Young Gods

by xxJustBeingMexx

Summary

Kathleen never set out to break one hundred years of tradition when she attends her grandfather's school. It's only for a term, what could possibly happen? But time and fate don't wait around, and don't have favourites. What starts off as a fairly regular term soon starts spinning out of control as the budding free thinkers clash with the rigid authority at Welton.
I have reached the pathetic stage now where I have read every single DPS fic on the internet, and remain confused about the small number in existence. I'm also a sucker for the typical girl at Welton stories, so here I am with another one to contribute to the collection. I hope to write more for the movie because it honestly deserves so much more love than it gets.

Also, House MD & The Good Wife have disappointed some extended characterisation out of me.

Kathleen Murray turned abruptly.

Deep, brassy notes reverberated through the crowded of startled parents. Hat-less women turned, their permed hair barely shifting unlike Kat's own bouncy ponytail. She smiled to herself as the familiar tune of 'Scotland the brave' filled the cavernous chapel. It easier to breathe in the midst of melodies of home, even if that home lay in the highlands thousands of miles away. Unlike the village fêtes of her childhood, the procession appeared solemn. Lines of boys marched towards the mahogany pulpit where her grandfather, Mr Nolan, was situated. His piercing eyes examined the approaching unit, watching for the moment to begin the same speech that she remembered him making as a young girl.

'Tradition, Honour, Discipline, Excellence.' Kathleen had heard those four words several times already since arriving in Vermont two days prior. Her stomach tightened. Maybe her Father had been right in wanting her to return to Scotland. Imagining herself travelling to another school like a sort of exchange student was one thing, actually being here was completely different. Now it all seemed quite real. A seventeen year-old girl attending an all-boys school? Unbelievable.
"Ladies and gentlemen, boys. The light of knowledge" Mr Nolan began.

Admittedly, she was under her grandfather's watchful eye. Three months would hardly make a scratch on her academic record...a non co-ed record. Growing up with two younger brothers and a few boys her own age in the village hadn't really prepared her for this. She shrank low in the corner of her back pew. Any minute now all eyes would be searching for her.

"One hundred years ago in 1859, forty-one boys sat in this room and were asked the same question that now greets you at the start of each semester. Gentlemen, what are the four pillars?"

A ripple of dark blazers arose like a wave, but unlike the sea their words were not whispers. "Tradition, honour, discipline, excellence" rang clear and rapid from the mouths of each student, all with the same straight face and posture. The uniformity was sent a shiver down her spine. Welton Academy had fascinated her as child with its maze of corridors, vast land, and classrooms full of books and knowledge. Now, it seemed stifling and miserable; not a single paying pupil looked happy to be here.

"In her first year," her grandfather's voice broke her out of her thoughts, "Welton Academy graduated five students. Last year we graduated fifty-one. And more than seventy five percent of those went on to the Ivy leagues."

Enthusiastic applause thundered like the wrath of God. It certainly did not take a brain like Sherlock Holmes' to perceive why the school was so renowned, especially among parents of a certain mindset.

"This kind of accomplishment" he continued, "is the result of fervent dedication to the principles taught here. This is why you parents are sending us your sons. This is why we are the best preparatory school in the United States."

Movement caught her eye. She watched as the parents in the pew to her right cajoled their almost fully-grown son. She tried desperately not to roll her eyes. Their son looked downright terrified by the speech but - oblivious to the poor boy's agitation - they just nudged him to applaud.

"As you know, our beloved Mr Porte's of the English department retired last term," he announced to the sobering crowd. "You will have the opportunity later to meet his replacement, Mr John Keating." Mussed, brown hair came into view as a kindly looking man arose to face the curious onlookers. Crow's feet ran faintly from the crinkles created by his smile. And, if she was not mistaken, the wink sent to a crying first year in the front pew before he disappeared down into his seat. "Himself an honours graduate of this school, who for the past several years has been teaching at the highly regarded Chester School in London. Now, before we leave, I have one more matter to address."

Her hands shook as she smoothed her skirt, avoiding her grandfather's eyes.

"This semester we have a more...unconventional student attending the Academy. My granddaughter, Miss Murray, will be here until the new year when she will return to St. Mary's Academy for young ladies. I assure you that this will in no way affect the education of your sons. Her living quarters will be separate, and if there is any disruption to classes, they will also become separate immediately. We will meet this temporary change with grace and use it as a practice for the boy's good manners and chivalry. That is all."

Hundreds of heads turned, eyes seeking her out, the girl breaking tradition. Fortunately, she was well hidden and dressed in a similar fashion to many of the boys' sisters. Those unlucky girls would never be valued enough to be sent to schools of the same calibre as their brothers. A woman
draped in fox furs shot her a questioning look. Kathleen nodded silently, sending a polite smile in the direction of the few couples nearby who regarded her with such caution. In anticipation of their queries, she stood, quickly melting into the exiting crowd.

Outside was a hub of activity. A dizzying collage of sights and sounds covered the expansive grounds. Cars lined the driveway, piles of luggage littered the ground, while parents fussed, and young boys cried in their Mother's arms. Older boys slapped each other's backs in greeting. She hovered just outside of the door for a moment. Her grandfather was clearly busy, and nobody had told her what to do until dinner, or even where to sit. Now did not seem like the opportune moment to inquire. With a sigh, she let the gravel crunch over her shiny heels as she rounded the corner of the building. The stone arch marking the main entrance stood out from the rest of the aged stone. As she ascended the steps her thoughts turned to the timetable she had received at breakfast. The present moment was a golden opportunity to find tomorrows classrooms.

Inside it was much quieter. The odd teacher wondered by, seeking refuge from the onslaught of parents and their questions, no doubt. She found chemistry and Latin promptly and spent a little more time finding her way to English. It was getting easier to find her bearings by the day. She checked her watch; she still had a while before dinner. She turned down the next corridor and found herself in what must be the dorms. Boys darted in and out of rooms, suitcases were abandoned in doorways and the air was filled with chatter and boisterous laughter. It echoed her own experiences at boarding school so intensely, yet the underlying pulse was different, more suppressed. If she was at St. Mary's like she was supposed to be, there would be shrieks, hugs and giggles before late nights talking about the summer with snacks and coca cola. Homesickness stirred up inside of her, not just for her home in Scotland but for her own school and friends. It would be days before she received any letters.

Kathleen weaved through the clusters of obstacles, briefly peering into rooms as she passed. Each room was similar to her own, located near her grandfathers, except hers had a bathroom and a little more space and storage since it was a single. The end of the corridor came into view when she was blocked by a group of boys gathered outside of an open door.

"Rumour has it," drawled a voice dripping with confidence, "you did summer school."

"Yep, chemistry. My Father thought I should get ahead. How was your summer, slick?" came a lively reply from inside of the room. Kathleen tried to edge around the group but was forced back by a feverish boy and his hurried father. She pulled a face involuntarily as the sick boy sneezed a little too close to be hygienic.

Suddenly the boy closest to her stepped backwards, right into her. He pivoted in surprise.

"Sorry, I didn't see you there" the tall boy swept his hair back with his left hand, extending his right towards her. "I'm Knox Overstreet, and you must be Nolan's granddaughter, right?"

"Yes. Kathleen Murray" she took his hand, surprised by the extent of his apologetic demeanour. "It's okay, it wouldn't have happened if some kid hadn't sneezed so closely to me."

"That'll be spaz" laughed an auburn-haired boy in glasses next to him, "I'm Steven Meeks."

"Pleasure to meet you" Kathleen smiled, shaking his hand as well.

"You found the girl?" The same drawling, almost laughing voice from before floated out from inside of the room.

"Yeah" Knox called back, turning to her as he stepped into the dorm, "do you want to come in and
She nodded, swiftly following Knox and Steven over the threshold. Inside were three others, including the terrified boy she had seen in assembly.

"Meeks, door closed" she identified the owner of the voice. He had draped himself languidly over a bed, barely ruffling his brown hair as he lit the cigarette with a single flick.

"What are the four pillars?" asked another as the boys settled themselves in the room.

"Travesty, horror, decadence, excrement" they echoed dramatically.

Kathleen leaned against the ugly, cream wall, listening to the interaction with amusement.

"Hey, study group" announced the boy with the cigarette, "Meeks aced Latin. I didn't quite flunk English so" he continued, stretching further out on the bed "if you want, we've got our study group."

"Sure" replied the boy in the window, whose raised brows indicated the true ownership of the furniture used so freely. Despite the open suitcase he had been forced to abandon at the end, he seemed unaffected, even expectant of the clearly welcome intrusion. "Cameron asked me already, does anyone mind including him?"

"What's his specialty? Bootlicking" his friend smirked.

"He's your roommate"

"That's not my fault!"

"Kathleen, are you interested in joining?" Steven asked, turning away from his friends.

"If it's okay with all of you," her heart sped up at the shake in her voice. Daring to remove her focus from Meeks' cordiality, she looked briefly at the others who were all nodding.

"Hey, we got the girl" cheered one of the boys.

"The girl is called Kathleen" she corrected laughingly, "I'm great with English and history, but pitiful with mathematics."

"Don't worry about it" assured the tall boy, "I'm Neil Perry by the way. That's Charlie" he said pointing at the boy on his bed who saluted, "and that's Todd Anderson. He's new to Welton too."

"Hi" all the boys echoed, introducing themselves in turn to Todd, who shook their hands obligingly before returning hastily to the task of unpacking.

"Todd's brother is Jeffrey Anderson" said Neil. The others murmured in recognition. Clueless to the significance of this brother, Kathleen listened.

"Valedictorian and national merits scholar" Charlie whistled. He was right, it was a pretty impressive list of accomplishments.

"Oh, welcome to Hellton" commented Steven with a nod at both Todd and Kathleen.

"It's every bit as tough as they say, unless you're a genius like Meeks" Charlie added, offering Neil a smoke.
"He flatters me. That's why I help him with Latin."

"And English, and trig" Charlie's laugh trailed off into coughs as he accidentally inhaled the smoke.

A knock at the door sounded, sparking a frenzy of movement as Charlie stamped on the cigarette and Neil tried to wave the smoke away. "It's open," he called.

In strode a man in a grey suit, the boys stood, Kathleen copied them.

"Father! I thought you'd gone" Neil blinked, his hands tensing into fists.

"Mr Perry" Charlie smiled tightly, obviously familiar with the man.

"Keep your seats fellas, keep your seats" he glanced around the room, "oh, and lady. You must be Gale's granddaughter, Miss Murray."

"Yes sir." She replied, startled by the recognition.

"I've heard great things from your Grandfather. Shame about the fire at St. Mary's" he frowned, "but I'm sure you'll find Welton a great substitute. I hope the boys have been treating you well."

"I'm convinced I will, sir. My grandfather runs a fine institution. And the boys have all been perfect gentlemen" her wide, society beam surfaced. She thought briefly about how pleased her etiquette teacher would have been to see genuine effort for charm, not the teasing most usually found among her friends in that Thursday afternoon class.

"I'm glad" he nodded curtly. "Neil, I've actually just spoken to Mr Nolan. I think you're taking too many extra-curricular activities this semester, and I've decided that you should drop the school annual."

"But I'm assistant editor this year!"

"I'm sorry Neil." His response was firm, but in Kathleen's opinion he didn't seem apologetic at all.

"But Father I can't! It wouldn't be fair-"

"Fellas, lady, would you excuse us for a moment, please." Mr Perry interrupted his son; his quick exit left no chance of discussion. She remained silent, tracking the knowing look exchanged between the friends, she even caught Todd's lingering gaze of concern. They were both newbies, but she knew that he could also tell it was bad. The atmosphere had changed the moment had Mr Perry walked, thought it hadn't been so prominent until now.

Whispered arguing slipped under the door. The students inside fidgeted, eyes locked on various objects as they tried not to listen. Thankfully, Steven broke the silence. "Mr Perry mentioned a fire. If you don't mind me asking, how did it start?"

"It's fine" she smiled, grateful for the distraction. The others turned; eyes fixed eagerly on her as she delivered an escape. "Summer school cookery club got a little out of hand, one of the younger girl's pans caught fire. She panicked and ran over to the sink, but it caught the curtains. The supervisor got everybody out before it got to the gas. But the kitchens exploded along with damage to half of the west wing. They actually thought the chemistry class was at fault until they realised the class went to the library that day." She lengthened her explanation with further details, attempting to drag the story out until Neil and his Father were finished.
"That's awful, was everyone alright?"

"Shit" Charlie murmured.

"No injuries, but repairs mean school can't open until January - if it all goes to plan."

Silence.

It seemed like Neil's Father had left, but Neil still had not reappeared. Thirty seconds had barely passed before Charlie and Knox darted out to check on him.

Kathleen conversed with Steven, and eventually Todd while they waited for their return. She found out about another friend, Gerard Pitts, and that Charlie's roommate Richard Cameron sometimes tagged along as well. Dinner was in a few minutes so they re-grouped and made their way down to the dining hall.

Chapter End Notes

I'm English, not American or Scottish so if you spot any cultural inaccuracies please do drop me note in a review or DM me. It would appreciated.

Kathleen's Mother is American and her Father is Scottish. Since she has attended an American boarding school from the age of eleven, I imagine her character as having a watered down accent with a mix of vocabulary from both countries.
Chapter 2 - Carpe Diem

Three days, to Kathleen's bewilderment, had not been sufficient time to re-acquaint herself with the mansion. Almost a decade had passed since her last family visit. Although the decor had not changed, the scale certainly had. Her new perspective was rather muddling. Without the guidance of the boys she certainly would have been late to dinner.

In the few minutes it had taken to reach the Jacobean style main staircase, all traces of tension had vanished. Neil had shed the shackles of dejection, emerging as the cheery leader of the strange blend of personalities. He led them on a guided tour, jesting with Charlie over portrait opinions, and telling anecdotes for the benefit of Todd and herself. As they trailed along admiring the architecture, the debate over Charlie's detention for sledding down the stairs in third year became an argument over who had the worst Summer.

"What about you two?" asked Knox.

"Yeah, any horror stories from your summers?" Neil nudged Todd with an encouraging smile.

Todd shrunk away from the contact. "Uh, no. My summer was-my summer was fine," he stuttered.

"Mine was great until I got here" Kathleen added, watching as Todd ducked his head, hiding the rising flush in his cheeks. She wondered if his nerves would recede somewhat with the reassurance
of a few acquaintances. "I'm relying on you guys to change that now; I'll go loopy if I'm stuck with my grandfather every day."

"God, what's he like as a grandparent?" Charlie's amused expression dropped at the thought.

"I learnt the four pillars by my fourth birthday" she muttered, earning a mixture of groans and laughs, "and every time I visit, I'm sent to various dinners and dances, all dressed up like a possession to show off and charm his associates."

"Ah, you're one us after all" Charlie winked, "only prettier."

She blushed, letting a laugh speak for her, but it faded as the group approached the dinner hall. As the heavy doors were thrown open, the large rectangle room came into view. It was well lit by old candelabras which glowed like stars beneath the high, shadowy ceiling. The walls were adorned with tapestries older than her grandfather, hung in the large spaces between the tall windows. The parquet floor was shining, newly cleaned, under the rows of tables which lined the room. By the left wall was the buffet area. Boys and teachers queued with plates to serve themselves. At the far end of the room was the teachers table, and Mr Nolan was sat in the centre, conversing with the new teacher - Mr Keating.

She took a deep breath and followed the boys over to the welcome buffet. "Thanks" she muttered as Knox passed her a plate. At least the food seemed nice enough. There was a wide selection to choose from, and a few deserts on a smaller table. She piled her plate up with food and exchanged a nervous smile with Todd, whose hands were shaking as he poured the gravy. It was a rather intimidating room where everyone else knew where to sit, what the rules were, and the air was full of history with one another.

"Hey!" A shout cut through the din of crockery and chatter; its source found in a blond boy with elfish features. His pale blue eyes held challenge, briefly meeting Neil's from the table nearest to where Todd, Neil and herself were stood waiting for the others to finish up. "Sweetheart, why don't you sit with us."

"No thank you" Kathleen said tensely. This was exactly the kind of thing which she had dreaded happening. If there was a scene, she would be isolated from the other students for her entire stay. It wouldn't matter whose fault it was to Mr Nolan.

"Her name is Kathleen, Fraser, not sweetheart." Although his tone seemed as light as before, the warning could not be missed.

"I don't remember asking you Perry, I was talking the girl with the pretty face," Fraser goaded over his friends' raucous laughter.

"And I don't wish to engage in any further conversation" she said hotly.

"Come on, I was being nice!"

"No, you're being an ass" Neil retorted, "come on guys, let's grab a table. The others will catch up."

The pair followed Neil to the other side of the room where they found a large, empty table, far from the jeering idiots, much to Kathleen's relief. Todd sat on the end of the bench, Kathleen next to him and Neil opposite Todd. Soon after the others found them. Charlie sat next to Neil, Knox next to Kathleen and Steven opposite her and Knox with another two boys who she had not yet met.

"Kathleen, Todd" Steven said, "let me introduce you to Gerard Pitts and Richard Cameron."
"Hi" the four echoed to each other. Dinner was rather subdued, small talk was made and jokes told but tiredness started to creep up on the students who one by one began to yawn.

Finally, at Gerard's sensible suggestion, the group traipsed out of the hall and up towards the dormitories. At the top of the staircase Kathleen recognised the corridor which led to her own, isolated room.

She waved the boys away. "My room is way," she explained, bidding them goodnight.

Calls of "night" and "see ya" followed her down the passage. She let herself into the room, almost knocking forgetting to flip on the light switch in her distraction. A small smile graced her lips as images of the boys’ kindness danced through her mind. Whatever her grandfather may throw at her, she could have friends, and that fact made all the difference in the world. Her smile grew, fading only as she slipped away into hands of her dreams.

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Waking up to a clanging alarm was slightly disorientating. Kathleen half expected to be greeted with the sight of her three roommates in various states of morning chaos, before remembering that she was alone. She showered and dressed, donning her substitute uniform as instructed. It consisted of a white blouse, a grey jumper emblazoned with the Welton logo, a knee length skirt and white socks with her patent Mary Janes.

Upon seeing the time, she left her room and turned the corner to the staircase. It was like a zoo. A mad rush of boys stampeded down the stairwell, each one ignoring the frazzled teacher shouting about "slowing down." She also caught the words "horrible pubescent's" and she stifled a giggle as she joined the chaos to reach breakfast. In the dining hall, she grabbed a croissant and headed off to chemistry.

The first lesson only proved Charlie's words, Welton was tough. One lesson in, and she already had a chapter to read with twenty questions to complete for the following day. Latin consisted purely of mind-numbing repetition, and trig was pure hell. By the time she got to English, she - along with the rest of her year - had a horrifying stack of textbooks and homework assignments. Observing the classroom was empty, they took their seats and did what all teenagers do when they finally get a minute to relax - complain and throw paper planes at one other. Kathleen chose a desk near the back, in front of Charlie and across from Pitts and Neil. She had begun to pick up on how things worked around here, some boys were referred to by surnames or nicknames, others by their names only. She hoped that she wouldn't be granted with an awful nickname in short stint as a student.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Mr Keating. He strolled casually in, adjusting his tie as if they were not present. The class fell silent, yet he continued to ignore them in favour of whistling as he exited the room. Looks of utter confusion were exchanged across the room, their collective questioning only increased when Mr Keating stuck his head back in and beckoned them to follow. They complied, grabbing their hymnals on the way out.

"What the hell is going on?" asked Charlie as they left the room.

"Not a clue" Kathleen murmured back.

Cameron led his peers into the foyer used as Welton's trophy room. Under the grotesque stag head mounted on the wall, were the many alumni accomplishments on display to make every passer-by feel inadequate. Keating sustained his tune as Cameron came to a halt behind the table dividing the space. Kathleen slipped into the front of the semi-circle her classmates formed on the side nearest
to the classroom. She glanced around as she waited for the others to settle, noting their proximity to the banners from yesterday's assembly, each suspended from one of the four corners. 'Discipline' hung to her right, and 'tradition' to her left, while Mr Keating's side was framed by 'honour' and 'excellence.' She wondered how any of this could be applicable to poetry.

"O' Captain, my captain. Who knows where that comes from? Anybody?"

Only spaz - whose real name was still unknown to her - answered, in the form of sneeze.

"Walt Whitman" Kathleen said hesitantly, "He wrote the poem about Abraham Lincoln."

"Indeed" he replied. "Now in this class you can either call me Mr Keating, or if you're slightly more daring, o' captain, my captain." A few uncertain chuckles rang out, but his face remained serious. "Now, allow me to dispel a few rumours so they do not fester into facts. Yes, I attended Hellton. And survived. No, at that time I was not the mental giant you now see before you. I was the intellectual equivalent of a ninety-eight-pound weakling. I would go to the beach and people would kick copies of Byron in my face. Now Mr..." He looked down paper register, "Pitts? That's a rather unfortunate name, Mr Pitts. Where are you?"

Pitts raised his hand.

"Pitts, would you open your hymnal to page five forty-two. Read the first stanza of the poem that you find there."

His face dropped. The class scrambled to open their copies, barely restraining their reactions as he read the title, 'To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time."

"Yes, come on. Somewhat appropriate isn't it."

"Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today
Tomorrow will be dying."

The words took her back to her last term at St. Mary's, when the bored of Governor's almost fired a teacher over the use of Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress.' The poems sentiments towards life were certainly similar. She wondered which poem was published first.

"Thank you, Mr Pitts" Mr Keating's voice stopped the reading, much to Pitts' relief. "Gather ye Rosebuds while ye may. The Latin term for that sentiment is Carpe Diem. Who knows what that means?"

Meeks raised his hand, "Carpe Diem, that's seize the day."

"Very good, Mr..?"

"Meeks, sir."

He paced back and forth, energy emanating from being. "Meeks. Another unusual name. Seize the day, gather ye rosebuds while ye may. Why does the writer use these lines?"

"Because he's in a hurry?" called Charlie from the back.
"No," Mr Keating stepped forward, his arm hitting an imaginary bell, "but thank you for playing anyway." Chuckles filled the room, less uncomfortable and more amused by the odd man that seemed to have returned to stuffy, old Welton by mistake.

"Because we are food for worms lads" his voice dropped into solemnity, but he spared a wink for Kathleen, "and lady." His eyes focused, moving to meet those of every student looking his way, "because believe it or not, every one of us in this room is going to stop breathing, turn cold and die."

Silence.

"I'd like you to step forward." He gestured to the glass cabinets lining the far wall. "Over here please. I'd like us to peruse some of the faces from the past. You've walked past them many times, but I don't think you've really looked at them."

The class shuffled forwards; gazes fixed on the photographs of students from days long gone. One hundred years of Welton graduates were lined up before them, and soon these boys' faces would join the archive. Kathleen leaned in to see, briefly wondering if she would one day be unique enough to count.

"They're not that different from you, are they? Same haircuts, other than yours of course" he grinned at Kathleen. "Full of hormones just like you, invincible like you feel, the world is their oyster. They believe that they're destined for great things just like many of you. Their eyes are full of hope just like you. Did they wait until it was too late to make their lives even one iota of what they're capable of? Because you see, these boys are now fertilising daffodils. But if you listen real close, you can hear them whisper their legacy to you. Go on. Lean in."

Baffled, the class complied.

"Listen" Keating cupped a hand behind his ear, "do you hear it?"

A whisper moved behind them; the words floated from one side of the gathering to other.
"Carpe...Carpe Diem."

Multiple students caught their friends' eyes. Cameron looked disgusted at the breath ghosting his shoulder.

"Carpe Diem. Seize the day boys, make your lives extraordinary."

He was mad. Thought Kathleen, well and truly mad.

And it was brilliant.

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"That was weird!" Pitts exclaimed, throwing open the doors to the courtyard. Sunlight poured over the emerging class, its golden rays slinking west in time with their walk towards the building listed next on their timetables.

"Different" Neil commented, raising his voice over the ringing of the school bell.

"Spooky if you ask me" added Knox.

"He is definitely insane" Kathleen agreed, handing Knox the book falling from his unstable stack, "but I like him."
"Yeah, but do you think he's going to test us on that stuff?" queried Cameron.

Charlie rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on Cameron. Don't you get anything?"

"What?" the red head protested, "What?"

"Nothing" she said to Cameron kindly, "we won't be tested on that."

The boys ran off to their next lesson, fencing. It was one of the many school sports her grandfather had deemed as an inappropriate for a young lady. Instead, Kathleen made her way to the library with her mountain of study, hoping to get the majority of it done during the next hour. Being alone and undistracted seemed conducive to her goal, yet her mind wondered.

"Gather ye rose buds while ye may" she recited the words under her breath. The woods visible from the large window pulled her eyes from pages of her chemistry book. "And this same flower that smiles today" she paused, watching a leaf fall from a sugar maple tree, "tomorrow will be dying."

Ink flowed from her pen, filling in the answers in a rush of anticipation. Before the last drop had a chance to dry the book was slammed and shoved under her arm as she hurried out of the library. Air filled her lungs with first step out of the man-made structure, and into Mother Nature's domain. Kathleen dropped her satchel under the sugar maple, and she spun around its trunk as the sun set orange over its fiery leaves. A few moments later, she dropped onto the grass, bathing in the warmth with rosy cheeks. Just one hour, she promised herself, forgetting the other assignments calling her name.

After all, she needed something to work on in study group.
Thank you for all of your kind words. I am ecstatic that even a fraction of DPS fans are already growing to love Kathleen as much as I do. She has lived in my mind for over month, so to put her on the page is both a relief and a risk. Please continue leaving comments. Each one truly make my day a lot brighter, and I hope this update brightens the day for you.

'Alas, Love, what is this thou wouldst with me?

What honour shalt thou have to quench my breath,

Or what shall my heart broken profit thee?

O Love, O great god Love, what have I done,'

~ The Complaint of Lisa by Algernon Charles Swinburne

Kathleen sunk low into the worn fabric of her armchair. 'A Tale of two Cities' lay open on her lap, its pages illuminated by one of the lamps emitting soft light into the senior common room. Someone had drawn the thick, red curtains over the autumn view, shielding the room from the approaching darkness. A low hum sustained in the relative quiet, an unusual state in the rare moments of unsupervised time.

Knox was away, reluctantly attending a dinner with his father's work friend Mr Danburry, and his family. His absence may not have been wholly responsible for the tranquillity, but it certainly helped to regulate the tone. Meeks and Pitts were stationed at a table not far from her armchair, preoccupied with the radio they had been building since her second night. The other boys were doing homework, playing darts or chatting in small groups. She felt more at ease with each passing day at Welton Academy. Almost a week had passed and already she sensed the beginning of attachments. She would miss these boys when she left, but at the same time she ached for her current friends indescribably.

"I see a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this abyss. I see the lives for which I lay down my life, peaceful, useful, prosperous and happy. I see that I hold a sanctuary in their hearts, and in the hearts of their descendants, generations hence. It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known." Sydney Carton's words pierced her heart. Charles Dickens was without doubt one of her favourite authors, even if Cameron turned up his nose every time she quoted his work. Cameron didn't read anything fictional, in fact, he hardly did anything for the sake of fun.

"How was dinner?" Kathleen looked up, startled by Charlie's question. Against the heavy, wooden door stood Knox with his jacket slung over one shoulder, and a far-away look in his eyes. She hadn't heard him come in.
"Huh?" Knox asked, shaken from his daze.

"How was dinner?" Charlie repeated.

His eyes dropped as he let the door take his weight. "Terrible."

Kathleen closed her book, "why, what happened?" She swapped the comfort of the cushioned seat for a resin wood chair at the table. Even Cameron placed his designated math pencil behind his ear as Knox approached, exhaling further words of despondency.

"Tonight" he sighed, sinking down into a chair, "I met the most beautiful girl I have ever seen in my entire life."

"Are you crazy? What's wrong with that?" Neil cried, voicing everyone's thoughts.

"Because she's practically engaged, to Chet Danburry."

Groans echoed around the two tables. Meeks looked particularly disturbed, while Neil pushed his textbook away to offer his support to Knox.

"To bad" Pitts mumbled, reaching over to pat Knox on the back.

"That guy could eat a football!" Charlie exclaimed.

Kathleen felt her brows furrow. She leaned forward to catch the scrunched-up paper Knox threw down. "Who is Chet Danbury?" She asked, smoothing out the creases to reveal a legal services business card that had taken the brunt of Knox's frustration. The details were for Mr Danburry.

"He's a football player at the local high school, the walking stereotype of a jock" Neil explained, "he used to come here but he flunked out in fourth year."

Charlie chuckled darkly, "the knucklehead deserved it."

"Too bad" Pitts said sympathetically.

"It's worse than to bad Pitts" Knox implored, "It's a tragedy. A girl this beautiful in love with such a jerk!"

"All the good one's go for the jerks."

Kathleen pivoted in her seat to face him. "That's a little unfair" she objected, thinking of the boy dramas discussed in halls of St Mary's, "as long as someone isn't abusive, it's none of our business who any person chooses to date."

"Sorry" Pitts mumbled.

"Forget her" Cameron broke in, reaching for Neil's abandoned Trig book. He pointed to the problem, oblivious to the disbelief etched into Charlie's features. "Open your trig book and try to figure out problem five."

"I can't just forget her Cameron!" Knox exclaimed, "and I certainly can't think about trig."

"I hate to say it, but maybe he's right. The chances of seeing her again are slim, and like you said she already has a boyfriend" Kathleen spoke apologetically, provoking a smile as she held up the business card and ripped it down the middle. Suddenly, the radio which Meeks and Pitts had been working on sprung to life, saving Knox from further conversation.
"WE'VE GOT IT!"

"All right gentlemen, five minutes" came the voice of Hager, interrupting the celebrations of the pair as the door opened. Instantaneously, they swept the radio under the table.

"Let's go!" The supervisor gave Kathleen a pointed look before herding the darts players into tidying up. She rose from the chair and picked up her book with a little more haste.

"Did you see her naked?" Charlie asked, darting out of Knox's range on his way out of the room. Kathleen caught Knox's annoyance and swatted him lightly with her book.

"What did I say?"

"You know what you said, Dalton."

Kathleen said goodbye to the boys as they split off to their respective dormitories, leaving Meeks and Pitts trying to convince the teacher that they really did have a science experiment. Here, the skills taught in debate club were - and not for the first time - successfully put to use.

"Come on, we're going to be late to English!" Kathleen tugged at Todd's arm, half dragging him down the corridor.

"You were the one who insisted on checking the post!" he laughed, quickening his pace slightly as they flew down the flagstone hallways of the ground floor.

"Nancy said she would write" she repeated for what felt like tenth time this morning. "I can't arrange to see her until I know she's arrived at her aunt's house" she whined.

Todd shook his head, "I can't believe that her aunt lives in town. It's so lucky."

"What can I say? I'm a lucky person!"

They rounded the final corner, not bothering to collect themselves before rushing into English with apologies for their slight tardiness. As expected, Mr Keating simply nodded as they slipped quietly behind their desks and lifted the lids to collect their hymnals.

"Thank you for joining us, Mr Anderson and Miss Murray" he smiled at the late comers. "Mr Perry, would you read to us the first paragraph of the preface titled 'understanding poetry,' please."

"Understanding poetry" read Neil, pushing up his reading glasses, "by J. Evans Pritchard PHD. To fully understand poetry, we must be fluent with its metre and rhyme and figure of speech. Then ask two questions. One, how artfully have the objectives of the poem been rendered? Two, how important are those objectives..."

Kathleen, like many others began taking notes as Mr Keating drew a graph on the blackboard.

"And its importance is plotted on the vertical, then calculating the total area of the poem yields the measure of its greatness." Neil continued to read, "A sonnet by Byron might score high on the vertical but only average on the horizontal. A Shakespearean sonnet on the other hand might score high both horizontally and vertically. Yielding a massive total area. Thereby revealing the poem to be truly great..."

She paused, wondering if she had heard the theory correctly. How could such subjective measures
dominate critical concerns? Her frown increased with each word Neil read, and she saw her confusion mirrored in his own expression. She watched as Mr Keating plotted the examples accordingly, and her irritation increased with insult to Byron. He had always been one of her father's, and then her own favourite poets.

"Excrement."

Her head shot up. "Excrement," repeated Mr Keating. "That's what I think of Mr J. Evans Pritchard. We're not laying pipe, we're talking about poetry" he announced, "how can you describe poetry like American bandstand. Oh, I like Byron. I give him a forty-two, but I can't dance to him."

Kathleen needed no encouragement to draw and thick, blotchy line through her notes.

"Now" Mr Keating said, "I want you to rip out that page." His words provoked nothing but blank and even worried looks. "Go on, rip out the entire page. You heard me, rip it out."

A loud tearing noise ripped through the silence. Kathleen, along with the rest of the class turned to see Charlie holding up the page with a smirk.

"Thank you, Mr Dalton!" Mr Keating called over the disbelieving laughter. "Tell you what. Don't just rip out that page. Rip out the entire introduction. I want it gone, history, leave nothing of it."

Sounds of ripping began to appear from various directions. Charlie threw his page at her, the challenge evident in his countenance. She threw it back, holding her own book in full view as she began ripping out the pages of the introduction.

"BE GONE J EVANS PRITCHARD PHD!" Mr Keating bellowed, " RIP, RIP, RIP IT OUT. I WANT TO HEAR NOTHING BUT RIPPING OF MR PRITCHARD!" His frantic gestures came to halt as he passed Cameron's row. Kathleen saw him register the distress dripping from Cameron's face. She fought her laughter at the sight of Mr Keating reassuring him, "It's not the bible. You won't go to hell for this." He gave the stressed student a last comforting pat on the shoulder before disappearing into the closet.

"We shouldn't be doing this" Cameron complained.

"Rip" Neil replied, ignoring Cameron's concerns.

It soon escalated into a paper fight. Screwed up notes and introduction pages flew through the air like deadly missiles. Kathleen felt something hit her shoulder, she turned to see Charlie grinning as he threw another ball of paper at her.

"It's on!" She laughed as she chucked her own pages at him, one hitting him in the chest, while she threw the other at Pitts.

In the midst of the chaos, their Latin teacher stormed in, the door hit the wall with a thud that could barely be heard over the commotion. In the same moment, Kathleen's eyes landed on Charlie's drawing. He only laughed at her wide-eyed shock.

"WHAT HELL IS GOING ON HERE?" Mr. McAllister demanded.

Charlie ripped the rude drawing out of his notebook and popped the page into his mouth before the teacher had a chance to see it, causing Kathleen to choke down her laughter.

"I don't hear enough rip!" Mr Keating returned from the closet with a trashcan.
"Mr Keating," the teacher's eyebrows rose, "I didn't know you were here."

"Mr McAllister," he greeted, smiling casually "I am."

Pitts snorted.

"Ah, so you are, excuse me." The Latin professor hurriedly backed out of the room, closing the door firmly behind him.

"Keep ripping lady and gentlemen. This is a war, and the casualties could be your hearts and souls" he carried the trashcan around for everybody to dispose of the paper. "Armies of academics, measuring poetry" he mocked, "NO. We will not have that here. In my class you will learn to think for yourselves again. You will learn to savour words and language. No matter what anybody tells you. Words and ideas can change the world."

Mr Keating strode down the centre of the classroom, looking around at each student, "I see the look in Mr Pitts eye, that 19th century literature has nothing to do with going to business school or medical school. Right? Maybe. Mr Hopkins, you might agree with him, you may think that we should simply study our Mr Pritchard and learn our rhyme and metre and go quietly about the business of achieving other ambitions." He paused. "Now huddle up."

Kathleen and the others from the far row came forward to sit on top of the desks of those sat closer to their professor. She joined Todd and Charlie by Neil's desk.

"We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race and the human race is filled with passion. Medicine, law and business aren't generic, these are noble pursuits that sustain life but poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for. And to quote from Whitman;

'Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring,

Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish,

—What good amid these, O me, O life?'

"Answer? That you are here. That life exists and identity. That the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse. What will your verse be?"

The moment that the students left the classroom, it was like a trance had been broken, except everything seemed brighter, louder, more important. They headed to lunch talking about how mad and fantastic Mr Keating was.

Just after prayer, Neil pulled out an old red book, "hey, I found his senior annual in the library."

"Let me look at that!" Cameron snatched the book from Neil.

"Captain of the soccer team, editor of the school annual, Cambridge bound, thigh man and member of the dead poets society" Neil listed from memory as he dug into his lunch.

Cameron read it with rare admiration before passing it along, "man most likely to do anything"

"Thigh man? Mr K was a hell raiser!" applauded Charlie, handing it to Kathleen under the table.

"What's the dead poets society?" She asked.

"I don't know, no other mention of it" Neil replied.
"Why don't you ask" Cameron stated, closing it once it made its way back to him.

Once they felt satiated, the gang decided to track down Mr Keating before lunch finished. His proclivity for lunchtime walks in the ground was well-known, so they took a chance and found him whistling on the green. It was an odd habit they had learnt to expect.

"Sir!" Neil received no response. "O'Captain, my captain?"

Mr Keating stopped and turned immediately. Kathleen shook her head in amusement.

"We were just looking in your old annual," Neil explained handing the red book over.

"No, that's not me" Mr Keating laughed nostalgically at the worn pages. He thumbed through the book, eyes glistening with the ghosts of the past.

"We were just wondering," Kathleen asked stepping forward as he reached the end, "what is the dead poets society?"

"I doubt the present administration would look favourably upon that" he warned, "especially your grandfather. It's probably best not to mention it to him."

Kathleen nodded solemnly.

"Why?" Neil crouched next to his teacher, "what was it?"

Mr Keating studied the teens for a minute, "can you keep a secret?"

The group nodded, kneeling down to join the conference.

"The Dead Poets" he began, "were dedicated to sucking the marrow out of life. That's a phrase by Thoreau that we would invoke at the beginning of every meeting. We would gather at the old Indian cave and take turns reading from Thoreau, Whitman, Shelley, the biggies" he smiled. "Even some of our own verse. In the enchantment of the moment we let poetry work magic."

Knox frowned, "You mean it was just a bunch of guys sitting around reading poetry."

"No, Mr Overstreet" Keating shook his head, "It wasn't just guys. We weren't a Greek organisation" he winked at Kathleen who smiled in return, "we were romantics!" His hands wove gestures of magic. "We didn't just read poetry, we let it drip from out tongues like honey. Spirits soared, woman swooned, and Gods were created. Not a bad way to spend an evening, eh?"

He analysed the captivated students and handed back the annual. "Thank you, Mr Perry, for this stroll down amnesia lane. Burn that, especially my picture." And with those parting words, the Captain went on his way towards the lake. Every individual was frozen. The school bell sounded, but they remained rooted to the spot, united under the spell.

Neil broke the silence, "I say we go tonight."

"Tonight?" repeated Charlie.

"Wait a minute" Cameron protested.

"Everybody in?" Neil ploughed on, ignoring the few mutterings of disagreement.
Kathleen considered Mr Keating's words. His warning against Nolan certainly held the appeal of youthful rebellion, besides, she would be a fool to let her grandfather know about anything she out of his sight, adding one more to the list was hardly a chore. "Sounds good" she said. Neil nodded.

"Where is this cave?" asked Pitts, beginning to back up towards the main building.

"I know where it is" Neil replied, falling into step with him, "it's beyond the stream."

"Sounds boring to me" Cameron huffed, quickening his pace.

"Don't go then" Charlie said, nodding at Neil and Kathleen.

Three in.

"Do you know how many de-merits we're talking Dalton?"

"So, don't come, please."

"All I'm saying is that we have to be careful. We can't get caught."

She almost bumped into Todd as she turned to face the owner of such a thoughtless statement. "Nobody's planning to, Cameron" she called over her right shoulder. Charlie spoke in harmony with her. "No shit, Sherlock," he swapped a look of exasperation with her.

"YOU THERE, HURRY UP" bellowed Mr Hager from the steps.

"Alright" Neil spoke quickly, "who's in?"

"Oh, come on Neil, Hager-"

"Forget Hager, Cameron!"

"I'm in" Charlie shrugged.

"Me to" Kathleen reaffirmed.

"I'M WARNING YOU!" Hager's irate shouts drew a sigh of consent from Cameron.

"I don't know, Neil." Pitts began walking again, glancing worriedly at the staff member prowling the steps.

"What, Pitts?" Neil followed him.

"Come on!" Charlie encouraged the others.

"Even Cameron is coming" Kathleen coaxed, hurrying to catch up with Pitts and Neil whose strides covered twice the distance of her own. Meeks was a few paces behind the tallest pair, a frown creased his forehead.

Meeks intervened, "his grades are hurting."

His excusing argument fell flat. Neil looked almost offended by the knowledge. "We can help him, Meeks."

"What is this? A midnight study group" Pitts snapped, disregarding the offers to extend group study periods in compensation for the lack of sleep.
"Pitts, you're coming" Neil concluded, "Meeks? Are your grades hurting to?"

"I'll try anything once."

"Except sex!" Charlie hollered, bounding up the stone steps. "What about you, Knox?"

"I don't know Charlie..." he hesitated.
Charlie put his hands on his shoulders, "It'll help you get Chris."

"Yeah? How?"

"Woman swoon?" He chuckled, running off to class.

"WHY? Why do they swoon? Kathleen, you're a woman! "Knox called after the group running to supervised study.

XXX

Charlie somehow managed to procure a map of the grounds within half an hour of study. One by one, they slipped across to his table to help pinpoint the location of the cave as quietly as possible. Unfortunately, they hadn't succeeded.

"For God sake, stop chattering and sit down" the teacher reprimanded the group for a third time. Reluctantly, Kathleen and Neil trudged back to their table where Todd was waiting, leaving Charlie and Cameron to argue about the dangers. Knox was left as the sole referee, and Meeks had moved to help Pitts with his homework alone.

"Hey, Todd" Kathleen asked as she shuffled along the bench, "are you coming along?"

"No."

Neil fell into place on his other side. "Why not?" Neil whispered, "you heard Keating, you were there. Don't you want to do something like that?"

"Yes, but-but"

"But what, honey?" Kathleen said softly.

"Keating said that everybody took turns reading and I-" he shrugged, looking down. "I don't want to do that."

Neil and Kathleen's concerned eyes met behind his tense shoulders.

"Gosh" Neil breathed, "you really have a problem with that."

"No-no, I" Todd took a deep breath, his hands clutching the edges of the table as if he would fly off without an anchor. "I just don't want to do it, that's all. Okay?"

"Alright" he said.

"Kat?" Todd looked at Kathleen pleadingly.

"You don't have to read anything out loud, but please come" she bit her lip.

"She's right. You don't have to read; you can just listen."
"But that's not how it works" Todd objected.

Neil smiled. "Forget how it works! What if they said it was okay?"

"What? are you going to go up and ask them if-" Todd trailed off, realising that Neil would do exactly that.

"I'll be right back." Neil darted away right on que. He slid behind the other table with ease, but his hushed whispers once again caught the attention of their supervisor. His admonishing glare was enough for Neil to sink right back down once he stood to return.

"It'll be fine. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do" Kathleen said taking the opportunity to whisper while he was busy, "but you're our friend, Todd. We want you there with us."

The shy boy gave her a small smile, his eyes flicking after his absent roommate. "I guess I'll see you tonight."

Kathleen smiled brightly, "I guess you will."
Chapter Notes

My laptop lost the Wi-Fi connection half-way through the cave scene, just after Charlie's poem! I had to re-write that part from memory, always, always, always, save your work after every other sentence. That's what I've learned today. Anyway, I think this chapter drops a few hints about the plot despite its comparative shortness.

* 'The Prophet' by Abraham Cowley. This is not actually a poem by Charlie, but for the sake of the plot please pretend it is an original Charlie Dalton masterpiece.

> 'When a sedate content the spirit feels,
And no fierce light disturbs, whilst it reveals;
But silent musings urge the mind to seek
Something, too high for syllables to speak;
Till the free soul to a composedness charmed,'

~ A Nocturnal Reverie by Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea

Chapter four - I went to the woods

As the clock struck midnight, Kathleen slid out of bed. Her feet danced on the icy floor as she pulled on her socks, oxford saddle shoes and finally her winter coat. She pulled the thick material tighter with a shiver as she fumbled for her flashlight. With her pockets laden with hard boiled sweets, she pulled open her door and crept out. Wind howled around the impenetrable stone, contrasting with the silent interior. She could see nothing but inky darkness, only slivers of floorboards were illuminated by the little moonlight let in by the grand windows. She did not dare to turn on her flashlight and risk getting caught, so she put her hand onto the wall and edged her way down the corridor, wincing at every creak or squeak of the floor. Finally, she reached the staircase, where she saw dog biscuits littering the floor, and Nolan's dog eating them contentedly. She silently thanked whoever thought of that and made her way down the stairs towards the backdoor. Its location marked the start of their adventure.

"Kat!" A hushed voice arose from the shadows beneath, "we're over here." She ducked beneath the carved wood in search of the muffled voices. Todd welcomed her into the fold as the unit tiptoed towards the bolted door.

Meeks lifted one end, while Charlie guided the metal scraping harshly against its metal fixings. "Lead the way Neil" whispered Meeks, greasing the hinges before opening the door.

One by one, they crossed the threshold into the night. They sprinted across the lawn, dark coats
bellowing out in the gale. Soon, they hit the treeline where the school grounds met the woods. Fallen leaves crunched under their shoes, their footsteps light and bouncy on the moss. As the foliage grew thicker the group slowed to a jog, flashlights guiding them alongside Neil's map reading skills. He led them deeper into the woods, they climbed over fallen trees, logs and large rocks. A small brook was crossed before a clearing came into distant view.

They were nearly at the cave when Charlie jumped out from behind a tree, "AHHHH, I'M A DEAD POET!" He cackled manically as he grabbed onto Kathleen's shoulders, who shrieked.

"Charlie!" She whirled around to face him, "you almost gave me bloody heart attack!"

"Quit it, Charlie" Cameron chided, recovering from his own shock at Kathleen's sudden scream, "someone will think she's being murdered."

"Who's going to hear us out here" he muttered, "besides she knows I was only teasing, right?" He glanced at Kathleen who nodded.

"GUY'S OVER HERE!" At Neil's shout, the trio followed the sound of his amazement, and found themselves at the mouth of a cave.

"Ladies first" Charlie said, gesturing to the cave. Kathleen rolled her eyes at his sudden display of manners and climbed into the cave. Inside was bigger than she had been imagining, the ceiling gradually got higher until it was possible for even Pitts, the tallest member of the group to stand in the centre. Logs had been moved into a rough circle, and in the centre the boys were trying to light a small fire. Kathleen, Charlie and Cameron sat on the large log nearest to the entrance. After five minutes of heads hitting the lower parts of the rock ceiling, and several failed fire lighting attempts, Neil called for the meeting to open.

"I hereby reconvene the dead poets society" he read, eliciting cheers from the small party. "The meetings will be conducted by myself and the other initiates now present, and Todd Anderson, because he prefers not to read will keep minutes at our meetings. I will now read the traditional opening message by society member, Henry David Thoreau."

He cleared his throat,

'I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately,
I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life"

"I'll second that!" Charlie called.

"To put to rout all that was not life;
and not, when I came to die,
discover that I had not lived.'

"And err, Keating's marked a bunch of other pages" Neil said as he flipped through the book.

"All right, intermission. Dig deep, right here, lay it down" Charlie took control of the food supplies. Kathleen took the sweets out of her pockets, holding them in her gloved hands instead of dropping the paper bags onto the dirt.

"On the mud?" Meeks queried, appearing every bit as disgruntled as she felt.
"Meeks, put your coat down. Picnic blanket" Charlie responded, "don't hold anything back either. You boys are always bumming my smokes."

Kathleen chucked the sweets down, earning an approving nod from Charlie as they landed among the pitiful pile of food. It became abundantly clear that food would not be a source of comfort in the cold, disused and damp cave. The members of the society shivered, eyes brightening only when Charlie produced a flask from his pocket, throwing it in with a huff. They may not have managed to light a fire, but at last there seemed a chance of achieving some warmth.

Cameron glared at the flask with disapproval, but his expression darkened further as he prodded at a red box with a stick, "raisins?"

"Yeah, I like raisins" Knox shrugged.

"Me to!" She piped up, seeing the defensive set in his shoulders.

"Wait a minute! Who gave us half a roll?" Charlie demanded, directing the beam of his flashlight at the offending half-eaten roll, hidden among the cookies.

Breadcrumbs littered the ground as Pitts held up his hands, "I already ate the other half."

Kat picked up a cookie, merely brushing away the lumps of bread mingled in the with pile. Laughter echoed around the dripping walls, seeming to wash away the damp smell and disuse as their body heat permeated the frigid air. Eventually, Neil called them to attention. He pushed aside the list of poems he had decided upon with Todd, giving his roommate control of the notes while he pointed his flashlight up under his chin. His eyes gleamed in its white light, illuminating his face into a grotesque caricature in the shadows.

"It was a dark and rainy night" he began, his voice dropping deep into a dramatic whisper. "This old lady who had a passion for jigsaw puzzles, sat by herself in her house, at her table to complete a new jigsaw puzzle. So, she pieced the puzzle together and realised, to her astonishment, that the image that was formed was her very own room. And the figure in the centre of the puzzle as she completed it, was herself. With trembling hands, she placed the last four pieces and stared in horror at the face of a demented man. The last thing that this little old lady heard, was the sound of breaking glass."

"Scared yet?" Charlie whispered, nudging Kathleen.

She shook her head, "it takes more than a summer camp ghost story to get to me. You should know, dead poet."

"I've got one that's even better than that!" Cameron interrupted, "I do! Okay, so there's this young married couple and they are driving through the forest at night, on a long trip, and they run out of gas and there's a mad man on the loose-"

"Is this the one the mad man bangs on the car and kills the couple when he-" everyone asked, repeating different variations of the same story.

"I love that one" cried Cameron.

Charlie pulled a face, "I told you that one."

"You did not! I got that from summer camp in sixth grade-"

"In a mean abode on the Skankill Road"
Lived a man named William Bloat;

He had a wife, the curse of his life,

Who continually got his goat.

So one day at dawn, with her nightdress on

He cut her bloody throat.'

Pitts finished the stanza and looked up, "It gets worse further down." Knox took the book next.

"You want to hear a real poem?" challenged Charlie.

"Sure" Knox began to pass the book to him, but he pushed it away, "did you memorise a poem?"

"An original piece by Charlie Dalton?" Chuckled Neil as he clambered over Todd to be able to see, "do you know what this is? It's history."

Charlie stood up and unfolded what looked like a magazine article.

"WHERE DID YOU GET THAT?" Cameron's mouth along with the rest of the boys hung open. He looked up at Charlie with more admiration in his eyes than Kat had ever seen. Todd was blushing and Meeks looked sheepish.

"What is it?" Kathleen demanded, Charlie held it at an angle where she could only see the writing on the back and the beams of the boys' flashlights as they stared at whatever was on the other side.

"Nothing you want to see" Neil laughed "God, Charlie!"

Charlie cleared his throat dramatically and began;

*Teach me to Love? go teach thy self more wit;

I am chief Professor of it.

The God of Love, if such a thing there be,

May learn to love from me,'

"Charlie, did you write that!?" Kathleen exclaimed. He folded the article down until only a few words were visible. They were scribbled down in his own handwriting.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

"It's amazing, I didn't know you could write like that."

The boys gave him a wild round of applause and Charlie bowed to his audience. He took a moment to bask in the moment before he sat down with a smile. He slipped the paper into his pocket, replacing it with his flask.

"So, now will you tell me what was on the other side of that article?"
"Not a chance." He took a swig of whiskey, offering it to Kat.

She glared at him but took a sip anyway. "Please?"

"No."

"Is it dirty?"

"You're relentless, aren't you?" He laughed, handing the drink to Pitts.

"Is that a yes?"

He fixed his gaze on the small, silver, string of moonlight cutting through the dimness. If Kathleen leaned back, she could discern the gap in the rock it originated from, and even catch a glimpse of the full moon. She let him stare unflinchingly at it for a moment.

"There is no point praying to Selene or Artemis." Her statement caught his attention. "Artemis especially would take my side."

He chuckled, "I'm protecting your delicate mind from filth, isn't that what a guy is supposed to do?" He paused for a second, his stare catching on the moon once more, "wouldn't Artemis understand the value of that?"

"My knight in shining armour" she replied drily.

"Stop flirting and pay attention, you two" Cameron snapped. His voice projected so loudly that it echoed around the natural structure. Neil shot him a disapproving look, continuing to gesture for silence, the meeting book open in his lap.

"We're not flirting."

"Aw, Cameron are you jealous?" cooed Charlie.

Knox shushed the bickering trio as Neil began the next reading of Alfred Lord Tennyson,

‘Come, my friends,  
’T is not too late to seek a newer world.  
for my purpose holds  
To sail beyond the sunset,  
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;  
One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

"And women swoon...I'm not swooning yet" Kathleen joked, "are you sure Keating was right?"

"Come on Meeks, it's your turn" Neil threw the book to Meeks, "make the lady swoon!"

The gang laughed at Meek's mildly horrified expression, they had been getting sillier as they grew more tired, yet more awakened to the magic of verse. It was the witching hour, and when later
asked, the supernatural aspect combined with the early hour was Meek's excuse for his quite sudden and out of character desire to cause chaos. He flipped quickly through the pages, deciding on a more musical poem. It had been quite a shock when he had let out the shout,

THEN I had religion, THEN I had a vision.

I could not turn from their revel in derision.

THEN I SAW THE CONGO, CREEPING THROUGH THE BLACK,

CUTTING THROUGH THE FOREST WITH A GOLDEN TRACK.'

It didn't take the others long to adapt. Delirious with rhyme they pounded the floor and clapped along, chanting, singing and screaming with joyous abandon. Meeks led the lively procession through the woods, their reckless merriness faded as they approached the school grounds and was replaced by the thrill of the nights events, unspoiled by being caught.

The perilous journey through the silent halls was made successfully and the students crept back in bed. A mere few hours later they emerged from their blanket cocoons at the last minute. Helios' rays seemed too bright, burning and reckless. As he illuminated the bruising bags under their eyes which were just as prominent as their smiles, a further intangible change became evident. As faint as moonlight was the new bond forged by the secrecy and knowledge of the club, and of the sheer, reckless power of being truly alive.
Chapter 5 - A day of revelation, one

Chapter Notes

This is the start of the action! Now that the story is established, I will be adding more scenes which deviate from the movie script. This chapter is also a little shorter than usual, but there was no way to add anything else without messing up the timeline of events.

'Heav'n from all creatures hides the book of fate,

All but the page prescrib'd, their present state:

From brutes what men, from men what spirits know:

Or who could suffer being here below?'

~ An Essay on Man: Epistle I by Alexander Pope

Chapter Five - A day of revelation

"TODD!" Kat threw open the heavy, common room door. It hit the wall with resounding bang. She hurtled forwards, almost vaulting across the table in her haste to slam an object down in front of the boy. Todd remained frozen in an image of bewilderment as she continued to shriek, "IT CAME!"

"I-I see" he stuttered, unable to form sentences in his current state of shock.

Knox propped his elbows on the arm of his chair, leaning forwards to see the cause of the commotion. "What came?"

"My letter from Nancy!" She clutched the pale blue envelope to her chest. Knox winced at her volume.

"You're blocking my light" Cameron said, gesturing for Kathleen to move aside. She glanced down and saw her shadow cast over his textbook and she obliged, moving to take the spare seat across from Meeks and Pitt's chess game.

"So, what did it say?" Neil prompted, giving his roommate a reassuring pat on the shoulder as he joined the group. Todd shot him a placating smile, having shaken himself out of his surprise.

"I haven't read it yet" she frowned, tearing it open.

Her facial expressions were comical as her eyes flittered across the page of compacted calligraphy. She laughed, frowned and gasped in shock like a one woman show; oblivious to the attentions of her audience.
"What's wrong?" Todd leaned in closer to see the letter. Kathleen looked up, her eyes were wide, and her cheeks flushed.

"Knox" she breathed, "what is did you say Chris's surname was?"

He glanced up from Cameron's trig notes. "Noel, why?"

She stared unblinkingly at him for a moment. "Christine Noel" she said slowly, her eyes never straying from his face. "The daughter of Joseph and Linda Noel."

"Yeah, how did you know."

Kathleen bit her lip as she glanced down. The fragile paper crinkled under her tight grip as she read the words over and over again until they were imprinted in her brain. "The family Nancy's staying with" she gushed, "are her maternal aunt and uncle. She's staying with them next month, and her cousin Chris." Sharp breaths were drawn around her, but the reaction she sought was inaudible. For the first time, Knox was rendered speechless. His face mirrored those of her younger brothers on Christmas morning. His dark eyes searched her for confirmation. She nodded.

"YES!" He jumped up, sending his chair crashing to the ground. "You can get me in. YOU CAN GET ME IN WITH CHRIS!" His arms flew out, nearly knocking over the lamp in his glee.

"What the hell is going on."

Charlie's grip tightened on the door frame where he stood unanswered. "Knoxious?"

Knox ran over to his friend, seizing him by the shoulders. "Kathleen's best friend is Chris' cousin!"

He laughed wildly, "I've got my way in." He fist bumped Charlie who remained stiff, stunned at the scene unfolding before him. Knox crossed the room in a matter of seconds, tackling Kathleen into a hug. She laughed at his succession of "thank yours" which rained down upon her with a squeeze stealing her breath from any reply. She merely exchanged a look with Todd, who was sat with Neil reading over Nancy's letter.

"I didn't know that you spend Sunday evenings with Nolan" stated Neil, looking up from the delicate paper.

Crossing her arms, she muttered sarcastically "it's the highlight of my week."

"Is it that bad?" Todd asked quietly.

She shrugged. "We make small talk over drinks, move on to discuss my studies, and then he lectures me on life, or whatever else he sees as relevant. Then I leave."

"Ouch," Charlie winced, "an evening a week of Nolan's one on one company. I can't believe you're actually related."

Kathleen smirked. "At home we like to think his crazy skips a few generations. Why do you think my Mother moved to Scotland - in the height of war - with a man he didn't approve of?"

"Your parents were rebels" Meeks grinned at her before turning to Charlie, "she's got a double dose of rebellion."

XXXX

"A man is NOT very tired, he is exhausted" declared Keating, closer in action to bouncing across
"And don't use very sad. Use...come on, Mr Overstreet. You twerp."

"Morose?"

"Exactly, morose. Now language was developed for one endeavour, and that is?" Mr Keating asked. His eyes swept the classroom search of a student who had not yet spoken. "Mr Anderson. Come on! Are you a man or an amoeba?"

Todd looked up wearily but stayed silent, hands clutching the harsh desk edge in prayer for Keating to move on.

After a pause the Captain's eyes softened. He spoke again, "Miss Murray?"

"Uh, to communicate?"

"No! To woo women. Or, possibly in your case, woo men. Although," he began to stage whisper, "between you and me, I think a couple of boys in this classroom are already infatuated with you." She blushed and shook her head as Keating turned back to the class, "today we're going to be talking about William Shakespeare."

A collective groan echoed around the room, even Neil and Kathleen - the biggest literature fans in the class- grimaced.

"I know. A lot of you look forward to this as much as you look forward to root canal work. Now, we're going to talk about Shakespeare as someone who wrote some very interesting things. Many of you have seen Shakespeare done very much like this," he began contort his arms, folding in on himself and emerging as seemingly a different entity altogether as he acted out an exaggerated scene. "Oh Titus, bring your friend hither." But if any of you have seen Mr Marlon Brando, you know that Shakespeare can be very different…"

The class ended with a dramatic reading. Its content drew on dog humour, but Kathleen was too caught up in the sensation of joy thrumming through her being to translate it. Tears of laughter streamed down her cheeks until her mascara transformed her into Shakespearean spirit worthy of joining the spectacle. She giggled through the few lines bestowed upon her with as much decorum as her Grandfather's strict lessons could summon. His methods were no match. Keating's class was always exciting, never failing to break the cycle of monotonous classes at Welton.

Unfortunately, monotony ruled the region. Kathleen found herself in the library with enough papers to suffocate herself beneath. Yet as she entered the ancient space, she let out an involuntary sigh of pleasure. The Welton library truly was exquisite. Dark, oak wood shelves lined the room and created a labyrinth of literary walkways under the high domed ceiling. Dazzling glimmers of light streaked the dusty space, illuminating the mysteries of the collection. Hidden alcoves contained desks in each section, and larger, more communal tables were located by the librarian's desk. The room was lit by a mixture of natural daylight from tall windows, and a number of dim lamps which adorned the walls. It was a like a piece of heaven hidden away at Hellton.

Kathleen found an alcove desk in the history section. After wrestling down some heavy volumes from the surrounding shelves, she cast her mind away from the dreary weather outside, and envisioned the passionate battles of the past as she considered the effects of American civil war. Her pen mapped paths of ink down the page as the hour ticked by. She was just finishing her conclusion when a real shadow fell over her page. Looking up, she saw Fraser standing behind her.

"What do you want, Fraser?" Her tone remained flat. Her eyes abruptly sought half-finished
Dear Nancy,

You have no idea how much I needed your letter! Life at Welton differs vastly from the routines at St. Mary's, not just because of the boys, but because I can't so much as sneeze without word getting to my grandfather that I have caught a cold. Such conditions are most inconvenient for our usual mischief, but also the entertainment of the gossip mill. I must confess how unsettling it is to be the topic of choice in the teacher's lounge. Fear not, all hope for fun is not yet lost! A few of the boys and I have found a way around the totalitarian rules. Not only have Meeks and Pitts built a radio so that we can listen to music and dance (which grandfather frowns upon unless the event calls for it), but we have found an escape through poetry. The credit belongs to the most intriguing man we have ever met, our English teacher. You must swear not to utter a single word. I'll fill you in on the details the minute you arrive in Vermont, and I'll persuade the boys to let me bring you along to a meeting. That at least will be simple. They're starved of female presence. There are no female staff, and other than myself there is only a rare female visitor temporarily on site.

Most amazingly of all, your cousin Chris is a bit of a celebrity at Welton. In fact, a friend of mine, Knox Overstreet, fancies her. He's positively lovesick, always rambling about how she is the most beautiful girl in the world. The problem of her boyfriend remains, as I'm sure you know. I'm trusting you not to say anything to her. I've promised Knox that I'll arrange a way for him to see her again. We need a plan. I haven't promised him that she will give him a chance, only that I'll give him one to impress her. I refuse to wreck her relationship, but Knox needs to either succeed or have his heartbroken. If not, I fear he will never get over her.

Enough about me. How are you? When are you coming? When will I see you?

I'm so glad that your parents decided on home school instead of a temporary school place. Is that selfish? I will happily be labelled such if it means that I can see you. I won't let you get too lonely! I heard from Mother that Tara has been moved to another school in Wales, she will be closer to home permanently. How many of the other girls won't be returning in the new year? Things will be so different when we return and whenever I think about it, I get this ache in my stomach because as much as I look forward to going back, I'm going to miss these boys a lot. I've made friends who I want to know my entire life.

I can't wait to see you. I need my best friend!
Love

Kat xxx
Chapter 6 - A day of revelation, part two

Chapter Notes

Kathleen's poem is actually one of my own, be nice please. Also, have any of you seen Welton Jumpers on Amazon or Etsy? I have not yet managed to discover one but apparently they exist!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hope was but a timid friend;
She sat without the grated den,
Watching how my fate would tend,
Even as selfish-hearted men.

[...]

False she was, and unrelenting;
When my last joys strewed the ground,
Even Sorrow saw, repenting,
Those sad relics scattered round;

Hope, whose whisper would have given
Balm to all my frenzied pain,
Stretched her wings, and soared to heaven,
Went, and ne'er returned again!

~ Hope, by Emily Bronte

Chapter 6 - A day of revelation, part two

"Why do I stand up here? Anybody?" Mr Keating examined the sea of curious faces breathing life into his lesson. His gaze swept the length of the room, settling at last on the perpetual smirk in the back.

"No," the Captain rang a bell with his foot. "Thank you for playing, Mr Dalton" he called over the shrill sound.

Kathleen turned around and grinned at Charlie, her eyes searched his desk for the doodle of the day. Sure enough, on his notebook were lines in contrasting shades of lead to form a drawing. A woman with a sultry look smoking a cigarette was imprinted on the page. She looked at him and he shrugged, their recently developed code for the game played each English lesson. Since she had seen his enhanced drawing of female anatomy in the midst of the whirlwind of the second lesson, a habit had developed. He would draw something, and she would react. Sometimes it would serious, other times silly and sometimes he would surprise her like he had yesterday, when he had drawn the most beautiful sunset...which by the end of the lesson had a couple having sex on the beach
beneath it. Really, she should have expected that one.

"It's good" she mouthed in response to his unasked question.

"I stand upon my desk to remind myself that we must constantly look at things a different way."
Keating's voice cut through their silent exchange and Kathleen turned to face the front of the room again. "You see" he continued, "the world looks very different from up here. You don't believe me? Come see for yourself. Come on!"

Despite knowing he was serious, the students remained seated. Kathleen heard the chair behind her scrape across the tarnished floorboards. Charlie fell into step with Neil, joining him as the first to rise from their seats and experiment with Keating. Kathleen caught Knox's eye and shrugged, standing resolutely amidst the questioning glances as she moved to stand behind Keating's desk. Knox joined her as she passed him; prompting Meeks to take up the opportunity. Soon, the rest of the class followed, forming a que the United Kingdom would be proud of by the central desk.

"Just when you think you know something; you have to look at it in another way. Even though it may seem silly or wrong, you must try! Now, when you read, don't just consider what the author thinks. Consider what you think" Mr Keating jumped down, gesturing for his students to step up.

Neil's long limbs swung up first. He stood above the sequences of mundane objects of education. His eyes drank in visions his friends could only guess at from the gleam in his eyes. Charlie helped Kathleen up. She smiled gratefully, laughing when he deliberately turned away from Knox's mocking hand, which he held out like a lady, and the pout on his face when he was ignored.

"Boys, and girl. You must strive to find your own voice. The longer you wait to begin, the less likely you are to find it at all. Thoreau said, 'Most men lead lives of quiet desperation'. Don't be resigned to that. Break out!"

Kathleen and Knox jumped down and headed back to their seats to watch the others have a go. Most people took a moment to ponder the view, while some jumped down almost immediately, causing Keating to yell "don't just walk off the edge like lemmings! Take a look around you!"

There were still several students in line when the bell rang. The gang gathered up their stuff and waited for Todd who was currently elevated on the desk.

"Dare to strike out onto new ground! Now, in addition to your essays, I would like you all to compose a poem of your own, an original work." The Captain grabbed his blazer and walked casually over to the doorway. He surveyed them for a final time, and then flickered the lights on and off, ignoring the protests of the class. "That's right! You have to deliver it aloud in front of the class on Monday."

As Todd jumped down, Mr Keating who had just left, returned to the doorway, "Mr Anderson? Don't think that I don't know that this assignment scares the hell out of you, you mole." He punctuated the words with intent, reaching out to turned off the lights as he disappeared. The class remained in darkness.

"Todd?" Neil called out into the darkness. He projected his voice above the sniggering of his classmates. "Todd, where are you?"

"Ouch!" Kathleen cried. A sharp pain bloomed as her thigh hit the corner of a desk. The ache betrayed the beginnings of a nasty bruise.

Charlie's voice emerged from the darkness, "are you okay?"
"Yeah, just walked into a desk" she replied, squinting to make out shapes which she could not discern. "Will someone please turn the lights back on!"

"I'm trying to locate them" Cameron snapped from the other side of the room.

"She's hurt Cameron, don't be an ass" Charlie's voice was this closer this time.
Kathleen turned towards the sound, "I'm fine. Don't worry."

"Neil? Is that you?" Todd's voice interrupted the brewing argument.

"Yeah" Neil said, "hold onto my arm. I'm holding onto Meek's. Everyone else grab on!"

"Neil, keep talking. I don't know where you are" Knox called.

"I think we're in the centre."

She felt her way around the desks, her hand brushing each rough surface with care to protect herself from further injury. "Charlie? Are you still nearby?"

"I think so" she heard his voice somewhere on her left, "stay where you are."

"Cameron, lights?" Shouted Neil.

"I'm trying!"

"If you can't find them, then someone fins a window and pull up the bloody blinds!" She breathed deeply, reigning her in fraying tempter in. Just then she felt a warm hand hesitantly touch her arm.

"Charlie?"

"I've got you" the hand relaxed and slid down her arm to take her hand, gently guiding her into what she guessed was one of the walkways between the rows. The lack obstacles was a welcome relief. "This should be a less hazardous path" he muttered.

"Charlie? Kathleen? We're just missing you two and Cameron" Neil shouted.

"We're getting there" Kathleen replied, "just keep talking."

The words had hardly left her lips when a blinding flash lit the room. An artificial yellow swept down from the ceiling as the electricity buzzed back to life. Fraser stood in the doorway. His face composed with a smirk and his arms folded with satisfaction as her observed the bewildered crowd. On the opposite wall, Richard Cameron clung to a framed illustration of William Blake. He shuffled backwards, flushing at his error. As he moved towards the centre, he was bumped into a line of boys all holding onto each other's arms, bag straps or shoulders. A few metres away Kathleen began to gain her bearings, her hand entwined with Charlie's.

"All right, Dalton." Fraser's gaze dropped, pointedly fixing on their joint hands. Kathleen reacted in tune with her senses. She let go of Charlie's hand, replacing the grasp with the strap of her satchel.

Charlie scowled at Fraser but said nothing. As Cameron crossed his field of vision he snapped, "well found, genius."

As the students picked up their stuff and left, Kathleen caught up with Charlie and thanked him. For some reason she felt awful about dropping his hand like a hot potato. He was just being a good friend, she thought, much like Neil immediately seeking out Todd.
That afternoon Kathleen lay stretched out on the grass under the golden tree by the lake. Tendrils of hair escaped her neat ponytail in the mid-September breeze. She smoothed down the flicking pages but stopped as movement caught her eye. She put her copy of "The Secret Garden" down, propping her chin up on her palm as she watched the boys' boat go by. She didn't envy them at all. Her grandfather ran the school rowing club, and he was serious about the sport. Even from the embankment, she could hear him shouting orders at the poor boys. Friday afternoon rowing was the only time that Meeks and Pitts dared to use their contraband radio - even if their caution confined them to the rooftop.

As she spotted them rowing back towards the school, she got up and dusted herself off. It was best to make herself scarce and avoid any unnecessary awkward conversation with Nolan, especially in front to the boys. Although they all knew that she was the headmaster's grandchild, she didn't like to remind them of that fact. She headed back to her room and began to write her poem. Reading poetry was one thing, writing it was much harder.

I'm haunted by life.

Memories shroud every inch this family home,
secrets buried deep beneath stone.

I've found friends far from my true home,
inside these walls which make me feel most alone.

Nostalgia haunts the bad, and time taints the good.

It's better than any sin.

Yet time marches on,
reminding me to act on whim.

I'm haunted by life,
By what is.

By what could, and has been.

By what is ahead.

and what is within.

Her pen clattered onto the desk with a release of breath. She stared at the words; each curl of ink blurred together under her critical eye. A frantic knock on the door interrupted her reverie. "Come in."

In tumbled Todd, his eyebrows furrowed.

"Todd?" Kathleen said softly, "what's wrong?"

"You're a girl. Girls know this, they're good with secrets - right?" He stared at her with startling intensity.
Kathleen rose from her desk. "I can keep a secret" she promised, closing the door, "sit down." She gestured to her bed and he perched on the end.

She had just sat down next to him when he leapt up to pace the room. Each length of her tiny dorm was crossed thrice before she dared to speak. "Todd? Are you-

"I think I like someone" he blurted, "I'm sure- I- I don't- I don't know."

"Okay," she nodded, feeling her panic recede. That was something to work with. "Todd, it's a completely terrifying feeling but we can figure it out."

He looked up; uncertainty painted across his features. "It is?" He asked, "even for." Todd broke off again, "even if..."

Kathleen said nothing, her heartbeat loud in her ears. She scarcely dared to move in fear of preventing him from getting whatever it was off his chest.

"Kat" he whispered, settling across the room in the chair by her desk, "we're friends, right?"

"Of course," she nodded solemnly.

"And friends are friends no matter what?"

"No matter what. Friends aren't real friends if they purposely hurt you" she replied, eyes scanning him for any sign of harm.

"I like Neil" he said.

Kathleen blinked as the puzzle pieces fell into place. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay" she nodded.

Todd almost tripped in his haste to leave the room.

Kathleen collapsed into the chair he had just vacated. How had she not noticed?

The truth hit her in a barrage of memories. Moments that had been discarded in her own distraction made so much more sense. Todd had really come out of his shell, but when they talked about their old schools he had shut down. He told her he had some trouble, lost his friends and his parents moved. She knew that Neil and herself were his best friends, but there was a difference between how Todd reacted to him, and how he reacted to her. She had been so caught up in Nancy's impending visit, the club, and her Grandfather that she had neglected to notice his turmoil.

She jumped up and rushed out of the room, "Todd?" Kathleen hurried around the corner and down the boy's corridor, directly into Fraser.

They collided with a thud; her hand braced against the wall the steady herself.

Red warmed her cheeks, "sorry."

Fraser seemed unaffected, barely moved by her momentum. With a shrug, she turned towards Todd and Neil's room.

"Hey!"
She turned around, scanning the barren corridor for her friend. "I'm sorry, I need to be somewhere Fraser. You can make mysterious comments tomorrow."

"Mysterious comments?" The door between the two students opened. Charlie and Cameron appeared in the space.

Cameron glanced at them, frowning at her flustered expression. "We heard noise" he said flatly.

"What mysterious comments?" Charlie repeated. A fierce glare fixed on Fraser.

"I don't have time for this!" Kathleen threw her hands up, "sort it out yourselves." She pushed past the trio of testosterone, past Neil and Todd's empty room and found herself on the rooftop in pursuit of Todd.

"Todd?" She spun like a human compass across the stone. "Todd?"

"Kat?"

"Todd" she breathed out in relief, spotting him curled up by the wall. "Why did you run off like that?"

"I don't know, I just got overwhelmed and I-I panicked."

Kathleen slid down the wall, sitting cross-legged next to him. She drew her skirt over her knees as she spoke, "is this why you had to leave Balincrest?"

He nodded, "I don't want it to happen again. I like it here, I-I like the people."

"You won't have to" she promised, nudging his shoulder with hers. "I understand more than you know. Nobody will think any differently of you, not Charlie, Meeks, Pitts, Knox, especially not Neil. And Cameron might have trouble at first, but he'll get used to it. Neil loves you as a best friend for sure, you won't lose that, ever. Even if he doesn't feel the same, he won't treat you any differently."

"Really?"

"Really. And if it doesn't work out, well...at least you have some more material for your writing."

Todd let a small laugh escape as they watched the stars glowing in the night sky. His shoulders feeling lighter as they rested against the cool stone. His arm pulled her in, and she rested her head on his shoulder.

"Thank you, Kat" he murmured quietly into her ear

"Anytime" she whispered back.

Chapter End Notes

See, I promised you Anderperry.
Chapter 7 - Lord, what fools these mortals be!

Chapter Notes

The title is actually a quote from a midsummer night's dream!

Nushka - thank you for that lovely, long review, I'm glad you're enjoying it :)

Gueststarring- Thank you, haha I love Todd so much as well, he's my precious little cinnamon roll!

Chapter Seven - Lord, what fools these mortals be

"A midsummer night's dream?" asked Kat, picking Neil's script up and flipping through.

"Open try outs on Monday after school."

"You'll be great" she threw him a reassuring smile and took a seat next to Knox who accidentally flicked cereal at her, "wait, am I missing something, or did you all become left-handed over night?"

Every boy on the table was attempting to eat his cereal with his spoon in the opposite hand. Milk was spilt and clusters of cereal were scattered across the table.

"We're trying to look at things in a different way" explained Knox, slopping cereal down his front, "damn."

Kathleen sighed and switched her spoon over, it was much harder than one thought it would be to eat like this whilst keeping up a somewhat intelligent conversation.

"we saw this for you in mail" Meeks said, handing her an envelope.

"Thanks" she took it and tore it open; choosing to ignore the raised brows and looks of amusement that the boys shot one another at the sight of her eagerness.

Dear Kitty Kat,

TELL ME EVERYTHING!

I arrive at the Noel's on Wednesday night. I've been so bored over the last few weeks, being an only child sucks. I can't wait for Friday, I'm coming to see you Thursday. I don't care about breaking rules or irritating Nolan. You're sneaking me in, get those crafty boys to help and take the chance to be rebellious. I'll be waiting outside the gates at one o'clock, don't let me down, sugar!

I haven't seen Chris since last Christmas and she was single then. She has mentioned a Ginny Danbury but I don't remember any mention of a Chet. We'll plan on Thursday. This is honestly the most exciting thing I've done since my trip to France in July, it's now October. YOU'VE RESCUED
MY SANITY KITTY! I'm all in for whatever crazy things you need my help with.

You better not let me get lonely! There must be some rule of friendship against it. I cannot wait to reunite and have sleepovers and girl talk and shop and meet these wonderful boys who've rescued your sanity. Knights in shining armour in my opinion, princes amongst men! I don't know if the other girls got as lucky as you with their schooling. As far as I know only Helen and Tara are not returning.

I NEED MY BEST FRIEND MORE THAN YOU DO!

Love forever,

Nancy xxx

Kathleen broke into a smile, biting her lip in an effort to contain her joy.

"You look like you've inherited a million" Charlie said, "what's the good news?"

Kathleen looked at the group, "who fancies doing something really rebellious next Thursday?"

"What is it?" Neil grinned.

"Hell yeah" whooped Knox, high fiving Charlie.

"Nancy wants us to sneak her in, she'll be waiting outside the gates at one o'clock."

"Another girl" spluttered Meeks.

"Isn't that against the rules?" Cameron muttered, knowing that he would be ignored.

"Yes" Kat replied with a shrug, "she arrives at the Noel's on Wednesday so she'll have news about Chris" she teased with smirk.

"Guys, we're doing it" Knox cried.

"Doing what exactly, Mr Overstreet?" came the booming voice of Mr Hagar, who was stood behind him.

"Finally figuring out the answer to question five. It's been evading us for days and it's due in on Monday" Kathleen said earnestly, showing Mr Hager Cameron's open Trig book. With a last suspicious look at the group, Hager moved on. It took around two seconds for the entire table to dissolve into an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

"That was brilliant!" Charlie pretended to wipe tears of laughter from his face with pride.

"Question 5. It's been evading us for days!" impersonated Pitts in a high-pitched voice between guffaws.

"I don't sound like that!" Kat threw a cluster of oats at him playfully.

"So, meeting tonight?" asked Neil, finally managing to compose himself after being hit in the temple by a flying oat cluster.

The group nodded and headed up to the common room, because all jokes aside, they really did have a ton of homework to do.
"Truth or dare?" asked Charlie, lighting another cigarette. The tendrils of smoke swirled around before being swept away by the chilly autumnal breeze. Kathleen shivered and pulled her coat more tightly around herself.

"Dare" Knox responded.

"I dare you to write your poem about Chris."

"Already have" Knox smirked, "dare complete."

"You've already written yours?" broke in Pitts with an expression of disbelief.

"Haven't you?"

"No!" echoed Neil, Pitts and Meeks.

"What did you do all day?" wondered Kathleen, "and what if you don't get something down tomorrow?"

"Don't say that" groaned Neil.

"What did you write about?" Meeks asked.

"What do you think!" laughed Charlie

"Life" shrugged Kathleen.

"Well that's helpful" muttered Pitts.

"Anyway, truth or dare" Knox asked Neil.

"Dare."

"I dare you to...recite a poem from memory."

Neil stood up and made his way into the centre of the Indian cave, handing the book to Todd for safekeeping, "Can it be about anything?"

Knox nodded.

"Okay, A Glimpse, by Walt Whitman" he began,

"A glimpse through an interstice caught,
Of a crowd of workmen and drivers in a bar-room around the stove late of a winter night, and I unremark'd seated in a corner,
Of a youth who loves me and whom I love, silently approaching and seating himself near, that he may hold me by the hand,
A long while amid the noises of coming and going, of drinking and oath and smutty jest,
There we two, content, happy in being together, speaking little, perhaps not a word."

The society broke into a round of applause, and Todd handed the book back with a bright smile.
"Thank you" Neil bowed, "Todd. Truth or dare?"

Todd's head shot up like a deer in headlights, "I-what?"

"Truth or dare" Neil repeated.

"I-uh, truth" he blurted.

"Hmm" Neil tapped his chin, "have you ever kissed anyone?"

"Yes" he replied shortly, slowly turning crimson.

"You have?" Cameron blurted in incredulity.

Even Neil looked shocked, unsure how to feel about the fact, not that it was anything to do with him, he just obviously had not anticipated that answer. It felt wrong somehow. He had thought it would be an easy question that would save Todd from embarrassment when the game inevitably got more invasive later. Perhaps he was making the same mistake that most people did with Todd. Underestimate him.

"Who?" Knox leaned in.

"One question per turn Knox, and it's not your turn" cut in Kathleen, "Todd, it's your turn to ask."

Todd nodded, breathing a little easier, "Kat, truth or dare?"

"Kat? Since when did you get a nickname?" interrupted Charlie.

"Since forever" she replied, rolling her eyes, "anyway, I pick truth."

"Uh" he drew his eyebrows together, "have you...have you ever had a boyfriend?"

She shook her head, "no"

"Seriously?" interjected Meeks.

"Seriously, but I am flattered by your surprise" she laughed, "Cameron. Truth or dare?"

"Truth."

"Come on, Cameron. Take a risk!" called Charlie.

"Fine. Dare" he huffed.

"Have you written your poem yet?" she asked.

"Not yet."

"Then I dare you to perform a love poem in class on Monday" she flashed him an evil grin.

"And you thought she would be nice!" chuckled Meeks.

"Shut up, Meeks. Truth or dare"

"Dare."

"I dare you to declare your love for somebody. Right now."
Meeks pushed his glasses up his nose and stood up, "Mrs Smith" he declared, "you were the prettiest math teacher that I ever laid eyes upon. I'll never forget my juvenile love for you, even though you were married and Thomas McCarthy was your favourite student."

"Alright, Charlie" he continued over the laughs he had elicited, "truth or dare?"

"Do you even have to ask? Dare" he challenged.

"I dare you to...tell us a secret."

"A secret? What kind of boring dare is that?"

"Something that's actually remotely challenging for a daredevil" he retorted.

"Fine. What do you want to know?" he relented, feigning an air of nonchalance.

"Guys?" Meeks asked, opening the question to the group.

"What did you actually get in Tuesday's trig test?" shouted Cameron.

Knox groaned, "come on Cameron, get over that already."

"Fifty-two."

"You let him off easy" whined Kathleen.

"Easy, huh?" drawled Charlie, "truth or dare, Kat" he emphasised her nickname.

She thought for a moment, "dare."

"I dare you to pretend to Fraser that we're dating" he said, the words rolling off his tongue without a thought.

"What?" she spluttered.

"Charlie, where did that come from?" a concerned Neil warned.

"Why?" Kathleen stared at him.

"Why not?"

"Fine. Truth or dare, Dalton?"

He winced slightly but pushed on and declared "dare."

"I dare you to tell me what the hell this weird thing going on between you and Fraser is."

"Why? What has he said?" Charlie sat up.

"It's a dare, you don't get to ask questions."

"You just did."

"Not the point!"

"What has he said?"
"What are you so worried about me hearing?"

"GUYS" yelled Neil, "quit it!"

"Sorry" she muttered, glaring at Charlie.

"I think we're all tired. We should head back" suggested Meeks, looking between his two feuding friends.

Neil hastily agreed and the group trudged out of the cave and back through the dark woods. Kat walked ahead with Meeks, Todd, and Pitts, while Neil interrogated Charlie in hushed tones from behind, with Knox eying them both nervously.

They had just reached the top of the staircase back at school when Charlie broke their mutual silence and whispered, "I told him we had a thing going on."

"You what?" hissed Kat, freezing on the spot.

"He was making bets with some guys in the locker room about who could get in your pants first. I told him that you were interested in me, so there was no point in even trying" he elaborated uncomfortably.

"Why didn't you tell me" she whispered icily, trying to make sense of the tension between the boys and Fraser's cryptic comments over the past week or so.

"I wasn't thinking and I felt stupid after saying it. It was too late to take it back so I just rolled with it, I guess I figured you'd be better off oblivious."

"Well I'm not."

"I know" he admitted, "are you mad?"

"Yes. I'm mad, that was over a week ago. Did you seriously not think to inform me!"

"I'll-err, I'll let you get to bed then."

She took a few steps away and turned back, "Charlie?" she called hesitantly through the darkness.

"Yes?"

"Thank you for having my back" she whispered, "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."
Chapter 8 - A poem begins as a lump in the throat

Kathleen awoke at eight am, with absolutely no desire to get up and face the day. Or more accurately, face the boys. Yes, she was angry that Charlie hadn't said anything, that nobody had thought she needed to know, that the likes of Fraser and his buddies thought they had the right to talk about her in that way. Yet she had forgiven Charlie already, no matter how much of a reckless idiot he could be, the boy had a heart of gold and nothing but good intentions. But she also had to show them that she wasn't this fragile thing to sheltered, she had a right to know these things. She groaned aloud at the whirlwind of thoughts in her brain, and cocooned herself in her bedcovers. At least it was Sunday.

After a few more minutes of indulgent self-pity, she forced herself to get up and face the day. She dressed and made her way down to the food hall, praying that it would be filled with only the early risers. She plated up some toast and made her way to the usual table, to her relief only Neil and Todd were there.

"Morning" she greeted, sitting down and spreading marmalade onto her toast.

"Hi" Neil smiled brightly, "I'm going to get another pastry, anyone else want one?"

Kathleen and a sleepy Todd shook their heads and murmured "no thank you."

"He got you up early again, then" she observed once Neil had wandered off.

Todd nodded, "how does he manage to be so lively at seven am? He was practising his lines and woke me up" he grumbled, "then he made me get up because he was bored. Bored when he should be sleeping."

Kat laughed, "benefits of having no roomie."

"I'm moving in with you if he continues every weekend."

"Oh, you wouldn't leave, even if he kept you up rehearsing all night."

"Shut up" he mumbled, "besides, Neil told me what happened."

She glanced over to the serving area and saw that Neil was safely engaged in conversation with another student by the juice.

"What do you think of it?" she asked.
"He should have told you, and preferably not done it in the first place. But he meant well and Neil thinks he's sorry" he shrugged apologetically, "Fraser is a jerk by the way."

"Thanks" she smiled weakly, "I think I've forgiven him already but I just want everyone to tell me things before they have to. I don't know, he needs consequences."

He nodded thoughtfully, "I get it. But try not to be too harsh, he seemed pretty miserable when he came to find Neil last night."

The pair fell silent when they saw Neil approaching the table.

"Who died?" he asked, "the mood has dropped to negative numbers in the space of five minutes."

"We were talking about Charlie" admitted Kathleen

"Oh."

"Yeah." She finished her toast.

After breakfast the trio headed back upstairs to the boy's dorm, Neil still had his poem to write for Keating's lesson tomorrow, leaving Todd and Kat sprawled out across Todd's bed playing chess. It was getting close to lunch time when they were interrupted by the door flying open and Charlie stalking in, shadowed by a red faced Richard Cameron.

"I swear to God, I can't share a room with him much longer!"

"This is your fault, Dalton" shouted Cameron, charging after him.

"Just calm it down " Neil tried unsuccessfully to intervene.

"You're annoying me on purpose!" Cameron continued.

"You annoy everybody" Charlie shot back.

"Guys" Neil raised his voice.

"Untrue and irrelevant to this discussion."

"Oh, do everyone a favour and shut up, Cameron"

"Don't take your bad mood out me, Charlie. It's your own fault that you're miserable" retorted Cameron.

Kathleen caught the look distress that flickered briefly across Neil's face. "Boys!" she shouted suddenly, sitting up on Todd's bed and abandoning the chess game.

The pair whirled around, startled by her presence.

"I think we should get some lunch" she suggested firmly.

"Good idea" Neil jumped up and lead the way out before anybody had the chance to disagree.

Lunch was an awkward affair. Nobody was fighting but nobody was having much fun either. Charlie and Cameron ignored each other, and Kathleen and Charlie were not ignoring each other,
but they were not talking. The most contact they had was the cautious glances they sent at one another every now and then when they thought it was safe, flashing weak smiles when their eyes met.

"Okay" Neil threw down his fork, "I can't take this anymore. Charlie apologise and you two", he pointed to Cameron and Kathleen, "take turns talking it out."

"He already apologised and I forgave him" Kathleen said, pushing her pasta around the plate.

"You did?" Charlie blinked.

"I do" she sighed, "I implied it last night because I was too angry to be sure."

"You don't have to do the dare" he replied, "it wasn't right."

"Thanks" she smiled carefully, earning a small but genuine smile back.

"Good, now it's your turn Cameron" Neil prompted.

"I'm sorry" he muttered.

"Charlie?" Neil nudged his friend expectantly.

"It was just a stupid fight, we have them all of the time" he protested. Neil stayed silent and gave him a pointed look.

Charlie rolled his eyes, "sorry."

"Better?" Neil grinned, "Now let's get desert."

The rest of the afternoon passed by quickly, the rifts healed and the post-fight awkwardness faded with time, by the early evening sunset, the group lay out on the grass beneath a tree. Watching the sun set over the lake and laughing at jokes they wouldn't remember by tomorrow morning. They only separated when the bells chimed through the autumn darkness at seven o'clock.

"Oh no, I have to go" Kat whined, dusting off the blades of grass which Charlie and Knox had been throwing at her.

"Why?" asked Knox, "we still have another hour until curfew."

"Dinner with Nolan" she explained wearily.

"Have fun with that" Meeks smirked.

"I'm sure I will" she frowned.

The boys waved goodbye and she headed back towards the school. Dread settled in her stomach and her nervousness increased with every step closer to his office, and away from the comfort of her friends.

XXXX

Kathleen paused outside of the door. With a deep breath, she knocked, straightened her clothes and smoothed down her hair.

"Enter."
She pushed open the heavy door and stepped over threshold onto the thick, red carpet of her grandfather's opulent office. She felt slightly sick.

"Good evening" Mr Nolan inclined his head, "please be seated."

"Good evening, Grandfather" she said, gingerly taking the seat by his desk, directly opposite both him, and the rather large portrait of himself which hung on the wall behind his seat.

He finished the papers that he was examining and moved them aside so that they joined the stack to his right.

"How have your classes been this week? I have had positive reports but I would like to hear about it from your perspective."

"They have been going very well, thank you. Still slightly more challenging than what I am used to, however my study group has helped enormously" she adjusted her skirt before folding her hands delicately over her knee.

"Excellent. I know your Father was concerned about you attending Welton. I told him it was the right place for you" her grandfather smiled, "coffee?"

Kathleen nodded, "please."

"Have you called home yet this week?" he passed her a steaming cup.

"Thank you" she took the cup, "I last called on Tuesday."

"And how is your Mother?"

"Very well. Her ladies club are attending the opera in London next week."

"My dear Cordelia always had taste, even as a girl. And your Father? I suppose cultural pursuits are not his idea of quality entertainment."

"He's staying home with the boys" she replied shortly, recognising the usual veiled dig.

"No nanny?"

"No."

"I have always told Cordelia she should get him to pay for a nanny. I see he still doesn't agree."

"Mother still prefers not to have a nanny" Kathleen said, sipping her coffee to hide the scowl threatening to adorn her features.

Nolan continued on as if she had not spoken, "I have been suggesting for years that the boys attend Welton. Your presence gives me hope, William is already fourteen and Neville must be approaching eleven soon."

"He turns eleven next September."

"So he does. The family must visit before you depart."

"I'm sure they will" she gripped the china handle of her cup tightly.

"Yes, yes they must. Now, I see that you have made a couple of friends, the Perry's boy, Mr
Cameron and Mr Overstreet are excellent choices. I assume they are part of this...study group you have mentioned?"

"Oh, yes" she replied, relieved at the change in topic.

"And Mr Anderson? He seems rather different from his brother. Jeffrey was quite the star during his time at Welton."

"Todd is doing well. He is slightly shy around new people, that's all."

"I'm glad to hear. It he needs to speak up if he expects to follow his brother to Ivy leagues" he said, "Have you thought about your own path after graduation?"

"Oh," Kathleen replied hesitantly, "I have been considering college, or possibly further education in Britain."

"I see" Mr Nolan set down his coffee cup, "I would perhaps consider securing a marriage. Education is very important, but making a life should be a priority for you. By no means am I encouraging you to be as hasty as your parents, young love can seem...intense. You need to take your time and remember that your future family will depend on this choice. One must be practical. Your time here may even be helpful."

Kathleen placed her coffee cup down with as much control as she could muster and silently counted to ten.

"Of course, I shall consider your advice" she responded, "It is getting late and I have classes tomorrow, may we continue next week."

"Oh, yes. Do not let me keep you" he rose from his desk and walked her to the door, "goodnight Kathleen."

"Goodnight." She exited the room as quickly as possible. As soon as she rounded the corner she let her composure slip. She wanted to scream. Had her grandfather just implied that he took her in this term, with hopes that she would find a suitable husband!? She had known that suggesting college or university was risky, but in the end, it was her choice and her parents were luckily more than happy to help her find one. Nolan still was not over his daughter marrying a man he did not approve of. God help her brothers, William had evaded Welton so far, now it was Neville's turn. Being a girl had given her a surprising freedom, the ability choose her schooling.

Kathleen got into bed, anger still bubbling deep inside. It was 1959, for crying out loud! Nolan needed to get with the times and stay out of her personal life, or else he would drive her away the same way he did with her Mother. She missed her paternal grandparents. As she stared into the darkness she could picture their country house on the coast of inverness where she had spent every Christmas since she had been born. It was there that her grandad had taught her to read in his armchair by the fire in his library. She could almost smell the gingerbread houses they made with her granny in the kitchen, the scent of the Christmas tree which clung to her father's clothes after he wrestled it into the entrance hall, feel her mother's arms around her as opened her presents to the joyous laughter of her little brothers.

She succumbed to the pull of sleep at last, dreaming of warmth and love far away from the cold elegance of Welton.
**Chapter 9 - We all have a poet and a YAWP inside of us**

**Chapter Summary**

Okay, so I know that the football lesson and scene where Neil tells the others that he got the part come before this, but for the purposes of the story I have switched this around.

Thank you so much for reviewing. I can't even begin to express how much it means to me :)

Now, as always, anything you recognise has been taken from the movie and was not made up by my brain (as much as I wish it was).

Monday morning arrived much to quickly for the students liking, especially for Mr Keating’s class, who sat fidgeting and dreading their own turns, as they watched their fellow students get pushed into the limelight as they shared their innermost feelings with the class.

"Mr Overstreet" called Keating from his perch on the windowsill.

Knox rose from his desk and made his way to the front, unable to meet the eyes of anybody else.

"To Chris" he began, eyes glued to the paper.

"Who's Chris" whispered several of his classmates, causing the gang to smirk in amusement

Knox ignored the whispers and began to read,

"I see a sweetness in her smile.

Bright light shines from her eyes.

But life is complete; contentment is mine,

just knowing that..." he trailed off hearing the smothered laughter.

"Just knowing that she's alive" he screwed the poem up with a frown, "sorry Captain, it's stupid."

"No, no, it's not stupid" the Captain pushed off from the windowsill and paced around the front of the room, "It's a good effort. It touched on one of the major themes, love. " He smiled reassuringly at the Overstreet boy, "a major theme not only in poetry, but in life. Mr Hopkins, you were laughing, you're up next."

Hopkins shrugged, stood at the front and said, "the cat sat on the mat."

"Congratulations Mr Hopkins" Keating ignored the thumbs up Hopkins shared with Fraser. "Yours is the first poem to ever have a negative score on the Pritchard scale" he said, earning chuckles from the rest of the class. "We're not laughing at you. We're laughing near you" he grinned, "I don't mind that your poem had a simple theme. Sometimes the most beautiful poetry can be about simple things, like a cat, or a flower or rain. You see poetry can come from anything with the stuff
of revelation in it. Just don't let your poems be ordinary. Now, who's next..." Mr Keating scanned
the room, most students avoided his gaze but his eyes landed on the quiet boy at the front, "Mr
Anderson, I see you sitting there in agony. Come on, Todd, step up. We'll put you out of your
misery."

Todd's head shot up, eyes wide like a deer caught in headlights, "I-I-I didn't do it" he stuttered, "I
didn't write the poem."

Kathleen and Neil exchanged a worried look, they both knew for a fact that he had done it.

The Captain merely raised an eyebrow, "Mr Anderson thinks that everything inside of him is
worthless and embarrassing. Isn't that right, Todd? Isn't that your worst fear? Well, I think you're
wrong. I think that you have something inside of you that is worth a great deal."

He turned to the blackboard and wrote 'I sound my barbaric YAWP' in his loopy cursive before
continuing, "Uncle Walt again. Now, for those of you who don't know. A yawp is a loud cry, or
yell. Now Todd, I would like you to give us a demonstration of a barbaric yawp."

Todd only looked at the teacher blankly.

"Come on, you can't yawp sitting down, come on. Let's go" he pulled Todd to the front of the
class, where Todd reluctantly agreed to position himself into a 'yawping stance'.

"A yawp?" clarified Todd, looking faint.

"No, not just a yawp. A barbaric yawp."

"Yawp" the boy said faintly.

"Come on, louder!"

"Yawp" his volume had barely increased.

"No, that's a mouse. Come on, louder" Keating encouraged

"Yawp" he said, frustrated.

Kathleen bit her lip, Todd's distress was obvious...but maybe...maybe Keating was on to something
she thought.

Keating suddenly rushed forwards, "Oh, good God, boy. Yell like a man!"

"YAWP!"

Kat's heart skipped a beat and she stared at her friend who had just rendered the class silent.

"There it is!" Keating flashed Todd a hundred-watt smile, "see, you have a barbarian in you, after
all" his smile fell as Todd began to stomp back to his seat and he pulled the boy back towards his
desk, "No, you don't get away that easy."

Todd threw Kat a nervous look before his eyes slid over to Neil, who must have been agitated,
judging from the half-smile that he forced onto his lips the moment their eyes met. Their eye
contact only broke when Todd was turned around by Keating, to stare at the picture tacked to the
wall above the board.

"The picture of Uncle Walt up there, what does he remind you off? Don't think. Answer" he
paused, "Go on."

"A-ma-madman" Todd stuttered.

Mr Keating began to circle the boy, tearing his attention away from the thirty sets of eyes which rested upon him, "What kind of madman? Don't think about it. Just answer again."

"A c-crazy madman" he panicked.

"No, you can do better than that. Free up your mind. Use your imagination. Say the first thing that pops into your head, even if it's total gibberish."

"Uh, a sweaty-toothed mad man."

"Good God, boy!" Keating exclaimed, "there's a poet in you after all. There, close your eyes. Close'em. Now describe what you see."

Keating placed his hands over the Anderson boy's eyes and spun him slowly.

"Uh, I-I close my eyes."

"Yes?" Keating prompted.

"and this, this image floats beside me."

"A sweaty-toothed madman?" suggested Keating.

"A sweaty-toothed madman with a stare that pounds my brain."

"Oh, that's excellent" the teacher muttered, "now, give him action. Make him DO something."

"H-His hands reach out a choke me" Todd babbled.

"That's it. Wonderful. Wonderful" Keating let go, but Todd kept spinning, eyes closed tightly.

"And, all the time he's mumbling."

"What's he mumbling?" Keating grinned with pride.

"M-Mumbling, Truth. Truth is like, like a blanket that always leaves your feet cold."

His sentence drew a few sniggers and his eyes snapped open, however Mr Keating covered them before he could get a good look at the class, "forget them, forget them. Stay with the blanket. Tell me about the blanket."

Todd took a deep breath and all of a sudden the words spilled out of his mouth, it was as if the dam which had previously been carefully constructed by all of the careless individuals in his life, had broken and his words were flooding out at last, "You touch it, stretch it, it'll never be enough. You kick at it, beat it, it'll never cover any of us. From the moment, we enter crying to the moment we leave dying, it will just cover your face as you scream..."

An unsettling silence hung in the air.

"Don't you forget this" Keating whispered to Todd, pushing the dazed boy back to his seat, "Miss Murray. I believe that you are next."
Kat stood up shakily, eyes alternating between worried glances in Todd's direction, and the old, wooden floor. She kept her eyes on her paper as she read the words that she had written without thinking about the consequences. Anybody who payed enough attention would be able to take a peek into her mind; but there is bravery in vulnerability, she thought to herself, while attempting to stop her cheeks from burning,

"I'm haunted by life.

Memories shroud every inch this family home,
secrets buried deep beneath stone.

Yet I've found friends far from my real home,
inside these walls which make me feel most alone.

Nostalgia haunts the bad, and time taints the good.

It's better than any sin.

Yet time marches on,
reminding me to act on whim.

I'm haunted by life,
By what is.
By what could and has been.
By what is ahead.
By what is within."

Once she had uttered the last words she almost scampered back to her own seat. She never had enjoyed public speaking but it had never bothered her that much until now. Bearing her soul to the world was certainly not her strong point. She breathed deeply and began to relax as the others took their turns revealing their souls.

As expected, the others all had poems which matched their own essences. Neil recited a joyous verse about the beauty of hope and humanity. Cameron's poem was a rigidly structured haiku, on love as promised. And Charlie's, while being surprisingly eloquent and gentle, still managed to be evocative and borderline obscene; which was made worse, in her opinion, by the wink he threw at her, causing a flush of embarrassment to rise to her cheeks. It was only when he was at the front that she looked at this lessons drawing, today it was surprisingly tame. He had drawn the woods with moon in the sky. It was only at the end of class when she took a quick second look that she noticed that he had also illustrated small figures climbing upon the stars.

For the first time this year, normal lessons conducted in absolute silence were a relief. No matter how much lighter the class felt after the round of self-expression, nobody was ready to talk about it quite yet. Or possibly ever. Keating was not only aiming for impressive exam results, Kathleen concluded, he was also aiming to teach the value of imagination and individuality to a group of teenagers raised under the weight of expectations and obligation. And it felt like some of them were beginning to understand it.
Chapter 10 - From this hour, freedom

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all of the wonderful reviews. I don't think that I let you know how much I appreciate them enough. And to all of the silent readers who don't leave comments, thank you as well. I see the numbers and I know that you are there. Seeing how many individuals actually take the time to read this story each month is absolutely astounding!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Sixty-four?" she bit her lip and looked up at Cameron for reassurance.

"No" he shook his head, "you should have gotten forty-seven." She handed the red-head her notepad and he studied her work, his eyebrows furrowed as he tried to unpick her method.

"What did I do wrong this time?" she groaned, stabbing her pencil lead into her eraser. She had been working for half an hour and they had only gotten to question three. Although, without Cameron's help she would not have made it past the first question at all, but in her defence the first fifteen minutes had been spent in the common room on a crowded table, where they hadn't been able to get anything done at all, no matter how many times Cameron snapped at people to shut up, and she had progressed from asking the boys to quieten down to begging them. It was Fraser's distasteful comment about begging that had caught Charlie's attention. Even though he was throwing paper planes at Meeks from the other side of the room. He had suggested that they move to the dorm he shared with Cameron for some peace. Cameron had pointed out the likelihood that it was against the rules, even if it had not been specifically stated, but Charlie's logical argument soon won. Which was why she was currently curled up on the floor of the boy's dorm, suffering through her impossible algebra homework in near silence.

"You multiplied the six, but forgot to subtract the previous answer at the end" he concluded, correcting her work and handing it back, "question four is almost identical in method. Just watch the clarity of your columns and you should be okay."

"Thanks" Kathleen replied. She had just begun question four when the door opened and Charlie walked in.

"Sorry to interrupt. I was just wondering if you'd seen Neil yet?"

They both shook their heads.

"Three?" she asked Cameron. He checked his own answer sheet and nodded.

"I think you've finally got it!" he smiled.

She returned his smile, but the second she caught sight of the next question the smile slid away.

"I'm sure it's not that bad" Charlie shut the door and sat across from the pair, creating a triangle around the study materials which littered the floor.

"You have too much faith in me" she muttered, passing him her corrected work as proof.
His eyebrows shot up but he hid his surprise quite well in her opinion, "okay, you're a little out."

"A little?" she rolled her eyes and handed Cameron the next question to mark.

"It's mainly confidence" Cameron commented while he examined her work.

"See" Charlie chuckled, "even Cameron agrees with me!"

"He's right. It's a rare phenomenon" Cameron deadpanned.

Kathleen took a second to stare at him...had that been a joke? With Cameron, it was often hard to tell. Luckily, the pause was interrupted by a tremendous thumping, accompanied by a Neil like yell.

The trio rushed to the doorway to peer into the corridor and sure enough, Neil was practically jumping off the walls with joy.

"Charlie, I got the part! I'm going to play Puck! I'm going to play Puck!" he cried, tackling his oldest friend into a hug. Charlie returned it with a grin.

"Of course, you did! You're good. Congratulations, now go and tell Todd!" he patted Neil on the back and pushed him in the direction of his own door, which he enthusiastically threw open with another round of excited shouts.

Kathleen shook her head with a smile at Charlie's look of amusement as he watched Neil descend upon a red-faced Todd.

He caught Kathleen's look and said, "look me in the eye and tell me that you haven't noticed."

"I can't" she replied, sharing his amusement "we're their best friends. How could we not."

"True" he laughed, "but they seem pretty clueless about each other, if you ask me."

"Haven't what?" queried Cameron, startling the pair. Charlie closed the door, blocking the sight of the two boys embracing.

"Nothing" he said.

"Thanks for your help, Cameron" Kathleen gathered her things, "please can you check it again tomorrow? I have to go otherwise Hager will find me in here."

The boys looked at the clock on Cameron's desk. Sure enough, It was fast approaching eight o'clock and Hager would begin his rounds any minute now.

"Of course," Cameron nodded "it's nice to have someone who actually appreciates the help," he looked pointedly at Charlie and continued, "and who's willing to work instead of copying the answers."

"I'll take that as my cue to leave" she laughed, "night!"

xxxx

It was early on Tuesday morning, when the upperclassmen were still bleary-eyed and inattentive when Mr Keating's whistle was heard through the hallways of Welton. He strolled into his classroom in high spirits, but the class was paying more attention to his outdoor attire than his good mood.
"Are we going outside today, Captain?" asked Neil, speaking for the class as usual.

"We are, Mr Perry." Keating picked up a football from beside his desk and threw it at Pitts who caught it, "we're going to get some fresh air today and exercise not only our bodies, but our voices and minds." He turned to Kathleen, "I know that you're not usually allowed to participate in physical activity. But do you have a sports kit, Miss Murray?"

"I do" she nodded, thinking about the clothes which remained unused, and were still folded at the bottom of her wardrobe since she was unable to take up any sport other than walking at Welton.

"Good, meet us outside the main doors in ten minutes," he turned to address the rest of the students "lads, we're off to the changing room!"

The students filed out, the boys followed Mr Keating over to the P.E department, and Kathleen headed upstairs to her dorm room. She dressed in her navy and white St. Mary's gym suit, put on the matching socks and laced up her white sneakers. She then tied her hair up and headed down to the main doors. A few of the boys were already there, dressed in their grey, Welton sports kit. The rest continued to join them at a leisurely pace, until the whole class was ready. Mr Keating joined them with a net of footballs, or soccer balls as they call them in the States, slung over his shoulder and he led the way to the pitch. Upon arrival, the confused class saw a gramophone set up on the side-lines.

"What are we doing?" wondered Todd.

"Your guess is as good as mine" Kat replied, eyeing the goal which was situated directly ahead of where the group had come to a stop.

Keating turned to face the group holding a whistle, "Now devotees may argue that one sport or came is inherently better than another. For me, sport is a chance for us to have other human beings push us to excel. I want you all to come over here and take a slip of paper," he waved his left hand in the air, and then gestured with the whistle in his right, "and then line up in single file." He then put down the equipment and began to hand out the slips of paper. "Meeks, time to inherit the earth," he joked. "Mr Pitts, rise above your name." Soon all of the students had a slip, where a single line of poetry was written, seemingly aimed specifically at everyone, they realised upon comparison.

Kathleen got in line, with Charlie in front and Todd behind, followed by Neil and then Cameron. The others had been pushed to the front. It seemed like nobody wanted to push Charlie or Cameron out of place, luckily for the three in the middle.

Keating suddenly blew the whistle, "you know what to do, Pitts."

The others craned their necks to try and see what Pitts was doing. They saw him step forward and say "Oh to struggle against great odds. To meet enemies undaunted."

Keating held up his hand, "It sounds to me like you're daunted. Say it again like you're undaunted."

"Oh, to struggle against great odds. To meet enemies undaunted!" he said with more volume.

The Captain nodded, "now go on."

Pitts ran forwards a kicked the ball towards the goal, it just skimmed the post.

"We have to kick it?" Kathleen observed apprehensively.
"Well, it is a ball" Charlie said, turning to look at her, "what were you expecting?"

She crossed her arms, "I've never really played football-soccer, whatever you call it. Girls are usually banned from the pitch unless they're cheerleaders."

"You've never played a ball game?" repeated Neil incredulously.

"Tennis and lacrosse" she shrugged.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously" she nodded.

"Shit" Charlie muttered, "I would teach you properly but we're up soon. Basically, you use the inside of your foot here, like this," he mimed a kick in slow motion which she copied. He nodded in approval, "make sure you lock your ankle, keep your body straight. Power comes from the leg."

"Swinging your arms will help" added Neil, leaning on Todd's shoulder as he watched her try to imitate Charlie's demonstrative kick.

"You'll be fine" Todd reassured her, surprised that for once, he wasn't that nervous. Whether it was because he had never seen Kat so unsure and was too busy worrying about her, or because he was growing more at ease with himself. Also, Neil was touching him which caused his heartbeat to become erratic for an entirely different reason.

"I'm going to look like an idiot" she said, her eyes following Mr Keating who was putting on a record at a rather high volume. They moved closer to the front of the que. Meeks was up next.

"Come on, Meeks! Listen to the music" Keating called above the violin solo.

"To dance, clap hands, exalt, shout, skip, roll on, float on" he read over the classical record.

"Yes!" shouted Keating, gesturing for Meeks to move on. Meeks kicked the ball and managed to get it into the goal. Kathleen studied his kick, it didn't look that difficult, but all her life she had heard that girls were rubbish at sports, that ball games and mud were for the boys. Just another stereotype that she needed to prove wrong she thought, watching Hopkins lazily take a shot. The boys seemed to believe in her, judging from their disbelief in her lack of a sporting history and willingness to teach her.

"Oh! boo!" Keating shouted, "Come on, Charlie. Let it fill your soul!"

Kathleen snapped out of her thoughts, realising with a jolt that she was next. She saw Charlie take a deep breath with his arms flung out in a dramatic power pose, he yelled "TO INDEED BE A GOD!" and he aimed a powerful kick at the ball, shooting it straight through the middle of the goal. Kathleen's mouth dropped open, how on earth did he expect her to emulate that!?

"Kathleen" called Keating, "you're up!"

Kathleen snapped out of her thoughts, realising with a jolt that she was next. She saw Charlie take a deep breath with his arms flung out in a dramatic power pose, he yelled "TO INDEED BE A GOD!" and he aimed a powerful kick at the ball, shooting it straight through the middle of the goal. Kathleen's mouth dropped open, how on earth did he expect her to emulate that!?

"Kathleen" called Keating, "you're up!"

She stepped forwards and let out the words that she had long ago memorised as they were, coincidently, taken from one of her favourite poems, "From this hour, freedom! From this hour I ordain myself loos'd of limits and imaginary lines." She tried to imitate the boys she had just watched, and aimed a hard kick at the ball which rolled in the right general direction, but stopped before it was in close vicinity to the posts. She pulled a face and made her way off the pitch and joined the others who were taking shelter beneath the trees.
"Good try" Knox, patted her on the shoulder.

"It was, but maybe we should teach you. Keating wants to do more of these active lessons in future" Neil said worriedly, putting on a smile for the sake of her pride.

"It was a rubbish kick, be honest" Kat laughed before admitting, "I would be very grateful for any lessons in sport, politics and anything else that the administration frowns upon me knowing."

"We can do that" Pitts smirked, "Keating said that the club wasn't a Greek organisation. All members should be equal, surely the same principle applies to skills and education."

"Pitssie's right" agreed Meeks, "between the two of us, we could easily train you to fence."

"Neil and I can take soccer and football" added Charlie, "real, American football."

"My parents have taught me everything to do with law and politics" Knox shrugged, "that's my area of expertise."

Kathleen nodded, "Cameron already tutors me in math."

"Todd? What about you?" inquired Cameron.

"Uh-"

"I don't think there's anything left! We've got quite a long list already" interrupted Kat.

"Well, there's always the male anatomy..."joked Meeks.

"And to think that I expected better from you" Kathleen shook her head, ignoring the laughter.

"Cars" mumbled Todd so quietly that only Neil who was stood beside him heard it.

"Cars?" Neil repeated loudly, "I didn't know that you were interested in cars."

All heads turned towards Todd, whose cheeks flushed at the attention, "I-I had a friend who worked in his family's garage and I, erm, I used to help. I also fixed Jeffrey's car in the summer" he explained.

"Well, it's settled then" Charlie said, "and tomorrow we need to plan how we're going to sneak your friend into school."

"Why tomorrow?" Neil smiled, "It sounds like the perfect opportunity for another meeting."

"Tonight then?" asked Kat.

"Tonight" Neil nodded, looking at the group.

Chapter End Notes

Kathleen's line is taken from "Song of the Open Road" by Walt Whitman, I encourage you to read it. It's actually one of my favourites.
I missed last week's update and I apologise profusely for it. The end of term has been hectic but I'm getting myself back on track, don't worry! I know this chapter is short and a bit of filler, but it has to be here for the story to progress unfortunately. The good news is that you will finally get to meet Nancy in the next chapter! Also, we're getting closer to the scene that I have been waiting to write for ages, Knox's party scene!

Kathleen shivered. She could feel the harsh bite of the midnight wind through her thin pyjamas. The simple pink and white striped set may have been a modest and sensible looking choice of attire for tonight's hike through the woods, but they certainly were not warm. Her standard Welton coat kept her body well protected from the icy chill, but her legs were suffering.

The group drew nearer to the old cave, torch beams illuminating the way. Whispers were drowned out by the leaves which crinkled and crunched with each step closer to freedom. Soon they reached the cave. One by one they clambered blindly through the inky darkness. Each crack and bump in the stone walls had grown familiar to their touch. These cold, damp nights had become a comfort.

It only took a few seconds for Meeks and Pitts to light the fire. The group settled down and warmed their hands as Neil prepared the opening poem.

He cleared his throat and a hush fell over the young poets, "tonight we shall begin with a reading of Mutability by Percy Bysshe Shelley,

"We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon;
How restlessly they speed and gleam and quiver,
Streaking the darkness radiantly! yet soon
Night closes round, and they are lost for ever:"

He passed the book over Todd, into Pitt's hands,

"Or like forgotten lyres whose dissonant strings
Give various response to each varying blast,
To whose frail frame no second motion brings
One mood or modulation like the last."

Pitts handed the volume to Knox,

"We rest—a dream has power to poison sleep;
We rise—one wandering thought pollutes the day;
We feel, conceive or reason, laugh or weep,
Embrace fond woe, or cast our cares away: —"

And Cameron closed the poem,

"It is the same! —For, be it joy or sorrow,

The path of its departure still is free;

Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;

Nought may endure but Mutability."

"Onto business" Cameron said, passing the book back to Neil; "how on earth are you planning to
smuggle a girl in."

"What do you mean by 'You'? You're in the club as well" Charlie grinned mockingly.

"This isn't a cult, Dalton" he snapped, "I need a clean record for college."

"Relax, we won't get caught."

"As much as I want to help, we have less than twenty-four hours" Pitts sighed, "he has a point."

"It's really quite simple" Neil interrupted. He ignored the puzzled looks, except for Charlie's
provoking smirk. Neil shot him a disapproving look in an attempt to prevent any further arguments
which it could cause to break out.

"What's the plan" Kathleen interjected.

"One o'clock is halfway through lunch, so we eat in three groups. That way we won't all be
missing at once and arouse suspicion" he explained. "We will all begin in the food hall. After
fifteen minutes, at exactly quarter to one, group one will slip away and meet Nancy at the gate.
Meanwhile group two will leave five minutes later and head to the roof. Group three will stay
seated and ready with excuses should anyone ask where the others are."

"Why are people on the roof?" Meeks questioned.

"I'm getting to that" Neil grinned. "Group one will lead Nancy through the treeline and stop at the
edge, opposite the side entrance. At this point, group two will be watching and will wave wildly if
they spot trouble. But once group one is hiding at the end of the treeline, one member of group two
will stay, the other member will go back to lunch, once they get to the table, group three will go
and clear the way for group one to bring Nancy in. The rooftop watchman will go back to lunch
and groups one and two will aim to get Nancy to Kathleen's dorm. Considering how close her
dorm is to Nolan's rooms, we can use one of our dorms if need be. Once Nancy is safely hidden, we
will leave Kat to her friend and the rest of us will return to lunch. Any questions?"

"What if it goes wrong?"

"How will we keep the timings?"

"Can't we disguise her?"

"It sounds good."

"No, it sounds complicated!"
"Okay!" Neil shouted over the barrage of questions, "If it goes wrong we improvise. I promise it isn't complicated, and to solve the issue of timing we will all synch our watches. We will all wear one."

"There's eight of us, so which one is the group of two?" Kathleen asked.

"I was thinking that you, Charlie and I would be group one" Neil answered, "group two would be Pitts and Meeks, then group three would be Todd, Knox and Cameron. But Cameron" he turned to the red-head, "how would you feel about being the co-ordinator? You would have to stay at the table for the entire duration, time keep and send everyone off at the correct time."

"And I could deny involvement when you get caught?"

"If we get caught, yes."

He nodded, mollified.

"When did you come up with that?" Meeks inquired.

"I've been thinking about it for a few days" Neil admitted.

"It's good!" Kat smiled, "I really think that we're going to pull this off."

"Of course" Charlie smirked, "the question is how to get her out again."

"We give her a Welton coat, pull up the hood and a couple of you take her back through the treeline. Anyone in the grounds will assume that it's me" she shrugged.

"It's sorted then" Knox stood, "I don't know about you guys, but I'm exhausted."

Pitts yawned, "me too. We need to be well-rested for tomorrow."

Kathleen helped Meeks put out the fire and the group filed out of the cave. The trek back to Welton seemed shorter than usual. They made their way through the woods, darted across the school lawn, slipped in through the empty kitchens and silenced Nolan's dog with biscuits. Whether it was due to excitement or exhaustion, the weary bunch fell asleep just moments after collapsing into their beds. Dreaming of futures which did not include courtrooms, banks or medical schools.

Futures that were beginning to seem possible at last.
Anticipation had to be the world's biggest killer, Kathleen decided. There was only so long a girl could look at a blackboard and repeat Latin verbs on a regular day, let alone a day where she is less than an hour away from reuniting with her best friend. She had never known verbs to be so painful. Unfortunately, the following textbook work was only a temporary relief. It had taken her five minutes to realise that she had been reading the same line over and over, yet she still couldn't recall a word of it.

"You appear to have gone back in time Mr Dalton. One minute ago, you were on page twenty-four, now you're on page five" boomed Mr McAllister, making Kathleen jump in the process.

"Ah, Sir. You recognise my talent at last! I'm flattered" he smirked, eliciting smothered laughter from his peers. Even Cameron's mouth twitched as he shook his head at his roommate's inability to keep his mouth shut.

"Five demerits" Mr McAllister snapped before turning back to the lesson, ignoring the insolent boy's answering 'fair enough' shrug.

The interruption only revealed that many of the dead poets were in a similar predicament to her own. Judging from the way that Neil was drumming his pencil absentmindedly, Knox's interest in the view out of the window and Meek's tapping foot.

When the bell finally rang for lunch, the eight shoved their stuff into their bags and almost ran in their haste to reach the dining hall. They slowed their pace as they approached the doors and took one last look at each other before they separated at the serving area.

Once seated they scarfed down their food in silence until Cameron broke the silence, "Group One. Now."

Neil, Charlie and Kathleen collected their plates and headed back over to the serving tables, but at the last second, they ditched their plates and slipped out of the double doors. In four minutes, they were out of the side door, across the short stretch of lawn and concealed by the woodland that surrounded Welton's grounds. For the next few minutes they picked their way through the undergrowth, carefully avoiding fallen branches and patches of nettles whilst trying to maintain a brisk pace.

"I think I can see her!" Neil pointed to a gap in the trees. Kathleen moved closer and sure enough, a blonde girl in a pink and white floral dress was leaning against the gatepost with her arms crossed. The sight propelled her forward like an invisible force, and before she knew it, she was stood a metre away and just out of the girl's peripheral vision.

"Those shoes are really quite impractical" Kat said with a smile.

Nancy turned, her face lighting up. "But very cute" she grinned, swivelling her right foot clad in a fuchsia kitten heel.

"The cutest."

"Never mind the pinching or the blisters" Nancy deadpanned.

Charlie rolled his eyes, "so it's true, all girls really do is talk about shoes."
Nancy cocked an eyebrow, "which one of your boys is that?"

"Charlie," Kathleen pouted "ignore him. Don't let him steal your attention from me, I'm the best friend you've been dying to see."

Nancy laughed and hugged her, "I missed you."

"I missed you too!"

"Sorry to interrupt" Neil said, "but we've got to get back if we want to stay on schedule."

"Schedule?" Nancy frowned.

"What Neil is referring to is our rigorously planned smuggling operation" Kat smirked, "follow us."

"So, what's the plan?" Nancy asked as she followed Kathleen and the two boys into the woodland.

"We get as close to the side doors as possible, dash into the building where we meet some of the others and sneak you into my room" Kat filled her in.

"And up there" Neil pointed to the roof of the school where two figures were only just visible, "that's Meeks and Pitts, their job is the signal us if anything goes wrong. So, watch out for any wild waving."

"Right."

"Fool proof" Neil smiled.

"You hope" snorted Charlie, avoiding the hand that Neil stuck out to shove him.

Soon the foursome reached the edge of the trees. Neil removed his standard issue Welton coat and handed it to Nancy, "to draw less attention to your dress" he explained. She nodded, put on the coat and removed her shoes. They stayed crouched in the bushes until they saw Todd and Knox. Neil waved at Todd, who tapped Knox and said something. Knox nodded and ducked back into the building. Todd approached the group.

"Is it clear?" Charlie asked.

Todd nodded.

"Okay Nancy," Neil stood "I want you to stay behind us at all times with that hood up."

"Sure thing" she answered.

"Alright, let's move!"

The group arranged themselves into an almost circular shape, around the visitor and made their way across the grass and up the stone steps into the east wing. The corridor was deserted. Only the faint chatter and clattering from the dining hall could be heard. Knox was waiting for them at the corner and they made their way over.

"Hi, I'm Knox. And you must be Chris's cousin Nancy" he extended a hand.

Nancy shook it, "pleasure to meet you."
"How does it look?" Neil questioned.

"Clear. It's sixteen minutes past one so we need to hurry" Knox replied.

Neil nodded, "we can do it" and he led the group around the corner and down the east corridor. They successfully passed the doors to the dining hall and had almost reached the entrance hall where the main staircase was situated, when Neil walked around the final corner and straight into Dr. Hager.

"Dr. Hager!" he cried. Causing Kathleen to push Nancy into the gap between the trophy cases.

Charlie swore under his breath.

"Help him" Kat whispered to Todd before giving him a gentle shove in the direction of the corner. Todd disappeared around it and joined Neil.

"What do we do?" whispered Knox, eyes wide.

"Improvise" she muttered darkly, repeating Neil's casual words from last night.

They listened to Neil's voice as he wittered on about the school needing a drama club and the importance of the arts and culture. After a few minutes of agony, Dr. Hager silenced him and ordered them out, before storming around the corner. He eyed the trio gathered around the trophy case suspiciously.

"Why are you loitering in the corridor?" his eyes narrowed.

The three turned, each teen wearing an expression of innocence.

"We were looking for old Nolan's name, sir" Charlie said cheerily, "along with the other ancients."

"What he meant to say" Kathleen glared at her friend, "is that I wanted to find out about my ancestors who attended the school. The boys offered to help me look."

"Do you know where we could find anything?" asked Knox.

With one last suspicious look, he acquiesced. "Clear out of the way" he waved them to the side, not noticing the panicked looks they shot each other.

"Really, sir. We don't want to waste your lunch hour" Knox protested.

"It's alright if you're busy. I can ask my grandfather."

"I think it will be further down that way!"

"What" Dr. Hager growled, pointing at the gap between the cases "is this?"

Nancy froze. Not daring to breathe.

"Laziness and convenience, sir" shrugged Charlie "welcome to the new America."

"There is no excuse for dropping your personal items and piling them up. This is a respectable school, not a playground" he lectured, gesturing at the plie of coats and scarves between the trophy cases. "Unacceptable. Remove them at once and get to your lessons."

"Yes, sir" they nodded and Kathleen picked up the scarfs, handing them to the correct owners.
They watched Dr. Hager leave before she picked up the three coats and revealed a girl curled up on the floor.

"God" Nancy breathed, "I have never been so scared in my life."

Knox helped her up and the four stared at each other in utter disbelief.

"How the hell did we get away with that? "Charlie voiced their shared thought.

"I don't know" Kathleen shook her head "but I'm not risking it again."

"Run? "suggested Nancy.

"Run" the three Welton students agreed. They raced up the stairs and did not stop until Kathleen had thrown her door open, allowed them all to pile in and slammed it shut again.

A ring echoed over the grounds.

Charlie checked his watch and groaned.

"That's the end of lunch, isn't it?" moaned Knox from where he had collapsed on the floor.

"Off to lessons, you three" Nancy chirped from her perch on Kat's bed, "we can't have the administration barging in here, searching for you."

"I hate you, Turner" Kat said as Nancy shoved her off the bed.

"Love ya to, Murray" she smiled as she waved them goodbye, "see you later. And have fun!"
Chapter 13 - Paper ammunition

Nushka - Thank you! You always leave the best feedback :) And yes, it was my intention. I wanted us all to feel the fear that she was about to be discovered and that the plan would fail. Torturing the characters is no good unless it tortures the readers as well! Don't worry, there's plenty more of Nancy, and soon Chris and Ginny will be introduced. I can't wait to have some female friendship thrown into the story because believe me, Kathleen will be needing some advice from those girls in the future!

I apologise for the lateness, A-levels are insane and it can be quite difficult to write chapters like this one that lead up to other chapters which I am itching to write. My phone notes are full of snippits to use in future chapters. I literally have a 600 word excerpt from a future chapter that I haven't written yet. I think I'm getting a little bit ahead of myself...whoops. But anyway, here is the next chapter. I hope you like it!

"We've talked about everything from Nolan's inability to play nice with others, to the mystery of your missing sock" Nancy huffed, "so let's get to the good stuff. Tell me, which one of them is it?"

"What do you mean?" Kat asked, switching on her lamp to brighten the room which was bathed in early evening darkness. As soon as class had finished, Kathleen had sprinted up to her dorm with an armful of rolls which Pitts had helped her to steal from the kitchen. Three hours of undisturbed girl time spent talking, eating and nail painting had followed. She loved the boys. Truly, she did. But she had missed this so much more than she had realised.

Nancy rolled her eyes, "you know exactly what I mean- or should I say who? My money's on shoe boy, by the way"

"We're just friends."

"For now."

Kat laughed and threw a pillow at the disbelieving blonde. "His name is Charlie. Anyway, it's Knox who we should be focusing on."

"Oh, yes! I do hope that my darling cousin will come to her senses" she muttered, laying down beside her best friend. "Chet was over for dinner last night, the arrogance in him is unbelievable. Half of dinner was spent listening to him boast about his athletic ability and sucking up to her parents, the other half was Chris editing everything he said to make it sound better. Let me tell you, my aunt and uncle toughly enjoyed listening to his drunken escapades..."

"He didn't!"

"He did. There was the time when he and his gang got locked in his parent's garage during a party, and managed to trash the place and his father's car. Or last Halloween where he got a pumpkin stuck on his head, or the Christmas when he got a concussion jumping from the garage rooftop to the pool, and hit his head on the pool ladder when he tried to get out-drunk."
"And they're okay with him dating their daughter?" Kat stared, unable to comprehend that anyone would be okay with that. Her parents would have asked her if she was taking drugs like her Uncle Percy had when he tried to propose to a mop one Christmas, or possibly just a love-struck fool. But who was she to judge? Chris sounded like a lovely girl. Perhaps she was just too nice, or Chet was misleadingly charming.

"Apparently so. Probably helps that their parents went to school together" Nancy rolled her eyes, "blind faith ruins nice people."

"Promise me that you'll never let me get like that"

"Promise me the same and we have a deal, Kitty-Kat" she laughed.

A knock on the door sounded, silencing their giggles.

"Who is it?" called Kathleen, exchanging a worried glance with Nancy who was edging quietly towards the door of her en-suite.

"Neil and Knox" a voice called back.

"It's open!" she shouted, breathing out in relief. The door swung open and the tall figure of Neil stepped in, followed by Knox who made sure to close the door behind him. Knox took the chair from beneath her desk and sat on it backwards, his arms folded across the back as he studied the mess of pillows, cosmetics and sweet wrappers that littered the floor. Neil cocked an eyebrow at the sight, which was very different to how it had been only a couple of hours earlier.

"Not to interrupt your fun, or anything" Knox said, "but it's time to take you back, Nancy."

"I suppose it is" Nancy sighed, "I'll call you tomorrow."

"Please try not to get caught on your way out" Kathleen passed her coat to Nancy, "I rather like seeing friends."

"I won't! Now, stop panicking you fuss pot, and find my other shoe."

"I've got it" Neil called, pulling the missing heel out from under the bed, before throwing it Nancy who caught it and swiftly put it on. She straightened her coat, hugged Kat and followed the two boys out - hood up, as promised - leaving Kathleen to clean up the mess. All in all, it had been a fantastic evening.

xxxx

Friday morning was rather subdued. The group were in the library, squashed onto one table for six. Neil and Meeks had put extra chairs on the two ends, and luckily, they were all working on the same chemistry essay which minimised the number of books taking up the already limited space. Cameron had long ago devised the most efficient method; two copies of each relevant textbook was needed and one copy was shared between four. This way everyone could see and they wouldn't be working in chaos. The dorms would have been much more practical, but Hager had announced at breakfast that they would be closed all morning for room checks, meaning the common room would be a busy.

"ugh" Pitts groaned, massaging his temples "please can someone explain Avogadro's law again? I don't understand a word of this gibberish," he glared at the offending textbook.

"Sure. Let me finish this sentence and I'll be done" Neil offered. He scribbled down a few more
lines before throwing down his pen in triumph and turning his attention to a rather distressed Gerard Pitts. "Avogadro's law states that equal volumes of all gases have equal numbers of molecules at the same temperature and pressure" he explained, "so if you want to work out the volumes, you replace the coefficients in the equation with volumes, since volume is equal to the number of molecules. From this you get a ratio. That ratio is what you apply to the measurements. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, thanks" Pitts nodded distractedly as he focused on his next paragraph. Kat was finishing her conclusion when she felt something hit her on the nose. She flinched, but looking down she could see nothing, so she continued to write her last sentence. Once she was finished she pushed her essay away and stretched her cramping hands. When she looked up she caught sight of Knox shaking with repressed laughter. She frowned. But before she could ask what was so funny, she was hit on the cheek. Blinking in surprise she turned and saw Charlie smirking at her, he tilted his head to gesture in Neil's direction. Still slightly confused, Kathleen looked at Neil who was whispering to Todd about what she assumed was the essay. Just as she was about to turn away she saw it - a small paper ball bouncing off the side of Neil's glasses. And then it clicked. She looked back at Charlie, who now had a small mountain of tiny paper balls in front of him.

"Bored" he mouthed, reading her questioning look. Kathleen rolled her eyes and picked some bits of paper out of her hair, which had obviously been thrown at her and gotten stuck. But instead of leaving them, she picked one up and chucked it at Charlie. It hit him square in the forehead. A smothered splutter sounded on her left and she turned to see Meeks staring at Charlie's surprised expression, struggling to compose himself. Charlie launched one in Meeks' direction but managed to hit Todd instead. Todd's gasp caught Neil's attention, who retaliated but ended up attacking Cameron. Soon it was a full-scale war waged as quietly as possible, they desperately choked down yells of indignation, shrieks and laughter. Not wanting to catch the attention of the librarian Mr Smythe, an old, grumpy man who appreciated silence and order in the library. And also who appeared to hate anybody under the age of forty-five.

And sure enough, he came barrelling down the aisle of general science books hissing for silence. The boys sprang into action, Meeks and Pitts began to shove books back onto the shelves, Neil pocketed the pens and Cameron gathered the essays up with sour expression on his face. Kathleen and Todd were pulled up by Charlie while Knox counted down.

"6 seconds" Knox muttered, his eyes trained on the incoming storm of Mr Smythe's infamous wrath.

"Go!" Neil whispered and suddenly Kathleen and Todd were led around the corner into the biology section and then through the back of the economics aisle. The group were moving through the maze of shelves with speed. Their footsteps were quick and light as they moved through the well-practiced route; except for the two newbies who bumbled along behind with the guidance of the others. All of a sudden, they came to a stop. Todd fell into Neil who smirked at his best friend's blush and silenced his garbled apologies with a hand over Todd's mouth. "Wait" he mouthed and pointed to the gap in the shelves which the group had stopped beside. Peering through the gap they saw Mr Smythe stomping back to his desk, muttering curses directed at 'those vexatious miscreants'.

Once he had gone the teens moved quietly out of the library, their feet left the worn red carpet and hit the flagstone floor. The ancient door slammed shut with such a sense of finality that it set them off on another round of laughter. Cameron was stood to one side complaining about lost merits and possible losses of library privileges again, but Kat could've sworn that she saw his mouth twitch.

It was only a few moments after they had pulled themselves together enough to rid themselves of
the paper ammunition that was still nestled in hair, pockets and even down shirts, the unlikely catalyst of the whole escapade. And begun to hand pens and essays back to the rightful owners that they were interrupted by a small boy. He ran up to them with flushed cheeks and folded note in his right hand.

"Miss Murray!" he squeaked handing her the note, "Mr Nolan asked me to find you and hand deliver this."

"Oh, thank you..."

"Lawrence. Timothy Lawrence" he informed her with pride, his cheeks stretched into one of the brightest smiles that she had ever seen.

"Thank you, Timothy" she amended, opening the note.

"What does it say?" asked Todd as he moved to peer over her shoulder.

"Nolan wants to see me immediately, and I'm expected to attend dinner at the Noel's on Sunday" she replied scanning the letter.

"And he need an eleven-year-old slave to let you know" scoffed Charlie.

"I'm twelve!" Timothy piped up indignantly.

"Shouldn't you be in class? Lower school students don't have free periods" Cameron intervened.

Timothy nodded, "I have mathematics, but I was taking the register to the office when Mr Nolan asked me to find you."

"Well, you found her " Cameron said, "get back to class."

"It's fine Cameron" Kat turned so that only Timothy could see her and rolled her eyes with exaggeration, making him laugh, "I'm sure he was just about to leave before you said that."

"I was" Timothy agreed with a smug look, as Cameron glared at him. The tension between the uptight red-head and the young boy elicited amused chuckles from the others. Timothy broke the eye contact and looked back at Kathleen. "Goodbye, Miss Murray" he waved at her before heading back, presumably to his mathematics lesson.

"Did you just fight with a kid five years younger than you?" asked Pitts in disbelief.

"Did Nolan really send a twelve-year-old all over the school like a damn messenger pigeon?" muttered Charlie.

"I think so" Kathleen said slowly, "in answer to both."

"The Noel's?" asked Knox, leaning back against the wall with feigned nonchalance.

"I assume it's at Nancy's request. I'll ask for a plus one invitation when I call her tonight" she smiled, "but I'd better get to his office. The note said immediately."

"We'll probably be in the common room until room checks are over" Neil said, "see you later."

"Bye," she headed off to her grandfather's office, wondering what on earth needed her immediate attention at 10am on a Friday morning.
Chapter 14 - The dread of 'endeavours'

Kathleen stood in corridor and completed her usual pre-Nolan ritual; she smoothed her skirt, ran her fingers through her hair and re-tied the ruby red ribbon which was keeping it up. Once she was satisfied that she wouldn't receive a lecture about looking presentable, she knocked.

"Enter."

She opened the door and stepped into the lavish room. Her grandfather was stood by the window gazing out at the grounds which were covered in a kaleidoscope of deep red, orange and light brown leaves.

"Good morning" Kathleen greeted tearing her gaze away from the outdoors and moving to stand beside her usual seat.

"Ah, Kathleen. You received my message" he turned away from the breath-taking view of the lake in favour of taking a seat at his desk, he waved his hand towards the empty chair for her to sit also. She obliged. "I wanted to speak to you about the arrangements for dinner at the Noel household. To my understanding, one of your friends from school is their niece. I assume it is girl you told me about a few weeks ago?"

"Yes, Nancy Turner."

"I am very happy to hear that you have kept in touch, you won't be here forever after all. Now, I called you here because they have extended an invitation not just to you, but rather graciously to a guest of your own choosing. Is there anybody that you have in mind?"

Kathleen pulled at the loose thread on the sleeve of her sweater, "I was thinking of bringing Knox Overstreet."

"Mr Overstreet?" Nolan repeated, analysing his granddaughter.

"Yes, if that's okay" she replied.
"He will do perfectly" the old man said, "only, I had the impression that you had grown rather fond of Mr Anderson."

"Oh," Kathleen felt her cheeks flush "Todd is a very good friend. He reminds me of Neville a little bit" she explained, thinking about her youngest brother. Neville had always been the quiet one in the family. Content to sit indoors with his books and board games, disinterested by the war games or pirate games played by the village children. Much like Todd, he found it difficult to read aloud in class or perform plays, yet had no trouble speaking animatedly with the people he loved.

"Ah" Mr Nolan nodded, "that clears things up considerably. I'm glad to hear it."

"You are?" Kathleen's brows shot up.

"Speak properly Kathleen, it is 'are you?' and remember to control your tone" he reprimanded, "and yes. I am. Mr Overstreet and yourself are to meet Dr Hager at the foot of the main staircase at precisely 5:35pm on Sunday evening. You will both be dressed appropriately and will use the manners that I know you both been brought up with. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Grandfather."

"Very well. I wish you luck in your endeavours with Mr Overstreet, a very suitable choice. You are dismissed."

Kathleen rose from her seat obediently and was half-way out of the office when the weight of his words hit her. She spun around, forgetting her manners for a second time this morning.

"What do you mean by my endeavours?"

Mr Nolan looked up from his papers "Kathleen. Once again, I must remind you to check your tone" he frowned, "you have been dismissed. I have important work to do and a highly-regarded school to manage. We will resume this after you get back on Sunday." He promptly went back to his papers, ignoring his gaping granddaughter completely. Kathleen forced herself to take the remaining steps out of his office and closed the door quietly. Standing in the empty corridor, she took a deep breath and tried to regain her composure and dispel the irritation which was quickly beginning to overwhelm her. She glanced at her watch. It was 10:30am, so there was still half an hour of her free period left. She went back to her dorm room to swap her chemistry work for her copy of 'The Great Gatsby', before making her way down to the common room.

xxxx

The common room was a jungle - that much was clear the second that Kathleen opened the door and almost got smacked in the face by a football - which did nothing to improve her mood. Upon entering she had to navigate through the mess of abandoned textbooks, randomly placed chairs and teenage boys in an attempt to find both a free seat and her boys. The only people in the noisy chaos who she currently did not feel like killing for the mere crime of existing. It was the second time that she almost tripped over a random object that she gave up, and sat on the windowsill. She pushed herself into the corner where she was half-bathed in sunlight and opened her book.

"He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass. A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about...like that ashen, fantastic figure gliding toward him through the amorphous trees."
"What are you reading" a voice broke through her bubble, bringing Kathleen back to the present. The wave of noise which she had blocked out hit her and she blinked, trying to adjust to the real world again. She lazily lifted the cover and showed the curious interrupter.

"Isn't that the depressing one, narrated by a loner obsessed with horrible people?" asked Fraser.

"I guess you could interpret it that way" Kathleen responded carefully. It had been weeks since Fraser had spoken to her, and only the second time that he had conversed with her like she was a fellow human being.

"You like it?"

"I like Gatsby. Jordan Baker isn't to bad and neither is Nick Carraway, the loner narrater."

"We read that in English a couple of years ago" Fraser sat beside her with his back against the window, "and if I remeber correctly, Gatsby was the fake obsessed with the rich girl who didn't like him."

"Daisy liked him, loved him actually but she didn't love him enough" Kathleen shrugged "Gatsby may be flawed character but he's my favourite. His biggest fault was his love for Daisy, who didn't really deserve it. And getting caught up in a dream. Anyway, he represents success and the American dream, aren't you Americans supposed to love that?"

"We sure are" he laughed, "but not all of us do. Aren't you Scots supposed to love haggis and swearing?"

She pulled a face, "haggis is disgusting."

"Glad we agree on something" Fraser smirked, letting the pair fall into silence.

Kathleen felt his eyes on her as she began to read once again, she got through another two pages before she couldn't take it anymore. "Not to sound rude" she began "but why are you here?"

"You're alone" he replied, but backtracked once he caught the expression on her face, "that sounded creepy, I didn't mean it like that. I meant that you are usually surrounded by your guard dogs. There's no chance of anyone else talking to you then. Plus, you're letting me."

"Those 'guard dogs' are called friends. They look out for me which is only necessary when gross comments are made" she turned another page, "and I'm letting you because you haven't made any comments of that kind yet. You usually open with one."

He went quiet again. Kathleen had just begun to relax when he broke the silence yet again.

"Nolan called my Father about a dinner" he said, staring resolutely ahead.

"My Father is on the school board and apparently, Nolan wants to discuss some business with him" he continued.

"Let me guess, he suggested that it would be nice for us to join them."

Fraser nodded.

"There is no way out of this, otherwise you wouldn't be making sure that I don't hate you enough to mention anything unpleasent to Nolan and your Father" sighed Kathleen.
"Yeah, sorry about that" he said standing up, "looks like your lot are back. See ya around, sweetheart."

"Don't call me that!" she called after him as she caught sight of the gang pushing their way through the crowded room.

"Sorry, Kat!" Neil called "we did a kitchen run. But we brought back a jam tart for you."

Todd handed her the pastry with a concerned look, "was that Fraser who I saw talking to you."

"Thank you" she ate the tart and nodded before murmuring "later" to the pair before the rest of the group joined them.

Neil and Todd exchanged a look but stayed silent as the other boys came within hearing range.

"Latin starts soon" Cameron warned "we should get going."

Kathleen slipped off the windowsill and grabbed her satchel "I'm ready when you are, Cameron."

The red-haired student nodded as the bell rang. At the shrill noise, the common room sprang into action as the rest of the boys shoved their belongings into their own satchels and stampeded out into the rest of the school. The group followed and joined the mad rush of kids on the stairwells and in the hallways. Timothy waved at Kat on his way up the stairs and she waved back with a smile, causing Cameron to scoff. She sent him a questioning look which he refused to acknowledge, making Charlie snigger and Neil swat at the latter playfully. Kat just rolled her eyes at the familiar routine but was silently thankful for their antics, it was a distraction from the thoughts swirling around in her head and the fear that she knew exactly what her Grandfather had meant.
Saturday morning came to quickly. Kathleen decided as she was rudely woken up by fist pounding relentlessly on her door. She groaned and burrowed further down into her bed but the noise would not stop.

"Go away" she muttered, throwing the covers back and sliding out of bed into the cold morning air. She caught sight of herself in her mirror and rubbed the sleep out her eyes, brushed her hair and padded over to the door.

"It's 7:30 am, this had better be an emergency" she grumbled, opening the door to a lively looking Charlie, a perky Neil and a long-suffering Todd Anderson.

"That is exactly what I said" Todd growled, folding his arms. He shot a glare at Neil who just smiled in amusement at the rare sighting of grouchy Todd. It was almost as if Neil had done it on purpose, Kat thought as she mirrored Todd and glared at Charlie with folded arms.

"Why on earth are you dressed like that?" she asked wearily, taking in his sports kit, football boots and the whistle hung around his neck.

"Because" he smirked, leaning against the doorframe, "you have a training session to attend."

"At 7:30 on a Saturday morning?" she repeated.

"Why not? You're awake now" he shrugged.

"Because of you."

"And you can't go back to sleep once you're up, right?" Neil chipped in.

Kat's eyes narrowed, "which you are fully aware of, Perry."

"I could" complained Todd.

"But you're not allowed" sang Neil.

"As much as I appreciate the sight of those pyjamas, get dressed Murray" Charlie winked playfully at her, "we have another one of Keating's lessons on Monday to prepare for."

"Be quick" Neil added, "we'll be waiting out here."

Kat looked down at her nightdress and rolled her eyes, "give me five minutes" she said and closed the door. She washed her face, applied light make-up and swept her hair up into a pony-tail secured by a white ribbon, and then went to her wardrobe. She opened the doors and wrinkled her nose at the sight of her gym suit. She hated the thing. Instead, she chose a pair of white Bermuda shorts paired with polo shirt under a navy jumper instead. She then put on her white socks and sneakers. Ready in record time, she went out to meet the three boys in the corridor.

"Finally, "Charlie exclaimed, picking himself up off the floor, "you said five minutes!"

"I was fifteen minutes at maximum" she replied before turning to Todd who was looking a bit
more awake, "have they given you coffee yet?"

"No, but I was promised it."

"I always keep my promises, Todd" Neil patted his roommate on the shoulder "come on, let's get some life into you." The group followed Neil downstairs and into the dining hall which was almost empty. Two teachers were seated at the staff table and only a few other students were milling about.

"I've never seen it so empty" marvelled Charlie, looking around the vast room.

"You should see it in the holidays" Kat poured some cornflakes into a bowl, "the school is empty and meal times are a teacher's banquet."

"What did you do?" he asked, pouring two glasses of orange juice.

She thanked him and took her glass, "I dined with them and it was torture. Keating didn't turn up until the last day of term, so I didn't meet him before the first lesson" she explained.

"Do you reckon you'll stay here for the Christmas holiday as well?"

"Probably" she replied, "Nolan wants to bring my family over here instead of sending me back."

"And what do you want?"

"To go back, alone" she laughed. They sat opposite each other and Kathleen watched Neil fumble around with the coffee as he tried to follow Todd's instructions to the letter.

"So, you're definitely leaving? After...you know..." he trailed off.

She looked back to him, "that was the agreement."

"Do you want to?"

Kathleen tore her gaze away from his, "I don't know." At that moment, Neil and Todd arrived laden with food and beverages; saving Kathleen from a path she didn't want to go down. "What's the plan for today, then?" she asked Neil as he sat on the opposite side of the table, leaving the spot next to her open for Todd.

"Well, Keating told us that we're playing soccer on Monday. So, we figured that we would start there."

"Sounds good" she nodded. The four finished their breakfast, conversing about the rules of soccer. Once they had finished, Charlie was sent to smuggle out some snacks whilst the other three went to procure a ball from the PE cupboard.

They met up again at the pitch. Charlie handed the food which he had wrapped in napkins to Todd, who they had appointed as referee. Which really meant that he was spectating, although nobody commented on that, or the fact that Charlie had kept the whistle.

"Okay" Neil began, "first we're going to teach you to kick the ball."

"I can kick a ball, Neil" she cocked an eyebrow.

"Well. He meant teaching you to kick it well" Charlie amended.
She glared.

"Maybe you need coffee to" Todd grinned into his mug. The boy had become his usual self after his first cup, but he was ecstatic after Neil managed to swipe second for him to take out onto the field.

Kathleen shook her head, "just tell me what to do."

The next couple of hours were spent kicking the ball back and forth in a triangle before progressing into a mini-game once her technique had been perfected. They had just started to tire when it happened. Neil who had aimed to take the ball from Charlie slipped, his limbs flailed like Bambi on ice as he tried to regain his balance but he went down and slid through the mud. He landed on his backside and the impact sent mud flying, splattering the other two. Charlie extended a hand to help his friend up, Neil took it but yanked him down too, catching Kathleen in the crossfire which resulted in all three of them laying in the mud, breathless with laughter. Todd got up to help but backed away as he caught the mischievous look on Neil's face.

"No,no,no" he held his hands up nervously, almost clear of the danger zone but Neil kicked out; locking Todd's ankle with his own and taking him down too. That was how Knox found them ten minutes later, sat shivering in the mud munching on pastries and grinning like fools.

"Nancy called to confirm the details for Sunday" he said sitting down on the grass, away from the mud, "is it worth asking what happened?"

"Neil fell over" Kat laughed, "and took us all down with him."

"Alright" Knox shook his head at his friend's antics, "I was sent by Cameron to get you in for lunch. You should probably clean yourselves up a bit first," he said taking in the sight of them sat in the mud, covered from head to toe in mud and grass stains.

"Knox is right" Neil said standing up "I'm cold. Let's hit the showers."

The other three got up, brushing themselves down as best they could before gathering their belongings and starting the journey back to the main building.

"So, what did Nancy say?" she asked Knox.

"She told me to bring flowers for her aunt and uncle, to dress nicely and not to stare at Chris too much" his cheeks coloured slightly at the last instruction, "but she demands that you wear the red dress. She said you would know which one."

"I do" Kat replied, "I'm just not sure about it."

"She also said that Chris is in pink and she is wearing the 'Purple Marilyn', and if you don't wear it then we can't let you leave."

"What the hell is a 'Purple Marilyn?'" exclaimed Charlie.

Kat rolled her eyes, "a purple version of the white dress worn by Marilyn Monroe in 'The Seven Year Itch'" she replied at the same time as Knox.

"You knew that?" asked Neil.

"She yelled it at me, so now I do" he grumbled.
"That sounds like Nancy" Kat laughed.

"Hey, no distracting from this mysterious red dress!" Charlie interrupted, raising an eyebrow "why is there a drama over this dress?"

"There is no drama" Kathleen corrected him. "We went through my wardrobe while she was here, she wanted me to wear it tomorrow night. I said no, she obviously disagrees."

"Why don't you want to wear it?"

"It's not that I don't want to, I love that dress" she shrugged, avoiding his gaze "It's just a little to bold and showy for small dinner party."

"Sorry, Kat. But I don't think we can let you leave without it on" Neil said breezily, "an order is an order, right Charlie?"

"Right" he nodded but he seemed distracted.

They arrived at the doors and were about to go in when Charlie paused, "Neil? Do you think that you and Knox should go in first?"

"What?"

"Just to...you know...make sure Kat isn't caught doing sports?" he said, staring at Neil.

"Oh! Yes. Excellent idea. Todd, Kat, you two stay right there. We'll be five seconds, come on Knox!" Neil garbled, grabbing Knox's arm and dragging him into the school before he could protest.

"Weird" Kathleen turned to Charlie.

"Not as weird as you lying about a dress" he countered, signalling at Todd to help him.

"Charlie, I do own a red dress."

"But you're lying about why you don't want to wear it. Obviously, Nancy thinks the real reason is ridiculous."

"Todd?" Kat spun around to face her other best friend.

"Sorry Kat" he sighed, sitting on the wall, "he's got a point."

"Is feeling uncomfortable not a justified reason?" she folded her arms.

"I would be, if it was true" Charlie said.

Kathleen cursed internally. Why was he so perceptive? She hadn't exactly lied. The dress was a little bit bold and showy but she didn't care. Besides, nothing could be classed as 'too bold' next to Nancy Turner. That girl had never cared for boundaries or social norms, the very reason why Kat loved her so much. Couldn't he just leave it alone? No, she decided. It was Charles Dalton, the more she shut it down, the more persistent he would get.

"Can we talk about this later? It's cold."

"Fine" he said, holding the door open for the other two "I'll see you at lunch."
"Thank you" Kathleen entered the school, sent an apologetic look at Todd - who she knew hated tension and arguments - before going back to her dorm to shower and change for lunch.

xxxx

Once Kathleen had disappeared upstairs, Charlie turned to Todd. "You cannot tell me that this isn't weird. It's not the dress but something to do with it that's bothering her."

"There's something she's not telling us" Todd agreed, glancing at the spot where she had been a few seconds ago, with concern.

"Just-just try again later, okay? Even if you can't involve me, be there, Todd."

"Why wouldn't you be involved? You're important to her as well" he asked, confused by this side of Charlie Dalton. Welton's rebel king was the cocky one, the resident joker. Charlie wasn't supposed to be worried or stumble over his words. He was.

"There are only three people who make her angry, and I'm one of them!"

"So is Mr Nolan. And she wasn't smiling at him five minutes ago, she was smiling at you."

"But she still won't tell me anything!"

"I promise to talk to her after lunch, Charlie" he said earnestly, "and you talk to the third person...I guess that's Fraser."

"Correct. I swear, if that slime ball has said anything to Kat, I'll-"

"D-Don't do anything" Todd stuttered, looking anxious, "you'll m-make it w-worse."

"Fine" he relented, "let's catch up before Neil comes looking for you. I don't think he trusts me not to scare you."

"You don't scare me" Todd looked up, his forehead creased, "why would you think that?"

Charlie shrugged.

"I know I-I can't do things like everyone else, th-that I get anxious. But you don't scare me, none of you do" he admitted, lifting his eyes from the floor and risking a look at the other boy's face, surprised to see a him smiling softly. "And Neil trusts you with his life, Kathleen would too" he said firmly.

"Thank you."

The boys headed back to their dorms in silence. Once they were showered and dressed, they went down to meet the others with a new, silent understanding bonding them together.

Chapter End Notes

Apparently, girls used to call gym suits, 'monkey suits'. I can't blame them. Google '1950s gym suit' and '1960s gym suit' and I think you will understand.
Chapter 16 - Where dost thou hide thy head?

Chapter Notes

Chelocean22 - CHARLIE FANS ARE ALWAYS WELCOME! I adore his character so much, it's unhealthy. Weirdly, I've also been growing to like Cameron since writing this...I never thought that would happen. But anyway, thank you so much for your continued support. I hope the illusive red dress lives up to your expectations and stay tuned for Charlie's reaction to Kathleen wearing it!

Anasatsia98 - Thank you :) I'm so happy that people love reading this as much as I love writing it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter sixteen - Where dost thou hide thy head?

"How was soccer practice?" asked Pitts as Kathleen approached the table.

"Good" she took the seat at the end of the table, with Cameron on her other side, "if you forget the part when Neil decided to give us all a mud bath."

"Sorry" the boy in question laughed, stuffing another spoonful of mashed potatoes into his mouth.

"Where have Todd and Charlie got to? "Knox stared at the two empty seats before turning to Kat, "they can't have been far behind you?"

She shrugged, "No idea, they were talking when I left." Her words attracted an array of confused expressions.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but what on earth would they have to talk about?"

"Take a wild guess" Cameron muttered sarcastically, earning a subtle kick under the table from Neil which went unnoticed by the rest of the group, who had spotted the missing society members walking in.

"Hey, Neil" whispered Kat, taking advantage of the distraction "could I talk to you and Todd later, in private?"

"Sure" he gave her a reassuring smile.

"Greetings, peasants!"

"Hello to you too, Charlie" scoffed Neil, gesturing for Todd to sit next to him.

"A shocking display of disrespect" he mocked, what does a King have to do get some admiration around here?"

Cameron rolled his eyes, "actually be one."

"Nonsense, I Charles Dalton, of Dalton Banking Inc. have been ordained by God!"
"Stop it, people are staring" Cameron hissed.

"Let them, I can't help being this handsome."

"Shut up and eat your potatoes, King Charles" instructed Neil, "the rest of us are almost done."

He pouted, "it's a sad day when the court jester usurps the crown."

"If Neil's the jester, what are the rest of us?" laughed Meeks.

"You're Nostradamus, Pittsie's the chancellor, Knoxious...you can be the prince and marry the princess of Noel."

Kathleen bit back a smile at the look of pride on Knox's face.

"That leaves Kat as...princess?" guessed Pitts.

"Queen" she corrected at the same time as Charlie, causing the whole table to laugh.

"I'm glad we agree" she grinned.

"What does that make Todd and me? The stable boys?" Cameron grumbled.

"Oh no" Charlie smirked, "Todd would be the stable boy. You'd be the kitchen maid."

"Don't worry, Cameron" Kat nudged her scowling friend, "I think you'd look quite fetching as medieval maid."

Knox choked on his water, sending the group into another fit of laughter as the liquid sloshed out of the side of his glass.

"Stop!" he cried between coughs, "I can't get the picture out of my mind."

xxxx

It was nearing sundown and the gang was lounging about by the lake. Charlie was smoking, still refusing to share his secret hiding place with the others, who had been so sure that his stash would be found during the room checks yesterday. Meeks and Pitts were working on plans to build a record player, using stones to hold down the papers, while Cameron was helping Knox with the biology homework.

"Oh, Kathleen" Neil sat up and waved his script in the air, "do me favour and read the part of Demetrius. I need to practice this scene. Todd, you can do Lysander. There aren't many lines for him in this bit."

"Sure."

"Thanks" Neil stood up, "we'll be by that tree, okay. We won't disturb you guys that way."

Kathleen and Todd followed Neil over to the tree a few metres away from their current spot on the lakeside. They sat in a triangle, brushing away the last of the fallen leaves which were scattered at the base of the birch tree.

"What did you want to talk to us about?" asked Neil, ignoring the script and focusing solely on his friend.
"Aren't we helping you rehearse?"

"We are, I didn't lie" Neil assured Todd. "It's just that Kat wanted to talk to us alone...I'm assuming it's about earlier."

Kathleen nodded, "It was Fraser who you saw. We had a little chat and well..." she paused, pulling at the grass as she searched for the right words. "He told me that Nolan has invited his Father for a business dinner, that we have to attend as well."

"Dinner with Nolan, Fraser, and his Father?" repeated Neil, "I get that it's unpleasant but why is it so bad?"

"It's not just dinner, is it?" observed Todd.

"Exactly. It's a set up" she agreed.

"A set up?"

"For weeks, my grandfather's been questioning me about my friendships, he thought I was interested in Todd! I told him that it's not like that but last night he wished me luck in my 'endeavours' with Knox. He basically said that he let me attend Welton so I could find a suitable husband. Now he's starting to arrange dinners and parties...it's a repeat of what he did to my Mother!" She bit her lip, "I don't know what to do. He's trying to control my life and ruining things for me" she trailed off.

"And the dress?" Todd asked softly.

"If I dress up tonight, I set the standard for every occasion I'm forced to go to in future. He's spreading the word and I don't want to help. I need to be a plain Jane, I need to blend in and appear ordinary."

"That means giving in Kat, and you're not a quitter" Neil said firmly, "you chose a boarding America, and when your school closed you chose an all-boys school with the relative you don't get along with because you knew it was an opportunity. You ignore expectations and join underground poetry clubs with the rebels and nerds alike. You're never going to be boring, plain, or ordinary. Accept it, and tell him to kindly get the fuck out of your life."

"Possibly in politer terms" interrupted Todd, "but the point stands."

"In a red dress" added Kat quietly.

"In a red dress" nodded Neil.

"Sorry for being stupid."

"You're not stupid" Todd hugged her, "you got worried. Talk to me sooner next time, please?"

"Of course," she hugged him back and opened an arm for Neil to join, "thank you."

"I'm glad you're okay" Neil smiled as they pulled away and he held out the script, "are you still up for some healthier drama?"

"Always" she laughed, taking the script and reading out the first line, "Lysander! speak again: Thou runaway, thou coward, art thou fled? Speak! In some bush? Where dost thou hide thy head?"

xxxx
Sunday morning flew for all but Knox who was, as expected, a nervous wreck.

"It's three, Charlie! Three in the afternoon and I don't know what to wear!"

"Just wear something like what you wore to the Danbury dinner."

"But this is her parents, Charlie. Meeks, tell him!"

"It will be fine, Knox" Meeks pulled a blue shirt out of his friends draw, "how about this?"

"That was the first thing I chose" he groaned.

"What's so bad about it?" asked Pitts.

"It doesn't match pink and Nancy said Chris is wearing pink" he put his head in his hands, "I was wrong. I need help, someone get Kat or ring Nancy. I have no dignity left to lose."

"I'll be back in a minute" Neil said, walking out. And sure enough, he was back two minutes later with Kathleen in tow.

"What do you need?" she asked, handing Knox a bunch of pink peonies "these are from us to the Noels, Chris's favourite apparently."

"Thank you!" he threw his arms around the girl, taking care not to crush the flowers.

"It's fine" she giggled, stepping back and noticing the chaotic state of his room. The boys had kicked Knox's roommate out hours ago, to make room for what Charlie had dubbed 'operation fancy pants', the floor was littered in clothing, shoes and belts, the draws were flung open and an array of aftershaves lined the windowsill. She raised an eyebrow at Meeks who was waving around a navy shirt helplessly. "Absolutely not, Meeks. If Knox is wearing the cream pants that he currently has on, he will match Chris. That shirt ruins the effect. Find a plain white one" she instructed, before turning to Charlie who looked thoroughly annoyed by the bundle of sweaters on his arm, "pick the sky-blue sweater, Charlie." She then turned to the others, "we need a blue tie and brown shoes, guys." Within ten minutes they were sorted, Knox stood in front of the mirror looking calmer.

"How are you not stressed?" he breathed.

"Because I've done this a lot" she laughed, "and I'm visiting my best friend's extended family, not my crush and her parents."

"Please don't remind me" he said faintly.

"You'll be fine" she smiled, "now I'm going to get ready. Meet you by the stairs at 5:30."

Chapter End Notes

I debated ending it with Kat and Knox at the Noel's front door but it seemed awkward to add the next part. The next chapter will pick up at the staircase and follow the entire dinner. I'm not sure where to end it yet but it will probably be a long chapter, so be prepared!
I'm making a playlist on Spotify for this story, if you want to check it out it's called 'Book #2 writing playlist' by ~chloejade~, I debated making it public because spoilers but I thought, nah. It's more speculation about the direction of the story than confirmed spoilers, and I personally love listening to author playlists and the songs that inspired their stories. One more thing, if any of you go through all my Spotify playlists, please do not judge my music taste too harshly. Thanks :)

And if you want to see the inspiration for Kathleen's look, go on google images and search '1959 dinner party dress' and the second picture on the second line is an illustration of one man and four women in evening wear. The woman in the red dress and white gloves is sitting on a chair at the front.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter seventeen - It's a small world

"We have five minutes" Knox worried at his lip, "do you think I should go up?"

"No."

"But it's been twenty minutes!"

"You're twenty-five minutes early, Knox."

It was silent for a moment.

"Maybe I should? Or you should? Just in case, y'know?"

"No."

"Come on, Charlie" Knox stared at his friend who merely raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms before closing his eyes and relaxing back against the door frame.

"I can't help being nervous!"

The boy hummed nonchalantly in response.

"Damn it, Charlie! Give me some last-minute pointers, you're the girl expert" he cried.

"Really? I could've sworn that Cameron held that title" teased Kathleen, appearing on the staircase and descending slowly down the stairs.

"Need some help?" Knox offered her an arm, noticing her awkward movements.

Kathleen took his arm gratefully, "these heels aren't the most practical" she admitted sheepishly.

"Nice though" shrugged Knox, his mind slowing and muscles relaxing with the reassuring presence of his friend, "wouldn't you say so, Charlie?" He turned around at the lack of a response,
"Charlie?"

The boy in question gulped, stepping away from the doorframe and standing up a little straighter, he replied "Yeah. I mean, you look great."

"Thank you" she smiled, oblivious to the strange way that his eyes darted wildly between looking directly at her and anywhere else. Her red heels click clacked on the parquet floor as she moved to stand in front of the window, to use its reflection to inspect her appearance, whilst Knox fretted about the dinner and Charlie nodded distractedly, unusually silent as he struggled to keep his eyes away one friend and tried desperately to focus on the other's anxious rambling.

The red boat neck dress was tight down to her waist where it flared out in two layers down to her knees, the upper layer was translucent with a deep red ribbon around the hem, her chocolate brown hair was pinned into an elegant up do which she checked was secure before pulling on her white gloves.

She turned to Knox, "ready?"

He nodded nervously, clutching the flowers in his hands.

"See you later" Charlie patted Knox on the back and wished him luck, he gave Kathleen a nod.

"Bye, Charlie" she smiled in response, taking Knox's arm and letting him lead her out the front door to where Hager was waiting for them by his car.

The Dalton boy stood in the doorway, watching as Kathleen threw her head back and laughed at something that Knox had said. His eyes tracked her every move from the impatient bouncing on the balls of her feet to the graceful movements of her legs as she got into the car and where she settled down, crossing her legs. It was then that Neil walked quietly over to his best friend.

"You need to say something" he said, sitting on the stone step beneath the doorway.

Charlie shook his head, still staring down the empty driveway, "I can't ruin things. We're happy as friends, besides she's leaving soon."

"Two months is plenty of time and after this year she might go to college in the US...with us."

"Maybe she will" he sighed.

"You'll figure it out" Neil patted him on the back.

"So, will you" Charlie smirked looking amused at the shocked expression on his best friend's face.

"I don't know what you're talking about" he choked.

He rolled his eyes, "come off it, I have eyes."

Neil shrugged, "what do you think? Honestly."

"I think you'll be great."

"Will?"

"You have eyes as well, Perry. I suggest you use them" Charlie dusted himself off and stood up, "I saw lover boy on the roof looking miserable, fix it," he said before heading back inside, leaving Neil to sit there stunned for a second before he shot up and dashed to the rooftop.
Ten minutes later the car pulled into the driveway of the Noel household, a pretty suburban house with a manicured lawn and neat flowerbeds under the front windows.

"Ready?" Kathleen put her hand on Knox's knee to stop it from bouncing. The poor boy looked like he was about to vomit.

"Yes" he said resolutely opening the car door, "let's go."

Hager followed the two students up the to the door, hovering behind them as Kathleen rang the bell.

"COME IN!" squealed Nancy, throwing open the door and ushering them into a spacious entrance hall with cream walls adorned in photographs and various pieces of art which carried on up the wooden staircase to the left and down the hall.

"Thank you for bringing them, sir. We should be done by nine" she smiled politely at their chaperone, and closed the door.

"I've never seen so much artwork in my life...and I've been to the Louvre!" exclaimed Kat, gazing at the tasteful sculptures and framed paintings that lined the hall as Nancy led them into a modest sitting room.

"My Aunt and Uncle are art dealers "she smirked, "and collectors," she gestured to well-dressed couple in their mid-forties who stood in the centre of the room, "Kathleen Murray and Knox Overstreet, meet my Aunt Linda and Uncle Joseph Noel." The students shook hands with the couple.

"It's a pleasure to meet you both" greeted Mrs Noel, "we've heard so much about you from Nancy and the Danburys."

"Oh yes, I've heard that this young man is an aspiring lawyer!" Mr Noel led Knox over to the couch.

"The plan is for me to take over my Father's law firm once he retires" explained Knox, taking the seat next to the man.

Kathleen followed Nancy over to the drinks trolley where she was helping Mrs Noel with the pre-dinner drinks. She was pouring four coca-colas, presumably for the teenagers, and alcoholic beverages for her husband and herself. "Nancy dear, please take these to the men. I'm just popping upstairs to fetch Christine."

Nancy complied, sharing a subtle conspiratorial look with Kat as she handed out the drinks. "I bet you my Chanel sunglasses that my cousin leaves him speechless" she said in a low voice.

"I think that's a given, no bet" she whispered back, cutting her reply short as the sound of footsteps on the stairs became audible. Sure enough, Mrs Noel re-entered the room with her daughter in tow. Kathleen's eyebrows rose involuntarily, Knox might have been exaggerating slightly but he wasn't wrong. Chris was beautiful. She was practically angelic in her pale pink dress with her smooth blonde hair curled at the ends and big blue eyes. Kat turned to see Nancy, whose smug grin was directed at Knox, who had paused mid-sentence with his mouth hanging open.

"This is my daughter, Christine" Mrs Noel introduced her to Kat who received a warm smile from the Noel's daughter.
"It's lovely to meet you at last, my dear cousin has been driving me up the wall with her excitement to see you" she laughed, "she even knocked the juice over at breakfast trying to snatch your letter from my Father's hands."

"Hey! I'm not that bad" she argued in mock offence.

"I have to disagree, Nance" interjected her uncle, "you looked like a cat who got the cream when we organised this dinner" he teased.

"And this is-" began Mrs Noel.

"Knox, right? You were at the Danbury's a few weeks ago," interrupted Chris.

"Y-You remember me?" stuttered Knox.

"Of course," she smiled, "but it's a shame we didn't get a chance to talk much. Chet was insistent on leaving on time."

"He cares about your curfew, sweetheart. He's a responsible lad" Mr Noel said, taking a sip of his drink.

Nancy coughed and Chris shot her a look.

"Are you okay, dear?" asked Mrs Noel, feeling Nancy's forehead, "you're not coming down with that nasty flu virus, are you?" Mrs Rifenberg next door has been in bed with it all week, the poor woman."

"I'm sure it's nothing to worry about, Mother" reassured Chris, crossing the room to sit with her Father, "Knox, you must tell me all about Welton. Chet hardly speaks of it and his sister, Ginny goes to Henley Hall and she adores it. Isn't that your sister school?"

"Uh-sort of. It's more our sister school on paper, we don't mix" he replied.

Kathleen tuned out and turned to Nancy, "what was that about?"

Nancy led her over to the sofa in the corner and watched Mrs Noel wander into the kitchen before she spoke, "Chet caring about her curfew is rubbish. The boy just wants her away from adult supervision so they can make-out before he takes her home. I should know; I've caught them in his Father's car twice already."

"You really don't like him" she observed.

"I don't" she confirmed, "which is why I hope this works out" she glanced at the pair of teenagers conversing over the coffee table, laughing and leaning in with interest to what the other was saying. Knox's nerves appeared to have melted away and the flowers he brought with him were received with delight. Chris immediately placed them in a vase, marvelling at both the scent and the lucky coincidence that they were her favourite flowers.

The evening wore on and the conversation flowed at the dinner table, accompanied by a showering of compliments upon Mrs Noel for the excellent meal. Knox, who had been seated next to Chris hadn't stopped smiling since they arrived. And the girls could barely contain their glee at the sight of the two getting along so well. They had begun desert-a tasty homemade apple pie-when they were interrupted by the shrill ringing of the doorbell.
Mrs Noel looked up with an expression of surprise, "I'll get it."

"Are we expecting anyone else, Father?" asked Chris.

Mr Noel shook his head and lifted his wrist to read his watch, "your brother is sleeping at the Michaels house tonight and Dr Hager isn't due for another half hour."

The speculation was ended with the reappearance of Mrs Noel, "look who decided to drop by" she smiled, stepping aside to reveal a tall brunette boy dressed in a red varsity jacket.

"Chet!" Chris jumped up to greet her boyfriend with a hug and Knox's face dropped.

"Hey" he said, throwing an arm over her shoulders, "what's up Mr N?"

"Nice to see you Chet" he stood up to shake the boy's hand. "You sit down and enjoy your meal, Linda" he told his wife, "I'll fetch another chair."

Soon enough the newcomer was seated with a plate of spare food and a beer in front of him. Unfortunately, his chair was placed in the middle of Knox and Chris.

"Chet, you remember Knox? He was at Welton with you" said Chris.

"Oh" he rubbed the back of his neck, "good to see you mate. Still friends with that ginger kid."

"Meeks" he replied shortly, "and yes. "

Kat watched the tense exchange with interest, Meeks had never been brought into the equation before. Perhaps there was more of a backstory to Chet's time at Welton than she knew.

"Right" he nodded, "and who is this lovely lady?"

"This is Kathleen, she went to St. Mary's with me" Nancy explained, "she's actually at Welton temporarily."

"Woah, they let girls in!" he exclaimed, shovelling in a forkful of salad, "makes me regret leaving."

Nancy stabbed her pie, trying not to look as murderous as she felt since the jerk had remained oblivious to the flicker of hurt on her cousins face at the thoughtless joke.

"Girl" Kathleen corrected, "Nolan is a family member, so I guess it is a one-off occasion."

"Makes sense" he agreed, "the workloads tough, isn't it? I bet it's different to your old school."

"Kat is top of the class in English" Knox jumped in, careful to keep his tone even and polite.

"You must be brainy if you displaced four-eyes."

"Chet!" Chastised Chris.

"It's a joke, love" he reassured her, "let us boys have our nicknames, right Mr N?"

"Chet's right, sweetheart. It's all light-hearted jokes between friends" Mr Noel assured his daughter.

Knox glared at his plate, muttering inaudibly.

"Charlie was always one for jokes, Knox is used to it" Chet continued, ignoring Chris's pleading stare. "That reminds me Kathleen, how are you dealing with him, that boy sure has a reputation."
Kat lowered her spoon, "Charlie is one of my best friends."

"Just a friend?" he smirked.

"Just a friend" she said firmly.

"Are you sure that you're thinking of the right person?" Nancy asked, "Fraser is the one to avoid, Charlie has been nothing but kind and respectable towards Kitty Kat."

"Fraser? Wasn't he one of your friends?" Chris turned to her boyfriend.

"Oh yeah, he's a laugh "he shrugged "great at football too."

Kathleen exchanged a disbelieving look with Knox across the table.

"It's a small world" mused Mrs Noel, beginning to clear the plates, "Chet, dear. There's more pie in the kitchen, help yourself."

"Let me help" Kathleen rose from the table, quickly followed by Nancy, Chris and Knox.

"Thank you, just bring them through to the kitchen" she led them through a wooden door to the right of the dining table. "Leave them on the side and head into the sitting room. You still have a few minutes before your teacher arrives."

The teens thanked her but as they turned to leave the kitchen Chris called Knox's name.

"What's wrong?"

"I want to apologise for Chet's behaviour. He's slightly drunk and I know it's no excuse but he's not usually like that. I promise."

"Don't worry about it" he smiled softly, "it's not your fault. I did go to school with him, I know he doesn't think before he speaks."

"That's true" she laughed, "and Kat? I'm sorry."

"Like Knox said, you have nothing to apologise for."

"Thank you" she smiled hovering in the doorway where she could see her boyfriend talking animatedly with her parents, "And Nance, you were right. Your friends are pretty cool."

Chapter End Notes

Mentioning Todd looking miserable on the roof is my way of referencing the flying desk set scene (I posted something about that scene ages ago, it was written way before I had even thought of this story so it's completely unrelated to the plot but still, feel free to read it).

I also used the deleted scene from the Danbury dinner (which you can watch on YouTube) for the details about Ginny and for the relationship between Chet and Chris.

I hope you like it, this was a tough chapter to write and difficult to end. Anyway, thank you for all the support and feedback. It truly makes my day when the notification
email arrives. And I promise the next chapter will be up sooner!
Chapter 18 - We need to talk

Chapter Notes

Anasatsia98 - Thank you! One of my pet hates is insta love so I always make a conscious effort to avoid it and add more depth into the relationships in anything that I write. I just want them to kiss and live happily ever after already! Unfortunately fate isn't that kind...but I can promise that a kiss will happen. The scene has been written into my story plan for a while now ;) I hope you enjoy the chapter.

Chelocean22 - Thank you :D Charlie is so entertaining to write!

opymalna - I glad you like it!

Chapter eighteen - We need to talk

The drive back to school was rather subdued, the two teens sat silently in the backseat and Dr Hager was by no means eager to engage them in small talk. It was approaching half past nine when the black station wagon pulled up by Welton's large front doors. The eerie post-curfew quiet lay over the grounds like a thick blanket, interrupted only by the crunch of their footsteps on the gravel until Dr Hager stopped them in the entrance hall, "Mr Nolan will see you briefly in his office. Afterwards you are to go straight to bed. Understood?"

"Yes, sir" they nodded.

"Very well" Dr Hager dismissed them curtly and left them by the dim lamp lit staircase as he disappeared in the direction of the teacher's lounge.

"Why does your grandfather want to see me?" Knox climbed the stairs.

Kathleen followed, "most likely because he wants to play matchmaker" she admitted reluctantly, sneaking a glance in his direction.

"He what?"

"By inviting you...I gave him the wrong impression. Although, before that he was convinced that I was interested in Todd."

"Isn't Todd ga-" he started but Kat shushed him before he could finish.

"Remember the heart attack Hager had when he saw Neil reading Capote?"

"But Neil and Todd are so...obvious about their feelings."

"I know" she smiled, "but all we can do is wait."

"Neil's been so helpful with Chris and I want to help him back" Knox whined.

"And you will" Kat laughed, straightening her gloves.
They came to a halt outside of the headmaster's door. Knox pushed Kathleen's arms down when she tried to fix her hair and knocked before she could protest.

"You look fine" he mouthed, ignoring her glare as he opened the door.

"Ah" Mr Nolan nodded at the two students as they entered his office, "you both look very smart. Now, take a seat, I will not keep you long."

"Thank you, sir" Knox said, following the headmaster's command, followed by a less enthusiastic Kathleen.

"I see that you enjoyed your evening" he observed, satisfied by the murmurs of agreement, "How was the food?"

"Very good, sir"

"Mrs Noel is an excellent cook."

"I must invite them to our annual Christmas party. How many guests did they have?"

"Just us, sir" Knox replied.

"An intimate evening. The perfect opportunity-"

"We met Nancy's cousin Christine, the Noel's daughter" interjected Kathleen urgently, "very nice, Knox is rather charmed by her" she continued, wincing internally while she dropped her friend into the firing line.

"Is that so?" Mr Nolan asked shifting his attention to Knox whose face was heating up.

"Oh-err-yes, Sir. I mean, she is very nice."

"I see. Well, it is getting late and the two of you have lessons tomorrow morning, goodnight."

"Goodnight" they echoed back, relieved to be dismissed so quickly.

Once they were back in the corridor with the office door firmly closed behind them, Kat turned to Knox "I'm so sorry, I couldn't think of any other way to stop him before he got fixated."

He let out a long breath, "it's fine. Just give a guy some warning next time."

"Sorry" she apologised again, "but you do still like her, right?"

"Like her?" Knox repeated, "after tonight I'm almost certain that I'm in love with her."

"How do you know?"

"I don't know how to explain it" he shrugged as they neared Kathleen's dorm, "I just can't let go of her, everything reminds me of her and my heart stops every time she looks at me" he grinned, "and talking to her is so easy." He laughed, "it's sappy. I know, but Chris owns my heart and I don't ever want to stop the feeling."

"That is sweetest thing I have ever heard" Kat smiled softly, "tell her that. When the time is right, tell her that and I promise you that she will never forget it."

"I hope she doesn't forget me" he sighed.
"She recognised you the moment she saw you, Knox! After tonight, there is no way that she ever could."

"You really think so?"

"I'm sure of it. And tomorrow when I ring Nancy, I'll ask her for Chris' opinion of you" Kathleen reassured him, "there will no doubt after that."

"Thank you" he beamed, pulling her into a quick hug "you are truly my fairy godmother."

"As your fairy godmother, I will do whatever I can to make your wish come true" she laughed, "especially after meeting Chet. I take back what I said about him possibly being a decent guy."

Knox shook his head, "I don't understand what she sees in him."

They walked in amiable silence until they came to a halt outside Kat's door, she was just about to go in when she turned back, "hey, Knox?" she asked quietly, "why did Chet bring up Meeks?"

The boy leaned against the wall, his jaw clenched, "they didn't get along" he said slowly, "more precisely Chet and his buddies didn't get along with Meeks, who as you can imagine just wanted to be left alone with his friends and his schoolwork. Which they liked to make fun of him for."

"Oh" she bit her lip, "but they've stopped now?"

He nodded, "anything said now is nothing different to how they treat the rest of us, don't worry about it."

"Okay, now go and dream about Chris" she smiled.

"Good night, Kat" he responded rolling his eyes before heading back to his own dorm room. Where he did dream of Chris, even if he wouldn't admit it.

xxxx

As promised, Keating's lesson the next morning was another soccer game. The students shivered in their sports kits which failed to protect them from the biting autumn wind. To Kathleen's relief they were split into teams of six for the game. Keating explained that two teams would compete on the pitch, and the winners would be the first to score five goals. However, after the ball has been passed the new player in possession of it, can only continue if they give a satisfactory answer to his question, if not the ball will go the opposite team.

"Less chance of embarrassment today" she whispered to Todd who grinned back.

Keating gave each of them a number between 1 and 4 and the class split into teams. Kat watched in amusement as he deliberately missed Todd out of the first sequence in order to put him in team two with Neil. Soon it was her turn and she found herself in team four alongside Meeks, Fraser, Sam, Russel and Francis.

"Alright, team one and team two on the pitch first. Move it lads!" hollered Keating, blowing his whistle to hurry them along.

The remaining two teams sat under the trees to watch the chaos unfold. Sure enough, the game was a disaster with boys who were so eager to win that they forget to stop and were forced to forfeit the ball to the opposing team. Abuse was thrown and Cameron was getting stressed. Cheating meant that Pitts was elbowed in the stomach and three boys were sent off the pitch, including Charlie for
almost causing a fight with a boy who tripped Todd up.

"Hey, have you thought about what I said?" Fraser moved to sit on her left, much to the surprise of Meeks who was on her right and Knox who was in team three and sat on the other side of Meeks.

"I have" she replied shortly, keeping her eyes on the game.

"And? Are you going to say anything?"

"Only if necessary."

"What kind of bullshit is that?" he snapped.

"Hey, don't talk to her like that" retorted Knox.

Fraser rolled his eyes and ignored him, focusing his attention back on Kathleen, "are you ratting me out to my Father and Nolan or not? I need to prepare if you are."

"Kat? What is he talking about?" asked Meeks cautiously, glaring at the unwelcome classmate.

"Nolan is having dinner with Fraser's father, a board member" she explained, "and both of us have to go."

"When you were talking about matchmaking last night, it wasn't just Todd and I that Nolan's been thinking about" interjected Knox, "is it?"

"You're a smart one" muttered Fraser.

"I'm not going to sit there and sing your praises but I won't be blunt unless I feel the need to" Kat said, ignoring the snide remark "so, as long as you are pleasant through the visit. You have nothing to worry about."

"I guess that's fair" he shrugged.

"More than fair, you're lucky she's a reasonable person" Knox huffed. Meeks nodded in agreement as the whistle blew to signal the end of the game.

"I think it would be best if you left before the others get here" he advised Fraser, looking pointedly the players leaving the pitch. Without another word, Fraser got up and moved to sit with his own friends.

"Team one are the winners!" called Keating over the loud cheering, "team two swap with team three."

Knox was soon replaced by Neil and Todd who collapsed on the ground, red-faced and out of breath.

"why was Fraser here?" asked Todd once he got his breath back, "is he talking about dinner again?"

"You knew?" Meeks pushed his glasses up his nose, "judging by the look Charlie is giving him. He clearly didn't." The three teens looked in direction that Meeks was pointing at and saw Knox speaking to Charlie and Pitts in the middle of the pitch, all three of them were frowning.

"Oh, God" Kathleen groaned.

"Sorry" mumbled Todd, "we didn't tell him about the dress either."
"He's going to feel really left out" muttered Neil, "this is not good."

"I only told Knox about the match-making last night" Kat bit her lip, "Cameron, Meeks and Pitts weren't told anything!"

"But we're not your best friends" Meeks pointed out, "we should be the last to know."

"Please don't argue again" Todd said quietly, "it's awful when you fight."

"I really don't want to, but I've messed up."

Neil was about the say something but was he cut off by Keating's whistle.

"Team three wins, now team one sit and team four get out here!" he shouted.

Neil, Todd, Meeks and Kat went over to the pitch. The game lasted for fifteen minutes and Neil managed to score a goal. Even Kathleen was able to pass the ball twice, much to her delight. She had almost forgotten the dark cloud which hung over her head but as the class trudged back towards the school covered from head to toe in mud, it became clear that her guardian angel was off duty today. First, she almost slipped over, the second indication was when she was stuck walking with Cameron, who knew nothing of her dilemma and proceeded to talk her ear off about how she could improve in trig. She thought the final straw was the moment that it began to rain.

But truly, it was the moment that Charlie walked straight past her, acknowledging her only long enough to utter the words that nobody wants to hear, "we need to talk."
Kathleen all but ran down to the teacher's corridor, her hair was unpinned, hanging loose and still slightly damp from the shower, and she was sure that her uniform was untidy since she had thrown it on, only using the mirror to rush through her everyday make-up routine. She had skipped using any blush and eyeliner at all, because she had ten minutes until break began and she had an urgent telephone call to make. She would be in major trouble if she was caught in the teacher's wing, but if she wanted the privacy that she couldn't on the student telephones, it was a risk that she was willing to take.

Two minutes later, she skidded to a halt by the teacher's telephone line and dialled the Noel household's number. Please pick-up, please pick-up, please pick-up she prayed, repeating the mantra until she heard a familiar voice at the end of the line.

"Hello?"

"Nancy!"

"Kitty Kat? Are you okay?"

"Fine" she breathed, "how is your tutoring?"

"My tutor doesn't arrive until two."

"Oh, that's good. How are things with Chris? I promised Knox that I would ask for her opinion of him."

"I spoke to her about him after you left, actually. She was making excuses for Chet's behaviour and I joked that she should date Knox instead. She shook her head and gave me the weirdest look, I don't think she had thought about dating anyone else. So, I guess that's progress" her voice crackled down the phoneline, "you never call in school hours, spit it out, Murray."

"I fucked up."

"Really?" Kathleen could hear Nancy's nail tapping impatiently on the receiver as she spoke.

"Yeah" she breathed, "remember that dinner with Fraser and his Father that I told you about?"

"I do."

"And remember the argument I had with Charlie a while ago, the one about telling each other things, not letting the issue get out of hand or finding out from someone else first."

"You haven't told him yet and someone else beat you to it" she stated bluntly, trying to keep her tone devoid of judgement, "tell me it wasn't Fraser who told him. Please."

"It wasn't. Fraser talked to me about it in front of Knox and Meeks, afterwards Knox went straight to Charlie and Pitts" she explained, "Neil and Todd already knew, as I told you before. Cameron is still clueless but fiddlesticks! He blanked me, told me that we 'need to talk' and stormed off. I should have told him earlier but I couldn't and now I've done the same thing that I was angry with
him for doing, but this time it's worse because he's the last to know and he means just as much to me as Todd and you do...I..." she trailed off, "I don't know how to make this better" she finished weakly.

Nancy whistled down the line, "that is one a hell of mess."

"Not helpful" she cringed as her mind replayed Neil's reaction and Charlie's refusal to look at her.

"Well, start with calming down" she advised, "then sort your head out. Don't do anything else until you're less gushy."

Kat hummed in agreement.

"And then, I want you to read some Pride and Prejudice, put on some lipstick and channel Elizabeth Bennett while you make things right. Lord knows, Charlie will be easier to deal with than Darcy."

"This is not a misunderstanding of love, Nance."

"Oh, honey" Nancy laughed, "never mind me, just pick up that book and calm down. Good luck."

Click.

Kat put the receiver back on the hook and walked quickly back to her dorm. Following her best friend's advice, she straightened her uniform and finished applying her make-up. Looking at the clock on her nightstand, she saw that she still had a few minutes before Latin so she went to her bookshelf and cracked open the Jane Austen novel.

"However, he wrote some verses on her, and very pretty they were."

"And so, ended his affection," said Elizabeth impatiently. "There has been many a one, I fancy, overcome in the same way. I wonder who first discovered the efficacy of poetry in driving away love!"

"I have been used to consider poetry as the food of love," said Darcy.

"Of a fine, stout, healthy love it may. Everything nourishes what is strong already. But if it be only a slight, thin sort of inclination, I am convinced that one good sonnet will starve it entirely away."

After what felt like mere seconds, Kathleen was interrupted by the bell. She picked up her Latin books and hurried down the staircase, pushing her way through the throng. She arrived a minute late and saw the class already seated and silent when she opened the door.

"Mea culpa, Dominus McAllister" she apologised in Latin, feeling a blush rising on her cheeks when the students turned to stare at her.

"Take your seat, Miss Murray" smiled Mr McAllister "I'll let you off this time for that superb pronunciation. Don't let it happen again."

She slid silently into her seat and held in a groan when she realised that she had not only brought her Latin books down, but also Pride and Prejudice which she must have forgotten to put back in her haste.

The next hour crawled by in a slow rhythm of Latin verbs and Kathleen's enthusiasm for the language was as dead as the romans themselves, by the time she emerged out of the dusty
classroom and into the hall which was bathed in the afternoon sun, glowing amber as it shone through the high windows. She had only taken a few steps towards the dining hall when she was pulled out of her thoughts by a voice.

"Pride and Prejudice? I didn't know that was on the curriculum" teased Charlie, who was leaning lazily against the wall, "don't let anyone see you with that. You'll be ridiculed for eternity."

Pushing down her surprise she responded, "I doubt any of you boys would let them, as a group you're referred to as my 'guard dogs' or haven't you heard? You have a reputation to live up to."

"Really?" he chuckled, "who came up with that?"

"Nobody important" she shrugged, determined to keep up their familiar rapport.

"Oh, well" he pushed off from the wall and moved towards her, "seeing you with a book is nothing unusual. But seeing your hair like that, however, is. I've never seen it like this before" he reached out and playfully tugged on several strands of her hair, raising an eyebrow at the slight dampness.

"I didn't dry it properly, I got distracted" she explained. "So, that talk? I need to switch books so you could come with me before lunch? Or we can do this later."

"Now is probably best" he let her hair fall through his fingers and shoved his hands into his pockets. The pair walked up to Kathleen's dorm in a strange silence, half comfortable and half awkward, like the feeling you get when visiting family who you haven't seen for a couple of years. Once they got to her room, she put the novel back and then swapped her Latin work for her math books. It was only upon seeing Charlie standing awkwardly in the middle of the room that she realised that this was only the second time he had been in her dorm.

"So" she began, gesturing towards the chair, tucked beneath her desk "where do you want to start?"

Charlie sat in the wooden chair, facing Kathleen who was sitting opposite him, cross legged on her bed. "I don't know, nobody other than Knox will tell me anything. Todd said to start with why Nolan let you come here. Which makes zero sense to me, obviously..."he trailed off when he caught sight of her expression, "but the look on your face tells me it's important."

"Can you promise not to say anything until I'm finished talking" she asked, biting her lip "after that you can ask whatever you want."

"I promise" he frowned.

"For a couple of weeks, my Sunday evenings with Nolan have been..."she tried to search for the right word "difficult. He basically told me that I'm here to find a suitable husband, so that I don't embarrass him like my mother did" she breathed, looking away from Charlie's shocked countenance. "he also interrogated me about my relationship with Todd and for the last week or so he has been fixated, on what he called my 'endeavours' with Knox. Fraser told me that Nolan has invited his Father - who is on the school board - to dinner, and that we are being forced to go. He's nervous about me saying something bad about him to his Father. And the whole dress thing was me getting in myself into a tizzy about it, I had this vision of myself having to dress up like that and act through countless dinners, parties and social engagements while he spreads the word that I'm on the marriage market like some sort of prize cow...Neil and Todd snapped me out of it, and Nancy thinks he will give up soon but I don't know" she shrugged, picking at her already chipped nail polish. "Any questions?"

"That-that is a lot more than I was expecting" he said finally, "that sucks."
"Tell me about it" she muttered faintly, meeting his eyes.

"Could you maybe keep me in the loop, you know? Talk to me when things happen, or are happening."

"I wanted to, I was just struggling to process it" she admitted, "now that I'm over the initial shock I have a clearer perspective again.

"I think I might need some time to process."

"Take as long as you need" she smiled weakly, "God knows how long it's taken me."

"Just talk to me next time, please."

"I promise to talk to you first" she said, standing up and picking up her books, "and I'm sorry for doing exactly what I got angry with you for doing."

"It's okay. We both need to practice this talking thing, I guess" he laughed, opening the door "we should go to lunch. And by the way, nice bookcase. I didn't know you were so into Austen. I thought you were more of a Dickens girl."

"I can be both" she side-stepped him to prevent him from taking her books, "I'm capable of carrying my own books, Charlie."

"It doesn't mean that you should."

"Think of it as my act of repentance" she rolled her eyes.

"Repentance for what?" he asked, "you're already forgiven."

She muttered something under her breath that he didn't catch and turned to close the door. He watched her chestnut tresses swing at the motion, fascinated with the messy curtain of hair that was usually tied or pinned up out of her face. He shoved his hands deeper into his pockets and resolved to speak to Neil because she was right, it was a lot to process; for more reasons than she knew.

Chapter End Notes

Today I'm updating some of the early chapters with spelling corrections so just ignore any notifications for them, there will be no changes other than them being nicer to read :) I hope you enjoyed the chapter, let me know any theories, thoughts or questions you have!
Chapter 20 - The God of the cave

Chapter Notes

I have my AS exams in about week and I'm lowkey freaking out.

Anyway, here is the next instalment which I thoroughly enjoyed writing, because I felt less stressed by focusing my energy on something that I love. I hope you love it just as much!

optymalna - I hope everything works out well for you! I'm sure things will fall into place, in the meantime you can amuse yourself by watching Charlie and Kathleen figure things out in their own rather...interesting...way.

Chelocean22 - Thank you :) I'm so glad that you like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter twenty - The God of the cave

It was Tuesday afternoon and the sun was beginning to set. Its last rays reclined lazily from the mouth of the cave, casting the poets into a dim, hazy light. Tendrils of smoke curled upwards from the pipes which were currently being smoked by the cave's occupants. An expensive set that Knox had been given this morning to pass onto his Father, a gift from the Danbury's. Which explained his melancholy mood.

"Attaboy, Pittsie, inhale deeply" called Charlie as Pitts choked, unaccustomed the smoke.

"Not all of us share your bad habits" Kat reminded the resident smoker. Refusing the pipe, he held out in her direction.

"My Dad collects a lot of pipes" mused Meeks leaning forward to inspect the box.

"Really?" Charlie flicked his lighter absentmindedly, "mine has got thirty."

"Your parents collect pipes? Oh, that's really interesting" snarked Pitts, blowing smoke at Meeks and laughing as it fogged up his glasses for the third time.

Kathleen felt a smile tug at her lips as Meeks removed his glasses to wipe them, only for Pitts to do it again. Causing the comedic sequence to repeat. Shaking her head in amusement at their antics, she caught Cameron's disapproving eye. The ginger was still sulking; despite his contentment to smoke a pipe like a grown-up. She sympathised with him to some extent. Yes, sneaking out to the cave in daylight was risky but they had taken a democratic vote and he always had the choice not to come. He didn't always have to look like he had - in her Father's words- 'sucked a lemon.'

"Come on, Knox. Join in" Charlie's voice interrupted her thoughts and she watched him shove a newly lit pipe in the boy's face.

"Yeah, Knox, we're from the government. We're here to help, man." Teased Meeks, swatting Pitts away before his glasses got fogged up yet again.
Charlie exhaled and turned to face his friend "what's wrong?"

"It's Chris" Pitts said, picking up the magazine he had abandoned in the cave at the last meeting and opening it up. "Here's a picture of Chris for you" he laughed, holding up an illustration of a blonde pin-up model, prompting some wolf-whistles and mocking cheers of Chris's name.

"That's not funny" Knox said, throwing a twig at Pitts.

"Smoke that" suggested Meeks over the cacophony. "Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

"Knock it off" commanded Charlie, glancing briefly at Knox, "smoke your pipes."

Silence reigned over the group once more, interrupted a few seconds later by footfalls outside the mouth of the cave. Dirt rolled in as a lanky teenage boy made an appearance.

"Neil!" Todd smiled through the smoke.

"Friend, scholar, Welton man" Neil greeted, patting his friend on the shoulder with one hand and carrying what Kathleen thought had to be the world's ugliest lamp in the other.

"Uh, what is that?" asked Meeks, wrinkling his nose.

"It's a lamp, Meeks. Duh" answered Pitts.

"No" Neil shook his head and removed the shade to reveal a statue of a man as the lamp base, "this is the God of the cave."

"Whatever it is, it's ugly" Kat voiced.

Meeks met Kathleen's eyes, assenting. "The God of the cave" he repeated, unimpressed, before jumping at the sudden blast of the saxophone.

Looking up in surprise, Kathleen and the boys watched Charlie, cringing as he killed their ears with the harsh, wild and out of tune notes of the instrument. Satisfied that he had their undivided attention he ceased the torture, "what do you say we start this meeting?"

"Yeah, I just need a light" said Cameron.

"and earplugs" added Kat under her breath, eliciting a stifled laugh from Todd who was sat close enough to hear.

Charlie ignored them and moved into the centre of the cave. "Ladies and Gentlemen" he announced, "Poetrusic by Charles Dalton." And proceeded to resume the infernal racket.

"No!" Cried Neil, clamping his hands over his ears, at the same time Kat buried her face into Todd's shoulder to muffle the obtrusive sound.

"Laughing, crying, tumbling, mumbling. Gotta do more. Gotta be more." He chanted between the erratic nonsense notes, "Chaos screaming, chaos dreaming. Gotta do more! Gotta be more!"

Suddenly the painful notes faded into a melancholic tune which danced through the air. Twirling up and out of the darkness, free from the confines of the brass instrument and the dark depths of the underground. The poets emerged from their braced positions to listen and found themselves swaying, spellbound by the melody.

"Wow" murmured Meeks.
"That was nice, that was great" agreed Pitts, "where did you learn to play like that?"

"My parents made me take the clarinet for years. "He put the saxophone down and collapsed onto a rocky ledge on the far side of the cave.

"I love the clarinet!" Cameron piped up cheerily, a contrast to his usual contained self.

Charlie shot him a disgusted look. "I hated it." Which prompted a round of laughter. "The saxophone..."he mused, "the saxophone is more sonorous."

"Ooh, vocabulary" Meeks grinned.

"Well done, Meeks" joked Neil "your tutoring has finally started to pay off."

Knox dropped his pipe dazedly. "That's it! I can't take it anymore" he yelled, bolting up to stand where Charlie had been moments ago. "If don't have Chris, I'm going to kill myself" he continued softly.

Kathleen whipped around, her mouth open in shock. Neil grasped her arm as she tried to stand up, his face drained of colour and his other hand clutching at the hem of Todd's faded blue jumper. The God of the cave lay cracked and abandoned on the ground.

"Knoxious" warned Charlie, "you've got to calm down."

"No, Charlie" he shook his head. "That's just my problem. I've been calm all my life, I have to do something about that."

"Where are you going?" Asked Neil, dropping Kathleen's arm.

"What are you going to do?" Charlie sat up.

"I'm going to call her" he chuckled. Jumping over a log and running out of the darkness into the open air of the woodland.

The others shot up, grabbing their coats before scrambling out after him. Everything else with the exception of Charlie's saxophone was abandoned in their haste to follow him into a task that most were betting he would chicken out of.

xxxx

"Hey, Cameron?" asked Kathleen from her perch on the radiator where she was watching Knox muster up enough courage to take the five remaining steps to the student telephone, "If you love the clarinet so much...Why not ask Charlie to teach you?"

Cameron folded his arms. "In which dimension would he ever agree to that? He is not the person you think he is, Kathleen. He would laugh in my face."

"Not if you ask in exchange for homework help" she tried "something like this might go a long way in improving things between you two."

The pair watched Knox grasp the telephone and then drop the receiver as if it a had burned him, oblivious to the five-dollar bill being exchanged between Meeks and Pitts.

"Maybe."

"Just think about it" she shrugged before leaving the warmth of the radiator to re-join the eager
audience around the telephone. Knox held a coin in his right hand which hovered above the slot.

"She is going to hate me. The Danburrys will hate me. My parents will kill me" his eyes flickered between his friends and the phone. "All right" he breathed. "Goddamn it! You're right" he grinned, "carpe diem even if it kills me," and with those words he dropped the coin into the slot and dialled. Thirty agonising seconds later the call was picked up. With bated breath, his peers squashed together around the receiver, desperate to hear the exchange.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Chris?" Knox asked, hardly daring to breathe.

"Yes."

"Hi. This is Knox Overstreet."

"Oh, yes. Knox. I'm glad you called."

'She's glad I called!' He mouthed with excitement.

"Listen. Chet's parents are going out of town this weekend, so he's having a party. Would you and Kathleen like to come?"

"Would we like to go to a party?" he addressed Kat quietly. She nodded.

"Say yes! Yes" badgered Charlie.

"It's on Friday...about seven."

"Sure" he replied "we'll be there, Chris"

"Okay. Um, unless you need to talk to Nancy..."

"Oh no. That's okay."

"I'll see you two on Friday, bye."

"Thank you. I'll see you, bye."

He put the receiver down and slumped against the wall, "YAWP! Can you believe it? She was going to call me. She invited me to a party with her" he said dreamily.

"At Chet Danbury's house" cut in Charlie.

"Yeah."

"Well?"

"So?"

"So, you don't really think she means you're going with her?" he checked, "Seriously."

"Well of course not, Charlie" Knox scoffed, "But that's not the point. That's not the point at all."

Meeks pushed his glasses up his nose "uh, what is the point?"

"The point, Meeks. That point is, uh-"
"Yeah, the point is?" Charlie inquired again.

"That she was thinking about me" he settled, "I've only met her twice, once properly, and already she's thinking about me. Damn it, it's going to happen guys. I can feel it! She's going to be mine" he sighed, turning to address the group, "CARPE!"

"DIEM!"

"CARPE!"

"DIEM!"

He flipped his scarf over his shoulder dramatically and climbed the stairs as the clock chimed five o'clock.

Kathleen watched him go and slipped through the chanting crowd, reaching for the telephone.

"Boy, he has guts" commented Neil, leaning on Todd's shoulder.

"He certainly does" Kathleen replied as she dialled.

"Do you think that you could be like that?" he asked, "or is he a fool in love?"

"I couldn't" Todd looked Neil in the eye.

Kat hummed, "possibly. I think it would depend on my certainty."

"I think I could. I would be a happy fool indeed" Neil gazed away from their little group and watched the others jumping and hollering at the foot of the staircase.

"Then, why don't you?" She said drily.

Before Neil could respond the telephone connected once again.

"Noel household."

"Hey, Nancy. I heard there's a party."

"Sure is, sugar. Now do me a favour and tell Nolan you've been invited over tomorrow. We have things to discuss."

"Why don't you get your Aunt and Uncle to ring. It will be more effective."

"That's what they're just about to do. And bring dresses with you, there are four of us to co-ordinate."

"Four?"

"Chet's sister Ginny is a friend of Chris' and the three of us are having a sleepover. Now go and make sure you can get your lovely butt down over here."

"Aye-aye Captain" she put the phone down and turned to Neil and Todd, "it looks like I have a job to do."

"Good luck" Todd called after her as Neil waved her off towards Nolan's office.

She had some persuading to do.
Guess who has already written the first 675 words of the next chapter…

I got into the flow and I couldn't let my idea slip away, so yeah.

On a side note, the movie script is online (I use it along with the movie when I write) and it says that Pitts holds up a centrefold. In the movie, he does hold up something but there is no clear image. Apparently, a centrefold is a double page picture, usually of a 'naked or scantily clad model' according to google... so I didn't make that part up completely. Pitts is just as bad as Charlie apparently.
Chapter 21 - Four gray walls

Chapter Notes

Four gray walls, and four gray towers

Overlook a space of flowers

~ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, The Lady of Shallot

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter twenty one - Four gray walls

"A sleepover" Nolan asked, "on a school night."

"I know it is a big request and I apologise" Kathleen twirled a lock of hair around her finger, keeping her eyes trained on the movement "but Nancy and Chris are having a girls' sleepover with Ginny, whose parents are hosting the party that Knox and I are invited to on Friday. They want to plan our outfits and introduce me" she explained. Taking a deep breath, she added "I guess it will be one of the last opportunities she has, since Christine is practically engaged her boyfriend Chet."

"Engaged?" Gale Nolan repeated. Pausings his review of the school's accounts to listen to his granddaughter.

"Yes, she wanted us to help her look through the bridal magazines that her Mother bought her" Kathleen lied, "they're expecting a proposal in the summer."

"How old is Christine?"

"My age, like Nancy. Ginny is only a year younger."

"Are many of your friends considering marriage within the next year?" He straightened his papers and moved them aside, leaning forwards to study the young lady seated demurely before him, almost an exact copy of her Mother.

"Oh" she blinked innocently, "a fair few, when I think about."

"Well" he said sternly, "just this once, I will allow you to go on school night. I fear that I have forgotten how necessary feminine company is for a young woman."

He watched her lips part in surprise, "Oh! Thank you, Grandfather" she beamed. He maintained his serious expression, spoiling the girl this way would not do any good, but he hadn't had his daughter or granddaughter look at him like that for years.

He rose from his desk and moved to hold open the dark oak door, "now that the matter is settled, I insist upon escorting you to dinner. We can't have you getting a detention now, can we?" Kathleen let a genuine smile escape at his words and took his arm as if she was an eleven-year-old again, and let him walk her to the dining hall. She paused in the middle of the hall to thank him again, before their paths diverged and made a beeline for her usual table and slipped into her seat, fifteen minutes late.
"We got you some food" greeted Neil, pushing a bowl of pasta salad towards her.

"And juice" Todd said pointing to Charlie who handed her a glass of cranberry juice.

"Thanks guys" she smiled, tucking into the meal.

"So?" asked Knox, "Neil told us what Nancy said. Can you go?"

She nodded, sipping her juice.

"How the hell did you do it?" exploded Neil.

"Charm" she responded, "and little white lies go a long way."

"You, being manipulative?" Charlie shook his head, "I can't see it."

"No, you seem too nice. Charm I can see, but not manipulation" agreed Meeks.

Kat threw a piece of pasta at them, "I'm not always nice!"

Pitts snorted into his juice, receiving an amused glare from Kathleen in response.

"I told him that Chris is to be engaged by the summer. That she wanted us to look at the bridal magazines her Mother bought her."

"What? Chris is getting engaged?" Knox dropped his fork, sending it to the floor with a clang.

"No, that was lie" she reassured him, "but as far as Nolan is concerned, the majority of my friends are."

"And that convinced him?" Laughed Neil.

"Oh, yes" grinned Kat, "he apologised for my lack of feminine company, which he feels is necessary for a young woman."

"You snake!" Charlie nudged her with his foot under the table, looking impressed.

"You all seem to have forgotten about her lying to Hager" interrupted Cameron sourly, "it's hardly new information that she's good liar."

"Shut-up, Cameron" echoed two or three boys.

"I don't mind taking compliments, Cameron" laughed Kat, "don't stop yet." Causing his cheeks to flush a similar tone to his hair.

"So, we can go to the party?" checked Knox, ignoring the bitter mutterings of Richard Cameron.

"I assume so" she tilted her chin up to glance at the teachers' table and caught sight of her grandfather watching her interaction with the rest of the table's occupants with interest, however his gaze lacked the usual cool scrutiny, "if I had known that it would be so easy to placate him I might have done it a long time ago," she mused.

"Aren't you worried that it will encourage him?" voiced Pitts.

"Look at him now" she replied. "No! Not all at once" she hissed when all seven boys craned their necks to look over.
"Sorry."

"Oops."

"What I meant" she amended, "is that me talking to any of you or hanging out with you is enough to encourage him. I guess I'm getting tired of being careful, if it all goes to hell...well...it was only a matter of time."

"Wow" Meeks peered at her over the top of his glasses, "that is a long overdue revelation."

Tuesday slipped into Wednesday and the group found themselves outside for English once more. However, today they were in the courtyard and fully dressed in standard Welton uniforms. Which admittedly did considerably more to shield the students from the chill which lingered in the morning air as they stood in line watching the three boys circle the courtyard, waiting for Mr Keating to reveal the wisdom behind such a dull act. 

"No grades at stake, gentlemen. Just take a stroll" he called, gesturing at Cameron to get him to stop shooting nervous looks in his direction.

"How do you think this relates to Shelly or Keats?" questioned Neil whose chestnut eyes were focused on the blur of movement around the stone enclosure. Todd shrugged before turning to the girl on his left.

"I haven't the faintest idea" Kathleen admitted, "Charlie?"

"Possibly something to do with a journey or maybe the rhythm?"

"I like the rhythm theory" Neil began to speak but was interrupted by Keating's shout,

"THERE IT IS!" He began to clap to the rhythm and one by one the idle students joined in. Neil raised an eyebrow at Charlie, impressed with his intuition as chorus began:

"I don't know, but I've been told-

"I don't know, but I've been told-

"Doing poetry is old."

"Doing poetry is old."

"Left, left, left-right, left. Left, left, left-right left. Left, holt!"

The boys came to a stop and the class ceased their tune. "Thank you, gentleman" Keating nodded towards the walkers before turning to address the class, "If you noticed, everyone started off with their own stride, their own pace. "Keating proceeded to stroll in a similar fashion to the boys, oblivious to the curtain twitching in the office above the courtyard, where a stern looking man examined the unusual classroom activities from above.

"Mr Pitts, taking his time. He knew he'll get there one day." He melted into a more hurried gait  "Mr Cameron, you could see him thinking 'is this right? It might be right, it might be right. I know that. Maybe not, I don't know" he chuckled sinking down and pushing his groin out in a more exaggerated imitation of Knox. Kathleen covered her eyes but let a small bubble of laughter slip out. "Mr Overstreet, driven by a deeper force. All right, now I didn't bring them up here to ridicule
them." Keating continued, sliding back into his normal stride, "I brought them up here to illustrate the point of conformity: the difficulty in maintaining your own beliefs in the face of others."

Neil reached over to nudge Charlie, "rhythm was a good guess but I think I prefer this" he whispered. Smiling as Charlie smirked back but kept his attention focused on the lesson. In his seven years at Welton, his oldest friend had never paid so much attention in class he thought.

"Now, those of you- I see the look in your eyes like, 'I would have walked differently.' Well, ask yourselves why you were clapping" Keating said. "We all have all have a great need for acceptance. But you must trust that your beliefs are unique, your own, even though others may think them odd or unpopular. Even though the herd may go 'that's baaad' " he barred mockingly like a sheep. "Robert Frost said, 'two roads diverged and I took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference' " he quoted, examining the young people stood in front of him. "Now, I want you to find your own walk right now. Your own way of striding, pacing" he gestured for the crowd of students to disperse, "Any direction, anything you want. Whether it's proud, whether it's silly. Ladies and gentlemen the courtyard in yours!"

Neil shrugged and pulled Todd along with him to an empty space near the corner, walking slightly ahead and gradually leading him towards the centre while he talked. Kathleen walked along the edge, gazing up at the sky and around high the stone walls and glinting glass that formed the mansion with fascination. Knox strode casually around, looking thoughtfully at the flowerbed, Meeks and Pitts spluttered with laughter as they did twin chicken walks, Cameron walked around serenely with his hands in his pockets and Charlie did not move. He simply folded his arms and leaned back against one of the stone pillars and watched his classmates with amusement.

"You don't have to perform, make it for yourself" Keating called, witnessing Fraser and Hopkins in competition over the most ridiculous walk. The English teacher turned away and caught sight of the boy in the corner, "Mr Dalton? Will you be joining us?"

"No, sir" he replied "exercising the right not to walk."

"Thank you, Mr Dalton" Keating nodded sincerely over the chuckles "you've just illustrated the point. Swim against the stream."

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After classes had finished the poets grabbed their books and headed outside to their usual spot under the tree by the lake. They spread their coats on the ground to avoid the damp which clung the grass and lay on the ground amongst the last of the autumn leaves, eager to catch the last rays of sunshine before heading into dinner, or in Kathleen's case over to the Noel's house.

"Willows whiten, aspens shiver.

The sunbeam showers break and quiver

In the stream that runneth ever

By the island in the river

Flowing down to Camelot.

Four gray walls, and four gray towers

Overlook a space of flowers,
"And the silent isle imbowers

The Lady of Shalott."

"I like this one" sighed Kat leaning over Neil's shoulder to press down the page which fluttered in the breeze, obscuring the next verse.

"As soon as you mentioned Poe, I thought of this." Neil turned the page, "so am I right?"

"Yes" she rolled her eyes, "Tennyson is worth reading for pleasure. Are you satisfied now?"

"Very" he smirked, placing a stone upon the open book to keep their place as another gust of wind swirled over the group. Kathleen growled in annoyance as she was blinded yet again by the hair, which was coming loose from her ponytail. She reached up to fix it but the hair tie snapped.

"Ouch" she blinked, reflexively letting go of the ribbon. Its location was lost as another rush of wind carried it away and blew her hair directly into Neil's face.

"Sorry" she murmured trying in vain to gather the loose tresses which were still attacking both of their faces. "Meeks? Pitts? Have either of you got any string?"

Obligingly, the boys turned out their pockets and pulled out an assortment of stationary, wrappers, springs and crumbs but unfortunately neither had anything to act as a tie.

"Anyone have a-a rubber band?" Suggested Todd, rescuing his roommate's treasured book of poems before the wind tore the fragile pages.

"I've got something" Charlie said throwing his sketchbook at Knox who caught it deftly. He moved to the opposite side of the circle and knelt to the ground, removing a shoelace.

"Ah, good idea" praised Meeks.

Charlie tried to hand it to Kat but she shook her head, "the wind is too strong. Could you help?" She swept the hairs which she had under control over her right shoulder and held the hand-held ponytail out to him. "Hold this" she commanded, ignoring the flush rising in her cheeks.

"Oh-err, sure" he reached out to replace her hold, brushing her hand as she let go to smooth the rest of the fly-away hairs down and into his hold.

"As lovely as your hair smells" Neil spluttered as soon as his vision was cleared, "I'd prefer not to have it in my mouth."

Kathleen laughed and pushed Charlie's hand away with a quick "thank you," separated her long hair into three section and began to braid it. He handed her his shoelace and she tied it neatly around the end. He watched her work, frozen by her side.

"Much better. Thank you."

"S'okay" he shrugged, "what's so good about this poem, then?"

"The Lady of Shallot" she corrected, shifting to lay on her front "It's very Edgar Allan Poe in style. Like a mythological story, and it mentions Camelot."

"So, it's the English geek's dream" he took the open book from Todd and glared at Neil who giving him a discreet thumbs up. "A pale, pale corpse she floated by" he read perplexed, "isn't a bit morbid."
"No more morbid than your fascination with obituaries" she countered, "you literally read the paper in hopes of finding interesting deaths."

"I like people who go out with a bang" he teased, "It's better than your literary catharsis."

"Arguably, your catharsis is sonorous music" she retorted with a singled raised eyebrow.

"Can't a guy play the saxophone one time and be done with it?" he mocked, "I know I'm-"

"Modest?"

"Excellent."

"Oh, here we go" she rolled her eyes good naturedly

"It's not my fault that I'm so gifted!"

"In hubris, maybe."

He chuckled, "you've got me there."

"Someone got the best of Charlie Dalton? Do my ears deceive me?"

"Who's the modest one now?" He snapped the book shut and handed it back to Neil "and on that note, we should go or we are going to be late to dinner and you to your sleepover."

"Since when do you care about being on time?" Asked Cameron studying his watch and seeing that they indeed had five minutes to get there.

"Since Hager threatened him with a Saturday detention" cut in Meeks, "he was late to PE four times in a row and then Hager caught him eating in the woods instead of running."

It was Kathleen's turn to laugh, "you eat instead!"

"Hey, in my defence Keating seems to be doubling as a coach" he said swiping up her books before she could protest, "and I do so many extra-curricular sports that I don't need a designated lesson to waste my time" he shrugged.

"You can keep talking, but that won't distract me" she mumbled.

He sighed dramatically and handed her a pen, "now you can't complain."

"Let him" Todd said quietly as he stood up, taking the pen from her.

"That's the spirit, Todd!" Charlie clapped him on the back and began to lead the group across the lawn towards the great stone mansion. In the few minutes that it took to reach the doors, the purple haze of dusk was already fading to black and the warmth of the school building was welcoming after walking through icy puffs of wind.

Once they reached the double doors of the dining hall Charlie released her study supplies with smug expression which earned him a reluctant 'thank you' from Kathleen, who then bid the boys goodbye. Promising Knox that she would say hello to Chris on his behalf, before she continued through the dimly lit structure until she reached her own room and packed her overnight bag, turned her lamp off and hurried down to meet Hager in the entrance hall. Simmering with excitement for the coming night.
I'm not completely happy with the last section of this chapter but I can't think of any other way to write it, so here it is! Apologies for the delay, but I didn't want to publish complete rubbish. I have too much love and respect for both the story and all of you to do that. On the Brightside, I think this is the longest chapter yet!
It was approaching seven o'clock when the black station wagon pulled into the Noel's driveway. The sky above was painted midnight blue, all earlier traces of orange and violet had faded at sunset. Kathleen thanked Dr Hager for the lift as she stepped out of the car and breathed in the suburban scent of freshly cut lawns and petrol. It was the oddest mix but strangely comforting. Homely, she thought vaguely ringing the doorbell.

"KAT!" A blonde blur launched herself at the guest, knocking the air from her lungs.

"Nance" she wheezed, "I love you but get off. I can't breathe."

Biting her lip, she let go,"oopsie." Kathleen rolled her eyes and pulled her friend into a calmer hug and then turned to greet the hosts - who she realised were absent.

"They went out" explained Nancy reading the brief look of confusion on her face, "they got a call about an auction in Burlington, apparently some rare paintings are up for sale. They rushed off about twenty minutes ago with instructions" she shrugged, "that dinner is in the oven and don't burn the house down."

"Sounds manageable."

"Not when you come in here" she said leading Kat into the kitchen, "we've been left on dinner duty while we continue baking our snacks." She gestured to the kitchen island where Chris and an unfamiliar girl were kneading dough.

"Hey, Kat!" Beamed Chris, waggling a flour covered hand in greeting, "this is Ginny."

"Hi" Ginny waved.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you" Kathleen smiled.

"Now that's out of the way, it's time to muck in if you want to eat" Nancy donned a white, heart printed apron and threw a striped pink one at Kat, who caught it and slipped it on. "You can chop the carrots while I sort the potato salad" she pushed her brunette friend over to the chopping board and left her to the task, chatting to the group about which icon they could be.

"She's been taking quizzes all day" whispered Chris as she put a tray of cookies in the oven.

"And honestly, I knew didn't need a quiz to tell me that Chris is our resident Grace Kelly" Nancy chattered on, "just look at the fair beauty, all classy and dignified. But I didn't picture you as a Jackie Kennedy" she tilted her head at Ginny, "but I see it now."

"And you are Marilyn Monroe" guessed Kat as she tipped the chopped carrot pieces into a pan of boiling water.

"That was a given" she grinned, "but who are you?"

"Audrey Hepburn?" Offered Chris.

"No, Kat's too tall" Nancy clucked scrutinising her friend.
"Katherine Hepburn?" Tried Ginny.

"Lauren Bacall? Kat guessed but Nancy shook her head.

"Both are good, but I feel like you'd be smashing Jane Russell!" She settled finishing the salad.

"How very 'Gentleman prefer blondes'" responded Kat drily, knowing the soft spot her friend had for the movie.

"Oh, yes!" she twirled around to grab the wooden spoon from the draw on her left. "You are the Dorothy to my Lorelai. The Jane to my Marilyn." She began humming and spinning around the kitchen, taking her cousin with her.

"A kiss on the hand may be quite continental" she sang.

"But diamonds are a girl's best friend" the others joined, "A kiss may be grand... but it won't pay the rental on your humble flat

Or help you at the automat..." They danced unaware that Chris' younger brother was stood in the doorway in his pyjamas staring at the laughing girls.

"Did you steal Father's whiskey again?" He asked.

"Alex!" Yelled Chris.

"Woah, Alexander Noel" cried Nancy ruffling the nine-year-olds hair "you have to fill me in later."

"Okay" he shrugged, "I wanted to know how long dinner will be. I'm hungry."

"Not long, sweetie" Chris promised plating up a portion "in fact, you can have it now." She handed him a tray and placed his full plate, cutlery and a juice box on it.

"Thanks" he smiled as Nancy discreetly handed him a jam tart from the treat cupboard.

"It's fine, now run along" she grinned. And sure enough, his footfalls were heard on the stairs and his bedroom door slammed shut.

"Just remember to remove the evidence that we let him eat up there" Chris said serving the rest of the meals. "Now eat and bake, girls. If we want treats for later we'll have to get them in the oven before eight."

"Hey, Chris" called Ginny, scooping up a handful of flour "think fast." Chris turned around, lifting the spatula to her face just in time to shield herself from most of the flour, but some of the white powder still coated her shoulders and clumped in her hair.

"Gin" she whined "not again."

"I told you that I would get you back!" She cackled, ducking as her disgruntled friend launched a spoonful back at her.

"I told you things aren't manageable" Nancy smirked, "I'm up for round two" and with that, she lunged for the bag of flour which had been left on the countertop.

"Don't you dare!" Kat cried, holding up a large saucepan for cover as she backed away from Nancy, straight through the middle of the combat zone.
"No safety there, Kitty Kat" Nancy called, throwing a handful at her friend but missed and hit Chris instead.

"EVERY WOMAN FOR HERSELF!" Shouted Ginny ducking into the pantry as Chris turned her assault upon her cousin, dusting Kat with a light frosting of flour in the process, triggering a full-scale war in the kitchen which continued until all had decided upon a truce due exhaustion. Not only was the kitchen a mess, with flour coating the room like snow; the girls themselves were not better. Their aprons had done little to protect their clothing and the makeshift saucepan helmets hadn't kept their hair safe either.

Once the aftermath of the 'Great baking fight of 59' - as Ginny had dubbed the food fight - was sufficiently cleaned up, the four girls trudged upstairs with the plate of cookies which had been safely warming in the oven during the worst of the battle. They cleaned themselves up and changed into their pyjamas before settling down in Chris' bedroom, laying on the floor amongst the cushions for a well-deserved pamper session. The conversation turning to the upcoming party and subsequently, dates.

"On the topic of dates, how would Knox feel about meeting a friend of ours?" Chris asked.
"Jennifer Tipperton is a senior at Ridgeway, nice girl but a little lonely in love, so Gin and I thought we'd introduce them at the party."

"Oh, I can ask but I don't think he's, err" she searched for the right words "...looking for love at the moment" Kat replied.

"I thought so too but they wouldn't listen" Nancy added petulantly, "he didn't seem like the type to blind date to me."

"You're right" Kat laughed, sharing a look with her best friend but upon catching the disappointed faces of her new friends decided to try a more diplomatic approach, "but I'm sure he won't object to company, even if he wanted to. He's too much of a gentleman to complain. He wouldn't want to disappoint you, Chris."

"He really wouldn't mind? I know I probably should have asked you both before arranging anything-"

"Both?"

"Yes, we um-" she exchanged a guilty look with Ginny, "we sort of, well. We took it upon ourselves to arrange dates for the newcomers to the Ridgeway social scene."

"What Chris is trying to confess, is that she set you, Knox and I up with locals for the party" Nancy explained, "conveniently, I was only told this morning. As if I would object!"

"We knew you wouldn't" Chris rolled her eyes, "but you Welton folk are so elusive to us townies, we hardly mix and we know you're attached to Knox's friend-"

"Attached?" Kat choked out, dropping the rollers that she had been trying to arrange into her damp hair "to who?"

"Charlie" Nancy said nonchalantly.

"We're not-" she shook her head, "why does everyone assume that we're a thing!?"

"You're always together, you always talk about each other, you argue with him, the whole Fraser jealousy incident..." Nancy listed.
"That wasn't jealousy, that was a misguided attempt to help."

"To an outsider, that list sounds like evidence" Ginny laughed.

"Of friendship!"

"Oh, Honey" Nancy shook her head, "you've got it so bad and you don't even know it."

"No, I have not" she said indignantly chucking the floral cushion that she was sat on at the blonde; who burst out laughing at the sight of the blush which stained the cheeks of her attacker.

"It's only one date" Ginny cut in, flipping through her magazine "to us lowly folk a first date is a tester. Like viewing the trailer before committing to watch the movie" she looked pointedly at Kathleen "it's not a marriage proposal or a family alliance. We actually live in this decade."

"Exactly!" Exclaimed Chris, "Ginny and I have handpicked the best of ridgeway for you two. He's cute, so have fun."

"Come on" whined Nancy as she threw the cushion back, "this is the perfect opportunity to prove us wrong."

"Now I'm listening."

"Of course, you are, Kitty Kat" she smirked, "if you go on this date and find yourself wishing it's that troublesome rich boy. You can face the facts and make out with him already." She held up a hand to stop Kathleen - who was already muttering a variety of unladylike words under her breath - from protesting. "I'm not finished yet" she tutted, "and if you enjoy yourself without thinking about him than we'll shut it. Alright?"

"Fine" Kathleen threw her hands up in surrender "I'll go to the party with this...Wait, what is his name?"

"Thomas Baker" supplied Chris.

"This Thomas Baker" agreed Kat.

"Excellent" beamed Chris high-giving Nancy, "he'll pick you up from mine on Friday at seven."

"Maybe this will knock some sense into you" mused Ginny, "from what Nancy has said it's obvious to us that you like him. Oh, Nance! That colour is divine, pass it over."

"I can't like Charlie."

"Why not?" asked Nancy sliding her eyeshadow palette over to Ginny.

"Because he's a deviant?" Joked Ginny, sweeping the brush over the latte coloured powder.

"Because he's one of my best friends."

"So? You have several guy friends" Nancy probed, "what's the difference."

"Each friendship is different. With Todd it's easy, secret sharing, exploring the school, and then with Neil it's discussions about books, advice or helping Todd. Knox is just...fun" Kathleen's eyes flickered over to Chris, "but Charlie doesn't have a category" she explained, staring at the pearlescent pink polish shimmering on her toenails, "he's a mix of everything. The only thing we don't talk about is me leaving. He tried once but I couldn't and I-I don't know. It's different to the
others, always has been but I can't explain it."

"Because you like him."

Kathleen remained silent.

"Oh my!" Chris shuffled over to wrap an arm around her shoulders, "I know that look, you didn't let yourself consider that until now."

"Are those words spoken from experience, dear cousin?"

Chris bit her lip, "considerations are not confirmations" she said carefully."

"Please ditch my idiot brother" moaned Ginny, "I would love you to be my sister-in-law but don't tie yourself down to him. He'll turn out like Father, I know he will and I can stand that in my brother but not in the husband of my best friend!"

"Ginny...he won't" she sighed, "he vowed that he wouldn't."

Nancy and Kathleen shared a look of confusion.

"My Father" spat Ginny, "drinks too much and spends time with women half his age and he doesn't even have the decency to be discreet about it anymore. Chet already does stupid drunk shit and I don't see that getting better. He's a good brother and a good friend but he doesn't deserve you Chris."

It was Chris' turn to fall quiet, eventually saying in a measured tone "I like him, Gin. But if there is ever someone I could like more, than I promise to break it off. But right now, I like Chet."

"That's sensible" Kat agreed, casting a worried glance over at Ginny.

"That's progress, at least" the younger girl muttered, "now try the lilac nail polish for once."

"No more boy-talk" announced Nancy, waving around a magazine "I for one want to know which planet represents me. Whose up for a quiz?"

Chapter End Notes

It's June already! I can't believe this story has been going for nine months now :D

I thought it was time to give the girls some time to shine, although it was hard to think of what girls did in the 50s at sleepovers...

I hope you enjoyed the chapter. Let me know what you think! I love hearing your theories about what you think will happen.
Chapter Notes

Guess who went to see ‘A Midsummer Night's Dream’ at Tolthorpe Hall! I finally feel fit to write about Neil's production now that I've seen the play performed by the Shakespeare Company!

Anyway, this chapter is extremely long in comparison to the rest but I didn't want to cut anything...

As always, please tell me all of your thoughts and theories.

Chapter twenty-three - Storms are brewing

Kathleen awoke to the familiar sound of a clanging alarm clock, in an unfamiliar room. Sunlight poured through the open window, illuminating the pale pink walls and soft furnishings which surrounded her. She stretched and winced as she realised that one of her rollers had come loose and subsequently tangled in her hair at some point during the night.

"Nancy" she poked the sleeping girl lying next to her, "Nancy get up and help me." The blonde muffled a yawn in the duvet and shuffled down.

"I'm up, I swear!" she said as her eyelids fluttered closed, "give me two minutes."

"Do you want me to cold throw water on her?" Came a voice from across the room. Kat looked up to see Ginny stood in the open doorway with a breakfast tray in her arms, "I have no reservations about it."

"Oooh! You made pancakes" grinned Chris from her bed, "you're an absolute angel, Gin."

"We have to leave in half an hour" she replied placing the tray on Chris' bed, "and we need to eat something before school." The four girls gathered on the bed and ate in relative silence before dividing the remaining twenty minutes between getting ready for the day and frantically packing. Miraculously, they were out the door on time. Nancy off to her fitness class, Kathleen to meet Mr Keating who was picking her up while Chris and Ginny set off to school.

It was only once Kat had stepped into Keating's comfortable little car that she realised the rogue roller was still tangled in the back of her hair, hidden amongst the voluminous curls.

"Sir" she said, flushing red at her forgetfulness, "I don't suppose you're any good at untangling things. I seem to have gotten myself into a bit of a predicament..."

"I was wondering when you would notice" Keating chuckled, "don't worry Kat, it happens to my wife all the time. We'll sort it before class."

"Thank you."

xxxx
Mr Keating kept his word and soon enough Kat was sat at her desk - tangle free - with only her pride sustaining any damage. But she could live with that. She didn't have much time to dwell on it as the bell sounded and hordes of boys came flooding through the door, noisily scraping their chairs along the wooden floor and calling out to each other. Kathleen tuned out and focused her attention on the blurred colours of the leaves falling from the woodland trees, visible from her seat. Interrupted only by a paper plane which landed on her desk as Keating called for the class to settle down.

She unfolded the paper to see Knox's script spelling, 'How is she?' Kat's laughing eyes caught his anxious ones from across the room, 'good' she mouthed as Keating began to address his students.

"In continuation of our Shakespeare unit, today we are studying his most famous sonnet." He announced over the groans of his students "Mr Cameron, are you able to name it?"

"That would be sonnet 116, Sir."

"Excellent" praised Keating much to Cameron's pleasure. "Mr Perry would you be so kind as to read that for us. Page 45."

Neil nodded and slipped his glasses on,

"Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments. Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove.  
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,  
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come;  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.  
If this be error and upon me prov'd,  
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd."

"Thank you. Now what is the message of the Poem. The big picture?" Asked Mr Keating pacing around his desk.
Knox raised his hand. "He's saying that true love is strong and constant." Keating nodded scribbling the words onto the board.

"Mr Dalton, how does he show this?" Called Keating tapping his chalk.

"He calls is 'an ever-fixed mark'” he replied from the back, "unmoved by storms. Almost like a lighthouse, I think. Which would fit with the metaphor of a 'star' guiding ships."

"Good! Now Mr Hopkins, can you see anything else?"

"Uh- it doesn't alter with time."

"See, it's easier than you think. No rocket science or geometry here," smiled Keating enthusiastically. "Don't be scared to really go for it with your interpretations. Give me more, anyone!"

"Circumstances" called out Neil, "like societal expectations or opinions are irrelevant to the love Shakespeare is talking about. A true, pure, soulmate kind of love."

Keating beamed, "As shown in Romeo and Juliet! Any more ideas?"

"He's certain, and the last two lines are powerful because of that" suggested Kat thoughtfully, "we can safely assume that writing was as important as breathing to Shakespeare. If he was willing to stake his writing on his views than he had no doubts whatsoever."

"But doesn't he contradict himself?" Asked Meeks, "he says the 'worth's unknown' yet admits the amount of love felt can be measured somewhat. It can't logically be measured without known value."

"But is love logical?" Interrupted Neil, "I don't think the abstract can be truly defined in concrete terms."

"Which explains the use of poetry as the form of expression" agreed Kat.

"And that excellent point will be the topic of your essays" Keating snapped his book shut, "on Monday you will each hand me an essay addressing the question, 'How does Shakespeare explore the theme of love in sonnet 116'? That little exercise was to give you some ideas to play with. Let's move on..."

xxxx

Before they knew it, lessons were over and the teens found time to breathe again. Well, some of them. Neil had dragged Todd off to practise lines for his rehearsal tomorrow while Meeks and Pitts went to detention as a punishment for the radio plans found in the back of Pitt's math book. Leaving Cameron, Knox, Charlie and Kat in the half-empty common room. The four were gathered around a table with their homework laid out, but only one member of the group had the motivation to do more than stare mournfully at the papers.

"We should swap parents, Knox. You be the boring banker and I'll be a lawyer" Charlie bounced a tennis ball at the wall, "that way I would get paid to object."

Kathleen bit back a smile.

"What?" he asked, upon seeing her expression. "You don't think I would be a good at arguing?"
"I think you're too good at arguing" she corrected, "more significantly, you're issues with authority would probably piss off the judge."

"Keating is a figure of authority" he countered, catching the ball once more.

"Yeah, but he's not exactly conventional" cut in Knox, ignoring Cameron who scolded him for getting distracted yet again.

Knox rolled his eyes but went back to work, listening to Cameron's explanations and improvement pointers.

"I'm so bored" Kat whined laying her head on the desk, "how can the common room be so empty?"

"Make it emptier" suggested Cameron, "or stop talking."

Charlie rolled his eyes, "you're always such a delight to be around, aren't you?"

Cameron didn't acknowledge him, so Charlie rolled his tennis ball across the table, knocking the boy's neat pile of papers off the edge, scattering them as they floated to the ground.

"HEY!"

"I was bored" he said pleasantly as Cameron's face slowly became tinged with splotches of red and purple.

"You shouldn't have done that" Kat whispered, pushing back her chair back slowly. Anticipating Cameron's reaction.

"It won't happen again" he held his hands up, "but I'm sure Knox wouldn't protest if it did."

Knox laughed, leaving ink blots strewn across his work in his state of distraction. Which caught Cameron's eye immediately.

He seethed, "you might not care about your grades but others do."

Charlie opened his mouth to retaliate but Kat laid a hand on his arm, "don't. It will only make things worse." He kept his mouth shut but hurled the tennis ball at the wall with a loud thud. Repeatedly.

Something inside of Richard Cameron snapped. He shot up from his seat and slammed his palms down on the table, upsetting the remaining papers and pens on the desk.

"Oh no, Cameron! You've distracted poor Knox from his work again" Charlie mocked, winking at Knox whose shoulders shook with the effort of suppressing his laughter, thankful for a break.

"GET OUT! GET OUT UNTIL YOU REGAIN YOUR SENSE OF DECORUM!" He snapped, pointing to the door.

Kathleen tried to remain composed but his words sounded so much like her grandfather's that she dissolved into giggles, infecting Knox who snorted.

"Stop giggling" Cameron's cheeks burned "and go!"

"Men" Charlie stated, his mouth twitching "don't giggle."

"I don't know..." Kat wheezed, glancing at Knox "I would call that a giggle." She stopped joking as
she caught the sour expression on Cameron's face and added, "okay, we're leaving" pulling Charlie up with her.

"Good luck, Knoxy-boy!" He saluted, letting the brunette girl pull him away from the amusement.

The door was slammed shut behind them and they found themselves in the dull, empty, second floor corridor. Suddenly aware that they had nothing to do.

"We could go outside?" Suggested Charlie.

"To the lake or the woods?" She asked as they made their way through the stately hall, down to the grounds.

"Tree line?" He thought about the box of cigarettes in his pocket, "that would be ideal, actually."

"You're an addict" she sang. Making light of her well-known disapproval.

"You sound like my Mother" he muttered. Thinking about how little the two women had in common.

"And Camron sounds like my grandfather" she retorted, "although he would take that as a compliment...should I?"

"Maybe" he shrugged, opening the cloakroom door and handing Kathleen her coat before pulling on his own. She thanked him and pushed open the side door, striding out into the chilly autumn afternoon. They went across the lawn, leaves crunching under their feet as they approached the woods. A few paces into the dense woodland was a small clearing with a fallen log by the foliage. The location was concealed enough for Charlie to risk smoking but still open and airy, with a clear view of the lake and grounds through the branches. Gratefully, he lit up his cigarette. Careful to exhale away from the girl sat next to him on the log, only inches away.

"It's so pretty" she breathed, staring out at the sparkling water with a dreamy expression. "That's probably why I like it here. For all its faults, the school is physically stunning."

"And here I was, thinking you stayed for my dazzling company" he teased. Drinking in the details of her face unabashedly while she was distracted. She didn't reply, feigning interest in the rippling water, but took note of his eyes on her. She had felt his stare more often in the last week but had dismissed it every time. She swallowed and forced herself to slip back into her admiration of the exquisite scenery again, it wasn't sensible to dwell on theories. No matter what the girls seemed to believe.

Suddenly, a large grey bird swooped down from the tree tops with a loud 'squawk', gliding over the surface of the water. Yanking Kathleen out of her reverie with a start.

"It's just a bird."

"I know" she turned to glare playfully at him, "I just wasn't expecting it."

"Shame, for moment I thought you may be scared of birds. That could have been a lot of fun."

"Not birds" she mused, "toads."

He accidently inhaled and began to cough. "You're scared of toads!?!"

"When I was younger" she explained in a grave tone, "my brother put one in my bath and I was
stuck in the tub with this devil toad jumping around like it was possessed."

He burst out laughing. "I'm sorry" he breathed, struggling to speak "but oh my God."

"I hate them."

"I can imagine" he sobered up but his lips twitched, betraying the extent of his amusement.

"Your turn" she said, "tell me something embarrassing about yourself, and then we never have to mention this conversation again."

"Hmmm" he blew out a cloud of smoke. "If I tell you this, you have to swear not to repeat it. To anyone. Ever."

"I swear" she looked up at him, her eyes dancing.

"A few years ago, the school organised a charity fundraiser. Neil and I were snuck into the kitchens that morning and stole some of the cakes, but on our way out we slipped, fell down face first into mop buckets and by that evening our faces were covered in bruises. We had a black eye each and we were so embarrassed that we told everyone we had gotten into a fist fight" He confessed, "we were banned from the event but our reputations were saved."

"You tripped and told everybody you were in a fight?" Her eyes widened, "how old were you?"

"Fourteen. I know it's such a cliché."

"You two didn't tell anybody?"

He shook his head.

She grinned, "have you ever been in a real fight?"

"A few" he shrugged, "I tried to get expelled for the first two years but the school wouldn't expel me."

"Ah, your parents are on the board, aren't they?"

"Oh yes, and they make sizable donations to keep me here on top of the fees" he smiled bitterly, "they have too much money." He paused and looked at the sky, "it looks like it's going to rain."

Kathleen looked at him. Had he really spent two years trying to get expelled, only for his parents to fork out more than the thousands of dollars already paid in fees to keep him here? It was then that she realised how little she knew about his home life.

"I don't mind a little rain" she replied, letting him change the subject.

"Even if it ruins those curls" he gestured to her hair, the curls had held wonderfully and they looked almost exactly like they had this morning.

"They'll be ruined at some point today."

"A relic from the sleepover?"

"How did you guess?" she laughed "it was a fun night, we even managed to have a food fight."

"You had more fun than we did" he raised an eyebrow, "how on earth did you end up in a food
"Baking and revenge."
"You girls are dangerous, remind me not to cross you" he joked as the first droplets of rain began to fall.
"That reminds me" the smile dropped from her face, "I need some advice on something."
"What's up?" he stubbed out his cigarette on the damp log and twisted around to face her, his legs on either side of the log. She turned to face him properly too, but managed to maintain a lady-like posture with her skirt fanned out over the log.
"Nancy and I were ambushed with some...arrangements...made for the party" she began, "one of those is a blind date set up for Knox with one of Chris' school friends."
"And you don't know how to tell him" he guessed.
"Exactly."
"Why did they do that?"
"They don't know he's in love with her" she sighed, "they thought they were helping. We couldn't exactly turn them down."
"Hold on, who's we?" He asked tensely.
"Knox, Nancy and I" she avoided his gaze, "they set up dates for all three of us."
"What did you say?"
"Initially, I said no but they convinced me" she pulled at the sleeves of her jumper as she spoke, "besides it's a party. There'll be loads of other people to talk to, so if he's awful I can find a friend, but I'm sure he won't be terrible. I mean, I trust Ginny's judgement even if Chris chose Chet for herself."
His relaxed his countenance back into his usual state of interested amusement as she rambled, and when she trailed off, he said "tell Knox and ask him to stay with you if you're worried. I bet he'll be happy to." He advised with an uneasy feeling in his stomach, "I'm sure it won't be too bad."
She shrugged, droplets of water ran down her face and soaked her hair as the rain increased. She brushed the damp strands out of her eyes, "I don't know why I feel so weird about it. Maybe it's on Knox's behalf. It can't be pleasant to be invited to a party by the girl you're in love with and have to date her friend because she asks you to. I don't know how to tell him."
"You have to tell him tonight."
She nodded, "after dinner?", but the rest of her sentence was drowned out by a rumble of thunder. The pair looked up at the sky just in time to see a bright yellow light flash through the sky.
"Run for it?"
"Run for it" he agreed, and they sped out of the trees, running across the lawn shouting and shrieking as they got splattered with the mud they slid through, cold water soaking through their clothing while the thunder rolled aggressively overhead. Kathleen threw open the side door and they tumbled inside breathing sighs of relief. They peeled off their sodden coats and jumpers,
shivering as they walked through the halls, leaving a trail of water and muddy footprints behind them.

A trail which led Dr Hager directly to the culprits who besmirched the pristine halls of Welton.

The students were half-way up the staircase when he caught them.

"YOU TWO! STOP THIS INSANT" shouted Hager, walking briskly up to the pair. "What on earth do you think that you are doing?"

"Walking" stated Charlie, leaning back on the banister, "What are you doing, Sir?"

"That was a rhetorical question, Mr Dalton. It wasn't meant to be answered."

He felt Kathleen poke his arm to communicate that he should pipe down. He almost stayed silent but the thought of the party tomorrow stopped him. Knox was being screwed over and she was spending the evening with some guy that she clearly did not want to go with. He opened his mouth, "That was a rhetorical answer, Sir" he said with false cheer, "it wasn't meant to be questioned."

"One week of detention, Mr Dalton for wreaking havoc on school property and insolence."

"Sir-"

"Miss Murray, you would be wise to stay silent" interrupted Hager, "one week of detention for your lack of respect for the building and possibly it's authority. I expected better from you, young lady. I want to see you both on Monday evening. Now, get yourselves properly presented for dinner or you will be spending more time with me after class."

"Yes, Sir."

"Of course, Sir."

They moved quickly up the stairs and split off to their separate dorms, not willing to risk further communication in front of Hager. Too busy anticipating the next day to think about detention.
Chapter 24 - Truth, Reason, Love

Chapter Notes

"And yet, to say the truth, reason and love keep little company together nowadays"

- William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter twenty-four - Truth, Reason, Love

Kathleen picked at her salad.

Despite her rush to freshen up, change clothes and make it down to dinner on time, she still found herself lacking in appetite. Knox was sat opposite her, practically radiating excitement, and Charlie kept looking at her with that same odd expression on his face that he had developed as of late. With a sigh, she pushed her plate away.

"Knox? Could I talk to you after dinner?"

"Sure. Is it about tomorrow night?" he asked eagerly. She nodded, her stomach twisting with guilt.

Soon the meal was over and the others left for the common room, leaving Knox and Kathleen alone at the table to talk, at Charlie's suggestion. He nodded reassuringly at her as he left but it didn't inspire much confidence in her, especially when Knox was looking at her with so much hope and happiness shining in his eyes. She had become too invested in it all, she thought wearily.

"What did you want to talk about?"

"I found out something yesterday, and I'm afraid it's not good" she answered. Wincing as his smile dropped.

"Is it cancelled? Can't we go?" He fired off anxiously, "is Chris sick?"

"No, no. Nothing like that" she shook her head, "it's a different kind of not good. Chris and her best friend Ginny felt bad because they both had dates to hang around with, and Nancy didn't. So, they set one up for her, and then we got invited and they found dates for us as well" she explained with a grimace.

"Dates?" he choked out.

"I'm not exactly thrilled either, but they were so excited about it, and they were trying to help us out, as well as their other friends. I couldn't say no" she apologised, "I'm so sorry, Knox."

"Chris felt bad for me?" He grinned, "and trusted me to entertain her friend? Why are you apologising!?"

"Because you're on a date with her friend" she said slowly, "Chris set you up with her friend Jennifer."
"Exactly, her friend who can put in a good word, and get me time with her."

"Oh" Kathleen stared bemusedly at him, "I suppose I didn't think about it that way."

Knox rolled his eyes, "you and Neil are supposed to be the optimists, the cheerleaders, what's wrong with you? You're both so serious lately."

"I'm so relieved" she confessed, "I thought you'd be in the depths of despair."

He shrugged, "I just see it as another chance. A chance that I'm lucky to have, a sign that we're inevitable."

"I'm glad."

"Let's join the others, then" he rose from the table and Kathleen followed, stopping just outside of the wooden doors.

"You go ahead, I'm going to get an early night" she yawned, "I'm still tired from last night and I need to stay awake at the party."

"Of course," he nodded, "I should probably get an early night as well, see you tomorrow."

"Night" she waved, heading straight up to bed.

xxxx

Friday passed like any other, in a flurry of activity underpinned by a longing for the weekend. Once the last bell had sounded, the students spread out across campus to make the most of their freedom, banishing all thoughts about homework with the intention of enjoying their afternoon.

Kathleen was curled up on Todd's bed, reading Neil's book of Tennyson poems while Todd wrote reply to a letter from his brother. Ten minutes ticked by before Kathleen sat up to ask where Neil was.

"Rehearsal" replied Todd, "Charlie snuck out with him today."

"Have you ever been?"

"No, I wish I could but there are too many people and too much chaos" Todd admitted, "but I'll go to the performance."

"We all will" Kat agreed, "do you reckon Mr Keating would take us as an official trip. We wouldn't have to sneak out that way."

"Good idea" he nodded enthusiastically, "maybe we wouldn't have to walk either."

She hummed in agreement, "it'll be freezing in December."

"I'll talk to Neil later" Todd decided, scribbling down a reminder on a torn piece of scrap paper. "What time are you leaving tonight?"

"Six" Kathleen glanced at the clock and rose to leave. "I should probably start getting ready. It's already half-past four. Can you fill me in on tonight's meeting, tomorrow?" She called over her shoulder, pausing with one hand on the doorknob.

"I will" he promised as she left, "and have fun!"
Neil and Charlie dismounted, leaving their bikes propped up against the exterior brick wall of the theatre.

"Ready to show me what you've got, Perry?" Teased Charlie as they entered the building, but the sight of the grand interior stunned him into an immediate silence. It was by no means the small community theatre that he had been expecting. Inside was a large, high-ceilinged, square room painted green with gleaming gilded arches around the doors, upper tier boxes and most importantly the stage. The blue carpet was thick and the rows of luxury red seats upon it stretched out before the large stage like an ocean. The stage was a hum of activity with sets moving and people darting in and out of view; attending to the lights, the set and the costumes, whilst a lady with a clipboard stood in the centre of a ring of youths, all adorned in intricate crowns of woven twigs, berries and flowers. More adults were in the front row waving pens and shuffling papers between glances up at the stage.

Neil broke out into a blinding smile as he breathed in the familiar scent of paint and popcorn which always clung to the room. Charlie only stared, open-mouthed, finally able to splutter "Oh shit, Neil. This is the real deal."

"I know" his best friend waved at a huddle of passing stage hands who all waved back, "it's the stuff of dreams, Charlie. I feel alive!

"Neil!" Cried a girl with curled brown hair who flung her arms around him. "I adore Eric but quite frankly, he's wooden. I can't rehearse with him," she grumbled adjusting the flower crown nestled in her hair. "Oh, who's this?" She asked when she noticed that Neil was accompanied.

"This is Charlie Dalton, he goes to Welton with me" Neil explained. "Charlie, meet Ginny, she plays Hermia."

"Nice to meet you" he shook her hand and her eyes widened in recognition.

"You won't think that in a second!" She laughed, releasing his hand.

"Why would that be?"

"I was at the sleepover with Kat and Nancy last night" she laughed, "I'm Chris' friend and I've heard all about you."

"Good things, of course" Charlie smirked as Neil scoffed.

She cocked an eyebrow.

"Ask Knox about the 'chemistry catastrophe' "said Neil, "that's basically Charlie in a nutshell. Great party story, and one that I don't think Kat has heard yet."

"I'll try" she answered slyly as she eyed the handsome newcomer, spotting an opportunity to test the waters on Kathleen's behalf. "If I can tear them away from their dates. Thomas Baker is a real catch, I must admit that I'm slightly jealous of Kat." She laughed lightly as she watched the two boys try to cover their awkwardness. The look of irritation that had flashed across Charlie's face was almost quick enough to miss but Neil's worried gaze was the confirmation that Ginny had been looking for. Oh, that boy was dead gone on Kathleen and it seemed as if his friends knew it, she thought with a wry smile.

"Really?" Charlie responded politely. "Why is that?"
"Tall, handsome, funny, football star" she listed, "what's not to like?"

Charlie opened his mouth to speak but Neil interrupted. "He sounds great but we should probably start rehearsing, Ginny."

"Probably, but we can't abandon your buddy" she said dismissively, turning back to Charlie. "So, what is Kat's type? Chris showed Thomas a picture of her and Nancy, and he was totally into her. Does she go for blondes? The Hollywood looking 'Tab Hunter' type?"

"I wouldn't know" he replied tensely, feeling the residual negative thoughts from last night come back with full force. But before he could say anything more, another two girls entered the theatre and came to join them.

"Ginny! We've come to see the rehearsal" smiled a girl draped in a large fur coat "have you seen Travis around?"

"We heard that he was in the play" giggled the second girl wiggling a box of cigarettes in the air, "we bought him a little something."

"Yes, but we're just about to begin rehearsals" she said shortly. "Right, Neil?"

"Oh-err. Yes. We are" he nodded, as Ginny turned on her heel and walked away. "Charlie why don't you sit with err-"

"Tina" smiled one girl, "and this is Gloria."

"Tina and Gloria" Neil smiled pleasantly.

"Sure, if that's okay with you girls" Charlie flashed them his trademark smirk, "and afterwards there's a little midnight gathering up at Welton. You can come if you like." He sat down but threw his legs up on the seat in front, lounging about, actively avoiding Neil's panicked looks.

"Welton!" Blinked the giggly girl with another laugh, "of course we'll come!"

"Charlie. Can we talk?" Neil's overtly polite tone had an edge to it.

"Later, Perry" Charlie dismissed him as Tina? Gloria? He couldn't remember which one she was, sat close to him. Their shoulders brushed and her pungent, musky, perfume was clouding his senses, helping him to erase unwanted thoughts of a different girl who always smelled like earth and flowers.

"We'll take good care of your friend, don't worry" assured the other, as the woman with the clipboard called the cast for a gathering on stage.

Neil threw a parting glare at his impulsive, irrational friend and left him for the stage.

xxxx

Kathleen and Knox stood at the end of the Noel's driveway, watching Nancy chat to the boy who had just pulled up in a gleaming red Cadillac convertible, which stood out in contrast to the darkened neighbourhood.

Finally, she turned away and waved the pair over. "Knox, Kitty Kat, this is Johnny" she smiled at the driver, "my date. Who has kindly offered to drive us all tonight and next to him" she pointed at the tanned, blonde boy in a letterman jacket, "is Thomas."
Kathleen muttered a shy "hello."

"And the beauty in the back is Jennifer" Nancy finished the introductions and let Johnny step out to open the door, the three teens slid into the back with Jennifer who smiled warmly at them.

"Hi, you all look great" she greeted them, admiring Nancy's pink and green floral dress and gushing over Kathleen's diamond earrings before telling Knox how good his hair looked, which brought a smile to his nervous face as he told her it was nothing, when Kat knew for fact that it had taken him a full twenty minutes and then another five for her to drag him away from the mirror.

They made small talk during the short drive to the Danburry house. In that time, they learned that Jennifer was on the cheer squad with Chris, while Thomas and Johnny were on the football team with Chet, which was how they knew each other. But mostly, the town kids asked questions about Welton much to their surprise. Kathleen hadn't realised how removed the school was from the rest of the community, Ginny had been right to call its students 'elusive,' because the locals knew very little about the establishment, and seemed to have filled the gaps with wild rumours and imaginative fancies.

By the time they arrived, the ice had been well and truly broken, even Knox had stopped shaking with nerves. He was almost completely calm as the Thomas rapped twice on the front door.

However, the calm was short-lived as the door opened to reveal Chris, adorned in a simple pink jumper and baby blue skirt ensemble that rendered Knox speechless.

"Hey! You made it" she beamed, "bring anybody else?" She peered through the doorway to check before closing the door behind their group, "we've had random people walking in for the past two hours" she explained, looking entirely unperturbed by the invasion.

"We brought a bottle" Johnny stepped forward to hand her a bottle of something alcoholic and Chris took it in one hand and grabbed the lapels of Knox's coat with the other and pulled him along behind her calling for them to come in over her shoulder.

"Ginny Danburry's here- wait" she stopped, focusing on the stairs "I have to go find Chet. Why don't you go downstairs where everybody is" she nodded at Thomas to direct the group to the basement as she dashed up the stairs calling, "make yourselves at home!"

"But I-" Knox trailed off, staring vacantly at the stairs.

"Don't worry about it" Jennifer linked her arm through his, "she's a bit frazzled, understandably, it's hard work to host a high school party."

"Oh."

"We'll catch up with her later" Kathleen patted his shoulder as she passed him to follow Johnny, Nancy and Thomas who were leading the way down to the basement, the music grew louder as they descended the stairs and laughter flooded the air as they entered the large basement which was alive with celebration. Kat's senses were flooded with the scent of smoke, sweat and perfume and her eyes roamed the room, spotting dozens of couples in every nook and cranny attached at the lips. In the centre of the room was the dancefloor and a multitude of bottle and beer cans were littered across every available surface. She turned her attention back to the group, but Nancy and her date had already been absorbed into the dancing. Kathleen stood awkwardly by the wall.

"Can I get you a drink?" Asked Thomas, raising his voice to be heard over the cacophony.

"Please" she nodded "but take Knox with you" she instructed, "I'm afraid Jennifer may be
disappointed with her evening." Thomas turned to look in the direction of the pair and saw Knox hovering at the foot of the stairs, nodding every now and then distractedly as Jennifer spoke to him.

"Of course," Thomas assented, calling Knox over to follow him through the crowd to the kitchen. Leaving Kat to wander over to Jennifer who appeared to be feeling just as out of place as she felt herself.

"This is pretty wild already" Jennifer surveyed the room, "I hope the squad won't be roped into clean up-duty."

"Make the football team do it" laughed Kat, "it's Chet's house after all."

"True" she smiled cheekily, perching on the edge of an end table. "it would do their egos some good. Although, I must say you've done well with Thomas, and Johnny's not too bad either."

"He does seem kind" she agreed, thinking of his good manners and easy conversation. He hadn't put a foot wrong yet.

"Oooh, there's Ginny!" Jennifer waved madly to the younger Danburry who flashed the girls a smile as she whirled around the dancefloor.

"I'm glad she's having fun" grinned Kat as Ginny was swallowed up by the throng again, out of sight. Her eyes slid around the room and she saw the boys fighting their way back through the jubilant, drunken crowd. Each held a red cup in either hand.

"Mystery punch" explained Knox, handing a drink to Jennifer "unfortunately it's the only beverage we could reach."

Thomas handed one of the cups to Kathleen who thanked him, taking an experimental sip of the red liquid.

"I'm not sure what it's laced with now, but it used to fruit punch with a dash of happy juice" Thomas winced as the liquid burned his throat, "it's strong tonight."

"It seems like Steve and Bubba got to it already" groaned Jennifer.

"Well, here's to a good time" toasted Knox, taking a sip of his liquid courage.

"Fancy a turn on the floor?" Asked Thomas. Pouring the remainder of his drink into a nearby plant plot and extending his hand to Kathleen.

"I would, thank you" she nodded. Taking his hand and mouthing 'good luck' to Knox over her shoulder as Thomas led her over to the dance floor. He took her hands and they began to sway to music, keeping a respectable distance between them while they danced until they relaxed, prompting them to start spinning around. Twenty minutes later they stumbled over to the sofa, breathless with laughter as Thomas apologised for stepping on her toes for the fifth time. Kathleen had been reassuring him that she was okay when she spotted Chris and Chet a few feet away, dancing; in the corner of her eyes she spotted Knox turning away from the pair with a mournful expression. Where on earth was Jennifer?

"Promise me that you'll tell me if I've killed your feet."

Kathleen snapped back to the present, "I promise" she replied, "but I'm just as bad at dancing. I would be a hypocrite to hold it against you."
"Your too kind" he grinned, "I don't think I'm drunk enough for more dancing. Table tennis?"

"You're on" she smirked, thinking back to all the leisurely summer afternoons at St Mary's spent on the tennis courts.

Ten minutes later she was proved right as she won the third match, with barely any effort at all.

"Come on! You can do it."

"No" he laughed, shaking his head "you've well and truly beaten me." But he tried to hit the ball after she served it over to his side, and subsequently missed.

"Hey, Thomas" shouted a large teenage boy in an antler helmet, "stop letting the pretty girl win!"

"Find your own girl, Bubba" He called back good naturedly, "and your own business."

Kathleen put down her paddle.

"Sorry about him" he rolled his eyes, "another game?"

"I don't want to win this one" she warned.

"It's not polite for me to win against a lady" he apologised, "come on. We were having fun, you're quite cute when your winning."

Screw polite, she thought. The boys had never let her win soccer games, and Charlie certainly would never let her win any of their ridiculous competitions, the competitiveness, the trash talk and the bets were half the fun.

"Let's see how cute I look losing" she replied with false cheer, he flashed her his toothpaste commercial smile again, all white teeth and charm. Oblivious to the change in atmosphere. With sudden horror, Kat realised that Nancy might be right about her friendships at Welton ruining ordinary boys forever. She couldn't keep comparing every male to her friends because, somehow, Kathleen knew that she would never find any boy better than the ones she already knew.

She shoved the thought away, concentrating on the boy in front of her. If he wouldn't let her lose, then she would have to make him win.

Chapter End Notes

And that concludes part one.

Part two will be posted next Friday, I don't think I can make you wait or make myself wait two weeks for the next instalment. Part three will be posted on the Friday after that. Depending on how much I get written, this could go back to being updated every week again. We'll see.

Thank you for the follows, favourites and reviews! As always, talk to me. Let me know your thoughts and feelings. It's interesting because different people pick up on/focus on different elements of the story.

- Chloe
liveforthelittlethings - Thank you so much! It's something that bugs me as well, I can't believe all of Ginny's scenes were cut from the movie (including the scene where Chris and Knox talk to each other properly). It's probably the reason why I love reading DPS female AU fics. I'm trying to develop the female roles as much as possible and I'm so pleased that it's appreciated :)

"Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,
And therefore, is winged Cupid painted blind"

- A Midsummer Night's Dream, William Shakespeare

Chapter twenty-five - Cupid painted blind

Knox tried in vain to tear his eyes away from the couple, but Chris was a vision as she twirled, her smile lighting up the room as she danced with her boyfriend. Her boyfriend, Knox thought with a sigh.

"You love her, don't you" observed Jennifer, her voice pulling him out of his melancholy.

"Chris. You're in love with her" she repeated.

"I-err" he flushed, "sorry. I, um."

"She laughed merrily, "don't panic. It's okay, I didn't want to come here with a date either."

"You-you didn't?" He breathed.

Jennifer shook her head, her ponytail swishing, "dating has never really interested me much, to be honest. The girls are just trying to be good friends and they think they're helping so, I humour them now and then. Chris is a difficult person to say no to, she's too sweet. So, I can guess how you ended up here."

"Thank God" Knox broke into his first genuine grin of the day, "you're fantastic and all, but my heart wasn't in this and I've ignored you. I'm so sorry" he apologised.

"Don't worry, it's a relief to me as well" she assured him, straightening his crooked tie. "Now stop looking so nervous, and ask her to dance" Jennifer instructed, "it may seem tough to outdo the captain of the football team but it's easier than you think. Now go, I have friends to hang out with and a good word to put in for you. Good luck, Knox. You're a good guy. Don't waste that on girls you're not interested in." She chided, pushing him gently towards the dance floor, and after flashing one last encouraging smile, she was gone.

Knox took two steps forward. Gulped. And took three steps back before fleeing to the kitchen. If he was really going to do this then he needed to play this right. He needed to offer her a drink.

After all, dancing is thirsty work.

xxxx
Kathleen stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror and tried to smile, but it looked false. Music pulsed through the locked door and vibrated through the floorboards; reminding her that this was a party and parties were supposed to be fun.

And it had been, until antler hat Bubba had uttered those words and ruined it all.

She hadn't realised that Thomas has been losing on purpose and since it had been pointed out, his other pretences had been magnified. It was like his secret twin had swapped places with him. The Thomas Baker she had enjoyed spending time with had vanished, replaced by imposter seeking approval at every turn.

The last table tennis match had been a disaster. A competition to see who could lose had enthused since he wouldn't be 'ungentlemanly' and beat her. Yet, the moment that she refused to beat him, he joked that she needed to be 'a good sport about it.' Ouch. After that she had been introduced to the football team, a rowdy bunch who had spent an hour recounting heroic sporting stories in front of their dates, basking in the glory of their past victories while the girls gradually lost interest. They had just begun a game of truth or dare when she had excused herself for a bathroom break along with several others who made the same excuse. Somehow, she knew that being caught up in that game would be a bad idea.

Kathleen sighed and smoothed down her deep blue dress, retied the sash and ran her fingers through her hair. With one last failed attempt at an enthusiastic smile, she gave in. Maybe the mystery punch could get her through the night, if she couldn't find one of her friends to distract her first. With her mind made up, she snapped the bolt across and exited the bathroom. Making her way into the kitchen she caught sight of a familiar, suited up, brunette.

"Knox!" She called his name while weaving through the tipsy crowd, but by the time she reached the makeshift bar he had gone. Shoving away the flicker of disappointment she inspected the punch bowel. The liquid had darkened and the pungent scent of alcohol had strengthened, she ladled a little into a fresh cup and topped it up with soda. Enough to soften the taste, but not enough to end up drunk. Suddenly, she was glad that she had followed Charlie's advice and eaten beforehand.

She had just taken her first sip when she heard her name.

"Oh, Thomas!" She turned, startled by his sudden appearance.

"So, this is where you ran off to" he chuckled, "for a second I thought you'd ditched me."

She laughed lightly, "that's me. Taking refuge with the drinks."

He grinned, "I'm glad I found you. The game is in shambles. Apparently, it was just a ploy to set up Jane Peters with my mate Chuck" he shook his head disbelievingly. "We need to find some other amusement; how do you feel about watching beer pong?"

"Why not" she shrugged, taking another sip.

"Then let me escort you to the tournament" he held out his arm and Kathleen took it, letting herself be led into the dining room. To her delight, Chris and Chet were there. Giving her hope that the next hour would be much more interesting than the last.

xxxx

Knox entered the kitchen, squinting at the sudden, harsh, overhead light which illuminated the room, unlike the dim lamps and coloured Christmas tree lights which set the atmosphere throughout the rest of the Danburry residence. He found himself surrounded by football players as
he neared the beer keg. He contemplated going for the punch instead but he figured that beer was manlier, he was competing with the football captain after all.

He was in the process of filling his cup when one of the players grabbed his arm.

"Hey, you Mutt Sanders' brother?" the guy asked, drunkenly inspecting his face before he turned to one of his team mates. "Bubba, this guy look like Mutt Sanders to you or what?"

The second red jacketed boy spat some ice cubes into the sink and slurred, "you're his brother?"

"No relation" Knox shook his head apologetically, "never heard of him. Sorry, guys."

"Where's your manners Steve?" Bubba ignored Knox and pulled at the antlers stuck to helmet on his head. "Mutt Sanders's brother and we don't offer him drink. Here, go have some whiskey, pal." He shoved a full glass into Knox's other hand, looking expectantly at him.

"Yeah" nodded Steve.

"Whoa" Knox looked around for an escape but he was boxed between the players, the sink and the kitchen island. "I-uh-I don't really drink" he stuttered.

"To Mutt" toasted Bubba, seeming not to have heard him.

"To Mutt" agreed Steve, clinking his glass with both boys and causing whiskey to slosh over the side.

Knox took a deep breath and took a big gulp of whiskey, muttering under his breath "to Mutt." He blanched at the burning sensation in his throat and loosened his tie. He really was not used to drinking this much.

"How the hell is old Mutt anyway?"

"Yeah, what's old Mutt been up to?" The two players refilled Knox's cup along with their own.

"I don't really know Mutt" Knox tried to tell them again but they eyed the beer still in Knox's other hand and Steve lifted both of Knox's arms into the air.

"To Mighty Mutt!" He cheered.

"To Mighty Mutt" repeated all the players in vicinity before knocking back another drink. Knox followed suit, obligingly drinking his beer as well as the whiskey. He hurriedly dropped the empty beer cup into the sink as the room started to spin.

"Well, I gotta find Patsy." Bubba rubbed his bloodshot eyes, "say hello to Mutt for me, okay?"

"Will do" responded Knox unsteadily.

"Yeah, hell of a guy your brother Mutt" nodded Steve, following Bubba out of the kitchen. Knox grabbed a glass of water which had been abandoned on the kitchen counter and hastily exited the kitchen while he still could. He found a space on the sofa and collapsed into it gratefully, idly taking small sips of his water, which he didn't realise tasted odd. Too drunk to decipher the difference between water and vodka.

His head was pounding and the couples draped across either end of the sofa kept encroaching on his personal space. Wrinkling his nose, he began to get up but abruptly sat back down, rooted to the spot when he realised that the girl sleeping peacefully next to him was Chris Noel. He gazed at
her in wonder as she slept, her face was peaceful and her cheeks flushed pink. He had never seen her face up close until now, he realised, as he traced the angles of her face and the slope of her nose with his eyes.

"God help me" he whispered as his gaze landed on her lips. He dragged his eyes away from her sleeping form and tried to look around the room, but his eyes were pulled back to her. Enraptured by her beauty he uttered the words "carpe diem" softly. Hesitantly, he lightly ran his fingers through her hair. Captivated by the golden strands. After a minute, her leaned over and brushed his lips over her forehead.

Unfortunately, it was the same moment that Bubba looked up from his card game and cried, "Chet! Chet! Look!"

Chet Danburry sighed, "what?"

"It's Mutt Sanders' brother!"

"Huh?" He turned in his seat and saw a horrified Knox leaning over his girlfriend, who was beginning to stir.

Chet leapt up. Chris awoke to see him storming over. Her eyes slid over to Knox who was frozen at her side. She jumped up in surprise.

"Knox? What-" she stated to ask but she was cut off by Bubba's cry.

"HE'S FEELING UP YOUR GIRL!"

"What are you doing?" She asked, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. But before Knox could respond Chet was at her side, shaking with anger.

"What. The. Hell" he growled.

"Chet!" She warned, "Chet, don't."

"I know it looks bad" Knox said quickly, "but you've gotta-

Chet tackled him to the ground.

The two boys rolled around on the carpet like animals. Knox struggled to break free while Chet threw punch after punch at him. Knox tried to block the blows to his face by raising his arms over his head. The violent smacks drowned out the chants of the gathering crowd. Knox attempted to kick his attacker away, but Chet was bigger, stronger and angry.

"Chet, no!" Chris screamed, "You'll hurt him! Stop it, leave him alone!"

"Knox!" Kathleen pushed through the crowd with Thomas hot on her heels, and they threw themselves into the brawl to separate the two. Thomas helped Chris to restrain Chet, while Kathleen helped Knox to stand, narrowly avoiding a badly aimed punch. Thomas wasn't so lucky, earning a bruised cheek from his captain who fought the restraints.

"Bastard!" Shouted Chet, ignoring Chris' pleas for him to stop and calm down.

Knox gingerly lowered his hands from their protective shielding of his face and stared at the blood, his blood, which had stained his fingertips crimson

"Oh, Knox!" Kat worried, "your nose is bleeding."
"Knox, are you alright?" Fussed Chris, abandoning Chet.

"Chis" snapped Chet, trying in vain to pull out of Thomas' vice grip on his torso, "get away from him."

"You hurt him!" She cried, anger contorting her dainty features as she heard him express his pleasure at the fact.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry" repeated Knox in a daze

"It's okay" Chris rubbed his arm. Thomas finally released Chet but kept a warning hand on his shoulder, letting him pull Chris to his side.

"Next time I see you, you die" he fumed, glaring at Knox who gulped.

"I'd better follow him, I'm so sorry Kathleen" Thomas apologised.

"Go, it's okay. I need to look after Knox" she bit her lip as she slung Knox's arm over her shoulders to try and keep her friend upright, "you're lovely and I had fun but-

"I know" Thomas nodded, "you don't like me that way."

"How did you-"

"You looked like you missed someone else" he smiled slowly, not his dazzling smile but a real one, an emotive curve of the mouth.

"I'm sorry" she apologised, barely registering the weight of his words as she struggled to support Knox's weight.

"He's a lucky guy, but if you change your mind" he shrugged, "give me a call."

"Thank you."

"S'okay" he turned and followed Chet upstairs, leaving Kat to get a half-asleep, likely concussed, seventeen-year-old boy, to the bathroom.

A task which proved to be just as difficult as Kat was concerned it would be. Where on earth was Nancy? Or Ginny? Why hadn't anyone else cared enough to help Knox, or help her move him? Nobody was coherent enough or considerate enough to even hold open a door, she fumed.

This party had been a mistake, she decided as she deposited Knox on the closed lid of the toilet, with his back against the sink to keep him upright. Kathleen busied herself by filling the sink with warm water and finding a clean flannel while Knox groaned, squinting in the harsh light.

"Where am I?" he moaned, "I feel awful."

"You're in the bathroom, honey. You were in a fight" she explained quietly "do you remember?"

He nodded slowly, wincing as she gently cleaned the cuts on his face and checked that his nose wasn't broken.

"Stings" he muttered, his eyelids flickering as he fought sleep.

"I know, I promise I'll be quick."
"Kat.

"hm."

"Kat, I-I think I'm-

"You don't look so good, Knox" she worried. Stepping back to examine his face which was far too pale for her liking.

"No, I'm-I have to-" he began but he vomited before he could finish. It splattered down the front of her dress and all over the floor as she jumped back. Her nose wrinkled, and she used her bracelet as a hair tie, pulling her hair into a ponytail with more force than necessary and chucking a towel down on the floor to cover the mess.

"You know what" she muttered to a once more unconscious, but less pale looking Knox, "fuck it. I'm not cleaning this up. Let Chet do it." She used the wet flannel to clean her dress and wipe down Knox, who she left sleeping peacefully. Nobody in their right mind would enter the main bathroom now, she reasoned as she left him there while she searched for Nancy.

It was time to go home.
"Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

~ William Shakespeare, Macbeth (Act V, Scene V)

Chapter twenty-six - Out, out, brief candle

A single candle burned brightly, from its position in the ugly lamp that Neil had taken from the theatres unwanted prop box. It's steady orange flame lit up the centre of the old Indian cave but despite the much needed light, the carved lamp which Neil had fondly dubbed 'The God of the cave', was unsettling. Much like the eyes of Dr T.J Eckleburg, as Kathleen had whispered to Todd during the last meeting. Even in her absence, Todd had to agree. It was creepy.

He was pulled from his musings by a scuffling in the entrance...and giggles. The boys ceased their individual conversations, immediately apprehensive. Kat was away at a party with Knox; and only Neil and Charlie were expected. Not a single student in the cave had ever witnessed such a distinctly feminine noise emerge from the mouths of the pair. Camron pointed his torch towards the source of the sound, the beam of white light shook slightly, betraying his nerves.

"Go on in, it's my cave" Charlie's voice floated down the narrow entrance, "watch your step."

Meeks shot Pitts a confused look that turned to pure shock as two girls entered, bathed in the light of four torches.

"Hi" smiled a girl in brightly coloured top. Her friend waved shyly at the group of open mouthed boys.

"Hello!" Pitts called, shooting up from his perch on the log and whacking his head on the roof of the cave with a painful thud.

"Hey guys, meet Gloria and...uh?"

"Tina."

"Tina" nodded Charlie with a smirk, ignoring Neil's glare. "This is the pledge class of the dead poet's society" he explained, gesturing for his dumbstruck friends to move. "Come on folks, it's Friday night. Let's get on with the meeting."

"I tried to stop him" hissed Neil, out of the earshot of the unexpected guests. "He wouldn't listen."

"I'm glad" sniggered Pitts.

Cameron frowned "I hope that was sarcastic." For once in his life, Neil found himself agreeing with him.
"Guys!" Charlie stood in the centre, waiting for all eyes to be on him "I have an announcement to make. In keeping with the spirit of passionate experimentation of the Dead Poets, I'm giving up the name Charlie Dalton. From now on, call me Nuwanda."

Pitts was first to break the disbelieving silence with a splutter, "Nuwanda!?"

"Nuwanda?" Repeated Neil, his face contorted into a rare expression of cynicism. His eyebrow rose as 'Nuwanda' snatched Tina's red lipstick out of her hand and applied it to his face, an obscure symbol drawn thickly onto each cheek.

"We going to have a meeting or what?" He continued, but his nonchalance didn't fool Neil for a second. The actor could see that his oldest friend was basking in the in attention. Charlie had always been a fan of the shock factor.

"Yeah" agreed Tina boldly, surprising the boys as she spoke for the first time. "If you guys don't have a meeting, how do we know if we want to join?"

Neil almost choked "join?"

Cameron threw his arms out in silent protest. Even Todd's eyes flickered between Charlie and his guests in concern.

Luckily, they were saved from responding as Charlie leaned over to Tina with a smoulder that made Neil cringe. "Shall I compare thee to summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate."

"That's so sweet" she breathed.

"I made that up just for you."

"You did?" She blushed, oblivious to the smothered laughter around her.

Charlie slid over to Gloria, "I'll write one for you too" he said solemnly, reciting "she walks in beauty like the night. Of cloudless climes and starry skies. All that's best, dark and bright, meet in her aspect, and her eyes."

"You've got to be kidding me" scoffed Cameron, but he was shushed by Meeks.

"That's beautiful" sighed Gloria.

"There's more where that came from."

Neil threw the society's book of verse at him.

XXXX

Kathleen growled, closing the back door with force. She had searched the entire house from top to bottom and there was still no sign of the best friend. Outside was almost as loud as the inside of the house; teenagers splashed around in the pool and music from the record player drowned out the echoes of the noise from inside.

She scanned the garden for a familiar face. Kat nearly cried tears of relief when she spotted her favourite blonde bombshell perched on the edge of the diving board, deep in conversation with a group of people in the pool. She hurried over, immediately catching the attention of Nancy who
took one look at her before jumping up and shoving her heels back on.

"What's wrong? I left you a few hours, what could possibly have gone wrong?"

"Chet beat up Knox and he's passed out drunk in the bathroom after throwing up on me, he's black and blue all over and Thomas left me to deal with it alone while he looks after Chet, who won't stop controlling Chris and I'm tired! You weren't there, neither was Ginny and I just want to leave. This was horrible idea! I knew we should never have come, Charlie told me to stick with Knox and I didn't listen. How does he always know what's best for me, even before I know it myself? He was right. Just like you were right about missing him and I think I might be drunk, and Knox is sick and-and" she trailed off as Nancy swept her into a hug, "I smell disgusting."

"Let's get both of you home" Nancy squeezed her a little harder, "I'm so sorry for leaving you. I thought you'd have fun, I shouldn't have forced it. Forgive me?"

"As soon as we're out of here" Kat mumbled, cracking a smile.

"Five minutes, Murray. I swear!" Nancy turned to call over Johnny, who she sent to ready the car, while Kathleen led Nancy up to the bathroom, where Knox was still curled up asleep on the toilet seat. Together, the two of them woke him and guided him safely out of the house and into the vehicle. Nancy grabbed a bowl of chips on the way out, poured the remaining snacks into her mouth and gave the bowl to Knox in case he felt sick again.

The group thanked the heavens as they pulled up outside the Noel's house with an empty snack bowl. Nancy sprang up to unlock the front door while Johnny took most of Knox's weight from Kathleen who was beginning to sway.

"Go and brew some coffee." He instructed, "make it strong."

She complied, glad to free of the heavy weight. Twenty minutes later, the four teens were sat on the kitchen floor with empty coffee mugs, trying to force a strange drink that Johnny claimed was a hangover cure down Knox, who was slowly becoming coherent again. The girls had not asked what was in it, the smell was enough to convince them that ignorance is bliss. Let alone the thick texture and greenish colour.

"Oh, lover boy" sighed Nancy poking his cheek, "what on earth were you thinking?"

"Idiot" Kathleen said fondly, "I'm never going anywhere with you again."

"Don't worry" groaned Knox blearily, "I'm never drinking again."

"I wouldn't hold him to that" chuckled Johnny, "that's what they all say."

"Not so loud" Knox moaned covering his ears.

"shhhh" Nancy brought the glass back to his lips, "keep drinking."

"I'll be sick if I have anymore."

Kat hastily grabbed the glass from Nancy and set it aside, "I don't want to risk it. Hager will be here soon and he has to hold it together. Can't we stick his head in ice water or something?"

"Actually" mused Johnny, "that's not a bad idea."

"I'll get the ice" Nancy volunteered, "keep him awake and fetch a tea towel from the middle draw
on your right."

"Sorry, Knox" Kat apologised softly, "but you've brought this upon yourself."

**XXXX**

Tina passed the bottle to Neil, "go ahead. Pass it around."

Cameron motioned wildly for him to stop but with a shrug, Neil took a swig. Wincing as the amber liquid burned his throat, he passed it to Todd who passed it straight to Cameron, who discreetly hid the bottle behind the log while an awkward silence enthused once more.

"Me and Pitts are working on a hi-fi system, it shouldn't be that hard to, uh, to put together" voiced Meeks twisting his unused cigarette in his hands.

"Yeah. I, uh, I might be going to Yale" added Pitts, trying to gage the reactions of the girls who remained passive. Blowing out puffs of smoke. "Uh, but I, uh, I might not."

"Don't you guys miss having girls around here?" Interrupted Gloria.

"Yeah" Meeks and Pitts nodded enthusiastically. Anyone meeting them in that moment would never have guessed how high their individual IQ scores were.

"That's part of what the club is about." Charlie exhaled the smoke from his lungs languidly, "In fact, I'd like to announce that I published an article in the school paper, in the name of the Dead Poets."

"What?" The members whipped around to face him. Neil paled and Todd clutched his roommate's coat sleeve.

"Demanding that girls be officially and permanently admitted to Welton" he finished. Leaning back against the cold stone wall with a self-satisfied smirk.

"You didn't" groaned Pitts.

Charlie laughed, muttering something under his breath that made Meeks' cheeks flush scarlet.

"How did you do that?" Neil pressed his leg against Todd's in a subtle effort to calm the silent, but clearly anxious boy.

"I'm one of the proofers, I slipped the article in."

"It's over now" Meeks winced, thinking of the cane cupboard in Nolan's office and the de-merits and the detentions that he could see coming their way.

"Why? Nobody knows who we are" he argued, slipping off the rock he had been sat on in favour of pacing circles around the small space.

Cameron huffed, "well, don't you think they're going to figure out who wrote it? They are going to come to you and ask to know what the Dead Poets Society is. Charlie, you had no right to do something like that!"

"It's Nuwanda, Cameron."

"That's right" echoed Gloria, smiling up at the rebel "it's Nuwanda."
"Are we just playing around out here?" He asked, gesturing around the cave, "or do we mean what we say? For all we do is come together and read a bunch of poems to each other. What the hell are we doing?"

"All right" Neil said firmly, attempting to ease the tension. "But you still shouldn't have done it, Charlie. This could mean trouble. You don't speak for the club."

"Hey!" He sniped, "would you not worry about your precious little neck? If they catch me, I'll tell them I made it up." He turned his back on the boys and spoke to the girls, his tone softer but still tight and controlled, "how about you let Nuwanda walk you out of the woods? I think we're done here."

The girls nodded and the other boys said their goodbyes, still fuming reckless action. The rest of the Dead Poets snuffed out the light held by the cave God and trudged back to school. Their minds and hearts heavy with dread.

XXXX

It was approaching midnight when Hager arrived back at Welton with the two students, who he quickly sent up to bed, determined to get to bed himself.

By some miracle, Johnny's cure had taken the edge off Knox's drunkenness, leaving the young man able to appear sober in the darkness to Hager's tired eyes and unfriendly attitude. It was times like this in which Kathleen found herself grateful for the cold, impersonal approach that he took in teaching. As he had found nothing odd about Knox's silence, sleepiness and the coats pulled suspiciously tight around the pair.

Keating would have spotted the difference in his students within seconds.

But that didn't matter now, Kathleen thought as she helped Knox up the stairs.

"You can't go back to your dorm in this state" she sighed as he tripped for the third time, nearly taking her down with him, "let's hope that the boys are back."

It took ten minutes for them to take the three-minute route through empty corridors to the boy's dorms. She figured that the universe owed her another favour after her night of hell, and the universe seemed to agree as Neil was leaving someone's room as the sorry pair turned into the right corridor.

"Neil!" She hissed, her voice loud in the silence of the night, "Neil!"

The tall boys spun around, "Charlie. Look who's back" he whispered. Charlie poked his head out of the room which Neil had just exited.

"Holy shit, is that blood?" Charlie was by her side in an instant, pulling her undone coat away to check the blood which stained her dress.

She waved him away, "it's not mine, it's Knox that you need to worry about."

"Kat? What happened?" Neil inspected Knox's swollen face and eyed his wobbly legs.

"Woah" Charlie caught Knox who had fallen forward, half-asleep and still out of it.

"Chet beat him up and he's drunk, really, really, drunk" Kathleen chewed her lip, "he was unconscious for a while and then he was sick about an hour and a half ago and he's been asleep on
"Knoxious, what did do to yourself?" Charlie muttered, slipping an arm around his friend and leading him into his dorm. "Neil, you and Todd get his mattress. Quietly. Bring it here."

Neil nodded, walking back out into the shadows.

"We gave him coffee earlier and Johnny made this gross hangover drink which seems to have helped" she explained as they propped him up against a cushion on Charlie's bed, "we dunked his head in ice water just before Hager arrived."

"Johnny? Who-' Charlie shook the question out of his brain, "has he eaten?"

"Only a bag of animal crackers. He refused to eat anything else" she smiled tiredly.

He nodded, "he'll be fine. Don't worry, I've been in a worse state. Are you sure that you're okay?"

"I'm tired, full of regret and wearing a dress that Knox threw-up on" she yawned, "other than that I'm fine."

"Oh God, he got you?"

She wrinkled her nose and nodded, "something I have no desire to repeat."

"And the blood?"

"Drunken Knox kissed Chris' forehead while she was asleep from what I can gather. I head the fight chants and saw Chet pinning him down and punching him. Chris was screaming at him and he wouldn't stop" she stared at Knox who was sleeping peacefully, blinking back tears "it took a few of us to get Chet off him. He threatened to kill him if he sees him again."

"Hey, why don't you go and get some sleep" Charlie suggested softly, "I'll keep an eye on him tonight and we'll talk in the morning."

"Thank you" she whispered, a small smile gracing her worn out expression.

"Knoxious, you idiot" she heard him mutter as she left the room, confident that he was in safe hands and too groggy to process the nights events.

She could deal with it tomorrow.
I'm so sorry about the lack of an update last week, my internet was playing up. The outline and all of my notes are on FF so I couldn't write without them and I couldn't stay connected long enough to do anything. I spent the time fixing the grammatical errors in the early chapters so don't be alarmed if you get update notifications for them today.

After the whole Wi-Fi palaver it's been harder to get back into my writing schedule. So here is a lovely, long chapter and my sincerest apologies.

"We are never half so interesting when we have learned that language is given us to enable us to conceal our thoughts."

~ L.M Montgomery, Anne of the Island

Chapter twenty-seven - Truth and omission

Tomorrow came too soon for Kathleen's liking.

Despite the warm, bright midday sun which shone through her window, and having eleven hours of sleep; she didn't want to get up. Last night's events were seared into her memory forever and she didn't know how to explain them to the boys, let alone how to face Knox. With a groan, she threw back her covers to hastily shower and dress. Resolving to take some time for herself, she grabbed 'Anne of the Island' from her bookshelf and a skipped downstairs. Avoiding the main routes in favour of lesser used corridors which led to the kitchen.

"Oh, Robert!" She flounced into the busy room, armed with charming smile, "is there any chance of brunch? I slept in after an outing last night and I don't quite feel up to lunch. Please?"

The good-natured chef threw back his head and laughed, with a finger to his lips he slid a bowl of fruit salad and a pastry over the shining, stainless steel counter towards the grateful girl.

"You're the best" she beamed, leaving the students favourite, soft-hearted chef to his work. Kat left quickly, hoping to avoid Pitts, who regularly begged for food at all hours of the day, but was especially guilty on weekends. With that in mind, she took her smuggled delights to the third floor, and settled down in the hidden alcove behind an old grandfather clock. Which was nestled between two science classrooms. It had been her sacred spot since she stumbled upon it during a game of hide and seek as a child. The faded red cushions, candles and scuff marks which lined the floor were a testament to her fondness for the secret hideaway. With a contented sigh, Kathleen settled down to eat and spent the rest of the afternoon reading by candlelight.

Once the old clock had chimed for six, o'clock, Kathleen emerged from her shadowy den in search of dinner and company. Literary comfort was nice, but she felt it was time to re-enter the real
world. With that in mind, she clutched the book to her chest and walked down to dinner, slipping into her usual seat with an aura of positivity.

"You don't seem hungover at all" observed Meeks, "when you didn't come down by lunch, we thought you were in the same state as Knox."

"Just better at hiding it" winked Neil.

"No, I was mildly tipsy at most" she smiled, "I was tired this morning. I slept in until lunch and decided to beg Robert for food. I spent the day recovering from last night's ordeal."

"I take it the party wasn't so good?" questioned Cameron.

"It started out okay but it soon descended into chaos."

"And what happened to Knox? He's been in bed all day, we couldn't get a coherent word from him" asked Pitts with a mouthful.

Kat cringed at the sight of the mushy food in his mouth but chose not so to chastise him. Instead, she replied "I would love to know. I hardly saw him to be honest. We arrived together but soon separated, and the next time I caught a glimpse of him, his date had vanished. A while later, when things had begun to get a little out of hand there were chants for a fight. I thought nothing of it until the antler hat guy started yelling about someone 'feeling up Chet's girl,' that's when we went to see who it was. Chet had Knox pinned to the ground and his face was bloody, he wouldn't stop and Chris was screaming at him to leave Knox alone." She shook her head, "Thomas and I broke them up and he restrained Chet until he had calmed down."

"But he didn't touch Chris, did he?" Clarified Neil, much to the others outrage.

"A kiss on the forehead from what I heard. She was asleep next to him at the time."

"I'll kill him" scowled Charlie, "who does he think he is? One punch or even a threat would have done, he didn't have to beat him bloody like that."

"You won't go anywhere near him" Kat pointed her fork at him before turning to look each of the others in the eyes, "and that goes for all of you as well."

"We can't let him get away with it!" Burst out Meeks.

"Report it to a teacher, his parents or go to the police" suggested Cameron. Nobody spoke, but their expressions of disbelief were enough to shut him down. "Or don't" he muttered.

"I suppose we could count on Ginny to give him hell for it. She seems decent" commented Neil.

"You know Ginny?" Kat asked, startled by the knowledge.

"Oh, yeah. I forgot to tell you! She plays Hermia in the play."

"How on earth did you both neglect to tell me this? Wait, Charlie. Did you meet her on Friday? Todd said you went to watch the rehearsal."

"Briefly" he shrugged, "she's nice enough but she went on about your date a fair bit. Are you sure she's not after him for herself?"

"Honestly, I hardly saw her and I alone was with Thomas most of the night. You should have spoken longer, you have the same sense of humour; I think."
"I thought you were staying with Knox?"

"Yeah" agreed Neil pushing his glass aside so that he could lean into the conversation, "how did you lose him so quickly?"

"Dancing" she answered. "He refused to join in, preferring to mope around waiting for Chris. Once he saw her with her boyfriend, he wandered off. Nancy and Johnny had disappeared outside to the pool, so I was left with Thomas."

"You don't sound pleased..." Analysed Meeks.

"He was great at first" she pushed her food around her plate, keeping her eyes down.

"Did something happen?" Probed Todd quietly.

"Nothing awful, just...It's silly really."

"Just what?" Neil paused mid-bite looking concerned.

"He let me win every game of table tennis, pretending to be terrible at it. He let me believe it until one of his teammates made a comment" she caught Charlie's eye. "It sounds stupid, but it ruined what had a fun night. Well, in hindsight, it was the first pitfall. But I digress" She breathed. "When I refused to win another match to force him to play fairly, he told me to be 'a good sport' because apparently, it's not the done thing to beat a lady at table tennis."

"Wait a minute" snickered Charlie, "he actually thought that he would get somewhere with that."

"He kept calling it 'gentlemanly behaviour' " she pouted, "I must have looked so stupid and he had the nerve to say it was cute!"

The boys howled with laughter at her indignation as she recounted the tale with an equal mixture of bashfulness and outrage.

"You won't find the next bit funny" Kat warned over the merriment.

"Why not?" Questioned Meeks as the laughter came to a halt.

"Because once he pulled Chet away from Knox, he said goodbye and followed him out. Leaving me to drag Knox to the bathroom and clean him up, alone."

"But Knox is at least three inches taller than you, not to mention bigger and heavier."

"I realised that" she replied drily.

"Let me get this straight. This guy spends all night with you, tries to impress you, and then ditches you for his jerk of a friend who beat up yours?" Frowned Charlie.

"Basically."

"And that's when your dress got ruined with Knox's blood and puke" confirmed Neil.

Kat nodded, the face she pulled told them all that they wanted to know about her feelings on the subject.

"That jerk!" Declared Pitts. The others murmured in agreement.
"Thomas isn't all bad" Kat sighed, "but I think it's safe to say that Nancy had the best date since I know nothing about Ginny's. Once I found them, Nancy helped me get Knox out of the house and Johnny put him in the car, drove us back and made Knox conscious enough to face Hager. It took a lot of coffee, vile drinks and an ice bath. But he went above and beyond with no complaints."

"Thank God" muttered Neil, "I thought the Noel's just had poor taste in guys. Perhaps there's hope after all."

"Perhaps" nodded Kat. "Enough about me. How was the meeting?"

Pitts perked up, "There were-

"There was nothing special" interrupted Neil, "we should head up to the common room. Keating said he would look in tonight to help us with our assignment."

"We-we should go" Todd agreed.

Confusion crossed the faces of the rest of the boys but one by one it dawned on them that they were not to talk about the unusual guests that Charlie had brought along to the meeting. Even if Meek's had to elbow the realisation into Pitt's ribs. Much to their relief, Kathleen simply nodded and rose from her seat, ready to leave the dining hall. Order restored by omission.

XXXX

"Ah, if it isn't my favourite students!" Called Mr Keating, poking his round the door. "Keep that quiet for me lads, lady. It won't do for me to be accused of favouritism."

"In imagination, she sailed over storied seas that wash the distant shining shores of "faëry lands forlorn," where lost Atlantis and Elysium lie, with the evening star for pilot, to the land of Heart's Desire. And she was richer in those dreams than in realities; for things seen pass away, but the things that are unseen are eternal." Kathleen closed her book at the sound of their English teacher's voice. She tried to sit up properly but Charlie's legs pinned her own down, as he had flopped down on the opposite end of the couch earlier, and thrown his legs over hers to form a cross shape, which allowed her feet to rest on the couch and his on the footstool. She had offered to switch places so that they could sit with personal space, but he had given her a worrying mischievous grin and said that he was fine where he was. She had just rolled her eyes and gone back to her book.

"No worries, Sir. As you can recall, we're good with secrets" teased the boy next to her.

"I can't be sure of what exactly you're alluding to, Mr Dalton" winked Keating "I am a member of staff, after all. Which brings me to your essays."

"I can't be sure of what exactly you're alluding to, Mr Dalton" winked Keating "I am a member of staff, after all. Which brings me to your essays."

"Thank you, Sir" Cameron held up the paper he had been working on. "I'm having trouble with the multiple interpretations. I can't see any other reasonable line of thought behind the lines."

Keating scanned his essay "top notch work as always, Mr Cameron. However, I encourage you to be more abstract. Think outside of the box and the interpretations will flow from your pen. Perhaps you could consider Shakespeare's definition of love in the context of the poem and how it differs from another perspective..."

"I can't believe that I'm doing better than Cameron" whispered Charlie, "clearly I've been hanging around with English nerds too much. I would never have thought of all this nonsense about the ship being a symbol for the heart before this year. You and Neil have finally done it, you've corrupted me."
"Some would say it was the other way around" she mused, "Neil and I are saints in the eyes of the faculty."

"Exactly, the faculty. The mark of a true corruptor is the concealment, the angelic pretence. I'm honest."

"Honest is one word for it" she teased.

"I'm offended" he gaped mockingly.

"Offended by dear, Miss Murray?" Mr Keating turned to face the pair, "are you sure you didn't deserve it?"

"This is bullying. I deserve an A for this, Sir."

"I look forward to seeing your creativity with words channelled into your work, Mr Dalton. Now, Kat. I haven't seen you since class on Friday, you social butterfly. Are there any questions on your mind about the essay? Or are you all set to hand it in on Monday?"

"I'm all set, thank you Sir."

"Very good. I look forward to reading it" Keating smiled warmly at the two students. "Mr Perry, I must ask how the play is progressing. But for the rest of you, off to bed. I want you bright-eyed and ready to finish those tomorrow. Up you go" he herded them out as he spoke to Neil.

"Todd!" Called Kathleen, catching up with the boy who stood by the corner waiting for his roommate. "You never got the chance to fill me in about the meeting."

"Kat?" Asked Meeks hurriedly, "I was going to look in on Knox before bed. I know it's just past curfew but do you want to risk coming along?"

"We already have detention next week" sulked Charlie, "don't earn yourself another one."

"He's right, Meeks" she said apologetically, "I'm sure Knox will be at breakfast tomorrow. I'll see him then."

XXX

Kathleen was right. Knox was at breakfast on Sunday morning and he was almost fully functioning again, the last hurdle to normalcy was the embarrassment.

"No, I don't know what I was thinking" he groaned for the third time, "it's a hazy memory and obviously, I wasn't thinking straight."

"Obviously, you still aren't if you don't regret it" said Cameron.

"Why?"

"Because you got the stuffing beaten out of you" deadpanned Charlie.

"It was worth it" Knox stated firmly, reaching up to touch his right cheekbone which was still a little sore from the incident, "my lips touched her skin, only for a moment, but they did." 

"Insanity" Kat muttered into her cornflakes.

"What about your date?" Asked Neil, "what did she think about it?"
"She suggested it."

"What!?” Kat almost choked on her cereal. "Jennifer told you to kiss a sleeping girl?"

"Not in those words, she told me to go after Chris, ask her to dance. She also told me not to waste time with girls I'm not interested in, that it will be easy to outdo Chet. I guess that my intoxicated mind took her advice." He shrugged.

Cameron narrowed his eyes, "you do realise how wrong that is, don't you?"

Knox began to protest but Charlie cut him off, "break it up boys. It's only nine o'clock."

"Speaking of Jennifer, where did she go?" Kat asked, "One minute you were together and the next she was gone!"

"Turns out she didn't want a date either. As soon as she figured out I'm in love with Chris she gave me some advice and joined her friends" he beamed, "I couldn't have planned it better. She's on my side!"

"Wow. That was lucky" Kat assented before poking his arm, "are you sure that you're alright now?"

"Fine" he waved her off, "just embarrassed. I'm so sorry about the err-yeah."

"Thanks. Just promise to never do it again."

"Not that I'm ungrateful or anything, but you would make a terrible nurse with that attitude."

"I wholeheartedly agree. I couldn't think worse career for me, except maybe a mathematics teacher. Which would be worse? The gory or the boring?"

"Be thankful that your parents aren't set on medical school" complained Neil, "enough career talk. I propose, that in the spirit of avoiding the noble profession of medicine, you all help me rehearse today. Opening night is a now mere a month away!"

"In the spirit of avoiding medicine" toasted Charlie, holding up his glass of juice.

"In the spirit of avoiding medicine" repeated the group, raising their own juice or mugs of coffee with a cheer.

XXXX

Kathleen had never felt a silence more painful than this one. Nolan knew about her detentions, Hager wouldn't have hesitated to tell him the details but this brought a whole new level to the phrase suffering in silence. More than her usual Sunday evening visits.

"I knew this friendship was trouble. The Dalton boy has dragged many model students down with him through the years, but I thought you were more sensible than this. Playing in the mud, of all things, Kathleen Cordelia Murray; you're seventeen years old! Your parents may not have allowed a debutante ball but you are still a lady and must act like one" Nolan looked down at his granddaughter, "what were you doing?"

"I wanted to sit outside, by the lake. We were caught unaware by the storm."

"That is all?"
"Yes, Grandfather."

"You are forgiven; however, it is not to happen again. Understood?"

She nodded contritely, not daring to voice her doubt about the reality of the situation. She couldn't honestly promise not to get caught in the rain again. It wasn't reasonable. Then again, Nolan wasn't reasonable.

"Now, I did not invite you here to chastise. I invited you here to give you something" Gale Nolan swiftly opened the draw in the right-hand side of his desk and lifted out a small, black, velvet box. "This belonged to your Mother. An eighteenth birthday present" he explained, snapping open the lid to reveal a glimmering diamond pendant, "she left it behind, so I now I am returning it to you as an early birthday gift since you will have left by then."

Kat stared at the shimmering jewel. Captivated by its beauty under the soft glow of the lamp light.

"Nothing would make me happier than its appearance at dinner next Sunday" he passed her the precious gift. "I pushed the date back to allow you to attend the Danbury party this week."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand" she reluctantly shut the box.

"We have guests and will be dining in my quarters. You are to arrive at exactly six o’clock with-"

Her mouth dropped open, "Fraser said-"

"Yes. He will be accompanied by his parents. Do not interrupt me. You are to arrive in your best dress and he will arrange the details with his parents. You may be required to accompany him to my quarters."

Kat inhaled sharply, closed her mouth and tried to regain her composure. With everything that had happened since their conversation, she had completely forgotten about it. "Y-yes" she stammered "of, course."

"Then we have concluded our business. Good night, Kathleen."

"Goodnight."
I'm back from my holiday and away from the hotel with the worst Wi-Fi imaginable. Luckily, we were out sight-seeing everyday and didn't feel the loss until the evenings. At least I got a lot of reading done, but that's the only upside.

How have all your summer's been? Have you done anything interesting?

Also, I promise you that there is a purpose behind all the Anne of the Island references. It doesn't matter if you are not familiar with the book because the relevant details are explained when necessary.

"Most of the trouble in life comes from misunderstanding, I think,' said Anne."

- L.M Montgomery, Anne of the Island

"Ninety-four, ninety-five, ninety-six, ninety-seven" Kathleen mouthed as she lined the photo frames up in chronological order along the shelf. "Ninety-nine? Charlie!" she swivelled on the spot "We're missing the class of eighteen ninety-eight."

"Damn" he scowled dropping a sopping wet sponge into the bucket with a splash before hunting for the missing photograph amongst the pile of cleaned frames which had built-up in the hall. This was the third time he had skipped a number and he was letting the system that they had devised down. First, they cleared a trophy case of objects and cleaned it, then he would clean each photo frame while Kathleen dried them and put them back in order. Hager's instructions had been very clear, along with his threat to make them repeat the task tomorrow if it was not done correctly.

"Found it!" Her voice rang out, much to his relief. He looked up to see her triumphantly waving the stupid thing in the air before promptly placing it between the photos of the graduating classes of eighteen ninety-seven and ninety-nine.

He currently despised the previous generations of Welton boys. Which was ironic considering that they had inspired him in Keating's memorable first class at the beginning of term. Now he wished they had never existed because he was sick of cleaning and his latest clarinet poem was calling him. He didn't have time to 'uphold the dignity of the establishment and atone for damages' as Hager had so nicely put it. He retrieved his sponge, wrung it out and started again, his jaw clenched at the thought of another fifty-nine to go.

Twenty minutes later his attention was grabbed by Kat yawning as she scanned the shelves for the matching date of the sports trophy in her hand. He glanced at his watch, five past eight. No wonder she was tired, they had been at this for over an hour in the cold, dimly lit stone corridor where everything was dark and identical. The only variation in their task was the different hairstyles every decade or so in the photographs and the dates. He dipped his sponge into the bucket automatically,
ready to start on the next line but something made him pause. A seed for an idea had been sown.

Silently he rose from his position on the floor and darted behind her, threw his arm out and squeezed the sponge over her head. Predictably, she squealed when the once warm soapy water-which had chilled to an icy temperature in the stone corridor - made contact with the back of her neck, the liquid soaked her ponytail and dripped down the back of her jumper. She shivered and spun around, spluttering profanities as he doubled over with laughter.

"You little-

"Careful, you never know when Hager will appear next" he teased "and that's no way to talk to your kindly friend for doing you favour and keeping you awake."

"A friend who should kindly watch out" she lunged for the bucket and before he could back far enough away, she had thrown a saturated sponge directly at his forehead. The impact sent water dribbling down his face which was scrunched up in shock.

"Oh, it's on" he recovered with a signature smirk. Stepping carefully over the pile of uncleaned objects and towards the bucket.

Her eyes widened as she realised his intention and she dived behind one of the empty trophy cases, second before the air assault of sponges could hit their target. Puddles of soapy water gathered on the floor and the two students ran around, slipping and sliding as they hid behind the furniture and dodged flying sponges; trying in vain to keep the noise down to any avoid further punishment. They each took more and more hits as their energy dwindled, until they collapsed on the ground in mutual surrender to catch their breath.

"How many do we have left?" Asked Charlie.

"I was at the class of nineteen twenty-five, so" she looked up at the ceiling as she worked through the calculation, "thirty-three plus any awards."

He groaned "remind me not to mess with Hager again."

"If you recall" she turned her head to look at the boy laying next to her on the cool, flagstone "that's exactly how I got into this situation."

"Ah, yeah. Sorry."

"It couldn't be helped" she shrugged "besides, Nolan blames you for being a bad influence. I was lectured about appropriate behaviour and given diamond jewellery, so feel free to influence me into more minor infractions if I'm rewarded like this" she laughed.

"Seriously? He chastises you and then bribes you? I thought it was only my parents who did that!?

"Oh, no. It's the Nolan way. When my Mother first ran off, he bought her a tiara."

"What did she do?"

"Well, it was 1940" she explained, "so she sent it back with a note asking what on earth he was thinking, there's a war on."

Charlie burst out laughing "God, I wish I could have seen his face!"

Kat smiled in amusement but sighed, "I guess he must have missed her. I do feel sorry for him
sometimes but he makes it difficult to sympathise for very long."

"Keep the diamond."

She furrowed her brow, "I was intending to."

"No, I mean rejecting the gift is rejecting him. If you accept them, he knows things are repairable" he sat up, cross legged on the floor "and you get fancy presents so it works out for everyone."

"I guess it is" She mulled it over, "I never thought about it like that."

"That's what you keep me around for, my brilliant advice. Now let's finish these before Hager keeps his promise" he stood, holding out his hand to pull her up.

XXX

Classes on Tuesday morning were hectic to say the least. A mouse had bolted across the room in Latin, then in geometry their teacher had apologised for misplacing their test papers before making them take the test again, and the political debate in history had gotten personal between some of the boys much to Charlie's amusement when he managed to a hit a nerve with Fraser - whom he had been keen on irritating since Kat had mentioned the immediate dinner plans.

All of this was more than enough to fray Cameron's sensitive nerves which is the only explanation for his behaviour at lunchtime, when he did something unusual, tactless and uncharacteristically thoughtless.

Neil had been talking about the play again, explaining everything he learned from the production and Charlie's positive reaction to the rehearsal last Friday.

"My acting is finally being taken seriously," he had beamed "for the first time I'm respected as professional; not a silly boy who wastes his time dreaming the impossible."

Cameron snorted, "Right. Charlie respects you so much as a professional that he takes girls home from your performance and dooms us all with his sexual frustration."

Silence fell along with the mouths of every student at the table. Even Cameron looked astonished that he had articulated the thought aloud.

"I'm sorry" Kathleen stared at Cameron, "can you repeat that and fill me on the events of Friday that I clearly am unaware of, and explain why we're all doomed."

"I-I didn't" Camron flushed, looking wildly around the group.

"Didn't mean to tell me?" She said sarcastically.

"Kat." Neil started.

"No. Don't apologise, explain" she interrupted "every time I've asked about the last meeting I've been interrupted or distracted. That wasn't a coincidence, it seems. Now tell me what he means by doomed."

"I slipped an article into the paper campaigning for the admittance of girls into Welton" shrugged Charlie nonchalantly, "it's being published on Thursday and they've all got their panties in a twist about it."

"Was it supposed to be a surprise?" She asked in a warning tone.
"No. I would've said something, but Neil forbade it" he glared at his friend, "he demanded that we keep quiet until he told you."

"When were you planning to mention it?" Kat narrowed her eyes at Neil, resolutely refusing to look at Todd "it's been four days."

"Tomorrow" Neil admitted, "I didn't want to give you time to overthink and panic like the rest of us."

"I don't get it!" Exploded Charlie, "I signed the article in the name of the society, an article articulating our beliefs, big deal."

"The deal" growled Meeks, "is that you didn't consult us!"

"They're going to find out who we are" hissed Cameron, red splotches appearing on his pale, freckled face. "The 'big deal,' is the consequences we have to face for your stupidity!"

"I'm not an idiot, Cameron" He scowled, "I know what I'm doing and I've said that I'm taking the blame."

"What about Kat?" Questioned Todd in a whisper barely audible over the clatter of the dining hall.

"What about her? You agree with me, don't you?" Charlie fixed his gaze upon her. She shifted uneasily.

"This is not a conversation to have in here" she said, arching an eyebrow with her following words "and what did Cameron mean about taking girls home?"

"It wasn't like that" he glared at Cameron, "there were two girls watching the rehearsal and we talked, I invited them to the meeting for a laugh."

"For a laugh?"

"Yeah, they didn't have a clue about poetry, thought Shakespeare's poem was my own" he defended, "but they had booze and cigarettes. My stash is running low. Remind me to top up during Christmas break, Neil."

"I don't think you'll have a problem remembering" Neil replied drily, studying Kathleen who was looking at Charlie in utter disbelief while Charlie kept his eyes on anything that wasn't her.

Kat stood up.

"Where are you going?" Asked Knox guiltily.

"For a walk" she said shortly "and Neil Perry, you are coming with me."

Neil and Todd followed her out the door as unit without protest. Leaving poor Cameron to deal with Charlie's wrath and Knox's conscience alone. Meeks and Pitts were sensible enough to stay out of it.

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Kathleen wandered through the empty halls down to Hager's office with Neil's words swimming around her brain. Of course, Charlie was at liberty to do whatever he wanted, and anybody would be a fool to try and stop him; but bringing strangers to a meeting? As amusing as it must have been, it was dangerous. If word got back to the faculty they would all be in so much trouble, forced to
give-up the society and any remaining shreds of sanity they had found in this institution. The club was more important to them than they could ever admit aloud, and they all knew it. Why had Charlie threatened that for the sake of some random girls? For the novelty of their presence?

Yes, Neil had said it was partly due to Ginny provoking him and that she could believe. She hadn't known the girl long but she knew Ginny Danbury well enough to resolve to ask Nancy and Chris to investigate what exactly she had said to set off Charlie's reckless attitude. The boy always had a trigger when he did something this irresponsible and inconsiderate. Normally, he would have dropped a heavy hint or pitched the idea. Not dived headfirst and pulled them all down with him. The article was concerning not only because it risked exposure, but because it risked the security of her own position at the school. Which he obviously hadn't stopped to consider. Kat was by no mean naïve but if he really had feelings for her like Neil implied, he would never have tried to seduce other girls with stolen poetry, he wouldn't risk her expulsion or isolation. Staring meant nothing. Sure, nobody wants to believe one of their closest friends is in love them. Wait, love? Where had that come from? Neil had said liked. No matter, both are downright unrealistic. Neil was fanciful, after all.

She ran a hand through her loose hair and shook her head to try to clear her mind before entering Hager's office. Probability dictated that she would be here before Charlie but she didn't need these ridiculous notions filling her head when she saw him. She had a detention to get through and an argument to avoid.

Kat knocked on the door.

"Enter" boomed Hager from behind the heavy wood which she swung open. Finding that she was right about arriving first. "Take a seat, Miss Murray while we wait upon Mr Dalton. He has five minutes before he earns himself another week of labour."

Four minutes ticked by on the clock, the only sound in the room until the door was flung open with a loud thud as it hit the wall. He strode lazily into the room, hands in his pockets and tie askew, with only seconds to spare.

"How kind of you to grace us with your presence at last" snarled Hager, pointing to the empty chair on the opposite side of his desk to Kat. "This evening you will be copying addresses onto these envelopes and stamping them. Use the names on the letters to find the corresponding addresses from this book" he instructed, placing a heavy volume in the centre of the desk. You have two hours." The balding man paused for questions but none came. He left the room, closing the door behind him. Leaving the two students alone.

"Are we going to talk about it now?" Charlie asked, whipping off the blanket of silence which had descended upon the tiny office.

"You shouldn't have done it without asking, Charlie. Everyone else has told you the same thing. Why would I be any different?"

He shrugged "I guess, I thought that you would get it."

"I get that you're putting your beliefs into action, but you need to pick your battles wisely and this isn't wise" she explained, distributing the letters evenly between them. "You shouldn't have signed in the name of the society without our consent."

"I knew that you'd all be too cowardly to agree" he challenged, flipping open the address book and scanning the pages for 'Richard Adams.'
"It's not about bravery, it's about expulsion!" Kat exclaimed, struggling not to raise her voice.

"And as I've said - one hundred times - I'm taking the blame!"

"A society is made up of more than one, Charlie. It doesn't take a genius to figure out who the other members are. You might be safe from expulsion but the rest of us aren't. I don't understand why you needed to publish it immediately. Couldn't you have waited?"

"Why? There's a girl here now and you match Meeks' grades. It would be nice to have more around."

"I thought the initial novelty would have worn off by now" she replied stiffly.

"That's not what I meant at all. Just, it's nicer with girls here. You're the one who proved that. I'm sorry if you don't approve but I won't read soppy poetry and play schoolboy rebel. I'm taking action."

"Action that might get me removed!"

"Nolan wouldn't."

"Were you even listening to the welcome ceremony speech? Trouble would get me separated. He said so!"

"To appease the parents. You're his granddaughter, Kat, it counts for something" he defended, the colour draining from his face.

"Don't talk about things you don't understand!"

He threw up his hands, "fine. It's my fault and I'll tell them that. Nothing will happen to you, or to anyone else in the club. Okay?"

"If that's what you believe." She glared returning to the task at hand, "I hope for all our sakes that you're right."

"Friends?"

"Always" she sighed, "just not the best of them until one of us is proved wrong."

Chapter End Notes

I lost the freaking Wi-Fi connection, tried to save before realising and LOST THE LAST FEW HUNDRED WORDS.

WHY DOES THIS ALWAYS HAPPEN TO ME!? Honestly, it's probably because I live in the middle of nowhere.

Enjoy the re-written last part, I certainly didn't.
Chapter 29 - Kindred spirits

Chapter Notes

Oh my gosh, all your reviews are so sweet. THANK YOU!

And I know that I have a lot of readers in the US and others from Mexico, Puerto Rico and other places affected by hurricanes recently, I hope you're okay. I'm sending you all my best wishes x

"I wouldn't want to marry anybody who was wicked, but I think I'd like it if he could be wicked and wouldn't."

- L.M Montgomery, Anne of the Island

Chapter twenty-nine - Kindred Spirits

"No."

"Aww. Come on, Kat."

"No" she shook her head "I am not sharing my candy with a liar, Neil."

"But you're sharing with Todd!" He pointed accusingly at the boy in question, who sat innocently against the school gates with a mouth-full of strawberry candies.

"I like him more than you" she poked her tongue out, passing the striped paper bag over to Nancy, who popped a candy into her mouth with a laugh.

"Face it, Puck. You're not getting one until she forgives you."

"I was trying to help" he whined, "it's not my fault that we befriended an idiot like Dalton."

Rolling her eyes, Kat chucked the bag to Neil who whooped with delight, prompting the other three to collapse into another fit of giggles.

Nancy flopped down on the gravel - using her folded, banana yellow cardigan underneath her head as a pillow - and sighed.

"What was that for?" Kat asked.

"It's freezing out here."

"You just took a layer off?" Neil said furrowing his eyebrows.
"I thought there would be a gentleman around to lend me a coat" she groaned, "but you're all too accustomed to this weather to bring one."

Todd smiled into the bag of sweets, amused by her plight. Turning to Neil he threw a sweet at his nose to get his roommate's attention. "Open" he said once a pair of familiar, warm, brown eyes looked his way. Neil complied, and Todd began to aim them at his mouth. His laughter increasing in volume as Neil's attempts to catch them got wilder with each try.

"Speaking of gentleman, where is yours today, Kitty Kat?"

Throwing a glare in her direction, Kat said shortly "with Cameron."

Nancy's eyebrows shot up, "I may not be an expert on the dynamics of this place. But isn't that concerning?"

"I think he took up my suggestion to teach Cameron the clarinet. In exchange for homework, of course" Kat shrugged. "How badly it will turn out unsupervised is not my problem today."

"I thought you two sorted things out in detention yesterday" Neil turned to look at the girls, his sudden movement caused a pink candy to hit his nose and his face to scrunch up. Earning a sound of utter delight from Todd. Neil failed to hide the grin which spread across his face at the sound.

"We talked-"

"In an argument way or a mature way?" Interrupted Nancy.

"Uhm, a mixture" Kat admitted. "We're not fighting, but I'm still annoyed because he doesn't see what he's done wrong. Maybe it's silly, but it's like our friendship started as a gender thing, not a kindred spirits thing to him. All he cares about is making the school co-ed."

"Maybe at first, but he stopped hitting on you after a week" Neil said seriously, "and then it became about you, as a person. You made him laugh, you got along with us and you tolerate his antics, even join in. That's why he became friends with you. I swear. This co-ed obsession is because of you, maybe it's a subconscious effort for you stay. We all want that."

Kat nodded, running her hands over the gravel. Dusting the little stones and dirt off her palms.

"I agree with Neil, sweetie. You're important to him and Ginny, bless her, exploited that thinking she was helping and I think he was a little jealous of Thomas. It's an awful thing, but I think he used Gloria and Tina as distractions, not girls to befriend."

"Why would he be jealous? I'm friends with most of the boys here!"

"Boys he knows aren't interested or wouldn't dare express any" muttered Neil. Ignoring the look of exasperation on her face.

"What are 'kindred spirits'?" Nancy shuffled into a sitting position, jumping in before her best friend had the chance to sail further down the river of denial.

"Anne of Green Gables" answered Kat and Neil simultaneously.

"The main character, Anne Shirley, is always searching for them" Kat explained. "It's a person with similar interests or life views as you. Someone you bond with because they understand you, enough to know what you're thinking. They can be a best friend, close family or a partner."
"My Mother loved those books" smiled Neil fondly, "she started reading them to me when I was younger. Dad stopped her and to his horror, I checked the rest of them out of the library the following week."

"And you see Charlie as one?"

"Yes" Kathleen nodded, "and the three of you."

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As evening approached, the group split away. Nancy heading back to town and the three Welton students back through the woods towards the school. By the time Kathleen reached Keating's room for detention, she was five minutes late.

"I am so sorry Captain" she apologised, closing the classroom door behind her.

"I can forgive any student who gets caught up appreciating the beauty of nature, Miss Murray" He responded.

"You brought the outside in with you" clarified Charlie, seeing confusion flash across her features.

Looking down, Kat saw that she had muddied the hem of her skirt and flecks stained her school jumper.

"Oops" a smile tugged at her lips, "I'm glad Hager has a meeting tonight."

Mr Keating chuckled. Rising from his desk, he crossed the room and heaved a pile of books from the shelf over to one of the front desks. "I'm afraid we're in for a hard night, prisoners. I decided upon a discussion of Othello in class tomorrow, but I forgot which copies are annotated. Our task is to find them and erase the pencil notes."

The two students nodded and began the job in silence, something which their teacher had not been expecting. After several failed attempts to maintain conversation, he gave in.

"Out with it you two. What's bothering my favourite troublemakers, hm?"

"Read the school paper tomorrow morning, and you'll know" Kathleen replied.

"Know that I've done something important" the boy opposite her corrected.

Looking between the two, Keating saw the tension and wondered why he hadn't identified it earlier. "Am I not allowed a preview of the content?"

"It's a petition published in the name of the society, Captain" explained Charlie with a look of satisfaction, "I decided to take action that the others are unhappy about."

Kathleen shook her head "what we are unhappy about, is the naming of the society and the timing of the article."

"I see. Is it a sensitive topic?"

"More provocative" smirked Charlie.

"I'm not sure which way to interpret that comment, Mr Dalton. But I assume it will provoke the faculty either way."
"You assume correctly" Kathleen finished erasing her last copy of the play, placing it on the pile of clean books.

"Well, I shall look forward to the surprise which awaits me at dawn. Off you go, I want you both to have the evening to relax." Keating waved them out of the room, "away with you. I have a coffee calling to me from the teacher's lounge and you have a Hager free evening. Enjoy it."

The students returned to the common room; where Charlie continued to alternate between helping and yelling at Cameron while he practiced the clarinet. And Kathleen curled up by the radiator with her book, which Neil decided to read over her shoulder out of childhood nostalgia.

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Breakfast on Thursday morning was conducted in an unusual manner.

Rarely did they end up eating together this early, but on this occasion, they were all sat down within ten minutes of the doors opening. Too anxious to feel tired and too nervous to eat. Worryingly, Pitts managed only a few bites of toast before pushing his plate away in favour of drumming his fingers on the table.

Their heads turned like owls every time they spotted a flash of white paper and black print, but all were false alarms until a younger student came barrelling through the doors, shouting over to his friends "GIRLS. WE MIGHT BE GETTING GIRLS AT WELTON" which caught the attention of everyone in the room. Staff and student alike.

The chaos was instantaneous.

Amongst the cacophony of scraping chairs, excited whispers and bewildered teachers trying to maintain decorum, Richard Cameron met Neil Perry's eyes from across the table, and with a nod from Neil they hauled Charlie from his seat and pulled him out of the room. Signalling for the group to follow.

Once they were safely away from the initial disturbance they went straight to Keating's classroom at Todd's suggestion. The perfect hiding place and conveniently, their first class of the day.

"Good morning, you're startlingly early" The Captain greeted as one resentful boy and six anxious students piled into the room. "Not that I don't love your company, of course."

"Have you picked up a copy of the school paper yet, Captain?" Meeks inquired, cleaning his glasses.

"Indeed, I have "nodded Mr Keating. "Excellent writing, Charlie. If only you paid the same attention to your grammar in your homework..."

"Thanks, I'll take it under consideration" the author chuckled.

"Powerful piece. If it wasn't in the name of the society I would tell the others to be proud, but it is. Which will only anger the faculty more."

"We didn't say we weren't proud of him" Interrupted Neil, "it's his lack of reason that we're not proud of."

"Does that mean you'll read it?" He looked at each of his friends.

"Oh, no. The less I know, the more innocent I'll be when we're interrogated later" exclaimed
Kathleen, earning murmurs of agreement from the group.

Knox put a hand on his shoulder, "we'll read it afterwards, Nuwanda. If we're still here."

"Very funny" Charlie scowled, shaking Knox's hand off, "no one is going to do anything about the paper until after lunch. Relax for a while."

"May I suggest Shakespeare?" Keating held up a copy of the play, "we're discussing the love between Othello and Desdemona in small groups today. You can get a half hour head start."

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True to his word, thirty minutes later the class was in full swing. Separated into groups of four, the students were sitting in circles around desks discussing ideas while Keating went to fetch academic essays and reference books from the cupboard.

Kathleen, Charlie, Neil and Todd were in one group, gathered around Kat's usual desk, debating whether the characters had really been in love, or if it was lust, infatuation or admiration induced passion.

"Love isn't white knights, it creeps up on you in friendship, to paraphrase L.M Montgomery" Neil winked at Kat.

"What the hell has that got to do with Shakespeare?" Asked Charlie frowning.

"Nothing, I'm just thinking about Anne's ideals and blindness" he nodded towards the book titled, 'Anne of the Island' on Kathleen's desk by L.M Montgomery, "I would hope that it doesn't take a Roy Gardner and the love of my life nearly dying to come to my senses, don't you agree Kat? The Gilbert Blythes of the world are taken for granted."

"I suppose" she responded. Confused by the sudden turn in conversation.

"I mean" Neil continued, "Diana Barry told Anne but she wouldn't see it, even when the whole of Avonlea could."

"What is he jabbering on about?" Charlie asked.

A wave of dread washed over her as she caught onto Neil's game, but she just shrugged. Feigning nonchalance.

"I know your Diana has an opinion" Neil smirked, staring meaningfully at the red-cheeked girl, "and us Welton lot see as clearly as the town of Avonlea."

"People can make up their own minds quite capably" she said. Ignoring Charlie in favour at staring back at Neil, trying to tell him to stop talking with her eyes. Either she failed, or he pressed on regardless.

"Kindred spirits, after all" he said, "shouldn't be pushed away for their mistakes. Although, honesty is best as even the most well-matched souls can't read each other's minds. Look how it turned out for poor Marilla" he hummed.

"Why don't you take your own advice and let me know how it goes" Kathleen snapped, irritation coursing through every fibre of her being as Neil carelessly threw her own words back in her face. Her harsh tone shocked the other two boys who watched the unfolding argument in bewilderment.
"I'm inclined to believe I'm a Fred Wright, I know where I stand" he shrugged, "but Anne is so stubborn. Maybe a Christine Stuart or two would be good to hurry things along."

Kathleen glowered, "Neil Perry, stop this nonsense and get on with the work."

"Neil" Todd warned, not liking the turn in Kathleen's mood. The usually sunny girl was practically a thunderstorm. Sitting rigidly like she might explode at any moment.

"I know that Sydney Carton was Lucie's dearest friend, but he was unrequited, so I thought Gilbert Blythe was a better fit for the situation" he ploughed on. Hoping to break through the wall to Kathleen's true feelings.

Her eyes flashed.

"I don't understand what's going" Charlie said trying to ease the tension, "but I think-"

"We're not supposed to" whispered Todd.

"Please, stay out of this" Kathleen closed her eyes and breathed deeply for a second, wrestling with her emotions for control over her body.

"Kat" Neil said, his tone softer, "I just think that-"

"You've done enough thinking" her eyes opened to reveal a face clear of any expression, "and enough talking. Perhaps Todd should voice his opinion on the love between Othello and Desdemona. Since you seem to respect his opinion more than mine" she said calmly. Rising from her seat to fetch some books from Keating's desk before anybody had the chance to respond.

"What the hell was that?" Charlie scowled, watching Kathleen select four battered books from the pile.

"Nothing for you to worry about" he shrugged.

"Neil" pleaded Todd, "don't."

"I'm helping, she needs it" his brown eyes melted as they landed their gaze upon Todd's distressed face, "I'm sorry. I know you don't like conflict."

"And I don't like it when you talk in your exclusive literary code" sulked Charlie, "that was over my head, Neil. You did that on purpose."

"It's in your best interests" he protested.

"Well, it doesn't seem to be in hers."

Neil studied his best friend of six years, "Charlie, I promise you that it is. I know that she's under a lot of pressure, we all are. This is helping her, I swear."

Charlie said nothing, but eventually he nodded.

"Thank you" Neil breathed quietly, watching Kathleen draw closer to her abandoned seat.

She distributed the academic books before sitting down, her posture stiff and her face still infuriatingly neutral.

"Todd, how about you go first" said Charlie, his tone unusually subdued as he eyed the novel
laying innocently on Kathleen's desk. He couldn't for the life of him remember who Sydney Carton was, but he recalled Kat mentioning the name several times, and he had certainly never heard of Gilbert Blythe. Suddenly he found himself regretting all the time he wasted in English over the last few years, if only he knew what had unsettled her so much, he thought, tuning out Todd's stammered words about betrayal, choosing to study his two best friends instead. One of them would drop a hint, he assured himself. It was just a question of who would crack first.

Okay, explanation time for those who have never heard of Anne of Green Gables.

**SPOILER WARNING:**

1) Anne becomes close friends with Gilbert Blythe, who falls in love with her. Anne loves him too, but she hasn't realised it yet. She is convinced that she only sees him as a friend and this temporarily ruins their friendship.

2) While they have stopped talking, Anne thinks she falls in love with a man called Roy Gardner, but later realises that she was blinded by her childhood dreams of love. At the same time Gilbert befriends a girl called Christine, whose brother asked Gilbert to look after her while she settles into college. Christine is engaged to a man at home, but rumours spread that Gilbert is planning to propose to her.

3) Misunderstandings and angst enthuse before things are resolved. Diana Barry is Anne's best friend and Avonlea is their hometown. Diana and everyone in Avonlea can see how much Anne and Gilbert love each other, before Anne realises herself.

4) Fred Wright is Diana's fiancé. They both knew they liked each other and acted on it. In contrast to the struggle between Anne and Gilbert.

= Neil is using these characters to tell Kathleen that she and Charlie are like Anne and Gilbert. Charlie like Gilbert knows he likes his female bestfriend.

= Neil warns Kat that she might trick herself into a false love if she continues, and suggests that jealousy of other girls around Charlie might be good for her.

= Welton, like Avonlea can see that they like each other. Kathleen is in denial much like Anne. Nancy is like Diana who is trying to talk sense into her friend.

= Marilla is a character who lost her chance at love after an argument with the man she loved when they were young. They never made up and she never found love again. Neil uses her character as a warning.

= Neil argues that he is like Fred Wright because he knows his crush likes him back.

That was more complicated in words than it was in my head. Very sorry if my explanation has confused anyone.
"...the sorrows we brought on ourselves, through folly or wickedness, were by far the hardest to bear."

~ Anne of the Island, L.M Montgomery

Chapter Thirty - Judgement Day

Two sharp knocks sounded on the door of third period geometry, the harsh sound cut through the quiet scratch of pencils. Eight heads in particular shot up as the door opened, and Mr Nolan took three, firm steps into the room, certain that this was the end as far as the dead poets were concerned.

But it was not.

"Classes will finish an hour early this afternoon" he announced. "Regrettably, a compulsory assembly will be held, which you are to go directly to in place of your last class. Understood?"

"Yes, sir" echoed the students.

With one last look of scrutiny around the young faces staring back he left, the door closing with a thud behind him.

Kathleen caught Neil's eye and he attempted a smile, but it did not reach his eyes. A similar wordless conversation passed between Meeks and Pitts at the back of the room. It felt as if the net they had deluded themselves into escaping was finally catching up, poised above the water ready to banish their freedom, in exchange for an eternity in the fishbowl they had tried so desperately to escape.

Suddenly, Kathleen felt an odd kinship with captured sea creatures that she had never felt before. XXXX

Only five turned up to lunch. Well, more accurately five plus Cameron who had decided to begin distancing himself and had chosen a seat elsewhere. Their worlds might have been ending but the outside world was not. The day that Richard Cameron skipped a meal would be the day he was six feet under, even then he would be dining at precisely one o'clock inside the pearly gates of heaven, or depths of hell. As Charlie had pointed out eagerly, it all depended on one's view of redheads.

Meeks and Pitts were missing, assumed to be hiding the kitchens. Knox although present in body was certainly not present at the table in mind. Todd had reverted to the nervous silence of his early days at Welton. Leaving Neil to navigate an appeasing conversation with his rather falsely cheerful best friend while Kathleen tried to communicate with Todd using only her eyes - contributing audibly to the conversation only when asked a question.

Fifth period followed in so much of a similar fashion that it was almost a relief when the bell
signalled for their descent into the assembly hall and their inevitable doom. The group reunited for the first time since first period as they made their way down to the hall and took their seats, ignoring the whispers of speculation from the student body around them. Even Charlie was silent, but a small smirk played across his lips which worried Neil - who was sat on his other side - enough to elbow him into solemnity.

Silence fell when the teacher's footfalls were heard on the steps. Mr Keating winked at the group as he passed with a newspaper in his hand like many other members of the faculty. Every student rose, standing patiently until Mr Nolan instructed them to sit from his podium at the front.

"In this week of Welton's Honour there appeared a profane and unauthorized article." The headmaster addressed the assembly with a frown. "Rather than spending my valuable time ferreting out the guilty persons - and let me assure you I will find them - I'm asking any and all students who know anything about this article to make themselves known here and now. Whoever the guilty persons are, this is your only chance to avoid expulsion from this school."

Cameron made a move to stand but Knox dutifully yanked him down, but before his movement could be noticed the shrill ringing of a bell echoed around the stone walls. The noise caught the attention of the staff who looked around in confusion for the source. The poets' own confusion was short-lived as they realised one by one, that the culprit was amongst them.

Kathleen's mouth fell open as Charlie pulled a telephone out from under the bench, ringing a bicycle bell attached to his left thumb.

"What are you doing!?" Hissed Neil.

Kat made a grab for the telephone, but he was to quick. The colour drained from Cameron's face and the group exchanged looks of pure horror at the drama that was unfolding before them.

Stood up in a sea of matching blazers and shock, Charlie Dalton answered the phone, "Welton Academy. Hello. Yes, he is. Just a moment." In a performance that Neil would have been proud of in any other scenario, he said in a tone of equal surprise and nonchalance, "Mr. Nolan, it's for you...It's God! He says we should have girls at Welton."

Laughter erupted from around the room, prompting Mr Nolan's face to turn an impressive shade of crimson. Cringing, the dead poets sunk low in their seats and shook their heads in utter disbelief.

Charlie held the phone out towards Mr Nolan. Apparently oblivious to the rapidly rising blood pressure of the both the faculty and his friends, he basked in the reactions he had elicited from the teachers and student body.

"My office, Dalton. NOW!" Mr Nolan pointed to the doorway before turning his attention to the rest of the students with no less aggression, "you are all dismissed."

Taking advantage of the chaotic discussion taking place amongst the staff, the teenagers exited boisterously. Various boys slapped Charlie on the back in congratulations for his daring stunt, others in sympathy for the whipping he was about to receive. Nobody needed Kathleen to explain the meaning of her Grandfather's strained expression. It was one the more troublesome boys were already well acquainted with.

"Charlie!" Kathleen pushed her way through the throng of males, "CHARLIE!"

"Come to lecture me or congratulate me?"

"Come with you, actually" she grabbed his arm and pushed her way out of the horde, pulling him
along with her. Ignoring his protests, she marched him up to her Grandfather's office and slammed the door shut behind them.

"Kat-

"WHAT THE HELL!" She shouted, "are you that much of a fool or just a masochist."

"Calm dow-

"I am not calm, Dalton" she snapped, "so don't patronise me. You know what he's going to do to you. He has an entire cupboard of torture weapons and you're practically begging for him use the worst of them! Yes, humiliating him is daydream we all have. But, doing it, and in front of the entire school is not a sane thing to do-

"I KNOW THAT" he cut in, "I don't care what he does to me! Which is why you need to leave because I happen to care about what he does to you."

"I am not leaving" she crossed her arms, staring him down defiantly.

"I thought you didn't like to pull the family card."

"I don't" she gritted her teeth.

"Then don't" he threw his arms up. "Look, I appreciate your concern, but I'm a big boy. I can handle a little whipping."

"You shouldn't have to!"

"Kat! Don't worry about me. Just get out before he gets here."

The door clicked.

"Too late" she whispered, heart pounding as she squeezed his hand. She dropped it as the door opened, too focused on the oncoming storm to see him staring down at the spot where their hands had been entwined mere seconds ago, flexing his left hand.

"Kathleen?" Gale Nolan's eyebrows jumped up at the sight of his granddaughter stood next to the miscreant by his desk.

"Good afternoon" she replied weakly.

"Why don't you wait outside. I will be with you ten minutes."

"It has to be now" she blurted.

"Go" whispered Charlie.

Mr Nolan's eyes slid back to the troublemaker, "what was that?"

"I told her to go, sir."

"No, this isn't right" she protested.

"Stop this insolence at once, Kathleen. Go back to your dormitory."

"There is no proof that Charlie is responsible" she cried, "maybe a detention for that silly stunt just
now, but corporal punishment...Grandfather, you can't!"

"Do not tell me what I can and cannot do, young lady" Mr Nolan held open the door, "obey me, and stop this nonsense."

"Please!"

"I SAID OUT" He shouted. She flinched, and he took a calming breath.

Charlie broke the silence, "It's my fault, Kat. I am not worth getting into trouble over. Listen to him."

"Those words are the most intelligent that you have uttered since beginning this school, Mr Dalton. Take heed of his advice, Kathleen."

Blinking back tears Kathleen left.

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Biting his lip, Charlie watched her walk out.

"Wipe that smirk of your face" Mr Nolan circled around him, finally settling in a standing position behind his desk. "My Granddaughter may have a sensitive disposition, but I certainly do not."

He remained silent as the headmaster's stare bored into him.

"If you think, Mr. Dalton, that you're the first to try to get thrown out of this school, think again." Nolan continued, "Others have had similar notions and have failed just as surely as you will fail. Assume the position."

With a sigh, Charlie braced his hands on the desk.

Mr Nolan crossed the room and opened the famous right-hand cupboard. He did need to turn around to know that the headmaster was selecting the tool he felt most appropriate to express his anger. While he waited - as much as it would shame him to admit - he thought about how much worse this could be with Kathleen's failed intervention. Nolan hated him. That was common knowledge. How he would react to his only granddaughter defending him could be painful.

"Ah" Mr Nolan selected a hard, wooden paddle that would not look out of place in a garden cricket set. Taking out his cufflink and rolling up his sleeve, the authority figure turned towards the boys who had caused so much disruption to his beloved institution throughout the years. "Count aloud, Mr Dalton."

Charlie gulped, keeping his face neutral.

The first blow was delivered.

"One."

Another swing.

"Two."

Another.

"Three."
Again.
"Four" he spat.

SMACK.

"Five."

A harsher strike.

"Six" he breathed, not wanting to give the man the satisfaction of hearing his pain.

A quicker strike.

"Seven."

TWACK.

"Eight" he growled.

Again.

"Nine."

The last, violent strike was delivered, and Mr Nolan watched the boy's face screw up in pain.

"Ten" he choked out.

"What is the Dead Poets society? I want names." He placed the paddle down on his desk in full view of the student.

Silence.

"You are to turn in every member of this club and apologise. Then all may be forgiven." He rolled down his sleeve and replaced his cufflink. "Go back to your dormitory. Let us hope that your lesson had sunk in."

Chapter End Notes

Keep your eyes peeled this weekend for the next chapter. A christmas gift from me!
Chapter 31 - Pain, pain, making me insane

Chapter Notes

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

It's a shame that the Christmas chapters will be out once winter is over but never mind. I hope that you all enjoy the holiday time even if you don't celebrate Christmas. Eat lots of food, watch good movies and read great books!

"Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it."

~ Percy Bysshe Shelley

Chapter thirty-one - Pain, pain, making me insane

Kathleen leaned against the wall outside the office, trying desperately to hold back the tears which threatened to cascade down her cheeks. Taking deep breaths in and out, she slowed her heart rate and concentrated on erasing the barrage of emotion and memories which were running wild through her mind.

She could see it all now. The first time she had seen the cupboard. Her confusion when her strict but always kind Grandfather explained that bad children needed to be punished properly. She recalled with crystal clarity the blinding pain and her screams when he used a thin paddle on her for the first and only time. All because she had lied to him about breaking an antique that he had explicitly told her not to touch. Kat remembered the vicious argument which ensued once her parents found out what her Grandfather had done. Her father's shaking hands and her mother's tears while they comforted her younger self were a memory she could never forget. More recently, she thought of her little brother coming home unable to sit at the dinner table after getting the cane at school. Her parents had frowned as he shrugged it off as no big deal despite the grimaces on his face with every movement. It was wrong. A deeply unfair part of the despotic establishment that Keating had been giving them the tools to fight.

Now one of her closest friends was in there. She had left Charlie to face the wrath of powerful figure alone. Kat couldn't explain why she ran in there like that, or why the thought of him suffering hurt her so much. The whole situation just felt wrong. Shaking her head, she pushed off the wall and began the journey back to the boys' dorms to wait with the others. Her pace increasing as she heard the first thwack through the door.

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"He's been ages" Neil repeated, glancing at his watch for a third time, "how long should this take?"

"Twenty minutes max" answered Fraser from his doorway. "The answer won't change Perry. Take the damn thing off already."

Todd took a step sideways, sliding along the wall to bump Neil softly with his shoulder. Prompting
an exchange of small, nervous smiles.

Kat watched them from her position, cross legged on the floor with her back against the wall opposite them. She had been rather taken aback by the crowd awaiting Charlie's heroic return. Somehow, she had ended up in a surprisingly pleasant conversation with Fraser about their impending dinner arrangements. Talking to him required energy and as far as Kathleen was concerned, she badly needed the distraction. All conversation had faded from the corridor as time passed, with anticipation gradually seeping in to take its place. Knox was pacing, and Pitts was stress eating the crackers he had liberated from the kitchens. A reward garnered from a successful distraction mission, which he had dragged Meeks along on a few minutes ago. The short trip to kitchens had stopped their individual quarrels with Cameron, who then stalked off to the library in a strop.

"Charlie!" Neil perked up, causing all heads to turn in the direction the tall boy was staring in.

Kathleen shot up from the floor almost headbutting Fraser in her haste.

"Careful" he muttered, but she ignored him. Choosing instead to dart over to Todd while Neil headed over to greet to his friend. They all watched Charlie walk serenely towards Neil, albeit rather stiffly.

"You get kicked out?" Neil stepped back when Charlie swatted his helping hands away.

"No."

"Come on, what happened?" He followed his friend to his door, ignoring the swarm of nosy onlookers forming around him.

Charlie opened his door and stepped into his darkened room, turning back towards the lightened corridor to say, "I'm to turn everybody in, apologize to the school and all will be forgiven."

Knox inhaled sharply.

"So, what are you going to do?" Asked Neil "Charlie!"

"Damn it, Neil. The name is Nuwanda" he smiled, shutting the door on the curious crowd left in awe on the other side.

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"It's been two hours!" Kat slammed her cards down on the table, "someone should check on him."

"His pride had been hurt" Meeks said, "leave him for a bit."

"More than his pride" she protested, "you haven't seen the cupboard of cruelty."

"Ace" Knox put his corresponding card down in the centre. Choosing to continue with the game. One that Kathleen thought must win top prize for the most mind-numbing card game in history.

"He always wants to be alone when he's in a mood" Neil inspected his hand.

"That's why someone should see how he his" she ignored the game, "It's been ages and he's almost as social as you, Neil. Anti-social and Charlie in the same sentence is an oxymoron."

"See, if Charlie was here" Meeks pushed his glasses up his nose, "he would call that nerd language. Just act like he is. I'll help you pretend."
"Who wants their turn" interrupted Knox, "since Kat clearly isn't playing."

Todd looked between Neil and Kat, "it has been a while..."

"I guess" conceded Neil, "but I don't want to risk worsening his mood further."

Exasperated, Kat threw her cards into the middle "if none of you cowards will go, I will."

"Cowards?" Squeaked Meeks.

"Yes, cowards" she teased as she stood.

"I don't think it's a good idea" Knox warned, "I'd want to be alone if I were him."

"Then it's a good job you're not" she called over her shoulder, walking determinedly out of the room.

The boys shook their heads as her figure disappeared from view.

"I suppose if anyone can get through that thick head of his, it's her" sighed Neil.

"But she hasn't got that concept through hers" muttered Pitts, "this is painful to watch."

"Can't we say something" Knox shuffled the cards Kathleen had abandoned.

"Nah, best not to get involved" shrugged Neil, winking at Todd "these things have a way of sorting themselves out."

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Kat knocked.

"Enter if you must" called a deep voice from inside. She pushed open the door, letting her eyes adjust to the dim, glowing light which spilled into the room from the orange sunset visible through the open window.

"It's me" she said softly, closing the door behind her.

"Oh. Come sit down" he shuffled closer to the wall, still laying on his front. He pushed up on his elbows, turning to face her. Tentatively she perched on Cameron's bed with her legs folded underneath her.

Charlie arched an eyebrow "Cameron will kill you."

"Cameron is having a strop in the library, he'll never know" she countered.

"When isn't he" came a muttered response.

"We were all a little stressed" she defended, but the grin on her face and tone of voice contradicted her words.

"Sure" he replied. His tone equally as sarcastic.

Pulling a loose thread on her jumper, she avoided his eyes in the following silence. Half-regretting her decision to come here and half-wishing that Cameron was in the room yelling at her to stop crinkling his sheets. Cameron could likely distract from anything if he was given the right topic to
"Are you...alright?"

"Me?" She looked up, startled. "I should be the one asking you that question."

"Well, that would be stupid" he snarked, "I've just been cruelly beaten."

"Which is why I didn't ask" she smiled, "at least your sarcasm is intact."

He laughed, looking almost surprised by the action.

"What I meant to say is that I'm sorry. For shouting at you, I mean."

"Don't worry about it" he shrugged, "it's fine."

"It's not fine" she disagreed, shaking her head. "I maintain that you were being stupid. However, screaming at you doesn't help. Even worse, I made Nolan angrier."

"Has he spoken to you about what happened in the office?"

"Not yet. It's fine, he'll probably pretend it never happened."

"Liar."

She sighed, "then I guess we'll have to see."

Charlie nodded, silent for a moment. "You were right, y'know. All of you - and I'll kill you myself if you repeat this to anyone other than Neil or Todd."

"Nancy?" She negotiated.

"Fine" he stated, "but my words are not to be repeated."

"My lips are sealed" she promised.

"Right, well I-I didn't think they would question me taking the blame or try to pressure me into giving names." He confessed, "I don't think I was even thinking, to be honest." He bit his lip, "I knew you tiptoed around Nolan but the way he treated you in there, hell. I didn't know the ice was that thin. I could have gotten you removed and it would have been my fault."

Kathleen opened her mouth and closed it again. Unable to find the right words. Instead, she looked away from his pale face. His words were sincere, but his voice was laced with pain and somehow her insides ached. The strength of his anguish hurt her, she realised with a jolt. "You didn't mean to" she managed to say, "but please think before you do something so bold. One day it will end badly."

"I know" he replied quietly, staring down at his hands. "I don't think I'll be at dinner."

"Okay." She let him change the subject and stood up to leave. "Thank you. And I'm sorry about Nolan. He shouldn't have done that, it shouldn't be allowed."

"It's not your fault" he mumbled, watching the door swing shut behind her for the second time that day. Ignoring the burning pain, he stretched over to his bedside table, opening the top drawer to retrieve a worn, brown notebook. Taking care that none of the loose sheets fell out, he pulled it towards him, pulled out the pen and flipped it open to a clean page. Using his hands to drum a beat.
on his wooden bedframe, he began to chant under his breath.

"Pain, pain, making me insane..."

By the time Cameron returned to the room after dinner, Charlie was in his pyjamas under his bedcovers with the lights out, refusing any attempts at conversation. Instead, he lay in the darkness ruminating about his newest poem. If he couldn't speak the words, maybe he could perform them.
Chapter 32 - Dust and gasoline

Chapter Notes

I'm back and I've missed you these past two months. To make up for my absence I present you with this monster of a chapter, a whole four thousand words of apology.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"In secret we met
In silence I grieve,
That thy heart could forget,
Thy spirit deceive."

~ Lord Byron

Chapter thirty-two -Dust and gasoline

The sky above Welton was a muted blue, tinged with a layer of grey beneath the wispy clouds. Not a trace of yesterday's golden sunlight remained. Some, namely Neil, announced that it was as an eerie reflection of the mellowed atmosphere.

He wasn't wrong.

All of the excitement from the previous day had vanished, and a widespread, apathetic mood had seemingly tiptoed into its place. Kathleen rubbed her eyes for what felt like the millionth time and yawned into her cereal. Neil slid his own, untouched coffee towards her and swapped it for her orange juice with a reproachful look.

"Stop it" Kat mumbled, taking a sip which scorch ed her tongue.

"I'll stop when you have nap." Todd nudged his side and Neil's eyes softened when he looked back Kathleen. "He's fine, y'know. We looked in on him."

Ignoring the scalding heat on her tongue, she took a larger mouthful from the mug.

"He'll be in the library. I don't think he wanted the attention at breakfast" Todd added quietly, sounding perplexed by the latter half of his statement. "He said something about subverting the conditioned demand for immediate consumption of art?"

"I didn't expect him to come to breakfast, or study group." Kat grimaced at the tenderness of her burnt tongue. "I've been thinking about Nolan's reaction. He hasn't summoned me yet and he did not look impressed by my outburst...I don't really know what happened myself."

Neil tilted his head to the side, "Oh."

"Oh?"

"It's nothing" he said, moving on before she could challenge him further, "if you're going to continue pushing your cornflakes around then we'll go now. If not, eat quickly."
"Not" Kathleen decided, standing up first.

"Alright, then. Let's go." Neil led the two brunettes in a zig zag around the tables before they reached the sparse hallway.

Kat turned to Todd in mock bewilderment as they trekked down to the library, "did I just get away with eating no breakfast? Usually there would have been a lecture from Mum."

"Mom" both boys corrected under their breath.

"Ha-ha" Neil rolled his eyes, "like I haven't heard the mom jokes before."

"Oh, I know you have" Kat grinned, stifling another yawn. "I don't have the brain power to be original today."

"Thank heavens. I don't know how I would survive your cutting wit."
Kat pouted, "rude."

"Grumpy" he countered, holding open the library door, "and don't complain to me when you're hungry later."

"I knew it!" She cried, prompting Todd to muffle a laugh, "you can't help mothering us. It's in your DNA, Perry."

"I don't mother anyone" he argued, rounding the corners of the book shelves. Neil knew his efforts were futile as the words left his lips in the same moment that the trio approached the table seating the rest of the group.

As expected, he was welcomed by a chorus of "you do."

"Where were you mom?" whined Charlie, "I needed help with my chemistry homework."

"We don't have any chemistry homework, you dolt" Neil dropped into an empty seat and reached across the table to whack Charlie lightly on the side of the head.

"This is abuse" he crossed his arms indignantly, "I'm injured. I'm off limits for at least a week."

"You're fine" Cameron interrupted, passing sheets of paper to the three new arrivals. "We are doing the Latin paragraph and then we'll move onto math."

Kat made a noise of protest that sounded embarrassingly like a whimper.

Nial patted her shoulder, "copy mine."

Cameron glared but Neil shushed him. "Kat is exhausted, Richard. She's running on coffee."

"Just let it go, Cameron" Knox frowned when he opened his mouth.

"Fine. But don't expect any help from me until you're willing to do it yourself."

"Have a heart" growled Charlie.

"Oh, shut-up. You are just upset that I wouldn't pass your stupid bongos."

"They were out of comfortable reach" he spat through gritted teeth.
"Okay, time for Latin" Neil called "Meeks, what a have you written about so far?"

Meeks pushed up his glasses, "a generic description of an observatory. Pick any place that you can talk about confidently and focus on the grammar" he explained. "You also need to mention a reason for your choice. For example, I picked an observatory because I hope to work for NASA. Everyone good?"

They nodded.

"Great."

Surprisingly, the group lasted almost the full two hours before Mr Smythe chased them out. Despite the mildly frightening experience of being pursued by a profanity spewing, elderly, maniac wielding an encyclopaedia, the poets where in a rather good mood considering the circumstances. Even Cameron joined in the jovial, dramatised rendition of 'O Captain! My Captain!' through the empty halls on the way to Latin.

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"Pssst" a ball of paper bounced across Charlie's desk.

"Hey!" Fraser hissed, stretching forwards to tap his unresponsive target on the shoulder.

"Come on, man" whispered Hopkins, his eyes trained on Mr McAllister.

Neil tapped his pencil on his desk and gestured for the boys to pay attention to the lesson, but they ignored him in favour of throwing chunks of erasers and balled paper at Charlie, whose body grew visibly tenser with each hit.

Kat met Knox's eyes as they both glanced nervously at the situation developing ahead of them

"Charlie" Fraser poked him in the back with his pencil. He turned to face Fraser with an expression of distain.

"My name is Nuwanda, or hadn't you heard?" His tone was icy enough raise the eyebrows of several classmates within hearing range of the spectacle.

"Seriously? That's stupid."

Rolling his eyes, Charlie began to turn back to the front, but Hopkins jumped in, "you never told us what happened with Nolan yesterday."

"Gather everyone in the common room after geometry" he stated cryptically. He ignored all further attempts of communication from students outside of the society throughout lunch and afternoon classes. Eventually, the student body seemed to give up on their collective efforts to piece together exactly what happened between the end of assembly and Nuwanda's return.

That was how poets found themselves later that day. Along with the rest of their year group and a few brave lower years, who found themselves a spot on the floor around the armchair which Charlie occupied in the common room. It had already grown dark outside. The windows were shut tight against the chill, and the lamps bathed the space in a low, orange glow. As his closest friends, the society had managed to squish themselves onto the few arm chairs and the one sofa nearby. Pitts and Meeks were tangled like contortionists on one, with Pitts' long limbs hanging over the side. Neil and Todd were comfortably squished together on another, leaving Kat with Knox and Cameron on the sofa. Cameron had managed to isolate himself on one half, while Knox claimed
the other end with Kat in the middle and a blanket draped over their knees. The rest of the students were designated the hardwood floor where they sat like kindergarten children eager for story time.

Charlie was in the centre, with a pair of dark glasses on, a cigarette in one hand and bongos on his lap, which he played with his free hand. Honestly, Kat agreed with Cameron that he looked ridiculous, but kept her mouth shut out of sheer curiosity about what had occurred the previous evening; even if it required her to discern the truth from a rather dramatised performance.

"Creeeak" he imitated the tired floorboards of Nolan's office, hitting the bongos to create the sound of footsteps. "He started walking around towards my left" he said, "creeak, creeeak. Assume the position Mr Dalton." He took another drag of his cigarette, blowing the smoke out slowly, and was interrupted by the real creaking of the common room door opening. The sound jolted the audience out of their reverie and many scrambled to remove themselves from the suspicious gathering.

"It's alright" called a familiar voice as Kathleen craned her neck to see which teacher had startled the others.

"Mr Keating" Charlie removed his sunglasses to greet their favourite teacher with a smile that was not returned.

"Mr Dalton. That was a pretty lame stunt you pulled today."

"You're siding with Mr Nolan?" He looked up at the man in front of him, his forehead creased, "what about carpe diem and sucking all the marrow out of life? What about all of that?"

Keating sighed, "sucking the marrow out of life does not mean choking on the bone. Sure, there is a time for daring and there is time for caution. A wise man understands which is called for."

"But I thought you'd like that" he admitted, prompting Keating's expression to soften.

"No. You being expelled from school is not daring to me, because you would miss some golden opportunities."

"Like what?" He mumbled, unconvinced.

"Like, if nothing else, the opportunity to attend my classes. Got it, Ace?"

"Aye, aye, Captain."

"Keep your head about you" Keating winked before scanning the faces of the watchful students around them, "and that goes for the lot of you."

"Yes, Captain" the students chorused.

Satisfied with their attentiveness, Keating headed out of the room, "phone call from God" he shook his head. "If it had been collect, that would have been daring."

The door shut behind him on the echoes of laughter which faded into a resumption of the dramatic tale he had interrupted minutes before. It would be almost two years before Keating would admit to staying behind the closed door to listen in on the tale. The teacher made himself scarce once the students began to mumble about dinner, not wanting to encourage reckless behaviour with his admiration for the unparalleled daring of the young man.

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"I think I've got the technique" Meeks called over the din of the cutlery, he rolled the spaghetti over his fork shakily, using the knife in his right hand to steady the movement. Neil and Cameron studied his method and successfully ate a mouthful, while Todd gave up altogether and simply ate dinner with his left hand in a daintier manner than Pitts, who shovelled in fistfuls.

Knox snorted into his water as spaghetti dropped out of Pitt's mouth and splattered tomato sauce down his front.

"You're so disgusting" Kathleen giggled, ducking to avoid the droplets of sauce which sprayed out of Pitt's mouth when he laughed.

"At least he's eating" Charlie complained. "It's like eating an octopus or something..." he trailed off as Hager strolled over, halting by the head of the table.

"Mr Dalton" he boomed.

"Sir?" He looked up innocently.

"Are you gentleman normally all left-handed?" Hager grimaced at the mess covering both the tables and the students themselves. Meeks had already begun to discreetly wipe his sleeve on his napkin.

"No, sir" the table's occupants put down their cutlery and stared either at the table or repentantly at Hager.

"Then why are you eating with your left hands?"

"We thought it would be good to break old habits, sir" Knox answered, thinking back to the poem Neil had found before dinner.

"And what is wrong with old habits, Mr Overstreet?"

"Well...they perpetuate mechanical living, sir. They limit your mind."

"Mr Overstreet" Hager looked down at the seventeen-year-old, "I suggest that you worry less about breaking old habits and worry more about developing good study habits. You understand?" He asked, staring pointedly at the fork which had crept back into Knox's left hand.

He released the fork. "Yes, sir."

"That goes for all of you" he warned, removing the glass of water from Kathleen's left hand. "Now eat with the correct hands." He watched them comply with his demands for a minute before drifting towards another table where an argument had broken out over the last bread roll. Hager stopped only to place Kathleen's glass back onto the table and inform her that she was to see Mr Nolan after dinner.

As soon as Hager turned his back, they switched their utensils again and continued to change up the daily task. To spite Hager, Charlie picked up Meek's bread roll and shoved it into his mouth, almost choking in the process but he chewed determinedly. Meeks' protests dissolved into hiccups and the table descended into chaos once more.

"I con eaany mow" Pitts groaned, flinching as slimy tendrils of stringy pasta fell from his overstuffed mouth.

Cameron shielded his eyes "How are you surprised?"
"I second that" Meeks lifted the wasted slice of apple pie from Pitts' plate, giving the desert a new lease of life in his stomach.

Pitts managed a grin when Cameron poured Pitt's bowl of custard onto his own pie, thinking that nobody was watching.

"So, shall we have a meeting tonight?" Neil whispered, leaning into the centre of the table. "I thought we could celebrate Char-sorry, Nuwanda not getting expelled."

"Sounds good to me" Charlie agreed, "and I might have a little bottle of something to bring along. Feel up to it yet, Knoxy?"

"Ugh" he buried his face in his hands, "too soon."

"Now that is a point to second" Kat poked Meeks, "nobody needs him vomiting again."

"All right, everyone in?" Neil asked, looking around at the eager faces of the group. "We meet in the foyer at midnight."

" Couldn't we go earlier? It's dark already" Cameron pointed to the windows which were already a black mirror reflecting the room.

"Relax, it's the weekend-" Kat caught a glimpse of her grandfather leaving the staff table over Cameron's head. Nolan made eye contact as he strode out of the hall, choosing a path closer to her seat than usual. "Sorry, that's my cue" she threw her napkin onto the table and followed him out at a comfortable distance, only nodding in response to the calls of good luck.

By the time Kathleen reached the imposing door, she found herself in an oddly calm state. Smoothing her hair down with one hand, she rapped twice on the door with the other, waiting for permission before pushing it open. Inside the fire was roaring, and Nolan's dogs lay at the foot of the hearth, basking in the heat. More surprising, was her Grandfather's relocation from his desk to one of the arm chairs by the fire. A position usually reserved for meetings with the school board or alumni. Kathleen slipped into the armchair opposite him, keeping her back uncomfortably straight against the firm cushions.

"I do not intend to keep you for long" Nolan said. "Is there anything you would to say before you explain your childish behaviour."

Resisting the urge to roll her eyes, Kathleen apologised, hoping that the false sincerity of her tone was undetected.

Nolan inclined his head in acknowledgement. Whether he believed her or not was impossible to say, but his stare was as cold as she remembered. "I am still waiting for a suitable explanation."

"I don't agree with corporal punishment."

"I know that my opinion is irrelevant, but I cannot morally allow myself not to try to change the outcome." She looked nervously at her Grandfather who remained unreadable. "He is one of my closest friends. I-I don't like to see any of my friends hurt. I had to do something. My actions were...improper. I recognise that I broke rules. I let my emotions get the better of me. I apologise."

Nolan sighed, "you are a sensitive girl, Kathleen. I forget how little you know of the world. Order must be kept, usually at the expense of an individual. Rules serve a purpose, society needs rules.
Do not forget that, no matter how sympathetic you are to the suffering of another."

She nodded.

"Good. You are to walk with Mr Andrews to my rooms at seven o'clock on Sunday evening, where you shall greet his Father. I expect nothing less than your best behaviour for this dinner. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Grandfather."

"Then you may return to your studies."

Kathleen left the stifling warmth of the study at a speed that was almost rude. She twirled the diamond pendant - that her Grandfather had given her not long ago- around her finger as she walked back to her dorm room to pick up the book she had been hoping to finish tonight. With her copy of Anne of the Island safely under her right arm, she walked down to the common room where she informed Fraser of Nolan's instructions for Sunday and re-joined her friends. She curled up on the end of the sofa nearest to Cameron and brushed off the questions about the meeting. She must have looked more dejected than she felt, because they left her alone to read in peace.

' "There is no need Phil. I'm in the dust. This has spoiled everything backwards. I can never think of Redmond days without recalling the humiliation of this evening. Roy despises me - and you despise me - and I despise myself."

"You poor darling," said Phil, melting. "Just come here and let me comfort you. I've no right to scold you. I'd have married Alec or Alonzo if I hadn't met Jo. Oh, Anne, things are so mixed up in real life. They aren't as clear cut and trimmed off, as they are in novels."

"I hope that no one will ever ask again ask me to marry him as long as I live," sobbed poor Anne; devoutly believing that she meant it."

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By midnight when Kat joined the boys in the foyer, her mood had lifted considerably. And by the time they reached the cave, all traces of negativity had been erased from her mind by their antics - and Pitt’s legendary, face first, fall into a hole.

The group settled down in the cave and read poetry by the firelight for almost thirty minutes before Charlie pulled two bottles of whiskey from his coat. The amber liquid was well received by all, and the bottles were passed around until they were almost empty. Talk soon turned to the 'mad, bad and dangerous to know' Lord Byron, Charlie's latest hero after Keating's conversation with the class earlier in week.

"Never mind his questionable morals" Kathleen interrupted Cameron's tirade, "his daughter was Ada Lovelace!"

"And he fought for Greek Independence with everything he had" added Knox, "he would've died for it if illness hadn't got him first.

"Don't forget the establishment of the Byronic hero" Neil gestured wildly, "the entire trope was his creation. Literature wouldn’t be the same without his contribution."

"Master of puns" snorted Pitts, "get it? The irony of bi. Byronic, bisexual, Byron.
The group groaned at the joke, except Cameron who frowned.

"Don't be silly, Pitts. He was a notorious womaniser."

"Come on, Cameron" Charlie laughed sarcastically, "do you really expect us to believe you weren't listening to word Keating said in class. The man was clearly bisexual, opening the right book will have the evidence printed in black and white."

"I think he's scared of the possibility" joked Neil, but his wary expression conflicted with his easy tone.

"Never mind the possibility, he's scared of half the poets worshipped by the group and likely half the boys in the school" Charlie said, "who hasn't considered sticking to their own side now and then? Right?"

"Sure" Kathleen propped herself up on her elbows, "everyone does at some point."

Pitts shrugged, and the other boys responded similarly or hummed in agreement, except for Cameron who said, "No. It's illegal."

"So is assault, yet I often think about punching you " Charlie glared at him. "In fact," he said, throwing in a wink " it's become a fantasy of mine."

Cameron made a face of disgust.

"Come on, it's a school full of hormonal teenage boys" Meeks interjected, "things happen outside of fantasies."

"It's the same in a school of girls. Any school, actually" Kat agreed.

"Yeah" Neil nodded, "why did you think Ted and Andrew got expelled a few years back."

Kathleen rolled onto her stomach, resting her chin on her hands. The boys rarely spoke of the past. Most of them seemed to focus on their futures, or the here and the now. In her all-consuming interest, Todd's sudden pallor escaped her notice.

"As part of school annual that year, I had the privilege of working with all the journalist wannabes and school loudmouths. The editor was in Nolan's office for a meeting when Andrew's parents called him, he was sent out, but he heard the expulsion was officially recorded as severe misconduct and inappropriate behaviour. Rumour had it, that Hager found them together."

"Quick and discreet handling" whispered Todd. Kat frowned at the strange, almost sickly expression on his face.

"Exactly" Neil nodded, "that's what we all thought at the time."

"The only inappropriate thing about it was Hager's presence" Charlie smirked at the thought of Hager's face.

"But Cameron, a few of the romantic poets had a variety of relationships" stated Knox. "You seem to enjoy the club and the club is about their values of freedom, imagination and revolution. Why do you think we go to the cave?"

"Not all of them" Cameron insisted with a blush staining his cheeks, "we are not practicing free love or spirituality."
"Speak for yourself" Charlie snapped, "point is we have the right to a choice. Don't tell me you support that monster McCarthy*!"

Todd slipped out of the cave as the argument erupted. Neil was too busy listing the poets - who Keating had mentioned to him after class once - to notice the shaking figure try to escape. Kathleen wasn't. Immediately, she followed him, shooting a reassuring glance to Neil who had looked to his left and saw an empty space.

Outside, Todd was sat on a rock taking deep breaths.

"Balincrest" Kathleen joined him, sitting cross-legged on the muddy ground. "I didn't put it together before. That's why you left, isn't it?"

Todd nodded "he was the one who taught me about cars."

Kat stayed quiet, simply squeezing his hand in what she hoped was a reassuring manner.

He reciprocated with a grateful smile. "It doesn't hurt much anymore" he whispered "but I can't do it again. Not-not now."

"Things are different here" she agreed, staring at the ground. "It's almost feels like that part in a book where you know something big is coming, but you don't quite know what. Whatever it is will change things forever, but you don't want them to change, the characters are finally getting what they want-what they need, but you know it can't last forever."

"Like the air before a thunderstorm on a sunny day."

"Exactly" Kat met his eyes, "I'm not going crazy."

Todd nodded, "I-I think it's because we know different." He swallowed, "all they know is Welton, but this home is new to us. It's still precious."

"And the outside world isn't as distant." The pair sat in silence, staring up at the moon until the crunch of leaves indicated a presence.

"Are you alright?" Asked Knox.

"Fine, j-just needed some air" Todd stood up, giving Kathleen a hand up and smiling guiltily as she tried to rub the mud off her pyjama pants.

"You guys ready to head back? It's quarter to two" called another voice from the mouth of the cave, followed by the appearance of Neil's face.

Kat nodded, nudging Todd to do the same. Seemingly satisfied, Neil turned away from them to call the others, and a moment later he led the procession back through the woods. His roommate was at his side and he laughed as he took another burning swig of the whiskey Charlie had passed around at the meeting. Kat watched the pair, nodding vacantly as Pitts explained the latest improvements to the radio he and Meeks had been working on. By the time she fell into bed at two thirty, she was too tired to think, so instead she dreamt about a familiar, timid boy, left all alone in a cloud of dust and gasoline.

Chapter End Notes
*Charlie's mention of McCarthy is a reference not to the red scare, but the lesser known lavender scare in the 1950s as another branch of McCarthyism.
Chapter 33 - Stars, hide your fires, part I

Chapter Notes

Something tells me you will like this chapter a lot. I'm super excited to hear your thoughts!

"Stars, hide your fires; Let not light see my black and deep desires."

~ William Shakespeare, Macbeth

Chapter thirty-three - Stars, hide your fires, part I

"As much as I love the library, I don't want to spend all day in here" Kat scanned the shelves for a copy of 'On the Road.' "Are you sure the school has one?"

"Yes" he frowned, moving onto the next row, "Keating said he donated a copy, and told old man grumpy, that it was important for wider reading."

Whether 'old man grumpy' referred to the librarian or Nolan, Kathleen did not know nor care. Another glance at the clock told her they had been searching for twenty minutes. "I'll get you one for Christmas" she said, "now can we go? Todd got another letter from his brother. I want to hear the latest news about Jeffrey's haunted dorm at Harvard."

Charlie simply pointed towards the next aisle. Kat sighed dramatically but scanned the titles without further complaint. Anthony and Cleopatra, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Cymbeline, Hamlet, King Lear, Macbeth, Othello, Romeo and Juliet, Titus Andronicus, Venus and Adonis. "These are all Shakespeare" she called as loudly as she dared with Mr Smythe prowling the stacks for kids to intimidate on his Saturday. "Oh, Shakespeare's collected works!" She flipped the book open, tracing the illustrations with her finger, "it's illustrated" she said under her breath with awe.

A laugh made her look up.

Charlie had appeared in the aisle. He was leaning back against the shelves, a smirk playing across his lips. "I sometimes forget how nerdy you are."

"I'm just passionate" she defended with a grin, suddenly wondering what it would be like to kiss that adorable, smug look off his face.

'Shakespeare's collected works' slipped from her grasp, the heavy volume hit the floor with a resounding bang. It shocked her into action. "Sorry, I-I don't think I was holding that properly."

He gave her an odd look, thrown off by the blush spreading across her cheeks as she clumsily knelt to retrieve the encyclopaedia sized hardback. It was just a dropped book. "Right."
"Right" she repeated, staring at him like he had grown an extra head. He shrugged, turning to search another shelf for Jack Kerouac's novel. As he turned away, she took a deep breath to try and slow her heart rate because, holy hell, they had all been right. She did like Charlie as more than a friend, seemingly for longer than she'd known, and the butterflies in her stomach didn't seem to want to pack up and leave anytime soon.

This was very, very bad.

XXX

"Pick up, pick up, pick up" Kat mumbled into the receiver. Once again, she was ringing Nancy in a panic - at this point she had lost track of how many times she had put aside her dignity to beg for help like this. Who was she kidding? She didn't have any dignity left, the remaining shreds had been lost when she ditched Charlie with a weak excuse, and exited the library before he had chance to question it. Thinking back, she probably looked as out of sorts as she currently felt.

"Hello? Noel household."

"Chris? It's Kat, is Nancy around?"

"Hi! Yes, I'll let her know you're on line." Kat pulled the receiver away from her right ear, just in time to hear a piercing yell echo down the line. "So, how are things at Welton? Is Knox doing okay?" Chris continued at a more reasonable volume.

"Oh-err, yeah. Yes, everything's normal here. It's quite boring actually" Kat lied, bouncing slightly on her toes. "Knox is great. He's been teaching me about law which is going well" she babbled, "if all else fails, I might have a shot as a legal secretary."

"The Danbury's would be pleased" laughed Chris, "and maybe Knox would hire you for a better position when he takes over his Father's firm."

"Maybe" she replied drumming her fingertips lightly on the receiver. She sighed in relief when she heard a familiar voice in the background. "It was lovely chatting to you Chris, us girls should meet up again soon."

"For sure, I'll contact Gin. Bye!"

There was a clatter, "Hey, Kitty."

"Hey, Nance. Would it be possible for you to meet me outside the gates?" She asked, taking care to slow her voice into a calmer tempo.

"Now?"

"Now would be ideal."

"Dare I ask why?" Kat, could envision the amused expression on Nancy's face.

"You get to revel in 'I told you so' while I pray for mercy" Kat said bitterly, leaning back against the wall, with the telephone wire wrapped around her fingers.

Nancy gasped, "is this what I think it is!"

"Probably. I had an epiphany at a rather inconvenient time."

"You mean, in front of him" she guessed, biting back a smirk despite being across town and unable
"Yes. Now can you make it or not? I'd rather sort my head out before Neil meddles" she replied, whispering the latter half of the comment, aware of the lack of privacy around the student telephones.

There was a slight pause - and knowing Nancy, she was rolling her eyes dramatically. "Give me ten minutes."

"Thank you" Kat breathed, hanging up the telephone and speeding upstairs to fetch her coat, before making the trek across the grounds and through the woodland, feeling unusually alone on familiar the route. It was the path taken at least one night a week for the meeting. Upon reaching the gap where the treeline met the wrought iron gates, she slipped through and lay her coat on the dirt beneath a balding, sugar maple tree, laying with head on the soft fabric and stretching her legs out. She began to compose a bouquet of surviving wildflowers while she waited, tying the stems together with the pale yellow ribbon that had been securing her hair. She thought briefly about the irony of her situation, surrounded by flowers like the ones described on Prince Edward Island. When she was in a situation not too dissimilar from Anne Shirley's. The idea she had so vehemently denied only a week ago to Neil, was quickly becoming her reality.

Her thoughts were disrupted by a mechanical whir and the clatter of a bicycle falling to the ground.

"Hello, you." A yellow haired girl obscured by a bouncy, baby blue, poodle skirt flopped onto the ground beside Kat, pushing her gently to shuffle over so that they could share the make-shift ground cover. "Do I have permission to say it yet?" She teased.

"Feel free" Kat groaned, hiding her face behind the bouquet like a shield from the verbal humiliation.

"I told you so" Nancy sang, "each and every one of us." Kat said nothing but elbowed her best friend lightly in the ribs, eliciting a giggle. "No! You know I'm ticklish!"

"I do" she cackled, continuing to poke Nancy's side "and I'm too nerdy to disrespect Shakespeare, yet I threw a volume of all his works to the ground."

She gasped in mock horror, "No. You didn't! He'll be out of his grave to haunt you."

Kat rolled her eyes, "maybe he can further inspire my doomed romance."

"So, you finally admit it by throwing Romeo and Juliet at him? Or sonnets perhaps?" She propped herself up on an elbow to study her best friend. "Isn't that a little dramatic even for you?"

"I did not throw it at him" she clarified, "I merely lost my grip on reality for moment."

She let the explanation slip by with only a look of disbelief. "What did he do to make you realise?"

Kat's cheeks bloomed with colour, "Nothing, he just looked smug and I wanted to get rid of the smirk."

"With your mouth?" Nancy observed, eyebrows raised. "Kitty Kat is growing up at last."

"Shove off" she grumbled, "it was a romantic novel cliché. I'm so ashamed."

"These things always are" Nancy mused, laying back down to watch the clouds above them, "Johnny showed up at the door with pink roses last night. He took me to the drive in, because they
were playing 'The Prince and the Showgirl.' That was when I realised I would marry him right then, if he asked. I still would" she admitted, taking Kat's hand. "As much as I love and admire any character Marilyn plays, I wanted that movie to end differently because it reminded me of you. It would be selfish of me to ask you to come back to school with me next term. I need you, but you and the boys need each other more. You need your story to end well. Is there a chance that you would be allowed to stay?"

Kathleen squeezed their interlocked hands, "the governors barely allowed one term" she whispered, her throat closing up, "and Nancy, I really, really don't want to go."

"I know" she whispered back, tears blurring her vision, "this is the happiest I have ever seen you."

Kat closed her eyelids tightly, "don't cry. You'll make me cry too."

"Sorry, honey" Nancy sniffed.

"No matter what, you'll always be my sister" she croaked, her eyes stinging with tears. "I might have gained several poets and one poetically stubborn, expulsion bound menace; but you will always be my sister no matter how many miles or oceans lie between us."

Nancy only nodded, too tearful to reply and lay her head on her sister's shoulder. Kat leaned her own head against Nancy's. Tears dripped down their cheeks as they lay in silence, watching the clouds float by, clinging to each other as if they themselves would float apart. Their exhausted silence slipped into soft snores.

Time crept by, measured by the deepening hue of the sky until Nancy awoke with shiver. She rubbed the goosebumps on her pale arms and shook the brunette next to her awake.

"Go put a sweater on and find the boys before you're missed" she instructed tenderly, leaving no room for arguments when she folded Kat into a quick hug, picked up her bicycle and rode into the approaching twilight. Kathleen picked up her bouquet and draped her coat over her shoulders like a cloak. Following orders, she headed back into the warmly lit, stone mansion. Upon entry, she divested her muddied coat in the cloakroom, before using the first-floor bathroom to wash her face, comb her fingers through her loose hair, and pinch the colour back into her cheeks. Once she was satisfied, Kat went up to the common room where she was greeted warmly by the gang.

"We were wondering where you disappeared to! "Neil called as she crossed the threshold of the common room, "Knox said he saw you outside earlier, and I guess he was right" he eyed the flowers in her hands.

"That's where you rushed off too" Charlie observed, faking her accent "for a spot of flower arranging."

Kathleen reposed on the rug next to Cameron, who was as busy as always with school work. She rested against the radiator, "actually, I met Nancy outside the gate."

"Oh, you didn't mention it" Todd looked up from the book he was studying with Neil.

"It slipped my mind" she lied.

"Like that book slipped out of your hands" Charlie grinned, "poor Shakespeare did nothing to offend you, and that's how you treat him? God rest his soul."

Kat flushed, suddenly reminded of her heart to heart with Nancy. "Very funny" she said drily, turning to Cameron "if you're not too busy, could you possibly help me practice for the geometry
"At least one of you has the motivation to pass" he threw a scathing look at the group lazing around. "I would be delighted."

"Thanks" she said, taking the spare paper and pen he held out to her.

"Take this as well" Charlie threw the red sweater that had been hanging on the back of his armchair at her, "you have goosebumps."

Kat glanced down, and sure enough, the hairs on her arms were raised. She was about to deny it, but before she could open her mouth her body betrayed her, and she shuddered. Slightly miffed by the treachery of her muscles, she pulled it on.

"This clashes horribly with my skirt" she said, thinking instead about the softness of the fabric and how easily it warmed her right through to her bones.

Cameron jabbed his pencil in her direction, "less concern about fashion, and more concentration on perpendicular lines."

"Jesus" Pitts muttered, as Cameron upset the house of cards he and Meeks had been building, with the force of his textbook cover hitting the floor. He had flung it open with an unnatural amount of enthusiasm.

"What have I done" Kat groaned above the laughter at her terror, as she confronted the page of geometry questions.

"You'll be fine" Charlie reassured her. Kat shook her head in disbelief but said nothing, unable to lift her eyes from the ground. Suddenly, she felt uncomfortably warm under his casual gaze.

"No, no, no" Cameron, pulled her back to normality with his firm logic, "go back to the part A and try again." Kat complied with his demands, grateful for the distraction, as she wished away the awkwardness that seemed to have taken over her entire being since the library fiasco. All she wanted was the ability to look him in eye again. The ability to speak in full sentences would be bonus.

Apparently, the new population of butterflies inhabiting her body had other, more irritating ideas.

XXX

Sunday morning truly seemed to be a day of rest as far as the butterflies were concerned, much to Kathleen's relief. Having regained the ability to function like a normal human being, she could acknowledge the shift in her emotions, without the newfound knowledge being overwhelming. The fact was proven by the food fight she found herself caught up in at the breakfast table. Honestly, she thought, thinking back to various, similar, incidents; it was as if teenagers thought of nothing else in presence of food.

Clearly, Meeks agreed as he held his book up to shield his face from yet another attack. "I'm reading, Pittsie" he said as he picked a rice crispy out of the pages.

"Todd put his book down" he protested, "so did Kat!"

"No, Neil stole it" Todd corrected him, throwing a glare in Neil's direction.

Kathleen pushed her small pile of rice crispies towards him, "these would be more effective."
Todd smiled, swiftly sending the entire handful raining down upon his roommate before he could react. Neil stared at him open-mouthed, his expression darkening when Charlie high-fived Todd. "Oh, it's on."

Kat ducked, managing to avoid the next round of fire, shamelessly sliding away from Todd.

"Coward."

"Are you trying to start something, Nuwanda?"

He shrugged.

With a dramatic sigh, she threw a couple of rice crispies at him. Laughing when he caught them in his mouth.

"HAGER!" Hissed Knox, interrupting the game. Immediately, they swept the evidence under the table and resumed what they hoped, was normal behaviour. Hager moved past the table without any comments, instead he approached the only staff member present to ask if he was alright. The group turned to see Mr McAllister choking on his morning coffee, with one eye fixed on the mess of crushed cereal beneath their table.

"Yes, yes" he waved Hager away, "I'm just getting old."

The wink in their direction when he left the dining hall said otherwise.

XXX

It was twenty to seven when Fraser flopped down into an armchair by the confused members of the society. It wasn't just their group whose eyebrows were raised. Most of the heads in the common room were turned, observing the usually loud, boisterous, peacock crumpled in an armchair, dressed in an immaculate dinner suit, half-drunk. Presumably, his inebriation was due to the silver flask in the hand, that dangled over the arm of the chair.

"Are you alright?" Knox asked the boy tentatively, remembering his own unpleasant experience with drink.

"Just fucking fine and dandy" he snapped. Fraser tried to take another swig of whatever concoction was in his flask, but found his hand was empty. The flask was in Neil's hand and quickly shoved under the sofa.

"What are doing" he groaned, "I need that!"

"No, you don't" Charlie glared at him. "What the hell are you thinking?"

Fraser rolled his eyes, "I know for fact that you drink excessively at home in the summer. All of you losers would do the same if Mommy and Daddy showed up for dinner."

Charlie fell silent, his glare faltering enough for Neil to step in front of him. "Andrews. I know it's difficult, but you need to hold it together tonight. In a few hours you can do whatever you want, but right now you have a responsibility, not only to Kat and this school, but to yourself."

"I don't need some bullshit inspirational speech."

"Then prove it" Neil challenged him, "pull yourself together and prove it to us. You don't see Kat getting wasted, and she is arguably in a worse position than you."
Meeks made a 'cut it out' motion from behind Fraser but it was too late, and Neil's eyes widened at the resentful expression that emerged in response to his words.

"I don't see the Welton Princess anywhere" he spat, "so how about we go, Perry. Or are you as weak as that mouse you seem so attached too? He sneered in Todd's direction, causing Charlie to lay a hand on Neil's arm and hold him back for change.

"Kathleen went to get ready a while ago" voiced Knox in a nervous act of diplomacy, "she should be back any minute. How about you have some water?"

He held his own water bottle out to the boy who snatched it, with a muttered "thanks" tacked on almost as an afterthought.

It was in the following silence, that the click clack of high heels was heard, indicating Kat's return. She entered the common room, a look of surprise fluttering across her face as her eyes landed on Fraser, surrounded by her friends.

"What's wrong with him?" She asked, wincing at the slight rise in the pitch of her voice. "Nolan will kill me if we're late, or he's not there."

"Don't worry about me" he pushed himself up with only a slight wobble, "my Father's used to it."

"It's not your Father I have concerns about." The brunette eyed his otherwise immaculate appearance with suspicion. "Will you at least hold off on the wine?"

"If I must, but I will not be sober for this" he warned, crossing his arms. "If you have any sense, you'll be downing yours by the glass."

He made a move to leave the room but was stopped by Charlie suggesting he walk with them. Fraser turned his head to see Kathleen decline the offer. The exchange was somewhat amusing in tone, the tension palpable - unfortunately they didn't have time for him to mock it as much as he would have liked. "Leave her be, Nuwanda" he drawled, unable to stop the sarcasm dripping from his tongue. "I'm sure your hero complex can survive for a few hours without a maiden in sight. We are going to earn ourselves our own round with the cane, if we're not careful."

Charlie relented but his expression was disdainful as he muttered something unsavoury. Kat gestured for Fraser to lead the way. He gladly began to distance himself from the nerds, pausing only to hold open the door. He snuck a quick glance back as she exited the room. To his amusement, most of the boys had turned their attention back to their previous tasks, except for two. Charlie's whole body language relaxed as he watched the girl, unaware of Fraser's eyes on him. The second boy, Todd, was also watching the scene with a faint smile gracing his lips.

Shaking his head, Fraser closed the door and fell into step with Kathleen, whose lacy, powder blue dress was a cheery sight in contrast to the dull halls. The sickly, yellow light from the wall lamps reflected off her patent, white heels and matching nails. For a moment, he could almost see why Charlie liked her.

As they approached the strangely intimidating door, their strides slowed to a halt. He watched her fuss over her appearance unseeingly. "You look fine" said lowly, not wanting to alert the men behind the door of their arrival. She looked at him with furrowed eyebrows. "I may be an asshole, but I'm an honest one" he continued "besides, we're about to walk into hell. I figured we should at least be on civil terms."

"You've changed your tune" she whispered back, glancing cautiously at the door like one would
watch a temperamental dog with a missing muzzle.

He shrugged, pulling at the collar of his shirt. "You're old news, Sweetheart. Sorry to disappoint."

Kat let the words wash over her, unbothered by his comment. "I guess we should go in."

"I guess" he replied, inching his fist closer to the door. With only a brief hesitation, he knocked.

The door opened to reveal Mr Nolan in a similar attire to his. Behind him, a man rose from his chair beside the roaring flames in the fireplace. A rusty hue bathed his features, but the tall man was unmistakably similar.

"Mr Nolan" Fraser greeted, shaking the headmaster's hand respectfully. "Father" he inclined his head, "may I introduce you to Mr Nolan's granddaughter, Miss Kathleen Murray."
Chapter 34 - Stars, hide your fires, part II

Chapter Notes

I know all of you are intelligent. Regardless, I feel the need to insert a disclaimer: certain views and ideas expressed by characters in this chapter are not representative of my own views or beliefs. They are period typical and/or in opposition of the values held by the protagonists.

Thank you again for leaving such sweet reviews. I'm honestly so overwhelmed by the response to this story! And yes, keeping these characters apart is killing me too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter thirty-four - Stars, hide your fires, part II

"I am honoured to make your acquaintance at last, Miss Murray" the large man by the fireplace stepped forwards out of the rusty haze of the firelight to grasp her hand in a firm, business style handshake. "You are every bit as pretty as your Mother."

"Thank you, Mr Andrews" she replied graciously "it's a pleasure to meet you at last." Her eyes flickered between the Father and son, noting the similarities in height and facial features. Despite the wrinkles and bushy salt and pepper moustache that differentiated the two; it was like looking at Fraser's future. With a change in attitude, he was on track to follow in his Father's footsteps. The thought was paralysing.

"Call me John, please. No need for such formalities around old family friends" Fraser's father insisted, ignoring his son who had slipped past Kathleen to enter the room.

"Drinks?" Asked Mr Nolan, closing the door.

"Bourbon for me, thanks" answered Fraser without hesitation.

"And red for you, Kathleen?" Her Grandfather opened a bottle set a few inches away from the others on the drinks trolley. "A mature red was always Cordelia's favourite. Yet, my late wife had a for taste champagne."

Mr Andrews let out a bellowing laugh, almost spilling his drink in his haste to place it safely down on the end table. "Edith Nolan was quite a woman, her dinner parties remain incomparable. Gone are the golden days, Gale. My Father was right when he said the crash was the point of no return. You would remember it better than I do."

"Your Father was never wrong, John. Without him at the table, I would never dare play a hand, or take a chance" Gale Nolan handed the youths their drinks, keeping an eye on the gilded clock that stood proudly on the mantelpiece. "I more than tripled my fortune in the twenties with your Father by my side. It was also his instincts that saved us both in twenty-nine."

"And I thank God every day for it." Nolan nodded in agreement. "It's about time the young ones met" boomed John, "such a shame the old crowd divided. Business hasn't been the same since."

Kathleen sipped her wine, ignoring the knowing look Fraser sent her way. She lowered the glass in
defiance, in the same moment he swallowed half the contents of his.

"It has become an era of change" Nolan responded, his tone hard. "Schools like Welton are a sanctuary for the old times, a cornerstone of tradition"

"Well said" applauded John Andrews, pausing to sniff the air. "Is that dinner? It smells excellent."

Nolan moved to the ajar, dark wood door, on the far right of the reception room. His movements were not as fluid as John remembered from the social occasions enjoyed throughout his youth. The once handsome, yachting, hard-headed business man now moved like a weathered, grey machine.

"Right on time" her Grandfather's calcified smile gleamed in the low, firelight. "Only the best for this institution" he ushered the guests through "if I would not allow it in my home, I will not allow it in this school. The kitchen staff are no exception."

Kathleen withheld a gasp as she crossed the threshold. The dining room was just as she remembered, but somehow it felt more imposing despite her maturity in both age and height, since she had last visited. The wooden panels now met the rich, red, wallpaper at hip height, rather than head. Candelabras still cast the same golden glow over the large oval table, reflecting off the silverware and glistening as it fell on the cut-glass bowls, jugs and drinking vessels. Most prominent, were the paintings which dominated the walls. Each past headmaster was immortalised in the identical, dark wooden frames which lined the room. One day, Kat realised, the portrait in her grandfather's office would hang alongside them.

And his office would be occupied by a stranger.

Casting the morbid thoughts from her mind, she sunk into the chair pulled out for her by the hired waiter. At least, she assumed the young man was hired, since she did not recognise him as one of the kitchen staff or groundskeepers. "Thank you" she said quietly. He bowed his head and stepped back to fetch the dishes from the heaters located on the sideboard. Her eyes slid away from him and settled on the full wine glass in front of her. Much to her irritation, it looked just as appealing as Fraser had warned.

The waiter returned to the table with four, delicate, steaming soup bowls.

"Vegetable soup" announced Nolan, "all locally sourced, of course." He took a single mouthful before turning his attention back to his guests. "I must inquire about your recent trip to Washington, in particular the political scene?"

"Nixon is gearing up for the campaign and I've made my donation" John paused to taste the soup, nodding in approval. "Although, I think it's safe to assume it will be an easy win against Kennedy. He's too young, inexperienced and idealistic. Perhaps the democrats would've been in with a chance if Johnson stepped up from running mate. The man deserves a shot at the presidency."

"A man of law, military and political experience is what the country needs in the face of such change" Nolan agreed, "who could be better for the country?"

"Kennedy" Kathleen swallowed her quiet answer with her soup, causing Fraser to choke on his food.

Mr Andrews stared at his son, his eyes full of disapproval. Catching his father's irritation, Fraser grinned wolfishly. He swiftly lifted his half-full glass in a sardonic toast, "to Nixon. The finest possible President to grace the sacred halls the White House." After a single clink with his father's glass, he poured the rest down his throat and held his arm out for a refill. The waiter complied.
"Thank you, Harding" Nolan said, eyeing Fraser's wobbly arm. "I think young Mr Andrews should slow down until the main course is over."

Kathleen failed to bite back her grin at Fraser's horrified expression. He frowned at her, picking up her glass while the two senior men were distracted by their political discussion, and dumped the wine into his bourbon.

Her mouth fell open. But before she could react, Mr Andrews asked for her opinion on something she hadn't been listening to.

"Oh. I was always taught never to discuss politics or religion over dinner" she responded with a tight smile, "my parents are under the impression that such a spirited discussion is not only bad for digestion, but too much for an intimate space."

"I would tend to agree, when dining around those with opposing or unknown views" Mr Andrews waved Harding over and gestured to his own empty glass. "However, when all parties agree it is a rather thrilling topic." Distracted by Harding's offer of a selection of alcoholic drinks, he missed the scathing look that had slipped past his son's mask. Almost as fast as it had appeared, the emotive expression on his face was gone.

"Mr Andrews" Nolan turned to the younger man, "what are your plans after graduation? Are you lined up for an Ivy League?"

"Oh no" John interrupted, "my boy is going straight to work in the company. He won't have everything handed to him on a silver platter, he needs to learn the value of hard work. In a few years he will have worked his way up from the bottom as I did, when I left my Father's company to build my own."

"Oh, yes" Fraser agreed, stabbing his fork viciously into the main course. "I'll be wealthy again, after a few years of labour."

"Hard work is what's missing from the youth of today" his Father continued, "what happened to the American dream? Success is earned. We can't let our kids forget it."

"That is the very philosophy that underpins this school" Nolan waved a hand at the paintings, "tradition, honour, discipline, excellence. The four pillars as written by the first headmaster, still stand today."

"Respect would be an apt addition."

Fraser's head snapped up.

"In my day" he rumbled on "parents were respected. The family was respected, not besmirched by teenaged tomfoolery."

"Just this week I had an incident of disrespect" Nolan folded his hands, "a secret club demanding girls attend Welton. The spokesman proceeded to mock the heavenly father. Where they get such ideas remains a mystery. Next they'll be campaigning for desegregation of private education as well."

Kat tensed. The uncomfortable atmosphere intensified when Mr Andrews turned sharply to his son, who went rigid under his harsh gaze.

"Did you have anything to do with this incident" he spat, the cheerfulness drained from his countenance.
"No, Sir."

"It wasn't Fraser, Sir" Kathleen said tentatively, "it was another student."

His face changed, the jagged, icy edges melted into the rounded, joyous, confidence of before. Kathleen swallowed nervously. She turned to her grandfather for guidance, but he was busy asking about the issue. Her eyes caught on the frantic movements of Fraser's hands, as he wrung the cloth napkin that lay on his lap. "Don't say anything" he whispered, "not to me. Not to anyone."

"An immigrant girl" exclaimed Mr Andrews angrily, "his silly, summer flirtation almost cost us an important business deal, and our reputation!"

"I promise" Kat replied quietly. She tried to distract him from the complaints, but his father's voice was overwhelming as he spouted his backward views. She took a long gulp of her refilled wine and handed Fraser the remainder when she saw his empty glass.

Fraser met her eyes with silent gratitude and downed the rest, saying only "I don't want to remember this tomorrow."

"Not to mention the obsession with love" Mr Andrews' drunken rant carried over to the teens once more, shattering the fleeting moment of safety. "Love is for a few months, years if you're lucky but an alliance is forever. It creates a legacy that can forge love between any couple. What he needs is a nice society girl to screw his head on straight."

"Kathleen is yet to find a match" Nolan placed his cutlery down. "She is more grounded than Cordelia, but more ambitious. University appears to be her next step."

"Hopefully an Ivy league, or perhaps Oxford like my father" Kat added quickly, hoping to steer the conversation to safer ground.

"A M.R.S degree is hardly necessary for a woman of your looks and status" chuckled Mr Andrews, "I'm surprised you need to consider it with all the eligible families at Welton." The end of a parsnip flew across the table. Kathleen released her hard grip on her cutlery with an apology that was spoken over. "Your Grandfather told me you missed the debutante ball, surely there is still time to have one on this side of the pond. You may not be presented to the Queen, but you'll be moving in the right circles."

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure" Fraser hummed, "some of the boys have taken a shine to her. Dalton seems quite protective."

Kathleen's cheeks were burning as hot as the candelabra aflame above their heads, "he was worried about something he heard like any good friend" she said through gritted teeth. "The real concern is the source of the impropriety."

He glared at her, his mouth pressed into a firm line at her implication. Even saturated with alcohol, he had enough of his wits to recall the accord they had made. He wasn't about to break his end of the bargain while his Father was riled up.

"I hope Mr Andrews was not part of this concern" Nolan's expression was serious. "I was not informed of any problems."

"It was nothing more than teething problems" she reassured him. "But I'm ashamed to admit that this is longest conversation we've had" Kat glanced at the boy on her right, "we move in different circles."
"Is that so?" Mr Andrews addressed his son, "that is disappointing to hear."

"There is no time like the present" Nolan's cool, blue eyes lingered on the teenagers. "Perhaps we shall do this again."

Kathleen's carefully curated expression faltered at his words, which was not missed by her Grandfather. His eyebrows knitted together as he studied the pair. For the first time, he began to see the awkwardness between them. His granddaughter was the epitome of a well-mannered, charming young heiress in posture, but she lacked the lively spark he had observed in the girl during regular, evening and weekend mealtimes. Kathleen reminded him of Cordelia increasingly with every passing day. Nolan ignored the vice grip on his heart, concentrating instead on the young Andrews talking about his summer internship.

When the last desert spoon was laid down half an hour later, the two teenagers had reached the limits of their patience and self-restraint. Nolan moved the guests back to the reception room where the fire seemed to roar more viciously than before. The heat was stifling, and Mr Andrews' laugh was beginning to give Kat a headache. Their eventual dismissal felt like rain in the desert, and the pair hurriedly left the men to discuss business. They walked back through the darkened halls half-drunk, driven on by the nervous energy that had accumulated over the last two hours.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Kat asked quietly as they turned the corner. All previous hostility towards the taller boy vanishing.

"The isn't much to say" he shrugged, the venom seemingly drained from his weary body. "Her father was our landscaper. Her family lived in the stable conversion, so we sort of grew up together, I guess."

"Was?" Kat frowned, "you mean he was fired?"

Fraser nodded, "my parents fired him. I don't know where they went."

"Your friends don't know about this, do they?"

A muscle jumped in his jaw, "no."

"I won't say anything" she promised, "it's not my secret to tell."

He said nothing, choosing instead to point at the door on her right. It was Todd and Neil's room. An echo of laughter escaped from under the door that sounded suspiciously like Meeks.

"Thanks" she said, resting a hand on the door handle as she watched him walk to his own room, and slam the door shut.

Chapter End Notes

The historical accuracy is slightly off concerning the 1960 election. Kennedy formally announced his candidacy in early January 1960, so I thought November 1959 wouldn't be too much of a stretch from the truth. Anyway, keep the reviews coming. I really enjoy hearing your reactions and predictions.
Chapter 35 - Distant fire

Chapter Notes

Following Josh Charles and Gale Hansen on twitter was the best decision of my life. I highly recommend it.

'And more I admire

Thy distant fire,

Than that colder, lowly light'

~ Evening Star, Edgar Allen Poe

Chapter thirty-five - Distant fire

"Hey!" Neil patted the empty space on the floor next to his head, which dangled over the side of his bed. "Sit down and tell us everything." Kat toed her heels off and settled in the spot Neil had pointed her towards, with her back resting against the bed, and the cushion that Knox had thrown over laying in her lap.

"So? How was it?" Neil demanded, his cheeks flushed from the blood rushing to his head. Why he insisted on hanging upside down all of a sudden, Kat didn't know, but her head was swimming slightly and the sight of his face the wrong way up certainly wasn't helping.

She sighed, hugging the cushion closer "his Father was so awful that I almost feel sorry for him."

"Most of us have less than perfect parents. It's no excuse for the way he acts."

"I know" Kat turned her head to meet Neil's eyes, "that's why I said almost."

"Surely some good came from tonight?" Meeks adjusted his glasses. "You were gone for almost three hours."

"Let me think" the sarcasm rolled easily off her tongue, "perhaps the good came from my life plans being mocked, or possibly when I was told I'm too rich and pretty to go husband hunting at university. Maybe even the blatant racism, or the reminiscing about 'the good old days' of Wall Street." She paused, "no. It was the marriage discussion. Love is irrelevant in a transaction, after all. I should have studied my Shakespeare better."

Meeks opened and closed his mouth in a convincing imitation of a fish.

"Are you alright?" Todd shuffled closer, eyeing her cautiously.

"Fine and dandy" she replied, briefly thinking how odd the phrase sounded when it wasn't spoken in her Father's brogue.
"Wait, are you drunk?" Knox snickered, "don't make things equal by puking on me."

Kat shook her head, pouting "I'm not pissed, wait, I am. Not off my face pissed, angry pissed."

"Either way, you're pissed" Charlie grinned. "Share with the group, what did you have?"

"Only a little red wine. Apparently, it's 'dear Cordelia's' favourite" she rolled her eyes, "I was always under the impression that my mother liked Sherry...but that isn't the point. He keeps giving me the things that she liked or were hers."

"Is he aware that you're different people?"

"Clearly not. You know, at one point I thought he would whip out a betrothal contract over dessert. Luckily Fraser and I played it off like we hardly knew each other" she shrugged, keeping her eyes glued to the floor. "Wasn't much a lie either. Not that it satisfies men with dollar signs in their eyes."

Todd patted her shoulder sympathetically. Kat forced a smile that appeared more as a grimace, unable to dissipate his concern as she had intended to. Such an oppressive feeling felt uncomfortable to see on the features of one so undeserving.

"Just think how romantic it would have been" snorted Pitts, " 'I do' over mushy fruit salad with the elderly."

A small hiccup escaped from Kat as she giggled. She clamped a hand over her mouth, eyes wide with shock.

"Oh, Mr Darcy" Neil tumbled off the bed into a heap on the floor. He stood up, removing his dressing gown with a flourish and tying it around him like a little girl playing dress up in ballgown made of bath towels and blankets. Much to their collective surprise, he dropped to his knees and crawled over to Charlie, batting his eyelashes. "I do, I do" he swooned.

Charlie threw his arms around his oldest friend, planting lavish fake kisses on his cheeks, before playfully shoving him away.

"Who needs an Austen novel when Mr Collins is down the hall" Kat said, catching her breath once Neil returned to his spot. Unshed tears of laughter brimming in his eyes as he howled at Todd's expression, a perfect mix of a scandalised horror, bewilderment and joy.

"Shhh" Cameron hissed, stretching over to clamp a hand firmly over Neil's mouth to smother his raucous laughter. "We're here after curfew. Are you trying to get us caught?"

Whispered apologies echoed around as they fell silent, obeying his instruction, much to Cameron's delight.

Taking advantage of the rare tranquillity, Pitts moved further into the lamp light and began to move his hands in variety of intriguing contortions. But after a series of confusing and rather monstrous shapes, he settled for a simple butterfly, using the shadows to create the illusion of a delicate creature fluttering. Cameron intervened swiftly, muttering about 'summer camp,' unleashing an impressive quantity of expert animal silhouettes, earning more than a few hushed compliments. Despite the usual, cool demeanour, his delight shone through the cracks of his facade as the show progressed, uninterrupted by even his roommate.

Kat was so immersed in the story that it took several moments for her to respond to the sensation of warm breath tickling her ear. She blinked, suddenly registering Neil's urgent whispers.
"Do you believe he would ever really do it? Force you into an engagement?"

She bit her lip, "no. I-I don't think he would force me, but if he saw an opportunity... he would certainly try his best to manipulate a proposal at least."

He nodded thoughtfully. His voice low and distant, almost as if he was asking himself "I wonder what would be worse, a loveless marriage, or seven years of medical school?"

"I really couldn't say" she whispered back. "But medical school doesn't have to be the end. Keats went, and he was immortalised as one of the greats for his poetry. Ask the Captain about him after class tomorrow. He must know a great deal about his namesake."

"I will" Neil smiled softly, "thank you."

"No, thank you" She laid her head on his shoulder, "you rescued my evening."

A shrill ringing roused Kathleen from her slumber. She took a moment to orientate herself, rubbing against the familiar, soft, white bedsheets before opening her bleary eyes to the sight of her dorm flooded with blinding natural light. Her curtains were pulled back, and the tartan blanket which was always folded at the foot of her bed was somehow spread across her. Sitting up, she realised that not only was she still in last night's dress, but there were mascara stains on her pillowcase, and she had no memory of leaving the boys dormitory last night.

Still disconcerted, she removed her clothes, discovering her shoes already removed and placed neatly by her bedside table. The bathroom mirror revealed further horrors in the form of yesterday's make-up smeared under her eyes. Mentally berating herself for the havoc this would no doubt wreak on her skin, she wiped it off and showered, spending longer than usual under the scolding water to pump some energy into her body.

By the time she made it to breakfast, the boys were almost finished. She hurriedly gulped downed some juice and grabbed two slices of toast for the walk to Chemistry.

"How are you feeling?" Asked Knox as they slipped into their seats.

"I'm guessing hungover" she glanced around the room, her eyes resting on Fraser who was across the room with his head in his hands, "and it seems I'm not the only one."

"Definitely not." Knox's eyes darted between the pair, "you, however, are in a much better state. Not that I know much about this stuff, but you look great. I would never have known you were guzzling wine by the bottle last night if you hadn't of said."

"Shut up. It wasn't by the bottle" she groaned. "Besides, if can't remember getting back to my room, how am I supposed to remember formulas?"

He laughed, "I can't help you with second, even without impairment. But to the first, Charlie and I walked you back after we pried you off Neil. Apparently, you're a clingy, sleepy drunk with an attitude."

"Oh no" she sunk down in her seat, "what did I do?"

"Not much" he grinned, "stumbled and cuddled a little, told me how sweet I am about Chris. You almost fell asleep on Charlie, then complained about him smelling like 'those damn coffin nails.' The truth really came out."
"And that was all I said" she sat up a little, forcing herself to breathe slowly.

"Yeah" he nodded, swinging his legs under his desk and pivoting towards the front as the teacher walked in. Kathleen barely absorbed the lesson, concentrating more on her mounting panic. Surely, if she had said something, Knox would have heard. The boy could hardly keep a secret as it was. A revelation about her feelings would be impossible for him to keep quiet about.

The day progressed in a similar fashion, quiet classes, avoided eye contact and distraction with an undertone of anxiousness. Keating's class was both a blessing and a curse since it was the only class that she was in close proximity to Charlie in.

Sure enough, the first interaction of the day happened seconds after she walked into the classroom. She had almost made it to her seat when a shadow fell over her. Fraser blocked her path, startling her.

"Hi, um, are you feeling less hungover?"

He nodded, his eyes skipping over the surrounding classmates frantically for a moment. "I just wanted to say thanks for, you know, not saying anything."

"It's not my place to comment, and you mostly kept your end of the bargain."

He bobbed his head, awkwardly holding out his fist. Kat's eyebrows rose slightly at the gesture, but she bumped her fist lightly against his. The absurdity of it all kept her rooted to the spot as he shuffled away, his pace quickening when Hopkins entered the room, much to her amusement. Hardly a second seemed to have passed before Charlie was at her shoulder.

"Everything's fine" she waved him off, moving at last to her desk. "It's a just a little weird to have a kind of secret truce."

"I don't understand why it has be secret" he scoffed, slipping into his own seat with his legs thrown casually up to rest on top of his desk, "being seen with girl who doesn't look disgusted by his presence could only help his street cred."

"Oh, I don't if I help anybody's street-cred after yesterday" she laughed nervously, deciding to test the waters. "Knox said I was little loopy and I don't remember anything past Cameron's surprise shadow puppet show. That can't be a good omen."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing" she confirmed, unpacking her satchel. A moment passed without a response, causing her to frown. The frown only deepened as she caught sight of his expression. "No. Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Smirk and act like there's something you're aware of, that I am not."

He shrugged.

"Stop!" She kicked the leg of his desk in protest, "I know there isn't."

Charlie's shoulders twitched as he tried to conceal his amusement. "If you're so sure, then there is nothing to get worked up about, is there?"

"I hate you" she turned to face the front, and to her surprise, Mr Keating.
"Hate?" Mr Keating repeated, standing a mere few steps away from her desk with a handful of marked essays. "Some say hate is only an absence of love. Others believe it to be love gone wrong. In any case, we all sympathise with you, Miss Murray. It is well known that Mr Dalton is capable of driving even a saint into the arms of the devil" he winked at the boy as he handed the pair their essays. "Excellent as always, Kathleen. And Charlie, I daresay this is your best work yet. Perhaps the theme inspired you."

He inhaled sharply at Keating's words, "they are supposed to be universal themes, Sir. I've seen enough movies."

Keating smiled kindly, immediately sorry for his rather public, and perhaps premature meddling. "Apologies, I never pictured you as one to enjoy the delights of an on-screen, romantic epic."

"There is a lot you don't know about me, sir" he replied with a smirk. Grateful for the redirection of his classmate's attention.

"And that opens our discussion on the works of Mr Edgar Allen Poe" Keating announced, bouncing back to the chalkboard where he began to map ideas. "Today we shall be perusing the contrast of emotion in the layered 'Evening Star.' We continue with universal themes of human emotion such as love, lust, longing and of course, hatred. The use of nature as form of revelation, and the methods deployed to achieve the desired effects. Turn to page forty-three and discuss!"

"As much as I enjoy Keating's lessons, they're killing me" Meeks complained, drawing worried looks from the society.

"Do you still have a headache?" Pitts asked, scuffling briefly with his roommate as he attempted to feel his sweaty forehead. "You do" he frowned, touching his burning brow until he was swatted away. "You should go to bed."

"No, I'm fine" Meeks insisted, "it's probably stress."

"Stress over what?"

"I don't know" he sniffed, "but I never get sick."

"Never?" Kat repeated, scepticism evident in her tone.

"It's true" Charlie sighed, "one year the whole school was down with the flu, except Meeks." 

"He was one of five kids to turn up to class, even the teacher couldn't make it out of bed."

"Best week off we ever had" Charlie shared a look with Neil who rolled his eyes.

"We were delirious, Charlie."

"Exactly. A natural high."

"Shut-up guys" Pitts interrupted the staring contest, "he looks pale. I think you're hurting his head."

Neil apologised, promising to keep their voices down.

"Meeks? I really think you should get some rest" Kat's forehead creased as she studied the boy. His curls were damp and stuck to the skin at the edges of his hairline, the dark scarlet locks contrasted with the ill pallor of his skin. His knuckles gripped the radiator he was leaning against. Most
worrying was his subtle reliance on the radiator for heat despite his temperature. "You have a fever."

Pitts jumped up, "I'll get you some water." The lanky limbed teen was out the door before Meeks' weak protests could be heard. He shook off the blanket Neil tried to wrap around him.

"I'm fine!" He growled.

Charlie pulled him up, ignoring his protests and pushing back the flailing arms hitting out in his direction. "You're not fooling anyone, God."

"God? God wouldn't fool me, I'm catholic."

"Come on, St Peter" he guided the boy towards the door, signalling for someone to open it. "Let's get you bed."

They watched the pair leave with Knox following closely behind until the door blew shut with a bang. Neil reached out to the centre of the circle and began to sweep the abandoned cards towards himself, smiling gratefully at Todd for pushing every card in his own proximity towards him. Wordlessly, Kat passed the empty box over and took the armchair Knox had abandoned. She traced the tartan print on the cushion with her index finger, mesmerised by the blurring lines until her eyelids began to droop.

"There is a bug going around lower school" Cameron's voice pulled her out of her stupor. "A two or three-day mild flu. Nothing to worry about."

"How did Meeks of all people catch it?" Neil frowned. He threw his arm over the back of the sofa, oblivious the blush it evoked from Todd whose shoulder was almost touching his fingertips.

"I would say tutoring or clubs, but children are unhygienic, germ machines so it hardly matters how. We should be concerned about preventing the spread. Realistically, a few of us have contracted the illness already, but are not displaying the symptoms."

"Maybe your future should lay in medicine, not mine."

Cameron ignored the quip, studying the remaining three. "We all look tired due to our late night, so I propose we go to bed and reconvene in the morning."

"Reconvene? It's just a bug, Cameron."

"This is Welton, Neil. We can't afford to fall behind."

"I think he's right" Todd spoke before the brewing conflict could escalate, "we should get some sleep."

"Alright." Neil acquiesced, giving Todd a hand up. "I guess missing rehearsals would suck."

The four wandered back to the dormitories, bidding one another goodnight. With each ache and snuffle from the day forgotten, they drifted easily into dreamland, unprepared for the trials tomorrow would bring.
Chapter 36 - Truth is beauty?

Chapter Notes

My exams are over, and I have officially left school until I (hopefully) start Uni in the autumn! I hope you aren't growing tired of this story because updates shall be far more frequent. And to AlphaBadWolf, thank you so much and don't worry. There is still a long way to go before we hit the end.

The compulsion to use Britishisms like "bloody stubborn" or "daft git" in this chapter have been particularly strong. Perhaps it's down to the Harry Potter fanfic I've spent the day planning, or maybe it's because I'm doing this final edit at 2am (at least my insomnia is good for one thing.) Please forgive me if anything slips through. It's currently a little hard to remember to translate some things into American ;)

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."
~ Ode on a Grecian Urn, John Keats

Chapter Thirty-Six - Truth is beauty?

"How is he?" Kat leaned over her desk, nearly sliding out of her chair in her eagerness to hear Pitts' response.

"Asleep. Finally," a muffled moan sounded from beneath his arms where he had buried his head, "I'm exhausted. Meeks is my best friend and I feel for him, I really do. But a man needs sleep and I'm not getting any while he sleep talks and sneezes all night."

"In other words, he's sick" Neil chimed in.

"In other words, yes."

"Poor guy."

"Poor guy? More like lucky, he got to miss Doctor Cameron's health checks" Charlie scoffed, throwing down his pen.

"It's his way of helping, Charlie."

"Neil, I love Cameron. He is the sole reason I'm not failing trig" Kat said, "but my throat was fine until he poked around with a thermometer. We need to lock him out of the science cupboards before he causes more damage."

"Sorry Neil, but I can't go through that again" Knox agreed apologetically. "It was humiliating."

"Oh. Come, on" Neil gazed around the group but found no sympathy, "none of you were asked about your sexual history. He saved that delight for me, God knows why-"
"Because no one else indulges him" Charlie interrupted. "Tell him to shove it up his-.

"Where is he?" Knox cut in.

"Talking to Keating about his last grade" Kat supplied, "they were outside when I got here."

"I'm just saying we should be nice. He's trying to show that he cares" Neil concluded, pushing off the bookshelf he had been leaning against. "Maybe he was right. I've a headache since I woke up."

"Wait. You didn't tell him that!" Charlie called after him. "Neil, you hypocrite."

"Self-preservation" Neil shouted back, slipping into his seat as the classroom door opened for Cameron and Mr Keating to enter.

Kathleen tried to smother her laughter, lifting Charlie's sketchbook - which she had been looking through before Pitts' appearance - and hiding her face behind it.

"He-what" Charlie spluttered, "I can't believe it. That fraud."

She shook her head, amused by Neil's revelation. Instead of responding to Charlie's sulking, she continued to flick through the pages while Keating prepared the lesson. She leant back against her seat and paused when her eyes fell upon a drawing on the next page. Careful grey lines constructed a sketch of what appeared to be a society meeting in the old cave. In the centre was a fire, surrounded by logs which supported images of each member. Neil and Todd were depicted in the centre, reading a book which she assumed was their sacred book of verse. On their right was a girl resembling herself, dressed in a coat and silky pyjama pants, her long hair was swept to the side and she was smiling at the boy next to her. The boy was playing a saxophone. At their feet was Knox stoking the fire and Cameron was depicted on the opposite side doing homework. Behind him was a tall boy playing cards with a shorter, bespectacled boy. Across the top of was banner with 'carpe diem' etched in elegant letters.

A small, grey, lead smudge appeared on her index finger as she traced the letters. She pulled her hand back, stunned by the intricacy. Closing the book, she turned around and handed it back with a smile. "They're good. I like the one of Neil on stage" she praised one of the first ones she has seen. Somehow, the loving pencil strokes of the cave seemed too personal.

He shrugged, a half-smile on his lips.

"Today" announced Keating, drawing all eyes to the front, "we will be examining the work of John Keats upon the request of a student. And yes, before you ask, my parents did take the opportunity to honour him with my name."

Neil caught Kathleen's eye and made a thumbs up behind his back.

"The first thing we need to know about Keats, is his difference to the other poets on our course. Miss Murray, I've been told that you are the expert today."

Kat quickly retracted her thumb from her non-verbal reply to Neil, sitting up as the attention shifted onto her. "I think 'expert' would be hyperbole, Sir. But I do know that Keats spent most of his life training for the medical field and qualified for an apothecary licence before he dedicated his life to poetry."

"Absolutely." Keating paced in front of the chalkboard "tragically, Keats died from tuberculosis at the age twenty-five. Just four years into his career as a poet." He paused, "in four short years he achieved what many could only dream of, even if his efforts were recognised posthumously. A fate
many artists share."

As interesting as Keating's lessons were, Kat found her attention drawn to Neil who was enraptured. His fingers gripped the edges of the wooden desk and his whole head turned each time Keating walked the length of the room.

"Today I have a debate to wake up your gloomy spirits" he clapped. "Keats claimed in both his poem 'Lamia' and reportedly in life, that our knowledge of science ruins our sense of beauty. The more we understand, the less we appreciate. I realise this is a divisive and rather controversial view. I have my own opinion, of course. But what about you? Students of both science and the arts? Is Keats correct?"

Cameron's hand shot up immediately, "I agree with the claim. Science reveals the purpose of everything in our universe. Nothing is aesthetic or meaningful, contrary to many beliefs. There is no true, inherent beauty, only the value attributed by mankind. In a similar fashion to the dwindling of legend, folklore and religion in educated societies, beauty is now a construct of capitalism, not an appreciation for natural wonders. This is simply due science closing the gaps in our knowledge."

"Aren't you a romantic soul." Charlie's sarcastic drawl sounded from the back, causing Cameron to flush. Eyes sparking with rage, he whipped around to face his antagonist.

"Since you are so quick to judge, why don't you make a better argument?" He let his words hang for a moment. "Come on, wise guy. Has your wit suddenly dried up?"

"Calm it down, gentlemen" Keating moved forwards, placing his body in the space that had provided the hot-tempered young men with a direct view of each other. "However, he does have a point Mr Dalton. Would you be so kind as to share your own thoughts on the matter?"

He shrugged, feigning nonchalance despite the tension in his body. "Beauty has been the driving force of literature and art since the beginning of time. To deny the existence of beauty would be foolish. We know nature and people are beautiful, and we know science explains our attraction with evolutionary instincts, pheromones, symmetry, colour and anything else proven by science to be attractive to our species. Having an explanation doesn't lessen our appreciation. If it had, art and culture inspired beauty would have died out long ago. If anything, society exploits beauty for capitalist gain. We don't care about the science behind it unless we are scientists ourselves."

Knox made a noise of appreciation that deepened Cameron's frown.

"Careful, Richard" warned Charlie with a razor-sharp smile. "You'll be stuck with permanent frown lines if you continue to be shocked by the reality that I'm not a dunce."

Keating sighed loudly. "Mr Dalton. I would rather not supervise you in detention tonight. Please refrain from further inflammation."

He threw his hands up, "sorry, Sir. Perhaps we should hear your opinion, it could be the deciding vote."

"That," Keating pointed at him with a click of his fingers, "is a much better idea. Speaking from experiences on this earth, I believe that we only appreciate beauty with candour once we understand the hardships endured by a bud before it could flower in spring. In the same vein we value tales of rags to riches because we as a species have a sense of awe for an underdog. We hope for frogs to become princes or maids to be lost princesses. The beauty was always there but with success we see it with a clearer lens. The understanding cleans our glasses and we are able to perceive the truth. Truth, after all is beauty," he quoted, "and beauty is truth."
"Ode on a Grecian Urn" Kat whispered.

"Keats?" Charlie echoed, "damn, Keating. We can't beat that."

Mr Keating looked upon the stunned students, "everything in life comes full circle" he paused. His eyes sparkled with fondness for the youth, "and so should your essays."

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"Neil?" Todd's voice was a soft as his tentative touch on the taller boy's knee, "are you sure your feeling alright?"

His eyelids remained closed against his ghostly complexion, his body slumped over the table, "m'fine" he responded, his syllables colliding as he leaned into Todd's gentle touch and drifted off once more.

Todd studied the ragged rise and fall of the lanky teen's chest. He listened to the harsh congested breathing before his eyes flickered quickly over to the rest of their friends, with the exception of Meeks who had been on bedrest since last night and Pitts who had gone to bring him lunch.

"Neil." Cameron poked the unresponsive boy with the end of his ruler, "go to bed. You're infecting the rest of the senior class."

With a moan, Neil grabbed Todd's hand and pulled towards him as he shifted into a more comfortable position, eliciting a squeak from its owner.

Huffing, Charlie rose from the sofa and hauled Neil up to his feet despite his tired protests. "No. Clearly, you're not fine. Let's get you to bed before you do something you'll regret."

"I guess the meeting tonight is cancelled" Knox watched the three boys leave the common room. "It's probably for the best. I wonder who will succumb to illness next?"

"Pitts" Cameron said easily, rooting through his bag for a sheet of loose paper. Upon finding one, he began to draw out a betting list. "You know I don't place monetary bets but it's obvious. He's spent the most time around the first victim."

Kat blinked her sore eyes. After struggling to read the same sentence for the third time she closed the book and focused on the conversation.

"Nah" Knox shook his head, grabbing the pencil from Cameron. "It'll be Todd. Neil gets clingy when he's sick and that's with us."

"Before I match Knox's bet I need to know that no one in this room is about to down" Fraser flung himself into the vacant space next to Kat on the sofa. "Anyone got something to confess?"

Various boys around the room voiced their denials, satisfied, Fraser slapped a dollar on the table. "Put me down for Hopkins, boys. The loser has been coughing since sunrise."

"Count me in!" Called Russell from across the room, "and Francis thinks another three will be down by dinner."

"Only three?" Kat grabbed the pencil from Knox, "considering three went down overnight and Neil's just left there will likely be more."

Fraser leaned forward to examine the growing list of bets, "and how much are you willing to stake
She frowned, waving him out of the way. "I'm putting a dollar on five by tomorrow morning."

"Well then, we'll see how many of us make it through chemistry" he grinned, offering her a helping hand up which she took with a grimace as her vision clouded. The sudden pressure in her head causing her to wobble. "Are you alright?" Fraser muttered, eyeing his friends who were busy straightening their loose ties for afternoon lessons. "You look a bit peaky."

Letting go of his hand, Kat nodded. "Got up too fast. I think I might be dehydrated."

"If you're sure" he said lowly, casting her a worried look as he joined his friends. Knox watched the exchange in silence, shaking off Cameron's attempts to discuss the odds of winning the senior class bet they had unwittingly created.

They had almost reached the chem lab when he ducked beneath the staircase, telling Cameron they would catch up in a minute. Kat followed him into the darkened crevice. Her confusion was written plainly across her face when Knox turned to face her with a look of pure bewilderment.

"Since when were you and Fraser the best of friends?"

"What?"

He waved his arms in a wild gesticulation, "that-that thing. Back there!"

"The bet? We were all participating, Knox." She rubbed her temples, "we're going to be late for class. Can we talk about this later?"

"Class? Kat, you were practically holding hands with the creep!"

She sighed, "he was helping me up. Don't exaggerate."

Knox folded his arms, "look. I know you have a weird truce thing, but you came back from the dinner miserable, and until the next morning he was a creep. Still is by default if you ask me--"

"Nobody is asking you" she snapped, "careful or I might think you're implying something untoward."

"I wasn't implying anything!" He hissed, "I'm worrying about your well-being like a friend should. Don't turn this into something it isn't."

"Me?" She shook her head, the sudden movement jolting her back in a flash of pain. She squeezed her eyes shut and opened them to the outlines of his face in the shadows. "We talked, and everything's sorted. Is it really that difficult to trust me?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose with a noise of frustration, "it's not you I don't trust. You've known him five minutes compared to the six years I have, please just hear me out."

Her mouth fell open.

He blinked, understanding dawning on his features that she couldn't read in the dim light. "I didn't-"

"No" she cut him off, "I understand perfectly. But by your own logic, why should Chris trade Chet for you? She's known you five minutes compared to her boyfriend who she's known since preschool."
Regret sliced through her the moment the words left her mouth, but she was already flying out from below alcove and into her seat as the bell rang. The nauseous feeling swirling in her stomach intensified when Knox entered moments later, avoiding her eyes as he slid behind his desk. He paused only to murmur something to Todd who immediately turned his attention to her. She looked away, guilt staining her cheeks scarlet.

By the end of afternoon lessons another two seniors had surrendered to the epidemic sweeping the school. Several younger boys had recovered from what the dubbed the 'three-day horror.' The knowledge of a swift recovery seemed to comfort the older students, but the use of 'horror' was so opposite to the reassurance that overall, it did little to help.

Kat had begun to seek out Todd after class but the wariness in his body language as he spoke to Knox stopped her. The poor soul had enough on his plate with Neil out of action. He didn't need her bringing conflict to the table, evident by Knox storming off as soon as he laid eyes on her. It was well known how much conflict unnerved Todd. With that thought in her mind she headed up to the common room, fighting the dizziness when she moved too quickly.

Only Charlie and Cameron were sat in the society's usual corner. The unusual sight dredged up recollections of her fight with Knox, who was nowhere to be seen. With a sigh she turned away, missing the wave Charlie sent her way. Frowning, she made her way back to her own room, grabbed the soft school jumper which was folded over the back of her chair and sat down, slipping the garment over her head in an effort to warm herself. It was only now that she was seated that the reason for her antsy feelings became as clear as the guilt saturating every cell in her body. With a groan, she left the safety of her room in pursuit of what was likely a futile mission.

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Kathleen approached the open door, pausing before she stepped over the threshold. Inside the dorm she could see him sitting dejectedly in the window twirling a pen absentmindedly in his hand.

"Knox?" She said quietly, staying in the doorway.

His head turned away from the window. She gasped as the light bathed his features, revealing the hurt in his eyes. "Come to yell at me some more?"

She shook her head. Biting her lip as the tidal wave of regret that had been lapping at her heart all day washed over her once more. "I'm so sorry, Knox" she took a step into the room, fiddling with the too-big sleeves of her jumper; Charlie's jumper, she realised with a jolt. "I was feeling shitty and I shouldn't have taken it out on you. It's no excuse for what I said."

They stared at each other awkwardly as she took another tentative step across the floorboards. "Feel free to kick me out. I just wanted to say how sorry I am. You're perfect for Chris. I was lashing out, I didn't mean it."

The silence between them was painful.

Kathleen forced a small smile onto her face despite the ache in her muscles. She was sure it must have looked more like a grimace. "I-I didn't want us to go to bed without knowing where we were" she murmured, hyper-aware of both his blazing and lack of communication. "I thought the advice was too good to waste on couples alone."

He rose from the window ledge and pulled her into a tight hug, sighing into her hair. "I'm sorry too" he breathed, arms still locked around her. "I should never have implied that I didn't trust you
or that your judgement was wrong, I was just...

"Worried?"

"Exactly" Knox pulled away but kept his hands around her elbows as he examined her. "You're like the sister I never had, and I can't lose this over something so stupid."

Her heart melted at the sincerity of his words, "I never want to lose you either. Everyone's stressed and ill, things will be easier soon. If we can make it through this, we'll make it through anything."

A wide grin spread across his lips." Now why aren't you in bed, Missy? Your eyes are red, you keep rubbing your temples and I can hear your congestion a mile off. I can't believe I was dumb enough not to see it before. Harassing the sick? What was I thinking?"

"Oh no, I'm not sick enough to go to bed" she protested.

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not."

"Uh-uh."

"Nuh-uh."

Their eyes met, and they dissolved into giggles. Kat's bubbly laughter soon dissolved into a cough which she tried to smother.

He stared expectantly at her.

"The common room?" She suggested.

He paused, realising it was the best he would get before reluctantly agreeing. "One sneeze" he warned, "and I'm dragging you up to bed myself."

She rolled her eyes, suppressing another cough. "Yes, Dad. "
Thank you so much for all the wonderful reviews! Please keep telling me your thoughts, I love hearing them as much as Cameron loves his math homework in this chapter ;)

_The winter wind is loud and wild,  
Come close to me, my darling child;  
Forsake thy books, and mateless play;  
And, while the night is gathering grey,  
We'll talk its pensive hours away;-

~ Faith and despondancy, Emily Bronte

"Look who I found" Kat announced, throwing open the door to the common room, shooting a mock glare at Knox who watched her critically.

"We wondered where you'd got to" Charlie replied, looking up from his book.

Kathleen took the seat between him and Cameron, leaving the armchair opposite open for Knox. She nudged the front cover of his book up with her knuckle to see the cover without interruption to his reading. Her heart skipped a beat. It was the book they had been hunting for in the library a few days ago.

"You found it then" she stated, trying in vain to keep her voice even.

He nodded, keeping his eyes on the text. Taking advantage of his rare distraction she took the opportunity to study him; her eyes tracing his features from the flutter of his eyelashes to the purse of his lips as he read. Only the sudden scratch of an almost blunt pencil pulled her attention away. Following the noise that she could only compare to nails on a chalkboard, she saw Cameron dragging a jagged, blunting pencil over his maths work. The wooden edge squeaked against the page as the scratch increased in volume.

"Do you need to borrow a sharpener?" Knox frowned, glancing around the almost empty common room. "I'm sure someone has one."

"I don't need one. I only have two more pages to complete" Cameron replied, waving him away as he grabbed his ruler, his focus trained on the paper in front of him.

Barely a minute had passed before Kat found herself speaking up. "Cameron. I really don't intend to be rude, but would it be possible for you to not use that particular pencil?"

"It's my mathematics pencil."
"I know" she bit her lip, disliking her chances now that he had begun to use a monotone voice void of any emotion.

His response was punctuated with another infernal screech emitted by the friction. "Then why waste time asking?"

Sighing, Kat sat back and closed her eyes. Although the faux calm position did little in the way of distraction, it eased the pulsing ache in her head.

"Cameron" Charlie marked his page and shut the Kerouac novel, continuing to speak through gritted teeth, "will you please use a pen and stop scratching that pencil."

The red head made no acknowledgement of his suggestion, much to the everyone's chagrin. He continued to use the blunt lead and seemed to drag it across the page with purpose, the movement slowing with the formation of each individual number.

Knox sighed, shielding his eyes to avoid being dragged into the brewing argument. If he didn't see what he knew Charlie was about to do, he couldn't be implicated as a witness. Sure enough, Charlie leaned over and snatched the offensive object from Cameron's hand and hurled it across the room before reclining back in the corner of the three-seater. The unhappy mathematician scowled, retaliating by throwing his pen in the opposite direction.

"Well" Cameron glared, "it seems like I'll have to recite my work aloud until you fetch my pencil."

"Cameron. Please just get your pen" Kat pleaded. "I can't so this today."

He shook his head, "I am not the responsible party."

"Your pencil, your responsibility" Charlie retorted.

Cameron made a noise of protest that was deafening in Kat's ear.

"I'll get it!" She rose from the sofa, the action too quick for the liking of her headache. She wobbled, dizziness clouding her senses as she took a step forward and tripped.

Arms reached out to steady her. Warm hands wrapped around her biceps and guided her back down to the sofa. Charlie's thumbs traced circles on her forearms while she breathed deeply, eyelids shut. His concerned eyes didn't stray from her face until he was satisfied she was alright. Ignoring her embarrassment, she muttered "Cameron. Maybe you should get it."

However, it was like she had not spoken. Cameron remained seated, attention glued to the papers in his lap and he continued to recite the equations written on them without pause to reply.

Reluctantly, she turned to face Charlie, bracing herself for the inevitable slew of jokes about to be thrown her way.

"I think you just fell for me" he winked, smirking as her breath caught.

"Out of all the klutz related humour, that's what you choose?"

He shrugged, clearly pleased by Knox's laugh. "Unless you want to admit you're sick I can keep going."

"I'm fine" she sniffed, "I'm fine. Everyone is just a bit paranoid."

Again, Charlie rolled his eyes, "who are you trying to convince?"
"You. I-" her hands flew to her mouth; the jerk of her shoulders knocked the blanket from her shoulders as she sneezed.

She froze.

Tentatively Kat opened her eyes to meet Knox's stare. Whether it was a look of defeat or a plea for help that he saw in their depths, she didn't know. But her lack of protest seemed to spur him on as he chucked the blanket at Cameron and held his hand out to her expectantly. Kat resisted the urge to make a fuss - which she figured would only serve to humiliate her more - and took the help to stand.

Now that she had surrendered in part to the idea that she was ill, the symptoms she had been actively ignoring since this morning seemed to come alive all at once. Seeing the discomfort in her manner, Knox looped his arm through hers, nodding at Charlie to do the same.

Kathleen vaguely registered the familiar touch on her left as he obliged Knox's silent command. As her companions began the slow journey up to her dormitory she leaned into the assistance, comforted by the firm but gentle aid of the boys. "I could walk myself, you know" she said, immediately contradicting her words as they reached the foot of the grand staircase, and her hands found each of theirs.

"Sure. That's why you've all turned me into the nurse" Charlie complained, the humour evident in his tone. "Who knew I'd be spending my days escorting the sick to bed like a walking ambulance."

"Sorry for the inconvenience." She almost missed a step, distracted by the thought that she was wearing his jumper., the one she had meant to give back a few days ago. At least Neil wasn't around, she had sinking suspicion as to how he would rather vocally interpret this. She wondered briefly if anyone had noticed...if Charlie had.

Time seemed a foreign concept. They entered her room before she had realised they reached the top of the staircase. Perhaps they hadn't been exaggerating her condition after all, not that she would admit it. Kat let go of their hands, untangled her arms from theirs and moved towards her draws, selecting a warm pair of pink pyjamas usually reserved for meetings in the cave. When she turned around the boys had appeared to have made themselves comfortable. Knox sat at her desk with the chair turned to face her bed, and Charlie was examining the contents of her bookshelves.

She arched an eyebrow, "I guess you're not leaving yet."

"Nope" Charlie popped the 'p' as he pulled 'For whom the bell tolls' from the shelf.

"Put that back in the right place when you're done" she warned, shutting herself in the bathroom to change. Once her nightclothes were on she washed her face and brushed her hair, securing it in loose side braid. Examining her reflection in the pale, yellow light revealed her peaky complexion beneath her fading freckles. She pinched her cheeks and glanced one more time in the mirror before re-entering her room. The boys were exactly where they had been before. Ignoring them, she turned all lights off but her reading lamp by the window and climbed into bed.

She lay there for a disappointing minute before she broke. Pushing herself up on her elbows, she addressed them "how long are you planning to stay?"

"Until you go to sleep" Knox replied easily.

Rolling her eyes, she collapsed back down. "I can't sleep if you're watching me."

"I'm reading" Charlie's voice sounded from the other end of the room, "and Knox is daydreaming
about his wedding. Go to sleep."

Blinking her eyes open but keeping them trained on the ceiling, she tried again "I'll sleep when you
leave?"

Knox snorted, "Sure."

"Why not?"

"Because, 'Miss I'm not sick but I can barely walk' " she heard Charlie snap the book shut as he
spoke, "you'll get up and read or do some study or whatever other useless thing you're convinced is
more interesting the moment we're gone."

"And then you'll come down to breakfast pretending you're alright" Knox continued, "when you're
clearly delirious with a fever on three hours sleep."

Kathleen stayed quiet, struck by how well they knew her. Eventually she whispered, "Thank you.
I'll go to sleep."

"Good" Knox said softly.

She propped her pillows up against the headboard to help her breathing and settled down. Closing
her eyes, she allowed herself to sink into the soft blankets and relax her muscles, drifting into the
darkness.

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Inky black had enveloped the room by the time she awoke. Although her breathing remained
limited, her mind was coherent, and she could feel the oppressive heat sweeping her body.
Reaching for the lamp at her bedside, she found a glass of water and a dose of medicine. A further
glance at her alarm clock showed that only an hour and a half had past. Gulping down the water,
she realised it was still cool, prompting her to wonder how long the boys had stayed after she fell
asleep. Peeling the blankets away, she wiped her sweaty brow and stumbled over to the window
where she rested on the cushioned seat, laying her face against the cold glass. She revelled in the
draft escaping in from the November night. Kat drained the glass, took the medicine and
exchanged it for the book beneath the nearby lamp.

Fatigue soon engulfed her once more. Her arm falling into her lap and the book sliding to her feet
as her grasp failed. In her slumber, a harsh rap on her door was left unanswered.

The door opened, spilling murky, golden light through the doorway which was cut off by an
ancient figure striding in.

Gale Nolan surveyed the dorm, his eyes catching on the empty bed to his right until the he spotted
the girl in the window. He moved closer, taking a pillow and what appeared to be a home-made
quilt from the bed. Slowly, he approached the girl illuminated by starry night separated from her by
thin glass, pale moonlight bathing her features. Cautiously, he lay a wrinkled hand upon her
burning forehead, feeling his arthritis more keenly than ever as her swept her sticky hair aside to
slide the pillow between her fragile skull and the hard glass. He tucked the blanket over her knees,
pulling the book from her lap. Turning it over in the silvery light, he smiled; memories of little
brunettes with shining blue eyes devouring the collection of Sherlock Holmes mysterious in his
private library swam before his misty eyes. Cordelia had taught Kathleen to read in his library by
the very same collection she had broken into as a child. Recollections of Cordelia's short and rare
visits over the last twenty years swirled in the glistening reflection of the diamond pendant around
Kathleen's throat. Nolan placed the book down, running his thumb over the cover one last time before exiting the room.

The glint of the pendant reflected in his mind, reminding him of the tiara that still rested in his safe. Perhaps, he thought, sinking into his office armchair, Kathleen would be different. She would accept the wedding gift Cordelia had rejected. Just as she had accepted the pendant.

Perhaps Kathleen still had a chance at the life Cordelia should have lived.
This chapter is a little more fractured than I would like, but it takes us where we need to be. That is much more important than my raging perfectionism. I can't believe the support for 'Young Gods' is continuing to grow. It seems only a short time ago I was worrying my little OC tale would be a disappointment. Now my idea of a girl in the welcome assembly has become a wild fire. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I was capable of writing something this long!

"But when a soul, by choice and conscience, doth

Throw out her full force on another soul,

The conscience and the concentration both make

mere life, Love. For Life in perfect whole..."

~ Love by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Chapter thirty-eight - Dawn of hope

Sunshine beamed down through the wispy, cotton clouds, dousing the grey, stone structure in light. Its rays penetrated the cracks in the frosted exterior like a promise of summer amongst the winter gloom.

A harsh knock ricocheted through the tranquil air.

"What the-" the lanky brunette tumbled down from the large window seat, managing to grab hold of the ledge with one hand to slow her descent until she landed. The side off her left knee hit the hard floor. Her legs were stuck, curled beneath her and twisted in a blanket she had no memory of falling asleep under. Blinking awake she scrambled to her feet - the blanket still wrapped around her like a mermaid's tail - and half hopped over to the door.

"Do you have to knock so loudly?" She sighed, opening the thin slab of varnished wood to reveal two flushed forms bundled up in jumpers and duvets. Neil waved, and Todd peaked out from beneath the layers of their mobile fortress with a sheepish smile.

"What are you doing out of bed?"

"Inviting you to our place for the day" sniffled Neil, " Meeks was up and about last night and although it's only six in the morning, no one else from the group is sick yet. I thought it would be nice for you to have some company."

Kathleen beckoned them in, propping the door open as she retreated into her room to gather her things. "I guess someone told you I caught the bug then" she finished folding her bedding before balancing her pillows on the top of the pile, and led them out, leaving the boys the close the door
behind them.

"Yeah. Charlie and Knox stopped by to see how I was" Neil elbowed Todd lightly, "and found my sick nurse was also sick."

"Wow, Todd" she grinned, "you really held out for him."

"I wouldn't be suffering if he could learn to keep his germs to himself" Todd retorted with a small smile of his own. "I've never known such a clingy patient."

Kat couldn't hold in her giggles at the blush rising in Neil's cheeks. Although, she was sure that neither boy had minded Neil's increased affection. She would go as far as calling it progress; not that she would articulate that particular thought. The pair seemed to be taking new steps in their relationship every day. Sometimes she observed lingering touches, other times it was an unbroken stare or reciprocated loving tones in conversation. Part of her ached for the courage to do the same.

She shook away the thought as they approached the boy's dorm. Inside, the beds had been pushed together and the bedside tables moved accordingly. Warmth was created in the cold air by the glow of lamps instead of the chilling, bright light held back by the curtains which had been drawn across the window. Neil immediately collapsed on the bed, pulling the duvet over his head as he rolled over to one side. Todd nudged Kat forward as he shut the door, gesturing for her to get in next. She shot him an amused look but said nothing. Cocooned in her duvet, she shuffled over to the middle and placed her pillows behind her. Todd followed.

"This is cosy" she muttered, poking Neil's shoulder until he lifted the weight pinning down her hair. Dismissing his yawned apologies, she took the hair tie from her wrist and braided the wild strands in hope of keeping it intact and away from the restless boy beside her. As Neil drifted back to sleep once more she turned to Todd whose serene demeanour soothed her. It didn't matter if Neil's wheezing was loud enough to wake the dead, or that the fog in her brain and ache in her limbs had not yet subsided. When Todd allowed his anxiety to slip away he became like the monks she had read about. He radiated contentment at a level that even Cameron had to admit was akin to the holy. Currently, the boy in question was lost in a river of ink as the words flowed from his fountain pen, spilling across the pages of his notebook in a stream of creativity that birthed his poems before mortal her eyes. Tracing the ripple of his pen gliding across the pages was hypnotising. Before she knew it, she had slipped into a peaceful slumber.

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"Neil! I know I lent you my geometry set but I need it ba-" the words dried up in Knox's mouth as he took in the sight before him. His three friends were snuggled up in their blankets like caterpillars in cocoons. Their shoulders were touching, and their cheeks flushed with fever, but they seemed comfortable in their rest. Todd's notebook had slipped onto the ground and his pen was clutched tightly in his fist, the leaking ink rapidly staining his fingers. Knox crept over, gently wiggling the pen from his grasp and set it down neatly upon the notebook. With a tender gaze, he closed the door behind him and headed to breakfast; resolving to pinch someone else's geometry set instead.

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"I see our Sleeping Beauties have awoken at last" Knox swung himself up onto the foot of bed.

"No kisses needed" Neil deadpanned, pulling his legs up so that the others could squeeze onto the bed. Charlie took the space he had freed next to Knox while Meeks climbed onto the window ledge, Pitts occupied the desk and Cameron sat himself in the corner; far away from any risk of germs.
"What a shame," Cameron unpacked his sandwiches. "The pathogens would have thrived."

Ignoring the comment, Knox lifted a satchel into the centre of the bed and began to unpack their various water bottles, wrapped sandwiches and fruit cake which he divided amongst the rest the group. "Luckily our favourite chef was in the kitchen at break" he explained, "he was more than happy to rustle up something once I explained the situation."

"Knox this is amazing!" Kat grinned, skipping her sandwich and taking a bite out of the cake. "I'd forgotten how good food is" she moaned bringing a hand over her mouth to stop any stray crumbs flying out.

"Usually I would laugh" Neil's voice fought to slice through the boys' laughter, "but I must agree. This is heavenly, perhaps you could seduce Chris with fruitcake."

"Or not" Charlie kicked his ankle lightly. "Are you sure you haven't got a fever anymore? That was one of the worst ideas you have ever come up with, and that is saying something."

"What's wrong with my ideas?"

Cameron coughed, "maybe asking what isn't wrong with them would be simpler." He caught sight of Neil's expression, "what? No one else has forged as many parental letters of permission as you, let alone forming a forbidden midnight club in a cave."

"That comes with the territory of strict parents who don't support you" he retorted. "Anyway, on the subject of the meeting, I think it best that we hold it here tonight. That way we can still have one, without risk of worsening our symptoms or falling asleep in the cold. " He raised his hand, "all in favour?"

Every member in the room rose a hand.

"Alright then, gather here at midnight" he clapped, "and bring more of this fruitcake if you can."

"I don't think I can look at another fruitcake" Todd whispered, handing his third slice to Kat who subtly gave it to Pitts while Neil was distracted. "I've never seen him eat so much."

Kat studied Neil as he tucked into what she counted as his fourth slice of cake, "I would say he's a growing boy but he's already over six feet."

"Maybe I should be eating more. I feel short next to him."

"If we ate like he does we'd get fat" she observed, "maybe there is a lot of exercise in theatre?"

"Or he won the genetic lottery."

"If you say so" she winked, causing Todd's cheeks to flush scarlet.

He shrugged, playing with the hem of his jumper, "and if I do?"

"Hmmm" she thought for a moment, "then you should tell him. I guarantee he thinks the same about you."

Todd shook his head, "no. I'm not like that."

"I hate to shock you in your fragile state of illness, but if things were different" she whispered with a grin, "I would date you."
He nudged her arm, struggling to hide his pleasure. "And I'd date you."

"You'd date who?" Interrupted Pitts, crumbs spraying out his mouth.

Meeks rolled his eyes. "What he means to ask is do you have more cake."

"Yeah, but this suddenly got interesting!" Pitts batted Meeks' warning hand away as he grumbled about social cues. "I'm always last to hear the gossip."

"Because there is no gossip" she deadpanned, looking pointedly at Meeks. Much to his delight the bell sounded, forcing the picnickers to scramble and hunt for various belongings as they tried to clean up with enough time left to get to Latin without a late mark by their names.

"See you tonight!" Yelled Knox as he pulled Charlie out the door with him, ignoring the latter's complaints about wanting more cake. The resounding silence left in their wake was deafening.

After several beats Neil broke, "what do we do now?"

The three students sat pondering their rare freedom. At Welton there was always more work to be done, an extra-curricular to attend or teachers to avoid in moments of unstructured and unsupervised time. Suddenly, the trio had been left to their own devices with no obligations and all teachers busy with classes.

"Um...I don't know" Kat trailed off, struggling for ideas. "We could play a game?"

Neil shook his head. "No offence, but I've played enough card games in the last two days to last me a lifetime."

"We could go over some scenes with you?" Suggested Todd. Neil lit up instantly, which is how the boys found the trio once classes were over. Kat was draped in various blankets with a crown of paperclips resting on her head and a fountain pen in her right hand to serve as Queen Titania's wand while she fawned over Todd, knelt at her feet as Bottom, with a pillow serving as the donkey head. Neil leapt around the room as Puck, talking to seemingly nobody until Charlie stepped in and took the script from the ground, muttering about knowing Oberon's lines in his sleep since he'd heard Neil recite them so many times rehearsing. Eventually the entire group was adorned in make-shift costume to aid Neil's high-spirited practice. Meeks pulled a camera out and snapped candids, unseen amongst the chaos that reigned until Hager put a loud stop to the 'debauchery.'

When the dead poets returned to the dormitory under the cover of darkness the poems were performed with a new fervour. A renewed sense of purpose filled the lines they chanted in whispers.

By the time the meeting had drawn to a close Todd had fallen asleep on Neil's shoulder much to tall boy's delight. Not wanting to wake him, the rest of the group had been dismissed with a whisper and plea for quiet.

"Come on," Knox whispered extending his hand to Kat and pulling her up. "We'll walk you back, can't have you fainting or anything."

Kat shot him a playful glare as she dropped her pillows into his arms, "then you can make yourself useful because I'm fine."

"Fine is a relative term in your case" Charlie hissed, waving away Neil's glare and draping her blanket around her shoulders, moving it back into place when she shrugged it off in protest. "Almost predictably false."
"Are you calling me a liar?"

"I would never."

"Stop it, children" Knox hushed the pair as he stepped into the dim corridor. "I don't want a detention with Hager because of you two, and more importantly I don't want to incur Neil's wrath when you wake Todd and he gets embarrassed."

"This feels like deja vu " she muttered, pulling her blanket tighter.

"Like I said yesterday, I'm a walking ambulance" Charlie grinned "oh, what a burden superior health can be."

"Your choice to walk me back" She replied, "I could always ask someone else."

"You didn't ask us to" pointed out Knox, amused by his sudden invisibility to the pair walking behind him.

"I like my goodnight hug. I'm willing to give that up."

Her heart stopped, "what?"

"Didn't Knox tell you?" He teased, "your heroes were showered in affection. I'll feel cheated if the damsel sends me away cold." Contradictory to his words he paused at the threshold to her dorm, watching Knox drop her pillows and instruct her not to go to class if she still felt sick in the morning. As soon as he stepped out of the room, Charlie turned on his heel with no more than a wave in her direction. Knox followed.

"I'm not a damsel" She called after them, as loud as she dared in the silent halls.

He continued walking, "I know."

The brunette gripped her doorframe. The decision she wanted to make was exceedingly stupid but passing up on the opportunity felt like sacrilege. Maybe last night's full moon had induced madness, or perhaps she was just tired, but the choice was made as the words tumbled from her lips before she had time to grasp the reality of her daring tone, "do you want that hug or not?"

He paused, his shoulders falling as if all the breath had left his body. The space between them shrank as they stepped closer, her arms resting lightly around his neck and his around her waist, fingertips barely brushing her clothed back. As if acting on pure instinct, she tilted her head up to press a soft kiss to his cheek and slipped out of the embrace as quickly as she had initiated it, closing the door between them.

Stunned, she collapsed against the solid wood like one of the girls in Nancy's cliché teen romance novels, breathless and touching her lips in shock. Unbeknownst to her, she was mirrored by the frozen boy on the other side. His usual brashness replaced by astonishment and the seed of a joyous smile on his lips.

Knox stood smugly in the shadows, watching the dawn of hope rise in his friend's expression. If only the girl of his own dreams could give a hint that she liked him back. With a sigh, Knox gave his friend a few moments to compose himself before clearing his throat.

Startled by the sound, Charlie spun to see Knox in the shadows. "I-err-I didn't realise you were still here," he rubbed the back of his neck.
"So, it would seem" he smiled wickedly, nodding towards the door. "Just wait until Neil hears about this."
Chapter Notes

Guess who managed to get into their dream university for English Literature! When I began writing this chapter I was leaving home in two weeks, and now as I amend this author's note, I have been here for a week. The last few weeks have been manic in terms of preparation, goodbyes and settling into a flat with three strangers in a new city and adjusting to being completely independent for the first time. Thank you for your patience. I know this update is over a month late, and now that it's finally finished I hope it was worth the wait.

_The boy I love, the same becomes a man not through derived power, but in his own right_,

_Wicked rather than virtuous out of conformity or fear_,

_Fond of his sweetheart_

- Section 47, Song of myself by Walt Whitman

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Chapter thirty - nine - Tis proper I obey...

"And finally-" a harsh clang cut through Hager's droning voice. He paused, scowling at what the students could only assume was the bell. It seemed even inanimate objects were incapable of escaping his wrath. Kathleen yawned, grateful for the opportunity to perk up before Keating's lesson. No matter what time of day it was, trig never failed to make her sleepy. Perhaps it was the deadly combination of confusion, lack of confidence and silence that made her brain cells shut-down four times per week; or perhaps it was simply the security of having Cameron as her tutor. The boy had finally found a method which enabled him to teach her the material in at least half the time it took her to understand Hager. Shaking herself awake, she began to pack up her books, rolling her eyes behind her curtain of hair as she tuned into Hager's dulcet tones once more, "sit down! The bell does not dismiss you. I do, once your assignments have been submitted." His cold eyes surveyed the students for further movement before he began to take their papers in.

Dutifully, Kat laid her completed assignment on the desk.

"No, no, no. Idiot!" Kat looked sideways, her eyes narrowed at Neil's mutterings. His widened eyes met her own. Panic dripped from his features. "I forgot to do it!" His high-pitched whisper attracted the attention of several others who eyed Hager anxiously. It was common knowledge that his threats to remove a point from their final grade for each incomplete assignment were to be taken seriously.

He stared blankly at his untouched question paper, "my father is going to kill me."
"You were sick" Todd said lowly, "surely he will understand."

Neil shook his head. "And I have rehearsal tonight. I can't get detention!"

Pushing her homework to the edge of her desk, Kat looked pointedly at Hager who was fast approaching their end of the classroom. "Do it now." Without hesitation, Neil copied the answers down, mumbling his thanks before beginning to scribble down the method. His rapid glances in Hager's direction increased in frequency with every stroke of his pen.

Todd worried at his bottom lip, his eyes never leaving Neil's flustered form. Only the last seven questions remained incomplete by the time Hager reached Todd's desk. With the boy's assignment in hand, Hager was about to turn towards Neil when a series of garbled words tumbled from the quiet boy's mouth.

"Sir, please may I use the restroom?"

The old teacher blinked owlishly. Kat caught Charlie's eye as he bit down on his fist to smother his amusement. It wasn't every day that someone left Hager speechless, much less Todd Anderson.

Todd took a deep breath in the following silence and repeated his question, hands trembling beneath the desk. The harsh muttering of his peers roared in his ears, but he ignored it, desperately willing himself - for the first time in years - to maintain his hold on the class' attention.

Charlie leaned forward, jabbing Neil in the shoulder with his ruler, hissing "he's distracting him, you moron. Write!" Instantly, Neil's pen began to zig zag erratically across the page.

"No, Mr Anderson" Hager responded, his eyebrows knitted together. "At the age of seventeen we expect our students to have adequate control over their bladders."

"Sir?" Kathleen inquired innocently, a split-second before he turned away from Todd, "forgive my disrespect for it is not my intention, but I believe Todd is still feeling unwell. I doubt he would ask if was not urgent."

Behind the polite facade, she braced herself for the punishment.

"Although your concern is admirable, Miss Murray" Hager admonished, "I strongly advise that you leave the running of this classroom to me. Mr Anderson has suddenly shown himself capable of speech. Therefore, you have no need to speak on his behalf." She bowed her head in false contrition which quickly faded into anxiety as she glimpsed Neil's progress.

Hurricane Hager was about to hit when Pitts called out from the back "Sir, I think I forgot what the angle of a right-angled triangle was. May I have my homework back?" His ridiculous question elicited smothered laughter, but more importantly it inspired more participation in the unspoken plot for the last crucial minutes until Neil's hands shot up in triumph, knocking his inkwell to the ground in uncoordinated, light-headed relief. The noise caught Hager's attention, putting a stop to the class' efforts just as his temper reached boiling point.

"My apologies, Sir" Neil handed his completed assignment to Hager, "I spilt ink over the last question." Hager ignored him and dismissed the class who were now late to their next lesson. Frowning, he stepped over the inkwell, shuffling the papers into order as he thought about all of the ways he would have caned the ineptitude out of his students if he only had the time. In his wonderings he missed the radiant smile on Neil's face as threw his arms around Todd in the doorway.

"You're brilliant!" Todd's heart stuttered as the words sank into his skin. Shivering at the warmth of
Neil's whisper on his neck, he let himself sink into the embrace before slipping his arm through Neil's and pulling him down the empty corridor.

"Come on, we don't want to be late for the Captain." They flew down the stairs. Todd slowed as they approached the door, but Neil leaped at it.

"Mr Keating!" The door flew open, revealing the lanky teenage boy. Neil almost catapulted himself over several desks in his haste to reach the Captain. "You'll never guess what Todd did!" His hundred-watt smile appeared to blind the man as he fumbled for an answer.

In surrender to his student's charm, the Captain sat obligingly on the edge of his desk. "Why don't you clue me in."

Neil bounced on the balls of his feet, hands shoved into his pockets as he struggled to contain himself. "Oh, Captain" he shook his head, "it was amazing! There I was, sat in trig when the bell sounded, and I realised, to my horror, that I had forgotten the homework assignment. Hager was stalking around collecting the work, getting closer and closer to me. By this point I was panicking, because I can't have points taken from my final grade otherwise I couldn't be in the play! And of course, Father would kill me! I thought for certain that all was lost. I couldn't copy Kat's homework fast enough. All of a sudden Hager was seconds away from catching me when Todd...well, he...he" Neil paused, letting out a cry of joy as he slapped the desk beside him, "he looked right at Hager and asked permission to go to the restroom!"

Whatever Mr Keating had expected him say they would never know, but clearly it was not this. Neil babbled on, oblivious to the conflicting expressions of confusion, amusement and in Kat's opinion, a look of pride, flittering across his face.

"It was nothing" Todd insisted quietly, watching Neil act out the morning's dramatic event to Charlie. The usually snarky boy watched amiably; despite witnessing the event itself from a mere seat away no more than two minutes ago.

Keating gazed past the shell of the docile boy in front of him, seeing the growing fire burning within the trembling vessel. "It was not nothing, Todd. Look at his smile. That boy has the expression of Atlas when he thinks nobody is watching. In a moment when it counted most you took the weight of the sky from his aching shoulders." He lay a gentle hand on the Todd's shoulder. "That son is never nothing."

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When sunset finally arrived, the students of Welton Academy had claimed the common room as their safe haven from the trials of the day. Fire crackled in the hearth, keeping the troublemakers occupying the upper common room warm and sheltered from the melancholy, winter wind screaming around the stone structure.

Kathleen chewed on the end of her pen as she considered the position of Desdemona. Since the Captain's analysis of the limited female sphere in class today, the actions of Emilia had been at the forefront of her mind. The unexpected heroine had emerged from Iago's hold amidst the tragedy rapidly unfolding, only to die revealing the truth. "Good gentlemen, let me have leave to speak: 'Tis proper I obey him, but not now..." The words swam through her mind, filling up the void until her pen began flying across the page in wave after wave of ink forming a tidal wave of exploration on the shores of both the familiar Elizabethan society and it's Venetian counterpart, before sailing the seas of deception and perusing the prisons of oppression.

She was pulled abruptly from her thoughts by a jeering shout.
"Hey, this is the senior common room, run back to kindergarten!" The society turned their heads at towards the taunting. A short, pale-faced boy shrunk back from the hollering group of older boys, his body mostly hidden by the door which he seemed to be using as a shield against the onslaught.

Charlie growled, "the poor kid looks like he's about to cry." He stood up with the intention of intervening, but was stopped in his tracks by the young boy's strangled voice asking for Kathleen. Immediately, her essay was thrown aside, and she was smiling warmly at the kid who was too frightened to loosen his grip from the door.

"Phone call" his stammered in a voice barely loud enough to be heard over the unpleasantries spewed from the mouths of their classmates, "the-the student phone in the foyer."

With a nod, she rose gracefully from her seat in manner quite unexpected from someone with such a distinct frown.

"Who is it?" Asked Todd, watching sadly as the scene escalated with the launch of paper planes.

"I have no idea" she replied, her expression clouding further. "I already spoke to Nancy an hour ago."

Cameron shrugged, glaring in the direction of the shaking adolescent in the doorway. "Maybe it's an urgent family matter. Let's just be thankful it isn't the hooligan Nolan sent to find you last time." He observed the boy through narrowed eyes, oblivious the deepening creases on her brow with every word he spoke about the family she had left hundreds of miles away in the remote Scottish countryside.

Todd fidgeted, appalled by Cameron's insensitivity. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, I'll be fine. I'm sure nothing's wrong." She spotted Fraser sat amongst the rabble with a pool cue in hand from the game abandoned by his friends in favour of verbal amusement at the expense of a first year. When he noticed her, she ignored him and came to a halt between them and the messenger whose discomfort was palpable. "Thank you for finding me" she said, allowing him to retreat into the hallway while she blocked the tormentors from view with a swift slam of the door.

Without a word the boy turned on his heel and began to walk briskly down towards the student telephones. Kat followed, struggling to keep pace. When they arrived, there was another boy chatting on the phone who held the receiver out towards her.

She took the phone from the younger boy with a small nod of thanks, "hello?"

"Kat! Hey."

The two boys left. "Gin?"

"Yes, it's me" her velvet voice crackled down the line. "I'm with Neil at rehearsal and we had the most fantastic idea!"

Her eyebrows flicked up, "oh?"

"Tell her!" She heard the faint echo of Neil's nagging tone before it was buried beneath Ginny's hissing for quiet. Kat tapped absently on the wall supporting her weight, amused by the mini argument unfolding which sounded comically like the verbal sparring she engaged in with her brothers at home.
"I will if you shut it for five seconds" she heard Ginny mutter, followed by the rise and fall of Neil's voice. Although she couldn't decipher his words, she knew that teasing lilt well enough. Ginny's response was all the confirmation she needed.

"Are you finished?" Kat laughed, "I've never heard Neil called an 'unlicked cub' before."

"Really? It's a common expression and quite fitting" she said mildly, "but I digress. I wanted to talk to you about the next society meeting. I mentioned to Neil that I wanted to attend at least one, and he suggested that Nancy, Chris and I come to the next one as my birthday present since I turn sixteen on Friday. What do you say?"

"I say we should have done this sooner" her smile could be heard by pair across town. "The boys will be thrilled."

Ginny hummed in agreement, "Knox especially."

"You know about that?"

"Oh, anyone who claps eyes on them for even a second knows about that. The poor boy isn't subtle."

Neil's snort rang down the phone line.

"Besides, I thought we could do something a little different to mark the occasion" she continued, "a meeting dedicated to female poets."

"Smashing idea, do you have any in mind?"

"A few. You're probably the expert anyway."

Kat let out a mock sigh, "I guess I could scrape a few together."

"You're the best, Kat! Unfortunately, we have to go, Shakespeare calls. See you soon."

"Bye." She placed the phone back with a resounding click. Her body slumped back against the wall as she rested, breathless against the cool, solid structure. Her heart beat wildly against the constraint of her ribcage. The scattered pieces of her life seemed to be falling together again, but time's winds were gathering. Soon the most sentimental pieces would be blown away...but she didn't need to concern herself with the future just yet. Tonight, was for celebration she told herself, as she pushed off the wall and made the journey back to the common room. The light from under the door shone brighter as she drew nearer, following the boisterous chatter which fought its way out from behind the door. Breathing in, she entered the student's hangout and picked her way through the fun until she reached the corner occupied by the dead poets.

"I come bearing good news" she announced, slipping back into her spot, "Ginny and Neil rang from rehearsal, they had an idea for the next meeting."

Todd's head shot up from behind his notebook, "what did he say?"

"He's invited Ginny to the next meeting for her birthday" she grinned, looking directly at Knox "along with Nancy and Chris." Knox's mouth fell open despite the lack of words accompanying the action.

Meeks reached out to pat his shoulder "words, Knox. You'll have to use words if you want to impress her at the meeting."
"Oh, and only female poetry will be read. So perhaps you need to borrow a book from me later" she suggested, "I'm sure you'll find a poem to inspire her with."

"A serenade" Knox whispered, "this is my shot." Meeks and Charlie exchanged a worried look.

"No. Absolutely no singing" Charlie said firmly. Pitts' sniggering turned into a yelp as Meeks' elbow jabbed his ribs.

Pitts rubbed the sore spot on his side "Knox, you can't sing. Recite a pretty poem or say nothing."

He inclined his head sheepishly "uh, yeah. That might be a better idea."

"And please, Knox, for the love of God stay sober" Kathleen implored, her nose wrinkling at the memory of his last encounter with Chris. The ghost of the evening still haunted her every time she saw her blue dress, and seemingly each time Knox came up with another questionable plan 'to win 'his angel's affections.'

"Don't worry" the corners of his mouth sunk down at his foggy recollection, "I'm not in a hurry to repeat that night - well, what I can remember of it."

"Not so fast, Knoxious" Charlie smirked, "think of the society. It would certainly be entertaining for us."

"And entertaining for you clean up afterwards" Kat cut in drily.

"Carpe Diem" he shrugged, "it's a small sacrifice."

Meeks rolled his eyes, "for me. You always get me to do your chores."

"Friendship, Meeksie."

"Friendship won't get Knox a date" he fired back.

"Who knows" Charlie shrugged, fixing his gaze on the lamp above Kathleen's head, "it might be exactly what he needs."

Knox watched the colour rise in Kathleen's cheeks at his words, the scarlet tint only intensified when his gaze swept over her, focusing fleetingly on the lamp shining about her head. Suddenly, the exchange he had witnessed between the pair last night came flooding back. He studied them, watching them sneak glances at each other when the other wasn't looking, smiling softly when their eyes met. A contented smile slid onto his lips at their dance. Perhaps Charlie did have a point, he thought, friendships grew and sometimes flowered into something new."
Chapter 40 - Silence thy soul, Part I

Chapter Notes

Hello, I'm back! I promise I haven't forgotten about you. Life has been getting in the way and my workload is manic. I don't know why I expected a degree to be anything less. Anyway, this chapter will be split into parts due to the extreme length of the meeting. I hope it is worth the wait.

Oh, and one more thing. I know this is a slow burn fic but now that the initial dominoes have fallen, and the story is moving on track to an end; things are about to start happening very quickly. Can you call over forty chapters in 'quickly'? Possibly not, but the pace of certain plotlines is about to pick up. I imagine many of you will be pleased.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Say thou dost love me, love me, love me—toll

The silver iterance!—only minding, Dear,

To love me also in silence with thy soul."

~ Sonnet 21 (Say over again), Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Chapter Forty -Silence with thy soul, Part One

"Knox, the meeting is tonight" Kathleen slammed a fourth volume of poems down in front of him. "You need to choose something or else you'll never learn the words in time."

For the third time, a small tear began to form beneath his restless fingers as he scoured the volume, "it has to be perfect!"

She pulled his hand away from her book, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. "What could be more perfect than you not tearing the pages of my books?" She scolded him lightly and turned the fragile page herself. "They are old but gold, and I would prefer to keep them in their current golden condition."

He apologised, slowing his pace as he grabbed the next book and ran his fingers through his hair instead; he created a new victim of his anxiety with each harsh tug.

"You heard what Keating said, Knoxious" Charlie leaned back in his seat with an affected air of nonchalance blanketing what Kathleen saw as blatant concern, "poetry is for wooing women. Whatever you pick will work."

"But it's written by women!"

He shrugged, "doesn't matter. But if it really bothers you pick something by Sappho."

"Who is Sa-wait?" The pair leaned forwards as Knox traced a page with a gentleness he had
neglected almost all day. "This is perfect!" He exclaimed, snapping the book closed before they could decipher the sonnet.

Kat pivoted in her seat as he sprung out of his seat. "What's perfect?" Knox?

"He's gone."

"So is my book" she grumbled.

Charlie moved the battered books into a neat pile at the edge of the table. He kept his head down, amused by her petulant expression at her exclusion from Knox's plan. "I wouldn't worry too much, it's in a better place" he paused, looking up to catch the change in her features "or at least it will be when he's finished."

As expected, her mouth fell open. "I resent that."

He waited.

She glared back. But he could see the struggle against the glimmer of mirth fighting its way in. Barely a minute passed before she broke. Without moving her eyes, she grasped for the eraser abandoned on the table top and while he was distracted by her glare she flicked it at his arm.

"Cheat."

With a shrug she swept the pile of books into her arms, "I thought you would have learned not to mess with my books by now" she chastised with a grin. "See you at midnight" she called over her shoulder as she left the library.

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Moonlight dripped through the splintered canopy above turning the last of the crisp, autumn leaves silver and lighting the poet's path as they weaved through the darkened woodland. Upon reaching the mouth of the cave Neil's torch flickered. It's beam pulsing in time to their heartbeats as if it had been influenced by the electrified nerves of the teenagers crossing the threshold to freedom.

They fell into a familiar rhythm of action, underpinned by the quiet hum of faded chatter and pages rustling over the crackle of burning wood as the fire sprang to life. Its crimson lustre grew, creeping across the space until the 'God of the cave' was saturated in its bloody hue.

"Make room for the girls" Neil instructed. He ducked out from the blinding light to settle next to Todd, but his gaze remained fixed through the haze on the shadowy opening.

Pitts frowned from his position on the floor with the refreshments. After scanning the pickings one last time he picked up a muffin and threw it to Charlie. "Hey, Nuwanda. I'll swap you for a drink."

With a shrug he produced a flask from his pocket and handed it over. Pitts unscrewed it with sigh. "I can't believe I'll be sitting with girls."

"You sit with me every day" Kathleen deadpanned, reaching over Knox to grab the flask from Pitts' outstretched hand. "No." She said as Knox made a grab for it. "Not happening. No way."

"Just a little to steady my nerves?" He watched her ignore his plea and knock back a rather long gulp before passing it to the next awaiting hand. Knox stared at her. "That was more than usual."

She hummed in agreement as she rifled through her satchel for the books she had brought along for the meeting. "I have an idea of how things could play out tonight and trust me" her voice dropped,
"I'll need it." Before he could protest she shoved a familiar volume of poetry into his hands. He had almost found the right page when a melodic - and distinctly feminine - laugh filtered down the opening of the natural shelter.

Kathleen shot up to greet the guests who stumbled in. All but Nancy paused in fascination with the location they had only heard about in Kathleen's stories. The bouncy blonde kicked her heels off and threw herself onto the log next to Charlie. "We made it!" She beamed, "despite a few mishaps but I guess that's to be expected when navigating the woods at midnight." Her eyes lingered on Chris who blushed as Ginny pulled a few stray twigs out of her best friend's hair. "You boys had better make this worth our while. And if anyone asks," she lowered her voice into a whisper, "we are at the drive in watching a delightful family movie."

Ginny grinned wickedly, claiming the rock beside Neil. "Someone pass the birthday girl a flask. It's freezing out there."

Neil summoned the container and soon had it in Ginny's hands. "But alas," he winked, "fair Hermia wandered out of the woods and into the company of boys."

"Mother would have a fit" she caught Neil's eye and they dissolved into laughter.

Chris shook her head at their antics, smiling at the irony of Mrs Danbury's restrictions on male company. But the sight of Knox grinning at her halted her thoughts. Breathing deeply, she sunk gracefully down beside him on a log. "How do these meetings usually begin?"

"Neil reads the opening statement" Kat replied, slipping into the remaining space by Todd.

"Welcome initiates to the Welton Chapter of the Dead Poets Society" Neil rose with the sacred book in hand, "we shall commence with the words of Henry David Thoreau." He raised the torch to his chin as he read.

With the words spoken he nodded at Ginny before returning to his seat. As she took his place in the centre he shot her a reassuring smile.

"In honour of my sixteenth birthday it is my pleasure to announce a night of female poetry. I would like to thank the society members for this gift, and Kathleen for her help with tonight's selections. We shall begin with 'In an Artist's studio" by Christina Rosetti. It is a true poem of rebellion against literary tradition of the period."

"One face looks out from all his canvases,

One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:

We found her hidden just behind those screens,

That mirror gave back all her loveliness.

A queen in opal or in ruby dress,

A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,

A saint, an angel — every canvas means

The same one meaning, neither more or less.

He feeds upon her face by day and night,
And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,
Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:
Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;
Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream."

Applause filled the cave as her clear voice tailed off. She took a bow before moving back to the log. Only the faintest dusting of colour on her cheeks betrayed her pleasure at the praise in the air solidified in a high-five from Neil.

"You were really good" Todd said quietly as Neil resumed his duty as chairman.

Ginny studied the boy her theatre partner couldn't stop talking about. Although they had hardly exchanged more than a few words it was as if she knew him already. Todd Anderson for all his shyness had the main role in the tales told at every spare moment during rehearsals. Every week Neil had new stories about his roommate, the poet, the best person he knew, whose eyes - as he had let slip one late night - were breathtaking. And suddenly she could see the evenings spent rehearsing until sunset on the lakeside, lazy afternoons in the dorm filled with laughter and moments of something more that Neil had never quite been able to put into words. "Thank you" she whispered back, looking between the duo with a satisfied smile as the stories sprang to life before her eyes.

"How do you do it?" He asked twisting his fingers into the ends of his sleeves, "perform in a way that breathes life into words?"

She thought for a second. "I suppose it stems from need. I hear you're a writer, so I imagine the itch for a pen is the same as mine for the stage. Once I'm up there I can breathe in a way I can't elsewhere, and I guess the words are the breath of a person living for themself."

"And it's the same for Neil?"

"It is" she nodded, "you'll see it on opening night. Everything that is him is magnified, bubbling over with passion."

He wasn't looking at her but the smile stretching across his features was enough to see he was happy with her answer. He understood.

Their moment of silence was interrupted by Kathleen leaning towards them, her voice low. "It hasn't taken Nancy long to corner him" she muttered "how much damage can be done in a five-minute break?"

Ginny snorted at the sight she was referring to. Nancy was a picture of relaxation perched delicately on the end of a log with a bright smile directed at Charlie - or Nuwanda as they were told to call him - who looked baffled. Ginny could only imagine the strange and unrelenting questions he was being confronted with. "Lucky you" she replied as Nancy stood up, "it looks like you can ask."

Kat groaned comically as Nancy appeared before the trio, bypassing Neil's empty spot in favour of her best friend's lap. Todd smiled warmly at her as she greeted them.

"Enough of that" Kathleen waved away the pleasantries, "I want to know your game."
"Nothing" she cried, her hand pressed over heart in mock insult. "It's only astrology. Completely harmless, I swear!"

"Why astrology?" Ginny asked pleasantly. She eyed the magazine in her friend's hand with the feeling that she already had the answer.

"Compatibility, darling" she opened it with a flourish to a double page chart.

Kat's eyes widened, "please tell me you didn't."

"Oh, stop worrying. He's clueless" the group cautiously looked in the direction of the boy cleaning his saxophone. "Honestly, the lack of trust is insulting" she grinned. "I needed some information from him so that we could be informed on the bigger picture."

Todd's eyebrows furrowed. "The bigger picture?"

Nancy smirked.

"The arrogance seems misplaced on a 'professional' who had to ask" Kat arched an eyebrow. "Even I can tell his sun sign is stamped all over him."

"Honey, you know I had more questions than that."

"A fact I'm trying desperately to forget."

"Where is all that Sagittarian sense of adventure?"

Ginny cut Kat's reply off, "that's enough bickering. Stop pretending you're not dying to know, Kat." She huffed but the amusement shone through. No longer able to deny her interest she lifted the corner of the magazine to peek at the result.

Nancy's smug expression intensified as Kat mumbled the words. "Sorry, can you repeat that?"

"I said high compatibility" she repeated, keeping her voice at a whisper despite the pleased expression on her face.

Ginny craned her neck to see the pages, "is that it?"

The blonde shook her head and moved the chart away from her so that Todd and Ginny could see. "It's more than that. Maximum compatibility in all categories: love, communication and intimacy" she explained as she pointed to the corresponding boxes. Her finger tapped the last category for emphasis "although with two fire signs we can hardly be surprised by the intimacy paragraph."

"Nancy!" Kat hissed, throwing a cautious glance over at Charlie who at a glance seemed unaware of the conversation. But somehow, she knew he was listening. Perhaps it was tilt of his head or suspiciously fixed gaze on the instrument in his hands. Whatever it was, she knew he had heard every word.

"Alright everyone" Neil waited for silence, "we shall resume the meeting with a- " Giggles erupted as Nancy crouched low and darted across the centre of the cave to reach her seat. "With a reading by society member Knox Overstreet" he finished with a slight cough as he suppressed his own mirth at her antics. But his mirth disappeared as quickly as it had arrived. Knox took his place by the fire; despite its warmth his hands shook violently. The torch pointed at the page was barely steady enough for him to read, yet he rejected Neil's non-verbal plea to help.
"This, uh, this is a Sonnet Twenty-one by Elizabeth Barrett Browning." He took a shaky breath, willing his body not to humiliate him in front of Chris. Chris! His eyes sought hers and it was as if his prayers had been answered. The silence was irrelevant when she looked at him like she believed in him. When a single glance from her willed him to speak.

"Say over again, and yet once over again,
That thou dost love me. Though the word repeated
Should seem "a cuckoo-song," as thou dost treat it,
Remember, never to the hill or plain,
Valley and wood, without her cuckoo-strain
Comes the fresh Spring in all her green completed.
Belovèd, I, amid the darkness greeted
By a doubtful spirit-voice, in that doubt's pain
Cry, "Speak once more—thou lovest!" Who can fear
Too many stars, though each in heaven shall roll,
Too many flowers, though each shall crown the year?
Say thou dost love me, love me, love me—toll
The silver iterance!—only minding, Dear,
To love me also in silence with thy soul."

"Knox! That was amazing" she praised as he returned to the log they shared. "Are you reading anymore tonight?"

He felt the heat rush to his cheeks, the red patches darkening with her every word. "I'm glad you think so, but I wouldn't go that far" his beaming smile weakened, "no. Sorry, I'm not."

She touched his knee, "I could never recite poetry as well as you, the emotion was incredible. It's a shame there won't be more."

"In that case" he cast his mind back to the night Charlie had recited poetry for the girls, "I promise I'll recite poetry for you soon."

"I'll look forward to the next meeting" she laughed, "now tell me more about Welton. It sounds so different from Ridgeway!"

Chapter End Notes

Take note of Knox's promise before continuing with the meeting. Poor Chris has no idea what she's in for...
Speaking of Chris, what do you think about her character? I find her the most difficult to write because of her portrayal in the movie. Alexandra Powers does an amazing job with her role, but the script makes Chris a rather frustratingly flat character with no real purpose outside of being the love interest. The deleted scenes give her a little more substance through small interactions with the Danbury family but nothing much. Ginny is easier in the sense that she is a blank canvas outside of the facts (Danbury, Henley Hall student, Chris' friend, Hermia in the play). Any thoughts?
Chapter 41 - Silence thy soul, Part II

Chapter Notes

Happy holidays! I hope everyone is having the lovely break they deserve. A massive thank you for all of the follows, favourites and reviews. I know the update schedule has gone out the window and that makes me all the more appreciative. The fact that so many of you are re-reading in the meantime is honestly a better gift than anything I imagined receiving this Christmas.

"He comes with western winds, with evening's wandering airs,
With that clear dusk of heaven that brings the thickest stars.
Winds take a pensive tone, and stars a tender fire,
And visions rise, and change, that kill me with desire."

~ The Prisoner by Emily Brontë

Chapter Forty-one - Silence with thy soul, Part two

Nancy turned to the boy next to her with a smile one would imagine Lucifer wore in the moments before he fell from heaven. "It seems Knox has provided us with an opportunity to continue our conversation."

"You mean there are still questions left to ask about my birthday?"

Ignoring his sarcasm, she simply shrugged. "It's my prerogative. Now quit deflecting."

"Without knowing your sign? That seems unfair" he countered, "you hold far too many cards here, Nancy."

"Alright. I'm a June first Gemini, but unlike Miss Monroe I am far less charming." Her playfulness disappeared as a calculating gleam emerged from what had been kindly eyes. "For gentleman so notoriously, bold you're being frustratingly cautious. You both could do with a second dose of carpe diem to drown out the trivialities of the world - though my dear Kitty Kat would skin me alive for such directness with you."

He studied her in a manner he knew was alarmingly similar to Cameron when he was faced with a puzzle. Nancy - whose role in Kathleen's life seemed to be the equivalent of Neil's in his own - let him search her for answers with an openness that unnerved him. "So why rock the boat?"

"You two are good together" she stated. "Even if you are both too stubborn about the future to acknowledge how good you could be; I'm not."

Doubt clouded his features as he removed his gaze from the saxophone in his lap. "I'm stubborn about a friendship. She's stubbornly oblivious - not that it matters. Soon she will back to reality at her school, then home in Scotland where she'll meet a real-life literary hero in the countryside who'll give her adventure, and the perfect but unconventional domesticity that she will love, and
Nolan will hate." He swung the instrument over his shoulder and moved to get away from his own bitter words when he was interrupted.

"No." Nancy stared at him until he sank back down onto the log. "Don't get us confused. I may enjoy the things others label superficial like Hollywood movies and pink dresses; but at the end of the day I don't want to live in that world. I'm happy with a husband I love and three kids in a beautifully decorated home where I can host parties at the weekend. Underneath the dramatics I've always been the sensible one. Whereas Kat..." she sighed, glancing over at her best friend who was sat laughing with Todd at Knox's expense. The lovesick boy was so distracted by Chris that the marshmallow he had been roasting caught fire. "Kat's always wanted more. Underneath the books, the daydreams and her impeccable manners is a lust for life that runs in her blood. Her heart was made for a different life; one this society builds the foundations for. I bet on my life that she'll back in the states before too long, and likely in contact with the people in this cave who have captured not just her heart, but her mind and imagination. Don't disappoint me, Nuwanda."

Charlie opened his mouth but closed it promptly when Kat appeared at his side. "What were you two whispering about? And don't say nothing because I don't trust either of you."

Nancy shrugged, "nothing I care to repeat."

He followed her lead and smirked, "why? Is 'Kitty Kat' worried?"

"About the safety of mankind. This is a supervillain collaboration in the making."

"Hmm" Nancy rose from her seat, "maybe I'll go and threaten someone else next." They watched her cross over to Chris, her presence forcing the other girl to move closer to Knox.

"She's good" Charlie muttered, watching Knox blush at his sudden proximity to Chris.

"And subtle."

Charlie almost choked on his drink at the sarcasm in her tone. "It must be entertaining" he replied, recovering with a few coughs.

Kathleen hummed in agreement, "her fondness for shocking people is half her reason for meddling."

"And the other half?"

"Purely humanitarian."

"Shame" he frowned, struggling to appear serious. "chaos wreaked for selfish joy is a much better past-time."

"We have very different definitions of fun" she laughed."

"It's because I'm an Aries."

"I knew you were listening!" She whacked his arm lightly with the offending magazine. "Hear anything you like?"

"A few things."

Her heart contracted. "But you think astrology is nonsense."

He grinned, "how did you know?"
Before the pair could take their squabble any further the meeting was called to attention. But the call faded to white noise the second they caught each-other's eye. Brown met blue amid the shadows and blazing firelight, the connection remaining undeterred by the sharp looks and prickly comments flung their way as the meeting ground to a halt. Only Ginny's holler of "break it up, lovebirds" had the sheer strength and shrillness to break through.

Flaming cheeks pulled their mouths into frowns as both heads turned to face their peers.

"Ah" Charlie bit back throwing her words from the theatre back at her, "decided I'm worthier than Tab Hunter?" It was her turn to flush as the memory of their first meeting in the theatre flashed through her brain.

"Not that the real Tab would be interested" Neil mumbled, catching Charlie's eye.

"Yes, well I thought he would have looked him up" Ginny hissed. "And despite a few mishaps things worked out regardless."

His glare lessened slightly "still, the person in question didn't have that preference."

Ginny shrugged, "I had a theory to test."

Kat felt a crinkle form between her brows as she strained her ears to listen. Her frown only deepened at the expression of understanding slowly dawning on Nancy's face. "Get on with the poem, Neil" she chided lightly. At his acquiescence she let herself relax as the meeting resumed with a reading from Emily Brontë's works. Her shoulder brushed the solid body beside her, but instead of leaning away she leant into it, keeping their shoulders pressed together for the remainder of the meeting. Much to her delight the welcoming heat from his arm felt warmer than any jumper she had borrowed. If only he knew what effect he had on her, she thought wearily.

It wasn't until the meeting came to an end that the various pairs of teens inched away, before drawing close again like magnets as they vacated their sacred space. The air outside was biting despite the proximity to the rise of daylight. The blackened sky was streaked with age as the silvery pearl of night began its descent. Friendly figures bid adieu before separating sorrowfully under the painted sky. Each snapping twig and rustle of undergrowth seemed to signal another question for Kathleen about the poems until she agreed to lend them her books tonight; before the rapture of the evening vanished.

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Kathleen settled on throwing a glare over her shoulder to silence Pitts' yelp. His eyes were apologetic as he rubbed his elbow where he had caught it on the corner of the turn the group had taken on their journey through the halls of Welton up to Kathleen's room. She had given up on vocally shushing the motley band of boys several creaky floorboards ago.

Breathing deeply, she reminded herself of the worth of their eagerness to read Rosetti. She could only hope they didn't get caught as they drew nearer to her grandfather's quarters situated in close proximity to her dorm. However, her concerns faded as she stepped into the shadows shrouding her doorway and came into contact with a warm, solid lump at the foot of her door. Kat sprang back with a gasp as it emitted a deep growl. Her torch clattered to the ground.

"Woah." Knox's arm shot out to pull her back. White beams of light illuminated the glowing eyes of the dog whose body obstructed their path; to their horror the light from their torches seemed to provoke painfully loud barks from its snarling jaw.
Charlie swore as he rounded on Meeks for the dog biscuits they often bribed the school's security with, almost dropping the bag in his haste to open it and distribute its contents. Kat edged forward from behind Knox's shaking arm to retrieve her torch from the ground while the beast was distracted, jumping back quickly when it fixed its beady eyes on her.

"Enough!" Cameron hissed, jostling his way to the front of the group "he needs the discipline of an Alpha, not a reward for undesirable behaviour."

Nail cast his friend a doubtful look but stepped aside after surrendering another few biscuits. "Cameron, he's finally stopped barking" he whispered, "please don't prov-"

"I know what I'm doing," his quiet words were loaded with venom as he gestured for the society to stand back. Pointing his finger, he channelled his venomous tongue towards the dog who ignored the reprimands until the boy got too close. In an instant its neck surged forward with a cautionary flash of its sharp teeth. Cameron backed into Neil. "Right. Well" he swallowed, "I propose we don't put ourselves at risk of rabies, so I suggest a more distant approach. Clearly the establishment of trust is imperative."

"Back to the biscuits" Neil sighed, reaching for the final bag and sliding another treat across the floorboards.

Kathleen watched their futile efforts with a shiver. The chill of the winter night was beginning to seep into her bones and the fear of catching another illness crept across her like the draft raising goose bumps on her skin.

"Sorry, Kat" Charlie joined her at the rear of the group, waving an empty bag of dog biscuits. "I don't think he's moving."

She chanced another hopeful glance at the catalyst who lay calmly in the midst of the commotion he had caused. "Fantastic" she mumbled, making an effort to joke despite her tiredness. "I bet the wretched thing will be thrilled when I'm forced to join him on the floor."

"I'm afraid you'll have to disappoint the bastard and join some of us instead" he replied, "I can guarantee everyone but Pitts snores less."

Smothering her laughter, she let her eyes wander back towards the futile task. Neil had taken the helm once more with the assistance of his trusted first mate Todd, although it seemed more brushing hands and blushing was taking place than cooing and biscuit throwing. Realising that her companion was watching them with equal interest she commented amusedly, "perhaps I should take Neil's bed and make him sleep in Todd's arms."

"Why not sleep in mine?" He said.

Kathleen froze.

"Bed, I mean. Not-not arms" he rectified. Despite the darkness Kathleen could have sworn his cheeks were turning crimson. "Although, I wouldn't mind that either" he added, forcing the lightness of his usual jokingly suggestive tone.

"I-err." Her brain scrambled to form a reply; they had never strayed into this territory before.

"No funny business" he said sincerely. "All jokes aside, you know I'd never-"

"I know" she interrupted. The pounding of her heart rang in her ears. "I don't see why I shouldn't. We're friends." But honestly, she wasn't sure exactly how truthful the label was anymore.
"Exactly" he nodded, "friends." He composed his face into a small smile, "I dread to think of the state Todd would've gotten himself into at the idea of sharing a bed with Neil."

"Yeah" she said vaguely, "I can't imagine." But in truth her palms were sweating and the butterflies in her stomach wouldn't calm down. It's only Charlie, she berated herself mentally. And that fact happened to be her problem.

"He won't budge." Neil's whisper broke her train of thought, "we've already made far more noise than we should have. I'm sorry Kat, but you'll have to take one of our beds tonight."

"I would offer but my roommate would ask questions" apologised Knox.

"One of us can take the floor" Pitts offered quietly.

"I don't mind" Neil shrugged.

Kathleen shook her head, grateful for their willingness. "Thank you, but I can't kick you out of your own beds."

Todd's responding frown was deep enough to encourage her admission without his accompanying words. "What are you going to do?"

"Charlie already offered" she answered, avoiding eye contact "and I feel the least bad about invading his space."

"It's settled then" whispered Neil, giving Charlie an indecipherable look which his oldest friend refused to meet. The group finally left the dog to sleep peacefully with a parting scowl from Cameron as they began to tiptoe down the boys corridor. Knox slipped into his dorm first. The rest followed in pairs until it was only Cameron, Charlie and herself left. The former reached the door first and held it open in silence.

"Sorry for making you break the rules, Cameron" Kathleen said quietly as she slipped into the room.

"As long as you're gone by the time I wake up, it's fine" he replied. She nodded.

Charlie picked up the clock from his nightstand and placed it under the pillow he set aside for her, "I'll set my alarm for six."

"Goodnight" Cameron took off his shoes and coat to reveal his plaid pyjamas and got into bed, immediately closing his eyes and rolling over to face the wall.

"Night" Kathleen replied, and she did the same, folding her coat on the floor by the foot of Charlie's bed, and placing her shoes down next to it. As she straightened, she saw that Charlie was hovering by the bed.

"Do you want to sleep by the wall or-"

"It's probably best if I'm by the edge" she said quickly, "less chance of waking you both up when I leave."

He nodded and slipped into bed, shuffling as close to the wall as he could. The atmosphere was tense as Kathleen got in beside him, leaving a gap of a few centimetres between them.

"I've never had a girl sneak out of my room in the morning" he admitted, his teasing tone piercing
the layer of awkwardness between them.

Eased by the familiar banter she rolled her eyes, barely concealing the laughter in her words "oh no, the boasting will be incorrigible. Although...it's Cameron's room so really he's granted the same bragging rights as you-

"How strange" he interrupted with false cheer, "I suddenly feel tired."

She switched of the lamp," oh yes, very unexpected."

The room was plunged into darkness. Only the sound of breathing could be heard. Despite the startling impropriety of the situation she felt herself begin to relax. Her heart beat slowed in tandem with the soft breaths of the presence beside her. Kathleen let her eyes flutter closed in surrender as her senses engulfed her in the comfort and softness of the fabric. As the teens succumbed to the seduction of sleep the awkwardness faded from their bodies and they began to curl into one another, magnetised in their sleepy state.

Cameron rolled over, squinting through the night to see their silhouettes merged and unmoving. With a small smile that never showed by day, he settled down for the night. He thought briefly of the dumb luck of his roommate and the frustrating blindness of the girl until his own breathing began to slow. Before long he joined them on the journey down the river to the city of dreams.
Chapter 42 - of Iron or gold

Chapter Notes

I'm still here! This story is not going anywhere other than its planned end. Unfortunately, it's shaping out to be a chaotically busy semester, but I won't bore you with detailed excuses.

I know some of you like to look up the poems mentioned in each chapter, so I thought I should mention that 'The Sun Rising' is especially fitting (in my sort of expert opinion as a literature student who studied it this week) considering the opening of this chapter. However, the arrogance the narrator admittedly makes it more of a Charlie poem in my eyes.

Chapter Forty-two - of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers

"Busy old fool, unruly sun,
Why dost thou thus,
Through windows, and through curtains call on us?
Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run?"

- 'The Sun Rising', John Donne (1633)

Kathleen yawned. Her eyelids fluttered open; blue eyes appearing pewter in the hazy, grey light saturating every fibre of the room. Sleepily, she slipped her hand beneath the pillow and grasped blindly under the smooth cotton for the muffled alarm that had startled her awake. After successfully shutting off the bell, she let herself relax under the warm blankets with a contented sigh. A few stolen moments of bliss later she opened her eyes properly, trying in vain to recall her reasoning for such an early waking time. But instead of an answer, she was faced with the startling sight of Cameron snoring on the opposite side of the room. Reeling from shock she rubbed the last dregs of sleep from her eyes. The action was like the destruction of a dam as last night's events came flooding back. It was then that she realised it was not the sleepiness pervading each cell of body that pinned her down. In fact, she was literally pinned down.

The culprit lay a mere few inches away. His breath blew softly on the pillow his face was half-buried in, gliding across the snowy fabric and brushing her shoulder with burning intensity. One arm lay crooked underneath the feathered cushion, the other draped over her waist. His hand curled into the wine-coloured blanket bunched above her hip. She let her eyes rest on his face for a moment, marvelling at its rare, restful expression. Her breath caught at the tender feelings blooming inside her heart. As hard as it was trying to figure out how to move without waking him, it was harder still not to admit that she craved the opposite, desiring instead to rid herself of the space between them entirely. An eternity seemed to pass before she slowly stretched her legs out. Shivering slightly, she gradually twisted further sideways and slipped out of his bed. His arm fell
into the vacated space. She paused at the bedside, her bare feet as frozen on the icy floorboards as her gaze on the familiar figure she never could seem to turn her back on. Breathing deeply, she pulled the dislodged blankets further over him. Kathleen draped her coat over her shoulders, grabbed her shoes and tiptoed across the hardwood floor. With one last look at the two sleeping occupants of the room, she opened the door with a low click.

Welton's corridors were eerily silent. If she hadn't become so adept at avoiding creaky floorboards during the club's midnight ventures the short journey would've taken twice as long. By the time she reached her own door the grey morning light had brightened to a pale yellow. No dog was in sight, but an abundance of half-eaten biscuits and crumbs littered the floor. She hadn't realised how many the boys had thrown until several remnants crumbled beneath her bare feet. With a grimace she hopped into her room - almost tumbling through in her haste to brush the unpleasant layer of grime from her sole. Several moments and two clean feet later, Kathleen had cleared the mess and emerged from the bathroom washed and dressed.

Her sudden solitude perhaps wasn't the best situation, she realised, steering her wandering mind away from subjects she didn't particularly want to dwell upon. However, the memory of the last twenty-four hours seemed determined to clash with the future she knew would destroy everything that was beginning to build. Hastily, she picked up 'Dracula' from her shelf. A good scare of the supernatural kind would do.

Yet the literary refuge she sought was not easily found as Quincey Morris emerged from the pages. The bold, brave and diverting American hero was beginning to shift into a form too close for comfort. Kathleen snapped the book shut. Scanning her shelves became futile. 'The Bride of Lindorf', 'Wuthering heights', 'North and South', 'The Great Gatsby', 'Great Expectations', 'Breakfast at Tiffany's', 'Romeo and Juliet.' Since when had her favourites been centred around love and loss? Tragic romances and well-worn romantic tales stacked up around her until she ended up with 'The Odyssey.' But soon the Greek Heroes became unbearable. The inconvenience of having love shoved down her throat in literature had not occurred to her before. Once upon a time books had solved all her problems, but for now she settled on grabbing her Latin, staying as far away from "Carpe Diem" as possible.

"Where is everyone?"

"I wish I knew" Kathleen frowned, glancing at the doors again. "It's too quiet."

Meeks hummed in agreement and let his eyes roam back his watch. "I suppose it's only half-past. They've got another twenty minutes, but that's pushing it."

"Missing breakfast...sacrilege" Pitts muttered, jumping back as a small mountain of cereal slopped over the side of his spoon. Soggy lumps of cornflakes were strewn along the table. The mess dripped across the table top and more unpleasantly, down his uniform. Knox flicked a few flyaway droplets from his own jumper sleeve. His expression resigned.

"Would it kill you to learn some table manners?"

All four heads turned to the source of the complaint. Cameron's eyebrows knitted together as he sat amongst puzzled looks. "What? Am I not allowed to articulate what we're all thinking?"

"Cameron" Kat said slowly, "you're late."

"I know how to read a clock, Kathleen."
Pitt's looked around in mock panic "the apocalypse, Meeks. It's here, I can see the end now."

"Shut up."

"We've had a good run, Pittsie" Meeks laid a solemn hand on his shoulder. "If only Cameron were here to witness our last breakfast but alas, his nerves could not take the strain of unpunctuality."

"I swear I can still hear him" Pitts sniffed, "I shall never forget the sound of his nagging."

Meeks pretended to wipe a tear from his eye, "and all this time he was right. The world will end if compulsory."

"That's enough" Cameron snapped. His glare fierce enough for Kat to turn her giggle into a cough. Luckily for the boys, Todd arrived with a plate full of pastries alongside his usual breakfast. His presence was distracting enough to stop Cameron's tirade before it could begin, and the extra pastries enticing enough for Pitts to drop the act in favour of swiping one before the plate had even been set down.

"Those are for Neil" Todd said simply, his hardened look forcing Pitts to return the stolen treat sheepishly.

Kat took a sip of her tea. "Where is Neil? It's weird to see you here without him" she trailed her index finger around the rim of the mug as she spoke, "and Charlie. In fact, the four of you are weirdly late."

"I guess it is" he shrugged, bringing his own mug to his mouth. He smiled briefly at the caffeine hit. "There was a, uh, a disagreement" Todd tilted his head in Cameron's direction. "After that Neil needed his help with something. They'll be along soon."

"Disagreement?" Cameron rolled his eyes. "It was a hostage situation."

Todd didn't reply.

"Hostage situation?" Kat shared an uneasy look with Meeks. "Would you care to elaborate?"

Cameron frowned. His face screamed disapproval yet he refused to explain. One look at Todd's shaky hands was enough for her to drop the subject altogether.

"I guess we should divide the pastries between those of us with pockets," she said finally, grabbing the stack of napkins Todd had brought over. "It doesn't look like they'll make it after all."

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"I fell asleep recalling what I “used to do” when I was at Miss Havisham's; as though I had been there weeks or months, instead of hours; and as though it were quite an old subject of remembrance, instead of one that had arisen only that day.

That was a memorable day to me, for it made great changes in me. But it is the same with any life. Imagine one selected day struck out of it and think how different its course would have been. Pause you who read this and think for a moment of the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you, but for the formation of the first link on one memorable day."

Kathleen let her eyes slide over the page for a fourth time before she gave up, her sigh muffled by the open copy of 'Great Expectations' spread across her face. Fortunately, she had claimed the warmest spot in the common room without argument; it had become common knowledge that the
cold victimised her more than the boys. Coincidentally, it was also the most private since the rug by
the fireplace was located behind the armchair Cameron occupied - no one would dare bother her in
such close vicinity to his study spot. From where she lay on her back only her skirt clad legs could
be seen.

Scrunching her eyes closed against the rough pages, she blew out another puff of air. All day she
had been waiting for the incident last night to be brought up, but it was approaching four thirty in
the afternoon and still no mention had been made. As pleased as she was to keep her complexion
from resembling a tomato, the boys took any opportunity to rag on each other. The whole situation
was beginning to feel rather odd. It was unsettling to say the least.

She was so caught up in her tangle of thoughts that she almost missed the gentle prod in her arm.
Blinking herself back to reality she lifted the book to see Todd on his stomach beside her.

"Are you okay?" He whispered.

She nodded, "just a little muddled."

"Is this about" he looked at her hesitantly, "um, about last night?"

She shook her head, causing his forehead to collapse into wrinkles, "then what-"

"Today" she cut him off quietly, pausing to listen in on the boys chatter on the other side of
Cameron's armchair for a moment. "I expected jokes, or at very least a comment or two or an
interrogation from Neil but instead it's like nothing happened."

He sunk down to rest his chin on his hands which were pressed against the fabric of the rug,
tapping his fingers in thought. "Did something happen?"

"Of course not!" She hissed.

"Not like that." A ghost of a smile haunted his lips. "I mean for you."

Running her fingers through her hair she kept her gaze locked on the movement.

"Kat?"

"Nothing new" she admitted, folding her arms over her chest. "Not that it's a surprise to you."

Todd sat up with a smile. "Really Kat, it was selfish of you not to take my bed. There are only so
many times a guy can fall asleep on another guy's shoulder before he seems desperate." She bolted
upright with a shriek, but Todd was already striding away with a devilish grin.

"Are you alright?" Knox asked, his tone concerned.

She met Todd's pleased expression with a smile wider than any other she had given all day. "I'm
fine" she called back, "I was caught up in my book and Todd startled me."

Todd Anderson, she thought with an immeasurable mix of amusement and disbelief, you really are
a dark horse.
"Like a Poet hidden
In the light of thought,
Singing hymns unbidden,
Till the world is wrought
To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not:
Like a high-born maiden
In a palace-tower,
Soothing her love-laden
Soul in secret hour
With music sweet as love, which overflows her bower:"

- 'To a Skylark' by Percy Bysshe Shelley

Chapter Forty-three -Music Sweet as Love

"She's pretty" Nancy observed, glaring at Kat as she jostled her in an attempt to crane her neck around the doorway.

"But also, very talented" Chris added from her perch on the counter opposite the row of empty stalls. "Last year Henley Hall put on a production of Twelfth Night and she played Viola. It was incredible, so naturally Ginny's admired her ever since."

Ginny's awe had been clear from the moment the girls set foot in the diner. They had settled into a booth by the window, ready to put the milkshake versus hot chocolate debate to a vote when Ginny had sucked in a breath loud enough to silence even Nancy's vehement argument. The three girls had fallen silent, following her fixed gaze to a short, raven-haired girl curled up in a corner booth reading a Tennessee Williams play over a strawberry milkshake.

"Milkshakes it is" Chris met their eyes with a loaded look.

An hour later, Chris had sent Ginny over to her table to bond over their inappropriately summery drinks while she dragged the others with her to the restroom. While Chris reapplied her lipstick, Nancy had taken it upon herself to narrate the events occurring across the vast sea of check linoleum flooring. Although, in Kathleen's opinion the colourful dialogue she provided seemed
more fitting for an 'I love Lucy' sketch than small town diner talk.

"How long should we give it before we drag poor Ginny away?" Chris mused, smoothing the edges of her lips.

Kathleen cast one last look at the table in question before darting back from the doorway. "We're lucky it's relatively empty as it is. I doubt we can continue on like this without drawing any attention."

"There is no harm in keeping an eye on things!"

"Spying, Nancy" Chris laughed, "Kat's right. Hanging out the restroom door looks a little strange even for you, cousin."

She backed away from the half-open door with a glare, "if we go out there and introduce ourselves it will make things awkward."

"I have some change" Kat suggested, "we could use the jukebox."

Chris' eyes lit up. Before they could blink, Nancy and Kathleen were being dragged out of hiding, their shoes gliding across the shiny floor as Chris skipped over to the jukebox with her arms looped through theirs. The trio came to a sudden halt as Chris landed her hands either side of the large, lit up box of wonder.

"Lonely boy? Venus? "She reeled off titles like a record spinning out of control, cheeks flushing in excitement, "Sweet little sixteen? Tequila Song?"

Kat examined the list for a moment, "surprise us."

With a bright smile she closed her eyes and punched a button.

The upbeat notes of 'At the Hop' began to filter through the speaker, quickly accompanied by the tapping of Nancy's patent heels on the hard floor as she began to bounce along. Chris swiftly took Kathleen's hands, lifting them until she was spinning. The bright decor became a blur as the girls spun, swayed and pulled each other along as they each stumbled this way and that trying to keep up with the beat.

Ginny caught the smiling eyes of the waitress watching them from behind the counter, all pretences of cleaning dropped now that the diner was devoid of customers expecting her service. By the time Ginny made it over - ducking just in the time to avoid Nancy's rogue swing - the song dwindled until the tinny speaker fell silent once more, leaving only the faint buzzing of the overhead light to fill the cavernous space.

"Shut up."

Nancy threw her hands up, "I didn't say anything."

"You were thinking it" Ginny retorted without so much of a blush. Kathleen looked on reverently at her composure. If only her own emotions could be contained with such poise, she thought as she tried to stabilise her breathing.

"Besides" Ginny continued, "my idiot brother should be outside any minute now." As she spoke a roaring engine cut off outside the diner. The disruption turning heads in the streets took the disappointing form of a navy Buick. "Father will kill him for driving his car like that."
Chris pulled open the diner door, setting off the bell hanging above. "Then let's hope your neighbours aren't wandering around town this time."

"A nosy old couple like that?" Ginny retorted, "he'll be lucky."

"Who's getting lucky?" Chet took off his red letterman to drape over his girlfriend's shoulders with a kiss. "You girls had fun?"

"We did. How was practice?" Chris slipped into the front seat while Ginny immediately circled to the back, gesturing for the girls to follow.

He smiled, eyes flicking up to the rear-view mirror to gauge their attention to his answer as he gunned the engine. "Scored three times. Coach reckons I've got a scholarship in the bag."

"That's great, Chet." He frowned at her vague answer, the lines of his lips becoming more downturned when his girlfriend's focus shifted to the window. "Overstreet better not be there if he knows what's good for him."

"Chet!" Ginny snapped, her glare fierce. Her outburst remained ignored by her brother whose focus remained on the passenger seat. Chris made no response but her reflection in the wing mirror showed her lips pressed together. The unnaturally harsh line was startling against the memory of her peach painted cupids bow.

"What? No welcoming committee?" His joke fell flat, all eyes fixed on the asphalt rapidly disappearing as they progressed.

"No" she said eventually, "my grandfather is expecting me for dinner." His jaw tightened. If she hadn't been watching Kat would have assumed she imagined it. A chill crawled down her spine. He was annoyed Knox was unlikely to be waiting outside the gates for them. Suddenly, she was glad she hadn't known what time to tell the boys she would be back. All of her previous hesitations over setting Knox up with Chris went out the window as fast as the hand indicated on Chet's speedometer.

Christine Noel deserved better than Chet Danbury, and Knox sure as hell would not cross paths with him again.

I'm cold" Kat complained. She tried in vain once again to lift her legs, but Chalice's calves rested diagonally over her own. "If you won't get a blanket, move and I'll get it."
"Hmm" he placed his finger on his chin in mock thought, leaning back against the armchair Meeks occupied, "I think I'm quite comfortable as I am."

"Or just lazy."

"Here" he sighed dramatically; he signalled Meeks to pass him the school jumper thrown over the back of his chair. It had been there all evening. Actually, it had been on hand all day and quite possibly all week now that Kathleen thought about it.

"A jumper over a jumper, that's your solution?" She took it despite her rather valid - albeit sarcastic- complaint. "I don't understand why you carry a jumper every day when you never wear it."

He shrugged, keeping his eyes glued to his sketch pad. "Neil's mothering must be working."

"Don't get me involved" came a voice from the sofa that Kat was sat against with her legs out straight. "I'm just as interested in your answer to Kat's very relevant question." Neil signalled for Todd to throw over the blanket Kathleen had been referring to, but she shook her head. The double layer had insulated her arms effectively from the frosty air.

"Fuck off" he grumbled. "It's a jumper in winter."

Neil raised an eyebrow.

"Sure" Cameron snorted, catching the attention of the group. He rarely took notice of his friend's quiet murmurings during study group.

"Don't you have work to do?"

"Yes. Coincidentally, so do you" Cameron shot back. His roommate simply rolled his eyes.

Kat sought Todd's eyes questioningly, but for once he ignored her and kept his gaze fixed on Neil's script. She sighed and went back to her menial task, humming softly to the Buddy Holly record someone had put on in the common room.

"Kat?"

She made a noise of acknowledgement and continued to swirl the ink in calligraphy her teacher at St Mary's would be proud of.

"What does a girl mean when she asks you to go away."

"Go away."

He blinked, mouth opening and closing like a goldfish. "Oh."

She sealed the envelope in her hands, eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"I met a girl at the post office yesterday" Pitts said sheepishly, "we said hi and everything while we were in the queue and then I asked what she was doing next Saturday."

"And then she told you to go away?" Meeks chuckled, "are you sure that's all you said?"

"I may have, uh, asked her where she got her shampoo from. I told her she smells like my Mom's dog." He peeked at Kat's disbelieving face from behind his hands.
"Why on earth would you say that?" Kat eyed Pitts wearily, ignoring Meeks whose face was slowly turning purple as he clutched the arms of the chair, his shoulders shaking.

"Because it's true."

"But you don't say it!" Charlie threw his eraser lightly and it bounced off Pitts' forehead, "even if your mom treats her dog like the daughter she never had."

"Ouch" Pitts mumbled, "no need to rub it in. That mutt eats better than I do."

"Still, you don't say things like that" Knox groaned, "what's wrong with telling her she looks nice?"

"I panicked!"

"Obviously."

Knox's amusement faded as he caught sight of his name on one of the cards in Kathleen's hand. "Hey, what's that?"

She pulled the card away as he reached out for it. "Your lucky invitation to Nolan's annual Christmas party." He leaned closer and she snatched it away again. "No. If I am being forced to waste my time on them, you can be forced to wait for it."

He laughed, "what a special chance to practice your calligraphy ahead of the math test!"

Kat promptly folded the card into a paper plane and launched it at him. "Special delivery."

"All seniors get one" Cameron interrupted. "It is not special."

Knox swiped the envelope labelled 'Cameron' in Kathleen's careful cursive and chucked it at him. He frowned as it bounced off the hardback math textbook he held up in front of his face. "Of course it's special, Kat wrote it."

"She should be revising for the math test" he spat, "not copying out festive party invitations."

"Are you criticising Nolan!" Charlie shot up, slamming one hand to the floor to steady himself.

Cameron's mouth fell open. His eyes darted around the faces staring intently at him, squinting slightly at the glare of the light against his polished glasses. "I-no" he snapped, "one imperfect decision is not the judge of an individual as whole." He scanned the defeated frown lines marring the profiles of his friends, "besides" his voice dropped as he conceded "I am in the club, am I not?"

Kathleen smiled.

Chapter End Notes

"If music be the food of love, play on" - Duke Orsino, Twelfth Night. I didn't realise how much of a motif I made music until I edited and named the chapter. I also remembered this Shakespeare line from the play mentioned in the beginning.
Sometimes I surprise myself, haha.

In the UK we have The Sunday Trading Act which limits business opening hours on a Sunday, back in the 50s all shops would have been closed under the Shops Acts. I tried to find out if this was also the case in the US but could not find a definitive answer. If this is the case, please pretend for the sake of not only the story but also my sanity that diners would be open! If they were, I find it plausible that Sundays would be as quiet as I have portrayed in a small town.
Chapter 44 - Faithful heart

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

'Infatuated with my own desirable imagination,

I turned myself into a victim of my own romanticization.'

- Dream On, Orion Carloto

Chapter Forty-four - Faithful heart

SNAP.

Kat glared up at Neil. His interfering hands removed the compact from hers faster than she could protest.

"Stop looking at it." He sighed as she swipe it back, wishing he had thought to use his height to his advantage. "You look fine."

Her eyes narrowed further as she reopened the mirror. She took care to swerve it away from him as she inspected the abnormally large pimple marring her forehead. "That's easy for you to say, it isn't on your face."

Her glare moved to Todd whose muffled laughter was spurring Neil on, she could see it in his growing smile with each glance he stole at his roommate.

"Seriously, Kat" he continued, his words confirming her suspicions, "you could turn up to class painted green and Charlie would still think you're the most ethereal beauty to walk the earth."

"That's more of a comment on his preferences than my face" she retorted, unable to hide her blush. She tilted the mirror to catch Todd's eye in the reflection. Understanding her unspoken question, he subtly shook his head.

"Oh" Neil settled on the window ledge; arms crossed as he leant back against the window. "Todd didn't have to tell me. I have eyes and frankly I'm insulted you didn't speak to me."

"That's because there is nothing worth telling." She placed a hair pin between her teeth as she brushed her hair through with her fingers.

Neil rolled his eyes, "why don't you believe me?"

"Because," she paused to pull a slight side fringe from beneath her headband and pin it into place so that the hair lay over half of the angry bubble on her face, "I don't believe it."

"Don't" Todd said quietly, "or won't."

"Does it matter?" She replied softly, examining her reflection. "It's safer to contain hurt than watch the collateral."
The compact closed with a snap.

"Kat."

"No, Neil."

Todd remained silent; his eyes filled with the same doubt Kathleen felt.

"I just-I have a lot going on" she admitted, eyes downcast. "I hardly know what to think anymore."

"And if you stopped thinking?"

She picked up her satchel and crossed the empty classroom they had commandeered as a powder room. "Then I would be stupid." She didn't stop to see if the pair were following as she melted into the flood of students in the halls. "And selfish" she added quietly, unable to see the sorrow wiping the smile from Neil's face. Todd placed a hand on his back as they weaved through the crowd to chemistry, never straying far from her side but silent in the background.

**XXX**

"What time is the funeral?" Keating rose from his desk to greet the students slowly filtering into his class. He stopped in front of Neil's desk. "If I didn't know better, I would say you're not happy to see me."

Kat dropped into her seat with an audible groan. "We had chemistry, Sir."

"What she means" Knox translated, "is that our regular hour of suffering has been extended by several hours of extra work."

Approximately twenty pairs of eyes settled on Hopkins with a glare. The boy in question shrank into himself, barely ducking in time to miss the swat aimed at the back of his head by Fraser.

Cameron coughed, gaining Mr Keating's attention. "Two chapters have been added to our test next lesson because Hopkins-" Cameron broke off, his mouth twitching in restrained anger, "rather vocally complained of his ignorance to this material after one or two students gave an incorrect answer on the topic."

"I see." Keating strode further down the aisle. He stopped once more by Kathleen. "I was planning to cover elegies, but I suppose that can wait another day." His words addressed the class, but his eyes settled on her, "I don't like seeing my favourite students upset."

Her gaze slid down to the worn desk her arms rested upon. The various scrawls and aged scratches from hundreds of boys before her sprang to life. She could imagine their presence at the same desk with their own copies of Milton or Chaucer open beside their ink wells, pens poised as their teacher - likely Nolan himself - breathed life into the twenty-six letters re-arranged across the pages. As much as she currently disliked Keating's compassionate insight into his pupils, she appreciated him. It was safe to assume he was the first of his kind to grace Welton with his presence, much like herself in some ways.

Her musings were brought to a sudden halt by the landing of a folded square of paper on the left side of her desk. Shooting a cautious glance at Mr Keating out of respect, she subtly unfolded it behind her book. Laying it flat, she realised it was page torn from their chemistry textbooks. On top of the printed formulae, multiple black ink lines converged to form a flower, each petal unfurled into pages covered in writing. In the centre was a girl drawn cross-legged with her head bowed over a book in her lap, a pony-tail shaded dark in ink curled around the girl's shoulder.
Kathleen inhaled sharply at the sight of a bow in the ponytail of the girl in the sketch, resisting the urge to reach back and feel her own. Despite the lack of detail bestowed upon his usual works, it was abundantly clear that Charlie had drawn her. The circled symbol for potassium beneath the flower only confirmed her conclusion. She slipped it into her book as Keating marched closer, burning excess energy as he shared the forgotten delights of Felicia Dorothea Hemans' work. Kathleen found herself drawn in; her troubles burned away in the fire of 'Casabianca.' The enduring image of the boy on the burning deck became a girl enclosed safely in a flower as chaos ruled the ocean around her. As the smoke dissipated with the tail-end of the poem, her turmoil washed away with it.

The conviction of the poeticised Giocante rolled through her like the flames of the ship as she stepped out of Keating’s safe haven. Kathleen breathed in the crisp winter air, her peaceful smile only strengthened as Neil and Todd met her on the steps outside.

Charlie’s sarcastic tone interrupted their silent reconciliation as he slammed the door shut behind Knox. "If I ever fail to dodge conscription and find myself stuck on a burning ship, remind me not to wait for orders before I bail."

"It's supposed to be a commentary on innocence and faith" Knox retorted, "would it kill you to be romantic before committing to military critique?"

He pulled a face. Knox threw his hands up in defeat.

Cameron rolled his eyes. "How about you stop bickering like an old married couple and start on the chemistry revision. We can hold study group at lunch."

"Jesus, Cameron!"

"What?"

"No, I agree with Nuwanda" Meeks interrupted, "I doubt chemistry will improve the mood of anyone. You may find yourself worse off for suggesting it."

Charlie grinned, "we only just got Kat back. You wouldn't want to isolate your favourite student, would you?"

Cameron spluttered. Before he could form his rebuttal, Kathleen stopped him. "Whatever do you mean by 'got me back'?"

"You haven't smiled at anyone since breakfast" Pitts shrugged.

She gaped, "so?"

"Kat" Knox placed his hands on her shoulders, making direct eye contact as he spoke. "You hardly said a word in Keating's class. That is unheard of."

Neil nodded, "you nearly killed the table twice over with your glare."

"I know you hate math" Charlie smirked, "but you have to admit it equals a bad mood."

"Okay, okay" she slapped Knox playfully away, "I've been a sourpuss all morning. I get it! But I am fine now." She gestured to herself, "see!"

"Seriously?" Charlie scoffed, "All it took was an English lesson to cheer you up? I thought Meeks was bad. I can't believe I'm surrounded by nerds." He dodged Meeks' shove, almost knocking Neil
down in his haste.

"Yes" she replied, ignoring them as she thought of the drawing between the pages of her poetry book, "I guess Keating was right. Poetry really does woo women."

Knox shot her a curious look, shrugging when she raised a questioning eyebrow his way. She dismissed it, too distracted by Neil's wish for snow and the resultant tales of previous snowball fights to notice him opening his book to the verses Charlie had plagiarised the night of the party. Whatever his plan, Knox thought to himself as he studied the sonnets, it had to be better than the strategy of last year's snow battle. A real knockout.

XXXX

"I don't understand" Kathleen repeated, haphazardly pushing back the lock of hair falling in front of her eyes. "If I multiply by five there" she pointed to one equation before moving her finger to the next, "why is it different here?"

Cameron's eyes stayed glued to his chemistry revision, "because that is how it works."

"I know that's how it works but I don't understand why" she sighed. "It makes no sense."

"It does" he said, "but for the purpose of the argument it doesn't matter. Accept it, get the correct answer and move on."

She collapsed into her arms on the table, narrowly missing Pitts' pencil tower much to his relief. He carefully inched it away as she pleaded unsuccessfully with Cameron to end the tutoring session for the day.

Eventually she relented, moving on to the next question under Cameron's watchful eye. The hair fell from the front of her headband again. This time she twirled it around her finger, the slight pull soothing her despair. A pen entered her sight as he moved to correct a mistake in her method.

Kat let go, leaving the strands to fall over her eye as she reached for the eraser, she had nearly worn down completely. A few minutes later the cycle repeated, her frown deepened with each correction. "I'm going to fail the test" she muttered, the low volume audible only to her tutor.

"Perhaps it would be easier to study with a more sensible hairstyle."

She flushed, unwilling to divulge the trivial reason for the impractical twist on the headband style. She knew his patience was wearing thin as it was. Her dermatological concerns would hardly improve the situation.

"Meeks? Do you have the notes for this chapter?" Kathleen took a deep breath while his attention was elsewhere.

Meeks shook his head empathetically.

"You could ask for clarification" Todd suggested quietly. "I'm sure your initiative would be appreciated."

"Todd's right" Neil pushed, "office hours will be over soon. What if you memorise the wrong method?"

Cameron rushed to gather his possessions. The group froze, only returning to work when he lifted his head to warn them he would be at least half an hour.
The second the door slammed shut Kathleen threw herself at Todd, "I love you!" He squeezed her back with a laugh. "I'm serious. I couldn't see an end to the torture!"

"It was equations, not waterboarding."

She looked Meeks dead in the eye, "waterboarding would be more pleasant."

"Not if Cameron was inflicting it." Charlie grumbled, "let's get out of here before he gets back."

Knox threw his things into his satchel, "if I see one more formula, I will go blind. Last one back has to apologise to Cameron." His words had the desired effect. It was a scramble for the door.

"Hey" Charlie said, slowing to a walk as the others dashed down the halls. Kathleen stopped, watching the others go. "Don't tell Cameron but I think your hair looks nice like that. Besides, anything that annoys Cameron is a bonus."

"Thanks" she laughed, reaching up to check the false side fringe was still in place.

His gaze faltered for a second before locking onto her own half-veiled one, "but I miss your eyes. Don't make me wait until dusk to see that shade of blue each day."

Before she could bring herself to breathe, let alone form words, he slipped away to catch-up with the others. His confident demeanour and escape worked to mask the sheer panic in his countenance from her view. He swore internally, cursing his big mouth, his brain malfunction and any higher power that allowed such a sappy comment to go unfiltered. Unaware of his mortification, Neil's words echoed in her mind.

A noise jolted Kat from her trance.

"Having fun eavesdropping?" Kat asked sarcastically, annoyed by her own embarrassment. "Did no one teach you it's a sign of loneliness?"

Fraser shrugged. "Oh, I have friends. But as you can imagine I would rather not be seen with them right now."

Kat nodded, her initial unease soothed by the familiar irritation at Hopkins' earlier error.

"Sometimes I swear they have a combined IQ lower than their age" he added.

She fixed him with a look. "And that excuses your stalking how?"

"Don't flatter yourself, sweetheart. You're not that interesting." He grinned, "I was escaping to my dorm when I heard your little drama. What can I say? I'm invested now."

"Invested enough to forget about it?" She asked hopefully.

"He likes you" Fraser commented, his teasing expression falling. "And you like him."

Their eyes met. He shrugged and she tore her gaze away. "Don't let Nolan or any other bullshit hold you back" he said, "you'll only regret it."

This time it was him who refused to look at her. His rare earnestness evoked a memory of another evening walk through the halls of Welton, of the girl he reluctantly confided in her about, the one his Father ripped away.

"You're different, okay" He snarled, "everyone here is part of it and we never even had a chance.
We grew-up in it, we live in it, hell we will probably die in it. You are not. You dip in for a few months and leave intact. You're good for him and for some unfathomable reason he makes you happy in this awful place." He paused, adding gently, "don't forget it, alright?"

"Thank you" she said sincerely. He shrugged, eyes still turned upward as he turned away and disappeared without looking back.

Chapter End Notes

Switch on those alerts because I'm back. My return is fuelled by detailed chapter outlines and a whole extra week in the timeline. This will be the busiest summer of my life in terms of writing but I'm actually looking forward to it. Uni is over until October, and in September I am going to Edinburgh!

Anyway, in celebration I changed up the opening quote to something modern for once. As any of you who have my twitter know, I have the biggest crush on Orion...sorry. I couldn't help myself. Read up of Felicia Heman for your romantic era fix, she's great.

Thank you for all of the astonishingly kind comments. They seriously made my day during my exam stress and I honestly think they were my lucky charm because I got my results back today and I couldn't be happier! I've also picked two relevant modules for next year- one on literature of the romantic period and one on romantic lyric poetry. I'm extremely excited and I thought you guys would appreciate it.
Chapter 45 - Courtship's flatteries

Chapter Notes

Guess who is going on a trip to Scotland! I'm so excited. If anyone can recommend places to visit in Edinburgh please comment, my family has left me in charge of the itinerary which is both fantastic and ever so slightly stressful. Anything historical, pretty, literary or vegan would be wonderful.

Anyway, do you remember Kat's group from the soccer game way back in chapter 18? Fraser isn't the only one in the limelight. This time Sam makes an appearance.

*The poetry extract featured later is by 'The Lady's Yes' by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

'Too weak, for all her heart's endeavour,
To set its struggling passion free
From pride, and vainer ties dissever,
And give herself to me for ever.'

~ Porphyria's Lover, Robert Browning (1836)

Chapter Forty-five - Courtship's flatteries

Pale light glinted off the crystalline frost embracing the windows of the mansion. Prickles of the same glacial air that had driven Kathleen inside like a medieval damsel in winter could be felt through the glass. In surrender to the weather she had retreated to Cameron's favoured table in the far corner. No distant sounds of fencing or the games lesson in the grounds could be heard from her stone turret. Her usual solace as a ward of nature in these hours had been snatched by Jack Frost. Instead, Kat resided alone in a cavernous space intended for many. The patchwork of personalities stitched over the stern basics of the room only worsened her feeling of isolation. Books, pens and papers lay scattered over the thick rug, ink stains told the history of each wooden surface while jumpers evoked memories of their owners across the backs of each armchair. An odd collection of string, springs and every other odd and end characteristic of boys’ pockets lay visible in the strangest of places. Despite the roaring fire and struggling radiators the room felt cold in the aching absence of life.

Kat flipped a page of 'Lady Audley's Secret' mindlessly, pondering how used to company she had grown. At St Mary's there had been the feel of a never-ending sleepover. The affectionate presence of friends with years of proximity and formative growth had never retreated, only extended with every trip into town or spontaneous activity within the institute. Now, the bonds of liberation made in the face of Welton's rigidity had brought a comfort unlike anything she had ever known - a sense of being on the edge of something life-changing.
Like a crash of thunder, the boys rolled into the room. Their shivers and cherry cheeks receding as their energy seeped into every corner. Their exhausted lolling, teasing and playful fights over cushions brought warmth. Supressing a fond smile, Kat turned back to her long-abandoned book, acting as if she did not breathe a little easier with each body dropping into the reserved seats around her. All, it seemed as she looked up, but one.

"Have you seen Knox?" Meeks took the words out of her mouth.

Her brow creased. "No, I thought he was with you?"

Neil shook his head, "when he didn't turn up to class, we figured he would be here."

"Have you tried-"

"He's not in his room" Todd said gently, "and Neil asked around."

She ran her left hand through her hair - the bow styled more à la Brigitte Bardot than usual - taking care to keep the shrinking red spot out of sight. Knox had borrowed a poetry book from her this morning with a promise to give it back by dinner. Kat voiced his promise, adding his awareness that she needed it back to show Keating something tomorrow. It was a deadline they knew he would not miss.

"And if he doesn't turn up by dinner?"

"He will!" Meeks frowned at Pitts' vehement interjection.

Neil sighed, "we might have to tell Keating."

"Then we give him until dinner" she said firmly, "and hope Hager doesn't find out first."

Hums of agreement rang out, and as the anxious chatter died down, she focused back on her book.

"He forgot that love, which is a madness, and a scourge, and a fever, and a delusion, and a snare, is also a mystery, and very imperfectly understood by everyone except the individual sufferer who writhes under its tortures."

Kat had barely lifted the cover when it was poked by the end of a ruler.

"Lady Audrey's Secret?" Charlie surveyed the cover with a smirk. "What sort of thrilling scandal could that be? An affair? A secret fortune? Creased linen?"

"Murder, actually."

He blinked, surprise colouring the contours of his face.

She tilted her head as she examined him. "And you had better not poke that ruler at my book again" she said lightly, "or perhaps you will be the man on the lookout."

"Hm" he pursed his lips, eyes shifting towards Cameron. "If I die unexpectedly the police had better be pointed in another direction."

Neil scoffed, "Mr law abiding citizen?"

"I always pegged him as a snitch." Charlie crossed his arms defensively, "but you've got to admit his temper is as high as his grades. Anyway, you know what they say about red heads and hell..."
Meeks coughed.

"Some very specific people of a particularly rare shade of red."

Meeks' glare lessened as Nuwanda continued to amend his statement. Quirking an eyebrow, he simply responded that Nuwanda would be the victim due to his mouth. No objections were raised; only a 'fair enough' shrug from the theoretical victim himself.

"Unless we're thinking too obviously" Pitts examined the group. "In every Agatha Christie murder it's always the least likely suspect."

"Or the quiet ones" Neil winked at Todd.

"Why discount a collaboration?" Kat mused with a grin.

"No. Pitts is right" Charlie insisted, "no one ever suspects the woman unless there's an affair. Besides, she's a reader-"

"Oh?" Kat turned to face him.

"- and books give a woman all sorts of naughty ideas." She smacked him lightly with her book, almost missing her target in her mirth. Cameron continued to read, oblivious to his friends' antics.

"If someone tried to pry my book away from me, I would absolutely take my revenge."

Todd grinned. 'Not if it was geometry.'

His comment drew more laughter from them all. Meeks had to remove his glasses to wipe the tears gathering in his eyes.

"Knox had better watch out" he concluded, "lest he damage Miss Murray's book."

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"There he is!" Pitts slapped the table, hastily leaning over to point out the approaching fugitive. His elbow caught the gravy boat, knocking over the china and flooding the table with hot liquid.

Cameron grabbed several napkins to mop up the mess, but it ran over the edge, dripping down onto Neil's lap. The taller boy shuffled back with a groan, thanking Todd for the napkin passed his way.

"Every dinner" Kat sighed, catching Neil's resigned eyes.

Knox appeared, dropping cavalierly into the empty seat on her right, and immediately serving himself a large spoon of potatoes as if the entire table had not stopped to stare at him.

"What happened?" He mumbled through his mouthful as gestured to the table, his brows furrowing as he continued to receive no response.

"What happened?" Charlie repeated his words, disbelief evident in his features. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Me?"

Neil frowned. "Knox. You cut class, disappeared for hours without a word, and now you swan in acting as if nothing happened?"
"I just needed to get away for bit!" He exclaimed. "I didn't mean to worry anyone. I'm fine."

"Get away from what?"

"Huh?"

Meeks' eyes narrowed. "You said you needed to get away. What did you need to get away from for three and half hours?"

Kat examined him as he shrugged. Knox certainly didn't look stressed. He had colour in his cheeks, a smile in the corner of his lips and a dreamy daze in his eyes. The same daze that seemed to be impacting his mind. The only time she had seen him in this feverish state was...Chris. Her eyes raked down his figure, catching on the mud staining his clearly, non-uniform shoes. So, he had changed, and been through the woods. Surely, she thought, if he had met with Chris than Nancy would have called. Even if a secret rendezvous had been arranged, nothing got past Chris' quick-witted cousin.

Knox's tolerance wavered as the interrogation continued. He began to clam up with each additional question until a suspicious silence dominated the meal. The collective discomfort went unnoticed by its creator, although Kathleen had to concede that observation is rather difficult when the individual disappears. Only half an hour after his arrival, he went to bed. His feigned fatigue likely had less to do with evasion, and more to do with escaping Pitts' various 'experiments' to prove that Knox had been abducted by aliens and replaced by a creature they should send to area fifty-one.

The rest of the evening was spent in a frenzy of homework and conspiracy theories. In the face of what Cameron had dubbed the 'new Roswell hysteria,' the scientific duo - with Cameron's sceptical assistance - had scoured the library and put together an amusing, and dare Kathleen say, slightly convincing presentation.

Any phantasmagoria of geometry wielding creatures she saw in the dark that night was a credit to their research, and not the over-active imagination keeping her lamp on that night.

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In tune with the conspiracies of the previous evening, Knox remained guarded. Whether the plot twist of the day was alien intervention or pure luck was anyone's guess, but by lunchtime Welton's cold halls were alive with gossip of another kind. Anger rose through the senior student body like tidal wave to come crashing down on one individual - Samuel Pechman.

Pechman, a promising member of the science club had cast his high IQ into doubt with a single, unforgivable mistake. He had written and sent the ivy league invitations to Welton's annual science presentation with the wrong date. A call from Harvard had alerted Nolan and all hell had broken loose. Instead of having over a week left to prepare, they had three days. Afterall, 'to err is human' for all but Welton Academy.

In lieu of her tutoring, Cameron was pacing. He had been doing so for fifteen minutes. Her eyes tracked his frantic path, taking a welcome break on Pitts chewing his nails or Meeks' anxious murmurings when she felt too dizzy from his movements.

"That's it!" He stopped, his head swivelling towards his silent audience. "Everybody out. Science club shall reconvene immediately." Several boys shuffled towards the table he had abandoned as he turned his attention to the society. "That means you as well" he hissed. His tone softened a fraction as he addressed Kat, "wait in my room, tutoring will commence once I have sorted out this mess."
"We'll make ourselves scarce." Neil clapped a hand on his shoulder, "don't worry. You'll find a solution."

He nodded grimly, tapping his foot until his sympathetic well-wishers had left the room.

Neil lead them away from the common room, stopping by the staircase. "I guess we should head to rehearsals early. Todd's coming tonight, so we'll see you later." Todd waved as they descended the staircase in the direction of the cold, but freeing air of the grounds.

The three remaining teens frowned at the encroaching boredom. The walk to the dorms seemed to take forever, each step anticipating further disappointments. When they finally reached their destination, Knox hesitated at the threshold.

Charlie's glare went unnoticed. "Do you mind looking over my history essay while you wait?" He asked. "It would kill time."

"Sure. Knox? Are you coming?"

He shook his head. "Sorry guys, I've got something to do." Before they could form any questions, he was gone.

Kat stared at the closed door. "That was weird."

"No weirder than he's been for the last twenty-four hours" Charlie wrenched his door open. In three large strides he was across the room and he threw himself onto his bed, sprawled out with one arm across his face and the other gesturing for her to make herself comfortable.

Kathleen ditched her bag at the foot of the bed, keeping only her current read in her hand as she settled with her legs tucked underneath her at the end of the bed. She leaned back against the wall, her breath catching at the sudden influx of memories from the last time she had been here. She felt the heat rise in her cheeks. Swiftly, she removed herself from the assault of memory and thrust her head into her book.

The hours slipped by like sand in an hourglass, its desert golden in the setting sun. Charlie's completed essay lay to one side, illuminated by the last rays of natural light. He slid his textbooks beneath his bed and as he rose, the aged cover of his companion's book caught his eye.

"What happened to the other book? The murder one with the floral cover?"

Her voice floated out from behind the brown shield, "I finished it."

Of course, he thought, wandering briefly why he had expected anything less. The cover hiding her face was a few shades lighter than her hair. The faded cloth exposed every mark of love and damage from years of use, a contrast to the rich tones the orange light explored in her hair. Today it was down, held back loosely like the French actresses in magazines. He had the urge to reach out like the boy in those books she liked so much. Neil had explained to him how the boy had tugged on the girl's braids, and had been whacked over the head with a slate for his insult. Why Neil thought that moment was so significant he would never know, but he could understand the impulse. God knows he had enough of his own. He watched her turn the page, the book lowered to reveal a dreamy expression absent of worldly burdens.

* 'Learn to win a lady's faith

Nobly, as the thing is high ;
Bravely, as for life and death —

With a loyal gravity.

Lead her from the festive boards,

Point her to the starry skies,

Guard her, by your truthful words,

Pure from courtship's flatteries.'

The motion of her lips was too rapid for him to read. Her open expression grew dimmer as her eyes fell down the page. Perhaps it was this knowledge that prompted his action, or possibly the same poor impulse control he had pondered only a moment ago. The reason did not matter. Suddenly he was on his knees, swiping the book from her hands. He had only seconds to revel in her startled mien before she lunged after him. It was his own laughter that was his undoing. Astonished by the pure abandon of the sound he lost his balance, halting Kat's own precarious movement until she half-fell into his lap. With one hand planted by his knee she tilted her chin up, deep, blue eyes swirling with disorientation and something else he missed as her gaze dropped. His eyes dragged back to meet hers, almost certain she had been watching his lips to. She was close. So close, his heart had stopped. Her breath ghosted his lower lip. His hand reached to cup her cheek-

BANG!

Neil tumbled into the room, almost taking the door off its hinges with the violence of his passion. They jumped apart. Her book tumbled from his grip, landing soundlessly between them on the quilt. Charlie cursed under his breath. Neil's tirade on Knox's stupidity was drowned into mime by his stuttering heart. Faintly, he registered the wild gesticulations that should elicit his amusement, but he was too immersed in Kat.

Knelt with her palms flat on the covers, she was as still as the sculpted women in his Mother's garden. Only the slight blush fading from her cheeks seemed real. Each time Neil paused to gulp for breath she made noises of agreement. And just like that, they were back to just friends.
Here I am, on my virtual knees, presenting you with almost four thousand words from my absence. To those of you who continue to leave the most exquisite reviews, thank you. And yes, most of you were correct in guessing that Uni was behind the delays. Second year has made me realise that first year like is riding a bicycle with training wheels. Anyway, the one positive is that the story will not come to an end before next semester, when I begin modules in both romantic literature and romantic lyric poetry. I'm hoping I will be able to incorporate some gems.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

'Love, Hope, and Self-esteem, like clouds depart

And come, for some uncertain moments lent.

Man were immortal and omnipotent,

Didst thou, unknown and awful as thou art,

Keep with thy glorious train firm state within his heart.

Thou messenger of sympathies,

That wax and wane in lovers' eyes;

Thou, that to human thought art nourishment,

Like darkness to a dying flame!

Depart not as thy shadow came,

Depart not—lest the grave should be,

Like life and fear, a dark reality.'

- Hymn to Intellectual Beauty, by Percy Bysshe Shelley

~ Note ~

*Lizzie B refers to both the famous, suspected axe murderer Lizzie Borden, and the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning

"I have to ring Chris," the words spilled like tangled spaghetti from her lips. Neil nodded vehemently. Kathleen took a breath, both unwilling and unable to peel her eyes away from their
obliviou companion's face.

Oh, now. Neil is waiting.

Her brain kicked back into gear, cogs turning to release the blanket scrunched in her palms and unlock her stiff muscles. Her mind ticked over, mapping out the basic instructions - get up, pick up your bag, walk, walk, walk - interspersed with reels of polite exit words to make audible at the completion of her tasks.

"Wait!"

The whirring hum receded from her brain at the command. She pivoted, eyes connecting. Silence.

"You almost ditched Lizzie B, and not" he added, "the murderous one."* He stumbled forward, pausing abruptly in the centre to extend the book in her direction. She accepted it, short-circuiting at the brush of skin. Fingertips aflame, she stepped back over the threshold. Her lips shaped words of thanks.

Her limbs marched her down the corridor after Neil, barely registering Todd melting into line from his post outside the door. Her mind felt like a misplaced windup toy careening over the edge of a table and crashing down to solid ground. Charlie was nowhere to be seen and whether she was more relieved or disappointed by the fact, she couldn't quite decide.

The electric current coursing through her veins allowed her a short intermission as they neared the phones; immediately starting up again as she dialled the familiar number to repair Knox's damage. She loved Knox infinitely, but his stupidity seemed just as infinite.

"Hello-

"Chris!"

A sigh echoed down the line, "I thought you were Chet."

"I hope that I'm a welcome surprise."

"Always."

The warmth in her tone dragged a smile from Kat. She twisted the cord as her brain switched gears, grappling with where to start.

"I've been avoiding him all day, and he hasn't called me yet. I guess that means he hasn't heard."

"Ginny told me," Neil laid his hand over Kat's and tilted the phone towards himself. "Knox disappeared yesterday and refuses to say a word about it!"

"He had plenty to say when he turned up at Ridgeway."

The trio exchanged a look. Bitter was not an adjective often used to describe Chris Noel.

"I-I don't mean to be ungrateful. The flowers were gorgeous and the poem, well, nobody has ever written poetry for me, and certainly not about me." She paused, "but my whole class was there. He stood up in front of everyone like we were in some kind of fantasy romance novel. I'll never live it down. I have a boyfriend, a boyfriend who already wants to kill him!"

Kat squeezed her eyes shut, letting the colours cloud her vision like the paintings she had seen in the Noel's home. Hearing Chris relive her humiliation was even more painful than Neil's passionate
retelling of yesterdays events. "We'll talk to him" she promised, "he will apologise."

"Please, give me a few days" her voice became quiet. "I can't see him for a while. I don't know how-" she broke off. "I just need some space from him."

"Of course. I'm so sorry, Chris. We're friends with an absolute idiot."

"A sweet idiot."

"Yeah" Kat smiled softly, "he is."

"I've got to go. Chet might call. Tell Knox to be careful, please."

"Trust me, he won't leave our sight." Neil nodded grimly at her words.

"Thank you."

"Don't worry about it. Take care, Chris. Bye!"

As soon as the call disconnected Neil slapped a hand on each of his companion's shoulders.

"Tomorrow" he stated, looking them both firmly in the eye, "we corner him where he can't escape."

"Cameron should have finished his meeting" Todd tapped his watch. "We can gather the others."

"Excellent!" Neil herded them back towards the dormitories. "We have a lovesick fool to knock some sense into."

If only, Kat thought, she was able to knock some sense into herself.

XXXX

"Neil, wait! I didn't mean-" Todd's words faded as a rogue shoulder battered his left side and an over-sized satchel clipped his right leg. He came to a skittering halt in front of Charlie, who had shoved his way to through the crowded corridor.

Kat side-stepped, narrowly avoiding yet another eleven year-old - with a satchel almost matching the size of his body - rushing through the narrow hall to class. "I swear this is worse than London" she muttered, trying to catch sight of Neil's head bobbing above the sea of short, over-cologned, and slightly violent children who clearly needed glasses, or perhaps a healthy dose of respect.

Oh no, she sounded like Cameron.

Todd yelped. Kat barely had time to react before a book was sent tumbling out of her grip. Suddenly, a hand pressed in between her shoulder blades, gently guiding her forward. To her right, Todd handed her book back. He smiled sheepishly as he was similarly guided forwards.

"Hey! Make room for the lady. Lady coming through! Where are those manners your Mothers taught you!?"

She was about to protest but Todd's laugh stopped her. They were moving. The crowd was parting like the red sea in the illustrated Bible she had read as a child. Eyes looked up at the trio as they strolled easily down the corridor. Kat looked over her shoulder at Nuwanda's smug expression. Her eyes narrowed, "this is the one and only time you'll ever hear me say this" she warned, "but you were correct in Keating's lesson. You are indeed a God."

His subsequent grin followed them out into the courtyard. Kathleen breathed in the crisp air. Her
gloved hands clutched her book tighter as she walked the walled-border, fingers trailing over the uneven stone and meandering over the skeletal remains of flowers.

'I leant upon a coppice gate
When Frost was spectre-grey,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day.
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
Like strings of broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted nigh
Had sought their household fires...'

She felt eyes on her. "Thomas Hardy" she said in the same soft tone, "The Darkling Thrush."

Neil applauded, taking the chance to push Todd forward. "If Kat can recite poetry, you can find your muse."

"His what?" Meeks narrowed his eyes. "Did we play follow the leader so that you can chase some elusive muse?"

"No, we came out here on a quest Meeks." Neil dodged several ice filled cracks in the stone as he approached the bench. "We seek the answer to Todd's question" he explained, stepping onto to it. He threw his arms out. "His poetic authenticity is on the line!"

"Todd?" Pitts folded his arms. "What quest can be worth freezing for?"

Kat motioned for Meeks, hands forming a silent symbol. He understood, producing a pair of sewing scissors from his pocket. She snipped a sprig of evergreen, passing them back with a smile as she spun towards Todd. 'Life' she said, tucking it behind his ear. "What is poetry without polarity? Life and death, light and dark, love and loss. In nature we see it all."

She took his arm, and he squeezed her hand in gratitude. His voice wavered in the cold wind.

"I- I couldn't find the line" he flushed, "in my poem."

"The poem he worked on past midnight" Neil interrupted, exchanging a tender look with his roommate. Kat hardly thought it possible, but the red staining his cheeks bloomed darker. Neil cleared his throat. "We can't let him suffer any longer."

"I said I can't do it" Todd's grip tightened around her arm, "and that's okay. I'll move on to something else."

Neil cried out in indignation.

"He's right" Kat tugged him away from the group, releasing his arm and stepping back. "But it cannot flower from follow the leader, " she suppressed a smile at Meeks' phrase, "it has to come from you."

Todd stood motionless, silhouetted before the arch with snow coating him like an apparition
among ruins. Breathing deeply, his eyes fluttered closed. The white pines standing nearby quivered, their naked branches silenced of their usual rustle. Pine needles whipped across the ground, rising, falling and striking roughened stone. A sole mourning dove hopped across the ground, overturning soil and frost in its wake; its yearning song startling Todd from his reverie.

Neil started forwards, but Charlie pulled him back.

They watched as he moved, boots marking his path with each imprint on the snow. He reached the east corner, hands shaking as they rested on the ledge in the wall, one created by fallen stones. His eyes fixed on the gap, the small window to the outer grounds of Welton.

Kat scarcely dared to breathe. The air seemed dense, crackling around him at the focal point. Neil's barely restrained energy seemed to vibrate through each particle surrounding the group. He was curled in himself like a spring straining for release.

Todd slipped out of the shadows. His eyes alight, infused with a spirit barely glimpsed before.

"I've got it."

Applause ripped through the grey courtyard. His proud grin rivalling Neil's in intensity as the taller boy threw himself at him. Kat pulled the red ribbon from her hair, twisting it around the remnants of greenery scavenged from winter's desolation. The boys fell back into a circle of praise around their final pledge. Kat tied the bouquet to the lapel of his coat, eyes catching briefly on the vacant space where Knox should be.

XXX

By mid-afternoon the plot was ready to enact. As planned prior to recent events, Kat met to discuss the influence of the Shelley's European tour, and the subsequent Geneva circle over tea and biscuits with Keating. As lunchtime drew to a close, she proposed the plan in all of Cameron's meticulous detail, finally leaving his office with a grin at the pleasing - albeit expected - result.

As the sun sunk west, they set the stage for what they hoped would be final scene of this drama. Little Timothy, much to Cameron's dismay, was entrusted with the role of a messenger and dispatched to bring the final character from the wings. Neil directed each to hiding place, most ending up in the closet like a childhood game of sardines. Keating himself took centre stage behind his desk. Within minutes, the metaphorical curtain fell with the opening of a door.

"Captain?"

Keating rose, welcoming the poor boy with a sympathetic smile. "Mr Overstreet, thank you for coming."

"Sir? Is everything okay?"

The Captain beckoned the bewildered boy into a seat, placing Kathleen's poetry book before him. His eyes widened in recognition. "I-I don't understand."

"I admire your spirit, and most importantly your heart. But I have said it before, and I'll say it again. Sucking out the marrow of life does not mean choking on the bone." With his parting words reverberating, Keating absconded.

Neil flung himself from behind the open door, slamming it shut and barricading it with a desk. Knox remained rooted to the spot in utter disbelief as his friends emerged from various places in the room, converging around him at his desk.
"I guess this is an intervention" he said, finding his voice at last.

"A mad poetry reading is generally encouraged" Charlie said lightly, "when the recipient isn't cornered."

Knox blanched, "cornered? I didn't corner her!"

"Knox, honey" Kat perched on a nearby desk, "I know you want to be Mr Darcy. But honestly, that was a Mr Collins ambush."

"Pride and Prejudice?" Cameron wrinkled his nose, "is this really the time?"

"It's always the time for Austen!"

Neil snapped his fingers, "hey! We can fight later, and Cameron please stop being ridiculous."

"What Kat is saying" Cameron continued, ignoring her childish smirk, "is that you embarrassed her. You could have got her into a lot of trouble, and that is ignoring that amount of school rules you broke by yourself."

"Sure, she was too worried about Chet to focus" Knox defended, "but she loved the poem, and I brought her favourite flowers!"

Kat sighed, "we're not saying it wasn't romantic, Knox."

"Chris rang last night" Charlie crossed his arms, his posture radiating challenge. "You embarrassed her in front of her class, made her life difficult with her boyfriend who already wanted to kill you, and she won't accept an apology just yet. She wants space from you," he emphasised. "The problem is not the poem, it's your ignorance of her wishes."

Knox let out a shaky breath, "did-did she really ask for space?"

"She did" Neil lay a comforting hand on his shoulder. "And although she called you an idiot, she called you sweet idiot."

"Save the serenades for secret addresses at club meetings." Kathleen tapped the book, "just until she figures out how she feels."

He nodded slowly, ducking his head. "I'll apologise, I promise. I-I didn't think."

"We know," Neil looked at the others for help.

"The poem" Todd said quietly, "Chris never said she didn't like it. She said no one had ever written one for her." His words drew a faltering smile from Knox, strengthened by Kat's hug as she passed on Chris' message. She had specifically asked for him to be careful. And suddenly, his future no longer seemed so dim.

For seventeen years, Marley's ghost had been as essential to a festive evening as home-made mince pies and snow to Kathleen Murray. Each year her father's snowy boots dusted the entrance hall as he wrestled a six-foot pine tree through the aged front door. And as the years flew by, the three, little hands clutching the oak banister, and the eyes peeking tentatively through the gaps in the elaborate carvings, had grown into helping hands weaving magic into their home. Beneath her grandmother's quilt, A Christmas Carol was told, ghosts flickering in and out of the hearth as the
yule log flickered and crackled with flames.

Within minutes, the annual comfort provided by Charles Dickens was obliterated by a single, verbal sparring match.

Kat lowered 'A Christmas Carol,' all attempts at subtlety abandoned as she witnessed Cameron snatch the instrument away from Charlie's outstretched hands. The clarinet glistened under the low light, its sleek exterior reflecting its worth, despite the deafening sounds produced by the amateur handler of such a prize.

To his credit, Charlie had tried to conceal his winces. "Try taking a quick breath before the middle note" he advised, his back turned to the rapidly growing audience anticipating the night's crescendo.

"It won't work" Cameron said flatly.

"That's one opinion."

"It's not an opinion" he snarled, "it's a fact."

Charlie's body hit the wall with a sigh of utter distress, collapsing in on himself like a deflating composer. Mottled spots spread like rouge across Cameron's cheeks. He clutched the barrel like a gun, mouthpiece pointed at its owner.

"Fifteen minutes in and you're already taking a nap. I can hardly say I'm surprised with your academic record."

He lazily opened his eyes, cocking an eyebrow. "Oh, I'm sorry. Let me refund you for-wait, you're on my time. For free!"

"Then make it worth your time and give me some instruction."

Nuwanda plucked the sheet music from his temperamental protégé, lapsing into silence as he studied it. And whether he chose to ignore the words Cameron uttered under his breath, or if he simply did not hear them was indiscernible. Cameron's reaction, however, left nothing to the imagination.

"You never listen to me" he sniped, slapping the paper away so he could no longer be dismissed. "Why would my music be any different?"

"Oh, I'm sorry" he glared, taking the folder from the stand and pushing it into his chest, "I didn't see you there, you're too far up on your high horse."

Richard exhibited the strength characteristic of his name; he drew a deep breath and lowered the clarinet back into its velvet case.

"You never change, do you Cameron? Always quitting at the slightest adversity."

"Are you satisfied?" He snapped, throwing down the folder. His fearsome glare fixed his opponent.

"I wouldn't go that far" Charlie smirked, "but I will admit to being somewhat appeased."

Kathleen ducked behind her novel. She could hardly fight the giggle itching at the back of throat. A shadow fell over her as Todd perched on the left arm. She had never been so grateful for the lack of personal space allowed by the old armchairs; the distraction was a welcome remedy to her
"I give it five minutes before Cameron storms out" Todd whispered. He surveyed the focus of the room which lay unanimously on the explosive duo. "I can't decide if your idea was a terrible one for them, or brilliant for bringing the rest of the senior class together."

She tilted her head to face him, "what can I say? I'm full of bad ideas." He grinned, but the words dripped heavy like oil from her lips. The stain spread through her thoughts, reality becoming slippery with their grease. Scorching feelings swept through her blood once more, catching alight on the trail she had unwittingly laid for herself.

"Hey," a gentle squeeze extinguished the flames. "Are you okay?"

She breathed, her voice barely above a whisper. "Hypothetically speaking, what should someone do when a bad idea becomes appealing?"

Todd paused. "What kind of bad idea?"

"The kind that will give the most happiness - fleetingly - and hurt irreparably for far longer."

Rather than a grimace, his mouth twisted into the faintest hint of a smile. "Can I tell you a secret?" He asked, struggling to tune out the memory singing through his heart. She nodded. His hand flexed from underneath his chin, fingertips gently tracing over his lips. "It's worth it."

Kat shot up, almost tumbling out of her seat. "Do you mean-" she cut herself off, catching sight of his expression. "You did!

"We didn't get a chance to talk yet" Todd defended, ducking his head. "Did something happen?"

"Almost," she flushed at the admission. "But Neil, well, never mind."

"Maybe it will happen again."

She watched the boy in question pick up his scattered papers, abandoned by Cameron as Todd's guess came to fruition. His dejection was barely palpable through the mask of nonchalance. If Neil had not pitched in with a kind smile and forced joviality, she doubted it would have been perceptible at all.

"Maybe." Kat tugged the blanket closer around herself, observing the faraway look in her confidant's eyes.

And maybe next time she would let it.

Chapter End Notes

This likely sounds far-fetched, but the crowds parting to make way for one girl is something that really happened to me a few years ago.

I was seventeen and in my final year of high school, standing in between two sets of double doors trying to enter a building. Eleven year-olds in their first year were swarming the halls and practically running to class with huge backpacks. A group of fifteen year-old boys entered the other set of doors and saw me struggling to get
through. One of them shouted "let the lady through!" Another started shouting, "make room for the sixth-former!" And before I knew it, about six boys were actively clearing a path to escort me through the hall. To this day, it is still one of the most surreal and entertaining moments of my life.

Has anyone else experienced something fiction worthy?

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!