Common People

by howardently, WitchStuff

Summary

A My Mad Fat Diary / Pride & Prejudice cross-over AU.

Rae Earl is starting college, determined to be strong and hold on to her new-found self-worth.

Not an easy task, and it doesn't help that 1) her mom is crazy 2) her cousin Chloe moved in and brought all her hot, rich, snobbish friends along 3) her BFF Izzy is crushing on a boy that's totally out of her league, and 4) his surly best friend is always around being grumpy and rude, ruining her mood (and her beautiful Stone Roses T-shirt!).

Notes

Our undying love and gratitude to the woman behind the women, Madfatty.
Dear Tix,

The dreaded moment has arrived. Tomorrow morning I will be marching through the gates of hell, I mean college, ha ha, and God only knows what hellish nightmares will await me there!

Fatty, I’m too nervous to sleep, so I’ve decided to write you a bit. I know I’ve been bad with the writing, but it’s been two weeks of craziness here in the Earl house. Even more than usual, if you can believe that.

First, since my cousin Chloe moved into the spare bedroom, taking over my bathroom and my life, my mum is in over-drive of crazy. Between the two of them talking about diets, showing each other their shopping, and giggling over magazines, there’s not a moment of peace around here.

I swear the only sane person in this house is Karim, and he went away to visit his family abroad so he hasn’t been around to get me through the endless hours of prattle with these two. Kitty is still a tiny little angel, but she must miss him or something, because she’s been crying and fussing so much, and it just adds to the general chaos of everything, and, well, fuck. I can’t bloody hear myself think, Tix! Makes me miss those long afternoons of sheer boredom at the hospital with everyone. Maybe I’ll check myself in again. Ha ha, no I’m kidding. I’ll never go back. I know you’d throw a flower vase at me if I did!

Anyway, all this is going on and tomorrow is college and I’m bricking it. I don’t know if I can do another two years of people saying shit and always being mean fucks to me. Can I confess something, Fatty? I’m scared shitless that the moment my foot touches college ground, everything’ll start up again, and it’ll only take the world five minutes to destroy all the work that I’ve done on myself. All the progress, everything I fought for in therapy, the stuff Kester taught me… that all of it will just go poof the second someone puts me down.

Cause, yes, I know I’m brilliant, and you know I’m brilliant, but the rest of the world doesn’t give a fuck. And I know I’ve got so much going for me, and yeah, I’m a great person. But put me in those social situations, and all that is just irrelevant. People look at me and all they see is A BLOB. I think that I’m maybe strong enough now to stand up to people who take the piss, use my wit to give as good as I get. But I’m scared, Fatty, that actually, it really doesn’t matter how brilliant I am. Doesn’t matter how many witty put downs I have in my arsenal. The other person could always say, “Yeah? Well, you’re fat”. And they’ll be right, and I’ll be done.

Fuck, these are shitty thoughts to have this late at night, hours before I have to face my doom. I’m going to stop right now, and start turning that frown upside down. Here we go:

Tomorrow is going to be amazing.

It’s not going to be like last year.

People in college will be more mature and won’t care about looks as much.

I will not face my doom, I will face my DESTINY!

Because I am Rachel Earl, and I know what I’m worth.

:)
Night Fatty, write you again soon with all the amazing adventures I’m about to have.

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It’s not gonna be like last year.

Rae is still repeating this mantra in the morning, looking at herself in the mirror. And it already is better than last year. She’s looking in the mirror, and it is… okayish. Her long hair is brushed and pinned up, and falls to her shoulders in long curls that she must admit look really nice. The best thing is her outfit. She’s got a brand new t-shirt on, one so beautiful she can’t stop looking at it. Four gorgeous faces look back at her from across her chest, and the words “Stone Roses” are printed in reassuring white block letters above the black and white photo. It is perfect. She has a hard time not caressing herself.

This is exciting. It’s the first time she can choose her own outfit and not just put on the ugly uniform with the unflattering skirt and itchy sweater. And she looks… nice. For her.

Rae shakes her head and wiggles a finger at her reflection. Stop that. No negative thoughts allowed. She stares hard into her own eyes. “I am smart,” she tells herself. “I’m a good and loving friend. I’m witty and funny, and I know everything there is to know about good music. They may be beautiful, they may be rich, but none of them have what I have.” She takes a big breath and closes her eyes. Stop the chaos, go inside yourself and find a peaceful place where you really are your true self. Yes.

Rae opens her eyes.

"I AM RACHEL EARL AND I KNOW WHAT I’M WORTH."

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Of course, it’s one thing to find your calm place when you’re locked in your bathroom, but what do you do when you’re living in The House of Chaos?

As soon as she opens the bathroom door, Chloe is racing past her, dressed only in pants and pulling on a dress. She rushes down the stairs while struggling with the clingy, tight material, and shouting, “How about the green one?”

"Show me!” Comes Rae’s mum’s shout from the kitchen.

Rae stares in shock. Honestly, the fact that they are now a household full of nothing but females is no excuse to run around naked!

"What in bloody hell are you doing?” she asks as she comes into the kitchen, where Linda has her hands deep in dish soap, and Chloe is posing like a freakin’ model.

Chloe turns to her with a cheeky grin. “I’m deciding on an outfit, duh!”

"Why here? Why in the kitchen?” Rae hangs her backpack on one of the chairs and then goes straight for the outstretched chubby little hands of her baby sister, cooing at her from her high chair. Rae’s voice goes up several octaves as she kisses the little face. "Morning, darling girl! Are you having your breakie, you perfect little miracle of nature?"

When she’s done cuddling the baby, she takes a seat next to her at the table, absentmindedly reaching for the toast and pulling the butter closer to her side.
"Well, Linda wanted to see, and she was feeding Kitty, so." Chloe explains, already taking off the dress she had just put on, and holding up a tiny sweater that’s lying on the back of the chair. "Maybe just this, with my leopard print skirt?" she wonders, and Rae’s mind boggles at the fact that Chloe is just standing in only a pink bra and tiny knickers, in broad daylight, in front of two people (well, two and a half), in a room full of windows. How does she do that? Well, I guess if you’re perfect you don’t even think about it. Rae looks at the buttery toast in her hand, and puts it down. "Well, why the fuck do you need to see Chloe picking clothes, Mum?"

Linda turns to her, soapy spatula in hand, her face the picture of incredulity. “Picking the outfit is the best part of the first day of college!” her eyes move to Chloe for a split second, to share the joke. “Honestly, Rae.”

"Oh, well, excuse me, I had no idea.” Rae and Chloe roll their eyes and smile at each other when Linda turns.

A niggling thought appears in the back of Rae’s mind, that this breakfast could be the last time she eats until late afternoon. She picks the toast back up and reaches for some bacon strips as well. Linda looks at her, disapproval in her eyes. Here we go, Rae thinks. Do you really need that, Rae? You never make an effort, Rae. I know I always put all these piles of food on the table but do you have to actually eat it? Look at Chloe, she’s never eaten in her life!

But Linda only asks, “Have you picked out your outfit? We have to leave soon or we’ll be late.” Rae lifts her eyes from her plate. “Ahhhh… yeah.”

"Well?" Linda dries her hand on a towel. "Well, go and put it on."

"It’s this Mum. You’re looking at it."

"This - this is what you’re wearing?" Her mum has to brace herself against a chair, and Chloe, who knows by now how it is in the Earl house when they get like this, takes the opportunity to rush upstairs again.

"That’s it, Mum. Deal with it." She gives her mum a wide grin while still chewing on a bacon strip.

"But what about that pink dress we saw on the High street, didn’t you say you we’re going to get that?"

"No, you told me I should get that. My money was much better spent on this beautiful work of art.” She looks down at her chest and smiles at the upside down face of Ian Brown. “Hi, you!” she tells him.

Linda gives up, and huffs as she picks Kitty up. “All right, if you want to look like a sad sack of potatoes with no personality-“

"Excuse me, I’m showing all the personality I need right here." She motions to the beautiful band logo.

Her mum misses the point, as per usual. “Now, your boobs, yes, I wish you’d show a bit of cleavage sometimes. It’s your best feature; I don’t understand why you won’t flaunt it.”

It’s like there’s been a knife embedded in her chest ever since she can remember. She’s not sure who put it there, but a lot of people like to twist it from time to time. Just for fun. Her mum does it not because it’s amusing to her, but because she doesn’t think. She doesn’t notice the impact of her words. She doesn’t understand the connection between the knife in Rae’s chest and the knife
hidden at the bottom of her drawer.

But she doesn’t do that anymore. *I’m Rachel Earl and I know what I’m worth.* She repeats in her head, and swallows the scathing response that was on her tongue. *She doesn’t mean to be mean.* ”I like this.” She says instead.

"All I’m saying is, you’re sixteen. Everything is about to start, and it’s so exciting! But you don’t even care. You’re in college now, Rae! How are you ever going to get a boyfriend dressed like that? Who’s even gonna know you’re a girl?"

The knife twists sharply, making it hard to breathe. Just in time, Chloe bounces gracefully down the stairs, dressed in a perfect fucking purple dress. “I think I have a winner!” she announces, not aware of the tension in the room.

"See, that’s what a girl looks like.” Linda beams. Chloe, the daughter she always wanted, smiles nervously and smooths her hands on her perfect thighs.

Rae stands up, takes Kitty from her mum’s hands and holds her close to her chest while Linda picks up the baby bag and looks for her car keys. “So, what, I’m not a proper girl because I don’t look like Chloe?” she asks as they all grab their bags and things and head out of the house.

"Oh, Rachel, none of your silly feminist shite this morning, all right?” Linda shakes her head at her, and Rae can’t help but laugh.

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Linda’s car is a tiny dot in the horizon, and Rae and Chloe are standing, small and scared, at the edge of the huge campus. It’s unclear who’s more nervous, her or Chloe. Her cousin fidgets in her tight dress, fixes her hair three times a minute, and her eyes dart back and forth across the courtyard. Rae wonders what Chloe has to be nervous about; she looks like freakin’ Elle Macpherson. Especially standing next her blobby self.

"Look, there’s Stacey Stringfellow." Chloe jumps all of a sudden. "She’s going to the fountain, we should go say hello."

"I’m not going anywhere, I told Izzy I’d meet her here."

Chloe looks at her impatiently. “Babes, I know you two have been joined at the hip since second grade, but do you have to do every bloody thing together?"

Where is this coming from? Chloe has never had a problem with Izzy. Who would? She’s the most wonderful human on God’s green earth.

"No," she answers pointedly. "Just the things we’ve said we’d do together - like first day of college,"

"You know, Rae, first year of college is a time when people can reinvent themselves." Chloe’s eyes never leave the figure of the blond skinny girl who is walking around the courtyard as if she owns the place. Probably she does. She’s pretty enough to rule college.

"Yeah, and?"

Chloe shrugs, and Rae can tell she’s trying to be gentle. “Well don’t you want to at least try to improve your social status?"

Rae laughs. “What are you on about?”
"Your mum’s right. You’re not making any effort, Rae. I mean, you have such pretty face…”

Oh, lord, did she really use the most cliche-y cliche in the history of fat people? Rae laughs even louder. “Are you shitting me, Chlo?”

Hair flying and glistening in the sun, her cousin turns to her, eyes earnest. “No, I mean, Rae, you know I think you’re beautiful, but a little make up could bring out your eyes and lips and stuff.”

"Ohhh… is it make-over time?” Rae claps her hands and bounces on her heels in fake excitement. Chloe turns away.

"Fine, if you want to stay the same loser with the same loser friends… friend.” she sends a sharp look at Rae, then turns again.

Rae can’t help taking the piss just a little. “I thought you were my friend, Chloe!”

"I am! Of course I am, babes, always. But you know, my stock is plummeting lately as well. Not sure I’m the person that can help you climb up the social ladder. But I know for sure that tiny, ginger, can-barely-say-a-word-in-front-of-people-who-are-not-you-or-her-mother Izzy, won’t.”

"I happen to like our place on the ladder. Izzy and mine’s, of course, not yours babe. Wouldn’t want to drag you down to the bottom with the rest of us losers.”

She’s sure Chloe is going to bristle and say that’s not what she meant, but the girl next to her gets all quiet. “You think it’s easy? One day I’m on top, I’ve got everything. Next minute, my stupid parents decide they can’t stand to be on the same continent as each other and they both fuck off. And I have to live with my aunt and cousin - who I love, don’t get me wrong - but it’s not the same, is it?”

Rae wants to hug her, but she’s not sure Chloe will want to be seen hugging her, so she only pats her arm awkwardly. “Chlo… Your friends aren’t gonna treat you different just because you no longer have a house with a pool.”

Chloe’s voice is a little shaky. “I know that.”

"And if they do, they weren’t your friends to begin wi-"

"Yeah, I know that, Rae, God!”

Rae takes her arm away. “All right, as long as you know.”

Chloe’s fingers flash to her face, quicksilver quick, to wipe a tear away. She takes a cleansing breath and pulls her shoulders back, and it’s as if nothing has ever upset her. ”Meanwhile, Stacey hasn’t returned my phone calls all summer.”

Before Rae can say anything, Izzy is running at them and jumps into her arms.

"Collllleeegeee!” she yells.

Rae laughs as she does her best not to topple over with the weight, however minimal, of her friend in her arms. The day’s already looking brighter; Izzy always has that kind of effect. She’s like Rae’s own personal sunshine.

“I see one of us is excited at least.” She laughs. “And colorful. What are you wearing?” She takes it all in as she sets the redhead on her feet.
Izzy looks down at herself, in green short overalls and purple tights. “D’you like it, guys? I’ve decided this is an opportunity to re-invent meself, like. Because we don’t have to wear a uniform anymore so we’ve gotta take advantage, you know? I’ve decided my clothes are gonna be super-happy from now on!”

Shocked, Rae can only smile at her in surprise. “That’s… great, Iz. You look dead nice.”

“I see your hair will also be super-happy this year?” Asks Chloe testily, her eyes darting back and forth from her friends to the distant group surrounding the blond girl. “I mean, don’t you want to… put it away or something?”

Rae sends Chloe a warning look, but Izzy isn’t even aware of the fact that her looks were just called into question. She fluffs her huge curls, pleased as anything. “Yep! I am never plaiting my hair ever again. No uniform means they can’t make me.”

“Right, whatever. Now that Izzy’s here, can we go over and talk to Stacey already?” Chloe scolds and Rae shares a look with Izzy.

“What are we doing?” Izzy asks in a fake whisper as she twines her arm with Rae’s, and the pair of them follow a step behind Chloe.

“We are attempting to climb up the social ladder. Or at least watch how it’s done.” Rae whispers loudly back as the three of them make their way across the courtyard.

“Stacey!” Chloe calls as they approach, and Stacey spins around with a stiff smile. “How are ya? I thought something might have happened? You didn’t ring me back.”

The pair of them lean in to kiss the air near the other’s cheek, and Rae thinks she might gag. She’s never cared much for Stacey, not that she’s had much interaction with her, being on the bottom of the latter and all. But Chloe… Chloe reveres Stacey, and Rae has trouble not imagining her cousin as one of those yippy little dogs that are always following you around, tail wagging, just waiting for any scraps of attention that might fall her way. It makes a weird kind of sense, of course. Stacey is basically the pinnacle of everything Chloe cares about; she’s fit and rich and well dressed and popular with the boys without having the reputation as a slag. If life were more like the movies, Stacey would be the head cheerleader.

“Oh, you know how it is Chloe.” Stacey gives a fake laugh and raises her perfectly manicured eyebrows. “I’ve just been so busy; parties and trips and everything, you know, it’s summer!” Suddenly her face falls and she looks vaguely guilty. “Oh, but I heard about your parents. It must have been kind of a rough summer for you, what with all that.”

Chloe flushes, but tries to hide her distress behind a practiced smile. “Oh, it was fine. Didn’t have time to think about it, really, I partied so hard.”

“I heard you had to move, huh? Your Mum couldn’t afford that big house all on her own, could she? Shame.” Stacey’s face is the very picture of horrified pity, and Rae’s kind of glad Izzy’s holding onto her arm. She may not always be Chloe’s biggest fan, but that won’t stop her from throttling Stacey for being awful to her cousin. “Don’t worry though, babes. You can still come over to mine and swim even though you haven’t got a pool anymore.”

Chloe gives Stacey a smile that is more akin to a grimace, and the pair share an awkward hug. Rae clenches her fists, but Stacey’s got the talent of being totally catty and evil without actually saying anything that bad. And honestly, Rae’s a little afraid of Stacey turning that terrifying power on her. Chloe can handle a lot more of that bullshit than she can, and she’s the one who wants to be friends with Stacey anyway.
“The pool at our new house is absolutely huge!” Stacey exclaims, stepping out of the hug after just a second. “Of course, the whole house is absolutely huge, so it makes sense!”

Stacey’s brood of ladies-in-waiting all cackle sycophantically at her lame joke, and Rae does her best to keep from rolling her eyes. Izzy and herself are clearly only here for Chloe’s support, since no one’s thought to include them in the conversation at all, but that doesn’t mean she has to laugh at Stacey’s stupid jokes. She shoots a glance at Izzy, whose wide eyes sparkle with repressed humour, but Izzy’s much too polite to ever say anything unkind.

“Oh, did you move?” Chloe asks, and Rae cocks her head at her cousin’s tone.

“I didn’t tell you? Oh my god, you won’t believe this, Chlo! My Mum has only gone and gotten married over the summer! Yeah, I know, at her age. It’s disgusting. Anyway my new step-dad is completely loaded! We moved into his place, it’s practically a mansion!” Stacey laughs again, and her shadows chuckle along with her. “It’s so lush! You’ve got to come over some time, Chloe. I’ve got a new step-brother, as well. He’s… well. He’s something.” She turns to her cronies to share the joke, then turns swiftly around, leaning a bit into Chloe, “Oh, and he’s got this completely fit friend living with us, oh my god, he’s like something out of Hello! Magazine. And I’m so going to get with him before the Big Lucas Halloween Bash.”

“That’s great, Stace. I’d love to come ‘round and hang out with you. I’m free this weekend?” Chloe’s voice is so eager that Rae nearly winces. She can practically see Chloe’s little tail wagging furiously. She thinks about stepping forward and touching Chloe’s arm, to get her attention before she embarrasses herself by exposing how desperate her desire is to get back in with Stacey’s gang. But Rae is aware that she herself is no good with social cues, having spent so much time at the bottom of the food chain, so she holds back. As far as she knows, that’s what people like that do; rudely invite themselves to homes of people who obviously don’t want them there.

“Oh, no. This weekend’s no good, babes. So much going on, you know.” Stacey smiles sweetly, and Rae watches as Chloe’s hopeful expression falls. Stacey considers Chloe for a second, glances towards Rae and Izzy, then gestures behind her towards her friends, like a benevolent queen. “We’re all going to the pub this afternoon, though. The Swan? It’s this cool place, all the second years go there. You probably don’t know it. Anyway, my stepbrother and his friend will be there, too. Why don’t you join us? You can bring your little friends too. Nobody will mind.”

“Yeah. Yes, that would be great! We’ll see you there then!” Chloe enthuses, and Rae shoots a worried look at Izzy. Bloody hell. They’re going to have to spend their afternoon in some stupid pub hanging out with stupid Stacey Stringfellow and her stupid stepbrother. Ugh.

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Rae squares her shoulders as she stands outside the door to the pub, trying to push through her nervousness. Izzy’s not here yet, and it’s hard enough to go anywhere new without her little sunshine-safety-blanket-best-friend, but this is the pub. The one where all the cool kids hang out after school. She’s not sure why she let Chloe talk her into this.

*I know what I’m worth. I know what I’m worth.* She repeats to herself, taking a deep breath and frowning at Chloe, who is staring at her impatiently, waiting for Rae to open the doors. *I can do this. I am awesome.*

Rae pushes open the door and steps into what feels like a different world. The pub is smoky and dim, the late afternoon sun almost completely obscured and replaced with purplish lights. She squints, adjusting to the darkness, the buzz of voices around them, and the sharp acidic scent of beer. It only takes a moment before she hears the familiar strains of Blur trickling through the
conversations, and that’s all it takes for her to feel comfortable in this new environment. Any place with Blur playing can’t be that bad.

Chloe’s grinning like a madwoman when Rae glances back, clearly thrilled to have been invited to the it spot. She’s been nearly insufferable all day, unable to stop crowing about how she was regaining her place in the social hierarchy. Apparently Chloe’d had a much different impression on how this morning’s conversation with Stacey went. Rae had thought Stacey’d been at best cool, and at worst condescending and marginally cruel. But Chloe thought she’d been a picture of friendliness.

The whole thing gave Rae a headache.

They’re still standing around, drinking in the environment, when Izzy shoots in like a ginger ball of energy and tangles them both into a huge embrace. Rae laughs, but Chloe pushes out of the hug with a grimace, straightening her dress and smoothing out her hair.

“Hey guys!” Izzy smiles. “Chloe, you look so good with that thing on your neck!”

“It’s a choker.” Chloe fingers the black satin nervously. “Everyone’s wearing them in America.”

“Oh,” Izzy is impressed. “How do you know?”

“I saw it on Melrose Place, okay? C’mon.” Chloe beckons as she starts walking towards the back, where she has apparently spotted Stacey amidst the trails of smoke that fill the pub. Izzy and Rae turn to look at each other simultaneously, bursting into a fit of nervous giggles. Places like these are not a part of their lives, usually, and it all feels kinda exciting and grown up.

And to think that earlier in the afternoon, Rae’d truly done her best to get them out of coming to this thing, but Chloe is a force to be reckoned with when she sets her mind to something, and Rae had been forced to capitulate under Chloe’s determination. Izzy was no help- she’d just shrugged, ready to do whatever it took to make Chloe happy; to make anyone happy. “I’m all about meeting new people and having new experiences this year!” she’d chirped, and Rae knew her night was settled for her.

Stacey stands to greet them as they approach, shouting “You came!” in apparent delight and hugging Chloe tightly, as if she can’t believe her luck to have such honorable guests at her table. Chloe grins, beaming under Stacey’s approval, and waves hello to the rest of Stacey’s entourage. Rae feels a bit stupid standing behind Chloe wordlessly, like she’s one of Chloe’s ladies-in-waiting, but she’s not really sure what to say, so she just stands there while Chloe and Stacey play nicey-nice together.

And then it happens. It’s got to be some kind of trick of the light, but as a couple of lads turn from the bar to join their little group, it’s like the heavens open up to pour golden light down over their heads. Right in front of her stands the fittest boy she’s ever seen in real life. Rae even glances down at her shirt for a quick comparison. Okay, he doesn’t quite measure up to Ian Brown, but he’s close enough to make her lady garden perk up and take notice. This boy is all perfectly disheveled brown fringe, freckles and best of all, a leather jacket worn over a black Oasis t-shirt. It’s as if someone made a boy according to Rae Earl’s specific instruction. He jerks his head to clear his fringe from his eyes, and she swears she can feel her ovaries imploding from the sheer power of his sexiness.

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Somehow, she moves her stare to the left, where she is hit with the force of the bluest eyes she’s ever seen in her life. The other boy standing there with a pint in his hand is a total slice as well, with big muscular arms and a shirt tight over his impressive torso. He’s got a wide, sort of goofy smile and kind eyes. As he switches the pint glass to his other hand, Rae catches the flex of his
bicep for a second, and she can feel it all the way down her spine. Damn.

When had boys started to look this good out of the pages of magazines? It seems to Rae that only last year, every boy she came across was a short, skinny thing with spots and a smooth cheek. Suddenly this happens! These blokes, with their biceps and their jaw lines, were already more like men than boys. *Are we supposed to look like proper women already, too?* She looks at Chloe and Stacey and the rest of the girly girls. Even Izzy, in her sweet polka dot dress and orange tights, is embracing this shit. Is she herself being left behind?

“Chloe, this is my stepbrother, Arnold.” Stacey’s voice interrupts Rae’s musings and she glances around, noting that she’s not the only one who has been ensnared by the boys’ attractiveness. Chloe is all but salivating, her eyes traveling wickedly up and down the one in the leather jacket. Izzy, too, is staring, a flush stealing up her neck and pinking her cheeks. She’s got her eyes trained on the one Stacey has just introduced, and Rae holds back a snicker as she watches her best friend lick her lip just a little.

Typical. One for Chloe, one for Izzy, none for Rae. It’s not like either of them would like her anyway. **Okay, stop, Rae.**

Meanwhile, the three of them just stand there, not saying a word and generally drooling all over these fine specimens of masculinity, and it’s getting awkward.

Luckily, the stepbrother steps in to fill in the silence. “Stacey, you daft bugger, how many times do I have to tell ya? It’s Chop!” The boy with the easy smile laughs, slings an arm around Stacey’s neck and jovially ruffles her hair. Stacey clearly hates it. She’s turned red underneath his arm and scowls as he releases her, quickly smoothing down her hair and straightening her shirt.

Rae laughs brightly, anybody who gives Stacey Stringfellow a noogie is alright in her book. Chop gives her a pleased grin in response. “Ladies. I’m Chop.”

“Chop,” Stacey pops the “P” just to emphasize how much she dislikes his nickname. She steps next to Chloe and puts a hand on each of her shoulders, gives her a tight smile. “This is Chloe.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet ya, Chloe.” Chop says, then turns to Izzy. “And who might you be, beautiful?”

Rae can feel the way he focuses all his attention on Izzy, like a blue spotlight that’s suddenly turned on full blast and trained to her. She furrows her brow, unsure of whether she’s going to have to rebuff him for her fragile best friend, but Izzy turns pink and coy under his gaze, blooming with the attention.

“Iz… Izzy.” Iz manages finally, stuttering her way through her own name. Rae looks on with affection and a bit of pity.

Chop stares at Iz for a long minute, and to Rae’s great surprise, Izzy holds his gaze even through her blushing. He bends to gallantly take her hand and press a kiss to it, and Izzy giggles breathlessly. Oh, yeah. This crush is gonna be a doozy.

Eventually Chop shoots Rae a careless smile. “And you are, lovely?”

She raises her eyebrows, but she has to admit that she’s pleased to be included in his flattery, however facetious it is. “Rae.” She nods her head and smiles.

“As in Raymond?” Someone asks, and Rae glances over to see that it’s the beautiful boy
speaking, his gorgeous face somewhat spoiled by a mocking sneer. She rolls her eyes and shakes her head a bit. Looks like he’s tragically stupid. That’s okay. A girl can deal with stupid.

“Rae as in Rachel. You know, like the girl’s name. Since I’m so clearly a girl.” She gestures widely towards her generous bosom, then flushes. Did she seriously just deliberately draw attention to her boobs? Ugh. His beauty is short circuiting her brain. She pulls a face to cover the slip up, as if she jokes about her figure at least once a day, raises her eyebrows at him until he looks away. *That’s right, gorgeous. You just keep on looking pretty, no need to talk.*

He rolls his eyes and raises his upper lip, but Chop claps him heavily on the back and Rae’s silently amused as he stumbles forward. “And this grumpy fucker is my mate, Finn. He’s only just moved here too, staying with us for a bit.”

“Nice to meet you, Finn.” Chloe says slinkily, sliding her fingers over his arm. Rae’s slightly mollified when he doesn’t appear to be affected by Chloe’s advances, just giving her flirty mate a sturdy nod. Nice to see someone not instantly falling for Chloe’s charms.

“Right.” Chop announces, clapping his hands and then rubbing them together. “Who wants a drink?” *Obviously* he’s the better one by far.

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A little while later, Rae is intently pouring over the jukebox selection. It’s been an hour of intense flirting from Stacey and her gallery of hangers-on… and shockingly, a little bit from Izzy too. Rae’s never seen Izzy this way before; never seen her do much more than blush and stammer when a boy has spoken to her. Evidently she was serious about the new Izzy thing. Rae’s a bit bewildered by the change in Izzy, if she’s honest, but she’s also sort of proud, too. Maybe if Izzy can be so bold and brave, Rae can too.

Still, it’s a bit much to handle. The pheromones wafting through the air are almost visible, they’re so thick, and unfortunately Rae isn’t totally immune to their power. Chop is clearly into Iz, and the two of them are emitting a wall of hormones so powerful that it may turn the whole town into rabid sex-fiends. Obviously no one is directing any of that sexy energy at Rae, but she can’t help but be caught up in the lusty atmosphere. And it doesn’t really help that two of the most lust-inducing boys, no men, in all of Lincolnshire are sitting right there in the center. There’s no hope, really.

Other than smoking a cigarette in a manner that was practically porn, Finn has not impressed much in the hour of chatting. He hasn’t said much and the few things he has said… well, she was being generous before in thinking that he was just stupid. Turns out he’s as arrogant as they come, pronouncing his opinions with the air that they’re mandates. She can’t really blame him, she supposes, since everyone else seems to fall all over themselves to validate every word that comes from his lips. It’d be hard for anyone not to be puffed up with that kind of treatment.

Stacey has pulled out all her best moves from Cosmo, dropping things and bending over to pick them up, laughing at the few syllables he’s managed to utter, whipping her hair back so many times that she’s got to have a neck ache. Chloe too is doing her very best to entice Finn without offending Stacey. The two of them are locked in some kind of silent but furious combat to win his attention. Rae thinks she can see his ego inflating around him like a giant balloon with every flutter of Stacey’s mascaraed eyelashes, and his silence grows in correlation. The more she flirts, the less he says. He’d eventually swollen too big for their little corner of the pub, and stalked off to the bar about ten minutes before in search of better prey.
Chop, on the other hand, is such a good laugh. He’s uproariously funny, crude and vulgar while still managing an air of gentility. Rae supposes it’s mostly in his unflinching attentions towards Izzy, but he somehow manages to be really sweet while telling a vile joke about the Pope. Rae finds herself naturally gravitating towards his charming company, feeling completely comfortable around him and enjoying the lighthearted bantering. Izzy too has joined in on the teasing, and Rae marvels at her previously shy best mate, flirting in her adorable Izzy way.

Eventually, Chop and Izzy turn towards each other in an indefinable way that makes Rae a clear third wheel. So, she leaves them staring at each other and escapes to the jukebox, determined to correct the ratio of crap music to decent tunes. She’s pouring over the selection, feeding coins into the machine and humming to herself in satisfaction when Izzy appears beside her.

“So.” Izzy says, an irrepresible grin spread wide across her pink cheeks. Izzy’s face has to be aching by now; it’s been stuck in that position since they entered the pub.

“So?” Rae repeats, lifting an elbow to rest on the top of the jukebox. She’s going to draw Iz out, make her admit that she fancies Chop. It takes a lot of effort to rein her face in, keep her lifted eyebrows from lowering to match Izzy’s grin, but bringing out the subject of the new crush takes no effort at all, as Iz broaches it easily, trying for casual.

“What do you think about Chop? He seems…” Izzy’s flush deepens, and she lowers her face to grin madly at her shoes. “Really nice.”

Rae bites the inside of her cheek. Really nice? For the boy she’s already marrying in her head? She’s going to have to give more than that. “Sure. Really nice.”

“Did you see how he smiled at us? He’s got a great smile.” Izzy gives into the gushing, and Rae allows herself a grin as the floodgates open.

“Yes,” Rae wrinkles her nose and leans in conspiratorially. “Lots of teeth.”

Izzy gives a trilled giggle. “I like it.” She shrugs. “It’s a happy smile. He seems like a happy guy, and you know I’m determined to be happy this year!”

“To be happy or to do happy?” Rae waggles her eyebrows with an exaggerated leer, and Izzy bites her lip while slapping Rae playfully on the arm.

“Maybe both!” Izzy’s eyes are wide at her flirtation with the risqué. “I mean, did you see his arms? I wouldn’t mind having them wrapped around me!”

Rae laughs, surprised and delighted at Izzy playing along. She normally just rolls her eyes when Rae’s drooling over boys in magazines, rarely offering any of her own hormonal imaginings.

Izzy looks around briefly, then leans in close to half whisper, “Did you hear how he called me beautiful?”

Izzy looks radiant; a few words from Chop have allowed the light she’s so frequently suffused with in private to now be displayed for all to see. Rae doesn’t have the heart to tell her that it’s just something boys say, that it doesn’t really mean anything. He’d called Rae ‘lovely’, after all, so he’s not exactly a reliable source of information, is he? But Izzy looks so happy, and she can’t stand the thought of being the storm cloud to Izzy’s sunshine.

“Well, that just means he’s not blind, Iz.” Izzy beams under her praise, and they giggle again.

“Oi! What are ya doing over here all by yaself?” Chop’s booming voice breaks through the girl’s laughter, and they spin to see where it’s coming from. Izzy shoots Rae a bewildered look, the boys
aren’t visible anywhere. “Ya ought to come back over, Finny boy!”

There’s a large wooden pillar beside them, and Rae leans around it to discover that the boys are leaning up against the bar just on the other side. The pillar obscures them completely, so they have a perfect spot from which to eavesdrop. Rae jerks back quickly to find Izzy wide eyed, and Rae presses a finger to her own lips. If they’re quiet, they won’t be found out, and they’ll get to find out how much hope there is for Izzy’s new crush.

“Nah, you’re alright. You go on back.” Rae imagines that Finn’s perfect features are marred with a frown as he talks. It’s such a shame for that kind of beauty to be wasted on such a right knob.

“C’mon, mate. I’m having a bangin’ time with them girls. Best pair of lasses I’ve ever met. That Izzy’s a firecracker, she is! All that hair; and those eyes. She’s real pretty, don’t you think?”

Rae watches as Izzy’s face grows increasingly red, until her flush is nearly as vivid as her hair. But her smile has grown wider, too. Rae bites her lip through a huge grin, jostles Izzy with her elbow jovially. This Chop kid is even better than she’d thought. He messes up Stacey’s hair and calls Izzy pretty? He might just be worthy of Izzy’s affections.

“S’pose.” Finn mutters. Rae rolls her eyes.

“And her mate, Rae, she’s dead cool.” Chop continues, and it’s Rae’s turn to blush and be jostled by Izzy’s elbow. “You should come over and talk to them. I think you’d like her.”

There’s a moment, just a breath, before Finn speaks when Rae thinks it just might be okay. She’s the only one in their little group who hasn’t been falling all over him, and she’s improved upon his Oasis t-shirt with her even better Stone Roses one. He obviously doesn’t really like anyone, but she’s not like the rest of them, and there’s a sliver of hope deep within her that he might just recognize that.

“Piss off Chop, I’m not spending the evening with that just so you can get off with the little ginger girl. She looks like a roadie for some grunge band. She should wear a sign, “girl,” just so people know.” He chuckles mildly at his own joke.

Rae feels her heart free falling, coming to rest somewhere near her shoes. Her face is burning. It’s so much worse than she’d imagined it could be. That arsehole. She doesn’t even like him. It’s so unfair that he can make her feel like such shit even though she could care less about his opinion. But it’s like she can feel a seam within her ripping, the stitches she’d so carefully worked with months of therapy and self-affirmation tearing apart with his careless cruelty.

She swallows; stares down at the floor. Rae can feel Izzy’s sympathetic gaze, can picture the exact tightness of her best friends eyes and twist of her lips. But she doesn’t look up. She can’t bear to actually see the pity.

Chop grunts, and Rae thinks she can hear a tightness to his tone at Finn’s insult. “C’mon Finn, don’t be such an arse. She’s right crackin’; goin’ on about her music and shit, sounds just like you when you get started. I think you’d like her if you’d just come talk to her for five minutes.”

“Are you joking? We’ve been here for almost two hours and all them people are doing my head in. I don’t need another big mouth talking in my ear.”

“You’re being a right wanker, mate.”

Rae furrows her forehead as a brief wash of gratitude towards Chop ripples through her, pushing back some of her anger and hurt. He’s a good bloke. She chances a glance up at Izzy, finds her shaking her head with a sympathetic curl of her lips. Izzy places her tiny hand on Rae’s arm, and
Rae shrugs and rolls her eyes. It’ll be alright. She forces herself to run through her affirmations. *I know what I’m worth. I know what I’m worth.*

“Nah, you’re just too good,” Finn’s voice cuts off her mantra, and Rae closes her eyes in a useless attempt to block his harsh words. “But you can’t spend your life hanging with people out of pity.” There’s the sound of a pint glass hitting the bar. “I’ve had enough of that, I’m fine right here.”

“Suit yaself.”

They watch Chop’s retreating back as he heads back to the table. Rae leans around the pillar to look at Finn with a kind of sick fascination, drinking his beer and bobbing his head to the music playing overhead, not a care in the world. Bobbing to a song she’d just put on the jukebox.

“Rae…” Izzy begins, voice soft in comfort and to keep their eavesdropping secret. “You know…”

“I know, Iz.” Rae cuts her off, shrugging her shoulders again. She shoots Izzy a reassuring smile despite the shame beating against the back of her skull. “He’s a prick. I know I’m awesome. Who cares what he thinks?”

Strangely, speaking the words out loud seems to release some of the pressure from his terrible words. She’s filled with a new sense of conviction. Yeah, actually, she is awesome. And he is a prick. Who the fuck does he think he is to talk about her that way, to judge her when he doesn’t even know her?

“You are awesome, Rae. You’re the best.” Izzy offers with a hopeful smile. “That guy’s a dickhead. A twat. A… a… fucking wanker!”

Rae’s laughter escapes her in a great burst. Izzy never swears, and something about the vulgarity in her sweet little voice makes it especially hilarious. Izzy grins, the glow slowly starting to seep back into her face.

“I can’t believe Chop is friends with that guy.” Izzy says, ducking her head. “You don’t think… You don’t think he’s like that, do you?”

“No, Iz.” Rae states firmly, bending her head to force Izzy to meet her gaze. “Chop’s a top bloke. You’re free to like him as you will. You’ve liked many a stupider person. It’s just Finn who’s the arsehole.”

“Oh, you’re one to talk!” Izzy laughs. “You fancied Doctor Nick! That’s a much stupider choice. He’s as old as my Dad!”

“Is not!” Rae defends indignantly. “He’s at least two years younger than your Dad!”

“Oh, my mistake!”

Eventually, the giggling fizzles out and Rae turns absently back to the jukebox to distract herself from thinking about the things Finn said. Izzy hugs her side, fast and fierce.

“C’mon, Rae. Let’s go back to our table.”

Rae scans over the tracks one more time, glances back towards the table where Stacey is grimacing at something Chop is saying and Chloe is trying to hold back her laughter. They all look so normal, so attractive. She looks at Izzy and thinks that her best mate fits with them, fits with the beautiful people, especially with that glow lighting her features. But Rae doesn’t belong there. She’s too loud, too big, too much. She swallows and furrows her brow at the jukebox.
“Actually, Iz, I’m kind of tired.” Rae glances up to see Izzy giving her a knowing frown. “I… I’m just going to head home, if that’s okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll just go grab my stuff.”

“No!” Rae’s voice comes out more severe than she’d intended. “No. I mean, there’s no reason for you to go home too. Go back and flirt with Chop some more. See if you can’t get him to call you beautiful again.”

Izzy frowns and glances over her shoulder at the group, clearly torn between her desire to stay and her duties as a best friend.

“Really, Iz. I’m fine.” Rae laughs, determined to convince Izzy that there’s no reason for her to leave. “Go. Have fun. Keep count of how many times Chop grosses out Stacey with his jokes for me, will ya?”

Izzy laughs, gives Rae a huge beaming smile and wrinkles her nose. “Well, if you’re sure then. I guess I’ll stay for a bit.”

“Go.” Rae demands, giving her a little shove, and watches as Izzy skips back towards the table. As soon as she appears, Chop turns towards her and tucks her slender shoulders under his arm in an affectionate tussle. Izzy is all smiles and blushes, and Rae finds herself shaking her head. Izzy certainly hadn’t taken much convincing.

Rae watches the group for a minute more, torn between joy at Izzy’s obvious happiness and an aching sort of hollowness that she once again doesn’t belong. She sighs softly. It seems like new Izzy might have found her place a few rungs up on the social ladder, but Rae is destined to always be hanging off the bottom.

Rae tucks her thumbs under the strap of her backpack and heads around the pillar towards the exit. She only makes it a few steps before colliding with someone, jumps back with a cry at the sensation of icy beer sloshing down the front of her new shirt.

She stares down in disbelief. Her beautiful new shirt. She frowns down at Ian’s lovely face, now damp and faintly tinted from the beer, before scowling up at the person who’d marred it.

And of course, of course, it’s the arsehole. And of course he’s taking zero responsibility. “Oi!” He shouts gruffly. “Watch where you’re going, would ya?”

An icy rage begins to fill her. Who the fuck does this prick think he is? Insulting her, spilling beer all over her new shirt, and then insinuating it’s her fault? Oh, fuck no.

“Maybe you need to be more observant, knobhead.” She hisses, eyes narrowed at his affronted face. Bolstered by having managed that much, she allows some of her anger to spill out. “I shouldn’t have to be wearing a sign for you to see that I’m fucking walking here. But I guess I’m just another big mouth standing in your way, aren’t I?”

Rae watches with furious satisfaction as comprehension slowly dawns over him and an ugly flush mottles his cheeks and stains his neck. It takes a while; he really isn’t all that bright. And with his cheeks all red, he’s really not even that good looking. He just stands there, mouth open, trying to come up with something to say. His eyes lower towards her damp shirt, and he stares blankly at the logo for a long minute before she scoffs at him and he glances up again, face even redder.

“Prick.” Rae gives him a slow, deliberate roll of her eyes and a condescending sneer before she stalks off towards the door. She knocks his shoulder with hers as she passes. She makes it four steps before a victorious smile takes over her face. Take that, you beautiful arsehole.
The torn seams within her start to stitch themselves back up as she walks home, replaying her small victory over and over in her head. It’s the first time she’s ever really stood up for herself, the first time she hasn’t crumpled over some idiot’s cruel words.

_I’m Rachel bloody Earl, and I know what I’m fucking worth. And it’s more than that fucking knobhead._

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Dear Nan,

I don’t know why I thought moving to this new place would be any different. I guess people are boring arseholes no matter where you live in the world.

I really miss you. I’ve got no one to talk to, like, proper. I wish dad would be back already and we can get our own place. Living with Chop’s family is doing my head in.

Chop is a top bloke, you know he’s a real mate and he’s always up for a good laugh, but sometimes that’s not a plus, Nan. He meets new people all the time, like every person on the street can become his new best friend. He collects people like old Mr. Swanson used to collect strays. So he’s all about new people and large groups, and you know me, I would like nothing more than to sit in my room and listen to records, and I don’t much like talking to nobody. Remember Pop used to say, if you can’t improve upon the silence, you should keep your mouth shut? I wish more people had that idea. Nobody ever improves the silence around here.

I know you don’t like it when I say stuff like that, so I’ll give you an example, right? So, ever since I’ve been stopping at Chop’s, we’ve been hanging with his step-sister’s group, like her friends and stuff. And I swear they’re all a bunch of silly bints and boring shallow blokes. All the girls are interested in is clothes and trashy gossip magazines and boy bands, stupid stuff like that, and all the boys talk about is cars and Baywatch and crap. And the girls all try to crawl all over me like they’ve never seen a boy (sorry, Nan, I know you don’t like to hear that sort of thing but it’s true. Half the time I have to push some girl off me). I don’t fit in with these people, they are so stupid. Like, read a book sometimes. I bet you none of them even knows what a vinyl record looks like. There was this one girl there wearing a Stone Roses T-shirt, when I bet you a million pounds she has no idea who they are and she’s never heard a single song by them. But she thought the shirt made her look cool (it didn’t) so she put it on. Makes me sick, that.

So Chop is all “these people are great, let’s hang out with them”, because he fancies this one ginger lass that turned up, so he thinks I’m supposed to sit there all bloody night, listening to all this inane chatter of people saying nothing. I’m not kidding, Nan, I was the only person there who made any kind of sense. But you know how he is - he thinks everyone in the world is just swell. Like, the ginger girl he likes, she’s okay I guess, though she didn’t do much except giggle and look at Chop with love eyes. But her friend (that’s the one with the shirt) had such a gob on her and she was so loud and her mouth wasn’t the only big thing about her.

I think it’s pathetic how people like them try to fit in with the popular kids, like Stacey and us. Obviously they’re not going to fit in. What, the fat girl who doesn’t shut up and the ginger girl who doesn’t speak? Like we’re going to start hanging with people like them. Open your eyes and spare yourself the heartache, right?

But no, kids always try to push their way into our circles. I mean, I don’t like the popular kids, like I said, they’re all useless, but at least it’s my place, you know? I have the looks, the money, it’s
just how it is. Maybe it’s not a nice thing to say, but it’s life.

I dunno. Chop kept giving me grief about hanging out with them and liking them once I get to know them, which you know is garbage. You always said how important first impressions are, and you were right. Almost no one is different than they seem at first. So I told him, you know, that that girl was nothing special and that listening to all them yammering was doing my head in. But I think that girl heard me, Nan. I bumped into her later, and she said something…

But it’s not like it wasn’t true, you know? I wasn’t lying, and it’d do her better to know now that she’s not going to fit in, instead of her trying to bring her loud mouth into our group. I know I’m not the only one who found her obnoxious, you should have seen the looks Chop’s stepsister were giving me. I mean, she’s a stupid cow, but still. That girl isn’t going to fit in, and I don’t need to feel bad for letting her know it, right? Even if it wasn’t on purpose.

Well, anyway, I’ve found a bootleg of “Highway 61 Revisited” and I’m dying to have a listen. Write you again tomorrow, though I doubt anything interesting will happen here.

Love you always,

Finn

THE END (TBC)
Dear Tix,

Well, college started at full swing. It’s like I went from zero to sixty in one day. Tons of school work, so much reading, and it feels like every two days I need to turn in a paper. In fact, I’m writing you when I should be writing a Richard III paper. But fuck that, right? What does Richard know about trying to balance school with a crazy household full of crazy women (and I’m not even including myself this time!), and hiding secrets from a ton of new people, and also going to parties, and let’s not forget, sleeping from time to time…

I don’t know how Chloe does it. She seems to cram twice the activities I can into 24 hours. Like, I’m barely awake, and she’s already been on a run, or gone to Rounders training. She’s an excellent student by day, and still has time to date and go to the pub with us at night. She never turns in a paper late, and she never misses a party. Yes, our Chloe is a dancing-drinking-flirting party queen. How? Hooooowwww, Fatty? I’m getting winded just writing about it.

And Mum is all… oh, isn’t Chloe just fantastic? And I get the snide one liners, and then I’m expected to baby-sit Kitty at nights, since I’m not dating, am I?

I shouldn’t complain, though. I’m not in hospital, and I’m not cutting, so that’s a major improvement to six months ago. And I love Kitty so much. Really, spending time with her is total fun. I swear she’s the smartest kid in the UK, and she’s so funny, Tix! Who knew toddlers could have a sense of humour? I am now determined to start teaching her about proper music, because lately Mum has been trying to make her laugh by doing the Macarena. I cringe at the thought, poor Kitty can’t grow up thinking that kind of behaviour, that kind of music is normal.

So anyway, between Izzy liking the guy I told you about, and Chloe’s quest for popularity, I also spend a lot more time hanging with people I don’t really know. It’s very surprising to think about where I was last year compared to where I am now. If you’d’ve told me I’d have a group of (let’s call them) friends, that I’d get invited to pubs and parties and stuff, I’d have said that was crazy, you know? Yet, here I am.

I’ve learned that I can hold my beer with the best of them! Since that first horrible time, I’ve never gotten particularly hungover after a night with the group. And do you know what, Tix? When I’ve had one or two drinks, it becomes so much easier to not censor myself, to be as loud and as funny as I would be with actual friends. So I make them laugh a lot and that’s really nice, but I don’t know how much truth there is in my new social status. I have a feeling that most of them just tolerate me and Iz for Chop’s sake. Stacey Stringfellow definitely hates us; I know that for a fact. And Finn Nelson wishes that a ten-ton truck kills the both of us on the way to the pub. He thinks I can’t see when he sneers or rolls his eyes when one of us speaks, but I can. (Whatever, fuck him, he’s a total wanker.)

Some people are unexpectedly nice. Like there’s this boy Fergus, he often talks to Izzy about dancing (of all things!) because they’re both into that, and last time we went to the movies, me and him talked for a while about books, so that was nice. Also there’s a girl named Amy, she looks kinda hard and has a permanent “don’t fuck with me” expression, so I kinda stayed away, you know? But I guess there’s something about me that she likes, because she’s started to talk to me a bit, and one time this one guy spilled his chips on me, and she was like “Hey, watch it, fucker!”, so I didn’t have to engage. It was kinda cool, like I didn’t have to be on guard for a bit while I was with her.

And of course, Chop is just awesome. He is fast restoring my faith in the human race. We’re
having so much fun with that lad. He and Izzy are locked in some kind of hormone-induced staring contest, but nothing much else seems to be happening there. I know she’s shy, but he isn’t, so why doesn’t he bloody make a move already? He can’t be worried about rejection - she couldn’t be more obviously into him if she sat on his lap. I swear to God, I’ve never seen a person giggle so much in my life. There’s got to be a giggle barometer or something, x amount of giggling equals totally head over heels. It’s impossible that he doesn’t know. I may need to intervene there, Tix, work some matchmaking magic on that bubblehead.

Annnyyywwaaaay, Fatty, I think this letter got away from me and I’ve still got Richard III to deal with, so I’ll wrap it up. Tomorrow we’re going to Rutland, to this spot where all the older, cool kids always go to hang… and drink and fuck, I guess? Not sure. But I’m going tomorrow so I’ll let you know.

Hey, I just realize that “the older, cool kids” are now us! So weird.

Big love,
Rae

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“All ready?” Chloe asks as Rae comes down the stairs, her bag dangling from her shoulder, full to bursting.

“Yes! Let’s do Rutland!”

Chloe is in the kitchen, stuffing crisps and sandwiches into a colourful wicker bag. A beach bag, Rae thinks. Chloe is the type of girl who’d have a beach bag, even though there isn’t a beach anywhere near Stamford. All of a sudden, her old, tattered denim bag feels heavy and ugly against her side. And the food. She’d forgotten about the food. Fuck, why didn’t she have a proper breakfast?

While Chloe is busy, Rae grabs two slices of bread and stuffs a slice of processed orange cheese between them. She hastily shoves the impromptu sandwich into her mouth, almost choking as she tries to chew and swallow before Chloe notices this shameful display. When she sees her cousin starting to turn, she quickly opens the refrigerator door and bends to hide behind it.

“What are you doing?” Chloe asks, but before Rae can hmm something resembling an answer, there’s a loud and prolonged honking sound from outside.

“Fuck, it’s them!” Chloe jumps, and Rae looks over the top of the refrigerator door to see her perfect pony tail swinging fetchingly behind her. “Let’s go, come on!”

“Yeah, yep.” Rae nods, ducking back into the fridge, drinking milk directly from the carton, trying to help the dry bread-n-cheese combo go down faster.

“Come on, Rae!” Chloe says at the door, and Rae wipes her face for any evidence of this horrible moment in her life. What’s worse is she fears that it won’t actually matter. She’ll be starving in a couple of hours, and then she’s fucked.

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So, this is Rutland. She thought they would be closer to the water, so she could at least have a nice stroll on the water’s edge if she got bored. Instead they’re sitting around a bunch of half-toppled arches and loose bricks and patches of grass; quite nice for a sunny day out, but nothing to write home about, really. Blankets are spread around, food stuffs pulled from various bags and satchels and displayed all around, and the beer starts to flow; all within minutes of arriving.
Rae concentrates on the beer, to keep herself from thinking about the food. She’s spent the first twenty minutes observing the group, their interactions and manner. She’s studied how they laugh together, girls and boys alike, flirting or just teasing, and it all feels natural and unrehearsed rather than embarrassing or awkward. These people all know that they belong, that they always have. And they always will. They’ll always be beautiful and rich, their company sought after. Why should they try hard? Why should they worry, like her kind does? Life is as yummy and uncomplicated as the packed lunches their maids had prepared for them just this morning. Fat juicy grapes and gourmet sandwiches, the crusts cut off. If that isn’t a metaphor for privilege, she doesn’t know what is.

Rae sighs and tries to shift gears. No point in sitting here and judging them all, it only makes her irritable. She doesn’t really get the whole driving-for-miles-to-what-is-basically-another-county-just-to-lounge-about-and-drink-with-your-mates thing. Maybe it’s because she only has two and a half friends here, but it seems to her that they could do all this at home.

Oh, there she goes, being mean-spirited again… she better occupy her mind with something else. Reaching inside her bag, she pulls her book out. Trying to get comfortable on her blanket, she looks for the page where she left off, and then… she’s gone. She can’t hear them anymore, she doesn’t give a fuck about their privilege or demeanour she is transported into another place, a magical place. Well, Scotland.

“You brought a book to Rutland?” The high-pitched voice pierces her world and brings Rae sharply to the here and now. Lifting her head, she peers from behind her sunglasses at Stacey, standing in front of her, all blond and trim and perfect.

“Yeah, so?” Rae is preparing to defend her life choices, but another voice, Finn’s voice, jumps in before she has the chance.

“Why shouldn’t she bring a book? Fuck all to do here, anyway.” He sneers. Rae is shocked to discover that, while she had her nose in her book, he and a few other people have settled themselves right there by her side. Finn is sitting surprisingly close, on the neighbouring blanket in fact, writing something in a notebook.

Stacey, always concerned with getting in his good graces, quickly changes her tune. “No, I think it’s amazing, she’s so serious. We all came here to drink and have a good time, but Rae is just so… er, studious. She never stops reading!” She sends a supposedly-kind smile at Rae, then at Finn, all while arranging her short yellow skirt and looking for a way to gracefully sit in it.

Rae stares at her in wonderment. Where is this coming from? “I’m not always reading, obviously, Stacey.”

“Yeah, sometimes she’s writing!” Izzy pipes in. Her heart is in the right place, but it makes Rae stifle a groan. Some of the girls snicker quietly.

Finn Nelson ignores the group and asks, “So what’s the book about?” Then he does that thing… where people reach out and push your book up to see the cover with the title on it. Rae hates that. It’s such a rude invasion of her personal space.

Her voice comes out a little too harsh when she answers, “Murder”. He gives her a strange look, and she feels obliged to soften the moment, and adds, “and Scotland.”

He tilts his head, one eye closed against the sun, and smiles at her for the very first time since they met. “It’s not Macbeth, is it?”
She wants to answer with an emphatic No and go back to reading, but surprisingly she finds herself saying, “There you go, saying the name. Now we’re screwed.”

Finn Nelson chuckles and shoots back, “Would it help if I whistle?” She can’t stop a tiny smile from appearing. It is a very unnerving thing to find that she can have an amusing, and intelligent, exchange with this dickhead.

“I’ve read some of his books in The Culture series but not this one.” He points at the Iain Banks she’s still holding up, ready to return to at any second. Why is he talking to her? Is he seriously interested in books, of all things? What is she supposed to do with that? Just forget the fuck-awful things he’s said about her in the past and chat with him about sci-fi novels? It’s all she can do not to roll her eyes.

Lucky for her, she doesn’t need to work this conundrum out, because they are again the focus of the group’s attention when Chloe asks, “Ugh, are you guys done talking about fucking literature?”

“What’s it to ya?” Finn asks. See? Rae thinks. Still a rude prick.

“You’re boring,” Chloe exclaims. “I’m bored.”

“Read a book.” Finn suggests dryly, but he relents, and drops the conversation with Rae to go back to writing on his pad.

Rae sits there, eyes glued to the page, but unable to read a thing. She is so bloody confused by everything that’s happening. Why are all these people sitting next to her? Why is Finn talking to her? When had Chloe stopped jumping to agree with everything the guy says? It must have been about the time her gorgeous cousin met the “older man” she’s been talking about lately. It looks like Chloe’s lost romantic interest in Finn.

Rae admits to herself that she is relieved about that. Chloe’s flirty behaviour always embarrasses her, it’s so over the top and obvious. She much prefers Chloe when she’s, like, normal with guys. Like how she talks to Finn now, the way she would talk to Rae or Izzy, purposely pestering him into telling her what he’s doing, making the others laugh. After the fifth time she asks him what he’s writing, he reluctantly, without lifting his head from his work, informs the group that he’s writing a letter.

“A letter? Who to?” Stacey tries to read the letter upside-down, but Finn covers it. “Come on, fess up.” She giggles.

Reluctantly he looks at her. “To a friend, okay?”

“Like, who?”

“None of your business.”

“Boy or girl?”

“Piss off.”

Rae turns her head fast to catch Stacey’s reaction to this rudeness from a person who’s supposed to be a mate, but the girl is not fazed at all. She laughs as if she knows a secret and leans in again, reading. “Dear Lois –”

Finn snatches the paper away, his face red and eyes sharp on her. Rae sets her book down. This is getting really interesting now.
“So who’s Lois? Boy or girl?” Stacey laughs again, but there’s tension in the sound. Her careful plans to make Finn Nelson her love-slave by Halloween, thwarted by a mysterious girlfriend, perhaps?

Finn smiles at her, a wide, generous smile, which Rae suspects is false, but can’t deny, is simply beautiful. When he licks his lips and leans in to whisper in Stacey’s ear, the blond girl’s breath hitches. “Piss. Off.” He tells her, his voice soft and seductive, and every girl listening is probably clenching her thighs.

Everyone laughs, pretending that the tension is broken. Or maybe it is, and Rae just doesn’t get it, who can say? People here don’t act in ways that make sense to girls like her.

For example, ten minutes later, Stacey is stretching and looking around. “Who wants to come for a bit of a stroll? Finn? Rae?”

What? Her? Of all people? Is this a prank? While the blonde and some of her little girly friends get up and smooth skirts and brush imaginary grass off the back of their spotless trousers, Rae is trying to think of a way to get out of this, because there’s no way in hell that she’s taking a chuffin’ walk with these people. She looks at Izzy for help, but Izzy has her palm in Chop’s, and he’s pretending to read her fortune. Those two are gone, not even aware that other people exist in the world.

“Oh, Stace, you don’t want me to come with ya, anyways.” Finn says.

“What d’you mean?”

“Well, someone has to stay behind and appreciate your fine arses, right? I mean, that’s the reason you all are going for a stroll, yeah?”

Stacey and her friends sputter and pretend to be shocked at this. Rae cannot believe he’s just said that for real. He literally thinks he is the centre of the universe. She knows she shouldn’t draw any more attention to herself, but she can’t help it.

“It’s amazing how boys always think that whatever girls do is for their benefit.” She scoffs, rather pleased with herself, but it’s short lived. Her beautiful indignation is ruined by one of the girls, Rickie, saying, “Well, isn’t it?” with a laugh.

Rae is speechless. Feminism just got set back fifteen years.

“You go, Rae, put him in his place! What a shocking thing to say, Mr. Nelson!” Stacey laughs, cocking her head over her shoulder in Finn’s direction.

It’s even worse when they pretend to be offended with comments like that, when it’s dead obvious that they love it and they all think this is some sort of flirtation. In fact, Rae finds it all very misogynistic. She’s affronted by all these ridiculous games.

She sneers. “Unfortunately I believe he’s exactly in the place he wants to be.”

He looks at her in surprise. “What does that mean?”

Rae shrugs, “You know what you’ve said is disgusting but you don’t give a shit. You don’t exactly go out of your way to make people like you.”

“Well, they either like me or they don’t.” Finn pulls his neck in and raises his upper lip. She’s amazed once again at how abruptly he can go from completely fit to someone she can’t even stand to look at. “I am what I am. Why should I pretend to be anything for other people’s sake?”
“If you’re gonna choose to ignore your own faults and shortcomings by waving the ‘I am what I am’ flag, Popeye, at least acknowledge that it’s just another way to not give a shit about anyone but yourself”.

Her eyes are locked with his, and she doesn’t allow herself to even blink, even when his eyes turn cold. Especially when his eyes turn cold. She will win this if it’s the last thing she does. It feels like the entire county of Rutland has stopped breathing and is watching this match. They stare at each other for a long minute, and something shifts in Finn’s face, but she’s not sure what.

Stacey tries to lighten the mood by laughing, “Well, Finn is perfect, he has no flaws!”

The tension between them finally breaks as he turns to scoff at Stacey. Rae feels curiously lightheaded for a moment, before he speaks and her irritation rises once more. Stacey appears to have only made him angrier, and he snaps, “Of course I have flaws. Don’t be so fucking stupid.”

“Like, how you’re decidedly hateful to, oh, just, everyone?” Rae says sharply, offended even for Stacey.

“Or how you twist people words around against them?” He shoots back.

“Well, some people’s words don’t need my help, they’re twisted all on their own.”
She narrows her eyes at him, a vicious smile ticking up the corners of her lips. She can tell by the ugly red blotch colouring his neck that he knows that she’s referring to the night they met. She feels elated, victorious. She got him. She’s the queen of this day, and he’s her little bitch.

But then he gives her a tight lipped smile. “You know, it’s been said that my biggest flaw is that I’m a really harsh judge of character. But you know what, Rae?” He leans backwards on his arms and the way he drawls her name is like the biggest insult of all, worse than all the ugly words he’d used last time. “Usually I’m dead on.”

“Okay, guys, just leave it.” Chloe says, and Rae blinks for a moment as awareness returns to her. Her chest is tight, and she knows her face is probably bright red. She’s shamefully, painfully grateful for Chloe just then, because there is no doubt Rae’d just been rescued. Who knows where this conversation might’ve gone.

“I think I’ll go find some other place to read. Somewhere fucking quieter.” She mumbles, and gets up. She’s painfully aware of her size, how awkward and un-graceful her movements are, picking up her back-pack and book and walking away. It just feels like they’re all watching her. And laughing.

She fucking hates Finn Nelson.

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She likes to run her finger over the cases, likes the soft thuk thuk thuk as her skin skips over the crisp edges. It’s soothing. The whole place is soothing really, a respite for her senses after the estrogen fueled nightmare that is her house. It’s warm inside, a pleasant contrast to the sour-apple crispness of the autumn afternoon. Everywhere she turns, she’s surrounded by bright album artwork and graphic book jackets and moody VHS sleeves. Plus, the whole place has that record store smell; plastic wrap and dust and ink and magic. This is her place, this is where she belongs, and she sighs in contentment.

Okay, so she prefers the little indie shop over on Stirling, the one that sells primarily used CDs. That’s where she belongs, really, flicking through discs in the 2-for-5 bin in search of a hidden
gem. But a record store’s a record store, no matter how big or how corporate, right? And it’s only Tower that’ll special order imports, so here she is.

She’s just finishing up, after having spent a relaxing couple of hours browsing through the shelves. Sometimes she plays a game where she’s a millionaire, but she can only choose one item per rack to buy. Will it be Bronte, or Chaucer? Pulp, or the Ramones? Star Wars, or Titanic? It’s a silly thing, but it reinforces her own good taste, and anything’s better than listening to Chloe and her mum natter on. For someone so busy and so popular, Chloe sure is home a lot.

She can’t resist the sale bin, though her budget’s already tapped with Danny’s birthday present, the much anticipated import, and the fashion magazine Chloe’d just had to have.

“Well, if it isn’t Her Majesty, Rae Earl.” Finn’s voice sounds behind her, and she inhales deeply before turning around, needing an extra bit of fortitude if she’s to handle him without spoiling her fine afternoon.

“Alright, Finn?” She asks, with what she feels is an impressive amount of cheerfulness, considering. She sounds like she’s going to a funeral. The last thing she wants is fucking Finn Nelson here ruining what had promised to be a lovely day with his stupid face and his idiotic opinions.

“What’re you doing here?” He asks, and she glances around, wanting to roll her eyes at someone, share this ridiculous question with any passerby. She’s not exactly sure how to answer- what is anyone doing at a record store? Maybe he thinks she’s too poor to afford new CDs.

Rae shrugs and turns back around to the sale bin, slowly creeping down, hoping he’ll get the hint: she’s busy shopping, won’t he please bugger off? He doesn’t. It shouldn’t surprise her really, that’s the subtext of most of their conversations and he never gets the hint.

“I can’t believe there aren’t any decent record stores in this town.” He says, moving to stand beside her and sift through the discs. “It’s the Towers of the world that are ruining the music industry, inserting their corporate agendas and shit. Figures this is all you guys have.”

Rae opens her mouth to defend Stamford; it’s a shitty town, certainly, but it’s not without a decent music shop. They’re not savages. But an image flickers through her mind of him standing before her beloved 2-for-5 bin, running his fat baby fingers along the spines, picking up that much coveted Echo and the Bunnymen album before she can get it. So, she presses her lips together instead, saying little and looking haughty.

She crosses her arms, clutching her purchases against her chest, and moves across to the other side of the rack facing him. Finn’s eyes flicker up, catching the movement, and she tries not to squirm as he stares blankly at her chest for just a beat too long.

“Whatcha got there?” He asks, jerking his chin at the items clutched against the front of her t-shirt. Of course. Heaven forbid he should look at anyone for any reason other than to judge. She frowns, reluctant to surrender her purchases. Finn holds out a hand expectantly. “C’mon, give ‘em up. What’re you buying?”

She hands her stack across the bin into his clutches, fights rolling her eyes when he shoots her a smirk. Chloe’s magazine is on top and Finn holds it up, eyebrows raised, his customary sneer distorting his features.

“Didn’t take you for an Elle kind of girl.” He mocks, and she doesn’t bother fighting the eye roll anymore, though she knows she’s blushing too. Who would ever take her for a fashion magazine kind of girl? They’d have to be insane. She probably couldn’t wear a single thing gracing those
pages. “From Macbeth to Elle. You’ve come so far since last week.”

“Yeah, well, you don’t really have any idea what kind of girl I am, do ya?” She snaps to cover her embarrassment. He stares at her blankly for a while, too long once again. She doesn’t look away. It’s irritating, his constant passivity, him always standing around just looking without ever saying anything. He’s got a weirdly blank face that’s impossible to read, and Rae wonders once again if he actually has any thoughts or if he’s just got some kind of condition that makes his face do that. In either case, she doesn’t like it.

Eventually, he looks down at the stuff in his hands, and Rae smiles when she sees a faint blush colouring his skin, feeling like she’s regaining some ground in this weird tug of war they have going. He lingers over the import, hums under his breath, flips it over to study the track listings. Her grin grows; he’s impressed. He should be. Stamford would never have those two otherwise unreleased tracks improving its air if it wasn’t for her. She’s bringing the artistry and majesty of those two unheard Cure songs to their fair countryside. You’re welcome, plebeians of Lincolnshire.

After he’s studied it to his satisfaction, he flips the disc back over and pulls the VHS from behind the magazine. And just like that, he regains his arrogant composure. He holds it up and smirks at her.

“Terminator 2, really?” His voice is thick with disdain, so she rolls her eyes again.

“It’s for a friend. For his birthday.” She explains, snatching the movie back from him. She winces internally, scolding herself for revealing even that. He deserves no explanations from her, and by grabbing it like that she made it look like she was embarrassed. She’s not. She couldn’t care less how stupid he thinks she is. She should have just left it at the eyeroll.

“Sure it is.” He laughs. Rae narrows her eyes at him, infusing her gaze with as much disdain as she can. “I can’t believe you’d watch that shit.”

“Oh, you’ve seen it then?” She asks with feigned sweetness, blinking at him.

“Ugh, no. Why would I watch that? Action movies are so empty and pointless and stupid. You might as well be watching your brain cells die, cause that’s what’s really happening when you watch this shit.”

“Right.” Rae pulls a face, nods slowly. “Because passing judgment on something you’ve never seen is a great sign of intellect.”

She watches as his mouth opens and then shuts without anything emerging. She raises her eyebrows, makes sure her face shows that she’s waiting for his retort. He crosses an arm over his chest, still holding on to her magazine and CD and glances around. She’s not sure if he’s looking for someone else to back him up like she did, or if he’s just buying time as he scrambles for something to say.

“Whatever.” He pulls his head back into his neck, making his face appear all squishy and wrinkly like a turtle. “I don’t need to see it to know it’s shit. It’s made for the masses, pop culture drivel for the idiots to consume.”

He brings something out in her that she doesn’t like, makes her feel like a cat that’s got its hackles raised, ready to claw his face off. It’s not all bad; he pretty much deserves to get hissed at. He’s got no idea what he’s talking about, he’s all arrogance and no substance. Somebody needs to knock him off that high horse he rode into town.
“So what?” She asks forcefully, and his eyes get wide. “So’s Champagne Supernova. So’s everything Oasis has ever written. It’s pop for the masses, but it doesn’t make it ‘drivel’. It still has a beautiful truth to it, and that shines through, and that’s why everyone fucking loves it. And if they’re too high-and-mighty to like it, well I should hope they would at least listen to it before they dismiss it.”

Finn takes a step back, the ugly flush he’s been wearing a lot lately appearing once more. He gapes, actually gapes like in the books, and it takes everything she has not to grin victoriously and run around doing the Rocky dance. Mad, fat, broke Rae Earl has officially taken Finn Nelson down a peg. She holds her face as still as possible so that he can capture this moment in his head for next time he thinks he’s better than her.

She holds out her hand, smugness radiating from every pore. Damn, it feels good to best him. Almost good enough to make knowing him worthwhile. He shakes his head, obviously flustered and uncomprehending. She raises her eyebrows and nods towards the stuff in his hands, which he hands over with almost as much reluctance as she had. Rae makes a face at him, not a smile really, but a curving of her lips like the Sphinx or the Mona Lisa. Classic.

She starts towards the register, but his voice sounds before she’s even made it away from the sale table. “Are you leaving?”

Rae frowns. This is her town, her record store; she doesn’t have to give any ground to him. She wants to say no purely out of defiance. But then she might get stuck here talking to him. Or not talking, as it were. Battling.

It’s with a surge of hard-won confidence that she allows a reply to drip from her lips. “Yeah, unless you’ve got some more scintillating advice about media choices you’d like to share.”

Finn Nelson can do nothing but frown.

Rae spins on her heel and saunters towards the register. It feels like he’s watching, but she doesn’t look back to check.

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She’s sick of the sound of her own voice. There’s so much hanging out all the time, so much sitting around and chatting and drinking and laughing and drinking. It’s fun, for the most part, but she’s not used to the intensity of it, even after all these weeks. She’s used to solitude, to a quiet house and the safety of her own roomy head. Lately it feels like her head is absolutely full up with the sound of her own chatter.

So she decides to avoid the gang today. There’s a little coffee shop a few streets away from all their normal hang outs. She’d walked passed it by accident one day on her way home from school, and she’d been entranced by the perfect television coffee shop atmosphere that had poured out the front door with the wave of coffee scented air. This seems like the ideal place to disappear from the world for a bit, and it’s with an anticipation of quiet pleasure that she pulls open the glass fronted door.

The scent is the first thing she takes in, of course. The bitterness of the coffee beans roasting, the tantalizing sweetness of whipped cream and caramel softening it, overlaid with the vanilla scent of freshly baked cookies. She inhales deeply. There’s no one around she knows, so she might even treat herself to one of those mystery cookies.

The main wall is brick in a limited rainbow of hues, rusty reds and browns and the occasional mossy green. There’s a huge wooden bookshelf crammed full of tatty paperbacks and stacks of
well worn board games, and Rae runs her fingers over a battered velvet chair as she moves the room towards the counter. The café is all squashy chairs and tiny tables with low lights overhead, cozy and warm and dim. It’s perfect.

She orders a latte, though she’s not exactly sure what a latte is in the grand coffee world. It just seems sophisticated, and she feels like she should be sophisticated here. The blonde behind the counter does her best to make Rae feels stupid, rolling her heavily lined eyes and frowning. Rae wants to tell her, to lean across the counter and whisper conspiratorially, ‘I don’t need you to make me feel daft, I do just fine on my own, thanks.’ But she chooses to brush it off instead. Today she’s going to be a version of herself that’s fine being who she is. It’s just her today, and she doesn’t have to pretend anything. She can just be.

She hands over some notes and smiles grimly at the girl. She’s got an air of superiority about her, a tilting of her head maybe, that makes Rae think about Stacey. She fiddles with her sleeves as she slides into a little table by the window. It’s gray outside today, just on the verge of rainy, and it makes the transition into the memory that much easier, like the sky is a grey slate just ready for unpleasant recollections to replay over it.

She’d been coming around the corner from the loo, cheerful and buzzy after a couple of pints. She’d had her head down, smiling at the thought of resuming her conversation with Fergus about a show they’d both watched last week.

“So, Finn, you still sticking up for that Rae girl, even after all her blathering?” Stacey’s voice seems to creep around the corner like one of those smoke trails from cartoons. Rae imagines it’d be acid green as it curled up into her throat and choked her. “I’d think her big mouth might cancel out, what did you call them, her ‘pretty’ eyes?”

The gaggle of Stacey’s hangers on had all tittered, thrilled as usual with Stacey’s vitriol. Rae’d felt hot from head to toe, burning with embarrassment and anger and shame. She’d nearly missed Finn’s caustic reply.

“God, don’t you ever shut up, Stacey?”

She hadn’t stuck around to see what’d happened after that, to watch everyone shoot her wide-eyed mocking glances for the rest of the night. Fortunately, she’d had her bag and been able to duck out the back.

Rae frowns down at the tabletop, tracing the mosaic tiles with a fingertip, trying to shake herself out of the unpleasant thoughts. Who gives a shit about Stacey, anyway? It’s not a secret that she thinks Rae’s trash, so it shouldn’t surprise her that she’s going around saying it. Maybe there’s more than one reason she’s avoiding the gang today.

From behind the counter, the hiss of the steamer draws her attention and she glances up to find an incredibly cute boy looking back at her with a smile on his face. She does her best to surreptitiously look around. He can’t be giving her that playful smirk, can he? But there’s no one nearby; the few people who are actually in the café are sitting all the way on the other side. She’d chosen this table for both its solitude and its view. He’s definitely looking at her.

She shoots him a questioning smile, and he cocks his head and widens his grin until she can see all of his perfect teeth. God, he’s pretty. She has to look back down at the table, has to share her bewilderment with something, even if it is inanimate. She glances back up as casually as she can; he’s watching her as he goes about pushing levers and pouring liquids. She presses a hand to her hot cheek, pulls her bag into her lap and fishes in it for her Discman or her book, anything to prevent her from doing what she really wants to do, which is drool over this sexy lad who seems to be making eyes at her.
She manages not to look until she gets herself situated; music playing in her ears and the spine of her book cracked open on the table in front of her. She allows herself a quick glance as a reward for playing it so cool, but the guy isn’t behind the counter anymore. She heaves a sigh and shakes her head.

The table rocks as a decidedly male body slides into the seat across from her.

“One latte, and one giant cookie.” He announces, and Rae can feel the heat overtake her face again as her eyes leave the text and slide slowly up to meet his. He pushes back his glasses with a forefinger and smiles broadly at her.

“Oh, uh, I didn’t order that.” Rae stammers, jerking her head towards the plate. She’d balked under the scrutiny of the mean barista and couldn’t even consider ordering one, despite the heavenly smell.

He shrugs, casually. Effortlessly. She holds back a sigh. What it must be like to not have to try so hard all the time? “It’s on me. You look like you deserve something sweet.”

For a long moment, Rae just sits there staring at him, utterly unable to decipher what he means. Is he making a fat joke? She’s so big that he has to bring her free cookies so that she doesn’t go on some kind of rampage and tear apart the whole coffee shop?

He seems to sense her confusion, laughing as he looks down at his hands on the tabletop. “Cause you look like you’re sweet.” He mumbles around an irrepressible smile.

Rae blinks. Holy shit. Is this really happening? He’s flirting with her. She glances down at his hands, at the cracked tile underneath his thumb, at her latte. There’s a heart made out of the foam. Holy fucking shit.

She must have hit her head or something, and now she’s having a very elaborate, coffee-scented dream. “I’m Archie.” He grins, and holds a hand out over the table. Rae places her palm against his and they both laugh as they shake awkwardly. Actually, Rae thinks she might be giggling. She never giggles. This is definitely a dream, so she’s just going to go with it.

“Rae.”

“What’re you listening to, Rae?” Archie reaches across the table and fingers the foam of her earphone where it rests around her neck. She can’t tell if it’s wishful thinking, but his fingers seem to linger in her hair just a moment too long.

“Oh…” She scrambles for a second, her mind a complete blank. She’d just put the CD in less than a minute ago, she should be able to remember what it is.

He shakes his head at her, his grin widening. And then… then he scoots his chair until it’s sitting right next to hers, until the side of his thigh is just millimetres away from touching hers. He turns his head to glance up at her, a questioning look on his face. She’s got no idea what he’s asking but she nods anyway.

Archie reaches over her to press a button on her Discman. His arm brushes against hers as he moves, and a flush makes its way through her body. She can smell his cologne, see the texture of the stubble that is just starting to shade his jaw. She’s SO aware of his body, of her body, of the individual molecules that make up the space between them. The rather small space between them.

Is it possible to die just from someone’s proximity? She might be about to find out.
After a few seconds of humming, music starts to pour out from the tinny speakers around her neck. Archie leans in close to listen, really close. “Ah.” He hums, and a thrill runs down Rae’s spine. “I love Weezer. This is a great album.”

“Yeah.” Rae says, finally feeling like she’s getting back on solid ground. She can talk about music, no matter how attractive he is or how close he sits. She’s good with music. “I think it’s way better than the first one. Less mainstream, less poppy, you know?”

Archie nods, then reaches over her again to skip through the disc, all the way to the last track. “This one’s my favourite.” He says, and hums along just a bit as the strains of *Butterfly* begin to filter around their heads. She loves this song, has always been able to feel it coursing through her, but as the low vibrations of his humming start to shift around them, she can feel it in an entirely new way. “I play this one a lot when I do open mic nights.”

“You what?” She can feel herself gaping stupidly, but did he really just say what she thought he did? He plays Weezer at open mic nights? Like, he holds a guitar against his sexy body and actually plays Weezer? It can’t be true. Cause if it is… gush.

Archie chuckles at her expression, and normally she’d be humiliated to have such a fit lad laughing at her, but this time it just makes her feel… warm. Included in some kind of private joke, like there is actually something between the two of them.

“Oh, I play guitar sometimes, here and there.” He shrugs, like it’s nothing. It’s EVERYTHING. “I’m gonna play here in a bit, actually.”

“Seriously? I didn’t even know they did that here!” How could she have missed the chance to drool over sexy musician-types right here in Stamford? Is this a thing that’s been going all on this time without her knowing about it? “What are you gonna play? Do you sing as well, then?”

She’s basically fawning all over him. She’d probably be embarrassed if she wasn’t so turned on. A sexy musician who likes Weezer, sitting right next to her, practically on top of her, flirting with her. The world must have tilted on its axis or something.

Archie lifts a shoulder and gives her a lopsided smile, then leans in impossibly closer, close enough for her to feel the dampness of his breath against her ear as he whispers, “Well, that’s a secret I’m afraid.” He moves back to look at her with lifted eyebrows, and she thinks once again that she might not survive this conversation. He leans in again, and his words push strands of her hair over her shoulder. “If I told you, I might have to do something to you. Something very bad.”

Rae shivers as a frisson of desire slinks through her. “Kill me?” She barely chokes it out, her throat is suddenly very tight.

Archie cocks his head at her, bites his lip through his smirk. He studies her intently for a moment, then shrugs. Rae feels her stomach drop, and it’s thrilling as well as unsettling. He is shamelessly flirting with her. This tyrannosaurus of sexiness is actually sitting here at her table bloody flirting with her. She wishes she knew what her face was doing, wishes for the first time ever that there was a mirror nearby. She’s probably literally slackjawed like some idiot, and she knows she’s blushing. She shakes herself internally - this boy, for whatever inexplicable reason, is flirting with her, and she’ll be damned if she’s not gonna flirt back. She lets a loose grin overtake her face, ducks her head ever so slightly to look up at him from under her lashes. That’s how they do it on TV, right?

Archie chuckles a bit, and it feels like slow motion as he reaches out his hand and rests it on her upper arm. “So, do you have any plans this Saturday?”
She’s got a date. An actual date with an actual boy. And not like a gross boy, a really really fit boy. One who is currently perched on a stool in a corner of the café, playing the guitar and crooning. It’s an absolute miracle that she’s not a puddle.

Archie’d flirted only a few moments longer before the nasty blonde had called him over to make more drinks. Rae’d scrawled her number on a scrap of paper torn from her notebook and pressed it into his hand. He’d held it to his chest like it was some kind of prize, and she’d giggled again. Apparently she’s a secret giggler, and it just had to be unlocked by a cute boy showing interest in her.

She sips her latte as she watches him play. She doesn’t really like the coffee, if she’s honest. It’s a little bit bland, more bitter than she likes, and it’d gone cold while they were flirting. She just likes to repeat it to herself: she’d been sitting here flirting for long enough for her coffee to get cold. Rae Earl, champion flirter.

She drinks it anyways, just for something to do with her hands, to keep them from shaking with her adrenaline rush. She thinks she’s doing an okay job of playing it cool, of keeping her internal giddiness from seeping out for everyone to see. The coffee helps with that too, no one can see her manic grinning if she keeps the mug at her lips.

She’d picked up her book for a bit after he’d gone back to the counter, but it was mostly just pretense. What is it lately with all these boys blocking the words from sinking in? At least this time the distraction is infinitely better than it was with Finn Nelson. She’d watched Archie moving behind the counter, his wiry body quick and graceful. Hopefully he hadn’t spotted her peeking from over the top of her book.

Though, really, who holds their book that unnaturally high?

As soon as the rush had died down a bit and all the patrons had settled around tables and into comfy chairs, Archie’d moved out from behind the counter and pulled his apron off. He’d shot her a quick grin and a nod as he stood on a stepstool and adjusted one of the tin lights overhead. He’d disappeared behind a door and emerged with an ancient stool and a glossy guitar, settling himself down under the light. Rae’d been unable to do anything but bite her lip in anticipation.

Fucking hell, he’s sexy up there. His eyes squeeze shut when he sings, and an answering squeeze happens low in her belly. When he opens his eyes, they scan around and meet those of each person in the room. There’s the sense of a collective sigh, of a dozen girls all turning to mush as he strums through chords. Eventually his eyes meet Rae’s, and she grins into her latte as his lips curl up at her.

So, of course, that’s when a pounding sounds on the glass right next to her.

She’s startled, and her elbow slips underneath her, causing the coffee to slosh out onto her hands. She glances up to see Izzy’s grinning face through the window, hand waving frantically. Rae sighs. She loves Izzy, is always happy to see her, but… She looks back towards Archie’s squinted eyes and sexy fingers moving over the strings.

Izzy’s in the café and sitting across from her before Rae has time to properly lament the demise of her solitary afternoon of lusting.

“Hiya!” Izzy beams, and Rae can’t help but smile back. “What’re you doing here? It’s the Swan on Tuesdays, remember?”
“Yeah, I just…”

There’s a squeaking sound on the glass, and Rae turns to find Chop blowing out his cheeks against the window, sliding his mouth along with a wet squeal. Rae wrinkles her nose, but Izzy’s laugh elicits a wide grin from Chop.

He’s borrowing a chair from another table in less than a minute. “Whatcha doing here, baby girl? You should be with us, having pints and pissing all over Finn’s jukebox choices!”

“Hey Chopper.” Rae concedes, grimacing as she watches him break off a piece of her Archie cookie and shove it into his mouth. She wants to cry. But hey, at least someone’s eating it.

With Chop and Izzy crowding the tiny table, she has to strain to see Archie across the café. She’s craning her neck to catch another glimpse, when a familiar and decidedly unwelcome face enters her vision. She doesn’t bother to hold in her groan.

Finn stands next to the table, of course. The great Finn Nelson probably never sits down in cafes, probably only takes his fancy beverages to go. He glances around with a sour expression, always ready to find something to feel superior about. It’s probably that the chairs aren’t made of fine leather, and the tables aren’t oak or something.

“What are we doing in here?” He asks, and Rae tilts her head back to roll her eyes at the ceiling, blowing out a huge breath. At least Archie’s only strumming at the moment, and she doesn’t have to suffer the indignity of Finn’s voice over Archie’s singing.

“I was just having a cup of coffee.” She says, and there’s more than just a hint of irritation colouring her tone. “I’ve no idea what you lot are doing.”

Finn frowns down at her, then sits on the edge of a big coffee table next to them. Rae sighs heavily as Chop offers him a piece of her cookie. It’s like he can sense happiness from miles away and has to show up to spoil it. Archie starts singing again, and if she hadn’t been looking at Finn, she would have missed the flash of emotion that crossed his face just then. She can’t really put a name to what it is, but it sure doesn’t look good.

Finn gets stiffer, which she didn’t know was possible, and he turns his head in slow motion until he can see Archie over his shoulder. He grunts and when he turns back around, he’s wearing a scowl significantly worse than any she’s ever seen on him before, and the boy has quite a varied collection of scowls.

“What the fuck is he doing here?” Finn grumbles to Chop, who turns his whole body around in his seat to gape. Rae winces. She’d been doing so well on her own, and here comes the peanut gallery to make a spectacle. She’s going to have to leave with them just so they don’t ruin everything. So much for her quiet afternoon.

“Who?” Chop asks, glancing around the shop.

“The twat murdering this bloody song, that’s who. It’s Archie.”

“Archie Archie?” Chop asks, and Rae watches as the pair exchange a loaded look. Chop’s chin tilts down, and Finn nods with a grimace. They stare at each other in silent communication for a bit, before Finn turns and glances quickly at Rae. She can’t help but be affronted by his expression. It’s basically as far as you can get from Archie’s easy smiles. But before she can shoot back a grimace or a sharp retort, Finn’s risen to his feet in a single, jerky movement.

“Look, I can’t even…” Finn slices his hand through the air. “I’m just gonna go.” And then he stalks out the door.
Chop looks after him for a second, then gives Izzy an apologetic smile and a kiss on the cheek before darting out after his mate. “Finn, wait up!” They hear him call around the closing door.

Rae watches the boys retreating backs, baffled by the abrupt behaviour. “What was that about?”

Izzy’s got a huge smile on her face, her fingers pressed to the spot that Chop has just kissed. She shakes her head and replies dreamily, “I’ve got no idea.”

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Dear Nan,

Sorry for not writing a lot. Things are kinda busy since college started full swing. I’m sure you’d be happy to learn that for such a nothing, touristy town, they really take the education crap seriously. Besides that, it’s the usual. People go everywhere in groups, it’s kind of strange I think. Does no one want to do anything by themselves, ever? I thought about it and came to the conclusion that they’re all working on their social status, and that’s not something you can do without, you know, society around you.

Dad said I should get used to being back here, because we are not going back to London, period. I don’t mind telling you I did have a bit of hope still in me that we’ll be back to civilization soon. But that’s what he decided and I don’t want to upset him. As we know, this has been a terrible year for the Nelsons. So anyway, in an attempt to be a good son, I did what you told me that time, and started going for long walks around the town, just to get to know it again and maybe find some cool places. I’m happy to report that I’m writing you from a bench in the park where I’ve been spending some time lately. I even met a bunch of lads and they let me play footie with them one time, and said I’m welcomed to come back. It was really fun and good for stress, especially because they didn’t seem to want to become mates or start going everywhere with me in a group… heh. We just played for an hour, shook hands, goodbye. Refreshing, really.

I also found those gardens Dad was always raving about, and they really are nice and peaceful, so I went there a couple of times to read. And I combed the area looking for a decent music shop, but there’s nothing. They have two, count them – two – Tower Records shops, one at each side of the high street, but nothing like me and pops used to visit, where the people behind the counter really know their stuff.

When I was there I ran into Rae, and we argued again. I think. Sometimes it’s hard to tell with her, because we could have a perfectly normal conversation but she acts like everything I say is offensive. Like, if I say that girls can’t be just about shopping and manicures, and they should have more substance, and, like, read or have hobbies – that’s a compliment to her, since she’s sitting there with a book! But no, she starts on me immediately, saying I have high standards that no girl could match. Which is crap, as we know. If that were true I’d never date anyone, and I’ve been on lots of dates, right?

I don’t even know why I let her bother me, but she just does. It’s the way she talks about things, as if there’s only one way to see them – the Rae way. In the shop we got into an argument (maybe) about an American action movie she was buying "as a gift" to “a friend”.

See? It doesn’t take much to get her going. I think she seriously doesn’t like me, but that’s okay ‘cause I’m not too crazy about her either.

It’s just that we always have to hang together, since Chop’s full time job nowadays is to charm the pants off of Izzy, and Izzy and Rae are a package. I wonder if they’ll take her on dates! Ha! Or
they’ll need to find her a date so they can double. They could call the imaginary guy she was buying the gift for. He could be real, I guess, could be her boyfriend or something.

I know when I first told you about her I was saying things like, you know, like who the hell would even date a girl like that, right, but the more I know her I can see why someone would find stuff about her to… like, I suppose. I mean, she’s annoying and a loud mouth with too many opinions, but at least she has opinions, you know? And she’s not bad looking or nothing, her eyes are very, I don’t know. Striking, maybe? It’s hard to tell with her terrible personality.

I’m only telling you all of this so you can see how much I’m growing, as a person, Nan!

Anyway, a bit of sun has come out so I’m going to try to do some reading on the grass before it disappears. I’ve started this new book, it’s about Scotland and murder – you would love it :)

Love you always,
Finn

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Nan,

You won’t believe who I just saw. Fucking Archie is in town! I’m sorry for the language, I’m sorry, but you know that guy drives me crazy, and he drove you crazy as well, so I know you know what I mean. What is he even doing back? Is he following us, just showing up wherever we go? Just showing up, all charming and playing his bloody guitar, as if nothing happened. The worst thing is, as far as that self-centered bastard is concerned, nothing did!

What should I do about this, Nan? Do I have some kind of duty to tell people about him? To warn the local female population or something? It went so bad last time… I think it’s best I avoid him completely. There’s no reason we should be in the same company again, I can just avoid the place where he works, right?

Right. I don’t owe anyone anything. It’s not on me if he leads another girl on.

Okay, so… good.

Love you always,
Finn

(To Be Continued…)
Chapter 3

Dear Tix,

There’s been so much going on since I wrote you last, I don’t even know where to start.

Okay, that’s a lie, I know EXACTLY where to start! So I hope you’re sitting down on something extra fluffy when I tell you that… I HAVE BEEN DATING SOMEONE!

I know, right???

Technically we’ve only been on two dates, but we did meet at a cafe so I’m counting that as a third. Three dates is considered “dating”, I have that on good authority, i.e. Chloe.

Not only am I, Rachel Earl, dating… but he’s not even a lowlife or a fatty chaser or any of those guys I could maybe see myself ending up with. Tix, his name is ARCHIE and he is A GOD AMONG MEN! He is so cute and lovely, and he totally hit on me in public. He plays guitar and sings (nice voice - excellent music choices) and everything. When we were on our dates (squee!) everyone wanted to talk to him. He’s like a magnet. I really like that about him, that he gets along with anyone, fits in everywhere. Unlike some people who don’t even bother trying, and they just sit there and sulk and ruin it for everyone else.

Gosh, what else can I tell you about my boyfriend (OMG I totally just called him my boyfriend! Ha! He’s not, though. It’s all very, like, new, you know? Like, we have to figure out what this is, where we’re going. You know.)

Oh, I forgot the most important bit! WE MADE OUT FOR HOURS AND HOURS AND HOURS!!

Okay, so, that’s not accurate. But he totally snogged me on our very first date! Archie ‘Sex-on-Legs’ Taylor leaned over towards Rachel Earl, Blob Girl, and planted one! And it wasn’t like secretly, in the dark of a movie theatre or when we were locked in a room somewhere. He came at me right as a group of lads from second year were passing, and didn’t even care that they were cat-calling and saying things about him! And I didn’t either, ‘cause, well, I was concentrating on the kiss. My first kiss from a real live boy. It was nothing like kissing your hand, or a silly Damon poster. It was amazing! A little wet… there was unexpected tongue, and just when I was getting into it, figuring out what I could contribute, he pulled back, but yeah, really nice. I mean, the most important thing is I got kissed, right? Hooray me! I’m not going to be a Mrs. Dewhurst: The Untouched! Fatty, you are the only person I can tell how fucking relieved I feel right now. That a boy, no - a man - like Archie would willingly kiss me and not at gun point… Thank you, baby Jesus.

There are also other benefits to this new situation, other than the obvious. For one, Mum is over the freakin’ moon, Tix. Seriously, it’s embarrassing how chuffed she is about this. I was planning to tell her as little as possible about Archie, just enough to allow me to leave the house and stay out later than usual, or get money to go shopping for a nice date-outfit (which I’m leaving in a few minutes to attempt), nothing more whatsoever. But of course, Chloe had to open her big mouth and spill all the beans at dinner time. Should have seen them two, they were screeching and clapping like a couple of loons. Scared the baby. Why they’re so fucking invested, I can’t imagine. But boy, do they have opinions.

Everyone does.
Seems like every person in Stamford wanted to talk to me about Archie at some point this week. First my Mum and Chloe went on and on about how I’m finally normal (and I believe Linda is also relieved to know I’m not a lesbian. Me. If only she knew how much of my time upstairs is dedicated to pervy heterosexual thoughts… anyway). Then she actually told Karim about it on his Weekly Friday Night Phone Call, and he asked to talk to me, and gave me what I assume is a very lovely speech, saying he is happy that I found amour, and that if Archie tries anything he will kill him with a machete. Not sure about either of those messages, naturally, as his blend of Arabic and French is all Greek to me, hee hee.

Then, Finn Nelson takes me aside at the pub to tell me he’d heard that I’d gone out with Archie and that he doesn’t think it’s such a good idea. OH REALLY, MR. NELSON?? Are you my long lost dad or something? Don’t know where that came from, or why he thinks we are two people who talk to each other about such things. I mean, do I volunteer my thoughts and theories about his love life? No. Because that’s gross. The whole conversation was a huge What-The-Fuck moment, like most of my moments with the guy, come to think of it.

But whatever, right? Nothing, not my crazy Mum, not blabbermouth Chloe, and especially not Finn ”I’ve Got an Opinion About Everything” Nelson can get me down right now. All I have to do is think about Archie, about how he chatted me up right there, in front of God and everyone, like I was a girl, just a normal girl, who gets chatted up. Because there’s nothing wrong with her. I only have to think about those moments, about that giant cookie, and I feel so good I could cry.

I know you will understand this, Fatty. You’re the only one who would.

Gosh… I got a little teary eyed there… ridiculous, really. I’ll pretend you’re here with me and that you’re giving me a Tixie hug right now, and it’ll go away.

There, all better.

I miss you like crazy. Thank god for our letters.

Love you,

Rae

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What a beautiful day it is in Stamford. Not too cold, sky not completely grey and drizzling… she can work with that. She is practically bouncing on the sidewalk, and has to remind herself to calm the fuck down. But she’s so happy. For her, she’s something close to blissful. She’s got a twenty pound note clutched firmly in her hand; a rare treat from her mum, for the specific purpose of buying a new outfit.

Linda wanted to go with her, and Chloe volunteered to come as well; the both of them not too subtly suggesting that, left to her own devices, Rae would probably get some baggy cargo pants from the salvation army store and spend the rest on records. That was a little too close to the truth, so Rae made up her mind to find something decent, as girly-without-being-puke-inducing as she can manage. On her own. Which is why she’d waited until they were both busy taking one of the Cosmo quizzes (“Do you know how to keep your man happy”) to sneak out of the house.

And here she is, practically skipping her way to a shop she has high hopes for. This one time, she found a red top there that was totally her size and looked pretty nice on her, but didn’t have the money at the time. That was last year, so it’s not like she expects to still find that same top. But she figures that a store that would stock her size once might have more surprises. She hopes. Because if not, she is pretty screwed.
It’s not like she could go into any store there and just look for something she likes. She stops in front of a window and looks at the mannequins in disgust (well, really envy more than anything). Not all of it is to her liking, but maybe she could have found something, if she went through the hangers. But shops like this never carry anything bigger than size bloody ten. Never. She knows this, every girl who isn’t proportioned like a Stacy or a Chloe knows this.

When they were really young, Izzy and Rae had this game they used to play, called “Would You Wear It”. They used to stand in front of a shop window, point at the different garments and comment. “No. No. No way. Wouldn’t touch it if they paid me. Yuck. NO!” And they would giggle and laugh and run to find a new display to mock.

*God, Rae thinks now. Was I really ever that young? That naïve? Didn’t I know it’s not my choice? It’s never my choice. She looks glumly at a purple strapless dress with a slit down the side.*

“Oh, what have we got here! Jabba’s gone shopping!”

Rae closes her eyes. She doesn’t need to turn around to know what’s going on behind her. When she opens her eyes, though, she can see them reflected in the shop window. Oh God. Oh no. She was having such a lovely day…

“What’ya doing there, fatso? Looking for something to make you look fuckable? Did ya try the tent shop?”

“This is fucking pathetic, even for you, Jabba!”

She feels the panic rising, she wants to run but she can’t even turn.

“You’re not planning on buying that, are ya, fatso? Noooo! Don’t do it!”

“Nooooooo!” they all chime in, laughing like hyenas. *No. No. No way. Wouldn’t touch it if they paid me. Yuck. NO!* goes round and round in her head. “Don’t do it, Jabba!”

The panic turns in her stomach. And then, it turns into something else. Why is the choice never hers? What gives the rest of the world the right to decide so many things about her? If she’s having a lovely day, if she’s finally dating a lovely guy, fuck, if she wants to fantasize about a fuckable dress - who are these wankers to tell her not to?!

One of them, probably encouraged by her total lack of a response, has come closer than they’ve ever dared, he’s right behind her and she can see his sneering face in the window. If he knew, if he knew how much anger is building inside her right now, he would run the fuck away. But he doesn’t see it in her eyes, not in her clenched fists. “Ya got it all wrong, Uggo! You got to cover it up, not show more of it! Whatever you got under your fuck-ugly clothes, cover it all up, for fuck sake!” and he laughs in her ear. He’s positively cracking up at this.

Rae turns.

*Enough of that, she thinks. I know what I’m worth. You may not know, but I know. Her heart is racing, and she thinks it may be with elation rather than fear, for the very first time. She is Wonder Woman. She is bloody Xena, Warrior Princess. She is so powerful right now that she’s about to choke on it. It fills her head, her chest, her everything. Enough of that, forever. Whatever it takes, she thinks, her fist rising, she’s ending it now.*

The git’s face turns to putty in front of her eyes, as the fist connects with his cheek, his nose. Blood splatters, she can feel it on her face. The whole thing is surreal. She looks down at her
fist. Did I do that?

“Why don’t you piss the fuck off, you snotty little shite? Fuck off outta here or I swear to god, next time I see ya, it’ll be your bollocks, not your ugly face!”

“Jesus!” the boy whimpers. What’s his name? She thinks dumbly, watching the blood spurt out of his nose. “Jesus, I’m sorry!”

“Don’t say it to me, fucker, say it to HER!” And he jerks the collar of the kid’s shirt, as if presenting him to Rae.

He. Him.

Fucking Finn Nelson.

Fucking Finn Nelson, standing there, watching her tormentors scatter away on their bikes like pigeons. His chest is heaving, and when he turns to her, his eyes are blazing with anger and violence and more things, things she doesn’t know how to read.

“You alright? They didn’t hurt ya, did they?”

She’s still in a haze, maybe. Everything feels weird. She’s still got all her rage twisting inside her, impotent, with nowhere to put it.

Her eyes zoom in on his.

“Are you fucking INSANE?” she screams.

Finn is taken aback. Literally, he takes a surprised step back. So she takes a step forward. It only makes sense. “What the hell did you do to that boy?!”

“I - What? He has no right to talk to you - you can’t let people talk to you like that!”

They are standing face to face now, and Rae takes great pleasure in the few inches difference in their heights, the one that makes him look up at her while they sneer at each other.

“Oh, there you go again! It has been two days since you last told me what I can and can’t do, I was feeling so helpless without Finn Nelson informing me of the right path!”

“I was trying’ to HELP you, you insane cow! Can’t you tell when someone is coming to your fucking defense?”

“Who asked you to? Did you hear me call out ‘oh, Finn, save me!’?” She raises a fist, still clenched. “I had it covered, all right? I was doing fine - ”

“Oh yeah?, you were standing there like a fucking statue -”

“I was getting ready to act!” she screams at him, and yes, she can hear herself, how lame she sounds, how shrill. But she can’t stop. “This one was mine. MINE! I was - I had it - sorted!”

He ruined it. He killed her moment. She was ready, finally ready, to take a stand, to make it all stop. If she had done this one thing, this one small thing… she knows it’s dumb but she can’t help thinking that, had she stood up to those wankers, finally said something, hit someone, threatened someone, that some spell might have been broken. And then her life, her real life, the life she’s always deserved, could finally start. She’d finally stand strong, bathing in sunlight.

But here comes Finn Nelson, who couldn’t possibly begin to understand her world, keeping her
down, holding her under water, to struggle and suffocate with the rest of the lowlifes. No choice. No say. No control over her own life.

The fight goes out of her. The tears are coming. She’s not Xena. Never the hero. She’s the hero’s stupid, helpless girlfriend, who gets herself in trouble and has to be rescued… except, those girls are always tiny and stunning. Can you imagine Superman trying to fly away with her in his arms? Poor guy.

Finn is talking. He’s yelling back. He is very passionate about what he’s saying, she can see that. But the walls are closing in and Rae’s not listening. If she cries in front of this awful, stupid guy… She’d rather deal with the Green Lane gang on a daily basis than let him see how broken she is. How tired. She’s so tired.

While he’s still yelling, she turns in silence and walks away. Head bowed, eyes glued to the pavement, twenty pound note crumpled inside her fist.

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“So then, he laid me on the couch all sweet like, and we kissed for like two hours.” Izzy says, a wide, dreamy grin gracing her features. Her feet swing idly in the air above her until she rolls over onto her back, head lolling over the side of the bed. “It was amazing, Rae. I never wanted it to end.”

“I bet.” Rae says, widening her eyes down at the book in her lap. They’re supposed to be studying, but mostly Izzy has been gushing with progressive grossness about her and Chop’s recent series of make out sessions. It’s not as bad as it could be, because at least now Rae’s got some kisses she can gush over too, if she could ever get a word in.

“I swear, Chop is the best kisser. His lips just barely touch mine, and I practically melt. It’s amazing. He’s amazing.” Izzy clutches her open text book against her chest and Rae wonders if she’s about to get a re-enactment of the best snogging ever with the book as a stand in.

“You’ve mentioned that, yeah, Iz.”

“It’s like, my whole body is like on fire, like there’s molten lava pouring through my veins. You know?”

“Mmm.” Rae counts on Izzy to fill in her silence, because the thing is, she doesn’t know. It’d been nice kissing Archie. She’d been thrilled to be finally kissing, to be checking that particular number off the ‘ways to be a non-pathetic person’ list. And, she’d really enjoyed feeling desired, having an actual boy actually wanting to kiss her. But it wasn’t anything like the books describe, all tingles shooting through your body and fireworks exploding behind your eyes. It wasn’t anything like Izzy described. It was just… nice.

But why should everything have to be fireworks and lava and explosions? Isn’t it better to live in the pleasant realm? Rae’s spent so much of her life battling highs and lows, mostly lows, it’s got to be a good thing to live in the safety zone. Plus, most of that’s probably all bullshit anyways. Everyone knows you can’t trust books as accurate representations of what things should feel like. There’s hardly any heaving bosoms and engorged members in real life. She’d only been a little underwhelmed at snogging Archie because she hadn’t had any real life experiences to compare it to. If you’re going around expecting fireworks and magic all the time, of course you’re going to be disappointed.

She shouldn’t be. There’s a boy who actually likes her, who wants to kiss her, and so what if it isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. It’s still pretty freaking great.
“And that’s just the kissing.” Izzy’s voice gets lower, a little bit suggestive, and Rae laughs. “The, um, other stuff is even better.”

“What stuff?” As far as Rae knows, there hadn’t been any stuff before now. Maybe she’s not keeping up as well as she thinks.

“Well…” Izzy sits up, draws the moment out to make sure she’s got a captive audience. “Before the other night, it was always just like a snog and a grab, you know?” Izzy nods, wide eyed, but Rae’s a little lost. She must look it, because Izzy continues, “Of my boobs. Him grabbing my boobs, I mean.” She giggles.

“But not anymore?” Rae finds herself leaning forward in her chair. Izzy’s been talking about this for almost an hour, and they’re finally getting to the good part.

“This time, I got to do a bit of the grabbing!”

Rae raises her eyebrows, makes an O with her mouth. “You saucy little minx!”

“I know, right?” Izzy giggles, cheeks pink. “It was just getting so good, and I just told myself ‘Be brave, Izzy.’ Because Chop is like, a total gentleman and he won’t, like, push. But I’m totally ready to go a little further. So I just did it.” She sits up a little straighter on the bed, shoulders squared, and Rae has a flash of awe at her friend. “I just reached right into his shorts and had myself a little fondle. And it was well nice.”

Rae covers her mouth and nose with her hands for a brief second, hiding her grin, then drops her hands to give Izzy a dainty round of applause. Izzy nods magnanimously, giving a jokey seated bow. The two of them grin at each other for a minute before dissolving into a swell of giggles.

“What was it like?” Rae asks, still breathless with laughter. “His… you know, thing.”

“His cock?”

“Izzy!” Rae shrieks, and they giggle some more. “Listen to you! Did it have some kind of magical powers? Touch the cock and lose all shame?”

“Must be! If I can touch one, I guess I can say it, right? I’m like a proper grown up lady, now.”

Rae covers her mouth and nose with her hands for a brief second, hiding her grin, then drops her hands to give Izzy a dainty round of applause. Izzy nods magnanimously, giving a jokey seated bow. The two of them grin at each other for a minute before dissolving into a swell of giggles.

“Well, I didn’t actually get a good look at it.” Izzy mirrors her pose. “But it felt strange, I don’t really know how to describe it. Like hard but still kind of squishy.” She’s nodding again, head cocked thoughtfully and lips pursed. “It was smooth and soft and the skin kind of moves around when you move your hand, like one of them water snake thingies from the chemists?”

“Weird.”

“Yeah, it was weird. But also good.”

“Did he come? What was that like? Are you gonna let him touch your bits now? Are you guys gonna have sex?” The questions tumble out of her mouth fast enough that they aren’t embarrassing.

“I think he was almost there, like right on the edge, but then we heard the front door opening and we had to stop, real quick like. But next time, yeah, I’m totally going to let him.” Izzy shrugs, and
Rae shakes her head in amazement. Where did her shy best mate go? “As far as sex, I think we should wait a while. I really want it to be perfect, you know?”

Izzy sighs dreamily, eyes far away, clearly lost in imaginings of her perfect first time. Rae watches her for a bit, wondering about her own first time. She and Archie are nowhere near doing the deed, and she can’t even really picture what it will be like. Not like the books, she thinks, so she’s got no frame of reference. Not like Izzy and Chop either, probably.

“Izzy, what does it feel like when Chop touches your boob?” Rae asks, turning away to hide her pink cheeks, fussing with the pens on the desk in front of her.

“Oh, it feels amazing.”

“Yeah, but I mean, like specifically. What does it feel like?” Rae spins in her chair, able to look at her best mate now that she’s determined that Izzy won’t find the question weird.

“Well, at first it just feels kind of warm and nice.” Izzy’s bottom lip protrudes just a bit and she bobs her head. Rae feels a surge of vindication; the books ARE wrong. “But then, it gets like wired. Like there’s a line of tingles that connects straight from your boob to your lady parts, like everything he’s doing up here, you can feel down there.” Izzy gestures, wide eyed, to her groin and Rae feels her heart sink just a little. “Is it not like that with you and Archie?”

Rae can feel her blush starting at the roots of her hair and spreading down her face like wildfire. It’s not the sex talk that she finds so embarrassing; it’s that here’s one more way she’s not like everyone else, one more way she’s defective.

“I dunno. It’s nice, like you said. Warm and good or whatever. But that’s it.”

“Well, I read in a magazine that some people just don’t feel so much as others. Like, some people just don’t have sensitive nipples. Some people can be touched and touched and never have an orgasm.”

“Orgasms are definitely not a problem.” Rae says flatly, and Izzy giggles. “But wouldn’t it be just my luck to have these huge tits and have them be good for nothing?” Rae glances up at Izzy’s pitying pout and frowns. “Or maybe Archie’s doing it wrong.” She shrugs.

“Yeah, could be.” Izzy grunts, and the sympathy painted all over her features is easier to bear when it’s for the situation rather than for Rae. “When Chop does it, he like…” Izzy’s forehead furrows as she struggles to come up with the words, then she reaches up to cup her right breast and give it a squeeze. “Well, he like squeezes it and then kind of kneads it? Like that?” Rae watches with vague horror as Izzy twists her hand rather violently. “And then he sometimes like flicks at my nipple, yeah? Mmmm, and then he’ll pinch it. God, it’s good.”

Rae can’t help her horrified expression. If that’s how groping is supposed to be done, then she’d rather avoid the whole mess. “Well, Archie didn’t really do all that. He just kind of squeezed a couple of times, over the whole thing, sort of.”

“Well, then he must’ve been doing it wrong.”

“D’you reckon Chop knows stuff that other boys don’t? Like, the… flicking and the - the pinching and all. Where’d he learn that?”

Izzy shrugs. “Maybe he’s read The Lady and The Stable Boy as well?” She giggles, but when Rae doesn’t join in, she quickly adds. “As long as you’re feeling the rest of it, I wouldn’t worry.”

Rae looks away. It’s nice and all, with Archie, but there’s really not that much to feel. It just sort
of happens… they snog, he grabs, it’s over and they go home. “The rest of it?”

“You know, the tingles, that melty feeling you get when he kisses you.” Izzy sighs again, lost in reminisces of her perfect snogging sessions on Chops perfect couch. Rae grits her teeth and frowns down at her lap. After a moment, she looks up to find Izzy staring at her questioningly. “You do have the tingles, right?”

She can’t decide what to say. There are lots of great parts to dating Archie, and she does get the little stomach quivering thing when she’s going to see him. He’s totally fit and she definitely likes looking at him. One time she felt a sort of urge to grab him by the shirt and press a little more against him, but as soon as she did he ended the kiss and she didn’t get to explore this urge further. Archie is a gentleman, too, she tells herself. But there are no tingles, just all pleasant normal kind of stuff. However, she can’t really tell Izzy that.

“I’m so nervous about meeting Chop’s parents. It’s like I’m his proper girlfriend. What if they don’t like me?”

“I’ll be a better time if you’re there.” Izzy’s eyes are wide and pleading, and Rae laughs and shakes her head, knowing she’s lost the argument. She always loses against Izzy anyway. Izzy turns back to the closet and flicks through Rae’s worn band tees and flannels, searching for the nicer things hidden in the very back. “Besides, I already told them you’re coming, and you can’t cancel on the Peters. Everyone knows that.”

“Great. Me, you, Chop, his parents and Stacey. Fun times will be had by all.”

“And Finn.”

“What?”

“And Finn Nelson, he’ll be there too.”

“Why?” Rae whines, tossing her head back to plead with the ceiling.

“Because he lives there, that’s why. I don’t know why you dislike him so much, he’s always nice to you.” Izzy clucks and tilts her head as she examines a sparkly top.

“What? First of all, I don’t dislike him, I loathe him. Secondly, he is never nice to me, I don’t know what you’re talking about. And third, wyyyyyyyy?”
“Oh, come on. I know he said that awful thing when we first met, but since then, he’s been proper nice. He asks you about your books and you guys are always talking about music.”

“Arguing. We’re always arguing about music.”

“And he always asks after you when you’re not there.” Izzy raises her eyebrows suggestively.

“Yeah, and I bet he actually smiles in relief when you tell him I’m not coming. Well, that might be taking it too far. I’m not sure he’s capable of smiling. I bet his cheek twitches though, relieved cheek twitching.”

“I think he likes you.” Izzy says definitively, like it’s the capper on this whole awful Finn Nelson conversation they’ve been having. Rae blinks slowly at her, a couple of times to make sure she sees it.

“Well, you’re delusional.” She says distinctly.

“He’s well fit, you know.” Izzy grins, and Rae feels her eyes get impossibly wider. What in the name of all that is holy has happened to her best mate? Izzy’s been replaced by a pod person. Maybe penises make you turn crazy. Rae’s always suspected this. “If you started going out with him, we could go on double dates.”

“Oh my God, Izzy. I don’t even know where to start with all the things that are wrong with what you’ve just said. How about, I have a bleedin’ boyfriend?!”

Izzy sighs and turns to the mirror, holding Rae’s blue dress up to her chest. It’s comically large, like a giant’s dress put in front of a fairy. Something about it makes Rae impossibly sad, makes it clear that Izzy is departing their familiar world for the land of the cool kids, a place where Rae will never belong. Izzy spins around with a smile. “You’re right. Sorry. I forgot about Archie.”

“It’s alright.” Rae exhales, sitting up. She’d been slumping in her seat without realizing it. “He’s barely my boyfriend, I guess it’s easy to forget.”

Izzy smiles and shakes her head, then turns back to the mirror with a sigh. She holds the dress against her, tucking the excess fabric around her hips. It nearly wraps all the way around her back. “I love this dress. I wish we could swap clothes, like we were really sisters or something. I wish we were the same size.”

“Me too.” Rae says, smiling, but really she’s thinking, you’ve got no idea, what I wouldn’t give to be your size. But then she tamps down on that line of thought, on her destructive habit to compare herself to her best mate. She replaces the thought with her familiar mantra, instead. I know what I’m worth. I’m perfect just as I am.

“I’m so scrawny,” Izzy looks at Rae somewhat wistfully, and Rae feels her cheeks warm. “I wish I was curvier like you.”

“Oh Izzy.” Rae stands up and pulls her friend into a hug. “You’re perfect, remember? I’m perfect and you’re perfect just the way you are. It’s all perfection in here today. It’s a good thing nobody else is around or we might blind them with our radiant beauty.”

“Yeah, but perfection doesn’t really help much with the borrowing situation, does it?” Izzy laughs and ducks out of the hug, looking at herself in the mirror once more with the blue dress up against her body. It really does look nice, the blue against her fair skin and vibrant hair.

“You could always try Chloe’s closet?” Rae offers, raising her eyebrows and grinning slyly. “Who knows, a leopard print mini-skirt might just be the missing piece, might really fill in the
missing hole in your wardrobe.”

Izzy’s face pulls up into comical horror, and both girls dissolve into giggles once more. Izzy hangs Rae’s blue dress on the closet door and returns to her spot on Rae’s bed. “I do think Finn likes ya, though. He’s always looking at you.”

“Maybe he’s still trying to figure out if I’m a boy or a girl?”

“Rae…”

“Besides, even if he did happen to like me, as preposterous as that is, he definitely doesn’t anymore.” She leans against her desk, moving her chair back and forth with the toe of her shoe.

“What? Why?”

“I dunno, Iz. It’s like this whole thing.” Rae rolls her eyes, throws her hair back over her shoulder. She could kick herself for opening this line of conversation, because there are parts of what happened yesterday that she really doesn’t want to share with Izzy. But, at the same time, she’s been chewing over that stupid incident endlessly since the other day, feeling an ugly tangle of guilt and irritation and regret, and talking to Izzy almost always helps her feel better.

Izzy crosses her arms over her chest. “I’ve got time.”

“Well,” Rae turns and stacks up all the books on her desk by size. When it’s done, she spins back around to face her friend. “Okay, so the other day, my Mum gave me some money to go buy a new outfit for my date with Archie. You know she’s like practically beside herself that an actual boy likes me, like it’s the 1800s or something and I’m only worth how good of a marriage I can get.”

Izzy doesn’t laugh at the joke. “I’m definitely interested in what you bought for your date, but what does this have to do with Finn Nelson?”

“I’m getting there.” Rae huffs, but she finds herself picking at a loose thread at the hem of her shirt. “So, I was looking in this window down on the high street and Big G and those tossers showed up and started giving me a hard time.”

“I didn’t know they were still doing that!”

“Yeah, well, it’s fine. It’s not a big deal. I’m better now, right, and I was all ready to defend myself, to totally tell them to fuck off and go suck a dick or something.” Izzy nods, still frowning. “But then fucking Finn showed up and started punching them.”

Izzy shakes her head. “I thought this was supposed to be a story about how Finn doesn’t like you.”

“Izzy! I was really pissed off! There I was, in the middle of a shit situation, and here comes Finn and his stupid fists to save the day. Like I needed him.” Izzy looks skeptical still. “And I was all angry about those twats taking the piss, and so I sort of, like, really yelled at Finn. A lot.”

“You what?”

“I was really mad! And he chased off the people I wanted to yell at! And he stole my thunder! My thunder, Iz!” Rae raises her hands and her shoulders, her whole body pleading with her friend to understand.

There’s a moment of quiet, and though Rae is carefully watching Izzy’s face, she can’t tell which
way the conversation will go. Then, Izzy says it, and Rae huffs out a big breath and tosses her head back.

“Rachel Earl.” They’ve been friends for so long that Izzy sounds just like Linda. Rae winces. “I cannot believe you did that! He was defending you, being your knight in shining armor. How could you yell at him for trying to help you?”

“I don’t need a knight in shining armor! And I certainly don’t need help from Finn Nelson!”

“You have to apologize to him.” Izzy continues unabated. Rae juts her jaw forward, mouth agape. She can’t think of anything worse than having to apologize to Finn. She starts to protest, but Izzy holds up a hand. “No, you have to. You’re a good person, and good people don’t go around screaming at boys who are trying to do nice things for them.”

“Iz.” Rae pleads, putting on her best pouty face.

“Izzy is stern, neck stiff and shoulders jutting. Rae squeezes her eyes shut, screws her whole face up into a pouting grimace. “Don’t you feel bad about treating him that way?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Maybe.” Izzy repeats mockingly, so Rae scowls at her.

“Fine. I do feel bad. But that doesn’t mean I need to apologize. He never apologized for what he said about me.”

“Yes, but you’re a good person, remember?” Izzy prods, cocking her head in a very annoying superior fashion.

“You were trying to get me to go out with him five minutes ago! And now you’re saying he’s not a good person!” Rae crosses her arms across her chest, belligerently arguing a point she knows she’s going to lose. Izzy copies the movement, and they stare at each other for a long moment. Izzy’s eyebrows seem to rise impossibly high, and finally Rae sighs. “Fine, I’ll apologize.”

“Yay!” Izzy claps her hands and jumps up, rewarding Rae with one of her sunniest smiles. Rae is frustratingly mollified, and finds herself grinning back at her friend, though she does roll her eyes.

“Rae jumps as the door slams open. Linda strides into the room to give Izzy a kiss on the cheek, a laundry basket balanced on her hip. “Oh, Izzy love, I didn’t know you were here!”

“Hi, Mrs. Bouchtat! How are you? How’s the baby?” Izzy chirps, and Rae shakes her head. As if any parents anywhere wouldn’t absolutely adore Izzy. It’s like Izzy’s super power, charming adults with her sunny disposition and unfailing politeness.

“Good, good.” Linda smiles absently over her shoulder as she unloads items from her basket into Rae’s dresser. “Will you be staying for tea tonight?”

“Oh, no. I can’t tonight. Thank you, though.” Izzy replies, then turns to start packing up her things. Once Linda’s interrupted, their afternoon girl time is invariably over.

“Oh, that’s too bad.” Linda says, closing the last drawer and turning around with the basket in front of her. “Maybe you can come over tomorrow while Rae is watching Kitty. I’ll leave money for takeaway and you girls can watch a movie once Kitty’s in bed. That’d be nice, yeah? Babysitting fun. A real girl’s night in.”

“Uh…” Izzy shoots Rae a questioning look.
“Mum, I told you. We’re going to have dinner with Izzy’s boyfriend’s parent’s tomorrow night.” Rae shakes her head, rolling her eyes at her Mum’s inability to remember anything.

“Oh. No.” Linda says simply, and Rae turns to find Linda blinking slowly at her.

“What do you mean, no?”

“I mean, no you can’t go.” Linda turns to glance at Izzy, like she’s looking for support. Izzy looks supremely uncomfortable, tugging at the loose ends of her backpack straps. A choked sound escapes from Rae’s throat. “I’m your mother and I say you can’t go. So, no.”

“Mum.” Rae says, horrified. She juts her neck out, shaking her head slightly with every sentence. “I am sixteen. I will go exactly where I want to go. You can’t stop me.”

“Oh yes, I bloody well can.” Linda retorts, eyes wide and bulging. “You live under my roof, so you’ll do as I say. I’m working an extra shift tomorrow, and you have to watch your sister. End of.”

“End of? No, not end of!” Rae can feel herself growing screechier and increasingly defiant. It’s a teenager thing, she thinks. She can’t really help it. Whenever the adults try to throw their weight around, you can’t help but put them back in line. Instinct, really. “I have plans. I’m going out and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Linda walks slowly across the room until she’s standing right in front of Rae, the edge of the laundry basket brushing against Rae’s shirt. Rae angles her face away so that she’s not looking at her mother, rolls her eyes towards the ceiling to make sure her Mum knows that this is total bullshit.

Linda’s voice is quiet and menacing when she speaks. “You listen to me, Rachel Earl.” Izzy makes a soft squeaking noise across the room, but Rae’s too busy maintaining her dealing with Linda stance to look over. “You live in this house and you have responsibilities to this family. You will be here tomorrow, babysitting your sister with a bloody smile on your face. Understood?”

Rae’s words are just as clipped. “But I’ve made plans already.” She says in a measured voice. ”Ask Chloe to stay.”

“Chloe has an activity at school - “

“What activity?”

“I didn’t ask but she said it’s important.”

“Mine’s important!”

“Not as important as your mum telling you you’re staying.”

Everything in Rae tightens, her arms crossed over her chest and her teeth clench at the unbelievably unfairness of it all. She raises her eyebrows defiantly and deliberately doesn’t look at her Mum. There’s a long, silent minute where the three of them stand frozen and tense, until Linda breaks it with a harrumph and leaves the room. Rae scoffs as soon as her Mum is in the hallway and then moves to slam the door.

“Well this is some fresh bullshit!” She shrieks at the closed door, then spins around to find a very anxious looking Izzy. “I can’t believe her!”
Izzy chuckles weakly. “Well, I guess you got out of going to that dinner after all, yeah?”

Rae narrows her eyes dangerously, and Izzy squeaks slightly again. “Oh, I’m going. There’s nothing that could bloody stop me from going after that! The nerve of her! What am I, her fucking slave? Only here to watch after the baby? I think not! I am a grown woman and I am going to that bloody dinner if it’s the last thing I do.”

“You know, it’s not that big of a deal, Rae. I can go by myself.” Izzy looks terrified, but she’s never lived with someone like Rae’s mum. Rae knows much better how to handle Linda. She’s just got to be firm, teach her that she can’t just order her daughter around.

“I’m going. End of.” Rae cuts her hand through the air decisively.

“Okay.” Izzy makes a face. “I’m gonna go now. It’s getting late and my Mum’ll be wondering after me. I’ll see you tomorrow. Maybe we can talk about it more then, yeah?”

Rae nods, stepping back and opening the door. Izzy offers her a brief, one-armed hug as she leaves, and Rae leans back against the door after she closes it behind her friend.

“The fucking nerve.” She mutters to the empty room. “I’m going to that bloody dinner if it’s the last thing I do.”

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Dear Nan,

I’m going crazy in this stupid house. I keep missing Dad’s calls and I really need to talk to him. I miss you both so much. I miss us, the family. I never realized how much I relied on talking to you guys every day until this year.

I don’t know what’s up with me lately. It’s like I’m annoyed all the time, at everything. Doesn’t take much to make me lose it these days. Suppose I’m being real rude to people, but I can’t control it. Everyone’s doing my head in.

Oh, and Archie being here is really not helping. If I had any self control around stupid people before, it’s all gone now. Remember how I said I wasn’t going to interfere, not my business and all that? Well I only lasted two days before I flew off the handle. But seriously, Nan, it wasn’t my fault! I just can’t stop thinking about him being here. What is he doing in Stamford? He knew we’d be here, how dare he show his stupid specky face after what he did? He’s just a user. He follows me around, taking advantage of people. He’s doing it again now, and that’s why I couldn’t keep my mouth shut.

He’s only been here a minute, and already he’s going out with Rae. What the hell? Apparently he just walked up to her, asked her out, and she said yes. Just like that! What is it about that wanker that makes every girl just fall at his feet? That’s just ironic, that is. And Rae, I would have expected more of her. She never gives the time of day to anyone, but now she’s going out with bloody Archie Taylor? All everyone’s talking about is how they’ve been seen at the cafe, and the movies, and snogging at the bowling alley. Like, who takes a girl on a date to a bowling alley? So anyway, I saw that she’s not getting it herself, even though usually she’s so sharp, so as soon as it started I took her aside and I told her, look, this is not a good idea. This guy is not a good guy for you. Well, if you knew her you could imagine her reaction.

I don’t know what to do about her. The nicer I am to her, the more awful she is to me. I should stop trying. I should. I don’t know why I keep trying with her.

Well
Well she is one of the only cool people in this town, so I’m trying, you know? But

Look, I don’t know why I even bother you with all of this, Nan. I’ll write you more when there’s something new happening.

Love always,

Finn

+++  

Dear Lois,

How are you girl?

I was thinking of coming to London for a couple of days, to clear my head like, and visit me Nan. And you, of course. I miss you, buddy! And I need to get something off my chest, and you’re the only one I can talk properly with, like, really freely. But I can’t wait till London, so you get a letter instead, lucky girl!

Okay, so… Here’s the thing. Remember what we talked about last time on the phone?

Well don’t let it go to your head, yeah? But I think you were right. Something happened yesterday and it got me so rattled… I seriously haven’t been able to think about anything else since.

I was walking to the shops, and I saw a bunch of twat faced bastards harassing Rae. Lo, they were really letting her have it. The things they said… I don’t know who can talk like that to another person. Well, yeah, I’ve said bad things about her in the beginning but it wasn’t the same. It wasn’t to her face was it? I didn’t think she was listening! Anyway, those fuckers were right up in her face, calling her names, saying really ugly stuff about- well, really ugly stuff. And she just stood there and took it! This girl, Lo, I’ve never seen her without a sharp come back, something to say. She’s always banging on and on, she could talk for England. But she was silent. Like, paralyzed. She was so hurt.

Her face, Lois.

I can’t get it out of my head. Seriously. When I close my eyes I see her standing there, so beat down. Like a different girl. A twin but without all the life and laughter and sunshine. I wanted to fucking kill those tossers.

So I threw some punches. I’m not ashamed. Someone had to teach them a lesson.

Okay. So then I turn to her, and I suppose I was thinking - this is it, right? Now she’ll see that I’m only trying to be her mate, that I’m alright, and she’d finally, I don’t know. But what do you think happened, Lo?

She nearly took my head off! And she said she had it handled and I shouldn’t have interfered. She screamed at me right there on the street!

I don’t even know how to explain to you what that felt like. I screamed back, natch. But it was just… Background noise. I couldn’t stop looking at her. She looked so

Oh, fuck it. She looked pretty. Beautiful. We’re screaming at each other and I’m staring at her mouth. Did I ever describe her mouth to you? Man. When she’s mad, everything about her is so alive and I’m beginning to feel like I’m proper alive when I’m with her. Even when we’re
arguing. Maybe especially when we’re arguing. Arguing with her is the most interesting thing that happens to me round here.

But this time it wasn’t nice. It felt awful, to have her look at me like that, yell at me. I tried to tell her I’m trying to be her friend, that she has to stick up for herself, that she shouldn’t listen to those fuckers - I’m yelling all these things I think are good things, that would turn this moment around. But then she looks at me with the same expression she had on when those fuckers were calling her fat and ugly. As if I were the one calling her - that. It felt like she punched me.

So here it is, buddy. You were right, I have a thing for Rae Earl. If wanting her to not hate me all the time, if wanting her to look at me with a smile and never with those sad eyes, means I have a thing for her, then fine. I admit it. If the thought of her dating that loser… oh, she’s dating someone. Forgot to tell you about that. He’s a total bastard, but he’s all over her and she seems into him. If that making me a little crazy means I’ve got a thing for her, then fine. If thinking about her mouth and her hair and her tits all the time…. Just kidding, Lo ;) Sort of.

So, Miss Smarty Pants, now that I’ve admitted you’re right about it, what am I supposed to do next? She is like the last girl In Lincolnshire that’s suitable for me. Go on, tell me what I’m supposed to do with all this. You’re the only one who can.

Big hugs

Finn
Dear Tix,

You will not believe the shit I have to put up with around here. We thought the hospital was like a prison sometimes, right? Well, it’s nothing compared to life under my mum’s roof.

Do you know what she just said? She says she FORBIDS me going to this dinner-thing with Izzy at Chop’s. She FORBIDS me! Can you believe that?

It’s like I can’t win with her, no matter what I do! For years she’s been on my case for not being “girly” enough, which she thinks means wearing fluffy pastel-coloured clothes and talking on the phone about boys and dating, always fucking dating. Like my number one job as a girl in the world is to find a boyfriend. That’s top priority. Only now that I’ve actually met a boy and I’m actually dating, she’s still not happy! She just finds something else to rag on me about!

On the one hand, she’s always pushing me to be like a “normal” teenager, never mind my own individuality, right, and on the other hand, she always says that because I’ve been ill, we have to take extra care, she can’t just let me go out and do all those things that kids do. So what do you want from me, Linda bloody Boushtat? “Why can’t you be more like Chloe?” she’s always saying. Well, let’s see. I can’t go partying like Chloe, I can’t stay up as late as Chloe, I can’t have money to buy shit like Chloe does. So, like, decide Mum - do you want me to be like precious Queen Chloe, or don’t you?

All Chloe has to say is “Oh, I can’t stay home tonight, I’ve got a school project I’m working on with friends.” and she’s free and clear. She makes it sound like she’s on all the committees, and that she and a bunch of pristine virgins sit around all night hand knitting scarves for starving kiddies in Africa. D’you know what she’s actually up to, Tix? Well I happen to know that she’s going off with some older boys she’s just met to some party out of town. Out of town! So I’m supposed to stay home with Kitty and not go to a very posh dinner with my friends!

We had a massive fight, Tix. After Izzy left I tried again - see, I’m not completely unreasonable - to talk about this quietly and rationally. That lasted like 45 seconds before we were back to yelling. I told her she can’t just make plans for me, I’m a human being! She said that taking care of the baby is the only thing I do around here - can you BELIEVE her?? I yelled that at least it’s more than Chloe does, which is NOTHING. My mum was all “Oh, we have to be nice to her, she’s been through so much, she was abandoned by both her parents!” (Unlike me, only abandoned by one, and maybe not even the right one. But I didn’t say that out loud). I suggested that she hire a proper babysitter, like other people do, and she laughed in my face. LAUGHED, Fatty!

At that moment I was so angry, I almost told her all about Chloe’s real plans. See, I know I could just rat her out for lying and going off with them guys, but I just can’t. That’s the most annoying part. She irritates the living fuck out of me, but she’s still Chloe, you know? She’s been there all my life. We were so close when we were kids, there was nothing I wouldn’t do for her. I loved her. Maybe I still do, way deep down.

Like, deep, deep, way deep down.

Anyway, about the dinner. It’s not even that I want to go, especially, because me and posh people? I don’t know. Plus, you couldn’t pay me enough to spend an evening with you-know-who, especially after what happened in the street. And especially especially since Izzy is all “You must apologize to His Royal Highness for being rude and yelling at him.” But Izzy needs me, and
she’s picked out my outfit and everything. So if Mrs Boushtat thinks she gets to tell me where to
go all the freakin’ time, she’s got another think coming! I’m going to take a shower now, put on a
nice dress, some make-up and some perfume - you know, the whole GIRLY PACKAGE, and
head off to spend the night with proper grown-ups.

And what can Linda do about it? Not a bloody thing.

Will tell you all about it soon.
Love, Rae.

+++ 

Rae pauses with her hand on the door knob. Her guts churn at what she’s about to do. It is one
thing to be Righteous Indignation Girl in a letter to Tixie, and quite another to sneak out of the
house all dressed up for a party, leaving her mum with no back-up plan for Kitty at all.

Linda is upstairs, taking a shower before work, and Chloe is talking on the phone in a hushed
voice, and laughing, so Rae figures she’s planning her own escape from HMP Earl. So it’s not as
if she’s leaving a helpless baby alone in the house, right? And it’s not as though she’s leaving her
mum stranded; Chloe is right there. When they realize Rae is not at home, Chloe will have no
choice but to stay, and Linda won’t even be very late for work. Simple as. It wouldn’t kill her
cousin to mind the baby from time to time. This time, Chloe will do the helping, and Rae will do
the partying, for a change (not that she expects this thing to be a party or anything. Well, she
doesn’t know what to expect, exactly, but when someone invites you to a “dinner party”, you
shouldn’t expect a booze up).

Her heart is pounding stupidly at the act of sneaking out, and she’s sure that any second now she’s
going to get caught by an irate Linda, but she manages to close the door behind her without any
fuss. She jogs to the end of the street, disappearing from the view of anyone in the house. This
was almost too easy.

She can see Izzy waving at her from the back seat of a cab.

To freedom.

+++ 

Izzy’d started off the evening masking her nerves with reckless energy and manic chatter, but
she’s grown increasingly quiet on the long cab ride over, the rather expensive cab ride over. Even
split between the two of them, it’s exorbitant. Izzy watches the numbers on the meter grow, letting
out a soft sigh.

“There goes my cheque for the week.” She mutters darkly, and Rae shoots her a sympathetic pout,
though she’s wincing at the meter too. She’ll have to surrender her date-outfit money. The thought
makes her sad, but she tries to stay upbeat for Izzy.

“I guess you won’t be stopping by Chop’s after school, eh? Seriously, how long is his drive in
every morning? No wonder he’s always late.”

Izzy chuckles softly, three short bursts of air, face turned to stare out the window. The drive had
taken them through increasingly nicer parts of town. Normal houses with wooden slats were
replaced with tottering, narrow three story houses with story-book peaks, then grown outwards
into wider homes with huge windows and sprawling lawns. After a while, the houses grew walls
and ornate iron gates, spread further and further apart until they were only passing a new property
every ten minutes. And then, after the longest expanse yet of fairly open countryside, the car had
turned into a graveled drive and let them out at a huge stone and iron gate.

“This is it?” Izzy asks the driver nervously, bending down to peer through the windshield at the towering gate. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, Miss. Netherfield Park. This is it. Some posh friends you got.”

The three of them sit in silence for a minute, stunned and anxious for the girls, dubious for the driver. Rae pouts as she hands over the twenty, and Izzy smooths out the wad of bills she’s pulled from her purse.

The driver tips his hat in thanks, and the girls climb out of the car to stare up at the gate, smoothing skirts and adjusting hair. Izzy looks at Rae, who shrugs. How is she supposed to know what to do? Izzy walks forward and tugs at the ironwork.

“Can I help you?” A tinny voice asks out of nowhere. Both girls jump. Rae glances down the long empty road, squinting against the almost set sun.

“Um, I’m, uh… Izzy? I’m here for Chop, I mean, Arnold?” Izzy’s voice cracks, and she hunches her shoulders inward as she stares at the gate.

“Arnold?” Rae whispers wonderingly, barely stifling her giggle.

A muffled shuffling echoes on the other side of the speaker. “Very good, Miss.” There’s a beep and the gate opens inwards.

Rae and Izzy share a stunned look, then set forward on shaky legs down the long winding driveway. With every other step on the gravelly lane, Rae trips over her unfamiliar heels, and Izzy makes a sound of shock. After a couple of minutes, the driveway gives in to a curve. They both stop short at the first glimpse of the house.

“Holy shit.” Izzy moans, and Rae nods without wrenching her eyes away. Chop’s house isn’t a house, it’s… it’s an Estate, capital E. It’s a mansion.

They’re standing in the driveway, which is in the center of a huge, brilliantly green lawn, which is in turn surrounded by what appears to be tiny forests. As they’re standing there, stunned, a row of lanterns flickers on along the edges of the driveway like magic. Rae wonders if they have a person here whose job that is, to turn the lights on right as visitors arrive. The house is so fucking fancy that it seems plausible.

There are maybe a hundred windows. Okay, so that’s probably an exaggeration, but the windows that are there are so grand and impressive that it feels that way. The house itself is brick, faded by age into coppery oranges and milky browns. There’s a huge entryway topped off with a triangular roof, with wide stone columns holding it up. The windows (there are twenty-two, she counts) are enormous and decorated with fancy ironwork. Just in front of the door, the driveway forms a huge circle with a defunct fountain in the center. It makes her feel a little better that the fountain isn’t working. It’s one thing to hang onto in the crazy splendor of it all. Of course, it’s minimized by the beds of flowers spilling out of it, but it’s something.

She frowns; how’ve they kept everything from dying? It’s fucking October, and all their plants look like it’s the middle of the summer. Rich people, Jesus. They must have their own personal magicians or something.

It’s then that she realizes that they’re both just standing there, staring. Rae looks down to find Izzy, looking a little green. Rae wraps an arm over her shoulders and gives her a comforting squeeze, “You alright over there?”
Izzy glances up, wide-eyed, and gulps. “Oh my gosh, Rae, would you look at the size of this place? It’s massive!”

“Yeah. I guess Stacey weren’t kidding.”

“Chop said that Finn’s old house outside of London was even bigger than this.”

Izzy’s still not moving, so Rae twines her arm in Izzy’s and starts them shuffling forward again. Izzy’s got so many bangles and silver necklaces on her that she jingles. Rae can’t help be impressed by the redhead’s new found style. She has a way of piling stuff on herself and somehow making it work. If Rae had tried to put so many colours and layers and sparkly things on, she’d look like a drunken Christmas tree. But Izzy, she’s just… stunning.

“Bigger than this? How can it be bigger than this? Did he live in bloody Windsor Castle?”

“No, but it were like a London mansion, like old fashioned.” Izzy sounds breathless and shaky. Rae huffs, staring up at the house as they climb the drive. “Wonder why he would give all that up, then. Just to come to Stamford and slum it with the likes of us.”

Izzy stops in her tracks and looks up at Rae, her eyes big and her face pale. Rae has to hold back her sigh. They’re never making it to the house at this rate, and it’s almost full dark, though the lights along the driveway and pouring from the house keep it bright.

“Oh, don’t say that, Rae! I’m bricking it as it is!” Izzy turns her face to look at the looming house. “They’ve got so much money, and my family’s like, normal.”

“Oh, babe, you’ve got nothing to be intimidated about!”

“No?” Izzy scoffs, gesturing towards the house with an upturned palm.

Rae blows out a gust of air. “Okay, the house is big, I get it. But, it doesn’t really matter whether or not we’ve got money. Because we’ve got loads of other things. Just as important, if not more so.”

“Yeah, we do!” A beginning of an Izzy smile emerges, only to falter once more. Izzy blinks and tugs on Rae’s arm. “Like what? Like, what kind of, what sort of other things? Do we have?”

Rae strikes a pose. “Like, we are fabulous!”

Izzy giggles, and it sounds a little manic in the wide open space. “Oh, Right! Right. In what way?”

“Oh, c’mon, Iz.”

“No, listen!” Izzy clutches her arm once more, nails digging in hard enough to leave marks. “I’m about to go in there and meet Chop’s entire posh family. I’m going to need specifics! How exactly am I fabulous? Go.”

Rae takes her arm again, slowly marching her towards the house, ignoring her friend’s subtle attempts to pull back. “Well, you, Izzy, are like someone took sunshine, made it into a person -”

“Aw, am I?” Izzy tries to stop, but Rae keeps walking and Izzy is forced along.

“Yes, and Chop sees that! Because Chop is like… What is he like?” She stares at nothing for a second, thinking. “Chop is like… A flower.”
“Chop is a flower.” Izzy repeats dryly, her eyebrows raised in doubt. She pulls at Rae’s arm and her bracelets jangle.

“Yes. He’s like a sunflower. He turns his head towards the sun. Where the sun is, that’s where he looks.”

Izzy’s hand rests on her heart. “Does he really do that?”

“Oh, my God, he never takes his eyes off ya.” Rae watches as Izzy’s anxiety melts off her face, her smile back to full Izzy wattage.

“Wow, Rae.” Izzy coos, standing straighter. “That was proper beautiful! I love it when you say stuff like that.”

“Thank you, m’dear.”

“You could be a writer.”

“Well, I do write sometimes.” Rae retorts, thinking back to that picnic at Rutlands and Izzy’s attempt to defuse Stacey’s mocking remarks. She sticks her tongue out cheekily at Iz, but they’ve finally reached the huge brown front doors and her friend looks about to puke. “Are you ready for this?”

“Not really.” Izzy swallows.

“Don’t tell me I’ve wasted that brilliant pep-talk on you!” Rae uses their twined arms to rock Izzy back and forth, but she doesn’t even look up. “C’mon. Chin up, boobs out,” she ignores Izzy’s face as she compares their radically different chests. “Let’s see that blinding Izzy smile. There you go. Go get him.”

And in more rich people perfect timing, the door opens.

“Hello, ladies…” Chop’s greeting trails off as his eyes devour Izzy’s form. “Oh, wow.” He clears his throat. “Look at you.”

Izzy looks down at herself and fidgets with the million silver bands she’s wearing on her wrist. “Too much?”

“No! You look, you look, lovely.”

Izzy blushes and deflects attention by motioning at Rae. “Oh, and how about Rae, doesn’t she look great?”

“Raemundo, looking as gorgeous as ever.” He smiles, but Rae laughs. She doubts he even noticed whether she’s got clothes on or not.

For a moment, it’s just like it is any other time. It’s just them and Chop, even if she is wearing these stupid shoes, and it feels normal. Chop steps out of the open door and wraps his arms around Izzy, lifting her off of the ground for a second. Izzy giggles, and when he sets her down, she’s landed back on her proverbial feet as well. Chop wraps an arm over Rae’s shoulder, lifts his other arm for a noogie that Rae manages to duck.

“Well, what’re we doin’ standin’ out here like a bunch of idiots?” He grins, taking an arm from each girl. “Let’s go in!”
Rae takes it as a bad sign that the three of them side by side fit through the doors. Stepping into the house is like stepping into a wall, it’s so shocking. She didn’t know people actually lived like this.

Everything is gorgeous and sumptuous and expensive. The floor is this cream-colored tile that she suspects is probably marble, shiny enough to see their reflection in. The whole… foyer, she guesses, she’s never had occasion to call anything a foyer before, but this is a textbook sort of foyer and the whole foyer is filled with this perfect warm honey sort of light, the kind of light that guilds everything and makes it look a thousand times better. It’s the kind of light that people pay to have their pictures taken in. Rae glances up to see that it’s coming from a huge crystal chandelier above their heads. All she can think is, of course.

Of fucking course.

There’s a huge, sweeping staircase before them, curving gently down to the floor like a ladies skirt. The banister is polished wood, the dark offsetting the pale floor and walls. The walls, oh God, the walls. Rae didn’t know that walls could be beautiful things all on their own, but these are. They have all this ornate gold trim, like series of rectangles framing individual sections of wall. It’s not even expensive paintings like she imagined, it’s just walls that look like art.

Chop has stopped to let them take it in, and there’s the sense of a hush like an intake of breath, though all Rae can hear is some tinkling classical music from somewhere and the ticking of the huge grandfather clock to their left. Rae looks up at Chop, and he’s grinning proudly as he watches Iz take a look around. Something in her unclenches, because he doesn’t look horrified at their obvious gaping, he just looks smitten with Izzy.

And then Stacey sweeps down the stairs. She moves like Scarlet O’Hara in Gone with the Wind, like she’s been gliding down staircases her entire life. Rae feels bereft just looking at her, because she knows she’ll never be able to glide smoothly like Stacey, no matter how hard she tries. You have to be born like that, she thinks.

Stacey’s wearing a shimmering silver dress that clings to her. She looks like a movie star or something. The light bends around her, sparkles off the beads in her dress. She makes Rae and Izzy’s dresses and accessories seem dull and stupid, like they are just two little girls playing dress up. And then Rae sees her sneer, and the movie-magic bubble of the moment seems to pop, and it’s clear that she’s uncomfortably standing in a place where she doesn’t belong. Rae’s not a princess seeing her castle for the first time, she’s an interloper.

“Hey Stace.” Chop calls up to her, loosening his hold on their arms. Stacey nods graciously at him, then curls her lip when he turns his back to ask, “Girls, can I take your coats?”

He moves to stand behind Izzy, carefully grabs the collar of her coat and pulls it down slowly. Izzy shivers as Chop touches the bare skin at her neck. Rae can see the warm glowy light reflected in her eyes. Izzy is graceful, and despite her wide eyes and almost visible trembling, she doesn’t look out of place. Rae shrugs off her own jacket and holds it in front of her.

A man in a dark suit appears, startling Rae slightly, to take their coats. Rae thanks him and he nods silently. Chop doesn’t speak to him, just takes Izzy’s hand and steers her around the staircase, past a round table holding a huge bouquet in a fancy vase. Rae thinks that if it were at her house, it’d be broken within two days.

“Rachel.” Stacey says, raising her eyebrows as she looks Rae over from head to toe.

“Stacey.” Rae replies, watching the other girl sneer and deliberately cut Rae off as she follows behind Chop and Izzy. Rae tilts her head back to sigh, but drops it when she catches a glimpse of the chandelier again. She shakes her head and starts down the bright hallway, taking her time to
look at the trim and the expected fancy paintings. This house is like a museum.

“Rae.” Someone touches her back, and she nearly jumps out of her skin. She thinks she might have actually jumped in a one-eighty, like in a cartoon.

“Oh my God, Finn!” She yelps, scowling at him. He doesn’t look fazed. “You scared me half to death! Where did you even come from?”

She looks up and down the doorless hallway, but he just shrugs. “The study.”

“Oh, the study, of course. I should have known.” She rolls her eyes. “That’s always where people mysteriously appear from. Is there a hidden door behind a bookcase?”

“Rae-” He starts, but she rolls right over him.

“What is it, pull the right book and out pops a monster? If I pull your face off, will you turn out to be the night watchman in disguise?”

Finn pulls his neck in, making an affronted face. She feels a shiver of pleasure at offending him. “Look, I wanted to talk to you.”

“Yeah, I wanted to talk to you too, actually.” She sighs. Maybe it’s better to just get it over with.

“Oh, well, I just…” He’s moving every single second, it’s stressful just to watch him. He shuffles his feet, rubs the back of his neck, pulls at his tie. She raises her eyebrows. “It’s just… I know you’ve got this, uh, long list of all the things you don’t like about me, and see…”

“It’s not a long list, per se…”

“Will you just listen for a minute?”

“Uh, you’re so bossy and controlling. If I did have a list, that’d be right up there at the top. Finn Nelson always has to get his way.” She finds herself rambling right over the top of him.

“Will you shut up for one bloody second? I’m trying to apologize!” His face is all red. She rolls her eyes again, crosses her arms under her breasts then extracts one to indicate that he has the floor. He takes a deep breath before trying again, bites his lip for a second. “Look, I don’t really understand what happened the other day, okay? I don’t really understand what happens with you most of the time, but I know I upset you and I apologize.”

She doesn’t want it to be effective, doesn’t want him to be able to sweep in with a few careless words and soften her dislike. But, fucks sake, she can feel her shoulders loosening. She uncrosses her arms.

“I know I said some shitty things when we first met, and-”

“And every time we’ve met since.” She mumbles, but he just raises an eyebrow and barrels on.

“I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t know you then, and I’m not the best at talking to people I don’t know. I can come off as kind of a prick. But, Chop and your friend-“

“Izzy, you mean? The girl you’ve hung out with twice a week for the last month? Do you really not know her name?”

“I know her name.” He narrows his eyes. “Chop and Izzy seem to have hit it off, and I dunno, maybe it doesn’t seem like it, but he’s my best mate and I want him to be happy. And she seems to
make him happy. So, it looks like we’re going to be spending time together and I just… I just don’t want you to hate me, alright? So, I’m sorry I’ve been a pillock. I’m going to try and do better.”

It’s more words than she’s ever heard Finn Nelson speak in all the time she’s known him. And, as insufferable as he is, he’s right. They do need to get along, at least a little. She’d intended to apologize to him anyway, right? Her resistance softening doesn’t have anything to do with the way he looks in his dress slacks and slightly crooked tie, his hair brushed to the side. Not at all.

“Pillock?” She laughs, and his face softens into a wide, relieved sort of smile. She tilts her head to the side, shakes it a little, rolls her eyes. God, she spends a lot of her time around him rolling her eyes. “I don’t hate you, okay? I… I’m sorry, too. I shouldn’t have yelled at you like that, it was uncalled for. You were just trying to help, I know.”

“Yeah, why did you?” He asks, tugging at the cuffs of his dress shirt.

She raises a shoulder in a half shrug. “You’re not the first person to say something mean about me, you know.” He blushes at that, shoots her a sorrowful look. “Those guys, they’ve made something of a career of it, been doing it for years. I’ve been trying to stick up for myself more, yeah? I thought if I finally told them off this time, they’d leave off. I was all geared up to give ‘em a right bollocking when you…”

“Showed up and ruined it.” He says, resigned. “I see. Makes more sense now.” He nods, looking down at the floor. When he looks up again, his eyes are darker, harder. “They really been saying that shit to you for years?”

Rae shrugs, and it’s her turn to shift her feet back and forth over the tile uncomfortably. “They’re just twats.”

“Yeah, but that’s fucked up.” She looks up, but she can’t quite read his expression.

“It happens all the time.” She reminds him gently, and he looks down again, shaking his head. “But, whatever. I shouldn’t have yelled at you and I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” He makes this full bodied sort of shrug, then gives her a big, warm smile. It makes her blush, though she doesn’t really know why. “So, we alright, then?”

She cocks her head and considers him a moment, ducks her face to hide her involuntary smile; his seems to be contagious. She tugs a little bit at the collar of her dress, it seems awfully warm in this huge house. She shudders to think what the heating bill must be, her Mum always complains about it during the winter.

“I suppose.” She gives him a mocking smile.

And then, he steps closer, eyes locked on hers. Rae has a brief, shocking moment where she thinks he might kiss her. She has the curious sensation that time has slowed, or rather that Finn is suddenly moving through some kind of gel, every movement slow and deliberate. He puts a hand on her elbow and his other one hovers in the air at her side, like he’s considering whether or not to put it on her waist. She wonders if her eyes are wide, if her face shows how stunned she is at his sudden proximity.

His hand is warm on her elbow; even through the fabric of her dress, heat seems to pulse out in waves from where he’s touching her. Her hip feels hot too, just from the thought of him resting his hand there. It’s deeply unsettling. She watches his hand move through the viscous air, and then in the blink of an eye, everything returns to normal speed.
He moves his arm over her shoulder, gives her a brief, awkward hug. It’s all angles and stiffness, and he holds it for a beat too long, until she pats his back uncomfortably. He releases her with a big smile and rubs his ear, cheeks pink.

“I guess we should go find the others, yeah? They’ll be wondering where we got to.” He gestures jerkily down the hallway. Rae nods and follows behind him when he starts walking.

What the fuck was that? She mouths at his back, eyes searching the empty hallway for answers. She feels hot and uncomfortable, like she can feel every place where the fabric of her dress is touching her skin. And her head is buzzing indistinctly, weirded out by this strange encounter but not sure exactly what to think.

As she follows Finn’s back down the hall, heels clicking on the marble, fingers trailing over the moldings, it settles into a single thought: That was fucking weird.

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By the time the salad course has arrived, it’s clear that the dinner is not going well. Though she should have expected as much, going to a dinner where there are several courses. She’s been sat at the far end of the table, with Stacey on one side and Finn on the other, in what’s pretty much complete soupy silence, so it’s kind of like she’s got front row seats for the total train-wreck performance of dinner at the Peters’ house.

Chop’s Dad is old, like really old, maybe sixty. He’s got a newspaper at the dinner table that he rarely puts down. He reads as he eats and spills soup down the front of himself when he isn’t paying attention, but just laughs and has the butler bring him a pair of fresh cloth napkins. (Oh yes, there’s a butler serving their meal. It’s preposterous and makes Rae painfully aware that she’s not certain of her table manners. The butler brings out each course and sets it before them grandly. No one seems to notice him, other than her and Izzy. They shoot each other incredulous glances from opposite sides of the table.) Mr. Peters is clearly very fond of his lovely, snobbish wife, as he keeps one hand on her thigh throughout dinner. He seems bemused and slightly indifferent to his son.

Mrs. Peters is another matter altogether. She is very invested in the lives of her daughter and step-son and she herds them around her like a mother hen, making sure they sit closest to her and Mr. Peters. This makes for awkward conversation, as she has to raise her voice to interrogate Izzy, whose name she keeps mangling in various ways. Chop corrects her politely each time, but doesn’t seem to mind much as he continually tries to engage his father in conversation with little success.

It’s quickly obvious that Stacey’s particular brand of backhanded compliments and barely concealed disdain for others are a family trait, learned at the hand of her mother, the master of polite nastiness. Izzy starts the dinner cheerful enough, but by the third question, her cheeks are pink and her answers are startled and chirpy. She gets increasingly polite too, which Rae might find amusing if she weren’t so concerned about her friend.

It’s obvious too, that Rae is a hanger-on and not especially welcome. They make it all the way through the soup without anyone saying a single word to her. Mrs. Peters talks to Stacey, who is silent and sullen and only nods distractedly at her mother, and talks at Izzy, spouting views on a myriad of uninteresting topics. Chop keeps a steady stream of chatter to his Dad, who hmmms every once in a while and occasionally shares sports scores. And Finn, who knows what’s going on with him? He scowls at his soup, glances over at her periodically, nods at nothing. So Rae is left to just listen to the conversation at the other end of the table.

“So, Isobel…” Mrs. Peters doesn’t pause from her previous ramble before launching in, and Rae
blinks because the older woman is literally holding her nose in the air so that she can look down it at Izzy. Rae didn’t know that happened outside of books.

“Oh everyone calls me Izzy, ma’am.” Izzy offers her a cheerful grin for the umpteenth time, just as sunnily as the first.

Mrs. Peters hums in distaste. “Izzy, then.” She’s got a smile that makes Rae think of a shark. “You and ‘Chop’ here, both so fond of the nicknames!” Her chuckle cuts off abruptly. “Stacey tells me you’re in her year at college. What are you studying?”

Izzy blushes, and Rae can’t tell if it’s from the question, or from the movement of Chop’s foot against hers. Rae can feel the table moving from where she’s sat. Probably everyone can. The table cloth jerks and Izzy puts a hand under the table, after which it stops.

“I’m studying fashion design and performing arts, ma’am.”

“Performing arts?” Mrs. Peters questions, very nearly sneering. Rae holds back a sigh. “Do you fancy yourself an actress, then?”

“No, ma’am. Just like theatre, is all. I’m mostly interested in the backstage stuff.” Izzy keeps her eyes down at the table. Chop reaches over in what Rae’s sure is supposed to be a surreptitious move and clasps her hand where it sits in her lap. Izzy smiles at him.

“Dad, Izzy did all the costumes for the play last year. The drama teacher told her they were the best he’s seen in years.” Chop brags, and Izzy hisses his name to get him to stop. “She’s really good at sewing.”

Mr. Peters looks up from his paper and gives Izzy a warm smile. “Costumes, eh? That’s nice.” Izzy blushed and grins at her lap. Chop tugs on her hand. Rae watches like it is the school play.

“Well, it’s a good thing you’re not thinking of acting. It’s such a cutthroat industry, you know. Only the very best make it.” Mrs. Peters sniffs in derision. “I modeled for a while, when I was young. I was very talented, very beautiful. It’s a shame I had to give it up.”

“Why did you give it up, Carol?” Chop asks, and Rae stifles a giggle. She’s not sure if he’s playing dumb or trying to win his step-mother’s favor, but clearly the question throws her off. She puts her fork down decisively and wipes her lips before answering.

Rae takes a bite of her own salad in the pause. She figures that she’s going to have to take a few bites of food during this dinner, and salad seems like the course to be seen eating. She takes a bite of a cucumber and then pushes her food around her plate the way she’s done a million times before. Beside her, Stacey seems to be doing the same thing.

“This is the longest I’ve ever heard you go without speaking, Rae.” She’s been so focused on the Peters’ conversation that Finn’s voice startles her and she jumps. He laughs. She frowns at him until he stops.

“I just don’t know what to say.” She shrugs, shifting greens from one quadrant of her plate to another. “This isn’t really what I expected.”

Finn tilts his head, furrows his forehead like he’s trying to figure her out. “You don’t like arugula?” He asks.

Rae sighs. She doesn’t even know what arugula is. “It’s fine.”

“You’re not really eating.”
“It’s fine.” She says more firmly, drawing the words out. She spears a leaf and puts it in her mouth, chews slowly and smiles at him.

Stacey scoffs. “I wouldn’t worry about it, Finn. I’m certain Rae’s never met a meal she didn’t like, even if it is salad.”

Rae swallows heavily, the food moving down her throat like acid. She’s not sure what she expected from dinner tonight, but it certainly wasn’t this. It was pretty shit when she was just sitting there watching, but somehow it’s even worse now that she has to participate. Oh, right, it’s because of Stacey. Everything is worse when Stacey’s involved.

“Stacey.” Finn scolds. They share some kind of look that Rae can’t quite interpret. Rae frowns, then deliberately turns back to listening to the conversation across the table.

“Fashion, hmm?” Mrs. Peters is saying, and Izzy swallows quickly, coughing as she choke a bit on her fancy lettuce. Chop pats her back with a concerned expression. “You know, I was accepted to a very prestigious University to study design, but my father said that he thought young women ought not to leave home before they’re married. I would have been a great designer if I had gone, I think. I’ve always been told I’ve got an extraordinary eye for that sort of thing.”

“Yes, ma’am. Your blouse is lovely.” Izzy offers. Mrs. Peter’s turns to hide her eye-roll.

“My Stacey inherited the same eye, I believe. She always looks beautiful and put together, don’t you think Francis?”

“How? What?” Mr. Peter’s turns to his wife, his tomato falling from his fork and splashing onto his plate.

Mrs. Peters raises her voice. “Isn’t Stacey beautiful, I said?”

“Oh, yes! Quite stunning!” He replies jovially, smiling affectionately at Stacey, who is staring blankly at her plate. “She’s going to be a great beauty like you, my love.”

Mrs. Peters bends over to give him a kiss on the cheek. Stacey groans quietly.

“Izzy’s got an eye too, Carol.” Chop says. “Jus’ the other day, she had on the cutest outfit. These bright orange tights with this short little skirt and a bright blue top. You shoulda seen it. She looked beautiful.” He turns to Izzy, and the look they share is somehow intimate enough that Rae has to turn away, and she’s used to seeing them snogging on a regular basis. Chop’s dad clears his throat, and she can hear Finn huff beside her. She doesn’t look at him.

Silence reigns uncomfortably for a while. Rae and Izzy keep giving each other wide eyed looks and strained smiles. Both Chop and Izzy eat awkwardly with one hand. Stacey and Finn are both utterly silent, though they do occasionally give each other conspiratorial looks. Mrs. Peters starts in on her fourth glass of wine. The butler comes and replaces the salad plates with fresh ones, this time each bearing its own miniature hen and roasted potatoes on a bed of herbs. Rae frowns. It might be difficult to pretend to eat this.

“So, Izzy,” Mr. Peters booms suddenly, folding his paper and setting it beside his plate, and Chop grins at his father. Chop pretty much hasn’t stopped smiling since they walked in the door. Rae thinks happiness suits him; he looks especially handsome tonight. “What does your father do, dear?”

Rae has to stop herself from gaping. What the hell kind of question is that? Mr. Peters has barely said a dozen words all evening, and this is what he starts with? And she was thinking he wasn’t so
bad. She takes a sip of water from her fancy crystal goblet. Jesus, this dinner is awful. She’d have been better off staying at home and babysitting.

“Oh, uh, he runs the green grocers down on Ryhall Road. Sir.” Izzy says, poking at her chicken with a fork absentely.

“Your parents are shop owners?” Mrs. Peters can barely keep the contempt from her voice. Izzy blushes, but holds her head up straight and steady.

“No, ma’am. My father is the manager.”

Rae closes her eyes and grimaces down at her plate, unable to stand watching this. There’s a moment where she thinks she can hear every person at the table breathing, it’s so quiet. Then Mr. Peter’s makes a gruff sound of approval, and Rae’s eyes open to peer down at him.

“I used to work at a grocer’s when I was a lad. Nothing wrong with a day’s labor, nothing at all.” He says firmly, nodding down at Izzy. “I built myself from the ground up through hard work.”

“Izzy works too, Dad. Plus going to school. She’s a really hard worker.” Rae knows that Chop’s only trying to boost his girlfriend in his Dad’s estimation, but she can’t help but see Mrs. Peter’s horrified sneer. She shakes her head and rubs at her eyes.

“You alright?” Finn asks, leaning on his elbow towards her. Rae leans away and nods, tries her best to give him a reassuring smile, but she’s sure it looks more like a grimace.

“Oh, no. I’m a waitress, sir.” Izzy’s saying in response to a question Rae’s missed. Izzy reaches for her wineglass with a shaky hand and takes a long sip. Rae frowns. She thinks that’s Izzy’s second glass and she knows her friend doesn’t handle alcohol very well, but she can’t really blame her. Poor Iz probably needs the fortification.

“Well, good for you, young lady. Working builds character, I always say.” Mr. Peters replies as he tears off one of the tiny legs of his hen, which he then gestures with. “I’ve been after Arnold here to start building his empire, but I’m pretty sure he’d fail all his classes if he had to balance working with his studies… and his busy drinking schedule.” He chortles merrily.

“Hear, hear!” Chop laughs, raising his glass of ale to tap against his father’s. They cheers and both take long swallows of their drinks. Izzy laughs too and finishes her drink. The butler silently appears and refills it.

Mrs. Peters shakes her head and looks at Stacey for support, but Stacey is having another silent conversation with Finn and misses it. She puts a hand on her daughter’s arm, and leans over to whisper to Stacey when she turns her head. They have a hushed conversation that’s clearly about Izzy, and possibly Rae, based on their derisive looks.

Chop has finally gotten his father’s attention, and the two of them start a boisterous conversation. Mr. Peters’ booming laugh vibrates over the table like thunder. Across the table, Izzy leans towards Finn and engages him in some kind of quiet discussion that involves lots of wide smiles from Izzy, both towards Finn and towards Rae. Rae feels a frisson of anxiety; generally, people looking at her as they talk to someone else is never a good thing, but this is Izzy, so she shakes it off.

She can’t shake off the fact that she’s the odd one out though, as she sits there at pokes at her chicken dismally. She thinks longingly of the hot pot leftovers in her fridge, of how she’d probably be putting the baby to bed about now and settling down in front of the telly. She sighs.

“Rachel!” Mr. Peters’ voice cuts across the chatter at the table, and Rae startles at the sudden

And she hadn’t thought this dinner could get worse. She can feel all six pairs of eyes fixed on her rapidly reddening face. She shoots Izzy a panicked look, but her friend just pulls a face and shrugs. Apparently Rae gets to explain to everyone at the table that she doesn’t have a father. Great.

“Oh, um.” She starts, then takes a long sip of her own wine. Stacey rolls her eyes. “I, uh… My Dad, he uh…” She chokes out, blinking down at her plate. She remembers suddenly that she does have a Dad now, though, she’s got Karim. She lifts her head and opens her mouth, but Finn’s cut in.

“Francis, did you see the Manchester game on Sunday? Bloody slaughter!” Finn calls jovially.

The tension breaks and everyone looks away. Mr. Peter’s turns his attention to Finn, chortles ‘ho ho!’, and then launches into a tirade about the team’s players and performance which requires no participation from anyone. Chop nods and laughs in all the right spots. Finn gives Rae a sidelong look, but she doesn’t meet his eyes. He frowns and looks away before long. Rae returns to picking at her food, now counting the minutes until this horror show ends.

So, of course, that’s when it happens.

There’s some kind of commotion coming from the foyer, and an unnatural stillness falls over the table, even the clatter of silverware on plates ceases. Rae closes her eyes, when she recognizes the familiar voice and wills herself to be anywhere but here. If teleportation were possible at all, this would be the moment it was discovered.

“Rachel Earl!”

“Oh, Jesus, no.” She mutters under her breath. From across the table, Izzy gives her a wide-eyed look of terror. She can’t even look at anyone else. This can’t be happening.

“There you are, young lady! What in the bleeding hell do you think you’re doing?” Linda’s voice arrives in the dining room before she does, but it’s followed shortly by the woman herself, in her nurse’s uniform with the baby on her hip and a giant tote bag on her shoulder. Rae breathes through her mouth.

“What are you doing here, Mum?” She hisses through clenched teeth without turning around.

“What am I doing here? What am I doing here? What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be watching Kitty!” Linda practically shrieks, her voice seeming to reverberate around the heavily windowed room. “We talked about this, Rachel. You have responsibilities to this family!”

Rae turns in her seat to look at her Mum, and she can feel the hatred pouring off of her in waves. She can also feel it bouncing off the mother shield that Linda always seems to wear. Linda scowls back, starts to bounce Kitty as the baby squirms at the tension. Then Linda seems to realize that they’re not in her kitchen, and she shoots an apologetic look at Mr. and Mrs. Peters at the head of the table.

“So sorry. I didn’t mean to burst in here and interrupt your…” She glances around at the impressive spread of food on the table and buffet, “feast. My daughter was supposed to be watching the little one tonight when I was off to work. But heaven forbid she do a single thing to help out! I’m sure you know what I mean, what with this house full of teenagers and all. It’s impossible to get them to do anything! Starting the wash is like torture to ‘em!”

Mrs. Peters looks horrified. She’s probably never started the wash herself, let alone asked one of
them to. They probably have a dedicated member of staff just to do the ironing for them. Rae glances around the table; they all look appalled.

Chop gives her a sympathetic grimace, but Finn’s jaw is so tight that she thinks he might actually break a tooth from the tension. Izzy’s covering her mouth with her hand. Rae pushes her chair back to stand and it catches on the rug beneath the table, causing her to trip and have to right herself on the edge. All the glasses shake. Mr. Peter’s reaches out quickly to catch his and his wife’s, but not before some of the wine sloshes out onto the table cloth.

“Sorry.” Rae tries not to groan at how small her voice sounds as she glances apologetically at the Peters’. Chop’s Dad doesn’t even smile, and she feels her heart sink. She turns to glare at her Mum, hisses through a forced smile, “Mum, can we please talk about this in the other room for a minute?”

Linda considers her for a long, silent moment. Rae is allowed a brief second of hope, until her mum is talking again. Rae knows the moment she hears those deceptively low and even tones that there’s no reasoning with her. “I had to call my supervisor,” she intones, her blue eyes blazing, “and tell her that I’m not going to make my shift, Rae. I had to drive all the way across town,” her voice rises, “with a crying baby, mind, because my daughter,” and Linda is proper yelling now, “fancied going to some dinner with her rich friends. So no, I don’t think so, Rae. I don’t think we’re going to talk about this. Get your things, and get in the bloody car.”

“Mum, please.” Rae pleads as quietly as possible. She can’t believe her Mum is really going to drag her out of this dinner this way. Waves of humiliation are buffeting her, and to make matters even worse, she can feel tears stinging at the back of her eyes.

“Go get in the car, Rae.” Linda spits, eyes narrowed and burning. Rae swallows and stiffens her spine, turning her back firmly to the table. If she has to cry, she’d rather not have them see.

“Mrs. Earl, surely there’s something we can do.” Rae squeezes her eyes shut at the sound of Mr. Peters’ kind voice. He’s only going to make it worse. Linda always gets more stubborn when people question her, Rae’s seen it happen a million times. “Perhaps one of the maids can watch the baby while Rachel finishes dinner. We’ll see her home afterwards.”

“I’ll thank you, but no.” Rae opens her eyes to see Linda stand straighter, raising her chin as she turns to Mr. Peters. “Rachel has responsibilities and this is an important lesson for her. If she had done what she was told, none of this would have happened.”

Mr. Peters clucks, and Rae can hear Stacey’s mother mumbling under her breath. Rae moves closer towards her Mum, ready to just go before this gets worse. She should know better. It always gets worse.

“And it’s Mrs. Boushtat, actually.” Linda says coldly. “I’m married to a lovely foreign man who is away in Tunisia. He may not be wealthy like you lot, but he’s a good man. Works hard for his family. Something we’re trying to teach our daughter.”

“Well, I never!” Mrs. Peters’ mutters, affronted. Rae wishes, for the first time since she’s been out of the hospital, that she could die. That the world would just end in that moment and swallow her whole.

Rae brushes her tears away, takes a deep breath and turns towards the head of the table. “Thank you for your hospitality, Mr. and Mrs. Peters. You have a lovely home.” She says shakily, trying to use her best company manners. “Sorry.” She adds weakly as she walks toward her Mum.

“Bye Rae.” Izzy mutters softly, but Rae can’t even nod to acknowledge it under the weight of her
mortification.

Linda hands Rae the baby, and Rae buries her face in Kitty’s dark curls as she follows her Mum from the room meekly. She doesn’t know why, but as she passes the foot of the table, she turns her head to glance at Finn. He’s staring resolutely at the table cloth, jaw still tight.

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Dear Nan,

I’m absolutely knackered. I feel like I’ve just run a marathon. This has been one of the craziest nights I’ve had since moving here.

Of course something that should be simple and fun turns completely pear shaped when Rae Earl is involved. Though, it did start out pretty well, I must admit. Really, really well, I thought. Before everything got turned around. But we’ll get to that.

So, it was supposed to be a nice dinner with the Peters and the girls. Mistake number one. What was Chop thinking? That bloke. He means well, but he’s just got some crap ideas sometimes. It’s like he’s walking through life with blinders on. And I know it was all about introducing his girlfriend to his parents, but seriously. I told him - really, Chop? A big formal event, that’s how you’re going about this? Let’s be honest, she’s not a formal event type girl. And bringing Rae along, that won’t make it better, will it?

Neither of them knew what they were about with the likes of Mr. and Mrs. Peters.

And he’s only known her for less than two months, what does he really know about her? But when I tried to tell him that, he just wiggled his eyebrows, like, “Oh, I know her…” so immature, right, Nan?

As if all that stuff is any way to know someone. I mean, do I know anything about any of the girls that I’ve been with? No, I don’t. But maybe that’s just me. Maybe normal people don’t need to struggle that much to connect with other people.

Maybe Chop and Izzy’s love is like, meant to be or some crap like that, who am I to say otherwise? Yeah, maybe they were written in the stars, like in fairy tales, complete with disapproving parents and all. Because, and this will come as no surprise to you, Chop’s parents couldn’t have been less pleased with his choice. They were completely immune to Izzy’s so-called charms.

But here’s the thing about this Izzy, Nan. I do get that there’s something about her that is sorta just right for Chop, and maybe I was rooting for those two, deep down. Because if they could make it, then we’d know that it’s, you know, not impossible. Like, stranger things have happened, you know?

Never mind. Anyway. None of that is even relevant anymore. Because, among all the crazy things that went down at this disaster of a dinner party, I also had the misfortune to discover Miss Izzy’s true face. That in fact, she is not at all the innocent little thing she pretends to be. Because, get this, Izzy hit on me, right there at the table.

I’m not kidding. She turned to me in the middle of dinner, with Chop and his parents sitting there, and flat out told me that she’s about to dump my mate, and that if I played my cards right, I’d be the lucky sod who gets her next! I’m not making this up, Nan. I was shocked. Was just sitting there, gobsmacked.

You would probably tell me that it was some sort of misunderstanding, but I’m telling you, it
wasn’t. We’re having the most uncomfortable dinner of the 90’s, yeah? And my best mate’s girlfriend leans towards me and whispers in my bloody ear all about how she knows that there’s someone here I’m interested in, and she just wanted to let me know that that girl is interested as well. So I’m thinking, she must have seen me talking to Rae before, and she thinks something’s going on, which it totally isn’t. But then… she rubs my arm and looks right into my eyes, and says, “And I know what you’re thinking, this girl you’re into is with someone else, but I know for a fact, that that won’t last much longer…” and she sorta smiles at me like we’re sharing a secret!

I don’t even know where she got the idea that I’m into her. I couldn’t be any less into her, believe me, even if she wasn’t Chop’s girlfriend. And after that scene, if I were any less interested I’d be gay.

So I’m going crazy here, Nan. If ever I needed your advice… What am I supposed to say to my best mate, who I’ve known since we were kids, who is wearing his heart on his sleeve - so clearly completely gone on this girl - and she, in return, straight up makes a pass at me. And she kept looking at Rae… like maybe it was all part of some plan. And I don’t want to think that, but what else could it be? She wasn’t even coy about it or tried to hide it or anything.

Well, if she thinks I’m keeping this from Chop, she’s dead wrong. I have no choice but to talk to him. I’ve decided to ask Stacey to help me with this. She’s never seemed to like Izzy that much, anyway, and no one knows how to manipulate people like her. It feels like crap to go to Stacey, because I can’t stand her and I know she doesn’t care about anyone but herself, but it is what it is. I need to make him see that Izzy is totally wrong for him.

See?! Again people put me in situations where I have to intervene. Do I want this responsibility? No. Do I want to ask that viper, Stacey, for bloody favors? God no. But I’ve got to do something! How can I let him go on like this, dating a girl who would come on to anyone, who’s willing to chuck him if a better opportunity comes along? Someone who turns out to be nothing more than a flirt and possibly a gold digger? Oh, I forgot to tell you about the money thing!

I was coming back from the bathroom as the evening was finally winding down, and I see Izzy standing all alone in the foyer. I was debating whether to confront her or to sneak past her, but then Chop comes bounding down the stairs. She’s all smiley and big eyes, and Chop hands her a couple of twenty pound notes! Not sure what to make to this but knowing what I now know, it doesn’t look good, does it?

So one minute she’s all over me, talking about dumping him, and the next she’s acting all coy, like “are you sure this is all right?” And he’s saying, “don’t be silly, It’s my fault for not thinking about all that in the first place.” And then, he gave her a ride home. When he came back he was still talking about how he should have thought about the ride over for her and Rae.

God, this is a sad state of affairs. Chop will be devastated. But it’s for his own good, and he’ll get over her in no time. Next girl to smile at him will erase that one from his mind. Or, he’ll moon over his broken heart for months. He’s so dramatic sometimes. I don’t know why people can’t just get over stuff like that. You had fun, now it’s over. Move on, right? Me, I just push that person out of my mind and I decide to move on, and I do. Won’t catch me mooning over some girl for months and months.

Anyway, I should really be more brief. This letter is already so long, and I haven’t even gotten to the Rae fiasco yet!

Well first, like I said, it started off rather well. I took her aside when she came in the door, and we had a good talk about what happened the other day on the street. I apologized, which was good, but she also apologized, which was amazing. When she wants to be all nice and soft, she’s really something. She looked dead lovely, too, all made up, in this really nice dress… I sorta couldn’t
help myself and hugged her towards the end there. I could tell she was really surprised that I did, but frankly, so was I. Everything about her is surprising anyway, so why should this be any different. I think I flat out stared at her during dinner. Again, couldn’t help it. But it was interesting. Noticed a lot of interesting little things about her. Like, she doesn’t really eat, Nan. I really wonder about that. And when she’s uncomfortable, like she was during all of dinner, she keeps touching her neck, like right there where the shoulder meets the neck…

Yeah, so anyway, I was thinking maybe I could get a few minutes alone with her towards the end of the evening, just to talk to her about Archie again, is all. But then the Izzy thing happened and threw me. And then…

Then. You won’t even believe how excruciatingly awkward it turned out to be, right there in the middle of dinner. We’re eating and that, right? And suddenly this woman bursts into the room, yelling, with a baby on her arm. It was like something out of a play. And she’s yelling about babysitting, and how she had to drive all the way over here, and everyone is just sitting, thinking, who the hell is this crazy lady supposed to be? And it turned out it was, wait for it, Rae Earl’s mum.

This woman was, just… I don’t know. I don’t want to say insane, but… well. She was yelling, didn’t even care that she was humiliating her daughter, or embarrassing herself and the rest of us with her carrying on, nothing. No manners at all.

I could tell that Rae was just about ready to climb out of her own skin, she was so mortified. I could feel it in my own body, how unbelievably horrible that moment was for her. Felt like it was happening to me, in a weird way. I kinda felt like reaching over and putting my hand on hers, to let her know she wasn’t alone, you know. But it wasn’t my place. And maybe it’s good that I didn’t, ‘cause it just got worse and worse. Mr. Peters tried to be nice and save it, but Rae’s mum wouldn’t hear of it, and pretty much insulted all of us, saying something like some people have to work for a living, etc.

I suppose it just goes to show you don’t really know anyone. Even if you think someone’s cool and got it all sorted, or that they could be someone you could hang with, you don’t know all the stuff that goes on behind closed doors. And, you know what? My initial instinct about her was dead on.

She’s not one of us. In fact, she’s light years away. She just doesn’t belong.

It’s a shame, really. When you get her alone… she’s just so lovely and interesting. I kept thinking… maybe if… But there’s no way. Tonight proved it.

Well, like I said, I’m real tired after all that.

I’ll write you again soon.

Love always,
Finn

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Dear Lois,

Well, my friend, I’ve got news you’re not gonna like. I know you think I’m having some sort of will-they-won’t-they, meet-cute, Mills-and-Boon-like thing with Rae, but I’m afraid that after what I’ve witnessed tonight, nothing like that is likely to happen. Sorry, girl, I know you were real invested in our so-called love story…
I’ll tell you all about what happened over the phone, ‘cause it’s the middle of the night and I seriously can’t think about it anymore, but just wanted to share my conclusion - first instincts are always right. You form an opinion of someone, and you should trust yourself that there’s a reason you feel that way about them. That’s just how the world works. Again and again I can see that my first impressions are dead on.

I mean, I liked you straight away, moment I met you, and here we are. And those two, Rae and Izzy… I just knew from day one. And every time I think, maybe, just maybe… something happens to prove again that when people lose my good opinion of them, it’s for a reason. And it’s forever.

So I’m sorry, mate, but whatever romantic story you were telling yourself about Rae and me, it has nothing to do with reality. Rae Earl is just too much. And her friend is not enough. They are just… Just they are not for us.

Talk to you soon.
Big hugs
Finn
Dear Tix,

Well, my life continues to be a right ridiculous mess. I’m really struggling not to give in to the dark thoughts, Fatty, but it’s hard. A cold war is raging in the Earl household. My mum and I aren’t speaking, other than her barking orders at me, and me huffing at her and rolling my eyes.

After she’d humiliated the ever-loving shit out of me at that stupid dinner, making sure I never want to show my face again in any social situation, she is now walking around the house acting as though it was my fault, and I’m the one who’s fucked up. I’m pretty sure she called Karim on a Tuesday specifically to bitch about me, and then she gave me the phone and stood there with her arms folded across her chest, while on the other end of the line Karim was trying to do as she expected of him and bite my head off. But that’s just not him, is it? And so I just stood there and nodded and hummed, pretending to be thoroughly chastised, while he softly and kindly asked me to “please be good girl, take care of your mother, yes? Be nice to her, she is having hard time. And you big sister, very important.” I get all chokey when he starts talking about how we’re his girls, and that he is trusting me with his little baby that he misses so much. I think it’s amazing that this man thinks I am his daughter, when my own for-real wanker of a dad doesn’t remember my actual existence. I did get a little softer after talking to him, and promised him I would be better, and when I gave mum the phone back I could see her eyes getting all misty and lovey-dovey when he started talking to her. I suppose she really is having a hard time being away from him. Love is so weird.

I got over my momentary empathy for her, though, when she wouldn’t come around on me being grounded. I can’t go anywhere and escape the house, can’t see my sweet Archie, who is walking around out there, like a sexy gazelle amongst the hungry lionesses. God only knows what desperate girl is throwing her tits at him as we speak. He does call me a lot, which is just the sweetest thing. He doesn’t seem to mind that we can’t see each other, and we talk for hours (until mum yells) about so many interesting things, like music and art and history. Archie knows so much, and I try to keep up. All right, on occasion I do let him go on while my mind goes to a wonderful land where he talks dirty to me in that informative, geeky voice, but mostly we really have the best phone conversations. He’s so easy to talk to. I just wish he would be in arm’s reach again. I really want to try all that kissing-and-more stuff Izzy is always on about, you know? I need to experiment.

Anyway, so talking to Archie is pretty much the highlight of my days. Beyond that, it’s just college in the morning, then straight home to babysit. Me and Kitty are spending a lot of time dancing around the house (me dancing, Kitty sitting on my hip and laughing and clapping and being adorable) to Blur, because when mum’s not home and it’s just me and my little angel, it’s the perfect time to start her proper education. She likes “Song 2” the best. We also watch a lot of Postman Pat, because Kitty has a huge crush on him.

Yes, you can see that my life is just full of excitement.
At college I try to stay away from that group, you know, Chop and Finn and Stacey and them. I don’t think I could stand what they have to say about that awful dinner. I catch some of them looking at me from afar when I sneak past, but other than Chop when he’s with Izzy, none of them have tried to talk to me. Thank God.

Chop and Iz are still going strong. Izzy says that the dinner thing with mum wasn’t that bad (ha!) and no one talked about me after I left (yeah, right), and that it was all right, really. She had a good time. I was a little annoyed with her for having a good time when I was so mortified, but she’s Izzy, I can’t stay mad at that ginger face. Her and her boy-toy are trying to convince me to go to the big Lucas Halloween party with everyone, but seriously, Tix? That’s the last thing I’m in the mood for. What would I go as, for starters? Not a lot of sexy fat girl outfits out there. I can just hear the whispers now. The shit I’ll get from Stacey and Co. Not to mention a certain Mr. Nelson who always finds fault in every single thing I do or say, and who looked utterly disgusted last time I saw him, when my mum dragged me away from the Peters’.

Chloe is also on my case about this party, like, every day. I know that it’s this huge deal, because only college kids and up can get in, and even then only if they’re the “cool kids”. I guess she thinks I should be grateful that my association with her gives me a pass to the social event of the whatever, but really that only makes me want to go less.

I was cross with Chloe for a long time, thinking she really sold me out that night. She kept trying to apologize, and last night she’d offered to make me up and go shopping for the party, which to her isn’t an insult, but like a proper gesture. When I wouldn’t, she broke and hugged me really hard and said she knows she fucked up and it’s not fair, it’s just that there’s this guy, and he’s so cool and hot and he’s older so she has to make extra effort so he lets her hang with his mates, so if he invites her somewhere she has to go. She just likes him so much, and he’s so fit, and one day I’ll know what it’s like when there’s a boy that’s super important to me. I told her, “Hello? I’m dating Archie!” And she was like, “Oh, right. Still? Oh, okay. Then, you know.”

I’m so sick of every person in the entire world!

Other than you, naturally, dearest Fatty. I will never go off you. I miss you so much sometimes in the middle of the night, dying to talk to you but I know I can’t. So I just read all the letters again and that helps.

Will write more soon.
Big love,
Rae

+++ 

The phone rings.

“Rae! It’s Izzy!” her mum shouts from downstairs.

Rae slips off the bed where she was reading a new steamy novel, and picks up. “Okay!” she shouts, and Linda hangs up.

“Hiya, babes!” Izzy starts.

“Before you start, let me assure you again that I’m not going and there’s no use bending my ear about it. Again.”

“Oh, yeah, I know you said you’re not going, but Chop and me were wondering if you need a ride with us, in his car. We can swing by and pick you up, he says it’s no trouble.”
“Oh, thanks lovely, but I’m all sorted for a ride because I’M NOT GOING.”

“Oh. Well, we thought maybe it was because you needed a ride or -”

“Nope. I just don’t fancy it.”

“But Rae, everyone’s going and it’ll be such a laugh!”

“Don’t you start again. You guys go and have a great night, tell me all about it.”

There’s a definite disappointed silence on the other end of the line.

“Okay, Iz?”

“Yeah... I guess.”

“Good girl.”

“It won’t be the same without you, Rae.”

“You’re sweet. Talk to you later?”

“Yeah, okay.”

+++  The phone rings.

“Rae, Chloe for you!”

“Okay!”

“Hiya Rae!”

“Chloe? Where are you?”

“I’m at Ian’s getting ready for the party. But don’t tell your mum, she thinks I’ve gone to Stacey’s.”

“What’s all the laughing in the background? I can barely hear you.”

“Oh, that’s just the boys playing video games and... You know, getting ready for the party! What? Yeah, I’m coming, just a sec!”

“So when you say you’re getting ready, you don’t mean make up and stuff, right?”

“More like vodka and stuff, babe. Heh! These guys are crazy, Rae! I’m having a blast -”

“Okay, but Chlo, don’t you think you should take it easy with all that stuff? And who’s driving you if you’re drinking?”

“Rae! Stop being an old lady! I just rang to ask you one last time, do you want me to swing by and get you all ready for the party? Cause I’m making plans and it’s going to be too late when you eventually decide you want to go.”

“No, no, you do not need to swing by anything. I don’t need a makeover and I have no intention of going to this bloody party. I’ve told you!”
“Guys, shut up, I’m trying to talk to Rae. Rae! My cousin Rae! No, you haven’t met her, she’s - no, I’m not getting her anywhere near you lot, ha ha!! Yeah, so shut up a sec. Listen, babe, babe, are you there?”

“Yeah, but Chloe -”

“Listen, I’ve been thinking, I could fix you up a great costume in no time, I have this black thing that could be like a cape and I have this witch’s hat, and you could, like, hold an apple or something.”

“Oh, great, your idea is that I go as an old hag? Ta so much, but I’d rather stay at home and read about the adventures of the Duchess in Disguise.”

“Oh, you’re joking, don’t stay home and read some boring book, Rae!”

“It’s not boring! The Duchess and the Blacksmith are locked together in the hidden cellar over night and it’s really hot in there and I think they’ll start taking off clothes soon.”

“...Okay, that does sound good, I’ll borrow that book after you’re finished. But seriously, you can read any day. The Big Lucas Halloween Bash only comes once a year!”

“And yet it’ll just have to take place without me.”

“It won’t be the same, though.”

“I know. Now go back to your mates. And Chlo, try not to drink too much, alright?”

“Yes, Grandma.”

+++ The door bell rings.

There’s a long stretch of silence after her mum gets it, and then:

"Rae!"

"What? I'm busy!"

"It's Archie, but I'll just let him know you're busy, yeah?"

"Oh - no! Send him up!"

Rae jumps off the bed, shoving the steamy book under her pillow, then takes it out and throws it under the bed. Archie is coming up. He's about to enter her own private bedroom, and she's just lying there in her tatty house clothes and her hair all messed up!

She does a quick check. Bra - still on. Thank god for that. Breath - okay. She smells like the peppermint tea she had half an hour ago. She hopes. She looks around the room frantically, as the sound of her mum's prattle and Archie's polite laughter is coming closer up the stairs. The room is as good as it could be. No visible underthings lying about, nothing too embarrassing... at the very last minute she picks up an abandoned T-shirt and throws it over the pile of romance novels by her bed.

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Archie arrives at her door, smiling his sweet smile, fixing his glasses. Her mum is obviously beside herself by the mere existence of a male suitor for her unmarriageable daughter, since she’s forgotten Rae's grounded and is not supposed to have visitors. Jesus, Rae hasn’t seen her smile
directly at her since their big fight, and here she is, touching Archie’s shoulder, her other hand placed on her bosoms as she giggles, "He’s a real charmer, that one, eh?"

Rae can’t fathom what Archie might have said to her to get her eating from the palm of his hand, but she’s not questioning it, because Linda is leaving them alone in the room and going downstairs (not before her smile drops and she pointedly opens Rae’s door all the way and grumbles about not being born yesterday, to be foolish enough to leave them two alone together).

They smile at each other sheepishly as Linda leaves. Archie has his hands in his pockets and he looks around him for a few seconds before his gaze comes back to her. “Your room’s really cool,” he smiles.

“Oh, thanks!” Rae chirps, and her voice is way too high and way too loud. Fucking relax, she tells herself, or he’ll guess you’ve never had a boy over.

“Your mum’s funny,” he adds and she rolls her eyes.

“Yeah, funny as in a total weirdo from the planet Melmac.”

There’s a short silence where they both kinda stand there not knowing how to continue. Suddenly Rae jerks out of the moment, and turns to the bed, pulling on the edge of the blanket to make it flatter, and gestures for him to sit, all the while prattling on, unable to stop. “Yeah, I can’t even believe she’d let you up, to my room I mean. Not because it’s weird that - I mean, just ‘cause we’re in the middle of a huge row and I’m supposed to be grounded, so I don’t know how you did it…”

Her voice trails when Archie sits really close to her on the bed (on the bed!). He shrugs. “I’m really good with mums.” he says with a smile.

“Oh, ha! Right…” Rae laughs, then wonders what the hell she’s laughing about. She’s so nervous she feels like jumping up and running around the room to let some of the energy out. She knows there should be some sort of conversation going, but no one says anything. When they speak on the phone, nothing can stop the hurricane of words flowing between them, and now they’re finally side by side and her mind is blank, completely empty.

If we’re boyfriend and girlfriend then surely we shouldn’t be so awkward around each other, Rae thinks. Right? Or maybe, it occurs to her suddenly, I’m reading this moment all wrong, and this is not a time for small talk, but something else entirely...

She looks at him shyly. He really did sit very close. His bent knee is almost touching her thigh. Maybe it’s finally kissing time. Of course, they have kissed before, in front of people even, but it was always sort of brief. Archie would just grab her suddenly and snog her good, like he really wants her but is trying to hold back. Then he’d let go and look away, say hi to someone walking past, or order coffee or something. Maybe he wants to kiss her now, but is suddenly shy because they’re alone, or he’s weirded out by her mum, and he doesn’t know how to make the move. Maybe she should help him? She is allowed to initiate, right?

Oh, for fuck sake, she thinks, at this rate I’ll be an old woman before anyone does anything. She turns her head to him and smiles when he looks at her. He smiles back. “I’ve missed you. Seeing you, I mean,” she says in a voice she hopes sounds girly and flirty.

“Totally. Me too.”

Rae hesitates one more second, then gingerly places her hand on his thigh. “I’m glad you came over.”
Archie’s face flush and his eyes are on her hand. “Yea-”

Rae jumps him, presses her body to his and her lips to his mouth, in a messy and quick kiss. She looks at him to gauge his reaction and can’t tell what he’s thinking, but she figures he’s a guy and probably up for anything, so she tries again. This time she has better aim and she’s softer, and their mouths touch once, twice, and it’s tingly and nice. Archie raises his arm to hesitantly touch her hair, and she goes for a deeper kiss. That familiar warm and tight feeling starts in her lower regions, and boy, that feels nice. They kiss for a few long moments, and Rae waits for him to up the stakes, try to coax her mouth open so their tongues can battle for dominance - like they say in all the books by her bed - but he doesn’t, so she does it herself. She tries doing it just like the books say and the way Archie did in some of their other kisses, but she’s not sure she’s doing it right. It feels forced and strange, not at all rock-your-world fun like Izzy and everyone else say. Archie’s tongue doesn’t seem to be interested in battling hers for dominance or anything really. Rae makes one more try to get things a little more heated, and she moves her hand up his thigh.

At which point Archie jumps back, detaches from her lips and clears his throat. His cheeks are flushed and he looks uncomfortable. Rae tries to see if he’s got a hard-on and maybe that’s why - but he gets off the bed and goes to the window and looks at her apologetically. “You’re mum could come in, we shouldn’t... get... carried away.”

He’s right, of course he’s right, and she’s trying to swallow her disappointment. She didn’t get to that rock-your-world place, not even close. She can’t help but think again that it’s her, that there’s something wrong with her. If everyone else can feel it - Izzy and Chloe and the people in the movies - why can’t she?

It would be so fucking ironic if Rae Earl turned out to be frigid.

“So,” Archie says suddenly into the awkward silence, and she jumps a bit with surprise. “What’s the plan about this fancy dress party? Shall I pick you up, or are we meeting there?”

_Huh? What? Huh?_ Rae stares, baffled not only by the complete change of mood and topic, but by the content as well. “The party? How do you know - we didn’t talk about going to the party.”

He gives her a dazzling smile. As if her tongue wasn’t rummaging around in his mouth less than two minutes ago. “Thought it was a given, everyone’s talking about it.”

How does he even know about that? He doesn’t go to college. But people tell Archie things. People love Archie, she reminds herself, trying to cheer herself up. And he likes _me_.

Still, she shrugs and leans back on her arms. “Well I wasn’t going.”

Archie plays with a dusty Rubik's Cube he finds on her shelf, totally unfazed. “Of course we’re going, Rae.”

“I hate those people.”

“But you don't hate me...” he looks up from his busy fingers and smiles flirtatiously. It's hard to keep holding on to her crappy mood when he does that.

She smiles back. “Well, I don’t have a costume.”

He waves his hand about and puts the cube down. “Oh, we’ll figure something out! I’ll go home and look for something to improvise, and you do the same. I wish we could have gone like with a couple’s costume, but I guess it’s too late now.” he looks positively over the moon now, jumping on the balls of his feet like a happy puppy. She wants to get swept away by his excitement but
how can she? She wasn’t going! Didn’t she tell everyone she wasn’t going? It’s okay for him, to get all dressed up and go where there are a bunch of people who thinks he’s the cat's meow.

“Nobody wants me there, Archie,” she confesses silently, eyes fixed on the floor between them.

“That’s why you have to go! All those fuckers can’t tell you where to be or what to be.”

“You don’t get it. Those people hate me.”

He’s at her side in a second, leaning in front of her, hands on her knees, making her heart thump and her brain scrambly. “You? Who could hate you? You’re the coolest girl in the world, Rae!”

“They make fun of me.”

He shrugs it off almost immediately. “Fuck ‘em. We’ll go together! We’ll be the best couple there, even if we don’t dress up in a couples’ costume. Just let someone try and make fun of my girl. They’ll have to answer to me!” he gives her knee a squeeze. “Yeah?”

She chuckles, then nods her head, barely able to talk, she’s so moved. This is amazing. He is amazing. No one has ever offered to protect her. No one ever called her ‘his girl’. She doesn’t know how she’s so lucky to get him. ”Yeah.” she whispers.

“That’s my girl.” he slaps her thigh playfully, and presses a kiss to her cheek on his way up.

“Better be off, must find a fabulous costume to make everyone proper jealous!”

Rae gets up and follows him to her bedroom door, then down the stairs. “I really wasn’t going, you know. But I appreciate that you care if I go or not, and that you want me there.”

“I do, of course I do.”

“And that you are willing to mingle with all those horrible people we hate.”

“Can’t let them win, Rae.”

“You know your old friend Finn Nelson will be there.”

Archie’s step is hesitant for a second, then he continues towards the door. “Well he doesn’t get to tell me where to go or what to be anymore, either. So, fuck him an’ all.”

She knows there’s something behind that statement but this doesn’t seem to be the time to ask.

"Damn straight!” she nods.

They stop at the door, he looks back at her and smiles. “You really are the best, Rae. Whatever happens, I’m really glad I met you.”

Confused, she smiles back. “Me too...”

He leans in and kisses her fast on the lips, too fast to really feel it, but her heart soars.

“See you in a few hours, at the party!” he calls from the driveway. “Go start working on that costume!”

Oh, fuck, she thinks. Now I need a fucking costume.

+++

“So, you’re going after all, eh?” Linda says, crossing her legs as she leans against the doorway.
It’s a conciliatory pose, Rae knows. They’ve had enough fights and too few “sorries” that they’re both familiar with the body language of apology. She wants to snipe some more, hold out in anger a few more days just to make sure her mother knows that what she’d done was not okay. But she’s tired of stiff-necking and cold-shouldering. It’s so much more work to stay angry. And, she’s probably going to need some money for a costume, so…

“I guess.” Rae sighs, turning to face her mother straight on. She lets her eyes go wide and innocent. Linda blinks back, just the barest hint of surprise. “If I can find something to wear.”

“Hmm.” Linda taps a finger over her lips, a sly smile winking through. “I have an idea. Now, don’t get upset, but…”

Linda spins out of the room, and Rae trails after her. “What?”

She’s buried in the wardrobe when Rae enters Linda’s bedroom, plopping heavily on the bed and watching her Mum’s round bottom swaying as she digs for something. Rae lifts her eyes towards the ceiling and blows out a long breath. She still feels a little jittery from having Archie in her bedroom.

“Aha!” Linda crows, but still it takes a while for her to emerge from the clothing forest. Rae imagines her brushing her way out of the rows of blouses and slacks in Chronicles of Narnia style, with flecks of snow in her hair and wide eyed wonder. But Linda’s just red-faced and dishevelled when she turns around, clutching a piece of creamy white fabric.

“Here.” Linda holds out her arm proudly.

Rae takes the garment, letting the satin and chiffon slip through her fingers slowly. She hums in pleasure, it’s so soft. She fumbles through the fabric, finds the collar and holds it up, smiling as it flows gracefully to the floor.

And then she drops it.

“Mum, no.” Rae says, shaking her head in horror. “No, no. No.”

“Oh, don’t be like that Rachel. It’s fine.” Linda clucks, shaking her head.

“Mum, that’s…” Rae points an accusatory finger at the white puddle on Linda’s carpet. “That’s not fine. That’s… that’s lingerie.”

“I never actually wore it for, well, you know. I bought it when I was pregnant with your sister. Karim’s so fit, so,” Linda sighs dreamily, “rugged, and I was feeling a little less than my best. It’s important to maintain intimacy, love, even when you’re carrying around a watermelon in your bleeding trousers! But we didn’t end up needing it, Karim’s such a beast, and…”

“For the love of God, Mum, please stop. I’m begging you.”

“Alright, alright!” Linda holds her hands up in surrender, then bends down to pick up the nightgown from the floor and shake it loose. “I’m just saying, it’s unsullied. I thought you could use it for a costume somehow.”

“What would I be?” A preggers sex-crazed lunatic? Rae thinks but doesn’t say.

“Dunno.” Linda holds it up against Rae’s chest and squints like it will help. She nudges Rae over to a mirror and Rae can’t help but notice how pretty the dress is, how nice it looks against her pale skin and dark hair. She takes it from her Mum, pressing the fabric closer to her waist under her breasts. “I think it’ll look nice on you, go try it on.”

Rae twists a little in front of the mirror, examining the movement of the fabric. There’s so many layers of soft, airy netting that it glides as she moves. She purses her lips, still torn about the ickiness of wearing her mother’s old lingerie.

“Just go try it on.” Linda urges. “If it doesn’t work, I’ll give you twenty quid to go down to the shops and try to find something.”

Rae grins at her Mum through the mirror and moves into the small ensuite bathroom. She strips out of her jeans and t-shirt and into the dress as quickly as possible. She pushes back her hair, squares her shoulders, then looks into the mirror.

Well… the cleavage is a little lower than she’s used to. But other than that… It’s actually really nice. She looks kind of good. Pretty and floaty and even a little bit sexy. She can’t help but grin when she imagines the way Archie’s eyes will bug out when he sees all her goods on display like this. Maybe this dress is the clincher, the thing that will finally push them over the edge into the proper-snogging-hands-everywhere-so-good-you-could-die territory.
“Well, come out and let me see!” Linda calls impatiently. Rae takes a second to hike up the neckline before stepping out.

“Oh Rachel.” Linda sighs, and something about it makes a flush steal over Rae’s neck. Her mum moves her in front of the mirror again, stands behind her and rests her chin on Rae’s shoulder to look at her. “You look so lovely. It suits you. You could be a princess.”

Rae curls her lip at the idea. Her, a bloody princess? She can just imagine what Stacey and her gang of sycophantic Barbie dolls would say if she came in wearing a tiara. She doesn’t want to make a spectacle of herself, she just wants to go to the party and fade into the background so that she can have a good time with her mates and her boyfriend in peace.

“What about a ghost?” Rae asks, starting to envision how she could tear bits here and there, tatter up the hem, paint herself even paler.

“A ghost?” Linda echoes, squinting her eyes again. “I don’t see it. A princess is much better.”

+++ She’s nervous. Like knees bouncing, sweat-running-down-her-neck-probably-ruining-her-make-up, stomach churning, heart racing nervous. She shouldn’t be, really. She looks great. And it’s something of a miracle for her to be able to say that. The dress turned out perfect. Tattered, swishy, pretty, sexy. The pallor suits her, the added whiteness of her skin highlighting perfectly her dark eyes and dark hair. She looks great. If only that helped her anxiety.

Linda hums along with the radio cheerfully, and Kitty gurgles in the backseat. Rae stares out into the deepening darkness, watches the trees fly by as they speed towards the party.

“I’m so excited for you, love. I remember what it was to be sixteen and off to a party to meet a boy I fancied. You’re going to have such a great time.”

Rae swallows, rocking with the car as they turn off the main road and onto a narrow street. They’re close now, she can see the cars lining the curb up ahead.

“Archie’s a nice boy, Rae. A very nice boy. I quite like him, have I told you that?”

“You might have mentioned it, oh, a thousand times or so.” Rae mutters without looking over at her Mum.

“Well, I do. He’s a nice boy, a good boy. And rather fit, if you don’t mind my saying. You could hardly do better.”

She’s trying to be encouraging, Rae knows, but it only serves to remind Rae of how much better Archie could do. But no. She’s not going to think like that tonight. They’re going to be together, like officially together, at this huge party that everyone in the world is invited to. He wouldn’t have asked her to go with him if he didn’t like her a lot. If he didn’t want to be her boyfriend. He wants her, she looks great, everything will be fine.

Rae tugs at the neckline of her dress again, plucks at the tatters of fabric. Kitty makes a screech from the backseat. The car slows down, sliding to a stop. They’re in front of the Lucases now. Rae reaches for the door, but Linda puts a hand on Rae’s arm to stop her. She looks back at her Mum.

“You look beautiful, Rae. He’s not going to know what hit him.” Linda smiles softly, tucks back a strand of hair that Rae promptly shakes free again. “You make almost as nice a ghost as you would have a princess.”

“Thanks, Mum.” Rae smiles, the last stronghold of resentment slipping away into the night. Linda faces forward again, putting her hands on the steering wheel and clearing her throat. “Right then. Be safe. Don’t drink too much. Ring if you need me.”

“Okay.” Rae opens the door, then shoos her Mum off with both hands when she doesn’t drive off. Linda waves. Rae rolls her eyes.

When the car is finally gone, Rae stands up straighter and makes her way up the drive. She wishes she hadn’t blown off Izzy, hadn’t told Chloe she wasn’t going, hadn’t made plans to meet Archie there. It’s terrifying to be walking into the party all by herself. She stops outside the front door to give herself a little pep talk, but before she can start any affirmations, the door opens and a pair of boys spill out with a cloud of smoke and music. Rae slips past them into the party.

It’s insanely crowded, far more than she’d expected, and she’d expected a lot. There’s people everywhere, clustered into little groups, most surrounded by their own halo of smoke. Rae cranes
her head, lifting on her toes to peer into the crowd and find her friends. Find anyone she knows, really.

So of course the first person she spots is Stacey.

Stacey’s in the center of a cluster, all her girls and a couple of guys flanked around her. She’s wearing a skintight black body suit and cat ears, her eyes painted with dramatic wings. Her lips purse when she sees Rae, and it feels like the crowd parts between them, like Rae’s standing in a spotlight, her tattered white dress practically glowing in the dark room. Beads of sweat slick down her back, pool on the elastic band of her underwear. She freezes, waiting for the sneers, for insults to be flung across the room like lances.

But instead, Stacey just… looks away.

Rae stays stunned and frozen for a while longer, watching as the other girl shakes out her hair and smiles at the boy beside her. That’s it? That’s all Stacey’s going to do?

Rae must look even better than she thought. A haze of unfamiliar emotion slips through her, like she really is a ghost. She stands taller, prouder, a bright smile lighting her lips. She looks so good that even Stacey hadn’t had anything to say. She can’t wait until she finds Archie.

+++ Amy finds her first, shouting Rae’s name over the boom of the speakers, raising her arm in the air to wave her over.

“Hey!” Rae grins. She can’t seem to help the grinning.

Amy’s wearing a track suit with a big gold medal hanging around her neck. She looks almost exactly like normal. “I didn’t think you were coming.” She yells.

Rae shrugs. “I changed my mind. My boyfriend’s around here somewhere.”

Amy shakes her head, pointing to her ear. She’s holding a plastic cup of beer, and Rae suddenly feels really parched. She bends over to yell in Amy’s ear.

“Have you seen Chloe? I need a drink!”

Amy smiles, turns to make her way out of the room. Rae follows, hoping they’re headed towards some kind of booze. They wind through the bodies in the darkness, and eventually Rae sees the light pouring out of the kitchen. They head in, squeezing past a group of boys hovering around the kitchen table and cheering as a group of people play some kind of drinking game.

As they approach the island, Rae spots a familiar face and cheers, “Chop!”

He spins around, a goofy grin wide across his face. Izzy’s head pops out from behind him, and she streaks towards Rae, both girls laughing through a wobbly hug.

“Rae! Oh my God, you’re here! I can’t believe it!” Izzy shouts, shaking her head and gesturing to Rae’s dress. “And look at you! You look well hot!”

“No, I mean it. You look amazing!” She spins, tugging on Chop’s bicep. He spills the bottle of booze he’s been pouring, splashing it over the floor. “Doesn’t she look amazing, Chop? Look at her!”

“You do look fucking good, Raemundo.” Chop admires her for a moment, then jerks his head and looks around the room.

“Thanks, guys.” Rae blushes all the way down to her toes. “Is Chloe here? What are you up to?”

“Izzy steps aside and sweeps her hands over the island, nearly covered with tiny shot glasses that Chop is filling. There have to be over fifty.

“Holy hell.” Amy mutters, and Chop grins up at them.

“Better get to drinking, girls!”

+++ “Okay, okay, okay!” Rae calls, holding up a quelling hand. The cheering around her dies down a little. “One more round, and then I have to go find my mate!”

“No!” A boy pleads beside her elbow. She’s forgotten his name already, though he’d only told it to her half an hour ago. He’s wearing an enormous Elvis wig, though he’s got jeans on instead of the jump suit. “You’re fucking annihilating, Rae. You can’t quit now!”

“One more, really. My friend is here somewhere.” She bends low over the table, lining up her shot. Her opponent across the table, a tall kid with dark skin and dazzling white teeth, watches her
with narrowed eyes. She straightens, finishes off the last of the warm beer in her cup, then casually tosses the ball, bouncing it across the smooth wood to plonk perfectly into one of the cups on his end. She shoots him a smug smile, and he shakes his head as he fishes out the ball and downs the beer.

“O-ho!” Chop appears beside her, handing her a fresh drink and waggling a finger. “Our Raemundo’s a top bird, a real top bird. She’s going to take you down, Simon. You should just walk away now, mate!”

“Never surrender!” Simon crows, sinking his own ball in one of Rae’s cups. She drinks it in a single gulp, barely even fazed. This party is kind of amazing. She’s so glad Archie changed her mind.

+++ She’s looking for him on the dance floor, peering around the writhing dancers, looking for his tall, narrow body. She’d love to dance with him right now, love to rub herself all over him, press her hot chest to his. She thinks maybe his glasses would fog up in here, maybe she could make steam rise out of him. She giggles, shifting her hips with the music. Izzy appears beside her, spinning around in happy circles, laughter flinging off into the music. Rae grins. She’s so happy, so warm, so buzzed. It’s blissful. She puts a hand on Izzy’s shoulder, and the two of them spin together, just like they used to as little girls.

+++ She’s a little unsteady on her feet but she feels great. Moving around in this dress, the new sensation of walking in boots with heels, every step she takes feels like she’s dancing. Chuckling, she hugs a stone wall and flings herself around the corner, pretending that she’s in a musical, and almost slams right into... Finn Nelson and a plastic cup full of beer. Some of it splashes over, sending tiny drops spraying across her chest. He starts apologizing, then registers that it’s Rae he almost bumped into, stops abruptly mid-sentence, mid-word actually, and just... stares at her.

"Hi," she says. They haven't said two words to each other since that crap dinner.

Finn mumbles something that might be interpreted as some sort of greeting.

Rae looks down to survey the damage. It’s not so bad. “At least it’s not another one of my Stone Roses shirts.” She says, brushing the droplets away. When she looks up at him, his eyes are transfixed, glued to the wide hem of her cleavage. Rae feels an immediate rush of uncomfortable shame, as if she got caught doing something she shouldn’t. She stops her hand from flying up to cover herself, and instead goes for tucking her hair behind her ear.

Finn is still staring, stone faced and silent.

"Are you alive in there?" she waves a hand before his face.

"Yes." He swallows. And clears his throat.

But that’s all he says, so she shifts uncomfortably again. Why is he always so weird? She pulls at the folds of fabric at her thighs, waves it back and forth a bit. "D'you like my costume? Made it myself."

"Did ya."

She makes bigger waves, lifting it up a bit so he can see her awesome newly-dyed boots.

"Did ya." he says. His eyes follow the motion of the fabric. He looks a bit green. Motion sickness? She makes bigger waves, lifting it up a bit so he can see her awesome newly-dyed boots.

Something is happening to her. Did someone turn the air-conditioning off? She swirls her dress again and fans her face. "Yeah, I did." she says. "It was an old négligée. See?" And she leans forward, to pull the fabric up and show him the slip underneath.

Jesus. What is she doing?
She straightens herself up so fast she feels dizzy. She brushes all the fabric down, pulls the bodice up. "Anyway... yeah." she says dumbly, feeling like she's blushing from head to toe. This time she can't help folding her arms over her cleavage. Is that helping? Or just making her boobs more pronounced? She can't tell, and Finn's stare is burning a hole through her.

"Okay. So that's my costume." she mumbles, and that seems to snap him back into the here and now. He makes a sudden half turn in place, and leans against the wall. He brings the beer to his lips and drinks like a man who's been crawling around in the desert. An Adam's apple is actually... quite a sexy thing, Rae thinks suddenly.

She should go and look for Archie. Finn's such a prick, barely said a word to her, and now he's just leaning there.

He does do a good lean, though.

"Jordan Catalano?" she asks with a cheeky smile.

Finn is startled. Did he forget she's there?

"Jordan Catalano. My So Called Life? The guy who leans?"

He looks at her blankly. "Wha'?"

"Is that who you're dressed as?" she smiles broader at his confusion, then his annoyance as he snaps.

"I'm not dressed as anyone. I wish people would stop trying to guess."

She raises her hands in surrender, "Then by all means, come to a fancy dress party dressed as yourself. Makes sense."

In the following silence, she wonders why he doesn't just leave. She wonders why she doesn't just leave. She also thinks of three other people he could have been dressed as. A giggle tries to escape, but she manages to hold it in. However, this silly silence won't do.

"Well," she sighs heavily. Her bosoms go up, then down, in a very pleasing way, she thinks. "I've had a go, now according to the rules of small talk, it's your turn to say something."

Finn looks like he's trying his hardest not to look at her while still looking at her from the corner of his eyes. He takes another sip of beer, and says nothing.

"Like, you could say something about people's costumes. Or, hey, we could talk about my costume again-"

"No." he says quickly. She doesn't know why it's funny but it is. She may be a little drunker than she thought.

"Okay, or you could say something like, wow, look at all these fucking people, why did they invite so many more boys than girls? You know? Something meaningless, like that."

He looks down into his empty cup. "I don't do small talk."

She blinks. "Too big for small talk. Got it."

He shakes his head and almost turns toward her, but then he doesn't. "I'm just... I can't talk about nothing with just anyone."
"It takes a special someone to talk about nothing with?"

"Huh?"

"So you're saying, being a big snob is like being a certain height - nothing you can do about it."

"No, I - hey, I'm not a snob." Here we go, she got him to turn towards her. Points to Earl! "I have standards."

"You have prejudices."

"I choose the people who are worth my time."

"Who the fuck are you, that your time is so important?"

It's not funny anymore, she's really remembering what it is about him that she dislikes so much.

"Look - I'm not explaining it right. Some people can get along with just anyone. They can fit anywhere. I could never do that. I don't know how to, just, talk to people..."

"Because you're a big snob?"

"Because people are..." Finn's voice fades and she is suddenly very aware of the fact that he is standing very, VERY close. So close that if she wasn't taller than him, he'd be hovering above her. He leans his shoulder against the wall, like he can't hold his body weight anymore, and his eyes travel down her body. What just happened? What'd changed? Finn lifts his eyes to hers and suddenly they are full of meaning she has no way of deciphering and she holds her breath to find out the rest of the sentence. People are... what are people? Scary? Confusing?

"Boring." He breathes. His voice is low and rumbly. She doesn't dare look, but she thinks that maybe, his fingers are touching one of the many layers of her dress.

What is going on?!

With superhuman effort, Rae rolls her eyes and manages to huff out words without sounding out of breath at all. "Yeah, I can see what you mean." She detaches from the wall. "Well, I'm going to look for my date now. See ya."

She doesn't look back. She goes straight to the other side of the house, through the front room and back to the kitchen where she’s greeted with a loud chorus of triumphant cheers.

“The champion returns!” Someone cries. Rae doesn’t even wait for an opponent to sink a ball before she gulps down the beer. She really needs to find Archie.

+++ 

“He’s not coming!” Denny hollers into her ear, one hand on her shoulder for better balance. Rae starts to feel a little unsteady herself. “What?” She asks, though she’d heard him just fine. She can’t quite wrap her head around it. This beautiful dress, wasted. All these boobs, wasted. Her, so full of alcohol and hormones, wasted. She snickers a little at the joke. “Archie’s not coming! He came by the coffee shop just as I was closing! Said he didn’t want to see that prick Nelson! Said to say he was sorry! He’ll call you tomorrow!” His hand clenches almost painfully on her shoulder, breath hot and sour as he yells every sentence. Rae pulls away, shaking her head. “Fuck.” She says, at what would normally be regular volume, but is totally lost in the noise of the
party. She tries again, louder this time. “Fuuuuuucccckkkk.”
“Sorry, mate.”
A girl tugs on his arm, and he shrugs apologetically at Rae before allowing the girl to tug him
deep into the party. Rae imagines for a moment that the people are trees, and she’s luring him
deep into the forest. Then she shakes her head.
Fucking Archie. This was supposed to be their big night, when they were a proper couple in front
of the world and everybody. And when they were a proper couple in front of just them two. She’s
angry at him, disappointed and hurt, she can tell. But it’s buried underneath a nice thick cushion of
liquor, so mostly all she feels is frustration and irritation. Those are pretty much constant
companions of hers, feelings she can handle just fine. So she goes off in search of more shots,
hoping to push back all her feelings about Archie until tomorrow.

The queue for the bathroom is ridiculous. She doesn’t often wish she was a boy (other things,
sure, all the time), but tonight she’d give almost anything to be able to piss in a bush when it got
rough. She barely makes it in time.

When she comes back, Izzy is sitting in Finn’s lap. What the fuck is she doing? Rae thinks, and
because she’s practically sodden with beer, she says, “What the fuck, Iz?”
Izzy looks up, a bleary smile on her face. “Rae-Rae! Look who I found! Come sit with us!” She
giggles and buries her face in Finn’s shoulder.

Finn looks up at Rae, pleading on his face. He’s got his hands carefully placed on the sofa, clearly
not touching her. Rae wants to laugh, somewhere she really does. Izzy is so effusive when she
drinks, so affectionate with everyone, but she obviously shouldn’t be doing that with Finn “Party-
Pooper” Nelson.

“What the fuck, Iz?” She says, shoving sloshy Izzy off of Finn with little grace. Izzy rolls,
laughing, ends up only a little farther over, still almost on his lap. Rae gives her another shove,
until Izzy topples over the opposite arm, roaring with laughter, in a riot of color. Rae sits down in
the sliver of space her friend has left, trying to create a buffer between the two of them. Her thigh
presses up against Finn’s, all the way from her hip to her knee. She tugs up the neckline of her
dress.

“Having a good time, Nelson? Still bored?” She asks, squinting through the smoke.

Finn just grunts, but he twists a little bit to give her a look. A serious LOOK. It’s probably a why-
are-you-talking-to-me look, or maybe a I-much-preferred-Izzy-touching-me-to-you look, but she’s
so drunk and she already has a hard enough time figuring out his looks when they’re both stone
cold sober, so she decides not to give a fuck. She turns her attention towards the packed front
room. He keeps looking at her for a while, she thinks. It feels like itching along the back of her
neck.

After a minute or so, Chop comes up with a cheer and another armful of plastic cups. Once he’s
distributed them, he perches on the arm of the couch beside Izzy and proceeds to snog her face
off. The more into it they get, the more they lean into the couch, and the harder Izzy presses
against Rae. Which means that Rae gets closer and closer to Finn.

Something happens, some sort of warm buzziness or something. He’s solid and hot, and she feels
like she’s melting wherever she touches him. Which is more and more. It’s not long before her
side is pressed against him too, her breast tight against his bicep. She thinks about tugging her top
up again, but instead, she chances a look at him. He’s staring straight ahead with his jaw clenched.
Right. Enough is enough. “Okay, I’m just gonna…” She starts.

“Alright, budge up.” She says, shoving sloshy Izzy off of Finn with little grace. Izzy rolls,
laughing, ends up only a little farther over, still almost on his lap. Rae gives her another shove,
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up again, but instead, she chances a look at him. He’s staring straight ahead with his jaw clenched.
Right. Enough is enough. “Okay, I’m just gonna…” She starts.

Simultaneously, Finn says, “The music’s better than I was thinking. Couple of top tunes.” He
nods, still not looking at her.

Rae studies his profile, the angle of his jaw, the line of his eyebrow. “Yeah, not bad. Most of it’s
okay.”

He looks at her then, and she can feel it in her stomach. Weird. She squirms against him, but it’s
not really uncomfortable. Just… strange. Fuck, she’s drunk so much.

“You’ve been dancing a lot. You must have thought the music was decent enough to dance to.”
Rae shrugs, and Finn’s eyes drop to her chest to follow the movement. When he looks up, she
gives him a challenging stare, then retorts simply, “I like to dance.”

Finn hums an assent, ears reddening. Izzy moans and Rae can feel where their backs are pressed together. She thinks again about going to find more drinks or go dance or basically do anything other than this.

“So, anybody guess what you are?” She asks instead, and Finn turns his torso and even more of them are pressed together.

“I told you, I’m not wearing a costume.”

“Yeah. I meant ‘complete mardy bastard.’ Anyone guess that?” She laughs. Finn sneers, starts biting his thumb. Rae shakes her head. “Oh, don’t fuss. I’m just taking the piss.” She pulls Finn’s hand away from his mouth and folds her fingers over his, like she’d done a million times with Tix. Finn’s body stiffens, she can feel how tight he gets because they’re so fucking close. He looks down at where she’s rested their hands on her thigh, and then it’s like he melts into her. He goes soft and she realizes that there had been some space between them, at least in the places where his angles hadn’t met with her curves. But it’s gone now. They’re as close together as it’s possible to be without fucking, basically.

Rae feels really aware of her breasts nearly spilling from her top. She feels really aware of how close his pinky finger is to her crotch. He makes a little noise, something she can’t even really describe, and suddenly she’s jumping up from the couch. Their hands are still clasped together, his arm lifted, stretching out in front of him as he looks up in question.

“I, uh…” She drops his hand, and it falls back into his lap with significance. “I need to use the loo.”

“Didn’t you just come from there?”

Rae’s eyes are wide, she can feel it. She bends down and picks up her cup from the table and drinks it down in one long swallow. “Yeah, just. Uh. Been drinking a lot, you know.”

Finn just looks at her, another look with some kind of hidden meaning. Rae makes a half smile, half grimace and jerks her thumb over her shoulder. She opens her mouth to say ‘see ya’ or ‘goodbye’ or maybe ‘what the fuck just happened here?’ but she can’t pick a single one, so she just stalks off without another word.

+++ Beads of sweat are slicking down the center of her back, plastering the little hairs on the side of her neck to her skin. Her head is spinning spinning spinning. Her body seems to be moving all on its own without any direction from her mind. In fact, her mind seems to have checked out all together. It’s lovely.

They’re dancing in a group, the darkness and heat pulsing and thrumming through the building like a heartbeat. The music is EVERYTHING. She lets the beat flow through her, unencumbered by its time spent in her body. She just moves, loose and easy and effortless.

Nearby, Amy bounces on her toes, arms in the air, eyes closed. “I fucking love this song!” She shouts every few seconds to no one in particular. Rae laughs into the crowd.

+++ She’s so thirsty. The need for liquid is the only thing that allows her to peel her body away from the crowd of dancers. She stumbles into the kitchen, peers blurrily at the collection of bottles lined up along the kitchen counter. She can’t focus long enough to read them, to choose one to put to her parched lips. A bottle of something cold is pressed into her hand and she struggles to make sense of it for a long moment. By the time she’s turned around to see who’s handed it to her, they’re gone.

She drinks the entire bottle of water down in just a few long gulps, head raised towards the ceiling. She crumples the hollow plastic once it’s empty and sets it beside the other bottles. They’re a line of transparent people, and the one on the end is her, too pissed to stand straight like the others. She snickers, waits a few moments for another bottle to appear in her hand. When it doesn’t, she shrugs at the boys lining up shots and returns to the music.

+++ It’s late now, well into the early hours of the morning, but the party shows no signs of stopping. It’s shifted though, the music pounding to a slower beat, a haze of pheromones and longing
settling over the whole crowd like another drug. Dark corners are filled with tangles of mouths and hands and everyone still on the dance floor seems to have paired off. She can’t seem to stop. She’s sobered up a little, thanks to the water and the sweat still oozing out of her in a vodka scented sheen. Now she’s got just enough alcohol humming through her veins to reduce her to nothing, just a vessel, just a function of the music. If she doesn’t keep dancing, she might die. All she is is the music.

Chop’s dancing beside her now, borrowed from Izzy who’d claimed thirst and fatigue. Rae can’t stop dancing, and the dancing now needs another person, so she’s shifting her hips in time with his. He’s a few inches away, an arm balanced heavily on her shoulder. He sings along with the music, mouth open wide and eyes squeezed shut. She catches a glimpse of movement to her right and she lazily turns her head to see Izzy moving up beside them, up on tiptoes to sling her arms around Finn’s neck.

Rae has some kind of worry flicker through her, but it’s deep down, way below the haze of the booze and the music, and it’s skittered off before she can get a grip on it. Izzy bumps into Chop and his eyes fly open to find her. Even drunk, he can’t keep his eyes off her. The two of them will be shortly for a dark corner and some heavy petting. Shame, she thinks. Who’ll she dance with when Chop and Izzy fuck off?

Izzy yells something, but the music is loud and Rae’s drifty enough that she can’t understand anything anyway. Chop shifts them so he can bend over and yell back, but Rae only catches a couple of garbled words, “you,” and “hot,” and “yeah.” Then the pressure on Rae’s shoulder is gone, the wall of boy in front of her is missing.

Rae tilts her head back and keeps dancing.

Finn stumbles into the space vacated by his friend suddenly, shooting a glare over his shoulder as he tries to get his feet under him. He’s not dancing, not doing anything much but scowling. He glares at their friends, at the crowd behind her, at the floor. There’s a second, or maybe just a second in her head, where everything gets paused while she decides. It’s Finn, so it wouldn’t be unreasonable to twirl away into the crowd, or to stalk off into the kitchen or even out the front door. They’re not friends, and she’s irritated at him for her suspicions about Archie somewhere down beneath the good feelings. It’d be so easy to just say no, but…

But…

He’s glancing up at her now, bottom lip caught between his teeth as he waits to see what she’ll do. Rae just cocks her head, still moving slowly. She thinks about the way he’d looked at her earlier, about the way his thigh had burned up against hers…

She shrugs at him. Okay. Finn licks his lip and takes a step closer, lifting his hand towards her waist far slower than he should. They both watch his hand as it settles on the lace and satin over her hip, as it flexes there, curls tight over her flesh and then loosens.

He looks up again, eyes dark and shining. Is he asking permission? She can’t tell. And she doesn’t know if she wants to give it anyway, so she just raises an arm to settle on his shoulder. He tugs her a bit closer still, so her arm goes further behind his neck, sliding against his damp skin. And then he starts to move.

It’s just a little at first, just his feet shifting beneath them. They’re both looking down. Then his shoulder starts to move underneath her arm, just barely. Rae closes her eyes and consciously loosens her stiffness, lets her body go back to swaying mindlessly. Her hips shift, swivel slowly. Finn moves his other hand to the dip of her waist, fingers splayed over her side and back. His hands are so big, cover so much of her. Tingles shiver through her where his hands press into the satin.

The music drops out suddenly, and they both freeze. When she glances over at him, his eyes are fixed on her cleavage. She feels something tug in her stomach, hot and not entirely unpleasant. When his eyes meet hers, there’s a question in them, and she’s not sure what it is or how to answer. She just looks back, still and silent. The noise of the room filters into her head and back out again.

When the stereo starts back up, Rae lets out a groan. She loves this song, so she closes her eyes and lolls her head back on her neck in enjoyment. Her hips start up again, rolling slinkily in time
with the sultry beat. He doesn’t move with her, so she pulls herself out of the fog to look at him. Can’t he feel it, the song? Doesn’t it thrum through his very bones the way it does hers? He’s watching her, eyes on her swaying hips, her barely contained breasts, the sweat-slicked skin of her neck. He slowly licks his bottom lip, and it hits her suddenly, all at once – the heat, the aching. The tug in her stomach unfurls into something scalding and liquid, something that skates through her arms and legs and fogs her already addled brain. They’ve pressed play on something that was paused, some song she hadn’t known they were playing.

His arms tighten around her.

It seems like there should be a thump as she presses up against him suddenly, but there isn’t. There’s just all of him, his hard chest tight against hers, his arms slipping around her, one hand hot and damp above the back of her dress. She can feel his breathing in her ribcage, he’s so tight against her. His breath blows warm and damp over her décolletage. Something sticks in her lungs, makes her own breath come short and shallow.

He moves his hips against hers, and she has to bite back a gasp at the feeling. They’re so close, she can feel everything, all of him. Her head rolls back on her neck and his face is suddenly there, rubbing his cheek against her skin, his lips dragging over her throat. The music builds right along with the warmth in her body, with the swirling haze of sensation in her head. She moves against him, blindly seeking out friction, seeking out some kind of release to the pressure that’s building inside her.

His hand moves from her back, returning to splay over her side. His thumb grazes the underside of her breast and heat courses through her, shimmering and burning her synapses. She’s never experienced anything like it, didn’t know there could even be anything like it. She wants to wonder, wants to capture it firmly in her memory to examine later, but she’s finding that there’s no room inside of her for thinking. With him tight up against her like that, there’s no room in her for anything but feeling.

She winds a hand up into his hair, and she thinks he groans, but it’s lost in the rhythm of the bass pulsing through them. She tugs a little, testing to see if he’ll do it again.

Without warning, the song crescendos. The guitars wail, the singer nearly screeching into the microphone, drums pounding. He slips an arm up from her waist to cup the back of her head, his eyes blown black.

Without warning, his mouth is on hers. Something within her snaps, an audible click, and she’s lost. There’s nothing left of Rae, there’s only the pulsing of the music, the pulsing of her blood, the unbearable heat of the wanting. She moans, lips never leaving his. Rae pulls him closer, gasping. He steps into her, holds her so tight that her spine aches. The hand on the back of her head moves to her cheek, holding her in place while he invades her mouth with his tongue, hard and incendiary. There’s no sweetness to his kiss, no tenderness. It’s all open, raw, burning need. She never wants it to stop.

It’s like she’s never been alive until this moment, like he’s brought her into sudden, magnificent stereo. Her whole body tingles, every inch of her alight. She moves a hand down to grab his ass, shamelessly pulling him closer and rubbing against him. She wants more, wants to be closer, wants to crawl inside him.

She wants wants wants.

They’re moving somehow, though she barely tracks it until her back hits a wall and she’s wonderfully, gloriously pressed up against him from shoulder to knees. His hands move over her, tugging at the satin, leaving damp spots from his sweaty hands that cool and tingle as soon as he moves on. He uses a hand to tilt her chin so that he can kiss a line down her neck and over her breastbone. He pauses for a second before licking the uncovered skin of her breasts. When she moans and tugs at his hair, he buries his nose in her cleavage. She wants to tug her top down the rest of the way, let him nuzzle his way into the little she has hidden. All she can think about is having him touch the rest of her, all of her.

She traces a hand down his chest, pausing just above his belt buckle. She’s dying to feel him, to let her greedy hand travel just a little further down, explore the hardness she’s felt bump against her.
“Jesus.” She moans as his hand cups her breast. It just escapes, she’s got no control over anything her body is doing anymore.

Suddenly, he wrenches his mouth away from her skin and staggers a couple of steps back. It’s like a slap, the suddenness with which he removes contact. She struggles to pull herself out of the lust haze so she can understand what’s going on. He looks at her, shocked, arms raised in front of him like he has to ward her off. His hair sticks up and his eyes are wild. He looks horrified.

It’s another slap, this time sharper and clearer, when he shakes his head and spins, running off into the crowd. She’s left still leaning against the wall, panting and trembling. Tears sting her eyes as she watches him go, the last notes of the song fading slowly behind him.

TBC...
Chapter 6 - Part 1

Chapter Summary

“I’m gonna put him in a suit, and make out with him, in my brain.” (@how-ardently)

Chapter Notes

@Madfatty, thank you, I could not have done this without you.

Dear Tix,

I know it’s been a while. I keep meaning to sit down and write to you, but then I don’t. Don’t know why. Things are very strange lately and everything’s confusing. It feels like so much is going on but actually, the truth is, nothing’s been going on since Izzy and Chop broke up. You know all those parties we used to go to, and the going out to the local, or driving out to have picnics and all that other shit I always complained about? Well, we’re not doing any of it anymore. Or, I guess we’re just not getting invited anymore.

It’s like, as much as I couldn’t really stand all those people and friends of Chloe's, who would have ever thought that I’d miss all that noise one day? It’s like Stamford went from full-on party central to ghost town, where nothing really goes on other than college and college-type activities. And all because some people went away. It’s crazy.

See? I’m all turned around, I’m not even writing it all down properly. It just got all pear-shaped and confusing, and there are big parts of it I’d rather forget. Honestly, babe, just thinking about it makes me so tired. So let me try to do it fast, like pulling off a band-aid:

So, I ended up going to the Halloween party (I know, I know, I said I’d rather be flayed than be caught dead there, but eventually I let everyone convince me. Should have listened to myself instead, but anyway). I had a killer dress and felt amazing. But Archie, who was supposed to meet me there, didn’t show, for some fucked up reason. Which means that I drank way too much and danced with other boys and did some things I shouldn’t and was very, very mortified after.

Very, very mortified, Tixie.

At said party, Chop and Izzy were all over each other, as in love as two people could be, which is why it was so shocking when the very next day, like, the very next day Fatty, the stupid boy disappeared. Poof! Like a fucking magic trick. No explanation, no note, nothing. Took his friend and the evil stepsister, and legged it out of town.

Why? No one knows. Izzy sure doesn’t. Me and Chloe grilled her on it for, like, an hour, but she says she’s done nothing, and he said nothing. At the end of the party when he took us home, he was so lovely to her, they were like two drunk puppies in love - I fucking had to drag her away from his lips. I can’t even think what could have changed by morning, but there you go. Next day
First I suspected that him leaving town had more to do with his friends wanting to leave, because of those mortifying things that happened that I don’t want to get into. Chop’s the kind of nice bloke who would, you know? But then, why wouldn't he talk to her first and let her know? And when Izzy called their house when he didn’t meet her for lunch (or “post-party debrief”, as he insisted on calling it) the day after like they’d arranged, that bitch Stacey picked up and told her that him and his mate had left hours ago, and she was about to join them back in London for Christmas break. Christmas is like two months away! And she told Izzy Chop doesn’t want to talk to her. Doesn’t want anything to do with her.

I don’t get it. Are they just not going to finish the school year? I guess when you’re rich you can get away with that sort of thing, right? Must be nice.

Look, there’s so much more to tell you but I just, I can’t. Maybe later.

I still love you the best,

Rae.

+++ 

Dear Fatty,

So today in therapy I got a bloody earful for avoiding what happened that got me so riled up, and he said that if I keep stuff inside it’ll only lead me back to the dark moments and blah blah blah. You know how he gets. So I promised to try, and if I can’t share it with you, who can I share with, right?

I’m just gonna write it here and then I’ll look at the sentence and I’ll see it’s not so bad and I’m blowing it out of proportion.

Here goes.

Me and Finn Nelson full-on made out at the party.

Okay... I’m reading it and it sounds only mildly horrifying. Let’s see how the whole truth sounds:

Me and Finn Nelson got drunk and full-on made out at the party to the point where I was ready to lie down and spread my legs for him right there, and then he realized who he was with, freaked out and ran away. And then he had to leave town and probably change his identity and start a new life in Nicaragua just to get away from the appalling memory of grabbing my boob.

There. That looks much closer to the ugly, ugly truth.

Love ya,

Rae

P.S. Please don’t mistake my light-hearted tone for me not being crushed beyond anything to be, once again, so expendable and unwanted and easily rejected.

+++ 

Hiya Fatty.

Okay, so here’s one more try at addressing the issue like an adult.
Okay, so here’s one more try at addressing the issue like an adult. I’d let Archie talk me into going to that party, thinking for once, FOR ONCE, there would be someone there by my side, to fight off any evil bastards. I felt really good that night, and no one really messed with me, so I was thinking, finally, something was going my way in this world.

But then, Archie was nowhere to be found (he told me later that by the time he’d changed his mind about coming it was too late to call me). When I tried to understand what made him not want to come, he got all huffy and said “you’re not the only one allowed to be self-conscious with low self-esteem, Rae”. Which really threw me). And Chloe didn’t show up at all. I found out later she and her mates decided to go to a different party. After all her talk of this being The Social Event of The Year! But she said, “Well, I was with Ian and he said getting all dressed up is lame and we can get f***ed up anywhere, so we went to this other party and it was really good.” Honestly, I don’t know what’s going on with her.

Can you blame me for going straight for the beers, Tix? I got so drunk so fast... Which was very bad of me, but I just wanted to let everything wash over me, and not care about people disappointing me all the time.

I can forgive myself for that, but what I just don’t, I just DON’T get, is - why him??? Why, of all the people at that party, I wound up with Finn? A boy I don’t like, I never got on with, who always talks shit about me... How did it happen? I know he’s good looking, but what am I, an animal? Doesn’t my brain get a say when my hormones want to take over? Apparently not, because all it took was some booze and some music to make me lose myself.

People do stupid shit when they’re drunk, but here’s what I don’t understand: What was Finn thinking? He is just as not into me as I am not into him. Usually he doesn’t even say two words to me and all of a sudden he’s shoving his tongue down my throat? And why was he so shocked before he ran away? Am I supposed to believe he didn’t know it was me? Look, I don’t exactly remember all the details, but it felt like we were snogging for ages. Like, he had his hands all over me. So, what, was he under the impression that he was in fact groping a tiny barbie doll, only to look up and discover - JESUS, MARY AND JOSEPH, IT’S RAE EARL’S ARSE I’M SQUEEZING!?!?

F**k him.

And another thing. Where are all the whispers and snide comments and fucking innuendos? Why are people not inventing new nicknames for me, or implying Finn Nelson should be declared a saint for his charity work with the morbidly obese, or some shit like that? Even after Chop and him left town, no one is bloody talking about what him and me did at the party, and I just don’t get it. Were they all momentarily blinded by the sight of a blob like me with a hottie like him? Did he pay them to never ever, ever bring it up, ever? Maybe he threatened to beat them all up if they ever mention his horrible drunken downward spiral into Loserville...?

It couldn’t be that no one actually saw what happened, right? I don’t remember exactly where we were standing, I know it was dark, and it was kinda off to the side, but... I don’t know. When he left me standing there, I felt so exposed, as if I was standing in the middle of this bright spotlight, with everyone looking on, and sniggering. Maybe that was in my head.

Hey, maybe it was ALL IN MY HEAD! Maybe I made it all up, the drink and the mood stabilizers making me hallucinate! Wouldn’t that be swell.

Love

Rae.
Dear Tix,

It can’t be a hallucination, because I remember way too much of it.

I remember what it felt like when he kissed me and where his hands were, and the exact moment when it turned serious. I remember how hot his palms were against my body, like they’d burn right through the bodice of my dress. He had his hand in my hair and the slightest pressure from him made me turn my head this way and that. It was like in the books. Like on TV. Like Izzy said. Like everything I wanted to have with Archie and never had.

Finn Nelson turned me on so much I totally lost myself, just like they say. It’s not fair. I don’t want fucking fireworks with bloody, arrogant, called-me-fat-ruined-my-t-shirt-freaked-out-because-he’s-making-out-with-me FINN!

Fuck, Tix.

Everything sucks, and I still haven’t told my boyfriend about cheating on him.

Love,

Rae

+++ “But we had such a lovely time at the party…” Izzy mumbled into her pillow. They were two hours into it now, and Rae wasn’t sure how much more she could contribute, when the conversation seemed to go round and round and always come back to the same place.

“I know, babe. You two looked dead happy together.” she confirms, like she’s done countless times during the past two weeks.

Iz sits up suddenly, “Did I - did you see me do anything awful or embarrassing, Rae? I know I was a bit drunk and that, but all I remember is everything being lovely and Chop kissing me all the time… I’m just thinking, could I have done something to make him want to run away from me?” she bites the ends of her fingernails, just like she used to do when she was little. Rae almost reaches towards her to stop the nervous gesture, but at the last minute the notion makes her a bit queasy and she lets Izzy continue destroying her pink-and-sparkle coloured nails.

Rae wants to tell her friend that it’s not her the boys are running from, that it’s not anything Izzy’s done, this is all about Rae. Rae’s the one who acted like an awful, embarrassing slut-o-rama at the party, which is probably why this lovely tiny girl at her side is so heartbroken.

It’s on the tip of Rae’s tongue to confess, confess it all, just open her big mouth and let it all pour out, everything she’d done and everything she’d felt when Finn put his hands on her. But she can’t, she just can’t. She leans her elbow on her knee and her palm on her mouth to stop the word vomit from coming out.

When Izzy raises teary eyes to her, she swallows and says: “Course you didn’t do anything embarrassing, love! You were a little drunk but so was he. So were… everyone. We had fun, all of us, we had a bit of a giggle on the sofa and Chop was over the moon…”

“Then we danced,” adds Izzy, “we all had a lovely time dancing, didn’t we?”

“A-absolutely.”
Izzy’s hands fly up then down, smacking her own thighs in frustration. “Then I don’t get it! He took me home and kissed me and everything, like normal!”

They sit in silence, each of them consumed by their own sadness. Eventually, Izzy exhales noisily. Rae looks up at her.

“Fuck him!” declares the redhead, surprising the shit out of Rae, who doesn’t usually hear the girl go all out with the F-word. “If he wants to be like that - fuck him. If he’s just done with me and can’t even say goodbye like a normal person - then - just - whatever! You know?!?” she squeaks, her tiny voice weirdly full of power now.

Rae watches in awe as her ginger friend unfolds and jumps off the bed, makes a beeline for the cassette player on her desk and starts rummaging around. “What - Ever.” she says. “I like this phrase. He’s done with me? Then I’m done with him. He wants to go off to London and - and- sleep with all sorts of, like, leggy brunettes? Then FINE! I’m gonna put on Madonna!”

With that, her finger pushes the button and with a satisfying clanking sound, the familiar hiss of a tape fills the room. When the first chords of “Like a Prayer” swell, they sound a little gloomy. Izzy and Rae just stare at each other, Rae still on the bed, Iz swaying slowly from side to side, looking lost. But then the music suddenly picks up and Izzy starts dancing for real, and after another moment Rae joins in and they dance to Madonna for half an hour, interrupting the singing from time to time to yell WHATEVER! toward the ceiling.

+++ 

It’s that afternoon at Izzy’s that finally helps Rae to face what she’s been avoiding for so long, the secret that’s been weighing her down ever since the party. Seeing her childhood friend, once so timid and so ready to take everyone else’s faults on herself, go from a heart-broken, self-doubting mess to a strong and resolved powerful girl who is not about to wallow her days away, has made Rae feel amazed and impressed and inspired. Maybe it had all been on the surface, maybe Izzy was only faking it for now, but it was a powerful thing to watch and it did make them both feel better, at least for the rest of the afternoon.

Filled with the spirit of Madonna, Rae goes home and calls Archie, tells him she needs to talk to him ASAP. Lately it’s been even harder to fix a date with him that he hadn’t broken at the last minute, so when he starts saying that he’s made plans to play footy with the lads in the park, she doesn’t let up and he finally agrees to meet her there after the game.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s good, “ he says, suddenly all perked-up. “Maybe come a little earlier and you can, sort of, cheer me on if you’d like?”

Rae cannot picture herself cheerleading like some pathetic girlfriend on the sidelines, but he sounds so sweet and shy that she immediately turns soft and promises to try.

As expected, cheerleading is shit. She’s never been into football so she doesn’t really know what she’s cheering for, except maybe Archie’s tight arse in red shorts, and an occasional nipple sighting, courtesy of the large opening of the sleeve of his vest. She tries to follow the lead of other girls standing there (who knew park footy was such a hit with the locals?) but it just feels dumb, and she ends up spending most of the game trying not to imagine that the girls are looking at her and giggling. This is for Archie, she tells herself. Sweet Archie, who waves at her from the field, and one time actually runs at her. He looks like he’s moving in slow motion, his hair flying and his strong legs pumping. He gives her a peck on the lips, winks and goes back to the game, and as he leaves, they all give a collective sigh.
It takes another half an hour after the game is done for Archie to say goodbye to everyone, then turn them down when they tell him they’re going to the pub. He clutches Rae’s shoulder to him and says things like *Sorry, I promised my girl we’d do something nice, just the two of us.* Rae couldn’t be more uncomfortable, since all of Archie’s friends, most of them strangers, or people she knows of but has never spoke to, are looking at her and him and probably trying to wrap their heads around the togetherness of them. And also because Archie is clearly lying about their plans and making it sound more than it is and Rae finds it odd that he should do that. Oh, and also because Archie is still damp with sweat and is not smelling all that great, and is pinning her body against his. But she lets him be his charming self and seduce the lot of them, because she’s about to have that talk with him in a bit, and probably ruin everything.

He’ll probably be angry. He’ll probably chuck her on the spot. She wouldn’t blame him if he did, but it makes her throat hurt thinking about it.

Eventually he does manage to tear himself away from his group and Rae and him take a stroll through the park. Archie is in a good mood, he never stops talking, telling her everything he’s done this week, telling her about meeting some old friends from back home.

“It was really good to see them, Rae. I didn’t realize how much I miss London and all that scene.” He stretches and chuckles good-naturedly, and Rae is so tense she doesn’t even stop him to ask how come he hadn’t introduced her to his old mates. The thought just flits through her mind and disappears into the ocean of worries up there.

“Archie -“ She stops him. She really can’t take it anymore. “I have to talk to you. Let’s sit over there, alright?”

They walk to the bench she’s pointed at, and take a seat. Rae’s hands are buried deep inside the pockets of her denim jacket, and she can’t bring herself to really look at him.

Archie tacks a strand of hair behind her ear. “Hey,” he says, his voice so caring and soft, and it moves something deep inside her, to think that he cares for her like that. “Is it something bad?” he asks, “Should I be worried?”

Shit. Shit shit shit. She’s going to lose him.

“I… okay. So you know that Halloween party we were supposed to go to?”

“Sure.”

“Well, you didn’t show up, so I -“

She is startled by Archie making a sharp gesture with his hand, like he’s cutting the conversation in two. “I explained about that. I thought you understood.”

"I… yeah, I’m only saying… it was hard on me to be there without you. I was really looking forward to having you there, by my side, dancing, and, you know. I just felt like shit, so - "

"Oh, come on," he interrupts again. "That's not fair, Rae. I explained about that night already."

Rae lifts her face to him, eyebrows constricted. “Actually, no, you haven’t really explained what happened that night.”

"I’ve told you, there was no time to let you know I wasn’t coming, you'd already left. I made sure Denny gave you the message. Why are you bringing this whole thing back up again?"
"I'm - not. That's not what I want to talk about - "

But it's as if she's struck a nerve with Archie. He stands up, takes a few steps, before coming back to stand in front of her. "You know, it weren't easy for me to pass up on that party." He tells her, folding his arms across his chest. "You think I didn't want to be at the event of the year? To have a laugh with my girlfriend and, and dance with you and show you off? I did, I'm the one who convinced you to go, remember?"

"Yeah, I know -"

"So it took a lot to cancel, but eventually, I just couldn't go. I thought you of all people would understand feeling shit about yourself..." his voice trails off and he stares at the canopy of trees behind her, like some kind of tragic hero. "Thought you'd support me."

"How can I support you if you don't even tell me what's going on with you? What were you feeling shit about? You're amazing, Arch, everyone loves you."

"Whatever. Just forget it." He mumbles, still not looking at her. "You had a miserable time at the party and it's all my fault, as usual. Yeah, I get it. Are you breaking up with me now or something?"

"'Course not!"

She catches him glancing her way to see if she's affected. Rae is not dumb, she has been living with Linda all her life and she knows passive-aggressive when she sees it. Hell, she's a master at it herself. Why is Archie like this? She can't tell if he's really hurt or really just wants to be pissed at her.

"I... I think I'm just gonna go home." she stands up.

"Why?"

"This is not going so well. You're in no mood to listen, and I need to tell you something important, and it's not easy for me, but I didn't want any secrets from you, so maybe when you're feeling - " Her mouth is a runaway train, but Archie stops her with a hand on her arm.

"I'm sorry, I'm fine. It's just the adrenalin from football, that's all. Please tell me what's on your mind." He takes her by the hand and they sit back down, and he's sweet Archie again. "I'm listening."

"Okay. So at the party -" Rae peeps up at him, to see if he’s going to interrupt her again. He seems fine so she takes a deep breath and continues. "When you didn't - I mean... I was feeling bad, and there was all this free booze, you know, so I drank, like, sort of a lot. I got really bladdered, Arch, and I... and I..."

"It's okay."

"I got really drunk and I, well, I kissed someone else. I kissed a boy." She turns to him before he can say anything, grasping his hand. "It was an accident, I swear I didn't mean to, it was just the all beer and the vodka, it was such a huge mistake, and if I could take it back I swear I would, like in a heartbeat..." eventually she stops for breath and slowly, bravely, looks into his eyes.

Archie’s expression hasn't changed. Silence stretches between them, weighing her down.

"Well?" she prompts eventually.
"What?"

"Any thoughts?"

"Oh, was that it?"

Rae feels her jaw dropping. "What d'you mean?"

"Was that your confession? That you've kissed some boy?"

"Yeah, I - well, yeah! Why aren't you angry at me?"

Archie laughs. He actually laughs. "Oh, Rae, don't be silly! It's not a big deal."

"How is it not a big deal?" she’s so confused the world is tilting. "It's a huge deal. I cheated on you!"

He waves her words off. "Not like we ever said we were exclusive, so what's the damage really?"

_What? What did he just say?_

Rae feels the heat rising in her chest, she’s not even sure what this feeling is, but her eyes grow narrow and her mouth forms a precise little, "What?" sound, practically spitting out the T. "We're not exclusive? We are not exclusive?"

"Well, no…" Now he looks confused. "I mean I like you, more than any other girl, and we're having fun, and we're good friends and all, but it's not like we ever talked about - I mean, I simply assumed -"

"Are you saying you've been with other girls?"

"Rae, we've never -"

She can’t sit next to him for even a second longer, and she springs up off the bench. "Have you been getting off with people who are not me, Archie?"

He makes a sort of huff that could mean anything. "Maybe… once? I don't know, barely -"

Rae frowns even harder. "What does that mean?"

"You did it too!"

"Mine was an accident!"

"Yeah, so, mine too!"

Rae feels her face pinch uncontrollably. "No, you’ve just said we weren't exclusive, which means as far as you were concerned you could get off with whoever!"

"Rae, come on, don't shout."

She glances about. Apparently, people are starting to give them looks. She tries to calm down, she really does, but who is this person? She doesn't know him. It's not her Archie. _Was_ there ever an Archie like the one in her head?

"We’ve never talked about not seeing other people. How did you not know that it wasn’t an exclusive thing, like?" He tries to use a soft voice, but it only drives her more mad.
“Well, how would I know? I'm not a 23 year-old French bohemian, Archie, I'm a 16 year old girl from bloody Stamford, and you're my first boyfriend! Why would I even think that you were running around snogging other girls?”

“You’ve just said you kissed someone else!”

“You are unbelievable!” Rae almost starts laughing with frustration. “And to think how worried I was to tell you about kissing Finn Nelson, stupidly thinking you’d give a shit, when all along we were having this sophisticated open relationship!”

Having had enough, she turns to leave, only to have Archie take hold of her arm.

“Wait. What does Nelson have to do with it?” His top lip curls up and suddenly, he doesn't look handsome at all. He looks ugly. But she still feels awfully guilty and wretched and can’t look him in the eye. When she doesn't reply he says, "Did you snog Finn Nelson, Rae? Is that who you got off with?"

“I haven't got off with him. It was just a kiss, nothing really. We were drunk!"

"Wow. Oh wow." he lets go of her arm as if he can’t stand to touch her, and Rae feels a pang of hurt.

“Archie…” she tries. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. And, you know, you just said that you don't mind that I’ve kissed -”

“But not him! Not fucking Finn Nelson! You know how much I hate his guts, Rae."

“I'm sorry, I didn’t mean -”

“No, you didn’t think about me at all, did you?” he gulps, his voice wobbles.

They stand there for a long silent moment, each of them on the verge of tears so it seems, while the light changes around them, the late afternoon sun losing its harsh glare.

“Are you ever going to tell me what happened between you two?” She says eventually.

“He's a fucking prick.” Archie sniffs.

“Well, I know that. But you guys have a history you're not sharing, and… it's not fair. You know you can tell me.”

Something softens in his expression when she says the first part, and they share the tiniest of smiles, but it's enough.

Finally, Archie sighs and turns back to the bench, plops down and stretches his long legs in front of him in a V. "Fuck it. Alright." he says.

Taking a hesitant seat next to him, Rae can't believe she's finally going to hear all about it. She's excited to learn more about Nelson behaving like a shit-head, but unfortunately it has more to do with trying to chase away the memory of his hands squeezing her than anything else.

"Well, you know we grew up together."

"In London."

"Yeah. Finn's family is swimming in it. His dad had one of the most successful law firms in the
city before he even married into all that dosh from Finn's Nan's side, and they're all filthy-rich posh upper class arse-holes. Anyway, his mum was in college with my mum, who was just a regular person, you know, a single mum trying her hardest... but anyway, they were friends and so when Finn was born, his mum brought us to live with them so she could be his Nanny and take care of the house and stuff."

"Wow. That's generous." Rae piped in. She was still getting her head around all the monetary details. She knew Finn was rich but this sounded like Royalty-rich, not plain ol' comfortably rich.

"Yeah, she was a lovely woman, his mum. She always took care of us, and we grew up side by side. I had a lot of the privileges I would have never have had if she hadn't hired mum. She was always... really nice to me." Archie's head bows and he looks sad. Rae wants to hold his hand for some reason, but everything still feels awkward so she just waits for him to continue.

“Anyway,” he sighs. “That’s beside the point. So we all grew up together, me and the prick, and a third friend, a lass named Lois. Nelson and me, we always bickered, you know, like boys do.”

“Like in a brotherly way.” Rae nods. Archie clears his throat.

“Yeah. But me and Lois, we were thick as thieves. She was my best friend. She loved me and we told each other all our secrets... and it was all fine until we started growing up a bit and, like, puberty hit, you know? Then he started getting mean.”

Rae’s heart skips a beat. Not that she isn’t aware of how much of an arse Finn is, but the word “mean”, somehow, elevates him to a new level.

“What’d he do?”

Archie shakes his head, and colour rises in his cheeks. Rae knows that the window he’s opened to his life is about to close. “Doesn’t matter. Look, me and Lois, we were like brother and sister, you know? But he felt other things for her, and he didn’t like that she liked me more than what she did him. And that’s it. Everything has to be the way Nelson wants it.”

“But, what -”

Archie cuts the air between them with a sharp hand gesture. “He made sure I wasn’t welcome there anymore. And I had to come here, and my mum couldn’t work there anymore either.”

“Oh, wow…” she muttered. She had a million more questions, but it felt like he was on edge as it is. “Archie, that’s horrible!”

“I know.”

“I mean… I’m shocked! He’s such a horrible person…” And the thought comes, And you can’t stop thinking about making out with him, but she quickly brushed it away. “We have to tell people, Archie, no one knows what a fuckhead he is!”

In a split second, he’s on his feet. “No! You can’t tell anyone about this.”

“But if people knew -”

“Believe me, nothing would change. I’ve been here before. Everyone will take his side and I’ll have to start all over again, somewhere else.”

Knowing some of the people she’d went to school with, and their capability to bully anyone, she can’t deny that there’s a real possibility that his predictions are dead on.
“Promise me you won’t say anything, to anyone.”

“Okay.”

“Anyone, Rae. Not Even Izzy.”

“Okay, I promise.”

She gets up to join him, and they start walking slowly together on the path.

"Where's your mum now?" she asks after a while.

"She moved to Brighton, got a job at a fancy hotel there. She’s working hard, but I do what I can to help out."

"You're such a nice guy, Arch." She smiles at him. He smiles back.

“Yeah, well, she’s my mum, you know. I can’t wait to see her.”

Rae’s eyebrows constrict. “See her? Is she visiting?”

Archie stops walking and turns to her. “Remember I told you I’m going down there to visit her?”

No, Rae doesn’t remember that, and that off feeling is creeping up her spine again, but she says nothing as Archie continues sheepishly. “I miss her, I haven’t seen her in ages. And it doesn’t look like we’re gonna do the holidays together, Christmas is the busiest time of year at the hotel, apparently.”

_Don’t say anything, Rae_, she tries to tell herself, but obviously every thought is shown on her face, because Archie takes her hand and smiles tenderly. “Don’t be like that, babe. It’s not like you and your mum; we’re really close. And hey, I won’t be gone forever, I’ll be back in a couple weeks.”

“Yeah… but then I’ll be in London.”

Rae is aware that she sounds like a bit of a petulant child, but it’s worth it, because he gives her a huge smile and says, “Well, what’s a couple more days? And when you’re back from vacation we can start fresh, like all that shit never happened.”

Something inside Rae perks up, encouraged. For the first time since the party she thinks that maybe they’ll make it. Taking his hand in hers and giving it a little squeeze, she adds, “I’m glad we’ve talked about all that, though. It weren’t fun or nothing, but we were honest with each other and… we’re good now, right?”

“Yeah, communication is key.” he says, and they start talking about her upcoming trip, and he never really answers her question.

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“That’s not all you’re packing, is it?” Chloe asks, arms crossed over her chest as she leans in the doorway.

Rae glances up from trying to shove two more CDs into her over-stuffed backpack. “What’s wrong with this?” She gestures. A jewel case slinks out of the bag and back onto the bed.

“You didn’t even pack anything nice. You’ll be in London. You can’t wear those same ratty old
“jeans.” Chloe snorts, crossing the room and dropping gracefully onto the bed.

Rae has a moment of hating her, her litness, how pretty she looks when she’s not even trying, but she shoves it back down as quickly as it comes. She’s barely even seen Chloe over the last few weeks, which hasn’t helped with the overall dreariness. It’s been all freezing slush and quiet. Chloe is always gone, off at a party or a school event or god-even-knows what else, and Rae is… well, not. Rae is not anywhere anymore. Ever.

“What do you guys even do down there?” Chloe picks at a thread on the comforter. “Isn’t it boring? Three days with no one but Aunt June for company? Sounds horrible.”

“No, it’s amazing! We have some lovely afternoon tea in a proper tea shop, and then go look through old book shops. London has the most amazing used book stores.” Rae can’t help but smile. She looks forward to these mini-breaks all year. “Ooh, and this year, June got tickets to Much Ado About Nothing. I’ve always wanted to see it.”

“So you’re just gonna wander around and look at old books and watch Shakespeare? What are you, like seventy?”

“No,” Rae’s quick on the defense. “it’s not an old thing, it’s cool. Aunt June knows everyone, and she takes me to all the edgy places, like, like Camden and SoHo and introduces me to her friends, and we got for beer in pubs and listen to music, and -”

Chloe rolls her eyes, “Wow, so you go to dingy pubs with scruffy people. You could do that here.” She picks at the comforter in an absent-minded way. “I’m glad I don’t have to go.” She sounds disinterested and cavalier, but there’s something about the way she won’t look at her that makes Rae wonder if that’s completely true.

The annual London trip is a Rae and June thing, something they’ve always done since she was nine or ten. Since her birthday is so close to Christmas and her mum never had money for a party, Rae’s big treat had always been a big city getaway, stopping on June’s sofa. Linda was always busy trying to make ends meet and never had much time to give her daughter, so the weekend of undivided attention and affection at June’s had been a dream, even if they never did much. As Rae grew up, her lovely aunt had decided they need to go bigger; book a hotel room and stay a bit longer, make a whole thing out of it.

Chloe, on the other hand, had always had a big party for her birthday in the spring, and lots of attention all the time, so Rae’d never really thought much about the fact that Chloe didn’t get an “Auntie June Getaway” of her own. Being made a fuss of on your birthday is just one more thing that Chloe’d lost in all the mess of the divorce.

“You know, Chlo, you could come with.” Rae mumbles gently, trying not to wince. Why is she always saying things without thinking them through? She really doesn’t want to share that special time when it’s all just about her.”. “I’m sure June would love to spend time with you too.”

Chloe makes a sound that Rae is surprised to recognize, a scoff of wounded self-doubt. Chloe’s quick to cover it. “Not a chance. Ian’s having a big party on Saturday, I couldn’t miss it.” She stands and brushes at her skirt, but she’s meeting Rae’s eyes again and it’s not quite as sharp when she says, “Your black dress is nice enough for the theatre. I’ll loan you a necklace.”

“So, what are we looking for this time, Rae?” June smiles, slipping her arm through Rae’s as they walk towards a row of shops.
June’s voice is this gorgeous, musical, dancing thing that Rae’s always been a little envious of. Well, she’s a little envious of all June’s things. Rae’s aunt is charming, always on the verge of laughter, and effortlessly happy in a way that Rae’s always found bemusing. Rae wants to be just like June when she grows up, except with a record shop instead of a florist’s.

“I’ve been on a steady diet of romance novels lately.” Rae admits, laughing through the blush she can’t quite push back. “Izzy got me into them. They’re horrendous, but I can’t stop.”

“Good for you,” She squeezes her niece’s arm. “The dirty ones, I hope? If you’re going to read romance novels, the filthier the better!”

“Too right.” Rae teases back, “well, the filthiest we can find in Stamford.”

“Well, darling, this is London,” June breaks off to open the door to an overstuffed bookshop, “so I’m sure we can find something suitably saucy, even by your high standards.”

+++ She definitely isn’t crying, no way, no how. It was just a really powerful performance, and no one could fault her for getting misty. Seriously, she just watched Alan Rickman fall grandly in love with Emma Thompson, all in gorgeous iambic pentameter. She’d loved the play when they’d read it for school, but it’s an entirely different thing to see it performed. And by ALAN-bloody-RICKMAN no less.

She’s basically a puddle. A soppy mess.

She and June linger in their seats for a while after the curtain has stopped quivering and the applause has melted into cheerful chatter. They’re in the centre of a long, elegantly arcing row of seats, June seems to get that Rae needs another few minutes to soak it all in. She’s good like that, always getting it without Rae having to say anything.

Rae heaves another shivery inhale and turns to offer her aunt an elated, if weepy, grin. “Holy shit. That was amazing.”

June reaches an arm over the back of Rae’s seat with a huge smile on her face, and pulls her back and forth in an affectionate squeeze. “It was, wasn’t it? Emma was so funny, I nearly pissed myself laughing!”

“I know!”

June stands, tucks her knees close together. “Actually, I think I might wee right now if we don’t head for the loo. You always forget how long a Shakespeare play really is.”

Rae laughs as they make their way down the narrow aisle, runs her fingertips over the velvet seats. She’s still not quite ready to let this go. Who knows when she might make it to another real, live play? There’s not exactly a bustling theatre scene in shitty Lincolnshire.

The lobby is crowded and bustling. June grabs her hand as they snake through the people towards the back, turning to shoot Rae an exasperated look as they discover a ridiculously long queue for the ladies room winding along the wall.

“Why don’t you go round the back, find the stage door, see what you can see?” June offers on a sigh. “There’s no use waiting here with me in this line.”

Rae can’t picture herself going to the stage door alone, being one of those brave people trying to chat up the actors coming out. “It’s fine, I don’t mind waiting for you.”
“Don’t be daft, it’s going to take a while.” She gives her a shove. “Go! I’ll come find you when I’m done.”

So, Rae goes. It’s only moments before the crowd has sucked her in, taken her as its own. She’s not normally fond of crowds, but it’s nice to disappear into this one, to be one tiny, indistinguishable part of something much larger. She follows the stream of people she’s part of, not really sure where it’s headed, but hopefully the exit. She rises to her tiptoes once or twice, but it doesn’t seem to help much. She’s taller than usual on her pretty high heels, but not tall enough to make a difference.

She doesn’t quite make sense of it the first time, can’t distinguish it from the disjointed flood of conversations around her. It’s only when she hears it a second time that she wonders if someone is, in fact, calling her name.

There it is again. She swivels her head around to view the lobby. Who’s going to be calling her name here? Practically the best part of London is that she’s totally invisible. She takes another look around, slower this time, looking for something familiar in the current of people passing her by.

Nothing.

She shrugs, vaguely amused at her paranoia. Very vaguely. Just because he used to be everywhere for a time, and then all of a sudden not at all, doesn’t mean he’s going to show up here. He’s totally out of her life, and it’s blissful. She’s got to get over the feeling that his absence is just too good to be true.

“Rae.” She hears it again, closer this time.

She’s not the only Rae in the world, not the only Rae in London. Could even be a man Ray, she thinks desperately. But when the fingertips graze her elbow, she knows it’s him, both from the heat that circles her joint and the shudder of revulsion that passes through her.

She straightens her spine, stiff stiff stiff, before she spins on her heel to turn around. She keeps her expression blank and flat when she looks at him. Someone bumps her shoulder as the crowd continues around them, but she doesn’t let it alter her expression.

“Yes?” She asks coolly, a hint of confusion intentional in her voice, like she doesn’t even know him.

“Rae.” He says again, a bit breathless.

It’s so annoying, he’s so bloody annoying. She wants to play this out the way she’s been practicing in her head, wants to be indifferent and callous and give him no indication whatsoever that he’d had any impact on her life, or God forbid, her feelings. But she’d forgotten how fucking annoying he was and it’s kind of difficult.

“What are you doing here?” She asks disdainfully, forcing her eyes to stop narrowing, her lips to stop pursing. She straightens her neck. She’s always taller than him, but it’s even better now in her fancy London shoes, it’s a victory. A small one, but still.

Finn looks around in confusion, like it’s obvious why he’s here. Like every place he’s ever been is the obvious place for him to be. God, she hates him. “I came for the play. Why are you in London? I mean, shouldn’t you be in school?”

Nobody bumps into him, she notices.
She tosses her hair over her shoulder, finds herself making a sound that she thinks might actually be a *harrumph*. “Shouldn’t you?”

Finn smiles. He actually smiles. It takes all her willpower not to turn around and march off. “Yeah, about that. Listen…”

She doesn’t want to hear what’s on the other side of the deep breath he takes. She *really* doesn’t want to hear it. A deep corner of her brain whispers that it’s going to drive her crazy later to not know, to wonder if it’s an apology he’s preparing for, or a plea, or a dismissal. But she squashes it ferociously behind a wall of righteous anger, beyond a rage brought on by Izzy’s tears and her own humiliation. This time, she does spin on her heel, walking as fast as she can in the opposite direction.

Now it’s her bumping shoulders, one after another like she’s a card snapping on the spokes of a bicycle wheel. Bump, *sorry*. Bump, *pardon me*. Bump, *I’ve got to get out of here*.

“Rae!” He calls after her, stunned at her abrupt departure. “Wait! Where are you going?”

Where is she going? Seems she instinctively turned towards the safety of the ladies room, where June is, where he can’t follow. But mostly, she’s just walking away. Away from Finn, from the humiliation that surges under her skin every time she looks at his mouth. Away from another bad decision. Would she slap him? Tell him off? God forbid, kiss him? Whatever it is, she doesn’t want to find out.

She can hear his gruff apologies as he pushes through after her. But as the long line of women still standing outside the loo appears in front of her she realizes she can’t really escape into the ladies without causing a riot. And even if she did, she just knew he’d be standing there outside the door waiting for her, all ready to have the final word, when she did come out. There’s no getting away from him, she’ll just have to turn and face the latest Finn Nelson induced drama. She grinds her teeth and turns around. She’d been having such a fun day up until now, and he had to show up and kill her mood. He’s such a ruiner.

It’s a good thing the lobby has nearly emptied, because he greets her with, “What the hell, Rae? You just take off in the middle of a conversation? Don’t you have any manners?”

And that’s all it takes for her blood to boil and her fists to clench at her sides. “That’s rich, coming from you.”

“Huh?” He seems confused at the anger that’s rolling off her.

“Rae, there you are!” It’s June, sweet life-saving June. Finn has no idea how much he owes to her aunt right this minute. “I’ve been looking all over for you. Oh, hullo,” June eyes Finn with interest, her smile turning flirty, her gaze still on him as she tells a reddening Rae, “Who’s your friend? I like his snazzy suit.” And then, she actually winks at Finn, and Rae has to close her eyes to prevent herself from dying.
“He’s not my friend,” she mutters under her breath, but it’s lost in the sound of conversation around them. She silently starts to count, then has to start all over with her eyes open.

_Why did she have to mention the suit?_ She thinks desperately. _I was doing so well ignoring it._

The equally reddening Finn steps forward and politely holds out a hand. “Finn. Nelson. Finn Nelson.”

“Ah!” June replies, and Rae can tell she’s trying to hold back her delight. “And how do you know my lovely Rae, Finn?”

“We, er, went to school together in Stamford.” He says, hands reaching up to tug absently at his tie.

“Went? Have you finished your exams then? Are you off to Uni?” She’s incorrigible, though really, Rae can’t blame her. They’ve never, in the entire history of June Getaways, run into someone Rae actually knows, let alone a fit boy in a sharp suit.

Not that she’s thinking about the suit. And now she’s suddenly aware of the fact that she’s wearing a dress, and it takes every ounce of self-control she’s got not to tug at it.

“Uh, no. I just moved back down here. To London.” Finn answers June, but he’s mostly just looking at Rae, with only enough glances at her aunt for basic propriety. It makes her need to fidget even worse.

“I see.” And now June’s looking at Rae as well, like Rae should know what to say next. “Rae and I are just down for a little holiday to celebrate her birthday.”

“I didn’t know it was your birthday.” Finn flips the end of his tie again, and it’s only his newly distressed face that makes her realize he’d been vaguely smiling, at her this whole time. “Er, Happy Birthday.”

“It’s not for a couple of weeks yet. Closer to Christmas.” Rae explains with an awkward shrug.

June is swiveling her head back and forth between the two of them like she’s watching a ping pong tournament, which is ridiculous because literally nothing is happening. It’s another classic Finn Nelson non-conversation. She gives Rae those tight, you-should-probably-say-something-now eyes again, but Rae just gives her a tiny shake of the head.

“We’re staying at the Lambton Inn.” June adds, in an obvious effort to keep the exchange going. “Just a few streets over.”

“Oh, right.” Finn says, and Rae can’t help but raise her eyebrow. He’s not even trying to look at her aunt anymore, not even trying to be polite.

“So, you’ve moved down here for good?” She asks, trying to regain her coolness. June pinches her elbow, so she’s obviously found it. Rae ignores her. Finn nods, wary. “And Chop?”

He swallows, tugs at his jacket. “Yes, he’s staying with me now. The house was ready, so…”

“Oh, well of course. If the house was ready. Sure.” Rae nods magnanimously and Finn frowns.

“Uh… how long are you in town for?” His subject change is abrupt and awkward. She bites back a smile. “Maybe we could…”

“Just a few days, and we’re VERY busy, so…”
“Right.” He holds her gaze for a long second, his eyes inscrutable. Something twists in her stomach, unpleasant and electric. Finn turns his whole body towards her aunt and reaches for her hand to shake again. “Well, it was nice to meet you. I hope you enjoy your stay.”

*What is he, the London Tourist Board?* She tries to clear her expression as he glances back at her. His hand goes up towards her. Is he actually going to offer her a hand to shake, like some weirdo? Some formal-greeting, tie-twisting, hand-shaking weirdo? Oh, it’s going to be horrible and she’ll just have to play along in front of her aunt -

But before she finishes this sneering thought, something even weirder, even more shocking, more confusing happens, when Finn Nelson takes two stumbling steps and sort of hurls himself at her, to wrap his arms around her frame in an awkward hug. It’s warm inside his hug, it’s intimate and crazy and for a horrible few seconds, they are both frozen in this pose, not breathing, or moving, or talking. For a horrible few seconds, her entire world fills with his scent. Someone needs to step away or she’ll scream -

Finn hurls himself back, gulping air and clearing his throat. “Okay, so.” she’s staring at him in shock, but he doesn’t seem to be able to catch her eyes. “It was good to see you, Rae.” It’s low and strange and her mouth is too dry to reply.

He sends a strange smile in June’s general direction, and makes a bee line to the nearest exit.

“What was that about?” June asks.

“What do you mean?” Rae croaks, stupidly.

“What do you mean, what do I mean? That hug?”

“Oh, right.” she hums, still holding on to her state of denial.

“That weird hug!”

Rae shrugs. “Yeah, he’s weird.”

Her aunt eyes her. “And the way he just left like that?”

“It’s good that he left. I’m glad he left.” Rae starts marching towards the doors. “I hope he never comes back.”

+++”

They’re only a couple of blocks away from the hotel when it happens. She’s managed to push back the frustration she normally associates with Finn to a dull buzz at the back of her skull, determined to go back to enjoying her night of London-y fun with her cheerful, teasing aunt, when it happens.

A door opens just up the street, releasing a great billow of neon-tinted smoke along with the bass-heavy thud of electronic dance music. A couple pours out into the street, twined around each other, laughter swelling around them, broken by sloppy, joyful kisses. Rae smiles, glancing down at her shoes for a moment, because even though she’d never admit it, she sort of likes watching people be in love. It gives her a slick, second-hand kind of hope.

As the couple start to pass by them in the opposite direction, she glances up, and everything drops.

“Archie?” She chokes, or screeches, she can’t quite tell. She’s amazed that any sound has come out of her at all, because she feels like she’s been pulverized, completely flattened. But apparently
he hears, because he’s suddenly frantically trying to disentangle himself from the person he’d been so gleefully locking lips with only a moment before.

“Rae.” He says, practically leaping to the side. His voice is a choked screech, too.

When she looks over, there’s an absence in her, a hole where something should be sliding into place in her brain, but just isn’t. The guy beside Archie, the guy who’d been all over Archie, the guy who Archie’d just now been snogging madly in the middle of the street… (the guy the guy the GUY, it repeats uselessly in her head, making no more sense than her first glance did) snorts heavily, rolling his eyes in disdain. For some reason, his dismissal of her slices through her, searing a great slash of agony across her chest.

“Archie.” She cries again, tears filling her eyes, her head moving from his face to that of his… date. It’s a question, a cry, a plea. This can’t be happening.

“I can explain, Rae.” He says quickly, stepping closer and holding out his hands like he intends to soothe her but his eyes are frantic. “It’s not what you think.” She’s only starting to make sense of the situation and the hurt of it is starting to double her over. She places both palms over her chest like she’s putting pressure on the wound.

“What is it then? Eh?” She demands, striding towards him, though she’s not sure what she’ll do when she gets her hands on him. “Cause it looks like you were just snogging a bloke in the middle of the street. It looks like you, this whole time, it looks like you never really liked me. Why would you do that? Why would you mess me about like that?”

“Wait, please.” Archie pleads, stepping directly into her path. “Please, just… I didn’t mean - ”

“It looks like you’re gay, Archie, and you thought you’d use the fat girl from Lincolnshire as a cover up because it’s not like she’s got any other options, right? It’s not like she’d know the difference.” She’s crying now, her voice broken and ragged. June moves closer to her side suddenly, puts an arm around her. Rae’d forgotten she was there, that anyone was there but her and Archie.

But it all comes swirling back in Technicolor- Archie’s date, tall and sneering; the busy Friday-evening street, bustling with people who are turning curious faces to the scene unfolding; the roar of traffic and the smell of a Kebab shop half a mile in the other direction. She’s completely and utterly aware of where she is, and it’s a fresh humiliation.

“Let’s go, honey.” June murmurs gently, turning her away. Rae doesn’t miss the nasty glare she gives Archie, even as she lets herself be guided off.

“No, wait, please.” Archie calls frantically. “Please, let me explain.”

Over the street noise and the heavy thudding of her heart, Rae hears as Archie argues with his date and then calls after her again. She listens for his footsteps, worried he might run after her, but there’s nothing. She doesn’t stop, or look back, or say another word until they’re safely back in the hotel room.

(Continued in chapter 6, part 2)
“He’s still sitting there.” June says, dropping back from where she’s been on tiptoe, peering through the peephole. “It’s been over an hour.”

“Can’t we call Reception and get them to kick him out?” Rae asks, taking another bite of a Mars bar. “Or better yet, the police? Get him arrested for stalking?”

June turns her back to the door and gives Rae a rueful look. “Or, you could just go talk to him?” She holds up her hands when Rae starts to protest. “I know, I know. He hurt you, and he’s a right arsehole for doing it, there’s no question about that. And you don’t have to if you don’t want to, I won’t make you. But…”

Rae can hardly look at her aunt. Instead, she watches as her thumbnail presses into the pad of her middle finger. It had taken a long, scalding shower for her to cry herself numb, and she feels utterly worn out by all this drama. She wants to sleep for a year. “I’m not interested in anything he has to say. He’s a liar and a jerk and… why did he… why would he lie to me like that?”

June shakes her head. “Look, I don’t really give a shit about him and his internal struggle or issues or whatever, but clearly, you need answers. And you won’t know if you don’t ask.” she waves a hand to clear the air. “That’s all I’m saying about it. Feel free to tell me to go stuff it. It’s entirely up to you.”

“It’s just… we kissed and stuff. I feel so stupid.” She’s blushing again, and it’s ridiculous. After all that went down, it’s hardly anything to be embarrassed about. It’s hardly anything at all, really, in comparison with the way Archie was kissing that bloke. Or the way she was kissing Finn, if she’s honest. But this feels like the sticking point, the thing that’s the hardest to just get over.

Archie’s her first kiss. The sum of her romantic history, and now it turns out it doesn’t even count.

June sits beside her on the bed, and Rae lets herself sink into her aunt a little, lets herself rest her head on June’s shoulder.

“I know, darling, but it doesn’t say anything about you. It doesn’t mean he didn’t like you or want you.”

Rae doesn’t even have the energy to roll her eyes. “Oh, come on, he just had his tongue down a guy’s throat in the middle of Shaftesbury Avenue, but I’m sure it means nothing.”

“Maybe he likes both boys and girls, you don’t know. And you won’t know unless you talk to him.”
Rae sighs, low and long and heavy. June rubs her shoulder.

“Fine.” Rae mutters, pulling the hotel bathrobe around herself and belting it tightly. She takes a deep breath, eyes closed, as she stands in front of the door, and pulls it open.

“Rae.” Archie says gratefully and starts to get up, but she gestures for him to stay sitting against the wall on the other side of the hallway. She sinks down against the opposite wall and arranges her bathrobe around her knees. When she’s settled, he asks, “Are you okay?”

Rae scoffs. “What do you care?”

“I care about you.” He’s so earnest that she finds tears filling her eyes all over again. She has to look away. “I know I messed everything up, and I’m really sorry, but I do care about you.”

“Why would you do this, Archie? Why didn’t you just leave me alone? You didn’t have to pretend that you liked me.”

“I do like you, really I do.” He persists as she shakes her head despairingly. “You’re exactly what I would want in a girlfriend. You’re funny and kind and… you get me.”

“Obviously, I don’t.” If he thinks flattery is going to save him, he doesn’t really know Rae at all. A silence falls between them and she forces herself to ask the thing she’s most worried about, even if she can’t look at him while she does it.

“Archie, did I make you gay? Was being with me so…”

“No.” He cuts her off quickly, firmly. She looks up and he shakes his head resolutely. “Not at all. I swear it’s nothing you’ve done. I’ve been gay for… well, always. Sometimes I wish I wasn’t. But, you can’t help who you’re attracted to, can you? Or not attracted to?”

Rae hums a non-response, and in a flash that’s so brief it’s almost unnoticeable, the image of Finn leaning up against the wall in that leather jacket flickers in her mind and is gone.

“I tried. I wanted it to work with us. I wanted to just… be straight. It was so bad for me last year, so bad. I just really wanted to start fresh in Stamford and be straight. And if there was anyone to do that with, I wanted it to be you.” He smiles tenderly at her, and she feels a rush of the old affection that she’d so carefully tended and nurtured for him. “I never wanted to hurt you.”

Rae cocks her head to the side, considers. She’s still so wounded. She’s not ready to just let him off the hook. “What happened last year?” She stalls, and tilts her head a little further when his face darkens with a scowl, curiosity creeping into some of the space currently occupied by sadness.

“I shouldn’t say.” He mumbles, fingers picking at his jeans. He’s not making eye contact and Rae’s had enough. She holds the edges of her robe together and moves to get up. “Whatever,” she huffs.

Archie’s head shoots up and he holds out his hand to stop her, “I’m not trying to be evasive, I swear. I just know that you guys are kinda friends, or, well, I’m not really sure what’s going on with you two.”

“With who?”

Archie gives her a searching look, his eyes turning hard and cold when he spits out, “Finn Nelson.”

“First of all, I am not friends with Finn Nelson.” She snipes. Why does everything end up being
about stupid bloody Finn? “Secondly, what does he have to do with you being gay? Nobody even
knows.”

“Finn does.” Archie shakes his head, and she’s never really seen him angry before. His eyes are
flashing behind his glasses, and his cheeks are bright pink. “We’ve known each other all our lives,
you know. I guess at some point he just… knew. And he was always hinting at it, like he was
criticizing my choice not to be public about it. As if it’s just so easy!” his voice goes up, too loud
for a moment in the hotel hallway, and he quickly lowers it. “Of course we went to the same
school, which he never liked. It was one of the things I was only able to do because his mum
helped, you know? I’d never have a chance at a posh school like that otherwise. But there we
were, and last year he, well… he outed me to the whole sodding school.”

“What? Why would he do that?”

“I’ve been asking myself that for a year.” Archie huffs, stretching one leg out across the hallway.
His foot isn’t touching her, but only just. “He’s a dick. I think he did it just because he could,
because he thinks he’s better than everyone. But, that’s not even the worst of it.”

“No?”

“Well, the other lads took the piss, right? That’s why I never wanted to tell anyone in the first
place, I expected that.” He scoots forward a little, and then his foot is resting against her thigh.
“Well, a couple of them decided I needed a beating, too. They jumped me. I ended up in A & E.”

“Shit.” Rae breathes.

“Yeah. And, they jumped me on the grounds of our prep school, and since there’s a strict code of
conduct policy, I ended up getting kicked out. It was all lined up for me to go to Oxford, I had a
real chance to change my entire life. And then, just like that,” he makes an overly large,
exaggerated snap, “it was all gone. Future gone in the blink of an eye. All because of fucking Finn
Nelson.”

“Fucking Finn Nelson.” She agrees, bowing her head to pick at the carpet. The guy is basically a
plague on all who know him.

“So you can see why I wanted to start over, right?” Archie asks, and she’s startled to see how
close he’s gotten. He’s in the centre of the hall now, his bent knee pressed against hers, his other
leg splayed out beside her. “I know it was wrong, Rae. I know I hurt you, and I’m so sorry. But
you can understand, right? What it’s like to want to fit in?”

She watches him for a moment, considering. She does know what it’s like. If she could pretend
not to be fat, even just for a little while, wouldn’t she? No matter who it hurt? What wouldn’t she
give to experience normal?

“Okay.” She says finally, reluctantly. “I get it.”

Archie grins and reaches over to wrap her in a hug that she doesn’t return, to press a kiss against
her cheek. It feels like nothing. It feels like it always has. At least now she knows it’s not a fault in
her wiring.

They stay in the hallway a while longer, sitting side by side. Archie does most of the talking,
confessing his feelings for Brandon, the boy from the street. He tells her about meeting him, about
kissing him for the first time and feeling like he couldn’t breathe, and knowing, just knowing. She
doesn’t really want to hear all that, but she looks at him as he fumbles and blushes through the
story, and something important becomes suddenly clear.
He talks about Brandon the same way Izzy used to talk about Chop. All these feelings he’s having that she never had with him. That he couldn’t ever feel for her.

Because, it really isn’t about her.

And in a strange way, it makes all the difference.

When she’s back in her room, there’s a thick black smudge from where his shoe had rubbed against her robe. She’s grateful to take it off and start over with a new one in the morning.

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It’s a new day and Rae is looking forward to putting all the shitty parts of the trip behind her, and going back to the fun-having portion of her time in London. But as usual, she doesn’t get to decide.

She’s instantly angry when she hears his voice. She’s got something of an emotional hangover this morning, and all she wants in the world is a cuppa and a fat stack of pancakes.

For fucks sake, does he have to be everywhere? London is an enormous metropolis, with millions of people, and yet the one person in all the world she least wants to see, is here in the lobby of her hotel. Apparently waiting for her.

“Rae!” He calls again, and she takes a moment to close her eyes and breathe. This is just too fucking much. She may kill him, right here in the middle of this dated hotel. His blood would ruin the terrible old carpet and they’d finally have to replace it.

There’s a tiny little bar adjacent to the lobby, and there’s Finn Nelson, looking stiff and arrogant and entirely out of place. He’s perched at one of those too-tall-tables, his upper body hunched over the surface, one boot dangling while the other jiggles furiously. He’s not waving, not showing that he’s trying to get her attention, just hulking there, all self-importance and leather.

Rae tugs at June’s arm, tries to pull her aunt towards the doors, towards freedom, never to have to deal with him again. June utters a startled laugh.

“Hey, look, it’s your weird friend again. What’s he doing here?” she asks, all amusement, but thanks to all that is holy, the heels of her knee-high boots start clicking towards the door. Rae tugs at her harder. Because, there it is, the tell-tale screech of a chair scuffing over the tiles.

“He’s not my friend.” Rae grits her teeth.

“Does he know that?” June’s steps are slowing down again, and she’s turned her whole upper body to look back at Finn.

They’re so close to the door. So close. Just a few more steps, really.

“Rae.” He must have run, because now his voice is very close behind her. “Hey, hold up. Didn’t you hear me calling?”

“What do you want, Finn?” She only half turns towards him. Knowing what she now knows about his history with Archie, she’s even less interested in having one of their confusing conversations.
He takes a surprised step back, confused at her harsh tone. “I, uh… I need to talk to you.” He falters.

“Now is not a good time, actually. We’re kinda in a hurry.”

She sends a meaningful glance to her aunt, who is quick to pick up on the mood and steps closer to Rae, adding, “Yes, we are. We’ve got that thing.”

“Yeah, a thing. Can’t be late… for the thing.”

She thinks she’s got it sorted and has successfully put him off, but then she sees his eyes soften and he says, “Please. I just need ten minutes.”

It’s so unexpected to see a softer, non-douchebag side of him, that Rae finds herself suddenly wondering what he could possibly need to tell her. The only thing she can come up with is that he’s finally willing to share some information about Chop and why he’d fled like he did. If that’s the case, she has to hear him out, she owes it to Izzy.

Turning to Aunt June she says through clenched teeth, “I guess I could meet up with you in the cafe in ten minutes.”

“Would you excuse us for just a sec?” June smiles politely at Finn, as she pulls Rae a few steps away. In a low voice, for only her niece to hear she assures her, “You know, you don’t have to go anywhere with him if you don’t want to.”

Rae breathes deeply. “I know. I really don’t want to, but I think I should. I’ll only be a few minutes, and then I’m rid of him for good.”

”All right, if you’re sure.”

“I’ll be joining you for breakfast before you have time to say ’Earl Grey’.”

“Oh, no,” June says as they step back to where Finn is standing nervously, and this time, she doesn’t even try to mask her true feelings when she intones loud and clear, “I’ll be waiting right outside.”

“Thank you, I appreciate it.” he says.

“You should,” replies June pointedly. She starts walking towards the doors muttering, quite loudly and solely for Finn’s benefit, “Fuck me, I had no idea I’d be spending the entire weekend playing Rae’s bodyguard. Every day a different bloke, I mean…”

Rae smiles inwardly. That’s what she loves about her Auntie June. She’s a total doesn’t-give-a-fuck, takes-no-prisoners badass, and Rae wishes she was half as ballsy and cool as her. The fact that this awesome woman is in fact her mother’s sibling feels like science fiction to Rae.

“What did she mean by that?”

She turns back to Finn at the sound of his voice. “What do you want talk about?” She says, ignoring his question. Finn looks like he’s debating whether or not to push the issue. Rae takes the opportunity to notice how good he looks in his thick, blue cable jumper.

“Listen, I just… I need to talk to you.” He starts, glances around the room.

“Yeah, I got that. So talk.” She’s proud of herself for staying cold and mimicking his own arrogance, but there’s something about the way he keeps looking at her and moving about that’s
making her uneasy. Or maybe it’s just the remnants of last night’s complete emotional upheaval. It’s hard to say when it’s been one hit after another this fucking weekend.

“Um,” he puts his hands in his pockets, “can we go somewhere else? Somewhere private? Your room, maybe?”

Her mouth literally drops open. He’s got to be kidding. She’s making it very clear that she wants nothing to do with him. He can’t possibly think she’d invite him up to her room.

Even as she’s marveling at his audacity, a small part of her brain takes a weird detour. Clearly, she’s losing her mind for real, because one little piece of it has broken off from the rest and chooses this moment to create a particularly lurid image of all the things they could do together in her room. She’s dizzy from the surge of adrenaline as imaginary Finn pins imaginary Rae up against the wall outside her door, can almost feel the satisfying drag of her nails over the bare skin of his back and the hiss of his indrawn breath.

She blinks, trying to clear her head and orders her imagination to stop it. She cannot believe she’s still having all these thoughts and feelings, especially after all that Archie has told her about Finn last night. If she thought he was just a jerk before, it seems now that he’s a malicious bully as well.

She guesses it shows on her face, because Finn swallows thickly. “Right, so not your room.”

“Definitely not. You got nine minutes.” she snipes at him.

That moves him to action, and he grabs her hand suddenly to pull her around a partition and into the empty bar, and she’s too busy being confused by the onslaught of all those images of fevered kisses still running through her head to jerk her hand away until he’s reached his intended destination. Once they’re standing there facing each other, she crosses her arms tightly over her chest.

“So, uh…” He starts, swallows, looks at his feet. He takes a couple of steps backwards, looks at her for a few long moments. Her skin is starting to itch from his gaze. “I have to tell you something.”

She slaps her arms against her thighs with a smack. “For fuck’s sake, would you get on with it already?”

His mouth moves, but he’s still just standing there staring at her. His ears get red, presumably with the strain of trying to make sentences. “Seven minutes.” She announces, and waits. And waits. And waits.

“Okay,” he tries one more time. His eyes close in concentration for a second, hands clasped together, “here’s the thing,” but then he doesn’t continue.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, Rae’s had enough. “Whatever, Finn. You’re the one who wanted this little meeting. I’m not going to stand here all fucking day.”

She turns to go, but she only makes it a few steps when he says it, loud and abrupt and explosive. “I like you.”

She turns around slowly, until she can see his flushed face. “What?” It’s all there is to say, really. “What?”

Finn looks pained. “Actually, that’s not true.” he says, and before Rae’s brain has a chance to even wonder what this could mean, he looks right into her eyes, unflinching, and adds, “Actually, I’m in love with you.”
She’s frozen, the whole world’s frozen for several seconds. She can tell that he’s anxious about what he’s just blurted out, and maybe about her response to his words, but honestly, she can’t even think that far ahead, she’s so shocked. The most she can manage is an exhalation of breath; half laughter, half dismissive huff.

“Rae.” Finn says, with something like a hopeful smile. “I know it’s a shock. I know. Believe me. But… what do you think?”

Rae doesn’t understand that smile. What’s he got to be so damn amused about? “Is this a joke?”

“What… do you mean?”

“What the hell are you on about?”

However he thought she was going to react to his words, she can tell by the light leaving his eyes, the confusion that creeps in, that that wasn’t it. “Look… I know how it sounds -”

“Do you? Because you sound insane, Nelson.”

Finn takes a hesitant step towards her, just one, his arms half raised. “I know it’s insane, I tried to fight against it, I really did. I know all the reasons why we shouldn’t be together and why it’s ridiculous that someone like me would want someone like you, but I just can’t - “

“Be together, what -” she starts, then narrow her eyes at him. “what do you mean someone like me? What’s wrong with me?”

He makes a vague gesture of dismissal, as if all that is not important. “I didn’t mean anything by it, there’s nothing wrong with you, you’re great.”

“But not good enough for the likes of you.” she intones. Her mind is like a whirlwind with words and love declarations flying about, crashing into one another. She has no idea why she’s arguing with him, except that it seems to be their default setting when it comes to each other. That is why she can hear herself defending her own right to be with him, a terrible boy she hates and has zero respect for.

He huffs and rolls his eyes, as if she’s the exasperating one. “I’m not saying - that’s the opposite of what I’m saying! Rae,” he comes closer and his eyes turn to liquid chocolate when he looks at her. “I’m saying, I know what people are gonna say, and how this looks - and I don’t care. I just… want this.”

For the first time since he started his confession, Rae believes him. It ramps up the panic levels inside her to new heights. If only he would shut up for a minute and not say any more horrible things, she could clear her mind and get her bearings, but it seems Finn’s just got started, and apparently they haven’t even scratched the surface of the horrible things list yet.

His voice turns as sweet and soft as his eyes as he looks up at her. “We both know that, well, we’re not really in the same league, you and me, not even really in the same world. I mean, you live in a council house, for fuck’s sake. But it’s not even about that,” he hurries along, chasing a point. “The thing is, I know what you’re thinking.”

“I highly doubt that.” she mutters, and he smiles again. It’s almost sad how much he’s reading her wrong, but she can’t stop him from talking because it’s strangely fascinating to listen to him dig himself into a hole while trying to declare his feelings.

“I do,” he says, and takes yet another step towards her unmoving body. “because, believe me, I
thought it too, in the beginning. You’re thinking, ‘This can’t happen, no matter how much we may want it to’. But I’m saying - yes, it can.”

“Finn -”

“‘All we do is argue, and she can’t keep her mouth shut for a single second, ever.’ I told myself all of this. ‘Her life is a crazy mess, starting with her mother, who wouldn’t know a social grace if it sat on her face, then there’s her cousin, who’s shagging her way through half the countryside, not to mention her best friend…! She’s just not for you,’ I told myself. ‘Just forget about her.’” he stops for air, all of a sudden looking vulnerable. “But I couldn’t.”

And that’s the moment he chooses to take her hand in his.

At some point during his list, Rae must have gasped, because she’s still holding her breath. She’s yet to pull her hand away from his, the shock and rage are keeping her body rigid, there may even be smoke coming out of her ears. *Did he really say all that to her? About her?* She wonders as she’s standing silent in front of him, her mind muddled with too many thoughts.

“Don’t be like that, please, Rae. Say something.” Finn bites his lip, his eyes searching. “I get that you’re shocked, I mean, who would have thought we’d end up here, right?” His smile, though hesitant, has some hope in it again, even laughter. “Maybe I’ve just gone completely mental, who knows… this goes against even my own better judgment. I mean, we don’t work. Nobody would think so, but I just… I can’t stop thinking about you. About kissing you and touching you and arguing with you, all of it. I’m not going to keep fighting against it, no matter how ridiculous we may look. To me, you’re beautiful and I have to be with you.”

Having settled the entire matter between him and himself, Finn takes the final step to close the distance between their bodies, and as he moves, in what seems to her as extreme slow motion, a soft expression changes the lines and shadows of his face. He looks happy, stunningly pretty, utterly sure of himself and his place in the world. Rae watches his hand lift, tracing through the air between them, rising up towards her face as if he intends to cup her cheek. His mouth opens ever so slightly, but it’s enough to make his intentions clear.

This, is what makes her find her voice again.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” It comes out cold and stark, a missile shot into the ever-decreasing distance between their faces. It lands like a slap and Finn visibly jerks back. *That arrogant, condensing prick. How dare he? How DARE he? Who the fuck does he think he is?* There’s a steady rhythm of outrage pounding in her blood that she’s too angry to give voice to.

“No… I’m not kidding, I really mean it.” He says, and she can hear the tinge of doubt and tension that’s slipped in as he quickly corrects himself, “I mean, I really am in love with y-”

“That’s complete…” She can’t even find the words. All that comes out is some outraged sounds. She presses her fingertips to her eyebrow, digs her thumb firmly into her cheekbone. She can’t bring herself to count to ten, or do any of her affirmations to calm herself. Anger has been bubbling inside her during his entire crazy speech, and there’s no telling what’s about to happen as it finally spills over. She hears her own voice spit at him, “In what world would I EVER want to be with you?”

Finn straightens with a snap, all his muscles going rigid. “What?”

“Why would I ever want to be with you?” She jabs a finger in his direction. “What on earth would make me want you? Huh?”
“Why - why wouldn’t you?” he sways a bit on his feet, like he’s trying to find his balance again. For a second, the mask of condescension drops and Rae can see past it, into something like mortification in his eyes. He swallows, and shakes his head. “Stop it, you don’t have to keep doing that.”

“What am I doing?”

“You like me back.” he declares, with none of the confidence he usually displays. “I know you like me back.”

“Like you? I can’t stand you, Finn. How could you have missed that?” Rae’s voice has gotten screechy and loud, but she can’t seem to stop.

She can tell that the meaning of her words is finally dawning on him. The sense of entitlement that has always been part of his character as far as she can see, is shaken by the idea that he’s not the prize he thinks he is, and she won’t be doing any cartwheels across the lobby floor, even though he presented himself to her wrapped up in a big red bow.

“You liked me just fine when you were climbing all over me at the party.” he says.

Rae feels her eyes may seriously pop out of her head.

“You’re just mad because I was honest, because I’m not going to lie and flatter you and tell you some fairytale crap about how we’re just right for each other and how the whole world will line up perfectly for us to ride off into the sunset. People are going to talk, Rae. I like you despite all that.”

“Oh, lucky me, Finn Nelson likes me despite his own better judgment. Hoo-fucking-ray!”

Finn’s voice goes very quiet. “You are unbelievable. Always trying to pick a fight.”

“I’m unbelievable? I am?” She’s moving closer now, right up in his face. “What did you expect? That you could stand there and tell me all the reasons you had not to like me, and I’d still swoon and fall into your arms? What about that fact that I don’t like you? What about what an arrogant prick you are? How you are incapable of having a normal conversation or caring even a tiny bit about anyone else’s feelings? What about that, Finn?”

She uses his stunned silence to move on to her next point, bringing out the big guns. “You’re the kind of person who thinks so highly of himself that he gets to decide on other people’s happiness. You think I didn’t realize you’re the one who convinced Chop to disappear with you without a single fucking word, breaking my best friend’s heart? I bet you don’t even feel bad about it.”

“I don’t feel bad about it! Not at all.” His eyes are narrowed, his voice thick. “Did you know that your best friend was hitting on me at that party? Sitting on my fucking lap, flirting, laughing, right in Chop’s face. No shame.”

“What? That’s not true!”

“And she flat out came on to me at the dinner party, Rae. She saw an opportunity and she went for it. Made suggestions; practically saying that if I fancied her, she’d dump Chop in a heartbeat. I was doing my mate a favour by getting him away from her. Doing him better than I’m doing myself. You think she’s so innocent but it’s an act. I know girls like that, I’ve met plenty of women like that. I’ve seen them around my dad.”

“What are you on about? Izzy isn’t like any… women!” Rae feels like she’s lost the plot.
“Girls who play all their options. She’s put all her chips on him but it’s not Chop she wants, really.”

Comprehension dawns. Rae feels so angry it’s surreal. “It’s what, Finn? What does she want?”

He leans back a little and delivers it coldly, brutally. “His money. His status. That’s what she wants. Not him.”

Rae swallows, shaking her head. “You are so wrong. So wrong.” She’s blinking back tears. How could he possibly think that? Izzy, sweet, kind-hearted, head-over-heels-in-love Izzy, wanting Chop’s money? It’s ridiculous. “You don’t even know us. You don’t know what we’re like. Yes, we’re not rich people but we do alright and believe it or not, our life is not some soap opera where we scheme and manipulate to get our clutches on poor, deluded, rich men’s money. You arsehole.” She tries to steady her voice but there’s just no way, so she gives up. “Izzy is the sweetest, best person you’ll ever meet. There’s not one dishonest bone in her body, but I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that you can’t recognize it when it’s staring you in the face -”

“Oh, come on.”

“You were there, Rae, you saw how she was all over me!” his eyes change a fraction, with something like pleading. “You had to peel her off me yourself.”

“We were drunk.” Rae waves her hand about, trying to paint a lighter picture. “She’s just a happy drunk, that’s all. She’s touchy-feely. It doesn’t mean she’s, like, after you. Just means we were all shit-faced drunk -”

“I wasn’t that drunk.” Finn says, quietly. Rae looks up at him and all the words leave her head.

She’s not sure how long they stand there, just staring, her trying desperately to think of something to say that isn’t dumb. “I… was.” she says finally.

They’re standing very close together and she can feel the hot, quick puffs of his breath against her face. Her own chest is heaving, despite how quiet they’ve gotten, and it’s nothing like the books. It’s wretched, all these conflicting feelings running around inside her.

“I know.” Finn’s eyes flicker away from her for a moment before they come back. “I mean, I could tell, at some point.”

“Then why did you do it? If you knew I was out of it -”

“I didn’t, not at first. I thought you were like me. Into it. I stopped, didn’t I? When I realized, I stopped.”

Anger comes back, full on. “Don’t make yourself out to be some sort of hero.” her mocking mouth twists in something like a smile but her heart is beating so hard. “You realized who you’re making out with. Fat, poor, socially unacceptable Rae Earl, and you bottled it.”

“No, I was being a good guy!”

“So what do you want, like an MBE from the Queen or something?”

Finn’s arm fly up, his fingers go in his hair in frustration. “What do you want from me, Rae?”

“Nothing!”
“I told you how I felt about you. Feel about you. What could I do? I wanted to kiss you. That whole night, that’s all I thought about.”

She moves away from him. Listening to these words is like being in some science-fiction movie and it’s impossible for her to stand there and take it all in. “Don’t be gross.”

“Don’t be a hypocrite.” his voice follows her around the small space that hosts this unlikely scene, as her feet take her from bar stool to partition, and back to the bar.” I wasn’t exactly alone in that corner, now, was I?”

“I was drunk,” she turns back to face him, her finger pointing accusingly in the air. “You took advantage of me!”

Finn’s face is as emphatic as she’s ever seen it. “No, I didn’t!”

“And then, you just left me standing there and…” her hands make vague shapes in the air. “disappeared!”

“Are you angry at me for making out with you, or for not finishing the job, darling? Decide.”

Something changes within him. He looks more like his usual self-assured, big-headed self; cold and mean.

It makes Rae’s voice come out weaker, and she hates that. “How can you say you love me and then do that to me?”

He shrugs, but she can tell by the twitch at his temple that he’s only affecting coolness. “How can you say you can’t stand me and get off with me?”

“Oh, shut up. You’re such a dickhead.”

Finn turns his head away, like he can’t look at her. He’s crossed his arms over his chest, and he raises his shoulders in a stiff shrug. “Is that it? Is that the whole list of things you hate about me?”

“Hardly. It’s a pretty long fucking list.”

He glances at her, and then quickly turns his face towards the bar again. Leaning back on it, his hand suddenly smacks the polished surface. “Well, let’s have it then. Give me the whole list.”

He stands there, like he doesn’t actually believe that Rae could have more to say. But boy, is he wrong. Her weapons are many and he’s provided her with all of them himself.

“Well, there’s Archie, innit? How could you do that to him? It’s so fucked up, I don’t even know where to start.”

There’s a bit of a pause, and then Finn explodes, almost yelling. “Fucking Archie! Of course it’s fucking Archie. You sure are concerned about that fucker.”

“Of course I am. He was my boyfriend.” It comes out of her mouth just like that, in the past tense. She doesn’t meant to share that with Finn of all people, it’s way too private. But to say it any other way would be a lie.

He seems to not have heard anyway, all wrapped up as he is in his own righteous anger. She watches his mouth twist with derision. “Whatever it is you think you’ve got going on with him, believe me, he is not your boyfriend.”
“Yeah, I know, dickhead. That’s why I said ‘was’.” Again, the words just come out. Did she want him to know she’s now boyfriend-less? No, that can’t be it. He’s just confusing her here, with his bogus love confession and saying nice things… or, meaning to say nice things, she supposes.

Meanwhile, Finn stops and stares at her, taking in her news. “Wha- did you… did you guys break up?”

She huffs. Might as well get this over with. Making sure not to give him any false hopes she says simply, “Not that it’s any of your business, but yes, we have.”

“A-ha.” he intones carefully. “Did something, like, happen, or did you - who broke up with wh-?”

“No, no, no, no. I’m not talking about this with you. Like I said, none of your business. We’re talking about what went on between you two. What you did to him."

“What I did to him! What I bloody did to him!” Finn makes a scoffing sound. “Poor fucking Archie. You don’t know anything about that wanker.”

“I know that he’s gay, if that’s what you’re referring to, and I know that you outed him to the whole world. You got him beat up and kicked out of school. You ruined his life”.

Finn seems speechless for once. He stares at her, his brows furrowed as if he’s trying to make sense of her words. She supposes no one has ever confronted him about his actions and their consequences. “You are so lovely to the people you care about, Finn. What a treat to be one of them. And how unfortunate for the poor bastards who are ‘beneath you’.”

“Is that it? Don’t hold back on me now, Rae.”

“Well, let’s see, other than being an insensitive homophobic arsehole, and lording over your friends and sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong, not caring whose heart gets broken because of it, and, what else, let’s think… oh, right, the fact that your idea of a love confession means bringing up every little thing you DISlike about a person - other than all that? …Yeah, I can still come up with some more stuff.” She nods, feeling a bit victorious, and steps back.

“Wow.” Finn says eventually, after standing in complete silence for a few moments. “Okay. You are so… far from… the truth of what happened -”

“You mean your side of things. The only side that matters, right?”

He exhales loudly, tilts his face down. “How d’you do that, I wonder.”

“What?”

“You find it so easy to speak your mind.” He says, and she’s about to tell him that it is not at all true, that she’s constantly in a place where she lacks defenses and cannot speak up to save her life, but he’s taking a step towards her and his tone changes. “Even when you have no idea what you’re talking about, you just… keep talking. Anyway, thank you for explaining all the things about me you dislike.”

Rae doesn’t know how it happens exactly; without seeming to move again, he’s suddenly in her space. “But you know what I’d bet, Rae?” he says, and her breath hitches against her will at the soft way he has with her name. “I’d bet that all these faults of mine would have been forgiven if I’d just told you exactly what you wanted to hear. Just like any other girl. You want to hear all about how pretty you are, how well we fit together. I thought you were different, that I could be honest for once, but you’re just like all the rest. I should have just gone with my usual routine, bought you something shiny and expensive, flattered the hell out of ya. I bet you’d have given me
anything I wanted. Worked for Archie, didn’t it?”

Does it hurt more because he’s so close, so physically… there? He is everything controlled and beautiful and self-assured, everything she’s not. Everything intimidating. His words feel like a punch in the gut, but that almost makes sense to her. What she can’t figure out is why they feel like such a betrayal. She inhales sharply, and she can tell that he can tell, that he’s gone too far. There is a tiny flicker of regret there, but it’s too late. Rae suddenly wonders why she’s even still standing here, taking all this shit from him. Whatever the feelings he claims to have for her, she can’t believe there’d be anyone who would declare it in a more abusive way than Finn has, and she’s had enough. His ten minutes are well and truly up.

“Actually, Finn, there is absolutely nothing you could have done, or said, that would EVER have made me like you. Pretty much from that first night at the pub, I was amazed by your selfishness and arrogance and shit personality. You are the LAST person on the planet I would EVER want to be with. I regret every single second of that party. In fact I wish I’d never even met you.”

Finn looks… Rae finds it hard to keep holding his gaze while holding her ground, because he just looks… destroyed. Did she go too far…? But it was all true and she needed to be harsh to get through all that ego, so he could really hear her.

It feels like he’s showing her something raw, like there’s nothing masking his true self and for just one split second, she’s made him utterly defenseless. She’s often been in his shoes, on the receiving end of carefully chosen destructive words and she’d always imagined it would feel pretty fucking good for once to be the one delivering the blows. It’s not at all the good feeling she thought it would be. Regret turns into empathy, she almost touches him, she almost says she’s sorry and that she didn’t mean any of it -

And then he’s gone. She blinks again, and Finn’s a careful arm’s length away.

“I get it. I’m…” His voice is quiet, soft. She doesn’t look, can’t look. “I’m sorry. I… I shouldn’t have said anything, I shouldn’t have… I’m sorry. I’ll go.”

She watches his feet as they move around the partition and back into the lobby.

After a few more seconds just standing there, she holds out a hand to check, but she’s not actually shaking, it only feels like it. She’s been dying for months to tell Finn exactly what she thought of him, but she never imagined this part, the part just after all the words have been said. She feels exhausted and empty and not quite sure what to think.

Walking towards the lobby, she hopes he’s not still hanging about, but the only familiar face is Aunt June’s, standing close by.

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She’s fairly quiet all day, lost in her thoughts while she tries to assimilate all this new information. June does what she has always done best; understands and provides comfort, and tons of distractions. She’s always been good about giving Rae room to think things through.

They talk about it, a little. Rae can’t bring herself to share all of the details with her aunt, but she gives her the gist of it; he fancies her and she doesn’t return the feeling. That’s it. It’s strange to boil it down that way, to reduce that whole intense conversation to just a handful of words.
That entire day, it’s been doing her head in just to think of it. She was not even close to wrapping her head around the Archie drama, coming to terms with the fact that she essentially had been dating a gay boy for months, when here comes this other weirdo, dropping a huge bomb on her. It goes around and around in her mind, from bafflement to hurt to anger and back again. Like, seriously, is no one normal?

And what is it with Finn, anyway? All this time, all those looks and snits and confrontations. Is she supposed to believe that he’d fancied her during all of that?

June and Rae’d planned a day full of exhausting activity, and a good thing too, because she needs to stop thinking about all that. It is June’s day at the flower markets, a chance for her to set up meetings with suppliers she works with, to see what is new and exciting in the world of wholesale flora. Before Rae’d left, Chloe’d teased her about the fact that one whole day in London was bound to be wasted on waking up early so they could get to the markets during trading hours, then rushing all over, with Rae having to stand around while Aunt June argued with sweaty old stall owners about prices, but Chloe had no idea how amazing those days really were.

As they leave the hotel, Rae is in a bit of a daze, basically rushing after her aunt on auto-pilot to make it to the New Covent Garden Market before it closes. They barely make it, arriving just as stalls are being packed away and men in work clothes start to load up their vehicles. Rae is flustered and full of guilt, worried that her fight with Finn would be the cause of her beloved aunt missing her appointments, compromising her business. June only laughs, “Relax, baby girl, don’t you know who I am?”

And sure enough, June waltzes into the closing market with a spring in her step, long blond hair flying behind her, looking chic and gorgeous in her boots and tight jeans, and the vendors greet her with big smiles and happy welcoming calls, some of them stopping whatever they are doing to jog over and give her an affectionate hug.

“You all remember my lovely niece, Rae, right?” June says, and they nod and smile at Rae, but their focus stays on her aunt. And for once, Rae doesn’t mind being left on the periphery while people are far more interested in the other girl in her company.

Aunt June is the only person who doesn’t make Rae feel like shit in situations like this. She’s just so cool and pretty, her laughter filled the air, and Rae can’t blame all those people for wanting her company, because Rae wants it too. And when they are looking at June all starry eyed it is kinda like a complement to Rae as well. They think June is amazing and since June belongs to her, Rae feels amazing by association.

And while Chloe may have been right, most of June’s colleagues are indeed sweaty and rough looking, they are so much more than that. Some of her closest friends are young, muscly and tattooed florists; shoveling dirt and moving potted plants around by day, rock stars by night.

After they’re done with business, two of June’s friends take them to lunch in a funky little pub in a hidden court yard, and they all sit there, sipping beers and telling outrageous stories for hours. Klay, a sexy, bearded greenhouse owner June used to date “back in the day”, whatever that means, insists on paying for lunch, and no one cares what Rae orders or gives the smallest fuck about how much she eats. They’re also musicians, and when it’s time to say goodbye, Klay and his girlfriend (and bass player) Penny make the girls promise that they would come to their gig that night. Rae can’t think of anything cooler than that.

They start walking around aimlessly, going in and out of interesting shops and galleries, but Rae is already feeling that sinking feeling you get when reality slips in and you start to remember that despite all the fun you’re having on vacation, all your worries and troubles haven’t really gone anywhere.
The thought of going back home in a couple of days is daunting. She isn’t at all ready. Too much has happened in these few London days, and in a way, Rae feels cheated, as if she’d missed out on a proper vacation, too busy thinking about her trouble with boys to enjoy it, and not at all able to relax, not for a second.

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Coming to a sudden halt just inside the hotel entrance, Rae and her aunt exchange astonished looks. “Seriously, June, what the hell?”

“Do you want me to tell him to piss off?” June offers, clutching at Rae’s arm like one of them needs to be held back.

Rae only heaves a heavy sigh and turns to her aunt with a pout. “Why does this keep happening? Is it the hotel?”


They stand together and watch Finn, sitting in one of the leather armchairs in the small lounge area at the far end of the lobby, pen in hand, hunched over the low coffee table. He hasn’t seen them yet; his lips move and he seems to be reading a piece of paper on the table. Rae is curiously blank.

“So what do you want to do?” Asks June. “We don’t have to actually go in, we can go straight to the pub and just hang until the gig starts.”

“No, it’s way too early, we were gonna freshen up.” Rae protests, “He’s not going to ruin our plans.”

“Well, then… if you want that shower, you’re gonna have to cross that lobby.”

“I guess I’ll go see what he wants.” Rae groans, then turns wide eyes to her aunt. “June, what could he possibly want?”

“Oh, well, I don’t know, let’s put our heads together.” says June dryly, than laughs. “Pretty sure he wants you, love.”

Rae gives her a flat look. All she wants is to put her aching feet up, take a shower and maybe a nap, before putting on something nice and going to the gig. But there was no chance of that, as it seemed Finn wasn’t planning to ever leave the lobby of this hotel.

Rae straightens her spine, hands off her shopping bags to June, who gives her a sympathetic smile as they both head in, June walking towards the lift. As Rae approaches, Finn lifts his head and looks up at her, startled.

He stands up, holds his hands out in front of him to hold her off, like she’s going to yell at him again. His eyes are dark and sunken. She doesn’t like the tightness in her chest when she looks at him.

“Don’t worry, I’m not here to do something stupid. Again.”

“Okay.”
“Look, I…” He runs a hand through his hair, and it’s already pretty disheveled for his normally well put-together self. His fingers scratch a new path through it. “I’m not good at speaking. I always mess up what I mean to say.”

She’s getting alarmed now. He’s not going to try again, is he?

“I… can you just read this?” He gathers up some of the papers from the table, the ones that aren’t crumpled, and shoves them at her. When she doesn’t take them, he frowns. “I’m not stupid, I heard what you said. I’m not… asking… again. God.”

She takes the papers with a sigh. It’s hotel stationery, covered in his slanting, messy script. “Have you… you haven’t been here all day, have you?”

“There are some things I need you to know, okay? Can you just read it, and I’ll leave you alone.” He’s staring at her, his jaw tight, one of those burning, judgmental stares that have always made her uncomfortable and annoyed. What if these looks… what if they’ve always been something else entirely?

He breaks the gaze and blinks at the faded carpet. “Right then. I guess that’s it.”

“Okay.” She replies simply, still holding the papers gingerly, not quite committed to taking them. There’s another long, uncomfortable pause, where Rae wonders if there’s something that she’s expected to say or do now, in the unfamiliar role of the one doing the rejecting. Eventually, she just starts walking towards the lift, pushes the button.

“Nice knowing you, Rae.” He says solemnly when she gets in and turns to face him.

She’s still thinking how to reply when the door shuts on Finn Nelson for good.

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(7 PM)

Dear Nan,

It’s really hard to write this, but I feel like if I don’t share it with someone, I’ll literally lose my mind. Right now I don’t feel like there’s anyone in my life that I can really talk to about my actual, true feelings. I wish you were around, like available for a proper conversation, or even just a hug, like when I was a wee boy, and I’d crawl into your lap after dinner, and you’d pet my hair and ask me questions. Or even later, when I grew up a little and for a while I didn’t want to share anything about my life anymore, but you had a way of asking, that didn’t take “No,” for an answer, not from anyone. If you were here, I’m sure I would gladly spill all the horrible, miserable things that happened today and how completely PATHETIC I acted, but on the other hand, I guess it’s better putting it down in a letter. I will try to spare you the really embarrassing, 17-year-old-boy thoughts, but forgive me in advance if I get carried away.

It was a bad idea, such a bloody bad idea. What was I thinking, even going there to talk to her? She’s impossible to talk to at the best of times, and I know that! Unreasonable, maddening girl.

It was just… last night at the play, Nan. You wouldn’t believe her last night, in this little dress and her hair all pretty and she was just… I dunno… such a sight for sore eyes. After all this time, to turn around and suddenly see her just standing there. I thought I was dreaming her again (except
in my daydreams she’s never as mean as she is in real life). Look, it’s no secret I’ve been miserable. I thought it would end all my problems coming home, but it didn’t fix the Rae thing, did it? Because the longer I was away from her not knowing what she was up to or what that twat Archie (sorry for the language but you know exactly how I feel about that bloke) is doing with her, it just got worse and I couldn’t stop obsessing about it. Chop, of course, wasn’t helping either, always going on about his bloody broken heart and how he couldn’t believe Izzy would do that to him, and every time he asked us if maybe he should call her up just to give her a chance to explain, there was a part of me that was dying for him to do just that, ’cause that would mean we’d have some contact with the Stamford people and maybe I’d know something.

Don’t get me wrong, I still believe that Izzy’s no good for him and that Rae’s no good for me, but it doesn’t seem to matter because all I wanted was to get on a train and just be there and just see her stupid face again and hear her stupid voice and annoy her so she goes off on one… I just really… missed her so bad. I don’t get it, but it’s undeniable.

Fact is, by the time we left, it was too late. I already had those feelings, that constant excitement in the pit of my stomach, every day waking up, knowing that I’d probably see her, around college or down the pub, or at the record shop, which was always the best because it was just us usually, and we could argue (or, as I was starting to see it, flirt) in privacy. And, you know, feeling like that was alarming, but kinda fun too, although I didn’t think I was in any real trouble, until the party.

Oh, god, the party…

Lois kept telling me that I was in love with Rae but I’d refused to indulge her, I kept saying she was exaggerating. I mean, I fancy her, sure, I think she’s beautiful and like, an amazing person, but I don’t “love” her, that’s such a crazy thing to say. So what if I can’t stop thinking about every word she’s ever said to me. So what if I keep replaying that kiss… if you can even call what we did at this party ‘a kiss’… over and over, going over it in my head, like a sad idiot. Without going into the graphic details, let me just say, it was nothing like anything that I’d experienced before. I was out of control with her. That never happens. I always know what I’m about when I’m with a girl. When Rae and I started… dancing, I couldn’t even tell you what the other people around were up to. Hell, I couldn’t even say where exactly we were and whether anyone was watching. And I don’t want you thinking I was too drunk, Nan, because I wasn’t drunk at all. I just… she was wearing this thing… it wasn’t even a proper dress. It was sheer and flimsy and there was skin everywhere and she smelled amazing and then I finally, finally got to kiss her… so… yeah. That was really scary to suddenly realize I was completely out of control and it was like - what am I doing? You know I don’t do things like that in public, I don’t even like kissing my girlfriends around my friends too much. And here I was… and it was so intense… I had to get away.

Knowing you, you’d say run away, and as usual, you’d be right. I needed to get some distance and clear my head, or whatever. I thought I was getting there, too. Despite all those obsessive thoughts, I thought I was starting to come around, be more myself again.

Except after one minute of talking to her at the theatre I was, like, on fire, my heart was racing the whole time, and on the drive home, and truth be told, that entire night when I should have been sleeping and, well, that’s enough sharing…

So, thinking on what you would have advised me, I had the brilliant idea of going to talk to her to put the matter to rest, once and for all. I mean, I just couldn’t take it anymore and who knows if I’d ever get another chance like that again, right? (Don’t deny it, I know you just love the idea of me walking up to Rae and just pouring my heart out). And there was something so exciting - even though I was bricking it - about the idea of actually telling her, actually watching her face when she realized how much I like her.
‘Course, that was before she shit all over my heart… that was back when I thought she’d be happy to know that and that she maybe, maybe felt the same… I mean, the odds were that she was into me the same as I was into her, right? Not being arrogant or nothing, but, girls like me. That’s just a fact. But not this one! Oh no! Apparently, I’m the LAST PERSON SHE WOULD EVER WANT TO BE WITH. That’s what she said. Those were her words.

How could she think that? What’s so wrong with me, anyway? I’m losing my mind, going over and over every word she said and it’s all so vile, so painful, like my insides are crumpled and Rae Earl’s the one who crumpled them. Nan, I just don’t know how to

I don’t know…

continue existing.

This hurts, this really fucking hurts. I want to die.

But since I can’t… I’m going out to have a drink.

Love always, Finn

( 22:40 PM )

Fuck her, just fuck her. how dar she say those things. Like she’s sucha a prise. Everything about her life is messed up, she a total mess!!! instead of being fucking gratful that a good looking,educated, rich bloke from a respecatable family is a bit interested in her fat arse she’s so fullof herself like write her a letter?? ? Fuck if I’ma gonna write her a letter, like I what, like I owe her an explaination with all the things or sommat if thas what she things And like who evenn I mean I sure don’t, fuckin go be with fucking archie that cunt, go be with your gay boyfrind and leaveme the fuk alone you stuped cosw

( 23:25 PM )

sorry bout that Nan. I was a litttle drunk I’m sorr I’m all bettre now

( 3:00 AM )

Do you remember Nina Mitchell from when I was little? I tried to kiss her behind the monkey bars and she threw a plastic brick at my head. Remember that?

I’ve been trying to remember, and that’s the actual last time I can come up with where a girl said no to me.

So stupid.

I’m pathetic.

The whole thing is.

( 3:20 AM )
God, Nanna. What if she’s right, though? What if everything she thinks about me is dead on? Except for the Archie thing, which obviously was just him lying to her, what if it’s all true? That means I’m horrible, just a horrible person. I was so mean to her when we first met. The thought of how much I hurt her makes me cringe and feel sick inside… because I know other people hurt her and thinking about it makes me crazy and all I want to do is comfort her and protect her… but it’s too late and I can’t blame her for thinking I’m worthless and not wanting me like I want her.

God, I want her.

I wish we could know in advance, like when we first meet someone, to not be a dick to them, because even if now you can’t tell, later on they will mean everything to you and it’ll be too late because you fucked it up already and nothing you say can undo that early bullshit. Wish someone told me that a girl I wouldn’t even look at twice if she came towards me in the street,

I feel like that was your job, Nan. Like, you should have told me that a girl I would start out thinking was beneath me could turn out to be so much better than me. That a girl I wouldn’t have even looked at twice could be actually beautiful. So beautiful it would make my heart hurt.

(3:45 AM)

Sorry Nan, you did do that, you did do your job, I just was a stupid boy and I didn’t listen. Sorry. Sorry about everything. I love you.

Finn

TBC

End Notes

This story is also archived on a dedicated tumblr page, here: http://commonpeople-fic.tumblr.com/

We appreciate any kind of constructive criticism.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!