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Responsible Friend

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RESPONSIBLE FRIEND

by

Nina Correa White
B.A. December 2013, Old Dominion University

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

RESPONSIBLE FRIEND

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Old Dominion University, 2020
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This novel explores the purity of friendship and the ugliness of grief, and how each can affect, complicate, and enhance the other. It represents the life-changing relationships that exist in this world, but those that do not need romance or sexual desire to save us. This is a love story between two friends.

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This dedication is split three ways:

to Emily, who explored my dreams with me,

to my parents, who showed me I was intelligent enough to pursue them,

and to Sheldon, who inspired me to chase them wildly.

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PREFATORY ESSAY

Navigating Reality and Fiction with Broken Pieces

My fiction contains broken pieces of me. Pieces of me that have, over time, become scattered around the landscape of my life and often lost, pieces that have been tossed around by the storms in my life, pieces I'd forgotten, pieces I'd believed I'd never get back. What writing has done for me is provide me with a means to gather those scattered pieces and bring them back together, to see those moments through new eyes, to confront those crumbling parts of me with the strength I'd initially not had to fix them. It took me years to get to a place where I was willing to allow my stories to reflect pieces of myself, and where I was willing to allow my stories to reveal pieces of myself that I'd never known existed. The process of writing fiction has taught me so much about the person I'd like to be—someone who trusts her own instincts and approaches a project with the confidence she needs to succeed. Someone who isn't afraid to take a risk or aim high, who appreciates the beauty of different perspectives, and finds fulfillment in taking something familiar and turn it into something new.

I consider myself a chronic dreamer. For me, dreaming is like breathing. It's vital to my survival, inevitable, incessant. As a child, I was content with being alone, never minding the silence. My mind was as good a place as any to find entertainment, solace, and company. At times where my imagination was running wild, I used to climb over the rails of our half-turn staircase when my mother wasn't watching and pretend I was someplace else. I could be anywhere I wanted—scaling a skyscraper, on the high-dive of an Olympic swimming pool, peering over the edge of Niagara Falls. It was while clinging to the rails of our staircase that inspiration found me, where my imagination took me by the hand and showed me life beyond the

rails. It took me years of grasping for inspiration in my life before I realized that it had been there all along, just on the other side of the rails, waiting for me to take the risk, reach out and take it.

Although I've never had trouble dreaming big, I didn't always have the love and appreciation for the literary world that I have today. As a child, my imagination was what drove me. I was the universe that the voices in my head revolved around, and I cherished my oddities, never thinking twice about the sideways glances I'd receive. As I grew older, however, and my universe expanded, I realized that not everyone cherished oddities the way that I did. But there was a driving force inside of me, one that desired to push the boundaries of my reality, that required me to dream big—big enough for others to call me crazy. I was born to chase what others considered to be pipe dreams; my life was nothing without reaching as high as possible.

I learned early on that being a chronic dreamer meant that I had energy that was constantly needing to be expended via the chase of a wild dream; otherwise, my restlessness would easily become unbearable. It wasn't long before I began harnessing that energy into my ambitions. Unfortunately, much of my youth was wasted on chasing the wrong dreams.

The first time I ever picked up a book was after breaking both my legs consecutively, one after the other. After having surgery to repair one broken bone and spending half a year recovering, I broke my other leg just days after the doctor cleared me to resume my regular physical routine. After learning that I'd be heading into my second reconstructive surgery in one year on the leg I'd once considered my good leg, I fell fast and hard into a self-pitying, miry pit of which I couldn't work my way out. Prior to those two, life-altering injuries, I'd been pursuing a track and field scholarship, and it was a dream I had to abruptly abandon following my second injury, and a dream that had to be pried from my desperate, restless hands. It was here, at a time

where I was more physically broken than I'd ever been, that I stumbled upon the marvelous literary world, and I felt whole for the first time in my life.

Amid this discovery, I learned even more about myself, things that made me feel more than just physically whole. I had discovered pieces of myself I'd never known existed, pieces that gave me understanding and insight that I'd never realized I'd been searching for. Fantasy author Seanan McGuire summarizes this feeling perfectly in her young adult novel, *Down Among the Sticks and Bones*, when she says that “*some adventures require nothing more than a willing heart and the ability to trip over the cracks in the world.*” My life of adventure began with me taking an abrupt fall out of my world as I'd known it, but it resulted in me seeing the world through a transformative perspective. For the first time, I understood why I'd never felt like I belonged here—I was meant to keep one foot in the fictional world at all times.

My early writing began as a kind of release. In a desperate search for answers at a time where not much in my life made sense, I turned to my biggest source of comfort—writing. I needed to understand the pieces of my life that were crumbling, to make sense of all the parts of myself that seemed so dark and unfixable. Though I don't know if I ever found the answers I was searching for in those words, I found something else among the confession of every secret side of myself I was tired of hiding from everyone else—I found a strange kind of beauty in the ugliest parts of my reality that could only have been spotted through the lens of writing.

At some point, the stories began spilling out of me; I couldn't stop them if I tried. I found fiction to be the perfect place for absolute honesty—my own, personal confessional I could visit anytime I wanted. For every confession I'd make in the form of a narrative, my characters became more human. I'd sometimes find myself sifting through my own thoughts in search of the ones I'd hate most to admit out loud and give them to my characters to confess. Not only did

fiction give me the outlet I needed to move forward from some of my most self-deprecating thoughts, but it took seeing myself through this creative lens to realize that the things I considered to be my worst qualities also had the potential to be my best. Each time I'd write, I was introduced to another side of myself that, previously, I'd never had the words to speak into being. I made it my goal to create characters who could come to similar revelations about themselves.

I am a lover of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. Once beginning the pursuit of my MFA at Old Dominion University, I thought I knew exactly what I loved to both read and write. Since picking up my first book series shortly after my first surgery—Harry Potter—I couldn't keep my mind from spinning elaborate tales of things that were known as impossible to the world. I discovered reading at the late age of sixteen, and before then, I'd never known the power of books to tug us away from the world we knew and open our eyes to new realms. It was a kind of magic I never knew existed at a time where I didn't have much else to cling to, and something that transformed my life. That's why, upon entering my first year as an MFA student, I would have wholeheartedly defined myself as not only a lover of science fiction, fantasy, and horror, but someone who spent the better part of my time in the program creating those kinds of stories. Even if it wasn't what I'd set out to do, those supernatural and otherworldly elements always managed to creep into my stories.

Responsible Friend, the story that eventually became my thesis, is completely different from every other story I've attempted. There aren't any magical or supernatural elements, no complex, parallel or otherworldly setting, no moments of horror or edgy suspense. I used to believe that if I didn't have any kind of unique quality or oddity in my stories, I wasn't taking enough of a risk. But with this one, it's the opposite. By ridding my storytelling of all the things

that I was most comfortable with, I was stripping away all those distractions and taking away my need to spend so much time pondering an elaborate, twisty plot. I could, instead, spend time pondering what kind of story I'd really like to tell—I could focus on what underlying values I would like for my readers to take away from the experience. I could decide which of those darker pieces of myself I'd like to release into my story, I could spend more time developing my characters into honest, and real reflections of humanity, nurture pieces of myself within them, learn things about myself—my expectations and the way I see the world around me—through the narrowed lens of a story that is simply about living and being human.

Although it began as a mere scenario I'd created to explore the human reactions of an uncomfortable moment of high emotion, a character was born of that scenario where I asked myself, "what kind of person would find herself in this situation?" As I continued to answer that question, a story grew, followed by a world for my story to exist within.

I never thought creating a setting so similar to the world I exist within could be as exciting as creating an otherworldly one, but so much more goes into building a world for your story than merely aesthetic detail—this was something I hadn't recognized before attempting a much simpler plot and storyline. It made me think of what makes up the world around me, and the details in my life that make my world my world and not someone else's—people I surrounded myself with, places I frequented, things I turned to as sources of comfort—all these things made my world unique to me and were things I could focus on as pieces of the puzzle that made up the backdrop of my story that could help make a richer place for my readers to reside in.

A goal of mine with this story was to reflect on what kind of story I'd ultimately like to tell and do my best to develop that idea. I wanted my story to hold underlying values, to emanate a message of positivity beneath the events of the story that would stick with the reader long after

it was over—something to leave them feeling like they had been changed, even if only a little, once they reached the end. This has always been important to me, because since I'd begun my journey as a writer, I couldn't shake the feeling that maybe I was placed here to shed a little light and beauty upon some of those dark, ugly corners of this world, the ones that had left me feeling so lost and broken just before my own discovery of fiction. But often, this goal would become lost, slipping away from me as my plot would become more and more complex. I'd find myself adjusting this vision in order to accommodate my plot or fit a twist into my story.

So, upon asking myself what story I'd like to tell for my thesis, when stripping away the complexity of my story until I reached the bare bones of it, I decided that the story that was wanting to be told was about two things. First, a tale of friendship—what makes up a true, uncomplicated, and untainted friendship, and the kind of light and positivity that can arise from a friendship of that kind. What kind of healing can come from friendship? Is it enough to change a life? Can it be enough to save a life? And second, a tale of what it means to grieve—how it manifests itself differently in every person, how grief doesn't come solely with death; we can grieve many things in life, and every kind can be every bit as crippling as what we often view as the standard. Can we find true healing from grief? Is it something we're doomed to carry with us forever? Can our scars from grief eventually become our most beautiful qualities?

When I was in high school, my parents used to let me paint on the walls of my bedroom. It was something I started doing as a kind of release—for every struggle, every moment of doubt or questioning, every dark day, I would paint something on my walls in response, something to encourage me to keep moving forward. I can still visit that room and see pieces of me all over it, imprints of the girl I was and the girl I grew into painted all over the room, but most of all, visual

reminders of the things I've survived. Words of positivity that had once kept me going surround whoever is in it—

Dream big

Live big

Look forward

Press on

Inspire me

My favorite, however, covers an entire wall. At some point, I started having everyone who has ever come to visit me put their handprint on my wall. It's filled from floor to ceiling with colorful handprints of people who have passed through my life. There were many times when I still lived in that room where I'd find myself feeling totally isolated and closed off from the world at the end of the day, but no matter what had happened, I was able to look at this wall and remember that I wasn't alone, nor have I ever been.

Friends are like secondary characters in the story of our life that help us get from one point to the next. I've learned something from every friend I've had, whether that be from a brief conversation, from an unexpected hug at the right time, from moments where friends have disappointed me, from moments where I've disappointed them. Failed friendships and successful ones, friends who have moved away, friends who have passed away. They've all been part of my story, and they are evidence that, despite how alone sometimes feel, I've never actually been alone. This is the feeling I want *Responsible Friend* to represent.

Responsible Friend is about two unlikely friends—Nik, our protagonist, who is overwhelmingly honest, a bit crazy, impulsive, and charismatic, and Kayla, her roommate-turned-friend, who is responsible, standoffish, nurturing, and wary. They begin as solely

roommates, after Kayla answers Nik's ad for a roommate and "responsible friend." Although they have nothing in common, and their relationship begins with Kayla agreeing to be the friend that Nik needs—generally, someone to ensure that she always makes it home and into her bed after getting trashed and help nurse her back to life after the world's worst hangover—they both quickly realize that there is more to the other than just what's on the surface. As Nik works to understand Kayla's standoffish behavior that she soon discovers stems from a past tragedy she's not willing to admit and Nik's not immediately willing to investigate, Kayla soon notices that there are things in Nik's past that she is grieving as well—mistakes. While Nik's way of coping is obvious and overtly problematic—her automatic response being to turn to alcohol in order to turn her mind off to her guilt and grief—Kayla's way of coping may be just as, if not more, problematic, although she is able to hide it more effectively at first—something that's developed into a bad habit of crashing funerals.

My goal for *Responsible Friend* had always been to write the story to a point where Nik and Kayla eventually find themselves in reversed roles. While Kayla begins the story as Nik's responsible friend, it grows more and more evident as time progresses that maybe she isn't the responsible, together person she tries to appear as. Although Nik is the older of the two, she is perfectly content with being the one who needs taking care of, and Kayla's naturally maternal behavior seems at first to be exactly what Nik needs. Eventually, through a long string of mistakes and bad situations that Nik can't seem to help getting herself into, the story takes a turn, where Nik finally has to make the choice to become the friend she'd sought in Kayla.

I see pieces of myself in both Nik and Kayla—those broken and scattered pieces that can't seem to help but surface as I write—and through challenging myself to write this story and focus more on the development of honest, believable characters who are indisputably human,

I've learned more about myself in regard to the way I deal with both friendship and grief. One of my favorite things about fiction has always been that it provides me with an easy escape from reality whenever I need it most, and I think that's why I'd always been drawn more to the science fiction and fantasy genres than anything else. But what I've discovered through the development of this story for my thesis is that fiction that mirrors the world as we know it can provide us another doorway out of our reality. Though it isn't one that pulls us into other worlds, what it does do is provide us a glimpse into lives and perspectives that we otherwise would never get to experience. It provides us with a kind of parallel reality, one that can take the ugliest parts of reality as we know it and present it as something strangely beautiful.

ONE

Nik was in serious need of a responsible friend. That, of course, wasn't the main reason behind her plastering ads for a roommate all over every place that wasn't a bar. The main reason was simple—she couldn't afford to live anymore. But the fact that she needed a responsible friend—someone who gave a shit whether she wound up passed out shirtless on someone's lawn (which had only happened once before) or whether she foolishly showed up at her best friend Gray's closing shift at his café trashed and handsy (which had unfortunately happened twice)—that was a reason that came in at a close second to finances. And what better opportunity to rope in a solid friend than embarking on a quest for a roommate? There would never be another opportunity for her to post ads describing her ideal friend.

Nik found out about Kayla through Gray on one of those days where she could have out-drunk a frat house. There had been a hell of a lot of drunken mistakes that Nik had made in her lifetime—too many to count, even. But her worst decisions—all the ones that left her cursing herself out in the middle of the night—those somehow were all made sober. Signing a year-long lease for the townhouse was current number one on the endless list she chose to call *Shit Nik Does*. She had been out of her mind to think that she'd been able to afford it, but after a particularly good few weeks of tips from the oceanfront bar she tended to and having been smothered with compliments and more tips after her first gig at May Day, Gray's family café, she'd caught herself in a moment of unearned self-confidence. But not even two months into her lease, she was already living off of cereal and instant noodles and sweet-talking her bar manager and promising him midnight visits and slutty favors to get him to give her enough of his share of the tips to fill her gas tank.

Cranky and depressed after agreeing to yet another night she already regretted, she was attempting to swallow her shame for long enough to get through a set at Gray's café, while also scrambling to figure out how to pay her rent at the end of the week.

"Gray, I'm gonna need a shot of whiskey ASAP; I don't even care if it's that cheap kind that tastes like ass," said Nik, scrambling to plug in her acoustic guitar and mic, while attempting to wipe her mind of the shit she'd just agreed to at the bar in exchange for leaving early enough to make her regular gig at Gray's.

"Nik, come on. I love you, but I don't want a repeat of last time," said Gray, somehow managing to answer her from behind the bar and still shoot a polite grin at a regular while delivering a plate of fried shrimp.

"One shot," she said. "Just one, I promise. I'm just trying to clear my head before I sing."

Gray shook his head, but he obliged, pulling out a shot glass from behind the counter and filling it with whiskey, then sliding it toward Nik, who was standing at the end of the bar with a leg up on one of the stools tuning her guitar.

"You can thank that gorgeous voice of yours for that one," he said.

He smiled when he said it, and she had to admit that it was hard not to notice his charm when he smiled the way he did while leaning over the bar top. Gray's smile was his best physical quality—his dark, reflective eyes were lined with thick lashes and gave off a kind of stern quality that could be intimidating to someone who didn't know him well, but when he smiled, they wrinkled in a warm, almost goofy way. His otherwise sharp face would soften, and it was hard not to feel like the only person in the room who warranted his smile when it was directed at you.

Gray was a true friend. For the past seven years that she'd known him, he'd been the one she called when she was in trouble, like the time she ran out of gas and was stranded on the side

of the interstate, or when she caught the flu and needed someone to take her to her doctor's appointment because she was too sick to open her eyes long enough to drive, or any time her car was in the shop and she needed a ride somewhere. She'd even called him when she got stranded at the apartment of some asshole she met at a bar. The guy had gotten too handsy with her and wouldn't stop when she changed her mind midway through sex when she saw the picture of his girlfriend on his nightstand. After she punched him in the jaw to get his rancid, drunken mouth away from hers, the guy rolled off of her and moaned before passing out asleep. She locked herself in the bathroom and called Gray to pick her up, crying for the whole twenty minutes it took him to get there. It was the early morning, but Gray was wide away when he picked her up, and he held her until she could get her trembling under control. He brought her home with him and tucked her into his bed while he took the couch. That was the first and only time she ever let Gray take care of her while she was drunk.

Somewhere in the middle of all that, Gray had confessed that he had feelings for her. But Nik just shrugged it off and responded, "No, you don't. I'm not worth it, Gray. I'm a shitty person. You're too good for me." And that was that. They never spoke of it again.

"You're the best, Gray," she said, throwing her head back and downing her shot in one gulp, barely flinching as she welcomed the burn. She knew whiskey wasn't the best choice of drink to nurse her vocal cords before singing, but it did enhance the rasp in her voice in a way that she liked.

"By the way, anyone ask about my ad?" she asked, nudging a shoulder toward the bulletin board beside the bar. Her bright yellow roommate ad was eye-catching to say the least, yet she could almost feel how unread it was:

Seeking a responsible roommate. Townhouse with two master suites, both with baths.

Must be female. Must be willing to pay cash. Does not drink/smoke. \$600/monthly.

See store manager Gray Baines for details.

“Sorry, Nik,” he answered, shaking his head.

“Damn. No leads whatsoever?”

Gray thought for a moment before beginning again. “Actually, there’s one of my servers—I don’t really know if she needs a place to stay. I just know she’s alone.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. She’s always picking up extra shifts. Actually, I’m surprised you’ve never run into her because she basically lives here. No family here. She’s just—alone.”

“Well, what the hell, Gray? Ask her already before I’m thrown out on my ass,” said Nik.

“Okay,” said Gray with a laugh. “I’ll talk to her tomorrow. No promises, though.”

“Of course,” said Nik. But even as she agreed, she knew that if she had the chance to talk to this chick, she was going to pressure the shit out of her.

*

To: Chang, Drew

From: Chang, Kayla

Date: August 5, 2019

Subject: New Place?

Hey Bro,

I know you've been worried about me since you left. Just so you know, I'm totally fine. You've got enough to worry about on the ship without having to constantly be wondering whether or not I'm eating (for the record, yes, I am). I know you've been pushing for me to go back to Houston for the time being and stay with Aunt Nicole, but honestly, I've finally gotten used to the area here. Houston would probably just be a ghost town without Mom and Dad there, anyway. But I may have actually found a solution to my anxiety about living alone for the next few months—my boss connected me with another coworker who is looking to lease a room in her townhouse. Seems like she's willing to offer a good deal. Also, kind of seems like perfect timing with our lease being up next month. What do you think?

(Love you)

K

*

Gray had made good on his promise and talked to Kayla for Nik. Not even twenty-four hours later, she got a call from a number she didn't recognize, and was greeted by a timid, childlike voice.

"Hi, is this Danika John?"

"Oh, God! Who the hell are you and who told you my name was Danika?"

"Sorry. My name is Kayla Chang. Gray gave me your phone number," Kayla stuttered.

"Oh, you're the waitress Gray told me about! Well, shit! When can we meet?"

"Um, maybe tomorrow morning before my shift?"

"When's your shift?" Nik cut in.

"Three—"

“Great! Meet me at the end of the boardwalk at 40th tomorrow at noon? That’s not a far walk from May Day. I’ll take you to see the place.”

“Uh, yeah okay,” said Kayla, sounding reluctant. Nik could usually count on her abrasiveness and enthusiasm to startle people into agreeing with her. But the fact that Kayla had just obliged was a good sign. At this point, she didn’t have much of a choice but to try and force Kayla into agreeing to be her roommate. Time and money were running out.

*

Nik knew she was right about Kayla the second she saw her. If the black shirt with the “May Day” nametag labeled with her name wasn’t enough of a dead giveaway, the fact that it was only noon and Kayla was already dressed for her 3:00 work shift, nametag and all, was. She was petite, much smaller than Nik was in nearly every way—while Nik stood at 5’9—not including the uncontrollable head of curls she never bothered trying to tame that she could thank her Puerto Rican mother for inheriting—Kayla looked to be a whole head shorter than her. Flat-chested and baby-faced with exception of her eyes, Nik could hardly believe she was twenty-two, as Gray had said. Her deep brown eyes, however, were definitely experienced, although Nik couldn’t really tell how. Life? Love? Loneliness? It didn’t matter. Kayla looked like the kind of person who didn’t have one wild bone in her body.

“Excuse me, are you Danika?” Kayla asked, eyeing Nik, who was sitting on the railing at the end of the boardwalk, with caution. The wind whipped Nik’s dark brown curls around her face as Kayla approached, forcing Nik to spit out hair before replying.

“Okay, if I hear that name come out of your mouth one more time, I’m going to kill Gray for telling it to you,” she said, hopping down from the railing.

“Please, call me Nik,” she added, putting out her hand. Kayla took it and smiled, though she was unable to hide her hesitance. “But seriously. Don’t ever call me Danika.”

“Got it,” Kayla said.

“Relax, Kayla,” said Nik with a laugh, feeling that the rough, rasp of her voice was so much more evident in comparison to Kayla’s soft tone. “I like you already.”

“Okay,” she said. She clearly wasn’t much of a talker.

“So, you ready for a tour of the townhouse? It’s about fifteen minutes from here. We’ll take my car,” said Nik, throwing an arm around Kayla’s shoulder and pulling her along.

As they rode with the windows down to the townhouse, Kayla was rigid. She clutched her purse tightly to her chest and stared straight ahead, seeming to think that the stiffer she stayed, the less the wind would touch her. Nik loved riding with the windows down when she had people in her car; she felt that by the end of a single car ride with the windows down, she could tell exactly how stick-up-their-ass they were. People who were carefree would usually lean toward the window; the straight-laced ones leaned away. Kayla had already had her hair in a ponytail when they met, and she still leaned away.

“So, what’s your deal, Kayla?” Nik yelled over the wind and her car stereo that was currently on blast, just the way she liked it.

“My deal?” Kayla asked, shifting in her seat, clearly uncomfortable with the fact that she was being forced to raise the volume of her voice in order to shout over the noise.

“I mean what brings you to the Beach? Gray said you were from Houston.”

“My brother,” was all she said.

“Your brother? Is that why you’re so lonely? Cause you followed your brother here?”

“I don’t know why Gray told you I was lonely,” she said.

“Well, he didn’t say you were lonely. He said you were alone. I just assumed that meant you were lonely.” When Kayla didn’t respond, she added, “So where’s your brother?”

“Deployment.”

“For how long?”

“Until May.”

“Perfect! That’s when my lease is up,” Nik replied, but she decided by Kayla’s un-amused expression that she should probably reel in her enthusiasm at least a little bit. She couldn’t help it, though. This girl was perfect.

Nik pulled her car into the small driveway of her townhouse and got out, waiting for Kayla to follow. Kayla was hesitant. She seemed to not want to get out of the car. By the time she got the door open, Kayla was behind her.

“Welcome to my safe haven,” Nik said, swinging the door open to the townhouse.

As much as Nik resented herself for signing up to be indebted to the bills of this place, she had to admit that she loved it now as much as she did when she first moved in. It was newly updated, new appliances, new countertops and flooring, spacious, and had two big master suites with full bathrooms. It had been a steal, and she still didn’t know how she’d managed to find it. The moment she saw it, she knew she had to have it, and she couldn’t imagine anyone else but her coming home to it and kicking off her shoes to relax. This townhouse was her sanctuary. And when she signed the lease to it, she vowed to herself that she’d treat it as just that. Regardless of whatever nonsense was to occur outside of her sanctuary, it would remain outside. She would always leave her shit at the door. And that was exactly why she needed to keep it.

Nik showed Kayla her would-be room, which she’d already cleared out, dusted and vacuumed. The room was empty besides a bed and dresser. Nik had bought the full-sized bed set

and dresser at a yard sale not long after leasing the apartment with the intent that one day, she would get the courage to call home and that maybe her family would come to visit. It had just been an excuse to waste her money and fill up the room. She'd never have the guts to call home.

Kayla was acting shy again, inching her way around the room, peering around the bathroom doorway and in the closet like someone might be hiding in there ready to kill her.

"It's nice," she said finally. Nik could no longer handle her nonchalance.

"You know what, I like you Kayla. I think this just might work. And you know why?" asked Nik. Kayla shook her head, looking at Nik as if she were speaking a foreign language.

"Well, it isn't because I think we'd make the best of friends," said Nik, "because let's be honest, you think I'm crazy, don't you?"

Kayla looked mortified at the suggestion, and she was shaking her head no before she could even open her mouth to reply.

"Look, it's totally fine. Because I am," said Nik. "But I like you because you're quiet, and shy, and responsible. I know you're responsible because you'd rather get dressed for work three hours early than risk being late. Gray said you've never been a minute late to work as long as he's known you. I can also tell you're nothing like me—

"I'm gonna go ahead and be straight with you, Kayla. I'm crazy. And I need someone who can be there to be my sanity. Someone who'll make sure I make it to bed if I'm trashed, someone who'll worry about me if 10AM comes around and I never came home the night before. Someone who'll treat me like the twenty-nine-year-old child that I am.

"Now don't get me wrong; I'm honest. Honest enough to tell you I'm crazy as hell. And I never forget to pay my bills. I'll never throw parties in this house—hell, I don't even bring anyone to this house. This place is my sanctuary, Kayla, and I'd like to keep it that way.

“So, I think this arrangement will work, as long as you agree to be my responsible friend. God knows I need one.”

Nik dug in her pocket and pulled out a spare key to the apartment. She held it out to Kayla and looked her right in her wary, brown eyes.

“Will you, Kayla? Will you be my responsible friend?”

Kayla opened her mouth to respond, but nothing came out. She seemed stunned by Nik’s honesty and harshness. She was forward, and she knew it. That was one of her best and worst qualities. She made friends easily because of it. But she also scared away masses.

“Okay,” said Kayla finally.

“Okay?” Nik repeated, stunned at Kayla’s quick response. Kayla looked at Nik and smiled for the first time since she’d met her, seeming now surprisingly amused by her antics.

“Yes, Nik, I will be your responsible friend,” she said, reaching out to take the key.

*

Ever since she was a little girl, Nik had always wished for friends. Not that she’d ever had trouble getting people to like her; even as a kid, she remembered never having trouble getting people to like her. She was quick-witted and snappy, unafraid to say what was on her mind or tell the joke that everyone was thinking but no one was willing to say. This got her into trouble with authority figures, but her peers always loved her. She was never skipped over when it came to party invitations, was always picked first for teams on the playground, didn’t have to fear not having a place to sit at lunch. This carried over into adulthood. So did another, less desirable quality—her self-doubt. No matter how many people she surrounded herself with, she was unbearably alone. She couldn’t trust anyone to be there for her. At the end of the day, she never had someone she could rely on without reservation. She never had that special friendship

she could trust would last a lifetime. She figured it was her own fault—she had unreasonable expectations of friendship, and so she would never find the kind of friend she sought. But she also knew that she was just as unreliable as everyone else, if not even more so. That deep down, she wasn't willing to be that kind of friend either. So, she conceded that it just didn't exist.

It took Nik only one weekend to break Kayla into her role as “responsible friend.” Nik had spent a Friday night out with some of her regulars—an odd mix of guys and girls she knew from work who didn't have much in common besides their love for stiff drinks and cigarettes. Tightly clothed girls and unshaven guys who loved to dance too close. Her particular favorites were Mara, a bartender who was an ambiguous blend of about ten different ethnicities with a loud-mouth full of braces, Kristin, a dry-humored, bleach blonde server with eyes that could stare right through even the stoniest of exteriors, Ernie, a Filipino barback with a large frame, dramatically tall hair, and a passion for being the first on the dancefloor, and Ethan, her bar manager, a gym-going, retired Navy sweet-talker with shoulders as broad as their undefinable relationship. He was the one she'd find herself going to when her need for both sex and letting go were strong, and he'd welcome her with open arms and freshly washed sheets.

Everyone else in her crowd was interchangeable and ever-changing, a sea of faces to encircle her when she was feeling lonely, people she loved when she was trashed but forgot when she was sober. Together they hopped bars and clubs up the boardwalk and downtown, sharing shots and dances, slurring through stories of work and partying, but never anything personal, meeting up at bars and parties but never each other's houses unless it was to jump in bed with someone. They were her means to loosen up, to score free drinks and weed, to forget the shitty things she did each day. They knew and loved the Nik they saw, but she wasn't sure what they'd think about the Nik she didn't let them see, the one she'd enlisted Kayla to befriend.

That first Friday with Kayla as roommate, without warning, Nik stumbled through the front door of the townhouse hours after midnight, leaving a trail of clothes from the front door to the kitchen. Nearest to the door, she had discarded her strappy studded heels that she could never keep on for more than an hour, followed by the gold wristlet she always wore but always regretted wearing after a few drinks, her matching scarf that started itching her neck on the way home, and then lastly, the small tangle of lace and ribbons that were her underwear—which should have been the first to go considering how many times she’d had to pull them out of her ass throughout the night. She hardly remembered the process of taking those things off, though she remembered making a game of throwing them on the floor, didn’t remember her thought process preceding hiking up her skin-tight dress enough to be able to climb onto the kitchen counter to reach the top shelf of a cabinet, but she remembered Kayla’s sudden objections to it when she appeared, as it was the loudest she’d heard her speak since they’d met.

“Nik!” Kayla shouted. “Why don’t you have on underwear?” Nik spun around, half tumbling off the counter but managing to land on her feet on the way down.

“Oh, good, you’re still awake,” Nik slurred as she walked over to Kayla’s watery image, managing to throw her arms around her neck on the second try. “I love you,” she said with a smile, pressing her sweating forehead to the top of Kayla’s head. Kayla was completely rigid beneath her hug, and Nik tried to see her face, but her eyes felt crossed from being so close.

She had a feeling it was too soon to say this, but it seemed so true at the moment. Since the day Kayla had moved in, there was something warm and familiar about her, something she’d trained herself to stop missing since she’d stopped talking to her family. It wasn’t often that she’d let herself think about them—the way her mom’s eyes always seemed full of concern even on days where she should have had nothing to worry about, her dad’s ability to make people

want to impress him with hardly any effort, even her baby sister's skinny legs—there were so many small things Kayla did that reminded Nik of them. It was like the moment Kayla moved in, her ability to pretend she didn't have a family had diminished.

“Thanks,” Kayla said, tugging out of Nik's arms. “What were you doing in the cabinet?” Kayla asked, but Nik ignored her.

“But really, I do, Kayla. And you know why I love you?”

“Why?” Kayla asked, grunting and prying Nik's arms off of her neck, pushing her by the hips in a way that tickled, causing Nik to fall to her knees in laughter.

“No, not here,” said Kayla, yanking her by the arms until she stood back up and leading her away from the kitchen by the shoulders and toward the stairs. Nik stumbled, and she could hardly feel her feet moving, though she was clearly making her way toward the steps. The second Nik saw the stairs she slid down onto them, mentally noting that they were a surprisingly comfortable place to lounge; why would anyone need a recliner when they had a set of steps? Kayla sighed, hovering over Nik, somehow looking like a giant with her tiny childish frame. Again, she saw her mother in Kayla's eyes. Nik let out a nervous laugh at the sight.

“Because you,” Nik said, jabbing Kayla in the chest with her finger (which Kayla brushed off), “are a tight ass. Yes, that's what you are. I'd be shocked if you've ever even let a fart slip from that tight ass of yours.” Nik snorted, laying her head back on the stairs. Her head was pounding, and she needed to close her eyes.

“No, no,” Kayla said, pulling at Nik's arms. She seemed like she was working so hard, she even thought she could see sweat dripping from her forehead, but Nik couldn't feel a thing. “You aren't going to bed here; you're going to bed in your actual bed.”

“See what I mean? You’re a tight ass. You’re like—a mom. Did you learn to be a tight ass from your mom?” She didn’t want to talk about her mom, or moms in general. But here she was. The word felt foreign in her mouth. As she said the word, she saw something surface in Kayla’s eyes, like she was working to understand it too, as foreign to her as it was to Nik.

“Probably,” Kayla said, continuing to nudge and pull at Nik.

“I knew it. Me? I definitely didn’t learn that from my mom. I bet my mom wishes she had a tight ass for a daughter like you. But instead, she got me.” The words were coming out and she didn’t know where they came from. In all the years since she’d left home, she’d never admitted anything like that out loud, and it surprised her that she was hearing it now. Nik stood up for a moment as she said this and took maybe a step and a half, considering making a break for her bedroom, but the stairs were moving beneath her, so she slid back down. Kayla let out a groan.

“What’s your mom like, Kayla?” Nik asked, and even as she asked, she knew she needed to stop talking about moms. She pressed her head against the bannister of the stairs with enough pressure to temporarily alleviate the pounding she heard in her ears.

“My mom—isn’t alive. Neither is my dad,” Kayla said in one breath. The words hung between them for a moment.

“Wow, that sucks,” said Nik, and even as she said it in her drunken haze, she knew it wasn’t an appropriate reaction. She knew she should have paused and contemplated this statement more. But she wanted to change the subject, didn’t want to think about moms anymore. To make up for her haste, she reached out to touch Kayla’s face. For a moment, Kayla let her, but then Nik pulled on her cheek, and she smacked Nik’s hand away.

“But then how are you so mom-like? You follow rules so well and you don’t even like—have parents?” Shit. She’d done it again. “God, I’m sorry. That’s not appropriate to say, right? Anyway. I like you, Kayla. You’re a tight ass.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure you mentioned that already,” said Kayla, coaxing Nik up once again and wrapping one of her arms around her shoulders.

“Have I?” said Nik as the scenery around them began to change. A couple times, they almost both fell backwards down the stairs, but Kayla managed to catch them. Each time, this warranted an uncontrolled fit of laughter from Nik, resulting in her sitting on the stairs again.

“Yes.” They made it to Nik’s bedroom, and Kayla released her tight grip as soon as they were beside her bed. Nik tumbled onto the mattress and snuggled up to her pillow, closing her eyes. Finally, something familiar.

“Well, you know what else I like about you, Kayla?” she asked, unsure if Kayla was still even there, but too tired to open her eyes to check. Kayla didn’t respond, but she kept talking anyway. “That you’re nothing like me. Nothing. If you haven’t noticed, I’m a pretty shitty person. But you probably figured that out already. And if you didn’t, well—sorry to just blindside you with it. But you would have noticed eventually,” Nik paused, and suddenly, she felt a blanket being draped over her. Kayla was still listening. As the lights went dim in her room and she heard the door to her room creaking closed, Nik yelled after her. “You know why?”

“Cause I’m a tight ass,” Kayla finished.

“Cause you’re—wait. How’d you know what I was gonna say?” Nik asked, opening one eye to catch Kayla’s tiny shadow of a frame in the doorway.

“Lucky guess,” Kayla said as she closed the door.

*

To: Chang, Drew

From: Chang, Kayla

Date: September 1, 2019

RE: Sorry I made you panic

Drew,

I didn't mean to sound so panicked on my last email. I know you told me it would be a few days before you could respond. I just can't help where my mind goes, you know? Anyway. No, I'm not mad at you. I just worry about you. Glad to hear the diving has been going well, but please be careful. And actually, you'll be pleased to know that since I moved in with Nik, I've cut my hours down at work and am no longer working doubles every day. Trying to take your advice and get a life, or at the very least a hobby—I'll let you know how that pans out. I know Nik probably sounds insane, but she's actually pretty cool when she's sober. We might even be friends. (See that? I made a friend! That was on your to-do list for me, right?) Hey, can taking care of her count as one of my new hobbies? If so, it's a game I'm killing.

Thinking of you all the time. Don't forget about me!

K

TWO

An overwhelming pounding in her temples woke Nik from her restless sleep on the cold tile of her bathroom floor. Kayla, after having likely been awoken by the echoes of her hacking into the toilet, had decided to make her a bed of towels that she could curl up on. She passed out there, curled up on the towels like a dog, and halfway through the night she'd covered herself with the shower curtain she'd accidentally ripped down in a panic stirred up by projectile vomiting. All night long as she writhed in pain and wallowed in disgust of the countless shots of whiskey and cheap canned Limaritas she'd downed the night before, the promises to herself of "I'll never do this again," and "Last night was the last time," taunted her. Of course, now that it was morning, or likely, noon, her hangover was not even in full blast and she already knew those promises meant shit. She'd broken a thousand of the same kind.

"Good morning, sunshine," Kayla greeted her with a cheerful voice, as if she were enjoying the sight of her sprawled out on the bathroom floor. It took Nik a moment to feel strong enough to pull her hands away from her throbbing head and wrench her eyes open. Kayla was looming over her with a glass of green, thick liquid.

"Wipe that smile off your face, Chang," Nik said. "What the hell is that?"

"Spinach and banana smoothie," said Kayla. "Maybe the vitamins will do you good."

"I don't want it," said Nik, curling over onto her side and pulling the shower curtain over her head as if it were a blanket.

"Nik, you're singing at Gray's today. Did you forget?"

"No, I didn't forget! I just hadn't realized that singing at 5 o'clock meant that I had to wake up at the ass crack of dawn."

“It’s 1:30. You’ve been rolling around on the bathroom floor for half the day already. Gray said you needed to be there by four to set up, so you’re running low on time and you look like crap. You’d need more time than that just to wash the puke out of your hair.”

At this, Nik sat up and peeked over the bathroom counter to see her reflection in the mirror. Kayla was right. Her hair, which was still a puffed-up, tangled mess on a good day—something of which she’d learned to just go with over the years—was wet and spotted with puke. She sighed and threw herself against the bathroom wall, snatching the glass from Kayla’s hand, ignoring the knots of hair that were falling into her face. Had she been alone in the house, she likely would have missed her shift at Gray’s. She hated Kayla for trying to get her going, but at the same time, she loved her for it.

It was a strange dynamic Nik hadn’t quite figured out. It had been a little over a month since Kayla had moved in, and while Nik had never felt so cared for since she’d left home, she could also feel herself growing more insecure, though it was hard to put a finger on where it was coming from. Before Kayla, Nik had never had trouble calling it quits before she was blacking out drunk on the floor of her bathroom. True, she had many wild and crazy nights that had led to dozens of mistakes, but the number of times she’d lost control had steadily increased. Even though she now had Kayla to scrape her up off the ground when she’d overdo it, she couldn’t help but feel Kayla’s arrival had somehow triggered her lack of control. Something about Kayla made her long for home like never before, and while she’d previously mastered the art of pretending she didn’t have a family, she now found herself holding back tears over her family’s absence in her life more often than not. There was so much she didn’t want to remember about how things used to be, so many mistakes she’d made with them that she didn’t want to have to

admit to herself, and while she used to find easy distractions in work and play, it was becoming harder and harder for anything to distract her other than alcohol.

Still, she found herself growing more and more grateful for Kayla's presence. Despite feeling increasingly guilty over the family she'd ignored for so long, Kayla filled a void within her she hadn't wanted to admit was there, and she was less lonely because of it. And at the same time, she couldn't help but feel that Kayla was the reason she'd even noticed the void was there in the first place.

"What's got you so obnoxiously cheery, anyway?" asked Nik, taking a sip of her smoothie. The cool, leafy taste of it eased her raw throat. The banana taste came after and was almost too fruity for her traumatized stomach, but she forced herself to swallow anyway.

"I'm just excited to see you play," said Kayla.

"You're full of shit."

Since Kayla had moved in, Nik had yet to see her excited about doing anything remotely social. Nor had she ever agreed to see Nik play at the café, even though she worked there. Saturday nights at the café were more of a casual hangout, and it was for this reason that Kayla avoided the Saturday evening shift at all cost. Because she worked so often and was so quick to volunteer working doubles, Gray didn't hesitate to give her Saturday nights off, but Nik was growing tired of seeing Kayla waste them by sitting on the couch with a bowl of popcorn and a blanket while she left for her gig. Kayla wasn't one to socialize, and Nik had a feeling her self-isolation had something, if not everything to do with the confession Nik had accidentally forced her to make that first week of living together about her dead parents. She knew that a good roommate would probably have mentioned a conversation like that by now, or even at least admitted that she hadn't too drunk enough to remember the conversation in the morning, but it

had been easier just to ignore it. Instead, Nik tried avoiding the topic of parents all together, although she could no longer help what she said about her own on those nights where she was feeling particularly vulnerable and after having a few too many drinks.

“What?” said Kayla, Nik’s skepticism of her seeming to not put a damper on her good mood. “I’ve never actually gone to the restaurant just to hang out. Actually, I haven’t just hung out in a really long time. Plus, today’s Drew’s birthday, so he’s supposed to call.”

“So little loner girl might enjoy a social life after all? Does this mean I can get you to come out with me one of these nights?”

“Is the sight of you lying on the bathroom floor draped in a shower curtain supposed to make me want to?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t think so. How about you wash the puke out of your hair before you try to convince me that I want to party with you?” Kayla said before she retreated into Nik’s room.

Nik stumbled to her feet and followed to find a sandwich and a chopped-up apple sitting on a plate on her bedside table, along with the outfit she’d picked out with Kayla to wear at her gig laid out neatly on her bed.

“God, Kayla, you’re a saint!” Nik yelled after her as Kayla left the room.

Despite the fact that Kayla was seven-ish years younger than her, she had taken this responsible friend thing literally, to the point where Kayla had taken on almost a parental role with her. And Nik had to admit, Kayla’s presence made her feel safe. It was nice to have someone around who looked after her and was caring. Kayla reminded her of her mom: nurturing, hospitable, thoughtful—though she tried not to think about it too much. She didn’t understand Kayla. Kayla had taken to caring for her so quickly, treating her role as responsible

friend as seriously as her job at May Day. She suspected Kayla had been used to being that person for someone else before, probably her brother. That was another topic that a good roommate would probably bring up every now and then, but another topic Nik had placed on her mental “do not mention” list along with the topic of Kayla’s dead parents. She didn’t want nosiness to stand in the way of Kayla continuing to pamper her. Even when she lived at home, Nik didn’t remember her mother feeding her as well as Kayla did now.

She’d tried at first to understand Kayla’s behavioral patterns, but there really were no patterns to her behavior at all. Kayla was friendly enough, but she often refused to leave the house. Other times, she’d disappear for hours at a time and would dodge Nik’s questions if she tried to find out where she’d been. She acted lonely, yet somehow accepting of the prospect of living her life alone. And at first, she wholeheartedly believed they’d never be friends. They had nothing in common. But it wasn’t long before Kayla grew on her. She was fun to joke around with, and she surprisingly could hold her own against Nik’s banter. And oddly enough, seemed that Kayla had warmed up to Nik as quickly as Nik had to Kayla—or at the very least, Kayla enjoyed how much Nik seemed to need her.

There was an unspoken rule that Kayla and Nik had established within just the first couple weeks pertaining to drunken conversation that seemed to become the foundation of their odd, unconventional friendship—whatever shit was said between them while Nik clung vulnerably to a toilet seat and while Kayla struggled to shut her up would not be spoken of again. There had already been a couple of times where Nik had cried to Kayla about her parents not loving her anymore, something of which she’d hoped had been a bad dream but had obviously been real. Kayla, though, was as reluctant to bringing up those conversations as she was to talk about her own presumably horrible past. Nik had already made Kayla to admit that her parents

were dead, and it almost acted as some kind of leverage to keep Kayla from asking any questions herself. She didn't know if Kayla believed that Nik couldn't remember the uncomfortable conversations or not, but her consistent silence about it all every morning after seemed like an agreeable condition. Nik didn't want to have to hear about Kayla's sob story as much as she was sure Kayla didn't want to talk about it, and vice versa. Maybe that made her a horrible person, but what good was it to make her recount her tragic past and then have to apologize for Kayla's unfortunate life? She never understood the purpose of offering condolences; all it did was make the grieving person sadder and the person offering more uncomfortable.

*

To: Chang, Drew

From: Chang, Kayla

Date: October 11, 2019

Subject: Happy Birthday!!!

Drewy,

I know you said you'd call, but I just couldn't wait to wish you a happy birthday! I still can't believe it's your twenty-fifth and I'm over here and you're over there. I wish I could celebrate with you. But I'm sure you'll be pleased to know that in honor of your birthday, I've vowed to leave the house tonight. Nik has a gig tonight and I'm going with her. Don't laugh, but it's at May Day. But I'm planning on riding with her so that I have no choice but to stay and try to make friends. Progress, see?

Anyway, holding my breath for your call tonight. It's crazy how much I miss hearing that nasally voice of yours when I don't ever get to hear it! ;)

Love you, Drew. Happy Birthday.

K

*

Even though Kayla had been dressed and ready to go probably long before she'd forced Nik to peel herself off the bathroom floor and clean herself up for her gig, Nik ended up being the one who was ready to leave first. It took Nik all of fifteen minutes to emotionally recover from her latest humiliating drunken display—this resilience was something of which she prided herself in, although it was always easier to keep her mind off whatever foolish act had been done the night before when she had work to keep her busy, especially when it came to her music. Music calmed her overactive, jittery mind like nothing else could, so much so that after every gig at Gray's she swore to herself that she'd remember the rush next time she hated herself enough to be willing to risk the world's worst hangover for a few hours of numbness. Unfortunately, though, when the self-criticism really had its way with her, not even the memories of music could change her mind about drowning her sorrows in double shots of whiskey.

"Chang, get your ass off the couch. We've gotta go!" said Nik, who was hopping around in an effort to shove one of her feet into a high-top sneaker without untying the laces. Kayla, who was sitting cross-legged on their living room couch with her nose in her phone, glanced up just as Nik's leather skirt rode up her legs as she bounced around.

"Don't look unless you want a glimpse of the goods," Nik added, prompting Kayla to shield her eyes as though to avoid staring directly at the sun. This might have made sense for her

to do if she hadn't already seen all of Nik she could possibly see unwillingly and in pieces distributed in one drunken stupor at a time.

"Nik, just untie your stupid shoe. You could have had both on by now," said Kayla, still shielding her eyes. Nik continued struggling, finally forcing one shoe on and then grabbing the other from the ground to do it all over again.

"Seriously, though, why aren't you ready to go?" asked Nik.

"I don't know if I'm going," said Kayla, looking down at her phone probably in an effort to avoid looking at Nik's face as she said it. Nik paused the wrestling she'd been doing with her shoe and placed both feet on the floor, one foot still halfway out.

"No. Get up," said Nik. She wasn't about to let Kayla bail when this was the first time she'd agreed to come out with her since they'd become roommates. Kayla pretended she didn't notice her tone, scrolling casually through her phone.

"I'm not really in the mood anymore. I don't know."

"Kayla Chang, you get your ass up right now. You're going."

"Nik, I just don't really feel like going anymore. I can meet you there if I change my mind." Kayla was still avoiding eye contact. It was making Nik crazy. She'd done this plenty of times before, but she was usually never dressed and ready to leave the house when she bailed.

Nik saw a look on her face that was familiar. A look she'd seen before on the days where Kayla did nothing but mope around the house, although it had been something Nik usually ignored out of convenience. "What happened?"

"I just changed my mind."

"Bullshit." Kayla looked up at Nik, seeming somehow surprised at her response.

"Fine. I haven't heard from Drew yet, and I kind of want to wait for his call."

“You can wait for his call at May Day. Normal people don’t just sit around on a Saturday night to wait for a call from their brother.”

This seemed to hit a nerve with Kayla, as her face went from aggravated to pissed in a matter of seconds. Maybe that comment had crossed a line, but it was also true. Kayla’s happiness was way too dependent on her brother, and it was something Nik had already bit her tongue about more than once, and it was only because she couldn’t speak to what it was like to have dead parents. Kayla seemed like she smothered Drew even from a thousand miles away; she was terrified to go a single day without hearing from him. She knew this probably was a fear that stemmed from Kayla’s grief—Nik had caught Kayla crying more than once because Drew had gone longer than she’d expected without contacting her, and she’d sat by her phone stoically all day like she was waiting to receive news of his death. Maybe it was an understandable reaction, but Nik could also imagine Drew’s need to get away from her; if Nik were him, she might have volunteered herself for deployment just to get some space.

“Nik, I just don’t wanna go, okay?”

For a second, Nik let Kayla think she was retreating. She sat down on one of their ottomans, calmly untied her sneaker, and pulled it onto her foot. Kayla continued avoiding eye contact, looking to be checking her emails on her phone, probably checking for the thousandth time today to see if Drew had responded. This was something Nik had noticed was a compulsive habit of Kayla’s. She was forever pulling up her email account to check if she had an email from her brother. It wasn’t the most social habit she could have, but still, it was something she could keep on doing at May Day if she truly felt the need. Nik finished tying her shoes and stood hovering over Kayla, but she continued to act like she didn’t notice. As Nik strained her eyes to spy on what Kayla was looking at on her phone, sure enough, she noticed an email notification

from Drew. By just glimpsing at the message, she could see the first part of it:

Got your message; will call you around 8—

Nik didn't know why it was bothering her so much that Kayla was now refusing to go. She wanted to blame it on the fact that she didn't want to keep letting Kayla waste her Saturday nights sitting around the house by herself. But if she was being honest with herself, she might have admitted that Kayla agreeing to see her play had meant more to her than she'd realized it would; it had been a long time since she had anyone she cared about come to see her play. Her dad had once been the one to always be there, to cheer her on front and center no matter how small the venue or how unimportant the gig. But since they'd stopped talking, she hardly even bothered inviting anyone to see her play. Until Kayla.

Just as Kayla slid her phone open to read the full email, Nik pulled her off the couch by her legs and onto the floor. Ignoring Kayla's shocked objections, Nik wrestled her to the ground as Kayla flailed her arms and legs around, but Nik was bigger than her; it took her almost no effort to have her pinned to the floor.

"Are you crazy?" Kayla yelled. "Stop it!" The sight of Kayla attempting to squirm her way out of her arms made Nik laugh, reminding her of a small child having a tantrum.

"Why, yes! Yes, I am crazy!" Nik laughed.

"Get off me!"

"You're coming," said Nik. "I'll get off you when you say you're coming!" In one quick motion, Nik scooped Kayla off the ground and had her thrown over her shoulder.

"God, Nik! Put me down!" cried Kayla. Nik was no longer able to control her laughter.

"What the hell? You're a feather, Kayla! What are you, like 80 pounds? I didn't think I'd be able to pick you up so easily!" Nik hugged Kayla's legs and spun around a couple times just

for the sake of the reaction. Kayla's scream of terror was everything she hoped it'd be.

"Ugh! Fine, I'll go! I'll go, just put me down!"

At that, Nik dropped Kayla to the floor, still laughing. Kayla's shirt was wrinkled from the commotion and her hair was disheveled and strung in her face. She attempted to comb it back into place with her fingers, but after having been swung around, strands of hair were now clinging to the bobby pins she'd use to pick up one side. At the sight of her, Nik doubled over and fell to the ground herself, rolling around despite the fact that she could feel her skirt riding up, ignoring the fact that her own wild hair was probably becoming frizzy from rubbing against the carpet. Then amazingly, Kayla began to laugh.

"You're insane!" Kayla said through laughs.

"I warned you that I was," laughed Nik.

"Why do you want me to go so bad?" Kayla asked.

"Cause I'm not gonna let you be lonely anymore. Even if that means that I gotta drag you out of this damn house."

*

When she was thirteen, Nik's dad bought her a guitar. It was her very first, and it came from years of begging after Nik became obsessed with the idea of learning following the discovery of her dad's old *Eagles* record collection. He bought her a chestnut brown acoustic Takamine, and even though he, along with everyone else in Nik's family, knew nothing about guitars, he had apparently spent hours at the music store talking to different employees about what he could get for his budget. This was a purchase that had been thought through thoroughly, and even though technically, there were better guitars out there, the fact that her dad had gone through so much trouble and so much effort had been placed into buying it, that guitar was

flawless in her eyes. She swore by that guitar, and for the longest time she'd refused to buy anything else. It became like a friend to her, and she even gave it a name: Carlita. She practically slept with that thing in her arms as if it were a teddy bear.

She ended up leaving Carlita when she moved out at twenty. Had she thought things through more, she would have taken that guitar with her, but her leaving had been so abrupt that she didn't even have time to pack. She'd left everything behind, including a part-time job at a movie theatre she hadn't even bothered quitting, and a partially completed associates degree at a community college her parents had forced her to attend. And although she forced all those images of the day she'd left home as far into the back of her mind as she could, there were some details that would sneak up on her when she least expected it. Her dad storming out of the house and slamming the door behind him so hard that the family portrait by the door fell to the ground, shattering the glass and breaking the frame that held it. Her mother crying and begging her not to go. Her little sister Lainey trying to hug her as she grabbed the few things she'd actually taken with her and shoved them into a backpack. Harrison, the lowlife, grimy cokehead she'd thought she was in love with at the time waiting around the corner for her in his filthy Mustang that reeked of cigarettes and sweat. A face she could hardly picture without being reminded of the way his tongue constantly tasted of alcohol and all the nauseating nights of cold, sloppy sex in his backseat. But as much as she regretted him, no image hit her quite as hard as the image of Carlita sitting in a corner on her guitar stand, never to be touched again. She wondered what had become of Carlita, and she wouldn't even blame her dad if he'd thrown her away. God knew she didn't deserve for him to look after it.

Nik had ended up buying a new guitar a few months after moving out, once she'd managed to scrounge up enough cash for it. She had thought that playing music again would take

the pain away, and it did at first. But soon that emptiness she felt in her heart snuck up on her once again, and she realized that she'd need something stronger than music to numb the pain. Queue excessive drinking habit.

Meeting Gray had been her saving grace. They used to bartend together on the weekends back before Gray's parents put him in charge of May Day. When she first met him, she had tried to hook up with him; that had been another bad habit she had picked up since she had moved to the Beach. Once Harrison kicked her out of their apartment, she had been living couch to couch as she worked to save up money for her own place. She quickly learned that she was able to weasel money out of guys for favors, or even for empty promises. But Gray was different. He'd heard her talk about her music before, and he offered her something else—a chance to play her music and get paid for it. And that's how she began her weekly gigs at Gray's.

*

“You're doing great tonight,” said Gray as he leaned over the bar top toward her.

She was taking her fifteen-minute break before finishing up for the night, and based on the way Kayla had initially looked when she first sat at a table facing her corner alone—like she was ready to throw up from discomfort—she had anticipated having to utilize this break to rescue her from awkwardness and isolation. However, not even half way through her first song, Kayla was joined by some clean-cut, baby-faced guy in a polo shirt, and despite initially looking like she was going to bolt out the door at his presence, by the end of the first half of her set, the two of them were looking pretty cozy. She thought she may have seen him in the café before, sitting in a corner with a laptop. It was his presence and the fact that he'd succeeded in making Kayla smile for the first time since they'd arrived that prompted her to give Kayla a shout out midway through her first half.

“Just wanted to give a quick shout out to my roomie Kayla,” she began, but even as she’d said her name, Kayla hadn’t torn her eyes from the guy at her table. “Chang, hello? You listening? Trying to give you a shout out. Geez, girl!” Kayla suddenly turned toward her, and Nik could tell even through the dim lighting that she was blushing. So just for fun, she added, “By the way, for those of you who don’t know, that beauty over there is my roommate Kayla Chang. If you don’t know her, you better get to know her! This is her first night out in a while and she’s looking for a good time!”

In spite of being curious and dying to move closer to spy on them, based on the goofy smile that was still inhabiting Kayla’s face, she decided to leave her alone for the time being and stick around with Gray at the bar like she usually did during her break, but not before running up to Kayla and planting a wet kiss on her cheek to make her blush and leave behind a sticky lip-gloss kiss mark. May Day wasn’t like the bar she worked at, where there were always twenty guys ready to get in her pants; this was a much tamer crowd, so she actually enjoyed hanging out at the bar between sets and at most have people walk up and give her compliments or make small talk with her for a minute or two. It was a great change from what she was used to, and although she always played the humble artist, the compliments did well to heal her ego that was continuously being wounded by her own self-criticism. She tried not to dwell on it too much, but she knew her father’s absence had left her starving for compliments anytime she played.

“Thanks, Babe,” Nik said to Gray. “Can I get another shot of whiskey?” She tried to bat her eyes playfully at him, but he rolled his eyes at this.

“Sorry, Nik. Not tonight,” he said. He smiled as he said it, though, which made it hard to be mad at him.

“Why not?” she asked.

“You know why not.”

Yes, she did know why not. She'd gotten drunk once over the summer and slurred her way through the first half of her set. That was one of the days she'd attempted to call home. Lainey was graduating from high school, and she had planned to swallow her pride, apologize to her parents and beg them to let her come. She'd been avoiding them for so long that they probably didn't even know that Harrison had been out of her life for years already. She wanted that fact to be enough to fix things, but no matter how many mistakes she could blame on Harrison, she couldn't blame him for the years that had gone by. That was all on her. So instead, she just dialed her mom's number about thirty times and then ended the call before the line would even begin to ring. She never even bothered to try her dad's number. When she got to May Day, she was feeling like shit and wishing she wasn't such an asshole. She couldn't even attempt to make things right for the sake of her little sister, whom she hadn't seen in years. She had needed a few extra shots to get her in the mood to play, and since she knew Gray wouldn't have given her more than one or two, she sweet-talked one of the cute, young servers to sneak them to her. Gray was pissed when he realized it, so she tried to appease him by walking behind the bar and throwing her arms around him and kissing him. He made her leave without finishing her set. The next day, she stopped into the café to apologize, but he just shrugged it off. She was thankful for that, but she'd been surprised. From then on, she was limited to one beer or one shot, which couldn't even give her a proper buzz. That didn't stop her from trying, though.

“Gray, I love you, but you're a buzzkill,” she said.

“Please. I couldn't kill your buzz if I wanted to.”

“You're right. I don't need alcohol to be an idiot.” She was joking, but Gray's face shifted from enjoying himself to stick-up-his-ass. These were his two most common faces.

“You’re not an idiot, Nik,” he said.

“I—It was a joke, Gray. Chill!” Gray hated it when she was critical of herself. She tried to make a joke out of calling herself names, but it always got him worked up. He remained serious for a moment longer and then smiled again, shaking his head. She motioned to Kayla, who actually looked to be having a good time as she continued to flirt with the clean-cut guy.

“Who is Kayla talking to?” she asked.

“That’s Jeremy. Usually comes in here to work. I think he does freelance graphic design or something like that. He’s had eyes for Kayla for a while now. I’m surprised it’s taken him this long to approach her, actually—wait, where are you going?”

At that, Nik couldn’t take it anymore. She had to get a closer look at the two of them. With about five minutes to spare before she had to sing again, Nik left Gray at the bar and sauntered over to Kayla’s table, ignoring Gray’s calls to her to leave them alone. She threw her arms around Kayla’s neck as she greeted her.

“Who’s your friend, Kayla?” asked Nik as she began snatching fries off of Kayla’s plate. She held out her hand to Kayla’s friend. “I’m Nik.”

“So I’ve noticed,” he said with a smile. “Jeremy. Nice to meet you, Nik. You’ve got a great sound.” Jeremy was cute, but in a boyish way. He had smooth, brown skin and eyes that became perfect half-moons when he smiled. His hair was groomed and neat like the rest of him; his clothes were wrinkle-free, and color coordinated. This was a guy that clearly paid mind to his appearance, though he didn’t look like a jerk, or like a snob. He looked nice. Kind of innocent, even, like Kayla. Not Nik’s type, of course; she needed a guy with a little bit of edge to him. He also looked too young for her. But nice was perfect for Kayla.

“So, what’s your story, Jeremy? What are your intentions with my dear, sweet roomie?”

she asked, stroking Kayla's face. Kayla smacked her hand away.

"Well, I was hoping that at some point tonight, she'll consider me enough of a friend to give me her number," said Jeremy. "But according to her rules, first we need to know five important things about each other, and she's reluctant to help me out. She was actually trying to make me fish for her last name first, but thanks to your shout out, I got out of that one easy."

"Is that right?" Nik smiled at Kayla. Was Kayla actually flirting with this guy, playing a game of hard-to-get where the prize was her phone number? It was so un-Kayla that Nik was momentarily thrown off. For the first time, she realized that there may have been another side of Kayla, maybe another person entirely who had existed sometime before her move to the Beach who had actually been good at talking to people, or at the very least, guys. She wondered when she turned into the anxious, loner Nik knew.

"I'm just trying to make sure you're worth it first," laughed Kayla. It was the most relaxed Nik had seen Kayla since she'd met her. She needed to make this happen.

"Well I can help you out," began Nik, holding up her hand so that she could count five facts out on her fingers. "She's from Houston. Her middle name is Christine, which is also her mother's name. Her favorite food is mac and cheese, and she eats it just about every other day. She's basically a mom—like she's responsible and saves her money and cooks me dinner every day and cleans up after my drunk ass. And she has a brother named Drew who she is super close to. I used to think it was weird, but I got used to it."

"Nik!" said Kayla. The whole time that Nik had been going on her tangent and spewing facts about Kayla to Jeremy, Kayla had been trying to cover Nik's mouth, but she kept pushing Kayla's hands away and then finally resorted to hugging her tight so that her arms were pinned to her side. She might have believed that Kayla was angry if she didn't see her blushing and

smiling shyly at Jeremy as she rambled.

Then, Kayla's phone began vibrating on the table between her and Jeremy. It was an unknown number. Kayla jumped and scrambled for her phone, looking up at Jeremy and mumbling, "Sorry, I really have to take this," before scooting out of her chair and running for the door of the restaurant. Jeremy looked surprised.

"Don't worry, it's just her brother," said Nik, playfully elbowing Jeremy. "Plus, it seems like you two are hitting it off, regardless of what she is trying to make you think."

"Really?"

"Oh, yeah. Trust me," said Nik. "Usually it would take someone at least a couple tries before she warms up to them."

"Well, this isn't exactly my first try," said Jeremy.

"No? What happened the first time?"

"Maybe an error of judgment on my part. It sounds weird, but I actually ran into her at a funeral a couple weeks ago. Not the best time to try to get to know a girl, I know. But I recognized her from seeing her here, and I tried to talk to her. She wasn't really having it."

This was news to Nik. Kayla had gone to a funeral? She tried to think back on the last few weeks since Kayla had moved in and gauge whether or not she'd noticed Kayla upset. She remembered one day where Kayla seemed to be a bit more self-isolating than usual, but she'd never thought to ask. Geez, the girl lived the tragic life.

"A funeral? Whose?" asked Nik.

"Just a mutual friend of ours who passed away in a car accident. Michael Carrington. You didn't happen to know him?"

"Doesn't ring a bell," said Nik. She hadn't been aware that Kayla had any friends at all.

“I knew him from high school. Kayla apparently knew him pretty well. Said he was one of her first friends here at the Beach. Met him through her brother. He was a little odd. Quiet and sort of misunderstood. Kayla had a lot of nice things to say about him. That’s when I knew she had to be a good person. He wasn’t the easiest person to love.”

“She does have a bit of a knack for that, doesn’t she?” said Nik, contemplating whether or not this was a subject she should ever bring up to Kayla. Even though she and Kayla typically kept their conversations shallow and light, it seemed like something Kayla might have mentioned. Something about it all seemed off, but Nik couldn’t say why. Just then, she saw Gray giving her the nod from over at the bar.

“I’ve gotta get back up there, Jeremy, but come and see me if she doesn’t cooperate and I’ll give you her number myself.” She winked at Jeremy before retreating to the front to pick up her guitar. He’d be a good distraction for Kayla, at least. And Nik was going to make it happen.

*

To: Chang, Drew

From: Chang, Kayla

Date: October 11, 2019

Subject: Bad Signal

Hey Drew,

I hate that our conversation had to be cut short because of a bad signal, but I’m so glad I got to hear your voice at least for a little bit today. I rambled on for who knows how long before I realized you weren’t there anymore. In case you didn’t hear any of it, here’s what I was saying:

You know what I was thinking about today? You remember that summer we spent fighting when we were little that resulted in Mom and Dad forcing us to do everything together for an entire week? We had to literally do everything together until we learned to coexist. Even eat the same things and play the same games. If you went outside, I had to go outside. And remember how you always wanted to go outside and climb the trees in the backyard? You basically forced me up the big apple tree I was afraid to climb just to be mean, and somehow Mom didn't realize I was horrified and actually thought we were just playing together. I tore up your *Batman Forever* poster to get you back. We especially hated our lives when it came to having to share the guest room, although I managed to win the bed by threatening to sneak into it in the middle of the night and pee in the bed if you didn't concede to take the floor.

We spent half the week hating each other so much, and then all of a sudden, it was like we realized that Mom and Dad were to blame for our suffering. So instead of fighting, we sat around for a full day just complaining about how unfair they were. And from that moment on, we were friends. Of course, looking back now, I know we were being complete brats and probably deserved every bit of that punishment. But I can't help but wonder if that was exactly what Mom and Dad wanted to accomplish in us. That they knew us uniting under a common enemy would be better than us being enemies of each other. Maybe they knew that one day it would have to be us against the world, and they were getting us ready for that. Maybe they were trying to make us bond because they knew that someday it would be necessary for our survival. Do you think they knew that we would end up being all that was left of our family?

Anyway, I don't mean to get all deep on you on your birthday. I guess I'm just missing you and am feeling sentimental, and I wanted you to know that I'm thankful that through all the shit we've been through, you've been the consistent and stable part of my life. I wanted you to know that knowing we'll face everything together somehow makes everything okay.

Happy Birthday, Drew. I love you.

K

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"How'd I know that you were going to blow your shot with baby-face?" said Nik as she, Kayla and Gray lugged her equipment back into her car.

"Baby-face?" asked Kayla in that familiar irritated tone her voice seemed to always hold.

"Yes. That's what I'm calling him, anyway. It's perfect, because you're a baby-face too. Actually, he basically you in the male form. All clean and neat and responsible looking. The two of you could have dozens of beautiful, tight-ass, prim and proper children together."

"Yeah, that's not gonna happen," said Kayla, rolling her eyes.

"Why not? You seemed to like him. Didn't she, Gray?"

"Please. You were glowing. Then your face did this weird thing where your lips curved upward, and you showed your teeth," said Gray. "What's that called again? Oh, yeah—smiling! Who would have thought that it's a good look on you?" Gray nudged Kayla as they walked.

"Seriously, Kayla. What's your problem? He seemed to really like you and as far as I could tell, you liked him," said Nik.

"He doesn't know anything about me. Who just walks up to a complete stranger and asks for their number?"

“I don’t know how they do it on Planet Kayla, but on Planet Earth, that’s how people get to know each other,” said Nik, knocking on Kayla’s head with her knuckles. Kayla smacked her hand away, a gesture that Nik had decided to take as a gesture of endearment from Kayla.

“Well, it’s too late, anyway. He already left without getting it.”

“It’s never too late,” said Nik as she pulled a crumpled bar napkin from her pocket and handed it to Kayla.

“What is this?” Kayla asked, squinting to read the writing on the napkin in the dark.

“Just call me Cupid,” said Nik. “That is five facts about Jeremy. The five facts that you needed to know about him before he got your number.”

Jeremy had, as per Nik’s instructions, found her once her set was over. “I didn’t have time to tell her my five facts before you finished,” said Jeremy. “She’d been on that phone call for a while. So, she didn’t let me have it.”

“She’s a little slow,” said Nik with a laugh. “Don’t worry, though, I got you.” She pulled a bar napkin off a table beside her and handed Jeremy a pen. “Write your facts. Hurry, though, before she notices. And give me your phone and I’ll type in the number.”

It felt good that she was doing this, like she was doing Kayla a favor. Maybe this would even the scale a bit, like if she was responsible for some kind of epic love connection between Kayla and Jeremy, she and Kayla would be on more even grounds. Kayla was too perfect, too good of a roommate, and Nik had enough to put herself down about without having to feel like she didn’t do enough for Kayla, too.

“Thanks,” Jeremy said with a smile as he handed her the napkin in exchange for his phone. His smile was nice. Kayla clearly didn’t know what she was doing. She glanced down at the napkin to read his sloppy hand-written facts before Kayla noticed, and then shoved it into her

jacket pocket as she caught Kayla's eye from across the room.

5 facts about Jeremy Bradley:

1. Born and raised at the Beach

2. Middle name is Ryan

3. Favorite food is tacos

4. I work in sales/marketing but I also do freelance media work

5. I came here tonight because I was hoping I'd run into you :)

The last fact had made Nik anxious to give the napkin to Kayla; Nik was secretly a sucker for romance, though this was something she hid from most. Kayla was reading Jeremy's facts and rolling her eyes, but she could see that she was trying hard to fight the urge to smile.

"What?" asked Nik. "Worried that a smile would reveal that you actually have a heart? Come on, Kayla. For God's sake, live a little! Quit being so damn stiff!"

"Well, what am I supposed to even do with this? He already went home."

"Nothing. That was only so that you couldn't bitch about us not following your stupid rules before I gave him your number."

"Nik!"

"What? He knows your last name. He got your five facts and you got his—those were your conditions, right? Fair is fair."

Kayla could pretend she was mad, but she couldn't fool Nik. Especially not after Nik caught her folding the napkin with Jeremy's facts on it and putting it in her purse.

THREE

Nik hated working daytime bartending shifts, but she had chosen to work a week's worth of them to have Halloween night off. She never minded working Halloween at the bar; she was allowed to wear a costume if she wanted—really, it was encouraged, and the skimpier the better—and she made a ridiculous amount on tips each year she worked Halloween. But this year, she was growing increasingly unnerved at the idea of spending the night being hit on at the bar. She was tired of falling into the hands of strangers, and while it felt good in the moment when some brawny, dull-eyed military guy strung together their own fun combination of words to call her pretty or sexy, the effect of those words on her self-esteem were lingering less and less. Nothing was enough anymore to drown out the noise of her past or wash away the images of her parents and sister, and every guy was starting to resemble Harrison to her. With exception of Gray, she could see Harrison's watery, scheming eyes in every man she let close to her. She'd once been so good at compartmentalizing, at ignoring and avoiding and pretending. But with every new day, it was all becoming harder, and working at the bar was only making it worse.

Also, now she had Kayla, who had finally agreed to come out with her after months of Nik's insistence, and Nik was determined to show her the time of her life. So, on Halloween, she sucked it up through a slow, uneventful daytime shift, reminding herself of her badass mermaid costume, of the thousand Jell-O shots in her fridge at home and of the image of Kayla loosening up and having a good time. She might need to get a little alcohol in Kayla first, but thankfully, she was providing the Jell-O shots. She'd make Kayla take a few before they left the house.

"So, I hear you'll be at the party tonight," said Colton, the resident douchebag server.

Colton was blonde, exaggeratedly tan and had an odd crew-cut that made her think of

Ken Barbie. His facial features were sharp and as dramatic as his fake tan; he made her roll her eyes just by looking in her direction. Her aversion to him was partially her own fault; she'd slept with him in a pathetic, drunken, self-pitying whim, and he'd never let her forget it. He'd also never let her forget that he'd loaned her a monthly rent payment's worth of money in exchange for sex and she had unfortunately agreed on a second date while wrapped up in the excitement of knowing that she wouldn't be evicted that month.

"That depends," said Nik as she sliced pieces of strawberry for a mojito for Kristin, the blonde server in her afterhours circle, who was waiting at beside the bar with a tray full of cocktails for a table of women in pantsuits as she wormed away from Colton, who had no concept of personal space. Colton leaned over the bar toward Nik.

"On what?" he asked, sliding closer. If he leaned in any further, he'd be planking the bar.

"Whether or not your dumb ass is going," she said, dropping the strawberries and mint leaves in the mixer and shaking it.

"You know I'll find you." She looked away, but still pictured his gross, juvenile smile.

"Gross. Desperation is not a good look on you, Colton," said Kristin.

"Was I talking to you? Didn't think so," said Colton, moving around Kristin and following Nik as she walked away to grab some ice from the other side of the bar. She turned back around to find him in her face again, as Kristin waved a middle finger behind his back from the other side of the bar.

"Just trying to make sure you don't break your promise," said Colton.

"I don't owe you a damn thing, Colton," she replied, pouring her mojito into a glass and walking away from Colton to hand it to Kristin at the end. "Here you go, sweetie."

"Nik, you let me know if he keeps bothering you. I have no problem convincing the

kitchen staff to take their time with all his orders,” said Kristin as she squeezed the mojito onto her tray of drinks and walked away.

“Hey, come on, Nik. I’m only teasing you,” he said. That’s when she finally looked at him, struggling to suppress the urge to spray him in the face with the soda hose in her hand.

“I swear to God, Colton, if you so much as try to cross me tonight, I’ll beat your ass.”

“I’ll look forward to it,” he said, a nasty grin spreading across his face. He walked off. Nik rolled her eyes, shrugging off the idea that Colton was any more than just a horny asshole.

*

The look on Kayla’s face when Nik pulled out the thousand Jell-O shots she’d made for the Halloween party from their fridge had been priceless.

“What on earth,” she said, as Nik maneuvered a couple huge trays out of their fridge. “When did you even have time to make all those?”

“You know I’m a night owl,” said Nik. “By the way, is Jeremy coming?”

“I didn’t invite him,” said Kayla.

“Seriously? Why not?”

“Nik, we barely know each other. I’m not gonna invite him out to some random party.”

“You wouldn’t barely know him if you’d actually tried hanging out with him at some point instead of just texting back and forth all day like a couple of middle schoolers,” said Nik as she pushed a Jell-O shot at Kayla.

“I don’t want to get drunk, Nik,” said Kayla.

“Kayla, come on. Don’t be such a tight ass. It’s Halloween. Get at least a little drunk.”

“She doesn’t have to drink if she doesn’t want to,” said Gray.

“Really, Gray? It’s been all of ten minutes since you got here and you’re already making

me regret inviting you?” said Nik.

Gray was Nik’s one exception to her “no guys at the townhouse” policy, and it was because he was as tight-assed as Kayla. She never partied with Gray. He wasn’t that kind of guy. He was too respectful, and she’d never wanted to show him that side of her. Since Kayla was coming with her tonight, however, she wanted to make her feel relaxed, so she thought to invite someone Kayla knew to come along. Inviting Jeremy had been her first suggestion, but Kayla had been appalled at the suggestion. Nik never worried about having a designated driver; she’d always been able to bum rides, and if she needed, she had close connections with a taxi driver neighbor of whom she’d discovered that she could flirt her way into unlimited free rides. Since Kayla was taking giant strides over the threshold of her comfort zone for this party, Nik decided it best to find someone she trusted to be their DD for the evening, and Gray fit the part well.

The three of them were gathered around their kitchen table as Nik distributed Jell-O shots to each of them, Nik in her shiny, shell-adorned mermaid skirt and seashell bra, Kayla in her modest, homemade Snow White costume, and Gray in his mediocre Dracula-esque ensemble. They didn’t look like they belonged together as a group, and it made her laugh. She forced them to pose for a picture with their shots before she downed hers. Once the picture was taken, Gray passed his back to Nik.

“I’m driving, remember?” he said.

“Come on, Gray. A couple Jell-O shots aren’t gonna do shit to you.”

“I’m good,” he said.

“Fine, if he’s not doing them, then you have to,” she said to Kayla, placing his Jell-O shots in her hand.

“What? Why?” demanded Kayla.

“Because the two of you combined are too much of a damper on my Halloween spirit! At least one of you needs to get drunk with me!”

“Nik, I cannot take four Jell-O shots. I never drink!”

“Yeah, Nik. Really? She weighs like ninety pounds. She’ll be hammered,” added Gray.

“A hundred and ten,” said Kayla.

“Yeah, Gray, she weighs a hundred and ten. See? That’s good for six shots at least.”

“I don’t want to,” said Kayla.

“Kayla, do I need to kick your ass again right now in front of Gray?”

“Oh my gosh, fine! Only two, Nik! I’m not doing Gray’s shots,” said Kayla as she popped open the first shot and sucked it in with a grimace.

“Atta girl, Chang! I knew there was a reason why I loved you!” said Nik, throwing an arm around Kayla’s neck.

“Wow, peer pressure at its finest,” said Gray. “How you doing, Kay? That go down all right?” Gray laughed as he observed Kayla’s face.

“Grayson Baines, was that a laugh I heard come out of your mouth?” asked Nik.

“Shut up, Nik,” he replied.

“That was disgusting,” said Kayla.

“Too bad,” said Nik. “Because you got three more to go before we leave the house.”

Kayla wasn’t joking about being a lightweight. She seemed fine after the first. And even after the second, she wasn’t doing anything un-Kayla like. But after the third, suddenly, the sight of Gray’s face in his weird, powdery vampire makeup was making her laugh hysterically, her ears were bright red, and she was stumbling around the kitchen in an effort to merely stand upright. Nik was pretty amused at the sight—Kayla, her twenty-two-year-old mom, her

responsible friend, laughing and slurring words with her arms slung around Nik's bare waist, getting tangled in all the beads and necklaces she had strung around her neck.

"Looks like you're finally feeling good, Chang," said Nik.

"I'm good," said Kayla, looking like she was trying to exaggerate the movement of her mouth in order to form words. Without having to be asked, Kayla grabbed another Jell-O shot and threw it back, this time not grimacing at the strong vodka taste, then reached for another.

"Whoa, slow down, little one," said Gray, putting his hand on her arm. Normally, this would be where Nik might chime in and tease Gray for being a buzzkill, but she wasn't sure how much alcohol Kayla's tiny frame could even hold. She knew that if Kayla wound up curled up on towels in her bathroom in the morning, there would be hell to pay.

"Vampires can be so bossy," said Kayla. "But you forget, good sir, that I am a princess." This made Nik laugh enough to shrug off the idea that Gray was right on cutting Kayla off now. Four shots in the early evening may not even last her through the whole party. She grabbed another Jell-O shot and pushed it into Kayla's hand. Kayla swallowed it without hesitation.

"I think that should be it for now, Nik. Come on," said Gray.

"All right, fine," said Nik, opening another and sucking it down herself just because she could, and Gray was being a drag. Then she turned to Kayla. "You ready to party?"

After demanding they take a dozen more photos in every pose they could think of, Kayla was falling on the ground cracking up at the goofy-faced photos she insisted they take, still finding Gray's face hilarious despite the fact that he'd never loosened up enough to make a very goofy face. But as they scrolled through the photos, she stopped and looked down at her mid-length, Snow White dress that she'd initially been so proud of having made herself and gasped.

"Oh no," she said. "Nik, you have to help me fix this before we go!"

“What do you mean? You look great,” said Nik.

“No, you look great, Nik. You look hot. Your outfit is all small and tight and I look like a child. Don’t I? You always say I have a baby-face. Do I look like a child in this?”

Nik had to admit, she had been trying to look hot when she’d put her outfit together, and she felt she’d succeeded. She’d purposely made her outfit tight, had picked a costume that would allow her waist to be exposed, and left her hair wild, untamed and covered in glitter and fishnet hairclips. She knew what passed for sexy, and Kayla’s costume, while cute, was cute in an innocent little girl kind of way. Something a mom would make for her daughter.

“I mean, it’s not really the costume, Chang,” Nik lied. “The costume is great. It’s just—you kind of always look like a kid.” Kayla suddenly looked mortified.

“But I don’t want to look like a kid. I want to look sexy.”

“You are sexy!” said Nik, giving Kayla a sloppy kiss on the cheek that sober Kayla would have instantly wiped away. “Isn’t she, Gray?”

Gray, caught off guard by suddenly being included in a conversation he likely was hoping to have no part in, began to stutter as Kayla looked desperately at him for a response.

“Of course—um, I mean—Kayla, you look very pretty—” he said.

“But not hot? Nik, fix it!” said Kayla.

“Okay, okay. Come here,” said Nik, taking Kayla by the arm and dragging her upstairs.

A few minutes later, Kayla was stumbling out the door of their townhouse holding Nik’s hand and laughing so hard that she fell to the ground as Gray picked her up and coaxed her gently into the car, hushing her so that the neighbors wouldn’t notice she was drunk while also quietly laughing. About two feet of fabric at the end of her Snow White dress had been jaggedly lopped off by Nik in her bedroom—she’d tried to do it as neatly as possible, but Kayla had

refused to both take the dress off while she cut, and to stand still—so now her dress was as short as the ones Nik usually saw at these parties. Any other day, she was sure Kayla would be panicking about her ass hanging out or people staring at her, but not tonight. Tonight, Kayla seemed to have no care in the world, and Nik took pride in being the one responsible for it.

*

The Halloween party was being hosted by Ethan, one of the managers at Nik's bar and one of her weekend-night-out regulars. Ethan had been the first guy Nik had become friends with at the bar, as well as the first guy she went from friend to friendlier with. Unlike most of the other guys she'd been with, Ethan had never expected anything of Nik. Actually, he pretended it never happened, as he did every time following. Though she was surprised at first, she was relieved at this unspoken agreement. For once, there was an action that she'd never have to suffer any consequences for; unlike with Colton, who would make her regret it for the rest of her life.

"How does he even live here?" Kayla asked as they pulled up at Ethan's acre lot adorned with a large three-story, ranch-style house. "Didn't you say he was a bar manager?"

Ethan prided himself on living out in the countryside, at least a half hour from everything, but according to him, the tedious drive was worth the privacy. Out here, he could be as loud and wild as he wanted, and no one would ever complain. This pleasure was something well-exploited on Halloween, as Ethan had strung up colored lights around his trees and porch and had filled the yard with dozens of costumed people. It was chilly out, and almost no one had jackets on, because what would be the point of wearing a costume and covering it up with a jacket? But she was sure there was plenty of alcohol to keep everyone warm.

"Family inheritance or something," said Nik.

"Oh, look, Nik, it's a pirate!" said Kayla, hugging Nik tight around the waist, causing

her seashell bra to come loose. Kayla was so much shorter than Nik that her face was eye-level to her boobs, which was never something that bothered her until now that Kayla was five shots in and kept hugging her and knocking her bra loose. Nik needed to get a few more shots in her if this was going to be a frequent occurrence of tonight.

“Oh, hey, Nik!” called the pirate. “Your highness,” he said to Kayla with a bow. Kayla giggled and high-fived the pirate. She was already flushed and dreamy eyed from the shots.

“Hey, bud,” said Nik to the pirate, though she had no idea who he was.

“This should be fun,” said Gray, eyeing a cowgirl and a caveman who were rolling around on the grass in a heated passion. She could hear the judgment that enveloped his words. She was about to throw out a half-witted remark when she saw Ethan, Mara, and Ernie waving at her from the porch with beers in hand.

“Let’s get these Jell-O shots in the kitchen,” said Nik, grabbing the box of shots from the back seat and slamming the door shut with her hip. Gray said something in response, but she didn’t hear him, as she was already halfway to the porch steps by the time he did.

“Hey, guys,” called Nik as she skipped up the steps of his porch. Ethan was dressed in a gladiator ensemble that was surely designed to showcase his abs. Mara and Ernie from the bar, who had dressed as zombies, Mara’s version involving hardly any clothes and a ton of oozy makeup thoughtfully positioned to draw attention to her large, perky breasts. Mara flashed both her cleavage and her braces at Gray at the same time, obviously finding him attractive, but Gray didn’t even seem to notice amid being consumed by discomfort.

“Here comes trouble,” said Ernie, maneuvering a hug around Nik’s Jell-O shots.

“Hey, Nik, glad you made it. That is a lot of Jell-O shots,” Ethan said with a laugh.

“God, Nik, you look great!” said Mara. Even as she said it, she was eying Gray.

“You guys know I don’t do anything half-assed,” said Nik.

“Oh, we do know,” said Ernie.

“Should we get those in the kitchen?” asked Ethan, opening the screened front door for her and ushering her inside. Nik glanced behind her at Gray and Kayla, who were lurking behind her, looking like they were waiting to be introduced. “Guys, this is my roommate Kayla and my friend Gray. And this is Ethan, Mara, and Ernie. The better half of my weekend crowd.” She winked at Ethan as she said it.

“Nice to meet you,” Ethan said with a nod as Nik squeezed past him into the house, followed by Gray, Kayla, and Mara, who seemed to have purposely gotten in the back in line so that she could check out Gray’s ass on the way in.

“Love your costumes!” said Mara, confirming what Nik had already suspected about her being on the prowl. There was no way she could seriously think Gray’s costume looked good.

“Thanks,” said Gray. He smiled at Mara, but Nik could see the indifference in his eyes. Even though she’d never admit it, it made Nik glad that Gray was paying no mind to Mara. She wasn’t exactly girlfriend material. Definitely not what Gray needed.

They followed Ethan around the corner, maneuvering through a handful of decoratively dressed people toward the kitchen. A few of them said hi to her, only two of whom she knew as coworkers from the bar. It was starting to bother her—all the people greeting her by name whom she hardly recognized. It was giving her a knot in her stomach, bringing insecurities to the surface she normally wouldn’t have such trouble ignoring. Tonight would not be a night that ended in tears. She didn’t have time to think about the emptiness inside of her, or the aching hole where her family had once been. Tonight was a night to let loose.

“How about you and I get going on these before they all disappear?” she said, winking at

Ethan and playfully pushing him and allowing herself to be distracted by how hard his abs were.

She ignored the look Gray was giving her. She also ignored how quiet he and Kayla were being, and the fact that they were just standing behind her watching instead of doing their own thing. Obviously, they had expected her to introduce them to everyone, or to teach them how to have fun at a party, and she was regretting inviting them. She hadn't realized she'd have to be their babysitter, and their nervousness was annoying, because it was keeping her from being able to ignore the sound of her own mind. Ethan was a much better distraction. Hoping Gray and Kayla would get the hint and start mingling on their own, she turned away from them and faced Ethan, boxing Gray out in a way that prevented her from having to see his disapproving glares.

"Sounds like a plan," Ethan laughed, taking a handful of Jell-O shots and handing one to Nik, then edging over to the threshold between the kitchen and great room. "Caroline," he called. A moment later, a makeup-caked girl in fairy wings and a sequined dress appeared beside Ethan.

"Caroline, this is Nik, my friend from work. Nik, this is my fiancée, Caroline." The word hit her hard; he might as well have sucker-punched her in the throat.

"Fiancée? Really? I didn't know. When did you—" she tried to find the words that were hidden beneath her hazy buzz and the calculations she was now doing in her head to remember how long it had been since the last time she and Ethan had hooked up. Had they already been engaged? Had he been cheating with Nik every time they had?

"Crazy, right?" exclaimed Caroline, putting out her left hand as if allowing Nik to kiss it and waving around the massive sparkling rock on her ring finger. "It was a total shock to me as well! I know things moved fast between us, but we just couldn't wait any longer!"

"Nik brought Jell-O shots," said Ethan. That was all he could say? Nik eyed him, trying to spot even the slightest bit of wavering on his part, but he looked as calm as ever.

“Oh my god, you’re my new favorite person!” said Caroline. Nik’s thoughts were all colliding as she wracked her brain for the best way to respond.

Nik smiled at Caroline and threw her arm around her neck, pulling her close, then opened a Jell-O shot and tipped it to her. Caroline opened her own, raving about how excited she was.

“Oh, in that case, I bet the two of us will be the best of friends by the time the night is up,” she said to Caroline, winking at Ethan over Caroline’s shoulder. Finally, he saw the worry in his eyes. Good, Nik thought. He should be worried. Because she was going to make him pay.

*

It wasn’t clear when Nik had lost Gray and Kayla. Amid throwing back a dozen shots and working hard to be the life of the party, she had noticed Kayla and Gray in only one conversation with anyone at the party other than each other, not counting the occasional attempt by Mara to dance on Gray. Gray refused to leave Kayla alone, however, and the more drunk Mara got, the quicker she’d move on to someone else. Gray and Kayla were practically glued together, so much so that had Nik not been so focused on Ethan, she might have wondered if they were interested in each other. Then again, the looks of discomfort on their faces also gave them away.

She’d tried to pull them out into the living room to dance with her, but they both refused, Gray glancing down at his watch as if to hint that he was ready to go, and Kayla shaking her head in a panic at the prospect of being in the center of a room of people. Apparently, not even five shots were enough to keep Kayla’s social anxiety at bay.

The second time she’d approached Kayla and Gray, they had taken refuge in a near-empty sunroom, and she’d walked up on their one conversation with someone else. Even through the buzz of the alcohol, she knew it was a weird one.

“I thought you told me your name was Angela,” said a tall guy in a sweater with a thick, perfectly trimmed beard. “Why did he just call you Kayla?”

“I—” Kayla began, seeming to not know what to say. “What do you mean?”

“You must have misheard her, man,” said Gray.

“No, I didn’t,” the guy said, “I met her a couple weeks ago at a funeral, and she told me her name was Angela.”

For a moment, Nik thought back to her first conversation with Jeremy. He’d said he’d met Kayla at a funeral too. Had her head not been so light from the alcohol, she might have thought more about it. She might have questioned the fact that this was the second person who’d recently seen Kayla at a funeral. But the party was loud. People were calling her name. Ethan was taking shots with Caroline in the other room. She couldn’t concentrate on any one thought.

Gray eyed the beer in the guy’s hand, taking a step forward to position himself so that he was between Kayla and the guy. “Sure you haven’t had one too many?”

The guy grimaced at Gray, but he backed off. “Whatever, man. Just trying to figure out why she lied to me, that’s all. Didn’t realize she had her lawyer with her.”

“What was that about?” asked Nik, walking up just as the guy turned to leave.

“Oh, look who it is, Kayla. It’s the life of the party,” said Gray. He said it with sarcasm, but she thought she saw a slight smile on his face. “Are you ready to go? Some of these people are complete assholes. Case and point,” he said, motioning in the general direction in which the guy that had been bothering Kayla had gone.

Not that Nik had any reason to defend the people at the party, but Gray’s snide comment struck a nerve with her. “You sure you’re not the asshole, Gray?” she said. She didn’t give him time to respond before rejoining the crowd in the living room.

Initially, Nik had intended to outshine Caroline by being more fun than her. She made jokes, she danced, she flaunted the fact that she and Ethan were great friends by throwing out random stories and remember when's that Caroline had to admit she knew nothing about. She also out-drunk Caroline, who could barely handle taking Jell-O shots without chasers and certainly couldn't keep up with Nik when she started throwing back shots of whiskey like water. Nik prided herself in the fact that she could take shots of anything without a chaser and with barely making a face, and until tonight, it had been something that Ethan had always acted impressed by. Tonight, however, he ignored her, clinging desperately to Caroline, and the more Nik tried to get his attention, the more it seemed he found Caroline irresistible.

That was when she turned her attention toward Caroline, who'd had half as much to drink as Nik but was acting more drunk than her. Nik ignored the fact that the room was spinning and that she was laughing uncontrollably and nearly falling out of her heels. She pulled Caroline into the center of the room to dance. Caroline laughed and swayed with her, proclaiming Nik to be her new best friend and kissing her sloppily on the cheeks.

In her alcohol-induced, skewed view of the world, Nik believed she had Ethan right where she wanted him. But then Caroline graduated from silly, goofy drunk to handsy, horny drunk, hanging all over Ethan and ramming her tongue down his throat. Nik needed to keep up. And that was how she found herself in Colton's arms.

It was all a blur. One second she was dancing with Colton and screaming the lyrics of *Bohemian Rhapsody*, and the next, she was giving him a lap dance in front of a roomful of people as he greedily stuck his hands under her seashell bra. Things weren't piecing together anymore. Every time she blinked, she was in a new setting. People cheered her on as she danced on top of Colton. She felt his searing breath on her neck, face and boobs, and his hands lingered

between her waist and her ass. She thought she felt him tugging at her panties, but just for a moment, and she noticed something poking her hips after he let go. *That's for later*, she thought she heard him say in a breathy voice. Had he just tucked money into her underwear as if she were a stripper? Actually, knowing Colton, it was probably a condom. For a second, she was disgusted; what was she doing? She hated Colton. For some reason though, she couldn't stop.

Then she was being pulled off Colton, and she was stumbling, trying to catch her balance in her heels as she heard Colton objecting to her abrupt departure from his lap. And then Gray was in front of her, looking so out of place with his stick-up-his-ass posture.

"What the hell are you doing?" she said, trying hard not to stutter over her words.

"What am I doing? What are you doing, Nik? You're better than this," he said, holding on to her arm like she was his child, a gesture that reminded her so much of her dad, who used to do the same thing when she'd get in trouble as a little girl. Nik snatched her arm away.

"Don't treat me like a damn baby, Gray! I didn't bring you here to be my dad!"

"Really? Then why did you bring me here? So that I watch you make a fool of yourself?"

"I brought you guys so that you could have fun for once in your lives," she said, now recognizing the difficulty she was having at formulating a sentence.

"And what's been fun about this? That you abandoned Kayla? Or that you brought me here so that I could watch you throw yourself at some asshole you claim to hate?" he motioned to Colton as he said this, and Colton jumped out of his seat at Gray's accusation.

"Screw you, bitch," said Colton.

"Well, aren't you a class act?" said Gray. He turned to Nik, ignoring Colton's sorry insults. "Nik, I'm taking you home." He reached for Nik's arm, but Nik jerked away. She heard voices all around them, people talking about her and about Colton and Gray. People were staring.

“I’m not leaving!” she yelled, anger and embarrassment now overtaking her.

“You heard what she said, asshole,” chimed Colton from beside her now. “She’s staying.” Gray ignored Colton and turned to Nik, his jaw tight.

“Nik,” said Gray. “Come on.” This time, it sounded more like a plea. But she was pissed at him for storming in and embarrassing her in front of everyone.

“No,” said Nik. The noise turned to silence. She heard a weird ringing in her left ear. The people around her were watery images, faceless and irrelevant. But she saw Gray. She saw the disappointment loom over him. “I’m going home with Colton.”

He shook his head and spit out a short laugh, though there was nothing funny about it.

“Fine,” he said. And as he turned away from her, Nik saw Kayla, who had initially been hidden behind him, looking so out of place in her Snow White dress and sad, baby-face.

“Nik,” she said, but she stopped when Gray took her hand.

“Let’s go home, Kayla,” he said. “I can’t deal with her anymore.”

At that, Gray and Kayla were lost in the dizzying images of the party.

*

The rest of the evening came in waves of images, voices she could hardly make out, conversations she didn’t have the energy to understand. Colton’s face was unfortunately one of the few that was consistent and recognizable. She’d lost track of Ethan and Caroline not long after she’d landed on Colton’s lap. There was the living room and a jumble of voices amid loud music, and then there was a bedroom, a dark one, with Colton’s fake tan still somehow perfectly visible despite the shadows of the room. Time was passing with each blink of her eyes, and she couldn’t keep track of the space between each new image or change of scenery. As Colton moved on top of her, she thought she could also see Harrison’s face in the darkness.

Then the lights were on and Gray was there, Colton's face was being wrenched away from hers, and Nik could hear loud, crashing noises and Colton's stupid voice, but she didn't know what he was saying. She was being pulled up off the bed and the room was rotating and she was sick to her stomach, and then Gray was holding her up with one arm tight around her waist and guiding her through all the faceless people still at the party. The chill of the wind hit her hard in the face as they staggered down Ethan's porch steps and toward Gray's car. She could feel the grass poking her bare feet like needles. She remembered Gray being angry with her and storming off, and part of her was surprised that he was there now, guiding her into the back seat of his car gently and then tossing her shoes inside after her.

Kayla's face was in the shadows of the car, peering back at her from the passenger's seat.

What happened?

I stopped it.

Nik, are you okay?

"Oh, god," said Nik, stunned at the loudness of her own voice echoing over the buzzing in her ears. Her stomach wretched with each bump of the car. She was itching.

"God, my underwear—it's so itchy," she heard her voice say. She reached a hand down into her skirt and felt something thick and scratchy, like a wrapping of some kind.

Nik, don't you dare. You are not taking your underwear off in here. Seriously? Why do you have to take your underwear off every time you're drunk? Kayla.

Nik pulled at the wrapping that was tucked beneath the lining of her underwear. "There's something—itching me." She opened an eye to glance down at her hips while Kayla craned her neck to see what she was doing. She got it out, the scratchy wrapping, and held it up above her head to see it in the light of the streetlights above them—a Ziplock bag of white powder.

Oh my god. Gray. Shit, Nik, please tell me that's not cocaine.

Nik, why do you have drugs in your underwear! Kayla.

"They're not mine, I swear," said Nik. At least she thought that's what she said. It was hard to tell, because her mouth was so heavy.

Oh, you mean the drugs you just pulled out of your underwear aren't yours? Gray.

"Don't yell at me," she whined, pressing a hand to her pounding temples.

Nik, stop holding them up like that! Put them down! Kayla.

Put it away, Nik, now! Are you trying to get us all arrested? Seriously? Just when I thought this night couldn't get any worse. Gray.

"All right, all right. You don't have to be so mean—shit—" Everything was covered in the powdery contents of the bag. Her entire chest. Her hands and arms. Gray's back seat.

Oh my god. What did you just do?

Oh, god, Nik. Just stay down and shut up!

The rest was hazy. She might have been laughing uncontrollably. Gray kept yelling at her to shut up. Kayla was crying like a baby. Gray was hushing her like a dad. She imagined her dad and Lainey in the front seat of the car.

It's going to be fine. We're almost home.

They were home and Kayla and Gray were talking. Nik was vomiting on the driveway.

I'll get her inside. You grab the vacuum.

Gray was carrying her into the house. Kayla was wiping her off with a washcloth. She was falling onto her bed. She could hear the faint sound of a vacuum coming from outside just before she fell asleep.

She woke up sometime later, opened her eyes because she thought the vomit was going to start, but it didn't. She didn't have the energy to move. The world was finally becoming more real around her. Her room lights were off, but her bedroom door was open, and the hall light was on. She heard their voices before she noticed their shadows sitting up against the wall near the door. They were talking softly, but not quite whispering, and didn't seem to notice that she'd woken up. She was ready to fall back asleep, until she heard what Kayla was saying.

"My parents are dead," she said. It took a moment for Nik to process the words, but once she did, they hit her fast and hard. Kayla was talking about her parents. For one reason or another, their conversation in the darkness of her room had led to this point.

"What?" Gray's voice was weak.

"That's why I'm alone," Kayla began again. "My parents are dead. And I know I shouldn't just blurt it out like that. Up until tonight I wished I could be more like Nik and be fun and exciting and not always have that fact looming over my head like a shadow. But my past is a part of me. And the grass isn't always greener, I guess. I sure learned that tonight." Shit.

"I'm so sorry, Kayla. I had no idea," Gray said. "Does Nik know?"

"I don't know," said Kayla, sniffing. She was crying. "I told her once, but she was pretty wasted. I don't know if she remembers."

"It might be good for you if she did know," he said. "You know, to have someone to talk to about it. Or at the very least, so that she can understand you better. And look out for you."

Nik was wishing to be asleep again. Of course, she knew that Kayla's parents were dead. But she had never mentioned it following their initial conversation, and Kayla was unsure if she even remembered. She wondered what Gray would think of her if he knew the truth.

Kayla was silent for a moment before responding. "Thanks for staying for a bit."

“Of course. It was the least I could do after you helped me clean my car. I also didn’t want to leave you to deal with the vacuum alone. It’s not every night that a person has to deal with a vacuum cleaner full of coke.”

Nik was having a hard time putting the pieces of that comment together. Her head was growing heavy again. Kayla laughed.

“Honestly, I also wanted to make sure she was okay,” said Gray. “I mean, I hate her right now, but when I saw that asshole on top of her—” He never finished the sentence.

“I know,” said Kayla. Nik was fading. Listening to their voices in the darkness of her room was less about listening to what they were saying and more simply a source of comfort as she swallowed the acid in her mouth and tried not to focus on her churning stomach for long enough to slip back into unconsciousness.

“I take it you won’t be accompanying her to anymore parties?”

Kayla snorted out a laugh. “No. You?”

“Nope,” said Gray.

And that was the last thing she heard. Had Nik realized everything she’d done to Gray and Kayla at that moment, or had she understood how deeply she had hurt and disappointed Gray, she might have tried to hang on a bit longer. She might have tried to cling how comforting sound of his voice was in that moment, how warm it was when he was talking to a friend. Had she realized he may never talk to her the way he was talking to Kayla in that moment again, so comforting and kind, she may never have fallen asleep.

FOUR

To: Chang, Drew

From: Chang, Kayla

Date: November 2, 2019

RE: My sis the “party animal”

Hey Jerk,

While I totally resent your skepticism of me being able to have a good time at a party, I am pleased to report that it was amazing. You would have been very proud of me. I rode with Nik and Gray (my boss—I know, a little weird, but he’s actually really cool), we stayed late, and I even loosened up with a few Jell-O shots. Nik had to practically pull me off the dance floor at the end of the night. And everyone loved my costume, obviously. Nik isn’t as crazy when she’s partying as I thought she’d be; I might even go out with her again sometime.

Anyway, I am loving all the pictures you sent. Please send more! And don’t forget to pick me up a little something in every country you stop in. Even if it’s just a refrigerator magnet!

Happy to see you happy.

K

*

Gray hadn’t spoken to Nik since the party. Of course, after she’d woken up the morning

after the Halloween party lying on the floor of her bedroom still in her seashell bra that was now crooked and no longer covering a thing, with her bedside table drawer pulled opened, the contents having been frantically dumped on the floor so that she could use it as a vomit bucket, she'd expected at least that Gray wouldn't have been thrilled by her latest display of idiocy.

She had been unbearably sick that morning, in a cold sweat and shaking from what had to have been a fever, feeling so weak that she hadn't even been able to crawl to her bathroom. That was why she had resorted to hurling in the drawer, and after what seemed like the fortieth time, her stomach was empty enough for her to swaddle herself in her comforter and drift off into a restless sleep. Kayla never came to her rescue with magical hangover smoothies and sandwiches, and Nik assumed it was because she too was pissed at her for the party, but later she learned that Kayla had spent her own night clinging to the porcelain of her toilet bowl.

Nik had never been the kind of drunk who experienced amnesia; even at her worst, she typically was able to remember most of her wild nights in the morning. But there wasn't much she could remember about Halloween night. It was all scattered memories that came to her like déjà vu. Ethan introducing her to Caroline. She and Caroline hugging and spinning in the middle of the kitchen to *Livin' on a Prayer*, Colton sticking his slimy hands up her seashell bra, her yelling at Gray in front of a room full of people—

Her snapshot memories of Gray were the worst of all. She remembered thinking he'd left for good and then he was back again. But this time, he was pulling Colton off of her and punching him in the face. Colton had pinned her down in a spare bedroom, and she couldn't remember how she'd gotten there or whether or not she'd agreed to sex. Gray was angrier than she'd ever seen him. And then he was yelling at her all the way home, but she couldn't remember why or what he had been saying. But she did remember when he told Kayla he

couldn't deal with her anymore, and when he told her he kind of hated Nik for whatever else kind of shit she'd done throughout the night. Of all the random memories, she'd hoped that one wasn't real most of all.

It was now Saturday and she hadn't heard from Gray since Thursday night after the party, which might not have seemed like a big deal if it hadn't been for her numerous failed attempts at apologizing via text. But she was supposed to be at May Day at 4:00 to set up for her regular gig, and she didn't know if she was more relieved or terrified of that. She was relieved at the fact that Gray would no longer be able to ignore her because she would technically be working for him, but she was terrified of how he was going to respond to her. Of all the things she'd ever done to make a fool of herself around him before, nothing had ever been so bad that he'd actually ignored her. Gray had always been quick to forgive her in a "don't mention it" sort of way, so much so that she'd hardly ever even had to apologize to him before. Maybe she'd taken advantage of his feelings for her and had taken for granted the implied fact that they'd always be friends no matter what happened. But now she was realizing that might not be true. Maybe he really couldn't deal with her anymore.

Kayla was already in the kitchen making breakfast for the two of them when she came down the stairs on Saturday morning. With as shitty as she had been feeling the morning before about her drunk-ass self and her terrible decisions, she'd fully expected for Kayla to hate her too. She had, after all, dragged her to a party she didn't even want to go to only to ditch her for a guy—or really, multiple guys if she had to reluctantly include Colton in all that. But she had been elated to learn that Kayla didn't seem angry at her. Instead, she kind of laughed it off and said that she enjoyed getting out of the house for a bit, even if it was to just watch Nik make an ass of herself. Nik had been grateful, but she also remembered Gray acting the same way with

her at first. She had finally succeeded in ruining things with Gray, and she knew it was probably only a matter of time before she did the same with Kayla.

“Good morning, Sunshine,” Kayla greeted Nik when she walked into the kitchen as she scooped a couple of pancakes onto a plate and set them on the table for her. Kayla’s maternal instincts really were unshakable. It made Nik think of her own mom for a second—of the way she’d always greet her with a chirpy *good morning, mi amor*, especially when she was cranky and tired, begging her dad to make his famous banana pancakes every single weekend—but she shoved those thoughts to the back of her mind. She had bigger, more pressing matters at hand at the moment, number one being Gray.

“You’re my soulmate, Kayla Christine Chang,” replied Nik, grabbing hold of the syrup bottle that was already on the table and pouring it over her pancakes.

“10AM on a Saturday and you’re actually awake? No party last night?” said Kayla.

“Yeah, well—I figured it’d probably be best if when I see Gray, I’m not hungover.”

“He’s still not talking to you?”

“Not at all. Not even an *I hate you, Nik*.”

“He doesn’t hate you.”

“No? Did he say that?”

“No, but to be fair, he hasn’t really said anything about you,” said Kayla. Or about that night for that matter. I think he just needs some time to forget that whole thing ever happened.”

Nik grimaced. She would have preferred to hear he’d said he hated her—at least then, she’d feel she was still worth something to him. Hate she could work with, but not indifference.

“About that,” Nik began. “What did actually happen?” She’d been too sick and scared to ask yesterday, but now that she was seeing Gray tonight, she knew it’d be best if she at least

acted like she remembered the night. Maybe then she wouldn't seem like such a drunk.

Kayla turned away from the stove top for the first time since she'd placed the plate of pancakes on the table. There were pancakes still sizzling in a pan as she watched Nik with wide eyes. Nik thought she saw smoke rise from one of them.

"You really don't remember?" she asked, sounding completely appalled.

"Not really," Nik admitted. Kayla turned suddenly around to the stove top as if she'd just realized she was still cooking, and pulled the pan off the burner, turning it off and then transferring the pancakes to a plate. Then she pulled up a chair beside Nik.

"Nik, you had cocaine on you," Kayla said quietly, almost as if she thought someone was nearby eavesdropping on the conversation. Nik stopped mid-bite and nearly dropped her fork. It hadn't been what she expected to hear at all.

"What?" she asked. Her stomach dropped. How could she not remember that?

"Yeah, and then you wouldn't stop laughing about it. He was already hurt because you went off on him in front of everyone, and really worked up because he found Colton on top of you—I've never seen him like that. He was shaking. I think he really likes you, Nik, so all that was a lot to handle. Then you dropped coke all over the back seat of his car and we had to clean it up at like three in the morning."

"I—" Nik began, but she was actually at a loss for words. "I really don't know what to say, Kayla. I have no idea why I would have had drugs on me."

She knew there were so many things that Kayla had just said that should have mortified her, but the fact that she'd had coke on her drowned out everything else. After Harrison, she'd sworn to herself she'd never do drugs again. She'd hardly done them before, but had watched him get high off his ass and stumble around swinging his fists more times than she could count.

And it hadn't been just him who'd been dragged off to jail when he'd been busted; it had been her too. If there was ever anything good Harrison had done in his entire life, it had been swearing to the cops that she hadn't known about the dealing—which she hadn't—although, to this day, she was surprised he'd done it. Maybe a part of him had actually loved her after all.

“You pulled them out of your underwear,” said Kayla.

Immediately, Nik thought back to Colton and the hazy memory of him sticking his sweaty hands under her bra and on her waist—and for a brief second, in her underwear—he'd put something in them, and Nik had thought it was a condom. *That's for later*, he had said. Had he been trying to get her caught with drugs? In that moment, she was so relieved they'd made it home, so thankful to not have gotten pulled over. She would have been in jail right now, considering she had a previous drug-related arrest on her record. Gray knew this. She hated the idea of him believing they were hers.

“Kayla, you have to believe me. Those were not mine. Of all the bullshit things that come out of my mouth, this is the God's honest truth. I do a lot of shitty things, but I sure as hell don't do cocaine. That's the realest thing to ever come out of my mouth.” Kayla observed Nik for a moment in silence, then nodded.

“I believe you,” she said.

“You do?” Nik said, sounding much more astounded than she'd intended. “Do you think Gray will?” she added, though she felt like she already knew the answer to that question.

“I don't know,” said Kayla. “He was really hurt, Nik. He really likes you, and the drugs only happened after he found you with Colton.”

Even though deep down, Nik had always known that Gray liked her more than a friend, it still hit her hard to hear it coming from Kayla's mouth. Had he talked to Kayla about it?

“I know,” was all she could say. And in her mind, all she could think of was the image of Gray punching Colton after pulling him off of her. He’d saved her from only God knew what, and then she went and disappointed him even further by dumping drugs all over his car. “What do you think I can do to get him to talk to me again?”

“I don’t know, Nik,” she said. Then, after Kayla probably saw the depressed look on Nik’s face, she added, “Do you know his favorite dessert?”

*

“So, what time’s your date with Jeremy?” Nik asked Kayla just as they were putting the finishing touches on the perfect dessert for Gray, which she’d poured her heart into under Kayla’s watchful eye.

At Kayla’s suggestion, Nik had decided to make Gray a cheesecake as an apology, and she actually ended up being extremely pleased with the result. She was never good in the kitchen, and she had a hard time even following a recipe. Kayla kept having to correct her on measurements and what to mix together first and second and third, and she couldn’t figure out why she was having such a hard time deciphering the instructions on her own.

Maybe it was nerves; cheesecake was Gray’s favorite, and she knew that the restaurant served cheesecake on occasion, cheesecake that Gray’s mom had apparently perfected. But hopefully, since Gray was aware of how little she knew about cooking, he would appreciate the gesture. She’d even taken the time to write out *I’m sorry* on it in chocolate syrup, which Kayla laughed at, but she thought it was a good touch herself. Hopefully Gray would agree, because had a lot riding on this cheesecake. Like their entire friendship.

“It’s not a date, Nik, you know that,” said Kayla. “It’s just a ride.”

“And does Jeremy know that it’s just a ride?”

“I don’t know. Yeah, I’m sure he does.”

“Bullshit. With guys, it’s never just a ride.”

Kayla was playing the young and innocent act, but it wasn’t fooling Nik. She knew Kayla was aware of how much Jeremy wanted this to be something more. And despite acting oblivious, Kayla was probably enjoying the attention much more than she was letting on. He had, after all, been the one to ask for Kayla’s phone number, obliged to play her ridiculous Q & A game in order to get it, and had asked Nik to help him out when Kayla had still refused to give it to him. He texted her every day. There was no way Kayla was dumb enough to believe it was just a ride.

Kayla wasn’t playing her cards as casually as she wanted to believe, either. Since that first night she’d gone to see Nik play at May Day, Kayla had made attending Nik’s Saturday evening gigs a regular thing, and Gray had made it a habit of automatically giving Kayla Saturday nights off with Nik’s gentle nudge. And Jeremy quickly worked Nik’s Saturday gigs into his own weekend schedule, probably picking up on the fact that Kayla had been consistently going. It had taken them long enough to work out the arrangement, but finally, Jeremy was picking Kayla up so that they could go together. If it was up to Nik, they would be dating by now, but even slowly, Kayla was finally getting the hint.

“Nik, stop. I don’t want to start overthinking this,” said Kayla.

This kind of reaction might have in the past prompted Nik to keep making digs, but by the look on Kayla’s face and the way she was shifting uncomfortably on her feet, she knew Kayla wasn’t lying. She was nervous, and Nik knew enough about Kayla by now to know what happened when she got nervous. She’d shut herself up in the house and refuse to go anywhere. And considering Nik had a cheesecake and an apology to deliver, she wouldn’t have the time to drag Kayla out of the house like she had the first time she’d gone with her to a gig.

“All right, fine,” said Nik, carefully packing the cheesecake up in a cardboard cake box she’d bought at the store. “I’ll drop it as long as you swear not to get all weird and cancel on this kid the second I leave this house.”

“Don’t you have to be there soon?” said Kayla, ignoring her. “You better hurry up.”

*

She brought her equipment in first, scoping Gray out to see how mad he was. He was behind the bar when she saw him, as usual on nights like these, and though she kept one eye on him the entire time she was setting up, he never looked her way. He was definitely still pissed.

When she went back to her car to grab the cheesecake, she got so nervous that she almost tossed it in the dumpster out back. But she shook it off and decided she had to just suck it up and talk to him. This was Gray. After all they’d been through, he couldn’t stay pissed at her forever.

“Hi,” she said as she finally gathered the guts to walk up to the bar, craning her neck to position her face in front of his, as he was bent over the counter counting money to refill the register. His eyes flickered toward her for not even a second, and then he looked back down.

“Hey, Nik,” he said, sighing her name like it made him tired to say.

“Made you something,” she said, attempting to showcase the cheesecake, but even as she waved it right in front of his face, he didn’t look up again.

“Come on, Gray. Are you gonna hate me forever now? I mean to be fair I did warn you before that you’re too good for me.”

She’d thought that maybe if she made a joke, she’d be able to soften him up—that maybe if she put herself down first, he’d feel freer to speak his mind. But instead, he looked at her with a sharp anger, and suddenly, the image of him looking at her in this exact way at the party after she’d yelled at him came to mind. She stopped, now feeling hurt by him, though what had he

done to her? Was she allowed to be hurt by a look? Gray shook his head at her, biting his lip like it was taking everything in him not to explode.

“You don’t get it, do you?” he said. All she’d wanted before was for him to look at her, and now that he was, all she wanted was for him to look away.

“I—” she began, but he cut her off.

“Damn it, you are frustrating, Nik. After all this time, how do you not see what I see? How can you not see how incredible you are? You’re so much more than this. So much better than all of it. Why do you think you have to settle?”

She didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t at all the reaction she’d been expecting. Of all the names she’d called herself already in preparation for what was to come with Gray, “incredible” definitely wasn’t one of them. Yet even as he called her incredible, it pierced her like the deepest insult. She’d been sure she could handle whatever he had to say, but now that she was standing in front of him, she realized how wrong she’d been. Where could she even start?

“Gray, they weren’t my drugs, I swear. Honest to God, I don’t do coke.”

It was the truth. Even on her darkest days, when she’d been living with Harrison after she’d been stupid enough to leave home. Even though, for him, snorting coke was like breathing and he’d pressure her to try everything imaginable, she’d never so much as touched the stuff.

Gray shook his head. “You’re unbelievable,” he said. She didn’t know what he wanted.

“If this is about Colton—”

“This isn’t about Colton! It’s about you! How can you possibly be the only one on this earth who can’t see how amazing you are?”

The heat in her body rose. She’d thought he’d be angry at her, that maybe he’d yell at her for being such a loser at the party. Everyone knew it. Everyone but him. He paused for a moment

then laughed nervously, and suddenly, she was reminded of the party, as it was a sound she had heard that night as well, and yet again, the memories were coming back to her like *déjà vu*.

It didn't make any sense. She'd been hoping for him to not stay mad at her, yet a part of her just wanted him to call her names and confirm everything she thought about herself every single day. He wouldn't do that; instead, he was still telling her she was amazing. And he was madder at her than she'd ever seen him. She didn't know what he wanted from her, but she didn't know what she wanted from him either. She didn't want to lose him, but she also believed she'd never deserved him in the first place. She'd been biding her time with him since they'd met, waiting for the moment she'd push him over the edge, and he'd leave her sorry ass behind. She wanted to win back his friendship while at the same time expecting to lose him forever.

"I've tried, Nik. I really have. I've tried to help you see it. And over and over again you have tried to make me believe that you're not worth it. Like I can possibly be too good for you. And you know what the sad thing is? I've never once believed it. Not even now."

"Gray, I'm sorry," she said, not knowing what he even wanted her to say.

"Me too," he said. "Because I still see that girl when I look at you. I just can't keep trying to make you see her. You're on your own, Nik. I'm sorry."

At that, Gray left the bar and retreated into the kitchen, still never even acknowledging the cheesecake she'd made him that now seemed like such a dumbass idea. It took everything in her not to follow him. But she couldn't. He was done. And there was nothing she could do about it but stand there and wonder how the hell she was ever supposed to be that girl he wanted when she couldn't even see that girl herself.

*

After all the nudging Nik had done to push Kayla toward Jeremy, she unfortunately wound up being the reason their “date” was cut short. After struggling through her set at May Day and feigning the energy she typically had—still aware that she was in no way was performing as well as she normally would—she packed up her equipment immediately following the end of her set and passed by Kayla’s table on the way out. She’d intended to be casual about letting her know that she was going home, but she’d accidentally let the tears out.

“What’s wrong?” Kayla said immediately. So much for hiding her feelings.

“Nothing. It’s just been a shitty night. I’m getting the hell out of here,” said Nik.

To Nik’s surprise, Kayla was quick to offer her comforting presence, telling her she’d meet her at home. Were it not for the fact that Kayla was pretty much her only friend—at least the only one who wouldn’t try to cheer her up with a double shot of whiskey or an offer to bone—and her offer to ditch Jeremy in order to be by her side was so touching that it made her cry even harder, Nik might have pretended she was fine so that Kayla could keep getting to know Jeremy. But of all nights, tonight was not the night for Nik to successfully hold back her tears. And so, she agreed and hugged Kayla gratefully in a way that was perhaps a bit dramatic, and then she fled to her car before anyone else had time to notice she was upset, most of all, Gray.

By the time Kayla had made it back to the townhouse, Nik was slouched at the kitchen table already digging into Gray’s *I’m sorry* cheesecake without even removing it from the box. She had just shoved an extra-large bite into her mouth after smearing the chocolate syrup words sloppily around the top layer and taking a fork right to the plate, when Kayla entered the kitchen, followed by Jeremy. The sight of him seeing her in an even more pathetic state than earlier with her mouth stuffed with cheesecake actually made her spit out a laugh and then choke for a second, before she washed it down with a sip from her cheap bottle of wine.

She didn't even have the energy for a witty response at his presence—a man they hardly knew in their sanctuary—or the fact that Kayla had apparently decided tonight would be a good night to invite him over, and instead just pushed herself up from the table in a way that was probably an exaggerated expression of her sorrow without even removing the fork from her mouth, dragged herself over to the silverware drawer to retrieve two more forks and pressed them into Kayla and Jeremy's hands. Thankfully, they didn't object or even react to this gesture, and instead sat down at the table next to her and followed her lead by picking away at the cheesecake. That was how the three of them ended up sitting around the townhouse kitchen for hours until most of the cheesecake was devoured while Nik spilled her guts about Gray.

"I don't know, I guess I'm an even shittier person than I thought," said Nik through bites of cheesecake. "Because you should have seen his face, Kayla. It was like he hated me. But the crazy thing was that he was like—mad that I didn't see myself the way he did. Like he thinks I'm this amazing person that I'd never actually have the capacity to be and he's mad that I'm not trying to be that way."

Jeremy surprised Nik by never breaking eye contact with her as she cried about Gray. He didn't even seem uncomfortable or upset with how his night with Kayla had turned out. Instead, he listened intently as she rambled, and in spite of Kayla's best effort to seem like she was paying as much attention as him, she couldn't help but watch him watch Nik, and the admiration for Jeremy she could see in Kayla's eyes was growing by the second. At least that was one good thing that seemed to have come from the current shit show that was her life.

"I mean, as a guy, what do you think I should do?" she asked, seeming to take both Kayla and Jeremy off guard by addressing Jeremy directly for the first time since she'd started vomiting her feelings.

“Uh—” he began, at first seeming totally unprepared to speak. “Well, that’s a little hard for me to say. I think I might have missed some of the context of the situation. What’d you actually do to make him so mad?”

“Oh, God,” Nik began, snorting as she took another giant bite of cheesecake. It vaguely crossed her mind to be more generous with the story for Jeremy, but then she figured, what the hell—he’d already heard the entire story of her and Gray’s relationship. “Well, I kind of yelled at him in front of a room full of people, then I forced myself at some douche bag to spite him and practically volunteered myself for date rape, which he then had to save me from, and then I accidentally dumped drugs all over his car on the way home.”

Kayla covered her face with one of her hands, and Nik could see her cheeks flushing with embarrassment over her blunt words. She was probably also reliving how terrible the night had been for her and Gray, something of which, up until this point, Nik had tried to avoid prompting. She knew that Jeremy was practically a stranger who probably now believed her to be insane, but in spite of all of the things she hated about herself, she had always prided herself on her honesty. Jeremy’s eyes widened a little at her confession as well, but he quickly composed it.

“Wow,” he said, at first seeming to have no advice to give her. It was quiet for a moment, and each of them took another bite of cheesecake, perhaps to try and fill the silence with some sort of purpose. “I mean, what’s stopping you from being that person?” Jeremy said finally.

It was quiet, and Kayla and Nik exchanged a glance. When it was clear that Nik had no idea what he was talking about, he added, “the girl he said he sees when he looks at you.”

For the first time since they’d been sitting around the table, Nik had nothing to say. Since she’d been living at the Beach, no one had ever flat out questioned her decisions, not even Gray. That was probably why his response today had caught her so off guard. She didn’t know why she

couldn't just stop making such shitty choices and be better. It seemed like such a simple solution when Jeremy said it. But no matter how many times someone tried to tell her, she couldn't believe that she was better than the life she was settling for. She didn't know if she could have the same faith in herself that Gray had in her. Maybe this all was exactly what she deserved.

"Honestly, Nik, I think unless you're willing to change, there's not really anything you can do to fix it."

At that moment, Kayla's phone rang, and Nik glanced over just in time to see an unknown number flash on the screen. Kayla immediately jumped up and excused herself before Jeremy could even react, leaving him and Nik alone in the kitchen together.

It was quiet for a moment, and Nik shoved another bite of cheesecake in her mouth just to avoid having to respond to what Jeremy had just said. She didn't want to have to dwell on it; it was bad enough that he'd just called her out on her shit when he barely knew her. She wondered if Kayla had ever talked to him about her. Thankfully, Jeremy broke the silence.

"So, Kayla's brother," he began, "has he been gone long?" Thank God.

"He left a little before she moved in with me," said Nik. "So, August, I think?"

"She doesn't talk about him much, considering how close they seem," he said.

"Yeah. I think talking about him makes her sad, so she just dodges the topic."

"It makes her sad? Why?" he asked.

She didn't know whether or not she should even have said it. But it was keeping the focus off her. She was gathering that Jeremy, like most, had no idea about Kayla's parents. And she imagined what a buzzkill it'd be on a date if he accidentally did something to make her blurt it out the way Nik had that first weekend after Kayla had moved in. If it were her, she would have wanted a head's up.

“Kayla’s parents are dead,” said Nik. The second she said it, it felt wrong. But it was too late. Jeremy was processing her words and looking at her with a dumb, shocked expression.

“I—wow. That’s awful,” said Jeremy.

“I don’t know much about it, because she doesn’t like to talk about it, but I know that’s why she moved here. She came with her brother when he got stationed here, and then she kind of got stuck here alone when he went on deployment. I think certain things just make her feel really sad and lonely to talk about, so I try not to bring it up.”

Jeremy nodded. She could see it in his eyes that he had a dozen questions. And Nik was starting to worry that Kayla would see it on his face the moment she walked through the door. She was ready to tell him not to say anything to Kayla when she heard the front door open and close, and Kayla walked back into the kitchen.

“You guys are quiet,” said Kayla.

Nik was growing increasingly guilty, increasingly afraid that Jeremy was going to bring it up to Kayla right then. But then Nik looked back at him and any trace of concern and shock he once had was already gone from his face. She had to give it to him that he was good at composing himself on short notice.

“You know, just sitting here stuffing our faces,” said Nik, taking another bite of cheesecake. Jeremy followed her lead with his own bite.

“I can’t believe we’ve almost eaten that whole thing,” said Kayla, sitting back down at the table and picking up her fork again.

They continued on like before, picking at the cheesecake, analyzing Gray’s behavior toward Nik, and eventually, laughing and joking with each other. Kayla seemed more relaxed than Nik had ever seen her. She hoped that Jeremy was smart enough not to ruin that by bringing

up an off-limits topic. But nothing could be done about it now. Kayla's tragic past was out in the open and she couldn't take it back. She was just going to have to trust that Jeremy knew better than to tell Kayla he knew.

*

To: Chang, Drew

From: Chang, Kayla

Date: November 3, 2019

(Draft) RE: Date update

Drew,

I guess instead of continuing our argument about the fact that it wasn't an actual date, I'll just update you on what a nightmare this "date" turned out to be. Apparently, when I stepped outside to take your call last night, Nik had taken the opportunity to tell Jeremy about Mom and Dad.

Jeremy brought it up when I was walking him out to his car. He was just trying to be nice—I guess he wanted me to know that he respected my space and I didn't have to feel obligated to talk about it if I didn't want to—I was so thrown off by it that I ended up breaking down right in front of him. I basically spent the night crying into his shirt, and I'm so embarrassed.

You know that feeling you get when suddenly you're forced to think about it all and every little bit of composure you've spent so much time building for yourself just comes crashing down around you? I was so angry that I was shaking, but I couldn't figure out if I was angrier at Nik

for telling him or at him for bringing it up and blindsiding me. It's crazy how, from one second to the next, everything can seem perfectly fine, and then suddenly, it all seems so wrong. I mean, God, what's wrong with me? I'm parentless and living with a crazy twenty-nine-year-old child who drinks herself into oblivion on the regular just because she thinks her parents don't like her—but who gives a shit, right? Her parents didn't fucking die. Mine did. Yet here I am spending all this time taking care of Nik when all I really want is for someone to take care of me. I wish Mom was here to make me pancakes or sandwiches or tuck me into bed like I do for Nik when she's vomiting and falling down drunk. I want to hug Mom just one more time and feel the warmth of her embrace and lean my head on her shoulder and rub her silky-smooth arms like I used to do as a kid. I'll never receive enough hugs in my life to make up for missing hers. It's so wrong, isn't it? She should be here for me to talk to about Jeremy. I want to be able to tell her about my shitty day. Dad should have been around to greet Jeremy last night at the door when he picked me up. I should have had him here to act suspicious of Jeremy and question his intentions for being older than me. Really, I should never have met Jeremy in the first place. I should still be in college and coming home on weekends to visit and filling Mom and Dad in on how well I'm doing and invite them to come to parent weekend in November. I should still be able to go back home to Houston for holidays without feeling like I might suffocate from the emptiness of knowing that Houston is existing without them, when it feels like the whole city should have crashed and burned to the ground the moment Mom and Dad died. It's all so wrong, Drew. I hate that I feel like I have to hide the fact that they're dead. I want to be able to talk about them whenever I want. But talking about them forces me to admit out loud that they're dead. And I die a little more each time I say it out loud.

Please tell me I'm not alone in all this? Please tell me you feel it too? Tell me you sometimes wake up and are surprised you're still here—that you're still living and breathing on this earth even though after Mom and Dad died, you half expected to follow them out of this world because nothing makes sense here without them. I'm sorry. I know you need positivity right now. I know this email is going to bum you out. But I just feel so alone today, Drew. I need to know that I'm not the only one in this world who is being suffocated by grief. Am I alone?

K

(Message Moved to Trash on November 3, 2019)

To: Chang, Drew

From: Chang, Kayla

Date: November 3, 2019

RE: Date update

Hi Brother,

I could waste my time telling you for the thousandth time that it wasn't a date, but I'm sure you won't listen to me anyway. In any case, whatever it was went well. Yes, Jeremy is a perfect gentleman, although, why would you need to know that if it wasn't a date, right?

Maybe you're the one who needs to get a hobby. You're the one who is overly invested in my (non-existent) love life.

Excited about the “surprise” you’re bringing home for me. Sure you can’t just send me a pic? Or even a small hint?

You’re the best. Don’t forget it!

K

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After Kayla had gone outside to walk Jeremy to his car, Nik brought her half-empty bottle of wine, as well as the last few bits of crumbled cheesecake, up to her room with her. She heard Kayla come back in almost an hour later, and at that point, she was too full on wine and cheesecake to care and dozing off in her bed. She’d expected for Kayla to come into her room to check on her at some point, or maybe to fill her in on how it went with Jeremy outside, but she never did. She fell asleep waiting for her, worried that Jeremy said something to Kayla about her parents, listening to John Lennon on vinyl with the cheesecake lying beside her on the bed and the empty bottle of wine on her now drawer-less bedside table.

In the morning, she woke up to cheesecake smeared on her arms and comforter. She must have rolled onto it in her sleep. She had a headache, but it was mild and seemed more likely due to her crying than a hangover. She could hear Kayla in the kitchen already. It was 10AM and too early for her to be awake when she had nowhere to be until her midday bar shift. The thought of working at the bar made her involuntarily think of Colton’s stupid face, and suddenly her mild headache felt unbearable. She had avoided seeing Colton since the party just by luck of the work schedule draw, but she knew for a fact that he’d be working today. She considered calling in sick, then decided she’d better not. She needed the money, and she couldn’t avoid him forever.

By the time she dragged herself out of bed and downstairs, Kayla was getting ready to walk out the door. The kitchen smelled like fresh Lysol, but also a little bit like fried eggs. The dishwasher was running. She wondered if Kayla had fixed herself breakfast without thinking of Nik and then tried to clean it all up and scrub the kitchen of the evidence before she'd have time to notice. Not that Nik would have had any reason to get worked up about it; true, Kayla did usually cook for Nik whenever she cooked for herself, but it wasn't like Nik had any right to expect it of her. She was worried, though, that this was a sign that Kayla was mad at her.

"You going to work already?" asked Nik as Kayla was putting on her shoes. She was wearing her black slacks and a plain black shirt that she typically wore beneath her work apron.

"Gray asked me to come in early," she said, tightening the laces of her non-slip sneakers.

"Doesn't May Day open at noon on Sundays?" Nik asked. Kayla just shrugged and kept tugging on her laces. Nik had barely opened her mouth to ask Kayla what her problem was when Kayla spoke first.

"Why'd you tell Jeremy my parents were dead?"

At the question, Nik felt her stomach twist, and it reminded her of when she was a kid and her dad would come home after work and kill her excitement at his arrival with a *why were you bad for your mom today?* So, not everyone was as uncomfortable with bringing a topic like that up with someone as Nik was. Damn it, Jeremy.

Kayla was looking at her now with her arms crossed around her waist, looking a lot like Nik's dad used to, actually. She suppressed the urge to laugh nervously at that fact and looked Kayla in the eye, trying to appear as innocent as possible. She considered throwing Jeremy under the bus and maybe blaming him for asking too many questions. She knew this wasn't true, however, and Nik liked Jeremy. She liked how much less of a tight-ass Kayla had been since

she'd met him. The last thing she wanted was to make Kayla mad at him. So, she said the first answer that came to mind.

"Because they are." The second she said it, she realized that it was a huge error of judgment. Kayla's mouth hung open like she was appalled. But it was the truth. Kayla shook her head angrily as if she disagreed with the fact. When she didn't say anything, Nik continued.

"Kayla, look, I'm sorry. But they are. And that's not really a fact you can skirt around."

"I didn't even think you remembered," she said quietly.

"I just didn't want you to feel like you had to explain it to me. I mean, I don't want to have to explain my shit to you either."

"But you went and told Jeremy so that I'd have to explain it to him?"

"No, I told Jeremy so that you wouldn't have to explain it to him. I told him for you."

"That's not for you to tell, Nik. It's my life. How would you like it if I went and told Gray all about the crying sessions you do about your mommy and daddy issues every time you're trashed?" That was enough to set Nik off. From that point on, her mouth was moving faster than her mind.

"Really, Kayla? You're gonna sit here and pretend you know shit about my life just because your better-than-thou ass has held my hair back a few times? Well I've got news for you. You don't know shit about my damn life! You're not the only one on earth who's been through hell."

"Screw you, Nik! You may be crying about how your parents don't love you, but you know what I hear? That you have parents. You have fucking parents, Nik! I don't!"

Before Nik could get out another word, Kayla snatched up her apron and purse and stormed out, slamming the door behind her. A canvas picture that hung beside the door fell off the wall. And while she wanted to cry, she had to laugh at the familiarity of it all.

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It took Nik all of five minutes to feel like complete shit about making Kayla upset. She'd jumped in the shower not long after Kayla left, and then by the time she was done, she was completely ridden with guilt. Nik did her best and worst pondering in the shower. Something about the steam and the hot water and the smell of her coconut shampoo that got the wheels turning in her head. And she hated it.

She tried calling Kayla's phone a couple times not expecting her to answer, which she didn't. And after going back and forth about whether or not to call the restaurant, she decided to just go ahead and do it. May Day wouldn't be opening for at least another hour, so whatever Kayla could be doing over there could probably be put on pause long enough for Nik to apologize for being an ass. Sometimes, she really couldn't comprehend the idiocy of her choices. Actually, that was most of the time. There were a lot of things she did that she regretted, but blatantly belittling the fact that Kayla's parents were dead was pretty damn low, even for her. Maybe Kayla didn't understand what Nik had been through, and she probably never would, but Kayla was right to be upset. Nik had parents and Kayla didn't. She didn't know why she couldn't just swallow her pride and call her parents, because she knew that if something ever happened to them, she'd never forgive herself for the silence she had created between them. But for now, it somehow seemed like a risk she was willing to take if it meant not having to deal with the past.

"Thank you for calling May Day, this is Gray," she heard Gray say on the other line.

"Gray, it's Nik."

“Can I help you?” She wanted to snap at him for being short with her, but she refrained.

“Listen, I need to talk to Kayla. It’s important.”

“Kayla’s shift isn’t until three today.”

“Bullshit. I saw her leave the house dressed in her uniform not even half an hour ago.”

“Nik, we don’t even open till noon. You know that.”

“Look, Gray. I know you’re mad at me, and I know she probably told you she didn’t want to talk to me, but I really need to—”

“She’s not here, Nik. I swear.” The seriousness in his voice got to her. She could hear his tone change from irritation with her to that genuine Gray concern that he just couldn’t help. “Is something wrong?” he asked.

“She was upset when she left the house and she told me when she left that you asked her to come in early today. I’m not really sure where she could be.”

It would have been one thing for her to have lied and told Nik she was going to May Day when she wasn’t, especially after their fight, but when Nik woke up, she was already dressed for her three o’ clock shift. Nik thought of the day she met Kayla. Kayla had a shift at three o’ clock on that day too, and she had already been dressed for work when they met. Was Kayla doing something this morning before work that she felt the need to lie about?

“All right,” she heard Gray say. “Look, I’ll let you know when she comes in. Okay?”

“Okay. Thanks, Gray,” she said.

“You’re welcome,” he said. There was silence for a moment. She didn’t want to end the conversation so soon, especially now that she’d finally gotten him to listen to her. But she couldn’t think of a reason to keep him on the phone.

“Bye, Nik,” he said, finally. She thought she could hear something in his voice,

hesitation, maybe. She wanted to say something more, but she couldn't.

"Goodbye," she said.

It took her a moment to remember why she'd even called, and even longer to recall the fact Kayla had lied to her about where she was going. Now overcome with curiosity and more than willing to take the bait of the distraction to get her mind off Gray, Nik decided to take a quick look around Kayla's room. She wasn't sure why Kayla had lied, or why it mattered so much to her that she did, but for some reason the fact that she had lied was unsettling. What could Kayla be doing this morning that she'd have to hide from Nik? The thought crossed her mind that she could be meeting up with Jeremy, but she felt it was unlikely that she'd be doing it in her May Day clothes. Even in spite of all her Kayla-esque compulsiveness, she clearly wanted to impress Jeremy and likely look cute when she saw him.

She hadn't spent much time in Kayla's room before; unlike Nik, who lived by an open-door policy, never closing either her bedroom or bathroom door, Kayla always kept her door closed. Nik had helped Kayla move boxes and furniture into her room and then had never so much as peaked inside it since. Kayla's room was, as Nik had expected, clean and organized. Her bed was made, sporting a black and white plaid comforter, and she had an old, raggedy mismatched patchwork quilt that was neatly folded on the corner, and on top of that lay a ratty stuffed bunny rabbit that looked like it had been hit by a car. Her bathroom was, to no surprise, spotlessly clean. She had only two pieces of furniture in the room besides the bed and dresser that had been in it before—a small desk and a bedside table. On the bedside table, there was a copy of *The Importance of Being Ernest*. She had only one thing hanging on her blank, empty walls, and that was a vintage-looking *Batman Forever* poster that had evidently been ripped into five or six pieces and then taped back together. A small flat screen TV and Blu-ray player was

set up on her dresser, and next to it was a laptop.

Kayla's desk was what surprised Nik. While everything else was picture-perfect and screamed clean freak, her desk was a complete mess. It was piled with papers, receipts, pictures, paperclips, pens, folders, notebooks, birthday cards, books, and even a couple of yearbooks. Nik gently poked through the mound of crap, trying not to upset it enough to make anything fall over. She found a folder labeled "Just in Case" and found a stack of bank statements for a savings account with close to 30K in it. She immediately felt guilty for looking and closed the folder and moved onto another labeled "Schooled" and found her college transcripts, class syllabus handouts, printouts of her grades from her first semester of college and a letter from the Board of Education granting her a leave of absence in light of her parents' death. Nik's heart dropped as she saw the date on the letter was from March of last year. She hadn't known it had only been a little over a year and a half since Kayla's parents died; then again, she'd never asked.

Nik glanced at a few of the pictures on the desk, which looked to be mostly pictures of Kayla with her friends. There was one of Kayla and three girls in bikinis at a lake, one with her and another girl eating ice cream, one of a group of guys and girls at a football game, one of her and a cute, freckle-faced boy at prom. She looked so happy. So fun and social. So unlike the Kayla she knew now.

Then there were ones she could only assume were old family photos because of the poor quality and the reappearing little girl she recognized as a little Kayla. One with toddler Kayla wrapped in the arms of a beautiful brunette woman that looked a lot like Kayla did now smiling at the camera. One with young Kayla and a little boy that had Kayla's eyes and smile that had to be her brother laughing and jumping on a bed. One with a middle school-aged Kayla in a track uniform standing next to a tall, dimpled, Chinese man holding a sign that said "Go Kayla! That's

my girl!” Her dad. There was a photo of Kayla in a graduation gown standing next to her parents and brother. She’d never seen a picture of Kayla’s brother Drew before, but she knew that had to be him. He, again, had Kayla’s eyes and smile and resembled the boy jumping on the bed. She found another picture of him and Kayla, only now he was in a navy uniform.

She was about to move on when she noticed a stack of what looked like bulletins from a church service, the one on top featuring a beautiful photo of Kayla’s mom and dad with their arms around each other, her mom with her head thrown back in laughter and her dad gazing down at her mom like he couldn’t believe his luck. Nik felt her eyes growing hot and watery as she read the heading on the top of the paper—*Celebrating the Life and Love of James and Christine Chang*. Their memorial program.

She shouldn’t have been looking at any of this. Nik was ready to put the program back and run from the room, when she noticed what she’d accidentally uncovered beneath her parents’ memorial program. The stack of what she’d first thought were church service bulletins was actually a stack of memorial programs. Not her parents’ though. There were around ten or fifteen of them, but they were all of different people, all different ages and ethnicities, but all with one thing in common—they’d all taken place within the year, and they’d all taken place in the Beach.

“What the hell?” Nik said.

There was no way Kayla could have known that many people who had died this year. No one’s life, not even Kayla’s, could be that tragic. She sorted through them, looking at the dates on the front of the programs. One of them was dated August 7, the same day that Nik had first met Kayla at the boardwalk and taken her to see the townhouse. When Kayla had already been dressed for her three o’clock shift at May Day. Was it a coincidence that, if you took away the colorful apron, the dress code happened to be all-black? Practically funeral attire. The same thing

she'd been wearing when she'd left the house today. One program was for a Michael Carrington, the mutual friend Jeremy had said he had with Kayla who'd recently passed away. All those times Kayla was gone before Nik woke up, when May Day didn't open until noon. The guy at Ethan's party who called her Angela. He said he'd met her at a funeral. It had been something Nik had hardly processed then, but it was all starting to come together now. There was so much about Kayla that was a mystery, yet Nik had never bothered to question any of it. But now, standing in Kayla's room and seeing the chaos of her desk, the only unorganized, messy part of her life that held the secrets of not only her family tragedy, but the evidence of how fucked up she actually might be by grief, a piece of herself she tried her best to hide from everyone around her, she realized that maybe she should have been keeping a closer eye on Kayla after all. This was beyond tragic; it looked like Kayla had made a hobby out of crashing funerals.

FIVE

Over the next couple weeks, Kayla didn't talk much to either Nik or Jeremy. Things had been weird between Nik and Kayla since their fight, but Nik had also suddenly become thrust into an awkward position between Kayla and Jeremy out of default, as Jeremy was quick to hassle Nik about Kayla that first gig at May Day after their fight, when Kayla didn't show up to watch Nik play. From there, she'd given Jeremy her phone number in a moment of weakness—Nik had felt partially responsible for Kayla distancing herself from him in the first place—and Jeremy was totally comfortable with texting Nik any time he felt that Kayla was giving him the cold shoulder. That, unfortunately for Nik, seemed to be all the time.

Nik didn't have much advice to offer him, however, considering she was still trying to figure out how to get things back to normal with Kayla herself. She made it a point to be a calmer, more soft-spoken person around Kayla, although she still said more stupid shit in an hour than Kayla probably had in her lifetime. But she was genuinely concerned that their friendship wasn't going to go back to normal—if “friendship” was even the word to call what they had. And even though Nik had texted her about every hour on the day of their fight to apologize for being an ass, she'd never worked up the courage to apologize to Kayla in person, or even acknowledge what had happened between them that morning. Instead, she chose to shower Kayla with compliments, dumb stories, and jokes to lighten the mood between them, which usually worked in the moment, but as soon as the jokes died down, they were often left in silence. She had even gone as far as attempting to make Kayla pancakes one morning, though they were disgusting. At least they'd had a good laugh as they spit their bites of pancake into their napkins and tossed the rest in the trash.

It wasn't that their dynamic had changed much, really. They were exactly as they had been when Kayla had first moved in. Kayla still cooked dinner for them almost every night, and helped Nik stumble up to her room when she came home drunk. But for a while, it had seemed like Nik and Kayla had crossed over that line between roommates and friends, until suddenly, their fight had amplified the fact that they were roommates, not friends.

To make things even weirder, anytime Kayla would leave the house earlier than noon and say she was going to work, or anytime she would already be gone somewhere when Nik woke up, all she could think of was the image of Kayla crying alone in a corner at some stranger's memorial service. It bothered her so much that at her next May Day gig, she'd gone into the kitchen and checked the bulletin board to see Kayla's work schedule for the next two weeks and wrote it down so that she could compare. She needed to find out how often, exactly, Kayla resorted to that crazy habit of hers. Not that she could be one to judge; she was crazy herself, but crashing funerals was on a whole new playing field of crazy.

The Monday before Thanksgiving, Nik got a call from Jeremy as she was getting ready to leave for work. Kayla had already left for work as well, which based on the May Day schedule Nik had written down, she could confirm that Kayla was, in fact, at work and not at a funeral. Previously, Jeremy had always stuck to texting Nik. But with the holidays coming up and her strained relationship with Kayla paired with her no longer existent friendship with Gray, Nik was growing lonely enough to welcome Jeremy's potential friendship in whatever form it came in; she was thankful to have someone to talk to.

"Hey, Jeremy. What's up?" said Nik as she answered the phone.

"Hey, Nik. Sorry to bother you, but I was hoping to get your opinion on something."

"Okay." She waited for him to continue, but he didn't. "I'm listening," she said.

“Well first—how is Kayla doing?”

“She’s fine as far as I know,” said Nik. “Why?”

“Well, I know the holidays can be rough for someone who’s lost a loved one,” he said.

Shit. Admittedly, the thought hadn’t crossed her mind, even though Nik had been dreading the holidays herself for similar reasons. True, she hadn’t lost a loved one in the same sense that Kayla had, but the holidays made the absence of her family nearly unbearable, to the point where Nik wished she could just be sedated from Thanksgiving to New Year’s. She couldn’t believe that she hadn’t even stopped to think of how hard it all had to be on Kayla.

“Did you read that in your Grieving People Handbook?” said Nik. Making jokes had always been her greatest defense against her guilt.

“Actually, it was *How to Date a Person with Baggage for Dummies*,” said Jeremy. She laughed.

“Wouldn’t you actually have to be dating someone to take that advice to heart?”

“Ouch. You got me there,” he said. At that, he cleared his throat. “Anyway. I wanted to ask you about Kayla’s Thanksgiving plans.”

“Her plans? You should know by now that Kayla doesn’t have plans often.”

“Do you think she’d want to spend Thanksgiving with me?” he asked. When Nik hesitated on a response, he added, “I mean, not just me. My roommate and I are hosting a Thanksgiving dinner for all our military friends who don’t have family in the area. You’re more than welcome to join too, of course.”

“You’ve probably got a better chance of having Kayla join you if I’m not involved. I haven’t exactly been her favorite person lately.”

“I’m sure that’s not true. You’re like her best friend,” said Jeremy. This pulled at her heart to hear. She didn’t have the guts to ask Jeremy if Kayla had said something to make him draw that conclusion. She wanted for it to be true so badly that it hurt.

“In any case, I have plans,” Nik lied.

“Okay. Well, you’re welcome to join if anything changes. Problem is, though, I feel like I’d need to ask her to her face, considering she’s been kind of ghosting me by phone. I’ve been trying not to take it personal because I know she’s probably been dreading the holidays.”

“Then go ask her. She’s at May Day now,” said Nik.

“Really? You don’t think she’ll feel cornered if I just show up there?”

“I don’t know. Maybe she will. But Lord knows that girl needs a push every now and then.” She hoped it wasn’t bad advice, but the last thing she wanted was for Kayla to end up spending her Thanksgiving crashing a funeral.

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There were a few things that had gone down within the days leading up to Thanksgiving that made Nik resent herself even more than she already had been post-Halloween.

First, Gray was still not speaking to her. And she’d actually wholeheartedly believed that he’d at least be willing to talk to her again by now. Especially considering the fact that she’d spent the last couple of Thanksgivings with him and his family. In spite of their many years of friendship, their conversation leading up to his first invitation had been the first one they’d ever actually had about Nik’s family. She’d never wanted to talk about them before. But when Gray had discovered that she neither had any plans for Thanksgiving, nor had she ever had any plans for Thanksgiving, he couldn’t help but invite her to spend the holiday with him.

“I feel terrible that I never thought to invite you before. Why didn’t you tell me you

always spent it alone?” he had asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I guess I didn’t want you to feel like you had to fix it for me.”

“Nik, we’re friends. Of course, I’d want to fix it for you. But why is that a bad thing?”

“Because I deserve to be alone,” she’d said.

She’d broken down in front of him that day. And she’d allowed him to try to fix it. To fix her. She had opened up to him about her parents and sister, and she told him the story of how she’d ruined things with them—of her fight with her dad, of choosing Harrison, of the drugs and the arrest. She’d expected him to be disgusted or disappointed. She’d expected him to stop liking her. But instead, she had felt his kindness and his love for her in a way that she never had before. She had seen him in a new way, as someone she could love as well. But she was never able to shake the feeling that he deserved more than her, and that she would never be good enough for him. And while that was the moment that she’d finally seen Gray as someone who could be more than just her friend, that was also the moment that she had begun pushing him away.

Now, she and Gray weren’t even talking, and she was alone for Thanksgiving yet again. And it was this reality that had led to the second thing that had happened: Colton. He happened just as he’d intended. Nik had been hurt and vulnerable since she and Gray had stopped talking, and the next time she saw Colton at work, she’d found herself angrier at him than she’d ever been. She’d already cursed him out multiple times for the drugs, and for his pushiness and whatever else Gray had stumbled upon at the Halloween party. But her rage had always made Colton more attracted to her, more desperate for her acceptance, more persistent with getting what he wanted from her. And she found herself in bed with him even though she hated him, and even though she hated what he’d caused between her and Gray. But even more than she hated him, she hated herself. Even in spite of Colton’s pushiness and greediness with her, she’d never

actually tried to say no. And she probably never would. That was just the kind of girl she was.

Then, while she was in a half-drunken, self-loathing haze as she stumbled into the back seat of her taxi friend's cab wearing one of Colton's oversized hoodies over her wrinkled party dress from the night before, makeup smeared and hair a tangled, poofy rat's nest on her head, she received a call from a number she didn't recognize. Had she not still been half-drunk, she would have probably never answered it.

"Hello?" she said, the morning rasp of her voice ringing sharp in her ears.

"Danika?" said a small voice on the other line. It was a girl. She sounded young and uncertain. Her voice was shaking.

"Who the hell is this?" said Nik. Over the course of many years since she'd chosen to shed the name her parents had given her, it had become her natural reaction to reply aggressively any time she heard it. Just before Nik was ready to hang up, she heard the voice again.

"It's Lainey."

There was silence again, except this time, it was on her end. She couldn't get her mouth to open. Her little sister, whom she hadn't seen in so many years, a voice she hadn't even recognized, was on the other line. What could she even say to her? Lainey was the one to break the silence.

"Are you there?" she asked.

"I'm here—" said Nik. She heard Lainey clear her throat.

She wondered what she was doing as she held the phone to her ear. If she was chewing on her bottom lip like she used to do as a kid when she was thinking. She wondered if her hair was currently curly or straight. Lainey's hair had always been curly, like Nik's, though not quite as un-tamable, but lately, she'd gotten into the habit of ironing it straight. Nik only knew this

because every now and then, she would browse Lainey's social media profiles to catch a glimpse of her beautiful little sister and reassure herself that Lainey's life was good. That Lainey was the good little daughter their parents deserved. And she was. Lainey graduated high school with honors, and she was attending a local university. She had a sweet-looking, preppy boyfriend that bought her flowers and took her to nice restaurants. She spent most of her weekends at home with their mom and dad. She was a good daughter.

"How did you get this number?" asked Nik.

"Long story, but to make it short, it involves an innate talent for internet stalking that I'm not entirely proud of having, and an apparent knack for detective work that I actually am pretty proud of discovering—" she let out a laugh, obviously out of nerves. Nik remembered her doing that even as a young girl.

"So," began Lainey, "I'm not calling to get on you about missing my graduation, if that's what you think. I'd thought about it when June came and went and I never heard from you. But then I realized that I was being stupid, because after not seeing you or hardly hearing from you for years, why would I ever expect for you to have shown up then?"

"I'm calling you because I want you to know that I don't hate you, Danika. I never have, and I never will. I don't know why you've never come back after all these years. And even though Mom and Dad don't talk about it, I can see how much it hurts them. And it hurts me. Even though I don't even know you, I miss you. Because you're my sister. I want to know you so bad, Danika."

Lainey's voice trailed off, and Nik wondered if she was crying. But as she felt the pain surface in her own throat, and she felt the warmth of her tears wetting her cheeks and smudging her already-ruined eye makeup, she knew that Lainey was crying.

“Please come home,” Lainey said, her voice now merely a whisper. “Please.”

“Lainey, I—” began Nik, but she stopped. What could she say, really? How could she ever explain where she’d been? “I’m sorry, but I can’t. I don’t belong there anymore.”

At that, Nik ended the call, curling up into a ball in the back seat of the taxi, urging her taxi driver friend to just keep driving each time he turned around to see if she was all right, now nauseatingly aware that she couldn’t even remember his name.

After that, she decided that there was nothing more for her to do on Thanksgiving but go out and get as wasted as possible so that maybe if she was lucky, she’d be numb enough not to notice the fact that her life had gotten so low that she had no plans but to get shitfaced on Thanksgiving. And nothing was going to change her mind of that. Not even Kayla.

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“So, you mean you’re really going to Jeremy’s dinner, and no one even had to threaten your life in order to get you to agree?”

It was Thanksgiving Day. Nik was sitting with Kayla in the kitchen as she sliced up apples for a pie. Even though Jeremy had told her not bring anything when he’d invited her to dinner, Kayla of course was too motherly to agree to that. Or maybe, she thought she’d be able to hide behind a pie if she started feeling uncomfortable. Nik kept stealing pieces of apple as Kayla worked, prompting Kayla to smack her hand away like a grandma would do to a child.

“I decided to take a risk today,” said Kayla. This was so unlike her that Nik had to laugh.

“Going to eat at someone’s house is a risk now?” said Nik.

“A risk you’re obviously not willing to take. You could come with me, you know? Aren’t you and Jeremy friends now or something?”

“Or something,” said Nik, spinning an unlit cigarette between one of her fingers,

something that she knew was driving Kayla crazy considering she hadn't even wanted her to sit at the table lest she breathe on the apples for her pie. After Kayla shot her another dirty look, she tucked the cigarette behind her ear and reached for another apple slice.

"Nik, there are apples in the fridge! Why do you have to eat the ones I'm cutting?"

"Because those aren't sliced up all nice right in front of me and my ass is lazy," she said, crunching on the apple slice.

Nik glanced down at her phone, still blank with no new notifications, just as it had been five minutes ago when she'd last checked it. She didn't know what she was checking for anyway; it wasn't like Gray was going to suddenly insist she join him for dinner with his family. She hated that Gray's absence was the main reason she was planning on going out tonight. True, she also had her Mommy and Daddy issues and shitty conversation with her sister to blame, but out of everything she hated about the upcoming holidays, not having Gray was what stung the most, because even if every other stroke of misfortune—or rather, consequence for her poor choices—had still existed, she would have been okay as long as she had Gray.

"Were you drinking last night?" Kayla asked.

"What? No, actually," said Nik, surprised that Kayla asked, but considering it was mid-afternoon and she still had last night's makeup smeared all over her face and had yet to attempt to untangle the matted knot of hair on the top of her head, she knew she had no reason to be.

Kayla was quiet, and Nik couldn't help but feel her silence was full of pity. It was something that made her feel defensive, like maybe now might be a good time to bring up the fact that she'd discovered her morbid hobby of funeral crashing, but she knew that was a subject that would need to be approached with caution. It certainly wasn't a card to play just because Kayla thought that Nik lived the more fucked up life.

“You sure you don’t want to come with me tonight?” she asked again.

“I have a feeling that Jeremy’s crowd isn’t my kind of crowd,” said Nik. “Perfect for sweet, innocent baby-faces like you, though, I’m sure.”

“Well, I’m sure the crowd is better than any you’ll meet at clubs while you’re falling down drunk,” said Kayla.

“Maybe so, but at least if they suck, I’ll be too drunk to notice.”

“But you’ll generally avoid anyone who would hide drugs in your underwear.”

“Ouch,” said Nik. The comment stung a bit because the wound of Gray’s absence in her life was still so fresh, but Kayla was smiling. And Nik could get on board with her teasing if that meant that for a few moments, things seemed to be normal between them.

Kayla’s phone buzzed on the kitchen counter. “Drew,” Kayla said, picking up her phone and flashing her screen to Nik, revealing an unknown number. As she left the room, Nik threw an apple slice at Kayla, hitting her in the side of the face.

“Don’t eat all my apples!” Kayla yelled over her shoulder before exiting the kitchen to answer the call. Nik reveled in the smile Kayla shot at her, evidence of the fact that maybe their friendship wasn’t doomed, after all.

Ignoring Kayla’s demand, Nik picked up another apple slice and crunched on it, checking her blank home screen once more out of compulsion. She was beginning to remind herself of Kayla whenever she was awaiting a call or email from Drew. Only difference was, though, that her compulsiveness was much more pathetic considering her circumstances with Gray.

Suddenly, she noticed Kayla’s voice coming from the living room, a sound much less content than she’d usually hear when Kayla was talking to Drew. She sounded panicked.

“Drew? What’s wrong? No, no. It’s okay. Shh—it’s okay.”

Nik peeked her head out of the kitchen. Kayla had backed up into a corner of the living room and onto the floor. One hand was covering most of her face, as if to shield herself from Nik's view. She was trembling.

She had never been good at giving sympathy. She never did or said the right things at times like this. She felt like a hypocrite for even thinking of trying to comfort Kayla. But as she watched Kayla slowly crumble into the corner, the girl who had been there to physically pick her up so many times this year when she herself was falling apart, there was nothing she wanted more than to change it for her. Kayla was breathing heavily as she listened to whatever Drew was saying on the other line. Nik watched she slumped lower and lower into the corner until finally, she was curled up in a ball on the floor, not much unlike the way Nik would often curl up in front of her toilet after too much alcohol. Nik walked over, unsure of what to do or how to handle the situation, trying to be as quiet as possible, as if she were trying to hide the fact that she was there. She could hear the faint, deep echo of a voice through Kayla's phone, paired with heavy breathing not unlike Kayla's. Was Drew crying too?

Kayla took a deep breath, her voice muffled by her hand still covering her face. "I remember," she said quietly. "It all just hurts. But we're still a family, Drew."

The sound of it made Nik's throat ache from swallowing back her own pain. Seeing Kayla breaking down for the first time since they'd been roommates was enough to make her heart break as it was, but hearing her words broke her in a different way. She forced away the images of her own family, of her own mother and father and sister somewhere curled up like Kayla was, only they were crying for the daughter who'd chosen to leave them. She sat down beside Kayla, considered touching her or pulling her into a hug, but hesitated. She wasn't that person. She was no one's stronghold. How could she be, when she was crumbling herself?

Instead, she just sat beside Kayla, close enough to where she'd be able to tell that she was there, even in spite of her still being curled in a ball on the floor covering her face with her hands. She sat with her until she hung up with Drew, stayed with her for an hour longer as she cried. She waited until Kayla finally sat up, wiped her eyes and sniffed, and said, "guess I don't have time to finish my pie."

Nik, who hadn't even noticed she'd been crying beside her until Kayla sat up and wiped her own tears, let out a sigh of relief, a breath she hadn't even realized she'd been holding for her friend. She laughed at Kayla's unswerving ability to care about things like pies even in the midst of her pain. And before she thought better of it, she reached out and touched Kayla's face, wiping the tears from beneath her eyes. Kayla said nothing to this, didn't move or pull away. Instead, she nodded gently. And to Nik, this was her way of acknowledging her—acknowledging that even in the midst loneliness and grief, she knew that with Nik by her side, she wasn't alone.

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To: Chang, Drew

From: Chang, Kayla

Date: November 28, 2019

Subject: Sorry

Drew,

I feel terrible about the way our conversation went today. Admittedly, I hadn't given much thought as to the fact that this Thanksgiving has to be so hard for you. Sometimes, it takes everything in me just to get through the day, and holidays are the worst of all. I've been so

focused on making sure that I'm still breathing that I hadn't even considered that you, even more so than I, might be struggling to make it through the day. Last year, we had each other, but more specifically, I had you, and you had been so strong for me, forced me out of bed and helped me forget about the gaping hole in my heart where Mom and Dad should be. I wish more than anything I could be that for you this year, and I'm sorry that I can't be.

Remember that Thanksgiving when Dad spilled turkey grease on his foot and had to go to the hospital to be treated for a third-degree burn? It's honestly one of my favorite memories of us, because Aunt Nicole gave us a bunch of Thanksgiving food to sneak into the hospital and we all sat around his bed at 9 o' clock at night eating turkey while trying not to look at his blistering foot. Somehow, in spite of everything, I remember laughing more than I ever had at any Thanksgiving dinner before it. We were happy, Drew. We'll be happy like that again.

Anyway, I just want you to know that you don't always have to be strong for me. You're my big brother, but you don't always have to be the one to carry me. I'm here to carry you too.

I love you. Happy Thanksgiving, Brother.

K

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Nik's Thanksgiving evening was a blur. The alcohol was the obvious explanation why, but even before she'd started drinking, Nik had decided she'd do her best to remember as little of the evening as possible. She was numb. Numb from the absence of her family, from Gray's scorn, from Kayla's collected exterior faltering for the first time since she'd known her. She'd

convinced herself she needed the drinks to chase away the memories of her mistakes that haunted her from sunrise to sunset, but even as she'd arrived at one of the loud, dim lit oceanfront bars that she frequented, this time alone because even her weekend regulars had plans on Thanksgiving, she was hardly processing the images in front of her. She went into the night knowing full well she never wanted to remember it.

At some point, she found herself in the back of her taxi driver friend's car, though she didn't remember ever calling him to pick her up. At some point, she found herself on their front porch steps, her face pressed up against the cold concrete. At some point, she heard him talking on the phone to someone. She could make out only a few of the words. *This is Frank. Your neighbor. Taxi driver. Nik called me. She's not herself. Never seen her like this. Think she lost her key. She's lying on your porch. Can't get her to stop crying. Afraid to leave her alone.*

The freezing porch steps felt good on her cheek. Her body was a thousand degrees. She was lightheaded and sweaty, a sign that her body was working hard to regurgitate all the poison she'd forced down to numb the pain. It hadn't worked. Nothing was numb but her bare legs that were exposed beneath her sequin mini skirt and pressed up against the porch like her cheek. The fall breeze was blowing right up her skirt and chilling her legs, but somehow, it wasn't enough to keep her forehead from sweating. She had to lie still, or else she was going to vomit. She knew she shouldn't vomit on her front porch but had forgotten the reasons why.

She heard a car door slam shut and footsteps hurrying toward her. *I think she lost her keys.* Her taxi driver friend. The dependable neighbor whose name she could never remember. He had brought her home. Her head was spinning so she couldn't remember much else, just that he'd physically picked her up to place her in his car. She thought she remembered falling out of

the car, remembered a door opening and her spilling out onto the grass, but she couldn't remember how she'd gotten on the porch.

How long has she been crying like that? said a soft, familiar voice that hovered above her. Kayla. She was brushing curls out of her face. She noticed a moaning, a noise that she herself was making, though she could barely remember why she was so sad. She just knew that she was. The world was collapsing before her, and she could do nothing but cry.

Since I picked her up, said the voice of the taxi driver.

Nik? said Kayla's voice again. *Hey, I'm here. Can you sit up?*

No, she thought. She couldn't move or she'd vomit. But regardless of her internal objections that she couldn't put into words, she felt the world around her spinning, and she was being pulled upright by her arms. She was dead weight, yet flimsy like she was made of paper, and she could feel hands holding her tight by the shoulders as she dropped her head onto Kayla's shoulder. The comfort of her warmth beside her was enough to make her cry all over again. Or maybe she'd never stopped. She smelled flowery, like one of those body sprays Nik used to wear when she was in high school.

"You smell nice," said Nik. At least she thought she did. Kayla didn't seem to hear her.

Try stand, okay? Can you help me, Frank? Who the hell was Frank?

Easy, Nik. Don't worry, I've got her.

Thank you so much. I'm sorry about all this.

The world was spinning again, and she was floating away from the ground. She was in someone's arms. A man. He smelled like leather and dish soap. Her head was pounding, and it felt like he was shaking her awake. She was going to be sick.

"I feel sick," she mumbled.

Almost there, Nik.

She was lying in her bed on her stomach, her face half-buried in her pillow. Her stomach was churning. It tasted like she had ash in her mouth. She cracked her eyes open for the first time since she'd collapsed on the porch and saw two blurry figures in front of her, the tiny one sitting beside her on the bed.

There's a trashcan beside you, Nik. Okay? If you get sick, it's right here in front of you. She was pointing at the ground, but Nik couldn't see what she was talking about.

"Kayla?" she said sloppily between choked cries, her throat stinging, her mouth incapable of forming words.

I'm here.

"I wanna go home."

*

The vomiting started around 4 AM. When Nik was jolted awake by her stomach turning inside out, Kayla was sleeping beside her on top of the covers still fully clothed before she flew into the bathroom and began heaving into her toilet. After a few rounds of projectile vomiting, she pulled her face out of the toilet for long enough to grab a wad of toilet paper and wipe her mouth. That was when she turned and noticed Kayla standing in the doorway looking like a zombie, red eyed and disheveled, blinking incessantly, probably from having fallen asleep in her contact lenses. She was holding Nik's bundled up comforter and her pillow.

As Nik flushed the toilet and grabbed more toilet paper to clean the mess she'd made around the bowl, Kayla was folding her comforter for her, making a bed for her on the floor. Nik crawled over to her cabinet under the sink, grabbed her Listerine, gargled and spit into the toilet,

then threw herself onto her comforter, moaning from the nausea. Kayla sat down beside the sink, resting her head back on the wall, her knees out in front of her, watching Nik through tired eyes.

“Nik, what happened?” Kayla said, her throat dry and scratchy from having been asleep.

“Oh, you know me,” Nik began, trying to clear her raw throat. “Had five too many tequila shots. Or maybe that was fifteen too many—” She tried to joke about it, because maybe if she did, Kayla would think this was more funny than pathetic. Kayla didn’t smile, however, nor did her serious expression waver at all.

“No, not that,” said Kayla, then she paused, looking down at her knees and hugging them close to her chest. When she looked back at Nik, she had tears in her eyes. Of all the looks Kayla had ever given her, this one was by far the worst. “I mean what happened before—Why do you do this to yourself?”

It was everything she never wanted to think about hitting her all at once. The shame that she swallowed like bile every single morning. The pain she was always attempting to keep away by overdosing on parties and activities and work, the reasons she preferred herself when she was drunk. It was rushing at her like motion sickness, spinning her around and around until she couldn’t remember which way was up. And she was hunched over the toilet bowl once more, vomiting it all out until all that was left was a hole.

“I can’t face them,” Nik cried once it seemed her stomach had no more to give. She was aware of how much more pathetic her voice sounded echoing in toilet. She flushed, wiping her mouth again with toilet paper and leaning back against her bathtub. “They hate me.”

Kayla said nothing through her own tears, just shook her head. As if she could possibly disagree with what Nik was saying.

“I was just a kid. I was a stupid fucking kid. And I thought I knew better than them.” She heard her voice speaking the words, but she couldn’t feel her mouth moving. Her body was acting on its own, its own way of self-preservation. Its own way of vomiting up all the toxins that were killing her to keep itself from shutting down. She needed to let it all out once and for all.

“I fell in love with a damn loser. And my parents knew it. Everyone knew it but me. And when my parents told me I couldn’t see him anymore, I left. I packed up my life and followed him here. I swear to God, Kayla, I didn’t know he was dealing drugs. I didn’t know until the police were storming our apartment and arresting our asses. The only reason I didn’t wind up in jail was because they had no evidence to prove I had any idea he was carting drugs around the city. I didn’t know, Kayla. And that’s why I think Gray reacted the way he did about the drugs. Because he knows what happened to me. I wish to God I’d never even told him.”

She paused, feeling like she was going to be sick again, leaning into the toilet for a moment, but nothing came. Kayla watched from her spot by the sink. She was changing—Nik could see it in her eyes—into someone who finally knew the truth about her.

“And you never went back home?” asked Kayla, her voice gentle, almost as though she understood. But she couldn’t. There was no way.

“I called my parents when they let me out. After I’d gotten arrested—when they told me I was being let off, but Harrison was going to be locked up for a while.” She cringed as she said his name, feeling like she should vomit again just to get the taste of it out of her mouth. “I had nowhere to go. My dad picked up when I called, but before I could finish explaining myself, he hung up on me.”

There was sobbing again. It bounced off the walls, rang in her ears. It seemed impossible that the sound was coming from her own throat. But it was. The sound of her dad’s voice was

still sharp in her memory, the uttering of disbelief and shock that came through the phone line. The hollow buzzing that came when the line had been disconnected. It was something she heard late at night when the buzz of the alcohol began wearing off.

Every fight she'd ever had with her parents was surrounding her now. The words she'd said to her mom that she didn't mean, the tone she'd used that she should never have. The memory of shoving her dad to the side before storming into her bedroom, slamming the door and locking it behind her. The framed family portrait that fell to the ground and shattered as her dad left the house—she wondered what had become of the picture. Did they throw it away with the broken shards of glass? It was merely a reminder, after all, of the broken family that they were—broken because of her. She could never take it back. It was a part of their family. A part of her.

Then there were arms around her. Holding her tight. Steadying her. Holding her together so that this hole inside her couldn't continue spreading until she crumbled. Kayla was holding her, rocking her, hushing her. Her cheek was on her head, and it reminded her of how her mother used to hold her as a child. Her mother, the sweetest woman she'd ever known, so composed, so even-tempered to balance out her father's short fuse. Her mother hadn't deserved that. And her father had only wanted what was best for her. She always knew that, even when she hated him.

She cried until she felt herself drifting back to sleep. And as she slipped into unconsciousness, something began to grow inside her. Something she would have never acknowledged or admitted before, something that she could no longer ignore. A thought so loud that she could almost hear it. *I can't live like this anymore.* It was the last thing she remembered before the night finally slipped away from her. Kayla didn't let her go.

SIX

“Come on, Chang. You expect me to believe that you can’t spare a single hour of your time to go with me to get a Christmas tree? You forget that I work at May Day too. I can see your schedule; I know you’re off tonight.”

It was two Thursdays before Christmas and Nik had been hounding Kayla about getting a Christmas tree for the townhouse since Black Friday. Since the Thanksgiving fiasco that had led to Nik’s painful confession about her parents, things between her and Kayla seemed even more odd than usual. Not only did they still have the topic of Kayla’s dead parents lingering between them—along with the fact that Nik had, despite her best efforts, not cracked Kayla to get her to admit her weird funeral habit—but now, they had Nik’s whole sloppy history to avoid talking about too. Nik had assumed that Kayla would have had tons of questions for her, but Kayla was obviously not the type to press the matter; either that, or she was too embarrassed to bring it up. Maybe Kayla was just quietly waiting out their lease so that she could get the hell out of Nik’s life. But when Nik woke up on Black Friday and Kayla hadn’t mentioned it, she did her best to be her normal, sarcastic self, making fun of Kayla for being a tight-ass, swooning over every detail of her Thanksgiving dinner with Jeremy and his friends, obsessing over how cute they’d be as a couple. It was almost like the night had never happened. But of course, it had. And Nik was sure that it was something neither of them were going to be able to forget.

“Nik, what’s the point of getting a Christmas tree? They’re so much work and they’re messy and we’re just gonna have to take it down soon anyway,” said Kayla.

“Seriously? Christmas trees are supposed to be fun! They’re supposed to—you know—give us the holiday spirit and shit.”

“Very eloquent way of putting it,” said Kayla.

Normally, Nik would never have pushed the subject of a Christmas tree. She generally had always thought they were tacky, and she typically avoided any place trying to give people “holiday spirit.” She also, on a different day, might have had the tact to not continuously bring up getting a Christmas tree to someone who had no family except for a brother on deployment through the holidays, like Kayla. She hated the holidays enough herself.

But something had changed on Thanksgiving, something that made her ache for home like never before, and maybe the Christmas tree idea was just a distraction, but Nik had placed all her hope into this idea. Like having a Christmas tree in their townhouse might make up for the lack of family they each had. The townhouse was supposed to be her sanctuary. But as much as she tried, it was no longer somewhere Nik could hide from her problems. True, maybe Nik was alone, but Kayla was alone too. And since they had no one else, she’d begun nursing the idea that she and Kayla could form their own, tiny family unit.

“Ugh—okay, fine. If it means that much to you, I’ll go,” Kayla said, surprising Nik by agreeing. Nik was already picking Kayla up and swinging her around, partially in excitement, but mostly because it was something Kayla hated, and Nik found it funny.

“I knew there was a reason I loved you!” said Nik.

“Nik—put me down! By the way, I have to be somewhere until around seven, so we’ll have to go after that,” Kayla said.

“Wait. Where are you going? I thought you didn’t have to work?” said Nik. Of course, she had a pretty good idea of what the answer to that question was: a funeral.

“I have plans.” Kayla was being short with her. Skirting around an actual answer. Nik was ready to catch her in the lie.

“With Jeremy?” she probed. Now that she and Jeremy were friends, she knew this was something she could confirm if Kayla answered yes.

“Yeah,” Kayla said. She’d walked right into it.

“You should invite him tonight.”

“What? Why?”

“So that we have some muscle to help us lug our tree around. Because let’s face it—you don’t have any.”

“No, I’m not just going to invite him so that he can carry our Christmas tree for us,” said Kayla. The discomfort was now showing on her face, discomfort that previously, Nik might have mistaken for nervousness around Jeremy; now she was sure it was because Kayla was lying.

“Fine, then I’ll do it,” said Nik as she pulled her phone out of her back pocket and began typing out a text, pulling further and further away from Kayla each time she tried to snatch it away. Kayla’s efforts were futile; she was too much shorter than Nik.

“Nik, stop! Why don’t you—” Kayla stopped herself, and Nik was too aware of what she was probably about to say.

She was probably about to ask Nik why she didn’t just text one of her own friends before she remembered that she didn’t have any. Aside from Kayla, whose friendship was still unconfirmed, Nik had only had one friend that wasn’t just trying to get in her pants, and that was Gray. Gray was still a current do-not-discuss topic, especially since now he apparently was dating some girl named Elle who conveniently came around May Day at all the right times. Saturday nights when Nik was playing, especially. She got the feeling that it was Gray’s way of silently torturing her, though he acted oblivious to it all.

“Too late, anyway. I just invited him,” said Nik. And she had. And Jeremy had taken no time at all to reply. “He said he’d come. See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“What did you say to him? You didn’t say I told you we were hanging out, did you?”

Of course, she had.

“No, why?” said Nik.

“I just don’t want him to know I was talking about it to you,” said Kayla.

“Why? What’s the big deal?” Nik was pressing the subject, hoping that at some point, Kayla would crack, or at the very least, slip up. She’d never been more convinced of the fact that she’d caught her in the act. “What are you hiding?”

“What? Nothing. I’m not hiding anything,” she said too quickly.

“Yeah, okay. You look like me the first time my overweight aunt asked me if her ass looked big in her shorts.”

“Nik, can we not—” she began, but Nik interrupted.

“This isn’t the first time you’ve lied to me about where you were going,” said Nik. Kayla looked taken aback by this, and not in a hurt way. In the way a child does when they get caught doing something wrong.

“I’ve never lied to you about where I was going.”

“Don’t shit with me. I know you have. And I can tell you the exact day of a time you did it. It was the morning we got in that fight about your parents—” Kayla cringed as she said it, like she hoped she’d never have to remember that day again. Nik had never intended to bring it up again either, but this seemed too important. “I called May Day because I felt like shit about the things I’d said to you, and Gray told me you weren’t even supposed to be in till 3 PM. But you were dressed for work when I saw you leave. Where’d you go, Kayla?”

“I—” Kayla began. She was scrambling, trying to plan her words, avoiding Nik’s eyes. “I just left the house to clear my head.”

“Well, I call bullshit on that. But say it was true, is that what you’re doing today? Leaving the house to clear your head?”

“Maybe.”

She had expected more of a fight, more of an angry response considering Nik was currently accusing her of lying. She wanted to keep pressing the subject, but it was clear that Kayla knew she’d been caught in a lie, yet she was still refusing to give her a straight answer. Then again, maybe Kayla was just leaving the house to clear her head. She did have an excuse to do that on occasion. And Nik didn’t want to start crossing that line again of harassing the girl with the dead parents. So, she tried another approach.

“Well, do you want some company? I could probably use some head-clearing too. Lord knows I’ve fucked up my life enough to deserve it.”

For a moment, Nik let herself imagine it. She and Kayla sitting somewhere like on a park bench, or on the railing at 40th Street at the end of the boardwalk, just breathing and clearing their heads. It was a nice image, she had to admit—something she never knew she needed. And it would be nice to have someone to do that with, someone who was as screwed up as she was, someone so wrapped up in her own shit that she had no room to judge her for her own. She imagined Kayla sitting by her side as she faced all the shit of her past, just as she had on Thanksgiving. She imagined Kayla finally admitting her secret about the funerals, and somehow, it seemed like it would feel good to hear, like Kayla admitting her secret to Nik would somehow ease her own pain. Maybe it would; maybe being able to act as the sane one in their relationship for once would heal her, or being able to reassure Kayla that she wasn’t crazy for doing the

things she did would make her feel less crazy herself—it was just her way of drowning her sorrows, just as Nik did with alcohol. She imagined telling Kayla it was okay, that she understood, and that it didn't change the way she felt about her. She imagined telling her she'd help her get through it. That they'd tackle their problems together.

But then Kayla said, "I appreciate the offer, Nik, but this is really something I should do alone. Sorry."

And then she turned to leave, again avoiding making eye contact, leaving Nik feeling like maybe her only friend in the world wasn't a friend after all, like maybe there was nothing that could be done and people like her and Kayla had no choice but to remain broken forever.

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To: Chang, Drew

From: Chang, Kayla

Date: December 12, 2019

Subject: Question

Hey Drew,

This might seem random, but it's something that's really been weighing on me lately. Do you ever find yourself doing things that you know you shouldn't be doing? Things that, maybe in another lifetime, would be completely crazy, but somehow, in the context of our life and all the things we've been through, seem completely reasonable or sane?

Maybe this doesn't make much sense to you. But there are some things—habits, I guess—I've kind of started doing since Mom and Dad that I know would probably seem completely crazy to other people, but they somehow make me feel better, even if only for a moment.

Does our grief justify us doing crazy things sometimes? Does it somehow make us less crazy?

Am I going crazy?

K

*

Somehow, through all the chaos, Nik and Jeremy had become friends. Apparently, Kayla hadn't seemed to notice, as she'd freaked when she saw Nik was texting him. That may have largely had to do with the fact that Kayla had used Jeremy as an excuse to cover up her lies. Nik knew that most of Kayla's secretiveness in general had to do with the fact that she was still messed up from losing her family. Had she thought things through, she may never have brought Jeremy into it at all. But the Christmas tree plan seemed innocent enough, even though she'd been trying to use it to get Kayla to admit to her what she was always sneaking off to do. She hadn't intended to make Jeremy suspicious of Kayla's whereabouts alongside her.

"So, where's Kayla?" Jeremy asked.

"I don't know. She said she'd be home by seven. She was running errands, I think, so maybe she's just running late."

Jeremy nodded, though for some reason, he didn't seem convinced. "Why'd you think we were hanging out today?"

"Oh, I don't know. I guess that was me just being all assumptive and shit." She was grasping. Jeremy laughed.

“Did she know we had plans? It’s not like her to be late,” said Jeremy.

“Yeah, she knew. You’re right, it’s not like her at all,” she stopped, not sure if she should say more. She might have already said too much.

“I’m a little worried about her,” said Jeremy. “I think the holidays are getting her down. She doesn’t talk about it, but I know she misses her brother. She hasn’t seemed like herself.”

Nik wondered what that even meant. Maybe Kayla was standoffish and distant, but she was always like that. She wondered what Jeremy got to see of Kayla that she didn’t that made him feel like he knew her so well. So maybe she’d just discovered something a little unnerving about her, but she was still the same as she’d always been. Wasn’t she? It wasn’t like Kayla hadn’t already been hiding this side of herself before now. But maybe Kayla had been acting off lately, and she had been too consumed with her own life to notice. Was it that she didn’t know Kayla well enough to notice when she was off? Or was it that she knew her well enough that her oddities didn’t surprise her? She wasn’t sure.

“She isn’t really running errands, is she?” he added. His incite surprised her, and she thought to make something up, but what would be the point in getting caught in some kind of lie when she didn’t even understand the reason behind it?

“No,” Nik admitted. She didn’t know why, but this simple confession gave her relief.

“She told you I was hanging out with her?”

She didn’t answer, but she didn’t have to. His question had been more of a statement, anyway. He seemed to already know the answer. Still, she hesitated, and he seemed to comprehend her hesitance. She wasn’t sure what else there was to say, anyway. She was afraid that if they kept talking, he would keep asking questions, because not only was he observant and

good at asking all the right ones, but he was also easy to be honest with. It didn't matter, however, because at that moment, Kayla walked through the door.

She didn't seem to see them at first. She stopped right in front of the door after closing it, dropping her bag to the floor and leaning back, covering her face with her hands. She was wearing black dress and sweater, low heels and tights, not what she'd seen her in when she'd left the house, and something that screamed "funeral." Nik hadn't even had a chance to react before Jeremy had jumped up from the couch and was by her side at the door, gently attempting to pull her hands away from her face.

"Kayla? What's wrong?" he asked.

"Oh," Kayla said, as though surprised they were there. "Nothing. I'm fine." She scrambled to wipe the tears off her face.

"No, you're not," said Jeremy. "It's okay. You can tell us." Nik was surprised at his persistence; had she been in his position, her natural reaction would have been to accept that Kayla was either okay like she said, or that she wasn't but she'd never tell her why anyway and move on. Now she was realizing that her natural response was probably completely heartless.

"I'm fine." She pushed past the two of them and then made an attempt for the stairs. Jeremy caught her by the arm before she had the chance to escape.

"Kayla, wait. Where were you?" he asked. "We were worried about you."

"What?" she said, still sniffling and looking dazed.

"We've noticed that you haven't been acting yourself." Shit, Jeremy. So they were doing this now, then.

"We're worried about you," Nik said.

“I told you I was fine,” Kayla said, glancing toward the stairs as though contemplating making a run for her room.

“Okay, if that’s the case, then where do you go all the time?” Nik blurted out. She was surprised at how much she wanted Kayla to just admit what she’d been doing, surprised at how much it hurt that she wouldn’t tell her the truth. “Where are you always sneaking off to? Just tell me, Kayla. I don’t care. I’m gonna think you’re crazy. I’m crazy as hell, you know this.”

“Kayla, it’s okay,” began Jeremy. “I know the holidays can be really hard, and if you need to sometimes go off the radar, we aren’t going to judge you for it. We just—”

“I was at a funeral!” she said finally, shouting at a volume Nik hadn’t even thought she was capable of reaching. “Good Lord, just leave it alone!”

For a second, Nik felt the relief coming again. Finally, Kayla was going to be honest with her. It wasn’t ideal that it was about to go down in front of Jeremy, but if this was what Kayla needed, then fine. But then, Jeremy was at Kayla’s side with a guilty look on his face, obviously feeling like complete shit, and Kayla was still turning away from him like a little baby.

“God, Kayla, I’m really sorry. I didn’t know,” he said. He tried to touch her arm, but Kayla snatched it away. “Kayla—”

“Get out, Jeremy,” she said. It was a harsher sound than anything she’d ever heard come out of Kayla’s mouth, and it stunned the hell out of Nik.

This wasn’t the moment of confession Nik had hoped for. And maybe if she’d had half a brain, she would have let it go and confronted Kayla without Jeremy there, gently and tactfully, finally admitting she knew about the funerals. It may have been her growing friendship with Jeremy, the fact that maybe she felt the need to defend the only other friend she was close to

having in her otherwise empty life. Or maybe she just needed someone else to admit to being as crazy or broken as she was. Whatever the reason, she snapped.

“Don’t do that shit,” said Nik.

“What are you talking about?” said Kayla, looking like she’d been slapped in the face.

Nik wasn’t sure why she was even getting so worked up; she knew better. Even as she heard the harshness of her voice, she was unable to tone it down. Hadn’t Kayla been through enough, anyway? Didn’t two dead parents warrant a little secretiveness? Didn’t it warrant a little self-righteousness? But now that she’d gotten started, she couldn’t seem to turn it off.

“I’m talking about you walking around all the time like you’re the only one in this world who doesn’t have fucking issues when you’re just as screwed up as the rest of us,” said Nik.

“I don’t know what you mean—” she said, her voice taking on its usual timid, childish tone once again. Jeremy was looking at Nik now seeming even more confused than Kayla, his face growing red despite the fact that Kayla was the one who should have been embarrassed.

“Really?” Nik said, spitting out a laugh of frustration that reminded her of the way Gray had sounded at the Halloween party when she’d refused to leave with him. “You wanna do this in front of Jeremy? Fine. Tell us the fucking truth, Kayla.”

“Nik, what are you doing?” said Jeremy, looking now at Kayla like he was afraid that anything Nik said in this moment would be held against him forever.

“She didn’t lose someone, Jeremy. She doesn’t need your condolences. She’s a damn funeral junkie. She crashes funerals.” Maybe there was truth in what she was saying. Maybe Kayla needed to hear it. Maybe she didn’t. It was probable that Nik was crossing a thousand lines. But she couldn’t stop. And they were the ugliest words she’d ever heard come out of her, and she recognized it as soon as they left her mouth.

“What?” Jeremy said, looking confused as he glanced from Nik to Kayla, maybe waiting for Kayla to deny it, maybe waiting for an explanation. Kayla did neither.

Kayla took a step back, again looking toward the stairs, possibly wishing she’d made it up the steps to hide in her room a long time ago. Her eyes were watery, but the anger was gone. She looked mortified. In that one look alone, Nik’s suspicions were confirmed. And it was something that could never be taken back.

“Kayla?” said Jeremy.

This was where Nik was waiting for him to help her out. To be the one to come in with the kind of empathy Nik didn’t have the capacity to provide and coax Kayla into telling them more so that they could finally get to the bottom of this. In her mind, she had merely been giving Kayla tough love, maybe a bit harsher than it needed to be because of how frustrated she’d been over Kayla’s dishonesty, but Kayla would forgive her once she was able to finally be honest with the people she cared about. But then Jeremy surprised her by taking the subject somewhere else.

“Michael Carrington,” he said. “Did you know him?”

It took Nik a minute to recall the name. But then she remembered. Long before she’d even known about Kayla’s secret, before she and Jeremy had been anything to each other, when Jeremy had come up to her and asked her for help with getting Kayla’s number. He’d said they’d met at May Day when she was his server, but he’d run into her at a funeral. The funeral of a loner kid named Michael who hadn’t had a lot of friends. Kayla had told him she was his friend, that she’d met him through her brother. Jeremy had said he wasn’t easy to love, so he’d been determined to get to know Kayla because of it. And the day Nik had found Michael Carrington’s memorial program in her room, she had realized that Kayla had actually accidentally run into Jeremy while crashing a funeral.

“No,” Kayla said quietly.

“I don’t understand. Why would you—” he began.

“Just go, Jeremy,” said Kayla. Her voice was barely there, and it was clear that even as he stood waiting for her to perhaps change her mind and ask him to stay, she was done talking.

As he shut the door behind him, Kayla was already on her way up the stairs. “Kayla, wait,” said Nik, but all she heard was the sound of Kayla’s door shutting and locking.

Nik had finally gotten the confession she’d thought she’d been wanting, but upon doing so, she’d also finally managed to screw up the last thing in her life that had been worth hanging on to—Kayla.

SEVEN

Even though she was twenty-nine, Nik had never actually been to a funeral. She'd only ever personally known two people who had died, two kids from high school, one car accident and one chronic illness, though both were merely acquaintances and not quite friends. All four of her grandparents were still alive despite the fact that one was turning ninety next year and one had been telling her he was going to die since she was a little girl. She didn't know why the heavy weight of grief pressed down on her chest at every sober, waking moment. She didn't know why she sometimes cried over her parents as though they were dead when they were very much alive.

Nik had gone straight to bed on Thursday night after what had happened with Kayla and Jeremy, feeling suddenly exhausted by her life, wanting to sleep just for the sake of avoiding the inevitable build-up of her own self-hate. She woke up on Friday sick to her stomach, a sensation that easily rivaled a hangover, but one she wasn't used to feeling so strongly—guilt—and with only a few minutes to try to make herself presentable before she had to leave for her shift at the oceanfront bar. She snuck out of the house, careful not to make noise in an effort to avoid Kayla on the way out; she knew she'd have to face her sooner or later, but the last thing she could handle at the moment was having to force out a half-assed apology. She needed to be ready for that conversation before it happened. Kayla's bedroom door was still closed. Nik had already conceded to the fact that she would be late to her shift, but somehow the frantic pace of her morning seemed appropriate; it was nothing less than she deserved. And despite driving like a maniac and cutting people off left and right, the irony of life had placed her right in the back of a long line of slow cars with their hazards blinking in unison: a funeral procession.

Of course. Her fight with Kayla was still ringing in her ears, and if that wasn't enough to make her sick to her stomach, she'd just been slapped in the face with a blatant reminder of their fight. She thought of Kayla, wondered whether or not she'd even attempted to explain to Jeremy. She knew she'd screwed her over in that regard; she should have never gone at the subject with Jeremy there. But in the moment, she'd imagined that pulling it out of Kayla, no matter how forcefully, would have been healthier than letting her go on pretending that everything was fine. She tried Kayla's phone and it went straight to voicemail, though she hadn't expected any differently and didn't even know what she might have said if Kayla had actually picked up.

The funeral procession was making her miss her family like never before, and she felt the grief creeping up in her throat. It was restricting her airways as she followed the line of cars on her route to work; she assumed it was her seatbelt at first, but the more she tugged at it, the harder it was to breathe. She imagined that Kayla might have been in a similar scenario the first time she'd ever chosen to crash a funeral. If she were being honest, the more Nik focused on the heavy weight in her chest, the more she was beginning to understand Kayla's crazy habit. She heard a honking behind her, someone who was probably supposed to be in the line of cars before her. She waved her hand at them and turned on her signal to move into the next lane, but she stopped, and instead, turned her own hazards on and continued following the line of cars.

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As luck would have it, Nik happened to have a black sweater in her car. Once she put it on and buttoned it all the way up, her work slacks looked appropriate, if a little casual. She also had a pair of heels in her back seat that had been there since the time she and Ethan had hooked up in it after a work party. She'd always meant to take them out when she saw them but was always too lazy to do so by the time she got home. The thought of it seemed so pathetic that she

cried as she put them on, so that she was already teary-eyed and red-faced by the time she reached the crowd of sniffing, grief-ridden people all gathered around a hole in the ground.

She stood in the back as a group of men pulled the coffin out of the hearse, unable to prevent her heels from sinking into the grass. She imagined herself sinking further into the ground, being buried with the body in the coffin. The closer the coffin came to the crowd, the louder the crowd sniffed, and the more Nik cried. She didn't understand what she was doing there. All she knew was that among this crowd of grievers, she felt more at home than she'd felt since she'd first moved to the Beach. Over the years, she'd become an expert at holding herself together, at seeming fine when she wasn't, at making people believe she didn't care what they thought, when in reality, all the shit she did that made her hate herself crept right back in at the end of the day. She wondered if this was how it was for Kayla the first time.

It was all hitting her now as she stood among the sobbing crowd. The shame that she swallowed like bile every single morning. The memories of how she'd treated her parents and the family she'd ignored for years and the fact that she may have ruined the last relationship that mattered to her the night before—all the things she kept away by overdosing on parties and activities and work, and all the reasons she preferred herself when she was drunk. It was rushing at her like motion sickness, spinning her around until she didn't know which way was up. And then she was hunched over on the ground behind the crowd of grieving strangers, vomiting it all out onto the grass until she was finally empty.

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People were staring, but she couldn't stand back up. Her legs were shaking, and she tried to push her hair from her face, but it kept falling back down. She saw specks of vomit clinging to a few of her thick curls and attempted to wipe it away, thinking of all the times she'd get vomit

in her hair while sprawled out on her bathroom floor. The sight was familiar, yet now unbearable, something that made her want to vomit all over again, a reminder of the mess she'd made of her life. Her mind was screaming at her to pull it together. This wasn't what she'd imagined when she'd come. She'd thought she'd just sneak quietly in the back, cry a little, and then leave before anyone noticed she didn't belong there. Now, though, she was all too aware that this funeral was likely a private event, as there were only around twenty to thirty people there. Surely, they could all see that she was a stranger.

The last thing Nik had wanted to do was cause another scene. She'd obviously done enough of that over the last few weeks, yet here she was crashing the funeral of someone whose name she had yet to learn, kneeling on the ground in a way that she was sure was causing her ass to show as she wiped the puke from her mouth. Most of the crowd had stepped away from her as they worked to keep their attention on the coffin at the base of the grave, forming a discrete half-moon dent in the group where she was kneeling, but one woman, an older woman around her mother's age, hung back, bending over and rubbing Nik's back with her hand. The gesture was so gentle that she cried as she thought of how her mother used to comfort her when she was sick.

"Poor thing," said the woman, gathering up Nik's thick tangle of hair in her hands and pulling it away from her face.

"I'm sorry," said Nik, the embarrassment settling in now that she was receiving attention.

"Grief isn't easy," she said.

The woman handed her a tissue, and Nik watched her freckled, veiny hands, though she still didn't have the strength to look up at her face. She smelled like dry flowers, like a bowl of potpourri you might find in a hotel bathroom. It was in stark contrast with the acidic smell of her vomit pooled up on the ground before her. She took the tissue, and as she wiped her mouth, the

woman reached for her other hand. Nik took her hand and squeezed it, closing her eyes and imagining her mother.

“It’s not so much the goodbyes that get me as it is thinking about all the things I should have said and done differently,” said the woman. “The regret is what makes me sick.”

“How do you make it go away?” asked Nik.

“You just have to learn to live with it. And promise yourself you’ll do better next time.”

Nik nodded, squeezing her eyes shut and praying for those words to be true, praying to finally cleanse herself of all the things that were slowly poisoning her. Images of her parents and family filled her, the distance between them enveloping her as she glanced up at the men who were now lowering the coffin into the grave. Kayla’s constant disappointed face as Nik let her down over and over lingered with her. Her sister’s shaking voice begging her to come back home. That damn family portrait falling from the wall and shattering as her father slammed the door behind him. Gray’s echoing words as he’d relentlessly tried to convince her that she was worth more than what she settled for. But she’d found herself in bed with Colton, over and over, and for that, she hated herself. Because the last time, she hadn’t even tried to say no, as though she didn’t even believe she could.

The things she buried day after day were lying before her. It was her mind acting on its own, involuntarily producing memories that had been suppressed for years, hurling them out as its own way of self-preservation, its own way of vomiting up all the toxins in order to keep them from killing her, just as her body always did whenever she’d nearly poison herself with alcohol. The coffin disappeared into the hole in the ground. *I’ll do better next time. I’ll do better next time.* She kept repeating it. She couldn’t stop. Suddenly, there was another hand grabbing onto her, only this one was much more forceful, taking her by the shoulder and yanking her backward.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

A sharp voice came at her from above, and Nik looked up to see a middle-aged woman hovering over her dressed in a lacy black mid-length dress, face wet and eyes red and swollen. It was the woman she'd seen when she'd first arrived standing in the front and center, sobbing into a pile of tissues. The woman she could only assume was the widow of the person in the coffin.

“Dana, what are you doing?” said the woman who'd been comforting Nik.

“This has to be her. The one who was having sex with my husband. How dare you show your face here,” said the widow. She was shouting, and the sound of it halted everything else around them.

Everyone was staring now, some covering their mouths in shock, some scowling at Nik like they were ready to pick up their torches and form a mob against her. The woman who'd been holding her hand before was looking down at her now, and for a moment, when Nik finally looked her in the eyes, all she saw was the face of her mother. It quickly faded to the face of a stranger, the only kind of person who'd have the capacity to give her sympathy. The widow was still holding her by the shoulder, squeezing hard enough to make Nik flinch. Nik grabbed her hand and tried pulling it away, but the widow's nails were dug deep into her shoulder, and she was still feeling weak and shaky from being sick.

“I don't know what you're talking about. I didn't even—” she was getting ready to say that she didn't even know her husband, but the widow cut her off. Why would she have believed her, anyway? She was sprawled on the ground sobbing; it definitely didn't look good for her.

“Haven't you done enough? Get out of here!” she shouted.

Now all eyes were on the two of them. Nik considered arguing with the widow, explaining herself and telling her the whole story. But as she considered the widow's words, she

it sounded like the widow was talking about her. Hadn't she done enough? That was certainly the question of the decade. Maybe she hadn't had sex with the widow's husband, but she sure as hell had done plenty that was the equivalent or worse. She'd let down everyone who'd ever given a shit about her. She'd slept with Colton. She was no better than the woman the widow hated.

Before she could even attempt to put her thoughts to words, the widow drew her hand back and slapped Nik across the face. She'd never been slapped in the face before, but she'd been in a fist fight in high school, one in which she'd been punched in the eye, and this was nothing compared to the sting of an open-handed slap. The entire side of her face felt like it was on fire, and her neck actually twisted to the side so quickly that she felt a muscle beginning to cramp. Half the crowd let out a gasp, something that sounded so timed and comedic that it made Nik spit out a laugh. The woman who'd been comforting her had her hand over her mouth. Somehow, she could still see the sympathy in her eyes.

On a normal day, she would have fought back. She would have denied the shit out of the widow's accusation, defended her own honor. But she still weak, still shaking from being sick on the ground. She didn't have the energy to even try explaining why she was there, because it didn't make sense even to her. So instead, Nik pushed herself up from off the ground, her legs still wobbly and her heels still sinking into the grass, and she turned and walked back to her car holding her stinging face with one hand. She welcomed the burn. She deserved it, anyway.

*

To: Chang, Drew

From: Chang, Kayla

Date: December 13, 2019

RE: You're NOT crazy

Hey Brother,

Thank you. Thank you for always talking me away from the ledge. Thank you for believing that I'm not crazy. This may sound crazy in itself, but you have no idea how badly I needed to hear you say it. I needed to hear you say that you know I'm not crazy, no matter what.

Honestly, though, that's all I've been feeling lately—that I'm losing my mind. I know I haven't seen my doctor since you left, and I knew that was going to be one of the first things you suggested. You're right. I need to talk to a professional again.

I'm a little ashamed at how much I let myself slip, and at how much I've just embraced the grief in whatever insane form it chooses to take in the moment. I messed things up with Jeremy because of it. I also haven't been entirely truthful with you about how things have been going.

I'd like to explain more, to talk this through with you when you have a chance. It's too much to say over email. Please call me when you have the chance.

And thank you. I wouldn't be here without you.

K

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To her surprise, Kayla was still at the townhouse when she returned home. After the funeral, Nik decided to call in sick at work. Ethan was the manager on staff—a fact that made

Nik even more grateful to be calling out—though he wasn't happy with her. She didn't care. She was sick, and the thought of having to smile at strangers was making her want to die. She found Kayla's car still in their driveway when she got home, even though she'd written down her work schedule earlier on in the week and this was now past the time she was supposed to be at work to serve the day shift. She must have called out too.

Nik had half expected to find Kayla's stuff packed in boxes and piled at the front door when she went in—there was no way Kayla would want to stay with her after last night, but then again, she probably didn't have anywhere else to go, stuck with Nik at least until their lease ran up in January. Not that January was that far away. The thought of Kayla moving out in a couple weeks hit Nik hard enough to make her want to cry all over again; she needed to make this right.

Kayla was in the room with her door closed, and Nik didn't even bother knocking before barging in and finding her with her hair in a knotted mess at the top of her head—a look that Nik frequently dawned, but one she'd never seen on Kayla—her glasses were on—a sign that she'd probably yet to get out of bed considering Kayla never left her room without her contacts on—and her old quilt pulled all the way up to her nose. She'd finally broken Kayla.

Kayla peaked up from beneath her quilt and glanced at the door upon Nik's entrance, but she quickly laid her head back down again. "What happened to you?" she asked.

It was a funny thing to say considering her current state, but Nik supposed she probably looked like madness following her run-in with the widow. Not to mention the puke that was probably still in her hair. She took Kayla's willingness to speak as a good sign, however, and sat down on the corner of her bed.

"Well, let's see," Nik began. "I actually took a page out of the old Kayla grief handbook and crashed a funeral. Thought I'd see what all the fuss was about."

Kayla snorted, rolling over onto her back to face Nik. “You’re kidding.”

“I wish I was.” Despite the embarrassment that surrounded her confession, she felt her nauseated stomach relax a bit as she said it.

“You know, I should probably be taking a page out of your handbook instead. Believe it or not, I think drinking myself into oblivion is the saner choice of the two.”

“You’re telling me. The widow fucking slapped me in the face.” She wanted to laugh as she said it; it wasn’t funny, but there was something almost therapeutic about saying it out loud.

Kayla let out another snort and covered her mouth, and it was the best sound in the world considering Nik was expecting her to never speak to her again. Still, she could see the sadness in her eyes, the brokenness deeply embedded within her that she could no longer hide behind routines and responsibility. “Seriously?” Kayla asked.

“Do you not see the hand-shaped glow on the left side of my face? She accused me of having an affair with her deceased husband, and then she slapped me. Apparently, I just have that look about me.”

Kayla shook her head. “You just have that look about you?”

“Well, I don’t know. Maybe she got suspicious because I broke down when they started lowering the coffin into the ground, then I threw up. I guess from an outsider’s perspective it could have looked like I was in love with him or something.”

“You mean you went to the burial? Geez, Nik. No wonder she was suspicious. Burials aren’t always open to the public.”

“Are you seriously trying to tell me there’s a right or wrong way to crash a funeral?”

“Yes. The memorial service. You know, the parts of funerals that are open to anyone where you can quietly sneak into a back row and not be seen?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I hadn’t realized there were rules to this fucked up hobby of yours,” said Nik, only teasing Kayla, but realizing right away that it was too soon to be teasing her about crashing funerals. Kayla’s face dropped, and she rolled back over on her side.

“Shit. I have a loud mouth, Kayla. You know that,” said Nik. But then, she saw Kayla reaching for her phone on her side table, compulsively checking it for notifications like Nik recently kept catching herself doing against her better judgment. “Jeremy not talking to you?”

“Why would he? I’m sure he thinks I’m completely insane,” said Kayla.

“At least you didn’t dump drugs all over his car,” said Nik. Kayla laughed again, but Nik could tell she was still holding back tears. “I’m sorry, Kayla. I know I screwed things up between you two, and I’m so sorry.”

“You didn’t screw it up, Nik. I did. There are just—so many parts of myself that are completely crazy, and I could never own up to them. So, I lie. I lied to Jeremy. I lied to Drew. And to you—”

“Hey, if there’s anything I understand, it’s the crazy sides to a person. Those parts of ourselves we wish we could pretend don’t exist. It’s those parts we usually can’t hide, though. They’re always going to be there, whether we acknowledge them or not.”

It hit Nik that it sounded like she was giving Kayla advice. And Kayla was nodding, listening, taking in what she had to say. Was this what it was like to be the responsible friend?

“I know,” said Kayla. “You’re so honest, Nik. No matter what. You own up to every part of yourself, both the good and the bad. I envy that about you. You don’t need to be trying to be like me. I try to act like I have it all together, but look at me. I freaking crash funerals. You’re the saner one of the two of us. At least, you used to be until today, apparently.”

“Come on, Kayla. You know that’s not true. Trust me, there’s nothing worth envying here,” said Nik. It was an impulse. An automatic reply. Someone would give her a compliment, and she’d shoot it down. She’d spent years convincing herself that compliments were beyond her capacity to earn.

“Don’t do that,” said Kayla. “You’re a good person, Nik.”

She wanted to argue. But instead, she tried something new. She held Kayla’s words close to her. Closed her eyes and asked herself to believe them. “Thank you,” she said.

“You’re welcome,” said Kayla.

Nik wanted to do something more. She wanted to hug Kayla, or hold her hand, or pull the strands of hair from her face in a motherly way, the same way Kayla had done for her before in order to keep her hair from falling in the toilet. She knew that Kayla probably missed having someone to look after her, someone to comfort her like her mother might have done when she was young. But something stopped Nik from being that for her, and she didn’t know what it was. The same thing, she thought, that was keeping her from asking Kayla about her parents or asking her to explain her funeral habit. But now, after the afternoon, she didn’t think she needed Kayla to explain her thought process; Nik was now fully aware of how surrounding herself with dozens of sniffing, grieving people would be comforting. It was like finding a home for yourself, a place of refuge, to just let all the pain out. It had been to her, anyway, until the slap in the face.

So, instead of pressing the matter further, Nik took what Kayla was freely offering her in the moment—a white flag. Maybe they were friends after all.

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To: Chang, Drew

From: Chang, Kayla

Date: December 13, 2019

Subject: I Need to Talk to You

Drew,

I know I said I wanted to talk to you over the phone, but I don't think it can wait. There's this memory I have of Dad that's been torturing me. Something I've been so ashamed to admit happened even to myself, so I try to just ignore it and force it to the back of my mind, but it always ends up resurfacing at the worst of times.

Remember when I was on the cross-country team in middle school? I was never any good, but my friend Sara had convinced me to join with her. Even though those meets were some of the least exciting things for people to watch, Dad was at every one of mine. The Saturday of my state meet, Dad had woken up at 6AM to make me breakfast. He'd wanted to drive me to the meet, but I had wanted to ride with Sara. He'd made me eggs on whole wheat toast and had it sitting on the table ready for me when I came downstairs. He'd even gone as far as pouring orange juice in a glass for me, even though our coach always told us fruit juices were too full of sugar. Before I got the chance to acknowledge it, Sara and her mom were already knocking on our front door, so I just hugged Dad and told him I didn't have time to eat before running out of the house. I'd never thought twice about it again, not until after he and Mom were gone. But lately, I've been repeatedly tortured by the mental image of the eggs and toast sitting on the table and that glass of orange juice that I never touched. I never thought that something as stupid as seeing a glass of orange juice could make me sob, but now I avoid the juice aisle at grocery stores because of it.

It's strange how the smallest details can trigger crippling sadness. I never even thanked him for making me breakfast that day, and I'm afraid I'll regret it for the rest of my life.

It's gotten so much worse since you left. I cry more about orange juice and eggs on toast than I do about anything else. Once it starts, I can't stop it. I can't function. It's like world stops until I can take the time to acknowledge it. The first time it happened, I didn't know what to do to make it go away. I was on my way home from work, and I had to pull over on the side of the road. That's when I noticed a funeral that was happening in a small local church. I recognized it by all the sobbing people dressed in black who were making their way inside. So, I followed them in.

It's crazy, but it was like I finally found a home after all this time. I cried as hard as I wanted, and no one judged me or questioned my sanity. It was like everyone there was crying with me. There have been so many times where my grief slipped out at the wrong times. When it all first happened, it would slip out in the company of strangers—with people I waited on at the café, or a random stranger in line with me at the DMV. And in nearly every other setting, my grief feels inappropriate. But not at funerals. That's the one place I can go where grief is perfectly normal, and it's okay to let it out in whatever form it comes in, because everyone else is doing the same. I'd never intended for it to become a habit, but somehow, it's become my only source of comfort when all I can think of is that damn glass of orange juice.

I don't know why, but I felt like I had to finally tell you. I've been trying so hard to hide it, and it finally all caught up to me. Am I crazy? Please tell me you understand.

K

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

HISTORICAL

Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. Grove, 2011. First Published, 1953.

Waiting for Godot, by Samuel Beckett, is a short, two-act, nonsensical play that is centered around two men, Vladimir and Estragon, who are waiting for Godot. Throughout the duration of the play, it is never made clear what or who Godot is, or why it is so important that they wait. As time passes, even the two companions forget as they bicker and ramble. Nothing happens in this play; we are watching two characters as they wait, and as they are driven crazy by the anticipation of waiting. We never see them find what they are looking for. The audience is drawn into the madness, and into the desperate longing of waiting and the anxiety of sitting idly by rather than taking action. “‘Let’s go.’ ‘We can’t.’ ‘Why not?’ ‘We’re waiting for Godot.’”

This play could very well be about nothing, or it could be about everything. It could be a message speaking out against complacency. There is a familiarity within the absurdity of the story—it’s easy to slip into idleness when waiting for dreams, for achievement, for success, or for our big break. Sometimes we waste our lives just sitting and waiting, rather than taking action. Meanwhile, the longing has the potential to drive us to madness.

What is brilliant about this play is that the audience is a part of the madness. We sit back and watch and wait—drawn in by the characters’ own anticipation of waiting—wondering who or what is Godot and why waiting is so important. There’s a sense of questioning that prevails as we wonder about Godot, and at the same time, we wonder why we are even interested in a play where nothing happens. But what keeps us invested is the fact that we have become like Vladimir and Estragon. We have ended up waiting for Godot.

This story is brilliant in spite of its ridiculousness. It's wonderfully circular—the characters always end up in the same place no matter what they do. They never reach their destination. Every day runs together because every day begins and ends the same. It's much like life—we strive to achieve goals and to meet deadlines, only to receive new goals and new deadlines the next day. We satiate hunger and boredom only to wind up hungry and bored again the next day. There is always something we are waiting for, and always something we want that we haven't attained. We are always waiting for our own Godot.

As a writer, I admire the fact that this story is so odd and nonsensical, yet its layers of absurdity still represent common aspects of life that we know. This story is unforgettable because of its simplicity, and it is layered despite the shallowness of the subject matter. Beckett is unafraid to represent those small insignificant, silly moments that make life what it is, those silent, still moments that no one talks about because of their unimportance, and he takes them and makes them into something that means something in the midst of its meaningless. It's subdued cleverness that I could only hope to achieve in my own writing.

Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*. Simon & Schuster, 2011. First Published, 1953.

“Don't ask for guarantees. And don't look to be saved in any one thing, person, machine, or library. Do your own bit of saving, and if you drown, at least die knowing you were headed for shore.”

Fahrenheit 451, by Ray Bradbury, is a mix of science fiction and dystopian writing, existing in a futuristic society where books are not only illegal, but they are being hunted down, gathered up, and burned. This society is one where the government has found an effective way to control its citizens—by limiting their ability to think for themselves through the burning of

books. Our protagonist, Guy Montag, is a firefighter, but the meaning of the word is skewed—the main purpose of a firefighter is to track down the people who are hiding books and burn their collections. It's not a dangerous job, but it is for those being hunted, as some are willing to actually lay down their lives in order to save their collection of books.

Guy's internal conflict over what he does for a living seems subdued at first, because he has been kept in ignorance for most of his life about what books are and why they must be burned. But something has always compelled him to keep and stash away the books that survive the fires he starts, and eventually, after a streak of unfortunate circumstances, he chooses to finally turn to the books for answers, and his life is changed forever.

Despite the bleakness of the society Bradbury creates, there is a magic that exists alongside it, one that illustrates the way books can save a soul from despair. This is not only portrayed through Guy's transformation after he begins reading, but also by the people within the story who choose to die for their books, or those who live in isolation on the run from the government for refusing to stop reading. There is not only a surplus of knowledge hidden within the pages of books, but books are able to open eyes to other perspectives and societies, activate imaginations, ease pain by providing escapes into other worlds. This world speaks to how detrimental it can be for a society to veer away from reading, how narrow-minded and shallow one can become if they never learn the magic of literature.

In a society that has become more and more reliant on technology, it is difficult to impress, to entertain, and to command attention. It's clear that, although this book was written close to seventy years ago, Bradbury's assumptions on where society was headed might have been more accurate than they first appear. While technological advances have many benefits, they often prevent us from gaining knowledge and taking initiative to learn. With reading

becoming less and less popular of a pastime with each new computer, tablet, phone, or streaming service that comes about, society's empathy for and interest in one another dwindles. Books act as a window into the eyes of another. Bradbury not only understands this significance, but this book can act as a sort of call to action, making known to its readers the sense of urgency behind protecting and preserving literature.

Kafka, Franz. *The Metamorphosis*. Bantam Classics, 1972. First Published, 1915.

The Metamorphosis, by Franz Kafka, is a bizarre story set in a world parallel to ours, where a man can wake up one day having transformed into a giant insect and be more worried about losing his job than the fact that he has become an insect overnight. Kafka uses absurdism to bend the rules of the world within his story, and he uses the indifference and detachment of his characters to allow the bodily transformation of his main character, a traveling salesman named Gregor, to take more of a backseat in the conflict of the story.

When Gregor wakes up to find that his body has become that of an insect, rather than panic, he laments the fact that he will not be able to go into work. His mother, father, and sister, likewise, lament this fact, as Gregor is the primary source of the family's income and their only hope to escape their debt. As Gregor slips further into himself and becomes more bug-like, money remains their main concern, followed closely by the concern of Gregor becoming more and more of a burden. They are quick to forget his human qualities, along with the years of his life he'd sacrificed to keep them afloat; instead, they grow frustrated with his differences and the fact that they can no longer communicate with him. Soon, they regard him as nothing more than an insect, forgetting that he'd ever been human at all. Their dismissal of him is sadly familiar—a picture of a society that is completely self-consumed and desensitized to the suffering of others.

Kafka's writing contains an odd mix of irony, absurdity, and despondence, as the reader may want to laugh at its strangeness while feeling sadness for its portrayal of human suffering at the hands of isolation. While Gregor seems to be in a state of denial over the life-altering changes that have happened to his body, everyone around him distances themselves from him while also trying their best to pretend like nothing has changed. Their passivity is toxic, which is arguably the primary cause of Gregor's ultimate demise. Instead of acknowledging the transformation and attempting to cope or relearn how to live with it, each character skirts around the issue until Gregor has sunken into a state of complete alienation and despair. It's a story that appears as something comical, but there is tragedy hidden just beneath the surface.

What I admire most about this story is its ability to slowly seep in and consume the reader. While Kafka frontloads the story's inciting incident by opening with Gregor waking to find himself as an insect, there is heartache hidden within the story that grows stronger the longer it settles. It prompts contemplation and questioning, and Kafka manages to be both completely forthright and enigmatic at the same time. He uses farcical elements to tell truths about humanity in a way that is neither obvious nor forceful, yet still completely memorable.

Mann, Thomas. *Death in Venice*. Dover Publications, 1995. First Published, 1912.

Death in Venice, by Thomas Mann, is a tragic tale of longing, a depiction of the misfortune of chasing after a dream that can never be attained. It tells a story of self-destruction, of falling into an endless cycle of contemplation without action, of wasting time fantasizing and never doing, and of how toxic obsession can be. Our protagonist, the stoic writer Aschenbach, is blinded by passion, so much so that he is willing to sacrifice anything, even his life, to remain

close to his object of affection: the beautiful Tazio, a teenage boy he runs into while vacationing in Venice.

Aschenbach is a picture of loneliness and heartache, a man crushed by an unobtainable desire. After having the misfortune of vacationing in Venice during the time of a cholera outbreak, he has to make the choice of evacuating and possibly losing his only shot at knowing Tazio or staying in Venice and risking his life. Although his desire for Tazio begins with a mere search for inspiration, it develops into an obsession fueled by lust and longing. His desire for Tazio becomes all-consuming, until he is no longer able to function—he receives neither the rest nor relaxation he'd come for, and instead, he finds himself willing to sacrifice everything for even the chance to know a boy he's never even had the strength to talk to.

Despite the complex language, this book contains intricate, meaningful prose that lingers long after the story is over. Not only that, but it acts as a springboard for self-reflection, speaking to the hearts of its readers in a way that is universally understandable and relevant. “...*Passion dulls one's sense of discrimination and yields in all seriousness to charms that sobriety would treat as a joke or reject with indignation.*”

There are many questions this story brings about, many of which are timeless. Despite how much times have changed since Thomas Mann first wrote *Death in Venice*, unhealthy desires and obsessions are things that humans have always and will always struggle with. Often, we are willing to sacrifice too much to obtain our desires. In Aschenbach's case, his health, sanity, and even his life was at stake, and still, he was unwilling to abandon his dream. It's a timeless tragedy—people giving up everything they have to obtain a desire. Sometimes, that desire is obtained, but there is nothing left of the life we once knew. Sometimes, we've given up everything and still have fallen short. Regardless, the struggle is indisputably human, a mistake

many are doomed to make no matter how many warnings have been placed before them. Mann handles the topic with intricacy and grace and manages a world of depth within a short number of pages—something every writer should strive for.

Marlowe, Christopher. *Doctor Faustus*. Longman Group, 1984. First Performed, 1592.

Doctor Faustus, by Christopher Marlowe, is a dark play that showcases the tragedy of abandoning good to chase earthly pleasures such as fame, fortune, knowledge, and power. Told as a warning based on Christian beliefs to show the tragedy of turning away from God to pursue sin, Faustus, the main character and ironically, the “hero,” of the story sells his soul to Lucifer in exchange for twenty-four years of service from Mephistophilis, a devil. As Faustus ponders the idea of allowing his soul to be damned in exchange for twenty-four years of pleasure, his sights are set high on the things he can do with what he believes to be limitless power. Despite suffering internal conflict about the inevitable damnation of his soul and the question of whether or not he will have time to repent and evade hell, he signs a contract with Lucifer, excited by the possibilities of his power. Yet as the story continues and his twenty-four years pass by, he loses sight of why he’d initially desired such knowledge and power. Instead of using his power to enrich civilizations and gain a sense of wonder for the universe as he’d initially desired, he winds up using his power for petty things such as cheap tricks and tormenting those around him.

One of the most interesting things about this play is the fact that Faustus is considered to be the protagonist or “hero” of the story, yet his actions suggest that he is more of a villain, or even an antagonist. It could be argued that Faustus is his own antagonist, as he is the only thing that stands in his way of redemption or salvation. Throughout the story, he has dozens of opportunities to repent and turn away from Lucifer, yet there is always a reason for him to talk

himself out of it. Even at the beginning, as he is bartering with Mephistophilis, the devil is neither dishonest nor coy about hell and its torment, seeming to suggest that Faustus is making a mistake even as they are creating his contract. He receives warnings from angels and men alike to repent, attempting to convince him that it's never too late to be saved, yet he always ends up talking himself out of any desire for repentance, convinced that it's too late. As the play continues, it seems time speeds up, painting a portrait of how short life is in light of eternity, and more specific to Faustus, eternal damnation. When the time comes for him to be taken away to hell, it's clear that Faustus had wasted his twenty-four years on earth, never having even scratched the surface of his previously aspired accomplishments.

This may be one of the first examples of a protagonist who is more evil than good, one who is constantly making mistakes, tormenting others, and doing bad, yet we as the audience are made to root for him and desire for him to change—and in this case, repent—while at the same time, knowing that his fate is sealed. It is a great example of a tragic hero, one who, despite any effort to escape the fate he knows is coming, winds up slipping right into the fate he is trying to avoid. Often, the harder they fight, the faster they fall. In Faustus's case, while he is never overtly fighting his fate of eternal damnation, it is a constant, looming shadow over his head that he knows will someday swallow him whole, yet the best he can do is try in vain to ignore it.

Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Simon & Schuster Paperbacks,

2016. First Published, 1605.

A Midsummer Night's Dream, by William Shakespeare, is one of those classically bizarre stories that pulls you a whimsical world of nonsense and love triangles. This classic historical text proves that romance, fantastical elements, pranks, and lies have always been values of

entertainment in literature. He also represents original farce comedy, as we watch his characters recurrently making poor decisions, getting themselves into silly, humorous predicaments, and expressing themselves through exaggerated, emotional rants. For all these reasons, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* could be considered one of the very first goofy romantic comedies.

Though this play is much more lighthearted than most by Shakespeare, it also could be considered as a kind of warning that speaks out about how easily we can lose ourselves over the pursuit of love, willing ourselves to make impulsive, spontaneous decisions and abandon our intellect in order to “follow our hearts.” This is made evident as we watch the main characters make fools of themselves in the name of love, and in some cases, as with the thematically ironic Nick Bottom, whose head is turned into that of a donkey by the fairy prankster Puck, a character will literally make an “ass” of himself.

Although this play ends happily, with both Hermia and Helena in the arms of the man they love, we are left to wonder in the end whether their happiness will last forever, or whether it is merely superficial and will die out overtime. Considering how fickle each of the characters have proven themselves to be, each having gone back and forth regarding who they love, and with Helena still desperate to marry Demetrius despite the fact that he has already left her to pursue Hermia once before, it is obvious that their love is more of an emotional pursuit rather than a long-lasting effect. As fun as it is for the audience to see these two couples make things work and fall in love with the person they are “supposed to” be with, we know that their love is shallow, something easily upset by pranks and tricks, and something that will likely not last.

This play also speaks about what it means to be human, and how easily we choose to throw away our own security and sanity in order to pursue our dreams or love. This idea is most often played out through the contrast between the fairies and the humans, and Puck's thoughts

toward humans and his disregard for human intellect. He continuously disrupts their pursuit for his own pleasure and entertainment, sitting back and watching the chaos and saying, “*Lord what fools these mortals be.*” He is the outsider’s perspective, the one observing and shaking his head as he watches humanity’s desperate pursuit of love and acceptance and judges us for it. Is the pursuit of intellect better than the pursuit of love? Is the pursuit of love worth abandoning our intellect and principles for if we manage to obtain it in the end? Puck obviously doesn’t think so.

What I love about Shakespeare is that regardless of how society changes, there are things about his stories that remain timeless. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is no exception. Despite the centuries that have passed, it remains refreshingly witty, filled with the right kind of chaos, humor, irony, and best of all, drama. It is consistent entertainment value.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.* Longman Group, 1886.

The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, by Robert Louis Stevenson, is not only an innovative, suspenseful novel for its time, but it also serves as a social commentary, as well as a cautionary tale on humans indulging in their dark, or violent urges. Told in the third person limited point-of-view to Mr. Gabriel Utterson—the quiet, passive observer of the odd behavior of the reserved and law-abiding Dr. Jekyll and his relationship with the eerie, notorious Mr. Hyde—this book showcases a quiet, observing narrator telling the tale of an exotic being whose arrival changes the life of an otherwise ordinary person leading a previously uneventful life.

Although this book has been around for over a century, it is a classic example of the horror genre, of generating suspense through minute details, of creating mystery within a plot, and of narrative withholding in order to allow the reader to discover important information just as the characters do. Because of its reputation, it is likely rare that someone would come across

this story without knowing the big twist of the ending—that Jekyll and Hyde are one—but it’s easy to see how it was an effective reveal in its time. This is a story that has inspired plotlines for a century on as a classic example of the internal struggle of good versus evil that we all have within us, and what can happen to a person when they choose to stretch their moral boundaries.

While Dr. Jekyll was never pure and showed evidence throughout the story of having a lax conscience—particularly in relation to pardoning himself for the things he’d done as Mr. Hyde—Jekyll represents the side of a person that is bound by laws, guidelines, routines, rules, reputation, and social awareness. Although he always had cognizance of his darker self and the impulses to indulge in all the things deemed unacceptable or even evil by society, he was always able to successfully repress these things in order to maintain basic goodness. His curiosity, however, fueled by his desire to feel what it’s like to be free of all the moral and societal boundaries, led to the creation of Mr. Hyde—the representation of a man who is unrestricted by such things and free to do as he pleases. As Hyde’s impulses grow darker and darker, Jekyll realizes that he is losing more and more of himself to Hyde, no longer able to control when he becomes Hyde and when he remains himself. Eventually, it is obvious that he will soon lose himself to Hyde completely, a depiction, perhaps, of what will inevitably happen to anyone who chooses to seek a life of self-indulgence rather than morality.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*. Houghton Mifflin, 2002. First Published, 1937.

The Hobbit, by J.R.R. Tolkien, is a fantasy novel that revolutionized the genre and set the stage for dozens of stories to follow it. Many fantasy worlds have been born following Tolkien’s creation of Middle Earth that were likely either inspired by Tolkien or were created because of the influence of Tolkien on the writers who created them. Tolkien may be one of the first, if not

the first, great example of creating a vast, exquisite, multidimensional world for his readers, as he set the bar for worldbuilding for generations upon generations of writers.

Along with the setting, Tolkien's story follows the protagonist Bilbo Baggins, a hobbit—tiny people existing in this universe who exist alongside elves, wizards, dwarves, and other otherworldly beings—as he embarks on a journey to conquer a dragon. The story's structure is a classic example of a hero's journey, beginning with an inciting incident or call to action, as Gandalf, a great, powerful wizard, enlists Bilbo's help, interrupting his ordinary life as he knows it with extraordinary circumstances.

Tolkien's protagonist, as well, may have been revolutionary for its time, as prior to *The Hobbit*, it's likely that most of the heroes of stories before it embarking on tales of a classic “hero's journey” were those of a grander scale—strong, handsome, and tall, an “Achilles” of sorts—while Bilbo Baggins is small and underestimated. Bilbo is an unconventional hero, relying more on internal strength than anything else—his strength lies primarily in his character. He is a hero that children could admire and look up to, one who overcomes obstacles and barriers of the circumstances and society into which he was born. He teaches his audience that hero's journeys are not only for the physically strong; it takes only a willing heart to be a hero.

While Tolkien's prose is a bit dryer than I would expect from something that is so heavily imaginative, the world within the story is so rich that it's easy to still get lost in the story. However, I do feel as though so much of Tolkien's energy went into the development of his setting that the development of present themes—that of race, bravery, confidence, and character to name a few—was a bit lacking. I would have liked to see more depth in the story's messages that appeal to humanity and morality, as fantasy makes for the perfect platform to speak truth into the lives of young readers because of its ability to draw people in.

Regardless, there is nothing, nor will there ever be anything, like Tolkien's stories. The world is incomparable, and its vastness is one to be greatly admired. For those reasons alone, he will forever remain a driving force in the literary world will continue to inspire generations of writers to come.

Wells, H.G. *The Time Machine*. Signet Classics, 2002. First Published, 1985.

The Time Machine, by H.G. Wells, is an innovative, science fiction text that uses foreign, fantastical elements such as time machines and a fourth dimension to explore concepts of societal norms and political commentary. We first are able to catch a glimpse of what life is like for the time traveler, as he sits in a parlor surrounded by wealthy men who have come to a party to be entertained, who sit around and exchange stories for fun in their spare time, able to enjoy the luxury of social graces and downtime. We then follow the time traveler on his journey 800,000 years into the future as he witnesses a society that has been brought far beyond common societal structure and the use of intellect. They are simple creatures coexisting peacefully, yet supposedly at the cost of their independence, intelligence, and initiative.

Not only does Wells create a new depiction of the future through science fiction, but he also introduces the reader to what was probably one of the first pictures of a dystopian society in literature. 800,000 years into the future, the human race and society has devolved rather than evolved, becoming wilder and more animal-like, more segregated, and more naïve and unsophisticated. The narrator challenges the reader to examine society in order to try to pinpoint the kind of ideas that could have brought the human race to where it is when the time traveler shows up. The time traveler speculates that a variety of things could have caused the devolvement, such as communist ideas and society's obsession with capitalism.

At the end, we are reminded that the time traveler's story also exists in parallel to what is happening at the beginning of the story with the wealthy men in the parlor. After the time traveler narrowly makes his escape from danger more than once hundreds of thousands of years, and then millions of years into the future, he returns to the dinner party to find his shallow group of companions looking for an explanation for his disheveled appearance and odd manner yet unwilling to believe his story. Though he has been gone for days, barely any time has passed at the party. Unnerved by his inability to provide proof for the adventure he claims, the time traveler leaves again, declaring that he will be back with tangible proof within the half hour. We later learn that years have now passed, and the time traveler has yet to be seen again.

Despite the exciting air of adventure, the narrow escape from danger by the protagonist, and the anticipated praise the innovative scientist may have expected to receive upon his arrival back to the present, the story ends tragically. The guests at the party are skeptical of the scientist's claims, seeking evidence of his travels, believing his story to be an attempt at trickery. The time traveler is left unsatisfied despite all the knowledge he's gained from his travels, because his words hold no weight to his companions without proof. We are left wondering whether adventure means anything if there is nothing tangible to show for it in the end. *"We are always getting away from the present moment. Our mental existence, which are immaterial and have no dimensions, are passing along the Time-Dimension with a uniform velocity from the cradle to the grave."*

Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Random House: Modern Library, 1998. First

Published, 1890.

The Picture of Dorian Gray, by Oscar Wilde, is a close look at how vanity and obsession with beauty, status, wealth, and power can corrupt our minds. We are able to explore these ideas through the three main characters in three different ways: through Basil Hallward, the artist who falls in love with his muse, through Lord Henry, the wealthy man who lives his shallow life solely in pursuit of pleasure and self-satisfaction, and through Dorian Gray, the young man who becomes corrupted by a world obsessed with beauty and pleasure, who ends up trading his life to attain it. As the story progresses, we watch as a once-innocent Dorian Gray transforms into a man tainted by his sins. He is selfish, arrogant, desensitized to the suffering of others, harsh, and in many ways, inhuman. The deeper he falls into Lord Henry's trap of hedonism, the more and more unrecognizable he becomes.

Wilde represents the world of the elite in a way that is timeless and familiar. *"It is silly of you, for there is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about."* This seems to summarize the mindset of every person in pursuit of fame and fortune. Our society pursues the spotlight knowing that it will likely be filled with hate and criticism, yet we often figure that slander to our name may be better than dying without anyone ever having known our name at all.

Wilde goes on to call out society for its desire to "influence," describing influence in itself as immoral, because *"to influence a person is to give him one's own soul."* He suggests that there is no such thing as "good influence," because when we desire to influence another, what we are really doing is forcing upon them our own thoughts, passions, virtues, and even sins. In that case, can any of us mentor another with pure intentions, or are we doing it out of self-obsession? Are we longing to see bits of ourselves in those around us, desiring to be praised, and willing to do anything to receive it?

While I admire Wilde's ability to represent the harshness of this subject matter and I admire the brilliance and depth of his prose, this book is bleak. Not only does it call out society for its superficiality and toxic egotism, but also presents things we may believe to be good as equally corrupt, claiming society's inability to be genuine or pure. It is incredibly powerful, but it leaves no hope to cling to in the end. I found myself longing to believe that there are still good people with sincere hearts and pure intentions, those who help others without desire to feed their egos or gain recognition. People who do desire to influence the world in order to make it better and more beautiful. But can it even exist? Maybe that's the point Wilde was trying to make. That there is always ugliness in all things, even in the things in life that bring us joy.

CONTEMPORARY

Anderson, M.T. *Feed*. Candlewick Press, 2002.

Feed, by M.T. Anderson, is a futuristic, pre-dystopian, young adult novel featuring a world so advanced with technology that it is slowly killing itself. In a society where technology has advanced to the point where the need for basic skills such as reading, writing, and even face-to-face conversation has diminished, people are so used to having the cyberworld at their fingertips that they have lost the need to even live in or interact with the real world.

Following the first-person narrative of Titus, a teenager who lives in this alternate existence, who has had a high-tech computer called "the feed" implanted in his brain since birth, we witness first-hand the kind of damage this technology has done to society. This procedure is thought to be a sign of privilege that sets the middle and upper class apart from the lower class in America. While teens with access to the feed live with instant access to the knowledge of the

internet at any time, they are also subjected to the constant noise of advertisements and subliminal messages sent through the feed and immediately to their brains. In the meantime, this supposed luxury is not available to everyone, and those who don't have the funds to access it live as outcasts. Also blinded to the political turmoil and environmental decay going on all over the world, the feed allows its users to live in a state where they can ignore the destruction going on all around them.

This book was a great example of futuristic, sci-fi genre YA with a complex, rich setting that is filled with both the familiar and unfamiliar, details that present an exaggerated version of the world we know, while still seeming eerily plausible. Not only does this book present an immersive world for the reader, but it also presents a warning to an entire generation of young adults who are obsessed with technology and are entirely dependent on it to function properly. Anderson presents the kind of world we are headed for, where people are too wrapped up in their own pleasures to notice that our environment is dying and societies are crumbling around us, where we are so numb to consumerism and capitalism that we can't even recognize how much it is infecting our daily lives, where healthy communication is a thing of the past, and where every generation is less intelligent than the one before it because standards of intelligence are being lowered with each wave of new technology.

At times, this book frustrated me because of the skewed view of the characters, specifically the protagonist. The first-person point-of-view made Titus's desensitized take on the world was painful, as he was so blinded to his own lack of judgment. However, this choice in narrative was effective for the same reason; we were in a mind so infected by the feed, so accustomed to the constant noise that it has been trained to tune out so much of its surroundings. Anderson is unafraid to paint his protagonist in a harsh light, which is something to be admired.

Barnes, Julian. *The Sense of an Ending*. Jonathan Cape, 2011.

The Sense of an Ending, by Julian Barnes, is a novel that explores the concept of memories and how easy it is to warp and bend them into what we want them to be over the course of time. This story is told in two parts from the first-person perspective of Tony, an older man whose present circumstances have caused him to revisit moments of his past from his youth to college specifically surrounding his contemplative, intellectual friend, Adrian. While part one of this story is told from a temporal distance of narrative where Tony is reflecting back on moments of his youth from the present, part two is told from a close temporal distance to the present. As these two sections play out, we see the holes in the first section of Tony's story, holes that exist because they have been altered by Tony's subconscious over time in order for him to only have to remember the version of the story that best serves him. As the things he discovers in his present unravels the memories of his past, Tony becomes more and more uncertain that he can rely on his memories to provide him with the truth.

Barnes takes a risk on an unconventional storytelling format and, it pays off. The structure Barnes creates where the story is told in two parts, yet still revolves around the same events, is brilliantly planned out. While the reader is left with questions following the end of the first section, specifically in regard to the narrative's intention with the details that were chosen to be divulged and the ones that seem to have been withheld, the objective slowly unveils itself as the second section plays out. As we read this story, it is meant to appear as a memory at first, selective in what it chooses to disclose, pleasant enough, maybe a bit mundane, but overall, satisfactory. As the story continues on, those pieces of memory that seemed mundane, yet pleasant, become disjointed, and the clarity of it all starts to fade as Tony realizes that what he

remembers may not be the whole truth. Barnes continues to pull at this idea through the mind of our protagonist, hitting him hard with painful truths of his past that leave him evaluating everything he's ever believed about himself. Barnes doesn't shy away from allowing his characters to reap the consequences of their actions, while still allowing the reader a close enough look into their minds to evoke empathy.

While this book plays well off the concept of the unreliability of memories, especially over time, it does so in almost a subtle way, quietly causing contemplation and challenging readers to examine their own memories while not having to create loud moments of chaos to achieve confusion and disconnect within the story. Often, stories that set out to achieve this effect do so in a much more obvious way, and this book is a wonderful reminder that we can still create twists and turns that succeed to blow our readers' minds without having to be showy.

Haddon, Mark. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*. Jonathan Cape, 2003.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, by Mark Haddon, is a story told in the unfiltered first-person narrative of Christopher, a fifteen-year-old math genius on the autism spectrum, beginning on the night that he finds his neighbor's dog dead with a garden fork sticking out of its stomach. Christopher, who is both hyper-analytical and an unwavering fan of the *Sherlock Holmes* series, tasks himself to solve the mystery of who killed Wellington, choosing to also write his experience into his own murder mystery book.

Not only is this book an example of a flawlessly immersive narrative where every word, detail, and plot point embodies the way a person with autism thinks, feels and processes, but it also presents a charming plot with a surprisingly emotional twist. Although the way Christopher processes common human experiences such as grief, betrayal, fear, and sadness differently than

someone without autism would, his emotions are just as evident on the page, only displayed through his actions—his mannerisms, the details he chooses to reveal to the reader, and his interactions with others. The way the author has chosen to structure this book allows the reader to enter into Christopher's mind, where graphs and equations make more sense than sentences, where each change of setting evokes every sense and no tiny detail goes unnoticed, where the chapters of his book are only given prime numbers, and where every interaction is examined both honestly and literally.

This book, while told from the perspective of Christopher, who has a unique take on what is safe, what is true, and what is meaningful because of his autism, still reflects common human desires. Everyone, whether they admit it or not, is searching for safety in a world of chaos, is searching for the truth among a world of lies, and desires for nothing more than to find purpose and meaning in inevitable circumstances of life. Although Christopher may not always realize it, he feels the effects of loss, and he is searching for a means of healing. While Christopher may not be able to understand or recognize the emotions he feels as a consequence of the hardships he has had to face in his life, we are still able to identify the moments where he is feeling the effects of these events more strongly through the pacing of the narrative, and through his thoughts—which become more jumbled the more frustrated he becomes and often veer away from the subject matter as a kind of defense mechanism when dealing with the moments that are more difficult for him to process.

There are many things to admire about this story. Its narrative voice is strong, consistent and unwavering, and everything is effortlessly filtered through Christopher's perspective—the setting and surrounding details, the other characters, and even the plot structure are presented through Christopher's eyes, allowing the reader to become completely immersed in his mind.

Haldeman, Joe. *The Forever War*. St. Martin's Press, 1974.

The Forever War, by Joe Haldeman, is an innovative science fiction novel that immediately thrusts the reader into an alternate reality where Earth has been attacked by an alien army known as the Taurans, and the humans have responded by gathering together a group of men and women with exceptional levels of strength and intelligence in order to build an elite army for a space mission. This story is told in the first-person narrative of protagonist Mandella, one of the selected soldiers, as he undergoes grueling tests of character, judgment, and durability with his fellow soldiers, and spans over an entire millennium of the same war made possible through time dilation as soldiers in war are forced to travel through wormholes as they embark on missions located lightyears away from Earth. As our protagonist is given the ability to live in different moments of time over a period of a thousand years, we witness the futility of war firsthand as he is forced to fight the same battles over and over again that in the end prove to have been unnecessary.

Although this book was written in the 70's, it contains timeless elements that left me believing that it can continue to withstand the test of time to remain a classic science fiction novel. While there are a few concepts that are understandably outdated, specifically in regard to its take on sexuality and unfamiliarity with homosexuality that may have even appeared outdated by the 90's—the decade this novel is supposed to begin in—its worldbuilding and science fiction elements remain fresh and complex, allowing the reader to be completely immersed in this alternate reality. Above all, though, Haldeman's portrayal of the struggle of a soldier forced to commit senseless acts of violence in the name of war, as well as the portrayal of the isolation and disjointedness soldiers feel when returning from war, is real and honest, and something that will

remain relevant from generation to generation. For every time that Mandella returns home from war, years have passed, the world has aged, progressed some ways, and degenerated in others. Each time he returns home, he is forced to learn how to live again, and finds himself unable to adapt to a world that has continued to exist without him and hasn't bothered to slow down to allow him time to catch up.

There is an underlying sense of numbness within the narrative as our protagonist is forced to watch countless friends die in vain, many prior to even embarking on their mission, as their training alone consists of the harshest of conditions in order to not only prepare the soldiers for whatever may come their way, but also to weed out the weakest and most absent-minded from the group. Haldeman hits hard on the kind of turmoil soldiers often face in war that can alter their entire existence, and he does so within the framework of a thorough, multi-layered universe. This book is a great example of an author's use of genre fiction to create an allegory about the lasting ramifications that come with war and the inevitability that humans will always find themselves fighting battles that are not necessarily meant to be won.

Hamid, Mohsin. *Exit West*. Riverhead Books, 2017.

Exit West, by Mohsin Hamid, is a story told in an omniscient third person narrative to follow the life of a group of migrants, specifically the recently coupled Saeed and Nadia as they flee the political upheaval of their native country. Although the country is never named, Hamid creates a kind of familiar turmoil that allows the reader to imagine the present state of any country in a crisis. Saeed and Nadia's new relationship is placed under the strain of survival and dependence on one another as they are forced to escape the country together to find refuge in other places, with the assistance of doors that can be used to portal to other places. Though the

two share an inseparable bond because of their reliance on each other to survive and the tragic past that they share, their experiences also naturally begin to grow them apart. While this story gently relies on elements of magical realism to represent the exhausting life of a migrant in our present world, its representation of the relationship between Saeed and Nadia rings truest, as sometimes, no matter how deeply a person is embedded in a season of our life, they may only be meant to remain with us for a season.

This is a book of quiet tragedy, offering up a setting of political unrest and upheaval with a gentle touch. As we follow Saeed and Nadia on their journey to safety from the chaos of their homeland, we are also able to observe an honest take of two people who are barely more than strangers that fall into a relationship based on security and comfort at a time where they need it most. Their relation is deeply human, speaking to those relationships in life that don't come to an end with an ugly crash and burn, but rather, despite having come to an end, came about for a purpose that is evident to both sides. These memories are ones that often stick with us, as they help shape us into the people we are meant to be, and while the bitterness of loss may sting, what we feel most of all is the bittersweet reality that some people are given to us as mere passersby in a long lifetime of experiences to be exactly what we need at the time that we need it.

This story is also surprisingly whimsical despite addressing such a relevant topic, utilizing faint touches of magical realism to create metaphors, but in a way that is neither forceful nor overwhelming. Not only do the doors represent the transience and instability of life as a migrant, but it also represents those fleeting moments in time where a door is open at just the right time, and how bittersweet it can be when those moments also come to an end. There is much to be learned from the effortlessness of the prose of this story, and how easily it addresses poignant topics that succeed to move the reader without need for manipulation. It creates a

perfect balance of heart wrenching moments, not withholding of the violence and horror of a country's fall from safety and security, moments of quiet kindness and the representation of human purity managing to withstand tests of extreme circumstances, and the honesty of how ephemeral relationships often are. No matter how pure our love for another may be, life's unpredictability makes certain of the fact that we don't have forever to love the ones close to us.

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. Faber and Faber, 2005.

Never Let Me Go, by Kazuo Ishiguro, is a story told in the limited, first-person perspective of the protagonist, Kathy, and takes place in the 1990's, though in a kind of parallel universe where clones are raised in societies separate from the rest of the world to be kept healthy until it is time to harvest their organs. Kathy, a clone who has been enlisted as a "carer," someone who acts as a nurse for others in the process of donating their organs, grew up in the boarding school of Hailsham, a place that she previously had few fond memories of, but a place she grows to realize is far superior to the other places clones are typically raised, where they are protected from the dangers of the outside world, are cared for, and are even allowed various indulgences of the outside world, such as sports and art. She later discovers that the comforts provided for them at Hailsham was nothing more than a failed experiment, an attempt to show the outside world that clones were just as human as the rest of them, and the art they'd always been encouraged to create was meant to prove that they, like other humans, had souls.

This book is about fate and its steadfast, unchangeability, as well as the inevitability of loss. While Kathy and her friends are able to experience a childhood not quite devoid of basic human pleasures like love, art, and laughter, their fates have already been chosen for them, to be given over to the cause of organ donation, and to lose one another, no matter how hard they try

to fight it. Although Kathy's opportunity to grow up at Hailsham has allowed her to experience things like love and friendship, it is arguable that she ends up suffering even more for it in the end, eventually being the last of her group of friends from Hailsham who hasn't been given over as a donor, who has felt the pain of loss as she awaits her unescapable fate more strongly than the rest, and whose eyes have been open to the feeble attempt at bringing life and innocence to the cloning world that has been dismissed and dismantled upon Hailsham's forced termination.

Kathy's journey to ultimately discover every dark and ugly truth of her world speaks deeply to humanity and the desensitization of society toward the suffering of others. While most of the world prefers to view clones as disposable, and not human enough to suffer or feel pain like everyone else, we are able to see from the beginning that this is a skewed, dishonest perspective through Kathy's close narrative. She displays great amounts of compassion throughout the story toward her friends, specifically Tommy, who has always struggled with controlling his temper and emotions, and toward the donors she eventually looks after. She is later contrasted with Miss Emily and Madame, the two guardians of Hailsham who were most known as the pioneers for the school, their failed attempt to provide clones with a better life prior to their fates and to preserve their childhood innocence for as long as possible. Although their efforts could be seen as admirable, by the time Kathy is able fully discover the truth from them, they are resigned, numb to the fact that all the students they'd worked so hard to protect will eventually be sent to their deaths and are brutally honest about the fact that even their best efforts couldn't keep them from looking at the clones with apathy. In the end Kathy, while not entirely human, is the one left with her humanity most intact.

Ness, Patrick. *Chaos Walking Series*. Walker Books Ltd, 2010. First Published, 2008.

Chaos Walking, by Patrick Ness, is a science fiction/fantasy series that takes place within the dystopian society of New World, a planet where humans have fled to escape the destruction of Old World, where war has wiped out most of the native species, where men and women live in separate societies and fight against one another for the ultimate authority of the planet, and where a contagious germ has infected all the men, causing their thoughts to be audible. Chaos is inevitable on a planet swarming with the audible thoughts of men, and war is something that is familiar and consistent. This series follows Todd Hewitt, a young man forced into becoming a soldier for the conspiratorial, manipulative president of Prentisstown. We watch as Todd learns to navigate a life of war, attempting to walk the line between enemies and allies, right and wrong, and justice and vengeance. These books show us how blurred these lines often become in war, how difficult it is to justify our actions in war, and how difficult it can be to even choose a side to fight on. How do you choose a side when each side is willing to commit atrocious acts of violence in order to win? Is right and wrong just a matter of perspective or will there always be a true hero and true villain in every story?

There are so many things to admire about this series. It is emotion invoking, it's fast-paced and thrilling from beginning to end, and both its villains and its heroes are multilayered and complex, crafted to be flawed, conflicted, and believably human. The author is not only willing to push his characters to the limits of their sanity over and over again, but he also manages to represent gentleness and kindness amid all the violence and chaos. These books teach us that selfless love and friendship can keep us human even in the midst of total despair. They teach us that pain and heartache can make beautiful things out of us, that we can learn from our mistakes, and that we can move on from a past of tragedy. "Choices may be unbelievably hard but they're never impossible. To say you have no choice is to release yourself from

responsibility and that's not how a person with integrity acts."

As a writer, there are so many things I have learned from this series. These are books where the gentlest moments are preceded by moments of hatred and violence, books that give us brief glimpses of peace after horrifying moments of chaos, books that jerk my emotions around and make me want to both laugh and cry on the same page. The characters are beautifully flawed, making grave mistakes yet surviving in spite of them, learning to live with guilt without letting it destroy them. Though this series could be categorized under the science fiction, fantasy, or dystopian genres, I have never read anything like it, and I can find nothing to compare it to. There is always so much going on, yet I never feel overwhelmed or confused. The author uses dialect within the narrative in order to draw the reader into the world of the protagonist, yet it is never distracting to the actual story. Each book of the series grows darker and richer as the characters grow older, as the fantasy world expands, and as the stakes are raised. These books have something to offer everyone, regardless of age and regardless of their preferred genre.

Patchett, Ann. *Bel Canto*. Harper Perennial, 2001.

Bel Canto, by Ann Patchett, is a story told in a seamless, omniscient narrative that follows the events of a political hostage situation organized by anti-government terrorists in an unnamed, South American country. Government officials from all over the world have gathered at the vice president's house for a birthday party for the renown, Japanese CEO Mr. Hosokawa, whom the country's leaders hope can be coaxed into partnering with their country by inviting his favorite opera singer, Roxanne Coss, to sing. Not long into the party, the house is swarmed by a group of terrorists in search of the president, who has conveniently decided to stay home so as not to miss his favorite soap opera on television. The absence of the president at the party leads

to a drawn-out hostage situation in which the terrorists work to negotiate with the government, unwilling to resign to their seemingly inevitable fate of either imprisonment or death.

This book is about overcoming obstacles and barriers, both visible and invisible—barriers of culture, language, social class, and politics to name a few, all of which are common breaches of communication and causes of division between humans. Patchett poses the question of whether these barriers be broken by human experiences that have the power to surpass these obstacles, like love, music, compassion, and empathy. Can music establish a connection between two people when language fails? Are people able to escape the fates that have been given to them by their culture, environment, past, and social class? When stripped of those labels barriers that divide us, are we all the same?

Over the course of months in the story, we as readers get to experience this breaking down of barriers, as the terrorists and hostages learn to coexist. The hostages learn more about the terrorists, discovering first the surprisingly young ages of the terrorists aside from their three leaders, then over time, they bond over common interests, most prominently, music. As Roxanne decides eventually that she cannot go on much longer without practicing her singing, her practicing brings life back to the odd mix of people. Empathy is born from the hostages recognizing bits of themselves in the terrorists—a young boy who reminds the vice president of his son, another who reveals he can sing as beautifully as Roxanne Coss, a female soldier asking Hosokawa's translator to teach her to read and write. The house becomes almost frozen in time and space, where everything happening in the world outside no longer exists, because the residents within have learned to live peacefully with one another. Even the reader is almost able to forget about the sealed fate of the terrorists, who inevitably must suffer for their crimes.

This book is the perfect example of intricately designed prose, as well as natural, omniscient narration. The narration allows the reader to effortlessly move from the mind of one character to the next, creating a world where each character, whether captive or captor, is empathetic in his own way, human, and carries the potential to be greater than the unfortunate events they have been thrust into. This book is equally beautiful, tragic, romantic, and devastating.

Saramago, Jose. *Blindness*. Mariner Books, 1999.

Blindness, by Jose Saramago, is a story told in a distant omniscient narrative about a rapidly spreading pandemic of “white blindness” that suddenly strikes an entire city, leaving its citizens in chaos and destruction. The distant narrative is told with few paragraph breaks and no dialogue tags, vague descriptions, and unnamed characters. As the city unravels beneath the chaos of blindness, with laws and societal structure being abandoned as its citizens strive for basic survival above all things, the vagueness of the narrative keeps the reader in the dark, much like the sickness that has stricken the city blind.

This story speaks deeply to morality and humanity. It questions the purpose of laws and government, breaking down society’s moral code, implying that society’s ability to uphold morality is dependent on its ability to identify and understand morality. When something threatening comes around to shake that society, when life is being threatened, it seems the need for survival outweighs the need for morality. When survival becomes most important, morality begins to shift, and what was once unacceptable becomes understandable. Things you once would never think to do become basic instinct. It seems we are only as good as the established

system we use to hold ourselves to standards of morality. Saramago is unrestrained in his representation of society and the crumbling of morality.

This story is eerie, masterful, classic literature mixed with elements of both horror and post-apocalyptic genre fiction. It poses questions regarding humanity, challenging us to reflect on our desire to uphold the law, to be well-mannered and respectable, to have goals and ambitions, and to be kind and honest. Because what happens to our desires when everyone around us is suddenly struck blind? What is the purpose of succeeding or achieving if there is no one around to witness our success? Does it matter to be well-mannered and respectable if there is no record of it? Is our performance completely dependent on the recognition we receive for it? Is there a purpose in maintaining our humanity if no one is around to witness the moments where we completely abandon our morals and principles? If everyone in the world were mutually blind, could it even be considered a chaotic world, if no one has the ability to witness the chaos? *“I don’t think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see.”*

There are many things to be admired in this story. It is genuinely scary, but it evokes the kind of fright that sneaks in and slowly consumes, and the kind that gets the reader lost in questioning. It questions the meaning of life and purpose without overwhelming the reader with a “moral of the story.” It is an example of seamless omniscient narrative, and it manages to keep the reader at a distance and establish a sense of vagueness without making the reader feel like the author is withholding. While the disturbing premise kept me reading, this book was difficult to read at times. The narrative style does match the chaos of the subject matter, but the general lack of sentence structure, dialogue tags, quotation marks and character names pulls the reader in

circles at times. However, this is a story that is worth the extra effort, as there is so much to admire and learn from it.

Saunders, George. *Civilwarland in Bad Decline*. Penguin Random House LLC, 1996.

Civilwarland in Bad Decline, by George Saunders, is a short story collection featuring a wild range of stories that provide a combination of chaotic, extravagant settings, numb, yet hungry characters, moments of comedic timing amid complete madness, and underlying social and political commentary on what it really means to be human in all its ugly, shameful glory. Saunders effortlessly mixes familiar, human moments and details with completely nonsensical, sometimes otherworldly elements. While full of satire, he manages to also create stories that are exploding with meaning and life lessons meant to warn us of the way the world is shifting if we never learn to get a hold of our humanity and continue to pursue self-indulgence and pleasure by means of running over whoever may be in our way.

The desire for power, greed and success is showcased in this collection as toxic to the human condition, and these elements, above all, are what allow the reader to draw so many connections from Saunders' caricatured world to our own, leading us to wonder just how far we may actually be from the violent, senseless world that is being showcased. And even amid the humor of such bizarre premises, we are gripped by the reality that the answer is that we aren't far at all from the chaotic world in the stories.

Morality is a complicated thing that is often compromised much more than it should be. Amid a life filled with so many superficially attractive elements like wealth and success, morality ends up falling to the bottom of our list of pursuits, sacrificed for a means or mere shot at pleasure, despite the fact that, just like life, the pleasures we are able to attain in this world are

fleeting. What Saunders does is speed up the process of revealing just how fleeting those things can be when the cost is the abandonment of morality. But not only is our morality, or the absence of it, something that becomes evident at times where we are blatantly faced with choices that could affect the well-being of another, but it is also brought to light in the moments where we are the quiet spectator, the silent wallflower, the casual, corner observer, the general audience, or the reader—we sit and watch, gawking at chaos without blinking or flinching, fascinated by the mere idea of human pain and suffering. Saunders has created an opportunity for our morality level to be brought to light through the simple process of reading his stories.

This is more than a collection of brilliant, captivating stories; this is a call to action. Through this collection, Saunders challenges us to open our eyes to the ways that we may have become blind to the suffering of others, urges us not to see ourselves as twice removed from the chaos that he presents, but to examine whether or not we can actually see ourselves in the actions of the characters in his stories. He is able to demand the attention of the reader through a sharp, vivid dreamscape and intelligently uses his wit as a means of holding that attention long enough to convey a powerful, necessary lesson.

CRAFT

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Presses Universitaires de France, 1958.

The Poetics of Space, by Gaston Bachelard, is a close examination of the soul of the writer in relation to literary foundations and the ways in which our imagination plays on our own works of art. Bachelard relates commonplace memories and fond topics of literature such as the house, the universe, items of furniture, corners, and the miniature to the imagination and to the

essence of what makes writers who they are. He argues that the soul “inaugurates” form from “commonplaces,” objects, memories, or places that we as writers take a simple pleasure in.

There is something so *poetic* about the way that Bachelard breaks down the commonplaces of our memories and pulls the meaning out of these small details that often become overshadowed or overlooked. He describes the importance of the house of our memories as much more than just a house, but “*our corner of the world,*” and “*our first universe.*” The house that we favor in our memories, whether it be what we’ve made as our present home or whether it be the home of our childhood, holds so much significance over our own being, and it’s something that not only often comes across in our writing, but can be used to channel creative energy from. In his words, “*we comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection,*” and as creative beings, we can hope for nothing more than to inspire others by using the power of the very memories that have inspired us.

Along with this, Bachelard talks fondly of the importance of daydreaming in order to keep the essence of these fond memories alive. “*It is on the plane of the daydream and not on that of facts that childhood remains alive and poetically useful within us.*” As writers, it is important to keep these memories alive and nearby through daydreaming, revisiting them frequently, allowing them to excite and renew us. Not only does daydreaming prove that we find power in the moments of expressed imagination, but that we can find strength and solace in solitude, because it is within the quiet moments of life that our dreams can flourish.

He continues on in depth, breaking down the process of which we create images from these moments and memories that we hold dear, recognizing the importance of revering certain images, allowing them to become transformed into something more substantial or beautiful than they perhaps had truly been. Images and memories are often warped over time, tailored to

become something more significant in order to match what we may need from them. But that does not mean that it's wrong; that is the purpose and beauty of imagination: to "*blend memory and legend*," and to live in "*the absolute sublimation that transcends all passions*."

As someone who has always treasured my active imagination, I am drawn to Bachelard's depiction of many layers of a creative being. As a person who cherishes and clings to words for comfort, who analyzes and pulls apart the memories and details of my life that have stuck with me, who desires to find ways to use my own experiences and grief to inspire, and who has often felt rejuvenated in times of isolation, I feel that much of what Bachelard describes in *The Poetics of Space* is clear and present in my own life. I was not only excited by his words, but felt challenged to break down what I would consider to be the corners of my own mind, world, and universe in order to see what kind of inspiration may be hidden there that can be utilized through means of my own artistic expression. Not only that, but it reminded me that through dreams and imagination, life is both immense and immeasurable.

Calvino, Italo. *The Uses of Literature*. Mariner Books, 1984.

The Uses of Literature, by Italo Calvino, is an essay collection that takes a close look at aspects of literature such as science and literature, philosophy and literature, politics and literature, eroticism and desire, elements of fantasy, and comparison of literature to cinema. It also spends time addressing common questions of writers such as "why do we write," "whom do we write for?" and "why read the classics?" He breaks down common classics in depth, challenging us to go back and revisit the books from our past and to not shy away from classic literature, as it is a "*voyage of discovery*" where books can "*conceal themselves in the folds of memory, camouflaging themselves as the collective or individual unconscious*." Calvino believed

in the importance of literature and the ability for it to influence masses. He believed in approaching books without preconceived notions or bias, as you never know when one can change your life. He challenges us to take a look at literature with eyes of wonder and with expectations that we will learn and grow from it. Though books withstand the test of time and remain the same, we are always growing and changing, so reading and rereading our favorite books at different times of our life can bring whole new meanings and perspectives for us.

One timeless element of this book is Calvino's address of "the classics." Calvino doesn't just defend classic literature, but he is also willing to address the fact that school can sometimes inhibit us from wanting to read the classics. Rather than teaching us that classics aren't meant to be read "*out of duty and respect, only out of love,*" school systems are forced to choose which classics we should love, and therefore cause us to believe the opposite: that classics are only read out of duty. However, as we grow older and discover our own admiration for these classics, we learn that the classics don't have to be the same for everyone; we can choose our own classics, books that speak to our souls and teach us something different every time we read them. He encourages us to explore this idea, to find our book and our classic author. "*Your classic author is one you cannot feel indifferent to, who helps you to define yourself in relation to him, even in dispute with him.*"

This left me examining my own literary life, wondering which author I would regard this highly. It left me thinking of so many books of my past, ones I've read at one time or another that are considered timeless classics that I couldn't stand or disregarded as boring or unimportant just because what they were saying wasn't relevant to me at the time. Calvino challenges us to revisit these kinds of books; they are obviously considered classics for a reason. Yet he doesn't judge us for dismissing books; many times, we simply aren't ready to read them. But that doesn't

mean that their magic won't come to us later on. *"To read a great book for the first time in one's maturity is an extraordinary pleasure, different from (though one cannot say greater or lesser than) the pleasure of having read it in one's youth."*

I am a completely different person than I was even one year ago. My experiences have shaped who I am in the present and the way I view life. Of course, the kinds of books that speak to me now are going to be different than the ones that moved me in the past. I was challenged by Calvino to revisit those books of my past looking through a new lens of maturity. I have always wanted to go back and reread those classics we were "forced" to read in school before we were ready. I am excited by this concept of finding my book and my classic author.

Orwell, George. *Why I Write*. Penguin Books, 2005. First Published, 1946.

Why I Write is George Orwell's self-reflection on what it means to be a writer and how his life experiences and youth helped grow him into the adult writer he became. After spending much of his youth ignoring his burning desire to be a writer, Orwell describes his becoming a writer as inevitable, something of which he was "*outraging*" his true nature to ignore. He believes writers are born with impulses that burn within them that push them to write: "*sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse, and political purpose.*" He is neither proud nor ashamed of this fact about himself; he describes writers as vain and describes the process of writing a book as a painful, grueling process. But he also describes his need to write as something that is unavoidable, a driving force that is greater than him.

These ideas are woven throughout small memoirs of Orwell's experiences of life and war, politics, society, life and death. He continues to remind the audience throughout that our experiences have everything to do with not only who we are as a writer, but why we write,

pushing us to examine our own lives and experiences in order to trace our own line through history and see how it has affected the outcome of our writing. He also encourages us to become a part of our own history and heritage, because through the acknowledgment of the hurt and pain that exists within it, we can learn and grow stronger from it. *“We must add to our heritage or lose it, we must grow greater or grow less, we must go forward or backward.”*

Along with this idea, Orwell encourages political writing, stating that it should be written about because it is part of who we are. He states that *“people utterly unable to grasp what age they are living in or what enemy they are fighting”* are being bred by the obsession with material gain and the vain pursuit of money. His goal has always been to mix art with politics, but he only chooses to write in this way when there is a message that is burning within him that he needs to get out to the public. Though he believes writers to be vain and self-seeking, he also praises them, as their desire to be heard is still greater than their desire for money.

Orwell’s description of what it feels like to be a writer hits home for me. I understand what it feels like to feel like an outsider, and to feel like I don’t fit in because of the part of me that is desperate to be writing. It is a quirk that many cannot understand—feeling more at home within fantasy realms and dreams than in reality, having words that are building up within you that you feel you cannot express out loud, ideas and visions that come to you suddenly, that cause you to stop everything you’re doing in order to write it down immediately. For Orwell, writing is a burning desire, a painful, yet cathartic process, something that both thrills and terrifies. Many times, authors describe the passion for writing as something that is flowery and poetic, but they forget to represent the uglier, more agonizing sides to writing. But my best writing has often come from a place of deep grief and sadness, where there is nothing more I can do in order to try and make sense of the world but to write. It is in these moments of quiet

solitude that writers truly get know themselves.

Patchett, Ann. *This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2013.

This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage by Ann Patchett may not seem like your typical collection of essays in relation to craft. However, this is more than just a series of essays about writing; this is an examination of a human in the purest, most honest sense, a look of many angles of a woman and the things that make her who her are, the things which, in the end, have made her into the writer she is. In this series of essays, she talks of life, of love, of learning to love herself, how her failed marriage led up to a truly happy one, how she came to discover that she was a writer, and how she came to own a bookstore. She cherishes not only the art of writing or the value of reading, but she has come to act as what she calls a “spokesperson” for printed, tangible copies of books. *“If you feel that the experience of reading a book is valuable, then read the book. This is how we change the world: we grab hold of it. We change ourselves.”*

Ann Patchett is a master at crafting prose, both in her fiction and in her non-fiction essays. I find myself clinging to every word she chooses, as every sentence lingers in my mind and inspires me to strive for perfection within my own prose. I would read anything by her just for the sake of nurturing my love for words and language, in which case anything written by her could be considered a craft piece. For this reason, the way Patchett talks about the art of writing is eloquent and moving, as she talks of literature and writing with genuine love and passion, comparing writing a book to caring for a dog: *“We serve them, and in return, they thrive.”*

As she reflects back on her journey as a writer and the obstacles she faced throughout the pursuit of her master’s degree and while striving for publication, she spares few details about her life, including her Catholic background, her family, the dog she treated like a child, and friends

she met along the way, all things of which she views as a basis of her writing, recognizing that the heart of her writing has always been inspired by *“a life lived close to home.”* She is honest about the fact that much of her ideas for her writing are borrowed from moments or experiences within her own life, as she has always looked at the world around her as a basis for inspiration, or as a possible story to be told. The way she views the world around her is refreshingly positive, speaking of even the darker moments of her life such as her failed marriage as opportunities for growth and improvement. *“I try to study our happiness so that I will be able to remember it in the future, just in case something happens and we find ourselves in need.”*

As a writer, this series of essays challenges me to look at my own life in a new light: my circumstances are not only opportunities for growth as an individual, but they are opportunities for growth as a writer. Everything that has happened to me is not only a part of what makes me who I am, but it has shaped me as a writer. My life and the circumstances that have happened to me are stories to be told. I have been given things that only I can say to the world. What more could we want as writers than to grab hold of those words and change ourselves? And one could only hope that we end up changing the world in the process.

Ruefle, Mary. *On Imagination*. Sarabande Books, 2017.

Mary Ruefle’s *On Imagination* explores various ideas of what exactly imagination is, whether it is something that exists aside from thought and logic, how often we use our imagination, and what kind of limits there are to imagination. She begins by stating that she believes that thinking and imagining are one. *“We think in both images and words, and since words are imaginary enactments (the word “tree” is not a tree), thinking and imagining are one.”* She then goes on to talk about how there are good and bad moments of imagination, and

there are right and wrong ways to imagine. We can both create incredible worlds beyond our own with our imagination, and we can also be driven crazy by it, allowing it to add to our paranoia or fear. Imagination is something to be praised, but it also is sometimes something that is placed on a pedestal by the creative mind, allowing us to forget that it is something that can cause bad as much as it can cause good.

“The imagination has its own life and its own autonomy, the imagination is not what you play with, the imagination plays with you. It has the power to both create and destroy, to both inform and deform.”

I found the above statement to be too applicable, as it proves more than anything else that imagination and thinking goes hand-in-hand, despite the fact that many people who would consider themselves to be the logical, “thinker” types would not consider themselves to also be creative or imaginative. But sometimes, an overactive imagination could be proof of even thinking too much. We are the people who relive every conversation of our day and imagine what everyone must be thinking of us. We are the people who hear a loud noise coming from outside of our house and decide it must be a monster or terrorist dead set on destroying us. It’s true that our imagination will play with us more often than we play with it. It’s also true that most of our worries, fears, anxieties, and insecurities likely stem from our imaginations getting the better of us.

Another fun idea that Ruefle explores is the “real” versus the “made up.” As she breaks down different concepts behind imagination, she says, “I am making all this stuff up.” But they are her own ideas, so she also states that they are also real. Making things up is how things are made, and “real things are made things,” she says. She wonders how far we can take this concept regarding the real versus the made up. How much of reality is made up? Everything can

be categorized as something “made,” whether it be by a person, or by the universe. Therefore, one could say that all reality is made up, but also, all made up things are real. Ruefle continues to play with this concept, along with many others, continuously bringing up herself amid the musing, wondering aloud if each complex thought is result of her imagination. “When I had this thought, was I using my imagination?”

Ruefle’s reflective essay on imagination really embodies the creative spirit and what it feels like to be a creative thinker. Imagination becomes more than just possibilities; it becomes the basis of reality. We all construct our own reality out of imagination, and we allow our dreams come to life by seeing it as more than just possibilities. As someone who categorizes herself as not only a dreamer, but a chronic thinker, I enjoyed Ruefle’s string of thoughts and found her back and forth between what is real and made up to be strangely familiar.

VITA

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EDUCATION

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Old Dominion University, 5115 Hampton Boulevard, Norfolk, VA 23529, August 2017-May 2020. Thesis Title: *Responsible Friend*.

Bachelor of Arts in English at Old Dominion University, December 2013.

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

Part-time Advisor, Perry Honors College, Old Dominion University, June 2019-present.
Responsibilities include: providing support and advising to undergraduate students and assisting with resume building and completion of honors-specific curriculum.

Graduate Assistant, Perry Honors College, Old Dominion University, January 2018-May 2019.
Responsibilities include: assisting Dean of Perry Honors College with various tasks including, but not limited to, one-on-one undergraduate student support and advising.

PRESENTATIONS

Perry Honors College speaker at Old Dominion University Freshman Preview, Summer 2018 and 2019.

INVOLVEMENT

Editor of *Barely South Review* at Old Dominion University, August 2018-December 2019.

Reader of *Barely South Review* at Old Dominion University, August 2017-December 2019.

Advisory Board Member of Batten Arts & Letters at Old Dominion University to represent MFA program, January 2018-May 2019.