiet until he asked, “So, how are they?”

“Eh, I, uh,” I will *not* cry. Not again. “Not too good.”

“Oh. Jeez.” Jean frowned. “Mine came out pretty great, but—”

“I don’t care, I’m *sad*.”

“Okay, okay. I get it.” He quietly added a reluctant, “Sorry.”

I rolled over, facing the ceiling. “I have a D in my core classes currently. So I’m not failing. Thankfully.”

“Er,” He blinked and looked up at the ceiling. “That’s not necessarily true.”

“F is for failure, Jean. And Hitch Deliss is not a failure,” I grinned, clearing my throat. Then I remembered the direction my life was taking and how much I was struggling with class. “Yet.”

“You only continue with your program if you get C’s or higher,” He apprehensively told me. “Any lower and you’re kicked out.”

I bounced my foot and fought the urge to Google my own university’s graphic design program guidelines. *There is no way that could be right.* “It’s an art school, Jean, I mean, what else would I do if I got kicked out of the art program?”

“Take your Gen Ed courses, probably.” He rubbed his chin. “Re-submit your portfolio. Hope you get back in.”

I swallowed. “And if it’s not good, I…?”

“Try again?” He shrugged. I was not that optimistic. My arms remained crossed, and my foot was still bouncing. He was slackjawed until he apprehensively broke the news, “Or you could transfer, or drop out or something…”

“Don’t even suggest that.” I whined.

“Hey, hey listen—that’s not gonna happen to you. I promise.”

It was strange to hear Jean be so supportive. Jean was a talker. He could talk for days and days and days if he wanted to, but when he had nothing more to give, you can bet he didn’t care what you wanted to say. I really didn’t know what else to say except for “Th-Thank you.”
“We’ll just…” He sighed. “I mean, it’s gonna be the weekend soon. Halloween, right?”

“Right.” I said. “Halloween.”

I focused my energy not on my failing grades, but my Halloween costume. I would party first, catch up on work later. At least it would offer me some sort of distraction. Marco, the self-appointed Halloween King or whatever, was the one making all of the plans. He told me to show up to his room at five, in costume and ready to go. I didn’t know what kind of lame-ass parties were starting at five o’clock, but I rolled with it.

“Hi,” He grinned. “Happy Halloween.”

“Hey,” I said, walking inside his room. “What time are we leaving?”

“Ten o’clock tonight.”

“The party isn’t until ten?” I asked. “Are we really gonna drink for five hours straight?” I didn’t have any problem with it, but...

“Nope.” Marco said.

Jean threw an empty pillowcase at me. “We’re taking you trick or treating.”

“I’m taking both of you trick or treating.” Marco corrected him, shaking his pillow out of his pillowcase. “It’s weird that neither have you have gone before.”

“What do Mormons have against trick-or-treating?” Jean asked me.

“Nothing.” I said. “Back home, our houses were so far away from each other, it was damn near impossible to go door-to-door.”

Jean cleared his throat, unscrewing the cap of his vodka. Pouring himself, and nobody else, a shot, he told me, “Your life is so sad.”

Marco quickly chided, “Jean--!”

“You didn’t go trick-or-treating either.” I crossed my arms. “What’s your excuse?”

“I was overseas.” He explained. “It’s hard to trick-or-treat from a hotel in Barcelona.”

“From a hotel in Barcelona, I mocked him. “Oh, fuck off with your ‘problems.’ You don’t have any problems. If your biggest problem is that you couldn’t trick-or-treat in Barce-fuckin’-lona, you have no problems. Who are you even supposed to be?”

Jean adjusted the pom-pom on the hat. “Where’s Waldo.”

“Why Where’s Waldo?” I asked. He looked absurd. He didn’t even take his piercings out. He looked halfway between a goth and a goober.

“I’m gonna steal all the booze and disappear.” Jean explained.

“But not until we trick-or-treat,” Marco optimistically chimed in, his chocolate eyes strangely set on this one very specific thing.

Jean turned back towards me and asked, “What about you?”
I looked down at my paint-stained tunic and adjusted my beret. “An artist.”

“You’re supposed to dress up as something you aren’t,” Marco beamed, fiddling with the lid of his plastic teapot.

“But she’s horrible at drawing.” Jean said, fixing his plastic, lensless glasses. “It’s perfect.”

I ignored his wisecrack, grabbing an empty pillowcase. “Marco, who are you?”

He smiled, as if he was waiting all night for me to ask. “I’m Prince Zuko, banished heir to the Fire Nation throne, taking refuge in an Earth Kingdom tea shop—”

Boy, was I sorry that I asked. I wasn’t expecting a speech, with a thesis statement and everything. Lord. I let him ramble as I headed out with the boys to trick or treat. Most of the houses we went to were met with rejection. It was a feeling I was starting to grow numb to. Out of fifteen, only three houses gave us candy, and one of them had nothing but a bowl on their stoop. Jean dumped the whole thing into his bag until Marco lamented about “good fortune” and “karma” and “simply doing the right thing,” and suggested they only take two pieces like the sign on the door said. I didn’t care, so I didn’t participate in the argument. Instead, they came to a compromise: rather than take the whole bowl, we would each take a very generous handful. Jean disagreed, so his selfish ass took two handfuls. I don’t know why rich people act like they’re starving like Jean does. After that house, we decided that was probably going to be the best we would get out of tonight, and retired back to Marco and Jean’s room.

“I’m sorry the trick-or-treating was kind of...” Marco bit his lip, trying to think of what to say. He decided on “lackluster.”

I didn’t want to go trick or treating anyway, unless one of those treats was “a passing grade.” I just sat on Marco’s bed and sifted through my modest loot of fun size candy bars.

“Denying older trick or treaters is ageist.” Jean whined, organizing his candy into small piles. “I’m sure it counts as prejudice. It’s like denying a kid based on race--”

Marco was quick to correct him, “It is not anything like that, but if you insist.”

“Anyway, let’s stop complaining and find out what we’re doing next.”


“I’m with you on that,” Jean said, rubbing his hands together and hopping off of his bed to take a peek underneath. He reached towards the wall and stood back up with a bottle of rum in his hand.

“Where did you get that?” I asked, chewing on another piece of chocolate. Just make me fat.

“A good magician never reveals his secrets.” Jean pointed to his faux glasses mischievously. Was I missing something? I narrowed my eyes, glancing over at Marco for an explanation for both the rum and the whole “magician” thing. He just shrugged.

Jean cracked open the bottle and poured the contents into Marco’s teapot until it was a third way full. While Jean was filling the pot, Marco was distributing tea cups. He joked, “it’s like a tea party, isn’t it?”

Our cups were filled with rum and coke. Marco raised his glass. “Cheers.”

Jean and I echoed his “cheers” and took a sip. Not bad. Not bad at all.
Impatient to leave and get even drunter, I asked, “Jean, where are we even going?”

“Don’t worry.” He said, scrolling through his phone. “I have a few options.”

“Give us one.” Marco said, pouring himself a cup of not-tea.

“On Shiganshina. It’s not the best neighborhood, but it’ll be a good time.”

“That’s not too far.” Marco noted. “What else is there?”

“Hmm…” He scrolled for a few minutes before sighing and shrugging. “You know, they’re all across town.”

“There’s public transportation.” I suggested. “It’s really not that hard to go across town.”

“Oh, well, we’re just going to Shiganshina. Okay?”

Marco pointed out, “I think it’s the only one you have.”

“It’s the only promising one I have.”

“It’s the only promising one you have because it’s the only one you have.” I continued the teasing.

“Oh, well, if you find an address, then tell me.” He folded his arms. “Until then, we’re going to Shiganshina. Whether you want to or not.”

Marco shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “It’s just such a nasty neighborhood.”

“If we all walk together, we should be fine. It’s not that bad.” Jean rolled his eyes. And with that, it seemed that our destination was decided. A few more drinks and zero addresses later, we started making our way to the house. Jean was walking ahead of Marco and me, but just barely, to navigate through the streets. It was dark, and we were surrounded by rusting chain-link fences and caged front doors. I heard a dog bark, and I squeezed Marco’s hand so hard, it nearly popped. In the midst of the scariest neighborhood ever, we were trudging through while wearing the dumbest costumes ever conceived. I was in fucking short sleeves. I could feel my skin going numb. I cuddled up to Marco, out of warmth and protection. “I feel like such an asshole,” I whispered to Marco.

“Why?” Marco asked.

“We’re smack-dab in the middle of the ‘hood,” I said, but Jean chortled at that. He quickly recomposed himself and I continued, “dressed like a bunch of geeks.”

“You think this is bad?” Jean scoffed, but his voice was still a little quieter than his normal volume. “This is not that bad.”

“Says the asshole who lives in the city’s richest neighborhood.” I shot back, looking behind us to make sure nobody was following us. “You grew up your entire life with a silver spoon in your mouth, so don’t even act like--”

“Shiganshina is right here.” He interrupted me, making a harsh left onto a narrow street. Old string lights were hanging high above us, cross-crossing across the road. While it seemed they were trying to liven up the dreariness of urban life, some of the bulbs were flickering ominously, putting an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. Jean kept his composure. “Google says that the house will be on the left.”

“I-I was talking, asshole.”
“Yeah, yeah,” he waved me off. “I hear music.”

“Me, too.” Marco looked around for any sign of where it could be coming from.

I could, too. I could hear the bassline of whatever song was playing, thumping into the quiet of the night. As we got closer to the house, the music got louder, and we could hear the ambient sounds of laughter and conversation. Two strangers were standing by a stop sign, their phones in their right hand and a cigarette in their left. They reared their heads to peek at whatever car was passing by whenever they saw the glow of headlights. Jean smiled, “This has to be it.”

We walked up to the porch. There were certainly a lot of people in there and they looked like they were having fun. Jean smugly opened the white, iron security door, and announced, “Happy Halloween.”

Chapter End Notes

I got a blog and so does corey who helped me edit this, also happy bday
Flying Dutchman

Chapter Summary

happy halloween, hoes
this took too long to post

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

We walked into a Halloween party full of disguised strangers. I couldn’t even think if I saw them on campus before. It was just an intimidating mass of people. “First things first–let’s seek out where the keg is.” Jean said. “I heard this was a kegger.”

“From who?” Marco asked.

“You two have so many questions.” Jean sighed, seemingly perturbed on the surface, but I knew he loved the attention. “From the guy I heard it from, okay? He told me the guy hosting this thing got a keg and wasn’t charging. It’d be dumb not to hit this house tonight.”

“Yeah, yeah, does this guy have a name?” Marco asked, and then said more quietly, “You don’t have that many friends, I was just curious--”

I laughed, but Jean turned white and quickly hissed, “Shh! Why would you say that?”

“Well, it's true, you don't really have many friends--” Marco insisted.

“Any friends,” I added, “besides us.”

Jean sighed, taking a step closer to us.

“Okay, I didn't hear about this place from one of my many other friends.” He said, hushed. “I overheard it in my stat class.”

“What a surprise.” I noted. “Name one friend you have besides us.”

“What? That’s insulting.”

“It should be easy for someone so popular.” Marco added.

“Jean!” Sasha’s boyfriend called from the stairs. Sasha was right behind him, wearing all blue and a Cookie Monster hat. “How are you doing?”

“Connie.” Jean quickly said. He turned to me and smugly grinned, “Connie is my friend.”

“Not since high school, you jerk.”

“Ah, high school.” He said. “How nostalgic…”

“Hi, Sasha.” I interrupted the tension between Connie and Jean. “What are you supposed to be?”
She made her way around Connie to stand next to me and carry on our conversation. “I’m Cookie Monster,” She pinched Connie’s cheek. “And he’s a cookie!”

“D-Don’t pinch my cheek like that.” Connie chided, but the smile on his face proved he didn’t mean it.

“I remember you with that stupid hat freshman year.” Jean said, his voice laced with authentic nostalgia.

“Casual Fridays for days,” Sasha remarked, fixing her Cookie Monster hat.

“Hashtag: Catholic School Things.” Connie chimed in.

“Hashtag: Matching Costumes.” Sasha added before leaning into Connie’s selfie.

“Can you shut up with the fucking hashtags?” Jean crossed his arms. “You’re overdoing something that has been overdone since 2010.”

“No can do.” Connie said, the camera shutter going off. He brought his phone closer to his face to start typing. “I just got an Instagram, man. Gotta keep up with the times.”

“You’re doing a piss-poor job at it.” He glanced around, getting on his toes to survey the crowd. “Where’s Marco?”

Sasha shrugged off his attitude with a grin and turned towards me. “D’ya want a drink?”

*Literally a million*. Before I could answer, Jean said, “Maybe later. We’re gonna check things out.”

“Okay.” Sasha grinned. “I’ll see you around?”

“Definitely.” He said. “Have fun.”

And so, Sasha walked away. I sighed, and looked up at Jean, who asked, “Where to next?”

I didn't reply. He sighed. “What, you’re mad at me? Already?”

“You don’t talk for me.” I warned him. “It’s annoying.”

“I can’t be left at parties by myself.”

I ignored his complaint, twirling my hair around my finger. “You’re a grown-up. Of course you can.”

“I don’t know where Marco left–and stop touching your hair, why are you always touching your hair? Besides, I’ll be damned if Sasha takes you away from me and leaves me to fend for myself.” He exhaled, looking up at the ceiling and then the walls. “I don’t even know who lives here. Who lives here? Whose house is this?” He asked me, as if I knew. I kept twirling my hair, too.

There was a media center with knicks in the wood. The TV was relatively new - a flatscreen HD - but the dimensions were only marginally bigger than the Macs we had in the studio. Amidst a DVD collection and a shelf of old yet intimidating encyclopedias, there was a small photograph on one of the shelves. Jean maneuvered his way over there, grabbing it and holding it close to his face. “Who is thi–Oh. Oh *fuck* no.”

“What? What’s wrong?” I asked, trying to peep the picture in the frame.
He placed the frame back onto the media center. I still didn’t recognize the person in the picture. “Eren fucking Jäger.”

“Who?”

“Eren fucking Jäger!” Jean repeated.

“That doesn’t help.” I rolled my eyes. “Who is he?”

“I hate that kid—”

“That sucks.” I realized we’ve been here for five minutes, and I didn’t have a drink in my hand yet. “Can you get me a drink?”

“If I see him, I’m leaving.”

“Okay. Can you get me a drink, please?” I really really really just want to drink.

He put the picture back on the shelf and turned back towards me, his annoyance contained. “So you want a drink?”

“Who gave you that idea?” I wasn’t even irritated, really. Just tired.

Marco’s voice called out from the crowd, “Jean?”

His head turned faster than light to see Marco with a red cup, trying to flag us down. When he made it towards us he said, “Hi. I found where the drinks are.”

“Okay cool, where?”

“Out in the backyard. There’s a keg.” Marco swallowed, wrinkling his nose. “Reiner is guarding it.”

“What do you mean guarding it?”

“He’s only letting you get to the keg after doing a shot or a kegstand.”

“Okay, but why?” I wrinkled my nose.

“He said the party is too boring and everyone needs to get drunker—”

“What did you take?” Jean interrupted.

“Burnett’s.”

“Burnett’s?” Jean asked. “Why didn’t you take the kegstand?”

Marco blushed, defensive. “I-I can’t chug anything!” He looked down at his cup, frowning. “It’s too bitter—”

“Well, I’m gonna go.” He made his way to the glass door in the kitchen before turning towards me. “Are you coming?”

“You can go alone. I don’t want to get cold.” I rubbed my arms.

“At least hold my phone so it doesn’t fall out of my pocket.” He handed me his phone. Before I could take a peek at it, he warned me, “You don’t touch a single thing on it. I had to sign an NDA.”
He turned towards the door before turning back and taking a baggie out of his pockets. “And this, too. Don’t smoke it.”

“Out of what?”

“I don’t know. I’m just covering all of my bases, alright?”

Without even thanking me, he left as I put all of his junk in my pocket. I waited with Marco as Jean left to get the drinks. As soon as he was out of earshot, I said, “He’s getting on my nerves.”

Marco shrugged. “He’ll be better with a drink in his system. Maybe.”

“You don’t sound so sure.” I bit the inside of my cheek, sighing. “How’s your drink?”

He shrugged. “It’s a drink.”

“It isn’t good?”

“I can’t stand the taste of any alcohol, actually.” He took a peek into his cup with a look of extreme concern. “Is that weird?”

I sighed, got on my tip-toes, and grabbed his face. “You are too pure.”

His face was burning under my touch. “C-Coming from you!”

I laughed, despite being slightly offended and still looking for a way to distract myself from my recent plights. I turned and saw a group of kids that looked familiar. I just kept staring trying to figure out who they were. For five minutes, I was staring between these people trying to identify one of them. They looked familiar. How? I wasn’t sure. Marco leaned in and asked, “Who are they?”

“I have no idea.” The cogs in my head kept turning. I was staring at this one blond girl. She looked a lot like Annie, but I knew it wasn’t her. But why does she look so familiar…?

I thought back to my design class and realized she was in it. She always looked either too tired or too bored to really be interested in class, but her work was always flawless. I guess Marco could tell I had an epiphany somehow. He nudged my arm. “Did you figure it out?”

“Yeah, they’re design kids.” I turned to look at him and said, “I’m gonna go talk to them. Okay?”

Marco smiled. “You don't have to ask for my permission.”

“Okay, okay.” I nodded. “I just didn’t want to leave you stranded.”

“I’ll survive.”

“I’m gonna head on over.”

“You got it.” Marco grinned. Ugh, he’s so sweet. I went over to the group of designers, ready to strike.

“So,” I chimed in. “You’re--You’re all graphic design?”

They all answered “yes,” either verbally or in the form of a head nod. I nodded back, “Cool, cool, so...how about these projects?”

They all glanced between each other. One shrugged. “What about ‘em?”
“I mean...why do we have to paint and draw? We’re graphic design majors.”

“I’m not complaining. It’s pretty easy stuff.”

Mmm, no it’s not, but okay. “I mean, are we really going to be using this after what, this semester?”

One guy giggled, taking a sip of his beer and looking at the wall. He looked a little older than everyone else, but that may be account of his stubble and his mildly unkempt hair. “Yeah. You will be.”

“Oh really? How do you know?”

As soon as I spoke to him, he couldn’t hold back his laughter anymore. My face was getting really hot and I was so embarrassed I wanted to leave really badly. That’s when I remembered what my costume was. Oh my God. “I’m a sophomore.”

“Ha. Okay.” Well, now I was just sad. I have a D in drawing and I’m barely passing my design class. “Ha, well, that just ruined my day. I’m just gonna go--”

“If you get any less than a C, you get dropped from the program,” One girl had to just painfully remind me. I really didn’t want to think of what I would do if I failed out of this program. What other options did I have? The worst part is, this girl was talking like I wasn’t already failing out of the program. Great. She reassured me with a smile, “A C is pretty easy to get. You’ll be fine.”

“Oh, yeah.” I smiled, starting to walk away before I burst into tears. I couldn’t see Jean or Marco or Sasha anywhere, either. It was just a mess of strangers. Even as I was walking away and trying to find the nearest bathroom to cry in, I was still talking as if they were still there. Something to distract me from the tension building in my chest. “Okay, well, that just ruined my entire evening. I’m gonna fail, but whatever, it’s fine, I can figure something out, it’s cool, I got it, I’m fine, I’ll be okay...”

There was a closed door down the hall upstairs. I didn’t know what it led to, but there was a light on inside. I knocked on it a bunch of times. “Hi? Hi? Can I just come in for a minute?”

“Come in--”

I twisted the knob as quick as I could. This bedroom was so white and clean, it assaulted my eyes compared to the dimness of the house. The bed was by the door, with a long shelf that went all the way across the farthest wall. On it were an array of little knick-knacks: a framed, elaborate cross-stitch of one of those lucky cats you see in the windows of sushi shops, a foggy glass bottle, a pair of white bookends with a humble collection of books between them, a vintage sewing machine with a ratty red scarf draped over it, a vase full of flowers, two cushions, and a throw pillow with the image of a black cat. In the corner was a dress mannequin who was sporting a half-finished, black jumper. The voice who invited me in was from this girl on the bed, her laptop sitting on her crossed legs. I don’t think she was here as a guest. I think she lived here, because if she was in costume, it was shit. Not that she looked bad, I mean, even in her large hoodie, sweatpants, and without makeup, she still looked flawless. I stumbled, trying to justify me barging into her nice, organized little room to bawl like a baby. “Just a minute.”

I tried to swallow back the lump in my throat without sobbing, taking a deep breath. I shuddered on the exhale. I pointed to the shelf with the cushions and walked over towards it. “Can I sit here for a minute? I’ll be quiet, I promise.”

“That’s okay.” She went back to her work. There was no tone in her voice. It was too even too calm. It sounded automated. At least it didn’t seem like she was watching me.
I took out my phone to dial Jean and beg him to walk me home because I honestly just wanted to lie in bed and do nothing about how awful I felt. The usual. I started calling him, and after two rings, I felt a buzzing in my pocket.

I took a deep breath and fought the urge to scream. I wonder how angry his dad would be knowing someone else was dabbling with this prototype. I mean, as long as I had it, it was okay to look at, right?

The back was made out of dark matte aluminum, and his name was engraved on it so cleanly with such unerring detail, unsurprising given Tütone’s track record of perfection. I flipped it over. There was no home button - it was just all screen. I cautiously pressed my thumb on the screen. With my touch, the pixels underneath and around my thumb came alive, exploding in red. The white words “Wrong Print” faded into view. I quickly took my finger off of the screen. The imprint of my thumb was left on the screen, burning red like a newly branded animal. Soon, that faded into the black as well. The words “Swipe to enter passcode” took its place on the screen.

Before I could get a good look at the keypad, it started ringing. *Oh no oh no oh no*. I couldn’t see who was calling. I panicked and answered too fast. I hope it wasn’t his mom or anything. *Oh no oh no oh nooooo.*

I waited for them to speak first. Gotta feel for who was calling. “Uh. Jean?”

*Ohhhh*, no. It was a girl’s voice. “H-Hello?”

“Oh, I’m, uh.” She laughed uncomfortably. I really hoped she wasn’t important? Or Jean would kill me. Oh, Jean would kill me. I tapped my foot against the floor. “I think I have the wrong number?”

*Oh, no. Who is this.* “No, I’m, uh.” Maybe she said John? Maybe she said John. John’s a common name! She must have meant *John*. “Oh, well, who are you looking for? John…?”

“Kirschstein?”

“Oh.” I gulped. “Yeah, this--this is his phone. Who is this?”

All she said was, “Oh.” And she followed that up with the most *awkward pause in the history of mankind.* Who is this?!?

“I can tell him you called if you want, I don’t know where he is?”

“No!” She laughed. Maybe I was just paranoid, but it sounded like she was mocking me. “No, ew, don’t tell him I called...who *are* you?!”

*Ew*?! Why the “ew”?! “Well, it’s gonna be in his call history. So...” I shrugged, but she couldn’t see it. I was a little pissed that I assumed she was mocking me. I folded my legs, shrugged again, looked at the ceiling, waiting for an answer. Then she hung up.

Maybe I was really dumb because nothing that’s happened to me in the past half hour has made sense. I hope I didn’t sound mean at the end there. The more I thought about it, the more I think I was just being a bitch for the sake of being a bitch. I don’t think she was making fun of me, but--fuck. Fuck, I wanted to leave. Kind of wanted to cry to Jean until he gave up and walked me home. Kind of debated finding Marco instead because he’d save me some time, and drop everything as soon as he could to walk me back. I just wanted to go home because I couldn’t *take* being here anymore feeling how bad I was feeling.

I felt like I wasn’t cut out for this major or something or that I chose wrong. To be honest, I was kind
of searching for some sort of cushy job where I could just get by on natural talent alone. But now I didn’t know what to do. I was working so hard lately, a first for me. While my drawing professor said that my last drawing was a definite “departure” from where I was, and that I could be getting better, she also said I didn’t have a defined style and she could tell I was struggling. I feel like my work reflected myself that way, though. It was bereft of any direction or confidence, struggling to make itself noteworthy when every other piece was worth so much more attention. While everyone else tried to make their work be the belle of the fuckin’ ball at the upcoming art show, I was struggling to get into it. And that hurt like a motherfucker. I wanted to go home and fix everything in one night, but I was sure if I took one look at my art supplies and all of my returned work, I’d break down. Maybe when I get home after this party, I’ll sleep for a million years and never look at my art stuff ever again unless I was going to burn it. Maybe I’ll become a stripper or something. Who knows.

I kind of did this because it was something I thought I was naturally good at? I’m too dumb for science. I guess I’m too dumb for this, too. I didn’t really know where else to go.

“Did you come here by yourself?” The girl piped up, halting my runaway train of thought.

“Oh.” I was a little shocked that she talked to me. I shook my head. “No, I came here with my friend, he left to get me a drink and, uh, I don’t know where he went.”

“He’s around.” She said. “I’m sure he didn’t leave.”

“Oh, I know he wouldn’t leave...I’m gonna go look for him.” I told her. “Maybe he just...doesn’t know where I am. Yeah. That’s probably it.” I smiled. “He’s trying to find me, and I’m hidden away upstairs...I’ll go get him.”

The mysterious girl wished me luck. I didn’t get to thank her for helping me calm down while I gained the confidence to go find Jean. I started making my way down the stairs, but I stopped halfway. I figured I could work this high vantage point in my favor. It was perfect for surveying the party and finding my lost little pup.

There he was, standing by the couch, chatting up some whore sitting on the couch - no, I can’t say that, she’s not a whore , I’m just mad. And still sober . I peeked if he had two cups with him - one for me and one for him, like he promised. But he only had one . And so did she! I was mad, but I was mostly sad. I dramatically, and loudly, stomped back up the stairs to maybe get someone’s attention. I even took a step back to see if he was watching. But nobody was.

Upset, I made my way back to the bedroom and sat on the floor. The girl on the bed asked, “you didn't find him?”

Oh boy. Them tears were on their way. “S-So he’s--talking to some girl? And she has my cup-- and- and--and I’m failing.” Oh, boy. Ugly crying. There was snot. Snot . “I’m ‘unna fail andnevergraphicdesignanythingagain!”

She wordlessly rubbed my upper back in broad circles. I’ll admit it was a half-assed gesture but it was still nice. It genuinely improved my mood a little bit. I sniffled. “I juh--I just want my drink and my friend to like me back, is that too hard?”

“Men are useless.” She quickly lamented, though with the Jäger Shrine under her window it felt like a lie. “Focus on your grades.”

“I hate drawing!” I announced. “‘N art. Oh, I--g--eh…” What was her name. Fuck. “Erm…”
She looked at me, and then turned towards the door, because two people came barreling through. Jean was the first, who had turned the knob and basically fell through the doorway. Eren followed, his face expression turning more serious as he looked between an annoyed girl-just-trying-to-do-her-homework and a very drunk Jean. “Guys--”

“Hey, is this Mikasa’s room?” Jean asked, a little in shock. He picked up one of the picture frames she had on her nightstand. All of the photos featured Mikasa, except for one. That one was of two people whom I assumed to be her parents, on their wedding day. Another photo was of them and a much younger Mikasa in an amusement park. Another was of Mikasa and Eren, presumably at prom, kissing. Her heels made her two inches taller than him, but it was cute nonetheless. And the last was of her, Eren, and some blonde boy at their high school graduation. However, while the boys were in graduation robes, she was in a lovely black lace dress. As if he was gravely aware of his drunken state, he put the frame back down extra carefully. Then, he caught sight of me. He smiled, “There you are!”

“Did you get my drink?” I asked him, but he ignored my question.

Jean turned back to Eren and asked loudly, “Why’s Mikasa living with you?” He turned to Mikasa and asked, “Why you living with him?”

“She’s only staying with us while she goes to school.” Eren said. “She lives really far from here, and we’ve been friends for ages, so--”

“Is she from Japan?” Jean asked, in awe. Everything about Mikasa obviously amazed him, and it made me feel a little inadequate. I mean, who wouldn’t be impressed by Mikasa? Despite being a little curt, she was incredibly gorgeous, and by the looks of the jumper on her mannequin, a pretty great seamstress. I was just a hot, crying mess on the floor. Emphasis on the “hot,” because I did look great. Before the tears, my makeup was exquisite, and while you could take my pride and my grades away from me, you can’t take that.

Mikasa glared at Jean, before returning her gaze towards Eren. We really weren’t supposed to be here, and I could tell. I stood up and approached Jean to mutter, “C’mon, she’s busy, let’s go--”

“No, she’s not from Japan, you asshole.” Eren furrowed his brow and straightened his back in an attempt to look taller, but he still wasn’t taller than Jean.

“I’m from Montana.” Mikasa tersely replied in an attempt to get Jean out of here. “So’s Eren.”

“Oh, shit, that’s so boring.” Jean whispered, looking at the throw pillows on her bed. One had Montana’s outline, with a little heart somewhere in the middle. “Did you make these?”

“Yes.” She answered. She looked over at her boyfriend, again. “Eren.”

“You’re not supposed to be here.” Eren told Jean, finally. I grabbed his hand, and for once, he didn’t recoil. “This room is off-limits. You’re being a dick, and if you don’t want to go back to the party, I can either throw you out, or you can stay in my room while you calm down. How does that sound?”

“That sounds great, thank you Eren.” I quickly said, before Jean could get an insult in. I had to protect not only Jean from his own drunken self, but my own pride. I had to be really nice around these people. You never know who knows who. “Can you show us the way, please?”

“Yeah. Just follow me.” And so we did, down the hallway to a room that had a “DANGER! DO NOT ENTER” sign on the front of it.

“Psh,” Jean not-so-quietly whispered in my ear. “How middle school.”
The reek of hops on his breath was insane. “Jesus, what have you been drinking?”

“I took the shot, right?” He told me. “Figured no kegstand. Thought about it, but I didn’t want my hat to fall off. Took one for the team. Then, I got my drink...but when I went to get the other one, Reiner was like… ‘nah.’ So I had to take two fuckin’ shots of vodka and after that? I guess all the rum and coke just hit me because I am like wooooo .”

Once we were inside Eren’s bedroom, we realized the whole thing was extremely dated - not just the cheesy sign on the front. It was obvious it hadn’t been redecorated in quite some time. He had a tacky baseball rug, a poster from the 2008 World Series, and a horrific taste in wallpaper, Christ. The only thing that looked current were the pictures hanging over his bed. They were printed on cheap, standard paper, presumably from the dinky, old grey printer that sat on the desk. The photos were secured with clothespins to a strand of twine that hung over his bed. One was the same photo of him and his friends at graduation, while the other was of him and the same blonde kid on the beach.

That same blondie was actually in the room with us. He was sitting on Eren’s bed, his legs criss-crossed, as he quietly read one of the few books that sat on Eren’s underutilized bookshelf. Seriously, the bookcase had nothing except for some old knick-knacks (comic book figurines, a pair of chinzy-looking headphones, two dumbbells, and a treasure trove of guitar picks) and four books total - *Call of the Wild*, a copy of *Holes* covered in that protective library plastic, *Lord of the Flies*, and *Hatchet*, which was currently being thumbed through by Blondie.

The first thing Jean noticed in this egregious collection of doo-dads and thingamabobs was that there was an acoustic guitar by the closet, which he plucked from its stand. “Oh shit...Oh, shit! It’s a guitar!”

Eren tensed up. “Don’t touch that!”

“No, wait.” Jean put the strap around himself, dragging the pick out from the confines of the strings. “No, wait. No, wait. I’m gonna play it.”

“Jean, please put that down–”

“There you are!” Connie’s voice rang out from the hallway. He poked his head in along with Sasha and Marco. After they saw that Jean and I were inside Eren’s room, they strolled right in. Connie held up his phone to face Jean. “Hashtag: found you.”

“I was looking for you!” Sasha said to me. “What are you doing in here?”

“Waiting for Jean to calm down.” I replied, cringing when Jean struck an ear-piercingly off-key chord. “Fuck!”

“Put it down.” Eren warned him, but he didn’t. He just repositioned his unsteady fingers, trying to find another chord.

“Eren, who are you supposed to be?” Sasha interrupted. Eren looked down at his nondescript black sweatshirt and blue jeans. The Converse on his feet were worn and covered with scuff marks.

“Yeah, where’s your costume?” Connie asked.

“I didn’t have time for a costume.” Eren replied. “But that’s not the point, is it?”

“That’s so lame that you didn’t wear a costume to your own party.” Connie frowned. “It’s so easy.”

“You could get a pair of glasses and be Steve Jobs.” Sasha suggested, tapping her chin. “He wore
black sweaters, right?”

“She’s right, that’s a good one.” Connie said.

Eren sighed. “Guys--”

Sasha turned to Connie. “Oh! He could get an old sheet and be a ghost!”

Connie replied, “Classic.”

Jean struck another out-of-tone chord. He inspected the strings and lamented, “I think your guitar is broken--”

Eren turned away from Sasha and Connie to raise his voice at Jean. “It’s not broken, it’s just not tuned! Leave it alone! You don’t touch--” Eren began to approach Jean, until the sound of shattering glass rang out from downstairs. “Shit, goddamn--Armin!”

The blonde kid looked up from his book. “Yeah?”

“Hold down the room! I have to check that--”

“I’ll try my--” Quick as lightning, Eren dashed out of the room and ran downstairs, yelling for whoever broke the glass. Armin (was that right? Was that a real name?) sighed and finished his sentence quietly. “--best.”

I sat on the floor by Eren’s bed. I was pretty close to Armin, so I just turned to him and asked, “Is it okay if I sit here?”

He looked down from his book and smiled. “You’re not bothering anyone.”

“But he is.” I smiled, looking over at Jean. What a fucking mess, really. I leaned my head against the bed. Babysitting has left me exhausted. “Jean, can you take out your phone? Call us an Uber or something. I want to go home.”

“Yes, Sasha, really, already . This was a really bad Halloween. Really bad. I almost would rather be home.

“Agh--” He groaned, digging through his pockets, mumbling, “Fine, fine, we’ll go --I guess-- wait ! Shit, where’s my phone--?!?”

“Oh.” I reached into my pockets and pulled out his phone, and his bag of weed. “These are yours. I forgot to give them back after I watched them.”

“Holy shit!” Jean took the phone and tossed it into his pocket, completely forgetting I wanted an Uber home . He opened the baggie, and the stench of weed filled the room. “I forgot I had this!”

“How did you forget?!” Armin whined, covering his nose. “Blegh…”

“I can match you.” Connie quickly offered. He smiled nostalgically, “We can mix the strains together like a salad. It’ll be like high school, right?”

I twirled my hair to keep me busy. I knew now that no Uber was going to be called. Sasha matched Connie’s smile. Jean just blinked, unwilling to match their nostalgia. “Yeah. Just like high school.”

Connie sat on the floor, taking his backpack off and putting it on the floor in front of him. Meanwhile, Jean opened all the windows in the room as possible, and turned on the ceiling fan.
When he was unlocking and opening the window nearest Armin, who was trying so hard to focus on his book, Jean noted, “Hatchet. That book is fuckin’ lit.”

Armin stared back up at him, unable to think of what to say to a drunk man who described a piece of literature as “fuckin’ lit.” He just slowly turned the page and said, “Yeah, it is.”

“Have you... wait, is this your first time reading it? I read that in middle school.”

“So did I. But that was a while ago. I forgot what happens.”

“How... how old are you?” Jean asked, because I assumed that like me, he thought Armin looked spectacularly young. His haircut made him look like a sentient mushroom, and he had a very boyish facial structure.

He looked to the wall, a little put off by how many questions Jean had. “I’m eighteen?”

“You look way younger.”

Armin scratched his chin. “I get that a lot.”

Jean wandered off towards the open Macbook on the desk. Oh no. “Did you put on the music?”

“No. Eren did.”

“Well, I’m changing the soundtrack. The ambience.” Jean announced, unplugging the cord that connected the computer to the speaker system. He shut the laptop and chose a playlist from his phone instead.

Connie took off his cardboard cookie, rested it next to himself, and groaned, “Oh, great, thanks for the dad rock, Jean.”

“Shut up. I’m not a dad.” He snapped, taking Connie’s empty pipe. It looked like a tobacco pipe that could belong to Sherlock Holmes, but if you were looking at it through the tripped-out eyes of Lewis Carroll. It was orange glass with red-tinted swirls. He awkwardly stood up and announced, “I’m gonna fill this with water. Hold up.”

As soon as Jean left the room, Connie quickly turned to Sasha and worried, “Dude, what if he breaks my pipe?”

“He didn’t look okay.” Sasha responded. She turned to me and asked me something, but I wasn’t paying attention too well. I was still worried about getting an Uber and going home.

I blinked, and stopped twirling my hair. “Huh?”

“Is Jean okay?”

“Oh.” I shook my head. “He’s just drunk. He’ll be fine... I think. I hope? Er... yeah, I think he’ll be okay.”

“Man, I’m worried about Goku.” Connie wiped his face. “If he breaks Goku, he is fucked. He’s my favorite.”

I looked up at him and asked, “Who is Goku?”

“My pipe, dude! He’s my favorite piece!” He groaned, “Why did I let Jean take him--”
Connie shut up as soon as Jean walked back in the room, Goku completely intact and full of water. “All set. Connie, did you grind yours?”

“Fuck, not yet.” He grabbed a plastic bag from the front compartment of his backpack.

“Ah--” He waved his hand. “Fuck it. Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of it. Hand me everything.”

While Jean ground and packed the bowl with an astounding sense of dexterity and a Bobby Fischer-like intensity for someone this drunk, Marco was waiting oh-so-patiently. He sat criss-cross-applesauce on the carpet, quietly minding his own business. I want everyone to be more like Marco.

“I never used a bong before.” Marco shifted in his seat. “So this’ll be interesting.”

“Bubbler.” Jean chided, pointing at him. “There is a difference between the two.”

“Name the difference, Jean.”

“Bubblers...b-bubblers? They’re...baby bongs.”

“Baby bongs.”

“Yeah.” He shrugged and took the first hit.

“Is that the technical term--”

“Sasha!” Connie exclaimed, holding up his phone. Sasha began scuttering towards Connie to get inside of his selfie.

Sasha smiled wide and proud. “Spuds!”

“Hashtag: spuds,” Connie said aloud, tilting his phone to get Jean in the frame, and my arm. Jean glanced up at the phone and quickly took his hit, way too fast.

“Don’t take a photo of me! Not of me smoking.” He said between coughs, smoke puffing out of his mouth.

The camera shutter went off anyway, and I crawled over Jean to take a look at the picture. Connie and Sasha looked adorable, but Jean was caught completely off guard. There was a puff of smoke in front of his face, but it wasn’t thick enough to cover his open mouth, or the fact that one eye was closed slightly more than the other. “Send me that.”

“No! No,” Jean reached for the phone, grabbing Sasha’s shoulder and using her to balance himself as he reached for Connie’s phone. He leaped up before Jean could get to him, holding his phone above his head as Jean struggled to stand up. “Oi--”

Connie was hurriedly pushing buttons on the screen. My phone lit up with the picture. “Yes!”

Connie tossed the phone to Jean and put his hands up in the air with a grin. The phone fell on top of Eren’s dorky rug. “Go ahead, delete it--”

“You’re such a fucking dick,” Jean growled, kneeling on the floor and taking the picture off of the phone. “This is why--”

Connie interrupted Jean’s train of thought with a sigh, and he sat back down and said, “Ah, c’mon. All fun and games. Let’s keep it going around.”
“I’m gonna pass it clockwise,” Jean said, passing me the bubbler. Oh God. How did this work. I had everyone’s attention with this hunk of glass I had no idea how to make use of. “Fuck you, Connie.”

“...Cool.” I swallowed, putting my mouth on the piece. Time to...how did it fill up with smoke? Do I wait for it to boil? I kept trying to flick the lighter, but nothing was flicking--

“Here, let me help.” Jean clumsily wriggled the lighter out of my hand and positioned it by the bowl. “Start inhaling. Keep going...yup, you’re fine...”

*How long did I have to do this?* I could feel my chest puffing up. I had to turn cross-eyed to see. “Okay. When I move my finger...you’re just gonna rip it. Rip the fuck out of it, okay?”

I gave a slight nod, and did as he said, but afterwards, I couldn’t stop fucking coughing. It felt like a hole was burned right through my throat. Little puffs of smoke came out with every cough. Jean laughed, until he started rubbing my back and asked, “Oh, shit, are you okay?”

I kept nodding, but the burning sensation in the back of my throat was still intense. “Do you--” I coughed again a few more times. “--have a drink?”

“Here.” Sasha handed me her Solo cup and shrugged. “It’s beer, but...it’s a drink.”

Whatever. I took it, because it would maybe help cool me down. I coughed a few more times and kept swallowing, swallowing, swallowing in an attempt to assuage my throat.

I passed the bubbler to Sasha, who was too busy rubbing my back to take a hit. My obnoxious coughing fit had derailed this entire get-together. *Fuck.*

In an attempt to calm me down, Jean said, “If it makes you feel any better, that was a really strong hit.”

Eren rushed back to his bedroom. I don’t know what clued him into what was happening here: the coughing fit or the stench of weed? He saw Armin with his collar pulled up above his nose, Sasha trying and failing to strike the lighter, and released an exhausted sigh.

“Oh my God. Listen, you can’t smoke in here.” Eren said, pressing his hand against his temple. “This isn’t my house, it’s my parents--”

“We’re not smoking. We’re having a seance.” Jean said. He then pointed to the puny window over Eren’s bed. “Besides, we opened the window. We were considerate.”

“Well, do that shit up on the landing.” He waved us away. “Not in here. Not in my room.”

“Alright, I mean, it wasn’t a problem in the first place--” Jean shrugged, standing up and being the first to stumble out of the room. “But if you don’t want your baseball rug smelling like weed, I mean yeah, respect. Respect on your rug --”

“Shut the fuck up.” Eren called after us as Jean looked for the staircase.

Everyone shuffled out. Armin was a little red, mumbling a meek “sorry, Eren” as he turned back towards his book.

Once we got up there, Jean cracked open the window there and asked me, “Do you wanna try this again?”

“No, I’m good.” I shrugged, still trying to cool down my burning throat. “I’m here for the company.”
“Aw.” Jean said, handing the bubbler to Sasha to take her hit, finally. As the pipe went around, I wondered why I was the only one who suffered a coughing fit. It came around to me again, before coming to Marco. Jean nodded, “Take another one. See if it does you any better.”

I held the bubbler in my hands for a few moments, but as soon as I saw a faint smile on his face, I promptly passed everything to Marco. He took his hit, his face turning red from suppressing a coughing fit, until he couldn’t help it anymore. At least I felt a little less alone in that sense. He handed the pipe back to Jean, but we were quickly interrupted yet again.

“I told you, horseface!” Eren shouted up the stairs as he approached Jean. “I told you you can’t fucking smoke in here!”

“I’m—cough—sorry!” Marco squeaked, “We were just...confused…”

“How were you confused? I told all of you you can’t smoke here.”

“Uh, yeah, you did.” Jean growled. He poked at the leftover herb in the bowl. “You said to go up to the landing.”

“You said you were doing a seance!”

Jean was dumbfounded at this point. “Why the hell would I be having a seance at a fucking party, Eren? Why would I try to raise the dead at your fucking house?”

“I don’t know!” Eren shouted back. “To curse me or something!”

“Eren, you’re a fucking idiot,” Jean lit his bowl again, testing the last of Eren’s patience. He told Eren that he was “a goddamn fucking idiot” while smoke poured out of his mouth. “Just go downstairs.” Eren said curtly.

I bit the inside of my lip, shutting Eren’s window and doing as he asked. Jean took his time packing up his shit and returning it to Connie as the group approached the stairs. I took one step before noticing he wasn’t following suit. Everyone else went without us. I looked around to see if anything else was catching his eye. “Well, you heard the man. Let’s go.”

“No.” Jean shook his head and looked up at the ceiling. “We’re gonna do the opposite.”

“The opposite?”

“We’re gonna go on the roof.” He decided. “We’re gonna hang out on the roof.”

“Now you’re just being petty.” I groaned. Would there be any honor in leaving? Just leaving the party and Jean to go home by myself and take a nice nap? I still followed him through the doorway and to the rooftop.

I have to say, it was a pretty decent place. There was a wooden lattice erected by a plastic outdoor table, wrapped in fairy lights. Clay pots of various sizes, brimming with fresh herbs, were scattered towards another wall by a watering can.

I was hugging my arms in an attempt to keep warm as I checked the place out. Jean immediately went to the edge of the rooftop to look down at the yard below.

I grimaced, waving him back towards the center of the rooftop, where it was nice and cushy and safe. “Jean, you’re making me nervous…”
“Hey, look. Eren’s down there.” Jean pointed. He then yelled down, cupping his hands around his mouth as a makeshift megaphone, “Hey!”

The small group of three on the grass looked up to see Jean standing triumphantly on the rooftop. He proudly announced, “Waldo’s greatest illusion of all. I’m on your roof!”

It wasn’t really a feat getting up to the roof. I mean, it was just a matter of a dozen steps, but I let him have his fun while I pretended not to see what an ass he was making of himself.

“Waldo isn’t a magician, Jean!” Eren shouted up, cupping his hands. “He just stands in crowds!”

Jean smiled triumphantly, digging into his pocket to take out the last of his weed as I thumbed through the labels on the Jäger family garden to see what they were growing. Cilantro, chives, dill, and a big clay pot overflowing with bright green, leafy parsley. “Hey, Hitch. If you’re not too busy lookin’ at flowers and shit, we could always finish this up.”

“What? Oh. Yeah. Sure.” I turned away from the herb garden towards Jean. He sat down on the ground, and I followed, staring up at the sky while Jean struggled to find his lighter. Once he got everything ready, he handed it to me with a grin. “You ready to try this again?”

“I don’t think we would be allowed.” I said, glancing nervously around.

Jean scoffed. “Do you think anyone can see us up here?”

“There’s like, three buildings that are taller than this one, Jean.”

“Think anyone is gonna complain about two teenagers quietly smoking weed on the roof of a house that isn’t even theirs? Think the cops are gonna raid a rooftop for one bowl?”

“You were just screaming off the roof, but…”

“Just lay down for a minute.” Jean laid down, pushing his hair out of his face. “There’s probably stars out.”

“We’re in the middle of the city. There’s no stars.” It would be different in Sina. Sina at night was still and silent, illuminated only by the burning yellow windows of the houses, the headlights of the few cars that pass through, and the stars. Jesus Christ, the stars. They were crystal clear. You could make out constellations with ease. Then, you come to the city, where the sky is vacant and the only thing to provide you any sort of company is the moon. The stars at home made you feel a little less lonely and a little more optimistic. They reminded you that the world went beyond your little neck of the woods and that there were universes beyond this one. But in the city, those stars were gone. You were left staring at the skyline. Making it downtown was your goal. Taking a train twenty minutes into the city seemed to be the only thing that was left to do. And despite the fact we lived in a city that housed over a million people, it felt incredibly lonely.

“Light pollution. Just...fuckin’ up the sky. It’d look a lot better with stars though.” Jean geniusly observed. He pointed up at the moon. “I mean, there’s that, but…”

I stopped staring at the sky and shrugged. I just wanted to hang out and shoot the shit, despite it being freezing cold. I mean, preferably, I’d want to be inside an Uber headed home. But at least it was quiet, and Jean was calm, and things felt relatively good. It was nice when either one of us laughed because each peal of laughter was followed by a rush of warm air. So I tried to make him laugh as much as possible. I think he was trying to do the same. Or he was just weirdly funny.

“We have like, drones and smartphones and shit, but we still can’t translate cat-talk into English. It’s
fucked, right?”

“I wanted to be a Broadway actor for like, two months my freshman ye--okay, it’s not that funny.”

“Okay, okay, listen… HUH! Okay, guess that rapper.” That was the kicker. He just laughed for a good thirty seconds. “Right! Try this one... UNH.” Boom. Insta-chortle again. He was quiet for a moment after his laughter died down.

“I could literally fall asleep right now.” He said with his eyes closed, content. I was curled up, hugging myself and struggling to keep warm now that his laughter stopped. Short sleeves were such, such a bad idea.

“I-I couldn’t.”

“Cold?” He opened his eyes so he could watch as I got frostbite.

I kept rubbing my arms, which were covered in goosebumps. While the air was already cold, the frigid wind that blew by every two minutes or so bit at my skin so bad, I thought it was going to turn blue. “Uh-huh.”

“Wanna get inside my sweatshirt?” Jean lifted the bottom of his shirt, just so I could crawl underneath and get cozy.

“I--” Wouldn’t it stretch out? Won’t I ruin it? I couldn’t articulate my words. I swallowed, trying to moisten up my mouth. “I’ll just lie down with you.”

I tentatively lied down and cuddled close to Jean. It was a little odd, being so close, but I was certainly warmer. My head was directly next to mine, and I was a little uncomfortable how close we were, with him being wasted and all. He turned to me and laughed.

“Hey.” The scent of hops still on his breath. My nose touched his, and my mouth was mere millimeters away from his. Exhausted, I just laid my head down on his chest, sighing. I closed my eyes and melted. I couldn’t feel when my body ended and his began. I couldn’t answer back. I could feel his head cock to the side. “You okay?”

“Shh.” I tried to get my thoughts in order. All of my thoughts were running through my mind at a mile a minute: I hope Eren’s not mad. What’s Marco doing? Jean’s chin is so scratchy. I forget the blonde kid’s name already. I hope it doesn’t rain. What the fuck is the blonde kid’s name? I hope the neighbors don’t kill us. God, I can feel him breathing. I narrowed everything down into one train of thought: I need to calm down. I need to ride this out.

“Be quiet?”

“Jean, please. If I ever--If we ever--” My thoughts were getting jumbled up again. I spat out, “Just don’t let me smoke again, okay?”

“Anxious?” He asked. I couldn’t answer. “Just...spit it out. Spit it all right out.”

That would help so, so much. Not! I was thinking about him so much I was literally going crazy and if he knew how much I was thinking about him, he’d think I was crazy too. But what was more valuable, Jean or my mind? “Please don’t hate me.”

“Why would I?”

“I’m sorry.”
“Why?”

“I’m gonna talk now.” I suddenly remembered that I went through his phone - sort of. I went through everything that wasn’t locked. Oh, how do I tell him I answered his phone? I felt bad. I don’t know why I felt so bad, but I did. “Someone called earlier and I answered your phone…”

“Wait, who?”

“I don’t know, I hope it wasn’t someone important.” I tried swallowing back that goddamn lump again, but it was adamant about settling in my throat. “I--I think I was mean to her?”

He took out his phone to take a look at the caller. “Now you have me curious.”

“And who were you talking to downstairs, yeah? Oh, boy, I have a lot of questions…” t was all just spilling out, wasn’t it? I made a conscious decision to keep my mouth shut so I wouldn’t puke up any words that were important. He was still determined to check his phone. I couldn’t help peek at his screen. When he put his thumb on the screen, it created a green explosion rather than a red one. I watched with deep intrigue as his apps floated into view and hovered comfortably in the void, waiting to be used.

He went to his call history, shrugging. “I don’t know. Just some girl. Where were you?”

“Did you give her my drink?” I asked, ignoring his query.

“No?”

“I only saw you with one cup...where was my drink? Did you forget?”

“I chugged mine. That was yours.”

“That was mine?! Then why didn’t you give me my drink?!”

“Oh, shit!” he laughed. “I drank yours, too?”

“For fuck’s sake,” I groused, inhaling sharply. I really wanted to shut my eyes. I really wanted this night to be over with. On the contrary, Jean was settling into the roof. He was completely content on the cold roof. “Jean, you fucked up, you fucked up, you done fucked up so bad…”

“This was a good night.” He said to the sky. “I’m having a good night.”

“Great. This is the worst night of my life, actually.” I sighed. “I think I’m failing.”

“Agh. Forget about school.”

“No, I’m failing generally.”

“Generally?”

“I am failing everything .” I smiled. Maybe I had to laugh at myself. Maybe it would make me feel better, but instead I just felt sadder and lamer.

“Not everything.”

“What am I not --”

A baseball-themed bedsheet ghost poked his head up from the stairwell. It turned to Jean and said,
“Get the fuck off of my roof.”

“So, you decided to go with the bedsheets ghost?” Jean mocked Eren. “Classic choice.”

“For fuck’s sake…” Eren mumbled, lifting off his sheet and letting it rest over his shoulders instead. His hair was tousled and he was clearly fucking exhausted. He looked up to glare at Jean. With a sigh, slowly pushed himself up so he was sitting up. I took my head off his chest. The frigid October air went through me like an arrow.

“What? You don’t want people on your roof, either?”

“I don’t want you on my roof, aren’t you calling a cab?”

“We were,” I interrupted. “We just got distracted, I mean, I’m definitely not opposed to leaving—”

“Fight me.” Jean walked past me to challenge Eren.

“Really? You’re gonna fight me?” Eren rolled up his sleeves.

Oh no no no no. I made sure they weren’t near any ledges. “This is happening?”

“Yeah!” Jean shouted. “Let’s fucking go!”

“You two don’t have to fight, you know. On a roof. Three stories up.” I was not going to be responsible for having one of them falling to their deaths. I was too young to be scarred for life or whatever.

“I traveled the world, learning judo—”

“Oh, my God.” I mumbled. He was technically correct, but…

Jean reached for the back of his shirt to take it off. I groaned, “Jean, it’s cold out.”

“All fights start when you take off your shirt! C’mom, Eren!”

Eren turned pink and said, “N-No! It’s cold! Listen to her!”

“If you’re cold, Lou Gehrig, put your fucking sheet back on.”

“Don’t be an a--” Before he could finish his sentence, Jean swung and missed. Suddenly, the prospect of a rooftop fight was a lot less nerve-wracking. Hell, maybe I was just paranoid from the drugs. It may be funny seeing them both try to kick ass. As Jean regained his balance, Eren taunted, “Okay. Fine. I’ll give you that one—”

And so, Jean landed a punch on Eren’s cheek, and Eren landed one on Jean’s nose. I didn’t hear any cracks or snaps, but there was a splatter of blood underneath Jean’s nose, and a small trickle of blood dripping from a new cut on Eren’s lower lip. Fuck.

“Don’t fucking touch me again.” Eren warned. “Get out of my house.”

“I’m taller than you, asshole, what do you think you’re gonna do to me?” He asked. Blood was dripping from his nose towards his lips. He spat onto the concrete, staining it pink with saliva and blood. “Try me--”

Without missing a beat, Eren quickly flipped Jean onto his back. Oh no no no. Too far, too far, too far.
“Jean?!” I kept glancing between the ladder and Jean. I had no clue what to do. Oh my God. *What the fuck just happened?* I turned to Eren. Jean slowly sat up, groaning as he rubbed his back. I was starting to fear that, yes, even though Jean was acting like a total asshole, maybe Eren went too far. Maybe Jean didn’t deserve to get flipped. I turned between Eren and Jean. “You had to flip him? Jean, are you okay?”

“Y-You cheated!” Jean coughed, ignoring my question. He groaned as he got up off the ground, rubbing his sore shoulders. Okay, never mind, he was fine.

“How did I cheat?! There’s no rules when you’re being an asshole at my house!” Eren yelled back.

Instead of admitting his mistake and apologizing like an adult, or even continuing his attempt to assert his dominance, he straightened his back and threw his arm around me. I stiffened like a board. Please don’t involve me in this. “Perhaps --me and the lady --”

“I’m not your lady, just say you’re sorry.” I nearly threw those words up.

“--will be more welcome elsewhere.” Jean continued, tightening up his grip. “Good--”

“Good. Get out of my house.” Eren said.

“I was going to say good riddance !” Jean announced, stomping down the steps to the second floor, and then the first floor. Before approaching the front door, he turned around and announced again, “GOOD FUCKING RIDDANCE, Jäger!”

Some people actually jumped a little bit when he yelled that, and then went out the door. I waited a moment, pretending to check my phone and take a call with an Uber driver. After a few seconds had passed, I meekly ducked out the door and followed Jean home. I was concerned for his wellbeing, but also concerned for my social status if I was hanging around with the biggest asshole on campus.

He was stumbling towards the general direction of school. I hastened my pace to catch up with him. As much as I didn’t want to talk to him right now, I had to make sure he didn’t get kidnapped or something tonight. “Jean?”

“Can you fucking believe him?” He spat, wiping blood off of his face with his hand and slinging it onto the pavement. I didn’t answer. I wasn’t particularly in the mood. He got us kicked out of a party. Unbelievable! It seemed like it would’ve been a fun party too, if I wasn’t so down in the dumps or if Jean wasn’t completely useless. “I try to be a kindhearted guest...fuckin’ opening windows ‘n shit...do you believe this?”

I didn’t tell him if I believed it or not. He just groaned and turned back towards the Jäger household. “That prick. That smug prick can’t win. I wanna go b--”

“I don’t want to have a conversation with you.” I told him. “I want you to be quiet and go home.”

We continued trudging home. I kept Jean as upright as possible, despite being absolutely fucking horrified of the neighborhood we were in. I tried to keep Jean relatively quiet, and it was going okay for the most part. Whenever I turned around to check our backs, Jean would stand up aggressively straight and hiss, “Who’s there?!"

Of course, I’d say, “No one,” and he’d just return to his stumbling self, quietly laughing to himself. He kept his sleeve against his seeping nose. I kept my room key between my knuckles like a goddamn wolverine, and hoped that, God forbid, if an attacker did show up, the adrenaline in Jean’s system would override the alcohol, and he would back me up.
I mean, with how my night was going, why shouldn’t I get mugged? Nothing else was going right. Steal my dignity, my ambition, my optimism, my Halloween--might as well lose my material goods, too. Just fuck. Me. Up.

I looked down at Jean’s sleeve. It was polka-dotted with wet, snotty bloodstains near the wrists. He then balled his sleeve around his fingers, pressed it against his nose, and added a new mark to his collection. He sniffled and continued to look forward despite his dead eyes and incoordination. I grimaced, grabbing his hand and weaving my fingers between his. “It’s okay to cry if you need to.”

“No I don’t.” He snapped back. “I don’t...hafta…”

“You got flipped on your back and your nose punched in, that’s past the crying threshold.”

“I’m fine.” He dabbed his nose with his other sleeve, as I kept one hand occupied. “I could’ve...I could’ve taken him.”

“But you didn’t,” I teased. We were getting closer to campus. My muscles loosened, and my shoulders fell as I could faintly make out the lights from the student center. I could let my guard down a little bit now. I wouldn’t let go of Jean’s hand, of course, but I could stop being scared of a mugger or something.

“Sh-Shut up, I could’ve...If…” It’s okay, bud. Sound it out. You got it, fella. “If...er, I’ve been drinking--”

“I would have never guessed.”

“Yeah, and uh--psh.” He rolled his eyes. “Eren is like...three feet tall.”

“You’re exactly right on that one.”

“I could’ve kicked his ass sober. Easily. I studied--”

“Judo, I know, I know.” Save your breath. And my patience. “You say that all the time.”

“But all the time.” He grumbled. Only ten minutes away from our hall…

“Well, when you want to sound cool. If that’s the only thing that makes you cool, then I’m not impressed.”

“I traveled abroad until I was fourteen.” He said, turning to see the lack of excitement in my face. “I knew that, too.” I looked up at the empty sky. “And I know about your dad and Tütone--”

“Please don’t talk about that.”

“Why? If my dad was filthy rich, shit, I’d tell everyone.”

“It’s hard to tell who likes you or your money.” He dabbed at his nose again. “It’s a sappy...sappy story and it--fuck it pisses me off, but no, I’m not telling you.”

“Huh?”

“It’s not a story for you.”

“Who cares if it’s gonna dampen the mood?” I asked. I just wanted information, like a library, but with gossip. “Tell me all of it.”
“No. Stop asking me to.” He took his hand away and put it in his pocket. Oh well. “You’re not gonna convince me, you’re just gonna make me angry.”

“But—”

“Stop. Just, please.”

“I--fine.” I pouted, quickening my pace so I could shorten the awkward silence that was going to ensue. I crossed my arms, not wanting to hold his hand, either. There was only one person in the entire world that obviously bothered Jean. One person that seemed to come up in every conversation that seemed to represent pure evil. “It’s about your ex-girlfriend, isn’t it?”

“Shut up!”

“I’m sorry.” I quickly apologized. I shouldn’t be looking for drama, or to cut open old wounds, I just…”I just want to know more about you, that’s it.”

“Hah?” He wrinkled his nose, pushing his hair back. I grimaced. He looked like a discount Macklemore. I reached up and ruined his hair again.

“Don’t make me say it again.” I wasn’t going to beg for the details of The Wonderful Life of Jean Kirschtein, or the fairytale-gone-wrong that was his relationship with his ex. “I Keep making every effort to get to know you better, which I have never done before, and I feel like you disregard all of the opportunities I give you.”

“You’re not my...er….” He pondered for a moment before shaking his head. “You’re not my storywriter. You have no business asking me to... drunkenly exfoliate on my personal traumas.”

“Explain. The word is explain, and yeah. Jean, maybe you’re right. You just act like you don’t want people to like you.”

“I don’t fucking care if you like me.”

“Yes, you do!” Why the hell wouldn’t he care?

“I’ve made a determination to myself,” God, he was drunk, but it was hard not to take him seriously. He kept pointing at his chest. “I’m being honest with myself? With you. With every-fucking-body I meet, and if you don’t like me anymore, I don’t care. I am not editing my behavior to be like you. I don’t want to be like you.”

Recently, I didn’t want to be me, either. I smiled wanly. We were coming up on our hall. “Who would want to be?”

I fished my ID out of my pocket and swiped it. I opened the door for Jean to slowly walk through, trying his damnedest to look sober. After we signed in with the suspicious guard, Jean said, “I can’t waste my life on being what you and my mom and everyone else want me to be.”

While I would usually take the stairs, the elevator seemed more appropriate for Jean’s state. God, he wouldn’t talk about his money but he’ll divulge his mommy issues? “I don’t think I’ll be bothering you throughout your life, now.”

“What would make you leave?”

Third floor--let’s get him to bed. I shrugged. “You tell me, and I won’t do it.”
“You’d be that patient with me.” he stared out into the narrow, endless hallway. “Hitch--”

“Give me your key. I’ll get you to bed before either one of us says something stupid.” I put my hand out, and he obliged, albeit maladroitly. I threw his door open. The rum was still on the nightstand. I kicked the clothes on the floor towards his hamper so he wouldn’t trip in the morning. I hid the rum in the closet, and replaced its spot on the nightstand with a bottle of water. I put the wastebasket next to his bed. Hopefully that’d be enough. I pushed him into bed, not wanting to even bother with his snotty clothes. “Be careful. Let me know if you need anything else.”

“No, I need a new sweater.” He whined, trying to wrestle his shirt off. “Can you get me a sweatshirt? I’m cold.”

“Oh, okay.” I asked, “Where is it?”

“In m’closet.” He curled up into a little, shivering ball. Oh my God. What a little kitten. “On the left…”

“Oh, you have a lot.” I noted, trying to keep him talking while I peeped through his stuff. Unfortunately, it was pretty dark in his room. While it would have been a prime snooping opportunity (a snooportunity), I couldn’t get a good look at his stuff. I found a big, cozy sweatshirt with only the sense of touch. It had the faint image of grapes with faces on them, along with some text. “How’s your grape one?”

“My--” He burst into laughter and sat up, attempting to yank his shirt off of his head. “Yeah. That one’s perfect.”

I tossed it towards him. He nagged me again, “And pajamas…?”

“Pajamas?”

“I can’t sleep in jeans.” He said, a tuft of hair poking from the neck of his sweatshirt as he struggled to put it on.

“Right, right. Um,” Now I had to dig through this kid’s dresser. Great. I tossed him a pair of plaid pajama pants and sighed. “Okay. Is that it?”

“I think so--” He grabbed the pants and then looked up at me. “I’m not going to put them on until you leave.”

“That’s fine, that’s fine, I know.” I sighed, thinking of my next step. “Uh, I’m just gonna take your key. I’ll stop by tomorrow morning and make sure, you know, you’re not dead.”

“Psh, I won’t die.”

“Eh, well,” I nervously chuckled, swiping his keyring and hastily knocking on his nightstand. “Knock on wood, you know, but, uh...just sleep tight. Okay? Go to bed. I’m gonna go to my room if you need anything. I’ll have my phone on so you can call, just...be safe.”

I started slowly backing out of the room as Jean settled into his bed. Then suddenly, he sat up straight and exclaimed, “Wait!”

“What?! What’s wrong, what happened?”

In a much more subdued tone, he informed me, “I wanna tell you something.”
As if he wasn’t telling me stuff all night, jeez. “Save it for tomorrow. Write it down. Give it to me tomorrow.”

“Ya got it.” He assured me, clumsily flicking his lamp on and grabbing the sketchbook off of his nightstand. “I’ll see ya.”

“Be safe.” I told him as I slowly shut the door. “Sleep on your side. Good night.”

Finally. Peace at last. Or rather, peace for now. It took a little while for me to feel comfortable enough to fall asleep. I was tossing and turning until I texted Marco and asked, “When you get home. Please check on your roommate for me?”

He responded ten minutes later with a “sound asleep. Snoring. Good night.” It didn’t have that usual “charm” he texted with...as if his charm could come through a telephone wire. I mean, it was missing emojis, punctuation, the stuff that made him a pleasant person to talk to. I guess he was just tired, like all of us were.

I woke up the next morning a little groggy. Annie was back in her bed, snuggled in the covers. As soon as I realized I was awake, I got out of bed and grabbed Jean’s keys off of my nightstand to go and pay a visit. My hair was all tangled, and I was pretty sure I looked like the walking dead, but for once, my priority was another person.

I got to his door and let myself in. He was tangled in his bedsheets, facing the wall. Marco was tucked carefully into bed, snoring up a storm. I whispered to Jean to see if he was awake. “Hey.”

“Hm?” He groggily replied.

“I’m sorry, but I wanted to see how you were doing. I felt a little bad leaving you by yourself last night.”

Jean rolled over to look at me, before turning back around. “Morning.”

“You slept okay?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“Do you remember anything?”

He rubbed his eye. “Bits and pieces. How was I?”

I took a seat on Jean’s chair and solemnly reported, “Well, we can’t go back to the Jäger household.”

“Wait, what did I do?”

Where do I start? “For starters, you went into Mikasa’s room to smoke a bowl and refused to leave and kept commenting on her stitching while she was trying to finish a paper. You tried smoking in Eren’s room and made it reek of weed, you tried smoking in the hallway and you made that reek of weed. You climbed onto the roof and insisted that Waldo was a magician—”

“Are you saying he’s not?”

“Are—Are you serious?”

“Isn’t he a wizard?” Jean choked, his mouth hanging open. “I swear, he’s a wizard, or else—”

“He just goes to busy places, Jean. Jesus,” I sighed. That was one mystery solved: even when sober,
Jean insisted that Waldo was a magician. “You got into an actual debate with Eren about the canon of Where’s Waldo, from his roof, while he was trying to watch Reiner do a kegstand.”

Jean blinked, trying to remember. He wondered aloud, “Reiner did a kegstand?”

“I wouldn’t know.” I said. “I was on the roof with you. Then Eren came up to get you off of the roof. And you tried to fight him. And he flipped you. And you got upset that he beat you, because you’re bigger than him, and ‘shouldn’t have lost.’ Then Eren kicked us out because fuck, Jean, you’re a wreck.”

“Nah,” Jean buried himself in the sheets again. “That sounds fun.”

“It wasn’t fun,” I groused, “babysitting you all night to make sure you didn’t get jumped or fall off the roof. I cried.”

“You were just emotional that your drawing professor said you were shit.”

Maybe so. I was a little hurt he brought it up again, twisting the knife that was already digging into my side. “That doesn’t mean you’re not a wreck. You were disgustingly drunk, I was almost embarrassed to be seen with you--”

“Don’t call me a fucking wreck for going to a college party, like a normal person.” He spat, his words dripping with venom. I resolved to oblige him, not out of fear, but of empathy. “You’re not normal. You’re the one who grew up stunted in the middle of bumfuck nowhere--”

“You don’t get to call me stunted, either!” I snapped. I rolled my eyes in disgust and asked, “God, why do you even bother with parties? You don’t even talk to anyone, you just stand around and steal people’s booze and smoke in their houses and ruin everyone’s day. And that is literally all you do.”

“I do that sober, too.” Jean furrowed his brow. “Listen, you need to go to a party before you can talk. Crying by yourself in someone’s bedroom doesn’t count.”

“Do you hear yourself?! As if I wanted to be alone in--”

“You need to actually get out of your bubble, like you say you’re doing, instead of trying to leech off of my energy and trying to be like me, and do everything I do. Okay? Is that fair?”

No, not really, you’re just being a dick. I didn’t want to fight anymore, but I couldn’t give up, either. I calmed down, biting back choice words. “Okay, first point: don’t interrupt me. Second point: I’m not ‘leeching off of you,’ I’m just trying to be a better person. I want to draw better and go out more, and you--”

“Well, you chose an excellent model.” He laughed to himself, muffled by the pillows he buried himself under. “Christ.”

“I guess you’re right. Nobody wants to grow up to be a spoiled, rich asshole picking fights at a college party.”

“And can you stop bringing up my money?” He tightened his grip on his pillow, wanting to bury himself in his bed so he didn’t have to look at me. “Can you stop getting all excited about going out, and knowing ‘the Tütone guy,’ and how much money I have? As if having money means I shouldn’t have any fucking problems! You talk it up all the fucking time, then act like some sort of penniless Virgin Mary when I spend that money on weed or drinks.”

“I don’t act like the Virgin Mary.”
“Oh yeah? You drink all my rum and smoke my weed, but when I get crossfaded, suddenly I'm the asshole. As if you were there not to get plastered.” He rolled his eyes.

My efforts to calm down were failing. I could feel myself shaking. “Just because someone made me cry and someone else made me smoke your cheap weed that I hated, that makes me the Virgin Mary?”

“I like how you’re blaming other people for ruining your night when they were just being honest with you and trying to be nice to you.”

Well, the one didn’t have to laugh at me. Or patronize me. “But--”

“I’m gonna be honest with you again. Things aren’t always going to work out for you. This must come as a shock, I know, since you’re convinced the planet revolves around you. Maybe you’re not some godsent graphic designer like you thought you were. Maybe you’re not as great and talented and pretty as you say you are.”

That hit really deep. That knife in my side? He just twisted it so hard, it cut me in half. My stomach twisted in knots and I wanted to puke and cry all at once. “Why’d you have to say I wasn’t pretty?”

While I tried to be strong most of the time, my ego was one of my weaker points. I mean, I thought I was pretty. But what if I had a warped convention of beauty? What if cute city boys liked something different than cute country girls? What the fuck was I doing?

What the fuck am I really doing here? I didn’t know, so without another word, I gathered my stuff together and left the room. I went back to my room to fight the urge to cry, and recollect my thoughts. About half an hour later, I still had a sour taste in my mouth. I took a lot of deep breaths and a good long pep talk from myself, but I mustered up the courage to think of a way to approach Jean and try to make amends. I wasn’t going to apologize, because I didn’t do anything wrong. But I could try to hand him an olive branch and see where it goes from there?

I took another walk up to his dorm and knocked on the door. “Hey, Jean?”

I heard a tired voice from within. “What?”

“If it makes you feel any better, I looked up Where’s Waldo on Wikipedia.” I felt kind of silly saying that sentence from the hallway to nobody, but it was necessary. “Apparently there was a TV show in Britain about Waldo going on adventures with his dog. He had a magic walking stick, so I guess he’s kind of a wizard. Technically. Which means you’re kinda right, if that makes you feel better.”

“Why should I care--” I left before he could finish his sentence. I wanted to slam on his door with my fists, then slam my fists into his face, and tell him how he ruined my night and basically my whole year so far. But instead, I stomped towards my rooms while brooding. Why did I get myself tangled up in the web of Jean Kirschtein, and how do I get out of it? I don’t want that negative energy in my life. Not at all. I just want closure so I can move on. He’ll apologize. Or we just won’t talk ever again and I’ll just give him dirty looks on campus and spread some lighthearted rumors about him, like that he has gonorrhea or that his mom fucked a good horse and that’s why his nose is all jacked. Either option is fine with me. I can go out and meet plenty other of boys. Why linger on one?

When I got back to my room, I shut the door and continued to brood. I decided I wouldn’t talk to Jean until he tried talking to me. Actually, I wouldn’t talk to him until he apologized. Like an adult. Because I’m an adult that deserves respect and I deserve to be treated as such. I tried to start doing homework to get my mind off of things, but Jean was at the back of my mind and I hated it. I wanted to purge him out of there, but no matter how lost I wanted to be in my assignments, Jean was always
popping up. And it was beginning to make me extremely angry how much of a hold he had on me.

I hate boys. I fucking hate boys, I swear to God. The fact they can get such an emotional response out of me makes me wanna puke my guts out. It’s not even fair. I wanted to kick Jean in the shin or something. This was all his fault. Every bit of it. And if I wasn’t stupid and clingy enough to latch onto him like a leech on the first day of school...would I be here right now? I would probably find some other friends that didn’t piss me off so much. Friends that didn’t send mixed signals or work against me being happy. I didn’t know where they were. Instead I was stuck with stupid Jean Kirschtein.

My anger towards him was boiling hot, and it reached a peak when I heard a rapping on the door. I forced myself out of bed and looked out the peephole. Through a fisheye lens, I watched Jean bite his lip and bounce his foot. I took a deep breath and fought the urge to bang my head against the door. Like, what would I even say?

After swallowing a very large lump in my throat, I opened the door and quickly spat out, “Do you still want an apology? Because you’re not getting one--”

“No.” Jean scratched the back of his hand. “You didn’t do anything wrong, and I took things really...really, too far.”

Jean? Admitting a mistake? Surely, this was a joke. “O-Okay--”

“I took out my frustration on you, and I’m sorry.” He was playing with his hands and refusing to make eye contact with me. This seemed very rehearsed and I wasn’t sure if that was a good or bad thing. “You’re not stunted, and I like having you around, and I would go out with you again.”

“Okay.”

His face got red. “And uh, you’re pretty.”

That didn’t make me as happy as I expected it to. “That sounds fake. But okay.”

“You--” He hesitated before exhaling. “I didn’t say that because I meant it, I just wanted to hurt your feelings.”

I leaned back against the pillow with my arms crossed. “You asshole.”

“I know, and I’m really sorry.” He swallowed, biding his time as he thought of something else to say. “I have a lot of things to say about you and pretty is one of them.”

I cracked my back, shut my eyes, and took a deep breath. I could only forgive him under one condition. “List all of the other things you like about me.”

He groaned. “your feelings aren't that hurt.”

I tried to think of dead kittens or something and covered my mouth as I faked a sob. “You can’t think of anything else?”

He sat up straight, trying to make his voice as soothing and calm as possible. He lowered his brow. “No, no, I can, it’s just...uh, I don’t think that is solving any problems.”

“What?”

“Your problem is with me, right? I mean, I was an asshole yesterday and I’m sorry. Repeating how
great you are wont solve anything, I mean it’s up to me to acknowledge that...I'm shit. Maybe you should drink a little more and me a little less.”

I stopped my fake sobbing. I still wasn’t over his little outburst this morning. I doubt I would forget it soon. But I couldn’t sink to his level of petty. “We have our moments.”

There it was again: silence. Jean shifted uncomfortably on my bed. “Am I...forgiven? I mean, this is taking a lot out of me, I’m still hungover, and I need assurance that you’re okay.”

It was only three hours since we fought. I was still upset, really upset, but I figured, forgiveness isn’t instant. It’s not a switch you can flick on and off. After a deep sigh, I opened my arms wide. “Okay.”

Jean grimaced. “Do we have to hug on it?”

“I’m gonna cry again,” I lied.

“Again?” He groaned, exasperated, before he wrapped his arms around me and held me tight. His face was nuzzled into my neck, and my fingers were intertwined behind his back. I could feel his chest rising and falling against mine, and his fingers debating whether or not to hold me tighter.

“Jeez, you’re a crier…”

I was close to his neck - the one I stared at in the coffeeshop. I moved my fingers to rest on his sharp shoulders. I grabbed the fabric of his shirt, slightly rough from hundreds of washes, and loose from overuse. The cotton bunched up between my fingers, and I pulled myself towards him to leave a quick, chaste kiss on his freckle. As soon as my lips met his skin, he put his hands on my shoulders and gently pushed me away until I was an arm’s length away. Shit. Did I go too far? Maybe that was too far. *F*uck .

When he spoke again, he mumbled, “I’m sorry if all that sounded fake. I’m not good with apologies.”

“No, I understand. Me too.” I twirled my hair, trying to diffuse the situation. My hands needed something to do. “I know I can come off strong. You said something about being independent, or your family having money. Like, you don’t want anyone to know or whatever, and I get that, and I just wanted to let you know that if anything is bothering you...well, I’m listening. Okay?”

“Alright.”

“I like hearing what you have to say, and nothing you say will surprise me. At least, I don't think it would.”

He smiled. “Okay. Thanks.”

“You have a nice smile.” I noted. “You should do that more.”

“Okay.” He stood up and cracked his back. “Now you’re getting cheesy. I’m gonna head back to my room.”

“Oh. Alright, then.”

“Are we good?” He asked, taking his key out of his pocket.

“We’re good.”

“Wanna get dinner at the dining hall later, then?”
“That sounds fine. I’ll see you then...then.”

“Sweet.” He said, heading for the door. “See you tonight.”

He offered a last nod before leaving the room. I was alone again. It was just past one but I was already spent for the day. I had to finish my homework still, but was I really up to it? My brain was fried and I was just exhausted. I couldn’t even think about finishing my homework anymore.

Chapter End Notes

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Drydock

Chapter Summary

drydock (n): A narrow basin or vessel used for the construction, maintenance, and repair of ships, boats, and other watercraft that can be flooded to allow a load to be floated in, then drained to allow that load to come to rest on a dry platform.

Chapter Notes

a short fluffy update before winter break is over; ty corey for edits; follow my blog too

The week before Thanksgiving was a hot, hectic mess. All these professors started trying to squeeze in deadlines and extra assignments before school released for break. After class one day, when I finally caught a goddamn break, we were all sitting in Jean’s room. Jean wanted to watch Star Wars or whatever with me. Marco wasn’t in the mood, so he was chopping up some film at his desk. Through a lull point in the film, I rolled over onto my stomach and asked, “Jean, what did you want to do this weekend?”

He paused the movie with a groan. “Why do you just assume we have plans together?”

“We’ve had plans together every weekend.” I pointed out, tucking my hair behind my ear. “So, what are we doing?”

“You can do something by yourself. I’m going home.”

“But–But no! Why?” I whined, “Thanksgiving is like, next week!”

“My sister misses me. What can I say?”

Say ‘no.’ Tell her to grow up!”

His expression turned dour. “She’s six.” Sheesh, the dude was even crazier for her than I thought. What a little family man. Opposites attract, I suppose. I backed off, laying down to refocus on whatever was happening on the Space Warp or whatever that dumb fucking space ship was called. Jean’s expression lost its hostility. “But I’ll of course forward you any addresses I’ll get while I’m home.”

“So, none.” Marco chortled. “Unless you overhear one from your stat class again.”

Jean promptly turned red and tried to defend his coolness for two solid minutes. The same man who had an encyclopedic knowledge of the Star Wars “canonverse” or whatever it was called.

I loved him so much it grossed me out. I climbed off of his bed, and sat on Marco’s bed instead. “That leaves you and me. What did you want to do this Friday?”

“I’m actually visiting my brother before we go home for Thanksgiving on Friday.” He scratched his
“I can’t go out then, but I’m free on Saturday?”

“Marco,” I whined. “You’re letting me down!”

“Only for Friday!” He tried to console me. “You can find something to do, right?”

“Right. She can” Jean said on my behalf. How rude. “Go ask Sasha.”

“Do you think she knows any cute guys?”

Before Jean could reply, Marco said, “Maybe Connie’s friends...but I don’t think you’ll have that much luck there.”

“There’s that tough guy.” I suggested. A little too tough for my liking - I don’t like men who could overpower me physically or mentally.

“No woman is Reiner’s type,” Jean said, “if you get my drift.”

“Oh, so he’s picky.”

“N-No…” Marco solemnly smiled, trying to carefully explain the situation to me without stating the obvious.

“Oh.” The lightbulb over my head lit up, and I was a little embarrassed I didn’t catch Jean’s drift earlier. I went back to brainstorming. “There’s the tall one--” Wait, is that Reiner’s boyfriend? Shit--

“I don’t know what Bertholdt’s motives are.” Jean said. “Prefers nights in. Can’t talk to women for shit. And I see him with your roommate all. The. Time.”

“Annie? Annie doesn’t have friends. That’s impossible.”

“Yeah, well, who knows. Does Connie have any other actual friends?”

“Gosh, you’re so mean--”

“Let’s get back to Star Wars. You missed Lando Calrissian.”

“Who?”

“Hoo boy...You would not like Lando. Not one--”

“Shut up, you goddamn space nerd.” I stopped him right there. I turned back towards Marco. “We still have to talk about what we’re doing on Saturday.”

“I’m getting pretty sick of partying.”

“Fine by me.” That was a lie, but I was depending on Sasha to help me on that front. “There’s plenty of stuff to do in the city.”

“Mull it over later,” Jean whined. “My computer went into sleep mode. I wanna finish this movie. Come back.”

“You can watch your space shit by yourself.” I turned away from Jean and towards Marco. “So, yeah. Jean’s going home, but we can do something.”

He looked up from his negatives. “You want to?”
“Yeah, just us.” I took a sip of Jean’s water. “We’ll do something so cool, Jean will be really mad he went home. And we’ll talk about how great it was for like, a month.”

“Oh okay,” He nodded, “but what should we do?”

That was the hard part. Huh. I’m sure there was a lot of fun things to do in the city, but what was an amazing thing to do? I tried Googling “fun things to do!” “cool places to see!” All with exclamation marks, to let Google know how serious I was. But they were all so… vanilla. Touring the parks, boring ol’ museums... yawn . And it’s hard to Google “stuff to do in the city nobody knows about and is a big ol’ secret.” The results you get aren’t very promising. And our plans for our “exciting day on the town” weren’t every exciting so far. A breakthrough came the following afternoon while I was in my room working feverishly on my drawing homework while Annie read a book. Marco stopped by with a coupon he printed from the internet. Once I let him into my room, he sat at my desk while I laid on my stomach on my bed, curious about what he had.

“I don’t know if you’re interested, but I had an idea for what we can do on Saturday.”

“Shoot,” I shrugged, fixing the lines on my sketch.

“I don’t know if you’ve ever been,” Marco suggested, “but we could go ice skating.”

“Of course I’ve been ice skating before. It’s just that ‘before’ was...a very long time ago.”

“I mean, it’s just an idea.” He shrugged. “I just figured, ice skating is discounted. Rent two pairs of skates, and one skates free. We should go.”

“Okay, yeah, but who will the third person be?”

“What third person? We just need to rent two pairs of skates, and one of us will get a pair free .”

“No, no, no. Buy one pair for you.” I shook my head, and pointed towards him. Then, I pointed towards myself. “Get one pair for me. Get one pair free. But that third pair goes to someone else.”

“ Oh.” He scratched his chin. “Maybe we should wait until Jean comes back.”

“But won’t the sale be done by then?” He scratched his chin “Shoot…”

“You’re going ice skating?” Annie took out her headphones peeked up from her book.

“Well, we were.” Marco shrugged. “But now, I’m not sure.”

She put her book over her mouth and looked up at the ceiling, obviously nostalgic. “How nice. My dad used to take me all the time.”

“Oh, really?” Marco asked. “So you know your way around a pair of skates?”

“Yeah.” She said. “I used to have my own pair, but I grew out of them.”

“Oh, yeah.” Marco said, scratching his chin. “I have my own pair too, but...jeez, I can’t even tell you last time I wore them--”

God, this ice skate talk was booooooring . I sighed, waiting for them to just talk themselves tired, but Marco got my attention when he asked Annie, “If you wanted to come with us, I’d be more than okay with it.”

Wait what? Last time Annie and I hung out, she got me sick. She’s a succubus - sucking the fun out...
of all of the things I wanted to do. Fuck. Marco, what have you gotten us into? It’s not even like I can say she can’t hang with us anymore. This situation was \textit{fucked}, with a capital F. \textit{Fucked}.

“I’m okay with it. That sounds like fun.” She replied.

Well, okay. It’s a little strange, and I sure as hell wasn’t thrilled about it, but I guess I had an ice skating date with Marco and my roommate. We figured we’d leave the details TBD for now, since before we would go ice skating, I had a busy Friday ahead of me. Thanksgiving was approaching, and Sasha was at a loss for outfits that didn’t make her look like a middle schooler. She told me her woes, so I graciously offered to drive her to the boutiques on Main Street to find something nice to wear for her visit to Grandma Braus. I had her trying on the nicest blouses, skirts, and shoes each store had to offer. She met each item with disdain and distrust. Some of them truly didn’t fit, but the ones that looked \textit{great} on her, she had something negative to say about them. That was the case with each and every one.

“Eh.” She worried about one blouse I picked out, white with rose gold accents. “Don’t you think it’s too...fancy?”

I shook my head. “No. You want to look nice, this makes you look nice.”

“It’s not...I don’t know? It’s not my style.”

“Which is why you should definitely get the blouse.” I laughed. “Isn’t that the whole reason we’re here?”

“Eh, well, I guess you’re right.”

“I know I’m right.” I grinned. “Go try it on with the rest of your outfit while I get changed.” I waved her back off into her dressing room while I went into mine.

“When did you get so confident?” Sasha asked. After she finished her smoothie with an ear-rattling \textit{slurp}, she said, “I feel like nothing at these types of shops fits me...”

Well, Sasha. Hitch Deliss didn’t just pop outta the womb with all of this positive body image, jarring confidence, killer ass, and immaculate charisma. There was once a time where I was the shy daughter of a preacher, with mousy hair and a mousey attitude. After I chopped my hair off, I started my journey towards fully exploring the world around me, and myself as well.

The hardest thing about finding yourself is defining beauty. Inside the church, beauty was set aside in favor of plainness and purity. Modest dress, subtle makeup if any, the works. That idea of simplicity was appealing to some, but outside of the church walls, it just wasn’t going to do for me. I felt fine as a Mormon. A little empty and extremely fake, sure, but I was built for that environment.

But for a middle schooler going on high school, it wasn’t working. There were girls in the locker room stuffing their bras, or applying mascara, or fixing their skirts as they were riding up. For a girl with no “natural assets”, no makeup, and no skirt that went above the knee, I felt pretty fucking ugly. So the first time I put an outfit together I liked...it was maybe my sophomore year. Mom let me shop on my own for the first time ever. I got so excited. She gave me forty dollars. “Use it wisely - keep it appropriate!”

Little did she know, I had sixty dollars from birthdays, Christmases, and Easters, so I’d be buying what I’d like. So, in 2011, a year categorized by crazy colors, I got a magenta scoopneck tee that displayed the little cleavage I had (“If any!” Jean would probably say, if he was in my subconscious) and a short yellow skirt with ruffles. Match that with a pair of white wedges that accentuated my legs, and I felt pretty for the first time ever. I could own the world! I basically stood in the mirror in
awe of myself, taking pictures with my phone and looking at how great my ass looked.

...But then I saw my dark circles under my eyes, my pink nose that could definitely benefit from a nosejob or at least some contour. Maybe some makeup would do me right. So far, I had spent $12 on the shirt, $19 on the skirt, $35 on the shoes...the shoes, my mom would adore, and gladly pay for. That left $34, and while Mormon makeup was a thing, I wanted gold glitter eyeshadow and super thick eyeliner and cat eyes. Would my mom buy me that palette I’m looking at at Sephora? God, I was in awe. The colors looked like they were extracted from gemstones. They were so radiant and beautiful, but it was sixty fucking dollars, sixty dollars I did not have, so I reluctantly got some cheapo palette at Walgreen’s with some vibrant orange tones to make my grey eyes look blue. I also snatched some liquid eyeliner and a pink bottle of mascara. “That should do it.”

I stuffed my grabs into my purse, except for my shoebox. “Hey Mom...oh just a pair of shoes. White wedges...wanna see?”

So yeah. Sneaking that outfit to school and flaunting it, and getting hit on later that day by a boy (he was ugly but whatever) who thought I was a “new kid” were probably the two events that solidified my belief that I had value through my beauty and that I deserved everything I wanted. I can only do good when I looked good. I wholeheartedly believed that.

But of course, I wasn’t going to relay that whole spiel to Sasha, so I just replied, “Clothes make the woman, I guess.”

I left with a new pair of leather pants. Sasha left with a strawberry stain on her t-shirt. So we started the journey back to campus, Sasha without the outfit she wanted in the first place. “I’m kind of fucked.”

The exit for the school was coming up. With a shrug, I passed it. Sasha turned to watch the passing sign. “You missed--”

“Let’s go to the mall. We’ll have more luck there.”

“The nice mall?”

“The Fritz? Yeah.” It was half an hour away but it was worth the drive. A girl could always use more clothes.

So, we got to the Fritz, a massive mall with like a million stores. It was possibly bigger than our campus with all the parking and space inside. As soon as we found parking, I said, “We’ll hit up like, a Banana Republic or something...check out an outfit that won’t disappoint your grandparents.”

After about an hour and a few very productive visits, we got Sasha a new blouse, patterned with small, black cacti. She also got a mustard yellow button skirt, and a new pair of tawny pumps. She was going to be the belle of Thanksgiving, I could tell already. We were making our proud exit from the mall when Sasha stopped in her tracks. I turned towards her. “What are we waiting for? Did you want to get any jewelry?”

“No.” She quickly answered before pointing to the store across from her. “Hitch, let’s go to the Disney Store before we go!”

I took one look at the giant, mouse-eared entrance, and one listen to the brats crying inside. “Naw.”

“Hiitch …”

“Aren’t we a little old for that?” I groaned.
“Oh, never.” Sasha said with sparkles in her eyes as she stared at the window display. “I have a feeling we’re gonna find something great in there.”

“For Thanksgiving?” I whined. Forget it. There was no convincing her otherwise. My shoulders dropped, and I trudged towards the door. “Ten minutes, tops.”

“Yes!” Sasha celebrated, outpacing me towards a basket of stuffed animals. God, as soon as I took one step into that store...instant migraine. So many kids. Such loud music. So. Many. Kids . Reason #53 to get my tubes tied, I swear. Who could commit to raising such...well, hellraisers?

“Oh, I need this!” One girl called out from across the store. “Jean, Jean! Look!”

Jean?...or John. Christ, I was going nuts. I kept browsing through mugs to distract myself for...nine and a half more minutes.

“C’mon. Mom wants me to get you shoes or whatever.” An exhausted, familiar voice sighed. No fucking way . “I shouldn’t have even let you come in here.”

“Jean, but it’s my favorite.” I peeked up over the display. There was a small person with long, curly hair tugging at his shirt.

“Don’t pull it!” He said, “or you’ll owe me forty bucks for a new one.”

Forty bucks for a plain t-shirt, God, Jean, you asshole. I instinctively rolled my eyes. She stopped pulling, sadly gazing down at the toy in her hand. It was a greenish blue with gold glitter ribbons.

“But...it’s my wand.”

“Listen, you have so many toys, kid.” He carefully explained. “And it’s not yours until we pay for it, anyway...”

“Then pay for it!” Not like he couldn’t afford it. Or did he want to buy another fucking Dolce and Gabbana-ass, luxury-ass-backwards, black v-neck shirt?

“Hey, hey, hey. We need shoes for you. Okay? You got mud all over your other pair...”

“It was rainy.”

“Let’s just focus on the shoes, okay? Or you’ll have to go to school barefoot.”

“But I have plenty of shoes.” She countered. “My sandals, my light-up sneakers, my tap shoes, my flip-flops, my other flip-flops--”

While she was distracted, Jean plucked the wand from her pudgy, pink fist. She kept talking, “--my boots, my fuzzy boots, my--hey! Give that back!”

“We’ll get it later.” His exasperation was evident. Tired eyes, a slouch. “Let’s just get you...new, colorful, squeaky shoes. Okay?”

“You gotta promise.”

“...Sure.”

I hid near the Space Wars stuff--sorry, the Star Fights stuff. And I wasn’t hiding, per say. If Jean looked my way he’d see how I was interested in his interests. I love Space Wars, especially...Chewbecky. Ah. Good old Space Time. But, he was watching over his very peppy sister instead. I looked towards the Princess section where Jean left the wand. It wasn’t anything special--
just a chunk of plastic wrapped with glittery things and ribbon. It lit up if you hit a button, and had the silhouette of a princess at the end of it. Whatever. If it made the kid happy. I mean, who wouldn’t want a magic wand?

I went up to the cashier and paid for the twelve-dollar (TWELVE FUCKING DOLLARS) wand. As soon as I walked out of the store with Sasha, who had gotten some stuffed animal, I took all the tags off and was filled with immediate regret. Oh, man. Out of all the clingy shit I’ve done since August, this was the worst. Who let me do this shit. I don’t even know that kid’s name. This was so goddamn weird. What was I gonna say? “Oh, hey, I saw you at the Disney Store, but you didn’t see me, here’s the wand your sister wanted?” Oh, jeez. Oh, jeez. JESUS. FUCKING. CHRIST.

I held it up to Sasha, lighting it up. “Is this weird? Is giving this to Jean’s sister weird?”

Sasha took the tag off of her doll and put it in her purse. Only the head was sticking out. “I mean, yeah but she’ll be happy to get it, I guess.”

“I should just say fuck it and return it.” I remembered all the tags and packaging, which sat at the bottom of the bag in shreds. “Egh.”

I couldn’t shop without keeping an eye out for Jean, or obsessively thinking about what the fuck to do with a $12 mistake. Ugh, what if they went to the store and got the wand before I could see them, like he promised her? Ugh. Kill me. Kill me painfully and slowly, a thousand times. It’d be better than making an absolute ass of myself. No matter what store we went into, I remained miserable and jittery. Not even Sephora could cheer me up. Sephora. Usually new make-up heals all wounds, quells any anxiety, or what have you, but I just felt dumb. There was nothing that could make me feel any less dumb.

We left the store empty-handed and took to wandering aimlessly through the mall, our footsteps echoing through the massive building. We spotted the kids’ shoe store. Sasha and I stopped for a moment and stared in silence until she asked, “Wanna sit down for a bit?”

That was code for “Did you want to stalk out Jean?” I agreed, and we took a seat on a nearby bench. We tried peeking inside the store if we could see them, perhaps behind one of the tall shelves, but there was no such luck.

We waited for about two minutes. Then Sasha got up to get a cinnamon sugar pretzel, but I kept on waiting. She came back with the pretzel to split. Five more minutes passed, our laps were covered in cinnamon and sugar, and my patience was running thin. Seven minutes in the store, and they still weren’t done? Jesus, how hard was it to get shoes for a kid? They’re so malleable. Just get them something that lights up and go home.

A little bit later, after my mind was fried and I was this close to saying “fuck it” and tossing the wand in the trash, Jean and his sister came out of the woodwork and walked towards the store counter. He looked like a zombie, but his sister skipped to the counter with a white shoebox in hand.

“Look,” Sasha whispered, as if they could hear us from inside the store. “What do you think they got?”

“Shoes?” A lucky guess.

“Well yeah, they're probably getting shoes at the shoe store…” She trailed off. I stood up, cracking my back and preparing to pounce.

As soon as they stepped out of the shoe store, we made our move to “accidentally” run into them. As
soon as we were close enough, I put my shocked face on -- eyes wide, big smile. “Is that Jean?”

“Hey.” He nodded and tried to keep walking, but I wasn’t having it.

“So funny seeing you here. How are you?”

“I--I’m good.” His sister was trying to disappear behind his legs. She looked really delicate: porcelain skin and light curls, with long, chopstick legs and a pink button nose. He put his hand on her upper back and gently nudged her forward. “Maddie, this is Hitch and Sasha from school.”

“Hi, Maddie!” I beamed, trying to be as kid-friendly as possible. “N-Nice to meet you!”

“Oh, hi.” She was holding tight to a bag from the shoe store.

“Oh, cool, did you get new shoes?” I asked, as if I didn’t already know they were buying shoes haha how could I?

“Yeah, I got brand new sneakers.” Her face was now glowing. She reached into the bag before stopping to ask first, “Wanna see?”

“Of course!”

“Maddie, we have to catch the bus in half an hour.” Jean said. “If you wanted to stop at the Disney Store, now’s the time to--”

“Wait,” I said. Fuck. Now that I have their attention, what do I say now? I looked up at Sasha for help. Pleeease . She simply shrugged, and I turned back to Maddie to awkwardly ask, “Er, Maddie, do you like princesses?”


“Well, I was there earlier, and I saw this wand…” I took it out of the bag and held it for her to see. Jean was completely flabbergasted as he stared at the same fucking wand his sister wanted . She, on the other hand, was totally joyful.

“We were there this morning and I accidentally ripped one of the tassels.” Sasha piped up, and geniusly so. “Yeah...it’s just a little ribbon, but the sales associate saw me do it. So she charged me for it.”

“And I knew you had a sister.” I turned to Jean and smiled. God, this lie was genius . “I figured she’d like it.”

“I do!” She said, pressing the button and watching it light up.

“Maddie, what do you say?” Jean encouraged her.

“Thank you!”

I smiled, mentally patting myself on the back while Jean checked the time on his phone. He told his sister, “Okay, well. We have a little bit of time to kill before we catch the bus. What’d you want to do until then?”

“Uhhhhh…” Maddie hummed while looking at the ceiling. Boy, she was really dragging this out. Make up your mind! She took a deep breath, catching Jean’s attention. But instead of deciding where she wanted to go, she continued pondering. “Uhhhh…”
Okay, this was getting annoying. I checked my watch. I could tolerate a child for a whopping four minutes. This must have been some sort of record. “We’re gonna head back to campus. I’ll see you later.”

“Okay, yeah. I’ll see you later.” Jean said, looking back down at his sister and gently prodding her in the arm.

Breaking out of her trance, Maddie waved after us. “Bye! Thank you!”

After they were out of view, Sasha and I debated heading home. She had a nice new outfit for her Thanksgiving dinner, and I was mentally drained from my last interaction with Jean. We both easily decided to call it a day. Sasha and I lumbered out of the mall and into my truck. I shut the door, reclined back in the seat, and sighed. What a day. What a fuckin’ day. As soon as we got back to the dorm, I ripped off my bra and my head hit the pillow.

I needed all this extra sleep for my ice skating date with Annie and Marco. Annie actually asked for advice with her outfit. I was surprised. I told her to add some color into her look because she had so much grey. If it wasn’t grey, it was blue. I offered to lend her one of my more colorful accessories—perhaps my pink plaid scarf? My chevron skirt? Some faux-gold jewelry? Nope. A solid, stiff “no thank you.” The best I could make of her outfit was her grey parka, a black t-shirt, a sky blue infinity scarf, and jeans. Match that with an incredible sneaker, such as Annie’s pristine white Nikes, and you had a cool, casual streetwear look. Ugh, just call me Mother Teresa. I can make even the saddest, poorest, and dullest people look the most expensive.

I ended up driving the gang to the ice rink. It was called the Crystal Rink. I would’ve been excited about today if Annie didn’t come along. She seemed to have a grey aura about her that dulled my glittery pink one, and Marco’s friendly canary yellow. She was a raincloud come to life. She and Marco made polite conversation on the way over. He sat in the back with her to keep her company while my lonely ass drove all the way through city traffic to the rink. God, I felt like a hockey mom. I should have brought orange slices for the team to eat after the game.

We rented our skates, and while we were lacing up, Marco and Annie were surprisingly chatty, despite Annie’s persistent monotone.

“I’m way too familiar with lacing.”

“Hockey?”

“Yeah, in high school.”

“I figured. I figure skated when I was little.”

“Did you?”

“Three years. Twisted my ankle and quit to take karate instead.”

I laced my skates with a little help from Marco, and began hobbling towards the rink. Annie and Marco were making walking on skates look easy, as they continued conversing.

“I would have never thought you were a figure skater.”

“Yeah, well. It rarely ever comes up.”

We made it onto the ice, and hoo boy, was it harder than it looked. I shuffled onto the ice, grabbing the wall with my gloved hand. I immediately regret this decision and all the events that led up to it. I
turned towards Marco and Annie to see how they were struggling. Annie started off slow, finding her balance (without a single hand on the wall!) and transitioning onto the frozen surface with ease. Marco carefully treaded onto the ice, grabbing the wall before pacing himself next to me, again, without any support from the wall. Annie...that bitch was skating backwards, watching my hardship. Marco asked me, “Are you okay?”

“Psh,” I lied. “Peachy. Just gotta...loosen up my joints, ya know? I’m fine.”

“That’s good.” He grinned. “Are you gonna, y’know, let go of the wall?”

“My knee joints,” I fibbed again. “Still oilin’ ‘em up...I mean, don’t let me slow you down. I’ll be...out-skating you in no time.”

“You sure?” He skated in front of me, looking back as he caught up with Annie. “You got it?”

“Easy as pie.” I scoffed, brushing off his very valid concerns. “You...crazy kids, you go off. I’ll catch up in no time.”

I did not catch up. They caught up with me, circling all the way back to where I was. I only made it about ten feet and had inconvenienced other, slightly faster skaters, who preferred to stick near the wall. Marco asked, “You sure you’re okay? I can, uh, teach you how to skate if you want.”

“Knees,” I quickly waved him and Annie off. “Knees still a little stiff.”

“If you say so.” Annie was not concerned for my health. Not one bit. I could be on fire right now, and she would just watch. She turned back towards Marco and continued their conversation, gliding away and out of earshot.

This sucked serious ass. I was already a shitty artist. I couldn’t be a shitty skater too. There were children on the ice for Christ’s sake. They were gliding across the ice with their stupid toothless grins. Who did they think they were, with their short legs and pompous attitude? I swore yesterday in the Disney Store to never, ever get pregnant, and to never, ever, ever have kids. I swore again when I fell on my ass and some fatso kid skated past me, pointing and laughing while I was hoisting myself up.

I just finished my second lap around this godforsaken ice rink while Annie and Marco finished like, their hundredth. They stopped themselves. Marco asked, “do you both want to get food or something?”

“Yes.” I begged. Get me off this ice. “I’m starving.”

We hauled ass to the snack stand, wasting no time in deliberating what greasy, crappy snack food we were going to stuff into our mouths. I got an order of mozzarella sticks and a tall Sprite. Caloric intake be damned.

We found a table overlooking the rink. There, I gracelessly scarfed down mozzarella sticks, struggling to bite off the stringy cheese that was pulled taut between my teeth and its breaded cocoon. Annie politely nibbled on a soft pretzel, and Marco gently sopped up the grease from his pizza with a handful of napkins.

“Do you always pat down everything?” Annie asked.

Marco, now self-conscious of his eating habits, lowered his pizza back down onto the plate. “Well...I just think places like rinks and like, bowling alleys tend to be a little too generous with the grease.”
“You think so? Have you ever had pizza from Genarro’s?”

“No, never heard of it.”

“You haven’t seen disgusting until you get pizza from Genarro’s. I swear, Bertholdt got food poisoning from how oily their stuff is.”

“Haha, that’s gross.”

Ugh, get a fucking room. I wondered what Jean was up to. He was probably spending quality time with his dumb sister—no, his sister isn’t dumb, I’m just bitter. I glanced at my silent phone. I wanted to text him so bad, but I fought the urge. It was a very strong urge, but I kept myself out of his notifications. I had such willpower. I deserve some sort of award.

I deserve two awards, actually. The other one is for spending the day with Annie. It was exhausting, and I was a little annoyed that I basically spent the day alone on the ice while Marco and Annie just had a blast. I passed on dinner with him to instead spend time with Sasha. Annie was just blooming with Marco, like a regular ol’ social butterfly, and I didn’t want to interrupt such a magical moment. While Marco and Annie exchanged Snapchat information, presumably to have obnoxious, stupid phone sex or something since they were so talkative today, I shot Jean a harmless “how was your day?” text. Then, we returned our skates and headed back home. Annie and Marco seemed thrilled with how the day unfolded, but me? Not so much. I just wanted to get a simple salad in my system before a hot shower and a long, warm, good night’s sleep.

It started raining shortly before I was due to meet up with Sasha and leave for the dining hall. I groaned about how of course it began to rain while we were headed out the door. Instead, she shrugged with a smile on her face. She donned her hood and said, “It feels like the city has been sunny for like, a thousand years. I actually like the rain.”

Well, if you say so. When we got to the dining hall, Sasha surprised me. Usually she goes to the right, hitting up the Italian corner for some pizza and garlic bread, then circling her way around the cafeteria to snatch up an apple and a pile of peanut butter. As if that wasn’t enough, she’d stop by the grill for some boneless buffalo wings with a generous drizzling of ranch dressing. After she was done gorging herself, she would grab a brownie or a miniature apple pie for the road. But today, she held back. Instead, Sasha accompanied me to the salad bar. She filled her plate with cucumbers, olives, onion, and tomato. Instead of flooding her plate with ranch and cheddar cheese, she threw a light drizzle of olive oil over her creation, along with a handful of feta.

It was an unusually green concoction for Sasha. She didn’t look too thrilled about it while we were waiting to be rung up. “Where’s your like, stack of pizza?” I asked her.

“My mom told me about the freshman fifteen or whatever and I’m horrified.”

“So you’re just going to eat nothing but salads?”

“Salads,” She lamented, “And fruit for breakfast. Maybe soup for lunch...some salmon or chicken…”

“Chicken is good for you,” I told her as I swiped my ID.

“I want buffalo chicken,” She whined. I ignored her complaint and made my way towards a table for two.

“Anyway, how’s things with Jean?” She teased, punching me in the arm.
I looked down at my salad. There wasn’t really much to say. “I don’t know. I haven’t talked to him since we saw him at the mall.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, so.” I rolled my eyes and took a deep breath.

“I thought you were the type that talked everyday.” So did I, Sasha. I sent him a few things today - conversation starters,

“Not every day. I know he’s back home, I just don’t know what he’s up to. Well, whatever. You know him better than I do.” We chose a table by the window. I eagerly dug right into my dinner. Before taking a bite, I asked Sasha, “What was he like in high school?”

“I don’t know Jean that well.” She shook her head, trying to gather as much feta on her fork as possible as she prepared the first bite of her salad.

“What? Yes, you do. You’ve known him for like, five years. You definitely have something to say.”

“Well, he wasn’t always so...mysterious.”

“Mysterious?”

“I’ve known him since I transferred to Trost,” Sasha said, poking at her salad. I could see she was regretting her diet already. “And he was a really sweet kid. He had a little baby fat on him, and he was just friendly. Bad with words. Awkward. But he wanted friends. And he was sweet.”

I couldn’t see him being so sociable now. “Did he ever have a lot of friends?”

“He got a girlfriend, so...‘mi casa es su casa,’ I guess. You know? Her friends became his friends, and so he stopped really talking to us.” She shrugged.

I furrowed my brow. Who was this mystery girl? I needed to get to the bottom of this. “Was she a bitch?”

“No, she wasn’t mean, she was just, I don’t know. From a different world.” Sasha tried to explain, “We never had any common ground, so there was no reason I should be hanging with her, or her friends...or eventually, Jean. We had nothing in common. There was nothing to talk about.”

“What does she like?”

“Well,” Sasha cleared her throat. “I was member, secretary of, and then president of the Anime Club. And I was part of the Art Club. She wasn’t involved in anything. All I remember is that she was in my Earth Sciences class, and she was pretty smart. I think she was into gems and jewelry. I think that was her art elective, but she wasn’t a very artsy person.”

“I’m sure Jean was part of the Art Club.”

“You’d think.” She rolled her eyes. “He was part of the Art Honors Society. You can be a member of both. I don’t know why Jean wasn’t, but...whatever.” Sasha put her fork down on her plate and pat her mouth with her napkin. She wasn’t usually this overtly polite when she was eating pizza, or something she actually liked. “We graduated. It’s in the past.”

“Okay.” I sipped my water. “If you don’t want to talk about it, I get it--”

“It--It’s just...It’s weird.” I got her on a tangent. Things just got interesting. “I saw him everyday,
and everyday he looked exactly the same as the day before. So I can’t tell how he changed. Or how fast he did it. All I know is that one day he didn’t wave back to me, and he pretended he didn’t know who I was.”

“He ghosted you?” What a piece of shit.

“I don’t know what ghosting is.”

“It’s like, when a person just drops you? Like refuses to acknowledge your existence.”

“Oh.” Sasha stuffed a biteful of salad into her mouth, chewing it as she said, “Yeah. Yeah, then he ghosted me.”

Oh, yikes. “Well, like, what happened when they broke up? What happened after that?”

“Hmm. After she broke up with him--”

“She broke up with him?”

“Oh, yeah.” Her eyes widened as she rooted through her salad for a crouton. “It was not mutual. At all. After they broke up, Connie and I kind of thought he’d come crawling back to be friends with us again? We had a whole dramatic speech prepared and everything.”

“It kind of went like, ‘How dare you come crawling back,’” She bellowed, before shrugging and turning back to hunting for croutons. “But instead, he just...disappeared.”

“He stopped coming to school?”

“No. But he never talked. He just always sat by the wall and kept to himself - save for like, a handful of snarky comments a year.” She said. “At prep, our curriculum split after you decided what you wanted to focus in. Liz--that’s his ex--went into the business track, Connie went into engineering, and Jean and I went into the arts. We didn’t have a lot of classes together but when we did, he was like a ghost.”

He’s such a fucking loudmouth. So sassy. He couldn’t keep his mouth shut for four minutes, let alone forty. “I really don’t believe that.”

“It’s true! He’s really overdramatic!”

I can’t say I never noticed Jean’s melodramatic flair before, but that melodrama always included whining in some form. If he wasn’t whining, he was snarking. If he wasn’t whining or snarking, he would be grumbling with his arms crossed, conspiring new ways to be as petty as possible. “If you say so.”

“Mm-hmm. It was like the Twilight Zone or something.”

“So, let’s talk about this Liz girl.” I decided, chewing a spinach leaf from my salad.

“I can’t. I don’t know that much about her.”

“You can’t scrape up some gossip on her?” I asked. “You have to be able to dig up some dirt to tell me. C’mon. Spill the tea.”

“Hitch, I legit can’t.” Sasha shrugged. “I had no classes with her my last two years of school, what am I supposed to say?”
“You could pull up her Facebook.” I offered. “Social media, something. Like, who knows what--”

“I think you’re a little too obsessed with this story.” Sasha noted with a hint of discomfort in her tone. “There’s no reason for you to be, you know, so obsessive over this girl.”


“Oh,” Sasha laughed, “you definitely want him to be more than friends.”

I blushed, turning back towards my salad. “Shut up. I just want to know what happened is all, because talking to him and trying to get him to just open up is like pulling teeth.”

“You can’t force that.”

“Yes, I can.”

“No, it has to be when he’s comfortable. I think it’s kind of sad that one person broke him so much, but at the same time, I can’t really feel too bad for him because he had every chance to fix it, but he didn’t act on it.” That took me aback. Sasha, for someone usually so carefree and, for the lack of a better word, ditzy, could really strike a blow. She took a careful bite of salad. “I don’t know. I want to be friends with him again, but at the same time, I wonder if I’m better off without him after all.”

“Your instincts are pretty good.” I dug into my salad again. “You should tell me what they’re saying more often.”
We started having models come in for drawing. Nobody else seemed fazed by it, other than me. I think because halfway through our warm-up sketches, I realized this is the first person I’ve ever seen naked before in real life, other than myself. I felt awkward watching her while I was sketching, even though she was really old and wrinkly and a little doughy.

I felt so middle school. Is it abuse on my parents’ part to scare me into staying so sheltered until college? What if because of them, I started doing meth or heroin or became a prostitute or something as soon as I left home? They came so close to ruining my entire life. Speaking of my parents, it was Family Day at school this upcoming weekend, where all the students invited their families up to campus to see what college life was like. My parents hopped on the opportunity to spend an afternoon with “the college girl,” so that meant having to adhere to the Mormon code of conduct for the day, dress and all.

Probably the most embarrassing thing I brought to campus were my garments. Mormon underwear. I never wore them by choice. Not even when I was low on clean clothes. They were only on campus so I could gauge if my dress was acceptable or not for my family. It was a little easier to do that without the help of garments in the winter when I had to wear longer sleeves, but it was hard to find cute, loose clothes that cooperated with granny panties. They made my leggings have such an awkward pantyline. It looked more like I was wearing basketball shorts underneath my pants than an actual pair of underwear. It looked dumb.

Being a pastor’s daughter was such hard work. I settled on wearing a maxi dress and a sweater for this Deliss family reunion. I cleaned my dorm room and put everything in its place so I would get a rave review from my mother when she saw it. As soon as I got the “we’re here” text, I was out the door.

I met them outside my dorm so we could pile in the car and go to lunch. We went out for lunch at the same place Jean and I had breakfast a few weeks ago. It was weird to relive those memories while I was with my parents. I tried to focus on something else. I tried to get myself excited for this chicken Caesar salad wrap when I knew it was going to be drowning in dressing. I tried paying attention to my parents’ conversation as they were trying to tell me about their new friend Gideon or something, I don’t know. My thoughts went to how worried I was that I hadn’t heard from Jean yet today. I mean, I saw passing glances of him over the course of last week, but we never...hung out since he went home. I was actually kind of curious what he was up to or where he was, but I couldn’t pry too
much. I mean, I wanted to pry. I’ve tried subtly asking Marco to hang out and asking to invite Jean along with. While Marco was always up for it when he could, Jean was always conveniently “busy.” I bet he was avoiding me because he thought I was crazy because of what happened at the mall last weekend. It was a little frustrating, but I had to keep telling myself not to think about it, as hard as it was. Right now, he was probably with his family too. He and his sister were probably talking about what a big, crazy weirdo I am.

I should have kept my focus off of Jean and put it on my parents. As soon as the waitress took our drink order back to the kitchen, my dad decided to change the subject. “Hitch--have you been thinking about your mission?”

The dreaded Mormon mission. My parents kept pestering me about doing one, even though it wasn’t required of me. It’s one of those things where if I don’t do it, they won’t be mad, just disappointed. I never wanted to do a mission, ever, but in order to get my parents off my back, I told them I’d do it as soon as I was eligible - at twenty-one. Since then, the age difference changed, and I could go next year if I wanted to. But I still don’t. I swore up and down I’d do it once I’m twenty-one and out of college. They’re telling me to at least plan it now, but I don’t want to do that either. I told my parents I was undecided, and that I needed more time to think about where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do with myself on that mission. Of course, I already firmly decided “I’m not going on one, Dad!”

I’m still thinking of how I’m gonna break that news to my parents. I’m dreading it, actually, but I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it in three years. “I’m kind of preoccupied with other stuff right now.”

“Uncle Mitch thinks Milan would be a great place to go on your mission.” Mom mused. I bit the inside of my cheek, worrying it between my teeth. “You like fashion and stuff, don’t you?”

“Them fashion designers, though.” My dad shook his head, sipping his water as he thought out loud. “Their definition of fashion...is pretty loose, isn’t it? Some of the crazy stuff they put out...who would wear that?”

My dad was a simple man, one that didn’t see fashion as art. He valued utilitarianism in handicraft. In his own carpentry workshop, every scrap of wood that went into it came out as something “useful,” like a chair. God forbid he makes art? Simply for the, dare I say it, aesthetic value? Craig Deliss believes his wardrobe needs nothing more than his garments, robes, a few button down shirts, and some nice slacks, plus a pair of old pajamas for when he got tuckered out. It was hard talking to him about art if it didn’t serve a greater purpose.

“I gotcha, Dad,” I lied. I tried to sound as disinterested as possible, even though I’m always a slut for couture. “I wouldn’t want to go all the way to Milan. It’s still so far away, Mom. I want to focus on schoolwork now.”

“I know, I know.” She sighed, at a loss about my “lack of direction” or whatever within the church. She was a lot less strict about it than my dad was, so I preferred to talk to her over him. But ideally, I wouldn’t be talking to either of them about the topic at all.

“How is school going?” Dad asked. “Get any of your grades back yet so far?”

I couldn’t disappoint them. Mom was wearing her “city scarf” - a blue and white quatrefoil scarf. She thought it made her look young and “cultured” and she wore it every time she crossed the bridge to come here. Dad had on his nice, yellow button-down to compliment her outfit. They looked spic-and-span and I couldn’t see frowns on those faces. Like, as annoying as they could be, they weren’t evil or anything. Just nosy and overbearing, but it was always out of love. It was easy to get mad at them, but you couldn’t stay mad at them. And you couldn’t disappoint them, either, but here I was. “Not the best I expected. But it’s my first semester! I’ll keep trying my best.”
He offered a wan yet sympathetic smile. “I'm sure you'll figure it out.”

We finished our meal in silence. A comfortable, content, happy silence. We stopped at a grocery store on the way back to pick up some snacks and drop me off at my dorm. They helped me bring in some larger stuff, like my jewelry and my frumpy clothes that I “forgot” on move-in day. I walked them back outside to exchange goodbyes before getting back to my carefree, college life.

“You be safe.” My dad chided. I rolled my eyes, reaching for the bag of snacks he was about to hand me. Instead, he pulled back, holding it out of my reach. “You promise?”

“I promise.”

“That's my girl.” He handed me the plastic bag. “You'll pull through with your grades. I promise.”

“We know it must be lonely at school,” My mom added, “and recently, I’ve been really devoted to my work. Estate sales, auctions, you know.”

“Oh,” I grit my teeth together and put on the best smile I could. Cheesy auction finds. The stuff that is too junky to sell off, but apparently fit a good young Mormon girl’s tastes just right. “What do you have this time, Mom?”

She opened up the plastic bag and extended it towards me. “A treasure trove of crazy old cat lady stuff.”

“Oh!” The biggest thing in the bag was about the size of my forearm. It was a hand-sewn cat doll made from a chintzy old white bedsheet featuring a pattern made with evergreen trees and red diamonds. One of its button eyes was haphazardly sewn back on, and the other hot-glued. There was a red bow around its neck made out of faux suede. It smelled like cigarettes and the Febreeze Mom keeps in her car. “Oh, Mom--”

“Oh, there’s more.” She told me. Underneath the cat doll had been a pillowcase. My mom held the bag and doll excitedly as I opened up the case. It had three tabby kittens on it, all wearing proper Victorian church clothes in a garden blooming with flowers. “Isn’t that so adorably kitsch? Th--Oh, Hitch.”

When I opened the pillowcase, there was a light metal sound. I looked to the ground and a foot away was a little rosy pink button. “Is that mine, too?”

“It must have gotten tangled in with the pillowcase. Hm.” Her face just lit up like she remembered something. She turned to face me and said, “I found a whole set of hand-embroidered cat pillows. Little kittens in a field of flowers with baby blue accents. Too bad there’s a little orange juice stain on the back, or else they would’ve been a great sell...”

There it was, the admission that all my gifts were technically trash. She continued nonetheless, “I put them on your bed at home for now. I’ll send pictures!”

“Okay, thanks Mom.” I said, leaning down to pick up the button. In addition to the pink background, it had the image of a winking kitten with a beret. “I am a cool cat, an’ that is that,” it read.

“Oh, I am!” I exclaimed. I didn’t have anything to pin it on. Actually I did, but I didn’t want to wear it in public. Where people could see it. Perhaps it would fit on my corkboard. “This is fantastic.”

What’s weird is that it wasn’t a lie. I loved all of this. I love cats, as lame and cliche as it sounds. I can’t get enough of ‘em. Too bad my dad is allergic, or I’d have eight. And sure these gifts were kitschy and lame, but on the inside, I loved their weirdness and their hyper-femininity and even that
weird, musky mothball scent that you could probably never get out, not even after a thousand washes. It felt weird to enjoy gifts given to me by my mom. It felt weirder to actually be touched by them. Her face was glowing. “You like them?”

“Yeah, thank you.” I went in for a hug. “Thank you so much.”

“I figured it would be a little taste of home,” She said. “You didn’t bring any of your antiques to college.”

Please. It was hard to convince people in high school I wasn’t backwards or some weird polygamist...the crazy antiquing didn’t help that stereotype. Making my room stink like mothballs, bundt cakes, Republican politics, and AM radio wasn’t the best way to tell my peers that I’m trendy. While I hated my mom’s rampant antiquing, some of the stuff I got from her were truly diamonds in the rough. I really liked my set of white ornate picture frames, even though I couldn’t think of what to put inside of them. I also liked my functioning Polaroid camera, my ceramic unicorn that held my rings, my globe that was old enough to still have the Soviet Union, Saigon, and East Germany. “This is really great. Thanks, Mom.”

I went in for a nice “thank you” hug. I put my chin on her shoulder, looking out at the cars weaving in and out of the parking lot. There were a lot of goodbyes and exchanges of goods, along with a lot of stops from late visitors. I scanned the lot for any familiar faces, and boy, of course. There he fucking was. Jean was in the distance, walking from an idle Lexus and towards the hall. The car he just emerged from dashed right out of the parking lot as soon as he shut the passenger door, and I couldn’t see inside to maybe get a glimpse of whoever was driving it. I think Eliot Kirschtein would be driving something a bit more luxurious than a Lexus. Not that it’s a bad car, but it’s not like a Ferrari or a Lamborghini. But I liked to believe he was driving a Lexus to humble himself or disguise who he was on the road. Yeah...as far I was concerned, that was absolutely him. Yes. Totally.

Anyway, back to Jean. I couldn’t see at the time, but I knew something was a little off with him. I squinted, trying to figure out why he looked so...weird. He looked sanded down. He looked like his edges had been rounded. I felt like I had entered Uncanny Valley as I tried to figure out what was different about him until he was right in front of me.

“Oh. Hey.” His piercings were gone. Where were his piercings? He was wearing an old, grey sweatshirt with “Pitt” screenprinted on the front, the lettering cracked from years of wear. The neckline was pulled out, making it loose and baggy. When the hell did he go to Pittsburgh? “Are these your parents?”

What the fuck is this. I blinked. Then I blinked again. What the fuck is this. I looked at my dad, who was already preparing for a handshake. I coughed, stepping back. Should I trust him to shake my parents’ hands? Was it really Jean, or was this some doppelganger that stole Jean’s identity and credit cards? He probably left the real Jean zip-tied to a toilet in a gas station bathroom somewhere. “Jean, these are my parents.”

“It’s really nice to meet you.” Jean smiled.

I mouthed “Who are you?” when my dad shook his hand. This was like some alternate universe Jean. He had the real Jean tied to the train tracks somewhere while he carried out his master plan, because “this town is only big enough for one of us,” and...yeah. That was the most plausible explanation.

My mom asked me, “So, is this your friend?”

“Yeah, yeah. We’re friends.” I quickly said, itching to get in my dorm building and out of this
awkward situation. Worlds were colliding, and it was making me extremely uncomfortable. Jean was new money, he was stainless steel and exposed brick. Craig and Lorainne, on the other hand, were the textbook definition of traditional. My mother is an *antique* dealer, for Christ’s sake. They liked vests and golden retrievers.

“Well, Jean, it is very nice to meet you.” She said with a smile. Luckily, it looked genuine.

My dad checked his watch. “We have to head back if you want to make that flea market, Lorainne.”

“Oh, shoot--” She sighed, reaching for one last hug from me before hitting the road. “Can’t miss out on that...it was good to see you honey. And it was nice to meet you, Jean.”

“Good to meet you too, Ms. Deliss.” Jean replied.

My dad pulled me in for a quick hug and a kiss on the forehead. “You keep your chin up. We’ll call you later.”

“Thank you, Dad.” I said. “Drive safe.”

“Don’t worry about us. We’ll talk to you soon.” He assured me as he started walking towards the car with Mom. I started awkwardly waving towards them as if I were watching them from my parade float.

Once they got to the car and my mom opened the door, she called out, “Goodbye, sweetie! Call us this weekend!”

I stopped waving and scratched the back of my head, flushing red as every word that came out of her mouth got louder and louder. God, could she be any more embarrassing? She was pretty much announcing this to the entire freshman class! I cleared my throat and called back, “Y-Yeah! Of course!”

Once they were both in the car, I hastily turned back towards the hall. I opened the door to the building and noticed Jean was following suit. I didn’t glance at him for more than a second. “You’re still here?”

“S-Sure, why not?” He frowned. “If you’re mad at me, tell me what’s wrong now.”

“You could text me back, for starters.” Well, I wasn’t mad, but if he *asked*, I wasn’t going to lie. I shrugged, still trying to play it cool after he watched my family make a spectacle of themselves.

“I’m not much of a texter.”

Well, he was here. I mean, at least he wasn’t running for the hills or anything, and I had someone to hold open the door for me while I carried in all of this junk. “Can you help me bring all of this stuff inside for me?”

He agreed with a nod and we made our way inside. I don’t know if our silence was because things were awkward or if we were exhausted, but as soon as we both swiped our cards, I turned to him to finally comment on his outfit. “Nice sweatshirt. You transferring to Pittsburgh?”

“No.” He grimaced. “It’s my mom’s sweater she keeps in the car. It was cold out.”

“Oh.” I shrugged. I unlocked the door to my room, and as soon as I threw the door open, Jean walked directly into my room and sat on my bed. I asked him, “I guess she’s the one that went to Pittsburgh?”
“Class of ‘96.” He replied. Shit, that was the year I was born. Did that poor woman have a baby right out of college? I decided not to press further, and he took it upon himself to sit up and ask, “What’s up with you?”

I nonchalantly held up a yellow plastic bag of groceries. “Parents dropped off some snacks. That’s pretty lit.”

“Like what?” He said, trying to look into the bag. He wanted to steal my food. I could tell already.

“Greek yogurt, some string cheese, and those little oranges that are easy to peel.”

“Oh, boring.” He groaned. “I thought you would have gotten like, chips or something good.”

“I try not to eat junk food.” I said from my pedestal.

“Marco said you had mozzarella sticks yesterday.”

Confused, I asked, “Why are you talking about what I eat?”

Avoiding the question, he shrugged and nodded towards my new(ish?) gifts. “What’s all this?”

Eek. I mean, I loved my gifts. Don’t get me wrong. I love cats. But this was crazy cat lady territory. It was a territory I was familiar with, but I didn’t want anyone to know that. “Oh, those aren’t--”

“You can’t pretend those aren’t yours.”

“Grandma’s.” I lied. “Seeing her next week, so...my mom--”

“So you have them. In your college dorm room.” He nodded. “Far away from where your grandma probably is.”

One of them was in the ground and the other one was probably chain-smoking on my uncle’s porch, so he had me there. “I’m testing them out. I hope they meet her standards--”

“You’re a bad liar.” He smirked. “You’re a cat lady.”

“N-No I’m not.”

“How many do you have?”

“None.” I replied. “M-My dad is allergic, but my grandma has...she has tons, and that’s why--”

“So if I come back next week, all this cat stuff is gonna be gone?” He asked. I stared at him, waiting for him to crack, because I couldn’t admit that...yeah, the stuff would not be gone.

“W...Well I’m visiting her in two weeks, so...” My voice got lower and lower as I tried to dig myself out of the hole. “You may come over...before I actually...see her.”

“Cut the crap,” He invited himself to sit on my bed, picking up Cigarette Cat and turning it over in his hands, running his thumb over the stitching. “The only thing more embarrassing than you being a catless cat lady is you trying to lie about it.”

“Hmph.”

“I mean, it’s nice that your mom does this for you. You know? She thinks of you, picks you up little gifts at work.” He shrugged. “I mean, it could all be junk. And she seems like a pain in the ass to
deal with most days. But at least she gets you stuff.”

“My mom doesn’t know me.”

“God, why are you fighting it? Like ‘how dare my parents do nice things for me?’ Like, fuck you, right?”

Way to make me look like a jerk. “You don’t have to live with them.” I grumbled.

“I guess that’s true.” He reluctantly agreed. “They seem like they could be a pain...sometimes.”

“Most of the time.” I opened the mini fridge and started packing the fridge. “Thank you again for like, meeting them. Dressing up nice and everything, you didn’t have to do that.”

“Is a sweatshirt ‘dressing up’ for you?”

“Taking out all of the goddamn metal in your face is.”

There was a small smile on his face, but once he gathered together his thoughts, it disappeared. “Not for you. My grandma hates them, so…”

“You could have not said anything to them.” I shrugged. “But you did.”

“Yeah. I did.”

I grinned, looking down at the ground. “Thanks.” Currently, my mind was a blank, so my mind started focusing on smaller details...such as how humid this room was. I sniffled. “I don’t know why this room is so musty.”

He shrugged. “We can go back to mine.”

“I’m sure your room won’t be any less musty.”

“It probably will be,” He picked up Cigarette Cat and turned it over in his hands. “Since, you know, it isn’t full of old cat junk.”

“They’re antiques,” I mumbled, grabbing my keys from my desk. “Let’s get a move on.”

I locked my dorm room and headed upstairs to Jean’s room. When we got to the top of the staircase, I asked, “When did you get so buddy-buddy with my parents?”

“I have to talk to a lot of my dad’s work colleagues or whatever.” He replied, reaching in his pocket for his keys. “I’m kind of hardwired to suck up when I have to.”

“Did you see your dad today?”

“No.” His answer was short and a little venomous. “He doesn’t come down for things like this.”

“Oh.” I pursed my lips, careful not to touch on the thorny subject again. I guess you could nix my Lexus theory. He was in the midst of opening his dorm door when I asked, “Who does, then?”

Jean didn’t answer, pausing to throw open the door. God, if my room was musty and gross, why did I think a boy’s dorm would be any better? This was only worse. You could have lit eight hundred cigarettes in here and burned them like incense and it would probably smell better. It was not only musty, but there were dirty sweatshirts and jeans lying all across the floor. Cables and cords were draped all over Jean’s desk, along with scattered paint tubes. There were open sketchbooks with
experimental charcoal doodles and figure drawings. Jean looked somewhat embarrassed of the mess. As soon as he walked in, he started kicking the sweatshirts on the floor to the side, clearing a path to his bed. He shut his open sketchbooks and piled all of his paint tubes in one corner of his desk. He finally answered my question about his family. “My, uh, mom’s side of the family is the only one I ever talk to.” He scratched his chin. “Mostly my mom, really, uh.”

“And your grandma.” I winked.

“Rarely.”

I climbed onto his bed and lifted his blanket up so I could cuddle underneath of it. When I did that, two hoodies rolled off of the bed and onto the cluttered floor. Not that this room was ever tidy, but it seemed way worse than usual. “Has school been stressful for you lately?”

“Time-consuming, but not stressful.”

“Why don’t you get some of it done now while we hang out?”

“You sure?”

“Well, sure. You can work on it while I’m here. I won’t get offended.”

“Are you okay with that?”

I looked up at the ceiling, chewing the inside of my cheek. “I may be a little needy, but it’s not like I don’t understand.”

“Do you have anything you need to work on, too?”

“Probably.” I sighed. Between schoolwork, my parents, and Jean’s general weirdness, I was already exhausted. “I’m not going to think about it.”

He gathered together his charcoal and chalk, and readied his sketchbook. Then he leaned over to reach the tissue box on his desk, tossing a lone tissue haphazardly on top of the desk’s surface. “I have to finish some exercises in drawing paper or fabric or something. Why are you just sitting here while I draw?”

“I just like your company.” I told him. I rolled my eyes. “I don’t want to admit it, but I actually missed you this past week.”

“Sorry. I’ve been busy.”

“Yeah, so is everyone.” I leaned back against the wall, pouty. “Seems your roommate’s been pretty busy too, huh?”

“I mean, he’s in the middle of developing his photos.” Jean noted, sketching the outline of the tissue. “He can’t do that without a dark room.”

Sounds fake, but okay. “I bet he’s spending a lot of time with Annie.”

“Wherever he’s been, it’s not here.”

“It’s probably been with Annie.” I grumbled, “Definitely been with Annie.”

He turned to me to ask, “Has he been in your room?”
I furrowed my brow. “Like, in general, or…”

“With Annie.” He turned back towards his sketchbook. “I mean with Annie.”

“No.” I replied. Come to think of it, I couldn’t even remember if he was in my room just visiting me. Huh. “No, he hasn’t, but still.”

“He could just be at the studio.”

I grumbled, “No, he’s definitely with Annie. I know it.”

“Mph. The lighting is weird. I’m gonna shut the blinds.” Jean sat up and closed his sketchbook on his pencil. He eased himself out of bed, but before he reached for the string, he squinted. Staring out the window, he mumbled, “Speak of the devil.”

“Who is the devil?”

Jean pulled the blinds shut before approaching his workspace with a shrug. “Marco is walking into the building with Annie.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope.”

“Let me see.” I jumped up out of bed and went to the window to take a look.

“You don’t believe me?”

“No!” I hustled to the window to take a look, and of course, there they were. Marco carrying all of her bags like some stupid, handsome gentleman as they chatted their way towards the door. God, they were probably planning their wedding already. He may as well have swept her off her feet and whisked her to bed or whatever married people do. Clearly, I was still pretty peeved that Marco and Annie were so buddy-buddy. I mean, I haven’t seen them together since ice-skating, but I know there was some fishy business underneath the surface.

Soon enough, I could hear the jostling of Marco’s keys as he came into the room. He then shut the door behind him and looked up at me as I hustled to back away from the window and not look like a creepy peeping Tom. Of course, Marco had no suspicions about me. He just offered that same friendly smile and said, “I didn’t know you’d be here.”

Jean turned around from his workspace and asked, “What do you have there, bud?”

“Lobster mac and cheese.” Marco gripped his takeout box just a little tighter. “You’re not touching it.”

“I’m not going to steal your pasta; relax.”

Marco carefully placed his styrofoam takeout box in the mini-fridge, squeezing it in between bottles and boxes. Once the door was closed, I crossed my arms, ready to confront. “What, did you meet the parents?”

He blinked, clearly confused. He sniffled, “My parents? We met at Winnie’s for lunch.”

“No, Annie’s parents.” I leaned back in Jean’s bed and snuggled into his side. He kept his arm at his side, refusing to put it around me. I pulled my hood up over my head and grumbled, “Since you two are so in loooove .”
“What makes you say that?”

Jean shrugged, unwilling to get involved in this conversation. I replied, “We saw you walking in with her from the parking lot.”

“It was a coincidence,” He explained, “My parents dropped me off the same time she was taking stuff to her dorm room. She’s going home for a few days.”

“She’s going home?” I asked, somewhat excited I would have the room to myself for the weekend.

“Yeah, until Monday morning.” Marco took off his jacket and threw it onto his bedpost before snaking into his bed, getting himself comfortable. “So her dad just gave her a few things so she didn’t have to bring it all with her on the train back.”

“Are you gonna miss her?” I asked.

“No really.” He laughed. “I don’t know why you swear that we’re dating.”

“You two were all up on each other at the ice rink.”

“That was just me being nice. I’m not into Annie.” He blinked and scratched his nose, sniffling as he fought the symptoms of the common cold. “I’m not really interested in anyone like that, actually.”

Jean rose his eyebrows. “You sure about that?”

“Ooh, you do like Annie--” I gushed. It was childish, sure, but I still gushed.

“No, I don’t like anyone like that.” Marco chewed the inside of his cheek, searching for the right words to tell me. “I just...don’t.”

“You haven’t met a pretty girl at school yet?” I sighed.

“I haven’t met a pretty girl like that in my entire life.” He awkwardly laughed. “So far.”

I paused and changed my question before falling onto Jean’s bed. “You haven’t met a handsome boy at school yet?”

“No, no, no,” He argued, sitting down on his bed cross-legged. He dragged his laptop towards himself and placed it on top of his lap. “I just don’t feel like that towards anyone.”

“Marco, you’re only like, eighteen--”

“Nineteen.”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, nineteen. You have your whole life ahead of you to meet someone. You can’t be so negative!”

“I’m not being negative, that’s just the way I am.” He shrugged. “I just exist and I’m pretty happy focusing on myself.”

“Marco, that’s sad.” I whined. How can you not like anyone? That’s so sad. Someone had to like Marco, Marco had to like someone! “Marco, no. You’ll find someone one day.”

“Eh, heh.” He nervously laughed. “I don’t know if I want to--But thank you for, uh, the sentiment.”

And on that awkward note, I felt it was time to leave. Jean was too busy working on his drawing and
I made Marco super uncomfortable by interrogating him on his sexuality. Hopefully by the time I got back to my room, Annie had gone back home and I could begin having the entire room to myself. I spent the rest of the day dicking around on the Internet until I got tired. What else was new?

When I woke up, it was to a beautiful Sunday morning. The birds were chirping, the sun was shining. It was all so peaceful, except for the growing sense of dread in the pit of my stomach due to the mountain of work I simply ignored this weekend. I figured in order to be the functioning member of society I wanted to be, I had to get cracking on all the homework I had due the next day.

Of course, I decided not to do any of that and delay it even further because the thought of doing anything school-related made me anxious. Instead, I hauled ass to the gym to try to work out all the stress. I’m not one of those superhumans that actually finds enjoyment in working out, though. I hated the gym. I absolutely loathed everything about it. The noise, the sweat, the effort I had to exert.

I came the same time every week, so I got used to the faces here. But since I woke up so early this Sunday morning and couldn’t fall back asleep, none of the faces here looked familiar to me. I figured I could go for a short run on the treadmill, grab a smoothie to cool down, and head back to my dorm to shower and get ready for the day. Maybe I’d feel productive enough to get something done later, but I doubted it.

The great thing about being at the gym in the morning was that you had basically free pickings of the equipment. There were the usual meatheads by the weights, sure, but there was only one other person on the treadmills. I picked the one closest to the window so I had a nice, pleasant view of campus as I ran.

After about five minutes of intense running, I took a break and settled for a leisurely walking pace. I took the opportunity to glance around the gym and see who else was dumb enough to work out at seven in the morning.

Oh, look. Great. There’s Jean by the mirror, with the weights. Benchpressing. Man, I was starting to hate how small this school was. Like, I literally can’t go one fucking minute without having to see his dumb face. There were these two weights on them that looked wider than I was. I’ll admit, I was a little mesmerized watching his muscles tense up and his face contort into a look of concentration. I’m a sucker for strength. After lifting the weights about 8 times, he gently put the weights back down on the power rack before sitting up. I immediately turned back to face front on the treadmill.

You can’t be staring all the time! It’s weird! He’s probably going to file a restraining order on me by the end of the week between the mall thing (which we have never talked about and probably never will) and the general weirdness of him meeting my parents yesterday.

I ran for a few more moments until I heard the rattling of metal weights and a deep sigh. Then, I turned my attention back towards his pulsing muscles and his sharp eyes and fuck. I slammed that motherfuckin’ plus button and ramped up the speed of the treadmill. I had to distract myself by all means necessary.

I had to focus on myself. I had to make myself look good. No scrubs. Of course, this mindset worked beautifully and was extremely empowering until I thought I caught the ghost of Jean glancing towards me. I didn’t think he really did, because I thought...well, if he knew I was here, I would hope he would wave or something. Acknowledge me some how. It was probably a trick of the light or something. Besides, if I knew he was looking, I shouldn’t be moseying along on this treadmill like a fucking snail. I should be meeting, if not achieving, my fitness goals. Running at lightning speed, drinking lemon-infused water, running up mountains and shit. But I’m doing it for me and not him. No fuckin’ scrubs. I bumped up my speed another notch. This was good. I looked good. I looked like I knew what I was doing. I felt like a real health goddess until my legs started shaking and my throat felt uncomfortably dry.
This was not good. I was no longer a health goddess. I had quickly fallen from grace, and in the most embarrassing fashion ever: I hastily bumped my speed back down to zero, and leaned on the treadmill as I stood and caught my breath. My forehead was slick with sweat and my legs were sliding against each other like wet noodles as I tried to find a good balance. My breath felt dry. The back of my throat was cold, yet burning at the same time. I kept my grip on the treadmill while I struggled to stand on my own. I was sweating like a goddamn animal. This is the last time I try to impress boys because look where it gets me. Red in the face, sweaty, and near death. How long did I even run? I was almost scared to check the timer. Ten minutes and forty-two seconds. That’s it? That was pitiful. My time as a health goddess was short-lived like my stamina.

I didn’t want to insult myself further by trying to run again. I wiped down the machine and headed back to the little cubby where I had my bag and my jacket to catch up and cool down. I wiped down my face with my forearm, shaking slightly as I grabbed my keys and gathered my things. While I was basically panting and trying to get back to normal, Jean nodded towards me as he approached the other set of cubbies on the other side of the wall. “Hey.”

“How much weight do you lift?” Jesus, you couldn’t even say hi?

“185.”

I couldn’t think of how to answer his curt responses until he was about five steps away. “I’ll text ya later.”

After he was out of earshot, I hissed an aggravated “Shit” under my breath and turned back towards my cubby hole. How dare he make me feel dumb all the time, I swear. I glanced at him as I checked my emails and threw my jacket over myself. He just zipped his coat up and quickly hustled out of the gym as if he had important plans afterwards.

I was really fucking up big-time with Jean. How could I be so awkward? Jesus Christ. One minute I’m weirding him out at the mall, and he’s refusing to answer my texts. The next minute, we’re hanging out on his bed and cracking jokes. I think we’re on good terms, and boom! He goes right back to not answering my texts, and just generally being curt and weird.

I gathered together my things before heading out to the gym lobby so I could make my way out the door, and of course. Of course I fucking saw him, sitting on a bench and tapping his foot as he browsed through his phone. He was still all zipped up and ready to go outside, but he just...wasn’t. Why could I not go like, half an hour without escaping this kid? Half an hour. That’s all I ask. I wanted to shake him by his shoulders and ask who the fuck he thought he was, but I couldn’t. That wasn’t socially acceptable. “You waited for me?”

“I figured you wouldn’t be too long, probably.” He told me, standing up from the bench. He was averting eye contact for a pretty long while. “I didn’t get a chance to when I saw you yesterday. I wanted to thank you for that thing with Maddie. Uh, it was weird, but it made her happy. So, thanks.”

What a lackluster thank-you. But the fact he acknowledged me put a part of my mind at ease. I just shrugged. “It’s no problem.”

We were walking in the same direction, outside of the gym and onto campus, but he wasn’t saying anything else. He was just staring at his feet, then the sky, then the nearby trees, which were shedding the last of their autumn leaves. He cleared his throat before he finally spoke.

“Excited for Thanksgiving?” Jean asked, and I shrugged. I really didn’t feel like driving home in Thanksgiving traffic, and it wouldn’t be worth the extra-long dinner with the Mormon clan, sitting at
the kids’ table with my creepy cousins. My parents already interrogated me over my mission this weekend, and I couldn’t imagine sitting through another round of that with more family members for a longer amount of time.

I’ve wanted to get away from that dinner for so many years, but where else would I go? I either had to suck it up and just go, or settle down and stay in the city by myself. Both options would be no fun. The city is an adventure, but not if you’re alone. Then it’s pretty pathetic. I tried to hide my discontent from Jean.

“I’m trying.” I turned and motioned him to follow me, but he refused. I groaned and said, “No, don’t look at me like that.”

“You need to go home.” His arms were crossed now. “Staying by yourself on Thanksgiving is even more pathetic than just sucking it up and eating dinner with your family.”

“Jean, I’m not driving an hour to get shit from my parents, and my aunt, and my uncle, and their kids, and my grandparents.” How did the voice of teen angst suddenly become the champion of family values? My arms were crossed now, too. “I’d rather be alone in my room. I just wanna have fun over this week off, and I can’t do that with my awkward family breathing down my back and being expected to entertain my ugly cousins.”

“Aww, c’mon. It’ll be cute. Eating real food with your...charmingly oddball family.”

“Mormons don’t drink coffee, tea, or booze, and my uncle’s family is vegetarian.” The past eighteen years of pretending to indulge myself on mashed potatoes, corn, and a dry tofurkey. “Jean, their backwardness has transcended ‘cute’ and has entered ‘miserable’ territory.”

He sighed. “You’re going to be the only one on campus staying if you do decide to.”

“I know that. But I’ve already decided. You’re can’t convince me to go. Ever. I can get a lot done on campus. Like my impressionism paper, my writing paper, my drawings, my design class--”

He sighed. “Fine, I won’t force you to go back home, as much as I want to.” He pointed a finger at me. “But I will force you out of your dorm.”

“Jean--”

“You can at least spend the week at my house.” He said quickly. My heart began to beat at a rapid pace. A week at Jean’s in the city. “I don’t live that far away, and my mom doesn’t do anything fancy for Thursday. You’ll probably just need to help around a bit.”

“That’s fine.” I answered a little too soon. “That’d be fantastic.”

“Good.” He nodded and grinned, re-crossing his arms and catching up with me to continue walking. “I’ll exchange room and board for a ride there.”

“Speaking of room and board, where in the house do you think I’ll be staying?”

A smirk grew on my face, but it died when Jean said curtly, “The couch.”

My enthusiasm quickly died, but I really couldn’t complain. Even at the most basic level, Thanksgiving with Jean was better than Thanksgiving with my own family. The food already sounded better, and so did the company. That didn’t mean I still wasn’t nervous as all hell. On one hand, I was really looking forward to spending even more time with Jean. I really wanted to get to
the bottom of his wacky, back-and-forth feelings. Wringing information out of him could only be really fun, or horribly awkward.

Besides Jean himself, I was looking forward to having a non-Mormon, meaty feast. I’m sure all vegetarians didn’t eat food that resembled tissue paper and hay, but my aunt and uncle did. They “generously” made a dry tofurkey every year, along with a large can of store-bought creamed corn, cranberry sauce that was in the same shape of the can it came in, and a passable pumpkin pie. My mom’s homemade mashed potatoes were a wonderful addition to the table, yet my dad’s vegetarian stuffing left a lot to be desired. To add, the asparagus was always underseasoned, and pearled onions were always nasty.

I was really hoping for a proper, juicy turkey and all the homemade food in the tristate area. I don’t know, but I think Jean’s mom seemed like a good cook. I never met the woman, but something in my gut told me she knew how to cook a turkey. I figured no matter what she did to the bird, it would still be better than tofurkey. I can’t really imagine a more awkward, bland dinner than the Deliss Thanksgiving Feast, but who knows? Maybe Jean Unreadable Kirschtein could somehow beat it!

I didn’t hear anything else about Thanksgiving at the Kirschtein’s until the next day. While we were getting a quick to-go meal at the dining hall he turned to me in the middle of the salad bar line to say, “I forgot to ask you. My mom wanted to know if you had any allergies.”

“Why?” It didn’t even process in my mind why he would ask.

“Y-You’re still coming over for Thanksgiving, aren’t you?”

“Oh! Oh yeah, absolutely!” I shook my head and replied, “Uh, just latex. That’s it.”

“Okay.” He poorly tried to hide his laugh. “I’ll tell my mom to leave latex out of the stuffing.”

“I--Don’t laugh!” I stammered.

“Why did you think I would have needed to know that?”

“Y-Y-You asked! You asked me, to my face. It’s your fault for not being clearer.” He just kept trying not to laugh. God, this was bad. The thought of going over to Jean’s caused my stomach to tighten. The general awkwardness of this conversation was enough to tie my gut into knots, and this was only a quick lunch! I couldn’t be calm, cool, and collected over a lengthy Thanksgiving dinner if I couldn’t even be calm now. I twirled my hair around my finger, worrying it. This whole plan was probably a bad idea - probably the worst idea I’ve had in a long time. But all I could do was grin and bear the discomfort the next week was due to bring.
Well, it was Tuesday night. It was time to move out of the dorms and head home for Thanksgiving - or, in my case, to Jean’s house. I had just gotten out of a very tedious drawing class that was cut short due to the holiday antsiness. I headed back to finish packing while Jean anxiously waited upstairs for me to stop by and give him the green light to start loading up my car. I slung my laptop bag over my shoulder, and lugged my duffel bag up to Jean’s room. I didn’t have to wait long after I knocked on the door - I’m sure Jean was impatient for me to get upstairs. He just threw the door open, offered a quick “hey,” and got right back to packing his suitcase. While his side of the room looked like a mess - a mess organized into small piles to bring home, but a mess nonetheless - Marco’s was nearly pristine.

It was a rare sight. The floor was clean, and the desk was free of its usual debris. The bed was still unmade, however, and there was still a rogue hoodie sticking up from the crevice between the wall and the bed. “His side of the room looks so empty.”

“Marco left this morning.” Jean said. “His brother picked him up for their shore house or whatever.”

“Marco has a shore house?”

“Apparently.”

A pause, and then I asked, “Marco has a brother?”

“I guess.”

I sighed. The strap of my duffel bag was beginning to dig at my shoulder, and my laptop bag certainly had some weight to it now. “Got all your stuff yet?”

He shrugged, annoyed with his packing. He had a suitcase, a portfolio, and a leather bag designed for his laptop. It was plenty for a weekend home, but he didn't seem to be satisfied. “I guess there's no time left to pack any more…”

“I’d help you carry stuff,” I lied, gesturing towards my bags, “But I got my own problems.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “You do not pack light.”
“Says you!” I scoffed. I followed that with a judgmental eye roll. “C’mon, we can make a second trip.”

We lugged all of our stuff to the truck and tossed it into the bed. After we were all packed up, I put the cover over it to protect all of our stuff from the elements. I sighed, crossing my arms as I stared at my hunk of scrap metal. I really needed a new car. Like, an actual car that didn’t come straight out of a 1996 country music video. I honestly don’t know how my old rusty red truck made it into 2014. By all accounts it, should have died out, caught fire, and exploded about fifteen years ago. Hell, it didn’t even have a CD player or a working radio. But here it is, still pulling its weight. I turned to Jean and said, “The door’s unlocked if you want to get inside.”

He gave a single nod before we both settled into the truck, snapping on our seatbelts. Before we took off, I reached over Jean to unlock the glove compartment where I kept all my cassettes. I turned on the ignition and told Jean, “You can pick out the music if you’d like.”

“Oh, radio is fine.” He reached over to turn on the radio, but the speakers wouldn’t work. It was set to 96.5 FM, but it was completely silent. He turned the volume all the way up. Still no luck. He turned it back down.

I repeated myself and pointed towards the glove box. “You can pick out the music.”

“You can only play cassette tapes?”

He laughed at that fact. I rolled my eyes and strapped on my seatbelt. I didn’t have to be reminded of how ancient my truck was.

“You need to pick a cassette.” I heard the sound of plastic clanking against each other as he searched for something that would suit his interests. I doubted he would, since I didn’t have Hipster McFuck or Obscure Noise Band on cassette. I don’t know.

“Nicki Minaj?” Jean snickered. I glared at him before looking up at my rearview mirror, finally backing out of the parking lot.

“Don’t act so pretentious,” I sighed, “or I swear to God, I will kick you out of this fucking car.”

“No, I’m just laughing because it’s 2014, and you have Nicki Minaj on cassette.” Jean dropped the tape on his lap and pulled out another cassette to study. “The fact you made this is just making me laugh.”

“Well, I want something to listen to.” I shrugged, finally out of the parking lot and bound for Jean’s house.

“Did you like, wait for the radio to play these songs and put them all on cassette?”

“No!” Well, for some. Others I used a tape deck and a cable-thingy to connect it to my laptop.

“What do your parents think of this?” Jean held up my Drake cassette with a stupid smirk on his face. God, I wanted to smack it off his horseface. With my mouth, if possible.

“They probably wouldn’t approve.” I rolled my eyes. “I keep this shit under lock and key. Literally.”

Jean now had five cassettes on his lap. “Don’t you have anything good?”

“Do you have a problem with my taste in music?”
He replied curtly, “Yes, I do.”

“Sorry,” I straightened my back and refocused on the road, grinning smugly. “I like to feel like a queen when I drive.”

“Oh, because listening to Beyoncé in a used truck from 1995 is a thing of luxury.” Jean snapped back.

I sighed and pulled over, putting my hazard lights on. We were barely off campus. I was literally pulled over next to the welcome sign for the university. “I swear to God, Jean, I will turn this truck around, and you can get Thanksgiving dinner at the dining hall.”

“Alright, I’m sorry, it’s just… really funny.” He dug into the pile of tapes on his lap, taking one out of its case and putting it into the stereo. “Fine, here. I’ll shut up. I promise.”

I took my hazard lights off and merged back onto the road, sighing. What a pain. He sank in his seat and watched his own bony fingers as they wrapped themselves around his sweater-clad elbows. He was looking out the window as if I wasn’t even here. He seemed to be living up to his promise, until the song ended and the sound of the DJ came in. “Here at 104.9 FM, this is--” Then, the tape cut to the next song. Jean just exploded into a fit of laughter and noted, “This is so nineties.”

I shot him a quick “shut up” and he sank right back down into his seat. He sat up a little straighter though when we got onto the highway, though. We left the area of campus - decorated by shedding leaves, grassy fields and old brick buildings - and entered a world of lights and concrete. I turned to Jean and asked, “I get off the exit to the right here, correct?”

“Yeah.” His eyes never left the city skyline. It was a brilliant sight - the buildings all seemed to be tinted blue, except for a handful of windows that were burning orange. I wished I got to look at it more while I had such a good view of it, but I kind of didn’t want to crash the car.

As I continued driving, the skyline got closer and closer until I had to look up to see it. Eventually, I was bending backwards to see the skyscrapers. I was right there, in the midst of gray stone and illuminated shop windows. Eventually, the cool concrete jungle turned into an area lush with greenery and perimetered by brick walls. I first noticed the change when the car began to vibrate. “This is where the asphalt ends.”

“B-But why?” I groaned. This couldn’t be good for my old car.

Preserving the history of the area?” Jean shrugged. The area was busy, especially with foot traffic, yet still strangely quaint. While the stores were built out of old, aging brick, its windows were all filled with modern artisan goods. Jean pointed down a narrow alley, perimetered by rowhomes. Some of them flew crisp, clean American flags. They all had shutters in dark autumn tones, perfect for the Thanksgiving holiday. It just looked...like home. Like I’ve lived here forever. Jean pointed to one house with navy blue shutters. There were clay pots on the balcony, each one overflowing with flowers. “That’s mine.”

I parked right in front of it and leaned over to look at it further. It was cute. There was an antique street lamp in front, along with a black iron hitching post. The sidewalk was paved in small, dark gray cobblestones. Jean got out of the car and explained, “Everything here hasn’t been updated since, like...the Revolution.”

“Nice.” I reached into the back of the car to start grabbing our luggage as Jean fished out his keys from his pocket to open the front door. As soon as he did, he placed his heavy-as-hell art bag against the wall, rubbing the red mark it left in its palm.
Mom! He shouted through the house as he held the door open for me to bring in my belongings before locking my car. I dropped my bags next to the couch before collapsing on top of it. It was soft, but the cushions were slightly itchy. This may take some getting used to.

Jean was at the door, shaking out his reddened hand, when he asked, “You alright?”

I yawned. “Yeah, just--”

A high-pitched voice from upstairs interrupted me, and it got louder along with the sound of running footsteps. “Jeeeeaannnn!”

A young girl whose bouncing curls matched her bubbly demeanor raced down the stairs, carrying with her a plastic bow and arrow. She threw herself at Jean, getting an oof out of him as she wrapped her short little arms around his waist. “I missed you!”

“I missed you too.” He grabbed her by her shoulders and turned her around towards the couch. “Maddie, how about you introduce yourself?”

“I met you before.” Maddie pointed out. “At the mall!”

“Oh, right.” Jean smoothed out his shirt, but Maddie clung right back to him. “I forgot about that.”

Ugh, how could I forget about that shitshow? I averted eye contact with him. My attention was drawn to the coffee table. There was a clean stack of coasters near the edge along with a sticky note. “JEANBO--” God, why do adults write everything in all-caps? My head hurt from how loud my inner voice was shouting. “EMERGENCY SHIFT. LEFT @ 6:30. COME BACK @ 11. HUMMUS IN FRIDGE FOR U + HITCH. LOVE YOU. -MOM.”

I picked up the note and handed it to Jean. “This is for you.”

He quickly scanned it over and groaned. “I hate when she--” He glanced over at Maddie, who was still hanging onto his waist. He took a few steps towards the kitchen, but she still hung on. Her toes were dragging against the carpet, leaving tracks. She giggled.

“I’m gonna grab that hummus,” I told him, moseying on over to the fridge. “Maddie, do you eat hummus?”

“Nope.” She answered. “Mom made me breakfast.”

“All you ate was breakfast?”

“No, I had breakfast for dinner. Mom made eggs and pancakes. And bacon!”

“For dinner?” Jean kept trekking to the kitchen, still dragging his sister behind him.

“Yup!”

“I’m jealous.” His toes were touching the linoleum of the kitchen when he yielded, “Why don’t you let go and pick out a movie or something?”

“Okay,” She let go of his waist and stood straight before heading towards the entertainment system to pick out something to watch.

I opened the fridge and was immediately introduced to the messiest fridge ever. It wasn’t dirty, it was just disorganized. Where was the order? Where was the system? “Jean, I have no idea where this hummus is.”
“Let me see.” Jean gently shoved me aside to check the fridge himself. He scanned the shelves until he spotted something, his eyes widening in surprise. He groaned, reached into the fridge, and pulled out a chilled wallet. “I don't understand how she lives like this.”

“Aladdin?” A tiny voice rang from the living room.

“No, M--” Jean turned around to see his baby sister holding onto a DVD.

She blinked and asked, “Can you put on Aladdin?”

“What? Sure.”

So, we put this movie on, but this house was still so foreign to me. I wanted to keep exploring, but that kid’s eyes were glued to the TV screen. I didn’t want to interrupt. I turned my attention away from the screen and towards the kitschy little knick-knacks around it - lots of picture frames and doodads from around the world. You wouldn’t know they were rich from how this place was decorated. Jean’s graduation photos, Maddie’s kindergarten photos, and a pair of snowglobes were the standouts. Some of those souvenirs were so kitschy! Between the cliche Eiffel Tower snowglobe and a crappy little statue of that Venus painting with the seashell, it was definitely not what I was expecting. I don’t know what I was expecting, actually. Like, a 24-karat gold frame with a picture of the whole family hanging out with Obama or something? Something more substantial than a cheap $3 porcelain statue of Venus.

I turned my attention away from the decorations around the TV and towards the wall behind me. There were two baby pictures on the wall, the one of baby Jean I liked so much and another one of Madeline. In hers, she wore a fluffy pink dress with lacy white socks and black shoes. She looked cheeky. Framed on the end table was a picture of baby Jean and Eliot Kirschtein (I can’t call him anything but) in some old rundown house with wood paneling. Still no pictures rubbing elbows with the Kardashians or anything. How disappointing. I turned back towards the movie, and pretended to watch while I let my mind wander.

Halfway through, Maddie stretched her arms. “I’m tired.”

“Then go to bed,” Jean told her. “Do you have school tomorrow?”

“Only a half day.” She yawned. “Because it’s Thanksgiving.”

“Then brush your teeth and get into bed.” He told her. “Do you need anything else to fall asleep?”

She shrugged. “Can you come upstairs with me?”

He stood up and cracked his back. “Sure.” She hopped up the stairs while he lumbered behind her. He turned to me and said, “I’ll be back down in a few minutes.”

“Okay.” I wrapped my arms around my legs and began the wait for him to come back downstairs. That didn’t last long. I have no patience. After a few moments I got up to inspect the frames on the wall. So many pictures of trips abroad. Some of them had ticket stubs and other ephemera stuffed into the frame.

I flinched when I heard a voice ring out from outside. “Ooh, look at this one!”

My grouchy ass peeked outside the window to see what hooligan was out on my lawn. Living here would be weird for me. There were tourists strolling down the street, staring up at the houses while they touted their kitschy souvenirs. They were taking their next profile pictures in front of faux-candlelit streetlights. I really couldn’t imagine having to drive over fucking cobblestone everyday.
If you told me Jean Kirschtein lived in some old-ass house surrounded by cobblestone and dumb tourists, I wouldn’t have believed you. I expected like, some *Jetsons* futurism to be going on here. I expected *something* to be chrome-plated. I should be drinking aged chardonnay on a sheepskin rug, wearing heels for no real reason, and saying shit like *market segmentation* and *liabilities*. Instead, I was on a so-so couch, watching cartoons on an average TV, and waiting for Jean to finish reading his kid sister a bedtime story.

I rolled my eyes and got off the couch to go look through the dusty DVD’s stacked underneath his TV when Jean’s footsteps got louder and louder. I guess he noticed my searching, because he noted, “I’m feeling pretty judged right now.”

“Eh. I like to snoop.” It was my only defense as I took a closer look around the house. I kept trying to press him for a tour, but he plopped down onto the couch. Like...there just has to be more to it. Like, a secret room of Tütone secrets or something? Maybe the Batcave? “I didn’t get to see the whole house.”

“You’ll get used to it,” was the curt response given while he was flipping through channels. “Do you want anything on?”

Ignoring his question, I continued to snoop through his movie collection. “Why does your mom have like, a million tapes of ‘The X-Files?’” I laughed, tracing my finger over one of the cassettes. Oh, parents and their weird obsessions.

“They’re mine, you dick.” Jean snapped, folding his arms. “They’re good.”

“You know like, DVDs exist. Or the Internet.”

“Yeah, well. I have cassettes.” He snarked. “Sue me.”

I mocked him, “It’s 2014 and you have the X-Files on *cassette*.”

“Yeah, I do!” He turned back towards the TV. “What do you want to watch?”

“Jean, I don’t *care*.” I sighed. “I haven’t watched TV in like, a million years.”

“Because you come from a crazy Amish family?”

I rolled my eyes, flopping onto the couch. “Because nobody has channel-flipped since the nineties, idiot.” I turned towards him and added, “Nobody has recorded an X-Files episode since the nineties, either.”

“I’m putting on soccer,” he decided firmly, settling on a station that was speaking entirely in fast-paced Portuguese. He put the remote down on the couch, his decision final.

“I don’t like soccer. I don’t like *sports*.”

“Then what do you want on?” He asked, exasperated.

“I don’t care!” I whined, “Just not soccer!”

“I’m gonna put Aladdin back on.” He sighed. “I was just getting into it, anyway.”

“Good.” I yawned, and leaned on his shoulder. I feel like the least we could do was snuggle. I mumbled, “As long as it’s not soccer…”
I felt extremely comfortable at that moment. Cuddling was an astoundingly peaceful way to end a stressful, albeit short, school week. Or so I thought, until moments later, when Jean said, “My arm’s falling asleep.”

He maneuvered his arm out from underneath my head. Before I could suggest putting it around me instead, he just scooched to the other side of the loveseat. “I--Okay.”

I didn’t know what to say. I understand there is such a thing as comfortable silence, but I just wanted to talk all night and learn all about this house and his life. It was weird here. It wasn’t like I was uncomfortable (physically, yes, now I was uncomfortable), it was just weird. I was dropped into this strange foreign world without any introduction or any preparation. I guess if I didn’t get a tour now, I never would. I yawned and stretched out my back. Let’s try to get some small talk brewing! “That drive exhausted me.”

“It’s hard sitting in a car for half an hour.”

I was so tired, his sarcasm went right over my head. I just nodded, swallowed, and rested my head on his lap. I quit. “I’m gonna go to sleep.”

“Hitch, it’s the climax of the movie.”

“I’m still tired.”

“Do you at least want a pillow?” Jean took one from the armchair, but I shook my head.

“No, they’re scratchy.” I laid against his thigh and closed my eyes. I couldn’t even remember trying to fall asleep. It was instant. I came in and out of consciousness.

“I-I think so.” Jean’s voice drifted in and out of my head like a cloud. “Yeah, I do...Yeah, you’re right. Yeah, but...”

My eyes fluttered open, and I was staring at Jean’s front right pocket. I yawned, “Good morning.”

“Hi. It’s only like, eleven. At night.”

“Whoops. Did I drool on your lap?” I groggily asked, wiping my eyes and smacking my lips to get that weird post-nap taste out of my mouth.

“I don’t know.” He sat up straight. “By the way, this is my mom.”

Oh shit. I quickly sat up - a little too quickly, as evidenced by the mild spell of dizziness that followed. I shut my eyes, still adjusting to my newfound state of consciousness. His mom was standing right by the front door. Her hair, thrown up into a bun, was frizzy and dry. She was wearing scrubs and a hideous pair of clogs. I hobbled over to shake her hand despite my dizziness. “Ah--Hi. I’m Hitch.”

We exchanged a quick handshake. What do I say next? I cleared my throat. “Thanks for letting me stay here, by the way.”

“Oh.” She sighed, taking her purse off of her shoulder and hanging it from one of the hooks by the entryway. “Of course. It’s no problem at all.”

Well, we all know how exhausting small talk can be, especially when both parties are already exhausted. I turned to Jean. “Let me see your room. I still have the see the house.”
Jean’s mom turned to look him dead in the eyes. “You still haven’t given her a tour of the house?”

“No, Mom--”

Before he could finish his sentence, she put her hands on her hips. She made her way to the kitchen. “You have to show your guests where everything is. It’s polite.”

I expected him to sass back. He was sassy all the time. He didn’t know how to not sass. But instead, he stood up from the couch and said to me, “Alright, let’s go.”

“Don’t forget to bring up your suitcase,” Mrs. Kirschtein kindly reminded me. Then, more sternly towards Jean, she told him, “Help Hitch bring up her suitcase.”

“Sure.” He grumbled, grabbing the handle and lumbering up the stairs. I almost had to laugh. What a mama’s boy. I quickly told Jean’s mom goodnight before following him up the stairs.

After we were at the top of the stairs and outside of Mrs. Kirschtein’s earshot, I noted, “That was kind of funny.”

“What?”

I pinched his cheek before he swatted my hand away. “You’re such a little mama’s boy. It’s so cute.”

“No I’m not.” He rolled his eyes as he took my suitcase down the hall. “I just don’t want to stress her out right after she comes home from work.”

“That’s such a mama’s boy thing to say!”

I think that comment put him in a doubly nasty attitude. Before he turned the knob to his bedroom door, he grimaced. “Why are you so excited?”

“I wanna see where you live.” I shimmied my shoulders.

He tried to hold back an amused grin. He turned the knob and threw open the door. “You’re so weird.”

To be frank, it was a lot of buildup for nothing. It was a plain white room with nothing on the walls except for a postcard from Brussels. He had a big bed that was really close to the floor, a potted aloe plant, a tall mirror, and a nightstand that supported a desk lamp and a vanilla candle.

He unenthusiastically announced, “This is it.”

“No, it’s not.” I blinked. It was so...bare. I looked around the corner as if there would somehow be a treasure trove of clothes and rich people stuff on the other side of that wall. “Where do you keep all your stuff? Your belongings?”

“In the closet. Under the bed.” He shrugged. “I mean, I own things.”

He approached his aloe plant and inspected one of the leaves. Maybe if I pull one of them, it would trigger a secret passageway to appear and reveal all of his riches. “I don’t think my mom has been watering this.”

“How big is your closet, though?” I asked.

“It’s a walk-in, so--”
“Bougie,” I nodded. I wish I had a walk-in closet. I probably had way more clothes - actually, no, Jean would be the type to have a fuckton of stuff to wear. He kneeled on the floor by his duffel bag, and started taking out stacks of clothes.

“Just hold tight. I have to put some stuff away for the weekend.” He said, taking his safe out.

“You brought your safe home? Does it have your handcuffs?” I smirked. He put the safe away in a drawer under his bed. “Which girls are you handcuffing on Thanksgiving?”

“I don’t like handcuffing girls.” Jean said, closing the drawer and laying down on his bed. “And there’s more in the safe than that.”

“So you really do have handcuffs?”

“Yes!” Jean said in a whisper, afraid of someone overhearing him, even though nobody else could. “I didn’t take the safe home for the handcuffs, though. I have my pipe and some money in there. If Res Life takes the safe, then i’m out like, a hundred bucks.”

I laughed, incredulous of the fact that he had fucking handcuffs. “You really have handcuffs.”

“Can you stop saying that?” His face was getting redder.

“Why do you even have them if you don’t like using them?” I laughed. “That’s so stupid. Just in case you need to spontaneously arrest anyone?”

He rested his chin in his hand and mumbled, “It’s not for cuffing other people.”


I didn’t know what else to say. I chewed my lip, trying to think of how to change the conversation. The weather…? No, that was too cliche. “U-Uh. I’m gonna try to get some sleep, so…If your shower is weird or you hide your towels, just let me know.”

“Fine.” He responded. I hustled out of his room and into the bathroom. It was a nice setup. It almost felt like a spa. The tiles were earthtone, and the bathtub had jets in it. The bathmat was made out of flat, smooth rocks. The shower was easy enough to figure out, and there was a branch of eucalyptus hanging from the showerhead. Ugh. Amazing. To boot, the towels weren’t stashed anywhere weird, either. They were neatly stacked on the shelves that were above the toilet, along with a big glass jar containing small bath bombs, and another mason jar with Q-tips. All around, it was a beaut. 10/10, could not wait to bathe.

The shower heated up in seconds flat, and I could begin to smell the eucalyptus hanging from the showerhead. I hopped inside and started to scrub off the grime of the day. Then the shower thoughts began.

I still couldn’t get over the cuffing thing. Jean was such a nerd, carrying handcuffs everywhere he goes. How do you even whip those out before sex? Hey, before you fuck my brains out, do you mind tying me to the bedframe? How would any girl react in that scenario?

If it were me, I don’t know what I’d do. I mean, I’d probably think it was weird at first. But maybe after the weirdness subsides, I could find it pretty hot. The idea of putting a man in a submissive position was a pretty powerful move. Maybe it would only seem weird to me because I haven’t done anything of the sort yet…but I wanted to try it pretty badly.
... Jeez, I'm so vanilla. Stop thinking about it, Hitch! I physically shook my head and took a deep breath of the eucalyptus, and started to wash myself with Jean’s fancy soap. It was on the shelving inside of the shower. It was the top shelf. I knew it was his because the lowest shelf had tear-free kid’s shampoo, and the middle one had a pink loofah and a solution for dry hair. The soap Jean used was a fresh-scented bar with real lemon peels and herbs inside. I mean, I brought my own soap, but if you have the opportunity to use fancy soap, you take it. I didn't use his minty shampoo, as much as I wanted to steal eighteen bottles of it and smell it forev-- God, could I shut the fuck up for like...at least a minute? It just smelled so good, like a Thin Mint. Anyway, I used my own shampoo for my hair. I didn't want it to be obvious I was using all of Jean’s fancy, cool stuff. If I left the shower with silky smooth hair and skin, smelling like a peppermint, he would know I was mooching off of him. He was already letting me stay at his house. I didn’t want to take any further advantage of him.

I really shouldn’t have come here for Thanksgiving. This Jean obsession was going from “scary” to “unsustainable and stalkery.” Being constantly around him and all of his minutia was making it worse. And the handcuff thing - why couldn’t I stop thinking about it?! I like boys. I really liked boys. Strong, smart, muscley, ambitious, well-dressed men, actually. I liked men who could command a room. I don’t know why this handcuff thing was getting under my skin so much.

Ugh. I was a lost cause. I needed that cock so bad. Thanksgiving was a sacred American holiday or whatever to spend with your family, but I wasn't feeling that. I kinda wanted to not only stuff my face, but get dicked down too. Best of both worlds. And honestly, the idea of tying Jean to the bed and fucking his brains out until he was hearing colors sounded perfect.

I rolled my eyes at myself. Get it together. He was so snarky on the way here! Do you really think that type of attitude deserves to get any? I wanted to smack myself in the face for being so gross.

I left the shower feeling somewhat dirtier. That stupid eucalyptus didn’t help me “destress” at all. The kid was letting me stay at his house to share a wholesome, family meal with his tightknit little clan of a family. The least I could do was not have these gross sexual fantasies about him every waking hour of the goddamn day.

After I dried off, I got changed into my pajamas - the t-shirt the school gave me on move-in day, and a pair of cotton shorts. I combed through my hair and cleaned the makeup off of my face so I didn’t look like a raccoon before I went to Jean’s room to take the rest of my stuff to his mom’s office.

His door was already open. He was lying in bed, scrolling on his phone, wearing pajama pants and a tank-top that was maybe one size too big. When he was on his side, which he was now, the armhole (is that the right word?) was so wide, it exposed most of his chest, including his pierced nipple. His van Gogh tattoo was on display for me to gawk at. I swallowed, and knocked on the doorway. He looked up from his phone. “Hah?”

“Sorry, are you trying to sleep?”

“No, it's only like, ten-thirty.” He put his phone on his nightstand. “Didn't you say you wanted to sleep?”

“I-I was, but the hot water…” I shook my head. “Nevermind. I figured we could hang out until one of us gets tired.”

“Cool.” He sat up and asked, “What’s up?”

Getting straight to the point, I leaned against the wall and told him, “I have a question about your handcuffs.”
“Jesus Christ.” He rolled his eyes, grabbing his phone again.

I reached to take his phone from him. “Well, I was just--”

“Your hair is dripping water all over my bed, be careful…”

“Whatever.” I rolled my eyes. “I was just wondering how did you decide, ‘Oh, hey. I like when girls cuff me to the bed?’”

“I didn’t really...decide. Let me live.”

“Did you like, get arrested by a female cop and it suddenly all clicked for you? Or--”

He narrowed his eyes. “Maybe this isn’t something I want to talk about with you.” I think he was offended at this point, but who cared?

“I’m just curious how people like, develop their kinks.” It was a half-lie. I was genuinely curious, but the handcuffing thing also turned me on a little bit. Not gonna lie.

“I don’t know how you're eighteen and you're still so clueless about all of this.” He ran his hand through his hair and sat up.

“You were too, once--” I mumbled with my eyes averted away from his.

“You say you keep wanting to rebel against your parents and you're so ‘grown-up’.” He was talking to me like I was a baby and I wasn't appreciating that tone much. “So why haven't you done it?”

“What, the ‘not doing what my parents want me to do’ thing?” I frowned. “I've been doing a good deal of that, I don't--”

“No, I mean...It's easy to just go to some party, pick a guy, flash him your tits or something...” He laughed, albeit nervously. “Just picking someone out and getting it over with.”

I scratched the back of my ear, but my finger started twirling my hair instead. I knew I was doing it, that was my weird “tick” as my mom calls it. “I, uh. Well, just because I want it out of the way doesn't mean I don't want it to be nice.”

“How nice are you looking for?”

“I don't want to fuck some stranger in a dirty frat bathroom or something.” I frowned. “I want to at least know the guy and see something in him.”

“See what?”

“I dunno, potential?” He nearly choked on that, stifling laughter. “Shut up, Jean. I want him to be somewhat responsible, answer my calls if I'm worried about something…”

“Would you tell him you're a virgin?”

“No.” I quickly shook my head. “I feel like people freak out about that too much. I don’t want him to know anything about it and just go about it.”

“Ah.”

I looked up at the ceiling. “I don’t know who you would tell, but don’t tell anyone I’m a virgin.”
“There’s probably guys who would kill to take your virginity.” He shrugged. “Why lie?”

“I want to make a reputation on campus.” I folded my arms. “I was the weird Mormon girl all through high school and I want to leave that behind.”

“I don’t think—” He stopped talking to just shake his head. “That’s fine, I guess. Do whatever you want.”

I was officially out of things to say. Unless this was an offer to take my virginity and put those handcuffs to use, I wasn't interested in discussing it any further. “I'm gonna grab my stuff and go to bed.”

He unenthusiastically responded, “night.” I lugged my suitcase to my room, with no help from Jean. I was staying in Jean’s mom office. It had one tall bookcase, a couch, and a cluttered desk covered with bills and paperwork. The couch was a little uncomfortable, and the blinking modem lights got on my nerves. So much so, I hopped off the couch to throw one of my shirts over top so it wouldn’t keep me up. Despite how tired I was, falling asleep was hard, and I woke up with back pain.

By the time we woke up on thanksgiving morning - me at ten, and Jean at eleven - the dinner prep was already underway. Apparently both Jean and I woke up too late to start helping her peel potatoes and prep the desserts. She wasn’t mad at us, though. She just waved us off. “You’re both in college. You’re tired. Take a break.”

It was when Jean asked for breakfast that she got annoyed. She pointed to the pot on the stove, filled with water and peeled potatoes. Then, her finger pointed towards the oven - the silhouette of a pie could be seen inside. “Where am I going to make you breakfast, Jean?”

“F-Fine,” He mumbled, wanting to retaliate but not looking for a fight. He went to the cupboard. Surveying through the cabinets, he asked, “Hitch, are you good with cereal?”

I shrugged. “Cereal sounds fine.”

“We have fruit too, if you want that.” Mrs. Kirschtein suggested, tearing apart a ball of dough and arranging them in a skillet.

“Oh, fruit sounds better.” I turned to Jean. As the host of the house, he was obligated to make sure I was comfortable and taken care of. I saw him roll his eyes as he took a box of Frosted Flakes from the cupboard, and grabbed two bananas from the fruit basket on the countertop. He tossed them both to me. He fixed himself a bowl of cereal, and I settled for my fruit. I tore it into pieces instead of just going for it like a normal person. I was being really careful about avoiding stuff shaped like dicks after my little breakdown yesterday.

We heard the pitter-patter of little feet approach us from the top of the stairs. Maddie, upon seeing us, exclaimed, “You’re up!”

“Let us eat,” Jean sighed as he ran his hand through his hair.

He took another spoonful of cereal as Maddie lamented, “It’s not my fault you woke up so late. I'm playing a game upstairs. I need more people!”

“Fine.” Jean called back, salt in his tone. “Let me eat first.”

“Wait till they’re done eating, Maddie.” Jean’s mom backed him up.

So, as we were continuing breakfast, Maddie glared at us from the couch in the living room. I looked
at her, then at Jean, then back at her, then back at Jean. That kid was so fucking weird. That’s why I
don’t want kids. They do bizarre shit like, all the time. Jean noticed my discomfort, and turned to talk
to his sister. “Stop being creepy.”

“Finish eating faster!” She demanded.

Jean just rolled his eyes and took a few more bites of cereal before getting up to toss his bowl in the
sink. “Fine. Fine. We’re coming. Hitch?”

I looked around before shrugging. “Uh, sure. Sounds good.”

Madeline ran up into her bedroom, encouraging Jean and me to follow. The walls were rosy pink,
with a white canopy hanging over top her bed. An army of stuffed animals sat on the bench
underneath her window, including a big stuffed cupcake and a white whale with a floral-patterned
underbelly. I guess her two favorite animals sat on top - a yellow horse and a green lizard. Her
furniture was antique, but repainted white to look like new. In the dead center of the room,
underneath a small chandelier, was an ornate yet tiny wireframe white table with matching chairs. In
the corner of the room was a teepee made out of skinny oak poles, with a pink fur pillow and a short
stack of books inside. A floral, plastic tea set sat on top, and it looked like Madeline spent a lot of
time on the arrangement. There was a white, wooden window pane painted onto the wall she shared
with Jean. The pane itself was finished, but inside was just a pencil sketch of a castle on top of a hill.

Madeline’s eye had caught the unfinished work before she turned to Jean and asked, “You’re going
to finish it, aren’t you?”

“Oh, I don’t think we should have tea now with dinner later.” Jean waved off the suggestion.

Madeline blinked at him before glancing at me worriedly. She walked towards Jean and motioned
for him to come down to her level. He bent his legs at the knees, and Madeline cupped her hands
around his ear to whisper something. Whatever she said, his eyebrows furrowed at it, and he
grumbled, “Yeah, of course I know that--”

“Then let’s have tea!” She sang, pointing to one of the wire chairs. “Jean, you sit there.”

He groaned, sitting in the miniature chair. His bent knees were up to his chest, and he looked as
uncomfortable as he did ridiculous. I grinned before Madeline pointed to the chair across from him
and said, “Hitch! You’re a princess, so you can sit here next to me.”

“Oh…alright!” I slapped a huge grin on my face before sitting across from Jean, struggling to get
comfortable. Madeline looked right at home, a content grin across her face as she pretended to pour
hot tea from the rose-dotted teapot into our matching cups. “What am I the princess of?”

She turned to Jean, a confused expression on her face before Jean prompted her. “She lives in Sina.”

“Sina!” She gleefully exclaimed. She grabbed a plastic slice of cake from the tray in the center of
table and pretended to pour hot tea from the rose-dotted teapot into our matching cups. “What am I the princess of?”

“Thank you.” I beamed, picking a “sugar cube” from the jar in the middle of the table with a pair of
plastic tongs and stirring it into my empty cup. When Madeline poured Jean’s tea, he mumbled
“thank you” and took a deep swig from his teacup. For a moment, we sat idly by, pretending to drink
tea and nibble on plastic desserts. It was a nice flashback to my childhood. I threw a lot of tea parties
with stuffed animals. I always wanted to have a tea party with other people, but I didn’t get the opportunity until now. Five year-old me would be ecstatic.

Out of nowhere, Madeline cried out, “Hitch! Your tea...has been poisoned!”

I gasped, grabbing my neck and pretending to choke. Jean turned to Madeline and countered, “What? We all drank from the same pot. How come only Hitch is dead?”

Playing dead, I fell dramatically to the floor with my eyes closed and my limbs sprawled out. Lying on the floor actually proved to be somewhat of a relief for my still-aching back. Instead of rushing to “save me,” Madeline and Jean continued to argue. I couldn’t really complain. “Someone poisoned her cup while we weren’t looking.”

“But we were all looking.”

“Well then, how come she’s on the ground? She’s been poisoned, obviously!”

God, leave it to Jean to argue with a six year-old. I made gurgling dying noises to bring both of their attentions back to the corpse on the carpet. Madeline said, “She’s not dead yet, though!”

My eyes were shut tight, but I could hear Jean get out of his chair. I felt his foot slightly nudge my waist, and I blushed as I tried not to giggle. He noted, “Looks pretty dead to me.”

“She needs a kiss from a prince!” Madeline cried out, very concerned for my well-being. I don’t know how I wasn’t laughing. She was too much.

“Well, she’s out of luck. There’s no prince here.” I could hear the smirk in his tone.

“But you’re a prince! You gotta save her!”

“No, I’m not.”

“I’m a princess, and you’re my brother. That means you’re a prince! Come on!”

Too fucking much. I broke character, a muffled laugh escaping my lips. “Pfffff.”

“Haven’t you learned anything from movies?” Jean sighed in exasperation. “A prince doesn’t kiss the princess unless he wants to marry her. That’s like, the first rule.”

Madeline sighed. “Jean! I don’t want her to die on my floor!”

“Fine. Fine.” I could hear Jean take a seat next to me and mutter a “Sorry…”

My stomach twisted into knots and I loosened my lips in anticipation. Holy shit holy shit holy shit --I could feel his nose press into my face he kissed my cheek. Weeeeeeeeek. Before I could open my eyes, Madeline sighed and whined, “Jean, no prince kisses a girl on the cheek. You gotta kiss her until she comes back to life!”

Madeline, you crazy, mad genius. If I just sit here and continue to be dead while Jean kisses me, he has to continue until I “come back to life?” Easy enough. Weird circumstances, to have your first kiss at eighteen, forced into it by a six year-old with a hyperactive imagination. But I wasn’t about to complain.

“So sorry--” I could feel him plant his arm on the other side of me as he straddled my body. I held my breath. This was it. I resisted the urge to curl my lips into a grin as I felt a few rogue strands of
Jean’s hair tickle my forehead as he gently put his mouth against mine. *Holy shit*.

My moment of euphoria lasted about a millisecond. It ended when Jean suddenly stuck his tongue into my mouth and made an obnoxious sound like he was throwing up. “*Bleeegh.*”

“Christ--” I sat up, nearly smashing my forehead against his. He fell onto the ground, holding his stomach as he laughed. God, I could kill him. God, I could *fucking* kill him. My annoyance with him faltered however, once Madeline gave me a massive bearhug and cried out, “You’re alive!”

“Yeah, I’m alive. Thanks.” I mumbled. I sighed, letting the toxins escape my body, before I announced, “I’m going outside.”

I got up to excuse myself to the balcony. Maddie stopped hugging me to talk to her brother instead. If I smoked, this would be the time to. Instead, I just pouted on the balcony for what seemed like forever. It was a while before I heard any noise outside of the usual city clamor. Between revving engines and honking horns, I heard the door open. Jean sat in the patio chair opposite of me. I sighed. This ought to be good.

He said, “Hey, I was looking for you.”

“Were you?”

“Yeah.” Jean looked around the patio before his eyes settled on a nearby plant. He pressed his fingers into the soil before watering it with the can underneath his chair. “Didn’t think you’d still be out here.”

“After half an hour?”

“Well, it’s a long time to spend just...sitting outside.”

I crossed my arms. “You never take anything seriously with me, Jean.”

“What?”

I sighed. “When I was dying on the floor, earlier, you just...it was just *weird*.”

“Are you upset that I didn’t take a tea party with a six-year-old seriously?” I scoffed at the disbelief in his tone.

“You act different around me.” I tried not to sound upset by it, but I was failing miserably. My armor was cracking. “You wouldn’t have done that with anybody else, *like* that.”

“That’s exactly the point.” He replied. He wasn’t making eye contact with me - he was preoccupied, watering the plants that surrounded him. “We’re close, aren’t we? We’re *tight*.”

“Don’t ever use that word in that context again,” I warned him.

He laughed half-heartedly before adding, “But no, I wouldn’t bring just *anyone* here.”

That improved my mood a little. “That was my first kiss, though--”

“Well then, it just doesn’t count!” He offered nonchalantly. Almost happily.

“How can it not count?”

“*Easy*. We just pretend it didn’t mean anything. We were *acting*. It was a performance, right?”
He wasn’t making me feel any better anymore. He continued nonetheless. “You wouldn’t think somehow, if cyanide poisoning could be solved with a true love’s kiss or some mushy bullshit, me sticking my tongue down your throat would do the trick?”

Ha ha ha ha. “When you say it like that, probably not.”

“Right!” He visibly relaxed with the assumption that he cheered me up. “Just save that for someone important, alright?”

“Saying you’re not important?” I smirked.

“Oh, God no.” He looked down at the street, laughing. “No, I’m uh, no. That shouldn’t be me, I mean, uh...I fuck up. Not that type of person.”

This was pure self-deprecation. The type that somehow transcended the English language and couldn’t be explained by mere words alone. “Well, you’re important to me. Where would I be without you?” I pinched his cheek, but instead of swatting me away, he merely flinched.

“At your parents’, probably.” I grimaced at that. Sitting at the kids’ table again, despite being 18, and too nervous to chime into or interrupt whatever ultra-conservative or ultra-backwards discussion was going on at the adults’ table. “I want to visit your house, though.”

“Ha! No, no you don’t.” I shook my head. “I wouldn’t wish that on anybody.”

“No, I’m serious.” He said. “I think you’re making it up.”

“Am not!”

“You’re exaggerating then. A lot. A lot.”

I smiled. “Fine. You’re gonna see my house. And when you do, don’t complain about it once.”

“I promise I won’t.” He gave a sharp nod, turning to me and locking eyes before nodding again. “Uh, while we’re on the subject, do you like it here?”

“It’s nice.” I smiled, watching the few cars that were on the street. “Never spent Thanksgiving in sweatpants before.”

“I told you we’re not fancy.”

I heard the pitter-patter of feet in the distance, but it soon grew louder as Maddie barreled through Jean’s room to announce, “The food’s ready!”

The kitchen table was too small to hold all the food, save for a bowl of potatoes, some stuffing, and cranberry sauce. The rest was all laid out on the counter instead, alive with color and warmth. Fresh, buttery dinner rolls were squeezed into a black skillet, and even more fluffy mashed potatoes were piled high in a big bowl. Steam was rising from the mac and cheese, fresh out of the oven and topped with bread crumbs. The showstopper was a juicy turkey, golden and buttery, topped with green herbs. I hadn’t even touched the food yet but I could already tell it was better--just the smell was incredible.

Jean reached over to snatch some mashed potatoes, but I’m pretty sure his mom has eyes on the back of her head, because she called out from the stove, “Don’t touch it.”

In a desperate attempt to not look like a selfish pig, he started to defend himself. “I--”
“We don’t eat until we say grace; we don’t eat until everyone is seated at the table.”

She turned the stove off and approached the table with her sizzling pan in hand. She folded an omelette onto his plate while muttering, “You’re so weird, Jean, you’re so weird--”

“Thanks.” Jean said, cutting into it with the side of his fork.

Mrs. Kirschtein turned towards me and asked, “Do you want an omelette, too?”

“Oh, no thanks--”

“Because you’re not weird.” She pointed out. “For years, I’ve been making Thanksgiving omelettes for this kid.”

“Because you asked what food I wanted at the table…”

“I expected like, a salad.” She said, putting the pan in the sink before coming back to the table.

“Well, I just really like omelettes is all--”

She sat down at the table with a deep, relieved sigh. “Anyway. Time for grace.”

I cleared my throat and began to awkwardly mumble along to the prayer, like every other little blessing my parents insisted we do. “Dear Heav--”

My routine was interrupted by Jean’s unsure mother. “Uh. Hey, God.”

I shut up immediately and let her talk. She was the only one talking. I was just uncomfortably staring between each member of this family as they bastardized grace. “It’s us again.” Jean smirked. “Uh, thank you for the food. And, uh, our health and house. Amen.”

“Amen,” The kids echoed, and I mumbled along. Grace is like, three sentences long. I don't know what the Catholic one is, but I'm sure it wasn't like, a novel. Either way, the “prayer” was done so the food was a free for all. Jean finally reached for potatoes. I went for the turkey, Maddie the cranberry sauce, and Mrs. Kirschtein the stuffing.

Once I fixed up my plate, I texted Jean under the table. “Interesting grace”

I saw him check his phone and stealthily text back, “none of us know how to say grace”

He sent another text shortly after. “Its only bc thanksgiving is supposed to be ‘important’ or whatever”

I went through two...three?...four plates of food. It's amazing how meat could improve a meal. I actually struggled to stuff some more of that juicy turkey down my throat because it was so good. I didn't help with any of the dishes, and Jean’s mom wouldn't let me, anyway. Instead, I laid down for a little on the couch to let my stomach pain subside. It was working for a little bit. Maddie had on Charlie Brown holiday specials while Jean sat next to her on the floor, letting me play with his hair. My stomach calmed down some by the time that Mrs. Kirschtein announced that she laid out the pies on the counter. While Maddie leapt at the opportunity for a slice of coconut cream, the thought of eating any more made me feel even sicker.

Jean got up for a bit and came back with a slice of pumpkin for himself. It was about 30% pie, and 80% whipped cream, adding up to 110% of excessive sugar. He held the fork up for me to see. “Did you want any?”
I debated it for a while. With a defeated sigh, I replied, “Yes.”

I got a bite of pie that had a 1:3 ratio of pumpkin to whipped cream. It was good. Way too good. I don't know who Mrs. Kirschtein sold her soul to, but she could cook like a motherfucker. Hell, she was too nice to even have sold her soul at all!

Speaking of the maybe-devil, Jean’s mom called out, “coffee? Tea? Anyone?”

“Let me see.” Jean sat up with his pie in hand. I followed suit to the kitchen. I couldn't eat, but I could definitely drink.

After seeing the family’s small collection of coffee grounds and teabags, I asked, “Do you have any hot chocolate?”

“Heh. Mormon.” Jean snarked, which was met with an immediate smack to the upper arm from his mother. “Ow-- Ma, she always--”

I put my hands on my hips. “I’m hurt, Jean. Genuinely hurt.”

“We do, Hitch.” Jean’s mom quickly changed the subject and gathered together the cocoa mix, along with marshmallows from the pantry and whipped cream from the fridge. She fixed up a cup of cocoa from the boiling hot water in the kettle.

“Thank you.” She was so sweet. No human being was allowed to be so sweet. It was illegal. It was almost alien. I blurted out, “You're so nice.”

She looked taken aback. I could see Jean smirking from behind her as his mom tried to find a reply. She settled on a wide smile. “I-It’s no problem! Not at all.”

I don’t get how his mom could be the sweetest woman alive but he could turn out to be kind of a dick. He constantly flip-flopped between saying mean stuff and nice stuff and I was starting to suffer from whiplash. Let's kiss!...But I'm going to pretend to throw up in your mouth. I'm sorry I did that to you because you're special to me...but you're not special enough to kiss. But I want to get to know you better and meet your family!...But it's because they're Mormon circus freaks. Like, how the fuck was I supposed to get what's genuine and what's a joke? Was this whole thing a joke? Was this all one big elaborate prank? I mulled it over while we went upstairs with our hot drinks.

We both sat on the balcony. We were on the ground, leaning against the house. Now that Jean and I were alone, I had some opinions I wanted to share. I guess my annoyance was reflected on my face. Whenever I zone out I start playing with my hair and I stare into the distance. I usually tap my foot too, and I think Jean has picked up on that because he asked what was up. I couldn’t lie.

“I just don’t understand you. None of it makes sense.” I tried to explain. “I keep trying to piece it all together, but nothing adds up. One minute, we are so close and we’re getting along really well. Then like, without any warning, you distance yourself. And I don’t know what I’m doing that’s making you like that.”

“You don’t do anything.” He responded. “That’s just how I am. I get close to people, but not too close.” He blew on his coffee to cool it down. “Intimacy is intimidating.”

“What do I do that’s intimidating?”

“Nothing, it’s just a personal preference. I cut myself off before I get clingy.”

“What? I love clingy.” I argued, leaning my head against the wall. “I get weirdly obsessed with
things, and people. You don’t have to worry about being clingy with me.”

“I can’t be happy with myself when I think I’m being too clingy.”

“Of course you physically can’t be clingy. There is nothing keeping us from being best friends,” I explained, “except for you being so flaky. You don’t let yourself make connections with anybody.”

I took a quick sip of my hot chocolate. It wasn’t cool yet. I put it back down on the ground to sit. “If that sounded too mean, I didn’t mean for it to. I just want to get to know you, and I don’t know why you won’t let me. I just want you to answer my texts and acknowledge me as your friend. Don’t you want us to be friends?”

He blinked, and looked down at the mug he had his hands curled around. “I thought we were friends.”

“We are. I appreciate you inviting me here and everything.” I shook my head, still searching for the perfect combination of words. “It’s just you do really nice, wonderful things like that and then you don’t talk to me for a week or you straight-up ignore me. Or you act like a tool. I just want some sort of consistency. I don’t want to wake up wondering whether you’re going to like me or hate me. You know?”

“Yeah.” He sipped his coffee. I don’t know how he could drink it if my hot chocolate was still scorching hot. “I’ll answer your texts and everything.”

“That’s a start.” I picked up my hot chocolate again. “I just want to be really close to you. Do you feel the same?”

He planted his heels into the wood. “For the most part.”

I was a bit dismayed. “You don’t sound so sure.”

“You can read yourself better than I can. I don’t know if I can describe how I’m feeling in the way you can.”

I shrugged, sipping my hot chocolate. “If you can’t read yourself, how can you read someone else? It’s kind of an easy question. Do you want to be close or not?”

“Yeah.”

I nodded. “Good. I’m glad that we have that settled.”

Awkward silence. It didn’t last long though, because suddenly, Jean left a quick kiss on my cheek - blink and you miss it. I turned to stare at him and silently ask why he did that, but he was just staring at his feet while he twiddled his thumbs as if it didn't happen. I'd have been offended he was playing dumb, but the fact he did it at all caused a massive blush to spread across my face and my toes to curl into my slippers. The awkward silence that followed that statement was deafening. I swallowed, searching for the right follow-up. I needed to address it, but Jean changed the subject.

“So, how did you like dinner?”

“Oh my God, it was the best food ever.”

“You only said it about ten times.”

“Have you ever had tofurkey?” I asked, aggressively defensive. “It's gross!”
“I believe you.” He smirked. “I probably wouldn’t want to have it, either.”

I cracked my back again. I felt like no matter how many times I tried to realign my spine, it wouldn’t happen. “Ergh…”

Jean took a sip of his coffee while watching me as I tried to crack my back again. Once he was done, he asked, “What’s up?”

“Eh, it’s just my back.” I shrugged. “It’s not that big of a deal.”

“Yeah, I don’t like crashing on couches, either.” He took another sip, but then quickly suggested, “You can sleep in my bed, if you want. If your back hurts.”

My hot cocoa, now properly cooled, was calling to me. “What, would you take the couch?”

“Well, no. We would share.” He averted eye contact, looking out at the street. “It’s spacious. We’ll have a ton of space to split. It won’t be weird, and it’ll help your back.”

“Are you sure?”

“Only if it’s okay with you.” It was more than okay. I mean, a night without back pain, and a night in a cute boy’s bed? Be still, my beating heart. I mean, this weekend Jean proved he wasn’t exactly Prince Charming. He was pretty shitty at that, because when he was supposed to be a prince, he pretended to puke in my mouth.

Even though my heart was pounding just a little bit faster, I acted cool about it. I just shrugged indifferently and said, completely level, “Yeah. That’s fine. Thanks.”

A shower and one slice of late night pie later, it was time for bed. I was actually kind of nervous. I dragged my stuff from the office to Jean’s room like, “Am I really doing this?” What if I’m a bad bedmate? What if I drool all over his pillow? I took out my contacts and left my clunky glasses on his nightstand, which he promptly teased me for.

“Shut the fuck up.” I rolled my eyes and crawled under the blanket. As soon as I got all warm, he yanked the comforter off of me and began to drag it out of the room. “What’s your problem?”

All he said was, “I don’t have a problem,” before abandoning me without a blanket. Well, this sucks. Where did he even go? I tried to curl up in a little ball or cover myself with an extra pillow to warm up. This was sad. Like, really sad. But soon enough, Jean came back upstairs carrying a big ball of blanket.

"I put the comforter through the dryer." He threw it over the bed, encompassing me in a pleasantly warm, comfy cocoon.

"Ooh," I melted, tucking myself in. "Thank you--"

"It's not for you!" He quickly defended himself. He got underneath the covers too, undoing my tucking and snuggling into the bed. "I do this every night."

“That’s so extra,” I laughed, putting my head on the pillow. “But it’s nice. Goodnight.”

“Night.” He settled into the bed as well. Things were good for a while, but I noticed that every time Jean turned over, he wrapped a little more of the blanket around him. At one point, I could literally feel the comforter coming off of my body and I was exposed to the chilly air.
“Jean!” I didn’t even care about waking him up. I yanked the comforter off of him, unspooling it from Jean like a paper towel from the roll. “Stop hogging the blankets.”

“I am not hogging the blankets!”

“Yes, you are.” I grumbled. “You’re all wrapped up and I’m literally left in the cold.”

He sat up and yanked the drawer underneath his bed open. “Do you want a blanket? I can give you your own blanket.”

“Wonderful.”

He went into his closet. I couldn’t see him, but he soon reappeared, cradling a white fuzzy blanket in his arms. He tossed it at me. “Here.”

“Thank you.” I wrapped the blanket around me. In fact, it was way nicer than the blanket Jean had. It was soft to the touch. It felt like being wrapped up in a literal bear hug. “Seriously.”

“Goodnight.”

That was good advice. Problem was, I couldn’t really sleep. Having Jean in the same bed was distracting. I knew all I had to do was fall asleep, but how could I? I cautiously whispered to the dark, “Hey Jean?”

“What?” His voice was monotonous, but louder than my whisper. He must have been wide awake, too.

“Is your mom working tomorrow?”

“Yeah, morning into afternoon.” He rolled over. “Why?”

“Just curious. Hospital work must be stressful.” I wondered out loud. “She’s lucky she got Thanksgiving off.”

“Eh. She kind of gets dibs on days like this.” He shut his eyes, trying to get comfortable. “Every year she kind of puts on this whole dinner, and if she wasn’t there, then we’d be sort of fucked.”

“Hmm.” I buried my face in the pillow. “At least they’re understanding.” And I was asleep before he replied.

When I woke up, all I could think of was how much I loved being in a bigger bed. Love, love, loved it. I got to stretch out my arms and legs like a big old starfish first thing in the morning. Feeling the sensation of soft sheets on my skin along with the warm sun peeking through the window. Ugh. It was brilliant. There was just one thing wrong - Jean was missing. Poof. Gone. Not here. Where the fuck.

The bed was big and blank and empty and lonely. The first tours of the day were running outside. I could hear a bell chiming in the difference along with a man bellowing, “Hear ye, hear ye! A revolution is brewing, and the city is eagerly preparing for the redcoats to arrive!”

How fucking lame. I probably couldn’t even drink a cup of coffee on the balcony without having to put on a powdered wig. I sat up and rubbed my eyes. An orange sticky note on the nightstand caught my eye. “Library w Maddie. Back by eleven?”

It was a little past nine now. How long did it take to go to the library? Whatever. I rolled out of bed,
fighting off hunger and acclimating to the strange housing situation. Everyone was out of the house for me, so I felt a little uncomfortable going down to their kitchen to make myself something to eat - but only a little. I brewed a cup of coffee and added a shot of pumpkin coffee creamer that Jean’s mom had on the fridge door. Then, I dug through the pile of books underneath Jean’s bed. There was one called *The Art of Color*, and I felt that was pretty important for a designer to know, so I snatched it up to read on his balcony once Paul Revere had fucked off. His book collection wasn’t much to write home about. Just some books about art: the French impressionist movement and American modern art seemed to be favorites. There was a hardcover book in the back missing its sleeve, but the title page read *Chasing the Mystery of the Female Orgasm*. I laughed so hard that I snorted, and tossed it back into the depths of the drawer. I admittedly rolled my eyes when I stumbled upon the abused copy of *Catcher in the Rye*, the manifesto of spoiled, privileged emo boys everywhere. I put the book down and into the far corner of the drawer when I realized the similarities between him and Holden Caulfield, resolving to *never think about that again*.

Even though I had the idea to calmly read a book on the balcony, snooping through Jean’s stuff was proving to be a fun experience. When will I have this opportunity again?! I pulled another drawer from underneath his bed so it was on the floor, its contents rattled, and I took the time to peruse through all of them. All of his little sketchbooks, notebooks, and an array of old pens whose ink has probably run dry...it was strange to get so intimate with his stuff. I flipped through a small dream journal, skimming through short, curt tales of how he dreamt his girlfriend was cheating on him and was irrationally irate for a good deal of time before remembering he didn’t even have a girlfriend. It was funny, but besides the girlfriend story, it was also pretty lame and repetitive. I tossed it back into his drawer and continued to snoop. I blindly reached towards the very back, snatching pens, pencils, and other goodies until I wrapped my hand around a small paper bag. I yanked it from the abyss of the drawer and put it on the bed. A box of condoms, nearly brand new, unopened. How very saucy. With a chuckle, I tossed them back into the bag. They were probably latex anyway, and therefore no use to me.

I put everything back in its place and sat back, sighing. What to do now? Where to snoop? I didn’t want to get all up into the rest of the family’s business. That wasn’t fair to them, but it was *more* than fair to peek through Jean’s stuff. It was fair game. Jean’s closet caught my eye. It was full of *mystery*. I stood up and slowly meandered over to Jean’s closet. I wasn’t going to go *inside*, but...I was just gonna walk near it. My hand *accidentally* fell on the knob and I turned it by mistake. The door just...swung open all on its own. How weird! I peeked inside the dark little room before searching for a light switch -- by accident, of course. Once I found it, the room lit up a brilliant white.

I was pretty surprised, because for a rich kid, his wardrobe was pretty shoddy. I decided to start playing dress-up. A black-muscle tee that was way too big on me and showed an embarrassingly large amount of sideboob. I tied a distressed black flannel around my waist. I plucked a pair of grey sweatpants off of his hanger (who hangs their sweatpants in their closet?) and secured them around my waist. To finish off my homeless-chic look, I picked up this humongously oversized, dark green jacket with a bunch of pockets and a hood. I felt around the pockets for any forgotten hundred-dollar bills or rare jewels, but there was nothing.

I looked at myself in the mirror. I looked just okay. It would probably look a lot better on him, but I was surprised at the lack of bejeweled suits made out of platinum. I thought there would be *something* crazy nice in here, but...everything was thrifted. At least, I *thought* it was thrifted. I took the jacket off and decided to check the tag. Upon seeing the “YEEZY” label on the inside, I nearly fell backwards. I carefully put it back on and took a final look at my pricey-ass self in the mirror. Somehow, I looked better. Now, I looked street-chic. This was a good look, despite its clash with my colorful personality. I carefully stripped and curiously checked the tags of all of the garments - Drifter, Thom Browne, Club Monaco - before putting everything back in its place, exactly as I had
found it. I even dusted the jacket off of any hair, skin flakes, or other possible trace of me having worn it. I wasn’t even going near the suit I saw in the back corner of the closet. I rushed back into Jean’s bedroom and put on my own $10 pair of leggings, and a t-shirt with a coffee (hot chocolate, as far as my parents were concerned) stain at the bottom of it.

I shut the closet light off, shut the door, and hustled back to Jean’s bed to do some investigating. I started searching for the garments online and their price. I scribbled down all the info I could find and did some math before I found my answer. With the jacket at about six hundred dollars, the tank at $175, the flannel at $160, and the sweatpants at $570, that single outfit was probably worth more than my entire wardrobe. How spoiled do you have to be to get designer sweatpants? I rolled my eyes. Since my laptop was low on battery, I shut it off before it died. I leaned back in bed to lie down.

There wasn’t too much to look at here. There was that weird, out of place postcard from Brussels hanging on the wall. I sat up to take a closer look. There was really nothing special about it - at least, I thought so. I folded the card over so the front image was against the wall. The scribbles on the back met the light, albeit upside down. I tried cocking my head to read them, but after I got a crick in the neck, I bit the bullet and tore it off the wall completely. The tape spiraled up like a dying snake, and by how weak the adhesive was on it, I wouldn’t be surprised if this wasn’t the first time someone took it off the wall. I leaned back on the bed, facing the ceiling to read the postcard.

I don’t know. It was a lot of junk about how even though he already sent him a ton of pictures from the trip over the phone already, he still wanted to write and that he missed his family a lot. And how he thought Jean would be jealous that Maddie keeps getting postcards when he just gets texts and emails. And how he should be on the lookout for a package from Brussels that was due to arrive in the mail sometime soon.

“You’re very nonchalant,” Jean interrupted my reading, making me jump a bit. He opened the drawer closest to the foot of the bed and took out a roll of masking tape. He bit off a chunk, stepped onto the bed, and snatched the card from my hands. He continued, “about invading someone’s privacy.”

He put the card against the wall again, picture side up, and pressed the tape against it.

“Relax.” I groaned. “Don’t hang up something you don’t want people to look at.”

“This is my personal space.” God, he was a baby. Now he was fixing everything I may have touched. He even moved the candle on his nightstand slightly closer to the edge of the stand, as if I touched his stupid vanilla candle. I wonder if he’d notice that I went into his closet. He would probably have an aneurysm if he figured that one out. He sarcastically asked, “Did you learn anything interesting?”

“That you’re a fuckboy. I liked your copy of Catcher in the Rye.” I pointed towards the postcard. “And you have some daddy issues to work out.”

He rolled his eyes. “Not everything has subtext, Shakespeare. I just liked the picture.”

“Do you relate to Holden Caulfield because of his irrational disdain for his bourgeois parents, or his irrational obsession with protecting innocent people from being, quote unquote, corrupted?”

“For someone who shits on Catcher in the Rye, you know an awful lot about Catcher in the Rye.” He raised an eyebrow.

I didn’t want to admit that for a brief yet embarrassing part of my high school career, I admired
Holden Caulfield. I kind of fantasized about saying “fuck this” in regards to my shitty school and my fascist parents and just having an adventure in the city. I kind of repressed the fact that it ended with Holden being hospitalized and having a mental breakdown.

“Library slut. What else is new?” I held my elbows in my hands. Jean retired to just shrugging and continuing to fix up his perfectly fine room. For someone who called themselves “the library slut,” I honestly haven’t read a book there in a long-ass time. I think once I got accepted here to go to school is when I really started phoning in my work there. I mean, I was never really a hard worker, but instead of using my empty time to read books and sweep the shelves, I spent it hiding out in the reference section to daydream about what it would be like to finally fucking leave Sina.

Life was better now. Infinitely better. I felt like I was making more human connections than in high school. I mean, here I could actually be myself and make friends that liked me, but I kind of missed Sina, too. The city was full of opportunity and excitement, but it also reminded me of school and all the stuff I had to be doing. Speaking of, I still had a shitton of it, and I spend the whole weekend thus far sharing weird sexual tension with Jean, and procrastinating even further.

And my parents. Fuck, my parents. As gross as the food was and how lame the dinner was, this weekend just felt like an extravagant dinner and less of a holiday. I know my parents knew that I came here and they said it was all fine, but was it really fine? Did they feel really lonely that I skipped out on their dinner? As much as my parents drove me crazy, I was suddenly filled with this feeling of immense guilt.

I mean, Jean had been running errands with his sister. Their mom wasn’t here, but she made them all dinner and spent as much time with them as she could. And her kids were okay with that and forgave her for that. Then there was me. I was shooting the shit with a very handsome (yet very flaky) boy on a very important holiday. My parents said it was okay to come here and to have fun and that they would miss me, but Thanksgiving would go on as normal. I still felt incredibly guilty and sad for them for the first time this entire semester. I blankly said out loud, “I weirdly miss my parents.”

Jean turned to me. “Weirdly?”

“I don’t know, I just feel...weird?”

“That emotion is called empathy,” he snarked. “I know you’ve probably never felt it before--”

“Shut up.” I rolled my eyes. I guess I didn’t just feel weird. I felt bad. I looked towards my half-packed bag and shrugged. I should probably at least pay them a visit before the weekend is over. I started to get my shit together before making my exit.

“Can you tell your mom I said thank you?” I asked. “Like, a million times.”

“A million times exactly?”

“Yeah, no less than a million.” I sighed and slung my bag over my shoulder. “Thank you so, so much, Jean.”

“You're welcome.” He grabbed one of my bags to help bring downstairs.

“Oh…” I chewed my lip, trying to think of how else to thank him. “It was really, actually great.”

“Did you want any leftovers? I doubt my mom wants all of them.”

Oh my God, yes. I blinked and slowly nodded, which prompted him to go to the kitchen. I followed. Standing at the fridge, he asked, “What did you want?”
I couldn’t look too desperate. “Uh, maybe a little bit of stuffing.”

“Okay—”

“And turkey. Can you give some extra for my dad, too?” Old Meat-and-Potatoes Craig. I figured I’d be extra nice for abandoning my family on Thanksgiving.

“Yeah, sure. Is that i—”

“Just a little mac and cheese if your sister doesn’t mind...oh, and maybe some more stuffing.” My obsession with carbs will eventually kill me, but I’d let it slide for the next few days.

He set up a few tupperware containers of food and tossed it in a plastic bag. I don’t know if I was looking at him through rose-colored lenses because of him looking all domestic in the kitchen, or if I was all drugged up from the amazing smell of Thanksgiving food, but it was proving to be a really hard thing to leave right now. Sadly, I couldn’t be a dick on Thanksgiving. With a longing sigh, I told him, “You are actually incredible.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t cook any of it.”

“No,” I whined, “but you let me stay here, and you shared your bed with me and let me eat with you. And?” I poked his side. “Even though you can be super rude, you are a sweet boy. The sweetest boy.”

He scoffed, trying to hide the intense blush on his face. “I’m not sweet. I’m--I’m cool.”

“Hate to break it to you.” I shook my head with a smile. “No, hon, you’re not. You’re literally the lamest, cutest boy on the face of the planet. And you’re my best friend.”

“D-Don’t you have a Mormon temple to go to?” He stuttered.

“I guess so. I’ll just-- oof --” I loaded up my arms and shoulders with my belongings. “--I’ll take this to my car.”

“Okay. Drive safe.” He quickly added, “I-I guess.”

“Aren’t you going to walk me out?” I asked.

“...Nope.”

“Oh, because you’re not sweet after all. Right. You’re cool.” I rolled my eyes with a smile. Boys are so dumb. “I gotcha.”

“Yup.” He was still leaning against the counter.

“Okay, well. Tell your mom and sister that I love them and that they’re perfect and thank you so much for having me.”

“Wiiiiiiill do.” He promised. With one last eye roll, I made my way out the door and towards my truck. What a weirdo. My car was just parked down the street. I loaded it up, headed inside, turned on the ignition, configured the directions to my house, and began to start rolling out.

“Hear ye!” I heard ring out from in front of me. I rolled my eyes. Not this asshole. There was a group of people in the middle of the fucking road, taking very historically accurate photos of the neighborhood, featuring my beat truck. I’m sure George Washington drove something very similar across the Delaware River. I almost took them all out with my car before I decided to patiently wait
for them to transfer over to the sidewalk. Why were they even in the middle of the street? What was weirder is that their eyes were all fixated on one thing behind me. I turned around to see Jean, rushing from his house and towards my truck.

They were probably staring because he was pretty darn cute. Could be the fact his outfit was lacking a tricorne hat. It could also be because he looked super sweaty and crazy, like he was chasing me down or—oh my God, he literally just ran out of the house and chased me down. I rolled down the window to yell, “Did I forget something?”

We were totally interrupting this tour right now. Didn’t even feel sorry about it. The guide started to awkwardly continue his spiel, trying to stay in character about everyone in these houses wanting to fight the villainous King George and his taxes. Jean caught up to my truck, and caught his breath. He came up to the window. “N-No. I just...I’m sorry I didn’t say bye. Like a normal person.”

“It’s fine.” I smirked. Loser.

“I was being a dick.”

“Nah, you were just trying being cool, right?”

“Yeah. Casually.”

“You and your family are so cute.” Weird, but cute. I was still incredibly thankful (geddit?) for them. I pushed his hair out of his face and kissed his forehead. “Bye. Thanks again. I’ll text you when I’m in Sina.”

I pulled away from the curb yet again. ETA was an hour and one minute. It was going to be a hell of a drive to do all by myself. I got a big, styrofoam cup full of coffee at the closest Dunkin. I chugged it, and then purged the coffee breath with lots of gum before discarding the evidence at a McDonald’s right outside of Sina. I swear to you, as soon as I saw that “Welcome to Sina: Population 1,050” sign, the air smelled cleaner. The sky was bluer, and the grass was greener. Even though it was cold as fuck, I rolled down my windows. The city was beautiful, and Sina was a conservative, backwards, country-bumpkin hellhole, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t miss all the nature. I mean, by nature, I meant that there was grass and a few forests and stuff. It wasn’t where I would like to plant my feet, but it made for a decent day trip.

My parent’s estate - one farmhouse, a decommissioned barn, a fenced-off field that used to hold farm animals long ago, and lots of trees to separate us from the neighbors - was relatively small compared to the other properties around here. We had neighbors that owned huge barns, and had farm animals to go with it. It seemed everyone but us was saddled with having to take care of a dumb cow or something. Every other week, there was some kid worried out of his mind because of their idiot cow escaping the barn in the middle of the night. Like, how the fuck did you lose a cow, Jared? It’s big as fuck, and slow as shit.

Anyway, I rolled up to my parents’ house on this long, dusty road. Our driveway was nothing more than gravel, and Mom prettied it up by lining it with shrubs. With my big dumb truck and that whole backdrop, I felt like a walking, breathing country music video. It was weird. It was bizarre. It was...totally not my thing. Once I parked, I started hauling stuff out of the truck and onto the porch. I had just gone back to the car to pick up another duffel bag, along with my plastic bag of leftovers and my backpack when I heard the rickety screen door swing open. My dad’s voice called out, “I thought I heard someone visit. Didn’t know it would be you!”

“Hi, Dad,” I called back, strained under the weight of all my things.
“Let me take in some of that,” he offered, grabbing the bag on the porch and my duffel bag from my shoulder. “What a pleasant surprise. All your cousins just left.”

“Oh, what a shame,” I lied, dropping my bags off at the foot of the stairs before going back to the truck to lock it. Once I was inside, I dragged all of my bags upstairs to my room, and placed my leftovers in the fridge. I asked my dad, “How was dinner?”

“The usual fare.” He shook his head with a laugh. “Have you ever heard of a pumpkin ravioli?”

“Yeah. Never had one, though.” I was struggling to find room for the turkey in this very crowded fridge. “Psst. By the way. I got some actual turkey if you wanted some.”

My dad offered a sympathetic wink. The guy loves meat. I’m sure having a vegetarian Thanksgiving eats him up inside. “Anyway, your aunt made a batch of this ravioli...filled with pumpkin. And you know what she put on top?”

“Parmesan cheese?”

“Nope. Pecans!” He shook his head. Oh, Craig. Still never willing to change. “I swear, Thanksgiving gets stranger every year.”

“Was it good?”

“Well, sure—”

I shrugged. “Then that’s not a problem at all.”

While I was trying to find room for the turkey in the fridge, I heard my mom call out from the living room, “Is that my baby?”

“Yes, it’s your baby,” I called to her. She hurried to the kitchen to give me a massive hug. “Ow, Mom—”

“How was Thanksgiving at your friend’s house?” My mom asked.

“It was good.” I grinned. “I figured I wanted to stop by and visit you before the holiday was over.”

“There’s some leftovers if you were hungry.” My mom suggested. “Stuffing? Potatoes? Casserole?”

As good as the mashed potatoes at Jean’s were, I felt a little homesick. “Okay, cool. I’ll take some potatoes.”

I scooped a hefty serving of potatoes into a piece of Tupperware. I had my meals planned out for like, the next week. But honestly, given how good everything was, that was not a bad thing at all. As soon as I got everything together, I grabbed my computer and a cup of water, and retired to the living room to actually do my homework.

As soon as I sat down on the couch, I forgot why I came home at all. The quiet that my parents found so soothing was unbearable. Mom was sitting at the desk, writing out price tags and wrapping them around brooches that she scored at a recent estate sale. Dad was sitting on his usual armchair, with his Bible on one arm and his notepad on the other, taking notes to prepare a sermon. The TV was off, and I could literally hear my own breathing. I’m fine with quiet places obviously, since I
worked at a library and all, but this quiet had some tension in it. It was getting to be frustrating.

I don’t know what my breaking point was, but at one point, I felt compelled to stand up and announce, “I’m gonna head to the library.”

“You need to check out a book?” My dad asked.

“Have fun sweetie,” Mom mumbled, trying to make her handwriting on those tags just right.

“Uh, I just need to focus.” I chugged the last of my water and left the cup in the sink before heading out to my truck to begin my trip to the library. It was only a ten minute drive, but when you’re in the middle of nowhere, a ten minute drive could cover over ten or so miles of ground. It was a pretty serene route - it was just an open road surrounded by green pastures, spotted cows, and the occasional farmhouse. The library was nestled into the only civilized part of this entire town. It was right across the street from my high school, and it neighbored a handful of houses. These houses were relatively small. Each one had an American flag hanging out front and a tidy yard to go along with it. These were also the only houses within a fifty mile radius that didn’t come with a barn.

This area was the only place where there was anything to really do besides get dragged to church or chill in your house. There was a diner that was only a five minute walk away, and a little sushi place a few blocks after that. It was the only place in the area with culture, and it was very little culture, to boot. I kind of wondered what all the kids going to community college were doing in their free time for fun, but at the same time, I didn’t really care too much. I didn’t miss home compared to college, but I missed the quiet of the library.

Nobody really went to ours anymore. I worked there organizing books and eavesdropping on the gossip between the town’s elderly. I basically got paid to hide out in the aisles and read. The library at school was actually used, stuffed with restless college kids and the endless clatter of typing. Here, nobody had to enforce the “absolute silence” rule - there was nobody even here to make noise. You could drop a pin and hear it from across the room.

But today, I was here as a guest. I took out all the books I could find on impressionism and stacked them on top of the table nearest the heater. I needed to be cozy if I wanted to focus. I opened the first book and got out my notebook. My phone was vibrating in my pocket, and despite how tempting it was to check it, I couldn’t. I ignored it. It was chewing at me, absolutely. I wanted to know who was texting me so bad, but I refused to let my procrastination get the best of me yet again. I would not throw a graphic design degree and thousands in tuition away just because I can’t write a paper on art.

Okay. Chapter One: What’s in A Name?: The First Impressionist Exhibition. I twisted my wrist, ready to take a lot of notes.

Once I got my pen on the paper, I became extremely focused. All that existed in my universe was me, my books, and my notes. I filled three pages in about--well, I don’t know how long it took me. But I didn’t care if it took me five minutes or five hours. I outlined the whole book and checked the other ones out. Sure, it meant I would have to drive back to Sina within two weeks, but it’d be worth it if I could knock out some more work tonight or tomorrow. I came in to work when the sun was high and the sky was a light, baby blue. Now, the clouds were stained orange, and there were purple brushstrokes smeared across the open sky. It was brilliant, but it also made me realized how long I worked and how tired I was. I gathered my stuff up and walked outside, obsessing over how the sky changed so radically and how long I was trapped inside that library.

I got to the truck and started thinking about Jean. I got distracted and never called him when I got home. Shit. I called him up and dropped my phone into the cupholder before starting my trip back home. “…Hey. What’s up? I’m still alive. Why are you so worried?”
Chapter End Notes

tysm corey
capsize - when a ship or boat lists too far and rolls over, exposing the keel.

While I was zoning out in math class, staring at the ceiling, I realized how fast the days were flying by, and how the days of my first semester were numbered. It was Monday, December 1st. We were through with Halloween and Thanksgiving. Final exams were next, and then it was Christmas! Fucking Christmas! Since it was December 1st, it was essentially already Christmas. The fact my time was so limited was somewhat terrifying, especially because I wasn’t doing so great in my other classes. I mean, yeah, the semester was short, but my time here at this school could be even shorter if I didn’t get my act together somehow. Damn. Time just does not stop for nobody.

Speaking of a lack of time, I really had to get down to the art museum before next Monday, the last day of writing class. My paper on impressionism was due the very next week, and my professor was requiring us to take photos of the locally housed paintings that we had to use in our essays, and more informal selfies with the paintings as well. He really wanted proof that we actually went. The thing is, the paper could easily be done without hauling ass to the art museum and paying to stare at a canvas. Google Images had really been coming in clutch. My paper was essentially written. All I had to do was just take my photos at the museum and duck on out. It was a waste of gasoline, and an even bigger waste of time. However, the fact that the paper wasn’t completely finished was eating at me. Not to mention my drawing homework (eek!) and my design final, which was an exploration in color and texture. I was dreading everything, to the point where I actually woke up early. About five. This isn’t how Christmas should start. I couldn’t fall back asleep because of my nerves, so I took the opportunity to get some laundry done. Anything but work. It was a vicious cycle.

So, I tossed my dirty clothes into a washer. The wash would be done in like, an hour. Now what? I couldn’t trust myself to go back to bed because then I would forget all about my laundry. I groaned. I may as well work on my homework. It wasn’t like I was doing anything else anyway. Besides, if I put it off to the last minute, it would just hurt even more. I had to replicate three images randomly cut from a magazine - one using texture, one using acrylic paint, and the other using “unconventional” media. So, I had to replicate shark skin, grass, and hair. God, I hate art school. I really fuckin’ hate it. Annie was still asleep, so it was the perfect time to work in my room. I made a note to still keep it quiet, but I doubted painting would get loud.

I was nervous to start the actual painting, but I could at least paste my magazine cutouts to the presentation board. After finishing pasting the cutouts to the board, I just kind of laid down for a minute. Pasting three pieces of paper to a board was truly exhausting. I had so much to do, I was just short circuiting. I had to redo my drawings, and finish my design work. I mean, I had a math test too, but I wasn’t worried about that. On top of that, my social life was a sinking ship that I was struggling to keep afloat. It was so much, I was about to break. At least I had the domestic monotony of laundry to keep me feeling moderately productive. I mean, it’s really hard to fuck up laundry. If I could just get that done, I’d feel accomplished for the day. My brain stopped frying once the timer on my phone went off. It was like a switch that brought me back into the present, reminding me that I had easy
responsibilities to take care of.

I took my basket to the laundry room to take my delicate garments back up to air dry, as well as snag a dryer to fluff up the rest of my clothes. I tossed all of my sopping wet clothes inside and let them tumble. There was a quiet ruckus from the washer area - an unusual ruckus for six in the morning. I sneakily took a peek. A familiar face was in the laundry room at this ungodly hour, slowly stuffing heaps of linens and clothes into a washing unit. It was filled nearly to the brim. I decided to surprise him. I gently knocked his back with my laundry basket. “Hey!”

I startled him so bad, he dropped his phone onto the washer with a clang. He scrambled to pick it back up and go back to texting. “H-Hey, Hitch, how’s it going?”

I laughed. “Did I scare you?”

“No.” He scoffed, trying to be cool as always. He was failing. “You just don’t expect someone to be in the laundry room at six in the fucking morning.”

That was true. I would never willingly be up this early. I sighed. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“At least you have the day to catch up on it. Take a nap, go to bed early...” He trailed off.

“That’s true, I guess.” I rested my cheek in my hand, mulling over the suggestion before coming to a sad conclusion. “But I should finish my design homework.”

“What do you have to do?”

“It’s like, I have to paint something with a color palette--”

“I’m can paint good,” He stumbled before coughing and correcting himself. God, it was early. “I mean, I-I can paint. If you need help.”

“It’s okay, the painting part on this one is pretty easy,” I explained. I mean, it really wasn’t. I was still a little nervous to see how it was going to come out. I didn’t want to bother him though. I sighed and smiled. “Thank you for your offer, though. I appreciate it.”

“Yeah,” He sighed too, and patted the washer. “Well. I’m gonna go back to my room and try to fall back asleep.”

“Okay.” I shrugged, making my way out of the room. “Don’t forget to get your clothes after your nap, though.”

Once I got back to my dorm, I dropped my laundry basket onto the floor and went right back to my design homework. Time to stop procrastinating and to actually paint something. Goddamn, I was tired, but let’s go. Let’s paint some grass. Fuck it. I was so worried about how everything was going to look but I figured, fuck it. I don’t have to be Picasso to paint something half decent, let alone something as lame as grass. Honestly, I’m pretty sure this is what giving up is. Like, deadass just giving up. I didn’t really care anymore. I felt like my soul and all the fucks I had left to give had just ascended from my body, and here I was, an empty shell with a paintbrush. Let’s mix up some greens and paint some big, rough blades of grass. Let it dry, badabing, badaboom.

For the hair, I coated my board in brown paint. For the texture, fishing line was my first thought, so it was the thought I was going to go with. I had to go to a sporting goods store for it, but whatever. It was early enough, and it turned out to be an insanely quick trip. I got back just in time for my laundry to be done drying, actually, so I picked that up, too. Out of curiosity I checked out Jean’s washer - he had about four minutes left. I debated waiting for him so I could talk to him again, but
after realizing I had nothing to say, I just went back upstairs to finish my work. I wrapped that fishing line around and around the board until it was completely covered in straight, neat, shiny lines. Whatever. Good enough for me.

That meant the shark would be the unconventional media? Sure. Let’s go with that. I didn’t want to spend my money on sandpaper, so I grabbed a handful of sand from the volleyball court outside and mixed it with some navy paint before smearing it across my board for sandpaper. That works, right? Right. It should work. It was unconventional enough. I just wanted this project to be over, please. Once my textured boards were all done, I just needed to attach them to the bigger board. I wanted to put it off, but I forced myself to do it by telling myself that Christmas could only start when I got all my work done. Only then could I bother Jean and Marco, convince them to throw a holiday party for me, buy me a lot of alcohol, hint to Jean that I really wanted a date for my Christmas present or at least something with the Tütone logo on it, wear a really cute dress out, and get showered in presents no matter where I went. I kind of deserved it right now.

After slapping my masterpieces onto a board, I was getting ready to go over and bother my friends and “subtly” drop hints about what I wanted. I was halfway out the door when Annie finally decided to yawn and chime in from her bed, “By the way, I'm going home for the weekend.”

“Oh, okay.” I nodded. “That’s fine.”

“Yeah. I just figured I’d let you know.” She said stoically before putting her head back on her pillow and going back to sleep. Uh...okay? She’s so weird. I shut the door, shrugged, and headed up to pester my friends. I knocked on their door with a lot of gusto - since it was Christmas, winter break was creeping around the corner. I had to take advantage of being just down the hall from my friends. I leaned against the doorframe with my arms crossed as Marco opened the door.

Before he could say “Hiya,” I walked right past him and into their room, which somehow got messy again just after being nearly-pristine last week. Honestly, it’s inhuman how messy they both could be. Maybe it’s a boy thing.

“Ya know what day it is?” I teased, making myself comfortable on their folding chair.

“December 1st?” Marco guessed correctly.

“Uh-huh.” I crossed my legs with a grin. “And with December, Christmas has officially begun.”

“No. It hasn’t.” Jean responded from his bed, putting more paint on whatever painting was on his easel.

“Suck my dick, Jean,” I shot back. “If it is December, and if there is snow on the ground, and Christmas carols on the radio, then it’s Christmas. You need to get into the mood of giving.”

He raised his eyebrows, surprised. “You’re in the mood of giving?”

With a smug smile, I crossed my arms and answered, “I’m in the mood for receiving. And I want one of my gifts to be for us to all go do something fun this weekend!”

“I have finals to finish,” Jean replied quickly.

Marco reluctantly frowned. “I have a photo book to get ready.”

“No. You can take a break to come out and have fun with me! It is the birth of Christ.”

Jean offered a helpless and apathetic shrug while Marco seemed more concerned with my weekend
plans. He just smiled and said, “I’ll keep an eye out.”

I kept many eyes out. Someone had to be throwing a big weekend bash! I doubt everyone was up to their eyeballs in finals work. I mean, I was, but that didn’t mean I was going to do it! There had to be something to do this weekend. Before I went to class on Friday, I stopped by Marco’s room. It was hard to coordinate this stuff over text and I felt like I was annoying with my hourly “Any news?” texts. When he opened his door, I offered a courteous and respectful nod before asking, “What’s the status update?”

“So, Ymir is having something tonight,” Marco reported, scratching his chin. “No theme or anything. We just need to show up. And it’s BYOB.”

“Are you going?” I asked.

“Uh, probably.” Marco shrugged. “Nothing better to do. Jean?”

Jean shrugged, texting. *Who was he texting when all of his friends were here?* I asked, “Jean, yes or no?”

“Yes, sure.” He groaned. God, he was such a fucking baby.

“Whatever. It works. I’ll hit you guys up tonight. Maybe we’ll pregame?”

“Yeah, sure!” Marco answered rather enthusiastically, like always, while Jean offered back a grunt. Way to get hype, Jean. I left their room to head up to Sasha’s. Maybe she would join us for a pregame.

But then an idea struck. If Jean is being a fuddy-duddy, why bother going to his room when I could have the pregame at my own and go by my own rules? Annie was leaving campus today anyway for the weekend. The timing could literally not be any more perfect. I couldn’t be any more excited to tell Sasha my plan when I got to her room.

“So, Annie is going home for the weekend,” I announced. “Since my room will be empty, I’ve decided to host a little pregame in my room before Ymir’s party.”

“Hooray! This’ll be so much fun!” Sasha clapped her hands together. “What do you need?”

“Uh...all the alcohol.” I twirled my hair between my fingers. “I don’t have a fake. Or any legal friends.”

“I can help!” She volunteered. “There’s a sketchy-looking liquor store like, two blocks from my house. They sell boozy root beer!”

“Snatch that up!” I demanded. “It sounds fucking amazing.”

“Consider it done.” Sasha grinned. “This is gonna be so much fun!”

“Fuck yeah!” I nodded. “Now it’s just up to me to invite people.”

“Who’s on the list so far?” Sasha let her hair down, and tied it into another ponytail. “You, me, Connie I assume--”

“Jean.” I scratched my chin. “Jean is...obvious. Marco too. You can’t not invite Marco…”

And I was blanking. The grand total was...four. Four people. Oh, God, I only knew four people? I only had four friends? Hell, Connie wasn’t even a friend, he’s just fucking one of my friends. That
lowered my count to three! What the fuck gives? Concerned, I gasped aloud. “Oh my God, I don’t have any friends.”

“I can invite some of mine,” Sasha quickly suggested. “Eren—”

“Hard pass.” He probably hated me, anyway. And mixing Jean and Eren in a small room would probably bring about chaos. No negative vibes in my dorm room.

“Huh. How about Krista?”

I shrugged. “I don’t have anything against her.” Hell, I didn’t have anything towards her, either. I barely knew her.

“Er, she may have a student government meeting, but, hey, it never hurts to ask!”

“Hmm, okay.” I tapped my chin. “She’s dating someone. I can’t remember the name for the life of me, but all I know is that she’s gay.”

“Ymir.”

The drug dealer Ymir? The one who was hosting the party? I was trying to put a face to the name. I don’t even think I met her. “Ymir…”

“I mean, if Krista is going, Reiner would want to tag along.” Sasha mused out loud. “And if Reiner goes, then Bert would want to join in…”

“Whatever.” I shrugged. “We’ll just put the word out there and whoever shows up, shows up.”

I guess Sasha found a really good way to get word around, because there were a few total strangers showing up to this pregame. It was kind of awkward having this little mini-party with the RA on patrol. We couldn’t be too boisterous, and we couldn’t let too many people in here to draw suspicion. Sasha was on guard as Connie charged a three bucks per shot, with a promise to give me thirty percent of the proceeds for hosting. It pissed some people off, but when you’re under twenty-one, beggars couldn’t be choosers. More and more people started to pour in, and the shots were getting poured even faster.

“Ah, fuck.” Connie groaned over the murmur of the group. “It’s snowing outside.”

Of course, whenever someone says it’s snowing, every head turns simultaneously to take a look. True to Connie’s word, it was snowing. It kind of explained the crowd - nobody wanted to risk driving cabs or Ubers in the snow, so there was nobody to drive drunk college kids. Even the cheap ones that would have walked to it couldn’t justify busting their ass on ice for a shitty house party. So, word got around the hall pretty fast that there were shots and good company on floor two. I worried that it was going to be harder and harder to keep from the RAs, and that I would be paying the price if this got busted. Sasha promised to keep better tabs on who came in.

A loud knock came shortly after nine. Sasha got on her tiptoes to look through the peephole as the room got quiet, as if we could all pretend the room was empty. Heh. With a grin, Sasha threw the door open and announced, “It’s Marco and Jean! Get inside!”

The two hustled in, and Sasha shut the door behind them. Marco came empty-handed, and Jean was carrying a stupid backpack. Where was he hiking to at nine o’clock at night? Whatever. They both strolled further into the belly of the beast. Once Jean was right next to me, he stopped.

“This is so weird,” Jean noted, slinging his backpack in front of him so he could grab a bottle from
the main compartment. He handed it off to me. “Anyway. I got you this weird cake-flavored vodka for your Christmas gift. Or whatever.”

I blinked, turning the bottle over in my hand. “Why’d you get cake flavored?”

“Birth of Christ? I dunno.” He kicked at the ground with his foot. “A lot of vodka tastes like ass, and this one sounded sweet, so…”

Heh. I was really eager for a Christmas present. I didn’t think he’d actually do it. Actually, fuck that, I kind of expected more from a Christmas present. I was going to give him something completely, totally meaningful...to be determined later. But it would be really nice, and not just some shitty bottle of sugar water. But still, how stinkin’ cute. It was a nice gesture. I reached for an empty cup, trying to hide my blush. “Uh, here, pour me a shot.”

He shrugged and poured a small shot for me to drink. I downed it pretty easily until the aftertaste kicked in. My nose wrinkled, and my mouth was burning. “Blegh--”

“Does it taste like cake?”

I hissed and looked at the now-empty cup. I kept trying to wet my mouth in a futile attempt to water down the taste. “It tastes like really strong vodka.”

“Ah, well. We can’t all be winners--wait, what are you doing?” He asked as I poured another shot.

I shrugged. Idiot. “I’m just gonna drink until it tastes better?”

“Okay.” Jean grinned, raising his own glass before moving to another side of my room. “Uh, be careful.”

I decided to sip this shot rather than chug it. I found Marco, proudly took a sip from my cup, announced to him that “this will be a night to remember,” and then promptly forgot everything else that happened afterwards. Like, one minute I’m talking to Marco, and the next minute, I’m cold as shit, clutching my stomach, shaking, and crying into the drywall. Nothing hurt except for my stomach and my head. Oh, God, my head was pounding.

“Are you up?”

I held my breath. I glanced at the comforter, which was obviously Jean’s. This was not my wall. This was very much Jean’s wall. What the fuck did I do. What did I dooo?

I sniffled and wiped my nose. I didn’t want Jean to see me like this. I felt him turn over, his breath hot on my neck. “Hey, I’m sorry for tonight.”

I sniffled, trying to pull my blankets closer to my body. “I--It’s fine.”

“I might puke it back up,” I lamented. He stopped, sighed, and put the bottle on his nightstand. He climbed onto the bed. “Then let’s switch places.” He climbed over me, accidentally kneeing my thigh in the process, before he settled between me and the wall. “So you don’t throw up on me--”

I whined, clumsily clawing at my own back. “I--I need to take off my bra.” I was angry with myself and how useless my limbs were. All of my clothes were on, and my belt was buckled down on the fifth loop, just as it was yesterday. That was pretty relieving, but my body was still a disaster. I was
probably gonna die. “I can’t sleep with my bra on.”

“Er, I got it,” he awkwardly interjected.

He slid his hands underneath my shirt, careful not to touch my skin. After some fumbling and a quiet, “F-Fuck. I can do this,” it snapped open. I eased myself out of it, pulling it out of my shirt and dropping it onto the floor.

“Thank you.” I cooed, now snuggling comfortably into Jean’s bed.

“Would you, uh…” He stammered, “Would you actually want to sleep in one of my shirts instead? I figured jeans would be uncomfortable.”

“…If you don’t mind.” With that, he hoisted himself out of bed again. He stumbled in the dark towards his dresser and rifled through his belongings.

He held up two t-shirts that were too dark to see. “Uh...soccer jersey from when I was fat, or cool college t-shirt from this year?”

“Fat soccer jersey!” I smiled, reaching my arms out. “The bigger, the better! Gimme!”

“You couldn’t tell, but I just winked.”

“Ew.” I sat up pretty quickly, eager to get out of those tight jeans. I sat up a little too fast though.

“Augh…”

He tossed me his shirt and got back into his bed. “Do you want me to turn around?”

I didn’t know what I did in the past few hours. I trusted him enough to know that nothing sinister went down, but who knows what else I did? I probably threw up in his shoes or something, given how gross I felt. I just started to wrestle off my shirt. “At this point, I don’t really care.”

I felt him fall back against the bed as I started getting changed and kicking my clothes onto the floor. I couldn’t tell if he was looking at me or not, but I didn’t want to be obvious and turn around to look. I don’t think he was. It was too dark to even make anything out, anyway.

Once my clothes were in a messy pile on the floor, I tucked myself back into bed. Jean was right, the t-shirt was way comfier. Once I was more comfortable, he began rubbing my back in slow, warm rhythmic circles. I melted into his touch, wishing his palms would go under my shirt again. The more time I spent with him, the weirder the signals. By day, he kept his distance, refusing to touch me besides quick taps on my shoulder. By night, he was massaging my back, and generally managing to be the sweetest human being alive. It reminded me of Thanksgiving. “That feels really nice.”

“D-Don’t get any ideas.” He kept pressing into my back, regardless of his stutter. “I’m trying to keep you from getting sick. You’re here because you’re trashed.”

“Thank you for picking me up,” I sighed. “From...from…”

“Your room,” he said.

“B-But is there anyone--”

“Sasha offered to clean up and look after the fort, it’s fine.” He ran his fingers through my bangs, and that shut me up real quick. “Do you like when people play with your hair?”

I chewed my lip. What do I say? I twitched at the feeling of his fingertips touching my back as he ran
his fingers through my rat’s nest hair. “Okay.”

While combing my bed head with his fingers, he exhaled. “I'm sorry for getting you that vodka.”

Vodka…? Oh. “But that's my Christmas present.”

“Yeah,” he groaned and hugged me from behind. This was so strange. He rested his head on my upper back. His arms were wrapped around my waist. I rested my hands on top of his. “And I'm sure you wanted to spend Jesus’ special day being sick.”

I shrugged. Technically wasn't Christmas yet. I looked outside. There was an eerie orange glow. “Is it still snowing?”

“A little bit,” Jean replied. I recognized that glow anywhere - it was the color you get when the streetlamps outside reflect off of the snow on the ground. Everything was in orange and black, and it felt like time had stopped. I reluctantly broke away from Jean’s embrace to sit cross-legged on his bed to watch the last of the flurries fall to the ground. He sat up behind me and wrapped his arms again around my waist again, with one leg on either side of me. “You’re really gonna watch the snow?”

“Yeah. It’s always calmed me down.” He didn’t ask any more questions. He just sat with me. Watching the fall was helping me keep present. It helped keep me grounded to Earth. I don’t know how to explain it. It was just a way to see the time pass without staring at a digital clock until my eyes got bloodshot. It was almost like a cinemagraph, how the snow fell so fast juxtaposed with our still bodies.

“The vodka wasn’t my only present, right?”

“Probably not.”

“Cool.” I reached over and took another sip of my water. “I don’t know what I’m going to give you yet, but I want to do something really big.”

“Really?”

“Mm-hmm.” For some reason, I couldn’t hate Christmas. I really liked getting stuff. So, in order to receive cool shit, I had to give people cool shit, too. “I don’t know what yet, but it’ll come to me.”

With that, we enveloped ourselves in the quiet of the night again, watching the snow stack on the grass.

The light and quiet buzzing from Jean’s phone ripped me out of the moment. “Your phone is ringing.” I mumbled as I grabbed it from the nightstand. Text message from Potato Girl. “Who do you have saved as Potato Girl?”

“Sasha. She’s probably just wondering if you’re okay. You can ignore it.”

“Well, if she’s worried, I’m going to check what she said.” Lo and behold, it was a text message asking if I was okay. I sent back a simple “yes” and put the phone back down. I sighed.

“I think I blacked out.” I grumbled, struggling to remember anything from the “pregame.” I’m sure I was stating the obvious to Jean. I turned to face him to try to get a read on what information he had. He just offered me a shrug and poked my shoulder with his nose in an attempt to get me to turn my head back around.
“You’re fine,” he quickly assured me. “You got a little sick, but other than that, you’re fine. You kind of...eh. I’ll talk about it in the morning.”

Fine. I sighed, and reclined back into his chest. “I don’t care what anyone says. No matter how old I get, I think I’m always going to love the snow.”

“Hmm.”

“You know, when I was little?” I laughed, “Whenever I had a snow day, I used to go out to the yard and I would spend all morning making a little city. I used to like, dig out paths with my dad’s shovel and build little shops. They were just big lumps with like, logos drawn on them with my finger...and I always used to build a tunnel so only I could go into my city.”

“That’s cute.”

“I’m sure my dad could have just, you know, stepped over the bridge.” I yawned. “I built all of this stuff we didn’t have in Sina. I had like, a French bakery. It had to be French, specifically...” My blinks got longer as my eyes got heavier. What else did I used to make...? Oh. Right! “I always built a cafe too! Where they would sell really good hot chocolate with marshmallows...you know, Mormons and all--”

“A cafe where?”

“In my little snow city, Jean.”

“Oh, you’re still talking about that?” He asked. Before I could express my hurt, he clarified, “I’m listening. You were just super quiet for a while before you talked about the coffee shop thing.”

I turned around to face him, rubbing my eyes. “Oh, shoot. Do you think I fell asleep?”

“I think you did.” He laid back down, settling under the covers. “C’mon, sweetheart. Time for bed.”

My heart grew three times bigger with that ‘sweetheart.’ I swallowed. “What?”

He didn’t answer. He just handed me a corner of his blanket. I took it and nodded, snuggling back up into Jean until I drifted back to sleep.

It was still dark when I woke up, but it seemed like the sun was going to rise any minute. I checked the time. 5:57 AM. Christ. Jean and I were still both smushed inside his bed together. I had a pounding headache, and a horrible case of morning breath, and a really bad appetite, and also, I wanted to puke and die all at once. Marco was across the room, presumably still asleep. “I forget what happened last night.”

“It’s whatever.” His reply was curt, even, and surprisingly awake. He was facing the wall with three fourths of the blankets lying on top of him.

“I mean, I remember when we switched places last night, but nothing really before that.”

“What else can I really say?” Jean sighed. “You just drank. A lot.”

“How much?”

“You took four Christmas shots.”

“That’s it? Total?” I blinked. “That’s not too--”
“Within ten minutes.” He pulled even more of the blanket on top of him.

“Oh. That’s bad.”

“Yeah. You were pretty sick.”

“That is very bad.”

He tried to turn and face me, but his blanket burrito was limiting his movement. “Do you think I hate you?”

_Sometimes_. “What? No.”

“You said so last night.” He curled up more in his burrito, giving up on his turn and staying put. “You were going to sleep on the floor, but you started crying--”

“Oh, God, I cried?” I already knew there was that one I woke up crying. My dumb ass cried twice? “I don’t remember any of that.”

“Oh, you cried hard,” he added. “And you said I put you on the floor because I didn’t like you enough to put you in my bed, so that’s why we’re cramped like this.”

“I do prefer this to the floor.”

“But I didn’t suggest it because I hate you, fucking Christ.” He groaned. “I helped you out of your room, I held your hair back while you threw up, I let you crash in my room. What else did you expect me to do?” I swallowed, and he took a deep breath. He rasped, “I want to go back to bed, okay? I didn’t sleep at all last night. I was _just_ starting to fall asleep when you started screaming...”

“I didn’t scream. How did I scream?”

“It’s whatever. Really,” he grumbled. “I think I helped you enough last night, right?”

I blinked. “What do you--”

“So you can get back to your room on your own?”

I frowned. This was getting nowhere. “You were so _sweet_ last night, why are you being such an asshole all of a sudden? Don’t act like a stranger.”

“I’m not acting like a stranger. I’m trying to take care of myself. _Goodnight._”

“You can’t pick and choose when you’re friends with--” Actually, on second thought, maybe exchanging backrubs and having weird sexual tension were not things that friends did. “--when you’re _friendly_ with someone else. You’re just going to kick me out? That’s it?”

“Because I’m trying to sleep.” He groaned. “You keep me up all night, yet you don’t let me sleep for five minutes?”

“Oh.” I shrugged. “Well, you can sleep all day, because I won’t be talking to you for a _long time_.”

“Ugh, come on,” he whined. “It’s still morning. It’s too early for you to be starting shit.”

“I can pick and choose when I’m nice too.” I hopped out of bed and pushed my hair out of my face. I looked outside; the snow from last night already melted. There were some white patches on the grass, but the roads were pretty much clear. I carefully matched my feet to my shoes. I was still a
little wobbly, and still getting used to being awake, alive, and relatively sober. “So I’m not going to be nice to you for the rest of the day. Maybe for the rest of my life.”

“How dramatic.”

“You don’t know how dramatic I can be!”

“The lack of self-awareness is amazing.”

I woke up extremely early today. I must have only slept for an hour or two. At least that meant I had a lot of time to myself today, and I would probably spend that time hating my life choices and wishing I was dead. Even after I slammed Jean’s bedroom door shut and headed to my own surprisingly neat room, I was lingering on the events of this weekend. My annoyance kindled a hot fire of rage in my gut, and I had to find a way to exert it without putting my fist through a wall. Plus, apparently the RAs caught wind of last night’s cramped festivities, and scheduled me and Sasha to go to some seminar about the dangers of alcohol. I learned this through a very professional, albeit cold email. Between the pseudo-Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, the red cups stuffed into my wastebasket, and the mysterious bottle of cake vodka I found stashed inside one of my riding boots, I realized the narrative of last night was something I desperately needed.

I pieced together the night’s events from stories and anecdotes. Jean’s perspective was unwanted, so I didn’t hear anything from him. Marco, I guess, could sense all the stress building inside of my body. He was always weirdly empathetic and all-knowing like that. He invited me out for a cup of coffee to help me feel better, and when I told him I didn’t feel like getting dressed to go out, he said we could just pick it up and take it back to hang out at my room.

As I was removing my makeup - something I should have done last night and not this morning - Marco texted me. “Sorry i didn’t ask you earlier while you were in the room. There was this weird tension i didn’t want to interupt”

It wasn’t his fault there was tension. At least someone else noticed it.

When Marco arrived at my door, I grabbed one of the many bags that were stashed in our closet. They were small grocery bags, filled with cups and bottles and tied off. I found them hidden under a blanket. When I answered the door for Marco, I was holding two of the six bags under there. He turned red and grabbed the rest, looping them onto his wrists. “S-Sorry. We had to get them off of the floor, but we couldn’t carry them out to the dumpster so late at night…”

“I don’t care, it's fine.” I groaned. “We already have to go to a seminar about drinking, so…”

“Oh. I'm sorry.”

“Yeah, well. It’s not your fault.” The trip to the coffeeshop was rather silent. I was pretty deep in thought. My main thought being, what the fuck was I going to do with Jean? I had a lot of homework on top of being really mad at him. I frowned. It’s so hard to be petty!

“You okay?”

I looked up to stare at Marco, puzzled. “Er...yeah. I'm fine. Were you talking to me?”

He smiled. “No, you just looked...concerned.”

“Oh.” I turned back to look in front of me, blinking. “Yeah. I’m...I’m fine, I’m just thinking.”

Once we got to the shop, I picked up the biggest coffee possible, with a shot of espresso. Marco said
it was called a black eye. Marco ordered himself a plain roast, no sugar and no cream. He said he
needed the pick-me-up, too.

“How do you feel from last night? Better, hopefully?”

“Uh, sure. Maybe?” How did I feel last night? I shook my head. “Sorry, I’m kind of struggling to
figure out how I got to this point.”

“Oh, did you black out?”

“I remember telling you that last night was gonna be fun.” I smirked at the irony. “Then, I woke up
crying in Jean’s bed.”

“Well, you didn’t--”

Stop right there. “Yeah, I know he didn’t. I’m just trying to figure out how to fill in the gaps.”

“I can probably help,” Marco piped up. I sat up, eager to hear. “I was with Jean most of the night, so
you know, by association, with you too--”

“Great, great, great. Tell the story.” I rested my chin on my hands, ready to hear.

According to Marco, Connie came later than Sasha asked him to. His excuse was that the bus route
connecting his house to the school was delayed. As an apology, he brought a variety box of tacos
from Taco Bell. According to Marco, I pushed Reiner out of the way for a Doritos taco with nacho
cheese. I never had one before, and I’m not into eating messy foods around others, let alone some
processed nonsense from Taco Bell. Yet, I apparently took one bite of that taco and had cried “as if I
had seen the face of God in a hard corn shell.” Marco’s words, not mine. Then, I sucked the nacho
cheese off of my fingers while making uncomfortable eye contact with not only him, but Reiner and
Jean as well.

“Is Reiner the tall blonde guy?” I asked.

“Yeah. You don’t know who Reiner is?”


I guess I got thirsty, because Sasha said I slammed another shot of tequila and chased it with a
generous sip of her Baja Blast. About half an hour later, I was dancing with Marco to some trap shit
some rando put on. I started lightly grinding on him, because fuck it, the night was young. Why not
live a little? At least, I guess that’s what I was thinking. He didn’t put his hands on me, being a
gentleman and all. I told him I was sorry if I made things awkward, but he swears it wasn’t that big
of a deal to him. I wasn’t so sure about his sincerity, but I took it.

Marco said the weirdest part of the night is when Jean didn’t want to get sick from eating a whole
taco because it was “too spicy.” What a pussy, right? We had a good laugh over that. I got really
excited about eating the other half of his taco while still continuing to grind on Marco.

Trust me, I provided Marco with many embarrassed apologies. Also, I noted that I would much
rather have died than have to live with what I did.

“Aw, c’mon. That’s exaggerating.” He offered a smile out of sympathy.

“What happened after that?”
“Uh, nothing exciting. We didn’t end up going to Ymir’s, obviously,” Marco recalled. “Jean stayed back to take care of you, and I stayed back at your dorm to help kick people out with Sasha and Connie. Then we cleaned the place up a bit for you.”

“Mmph.” I fell back onto his shoulder, careful not to spill my coffee. “You’re the nicest person.”

“Uh, th-thanks. It’s just something anyone would do, really.” He stammered, taking a sip of coffee to soothe his nerves.

“Everyone did have the chance to help me out, but you were one of the only people that did.”

“Well, Jean did,” Marco offered. I rolled my eyes at the sheer mention of his name. “So did Sasha and Connie...but Jean…”

“Ugh, stop saying his name.”

“I just...hm.” Marco scratched his chin. “Just maybe...you could be a little more patient?”

I rolled my eyes again. I swear, they were going to fall out of my head. Marco followed it up. “Uh, you did...Jean had you sleep on the floor at first because it was cooler and you had more room. Then you asked him if you hated him and you swore ‘oh my God he hates me,’ and uh...I think that shook him up a bit.”

I took an angry sip of coffee as Marco continued, “He cares about you, but he’s not the type to show it. I think he’s trying his best, but you keep...expecting something else? Then you get mad when he doesn’t do the thing you expect him to do.”

“Because he could do that ‘something else’ very easily.” Like not be a dick to me in the morning? Thank you very much!

Marco sighed, tapping his foot as he searched for the right words to say. Once he strung them together in his head, he told me, “Listen, Jean is an honest, kind person, and sometimes he doesn’t know the best way to show it. You just have to meet him halfway and that starts with saying you’re sorry.”

No! Hitch Deliss doesn’t say she’s sorry! I mean, I cost Jean a night of sleep and insisted that he hated me. Maybe he did. I wasn’t ruling that out! So what if he bought me vodka and held my hair back after I drank all that vodka and gave me a place to slee--ooh. Oh, yeah, maybe I was a little selfish, but he still had...no right...for me to freak out on him in the morning when he asked me to leave so he could sleep.

Oh.

This was bad. The only thing worse than taking advantage of a friend was losing your dignity and admitting you were wrong. I like to think I don’t make mistakes. That all of my shortcomings are due to an unfair society, unrealistic expectations, and the flaws of other people. Going back up to Jean’s room to cry about how sorry I was was going to give him all the power. Since I was trying to get him under my thumb, I needed the high ground in our relationship. I grumbled and tossed my coffee cup into the wastebasket. “I’ll forgive him but it doesn't have to be today! Or even tomorrow--”

“Does that mean you realized you're wrong, but you don't want to admit it?” Marco offered a wan, exasperated smile.

Damn he was good. “No! It means I need to calm down.” And think of a way to apologize.
Marco left shortly after that, allowing me to figure out what I wanted to do with the rest of my very long day. I figured I could somehow let out some unbridled rage at the art museum today. But first, I wanted to hit up the gym and work off the toxins that were probably still in my body. It probably wasn’t the best idea since there wasn’t much in my stomach, but I let it happen.

I put my jacket and keys in the cubbyhole and turned around to find an open elliptical machine. The gym was fairly empty except for some dude pressing weights, and who was that I spotted in the distance but Marlowe Sanders, who was for some reason...doing homework in the gym? I had a lot of questions to ask, so I just went up to him to ask them. “What are you doing here?”

Without looking up from his computer, he replied, “work study.”

“You do work study and you work at the gym?” I smirked.

“Why is that so funny to you?”


“What, you think I should work at the library or something?”

“Hey.” I pointed at him, halting his speech. “Some pretty sexy people work at libraries.”

“Why are you so passionate about librarians?”

I rolled my eyes. “Sweetheart, I worked at a library back home. Deadass,” I added in a hushed tone, because I didn’t want to be branded as the school nerd, “And for a few years, too.”

“So, you’re good at reading?”

“Excellent.” I told him, kissing my thumb as I thought of what to say next. Well, speaking of reading… “How is your essay coming along?”

“It’s going. I’m working on it right now. Why?”

“Can I read what you have so far or something?” I asked. “I’ll scratch your back, you scratch mine? That kind of deal?”

“Like, right now?” He narrowed his eyes, confused.

“No, not right now. I wanna work out. But like, the day before we can show each other what we have and read it over. We’ll do edits, and then submit them afterwards.”

He looked at his screen, pensive, before turning back to me. “You said you’re good at reading?”

I rolled my eyes. “I said I’m excellent. Pay attention.”

“That sounds fine. We can meet at the common space back at the dorms and get it squared away.”

Yes! Progress! Now all I had to do was...finish the paper. Shoot. Whatever. “What hall do you live in? I live at Schultz, so if you’re somewhere else, you may have to sign me in.”

“Reiss Hall,” he said. “Honors housing.”

“Wow, fuck off,” I spat. Reiss Hall. Sure, it had a communal kitchen and a better location on campus, but it was lame. I wouldn’t want to move in there even if I was an honors kid. “I know it’s honors housing, you don’t have to say it like that. We could always meet in the library or something
like that if that’s easier.”

“I mean, I have no problem meeting in--”

“Why would you even say ‘honors’ like that?” I rolled my eyes. “I could’ve been in the honors program.”

“Then why aren’t you?” I wanted to hit him again. God, my life was so stressful. Was it really that hard to believe that I got decent grades in high school? I wanted to call him a prick, and a million other names. Why aren’t I in the honors program? It’s not that I didn’t want to be an honors student, I just didn’t want the so-called “perks” of the honors program. I didn’t want to live with all the mouthbreathers. Their quiet hours started at eight at night. Eight! Who wanted to live with a bunch of squares for a year? Not me. Not this girl. And how dare he give me so much attitude for it.

“I didn’t want to dirty up the place,” I pouted. “With my inferior brain.”

“What?”

“Me getting invited into the program was probably just a fluke.” I laughed. “Because you can’t be pretty and smart, right?”

“We could just not do this at all.” He looked back down at his laptop. “I don’t have to proofread your paper. I’m not obligated to.”

He was right. I could always ask Marco to do it. Marco was good with words, but I didn’t want him to be “my essay guy,” you know? Especially after all the nice shit he had done for me lately. “Well, I thought you were really smart, is all. I wanted to get your opinion.”

“If you’re going to give me an attitude, I’m not going to do it,” he said back. That’s a two-way street, buddy. Uuuugh.

“Whatever, dude,” I groaned. “Can I just see what you have so far? I want to make sure I’m doing my paper right so I’m not caught off guard.”

He sighed. “If you’d like.” He turned the laptop screen to face me. “Another set of eyes wouldn’t hurt.”

The first thing I noticed wasn’t the content of the essay, but the typeface. Helvetica? Bold? I frowned, selected the entire essay, and started to play around with the typefaces. Marlowe’s back straightened as he tried to snatch his Macbook back. “What are you doing with--”

“God, you stupid--” I groaned, scrolling through the myriad of typefaces I had at my disposal. I don’t think Helvetica Bold was the required typeface. You’d be an idiot to make it so. “You don’t use a sans serif typeface for body text...especially one as thick as this.”

“What’s wrong with it?” He looked offended that I was trying to make his hard work readable. His lips were shut into a tight, straight, emotionless line. “It’s bold. It pops off of the paper. There was no font requirement, so I figured I could have fun with it.”

“You get to choose a ‘fun’ typeface and you choose fucking Helvetica?” This was appalling. He was definitely just as serious as he looked, if not more so. He just wasn’t smart...well, he was. In almost every field we discussed, except for the history of typography. I would milk this for as much as I could. “You never use such a bold typeface for such a small point size. Never. Ever.”

“Let go,” he snapped, but I was still pressing keys. Garamond...must find Garamond.
“If you choose Helvetica Bold, the ink is going to bleed and make it unreadable,” I spat, searching through his typefaces. Some of them were truly atrocious. Footlight, Franklin Gothic (a beacon of light in this mess of a menu), and what in the everloving fuck was Funky Sans? Whatever. I eventually found Garamond. “If you choose something light and with serifs, it’s easier to distinguish between the letters and it’s easier to read.”

“What’s a serif?”

Oh my God. Whatever. What-fucking-ever. I didn’t have time to explain how fucking fonts worked. He was so weird. “That’s...whatever. Anyway.” It was pretty fun pushing his buttons, though. I could make a day of that, easily. “If you wanted someone to go with you to the art museum to look at those paintings, I haven’t gone yet. We could go together—”

“How have you not gone to the museum yet?” Boy, he was crazy about criticizing me, wasn’t he? He didn’t even thank me for educating him on his font choice. “That was the first thing you had to do to write the paper.”

“Well, yeah, but...” I shrugged. “I didn’t really feel like going so I just Googled all the pictures. I figured...”

“Well, I already went,” he said firmly, plugging his headphones into the jack. “And I’m sure everyone else in that class will tell you the same.”

“But—”

“You’re just going to have to go by yourself.” He popped his earbuds into his ears. “I have to get back to work. I’ll see you later.”

I was so close to pulling my hair out of my head. First Jean, and then Marlowe? Marlow Sanders? It seems the button-pushee became the button-pusher. Fuck my life. Why was everyone acting so inconvenient today? I was so close to putting my fist through the wall. I went through my quick workout to get myself in the cold-working-bitch mood again after my mess of a night in. While I was walking home, I took my phone out to give Sasha a call.

Once she answered the phone, I asked, “Hey Sasha, have you ever been to the art museum?”

“No, I’m going to the Christmas Village with Connie!” She whined.

“It’s open until Christmas, can’t you go tomorrow?”

“The Gingerbread House Contest th--”

“You know what? Fine. It’s fine.” I really didn’t want to, but I guess I’d go by myself. “Don’t worry about it. Enjoy your...Christmas thing.”

When I got back to my dorm, I jogged up to Marco’s room and knocked on the door. Just really quick. I’ll ask him a question super quick. “Marco, are you doing anything like, right now?”

He called through the door, “Yeah, I’m leaving for the arboretum.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“God...ugh, god fucking dammit...” I mumbled. “Never mind, I wanted to go to the art museum today...fuck. Well, thank you anyway.”

“I can go to the art museum with you,” Jean’s voice rang out, his stupid ugly voice. Goddammit.

“You can choke, Jean Kirschtein!” Rejections from Sasha, and now Marco, and...yeah, that exhausted all of my options. Shit, I had very few friends. I sighed. “I’m going by myself.”

“Um,” Marco interrupted, throwing open his door and nearly smacking me in the nose. He was wearing pajama pants and a button-down shirt. A very mismatched get-up. “Agh, sorry, but if you wanted to go tomorrow --”

I sighed. “No, I’m in that mindset where I wanna go today. Have fun with your plants, I guess.”

After a quick shower to scrub all of my sweat off, I got all pretty for the museum and a possible stop at Starbucks afterwards. Of course, I just got all sweaty again after parking in bumfuck-nowhere to go to the stupid museum. The walk to the museum from the road I parked on was a long one. I parked so far because I didn’t feel like paying a quarter for every ten minutes I wanted to be at the fucking museum. Fuck parking meters, honestly, and fuck this entire day. There was a nice park surrounding the museum that I had to trod through, freckled with sculptures. If it wasn’t a sculpture of some dead white guy I didn’t know, it was some abstract mess of steel and stone that I also didn’t know. I stopped by the first one I saw, trying to make sense of the iron, orange slabs on the grass titled “The Phoenix”. The next one was an aging bronze bust of “Sir William Fancyfuckfust the Fourth” who probably owned a fuckton of slaves. Neither of my attempts to analyze them were very successful.

Frustrated and already sick of today’s shit, I stomped towards the building and got my free student pass to tour the exhibits. I grabbed a map and made a straight route for the Impressionist exhibit. Let’s get this over with. I figured I’d snap a few photos of some choice pieces, and draw my bullshit art critic opinions when I got home. “The blue walls signify sadness, the white dress symbolizes the woman’s virginity.” Whatever. Art is subjective, right? I could pull anything from my ass and call it “meaningful analysis.”

I maneuvered my way to the painting through this labyrinth of a gallery. If I’m being completely honest, it was because I was looking for a giant canvas when in reality, it was only like, two feet tall. It was bordered with an ornate, golden frame. I took one quick photo for my project before taking a seat on the bench in front of it. I may as well try to see if I “felt” something now that I was staring at the painting in person, not through a computer screen.

I swear, I stared at the stupid painting for about ten minutes. I mean, my “fake” analysis was complete. It didn’t particularly interest me besides the colors and the fact the subject matter wasn’t boring as shit. God bless Berthe Morisot for not painting the other boring impressionist fare. No lame-ass landscapes, no fat ugly babies. She just painted ladies who were rich out the ass, doing normal rich people things. My painting was about a girl fixing up her make-up in the bathroom. It was mundane, but the only thing I could somewhat relate to.

Oh, look, another old white lady holding another ugly baby. For real, I don’t want a fucking baby. Who does? I could write about my bullshit “delicate motherly instinct,” having a vagina and all, but I think we all knew that paper would be a total farce. And what could I say about some stupid painting about flowers? “They’re pretty?” That’s why I was eager to write about this specific piece. Besides, my professor is a dude. Maybe I could toss in an extra hundred words about “the private intimacies of womanhood” since this lady was in her bathroom. “Morisot captures a quiet, personal moment for
this woman in a room designed for privacy, and displays this to the world through a thoughtful visual.” Ooh, artsy.

Maybe I really did like this painting. For real. In a gallery of splotchy lavender fields and shoddy sunsets, it was relieving to see something somewhat relatable, despite being like, a trillion years old. The light blues didn’t convey “sadness and anguish” like I said in my hashed analysis. Despite the fact you couldn’t see her face, the colors communicated a sense of peaceful, comfortable isolation. As I jotted down my notes, I secretly hoped I was looking at this painting right. I mean, Google didn’t really help when I searched “how do you look at art?” Or, “How do I feel something?” Maybe the second search was a little too vague, but either way, I was left in the dark. Maybe if his attitude had improved, I’d ask Jean to double-check.

Actually, no. Fuck Jean. If how he treated me was any sign, he’s fucking clueless about women. Mr. “Hurr-Hurr I Had Sex Before” Kirschtein. Mr. “I Can’t Be Cordial With a Girl Without Either Popping a Boner or Screaming” Kirschtein. I have eyes. I could explain what women do, and how the make-up ritual has rarely changed in the past few centuries. Damn, I really needed to fix up my report so it would meet my standards.

What should I do next? Should I walk through the rest of the museum and further this “artistic awakening?” Uh...no. No, I couldn’t afford wasting time or risk losing my motivation to write. I should have been editing tomorrow’s paper right now. I took a couple extra photos of the painting before hustling out of the museum, but not before I took a quick picture of one of those fat Cassatt babies. I sent the photo to Jean with the caption “haha thats you” before finding my way back to the large museum lobby. With every step I took, the sound of my footsteps reverberated through the building. It was a pretty place after all, and being able to hear your own footsteps in such an institution felt a little surreal, but I was too eager to get something done this semester to truly appreciate the beauty of it. With a skip in my step and a newfound sense of optimism, I made my way back to my truck. I brainstormed ideas for what to write in my paper the whole way home. I could smell that A+ already.

I picked up my laptop from my dorm and headed to the cafe to get some productive juices flowing over a cup of hot coffee. I was blessed enough to get a nice seat on the armchair nearest the wall outlet. I sank into the used and abused cushion, cracked my knuckles, and headed right to work on transforming this Masterpiece of Bullshittery into a Wise, Insightful Analysis Worthy of Reward.

The price of this iconic work of American scholarship was: three cups of coffee, three creamers, nine sugar packets, and an incredible backache. But God, hitting that “Submit” button was perhaps the most relieving moment of my entire life.

As soon as I was relieved of my duties to write a paper, the feeling of hunger settled in my stomach - a hunger that the coffeeshop’s scones and pastries couldn’t satisfy. I wanted something filling and salty and greasy and gross, and the best place to find salty, greasy, gross food was the dining hall.

I got a plate of chicken fingers and fries, along with a massive glob of honey mustard. My body was not going to thank me for that down the line, but I had the right to treat myself. I was debating bringing it back to my room to eat in bed and push that “fuck it, I earned this” vibe even further. But I saw Connie sitting in a booth next to Marco, who was shoved between the wall and this spry, animated young man. Jean was sitting across from them, his left hand holding up his chin, the fingers on his right hand tapping away on the tabletop. I swallowed my pride and approached the group.

“Well, well, well, look who’s alive,” Connie announced to the table.

I gave one of those smiles where I kind of tucked in my lips, kind of embarrassed and hoping that nobody would remember my drunken escapades last night - especially Jean, but there was no way in
hell he was forgetting anything. I awkwardly nodded towards the empty space next to where Jean was sitting on the bench and asked, “Can I…?”

Without saying a word, Jean scooted over to give me more room. I mumbled, “Thank you.” After a short pause, I meekly added, “For, um...all of it. So…”

“It’s fine.” Phew. That was it. That was my apology. That’s as much as I was willing to put out there. It was done, and it was relatively painless. I didn’t even have to say I was sorry. Hitch Deliss was back in business. “What are you doing on campus, Connie?”

“I couldn’t leave Marco and Horseface hanging out by themselves.” Connie shook Marco’s shoulder, to Jean’s visible annoyance.

“Nope. He couldn’t,” Jean mumbled as Marco tried to smile his way through the conversation.

“Real talk: I gotta stock up for Rocket.” He held up a Ziploc bag of hard-boiled eggs that were clearly swiped from the salad bar.

“How was the museum?” Marco asked me, clearly trying to drown out Connie’s weird ferret talk.

“Good. In and out.” I cracked my back. “I finished that paper, though!”

Marco sat up and smiled. “That’s great--”

“Anyway. Peep this.” Connie clapped his hands together and began his proposal. “Mr. and Mrs. Springer are up in the mountains for the weekend, so I’ve decided to take advantage of the situation. Party. 10 o’clock. Tonight. My place.”

“No.” Jean interjected. “Boil some eggs while they’re gone.”

Connie continued as if there was no interruption, but he spoke a little louder. “Five dollars at the door. All the booze you could drink. Theme is middle school.”

“How was the museum?” Marco asked me, clearly trying to drown out Connie’s weird ferret talk.

“Middle school?” Marco blinked.

“Middle school?” Marco blinked.

“I’m in.” I announced, nodding decisively.

“Middle school?” Marco blinked.

“That sounds awful.” Jean said.

“I’m in.” I announced, nodding decisively.

Connie gave me a thumbs up, but Jean shook his head. “We’ll think about it. Okay?”

“Good.” Connie checked his watch before smacking Jean on the back and standing up. “I’m gonna go home.”

As soon as Connie was out of earshot, I asked Jean, “Why do you wanna avoid this party so bad?”

“Connie’s parties always have the wrong company.” Jean sighed. “They’re boring. The only thing he can do is keep the taps running but that’s it.”

I scoffed. “So what, you’re going to spend your night alone in your room? That’s boring, too.”
“Better than going out of my way to go to a party that is middle school themed.” He argued.

“You didn’t even go to middle school.” Marco took a sip of his drink. “You can live vicariously through us or whatever.”

“Yeah, Jean!” I exclaimed. “You have no excuse!”

“I don’t need an excuse to say I don’t wanna go.”

I groaned, wiping my mouth with my napkin before tossing it onto my empty plate. “Whatever, Jean. I mean, you didn’t go out last night, so I figured you could go tonight.”

“Because I spent all last night making sure you didn’t get written up.” He sighed. “If I took care of you last night, you shouldn’t get drunk tonight.”

“I wasn't planning on it anyway.” I crossed my arms. “Don't go around saying that, by the way.”

“Trust me, everyone already knows.”

“Mmph.” I groaned, leaning back in my seat. Well, shit. “Just don’t bring it up again.”

“Sure.”

“Ever.”

“Okay, I promise.”

That night, we had a quick pregame at my place. None of us really got dressed up, either. If we dressed true to the theme, we’d be rolling around in Heelies wearing ill-fitting jeans and “hilarious” bedazzled t-shirts. We figured we’d be middle schoolers in spirit. It was just the three of us this time to pregame, not a bunch of random strangers. When I say quick, I really do mean quick. Jean and Marco each had a beer, I had single sip before feeling grossed out by the taste of hops. Since I was driving, I didn’t want to go overboard anyway.

Connie’s house felt like it was halfway between school and Jean’s house. It was in a weird area of the city that probably would have been impossible to walk to. I doubted many people were willing to get a ride or pay the price of an Uber to get here tonight. We parked about a block away from the house, and followed the noise of a muffled bassline towards Connie’s rowhome. When we found it, all of the curtains were drawn. Connie and Sasha were casually sitting on the porch, keeping an eye out for cops, or even worse, trashed guests ready to fucking explode.

“Hey, Connie.” Jean tried to walk past Connie at the door, but Connie wouldn’t budge, blocking the front door completely.

“Yikes.” He grimaced. “Guys pay seven dollars.”

“Oh, you’re fucking kidding me.” Jean rolled his eyes as Marco reached into his wallet. “I gotta pay for a party I don’t even want to go to?”

“I wanna go.” Marco said, handing Connie seven bucks in exact change. Connie nodded and marked Marco’s hand with a smiley face in black marker. “He said it costed money, Jean.”

“Yeah, he said five bucks, and I still didn’t want to pay it!”

“Yeah, I’m going, too.” I told Jean, fishing through my purse for the small wad of cash I stashed inside.
“Ladies go in for free!” Sasha gleefully shoved Connie aside to let Marco and me pass her and into the mudroom of her boyfriend’s house.

“You gotta be joking.” Jean sighed, left in the cold as Connie blocked the door again. “I don’t even have my wallet, Connie. Dude, we’ve known each other for ever--”

“Kegs cost money, Jean!” Sasha interjected. “No if’s, and’s, or but’s!”

Connie added, “We accept Paypal and Venmo, too.”

“Jesus, you accept credit cards at your house party?!” He groaned, before sighing. “Listen. You both know I’m good for seven dollars.”

“But we need the seven dollars now.”

“No weaseling your way out of this one, Jean!” Sasha firmly crossed her arms.

He turned to me. “Hitch, can you just spot me?”

I scowled. “Just pay with your credit card.”

“You have money on you! I didn’t expect to be billed at a house party! Hitch, for Christ’s sake--”

“Maybe I want cheese fries later,” I shrugged, playing with the strap of my purse.

“Jimmy G’s has five-dollar steaks after midnight,” Marco chimed in.

“Yeah.” I turned back to Jean. “I think I’ll take the five dollar cheesesteak.”

“You’d rather have a cheesesteak,” He groaned. “Than me.”


“How am I supposed to go in?”

“You can go home.”

“Fine. Fine.” Jean grumbled, taking his phone out and grumbling, “It’s gonna get billed to my fuckin’ card...for a party ...”

Once Jean got the go-ahead, he joined us inside. Because he was a constant source of negative energy in my life, he told me, “Those cheesesteaks are cheap because they’re the leftovers.”

“Shut up and just enjoy yourself.”

We all shed our coats and tossed them upstairs on Connie’s bed, praying they would be safe for the night. After we got back downstairs, we saw Connie and Sasha inside, starting to enjoy themselves at the party. Still bitter he had to pay to enter, Jean broke away from our group and went off on his own. I took the opportunity to survey the crowd. Eren and Mikasa were here along with their blonde friend. Eren’s presence made me a little nervous, but I felt like as long as I kept him and Jean apart, we’d be peachy. I didn’t see a “tall blonde guy” here either, so I was relieved not to have to deal with the awkwardness that was seeing Reiner. Would I apologize, and then introduce myself? Man, I don’t know. I decided I wasn’t going to talk to him, at all, ever. Reiner would not be in the narrative of my life from this point forward so I could try to live with myself, guilt-free. I still kind of wished I was dead after last night, or at the very least in another country so I could start a fresh, new life with a new identity and no record of my past embarrassments.
Still deep in thought, I felt Connie nudge my shoulder. “Do you wanna go see Rocket?” He smirked, and continued to nudge both me and Marco.

“The ferret?” Marco bit his lip, weighing his options. “Well...kinda.”

“Good.” Connie put his finger to his lips, judging Marco. “You have a calming presence. I wanna make sure he’s doing okay with all this noise. Hitch? Sasha?”

Pet dander, weird smells? “Nope.”

Connie clearly took offense, heading up the stairs while saying, “Your presence is a little negative, anyway.” I rolled my eyes as Connie turned towards his girlfriend. “Saaaaaasha?”

“Nope. I’ll visit Rocket later.” She bounced on her heels as Marco and Connie climbed the stairs to go visit the ferret.

Once they were out of sight, I turned to Sasha and asked, “Who is watching the door if you’re here?”

“Reiner and Bert offered to guard the door for a little bit.” Sasha explained. “I think Bertholdt is bummmed that Annie didn’t show up.”

Thank God. I guess I wouldn’t be going near the door for a little while.

“Are you looking for Jean?”

“Yeah.” I frowned. “Can you ask him where he is?”

She turned towards the door and gave an apathetic shrug. “I'm gonna tell him you're looking for him.”

“Word it differently. That sounds clingy.” I chided her while scanning the crowd. Plot twist: I was clingy, and I really wanted to spend the night with Jean.

Reading her text out loud, Sasha typed, “Jean...your...girl...friend--”

“Word it differently again.”

She exhaled loudly out of her nose while hitting the backspace button. She read out loud, “Jean. Where are you? You disappeared.” She turned to me and added, “Frowning emoji.”

“Good. Send it.”

Jean’s response was quick. Those three little bouncing dots popped up immediately. “Tell hitch to calm down, potato girl”

Sasha looked at me. “Am I Potato Girl? Or are you Potato Girl?”

“Clearly you.” I shook my head. I was confused, maybe even offended. “Why would that be me? He has you in his phone as Potato Girl.”

“He still has me in his phone as Potato Girl?” She frowned. She looked down at her drink. “I thought everyone forgot about that.”

Disinterested, and for some reason disgusted, I didn’t press any further.

“Hey, you fucking wet blankets.” Connie was standing on top of the stairs. He yelled through
cupped hands, “We’re gonna play spin the bottle!”

The party was so small and intimate, we had to play. I mean, I really wanted to. It was going to be fun. But not all of us (Jean) were so eager. He took a quick survey of the room, took another sip of his shitty beer, and walked towards the kitchen. Not on my watch.

I chased him down and grabbed his arm. “Hey! Come have fun with us.”

He blankly replied, “No.”

“You could kiss a pretty girl,” I teased. I playfully rolled my eyes, jokingly pretending to weigh my options in my head. “There’s some pretty boys here, too…”

“Or one of the million mouthbreathers sitting in the circle.” Before taking another sip of beer, he added, “I’m an experience.”

What a party pooper. “The reason nobody has experienced you since school started is because we all think you’re fucking weird.”

“We’re all at least eighteen.” Jean groaned, but still taking a seat on the floor with his legs criss-crossed. “We could hire strippers. We could buy tobacco. We could buy lottery tickets. We could vote. Literally all of those options are a million times better than playing spin the fucking bottle.”

“But spin the bottle is fun.” I insisted, poking him in the ribs.

“Have you ever played it?” Jean leaned back on his hands. “It’s only good when you follow it up with birthday cake and pizza.”

“Oh, fuck, we should have ordered pizza,” Connie chimed in.

“I want cake…” Sasha whined, sighing solemnly as she stared at the table.

“You charged seven dollars a head,” Jean grumbled. “You can afford a cake.”

“What was that, Jean?”

“Nothing.”

Connie handed Jean the bottle, but he didn’t take it. He just took a sip from his cup while Connie insisted, “Just for that, you have to start.”

“I don’t want to go first.”

“Don’t be a party pooper, just spin it!” I complained. “C’mon, c’mon, c’mon.”

He gave it a quick flick of the wrist. We eagerly watched as it began to slow. It landed one one person, standing and apparently not even facing the circle. Whose boots are those? My eyes traveled up her leather brown boots, her dark blue jeans, her white blouse, her red scarf…oh, fuck. Connie shouted, “Mikaaaaaaasa!”

She was standing, and didn’t really look like she knew what was going on in the first place. Jean kept stammering “I--I didn’t mean--”

Sasha and Connie were pushing them both to get in the closet. Mikasa rolled her eyes and asked a very angry Eren to hold her cup for her. Jean and Mikasa seemed to begrudgingly accept their fate as they were shoved into the hall closet. Connie shut the door behind them and yelled into his phone,
“Siri! Set a timer for seven minutes!”

Longest seven minutes of my life, actually. I nervously kept checking my static News Feed, the time, and my empty inbox until Connie’s phone chirped and the two were let out. When Connie threw the door open, the two were sitting on opposite sides of the closet, on their phones. Jean looked the same, and Mikasa’s lipstick looked pristine. Neither of them looked disheveled, or even happy. Good. I felt a wave of relief wash over me. As soon as Jean settled back into the circle, the game began again. Mikasa decided she was going to stand elsewhere.

“Hitch!” Connie yelled, pointing his finger uncomfortably close to my face. Oh, boy. Now I was nervous. I surveyed everyone around me. What if it landed on a girl? Who else was here? “Hitch, you have to spin it!”

“Sure.” I wanted to spin the bottle cautiously, perhaps so it landed on someone that didn’t know me so I could pretend to be way more mysterious and sultry than I already was. There were a few nameless boys in the circle that were passable. But then, instead of trying (and probably failing) to calculate my spin, I decided to just leave it to chance. I mean, how awkward could seven minutes in a closet really be? Jean and Mikasa didn’t even touch each other. I gave it a quick spin, and anxiously watched as the bottle spun in circles. It soon slowed, picking the lucky winner: Jean.

Of course. You can’t make this shit up, I swear. Fuck. I mean, it was entirely an accident. I just said I didn’t try to land on anyone specific! It was an accident...a good accident, but still a massive mistake. I felt like no matter what I did, God was just trying to smush Jean and me together while She went, “C’mon. Just kiss. Kiss. Kiss each other.” Fuck. Fuck!

“Jean!” Sasha gasped, her grin wide and open. “You two have to go into the closet!”

“Th-This is stupid!” Jean protested. “I’m not going in a second time.”

“Ya gotta, ya gotta! It’s the rules!” Sasha sang. I’m sure he would have fought harder, but he didn’t want to spill his beer. They shoved us right into the closet and slammed the door shut, nearly nabbing Jean’s fingers.

Jean hit the door with the side of his fist. “This isn’t fucking funny!”

Apparently, it was, because I could hear Connie and Sasha giggling from behind the door. Jean sighed and leaned against the wall with a thump, retiring from his quest to find some way to get out of this situation. He looked at me and raised an eyebrow. “So.”

“Siri! Timer for seven minutes!” Connie exclaimed from outside the door, followed by more childish giggling.

“So, uh...” I looked up at Jean, tapping his chest with my finger. “So, uh, what do you want to do here?”

“I’m not kissing you in a closet,” Jean groaned, and he shifted uncomfortably. The muffled giggles from the other side of the closet reappeared, but they didn’t sound like they were right outside the closet door. The song changed, and while I couldn’t recognize it, it made Jean roll his eyes. “You’re not having your first kiss during seven minutes in heaven.”

“I think a lot of people have had their first kiss during games of seven minutes in heaven, actually--”

“A lot of middle schoolers, probably.”

“Jean.” My anger from Thanksgiving had resurfaced, and added to the frustration I was feeling now.
I laid my head on his shoulder, my arms swaying at my sides like limp noodles. I mumbled into his sleeve, “Why won’t you just treat me like normal and play along with things with me?” I mean, if it was any other one of his female friends, don’t you think he’d be in a lighter mood? Playing around and making jokes instead of aligning himself to one side of a closet, not moving a muscle? He didn’t answer. “You hate me, don’t you?” I know he didn’t, but I didn’t know what else to say. All I could do was really try to make him feel guilty, and break him down a bit. “Is being in a closet with me literally the worst thing that’s ever happened to you?”

“No, it’s not that.” He grabbed my upper arms, about to push me off of him, but not yet. “Fuck, I...fuck it. Fine. We’ll kiss.”

“Does this one count?”

He finally did push me off of his shoulder, still holding me to help me stand straight. He sighed. “Yeah, it counts. Ready?”

“Yeah.”

“You sure?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Positive?”

“Yes!”

“Okay…”

“Get on with it!”

He bit the inside of his lip a bit, focusing on me. I could almost hear the gears turning in his head before he started leaning into me, grumbling, “close your eyes.”

Jean’s grip on my shoulder tightened a little bit, and I shut my eyes tight as he instructed. I felt a quick, slight pressure on my lips, and I immediately overreacted by unhinging my jaw, and prodding my tongue into his mouth. I thought it would be needy, sexy, all around romantic, but apparently, it was slobbery, awkward, and all around disgusting. I felt one of Jean’s hands leave my shoulder.

“Hitch, what the fuck?” I opened my eyes to see Jean wiping at his mouth with his arm. “What the fuck?”

“How was that?” The confusion on his face answered my question, though.

“I’m offended. I’m offended. Good God--” Jean wiped his arm now on his jeans. My face reddened, and I laughed, hoping to sink into the floor and disappear. This was a disaster. Oh, God, how long has it been? Probably like, a minute. Christ, this was awful. Jean looked at me and said, “C’mere. We’re doing that again.”

“What?”

“It sucked. We’re fixing it. If you kissed anyone else like that, I’d feel bad for him.” Jean grabbed my upper arms. “Just keep your lips, like...soft. Don’t open your jaw like that. And don’t tongue-fuck anyone again like that, Christ.”

“Oka--” He interrupted me my taking my lower lip between his own, sucking on it gently. I
attempted to mirror his subtle movements, arching my feet and standing on my tip-toes to get a better angle on him. He was rubbing his thumbs on my arms. He bit my lip one last time before breaking away from the kiss to say, “Much better.”

I nearly forgot this was a lesson of sorts. “Th--uh, thank you.”

“But you have to do something with your hands,” he said, glancing down at his own, which were still on my arms. “They’re just hanging at your sides.”

“Oh, um, okay--” I folded my arms so my fingers were on his chest. I had no idea where my hands should go to be sexy - well, except for one. I started slowly bringing my hands further south. “How’s this--”

“No, try again.” Jean hastily grabbed my hands, and placed them on his neck before returning his own to my waist. I weaved my fingers behind his neck, pulling him in closer to try again. He was taken a little aback by my initiative, but returned my advances nonetheless. My grip on his neck tightened and I pressed further into him. I persevered through the taste of hops on my tongue, which was now gliding over his lower lip. Before my tongue could make it from one corner of his lip to the other, he pulled away, biting the string of saliva that connected our two lips. He dove for my neck, leaving a bunch of quick kisses on my jaw and neck. “Don’t forget about the neck.”

**How could I forget?** I felt tingly all over. I hoped he had something on him. I was ready. This can’t just be some lesson, this was too good, too passionate, too great, actually. I wanted to rip his shirt off over his head and use it to tie his hands to the closet rod, since that was something he’s apparently into. I wanted to run my fingers over the tattoo on his shoulder, and rake my nails over the one on his back. *Just touch me, goddammit.*

He gave my neck a quick, gentle suck. “If you bite on a spot too long, you’ll leave a bruise.”

“I know that,” I told him. **JUST FUCKING TOUCH ME ALREADY.** He left another chaste kiss on the spot, like an apology. “Mm.”

“Some people like ‘em,” he said, paying more attention to my jaw and forcing my head to look upwards. “But I guess that’s up to you.”

“What matters is if you like them.” I leaned away from his kisses to run my finger along his jaw. “Do you?”

“Yeah. A lot,” he said. I dove for his neck, kissing and sucking the sensitive skin below his jaw as I pressed myself deeper into him. “I guess it’s all about responding to the person you're with...that's how you become a good kisser.”

I spotted the edges of the *Starry Night* tattoo on his shoulder, peeking through his collar. *God*, all of the thick sweaters and coats kept me from being able to gawk at his tattoos. I haven’t seen the Picasso one on his back in ages. I started laying kisses on the star closest to his chest, and started moving up his neck. I playfully nibbled on his shoulder, which was met with Jean gently pushing my hair behind my ear to return the favor. The bite he left on my shoulder stung an awful lot, to the point where I gripped him a little tighter and drove my foot further into the ground, trying to bite back swears.

As an apology, he brought his lips back to mine, introducing his tongue into play, lightly brushing over mine. Then, he got rougher, delving his tongue into my mouth. I pulled him in even closer. **This is it**. This felt so fucking good. For once, I felt like I had a chance with someone. He wrapped his hand around my hips, his fingertips grazing border between where my back ended and my ass
began. I whispered into his ear, “Sh-Should I?”

“Talk louder,” he said, supporting my head by holding the back of my neck before he dipped me back a little to lay more kisses on my exposed neck. “What do you want?”

The door swung open, and something barreled into us. We didn’t fall over, but we both hit the wall with a thud. I could almost hear my hopes and dreams shatter like china. Jean tucked my face into his chest, keeping my head safe, until we were clear. Then he let go and settled against the wall. His mouth was open, ready to say something, but he didn’t. I swallowed, my tongue feeling strangely uncomfortable in my own mouth. I turned my attention to the person rubbing their head. Marco’s voice cut through the awkward, embarrassed tension. “I didn’t think anyone was here.”

“Where did you think we were?”

“Everyone kind of uh, dispersed after like, two minutes.” Marco’s hands were searching for a lightswitch. When he finally found it and switched it on, the closet was dimly lit by a single bulb. The light was way too bright for this small space, nearly blinding all of us. The only thing shinier than the bulb was the light being reflected off of the sticky, shiny lip gloss smeared across Jean’s face. I saw it almost immediately. Marco did too, but he poorly pretended not to notice it. He just stared at Jean’s mouth while Jean scrambled to turn the light off again.

As Jean was trying to wipe his face off in the dark, Marco was trying to think of what to say. “How’ve--You good?”

“Was that better?” I asked instead.

“I think you got the hang of it, trust me.” I took a step back as Jean checked his phone, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “What did you get all over my face--”

“Hang of what?” Marco asked, turning the light back on. I gently elbowed his side. Please don’t ask.

“Hey, Jean.” I brushed my bangs out of my face and laughed. He pinched the collar of his shirt and used it to wipe the last of the gloss off of his face. “You’re literally bright red.”

He touched his face, now embarrassingly aware of his lobster-like complexion. He moved his hand to rest on his lips, his index finger bent as he used his phone as a mirror to clean his mouth. His face contorted into a look of pure concentration. He mumbled, “I’m pretty out of it.”

“You had a beer and one bowl.” Marco rolled his eyes. “You’re a lightweight.”

He wasn’t stoned, and he wasn’t drunk. I was fine with not kissing anymore. I had my peace. If he didn’t want to kiss me in the first place, he would have probably been a lot more assertive. He wouldn’t have even gotten into the closet at all. He just didn’t want to admit to anyone, not even himself, that he likes me. He’s embarrassed of me. “I guess so.”

I said, “You don’t have to lie about it, Jean.”

“Huh?”

Marco looked between us two, piecing together the night’s events. I smiled as warmly as I could. “You can be honest with me.”

“I am being honest. There’s nothing to talk about.”

“But there is --”
“We’re not talking about it. That’s it. It’s over with.” He crossed his arms. This wasn’t even fair. This was fucked up and not even *fair*. He can’t just take me and kiss me and make me feel like he loves me and say to pretend it never happened. I can’t just pretend not to know how much I like feeling his skin on mine, how I can feel his colors blend with my own. Everything that had just transpired left me feeling like a different person, as if the composition of my body felt like it had been altered by some playful kissing. There had to be more to that kiss than what he was letting on. I wouldn’t have felt this way if he didn’t feel something too. But then again, I didn’t know what was happening with Jean. I didn’t even know what the fuck I was doing half the time. He groaned before straightening his back and heading towards the closet door. “I’m gonna get a drink.”

Just like that, he ducked right out of the closet. I closely followed, trying to get some closure. Before I could catch up with him completely, Sasha seemed to come out of nowhere to grab my shoulders. “Where were you? I was looking for you.”

“You left us in the closet--”

She gasped and went in for a hug. It was a little much, to be honest, but I let her continue. “I’m so sorry. We put on Ginuwine, and Reiner and Connie switched shifts--”

“Yeah, fuck you.” Jean chimed in. “That wasn’t fucking funny--”

Ignoring him, I shook my head. “I don’t care. Marco got us just fine. Listen, I have to drive after this, so I think I’m just going to get all of my stuff together and go home. Where did you put our coa--”

“No bueno.” She shook her head. “Don’t think.”

“Don’t think?”

She pointed at me, and then at Jean. She bounced between the two of us as she slurred, “What *ever* is making you both want to *leave*? It’ll go away once you have a few drinks. You’ll forget about it *all* in the morning.”

“I still have to drive.” I frowned, trying to shake her off. Fuck, she was parasitic. “I’m not going to drink tonight. There’s no point in it.”

“Well, just try this.” She held up a piece of Tupperware she had in her hand. “Open your mouth.”

“What is it?” Jean asked, getting closer to investigate what was in her hand, but she grabbed something from the container and smashed it in his mouth anyway.

“*Jesus fuc*-- Oh, shit, this is good.”

“What are they?” Jean asked.

“Gummy bears,” she said, “soaked in Smirnoff.”

There was a clamor from the kitchen. My head turned as quick as a deer’s. “Oh my God, what’s in there?”

“Body shots,” Sasha said.

“Of tequila?”

“Yeah, th--” Before she could finish her sentence, he was off. I looked back down at the gummy bears and sighed. I guess I was on babysitting duty for the night. I tried to find something for myself
to drink that wasn’t gross tap water. There were a few bottles of soda that were for mixers, but I finessed a Solo cup of Diet Coke to get me through the night before plopping down on the couch.

I’ll be frank, I lost Jean for a little bit. I knew he was going to drink himself till he was shitfaced. I figured I’d leave that problem to Marco or some other poor schmuck. I mean, last I saw Jean, he had that look in his eye that screamed, “I want to make a lot of mistakes tonight,” and I guess the first mistake was me. Ha.

I’m completely fine with hookup culture. I want to put that on the record. I’m not looking for a husband or anything. I think I’d be down for a hookup with someone I knew. The fact I wasn’t good enough for a quick fuck in the closet kind of stung. The fact that he wanted to deny or pretend like he didn’t like me stung even more.

I really wished I hadn’t driven to the party. I wanted to drink myself to death. The only time I got up from that couch was to grab another glass of Coke. From the island counter, I peered into the kitchen and I watched Jean down a shot of tequila before licking salt off of Reiner’s collarbone. I couldn’t help but furrow my brow and tilt my head a little bit. What the fuck was happening? He grabbed a wedge of lime from Reiner’s fucking mouth and bit into it. It fell on the floor shortly after with a hiss and a mumbled “Fuck,” before he clumsily picked it up and tossed it in the sink. Tossing his mussy hair back with his fingers, he took a deep breath and let the next person take their turn.

Jean noticed me watching the festivities and leaned on the island counter to talk to me. I saw some girl point out Marco, choosing him to do a body shot off of. His entire face turned cherry red before agreeing to a sea of ooh’s. I looked back at Jean and offered a small smile. “Hiya.”

“We’re doing shots off of Reiner,” he told me, bouncing on his feet. I could tell this wasn’t his first shot.

“I’ve noticed.” I put my elbows on the counter. I mean, fuck me for being heteronormative, but I thought tequila body shots were supposed to be a...sexier affair? “Why aren’t any of the girls volunteering?”

“I dunno.” He turned to make uncomfortable eye contact with Mikasa, and then glance over at Sasha, and then Krista, and then Ymir. “They’re all dating someone else?” He then turned to me, his mouth agape. “You should do it!”

“Naw.” He scoffed. “Listen, I love tequila. I’m in a good...a good place r’now. I feel like I can...take...
Rome. I feel like I can go on an *escapade.* ”

“Holy shit.”

“And *YOU.* ” He pointed at me rather aggressively before combing back his hair again. It looked dumb as fuck, so I went right back to scrubbing it back up again. “You are so perfect. Your hair--your hair looks like amber wavy waves of grain.”

“Thank you,” I said, sipping my diet coke. He peeked into my cup, tilting it to look inside.

“Wus this?”

“Coke, wh--” He took my drink and downed it, wiping his mouth and handing it back to me.

“I had a bit, you can take the rest.”

I tossed the empty cup onto the floor. I didn’t care who had to pick it up in the morning. “Thanks.”

“I’m a little drunk,” he said. “Just a little. Don’t worry.”

“I think so. Maybe more than a little.” He put his arms around my neck, pulling me down into a clumsy, uncomfortable embrace against his chest. It left me kinda frozen.

“You are beautiful.” He fell back against the throw pillow, tightening his grip on me.

“Thanks,” I said, my voice muffled against his chest.

“You are the coolest girl I know,” he said. “You are just so fucking cool, you know? Your glasses are so cool. I love you.”

I mumbled, “Don’t go telling everyone I wear glasses…”

“You are so honest and real, you are real,” he said, his arms loosening their grip around my neck and moving down to wrap themselves around my waist instead. “I feel we’re really close, you know? Like a sister, but not. You’re not my sister, but you…you are. Jesus is my brother. But I love you.”

“Oh my God, Jean.” Please don’t ever say “like a sister” again. I pursed my lips, attempting not to laugh out loud. I bit my bottom lip as tight as I could. “Aren’t you an atheist?”

“And oh my God, I can feel like, your boobs on me. What the fuck is that?” He lifted his arms off of me, almost in shock. “Haha, what are they doin’ there? That’s crazy. Why are they like that? Crazy how life works like that.”

I glanced over at Marco who was pouring his drink into a personalized mug that was clearly not his. It was personalized, with a name on it. He glanced over at the name on the mug and exclaimed with a smile, “Ha! I’m Sunny now!”

“Marco’s fine.” Jean looked over at Marco. The two caught each other’s attention.

Marco came over with his floral mug and showed Jean. “I’m Sunny, Jean!”

“Eh.” I tried to bite my tongue and *not* panic. This was not going to be fun getting home. “What are you even drinking, Marco?”

“Fruit punch, man. Tastes like…” He smacked his lips. I wanted to smack both his and Jean’s face. After our resident sommelier let the flavors swish around in his mouth or whatever, he happily
slurred, “‘S Hawaiian Capris.”

“That’s jungle juice. You’re both trashed.” I had to take care of them. Oh, my God. This was my responsibility. I worriedly reiterated, “Oh, you’re both trashed.”

“No, I’m not,” Marco retorted, scoffing and taking a sip from his mug. “I’m fine. ‘S just a l’il Hawaiian Capris.”

“See? I know Marco—” Jean assured me.

“Sunny.” Marco corrected him.

“--I know Sunny. He’s fine, man.” Jean gave Marco a nod. “I know him because we’re connected. We’re brothers. Hitch, pay attention, I don’t want to repeat myself.”

“We know each other better than me and my real brother.” Marco took another sip from the mug that wasn’t his. “And he’s my fucking twin.”

“You don’t have a twin.” I corrected him.

“Yeah, I do.” Marco spat. “His name is...fuck, uh...P...P-PIERRE!”

“That sounds made up.”

“It’s not,” Marco insisted, pointing at Jean. “But he’s my real brother.”

“Best brothers!” Jean leaned over for a high-five, but his imbalance caused him to fall off of the couch, taking me with him.

“Okay.” I sat up, holding my hand out for him to take. “We should go.”

“But Hitch—”

“Now. We need to go now.”

“What? No!” He whined, holding onto a throw pillow for emotional support. “We’re not leaving. Not yet. I’m having fun!”

“No. You, me, and Marco are going to leave, and we’re going to go home.”

“One body shot.” He insisted, but I shook my head. “One shot, and I’ll go wherever you fuckin’...if you let me take a body shot.”

“I don’t think that’s the best idea for you.”

“Half a shot? Yeah?” He nodded, trying feverishly to find a compromise before getting up and taking me by the wrist. “C’mon. You’re gonna lay on the table. I’m gonna help you through this, okay? We’re together on this.”

“I cannot, in good conscious, let you take a shot off of me.”

“Half a shot. We agreed on that. Or else I’m staying and finding someone else to drink with! Okay?!?”

“Fine. Fine, fine, fine.” I sighed. “Just...hurry it up.”
“After I take the shot—” He grabbed me by the wrist and led me towards the kitchen table. He grabbed a nearly empty bottle of tequila off of the kitchen counter, along with a salt shaker, and a slice of lime from the fridge. He turned towards me and exclaimed, “Lie down, lie down!”

I turned back towards the table, rolled my eyes, and laid down. He asked, “Do you know what you’re gonna be doing?”

Ignoring my question, he yanked my collar down to reveal my collarbone. Yikes. He licked it pretty quickly, and sealed it with a kiss. I started to blush furiously, because what the fuck was happening? Sprinkling the salt on my skin, I said, “Don’t worry, I picked up on how to do this the second time Reiner did one.”

He put the slice of lime in my mouth on top of my teeth. The acidity shut me up real quick. He took the tequila and poured himself a shot - not the half shot he promised. I sat up so fucking quick, spit out my lime slice, and reminded him, “Half a shot.”

“I thought you wouldn’t notice.” He emptied a teensy bit of the shot into the sink.

“Jean, half.”

“Fine. Half.” He rolled his eyes at me. Whatever. I looked away and put the lime back on top of my teeth.

“Cheers.” He downed the shot and slammed the glass back onto the table. He wrinkled his nose, forcing the alcohol down as he gagged. “F-Fuck! That shit burns!”

“Then take the fucking lime!” I hissed through my teeth.

He quickly took his lips between mine, but instead of our kiss, he prioritized biting into the lime. The sour taste gushed into my mouth, and my nose was wrinkled now, too. I could feel Jean’s lips pucker, but other than that, he didn’t complain about the acidity.

I quickly sat back up. “Are you done? Can we go home, please?”

Without answering my question, he reached over and caressed my face. Startled, I started to ask “Why—”

“Hair in your mouth. That’s not weird.” He threw his arm around me as I searched in my purse for my keys. “Can we talk about how cool you are? Coolest girl. Coolest Girl Award 2-k-14. That’s you.”

“You said that already…” I shook my head.

“Like, no, really quick, look at all of these other girls.” As if he couldn’t be more obvious, Jean swatted my hands out of my purse and pointed to Mikasa. “Like, Mikasa’s hot, but she’s laaame. She’s fucking Eren Jaeger. That’s fucked up. That’s fuckin’... charity work.”

“Sure.” I shrugged, picking up my purse again to continue the search.

“No, no, you gotta look. Sasha? Sasha got kicked out of a fucking Chinese buffet for eating too much shrimp. They...they took a picture. Says ‘NO ENTRY,’ I fucking saw it! That’s what it says!”

“Found ‘em!” My keys were hidden in a weird pocket in my purse. “C’mon, let’s get Marco and go.”
I grabbed his hand as I moseyed on over to Marco, who was sitting on the couch drinking his water. As Jean was mumbling something about Ymir being “stone cold gay,” I told Marco to chug his drink and come home with us. It was a pain wrestling those two big, drunk babies to the truck, but I managed. Marco was nowhere near sober, but he was somehow more sober and less annoying than Jean, so I sat him in the front seat and buckled him in. I tossed Jean in the back, and I had to physically argue with him about his seatbelt and why I didn’t give a shit about his explanation for every girl at the fucking party.

“Krista is so cute .” He fell back in the seat.

“Can you buckle yourself in?! I’m trying to take you home!” I yelled.

“I have…” He held up his index finger as I shimmied the strap across his body. “I have a point to all of this. Krista is cute but she’s so gay for Ymir . Like, Reiner . You gotta chill . You gotta let those girls gay .”

I shut the door on him and sat in the driver’s seat. He was still fucking talking! His cheek was against the window as he kept droning on and on about how cool I was, as if I was unaware. “...but you’re cooler! You have this… look . And you're just...wow. Wow, wow, wow.”

“Let’s go--”

“My house!” Jean sat up in the backseat. “Let’s go to my house, my house--”

“No, Jean, we’re going to the dorms.” I told him. Jean immediately fell back, groaning as if I shot him in the foot.

“Maybe he’s right.” Marco whispered.

“Why would he be right?!”

“Well...if he’s too wasted, he could get in trouble. And we would get in trouble.” Marco warned. “If he stays at home, at least he won’t get reported to the RA’s or anything...”

“That’s stupid--”

“I don’t make the rules, I just follow them.”

I tossed them some empty plastic bags I kept on the floor for this type of occasion. Better safe than sorry and cleaning half-digested liquor out of my car interior. “Uh, I'm just gonna pull up his address…”

We began a scenic trip through the city to Jean’s house. The traffic was light at this hour, but the stoplights were proving to be a pain. The city was oddly tranquil. It was peaceful and serene. Its usual bustle was reduced to a quiet hum, except for our truck.

Apparently, this became karaoke hour. He complained there was no music, and after pulling up a playlist from his Spotify account, he sang along to every. Single. Song . I was convinced I had gotten into a really bad car accident a few blocks back and this was actually my own personal hell. We had just entered the historical district when I gave up and I sighed, “Jean--”

“I fucking love tequila, I’m still so fuckin’ lit,” he said excitedly. He leaned up as far as his seatbelt would let him to suggest, “Yo. Yo, yo, yo. I’m sure if we go back, do you think Ymir is throwing something? Or we could go downtown...or back to Connie’s!--”
“Can you leave me alone?” Marco quietly asked. He looked pale, staring blankly at the street ahead of him. He commented, “The cobblestones are so bumpy…”

I technically shouldn’t be parking right outside of Jean’s house, but fuck it. What traffic cop was going to ticket me then and there? I put my hazard lights on before hopping out of the car and going to Jean’s door. “C’mon, Jean. Let’s get you to bed.”

Jean got out of the car with his arm around my shoulders, again. I went up to Marco’s window and knocked.

“Marco? If you come in you have to be--” He interrupted my statement by puking his guts out into my shopping bag. The tequila and the turbulence from the cobblestones definitely proved to be a bad combination. I paused before finishing, “--quiet.”

He opened the door so I could hear him. “I’ll stay here,” he rasped.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah I just….” he puked again, and thankfully, it was into the bag. “Don’t worry about me.”

“Turn my hazards off, please,” I mumbled, and Marco did so, shutting them off and shutting the door behind him. Ugh. I still couldn’t believe I got myself into this mess.

“Check this shit out. You can get in through the balcony!” Jean said, walking towards the recycling bin. “You just...hop on here--”

“That’s not necessary--” I shook my head, tugging on his sleeve and trying to convince him that he was in no condition (and I was in no mood) for this parkour bullshit.

“Then you hop up from the bin, and you grab the railing, and you pull yourself up--” I rolled my eyes, reached into the pocket of his jeans (how come boys have such deep pockets?)— and pulled out his keys.

“Great.” You could tell a lot about a person from their keys. He had a membership to some gym, a discount card for an art supply store, a library card (represent!), a savings card for some grocery store, and some member card for the art museum. “But we’re just gonna go in the front door. As long as you’re really quiet about it.”

“No shit --”

“Too loud.” I whispered. “Talk as loud as I do.”

“My mom is gonna kill me,” Jean said, hushed. I nodded, approving of his volume and his sentiment, as I unlocked his front doors - the gated one first, and then the main one.

“She definitely will,” I sighed, slowly opening the door. “If you don’t shut the fuck up .”

The living room was oddly eerie when it was dark at night. I could faintly make out the faces of Eliot and Jean from the framed photographs in the darkness. The only light provided was from a blinking modem. I gulped, carefully shutting the door behind us. Jean whispered, “Is Marco okay?”

“Shut up,” I hissed, though I was worried about him, too.

“He’s never seen my house.” Jean blinked. “Should I--”

“Go to bed.” I stood to the side, letting him take the reins and lead me up to his room instead. “Go
upstairs and go to bed.”

“You wanna go upstairs?”

I put my hands on my hips. “Yeah, I want to go upstairs.”

“Let’s go.” He grabbed the railing and smirked at me. “I’m so excited, I’m so excited—”

“Can you shut up? Do you want to wake up your sister?”

“Mad-eline,” He grinned. “I forgot she was home! Yo...I wanna see Mad-eline.”

“It’s late! Don’t wake up your baby sister!”

“I don’t wanna see Madeline.”

“Good, good, good.” I pressed on his back, keeping him on a steady course towards his room. Once we got there, he maladroitly swatted at the light until it turned on. He sat on his bed, and started wrestling his shirt off. I made my way towards his closet and switched the light on. I was still jealous he had a fucking walk-in closet. “Let me find you some pajamas.”

“What?” He asked. I dug through his dresser and found a folded pair of plaid pants. They should do. Let’s hope they didn’t cost five hundred bucks like the rest of his closet.

“Uh, here.” I leaned out of the doorway to show what pants I picked out. “How do you like these?”

“Good.” Jean nodded.

I threw them at him, and turned so I was facing the window. “I won’t look.”

I tapped my foot, waiting for him to get changed. He asked, “You sure?”

I twirled my hair between my finger, waiting. “Yeah, don’t worry about it. Tell me when you're done. Just be quiet, I don't want you to wake up your sister.”

I heard a single sigh. “I’m done, but...I’m so mad. I got new barbells and you didn’t see ‘um.”

I blushed. “I forgot you still have nipple piercings.” It was less like “forgot,” and more like “repressed for the sake of my sanity.”

“Yeah. How do they look?”

I shrugged. “They look great. What kind of metal is that? It looks funky.”

“Rainbow titanium, or somethin’? I don’t know...” He fell back on his bed. “Wait...d’ya mean good funky, or--”

“Good funky.” I turned back towards the closet, not wanting to stare at his (really really really hot) nipple piercings anymore. Do you need a shirt? Are you cold?”

“Pfft, nah, I am fine.” He laughed, clearly not fine.

“What else do you need to go to sleep?” I asked, wanting to get back outside towards Marco as soon as possible.

“Er, wait. Wait. I need m’pillow.” He smashed the wall behind him with his hand in a blind search
for his “pillow.”

“Shh, shh--” I hissed, trying to calm him down before he woke up his sister. “It’s under your head.”

“My big pillow.” He corrected me. It was partially smushed between the wall and the bed. I yanked it out of the crevice, ooh ing at how soft the satin-like material was.

“Where was this on Thanksgiving, fancy man?”

“On...on the top shelf of my closet.”

“Okay, okay.” I started working faster so I could make it to my car and check on Marco. I quickly grabbed his phone and hooked it up to the charger that was plugged into the wall. I threw his comforter over him and asked, “Are you okay?”

“I’m okay --”

“Jean, I can drop Marco off and come back in half an hour, tops.” I promised. “I’ll stay over to make sure you’re okay, just give me your keys.”

“M fine. If you’re not gonna--”

“I can stay, I just need to take Marco home first.” I sighed, taking my keys out of my bag and beginning to ease my way out the door. “I’m going to go. Keep your phone on. I’ll call you.”

“I’m tired ,” he whined. I went to the bathroom to take the wastebasket from there and put it by Jean’s bedside.

“Here. Just in case.” I shrugged, readjusting him to lie on his side. “I know you’re tired, but I’m gonna be scared if I call you and you don’t answer. Okay? Keep your phone on so I can call you.”

“Call soon.” He whined as I turned off the light and snuck out the door.

“Drink a lot of water. Throw up if you can. Be safe.” Before I left his room, I remembered something. I quickly turned to him and leaned on the doorframe to ask, “Can I ask you really quick to come downstairs and lock the door behind me? I don’t want your house to get robbed.”

So, he followed me downstairs. I got all my shit together, and I opened the door. A blast of cold, crisp air hit my face. I breathed it all in. I turned to face Jean. “Well, let me know if you need anything el--”

“Hitch? Really quick.”

I sighed. “What is it? What is it now?”

“C’mere. Real quick. Really quick, I promise. It’s gonna bother me if I don’t.”

I turned around and whined, “What is it, Jean?”

“C’mere. Come closer.”

When I leaned towards him to hear what the fuck he had to say, he placed his hand on the back of my neck and pulled me in for a kiss. He just took my lip between his when I put my hands on his shoulders and shoved him away. He still reeked of liquor, and you could taste the burning tequila on this tongue. But the devil on my shoulder pointed out that he was shirtless, and it was the norm for people to exchange goodbye kisses, right?
“You.” He then added in a mumble, “...are a good kisser.”

Whatever. I was into him, a kiss wouldn’t hurt, and it would be quick. I didn’t think either of us would regret a kiss in the morning. I shrugged, and went in for it, wrapping my arms around his waist and leaning in to steal a quick kiss that somehow turned into an impromptu makeout session.

I have to say, it started out pretty cute. Some nice, soft lip action, hands in very wholesome places. It was great. I guess it was when I put my hand on the back of his head and yanked at his hair a bit...yeah, maybe in hindsight, that could be perceived as being a little kinky. He grabbed me by my ass and pulled me closer. Oh, yikes. I didn’t have a problem with that, I just thought it was worth mentioning because I’ve never had anyone grab my ass, and definitely not with that much gusto. I could feel him pressed up against me, his cock incredibly hard. It was easy to feel since his pajama pants were so flimsy. Oh, yikes. I gave it a quick grind - just some material for him to fantasize about later, nothing more. Plus, it was fun, and it was, er, informational. I learned that Jean’s dick was a pretty decent size. From what I could assume. You...You learn something new everyday, I guess. I figured I should probably wrap this whole shindig up and get on the road so Marco didn’t get even sicker. I was kind of worried about my car interior.

I left a quick parting kiss on his lips before whispering, “Okay.”

“Ah,” he sighed, pushing my bangs off of my forehead so he could leave a quick kiss. Aw, so cute. I relaxed my shoulders as he let go of me and said, “I love you.”

Oh, fucking yikes! Nope. Nope, nope, nope. I couldn’t offer back the same sentiment. He could only say it when he was drunk? Really? I gave him a light push so I could get my bearings together.

“No. Just...” I let out a small, awkward laugh. I zipped up my jacket and got my hand around my car keys. I had to go home. I had to drive Marco home and away from the wildly confusing and very drunk person, I just...nope! NOPE! “Nope. Not now. Don’t do this to me right now.”

I basically shut the front door in his face, before opening it again to remind him, “Don’t forget to lock it and go to bed and sleep on your side and drink lots of water. Okay that’s it I’m going home bye.” I quickly shut it again, refusing to even meet his gaze, as I hustled back to my truck. I tossed open the door and hurried inside, buckling myself in as fast as I could and starting the car. I took a quick glance at Marco to make sure he was still alive (he was) before hitting the gas and heading for school.

At the first light, I turned towards my shitfaced passenger. Marco was leaning against the car window, his face ghostly pale. His hands were shaking slightly. Oh, fuck. “You okay? You cold?”

“I threw up into a sewer.” He quickly told me before sniffing. “B-But I’m fine. It’s just cold out, I mean...I’m fine.”

“Th-Thanks for the memo.” I cranked the heat up and kept my eyes peeled for somewhere I could buy snacks at, ready to put this hellish night behind me. I quickly found and dropped by a corner store to pick up a pack of peanut butter crackers and a Gatorade for Marco to replace all the contents of his stomach. I was short a dime, but the cashier thankfully cut me some slack.

Marco and I continued our car ride in exhausted silence. I was still thinking about the night’s events and I was too distracted to start a new conversation. I think Marco needed the quiet, anyway.

Marco carefully signed back into the building without making any eye contact with the guard. It was unusual for him to not thank them or wish them a good evening, but I’m sure if he tried, he’d puke all over their desk.
We made it to his room, where he immediately plopped down on his bed and let out an exhausted groan that was clearly bottled up for a while. Closing the door behind us, I asked, “Home sweet home?”

“Mm.” He mumbled into his pillow. “Is Jean back home?”

“Yeah.” I scratched my chin. Jesus, I had to tell someone. But Marco could not be that someone. I sighed, sitting on Jean’s bed and resting while Marco crawled into bed. The covers shuffled for a moment before Marco’s hand snaked out from underneath the mess of blankets. He dropped his shirt on the floor. “I hate this shirt.”

I furrowed my brow. I thought he wore a black shirt tonight, but that one was grey. “Is that--whatever.” I probably misremembered. Marco’s clothing choice wasn’t that important to me. I should have stayed and kept an eye on Marco, but he seemed to have the hang of things. I went home to sleep in my own bed. I kinda missed it.

I had a lot to think about tonight, but sleep was more important. I hadn’t gotten a proper night of rest in like, three days. Before I laid down, I got all my bearings together. I got my keys, my ID, my phone, my wallet...check, check, check, check. I searched through my purse for Jean’s keys to make sure I could get back inside his house tomorrow. I found his school ID, but I couldn’t use that to get inside his house... fuck, I forgot to take his keys. I groaned, resting my head in my hands. I can’t believe Jean never gave me his keys to get back inside the house. Wow, he could be dying in there. Like, maybe actually dying. I swallowed my worst fears and dialed his number. Maybe I should have validated him and said “I love you” back when I had the chance. But like...I mean more like a friend love. I don’t...shit, I don’t know anymore. Like, okay, I did love him, but not drunk him, and I don’t want to tell him I love him when his blood was 96% tequila and 4% lime juice.

My thumb was hovering over the green “dial” button. I honestly didn't know what I wanted anymore. But I didn’t want someone who was a dick to me when he was sober, and only wanted to dick me down when he was plastered. It wasn't fair to either of us. I shrugged. All I could do now was bite the bullet and at least call to check up on him. No talk of what had just went down. Just a call to see if he’s alive and well. The phone rang for a few seconds before I heard a tired and muffled “Hello?”

“Jean. How is everything?”

“You woke me up,” he grumbled. I could hear the sound of rustling sheets. “’M sleepy.”

“Okay.” Good. He was alive. “Are you sleeping on your side?”

“Mm.”

“Yes?”

“Yes.”

“You have some water, don't you?”

“I got one,” he yawned, “from the fridge.”

“You didn’t fall or anything?”

“No.”

“You sound fine. I think you're okay. Are you okay?”
“Yeah,” he yawned again. “I’m gonna go to sleep.”

“Well...okay. Let me know if anything goes wrong.”

“I will. G’night.”

“Goodnight, Jean.” And...he hung up on me. I frowned, and tossed my phone onto my nightstand. For being a cramped twin bed, it felt so empty with only one body in it. I wanted to remedy that, but how could I? The only one who could fix it only liked me when he was drunk. That knowledge left an empty pit in my gut that I wanted to fill, but I couldn’t find a reasonable solution.

Chapter End Notes

holy fucking shit this took ages, and also years off of my life. how yall doin

thanks corey for the editz
Dead in the Water

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As I was doing my makeup in the mirror on this beautiful Sunday morning, I was displeased to find a small, red splotch on my neck from the day before. I grimaced, lightly poking it to feel its sting. My right shoulder cringed. I grit my teeth and grabbed my makeup sponge, hoping to mask the bruise before I drove down to Jean’s house. I mean, it was nearly noon. I should stop by and make sure he was okay. I’d be worried sick all day if I didn’t pay a visit. I already tried calling to confirm that he was okay, but after hearing that dumb “You have reached the voicemail of...JEAN KIRSCHEIN...is not available…” message for the eighteenth time, I was beginning to panic. Yup. I called eighteen times. It looked like I had to go to my last resort: breaking in.

I thought I could tackle the challenge of climbing up onto Jean’s balcony until I actually pulled up to his house. Oh God, how did he tell me he used to get up there? Something with climbing on the trash cans? There were two bins on the curb. I took one up to below the balcony. I looked up at it, with all its plants. There was probably an easier way to get into this house without smashing his windows, but I couldn’t think of one right now.

Wait. Knocking. Duh. I tried it, and got no answer. I even peeked inside the windows to see if there were any moving shadows, any signs of life. Maybe Maddie was home and was told not to open the door for strangers? Maybe Mrs. Kirschtein was somewhere in the house where she couldn’t hear me. I knocked again. Still no dice. I yelped, “Jean!” as if that would work any better. Fuck.

I carefully climbed on top of the trash bin, finding my balance and asking God why She would do this to one of Her sweet angels. However, I quickly lost that balance. Before I fell on the concrete and smashed my skull, I leapt back onto the ground, catching my breath. My damn shoes were probably what kept toppling me over. I took them off and threw them onto the balcony, waiting to hear them crash into a pot or something. Thankfully, I heard nothing, so I guessed I was in the clear.

I climbed back onto the bin, cementing my feet onto the lid and curling my toes into the plastic. After I was comfortable on the lid, I looked back up to the balcony. Keep your eye on the prize. I slowly crouched down, getting ready to jump. My heart was pounding in my chest. My biggest fear was that I was going to jump, be unable to grip the fence, and then crash back into the trash can, or worse, the concrete.

On nothing else but a wing and a prayer, I crouched down, and forced all my momentum up towards the bars. I gripped the bars until my knuckles turned white, ignoring the stinging in my hands as they slipped. My grip tightened even more, struggling and praying that I would latch onto this balcony as if it was the last thing I would ever do. Which was totally possible.

I was hanging from the balcony. My limbs and organs were all intact. I was not splattered across the concrete. Now came the hard part: climbing the fence and hopping over. I didn’t try to climb up the bars immediately. I just dangled, staring out at the sidewalk in front of me. This was simply unbelievable. I guess your body can do amazing things when adrenaline is pumping through it at the speed of sound. I watched out for people passing by, walking their dogs or taking afternoon walks, in hopes that none of them would call the cops on a very obvious break-in. Then again, as I was dangling from Jean’s balcony like an idiot, I couldn’t care less. This was a feat all on its own. God is real. God is so real. I was a Mormon again. I closed my eyes and just sighed, mumbling, “Heavenly Father, I thank thee…”
“What in the hell are you doing?” A shrill, elderly voice came from my left. I made sure not to flinch and lose my tight grip. Now was the time to start climbing the balcony and get away from this woman and into the safety of Jean’s house.

I didn’t even know what I was doing, or what to even lie and say I was doing. I just blurted out, “Don’t tell Mrs. Kirschtein!”

“And why shouldn’t I?”

Let’s think. Why did Jean sneak into his own house? Why did nobody bring up any issue with it when he did it? I swallowed, and kept trying to climb up the bars. The metal was pretty rough, which was good to hold a grip. Thank God for the days at the gym, trying to impress strangers with my dumbbell lifting. If I could just make it to the top and pull myself over, I’d be golden. Besides, her threats were probably empty. Even if she called the cops, Jean would make sure I wouldn’t get into trouble. If she told Mrs. Kirschtein...well, I don’t know what I’d do if she told Mrs. Kirschtein that I was trying to get up on their balcony. Or that somebody could climb up on their balcony. “I’m not breaking in, I have a reason to be here!”

“This isn’t your house!” I guess she knew the family better than I had thought.

“I wanted to surprise--” With a groan, I got one hand on the top of the bannister. Finally. “--my boyfriend!”

“You’re Shaun’s girlfriend?”

“That’s not even his name!” I pulled myself over the balcony, catching my breath. I wiped my brow and tugged my collar to air out my hot skin. I wrestled my shoes back onto my feet. “I can get him out right now and prove it.”

I furiously knocked on the door. I hoped Jean was awake, and home, and could actually hear me before this woman called the police. I gulped, nervous. After about five seconds of constant, nervous knocking, the door opened, and Jean was standing there wrapped up in his comforter and a backwards sweatshirt. Honestly, none of the clothes he was wearing was something I gave him last night. This was a Kirschtein original. The grey sweatshirt, the blue plaid boxers, the white tube socks with a blue stripe? I couldn’t even make fun of it. It was a daring look, and dare I say it: a comfortable aesthetic I was striving for right now? Instead of saying hi, he asked, “What?”

“Surprise, baby!” I cooed loudly, enough for the woman on the sidewalk to hear me. Before the little cocoon could say anything, I gave him a big hug and whispered in his ear, “Please tell your scary neighbor that you know me so she doesn't call the cops on me for trespassing into your lovely, sweet home.”

He sighed, wrapped his blanket tighter around him to hide his fashion choices, and went to the edge of the balcony towards the bannister. He called out, “Hi, Mrs. Braun.”

“You can’t be okay with this,” she called back. “This isn’t okay to do!”

“No, no, it’s okay. This is just...” He looked over at me. I was a little sweaty, very disheveled, and very worried about being slapped with an arrest for trespassing. “...her weird way of surprising me. I’ll talk to my mom about it.”

“You better!” She was clearly pretty frustrated with how lackadaisical and tired he was when I literally broke into his house. There was no way she wasn’t telling his mom about this. Fuck.

“Okay. Thanks for looking out. Have a good day.” He lumbered back inside. I felt like we could
have resolved that a lot better. Instead of trying to remedy the situation any more, I followed suit and shut the door behind him. He immediately fell onto his bed and wrapped himself up in his comforter again. For fuck’s sake.

“Jean.” I gently shoved his exposed arm. “Wake up.”

“No.” He pulled his blanket cocoon around him tighter.

“Jean, for fuck’s sake.” I took off my shoes again. I stood on the bed to step over him and lay down next to him, but I decided to do one better and sit directly on his side. “It’s past noon.”

“I hate tequila.”

“Coming from the guy who had five shots of it within an hour.”

Jean groaned, trying to throw me off by rolling over. I was keen to his tricks, and I sat back down right on his opposite side as he was staring directly into the wastebasket. “Sweet Jesus, I wanna die.”

“Want some water?” I cooed, and brushed my hand through his hair, wincing at how damp his scalp was. I wiped my hand on his bedsheets and murmured. “Oh, okay. That’s kinda gross. You’re sweaty.”

Ignoring me, he whined, “I want death.”

“Want some food?”

“Death.”

I sat up and gave his arm a gentle squeeze. “Let’s go get food.”

“I don’t want to get up.”

“You don’t have to get dressed or anything, just get up and into the car.”

“Augh.” I helped his reluctant ass out of bed. “Do I need–”

“Whatever you need, you don’t.” I sighed. “Don’t bother with your wallet. I’ll pay, just...get in the car.”

“Let me get my phone...” He rubbed his eyes before checking his notifications. His shoulders fell with a heavy sigh. “You called eighteen times? Shit.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry.”

He yawned and scrolled through his lock screen. “Apparently everyone thinks I’m dead?”

By “everyone,” he meant Marco. I guess that was technically right - Jean didn’t really have a life outside of Marco and me, anyway. Back to the point: Marco sent Jean eight texts. They were all sent sporadically throughout the night.

“HOME”

“When are tidy comin home I miss u”

“*YOU I still miss you*”
“I just woke up I'm not even hungover. Are you good?”

“Hey dude it's 10 and I'm a little worried about you. Can you call when you wake up?”

“If you're dead send back a sad emoji”

“Are you dead?”

“U good???”

Jean frowned, rubbing his eyes. He rasped, “I don't feel like talking to Marco.”

“It's fine.” I shook my head, taking out my phone. “I'll text him, you just get ready.”

“Keys.” He swiped them from his nightstand, along with a pair of sunglasses, but after realizing he didn’t have pockets, he turned to me. “Where--”

“I’ll put them in my purse.”

He surveyed his room again. “And--”

“Your school ID? I have that too.” I cracked my back. “C’mon. All you need is pants. We don’t need anything else to get food.”

After putting last night’s pajama pants back on, Jean lumbered down the stairs, his joints cracking as he moved. He hissed like a vampire when he opened the door, scrambling to put on his sunglasses to deflect the average amount of sunlight shining down.

I started the car. It was time to make awkward small talk. “Glad you didn’t die last night.”

“I threw up like ten minutes after you left,” he admitted.

“Good.” I nodded. “It always sucks, but it feels good after you do it.”

“I hate tequila,” he decided.

“I know, hon.” I headed to the nearest 24-hour diner that served breakfast all day. I figured greasy bacon and salty foods were the best cure for a hangover, and you couldn’t get that anywhere else.

We were lucky enough to find a parking space that didn't require my uncoordinated ass to try parallel parking between two cars. Six quarters in the meter for good measure, and we were ready to head inside.

I looked so cute. My white, long sleeve shirt - slightly sheer, but still thick enough to provide some type of warmth. A cute li’l orange scarf my mom knit for me. Light blue jeans and riding boots. Casual, yet cute. The perfect date outfit. Any boy would be so lucky to have me. My presence itself was a present. My personality and talents were just cherries on top of the sundae.

Jean did not return the favor. His pajama pants had a pizza sauce stain on the lap that I didn’t notice last night, and the logo of his old charter school. His sweatshirt said “#1 Dad,” and unless there was a very big and very drooly secret Jean was keeping from me, I was certain it wasn’t his. Actually, the subject of paternity had never come up in our conversations, so I figured I’d ask. “Do you have kids?”

He furrowed his brow. “What?”
“Your sweatshirt…” You know what? I could safely take that as a no. “Never mind. And take off your sunglasses,” I told him as we entered the diner. The bells on the door jingled, announcing to the diner’s patrons that the cutest girl alive had entered the building. Unfortunately, they were staring at the walking trash heap that was Jean. I nudged his arm, warning him again, “You’re indoors; stop that.”

He lowered his glasses just a smidge before pushing them back up on his face. He cringed, “The lights--”

“The lights? The lights are fine.” I rolled my eyes. I put on the cutesy act while we got seated, but I put on my mean face as soon as we were seated in our booth. “Act normal. Okay? Act like you're not hungover--”

“I am hungover.” He groaned, pressing his fingers into his temple. “Fuck, my head…”

“Well, cut that shit out!” I hissed, handing him his menu. I gently hit the table with each sentence, hoping the sound would wake him up and motivate him, like the coach at the end of a sports movie about an underdog lacrosse team at the championships. “Take off the sunglasses! Look alive! Don’t look homeless! Talk to peo--”

“What can I get you both?”

Jean didn’t answer. He just kept staring at his menu, lost in his own, hungover world. What did I just say, Kirschtein? I took it upon myself to order. “Hi, first I’d like two cups of coffee, and two glasses of water, one with lemon. And uh, can I get the quinoa fruit salad--”

“Wait!” Jean blinked, looking up at our very confused waitress. I ignored him and continued.

“And an omelette with pepperoni and Jack cheese for him. With white toast?” I took his menu and put it on top of mine before handing it to the waitress. “Wait! And a side of bacon.”

“With the omelette or the quinoa?”

“Omelette.” I nodded, handing her both menus. “Thank you!”

Once our waitress was out of sight, I growled, “Jean, if you don’t get your shit together, I swear to God, there is going to be a feel-good piece about you in the morning. It’s going to be titled ‘Local Woman-slash-Potential-Supermodel Buys Hopeless Homeless Man Breakfast at Local Diner,’ do you want that to be your legacy?”

He blew me one of those raspberries with his tongue. I wanted to slap him across the face. I added, “You’re going to Venmo me for your fucking breakfast after this is over.”

“Speaking of breakfast,” Jean asked me, “You’re ordering for me now?”

“Greasy food is the best cure for a hangover.” I informed him. Our waitress quickly arrived with our coffee and water. I took the lemon water and put that to the side as I dug through my purse. While he was fixing up his coffee with cream and sugar, I handed him some ibuprofen. “I use this for cramps but it should help with your headache, too.”

He took the pills and washed them down with his coffee. “Why aren’t you this on top of your homework?”

I rolled my eyes. Don’t remind me. “Because that’s hard, dingus. Can we talk about something else?”
He shrugged and took another sip of coffee. I asked him, “How did your mom react when she saw you this morning?”

“She doesn’t know I stayed over.” He rasped. He coughed, and he continued his story in his normal, yet tired, voice. “I heard Maddie’s alarm go off at like, six in the morning and they just went about their day.”

I shrugged. “I’m surprised she didn’t notice.”

He ran his hand through his hair and physically cringed at how dirty it was. “She has too much going on to notice stuff like that, honestly.”

I took a sip of my coffee and winced, but I quickly took care of the bitterness with more sugar. “You didn’t leave the house a mess, right?”

“No, just my room.”

“Okay.” I nodded. “That’s good. At least that’s taken care of.”

He reached for another coffee creamer. He slowly grabbed one and brought it towards his cup, picking at the packaging. “Why do you still bother with me?”

“I was a fucking disaster last night.” He stated the obvious.

“We can’t judge each other based off of what we said when we were drunk.” I played with my fingernails, knowing damn well I kept wishing that drunk, kissy, romantic, ass-grabby Jean was the norm. But here he was. He was normal. He was just some guy, trying to get through college and make friends and lead a normal life. Why was I putting expectations on him to be my Prince Charming? He could barely get himself together for breakfast, and why was I okay with that? Why did I think it was endearing?

Jean derailed my train of thought. “I think we're a lot alike.”

I looked at him up and down. What a ragamuffin. “No we are not.”

“I think we’re both lonely people,” he told me, pouring even more creamers into his coffee. I wondered what he was thinking about. I mean, I would agree I’m a lonely person. I’m thinking about how even though Jean was so disheveled, greasy, gross, and hungover, I would still bang him. Really. Really? I took another sip of coffee, marinating on how fucking disgusting I was. I was so lonely I was aching to get dicked down by this guy who had known me for months and still hadn’t given me the light of fuckin’ day. Honestly, being this close to Jean with little to no reward was like twisting a knife I had just plunged into my own skin. I was just hurting myself over and over and over again and making myself suffer and stress and cry for nothing. If my body was a temple, I was desecrating it bigtime.

I didn’t look up from his mug as he filled it to the brim with sugary garbage. I didn’t want to look at his face. I just noted in awe, “You really put a lot of shit in your coffee--”

“You have your cult family and their princess-locked-in-a-tower schtick…” He snarked, completely ignoring me. He didn’t even say it with a sarcastic tone. He was completely fucking serious. Why did I want to put up with this?
I rested my chin in my hand. “And you have daddy issues that Freud himself couldn’t fix.”

“Ha!” I’m actually surprised I got a laugh out of him. He tried to cover it up with a cough, because he was just as pathetic and image-crazed as I was. “Ah, uh, ahem , anyway. I just think we both know we don’t want to feel so fucking alone. And all we do is just push each other to do really self-destructive shit. Stuff we know won’t make us feel better, and I think it’s just time to...stop it.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Like, stop talking to each other?” I couldn’t quit cold turkey. I should, though. It would be hard, but giving up on other people should be like ripping off a bandaid. Dragging it out would only delay what was simply inevitable.

“No, no, no,” he quickly backtracked, shaking his head. “We shouldn’t get each other shitfaced everyday. We shouldn’t push each other to do stupid shit and just let things fix themselves afterwards. I feel like we’re both trying to force each other to do things neither of us should do, and that's just not fair to either of us.”

I scratched the back of my head. I was very guilty of that. “Yeah, I mean, I put these insane expectations on you.” I swallowed. “I’m so sorry I’m so...desperate. I know this isn’t really what you want and I shouldn’t keep finding myself in these weird circumstances with you. Like, this kind of thing doesn't happen to normal people.” What would we tell our kids, how I had to break into their dad’s house and how we’ve had to carry each other home on multiple occasions? All the stupid ploys and games I played in hopes that he would just pay attention to me?

I shook the idea of us having kids out of my head. I shook the idea of having him as a partner at all out of my head. “I shouldn’t be thinking of ways to make out with you when we’re drunk because it’s creepy. It’s childish. I just need to let go of you and let you do your own thing.” You deserve it.

“But--”

“But I can’t not be friends with you. There’s no way I can live my life without you in it.” I bargained with myself. Content with at least that , I took a bite of my fruit salad and pointed my fork at Jean. “You’re stuck with me. You owe me, every week from this point on, at least one dinner date--” I caught myself. I swallowed and backtracked, “At least one dinner with me a week.”

“I...sure. It's a deal.” We finished our food in relative silence - I think it was because we were both really fucking hungry. I paid for the meal, even though Jean insisted on paying me back later. I wouldn’t let him. I wanted to do one last nice thing for him before I attempted to cut him out of my life. Not forever - just for a little while. Enough to prove to myself that I could live without him. I owed myself that much.

When it was time to go home, I asked him as we climbed into my car, “Do you want me to drop you off at your house or at school?”

“School,” he curtly replied, plopping down into the passenger seat. “School is fine.”

The car ride was very quiet. At one point at a red light, Jean sighed and said he wanted to say something. I said he could go ahead and say it. Instead he groaned, and covered his tired eyes in frustration. Dragging his fingers down his face, he complained, “I wish I wasn’t dressed like an asshole.”

I laughed. “Don’t worry about it. Who are you trying to impress?”

“Yeah.”

I ignored his tired, uninspired, and frankly terrible answer to my question. We parted ways at the
staircase with tired waves of goodbye. As much as I wanted to, I didn’t look back. The only place to look was ahead!

Unfortunately, “ahead” wasn’t looking too great, either. Things were tense back at the Deliss Dorm. Annie got back, and was apparently refusing to speak to me more than usual after learning that I threw a party in her absence. I assume Reiner told her all of the details. I hope he left out the grinding part. With this newfound hostility, everything Annie did was starting to bother me. How she slept until noon on weekends. How grey her aura was. Fuck, how she left the fan on in the winter? Seriously? Was she trying to become a popsicle? Mere moments after arriving back at my dorm, I left my room again just for the sake of leaving. I made arbitrary stops at the mailroom, the coffeeshop, the library. I didn’t even buy anything or check out any books. I just wanted an excuse to be by myself. The trip to the mailroom wasn’t so pointless, though.

I got a package from my parents, labeled “Anti-Stress Kit and Pre-Christmas Box!” in Mom’s best bubble letters. My tiredness dissipated with the excitement of getting gifts. Maybe they could tell I was really burning the candle on both ends lately. I got oodles of little goodies - stuff that was clearly from the dollar section at Target, but still fun surprises. Some of this year’s highlights included a tiny little grow-your-own-poppies kit, a mug, a pack of hot cocoa mix, and a dark chocolate bar. I stayed up late that night, rotting my teeth with all of my new sweets as I worked on my drawing. I was really going nowhere with it, just fixing up glaring mistakes, and doing some tedious shading. I had to work in low light because Annie was sleeping, and I’m sure if I bothered her anymore, she would snap. She had kind of a Columbine vibe to her that I always knew existed, but ever since I pissed her off, its presence had become extremely unnerving. Not enough to make me move out or run away to Marco’s or Sasha’s or anything, but I will admit, I did check her drawers for weapons once while she was at class. I couldn’t find any, and thank God I didn’t, because if I died by Annie’s calloused, dry, dirty little hands, my ghost would be pissed.

I was quiet as a mouse the whole night until my phone started vibrating like crazy. When did I become popular all of a sudden? I checked it out. Jean was calling me. Why was he calling me? I answered it in a panic just so it stopped making that buzzing noise.

He didn’t even wait for me to answer with the standard hello? He just said, “Hey.”

“Why didn’t you just text me?” I asked quietly, nervously glancing over at the sleeping lioness.

“Oh, uh, I didn’t even think...you wouldn’t want a call, but, uh, what are you up to?”

“Drawing homework,” I mumbled. I yawned and rubbed my eyes. I should make coffee, or a cup of tea, or maybe some of that hot chocolate my mom sent me. Something to keep me up. “I feel like I really didn’t get anything done this weekend.”

“Yeah. Me neither.” He cleared his throat and quickly asked, “Do you want to go to the studio then?”

“No.” I frowned, sharpening my pencil. I think it shrunk an entire inch while I was doing this godawful shading. “I’m in my pajamas. No makeup, no contacts.”

“Ah...uh...that’s fair.”

I tapped my eraser on my desk, thinking of what I should do next to this drawing. I wasn’t bothered about making it perfect, like Jean probably was on his end. I was just trying to make it passable. I saw many mistakes, but I had to think of how to fix them. “Is that why you called?”

“No! Uh, I had an actual question.” He took a breath and said, “So, there’s this band playing this
At the stadium?

“Nah, they’re not that popular…” He cleared his throat again. “Uh, it’s this church downtown.”

I scoffed, wary of this offer. What a funny joke. “There’s a rock concert at a church? What kind of rock is it?”

“It’s not religious or anything, I swear, it’s just the venue. I dunno. I’ve been there before. It’s fine.”

“Yeah, but in a church?”

“The church basement,” he clarified. Suddenly I felt kind of dumb for thinking there would be a drumset on the altar or something, with a bunch of kids calmly dancing in the pews. “And trust me, it’s not a Mormon thing or anything. I’m not making fun of you. I said I’ve been there before.”

“Oh.” I shrugged. Even if the band was shit, I was gonna go with him. Even if the venue was weird, I’d still go with him. I kind of hated how eager I was to join him to see some weird underground church band I never heard of, in a venue I never thought would host that kind of thing. I lied through my teeth, “That sounds kinda fun.”

“You’ll go?”

“Kinda weird…but I’ll go.”

“Ah!” He sighed in relief. “Great--”

“Just give me the address and I’ll figure out how to get there.”

“Nah,” he argued, “Why try to find parking in the city? It’s gonna cost us like, forty bucks to park.”

“Oh, that’s a good call--”

“How about we just take the train there and go take a walk around? We can use the parking money to get food or something.”

“Oh, cool.” I nodded. “Is Marco coming or is it just going to be us?”

“Ah, no. Just us. I figured, just you and me. You never really got a good chance to explore the city, so I may as well take you around a bit.”

I didn’t want to get too excited about this offer, so I tried to hide it as well as possible. You’re going to get street food, go to a concert at a church, and go home. That is all you’re going to do.

“Great. Cool. Is this on Friday, or…”

“Friday, yeah.” I heard his chair squeak as he reclined back. “Cool. I’ll see you then.”

“Beautiful.” I coughed, whispering, “Okay, I’m gonna hang up…I don’t want to wake her up, so…”

“Right, right. I’ll text you.” I nodded at that, but he couldn’t see it. “I’ll talk to you later.”

I hung up and put my phone on my nightstand. I had to keep telling myself not to get excited, but I couldn’t help but make plans in my head as I painted into the late night. Dinner and a concert…it sounded like a fun date, but it was really nothing more than just a date on the calendar. I swallowed back my cutest thoughts.
probably wont make another major update until i get around to graduation/securing a job. weird to think how i started this fic and started school at the same time
It was the “big day,” as Jean has been calling it for the past week. Every single time I saw him, he’d ask, “You excited for the big day on Friday?” I’d say sure. He’d go “Cool! Cool, cool…” and then change the subject to something dumb like the weather, or something banal Marco said that morning. That night we met at the front door of our dorm, and then we made our way to the train station from there. We got off at a station in the heart of downtown, and I couldn’t even think of where to go from there.

Jean asked, “Are you hungry?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Understatement of the year. I was starving. I started scoping around the nearby shops for reasonably priced, nice restaurants. Unfortunately, when you’re downtown, it seemed your only options were really between artisan restaurants with a menu you couldn’t pronounce, or a McDonald’s that smelled like pee. “We should start looking for somewhere to stop.”

“Well, we’ll just take a look around. I’m sure we’ll find some good hole-in-the-wall.” I mean, in the city, it wasn’t too hard.

We walked one block, made a left, and then a right. It seemed oddly coordinated for wandering, but we stumbled upon a really nice-looking stirfry place. The interior was gorgeous - it was tall, open, and almost entirely decked out in light wood. Everyone inside looked so happy, slurping noodles at the stir-fry bar. I mean, just imagine how good it would smell inside. I started longing for noodles with flank steak, sesame seeds, green onion - I was just really in the mood now for a decent stirfry. I turned to Jean and tapped his shoulder. “Hey, Jean--”

“Oh my God, would you look at that.” Jean said, weirdly excited about the Olive Garden across the street from the stirfry place. He knew this city better than anyone else I’ve ever met, and his “hole-in-the-wall, really great” restaurant recommendation was an Olive Garden. “Oh, man, are you in the mood for Italian food?”

“No. We’re not going to Olive Garden.”

“Aw, come on.” He pouted, glancing between me and the restaurant. “Come on. Unlimited breadsticks. That sounds so good right now.”

“Why do you want to go here so badly?” I groused, longingly staring at my restaurant of choice. I looked back at the Olive Garden - dark, congested, and while I wasn’t inside of it yet, it probably reeked of garlic. “Why can’t we go to that nice place on the corner, I mean, sure, it’s more expensive, but c’mom, your dad’s rich. We can go, right?”

“No can do.” Jean shook his head. “I don’t like bringing my credit cards out to shows. I just brought the cash I need plus a little extra.”
If his family weren't filthy rich, and paying for his tuition in full, I'd feel sorry for him. But I didn't. I felt sorry for myself because I was about to dine at an Olive Garden. “Jean, I can pay for my own at the other restaurant. It’s fine. I don’t mind.”


So, we ended up going to Olive Garden. We sat at the table in relative silence as the waitress gave us our first batch of breadsticks, and took our drink order. I unenthusiastically scanned the menu. No stirfry here. Even when we got our drinks, we were still pretty quiet. I dunked my lemon wedge into the water, and started taking sips.

Jean scratched his nose before fixing his posture and clearing his throat. “How’s it?”

I stopped sipping my water. There was nothing on the table besides our drinks and our an empty basket that once held breadsticks. It was mainly Jean eating them all, and whenever the waitress asked if we wanted more, he would say “yes,” without even asking me first. Then they would come out, and he would ask if I wanted any. I would say no. Then he would go “oh,” and then continue eating them. This has happened twice already. We were still waiting on our food. He ordered a huge plate of ziti, and I ordered a house salad. I blinked at his question. “…How’s the water?”

He swallowed. “Yeah.”

“It’s good. It’s water.”

“I mean, that’s good,” he said, “You could have bad water. It’s not a weird question.”

“It kind of is.”

The waitress came back to our table. “Would you like another basket of breadsticks?”

I can end this. “Oh, I--”

“Yes please.” Jean interrupted, handing her the basket. “Thank you.”

I swallowed, taking another sip of my water in an effort to calm down. The waitress came back shortly with our fourth basket of breadsticks. Our fourth one. Jean took a breadstick from the basket and asked, “Are you gonna have any?”

“No,” I said again, taking an apathetic sip of water. “I’m good.”

“Oh.” He ripped his breadstick in half and started eating it.

My fingers ran over the condensation on my glass. Jean took another breadstick and ripped it in half. He started talking out loud. “I think they put cocaine in these or something. I don’t get how they’re so good.”

“Why are you so weird?” Oh. That came out very badly. Very, very badly. “I-I don’t mean... all the time, just...why are you weird now?”

“How am I weird?”

“I just watched you eat three baskets of breadsticks without stopping.”

“They only put like, four in a basket. They’re really small portions--”
“Jean, that's like twelve breadsticks. And ziti, Jean!”

“I’m just hungry, I guess. It’s not a big deal.” He shrugged. It apparently wasn’t. Our food came out, and Jean was eating this disgusting slop of melted cheese and carbs like it was nothing.

“Wow.” He was struggling to cut the putty-like cheese that kept the noodles glued together. “I love Italian food. Right?”

“Yeah, sure.” I shrugged. “I mean it’s just Olive Garden.”

“Heh…” He turned back to his ziti, keeping himself occupied with his monstrosity of a meal for a while.

Jean finished most of the ziti, save for a few rogue pieces of pasta, when he fell back in his chair, clearly filled to the brim with bread, pasta, and processed cheese. “Ugh.”

He looked at me, still slowly chewing my house salad. “Is that all you’re going to have?”

“Mm-hmm.” I nodded. “I like salad.”

“The salad comes with the meal, though.” He furrowed his brow. “No entree? Not even like, a dessert?”

“No, thanks.” I mean, I was really dying for stirfry, but whatever. I’d manage. “Just salad, really.”

Out waitress eventually stopped by with the check. That’s when she asked, “Can I get you anything else?”

Jean excitedly asked, “Can we get some breadsticks to go?”

I mumbled, “Oh my God.” I couldn’t help it.

“Listen, I don’t come to Olive Garden often.”

I leaned in and whispered so the waitstaff couldn’t hear me - not that they cared, of course, but still. “Nobody should come to Olive Garden often. This is a hellscape.”

“Hey.” He frowned, but his grumpiness subsided when the waitress came back with a styrofoam box. Once she turned on foot to return to the kitchen, it returned. He started counting cash while so sweetly offering, “Not my fault you didn’t take your fair share of breadsticks. Maybe if your mind was more open—”

“My mind is so fucking open!” I hissed. I’m already going to this stupid concert with you! “Did I have to eat two dozen breadsticks to become open-minded? Is that the deciding factor?”

“Whatever,” he rasped, putting an empty glass on top of the tip. “I paid for all the breadsticks you didn’t eat, so…”

I rolled my eyes and grabbed my purse. I just wanted to head on out, and get the concert over with. I wanted to make a beeline for the exit, my pupils fixed on the glowing red “EXIT” sign, but Jean diverted course at the last possible second, right before my fingers reached for the greasy, metal door handle... “I’m gonna stop at the bathroom. Hold up.”

I sighed, sitting back down in the waiting area. I tapped my foot, waiting for him to leave the bathroom. I looked across the street. Fuck, I really wanted stirfry. But I figured I shouldn’t expect more of Jean. He was clueless, he was selfish, he was not trying to impress me, he was inviting me
as company to this concert.

He finally emerged from the bathroom, wiping his slightly damp hands on his jeans. His shoulders fell and he sighed, “Well. What do you want to do next?”

“I dunno. Take a walk until we find something that looks fun?” I suggested. Whatever I wanted to do, for the rest of the night, I should get, because he made me eat at a fucking Olive Garden. He shrugged in agreement. We made it about a block before I spotted this little hole in the wall. There were purple velvet curtains hanging in the window with a kitschy neon sign that featured an all-knowing eye. A fortune teller! A fortune teller that also apparently welcomed walk-ins! My eyes lit up. “Let’s get our fortunes!”

“But those things are such a scam,” he whined.

“Okay, you don’t have to believe it, but it’s still fun to get one.” I opened the door, and a little bell affixed to the top sang out to announce our arrival. I faced him and told him “No turning around now, buddy.”

The interior was designed with the intention of spooking out whoever dared to enter, but it was hilarious at best, and hideous at the worst. The rug on the floor was ornate, and every surface in the shop was covered with crystals, books, candles, or some other voodoo mumbo jumbo. Incense was slowly burning away in the corner of the shop by a cow skull and some half-melted candles. I leaned close to Jean and told him, “Buy me a skull.”

“ No , Hitch, what the f--” Jean’s criticism was halted by the appearance of a gaunt woman in the cheesiest faux-gypsy garb I’ve ever seen, holy shit. Her hair hung down in loose, mousey curls, and her face had the same look as an old leather couch. He offered her a polite smile.

“Can I help you two?”

Before Jean could say no, I stood up straight and asked, “Can I get a tarot card reading?”

She just smiled and went through with the transaction before she invited me to sit on the floor in front of her little table, on top of a soft cushion. While she eased herself down onto the floor across from me, I could hear her old bones pop and crack. Once she was seated, she let out a deep sigh.

I got a text message from Jean. I guess he was too nervous to say it out loud, in front of the fortune teller. “ This is stupid ”

Without acknowledging him, I made it abundantly clear I was ignoring him by putting my phone on airplane mode. No more under the table texts for me. Jean responded by rolling his eyes and tucking his phone back into his pocket. The fortune teller pointed to a tall, neat stack of cards on the table. “Take your hand and spread these cards all over the table for me.”

I placed my hand on the stack and carefully spread the cards evenly across the tabletop. After they were scattered properly, I returned my hands to my lap. The reader looked up at me and asked, “Are you done?”

“Yup.” I gave a quick nod. She gathered all the cards back into one pile and split them into three.

“Pick a stack,” she requested. I pointed at the third. She slid it closer to her. “And another?” I picked the first. “Okay.”

She then arranged them, 7 cards up, in the shape of the Star of David with one in the middle. So this is my future, huh?
“Let’s start with your past.” She pointed at the one nearest her, at the top. “The Tower, Upright. There was chaos or conflict in your past. A relationship come to an end? An accident, perhaps?”

My parents. “The former?”

“These unexpected trials threatened your way of life, haven’t they?”

My parents’ trust? The trust of my friends? “Sure.”

She pointed at the bottom-right card. “The Magician. Upright. Presently, this is the right time to make a new start. Build from the chaos around you. Be creative. Use your energy before it’s too late.”

I looked at Jean, and swallowed. Right now? Was she talking about school, or...I couldn’t ask. Not with him here, his knee brushing against mine.

She pushed the lower left card forward. “Your future. Here it is - an upright high priestess.” A small smirk appeared on Jean’s lips. “Your heart is filled with wisdom, knowledge, serenity. There are no words in this stillness. Only beauty in this inner awareness and realization, not words.”

Well, that was cryptic as fuck. “Well, after my future, what’s left?”

“Your surroundings. The bottom card. The Star, upside down. Stop obsessing about those around you! Trust yourself. Rethinking your past actions are events can cause you to lose your confidence. Focus on you. Not them.” She pointed at the upper left card. “The hermit reversed. Your unconscious worries. Deep down, have you worried about connecting with a certain person?”

Not deep down. I wore my heart on my sleeve in that regard. Jean shifted in his seat. I stuttered. “Somewhat?”

She smiled, leaning in to whisper into my ear. “You’ll get through, dear.”

She sat back in her seat, but I was still confused. “Does--Does that mean it’ll work out, or…?”

Her thin lips curled to give me a waning grin. “You’ll get through.”

She pointed to the last card on the outside. “An upside down Strength card. Your solution to your current, pressing problem is to take action. Take a path you can manage instead of taking on an endless challenge. Even if it’s bitter or takes a compromise. Reward yourself with closure.”

The fuck does that mean?! “Uh...er...the center card. What does that mean?”


I blinked. That’s what I want. Badly. Or is that what I wanted to hear? I couldn’t let my parents influence my future like they shaped my past. I was not shy or modest or submissive. I was tall and outspoken and confident. Liberate yourself from your past self. “Okay. Thank you.”

The reader turned to Jean and smiled. “Your turn?”

He crossed his arms, staring at the card in the center - an angel with a trumpet. He shrugged, still cynical and apprehensive. “Eh--”

“Jean, do it.” I elbowed him. “I’ll pay for it if it means you’ll do it.”

“No, it’s fine.” He reached in his back pocket and took out his wallet. “Two for ten, right? I’ll just
“Perfect.” She pocketed the bills and gathered up all my cards in a single, spiraling swipe. She gave them a quick shuffle before putting them back down. “As before. Shuffle them, please?”

Jean put his palm down flat and spiraled the deck out broadly. He put his hand back down in his lap. “Done.”

The reader looked astounded by his curtness, but hey, that’s Jean. Curt and somewhat cruel if he wasn’t into something.

When she put them into stacks, he picked them out quickly - left, middle, right. On an excitement scale, from 1 to 10, he was at -11.

Jean’s patience was thin, and the reader rushed his reading as a response. All I can say is, with each result, his face got pinker and he got a little more superstitious.

“High priestess, reversed--You must let go of your past habits and ideals. What do you really want now?”

“Uh, I’m not sure--”

The clairvoyant just laughed. “That’s for you to answer on your own, dear.”

He swallowed back his embarrassment as she continued to flip cards. “And presently, you have the devil, upside down--”

He blinked, a little taken aback. He carefully asked, “The devil?”

“Don’t be worried. It’s perfectly natural, it only means you have jealousy--”

“Towards who?!” Boy, he was defensive. And so obviously jealous...of someone. I took mental notes.

“You are the only one who can answer that. Just know to confront this obsession. Do you need confidence? Power? Beauty?” He scoffed, but she continued, “Confront it. Now, for your future: lovers, reversed.”

Reversed...? I shifted in my seat, and the reader clarified, “Your heart is divided between two paths. Not necessarily two people, per say--” She looked at me, silently comforting me more than him. I hope he wasn’t clever enough to notice how nervous this card was making me. “But it’s time you choose which path to take. At the end, you could finally find the love you’ve been searching for.”

Yeah, Jean, settle on a path , I screamed internally. She said, “Your environment is characterized by the Magician. Regarding your surroundings, use its - or their - energy to make a new start.”

His chin was settled on his fist as he said, “Okay. Next card.”

“The solution is Death reversed--”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Jean groused. I smirked. At least I wasn’t given Death during my reading.

The fortune teller waved her hands, “It’s okay, it’s okay. Death reversed is a sign of resurrection. You can let go of your old life and start anew. It’s a sign that you are about to make a major change in your life, so why not go ahead and change it?”
I smiled, tapping my chin as I watched the teller flip over his last card. “Your outcome looks to be... ooh, ten of cups.” Cups? Jean frowned as the fortune teller continued, “Emotional bliss! Happiness! Joy. Isn’t that nice?”

“Hm.” He cracked his back, sighed, and swallowed. “Okay.”

A short pause before Jean asked, “So like, straight up happiness?”

“Of course.” She replied without any hesitation. “What kind of other happiness is there that isn’t honest?”

“Great.” He released a heavy sigh. With a quick “thank you,” we made our way through the door and headed back out into the streets, my mind buzzing with new ideas about what my future held. It was so obvious that the teller was totally into Jean and I being a thing. The emotions that went through my body after seeing her turn over that Lovers card was a wild ride. I smiled at the thought, before like usual, he casually struck down all my hopes and dreams without even realizing it. He scoffed and rolled his eyes. “You realize everything she said was super vague, don’t you? Oh, you’re jealous of someone, you want something. Like, no shit--”

“I dunno about that. I’m pretty spooked.” I looked up at him and accused, “You were pretty shook, too.”

“I was not.”

“Yeah, you were. You were totally scared when she pulled that devil card out.” I giggled. “You were actually terrified.”

“Sure, I don’t want the devil inside of me!” He retorted. “But I wasn’t... scared or anything.”

I laughed at him, “That’s not what she was saying at all, but yeah. You were--”

Embarrassed, he announced, “Whatever. It’s over with, the stars are aligned or whatever, let’s just move on.” Then he just shoved his hands in his pockets.

I checked my phone. “I think we still have lots of time to kill before we head to the venue. Let’s hit up another shop. Okay?”

“Okay sure.” He scratched his chin. “Sorry we got here so early. I wanted to make sure we had enough time to eat and do whatever.”

“Yeah no, that’s fine.” I was still scanning the shops to see what caught my eye. One in particular did. “What’s that?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.” Jean blushed. “We shouldn’t go in there.”

The shop display was as Christmas as a sex store display could get. Faux snow, red fuzzy handcuffs, candy cane lingerie. “We should go in there. This looks amazing.”

“Ugh--” I took the lead to go inside, with Jean dragging his feet behind. I will tell you, this store was a goddamn trip. The front section was lingerie, in the broadest sense of the word. If a leather gimp suit counts as lingerie. If a strap-on counted as lingerie. Some of the outfits here were actually pretty cute, if you looked hard enough.

The lingerie section was enticing, but expensive. The bra I had on currently was pretty broken. The underwire poked through and it irritated my skin, but I figured I could wait it out. Of course, even
though I debated an essential like a bra, I couldn’t stop myself from strongly considering buying a
dildo from the section stuffed into the back of the store. I thought it would be funny. I thought it
would be even funnier to harass a very quiet and uncomfortable Jean with one.

I came up with every excuse imaginable for bothering him with one of these crazy sex toys.
Whenever he wasn’t paying attention to me, I did something stupid so he would. I handed him a
cock ring and asked if he would marry me, which was met with a nervous “N-No!”

I found another that vibrated and was made of silicone to look like a butterfly. I gave him that one
instead and said, “Nevermind, this one is way cuter--”

“Stop giving me cock rings!”

He made his way to another section of the store while I perused pocket vibrators. There was a cherry
red one with devil ears designed to stimulate the clit. It had a little tail and everything to complete the
look. After eyeing it for a good minute, I grabbed its companion - a pink bunny. I snuck up behind
Jean, quickly put it against his ear, and turned it on.

“You--!” He cringed, covering the affected ear as I covered my mouth and prayed to God I didn’t
snort during my laughing fit. Oh my God. He was such a baby. He turned towards a completely
different section of the store while complaining, “Don’t do that! Don’t do that!”

“Calm down,” I sighed, putting the vibrator back where I found it. “It’s funny. You’re boring.”

He resigned to looking out the window, the blush on his face deepening as he tried to dissociate and
forget he was at a sex shop. There was a table nearby of actual dildos, like the super long ones that
were physically impossible to fit inside any orifice without causing internal bleeding. I wouldn’t rest
until he played along. I’m fucking funny, and it was time someone acknowledged it.

“Hey, Jean? Which one do you think compliments my eyes?” I asked, holding up a purple and a red
dildo for him to see. Instead, he pointed to the longer, blue one on the middle shelf of the display.

“You should get that one,” he suggested, smiling, “It’s like a sword.”

I leaned down to grab the lightsaber dildo off of the bottom shelf. “Or you can splurge and get an
actual sword.”

“Shut the fuck up.” He laughed quietly, as if the store clerk gave a shit that we found a lightsaber
dildo fucking hilarious. He turned completely around to look at it in all of its glory. “How much is
it?”

“Er…” I checked the tag and solemnly reported, “A hundred and sixty dollars.”

“Holy shit, holy shit.” He held it, somehow amazed that someone thought of making a lightsaber
dildo. It wasn’t too far of a stretch, but it entertained him to no end. “Does it-- holy fuck, it lights up.”

He showed it to me. “I have no purpose for this, but something is telling me that I need it.”

“Follow your heart. Buy it!” I enticed him, giving him my most mischievous grin.

He sighed, “I’m not, and I can’t.” He put it back on its shelf. “I didn’t bring any of my cards.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged. “Going to a gig, being in a large crowd? I don’t feel comfortable bringing all of my
“Boring.” I rolled my eyes. “Make a note for next time.”

“Sure,” He rolled his eyes with a grin. “This Star Wars sex toy is definitely on the top of my wishlist. An absolute priority.”

“Rightly so.” I had the final word before going to the BDSM section. And when I say BDSM, this store held no punches. There were honest-to-God gimp suits here and medieval chains and shit. Bruh, this was wild. There were kits to play with electrocution during sex, which made me shudder, but I turned my attention to the strange assortment of vegan leather accessories that were in front of me.

“Jean, they made a mask just for you.” I pointed to the horse-head latex mask, which was met with a huff. “C’mon, I was just kidding…”

After a quick survey around the room, he pointed towards a black paddle on the wall emblazoned with the word “BITCH” in big, bold letters. “Look, they made a paddle just for you.”

I shrugged. “I mean, it’s accurate.” He left again, and I turned back to the leather goods. I picked out a few of my favorites.

“Jean, look at me.” By the time he turned around, I was holding a crop with the silhouette of a horse on it, and I had a horse gag bit around my neck. Through a giggling fit, I asked, “How does this make you feel?”

He offered a half-smile before turning back to whatever he was looking at. “I feel like killing you.”

“I wanna buy them,” I told him, “just for the jokes.”

“Go for it. You won’t ever use them.” He smirked and shrugged.

“Maybe the horse mask is a stretch.” I admitted, pointing to it hanging on the wall. “But I could totally see you digging the riding crop.”

“Whatever you say.” He didn't acknowledge me otherwise.

I frowned. “What are you looking at?”

“Nothing, I’m just keeping myself busy.”

“Are those handcuffs?”

He choked on his words. “N-No. They’re not.”

“Yeah, they totally are.” I punched him in the arm. What a baby. “You should get a pair for your ankles.”

Maybe it was self-indulgent to suggest that, but I stood by it. What? It was hot. He crossed his arms and proclaimed, “I’m not getting anything.”

“Right.” I added in a mocking tone, “Jean Didn’t-Bring-My-Credit-Card Kirschtein.”

There was a wall of more vibrators that captured my eye. I started browsing through as he adamantly defended his reasoning for not bringing his credit cards. Whatever reason it was, it probably sucked. I was too busy scanning for a decent dildo that wasn’t scary huge. There was a cute little one right at
my eye level, and the best part was?

“Jean. It's gold. Look at it.” I held it up to show him.

“That's so you.”

“It’s so extra!” I proudly announced, picking it up and waving it around a little. It was kind of short and stiff, so it didn’t flop around like I wanted it to. “I need it like, yesterday.”

I didn’t need that sixty dollar price tag. It was literally a hunk of silicone. It didn’t vibrate or light up or do anything wacky. As bougie as it was, I couldn't part with sixty dollars for it. So unfortunate. I despondently put it back. Maybe I didn’t need it after all.

I felt bad not buying anything. We just spent a good chunk of time throwing sex toys at each other and shoving dildos in each other’s ears (well, maybe that was just me). I should be a good patron and buy something. The little devil vibrator was like, ten bucks. I could part with ten dollars easy. I grabbed the box and gripped it in my palm so Jean couldn't see what it was. I silently made my way to the cash register, making sure he didn't hear the transaction go down. He only noticed I was buying something after the cash register sprung to life with an obnoxious kaching.

He lumbered over as I was signing the receipt for my purchase. “You found something.”

I nodded, watching the woman put my selection into a discreet, black plastic bag. “Yeah.”

“Deadass?”

“Deadass.” I held up the shopping bag. The bag was big - like, crazy big. If you didn't know any better, you'd think I would have gotten like, a massive yard-long dildo. Jean got us set up on our way to the venue and we began a comfortable pace.

“Did you get the gold dick?”

I shrugged. “I’m not telling you.”

“You absolutely got the gold dick. Christ.”

“Okay,” I sighed. “I’m not telling you what I got but I swear I didn’t get that one.”

We soon arrived at the church. It didn’t look too old, but it wasn’t brand new, either. I could see the outlines of the shapes in the stained glass. Between the shrubbery surrounding the building was a dim tungsten light and a flight of narrow, concrete stairs leading down into the basement.

We waited in line to buy tickets. While Jean was distracted as he tried to see where the front was, I shoved my shopping bag into my purse and zipped it up. Hopefully he wouldn't notice it was missing.

We got to the counter, which was nothing more than a folding table and a poster taped to the front that said “$5” with a smiley face in magic marker. Lo-and-behold, there was Connie? “What are you doing here?”

“Manager-in-Training of the Tenth Inning by day,” he took his baseball cap off his head and flipped it backwards. “...Still the manager-in-training of the Tenth Inning by night.” He sighed. “My boss runs the batting cages uptown. I help him with his production business for some extra cash. Some punk shows, I dunno.”
“Can you grab us two tickets?” Jean asked, uninterested in Connie’s career goals. “Preferably...the Manager-in-Training’s Special, if you know what I mean…”

“No, I don’t,” Connie said. “It’s not my money to give discounts for.” He pointed towards the gaggle of flanneled men carrying in musical instruments, pedals, and amplifiers. “If you think it’s worth less than $5, you can take it up with them.”

He said that pretty loud. God, Connie should be shifty when he wanted to be. It scored Jean some looks. I turned towards him, glaring because we weren’t in the goddamn venue yet and he was already being embarrassing. “Don’t be cheap.”

“Yeah!” Connie smirked, “Listen to your girlfriend, Jea--”

“Of-Of course not,” he loudly stuttered. “Just a little joke...here’s a ten…” Boy, he was soft for a self-proclaimed “rebel,” who despite having like, nine piercings, was also inheriting nearly a billion dollars, traveled nearly everywhere in the world, and owed half of his “homeless-chic” wardrobe to Kanye West’s fashion collection. He sheepishly extended his hand so Connie could mark it with a smiley face in same magic marker he presumably drew the sign with. I followed, receiving the same brand. When we started making our way over to the floor, Connie handed the “wild blue yonder” marker to an associate and followed us.

The basement was big, and pretty empty. The cream-colored tiles were a little dusty, and the wood panel walls could use some updating. At the back of the very large room were four folding tables, lined up with merchandise.

Jean turned to me and asked, “Do you want to move closer to the front?”

I shrugged. “May as well head up now.”

“Not to the front, though.” He warned me. “Maybe...the upper-middle area.”

What a buzzkill. I groaned, “Why can’t we go to the front?”

“Y-You’ll see.”

We shoved our way closer to the stage until we were comfortable. I had to stretch my neck to see the stage, but it wasn’t too bad. We planted our feet into the tile, unwilling to move for the night and give up our spot. We looked at each other and exchanged satisfied nods. A moment later, we were joined by Connie, who announced his arrival by shoving Jean in the arm. “You should have told me you two were coming. Sasha is up in Maine for the weekend. Visiting her great aunt and eating lobsters or something, I ‘unno.”

“Yeah that sucks, when does the show start?” Jean peeked over the small crowd gathering by the stage. Some guys were setting up instruments, while another was flicking the hanging string lights on and off.

“Half an hour ago, but it seems motherfuckin’ Pixie Bitch can’t get their shit together…” He kicked at the tile. “Fuck, I don’t want to be here all night.”

He turned around and walked back up to the poor man’s ticket booth. We watched from a distance as he reached underneath the table and fished inside of a blue cooler. He snatched three green cans before heading back to where Jean and I were standing.

“Uh--” I looked around. Were there any cops…? Connie’s boss? “Is that okay?”
“What’s what?”

I looked around and told him, “I don’t have my ID on me...not even a fake.”

“I’m not selling it to you,” he laughed, handing Jean a can without waiting for an answer. “We have a policy of looking the other way.”

I felt better about taking it, then. Not entirely better since we were in the house of the Lord and all, but better. Jean popped off his cap, and then mine. He took a generous swig. “They’ve always been cool here.”

“The church?” I raised my eyebrows. I honestly still couldn’t believe I was drinking Rolling Rock at a fucking church. Dad would never let his happen at his. Never, ever. “I still can’t believe this is like, a thing. Like an actual thing that happens.”

“I don’t question it. I just let it happen.” He took another sip. “I had my first drink here, actually. It’s weird.”

“Aw,” I nudged his waist. “Jeanbo.”

“Pet names already?” Connie teased with a smirk.

Jean elbowed Connie in his shoulder, who responded with a meek “Ow…”

I laughed, “No, that’s his mo--”

Before I could finish my sentence, Jean nudged me and said, “Nope. Stop that.”

“Why do I get fucking bodied but she gets a tap on the shoulder?”

“Aye,” Jean put his arm around my shoulder in an awkward, rough embrace. I just kept sipping my drink. “She is a lady and she will be treated as such.”

“Hello!” The lights went down and the small crowd went fuckin’ wild. A girl wearing some Bohemian maxi dress, a shitton of bangles, and lots of eyeliner had taken the stage. A short yet pudgy girl trailed behind, her Mary Janes clacking against the stage as she shuffled towards her little keyboard. She had on a pair of big, round, reflective sunglasses, and her iridescent jacket could blind a man. The earthier-looking one sighed into the microphone, “We’re Pixie Bitch.”

“Oh, God.” Connie mumbled. He threw his head back, downing a respectable amount of lager as he prepared for the first set.

I politely, yet softly clapped, while trying to navigate around the beer in my hand. I felt it was starting to lose its chill, so I made a note to chug it and chug it faster. Jean didn’t clap, but he kept his arm around me, which was unreasonably sweaty, but comforting. The keyboardist was standing on stage, silent and stiff as a board, while the other girl cooed, “We’re going to start with this song and this song is called ‘4:21.’”

The song was strangely kind of space-agey. That little keyboardist was calmly firing away at those keys to create this trance-like sound that the girl in the front was really vibing with. She started excessively swaying back and forth, singing about your usual wannabe hipster teen trash. Covering yourself in glitter, rolling joints on the backs of Virginia Woolf novels, smoking cigarettes on a Parisian balcony that you bought with your dad’s trust fund money while studying abroad. And how painful and emotional it was to cover yourself in glitter, roll joints on the backs of Virginia Woolf novels, and smoke cigarettes on a Parisian balcony that you bought with your dad’s trust fund
money. All I could tell Jean was, “This sucks.”

Jean just leaned back in and said “I know. It's only the first act, it'll get better.” Four equally broody and not-so-much better songs later, the girls took their bow and hustled off stage with their equipment.

Some people were taking their cigarettes from behind their ear or their front pocket and taking them outside to smoke. I turned to Jean and asked, “Is that it?”

“No, there's two more bands.” He bounced his right foot. “They were just the headliner, so the other two should be a lot better.”

“Good. Pixie Bitch was a bit out of my realm.”

The crowd was beginning to grow exponentially. We were being pushed and pulled in all directions. Connie blew air through his nose and reluctantly trudged towards the very busy ticket stand. Not knowing what the do, and not in the mood to push against emo teenagers, we followed him. “Aw, dammit…”

“I guess they all wanted to skip the first band,” Jean hypothesized aloud, “just so they could see Anything but Country.”

“Why is this place so crowded?” Connie worried, hastily stuffing fives into his metal lockbox and scribbling smileys onto everyone’s hand.

“Anything but Country,” Jean explained, “was listed as the number one up-and-coming band in the scene on DIY Warrior.”

“What the shit is DIY Warrior?” Connie furrowed his brow.

“Some blog about the punk scene in the city. I forgot to unlike them on Facebook so I get all of their updates still…” I rolled my eyes. Nice excuse. Jean tossed the empty can onto the ground and crushed it with his foot. “I don't even feel buzzed.”

“Maybe that's because you ate a week’s worth of carbs at Olive Garden.” I safely guessed as I tossed my now-empty beer can.

“Olive Garden, romantic.” Connie monotonously yet briskly mumbled as he stuffed cash into the lockbox, made change, and drew shittier and shittier smiley faces. In between all of this chaos, Connie still managed to slam another can in Jean’s palm. “Have a beer.”

The lights went down yet again, and the people waiting in line to get their smiley face became visibly more agitated. Some were tapping their feet, others sighing, and the rest were rolling their eyes at Connie, who let out a painful groan as he rushed to make change and draw shittier and shittier smiley faces.

“C’mon, Hitch, let’s go get a good spot.” Jean tugged at my wrist.

We settled for a spot in the middle of the crowd. We couldn’t break through the area that Jean guaranteed would become “a fucking moshpit,” and he insisted we stay out of that mess, anyway. As the guitarist tested out a few chords, the singer was panting, “Thank you...for having us tonight. How is everyone doing?”

“Woo!” The crowd responded, holding their drinks up in the air.
“Ugh, we love you guys.” The crowd offered another “woo” as the singer continued, pushing his hair out of his face. “You know, we grew up here…” Woo! “I came to my first show here…”

“Ugh, I hate when bands give their backstory.” Jean rolled his eyes, sipping his beer.

“Woo!” I cried out, nudging Jean.

“I can’t speak about the rest of the guys, but…” The guitarist stopped tuning his guitar and turned towards the singer. “Alright guys. Let’s get started.” A very long woo followed. “We’re going to play Dazed.”

Ten seconds into this set, and I yell-whispered in Jean’s ear, “Oh, they suck too.”

“Yeah, I don’t get the hype.” Jean shrugged. “They all kind of suck.”

“But the hype is fun!”

“Oh, sure.” He took another sip of his beer before swishing around the can and handing it to me. “Do you want to finish this?”

I shrugged. “Sure.” It was lukewarm, but I powered through and chugged the last few gulps of it.

“Is there a trash can nearby?” I yelled into Jean’s ear.

“Don’t be a pussy, you’re at a punk show.”

“Right!”

“You stomp that shit on the ground!” He proclaimed.

“Right!” Taking his directions, I took the can and tossed it on the ground, smashing it under my foot. “Yeah!”

After both of our adrenaline had worn off, he added, “And then you pick it up and you recycle it as to not disrespect the venue owners.”

“Recycling isn’t punk, Jean!” I argued, keeping the can under my foot.

“That’s a lie.” He spun me around to face the stage before wrapping his arms around me and resting his chin on the top of my head. “Saving the environment is punk. So is being a nice, wholesome person.”

I broke away from his embrace and turned to grab his wrists. “Weirdo…c’mon, Jean,” I tried dragging him into the crowd, but he wouldn’t budge. “Let’s dance.”

“How are you going to dance to this?” He asked, laughing.

“I dunno, a lot of jumping? Head banging? Chain-smoking and complaining about the minutiae of American suburbia?”

He just shook his head and stood back, still grinning. I groaned and started jumping with the beat. “Ugh! You’re lame!”

A bra flew through the air and landed by the guitarist’s feet. He looked pleasantly surprised, looking into the crowd to see who threw it. That looked kinda fun. My adrenaline was pumping, and I was inspired to do it myself. This was such a small venue, I bet this kind of thing didn’t happen before to
them, or at least not very often. Besides, I could feel the underwire on my bra poking through the fabric. It was nearing the last of its days. Might as well kill two birds with one stone: make some musician’s day, and get rid of a broken bra.

I reached for my bra hook, palming blindly at my back to find it. Jean leaned close to me, his forehead against my head. He would whisper, but the club was too loud. “What are you doing?”

“I’m gonna throw my bra.” The hook gave way, and I maneuvered the bra off of my arms without taking off my shirt. I held it up for Jean to see. “It’s broken anyway.”

He pinched the wire, getting a better look at it. His face got red. I laughed at him, “What, you get nervous looking at a bra?”

He went on the defensive. “No, I’m just--Do you think you could even throw it from back here? What if it hits some random guy?”

“I can do it just fine!” I got on my tiptoes. I couldn’t get a good view of the stage anyway. If I tried throwing it from where I was, I was sure I would end up pegging it at the girl in front of me. “Actually, fuck--Put me on your shoulders!”

He rolled his eyes and crouched down. I jumped onto his shoulders, and he gripped my legs so I wouldn’t fall off. I could see everything perfectly from up there. I didn’t even care that I was blocking the view of the people behind me. I smashed up the bra so I could throw it with one hand, and tossed it at the bassist with an excited howl. This was absolutely electrifying. Jean yelled up, “Did you throw it yet?”

I laughed, debating my next move. This was so much fun. I don’t even like this kind of grungy stuff, but this was exhilarating. All the loud noise, all the people you felt a weird connection to, despite never having a conversation with them. Kinda wanted to crowdsurf, kinda wanted to climb on the stage. Instead, I grabbed the hem of my shirt, bit back a giggle, and lifted it for less than a second. It was the first time anyone else had seen my tits, and I felt so fucking trashy, but so giggly at the same time. This was fun. This was real fun. Out of exhilaration and slight nervousness, I started laughing. I can’t believe I thought this would be lame. I can’t believe I didn’t want to come here. Jean quivered a bit and whined, “Ugh, c’mon, my back hurts--”

I started smacking Jean on the head with my open palm. “Okay, let me down, let me down--”

He crouched back down, and I hopped off of his back. He stood back up, straightening his spine and groaning, “What took you so long?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know! I’m having fun.”

“Wanna go to the front?” He asked. I don’t think he knew what I did. I’d think his reaction would be a lot more emotional. Either way, I nodded at his question. “Alright, let’s go.”

He put his hands on my shoulders, trying to guide me through the crowd. It was a tight squeeze, and it was hard to navigate a mosh pit. We made it five steps before someone elbowed me in the nose. “Ah, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck--” Jean pulled me away from the pit, spinning me around to check out my nose, even though I wasn’t hurt. We stood by an open emergency exit to the outside. There were a gaggle of sound producers and members of Pixie Bitch chain-smoking cigarettes not fifteen feet away from us, along with one kid with a bleeding nose. He had a scarlet-soaked tissue held up to his face, and a pair of friends nearby typing frantically on their phones while they passionately argued whether you’re supposed to lean someone with a nosebleed forwards or back. I presumed the nose in
question was a casualty from the moshpit. Frankly, this area of the concert was a major bummer. Too much blood and tobacco for my tastes.

“I’m okay!” I beamed. I wasn’t bleeding, and it didn’t hurt too bad.

“What if it bruises?”

If it did, I would be majorly pissed. But I couldn’t worry about it and ruin the night. I brushed it off.

“I have makeup. I can cover it up. It’ll be fine.”

“Oh, okay…” He bit his lip. He seemed to accept that as the truth until he narrowed his eyes and confirmed, “Are you sure?”

“Mm-hmm, positive.” I smiled at him and he smiled back at me while a gust of nice, chilly winter air hit us. Even though it brought the scent of cheap cigarettes with it, it provided much-needed relief to my warm skin. “Oof, that actually feels amazing.”

“I know. It’s hot as balls in there.” He ran his hand through his hair.

“Wanna stay outside for a bit?” I asked him, putting my hand on the back of his neck and pulling his ear towards my lips so I didn’t have to scream.

“Sure.” One step out the door, and he leaned in to ask, “Or we could just bail completely.”

“Just leave?”

“Honestly, this band is probably gonna be the highlight of the night. We can either stick around or we could go spend the rest of the night somewhere else.”

“Sure.” I blinked. “I’m down for whatever.” With that, we pushed past the smokers and decided we would head for the train station so we could go home, but we were both open to new plans if either of us came up with any.

“That was weirdly fun.” I blinked as he led the way to the train station.

“Good. I’m glad you liked it.”

I looked up at him and added, “Even though all the bands sucked.”

He shrugged. “Yeah. They usually do.”

“Then why were you so eager to go see them?!” I asked.

“What else were you going to do tonight?” He asked. “Sit in your room?”

“We could have sat in my room together--”

He blinked. “Would you seriously rather stay in your dorm--”

“No! Jeez, I just told you I had fun.” I yawned. “I just can’t wait to lay down. Ugh. I’m exhausted.”

He put his hands in his pockets. “Me too. Fuck, I’m cold, too.”

“I know!” I whined to the sky, subtly quickening my pace to the station. I had no idea where I was going, but I was now leading the way to the train. “Tell me where to go! I wanna get warm!”
“Okay, okay.” I turned to look back at him. Ugh, he’s cute. The glow of the Christmas lights that hung between each telephone pole cast a red and green glow on everything, making them shine even brighter - the little buttons on his jeans and jacket, the piercings on his face, his eyes? Unbearably adorable.

Fuck, I needed to shut up. I needed to get over it. But how was I going to get over it when every little movement he made sucked me right back in? I needed to just look forward and get over it. I mean...Jean was just a really, really good friend. Right? I mean, if I’m this happy now, imagine how happy I’ll be with my future actual boyfriend. Astoundingly happy. Unbelievably happy. I mean, I’m pretty happy now. Ridiculously happy, and just having fun, and I think I spent half of tonight laughing to the point where I forgot the mountain of work that was waiting for me at home. “Good” was the only word that crossed my mind. My face was warming itself up thinking about it.

“I don’t know if I ever told you, but I feel really lucky that I got to get so close to you.” I shrugged. I don’t know why I said it. Life is short, maybe? Maybe it was the giddiness coming out of me? “So, thanks for tonight, especially. It was fun.”

“Y-You don’t have to thank me,” he said from behind me. “Uh, the train station is this building on the right, but...honestly if it weren’t for you, I’d be doing all of this by myself. So thanks.”

I turned to offer a quick smile, but turned back to the doors in front of me so I didn’t start having my dumb, lovestruck thoughts again. Luckily, the lighting in the station wasn’t as whimsical outside. It was dim, it smelled, and the smooth jazz playing over the shitty intercom didn’t really do its intended purpose. We consulted the scheduling - we were taking the train to the airport. Jean said our stop would be five away from where we are now, and the train would be arriving in fifteen minutes. Perfect.

We found a spot near the track, leaning against a pillar since all the benches were already taken. We started patiently waiting for the train to roll up, not moving except for the occasional glance down the tunnel.

“Tonight was good, right?” He asked out of literally nowhere.

I turned to look at him and grin. “It was great.”

“Cool. We made it through one night out without killing each other.”

“Well, it’s not that we don’t get along. We get along really well.”

“Right.”

I’m surprised he didn’t argue with me on that one. Regardless, I continued, “I think we just want each other to be really, really great and we’re really shitty with taking criticism.” I want Jean to be this perfect Prince Charming who can somehow read my mind, and he wanted me to be...I don’t know. Tolerable? Responsible?

“Yeah. Yeah, I think you got it.” He nodded. “It’s not the time to say it, but remember when we were at the diner and we were talking about us being bad influences on each other?”

“Mm-hm.”

“I don’t think that’s true. Because, I mean, I think of how I was in July or whatever before I come to college and everything and I like the person I am now more than the person I was then. And that wasn’t even a year ago. You do too, right?”
I bit my lip for a minute, thinking, until I decided, “Yeah. You’re right.”

“I mean, we have low points but so does everyone, and I think the high points are great. Right?”

“Right.”

“Right,” He echoed. I looked up at him, waiting for him to say something else, but he didn’t. We just kind of looked at each other, and then laughed to break the awkward tension. We were saying “right” a lot.

The train rolled right up to us. The doors opened. He asked, “That’s ours?”

I nodded. The little sign on it said “Airport.” This route went through the heart of the city before veering towards campus, and then finally stopping at the international airport. We hustled in through the doors.

“Ah. Can’t wait to finally sit down.” I sighed. I took a seat and stretched out my tired legs. “My feet hurt.”

“Won’t sit for long. We’re only like, five stops away.” He groaned. He leaned down to tie his shoe as I watched the window. Despite being nighttime, the city did a fine job of keeping everything lit. “Florian comes first, and then—”

“Florian Reiss University?” I was reading the variety of signs emblazoned with that name in neon. They had a hospital, a veterinary unit, a gym that apparently hosted a field hockey game last night.

“Yeah, that—” Jean popped back up and caught sight of all of the signs. His nose was an inch away from the glass as he inspected it further. “What?”

“What do you mean?”

“The train just skipped that stop—” He turned to me, puzzled. “It’s this? And then my Mom’s is after that, and then...”

We went underground. Jean folded his arms, angrily watching the changing scenery and waiting for the train to slow down. We sped through an underground station. I quickly read a sign that welcomed us to “The Olde City.”

“They skipped my stop, too.” Jean walked towards the map on the wall, slamming his finger against it. “We were supposed to stop here. And at Florian Reiss. Why aren’t we here? Who is driving this fucking train? Is he fucking lost? Is he fucking possessed?”

“You can’t really get lost when you’re on a train—” I tried to explain.

“It’s an express train,” the tired woman behind us interrupted in a meek voice. She yawned, and laid back down in her seat. “So it goes right to the airport...”

“Ah, for fuck’s sake!” Jean groaned.

So, soon enough, we were at the airport. As the train slowed to a stop, Jean complained in a low, gruff voice, “I can’t. Believe. We ended up farther away from home than where we started from.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Really.” We stepped off the train.
“It didn’t say anywhere it was an express route, so how was I supposed to fuckin’ kn--”

He went to raise his voice, but caught himself and took a deep sigh instead. “Whatever train is left. Whether it takes us to campus, or to my mom’s, I don’t care at this point. I don’t fuckin’ care, I just want to lie down.”

I’ve never been to the airport before. Then again, I haven’t been to any airport before. Strangely enough, it wasn’t as busy as I would expect it to be. Probably due to the hour. With his arms crossed, Jean read the short schedule up on the board. “Next train is out of here at one. We got five minutes.”

“That’s not bad.” I started heading for the nearest empty bench. There was a lack of footsteps behind me. I turned around to address Jean. “Well?”

“Well, we’re here. I’m kinda hungry.” He shrugged. “I think I’m gonna get a pretzel. Might as well.”

“Holy fuck, you can’t be serious.” I worried aloud. “That’s so many carbs! Jean, you ate... so much bread.”

“Well...I want more bread.” He looked around. “I always have to eat something right before I go to bed.”

“You’re not supposed to eat like, two hours before you sleep.”

“Well, there’s a lot of things I shouldn’t do. Help me find a place to get food. There should be a stand somewhere.”

“Jean…”

“It’ll be a literal minute.” He started to jog up the stairs, and I lamely followed. He hustled to the nearest pretzel stand and began what seemed to be the hardest decision of his life. “So we have plain, cinnamon sugar, pizza, Parmesan--”

“Cinnamon sugar. Maybe?” I decided for him, eager to get back on the platform. We only had a few minutes. I started grabbing napkins and little packets of yellow mustard so he didn’t have to do it after he bought his snack. Just in case. I just wanted to assure we could just get our shit and bounce. That was the plan, anyway.


“No,” I kicked at the tiled floor. I held up my handfuls of goodies. “I got the little yellow packets already.”

“No, I don’t like yellow. Huh...Hitch, should I get the super hot, spicy, or honey mustard?”

“Jean, I don’t care! Any one of them!”

“I don’t know what I’m the mood for…”

I was nearly ripping my hair out of my head. God, I wanted to leave! Jean! I pouted, “Spicy! Get the spicy mustard!”

“You heard the lady.” He smirked towards the cashier, which only made me angrier. “Spicy mustard it is, then. Oh!”

“What?” I cried out.
“Can you add a bottle of water to that order?”

We finally came to a conclusion, which was an accomplishment by itself. But we had larger problems to tackle. “Jean, it’s almost one.” My heart dropped. I grabbed his sleeve, trying to pull him towards the track. “It is a minute to one, please, we’re gonna miss our train!”

“But I gotta get my change--” Jean argued. The cashier was counting out his bills so slow, Jesus Christ Jean, why did you give the woman a twenty dollar bill for a cheap pretzel? She counted out fifteen dollars before I lost my patience, yanking him away from the counter and towards the track.

“Keep the rest of it!” I called back, sprinting. We had to run over to the track, go down two flights of stairs, and hop on this train in less than thirty seconds.

Spoiler alert: we missed it. The doors closed while we were rushing down the steps, and it began to slowly roll out of the station. While I had resolved to give up, Jean was not going to go down without a fight.

“Come back here!” Jean shouted at the train, running briskly like a dork alongside the train. I ran behind him, because a small sliver of me wanted to believe that the train would stop for us if Jean acted obnoxious enough. As a last resort, he threw his almost-full bottle of water at one of the windows. “Come back here, you diiiiiiiiick!”

The back door of the train opened, but before the steaming conductor could say anything, the water bottle ricocheted off of the moving train and smacked Jean right on his cheek. He stopped dead in his tracks and put his hand to his face, shouting, “Shit!”

I stopped running to walk towards Jean, who was now rubbing his face in confusion and mild annoyance. I glanced up at the conductor, who was roaring with laughter, returning back towards the train. I sighed, looking up at Jean as the train disappeared into the tunnel. His bottle, after bouncing off of his face, slowly rolled towards the tracks and fell down into no-man’s-land. “You’re a fucking loser.”

Jean groaned, shamefully dragging his feet towards the nearest bench. I trailed Jean, asking, “Was it worth it, Jean? Was that pretzel and water really worth missing the fucking train? Was it really another three hours of waiting for a ride back home?”

“Stop,” he whined, falling onto the bench and taking another bite out of his goddamn pretzel.

Okay, Hitch. C’mon. Think, think, think. I sighed, running my hands through my hair as I tried to come up with a solution to get us home, and quick. “The subway operates all night.”

“We’re not at a subway station, it’s a train.” Jean felt the need to remind me, as if I were dumb. “And we’re nowhere near a subway station, anyway.”

I whipped out my phone to check maps and estimated travel times. “Well...if we started walking to school - in the dark, in the middle of the night - it would take us two hours and twenty minutes.”

“Oof.” Jean cringed, before his eyes lit up. “Why don’t we walk to my house? Would that be any closer?”

“Three hours and fifteen minutes.”

“An Uber. How much would an Uber be?”

“Let’s see…” I peeked at my phone. “Oh, yikes. Uh, it’s peak hours, so fare is doubled...and getting
to campus would cost roughly ninety dollars.” I looked up at him. “I can’t afford that.”

“I can’t, either.” He swallowed, looking at the ground.

“You don’t have ninety dollars in your account?”

“I don’t have my credit cards with me.” He groaned. “And the next train comes…?”

“Three hours.” I rubbed my eyes. God, they were aching. I dug into my purse for my contacts and some hand sanitizer. I couldn’t take this right now. “Fuck, this is stupid.”

I washed my hands with hand sanitizer before taking out my burning contacts and putting on my glasses. I mean, nobody was gonna see for another three hours anyway.

Once I got my contacts out, I took out my clunky, Bill Gates-y glasses and put them on my face. Was this rock bottom? I looked over at Jean, hoping for some confirmation that things could be much, much worse.

He was still munching on his pretzel. I guess he truly did want to savor it. “This pretzel is making me thirsty.”

“What?” I figured if I’m gonna look like shit, I may as well finish the job and put my hair up. Jean was grinning, trying to get at something, but was failing miserably.

He coughed into his hand. “I said, this pretzel is making me thirsty.”

Yup. This was rock bottom. “Stop saying it like that.” I snapped.

His grin disappeared. He looked down at his pretzel and ripped off a generous piece. “...Do you want any?”

“No.”

“Well, do you have any water?”

“No.”

“Ugh, I’m thirsty—”

“Tough shit, Jean. We’re three hours away from another train. We’re stranded in an area that we don’t know—”

“That you don’t know.”

“That half of us don’t know. At one in the morning.” I crossed my arms, standing up and looking through the vast room. My voice was bouncing off of the tiled walls. “Nothing could be worse right now.”


“At least if any of them came, I’d be dead.”

“Don’t act like this is the worst thing that’s ever happened to you.” Jean furrowed his brow. “Listen, I fucked up. It’s nothing new. I feel bad about it, and I’m sorry I did this to both of us - that’s right, not just you - but I’m trying to make the best of it. Okay?”
I inhaled deeply before rolling my eyes and kicking the pavement with my heel. “Can I be mad at you?”

His mouth was open as he thought of an answer. He exhaled and lowered his shoulders. “Sure.”

We spent thirty minutes in silence. We both abstained from our phones, saving our batteries for an emergency. I stole glances at Jean. Even when I was mad at him for having to get that stupid fucking pretzel, he still looked good. I knew I’d forgive him in the morning, if not a few days. Hell, I was the reason we missed the midnight train (although my reason was justifiable, because apparently nobody labels these trains anymore). I just had to let my rage burn, until I was burnt out.

He was swinging his legs like a child, staring at his feet. How could you be mad at that, though? Even with so much silver in his face, he was still cute. Little Jeanbo. I wondered what would happen if I called him that? He’d usually be furious with me, but would he be now, when he was silently waiting for me to break my oath of silence? He glanced at me, quickly at first, until he realized I was staring. Then he turned to stare back at me. For once, I didn’t look away and pretend to be doing something else. I pushed my bangs out of my face and asked, “What is it?”

“Oh, nothing, it’s just that you look nice.” My heart was melting, Jesus Christ. But I couldn’t let him know that. I had to keep up appearances. I was still mad that I was having a moment in some bare, dreary train station, and not the cozy confines of my dorm. I scoffed at what he had said, pushing my glasses further up the bridge of my nose and leaning back on the bench.

“I’m not in the mood for compliments.”

Jean sighed, turning over a napkin in his hands. “Understandable.”

We sat there in silence for another long bout of time. There wasn’t really much to say. Jean stood up out of the blue.

“Hey.” He took off his sneakers and put them on the bench. He put his phone in one of them. I raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t see me dance at the show.”

“You kind of stood there and watched me make an idiot out of myself.” God, the concert. It felt like forever ago. My adrenaline rush has worn off. I was exhausted and exasperated all by Jean.

“Don’t think you look like an idiot when you’re enjoying yourself.” He picked up his phone again and started pressing buttons. “You look cute.”

My shoulders slumped, and I reluctantly got up, too. “If you say so.”

“I know so. Are you gonna join me?”

“I don’t know if I like you again yet.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. I can start,” I could hear the song’s opening notes.

“Is this the band we saw?” I asked.

“No. It’s my eighties playlist.” He explained, putting his phone back in his pocket. The opening notes seemed familiar, even to me.

“Oh, God.” I rolled my eyes. “The soundtrack to every slow dance ever.”

“C’mon, really quick.” He grabbed my hand. “We gotta get a groove before they start singing.”
'This is so weird.’ I rolled my eyes.

‘I can put on Pixie Slut, clearly they were the stand-out…’

‘Pixie *Bitch*.’ I corrected him. God, I could not believe I remembered that name.

‘I’m just trying to loosen you up--’ he quickly started to sing along. ‘*So true, funny how it seems--’*

‘Jean, c’mon.’ I whined. ‘Stop. C’mon. I’m not in the mood, really.’

‘THIS IS THE SOOOOOUUUUND, OF MY SOOOUUUULLLL!’ He belted out in the middle of the train station. His voice echoed off of the walls, to the point where it literally frightened me.

‘Jean! You scared me!’ I snapped, putting my hands on my hips.

He stopped his sing along to meekly mention, ‘I don’t make an idiot out of myself for just anyone.’

‘You kind of make an an idiot out of yourself on a daily basis.’ I crossed my arms.

‘Oh, I want the truth--’ He fucking dabbed, ignoring me. ‘--To be said.’ Another dab.

I rolled my eyes, trying to bite back a smile. ‘You’re such a goddamn weirdo.’

‘I can be weird with you. That’s the whole point.’ He observed. ‘We can be weird around each other.’

He yanked my hand, catapulting me into him. My face was smooshed against his body, and he enveloped me in a hug as we awkwardly swayed to the music.

He meekly apologized, ‘I’m sorry about being stuck here.’

‘Mm. Yeah.’

‘I was actually pretty nervous about taking you around.’ He said. ‘Like, terrified for the entire week. Like, I thought you were gonna hate me by the end of the week. But that’s dumb, right?’

I chuckled. ‘Kinda…’

‘But uh, you ended up hating me anyway because, you know, I’m a fucking mess…’ He swallowed, straightening his back and looking up from his feet. ‘Do you still hate me?’

I looked up at him, before looking back down at my socks. ‘Nah.’

His hands went down from my upper arms to my wrists. I saw him swallow and chew the inside of his mouth. ‘That’s good…do you like me? Do you genuinely like me?’

I blinked. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘Because I’m a piece of shit that needs constant validation.’ He smirked, before saying, ‘But really, I just want to make sure…you know, you aren’t settling or anything.’

‘No, I don’t think I’m settling.’ I told him. ‘I’m very happy spending time with you in a creepy train station.’

‘Like, this is what you want?’

‘I mean, I’d rather be in my bed asleep.’ I shrugged. ‘But we’re making the best of things.’
“Ah, well.” He paused and scratched his chin. “I mean, yeah...that…”

“I’m glad that if I had to be trapped in a train station with anyone, that it’s you.” I shrugged. “If it was anyone else, I’d be miserable.”

He rubbed his bruise again. “You know, I do like you. I like you a lot.”

I blinked. Was this happening. “Thank...you.”

“And I thought you did too.” He quickly added. “I was pretty sure, and I was excited. And then last week you said you didn’t.”

“I was just trying to get over you.” I shrugged. You know what? Fuck it. Fuck it. He was painfully awkward, but clearly very into me. I wasn’t reading too much into things, he explicitly told me he was into me. I wasn’t going to let this opportunity escape. Fuck it, I’m going to do it. “It didn’t work.”

Well, it was obvious we both wanted to do it. I took a deep breath, got on my toes, leaned in, and kissed him. It was short, chaste, and completely classy.

His lips were still slightly parted and tinted pink from my lipstick. He gushed, “I’ve been waiting for that all night.”

I smirked and teased, “If you had told me at the beginning of the night, I would have kissed you then and there.”

“Ha…” As he took my lower lip gently in between his teeth, he pulled me in closer by the small of my back, pressing my body against his. After he had my lip under his control, he began to suck on it, causing my tense shoulders to melt. I could feel every little twitch of his body and every breath he took along with them, each one sending a shockwave across my skin. He took his lips away from mine, and I was embarrassed to admit I may have leaned forward in a feeble attempt to kiss him again. I recovered by instead wrapping my arms around him, holding him tight and close, burying my flushed face in his shirt.

Fuck. I wondered how long he felt this way. I wonder why he waited so fucking long, too. But I didn’t want to interrogate him just yet. I just wanted to revel in the moment and be excited for us. “Do you feel better now?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I feel a lot better.”

On the contrary, I was shaking. I was actually shaking because I was so excited. Everything is comin’ up Hitch Deliss, I guess. I couldn’t keep still because there’s so much I wanted to do. I had ideas for dates, anniversary presents, little “good morning” texts, the whole shebang and I couldn’t wait to share it all with him.

“Oh!” Jean broke our embrace to sit back down on the bench. His hand reached into his bag, and out he pulled a box with a gold ribbon tied around it. He gracelessly thrust it into my general direction. I took it from him, examining the packaging. “Chocolates?”

“Yes.” He gave a slow nod. “I got like, one of those sampler things.”

“When did you buy thse--”

“A few days ago?” His face was a bright red, and his voice was diminishing into a mumble. “Uh, tonight was supposed to go a lot differently, and I didn’t know when to uh, give you these at an
appropriate time, so uh, here you go. Before I forget.”

“Didn’t plan on being stranded at the train station, huh?”

“No, that wasn’t in the itinerary.” He sighed, taking out his phone and reciting, “Six P.M., dinner at Olive Garden. Unlimited breadsticks. Seven thirty P.M., lady’s choice. Eight thirty--”

“I know that,” I couldn’t help but laugh, pushing my bangs out of my face while I just giggled. I doubted this was even happening, really. This was weird. This is something I’ve wanted forever but my stomach was in knots, and I felt like I was going to be sick. But if I puked, I would just be smiling the whole time. “Just one question - how important were the unlimited breadsticks?”

“Very.” He said, without any hesitation. “I’m poor--”

“You’re not poor.”

“I didn’t have my credit cards on me--” He corrected himself. “And I took an opportunity to get unlimited breadsticks. An infinite, never ending supply of breadsticks. Do you realize what an amazing offer that is? Theoretically, you could sit in Olive Garden forever, and just eat breadsticks indefinitely--”

This was getting old. “Okay. Another quick question--”

“You said one.” He seemed a little perturbed that I interrupted him earlier.

“I say a lot of things. If the show ended at eleven, what was supposed to happen from then onwards?”

He smirked, instantly forgiving me. He turned back towards his itinerary, cleared his throat, and said, “Eleven thirty train back to campus. Walk back to dorm, give chocolate, go home.”

“Is that it?”

“Is that it?” He repeated, somewhat appalled by my word choice.

“No kiss on the cheek, no heartfelt confession in the rain,” I tried to act disappointed, but I was smiling like an idiot. I wanted to rip it off my fucking face. Where’s my grace and charm when I needed it the most? I can’t play this off. I can’t. “...That’s so cute. You’re so cute. You’re so over-prepared with your little backpack, and it’s so cute.”

“Well, I didn’t want to fuck up,” he said, locking his phone and wiggling it into his pocket. “Still did, in the end. And, to be completely honest with you, I would set your expectations much lower than this.”

“Why?” I asked, shifting in my seat as I glanced between him and the empty railway.

“This is the most effort I put into another person’s day ever.”

I pulled the ribbon wrapped around the chocolates. “Ever?”

“Ever.” He looked down at his feet before looking at me again. “I’m kind of an asshole.”

“Hey, me too.” I propped the lid of the chocolates on Jean’s leg, using it as a guide to figure out which chocolate was which. “We’re meant to be.”
“Nah, you’re not an asshole. You *want* to be, though.” He picked at his fingernails, looking up at the ceiling as he counted off everything that was wrong with himself. “You just want to be a queen bitch because you couldn’t be in high school. And that’s fine, I respect that. I hold grudges, I love attention but I hate most of the people that give it to me, I’d rather be alone than compromise with others—”

“Jean, that’s not being an asshole.” I held out a cashew cluster for him to take. I only gave it to him because I don’t like cashews. I felt like that was a pretty asshole move, but I chose to keep that surprise until later, when he was least expecting it. “That’s called being a person, and not lying to yourself about the bad things that make up a person. You know who you are, and you don’t compromise that for other people. That’s the type of person I like to be, too. Life’s too short to change yourself for other people.” I tried to tell myself that all the time. I wish I could live that way to the fullest, but I couldn’t yet. But Jean...

He was slowly nibbling on his candy as he stared at the ceiling still, almost sagely. When he spoke moments later, all he mumbled was, “I’m so fucking tired.”

“Did you hear what I just said?” If my pep talk was all for naught, I swear to God-- “I’m still processing it.” His eyes did look droopy. They suddenly made me aware that I was exhausted, too. I yawned, and he turned to face me. He slowly eyed me from my jeans up to my eyes. “You look so good with your glasses.”

“Ew,” I muttered, pushing them up the bridge of my nose. “You’ve only said so about a thousand times.”

“Do you believe it yet?”

“No.”

His eyes narrowed in a pretty adorable way. “I wanna kiss you. Can I?”

I folded up my chocolate box and set it aside. Once it was out of the way, I inched closer to him. “You don’t have to ask for permission, you nerd.”

“Well, I’m respecting your boundaries,” He then reiterated, “And I don’t want to fuck up, you *nerd*.”

I laid my legs across his lap. I counted off the nice things he did for me on my fingers. “You took me to dinner, and a concert, and you got me candy. I like *all* of those things. There’s not much you can do that’ll fuck anything up, you *nerd*.” I inched closer.

“I made us miss the train, *nerd*.”

“I made us miss the first train, you *nerd*!” I pointed out, inching even closer until I was maybe five inches away from his face. While Jean ruined our chances of getting home before sunrise for the sake of a cheap soft pretzel, I ruined his precious itinerary. I guess that was bad, too. Not as bad as making us miss the last train home, but...okay. He did fuck up, and catastrophically so, but I was just elated I could pass the time by kissing him and getting showered with compliments by my favorite person. I wish I could do it above ground, and in the comfort of one of our dorm rooms. And maybe post-nap. But, I was going to take what I could get, because what I got is still pretty great.

“I hit myself with a water bottle.”

“That made my *week*.”

“I took you to dinner and a concert, and I got you gifts,” he said, raising his eyebrows and leaning
closer towards me, “And me hitting myself with plastic is what makes your week?”

*Gifts.* He said *gifts*. He gave me a quick kiss, followed by a longer one, but I was too materialistic to not focus on the plural *gifts*. He brought his hand up to cradle my jaw as he kissed me. I fought the urge to melt in his arms and instead gently pushed him off of me. “*Gifts?*”

“What?”

“You said *gifts*. Like, the plural use of the word... *gift*. I only got *one* gift.” We both looked down at the chocolate. He swallowed.

“You got me something else, right? You totally did.” I leaned back and away from him, wiping my lips with my sleeve. I crossed my legs and closed my fingers together like pincers. “Gimme. Gimme, gimme, gimme.”

“Nah, you’re gonna have to wait until later.” I thought he was going to resume kissing me, but instead, he gave up, fell back, and rested his head on the bench instead, which I thought was gross. “You need to get it in the correct context.”


He opened his eyes. I grinned, but Jean just shut his eyes again and went back to rest. “I’m going to go to sleep.”

“Jean!” I whined, my shoulders sinking. “Okay, look, I was kidding; a little. I’ll wait. Do you want another chocolate?” That one I was offering out of sincere kindness.

“Guard our stuff while I’m out.”

“From who?” I asked, loud enough for my voice to echo through the station. And hopefully, loud enough to annoy Jean into staying awake.

“Sewer rats. Stealthy hobos. The list goes on and on.”

*Noooo* he couldn’t sleep. I had to shock him awake. “I threw my bra at the bassist.”

“I know you did, I saw.” He yawned, his eyes still shut. He sounded sleepy. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was out cold within the minute.

I sat up. I was somehow tiptoeing around the situation while also trying to address it head on. I rocked side to side, putting on my most innocent voice. “*Well*, I also...kinda...sorta...flashed the bassist.”

After a pause that seemed to last forever, he just laughed. “I shouldn’t have worried about corrupting you.”

“Corrupting me?” I laughed. “Is that why you waited so long to make a move?”

“Yeah.” He finally opened his fucking eyes.

“You’re the one that needs corrupting! Look how red you are!” I teased.

“Okay, *maybe*, but...” He gently moved my hair out of my face. I have to admit, it was sweet. I was
melting. “I have all of this baggage and all of this weird shit that keeps following me around, and I don’t want you getting involved in any of it.”

“So do I, sweetheart. You’re not the only one. I can deal with all of your rich-people weirdness if you can deal with my Mormon, countryside weirdness.” I laughed to myself before whining, “Ugh. ‘Corrupting’ me. I’ve been making so many moves!”

Pouting, I placed my chin in my hands and grumbled, “I thought you were starting to hate me.”

“Nah, of course not. It’s...agh.” He scrunched up his face, trying to think. “It’s a mix of me being weird around girls and me trying not to take advantage of you.”

“You’re not taking advantage of me at all!” The opposite, actually.

“Well, I mean, it’s not like you were giving anyone else a real chance, either.” He pointed out. “I didn’t want you to put all of this time into this just to get let down and regret it all. Uh, I didn’t think you’d be into me after you got to know me. And I didn’t want to set myself up to get broken up with again.” He scratched his chin. “Shit, that probably makes me pretty selfish...”

“Yeah, you were one of the first people I met at college. Whatever.” I shrugged and smiled. “Doesn’t matter. I think I just got really lucky.”

He smiled and looked back down at his feet. “If you say so.”

“Well, I already know how weird you are. No more surprises there, fuckin’ ‘sound of my soul.’” I copied his pitiful dab before climbing into his lap. “But I also know deep down, you’re nice. You’re a good person. Really.”

“Well--” Before he could argue with me, I leaned in to kiss him again. I refused to let him fight with me anymore tonight. His hands were by his sides still, almost refusing to touch me.

I bit his lower lip before challenging him, “And you’re a little kinky, too...which is gonna be fun.”

He kissed me back, sure, but he was still refusing to touch me at all. I couldn’t spend hours just kissing this boy. My lips were gonna get tired. How do I ask this? “I--er--you can touch me...more?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, just like…” I put my hand on top of his and brought it towards my ass. “You can be a little touchier.”

“But--”

“It’s fine.” Between kisses, I said, “It’s gonna get boring if you don’t make a move.”

“Okay, okay.” he just looked up and said, “I-I just don’t think a train station is the place for it.”

“If a train station isn’t the place, then why do I wanna fool around with you so badly?” I whispered in his ear. I left kisses from his earlobe and going down his jaw. “You can touch me wherever you like.” I learned that I was incredibly easy to arouse. I was super into him. Just, as he said, who knows who was watching...I just wanted to dive into him and explore every inch of his skin. I brushed my hands through his hair, revealing a widow’s peak under his stupid haircut. “Ha.”

He moved his head so I wasn’t pushing his hair back anymore, awkwardly giggling while nuzzling into my neck. “Ah...why would you do that?”
“Because I love you, you nerd.” Aaaaand I fucked up. I wish—ugh. I love you. I LOVE YOU? This early in the relationship? Hell, were we in a relationship? No way. No way I just said that...I need to backtrack. Save myself. I swallowed, trying to think of what I could say to diminish the intensity of what I just said. “I, er—”

He interrupted me with a swift kiss. “Shut up.” He laid another on my cheek, then my jaw. “I love you too.”

I worried, gritting my teeth, “Are you just saying that to make me feel better…?”

“No, I mean it.” He bit my neck, causing my left arm to tense up before he began assuaging the mark with his tongue. He pulled away and wiped off the remaining saliva with his thumb. I rubbed my eyes, aching to stay awake so I could remember every little detail of this big moment - big for me, at least.

He continued to pepper my neck with kisses and careful affection while I was sitting there, still and clueless. My uncertainty must have been obvious. He stopped kissing my neck to ask, “You trust me when I say that, right? Because I’m telling the truth.”

“Yeah, I trust you.” I mean, I definitely needed the assurance, but I still believed him.

All he said was, “Good,” before diving in again and continuing to kiss me.

I was probably really bad at this. I could faintly hear his tongue piercing clacking around in my mouth. I was definitely a horrible kisser, but honestly? Jean probably was, too. I think we both just had this similar, frantic approach to this whole night where we were just trying to release months and months worth of sexual tension in a single night. I was totally fine with that.

My fingers were lingering by his waist, dancing across his belt as they approached the buckle. I gave a slight, and honestly, hella thirsty tug on the waistband of his jeans.

“Hey, um.” He grabbed me by the wrist and put my hand back on the bench. “That’s not...necessary…”

Why do I keep fucking up. “Sorry. I just wanted to keep things moving along, you know?”

“You can do that when we’re not in a train station.” He swallowed. “Maybe we can chill out for a second.”

“Fuck. I’m sorry I made it weird.”

“You didn’t make anything weird. I can’t blame you.” He had a smug look on his face that I wanted to slap. I loved it. He leaned back on the bench. “What can I say? I’m charming and irresponsible.”

I immediately started laughing, and before I could correct him, he caught himself by saying, “Irresistible. Fuck.”

“Dork.” I crawled off of him and rested my head against his lap, draping my feet over the side of the bench. “What time is it, anyway?”

“It’s like, half past two.” He reported. I groaned, kicking my feet. “Trains start back in two hours.”

“Cool.” I yawned. I was sitting right underneath an overhead light. It was really bothering my eyes, so I shut them for just...one...minute...
After what seemed to be a few minutes, I turned over in his lap. He yawned, “Oh, look. You’re up.”

“I fell asleep?” I sat up, cracking my back. Oh, God. I don’t think I regained any energy from my nap, if I ever had one. “Really?”

“For like...just a little bit.”

“Fuck. I tried not to fall asleep on you.” I groaned, standing up to stretch. I was pathetically tired, and standing up only made me extremely dizzy. “I’m...wow. I’m exhausted.”

“Wow, couldn’t imagine the feeling.” He grumbled as he checked his phone. “At least I didn’t crash.”

“Shut up.” I whined, leaning back on his lap. “Can you keep watch while I rest my eyes for a bit?”

“Fuck no, you’ve been asleep for half the night.” He nudged me off his lap and warned me, “Hold out for another half hour. I’m gonna start checking bus times.”

“Mm, fine.” I tried to sit up, but I immediately nuzzled into Jean’s arm instead. I really wanted to sleep. Really, really bad. I almost dozed off again until he shook me off his arm.

“Would you be okay going back to my house instead of campus?” He asked. “No pressure, but your answer completely determines when we get to leave.”

I liked the idea of going back to Jean’s. His mom had that eucalyptus leaf in the shower that made the whole bathroom smell like a spa, and Jean’s vanilla candle with the big, queen sized bed? I was so down. “Whatever has us leaving earliest.”

“Oh good, because the buses to my house start leaving just a few minutes before the trains do,” Jean explained. “So, four in the morning exactly is the earliest we can leave.”

“Relax,” Jean said, squeezing my shoulder. “Nothing we can’t handle.”

“You hit yourself in the face with a water bottle.” I reminded him. “I don’t think there’s much we can handle.”

He offered me a teasing smirk before we dragged our tired feet to the bus stop. Despite the fact it was just outside the ground entrance to the train station, we still got lost trying to find it. But we made our way there in plenty of time. In fact, we were the first in line to get on the bus. Over the course of our hour-long trip, it filled with tired commuters who were unlucky enough to have work on a Saturday. It took everything not to fall asleep on Jean’s shoulder. Every thirty seconds, he would squeeze my arm to keep me awake.

We came to our stop, which unfortunately, wasn’t at Jean’s doorstep. We sauntered through the historic area of the city, our heels padding across the chilly cobblestone as we took every shortcut and went down every shady alleyway to get home. We soon approached a neighborhood that seemed to be built entirely of brick and wood. The standard, electric streetlights of the city were replaced by faux-gaslights, and there were old-fashioned hitching posts instead of bike racks. 13-starred American flag after 13-starred American flag - we were so close to Jean’s house. I could already smell the warm vanilla candle, softly glowing as dawn approached. I just couldn't wait to be there already.
When we finally got there, Jean gently unlocked the door and slowly walked in first as to not disturb his family. Apparently his efforts were useless because they were already awake and immediately alert to our arrival. His mom was standing in the living room with the remote in her hand. Maddie was on the couch, her feet swinging as she watched a very, very early morning cartoon. All she could say was, “What a pleasant surprise. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Me neither,” was Jean’s curt reply as he wiped his eyes and shimmied his feet out of his shoes. His mom offered a friendly reminder to toss his shoes into the foyer. He rolled his eyes and opened the door to toss his sneakers haphazardly next to the umbrella bin. He turned to me and mumbled, “Yours too.”

I started hastily wiggling my feet out of my sneakers, leaning on the wall for balance. “R-Right.”

“Why so early?” Jean’s mom smiled. “Did you have anything to eat?”

Jean shook his head. “We didn’t sleep--”

“What happened? Why do you smell like garlic?”

“Oh shit, I forgot I got breadsticks--”

“You stayed up ‘til morning?” Maddie exclaimed. I didn’t hear the rest of the conversation. As soon as my shoes were off, I headed upstairs. I threw open the door to Jean’s room as if it were mine, and collapsed on his bed.

When I woke up, the sun was high, and the bed was slightly warm, but not for much longer. I immediately recognized the smells and sounds of cooking, crackling meat on a skillet. My eyes were still adjusting to the bright white of Jean’s bedroom. I watched dust motes dance in the sunbeams filtering through the window, and listened to the bustling calm of a city Sunday. Jean’s side of the bed was getting chillier. But, despite my physical loneliness, I didn’t feel lonely. Rather, I felt clean. I felt as relaxed and clean as the room I was in. I decided to reflect until my appetite drove me towards the kitchen, as it eventually would.

Even when I was on my back, staring at a white ceiling that was unmistakably Jean’s, I still didn’t think last night happened. I turned over. I was staring at the balcony now, and its myriad of greenery. I must’ve dreamed last night. They’re uncommon, but I’ve had vivid dreams before. And I’m embarrassed to admit it, but I’ve imagined kissing Jean in multiple scenarios. On a Ferris wheel, in my car, on the balcony, at an art museum, after some epic, implausible fantasy adventure that could never happen but should, because it involved magic and dragons and swordfighting. But last night’s was still my favorite, if it happened. It was short, but in that short amount of time, everything was happening. My arms were frozen, my heart was beating like nuts, Jean’s hand was on the small of my back, and the grimy station vanished, if only for a second. My face grew hot and I was someplace different entirely.

Maybe it was all too good to be true after all. It was odd for this house to be as quiet as mine. Jean would be with me, too. I would be able to hear Maddie doing something, whether it be running around the house or singing or playing a game with her dolls. I would hear Jean’s mom leaving the TV on in the living room, even though she was doing something completely unrelated. I would hear Jean breathing, typing, sketching...I would hear something.

Maybe I was back home in Sina. Maybe I’d open my eyes and find an explanation for the quiet, surrounded by pink. Maybe last night really was some dream or illusion after all. Maybe the cops found us in the empty station, knocked out by some hobo, and took me home. Maybe I dreamt up the whole thing as a coping mechanism.
Once I came to terms with my comatose state, I heard a loud bang. Jean’s “Fuck!” echoed through the house. I sat up, climbing out of bed and pinching myself for good measure. I would’ve launched myself down the stairs to make sure Jean wasn’t dead, but my body was still half-asleep.

When I got to the living room, I took a peek into the kitchen. Jean’s toaster was dangling off of the counter. It would have hit the floor if it wasn’t still plugged into the wall. The crumb-catcher-thing was laying a foot away, a thick trail of breadcrumbs between it and the toaster. Jean stood by the mess, observing it for a moment with exasperated eyes. I waltzed onto the scene, unsure of how to address the clusterfuck. I then noted that behind Jean were two plates, each with an omelette and two slices of plain, rye toast. Jean just sighed deeply and whined, “Hiii.”

He took the toaster and sat it upright on the counter. Well, that was a start. I just took hold of both of the plates and led them to the kitchen table. “I--I don’t know where your broom is.”

“I do,” he replied, despite making no effort to move. He finally sighed before going towards the kitchen closet.

I put our plates on the table. I seated us right across from each other on the short side of the table so we wouldn’t be too far apart.

I took my seat and cut through the omelet to let some of the heat escape before taking a bite. Two bites into this amazing, soft, mouthwatering omelet, and I asked Jean, “What did you put in this?”

“Spinach, bacon, tomato.” He answered. I could still hear him diligently sweeping the floor. Then, a pause. “Are you eating without me?”

My mouth still full of toast, I answered, “I don’t know what else to do.”

“Just wait for me.” He finished lazily sweeping the kitchen with a defeated “whatever.”

He sat down in front of his place with a low groan, cracking his back before leaning back in his chair. “Okay. We’re here.”

“This certainly...is a breakfast.” I paused before quickly adding, “Thanks. Did I thank you for cooking yet?”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Well...thanks.” We both took that as our cue to start eating. This was weird. Like, are we dating? Is this what dating feels like? It feels like everything is normal but knowing that I kissed that person and told him I love him and now it feels like the universe reset or something. Should we be holding hands or something? Would it be dumb to ask? Probably. It would probably be pretty dumb.

Our meal was kinda quiet, but quick. After we finished eating he asked how I felt, and I said I felt okay and he said he felt great, and I offered to do the dishes just because he made an entire breakfast while I was asleep and I didn’t do shit. And this was his house and I should be a good guest or whatever, and are we fucking dating? Is this what couples do, give and take? Like, am I good? I’m sure if I asked he would make fun of me or something. What, do I have to sign a form saying you’re my girlfriend? That’s what he would say. Something very much along those lines. Throw in some jab at my family being Mormon and you got a one-way ticket to Angerstown, a town of which I am the mayor.

I just grabbed all the plates and stuff and brought them to the kitchen. He followed, resting his elbows on the counter next to me while I washed the dishes. One dish in and I finally asked, “Do you not trust me to wash your dishes?”
“No, I trust you, I just don’t want to fuck off and do something without you and leave you alone in the kitchen.” He yawned. “It’d be awkward.”

“So hovering over me and watching me clean is less awkward?”

A pause. “I thought so.”

“I mean, I got it. You can find something to watch on the TV or something and I’ll be done this in like, a minute.”

“Okay. That’s a plan. I’ll get a movie or something.” He stood up and went to move towards the living room, but not before turning on his heels, placing his hand gently on my jaw, and pulling it closer to his lips for a quick kiss on the side of my head. Then he finally left me to finish cleaning the dishes. I went back to scrubbing with a slight smile and a newfound peace of mind.

Chapter End Notes

so bc i dont have a lot of the next chapters fleshed through that well yet and i have graduation/job hunting/etc to focus on i'm gonna try to put this on the backburner until may? if anything changes i'll post on my blog but yup yup but this chapter was like 30k words so hopefully it keeps yall satisfied until then
And so, there we were. I was sitting on the couch, my eyes glued to my phone scrolling through gossip articles and memes while Jean was stealthily peeking at them from over my shoulder. His right arm was hooked around my waist. Once he started combing his fingers through my grimy, unwashed hair, I wriggled myself free from his grip and stood up. “I need a shower.”

“Go take a shower.” He took out his own phone and continued his browsing as I made my way up the stairs.

Halfway up the staircase, I called back, “I’m gonna use all your shampoo and stuff.”

“I don’t care.” I shut the bathroom door and got reacquainted with their little mini spa, the eucalyptus still hanging from the showerhead. I hopped in and took full advantage of the fancy soaps and shampoos, resolving to take a very long shower.

I wasn’t going to pretend this wasn’t a little weird. I couldn’t keep my hands off of him last night, and today it felt like we were both trying to reconnect. Unfortunately, we were on different planes of reality. We were both searching for some sort of intimacy as we recovered. Since we already ate, all we had left to do to get back to normal was to shower and get some more sleep into our systems. Then I think we could finally talk about this? Like what the fuck happened? And what we were now. Are we something? We had to be. He made out with me last night and he kissed me this morning. Right?

After my nice, hot shower, I walked back into his room, ready to commence the after-shower ritual of lying in bed for half an hour while refusing to get dressed. Instead, Jean was under the covers, with only one foot and a tuft of dirty blonde hair poking through the white mass of blankets and pillows. I asked, “Did you go back to bed?”

He rolled over to look me dead in the eye and reply, “No, Hitch.”

I glared at him, my eyes heavy with annoyance. “I didn’t know if you were sleeping!”

“I’m trying. I’m still tired.” Before rolling back over, he asked, “Do you have anything to change into?”

I inhaled sharply. Wow, totally forgot that I had nothing to wear. It’s not like I expected to be stranded at a train station with Jean all night. Didn’t think that dinner and a concert required a change of clothes. “...No. I didn’t think that far ahead.”

He groaned, lifting himself out of his cocoon and lumbering towards his walk-in closet. When he came back out, he had a pair of sweatpants, an old t-shirt, and a pair of boxers in his hand. He put them at the end of the bed before crawling back in and trying to get some more sleep.

Unsure if his clothes would even fit, I gingerly picked them up and took them back to the walk-in closet. “Th-Thanks. Let me try them on.”

“Yeah.” With that, I shut the closet door.

The shirt was loose, but that was to be expected. He had some broad shoulders. It hung off of me
like a pair of curtains. I settled for just wearing a t-shirt today.

I took a look at his expensive, beautiful closet once again. Why can’t I be this rich? I deserve to be happy. I said out loud what I already knew. “These clothes are nice.”

“Thanks.” He sighed. “I rarely ever wear them.”

“Can I have the fancy sweatpants then?”

“No...what do you mean fancy sweatpants?”

I quickly pointed out, “They're on a hanger, weirdo.” Then I sighed and admitted, “I got bored on Thanksgiving and snooped through all your stuff.”

“I--Yeah. That sounds like you.” I could hear his blush somehow while I got changed. “Let's not talk about it.”

“I think we will, Mystery of the Female Orgasm.”

“Yikes. I'm surprised it took you this long to bring it up. I thought you didn't see it…”

“How is your chase going?” I held back laughter at the risk of crying.

“It went fine.” He sighed. I could hear his bedsprings give a low whine as he reclined back. “High school was a bad time.”

“Fine.” I sighed and left the closet, turning off the light behind me. I headed back to Jean’s bed, letting myself under the covers to join him. “I guess I’ll stop bullying you if you let me share your bed with you.”

“Well. Fine.” He turned over in his bed and yawned, “I guess.”

I cozied up, cracking my back and burying my face in his pillow. Once I got comfortable, I started to ask, “About the female orgasm--”

He groaned, flipping over onto his back to whine, “You said you’d stop bullying me--”

“No, I just wanted to say…” I cleared my throat. “...You should demonstrate. Sometime.”

He paused, cracking his back and turning back over to face the wall, away from me. “Maybe. Speaking of…” He nuzzled into his pillow, yawned, and mumbled, “What did you get at the sex shop?”

I shrugged. I should have one secret to myself. “You’ll find out eventually.”

“You can’t tell me now?”

“No.” The Internet taught me that all straight boys are the same. The types of guys that would respond “ aww without me ;)” to an innocuous text about taking a shower or going to bed. I couldn’t have Jean whining “ aww show me ;)” once I told him about my new play-thing.

“Mmph.” He swallowed, trying to wake himself up just enough to ask, “How did you like your first date?”

I turned over. “That was a date?”
He was silent. Oops. I backtracked, “I--Well, you never said it was a date.”

“Yeah, but in hindsight, clearly, it was pretty much our first date--”

“‘Oh, I’m Jean Kirschtein,’ I mocked him, ‘and this Friday is gonna be the big day.’ That was you! All week!”

“A date is a big day!”

“But not every big day is a date.” I explained. “I thought you were just excited to see that band or whatever.”

“No, they suck. I just wanted to do something that wasn’t some stupid dinner and a movie.”

“Well. I thought it went fine.” I replied, snuggling into his back. I mumbled, “I had fun.”

“Me too.” He yawned. “I hardly slept last night.”

“I know.” His sleepiness wasn’t as contagious as I thought it would be. Maybe it was the lovesickness, but I was fucking wired. I was extremely excited. I smirked, “Can I tell everyone we slept together after the first date?”

“No. It’s a lie.”

“It’s technically true.”

“Mmph.” That didn’t get the heated, embarrassed, hysterical response I was aiming for. I pouted. Boy, I am just desperate for attention.

“Ooh, I’m gonna steal your wallet.” I teased, digging it out of his pocket.

“I don’t care,” He mumbled into the pillow. He tried fighting off sleep, but was clearly losing the battle. I frowned. I just wanted him up on his feet so we could...I don’t know. Bond? Get to know each other better as boyfriend-girlfriend? Partners?

“Oh, credit cards.” I cooed, trying to capture his attention. “Platinum spender.”

“Yeah. Credit cards.” He turned over in bed.

“I’m gonna steal your bank information and use them on breast implants.” I told him.

“Uh-huh.” He grumbled into the blankets, clearly not listening.

I grabbed his student I.D. and his state I.D. and compared them side by side. “Aw, how old are you in your state photo? Seventeen? You look so cute!”

“It was only a year ago, chill out.”

“But your li’l soccer uniform! I wanna be a soccer wife! You should start playing again.” I whined. I turned his I.D. over between my fingers before reading the name. “What does the A stand for?”

“The A?”

“Jean A. Kirschtein.” I handed him back the plastic card.

He put it on his nightstand and shifted in his bed, thinking. “Er--Adam.”
I smiled, rolling onto my side. “No, it isn’t. Nobody has to think about what their middle name is.”

“I’m not telling you mine.”

“I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours!” I pushed my bangs out of my eyes. “Mine’s Emma.”

“Emma isn’t nearly as bad—”

“Fair is fair.” I interrupted, pouting. “Less than twenty-four hours into this relationship, and I’m already having trust issues?”

“I never promised you anything.” Jean said.

“You promised if I told you my middle name, you’d tell me yours.” I lied. “Emma. So tell me!”

“I didn’t promise anything!” He retaliated. “Just drop it.”

I did, reluctantly, and with a sigh. Fuck, what’s there to do now? Clearly he was being a fuddy-duddy. “I’m gonna work on some homework. Can I use your mom’s office?”

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “I can throw in your clothes with mine, by the way. Wash them before we go back to campus.”

“Oh, that’s nice of you.” I smiled. He hoisted himself out of bed to start chores. “Thanks.”

While Jean, as domestic as he was, was carrying his laundry basket to the basement, I retired to the office. As uncomfortable as that couch was the time I slept over during Thanksgiving, this office was probably one of the nicest workspaces I’ve ever stepped foot in. I really liked Annette’s taste. Her office was right out of a Pinterest board. I was obscenely jealous of her bookcase, which took up an entire wall. Her reclaimed wood desk sat in front, with all of the wires from her surprisingly clunky computer were neatly hidden in a box below. I felt like a powerful executive just standing here. I straightened my posture as I approached the desk.

I turned on her computer, but it was taking forever to boot up. I don’t know how you can be the wife of a tech mogul and still have a dinosaur for a computer. I spun in circles while sitting in the chair, but I stopped once I felt my head start to spin, too. My eye landed on her bookcase. It was an odd array of memorabilia. Some photo frames and neat knick-knacks filled the empty gaps. Some of the shelves had old children’s books that clearly Jean had outgrown - probably keeping them around for his sister. She had one of those wooden ampersands on her shelf that I felt like every mom had in her home somewhere. Other shelves had books that seemed to be more of Mrs. Kirschtein’s style. Self-help books, celebrity autobiographies, airport romance novels, a biography from an inner-city nurse.

On the bottom shelf of her bookcase was a series of scrapbooks. The first one was the oldest: a repurposed binder labeled “ELIOT & ANNETTE” on the spine. The second was blue and said, “Jean” in Sharpie. The third was bright pink, and it was labeled with fancy, pink foam letters. “MADELINE.”

I plucked Jean’s scrapbook off of the shelf and settled on the couch to read it. The login screen for the computer was up, and I could easily hop online considering that Mrs. Kirscheit left all of her passwords on a sticky note for some reason. But the scrapbook was now more important. When I opened it up, a bunch of recent photographs had fallen out - rejected photos from family vacations and parties that didn’t quite make the cut I guess, but still had too much sentimental value to toss away. I tucked them between the rear page and the cover, and turned back to the front.

The first page was a series of Polaroids of baby Jean swaddled in a hospital blanket, wearing a pink
and blue striped hat. The page read, “JEAN APOLLINAIRE KIRSCHTEIN. Born April 7, 1996.”

“Apollinaire!” I exclaimed. Mystery solved! I excitedly carried the baby book to Jean’s room, holding the scrapbook up to excitedly ask, “Your name is Apollinaire?!”

Quick as a fox, he dropped his box of dryer sheets and leapt for the scrapbook. I fled out of his room and down the hallway with it, loudly laughing as I wondered about the treasure that could be hidden inside this book. I needed to preserve it. I needed to keep it safe because I'm sure it was a goldmine.

I locked myself in the bathroom so I could browse the book in peace. I sat on the floor and leaned against the door, listening to Jean as he tried to get inside.

Lots of cute fat baby pictures to start with. Jean literally came out of the womb a pudgy, grumpy baby, with his hands balled into fists. There were more baby pictures than I could even count - first smile, first steps, first word (“Hi!”). His early years were well-documented, despite the fact that they all took place in a dingy little wood-paneled living room with matted shag carpet. He didn’t seem to mind.

A page later and you could even see the exact moment when his dad made the family’s money. It was like transitioning from a dull, sepia tone to wondrous technicolor. All of their clothes got a little nicer, and the memories made in their crappy little seaside shack were left behind in favor of sunny California, rainy Seattle, and an electric NYC. Candid moments of baby Jean napping in his sleeping dad’s arms on a hotel bed, and a worried Annette applying sunscreen to her son’s face at the beach.

I sat in silence going through this scrapbook with a wide smile etched onto my face. A Christmas morning, with Jean decked out in festive red pajamas while eating leftover cookies that were meant for Santa the night prior. A day at the beach, with the sticky syrup from a melted popsicle smeared all over his face. A night in Disney World, his toothless grin stretched from ear to ear with a fireworks show in the background.

What a happy, smiley kid. It was honestly contagious. I flipped the page.

“Wait! You had a fedora.” I gasped. I couldn’t stop fucking laughing and shaking. “You owned a fucking fedora!”

“ When I was thirteen!”

“Oh, the awkward teen years.” I leaned towards the door so he could hear me better. “Any embarrassing secrets I should know about?”

“Not off the top of my head.”

There were homecoming dance photos, but only for the first two years of his high school career. Jean looked awkward - he clearly had no idea what to do with his hands or his smile, and he only had one pierced ear that happened to make him look like a douchebag. I couldn’t tell how his date looked, because someone put scrapbooking stickers over her face. The first sticker said, “First Dance!” and the second one said “Memories.” The freshman and sophomore photos both looked about the same, except for the girl’s dresses and a noticeable weight loss on Jean’s part. He still didn’t look great. Still kind of a fat kid, but there was clearly some progress.

The next page was all about sports, with soccer photos that his mom had already plastered all over Facebook to snoop out. I skipped those and flipped right to senior year of high school and all the fancy, professional photos that came with it. A black collared shirt, all of his dumb piercings, and a scowl that said, “I know I’m too good to be here.” The combination of all three melted me into a

“What?”

“Your senior photo.” I clarified, talking through the door. “You look so good, I hate it.”

“The one in the black?”

“Yes. You’re stupid handsome.” I groaned, flipping through the past photos. I swear, he got hot in an instant. There is no gradual turn from cute little fat baby to awkward teenager to attractive-as-fuck adult. What? Maybe it was the piercings. Maybe he made a deal with a demon and sold his soul, or kissed a frog prince or something, I don’t know. “It’s not fair.”

“Well, when did you get so pretty?” He huffed. I honestly didn’t know the answer. I still saw myself as a work in progress. Not that I didn’t look fucking incredible currently, but there was progress to be made still. Jean continued grumbling, “I didn’t, you know, go on a quest for your embarrassing—”

I stood up and opened the bathroom door with a contented sigh. I got all of the information I wanted from this scrapbook. Jean still had his arms crossed. “What, are you happy now?”

“I’m very happy.” I handed him back the book and opened it up. “I just have a few follow-up questions. Were you the one that put stickers over her face?” I laughed, pointing to his homecoming dance photos. How petty.

“No...my mom must’ve.” He flipped the page to look at the next one before turning it back. “That’s pretty funny, actually.”

“If I fuck you over, will your mom erase me from the scrapbooks too?!”

“I'd think this scrapbook would end at high school graduation.” He guessed. But he guessed wrong. So amazingly wrong. There was one spread set aside for his college graduation with diploma and paintbrush stickers in the sleeves, ready to be adhered. “Is that why she wanted a photo from Family Day so bad...?”

The next one was all lacy and white. “Is this for a wedding?”

“That's incredible!” I laughed.

“What happens after my wedding?” Jean flipped the spread to a single blank page.

“Well, if there's nothing else in the scrapbook, then clearly you're just gonna have to die. Your story is over.” I shrugged. “It's the rules of the scrapbook.”

“If you die in the scrapbook, you die in real life.”

“You were such a cute kid.” I laughed, ignoring his joke to get back to the main topic. A weird kid, but still cute. I pinched his cheeks, but he backed away. “And now you’re a handsome adult!”

“Y-You're embarrassing...”

“Who am I embarrassing you in front of?! We’re all alone!”

“Me!” He shut the book and pushed it back towards me. “Here. Put it back.”

I guess we were all done looking through it, anyway. I got up to place the scrapbook back on the shelf. While I was in the office, I and turned off Mrs. Kirschtein’s computer. The essays I had saved
on the cloud, and the Calculus I needed to study for weren’t top priorities. Honestly? I was probably gonna fail all my core studio classes, anyway. Best I could do was just make an effort to fix them up as best as I could before the final one night. This week was the last week of classes, and the next was when this was due. Eek.

After the office was spick-and-span, I joined Jean in waiting for the dryer cycle to finish, then we folded up clothes. I still struggled with how I should ask him to help with my art. Like, help a lot. Bordering on plagiarism. Once Jean’s last shirt was all folded up, he asked, “Do you want to stay another night or head back to school?”

“School,” I admitted. “Only because that’s where my work is.”

“That’s fair.”

“And before I forget? I have one question.” I rocked back and forth. Oof, I didn’t know how he was going to take this. His honesty, and all. “Can you maybe, perhaps, per chance, help me with my final drawings so I don’t fail and have to leave college forever sometime in the next, er, two weeks?”

“Uh. Sure.” He nodded slowly at first, but the pace quickened soon enough. “Sure. I can manage.”

After the laundry was settled and we were ready to go back to school, we took the train back to campus. We parted right outside of my dorm room with a kiss, and agreed to get some work done tonight since nothing got done yesterday. Immediately after he turned to leave towards his room, I went inside of mine, completely disregarded my roommate sitting on her bed, and promptly screamed into my pillow out of excitement. I had a boyfriend. Right? My game of cat and mouse was over. I was in a nice, so-far stable, and committed relationship. I was like... growing up. It felt weird. A good weird, but still weird.

Speaking of growing up, I didn't know where to put my little red vibrator. My nightstand at home was a hard “no.” I’d lose it in my drawers here. Besides, relocating it while Annie was in the room, trying her damnedest to ignore me, would be a little more than uncomfortable. It seemed my only option was to store it in my purse for the time being. I took time unpacking everything else, though. Everything. I even hesitated throwing out the train ticket from last night, or the napkins from the pretzel place.

Ugh. I was becoming one of those girls I hate. The ones who depend on their boyfriends for everything, down to their purpose in life. I couldn’t let myself become that under any circumstances, as easy as it was. The first step was just to try to draw. Look inside myself or whatever. As helpful as it was to have Jean model for me and give his feedback, was I really going to depend on him for these credits?

I pulled out my drawing board and turned my back towards Annie so she was out of my vision. I don’t even know what she was doing. Listening to music? With her attitude, I guessed she was listening to a murder mystery audiobook thinking of a way to kill me. I mean, the way she looked at me, I figured she wanted to kill me. I put that thought out of my head and worked up the courage to get back to drawing. After an hour of sketching, studying this stupid fucking reference photo, and furious erasing, I officially came to the conclusion that yes, I was going to depend on Jean for these credits. I was at my wit’s end with this shit. I needed Jean to come help me fix them, but unfortunately for me, he had his own shit to deal with at the moment. He holed himself up in the studio and made me pinky-promise not to pay any visits because apparently, I’m a “distraction.”

Okay. Let’s not think about drawing anymore. Let’s think about how great your life is in other ways! Like your night with Jean! I couldn’t just sit on all this juicy gossip and not tell anyone about all of the fresh details of my date. I needed to talk about it to someone. Marco? Marco.
Based off of our morning routine walking to class, and the kinda-helpful-but-not-really signs plastered up in the building, I found my way to the campus’ dark room. The photography studio was on the second floor - that was where Marco took his classes and had all of his little photoshoots. The room where he spent most of his time however, was the darkroom, developing photos. Since the main floor held architecture classrooms for some reason that our school’s own architects failed to think through, the basement had the materials needed to develop film.

It was a literal hole in the ground to prevent any sunlight from permeating through. The drab, white walls were made out of aging cork. There were some water stains in the ceiling, and the white linoleum floors were scuffed with years of wear and tear. There were warnings printed in Comic Sans (eek!) all over, warning visitors about the dangers of light exposure. The basement was an absolute dump, but this was Marco’s little hiding place. I couldn’t knock on it too bad. I made my way over to the entrance to the dark room, which was plastered in warnings. I swear, I must have read the phrase “PLEASE KNOCK” at least eight times.

“Knock knock,” I called out as I rapped on the chamber door. “Marcoooo.”

I waited for a moment before Marco opened the door for me. “Come in! Nobody else is in here.”

The dark room - or not so dark room, since it was low-lit with a red bulb. Marco said the “real dark room,” whatever that means, was a broom closet across the hall where they opened film canisters. Anyway, back to this room. There was a photo...processing...doo-hickey against the wall. That’s where Marco kept his blank photo pages. There were a few tubs of Jesus-God-what-are-those-smelly-chemicals sitting in this massive sink. The last tub was chock-full of developed black-and-white prints.

“Jean said you’d be here. I wanted to visit.” I sat on the wooden stool sitting by the Processor Doo-Hickey, kicking my feet as I wondered what to say. I smirked, teasing, “I have some news, you know.”

“What type of news?” He asked, tossing an undeveloped photo in a vat of mystery chemicals.

“I’m dating your roommate.” I sang, super excited.

He turned away from his photos to look at me with a bemused grin on his face. “Really?”

“Yes!” I smiled. “We went to a concert--well, not really a big concert, like a basement show, and then--”

“That’s fun.” He turned back towards his photo developing.

“No, the story isn’t over yet.” I awkwardly giggled before clearing my throat. “So, we went to dinner first. I wanted to go get stirfry, but he insisted on Olive Garden; when I look back on it I don’t know why, he was probably nervous--”

“That’s funny.”

My shoulders fell. Frowning, I asked, “Do you need me to leave you alone?”

He shook his head. “No, no I’m fine. Why?”

I blinked. “You just...I dunno, you sound very disconnected from this conversation.”

“I’m just trying to juggle two things at once--”
“Well, Jean already asked me to leave him alone for the day.” I twirled my hair. “So, I hoped you weren’t busy, and I feel like we haven’t hung out one-on-one in a while. I figured--”

“Oh, we haven’t.” He straightened out his spine with a crack before nodding. “I’m sorry, I just... keep talking. I’ll pay better attention.”

“You sure?--”

“I promise.” He pulled his photograph from the vat of chemicals, the image slowly coming into view. He shook off all of the excess liquid and dunked it into another vat. “So, concert, then Olive Garden.”

“No, it was Olive Garden, then the concert.” I corrected him, trying and failing to curl my bangs more with my fingers. “He had like, eighteen breadsticks at the Olive Garden. And then like, a gallon of ziti--”

“All Jean has in our mini-fridge is queso and Gatorade, so I’m really not surprised he eats like an animal.”

“Jesus fucking Christ.” I mumbled. No wonder he was so fat when he was a kid, he eats nothing but garbage with melted cheese on top. “Anyway. Ugh, we went to a concert and then we missed our train. Several trains actually, but ugh, we danced in the train station! And--”

Marco hesitated to answer. He continued playing with chemicals and photographs before he noticed the lull in conversation. “Oh. And?”

I could see I was being boring. Gushing about a partner wasn’t really fun unless the other person had one, I guess? And Marco, I think, was content just being Marco. At least for now. I wondered who Marco would date? Probably some angel sent from heaven. I feel like they’d be the “mom friends” that would tuck you in after a big night out and brew you tea and bring you snacks. But they wouldn’t bring you like, Cheetos or anything. They’d get you, I don’t know, vegan granola or something. Either way, this conversation wasn’t going anywhere. I kept hitting a wall.

I made a bad excuse just so I could duck out of the dark room and leave Marco to his work without making him feel bad for being sick of me. Not his fault. I was just excited. I could float. Oh gosh, who should I tell next? Sasha? Definitely Sasha, in all of its mushy, adorable glory. Tell her to pass the news to Connie since he called me “Jean’s girlfriend” at the concert. Shit, I had to announce it to everyone. Shout it from the mountaintops. I don’t know, I was just so excited. The only person who could probably handle me in my overeager, annoying state would be my mom, who would be less than thrilled to hear about my news.

The only one who could probably deal with me right now is Jean. But I promised to let him work. But I wanna see him. I walked to the studio without even thinking. Jesus. Not even one day into our relationship and I’m already crazy. I was basically pacing outside the building. I took four steps towards the door before thinking, “No, I shouldn’t bother him.” Then I took four steps towards the dorms and thought, “Well, one quick visit wouldn’t hurt.”

I figured, you can’t really hate someone after they come bearing gifts. I bought a black coffee from that shady automatic coffee machine by the vending machines. It was cheap, hot, and I didn’t feel like making the pilgrimage to the cafe.

I got Jean’s order fixed, and the machine spit out a little plastic cup and filled it to the brim with hot, black coffee. I didn’t mention the machine was screaming bloody murder the whole time and it made me insanely self-conscious in case anyone heard it and saw my dumbass getting coffee from a
sketchy little robot rather than the perfectly good café we had on campus.

Now it was time to deck out his drink with the sleeve, the lid, and the works. The little red straw, some napkins too; I figured I’d rather be safe than sorry I guess. I forgot how Jean took his coffee, just that he used a fuckton of dairy and an unholy amount of sugar that raised a lot of concerns. I snatched up seven creams and twelve sugars. Just to be safe.

I spiraled up the studio’s second floor, each footstep sending an echo out into the stairwell. The fine arts studios were underserved and frankly horrifically ugly, but there was a certain amount of charm in how the students decided to liven it up. Lots of graffiti with acrylic paint, spray paint, and Sharpie pens. It ranged from the illegible tags (Samuel? Samson? Salamander? Saudi Arabia?) to reproductions of memes (“IM DIRTY DAN”) to lots of hearts and somewhat meaningful declarations of love. I thought they were stupid and kitschy, but at the same time, if I didn’t see a “JK + HD” one by the end of senior year? As offensive as it sounds, I was gonna go crazy-girlfriend-Columbine.

I tried to sneakily peek into each studio until I found Jean, hunched over a sketchbook page that was nearly complete. Unfortunately, it didn’t seem like Jean was making progress very quickly with his fine-point pencils. I tried to enter the room quietly, but the heavy barricade of a door made my entrance a lot more boorish.

Jean’s first instinct was to take out his earbuds and look at the intruder, also known as me. “You know you pinky-promised, right?”

“Yeah, but I was in the neighborhood. So I figured.” I put his coffee down on the stool next to him, making sure it was keeping steady. He rested his drawing board on top of his feet to pick up the cup.

“You’re always in the neighborhood, we go to the same school.”

“God, just be grateful I brought you something to drink.” I rolled my eyes. “It’s just black coffee.”

“Did you bring any sug--” Before he got finish his sentence, I grabbed handfuls of coffee fixings from my pockets and presented them to him. He just nodded, grabbed them, and put them in his lap while he carefully took the lid off of the travel cup.

“Are you mad I interrupted your flow or whatever?”

I counted how much cream and sugar he took for future reference. He took five packets of sugar, lined them up, and ripped them open in one fatal swoop. Christ, the sugar. “No. I’m making good time, anyway. Thanks, honey.” He was up to two creams.

I grimaced. “Honey?”

“What, you don’t like it?” He had four creams in his cup, Jesus, four?

“Makes me sound kinda old.” Four creams and five sugars, Jesus Christ. He took a sip and put in another thing of cream. Five creams. Five sugars. I took a mental note, but it made me sick to do so.

“Eh. Okay. I’ll find it sooner or later.” He started stirring his sugary milk before taking a sip. The label “coffee” wasn’t accurate anymore. If he stirred it anymore, I think it would have turned into whipped cream. “Are you getting work done?”

“No, I visited Marco. I told you, I can’t finish my work without you helping me out. I’m really at a loss.” I scratched my neck. “I actually rubbed a hole into my project from erasing it so much…”
“Christ. Okay. Either tomorrow or sometime early this week. I promise.”

“Well, it has to be. They’re all due like, Wednesday.”

“Ah, fuck.” He sighed. “Okay. Maybe I can even stop over later. I don’t know.”

“Give me a heads up and I can let you know.” I scratched my chin. “I hate asking for help but I’m glad I did. You know?”

“Yeah. Me too.” He gave a single nod before cracking his back and looking back at his drawing board. “Alright.”

“Back to the literal drawing board.”

“Right.”

I was officially out of shit to say for now. “Well, I’m gonna go back to my dorm. Drawing tomorrow. Right?”

He put his coffee down and reached for his earbuds. “Right, darling.”

“That’s not it, either.” I smiled, now facing the door out. “Well, we can figure it out tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow. Right.” He sighed, cracking his back. “I’m gonna go back to my drawing.”

“Looking perfect, as always.” I sighed, a little bitter. I gave him a quick, chaste kiss on the cheek before heading out the door. Before he could react, before anyone else in the room could react, I was out. “Tomorrow. I’ll see ya.”

I don’t know why I was so embarrassed to like him so much. I think it was just nerves. New relationships and putting yourself out there? It was always a struggle. Stepping into the unknown and whatnot, but it was a struggle I was looking forward to.

Chapter End Notes

wew. it's been a really weird few months. i graduated since the last updated? i remember i started this literally the first week of my freshman year and to be 4 years deep and still doin this feels weird. im like doing adult shit now. but its fun to have something to help tune my brain out. anyway, thanks for keeping up. sorry all my stuff is so dialogue-heavy i wanna get more into reading and trying to get better :-(
“hellooooooo. Lets hang out tomorrow.” Late at night, I had to text Jean another reminder that my artwork was in a crisis right now. I was up to my eyeballs in drawing work that, like I said multiple times before, could not be completed without Jean’s help. I wanted to relax, get some work done, and maybe end the day with some sort of stress relief, in whatever form. Stress relief that preferably involved tongue.

To start our morning the next day, we sat on top of the hill behind the hall, sharing sips of coffee from his “COFFEE” mug because I was too much of a pansy to drink from the one labeled “PAINT.” When I asked Jean why he couldn’t take the “PAINT” mug instead, he looked down at his feet before suggesting we share.

While we were hanging out, Jean was still in the process of waking up. It was about ten, which is a beyond reasonable wake-up time. I would expect him to be up and ready to conquer the day, but this time, he was absolutely exhausted. Marco answered the door when I knocked this morning with his usual sunshiny smile. “Morning, Hitch!”

“Hey, Marco,” I looked over his shoulder to Jean putting on a pair of dark jeans. A grey, long-sleeved shirt was hanging off of his shoulders, and he looked nearly dead.

As soon as he saw me over his shoulder, his pace hastened. “Oh, hey, do you want any coffee?”

After our debate about the mugs, Jean started brewing our coffee. He reclined in his desk chair as he put on his socks, nearly falling asleep after he was done. The last sputtering drops of coffee fell into the mug with a loud wheeze, and Jean’s eyes fluttered back open as he scrambled to stir in sugar and cream. He handed me the mug and said, “Okay, Marco, we’ll see you later--”

“You need a jacket.” Marco said simply, his arms crossed.

Glancing down at his feet, I suggested, “And shoes.”

Jean groaned, glancing around the room before sticking his feet into Marco’s slip-on Adidas sandals. “Let’s go.”

“Your jacket…!” Marco whined. It amazes me how selfless Marco was that he didn’t call Jean out for stealing his shoes. “It’s cold out!”

“Don’t mom me,” Jean spat, grabbing his keys from the desk before walking towards the door. I followed, and he said, “I’ll be fine.”

Jean opted to take the elevator instead of his beloved stairs. God, he really did look like death. I, on the contrary, was the picture of perfection in my neat, green peacoat and khaki skinny jeans. While on the hill, I asked, “Why so tired?”
“I’m not tired.” He grumbled, wiping his eyes.

I smirked, “You look tired.”

“Mph.” He looked down at the communal coffee mug and took a generous sip. He turned to me and suddenly asked, “You wanna go to this party with me on Friday?”

With me. I blinked and asked, “Whose party?”

“A friend of a friend of Marco’s.” He said, looking down at the bare tree that sat at the bottom of the hill. It was still skinny, so it must have been planted in the past few years. He took his attention away from the tree and looked at me. “To celebrate the semester ending. You up for it? I promise it won’t be another sloppy game of seven minutes in heaven.”

Wouldn’t complain if it was, but... “I’m up for it.”

I took the coffee mug from his hand and took another sip. With that answer, Jean kept his eyes on me and asked, “It’ll be like...a real party. Like the one at the frat.”

Well, I can’t avoid “real” parties forever just because of one experience. That was like giving up, and I refused to do that. I furrowed my brow and put the mug back on the grass. “Yeah, Jean. I want to go to parties, you know? I’m not letting one time get in the way of that. I can’t never go to a party again.”

There was a pause, and I added, “I’m not, you know, a nun or anything.”

He blinked, and grabbed my shoulders as if he were deathly concerned about me. There was suddenly a great amount of tension between us. The gold in his irises wasn’t dulled by sleep, unlike the rest of his complexion. With his grip on my shoulders tightening, he asked, “Are you sure about that last part?”

Ha. Religious joke. You know, because my family is full of super Mormons. Laughing my fucking ass off here. I backed away from him, and I joined him in his obnoxious, fake cackling. He wiped his eye, and I exclaimed, “You’re such a dick!”

I punched him on the shoulder. Either I underestimated my strength, or I overestimated Jean’s fortitude because he yelped, “Augh!” before he fell onto his side and began to tumble down the hill. I didn’t even go to help him at first because I was still surprised I managed to send him flying down a fucking hill.

Why am I like this. Why does this stupid, Benny Hill bullshit happen to me every single time i do anything?

The scrawny tree at the bottom of the hill broke Jean’s fall when his torso hit it with a dull thud. I grabbed the mug and carefully made my way down the hill to assist him. “You okay?”

He rolled over on his back. His left cheek was red, and his one of collarbones had a nasty-looking scrape on them. Nothing worth a visit to the doctor or the hospital for, but still not a pretty picture. “You sent me down a fucking hill.”

“By accident.” I extended my hand. “You know I wouldn’t break your face on purpose, don’t you?”

He took my hand and nearly took me down with him by the force he used to pull himself up. He grunted, which I took as a “yes.” I kept his hand in mine with a sly grin on my face before handing
him his mug and leading him to the hall. “Come on. I have a first aid kit in my room.”

I led him into my dorm - I knew Annie was probably home for the weekend, and if she wasn’t, tough luck for her. My hot boyfriend required medical care, and that medical care may require him having to take his shirt off. We stood in the hall while I combed my purse for the keys. Jean rested his head on the wall and groaned, “We should have coffee again sometime. Like, we should go all out.”

I beamed. “You think so?” A proper coffee date didn’t sound too bad.

“Sure. We can get macchiatos, lattes, some fancy shit. Whatever floats your boat.

Maybe some doughnuts for breakfast. I’ll even pay.”

“Mmm.” I suggested, “Like maybe we could get those gourmet maple bacon ones! The ones people post on Instagram all the time?”

“Yeah! That’s a great idea!” He gleamed. “Then maybe afterwards, you can push me down a hill.” My daydream crashed and burned.

“Shut up,” I whined.

I took my key from the bottom of my purse and threw the door open to an empty dorm. I pointed towards my bed and said, “Lie down.” He nodded and eased himself onto the bed as I searched my dresser for a first-aid kit. “There’s also this big Christmas thing coming up in the city.”

“Oh, right.” I blinked. Shit, it was almost Christmas. That was a reminder that I had no idea what to get for Jean, or my parents, or Marco. “That’s...a thing.”

“There’s this garden that decorates everything with poinsettias and lights and everything.” He said. God, where is this first aid kit? “It’s really fancy for a Christmas thing. It’s a lot nicer than going to some cheesy light show or something.”

“You’ve been there before?”

“I looked it up on Google.” He said. “It looks pretty nice, if you wanted to go sometime soon.”

“That--That actually sounds lovely.” We’re planning dates! We’re an actual couple! “I’d love to go, like maybe over Christmas break when I’m back home. We can make a day of it.”

“Yeah, exactly.” He said, watching me as I scrambled to find this first aid kit, which I haven’t seen since move-in day. “Afterwards we can go get dinner, either at my house or out somewhere in the city?”

“Could we go to a hibachi? I’ve always wanted to try hibachi.”

“Of course. Anything you want, princess. Then afterwards we can go on a nice walk through the city? And then you can push me down another fucking hill.”

I rolled my eyes, like how Jean’s weak body rolled down a hill like a ragdoll. He kept talking. “If coffee doesn’t float your boat, how about going to breakfast again? Remember when we went to that diner on Main Street? Only this time, instead of getting those tropical pancakes--”

“You remembered my order?” I squeaked. God, I couldn’t help it. He blinked at me before turning back to the cinderblock wall. I teased, “And I know, instead of getting the pancakes, how ‘bout I
push you down a hill."

A pause, before I asked, “You’re never going to let this go, are--”

He interrupted with a curt “No.”

*Found the kit!* It was hiding underneath my socks in my sock drawer. For whatever reason. I had just grabbed it, and pulled it out just enough so he could see I had it, but I froze to glare at Jean. After a moment of glaring, I turned back towards the drawer and placed the first aid kit back. “Well, if you’re gonna act like that…”


“That little tree did a number on you, huh?”

“Shut up.” He groaned, and I grabbed the kit again and sat on the side of the bed. As I asked, “Just show me where you have your scrapes and stuff. There’s probably like, grass or dirt in them,” I took a disinfecting wipe out of the kit.

“Gross,” He muttered, sitting up to take off his grass-stained shirt. He tossed it on the floor and I said, “Lay down, don’t strain yourself.”

He furrowed his brow and looked at his torso - a bit on the scrawny side, but there was the faintest outline of the start of a six-pack. Christ. I asked, “Why aren’t you lying down?”

“I’m not in a lot of-- *shit*--” He looked down at the faint but massive, purple bruise on the left side of his stomach. I cringed thinking of how nasty it was gonna look tomorrow morning. When he sat up, his skin folded around it, and I could only imagine the discomfort. I scrambled to sit behind him, my legs crossed. “Be careful. Jean, just lean back.”

He abided my advice and fell onto my lap. He began to sigh, but he choked it back when he noticed my face above his. I simply smiled. “It’s just easier this way.” I struggled to keep my focus on caring for the small scrapes on his face with that massive bruise on his stomach. *Focus on the face first.*

After I had patted each scrape with the disinfecting wipe - the one on his cheek, the one on his jaw, the one near his eyebrow - I glimpsed at the wipe. There were minute drops of crimson dotting it, causing me to grimace. I patted the scrape on his eyebrow with my finger, and he winced at the touch. There was a little drop of blood on my index finger that I rubbed away with my thumb. He was bleeding, but I didn’t want to put stupid fucking band aids all over his face. As I contemplated what to do about that, I wondered aloud, “What if something on the ground got caught on one of your piercings?”

“Don’t ever say that again.”

I stretched my arm down to disinfect the wound on his collarbone. I tossed out the disinfecting wipe, instead grabbing a handful of tissues from my nightstand and pressing them into his eyebrow. He glanced up at me and asked, “What are you doing?”

“You’re bleeding.” After his eyebrow seemed to stop bleeding, I flipped the tissue over and pressed it into his cheek, and then his jaw.

“Is it bad?”

“No, not really.” I grimaced, lifting the tissue from his jaw. Seemed to have stopped. I threw the tissue away before I reached back into the first aid kit, pulling out the metal canister of bactine. “I
should get to this scrape on top of your bruise.”

He shrugged. “Is all this really necessary?” His eyebrows squished together and he shifted his position on the bed to further get comfortable. I rested my hands on the underside of his jaw, slowly rubbing my thumb over his subtle stubble, and assured him, “Yeah. I’ve always dealt with cuts like this.”

A small smirk crossed his face. “I mean, I’ve gotten tons of cuts and nobody’s ever given them this much attention.”

He was right, and he knew he was right. None of it was really necessary -- all that was necessary was maybe stopping the bleeding and splashing some water on it -- but it would help with the healing process a bit. I’m sure nobody took care of his scrapes with his head in their lap and an overwhelming urge to kiss every square inch of him. I didn’t want to tell him that, though. Knowing him, he would try to stubbornly soldier through this, and worse, take his head off of my lap. I didn’t answer his question and simply said, “Sorry for pushing you down the hill.”

He sighed and turned towards the wall and mumbled, “You didn’t push me down the hill.” I grinned warmly at those couple of words, and he turned to me again. “Are you still up for Friday?”

“Friday…?”

“The party.”

“I’ll go with you.” I nodded too eagerly, and maybe a bit too quickly. I glanced down at that scrape on his stomach again, biting my lip. “You sure you don’t want any bactine on that?”

“No, that’s okay.” He kicked Marco’s sandals off of his feet, digging his toes into the striped comforter. “I’m comfortable here.”

“Good,” I laughed, curling my hands around his jaw as his thin lips curved into a small smile. My fingers tapped the side of his face when he looked up at me to ask, “Why are you touching my face like that?”

I loosened my grip on the sides of his face, my hands falling towards his chin. He grabbed my hands and guided them back up to each side of his face, my thumbs caressing his strangely impressive sideburns. “No, keep them there.”

“Um.” I searched for a plausible excuse. There was no reason I should be cradling his head, wanting desperately to run my fingers over his Starry Night piece, through his chest hair, and towards his bruise instead. I poorly suppressed a laugh and admitted, “I like your face.”

His smile, at first reluctant, grew. He arched his neck backwards to gently nudge my stomach with his head. “I like yours.”

Oh, fuck it, close enough. This was too cute. I leaned down and pressed my lips against his, drinking in the taste of coffee that lingered on his lips with my hands still placed on each side of his head. I started to worry that I may have jumped the gun, or I may have come on too strong with how quick I came into action, but I was pleasantly surprised to feel Jean’s hand on the back of my head, and his lips moving against mine. When I pulled away, Jean broke into a soft smile. When I smiled back, he slowly closed his eyes and sighed in contentment. I couldn’t help but laugh, putting my hands over my face in a terrible attempt to hide my blush. I still couldn’t believe I did that. And I still couldn’t believe it was well-received. I wasn’t pretending to be poisoned, and I wasn’t learning how to kiss without accidentally ingesting the other party’s lip. I kissed him solely because I cared about him,
because I really wanted to, and as embarrassingly cliche as it sounds, he looked ruggedly handsome with cuts all over his face. I was excited that he had responded to the kiss with the same amount of warmth that I had to put into it without any sarcasm. I was just excited.

As I gradually calmed down and the adrenaline left my system, I ran my fingers through his hair, only to have him swat my hand away.

“Stop. If you do that, I’m going to fall asleep.” He said without opening his eyes. “Marco will never get his sandals back.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll bring them back later. Marco has nothing to worry about.” I gave him another quick kiss, and he seemed almost annoyed at how fleeting it was. I started brushing my fingertips against his scalp again, leaning in for another.

This was more fun than I anticipated. Though, I couldn’t stand the kiss for long. I was so awkwardly hunched over, my curved spine was beginning to get sore. I unwillingly broke away from him and leaned back to grab a pillow. Jean watched, confused and speechless, until I said, “Hold on.”

I carefully maneuvered out from underneath Jean, placing a pillow underneath his head now that my legs were straddling his torso instead. I was careful that my legs weren’t brushing against that nasty bruise. Jean flushed a deep red, and I asked, “Is that okay?”

He swallowed and managed a meek “Yeah.” I smiled, and braced my hands on his chest to lean forward and kiss him.

I lifted my hands and pointed at his chest. “I keep forgetting about your nipples.”

He smirked. “My nipples?”

“You’re piercings.” I coughed. “Is there a part of you you haven’t pierced?”

“Just a few.” Jean smirked and raised his eyebrows. Naturally, I had to (very gently, because I’m apparently stronger than I think I am) smack him with the back of my hand in the center of his chest. He just laughed. “I’m working up to that though.”

I blinked, dragging my fingertips over his barbells. He shook, which caused me to wince and shift my right leg over and away from his bruise. That should be better. “Seriously?”

He grinned, and gripped my thighs before pulling me closer. “What’s your opinion on that?”

I bit my lip, taking my hand off of Jean’s right nipple to bite my thumbnail in thought. How would that even feel? “Um. Wouldn’t a dick piercing hurt?”

“I was talking about my eyebrow.” I turned pink, and Jean put his hand on the back of my neck and pulled me in for another kiss. This one was short, followed by another on my cheek before he teased, “You sick fuck.”

“Oh, shut up.” I scratched the back of my head until I could feel him quietly shaking with laughter underneath me. “An eyebrow piercing would be cute, if you were serious.”

“Cute? I was going for ‘sexiest person on the planet.’”

“Aren’t you cocky?” I joked. Jean only wiggled his eyebrows. I tried not to laugh, I really did, but it was too ridiculous. I rested my forehead on his chest, sighing. “I hate you.”
He spotted my drawing board. Eek. “How’s that coming along?”

“It’s not.”

“You haven’t worked on it? At all?”

“No. I told you I needed you to help me out.” I just had to fix up all (and I mean all) of my shitty work and hope it was good enough.

After naturally complaining to Jean about it again, he asked, “Hey. Remember that shopping trip for a bra or whatever?”

“Yeah? What about it?”

“Let’s get it out of the way now. So you can get that off of my schedule. That way you won’t complain about that for the rest of the week, too.” I frowned, until he said, “And then drawing after. Okay?”

Okay. I figured we could get this done, and this bra would hopefully make me look great and give me all the confidence I need to complete the rest of my work. Easy-peasy. We made one pit-stop at Jean’s dorm, where after seeing a very bruised boy, Marco told him that “a sweater would have cushioned his fall.” Jean begrudgingly grabbed a coat and shoes that were more appropriate for the mall in December, and we were on our way.

At first, Jean suggested we stop by Victoria’s Secret. I merely laughed. That’s the lingerie shop of the commoners. After extensive Google-fu and reading approximately fifty-five very satisfied customer reviews, I insisted on Les Clessidra. Fancy Italian joint. The owner is from Milan. “You can either pay forty bucks for an ugly bra that has PINK SLUT written across my tits…” I squeezed his hand as we entered the massive, sandstone mall. “Or something you’d actually enjoy seeing me in?”

He blushed, looking down at the ground. “I mean, if you want to be a pink slut, you can.”

“Well, I don’t.” I winked. “I mean, maybe not emblazoned across my boobs. I like to think I’m classier than that.”

La Clessidra turned out to be a very cute little boutique. There were all of these rustic bird cages everywhere, each holding a stack of bras or panties. There was barn wood all over, adding to the shop’s abundance of farmhouse charm. I picked up the first bralette I spotted, holding it up to my chest. “Oh my God, I love it here.”

“No, no...well, maybe? No!” Where do I even start in this store? I picked up another bra. Ugh, I wanted everything. “We may be here for a while!”

“Well.” He scratched the back of his head. “Can I go get a pretzel--”

“No, I want to try everything on for you.” I whined, grabbing his arm. “It’ll be fun. Trust me.”

He surveyed the store again. I think there were at least twenty different bras here to try on. I was ecstatic, but that same level of excitement and wonder wasn’t mirrored on Jean’s face. “It doesn’t sound fun at all for me, actually.”

“You promised you’d buy me a bra.” I reminded him. “If you’re paying, you should at least pick it
“I’m not coming in the dressing room with you.” Jean shook his head as I picked another bra in my size. My count was now up to three.

“What if I use your money on like, a granny bra or something?”

“Who cares? This is going to get boring for me.”

“You should,” I had the biggest shit-eating grin on my face. I really really wanted a cute new bra. And I wanted to show it off as much as possible. “You’re going to be the one seeing me in it the most since I’m your girlfriend.”

“Never said you were my girlfriend.”

“Is that so? I thought all the kissing and junk kind of made me your girlfriend.”

“You guessed wrong.”

“I’ve lost time I could’ve spent being a ho.” I sighed. “How unfortunate.”

“You say that, but we both know you couldn't get with another guy even if you wanted to.”

Okay. He got me there. That was true. But I didn't want to admit that to him. “Whatever. Are you coming with me inside or not?”

“Sure.” Turns out that was a lie. The dressing rooms felt comfortable and friendly, but still with banging lighting - a far departure from the dressing rooms I’m used to at general shops. Jean opted to wait outside, sitting on a little embroidered stool. I don’t know if it was a misunderstanding or general defiance. Either way, I put on the first bra. After establishing that yes, this bra was fucking incredible, I decided that my boyfriend-who-won’t-admit-to-being-my-boyfriend had to see it.

“Ooh. Jean.” I poked my head out of the changing room. “Come look at this one.”

“No thanks.”

“Aww, c’mon. I need your advice.” I went back inside of the changing room, turning to see how my profile looked. “It’s your money.”

“If you like it, then get it.”

“I can’t decide, though.”

“You can,” He said adamantly. I could hear tapping from his phone. “Just make up your mind.”

“Jean, just come look.” I paused. “I'll make a scene if you don't.”

“What do you mean, 'make a scene?'”

“I dunno, I’ll scream or start crying or something.” I read somewhere that you can cry on command by pulling out one of your nose hairs. This would be a good place to put it to the test.

“You won’t.”

I leaned against the doorframe of the fitting room and began to whine, “But Je--”
That seemed to work exceptionally well, because Jean just threw up his arms and spat, “Fine. Fine! *Fine.* I’ll go into the *fucking* dressing room with you.”

“Ha! Yay,” I beamed, adjusting the straps on Potential Bra #1 to fit better as he took his seat. “Now I can start getting a second opinion.”

“Sure.” He kicked at the ground with his heel. “I don’t know how much help I’ll be.”

“You’ll be plenty of help.” I assured him. This bra was doing plenty of favors for my chest. I wondered aloud, “You’ve never seen my tits before, have you?”

“Nobody’s seen your tits before. So no.” He furrowed his brow as he continued hopping his foot up and down.

“Guy in the band.” I reminded him.

“Don’t remind me.”

“You baby. It shouldn’t bother you.” I groaned, obsessing over myself in this cute-as-fuck bra before unhooking it to try on the next one. But first, let me take a good look at myself in the mirror. “Ugh. Do you think it’s possible to fall in love with yourself?”

Jean looked unmoved. He wasn’t even looking at me, he was looking at his phone. I sighed and reached for the next option to wear. It was pretty sheer. It was an aesthetic choice more than a utilitarian one. It was good for support, but my tits would be displayed to the whole world if I was wearing a white shirt over top. I mean, I wouldn’t wear white with it anyway. It was a canary yellow color, and it was *adorable*. “How about this one?”

“It doesn’t *cover* anything.” He pointed out the obvious as he crossed his arms.

“The purpose of a bra isn’t to cover anything.” I unhooked the back, watching gravity rework its black magic. “It’s for support.”

“What’s there to support?” He joked. It earned him a swift punch on the arm.

I rolled my eyes. I folded my arms, watching how my tits got three times bigger. They still weren’t very big, and my cleavage was still fairly pathetic. “I thought this would be *funner* with you here.”

“Funner?”

“Yeah. Funner. You’re being kind of a fuddy-duddy.” I pouted. “Why aren’t you being cute right now?”

“Because I don’t want to be creepy and obnoxious and make a *scene*.”

I bit my lip, gently rocking back and forth. I looked at the ceiling and mumbled, “Maybe I *want* you to be creepy…”

“You want me to be creepy?”

“Yeah. I mean, touch me. Touching me isn’t creepy.” Especially if I’m your girlfriend...wait, were we dating? I never got official confirmation. And honestly, since he pulled that “I’m not your boyfriend!” shit earlier today, I was kind of worrying maybe I was moving too fast for him. Was I? I couldn’t be. But...?

Defeated, he started to reach up for my back. I could spot it in the mirror. I didn’t react until I felt his
hand on my back. Quickly, I said, “Not unless you say you're my boyfriend.”

“Shit, Hitch, I was kidding.” He snapped the hooks. “Of course I'm your boyfriend, now just spin around for me--”

“Well, you never said we were dating!” I whined, holding my bra up so it didn’t fall to the floor just yet. “How am I supposed to just assume?”

“What am I supposed to do? Say, ‘Hello, I’d like to make you my girlfriend, does that tickle your fancy?’ How’s that?”

“Yes, you do just that!”

“No, Hitch, that’s weird. You don’t just say that to another human being.” I let the bra fall and Jean caught it, putting it next to him on the bench before grabbing the next one.

I tried it on pretty quick. I wasn’t feeling this one too much. It was lavender, and they tried to be cute by making the straps thinner, and adding more of them. Made me look like a suspension bridge, or raw meat wrapped in twine. Not a fan, just like I wasn’t a fan of Jean’s current attitude. “Yes, you do.”

“Okay, maybe I can say it to you, since you grew up in a cult for eighteen years--”

I grumbled, taking off this bra and tossing it with the others. “That went too far.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” He leaned back against the dressing room wall and let out a deep sigh. “Hello. I'd like to make you my girlfriend. Does that tickle your fancy?”

“Yes!” As I token of my appreciation, I turned around and maneuvered myself so I was sitting on his lap. It was pretty difficult because he was offering no help. I pouted and went in for a kiss, but his crossed arms were getting in the way. I settled for a shitty Eskimo kiss before I pressed myself into him, dying to loosen him up and get him to uncross his arms. “Please, Jean?”

“Hey--” He pushed me back, but his hand placement wasn’t ideal. The center of his palms were right over my nipples. This was only getting better and better for me. I tried to hold his hands in place, but he quickly retracted his hands and sat on them, his face turning redder by the second.

I took the opportunity to just get closer to him, kissing the sensitive skin underneath his ear. “Maybe I shouldn’t buy a bra after all. Maybe I just won’t wear any bra ever again. Is that how you’d like it?”

“The lady is right outside the curtain.” He grumbled, stiff as a board and refusing to budge, even an inch while I was on top of him. “If you want that goddamn bra, you’re going to stop and not get us kicked out.”

“Or I can just be really, really quiet.” I whispered the suggestion into his ear and slid my hands underneath his shirt, upwards from the hem, as my lips met his. His hands were still underneath his thighs. I was starting to entertain the idea that maybe he was actually uncomfortable. My hands went slightly limp and I sighed, “Don’t you get off on this type of thing?”

“I have self-control.” He growled.

“Do you?”

“Yes. Plenty. I just want to get this over with.” He told me. “You have three to pick from. If you don’t, I’m not paying for it.”
Oof. I can’t afford this luxurious lifestyle myself. I tried on the second bra again, the sheer one. It looked great. I dug it. “Yup. I think this is it.”

“Alright. You settled on one?”

“Uh-huh.” I nodded. “I think that’s the one.”

“Cool.” He stood up and extended his hand. “Here. I’ll pay for it.”

The four most beautiful words in the English language: I’ll pay for it. I poked his cheek. “Best. Sugar--”

“Don’t say it--”

“--Daddy--” I poked his other cheek.

“ No .”

“Ever.” I poked his nose. He cringed from my touch. I just laughed and turned back to the mirror. Shit , I did look good. And it was nice, not having to worry about having to pay for it, either. Nobody should cut corners on a good bra like this one. I took it off and put it in Jean’s hand.

“Don’t you ever call me that again.” He groaned, snatching it from me. “ Never .”

I bit back a smile. “I could torture you all day.” I mused, before a strike of genius hit me. I mean, the bra was cute. But do you know what was even cuter? “ Dude .”

“Did you just call me ‘dude’--”

“I know panties aren’t part of the deal.” I told him, turning to peek at what I looked like from the rear. “But my butt looks real cute today.”

“You’re right, they’re not part of the deal.”

I sighed, sitting down on the bench. I turned to him to wonder, “Should I buy the matching panties?”

“Do you want the matching panties?”

“Yes , but I don’t know.” I whined. “Do you get like, upset when girls’ bras don’t match their underwear? I feel like that’s something that bothers you.”

“I wouldn’t necessarily care .” He blushed, getting a little quieter. “I think I’d notice if they matched, but I wouldn’t care if…”

I got dressed again and headed out of the changing room, dropping the two bras I didn’t want into the little crate by the door. I led the way back to the showroom where they had all of the lingerie on display, to find my bra’s match. And there it was - cute as could be, a matching yellow pair of panties with a sheer heart-shaped cutout on the back . Oh my Lord. I needed it. By the grace of God, I fucking needed these on my body immediately. I checked their price tag - equally cute as a button, a traditional white pricetag with earthy twine. “Thirty dollars is kind of a lot…”

“Hmm…” He tapped his foot, scratching the short hair on the back of his head before rolling his eyes. “Fuck it. I’ll buy it.”

“Really?” I immediately snatched them off of the shelf.
“Yeah. You’ll hold it over my head if I don’t.”

Super eager to take these bad boys home, I made my way to the checkout. I was nearly skipping. I put my choices on the counter. I honestly could not wait. “Yay! I’m so excited!”

The cashier did her thing as I eagerly watched, excited to finally get my babies home. She listed the total price, and Jean looked flabbergasted.

He asked, “Seventy? Seventy dollars?”

“Yes sir, seventy dollars.”

“With the Christmas discount?”

“Yes, with the Christmas discount.”

“Shit--Sorry. Okay. It’s fine. Just put it on my card,” He grumbled, reaching into his wallet and handing her his platinum plastic card. I grinned as I perused the small yet gorgeous collection of body mists they were selling, complete with floating petals and herbs on the inside of each clear spray bottle. I went to turn the coconut and hibiscus one around to check it out, but as soon as my fingers wrapped around the bottle, Jean chided, “No.”

With a little symphony of sounds coming from the cash register, the transaction was complete and we were free to go about our day. As soon as we left the store, I sighed, delicately peeking into my cute little shopping bag. My bra was packed like a present in a kraft paper bag, stamped with the logo of the shop in white ink. The tissue paper that protected everything was patterned in silver with the prettiest, most delicate lace I’ve ever seen. “Ah. You’re the best.”

I took a quick look around the mall. Not too crowded for a December weekend. We really got lucky! “Do you want to get lunch before--”

“Yes, I’m starving.” He sighed, trying to make his voice level again. I guess my boy was truly fucking hungry. “What are you in the mood for?”

I tried to recall what the food court had to offer in my head. “Pho?”

He shrugged. “Pho is fine.”

So, we got pho. I figured I could buy my own meal - eight dollar pho was nothing compared to what Jean just dropped on me. But Jean insisted on buying that too. He said it was the “date-y” thing to do. Since it was mall pho, it came out in no time, but it didn’t make it any less appetizing. We took our seats at a small linoleum table after Jean wiped off the Chickfila crumbs with a napkin. As soon as I sat down, I could feel the heat rising from my soup on my neck and face. What a perfect meal for a chilly December day. “Ah. You’re the best.”

He opened his straw and poked it through the lid to his soda. “Thanks.”

I continued to wring out my lime on top of my bowl, stirring all the ingredients together before picking my bowl for the biggest slice of steak, and the heartiest serving of noodles. After sloppily chewing through the meat and grain, I smiled, “I could really get used to this.”

“The pho?”

“No,” I happily took a sip of water before grinning up at him, resting my chin in my hand. “Having a boyfriend to do boyfriend things for me.”
He leaned back in his chair and rose an eyebrow. “Your idea of ‘boyfriend duties’ is having me buy you lingerie and dinner?”

What did I say? I poked at my food with my chopsticks. “I offered to buy my own noodles.”

“Not the point.”

I chewed on my lip, tapping my feet. “I mean, if you’re implying that I really like those things? Of course I do--”

He rolled his eyes and lamented, “I may as well start telling people my net worth instead of my name, since it’s all people care about.”

Can we not do this in a food court? What did I fucking say? “I’m sorry?”

“Yeah. I could never work a day in my life. I could work for my dad’s stupid chrome-plated tech company, but I don’t want to.”

“You don’t have to.” As someone whose parents worked to make ends meet, the money seemed...wow. But I bit my tongue. Instead I said, “Stop being sensitive. I’m trying to thank you.”

His eyes were shut. He took a deep breath before leaning even further back in his chair. I thought he was gonna fall out of it. When he opened his eyes again, he began a long, powerful gaze. “This is going to work. It’s easy to make this work. You just have to drop the whole cash thing.”

“The whole cash thing?”

“That doesn’t mean I won’t take you out places or buy you things,” He held up his hands. “Just don’t expect anything, you know, over the top.”

Well, okay. I took a sip of my water. “I’ll take note.”

“Don’t get mad if I ask you to split bills sometimes.”

“Jesus, I’m not a monster.” I put down my chopsticks. “Do you think I’m really that fucking selfish?”

“No. I just want to draw the line now rather than later.” His disgruntled frown turned to a sly smirk. “I’m not saying I won’t spoil you. But I draw the line at spoiling you rotten.”

I rolled my eyes, trying to bite back my stupid grin as I dug back into my pho. “Stop being cheesy, I’m trying to stay mad at you.”

“I’m just trying to cover my bases. That’s all. I just don’t want anything to snowball out of control.”

He continued. “I don’t want it to go from like, buying your McDonald’s after school, to paying for your Starbucks, to buying you Chipotle, to buying you an outfit from Urban, to fucking Nordstrom, to purses, to--”

Let’s halt this train before it goes off the rails. I frowned. “That is very specific.”

“Either way. I want to be able to treat you to stuff. It’s fun. But I don’t make my dad’s money. I’m not like, some paycheck for you.”

“Well, we both know there’s a lot more to you. I knew that before I found out who you were, right? We were friends for a whole month.” I wiped my mouth of broth before reaching into my purse for my compact mirror and lipstick. “I mean, if I just liked you for your money, we’d already be married.
And I’d stage your death to look like an ‘accident’ so I can inherit all of it.” I gave him a cryptic wink.

“Oh, well.” Jean nodded, stirring the rest of his soup. “That’s reassuring.”

“Instead of just shopping for me,” I suggested, being selfless for once, “do you need to get anything here?”


I haven’t picked up a shift at the library in quite a long time. I checked my bank account a few days and after only seeing months and months of transactions, I got physically sick. “No, I was just asking. I could help you shop.”

So, we went to shop for a pair of jeans. Something casual, maybe a little faded or some holes. Jean said all of his current pairs made him look like a “square.” I asked if he usually shopped with his mom, and he pleaded the fifth.

I learned Jean was a picky shopper. This didn’t really surprise me, but he read the tags and compared every little detail of each pair, down to the stitch. It was excruciating work, but he narrowed his search down to a “modest” ten pairs for consideration. He put my pickiness to shame.

“I should probably try these on,” He frowned. “I’m hoping the holes on these jeans line up right with my knees…”

“You really need to just buy a pair of fucking pants.” I groaned, looking at the dressing room area. “Do you want me to come in with you? Make your decision a little easier?”

“I--Hm.” He shrugged. “I guess it’s only fair since I went in with you.”

I took a seat in the cramped dressing room, tucking my legs under the bench to maximize the limited space. Once the curtain was closed, he stripped down to just his sweater and boxers. I averted my eyes, or at least I tried to. I would try to look at his face, his important and very handsome face, but I would succumb to my stupid temptation and try to look at his dick instead, hidden behind a layer of thin, plaid-patterned fabric. He glanced at me during my ogling, catching me red-handed. He started to wrestle his sweater off, muttering a muffled “Fuck it, why not” before tossing it onto my lap.

I ran my fingers over the stitching across the crew neck to keep my fingers busy, if only for a short time. His sweater had some residual warmth, and I bet it smelled like cologne, too. I looked up at him as he wiggled into his first pair of jeans. “Aren’t you cold?”

“Yeah, but…” He looked up from his legs to look me in the eyes and say, “I think it’s kinda funny.”

“Funny? What’s funny?”

“Wait, what do you think of this pair?”

“Fine.”

“Fine? The holes look okay, the pockets...eh, the pockets are lacking.” He complained, despite the fact the pockets were massive. All boys’ pockets were, but that I could bitch about that for hours. He took his jeans off and hung them back up before picking the next pair. I crossed my legs, tapped my fingers on the bench, wiggled my toes, anything to distract me so I didn’t look creepy. I wasn’t creeped out with Jean in the dressing room with me, why should I creep him out? But I still had to be respectful, understanding of his boundaries, and resist the urge to gawk. The very strong urge to
We made it through eight more pairs without any complaints. How do they fit? Fine, they all fit fine. Jean had three different pocket sizes - “lacking,” “decent,” and “excessive.” Based on his intense criteria, he sorted his choices into three piles. Those piles were either “absolutely not,” “maybe,” and “good contenders.” We only nixed two pairs. I was pretty sure I was going to die of starvation or something in this dressing room.

It was fucking torture! Every few minutes I got to look at Jean in his boxers for a couple of seconds, but I couldn’t do anything about it. I think even he was starting to realize how excessive and horrible this process was and how fucking picky he was because he asked, “How are you holding up?”

I yawned, “No.”

I sat there for a moment trying to realize what exactly I meant by just “no,” and Jean just smirked and kissed my forehead. “Did that perk you up any?”

“No? My grandma kisses my forehead, are you joking --” He interrupted my train of thought by planting each hand on either side of me and having his lips meet mine. He tasted like pho. It was actually kinda gross, but I tried not to think about it too much.

He placed his hand on the side of my neck, his thumb lightly caressing my throat. Jesus fucking Christ. This was new. I made a mental note that it’s kinda hot to If he pressed down any harder...I dug my heel into the tile and choked back a breathy moan so it wasn’t too loud.

Instead of reading the room, he took his hand off of my neck and stopped kissing me to

“Don’t moan like that. It’s not that big of a deal.” Jean started going through the “maybe” pile and making his final decision.

Not like Jean could decide what was and wasn’t a big deal to me or control how I wanted him to treat me or look at me. For a brief moment I wondered what I was doing wrong. Did I not look as great as I thought I did in the last dressing room? Like...just what the fuck was I doing wrong? Nothing, right?

There was just a massive brick wall between us that I keep chipping at. Sometimes I can make a hole, enough to peek or stick my hand through. And other times, my progress gets patched up again without a word of notice. I just needed to tear down that barrier completely, all at once. Maybe now wasn’t the time, and with my impending finals, I frankly couldn’t see it happening in the next week. I shook off all of my long-term fears and instead focused on the matter at hand. As Jean took one last look at the pants he had on, I noted, “That pair fits really good.”

“It does,” He responded, putting his hands in his pockets to gauge the size.

“We should share clothes like the sisterhood of the traveling pants.” I suggested. “You have really nice birthing hips.”

“Jesus Christ,” He mumbled under his breath, touching his exposed knee through the hole on his jeans. “What do you think? Are the holes too much?”

“No, not at all.” I frowned at the yellow discoloration right on top of his kneecap. “What’s that bruise from, though? It looks horrible.”
“Gee, thanks, it’s probably from when you pushed me down the hill.”

“This again,” I rolled my eyes. “Just wondering.”

Once he whittled his selection from ten pairs of jeans to one, we were finally—finally—going to checkout. I watched as he took his credit card from his wallet and hit him with a real kicker that I was holding onto all damn day. “Would ya look at that.” I laughed as he swiped his card. “Jean buying jeans.”

“Shut up.” He groaned. He knew it was coming. He had to have. With that last purchase, we started heading back to my truck together. We didn’t even discuss us leaving - we both just knew we were tired of the mall.

I started the drive back to campus. We didn’t really talk. Were we sick of each other already? His hands were firm in his lap, and he was staring intently out the window. I shoved his thigh. “Hey. You okay?”


“You can pick another cassette to listen to if you’d like.”

“No, it’s not…” He shrugged. “Today went fine, right?”

“Yeah. Today was great.”

“Good date? I didn’t fuck up?”

I tapped the steering wheel. “Good date.”

“Okay...ha, okay.” He sighed, holding his shopping bag a little tighter.

“Relax.” I took the red light as an opportunity to look at him in the eyes. “You’re doing great. You don’t have to be all worried and twitchy and awkward around me.”

“You’re not mad about the food court thing, right?” He played with the sleeves of his sweater, pulling them past his knuckles, then pushing them back towards his wrist.

“No. I got over that pretty quickly.” Lie. It was weighing on me since I was trying on bras and Jean couldn’t avoid having a blush. I may as well ask while we’re on the subject. “I didn’t creep you out today, right?”

“No. No, you’re fine.” He shook his head. “You’re intense. But that’s not a bad thing.”

Me, intense? After that fit at the food court? Whatever. I couldn’t keep atoning for the scars his ex left. Shit, this whole relationship just started. “After my drawing stuff is done and we’re all done with classes for good, can you tell me what happened with your ex?” I asked, focusing intently on the road to avoid eye contact. Gotta schedule that wall-smashing sometime.

“My ex?”

“I just feel like it’s weighing on you.” Before he could ask, I said, “You never mentioned her today, but it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to tell. It’s just hard to work through it all without knowing what exactly is wrong.”

“I—Hm.” He turned back to face the road with me before mumbling a curt, “Yeah. Yeah, I probably should.”
“Good.” I wet my lips and shrugged, “I want this to work out.”

“Don’t say that like that.” He looked up from his lap to look at me. He even leaned forward in a weird attempt to make eye contact with me as I tried to drive a car. “Okay? We’re gonna make it. That’s not really a question, it’s just patience, I guess. We’re not gonna immediately be obsessed with each other and ready to get married and know everything about each other. It’s a process.”

“I’m just really impatient. So, you know, after finals and everything--”

“Oh shit, I still have to help you out with your drawing.”

“Right, right. So, after that, and after I get my C- to just pass, we can talk everything out and get it all on the table. Okay?”

“Okay.” With that, our first official date was over. I don’t think it was going to be a romantic tale we’d tell our kids or whatever. At the very least, I’d maybe slash the details to a simple “We went out for pho.” But it was a start - a rocky yet honest, open start. I could see the cracks starting to form in that brick wall.

Chapter End Notes

i got inspired to get off my ass and do some lazy editing of this chapter i had sitting on my computer. adult life is weird
**Close-Hauled**

Chapter Summary

close-hauled: of a sailing vessel traveling, or "beating," as close to the opposing wind as possible, against the odds.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The night of Ymir’s weirdly-timed Monday farewell party started with Jean coming over to my dorm room to investigate my drawings while Annie was out at studio. She seemed to be out of the room more and more lately, which only meant good things for me. She came into the room like a ghost, usually around two in the morning when the studios shut down. If I was asleep, she never woke me up, but I got the “two A.M. timestamp” from one night where I couldn’t fall asleep.

Every day for the past three days, I’ve fallen victim to a lump in my throat. It usually shows up for an hour or so when I remember how fucked all my drawings are and have a miniature mental breakdown where I imagine myself living as a nun at my parents’ farmhouse until I wither up like a raisin and die. Jean says that probably won’t happen, but he also said this without looking at my work before more closely. Today was the first day he could since that eager beaver signed up to have his final review on a Monday. Mine was Tuesday - tomorrow. Less than 24 hours to pull my shit together. I felt the lump in my throat again.

Seven o’clock at night. We were both woefully unprepared for a party - t-shirts, sweatpants, the standard “finals week” couture. We both stood in the center of my room, arms crossed, staring at my drawings on the floor. I was having an episode, and Jean looked oddly calm. “You said you wanted to go to this party.”

“That’s before I looked at my dumb fucking drawings, Jean, help!”

“They’re not that bad.”

“I’m so stressed, I’m freaking out.” I looked at him. “I step out that door and I’m gonna immediately throw up in the Uber. I’m telling you right now. My nerves are acting up.”

“Don’t stress out, you’re being a downer.” Jean frowned. “You want something?”

“I don’t know. I just want to, you know. Fix my design.” I bounced my foot. “It looks horrendous.”

“You have all day tomorrow, come on.”

“I don’t. Help.”

He pouted. “We’ll go to this party for a few hours.”

“A few?!”

“Yes, a few. And a few beers? One beer?”
“I don’t like beer.”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s a kegger, all they ever have is beer, you gotta learn to like beer.”

“I...fine.” I groaned. “It’s just annoying, you know, because I’m basically failing. I need to make up for it and I just...I gotta do better.”

“You’re already doing better, I mean, you’re establishing the problem. We just gotta think of a solution. You’re fine. These fixes are...easy. In the meantime, let’s have fun. Two more hours, max. You can do that.”

“Maybe. I don’t know if--”

Jean grabbed my shoulders. “We’re going to get fucked up tonight. We’re going to get _fucked up_. You have _never_ been one to turn down a good fucking time.”

True...I mean, I may as well ball out before I inevitably get kicked out of school. Say my last goodbyes, have a few beers before I go back to Mormon hell. Maybe I should start plotting my way out. I thought about it while I asked Jean to go back to his room and get dressed to go out. While he was off doing his thing, I start comparing outfits in the mirror. What was I to do with all of this? No way would my parents think a crop top was “appropriate.” Maybe I could give them or lend them to Sasha or something for safekeeping, because I couldn’t just give them away. These were the only clothes I felt good in. The long sleeves and the pants always made me feel like a haggard old woman. I felt the farthest from “godly,” and besides, God probably thinks all my crop tops are cute.

Ugh, first my clothes, then my lack of coffee...would kicking coffee mean I would get withdrawals? Would I have to sneak out to Starbucks for a fix like a goddamn junkie? Ugh, and God knows I’ve _thought_ about it, but I didn’t want to actually consider the fact my parents would never let me see Jean alone ever again. Unless he wanted to marry me, we wouldn’t be able to hang out again without another little Mormonite present, and I doubt Jean would marry someone just to cop a feel.

Speak of the little devil, he just knocked on my door. He was ready already? I was still looking over my clothes...maybe I got distracted. I got a little too wistful. I had to live in the moment and enjoy this time before getting back to drawing and failing and moving home, all while my anxious stomach twists in knots. “It’s open.”

“Hey, I’m ready.” He didn’t do much to get changed. He just replaced his sweatpants with his new pair of jeans and phoned it in. “You still picking something out?”

I can’t be a negative Nancy. I had to put on a smile and try to have the time of my _fucking_ life, and that all started with my outfit. I shook my head, “Yeah...yeah, sorry. I can’t decide. My top pick I think is this pink bodysuit? With the white skinny jeans?”

“It’s cold. Do you have a jacket?”

I shrugged, playfully pouting as I kicked my foot back and forth against the cold tiled floor. “I was under the impression I could just steal yours.”

“I get cold, too!” He whined, looking down at his phone. “I’ll call the Uber if you put on your own coat.”

I took the hint and grabbed a jacket from the wardrobe. “Fine. I’ll bring my own coat, but the more I think about it, the more I wanna drive there.”

“What? Drive?”
“Yeah. If I know I have to drive, that way, I won’t let myself get shitfaced.”

Jean shook his head. He put his hand over his heart, almost offended. “Oh, no, I want you to get shitfaced. I’m personally getting shitfaced.”

“Jean?”

“Just a few drinks. We’ll Uber home and get the car tomorrow if we have to, but—”

I shook my head. “I’m still driving. Okay? Save your money, I’m going to just drive us there.”

He gave up the fight and followed me to the truck. He handled the GPS for the drive over. It was pensive, and frankly, a little tense. I was being responsible for the night, which I guess was the antithesis of the ideal partygoer. But I had to be good so I could do good work in two hours. I debated setting a timer on my phone until Jean chirped from the passenger seat, “Just don’t be a downer. I know you want to be responsible, but just have fun. That’s the whole reason we’re going.”

“I–I know. I’m excited, just...I’m taking care of myself.” I played with my necklace at the red light we were stopped at. “This is like our debut too, you know. Like...we’re dating. And this is gonna be everyone’s first impression of us as a couple.”

He looked at me before cracking a smile and looking down at his phone. “Showstopping.”

“Ugh, I mean, just look at me. Everyone’s gonna be like, ‘Damn, what’s your name? What’s your number?’ And I get to be like, ‘Not so fast; have you met my boyfriend, Jean?’” I coiled my arms around one of his. “Could you beat someone up?”

“Oh, without a doubt.” He shook his head, laughing. “Are you glad you came out tonight?”

Had to keep on track. “For two hours.” We left at nine. It was now 9:08 in the truck. “An hour and fifty-two minutes.”

Jean peeked out the window at a block’s worth of generic rowhomes, as if one of them would say YMIR outside in flashing neon lights. “Let’s start the two-hour countdown when we walk into the house. Okay?”

I sighed. “O-Okay, just don’t...just don’t fuck me over. Okay?”

“Okay, I swear.”

I looked at him, my eyebrows raised. “If I fail school, you’ll probably never see me again.”

“Ugh, don’t guilt me--”

I slowed the car slowed in front of a house that was probably Ymir’s. We could see some sort of strobe light inside the window, clouded by the curtain. I parked the car as close to the curb as possible, and finished my thought as I opened the door to the frosty December air. “I’m not. I don’t wanna disappear, but I’m just...being honest.”

“Okay. Let’s not...let’s not talk about it. For two hours. Let’s just go inside.” He knocked on the front door and waited for a brief moment before sighing and just barging on through to the party himself.

I always thought Ymir was our age until like, yesterday. Apparently she start university a little later than the rest of us. While she wasn’t exactly twenty-one, she had friends who were. Admission to the
party was free, but the beer was not. That was the catch - they bought a ton of cheap Blue Ribbons and were selling them for two bucks a pop to make their profit. Jean brought a ten to cover both of us for the night. We got one beer to start. I sat on the couch, trying to nurse it while hiding the disgust on my face. Ice water was running down my arm and I was losing feeling in my fingertips. The smell of hops was making me sick and I wished there was some tequila at this party to expedite the process of me getting shitfaced. Instead, Jean smirked and clanked his nearly-full can against my own. “Whoever finishes their beer last has to drink another.”

I was wiping the condensation off with my fingers so I could get a better grip on the can. Before I could tell Jean that I accepted his challenge (knowing damn well I’d lose, but refusing to accept defeat), Ymir, with her housekey between her fingers like the Wolverine, came out of nowhere and poked a hole in the aluminum. She shouted, “Shotgun it,” as the lager spouted out of the hole.

In a panic, mainly not to ruin the carpet or my shoes, I started to chug it. The sour, musty taste was getting to me, so I pinched my nose and powered through. After the can was emptied, I slammed it onto the coffee table and covered my mouth as I struggled to swallow it all. I looked like a chipmunk with all this booze stuffed in my face. Shotgunning was a fucking disgusting sensation, and after it was all said and done, my stomach was churning and I felt so bloated and gassy and gross. I leaned on Jean’s chest and sighed, “You looost .”

“You had an assist, it doesn’t count.” He got up to go back to the kitchen, leaving me sprawled out on the couch and staring at the ceiling. I hoped tonight was fun. I was being a downer though. The sooner I got home and the sooner I could finish my work, the better I would feel...considering I could manage to stay sober. I don’t think that was going to happen, because Jean came by with a new can. “Have another. Game still stands.”

Chugging two beers really sent me into a fucking tizzy. At least this one went down the hatch much, much easier, and within twenty minutes of me getting to this party, I was already tipsy. I didn’t have the energy to stand up and dance and do anything fun, so I just laid my head on Jean’s lap, staring at the ceiling.

I tilted my head to analyze his face. “Huh.”

“How big do you think it is?” He asked in my ear as I fought off my dirtiest thoughts. I mean, I was on his lap. I could feel it through his jeans, and I struggled not to straight-up whip it out.

“Eight inches, even.” I guessed with a single, firm nod. “Easy.”

He nearly choked on his drink. He narrowly avoided a spit take, but he did start coughing uncontrollably into his hand. I continued, sitting up to sit in his lap. "You're gonna fuck up my walls with like, the biggest dick in the universe."

"How big do you think it is?" He asked in my ear as I fought off my dirtiest thoughts. I mean, I was on his lap. I could feel it through his jeans, and I struggled not to straight-up whip it out.

"Eight inches, even." I guessed with a single, firm nod. “Easy.”

He laughed, tightening his grip on me just a little bit as I pestered him, “Was I right? Was I right?”

He didn’t answer, he just fought off a blush while he rubbed my back and let me tire myself out. A moment after I stopped asking and began reevaluating the party and what to do next, he leaned in to tell me, “Seven. You’re close, though.”

“Seven?!”
“Well, a little over seven. But still.”

“Fuck. Seven is still a lot.” I chewed the inside of my cheek. “Is it thick?”

“I guess?” Jean shrugged. “What’s thick for you?”

“I’d know it if I saw it.” I winked, telling him, “but i already know it is.”

“Shit. I have never had a girl so into me. In my life.”

“Get used to it!”

“Hah…” His face was cherry red now. I don’t think he was ever going to get used to it. He mumbled, "I don't want to take it out in the middle of a party."

“Good thing there’s a bedroom, then.”

“I can’t believe this is because you wanna see my dick this bad.”

“Well, I can do stuff to your dick too.” I rolled my eyes. “What-ever.”


“I want it to happen now.” I nuzzled into his shoulder. “I don’t think a handjob is unreasonable.”

“Hitch—“

“A good old American handjob. It’ll be fine.” I kissed his neck and reasoned into his ear, “I get to feel how big you are. And you get to come. Easy.”

“C’mon. What about romance?” He was trying to be real cute about it. His fake-ass, smug smile as he tried to get the conversation off of how much I wanted to bang him.

“I can feel you up by candlelight. Come on.”

“I kinda wanna smoke.”

“But—”

“Come with me,” He stood up, grabbing my hand and leading me towards the nearest door. We slunk off into a cramped little bathroom. It reeked of a cheap, plug-in air freshener and was decorated from floor to ceiling with robin’s-egg-blue tiles. Jean quickly pulled a small pipe from his pocket, speedily packing it with the weed he had stashed in a little bag. We passed the pipe around along with some choice lines of quality conversation, hidden away from the rest of the party...though we did hear a lot of knocking and frustrated groans from outside. Having this room to ourselves in the crowd was kind of nice - like some little hidden grotto.

“Hitch.” He prodded at the ash in the bowl with his finger before handing it to me. “Last hit of the bowl. That’s yours.”

“Thanks.” I grabbed the pipe and held it to my lips. He brought his lighter to the bowl, swirling the flame around its edge. After I took my hit, I exhaled with a coughing fit. I nodded, watching Jean as he emptied the bowl and packed up his stash. “How do you feel?”

“Getting there,” He told me as I kept swallowing and swallowing in a bad attempt at trying to make my mouth wetter. “You have cottonmouth?”
“Huh?”

“Is your mouth dry?” He took some cash out of his very deep pockets and put it on my lap before shoving his weed accessories in there instead. “Need another beer?”

I uncrumpled the bills he handed over to me to stare George Washington in the face. Have I ever really looked at a dollar before? It was so...soft. And there was so much writing, and--

“Hey. Hitch?”

“What?” I looked up at him, fumbling to find a spot to put his money. I couldn’t fit any more shit in my pockets, since capitalism decided women should carry purses instead or whatever, so I just squirreled it away in my bra.

He made eye contact with me and just laughed, mumbling under his breath, “Oh shit.”

“What? What do you want?”

“I asked if you wanted another beer so your mouth isn’t dry.” He stood up. “Want water instead?” I needed water, but I really wanted to dance. I wanted to move and have fun and lose myself in the moment. I grabbed his arm and twirled underneath. “After this song.”

I dragged him out of the bathroom in a puff of smoke, dizzy but really giddy too, to start dancing in the living room. He had the same sense of rhythm as a deaf crab. He was just awkwardly caressing my ass as I grinded against him. I ran my fingertips up his chest and weaved them back together around the back of his neck. I smirked, “You’re so awful at dancing.”

“Wh-Whatever.”

“Can we just fuck already?” I groaned. “We’re literally dancing around the subject. Can we...just...” I leaned in to kiss him, all tender and sweet and shit, before Ymir slapped us both on the back.

“Take your hetero bullshit to one of the bedrooms. Just not mine.”


“O-Okay. Let’s go. C’mon.” he tugged on my arm. We sidewinded through the crowd and towards an open bedroom door. Something about this room screamed “Ymir,” which means we didn’t follow the directions, but that wasn’t my main concern right now. All of the tension in my gut subsided. I was nervous, but excited. Jean shut the door, and as soon as I heard the lock latch, I pounced. I raked my hands through his hair, pulling him closer. I carefully walked us towards the bed so we could lay down on the mattress and give my feet a break from standing. As soon as I felt comfortable on the bed, surrounded by softness, I started to wiggle my jeans down my thighs so I could undo my bodysuit and show him my bra. It was the one I got at the lingerie store! I wanted to show what it looked like in-situation!

“F-Fuck...this is hard...” I whined as I tugged my bodysuit over my head. After a long battle, I tossed it next to me. I squeezed my tits, bringing attention to the fact I was wearing my new bra. “Ta-da--”

“I’m not hooking up with you like this.” He pushed my hair behind my ear. “You-You need to sober up.”
Booooooo. I was going to snuggle into the sheets before I spotted a purple candle on the nightstand.
“Jean, give me your lighter.”

He didn’t react in time. I reached into his pocket and leaned over to light it. The smell of lavender wafted through the room, and a soft glow illuminated our corner of the bed. “It’s way more romantic, isn’t it?”

It was very romantic, devilishly romantic, even. But he wasn’t kissing me. Why wasn’t he kissing me right now? Where is my love and affection? “Jeeeeaaan.”

“W-What?” Jean interrupted, his arms awkwardly crossed as he was sitting on the bed. My attention was towards the bulge pressing against his jeans, its presence alone making me feel unbearably hot. “What do you want me to do?”

He started to sit up. In all of my horniness, I immediately wrapped my legs around his waist. “You want to switch, right? Here—” I clumsily maneuvered us so he was on top of me. He let out an oof, and I took a deep breath before reaching up to start caressing his thigh, working my way up to his cock, already hard. “If you’re ready, I’m ready.”

He gently smacked my hand off of his body and back against the bed. “You’re not ready.”

“But—“

“This isn’t happening tonight.” He squeezed both of my hands, pinning me against Ymir’s bed. Fuck, I was weak. My legs were shifting underneath him, wishing that just now he would change his tune. I was so hoping he would keep my hands down...pry my legs open somehow. Wedge himself in between them? He struck me back down to reality by affirming, “Okay? This isn’t going to happen.”

Did he not know? Was he unaware of how I was feeling? “But I’m so wet already.”

“From what?” He loosened his grip, but I pulled him back.

I cracked my back, further settling into this cocoon of blankets and pillows. “We’ve been kissing and flirting and grinding all night, so. I just wanna do it. Keep my hands against the bed while we do it, okay? And just...let me feel you.”

“Whenever you smoke, you’re either loopy or paranoid—“

“And tonight I’m loopy! C’mon, I’m so wet, look—” I giggled. I broke away from his grip to reach down into my jeans, but he grabbed my wrist again. Awesome. Then he gently placed my hand on my chest and laid back down next to me, getting himself all comfortably celibate. Not awesome.

“If you won’t just man up and fuck me, I can get myself off. It won’t be hard, I’m already wet.” I outlined the plan. Honestly? It was unfair of him to imply he’d eat me out. And then refuse to eat me out. This was torture. “First off, I’ll—“

“I’m saying no. Stop.” He rolled his eyes. “Listen, if you stop, I’ll pack another bowl. Okay? And maybe afterwards...we can go home...and do...that stuff.”

“You have to promise that.”

“Sure. I promise.” He shakily fished the rest of his weed out of his pocket. “Let’s just chill for a minute. Okay?”
“Fine.” I sighed, looking at my phone. “We only have an hour before I want to go back home.”

His shoulders fell and he looked back down at his hands. I waited as he pinched the last of it into his bowl, still dirty from the last use. There was barely enough this round to fill the bowl halfway, but he packed it anyway.

I felt a little drunk, and a lot high from smoking a bowl.

“Your eyes are already super red.” He said, handing me the bowl after he took the inaugural hit. “I feel really irresponsible handing this to you right now.” I took it anyway. We began the ritual of passing the bowl amongst ourselves before I really started to feel the effects. It was just...strange. I don’t think I’ve had this much weed in my life. My throat was on fire, like I just tried to swallow a lump of burning charcoal. My head was in the clouds, and the only way I could bring myself back to earth was just to speak.

“I feel like in those old cartoons,” I struggled to articulate myself. “When someone dies, and their ghost steps out of the dead body. That’s me.”

“Ha,” he smiled. “Weirdly enough, I totally get it...I feel like I’m walking on a tightrope, right? On the edge of the world. And I’m gonna fall off any minute now.” He tightened the hold he had on my bicep. “You keep me grounded.”

“I don’t know how you do this.” I hated feeling like a ghost. I sat up so I could go for a walk outside, but Jean held onto my arm.

He looked at me, his brow furrowed and his mouth hanging open. “You’re going out?”

“Yeah. Maybe for water? Air?”

He shook his head. “Nah. Stay here. I can’t imagine talking to strangers right now.”

“Shit, good call.” I said, laying next to him again. His scent was the only thing familiar to me in this house. Even the way Jean held me was unfamiliar - his arm coiled around mine, and the other under my head. I parroted my brain - well, I guess that’s what all conversation was, but regardless, “Party houses have the weirdest energy.”

Like, everyone outside the door was moving double-fast. Despite the fact that it was December, the ceiling fan was on and I could see it spinning the fog in the room around into a vortex...oof. I forgot how hothotboxing worked. I wondered if Ymir would be mad. There was a lot of fabric in here - a lot of vessels for weed-smell. The tapestry on the wall, the throw pillows, the clothes proudly displayed on the coat rack.

For real, Ymir’s wardrobe was displayed proudly on a single metal garment rack in the corner of her room. It was so monochromatic, it was a little depressing. It was all on the spectrum of “beige.” Before I knew it, I was standing next to her coat rack, investigating all of her clothes. A camel-colored coat, slim khaki jeans, a pair of tasseled brown leather loafers on the floor...I was actually pretty impressed her aesthetic was so consistent. It was a prep-school look with a bizarre, punk rock attitude. Was it the masculine energy?

Jean rolled over to his side to watch me internally debate and analyze Ymir’s fashion. “What’re you doin’?”

“Snooping.” I replied, holding Ymir’s coat up in front of Jean’s torso. All of her hangers were identical, crafted from copper wire. “If she wasn’t so goddamn twiggy, I’d ask her to lend you some of her clothes.”
“Are you saying I’m fat?” He rolled over again so he wasn’t looking at me anymore before mumbling, “Bitch.”

“The right amount of muscly. Not scary muscly...why did I get up, again?”

“Snooping.”

“No, snooping came second. It just...happened.” I put my hand over my mouth. “Hm.”

I looked between the haphazardly-hung fairy lights...the black letter board that was rearranged to say “BUTT Z” with the rest of the letters in a pile on her dresser. I was so stoned, it made me laugh. I covered my mouth, embarrassed of how obnoxious I thought I was acting.

“You good? You sick?”

I didn’t know which question to answer. “...Yeah. Just racking my...oh! The window!” I went to unlock and open the window, letting a cold gust of wind travel through the room. Ah, the crisp, winter air felt incredibly refreshing. Hopefully it would send the smell of pot into space. I asked Jean for his lighter and lit all of the candles in the room to expedite the process. “That should be better, right?”

“Sure.” He took a whiff. “What are the candles supposed to smell like? Cotton?”

“Dunno. But I hope they smell really good.” I swallowed. “I wanna take a nap, or cuddle, or something...”

“We can do that.” I just wanted this bed to swallow me up whole. How long could I nap before I had to go back home? I wanted to stay out for two hours before going back home to work. I checked my phone.

I was twelve minutes behind schedule. Twelve. What could I have done in twelve minutes? Probably a lot. I don’t know what I could have done, but it was something. I sat up, feeling my joints crack and whine. Jean turned over in bed and asked, “Wait, where are you--”

“Gotta get home. Gotta do my homework.”

“Now?” He stood up after me. “Right now?”

“Yes.” I gave myself a cursory check-up in the mirror to make sure I was presentable before going back to the party. My eyes were bright red, but I couldn’t do anything about that now. I had to get out of here and get some shit done. Had to call an Uber, or even walk, or do something to go back home and try to get my grades up in a hail-Mary effort. I floated through the living room weighing my options. I couldn’t even focus on the tall figure approaching me from the couch, and I couldn’t focus on its freckles until they was mere inches away from me. “Oh! Marco’s here!”

“Hi, guys…” Marco moseyed on over, a Solo cup in his hand. He looked over my shoulder at Jean.

“Did you smoke a bowl?”

I took a peek inside Marco’s plastic cup. “Rum and Coke?”

“No, just regular...diet Coke. I have a final tomorrow.”

Oh, right! School! You know, like the school I was about to get kicked out of? The school that was going to dick me over for being a bad artist? This night was all wrong. I wanted Jean to fuck me, not the educational system. Ah, shit. Ah, goddammit. Now I had a lump in my stomach.
“What a coincidence, me too, so I have to get home to finish all the work I have for it.” I nervously laughed. I felt woozy. I almost felt nauseous. Scratch that, I was totally nauseous. “Ha...ha, oh fuck. Marco, I’m fucked.”

“No, you’re not!” Jean quickly decided from behind me, resting his hand on my shoulder before spinning me around to look at him. I felt even woozier. “Y-You’re not. Okay? Wanna go home? Would that make you feel better?”

I was expecting a bigger fight with him about wanting to leave. “Uh-huh?”

Jean started escorting me outside. “Okay, we’re gonna go home...can you drive?”

Marco followed us out the front door, his face full of worry and dread. What a sweet, sweet boy. What good deed did I do in my life to deserve an actual guardian angel named Marco Bodt? He answered on my behalf, “No. Neither of you can drive. No, no, no.”

“Can you drive?” I asked him.

“Yes, of course I can drive.”

“Wanna get food first?” Jean asked. He turned to Marco. “I’ll pay for it. As sincere thanks.”

“If you want--”

“We’re getting a pizza.” Jean decided as soon as we were standing by my car. The cool breeze was a welcome change compared to the stifling humidity of the party inside.

“Your keys.” Marco said, looking at my front pocket. “I’ll go and get it, just uh...wait inside. While it’s delivered.”

Marco was internally trying to conjure up a plan while Jean just kept naming foods. I forgot to give him my keys. “A big pizza. And a soda.”

“If you want pizza, we can order...”

“Delivery? No, no, no. We’re going there.”

“I don’t want to sit in a restaurant.” I whined.

Jean whined back, “We’re not sitting down in the restaurant, Hitch, we’re just gonna grab it and go-”

“Oh my God.” Marco muttered under his breath. I would’ve said something, but Jean was getting on my nerves more.

“Can we get dipping sticks?” Jean turned towards Marco, who blinked. Dipping sticks sounded so fucking good.

“Ooh, garlic knots too.”

“Well, let’s calm down here. I’m not...Daddy Money, I can’t afford the entire restaurant. Unless you want me to take out a loan.” Jean calmed down, furrowing his brow and looking at his feet, deep in thought. “But we can’t starve, either.”

“I’ll pay for the garlic knots, idiot.” I said to Jean, but I don’t think he heard me. He was too busy muttering to himself.
“I hate how everything costs money…” He groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose again. “Capitalism really got us fucked, huh? I hate dealing with money …”

“They’re like, three bucks.” I sighed. Besides, if anyone is complaining about capitalism, it should be me…not a Kirschtein.

“That is your fiscal responsibility, Deliss. And we will all - all share it.”

I fished my wallet out of my purse, leafing through the bills. I slowly pulled out a twenty, and then a ten. I turned to Marco and asked, “Do you want anything?”

“I’ll just have two slices.”

“Here, Marco. Take my money.” I pushed the bills into Marco’s chest, which he quickly took and stuffed in his pocket. “We’ll get a pizza, and dipping sticks, and a soda, and garlic knots.”

“Two pizzas!”

I waved him off. “No, babe, that’s too much pizza.”

“C’mon. We gotta go now.” Jean walked over to the car, putting his hand on the handle of the backseat door. “I’m afraid by the time we get there, I’ll be like, really starving. I wanna get there before I’m way too high.”

I quickly informed him, “You are high.”

Jean’s head hit the window of the car with a soft thunk. “I’m so hungry.”

“I know, I know. Where’s your money? Didn’t you tell Marco you’d pay for the pizza?” I mumbled, rubbing his back. I watched him turn around and reach into his pockets, unfolding crumpled bills and displaying them to us to observe in all of their glory. He looked like a child counting out his first allowance. It was kind of cute. Since he only had four dollars to spare, he groaned and gingerly handed Marco his credit card instead.

“And make sure to get the second pizza. It’s a tomorrow pizza.” Jesus Christ, no wonder he used to be a fat kid.

“Okay, okay.” Marco said. I had to admire his patience. He’d make a good dad. He looked over at me, shrugging, because we were still getting two pizzas. Sixteen slices of pizza for three people was just…heathenous. Marco asked, “Hitch, can you give me your keys?”

I nodded and reached into my pockets, taking out my keys and tossing them towards Marco. They landed with a “klang” about a foot from his feet. Awkward silence, until Jean just added a lackluster, sarcastic, “Kobe.”

“I’m sorry,” I wiped my eyes. “I’m not...I’m not in a good place right now?”

“I can tell.” Marco unlocked the car, getting into the front seat. “You both sitting in the back?”

“Sometimes it feels like time is moving slow, sometimes it’s super quick,” I mumbled, crawling over to the opposite side of the backseat. Jean followed suit, slamming the door behind him and buckling himself in. “Sometimes I’m yelling, sometimes I think I’m whispering...what are we doing again?”

“Pizza,” Jean and Marco harmonized as the engine roared to life and Marco sought to deliver us from evil and towards the joy that was the late-night munchie.
“Right.” I whined, resting my chin in my hands. “Oh, guys. Have you ever been so stoned, you--?” I lost my train of thought. I was internally scrambling to put my thoughts together. There was a little mini-me in my brain sitting at a slot machine, pulling the lever to get all my thoughts to line up. “Car ride.” “Pizza.” “High.” “Incommunicating?” I don’t think that was a word...I couldn’t talk right.

“I know you probably hate it, but--”

“I know it’s not possible, but do you ever genuinely feel like you’re gonna be the first one to die from weed?” I turned to look Jean in the eye and ask that because it’s a pretty strong fear right now. His mouth just kind of froze in a weird, half-open smile as I took him out of his train of thought.

He cleared his throat, and found what he wanted to say - I could tell because he had this little sparkle in his eye. He continued, “You’re a good smoking buddy, or whatever you want to call it...even though it’s gonna kill ya.”

“It is?!”

He just laughed and tossed my hair with his hand before going back to brush my bangs out of my face. Then, he would let them fall back onto my forehead before petting them back, over and over. “I forget how soft you feel.”

His touch was nice, too. It was warm, but not totally familiar or expected. I didn’t know what to expect, really. I just knew I wanted to chase that warmth. When we reached our first red light, I acted quick to cautiously unbuckle my seatbelt and scooch over so I was in the middle seat, directly next to my sweet little boyfriend. I buckled back up - safety first, I suppose - and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

“You regret leaving the house tonight? Or the dorm, I guess--”

“No, not really.” I sighed. I mean, as long as we got my projects done, I’d feel better, but, I mean, we’re in the car. We’re on our way home. There wasn’t really more I could ask for. It wasn’t like we were lame ducks sitting at a party while my stomach turned over. “Wish we could have stayed longer...”

“We--We could have.” He offered an exasperated laugh. “But...it’s fine. Whatever. We’ll go back, in the comfort of our own...dorm room...”

I smirked, “Yeah, I bet l’il Picasso can’t wait to spend all night helping my dumb ass draw.”

“Well, I wasn’t excited about the drawing par-- shit goddamn !” Marco made a sharp turn into the parking lot. He slowed down and chose a parking spot near the back of the lot. He turned off the ignition and reclined back in the driver’s seat with a low sigh.

Jean caught his breath, squinting to scan the restaurant. “Is the pizza ready already?”

“We don’t order our pizza until we go inside.” I looked outside at the storefront. The only two words that I could use to describe it were “Italian kitsch.” Red and white checkered curtains, a plastic life-size model of a portly pizza chef, and bells fixed to the cheap glass door. To top it all off, the place was named Marco’s. I glared at our Marco and said, “I can’t believe you.”

“It’s a great name.”

“You’re going inside and ordering the pizza then.” I decided. “It has your name written all over it.”

“You guys aren’t coming in? I thought we were gonna eat there.”
There was an awkward pause until Jean meekly said, “We’re busy.”

“Fine.” Marco took off his seatbelt and began to count the money in his pocket. “Just hold off your busy work until I’m out of the car.” With a long-suffering sigh, he exited the vehicle. After a pause, Jean put his arm around my shoulder and tried to kiss me through a goofy, mischievous grin. I palmed for my seatbelt to loosen it, and once I was out of its bind, I held Jean tight, falling back in my seat. I took him with me, to which he fell on top of me with an “oof” and a low, mumbled, “shit…”

“You good?”

“Ack --” His own seatbelt was almost around his neck, nearly choking him until he tactlessly wrestled his way out of it. “Fine, fine--” He kissed my neck and grabbed my tit - not that he had to try very hard, or try at all. I gave pretty easy.

“You can take my top off if you’d like.”

Without a peep, Jean sat up, straddling my waist with his legs as he maneuvered his own shirt off of his body and onto the floor of my car.

“Oh I missed your little shoulder tattoo!” Hiding behind his sweaters all the time in the frosty weather! He gave a sheepish grin. I forgot what a nice piece it was. Easier on the eyes than all of the dumb tribal tattoos and script names inked on all of the other dumb boys on campus.

I laid kisses on all the little stars before he yanked on my bodysuit and asked, “How do you take off this weird unitard-thing?”

I shrugged. “S’easy…wanna watch?”

“Absolutely.”

“Okay, okay, okay. First, you gotta…” I took a deep breath, easing myself out of my jeans and psyching myself up. It was getting cold in the car since it was off, so all of the contact felt nicer and warmer than it probably would’ve otherwise. He was focusing super intently. “Ha, are you following so far?”

“Very complicated.” He shook his head. I couldn’t tell if he was teasing or not. The weed was really complicating my sense for sarcasm. “Continue.”

I smirked, sitting back to unclasp it and pull it over my head before tossing it onto the car floor, next to his own shirt. “See? It’s tricky, but--”

“I know for next time.” He smirked, leaning in to kiss me again. I felt him rubbing up on me. I mean, I was in my underwear right now. I think it’s more than reasonable to want to see his dick at this point. I basically started clawing at his fly, trying to undo it with one hand. He provided an assist, eagerly unbuttoning his fly. I pretty much jumped right in, snaking my hand into his boxers and launching me into an immediate giggle-fit.

I don’t think laughter was the first reaction a guy wanted after being felt up. I had to clarify. “Okay, wow. Oh my God, you’re huge.” How the fuck could I take this? I’d probably be snapped in half, like a pair of chopsticks. Good God. “It’s not even fair, you’re so biiiiiiig. You were being way too modest.”

“Oh.” He continued nibbling on my neck, his hair tickling the side of my face. “Modesty over, how much do you want my dick right now?”
“Are you dumb?” I leaned back against the backseat with a deep sigh, running my fingertips up and down his shaft as I racked my brain for what to do next. My high-ness was seriously fogging my judgment on what was sexy and what was not - if I woke up tomorrow to find out I did some dumb shit, like lick his forehead or something, I would - no joke - kill myself. “I’ve been telling you all night how into you I am.”

He pushed my panties to the side to rub my clit for a few moments before quickly sliding his fingers inside of me. “How’s that?”

“Nice—” My pleasure was quickly negated when he nipped at my neck - an action that made this entire backseat-makeout session go from “hot and heavy” to “absolutely vampiric” real quick. I squirmed, gritting my own teeth as I groaned, “Oof, oof, too hard, too hard—”

“Hm?” He stopped fingering me, but kept his teeth clamped down on the sensitive flesh of my neck. Stupid, stupid, he’s so damn high and dumb and stupid and cute... no. I put my hand over his, gently caressing his fingers as I guided them back towards me. “Don’t bite my neck.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” He backed his head away to kiss me instead. The side of my neck felt hot and sore, but it was shockingly easy to ignore in the heat of the moment. Kind of reminded me that this whole thing was just one big learning process. Both of us were due to fuck up a lot more before learning everything about each other, and what makes us tick. But when we finally would... I coiled my hand around his cock, shivering with excitement as “what-ifs” swirled around my head.

“C-Can you flip us over? Plea—” Without a second to lose, he maladroitly tried to get on his side in my claustrophobic backseat. I helped finish the job, straddling him as I got him on his back so I could begin attacking him with kisses and rubbing myself against his dick, feeling it press against my clit. “How’s that?”

He didn’t answer, but since his fingers weren’t inside of me anymore, he took the opportunity to lick them and I just about damn near died. Jesus fucking Christ. He rasped, “Ugh, I wanna fuck you so bad—”

“He whined, moving his hands, slightly damp, up my body to play with my tits. He laughed, “We’re in your car.”

“So?” I looked out the window of my beat-up truck at the world passing by us. It was kind of thrilling - we were in the back of the lot, far from actual people. But the sheer thought of someone walking by and peering in to see us...I couldn’t help it, I leaned down to start kissing him again. I whispered in his ear, “It’s kind of hot...”

“We can’t, Marco’s gonna—”

I reached down to stroke him for a few moments before returning to my grinding. His cock was slick with precome. “Get jealous that his best friend’s girlfriend is like, the hottest girl in the whole world?”

He laughed. I could feel myself coming back down to earth from my high, finally. My limbs all got a little heavier and my joints a little tighter. My strongest tether to the earth was feeling Jean’s heart pulse against the palm of my hand. Whenever my hips moved faster, or when I made him laugh, his heart would nearly beat out of his chest. Made me feel proud. He stopped kissing me to ask, “Are you close?”
My breath was getting faster and faster. I was squirming on top of my boyfriend, pressing my hand against his collarbone to keep myself from crumbling completely. “Wh--We--Yeah?”

“Perfect.” He combed my hair away from my ear, tickling the back of my neck. “Me too…”

I continued teasing his sensitive flesh with my own. If what we were doing was working, I guess why bother changing it? If I sat up just a little straighter and changed positions just ever so slightly - messed with the angles just a bit - we could be fucking in the back of my car. It could be quick and dirty and off our plates. I just needed a small taste of it. A nibble, like sneaking a swipe of frosting off of a birthday cake before the party. After breaking the seal, it could probably open up a whole new window of opportunity for me. It would help me transition from out of my parents’ thumb and become my own.

But we didn’t do that. With a shiver and a breathy, shaky moan, I fell of the edge with Jean’s dick pressed against me.

I was slowing my pace until Jean gripped my waist. “Keep going, just a little longer--”

Watching Jean come was somehow even hotter than I thought. Seeing someone so tough with a mess of metal in his face be so vulnerable and shaky and raw left me feeling... supreme? Sex really does hold an insane amount of power. Dragging my fingertips along Jean’s flesh was enough to make his hair stand up on end, curl his toes.

When he came, he straightened his back, and his mouth hung open ever so lightly so I could see the white of his teeth. A soft moan escaped from between his lips. Our shaking and writhing stopped, and suddenly, there was calm. He asked, raspy, “Are you okay?”

I wet my lips and caught my breath - hot, heavy and broken. “Y-Yeah. I’m good...you?”

“...Sweaty.” I let out a half-laugh. I was sweaty too, and uncomfortably so. It felt like my legs were glued to either side of Jean.

We sat there for a while. Not for that long, but it felt long. I licked my lips, trying to think of something to say. What do I say? Somehow none of this...felt real. My body was trembling and I was scorching hot in the middle of a December night in my freezing cold car. I was rubbed totally sore. It all felt...good? There were so many good thoughts passing through my skull, but they sped through my brain like a school of fish and all I had to catch them with was a plastic bucket.

I instead focused on my most imminent task - handing Jean a napkin so he could clear the cum off of his stomach. I exhaled and lumbered off of him, peeling my legs off of his body so I could lean forward from the backseat and reach for the glove compartment. I was blindly trying to snatch a fistful of napkins that I knew were buried there somewhere. Jean took the opportunity to grab my ass - warm and maybe even a little bruised from all of the groping. I smirked as I finally found the napkins and shut the glovebox. I reclaimed my seat next to him and chided, “You’re so grabby.”

With my butt now firmly planted on the backseat and officially hands-off, he instead resigned to rubbing my thigh. I smirked, passing him the wad of napkins. “Here. Before you get cum on my interior.”

“You’re right. You’re right,” He sighed, sitting up as he cleaned off his stomach. “Fuck.”

“That pizza is taking forever…” I observed, looking out the window.

“Yeah, Christ…” He fell back to sit next to me, staring at the wad of napkins in his hand. He looked at me and asked, “What do I do with this?”
I shrugged my shoulders, leaning over Jean to roll down his window. He gave me an incredulous look. I simply pointed out towards the lot. He sighed, tossing them out the window and wiping his hand on his jeans. He quickly rolled up the window and pulled his jeans back up. “Gross.”

“Wait up,” I said, rebuttoning his jeans for him. “There.”

“Thanks,” He mumbled. I leaned against the opposite door, facing Jean who was laying down. I looked on the car floor for my underwear and jeans, but he nudged my waist with his foot. “I don’t want you dressed yet.”

“Well, I need to get the bodysuit back on at least, it’s a bitch to get--” I looked over at him as I laid my suit on my lap, pressing out any wrinkles with my fingers. He looked so good when he was exhausted. I went to play with myself again, but I was rubbed red and raw. I rolled my eyes. I didn’t want to be gentle with myself, or him. “Ugh. I’ve never been this sore before.”

“Yeah, sorry.” He sat up to run his thumb along my neck. “I hope that doesn’t leave a mark.”

“It’ll be fine…” I sighed, searching the floor for more clothes. I had my flashlight on at this point to gather anything that was lost...and would be embarrassing to find three months later.

Jean joined the search. “Can you grab my shirt?”

“Yes,” I ran my hands underneath his shirt again as the passion between us was rekindled. We really needed a place of our own. And condoms. And time, since, you know, I was due to fail school in less than twenty-four hours. In the midst of this heat, we heard all the doors unlock in unison. Quick as lightning, Jean took his hands off of my tits and put them in his lap, staring straight ahead at the driver’s seat in front of him. I thought I was well-prepared to be visited by Saint Marco Bodt of Purity, until Jean reached into his pocket to pull out my panties. “Hey-- give me my panties back.”

He caught my eye, and instead of doing what he was asked like a good person, instead, he gave me an innocent smile and stuffed them right back in his pocket. “Nope.”

“You bitch!” I barked, cackling as I hastily threw on my jeans as fast as I could.

“Whoa!” He laughed, and as soon as I was decent, I started trying to reach over into Jean’s pockets to grab back my panties, that is until Marco opened the door to the backseat. I was on top of my boyfriend, ready to rumble to get my panties back. We looked up at Marco like deer caught in headlights until Jean sat up, basically throwing me off of him and back into my seat.

Marco handed Jean the pizza and asked “Can you hold these, please?” Before Jean could answer, he shut the door and climbed into the driver’s seat. Well, at least he said “please.”

He turned the ignition on to let the car heat up. He turned around to look at us - our faces red, and our wide eyes fixed away from his.

He licked his lips, searching for the right combination of words. “Uh. So. Whatcha up to--”

“Just waiting for you.” Jean quickly responded. “That’s it.”
Yeah. Exactly. We were just sitting three feet apart, hands in our laps, eyes bugging out of our skull. 
_Casually._ I bit back a grin.

“O-Okay, if you say so.” Marco slowly nodded, buckling his seatbelt before putting the car and mumbling, “Wash your hands when you get home.”

And then...silence. Marco had to have known. He had to. I was fighting off an intense blush, and an even more intense giggling fit. We were about two lights away from home when Jean asked, “So, uh. What was taking that pizza so long?”

“Sheh, I expected a wait. We kinda just showed up...and they only had like, two people working since it was so late...but at least it’s fresh.”

We continued our awkward, faux-Uber drive home in near silence until we got to the dorms. Once we signed in and passed the security guard, Jean mentioned, “Hey, I think I’m gonna go with Hitch. Help with her homework.”

“Allright. Figured.”

“Let me give you your share of the pizza first,” Jean offered, and we followed Marco up to the boys’ room as he fished for his keys to get inside.

Jean flipped the pizza box open and asked, “Uh, how many slices do you want?”

Marco opened the door and hustled inside. “I’ll just take two.” He dug through the mess of plastic silverware and paper plates they kept above the mini fridge. “You have your own key, right?”

Yeah, I do--”

“Good, because I’m probably gonna pass out after I’m done eating.” He sighed, loading up a paper plate with two piping hot slices of pizza. “Night.”

Jean shoved the pizza box closed again as Marco shut the door. “O-Okay. Night.”

As soon as it was shut tight, I turned to Jean and safely guessed, “I think he knows.”

“Oh, he _definitely_ knows.”

We finally made our way to my room. Until this very moment, when I was putting my key into the door, I realized I forgot I had a roommate. An absolutely _creepy_ roommate that would totally fuck up all my plans and probably bite my head off if she saw I wanted to bring my boyfriend in for the night. The worst part is, I’d probably have to give her some pizza. _Uuuughh._

“Is Annie here?” I sang, trying to be as cute as possible as I peeked my head in the doorframe, nervously flicking on the light. “Oh _fuck_ yeah, Annie’s not here.”

We took that as a cue to sit on my bed, put on some music to break the awkward silence, and begin violently shoving pizza down our own throats because _fuck_, we were hungry. We both sat facing each other, legs out, with the pizza box sitting across our laps like some sort of Italian heated blanket. It was good pizza, too. Not gourmet, fresh-from-the-hills-or-canyons-or-whatever-of-Tuscany good, but like, street-good. Like the pizzeria has been open since nobody knows when, the cook is a former convict or something, and the pie is just _swimming_ in grease. We needed one of the plastic knives I hoard from the dining hall to cut all the stringy cheese.

We had two slices each, and were working on a third when Jean suddenly realized, “Did Marco ever
get us our garlic knots?"

"Ah, no."

"Dickhead."

Continuing our chewing, Jean suddenly apologized, “Sorry for being all grabby.”

Ooh boy, back to melodrama. I thought we left it behind at Ymir’s. “Why do you think you’re grabby?”

“I mean, I think I moved too fast, and...well.” He swallowed. “Sex is great and all until--”

“Well, this is what we’re not going to do.” I looked around the room, trying to make sense of what he was saying. “I don’t understand because you’re literally the opposite of like, some crazy horny kid. You’ve had every chance to do it, and you haven’t taken it. Not even now.”

“Yeah, well, doesn’t mean I don’t want to. It just means I’m trying to be considerate.” He reached for another slice of pizza. He met my judgmental stare and replied, “I swear, this is my last one. Anyway, besides, I can’t even think of a time before tonight when--”

“My pregame.” We watched the snow fall in the wee hours of the morning before falling asleep in each other’s arms. How cute was that shit?

“You were drunk, doesn’t count.”

“Seven minutes in heaven, the literal day after.”

“I was drunk, doesn’t count.”

“No, you weren’t.”

“I was. At the end of it. And I think you are worth more than a casual hookup in a car in the middle of a late-night pizzeria parking lot.” He retorted, chewing the tough, doughy pizza crust like it was jerky. He wagged the remains of the crust in my face. “Just so you know.”

A casual hookup in a car, huh? “You don’t think this whole thing is casual, do you?”

“Not casual casual, but...”

“Good. Making sure we’re on the same page.” I finished my slice, throwing all of my garbage in the open pizza box. I pointed out the obvious, “I didn’t know you in high school, or how you used to treat women in your relationships?”

Jean followed suit, throwing a bunch of napkins and the orange-stained plastic knife in the box as well. “Sure--”

“But isn’t half of the point of college to do better?” I swallowed, leaning back against my pillow. Shit, I was tired. It felt like weights were tied to my eyelids. “Like, I know you’re trying to improve yourself and be better than you were then. And I think you’re there. But every time we do something, it’s always one step forward, and then two steps back towards celibacy. I think this weird part of you is trying to atone for going through all of your awkward, horny teen emotions when there’s nothing to atone for. I mean, you’re an adult. A respectful adult! If we were all judging each other based off of the people we were when we were awkward kids going through puberty wanting to fuck everything that moved, Jesus Christ, nobody would be friends with anybody.” Just make a
I sighed, sitting up to close up the pizza box and toss it next to my trash can. I almost forgot about my homework. “Alright. Enough bonding or whatever. Time to help me draw.”

“This late?”

“Now or never, bud. My review is tomorrow.” I smiled, and released all of my tension through one exasperated half-sigh, half-laugh. “Jean, I need to get this done. I don’t have time to become fucking Vincent Van Gogh, I’m just trying to pass. Okay?”

He cracked his back and rubbed his eyes. “Alright. What do you need?”

I pulled out every major drawing I did between the start of the semester and now. Still life sketches, buildings, wonky portraits of sitting models...it was all here, and it was all terrible. Luckily, Jean was more than willing to criticize for the sake of improvement.

“The shading looks off on this building.” Jean pointed to something I made during our outdoor drawing exercise. We all sat on the grass and drew the dining hall that day. I was partially distracted by the ants that seemed to be crawling over everyone’s legs, including my own - ick.

I mean...all the lines looked straight. And there were windows and doors where there should be windows and doors. This building could totally exist in real life. “What? It’s fine.”

He pointed to the two faces of the building. “Where is this light coming from?”

“The sun, idiot.”

“Then where is the light on this side of the building coming from? The other sun?” He paused. Instead of fighting me, he just took the charcoal pencil. “It’s whatever. I’ll fix it up for you.”

He started helping me shade in one face of the building. I kept on shading the still-life I drew of a tin can. All of the little ridges and bumps were starting to burn my eyes and wear me down. It wasn’t like shading was hard - it was quite peaceful, actually. It was just the monotony.

A quarter of the way through and I had to shake out my fingers. “My hand hurts.”

“That’s fine.” Jean continued shading. Finally, about fifteen minutes later, he sighed and held up his (mine? our?) drawing of the dining hall. “There. That’s...better. Okay. We got one.”

“I’ll put it in my portfolio,” I picked up the paper off the ground and took it to put in my big oversized drawing portfolio. I’m ashamed to say that this was the first piece that I was confident was complete. “One drawing done out of...seven.”

“One and three quarters.” Jean nodded. “The can looks really good so far, just gotta finish up. Keep doing what you’re doing. I’ll fix...this lady’s face, good God, did she have pink eye?”

“Stop making fun of how I draw eyes!” Or to be more accurate, how I couldn’t draw eyes.

I knocked out the drawing of the tin can and started to fix the weird, blurry shading on the very first still-life I made. I first started this in the summer, when it was nice enough to sit at the dining tables outside and sketch. The sound of the cicadas chirping in your ear, the soft breeze on your skin, the distant sound of dumb boys playing frisbee in the quad. Campus during winter was deathly quiet - the abundance of life that was here in August withered and died.
“Jean? It’s four in the morning. I’m starting to get really tired.” To be fair, I was tired since I came. Sorry for the TMI, but it was true. Between that and eating so much pizza, I was about to pass out.

“Have you never pulled an all-nighter?”

“But I still have to present these, and look nice, and...fuck. Babe, I’m fucked.” I took a deep breath, coming to terms with my inevitable failure. “I really don’t think there’s a way to fix these.”

“I mean, it’s a crit. They can be nerve-wracking, but they’re not hard. The professor just talks to you?” Jean nudged my shoulder. “For, you know...your opinion?”

He nudged me again. I chastised him, “Stop that.”

“I have a point with this. I’m saying if you can’t work on them anymore, explain yourself. I dunno. Talk about the meaning behind it or make up some bullshit artsy reason why this line is crooked—”

“Ack--!” I immediately took a pencil and started trying to straighten it out.

He then pointed to my portrait of him. “Or why my face looks so yellow. Why does it look so yellow?”

“I, uh...” I sat back, brushing my bangs out of my face and thinking hard about what I could possibly say besides pointing out that I fucking suck at drawing?! “Um...”

“Color experimentation?”

I turned to face Jean, who was leaning against the bed, his thumb pressed against his chin in thought. “You’re experimenting with color, and trying to express emotion through a complex, abstract color palette.”

“That’s...that’s actually pretty good. That sounds legit.”

“Thanks. I’m just spouting bullshit from amateur Picasso documentaries I saw on Youtube. What else?” He pointed at the crooked line on my still-life of the dining hall silverware. “Oh. And with the invention of the camera and the ability to instantly capture reality, portraying the world for as it is is pointless and meaningless, so instead - nah, in its stead - you wanted to capture the essence of the dining hall instead.”

“A fun jab at the food? Saying the drawing represents something that can’t exist in reality, but somehow does?” I nodded. “Good stuff.”

“Yeah just keep...making shit up and throwing out really big artsy words.” He shrugged. “Experimentation, abstraction...whatever ends with ‘i-o-n,’ just throw it out there and force it to stick.”

I was mentally jumping hurdles to justify being bad at drawing. I think I spent more time this semester justifying being unskilled compared to actually improving my skill. “Is it really that bad?”

“Uh.” He scratched his chin. “By my standards? Yeah, it’s bad.”

“Agh!” I groaned. My hands were shaking. I was prime for another meltdown. Haha. Cool.

“But! But, but, but, but--” He quickly backtracked, “you got into this school, right? I mean, if you didn’t belong here, you wouldn’t be here in the first place, and uh, it’s not...it’s not a class that is gonna make you fail.”
I stared intently at my portfolio as if it was all suddenly gonna get better the longer I looked. It didn’t.

“Hitch, I’m being honest. The crit may be weird. But you won’t fail. You’ll get your B, you’ll say thank you, and you’ll go home. And it’ll all be done with. Okay?”

“You promise?”

“A hundred percent.” He sighed. “Are you done with these for the night?”

“I guess.” They were as good as they were going to get without me completely losing my mind. It was hard to not overthink things, but the very best thing I could do right now was to try to avoid falling into that abyss of self-doubt and questioning. I should just lay down, maybe cry a little to control this emotional rollercoaster I’ve been on since eight o’clock, and wait for tomorrow to come? Yeah. That seemed like the best bet.

“You sure you’re okay?”

My plan was all laid out in my head. “Yeah, I’m fine. I’m just gonna lay down, go to bed…”

He didn’t budge from the floor. He just wiped his eyes and yawned, “Alright.”

“Do you have your key to get back in your room?”

Getting the hint, he stood up and put his hands in his pockets. “Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

“Okay.” I sighed, looking back at my art. I wanted to burn it. “Thanks again.”

“Forget,” he pulled my panties out of his pocket. “You want these back?”

I shrugged, waving him off. He shoved them back in his pocket as I yawned, “Keep ‘em, it’s fine.”

He was gone. My head hit the pillow, and I was out.

Chapter End Notes

i keep swearing to myself i’m gonna work on an actual release schedule but that never happens...ha. anyway. since i last posted, i have an actual job :~) with a salary and 401k and all that fun adult jazz. life after school is weird. like i’m expecting the new semester to start any day now and the end of summer break is long overdue. this is nice and nostalgic

End Notes

I have a blog: http://eldian-trash.tumblr.com/

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!