### What We Don't Know

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**Summary**

“It’s partly a celebration,” she tells him, “and partly because I’m a little nervous about something. If I’m at home, I know I’ll just be obsessing over it.”

He nods thoughtfully. “Ah, I see. So you need a distraction.”

One night stand before the first day of your new job and oops that was your new boss you were sleeping with AU.

**Notes**

So here's the thing -- I've never, ever written an AU before... and I'm seriously nervous about it.

I definitely wouldn't have the guts to do it if I didn't have the fabulous Bethany to beta for me -- and if Katya hadn't talked through so much of it with me in the beginning. Thanks, guys!
Chapter 1

She chooses the bar based solely on location.

It’s just one block over from the Hamish, Hamish, Hamlin, & Hawthorne offices, and after a two-hour orientation session that consisted of filling out copious amounts of HR paperwork, smiling blandly for the photo on her building ID, and watching a video about sexual harassment that has to be nearly as old as she is, she could use a drink. The bar looks just decent enough too, a place where she can actually afford to miss Happy Hour, but isn’t so divey that she has to worry about getting hit on by angry biker types.

It’s the perfect place to escape for a few hours.

The good news is that it’s not as crowded as she expects, given that it’s located right in the heart of Greendale’s business district and the work day is officially over for most. Maybe it’s the fact that she’s just missed the end of the drink and tapas specials that makes it so easy to find a seat at the bar, tucked away in a dim corner where no one is likely to bother her unless she decides that she wants some company.

The bartender slides her glass of wine in front of her with a half-hearted smile and moves over to refill beers for the couple in the middle of a pretty steamy PDA without missing a beat. Her first impulse is to throw back the wine like it’s a dose of cough medicine, a shot of tequila, but that seems a little too unseemly. So she does it in several dignified sips, like it’s just too sweet and delicious not to. She’s barely set the empty glass down before the bartender is back with another -- and she’s not entirely sure that she should drink a second glass so quickly after the first, but it’s there, just waiting for her, and it would be rude to refuse it.

So she drinks.

She isn’t entirely sure why she’s feeling quite so unsettled. It wasn’t even her first official day of work yet -- that isn’t for another fourteen or so hours -- and all of it was so disappointingly boring, more like an afternoon at the DMV than an episode of Law & Order. This is supposed to be her fresh start, the beginning of something big, and she wanted it to feel like that, like she’d said goodbye to the bland, by-the-book world she’s always lived in and stepped forward into something bold, unexpected, and new.

Maybe she isn’t quite there yet.

She finishes her second glass of wine, and this time, she actually signals the bartender for a refill. It’s not like she’s looking to get drunk, but she can’t go back to the apartment just yet, because she knows exactly what will happen if she does -- she’ll lay out her clothes for tomorrow on the dining table, the only spot that she can really claim as her own, and then move on to organizing her bag -- making sure that she has her lucky purple pen, that her laptop and phone are properly charged, that she has her little emergency kit with Advil, bandaids, a couple of tampons, and peppermint Altoids -- like it’s the first day of kindergarten and not a very real, very adult job that she’s spent almost a decade scratching and clawing her way toward.

She’ll stay at the bar a little bit longer, have another drink or two, so when she finally calls a cab -- earlier, when she’d taken the bus down here, she’d regretted lending her car to Abed and Troy so they could go to the mall, but she couldn’t really refuse them, not when they’re letting her camp out on their futon indefinitely without a word of complaint, and now she’s actually glad that she doesn’t have to worry about getting her beat-up Toyota home -- she’ll be drowsy and relaxed,
ready to get a good night’s sleep.

And she’s firmly committed to that simple, foolproof plan until he slinks into the bar.

She notices him immediately, because even though his suit is a little rumpled and his tie is loose at his throat, it’s obvious that they’re both expensive, probably made by some fancy designer that she’s never heard of, and even though it looks like he hasn’t shaved in a couple of days, that doesn’t do a thing to hide the fact that he’s got one of the most handsome faces that she’s ever seen in real life. He could seriously be a model or a game show host or even the tortured star of a movie based on a Nicholas Sparks book.

But, she thinks, what really draws her eye is the fact that, no matter how hot he is, it’s pretty obvious that he hasn’t had the best day, not if the way he slumps onto his stool and immediately downs the drink that the bartender slides in front of him is any indication, anyway.

And she knows all about bad days herself, so maybe she senses a kindred spirit.

In all honesty, though, she isn’t entirely sure what it is that gives her the nerve to call the bartender over and ask him to bring the handsome stranger another drink.

She is pretty sure that it’s not just sympathy or his good looks, though. It probably, almost certainly, has something to do with the fact that tomorrow she starts her brand new life, where no one knows her, or has any clue about her past, or can even guess at the very twisted road that’s gotten her here, and it feels like it’s time to reinvent herself.

The old Annie Edison wouldn’t send a drink over to a hot guy in a bar, but she’s ready to shake things up, celebrate this night when the world is about to open up for her in a hundred new ways. Besides, she’s feeling kind of sexy in the sleek, little black suit and heels that she splurged on, and there’s no good reason that feeling should go to waste.

Even the bartender seems to appreciate the new Annie -- he shoots her an impressed grin just before he hurries off to pour Mr. Hottie a fresh drink.

She tries to play it cool as he brings the drink over, running a finger along the bottom of her wine glass and practicing a bored expression. The handsome stranger looks confused at first, like the drink has materialized out of thin air, but then the bartender points her way and he turns to look at his mysterious benefactor. He studies her for barely a second before the corner of his mouth lifts in a devastating grin.

Crap.

She may have overestimated new Annie because something in his smile literally makes her feel weak, dizzy and shivery like the wine has suddenly gone straight to her head, but he’s rising from his stool and heading toward her before she can fully entertain any second thoughts. Her only hope is that she remembers how to speak.

“You stole my move,” he says, lifting his glass toward her in an almost toast as he settles on the seat next to her. “But I’m obviously off my game tonight. Not noticing you when I came in.”

He shakes his head, like he’s supremely disappointed in himself, and she smiles easily.

“You just looked like you had a rough day,” she tells him. “And I know a little bit about that, so…”

His eyes rake over her from head to toe in a slow, deliberate way that makes every inch of her feel
hot and edgy. “You look anything but rough.”

She can feel the blush burning her cheeks and hates herself for it, so she fiddles with her glass just for something to do. “Well, things have actually been picking up for me lately.”

“Yeah? Maybe some of your good luck will rub off on me then. I could use it, believe me.”

“What’s the problem?” she asks.

“Work,” he sighs wearily. “But who the hell wants to talk about that?”

She certainly doesn’t -- the whole reason she’s here, talking to him at all, is to forget that the job that she’s spent every minute of the last seven years working for begins tomorrow -- so she takes another sip of wine, hoping it calms her. He taps his hand against the bar, and it occurs to her suddenly to check for a wedding ring or a tell-tale tan line that shows he’s just shoved it away in his pocket. Besides a neat manicure, though, there’s nothing noteworthy about his hands. Well, they are also seriously big, with long, elegant fingers that she can suddenly picture sliding up her thigh, disappearing beneath her skirt.

She feels it then, the night taking a decidedly different turn.

“What about you?” he asks. “What has you drinking all alone on a Monday night?”

She doesn’t want to give too much away, because while she is trying to be a shiny, new person, she is still the same old cautious Annie at heart. “It’s partly a celebration,” she tells him, “and partly because I’m a little nervous about something. If I’m at home, I know I’ll just be obsessing over it.”

He nods thoughtfully. “Ah, I see. So you need a distraction.”

She vacillates between feeling relief that he isn’t pushing to know what she’s celebrating or why she’s worried and exhilaration at the idea that he knows exactly how to take her mind off things -- because seriously, he is as good a distraction as she can imagine.

“They’ve got pool tables in the back,” he says, which isn’t exactly what she’s expecting. “Let’s go play a game. You can’t be obsessing when I’m kicking your ass.”

The gleam in his eyes is almost too delicious to stand, and she laughs, shaking her head. “Kicking my ass wouldn’t be much of an accomplishment, actually. I don’t know how to play.”

He grins again, and he seriously has to stop doing that because she might jump him right here in this bar, in front of 30 or so drunken strangers, if he doesn’t. “It’s really your lucky day then,” he declares. “Because I happen to be a world class pool player. And a pretty good teacher too.”

“That’s really not necessary. I’m just--”

“Hey, come on. It’s the least I can do after you bought me a drink.” He lifts his glass, draining it in one smooth, deep sip. “You need a distraction and you may not believe this, but I’ve been told that I’m very distracting.”

She bites at her lip, trying hard not to smile -- because new Annie is inscrutable, plays hard to get, wraps hot, charming men around her little finger without breaking a sweat. So instead, she just shrugs, like none of this is a big deal and she hasn’t really got anything better to do with her time. He stands, waiting for her to slide off her stool. Like a gentleman, though, he holds an arm out, gesturing for her to go first, and he rests his hand lightly at the small of her back as he steps behind her, guiding her toward the rear of the bar.
The spark that travels through her is impossible to ignore -- and maybe she hasn’t felt anything like it in a long time or maybe she hasn’t ever felt anything like it ever before, but either way, she only wants more.

Right from the start, he has the sense that she’s not like the women he usually picks up -- there’s just this spark of something bright and earnest in her eyes that’s impossible to turn away from and a softness to her smile that’s almost too genuine to be real.

Sure, she sends over a drink, a pretty standard opening shot in the back and forth that tends to lead to a one-night stand in his experience, but she seems unsure and nervous about the whole thing, like she’s trying to talk herself into it. She’s also got a sweet, wholesome name to go along with her angelic face (the women he typically finds himself chatting up have sophisticated, pretentious names like Audra, Brigette, or Sonia) and a habit of humming what sounds suspiciously like bubble-gum pop under her breath when she’s trying to concentrate.

Frankly, it’s not really what he’s usually attracted to, and he wonders briefly if it’s worth all the trouble it might bring.

But she’s got a ridiculously hot body, even in her conservative little suit, and he can’t lie -- even those wide, soulful blue eyes of hers are doing something for him. So he’s willing to roll the dice, and if she goes all Fatal Attraction on his ass, he’ll just never show his face at L Street again.

It’s when they start the pool lesson, though, that he realizes just how different this woman really is -- because she’s not just letting him “teach” her as an excuse for stupid, clichéd flirting, to let him lean over her and feel her up in a way that’s acceptable in a public place. She takes his instruction seriously, asking questions and trying to perfect her technique, which, truthfully, is kind of awful (he keeps that bit of info to himself, because getting in her pants is still the end goal here), and when they finally move on to an actual game, she is firmly committed to beating him, even if she doesn’t have the skills to do it.

And strangely, all of that only makes him like her more.

Of course, she isn’t only interested in learning to play pool, and really, that’s reason enough to like her.

She takes a few opportunities to squeeze between him and the table when she’s making a shot, and she might do it with an innocent, little blush, but she bends just enough to rub against him more firmly than is strictly necessary, and when he leans over her to help her line up a shot or two, she shivers a little and presses back against him -- so yeah, he’s pretty sure they’re on the same page about where the night is headed.

He doesn’t believe in fate or destiny or any of that crap, but for a second, he wonders if she’s the universe’s way of making up for the utter shit that his life’s been the past few weeks -- the iffy case where he couldn’t charm the judge into granting his mistrial motion, the fender bender that was entirely his fault, the stock in that tech company he bought on a tip from Mark falling nearly 25 percent in a span of a few days, his mother making noises about coming for a visit at the end of the month. It’s a clusterfuck of crap, for sure, and that asshole Alan stealing the McAllister case out from under him today is just the fucking cherry on top. And he’s turning 40 in barely two months, and his chances of making senior partner at the firm by then have all but gone up in smoke.

The least he deserves is a night of hot sex with a beautiful woman who also happens to be smart.
and sexily competitive and maybe even a little sweet.

It doesn’t take much effort to win the first two games, and she seems pretty annoyed with herself
that she’s not picking up the game fast enough, so as much as he likes winning, he goes easy on her
and lets her have the last one. She said she sent him the drink because she could tell he was having
a rough time, and maybe he just wants to return the favor. But she eyes him suspiciously as she
sinks the final ball, like she knows exactly what he’s doing. He busts out his most charming smile
and shrugs, feigning innocence.

“You’re a quick learner,” he says.

She smiles back, laying her pool cue on the table. “Well, you were right. You’re a pretty good
teacher.” She takes a step toward him and tilts her head coyly. “And very distracting.”

He grins. “You think this was distracting?” he teases. “It wasn’t even my best stuff.”

She steps even closer, and he can feel the warmth of her body, drawing him in. “No?”

He shakes his head and is about to ease his way into a kiss when she beats him to the punch,
grabbing a fistful of his tie and tugging him down in a hurry so she can seal her mouth over his.

She tastes rich and sweet, like the wine she’s been sipping all night, but she kisses like she wants to
devour him whole, hard and unrelenting and with just enough bite to make him push away from the
pool table and press her up against a nearby column. She doesn’t seem to mind, though, not if the
way she digs her nails into his shoulders through his dress shirt and tugs at his lower lip with her
teeth is any indication. He nuzzles his way across her cheek, so he can press breathless, open-
mouthed kisses to her jaw, and she pulls at his hair, making a hungry moaning sound that clues him
into the fact that maybe this is all getting a little too heated for public consumption.

“Hey,” he says, shivering a little when her warm breath ghosts over his neck. “Wanna get out of
here?”

She jerks her head in a frantic nod. “Yeah. Okay. Yes.”

“Do you live far?”

She wrinkles her nose a little, and he thinks he might hear the warning bells go off in his head.
“Oh, um… actually, I’m kind of in between places at the moment. So I’m sleeping on some
friends’ couch.”

He tries not to frown, but the fact is that it’s against all of his rules to bring a woman back to his
apartment, where he can’t slink away in the dead of the night, never to call her again. But he looks
down at this woman, practically squirming against the column, like she can’t wait to tear all of his
clothes -- and hers too -- off, and he knows there’s no way that he can walk away from her, not
after the way she kissed him, not when he’s still dying to know what she looks like out of that suit.

“My place isn’t too far,” he offers reluctantly, and she grins, pulling him down for another kiss.

Somehow, when he follows her out onto the dark street, he doesn’t have a single second thought.

She’s been taking karate for almost six years -- she can take care of herself.

That’s the thought repeating through her head as she fastens the seatbelt in his sleek, dark Lexus
(she notices that it’s a convertible, even though he has the top up, and thinks that it’s a perfect match for him, with his relentless charm and expensive suit) and considers the fact that this is a total and complete stranger and he could be an axe murder for all she knows.

He also might be a little old for her, if the faint lines around his eyes when he smiles are any indication -- but honestly, they only make him sexier. And it’s not like she’s looking for a soulmate here, some perfect happily-ever-after. She’s been a good girl for years, and she’ll be a good girl again, starting tomorrow. Tonight, just for a little while, it’s got to be okay to be bad. Because for years now, she’s done everything that she was supposed to, through college and law school and internships and a long-term relationship with a sweet, uncomplicated guy. But she barely made any time for real fun -- for decadent, luxurious, naughty fun -- and this guy looks like he can give her a crash course in that without much trouble.

She is also eternally grateful that he offered up his place because she can’t imagine anything more embarrassing than having to sleep with him on the futon in Troy and Abed’s living room, with Inspector Spacetime posters and Scooby-Doo figurines keeping watch -- which means she probably would have wound up sweaty and half-naked in the backseat of his car, which is slightly more sleazy that she wants to go with this encounter.

Instead, he takes her up to the top floor of a fancy building, with marble tile in the lobby and a doorman to push the elevator button. His apartment is just as impressive, even if it’s a little too minimalist and modern for her tastes. He probably thinks that she’s the kind of girl who’s impressed by these kinds of surroundings, though. She probably should be, considering that she’s an adult, with a new career and enough student-loan debt to rival the gross national product of some small island nations. He’s probably in finance, running a shady, morally questionable hedge fund, or maybe a surgeon who sculpts new noses and breasts -- but it hardly matters.

He is gorgeous and really knows how to kiss (and, she suspects, a whole lot more) and she is dying to see what he looks like out of his designer suit.

But there is no reason to be reckless, so while he pours her a drink, she discreetly sends Troy and Abed a text with the building’s address and a half-joking message that if she’s dead in the morning, this is the last place she was. Then she turns her ringer off because she knows the guys. They’ll send no less than 25 texts demanding to know why she’s there and who she’s with and what they’re doing -- and that would seriously kill the mood.

Still, she is nervous enough that she empties the glass he hands her in one deep gulp, even though it’s scotch and she doesn’t particularly like the taste. It’s been nearly six years since anyone other than Vaughn touched her, and there weren’t exactly a lot of guys before that, so even though she wants to ride this guy like a bucking bronco more than she’s wanted anything in a long time, there is plenty of anxiety to the whole thing.

But then he slides the empty glass from her fingers, sets it on his coffee table, and turns back to her, moving in slowly, like he understands that she’s nervous and is giving her every opportunity to back out. He skims his fingers along her jaw and she presses up on her toes because she needs a little extra height even in her heels to reach him.

When his mouth closes over hers now, he tastes rich and smoky, like no one she’s ever kissed before, and something about that makes her frantic, as if she can feel every minute she’s ever wasted in her life raining down on her. She grabs fistfuls of his jacket, shoving it to the floor, and he starts walking backwards into the dark of the apartment, pulling her with him. They stumble a little, because neither of them is willing to break the kiss, and the next thing she knows, he’s spinning her around and she’s falling onto his bed, bouncing on the mattress as he crawls over her.
She can barely catch her breath, but she claws at his shirt, trying to pull it off him without undoing the buttons. He pushes her jacket out of the way and slides a hand under her tank top, his fingertips brushing over the lace of her bra -- and she isn’t really prepared for how good it feels and she cries out, scratching at his back in desperation.

He lifts his head from the curve of her shoulder and smiles, brushing the hair away from her cheek. There is something strangely tender about the gesture, and she shivers.

“I don’t usually do things like this,” she finds herself whispering, and soon as the words leave her mouth, she realizes how ridiculous they make her sound, like a little girl who doesn’t know anything about the way the world works.

He holds himself over her, balancing his weight on his forearms, and she curls her fingers around his biceps. She tries to remember his name -- he told her earlier and she’s pretty sure that it starts with a J, like Jason or Jeremy -- but she can’t seem to remember much at the moment because her head is spinning and her blood is humming and there’s a fever burning just beneath her skin.

“Oh, yeah,” he says. “Me neither.”

She knows immediately that he’s lying, because his grin is a little too wry and his eyes are a little too bright, but she finds that she doesn’t really care. She wants him, and not just because he’s gorgeous -- with blue eyes that could cut a diamond and a body that looks like it was sculpted from marble -- but also because there’s this unmistakable confidence in everything that he does, from holding a pool cue to paying their tab to sliding his hand along her thigh. And she shouldn’t be thinking of Vaughn right now, because it’s not fair to anyone involved, but he was always so eager to please, so desperate for approval; at some point, she just got tired of working so hard to make other people feel good about themselves.

This guy -- Jeff, she recalls in a rush of adrenaline. His name is Jeff! -- presses a kiss to the side of her neck, and it’s like he knows exactly how she’s going to react, so when she slides her fingers through his hair and rocks her hips against him, he doesn’t falter at all.

“I start a new job tomorrow,” she tells him, for no good reason. “That’s why I’m so stressed and I think I just need to --”

“Hey, hey,” he whispers. “You don’t need to explain yourself to me.”

It’s silly, but somehow, that’s exactly what she needs to hear, at the exact moment that she needs to hear it. He rubs his thumb against her nipple, and she whines low in her throat, nodding against the mattress in a daze.

Later, when she has her legs wrapped around his waist and he’s driving into her like he might never stop, he slides his hand under her ass to tilt her hips up at just the right angle so that the stars that burst behind her eyes are white-hot, and she doesn’t have to think and she doesn’t have to worry and she doesn’t have to obsess.

She only has to feel.

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The bed shaking is what wakes him.

His alarm isn’t set to go off until 6:30, so he can cram in at least a half-hour at the gym before he heads to the office, and it’s still too dark outside his bedroom window for it be anywhere near dawn. He squints into the darkness and can just barely make out the woman who bought him a
drink at the bar, standing beside his bed in her underwear as she hurriedly tries to throw her clothes back on.

She is as eager to get out of his apartment as he usually is to flee some unsuspecting woman’s place.

So his new friend may just be the perfect woman -- she’s beautiful, smart, just the right combination of uninhibited and eager in bed, and she doesn’t have a problem just walking away in the cool light of day.

It’s amazing.

He reaches over to flick on the lamp on his nightstand and she freezes like she’s been caught in the middle of emptying a cash register or cracking a safe. In the soft light of his bedroom, with her makeup rubbed off and her dark hair a mess of waves, he realizes that she’s probably a little younger than he thought last night -- early 20s, 25 at most. Sure, that’s probably too young for him, but he can’t really feel bad about it -- even if it does make him panic momentarily that he’s going through a midlife crisis, messing around with girls young enough to, technically, be his daughter. She’s the one that sent him the drink after all.

“You going?” he asks.

She slips into her blazer, avoiding his eyes as she pulls her hair out from beneath the collar. “Yeah. I’m starting a new job tomorrow … or I guess, it’s today now, isn’t it? So I need to get home.”

He nods. “Right. The new job.”

She bends to fish one of her shoes out from beneath the bed, and he shifts to the edge of the mattress, so when she straightens, he can reach for her hand. She makes a sound that’s half nervous laugh, half wistful sigh and ducks her head, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear, and he seriously wishes that they’d met on a Friday or Saturday night so there’d be time for another round before they go their separate ways.

“I had fun,” he tells her, on a whim, and her cheeks go a little red, which amuses him. “We should do it again sometime.”

She lifts her shoulders stiffly. “Yeah, but um … I just got out of a relationship actually. So I’m not really looking for…” She shrugs again, looking apologetic. “And I’ve got this new job, so really that’s what I’m going to be focusing on. You know, work. My career. I’m not really going to have time for anything else.”

He nods, as casually as he can manage, because it’s not a big deal. It isn’t as if he wants an actual relationship with this woman, however hot and good in bed she may be, so it’s not like it matters if she’d rather push papers around on a desk than fool around with him again.

But the thing is, he’s said the same thing to plenty of women over the years, painted himself as some sort of dedicated workaholic, so committed to the demands of his job that he just can’t make room in his life for much else. He knows that it’s nothing more than a convenient line, a way to let them down gently.

Because maybe he’s committed to becoming a senior partner, to getting that fifth floor corner office with the built-in bar cabinet and view of the mountains that’s been vacant since Jim Galvin retired six months ago, to seeing his salary go from ‘doing well for himself’ to ‘filthy, disgustingly rich’, but with the least amount of work possible to get it done.
Still, this chick is really hot -- and her body is kind of ridiculous, so much so that he’ll be fantasizing about this night in the shower for the foreseeable future.

“Hey,” he says, conjuring up a charming grin. “I get that. Better than most, believe me. But everyone needs a break once in a while…”

She still looks reluctant, like she wants to get out of here as quickly as possible -- he recognizes that look from years of experience too. He frowns, straightening the sheets across his lap uselessly.

“Okay, fine.” He watches her nod briskly, smoothing her skirt into place, before he reaches toward the nightstand for his phone. “Let me call you a cab.”

She doesn’t argue, but as soon as he hangs up with the dispatcher, she’s hurrying out of his bedroom, apparently preferring to wait downstairs with Eugene, the night time doorman, than with him. It’s becoming increasingly difficult not to take all this personally.

“It was fun,” she tells him, as they say good-bye at the door -- and she smiles in a way that suggests she isn’t really lying.

“Yeah, well, if you change your mind,” he says. “I’m at L Street pretty regularly.”

“I really don’t think I’m going to get out much.” She sighs, looking uncomfortably contrite. “But I’ll keep it in mind.”

It annoys him, how she’s acting like she’s throwing him some kind of bone, sparing his delicate feelings, so he lets her go after that, closing the door behind her without so much as a wave. Back in the bedroom, he checks the time on his phone -- he still has more than three and a half hours before he has to get up, so he slides back under the sheets.

He tells himself he dodged a serious bullet. This woman already knows where he lives and he stupidly let her know where he hangs out -- information that he usually tries to keep from women, that he’s always purposefully vague about. It’s a good thing that she didn’t rise to the bait, that she couldn’t possibly care less about seeing him again. Who wants to deal with some clingy chick, showing up at all hours, following him to the bar, completely cramping his style?

That would be a total fucking nightmare.

He shuts off the light, flips his pillow over, and lies back down. It only takes an hour or so for him to fall asleep.
He’s counting on the 45-minute cardio session in the gym to perk him up -- endorphins and all that bullshit -- but when he makes it up to his office, he’s still as cranky as when he got out of bed. It almost makes him hope that he runs into Alan because his patience is worn so thin that it wouldn’t take much for him to haul off and slug the bastard right in the face.

Instead of a fist fight for breakfast, though, he has a double shot of espresso and a protein bar, courtesy of his assistant Claire, who seems to sense the mood that he’s in and gives him a wide berth. He has an afternoon court appearance for one of his cases, but until then, his schedule is pretty much wide open. Usually, he relishes that kind of down time, but today, it only seems like a rabbit hole that he’ll fall down, with too much opportunity to think and think and then think some more.

Last night should have helped to clear his head; fantastic sex with a beautiful woman has a tendency to do that for a guy. But even something about that has him feeling out of sorts, off his game, in a way that he almost never feels in that particular area of his life.

So he’s hating the world at large pretty enthusiastically when Mark strolls into his office, bypassing Claire completely, with a grin that’s a little too cat-that-ate-the-canary for Jeff’s taste. (Mark may be one of the few people he almost considers a friend --almost trusts -- at the firm, but it feels like there’s a distance there, a certain gap, since Mark made senior partner almost a year ago. Maybe it’s all in his own head, but some days, Mark is nothing but a glaring reminder that Jeff hasn’t quite made it yet.) He isn’t really in the mood for a visit at the moment, but Mark’s got a stack of file folders under his arm, so maybe he just needs to drop off some case files. That’s Jeff’s best hope right now.

“Tango, Tango, Tango,” Mark drawls smugly. “Do you ever just drop to your knees and thank God that you know me? Do you ever do that?”

Jeff rolls his eyes in frustration. “What the fuck do you want?”

Mark’s smile doesn’t falter in the slightest as he takes a seat in front of the desk. “I’ve got good news and more good news… and then a little more good news.” He sighs dramatically. “Which would you like to hear first?”

“How about the good news?”

“Okay, so you know how you were so desperate to get the McAllister case? Like bending-over-backwards, tying-yourself-in-knots desperate? Even though everyone here knows that the Rutherford case is where it’s at, where everything’s at… but we were all so sure that Ted would handle that one himself, right?”
“This is a really roundabout way to get to good news,” Jeff mutters. He spins around in his chair, taking in his not-so-impressive view of the parking garage. “And that fucker Alan already stole the McAllister case out from under me, so why are we even talking about this?”

“Tango. Look at me, buddy.” Begrudgingly, Jeff turns back around. Mark grins, baring all his teeth in a way that’s kind of scary. “We’re talking about this,” he says slowly, “because Alan’s going to piss his pants like a little girl when he finds out you’ve got the Rutherford case and he’s got the measly second prize.”

“Wha-aat?” Jeff sputters, convinced he must have heard wrong. “How… what… why isn’t Ted handling Rutherford?”

“Ted’s going to be out of the office for a few medical procedures over the next several months,” Mark explains. “Between you and me, I don’t know if he’s getting his stomach stapled or his face lifted, but it doesn’t really matter. Because you’re on deck, Tango.”

Jeff shakes his head, trying to process the information in a way that makes sense. He’s always considered himself a fairly lucky guy, but this whole scenario involves so many dominoes falling his way that it almost defies logic. It’s almost too damn good to be true.

“What about the other partners?” he asks. “John and Larry and Doug? They don’t want in on this?”

“Well, actually, they’re all otherwise indisposed and kind of wanting to fly under the radar at the moment. Let’s see…” Mark holds a hand up, counting them off on his fingers. “Rehab, nasty divorce, and pregnant teenage mistress, respectively. Bet you’ve never been so happy to work at such a shit show.”

Jeff cocks his head, studying his friend carefully. “What about you? Why aren’t you jumping all over this?”

“That’s the other good news.” Mark leans back in his chair, hands clasped behind his head. “I’m going to be cruising around Tahiti with Monica. You know, that boat-show model with the belly-button ring I met last month? I won’t be back until January. Besides, I’ve already made senior partner -- I can share a little of the wealth.”

It’s almost mind-blowing. Here he was, cursing the universe and everyone in it for the shitty state of affairs in his life, and in the span of a few minutes, it’s all turned on a dime. But then, Jeff almost wonders why he ever worried in the first place. Things always have a way of working out for him -- that’s just what happens when you’re as charming, brilliant, and charismatic as he is. It’s a simple law of nature.

“The Rutherford case,” he says, shaking his head. “Those are federal charges. It’s going to get national coverage… it’s going to be huge.”

Mark nods, his grin almost comical, and Jeff gets out from behind his desk to bend and give him a one-armed hug.

“You’re a true friend, Cash. I don’t care what anyone says. But… didn’t you say there was more good news?”

He’s probably being a little greedy now, but he can’t help it. Mark laughs, tossing the files in his lap onto Jeff’s desk. “The new first-year associates started today,” he says. “I’ve already seen a blonde, a redhead and oh, a brunette in the HR office that could bring a blind man to his knees. Insane talent, Winger. Insane.”
Jeff grins. “Good to know.”

“And I snagged their HR files.” Mark points to the pile of folders. “So you get first dibs.”

“I appreciate that, but it’s probably not their CV’s that I’ll want to check out.”

“That’s not what I meant, you dog.” Mark shoves at his shoulder playfully. “You’re gonna need someone to work with you on the Rutherford case. I’m not gonna be around and God knows you can’t trust anyone else in this pit of vipers. I figure you can find a really ambitious, really eager-to-impress first year who’ll do anything you say in the hopes of advancing their career. Someone who’ll be loyal to you because you’re their best chance to get ahead.”

“And you’re a genius too,” Jeff says, with a laugh. “How am I going to get by without you for the next few months?”

“You’re going to be lost, Tango. That’s a given.” He nods toward the pile of folders. “But maybe you can get one of those first-year hotties to keep you company.”

When Mark heads out to an appointment with a client for a liquid lunch, even though it’s not quite 11, Jeff decides not to waste any time. He dives into the first years’ files, flipping through the folders to try to find that one special candidate that stands out. He’s kind of tempted to go down to the second floor, stroll by their offices, and check out some of the talent that Mark’s so excited about -- but that would just be a waste of time. He might have a fling with one of them at some point, but he isn’t as stupid as the other guys around here -- he doesn’t need some hot woman with a nice rack to dress up his office. He needs someone who’s competent enough to do the work that needs to be done and driven enough to see him as a meal ticket to something bigger and better at the firm to do whatever he needs.

Which is why one file in particular catches his eye.

Anne Edison, the resume says across the top, in bold, black print, and that seems like a good, serious name. He notices that she spent two years at Greendale Community College back in the day too, and that’s a pretty big sign all by itself. Some of the guys at the firm would probably hold that against her, considering its reputation, but Greendale is the same place that bailed him out once upon a time. That means they’ve already got something in common, and it’ll probably be easier to get her on his side.

Of course, the rest of her resume doesn’t hurt either.

She finished up her undergrad career at UC Denver with a 4.0 and then graduated with honors from Stanford Law, which was ranked first or second in US News & World Report the last time he checked. She was editor of the Law Review, had summer internships at a couple of prestigious firms in San Francisco, and still managed to fit in volunteer work for a student-mentoring program at an elementary school and free legal clinics at Stanford. She seems like a classic overachiever, the kind of associate that he could lean on heavily for the next few months without worrying about her collapsing under the strain of a heavily publicized, seriously important case.

It does occur to him to wonder what she’s doing back in Greendale. She’d made it out, and gotten all the way to California, which seems like a prison break to him. A sane person wouldn’t willingly lock herself up again, would she? He’s never made it out of state himself, and more and more, it’s starting to seem like he never will because he’s just too comfortable. But if he had, he’s certain that he would have bolted and never looked back. And even if Colorado’s home for this woman and she just had to come back, she could have gone to Denver, made a name for herself there.
Maybe, like him, she understands that there are benefits to being a big fish in a small pond -- like lucking into a case that has the potential to put you on the fucking map, career-wise.

But whatever her reasons, he’s going to take full advantage of Anne Edison’s decision to make Hamish, Hamish, Hamlin, & Hawthorne her home. He calls down to Craig, the head of HR and Recruiting, who’s always willing to bend over backwards to accommodate Jeff, and requests that Ms. Edison be assigned to his case and that she meet him in conference room F just after lunch so they can get started as soon as possible.

He also decides it’s a good move to call Ted and thank him for the amazing opportunity that he’s been gifted with. It’s a little bit of ass kissing that he figures can’t really hurt -- and it works like a charm.

“I should really be thanking you, Jeff,” Ted says. “I mean, I’d be really worried about this case if we didn’t have you to handle it. And I don’t need the stress of that when I’m dealing with these health issues. Besides, Rutherford is the biggest case we’ve had in a few years and you’re the best we’ve got, Winger. Everybody knows that.”

“I really appreciate that, Ted,” he says. “Could I ask a favor, though? Could we keep the fact that I’m lead counsel on this case hush-hush for a bit? I’d really like the opportunity to break it to the rest of the guys myself. You know, just in case there are any hard feelings.”

Ted chuckles, like he’s already imagining the collective meltdown. “Sure. Whatever you think is best, Jeff. It’s your news to spread.”

Jeff grins as he hangs up the phone because he’s already picturing the look on that dick Alan Connor’s face when he hears that Jeff is representing Simon Rutherford in the firm’s biggest case in recent history. Even better, Jeff will get to be the one to tell him, will get all the joy of delivering the blow in person -- and honestly, that’s almost as good as having the case in the first place.

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This is what she gets for trying to reinvent herself -- a big, old karmic slap in the face.

She can’t think of any other way to explain how she slept through even her second alarm so that she had to rush through her morning routine to get ready (never mind that she sets her alarms earlier than any sane person would, because if she’s not at least 15 minutes early, she’s late; it’s the principle of the matter), got stuck in a traffic jam so the last three minutes of her drive took nearly 20, and wound up having to spend a good chunk of the morning in the HR office, straightening out an error with the direct deposit form for her paycheck, instead of with the other first-year associates getting a tour of the building.

Her first day has been an unqualified disaster, and it’s not even 11 o’clock yet.

Part of her can’t help thinking that it all started last night, when she made the uncharacteristically impulsive decision to go home with a stranger. She didn’t get back to Troy and Abed’s apartment until almost 3:30, so she got less than three hours of sleep even with the ignored alarms. The entire reason that she’d gone to the bar in the first place was to ensure that she’d be relaxed enough for a good night’s sleep, a solid seven or eight hours before her big day. Picking up some hot guy was definitely not part of the plan, and now it’s like her entire life has shifted off-center because of that one crazy decision.

She tries to keep pace with Quendra from HR, who’s hurriedly trying to show her everything that she missed when she was dealing with those stupid banking forms.
“We have a pretty nice gym in the basement,” Quendra says. “You know, if you want to fit in a workout on your lunch break or whenever. And our cafe is on the first floor… we’ve got the most amazing salad bar!”

Annie nods, but she really doesn’t care much about those types of amenities. “Where’s the library?”

“Oh, um… that’s on the second floor,” Quendra says. “I think. I’m pretty sure anyway. And that’s super convenient because that’s where your office is.”

Annie follows her into the elevator, watching as she presses the button for the second floor. The elevator somehow seems bigger and nicer than the cramped apartment that Annie shared with Vaughn in Palo Alto. She tells herself that’s a sign of how much her life has changed, how much better off she is now -- even if her first day isn’t exactly going according to plan.

“All first-years have to share an office,” Quendra tells her, just as they reach their floor. “But don’t worry -- in a few years, you’ll have your own. Well, if the partners like you anyway. And I mean, at least you’re not a paralegal. They just get these tiny cubicles.”

Annie nods again, though she doesn’t particularly care about her office either -- as long as it’s a quiet space with adequate lighting where she can get her work done, it’s fine. Her officemate is a quiet girl named Vicki, whom she chatted with about tort reform at the orientation session yesterday, so she thinks that they’ll get along just fine. Annie sets her messenger bag on her desk and takes a deep breath. She reminds herself that she is in a smart gray suit and her hair is pulled up in a neat twist, so even if she feels like she’s falling apart inside, she probably looks like she has everything under control -- and “fake it till you make it” has always been her mantra.

Quendra rattles the blinds on the lone window in the room. “Oooh, you guys got a window!” she says gleefully, like they’ve won some kind of lottery. “Most of the offices on this floor don’t.”

Annie smiles politely, refraining from pointing out that all the window provides is a view of the parking garage. Quendra gets ready to leave, dropping a business card on Annie’s desk, but before she makes it to the hallway, her cell phone vibrates in her pocket and she stops to check her messages.

“Oh, Annie,” she says, a little shrilly. “It's totally your lucky day!”

Across the room, Vicki looks up from her computer with obvious interest, but Annie just shrugs. “What does that mean?”

“We’ve already got a case lined up for you,” Quendra tells her. “And you’ll be working with Jeff Winger. He’s one of the junior partners… the best of the bunch, really. He’s kind of the golden boy around here. His acquittal rate is off the charts. And he actually requested you! Saw your resume and was seriously impressed or something.”

Vicki nods sagely. “I’ve heard about him. That’s a really big break.”

Annie manages a tight smile -- honestly, though, she could kick herself. Instead of going out and picking up a stranger in a bar, she should have been home, devouring the firm’s website, reading up on all the senior and junior partners, memorizing their bios and familiarizing herself with their past cases. That’s the kind of homework that she always does, the bare minimum of preparation that seems acceptable. So naturally, the first time that she’s a little lax, she pays for it.

Quendra grins, leaning across her desk in some attempt to be discreet. “But there’s more,” she
nearly whispers, though it’s loud enough that Vicki hears and rolls her chair over a couple of feet to absorb whatever piece of office gossip is about to be imparted. “He’s such a hottie! So I mean, working late with him probably won’t suck. If you know what I mean.”

Quendra gives her a cheesy wink and Vicki giggles, but Annie just frowns, not even wanting to acknowledge the possibility of getting distracted by something so stupid and superficial.

“That really doesn’t matter,” she says. “I’m here to work. Just work.”

Quendra nods, patting her on the arm in a surprisingly condescending way. “That’s what you say now, Annie… but you haven’t seen him yet.”

She says the last bit in an annoying sing-songy tone, and somehow Annie manages another smile, biting at her lip a little to keep from saying something she shouldn’t. Because she shouldn’t let frustration get the best of her when her day is finally starting to look up. She has an actual case to work -- unlike Vicki, who appears stuck spending the next few hours surfing the net -- and apparently she’s going to have the opportunity to learn from one of the firm’s best lawyers.

That is a pretty fantastic first day on the job by any standards, but especially considering how it started.

Of course, it’s not all smooth sailing.

She can’t log onto her computer, so an IT guy has to spend nearly an hour crawling around under her desk and restarting the damn thing a dozen times -- and even then, it’s still stupidly slow. He promises that he’ll have it fixed by the time she gets back from lunch, so she goes to the cafe with Vicki and manages maybe four bites of her salad, mostly just pushing the spinach around aimlessly. She may be confident in her abilities, in her intelligence and work ethic, but she’s still a little nervous about her meeting with Mr. Winger. This is a prime opportunity to make her mark at the firm -- and so much more quickly than she was hoping! She is terrified of blowing the chance, of not being able to hack it with the big boys, and the knot in her stomach makes eating unappealing at the moment.

So even though their meeting isn’t until one o’clock, she says goodbye to Vicki and heads to conference room F nearly a half hour early. She sets her notepad on the table, with her lucky pen positioned carefully beside it, and tries to figure out the most confidence-inspiring pose with which to greet her new boss. She tries leaning back in the cushy chair with her legs crossed, but that seems too casual. She pulls the chair all the way up to the table, sitting ramrod straight with her elbows resting on the surface, but that seems too stilted. Finally, she angles the chair slightly, so she’s facing away from the door and toward the head of the table and has one elbow resting on the surface, figuring it’s a good compromise.

She still has a few minutes before Mr. Winger (she deliberates over what to call him for a while -- does using the “Mr.” make her seem like too much of a kiss-ass?) is due to arrive, so she fishes her cellphone out of her pocket and starts to pull up the firm’s website. She can probably get in a few minutes of research on this guy that might help her get a better feel for how to handle him.

But the page still hasn’t fully loaded when she hears a voice in the hallway just outside the conference room, and she immediately thumbs off her phone, sitting up straight and trying for an attentive expression.

“Britta, for the last time, I’m not watching your cats,” she hears the voice say, and there is something strangely familiar about it, though she can’t quite place her finger on what. “Even if it’s only for the night. I can lend you money to board them somewhere, understanding full well that
you will never pay me back, but that’s my best offer.”

Annie keeps her eyes trained straight ahead, on the bare wall in front of her, so it doesn’t seem like she’s eavesdropping. She hears him step into the room, closing the door behind him.

“No… I just… I don’t have time for this, okay? I’ve got an appointment to get to.”

He sighs as he disconnects the call, sounding supremely annoyed, and Annie would seriously like to throttle whomever it was on the other end of the phone for sending him into this meeting in such a rotten mood.

“Sorry about that,” he says distractedly. “Anne Edison, right?”

She pushes her chair away from the table to stand, ready with her most polite smile and firmest handshake. “Yes, Mr. Winger, it’s a pleasure to…”

When she turns, though, the words die on her lips, because there, standing right in front of her, gaze still firmly fixed on his cellphone, is the guy from last night, with the ridiculous blue eyes and that trick with his tongue that had her practically seeing God.

He’s clean-shaven now, so he looks younger, a little more polished and put together, but she’d recognize that beautiful face anywhere.

“Please,” he says, still typing away on his phone. “Call me Jeff.”

He finally looks up, and as soon as he sees that it’s her, he’s shooting her the same disarming grin that made her throw all caution to the wind last night. She feels weak again, but this time, it’s from horror and shock.

“Oh my God,” she groans.

Jeff Winger just laughs, like this is all more amusement than he can handle — and she feels karma smacking her right in the face yet again.
“This can’t be happening...”

Annie practically collapses back in her chair, like the wind’s been knocked out of her. What are the odds, she thinks frantically. What are the odds that the guy she picked up last night is the lawyer that wants to work with her? She struggled through Statistics and Probability in college -- it took a near perfect score on the final to nail down that A -- but they must be astronomical. Because there are almost 42,000 people who live in Greendale alone, not counting the larger Metro Denver area, and figuring that about half of those are men, and about half of those men are over the age of 20, it’s got to be … 1 in 10,000.

Or something close.

It’s insane -- but just her luck, apparently.

“This seriously cannot be happening,” she mutters again, almost under her breath, and Jeff Winger shakes his head.

“I don’t know,” he says breezily. “I think maybe the universe is trying to tell us something.” He walks around to the other side of the table, taking the seat directly opposite her. “So this is that new job of yours? Interesting. I didn’t have you pegged as a lawyer.”

“I don’t … what is …” She buries her face in her hands, feeling it go all hot and tingly. “I’m so embarrassed.”

“Why? You haven’t done anything to embarrass yourself.”

She looks up at him sharply and gapes in disbelief. “Last night! We… you know.”

He nods, smirking. “Oh, I know. Believe me. But like I said, you didn’t do anything to embarrass yourself.”

They stare at one another across the table for a long moment, like neither of them can look away, and she feels that same electricity from last night, crackling sharp and hot between them.

But this is her career -- her life really. She can’t be screwing around, letting some guy with a nice smile distract her from what’s important, make her deviate even a little bit from the path she’s carving out for herself. She clears her throat, sitting up straight again. “I don’t understand,” she declares. “Did you know who I was last night?”

He shrugs. “No. I mean, you told me your name was Anne, but it’s not like that’s an unusual name.”

“Annie,” she corrects him. “I prefer to be called Annie.”
He cocks his head, studying her for a second. “Yeah,” he agrees. “That does suit you better.”

It is becoming harder and harder to concentrate, but she takes a deep breath and wills herself to regroup. “So this is just some big coincidence? You just happened to pick me to work on your case?”

He leans back in his chair, grinning again, and she tries to remember if he was this insufferable last night. “As much I’d like to take the credit, that’s exactly what this is. A happy coincidence.” He shrugs, and maybe she’s naive, but she gets the feeling that he’s telling the truth. “I was going through the resumes of all the first years, looking for someone to help with my case, and yours was the most impressive of the bunch. I mean, you had a 4.0 and a list of extracurriculars as long as my arm, which tells me you’re a classic overachiever. So it seemed like a safe bet that you could handle the work… and I need someone I can count on here.”

She has to work hard to maintain a neutral expression, because the praise is getting to her and the urge to preen is strong.

“Besides,” Jeff continues, “I saw that you went to Greendale Community College. I spent some time there myself… so I thought I’d help a fellow alum out. My good deed for the year.”

She can’t help her smile, because it’s probably the first time ever that her stint at Greendale isn’t something that she has to explain away, justify, or hide. And if Jeff Winger attended Greendale and is now as highly thought of at this firm as Quendra and Vicki would have her believe, then maybe he’s proof that it won’t hold her back either.

“I’m gonna lay all my cards on the table, all right?” he says. “This case is big for me. And it can be big for you. I don’t know what your plans are, but if you want to make a name for yourself here, this is the case that’ll do it.”

She frowns, confused. “Wait. You still think we should work together? Even after last night?”

That devastating smile is back -- and she is seriously starting to wish that they’d met again under other circumstances because she’d really like another night with him -- and he lifts his shoulders casually. “Why not?” he wonders. “We’ve already established we work pretty well as a team.”

She flushes, because the memories are too fresh not to get a little caught up in them -- but she shakes her head, pulling herself together so she can look back at him with a steely gaze.

It feels steely anyway -- he keeps smiling at her like a smug jerk, though, so maybe it doesn’t have the desired effect.

“I don’t know,” she says snidely. “Maybe because it’s unprofessional? Isn’t it a conflict of interest or against the sexual-harassment policy or something?”

He purses his lips, like he’s deep in thought. “Well, since technically you weren’t an employee of the firm yet when it happened, I think we’re in the clear. Besides, you’re not going to tell Ted and the other partners, are you?”

“Oh, God, no!”

He chuckles again, and dammit, his eyes twinkle just like they did last night when he had his hand under her skirt.

“But I mean,” Annie stammers. “I bet you’re not supposed to… fraternize with co-workers. Or at the very least, co-workers who are below you in the organizational hierarchy.”
Jeff leans in across the table, lowering his voice. “I’m going to let you in on a little secret,” he stage whispers. “Up until three weeks ago, Ted was shackled up with Emily, a second-year associate. Kimberly, the senior partner in charge of Real Estate, is sleeping with Chris, a junior partner in Mergers and Acquisitions. Crystal in HR left her husband for Allison, one of our Estate and Trust associates -- they’re fighting right now because Crystal wants a Pekinese and Allison wants a Labradoodle. I’m not worried, though. Call me a romantic, but I think those two crazy kids’ll work it out.”

She rolls her eyes. “This isn’t funny. I’m serious.”

“Anne, it’s not—”

“Annie,” she corrects again, a little more testily than is probably appropriate.

“Annie,” he says, very deliberately, and the way he draws her name out makes her shift a little in her seat. “I’m just explaining what things are like around here. Because that’s the tip of the iceberg, really. There’s kind of an unofficial ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy.”

From the few partners and associates that she’s met over the past two days, she can believe that is how things are. This might be one of the largest law firms in the greater Denver area based on revenue, with a pretty impressive track record, but the place has the feel of a cheesy Caribbean singles resort. She doesn’t particularly care how everyone else here chooses to spend their time, but she definitely doesn’t want any kind of reputation, doesn’t want anyone to think that she’ll sleep with whomever it takes to get ahead.

She may have spent a night with him, but Jeff Winger is a total stranger -- for all she knows, he’s going to run straight out of here and brag to all of the good old boys on the fourth floor about the first-year associate he banged.

He must sense her reluctance because he loses the charming smile and winds up with something that more closely resembles a grim frown.

“Okay, listen,” he tries again. “This is a career-making case. It’s seriously that big. Especially for you, just starting out. I mean, if I’d gotten a case like this my first year… well, let’s just say I wouldn’t need one like it quite so badly now. And I’m not gonna lie… I need this one, I really need it. And I can’t trust anyone around here to help me without screwing me over. So you’re pretty much my last hope.”

It’s strange, because she doesn’t know him at all beyond a few games of pool and a couple of hours in his bed, but something tells her that he’s not usually this honest, this open and vulnerable -- and she gets the sense that it’s not an act, either. She thinks that she remembers him mentioning something about problems at work last night, actually, so it doesn’t seem like he’s playing her.

Besides, she’s felt all alone in the world more times than she can count, so she decides that it’s only fair to at least hear him out.

Well, that and the fact that if he’s telling the truth, it could mean big things for her career -- she’s not being entirely selfless, here.

“Tell me about the case,” she says.

He smiles again and slides the manila folder in front of him across the table to her. “This is a rough outline of what we’re dealing with, but the basic gist of it is this: federal charges of conspiracy to commit securities fraud, embezzlement, tax fraud, and tax evasion.”
Annie skims the contents of the folder, her eyes going wide as soon as she reads the first line. “This is Simon Rutherford!” she declares. “From Pine Brook Capital. He stole all that money from the Denver Teachers’ Union and the Colorado Transportation Workers Federation and a half-dozen other pension funds!”

“Allegedly,” Jeff says. “We’re defending him, Annie. We have to at least pretend he’s innocent.”

She nods, but she’s honestly a little overwhelmed because this story has been all over the headlines for the past few weeks. It’s major news, and not just in the greater Denver area. There’s been coverage on CNN and MSNBC.

And there’s also the fact that she has vague memories of shaking his hand at boring holiday parties and muggy picnics when she was barely a teenager, always on her best behavior because her father had drilled it into her head.

It’s so strange to think that she might now be part of the team that holds his life in her hands.

“But yeah,” Jeff continues, when it’s obvious that she’s not going to respond, “it’s a big deal. Like I said, a career-making case.”

He clearly isn’t exaggerating. This is a prime opportunity to make a name for herself, to distinguish herself from all the other first-years, even the second-years. It’s the kind of chance that might allow her to make partner way ahead of her ten-year schedule.

But she can’t ignore the potential for disaster here either.

If it gets out that she and Jeff slept together, if she allows herself to be distracted by him, if he winds up being the kind of pig who would try to get sex out of her by dangling her career in front of her like a carrot, then it’s all going to blow up in her face.

She weighs the pros and cons in her head for a few seconds, trying to figure out the right path. In the end, though, the opportunity is just too tempting.

“I’d like to work with you on this,” she tells him, and Jeff smiles calmly, like someone who is clearly used to getting what he wants. “But we’re going to keep this strictly professional, okay? As of this minute, last night never happened. We don’t talk about it, we don’t joke about it, we don’t even think about it. This…” She gestures at the space between them. “Is all about the work. Understood?”

His expression becomes surprisingly neutral, which is frustrating because she can’t tell what he’s thinking. He pushes his chair away from the table and starts to walk around it -- that’s it, she thinks. He is a pig. He saw this case as a chance to claim afternoons in a hotel bed as a work expense and now that she’s made it clear that she won’t play along, he’s going to go find some pretty associate who will.

Well, fine, she thinks angrily. Why would she want to work with a jerk like that?

But Jeff stops in front of her then and extends his hand. “Understood. We eat, sleep, and breathe this case. Nothing else.”

She takes his hand and shakes it as firmly as she can. “Good.”

It’s not intentional -- at least not on her part -- but they hold one another’s gaze for a few seconds, still shaking hands like they’re playing a game of chicken to see who will be the one to break away first. But there’s a knock on the conference-room door then, and the moment breaks. She pulls her
hand away, and Jeff turns to open the door. A heavyset man wheels in a cart, overloaded with cardboard boxes that are nearly brimming with paperwork.

“Neil,” Jeff says amiably. “Right on time.”

“I’ve got everything you asked for here.”


“Got off ‘em last week. She’s back to running around, bossing everyone around again.”

“Glad to hear it. Send her my best.”

In those thirty seconds, Annie thinks she gets a pretty good glimpse into how well Jeff Winger might be able to charm a jury, a judge, a courtroom full of spectators. She tries to reign it in, but she can’t stop the little chuckle that escapes. Jeff smirks at her, amused.

“Oh, hey, Neil, this is Annie Edison,” he says. “It’s her first day. Annie, this is Neil, one of our finest paralegals.”

Neil smiles. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too.”

Jeff takes his phone from his pocket, thumbing it on and scrolling through screens. “She’s actually going to be helping me with the Rutherford case.”

Neil raises a brow, looking impressed -- which only serves to underscore what a golden opportunity this is for her. “Wow. First day here and you’re jumping right into the fire. Good for you.” He glances between her and Jeff. “If either of you need any help, just let me know. I’d love to work on the case.”

Jeff grins, oozing that trademark charm again. “You’re always at the top of my list. You know that, Neil.”

He bobs his head encouragingly as Neil shuffles out, and then turns back to her and points at the cart.

“Okay, so here is everything we’ve got on the case so far,” he tells her. “I’ve got a court appearance downtown for another case, so I need you to go through all of it with a fine-tooth comb.”

“What am I looking for?”

“Anything I can use,” he says. “I don’t care how small it seems. We don’t need a smoking gun, okay? We need just a little tiny grain of doubt that I can use to build a defense around. That’s all I need. They don’t call me the miracle-worker around here for nothing.” He smiles, brimming with confidence that makes it easy to believe he could spin nothing into something. “Oh, we’re also gonna want a forensic accountant to go over all the financials. We’ll probably need to talk to a few actually, until we find someone who tells us what we want to hear. My assistant Claire has the names of the people we usually use, so you can get that from her.” He reaches into his inner jacket pocket to pull out a couple of business cards. “Here’s all of her info and here’s mine. I’ll check in later.”

Just before he disappears into the hall, he does this awkward, little-half wave thing that shouldn’t
be as adorable as it is -- shouldn’t be adorable at all, really.

Because he’s technically, kind of, almost like her boss.

He isn’t cute, he isn’t hot, he isn’t charming.

He’s just a pretty successful lawyer, with an exciting case, that can help her career.

So she lifts the first box off the cart and goes to work.

--

Defending snotty, spoiled rich kids against drug possession charges isn’t exactly his favorite way to spend an afternoon, but anytime he gets inside a courtroom, he feels a rush of adrenaline, a surge of purpose that he’s never felt anywhere else.

It doesn’t even matter that today’s appearance is only an arraignment, where he doesn’t really get to show his stuff -- his head is still fully in the game and he manages to get bail down to a reasonable amount that this douchebag’s father will have paid before Jeff even makes it back to his car.

It’s an afternoon well spent.

He especially needs that right now, when he keeps shifting between replaying highlights of last night with Annie and trying to calculate the chances of her, out of all the people in the state of Colorado, being the associate that he’d choose to help with his case. The back and forth is practically giving him whiplash, so it helps to have something, anything else, to focus on.

Despite his best intentions, his mind keeps circling back to the fact that Anne Edison, the driven, ambitious overachiever that he chose, completely blindly, to be his right-hand person on the Rutherford case is Annie from last night, the woman who blew his mind six ways from Sunday. It is, just as he told her, a coincidence. And yet, there’s this stubborn voice in his head that says it has to be something more than that, because what were the odds of it happening otherwise?

But he doesn’t believe in fate, so it’s not something clichéd and touchy-feely like that. Maybe there was something going on with his subconscious. Maybe as he was going through the files, his head was repeating Annie, Annie, Annie, over and over again, so when he came across Anne Edison’s resume, he couldn’t help but pick her.

It wasn’t just her name, though, he reassures himself. She had the most impressive resume and fit the profile of someone who would gleefully do all the necessary grunt work so he could stay nice and relaxed for the actual trial.

There is the little detail about her going to Greendale too -- again, what are the fucking chances? -- but that only seems to lead back down the destiny/kismet path and he refuses to go there.

He stops at the coffee cart in the lobby of the courthouse to get a little afternoon pick-me-up before he head back to the office, and as he stirs a packet of Stevia into his cup, he wonders if he’s making a mistake. Even if Annie is the smartest, most capable, hardest-working first-year associate that the firm has to offer, she could still be a liability.

If she proves to be too much of a distraction, that is.

And he has to face facts -- she was just as hot with her hair pinned up and wearing that drab gray suit under the fluorescent lights of the conference room as she was last night, half-naked and
flushed in his dim bedroom.

Fuck.

But she said it herself -- this is nothing but a professional relationship now. And it’s not like he doesn’t have experience sleeping with women and then stopping, just like that, without any major difficulties. He runs into Robin from Marketing all the time in the gym and it’s always cordial, without even a trace of awkwardness. The same goes for Sabrina in Employee Benefits Law and Jessica in Family Law. Hell, he still manages to have a conversation with Britta most days and they don’t have a damn thing in common. He’s not some hard up guy, desperate enough to cling to memories of a one-night stand so tightly that he can’t move on.

It’s not a big deal at all.

He takes a sip of his coffee and reminds himself that things are actually looking up -- and it’s as if the universe wants to prove that fact because just as he’s about to head for his parking garage, a hand clamps down on his shoulder and gives him a hearty shake.

“Winger! How do you like that? Our offices are in the same hallway and we run into each other here.”

Alan Connor grins up at him in a slimy, self-satisfied way that makes Jeff want to slam his fist right into his jaw. But the rational part of his brain knows that isn’t the best play, so he utilizes whatever shred of self-control he has to maintain a bland, unaffected expression.

“Alan, hey. How’s it going?”

“Oh, you know. Same old, same old. Making bank and laying pipe.” Somehow, Jeff manages to not roll his eyes, and Alan throws an arm around his shoulder, like they’re old, trusted friends.

“Listen, Wing Man, I’m glad I ran into you here, away from all those clowns we work with. Because I really want to make sure there are no hard feelings.”

Jeff shrugs, feigning ignorance. “Hard feelings?”

“Yeah, you know,” Alan sighs. “Because Ted decided I’d be a better choice for the McAlister case. I mean, I know you had your sweet, little heart set on it, buddy, but if the boss man thinks I’m the best man for the job, then I guess that’s just what I am.”

Jeff clenches his jaw so hard that he’s surprised he doesn’t pull a muscle -- but he still manages to conjure up a smile. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve got zero hard feelings.”

Jeff shrugs, feigning ignorance. “Hard feelings?”

“Of course not,” Alan laughs. “Because you’re a team player… so what if this time you’ve got to play cheerleader on the sidelines? I bet your legs’ll look great in one of those short little skirts.” He does a stupid little kick as if to demonstrate. “And you know, maybe I’ll be able to find a little something for you to do for the case. I mean, I’m only one man. I can’t do everything.”

When Jeff grins now, it is one hundred percent genuine -- because he finally gets to do what he’s been dying to do since Mark wandered into his office this morning and delivered the good news.

“That’s really generous of you, Sundance,” he says. “But I think I’m gonna be pretty busy the next few months. Won’t really have much free time.”

“Actually,” Jeff says, trying to stay as cool as possible. “I’m gonna be tied up with something a little bigger than that. You know, the Rutherford case?” It’s amazing how he’s able to ask in a way that makes it seem like it’s remotely plausible that Alan hasn’t heard of the case, and he shrugs again, doing a pretty good ‘aw shucks’ impersonation. “Ted just asked me this morning if I’d take care of it for him, so…”

Alan isn’t new to the rodeo, so he manages to choke down his shock, anger, and envy in a hurry — but for one brief, amazing second, Jeff sees all of it play across his face, in his dull, soulless eyes, and all is right with the world.

“The Rutherford case?” Alan repeats, his toned clipped and tight. “I hadn’t heard about that. I thought Ted was handling that one himself.”

Jeff lifts his shoulders casually. “Seems he’s got some health issues that need tending to. So I guess he thought I was the next best thing.”

“Yeah, well… I guess that might keep you busy.” He cocks his head, and Jeff can practically see the wheels turning in his head, trying to find some way to spin this back in his favor. “So you know… if you do find yourself a little… overwhelmed, I’d be willing to lend a hand with Rutherford. You know, as a personal favor to you.”

Jeff chuckles, patting Alan on the back. “Oh, I know you would, buddy. But you’ve got your hands full with McAlister. You can’t do everything, right?” He takes a sip of his coffee, savoring the rich taste and the moment, and maybe he’s a total asshole but he can’t resist twisting the knife a little. “Besides, I’ve got one of the new first-years to help out, so I should be fine.”

Just as expected, Alan looks like he’s been forced to chew glass — or is getting ready to plot Jeff’s murder. And all Jeff can think is, let’s twist it a little more.

“Hey, you know what, buddy? We should celebrate! You got a big case… and I got a really big case. If that doesn’t deserve a drink, what does?”

Alan forces a grin, bobbing his head like none of this is bothering him at all. And even though hitting a bar with this asshole is the last thing that Jeff wants to do, he does it, needing to enjoy his victory, all up close and personal in Alan’s face, a little longer.

As predicted, it makes the booze taste even better.

--

She doesn’t get out of the office until nearly ten.

The place is virtually deserted, with all of the other caseless first-year associates long gone, but she is determined to get through every single piece of paper in the case files before she heads out. Jeff may have said that he only needs the smallest, tiniest scrap to build a case around, but she compiles a list that’s more than ten pages long, full of contradictory information, case laws that they should research, and other tidbits that could form the basis for an effective defense.

She’s managed to impress herself.

She isn’t sure if she’s impressed Jeff, though, because he never returns after his court appearance and she doesn’t get a phone call, text, or email either. So she takes it upon herself to email him what she’s found, pretty sure that his socks will effectively be knocked off.

If she’s honest, she is actually somewhat relieved that he didn’t make contact again. It was good to
focus on the case, on work, on professional details that she has every reason to know. Because the fact is that she knows way too many things about her de facto boss that she shouldn’t -- like that he’s ticklish on his hip and he makes this ridiculously sexy purring sound when he’s truly satisfied -- and she isn’t in a place right now where she can be around him and not remember those things.

In vivid, Technicolor detail.

She’ll get there, though, as long as there’s enough work and appropriate distance between them -- that’s what she tells herself as she drives home.

When she gets to the apartment, Troy and Abed are in front of the TV in their pajamas, watching some bad 80s horror movie about a killer on a college campus. And even though it’s after ten, Abed is eating a bowl of buttered noodles and Troy has a large bowl of mac and cheese that is a disturbingly bright yellow.

“What are you eating?” she asks him, as she drops her bag on the table.

Troy shrugs. “We watched an episode of Unwrapped before and it was all about Kraft Mac and Cheese and how in Canada, they put ketchup on it. I like mustard better so I figured I’d try that… and it’s delicious.” He lifts a heaping spoonful from his bowl. “Want a taste?”

She shakes her head with a grimace and practically collapses on the futon.

“So how was it?” Abed asks. “Your first day as a high-powered lawyer? Was it more like Law and Order or Boston Legal or L.A. Law?” He’d made her binge-watch nearly every legal drama from the past 30 years over the summer to get her in the right frame of mind, but she is pretty sure nothing could have prepared her for what actually happened today. Abed smiles gleefully, no doubt remembering every detail of every show. “Or was it more like Ally McBeal? Is there a unisex bathroom?”

She groans, shifting forward and burying her face in her hands. “I slept with the guy who’s pretty much my boss,” she cries, not aware that she’s about to confess until the words are out of her mouth.

“Whoa,” Troy says. “Dude works fast! Did he like sweep everything off his desk and do you right there?”

“Troy!” she gasps. When she drops her hands, both Troy and Abed are studying her with obvious interest. “It wasn’t like -- I didn’t know he was my boss at the time.”

The guys narrow their eyes in twin looks of confusion.

“You know how I was with that guy last night?” They nod. “He turned out to be Jeff Winger, this kind-of jerk who I’m working with on this big case.”

Abed grins, eyes lighting up like a Christmas tree. “It’s more like Grey’s Anatomy!”

Annie rubs at her temple. “It’s not Grey’s Anatomy, Abed. It’s my life.”

“But you used to love that show,” he reminds her.

“That’s not… I don’t--” She sighs. “Don’t you get it? This is supposed to be my big chance, my shot at a bright, shiny future. And somehow I’ve managed to screw everything up inside of a day. I mean, I came back here because I wanted…” She trails off, because she’s had a bad enough day -- there’s no point in traveling over that uncomfortable road. “The point is that I have this amazing
opportunity now and I might have ruined it because I did something so stupidly impulsive. What was I thinking?"

“I don’t get it,” Troy says. “They’re gonna fire you because you did this guy?”

“No. They couldn’t do that.”

“So what’s the big deal?” Abed asks. “Is he holding it against you? Keeping you off all the good cases or something?”

“No. He actually chose me to help on this really high-profile case. He didn’t know who I was at the time, but he still thinks we should work together even though we hooked up.”

“Oh,” Troy says, nodding. “So he’s some gross dude who’s going to make you bang him again so you can keep the big case? Because he can’t do that, Annie. That’s sexual harassment and you don’t have to take it.”

“No,” she says again. “I don’t think he’s going to do that. I mean, he’s all slick and smooth and uses his charm to try to talk his way into everything but--”

“Like your pants,” Troy snickers.

She glares at him, and he immediately quiets.

“But I don’t think that’s his plan,” she finishes.

“What’s the problem then?” asks Abed. “It’s not like he’s some long-lost lover. He’s just a guy you had sex with once. If it’s not going to happen again, it doesn’t really matter, right?”

She nods slowly, taking a deep breath to calm herself. Because Abed is right -- there is really nothing to worry about because she isn’t going to sleep with Jeff Winger again. Sure, there’s some lingering awkwardness to deal with, but they can do that. They’re both adults, adults who managed to make it all the way through law school and pass the Bar -- they can do this, too.

She’s getting ready for bed when her phones chimes with a new email message. Much to her chagrin, she can’t help but smile, just a little, when she sees that Jeff’s finally replied to the list that she sent.

Very thorough, he’s written. Let’s talk tomorrow. 9 am. My office.

She crawls under the Star Wars throw on the futon, feeling pretty pleased with herself.

--

He isn’t hung over, but he is feeling a little tired and jittery when he steps off the elevator.

Staying out as late as he did with Alan wasn’t part of his plan, but he found that as soon as he sipped that first drink, felt the pleasant little buzz heightening his already good mood, he didn’t want to walk away. The tight, constipated look Alan wore all night definitely didn’t hurt either.

He’s only human -- delighting in his enemy’s misery is second nature.

Claire offers up a sunny smile when he makes it to her desk and he mimics her, trying to project an ease he doesn’t quite feel yet.

“You’ve got three messages,” she tells him, handing him several slips of paper. “None of them
urgent. There’s a senior staff meeting at three o’clock in conference room C, and Ted wants to take you to lunch.”

He nods as he glances through his messages. “Okay. Sounds good.”

“And Annie Edison is inside,” she adds, “waiting for you.”

He does something of a double-take, glancing over at the doorway to his office before checking his watch. It’s a quarter to nine.

“Already?” he says before he can stop himself.

Claire shrugs. “She’s been here for twenty minutes.”

He nods again, heading for his office almost hesitantly. He stops just outside the doorway, peering in at her -- she’s sitting in one of the chairs in front of his desk, one leg crossed over the other, with a pad in her lap. Today she’s gone with a pinstripe pantsuit, with a bright turquoise shirt underneath, and her hair is loose over her shoulders.

For a moment, he almost forgets why she’s here.

But he pulls himself together and strolls inside as confidently as he can manage. She looks up at him almost immediately, like she just knew the precise moment he would finally show up. He notices then that there are two cardboard cups of coffee and the overview of the case that he gave her yesterday on the desk in front of her.

“Good morning,” he says brightly. “Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Annie lifts her shoulders, smiling politely. “No problem. I was a little overeager.”

“Yeah,” he agrees. “I kind of got that from the novel you sent me yesterday.”

She nearly smiles. “I think I prefer your assessment from last night better. I was thorough, that’s all.”

Jeff grins, tapping a hand against his desk as he moves to settle himself in his chair. “Okay, then. Thorough it is.”

She smiles for real now, with a soft blush in her cheeks and a brightness in her eyes. They just look at one another for a minute, and he is aware of the blood pumping through his body in a way that he usually isn’t. Annie shifts in her seat, reaching forward to push one of the coffees toward him.

“Claire said you like it black with one Stevia,” she says. “It’s probably a little cold now, but …”

He wraps a hand around the cup and nods. “It’s the thought that counts, right?”

She gives him a little half smile, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Something like that.”

He grins, watching as she taps a pen against her legal pad. It seems like it might be a nervous tick, the way she drums it faster and faster, her fingers clutching a little more tightly each time. The joke’s on him, though, because he has to bite at the inside of his cheek to force back a memory from the other night: her hand gliding over his stomach, wrapping around him, and making him see stars...

Annie clears her throat, and he sits up straight in his chair.
“Okay,” she says. “Should we go over what I’ve found?”

He nods, turning to his computer to pull up the document she sent last night. As he waits for the file to load, he tries to remember the last time that he felt quite this excited about work.

Years, he thinks. It’s been years.
Thanks, as always, to the most fabulous beta, Bethany.

I feel like now is a good time to point out that everything I know about how big law firms work comes from stories that my friend the lawyer used to tell me about her job and some basic Google research. I am, by no means, an expert, so if I’ve gotten some details wrong, please forgive me.

Annie has been working with Jeff Winger for nearly two weeks, so she doesn’t think that she is being hasty in her judgement: he is easily the laziest slacker that she’s ever met in her entire life.

It’s not like she is inexperienced in dealing with those types. Over the years, she’s come across plenty of people who wanted to take advantage of not only her intelligence but her drive, work ethic, and propensity to take everything on her own shoulders. Back at Greendale, Troy and Abed were always watching cartoons or DVD special features, trying to toast marshmallows over radiators, or painting action figures to look like themselves whenever they were supposed to be helping with a project for whatever class they were all taking together. But in the end, they’d always pitch in at least a little bit, even if it was only bringing her coffee and donuts so she could stay up all night working.

Jeff, on the other hand, has been pretty much invisible since they started working together.

He’s blown off meetings with three different forensic accountants, telling her that they’re nothing she can’t handle. And at first, she almost falls for it, somewhat flattered that he has such faith and trust in her and her abilities that he’ll leave her all on her own.

But then, when it starts to fit into a larger pattern of behavior, the con becomes way too obvious to ignore.

She invites him to join her in the firm library to research case law that might be helpful on two separate occasions and he makes excuses both times. The first time, it’s something vague about a conference call that he can’t miss, and then it’s an appointment downtown with a client. Neither explanation holds much water, because she knows that he’s tied up almost all of his pending cases outside of Rutherford.

And then there’s the fact that too many times when she stops by his office to check in, his assistant tells her that he’s off at some swanky restaurant, having a three-hour lunch with one of the other junior partners, or downstairs in the sauna, recharging his batteries.

So at this point, she is fairly certain that she’s never seen him do a lick of actual work, outside of the occasional court appearance downtown.

The joke’s on him, though, because she isn’t some damn pushover. He doesn’t know who he’s dealing with if he thinks that she’s just going to let him get away with all that. She doesn’t mind working her ass off, but she isn’t about to let anyone take advantage of her. She isn’t going to do all the grunt work and let Jeff Winger swoop in at the end to get all the glory.
When she goes up to the fourth floor to tell him just that, Claire is away from her desk so she gets the satisfaction of storming directly into his office. He is sitting behind his desk, feet propped up on the edge, playing some game on his phone with loud whistling sounds. Seeing him sprawled out like that, caught up in another mindless pursuit, is just confirmation that all her righteous indignation is justified.

“Annie,” he says brightly, when he sees her. “What can I do for you?”

“What can you do for me?” she spits back. “Oh, I don’t know… how about your job?”

He cocks his head, like he’s confused. “Excuse me?”

She folds her arms over her chest and takes a deep breath. “If you think you can saddle me with all the scut work on this case, while you lounge up here like a fat cat, playing Angry Birds and eating bonbons, you’ve got another thing coming.”

He drops his feet to the floor and sits up in his chair, almost ramrod straight, and for a moment, she thinks that she has seriously pissed him off and he’s about to throw her off the case, condemn her to a fate where she just reviews corporate documents all day and doesn’t see the inside of a courtroom for the foreseeable future -- but after a moment, he actually shakes his head and laughs. “Eating bonbons?” he repeats. “You realize I’m not a lonely divorcee in a Lifetime movie, right?”

He’s trying to be cute and charming again, trying to smooth her ruffled feathers with that lovely, persuasive smile, but she grits her teeth, refusing to rise to the bait. “You know what I mean.”

“Listen, Annie,” he says, as patronizing as it gets. “I know I’ve been leaning on you a lot, but that’s only because I know you can handle it. Because I trust you to--”

“Oh, cut the crap,” she snaps. “You’re not leaning on me. You’re dumping everything on me. Everything.”

The corner of his mouth twitches, like he’s trying hard not to laugh, and she feels her hands curl into fists in frustration, almost against her will.

“Look,” he says. “You’re new to all this, so maybe you don’t understand how it works. It’s like… are you a baseball fan?” She frowns in annoyance -- because what the hell does baseball have to do with his complete and utter lack of a work ethic? And she really doesn’t know much about it, except that she and Vaughn went to a Giants game once and it was a no-hitter, and that hardly seems relevant -- but he waves a hand at her dismissively. “Hear me out. A team’s got a bullpen to help pick up the starting pitcher, right? And they all work together, they’re a unit. But a middle reliever’s got to eat up a lot of the garbage innings in the middle of the game, and it’s not usually glamorous, it’s not prime time, because in the bottom of the ninth, when the game’s on the line, you bring in your closer to get the job done. It doesn’t mean the middle reliever’s not important. It’s just a different role… and you’ve got to earn your way to something bigger.”

She rolls her eyes so hard that it almost makes her head ache. “You are so full of it. Seriously. Do you believe even half of the crap that you spew?”

He shrugs, smirking prettily, and she would seriously like to deliver a roundhouse kick to his stomach right about now.

“I don’t get it,” she says, shaking her head. “Why did you even become a lawyer if all you want to do is sit up here and take it easy?”

She braces herself for whatever clever, glib comeback he’s about to throw at her -- but in an
instant, Jeff’s expression shifts, hardens almost, and all of the amused, smug confidence seems to fade away. It is unnerving because she may not know him that well, but she’s never seen him look like this before, and she gets the feeling that it doesn’t happen very often. He starts absently fiddling with random items on his desk, his coffee mug, a stray paperclip, a roll of mints, like he just wants something to do to keep him busy, and it makes her so uncomfortable that she has to look away.

“You wanna know why I become a lawyer?” he asks, obviously annoyed. “Because when I was a kid and my parents were in the middle of a bitter divorce -- now, don’t get the wrong idea; they weren’t fighting over me, because Dad didn’t want a damned thing to do with me -- the only person who wasn’t totally losing it was Mom’s lawyer. He was calm and cool and collected and at the end of the day, he got what he wanted. So I grew up wanting to be like that. In control all the time.”

She is surprised by his honesty, caught off-guard by this somewhat tragic piece of his backstory, but there’s also some guilt involved. She doesn’t think apologizing would go over too well, though. He’s avoiding her eyes and biting at his lip, like he desperately wants to erase the past 45 seconds.

“You convinced me to work with you on this case because you said you needed my help,” she tells him instead. “I thought we’d be a team. If that’s not how you see it, then maybe you should find someone else.”

He exhales heavily, and part of her almost expects him to send her on her way -- this whole thing has been more complicated than either of them anticipated. But Jeff offers up a half-smile and lifts his shoulders. “What do I have to do?” he asks. “To make you feel like we’re a team?”

She grins in relief. “Come with me to meet the next forensic accountant tomorrow afternoon. The first three weren’t--”

“Okay,” he says, and she nods happily. “Well, not okay, actually. We’ll go to an appointment together tomorrow, but not to see an accountant. Because Simon Rutherford would actually like to chat with us. The trial may not be for almost five months, but I think he wants to make sure we’re not just racking up billable hours.”

She raises a brow. “Isn’t that exactly what you’ve been doing?” she teases.

He lets out a little laugh and shakes his head. “Touche.”

She give him a brisk nod, and heads for the door. At the last minute, though, something stops her, and she turns back to find him smiling warmly.

“I’m going to be in the library after lunch,” she says. “Researching some more case law. You know, if you feel like being a good teammate today.”

His smile widens a little, and he nods. “We’ll see.”

For now, that seems like a decent start.

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He’s seriously starting to think that she’s going out of her way to find things to argue over.

Normally, it would be strange, a first-year associate picking fights with a junior partner who chose her to assist on a case that any lawyer would kill for, but he thinks he understands why Annie’s doing it: it’s her way of making sure to keep some distance between them.
(His uncharacteristic understanding might have a little something to do with the fact that she is seriously hot when she gets all worked up or annoyed, with that sexy flush that goes all the way down to her collarbones. Not that he’s looking \textit{that} closely or anything; she’s got pale skin so it’s hard not to notice.)

It’s probably for the best because he knows that he’s seriously hit the jackpot with her -- and he’s not referring to that night between them that didn’t happen. She is smarter, sharper, and harder-working than her resume could ever hint at, so he doesn’t want to screw things up. He wants to stay on her good side, appease her as much as possible, which means he’s trying (or more accurately, pretending) to be a good boy, a team player.

That’s why he spent almost two hours in the firm’s library with her yesterday evening, even though Eric in Intellectual Property offered him a ticket to the Avalanche game and Kristy from Marketing invited him to a friend’s birthday party. Of course, he didn’t do much actual work beyond confirming that what she’d found was useful and topping off her (reusable, naturally) water bottle when she needed it, but she didn’t seem to mind -- the fact that he was putting in the face time seemed to be enough for her.

So he’ll probably have to do more stuff like that in the weeks ahead, because he’s trying to earn some goodwill, some benefit of the doubt with her.

Today, however, he can’t be accommodating because the argument du jour is about who’s going to drive to their meeting with Simon Rutherford, and as soon as he sees her ancient Toyota Camry, he knows that he’s not about to let her get her way. He shakes his head emphatically. “Nope. No way.”

“Why not?” she demands. “I bet I’m a safer driver then you are. I’ll have you know that I’ve never gotten a single ticket, so--”

“It’s got nothing to do with your driving skills.” He casts a disapproving glance back at her car. “It’s this thing. We’re not pulling up to a meeting with Rutherford in the same car you drove to pep rallies and SAT prep classes.”

She frowns, studying the Camry for a moment. “It’s not that bad,” she insists, but he notices that she doesn’t deny having had it since high school.

He starts to guide her toward his car, and she doesn’t put up a fight so he figures that she begrudgingly agrees.

“What’s with the Cali license plates?” he decides to ask as they hit the road. He tries for a casual tone, like it’s just a simple question -- because really, it is, even if he’s more curious about the details of her life than he wants to admit. This is just small talk; co-workers make small talk all the time, and it doesn’t mean anything.

Annie shrugs. “I haven’t had a chance to get Colorado plates yet.”

“That actually brings up another question,” he says. “You made it all the way to California… so why the hell would you ever come back here?”

She’s silent for several seconds, and he starts to think that maybe she’s just not going to answer. Maybe this goes beyond those professional boundaries that she was so careful to set up, or maybe he sounds like a creepy stalker. When he rolls to a stop at the next traffic light, though, he looks over at her, and she shoots him a sideways glance, shrugging again.
“This is where I grew up,” she says simply.

He supposes that’s a good enough answer for most people -- home, family, and all that sentimental crap -- so he just nods and lets it go. Because he’s got more important things to focus on, like making sure this meeting with Simon Rutherford goes well. There is plenty at stake here -- one complaint from Rutherford and he could be off the case in a heartbeat. Fortunately, Rutherford seems to be in a good mood when he meets them in the corporate dining room at his office, smiling in a way that a man facing up to 60 years in prison just shouldn’t be able to.

He’s got brass balls, Jeff thinks. You’d have to, to not even worry about spending the rest of your life in prison, to think that you could get away with stealing nearly five billion dollars from your investors in the first place.

Allegedly, anyway.

“Jeff,” Rutherford says warmly. “Good to see you. It’s been awhile, hasn’t it?”

Jeff nods, shaking his hand. “Since Ted’s 55th birthday party, I think. And that was a million years ago.”

Rutherford laughs. “That’s right, that’s right.” He pats Jeff on the back, leaning in close like they’re old friends when the truth is actually that they’ve only met on a half dozen occasions. “I’ve got to be honest. I was relieved when he told me you’d be handling the case. Not to disparage your co-workers but…”

“No worries,” Jeff says. “But I would like to introduce to my associate, Annie Edison. She’ll be helping out on the case.”

Rutherford looks over at Annie, as if he only just now noticed that she’s in the room. He cocks his head, studying her carefully for a moment, and Jeff wonders if he’s going to have to have an awkward conversation with their client about how it’s probably not appropriate to hit on her.

“And Annie Edison,” Rutherford repeats, the corner of his mouth lifting in a near smile. “Are you John Edison’s little girl? I haven’t seen you since you were about this high…” He holds his hand up somewhere in the vicinity of his midsection. “Wow. I wouldn’t haven’t recognized you at all if I hadn’t heard the name…”

Jeff squints in confusion, looking over at Annie who studiously avoid his gaze -- which tells him that she most certainly is John Edison’s little girl. Whatever that means.

“It’s been a long time, Mr. Rutherford,” is all Annie says as she shakes his hand.

“So you two know each other?” Jeff asks, looking pointedly at Annie -- but she is studying the marble tile beneath her feet, the pointy toes of her shoes.

“That’s right,” Rutherford says. “Annie’s dad used to work for me back in the day. He was one of our investment officers … and he was good at what he did, don’t get me wrong, but he was absolutely deadly with a golf club. How’s he doing, Annie? Still hitting the links?”

Annie’s expression is neutral. “He’s good.”

As much as Jeff wants to know what the fuck is going on, he gets the strong sense that there’s trouble ahead if he lets Rutherford keep visiting memory lane. So he claps the older man on the back and smiles. “Okay, Simon, we should probably discuss the case. The progress we’ve made.”
“Yes, yes,” he agrees. “Absolutely. Honestly, though, the only progress I’m really interested in seeing right now is having this thing removed.” He pulls up the leg of his pants to show off the ankle monitor above his right foot. “I can only go here and home. I guess they’re afraid I’ll run away to Morocco or Tunisia. You know, one of those countries without an extradition treaty.”

Jeff should probably be disturbed that his client so readily knows the countries that won’t extradite, but he puts it out of his mind because he’s got to be his most charming, his most convincing, his most reassuring, so Rutherford stays absolutely confident in his abilities. It’s a dance that he’s done with clients countless times before -- and Annie’s hard work over the past couple of weeks makes it easy to provide plenty of details -- but it’s a little harder when he finds himself stupidly distracted by the fact that she withheld vital information about her relationship to the case from him.

It almost feels like some kind of betrayal.

Which is why he barely waits a second after Rutherford has shown them to the elevator and the doors slide closed before turning to her with what he’s pretty sure is a seriously accusatory glare.

“What the hell was that about?” he demands.

She shrugs, trying to play dumb, but it’s not a look that she can pull off convincingly.

“Oh, don’t even try it, Annie. You know Simon Rutherford and you didn’t think that was something I should know about?”

“I don’t really know him,” she insists. “My dad worked for him for a few years more than a decade ago. I met him on a handful of occasions, like Christmas parties and Labor Day barbecues. With a hundred other employees’ kids. That’s it.”

“Your father worked for him, Annie. I know his name hasn’t come up in our research, but what if it does? He’s your father… it’s only natural that you’d want to protect him. Which could put our client at risk. That can’t happen. I won’t let it happen.”

She shakes her head adamantly. “It’s not a problem, Jeff. I promise you.”

He snorts. “That’s what you say now, but if the shit hits the fan, then--”

“No,” she snaps, and her voice is nearly as loud as a gunshot in the empty elevator. She lowers her head immediately, as if she’s embarrassed by the outburst. “I’m sorry,” she says softly. “It’s just… I haven’t spoken to either of my parents in over eight years. So I really don’t think it’s going to be an issue. All right?”

She looks up at him, and her eyes are shining, like maybe she’s holding back tears, and it’s not what he’s expecting at all. He’s anticipating more fighting and fire, more of her needlessly argumentative distance, and he feels some strange tightness in his chest that he really wants to attribute to indigestion from the fish at lunch, but it seems to spread through his body in a way that heartburn just doesn’t.

So he nods, and even though he wants to ask more -- even though he wants the full story, every agonizing detail -- he doesn’t ask. He stays quiet as the elevator descends the remaining ten floors, and reminds himself that they’re just professional colleagues, co-workers, two people who punch in at the same office, and none of it really matters to him anyway.

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She is pretty sure that he’s just trying to get her off his back, but when Jeff tells her that she’s going to work herself into the ground if she keeps up her current pace, she sort of listens.

“And then you’ll be no use to me when it really counts,” he declares. “Take a break every once in a while. Relax. For the good of the case.”

He has been making an effort lately, however minor, so maybe that’s why she decides that she should at least consider his advice. Of course, it probably also has something to do with the fact that she is feeling a little guilty about not disclosing that she knew Simon Rutherford, and embarrassed about making a scene in the elevator after their meeting. She almost broke down in tears like a child, making them both uncomfortable and unsure what to say.

So she starts taking a break each day to fit in a workout at the gym. Not only is it a break from work, but she recently read an article about how exercise can actually help improve concentration. She’s been in the office so much lately that she hasn’t had time for karate, and it seems like a good idea to keep her mind as sharp as possible. She goes in the late afternoon, just before the end of the official work day, because everyone is hurrying to get out so it’s almost always empty and she has her pick of the equipment. Normally, she’d just go running in her sports bra and shorts, take her karate class in a tank top and yoga pants, but that doesn’t exactly seem professional, so she borrows one of Troy’s Inspector Spacetime T-shirts that hangs loosely around her and covers the backside of her workout pants.

It’s not enough to help her disappear into her surroundings completely, though, because she’s just about finished her time on the elliptical when a guy steps onto the machine next to her. He is kind of nondescript, but she thinks that she might have seen him upstairs near Jeff’s office. He shoots her a cheesy grin as he powers up his treadmill, but she figures that he’s just trying to be friendly to a co-worker, so she smiles back politely.

“There it is,” he says, pointing at her. “I knew you’d have a million-dollar smile.”

She fights to keep her smile from becoming a grimace. This is exactly the kind of crap that she’s been trying to avoid, but having a messy confrontation with a co-worker that she doesn’t know probably isn’t a good idea. So even though she still has a few minutes before she hits her 45-minute goal, she decides that it’s time to bail. But she barely has time to grab her water bottle and step off the machine when the guy on the treadmill stops it and hops off in front of her.

“Whoa. You’re leaving already, honey?” he says. “You can’t leave yet… I didn’t get a chance to introduce myself.”

He didn’t spend more than a minute on the treadmill, but his forehead is shining with sweat, all along his fully-receded hairline, and his t-shirt clings to his little paunch -- and she feels bad noticing those details, because she doesn’t really think of herself as a superficial person, but she’s getting such creepy vibes from this guy that it’s difficult to overlook them.

“I’m sorry,” she says, taking a step back. “But I’ve really got to--”

“I’m Alan. Alan Connor. I’m a junior partner,” he tells her, like he expects her to fall at his feet at the news. “And I’m kind of a big deal around here.”

“Oh yeah? That’s nice. But I’m not really--”

“You’re new around here, right? I mean, you’d have to be because I definitely would’ve noticed you before. So what do you do around here? Are you Craig’s new HR assistant? Or are you one of the new Marketing interns?”
“No, actually, I’m a first-year associate. I just--”

“I should have known. You look way too smart to be mucking around in HR or Marketing.” He cocks his head, studying her intently for a long moment. “And if you’re a first-year, then you probably know all about the McAlister case. That’s mine, actually. And it’s a big one. You’ve heard about it, right? How big it is?”

Annie shrugs. “Yeah, I think I heard a little something. But listen, it’s not--”

“So what… you just squeezing in a little workout in before you get back to your desk?”

“Exactly, and I really do have to get back now so...”

He grins. “I know better ways to work up a sweat.”

“Excuse me?” she says, barely hiding her contempt, and he holds his hands up as if in surrender. “Hey, I’m just talking about racquetball. You’ve really got to get your mind out of the gutter, honey.”

He laughs, like he genuinely thinks that he’s funny or charming, and she can only shake her head, because what she really wants to do is deliver a swift, hard kick right to this guy’s solar plexus. But even though he’s totally asking for it, she knows that it would be a mistake. So instead, she turns, ready to leave without another word.

“Hey, wait a sec, honey,” he calls after her. “You didn’t even tell me your name.”

“Annie Edison,” she says, still walking toward the locker room.

“Well, Annie Edison, how would you like it if I made your day?”

She glances back at him with a frown. “My day’s just fine already, thanks.”

“The McAlister case is a big one,” he says. “I could definitely use some help. How would you like it if I asked you to come work with me on it?”

He grins at her, as if he expects that she’ll be so blown away the offer that she’ll start stripping off her clothes in gratitude any moment now -- and it occurs to her that she’s really lucky that it’s Jeff she accidentally slept with and is working with. She suspects that if she’d made the same mistake with a guy like this, she would be in serious trouble now. She stops at the locker room door, smiling back at Alan blandly, and lifts a shoulder. “I’m sure that would be a real honor, but I’m actually already working on a case. So I’m not available.”

He snorts in what sounds like disbelief. “You’re already working on a case? I doubt it’s better than McAlister. What, does Greg having you working on that intellectual property case? What a snoozefest.”

“Actually,” she says, “I’m working with Jeff Winger. You know, on the Rutherford case.”

For a moment, he stares back at her almost blankly, like he’s completely zoned out or doesn’t quite understand the English language. But then he tips his head back and barks out a laugh, deep and from the belly as he lets loose. “Oh, of course,” he says, between snorts. “Of course. It makes perfect sense. Winger snatched you up. And I bet on your first day, too.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” she asks, feeling strangely defensive for no good reason.
“Oh, no. No. I don’t mean to offend you. I’m sure you’re totally capable…” He scrunches his face, like he’s tasted something sour. “But let’s just say… you’re exactly the Wing Man’s type, so it’s not really a surprise that he’d want you working closely with him. Even on the Rutherford case.”

It doesn’t take a genius to understand what this guy is implying, but she doesn’t want to give this jerk the satisfaction of reacting in any way. “Speaking of Rutherford,” she says, pulling open the locker room door. “I’ve got work to do.”

She isn’t even lying, because Jeff actually agreed to meet with her to go over the notes from the forensic accountant who’s agreed to help on the case instead of just having her do it herself and write up a summary for him. When she gets to conference room F a few minutes late, though, and he’s not there, she is almost certain that he’s blown her off again. She takes out the copies of the notes that she’s made, collating them because she needs something easy and mindless to do. She tries not think about what that creep Alan said, because it’s not like he knows what happened between her and Jeff, not like he needs to know to imagine something tawdry going on. It’s not like she can’t see that a guy like that would assume the worst in any situation.

It doesn’t mean anything.

She pushes Jeff’s copy of the notes to the empty seat beside her almost petulantly, and takes a bright yellow highlighter out of her bag so she can just bury herself in work. That’s usually the best way to distract herself. She makes it through exactly two pages before Jeff strolls in, looking vaguely apologetic and carrying a couple of plastic bags.

“Sorry, sorry,” he says. “But if we’re going to spend all night on this crap, I’ve got eat.” He lifts the bags so she can see them better. “I took a chance and got Chinese… and I ordered enough dishes that you’ve got to like at least one of them. I mean, unless you’re the world’s pickiest eater.”

She forces a smile. “Sounds good.”

She insists that they work as they eat because their relationship is professional and just sharing a meal and conversation seems more like something friends would do. She has to lend him a highlighter because of course, he’s not prepared, and he smirks a little when she hands over the pink one -- but he uses it without complaint, diligently marking important important figures with a wrinkled brow that makes him look pretty dedicated to the whole thing.

It’s so unlike him.

And then she realizes that she’s been watching him for a minute or so instead of working, and she sighs. “Hey, Jeff,” she somehow finds the courage to say.

He looks up, his eyes a little glassy from studying the small print. “Yeah?”

She fiddles with her highlighter, tapping it against the table. “When you picked me for this case,” she says, “it was really because my resume impressed you?”

He squints at her, looking confused and a little amused. “Yeah. Why are you…” He cocks his head, grinning at her in his charming way. “Are you fishing for compliments? Is that what this is about?”

“No, I just… I want to be sure I’m here for the right reasons.”

Jeff frowns. “What other reasons would you be here for?”

She thinks back to that afternoon in this very conference room, when he strolled in and found her
waiting for him. He was genuinely surprised, and way too amused by the coincidence of it all to be faking. He couldn’t have known that she was working at the firm, he couldn’t have picked her for any other reason other than that he thought she could help with the Rutherford case. That’s the only thing that makes sense.

“No… nothing,” she says, laughing a little. “I think I’m just tired.”

He smiles. “What did I tell you about working too hard? It’s a marathon, Annie. Gotta pace yourself.”

She nods, slow and steady, like she’s taking every word to heart. She looks back at the page in front of her, trying to focus on the numbers and the accountant’s commentary, because that’s her job. That’s what she’s here for.

They eventually come to an agreement that they’ll meet (at least) once a day for progress reports on the case and to dole out the necessary work in a more equitable fashion.

He agrees to the daily meetings because he’s hoping to limit the amount of time that he has to spend in the firm library as much as possible. Conference room F he can deal with, but the library is just too stuffy and depressing for his tastes. And he figures that if he at least plays at being attentive and on top of things, Annie won’t make him research any more case law.

And, if he’s honest, what she expects of him is kind of a bare minimum level. Most times, if he’s just present, breathing the same air, that seems to be enough. Probably because she’s the kind of person who doesn’t trust anyone else to do things up to her exacting standards.

Complications like their one-night stand aside, he really did hit a home run when he chose her to work with him on the case.

Depending on the time of day that they're having their progress report meetings, he usually insists that they get out of the office. That’s partly because he needs a break from all of the office politics bullshit, and he knows Annie’s working hours that no sane person should so she can use a change of scenery too; and maybe partly because he’s just a little -- just the slightest bit -- paranoid about the other assholes at the firm listening in on their conversations and using whatever info they pick to sabotage him.

He is starting to develop a complex -- he can admit that -- but he’d like to think it’s understandable given the circumstances. This case could mean the difference between another year on the fourth floor with Alan and those dumbasses and a move up to fifth floor with all the big boys. It’s so close now that he can almost taste it, which makes him hyper-aware of all the potential pitfalls.

Of course, when he thinks about it rationally, the importance of the case should be reason enough for him to take a more active role, even in these early stages. He shouldn’t need Annie cracking the whip and threatening to walk away every two seconds to work at this, even a little bit. But he’s been coasting along, winging all of it for so long that it’s a tough habit to break.

There is also that little voice in the back of his head, the one that his last therapist was so adamant that he listen to, that suggests it’s all a means of self-protection. If he tells himself and anyone who’ll listen that he doesn’t ever try, if he just acts like all of his ability in the courtroom comes down to innate charm and charisma and not any sort of real effort on his part, then it won’t sting as much if it doesn’t work out.
It won’t feel as much like failure.

Besides, why should he burn himself out now when Annie, who -- it’s becoming more and more obvious -- is smarter than he is, is doing such a bang-up job?

That’s what he’s telling himself, anyway, as they walk into the coffee shop around the corner from the office. He’s designated it as their unofficial meeting spot because the staff is so well-acquainted with his coffee habit that all he has to do is walk through the door and wave, and his French Roast is already being poured. (Also the owner, Shirley, has a serious soft spot for him.) They’ve been coming to the coffee shop enough over the past couple of weeks that they’ve developed a system -- Annie goes and scouts out a table while he orders their drinks -- so he heads for the counter, sparing her a backwards glance.

“My usual?” he asks, and immediately tells himself not to focus on the fact that he’s gotten to know her well enough to be familiar with her regular coffee order. He’s been working with Mark for over a decade and he couldn’t guess how the guy takes his coffee if it was a matter of life and death.

Annie tilts her head, considering the question carefully, like she does everything. “Actually… I think I’d like a hot chocolate today.” He can’t help snickering, even as he bites at his lip, and she glares back at him. “What? It’s almost November. It’s totally hot chocolate weather.”

He shrugs and shoots her a smile, because he’s not about to explain to her that it’s not the weather that makes her order amusing (and, honestly, kind of cute). Shirley is behind the register when he strolls up and she holds up his coffee, already poured and lidded. He grins as he leans against the counter. “And a large hot chocolate,” he tells her.

Shirley raises a brow, glancing toward the back of the shop where Annie is settling at a table, and knowingly hums, “Mmm-hmm,” under her breath.

She’s probably only a few years older than him, but she is always full of meddling, motherly advice that he listens to with equal parts amusement and annoyance. (Her biggest bone of contention is his love life, mainly the fact that it has little to actually do with love.) What’s really sad is that she is literally the only person on earth who could get away with it -- hell, he’s been tuning out his own mother since he hit his 20s -- and their relationship originated entirely because of proximity and the fact that she makes the best coffee in all of Greendale.

He watches as Shirley busies herself making Annie’s drink, bracing himself for today’s pearls of wisdom. Shirley waits until she hands over the cup, when the eye contact is seriously intense. “And a large hot chocolate,” she says pointedly, looking back at Annie again. “So you and that pretty little dark-haired girl… it’s getting serious?”

Jeff laughs, reaching into his pocket for his wallet. “What are you talking about?”

Shirley shoots him that disapproving scowl as she takes his money. “Oh, don’t even. I’ve seen you! You’ve been in here with her five times in the past week and a half.”

“So?” he asks. “That’s not exactly newsworthy.”

“Please. I’ve never seen you in here with the same woman that many times. That’s newsworthy in my book.”

He smirks. “What makes you think I bring dates here? I’m not some emo college kid, Shirley.”

Shirley crosses her arms over her chest, looking good and peeved. “Oh, so I guess I imagined you
and that snooty redhead who complained about my cappuccino canoodling in that corner booth like a couple of cats in heat. She had her hand so far up your thigh, I thought she was going to ask you to turn your head and cough.”

He cocks his head back and forth, considering. “Yeah, Tina is pretty friendly.”

Shirley nods, finally handing back his change. “And there was that super tan girl who drank so much espresso I thought she was going to spontaneously combust -- she never sat in her own chair. Apparently, your lap was more comfortable.”

He shrugs. “Well, I am pretty sturdily built.”

Shirley points an accusing finger. “And you and Britta used to be an item upon a time and you brought her in here.”

“We were never an item, Shirley. We slept together for a while until we got bored. That’s it.”

Shirley sighs almost wistfully. “Well, I always thought you two were a good match.”

He lifts the two cups from the counter. “Yeah, if by good match, you mean prime candidates for one of those tawdry Investigation Discovery shows about murder-suicides.”

Shirley tuts and swats at his arm with a dish towel. He chuckles again, more amused than is probably right at how worked up he can get her. She nods over toward Annie again. “Well, maybe this is the one for you then. What’s her name again?”

“Annie,” he reminds her. “And we just work together. That’s all.”

Shirley rolls her eyes. “Like that’s ever stopped you before.”

“Okay, as fun as this has been,” he says, and he holds up the two cups. “You’ll have to excuse me so we can drink your fine beverages while they’re still remotely warm.”

“Ask Annie how she likes the hot chocolate,” Shirley tells him. “I tweaked the recipe, added some cinnamon. I think that’s the magic ingredient.”

He nods dutifully, because there’s never any point in arguing with her, and heads back toward Annie. For a moment, he thinks about what Shirley would say if she knew how he and Annie met. While she certainly wouldn’t approve of the whole having-sex-with-someone-you’ve-just-met part, she would absolutely read into the fact that they met again, totally coincidentally, the next day. She would see it as a sign of some sort of romantic fairy tale to come. Let’s face it, she’s made more of less, a whole lot less (Exhibit A: his thing with Britta, which might have been the most joyless sexual relationship he’s ever had in his life).

That’s just who Shirley is; she wants to see everyone happily paired off -- as if that’s possible, as if that’s what everyone wants, as if that’s all anyone strives for.

God knows, it’s not his goal in life.

Right now, becoming senior partner is all that matters. Once that happens, he’ll re-evaluate.

Maybe the new goal will be improving his golf game.

When he finally makes it to the table, Annie has her phone out, scrolling through screens and wearing a disgusted frown that he can’t help smiling at.
“Come on,” he says, sliding the hot chocolate in front of her. “It can’t be that bad.”

She shakes her head. “No, it’s just… I guess I’m realizing that I shouldn’t be so hard on you about being lazy. Because apparently no one around this place does any work. Every other day, I’m getting an email for first-year associate bowling night or first-year associate laser tag. It’s ridiculous.”

He sits down across from her and shrugs. “I think it’s supposed to help build camaraderie, boost morale and all that. You know, so we get a high rating in those law firm employee-satisfaction surveys.”

Annie rolls her eyes and waves a hand at her phone. “Today, it’s an invite to that stupid cocktail party. Like I don’t have anything better to do than watch all the senior partners take advantage of an open bar.”

He laughs, pulling the little tab up on his coffee’s lid so he can take a sip. “You’re not really off base… it’ll be that boring, but I wouldn’t blow that one off. It’s not like bowling and laser tag. It’s an important networking opportunity. Especially for you, just starting out.”

She regards him skeptically. “So you’re saying for the good of my career I have to get dressed up and watch my co-workers get drunk and paw at each other just so I can schmooze with the partners? That’s ridiculous.”

He shrugs. “Hey, I didn’t make the rules.”

“Yeah, but I bet you love this kind of crap.”

There really isn’t any way to deny it, so he takes another sip of his coffee, trying for an enigmatic look. “Schmoozing definitely happens to be part of the game and I definitely happen to be good at it.”

She shakes her head, feigning annoyance. “All style and no substance.”

He smirks. “Substance is overrated.”

She sighs in pure exasperation, but there’s a smile pulling at her lips -- and then without warning, she kicks at his shin under the table in a teasing, playful way that has him suddenly remembering their game of pool, how her body fit so perfectly against his, how she coaxed a reaction out of him that he couldn’t control. His skin suddenly feels warm and way too tight, and he grips his cup even more firmly. They’re in a dark corner of the shop, but Annie looks a little flushed too, and he knows that if he doesn’t do something soon, the awkwardness is going to become impossible to shake.

So he lifts his shoulders casually, like nothing’s wrong, and smiles. “Besides,” he says. “You’re looking at this the wrong way. It’s Ted’s last party before his leave of absence so he’s going all out. He’s having it at the St. James Hotel, which is a pretty fun place to hang out, and as you mentioned, open bar… so free booze.”

She sighs dramatically, smiling slightly. “So you’re saying I have to go?”

He nods. “Pretty much. I mean, if you don’t go, who’s going to be really judgmental about everyone else with me?”

Annie actually laughs, her eyes shining. “Okay, okay. Fine. I’ll go….” She takes a deep breath, all mirth gone. “But now, can we please talk about what’s really important? The case.”
He watches as she pulls a file out of her bag and starts leafing through her notes to figure out where
they left off. She absently reaches for her hot chocolate, taking a sip as she scans the pages -- but
then she stops, looking at up him with wide eyes. “Oh my God,” she says. “This hot chocolate is
amazing. I think there’s a hint of cinnamon in it.”

He smiles, discreetly glancing over his shoulder to make sure that Shirley hasn’t overheard Annie’s
princess and the pea moment.

And there’s no way he’s telling her -- she’d definitely make something out of that.
As always, the fact that this story is remotely legible or coherent is all due to Bethany's outstanding beta skills. She is a miracle worker.

And I offer my sincere apologies for the delay with this chapter. My goal is to update weekly, but I got derailed by a migraine. This chapter is a little longer than usual to make up for the wait.

When Annie comes out of the dressing room in her fourth dress, Troy is half-asleep in the comfy armchair, his eyes glazed over and mouth hanging open.

It is a pretty pitiful sight, but she totally understands -- shopping for a cocktail dress isn’t exactly her idea of a fun Sunday afternoon either.

“What about this one?” she asks, turning slowly so he can see it from every angle.

Troy frowns, pushing himself upright. “Every one you’ve tried on is black. It’s like someone died. Isn’t this supposed to be for a party?”

“Yes, but I need to look professional, Troy. I can’t show up in sequins.”

“Why not? Don’t you want to stand out? Get noticed?”

She runs her hands over the dress at her hips, smoothing away imaginary wrinkles. “For my intellect and abilities and work ethic. Not because I wear the flashiest dress.”

Troy groans, tipping his head back against the chair. It occurs to her that this is the precise reason why it often helps to have female friends who understand that choosing a dress isn’t as simple as picking the prettiest option. She thinks of Emily and Laura at Stanford for a moment -- they may not be the kind of lifelong friends that Troy and Abed are, but they would be much more helpful right now. They’d understand that she needs something that is fabulous but not so fabulous that she’d feel uncomfortable wearing it around some of the creepy guys she works with. Too bad Emily’s in San Diego and Laura’s in Philadelphia, and she hasn’t been in touch with them since she got back to Greendale. She was only able to get Troy to come and offer his opinion because she promised him a treat afterward.

“Just pick one,” Troy whines. “They’re all pretty much the same and I’m not sure how much more of this I can take. Even for bubble gum ice cream.”

“There’s just one more,” she tells him, ducking back inside the dressing room. It takes some impressive maneuvering, but she’s able to pull down the zipper at her back without any assistance. As she slips the dress back on its hanger and sets it on the hook in front of the previous three options, she has to admit that Troy is right. They are all virtually the same, just with a few minor details differing -- one with three-quarter sleeves, another with short sleeves; one with a V-neck, another with a scalloped neckline.

They’re all black and boring and probably better suited for a funeral.
She looks over at the last dress. If she’s honest, it’s her favorite, the only one that she was actually drawn to as it sat on the rack. Unlike the others, it’s a rich, dark navy -- which still seems professional but not quite as boring as black -- and there’s an embroidered lace overlay that makes it look sophisticated, not sweet.

But it’s when she slips it on that she really falls in love.

She looks and feels fantastic as she spins in front of the mirror. The neckline isn’t too low, so there’s not too much cleavage exposed, and the hem goes demurely to her knees, and yet she still feels kind of sexy. Work sexy anyway -- confident and capable and ready to charm every senior partner in a five-mile radius.

She really knows that it’s the right dress, though, when she steps outside again and Troy actually smiles. “That’s the one,” he declares. “For one, it’s not black. And you look hot… but not so hot that it’s too distracting and I wouldn’t pay attention to what you’re saying.”

She eyes herself critically in the floor-length mirror, trying to find a flaw. “You’re sure?”

Troy heaves himself to his feet and nods. “Yep. That’s it. Now go put your regular clothes back on so I can have my damn ice cream.”

It isn’t until she’s back in the dressing room, placing the dress on its hanger, that she checks the price tag: nearly $500. Normally, she’d never even dream of spending that much money on an item of clothing that she’ll probably wear two, maybe three, times a year tops, but she has a real job now, one that pays pretty well. In fact, the other afternoon, when her first paycheck hit her bank account via direct deposit, she’d come as close to hyperventilating as she ever has in her life. She’d done the calculations to make a reasonable guess as to what the net amount might be, but she wasn’t really sure how the taxes and health insurance and 401k contributions would shake out. Besides, it’s one thing to have a number in mind and another thing entirely to actually see her account balance more than double overnight.

After scratching and saving, skimping and budgeting like crazy for the past seven years, she isn’t about to go crazy, but it’s nice to know that she can buy a dress like this without worrying about how she’s going to eat for the next month. And it’s nice to be reminded that she won’t have to sleep on Troy and Abed’s futon forever. In a couple of months, she’ll have enough saved for her own place, and as much as she loves the guys, she can’t wait for that.

At Baskin-Robbins, Troy proves that he isn’t kidding -- he orders a triple scoop of bubble gum with hot fudge and gummy bears. She feels a little nauseated just watching him eat it, but it’s almost comforting to know that nothing much has changed about him in the three years that she’s been living in California, even something as insignificant as his favorite ice cream treat, and she digs into her own scoop of cookie dough to distract herself.

“I’m surprised Abed didn’t want to come,” she says. “He always used to love that bubble gum ice cream as much as you did.”

Troy nods. “He still does. He asked me to bring him home a cup, actually… but he had a serious breakthrough on the game last night and he wanted to work on it while it was still fresh.”

Annie frowns, fishing a chunk of cookie dough out of her cup. “I still don’t get it. Why is he spending so much time creating this video game when he really wants to be making movies?”

“You don’t get it,” Troy declares. “Abed’s brilliant! He’s figured out a way to combine the two. Because it’s not like there’s some big movie-making scene here in Greendale… so how’s he
supposed to get anyone to let him make one?”

“Well, he could move to L.A., for one thing.”

“But we work for one of the fastest-growing video game companies in the whole country,” Troy continues, ignoring her completely. “So he’s got an in with that industry… and they turn video games into movies all the time, like ‘Resident Evil’ and ‘Street Fighter’ and ‘Mortal Kombat’… and ‘Super Mario Brothers.’ But Abed’s really smart because he’s writing the movie and working on the game at the same time so it’s not gonna have some lame-ass story. It’s gonna rock!”

“Aren’t you supposed to be helping him with the game?”

Troy shrugs. “I’m really just in on general brainstorming and game testing. The other parts are too boring for me.”

Annie smiles. “Apparently even more boring than shopping for a cocktail dress. Why else would you be here?”

“You bribed me with ice cream, Annie. What sane guy would say no to ice cream?” He reaches his spoon into her cup to steal a taste, leaving a pink smear of bubble gum against her ice cream that makes her wrinkle her nose. “Besides, you’re working all the time so it was the only way to spend any time with you.”

“I’m not working all the time,” she insists, even though she knows that it’s a lie as soon as the words leave her mouth, and Troy rolls his eyes because he knows too. “Okay, fine. I’m working a lot. But this is what I wanted for so long. I want to make the most of my opportunity.”

Troy snickers. “What? To do it with your hot boss again?”

She kicks at his foot under the table and unleashes a glare that has him slumping a little in his seat. “Don’t even joke about that,” she practically hisses.

“Whoa, sorry. I was just kidding.” He shrugs, digging his spoon back into his own ice cream. “Is it not going well or something? Is that why you’re so touchy?”

She frowns. “I’m not touchy. And things are going fine. Well, aside from the fact that I have to babysit him every minute of the day to make sure he does any work.”

Troy squints, looking confused. “Isn’t he your boss? Why are you making sure he works?”

“Because he’d slack off at every turn if I didn’t… and leave me to do everything.”

“Because he’d slack off at every turn if I didn’t… and leave me to do everything.”

“But you like doing everything. Well, you used to anyway. You used to say Abed and I just screwed things up.”

“That’s when we were making dioramas and banners for extra credit. This is the real world. I can’t do it all myself.” She scrapes her spoon through her cup, searching for another chunk of cookie dough. “And I mean, he might be a slacker, but Jeff does have experience in an actual courtroom, with real, challenging cases, so it’s a chance to learn from someone who knows what he’s doing. So he has to do his part.”

“Do you like him?” Troy asks. “I mean, I guess you’d have to, ‘cause you did do the nasty with him that one time. But, like, now that you know him… is he a cool dude to work with?”

She shrugs, lifting her spoon to her mouth and letting the ice cream melt on her tongue. “He’s
okay,” she says.

She is not about to tell Troy that despite his laziness, Jeff is smart in a sly, sharp way that makes arguing with him, even about something as stupid as whether Disneyland is a valid vacation destination for an adult, more fun than she’s had in a long while; or that he always seems to sense when she’s completely fed up with the world at large and comes up with the perfect story or joke to distract her; or that one afternoon when she complained that her blood sugar was low, he came back from the vending machine with a bag of animal crackers because she mentioned once, in passing, that they were her favorite. None of that really matters in the grand scheme of things, none of that has any great meaning, not when compared to her career and the work and this case that has the potential to benefit both of them so much.

“You’re lucky, then,” Troy tells her, standing to get back on line to order Abed’s ice cream. “Because he could have been a real creep and then you’d have to work all day next to him, knowing he’d seen you naked.”

As usual, Troy’s voice is booming, and it seems to echo across Baskin-Robbins like a gunshot. She looks around in panic, trying to see if the other patrons have overheard -- one guy sitting alone with a sundae seems to be checking her out and she’s getting ready to send him her dirtiest look when her cellphone chimes in her purse, distracting her. Still, she manages to send the eavesdropper a mild glare that has him studying the contents of his dish like they hold all of life’s mysteries as she roots around in her bag.

When she sees that she has a text from Vaughn, she can’t help the vague feeling of dread that uncoils in her gut. She hasn’t heard from him in over a month, and it’s honestly been a relief because she is tired of all the pleas for another shot and awkward trips down memory lane. Now, though, all he’s sent is a photo, a selfie in front of some scenic view with mountains and pine trees and an impossibly blue sky. She has no idea where he is because he refused to plan any part of his cross-country trip. (“I just wanna go where the wind takes us, Mountain Flower,” he told her, back when he was still trying to convince her to come along. “No maps or GPS or anything.” Even if she hadn’t had a job lined up and waiting for her, she would’ve refused to go because the idea that he didn’t know her well enough after five years together to understand that she could never take a trip like that only solidified her growing belief that they were totally wrong for each other now.) But he looks happy, smiling crookedly and squinting at the sun in his eyes, and that is a relief too because that’s all she wants for him; and she knows, even if he doesn’t, that he has a much better chance at real happiness if she’s out of the picture.

For a second, she can’t help wondering if he got the van’s transmission checked out before he left like she told him to, if he brought along a jacket that’s warm enough now that it’s getting closer to winter, if he remembered a first aid kit and a spare tire. It hits her, in that moment, how grateful she is that she isn’t responsible for worrying about those things for him anymore, that the only person she has to worry about these days is herself.

That probably makes her a terrible person, but she refuses to feel guilty about it -- because now they’re both free to be happy in the way that they deserve.

“Sexting with the boss man?”

She looks up and finds Troy grinning down at her with a teasing gleam in his eye, and she promptly elbows him in the hip. “Shut up,” she says. “Got Abed’s ice cream?”

Troy nods, holding up a white paper bag. She throws her phone back in her purse and grabs the garment bag with her new dress from the chair beside her. Troy bumps his shoulder against hers as
they head for the car, like he wants to cheer her up.

“You know, they probably all already love you,” he says. “The bigwigs at the firm. It wouldn’t matter if you showed up at the party in Abed’s Inspector SpaceTime cosplay gear. They’d still think you’re the best.”

She smiles, bumping her shoulder back against him. “Of course you think that. You’re my friend.”

He nods. “Duh. I’m your friend... so I know how great you are.” She is trying to decide whether she should hug him or pretend that his vote of confidence isn’t really a big deal, doesn’t mean all that much to her, but Troy shrugs before she can. “And the dress ain’t gonna hurt.”

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An appointment with an accountant is a decidedly crappy way to start the work day in his book.

But it’ll get Annie off his back for a little while and the meeting actually winds up being pretty productive. Carol Strause, forensic CPA, has found a way to spin Pine Brook Capital’s financials in a way that doesn’t make Simon Rutherford look like a complete and utter crook.

Best of all, he’s back in his own office by a quarter to eleven so it doesn’t even take up that much of his morning -- which means he has to call it a win and reluctantly concede that Annie was right when she insisted that the meeting was worth his time.

Not that he’s about to tell her that. She’s probably already starting to catch on to the fact that she’s the brains behind this operation (he isn’t insecure, so he’s totally fine with being the pretty face and charm), and he really doesn’t want to throw any more fuel on the fire.

So after a morning of (semi-) hard work, he figures that he deserves a little reward and he’s got a couple of hours to kill before he’s supposed to meet Eric for lunch -- which means a little shopping spree on the Barneys website is in order. He’s just adding a cashmere crewneck in a shade of blue that is sure to bring out his eyes to his cart when his office door unceremoniously opens and Alan strolls in.

Claire must be away from her desk because she’s always good about warning him when Alan or someone of his ilk is within a two office-radius, because normally, this type of unexpected visit would have the potential to ruin his day. But considering that he’s the one with the complete upper hand at the moment, that he’ll have made senior partner by early next year while Alan’s still scrambling to find middling cases to get there himself, Jeff is almost welcoming it. As usual, Alan’s wearing a smug grin, but there’s something almost squirrelly about the way he fidgets in front of Jeff’s desk.

“Sundance,” Jeff says amiably. “What can I do for you?”

Alan shakes his head. “You’ve got it all wrong, Tango. This is about what I can do for you.”

Jeff smirks, stopping himself from rolling his eyes, because he’s pretty sure where this is going -- it’s another awkward attempt by Alan to sell the idea that he’d actually be of help on the Rutherford case. That’s bullshit, of course, because all the prick would do is try to sabotage Jeff at every turn, but still, Jeff waves a hand for Alan to continue, like all of this isn’t a colossal waste of time.

“I’m going to take care of the Torrey case for you,” Alan says. “You know, so you don’t have to worry about it.”
Jeff grins. “The trust-fund baby facing nose candy charges? Really? You’ve got the time for that with your busy schedule, Sundance?”

Alan fidgets a little, sliding the stapler at the corner of the desk back and forth. “Well, you know… Ted asked me if I would,” he admits reluctantly. “And I’m nothing if not a team player.”

Jeff tries but fails to reign in his chuckle. “Of course you are, buddy.” He turns in his chair to flip through his file sorter to find the Torrey folder. When he turns around to hand it over, Alan’s chewing at his lip, probably because it’s not quite as easy to eat his heart out. “There you go, buddy. That should be everything you need.”

Alan manages a tight smile and a brisk, little nod before he turns tail and heads for the door, and Jeff allows himself to fully enjoy the moment, clasping his hands behind his head as he watches the other man retreat. It’ll be enough amusement to carry him all the way through until lunch.

At the very last minute, though, Alan turns around, grinning in his slimy, smarmy way. “Before I go,” he says, sounding a little dramatic. “I feel like I should also give you a little friendly advice.”

Jeff smiles. “You’ve got advice for me?”

Alan shrugs. “Well, see, the other day, I had the pleasure of meeting the first-year associate who’s helping you on the Rutherford case. Annie Edison, right?”

Jeff feels his hand curl automatically, almost instinctively, into a fist against his thigh, but he somehow manages to keep his expression blank as he nods slowly.

Yeah, she’s really something else,” Alan says, with a laugh. “Let’s just say, I know exactly why you chose her. I mean, I kind of thought you’d go the more traditional route and pick the blonde, but…” He shrugs. “Here’s the thing, though…” He walks back over to the desk, leaning in close like they’re old friends sharing something in genuine confidence. “It’s probably not the best idea to bang the chick who’s helping you with the biggest case of your career.”

Jeff narrows his eyes. “Excuse me?”

“Well, I mean, common sense-wise… she’ll probably be a distraction. And worst-case scenario, someone goes to the partners and the board and puts a little bug in their ear about you being a sexual harassment case waiting to happen and poof! The Rutherford case goes up in smoke.”

It’s a supreme act of will power, but Jeff manages not to snap, taking a deep breath and crossing his arms over his chest instead. “I’m not really worried about that happening,” he says. “Because I’m not sleeping with Annie. See, the thing is, I’m not so hard up that I’ve got to troll for prospects among the first-years. You might not be able to understand that, but…”

Alan chuckles, holding his hands up as if in surrender. “Hey, come on, Wing Man. No need to get nasty. I’m just trying to be a bud here, let you know how it might look. Because out of almost fifteen first-years, you coincidentally wind up choosing the one with the biggest rack to work with you? I mean, not that I think there’s anything sleazy going on… but you know how people are around here. They’re animals. Filthy, gossiping animals.”

Jeff heaves himself to his feet, so he can tower over Alan and look directly in his beady little eyes. “People around here can say whatever they want, because I chose Annie on the strength of her credentials. She graduated with honors from Stanford Law, she was editor of the Law Review, she had a stack of outstanding recommendations from summer internships--”

“Oh, sure,” Alan says. “Of course. But you know, with the way she looks, who’s going to believe
any of that really mattered?”

“Considering I picked her based solely on her resume, without knowing what she looked like, I bet plenty of people will believe it.”

Alan smirks, nodding. “Yeah, that’s good. That’s the story to tell everyone for sure.”

Whatever patience Jeff might have is wearing pretty damn thin, and if he doesn’t get this asshole out of his office in the next few minutes, he might seriously consider tossing Alan out the fucking window. “You know, if I were you, Alan,” he says, “I’d worry a little more about what everyone’s saying about you. Because I don’t think the McAlister case is gonna be enough to get you senior partner… and defending trust-fund babies on nose candy charges definitely isn’t going to get it done either.”

“Whoa, Winger. Calm down, alright? What, are you on your period or something? I’m just trying to offer a little advice. But if you think you know better…” Alan shrugs, failing miserably at trying to look innocent. “Good luck with Rutherford… and staying out of trouble with Annie.”

Alan leaves, just as unceremoniously as he arrived, but it takes a moment for Jeff to sit back down behind his desk. Nothing that dick said had any real effect on him, though, even if he finds himself trying to imagine some scenario in which Alan could have found out about his night with Annie before she started at Hamish, Hamish, Hamlin, & Hawthorne. But that’s a waste of time because the only two people who know about it are him and Annie, and neither of them is spreading that news around.

It’s just Alan’s usual M.O., trying to make trouble and play head games in his ridiculous, ineffective way. There’s no reason to pay it any more attention than that.

So Jeff goes back to his computer, where the Barneys website is still open, and distracts himself with shoes and belts and some seriously cool leather jackets until he’s spent nearly a thousand dollars and it’s finally time for lunch.

--

She’s tried her best to ignore it, but when Jeff practically slams his hand against the stapler in an attempt to fasten together the printouts that she just gave him, as petulant as she’s ever seen him, she has to admit that his huffy mood is becoming an issue.

The fact that his annoyance and anger haven’t been directed specifically at her, but at everyone who crosses his path, is the sole reason that she’s tried to overlook it. It’s obviously not something that she’s done to offend him or some imagined wrong on her part that he’s brooding over, so she told herself that it was really none of her business. Now, though, it’s starting to make working with him more than a little uncomfortable, which means it might be time to finally say something.

It’s no mystery what set him off this afternoon -- he kicked at the wall like a cranky child when they went up to conference room F for their daily progress report meeting and found that one of the Mergers and Acquisitions attorneys had already snagged it for a client appointment. Apparently, they couldn’t go the coffee shop either because it’s raining and Jeff is wearing his brand new cashmere-wool Burberry coat today and refuses to risk any water spots (she had to bite her tongue to refrain from pointing out that spending nearly $4000 on a coat that he won’t wear in rain or snow is a ridiculous waste of money) so they’re stuck in his office. But it really isn’t a bad place to work, so she doesn’t understand why he’s still so annoyed.

He smacks his hand against the stapler again, because apparently he missed the first time, and
curses under his breath.

She looks up from her notes. “Is something wrong?”

He squints at her, like he doesn’t quite understand the question, but then he waves the pages in his hand at her dismissively. “No. It’s just … it’s been a long week.”

“Only a day and a half left,” she offers hopefully.

He almost smiles as he leans back in his chair. “That is true. You really are--”

The door to his office suddenly flies open and one of the mailroom carts is shoved to nearly the center of the room. It’s followed by a blonde woman who, coincidentally, looks just as peeved as Jeff does. She pushes the cart to the side and huffs in frustration, crossing her arms over her chest. “They stuck me in the mailroom again,” she declares to the room at large. “That’s the third time in a row. It’s ridiculous! Like I’m not qualified to do anything else around here but hand out catalogs and platinum card offers. It’s an insult!”

Annie is more than a little confused, so she looks over at Jeff, who rolls his eyes without an ounce of humor. “What the hell do you want me to do about it, Britta?”

The woman throws up her hands. “Oh, I don’t know… maybe talk to someone? You’re always crowing about how much pull you have around here. How about using it for good for once?”

“Seriously?” Jeff shakes his head in obvious annoyance. “You tell me that you need a second job and I hook you up with this temp gig and you still expect me to pull strings and get you some cushy position where you can spend all afternoon Googling possible protest locations? Dream on.”

“I’m not saying I don’t want to do any work. I’m saying I want to do something that actually requires more than three brain cells, okay? Can’t you just call up the HR guy and ask--”

“Listen, Britta,” Jeff says firmly. “I really don’t have time for this. Because some of us have real, meaningful work to do, okay?”

Annie can’t help smiling. “By some of us, you don’t mean you, do you? Because you’ve spent more time on your fantasy football team’s lineup than the case today.”

For a moment, Jeff shoots her an irritated glare, but she smiles back as resolutely as she can and his expression softens into something almost amused.

The blonde, apparently named Britta, snickers before asking, “Who’s this? Because I like her. She’s sassy -- doesn’t take your crap. We can always use more of those.”

“Maybe I would have been polite and introduced you properly if you hadn’t come in here complaining from word one.” He holds his hand out toward Annie. “Britta, this is Annie Edison. She’s working with me on a case.” He juts his chin toward Britta. “Annie, this is Britta Perry. Part-time bartender, part-time Hamish, Hamish, Hamlin, & Hawthorne floating temp, and full-time pain in my ass.”

“Shut up, asshole,” Britta says almost good-naturedly, as she comes over to shake Annie’s hand. “It’s nice to meet you. Though you have my condolences, having to work with this guy.”

Annie smiles. “So you guys are old friends?”

Jeff shrugs, while Britta shakes her head. “Not really,” she says. “I mean, we’ve only known each
“Something like that,” Jeff says. “Once upon a time, I saved Britta from jail time when she tried to set a bunch of lobsters free at Safeway, and--”

“Hey, I didn’t ask you for help,” she snaps, jabbing a finger at him. “It was my stupid parents, always meddling in my life.”

Jeff smirks. “Yeah, they spent their hard-earned money to keep you out of jail. What monsters.”

Britta scowls, but apparently decides that ignoring him is the best course of action, flipping her hair over her shoulder and taking the seat beside Annie. “So Annie, you’re a lawyer too?”

“Yes. I graduated from law school in May, so this is my first--”

“I’ve got to be honest with you,” Britta says. “I don’t have much respect for the American justice system.”

Jeff throws his head back and groans, and it seems like he’s definitely heard this speech more than once. “No one cares, Britta,” he insists. “In fact, we’re employed because of that justice system you hate so much, so all your rhetoric is just going to fall on deaf ears.”

“Well, actually,” Annie says, lifting a shoulder, “I kind of agree. There are definite flaws in the system. In most cases, though, the best way to change something is from the inside, so…”

The corner of Jeff’s mouth lifts in an almost-smile, and something about the way he looks at her reminds her of that night in the bar, when she wanted so badly to be someone else but couldn’t help being herself. It rattles her, leaves her feeling jittery and anxious, so she looks over at Britta, who’s nodding vehemently.

“See?” she says. “That’s because you’re a smart, driven person who actually has a conscience. You know what you should be doing? Working as a public defender… or for a non-profit organization. Somewhere you can really make a difference.”

Jeff laughs derisively. “Yeah, and barely make 40k a year? She’d still be paying off her student loans when she hits retirement.”

“Money and material things aren’t everyone’s number-one priority,” Britta declares. “Like, I mean, Annie… what kind of car do you drive?”

“Um, a very ancient Toyota Camry… but I’m thinking my next car will be a hybrid.”

Britta nods approvingly again. “Well, that’s something. See, Winger? She’s not going to go out and buy some flashy sports car just because she’ll have the money. Because some people actually have a social conscience. They don’t just buy a gas-guzzling car because it happens to complement their eyes.” She throws her shoulders back haughtily. “Personally, I use a bike. Which, you know, is much better for the environment.”

Jeff snorts. “Yeah, and that’s got nothing to do with the fact that your car died and you can’t afford a new one, right?” Britta turns and flashes him the finger rather elegantly, but he doesn’t rise to the bait. “Hey, by the way, do I actually have any mail? Isn’t that why you came up here?”

Reluctantly, Britta pushes herself out of her chair and goes back to the cart. She grabs a couple of envelopes and a magazine and nearly throws them on Jeff’s desk. “Thanks for nothing, as usual, Jeff,” she says, as she heaves the car back out into the hallway. “Nice to meet you, Annie. Good
Annie murmurs her goodbye as Britta and the cart disappear down the hall. When Annie turns back to Jeff, he’s reading over the pages that she gave him with a ridiculous amount of concentration, almost like he’s avoiding her gaze.

“So…” she says, “are you so close with all of your former clients?”

He sighs, sounding exasperated. “Britta’s barely a friend. She’s kind of like an annoying rock that gets stuck in your shoe that you can’t seem to shake loose.”

“You got her a job,” Annie points out.

“Because she’s a mooch who never pays back the money I lend her. This way, there’s at least a small chance I’ll actually get a dime back.”

Annie nods, figuring that it’s best not to argue the point, even if it seems like he wouldn’t lend money that he knew he wasn’t going to get back to someone who wasn’t a real friend in the first place. She looks at him across the desk, leafing through his notes, and sighs. “And you’re sure nothing’s wrong? Some problem with the case, or a--”

“I’m fine, Annie,” he says -- and amazingly, when he grins now, it’s so genuine that she finds herself smiling back automatically. “I’m just worried about finding something to wear to the party tomorrow night.”

She smirks. “And here I thought you’d already have the perfect $8,000 suit all ready to go.”

“I’ve got a closet full of those, Annie. It’s tough to narrow down the choices.”

“Oh, it’s not that hard,” she says, flipping open her note pad. “Britta’s right -- you always go with whatever makes your eyes pop.”

She gestures toward his pale blue dress shirt which almost exactly matches his eyes. He looks down at his chest, his grin widening, and she feels that jittery, fluttery buzz skitter through her body again.

“You think you know me that well already?” he asks, and it’s difficult to tell whether he’s amused or annoyed again or genuinely curious.

So she just shrugs, doodling random squiggles in the margin of her pad and hoping she hasn’t given too much away.

--

His first mistake is agreeing to get a drink with Kristy when they run into one another in the lobby of the building as he’s trying to duck out early.

The second and bigger mistake, though, is taking her to L Street.

Really, he’s just begging for bad karma -- because he hasn’t been there since the night he met Annie.

It’s not like he’s avoided the place intentionally or anything. It’s only been about a month, and he’s pretty sure he’s gone that long without stopping by L Street in the past. But he’d be lying if he said the place wasn’t linked to Annie pretty strongly in his head, which is only confirmed when he
follows Kristy inside and is practically assaulted with the kind of sense memories that could bring a guy to his knees.

But it’ll only get weirder if he waits any longer to go there with another woman, almost like it’s become “their place” or something -- which is ridiculous for so many reasons, but mainly because they are nothing more than co-workers and he’s technically her supervisor at the moment and they have no business having a “their place.”

Maybe that’s the reason he suggests it to Kristy, as an easy way to replace the memories of his night with Annie with something new. Of course, there’s also the fact that L Street happens to be the closest bar that’s halfway decent, and he’s been in such a shitty mood this week that if he doesn’t get some alcohol to mellow him out as soon as possible, he’s pretty sure that Kristy won’t be hanging around long.

That might not be such a bad thing, though, because she orders a Cosmo, which is so stupidly predictable that he has to squint as the bartender takes his order to keep from rolling his eyes. Then she starts some story about Todd, who works with her in Marketing and is, according to Kristy, desperately in love with Quendra from HR, even though she doesn’t know he exists, and he couldn’t possibly care any less about this petty office gossip, so he throws back his scotch in one deep gulp in the hopes that it’ll fuzzy up his brain a little faster.

He’s seriously starting to wonder why he thought this was a good idea. Sure, Kristy’s got a nice smile and would almost certainly look fantastic naked, and sex with her would likely distract him for a little while. But somehow, everything about her is annoying him at the moment, from the way she taps her foot against the rung on her stool, to her French manicure, to her habit of sighing heavily for no good reason.

It’s not really Kristy’s fault, either. He’s been frustrated and angry all week because, almost four days later, he still can’t stop thinking about his conversation with that asshole Alan -- and it only pisses him off more that Alan’s the reason behind it all, too. In weaker moments, he’s even started to find himself blaming Annie, because she’s the one who started all of this, who sent that drink over and made it impossible to ignore her. Alan’s words would have zero weight if that night had never happened.

But he knows that’s irrational; he knows that’s crazy. And he doesn’t really understand why anything that bastard said is bothering him so much, when there isn’t even a shred of truth to it -- but then he really doesn’t want to analyze the whole situation too closely either, because that might dredge up other things that would make him uncomfortable, so he’s been stuck in brooding mode, with no obvious way to get out it.

He ducked out of the office tonight without letting Annie know mainly because he feels worse when he’s around he. But he didn’t even think that through, because because now he’s got a good dose of guilt to pile on top of his annoyance.

“So…” Kristy says, toying with the lime wedge on the rim of her glass. “I heard you’re handling the Rutherford case. That’s a big deal. A really big deal.”

He shrugs, managing a smile. “It’s a pretty good opportunity,” he says, all faux modesty.

“They’re all insanely jealous of you, you know. The other junior partners. It’s all they can talk about.”

Jeff chuckles. “Is that right? I hadn’t heard about that.”
Kristy laughs, leaning in a little closer. “Oh, who are you kidding, Jeff? You love it, knowing they’d all murder you for a chance at that case.”

“It doesn’t suck,” he admits, and she nods, twirling a strand of her auburn hair around her finger with a sultry gleam in her eye. “But you know, it’s not that…” He trails off, feeling his phone vibrate inside his jacket pocket, and once he pulls it free and sees that he has a text from Annie, he loses his entire train of thought.

As if he needs a reminder of everything that he’s running from.

*Are you still around?* she’s written. *I’ve got the name of a former Pine Brook investment officer I think we really need to look into.*

He sighs, reading over the message a few times for no good reason. It would be so easy to ignore it, go back to his drink with Kristy, and forget all about it -- or tell her that he’s busy tonight and they’ll go over her new info in the morning. It would be that easy to get out of it. But as he looks over at Kristy, her eyes glittering in the dim light of the bar, he can’t seem to make himself do it.

“Speaking of Rutherford,” he says to Kristy, “duty calls. I’ve got to get back to the office.”

Kristy pouts, looking more than a little ridiculous. “So soon?”

He nods, pulling some money out of his wallet to cover their drinks and throwing it down on the bar. “Sorry. But like you said, this is a big deal.”

She sighs, but bobs her head in agreement. “Okay... but we’ll have to finish our drink tomorrow night. At Ted’s party.”

“Sure,” he says, but he’s barely paying attention, trying to figure out if he can make it to Shirley’s before they close. He’s going to need coffee -- and lots of it -- if he’s going to make it through the evening.

Fortunately, Shirley herself isn’t behind the counter when he orders, so she doesn’t shoot him a knowing glance or asked him pointedly how Annie is when he orders two coffees. It’s barely after seven when he makes it back to the office, but the place is already a ghost town -- which is probably a good thing. It means there’s no one there to see him when he finds Annie behind her desk, her dark hair twisted up in a messy bun as she diligently researches their case, and stands in the doorway for nearly a minute just watching her work.

She looks up suddenly, almost as if she senses that he’s there, and smiles. “You’re still here,” she says, sounding pleased. “I was hoping I hadn’t missed you.”

He holds up the coffee cups so she can see them. “I was at Shirley’s when you texted. If I know you, you’ll have us working all night, so caffeine is a necessity.”

She shrugs, looking almost sheepish. “You’re probably not wrong.”

He settles himself in the uncomfortable chair in front of her desk and slides one of the coffees toward her -- and she must have faith in him, because she takes a sip of it without checking to make sure that it’s the way she likes it. Of course, he did get it right, though, if the satisfied little sigh she makes after tasting it is any indication.

“Thanks,” she says. “I really needed that.”

He shrugs, fiddling with his own cup. “Okay, so what’s this big breakthrough you had?”
Just at the mention of her research victory, her eyes go all bright and her smile gets all self-satisfied, and he seriously has to check himself because in that moment, he wants to kiss her more than he’s ever wanted anything.

“I’ve been going over Pine Brook employee records and speaking to some former employees,” she explains. “And I’ve finally found someone who might be of interest to the case. Deborah Wahlstrom.”

“Deborah Wahlstrom?” Jeff repeats. “What’s her deal?”

“Well, she started as an intern about 15 years ago… and five years later, she was promoted to investment officer, which, according to everything I’ve dug up, is very unusual.”

He waves a dismissive hand. “Okay, so she jumped a few rungs on the ladder. Big deal. How does that help us?”

Annie is silent for a moment, leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms over her chest. She must really believe that the info she’s got is top-notch because this is the same act he’d pull if he was getting ready to knock someone’s socks off.

“According to the financials and Carol Strause’s analysis, Deborah Wahlstrom’s promotion to investment officer directly coincides with the first incident of investors’ money disappearing,” Annie says triumphantly.

Jeff nods. “Okay. That’s definitely something we can work with.”

“There’s more!” She practically bounces up and down in her seat, and he can only grin. “She was let go from Pine Brook two years ago under a real black cloud, but no one really knows why. And since then, she’s disappeared off the face of the earth.”

It is pretty perfect, he thinks. Someone to cast blame on and raise reasonable doubt, who won’t even be around to defend herself, so it won’t really require getting his hands dirty.

“That’s good, Annie,” he tells her. “Really good work.”

Behind her desk, she beams, like he’s handed her a shiny gold star to pin to her lapel -- and it occurs to him how stupid he’s been, paying any mind to any of Alan’s trash talk. Annie brings more to the table than most of other junior partners, let alone the other first-years, and once anyone spends even five minutes with her, they’d understand that.

“It’s amazing, right?” Annie says. “I mean, it’s a real shot at concrete proof that Rutherford hasn’t done anything wrong.”

He shifts in his chair, avoiding her hopeful gaze -- because apparently she honestly believes that there’s a chance that Rutherford is innocent, which is obviously ridiculous. He could just tell her that, explain that that’s almost never the case, but she’s just starting out, just learning how to play this game, and maybe she needs that belief to fuel her along. He doesn’t think that he was ever that hopeful, even the day that he worked on his first case, but he wasn’t always as cynical as he is now.

At least, he doesn’t think so. It’s hard to remember that far back sometimes.

It’s not even about Annie’s innocence, though -- he needs her to keep her head in the game, be as committed to the case as she’s been from the start, so pointing out that there’s probably zero chance that their client is innocent would be a tactical mistake of the highest order.
“But there is a problem,” Annie says, gesturing toward her computer. “I’ve been searching for over an hour in virtually every database we have access to… and I can’t find a single record of Deborah Wahlstrom in the past two years. It’s like she’s vanished into thin air.”

“Or is lounging on a beach in some country with no extradition treaty, with a shiny new identity,” he offers. “It’s okay, though. The firm’s got some private investigators on retainer. I’m sure they can track her down.”

She grins again, clapping her hands together excitedly, and he laughs, because there’s nothing else to do really. Annie starts making a list of the former Pine Brook employees that they might still want to talk to, brainstorming aloud, but he’s barely listening. Somewhere in the middle of it, though, she pulls a bag of animal crackers out of her desk drawer, shaking a few out onto the napkin under her coffee cup -- and then she pushes it toward him without looking up. He doesn’t know why he takes one -- because he has no intention of eating it -- but he slides a cracker shaped like an elephant out of the bag before pushing it back to her.

It’s still pressed against the palm of his hand when he walks to his car two hours later.

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It goes all the way back to childhood, the unshakable notion that if she’s not at least ten minutes early for an appointment or event, she is running late -- ever since she was 12 years old and her parents decided that she was old enough to walk the three blocks to the bus stop by herself and she was always the first one there.

So when she walks into the ballroom of the St. James Hotel at 7:35, five full minutes after the cocktail party’s prescribed start time, she feels as if she’s showing up a little more than fashionably late. But she had to go home to shower and change, and her hair refused to cooperate, which meant she had to spend nearly half an hour in the bathroom, trying to tame the frizz. And then she still had to do her makeup and find a pair of earrings that complemented her dress. The room is not even half-full when she gets there, though, so she’s arrived before approximately half of her co-workers and no one is likely to notice.

But even setting aside the timing issue, she feels out of place at this stupid party. She doesn’t really have a problem talking to people, not even strangers, particularly about things that are important to her, but that’s the thing: she is fairly certain that the people at this party don’t want to talk about anything remotely important. She has no idea how to wander up to one of the partners and make stupid, superficial small talk -- and honestly, she resents having to do it.

Of course, Jeff is probably right that it’s something that she should do for the good of her career, but she really has no clue how to go about it.

She scans the room, looking for Vicki or one of the other first-year associates that she’s sort of friendly with, but she can’t find any of them. She does see Quendra from HR, chatting with an older man that she doesn’t recognize, but Annie isn’t even sure how to start a conversation with her at the moment.

It’s ridiculous, because Annie’s aced so many interviews in her life -- including the one for this particular job -- so she knows how to sell herself. There’s no reason for it to be this hard, but as she huddles against the wall, trying to figure out the fine art of mingling and business networking, there’s one thought going through her head: Jeff would know what to do and say. Jeff has the kind of charm and charisma that make this sort of thing child’s play. In fact, that’s probably why he can afford to be such a slacker at the rest of his job.
He can smooth everything over with a carefully crafted conversation and a winning smile.

Annie is about three seconds away from taking out her phone and googling ‘easy conversation starters’ like a loser when a champagne flute suddenly appears over her shoulder, full of bubbly. It’s as if her thoughts have summoned him, because she turns and finds Jeff smiling down at her.

“You’re going to need this,” he says.

She nods and takes the glass, sipping from it delicately instead of tossing the entire thing back like she really wants. She studies Jeff discreetly over the rim of her glass, and observes that unlike almost all of the other men in the room, he’s ditched the navy suit that he wore to the office for a sleek black option that somehow makes him look taller and broader at the same time. His tie is a rich cobalt blue that pops against the stark white of his shirt and does amazing things to his eyes. Normally, she’d probably think him vain or superficial for going to all the trouble of changing, but he obviously knows what he’s doing, standing out in a room full of drab gray, so she only thinks him smart.

He sips his champagne, scanning the room for a moment before turning back to gaze at her. “You look great, by the way,” he practically purrs, and she curses the flush that she can feel creeping up the back of her neck.

“That’s inappropriate,” she tells him.

He laughs. “It’s inappropriate to tell a coworker she looks nice? I just told Hamilton from Family Law that he was looking good and he didn’t seem to take offense.”

“Probably because you didn’t say it in a way that suggests you’ve seen him naked.”

“Nah, probably not. Hammy’s got some body image issues. I didn’t want to remind him of the incident with a dropped towel in the steam room.”

She shakes her head, unable to hide her smile. “You are so…”

Jeff grins, and she suddenly remembers with vivid clarity exactly why he was impossible to walk away from that night at the bar. “Witty? Charming? Devastatingly handsome?” He cocks his head and waits for a moment. “Okay, the fact that you’re not answering leads me to believe it’s all of the above.”


He shrugs, not bothering to argue. He looks around the room again, which is finally starting to fill up, and she wonders what he’s searching for, what exactly he hopes to get out of this evening. As far as she can tell, he is already in prime position at the firm -- they’ve already trusted him with their biggest case after all -- and it’s only a matter of time before he makes senior partner. There doesn’t seem to be much advantage to chatting with people that he doesn’t really like about the Broncos’ chances on Sunday or whether Aspen, Vail or Telluride is the place to be this season.

He finishes his glass of champagne and sets it on the tray of a passing waiter. “Okay,” he says, rolling his shoulders almost like he’s gearing up for a workout. “As much fun as it would be to hang out in this corner with you all night, we’ve got to get out there. Networking, Annie. That’s the whole reason you’re here.”

She sighs. “I’m trying… I just don’t know how to do it. Am I just supposed to go up to people I don’t know and--”
“You think too much,” he tells her, with a smile. “Come on…”

She doesn’t realize that he’s guiding her across the room to where Ted is holding court with several junior partners until they’re barely five feet from him and there’s no way to gracefully back out. Jeff hands her a fresh glass of champagne, like he’s sensed somehow that her mouth is a little dry, and she takes a sip to steady herself.

“Ted,” Jeff says, clapping a hand against the older man’s back. “You’ve outdone yourself. This is some party.”

Ted grins, shaking his head amiably. “Oh, come on, Jeff. You know it’s not really a party until you show up.”

Annie keeps a polite smile plastered on her face, despite how strong the urge to roll her eyes is -- and it’s a good thing too, because Jeff drops his hand to her shoulder, moving her forward and closer to Ted. “You know, I don’t think you’ve gotten the chance to meet Annie Edison yet,” he says. “She’s one of our new first-years and she’s assisting on the Rutherford case.”

Ted smiles, though he scans her from head to toe like he’s trying to size her up. “Annie Edison,” he repeats. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“You too, sir.” She takes the hand that he extends and is unsurprised that his handshake is overly firm and overly aggressive.

“You’re pretty lucky, you know,” he tells her, nodding toward Jeff. “You’re working with one of our very best. You can learn a lot.”

She meets Jeff’s gaze, smiling just a bit. “I feel like I’ve learned so much already,” she says, and sure, she’s laying it on a little thick, and Jeff knows it if his slight smirk is any indication, but Ted nods briskly. “I’m just so grateful for the opportunity.”

“I’m pretty lucky too,” Jeff says. “Annie’s been a big help. And she’s a Stanford grad, you know.”


Jeff lifts his glass toward Ted. “That’s right. I’d almost forgotten.”

When he looks over at Annie, he is barely smiling, but there is something bright shimmering in his eyes so when he gives a discreet wink, just as Ted launches into some story about his time on the Law Review, she is already expecting it.

But the way it makes her stomach flip, like she’s falling from a roller coaster’s highest peak, is something of a surprise.

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It takes just about an hour and a half before Annie decides that she’s had her fill.

Jeff has introduced her to Ted, Larry, and Doug, and with John still in rehab, that’s all of the senior partners who sit on the board. He also makes sure that she gets a few minutes with Suzanne, Mike, and Lauren, the other senior partners who are worth impressing. Annie can claim that she doesn’t know how to talk to people like that all she wants, but she pretty much kicks ass as they make the rounds -- and he can’t even take any credit because he might make the introductions but he sits back for the rest of it so she does the hard work of charming the pants off of them.
It’s not really a big deal, helping her out like this. He long ago won over everyone in this room who matters, and he’s poised to leap to the top of the firm food chain any day now. Once he ties up the Rutherford case with a neat, little bow, he’ll get his senior partner title and fifth-floor corner office.

Besides, if Annie looks good, he looks good, so there’s sort of something in it for him too.

“I need a break,” she whispers after they finish talking to Lauren. “And some fresh air. It’s so stuffy in here.”

So he follows her out onto the terrace, which is empty, probably because it’s pretty cold. Still, it offers a nice view of their dull, little city, all lit up and glowing in the darkness like it’s someplace worth visiting. Annie crosses her arms over her chest, like she’s trying to trap some warmth.

“Wow,” she says. “I wasn’t expecting it to be so chilly for some reason.”

He grins. “But it’s hot chocolate weather, remember?”

She rolls her eyes, rubbing her hands over her arms, and before even he realizes what he’s doing, he’s slipping off his jacket and draping it over her shoulders. And immediately, he feels like the biggest loser on earth, like some pimply-faced teenager at his first dance with a pretty girl that he doesn’t deserve, so even though Annie smiles up at him with a warmth that makes him barely aware of the temperature, he forces himself to frown.

“Don’t spill anything on it,” he mutters.

She huffs out a laugh, shaking her head as she looks out on the city. He leans against the railing beside her and tries to focus on the skyline.

“That felt like a huge waste of time,” she says. “Was it a huge waste of time?”

He gapes at her. “Are you kidding? They loved you, Annie. All of ‘em.”

She scrunches up her nose, looking dubious. “I barely spoke five minutes to any of them. What difference could that possibly make?”

“You got face time. Believe it or not, that matters. You think any of the other first-years got that?”

She cocks her head, grinning slyly. “Most of them were hanging around the bar all night, trying to find an in. They didn’t get far.”

He smiles back at her, because if he’s honest, he is seriously into how competitive she is, how she seems to want to annihilate anyone who might try to be even half as impressive as she is. “See?” he says. “You’re at the head of the class.”

Annie preens for a moment, clearly pleased with the notion, and then turns to him, ready to offer up some witty retort, when there’s a loud bang against the French doors behind them. Jeff turns just in time to see Alan stumbling against the glass, clearly having indulged a little too much at the open bar if his rumpled suit and lack of balance are any clue.

“Ugh,” Annie says when she catches a glimpse of him. “That guy is so gross.”

Jeff frowns. “You know Alan?”

“No really. He cornered me in the gym last week and was a real creep.”

It all makes more sense now, why Alan came at him with all that crap earlier in the week -- he was
jealous of the Rutherford case and pissed that Annie shot him down. He’s got more than one axe to grind, apparently. Jeff straightens up, looking over at Alan who’s staggering back toward the bar. “He didn’t try to--”

“Oh, no,” Annie says. “Not really. He was just a jerk. No big deal.” She looks up at Jeff warily. “He’s not a friend of yours, is he?”

Jeff snorts. “Not even a little bit. He’s kind like of my Lex Luthor.”

Annie giggles, biting at her lip to reign it in. “Does that make you Superman then?”

“Hey, you said it, I didn’t.”

She bumps her elbow against his almost scoldingly, and his borrowed jacket falls off her shoulder. He reaches up to right it, and their eyes meet suddenly, and there’s something so warm and tender in her gaze that he feels his skin heat, and for one long, achingly still moment, they’re both very still, like they don’t quite know what to do. Annie finally lowers her head, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

“You know, I still feel like tonight was a bust,” she says lightly. “The conversation was boring, the music was awful, and I wasted a ridiculous amount of money on this dress.” She plucks at the lacy hem of her skirt almost accusingly, and he’s a little offended on behalf of the dress because he’s spent all night admiring the way the midnight blue fabric makes her pale skin look even more luminous.

“You didn’t waste any money,” he tells her. “Trust me.”

She smiles again, and he knows that she’s not drunk because she’s barely had three glasses of champagne all evening, but her eyes are so bright and her cheeks are so flushed that she’s practically glowing in the dim light of the terrace. It reminds him of that first moment he saw her, sitting across the bar like the answer to a question he hadn’t even asked yet.

“I really don’t know how I let you talk me into coming,” she teases.

He smirks, lifting an indifferent shoulder. “Don’t feel bad. I’m really good at talking people into things. It’s how I make my living, you know.”

She tilts her head, as if she’s considering the idea very carefully, and slides forward a few steps, so there’s very little space between them. He can smell her perfume, something warm and rich with a hint of vanilla, and he leans down, somehow knowing that when she speaks again, she’s going to whisper.

“You didn’t talk me into it,” she tells him. “That night at the bar. You know that, right?”

He nods automatically, even though he hasn’t really thought about it before, hasn’t really considered how all the dominoes fell that night. Knowing Annie as he does now, it’s impossible to imagine anyone talking her into anything she didn’t want to do -- she is too strong, too bright, too willful for that. She looks up at him with her impossibly blue eyes, though, and he is certain that she could talk him into plenty if he’s not careful.

“That’s the second time tonight you broke your own rule,” he says.

The corner of her mouth lifts in a near smile. “What does that mean?”

“That night never happened,” he whispers. “Remember?”
Her eyes seem to get even wider, even bluer, and she sighs wistfully. “I do. That’s the problem.”

He exhales heavily, caught completely off-guard, and nods like everything suddenly makes sense, even as he feels the confusion grow. He isn’t drunk either, because all too much champagne ever does is give him a headache, but there’s a prickly heat spreading through his body that’s making it impossible to think straight.

None of this could possibly make sense anyway -- because last night, he was with a beautiful woman who was ready and willing, and he didn’t feel any of this. It was more like the feeling he gets when he comes home starving at the end of the day and knows that all he’s going to have is some bland grilled chicken and spinach salad: it might feed his hunger, but not in the way he really wants.

Annie takes another step forward and so does he, and then he can feel her heart pounding -- or maybe it’s his own -- and he’s leaning down, searching for her mouth in the darkness. Her lips part and he can almost taste her warm, sweet breath as her fingers grip the end of his tie, and all that matters is that he’s going to kiss her again, because maybe nothing has ever been so essential.

Until there’s another loud crash behind them, the sound of glass shattering, and they turn together to see a waitress hurrying past the terrace door to clean up a fallen tray. Suddenly, they’re aware of everyone on the other side of the glass and they drift apart as quickly as they came together.

“We should probably….” Annie says, gesturing toward the party and avoiding his eyes.

“Yeah, right,” he mumbles. “We should…”

He watches as she slips out of his jacket, handing it back to him still without looking up at him. Back inside the bright ballroom, he bites at the inside of his cheek, trying to keep himself together. He sneaks a sideways glance at Annie, who brushes her fingers over her lips for a brief second, almost like she’s feeling a phantom kiss.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

As always, a big thank you to Bethany, the world’s greatest beta.

All weekend, Jeff does his best to keep busy.

That’s because if he’s constantly on the move, continually thinking about other things, even if they’re trivial things, then he’s less likely to be fixating on what almost happened with Annie on Friday night.

(The key word being *almost*, he reminds himself, whenever his thoughts stray into dangerous territory.)

So he goes to the state park on Saturday morning, running the six-mile trail with “It’s The End of the World As We Know It” blaring through his earbuds on repeat so it’s impossible to think at all. Then he goes to the Lexus dealership and test-drives a new model, because his car is almost three years old and it’s probably time for an upgrade. He stops short of signing on the dotted line, though, mainly because he turns 40 in two weeks and buying a fancier, flashier sports car is way too much of a mid-life crisis cliche for his tastes. But he does splurge on a new 65-inch 4K ultra HDTV, after letting the Best Buy sales guy show him nearly every model in the store, because he feels like he deserves some kind of treat. Saturday night, he goes to Eric’s regular poker game, even though he usually makes an excuse to avoid it, and he actually wins a few hands. He sleeps in on Sunday morning, but hits the spa just before lunch for a facial and a massage that leave him looking and feeling like a million bucks; and spends most of the afternoon in his walk-in closet, auditing his wardrobe, getting rid of all the dead weight so there’s room for some new winter pieces. He passes the evening playing Mortal Kombat X on his new TV until his vision’s a little blurry thanks to ever-advancing middle age and it’s finally time for bed.

There may be a brief moment, just before he falls asleep, when he remembers the way Annie’s eyes went all soft and hazy as he leaned in closer, how she clutched at the end of his tie and pulled him in, but it’s only a minute and it passes just as quickly as it came.

By the time he gets to the office on Monday morning, though, he’s come to terms with the fact that he needs to come up with some kind of game plan. He and Annie are going to see each other at some point and there will only be awkwardness if he goes in unprepared. But he barely has time to take a sip of his coffee before there’s a knock on his door and Annie pokes her head inside.

“Are you free?” she asks, and he can only nod, even though he would like a minute to compose himself. Annie is the epitome of professional in a dark gray suit and pale pink button-down shirt. Even her hair is perfectly neat, falling over her shoulders in smooth waves, and he finds himself fiddling with his tie to make sure that it’s straight.

“Good,” Annie says, nodding briskly. “Because we need to talk.”

He shifts in his chair, somehow caught completely off-guard -- because he really didn’t expect her to just bring up the almost kiss, refer to it directly, like it was just simple chit chat about the weather. He assumed they’d make veiled allusions to it, assure one another that they’re both okay
with it in the vaguest of ways and move on.

But apparently, she wants to face things head-on, like an adult or something.

“I’ve been thinking all weekend,” she tells him, and he braces himself for whatever it is she might say next -- that he was completely out of line, that she doesn’t feel comfortable around him anymore, that they can’t work together any longer. Annie drops into one of the chairs opposite his desk and takes a deep breath. “If Deborah Wahlstrom is responsible for the missing funds, why wouldn’t Rutherford have mentioned her to us? Wouldn’t he want to give us another suspect to investigate?”

For a moment, he’s not quite sure if he understands what she’s asking, but he pulls himself together as quickly as he can, cocking his head like he’s considering her question very carefully. (He’s not, of course, because the answer is ridiculously obvious: Rutherford didn’t say anything because whatever Deborah Wahlstrom’s deal is, she didn’t have anything to do with those funds disappearing. Not that he’s going to tell Annie that, because whether she’s guilty or not, Wahlstrom is still a promising lead that they should pursue.) When he straightens and looks at her, she is staring him dead in the eye, like she stubbornly refuses to acknowledge that anything awkward has happened between them, almost as if she’s daring him to be the one to bring it up.

But he is just as stubborn and only shrugs. “Maybe he’s covering for her for some reason,” Jeff suggests. “I think we research her on the down-low just in case. And there’s really no sense getting his hopes up if there’s nothing there anyway.”

Annie nods solemnly, still not breaking eye contact, and her steady gaze is so unnerving that he reaches for his coffee and takes a sip just for something to do.

“I know you said we’d have investigators look for Ms. Wahlstrom,” Annie says. “But--”

“That’s right. I’ve gotta email the info to Claire so she can pass it along.”

“I still think we need to go over the Pine Brook employee records a little more closely. Maybe we can find someone who had a beef with her or some other other incident that might explain why she was let go.”

Again, Jeff just nods stupidly because he isn’t entirely sure what else to do. He is smart enough to call Neil, though, and ask him to come up to the office to help them. It has to be a little less awkward if there’s someone else in the room with them, a third party to make sure that they stay on task. Of course, Jeff’s mostly useless, reading over each line in the stack of files in front of him at least a half-dozen times before he comprehends a word.

Whenever he sneaks a glance at Annie, though, she seems utterly devoted to the work, the little furrow between her brows indicating just how hard she’s concentrating. He doesn’t understand it, how she could be so completely unaffected by what almost happened between them, because he is painfully aware of it every moment that he sits across from her. And the more he watches her, scribbling notes on her little pad and marking pages with bright pink Post-Its like nothing in the world exists beyond the case, the more pissed he is. He sends Neil out to get lunch, because it may have seemed like a good idea to have him around to keep the tension at bay, but obviously, there’s nothing out of the ordinary, at least as far as Annie’s concerned, so it’s not like she’ll mind if it’s just the two of them.

And then, like he’s in the fucking third grade, he glares at the top of her head as she’s bent over her notes, just daring her to look up and catch him and ask if anything’s wrong. Then he can deliver a casual, cool, “No. What could possibly be wrong?” and drive her just as crazy as she’s making
him.

It works like a charm too, because it takes less than a minute for Annie to look up. The little furrow between her brows gives her a worried look now, and all he can think is that he really needs to get laid, because he hasn’t slept with anyone since Annie and it’s left him frustrated enough to fixate on a damn kiss that didn’t even happen. She cocks her head and lets out a shallow breath, and he can tell that she’s just about to ask the question that he’s waiting for.

Until there’s a fucking knock at his office door -- because of course there is; the universe fucking hates him.

Jeff scowls at the door, supremely annoyed, but before he can call out to whoever’s on the other side, it swings open and in strolls Pierce Hawthorne.

It takes all the willpower that Jeff has not to throw his hands up and groan in utter frustration.

“Jeffrey! I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

Jeff shrugs, managing a bland smile. “My office is usually a pretty good place to start.”

“You’d think so, but every time I’ve stopped by recently, you’ve been MIA. What do we pay you for around here again?” Pierce laughs, pleased with his own little attempt at a dig. He stops short, though, when he notices Annie in front of Jeff’s desk, and his grin goes a little cheesy. “Oh, and who is this lovely little daisy?”

“Annie, this is Pierce Hawthorne,” Jeff says. “His father was one of the firm’s founding partners.”

Pierce nods proudly, extending a hand toward Annie. “I’m also a current member of the board. But that doesn’t mean you should feel like I’m responsible for you having a job. I mean, it’s probably true, but there’s really no need to thank me.”

Jeff rolls his eyes, but Annie conjures up a polite smile, though she looks a little bemused as she shakes Pierce’s hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Hawthorne,” she says, and she probably means it because that’s just who she is.

“Annie’s one of our first-year associates,” Jeff explains, though Pierce likely doesn’t care. “She’s working with me on the Rutherford case.”

Pierce shoots him a sly grin. “Oh, you lucky dog, Jeff. She’s a hot little number, isn’t she?”

Jeff frowns, avoiding Annie’s eyes. “We’ve been through this before, Pierce. You can’t go around saying things like that to--”

“You’re always so worried about being PC,” Pierce grouses. “You don’t mind, do you, Anna? You’re probably flattered, right?”

“It’s Annie,” she says amiably. “And actually, I don’t think it’s really appropriate to--”

“See? She doesn’t mind.”

Jeff sighs. “Pierce, is there something I can do for you?”

The older man takes the seat next to Annie and shrugs. “No. I don’t always need something from you, Jeff. I just realized that it’s been so long since we spent any time together--you know, like bros--and I just so happen to have tickets to tonight’s Avalanche game. In one of those fancy
luxury boxes where all the VIPs sit. I thought we could make a night of it.”

“As great as that sounds,” Jeff says, not doing much to hide his sarcasm, “I actually promised Annie that I would work with her on this--”

“Oh, well, she can come too!” Pierce grins over at her again. “It’ll be nice to get to know her.”

Annie smiles, encouraging him a little too much with her politeness, and Jeff sighs again. “We have a lot of work to do, Pierce. You haven’t been around much lately, but this is a really high-profile case for the firm. We need to make sure all our i’s are dotted and our t’s are crossed.”

Pierce blows a raspberry at him. “Didn’t you learn anything from Jack Nicholson?”

“Excuse me?”

“All work and no play makes Jeff a dull boy.”

“I don’t think anyone’s ever accused Jeff of being all about work before,” Annie says dryly, and when Jeff glances over at her, her lips are twitching in a way that suggests she’s trying very hard not to laugh. So even though he’s annoyed at her, even though he’s frustrated and distracted, he finds himself smiling.

“Then one more break won’t hurt,” Pierce insists. “But if you’re really busy tonight, then you can just come with me when I go to Cancun at the end of the month. I’m staying at this five-star nudist resort and I’ve already got my reservation, but I bet I can pull some strings and get one for --”

“The hockey game sounds great,” Jeff grits out. “Thanks for the invitation.”

Pierce smiles, nodding smugly. “What about you, Annie? Will you be joining us?”

She looks at Jeff for a moment, almost like she’s checking in, and he doesn’t know if she’s trying to torture him or prove to him that everything is the same between them as it was last week, but she nods just the same. “I would be happy to.”

When she glances over at him again, with a gentle, little smile that freezes him on the spot, all he can think about is how warm her breath felt against his mouth and how she pressed up on her toes to meet him halfway on that terrace, how close they came to something they couldn’t even pretend to ignore.

Pierce jabbers on about what time he’ll pick them up and where they should meet the car, but none of it really registers. He bobs his head like he’s following along, though, as indifferent as ever.

--

Annie’s strategy is simple: she is just going to pretend that it didn’t happen.

And it’s not like she’s really lying to herself because, in reality, nothing did happen.

Of course, something almost happened, and that is a big enough to deal to have her actively avoiding all thoughts of that moonlit terrace and Jeff’s crooked smile and the way her entire body seemed drawn to his, like a reflex that she couldn’t control.

She knew that she’d probably have to spend most of the day working with him, which was hard enough, but being stuck at a hockey game with him after hours is a kind of torture that she really doesn’t think she deserves. She may have been stupid and weak and impulsive to let that almost-
kiss happen, but that’s hardly a crime and there were extenuating circumstances. She was still giddy from the rush of charming every senior partner that she came across, and there’d been a couple of glasses of really good champagne, and Jeff looked particularly good in his black suit. Somehow all of those little details combined to create a perfect storm that made her forget all the reasons why kissing Jeff was a bad idea.

The one thing that she can be grateful for, she supposes, is that Jeff hasn’t pushed the issue. She thought that he might, more to tease her than anything else, and she knows that she would’ve been annoyed and embarrassed and it’s a pretty sure bet that a fight would’ve ensued.

They haven’t spoken to each other much today, but at least they’re not arguing.

And while she might be stuck spending the evening with him, they’re not alone. Though she’s barely known him a couple of hours, Pierce Hawthorne seems like the perfect companion to defuse the situation.

Because the guy definitely loves talking -- mainly about himself, but also gossip about his half-brother and his chef and the receptionist at his doctor’s office who he insists is hot for him. On the way to the Pepsi Center, she and Jeff sit with him in the back of the limo that he arranged, and there’s never more than ten seconds of silence. He fills every moment with some story or crude joke or criticism of everyone whose path has crossed his over the course of his life. It may border on excruciating at points, but it does distract from everything going on with Jeff at the moment.

When they get to the arena and Jeff leaves her alone with Pierce in the luxury box so he can hunt down some beer, she doesn’t even mind because it’s another few minutes that she doesn’t have to think about their near-kiss. Down on the ice, players are skating around, apparently warming up, and she tries to figure out how long the game will be -- two hours, three at most? -- because she still wants to do a little work before she goes to bed tonight.

“Are you a hockey fan?” Pierce asks as he settles into the seat beside her.

She smiles sheepishly. “Not really. Actually, I’m not much of a sports fan at all.”

He nods, then looks over his shoulder even though they’re alone in the box. “Can you keep a secret?” She nods back. “I’m not either. I was sick a lot as a kid, in an iron lung a few times actually, so I never really got to play any sports… and I think that killed any interest I might’ve had.” He shrugs. “Though I am something of an accomplished golfer. In fact, Jeff and I won the firm’s charity golf tournament earlier this year. Did he tell you about that? I mean, you wouldn’t know it from his pretty-boy haircut and sissy manicure, but Winger is actually quite the athlete.”

Annie grins, trying to imagine Jeff and Pierce working together as even a remotely successful team, and failing miserably. She hasn’t really had a chance to talk to Jeff about it, but it’s pretty obvious that he tolerates Pierce at best. “He didn’t mention that, actually,” she says.

“Oh, well, it’s not really a big deal.” Pierce lifts a shoulder casually. “I mean, I did give him a couple of pointers that probably took a few strokes off his game but…”

“I’m sure he appreciated that.”

Pierce regards her skeptically. “You must not know him that well. He’s not exactly the easiest person to win over. He’s got his walls up so high that sometimes it’s hard to even get a good morning out of him.”

Annie nods, though she isn’t sure that’s how she’d describe Jeff -- but thinking about him,
analyzing his personality, isn’t exactly what she wants to be doing at the moment. “So…” she says, more than ready to change the subject. “Your father was one of the firm’s founding partners?”

Pierce bobs his head proudly. “That’s right. In fact, he was always a little angry that his name came at the end. But I told him, you either want to be first or last. It’s all the names in the middle that people forget.”

“And you’re on the board now… so you followed in your father’s footsteps and became a lawyer?”

He nods again. “That’s right,” he declares. “Well, I never actually *became* a lawyer. I never finished law school, really. Mainly because I didn’t get accepted anywhere.”

“Oh,” Annie says, frowning. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to--”

“Don’t worry. I don’t really care.” He shrugs, keeping his eyes trained on the ice. “I mean, I used to. Back when my father was still alive and always threw it in my face every chance he got. But now… who cares?”

Annie looks down at her lap, twisting her fingers together. “That can be tough. You know, when your parents aren’t as supportive as they could be,” she says, her voice low.

“Water under the bridge,” Pierce insists. “Mainly because he’s dead, but also because no matter what he thought of me, I still get to sit on the board in his seat. Besides, you think I’m not as smart as that ass Ted and his cronies? I’m smarter than the whole lot of them put together. That’s why I’m always telling Jeff that we should--”

“Always telling Jeff what?”

Jeff edges his way back into the box, balancing a cardboard tray with several plastic cups full of beer inside. He takes the seat on the other side of Annie, and looks at Pierce expectantly.

“I was just telling Annie that I’ve got more brains and business sense than all of the Hamish, Hamish, Hamlin, & Hawthorne partners combined, so it only makes sense that you and I should open our own firm. Hawthorn & Winger... or Winger & Hawthorne. I’m okay with either.” He shoots Annie a knowing smile.

“And that’s why I’m always telling you that we can’t start our own law firm when you’re not a lawyer,” Jeff says as he starts to hand out the beers.

“Well, you’d handle all the legal mumbo-jumbo,” Pierce explains. “And I’d handle the business end. I mean, I’ve already run a car wash chain, a winery, a cigar shop, and a hypnosis center, so--”

“All of which have gone out of business,” Jeff mumbles into his beer, though Annie still hears him.

“It’s not like I don’t know what I’m doing,” Pierce finishes. “And I’ve got plenty of seed capital, you know.”

“At least you’ve got a backup option,” Annie teases, grinning at Jeff. “You know, if the whole senior partner thing doesn’t work out.”

He wrinkles his nose, clearly disgusted with the idea. “Please. Like there’s any chance I don’t make senior partner after we kill it on the Rutherford case.”

“Annie’s right, Jeff,” Pierce chimes in. “You’ve always got me as your backup.” He reaches around her to cuff Jeff on the shoulder.
Jeff smirks. “That’s really encouraging, Pierce. Thanks.”

Down on the ice, a high-school chorus begins to belt out the National Anthem and Pierce lurches to his feet, solemnly placing a hand over his heart. Jeff stands too, but sips from his beer the entire time, not paying attention to the song at all. Once the game starts, though, there’s something of a role reversal because Pierce pays zero attention to it -- he spends the first period and intermission explaining every detail of the renovations that he’s currently having done to his family home. During the second period, he tells Annie all about the woman that he met at the bank the other day who he thinks could be his next wife (he’s already been married eight times) and how, at the ripe old age of 71, he thinks that he might finally be ready for children, and he’s already got plenty of sperm frozen so even if his age makes it unlikely “the fun way,” it can still happen. (“You know, in a test tube or what have you,” he says. “Isn’t modern medicine a miracle?”) The third period is all about his oxycodone addiction and how he finally kicked it with a stint at some fancy rehab center in Palm Springs. (That story makes Annie squirm a little, enough that Jeff notices and asks if she wants another beer. Fortunately, he doesn’t ask any questions, though, so she just politely declines and goes back to nodding as Pierce talks.)

It’s a lot more personal information than she’s used to getting from someone that she’s known for less than a day, and he’s something of a boor, but she gets the impression that he doesn’t have very many people who’ll take the time to listen to him. It makes her feel a strange sense of sympathy for him.

Jeff, on the other hand, actually watches the game, ignoring Pierce’s running dialogue entirely. He doesn’t seem particularly invested in the outcome, though -- he doesn’t cheer or clap, just sips his beer and keeps his eyes trained straight ahead. She sneaks sideways glances at him as Pierce babbles on, and she wonders if he’s still thinking about their almost-kiss, about how they’re almost as close right now as they were Friday night on that terrace, about how easy it was for them to almost give in.

Maybe he’s thinking about how close they came to making a terrible mistake.

“And then I told her that the massage oil was edible,” Pierce says with a laugh. “That cleared up the whole misunderstanding just like that.” She smiles, trying to pretend that she’s been following along the entire time. “Hold that thought… I’ve got to go walk my snake.”

Jeff shakes his head in disgust as Pierce leaves. “Well, that’s charming.” He smirks at Annie. “Bet you’re really glad you agreed to come tonight.”

Annie smiles, fiddling with her cup. “He seems like a nice enough guy.”

Jeff snorts. “Pierce Hawthorne, nice? Please.”

“No, really. It’s just… I think he’s a little lonely. So he ventured a little into TMI territory, and--”

“‘Ventured a little into TMI territory’? He bought a piece of land, built a house, and raised a family there, Annie. Need I remind you… edible massage oil?”

She sighs in disgust, but then cocks her head, studying Jeff a little closer. “You heard that? I thought you were focused on the game.” He shrugs indifferently, taking another sip of his beer, and she can only smile. “You know, I hear the two of you are an unstoppable golf duo,” she says.

Jeff tips his head back, groaning. “Not quite. He’s insisted on being a team for the past five years and we haven’t won crap. This year, he bribed the scorekeepers to shave about 30 strokes off our score -- and everyone knew it. They just let him get away with it so he wouldn’t throw another of
his infamous tantrums.”

“Why do they even keep him around?” she asks. “I mean, if he’s such a nuisance, why do they even let him sit on the board?”

“His father was a founding partner,” Jeff says matter-of-factly.

Annie frowns. “So that’s it? He just gets to ride on his dead father’s coattails without having any qualifications or credentials? That’s ridiculous.”

Jeff shrugs again, looking bored as he stares down at the ice. “Get used to it,” he says lightly, with his usual glibness, but she thinks that she detects a trace of bitterness in his tone that she hasn’t really heard from him before. “Par for the course around here.”

She should probably leave it alone, let it go and make small talk about whatever the hell it is that’s happening in the game, but she can’t seem to help herself. “And that doesn’t bother you?” she asks.

He turns to look at her, and for a moment, she thinks that she sees the same thing in his eyes that she did on the terrace, a warmth that makes it impossible to turn away. “Nothing bothers me,” he tells her.

He smiles then, but something about it seems worn out and tired. She turns toward him, wishing that she knew the right thing to say, the thing that would make both of them feel better. The way he holds her gaze, like he’s expecting nothing and everything at the same time, rattles her, though, and she can’t think at all. Pierce returns a moment later, all worked up about the rude guy at the urinal next to him, and there’s nothing left to say.

Annie drains the rest of her beer in one deep sip, feeling exhausted herself.

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If he wasn’t in the middle of the biggest case of his career, he would definitely be taking a few vacation days right about now. All he really wants to do right now is check into some stupidly expensive, posh boutique hotel and lock himself inside its swankiest suite with a bottle of 16-year-old single-malt scotch and a gourmet room-service menu with incredibly small portions for a solid week.

It would clear his head, he thinks. Help him shake the distracted, jittery feeling that he’s had lately and get back to being the suave, unaffected, disarming son of a bitch that he usually is.

Unfortunately, he doesn’t have the luxury of taking time off at the moment, not when everything he’s spent the past decade working for is on the line. So as a consolation, he allows himself an extra glass of scotch at lunch. That helps mellow him enough that when he gets back to the office, he’s come up with the best alternative to a luxurious hotel suite.

He’s just got to put a little distance between him and Annie for the next few days.

It’s clear that neither of them wants to be the first to bring up their moment at the cocktail party and it’s making them both a little crazy, so time apart is the only way to get all that awkwardness and tension to go away. They both just need to get it out of their heads, and there’s no way to do that if they’re constantly on top of one another -- like at the hockey game the other night, when he had to pretend that he actually cared about the Avalanche to avoid conversation and eye contact and anything else that might give something away.

It shouldn’t be too difficult to keep his distance, either. He can easily come up with a few good
excuses to keep their daily meetings shorter than usual. Hell, he might even offer to handle some research himself, which should disarm Annie a bit.

So that’s the plan, he decides as he steps off the elevator. Keep a low profile until Friday and by next week, it’ll all have blown over.

Claire smiles at him from behind her desk as he strolls up to his office. “You look better,” she tells him.

“Claire, you wound me. I didn’t look good before?”

She shakes her head. “You looked a little constipated actually.”

He smirks. “I guess the 100% bran flakes I mixed in with my scotch at lunch helped then.”

“Well, now that you’re feeling better...” She hands over a few message slips. “Larry and Doug would like a meeting with you sometime this week. They want a progress report on the Rutherford case.”

Jeff nods. “Okay. Whenever they want, but try to steer them toward tomorrow afternoon at the earliest.”

“I think they actually were hoping for Friday afternoon.”

“That’s even better. Set it up.”

Well, there goes his afternoon of playing Fruit Ninja, Jeff thinks ruefully. As much as he likes to fly by the seat of his pants, going into the meeting completely unprepared probably isn’t the best idea. So instead of slicing his way through a fruit stand, he starts working on a list of all the progress that he and Annie have made. It isn’t until he’s more than halfway done that he realizes that he hasn’t done it in his usual half-assed way, scribbling out one-word phrases on the back of an ATM receipt. He’s actually taken the time to type it all out in a bullet-point list, which makes it seem all the more impressive.

It’s exactly the way that Annie would have done it.

A week ago, he probably would have teased Annie about it later, how she’s rubbed off on him in the most annoying of ways. Now, he’s just going to ignore it, act like it’s all business as usual -- and that’s exactly what he’s doing when Claire rings his phone.

“Your mother’s on line 1,” she tells him.

“Okay, can you just--”

“This is the fourth time she’s called this week. I don’t think she’s going to stop no matter what excuse I give her.”

He sighs, nodding even though Claire can’t see him. “Okay. Fine. Put her through.” He takes a deep breath. “Mom, hey. How are you?”

“Jeffrey! It’s so good to hear your voice. You know, I think you’re harder to get a hold of than the President.”

“Sorry about that. It’s been crazy around here lately.”

“Oh, don’t be silly, sweetie. I know how hard you work and I don’t want to keep you too long. I
just wanted to see if we could get together next week. Someone has a birthday coming up…”

She says the last bit in a sing-songy voice that he remembers from childhood, from whenever she was trying to get him excited about something that he wanted no part of -- and it’s the worst kind of reminder that he’s old as fuck. Somehow, with the case and Annie and almost kissing Annie, he’d nearly forgotten that he turns 40, takes that first serious step into middle age, at the end of next week.

“I’d love to, Mom,” he lies smoothly. “But I’m so swamped here at the office that I don’t know if I’ll be able to. I’ve got this big case and I’m trying to--”

“That guy who stole all the money from the teachers’ pension fund, right?” she asks. “I saw the news story and heard your firm was handling it. I knew that they had to give it to you. You’re the best lawyer they’ve got.”

He smiles, almost despite himself. “Yeah, well, we’ll see after this case.”

“You’re going to be great,” his mother insists. “Like always, sweetie. You know that.” He’s silent for a moment because he isn’t sure what to say. “Well, if I can’t see you for your birthday, what about Thanksgiving? Can you get away for that?”

“Maybe, Mom. I’m not really sure.”

“I hope you know I’m keeping track,” she says, “of all the birthdays and holidays that you’re missing… And one day when you’re not so busy, I’m going to collect.”

He hasn’t been keeping track himself, but if she’s serious, he suspects that he’ll have to take a couple of weeks off to make good.

“Sure,” he says tiredly. “We can do that.”

“Okay, then, sweetie. Go be brilliant.”

When he hangs up the phone, he’s even more tempted to google a list of five-star hotels in Denver. But he goes back to the list for the meeting, and for the first time in his life, he uses work as a distraction.

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She isn’t stupid, so she catches onto the fact that Jeff is avoiding her pretty quickly.

At first, she’s annoyed, because it seems like a pretty childish way to deal with what didn’t happen between them. If he’s so bothered by it, he should just talk to her about it; that seems like the most mature, straightforward way to handle what seems to have become a pretty touchy subject. Sure, she could just do it herself, but she’s more than content to let the whole thing die a slow, quiet death, so she’s definitely not going to do the hard work for him.

And after a day or so, she actually feels relieved. She can work in peace, without worrying every other minute that he’s going to blaze into her office and force her to think about the very thing that she’s been trying desperately to forget. It’s not like he’s disappeared on her completely like he did in the first few days they were working together, either: they meet for five minutes on Tuesday afternoon for a status report and for nearly ten minutes on Thursday morning, and there are texts and emails in the meantime asking her what she’s researching and if there’s anything that he should be looking into.
All of which is why she isn’t surprised when she gets a text asking her to come up to his office for a quick meeting on Friday afternoon. Whatever might be going on between them, they haven’t let it affect the work. Even if they were completely unprofessional the other night on that moonlit terrace, acting like characters in some cliched romance novel instead of co-workers at an office party, no one can accuse them of losing focus on the case.

That’s what she tells herself as she rides the elevator up to the fourth floor, anyway.

Jeff is in the bathroom when she gets to his office, standing in front of the mirror with the door open. She watches him eye his reflection critically for a moment, finger-combing his hair a little and straightening his collar, before she clears her throat to let him know she’s there.

“Oh,” he says, turning toward her. “Hey.”

“I didn’t meant to--”

He shakes his head, stepping out of the bathroom. “No problem. You’re right on time as usual.”

He moves behind his desk to his chair. His suit jacket is draped over the back and he lifts it, slipping it back on and making sure that his tie lays just right. It’s blue silk, but unlike the cobalt tie that he wore at the cocktail party, it’s a dark navy that matches his suit almost exactly. He buttons his jacket and runs his hands over his sides to smooth away imaginary wrinkles. He is clearly quite invested in his appearance, and she frowns, wondering whom exactly he’s trying to impress.

She clears her throat again, all business. “I’ve been meaning to ask you… have you heard anything back from the investigators about Deborah Wahlstrom?”

“No, which I’m assuming means they haven’t found anything yet. But I’ll follow up on Monday, just to be sure.”

“Okay, good.”

“Actually,” he says. “That’s kind of what I asked you up here about. You’ve sent me everything that you found on Wahlstrom, right? I’m all up to date?”

Annie nods. “You’ve got all my notes.”

He smiles, but it looks a little forced, like he’s still feeling awkward. “Great, thanks.”

“That’s it? That’s all you wanted to talk--”

There’s a knock on his door then and Claire pokes her head inside. “Sorry to interrupt. Jeff, Larry and Doug are ready for you upstairs in Doug’s office.”

“Okay. Let them know I’ll be right up.” Claire nods and ducks back outside, and Jeff shoots Annie an apologetic look as he grabs the case file from his desk. “I’ve got to go. I’ve got this meeting…”

“They just want a quick progress report on Rutherford. It shouldn’t take long.”

Annie frowns, looking down at her clothes in a panic -- unlike Jeff’s, her suit has actual wrinkles and there’s a small scuff on the toe of one of her shoes. She definitely isn’t prepared for a must-impress meeting with the senior partners at all. “You couldn’t have given me any warning?” she
asks. “I’m really not ready for a meeting. Can we get--”

“Oh, that’s okay,” Jeff says. “I thought I’d take this one by myself.”

She blinks in confusion. “Excuse me?”

Jeff shrugs, looking a little guilty. “They’re really not expecting both of us. I’m just going to give them a quick update.”

She crosses her arms over her chest, trying to reign in the anger that she feels building in a hurry. “We’re working this case together but they’re not expecting both of us?”

“It’s not anything formal and I didn’t want to waste your time. There’s really no need for you to be there.”

“How about I want to be there? Is that a good enough reason?”

She knows that she’s raising her voice, which embarrasses her a little, but he laughs then, all condescending and smug, and her anger feels completely justified.

“Annie, you’re getting upset over nothing. Larry and Doug know you’re working on the case and I’m going to put in a good word for you, okay? You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

She shakes her head. “Maybe I don’t want you to put in a good word for me. Maybe I want to do it myself.”

“Why?” Jeff asks. “You hated making small talk with them at the party. Why put yourself through it again?”

Her cheeks get a little hot, just at the mention of the party, but she snorts indignantly. “Because it’s not just small talk!” she declares. “It’s about the case. A case that I’ve been busting my butt on for almost two months now. You can’t just freeze me out.”

“I’m not freezing you out of anything,” he insists. “You’re completely overreacting here. So just take a minute and calm down, alright?”

She hesitates, taking a deep breath -- but it’s not because he’s right and she’s overreacting. It’s because she doesn’t want to give him the satisfaction of seeing her lose her cool. She throws her shoulders back and stares him straight in the eye, looking as calm and unruffled as she can. “Are you trying to punish me?” she asks. “Is this all because we almost … “ She trails off, suddenly realizing what she’s about to say.

Unfortunately, Jeff realizes too.

He narrows his eyes a little and lifts his shoulders. “Because we almost what?” he challenges.

It almost feels like a game of chicken, a battle to see who’s going to be the first to mention the unmentionable -- and there is a part of her that really wants to blurt it out, catch him totally off-guard, because he’s obviously expecting her to back down.

But she can’t seem to make herself do it.

“Forget it,” she snaps. “Forget all of it.”

She storms out of his office without looking back, but she still knows that he’s not following -- and that’s fine. She doesn’t really expect or want him to. He’ll go to his meeting and play the golden
boy as usual, and maybe he’ll drop her name a time or two, but she won’t get to speak for herself and Larry and Doug won’t understand exactly how big a role she’s played so far.

And she ends up being a fool for trusting Jeff Winger, even a little bit, in the first place.

She is good and fuming by the time the elevator opens on the second floor, and she’s seriously tempted to loaf for the next couple of days, to let everything fall on Jeff’s shoulders so he sees exactly how valuable she is. But she knows that she can’t really pull that off. It’s not in her nature to sit back and do nothing, even when she’s angry. In fact, right now, as pissed as she is, the only thing that will help her feel even a little bit better is work -- a nice, long night of research to distract her from everything else.

Which is probably pathetic, but it’s who she is and she’s not likely to change any time soon.

When she stalks into her office, she must look pretty ticked because Vicki looks up from her desk and frowns. Annie ignores her, pounding on her keyboard to wake the computer up from its sleep. She shoves her notepad and a couple of file folders to the corner of the desk too, suddenly annoyed with the lack of free space in front of her. Jeff’s desk is almost always empty -- just a few basic office supplies, like a stapler and tape dispenser, that he barely ever uses and a single folder most days -- but it’s still bigger than hers. How is that fair, she wonders a little petulantly. How is any of this fair?

“Bad day?” Vicki asks suddenly, and Annie looks up to find her offering a sympathetic smile.

“Just par for the course around here,” she mutters. “But I’m fine.”

Vicki cocks her head, looking dubious. “Okay. If you say so…” She shrugs. “You know, you probably just need a break. Are you coming out for karaoke?

Annie frowns in confusion. “Huh?”

“The firm’s hosting a karaoke night at L Street for first-year associates. You know, to build camaraderie… like the bowling and laser tag and the behind-the-scenes tour of the Museum of Nature and Science.”

“Oh, right,” Annie says. She gestures at her desk. “But you know, I don’t think I can make it. I’ve got a lot of work here.”

Vicki eyes the mess on her desk, but sighs. “Listen,” she says. “I’m just telling you this to be a friend, okay? I’m really not trying to cause trouble… but a lot of the other first-years have been talking about you. About how you think you’re better than the rest of us because you’ve got this big case. How you’re always holed up with Jeff Winger somewhere, working late…”

Annie feels her face go hot and her hands curl into fists beneath her desk. This is the cherry on top of the crap sundae that the day has become. As if she’s living some sort of charmed existence. As if working with Jeff Winger is any kind of treat.

“They’re obviously just jealous,” Vicki continues. “Because you got such an amazing opportunity right out of the gate and they’d all cut off their arm for it but … it probably wouldn’t be the worst idea in the world to show up at one of these outings. Even just for a few minutes. Because we’ll all probably be working with each other for a while…”

Somehow, Annie manages to keep herself in check -- she just exhales slowly even as her irritation grows. She is angry with Jeff and angry with Vicki and angry with all the other stupid behind-the-back-talking first-years, but she is probably angry with herself most of all.
Because she let herself think that she could control her relationship with Jeff and she believed that he actually valued her as a colleague. Because she isn’t like other people and she’d find more comfort in the firm library than at L Street or any other bar. Because it’s Friday night and she’s worked hard all week and she should want to blow off some steam by throwing back tequila shots and singing cheesy ‘80s songs and laughing at her co-workers butchering the Backstreet Boys and Britney Spears.

She sighs, pushing her pad even further to the corner of the desk. “What time is karaoke?”

--

He’s distracted for the entire meeting, but somehow, he manages to sweet-talk the senior partners just the same.

“Well, it sounds like you’re on top of everything,” Larry says as they roll to a close. “Not that we had any doubts.”

“We know Rutherford’s in good hands,” Doug adds. “We just want to be in the loop.”

“I understand how important this case is,” Jeff tells them. “I get it.” He stands, reaching across the coffee table to exchange perfunctory handshakes. He’s already mentioned Annie and her work on the case, but there’s still a persistent tightness in a stomach that he’s pretty sure is guilt, so he wonders if he’s made the point strongly enough. “And I really think we’re in a good shape. Annie’s really proven invaluable. We’re lucky to have her on this.”

Larry nods. “That’s good to hear. Because I don’t think most of the other first-years are all that impressive.”

“Well, it’s barely been a couple of months, right?” Jeff says.

“Yeah, but you know as well as anybody how much first impressions matter,” Doug says. “You can get a pretty good sense of somebody in the first few minutes you meet ‘em. It doesn’t seem like most of these kids have it. You know, the kind of gift that you do.”

Jeff smirks. “Oh, come on, Doug. You’re not being fair. No one has the kind of gift I do.”

The older men both chuckle, shaking their heads almost indulgently.

“Touche, Jeff.”

“You got that right.”

He could do this in his sleep, Jeff thinks as he heads back downstairs. Charm the pants off virtually everyone that meets, persuade others to believe what he wants them to believe, dress up some bullshit and make it seem like the truth. Hell, he’s gotten this far in his career on his ability to do all of that. But maybe he’s starting to acknowledge that it helps to have some substance behind all of his superficial appeal -- that having someone like Annie on his side, who actually gives him something real to work with, makes all of it so much easier.

He’d be pretty stupid if he blew it up just because he wants to kiss her and can’t, or because he’s annoyed that she won’t acknowledge it.

It’d make him a fucking moron, actually.

When he gets back to his office, Claire is already gone, and he remembers that she wanted to duck
out a bit early for some weekend getaway with her husband. There’s nothing else on his calendar and it’s already after five, so there’s really no reason for him to stick around either. But he sits down at his desk anyway, turning his computer back on so he can check his email. It doesn’t matter that he checked it on his phone in the elevator; it’s been almost two minutes, there could be something new.

But there isn’t -- just the same unopened messages from Eric and Kristy and a sale announcement from Brooks Brothers.

He doesn’t even know what he’s looking for. He isn’t expecting Annie to get in touch. She was seriously pissed earlier, and he suspects that it’s going to take more than an hour or so of cooling off to get her to talk to him again. It’ll probably take some roundabout apology, actually -- which kind of annoys him, because he really thinks that once she calms down, she should see things his way: the meeting was no big deal and it’s better for both of them to avoid each other for a little while longer.

Really, the fact that she thinks he purposely left her out because he’s mad at her (For what exactly? Because she almost let him kiss her? Because it didn’t actually happen?) is seriously insulting.

But then again, to Annie, just starting out at the firm, the meeting probably seemed like a major deal -- her first chance to really show her stuff in a work setting, and she didn’t get to go. She’s done nothing but work her ass off and she only wants the chance to prove it. He can’t really fault her for that.

And he knows that he can’t spend all weekend feeling guilty, not after spending all of last weekend obsessed with that damn kiss that didn’t happen.

So he takes a deep breath and forces himself to make the trip downstairs to see her. He doesn’t know what he’s going to say when he gets there, but he’ll make it up as he goes -- he usually has the best luck with that method.

But maybe his good fortune is running out, because her office is dark and empty. Sure, it’s Friday and it’s nearly six now, but Annie is always burning the midnight oil -- and he doesn’t believe that being pissed at him would be enough to send her packing. So he checks conference room F and the firm library, but they’re both deserted like her office. He’s getting ready to head back to his office, trying to decide if he should just text her and ask where she is, when Neil strolls up to wait for the elevator beside him. The entire office is pretty much a ghost town, so it’s almost a relief to see someone else who hasn’t made it out yet.

Neil smiles. “Hey, Jeff. How’s it going?”

“Pretty good.” Jeff cocks his head, studying Neil for a moment. “You haven’t seen Annie around, have you?”

“Actually, I think she’s down at L Street with Vicki and some of the other first-years,” Neil says. “The firm’s hosting a karaoke night thing for them.” He shrugs, looking a little bashful. “I’m thinking of heading down there myself.”

Jeff smirks. “Oh yeah? You’re a big fan of karaoke?”

Neil just shrugs, lowering his head to hide his grin -- which is unnecessary, really, because Jeff isn’t in any position to judge, considering that he’s pretty sure that he’s going to make an appearance at L Street himself. Of course, it’s not to chase after a woman, as he suspects it is in Neil’s case -- well, okay, it sort of is, but only in a strictly professional capacity. He just wants to
explain the meeting thing to Annie, clear the air, and move the fuck on.

It’s not the same at all.

It’s Friday night and the firm’s commandeered a quarter of the space for the stupid karaoke thing, so L Street is packed when he gets there. Still, he makes his way to the bar before finding Annie, because if he’s going to manufacture some kind of apology, he needs to have at least a little alcohol coursing through his system. The scotch helps to take some of the edge off, and he even manages a laugh as he pushes his way toward the center of the room where the karaoke’s going on and nearly bumps into Tom from Mergers and Acquisitions, who’s sloppily making out with some blonde that Jeff thinks he recognizes from around the office. Sometimes he could swear that the firm is more like a frat party than any kind of respectable business.

And maybe he feels a little superior about it, because he’s hooked up with plenty of women from the office, but he’s never been drunk or stupid enough to do it a room full of their colleagues. He’s nothing if not discreet -- his almost-kiss with Annie at the cocktail party the other night notwithstanding.

The closer he gets to the middle of the bar, the better he can hear the karaoke action, which currently involves someone singing ‘Girls Just Wanna Have Fun’ with plenty of enthusiasm. The voice isn’t half bad, actually, but the whole thing is still cheesy as hell, and he smirks as he moves through the crowd so he can get a look at the action.

He stops dead in his tracks, though; whatever he was expecting to see, Annie on the stage, doing her best Cyndi Lauper impression to hoots and hollers from her co-workers, definitely wasn’t it. She’s ditched the jacket from her suit and kicked off her heels so she can dance around the stage a little easier, and it’s kind of mesmerizing, watching her tossing her head back and forth, her hair flying around her, as she sings eagerly into the beer-soaked microphone. So instead of feeling judgmental, the way he would if it was any other first-year up there, he’s amused -- mainly because he can’t wait to tease her about it.

She finishes the song with a flourish and bounces off the stage to a bunch of high-fives, almost like an actual rock star. He watches from the back of the crowd, and she’s flushed and laughing, and all he can remember is that night in this bar almost two months ago, when she bought him a drink and sent everything off-kilter.

Her eyes go wide when she spots him, and she practically skids to a stop in front of him, beaming up at him. “Jeff Winger!” she shouts. “What’re you doing here?”

He smiles down at her. “Just taking in the show.”

She flips her hair over her shoulder, looking very proud of herself. “I was pretty good, wasn’t I?”

“You were really good,” he tells her, and she steps closer, tilting her head in a way that seems decidedly flirty -- and that’s before she reaches for the end of his tie and plays with it just a bit.

“I was in chorus all the way through high school,” she says. He gets a whiff of her breath then, and he’s pretty sure that he could get drunk on the tequila fumes alone. “I always got all the solos.”

He laughs. “I bet.”

She nods, smiling slyly, and then moves even closer to him, despite the fact that they’re standing in the middle of a room full of their co-workers. He knows that she wouldn’t be acting this way if she wasn’t drunk -- hell, she probably wouldn’t even be speaking to him at the moment if she wasn’t --
so he starts to guide her to the other side of the room where there aren’t as many Hamish, Hamish, Hamlin, & Hawthorne employees and they can get some privacy in a booth. He makes a pit stop at the bar first, so he can get Annie some water. She can’t stop laughing at nothing in particular as she sinks into the booth, which is a pretty good sign that she could use some.

He slides into the booth next to her and she scoots forward again, so she’s pressed against him, their knees touching. He cracks open the bottle of water and slides it toward her. “Drink this,” he tells her.

She looks up at him almost mischievously. “What is it?” she asks, even though it’s obviously a bottle of water.

“How about this.”

She takes a sip, grimacing when she confirms that it’s just water. She twists the plastic ring where the cap broke free around the rim of the bottle idly and studies him, like maybe she’s looking for some kind of answers in his expression. When she reaches out to tap a finger against his chin, her skin is cool and wet, and he shivers a little.

“I hate your stupid face,” she whispers, and pouts immediately afterward, in a way that is some strange combination of cute and sexy that confuses him a little.

Still, he laughs and shakes his head. “Really? I’ve never had any complaints before.”

She curls her hand around his jaw, turning his head back and forth. “It’s just too good-looking,” she says. “Too stupid and good-looking.”

He smiles. “I don’t think there’s any such thing.”

Annie cocks her head again, like she’s getting ready to argue the point -- but then her face goes a little pale and she presses her fingers to her forehead. “Oh, God. Everything’s all dizzy,” she moans. “I’m spinning. Or you are. I can’t tell.” She clutches at his arm, like she honestly thinks that she’s moving.

“Jesus, how much did you drink?”

“So many shots,” she practically whimpers. “So many. They just kept giving them to me and I kept drinking them because I don’t want them to hate me…”

He pushes the water toward her again. “Who?”

“All the other first-years.” She takes a dainty sip from the bottle. “They think I think I’m better than them… and you know, I kind of do… but I didn’t want them to know that.”

“Nobody hates you, Annie.”

“No,” she declares, “they do. They really do. Vicki told me so.” She takes a deep breath and slumps back against the booth. “All because I’m on the Rutherford case and get to work with you… so really, when you think about it, it’s all your fault.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, with a chuckle. “Actually, that’s why I came here to find you. To tell you I was sorry.”

She perks up a little, squinting at him. “Really? You came to tell me you’re sorry?”
He nods.

She lets out a happy, little sigh. “That’s just … oh, that’s really sweet.”

Her grin is soft and gentle, and he feels this strange tightness in his chest that makes him press his hand against his breastbone, trying to tamp it down. And if she weren’t drunk, if she knew what he was really sorry about it, then this might be some kind of moment.

But she is and she doesn’t, so it really doesn’t mean anything.

“What’re you sorry for?” she asks.

Her eyes flutter closed as she rolls her head against the booth’s cushion, and he really wishes that he could explain it all to her in a way that would make sense, that he’s sorry that they met that night two months ago but not really sorry at all, that he likes working with her and kind of hates it too, that everything that felt simple before he met her is a complicated mess now and he doesn’t know how to fix it.

But he doesn’t have the words for any of it.

When she collapses against his shoulder a moment later, all drowsy and out of it, he knows that it wouldn’t even matter if he did.
Somewhere in the distance, someone is banging on a snare drum.

That is Annie’s first thought as she drifts back to consciousness.

Of course, as soon as she opens her eyes and squints into bright sunlight, she realizes that there is no drum -- it’s just the pounding inside her head.

And that’s only part of the problem.

The sour, sawdust taste in her mouth, the dizziness every time that she blinks, and the nauseous lurching of her stomach whenever she tries to move are all pretty awful too.

But then, the fact that she doesn’t know where she is at the moment is probably the worst of it.

She glances around the sparsely but expensively decorated bedroom, which seems vaguely familiar somehow, and tries to remember the previous night. It all started with that stupid karaoke, she thinks petulantly. If she hadn’t gone, she wouldn’t have done those shots and she wouldn’t be feeling like she was about to die right now and she wouldn’t be worried that she’d done something really stupid, like gone home with a complete stranger.

She’s already done that once this year and look how well that turned out.

When she finally manages to push herself upright, she realizes that despite the fact that they are horribly wrinkled and smell like a distillery, all of her clothes are still in place -- well, except her suit jacket -- so maybe nothing actually happened. She lurches to her feet, wobbling with a fresh wave of dizziness. Her vision is a little blurry at the moment, but she spots the stainless-steel Rolex with the blue face sitting out on the dresser, and the light gray cashmere scarf draped over the easy chair in the corner, and the sleeve of a French-cuff dress shirt with a distinctive blue and gray triple stripe pattern peeking out from between the closet doors, and she suddenly understands why this room seems so familiar.

It’s Jeff’s bedroom, so she’s intimately acquainted with the place.

She buries her face in her hands and groans. She wasn’t just foolish enough to go home with a stranger; she was so stupid that she made the same mistake with Jeff again. A vague memory of him showing up at karaoke night flutters through her head, but it’s all very hazy so she can’t recall any conversation or how she might have wound up back here with him.

She was angry with him -- that’s the last concrete memory that she has. She can’t believe that she’d go anywhere with him.

But apparently she did, and now she has to face him with the mother of all hangovers making her feel like a death metal band has taken up residence inside her head.
She isn’t just stupid -- the universe hates her because she’s so very stupid.

Somehow, she forces herself to go find Jeff, making her way down the hallway with a hand braced against the wall to keep herself upright. Part of her wants to make a detour to the bathroom so she can see how awful she looks -- she pats her hair and can feel that it’s a matted mess, but she suspects that there’s also mascara smudged beneath her eyes and sleep creases bisecting her cheeks -- but there’s really no way to make herself presentable and knowing how bad it is would probably only make matters worse.

In the living room, she sees a pillow and folded blanket on the sofa, and her coat and messenger bag are thrown across one of the arm chairs. She’d really just like to grab her things and run out without confronting Jeff at all, but that would only be delaying the inevitable. She’ll have to face him Monday morning, and she can’t make it through another weekend, worrying and fretting over things with him again.

She can see him on the other side of the kitchen bar, fiddling with something on the counter. He’s wearing trackpants, a long-sleeved thermal t-shirt, and running shoes, and when she gets a little closer, she can see that his cheeks are a little red and his hair is damp with sweat, which likely means that he went out for a morning run while she was hijacking his bed.

She watches him for a moment, toying with the cuff of her shirt because she just doesn’t know what to say to him. But he spins to reach for something in the fridge then, and he must see her out of the corner of his eye because he turns to her and smiles.

“You’re awake,” he says. “I was starting to get worried.”

She shrugs. “Well, considering how bad this headache is, I think there’s more sleeping in my future. In fact, I’ll probably need to sleep until the spring to get rid of it.”

He opens the fridge again and pulls out a bottle. She can’t read the label, but it looks like water and just the sight of it makes her realize just how thirsty she is. He stretches over the bar to hand it to her. “Drink that,” he tells her. “It’s coconut water. It’ll help with the dehydration.”

She’s grateful, not only because she’s so thirsty but because opening the bottle and taking a sip gives her something to do, so she has a couple of minutes when she doesn’t have to come up with something to say to him or even look him in the eye. It doesn’t even matter that she kind of hates the taste of the coconut water -- she chugs nearly half the bottle just to get rid of the dry, grimy feeling in her mouth.

“You want something to eat?” Jeff asks, opening the refrigerator again. “I’ve got eggs and some cheese so I could probably make--”

“No,” she says, “My stomach really can’t handle anything right now. But thanks anyway.”

He leans against the counter and shakes his head. “You really should eat. You need something to soak up all that tequila.”

She frowns. “Speaking of tequila… I really don’t remember much of last night.”

Jeff smirks, which instantly makes her panic, imagining a myriad of shameful things that she might have done or said. “Well, I wasn’t there for all of it,” he tells her. “But I did catch the end of your karaoke performance. You gave Cyndi Lauper a run for her money.”

Annie covers her face with her hands and groans. “Oh God. I kind of remember that…”
“If it makes you feel better, you sang circles around the guy who did ‘I’ll Make Love To You’. He got booed off the stage.”

“That doesn’t set the bar very high.”

Jeff shrugs. “You were good, actually. Really good. Guess all that high school chorus experience paid off.”

She looks up at him in surprise. “How do you know about that?”

“You told me last night.” The corner of his mouth lifts in a pleased grin. “You don’t remember that either?”

She shakes her head, which only makes the pounding worse, and she drops down on one of the bar stools to steady herself. It’s likely just one of many things that she doesn’t remember and it makes her crazy. “Did I … I mean, I didn’t make… was there …” She pauses, taking a deep breath. “Nothing happened between us last night, did it?”

Jeff’s expression goes a little stony as he straightens and crosses his arms over his chest. “You were drunk, Annie,” is all he says.

“Right. But did we…” Her cheeks are warm, but she waves her hand, trying to fill in the blanks without saying a word.

He frowns, and she doesn’t think that she’s ever seen him look so annoyed. “You were really drunk,” he repeats. “And I don’t know where you live, so I brought you back here to sleep it off. I was out on the couch all night, okay? And I didn’t undress you -- you kicked off your shoes and flung your jacket off as soon as we came through door.”

It’s easy to believe him, because she knows, deep down, that he would never do anything with her when he couldn’t be sure she knew what she was doing -- and he is obviously upset that she’d consider the possibility for even a minute. But the fact is, they both almost let reason fly out the window a week ago at the firm cocktail party, so it’s not like she can’t imagine it happening under other circumstances.

“I’m sorry,” she says, “I didn’t mean to imply that--”

“Forget it,” he tells her. “That’s not what… Listen, we need to talk. That’s the whole reason I went to L Street to find you last night.”

She tilts her head, studying him across the counter. “You came to find me?”

Jeff gives her a stiff, business-like nod. “It was… I thought it would… I was just going…” He sighs in frustration. “I don’t apologize ever,” he says. “Well, at least not when I really mean it, so I’m no good at it.”

“Is that what you’re doing?” She can feel the corner of her mouth twitching, ready for a smile. “Apologizing?”

For a moment, he looks almost sheepish, like he’s embarrassed to be caught in some kind of genuine moment -- but he recovers quickly, conjuring up a calm smile. “I felt bad about the misunderstanding yesterday. About the meeting.”

She looks down at her feet, at her bare toes pushing into the plush fabric of his rug, because she remembers how angry she was yesterday, how foolish and naive she felt when he froze her out of
that meeting, and her face goes all hot with embarrassment again because if he’s apologizing, then he knows just how upset she was.

“Whatever you might think of me,” he continues, and she still can’t bring herself to look at him, but his voice has a low, rusty quality that nearly makes her shiver. “I wouldn’t hold anything against you that has nothing to do with work. I mean, no matter what happens, you know, after hours, I wouldn’t keep you off the case because of it.”

She is surprised enough that she looks up without thinking, and he is watching her with a strangely open expression. She realizes that this is the closest that they’ll come to discussing the almost kiss, but maybe they can put it behind them now.

It can become ancient history, just like that night they spent together before she started at the firm.


He nods then, and she nods back. She means it to be all business, but he smiles, just a little crooked and hopeful, and she can feel her blood go all warm and fizzy, and she’s convinced that she must be visibly shaking so she crosses her arms over her chest, almost hugging herself to keep it all together. Because the goal here is getting everything back to normal, to the safe, neutral ground that they’ve been sharing for the past two months, and that can’t happen if she keeps gazing at him like she’s about to fall at his feet. So she presses her lips into a tight line, going for a serious, almost grim look that keeps all of her cards as close to the vest as possible.

Jeff doesn’t seem to pick up on anything. He gives her a couple of Tylenol and makes her drink the rest of the coconut water before he drives her back to her car. He even stops at the Starbucks drive-thru to get her a piping-hot, rich black coffee on their way back to the office parking garage, and drinking that helps take the ache inside her head down from a 10 to an 8.5.

Just before they say their goodbyes, he also tells her in a mock stern voice that she should just take it easy the rest of the weekend, that she better not do to even the tiniest bit of work, or she’ll have to answer to him. She smiles, even though she doesn’t have any intention of keeping that promise, and reassures herself that everything is indeed back to normal.

Of course, her head is still throbbing dully as she drives back to the apartment so she definitely needs at least a few more hours of sleep. But that seems like a pipe dream when she opens the apartment door to blaring hip hop music and the whirring of a blender. Abed is seated at the table with three different laptops open in front of him, while Troy dances along to the music in the kitchen.

Abed cocks his head when he sees her. “You didn’t come home last night,” he says, almost accusingly.

Troy cuts the blender and whirls around, eyes wide. “Do you have any idea how worried we were?” he demands, and she thinks that she might have some idea because there are 16 unread text messages on her phone at the moment. “Well, me anyway. Abed was sure you were just working late.”

“I was sort of working,” she says. “I had to go to this stupid karaoke thing… and I had a little too much to drink.”

“Did you go home with another stranger?” Abed asks.

“Abed!” She glares at him. “No. I did not go home with another stranger.”
Troy crosses his arms over his chest, doing his best impression of an angry father -- it’s been awhile since she’s had personal experience with one, but she thinks it’s a convincing performance. “Well, then where were you?”

She isn’t about to tell them the truth because she knows how they’ll both run with it, so she just shrugs. “I stayed at a friend’s from the office,” is all she says.

Abed nods, taking her words at face value. “We were actually working last night,” he tells her. “We’re almost done with the game… we should be able to present it to our head of development at the end of this week. Early next week at the latest.”

Annie’s head is starting to feel incredibly heavy again, but she manages a weak smile. “That’s great, guys.”

Troy grins. “I’m making Cap’n Crunch milkshakes to celebrate. Want one?”

She shakes her head, grimacing. “Honestly, all I want is a few hours of sleep… but it doesn’t look like that’s going to happen.” She casts a forlorn look at the futon, just a few feet from the speakers where Troy’s iPod is docked.

“You can sleep in my room,” he offers. “I haven’t even made my bed yet, so it’s all warm and ready to go.”

She is so ridiculously grateful that she throws her arms around him and hugs him for all he’s worth. He laughs, sounding confused, but hugs her back.

Of course, even in Troy’s bedroom with the door closed and a pillow over her head, she can hear the music, the bassline echoing the pounding in her head. She closes her eyes and tries to block it all out, because she is so exhausted and can’t stand being conscious for much longer.

Counting sheep doesn’t work, so she tries to clear her mind, let everything go still and dark -- but somehow, even with the hammering in her head and music buzzing from the other room, all she can hear is Jeff saying, “Whatever you might think of me,” and she drifts off, trying to figure out exactly what she does think of him, how exactly she sees him.

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By Tuesday, he’s not just telling himself that things are back to normal between him and Annie -- they have actually shifted back into place, like there was never any problem in the first place.

Monday was something of a feeling-out process; it was the first time that they’d seen each other since he made his best attempt at an apology, and they were both still a little tentative with each other. But the air is pretty much clear between them now, so once they settle back into the routine of actual work, the rhythm comes back to them pretty seamlessly.

It’s stupid to think that ironing things out with Annie could set everything in his world back in order, but he feels his sense of equilibrium restored too and it makes coming to work a little easier. Which is probably why he doesn’t protest too vehemently when she insists they stay late on Tuesday night to finish up some research that they would have knocked out last week if they hadn’t been avoiding each other. He doesn’t even argue when she wants pizza for dinner because she’s tired of all the Chinese and Japanese takeout that they’ve been eating lately, though he does make a pretty convincing case for thin crust that wins her over.

Now, it’s almost eight o’clock, and what he really wants is to be stretched out on his sofa with a
glass of scotch and the Nuggets game on TV instead of hunched over folders in conference room F with its crappy fluorescent lighting and overeager heating. He leans back in his chair, contemplating the ceiling tiles for a long moment because the plain white plaster is honestly more interesting than anything in these files. Beside him, Annie sips her can of Diet Coke through a straw, completely focused on the documents in front of her, and it is really easy to imagine a future where she runs this whole damn place or maybe even a bigger firm, in New York or Los Angeles. Hell, maybe she’ll make it all the way to D.C. and seriously change the world.

She looks up suddenly, her eyes bright. “Do you have the financial analysis from Carol Strause? I want to compare something…”

“Ah, I think I just saw that…” He shuffles through the stack of folders in front of him, trying to ignore the slight blurriness of his vision. (Shit, is this the first sign that he needs reading glasses? He knows that he’ll rock a pair like the world’s sexiest professor, but he isn’t ready to concede his ever-advancing age, even if his birthday is just days away.) He manages to find the right one and slides it toward her.

“Great, thanks!” She flips the folder open, immediately scanning the page in front of her, and her expression is nothing short of captivated as she worries the end of her highlighter against her bottom lip.

“Are you seriously excited about this?” he asks, with a grin. “Staying late to go over the same files we’ve been looking at for weeks?”

She shrugs. “It’s fun. I like doing research.”

He can’t help laughing. “You’re nuts.”

“Why? Because I get satisfaction out of doing a good job? Because I find it interesting to put all the puzzle pieces together?”

“Because working turns you on, yeah.”

She wrinkles her nose and chucks the cap from her highlighter at him. “Just because you’re allergic to work doesn’t mean there’s something wrong with me.”

“Not at all work,” he insists. “Just crap like this. Wait till you see me--” His cell phone rings suddenly on the table beside him. He doesn’t recognize the number on the display, but he shoots Annie an apologetic look and answers it. “Jeff Winger.”

“Oh, Winger! Thank the Good Lord!” Jeff groans as soon as he hears the familiar British accent because he knows that he’s inevitably going to be asked to do something he really doesn’t want to. “I thought you might be in the middle of some heavy-duty carousing. I know you like to get an early start on the evening…”

Jeff spins his chair so his back is to Annie. “Duncan, what the hell do you want now?”

“I wish I had the time to be offended, but I’m in a wee bit of trouble at the moment and I don’t have the luxury.”

“Naturally. Every time you call, you’re in trouble.”

There’s a moment of silence, and he can just make out some muffled shouting in the background.

“Yes, well, be that as it may… I’m calling because I need your fine legal representation once
Jeff laughs humorlessly. “Are you serious? It’s not even a year since the last time.”

“I don’t keep a calendar of these things,” Duncan says testily. “But I’m locked up at the 17th precinct so I need you to work your magic and get me an arraignment tonight so I can get out of here. One of my cellmates smells like he’s pissed himself every day for a week and the other is carrying on a conversation with the leprechaun in his head. I can’t take much more…”

“Look, I’d love to help you out but I’m not really taking cases at the moment. I’m in the middle of a really big—”

“Oh, bullocks! Like you cared about my schedule when you needed my expert testimony that video game addiction is as debilitating as substance abuse? Or how about when I had to sit on the stand for nearly four hours and convince a jury that the woman who drove her Mercedes through her ex-husband’s living room could have been suffering from PTSD after a botched face lift? You scratch my back, I scratch yours -- that’s the entire basis of our relationship. And I’ve got a serious itch that needs scratching right now!”

Jeff grimaces. “Can you please rephrase that?”

“Stop being such a selfish wanker and maybe I will.”

Jeff sighs, stomping his foot against the floor in annoyance. His chair turns slightly, and he can just make out Annie in his peripheral vision -- she’s obviously watching him, listening to his call, and when he turns to face her fully, she mouths, “Everything okay?” He manages a nod, despite his frustration.

“What’s the charge?” he asks Duncan.

“Careless driving, which is a lot of rubbish. You swerve a few times on a winding road and suddenly you’re a menace to society.”

“Were you drinking again?”

“Well, now I am insulted,” Duncan says. “I’ll have you know I didn’t have a drop to drink tonight. I’m as sober as a bloody judge. In fact, they did a field sobriety test and I passed with flying colors…so this should be a piece of cake. The kind of case you could snake your way out of with your hands tied behind your back.”

Jeff brings a hand up to his forehead and massages his temples gently. “Fine. Let me see what can I do.”

He’s not really sure why he’s so annoyed -- even handling a garden-variety class 2 misdemeanor arraignment in front of a real live judge is more interesting than research. But then, everything involving Ian Duncan is a fucking headache and his life has been complicated enough lately. Across the table, Annie makes a show of flipping through her notes, though she’s sneaking glances at him every few seconds.

“Everything alright?” she asks finally.

He sighs. “There’s a case I’ve got to go deal with. A night court appearance.”

“I thought you said you weren’t going to be handling any other cases while we’re working on Rutherford.”
“This isn’t a normal case,” Jeff says. “I kind of owe someone a favor so…”

Annie nods, smiling just a little. “So you’re bailing on me. Again.”

“It’s not like I planned this,” he says. “I might not even be…” He trails off because he’s hit with a great idea. “Hey, why don’t you come with me? You can get some actual courtroom experience, even if it’s only a careless driving charge.”

She perks up, smiling eagerly. “Really?”

“Sure. It’ll be pretty boring but it’s got to be better than reading over the same files all night.”

Annie glances over at the stacks of folders surrounding her on the table almost guiltily, like it’s her responsibility to single-handedly do all of their research if he’s got to run off to court. “You won’t be playing hooky,” he says, with a smile. “This is legitimate legal business.”

That’s apparently all it takes to get her to tag along. She even agrees to drive so he can place a call to the clerk he knows from Judge Wood’s office to ensure that Duncan makes it onto this evening’s docket. It takes a little bit of sweet talk, which he has no problem with, even if Annie is snickering and rolling her eyes behind the wheel while she listens to his song and dance.

It occurs to him that he will never be able to get away with that kind of thing with her, that he’s not even sure he was able to that first night they met. He wonders why that doesn’t bother him more than it does.

Best not to analyze it, he tells himself.

By the time they reach the courthouse, there are only a couple of cases left to be heard before Duncan’s. He and Annie sit in the back row, listening to a woman get arraigned for grand theft and a guy for aggravated robbery. Annie is captivated by all of it, even though it amounts to little more than administrative bookkeeping. She eagerly takes in every detail -- from the public defender’s cheap suit to the judge’s bored frown to the bailiff’s hipster goatee -- like they’re the most interesting things that she’s ever seen.

He watches her with a smile, wondering if he was ever like that once upon a time, when he was a freshly-minted law school grad and hadn’t spent more than a decade learning the fine art of twisting the legal system into knots. But then, he doesn’t think he’s ever been quite as interested in anything as Annie is in most everything.

When they finally bring Duncan in, Jeff is raring to go, practically jumping out of his chair. Annie moves up several rows too, so she has a better seat despite the fact that he told her that there isn’t going to be much to see. Duncan doesn’t actually look too bad, though his clothes are rumpled and his hair is kind of a mess.

“Not guilty, right?” Jeff asks as they confer for a moment.

Duncan looks offended. “Damn right! There were these bloody squirrels in the road and I swerved to avoid them. I was saving the lives of two of God’s smallest creatures -- they should be hailing me as a hero!”

“Save it for the trial, buddy. They don’t want to hear it now.”

And the judge really doesn’t -- he enters Duncan’s plea and sets bail at a reasonable $3000, and the entire process is over in a matter of minutes. The bailiff leads Duncan away and Jeff prepares to go post bail and settle the paperwork. Annie’s waiting for him when he heads up the aisle out of the
courtroom, beaming.

“That was so cool!” she declares.

He laughs. “I’m glad you were entertained.”

“Well, you know, it’s just that everything that we’ve been doing is so theoretical,” she says. “This was the legal system in actual practice. It was exciting!”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

They take care of Duncan’s bail and wait for him to be brought out of the holding cell. He is grinning when he strolls over to them, looking a little too pleased for someone who just spent several hours in lockup.

“What did I tell you?” he asks. “I told you it would be a piece of cake. Now…” He hesitates, noticing Annie standing beside Jeff. “Oh, who’s the tidy little dish?”

“Ian Duncan, this is Annie Edison. We’re working on a case together so she came a long for moral support.”

Duncan leers at her a little. “Well, isn’t that nice?”

Annie frowns, wrinkling her nose a bit, but shakes his extended hand all the same.

“So you really weren’t drunk?” Jeff asks, trying to get the conversation back on track.

“No! I already told you. And you’ll get all the paperwork from the police and you’ll see I passed the sobriety test.”

“Then why were you really careening all over the road? And I don’t want to hear about how you were saving the lives of woodland creatures, all right?”

“Well, I may have been checking my phone … I was expecting a text from a lovely woman I met the other night and I was trying to … but it’s not like the cop saw that. He was behind me… and it’s not like I hit anything.” He shrugs. “I think he just didn’t like me because I’m British. He was kind of a … I think the word you use around here is redneck. Maybe there’s a discrimination lawsuit here…”

Jeff rolls his eyes. “Yeah, well, someone else is going to have to handle that. In fact, I’m gonna have to hand this off to someone else anyway. I’ve got this high-profile case and I can’t--”

“Perhaps Annie could take care of it,” Duncan says, shooting her a cheesy grin.

“Actually, I’m working with Jeff on that high-profile case,” she says politely. “So I’m busy too.”

“I’ll get Phil to handle it,” Jeff says. “You’ve met Phil. You like him.”

Duncan grouses a little, but eventually nods. “Fine.”

Bailing him out apparently isn’t the end of Jeff’s obligation, though -- Duncan asks for a ride home because his car’s been impounded and the lot’s already closed for the night. Just before they drop him off, he also makes Jeff promise that they’ll go out for drinks in the next couple of weeks. Annie listens to the entire exchange with a knowing, little smirk, and the entire time that he’s trying to get Duncan out of the car, he can’t stop looking at her.
“What?” he demands once they pull away. “You look like the cat that ate that stupid bird.”

She shrugs, feigning innocence. “So how do you know Duncan?”

“He teaches psychology at Greendale, so sometimes, I use him as an expert witness. And when he needs legal assistance, I help him out. That’s our arrangement.”

Annie nods, but she’s still smiling in a know-it-all way that alternately pisses him off and turns him on. “I see.”

“Okay, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means,” she says, pausing rather dramatically, and it’s obvious that she knows how to play to a moment, which bodes really well for how she’ll do in a courtroom. “That I’m onto you. So onto you.” She grins. “You claimed that Britta was the only former client that you’re friends with, but it turns out you’ve got a soft spot for this guy too. So you can pretend all you want that you don’t do anything that doesn’t benefit you, but I know the truth. Underneath all that carefully cultivated cynicism, you’re just a big, old softie.”

Jeff frowns, feeling his face get a little warm. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Annie shakes her head, and her smile goes all tender and soft in a way that is pretty much impossible to ignore. So he turns to stare at the window, where the scenery goes past in a blur -- because the dizziness that comes with it is better than the alternative.

When she rolls off the futon and into Troy and Abed’s shower at precisely 6 a.m., she is already composing a mental to-do list of all the things that she absolutely must get done today.

She has to call the forensic accountant and clarify a few points in her analysis. She needs to make sure that Jeff has checked in with the investigators to see how the search for Deborah Wahlstrom is going -- and possibly broach the idea that if they haven’t made any progress, the next step might be to consider asking Simon Rutherford about her. She also needs to start preparing the list of questions for the employee depositions because they’re only two weeks out, but that shouldn’t be too hard because Jeff’s already sent her a bunch so they’ve got a good head start. She really needs to drop off some things at the dry cleaner’s and do a load to laundry too, but that might have to wait until tomorrow.

Having a jam-packed schedule doesn’t bother her -- she likes to be busy; in fact, she’s most productive when she is totally swamped -- and she’s in a pretty good mood to begin with because she and Jeff are back on track again. And because there’s no awkwardness or tension, they’ve managed to be pretty productive this week. She even made it inside her first courtroom, which was amazing, even if she was nothing more than an observer. It reminded her of exactly what they’re working for, that moment when they actually get to put all of the research and planning and preparation into actual practice, and now she’s even more dedicated to the case -- if that’s possible.

Her good mood is probably why she doesn’t get too upset when she has computer problems and has to call Kim in IT within five minutes of sitting at her desk. Normally, the fact that her schedule is thrown off for an entire hour would drive her crazy, but she shrugs it off. And she doesn’t even care that the first email she reads when her computer is finally fixed is from Quendra in HR, asking her to come down to the office as soon as possible because there’s a problem with some of her paperwork that’s going to set her schedule even further back.
It’s ridiculous, Annie thinks as she makes her way down the hall, because she’s been working here for two months and it seems pretty sloppy to only be catching the issue with her file now. She’s been getting paid regularly, so it can’t be her direct-deposit information -- and her 401K and tax deductions all seem right according to her calculations, so she can’t imagine what the problem is.

When she makes it to HR, Quendra’s desk is empty, as are the desks of the other assistants. She really doesn’t want to waste time waiting, especially considering that she’s now almost an hour and half off schedule now, but she wants to get the problem taken care of as soon as possible so she sits in the chair across from Quendra’s desk and hopes that the other woman has just run to the bathroom or to get a cup of coffee.

Fortune seems to be smiling on her, though, because she hears someone humming Taylor Swift in the hallway less than a minute later, and she looks over at the door expectantly, waiting for Quendra to come through. But it’s not Quendra who strolls into the office; it’s Craig Pelton, the HR director, whom she’s only met once, way back on her first day.

“Now we got bad blood,” he sings as he comes inside. “You know it used to be mad love…” He stops short as soon as he spots her, placing a hand over his heart. “Oh my! You startled me.”

“I’m sorry. I was just waiting for Quendra. She said there was a problem with my paperwork.”

Craig tilts his head, squinting as he studies her. “You’re Annie Edison, right?”

She nods. “Yes.”

He heads to Quendra’s desk, rifling through her inbox. “You didn’t fill out an emergency contact form. Now, of course, we don’t expect anything to happen to you, but if -- heaven forbid -- something did, we need to know who you’d like us to call.” He shrugs. “Most people put down a family member, but you can list your partner or significant other or whatever term you prefer to use. We’ve very open-minded here. I mean, legally-speaking, we have to be. You’re all a bunch of lawyers who sue as often as you change your underwear.” He finally finds Annie’s file, pulling out the form in question and handing it to her. “Here you go.”

She glances down at the paper, with its accusing blank lines. She obviously won’t put down her family, whom she hasn’t spoken to in nearly a decade. She can’t put down Vaughn either, because he’s no longer a part of her life -- and she doesn’t even know where he is at the moment. The only people who’d really need to know if she were hurt are Troy and Abed, which is definitely pathetic -- and she isn’t even sure which one of them to list, considering they’re not exactly the most responsible people on earth.

Ultimately, she decides to go with Troy, primarily because he never lets his phone go unanswered. He might panic in a crisis, but at least he’d show up. She scribbles his information on the sheet and hands it back to Craig.

He skims it and shoots her an impish grin. “Troy Barnes,” he reads. “Is that your boyfriend?”

“Oh, no. He’s just a friend. I’m staying with him until I get my own place so…”

Craig nods. “You don’t need to explain yourself to me,” he tells her. “I know how complicated relationships can be…”

“Oh, well, if that’s it…”

“You’re working on the Rutherford case with Jeff Winger, aren’t you?”
Annie nods. “That’s right.”

“Oh, you’re a lucky girl!” Craig shakes his head wistfully. “He is something else, isn’t he?”

She allows herself a half smile. “He is definitely something else.”

“He and I get along so well because we’re both Scorpios,” Craig explains. “That makes for a very intense connection.”

“Really? Isn’t that interesting?”

Craig nods solemnly. “Which reminds me… his birthday’s on Friday. I really need to pick up a present, but he’s just so difficult to shop for…”

Annie frowns. “His birthday is Friday?”

“That’s right.” Craig nods, then leans in close so he can whisper. “But don’t tell him I told you. Technically, I could get in a lot of trouble for sharing information from his HR file so… but it’s something of a milestone. The big 4-0.”

Annie nods, though she’s not really paying attention anymore. Part of her is surprised that Jeff hasn’t mentioned his birthday. He likes being the center of attention so it seems like he’d enjoy having a fuss made over him. It seems strange that he wouldn’t want everyone to know.

“That can be really hard for some people,” Craig continues. “I turned 40 a few years back and it was pretty traumatic. I spent an entire weekend holed up in my bedroom with a case of strawberry champagne, a couple of economy-size boxes of Cheez-Its from Costco, and the Gilmore Girls DVD box set…”

“Well, everyone celebrates differently. It’s good that you--”

“Speaking of which,” Craig says. “If there’s any kind of party or get-together for Jeff’s birthday, will you make sure to let me know? I know he’d want me there, but he’s always so busy that it’s hard for him to remember. Like last year, when he won the McManus case … I only found out about the party the next day because it was all such a whirlwind…”

She nods absently, because she’s already trying to decide whether she should say something to Jeff about his birthday, if she needs to buy him a present, whether she should feel hurt that he hasn’t invited her to some hypothetical celebration. All of it is silly, because they have a professional relationship, not a friendship or anything deeper. If Jeff doesn’t want to tell her personal details about his life, that’s his choice and absolutely not something that she should feel bad about.

But she kind of does anyway.

So she goes back to her office and works the day away, skipping lunch and staying past dinner like the hard-working, professional employee that she is.

---

By mid-week, Jeff’s certain that things are really and truly on the upswing.

He’s gotten Phil to agree to take care of Duncan’s careless driving charge, he’s beaten his personal best of running a mile in less than 6:41 on the treadmill, and most importantly, he and Annie are back on track and kicking ass on the Rutherford case once again.
And somehow, he’s managed to mostly forget that his birthday is on Friday and AARP’s going to be sending his membership card any day now.

All in all, he thinks it adds up to the fact that he deserves to duck out for a couple of hours and take advantage of Brooks Brothers’ latest sale. He’s trying to decide what sort of vague explanation he should give Annie for his absence from the office -- a dental appointment seems like the best option because it won’t come with any concern about his health the way a doctor’s visit might.

But he’s barely typed out three words in his text to her when his office door swings open and Leonard Rodriguez strolls in, looking as ancient as ever.

“Your secretary’s MIA, Winger,” he announces. “Which is a real shame because she’s a looker. Is she still married? I’ve been waiting out that marriage for a while…”

“She’s not my secretary,” Jeff says testily. “She’s my assistant. What the hell are you doing here, Leonard?”

The older man drops himself into one of the chairs opposite Jeff’s desk, and it’s almost a surprise that his bones don’t actually creak as he sits down.

“You said you wanted an update. On what we’ve found on … oh, what the hell’s her name?”

Leonard reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a notepad. “Debbie Wahlstrom. That’s what I’m here to give you.”

Jeff sighs and leans back in his chair. He knows there are better private detectives in Greendale, but Leonard’s been working for the firm for years -- and despite the fact that he is ridiculously low-tech, he and his team always seem to get the job done. But that doesn’t make dealing with him any easier.

Maybe Annie can play go-between, he thinks, as he fishes his cellphone out of his pocket and dials her number. “Just a minute,” he tells Leonard. “I need to call the associate who I’m working with on this case.”

Leonard nods knowingly. “I heard about her. Another hot little number, right?” He grins. “Guess she’s already got you whipped…”

“Shut up, Leonard. Everyone knows about the time you got catfished by an inmate at Sterling.”

Leonard just laughs, shrugging disinterestedly, but Jeff’s too busy listening to Annie’s voicemail message to pay much attention. He tries to decide if she’ll get annoyed that he took this meeting even if she’s not available. It would be totally unreasonable, he decides, so he just leaves her a message and promises to fill her in later.

“Okay,” he says, as he thumbs off the call and turns his attention back to Leonard. “What have you got?”

Leonard lifts his shoulders again. “Nothing.”

“Excuse me?”

“We haven’t found this broad. It’s just like you said … she disappeared off the face of the earth. We can’t find any property, employment, DMV, or even criminal records for her since she left Pine Brook.”

“So you came down here to tell me that you’ve nothing?” Jeff says. “That’s your big update?”
Leonard nods. “Well, that’s just great. That’s just--”

“Oh, don’t razz your berries,” Leonard mutters. “I didn’t say we’re done. We’ve got a few more leads to check into.” He cocks his head thoughtfully. “You know, it might help if you raised my per diem a little. Give me a little more room to maneuver….”

“That would only increase the chances you’d spend the afternoon at the racetrack, Leonard.”

Leonard cackles, not bothering to argue. This isn’t a major setback, Jeff tells himself. It would help to have some backstory on Deborah Wahlstrom for the trial, but he can throw suspicion her way and create reasonable doubt for Rutherford without knowing a thing about her.

“Fine,” he says. “Keep digging. And next time, just email your update, okay?”

Leonard lurches to his feet. “Can’t make any promises, Winger. I like the Korean barbecue joint around the corner. Reminds me of the war…”

He stumbles out of Jeff’s office without so much as a goodbye, and Jeff feels like he’s gotten off easy -- usually, Leonard drags these “meetings” out to run up the bill. But then, that’s his luck lately, and he’s not about to let some small setback in the case derail his good mood.

So he goes back to composing his dental excuse text to Annie just like he planned.

--

For someone who prides herself on her laser-sharp focus, Annie is caught off-guard by how distracted she is.

It takes three attempts to read through her first draft of deposition questions before she registers a single world and she keeps accidentally turning on the caps lock when she’s typing up notes and emails, and she completely loses her train of thought every time someone passes in the hallway outside her open office door.

Worst of all, she has no idea why her concentration is so off, which means there’s no clear way to get back on track. She slumps back in her chair, sighing in frustration. Across the room, Vicki smiles in sympathy.

“You could probably use a break,” she says.

Annie shakes her head. “No. I’m not…it’s fine. I’m just going to run to the bathroom.”

She doesn’t really have to go, but she figures a quick walk down the hall, stretching her legs and all that, will help clear her head a little. Under the bathroom’s unforgiving fluorescent lights, she eyes her reflection in the mirror critically as she needlessly washes her hands. She looks fine, bright-eyed and alert, so she tries to make herself feel that, like she’s ready to conquer the world. Behind her, a toilet flushes, and she quickly glances down, not wanting to get caught studying herself so intently by one of the other first-years.

But it’s not Maggie or Angela who strolls out of the stall -- it’s Jeff’s friend Britta, whom Annie’s run into a few times around the building since they first met back in his office. Britta seems pretty distracted as she makes her way to the sink, but she does almost smile when she recognizes Annie beside her.

“Oh, hey. I didn’t realize that…” She pauses, smiling for real. “Actually, I’m glad we ran into each other.”
“Oh yeah?” Annie says casually, though she’s immediately wondering if Britta is going to invite her to some party or get-together for Jeff’s birthday. Maybe it’s a surprise. Maybe Jeff has no idea.

Britta gives a vigorous nod. “I need some legal advice.”

“Oh, well…” Annie shrugs. “You’re probably better off asking Jeff. I mean, he’s got all the experience and he’s worked with you before so it would--”

“Jeff’s an asshole,” Britta declares, flipping her hair over her shoulder. There’s a trace of some kind of affection in her tone, though, which undercuts her words a bit. “Besides, I know what he’d tell me and I’d prefer a female perspective. You know, smash the patriarchy!” She grins and pumps her fist in the air.

Annie appreciates the sentiment enough to smile back again. “Okay, then. What’s the problem?”

Britta glances around the bathroom, ducking down to check for feet beneath the stalls. “Not here. Let’s go grab some coffee.”

Annie knows that she should say no, that it’s nearly noon and she’s already 45 minutes off schedule for the day and work should be the only thing on her mind, but part of her thinks that maybe Vicki is right -- maybe a break will help her get back on track.

Besides, Britta is asking for legal advice, and dispensing it is what Annie is supposed to do for a living these days, so she’s really just doing her duty.

Which is how she and Britta wind up heading to Shirley’s, hurrying the half block to the shop because neither of them has a coat and it’s pretty brisk outside. Shirley is behind the counter when they come through door and she grins when she looks up and spots Britta.

“And here I thought you’d disappeared on me! Where you been lately, honey?”

Britta shrugs. “Around.”

“I was thinking that maybe you’d taken my advice,” Shirley says. “You know, about finally going back to school. You should do it, sweetie. It’s never too late…”

“I know, I know,” Britta mumbles. “But I’ve been working. You know, around the corner with all those douchebag lawyers.” She hesitates, turning to look at Annie over her shoulder. “No offense. I don’t know you that well, but I don’t really think you’re a douchebag like the rest of them.”

“Thanks,” Annie says, amused.

Shirley notices her for the first time then, but instead of smiling, big and wide, like she usually does, she frowns, brow furrowed thoughtfully. “You two know each other?”

Both Annie and Britta nod. “We met through Jeff,” Britta explains, leaning over the counter to look at the menu board.

It might just be her imagination, but Annie could swear that Shirley scowls a little, almost like the news annoys her -- though that obviously doesn’t make any sense. Britta doesn’t seem to notice, either, because she just orders her coffee, so Annie follows suit and requests a tea.

Once they’re settled into a corner booth in the back, a safe distance from the lunch crowd that’s starting to form, Annie decides it’s best not to waste any more time. “So… what’s this legal matter you need help with?” she asks.
Britta sighs, leaning back against the booth’s cushioned seat. “Okay, let’s say you know a guy who sells cars and he tells you that he’ll get you a discount, at least 15 percent off sticker price. Can that be legally enforced? I mean, even if it happens in the throes of ....” She cocks her head, squinting. “A sexual encounter?”

Annie tries to keep her expression neutral -- because it’s really not her place to judge anyone’s choice of a partner, or the dynamics of someone else’s relationship, or anyone’s love life in general. “Well, verbal contracts are legally binding,” she says, and Britta perks up, smiling. “But they’re notoriously difficult to enforce because it usually becomes a whole she-said, he-said thing. There wasn’t a witness, was there? To the verbal contract, I mean.”

Britta shakes her head dejectedly. “Dammit,” she mumbles under her breath. “I should have let the perv record it.”

“But you know,” Annie continues, trying to be encouraging. “Sometimes all it takes is the threat of legal action to get someone to fulfill a contact. So tell the guy that you’ve already gotten a lawyer if he won’t give you the discount. And then I could always call him, make him think we’ve got a case even if we really don’t.”

Britta grins. “Seriously? You’d do that? I mean, like I said, we don’t really know each other that well…”

Annie shrugs. “It’s no big deal.”

“Thanks, then. I really appreciate it.”

They smile at one another, and it’s silent for a long moment because as Britta has pointed out, they really don’t know each other, so conversation isn’t exactly easy to come by. Annie fiddles with the lid on her cup, tapping her fingers against the plastic. She should probably just head back to the office now that she’s given Britta her advice, but she can’t stand the idea of sitting at her desk for several more hours and getting little done because her head is somewhere else.

“So… what did Shirley mean?” she finds herself asking Britta. “About you going back to school?”

Britta huffs out a laugh. “Oh, she’s just such a mother hen. She’s trying to convince me to finish my degree. But I dropped out a million years ago so it’s just crazy talk.”

“Why? I mean, she’s right. It’s not like it’s ever too late to go back.”

Britta shakes her head. “No, it really is. I was a crappy student back then and I’m pretty sure I’d only be worse now… so what’s the point?”

“That’s kind of defeatist thinking,” Annie says.

“Not defeatist. Realistic.”

“You don’t think that if you studied something that really interested you, something that you really felt passionately about, that wouldn’t make a difference?”

Britta tilts her head, squinting thoughtfully. “Well, I mean, I did kind of like my psychology classes back in the day. And I’m a really good listener. And not to brag or anything, but I’ve got compassion up the wazoo so I’d probably be a really good therapist. But … “ she shakes her head. “It’s stupid. It takes money to go back to school and I barely make enough money to get by now.”

If Annie knew Britta better, she’d probably point out that there are things like scholarships and
work study jobs that might be able to help out, but she doesn’t feel comfortable pushing the issue with someone who isn’t a close friend. As it is, they only know each other because of Jeff -- and she barely even knows him.

Like the fact that tomorrow is his birthday, for instance. She’d never know that detail if Craig in HR wasn’t such a gossip.

But that’s not really a big deal, she reminds herself. They’re only co-workers -- it’s not like she knows when Vicki’s birthday is, either. (Of course, she hasn’t been working closely with Vicki for two months now like she has with Jeff so maybe there is a difference…)

She looks at Britta, who’s texting someone on her phone, and sighs. “So Jeff’s birthday is tomorrow, huh?”

Britta looks up, frowning. “What?”

“Jeff’s birthday,” Annie repeats. “Does he have a party planned or something?”

“Tomorrow’s his birthday?”

“You didn’t know?”

Britta lifts an indifferent shoulder. “Jeff’s not exactly forthcoming with the personal details.”

“But you’ve known him for a few years,” Annie says. “Isn’t it weird that he never mentioned it?”

“Not really. He’s a textbook narcissist, and as vain as they come. He probably doesn’t want anyone to know he’s getting older.” Britta leans across the table, so she can lower her voice. “He once had a mini-breakdown because he noticed his hairline was starting to recede. It was all he could talk about for like a month straight.”

Annie nods, smiling a bit, because it’s a little too easy to imagine that scenario. But -- and she knows that this probably says something about her that isn’t flattering, though she can’t really bring herself to care at the moment -- she also feels a strange kind of relief to learn that Britta didn’t know about Jeff’s birthday either. They’re real, legitimate friends, and he apparently didn’t feel comfortable telling her -- so it means next to nothing that he didn’t tell Annie, someone that he’s only known for a couple of months.

Somehow, that makes it easier to sit and finish her tea in a fairly awkward silence with Britta, someone else that she doesn’t know very well. When she gets back to her desk, it also somehow makes it easier to concentrate, easier to focus on her deposition-questions draft and make serious progress.

Apparently, Vicki was right -- she just needed a break.

--

It’s nearly nine on a Friday night, and he’s still at the office.

That would be lame enough on a normal day, but the fact that it’s his birthday makes it seem like a whole different brand of pathetic.

It doesn’t matter that he hasn’t really celebrated the day since he turned 30 and started to feel the slow, agonizing march to old age begin. He doesn’t really fear death the way that other people seem to; it’s the idea of breaking down that terrifies him. Wrinkles and stiff joints and shrinking
and getting those ugly liver spots on the backs of his hands, so he starts to look and feel like some vague memory that he has of his grandfather, that’s what wakes him up in a cold sweat.

And losing his hair.

That scares him plenty too.

Still, he usually gets some guys from the firm to go out drinking with him on his birthday -- without telling them the occasion, of course -- and gets drunk enough that he doesn’t remember what day it is. He hasn’t done that today because the idea of waking up 40 years old tomorrow, with a hangover, is just too fucking depressing to contemplate.

As it is, he stood in front of the bathroom mirror for nearly 15 minutes this morning, scrutinizing his face for signs of age, and he’s pretty sure that his crow’s feet are more pronounced today than they were just yesterday. Everytime he smiled, the corners of his eyes would crinkle like tissue paper and he felt a hundred years old.

Spending the night slaving away on the case in conference room F with Annie seemed like a good distraction.

Now, he’s starting to reconsider -- because he keeps checking the back of his hands for age spots every few minutes instead of really working, so it’s not like he’s distracted from much of anything. Beside him, Annie’s focused on the work like her life depends on it. He seriously envies her ability to throw herself headfirst into a task and block everything else out.

So he’s caught completely off-guard when she stands suddenly, pushing the case files in front of her aside. “I’ll be right back,” she announces, sounding a little anxious -- but then, she’s been kind of squirrelly all day, almost like she’s the one hitting a crappy milestone birthday that she’s trying desperately to forget.

He just nods, though, and goes back to reading Annie’s draft of the witness questions for next week’s depositions. Usually, he’d be thrilled that they require so little editing because it’d mean less work for him. Tonight, he’s annoyed because he needs something to keep him occupied. But then, Annie’s gone now, so he decides that it’s a good time to play Framed on his phone for a little while.

He does take a minute to consider what present he’s going to buy for himself, though. It’s a big birthday, so he deserves something seriously impressive. A new Rolex, he thinks. The one with the black face that he was admiring on the website the other day. Sure, it’s almost $10,000, but fuck, he doesn’t turn 40 everyday.

After all, this morning, when his mother made her usual call at 7:27, the precise moment he was born, to sing “Happy Birthday” to him, she did tell him to treat himself -- and he disappoints her enough as is.

Between his game and thoughts of a new watch, he’s distracted enough that he doesn’t notice that Annie’s back until she’s pushed the conference room door open and is edging her way inside. What’s really strange, though, is that she’s walking backwards and really slowly, almost like she’s trying to hide something. Jeff smiles, all ready to tease her, when she turns suddenly. Her own smile, big and bright, is what he notices first, but then he sees that she’s got two bottles of beer clutched in one hand, while the other balances a paper plate with a cupcake on it, a lone blue candle in the center.

It makes sense and he’s completely confused, all at the same time.
As she steps closer, he can see that the cupcake’s got pale peach frosting and a white squiggle down the middle -- which means that it’s one of those orange Hostess things that he used to love as a kid.

But there’s no way she could know that. There’s no way that she should even know it’s his birthday -- and still she slides the plate in front of him with a flourish.

“Happy Birthday,” she says, in a sing-song voice that would normally make him roll his eyes, but at the moment all he can think is that it’s been more than ten years since anyone got him any kind of cake for his birthday -- even the kind that comes in a cellophane wrapper and is loaded with artificial color and flavoring.

“Annie,” he starts, though he has no idea how to finish.

“I wanted to go to Shirley’s,” she tells him, “and ask her what your favorite cake or cookie was, but we got tied up here and she was closed by the time I got down there. So I had to get this from the deli around the corner.” She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a battered book of matches for the candle. “And there’s usually a bottle of wine around this place, because we seem to work with a bunch of functional alcoholics, but all I could find in the breakroom tonight was this gross pumpkin beer. I should have planned a little better.”

It takes her a couple of tries to light the candle, and he just sits there watching because he honestly doesn’t know what to say. He feels a little warm, like maybe he’s coming down with a fever, and it’s ridiculous because it’s just a shitty cupcake that probably only cost her a couple of bucks and beer that she stole from one of the paralegals.

It’s not a big deal. It definitely doesn’t mean anything.

“How did you even know?” he asks as she pushes the cupcake even closer to him.

Annie just lifts a shoulder and smiles slyly. He watches the candle’s flame flicker for a moment, trying to ignore the burning in his chest.

“I don’t usually celebrate my birthday,” he confesses.

She furrows her brow. “Why not?”

“You’re still young, so you probably don’t get this, but when middle age is staring you dead in the face, you don’t feel much like celebrating.”

“That’s so stupid,” she declares. “I’d get it if you were turning 90 or something, but you’re only 40. You’re in the prime of your life.”

Okay, seriously, how does she know everything about him, even all the things that he doesn’t want anyone to know? It doesn’t seem fair, especially when he knows so little about her.

“If I’m in the prime of my life, where does that put you?”

She shrugs. “I’m in the prime of my life too. I just got here faster than you. I mean, when you were my age, you were probably too immature to appreciate anything.”

He laughs, shaking his head. “How old are you anyway?”

“I’ll be 26 next month.”
“Oh, God,” he groans. “You are so young.”

She kicks at his ankle beneath the table and jostles the paper plate in front of him so the cupcake and its candle shift slightly. “Make a wish,” she orders.

It’s such a silly, childish concept, and completely pointless -- and besides, what would he even wish for, anyway? He’s got the kind of life most people would envy, and in a few months, when he wraps up the Rutherford case, he’ll have everything that he’s wanted since he started at the firm.

But he looks at Annie, smiling almost hopefully, and he can’t bring himself to say any of those things. Instead, he just blows out the candle and she claps a couple of times, like he’s actually accomplished something. She goes to work twisting off the caps on the beers then, and slides a bottle toward him.

She takes a sip from the other, wincing slightly. “Ugh,” she says. “It’s even worse than I thought. Why do they have to put pumpkin in everything these days?” She gestures at the plate. “Eat your cupcake.”

He shakes his head. “I really appreciate the gesture, but I don’t do carbs. Especially not those of the artificially-colored and -flavored variety.”

She rolls her eyes. “Seriously?” She leans back in her chair, eyeing him from head to toe like she knows exactly what he looks like naked -- which, of course, she does. “You really don’t need to worry.”

“Exactly,” he says. “Because I don’t do carbs.”

“It’s your birthday, Jeff. One cupcake isn’t going to kill you.” She rolls her chair until she’s right next to him and reaches for the cupcake, breaking off a piece. She holds it out toward him, smiling playfully. “Come on… just one bite. For your birthday.”

“Annie, come on,” he laughs. “This isn’t what--”

Without any warning, she presses the cake against his lips and before he even realizes what’s happened, he’s eating it. It’s just as sweet and delicious as he remembers from when he was a kid, and Annie’s laughing as she licks a smear of frosting from her fingers, and everything about this moment feels surreal. She shifts in her chair, her knee rubbing against his, and when she looks up at him, her eyes are so smoky and blue that he can’t help thinking of that night in the bar a couple of months ago when she sent him a drink and the way she looked at him was just as sexy as her hot, little body in that dark suit.

Annie tilts her head, her smile going even softer, and then she’s leaning forward or maybe he is, and they’re kissing.

It’s tentative, almost gentle, at first, like they’re both expecting the other to put an end to it. But then Annie sighs into his mouth and he can taste the beer and something sweet on her breath, and he moves against her, sliding his hand along the back of her head. His fingers tangle in her hair, and she clutches at his forearm, and his mouth settles more firmly over hers. His skin feels hot, but he thinks he might also be shivering. Annie trembles against him too, and he never wants any of it to end.

He tries to remember if it felt like this that first night, if it’s ever felt like this before, but it’s impossible to think clearly.

So he just kisses her and forgets everything else.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

My apologies for taking so long to update -- this chapter fought me kicking and screaming every step of the way.

I'm always so grateful for Bethany's amazing beta skills, but particularly with this one. She is amazing!

There’s some kind of miracle on Sunday afternoon and Annie winds up with the apartment all to herself, which she interprets as a sign from the universe that she should allow herself a break.

Of course, curling up with a mug of lemon zinger tea and the New York Times crossword probably isn’t what most people would consider indulgent, but she loves doing the puzzle, the way her mind clears of all its junk thoughts as she focuses on the challenge of figuring out each clue and sort of goes to sleep for a change.

And really, she needs to keep her mind occupied. Otherwise, she’ll do nothing but think about her kiss with Jeff on Friday night.

It’s bad enough that she spent most of Saturday doing just that, replaying it over and over in her mind as she did her laundry, took her car to get the oil changed, and made a trip to the grocery store so Troy and Abed’s kitchen would have more to offer than buttered noodles, sugary cereals, and Spaghettios. It doesn’t even matter that some of the details are kind of blurry -- for starters, she isn’t entirely sure if he kissed her or she kissed him, and that seems pretty basic as far as facts go -- because everything that matters is burned into her brain, where it plays on a perpetual loop.

His hand tangled in her hair, the heat of his body as she grabbed at his arm to pull him closer, his stubble rasping against her chin as he drank more deeply from her, the clean, soapy scent of his cologne as she breathed him in -- it’s all combined into a sense memory that she’ll never be able to shake.

It’s silly, really, because they did a lot more than just kiss that night over two months ago. What happened in the conference room felt different somehow, like they’d fallen into something sharp and powerful that they just couldn’t pull themselves out of. She could feel her heartbeat pounding through every part of her body as she and Jeff moved together, and it was the most terrifying and thrilling thing that she’d ever felt in her life.

They hadn’t really talked afterward, but she’s pretty sure that Jeff felt it too. There’d been a hot little blush across his cheekbones and at the tips of his ears, and he had just as hard a time making eye contact after they finally drifted apart as she did. He mumbled something about it being late and she mumbled back some kind of agreement and then they were gathering up their things and hurrying from the room like they were trying to escape the scene of a crime.

But he’d walked her to her car, even with all the tense silence, and she rolled down her window and wished him a happy birthday again before she pulled out, and even waved a little awkwardly as she drove away.
And yeah, she spent the entire ride wondering if it would ever happen again.

What’s the big deal, she thinks as she works on the clue for 13 Across. So she wants to kiss him again -- there’s nothing inherently wrong with that. He is stupidly good looking and he knows how to kiss like nobody that she’s ever known, with his hands in her hair and his chest pressed to hers like he’s using his whole body to do it, like there isn’t any part of him that’s not fully invested, until the rest of the world just fades away. There is no shame in wanting to feel that again. In fact, she would be willing to bet that most red-blooded, straight women would be tempted by Jeff Winger in all his sexy, flippant, charming glory.

But there is the case, the work that keeps throwing them together, and she knows that neither of them wants any kind of distraction that takes their eyes off the prize. They have to be professional; she knows that.

So maybe she is starting to wish that they’d met under other circumstances. Because, yeah, he isn’t exactly the perfect guy, with his deplorable work ethic and titanic ego and persistent sarcasm, but she thinks that he understands her -- the things that she wants out of life, what’s important to her -- in a way that not everyone would. She thinks of Vaughn, with his sweet love songs and silly pet names, and it doesn’t even matter that he was such a nice guy because there were just so many parts of her life that didn’t make sense to him.

When they first met, Vaughn definitely didn’t get her obsession with grades (“They’re all just a bunch of letters, Moonflower,” he’d told her. “Is one really any better than the other?”) and he didn’t really understand the goals that she set for herself (earning a BA from a real four-year college, getting into a top-ranked law school, proving to everyone who ever doubted her that she could still be an unqualified success, no matter what mistakes she might have made in the past) but that seemed mainly due to the fact that he didn’t really have any goals of his own.

He did, however, understand that it all meant something to her, and for a long time, that was enough to bridge the gap.

When all those dreams she had for herself started to become real, though, when she was spending hours in the law library, interning at firms all summer, barely sleeping for a week straight to work on the Law Review, it suddenly wasn’t enough any more.

Jeff may be a slacker, but she knows that he understands ambition. He might be motivated by completely different things, mainly getting that big, flashy office on the fifth floor, but he’d understand why everything else in her life has to take a backseat to work, he’d get the whole working late thing, (even if his idea of a late night is taking a client out for drinks). He wouldn’t expect her to blow off a court appearance to lie in the park, looking for shapes in the clouds.

Not that she’s imagining any kind of relationship with Jeff -- well, not really, anyway. She is completely focused on her career, on the work, so even if she’d met Jeff at the gym or a coffee shop or the cheese department at Whole Foods, the timing probably would have been off.

Still, she is starting to think that maybe there really is something there, something that could be nurtured, something that will keep for a little a while, until she’s established herself at the firm and can take her foot off the gas just a little bit.

She absently doodles hearts and stars in the margin of her crossword puzzle, thinking about the kiss again, about how every cell in her body seemed to come alive in a way that she doesn’t remember ever happening before.

Maybe it doesn’t even have to keep that long.
Maybe just until they finish this case.

When they’re riding high on their victory, Jeff will have his cushy office and she’ll have made a name for herself. If they’re working separate cases, it’s not like they can be accused of anything untoward or unprofessional -- and it’s not like that really matters anyway, because Jeff wasn’t kidding that first day when he tried to convince her to work with him.

Everyone is fooling around with everyone else at that office.

They’d just be a couple more names to add to the list.

So they kissed, and they’ll probably kiss again at some point.

It’s really not a big deal.

It doesn’t have to be a big deal, anyway.

She nods to herself, feeling a little more settled, and goes back to work on the puzzle. She doesn’t make it any further than reading the clue for 17 Across, a 15-letter word for “Totally gone,” when she hears keys rattling in the hallway and the door unceremoniously opens so the guys can stumble into the apartment. They hadn’t mentioned any plans for today, but they were gone when she got back from her morning run and their clothes clue her in to the fact that something must be up. They’re both wearing their usual jeans, but they’re also rocking blazers that are just a bit too big and ties. She can’t help smiling at their ties in particular: Abed’s is Batman-themed, while Troy’s is dotted with rubber duckies.

“Where did you two go all dressed up? I figured you’d gone off to play ultimate frisbee or laser tag.”


“We had a very important business lunch,” Abed explains.

“At Friday’s,” Troy says. “I had the chicken fingers. They were so good.”

Annie raises a brow. “Really?”

Troy frowns in confusion. “Why wouldn’t they be good?”

“No. I meant… you had a business meeting?”

Troy and Abed nod enthusiastically, looking like synchronized bobble head dolls.

“Max, the head of development, loved our game,” Abed says. “But he had a few questions so we had lunch to discuss it.”

“Just like businessmen do in the movies,” Troy boasts.

“On a Sunday afternoon?” Annie asks. “Why didn’t you do it on a work day?”

Troy shrugs. “It was a totally informal meeting. Max is a really cool, casual guy. Kinda like your boss, I guess.”

“Except neither of us has slept with him,” Abed clarifies.

Annie scowls his way, but he’s too busy turning on the TV and making himself comfortable in his
recliner to notice. Troy sinks down in the chair opposite him, sighing happily.

“This is shapin’ up to be an awesome week,” he declares. “They’re totally gonna greenlight our game and there’s a new episode of Supergirl and we only have to work three days because of Thanksgiving. Does it get any better than that?”

Annie slides her crossword puzzle aside and smiles. “Speaking of which … are you guys going to see your families for the holiday?”

Troy shakes his head. “Nah. I mean, it’s not like they celebrate so I’m not gonna get turkey out of it or anything. I’m just gonna see them for our usual Sunday dinner. When they’ll spend the entire meal trashing my Aunt Monica because she just became a cocktail waitress at Caesars Palace. They’ve been doing it for like two years straight, ever since she moved to Vegas in the first place.”

Annie nods sympathetically, reminding herself that just because Troy has contact with his family, it doesn’t mean that it’s all sunshine and roses when they’re together. Sometimes, she feels as if she is missing so much because her family isn’t part of her life -- and then other times, she wonders if maybe she is actually better off.

“What about you, Abed? Are you going to see your dad?”

“He’s been in New York all month, visiting my uncle. He doesn’t get back until next week, I think.”

“Okay,” Annie says brightly, because if necessary, she can drum up enough good cheer for all of them. She can handle spending the holiday alone, with a grilled cheese and mountains of research to keep her company, but it would be nice to avoid it if she can. “So why don’t we do a Thanksgiving dinner? You know, like the old days?” She cocks her head, considering. “Well, except let’s skip the McDonald’s that we used to get at Greendale. Let’s do a real, traditional Thanksgiving dinner.”

Troy’s eyes light up. “Like with a turkey?” he asks hopefully. “And mashed potatoes and sweet potatoes and green bean casserole?”

She nods. “Totally. Except… well, I don’t think I’m going to have time to do any cooking. We’ve got these depositions on Tuesday and we’ll need to go over them on Wednesday…”

“We can do it,” Troy declares. “I mean, we don’t know anything about cooking a turkey or stuffing it or squishing a pumpkin for pie, but we watch the Food Network all the time. We can totally figure it out.”

He looks to Abed for confirmation, who nods, and then they nod in unison, like they’re gaining confidence with each bob of their head. Unfortunately, Annie doesn’t share their faith, because she can see the entire scenario so clearly in her mind -- their kitchen trashed, with every mismatched pot and pan that they own spread across the room and the food still inedible at the end because the turkey is stuffed with candy corn and the sweet potato casserole is dotted with autumn-colored M&M’s.

“But you guys are busy too,” she says. “You know, with your game and everything. So I’ve got an even better idea. The gourmet deli on Whitehall sells prepared turkeys and all the sides. I’ll place an order on my way to work tomorrow. That way, it’ll be nice and stress-free for all of us.”

The guys consider the idea for a moment. Abed is the first to agree, giving her a thumbs up. Troy holds out a little longer, but eventually offers a reluctant nod.
“But I’ll still make dessert,” he says -- and she must still look skeptical because Troy sighs in frustration. “No, trust me! I saw this awesome recipe on Pinterest for these cupcakes that look like little turkeys. I just need some Duncan Hines cake mixes and Oreos and candy corn… it’s easy.”

“And we can do that hokey sitcom staple where we all go around the table and say what we’re thankful for,” Abed declares. “I’m going to come up with something especially poignant. I bet I can make you both cry.”

She smiles and Troy shrugs because they both know that it doesn’t take much to get them going and Abed knows all the buttons to press after years of friendship. Troy goes to get his laptop so he scan Pinterest for more dessert ideas and Abed starts searching Netflix and Hulu for classic Thanksgiving movies and episodes from various sitcoms and she goes back to her crossword, more determined than ever to finish.

And she makes it through three entire clues before she thinks about her kiss with Jeff again.

-x-

Aside from a momentary bout of panic on Sunday afternoon, the weekend is pretty much a breeze.

Sure, when Jeff pulled out of the parking garage on Friday night, he felt a strange buzzing just under his skin, like heat was mainlining through his body. He could even swear that the sweet, sharp taste of her still lingered on his lips as he slid into bed later and jerked off under the covers, in the dark, like he was 16 years old again.

But he didn’t feel bad about it -- he hasn’t had sex in two months, and while he’s had dry spells longer than that before, there’s been all the stress with the case and then his birthday that’s made it almost impossible to ignore the growing edginess.

So it’s not exactly surprising that even the smallest bit of physical contact with Annie, even something as harmless as a damn kiss, could leave him desperate for some action. Going to a bar and picking up another woman probably would have scratched the itch a little more effectively, but it was late and that just seemed like too much trouble.

Still, it didn’t really mean anything that he was still thinking about Annie and the kiss when he woke up on Saturday morning -- because it was a fucking hot kiss and it was the most action he’d seen in months (is it just a coincidence that the last time was with Annie too? Does it mean something that it was Annie again? No, he thinks fiercely. He’s going with coincidence. It’s just a massive coincidence) and Annie is gorgeous, and he’s only human, for fuck’s sake.

There’s also the little fact that she’d done a nice thing for him, with the stupid cupcake and candle, and maybe he’d forgotten what it felt like to have someone go to any trouble for him -- someone who didn’t have to, someone who didn’t have anything to gain but decided to do it anyway -- so it probably hit him a little harder than it should have.

But he can cut himself some slack for that too. It was turning 40 -- it’s fucked with his head in a major way.

And still, he was fine all Saturday, from his morning dermatologist appointment to his afternoon of shopping all the way through dinner with his accountant and a few drinks with Eric and Chris at a new bar downtown. Maybe he thought about Annie a little, off and on, throughout the night -- when one of the guys complained about the first-year they’re saddled with, or a woman pushed in next to him at the bar and her perfume was just a little too strong, or he checked his phone for texts
-- but that didn’t really mean anything either.

It wasn’t until he got home from the gym on Sunday and stepped into the shower that he started to have his doubts.

Because standing under the hot water, he couldn’t stop replaying every detail of the kiss, in all its hot, vivid glory, over and over again in his mind, until there he was jerking off yet again, like he just couldn’t control himself -- and it wasn’t like Friday night when there were still endorphins flooding his bloodstream that he could hold responsible.

Nearly 48 hours after kissing her, all of that should have been long gone from his system. He should have been over it.

Instead, he was acting like a lovesick schoolgirl, mooning over a goddamn kiss like he’d never felt anything like it before. And the idea that he could lose his head over a woman like that was terrifying. It wasn’t him; it definitely wasn’t who he wanted to be.

So he freaked out.

There wasn’t any other way to describe it.

He did almost 50 push ups even though he’d just been to the gym, drank enough scotch to make him vaguely nauseated, and started to get dressed to go out so he could find another woman and get Annie out of his head once and for all.

He’d only made it as far as choosing a pair of pants, though, when it hit him.

This wasn’t really about Annie. Well, at least, not about her specifically. It was the fact that she’d made herself off-limits when they first started working together. So even though they’d already slept together, there was the whole forbidden-fruit thing going on.

She is someone whom he can’t have, so of course, that only makes him want her more -- and he’s willing to bet that it’s the same for her.

It doesn’t even matter that they’ve already technically had a taste of the fruit, because really, all that night did was give them a pretty good idea of exactly how delicious it is.

So he can’t get Annie out of his system until he indulges the craving another time or two (or maybe three or four or ten; it’s not an exact science).

She’s probably right, though -- giving in while they still have the case to work on would be a mistake. Everything that he’s wanted for years is on the line with it, and he can’t risk getting distracted by anyone.

But based on how hot the kiss was, how flushed and glassy-eyed she was afterward, it won’t be hard to convince Annie that it’s something worth exploring once the case is wrapped up.

So when he gets dressed on Monday morning, he purposely chooses the cobalt tie that Annie’s complimented a couple of times and his favorite charcoal suit, the one that fits him like a fucking glove, and he feels like he’s at the top of his game as he steps off the elevator and heads to his office. It only gets better as he checks his email on his phone while he walks; there’s a message from the prosecutor's office, letting him know that the depositions that were supposed to take place tomorrow have been rescheduled for next Monday.

That definitely seems like a sign that things are going his way.
He does falter a little when he gets to Claire’s desk and she tells him that Annie’s waiting for him inside, though -- he was counting on having a few minutes to prep himself.

But there she is, sitting in the chair across from his desk, her legs crossed and foot bouncing slightly like she’s a little impatient. She’s wearing the black and white pinstripe suit, with the skirt that he knows has the little slit in the back, which just so happens to be his favorite. He wonders if maybe she took just as much care picking out her clothes this morning as he did.

“Good morning,” he says breezily as he shrugs out of his coat.

Annie looks up with a smile, but he thinks that she might be a little flushed again “Good morning. So…” She lifts her shoulders and exhales slowly. “How was the rest of your birthday?”

“Uneventful.” He throws his coat across the sofa. “The highlight actually happened here.”

She definitely blushing now, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Yeah, we should probably talk about that.”

“What?” he asks, settling himself into his chair. “How you tried to ruin my six pack by force-feeding me Hostess products?” She rolls her eyes and he nods. “Oh, you were talking about the other thing.” He feels the corner of his mouth twitching and there’s no way to stop it, so he lets himself grin stupidly. “When you kissed me.”

Annie’s mouth drops open and her eyes go comically wide. “It… no… I don’t … You kissed me!”

It’s impossible not to laugh now either, because he sounds so offended and embarrassed that it’s kind of adorable. It only takes a few seconds for her to realize that he’s just teasing, though, and then she’s almost smiling.

“We kissed each other,” she amends.

He nods again. “I should probably promise it’s never going to happen again, but I sort of did that before and look how well that turned out.”

She tilts her head, studying him for a moment. Her eyes are so bright and wide that he abruptly loses his train of thought, just like that, and all that registers for him is a strange tugging in his chest and heat in his veins.

“The timing’s just off,” she tells him. “Because I meant what I said when we started working together. We have to keep things professional. We can’t just …” She waves her hand through the air, as if that finishes her thought.

“Right,” he agrees. “But what I’m hearing is that you don’t think us kissing is a terrible idea. It’s just a terrible idea right now.”

She huffs out a sound that’s somehow a cross between a sigh and a laugh and is full of what he can only describe as genuine affection. He’s not really sure when the last time was that he felt that in quite this way. It’s a strange, disorienting feeling, and he exhales slowly to try to process it.

“You,” Annie says, nodding. “I think that’s what I’m saying.” She smiles a little shyly again, and he can’t help but mimic her.

“And taking it a step further,” he continues, “what you’re saying is that as soon as we finish this case, you want to go to town on me like a sailor on shore leave.”
The sound that she makes now is definitely an outraged gasp, but just in case he wasn’t certain, she tosses her pen in his direction for good measure. The whole effect of her indignation is ruined, though, because she giggles then, and his grin only widens.

“I really have a way with words, don’t I?”

“You’re really inappropriate is what you are.” Annie narrows her eyes, like she’s getting ready to scold him further, but then she shakes her head and she’s smiling, all soft and sweet, and he keeps smiling back because it’s impossible not to. And maybe he holds her gaze a little too long, because he feels the heat surging through him again and if he doesn’t get ahold of himself soon, he might seriously hurl himself across the desk and kiss her again.

“Speaking of professional things,” he says, feeling awkward as hell. “That asshole Murphy from the prosecutor’s office emailed me this morning. The depositions have been pushed back until next Monday. Somebody got their schedule messed up because of the holiday.”

She frowns. “Seriously?”

“Wait, are you upset about this? Most people would think it’s good news. You know, having extra time to prepare.”

“I just feel like we’re in the zone. We’re ready to go…” Annie shrugs. “I hate having to wait.”

“We’ll be fine,” he says, waving a dismissive hand. She nods, but doesn’t seem entirely convinced, so he figures distraction is the best tactic. “We do have the short week for Thanksgiving. You doing some family thing?”

He keeps his tone casual, because he remembers she told him that she hasn’t spoken to her parents in years and he doesn’t want to dredge up painful memories -- but just because she doesn’t have anything to do with her mother and father doesn’t mean that there aren’t other family members that she’s on good terms with. It’s probably best not to make assumptions.

“No,” she says. “I’m spending the day with friends, actually. What about you? Going to see your family?”

He shakes his head. “Nope. Same as you. Just getting together with some friends.”

Annie smiles. “I think it’s better to spend the holidays with friends. Fewer expectations.”

“Fewer questions to answer too,” Jeff says, trying not to think about how disappointed his mother will be when he calls later today and tells her that work will be keeping him away from home again this year.

“That’s true,” she agrees. “So hopefully, we’ll both have a nice, low-key, drama-free Thanksgiving.”

“My plans consist solely of scotch and football, so that seems likely.”

She smiles again, her eyes bright and teasing, and suddenly, he’s imagining a very different kind of Thanksgiving, where he ignores the Panthers/Cowboys game and instead spends the day tangled up with Annie, just like that night two months ago. He gets a little carried away, adding a roaring fire and a bearskin rug to the daydream, and he has to shake his head to clear the image.

“So,” he says, his cheeks warm. “Should we go over the deposition outline again?”
As focused as she normally is and as important as she knows her work is, Annie has to admit that she’s caught a little bit of holiday fever.

Considering how the rest of the Hamish, Hamish, Hamlin, & Hawthorne staff is behaving, it would probably be impossible not to get swept up in it. The short week, which culminates in a rare four-day weekend, has everyone distracted and fidgety, giddy just like kids before a school break. She assumed that her head would be in the game for the shortened week because they were supposed to take the depositions, but the postponement means that they’ve got a little breathing room and she feels her own attention start to wander.

Of course, it keeps circling back to the same topic so she finds herself thinking about Jeff as she heads back to her office after lunch.

For once, they acted like actual, mature adults and discussed what happened between them, and now they’re on the same page. And she feels such relief about it (and yeah, maybe a little of her own giddiness) that her mood is what Abed sometimes refers to as Disney Princess cheerful.

That’s probably why she doesn’t even flinch when her phone chimes with yet another text from Pierce Hawthorne. He asked for her number at the hockey game a couple of weeks back, and even though Jeff warned her not to give it to him, she just couldn’t say no. Since then, she’s gotten at least a couple of texts a day, full of meaningless commentary on his day and observations about the most random of topics, and she finds herself responding to each one with as much patience as she can muster. It’s probably mainly to prove a point to Jeff, who snickers every time she gets a text.

His latest message wonders if thongs are as uncomfortable as they look, and though her first impulse is to tell him exactly how gross he’s being, she decides to send back the emoji with its tongue sticking out and leave it at that.

She’s so busy trying to find a diplomatic way to respond to Pierce that she doesn’t even notice Britta lumbering down the hallway toward her until the ancient mailroom cart stops right at her feet.

“They’ve got me in the mailroom again,” Britta grouses, without any preamble. “Can you believe it? I think Jeff told them to stick me there on purpose. Just to fuck with me.”

Annie smiles. “I don’t really think he’d do that.”

“Oh, he totally would. Believe me.” Britta shakes her head in disgust. “But enough about him… I was looking for you, actually.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“That sleazy car salesman Cal totally caved when I told him I got an attorney and gave him your card. I got my discount!”

“That’s great!”

Britta gives a proud little nod. “So I got a nice, environmentally-friendly hybrid. And it’s lime green! It’s awesome.”

“That’s terrific,” Annie says. “I’m really glad it worked out.”

“And I mean, it was just in time, too, because riding around on that bike when it’s practically
winter was getting seriously old.”

“I can--”

“So let me buy you a cup of coffee. You know, as a thank you.”

Annie shakes her head. “Oh, no. That’s really not necessary. And I just got back from lunch, so--”

“Come on. It’s the least I can do.” She links her arm through Annie’s and starts to pull her back toward the lobby. “And I need caffeine more than I need my next breath…”

Annie glances back at the mailroom cart, abandoned in the middle of the hallway. “Should you really just leave that there?”

“What?” Britta spares a passing glance over her shoulder. “Oh, yeah, that’s fine. No one’ll touch it.”

Outside, it feels as if winter is definitely ready to arrive -- there’s a stinging chill in the air that makes Annie glad that she remembered to grab her scarf this morning. She tightens it around her throat as she follows Britta toward Shirley’s. Britta’s only wearing a leather jacket, but she does her best to pretend the cold isn’t bothering her.

“Hey, didn’t you say you needed a new car?” she asks as they walk. “Did you ever get one?”

“Not yet. I haven’t really had a chance to--”

“I bet we could totally scare Cal into giving you a discount too!” Britta grins almost maniacally. “We could go down there this weekend and intimidate the crap out of him!”

“As fun as that sounds,” Annie says, with a laugh, “I’m not really ready for a new car. I mean, I haven’t done any research yet. I haven’t even had time to find my own place.”

“Why not? Off the top of my head, an old lady died in my building over the weekend and I know a guy renting out his basement and a girl who wants to share her loft. I could totally hook you up.”

“It’s just a time thing,” Annie explains. “Jeff and I have this really important case and it’s demanding all of my attention at the moment. I figure once we finish with it, I’ll be able to focus on other things.”

Like securing more reliable transportation and finding an apartment of her own, she thinks. And maybe even riding Jeff Winger into complete and utter oblivion.

She thinks that she could make the time for that.

At Shirley’s, they’re in the middle of a mid-afternoon rush on caffeine so there’s a line. Annie checks her watch, starting to feel a little antsy about how long she’s been away from her desk. If it takes another five minutes to get their coffee and then another ten to drink it and five more to walk back, she probably won’t be back in her office until almost two-thirty. She pulls her phone from her pocket to make sure that Jeff isn’t looking for her, but there’s only another text from Pierce -- sunglasses-wearing emoji, a bomb emoji, and dragon emoji.

“So where are you staying?” Britta asks as they wait in line and grins. “Are you shacked up with some guy?”

Annie laughs. “Oh, no. They’re just roommates, in the most platonic sense of the word.”
Britta leans in against the glass pastry case, checking out the selection. “But is there a guy?” she asks. She squints then and shakes her head as they move forward in line. “Listen to me. Is there a guy or a girl? You know, just somebody.”

“There isn’t anybody at the moment,” Annie says. “Work is pretty much everything.”

“Now who on earth does that sound like?” Shirley appears in front of them with a knowing smirk, obviously having overheard their conversation. “A certain $6000 suit-wearing, smooth-talking lawyer that we all know, maybe?”

Britta nods thoughtfully. “That’s true. Jeff definitely uses work as an excuse for why he can’t have a real, meaningful relationship. And it’s so lame, because really, he’s just an emotionally-stunted man-child who could never care about anyone else as much as he cares about himself.”

“And she would know,” Shirley says, giving Annie a pointed look.

She takes their order then, without any follow-up comments, and Annie wonders if she’s missed something. “What did Shirley mean?” she asks Britta as they settle at a table.

“Huh? Oh, I think she just meant that you shouldn’t follow Jeff’s example. Don’t use work to keep yourself from—”


Britta shrugs. “Listen, don’t take everything Shirley says to heart, okay? She means well, but she’s a little … old-fashioned. She doesn’t understand that not all women need men to make their lives complete.”

Annie nods, wrapping her hand around her cup and savoring the warmth for a minute. She still doesn’t feel like she’s following the conversation at all, though, and it’s somewhat frustrating.

“Really, the older I get, the more I’ve started to think of sex as just another biological need,” Britta continues, dumping another packet of sugar into her coffee. “I mean, when I’m hungry, I eat. I don’t wait for some guy to come along and bring me a sandwich, right? I go and get one myself. Sex should be the same way. You want an orgasm? Get a vibrator and give yourself one.”

Annie laughs, glancing around the coffee shop discreetly to make sure none of the pervy partners from the firm are around to get a cheap thrill out of this conversation. “I guess that makes sense.”

“And yeah, Shirley’s kind of right,” Britta says. “Because if you’re looking for an emotionally-fulfilling relationship, you’ve got just as much luck with something of the battery-operated persuasion as you do with Jeff Winger.”

“Excuse me?”

“I mean, sure, the guy is good looking, and his technique is decent… but it’s kind of like having sex with a robot.” Britta shrugs. “And you’ve got to deal with that massive ego of his too. It doesn’t really seem worth all the trouble if you’ve got a good vibrator.”

Annie watches Britta take a sip of coffee and squeezes her fingers around her cup. “Oh,” she says stupidly. “So you and Jeff… dated?”

Britta scrunches her nose, like her coffee is too bitter. “Dated is a generous way to describe it. We fooled around for a while. You know, when we didn’t have anything better to do. That’s how Jeff likes these things… casual, uncomplicated. And I don’t mind that either so it worked out for like a
year.” She lifts a careless shoulder. “Last spring, he was sleeping with the receptionist from his dermatologist’s office because she always got him the best appointment times. But she made the mistake of asking him to go to some cousin’s or aunt’s wedding, and he never spoke to her again. He literally switched doctors to avoid this chick. How’s that for sleazy and cowardly all at once?”

“Yeah, that’s just--”

“But you know, Shirley somehow got this crazy idea that me and Jeff were the romance of the century and we’re just too stubborn to admit it. Which is just nuts, because the truth is, I’d wind up stabbing him to pieces with a butter knife if I had to spend more than twenty minutes at a time with him. You know, if alcohol wasn’t involved, anyway.”

Annie nods, though she’s barely keeping up with the conversation anymore. She tries to think of Jeff, of the person that she’s gotten to know somewhat well over the past two months, and reconcile that guy with whomever Britta is describing. It doesn’t really compute, but Annie deals with facts -- and Britta has certainly known him longer, has known him in a long-term intimate capacity, so she isn’t just pulling all of this out of thin air.

And of course, there’s the little fact that the night that Annie met Jeff herself, he was down for a one-night stand in the kind of easy, blasé way that only someone who is well-acquainted with those types of relationships would be.

Whatever she might be feeling at the moment, though, her expression must be normal enough because Britta laughs. “Why am I even telling you this? You work with him all day. You know what I’m talking about.”

Again, Annie nods her head in apparent agreement. She wants to ask a hundred questions and she also doesn’t want to talk about any of it again and it’s all very confusing.

“What are you doing for Thanksgiving?” she hears herself asking, a desperate bid to change the subject. “Seeing your family?”

“I’ve got to work actually,” Britta says. “My other job. But it’s not really a big deal because I’m a vegetarian so I don’t do turkey. And my parents are kind of the worst. Always meddling in my life like I’m still a kid. Like I asked them for a $3000 loan to help pay for my new car and the check they gave me was for $6000. Can you believe that?”

Annie can’t actually, because her parents haven’t paid for anything for her since the first semester of her senior year of high school when she went on a field trip to visit colleges in California. But it doesn’t really matter because she’s still thinking about Jeff, about what exactly he wants from her. About how she is too damn smart to read anyone that badly.

Britta smirks, completely oblivious. “I still think we should mess with Cal and get you a discount on a car, too. That offer is still on the table.”

Somehow, Annie manages a bland smile. She’s barely taken three sips of coffee, so there’s no way that she’s going to get back to her desk by 2:30 at this point.

She doesn’t even care anymore.

-x-

He should probably just call or text or email, but instead, he goes downstairs to find Annie around lunch time. He hasn’t seen her at all today, and a little face time seems like a good idea.
Barely anyone in the office is working, not with less than three hours until the four-day weekend starts, and even though he and Annie are as well-prepared for the depositions as they could possibly be, he knows that she’ll still be revising, editing, and polishing their questions until they meet her exacting standards.

He’s actually read over them for the fourth time today himself and he doesn’t have a single doubt that they’re ready (even if he has his doubts about how the whole thing is going to go for them). Now he just has to convince Annie, so she’ll leave at a decent hour and get a head start on her holiday weekend.

As expected, she’s hunched over some files and scribbling on a notepad in conference room F, despite the fact that in the hallway just outside, a couple of paralegals are having a loud, heated conversation about the most recent episode of South Park. Annie’s focused so intently on her work that she doesn’t even seem to notice.

“Okay,” Jeff says as he breezes into the room. “I’ve gone over the questions for the hundredth time and they’re perfect. We got this.”

She looks up with a frown, eyeing him strangely for a moment, before she shrugs. “It won’t hurt to go over them again.”

“We close down at 2 the day before holidays around here,” he tells her. “So I don’t want you pushing yourself to--”

“I’m not pushing myself,” she says curtly. He watches as she reaches for her pen and underlines something on the page in front of her several times. “I’ve got a couple more hours so I’m just putting some finishing touches on the outline. Don’t worry -- I’ll send you my revised copy before Monday morning.”

He pulls out the chair beside hers and makes himself comfortable. She slides her pad and notes away from him, as if to give him space, but he still sneaks a peek at them anyway -- he can barely recognize their deposition questions at this point because her copy is covered with notes, written in her usual purple ink, and it’s silly to think that he could pick up a mood from her handwriting alone, but everything about it seems angry.

Maybe the stress is getting to her.

“I’m not worried,” he says. “I just don’t want you doing more work than is necessary. We were ready to do this yesterday, Annie. Don’t start doubting us now.”

She pauses and lets out a sharp sigh, but she doesn’t look up. “I’m not doubting anything. I’m just doing my job.”

He’s spent years learning to read other people’s moods and he’s spent the better part of the past two months learning Annie’s specifically, which is why, despite how hard she’s trying to sell the whole nothing-but-focused thing, he knows she’s pissed about something. He replays the last day or so in his head, trying to figure out if he’s done anything that could possibly be construed as offensive, but aside from showing up 20 minutes late to their meeting yesterday, he comes up blank.

As far as he knows, they’re on the same page at the moment -- the really good page where they both recognize that there should be a hell of a lot more kissing in their future as soon as they put this case to bed.
But then, it’s the holidays, and people can get really weird about them, and he knows Annie’s got some family issues. It only stands to reason that it’s probably not her favorite time of the year.

“Well, it definitely seems like you’ve earned a break,” he says, trying to lighten the mood. “You’re starting to get cranky.”

It takes barely a second for him to realize that he’s said the wrong thing -- the pen falls from Annie’s fingers and she huffs out a noise that can only be described as pure outrage. When she pins him with a steely glare, he’s actually a little nervous.

“Do you know how patronizing you sound?” she snaps. “I am not cranky. I was trying to work and you came in here and interrupted me. I’m sorry that I didn’t roll out the welcome mat for you or something.”

He laughs, because he isn’t really sure how else to react. “Okay, sure. I caught you in the middle of work. That’s all this is.”

She continues scowling in his direction, but starts gathering up her files and pad. “You know what? On second thought, I have earned a break,” she declares, “so I think I will duck out early. I’ve got errands to run.”

She brushes past him on her way to the door, and he’s seriously tempted to reach for her hand and make her stay, but she definitely isn’t in a receptive mood, and he doesn’t really want to make a scene with the audience in the hallway.

There’s also the little fact that he doesn’t understand anything that’s happened, or what exactly his role in it is, so he’s not even sure what he’d do if he did stop her.

So he watches her stalk off into the hall, not moving out of his chair. It takes a minute before he realizes that he forgot to wish her a happy Thanksgiving.

-x-

She isn’t ready to go back to the apartment, so she just drives.

She knows that her bad mood is mostly irrational -- how can she seriously be mad at Jeff for something that he hasn’t technically done? It doesn’t make any sense -- but that doesn’t take the bite out of it. For a moment, she thinks that she maybe needs a drink, but going to a bar reminds her too much of the night that she bought Jeff a drink at L Street and she definitely doesn’t want to relive those memories right now.

So she goes to Barnes and Noble instead, because bookstores have always had a calming effect on her. She doesn’t have time to read anything for pleasure these days, so she buys a fancy new planner instead, even though she’s been using her phone and iPad to keep track of her schedule for the last couple of years. In the past, writing things down always helped her organize her time more effectively, though, so it might be a good time to pick up the habit again. She even picks up some color-coded stickers for maximum time management and a Strawberries and Creme Frappuccino from the cafe, and her impromptu shopping spree does help take the edge off her mood a little.

As she drives home, she is calm enough to analyze the situation objectively. She understands that she isn’t upset because Jeff slept with Britta and didn’t tell her about it or anything as petty as that - - that would be ridiculous, because whatever is going on between them, and however well they’ve gotten to know each other over the past couple of months, it’s not like they’ve ever really opened up to each other. She hasn’t told him about Vaughn, after all, and that was a hell of a lot more
serious than his thing with Britta, apparently.

No, she is angry because he probably thinks that he can have the same kind of casual, no-strings-attached arrangement with her too. Maybe he expects that they’ll exchange sex for other kinds of favors, like he obviously did when he helped Britta with her legal troubles, when he got the dermatologist’s receptionist to work around his schedule, when he conned whatever other unsuspecting women into giving whatever he wanted and offering nothing in return.

Sure, maybe he’s not as gross as someone like Alan Connor or the other guys at the firm who would dangle a case like Rutherford’s as a way to get her into bed, but he’s still a pig if he thinks that she’s just going to be at his beck and call whenever he needs an itch scratched. He’s got another think coming if that’s how he expects their relationship to unfold.

It’s not like she wants to marry him or anything, that she imagines some sort of happily-ever-after. But she thought that they actually respected each other, that maybe they’d come to understand and appreciate each other a little over the past couple of months.

She feels like an idiot that she might have things so wrong. When they met, he saw her as nothing more than a one-night stand. Why should she think things would be any different now that they know each other a little better? He is still the same guy.

She’s relieved to have the next couple of days off, so she can get over the disappointment that she’s feeling and at least try to salvage their working relationship — and she’s even more relieved when she can hear the guys hooting and hollering through the apartment door as she searches her bag for her key. Knowing them, they’re caught up in a movie or TV show, and they’ll find some way to get her swept up in their excitement for the next few hours.

And tomorrow, they’ll have a real Thanksgiving dinner, just the three of them, and she’ll be nice and distracted from all thoughts of Jeff Winger.

When she gets the door open, the first thing that she sees is Troy, jumping up and down with a fist pressed to his mouth in front of the TV. Beside him, Abed is still, but his eyes are wide, like he’s either completely impressed or confused. They’re obviously playing some video game because she hears the music and the sound of explosions — but that’s not noteworthy; they play games for at least 12 hours out of the day.

But what is noteworthy is that standing right in front of them, wearing one of their goofy headsets, is Jeff.

He’s taken off his suit jacket and tie, so he can maneuver with the controller more easily — and he’s just as into the game as the guys are, throwing grenades and shooting an uzi and high-fiving like a frat boy.

“What’s going on here?” she demands.

Jeff turns, grinning stupidly, and shrugs. Troy bounces up and down a couple more times, letting out a high-pitched squeal. “This is us beating level 29, Annie! We’ve never done that before. But Jeff knows how to —”

“What are you doing here?” she asks, scowling at Jeff.

Somehow, all of the not-so-righteous indignation that she almost, sort of, let go of on the way home comes flooding back just at the sight of him, standing in the middle of what is essentially her home, like he owns the damn place.
He pushes one more button on the controller, so there’s a bright, loud explosion on the screen and both Troy and Abed gasp in wonder. “I wanted to talk to you,” he explains, taking off the headset and setting it down on one of the recliners. “And Troy and Abed were nice enough to invite me to play while I waited.”

“You didn’t tell us Jeff was this cool!” Troy declares.

Abed nods. “Now we totally understand why you slept him the first night you met him.”

Jeff laughs, and Annie can only grit her teeth. “Will you excuse us?” She doesn’t wait for the guys to respond, just tugs on Jeff’s arm to pull him toward the futon.

Since she moved in, the guys’ concession to her need for privacy has been to hang a bed sheet across the room on a clothesline so she can pull it closed if necessary. She’s never really had a need before, but she tugs it closed now with a flourish.

“This is where you live?” Jeff asks, fighting off a smile.

“It’s temporary,” she snaps. “I’m just staying here until I have time to find my own place.”

“I think there’s actually a studio apartment available in my building. I started out in one of those back in the day when I was an associate and—”

“I’m not going to live in your building.”

Jeff shrugs. “Why not? It’d be convenient. You know, for all the late nights.”

She shoots him her most withering glare, the one that she honed over years of staring down law-school study group members who weren’t carrying their weight, but he only laughs.

“I meant when we’re working on the case, Annie. Jeez. Get your mind out of the gutter.”

She isn’t amused in the slightest and crosses her arms over her chest so he knows it. “What are you doing here?” she demands again. “And how did you even know where I live?”

He picks up the Disneyland snow globe that she keeps on the end table beside the futon, her only effort at decorating her temporary home, and shakes it, so all of the iridescent, white glitter swirls through the water. “I got a copy of your HR file. Craig’s always good about doing me favors.”

“Of course,” she says, throwing her hands up. “Something completely unprofessional and unethical. But that’s par for the course with you.”

He must realize that she isn’t teasing, that she’s being completely serious, because he squints like he’s trying very hard to understand. “What does that mean?”

“What are you doing here?” she demands again.

“Like I said, I want to talk to you.” He crosses his arms over his chest now, but he’s smiling. “I’m not an idiot, so I picked up on the fact that you’re alternating between acting like I’ve got some sort of airborne contagion you’re afraid of catching, or I threw a box of puppies into a burning building.”

“I don’t know what—”

“Which obviously means something is wrong,” he continues, like he hasn’t even heard her. “And I’ve wracked my brain to think of anything even remotely objectionable I might have done in the
last 36 hours … and I gotta be honest. I’m coming up empty.”

“Nothing is wrong,” she insists. “So this is completely unnecessary. I just--”

“Annie, come on. I know damn well when someone’s pissed at me. Usually, though, I’m expecting it.” He cocks his head, studying her carefully. “I thought you and I understood each other…"

“So did I,” she blurts out, surprising herself. “But I was obviously wrong. Because if you think you can just use me the way that you use everyone else … like Britta, like poor unsuspecting receptionists, like Craig in HR to get my address, then you don’t know me at all.”

He squints at her, like he doesn’t understand the language that she’s speaking. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I bet Britta’s not the only one,” she says, on a roll now that she can’t really stop. “Probably not, right? You probably sleep with all your clients. It wouldn’t even surprise me if you’re fooling around with Duncan, too!”

Jeff shakes his head, unimpressed. “Seriously, Annie? Like I couldn’t get a hotter guy than Ian Duncan… come on.”

She huffs in exasperation. “Oh, stop trying to be cute.”

Of course, he smirks (which, much to her chagrin, actually makes him look sexier). “I’m not trying,” he tells her. “It’s effortless.”

She exhales slowly, ready to really lay into him, when there’s a snicker from the other side of the curtain. When she pulls it back, Troy and Abed are sitting right there, in chairs from the dining table, with a bowl of popcorn between them. Troy almost looks guilty, but Abed just shrugs.

“I was wrong,” he says. “This is much better than ‘Grey’s Anatomy’. I never really found the whole ‘he’s got a wife she doesn’t know about who shows up and takes a position on staff’ thing very realistic. This is a much more believable conflict.”

Annie takes another deep breath, trying to remain calm. She grabs her bag from the floor and rifles through it until she finds her wallet so she can press a couple of $20 bills in Troy’s hand. “Go see a movie or play laser tag or have a donut-eating contest at Winchell’s. Please.”

Abed is reluctant to leave, pouting and grumbling under his breath, but Troy eventually coaxes him out of his chair so they can grab their coats and leave. Jeff waits until the door’s closed behind them before he gets back to the matter at hand.

“So this is all because you’re jealous of Britta?” he asks. “Because that’s ridiculous. There’s nothing going on there. You’ve probably got more reason to be jealous of Duncan, actually. We get along much better than--”

“I am not jealous,” she declares.

Jeff bites at his lip, obviously fighting off laughter. “Oh, so this is all just because you think I’m unprofessional? And unethical? Because it offends your moral sensibilities that sometimes, in the past, I mixed a little business and pleasure?”

“It’s because you think you can just use people for whatever you want! Sex from Britta, information from Craig, first-rate research from me. And maybe I’m ambitious enough to let you do it at the office because this case means big things for me too, but I’m not about to let you do it
anywhere else.”

He shakes his head, allowing himself a laugh. “I seriously don’t know what you’re talking about. But I’m pretty sure you’re making a big deal about nothing.”

She jabs a finger at him. “See! This is exactly what I’m talking about! It’s not a big deal to you at all. But it is a big deal to me.” She shakes her head, taking a deep breath. “So I think my first instinct was right. Our relationship should stay strictly professional. Now… and in the future.”

Jeff purses his lips, like he is resisting the urge to pout hard, and that seems so typical of him, she thinks, because he’s so used to getting what he wants. But he nods eventually and lifts a shoulder. “Fine,” he says. “Like I said, it’s not a big deal. So if that’s what you want…”

“That’s what I want,” she insists.

She does her best to ignore the way that her stomach twists suddenly as he moves past her toward the TV area where his suit jacket, tie, and coat lay over the back of a recliner. He doesn’t stop to put them on, just heads for the door and disappears into the hallway.

-x-

Sitting at the bar, he’s still somehow thinking about the fact that he never wished Annie a happy Thanksgiving.

It’s a stupid thing to be fixated on, considering that she’s effectively shut down any personal component to their relationship, and yet he tugs his cellphone out of his jeans pocket and contemplates sending her a text. There’s nothing inherently intimate about wishing a co-worker a happy holiday, he tells himself -- and it’s a good idea to keep the lines of communication open so things aren’t awkward on Monday. But then, maybe it’ll only make things worse, because Annie’s not exactly in a reasonable mood at the moment.

What the fuck is going on with him, he thinks as he tosses back the rest of his scotch. It’s a fucking text. Send it or don’t send, but don’t make a fucking federal case out of it.

“So I can’t even get some onion rings?” he hears Duncan ask beside him. “Or mozzarella sticks? I’m bloody starving.”

Britta stops wiping down the bartop to shake her head. “I already told you. The cook has the day off, so the kitchen’s closed.”

“We don’t need a damn cook. I mean, how much training does it take, exactly, to throw potato skins into a deep fryer?”

“Oh and what? I should back go there and do it because I’m a woman and I belong in the kitchen? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Whoa,” Duncan says, holding his hands up in surrender. “Calm down. That’s not what I was suggesting at all. I’m more than happy to do it. It can’t be that complicated.”

Britta shakes her head again. “I’m pretty sure our insurance doesn’t cover customers using the deep fryer.”

“Does this place actually have insurance?” Jeff wonders, mainly because he feels like he has to say something so they don’t pick up on the fact that he’s acting like some morose teenager who’s been stood up for the big dance. He’d likely be in a bad mood anyway, what with the fact that it’s a
holiday and he’s choosing to spend it in a nearly deserted bar with two people who meet the bare minimum qualifications for friendship, but the whole thing with Annie has him seriously off his game.

Britta sneers at him, even as she reaches below the bar for some kind of pamphlet that she pushes into Duncan’s hand. “We can order from the Thai place around the corner. They’re open today -- I saw Jessica turning on the lights when I came in.”

Duncan eagerly starts perusing the menu, mumbling about curry and pad thai under his breath, and Jeff opens up his text thread with Annie, staring at the blank screen and wondering what he might write.

*Hope this isn’t too personal, but have a happy Thanksgiving.*
Too snarky.

*Happy Turkey Day*
Too corny.

*turkey emoji, pumpkin emoji, pilgrim emoji*
Too 13-year-old girl.

Which leaves all of the possibilities equally pathetic.

Duncan must agree because he leans over to see what’s captured Jeff’s attention and snorts. “Annie Edison,” he reads dramatically. “You know, you never did tell me the story there…”

“Yeah,” Britta says, with a smirk. “What is going on there? Because she seemed kind of pissed when I mentioned we used to hook up.”

“You told her?” He shakes his head in annoyance, though the news does solve a mystery for him. He’s been wondering since last night how the hell Annie knew about the whole thing with Britta. Somehow, it never occurred to him that she got firsthand info. “Why the hell would you do that?”

Britta shrugs. “It just came up. It’s not like it’s a big secret or anything. I mean, you’re not the worst guy I’ve ever slept with.”

“Well, thanks for that glowing endorsement. But aren’t you the one who’s always telling me that women have more important things to discuss than men?”

“Yeah,” Britta says. “And we do! It’s not like you were the point of the conversation. You were tangential at best.”

Duncan leans across the bar, waggling his eyebrows. “Did I happen to come up too?”

Britta ignores him entirely, smiling at Jeff knowingly instead. “So what is the deal with you and Annie? Are you in lurve?”

She and Duncan both snort unattractively, beside themselves with amusement.

“I’m not …” He starts to say, but his phone rings suddenly and the screen lights up with Annie’s name and for a second, he honestly doesn’t know what to do.

“Oh, my God,” Britta gasps. “Look at his face! He’s totally in love!”

“Ass over teakettle,” Duncan agrees.
Jeff’s too busy thumbing on his phone to pay much attention. “Hello?”

There’s a few seconds of silence that feel more like an hour from the other end of the line, and he turns on his stool so his back is to Britta and Duncan.

“Jeff?” a voice says, but it’s a little too deep to be Annie. “It’s me, Troy. Annie’s roommate. The guy you--”

“Yeah, I know. Hey, Troy. How’s it going?”

He could probably ask the kid why he’s calling on Annie’s phone and he’d tell the truth, but Jeff doesn’t want to give too much away -- to him or to Britta and Duncan.

“Good… but listen, what are you up to today? Celebrating at some super fancy restaurant with super hot models or something?”

“Actually, I’m in a pretty divey bar, drinking scotch and waiting on some Thai take-out. Not exactly your Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving.”

“Norman who?” Troy asks. “Is that some dude you work with? Because I gotta say, that sounds pretty great.”

The kid isn’t lying, not if the enthusiasm in his voice is any indication, though Jeff doesn’t understand it, because it really isn’t all that great.

“But Annie ordered Thanksgiving dinner for us from this gourmet deli,” he continues. “And they were supposed to just give us a turkey breast that serves two to four people, but they messed up and gave us the whole turkey that serves six to eight, plus all the side dishes, so we’ve got a lot of turkey and stuffing and--”

“And pumpkin pie,” a voice that Jeff thinks belongs to the other roommate, Abed, yells over the phone.

“Oh, yeah, and pumpkin pie. And Annie doesn’t even like pumpkin pie, so more for us.”

“Well, I’m really happy you guys have so much food,” Jeff tells him. “But is there a point to this call?”

“Duh. We thought you’d want to come over and eat with us. And then maybe we could try to get to level 30!”

Jeff laughs. “That’s a really great offer, but I’m with friends and I don’t think I can bail on them.”

“Oh, well… you could just bring ‘em. The more the merrier!”

“Actually, one of them is working in said dive bar so we’re pretty much stuck here.”

Troy is silent, like he’s been stumped by a tricky math problem, but then he gasps in excitement barely a moment later. “What if we brought the food to you? I mean, you guys probably have plenty of booze there and that’s kind of the one thing we’re missing. It’ll be just like the first Thanksgiving when the pilgrims and Indians shared moonshine and candied yams!”

“I’m not really sure that’s historically accurate.”

“It’s the spirit we’re tryin’ to capture,” Troy says. “Like we just--”
“Troy!” a slightly shrill voice that Jeff would recognize anywhere yells over the line. “What are you doing with my phone?”

“So where are you guys?” Troy asks, sounding slightly panicked, and Jeff gives him The Vatican’s address without thinking too much about it.

He doesn’t want to get his hopes up either, because once Annie knows that her roommates made plans with him, she probably isn’t going to let them come. Wishing someone a happy Thanksgiving may not be personal, but spending the holiday with them definitely is, and that’s the line that she’s apparently drawn.

(He still doesn’t understand why exactly -- because he had a casual relationship with Britta? That’s hardly a crime, and he didn’t even know Annie at the time. If she’s going to be angry about that, he tells himself, then cutting any kind of personal ties with her is for the best, because he doesn’t want anything heavy and complicated and everything about Annie screams that. Sure, he wants to sleep with her again, but at what cost?)

“Hold off on the takeout,” he tells Duncan. “I think we’ve got some food coming.”

Duncan smiles, all smarmy and amused. “From the lovely Ms. Edison?”

“From her roommates,” Jeff corrects, signaling to Britta for another scotch.

He isn’t entirely sure whether he wants Annie to show up or not.

But twenty-five minutes later, when the door to the bar swings open, and Annie comes strolling in with Troy and Abed, he feels a little flare of heat in his chest. She may be wearing a tight, little frown, but she’s carrying a foil food tray and a shopping bag like the guys, ready to share her feast, and he finds himself watching as she slides out of her coat. She’s wearing jeans and a cranberry-colored sweater, and he’s never seen her in such casual clothes, but he likes how soft they make her look.

He needs something to do so besides watching her like a stalker, so he introduces Troy and Abed to Britta and Duncan, while trying to determine if this is the craziest group of people that he’s ever been in a room with. The answer becomes a resounding yes less than a minute later when the door swings open again and Pierce Hawthorne wanders in, brandishing a couple of bakery boxes.

“I’ve got pecan pie,” he declares, and then moves immediately toward Annie, pulling into her a hug that answers any questions about how he wound up here.

“I don’t eat meat,” Britta needlessly announces to the room as they start to push the bar’s rickety tables together and set out the food before it gets any colder. “But I do love sweet potatoes.”

“These are yams,” Troy says, peeling back the foil over the tray in front of him with a flourish. “And they’re candied,” he whispers, in a way that Jeff assumes is meant to be seductive. Britta shoots him a small smile in return, so maybe it hits the mark.

It’s just as well as that Annie ends up sitting at the other end of the table because Jeff can’t figure out whether he wants to glare, make wounded eyes, or smile at her in that sly little way that can wear anyone down eventually. So his plan is to concentrate on his plate instead, but then Pierce winds up sitting next to him and focusing on his green beans just isn’t possible.

The older man throws an arm around his shoulders in a half hug. “I’m so glad we’re spending the day together, Jeff. We should do things like this more often.” Jeff hums noncommittally, sipping at his scotch, and Pierce nods to himself. “I’ve really got to thank Annie for putting all of this
together. She’s a doll.”

Jeff leans forward slightly, so he can see her, laughing at something that Troy’s said, and he nods absently. Of course, it’s not like Annie planned this. In fact, Jeff’s willing to bet that there are a thousand places that she’d rather be right now.

Maybe even stuck at a table with her estranged family.

“Just think,” Troy says, shaking his head almost wistfully. “We all wouldn’t be here like this if Jeff and Annie weren’t working together on that mega case.”

There are murmurs are of agreement around the table, and Jeff leans forward to catch another glimpse of Annie, who’s smiling into her wine glass almost demurely.

“So does that mean we all have to be thankful for them?” Duncan practically slurs. “Because that’s pretty cheesy.”

“You should be thankful for me because I’m always keeping your ass out of jail,” Jeff counters.

Troy grins. “I’m thankful for you, Jeff. You got us to level 29! That’s awesome.”

“Level 29?” Britta repeats in confusion.

“In a video game,” explains Annie. “It may not seem like a big deal, but Troy and Abed are game testers for a living. They really shouldn’t need Jeff’s help.”

“Hey, it’s a really tough game! And we didn’t test this one, so it’s not like we’ve got any inside info.”

“You test video games for a living?” Duncan laughs. “That’s a real job?”

Abed nods. “But we may not be testers for much longer. We just presented an idea for our own game, with a movie tie-in, to our head of development.”

Britta makes the mistake of asking what the game is about, which leads to Troy and Abed acting out the entire story, complete with costumes made of paper plates, plastic cups, and napkins. Jeff zones out and finds himself thinking of last Thanksgiving, when he sat in this very bar watching football and getting drunk enough on the same shitty scotch that he had to call a cab to get home. He tries to determine if this year is better or not, but he can’t really decide. He leans back in his chair, rolling his shoulders to work out some stiffness, and when he looks over at the other end of the table, Annie's looking back at him with those wide, blue eyes that make him lose all train of thought.

Still, he waits until later, when they’re clearing the table so they can set out dessert, to actually approach her. She’s chatting with Pierce, who pulls her into another enthusiastic hug just before he wanders off to watch Troy and Abed play pinball. With Britta and Duncan behind the bar, trying to figure out the best liqueur to go with pumpkin and pecan pies, Jeff recognizes the opportunity for a little privacy and decides to seize it.

So he comes up alongside her and starts helping to clear the paper plates. He dumps a stack in a nearby trash can, watching as Annie carefully replaces the lids on the foil trays with leftovers inside, studiously avoiding his gaze and shit, she’s wearing less makeup than she usually does at the office but her face is still stunning. It’s like a watercolor painting, with her hazy indigo eyes and creamy porcelain skin and a hint of a flush always in her cheeks, and those lips that always look rosy even when her lip gloss has completely worn away. Suddenly he feels like the ground beneath
him has become quicksand and he’s sinking fast and there’s no way to pull himself out.

Annie looks up at him then, and something about her expression, honest and yearning, spurs him to fumble for words. “Just so you know,” he tells her, “I’m pretty sure Pierce is angling to become president of your fan club.”

She shrugs, almost smiling. “No one should be alone on a holiday. Well, at least, not if they don’t want to be.”

He nods, though he doesn’t really agree. There are plenty of people that deserve to be alone, but there’s really nothing to be gained from pointing that out. “I’m surprised you came,” he says. “When you knew I was going to be here.”

Annie pauses in her cleaning duties and looks at him over her shoulder. “Me too.”

“I’m glad you did,” he tells her, and he knows that his voice is low and soft and desperate, but he can’t help it.

She turns, looking him right in the eye with that serious, intent gaze that only she can manage to make intimidating, sexy, and hopeful all that the same time. “I can’t be mad at you on Thanksgiving. It’s not in the spirit of the holiday.” She twists the rag in her hand and frowns. “And honestly, I feel bad about how I acted yesterday anyway.”

He senses an opening, so he busts out his most charming smile. “You could try not being mad at me at all,” he suggests. “Because for once in my life, I can honestly say I haven’t done anything wrong.”

She sighs, dropping the rag to the table. “I know. I just think … we need to be on the same page with this…” She gestures at the space between them, “and I don’t think we are. But you’re right. I shouldn’t be mad at you for that. I guess I was just disappointed.”

He nods again, but this time, he thinks he understands what she’s saying. “Can I be honest with you?” he asks, and she nods her head eagerly, like that’s the only thing she wants. “I don’t really know this particular book that well, so I’ve got no idea what page I’m on.”

She tilts her head, looking sympathetic. “Well, you know… we don’t even really need to be thinking about this now. Because we’re working on the case and everything is going to stay above board until we’re done.”

“Right. Okay. Fair enough.”

“But in the spirit of the holiday,” she says, smiling. “I’m thankful that it’s you I’m working with on my first case. I mean, I could’ve wound up with someone like Alan Connor.”

Jeff laughs. “That has gotta be the faintest praise I’ve ever heard.” Annie shrugs, feigning innocence. “Yeah, well, you know what?” he says. “I’m thankful I’ve got you to do all my paperwork.”

Annie huffs in outrage and swats him with her rag -- and it might not be a kiss, it might not be anything really, but it does feel strangely personal. He doesn’t want to make a big deal out of it, though, so he just goes back to helping her put away the leftovers. As usual, she works so efficiently that he has some trouble keeping up, but they manage to get it done while everyone else slacks off.

“You know,” she says, just as they finish. “This really isn’t the low-key, low-drama holiday I was
envisioning.”

He smiles. “Still better than spending it with family, though.”
Your eyes are not deceiving you -- this story has actually been updated. Thanks to everyone who's hung in there and left comments and been supportive over the past couple of months.

I apologize for the extreme delay between updates. I can't guarantee much about how long it'll take to finish, but I will promise that you won't have to wait as long for the next update. Cross my heart and hope to die and all that. ;)

As always, thank you to the world's very best beta, Bethany. She is a super star for so many reasons (including reigning in my apparent obsession with ellipses) and this story wouldn't exist without her.

The depositions go about as well for them as Jeff’s expecting -- which is to say, not particularly well.

It’s essentially an endless parade of former Pine Brook Capital employees who all agree that Simon Rutherford was incredibly secretive and would never reveal the details of his investment strategy because it was, according to him, proprietary information. None of them could ever quite understand the too-good-to-be-true performance numbers either, but Rutherford never seemed surprised by any of it. And of course, they also took great joy in describing his lavish spending on things like sports cars and vacation homes and racehorses and even a yacht.

It's going to be a lot to combat in court.

The only piece of good news that they got was the statement from Daniel Baumann, who served as temporary CFO at Pine Brook from 2004 to 2006 and insists that he helped determine investment strategy and personally reviewed all of the funds’ returns. Baumann’s reputation is as sterling as they come; he helped run his own hedge fund for more than 30 years, practically earning commendations from the SEC for his integrity and professionalism. He and his wife oversee a charitable foundation that does things like build schools in Africa, sponsor job-training programs at shelters for domestic violence victims, donate to cancer research, and provide arts funding to schools all around Denver.

In other words, he’s practically a saint.

Jeff can definitely work with that.

Of course, it’s easy to figure out how the prosecutor will spin that testimony, because Baumann is almost 85 years old now and he’d been retired from the investment world for over five years when he agreed to take the job at Pine Brook as a favor to Rutherford. It’s a no-brainer that Murphy, that asshole of a prosecutor, will politely and relentlessly paint Baumann as a doddering, old fool who’s so out of touch with the world that he wouldn’t notice the room burning down around him, let alone securities fraud and embezzlement.

Jeff certainly doesn’t fault Murphy for the tactic -- he would do the same damn thing to Mother
freaking Teresa if it would help him win a case -- but it doesn’t exactly make things easy for him.

Even Annie must realize what they’re up against because she sighs as she settles into the passenger seat beside him on the way back to the office. “That could’ve gone better.”

“It’s fine,” he says, though the truth is that he’s starting to realize that this whole thing isn’t going to play out as easily as he’d hoped. “We knew it’d probably be tough. But we’re in good shape. Really good shape, actually.”

She nods, but even out of the corner of his eye as he navigates traffic, he can tell she isn’t looking at him, like she doesn’t want him to see what she’s really thinking. Of course, it might just be that things are still a little awkward after their fight last week and subsequent Thanksgiving makeup, and that’s why she’s having a hard time with eye contact. He fiddles with the radio at a red light, searching for something better than a droning news station to fill the silence.

In his head, he tries to come up with a couple of circuits to do at the gym after work, just to distract himself. It’ll be an upper-body day, he decides. Definitely an upper-body day.

“I liked it, though,” Annie says suddenly.

He looks over at her in surprise. “Huh?”

“The whole process today. You know, asking questions, reacting to what the other side asks, and having to think on your feet. All the research and stuff at the office is fulfilling in its own way, but I still feel like a law student there sometimes. This made me feel like a real lawyer.”

He nods, trying to hide a smile, because it had been pretty obvious in that bland conference room at the U.S. Attorney’s office just how excited she was -- a spark of something bright and determined in her eyes, like she’d finally found the thing that she was meant to do -- and for a moment, he’d felt it all too, a secondhand thrill.

“Yeah, this stuff is definitely better than poring over case law,” he agrees. “And we haven’t even gotten to an actual courtroom yet.”

Annie sighs, kind of wistfully, and he grips the steering wheel a little tighter. “I can imagine,” she says.

“That’s why I usually check out on the rest.” He shrugs. “And when you can do it in a few years, so will you.”

She frowns, shaking her head. “I don’t think so.”

He can’t help smirking, because he knows that once she gets a taste of real lawyer action, research isn’t going to cut it for her anymore. “When we finish this case and I make senior partner,” he tells her, “and get my amazing fifth-floor office, I’m going to make you come up there, sit in my chair and prop your feet up on the desk with a glass of single-malt scotch in your hand, and see if you feel the same when you’re taking in that amazing view that spans two entire walls of windows.”

“Nope,” Annie declares. “I mean, sure, I’ll delegate when I can. But I’ll still be totally hands-on. Mainly because I don’t trust anyone else to do the job right.”

Jeff laughs as the light changes. “Well, that I can believe, actually.”

Back at the office, Annie offers to follow up with Murphy’s assistant to make sure that they get the deposition transcripts as soon as possible, which means he can relax in his office for a little while
before their 4 o’clock conference call to update Rutherford. Claire even brings him a bottle of diet soda before she ducks out early for a doctor’s appointment, and as the caffeine starts to take effect, he’s wondering if he should put in a call to Leonard and see if the old guy’s made any progress in the hunt for Deborah Wahlstrom. It’s been over a week since they were last in touch, so a progress report is definitely in order.

Jeff doesn’t get any further than lifting the phone to his ear, though, before there’s an annoyingly prolonged knock at his door. He knows who it immediately because no one else he knows makes quite as obnoxious an entrance.

And sure enough, when he looks up, Alan sticks his head inside, wearing a particularly weasely smile. “Wingman! You’re here. I was hoping I’d catch you.”

Jeff forces a smile as he hangs up the phone. “What can I do for you, Alan?”

Alan shakes his head as he steps into the office. “Oh, no, no. You’ve got it all wrong. I just came by to check in on you.”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, I know you had some of the depositions for the Rutherford case this morning,” Alan says as he drops into one of the chairs opposite Jeff’s desk. “And I heard that they didn’t really go that well, so I just wanted to see how you’re holding up…”

Jeff feels his jaw clench involuntarily, but he does his best to keep his expression neutral. “Looks like you got some bad intel,” he says. “Because it went fine. Exactly like we expected.”

“Jeff,” Alan sighs, all patronizingly, as he clasps his hands over the center of his chest like he’s overcome with concern, “Come on. You don’t have to lie to me. I mean, I’ve got sources all over, and every little bird was singing about how everyone pointed the finger right in Rutherford’s direction.”

Jeff shrugs. “None of it was a surprise, Alan. We’re right on track here.”

“I’m sure it must be really tough,” Alan continues, ignoring him completely. “I mean, you get handed the biggest case in the history of this firm on a silver platter and now it’s all going to blow up in your face…” He presses the tips of his fingers and then fans them out, complete with annoying sound effects to mimic an explosion. “And with it, there goes your golden ticket to a partnership. That really sucks, man. I feel for you.” He shakes his head mournfully.

“There’s really no need, Alan. We’re going to win this case and I’m going to get my partnership.” Jeff shrugs. “I may even let you buy me a drink to celebrate when I do.”

Alan clucks his tongue, all faux sympathy, and Jeff really has to resist the urge to punch him. “Wingman, come on. You don’t need to throw all this false bravado at me. I get it, I do. I mean, do you have a single witness to help cast reasonable doubt in Rutherford’s favor? Do you have a single piece of evidence to counter the mountains and mountains of documents that the prosecution has on this guy?”

“I’ve won cases with next to nothing before,” Jeff counters. “It’s kind of my thing.”

“Not a case like this. This is national news! And Rutherford stole this money from a bunch of kindergarten teachers and hard-working bus drivers, and even a couple of charities. Somebody’s got to pay for all of that.”
Jeff purses his lips, unsure how to respond, because maybe there’s some truth in what Alan’s saying and maybe it’s something he’s known all along and maybe he has to face the fact that even he might not be good enough to work the kind of miracle that it’s going to take to win this case.

Alan stands, straightening his tie and jacket. “But like I said, you don’t need to worry, buddy. Because I’m kicking all kinds of ass on the McAlister case. When I make partner, I’ll be sure to look out for you. Because we’re buds. We go way back…”

He offers up a toothy, smarmy smile and slinks out of the room, way too pleased with himself. Jeff watches him go, wanting to put his fist through the wall pretty damn bad. But instead, he reaches into the bottom drawer of his desk for the bottle of scotch he keeps stashed there and pours himself a coffee mug full.

It only takes one swig to down it.

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Annie prides herself on her laser-sharp focus, so when she heads up to her office, the only thing on her mind is making sure that the assistant federal prosecutor sends over the deposition transcripts before the conference call that Jeff has scheduled with Rutherford.

That’s it.

But then, she’d be lying if she didn’t admit that there’s a nagging sense of worry interfering with her concentration just a bit. Jeff is right, of course -- the depositions went almost exactly as they were expecting -- and yet, she can’t help feeling that maybe all the research and long hours won’t make a difference in the end, that they can’t possibly overcome the obstacles in front of them.

She reminds herself, though, that there’s been virtually nothing that she wanted to accomplish in her life that she didn’t eventually manage if she just put the hard work in. The stakes might be a little higher now, but why would this be any different?

So really, she should quit worrying about the big picture and instead keep her focus on the small details that she can actually control, like getting the transcripts so she and Jeff can go over them before they update Rutherford.

She gets a little sidetracked when she gets back to her office, though, because Vicki is at her desk and looks up expectantly as soon as Annie comes through the door.

“How was it?” she demands, obviously wanting a little vicarious thrill.

Annie smiles. “It was amazing,” she says without thinking --- and immediately regrets it because she doesn’t want to sound like some wide-eyed schoolgirl who’s not ready to play with the big boys. She wants to sound professional, experienced, like she belongs, so she takes a deep breath. “I mean, it was amazing how efficient the whole process is. We were able to get through a half dozen witnesses in under five hours. It was really impressive.”

Vicki nods. “But how did it go for you guys? Was there testimony that’ll help you guys?”

“It went just like we were expecting,” Annie hedges. “And it’s not like we need much to work with, you know. Jeff is the best. They don’t call him the miracle worker around here for nothing.”

“And he’s got you,” Vicki says. “You’re like his secret weapon.”

Annie grins again, because she can imagine Jeff saying the very same thing. “Well, it’s not like I’m
She’s cut off by her phone buzzing inside her bag, and she’s distracted for a moment as she works to fish it out. But when she sees Vaughn’s name on the display, she immediately dismisses the call with a sigh. He called on Thanksgiving and again over the weekend, and she sent both of those calls straight to voicemail too because she just doesn’t have the energy to talk to him these days. He didn’t leave a message either time, and Vaughn really isn’t the kind of guy who plays games, but she still can’t help feeling a little annoyed -- if he wants her to call him back, just tell her that. She’s not going to try to read his mind.

“Sorry,” she says, offering Vicki an apologetic smile. “I just … we’re in good shape. We’re still in good shape. I think that’s what I was going to say.”

“When does the trial actually start?”

“Right now, it’s scheduled for the second week of March, but Jeff thinks they might push it back. Maybe even as far as May.”

Vicki nods. “So you guys still have plenty of time to prepare…”

“Right. Which is good because I don’t--”

Her cell phone rings once, and when she sees that it’s Vaughn again, she starts to panic. God, what if something’s really wrong? What if he’s stuck in a hospital somewhere? What if he’s run out of money and is starving in the back of his van? She may want to make a clean break from him, but she can’t bear the thought of him suffering all by himself.

“Sorry,” she tells Vicki again. “I’ve got to take this…” She steps into the hallway, accepting the call as she hurries toward the stairwell where she can get just a little privacy. “What’s wrong?” she demands as soon as Vaughn answers..

“Mountain Flower? Is that you?” There’s a pause and a burst of static snaps over the line. “I was starting to worry something was wrong. I called a bunch of times and you never answered.”

“You didn’t leave any messages…”

“Oh, come on, Mountain Flower. You know I hate talking to dead air like that. It’s too weird.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, feeling strangely guilty because she knows that she’s done nothing wrong. “I’ve just been really busy lately. I haven’t had much time to myself.”

“Well, that’s really why I was calling. Just for a progress report. I wanted to make sure you’re okay and everything. I had a dream the other night that you--”

“I’m fine, Vaughn. Really good. I’ve just been really swamped with work… but that’s good. I’m really enjoying it and learning every day. It couldn’t be going better, actually.”

“Yeah? That’s great. That’s cool. But… I mean, are you sure? Because you sound really stressed.” He sighs, sounding deeply troubled. “Are you finding time for yoga? You know how tense you get when you don’t do your yoga poses.”

She laughs, because the truth that she couldn’t bring herself to share with him is that she never really liked yoga. The stretching wasn’t bad, but she couldn’t really grasp the whole concept of clearing her mind, even for a few minutes at a time. “I’ve been busy,” she says again. “I’ve barely had time to eat, let alone do downward-facing dog.”
“See, I knew this would happen,” he tells her. “I knew you’d get all caught up in work and not make any time for yourself. You’ve got to do that, Mountain Flower, or you’re going to run yourself into the ground. Like you did that time you were studying for your final in that tarte class. Remember? You almost passed out because you forgot to eat for like 16 hours...”

“Yeah, of course,” she says. “But I just ate a sandwich… and I’ll try to make time for a yoga class later this week, okay? But I really should go… I’ve got a conference call in an hour that I’ve got to get ready for.”

He hangs up with a promise to call again soon to check up on her, and she wants to tell him to just forget it, that this isn’t the clean break that she wants for them, but she doesn’t have the heart -- and maybe it’s just easier to agree so he’ll get off the phone.

“Everything okay?” Vicki asks when she gets back to their office.

Annie takes a deep breath. “Yeah. Just an old friend wanting to catch up.”

She sits behind her desk, forcing her laser-sharp focus back on target.

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It takes nearly 24 hours for Leonard to get back to him, and even then, all the old bastard sends is a quick email that says:

THE BROAD IS STILL M.I.A. WORKING ON IT.

It isn’t exactly encouraging as far as progress reports go, and Jeff has half a mind to call Leonard and ream him out -- but that would require more effort than he’s willing to expend at the moment. He’ll give it another couple of days and then he might actually have to to track Leonard down.

Because he and Annie agree that finding Deborah Wahlstrom is pretty important to the case. She was there when Pine Brook’s performance started going off the charts and her promotion to investment officer from the firm coincides almost perfectly with funds starting to disappear from client accounts.

She might be a pretty effective way to introduce reasonable doubt.

In fact, Jeff’s starting to think that finding Deborah Wahlstrom, getting her full story, is crucial to turning this whole thing around.

He needs her or someone who knows her well enough to really have something to work with, though.

But they’ve interviewed all of the people who were working at Pine Brook at the time of Rutherford’s arrest and knew Deborah, and none of them had any idea why she left or where she might be. He shouldn’t have to do Leonard’s job for him, but time is running out so he looks over the employee lists going back several years, checking for anyone they might have missed. It’s just an endless stream of dead ends, though, and he’s feeling increasingly desperate -- until one name suddenly stands out.

John Edison.

According to the records, Annie’s father worked at Pine Brook from 2002 to 2006, so not only was he there at the same time as Wahlstrom, he was an investment officer when she was promoted to the position, which means there’s a good chance that he knew her fairly well. He could know
something about her that might actually help them.

But then, it’s not quite that easy.

Way back in the beginning, he remembers Annie mentioning that she isn’t on speaking terms with either of her parents, but she didn’t get into the specifics so he doesn’t really have a good grasp of the situation.

It could have been an exaggeration, just a melodramatic throwaway line to someone she didn’t really know well at the time. He’d been annoyed that she hadn’t told him about having a past with Rutherford, so maybe it was just a lie. Hell, maybe it’d even been a joke for all he knows.

Fate is smiling on him as he tries to figure out what to do next, because Claire pokes her head inside his office and offers up a tight smile. “Sorry to interrupt, but there’s a young man here to see you.” She glances back over her shoulder for a moment. “A mister….”

“Abed Nadir,” a familiar voice says, and when Claire pushes the door open, there stands Annie’s roommate, looking a little bored and impatient.

“Abed, what a nice surprise.” Jeff smiles over at Claire as Abed steps inside the room. “Thanks, I’ve got it.”

She nods, closing the door behind her. Abed is already wandering around the office, carefully taking in his surroundings like he’s not about to let anything slip past him, and Jeff wonders if he might make a better investigator than Leonard.

“So, Abed… what brings you down here?”

“I’m looking for Annie. She promised to take me to lunch at that Korean barbecue place where they cook right in front of you if I finally went to the dentist. And I suffered through an entire cleaning so she owes me.”

Jeff smiles in amusement. “Good for you, buddy.”

“I didn’t see her name on the directory downstairs, but yours was pretty prominent,” Abed continues. “And I figured since you two are working together, her office would be right next to yours.”

“Actually, she’s down on the second floor.”

Abed frowns. “Really? Isn’t it inefficient to have her so far away?”

“I’ll take you down to her,” Jeff says, ignoring the question. “But can I ask you something first?”

Abed studies Jeff’s face intently for a moment before making himself comfortable in one of the chairs in front of the desk. “Sure.”

“You’ve known Annie for a long time, right?”

“That’s the question?” Abed rolls his eyes. “Yes, I’ve known Annie a long time,” he says flatly. “Seven years now, actually.”

Jeff nods. “Okay, so… do you know what the deal is with her father?”

Abed squints, looking suspicious -- or annoyed, Jeff can’t really tell. “The deal with her father?” he repeats inanely.
“Well, I know they haven’t spoken for a while… do you know why?”

“Abbie doesn’t really talk about this stuff much,” Abed says. “But I think the gist of it is that she had some kind of disagreement with her parents right before the end of high school and they pretty much disowned her so she’s been on her own ever since.” He shrugs, like it’s not a big deal. “If you want to know more, you should probably ask her.”

Jeff nods, though he has no intention of asking her anything about this. “So she hasn’t spoken to her dad since she was 18?”

Abed leans his head back, studying the ceiling. “Actually… I think he did call once. Back during our second year at Greendale… but she refused to talk to him. I don’t think she’s talked to him since, but like I said, this isn’t really her favorite topic of conversation.”


“Why?” Abed demands. “Why do you want to know about her relationship with her father?”

Jeff stands, lifting a shoulder. “It’s nothing. I was just curious.”

“Because you guys have gotten close?” Abed prods. “Because you feel yourself inexplicably drawn to her and even though you know you should keep things professional, you can’t stop yourself from--”

“Whoa,” Jeff says, laughing nervously. “That’s a little too deep for me.”

Abed lurches to his feet too, turning toward the door. “Okay. Whatever.”

In the hallway, Jeff ushers him toward the elevators, watching the kid out of the corner of his eye. “You’re not going to tell Annie I asked about this, are you?”

Abed shrugs. “I guess I don’t have to. She’d probably freak out on you, you know.”

Jeff takes a deep breath as he reaches out to press the down button. “Yeah,” he says. “I know.”

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Jeff asks if they can postpone their afternoon progress report meeting until the evening because he has something that he needs to take care of, and she sees no reason not to agree.

He doesn’t elaborate, though, and she finds herself wondering what he’s up to because he is working on nothing these days but the Rutherford case. That probably means that it’s something personal, like a doctor’s appointment or a favor for a friend, but as curious as she is, she reminds herself that it’s really none of her business and she needs to keep her eye on the prize.

When she gets to conference room F, Jeff is already waiting for her, so he seems completely focused on the task at hand. He’s even brought dinner, takeout from the Thai place that he loves, which means he’s resigned to it being a long night -- and it’s probably even a good thing that they pushed the meeting back because now the office is mostly deserted and there’s no one to distract them.

“I finally talked to Leonard today,” Jeff says after they start eating. “And as I predicted, he’s been utterly useless in tracking down Deborah Wahlstrom. He says she’s disappeared without a trace.”

“Shit,” Annie blurts out, and Jeff grins, probably amused at her uncharacteristic use of profanity.
“So that’s it? He’s just going to give up?”

“He says he’s still going to keep trying, but I think maybe we have to cut our losses with him.”

She nods, pushing her noodles around with a plastic fork. “Can’t we find another investigator? Leonard can’t be the only one around…”

“I’ve had another investigator working it the same time as Leonard,” Jeff says. “She told me it was hopeless two weeks ago.”

As optimistic as Annie is determined to be about the case, she knows as well as Jeff that finding Deborah Wahlstrom is pretty important to their defense. In fact, it has the potential to completely change the entire narrative of the case. They can’t lose their focus just because a couple of investigators haven’t been able to track her down.

“You don’t want to give up, do you?” she asks. “I mean, you don’t think we should just roll over and--”

“No,” Jeff insists. “Of course not. But I think it means we need to get a little more…creative.”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

He leans back in his chair and clears his throat, almost like he’s a little nervous, and she wonders what could possibly have him so rattled. “We’ve interviewed everyone who was working at Pine Brook when Rutherford was arrested and knew Deborah from her time at the firm,” he says. “But maybe we need to dig a little deeper. Go back a few more years and find some other people who knew her earlier in her career but aren’t working at Pine Brook anymore.”

“Sure. That makes sense. She might have told someone something that would help us track her down… or that might even incriminate her.”

Jeff nods. “Right. That’s what I’m thinking.”

“Okay, so where do we start? There are probably hundreds of employees who fit the bill.”

Jeff takes a deep breath, crossing his arms over his chest. “Let’s think about this logically,” he says. “We’d probably want someone who was there when Deborah got promoted to investment officer so we can understand how it happened so quickly…”

“Yeah,” Annie agrees, pulling out the employee rosters and starting to sort them by date. “Okay…”

“And it would probably help to talk to someone who was at the same level as she was, because they’d been privy to the same kind of information.”

“Right…” She uses her pen to cross out a bunch of names that don’t make the cut -- that only leaves them with a handful of possibilities, so they can probably talk to all of them in the next few days.

Jeff taps his foot against the leg of the table, tipping his head back thoughtfully. “It would also help if we could find someone who would trust us enough to spill the whole story.”

She stills her pen and furrows her brow. “How can we know who’s going to trust us right off the bat?”

That’s all it takes to set Jeff off again, clearing his throat and shifting in his chair like he’s more
than a little uncomfortable, and she can’t help feeling confused.

“Well,” he says. “Maybe if we could find someone that we had a personal relationship with…”

She frowns as he gives her a meaningful look. “But how would we …” She glances back down at the employee list, scanning it for what feels like the hundredth time because she must have obviously missed something, if Jeff’s strange behavior is any indication.

And on her third pass-through, she finally sees what he’s obviously been alluding to: her father’s name, in bold, glaring print.

It is the strangest thing, because his name has obviously been there the entire time, on every occasion that she’s studied these pages and tried to figure out where to go next, and she never saw it. It’s like she purposely blocked it out, refused to let herself see it.

And if Jeff hadn’t pushed the issue, maybe she never would have.

Jeff heaves out a weary sigh. “That’s your father, right?”

She nods, feeling strangely numb. She knows exactly where Jeff is headed with all of this and she feels her hands start to shake at the mere thought. Back when they first met with Rutherford, she remembers telling Jeff that she hasn’t spoken to her father in years, but she wouldn’t blame him for forgetting -- they barely knew each other then and it probably didn’t seem important at the time.

“I don’t think… it’s not like…” She shakes her head, trying to pull herself together. “I don’t talk to my father. I haven’t spoken to him in years, actually.”

“Right,” Jeff says, and she looks up at him sharply. “You mentioned that.”

“Okay, so…”

He shrugs. “It just seems like now’s as good a time as any. I mean, when he can actually help us with the case.”

Annie cocks her head, wondering for a moment if she’d misheard him. He can’t really be suggesting what she thinks he’s suggesting.

“Because even if you haven’t spoken in years,” Jeff continues, “he’s still your dad. Which means you can probably get him to open up.”

“Wait a second…” She pauses, letting out a laugh that sounds a little too dry and stilted. “Are you seriously suggesting I should talk to my father for the first time in a decade just because it might help with your case?”

“Our case, Annie,” he corrects. “With our case.”

“No,” she says, without hesitation. “No. I can’t do it.” She shakes her head. “I don’t want to do it.”

Jeff sighs, rolling his chair closer to the table like that can bridge some of the distance between them. “Annie, this might be our best shot right now. And we’ve been -- you’ve been working so hard on this case. It would really be a shame to let it all fall apart when there’s something we can do.”

She gives another stubborn shake of her head, and then watches as he suddenly stands, walks around the conference room table, and takes the seat directly beside her, like he’s sitting with her in
solidarity or something. He lays his hand on the table beside hers too, and for a moment, she wonders if he’s going to reach for her. It’s one of those moments when she can imagine so clearly how good he must be in a courtroom, how easily he could sway a jury with a sad frown or a wry smile.

She doesn’t think that she’ll ever develop that kind of skill.

“I don’t know what happened with your father,” he says, his voice soft and almost painfully gentle. “But you don’t have to make nice or forgive him or anything. We just have to go talk to him. And in the end, you’ll actually be getting something out of him that’ll help you here, so it’s not like—”

“That’ll help you,” she points out. “That will help you get your promotion and that corner office and an extra zero added to the end of your paycheck. Isn’t that what you really mean?”

Somehow, she manages to stay completely calm, and that seems to unnerve him more than if she starting screaming and throwing things. He shifts awkwardly in his chair, shaking his head slowly.

“Annie, it’s not—”

“You want to win,” she says. “And I understand that because I do too. But you once mentioned something about your father… about him not being around. What if I came to you and said, why don’t you call him up and ask for help? You’d be okay with that? You’d still think the case should come first?”

Jeff looks down at their hands, still side by side on the table, and there’s a muscle twitching pretty prominently in his jaw, so she knows that she’s struck a nerve. There’s no real satisfaction in that, but at least it likely means that she’s gotten her point across.

“This isn’t about me,” he argues. “This is about our case. Which is kind of falling apart in front of our eyes. I’m trying to salvage things here, Annie. For both of us.”

“I thought you could work miracles. Isn’t this just an opportunity to prove yourself?”

He lifts his his head, reluctantly meeting her eyes, and she is surprised to see something like fear there, a nagging doubt that has to do with more than just this case. And she understands that, thinks that maybe she has the same worry down at the heart of her too, but none of that matters because what he’s asking is something that she can’t possibly deliver.

She shoves her chair away from the table and staggers to her feet. “I’m going to go back downstairs,” she says. “I think I’ll work better alone.”

As she hurries out of the conference room, there’s some part of her that expects him to follow, shout after her, try to convince her to see things his way, but she makes it all the way to the elevator and even then, the hallway is empty behind her.
“Wait a second… it’s been how long since she talked to her dad?”

Britta drops the shot glass in her hand to the sticky surface of the bar and stares at Jeff.

He shrugs, swirling his scotch around. “Like ten years. I think. And it’s both her parents. She hasn’t spoken to either of them in almost ten years.”

“Wow,” Britta says, shaking her head. “I figured she’d have those kind of too-good-to-be-true sitcom type parents. And I mean, I’ve never even gone more than three months without talking to George and Deb. She’s way more complicated than I thought.”

It almost sounds like Britta is impressed, maybe even a little envious, which makes sense because she’s always telling him that wounded people are more interesting. And maybe she’s right, because Jeff has at least a dozen questions that he wants to ask Annie so he can piece together this part of her past.

“What now?” Britta asks, carelessly filling the shot glass with tequila -- some of it splashes on the bar and he grimaces as she uses her fingers to brush the puddle to the floor. “I mean, what are you gonna do?”

“What can I do?”

He tosses back the rest of his scotch, savoring its fiery burn, because the truth is that he’s been trying to figure what he should do ever since Annie walked out of conference room F, looking like he’d asked her to donate one of her organs -- to carve out some vital, crucial piece of herself and hand it over. She had seemed more stunned by the whole thing than angry, and that’s what’s left him feeling so unsettled. There was plenty of selfish motivation to ask her to talk to her father, but he tries to convince himself that he wasn’t really that out of line because the case going well is only going to help Annie too.

Unfortunately, it rings a little hollow even to his own ears.

He looks over at Britta, who throws back her shot of tequila like it’s nothing more than water, and frowns. “Wait a second,” he says. “I forgot who I’m talking to. If I follow your example, I should just force her to reconnect with her dad even though she has no interest in that at all. Because it’d be for her own good, right?”

Britta narrows her eyes and tries to slap at his arm with her bar rag. He’s a little too quick for her, though, and she only winds up hitting the counter. “Pierce is the one who said he’d find your dad!” she insists. “I just told him it would be a good idea. Because anyone can see that your unresolved daddy issues are what’s keeping you from--”
“Yeah, see, I’m not about to do this with Annie.”

“But I thought you said her father had info that you needed for your case. So it’s important to talk to him, right?”

Jeff nods. “He might have information that would help,” he clarifies. “But you didn’t see the way she reacted when I suggested it. Whatever happened between them must have been really bad… and it’d be pretty unreasonable to expect her to overlook that. Even if it might help us with the case.”

Britta snorts unattractively and leans back against the shelves of booze behind the bar, wearing the smuggest smile (he can’t help thinking that she can’t really pull the look off; it mostly makes her look constipated). “Yeah, because you’re usually so reasonable…”

He isn’t an idiot so he knows damn well what Britta’s hinting at, but he’s more than willing to play dumb if it means avoiding an uncomfortable conversation. He contemplates the dirty bartop, trying to avoid her knowing gaze.

Britta’s having none of it, though, because she cocks her head and continues to study him carefully. “Seriously, though… what is going on with you and this girl? Is she, like, the world’s greatest lawyer or are you actually starting to--”

“I’m out of scotch,” he says, tapping his empty glass against the bar. “That’s what I actually am.”

Britta reaches for the bottle behind her, but he can hear her mumbling under her breath the entire time as she freshens his drink, and he seriously wonders why he bothered coming all the way down to this dump when he knew he’d have to put with her crap. There are plenty of bars between the office and his apartment where the bartenders don’t know him and wouldn’t assume that they know the inner workings of his head so intimately.

Fortunately, Britta’s phone buzzes with a text message then, distracting her better than he ever could, so he can sip his drink in peace. He watches as she reads her message, a gleeful smile tugging at the corners of her mouth as she starts texting back. He wonders what that’s all about -- she never usually looks that giddy about anything -- but it’s really not worth asking about because she’d inevitably turn the whole thing around on him.

So he sips his scotch instead, purposefully ignoring his own cellphone, heavy and silent and still in his pocket.

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It’s no secret that Annie has a slightly obsessive personality.

Well, some might argue the whole slightly bit, but the fact is that her compulsive nature is the reason why she’s always been such a good student, why she could study for hours on nothing more than coffee and fumes, long after everyone else gave up. It’s why she is able to work harder than all of the other first-year associates, why she can stay at the office until ten every night and not feel the slightest bit sluggish in the morning.

Of course, it’s also the reason that she got hooked on Adderall and blew the perfect, carefully-constructed future that her parents had meticulously planned for her to bits.

And it’s also why she spent over an hour googling her father last night.

Because as soon as Jeff mentioned him, since the moment Jeff suggested that they meet with him,
she hasn’t been able to think of much else. She rarely speaks to her brother these days, and when she does, she steadfastly refuses to broach the subject of their parents, so she hasn’t known much about what her parents have been up to since her grandmother died back when she was still at Greendale.

But thanks to her internet research, Annie now knows that he’s working at Kinkaid Investments, has been there since 2010, and has actually risen to the position of Chief Financial Officer. He doesn’t have a Facebook account, but he is on LinkedIn and in his profile pic and several other photos from industry publications, she could see that he’s started to go gray at the temples and he’s finally gotten rid of the mustache that her mother always hated.

For a moment, while she was scanning the search results for his name, she couldn’t help wondering if he ever does the same thing with her -- if he scours the internet for any pieces of her life that he might find, for any clues to how she’s turned out -- because no matter how many years have passed, there’s still some part of him that cares.

Not that it really matters, she tells herself as she settles in behind her desk and tries to find some way to crack the Rutherford case wide open without having to spend even a minute with her father. She is a grown woman, who’s come so far from that broken little girl who had to find a way to make it all on her own that her father probably wouldn’t even recognize her these days. And she certainly doesn’t need him to, she definitely doesn’t need to know that when he looks at her, he can still remember all those summer afternoons when she was little and he would take to the park and let her blow bubbles for hours because it was her favorite thing to do.

She doesn’t need anything from him at all.

Unfortunately, she is in dire need of some caffeine, though. Every time she tries to read through the case files, the space between her brows aches just a little more and she can feel her hand shaking even as she clutches at her pen.

She may have only been at work for an hour and a half, but she needs a break if she’s going to be even remotely productive today, so she bundles back up in her coat and scarf and heads to Shirley’s for some hot chocolate. It’s always comforting somehow, but Shirley’s added a peppermint version to the menu for the season, which makes it even better.

The shop is nearly empty because she’s conveniently missed the early-morning rush, so Shirley spots her as soon as she comes through the door and smiles.

“Annie,” she says warmly. “You don’t usually come in here this time of day.”

“I desperately need a cup of your peppermint hot chocolate.”

Shirley nods knowingly. “It is pretty damn good. If I do say so myself.”

She turns and busies herself getting the hot chocolate ready, and Annie tries her best not to remember that her father always used to load the hot chocolate that he made for her and Anthony with so many mini marshmallows that they’d absorb nearly all the liquid because it always made them laugh. She wonders if he’s had to work to forget all of those details too.

“Hey,” Shirley says, sliding a cardboard cup across the counter to her. “Perk up, sweetie. It’s the most wonderful time of the year…” She juts her chin toward the Christmas decorations that have sprung up in the store overnight, and Annie remembers that Hanukkah starts on Sunday and she doesn’t have any real plans to celebrate the holiday.
“Sorry,” she mutters. “It’s just been a crappy week at work.”

“Yeah?” Shirley cocks her head, squinting thoughtfully. “You know, I never had Jeffrey pegged as a slave driver…”

Annie sighs, wrapping her hand around her hot chocolate and savoring the warmth. Jeff is the other part of this whole mess. Since yesterday afternoon, she’s been trying to decide if she should be angry with him or not. Sure, she mentioned that she hadn’t spoken to her family, way back in the beginning, but it’s not like he knows the details. Maybe he thought she was just exaggerating. Maybe he figured it was just a minor disagreement.

He’d do anything to win this case, though, so she can’t ignore the fact that maybe he just doesn’t care about her family drama. He might want her to suck it up anyway and meet with her father, no matter what kind of effect it would have on her.

She still doesn’t know what to think.

“Speaking of Jeff,” she says, catching herself by surprise, and Shirley immediately stops wiping down the counter to look up at her. “You know him pretty well. Do you think he’d--”

“Oh, honey, I do,” Shirley sighs. “I really do know him, and I’ve been wanting to talk to you about this for a while but I wasn’t really sure if it was my place. I mean, I’m very fond of you, but we don’t know each other that well…”

Annie frowns. “Excuse me?”

“God knows I love that insufferable ass,” Shirley says. “Because underneath all that mousse and designer clothing and fancy cologne, he’s a good person. I mean, when my husband and I were going through some marital issues, he was always happy to give me free legal advice and he always tips at least 30 percent…”

“Shirley, I know he’s--”

“And even though I don’t know you that well,” Shirley continues, “you seem like a really nice girl, a good girl, and maybe it’s my maternal instinct kicking in, but I feel like I gotta tell you to watch out for him, all right?”

Annie shakes her head, laughing nervously. “I think you’ve got the wrong idea. Jeff and I just work together. That’s all.”

That is technically the truth, she tells herself -- they may have slept together in the past and they might even sleep together again at some point in the future, but at the present moment, there is nothing but work between them.

Shirley raises a brow and hums in apparent disagreement. “Sweetie, I’ve seen the way you look at him, and Lord knows I understand the appeal. And not just because he fills out a pair of pants better than anyone this side of Tyson Beckford. He’s probably the most charming man I’ve ever met… but that’s the thing, honey. That’s how he makes his money, charming people out of their good sense. He could sell ice to a damned eskimo, so it would probably be real easy for a girl like you to get hurt.”

Annie tries to keep her expression neutral, but she is as annoyed as she’s been in a long time because it’s everything building up -- the stuff with her father and her doubts about the case and yeah, everything that’s happened with Jeff -- and she isn’t sure that she can keep on a lid on it any longer. “I’m a grown woman,” she starts to say, even if it feels like it’s through clenched teeth.
“Oh, sweetie, I didn’t mean to--”

“And I know exactly what kind of person Jeff Winger is. I don’t need anyone to warn or protect me.”

“Honey, I think you’re taking this wrong way,” Shirley tells her, leaning across the counter to pat her hand. “I’m just trying to help. That’s it, that’s all.”

Annie nods, reaching into her pocket for money to pay for the hot chocolate. “Jeff and I are really committed to the case we’re working on… because it could mean big things for both of us. That’s all that’s going on.” She slides a five-dollar bill onto the counter without meeting Shirley’s eyes. “Thanks for the hot chocolate.”

She doesn’t wait for a response, just turns and heads out the door. Out on the street, she finds the nearest trash can and dumps the cup from Shirley’s inside without taking a single sip.

-x-

It takes him a day or so, but he finally realizes that he’s overreacting.

Rutherford’s case doesn’t hinge on John Edison. It doesn’t depend on getting Annie to agree to talk to her father for the first time in years -- he doesn’t need to poke at that wound any more than he already has.

Because Jeff Winger has been doing this shit for a long, long time and he has plenty of contacts. He knows tons of rich, influential people who owe him a favor because he’s gotten them out of DUIs or made solicitation charges disappear or helped their kids get off with nothing more than a slap on the wrist and a little community service after being nailed for possession of a controlled substance with the intent to distribute. One of these people has to know someone who knows someone who worked at Pine Brook at the same time that Deborah Wahlstrom was there.

It’s just a matter of placing enough calls and finding the right person.

So he settles in at his desk after lunch and starts drawing up a preliminary list in the hopes of figuring out where to start.

He doesn’t need to bother Annie with any of this either, and considering that he hasn’t seen her since he suggested that her father might be their last hope last night, it’s probably a good idea to let her cool off a while.

Of course, leave it to Annie to disagree, because he’s barely scribbled down four names when there’s a brisk knock at his office door. It opens before he can even respond and in Annie strolls, as purposeful as ever. She doesn’t say anything as she sits down, but she does slide a can of Diet Dr. Pepper onto his desk, which seems like a pretty significant gesture because she knows that’s his preferred form of caffeine in the afternoon. He taps his fingers against the aluminum and tries to figure out exactly how he should play this.

“I’ve decided that we should talk to my father,” she announces suddenly. She doesn’t flinch or break eye contact, so she appears pretty certain, and it throws him even further off guard.

Still, Jeff furrows his brow, studying her a little more closely to try to determine what her mood really is. “Annie, it’s fine. We don’t need--”

“It is fine,” she agrees. “But I don’t want him to know beforehand that I’m going to be there, so…”
He nods, trying to process all of this as quickly as he can. “Yeah, sure. That’s not -- I’ll have Claire call and make an appointment under my name.”

Annie nods back briskly, and there’s a determined look in her eyes that seems a little too forced. “You’re sure about this?” he has to ask. “Because we don’t have to do it if you’re not.”

She takes a deep breath and scans his face for a moment -- like she’s trying to find some deeper meaning behind his words, determine if he’s being sincere -- and then sighs. “Jeff, I have my eyes on the prize just as much as you do. We’re going to win this case And if my father can help us do that, then that’s what’s going to happen.” She huffs out a humorless laugh. “God knows he owes me.”

His curiosity flares again, and he wants to ask what exactly happened between her and her father, what kind of rift divided her from her family. But he understands that having that kind of knowledge carries a certain responsibility, that he’d be her go-to guy whenever she’s feeling sad or angry or confused about her parents, and he really isn’t cut out for making sympathetic noises and offering moral support.

So he nods again and lets it go.

-x-

She tries to remember the last time that she felt this anxious.

She was nervous the night before she started at Hamish, Hamish, Hamlin, & Hawthorne -- that’s the reason that she wound up in Jeff’s bed, after all -- but there was excitement too, the feeling that she was starting a thrilling new chapter of her life. She was a little uneasy before she ended things with Vaughn, but she was so certain that it was the right thing to do that a strange sense of calm came over her.

Leaving behind the only home that she’d only known to go to Stanford Law hadn’t been nerve-wracking at all. It had seemed like vindication after one terrible mistake had derailed the entire course of her life. Even starting at Greendale had seemed like a step, however small, forward.

So maybe it goes all the way back to that day she lay in a hospital bed and forced herself to tearfully admit to her parents that she had a problem and needed help.

But as she and Jeff sit in a conference room at her father’s office, waiting for him to join them, she tells herself that she can barely remember being that girl, that she’s come so far from that sterile hospital room that it’s impossible to even recognize her now.

Jeff must sense her anxiety, though, because he isn’t cracking his usual jokes, he isn’t making small talk about the conference room decor, and he isn’t asking her if she likes his tie -- which, she still manages to notice, is new. When they were in the car earlier, he even tossed her a bag of animal crackers to have with her coffee because he knows that they’re her favorite cookies.

Unfortunately, even that kind gesture didn’t do much to make her feel better.

She fiddles with her notepad on the table in front of her, shifting it a couple of inches to the left and then back again. Beside her, Jeff checks his watch, lets out an impatient sigh, and smooths his tie against his shirt, as if he is the one who’s nervous.

When her father finally strolls into the room, it’s only been five minutes since they sat down and yet it feels like an eternity. He is busy typing on his phone as he walks, so she can take a good long
look at him before he realizes that she’s there. The sprinkling of gray in his hair is more obvious than it looked in photos and the lines around his eyes are more pronounced, but getting rid of his mustache still makes him look younger somehow.

“Sorry, sorry,” he says, his gaze still fixed on his phone. “Mr. Winger, right? You’re working the Simon Rutherford case?”

Jeff stands, but Annie remains in her seat, not sure if she could move even if she wanted to.

“That’s right, Mr. Edison. We just wanted to ask you a few questions about your time at Pine Brook, if that’s okay.”

Her father finally looks up, sliding his phone into his jacket pocket. He shakes the hand that Jeff extends with a smile, and she is struck suddenly by a memory of him beaming up at her from the audience of her 7th-grade spelling bee, when she spelled “prospicience” correctly to win the whole thing.

“That’s fine. And call me John. But I’m not really sure how much I can…”

Annie is staring at the lines on her notepad as he trails off, but she can feel his eyes on her all the same, knows the precise moment that he realizes who is sitting in front of him.

“Annie?” he says finally, his voice quiet and a little high.

When she finally looks up and meets his eyes, she does it with her back held as straight as possible, trying to project as much confidence and poise as she can so he won’t realize how close she is to falling to pieces.

“Good morning,” she says briskly. She doesn’t know what to call him; ‘Father’ is out of the question and ‘Mr. Edison’ is ridiculous.

“What are you…” He shakes his head, dumbfounded. “I’d heard that you’d moved back and were working in town but I didn’t know…”

“I realize you know my associate,” Jeff says, taking the seat beside her again. “But we should probably just stick to the matter at hand.”

Her father sinks into a chair on the other side of the table, his eyes not leaving hers. It almost seems like he’s in a daze, like he’s seen a ghost from his past that he never imagined he’d come face to face with again. She taps her pen against the notepad, trying to calm her nerves.

Jeff clears his throat and her father finally looks over at him. “I guess the first thing we’d like to ask you is if you found anything unusual about the way Mr. Rutherford chose investments or shared returns. You’ve worked at several investment firms so you probably have a good idea of what standard protocol is.”

“Yeah, sure… I think…” Her father hesitates, glancing back at her momentarily. “You know, in the beginning, it seemed fairly routine. The other investment officers and I would meet with fund managers and get a feel for their strategies and performance, and then we’d all get together with Simon and present our findings so the entire committee could make a decision. That’s how it works in most places.”

“You said in the beginning,” Jeff points out. “Did it change at some point?”

Her father nods. “Yeah… maybe after I’d been there about a year. Suddenly, Simon was taking
most of the meetings and he was always very vague with the details for the funds he was considering. And we didn’t have an investment committee so much anymore because he was making all the decisions.”

“Did you talk to him about the changes?” Annie asks, proud of the fact that her voice doesn’t crack.

Her father nods again. “I did. And he basically said that after some tough losses, he wanted to take a more hands-on approach. He told me he understood if I didn’t like it and I was free to move on if I needed to… which I did, about two years later.”

“What about Deborah Wahlstrom?” Jeff asks. “You worked with her, right?”

“Yes. She became an investment officer just a few months after I joined the firm.” He shrugs.

“What about her?”

“How did she feel about the changes to the investment protocol?”

“I don’t think she was any happier about it than the rest of us,” her father says. “But it might have been a little more complicated for her.”

Jeff perks up, practically bouncing in his seat. “Why’s that?”

“Well, because there were always rumors that she and Rutherford … you know, that they were having an affair.”

Annie looks over at Jeff, who gives her a discreet nod, as if he’s trying to reign in how excited he is at this piece of news.

“Do you think the rumors were true?” Annie asks.

Her father cocks his head back and forth, and then lifts his shoulders. “I didn’t really pay much attention to them at first. It’s not like they affected me much. Deborah was smart and worked hard -- I didn’t really care what she did in her free time.”

“I feel like there’s a ‘but’ coming,” Jeff says.

“But then I kind of walked in on the two of them in the coat room at our holiday party one year. I didn’t really see anything, but it definitely seemed like they were doing something more than discussing investment strategy.” He sighs. “The other guys at the firm were pretty crude about the whole thing. They assumed she was promoted to the investment committee just because of her relationship with Simon… when really, she was probably smarter than all of them put together.”

Jeff bobs his head, scribbling something down on the file in front of him. “Do you know why she left Pine Brook?”

“No. I didn’t really keep in touch with anyone over there after I left myself.”

“We haven’t been able to track Deborah down. Do you know any places where she might have had family? Maybe owned a house?”

Her father leans back in his chair, lips pursed thoughtfully. “Her family actually owned a little ski resort in Vail… no, Aspen. We had a retreat weekend up there once. The place was small, but really nice. I remember Deborah told me that her goal was to make as much money as she could, as fast as she could, so she could retire early and just ski all day. She was really good too -- went
down some of those Black Diamond trails fearlessly.”

“Do you remember the name of the ski resort?” Jeff asks.

“Not off the top of my head. But I’ve probably got it somewhere. I’m kind of obsessive about the records I keep.” He looks over at Annie, like she’ll vouch for him, and she can feel Jeff watching her too, probably thinking that’s a trait that she inherited directly from her father. “So if you give me a little time, I can email you the details.”

“That’d be great,” Jeff says, reaching into his pocket to pull out one of his business cards. “Here’s my contact info.”

Her father takes the card, scanning it quickly, before looking over at her again, almost as if he thinks she might hand over her own information, like he has a right to expect that from her. She feels her cheeks get hot so she jots down gibberish on her notepad to distract herself.

“So…” her father says, and she tries to brace herself for whatever is going to come next. “You two are representing Simon at his trial? That’s a big case. It’s a really prominent case…”

He sounds like he’s impressed, but also surprised, like he never imagined that she’d be able to crawl out of the hole she dug for herself and ascend to such heights -- and hearing that in his voice shatters the small well of self-control that she’s been clinging to all morning. She’s lurching to her feet before she realizes what she’s doing and she wants to rant and scream and throw something at him, but she refuses to give him the satisfaction, refuses to let him think that she’s some kind of basket case. And she definitely doesn’t want Jeff to think that she’s someone that he can’t trust to reign in her emotions.

So she grabs her bag from the floor and her coat from the back of her chair instead.

“Excuse me,” she blurts out, and then she’s fleeing the room, hurrying down the hallway and past the receptionist, stabbing her finger against the elevator button and praying her father doesn’t come after her.

By the time the elevator doors close in front of her, she feels strangely numb but also as if she is shaking from the inside out. She falls in a heap on a bench in the lobby of the building, but the security guard doesn’t seem to notice. She is having trouble catching her breath, and she prays that she isn’t having a panic attack because that would cause the kind of scene that would probably get back to her father and she can’t let him know that he’s affected her at all. She tips her head back against the wall and closes her eyes, breathing in through her nose and out through her mouth until she feels her heart start to slow down. Her hands are still shaking, though, so she twists them together in her lap.

She has no idea how long she’s been sitting there when Jeff is suddenly on the bench beside her. She doesn’t have to open her eyes; she smells his expensive, crisp cologne even before he speaks.

“You okay?” he asks.

She takes another deep breath and exhales, and when she opens her eyes, he is watching her with a gaze so tender that she feels her heart start to pound again. “I will be,” she tells him. “I’m sorry about running out like that. You probably think I’m crazy and unprofessional and…”

He shakes his head. “I don’t think any of that,” he says. “Look, I don’t know what went on with you and your dad, and I don’t need to. But I do know that it was hard for you to be up there… and you still sat in the room and helped us get the information we needed, and if that’s not being a
badass, I don’t know what is.”

She smiles, almost despite herself. The idea that anyone would think that she’s a badass is pretty great; the fact that it’s Jeff Winger saying it is pretty much amazing -- and the soft, serious look in his eyes makes it obvious that he isn’t just saying it to make her feel better.

He really believes it.

“Do you know why I moved back here after law school?” she asks suddenly. “I had a job offer in San Francisco at the firm where I’d interned. I’d even gotten an offer from a firm in New York where my advisor at Stanford used to be a partner. So I had other options. Really big, impressive options. Not that Hamish, Hamish, Hamlin, & Hawthorne isn’t a great firm or anything, but…”

Jeff nods, lips pursed thoughtfully. “So why Greendale then?”

“Because my family is here,” she tells him. “And I wanted my father -- and my mother -- to know exactly what I’d made of myself. Because they gave up on me a long time ago and I wanted them to know how wrong they were.”

Jeff grins. “Well, I definitely think they’ll know now.”

She smiles too, but it’s really just going through the motions. There’s still that same jittery feeling inside her, like she is about to fall to pieces at any moment, and when she looks over at Jeff, who wants and expects nothing from her, she is hit with the sudden, overwhelming desire to tell him everything, to open up and stop pretending that it’s something that she barely remembers.

“My father got his MBA at Wharton and my mother went to Princeton,” she hears herself saying. “So I grew up with this all-consuming, unspoken pressure to be the absolute best at everything… and I just… I cracked under it.” She lowers her head, studying her hands in her lap. “I started taking Adderall because I didn’t know how else I could possibly work hard enough to be everything that they wanted. And when I hit rock bottom and realized I needed help, my parents didn’t think rehab was the best option. They just wanted me to go on like nothing was wrong, so no one would know what a failure they’d raised. And when I refused to do it, they pretty much disowned me.”

She shakes her head, not wanting to let the memories take too much hold. Recounting it all out loud makes it sound ever crazier -- plenty of kids are under pressure so they cheat on a test or buy a term paper online or act out by getting drunk and having ill-advised sex. They don’t all get hooked on a controlled substance. Annie glances over at Jeff, who looks shaken, maybe even overwhelmed by the whole thing, and she feels the same shame that she did when she admitted everything to her parents.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I shouldn’t have dumped all that on you. It’s not--”

“I only saw my father twice after my parents divorced,” Jeff says, and like her, his gaze is fixed firmly on his lap. “He made it to our first scheduled visitation, which is kind shocking in retrospect. And then we didn’t see him for another four years. I mean, there were no phone calls or birthday cards. He didn’t pay any of the child support or alimony he owed. And then one day, completely out of the blue, he showed up on our doorstep again, asking my mother if he could borrow some money.” Jeff laughs humorlessly, shaking his head. “So if I came face to face with him today, I would punch him square in the face and walk away without looking back. All things considered, I think you showed a lot of restraint.”

She looks at him, his perfect profile and the rigid line of his shoulders, like he’s trying just as hard
as she is to keep it all together, and the strangest sense of calm comes over her. She slumps against his shoulder, as much to comfort him as herself. “Family sucks,” she sighs.

Jeff glances down at her in surprise -- and laughs again, but this time, it has a warm, convincing sound. “It really does.” He pats his hand against her knee. “But you know what doesn’t suck? Getting information that could break our case wide open… that’s worth celebrating, actually.”

Annie smiles. “Coffee?”

Jeff shakes his head with a smirk. “I was thinking something a little stiffer. L Street?”

It’s not quite noon yet and it’s pretty unprofessional to drink in the middle of the day anyway, especially when they still have so much work to do, but she can’t help feeling like they’ve earned it. So she follows him back to the car with a clear conscience.
I’m not going to make a lot of excuses about why it's taken me so long to update this story -- it mostly comes down to a bunch of boring work-related things that no one wants to hear about -- but I do want anyone who's still reading to know that I’m as committed to this fic as I was when I started it so there is no doubt that I will finish it. It just might take a little longer than I originally anticipated.

(And this chapter is extra long in the hope that it will make up for keeping you waiting for so very long ...)

I also want to offer up my most heartfelt thank yous to everyone who continues to leave comments and send me messages. I've been terrible about responding recently -- and I promise to be better about that going forward -- but I read each and every note, and they mean so very much to me, especially when I'm battling fic-related anxiety.

As I always say, the only reason that this chapter (the entire story, actually!) is legible is because Bethany is the world's greatest beta ... and an amazing friend. The story and I would both be a mess without her.

“That’s totally unprofessional! He can’t get away with this!”

When she throws her hands up in the air, it occurs to Annie that she might just be throwing a tantrum. She stops short of stomping her foot, though, so maybe she’s safe. Behind his desk, Jeff doesn’t seem to be paying her much attention, shrugging an almost indifferent shoulder as he sorts through some papers.

“You agree with me, right?” she asks, needing reassurance in the worst way.

“Yeah. I guess.” He looks up and shoots her a bland smile. “It’s just showmanship. Murphy thought he could mess with our heads by springing this on us. Or maybe he’s just hoping we won’t show up… and I can’t really blame him. It’s something I’d do.”

She sighs, shaking her head as she presses the tip of her pointy shoe against the leg of his desk. It’s probably something she’d do too, given the opportunity. But that doesn’t mean she has to like it happening to her, to them.

“Joke’s on him, though,” Jeff continues. “Because he should’ve waited until an hour before the depositions to tell us they were happening. Three hours is plenty of time for us to get ourselves together.”

She looks up at him, uncertain. “You really think so?”

He nods, still not looking at her. “Sure. It’ll take us fifteen minutes to get there, so we’ll have over two hours to review our questions. We’re fine.” She bobs her head in agreement, but she isn’t entirely convinced. “I’ve got to stop by HR before we go, though. My accountant wants me to change my 401k contribution for tax purposes, so I’ve got to go sign some form for Craig. Why
don’t you go get your stuff and I’ll meet you in front of the building in ten?”

She is distracted all the way down to her office and as she gathers her coat and bag, trying to come up with possible questions for the two other Pine Brook employees that the federal prosecutor has suddenly decided it is absolutely imperative to get depositions from this afternoon. In the elevator, she actually takes out her iPad to jot down a few notes so she doesn’t forget anything in the heat of the moment.

There may also be a small part of her working overtime to determine whether Jeff was just preoccupied looking for retirement savings forms or if he’s acting strange around her. It’s been almost five days since she had her mini-breakdown after their meeting with her father, and they went to L Street together and promptly got drunk, and while nothing untoward happened between them -- no kissing, no inappropriate touching -- there’d been a little more opening up about their pasts. She told him about the terrible crush that she had on her English teacher in the tenth grade, how she wrote extra credit assignment after extra credit assignment in the hopes of impressing him and making him fall in love with her, and Jeff told her about how he’d almost flunked out of college his junior year and gave serious thought to just faking a degree and applying to law schools anyway.

She’s also pretty sure that she also shared all the gory details of the afternoon she lost her virginity, but she’d had so much tequila that she can’t really be sure that she didn’t imagine it.

But Jeff’s behavior is slightly off, which makes her think that it definitely happened. It’s probably because she’s so preoccupied -- her gaze fixed on the iPad screen instead of the pavement in front of her, her head still back in the office with Jeff -- that she barrels into some poor innocent bystander when she finally makes it to the street in front of the building.

“Sorry, excuse me,” she mumbles, not looking up.

“Moonflower?”

All it takes is that one word and suddenly all thoughts of sneaky prosecutors and deposition questions and Jeff being freaked out by her oversharing fly right out of her head. There’s only one person in the world who’s ever called her that, and it’s absolutely crazy to think that he’d be standing on the sidewalk in front of the Hamish, Hamish, Hamlin, & Hawthorne building. He’s supposed to be in Idaho or Louisiana or Maine, traveling cross-country far off the beaten path, not in Greendale, throwing himself right back in the middle of her messy, complicated life.

But of course, when she looks up, there Vaughn is, smiling down at her like this is exactly where he belongs.

Because of course with the way that her day is going, with the way her luck has been going lately, he is the random stranger who she carelessly bumped into.

“Vaughn?” she says incredulously. “I don’t… I’m not… what are you doing here?”

He probably doesn’t even hear her because he’s too busy pulling her into a hug, holding onto her like it’s been much longer than six months since they last saw each other.

“You cut your hair,” he says, when he finally lets her go. “I like it. It’s like when we first met...”

She tucks a lock of hair behind her ear self-consciously, but she studies him for a moment then, noticing that his own hair is a little shaggier, a little longer than she remembers, which makes sense because she always had to bug him into letting her give him a trim. And just as she’s been
worrying, he’s wearing the threadbare suede jacket with the torn pocket that he’s had since they met, which is much too light for the Colorado winter. He does have the rainbow scarf that his sister knitted for his birthday a few years back wound around his neck, though, which makes her feel a little better about his prospects of not freezing to death out on the road.

“Vaughn,” she says again. “What are you doing here?” She tries to keep her tone as gentle as possible, but her nerves are a little frayed so she isn’t sure how successful she is.

“Greendale was next on the list,” he says.

“I thought you weren’t going to make a list. You said you just wanted to go where the road took you.”

He shrugs, grinning. “It’s not an actual list. It’s metaphorical. And you know Tabby would kill me if I passed through Colorado and didn’t visit… and Hanukkah started this weekend and your birthday is in a few weeks so I thought it was a good time to--”

“Vaughn…” She sighs, shaking her head. “We talked about this before I left Stanford. You shouldn’t be making any plans that are based around me. I don’t want you to do that. We aren’t--”

“Hey, come on, Moonflower. I didn’t make these plans because of you. This is home for me too, you know. But since I knew you were here, I just figured…”

Her cheeks get a little hot, because really, what did she think? That he’s so lovesick and heartbroken over her that he cut short an amazing cross-country trip that he’s been planning for years just to catch a glimpse of her? It’s ridiculous, like something out a rom-com that Abed would criticize for being formulaic and devoid of real emotion.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I’m really busy with work so I can’t commit to--”

“Hey, there you are. I was starting to think you’d left without me.”

Her crappy luck holds because Annie turns, knowing exactly whom that warm, teasing voice belongs to, and there Jeff is, looking perfectly sleek and polished in his cashmere coat. It’s as if her past, present, and future are all colliding right there on the cold, gray sidewalk.

And it’s awful, because she’s pretty sure that Jeff is weirded out by everything that happened between them last week, and now here is more of her personal business insinuating itself between them, making everything uncomfortable and awkward.

“Sorry, Jeff. I was just--”

“Am I interrupting?” he asks, grinning in an infuriating way as he looks over at Vaughn. “Because I certainly don’t want--”

“It’s fine, man,” Vaughn says amiably “We were just catching up quick.”

Jeff nods, his smile veering into smirk territory in a hurry. “Oh, so you’re an old friend of Annie’s, then?”

“Well, actually, we were together for--”

“I’m being so rude!” Annie blurts out, stepping between the two men. “Vaughn, this is Jeff. We’re working together on a really important case for the firm.”
Jeff reaches over her shoulder to hold his hand out and Vaughn shakes it like the good sport he is. “Hey, hi, how’s it going?” he says. “So if you’re working with her, then you know Annie’s pretty much the greatest, right?”

Jeff looks down at her, his eyes practically twinkling in amusement. “Well, I definitely think so.”

She isn’t quite sure what it is, but she feels awkward and self-conscious, even as both men smile at her in a way that, honestly, is more than a little flattering. “We really have to get going,” she tells Jeff. “Why don’t you go get the car? You know, to save time.”

He cocks his head, and it’s obvious from the way he purses his lips ever so slightly in an almost pout that he wants to protest, to stay and get whatever info out of Vaughn that he can. When it looks like he’s about to open his mouth, she gives him a subtle shove in the direction of the parking garage. He doesn’t really budge, because he’s probably two and a half times her size, but she shoots him a pleading look and that must do the trick because his expression goes suddenly blank and he gives a quick nod. “Yeah, sure. It was great to meet you, Vaughn.”

“Yeah, you too, man.” She and Vaughn stand silently for a moment, watching as Jeff strolls off toward his car. “So is that guy, like, your boss?”

She nods absently. “Yeah, he’s kind of like my boss. Listen, Vaughn, we really are in a hurry… but maybe we can grab coffee or a sandwich or something while you’re here, okay?”

He smiles, and she feels like the worst person in the world, because all she can think standing across from him on the cold, gray sidewalk is that she really wishes that he hadn’t come back.

“Yeah, great,” he says. “There’s some stuff I want to talk to you about before I go. So I’ll check back in with you when you’re not so busy.”

It’s probably guilt that makes her give him a quick, one-armed hug before she goes to meet Jeff, but she makes sure to hurry off before he can make her feel any worse.

-x-

They’re barely five minutes from the prosecutor’s office when traffic comes to a sudden, grinding standstill.

The ride has been mostly quiet, and maybe it’s all in Jeff’s head, but he’s pretty sure that Annie has consciously been trying to stay busy to avoid conversation. If she isn’t typing away on her iPad, she’s calling the office, making sure that Neil’s pulled the files that she wants to review later or checking in with Vicki, the associate she shares an office with, to see if some mysterious delivery she’s been waiting for has arrived.

It’s all stuff that can wait, so he knows that she’s just trying to distract him from what happened before they got in the car.

The whole meeting-her-ex thing.

Not that she owned up to that detail, of course, but it was pretty obvious from her mood and their interaction that the guy wasn’t just another old friend like Troy or Abed.

It’s also very clear that she doesn’t really want to talk about it, so, of course, that’s pretty much all Jeff wants to do. He’s had a hundred questions rattling around his head, practically burning the tip of his tongue, ever since he saw her with the guy, and he’s been trying like hell to decide if it’s actually a can of worms worth opening. Since last week, when she had her run-in with her father,
he’s been feeling a little awkward around her, mainly because part of him regrets sharing all that stuff about his own father with her.

It wasn’t something that he’d planned on doing -- in fact, he almost felt like he was having an out-of-body experience when he heard the words spilling from his lips -- and yet, in that moment, when she’d been so upset and ashamed of showing weakness, offering up that little piece of his past had seemed like the only thing to do. He isn’t really sure why he got drunk with her later and spilled even more of his guts, like how he was all set to fake his way into law school once upon a time, or how he still sometimes feels guilty about sleeping with one of Mark’s girlfriends a few years back, even though Mark doesn’t know anything about it.

There was no good reason for telling her any of that, because by then, she was feeling no pain, so nothing about the run-in with her father could touch her. All the scotch certainly helped make him more talkative than usual, but… the thing is, Annie’s just easy to talk to. He knows that there’s some part of him that wants to unburden himself to her, that feels some compulsive need to share all the flotsam and jetsam of his ragged past with her.

Of course, the sane, rational part of him knows that’s a huge mistake, because he’ll only wind up feeling as naked and exposed as he has in the days since their meeting with her father. And right now, he’s a little worried that poking around in the turbulent, romantic part of her own history might lead him down the same path again, and he really doesn’t want that.

So he distracts himself by rolling down his window and leaning over just enough to catch a glimpse of flashing lights ahead in the distance. Beside him, Annie boosts herself up in her seat to try to peer around the car ahead of them too.

“I think it’s an accident,” he tells her.

“Great, that’s just great.” She throws her hands up and huffs out a sigh. “As if this day wasn’t bad enough… Now we’re going to miss the depositions, just like that jerk Murphy wanted.”

Jeff smiles. “Relax. We’ve still got almost two hours to get there. It’s going to be fine.”

She shakes her head and grumpily crosses her arms over her chest. From the corner of his eye, he watches her, bouncing her leg like she can’t quite control the nervous energy buzzing through her. It’s obvious that seeing this Vaughn has left her seriously rattled and Jeff really doesn’t understand it. Everything about the guy screamed loser, so it can’t be any kind of great loss.

Jeff reaches out to adjust the heat, turning the temperature up a couple of degrees even though the car is already comfortable. He fiddles with the radio next, flipping past the 80s and 90s channels to get to the Pearl Jam channel. Annie sighs, all breathy and ragged, and he feels his own knee start bouncing a bit. In that moment, he knows that he’s not going to be able to keep a lid on his curiosity much longer.

“So… you dated that guy?” he hears himself blurt out. “Seriously?”

She looks over at him in surprise, frowning. For a second, she just studies his face, her eyes narrowed purposefully, and he thinks that she might be contemplating creative and elaborate ways to murder him and hide the body.

“Yes,” she grits out. “Seriously.”

“For how long?” he asks automatically, because it’s almost like he can’t help himself at this point.

“A long time.” She shrugs, as if this isn’t a stunning revelation. “Almost seven years.”
“Wow,” he laughs. “Oh, wow. That’s just…”

Honestly, he isn’t entirely sure what it is -- shocking, unbelievable, ridiculous, disturbing: the possibilities seem endless -- so he can only shake his head. Annie crosses her arms over her chest again, but she looks even more pissed now.

“Why is that so funny?” she demands. “Vaughn is a wonderful person. He’s kind and generous and creative and--”

“Sure, right.” Jeff nods, like that’s absolutely the conclusion he’s come to on his own, and he’s not humoring her in the least. “I bet he’s a great guy. But he’s all wrong for you.”

She huffs out a sarcastic little laugh, and flips her hair over her shoulder almost haughtily. “Oh, please. You met him for like a minute, Jeff. How could you possibly know that?”

It’s a stupid question, really, because everything about the guy screamed that he was a mismatch for her from ten feet away. But Jeff just shrugs, trying for a disinterested look. “Okay, fine. So tell me… why’d you break up?”

Annie turns to look out the window, at the vast expanse of gray concrete and passing cars and bare trees. “Should we really be talking about this?”

He just his chin toward the cars lined up in front of them. “We’re probably going to be here awhile. We’ve gotta talk about something.”

She nods absently, and lets out a sigh that is equal parts resigned and tired. “It’s complicated,” she declares, and he can believe that because he doesn’t know of a single relationship anywhere that’s not riddled with complications of one sort or another. “I mean, Vaughn’s this amazing free spirit, and when we met, I thought that was exactly what I needed. Someone who was nothing like me, who didn’t plan everything and overthink every detail of their life to death. Someone who would just go with the flow. I thought he would help balance me out.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Jeff says. “In theory anyway.”

“Yeah, but In practice, not so much,” she admits. “It was fine in the beginning, because I was kind of finding my way, figuring out what I wanted to do with my life. And Vaughn was genuinely proud of me when I got into law school. I mean, he willingly picked up his whole life and moved to California with me… but I think he just thought of the whole thing as me satisfying some curiosity, almost like it was something I had to get out of my system. I don’t think he ever really expected me to devote myself to a legal career. He kept telling me that I’d find a higher purpose someday… it was obvious he didn’t think that was practicing law.”

Jeff smirks, because he’s heard plenty of bullshit in his day, and this is some grade-A garbage. “What exactly is Vaughn’s higher purpose?” he asks, trying not to sound too snarky -- and it must be even better than he’s imagining because Annie lowers her head, so her hair falls across her face and muffles whatever it is that she mumbles. “Excuse me?”

“He sells jewelry on Etsy,” she says. Jeff bites at his lip, working very hard to reign in his laugh. “He makes all sorts of corded bracelets and beaded necklaces and… he actually makes a pretty decent living at it. Well, he would make a decent living if he wasn’t always waiting around for a full moon or the right constellation for inspiration. And I’m the one who had to sign him up and
design his whole site and take care of all the practical details, really…”

“Maybe that’s what my outfit is missing,” Jeff teases. “A really cool beaded necklace.”

She shoots him another withering glare, but honestly, it turns him on more than it terrifies him.

“But the whole thing really fell apart when I was trying to decide to what job to take after I finished law school,” she says. “Vaughn didn’t think I should take any of them. He thought I should go with him on some cross-country trip instead, and camp out in the mountains and sleep under the stars. And you know, fifteen-year-old me probably would’ve thought that was incredibly romantic, but twenty-five year-old me just thought it sounded annoying and pointless and like a serious waste of time.”

“Well, camping definitely sucks,” Jeff agrees.

“And that’s when I couldn’t really pretend anymore, because it made me realize that we were imagining fundamentally different things for our lives. That we want fundamentally different things,” Annie says. “I want to practice law. And you’ll think this is stupid, I know, but I believe that’s my higher purpose. And I don’t want to give that up for someone else.”

“Especially not for a guy who seems to have a shaky grasp on weather-appropriate attire.” Annie swats at his arm, but she stifles a little laugh so the joke doesn’t totally miss the mark. The SUV in front of them eases forward a few inches, so Jeff lifts his foot off the brake and lets the car roll forward. “But that all begs the question: how is what you said any different from what I said? The guy’s all wrong for you.”

Annie shakes her head. “Because you’re being all judgemental and condescending. You think because he buys his clothes at thrift stores and uses patchouli oil instead of cologne that he’s not worth my time,” she declares. “But that’s not what it’s about. It all comes down to simple and basic happiness. He’s tired of staying in one place, he wants to travel and drift and just go where the wind takes him. But for years, I’ve felt like nothing in my life was permanent. It all seemed like a house of cards for so long that now I want some stability. I want to put down some kind of roots.”

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“Yes. You want your big career and a nice house, marriage, kids --”

“What makes you say that?” she asks, brow furrowed in either annoyance or curiosity.

“I don’t know.” He shrugs. “You just seem like someone with traditional tastes.”

She lets out an outraged huff. “Oh please. You don’t know me nearly as well as you think do.”

“What? So you don’t want to win the Rutherford case, make partner, get married, have a family, live happily ever … and all that crap?”

She cocks her head, considering the idea carefully. “Possibly,” she admits. “Maybe even probably. But not definitely.”

He lifts a shoulder, because he is pretty sure that she’s not being entirely honest, but there’s no point in pushing the issue. The traffic ahead of them moves forward another fraction, so he eases his foot off the brake again.

“What about you?” she asks suddenly.

He glances at her. “What about me?”
“Are marriage and family and all that crap in your plans?”

It’s impossible not to laugh at the idea, of traveling down that path that only leads to heartbreak and resentment and someone leaving someone else in the middle of the night, but she looks anything but amused as she watches him try to catch his breath. “No,” he says emphatically. “I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“Let’s put it this way: I’m pretty set in my ways, Annie.”

She rolls her eyes. “Oh, God. Is this yet another rant about how being forty is some kind of death sentence?”

He rolls his eyes right back at her. “No. I’m just saying I’ve built my life in a very specific way, one that I happen to like a lot, and it doesn’t exactly leave a lot of room for that kind of stuff. I don’t even have a dog… and I really like dogs.”

As if he’s said some kind of magic word, Annie’s suddenly smiling, all soft and almost dreamy. “I like dogs too,” she tells him. “We had a beagle when I was little. Bagel.”

“Bagel the beagle? That’s just cruel.”

She shrugs. “My brother named him. He was five.”

“Our dog’s name was Rosie… but I don’t remember how she got it.”

Annie’s smile is instantaneous, some strange combination of sly and tender that he feels all the way to his bones. “That means you named her and just don’t want to admit it,” she says. “And it means I’m right. You can act as tough as you want, but you’re really just a big softie.”

Immediately, he turns his eyes back to the road, because looking into those wide, all-knowing eyes of hers is a little too much for him. He clutches at the steering wheel so hard that he’s almost surprised that his knuckles don’t crack, trying to will the traffic into moving.

“So how were you thinking we should start with Dennis Karlson’s deposition?” he asks, figuring that’s a surefire way to distract her.

“Oh, well, let me see. I did jot down a few notes…”

It works like a charm.

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After the day she’s had, she is so exhausted and frustrated that she is seriously contemplating taking a bath in Troy and Abed’s tub.

There’s nothing particularly noteworthy about that in and of itself, but the fact that she doesn’t think Troy and Abed have cleaned it, beyond periodically switching the non-slip decals on the bottom when they get bored (their stickers of choice at the moment happen to be chubby penguins riding surfboards), doesn’t make the prospect all that appealing.

Still, after two and a half hours of depositions and another three hours going over them back at the office with Jeff, she definitely needs a little help unwinding. Maybe a glass of wine -- or two -- will do the trick, she thinks as she trudges up the stairs to the apartment.
When she reaches the landing outside the guys’ door, though, she realizes that she may need to bring the entire bottle into the bathroom with her.

Because there, sitting on the Inspector Spacetime welcome mat, is Vaughn. She can’t make out the title of the book he’s reading, but there’s a picture of a retro movie theater and a car on the cover, which makes her think it has something to do with his road trip.

She isn’t exactly surprised to find him waiting for her, but she curses under her breath all the same. He must hear her, because he looks up with a smile. “Wow,” he says. “You weren’t kidding about being swamped with work. I’ve been waiting for almost an hour. And I purposely didn’t come until like a half hour after I already thought it was totally too late to work.”

She sighs, watching him push himself to his feet. “Vaughn. What are you doing here?”

“Can you believe I actually figured out how to get here after all these years? Remember how I always used to get lost?” He bends to pick up a duffel bag from the floor, and she instantly starts to panic. “I always made a right at Horton instead of --”

“You can’t stay here,” she blurts out, hunting around in her bag for the keys. “Troy and Abed barely have room for me and I wouldn’t--”

Vaughn laughs. “Relax, I’m staying with Tabby. She’s really excited to have me around, actually. She’s been trying to convince me to visit for a while.”

Annie’s hand slips as she tries to open the door. It’s totally understandable that Tabby would miss her brother, but Annie can’t handle the stress of possibly running into him around every corner for the foreseeable future. “Are you considering it?”

“No,” he answers automatically. “I really want to finish my trip. That’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about.”

She nods, finally managing to let them into the apartment, already feeling calmer because this is a safe topic of conversation. She offered to help him come up with an itinerary before they separated, a route that maximized the sights that he’d see as he made his way to the east coast, and maybe he’s finally realizing that traveling without any kind of plan is just silly and wants to take her up on her offer.

She can totally deal with that -- and have him on his way in half an hour or less.

The apartment is empty, which surprises her -- the guys are usually camped out in front of the TV, making themselves sick on some type of dinner of questionable nutritional content -- but maybe it’s a good thing. There won’t be any distractions and she can get rid of Vaughn even more quickly.

“Okay,” she says, dropping her bag on one of the kitchen stools. “What about your trip?”

“I want you to finish it with me.”

She turns, blinking in total confusion, because she can’t have heard him right; he can’t honestly want to have the same conversation they had just a few months ago. “Excuse me?”

He shrugs. “There’s still so much to see, you know? And I just figured you’ve been working steady for a few months now so you got a taste and everything… and now you totally need a break. We could leave right after the New Year and it would--”
“Vaughn,” she says, as patiently as she can. “I can’t just take a break. I’m in the middle of a really important case, a case that could make my entire career, actually. I don’t want a break.”

He laughs, nodding vigorously. “Of course you don’t want one. You never do. But you’re so stressed out, I could feel it as soon as I saw you today. You need a break.”

“Of course I’m stressed! I’m doing something really important, something that really matters to me. Am I supposed to be loosey-goosey about the whole thing?”

“No, sure, I get it. But you’re so stressed out, I could feel it as soon as I saw you today. You need a break.”

“Perspective?” she scoffs. “I’m not the one who needs perspective here, Vaughn.”

He hangs his head, and she immediately feels guilty. It’s like they’re speaking two completely different languages, and neither of them seems to have the capacity to understand the other. It makes her wonder how they ever did, how they were ever able to fit together in a way that made any kind of sense.

“Look,” she starts, keeping her voice as soft as possible -- but she doesn’t get to finish because there are suddenly voices in the hallway and then a key in the lock and Troy and Abed spill into the apartment, laughing uproariously with one another.

Troy stops when he spots Vaughn, though, and practically beams.

“Vaughn! Hey, man, we didn’t know you were in town!” He pulls Vaughn into a hug, shooting Annie an accusatory glare over the other man’s shoulder. “Why didn’t you tell us he was coming?”

“I didn’t know until he showed up this morning.”

“You came all this way just to see Annie?” Abed asks, and she seriously wants to smack him for making an uncomfortable situation even more awkward.

Vaughn shrugs. “My sister’s still in Greendale too. And since it’s the holidays, I just figured it was a good time to visit.”

“Hey, do you remember those Hanukkah dinners we used to do back in the day?” Troy says wistfully. “Annie’d make that really amazing chicken and buy that cool lumpy bread and she’d let me light the menorah…”

“Because you whined so much,” she mumbles under her breath, though no one pays her any attention.

“Isn’t Hanukkah happening right now?” Abed asks, and he looks at her so pointedly that she finds herself jerking her head in a quick nod.

“We should totally have another dinner then!” Troy declares. “I mean, Vaughn’s here so it’s like almost a sign or something.”

Vaughn smiles. “That would be nice, actually.”

Annie usually prides herself on her patience, but at the moment, she feels herself grasping at the very last straws of it. “Guys, I’m really busy with work. I don’t have time to roast a chicken and find challah--”

“The food doesn’t matter,” Vaughn insists.
“That’s right,” Troy agrees. “We can just get a pizza or something.”

“Well, my menorah’s in storage too, and I can’t--”

“Me and Abed can come up with a makeshift menorah,” Troy declares. He looks over at his friend for confirmation, and Abed shrugs in some kind of agreement.

She wants to say no -- the word is practically burning the tip of her tongue, and she wants with every fiber of her being to say it -- but she looks at Troy and Vaughn’s eager faces, and she can’t seem to make herself disappoint them. “Fine,” she says, gritting her teeth. “Friday night? We’ll have pizza and light a homemade menorah. That sounds terrific.”

“It’s a date,” Vaughn says cheerfully, and she’s pretty sure that it’s just a figure of speech, that he doesn’t mean anything by it, but a pit opens up in her stomach all the same.

“Can I talk to you alone for a minute?” she asks him, and she’s learned she can’t trust the guys not to listen through the makeshift sheet room divider, so she gestures to the hall outside the apartment. Vaughn follows without question, and she purposely avoids Troy and Abed’s eyes as she trails after him.

In the harsh, yellow light of the hallway, Vaughn still looks hopeful and earnest, and it makes her feel like the worst person in the world.

“I’m really happy we’re gonna do the dinner,” he says. “It’ll be just like the old days.”

“Yeah… it’ll be nice. But I just want to be clear about this.” She takes a deep breath. “We’re doing this as friends, Vaughn. Nothing more.”

His smiles goes a little crooked, like he’s particularly amused. “It’s just pizza, Moonflower.”

She nods vigorously. “It is. But you show up out of nowhere and ask me to abandon my entire career to drive across the country with you, Vaughn, so I just want to be sure you’re not confused about what’s going on with us. I’m always going to care about you, but we can’t be together like we used to. It just isn’t…”

He takes a step toward her and reaches for her hand, rubbing his thumb across her knuckles. “Annie, you need to start listening to your heart. To stop doing what you think you should be doing, what you’ve been conditioned to do really, and do what you want.”

“That’s what I am doing,” she sighs. “That’s what this job means to me, Vaughn. It’s not what anybody else wants for me. It’s what I want for myself.”

“And you don’t think there’s room in your life for that and someone else? For love?”

Her palm feels sweaty and she has to resist the urge to wrench her hand away from his. She can’t tell him the truth: that her heart wouldn’t lead her back to him, that she doesn’t love him the way he wants anymore, that she stopped a while back, before she even realized it was happening. She definitely can’t tell him that she’s begun to wonder if she ever really loved him the right way, with all of her heart and head, in the way that he deserves.

But she needs him to stop looking at her like he can talk her back into their relationship if he just tries hard enough, if he just doesn’t give up. She can’t take it anymore.

Which is why she blurts out the first excuse that comes to mind.
“There’s someone else!”

Vaughn squints, his smile slipping. “Huh?”

“I’ve started seeing someone else,” she says. “It’s only been a few months, but it’s going really well and I’m--”

“Oh,” he says. He slides his hand away from hers and rubs at the back of his neck. “Oh, man. I didn’t realize…”

“It’s Jeff,” she tells him, on a real roll now as she builds the lie from the ground up -- but it isn’t really a lie, because she has slept with him and kissed him and is still holding out hope that there’s more of both in their future. They may not be in an actual, real relationship, but that seems like a technicality that doesn’t matter much at the moment. “You know, the guy you met today.”

Vaughn frowns, looking confused. “I thought that dude was your boss?”

“Sort of, but we’re also… you know, involved.”

Vaughn tips his head back, like he’s thinking very carefully about this new development, and for a moment, she wonders if he’s going to bust her for lying, force her to tell the unvarnished truth that is only going to hurt both of them more. After so many years, it seems like he should be able to see through her like she was a sheet of glass.

But Vaughn takes a deep breath and nods slowly. “I guess that makes sense. I mean, he’s a lawyer too, so you probably have lots of stuff to talk about. I never understood any of that legal mumbo jumbo that you were always spouting.”

She hangs her head, feeling guilty and awful.

“Hey, you think Jeff would want to come to the Hanukkah dinner?” he asks. “Because I’d like to get to know him a little better. You know what I always say… any friend of Annie’s is a friend of mine.”

She looks down, wincing. “Oh, you know, he’s really busy with the case and all. I don’t think he’d have time to--”

“He doesn’t even take a break for a little while on Friday nights? Man, he must be your soulmate.”

She laughs nervously, because Jeff takes more breaks than anyone she knows and he’d laugh his ass off if he knew that was the excuse she’d used on his behalf. Of course, he’d probably be more amused by the fact that she’s made him her fake boyfriend in the first place, but she’s trying not to think too hard about any of it at the moment.

“Maybe I can just stop by his office,” Vaughn continues. “I bet he can spare, like, five minutes to talk to--”

“He’ll come to dinner,” Annie says. “I’m being silly. Of course, he’d love to come. Definitely.”

Vaughn manages a smile. “Great, awesome, cool. We can all catch up then.”

She nods, even as she finds herself unable to contemplate the hole that she’s dug for herself.

“Can’t wait,” she hears herself say.

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Leonard requests the scotch, so he’s technically the reason that Jeff drags the bottle out of his desk drawer, but he’d be lying if he didn’t admit that it’s always easier to deal with the old coot when he’s got a little booze in him.

Of course, Annie doesn’t partake. She primly sips a cup of tea as she takes notes, despite the fact that Leonard still has virtually nothing to offer.

“No Wahlstrøms own any resorts in Aspen,” he announces gruffly. “But I got people looking into it. We’ll figure it out.”

Jeff rolls his eyes. “We pretty much did all of your work for you and you still have nothing for us? What the hell are we paying you for?”

“Yeah,” Annie says. “Have you ever actually found anyone that you’re looking for?”

Leonard screws his face up like he’s just tasted something sour. “Hey there, missy,” he barks. “Watch it. I’ve been solving cases since before you were even a glint in your daddy’s eye.”

“You watch it,” Annie fires back. “Or I’ll shove my--”

“Hey, now” Jeff says, interceding. “Let’s all calm down for a second.” As if to convince them, he takes a deep breath himself. “Leonard, if the Wahlstrøms don’t own any property in Aspen, doesn’t it make sense to check out Deborah’s mother’s family?”

“I ain’t a dummy, Winger. We’re checking into that. But we’re gonna need to get her mother’s maiden name to do it.”

“Shouldn’t you already have that information?” Annie asks. “If you ran a background check, then-”

“It didn’t seem relevant before.”

Annie gets a tight little furrow between her brows that clues Jeff in to the fact that she really wants to throttle Leonard, and while he fully sympathizes with the sentiment, he can’t afford to lose her to an assault charge.

“Okay, fine,” Jeff says as patiently as he can. “You’ve got a week, Leonard. One more week to find out Deborah Wahlstrom’s mother’s maiden name and what property her family owns in Aspen and how the hell we can find her, or you can consider yourself officially fired.” He pins the old man with a steely gaze. “Got it?”

“Whatever,” Leonard says, and pushes himself wearily to his feet. He grumbles under his breath as he shuffles out of the office. Most of it is unintelligible, but Jeff is pretty sure that he can make out words that sound suspiciously like “bastard” and “bearcat.”

“Well, that went well,” Jeff says dryly, once he and Annie are alone.

She sighs in obvious disgust. “That man is utterly useless. Why has this firm employed him for so long?”

“He’s probably sleeping with someone at the top,” he jokes.

Annie wrinkles her nose in a way that shouldn’t be as sexy as it is. “Ugh, don’t make me picture that!”
He grins as he checks his email. “So we’ve got the conference call with Rutherford at 3. Though I’m sure I don’t need to tell you. You’ve probably had it highlighted and circled in your planner for days now.”

She shoots him a glare as she gathers up her things, but doesn’t try to deny the claim. He fully intends to tease her further, but he gets distracted by an email from his mother, asking if he’s going to be available to celebrate Christmas with her. He knows that he should, because it’s been three years since they shared a holiday and neither of them is getting any younger, and yet he finds himself wishing for a ready excuse, some ironclad work-related business that would get him off the hook.

He’s contemplating his options when Annie clears her throat, and he finally realizes that she hasn’t left his office yet. Leonard’s been gone for almost five minutes now and she hasn’t moved at all, which is unlike her -- normally she’s in a hurry to get back to her own office and do some focused piece of research that wouldn’t occur to him even in his sharpest moments -- so his interest is definitely piqued.

He watches her for a moment as she fidgets in the chair in front of his desk, sliding his name plate back and forth aimlessly. When she finally meets his curious gaze, she looks almost stricken.

“He wants to talk for a minute?” she asks, and he wonders what about the case could possibly have her this spooked. “I kind of need a favor.”

He smiles, leaning back in his chair. “A favor?” he repeats. “I’ve already talked to IT about getting you your own LexisNexis account, so--”

“It’s not that. It’s more personal…”

And just like that, things have become so much more interesting. He can only hope that his grin hasn’t become too manic. “Personal?” he repeats.

She nods. “I need you to come to a Hanukkah dinner at Troy and Abed’s apartment on Friday.”

His brow furrows in confusion. “That’s it? You need me to eat brisket with you? As a favor?”

“Well, we’re actually having pizza,” Annie says. “And Troy and Abed are making the menorah, because mine is in storage… which probably means it will be a serious fire hazard and I need to make sure they have a fire extinguisher on hand.” She sighs, sounding pretty damn weary. “But it’s a little more complicated than that… because Vaughn’s going to be there.”

“So what? You want me there to entertain your ex-boyfriend? That’s not exactly--”

“I want you there to pretend to be my current boyfriend,” she declares, and she says the words with such simple conviction that for a moment, he is certain that he must have misheard her because she makes the request sound so damn reasonable, like she’s asking him for a ride home or to get something off the top shelf in the kitchen.

“Excuse me?”

She throws her shoulders back, sitting up even straighter. “I think you heard me.”

That is all it takes for him to lose it, laughing deep and loud in a way that’s mostly natural but also a little bit for effect. He takes a moment to catch his breath as she scowls at him. “That is just … I don’t know what … why would you want me to pretend to be your boyfriend?”
She looks down again, pushing his nameplate back to its original spot in the center of his desk. “I may have, possibly, led Vaughn to believe that we’re involved. You know, in that way.”

“In what way?” he teases, and she glowers at him again, hard enough that it prompts him to hold his hands up defensively. “Okay, okay… but why would you tell him that?”

She sighs again, and her shoulders slump, and he’s wondering if he misread that wannabe hippie completely, and perhaps it might be time to send some vague threats and menacing frowns his way.

“Because he came over last night and tried to convince me I should run away from my life with him,” she explains. “And I didn’t want to hurt him by telling him that there’s absolutely nothing about that idea that appeals to me. So I figured the best thing was to tell him that there’s someone else… and you were just the first person I thought of.”

He can’t stop himself from grinning, despite the fact that he knows if he were really a good friend to Annie, he would tell her that this is all a terrible idea, that she’s just begging for trouble, that absolutely no good whatsoever will come from it.

But he won’t tell her any of that, because there is just too much potential for fun here.

“I’m going to assume that’s some kind of compliment,” he says. “But I think you’ve watched a few too many episodes of ‘Three’s Company.’ I’m pretty sure real people don’t do things like this.”

She shakes her head, and when she sets those wide, pleading, blue eyes of hers on him, he is suddenly certain that she could ask for anything in that moment -- his car, his kidney, the key to his goddamn heart -- and he’d offer it up freely.

“Please,” she says. “Just do this one thing for me… and then I’ll owe you one, okay?” He grins, and her eyes instantly narrow. “Don’t look at me like that,” she orders.

He shrugs, feigning innocence. “Like what?”

“Like you’re thinking of the dirtiest favor possible.”

“I don’t think those kinds of things really qualify as favors,” he says. “You know, because we’d both enjoy them.”

Annie rolls her eyes, standing abruptly as she gathers her pad and pen. “Will you do this for me or not?”

The opportunity is absolutely too good to pass up, and he is a weak, weak man, so he knows that he’s going to agree right off the bat. But he still takes a moment to answer, partly to make her sweat and partly because he doesn’t want to seem too eager.

“Fine,” he says, all begrudgingly, like he’s the most put-upon man in Colorado. “I’ll sacrifice my Friday night so your ex doesn’t get his feelings too hurt.”

She nods, looking a little more relieved as she moves toward the door.

“But I definitely plan to collect,” he calls after her.

He’s not entirely sure because she’s already in the hallway but he thinks she’s mumbling some of the same things under her breath as Leonard did as she heads back to her office.

-x-
Work is always her first priority, but when it also serves as a perfect way to distract herself from the fact that Vaughn is in town and she’s let him rattle her enough that she actually asked Jeff to pretend to be her boyfriend, it’s a special kind of haven.

So Annie sits at her desk, obsessively reading over deposition transcripts for what is probably the twentieth time, searching for any small tidbit with the power to blow their case wide open that she might have missed, and blocks out all other thoughts.

She must look completely no-nonsense too, because across the room, Vicki, who’s had nothing to do all week but research which dogs are hypoallergenic for one of the senior partners, studiously avoids her gaze and keeps completely quiet.

If Annie’s honest, she enjoys the fact that she can look that intimidatingly committed, especially when she feels like a mess inside.

But then her desk phone rings suddenly, and she flinches, caught off-guard by the intrusion, which probably spoils her image a little. When she sees that the call is coming from Claire’s extension, though, she figures that it must be something important and pulls herself together.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” Claire says, and it almost sounds like she’s whispering, trying to keep her voice as low as possible while still remaining audible. “But Jeff’s out to lunch with Eric and I know he wouldn’t want to be bothered with this and your name actually came up so I thought maybe you wouldn’t mind handling it…”

When Annie makes it up to the fourth floor, Ian Duncan is sprawled out in one of the armchairs opposite Claire’s desk, looking a little disheveled with his rumpled jacket and tousled hair. He’s mumbling to himself under his breath, and Claire, who’s been patient enough to deal with Jeff on a regular basis for the past five years, is shooting him a pretty deadly glare.

This will be a pain in the butt, Annie tells herself, but at least it’ll be a good distraction.

It’s hard to tell who’s happier to see her: Duncan, who leaps up out of the chair; or Claire, who heaves a sigh of relief.

“Oh, thank God,” Duncan declares theatrically. “I was beginning to think everyone had abandoned me.”

Annie exchanges an exasperated look with Claire, and directs Duncan into Jeff’s office. Poor Claire has obviously had to deal with him long enough.

“What is the problem exactly, Professor Duncan?”

“Please,” he says, collapsing on Jeff’s sofa. “We’re practically friends, Annie. Call me Ian.”

She pulls one of the chairs from in front of Jeff’s desk over so she can sit opposite him. “The problem, Professor Duncan?”

“Phil is a total wanker. A complete and utter wanker. I could pull some rando out of my Child Psychology course and they could do a better job of representing me than that bloody wanker.”

Annie nods, though she can’t imagine that Duncan is right. Phil is the junior partner that Jeff asked to take care of Duncan’s most recent legal troubles, and she may have only met him a couple of times herself, but he seems perfectly capable of handling a careless-driving charge.

“What did he do exactly?” she asks.
Duncan huffs in outrage and throws his hands up. “He’s trying to sell me down the river!”

She can’t help laughing, but she covers her mouth to fake a cough. “How’s that?”

“He’s all buddy-buddy with the D.A. and wants me to plead guilty so I’ll have to pay a fine and take driver-safety classes every Saturday for two months! He’s supposed to be working for me, you know.” Duncan shakes his head. “This is exactly why I wanted to Jeff to handle all of this. He’d never hang me out to dry like this. Never!”

Annie pinches the bridge of her nose, already feeling the storm of a headache pounding behind her eyes. Still, she manages to calmly stand and move to sit behind Jeff’s desk so she can call Phil and get to the bottom of this mess.

She has to drop Jeff’s name almost a half dozen times before Phil’s assistant will even put her through, and when she finally gets him on the line, he is a little less than receptive to her efforts to help. (She has to remind herself that most junior partners don’t take first-year associates as seriously as Jeff does her, and that Phil probably sees this as some clumsy effort to climb the corporate ladder on her part, so she shouldn’t take offense.) But when he finally realizes that her assistance means Duncan will be out of his hair for good, Phil is more than willing to listen to her.

“Pardon my French,” he says. “But that guy is a fucking asshole. Does he have photos of Winger screwing farm animals or something? Because I can’t imagine any other reason why he’d be willing to help that schmuck.”

“It’s complicated,” Annie tells him -- because everything involving Jeff Winger seems to be -- and Phil seems to accept that.

It takes a few phone calls back and forth before they’re finally able to work something out, all while Duncan dozes sitting up on the sofa, snoring loud enough that Claire actually gets up at one point and closes the door.

Once the details are hammered out, Annie actually has to kick at his shin to wake him up.

“T’ve worked it out,” she announces. “If you plead no contest to the charges, the D.A. says you only have to pay a two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar fine and attend one four-hour driver-safety class. Phil’s going to send the papers to Jeff for you to sign, okay?”

Duncan frowns for a moment, like he’s actually got the nerve to complain again, but he eventually nods. “That doesn’t sound too bad,” he concedes. “How come that bloody wanker couldn’t come up with that deal on his own? He needs a wet-behind-the-ears newbie like you to do it for him?”

Annie rolls her eyes. “I think he didn’t have quite as much incentive to help you. That’s all.”

“That’s why I needed Jeff on this. We’ve got the whole you-scratch-my-back-I’ll-scratch-yours thing going on.” Duncan pushes himself upright on the sofa, and grins. “By the way,” he says, all smarmy. “I totally get it now. It all makes perfect, crystal-clear sense.”

“What are you talking about?

Duncan waggles his brows, looking like a cartoon character having a seizure. “The thing with you and Jeff.”

Immediately, she feels herself stiffen up, and she crosses her arms over her chest, almost like a reflex. She tells herself not to think about the fact that she’s asking Jeff to pretend to be her boyfriend or that it was just a few weeks back that they were kissing in the conference room or that it’s barely been three months since they slept together, because she wants to feel as much righteous
indignation as possible while she glares at Duncan.

“I don’t know what you think,” she says primly. “But Jeff and I are just colleagues. There’s nothing more going on here.”

For a moment, Duncan purses his lips, almost like he’s fighting off laughter, but then he sobers up, nodding briskly. “Well, right. Of course. I just meant, I understand why he thinks you’re so indispensable around the office. You are quite the impressive young lady.”

It occurs to her then that maybe Duncan isn’t implying anything tawdry about her relationship with Jeff, but is actually trying to hit on her himself. This time, she doesn’t make any effort to hide her grimace. “We’re done here, right?” she asks.

“Oh, yeah, sure. I know you’re very busy. You and Jeff. Busy, busy, busy.” He smirks knowingly. “With work, of course.”

-x-

The eighth mile is probably overkill, yet he still cranks up the incline on the treadmill and powers through.

His usual seven miles is more than enough cardio for the day, a nice pick-me-up in the afternoon when the Diet Dr. Pepper isn’t working, but he’s feeling so good at the end, plenty sweaty but barely tired, that he figures pushing himself will only make him feel that much better. It’s the endorphins, he guesses, the same way that he feels like he can conquer the world after really great sex.

But then, it’s been a while since he had really great sex. Nearly three months, now that he thinks about it.

With Annie.

He jabs his finger against the incline button again, taking it a little steeper.

He should be thinking about the case, about why he’s letting everything rest in the hands of a geriatric drunk with a gambling problem, someone who probably couldn’t even find his own keys if they were in his fucking hand. Instead, all he can think about is the fact that tomorrow night, he is being tasked with playing boyfriend for Annie.

That would be pathetic enough on its own, because it’s not like it really means anything, putting on a show for her space-cadet ex -- and of course, it’s not like he wants it to mean anything either -- but it’s actually starting to distract him from the case. That is a level of pitiful so deep that he can’t even look at his reflection in the mirrored wall opposite the treadmills, and that’s usually one of his favorite ways to kill time during a cardio workout.

He curses himself for forgetting his earbuds because he thinks music could help take his mind off things. Left alone with his thoughts, even with his heart pounding and his calves throbbing, he’s just going round and round, in dizzying circles that begin and end with Annie.

That’s probably why he doesn’t notice Doug come into the gym until the guy’s on the treadmill next to him, wearing a vaguely envious smile.

Usually, Jeff has a sixth sense for when senior partners are hovering, which is why he’s always ready to impress. At the moment, he is a sweaty, distracted mess who needs a few seconds to remember how to decrease the treadmill’s speed so he can carry on a conversation.
“Trying to make us all look bad, Winger?” Doug says, as he turns on his treadmill.

“Huh?”

Doug leans over slightly, checking out the display on Jeff’s treadmill. “Almost at eight miles there. I can barely make three without flirting with a heart attack. Which is kind of funny, considering my cardiologist is the one who told me I need to exercise more.”

“Maybe he’s just trying to drum up more business.”

Doug sputters out a wheezy laugh. “You always see the big picture, Winger. That’s why we love you around here.” He wipes at his brow, where sweat has already started to form after barely two minutes of running. “Actually, though, I’m glad you in here, making me feel bad about myself. If you’ve got time to run eight miles, the Rutherford case must be going pretty well…”

“Did you have doubts?” Jeff shoots back, feeling almost like his old, cocky self. It’s definitely a good enough impression to fool Doug, anyway.

“No, no. Of course not.” He shakes his head. “We all know how lucky we are to have you, Jeff. I hope you know that. I mean, could you imagine if this case was in Connor’s hands? God knows the guy can bullshit with the best of them, but when it comes to discretion -- you know, having a delicate touch -- he doesn’t have a damn clue.”

“Oh, I don’t know… I’m sure we don’t know about every time he’s had crabs.”

Doug laughs again, stumbling a little as he tries to keep up his pace. “No, probably not. Seriously, though…” He increases his speed slightly, panting to keep up. “We understand what it means that we can trust you with this, Jeff. So I hope you don’t think we’re dangling the partnership over your head, like this is going to make or break you. Because the truth is, you’ve already earned it. Probably a few times over. But it just makes sense to wait until after the Rutherford case is resolved. For appearance’s sake, if nothing else.”

Jeff nods, even though he isn’t sure any of this makes any sense, if anything in his life has made much sense over the past few months. “Of course,” he says. “Sure.”

“Besides,” Doug says. “Even if your partnership did depend on this case, it’s not like you have anything to worry about. I mean, we don’t call you the miracle worker for nothing, right?”

It surprises him, how easy it is to plaster on a self-assured smirk as he slowly decreases his treadmill speed until it slows to a complete stop. “Doug, you don’t need miracles when you’ve got skills like mine.”

That mostly feels like the truth.

-x-

She ducks out of work an hour early on Friday because she feels the need for a long, hot shower and a glass of wine before she faces dinner with Vaughn and Jeff and her loose-cannon temporary roommates.

It might actually take an entire bottle of wine to calm her nerves enough to make it through this ridiculous evening, but she doesn’t think that being drunk is good idea. She came up with the stupid lie about Jeff being her boyfriend when she was stone cold sober; God only knows what she might blurt out if she’s under the influence.
On the way back to the apartment, she thinks about inviting Pierce along. He’s been texting her all week about a feud that he’s having with his neighbor over some sort of invasive vine that’s growing between their properties and asking her what she knows about cherry bombs, so he could probably use a distraction. But she has zero confidence that he’d be able to keep up with the Jeff lie -- or at the very least, not ask too many questions that would probably clue in even the always-trusting Vaughn that something’s amiss -- so she vetoes the idea.

The fewer people involved, the easier it should be.

At least that’s what she tells herself.

She changes into jeans and her bright blue sweater with the tiny silver snowflakes scattered across it to try to get herself in a festive mood. The guys are trying to help things along in that regard too: not only have they fashioned the makeshift menorah they promised out of sawed-off soda cans covered in tin foil, but they’ve strung a few strands of twinkling blue and white lights around the table too, so the place almost seems ready for a party.

And they’re being pretty cooperative in general, a fight about how many pizzas to order aside (Troy insists that there should be one pie for every person there, obviously assuming that the rest of them have the same ravenous appetite that he does, but she knows that she’ll eat three slices at most and Jeff is going to be counting carbs as usual, so she’s finally able to talk him down to four). That’s why, just before she opens the door when Vaughn buzzes up from downstairs at precisely at seven, she turns to Troy and Abed and says, “You’re going to see and hear some things tonight that probably don’t make any sense to you. Just go with it, okay? As a favor to me.”

“What kind of things?” Troy asks, looking genuinely perplexed. “Like riddles or something?”

Abed smiles gleefully. “I smell a delicious trope in the offing!”

She shoots him a fierce glare, but it doesn’t seem to faze him in the slightest, as he gives her a little salute and goes back to picking out music that will help set the mood, which apparently amounts to Neil Diamond’s greatest hits.

Vaughn is beaming as usual when she ushers him inside, carrying a bottle of wine in one hand and a foil-wrapped plate in the other. “Tabby made me bring some of her cookies. They’re all candy canes and reindeers, so they don’t really fit the Hanukkah theme, but…”

“That’s really nice,” Annie says, as he hands them to her. “Tell her I said thanks.”

She busies herself setting the cookies on the kitchen counter and opening the bottle of wine that he’s brought, so she can avoid sitting at the table with Vaughn and the guys. It’s ridiculous because she spent nearly seven years with him, which means she should know how to talk to him, but somehow the idea of making benign, superficial small talk with him is beyond her at the moment.

Maybe it’s just the lie about Jeff that has her feeling so awkward. Maybe she’s just psyching herself out.

As if on cue, the downstairs buzzer chimes again, and Annie practically sprints for the door. “I’ve got it, I’ve got it!” she calls, before anyone can argue with her.

Jeff has changed out of his suit, wearing a dark blue sweater that does amazing things for his eyes. He’s carrying a bottle of something too, but it’s in a bag decorated with dreidels so she can’t see what it is.

“Annie,” he says, drawing her name out in a sappy, dramatic way that nearly makes her roll her
eyes and she knows immediately that he’s going to milk this whole fake boyfriend act for all it’s worth. “I’ve missed you…”

He reaches for her, and it’s almost embarrassing how she easily falls into his arms. But then, it’s not like she has a choice; they have to sell her lie. It has nothing at all to do with the infuriatingly sexy, crooked smile that he shoots her or the warm, woody scent of his cologne or the hint of stubble that’s starting to darken his jaw. They’re just playing a part, convincing Vaughn that she’s moved on so he’ll be encouraged to do the same.

That’s why she studiously ignores the flush that she feels creeping up the back of her neck when he bends and she realizes that he’s about to kiss her. It’s been a few weeks since they made out in the conference room after his birthday celebration, and yet, she remembers every moment like it was just an hour ago -- so she braces herself, knowing that there’s no way it will get as heated with a room full of witnesses around them but still not trusting herself not to react.

Of course, Jeff doesn’t exactly cooperate.

Because it’s not a quick little peck that’s just enough to convince Vaughn that they’re a real, honest-to-goodness couple. His mouth lingers on hers long enough to get her sighing, and he anchors an arm around her waist so he can dip her back a little, making her dizzy because the world seems to spin, and then she’s clutching fistfuls of his sweater at the shoulders, and it doesn’t matter if everyone that she’s ever met is the room -- kissing him is the only thing that matters.

She bites at his lower lip, and he makes a sound that’s maybe a gasp or even a laugh, and she is about two seconds away from hiking her leg up on his hip and climbing him like a tree, until she hears a low whistle in the distance, and Troy mutter, “Whoa…”

And then she and Jeff drift apart, and she feels her cheeks go even hotter as she presses her fingers to her lips and tries to avoid eye contact with the rest of the room.

“Sorry about that,” Jeff says, though he sounds anything but. “Sometimes, I just can’t control myself around this one…” He puts his arm around her again, tucking her against his side. “But who could blame me, right?”

Annie swats at his stomach, a little harder than what could probably be considered playful. “No one wants to hear about that,” she says, and finally works up the courage to look at the others. Troy is wide-eyed, looking vaguely scandalized and intrigued, while Abed smiles knowingly, like he’s figured out the entire thing and already knows how it’s all going to end. Vaughn looks like he’s some strange combination of confused and amused. “Will you guys give us a minute? I just need to talk to Jeff about a work thing really quick.”

She tugs Jeff down the hallway toward the bathroom so they can have a some privacy, and once they’re essentially alone, she pulls out the big guns, her fiercest scowl and a steely-eyed stare. Of course, he’s wearing his most infuriating smirk, but she can see a little flush, high along his cheekbones, and a brightness to his eyes that has to have at least a little something to do with their kiss.

“Stop laying it on so thick,” she hisses. “Make it believable.”

“Finding you irresistible isn’t believable?”

“You know what I mean!”

“I really don’t.” He shrugs, entirely unapologetic. “You want to convince this guy that you’ve
moved on and are blissfully happy, right? I’m just selling that story to the best of my ability.”

“Cut the crap,” she says. “And knock it off, all right?”

He tries for an innocent look, but the corner of his mouth twitches, making his true feelings pretty clear. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“That kiss!”

Jeff smiles slowly, and it’s obvious that he is taking way too much pleasure in all of this. “I guess I’m a method actor,” he tells her. “I need to really feel it if I want it to be believable.”

“You need to feel it? I’ll make you feel something,” she practically growls. “How about my knee in your groin?”

He actually has the nerve to laugh, which only feeds her desire to do the kind of damage that would render him incapable of fathering children.

“Oh, come on, Annie. Don’t act so offended. That’s not believable when you just had your tongue in my mouth too.”

She glares at him, but he just grins back, insufferable ass that he is. For a moment, she seriously wonders if she could punch him without Troy, Abed, and Vaughn knowing.

But then something about his expression shifts. His smile becomes soft and almost — sort of sweet, like there’s some small part of him and what he really feels that he can’t hide behind a clever quip and a know-it-all smirk, and dammit, all she really wants to do is kiss him again, just slam him up against the wall and have her wicked way with him, consequences be damned.

What she actually winds up doing is gazing up at him like an idiot, and it’s only because the pizza delivery guy buzzes up from downstairs that she doesn’t totally embarrass herself. She uses the distraction of having to let him up to avoid eye contact with Jeff, who insists on paying for the pizzas (and cheesy bread and volcano chicken wings and the brownie chocolate chip cookie molten lava cake thing that Troy claimed were all absolutely essential for a real party-like feel) despite her protests, and tries to tell herself that everything is under control.

But as she watches him slip the delivery guy an exorbitant tip -- close to 40%, she estimates -- she can’t help thinking about how he’s giving up his Friday night to play fake boyfriend for her ex, doesn’t seem to mind spending more time with her wacky (albeit completely endearing) interim roommates, and kisses her like no one ever has before. She doesn’t know how to make sense out of any of it.

“Hey, Jeff,” Troy calls from the other room. “Check out the menorah we made! It’s pretty freaking cool if I do say so myself …”

Jeff dutifully heads back into the apartment, weighed down by all the food that he’s carrying -- though he takes a moment to shoot her the smallest, gentlest smile that somehow gets her heart jackhammering in her chest in the same way that his kiss did earlier.

She is pretty sure that she isn’t in control of anything at the moment.

Of course, it only gets worse when they’re all seated semi-awkwardly around the table, with Jeff sliding his chair even closer to hers and Vaughn smiling at the two of them from the other side of the menorah like this is exactly how he expected to spend his Friday night.
“So… how exactly did the two of you meet?” he asks. “I mean, I know it was at the firm, but what were the circumstances?”

“It’s a funny story, actually,” Jeff says, setting down his wineglass and draping an arm over the back of Annie’s chair. “The night before she--”

“It’s not that funny,” she insists, stomping on his foot beneath the table. “He picked me to work on his case and--”

“Because her resume was beyond impressive, and I only work with the best. And you know--”

“That’s really it.”

“She is pretty much the definition of irresistible,” Jeff finishes. He grins at her, like he can’t quite help himself. “I mean, it’s not every woman who just starts throwing out orders like she owns the place her first day on the job.”

She gapes at him. “I didn’t do that! I was just making sure that we understood each other. Because we’d … you know…”

She catches herself before she admits the truth, though Jeff smirks the entire time because he knows how close she is, and once again, she seriously wants to smack him. But that would ruin the whole charade, so she forces a smile and shrugs.

“Because I knew how badly you needed my help on the case,” she finishes, looking over at Vaughn. “He was really in way over his head, so, you know, I felt bad for him.”

Jeff laughs, sounding more amused than annoyed, and Vaughn nods knowingly.

“Annie is really good like that,” he says. “Always helping people out, lending a hand…”

Jeff smiles. “Absolutely. She’s a real humanitarian.”

“You are?” Troy looks at her accusingly. “But I saw you eat a turkey sandwich the other day. Isn’t turkey meat? I don’t think--”

“Abed,” Annie says. “Why don’t you tell Vaughn about the game you guys are working on? I bet he’d love to hear about that…”

It’s the coward’s way out, for sure, because that’s all it takes for Abed and Troy to embark on a nearly hour-long explanation of the game and its complicated, intricate storylines. They act most of it out too, using different voices and the kitchen dish towels, a throw rug from the living room, and Annie’s scarf as various costumes.

Annie leans back in her chair, polishing off an entire bottle of wine by herself and studiously ignoring the brush of Jeff’s fingertips against her arm every time he laughs.

-x-

When Jeff strolls back to his office after lunch on Monday, he is so distracted that he doesn’t notice Neil sitting across from Claire’s desk until he nearly trips over the guy.

At this point, it’s getting beyond ridiculous, how every train of thought that chugs through his head seems to circle back to Annie, but he can’t figure out a way to derail it.

Since Friday night, he’s thought of nothing but what it felt like to kiss her again. It didn’t matter
that it was all under the guise of fooling her ex; it had felt as good and right as anything ever has.

Which means he’s been trying to figure out a way to make it happen again, as soon as is humanly possible.

He would’ve kissed her again this morning, when they met over coffee at Shirley’s, if he hadn’t thought that it would earn him a slap across the face, or a kick to an even more sensitive part of his anatomy.

It’s not that he thinks Annie doesn’t want to kiss him again; it’s that she has this hangup about keeping things professional while they’re working on the case, and he can’t really see any way around it at the moment, though not for lack of persistent trying.

So when he practically stumbles over Neil on his way back to his office, he figures that his preoccupation with Annie has led him to forget a meeting with the paralegal, even if he can’t think of a single reason why he’d need to talk to Neil. Claire is at lunch herself, so she isn’t there to save him either.

“Neil,” he says, with a smile. “Were we supposed to have a meeting?”

Neil stands, looking a little bashful. “Ah, no, Jeff. I’m sorry… I know you’re probably busy, but I just wanted to talk to you about something. I need a little advice.”

Jeff nods, ushering him into the office. “Sure, buddy. No problem. One of the perks of working here is free legal advice.”

“Oh, no,” Neil says, sitting down on the couch. “It’s not… it’s not really a legal matter.”

Jeff smiles. “Well, now you’ve got me really curious. What do you need help with then?”

It’s pretty obvious that the kid is nervous or embarrassed, like he doesn’t really want to be sitting here talking to Jeff but he’s run out of other options. He lets out a deep, weary breath, lifting his shoulders almost helplessly. “I’ve worked here a while,” he says. “So I’ve heard plenty of stories about you…”

“I hope you know you can’t believe most of the crap you hear around here. Especially if that douche Connor is the one who--”

“No, it’s nothing bad,” Neil insists. “It’s just … you know, I get the impression that you… that it’s not hard for you to… that you know, you do pretty well with women.”

If Neil had come to have this conversation just a few months ago, Jeff is pretty sure that he would have agreed without hesitation. Now, while he manages to nod briskly, likes there is any doubt about the fact, it takes him a solid five seconds or so before he can make himself do it.

Damn Annie. She’s messed with his head in a major way.

“I do okay,” he says, with a smirk, trying to give the impression that he’s being modest, that he’s some kind of expert, that he didn’t spend all weekend mooning over a woman like some pitiful, lovesick teenager.

Neil nods back, like that’s exactly what he expected to hear. “Well, see, I met someone… a woman. And she’s just… she’s really great. I mean, she’s smart and she’s funny and she’s got this really great smile that just makes me …” He shakes his head, looking down at his lap. “And I just feel like we’ve really connected, you know?”
“Well, that all sounds good. So what’s the problem?”

“She works here,” Neil says. “And she’s technically a little bit higher up the firm food chain than I am.”

Jeff smiles. “Neil, you’re not going to lose your job if you start--”

“No, it’s not that. I guess… it’s just … we only really talk here at work or at firm events and I just don’t know how to sort of take things to the next level without it being really weird. I mean, I don’t want to make her uncomfortable or anything. I don’t want her to think that I’m always trying to hook up with people around here or anything like that. And I figured that, you know, you’ve been here a while so you’ve probably dated someone you work with, so I thought you would know how I should handle it.”

Jeff’s first instinct is to laugh, because everything about this conversation is absurd, but that would probably send the wrong message to Neil, make the poor guy feel self-conscious. But he also knows that his example definitely isn’t the best one to follow, considering that he’s always had a policy of doing what felt good in the moment, consequences be damned.

Neil is way too thoughtful for that, way too kind-hearted -- basically everything that Jeff isn’t.

“Well,” he says, trying to project every bit of the confidence that he doesn’t feel. “I think the best thing to do is to be honest with her.” He seriously wonders how he doesn’t choke as he spits the words out, because he can count on one hand the times that he’s been really and truly honest with a woman about how he feels. “You know, just tell her how you feel and then when she tells you how she feels, you accept it, good or bad.”

Neil frowns. “So just open myself up to the possibility of all that rejection? Invite her to punch me in the gut?”

“That’s a pretty pessimistic way of thinking. You said you guys have really connected. Who’s to say she doesn’t feel exactly the same way about you?”

“Because she’s totally amazing,” Neil says. “And probably knows she could do a hell of a lot better than me.”

Jeff looks away, studying the carpet beneath his feet. “Neil, that’s not…”

He isn’t entirely sure what he’s going to say, how to convince anyone who feels less than worthy that it isn’t true, but he catches a break because there’s a knock on his open office door then, distracting both him and Neil.

Of course, it’s Vaughn who’s standing there in the doorway, wearing the same worn jacket and ugly rainbow scarf that he had on when they first met, so Jeff isn’t really sure that he’s dodged the right bullet.

“Hey, hi, hello,” Vaughn says, smiling a little sheepishly. “Sorry, man. Didn’t mean to interrupt, but I was hoping I could talk to you for a second.”

Jeff’s momentarily confused, looking back and forth between Neil and Vaughn like he can’t quite figure out how they both wound up in his office like this, how either of them could think he has any of the answers that they’re looking for.

Neil jerks to his feet, waving his hand “That’s okay. We’re done here anyway.” He smiles tightly at Jeff. “Thanks for the help.”
Jeff is pretty sure that he doesn’t deserve any kind of gratitude, and he watches Neil brush past Vaughn before disappearing into the hallway. It is bizarre to find himself suddenly alone with Annie’s ex, because of all the things that he might have imagined for this afternoon, nothing even close to this made the list. He curses Claire for taking the hour-long lunch break that she so richly deserves, because at least if she’d been behind her desk, he would’ve had some warning.

“You’re Annie’s boyfriend, right?”

“Uh… yeah. But I mean, I don’t know how you could be so sure,” Vaughn says quickly, shifting to his right so that he can comfortably lean on the wall. “I mean, I know I’m Annie’s boyfriend, but… you know… I don’t know if she’s even… Um…”

Jeff stares at him blankly, trying to figure out exactly what is wrong with this picture. There is no way that this is happening.

“I’m sorry,” Vaughn says finally. “I just… I mean, I know that this is all so sudden and… you know… I just… I don’t know.”

“Annie’s office is actually downstairs,” Jeff says. “I can take you down if--”

“No,” Vaughn declares, as he steps further into the room and takes the spot on the sofa that Neil just vacated. “I came to see you actually. I mean, I’m gonna go talk to Annie after this, but I wanted to talk to you first.”

Jeff leans back in his chair, crossing one leg over the other, in an effort to appear as calm and collected as he can. Vaughn looks back at him blankly for a long moment, but he’s content to wait the guy out. Vaughn’s the one who wants to talk; he should do all the heavy lifting.

Besides, it’s easier to pretend to be Annie’s boyfriend when she’s around to kiss and gaze at and make blush. He doesn’t know what to do when he’s on his own.

“I’m glad I got to meet you, man,” Vaughn says finally. “Annie’s really important to me. You know, even if we’re not together anymore. So I want to know the people who are important to her too.”

Jeff nods. “Sure. I get that.”

“And you know,” Vaughn continues. “I’m not one of those guys who wants to make trouble for his ex-girlfriend. I want her to be happy. That’s all.”

Jeff isn’t able to hide his frown, feeling a flare of annoyance that he doesn’t quite understand. “That makes two of us then.”

“Good, good. That’s really good to hear. Because this probably doesn’t really need to be said then, but I just … I guess I need to say it for myself. To know I did it.” Vaughn huffs out a nervous laugh. “Just … you know, watch out for her, okay?”

It’s more than annoyance that Jeff feels now -- it’s genuine offense on Annie’s behalf -- and he really wishes that she were here right now to put this guy in his place.

“Annie can take care of herself,” he says coolly.

Vaughn nods vigorously. “Oh, yeah, sure. Of course she can.” He shrugs. “But she’s almost too good at it. She gets total tunnel vision and puts all this pressure on herself and doesn’t want to ask anyone for help. Try not to let her do that.”

There is a big part of Jeff that seriously can’t imagine anyone keeping Annie Edison from doing whatever she is determined to do. She is like some unstoppable force of nature -- when she gets going in a certain direction, it’s best to stay out of her way if you still want to be standing in the end.

But he nods back, because he knows that Vaughn is coming from a true and genuine place, that he really does just want Annie to be happy, even if that means without him. And for one brief, dizzying moment, Jeff finds himself wishing that he could be that kind of guy -- someone more like Vaughn, like Neil -- someone who puts another person’s feelings ahead of his own because they somehow matter more.
“I’ll try to do that,” he tells Vaughn, unable to meet the other man’s eyes.

“Good. That’s real good.” Vaughn stands, and Jeff finds himself doing the same. “Oh, I almost forgot…” Vaughn reaches into the inner pocket of his jacket and pulls out a small black object. “Here…”

He passes the item, which turns out to be a drawstring bag, to Jeff, who takes it in confusion. He’s not entirely sure why he opens it and pulls out the contents, but everything about Vaughn’s expression tells him that’s what he’s supposed to do. He looks at the bracelet in his hand, at the light brown leather cuff with an aluminum plate that’s been stamped with a “J,” and tries to figure what he’s supposed to do with it.

“Is this for Annie? Do you want me to--”

“No,” Vaughn says. “I made it for you. It’s kind of what I do.” He pushes back the cuff of his jacket to show off the jumble of beaded and corded bracelets on his own wrist.

“You really didn’t have to do that,” Jeff tells him, and it’s only partly because he knows that he’ll never wear anything like this. It’s just all too weird and uncomfortable. It would be bad enough if he was actually dating Annie, but he’s not -- he’s just a guy who slept with her once and has been not-so-subtly plotting to find a way to make that happen again for months -- and that makes the strange, tight feeling in his gut seem more and more like guilt.


It’s pretty easy to picture: this guy making his aimless way across the country, passing out beaded bracelets and necklaces to everyone that he meets and never expecting anything in return. He can’t seem to help himself.

Jeff shakes his hand, wondering why any of this matters to him at all.

-x-

When Vaughn texts on Monday afternoon and asks if she’ll meet him in front of the office, she isn’t surprised.

Since Friday night, she’s been waiting for him to get in touch, even if she couldn’t possibly imagine what he’d say.

All things considered, she thinks that she and Jeff sold the whole dating thing pretty well. Vaughn didn’t seem have a single doubt about what was going on between them before he left the guys’ apartment. More importantly, he appeared to accept of the whole thing, like he’d finally realized that things between the two of them were really and truly over.

She’s already taken a lunch break, so she feels guilty for leaving her desk again, but it’s not like she hasn’t been working her butt off or that Jeff will even be checking up on her. Over the weekend, she tried to decide if she should say something to him about Friday night -- not to reprimand him or anything, because she knows that while he may have taken a little advantage of the situation, she was just as into the whole thing as he was -- but just to check in and make sure that things aren’t going to become weird between them again.

They both have a habit of freaking out whenever anything remotely intimate happens between them (and she should probably take the time to analyze the why of all that, but right now, she feels like her plate is more than full), and she wants to avoid going back down that road with him if it’s at all possible.
This morning, when they had coffee together, didn’t seem like the right time. And then she got caught up in work, and Vicki wanted to catch up over lunch, and now Vaughn is here, and it seems like the business with Jeff will have to wait.

When she gets downstairs, Vaughn is leaning against the building, just beside the revolving door. She has a sudden, vivid memory of him waiting for her to get out of a class, years ago at Greendale, because he’s wearing the same serene, at-ease expression that makes it clear that he never doubts his place in the world.

And when he spots her, he breaks into the same bright smile that used to make twenty-year-old Annie’s knees weak.

“Sorry to bug you,” he says. “I know you’ve got a lot of work to do and probably don’t—”

“It’s fine,” she assures him, stuffing her hands into her coat pockets. “What’s up?”

“I’m leaving… and I just wanted to make sure I got to say goodbye before I went.”

“What? Where are you going?”

“Vegas,” he tells her, which is just about the last thing that she’s expecting because Las Vegas doesn’t seem like his kind of town at all. “Remember Doug and Candace who ran that bead store up in San Francisco? They’re opening a new place in Vegas and they want me to come down and check it out. And I haven’t made it to Nevada yet, so the timing works out.”

Annie nods. “What about Tabitha? I thought she wanted you to stick around.”

“Yeah, well, she’ll get over it. And I promised I’d come back through before I head out east so …” He shrugs. “I’m glad I got to see you, though. I’m glad I got to meet Jeff. I’m glad I get to leave knowing that you’re so happy.”

She lowers her head, because the sincerity that she can see in his eyes is a little too much to take. She is happy, even if whatever it is she has going on with Jeff isn’t quite as simple as they pretended it was, even if she’s still sleeping on Troy and Abed’s futon, even if she still hasn’t quite gotten over seeing her father again for the first time in years, and it feels wrong and selfish to admit that she feels fulfilled now in a way that she never would have with Vaughn.

“I’m glad we could catch up too,” she finally manages.

“Maybe we’ll do it again when I pass through the next time,” he says. “If you’ve got the time.”

She forces herself to look up at him, and he is still smiling, as bright as always. “Sure.”

He hugs her to him, patting her back a couple of times -- and then just before he walks off, he presses a small black pouch into her hand without a word.

It’s not until she is alone in the elevator on the way back upstairs that she opens it, though she already knows that there is a piece of his jewelry inside. The bracelet’s leather band is a little more rugged than the stuff he used to make for her, but there’s a delicate crescent moon and a daisy stamped on either side of the “A” on its aluminum bar that makes her smile.

She doesn’t think that she’ll be able to concentrate on work at the moment, so she rides the elevator all the way up to the fourth floor and heads toward Jeff’s office. He is at his desk, feet lazily propped up on the edge as he scrolls through something on his phone, and she thinks that’s the image of him that will most readily come to mind years from now whenever she thinks of him.
He chuckles at something then, all low and warm, and her knees don’t get weak exactly, but she feels something inside her fly free.

“Hey,” she says, stepping inside the office.

She’s caught him by surprise because he almost drops his phone as his feet fall from the desk. “Oh, hey. Didn’t see you there.” He watches carefully as she sinks down onto his couch and exhales wearily. “Everything okay?” he asks.

She nods slowly. “Vaughn just left.”

Jeff is silent for a moment, pursing his lips as he studies her. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing? Your expression’s kind of hard to read.”

“Good,” she answers without hesitation, which makes her feel guilty all over again. She sighs, shaking her head. “Am I an awful person?”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because he told me he was leaving … and the only thing I really felt was relief.”

It is strangely liberating to admit it all out loud, especially because she doesn’t have to worry about Jeff judging her. He is silent as he stands and heads for the sofa, though his head is tilted thoughtfully. When he sprawls out next to her, she has to resist the urge to tuck herself into his side, lay her head against his warm shoulder and close her eyes.

“That doesn’t make you awful,” he says finally. “It makes you human.”

She wants to believe him, but it’s so difficult when everything in her is so sure that she is all twisted up and wrong inside.

“I can’t help thinking that I abandoned him,” she whispers. “And I know what that feels like, so I just don’t … I mean, he picked up and moved his whole life to California for me. Because it was what I needed, wanted really, and I was scared to do it all alone, to start all over again where I didn’t know anybody. He came along like a safety blanket. And now I’m older and I come back here where it’s all sort of familiar and I just get rid of him because he outlived his usefulness to me? How is that anything but awful?”

Jeff shakes his head. “That’s not what you did, Annie,” he insists. “You just weren’t happy anymore. You don’t need any more reason than that to walk away.”

She turns her head against the cushion to look at him, at his soft, somber eyes. “Then why do I feel so guilty?”

“You’re not responsible for anyone else’s feelings. You don’t have to--”

“I’m not?” she asks. “I don’t think that’s true. I mean, don’t we owe something to the people who we care about? We can’t go around like we live in some kind of vacuum where the things we do don’t affect anyone else.”

Jeff leans back, stretching his long legs out in front of him, and suddenly, she can’t help wondering how many hearts he’s broken, how many people he’s left in the dust for something better without so much as a second thought.

“When we don’t,” he says. “This is what happens.” He gestures toward her and what she knows
must be her pretty miserable expression. “You weren’t happy anymore, Annie, and maybe Vaughn hadn’t made it there just yet, but he would’ve eventually. You can’t hang in there just to spare someone’s feelings until they catch up to you. You can feel sad about it, but you shouldn’t feel guilty. The thing you guys had, it ran its course. Like all relationships do.”

His voice is soft and serious, which tells her that he’s not trying to act jaded or cynical to appear cool, that this is honestly what he believes, and she looks at him in surprise, sad for him and for her, because as much as she wants to protest, to tell him that sometimes people really do love one another forever, she can’t help thinking that he is right. Her parents divorced and then turned their backs on her as easily as other people throw away the trash, and now she’s done the same to Vaughn.

Maybe nothing ever really lasts.

She forces a tight smile, and nudges her shoulder against his. “Thanks for being my fake boyfriend.”

He smiles, too, but his is soft and warm. “No problem. Just know that the next time I need a date for a family wedding, you’re getting the call.”

“That seems fair.”

He nods slowly, still grinning. “Oh,” he says, reaching into his jacket pocket. “Vaughn made me a bracelet.” He tugs out the brown strap, holding it out so she can see, and she laughs.

“He made me one too,” she tells him, pulling hers out of her pocket to hold it beside his. They are identical, the same brown leather and aluminum plate, though with their respective initials and the added moon and flower artwork on hers. “I guess he thought we’d want a matching set.”

Jeff nods again, looking amused, but he doesn’t make any snide comments about how he’d never be caught dead wearing something like this or how ridiculous it is that Vaughn wastes his time making this kind of crap. He just taps his bracelet against the inside of her wrist, right where her pulse flutters, and just like that, she finally gives in, resting her head against his arm. He is a still for a long moment before she feels him relax, sink down just bit so she can feel his warm breath across her forehead.

It’s a long time before either of them moves.
Chapter Notes

I'm just as tired of starting every chapter with an apology note for taking so long to update as you probably are of reading them. But if it makes anyone feel better, I've made a resolution to be more productive fic-wise in 2017 so I'm determined to update more regularly. So far, I'm off to a good start too -- I'm already a few thousand words into the next chapter. Hopefully, that means it won't take another 6 months for me to update. ;)

Thank you to everyone who is still reading along and interested in this story. It means the world to me.

As does the wonderful beta support that Bethany continue to provide. She is so generous with her time and encouragement, and I would have likely given up a while ago if I didn't have her for back-up. <3

Jeff isn’t entirely sure how his mother pulls it off, but in the end, she somehow gets him to agree to spend Christmas with her.

It probably has something to do with the relentless emails, how she is willing to bend over backwards to accommodate what she assumes is his very busy schedule, or the plaintive sound of her voice when she finally gets him on the phone and laments that they haven’t celebrated a Christmas together in five years.

Of course, there’s also the fact that as he’s listening to his mother practically beg him to come and drink eggnog with her, he finds himself thinking of Annie, whose parents haven’t made an effort to spend any time with her in years, and there’s suddenly no way to turn his mother down.

So he agrees to go down to Colorado Springs for a late lunch/early dinner on Christmas day -- she’s promised the lasagna with meat sauce he loves, just like she always used to make when he was a kid -- and open presents in front of a crackling fire like something out of a Norman Rockwell painting. He’s already ordered her a Fitbit because she mentioned that her doctor said more walking might help with her arthritis, which he knows that she’ll happily accept; but he’s also working with a travel agent to arrange tickets for a cruise -- two, because he knows that she hates traveling alone and he figures that she can take one of her friends from her retirement community -- which he knows that she’ll refuse because she’ll think that they’re too extravagant.

He’s already figured out a surefire way to make her accept them, though: as soon as she hears that they’re non-refundable, she’ll be horrified at the thought of his money going to waste and begrudgingly agree to take the trip.

Before he can send a follow-up email to the travel agent, his cell phone rings. The number that comes up isn’t stored in his phone but seems vaguely familiar, so he finds himself answering it out of curiosity.

“Jeff?” a loud, somewhat confused-sounding voice says, inanely, right after he answers with his name. “It’s Troy.” There’s an almost dramatic pause, which probably feels longer than it actually
is. “Troy Barnes,” the voice finally offers. “You know, the guy who Annie’s--”

“I know who you are, Troy,” Jeff manages patiently. “What can I do for you?”

“Well, see, really, it’s what you can do for Annie.”

Immediately, the kid’s got Jeff reeled in, without any kind of hard sell. Annie isn’t really the kind of person who’s comfortable asking for help, so there’s something strangely satisfying about being able to lend her a hand without her even asking.

Not that Jeff’s about to let Troy know that.

“Oh, yeah?” he says, in the most cool, disinterested tone that he’s got in his arsenal.

“Yes, because her birthday’s Monday, and Abed and I are throwing her a surprise party this weekend,” Troy explains. “She always used to want one back in the day, but she was expecting it then so we could never pull it off. This year, she hasn’t mentioned her birthday once so we’re totally going to catch her off-guard. Like we might even get her to pee her pants, she’ll be so surprised!”

Jeff is able to ignore that bit of imagery because he’s too busy remembering that Annie did mention her birthday was in December, back in conference room F when they celebrated his birthday. That inevitably conjures up memories of the kiss that they shared, and he is suddenly distracted, shifting restlessly in his chair, remembering how it wasn’t really a single kiss so much as a series of kisses, each one somehow hotter and more intense than the last, that all left him feeling light-headed and feverish, like everything around him was somehow sharper and brighter than it had ever been before, and that sensory overload had been so complete that it’s all crystallized in his mind as a singular kissing experience that he is pretty sure can never be replicated.

“And?” he demands, forcing his thoughts back to the present conversation.

“Well, you’re invited, obviously, but we also kinda need your help.”

“My help?” Jeff repeats stupidly, wondering if Troy and Abed honestly think that he’s the kind of guy who’d go to the party supply store to pick out balloons or offer up helpful suggestions on cake fillings and frostings.

“Me and Abed figure you’re the perfect guy to get her to the party.”

“For what reason?”

“Why? Where are you having it?”

“At our apartment.”

Jeff laughs. “Can’t you just call her home then? I’m pretty sure that’d work.”

“But she’s always working late these days,” Troy points out. “With you.”

He delivers the last bit almost accusingly, like Jeff’s somehow conspiring to keep Annie locked away in a tower at Hamish, Hamish, Hamlin, & Hawthorne. It’s true that he relies on her big time, maybe even counts on her to be there when he needs her, but he’s fairly certain that Annie would be working around the clock even if he wasn’t in the picture. She expects so much of herself, and is unwilling to compromise even a little.

“And I mean, she’s not exactly gonna be expecting you to throw her a party, right?” Troy continues. “So it’s the perfect cover.”
There is a certain logic to Troy’s thinking, and it’s weird because something about how much
sense it makes leaves Jeff feeling almost rattled, like it’s a deeply personal failing to be the kind of
guy that Annie would never expect to acknowledge her birthday. She found a way to celebrate his
birthday even though he hadn’t told her when it was, so escorting her to a party that he won’t have
spent a single second planning seems like a pretty pathetic way to return the favor.

But he finds himself nodding anyway, even though Troy can’t see him. “I’ll get her to the party,”
he agrees.

“We’re also gonna need some help with the invites,” Troy says. “We don’t really know who she’d
want to come from work, so we thought you could handle that too.”

“She’s pretty close with Vicki, the associate who shares her office, and there are a couple of
paralegals that I know she---”

“Cool. So invite them? You know, just give ‘em our address and tell ‘em to be here by 8-ish. Then
you can bring Annie by around 8:30…”

Jeff sighs, starting to realize exactly what a hassle this is all going to be -- because seriously, what
reason can he manufacture to force Annie back to her apartment if she doesn’t want to go? He’s
going to need to come up with a really good story -- but he nods inanely once more. “Fine.”

“Oh, and you should probably also invite that old dude you’re friends with,” Troy says. “You
know, the one who brought all the pecan pie to Thanksgiving?”

“Pierce,” Jeff grits out, and the mention of that name is enough to get a headache brewing right
between his eyes. “He and Annie aren’t really friends, though. He’s just --”

“Annie likes him,” Troy insists.

“No. She really doesn’t. She feels sorry for him. There’s a difference.”

“She’d want us to invite him. I’ve known her forever, man, I know how she is. Trust me.”

“Fine,” Jeff mutters, because deep down, he is pretty sure that Troy is right. Annie probably will
want Pierce at her party because she’s too kind-hearted for her own good.

“And you know…” Troy pauses, and it’s obvious that he’s trying his best to sound breezy and
casual despite the fact that his voice has risen half an octave. “You should probably invite your
friend Britta, too.”

Jeff smirks. “You think?”

Troy huffs out a nervous laugh. “Well, she and Annie have kinda become friends, right?”

“I guess. Have you and Britta become friends, Troy?”

“It’s not a big deal,” Troy declares, though it obviously doesn’t feel that way for him. “At
Thanksgiving, she mentioned she needed some help picking out video games for her nephew’s
Christmas present so I gave her my number… and we’ve been texting a little. You know, like every
few days or whatever.”

“Oh, that’s--”

“But I mean, it’s not a big deal,” Troy repeats. He pauses again, even longer this time, and for a
moment, Jeff thinks that the kid’s hung up on him. “Right?” he asks suddenly. “That’s not a big
deal, is it?”

“You’d know better than me,” Jeff says, not unkindly.

“But you and Britta used to hook up, right? I’m pretty sure Annie mentioned that … so you … you
know her pretty well and stuff?”

Jeff laughs, because all of this is ridiculous and maybe a little uncomfortable and he isn’t quite sure
what’s happened to his life over the past few months that he finds himself involved in so many
random people’s lives. “You want my advice about Britta?” he says. “Get ready to listen to lots of
long, rambling rants about stuff you don’t care about and she doesn’t really understand. I’m pretty
sure she has a pathological need to erupt in righteous indignation over something every few hours
or she’ll spontaneously combust.”

Troy is quiet for a long minute, and Jeff wonders again if he’s lost the kid. “So what? She’s got
like some medical condition?”

“No, that’s not what I--”

“I don’t really care if she does,” Troy says. “I mean, I had to get tubes in my ears when I was a kid
because I was always getting ear infections, so I totally know what it’s like.”

Jeff isn’t exactly the kind of guy who wants to get involved in other people’s romantic drama, but
he’s starting to wonder if he needs to talk to Britta about Troy. He’s a nice kid, definitely not one of
the usual assholes that she spends time with (and Jeff isn’t under any illusions; he knows that he
could probably be the poster boy for that group), and there are probably more than a few scenarios
where he could get hurt here.

Especially if Britta’s not serious about the whole thing.

But damn, he really doesn’t want to deal with this headache. He’s got his own whole romantic
situation to figure out after all.

“Hey, your turn,” Jeff says, hoping to change the subject. “Give me some advice about Annie?”

“Huh?”

“Any ideas on what she might like for her birthday?”

He feels absolutely ridiculous asking, but helping get her to the party alone doesn’t feel like
enough to celebrate her birthday. He should probably get her something, something that lets her
know that he cares -- but not too much, not enough to make either of them uncomfortable.

And he has no clue what that might be.

“Me and Abed usually go the homemade route,” Troy says. “One year, we staged an entire musical
based on her life story… and another year, we invented a board game where Annie was the answer
to every question and you had to--”

“I’m not really a homemade-gift kind of guy,” Jeff tells him.

“Oh, well, I don’t know then. Maybe a Staples gift card? She really likes buying new pens… and
planners. And those little tape-y tab thingies to mark important pages...”
Annie definitely wouldn’t get the wrong idea if Jeff handed over a gift card for an office supply store — or at least, not the kind of wrong idea that makes her think that he’s like some eighth-grader with a crush. Going the Staples route will give her the kind of wrong idea that tells her that, in the hierarchy of people in his life, she places somewhere between his mail carrier and Libby who cuts his hair.

Neither is accurate, but he isn’t entirely sure which one he’d rather have her leaning towards.

“She also really love those bath bomb things that you throw in the tub and they turn the water colors,” Troy adds. “The one that smells like cookies is her favorite, I think.”

Jeff sighs. “Thanks, Troy. You’ve been really helpful.”

“Anytime, man,” he says, and Jeff doesn’t detect even a trace of sarcasm.

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Vaughn texts her a picture of himself next to the Welcome to Vegas sign, waving at the camera with a calm smile, and while her first thought is how out of place he looks amidst all the neon and glitz, she quickly realizes that the photo is meant to be a real and true goodbye.

They may see each other again someday, but all of the business between them is finished for good.

That is probably part of the reason why she’s been feeling more optimistic over the past couple of days. She doesn’t have to worry about Vaughn anymore, she’s mostly put the awkward reunion with her father behind her, they have enough information to track down Deborah Wahlstrom sooner rather than later (even if they’re relying on that old fool Leonard to do the job), and she’ll turn 26 years old in less than a week, which signifies a brand new year in her life, a fresh start where maybe everything will finally come together.

She’s been hard at work all morning, and Vicki is off on some mission or other for the partner who’s playing slavedriver for her this week, so she has the office all to herself, making it the perfect time to jot down a list of her goals for the upcoming year. She pulls out a pen, flips to a clean page in her legal pad, and starts scribbling.

*Win the Rutherford case, impress all the senior partners, make a name for myself at Hamish, Hamish, Hamlin, & Hawthorne, maybe write up an article on it for one of the law journals*

*Find an apartment*

*Start taking karate classes again*

*Try to find time for a vacation… Spain? Australia? Japan?*

*Figure the Jeff thing out*

She underlines the last item three times, scratching her pen across the paper with grim determination. It certainly isn’t the most pressing item on the list, but it’s definitely the most bewildering because it’s the one that she feels like she has the least control over.

Does she just want some casual thing, where they sleep together whenever the mood strikes and stay out of each other’s lives the rest of the time? Does she want something more serious where they’re actually a part of each other’s lives and try to plan some vague future together? Does she want something in between, where they take things super slow and don’t think too far ahead? Even if she manages to figure out what she wants, there’s no guarantee that Jeff will want the same thing.
She draws one more line under the item, pressing the pen against the pad with feeling.

“What did that poor piece of paper ever do to you?”

She jerks her head up, feeling like she was caught doing something shameful, and finds Jeff leaning against the door jamb with a wry smile. She slides her hand over the list just in case he steps any closer, and tries for an unconcerned shrug. “Oh, um, I was just…” She drops the pen to her desk. “My pen ran out of ink. I was just trying to…” She waves her hand in a meaningless circle, and Jeff does indeed step into her office, eyeing the chair in front of her desk. As casually as she can manage, she slides the pad from her desk, opens a drawer, and shoves it inside, as far from his prying eyes as she can get it.

“Get it going?” he finishes for her. “So you’re into pens then? You need new ones?”

She blinks at him in confusion, because it’s a bizarre question and he’s not exactly the kind of person who indulges in small talk about office supplies. “Huh?”

He sinks into the chair, smoothing his tie needlessly. “Oh, you know, nothing… it’s just… who even writes anything by hand these days? And I mean, you were born in the nineties. I didn’t even know you knew what a pen was. You know, with computers and all the, uh, texting and stuff…”

“What’s wrong with you?” she asks. “You’re acting weird.”

He shifts again, straightening his jacket this time. “Nothing’s wrong. I’m fine. I mean, I’m not the one assaulting an innocent piece of paper.”

She rolls her eyes. “I was making a list actually. Of all the things I could have done in the time it’s taking Leonard to find Deborah Wahlstrom. So far, I’ve got paint a replica of the Sistine Chapel ceiling over my desk, learn Arabic, earn my private investigator license and find Deborah myself… and Jimmy Hoffa next, with time to spare.”

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Jeff grins. “You would make a good private detective.”

Annie smiles back, feeling strangely pleased. “So what brings you down here? You usually don’t like associating with the riffraff on the second floor.”

“I was just a little bored… thought I’d take a walk. And I figured you were probably bored too, seeing as how there’s not much work for you to obsess over right now.”

“I went over the depositions for the seventy-third time this morning,” she admitted. “Without finding anything new. But I hate just sitting around, doing nothing.”

“That’s what happens when you get done in your first week what it takes other associates a month to do.”

She smiles again, her cheeks feeling a little warm. Jeff may be the smoothest talker that she knows, but when he pays her a compliment that he really means, she can always tell -- there’s something like wonder in his voice, as if he can’t believe that someone like her really exists. Part of her loves it, but another part of her doesn’t quite know what to do with it. So she just lowers her head, fiddling with her pen.

“So… do you have any plans for Christmas?” she asks, figuring a change of subject is in order. “Dinner at some stupidly expensive restaurant? An extravagant ski trip where you sip champagne while gliding down the slopes?”
“Actually,” he says, leaning back in his chair. “It’s been a few years since I celebrated with my mother, so I’m going to Colorado Springs for the day.”

Her natural instinct is to want to know more, why it’s been a few years since he celebrated with his mother, if it has something to do with his father deserting them, if there’s some painful childhood memory associated with the holiday, but she knows that it’s not her place to poke around in the traumatic details of his past.

She knows what it means that he’s shared anything at all with her, considering that he’s harder to get to open up than Fort Knox.

“What do you normally do for Christmas?” she finds herself asking instead.

“I don’t know. Order Chinese, zone out on the couch with a glass of scotch and a movie…”

She smiles. “So, a Jewish Christmas?”

Jeff laughs, shaking his head. “Well, I don’t like to perpetuate stereotypes, but if you say so…”

“When I was a kid, I thought we were so much luckier… you know, having eight days to celebrate instead of only one.” She sighs. “But as an adult, I’m not so sure. Trying to make eight days as happy and festive and joyful as possible is a lot of work. Throwing it all into one day seems much more doable.”

“You get presents either way,” Jeff points out.

“Yeah, but it’s just a lot of pressure. I don’t like it.”

“You shouldn’t feel any pressure to celebrate a holiday in a certain way,” he says. “I mean, if it has some religious or spiritual or cultural significance to you, then, sure, go ahead and celebrate the hell out of it. But you shouldn’t feel like you have to. If you want to sit around and binge watch ‘Stranger Things’ instead of lighting the menorah or singing carols, you shouldn’t feel bad about it.”

She nods slowly, mainly because she agrees but also because she can tell that what he’s saying really means something to him, like it’s a lesson that he’s finally learned. “I guess you could say the same things about birthdays,” she says absently, and in that moment, she thinks that spending her birthday curled up on Abed and Troy’s futon with a pint of mint chocolate chip and a good book sounds pretty heavenly, even if a little bit mundane.

Jeff sits up a little straighter in his chair. “You don’t like celebrating your birthday?”

“No, I do. But I feel like there’s a lot of pressure to it, too. Like you’re supposed to do something really fun and wild to celebrate, and if it doesn’t happen like that, you wind up feeling… I don’t know, depressed or something. Like it’s a harbinger of how bad the year is going to be.”

He smiles. “You only feel that way because you’re still so young. When you get a little older, you’ll realize you’re better off if no one notices your birthday.”

Annie rolls her eyes. “Please spare me another tirade about how you’re so old. I’ve heard enough of those to last a lifetime.”

“You think you’re so smart,” he says, smirking. “I was going to go on a tirade about how wise I am, actually.”
She laughs, watching as his smile becomes a little softer, and suddenly she is back in conference room F on *his* birthday, when they kissed under the fluorescent lights and it felt as if a fire had been lit under her skin, like she’d never be cold again.

That’s what she really wants for her birthday, she thinks. Another moment or two like that.

Maybe even more than kisses, actually.

Maybe another night like when they first met. He didn’t even know her then, and she felt a spark that she hadn’t felt with Vaughn in years. Now that they actually have a relationship, some kind of friendship, she knows it would be even better. She feels it every time that his knee bumps hers when they’re sitting close to go over the depositions, when his fingers brush against hers as they reach for the same folder -- a current of electricity that is impossible to ignore.

“You okay?” Jeff asks suddenly, and she wonders if she’s drifted off into some kind daze, staring at him with glazed eyes and drool leaking from the corner of her mouth.

She nods quickly. “Oh… yeah. Fine.”

She thinks of the last item on the list in her top desk drawer, and mentally underlines it a fifth time for good measure.

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This is what he’s been reduced to -- scrolling through the *InStyle* website for gift ideas for Annie’s birthday.

It’s getting to be crunch time -- the party is less than 72 hours away, and he’s come up with nothing on his own. *InStyle* promises 25 gifts that are sure to delight *her*, whoever she might be, and though they’re intended as holiday gifts, they should work just the same for a birthday.

Unfortunately, *InStyle*’s editors don’t know what the hell they’re talking about. Jewelry and perfume are way too intimate, but a rhinestone-encrusted phone case or a box of engraved stationery seem more like desperate last-minute gifts that you’d buy from a center kiosk at the mall.

“Goddamn it,” he groans, thumbing off his phone.

“Jeffrey!” Shirley glares at him from behind the counter where she’s making his coffee. “This is a Christian establishment. Please do not take the Lord’s name in vain.”

“Sorry,” he mumbles, feeling almost remorseful. “I’m just trying to find a birthday present for Annie… and nothing seems appropriate.”

Shirley cocks her head. “It’s her birthday?”

“Not until Monday, actually. But she’s celebrating Friday, so I’m kind of on the clock.”

Shirley slides his coffee across the counter as usual, but it’s hard to ignore her tight, little frown as he tears open a packet of Splenda. “I haven’t seen Annie in a few weeks,” she says. “Ever since we had that little disagreement…”

She lowers her voice like the last word is a curse, and Jeff looks up from his coffee, intrigued. “You and Annie had a fight?”
“Oh, it wasn’t that dramatic,” Shirley insists. “I just tried to offer a little advice, and she took some offense at it. Now, maybe I was overstepping my bounds a bit but she--”

“What kind advice did you give her?”

Shirley sighs, crossing her arms over her chest and eyeing him like he just might be the stupidest man on earth. “It was about you, Romeo.”

“What about?” he laughs. “Why the hell would you give Annie advice about me?”

“Because I know you, Jeffrey. And I can easily see that sweet little girl getting hurt, whether you mean to do it or not. You break hearts on the daily and I just thought she should know what--”

“Oh, first of all, she’s not a little girl,” he snaps, feeling his jaw clench almost painfully. “And second, I don’t break hearts. I don’t ever pretend to be something I’m not. I mean, Britta emerged from our situation unscathed, didn’t she? Did you feel the need to offer Britta advice?”

“Offer me what now?”

Jeff turns to find Britta strolling up to the counter, because of course that’s the kind of luck he has these days. “Speak of the devil,” he mutters. “Shirley insulted Annie by implying that she needs to be protected from me and a possible broken heart. You’ll vouch for the fact that that isn’t necessary, right?”

“Hardly.” She leans over the counter toward Shirley like she’s trying to be discreet, though she looks right at Jeff, locking eyes with him so she can be sure that he’s listening. “If anyone needs protection, it’s this guy,” she says, jerking her thumb in his direction. “That’s the only heart I see winding up broken in this scenario.”

His first instinct is to gape at her, but he suspects that will give too much away. Instead, he leans back against the counter, as casual as can be, and breezily asks, “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Oh, come on, Jeff,” Britta says distractedly, bending to study Shirley’s latest pastry offerings through the glass case. “You’ve got it as bad for this girl as I’ve ever seen. And I’ve seen plenty of ‘em come and go from your life, you know.”

He frowns, rubbing at the space between his eyes where a dull ache is starting to pound. It’s becoming more than a little annoying, the way everyone keeps referring to Annie as a girl. She is definitely a woman -- he would know -- and it’s starting to weird him out just a little that everyone else insists on seeing her as some innocent and fragile flower who needs protecting.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he says finally, hoping he sounds bored.

Of course, Britta ignores him.

“You should’ve seen him at Thanksgiving, Shirley,” she declares, looking back up at the older woman. “Pouting into his scotch like someone kicked his kitten just because Annie was mad at him, no doubt for good reason.” She looks over at him, smirking. “And then there was the time he was all, ‘Am I being selfish making Annie talk to her dad just to win this big, ginormous case that I haven’t been able to shut up about in months?’” She shakes her head, the corner of her mouth twitching a bit like she’s about to laugh. “I mean, have you ever heard him express even the smallest bit of concern that he was thinking about anyone other than himself?”

“Nope,” Shirley agrees, and her grin is sly and smart enough to make Jeff sweat just a bit. “Sounds
like a miracle actually. But then, before you got here, he was in an awful lot of turmoil over what to
get the girl for her birthday so maybe I shouldn’t be surprised…”

“She has a name,” he grits out. “Can you please stop referring to her as ‘the girl’?”

“Oh, look at him, Shirley! Defending Annie’s honor.”

“Isn’t that just the sweetest--”

“I’m not defending anyone’s honor,” he insists. “I just think it’s weird not to call her by her name
when it’s someone we all know.”

Britta nods knowingly. “Yeah. I’m sure that’s it.”

“You’re definitely right,” Shirley says. “He’s got it really--”

“I’m sorry you two lead such boring lives that everything I do apparently fascinates you endlessly,”
he declares. “But you’re way off the mark here… and starting to bore me. Besides, I would think
Britta’s life is plenty enough fodder for your worrying and meddling, Shirley. Her flavor of the
week’s still married, and ---”

“Oh, you’re such a liar,” Britta barks, though Shirley still looks scandalized. “They’ve been
separated for almost two years so the whole marriage thing is a technicality at this point.”

Shirley reaches across the counter to pat her arm. “Britta, I’m gonna pray for you but you really
need--”

“That’s not necessary, Shirley. I mean, it’s pretty much over anyway so my soul is no longer in
danger, okay?” Britta turns and shoots Jeff a glare. “You’re a real asshole, you know that?”

He just grins, sipping from his coffee. “Oh, by the way, you better not be busy Friday night.”

She narrows her eyes. “Why?”

“You’re coming to Annie’s surprise birthday party.”

Britta tips her head back, and groans. “Ugh, I hate surprise parties. Why do I have to go?”

“I don’t know… maybe because you and Annie have become friends? Isn’t she the one who helped
you get that lime-green monstrosity you’re driving around in these days?” She grumbles under her
breath, and though he can barely hear her, it’s pretty easy to pick out the few choice curses she
throws in his direction. “I think her friend Troy is kind of hoping you’ll show up too.”

It’s impossible to miss the way that Britta perks up or the small, almost hopeful smile that she can’t
hide. “Yeah?” She makes a little sighing sound -- that’s what it takes for her to catch herself, and
she straightens up, forcing a frown. “Fine. Text me the details… I’ll try to stop by.”

“Jeffrey?” Shirley looks at him almost tentatively. “Do you think it would be alright if I came?”

He shrugs, not really sure why she’d want to come. “I feel just awful about the last time I saw
Annie,” she says, as if she’s read his mind. “And I’d like to bake her a birthday cake as a peace
offering… does she prefer vanilla or chocolate?”

“I don’t really know. She like animals crackers, though.”

“Okay, that’s good. I can work with that.” Shirley jots a note down on a napkin that she’s
unfolded. “What’s her favorite color? So I know what to do with the icing.”
“Purple,” Jeff answers automatically. Britta snorts, shaking her head as she shares a knowing look with Shirley, and he frowns. “What?”

“You know her favorite color?”

He looks away, shrugging his shoulders defensively. “Well, she has this purple coat and she’s always using purple pens, so I just assume …”

“Whatever you say,” Britta laughs, while Shirley purses her lips, like she’s dying to add something to the conversation herself.

Jeff snatches his coffee off the counter and turns for the door. “Say hi to Troy,” he calls over his shoulder, just to be a jerk, and he’s pretty sure that he hears Britta curse again just before the door closes behind him. Out on the street, he’s almost relieved to have the cold air slap him in the face because it distracts him from the heat that he can feel in his cheeks.

Just as he makes it to the lobby of the Hamish, Hamish, Hamlin, & Hawthorne building, his phone vibrates in his pocket, another perfect distraction. He thinks it might be the travel agent, finally getting back to him about his mother’s trip, but it’s actually a text from Leonard.

CLOSIN IN ON THE BROADE, it says, and Jeff doesn’t hold the grammatical and spelling errors against the old bastard because he’s surprised enough that the guy knows how to text in the first place. As usual, the message is as cryptic as can be, but Jeff figures that it’s got to mean some progress on the Deborah Wahlstrom front -- because hearing from Leonard without having to hound him is a miracle in and of itself.

In the elevator, Jeff texts him back, but the distraction has already worn off and his mind is drifting right back to the one topic that he really doesn’t want to focus on at the moment.

Annie -- or, more specifically, the way the people around him interpret his relationship with her.

When he gets up to his office, Claire is on the phone, only sparing him a quick smile as he passes her desk. Everything in his career hinges on whether that old fucker Leonard can deliver the goods or not, and yet, he’s more concerned about what Britta and Shirley were so gleefully hinting at -- they’re idiots, who don’t know what they’re talking about, but he still feels like he’s somehow given something away.

It’s not like he’s thinking of buying Annie a necklace or bracelet or hell, even a simple pair of earrings for her birthday. She’s just a colleague, a trusted colleague, sure -- and maybe she’s even, sort of, become a friend. And yeah, he’d really like to sleep with her again. And okay, fine, sometimes, when he contemplates the hazy memories of what she looked like stretched out across his bed, her pale skin glowing like pearl against the dark sheets as she bit at her lip to try to keep quiet, his mind goes all fuzzy and hot, like every neuron has somehow short-circuited and is on a perpetual loop that is full of nothing but Annie.

But that doesn’t mean anything.

She is a beautiful, sexy, smart, passionate woman, so it’s only natural that most of his fantasies revolve around her, especially considering how much time he spends with her these days.

He’s got nothing to feel self-conscious about.

And he definitely doesn’t have any reason to agonize over what present to get her.

He’s technically her boss, at the moment anyway, so he should buy a completely professional,
impersonal gift that doesn’t have any significance or deeper meaning.

Which may be why, as he surveys his desk, he suddenly remembers the last time Annie was here, and the idea for a perfectly safe, perfectly appropriate gift comes to him. So he calls Claire into his office and asks her to place the order for him. She nods as he explains what he wants, but doesn’t react otherwise, which only confirms that he’s chosen a gift that doesn’t indicate anything noteworthy about his relationship with Annie.

“Oh,” he finds himself saying, just as Claire is about to head back to her desk. “Make sure it says ‘Annie,’ though. Not ‘Anne.’ That’s what she prefers ... and have them rush it. I want to have it in time for the party.”

The sly smile that slowly blooms across Claire’s face is as amused as he thinks he’s ever seen her. “Will do,” she says brightly.

He doesn’t like the gleam in her eye at all.

“What?” he demands.

“Nothing,” she insists, the corner of her mouth lifting in a way that threatens to turn a simple grin into a knowing smirk. “Nothing at all.”

“Good.” He straightens his tie needlessly. “Let’s keep it that way, okay?”

Claire doesn’t say a word, but he can hear her humming the entire way back to her desk and the urge to slam the door behind her is pretty strong.

--

She knows that something’s up the second that he suggests that they stay late on Friday to go over the case.

They’re still in limbo at the moment, waiting for Leonard to come through on his vague promise of tracking down Deborah Wahlstrom, so there isn’t anything pressing at the moment, and Jeff Winger isn’t exactly the kind of guy who likes burning the midnight oil even when there’s a legitimate reason to do so.

And yet, he found her just a little after 4 o’clock, when everyone is usually getting ready to wind down the week, and told her that he really thought that they needed to analyze the case anew -- an audit, he called it -- just to make sure that they hadn’t missed anything.

At first, she was kind of insulted. Sure, at that moment, she’d technically been killing time by trying to remember whether there’s anything in her suitcases on the floor of the guys’ apartment that’s festive enough to wear to the office holiday party next week. But she’s gone over the case with a fine-tooth comb enough times over the past few months that she could probably recite some of the deposition transcripts and forensic accounting records in her sleep. She hasn’t missed a single, solitary detail, even if Jeff may have.

But then, when they finally meet up in conference room F and he’s all fidgety -- wheeling his chair back and forth at his end of the table like he can’t quite get comfortable, asking to see stupid, inconsequential bits of evidence that they haven’t discussed since her first month at the firm, frowning every time she manages to find whatever scrap he’s asking for, almost like he’s disappointed that she’s actually kept such good track of them -- and she thinks that she finally understands what’s going on.
Jeff Winger is nervous.

He must be nervous about the case -- that’s the only logical explanation for his behavior.

He’s scared that they aren’t going to be able to find that little grain of reasonable doubt that he promised he could build a defense around when they first started working together, that he isn’t going to make senior partner and get his cushy fifth-floor office, that his entire future is about to go up in smoke.

Not that he’d ever admit it to her, or himself really.

But the thing is, if he is nervous, someone who’s got plenty of experience, who has a reputation for always saving his client’s bacon, who’s legitimately earned that miracle-worker nickname, then she should be absolutely terrified. Because if the case blows up in their faces, she can pretty much kiss her career at Hamish, Hamish, Hamlin, & Hawthorne goodbye too.

Maybe her entire legal career, actually.

And she’s already been working so hard, been putting in as much time and effort as she can without completely sacrificing sleep, so there really isn’t another gear for her to go to.

If Jeff thinks that they’re screwed, then they are most definitely screwed.

She has the sudden urge for a drink, something strong enough to turn her brain to mush for a few hours so she can pretend that her life isn’t a total disaster. Her birthday is Monday -- she deserves a little time off this weekend. Maybe she’ll let Troy and Abed plan a marathon of silly movies about killer toys or possessed cookies and just set up camp on the futon with a bottle of tequila and a plate of nachos. They mentioned that they had plans to go to some student film screening at Greendale tonight, but she’s pretty sure that she can guilt them into giving up their Saturday night to celebrate her birthday.

“Hey,” Jeff says suddenly, looking up from the folder in front of him. “Where are those notes from Carol Strause about the charitable donations Pine Brook made in 2006?”

Annie glances at the pile of files in front of her, scanning the brightly-colored tabs she’s added to help organize them. “Oh, um… I know I saw that one …” She flips through a few folders, looking for the purple tab that indicates charitable contributions. “Crap, I know I saw it. I just …” She pauses for a moment, squinting as she tries to remember where the file is -- and then it hits her. She did just see the charitable donation files: this morning, on the coffee table in Troy and Abed’s apartment, next to their Inspector Spacetime snowglobe and under their Magic 8 ball. “It’s back at my place,” she says. “I left all the charity stuff there because I thought we’d decided that it wasn’t going to be any--”

“Okay, well, let’s go ‘em.” Jeff pushes his chair away from the table and lurches to his feet in a matter of seconds. “I’ll drive.”

She blinks in confusion. “What? You really think we need to look over those notes right now? I mean, I can scan a copy later tonight and--”

“Let’s just get them now. I think I’m onto something and I don’t want to lose my momentum. So we’ll run to your place, pick up the files, and be back at work in less than an hour.”

He’s shrugging back into his jacket and patting his pocket to make sure that he has his keys, so she finds herself following suit. “Okay, fine. Can we get something to eat on the way back? I’m starving, and if we’re going to be working all night…”
“Sure,” he says distractedly. “Whatever you want.”

In the car, he is strangely quiet, not even giving her a hard time when she starts fiddling with the radio like he usually does. He must be really convinced that they’re going to tank the case if “Walk Like An Egyptian” isn’t getting to him, and that means she’s going to have to confront him about it before the night is over, because she’s not sure that she can get through the next few months pretending that they both don’t know that they’re doomed to fail.

He is trailing right behind her as they make their way up to Troy and Abed’s apartment, and she wonders for a moment if he isn’t being honest with her about the case because he’s trying to protect her. There’s something almost sweet about the idea, but not really, because then it means he doesn’t respect her enough to believe she can deal with the truth and that isn’t the kind of protection that she’s interested in.

Just as she fits her key into the lock and pushes the door open, she turns back to him and sighs. “Jeff, if you think that--”

But the darkness in front of them suddenly explodes into brightness and noise as all the lights come on in the apartment and a chorus of voices is shouting “Surprise!” at the top of its lungs.

She sees that Jeff is smiling, probably because she is wearing an embarrassingly dorky, wide-eyed look of shock. Troy and Abed descend on her with party hats perched crookedly on their heads and noise makers hanging out of their mouths like cigars, and she is suddenly in the middle of the surprise party that she always not-so secretly hoped for back when they were at Greendale and she was still so desperate to feel like anyone in the world actually cared about her.

“Happy birthday,” Troy sing-songs as he pulls her in for a hug and nearly chokes the life out of her.

“What… when… how did you do all this?” she asks, laughing a little breathlessly.

“It wasn’t that hard,” Abed says. “It’s not like you’re around here a lot. It’s easy to hide things from you.”

She can’t really argue, and doesn’t particularly feel like now is the right moment anyway, because behind the guys, she sees Vicki, Neil, Quendra, Todd, and several of the other associates and paralegals from the office. Britta even waves from a stool at the counter, and Pierce Hawthorne hoists a bottle of beer in her direction with a broad smile.

When Shirley brings out a cake from the kitchen that’s decorated with lilac and royal purple-colored icing and dozens of animals crackers, Annie feels something suspiciously close to tears stinging her eyes (and maybe even a little guilt for boycotting Shirley’s for the past few weeks).

She turns back and looks at Jeff again, who is still smiling, all soft and gentle.

“Happy birthday,” he murmurs, and it occurs to her how hard he was trying to get her here, so she could have this moment, and she wants to kiss him so badly. But they’re in a room that’s crowded with other people, including a few whom they work with, and as much as she wants to seize the day, she knows that she’d regret making a scene like that later.

So she just smiles back, promising herself that she’ll revisit the impulse sooner rather than later.

--

If he’s honest, he didn’t have high hopes for the party.
It just didn’t seem like his kind of scene.

But Troy and Abed have come through with some pretty good imported beer, and the small piece of Shirley’s cake that he allows himself is delicious. Neil, who’s been in charge of the music all evening, has been playing more R.E.M. and Pearl Jam than he would’ve expected. And he’s managed to successfully avoid Pierce for a good hour and a half.

Until the old man corners him in the hallway outside the bathroom when he’s gone off looking for Annie.

“Great party, huh, Jeff?”

“It was,” he mumbles under his breath.

“I’m so happy to be able to celebrate Annie’s special day. She’s one of those girls who deserves to have a big fuss made over her, you know?” Pierce bumps his arm against Jeff, sloshing some of his beer onto the floor as he points his bottle at the package in Jeff’s hand. “You got her a present? I didn’t know we were supposed to… I figured me coming was kind of gift enough, you know?”

“It’s fine, Pierce. I’m sure Annie’s just happy that you’re here.”

“Right? I mean, I don’t need to give people material things to let them know how I feel. My presence in their lives tells them everything they need to know.”

“I bet.”

“So what’d you get her?” Pierce glances at the box again, studying its shape. “Perfume? A scented candle? Edible underwear?”

Jeff frowns. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, I’m just joking,” Pierce says, waving a dismissive hand. “We both know edible underwear is more of an anniversary gift.”

“As scintillating as this conversation is,” Jeff says, “I would really prefer to be anywhere else.”

He leaves Pierce in the hallway and scans the kitchen area and living room again for Annie’s dark hair. She’s apparently pulled a complete disappearing act at her own birthday party, and he finds himself strangely impressed. The only other rooms in the apartment are Troy and Abed’s bedrooms, and it’s a toss-up as to which one she’d choose as her haven so he goes with the door that’s closest to him.

It opens to a room that, generously speaking, looks as if a small tornado has torn through it. Even in the dim light, he can see that there are clothes strewn across the floor and empty soda cans littering every flat surface and, for some reason, an oversized beach ball in the center of the bed.

But there’s also a large window, which must be the appeal for Annie. She stands with her head hanging out it, like she’s desperate for some fresh air.

“Are you okay?” he asks, closing the door behind him.

She jerks around to look at him, her eyes wide. “You scared the hell out of me.”

“Sorry… I was looking for you and I thought that you--”

“No,” she says. “Not now. Earlier. Back at the office… all the way here. When you were acting so
“weird.”

He laughs. “Okay… but why would me acting weird scare you?”

“Because I was convinced you were convinced that there’s no way we could win the case and you just didn’t want to tell me… and I … well, I almost had a panic attack.” She lets out a deep breath and smiles as she holds up her glass. “The tequila’s helping, though.”

He nods, using his foot to push some of the clothing off the bed so he can sit on the corner opposite her, setting her present on the mattress beside him. “I will admit that the things with the case haven’t exactly turned out the way I hoped,” he says. “But I am still one hundred percent certain that we can win it. And I’m not saying that just because it’s your birthday.”

She smiles, her eyes brightening. “I can’t believe you helped get me to my surprise party,” she says. “What did the guys have to do to convince you?”

“Oh, not too much.” He shrugs his shoulders. “Honestly, I kind of owed you. After your little impromptu birthday celebration for me.”

She nods, and her gaze falls to the box beside him. “Is that for me?” she asks, and there is something so husky and flirty about the sound of her voice in the mostly dark bedroom that he almost forgets where he is.

“This?” he says, lifting the package. “Oh, no. I’ve got another surprise party to get to after this.”

She laughs, practically falling forward to swat at his arm. “Shut up, you jerk.”

He holds the present out to her with a grin. “It’s all yours.”

She takes the box and sits down beside him on the bed, placing her glass on the floor. He watches as she traces her fingers over the ice cream cone design on the wrapping paper, and is grateful that Claire took the initiative to wrap the thing before giving it to him.

Annie removes the paper in a painfully slow, methodical way that leaves him wondering what the hell he was thinking, buying her something as standoffish as this for a gift. Pierce is right -- she is absolutely the kind of woman who deserves to have a fuss made over her, even if he absolutely isn’t the kind of guy who knows how to make the right kind of fuss -- and he seriously considers stopping her, ripping the box out of her hands and telling her that there was a terrible mistake and she shouldn’t see what’s inside.

But she’s already brushing aside the purple tissue paper before he can stop her, and she pulls the rosewood from the box so she can see the silver nameplate on the other side. She huffs out a breath that sounds like a cross between a sigh and a laugh, and it might just be a trick of the light but it almost looks like her eyes are shining when she glances up at him.

“Jeff,” she whispers. “This is … “ She looks down at the nameplate again, her fingers following the etched I and E at the end of ‘Annie’ almost fondly. “I love it…”

“You do?”

“Yes. Of course. Why wouldn’t I?”

He shrugs. “I guess I thought you might think it was a little too… impersonal.”

She shakes her head. “No,” she says again. “Not at all. I can’t wait to put it on my desk.”
He smiles, feeling a strange tightness in his chest. “Yeah… I noticed that you’re always playing with mine when you’re in my office and I figured you might like your own. I mean, they don’t even put associates’ names on their office doors… but people really should know who they’re dealing with when they come to see you.”

She grins, ducking her head. “I love it,” she says again. “Really.”

It could be heartburn -- he ate a little too much of that salsa that Troy and Abed were serving in the other room -- but the tightness in the middle of his chest gets even sharper, and he clears his throat in an effort to banish it.

Annie tucks some hair behind her ear, looking down at the nameplate once again. “I’m kind of overwhelmed,” she tells him. “Not just because you got me a really thoughtful gift. I was kind of expecting this to be a low-key birthday, but Troy and Abed went to all this trouble to plan a surprise party, and all these people actually showed up to celebrate with me and I just feel… well, it’s just nice.”

“Why wouldn’t they show up?” he asks. “They’re your friends. Of course, they want to make your birthday special.”

She cocks her head, studying him intently. “What’s your excuse then? For not only getting me a gift but going out of your way to bring me here so it would be a surprise and everything. I’m sure you had better things to do with your Friday night.”

He looks away, studying the floor where he notices a couple of dirty socks in an X pattern. “We’re kind of friends, too,” he says. “Aren’t we?”

She nods, but her smile is a little crooked, almost like she’s fighting it. “Yeah. I guess we are.” She sighs. “But… I wonder… would we be if we hadn’t been forced to work together?”

He points out. “We weren’t forced to do anything,” he says. “I chose you.”

She bumps her shoulder against his arm. “You know what I mean.”

“Do I need to remind you of the night we first met? We were pretty friendly then.”

She huffs, laughing in faux outrage, and shoves at his shoulder, harder this time. “We’re not supposed to talk about that!”

“I know. But it’s hard sometimes.”

Annie looks at him, intensely, just before she sets the nameplate down on the floor beside her drink. Before he realizes what’s happening, she’s kneeling on the bed beside him, her cool hand wrapped around the back of his neck as she tugs him toward her to seal her mouth over his.

For a moment, he just lets her kiss him, as serious and determined as any woman ever has, but then his arms wrap around her, his hands fisting in her hair, and he licks his way into her mouth until she’s trembling against him, and then she’s clambering over him, straddling his lap as she knocks him backward onto the bed so she can deepen the kiss, press her breasts against his chest in a way that reminds him of just how friendly they were on that night all those months ago.

It doesn’t matter that there are dirty clothes beneath them and a plastic beach ball that keeps bouncing against the side of his head and the strange scent of pepperoni and cinnamon in the air around them -- he’s not sure that any moment has ever felt quite as right in his life. His fingers slip under the hem of her shirt, to the curve of her lower back which seems made to fit his hand, and her
skin is so hot and smooth that he can’t stop himself from pulling her against him even harder.

When she moans, her breath tickling his cheek, he feels overcome, like a fever is racing through his body. She flings his tie over his shoulder, and her nimble, little fingers are undoing the buttons on his shirt, but somehow she doesn’t stop kissing him, and the texture and taste of her mouth -- velvety and mellow, glassy and rich -- obliterate every other sense memory that he’s ever had.

He never wants this moment to end.

Until the door suddenly bangs open and Annie lifts her head from his and he leans back just enough to see Troy and Britta gaping at them from the doorway.

Somehow, he manages to notice that they’re holding hands, but at the moment, that doesn’t seem like the most important detail to fixate on.

“Oh, shit!” Troy says. “Sorry! I was just gonna show Britta the demo for our video game… I didn’t know you guys were in here.”

Annie leaps up, smoothing her hair and her blouse back into place like she might be able to convince them that they didn’t walk in on what they just walked in. “No, it’s fine… It’s okay… No worries.”

She hurries past them back toward the party without a word to Jeff. He sits up, his back to the doorway, but doesn’t move off the bed. He’s not sure that he could even if he wanted to right now, and instead, tries to slow his breath and close his shirt again.

He hears Britta snicker behind him.

“Guess you found her a pretty good gift.”
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

As always, I am forever grateful to Bethany, who found time in the middle of traveling to work her beta magic. She is amazing. <3

Annie knows that she has no reasonable right to be angry with Jeff at all, and yet by mid-Monday morning, that’s exactly the state that she feels herself inching towards.

She hasn’t seen him since late Friday night when they said their goodbyes in the doorway of Troy and Abed’s apartment, with an audience of Troy, Britta, Shirley, Abed, and Pierce all breathing down their necks. When Troy and Britta had stumbled in on their makeout session earlier, she’d sprung away from him like he might be stricken with some deadly contagion, and she’d been determined to find some way to let him know that she didn’t actually regret anything that had happened without actually saying the words. So she’d hugged him, a little longer and more desperately than was probably appropriate for two people who were strictly co-workers, and whispered as sincere a “thank you” as she could manage into the curve of his neck.

His grip on her waist had tightened then, almost like a reflex that he couldn’t control, so she’d figured that he got the message.

But then he didn’t text or call all weekend, and now it’s already after 11 am on her birthday and he still hasn’t bothered to get in touch. She adjusts the gleaming nameplate that she placed on her desk as soon as she came through the door this morning, moving it a fraction of an inch to the left, and wonders if there’s any way to march up to his office and demand that he acknowledge her and what happened between them, what’s been happening between them since the day they first met, without seeming like a complete and utter spoiled brat. That’s when her phone chimes to let her know that he’s actually, finally sent her a text.

No need to worry, he’s written. I’m not dead. It’s so much worse than that.

She giggles before she can catch herself, and immediately looks over at the door to make sure that no one is passing by in the hallway outside to catch her, too.

It’s hard not to react, though, because Jeff is thinking of her -- because he feels like he owes her an explanation for his absence, and is pretty much implying that his being dead in a ditch is the only reason that he wouldn’t check in with her this morning.

The text may not say much, but it means quite a bit.

She bites her lip, trying to decide how to respond when she notices the three little dots that let her know he’s typing to her again.

Got roped into a brainstorming session with Larry, Doug, and Eric about how to handle some trouble with Larry’s divorce, he tells her. The ex is thisclose to getting the ski condo in Telluride, the cottage on Nantucket, and the art collection so obviously we’re in sky is falling territory.

It may not be a birthday message or some sly, subtle reference to rolling around on Troy’s messy
bed with her the other night, but it still makes her smile because it’s pretty obvious that he isn’t avoiding her intentionally.

*He didn’t get an ironclad prenup?* she finally texts back, hoping that the message comes across as casual and breezy.

It barely takes him 30 seconds to reply.

*The ex is hinting she’s got some incriminating photos of good ol’ Larry from some long ago trip to Mexico. Pretty sure she’s bluffing but she obviously witnessed something he doesn’t want getting out bc Larry’s not willing to take any chances.*

For the next hour and a half, he sends regular updates and desperate pleas for her to come up with creative, inventive excuses to get him out of there. She responds with silly emojis that prompt him to send a discreet selfie of himself looking decidedly unamused.

She’s made plans to go to lunch with Vicki, and she almost wants to back out because it’s harder to text him back with someone around to read her phone over her shoulder, but she and Vicki both need something to wear to the holiday party tonight -- there’s nothing like waiting until the last minute, but she’d been too distracted this weekend to go shopping and Vicki hadn’t been able to find anything that she liked -- so a trip to Macy’s is pretty much a necessity.

She likes the first dress that she tries on, and as she’s spinning in front of the dressing room mirror to admire the dark wine-colored velvet, Jeff texts again. As soon as he hears that she’s dress shopping, he wants her to send a photo, and she feels her heart thump a little faster and her cheeks get hot. She is almost ready to snap the selfie when she realizes that she’d rather he see her for the first time in the dress in person so she texts back, *You wish* and a winking emoji.

*I really do,* he replies. After that, she’s pretty sure that she doesn’t hear another word Vicki says for the rest of the afternoon.

She is tempted to ask him about the holiday party, to make some flirty comment about him getting to see the dress in person later, but she decides to play it cool. That doesn’t stop her from showing up at the restaurant where the party is being held 20 minutes early so she can find the best spot to keep an eye out for him without letting on that she’s waiting for anyone. The back wall opposite the entrance to the private dining room turns out to be the winner, and she uses a trick that she learned from him, pulling out her phone and pretending to be engrossed in a text so no one has any idea what’s really on her mind.

She is pretty convincing, too.

“*You’re still working?*” Quendra asks, when she passes by on her way to the bar. “It’s supposed to be a party! I think you’ve definitely earned a break.”

Annie smiles. “Just a little something I need to finish up.”

“Well, try one of the raspberry limoncello Prosecco cocktails when you’re done.” She shakes a nearly empty glass in the air. “They’ll change your life!” She gives a quick little wave, and hurries off to get herself another glass.

Annie thinks about following after her because Jeff is almost a half hour late, which means she’s been waiting for nearly an hour, and something sweet and bubbly and decidedly alcoholic might take the edge off just a bit. She scans her Instagram feed one more time, taking a second to like Troy’s photo of the bulldog that lives in the apartment next to theirs wearing a Christmas sweater,
and sighs.

Of course, it’s at that precise moment, with her gaze fixed on her phone screen, that a glass of champagne appears directly in front of her, just like at that cocktail party a couple of months back. Sure enough, when she finally looks up, there Jeff is, grinning a little crookedly.

She doesn’t know how he got in without her seeing him, and wonders momentarily if he had the same plan as she did, if he’s been lurking in some dark corner of the room waiting until he could catch her off-guard. He’s wearing a dark charcoal suit with a deep maroon tie, and there is just a hint of stubble darkening his jaw, and suddenly, she can’t help remembering how it felt against her lips the other night.

“Happy birthday,” he says warmly. “I know I wished you one the other night but now it’s your real birthday. Sucks that you have to spend it here, though.”

“Free food, free champagne,” she says, taking the glass from him. “It could be worse.”

He shrugs. “Could be better too.”

He stands against the wall next to her so they look like two co-workers making polite party small talk, but he’s close enough that their arms are brushing and she can feel the warmth of his body even through the layers of clothing.

“You look amazing,” he says, looking toward the bar where a couple of the paralegals are already doing shots.

“We match,” she murmurs, and when he looks down at her in surprise, she smiles and gestures between his tie and her dress, which are the same dark, rich red shade.

“Great minds think alike… and dress alike apparently.”

They both take a sip of their drinks, grinning behind their glasses.

“I was hoping you’d stop by today,” she tells him. “I put my nameplate out. It looks great… Vicki is so jealous.”

Jeff nods. “Who wouldn’t be? I have great taste in nameplates.” She bumps her elbow against his side affectionately, and he glances down at her, smirking just a bit. When their eyes meet, though, his expression softens, and suddenly she can’t seem to move. “I wanted to. Stop by your office, I mean. I just couldn’t get out of that meeting and I didn’t … I would’ve… you know.”

In that moment, there is something so boyish about him, like he isn’t quite sure how to talk to her anymore, like he’s nervous about saying the wrong thing. That’s all it takes for her to tug on the sleeve of his jacket so he knows to follow her as she heads toward the hallway outside the dining room. When she glances back at him as she sets her glass down on an empty table, he looks adorably confused, so she picks up her pace until they’re away from the crowd and she can pull him into the dark alcove opposite the bathrooms.

Even in her highest heels, she needs to press up on her toes to reach him, but she seals her mouth over his with unerring precision, like it’s something that she’s always been meant to do. That’s all it takes for Jeff to come alive, too, and he’s pressing her back against the wall and tangling his hand in her hair before she even gets her hands on him properly.

It is sheer madness -- even as she pushes back against him, she knows that anyone from the firm could pass by and see them -- but he feels too good and tastes too delicious and her heartbeat is
pounding throughout her entire body.

“We should…” he whispers against her mouth, and she has no idea what he’s suggesting but she nods anyway and moves with him as he pulls away and hurries her further down the hallway.

They wind up in the coat room, where the attendant is conveniently missing, and it all happens so easily that she wonders just how many times he’s done this before.

But then he is kissing her again, and they’re hidden behind a rack of coats now, so there’s no reason to hold back, and nothing else seems to matter.

Jeff lifts her off her feet then, and there must be some sort of table or counter behind them because he sets her down so she’s sitting, with a fluffy fur coat and a silky scarf underneath her. Her knees squeeze around his hips and his fingers slip beneath the velvety hem of her dress, gripping at her thighs so he can tug her forward. She can feel how hard he is against her stomach, and her teeth nip at his bottom lip almost instinctively until he’s moaning into her mouth and pushing her skirt up even more.

It’s obvious where all of this is heading, and even though she wants it more than anything that she can remember in a long time, she knows that it shouldn’t happen -- not here, not like this.

“We can’t do this,” she forces herself to say, even though her voice is too breathless to be taken seriously. He groans, dropping his face into the curve of her neck, like the thought of stopping causes him actual physical pain. “We can’t do this here,” she clarifies, and he stutters out a deep breath, nodding even as he presses a kiss to her shoulder where her sleeve has started to fall away.

She reaches for his face, smoothing her hands over his cheeks, which are prickly with stubble, so he’ll look her in the eye. “This is crazy,” she whispers. “Everyone we work with is just in the other room.”

He grins, turning his head slightly so he can press his lips to the side of her thumb. “They’re drunk off their asses. They don’t give a fuck what we’re doing.”

His hands are still on her thighs, his thumbs stroking over the soft skin so purposefully that she feels herself tremble, and her eyes slip shut and a fever surges through her blood. She guides him back to her mouth blindly, and kisses him hard and desperate, not caring if the entire party is taking bets on what they’re up to at the moment, or John, Larry, Doug, and every other senior partner at the firm have their ears pressed up against the coat room door, or the world is about to end.

Jeff shivers against her, almost like it’s all a little bit too much for him, but she only clutches him closer, as fiercely as she can, wanting nothing more than to ride this wave of heat and desire as far as it will go.

Of course, it’s at the precise moment that she is about to melt into him again that the room is suddenly loud with drunken laughter and there’s a soft thud, like a large pile of coats has fallen to the floor.

They both freeze, caught very obviously red-handed, and Annie keeps her eyes closed, as if whoever’s stumbled in won’t see her if she doesn’t see them. Jeff crouches down a bit, probably so he won’t be seen over the rack of coats behind him, and tries to shield her with his very large body to keep her from view.

Even in her panic, she recognizes the high-pitched giggles as belonging to Kimberly from Real Estate, which means that she’s probably with Chris from Mergers and Acquisitions, if the moaning and sighing sounds are any indication.
In that moment, Annie is certain that getting caught fooling around with your co-worker is only marginally worse than being forced to listen to your co-workers fooling around.

When she opens her eyes, Jeff’s jaw is clenched tight, his face sharp with frustration. She really can’t blame him, given that it’s the second time in less than 72 hours that they’ve been interrupted just as they were really starting to get going.

It’s difficult not to think that the universe has it in for them.

“Excuse me!” a shrill voice screeches suddenly. “You can’t be in here!”

Annie can’t see, but she assumes that it’s the coat room attendant, finally returning to her post to find a couple of drunks sloppily making out amidst all the wool, fur, and gabardine.

“Sorry,” Chris mumbles. “We were just--”

“I got the picture. But you have to do it somewhere else. You can just ...”

She must be guiding Kimberly and Chris from the room because it’s quiet then, except for the sound of the door clicking closed behind them. Jeff stands up straight, peeking over the racks of coats to see if they’re alone.

“She’s gone,” he confirms.

Annie places her hands on his chest and pushes him away gently. “See? That’s exactly what I was afraid of. I don’t want to wind up getting caught like those two...”

He offers up one of his most charming smiles, which she assumes is meant to reassure her. “But we didn’t get caught,” he says. “So it’s really not a big deal.”

She frowns, thinking about what everyone in the other room would say if they could see her right now, with her tangled hair, swollen mouth, flushed cheeks, and heaving chest. It would probably be something about how she’s sleeping with Jeff just to get ahead, or that the only reason that she got to work on the Rutherford case in the first place is because he wanted to screw her, or that he only keeps her around because she is cooperative enough to put out in public places.

That is obviously not who she really is -- both she and Jeff know that -- but she doesn’t want give anyone reason to think it, even if they’re just sexist morons, even if they’re just jealous and petty, even if they’re just interested in some juicy office gossip.

“It is a big deal,” she insists, hopping off the counter. She wobbles on her heels for a moment, and he reaches out to grab her elbows and help steady her. “It would be for me anyway.”

Jeff blows out a frustrated breath, nodding. “Okay, fine. You’re right. So let’s just get out of here. We can go to my place and --”

“They’d see us leaving together.” She wipes at her mouth, worried about smudged lipstick. “You know they’d make a big deal out of it.”

“I can go out the back. There’s a door behind the--”

“Jeff,” she says, and there’s a plaintive note in her voice because their moment has passed and she doesn’t quite know how to admit that. “I really should head home anyway. It’s been a long day.”

He sighs sharply, his eyes dark. “Annie...”
He draws her name out in a way that’s somehow even more wistful that what she did with his, and she shakes her head in an attempt to keep her resolve from crumbling. It would be so easy to fall back into his arms, and it’s as if she has to tense every muscle in her body to keep them from betraying her.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, and it’s almost impossible to look him in the eye because she hates that she’s denying them what they both want just because of what everyone else might think but suddenly all of this feels a little bit wrong.

He must realize then that the moment is lost too because he hangs his head and exhales wearily.

She isn’t entirely sure what possesses her, but she presses her hand against the center of his chest again and pushes up on her toes so she can place a gentle kiss at the corner of his mouth. Jeff keeps his eyes closed the entire time and stays so still that it’s like he’s barely breathing.

When she hurries from the room, she is pretty sure that he is in the same spot, still not moving.

-x-

On Tuesday morning, the headache that Jeff wakes up with is usually the stuff of hangovers.

But all he had the night before was a glass and a half of champagne and he didn’t feel anywhere close to drunk at any point -- unless, of course, he counts the nearly 20 minutes that he spent in the coat room with Annie where he was so out of his mind that he would’ve flunked any field sobriety test.

That had nothing to do with alcohol, though.

And that is the real source his headache, he thinks -- he is rapidly approaching a level of sexual frustration that he hasn’t felt since high school, back when he didn’t quite know how to get what he wanted and just barely managed to fumble his way through.

He knows how to get what he wants now -- or at least, he used to. This whole thing with Annie has him seriously off his game.

But then, it’s not really her fault that the last two times they’ve gotten close, it’s been in less than private circumstances, when it’s hardly surprising that they’d be interrupted.

So he tries not to indulge in too much self-pity as he drags himself out of bed and tries to face the day. He jerks off in the shower, pops a couple of Advil, and throws back a double shot of espresso in an effort to take at least some of the edge off, and yet his head is still throbbing and his nerves are still jangling when he finally makes it to his office.

He wonders if a little distance from Annie might help. If he’s not around her, he’s less likely to obsess over how desperately he wants her, and he’s got the case to worry about and Christmas with his mother to stress over, so it’s not like his plate isn’t full. He’ll lay low for a few days, and when they come back from the holiday, he’ll be back to normal, not acting like a goddamn horny high-schooler.

He can’t just disappear on her, though, so he sits down to write an email that will explain away his absence for the rest of the week. Coming up with a reasonable excuse is difficult; Annie’s too smart to buy that Larry wants to consult with him about the divorce for the next four days straight, so he’ll need to think of something better than that.

He’s barely finished typing Annie, though, when there’s an annoying series of knocks on his office
door. He curses himself for letting Claire take off the entire week before Christmas.

“Yoo hoo… are you decent?”

Craig from HR pokes his head in, and Jeff sighs, feeling his headache rage anew.

“What can I do for you, Craig?”

“We’re missing a signature on one of your 401k forms,” he says, stepping into the room. “We sent the originals to the plan administrator, so you don’t have to worry about the changes taking effect. Unfortunately, we lost the copy for our files so I just need your old John Hancock if you don’t mind.”

Jeff nods as Craig slides the paper across the desk. He has to hunt around his desk drawer for a pen, which Craig takes an invitation to sit down and make himself comfortable.

“So… that was some party last night, huh?”

“It was all right,” Jeff says, scratching his name across the paper and shoving it back toward the other man. “Kind of dull.”

Craig shrugs. “Well, I had a lovely time. Though you never joined me on the dance floor like you promised.”

“I never promised that I’d--”

“You told me to find you later.”

“What I actually said was ‘Maybe later’,” Jeff says. “So that wouldn’t hold up in any court of law.”

“Look at you, always on the clock! You’re a real inspiration, Jeffrey.” Craig shifts forward, leaning over the desk conspiratorially. “Which probably means you didn’t hear about how the coat check attendant caught Kimberly Fitzgerald from Real Estate and Christopher Hernandez from Mergers and Acquisitions going at it in the coat room like a couple of cats in heat.” He shakes his head mournfully, making a tsking sound. “So unprofessional…”

Jeff shifts in his seat uncomfortably. “As head of HR, you probably shouldn’t be gossiping about employees’ personal lives.”

“Oh, come on. You and I are very close friends … it’s not like I’m shouting about it at the water cooler. Besides, it’s not gossip… it’s a fact. Quendra saw the whole thing with her own eyes. I think she might’ve even posted a photo to her Instagram account.”

Jeff is pretty sure that he’d normally be at least mildly amused by this kind of news. He definitely doesn’t begrudge anyone getting a little action, but it’s pretty pathetic to not have enough self-control to keep yourself from getting caught in the act in a public place with all 110 of your co-workers in the next room. That’s generally how he sees it -- and yet, he and Annie were just on the other side of that rack of coats, more than a little red-handed themselves, and it was only good luck (or stupidity, he hasn’t quite decided yet) that saved them from the same fate.

And as annoyed as he might have been last night, he does get why Annie put an end to all of it. He’s no stranger to being the subject of office gossip, so he’s got a pretty thick skin and is enough of a rock star around this place for people to laugh off his indiscretions; while she’s just a newcomer and doesn’t have the reputation yet to fall back on.
“But you know,” Craig says, nodding his head knowingly. “I do understand why people would turn to someone they work with, though. We work such long hours, and sometimes in pretty high-pressure situations. It’s only natural that sparks will sometimes fly.”

“I guess,” Jeff says, glancing at the open email to Annie, just waiting on his screen to be written.

“Oh, who are you kidding, Jeffrey? You’ve been involved in your fair share of romantic entanglements around this place. You know how it is.”

“I wouldn’t say romantic.”

“You know what I mean.” Craig sighs melodramatically. “I can’t say that I’ve had much luck myself. That’s why I’ve been trying my hand at online dating lately. You know, just to mix things up.”

“Well, good luck with that.”

Jeff hopes that will be the end of this little discussion -- he’s signed the damn form; what the hell else is there to say? -- but Craig leans back in his chair, making himself even more comfortable.

“It’s just so hard, though,” he says mournfully. “I’m one of those people who knows right away if something is meant to be or not.” He cocks his head, eyeing Jeff intently. “Do you believe in love at first sight, Jeff?”

Laughing is the only reasonable reaction, and Jeff practically tosses his head back with amusement. “Hardly.”

Craig frowns. “Really? There’s not a certain feeling you get when you meet someone special? That little zing that makes you sit up and pay attention?”

“You’ve seen too many romantic comedies.”

“Maybe,” Craig admits. “I do love that Meg Ryan…” He shakes his head almost wistfully, then lurches back to attention, pointing a finger at Jeff. “Oh, that actually reminds me… I wanted to talk to you about Annie.”

Jeff has spent years cultivating his poker face -- it’s an essential tool in the arsenal of any lawyer worth his salt -- so he doesn’t so much as move a muscle in his face that might give anything away, but his stomach clenches all the same. “Annie?” he repeats as casually as he can manage.

“I know that she’s working with you on the Rutherford case,” Craig says, and for a moment, Jeff is certain that he’s going to bust him for whatever the hell it is going on between him and Annie that sure as hell isn’t professional. “So I just wanted to let you know that she’ll be in the sexual harassment seminar with the other first-year associates all day today. And tomorrow they’ve got the sensitivity-training workshop, and Thursday is conflict-resolution training, and Doug’s decided to close the office at noon on Friday so everyone can get an early start on the holiday weekend, so you probably won’t see her much this week.”

Jeff just nods.

“They were technically supposed to do all that training in their first month at the firm, but there were a few delays and now we’re scrambling to get it all in before the end of the year. I hope it’s not a problem for you. I know that Rutherford case is the big time.”

“It’s fine,” Jeff says. “We’re waiting on some info for the case so I didn’t expect to get much done
Craig smiles, and finally stands up. “Good. I wouldn’t want to interfere with your work in any way.” He turns for the door, but hesitates after making it barely three feet, and turns. “I’m glad things are working out with you and Annie. Your evaluation for her year-end bonus review was positively glowing. A couple of the other partners have complained about the first-years, so I’ve had to do some serious damage control. But you and Annie… you guys seem like a good fit.”

He gives a jaunty, little wave, and then finally, mercifully, leaves Jeff alone in his office once more.

He should be grateful; Craig’s made writing the email to Annie really simple. It barely takes him 30 seconds to type Heard you’re stuck with a bunch of HR crap for the week. Don’t worry -- we’ll get back on track after Christmas. Call or text if you need anything. But he feels irritated and rattled, like his world has tilted perilously off its axis.

It’s stupid, because time didn’t slow the night that he met Annie. He didn’t hear some angelic symphony or see fat, little diapered cherubs floating around his head, with arrows aimed right at the center of his chest. A sudden, burning clarity didn’t seize him and send him careening headfirst into euphoric bliss.

He saw a beautiful woman, who also happened to be smart and funny, with an amusing competitive streak and the kind of passion that couldn’t be ignored, who was willing to buy him a drink. That night, the only thought that he remembers running through his head was that she was someone who he’d enjoy spending the evening with.

It wasn’t any deeper or more meaningful than that.

Now, not even four months later, he wonders if he missed something.

Because maybe there was something more from the start.

Maybe it’s the thing that Britta and Shirley have gleefully pointed out, that Claire smiles condescendingly about and Duncan uses the most absurd British slang to describe, that -- God help him -- even Pierce has seemed to pick up on.

It’s the thing that means he’s well and truly fucked, but not in any kind of fun way.

He fishes out the bottle of Advil from his desk drawer and throws back another couple, chasing them down with his mostly cold coffee. But he suspects that his headache isn’t going away anytime soon.

-x-

For two days, Annie sits in conference room C with the other first-year associates and listens to lectures about what to do if they observe sexual harassment in the workplace and how to develop more successful interpersonal relationships with her co-workers. Today, it’s about what to do if those relationships break down and conflict arises. She knows that it’s all important, useful stuff, but she still can’t help but feel like she is wasting her time.

Of course, she doesn’t really know what she would have been doing this week if she didn’t have these workshops to sit through. As far as she knows, Leonard hasn’t come through with Deborah Wahlstrom’s location yet so the case is pretty much as a standstill. Well, at least that’s what she’s assuming.
Aside from an email on Tuesday afternoon, she hasn’t heard from Jeff.

In the 48 hours since, she has analyzed the note -- all 50 or fewer words of it -- at least two dozen times, and the only real conclusion that she’s come to is that he’s annoyed with her.

The email was purely professional, but she is pretty sure that he was alluding to the personal thing between them, too, and he made it pretty clear that the ball is strictly in her court. He isn’t going to be hunting her down to hash things out or clear up misunderstandings. If she wants to revisit the events of the holiday party coat room any time soon, she has to make the first move.

She doesn’t exactly blame him.

In the end, maybe she hasn’t exactly made her mind up about what it is she wants. That’s what her behavior would suggest anyway, because one minute she’s throwing him down on a bed or shoving him up against a wall in an attempt to devour him whole, and the next she’s running away from him like she fears for her life.

It would be easier to figure it all out if she only had to worry about the two of them, but there’s her career at the firm to think about, and how it would look for her to hook up with the attorney who’s supervising her barely four months after she started working with him. The other night, when Kimberly and Chris stumbled into the coat room with the same idea that she and Jeff had, she couldn’t help thinking of all the water-cooler gossip that she’s heard about them, all the snide comments and crude jokes -- and neither one of them is an associate, just starting out in their career.

Annie knows what kind of reputation she’d get if people thought something was going on between her and Jeff, because of her inexperience at the firm and the fact that she’s a woman. It would be ugly, with the potential to derail her entire career, and she doesn’t think a fling with a hot guy, even a hot guy who’s smart and funny, is worth risking her future over.

And yet, there’s still some part of her that is drawn to Jeff in a way that she can’t seem to fight, that she doesn’t really want to fight, and that only leaves her feeling mixed up and turned around.

So it makes sense that he wants her to decide what she really wants before they talk again -- that does seem only fair. And she has the nice, long holiday weekend to think it over, too, so there is no need to rush to judgement.

“Daydreaming again?” Vicki whispers to her as the woman leading the workshop starts to distribute another handout. “Don’t worry … we’re getting a break in five minutes.”

Annie could definitely use a break, to stretch her legs and get some coffee and maybe a little bit of chocolate because her stomach is rumbling and she is having trouble concentrating on conflict resolution. So she takes a trip down to the cafe on the first floor, and doesn’t even try to resist the brownies that are calling her name. She grabs one for Vicki too, who mysteriously disappeared toward the maze of cubicles where the paralegals are stationed when the workshop let out.

She’s just got on line to pay when she feels a tap on her shoulder.

“Well, Ms. Edison, we meet again. Aren’t you lucky?”

When she turns, Alan Connor grins at her in his smarmy way. Somehow, through some supreme act of willpower, she resists the urge to roll her eyes. “Hello.”

“That’s all you have to say? We haven’t seen each other in a long while…”
“We barely know each other,” she tells him as she moves up in line. “I’m not sure what else I would have to say.”

“Oh, I don’t know… maybe you could ask how my big McAllister case is going? We go to court the second week of January and I’m going to slay it.”

“That’s very nice,” she says politely, “Good for you.”

“Well, no, it could be good for you too. I mean, I’m gonna need someone to celebrate with when it’s all said and done.” He eyes her up and down, shaking his head. “You seem like a pretty good candidate for that.”

“I just sat through a six-hour sexual harassment workshop the other day,” she tells him. “You really don’t want to test me.”

Alan chuckles, holding up his hands mock-defensively. “Hey, come on, who’s doing any harassing? I was just extending a generous invitation, sweetheart. You might try being a little more grateful.”

“You don’t have--”

“Besides, I think that’s more of a Winger thing. He’s the one who put you on the Rutherford case, isn’t he?”

“I don’t know what you’re implying but it’s not--”

“How’s that going by the way?” he asks, pretending that he’s suddenly engrossed in something on his phone. “I heard that you guys might’ve hit a snag. Can’t say I’m surprised … but I feel for you guys. I really do. Especially the Wing Man. He really needed this one.”

He sneaks a quick glance at her then, clearly trying to gauge her reaction, and she knows then that he’s completely full of it and just fishing for information. She’ll be damned if he’s going to get anything out of her.

“I don’t know who you were talking to,” she says casually, “but you’ve been misinformed. We’re so far ahead of schedule that Jeff insisted I take this week to catch up on some training I’d fallen behind on. He was actually worried about me not having enough to do.”

Alan frowns, shrugging a shoulder. “If you say so.”

“I do,” she tells him, reaching the front of the cashier line and handing her money over. “So you can just worry about your own case.”

“Annie, honey,” he says, leaning in so he can lower his voice. “I just want you to know that when things with Winger blow up, like we all know they will, there’ll always be room for you on my team. I mean, if I’d seen you before Wing Man did, then…”

He lets out a low whistle, but Annie doesn’t wait to see if he finishes the thought. She shoves her change in her pocket, grabs the brownies from the counter, and hurries back up to conference room C before she gives in to the urge to slam her fist right into Alan’s weaselly little nose. She is confident that wouldn’t fall in line with the conflict-resolution principles in any of the handouts.

For a moment, though, she imagines Jeff’s reaction if he heard about her decking Alan Connor in the office cafeteria, and it helps improve her mood almost as much as the taste of her double fudge brownie.
Britta sends the texts on Friday afternoon just as he steps onto the elevator to head home for the weekend.

911!!!, the first one reads, and it’s followed up almost immediately by another that orders, get ur ass down to the bar pronto.

She sends a third before he’s able to respond that just contains a bunch of angry cat face emojis.

He braces himself because with Britta, there’s likely some sort of legal entanglement involved. She probably trespassed on government property or spray-painted some grammatically-incorrect rantings outside an animal testing lab as part of her latest protest, and now expects him to clean up her mess. The only reason that he points his car toward The Vatican, when it’s the last thing that he wants to do as he starts his long holiday weekend, is that he knows he’ll get some booze for his trouble. Britta’s taken to keeping a bottle of his favorite brand of 21-year-old single malt scotch beneath the bar just for him, so the incentive is even higher.

Of course, when he gets to the bar and spots her behind the counter, absently wiping down the surface in front of her as she scans her phone, he gets the distinct impression that she’s overstated the emergency.

She looks way too casual for someone who’s worried about possible jail time.

“Where’s the fire?” he asks as he drops down on the stool in front of her.

She frowns. “What fire?”

“Well, I assumed that your life was on the line from those cryptic, melodramatic texts. Was I wrong?”

“I didn’t imply it was a matter of life and death… I just need your help with something, and frankly, you kind of owe me.”

He snickers. “I owe you? Want to explain that one to me?”

“I’m your most trusted confidant,” she says, flipping her hair over her shoulder. “And I put up with all your babbling about your issues because—”

“You aren’t anything of the sort. And you’re the one who’s always trying to get me talk because you took a couple of psych classes at Greendale a million years ago and think that makes you some kind of shrink.”

Britta shrugs. “To-may-to, to-mah-to.”

He groans, and taps his hand against the bar impatiently. “Can you at least get me a drink? And then tell me what the hell I’m doing here?”

She doesn’t respond, but she reaches beneath the bar for a clean glass and the bottle of scotch. After she pours him a double, he watches as she reaches into the back pocket of her jeans and pulls out a piece of crumpled paper that’s been folded so tightly that she has to smooth at least a half dozen creases from it with her hand as she lays it on the bar.

“That HR guy at the firm says they’re in the process of deciding what temps to bring back for next year,” she explains. “And I need to get one of the junior or senior partners to fill out this evaluation
But you haven’t worked on a single project for me. How am I supposed to evaluate you?”

Britta waves a dismissive hand. “That doesn’t matter. Those dumbasses love you. If it’s got your name on it, I’m a shoo-in.”

Jeff glances at the form, and takes a deep sip from his glass. “Okay,” he says, “But what’s in it for me exactly?”

It’s probably meant to be intimidating, but the way she snaps the rag down against the bar and crosses her arms over her chest is more amusing than scary. Her scowl doesn’t help matters much, because it only makes her look constipated.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she says, “How about not winding up an embarrassing piece of office gossip like those dummies who got caught fooling around at the holiday party the other night? Because I am sure there are at least a dozen people who’d kill for a blow-by-blow description of everything I saw at Annie’s birthday party.”

“Britta, I swear to God, if you tell anyone, I--”

“Calm down, you jackass. Like I’d ever do that to Annie...” She drops a pen onto the form in front of him. “But that’s my point. You can trust me... so you owe me. Get writing.”

The two guys sitting at the other end of the bar signal to her for another round then, and she heads their way. He toys with the pen for a moment, tired and annoyed. When Britta didn’t make a big deal out of what she walked in on last week, he figured that they weren’t going to talk about it. He assumed that she realized he had the same kind of dirt on her -- whatever it is that’s happening between her and Troy is something that she’s clearly trying to keep on the down-low -- and as much fun as it would be to give one another a hard time over their respective situations, they’d both rather stay locked in a stalemate than have to acknowledge the reality of what they each might be wrapped up in.

So even though he scribbles out a paragraph of pretty effusive -- and blatantly untrue -- praise of Britta’s worth ethic, he catches her eye as she returns and leans over to freshen his drink.

“Just for the record,” he says, “you do realize that I saw what you were up to at Annie’s party too. Right?”

She frowns. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Did you really think I wouldn’t notice that you and Troy were slipping away to his bedroom at the end of the night?”

She shrugs, like what he’s saying holds no interest for her. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. And the oxygen supply to your brain was probably cut off, considering how you were dry humping Annie like--”

“You were the one holding Troy’s hand like he was about to take you to prom!”

“He was just going to show me his video game thingy. We weren’t --”

“Seriously?” Jeff laughs. “That’s like the modern-day equivalent of ‘Come up and see my etchings’.”
“Just because you’re a pig doesn’t mean that Troy is,” Britta snaps. “And we’re just friends. I mean, that’s only like the second time we’ve actually hung out. Well, he did stop by here the other night for a couple of hours but that was just… He wanted a piña colada and we make ‘em here, so…”

“Okay, sure, fine. If that’s your story.”

“Who are you to talk?” Britta demands. “If we hadn’t walked in, you and Annie totally would’ve had sex! But you’re still running around, acting like anyone who picks up on your thing for her is crazy. But we’re not the crazy ones here, buddy.”

“That isn’t -- I’m not …” He stops, because he doesn’t even know what more to say at this point. He takes another sip of his scotch, enjoying how it burns its way into his bloodstream.

“Me either,” Britta says after a long, silent moment. “Well, at least not really. Troy’s a nice guy. A really nice guy… and it’s not like I know a lot of those. So I like him, you know, a little bit. But I’m not dreaming of white picket fences and driving a minivan in the carpool or anything.”

Jeff nods, because he gets it; he really does. “The thing is,” he tells her, “I think Troy might be a white picket fences and minivan kind of guy. Or at least something closer to that than one-night stands or two-week drunken flings.”

Britta looks up at him, her eyes shining in the dim light. “Yeah, I kind of got that.” She sighs, sounding like the weight of the world is on her shoulders. “Is Annie?”

He lifts a shoulder, staring down into the bottom of his glass. “Maybe not exactly,” he admits. “But probably close enough that it still matters.”

Britta pulls out a bottle of tequila and pours herself a shot. The glass is so full that a little spills out when she hoists it in his direction for a toast. “To figuring out what our limitations are,” she declares. “Before the shit hits the fan.”

He huffs out a humorless laugh, but lifts his glass anyway. Misery always does love company, he thinks as he finishes off his scotch.

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On Christmas morning, Annie wakes up to snow. It’s probably just two or three inches, but there’s a vast white sparkling blanket when she peers out the window, and somehow that gives her a little bit of the holiday spirit.

Christmas may not technically be her holiday, but she’s always enjoyed celebrating it in a secular way, so she spends the morning at the stove, whipping up a batch of peppermint pancakes for the guys. She tries to pour them into the pan in candy-cane shapes, but all she sees is sloppy, misshapen Js, which probably says more about her state of mind than her batter-pouring skills.

Troy and Abed certainly don’t seem to mind -- they cover the pancakes in whipped cream and chocolate syrup, devouring all of them except the two that she manages to slide onto her plate. They put A Christmas Story on the TV, plug in the lights on their tiny tree, and it feels like a pretty nice way to spend the morning.

“Can we finally do presents?” Troy asks, and she isn’t sure whether it’s his pleading tone or the chocolate smeared across his chin, but he seems very much like a little boy.

“I’m ready whenever you are,” Abed says.
Annie can’t help feeling a little bit guilty at their obvious excitement. It’s the first Christmas that they’ve spent together in three years and the first one where she’s making more than enough money to buy some really great gifts, but she’s been too preoccupied with the case and everything else going on at Hamish, Hamish, Hamlin, & Hawthorne to spend much time at the mall. She couldn’t seem to come up with any gift ideas that were creative or really special.

Fortunately, Troy and Abed seem to like what she came up with -- movie theater gift cards, a subscription to some new streaming service that specializes in obscure horror movies, and season passes to Elitch Gardens. And she feels a little bit better when it turns out that they chipped in and got her a gift certificate for a massage, facial, and pedicure at the St. James Hotel’s spa. While it’s incredibly thoughtful (“We just really think you need to relax a little,” Troy tells her. “You stress yourself out way too much.”) it isn’t something unique and personalized enough to make her feel like a terrible friend.

Abed is going to spend the afternoon with his father, and while Troy’s family doesn’t celebrate the holiday, he makes some vague mention of plans that he has too, so it looks like she’s going to get some much-welcomed time to herself -- though Troy seems to feel bad about it, and Abed sees it as an opportunity to get out of seeing his father.

“We could go the movies, if you want,” he suggests. “It’s not like my father and I have real plans.”

“Yeah,” Troy says, noncommittally. “I could probably move some things around…”

“We could see Assassin’s Creed,” Abed says. “That’s based on a video game, so it would be like research for our game and movie. Maybe we could even deduct the price of the tickets on our tax return. It’s a business expense. Kind of.”

“That’s really not necessary,” Annie insists. “I’ve got a book that I’ve been wanting to read for months. I’m going to curl up on the couch with it and a bottle of wine and just relax all--”

As if the universe is ready to personally challenge her perfectly peaceful afternoon, her phone buzzes on the table, vibrating its way toward the edge. She grabs for it before it actually falls, wondering who it could possibly be. For a moment, she harbors the silly, schoolgirlish hope that it’s Jeff, but she tamps the feeling down as hard as she can.

Just as well too, because she doesn’t recognize the number on the display.

“Hello?”

“Alison?” a slightly hoarse voice croaks over the line. There’s something almost familiar about it, but she can’t quite place it. “Or… Amy?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t think--”

“Oh, ah, Anne? Or… Annie! Is this the Annie who works with Winger? Dark-haired broad with a nice ra--”

“Yes,” she snaps, as she suddenly recognizes Leonard’s voice. “It’s me, Leonard. What do you want?”

“I’ve been trying to get a hold of Winger all morning. But I keep getting his voicemail. Do you know where the hell he is?”

“It’s Christmas, Leonard. He’s celebrating the holiday with his family.”
“Yeah, well, I finally got an address for Debbie Wahlstrom. I figured he’d want to know ASAP. But I can always call him next week and --”

“You found her?” Annie asks, and suddenly, her annoyance lifts and her heart is racing with excitement and she is practically bouncing up and down in her chair.

“Yup. She’s in Aspen like you guys thought. Her family owns a small resort, but the place is in her mom’s name and she’s been married twice since she divorced Debbie’s dad so it didn’t turn up right away.”

Annie hurries over to the counter where the guys keep a basket that they toss odds and ends into. Her hand is shaking just a bit, but she manages to find a pen that’s been chewed on at the end and a crumpled napkin from Wendy’s. “Give me the name of the resort,” she demands, “And the address. Please.”

The last word is strictly an afterthought, but Leonard’s taken his sweet time finding the woman who just might be the most important person in the entire case so she thinks her curtness is understandable.

She hurriedly scribbles the information down on the battered napkin, already picturing Jeff’s face when she tells him the good news, the slightly lopsided smile and the crinkles at the corners of his eyes as he takes it all in. Then she realizes that she’ll probably have to settle for just hearing his voice over the phone, but the image is already so clear in her mind that she thinks she can make do.

-x-

The drive to his mother’s usually takes an hour, but the few measly inches of snow that have fallen have turned everyone into senior citizens behind the wheel, barely breaking 55 miles per hour on I-25, so he winds up spending almost an hour and a half on the road.

He tries not to let it turn him into too much of a grinch, because he doesn’t see his mother as often as he should and he knows that she’s really looking forward to today. Hell, she’s probably even thrilled that they’ve gotten a white Christmas -- it adds to whole Norman Rockwell vibe that she’s trying to build for the occasion.

Sure enough, when he meets her at the door to her townhouse, she is wearing a red and green argyle sweater and the kind of smile that reminds him just how little it takes to please her.

“Isn’t this perfect?” she says. “Our first Christmas together in years and we get just enough snow to make it a winter wonderland.”

He smiles down at her. “It didn’t seem like such a wonderland while I was driving here.”

She reaches for him, hugging him like she suspects it’ll be another five years before they celebrate together again. “Oh, forget about that… because now you can come inside and relax.” She pauses, looking at him contritely. “Actually, I do have a little favor to ask first. Would you mind shoveling the driveway and walkway? I know there’s not much snow, but I’m worried about it melting and freezing. No one around here can risk slipping, you know?”

Jeff frowns. “Don’t you have a groundskeeper who takes care of that? That’s the whole point of living in a community like this: so you don’t have to worry about stuff like that.”

“It’s Christmas, honey. Jimmy and Greg have the day off, and tomorrow too. So I figured that while my big, strong, strapping son was here, he wouldn’t mind helping out.” She grins, patting his arm affectionately. “It can be your workout for the day.”
“Ha ha,” he says sarcastically, but smiles despite himself -- and winds up spending nearly half an hour shoveling snow and working up a decent sweat.

When he’s nearly finished, though, he’s reminded once again that no good deed goes unpunished. As he gets near the curb at the edge of the driveway, his phone somehow falls out of his coat pocket and splashes into a puddle of slush at least five inches deep.

He feels a sense of panic come over him as he fishes it out, even though it’s highly unlikely that anyone would need to get in touch with him today. His mother offers up a bowl of rice, but that takes hours to dry out a phone, and he’s never met anyone that it’s actually worked for. It’s also Christmas, so there are no stores open where he can get a new one, which means he’ll have to wait until tomorrow to get his hands on a phone.

“It’ll be fine, Jeffrey,” his mother says as she hands him a mug full of hot buttered rum. “Actually, I think it’s kind of nice. You’re usually checking your phone every two minutes, so now it’s like I get you all to myself.”

“I’m not that bad, Mom,” he grumbles, petulantly stirring the cinnamon stick through his rum. “I just need to be in touch with work.”

His mother shrugs, sipping her own rum. “I think they’ll understand if you’re incommunicado for one day on Christmas, honey. How’s it going, by the way? I know work takes up so much of your time. You’re so dedicated that way.”

He looks away, staring down into the bottom of his mug. He knows that it says something that the first thing he thinks about when his mother mentions work is the draft of a text to Annie that is trapped in his now crapped-out phone, the one that he spent the better part of the morning debating about whether to send. He’d written and rewritten it more than a dozen times, because no matter how he strung the words together, they always sounded too romantic, too tender and affectionate to be considered anything but pathetic.

All he wanted was to let her know that he was thinking about her, because it’s been days since they talked and he misses her in a way that he doesn’t know what to do with.

But he never sent the text, and now he never will.

He sighs, wondering where to begin.

“Okay,” he finally settles, and he tells himself that’s mostly the truth. “We’ve kind of hit a roadblock. You know, with that big case that I--”

“Simon Rutherford,” she supplies. “I remember. I set up a Google alert, actually, so I get all the articles about it. I always hope there’s going to be a quote from you in them.”

He laughs. “I’m glad someone’s hanging on my every word.”

“I’m sure the jury will be too.” His mother smiles slyly, her eyes gleaming. “Just between you and me, is there any way at all that he didn’t do what he’s accused of doing?”

Jeff lifts an indifferent shoulder. “It doesn’t really matter. Because even if he did it, he’s still entitled to a good defense. Especially considering how much he’s paying the firm.”

She nods. “I suppose so. Innocent until proven guilty, that’s how it’s supposed to work, right?”

“Honestly, in my experience, it works the opposite way,” he says. “You accuse someone of
something that’s remotely plausible and everyone just assumes that it’s true. That’s what makes my job such a challenge.”

“For other people maybe. But not for you. You’re so good at what you do.”

He is, he reminds himself. He has built a reputation on being able to sell whatever version of the truth is most advantageous to him in any given moment, and that hasn’t changed. It doesn’t matter what the circumstances are, whom he’s up against, whom he’s working with -- he is always in control, always comes out on top.

“That’s what I’m counting on,” he tells his mother, and then he reaches for the bag with his gifts for her, hoping to distract both of them for a little while.

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Annie feels vaguely stalkerish, standing outside Doreen Winger’s door with her fist poised to knock.

Tracking Jeff down at his mother’s house certainly hadn’t been her plan, but when his cell phone went straight to voicemail just as Leonard said it had for him and he didn’t respond to the message that she left, or the multiple texts she sent within the hour, she knew that something had to be up.

His phone is practically glued to his hand at all times, and while she didn’t give specific details, she mentioned that they needed to talk about the case. So there is no reason for him to be intentionally avoiding her.

Next she tried his landline, which rang until the voicemail picked up too. She drove to his apartment just to be sure, which was probably going too far, but when she saw that his car was missing from his spot in the resident lot, she remembered that he’d mentioned spending the holiday at his mother’s, and figured that he’d already left.

He’d told her that his mother lived in Colorado Springs, but she didn’t have any more to go on than that.

She called Britta, apologizing profusely right off the bat for interrupting her holiday but asking in almost the same breath if she knew Jeff’s mother’s address. It was probably 30 seconds before Britta stopped laughing (“As if he’d ever share anything that personal with anyone.”) and Annie still didn’t have the info that she needed.

For a moment, she seriously thought about going to Hamish, Hamish, Hamlin, & Hawthorne and trying to break into the HR office to get his file -- she couldn’t think of anyone but his mother that he’d have listed as his emergency contact -- but her life, or at least her career at the firm, would be over if she ever got caught, so she had to come up with another way.

(She refuses to think about why it’s so important to tell Jeff the good news about Deborah Wahlstrom today, why she can’t wait until he gets back in touch himself, or why she couldn’t just send an email, why it’s so important to at least hear his voice when he realizes that everything is about to turn around for them. No good will come of thinking too hard about that, she is certain.)

So she figured out what one step below breaking into the Hamish, Hamish, Hamlin, & Hawthorne offices was on the desperation scale, and called Craig Pelton at home on Christmas to ask if he’d bend all of the rules and access the employee files to give her the info that she needed.

She figured his obvious admiration of and infatuation with Jeff would help convince him.
“Annie, I appreciate your situation, I really do, but I’m pretty sure what you’re asking for is illegal, and we work for a law firm so I feel like we must--”

“Craig, I know I’m putting you in a difficult position, but this is about the Rutherford case. Jeff is going to want this information as soon as is humanly possible. He’ll be so grateful to you if you help me get it to him.”

“You’d tell him that I helped?”

“Of course! Of course.”

Sure enough, it had worked like a charm.

But when she called Mrs. Winger’s line, she’d gotten an answering machine there too, and leaving a message for Jeff on his mother’s voicemail somehow seemed more inappropriate than showing up on her doorstep.

Which probably means that she’s crazy.

But Colorado Springs was only 70 or so miles away, so she isn’t totally insane. Though it is a holiday, and she is intruding on his personal life, and she is so out of line that she wouldn’t know how to get back to appropriate territory if she had a map.

So she takes a deep breath, smooths her hair, and knocks before she has time for second thoughts.

The woman who answers the door looks so much like Jeff that it’s almost startling. She has pale eyes, light hair that’s somewhere between blonde and silver, and a disarming smile. Her red and green argyle sweater is both festive and stylish, and makes Annie feel even worse for showing up like this.

“I’m so sorry to bother you today,” she says, feeling utterly self-conscious. “But I--”

“Are you Joyce’s granddaughter?” Jeff’s mother asks. “Don’t tell me… she wants some of my fresh thyme for her gravy? I keep telling her that it’s so easy to grow herbs on your windowsill, and she should--”

“Oh, no… I’m not…” Annie shakes her head, trying to calm her nerves. “Mrs. Winger, I’m here to--”

“Mrs. Winger?” she laugh. “It’s actually Fitzgerald. I switched back to my maiden name years ago.” The older woman frowns, her brow furrowed. “What do you--”

“I’m looking for Jeff,” Annie blurts out, and that seems to calm his mother down almost immediately. “I work with him, Ms. Fitzgerald, and I have some information that I really have to pass on to him. I’m so sorry to interrupt your holiday, especially because I know how much Jeff was looking forward to spending the day with you, but it’s really important and I just need a minute of his time…’’

Jeff’s mother smiles. “First of all, it’s Doreen, not Ms. Fitzgerald. And it’s fine if you need to chat with Jeff. I’m just sorry you had to drive all the way out here. He had a little mishap with his phone, which was all my fault…” She turns back toward the interior of the house. “Jeffrey,” she calls out before she turns back to Annie. “Oh, I’m sorry, honey. Come on in, it’s cold out there.”

Just as Annie steps into the house, Jeff appears from the other room. He’s wearing a pink and yellow floral print apron and there’s a streak of flour across his cheek, and it’s been less than a
week since she last saw him but it occurs to her just how much she’s missed him.

“Annie,” he says, clearly surprised, and he smiles briefly, before he seems to catch himself.

“What’re you doing here?”

She is pretty sure that she’s blushing so she tries to avoid his eyes. “I tried to call, but you didn’t pick up, and you weren’t responding to texts, and then you weren’t at your apartment and I remembered that you said you were spending the day in Colorado Springs…”

“I had to shovel the driveway for my mom, and my phone fell into the slush, so it’s busted. And because it’s Christmas, I can’t replace it.”

Annie looks up, nodding jerkily. “Right, sure. That makes sense.”

He nods back, and they look at one another for a long moment, as if they’ve both lost the power of speech.

“I’m going to go back to the kitchen,” his mother announces. “Finish those rolls you were working on…” She pats Jeff’s arm as she gracefully exits the room.

Jeff steps closer then, and Annie does the same almost without thinking.

“How’d you know where my mother lives?” he asks.

“I forced it out of Craig Pelton. He was quite invested in protecting your privacy.” Jeff snorts at that, shaking his head. “Seriously! It was only when I explained how important it was that I get in touch with you for the hundredth time that he--”

“Yeah, about that,” Jeff says. “Why was it so important to get in touch with me today?”

She grins, reaching into the pocket of her coat to pull out the wrinkled napkin that she’s written Deborah Wahlstrom’s location on. She holds it up with both so hands so he can see it clearly.


“This is it,” she declares. “This is Deborah Wahlstrom’s family’s place! This is where she is! We finally found her!”

Jeff looks back and forth between her eyes and the scribbled writing a few times, but then he breaks into a grin that she is pretty sure mirrors her own, and she isn’t sure who moves first but she is in his arms a moment later and he lifts her off her feet so she feels utterly weightless. She laughs into the curve of his neck, and he answers her right back, like they are completely in sync for the first time in days.

When she pulls away to look at him, he is smiling so brightly and their lips are so close that she wants to kiss him as badly as she can ever remember wanting to kiss anyone. She is pretty sure that he wants to kiss her just as much too, but he hesitates, mumbling something that sounds like “Sorry” as he sets her down as gently as possible.

Her cheeks feel hot again, and she finger combs her hair into place for something to do. “Okay, well, I know you’re spending the day with your mom, so I’ll drive back to Greendale and you can call when you’re on your way home so you can pick me up and we can head to Aspen. That’s not really out of your way because it’s four hours between here and Aspen but it’s only about three hours from Greendale so when you add on the hour between here and Greendale, it’ll be the same-
“Annie,” he laughs. “Hang on a sec. I appreciate your enthusiasm, I really do, but let’s slow down here. It’s Christmas. Deborah Wahlstrom’s probably off somewhere celebrating with her family. Besides, I think we should do a little strategizing before we go to see her. We want to approach this the right way.”

She nods. “Sure. You’re right. We need to be smart about it.” She shrugs. “I know driving down here just to tell you this probably seems crazy, but I was really excited and I thought you would be too, and I couldn’t wait…”

He smiles. “No, I really appreciate it. But I wouldn’t expect any less from you.”

“Okay, well, bright and early Tuesday morning, we’ll start coming up with a game plan,” she says. “Unless you want to start tomorrow? I know the office is closed but we could--”

“I’ll call you when I get home tonight, okay? We can figure out something then.”

“Sure. Great.” She gestures toward the door. “I should go and let you get back to your holiday. I really want to apologize to your mother, though. For interrupting.”

“It’s not necessary, Annie. Really.” She doesn’t budge, though, and he eventually turns toward the kitchen. “Mom, Annie’s going. She wants to say goodbye.”

His mother appears in the doorway, wiping her hands on a kitchen towel. “Leaving so soon? I bet you’ve got a family dinner to get back to…”

“Annie’s Jewish, Mom.” He grins at Annie. “So she’s going home to watch a movie and eat Chinese takeout, right?”

“Something like that,” she says with a smile.

“Well, in that case, why don’t you join us for dinner?” his mother asks.

“Oh, that’s really nice, but I don’t want to impose.”

“Don’t be silly. It’s my fault you had to drive all the way here to talk to Jeff about your case. The least I can do is offer you a home-cooked meal.” She smiles at Jeff. “Right, honey?”

Annie meets Jeff’s gaze, because she certainly doesn’t want to intrude where she isn’t wanted, but his expression is annoyingly blank. After a moment, though, the corner of his mouth lifts in a near smile. “She’s made three different lasagnas for just the two of us,” he says. “So really, you’d be helping us out if you ate some.”

His mother rolls her eyes. “I had to make three different ones because I never know what food groups he isn’t eating in any given month. So I made my famous lasagna and I made a meatless one and I made one with whole wheat noodles. They’re not that big.”

“Face it, Mom. You’re going to be eating lasagna for weeks,” Jeff teases.

“This boy, I swear.” His mother shakes her head fondly. “But please, Annie, stay and join us. That way, I won’t have to hear about how much food I made all through dinner.”

Annie looks over at Jeff again, and he smiles softly. “Yeah,” he says. “Stay.”

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When his mother drags out the second photo album, he excuses himself to the kitchen to freshen his drink.

She has already shown Annie every baby picture that she has of him, a lock of hair from his very first haircut, and one of his best finger paintings, and he is pretty sure that it’s only going to get worse.

“And this is from his first year in Little League,” he hears his mother say. “He won Most Improved Player that year and MVP the next …”

“You must have been very proud,” Annie responds, and she sounds so utterly sincere that Jeff wonders, not for the first time, how someone like her wound up as part of his life.

Having her in his mother’s house only makes it all feel even stranger. This is the realest part of his life, if such a thing exists, and here she is, making herself comfortable on his mother’s chenille sofa like it’s all perfectly natural. There’s been something tight and hot in his chest all afternoon, just watching her like this.

It’s why he wanted to send her on her way when his mother came up with the great idea for her to share Christmas dinner with them, because some part of him knew that no matter what happened between them going forward, how badly he might screw things up, he’d always remember her bathed in the soft glow of his mother’s Christmas tree, smiling across his mother’s table, as part of a memory in this area of his life that he’s purposely kept separate from everything else.

But he looked at her face, into those wide blue eyes that see everything, and he realized that it had been days since he’d spoken to her and there was no way to pretend that he hadn’t missed her, and sending her away wouldn’t change that.

All of this has gotten so far away from him that he isn’t sure that he could find his way back if he wanted to.

“He was on the baseball and the football teams?” he hears Annie ask.

“And track,” he says as he strolls back into the room with his freshly poured wine. “I was a triple threat.”

Annie grins. “I guess I just didn’t picture you to be such a joiner.”

He shrugs, sinking back down into the armchair beside the sofa. “What can I say? I liked all the perks that came with being a varsity athlete. So I did just enough to keep myself on the teams… I mean, I was mainly a pinch hitter for the baseball team and I was the second string tight end so I think I caught a total of 15 reception yards all four years combined.”

“Don’t listen to him,” his mother says, waving a dismissive hand. “He’s always been naturally good at whatever he tried.”

Annie looks at him for confirmation, but he just smiles over the rim of his wine glass.

“You’ve been at the firm a while now, Annie,” his mother continues. “So you tell me… is he a good person to work with?”

Annie huffs out a laugh, lowering her head a bit so he can’t see her face. “He’s been pretty great, actually. I’m pretty sure I’ve learned more from him than I would have with anyone else.”

“That’s definitely true,” he agrees.
“Then it’s a good thing you wound up with each other,” his mother declares. “Because Annie is obviously a very bright, poised young woman. You’re lucky that she’s the associate you get to work with.”

He nods, not bothering to correct his mother’s mistaken assumption that luck had anything to do with it. Annie chose him that first night at L Street, and he chose her the next day at the office. Fate wasn’t involved at all. “And that’s why she’s going to wind up with the biggest possible year-end bonus I could get for her,” he says.

Annie looks at him in confusion. “I didn’t get any bonus.”

“It’ll be with your next paycheck,” he tells her. “And let’s just say you’ll have no excuse to keep driving around in that old piece crap outside … or sleeping on your college roommates’ sofa anymore.”

She smiles. “Seriously? Wow… thank you.”

“Well, I only deserve partial thanks. Half the bonus is determined by how well the firm’s performed over the year, and the other half is discretionary based on performance. So I guess you should also be thanking Taylor and Armstrong for winning that multi-million dollar patent lawsuit earlier in the year. That was enough to put us in the black even if we’d tanked every other case.”

Annie tilts her head, her expression almost painfully soft. “I think I’d rather save all my thanks for you.”

He lifts a shoulder casually. “You earned it.”

His mother starts making noises about dessert, and he knows that she’s made some peppermint cheesecake that she can’t wait to show off. So he helps get the plates out of the china cabinet and eats a fairly thick slice even though he knows that he’s going to have to spend an extra hour at the gym tomorrow because of everything that he’s eaten today. Annie cleans her plate too, so his mother is more than happy.

It’s started to snow again, all light and delicate, but enough that Annie’s car is covered when she’s ready to leave so he heads outside with her to help clear it off. She stands beside the car in her purple coat and matching hat, snowflakes shining in her dark hair, and every time that she breathes out, the air crystallizes around her, and shit, she looks like some sort of fairytale princess. He is practically paralyzed with the desire to kiss her again, just as he was earlier when she told him the good news about Deborah Wahlstrom.

“So we’ll meet tomorrow at noon in conference room F?” she says. “Right?”

“Right.”

“Don’t be late,” she orders teasingly. “Not unless you’re stopping to get food. Maybe from the Indian restaurant on Spring Street…”

He smirks. “Real subtle.”

She grins, and he grins back, and for a moment, they just look at one another, snow flurries dancing in the air around them as the sky above darkens to an even richer shade of blue.

He isn’t certain, but it seems like they’re both relieved to be working together again, on the same page once more, and neither of them wants the spell to be broken by the wrong words. But as he’s trying to figure out what to do next, Annie reaches out, cupping his cheek with her gloved fingers,
and pulls him in for what might be the softest, sweetest kiss of his life.

“Merry Christmas,” she whispers.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I knew that it had been a long time since I last updated, but I legitimately had no clue that it had been all the way back in January. Geeze.

If you’re still here and reading this story, you have my profound gratitude. I can’t promise to have carefully scheduled updates going forward, but I do promise that I’m going to finish this story … even if it takes me another 10 years. ;)

(Though I can honestly say that it won't take another 8 months to update -- the next chapter is already written and just needs some editing, so it's a matter of weeks, not months.)

As committed as I am to this story, though, chances are good I wouldn't still be updating it if it wasn't for the help of the world's most amazing beta, Bethany. She is as generous, thoughtful, and insightful as they come, and the story owes pretty much everything to her. <3

Considering how long it’s taken to track her down, Jeff is expecting Deborah Wahlstrom to be wholly remarkable, exceptional in some way that will be obvious upon first glance.

As he studies the photo of her on the Aspen Pines Resort website, though, she looks like any ordinary woman. Sure, she’s attractive enough, with auburn hair, dark eyes, and a bright smile, but she doesn’t look like anyone who might hold the fate of their entire case in her hands.

“You’re sure this is her?” he asks Annie, who sits beside him at the table in conference room F.

She nods. “Well, the caption says, ‘Peter, Debbie, and other resort staff at the season opening party.’ I guess there could be two Debbies working at Aspen Pines, but considering it’s a family business, it seems like a safe bet. Besides…” She slides a printout with another photo on it toward him. “This is her at a Pine Brook holiday party in 2006. It looks like the same woman, right?”

Jeff holds the printout next to his laptop to compare, and there’s definitely enough of a resemblance to believe that Deborah Wahlstrom is the Debbie in the website photo, wearing a blue sweater that matches the rest of the resort staff’s outfits.

“I guess it’s just weird to see her,” he says. “You know, after looking for her for so long.”

Annie nods again. “Yeah, after awhile, she started to seem like Bigfoot. Or the Loch Ness Monster.”

He smiles, watching as she reaches for her phone when it buzzes with a text. It has been a serious challenge to get his head back on the case, because he’s been thinking of nothing but their kiss on the snowy street in front of his mother’s house since yesterday evening. He doesn’t really understand it, because it definitely wasn’t the hottest kiss they’ve ever shared, yet there’s some part of him that’s still vibrating inside, that is still hopelessly off-kilter.

Annie bites at her lip as she types something on her phone, and he wants to reach across the table
and seal his mouth over hers again until he’s sure that she feels everything that he does. She grinned up at him with a knowing gleam in her eyes when he showed up to conference room F only seven minutes late -- and with the lunch she wanted to boot -- so he knows that she hasn’t forgotten, but he would like a more practical demonstration of that fact.

It doesn’t help matters that he’s been distracted by her shirt since he sat down. There’s really no good reason for that, because it’s a simple tee shirt, with maroon raglan sleeves and the words ‘Stanford Law Review Softball Team’ scrolled across the chest, but paired with her ponytail, jeans, and tennis shoes, it gives her a girl-next-door vibe that is really doing it for him.

(He also really wants to know what position she played on the team for some reason, but that’s probably a conversation for another time.)

“I’m gonna run and get more water,” she announces, shaking her empty bottle. “Want anything?”

“Another Diet Dr Pepper?”

She already lectured him earlier about how drinking too much soda probably undermined all the exercise and obsessively restrictive eating he does, so he knows that he’s probably pushing his luck, but she nods absently as she heads for the hallway.

Maybe she realizes that caffeine is necessary to keep him interested in the task at hand so she doesn’t see the point in arguing, or maybe she’s just as preoccupied with what happened between them last night as he is.

The thing is, he knows Annie well enough at this point to understand that taking the case seriously, putting in his best effort, is just as much of a valentine for her as flowers or candy might be, so he’s determined to at least fake an unrivaled work ethic and sense of professionalism. Though, honestly, he’s actually pretty interested in all the Deborah Wahlstrom intrigue, so he scrolls through the Aspen Pines website for any more info on Debbie that he can find while he waits for Annie to get back.

There’s no staff page, which makes it tough to determine exactly what position Deborah Wahlstrom holds at the resort, but when he scans the contact page for the third time, he finally notices that all media inquiries are supposed to go through the director of marketing. Their email address just so happens to be debbie@aspenpines.com.

It seems like the kind of information that might help them arrange a meeting with Deborah and still catch her totally off-guard.

Jeff’s feeling pretty proud of his detective skills and anxious to share his find with Annie, so when he hears the elevator ding at the end of the hall, he sits up a little straighter and schools his expression into the smuggest smile that he’s got in his arsenal. Annie wouldn’t expect anything less.

“You’re probably gonna want to kiss me,” he declares as he hears footsteps just outside the doorway. “But try to resist the urge, please.”

“Not a problem. I’m afraid you aren’t really my type.” Just like that, Jeff’s good mood evaporates as Ian Duncan strolls into the conference room. He immediately zeroes in on the styrofoam containers in the middle of the table with the leftovers from lunch, popping one open without a hint of self-consciousness. “Annie promised me samosas… did you only get vegetable? Come on, man. And where’s the bloody chutney to dip them in?”
“What the hell are you doing here?” Jeff demands.

“Annie wanted me to lend some of my expertise to your case. I will confess I’m still a little gassed from Christmas spirits, but I will do what I can.” He tears into one of the samosas like he hasn’t eaten in days. “Even if the food is rubbish,” he mutters under his breath, his mouth appallingly full.

“Look, I don’t know what she told you, but--”

“Jeff, relax.” Annie breezes back into the room, carrying a couple cans of soda and her refilled water bottle. She slides the Diet Dr Pepper toward him, and he sees clearly now that it’s meant to be a peace of offering -- or a way of appeasing him, because she knows that he’s supremely annoyed. “I thought it might help to have a profile of sorts for Deborah before we head to Aspen,” she explains, “That might help us figure out the best way to get the information we need out of her.”

“Well, that might be true,” Jeff says, “If we had a reputable psychologist to do the profiling. You dragged a guy nursing an eggnog-induced hangover out of bed who couldn’t analyze an open book on his best day.”

“I’ll have you know that I’ve done a bloody good job analyzing you, buddy,” Duncan declares, pointing the remainder of his samosa across the table almost accusingly. “Like the fact you’ve got it so bad for--”

“If you’re going to be here, at least try to make yourself useful,” Jeff snaps, “Share some of those brilliant insights.”

As Annie gets comfortable in her chair once more and drags out a legal pad to jot notes down, Duncan nods, wiping his mouth with a napkin. “So you guys are sure that the lady in question and Rutherford were an item at one time, right?” Annie nods. “Well, then I think the way she’ll respond to your questions depends on what kind of breakup they had. If they parted on good terms, she’s probably going to be willing to help him. If it was a bitter breakup, she’s likely going to want to nail him to the wall.”

“Seriously?” Jeff laughs. “That’s your keen insight? If she’s pissed, she’ll have an axe to grind like every other jilted ex in the world?”

“It’s interesting how she’s flown under the radar since she left Pinebrook,” Duncan continues, ignoring him. “That makes me think if she does have information pertaining to the case, she’s been keeping it quiet. I mean, she obviously knows he’s been indicted. If she wanted to stick it to him, she would’ve contacted the police by now, don’t you think?”

Annie nods, scribbling furiously across her pad, while Jeff considers the idea. “Wouldn’t it work the opposite way too? If she knew something that could help and still cared about the guy, wouldn’t she have offered to come forward?”

“But that’s just it,” Annie says, “Maybe she’s been lying low all these years because she knows she got away with something. She probably wouldn’t want to come forward and implicate herself, even if she still has feelings for the guy.”

“True.” Duncan nods thoughtfully. “But that might help you figure out what exactly she knows. If it seems like she’s harboring a great deal of guilt … or is super-smug because she’s screwed him over, then you should be able to pick up on that.”

“Wow,” Jeff say dryly. “I’m so glad you were here to tell us that. How would we have ever figured
that out ourselves?"

Annie narrows her eyes, shooting him a sharp, scolding look, but Duncan is too busy shoving the rest of the samosa in his mouth to pay any attention to Jeff. “It’s just really strange,” she says, “I mean, regardless of what happened between her and Rutherford, why would she sacrifice her entire career over some guy? She completely gave up the high-pressure world of finance to run a little resort in the mountains? It doesn’t make much sense.”

Jeff shrugs. “She’s in charge of marketing, actually. And who knows? Maybe after things went south with Rutherford, she wanted a change, or--”

“A completely fresh start,” Duncan finishes. “It’s actually quite common for people to find themselves at a crossroads when a long-term relationship ends. They want a new place to live, a new job… hell, even a new haircut. It’s like you’re completely turning a page on the old things that might’ve been holding you back.”

Jeff’s first instinct is to laugh at the idea that someone would blow up their entire life just because a relationship didn’t work out, but when he thinks about it for a second, that is pretty much what Annie did after she dumped Vaughn. Well, she got an amazing new job and moved back to Greendale. He’s not sure about the haircut thing, because her hair seems pretty long right now so he’s not sure how much longer it could’ve been a few months back.

“Sure,” she agrees, still jotting notes down on her pad. “I guess I can see that.”

“Yeah, you’re amazingly insightful, Duncan,” Jeff says. “Thank you for sharing your vast expertise with us.”

Duncan leans back in his chair, dabbing at his mouth again with a crumpled napkin. “That’s what I’m here for. But you know, perhaps I could be an even bigger help to your case. If I accompanied you to Aspen and provided--”

Jeff laughs, shaking his head. “Dream on, buddy. You’re not getting a free trip to Aspen out of us so you can throw back hot toddies and hit on snow bunnies.”

Even Annie, who had called Duncan in in the first place, nods in agreement, and he tosses his napkin at the table petulantly. “Fine. Be that way. You two obviously want to spend all your free time canoodling and don’t want--”

“Speaking of Aspen,” Annie cuts him off, turning toward Jeff, “what time did you want to leave tomorrow?”

“I booked us on a 10:30 flight, which will get us into--”

“A flight? Really? It’s a less than a four-hour drive… why would we fly?”

“Because this way, we’ll be there in less than an hour?” Jeff shrugs. “Besides, the firm’s paying, so why not?”

Annie looks like she wants to argue the point, but she hesitates, staying silent. He doesn’t think anyone could really fault her for going along with it. The lure of a first-class trip, even for only an hour, is too much for even the most principled of first-year associates to resist. (Though he knows that Annie won’t partake of any of the plane’s free mimosas while she’s on the clock -- there are lines that she won’t ever cross).

Or maybe he’s rubbing off on her a little, like she’s maybe been rubbing off on him.
Because he’s able to talk her into ditching Duncan less than an hour after he showed up, and by four o’clock, Jeff’s even convinced her that they’ve done all the necessary prep work for their trip, and since they technically weren’t even supposed to be working today with the office closed, it’s fine for them to head home to get ready for tomorrow.

Of course, he wants to invite her back to his place -- it’s what he’s wanted since the kiss last night - - but he’s also pretty invested in not blowing things completely so it seems best to let her set the pace.

And she does let him walk her to her car, which really isn’t much of a concession given that they’re parked right next to one another, just beside the elevator entrance, but she stops next to her car, leaning back against the driver’s side door like she has no intention of running away from him. She’s even shorter than usual in her tennis shoes, so she looks up at him from beneath the heavy fringe of her lashes and offers up a soft, shy smile that leaves him acutely aware of the weight of his heart in his chest.

“This trip is really important,” she tells him, as if she isn’t stating the obvious. “So we need to stay focused. Keep our eyes on the prize.”

He grins, because she’s so damn cute and earnest with all her professional platitudes, and he doesn’t think that he’s ever genuinely liked anyone as much as he likes her -- and that’s even with her prioritizing work over fooling around with him. “Right. Sure,” he says.

She nods, like she’s pleased that he’s mature enough to agree with her -- but then, without any warning, she’s fisting her hand in the end of his scarf and giving it a hard tug to pull him down to her and pressing her mouth to his again. And just like that, he feels himself sinking into the kiss like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

But kissing her again only reminds him of how badly he’s wanted to do this all day, so he probably holds her a little too tightly and steals a little more of her breath than is probably polite. She laughs into his mouth, and somehow, he can taste the sound, sweet and light against his tongue, even as she pulls away.

“I thought we might be a little distracted if we didn’t get that out of the way,” she says, pressing gloved fingers to her smile for a moment.

He grins back. “Good thinking. But I think you miscalculated … because I’m still going to be pretty distracted by this.” He leans in to kiss her again, stooping down and pressing her back against her car like it’s the only thing holding both of them up.

As usual, he’s right -- he doesn’t think about anything else for the rest of the night.

-x-

She knows that she should be focusing on more pressing matters, but as Annie heads back to Troy and Abed’s apartment, she finds herself stressing over what exactly to pack for the trip to Aspen.

Jeff managed to get them rooms at a resort near Aspen Pines where one of his former clients is an investor since he wasn’t exactly sure how much time they’d need to find Deborah Wahlstrom and get the info they needed out of her, which means she’ll need an overnight bag. He told her to keep things casual, because he doesn’t want to show up looking like slick-talking lawyers. They want to put Deborah at ease, catch her totally off-guard, which means a power suit and heels clearly don’t fit the bill.
But she will still technically be on the job, and she has always prided herself on her professional
demeanor, so she is pretty sure that faded jeans with a ripped knee and her Stanford Law sweatshirt
aren’t the best option.

Of course, looking like she means business probably seems even more important at the moment,
considering that she can’t seem to stop kissing Jeff every chance she gets. She might not be able to
control herself much around him, but at least she can look like someone who is serious and
committed to the work.

Maybe her new turquoise sweater and black jeans would work, she thinks as she treks up the stairs
to the third floor. But then, her snow boots are purple and gray, and she isn’t entirely sure that it’ll
all coordinate.

When she finally makes it up to the apartment, she is so caught up in mentally inventorying her
sweater collection and finding the keys in her bag that she almost trips over Britta, who is sitting on
the floor beside the door with her phone in her hand.

“Britta,” she says stupidly. “Hey. What are you doing here?”

The other woman practically leaps to her feet, brushing off the back of her pants. “Oh, um… I’m
just, you know … supposed to meet Troy. But he’s running late so I was waiting…”

“Oh,” Annie says, opening the door. “I didn’t realize that you and Troy--”

“No,” Britta practically barks. “No. He just helped me pick out a Christmas gift for my nephew
that the kid really loved, so I told Troy I’d buy him dinner as a thank you. No big deal.”

“Oh, okay.” Annie smiles politely. “That’s nice.”

Britta follows her into the apartment, but she doesn’t really have time to play the perfect hostess.
She is trying to remember where she put her carry-on bag when she first moved into the apartment.
It’s not like the place is that big, but there are a surprising number of nooks and crannies for Troy
and Abed to shove things into.

“So... what?” Britta asks from behind her. “Did Jeff say something to you?”

Annie crouches down in front of the futon to look underneath it, but there’s nothing there but some
dust bunnies. “About what?”

Britta lowers her eyes, examining her fingernails closely. “Me and Troy.”

Annie absently shakes her head as she stands and heads for the closet. “We’ve been really busy
with the case the last few days so we’ve been pretty distracted.” She lets out a triumphant laugh
when she spots her striped bag beneath a pile of Troy and Abed’s cosplay gear. “Found it!”

“Yeah,” Britta says. “And I bet some other things have been distracting you guys too…”

When Annie turns, pulling her carry-on bag out of the closet, Britta is smiling in an unnervingly
smug way, and suddenly Annie remembers the last time that they were together in this apartment,
when Britta and Troy walked in on she and Jeff rutting around on Troy’s bed like a couple of horny
teenagers.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking,” she starts to say, but then, the gears in her head suddenly shift
in just the right way, and she puts together the fact that Britta and Troy were going off to spend
time alone together at her birthday party and now they’re sharing private dinners, and it all finally
adds up to something. “Wait a minute. Should Jeff have said something to me about you and Troy?”

“No,” Britta insists. But then she hesitates, looking down at the floor again. “Maybe. I don’t know.” She shrugs, looking confused and maybe a little afraid, and in that moment, Annie understands perfectly well how she’s feeling. “Would it bother you?” she asks. “You know, if there was something to tell?”

Annie frowns, her brow furrowing in confusion. “Why would it bother me?”

Britta lifts her shoulders again. “I don’t know. Because he’s your friend, and Jeff and I used to… you know.”

“Wait,” Annie says again, more pieces clicking into place. “Would it bother you? You know, if Jeff and I were distracted by something other than the case lately?”

Britta smirks, and it’s pretty clear that she thinks her suspicions have been fully confirmed. “Nope. Not even a little bit. Though it does make me question your judgment big time. Your taste too.”

Annie huffs out a laugh. “Okay, then, I’ll make this clear as I can -- I love Troy, and I just want him to be happy.”

Britta snorts. “Yeah, like that’s so easy.”

“I don’t know how easy it is,” Annie says, “But it seems like a worthwhile goal.”

Britta cocks her head, as if she is considering the idea carefully, but it’s difficult to tell whether she’s buying it or not. She seems to notice the suitcase at Annie’s feet then, and she juts her chin toward it. “You taking a trip?”

“Jeff and I have to go to Aspen. There’s a woman there who might be able to help with our case. She might be the whole key to our defense, actually. Speaking of which…” Annie reaches for two pairs of pants from her pile of clothes in the closet. “Which do you think are more professional? The black jeans or the dark-rinse?”

“You’re asking the wrong person,” Britta declares. “Though even I think jeans are a little too casual for a business trip. What, are you and Jeff going to spend most of it curled up in front of a business instead of--”

“We’re trying to catch this woman off-guard, so we don’t want to go in looking like slick, polished--”

“Sleazy? Amoral?”

“Lawyers,” Annie finishes, somehow resisting the urge to roll her eyes. “There’s not going to be any cuddling in front of fireplaces, thank you very much.”

“Hey, I didn’t say anything about cuddling.” Britta holds up her hands almost defensively. “I was talking about sex.”

“Yeah, well, that’s not happening either. We’re professionals, so we’re going to stick strictly to business.”

Britta grins, looking more than a little amused. “Whatever you say, Annie… but you know, life is pretty freaking short. So I think it’s okay to just live a little sometimes.”
For a moment, Annie finds herself thinking of Laura and Emily, her closest friends from law school. She knows exactly the kind of advice that they’d give if they were here right now -- they would know which pair of jeans looked most professional and understand exactly why it was so important to keep things with Jeff all about the work in a professional setting like this trip and tell her to play everything safe and smart -- because it would be the same things that she always tells herself. They have too much in common to think all that differently.

She and Britta have so very little in common, and come at situations from completely different perspectives, but maybe that’s what adult friendships are really about: respecting the other person’s differences, admiring them even, and learning what you can from them.

“Maybe you should take your own advice,” Annie says, “Just seize the moment, without worrying too much about what comes next. That’s pretty much how Troy lives his life.”

Britta ducks her head, but Annie still sees her small, soft smile. “Maybe.”

Annie nods, because maybe is all she is willing to commit too. She throws both the black and dark-rinse jeans into her bag, along with a teal sweater with a neckline definitely more appropriate for after-hours along with a more modest crewneck.

It’s smart -- and safe -- to cover all of the bases, just in case.

-x-

He gets to the office so early that he beats Claire, which he’s fairly certain has never happened before.

The flight that he arranged for himself and Annie leaves at 10:30. She insists that they can’t get to the airport any later than nine, which means they have to leave by eight because they’ll be driving right in the middle of rush hour. They agreed to meet at the office, and he figured that they’d both need coffee to fuel their early start, which meant he had to make a stop at Shirley’s first. He left his apartment at ten to seven, picks up coffee, and still somehow manages to make it behind his desk by 7:26.

Talk about overachieving.

It’s so early that besides the security guard at the front desk and Hamilton from Family Law, who’s handling a pretty bitter custody dispute, no one else has made it in yet. He feels particularly virtuous as a result, like he’s actually a serious lawyer with an unrivaled work ethic -- and really, that’s the whole point.

Because he wants Annie to know that he is focused, that he knows how important this trip is, and that he is ready to work his usual magic to ensure that the case is fully on track.

With everything that’s happened between them over the past week, it’s important that she understands that, that she knows that he understands why it’s so important for them to keep things professional.

Though, maybe, it’s just as important that she think well of him in general -- but he isn’t going to focus on that at the moment.

He is all about the work.

To prove it -- and make sure that Annie realizes exactly how early he made it to the office -- he snaps a selfie of himself behind his desk, holding the coffee cup that has her usual order scribbled
on the side, and texts it to her with the message, Beat you.

It doesn’t even take her 30 seconds to respond with, For the first time ever!! and an emoji with its tongue sticking out. He smiles, picturing the outraged, little frown she wore as she typed the text on her way to her car, the way she probably laughed despite herself at the whole exchange, and the way she might have given in and smiled herself as she started the engine.

His phone vibrates again, and there’s another message from Annie: And just so you know, now I’m worried the world’s about to end. He can’t help but laugh, feeling a lightness at the center of him that he isn’t used to. It’s ridiculous, really, because it’s just some silly teasing texts that don’t mean anything. And yet, just having someone on the other end of his phone who can’t wait to respond to his messages, who’s happy to hear from him and actually cares whether he responds, feels like the kind of novelty that he could get used to.

It’s probably why he contemplates his reply for a solid minute. It has to be exactly right, and he’s hoping for some kind of divine inspiration to strike.

“Woah! When did we institute a Casual Tuesday policy around here?” Without any warning, Alan Connor strolls into his office, and Jeff can only blame his total distraction for the other man’s ability to sneak in so easily.

Alan’s wearing a perfectly pressed suit as he eyes Jeff’s sweater and jeans with smug satisfaction. Jeff’s got to hand to the guy; he’s got a real gift for timing. He always manages to show up when Jeff’s in a bad mood that he can make worse, or when Jeff’s in a good mood that he can deflate.

Still, it’s been awhile since Jeff’s had to put up with Alan’s brand of bullshit so he can’t really be surprised that his luck finally gave out.

“I’m not going to be working in the office today,” he says blandly, somehow resisting the urge to point out that his sweater and jeans probably cost more than Alan’s suit anyway. “When you have a real big-time case, sometimes you’ve got to hit the road. You know, really earn those big bucks.”

“Is that so? And see, I thought you were just trying out your new wardrobe for when the big boys upstairs kick you out on your ass.” Alan smirks as he drops down into one of the chairs opposite Jeff’s desk. “I kid, I kid, Wing-man. You know I wouldn’t let them run you out of here… no matter how much you blow things with Rutherford.”

Jeff smiles. “Yeah, you’re a real pal. But if I were you, I’d stick to worrying about myself.”

“What do I have to worry about?” Alan grins, reaching out to fiddle with the stapler at the end of Jeff’s desk. “So… where are you headed? Gonna spend all day knee-deep in Rutherford’s file room or something?”

“Not exactly,” Jeff tells him. “I’m more likely to be knee-deep in snow in Aspen, I think.”

He doesn’t miss the way that Alan’s jaw tightens ever so slightly, or the way his eyes narrow just a bit as he processes his jealousy -- though it barely takes him ten seconds to get himself under control and school his features back into his usual smarmy, self-satisfied sneer.

“Wow,” he chuckles. “You must be good if you could sell Doug and the guys on the idea that some R and R on the slopes would actually help with the case.”

“Well, I am that good … but in this instance, we’re actually tracking down a witness. One who’s going to get Rutherford right off that hot seat once and for all.”
Alan flicks an imaginary piece of lint off his lapel, trying to fake boredom. “We?”

“Yeah. We. Annie and I are flying down to--”

It’s probably kind to classify the sound that Alan makes as a snort because it’s definitely not as dignified as that. “Oh, man, that’s smart,” he cackles. “That’s really smart.”

Jeff furrows his brow. “Excuse me?”

“No, it’s just that -- you know, you’re always so smart about these things. You know just how to handle them, right?” Alan leans across his desk, lowering his voice. “Getting hot little Annie out of town so no one around here catches wind of the extracurricular activities. Very, very smart.” He shakes his head, grinning. “But why would I expect anything less from the Wing-man?”

“We’re going down there for the case, Alan. That’s it.”

“Sure, right. Yeah, that’s exactly what I’ll tell anyone who asks.”

Jeff shrugs. “Well, it’s the truth so that’s a good place to start.”

“Yes. The truth.” Alan winks theatrically. “Just the truth between two good friends.”

“Look, you don’t know what--”

“I made it! I made it … in less than 10 minutes. And I only had to gun it through one yellow light to do it!”

Annie bounds into the room, all smiles and full of enthusiasm. She obviously doesn’t notice Alan at first because she shoots Jeff a challenging look even as she presses a hand to her chest and tries to catch her breath -- which has him convinced the she must have sprinted up from the parking garage just to get here as fast as she could. She’s ditched her usual purple coat for a quilted navy ski jacket, complete with a fur-trimmed hood, which he somehow finds both cute and stupidly sexy.

“Oh… I’m sorry,” she says, finally catching sight of Alan. “I didn’t mean to interrupt. I can just come--”

“No worries, Ms. Edison,” Alan says, standing up. “I know you guys have this very important trip that you’ve got to head out on so I will make myself scarce.” He strolls toward the door, looking back at Jeff over his shoulder. “Don’t worry, Wing-man. I’ll hold down the fort around here while you’re out there, taking care of business.”

He can’t seem to resist the urge to give Annie a sleazy once-over as he passes her on his way out of the office, and she curls her lip in utter disgust, a perfect mirror of Jeff’s own feelings.

“I seriously don’t understand how that guy still has a job around here,” she says. “He is disgusting.”

Jeff nods. “Unfortunately, that’s an asset in a place like this. If you’ve got zero boundaries, there’s pretty much no level you won’t stoop to win for your clients.”

She appraises him thoughtfully. “You’ve got a reputation as being plenty cutthroat… and you’re not gross like that.”

He smiles. “That’s about the faintest praise I’ve ever heard. If you’re not something that someone
just scraped off their shoe, you’re not gross like that.”


It’s nothing that he hasn’t told himself countless times in the past, but somehow, hearing it from her makes him feel cornered and jittery. He has to lower his head so he can avoid her eyes. “We should probably get going,” he says, “Since you were so late getting here…”

Just like that, he knows the subject is effectively changed because Annie’s eyes glow with blue fire as she starts protesting, pointing out that she’s actually ten minutes earlier than the time they agreed to, accusing him of going out of his way to be so early just to lord it over her, so she’s way too distracted to pay much attention to his mood.

He does his best to do the same, because Alan’s an asshole who doesn’t know what he’s talking about, and whether Jeff is better or worse doesn’t really matter when the case is on the line. He grabs his bag and follows Annie out the door before he can think about it anymore.

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Considering that it’s the week between Christmas and New Year’s, it’s hardly a surprise that there aren’t any rooms available at the Aspen Pines Resort.

But while it was to be expected, Annie can’t help feeling a little disappointed. She had imagined herself hanging out with Jeff in the lobby, staking out Deborah Wahlstrom with impunity under the guise of being over-enthusiastic skiers who just couldn’t resist the roaring fire and free hot cider in the lobby, while she Snapchatted the whole thing for Troy and Abed, who would love taking part in the intrigue even if it was only vicariously. The idea of engaging in that kind of investigation was almost intoxicating.

As it is, they’re seriously lucky that Jeff has plenty of contacts and was able to pull some strings so they could get a couple of rooms at another resort down the road, so they’re still close enough to Aspen Pines to get everything they need by the time they fly back to Denver in the morning. Of course, Annie still insisted that they drop their bags off as quickly as possible so they could track down Deborah Wahlstrom sooner rather than later.

They might have plenty of time, but there’s no sense wasting any of it.

Aspen Pines is much smaller than the resort where they’re staying, but that only makes it more charming, with its wood and stone facade and forest green awnings over the doors and windows. Something about it makes Annie think of fairy-tale castles, like the ones in the stories from the old leather-bound book that her grandmother used to read to her from. For a moment, she thinks that she understands exactly why Deborah Wahlstrom decided to run away to this place, even if Annie doesn’t know exactly what she was running from in the first place.

Even Jeff seems to agree.

“Nice place,” he says, looking around the warmly decorated lobby as the front desk clerk goes off in search of Deborah.

Annie is the one who came up with the perfect cover so Deborah Wahlstrom wouldn’t try to avoid them -- they are travel bloggers, planning to write up a little piece about the resort and hoping that the marketing department might have some helpful information to offer -- and she is feeling very proud of herself. She also kind of loves the idea of being undercover, of getting to play at being someone else, even if it’s only for a few minutes.
They certainly look the part, she thinks as she glances over at Jeff. In his dark blue ski jacket with white and light blue detailing, ribbed sweater with a zipper near the collar, and heavy snow boots, he looks rugged and outdoorsy, like someone who spends all of his time trotting around the globe to take scenic photos for a blog. He even has some stubble darkening his jaw and sunglasses hooked into his sweater, so he seems like someone who doesn’t have a care in the world -- definitely not someone who’s got a federal securities fraud, embezzlement, tax fraud, and tax evasion case with the power to decide the fate of his entire career weighing so heavily on his shoulders.

“Hey,” she says, leaning in closer so she can lower her voice. “I meant to ask … did you tell Rutherford that we were coming to see Deborah?”

Jeff shakes his head. “Given all the rumors about their relationship, I wasn’t sure how he’d react. And for all we know, they’re still in touch and he might’ve said something to her so we couldn’t surprise her.” He shrugs. “Besides, I don’t want to get his hopes up. We’ll see if there’s anything worth telling when we’re done here.”

“That makes sense.”

He grins. “Well, it’s not my first rodeo.”

She can’t help rolling her eyes, because he is such an arrogant son of a bitch sometimes -- and she is about to tell him so when she notices the clerk returning.

“I’m so sorry, but Deborah, our marketing director, isn’t in today,” she tells them. “I spoke with her on the phone, though, and she said that she’d be happy to meet with you tomorrow morning if you’ll be around. Would 10:30 work?”

Annie does her best to hide her disappointment -- because, really, she is chomping at the bit to just see Deborah Wahlstrom in person. After of months of being unable to find her, it’s almost as if she was a ghost, or an imaginary mythical character, like Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy. Annie needs to see her in the flesh to believe that she’s real.

Jeff gives the clerk his contact info so she can set up the meeting. They’re silent as they head out of the lobby, but Annie stops when they make it outside the hotel, frowning up at Jeff.

“That was anticlimactic,” she says, hoping that she isn’t pouting.

“Yeah,” Jeff agrees. “But we’re going to see her tomorrow, so we’re still right on track.”

“It’s just so frustrating. We’ve been trying to find her for months and now we’re so close and we still have to wait another day…”

He smiles. “You have a problem with patience, don’t you?”

She huffs in protest, shoving at his arm. “I just … what I mean is, what are we supposed to do now? We’ve got over eighteen hours until we’re supposed to meet her.”

Jeff sighs, like he’s deep in thought as he scans the surrounding mountains. “Well, the way I see it, there’s really only one thing we can do.” She looks up at him expectantly, and he grins. “Ski.”

She furrows her brow. “Excuse me?”

“You said you like to ski, right? And now we’ve got a whole afternoon in front of us and we’re in Aspen, one of the best ski spots in the country. How could we not?” He cocks his head, smirking
down at her in a way that leaves her cheeks feeling warm despite the chill in the air. “Oh, wait. You’re going to say that we’re technically still on the clock and it would be unprofessional and irresponsible to spend even a minute on the slopes, aren’t you?”

Her mouth twists in annoyance, but he is only taking her at her word. She did tell him just yesterday afternoon that they had to take this trip seriously, that they had to be professional -- of course, that was right before she kissed him again, so maybe her actions and words aren’t exactly matching up at the moment.

Maybe they’re both a little confused about what exactly the rules are.

Skiing isn’t kissing, after all, but Annie can’t help feeling like it’s shirking their responsibility. “It’s kind of true, though, isn’t it?” she says. “Shouldn’t we go back to the hotel and go over our questions for Deborah? Or take another look at the case files so we--”

“Annie, we’ve gone over all of that stuff a thousand times. At this point, we could both recite it in our sleep.”

She glances off in the distance, where a group of skiers are laughing as they head toward the chair lift. The twinge of envy she feels is sharp and biting, but she shakes her head. “Yeah, but …”

Jeff laughs. “See, this is exactly what I expected. You’ll never agree to go. You’re just too prim and proper to let go like--”

She gasps in outrage. Sure, she takes her job seriously and isn’t willing to compromise that for anyone, but if Jeff Winger thinks that she doesn’t know how to cut loose, when to have a little fun, he is dead wrong. She narrows her eyes as she stares him down, but that only seems to amuse him further, the corners of his eyes crinkling even deeper as he bites back a laugh.

So she finds herself doing the only thing she can think of: grabbing a fistful of snow from the railing beside her in a gloved hand and tossing it up in his face like some reality-show diva flinging a drink in someone’s face.

For a moment, he is stunned, sputtering snow and maybe some unspoken profanities, but she can’t stop giggling, covering her mouth with her hand to try to muffle the sound.

“What the hell was that?” he demands.

She shrugs. “Would someone so prim and proper do that?”

Jeff grins, looking surprised and delighted. “Does that mean we can actually go skiing?”

“We don’t have any gear,” she points out.

“Annie, you can’t walk five feet around here without stumbling into a ski shop. We can rent the equipment and buy anything else we need pretty easily.”

She looks around again, at the endless parade of skiers laughing and smiling without an ounce of guilt that they’re headed out to the slopes, and sighs. They technically worked yesterday, which was supposed to be a day off, so maybe it’s not the worse thing in the world to take a few hours for themselves.

Besides, now that she thinks about it, going skiing for the afternoon may technically be playing hooky from work, but it might actually be better than going back to the hotel to work on the case. She can’t seem to stop kissing Jeff at every turn -- who knows what she might do if they’re alone
in a room, with a bed just a few feet away?

The chances of jumping him in public, on a ski slope, are much, much lower. Skiing has to be the more professional option.


He bites at his lip, like he’s trying to reign in his smile. “Just this once,” he repeats.

She flings another handful of snow his way on their walk back to their hotel, just to show she means business.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

I am beyond grateful to everyone who is still reading along with this story even though I'm not the world's most reliable updater. You all are the best. <3

As always, this chapter is legible because Bethany is kind and generous enough to offer her beta expertise. I would be lost without her. :)

If he’d known that the resort’s restaurant had such a romantic vibe, he would’ve suggested that they go to the bar and split a plate of potato skins instead.

But the waiter is already pulling out Annie’s chair and setting the menus on the table by the time Jeff fully takes in the candlelight and moody piano music and large sprays of flowers everywhere. Like him and Annie, though, all of the other diners are dressed casually, in ski sweaters and jeans, but he’s willing to bet that the majority are hoping to capitalize on the dim lighting and free-flowing wine to get lucky later.

He certainly wouldn’t mind getting lucky himself, but Annie made it clear that she wants this trip to be entirely professional and completely aboveboard and he isn’t about to try to talk her into changing her mind.

It was enough of a victory to get her out on the slopes this afternoon, and some part of him knows, however reluctant he may be to admit it, that he had more fun just skiing with her than he’s had with a woman in bed in a long, long while. (Well, maybe since that night a few months back when he stumbled into L Street to lick his wounds in solitude and found Annie instead.) It’s why, the awkwardness of the setting aside, he knows that he’ll be content to sit across the table from her and make polite conversation about nothing in particular, without needing anything more.

When the waiter asks if she’d like to see the wine list, Annie declines and orders a seltzer with lime. He figures he should be on his best behavior too, and asks for the same. She looks a little surprised, but stays quiet, so he wonders if she’s feeling a little weird about the ambiance too.

She looks up at him then, and her cheeks may be a little wind-chapped from their afternoon of skiing, but in the dim candlelight, she just looks like she’s glowing — and Jeff immediately has second thoughts. There she is across the table, looking like she just stepped out of a Renaissance painting, and his head goes fuzzy without even a drop of alcohol in his bloodstream. Maybe he needs a bucket full of booze to numb him completely.

“So…” Annie says, fiddling with her silverware. “Is there something you’ve been meaning to tell me?”

He panics, his heart stuttering in his chest, because there must be at least a half dozen things he should tell her, and the fact that she’s guessed at any one of them means he’s as transparent as a damn piece of glass. “Excuse me?”

For a moment, he wonders if she’s thinking the same thing that Alan did — that he hustled her out of town so he could nail her without anyone at Hamish, Hamish, Hamlin, & Hawthorne knowing
about it. He thinks that she knows him better than that, but then, it’s not like he hasn’t done stuff like that in the past and he doesn’t know what kind of gossip she’s heard about him around the proverbial water cooler.

“Troy and Britta?” she prods. “The thing going on with them. From what Britta said, you know all about it.”

He laughs, so stupidly relieved that he can’t help himself. “I don’t know all about it. I know they’ve seen each other a couple of times. When I asked her about it, she admitted that she’s into him … but that was like pulling teeth, and I don’t particularly care, so…”

“You still should’ve told me. Our friends are dating, and I just think--”

“They’re hooking up, Annie. I don’t think it’s anything more than that.”

She shakes her head. “Troy doesn’t hook up. I mean, he gets attached really easily and is about as loyal as they come. So if they’re together, it’s more than just hooking up. For him, anyway.”

“Maybe. I wouldn’t really know.” Jeff shrugs. “Whatever’s going on, I just hope they don’t drag us into the middle when it all goes to hell.”

Annie frowns over the rim of her glass. “That’s a pretty pessimistic view to take,” she says. “Why would you assume that it’s going to fall apart? Maybe they’re perfect for each other.”

In that moment, he really wishes that he’d ordered some scotch or at least a beer, anything to dull his senses a bit so he’s not as present for this discussion.

“Statistics are on my side,” he tells her. “Pretty much all relationships end. That’s a fact.”

Across the table, her eyes widen, something like fear passing over her features. “I don’t know if…”

“Come on, you know I’m right. My parents split up… and yours did too, right? Your thing with Vaughn didn’t work out. Because when things get tough, it’s easier to leave than try to work it out. So what’s the point?”

She frowns, shaking her head. “That’s not why I broke up with Vaughn. We just didn’t want the same things anymore. There wasn’t any way to work that out.”

Jeff lifts a shoulder. “Semantics.”

“And I guess I still think that it’s worth it,” she says, ignoring him. “You know, whatever happiness you might get, for however long you get it. It doesn’t have to be forever to be meaningful.”

It seems like divine intervention when the waiter reappears to take their order because Jeff isn’t entirely sure what to say to that. The truth is that he thinks it’s pretty stupid and self-destructive to invest in anyone who isn’t going to stick around for the long haul, and because he doesn’t think the long haul ever really happens, there’s little point in giving up even the smallest part of himself up at all.

But then, he listens to Annie order a grilled cheese sandwich and bowl of tomato soup, watches her smile at the waiter’s lame joke, and he can’t see any way to walk away at the moment.

It’s a fucking pain-in-the-ass contradiction that’s impossible to figure out.
She looks up at him, her brow slightly furrowed like she just might be guessing at the contents of his mind, and he panics, blurting out the first thing that comes to mind. “So… when did you know you wanted to be a lawyer?”

Of all the ridiculous, embarrassing, first-date kind of crap he could be spewing, he’s pretty sure that takes the cake. Annie blinks, clearly caught off guard.

“Oh, um, I don’t think it was until after high school,” she says. “I mean, I was on the debate team from freshman year on and I really liked it, because arguing with people and proving I was right was a lot of fun.” She pauses, squinting thoughtfully. “You know, looking back, it’s probably because I was carrying around a lot of anger and debating was a socially acceptable way to fight and challenge other people.”

Jeff nods. “Yeah, I can see that.”

“And then in college, I randomly took a law class and something kind of clicked.” She shrugs. “Part of it was the fact that my parents had always wanted me to go into medicine and I wanted to stick it to them by choosing something completely different. And once I decided to be a lawyer, there was no turning back.” She leans in closer across the table, smiling slyly, like she’s confessing a secret. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed this about me,” she faux whispers. “But I tend to have a one-track mind… so it’s pretty much impossible for me not to see something through to the end once I’ve started.”

He grins back at her. “You know, I think I may have noticed something like that.”

They look at one another across the table for a long moment, and for the first time in his life, he thinks that he knows what it’s like for time to bend, for the seconds to stretch so they feel like an eternity and then speed up so there just doesn’t seem to be enough of them.

It is trippy, even though there is nothing coursing through his veins at the moment but endorphins.

“What about you?” she asks then, and he wonders if she’s forgotten the conversation that they had about his parents’ divorce shortly after they started working together -- and the idea of that hurts in a way that he doesn’t really understand. “What did you want to be when you were little?” she clarifies, smiling softly.

He laughs a bit. “I don’t know. Who remembers that kind of stuff?”

“Oh, come on. You know, when you’re in grade school and they make you dress up as what you want to be for Career Day … or middle school when they make you research the career so you know all the necessary education.” She smiles a little, remembering. “First, I did want to be a doctor, because my pediatrician, Dr. Hernandez, was the smartest person I knew, but then I wanted to be the Queen of England, and later it was--”


Annie lifts a casual shoulder. “Everyone else wanted to be a princess, and I thought, why be a princess when you can be the actual Queen?”

He nods, smiling. “Yeah, sure. I can see that. But why England?”

“My third-grade best friend Marley Sampson’s mother was British. Her family would spend every summer in London so I guess it seemed like a pretty cool place. That’s probably why I wanted to be Sherlock Holmes next…”
“I did say you’d make a good detective, didn’t I?”

She grins, because she always receives praise with the keenest pleasure, and reaches across the table to tap his hand. “So come on already… spill it. What did you want to be? You know, before you were too cool for school.”

“You really want to know?” It’s his turn to smile then because she nods so enthusiastically, and he can’t remember anyone ever seeming so interested in what he had to say before. “An astronaut,” he tells her.

When she laughs, it is a surprisingly bright sound, even over the piano music, the chatter of other tables’ conversations, and the clink of silverware. “Seriously?”

He nods. “Yeah. Why not? They’re the epitome of cool. Like outer-space cowboys or something. That’s a pretty appealing idea to an eight year-old.”

She squints, considering the idea for a moment. “I guess so... so what happened? What made you give up on the dream?”

“Well, it turned out that I sucked at science and math. You know, all those kinds of things that astronauts usually need to know,” he says. “Then my parents split up and I realized how cool being a lawyer was. And when I got to high school, I realized I was pretty good at talking people into stuff, convincing them to do what I wanted while making them think it was all their idea, and that’s a skill set that works pretty well for a lawyer, so…”

“What were you convincing people to do back then?” Annie asks, a teasing gleam in her eyes. “Get in the backseat of your car and take off their tops?”

He smirks. “I’ll have you know that, like you, I was a member of the debate team. Well, technically, I was only an alternate member of the James B. Seaver High debate team, but still.”

Her eyes widen in surprise, and she looks almost impressed. “Really? Your mother didn’t have any photos of that in her scrapbooks.”

“Of course, I mainly joined because there was this hot girl, Meghan Bailey, who I wanted to get to know better.” He shrugs. “It worked like a charm, though, because I was able to convince her that she wouldn’t regret a trip to the backseat of my car.”

Annie huffs out a laugh, a cross between amused and outraged, and kicks at his ankle beneath the table. “Oh, you’re such a jerk! Though it seems like something you’d do -- pretend to be interested in debate just to get the chance to break some girl’s heart.”

“Hey, I didn’t break Meghan’s heart. I took her to the junior prom actually. Probably would have taken her to the senior prom too, if she hadn’t broken my heart by moving to Montana.”

Annie’s expression softens, and she shakes her head. “Wow, I didn’t expect you to be the type to have a high-school sweetheart. You’re full of surprises.”

“What about you?” he asks. “Who was the great high-school love of your life?”

He doesn’t know what possesses him to ask, why it’s something he’s genuinely curious about, but the color that rises in her cheeks makes him think the story must be pretty good.

“Well, technically, I had this boyfriend, Evan, for two years but he was actually gay… so if I’m being honest…” She cocks her head back and forth, like she’s trying to find the best way to convey
the information, then practically whispers, “Troy.”

Jeff furrows his brow, convinced he must have misheard her. “Troy? As in, your roommate Troy? The one who thought he could use Roman candles to light your birthday cake? That Troy?”

She nods, wincing. “I had a pretty awful crush on him in high school but he didn’t know I existed. Then we both wound up at Greendale and actually became really good friends.”

“Wow, I never would’ve…” He studies her for a moment, trying to make sense of this new information. Having met Vaughn, Jeff knows he never would’ve pegged the guy as any kind of rival for Annie’s attention, but Troy is even more of a surprise. He still hasn’t managed to figure out how she manages to live with Troy -- and Abed -- without pulling her hair out, so anything else really doesn’t compute. “Wait,” he says. “So is it weird for you then? If something does happen with him and Britta?”

She shakes her head without hesitation. “Nope. Of course not. I haven’t had those feelings for him since I was seventeen,” she declares. “What about you? Is it weird for you because you and Britta used to … be an item?”

When she looks at him now, she seems almost shy, her eyes darting away from his whenever they meet. It occurs to him what they’re really asking one another, and he feels something inside him tying in knots. He knows what it means, and that it’s all becoming something he can’t take back, but he still can’t stop himself.

“We weren’t an item,” he tells her. “I mean, it was never about those kinds of feelings anyway… so, no. Not even a little.”

Annie gives a slow and thoughtful nod of her head, smiling softly. “Good,” she says. “Good. So neither of us feels weird.”

He nods. “Not even a little.”

-x-

The hardest part of packing for the trip was trying to decide what pajamas to bring.

It’s not like Annie expected to spend time with Jeff at bedtime, but it was important to project a professional image the entire time and she couldn’t predict what might happen -- like a middle of the night fire drill in the hotel or an emergency appendicitis. She didn’t have a set of sedate silk pajamas that would really fit the bill and she couldn’t see going out to buy a pair just for one overnight trip so she had to choose amongst the Old Navy pajamas pants and simple tank tops that she normally wore. Her favorites -- the pairs dotted with polar bears, penguins, kittens wearing top hats, or balloons -- were definitely a no-go, so she’d gone with a basic purple and blue plaid design and a black camisole, but not the one with the lace trim. She decided that leaned a little too much toward lingerie to be appropriate.

As she prepares herself to knock on the connecting door between her and Jeff’s rooms, though, she looks down at her get-up and wonders if it really shows that she means business. Despite the fact that they took the afternoon off to ski, Jeff has behaved so professionally that he’s been above reproach. She knows that his impulse control isn’t quite as strong as it used to be, at least as far as she is concerned, so she’s almost surprised that he hasn’t tried to kiss her, whisper in her ear, or even take advantage of the romantic setting at dinner.

All of which means that he took to heart her words about keeping things professional on this trip.
And strangely enough, that’s seemed to have rendered her with a little less control over her impulses than usual.

What can she say? A man who actually listens to her and respects what she wants, without trying to talk her into changing her mind, is a serious turn-on.

So as she finally raps her fist against the door, she finds herself thinking about what Britta said -- life is short and sometimes doing what you feel is the right thing. Hell, maybe it’s even the smart thing.

It’s not like Jeff will think she’s trying to advance her career if she sleeps with him, and she can trust him not to brag about it to anyone back at the office, so she isn’t entirely sure why it’s so difficult to give in to what she wants.

When Jeff opens the door, he is still mostly dressed from dinner. He’s pulled off his sweater, messing up his hair a bit along the way, so he’s just in a plain white tee shirt that’s snug enough to remind her how good he looks without his clothes on. He’s unbuckled his belt and undone the top button on his jeans too, so she tells herself that she’s just going to tell him good night and walk away from temptation before she does something that she can’t take back.

“Hey,” he says, smiling. “Did you see the hot tub out on the terrace? I was just thinking about getting in. I’m pretty sure I jammed my shoulder when I fell on that black diamond slope so I feel like I earned it.”

Annie steps into the room and sees that he’s left the French doors to the patio area slightly open. The hot tub is on, steaming into the darkness. The sky above is peppered with delicate, glimmering stars, and the wall of bushes around the tub is glazed over with a sheen of snow, and it seems like a scene out of those tawdry romance novels her Aunt Frannie always loved, so her mind instantly goes to all the places that it shouldn’t.

She forces herself to shake her head. “I don’t know,” she tells him. “I’ve never really understood the whole ‘outdoor hot tub in the snow’ thing. I mean, I know the water’s hot but there’s still that one point where you’re outside in freezing temperatures, in next to nothing, before you actually hit the water. Doesn’t seem worth it.”

“You put on one of those robes,” he says, gesturing back toward the fluffy terry cloth robe draped over the room’s easy chair. “And take it off right before you get it. It’s a few seconds at most.”

She eyes the tub skeptically and shrugs. “It doesn’t really matter anyway. I didn’t bring a bathing suit.”

Jeff bites at his lip, like he’s trying hard to keep from laughing or smirking. “I’ve got at least a half-dozen responses to that running through my head right now, but I’m pretty sure you’d say they’re all inappropriate, so I’m going to exhibit some serious self-control and not say a word.”

“But you’re still thinking them,” she teases.

He shrugs. “Well, yeah. I’m only human, Annie.”

She considers him for a moment, standing across from her with his hands at his hips. He is right, of course. He is utterly human, as flawed and complicated and maddening as anyone she’s ever met, but there is a tenderness to him, a vulnerability that goes bone deep, that he hides from nearly everyone. He’s allowed her to see glimpses of it, let it show through the cracks in his facade, and she can’t help but feel privileged, like it’s something that she shouldn’t take it for granted.
“You’ve been very professional,” she says. “All day. I’ve noticed.”

Jeff grins. “You say that like you’re surprised.”

“I’m serious. You took what I said yesterday to heart and I just … I really appreciate it.”

There must be something about the look in her eyes that convinces him of her sincerity because he lowers his head, like he can’t quite handle the heaviness of her gaze, and scratches at the back of his neck. “Well, you know I respect you and I wouldn’t want to do anything that makes you uncomfortable. And I know how important this trip is to you, for both of us, really, so I’m just trying to--”

She isn’t entirely sure what possesses her -- except maybe that he is being stupidly sweet and just as genuine as she is, and he looks good enough to eat in his tee shirt -- but she launches herself at him, curling her hands over his broad shoulders and practically climbing him like he’s a jungle gym on a playground so she can seal her mouth over his.

He barely moves at first, clearly stunned and frozen in place like time has stopped around him. When she licks at his lower lip, though, it seems to jumpstart him, and he wraps one arm around her lower back and fists his other hand in her hair to pull her closer. He moves his mouth over hers slowly but urgently, kissing her so deeply that he steals the breath from her.

She is pretty sure that no one has ever wanted her quite like this before.

Jeff spins around, throwing her world off its axis in a dizzying rush, and sets her down on the small writing desk in the nearest corner. She keeps her legs wrapped around his hips, grinding herself against him in a rhythm that he matches perfectly. Her skin feels hot and tight, like it’s suddenly a size too small, and taking off her clothes seems like the only solution, so she pulls away quickly to whip her tank top over her head and drop it to the floor.

For a moment, Jeff looks dazed, like he can’t quite believe what’s happening and doesn’t know what to do. He rubs his thumb absently over her cheekbone, and the way that he’s looking at her, like she is the best thing that he’s ever seen, leaves her feeling feverish, as if she’s burning from the inside out.

She thinks of their interlude in the coat room at the Christmas party suddenly, because this feels just as good, just as right -- except there isn’t a room full of their co-workers just on the other side of the door. It’s just the two of them, alone in this room, and there is no reason to stop if she doesn’t want to.

So she grabs the hem of his shirt, ready to yank it over his head so he can catch up to her, but his hand curls around her wrist to stop her. She meets his eyes and his pupils are blown wide, but there is something strangely serious about his expression. “I just …” he says, shaking his head. “Are you sure? You really want to do this?”

It is the last thing that she’s expecting to hear for some reason, but it only makes her pull him closer, grab fistfuls of his shirt to keep him that way. “Yeah,” she tells him, pressing her mouth to his jaw. “Yes. I’m sure. Really sure.”

That’s apparently all he needs to hear, because he tugs his own shirt over his head and throws it somewhere behind him. The room is cold, because Jeff’s left the patio door open, but she is starting to sweat as he pulls her against him again, and her warm skin slides against his, and everything behind her eyes goes bright and fuzzy.
None of this is new exactly, because they’ve had sex before and she remembers it as a pretty first-rate experience, but somehow it feels different now, like the intensity has been ratcheted up to an almost painful max.

It’s probably because that first night they met, they didn’t know anything about each other, and now she knows so much of the stuff that makes him who he is, even the things that he tries so hard to hide, and he knows so many of her own secrets and insecurities and flaws and still likes and respects her all the same. So when he kisses his way down her neck and curves his hand over her breast to rasp his thumb against her nipple, it’s with a kind of intimacy that makes the blood hum through her body until she’s nearly shaking.

She reaches between them for his zipper, but Jeff lifts her off the desk and she has to grab at his shoulders to keep from falling. It’s all worth it, though, when he finally carries her to the bed, where he sets her down so gently that it almost startles her.

He straightens then, and for a moment, he just stands at the foot of the bed, studying her. No matter what’s happened between them, she can’t help feeling slightly self-conscious so she busies herself with pushing off her pajama pants and underwear to distract herself. That gets Jeff moving too, and he crawls over her, trying to hold himself up so he doesn’t put much of his weight on her. She wants that, though, the feeling of him grounding her to the bed, so she hikes a leg up over his hip and pulls him down with all of her strength. He gasps in surprise but she opens her mouth over his again, swallowing the sound.

There is nothing suffocating about the feel of him on top of her. It is somehow exciting and comforting all at the same time, but his jeans are still in the way and they don’t give at all when she tries to shove them down with her toes.

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“Jeff,” she whines, pushing against him to try to get him to help.

“Shhh,” he murmurs against her throat, his tongue tasting her skin, and for a second, she is actually about to protest at being shushed, but then his mouth makes its way down her chest and closes around the tip of her breast, and the sound that she makes is much closer to a grateful groan than a outraged huff, because she definitely has her priorities in order.

She fists her hands in his hair to keep him close in case he gets any ideas about moving on, and she’s expecting it to be stiff, crunchy with expensive products, but his hair is so soft and smooth against her palms that she can’t stop running her fingers through it. He kisses his way to her other breast and his hand curves around her hip, his thumb finding the sensitive spot that leaves her squirming against the bed -- and that’s the point where she’s decided that she’s had enough.

Or not enough, really.

She shoves against his shoulders as hard as she can, and he finally lifts his head, looking almost drunk, but she must look as determined as she feels because he lets her guide him until he’s sitting up and she can finish undoing his jeans. They work together to get them and his boxer briefs off. She’s in such a hurry to get him naked that she nearly elbows him in the nose.

For a second, they just look at one another. She knows that neither of them can believe that this is finally happening again, and they laugh together, too giddy to feel self-conscious.

Despite the fact that there are a hundred reasons why she shouldn’t be doing this -- earning herself a scarlet letter at the firm and risking the career that she’s worked so hard for and putting their case in jeopardy -- she won’t feel guilty about it. Jeff looks at her like he sees every not-so-perfect part of her and still likes all of it. Maybe Vaughn did too, and maybe even Abed and Troy and her other
friends do in their own way, but it’s different with Jeff. He isn’t the kind of guy to cut any slack so it seems to mean more, to make her feel confident in a way that she doesn’t think she ever has before.

Maybe there are still times when she thinks it all comes down to sex, but she also knows that there are plenty of attractive women out there who would happily scratch whatever itch he might have. So if he wants her, he wants her. She understands that feeling, because he isn’t just any warm, stupidly attractive body for her either. Everything about how desperate she is for him is all tied up in his brain and heart, which is probably why what they’re doing now feels so much hotter than their first night together all those months ago, when they barely knew each other’s names.

She doesn’t really believe in fate anymore, and she isn’t entirely sure what she thinks about God these days, either; but she likes to imagine that there’s some kind of guiding force in the universe, and maybe it was looking out for her back then by having her meet Jeff Winger the night before she started work at Hamish, Hamish, Hamlin, & Hawthorne. She is pretty sure that she wouldn’t have risked her career by sleeping with him after they started working together if there hadn’t been a history there; if she didn’t already know what it feels like to have the heavy, solid weight of him on top of her, his hands moving over body at a pace that is both too fast and too slow, his lips pressing against the spot on her throat where her pulse pounds until the blood surges through her body in a way that leaves her lightheaded.

Some part of her has remembered all of it, every day that they’ve been working together, and wondering when it would happen again.

She reaches for him then, sliding her fist over his erection, which practically throbs, hot and hard, against her palm. She thinks about how she’d like to take him in her mouth, slide her tongue over him until he can’t see straight, but she tells herself there’ll be time for that later. Right now, she wants to feel him inside her again, wants to ride him into oblivion until nothing else seems to matter but the point at which they’re joined.

He must be reading her mind, because he wraps his hand around her wrist to stop the slow, deliberate rhythm she has going. “Keep that up and this’ll be over before it starts,” he tells her, in a ragged whisper, and she grins up at him like a fool.

Jeff blindly reaches toward the nightstand, grabbing for his shaving kit as he continues to blaze a hot trail over her throat with his mouth. “Got it,” he declares suddenly, lifting his head to grin and wave a condom at her triumphantly, pretty damn proud of himself. She grips his chin so she can kiss him again, laughing into his mouth.

She can’t believe that they’ve waited so long to do this again and she can’t believe that anything could possibly feel this good.

Jeff tries to balance himself above on his elbow, even as his free hand curves around her breast again, and her skin goes up in flames once more, like there’s a fire burning through her veins and her body can’t quite contain it anymore. Her fingers clutch at his shoulders, wanting to press herself even closer to him.

When she grabs the condom from him and tears it open, her hands shake a little because she’s so desperate, and Jeff makes a noise that’s somewhere between a whimper and moan as she rolls it on. She scoots back against the pillows so there’s room for him to crawl over her, but he rolls them over so she’s on top, and when she finally sinks down over him, she finds him looking right at her. She’s had this view of him once before, but everything about it feels new and thrilling, and she can only toss her head back and close her eyes and hope that it never ends.
Afterward, he can’t catch his breath.

His heart is pounding like a damn runaway train and he’s pretty sure that Annie’s going to catch on because she’s tracing patterns on his chest with the tip of her finger, her head pillowed on his shoulder where she pretty much collapsed once they were done. He wonders if she is etching some type of message into his skin, trying to tell him something that she can’t seem to find the words to say out loud.

All he knows is that the way her hand moves over him nearly makes him shiver, despite the fact that he’s sweating and flushed.

He’s had great sex before -- he knows perfectly well what that feels like -- and what happened in this hotel bed was more than that. All the outside stuff, like his wheezy breath, stuttering heart, and still-tingling nerve endings, jibes with the usual aftereffects of a pretty intense orgasm. But he feels different on the inside too, like he’s lonely now that they’re separated again, in a way that he never could have understood just an hour ago.

Annie shifts, her warm breath ghosting over his chest. “I wasn’t lying, you know.”

As if on instinct, he feels himself tense, his muscles coiling up like they’re readying for a fight or flight response. He wonders if he blacked out for a minute at some point, if she was sharing the deepest, darkest secrets of her heart as she came, and he was just too blissed out to hear any of it.

“Excuse me?” is what he manages to say.

She lifts her head, looking at him with those stunning, wide eyes of hers that are nearly paralyzing in their intensity. Her cheeks are flushed and her hair is a tangled mess and he is certain that she’s never been more beautiful. “The night we met,” she says, “when I said I don’t normally do things like this. I’m not really the sort of person who can sleep with someone like it’s not a big deal, like it doesn’t mean something.”

It shouldn’t surprise him that she’d worry about this, but he feels a little insulted all the same. And then he hears the annoying echo of all the things that Alan said this morning in his office. It occurs to him that he did exactly what Alan thought he was going to, and that maybe Annie thinks it’s all about sex for him, that it’s always been about sex, and nothing about what’s happening between them ever has been any deeper than that.

If he’s honest, there was even part of him that was hoping that’s all it was -- forbidden fruit and all that clichéd garbage. Jeff thought that maybe if he had the chance to sleep with her again, his head might clear and his focus would return and Annie Edison would just be another woman who’d occupied his attention for a little while (even if it was a little longer than usual).

But they’ve slept together again, and his head is still fuzzy, and Annie’s name is still stuck on a loop in his head. He wants her again, but it’s not just that.

It’s something more that he doesn’t even know how to name.

He must hesitate a little too long because she lowers her head, twisting an edge of the sheet between her fingers. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to--”

“No. No, that’s okay. I know this isn’t just … I know this means something.”

She looks up at him, the corner of her mouth lifting in an almost-smile. “Yeah?”
He nods. “But I’ve got a pretty shitty track record with this kind of stuff, so I hope you don’t need to know exactly what it means tonight.”

She shakes her head. “No, of course not. I just …” She grins for real now, drumming her fingers against the center of his chest. “I just want to be sure we’re on the on the same page. Or at least in the same book.”

“I think we are,” he tells her, and he hopes that’s true, even if he doesn’t really know what he wants beyond spending more time with her.

“Good. So we agree that we can’t let anyone know about this…”

He smiles, smoothing a hand over the back of her head. “You’re that ashamed of me?” he teases.

She rolls her eyes with the kind of precision that makes it seem like an art form. “You know exactly what I mean,” she says. “If this got around the office, you know the kinds of things people would say … about me, anyway. Because I’m a woman and you’re above me at the firm. All the other first-years will think I’m trying to sleep my way to the top, and all the other partners will think I’m fair game.”

“That’s ridiculous,” he declares, and though he absolutely means it, he know that she’s right. Just this morning, Alan spewed a whole bunch of garbage when he was only assuming he knew what was going on between the two of them; if he knew it for a fact, it would only get much worse.

“Anyone who spends five minutes with you would know that you’re smarter and more dedicated than all the other first-year associates put together, and you’d never cut corners or take a shortcut to get to the top. Hell, you’ll probably be Chairman of the firm before Hamilton even manages to settle the Kinkaid divorce, and their only real disagreement is who gets to keep seeing the family therapist…” Annie laughs, trying for a casual look, but there’s a gleam in her eyes that makes it obvious she doesn’t disagree. “Or maybe you’ve got political aspirations?” he continues. “So you’ll probably make the Senate before Alan figures out how to turn the porn filter off on his computer.”

She lifts a casual shoulder. “I’m not opposed to the idea of holding public office.”

“Well, then, keep a speech-writing position open for me. I’m excellent at rousing speeches that are full of style but very little substance. You know, like most politicians.”

Annie pushes up on an elbow, sliding her fingers over his stomach, her smile equal parts sweet and sultry. “You’re good at a lot of things, actually,” she whispers.

He grins. “Flattery will get you everywhere.”

Without any warning, she climbs over him again, swooping down to kiss him. “Haven’t I already been everywhere?” she practically purrs against his mouth.

It’s his turn to surprise her then, rolling them over so she’s under him once again and he can shove the sheets away. “Not quite,” he tells her, and then he starts the slow descent down her body, stopping to kiss the underside of her breast, scrape his teeth against her stomach, suck at the sensitive spot on her hip that makes her giggle and squirm against the mattress.

There’ll be time later to worry about what all of this means. Right now, he’s got more important things to do.

-x-

Waiting for Deborah Wahlstrom for the second time in two days, Annie feels strangely calm.
It doesn’t make much sense given that the case hangs just as much in the balance as it did yesterday when she and Jeff first came to meet this woman, but now she sits back comfortably on the sofa in Deborah’s office beside him and feels completely prepared.

There is nothing Deborah Wahlstrom can throw at them that can rattle them at this point, she tells herself. Beside her, Jeff crosses one leg over the other as if he is in complete agreement.

The sex probably has something to do with it -- if she’s being honest anyway.

They’re both calmer and more relaxed now that they’ve gotten all of that tension out of the way, which makes Annie wonder if she should have just given in weeks ago. Maybe by trying to resist the pull, she only left herself more distracted, more tense and edgy, and unable to give her best.

She looks over at Jeff, who is smiling faintly as he bounces his knee, and she is pretty sure what he would say if she asked him about that -- which is precisely why she isn’t going to share her thoughts on that particular subject.

As amazing as last night was, there is still something slightly strange about sitting next to him now. It’s silly, because from the moment that they started working together, they’ve both been fully aware of the fact that they had sex, but it’s all different now. They really know each other, and everything feels so much more intimate.

This morning, when she woke up in a bed that smelled like him, it was disorienting in the most wonderful way. She could hear him in the shower singing a song that she couldn’t quite identify, see his clothes folded carefully in a neat pile on the dresser across from the bed, and she felt a pang of the silliest happiness she could ever remember. Jeff came out of the bathroom surrounded by a cloud of steam, a towel wrapped low around his hips, and when he smiled at her, softly and a little shyly, she knew that he felt the same thing.

It might be why she left the door between their rooms open a crack when she took her own shower, and bent over to kiss him as sweetly as possible when she got out of the bathroom and found him sitting at the corner table in her room, with a platter of fresh fruit and muffins and a pot of hot coffee in front of him. He wasn’t running away from anything, wasn’t trying to act like last night was some meaningless fling.

The door to the office swings open suddenly, pulling Annie out of her thoughts, and an auburn-haired woman strolls in, reading from a manila folder in her hands. She is wearing crisp jeans and a Fair Isle sweater in bright shades of pink, purple, and orange, so she looks more like a low-key employee of a ski resort than some high-powered marketing executive, and Annie wonders if this woman could really hold the key to everything for them.

“I’m so sorry to keep you waiting,” she says distractedly. “I was out of the office yesterday so I’m trying to play catch up….” She drops the folder on the desk and turns to Jeff and Annie with a smile. “I’m Deborah Wahlstrom, head of marketing here at Aspen Pines. You two are the travel bloggers?”

Jeff stands, extending his hand for a polite shake. “I’m Jeff Winger. And this is my associate, Annie Edison.”

Annie pushes to her feet and shakes Deborah’s hand too. “Nice to meet you.”

“Well, what would you like to know?” Deborah says, leaning back against the edge of her desk. “I’m happy to answer any questions you have. I’m always telling everyone around here that marketing’s changing. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blogs … that’s what really doing the job
these days.”

Annie looks over at Jeff, feeling strangely guilty, but his expression is stubbornly blank. “Actually, Ms. Wahlstrom,” he says, “We’re not travel bloggers.”

She furrows her brow and frowns. “No? I swear Cassie told me—”

“We’re lawyers,” Jeff tells her. “And we’re representing Simon Rutherford in the federal case against him. We were hoping you would answer a few questions for us.”

As soon as Rutherford’s name leaves Jeff’s lips, Deborah’s entire demeanor changes -- her muscles seem to tense up as she crosses her arms over her chest, and the line of her jaw sharpens like she’s clenching her teeth. “Did he send you here?” she asks, in a low, careful voice.

“No. He doesn’t know we’re here, actually.”

She shakes her head, laughing humorlessly. “No, I bet he doesn’t. He wouldn’t want you anywhere near here. Even if it meant saving his skin.”

Jeff glances over at Annie, eyes narrowed shrewdly, before looking back at Deborah. “Could you?” he asks. “Save his skin, I mean.”

“Hardly. Let’s just say that when the news broke about him, I wasn’t exactly surprised.” She shrugs. “Nothing he does could really surprise me at this point.”

“My father worked with you,” Annie says, feeling like they might need an in. “John Edison. He said you were were one of the smartest people on the investment committee.”

Deborah tilts her head. “John Edison,” she repeats. “Oh, I remember John. I always liked him…” She studies Annie for a moment. “You look a little like him, actually. He must be very proud… you being a successful lawyer, working such a big case.”

“That’s very kind of you to say.” Annie smiles politely, but the other woman looks away, like this type of benign small talk doesn’t interest her in the least.

“Look, I assume you’re here because someone told you about Simon and me. That we were having an affair. And you want to dig up all the dirt.”

Jeff’s impassive mask doesn’t slip for even a moment, and Annie is reminded once again just how much of a pro he is. “You’re saying it’s not true, then?”

Deborah hesitates, contemplating the floor as she fidgets in front of her desk. “It’s true.” Her head snaps up then, and she pins Jeff with a steely gaze that makes Annie more than a little nervous. “And I know exactly what you’re thinking, because it’s what all of them always thought. But I didn’t sleep with him because I thought I’d get ahead. I slept with him because I thought he was the most interesting man I’d ever met. And once upon a time, I actually loved him.”

Her voice nearly cracks around the word loved, like it hurts her just to spit the word out, so Annie thinks she understands exactly how much the admission is costing Deborah. “How long were you two involved?” she asks gently.

Deborah shrugs. “Years. From the beginning of my time at the Pine Brook, really. And I knew people were talking. I knew what they were saying, so I worked twice as hard as any of them to prove that no matter what was going on after hours, I’d earned my job.”
Jeff nods solemnly, but Annie can see the fire in his eyes. He might be feeling somewhat sympathetic to Deborah’s plight, but he isn’t about to let that deter him from doing what needs to be done. “So you were intimately involved with him for years but you never knew anything about millions of dollars going missing from his funds?”

The corner of Deborah’s mouth twitches and she laughs darkly. “Wait a second… are you accusing me of something?” she asks. “That’s why you’re here? You want to pin all of this on me?”

Annie shakes her head. “No. No, of course not. We’re just--”

“We’re trying to figure out what happened,” Jeff says. “To get to the truth. That’s all.”

“Well, then,” Deborah says, looking at Annie. “I’m sure your father told you that around the time frame you’re looking at, Simon pretty much took complete control over investment allocation. We still had an investment committee but it was pretty much in name only.”

Jeff smiles blandly. “But even you have to admit that the timing of everything is pretty coincidental. Less than a year after the money starts disappearing, you were let go from Pine Brook and no one seems to know why. That’s what--”

“I wasn’t let go,” Deborah snaps. “I left. I threw my letter of resignation in Simon’s face and never looked back.” She shakes her head. “And if you really think I was involved somehow, then why did the money keep disappearing years after I’d gone?”

Annie looks over at Jeff, because Deborah’s got them there. That is the one piece of the puzzle that definitely doesn’t make sense if they want to paint her as a viable alternative to Rutherford as a suspect. Jeff doesn’t let on that there’s a weak link, though. He just shrugs, smirking in his maddening way.

“Why did you leave, then?” he asks. “If you didn’t suspect that anything was going on, what made you walk away?”

For a long moment, Deborah doesn’t say anything; she barely even moves. It’s easy to imagine how difficult this all is for her -- if someone put Annie on the spot right now and asked her to explain exactly why she ended things with Vaughn, it would be uncomfortable in the extreme. Here she and Jeff are, perfect strangers to Deborah Wahlstrom, asking her to share the private details of her past. It isn’t fair at all.

“I was with him for years,” she finally says, her voice low and strained. “And I guess I always assumed he loved me enough that one day he’d be strong enough to be honest with his wife, be honest with everyone, so we could really build a life together. But I came to realize what kind of man he really was and I didn’t want anything to do with him anymore.”

“What kind of man is he?” Jeff asks. “In your experience?”

Deborah tilts her head back, and it’s obvious that she’s going to laugh again -- until there’s a soft knock on the office door and a silver-haired woman pokes her head inside, smiling. “So sorry to interrupt, Debbie, but Owen wouldn’t go back to the house without saying goodbye.”

The older woman steps into the room, holding a toddler in a puffy yellow ski jacket in her arms. He reaches out his arms in Deborah’s direction as soon as he sees her. “Mama!”

She takes him into her arms, pressing a kiss to his cheek. “Are you gonna be a good boy and go home to play with Nana?” He nods his head frantically and pats his hands against her shoulders. “Okay, then I’ll see you later…”
There is more hugging and some sloppy kisses, and Annie looks over at Jeff, who is wearing the same curious expression that she is. He must be doing the math too, thinking about the little boy’s nearly black hair and icy eyes and how familiar they seem.

When Owen and his grandmother leave, Deborah closes the door behind them once more. She keeps her back to Jeff and Annie for a second, almost like she is trying to brace herself for what’s to come.

“That might clear some things up for you,” she says finally, turning. “He didn’t want me to have the baby, said he didn’t want any more children. He told me that if I insisted on having the kid, then he’d have to send me away, transfer me to the firm’s office in London or Singapore.” She shrugs. “So I said screw you and left.”

For once, Jeff looks a little stunned, his brow furrowed tightly, and Annie wonders if he is thinking of his own father. She can’t help thinking of hers either -- she wonders what Deborah Wahlstrom would think if she knew that John Edison is nearly as big a deadbeat as Simon Rutherford. He might have waited 17 years to do the abandoning, but he’d done it all the same.

“He’s never met his son?” Annie asks. “He hasn’t reached out to you to--”

“He’s sent child support from an offshore account every month since I left,” Deborah says. “But I tear every check up and send it right back. Even the past five months, when all of his assets are supposedly frozen, he’s found a way to send money. But I don’t want any of it. If he doesn’t want to be a real father, he can just take it and …” She trails off, lowering her head again.

Still, it’s hard to ignore the glassy look in her eyes, and Annie has to look away, feeling almost ashamed. Jeff stands suddenly, rubbing a hand over his face.

“I’m sorry we brought all of this up,” he says quietly. “We didn’t mean to … we were just trying to get some… I’m sorry.”

Deborah crosses her arms over her chest again and sighs. “You’re just doing your job. I’m sure Simon’s paying you big bucks to get him off. But none of this will help your case.”

Jeff nods, like he’s already reached that conclusion on his own. When Annie follows him out of the office a few moments later, she finds herself wishing that they’d never made this trip, that they’d never found Deborah Wahlstrom at all.

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Annie barely says five words to him after they leave Aspen Pines.

They go back to their resort to pick up their bags, wait for the car service in the lobby, ride the ten minutes to the airport, and she hardly even looks at him. She keeps her gaze lowered, focused on her lap or her boots, and the expression on her face is nothing less than miserable.

Jeff thinks that he understands. He was so sure that they’d be celebrating on the way home, toasting with overpriced champagne and practicing the victorious soundbites they’d feed reporters when Rutherford’s acquitted. Instead, the case is falling apart right before their eyes and there’s nothing he can do about it.

Well, that’s not entirely true.

There is something he could do about it. He could still spin everything that they’ve learned in a way that makes Deborah Wahlstrom look guilty, throw her under the bus to save Rutherford’s ass,
without even breaking a light sweat.

But something about that doesn’t seem right. That douchebag abandoned his kid and rewarded Deborah’s love and loyalty with an indifference that’s both stunning and chilling, so it’s difficult to think that anyone should be sacrificed for his benefit.

And the fact is, Jeff is good enough and smart enough and slick enough to find something else to save this case. There’s always part of him that thrives on a challenge like that, on rising to the occasion when no one else can.

If he’s honest, though, there’s this nagging feeling in the pit of his stomach, a kind of hollow emptiness, that tells him he’s quickly losing the thrill for all of it with this case. Sure, there’s plenty of good incentive -- getting promoted to full partner, helping Annie establish herself at the firm, and having the upper hand over Alan once and for all are all pretty compelling in their own right -- but Rutherford’s clearly an unrepentant bastard and that takes a lot of the fun out of the whole thing.

Jeff gives himself until the plane touches down in Denver to get a hold of his annoying, conflicted emotions, which means he’s got less than an hour to get himself in check. In the window seat beside him, Annie pulls a copy of *The National Law Journal* out of her bag and drops it down into her lap. She glumly opens it, flipping through a few pages, though it’s obvious that she isn’t really reading a word in it. He knows that he should say something to her, deliver some sort of half-assed pep talk that will raise her spirits, but he’s got no clue where to begin so he’s giving himself the same landing-in-Denver deadline for that too.

He needs this plane to take off like yesterday, because he’s got a feeling that he won’t be able to shake himself out of his shitty mood without some booze coursing through his veins, and the flight attendants won’t come around with the drinks until they’re 35,000 feet in the air.

Annie must be just as impatient about taking off because she slams her journal shut suddenly and exhales loud enough for the folks back in coach to hear her. “So that’s it,” she says, throwing her hands up. “Simon Rutherford is totally guilty. We’re defending a completely guilty man.”

He sighs too, though it’s a considerably softer sound. “Annie, nothing we found out today proves that Rutherford’s guilty of anything other than being a deadbeat dad. Just because he’s a scumbag who abandoned his kid doesn’t mean he’s a criminal.”

She shakes her head. “The sort of man who could walk away from his own child like that, who doesn’t even want to get to know him at all… well, I just think he could easily steal money from teachers and bus drivers without a second thought.”

“It doesn’t matter. Whether he’s guilty or not, he still deserves adequate legal representation.”

“It’s really that easy for you?” she demands. “Because I’m having a hard time coming up with a single reason why we should fight for this guy.”

“Everyone’s entitled to a good defense,” he says evenly. “You know that, Annie. They drill it into your head in law school… because it’s the only way our legal system can work.”

“But doesn’t it make you feel awful?” she asks plaintively, and it’s obvious that she’s not going to let this go. She may have the perfectly tuned mind necessary for criminal defense, but he’s started to wonder if she has the stomach for it, if her principled conscience and tender heart won’t always stand in her way. (And when he considers the possibility that years at this work might actually chip away at those, might leave her numbed and indifferent to it all, like he is, he feels something like a
“Fighting for someone you know is guilty, helping them get away—"

“I told you,” he says, as gently as he can. “You’ve gotta assume the client’s innocent -- pretend, if you have to. They’re never gonna tell you they’re guilty. They’ll lie to you just like they lie to everyone else, so you lie to yourself too, if you have to.”

Annie’s quiet for a long moment, fiddling with the bent edge of the magazine in front of her. Her face is almost terrifyingly blank and pale, and he can’t help but think of last night, when her eyes were as bright as stars and her skin burned hot like a fever, and he just wants to get back to that place. When she finally looks up at him, the corner of her mouth twitches, like she isn’t quite sure whether to smile or frown.

“Be honest,” she tells him. “If there wasn’t something in it for you, the promotion to partner and that cushy office, would you still be so dedicated to getting Rutherford off?”

He shifts uncomfortably in his seat, shrugging. “If we start deciding whether someone’s guilty before they have a trial, all it means is that even more innocent people will get locked up. This is the way it’s gotta be.”

She shakes her head, like she doesn’t want it to be true -- but it’s what he tells himself if he ever feels the shame get a hold of him too tight. And it is true, he’s sure of that, because if it isn’t, then there’s probably a shitload of bad karma headed his way.

Annie sighs, and it seems to echo loudly in the otherwise quiet plane cabin even as the aircraft starts to finally take off. “Can you imagine that?” she practically whispers. “A man walking away from an innocent little kid like that? Not caring enough to know what kind of person his son is going to become?”

Jeff lowers his head, rubbing his hands against his knees roughly. “I can,” he mutters.

She huffs out another sigh, but this one sounds even more anguished, and she reaches out to lay her hand on his arm. “I’m so sorry,” she says. “That was so insensitive. Of course you can.”

He curls his hand over hers, rubbing his thumb against the hard ridge of her wrist. “We both can, right?”

She nods her head almost imperceptibly but looks away in a hurry, like she really doesn’t want to analyze her own childhood baggage at the moment. He gets it, because he feels exactly the same, which is probably why he tried to deflect by pointing out her own experience with shitty parents.

Fortunately, they reach the right altitude, and the ‘fasten seat belts’ light turns off, and the flight attendant starts taking drink orders. He asks for his usual single malt scotch, and Annie surprises him by telling the flight attendant to make it two. If he wasn’t sure how shaken she was by this point, her sudden thirst for scotch would definitely do the trick -- but she sips it serenely, like she welcomes the burn as it makes its way through her body.

“I can’t stop thinking about Deborah,” she confesses suddenly, clutching her glass in a tight fist. “And I mean, not just the fact that her son’s father doesn’t want anything to do with him, but that she had to give everything up because of her relationship with Rutherford. She had to walk away from her career and people are still gossiping about her to this day… it isn’t fair.”

Jeff nods solemnly, but doesn’t respond -- the world usually isn’t fair. Annie should know that by now.

“That’s what would happen to me,” she tells him, in a low, hesitant voice. “If people knew that we
… if they knew about us.”

He looks at her as she studies the amber liquid in her glass and wonders why she let any of this happen if she really believes that. It doesn’t seem worth the risk -- he can’t possibly be worth the risk.

“It’s not going to happen to you,” he tells her. “I won’t let it happen to you.”

He has no clue what he means and hopes that she won’t question it. She lifts her eyes, which shine in the plane’s dim light, and exhales slowly. She isn’t looking at him like he’s some kind of hero who will save the day for her; she’s only looking at him like she understands that’s what he wants to be, what he wishes he could be, and somehow that’s enough for her. Her shoulders relax a bit, and she lifts the armrest between their seats so she can scoot a little closer to him.

She curls herself into his side, and he wraps his arm around her. She presses her face against him then, and he can feel her cheek warm against his chest. “Everything’s a mess,” she whispers into his shirt.

“We’ll figure something out,” he whispers back.

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