

HEART SHADES:  
STORIES OF LOVE, LIFE, AND HUMOR

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in the Department of English

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March 2016

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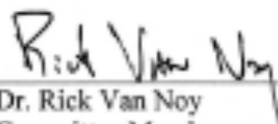
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## **Abstract**

*Heart Shades: Stories of Love, Life, and Humor* is a collection of six fictional, interconnecting short stories. Each story is written in the first person, allowing the reader to experience the unique lives and perspectives of the six different narrators. The linear progression of each narrative captures how the characters choose to navigate their lives while a series of flashbacks embedded throughout the collection help shed light on the intimate details of the Zander family. The Zanders and the people connected to them represent an alternative view of what's considered the typical, nuclear family. Family, in the end, is not about who is a part of it, but rather how it's defined in terms of love and support.

An accompanying analysis follows the collection. This analysis examines how the collection relates to the contemporary short story cycle. In addition, the analysis also responds to the social, historical, and creative contexts that the collection addresses.

Finally, a signature touch of humor present throughout the stories and analysis. While highlighting the many trials and errors of humanity, humor also has a profound ability to heal. When faced with many great challenges, laughter helps us connect and move forward.

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## **Dedication**

For Jilli Mac  
and to every Elliot out there

## Acknowledgements

This collection of short stories would not have been possible without Dr. Tim Poland, whose guidance, patience, and kindness not only helped me grow as a writer but as a person. His wit is boundless and inspiring, much like the nicknames I earned throughout the years of knowing him, starting with *smartass*.

I'd like to extend my gratitude to Dr. Jeff Saperstein, who introduced me to *Moby-Dick* as an undergraduate. Somehow, some way, a good *Moby-Dick* joke can be worked into anything. I also want to thank Dr. Donald Secreast and Dr. Rick Van Noy for serving on my thesis committee.

To Autumn and Emil, I cannot thank you enough for your friendship and your families' stories. Grandma Allen's escaped boob will forever be captured within these pages, floating away with the tide until it's returned. As for my own family, your love and acceptance allowed me to be who I am today, quirks and all.

Finally, to Issy, I found a happiness in me that I didn't know existed until I met you. For all the nights and days you listened to my stories, read and edited, I can only repay you with one thing. Love.

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## Finding Home

The best makeup advice I ever received was from the mortician's daughter. After years of secretly buying *Seventeen* magazine from the corner store along with inexpensive lipstick, eyeshadow, and blush, and having to hide my illicit purchases in a shoebox labeled 'baseball cards' under my bed, I finally met someone who recognized the beauty within me. Simone was my confidante throughout college, encouraging me in her own charming way. She'd drunkenly quote from *Hamlet*, shouting lines such as 'to thine own self be true' over wine coolers and Cheetos. As a meager freshman, I had reluctantly signed up for human bio to fulfill a GenEd, not expecting to meet the woman who would one day become my maid of honor.

Simone caught my interest the first day she walked into the biology classroom with her lips pressed together in a welcoming smile that dimpled her warm, dark cheeks. Her lipstick was a bright red that matched the cross in her Union Jack crop top. As she walked past my desk, her springy, coiled black hair bounced with each confident stride. She took a seat a few desks away from me, placing her *Spice Girls* binder on top of the graffiti-marred desk. Too timid to talk to her outright, I kept my face turned to our grey-haired, bushy-mustached professor until he asked the class to go around and introduce themselves. When Simone spoke, I turned to face her, noting how relaxed she looked in her cutoff denim shorts and the tied flannel shirt around her slim waist.

"Hey, everyone. I'm Simone," she said with a laugh. "I'm a sophomore from the Bay area. And let's see," she paused for a moment, running her hand through her hair. "Well, my dad's a mortician, so I know a lot about anatomy." She laughed again over the

‘ew gross’ and ‘that’s cool’ comments from our classmates. Nothing fazed her as her cheery smile remained and the professor moved on to his next student.

I was so determined to soak up her appearance, thinking I could absorb just one ounce of Simone’s chic style, that I ignored my peers’ introductions until I felt the unwanted gaze of over a dozen eyeballs on me. I found myself frozen in my seat, realizing it was my turn and I hadn’t thought of anything to say. To make matters worse, I wasn’t sure if my practiced pitch was high enough or, out of anxiousness, I’d slip into falsetto. Taking a deep breath, I tried calming my jittery nerves, praying that I wouldn’t mess up something so simple as my own name.

Meekly, I spoke. “Hi, I’m April.” Blush was already burning my pale face, and I still had three more facts to state. “I’m a freshman, and, um, I want to be a journalist, and-” I’m trans. Only my professors knew, after I went to each one of their offices the day before classes started and told them, politely, *don’t call me Bart*. There had to be something else I could share. I glanced at Simone’s desk and the binder on top of it. Staring back at me were the faces of Posh, Baby, Scary, Sporty, and Ginger Spice. Sharpied above them was their motto, *Girl Power!* I looked up directly into Simone’s inviting brown eyes. My lips moved. “And I love the *Spice Girls*.”

Her squeal pierced the rest of the room. “Me, too!” Placing her hands gleefully on her cheeks, Simone swooned in her seat. “I found my study buddy.”

The attention of the room was back on Simone as a few people snickered at her display of adoration for the British all-girl pop group. I sighed a breath of relief. At first I didn’t know if she was trying to save me or if she was being serious. It was definitely the latter. After class ended, it was Simone’s mission to know if I was truly a fan.

“What’s your favorite song on *Spice*?” she asked.

“*Say You’ll Be There*,” I said, turning several shades of pink. After being asked the default questions of ‘what’s your major’ and ‘where are you from’ by my hallmates, I craved a genuine conversation. “Do you have a favorite Spice Girl?”

“Scary Spice,” Simone said and squeezed her binder tightly in her arms. A smile was plastered across her face. “What about you?”

That was an easy question to answer. One day I would have the same brightly colored tresses as my favorite pop icon. “Ginger Spice,” I said, smiling back. All the pesky insecurities that typically kept me from speaking dissipated into courage. “Do you want to grab lunch?”

“I was just about to ask you the same,” Simone said. “I know the perfect place. It even has outdoor seating.”

For Simone to be the daughter of a mortician, she had and still has the most lively of dispositions. We walked across campus to a small cafe, laughing along the way as we basked in the California sunshine. I told her I was from the East Coast, and she told me about her family’s mortuary business in San Francisco. As a sophomore, Simone pointed out the places to go and hang out around campus along with the spot where she first met her girlfriend, Diane. She said that despite her girlfriend’s taste in grunge music, Diane was a lovely person with vivid pink hair and a penchant for feeding the university squirrels. The outside of the cafe where we sat had a few of the critters scurrying around for scraps, but we ignored them. Simone and I were engrossed in discussion, and we would have continued if I didn’t have to leave for my next class. Before departing, we decided to have dinner later so I could meet Diane. Simone and her girlfriend introduced



me to their favorite vegetarian bistro, and over hummus wraps and salad greens, I knew I made the right choice to uproot myself from home. Cultivated by my new friends, I finally found the place where I could grow.

By early fall, the leaves were starting to turn to hardy yellows and oranges. Simone and I had our first human bio test, and instead of hunkering down in the library, we stayed in her room to order pizza with Diane. I spent most of my free time in their dorm, watching *Friends* in the lounge and baking in the communal kitchen with them. At first, I was afraid to overstay my welcome but that was doubt whispering in my ear. In their room plastered with posters of neon animals, muscle cars, *Nirvana*, and *Spice Girls*, I realized Simone and Diane wanted me to expand their eclectic group. I was happy to join them. I made myself comfortable in their tie-dye beanbag chair, trying to determine if I wanted emerald green or chiffon pink nails. Simone sat across from me while Diane was on her bed.

“Do either of you want plain cheese pizza or should we order two veggies?” Diane balanced the phone between her shoulder and ear, twirling the cord around her pudgy finger. She was an avid animal lover, yet when strangers overheard she was a vegetarian, they would offhandedly make snide remarks about her thick and curvaceous body. Like Simone, though, she possessed her own confidence and beauty.

“Two veggies is fine, honeybee.” Simone scattered her nail supplies across the shag rug. “How about a pizza with mushrooms?”

“You and decomposition,” I said, handing Simone the pink bottle back. “I’m going to go with green. It’s my favorite color.”

Diane pursed her lips, accentuating her rosy cheeks that complimented her pixie cut. “If you want to get really wild,” she said, “we should dye your hair green.” I opened my mouth to protest but Diane’s face scrunched up. “Hello?” She raised a pierced eyebrow then scoffed into the phone. “No, I don’t want to dye *your* hair green. I want to order pizza.”

A shriek of laughter filled the room. Grasping her sides, Simone rolled on to the rug. “Oh, lord!” She knocked over the bottles of polish and flattened the cotton balls, still cackling. “They think they’re getting the Diane special!” She tried to wipe away tears as Diane’s face turned almost as bright as her hair.

“I’m about to give you the Diane special,” her girlfriend spat. “Huh? No!” She grumbled into the receiver. “I just want to order your damn two-for-one special.”

I tried to conceal my own laugh as Diane grew more frustrated with the person on the phone. Simone and I wouldn’t get any studying for the test done, but I didn’t care. Biology wasn’t as important as being with my friends.

---

A cold snap had traveled up the coast, making us bundle up in coats and scarves. We watched our breath linger in the crisp October air as we sat in the garden where Simone and Diane had first met. The frost had killed most of the plants, but Simone thought the spot took on a different kind of charm. It was the same place where I decided to open up about myself while we sipped on cups of hot chocolate.

“Bart?” The B-word blurted from Diane’s plumped lips. “Like Bart Simpson Bart? No wonder you wanted to change your name.”

“I know,” I said, taking a sip of my drink. “It’s the worst.”

“I think all names have an intrinsic quality to them,” Simone said. She then plucked a wilting flower and twirled it between her fingers. “April’s nice though. There’s new blooms, bees buzz around, and everyone sells chocolate bunnies.”

I chuckled as Diane finished off her cup of hot chocolate and tossed it in the bin. “Speaking of bees, my little bunny rabbit,” Diane said, “your honeybee is freezing her ass off.”

“I guess it’s time to go in.” Simone stood up. “How about you, April? Ready to try out my autumn palette?”

Earlier in the week, Simone, Diane, and I went shopping for fall fashions. Diane had let me borrow a pair of boots to keep my feet warm while Simone lent me the purple overcoat her Aunt Dorris had given her. She said I could keep it since her aunt had gifted her everything two sizes too big; however, I found a sturdy tan overcoat at a secondhand store that matched most of the clothes in my wardrobe. When I first arrived in California, I spent the remainder of the money I had from selling Grandpa Castor’s baseball cards on a few earth tone outfits. I couldn’t afford to buy new cosmetics, but fortunately Simone had plenty that she was dying for me to try on.

“You’ve been talking about it all week,” I said. “Let’s do it.”

“You two have fun.” Diane rubbed her gloved hands together for warmth. “I got to get ready for work.” She grimaced. “Nothing like serving body parts to the heathens and watching them smother it in gravy.”

“You’ll be okay, sweetie.” Simone kissed Diane on her cheek. She then gently squeezed her girlfriend’s hands as their lips met. “I love you.”

Diane grinned. “I’ll steal you some cookies from the dining hall.”

“Oatmeal raisin is my favorite.”

“I know.” She turned to leave. “Your taste in cookies is almost as bad as your taste in music.” Simone puffed up her cheeks, making Diane laugh. “You’re so cute.”

The slightest bit of envy resonated in my heart as I watched my friends. I wondered if anyone would ever tell me *I love you* or that I was *cute*, but I pushed that thought out of my mind. One day, I reasoned, a relationship would happen when I least expected it. Dating could wait.

Parting from Diane, Simone and I swiftly walked back to my dorm. Our teeth chattered as we reached the old building. The moment we stepped inside, we were greeted with a blast of hot air and a whiff of burnt popcorn and gym socks. I was situated on the first floor after the resident director met me and said there was a vacancy on the hall. She didn’t tell me the room was designed for someone in a wheelchair, but I was happy to live in a single. On my door was the newest monthly tag my RA had made me. It was in the shape of a pumpkin with ‘April’ done in green lettering to look like vines. It was silly, but I kept it up. I liked seeing my name.

Inside my room, Simone and I peeled off our outer layers, placing our coats and scarves on my bed. I turned on the CD player and shuffled through my albums as Simone transformed my desk into her workstation. She stacked my overpriced textbooks on the floor, making room for her tubes of lipstick and mascara, palettes of eyeshadow, compacts of blushes and powders, and brushes of all shapes and sizes. She then tossed me a bottle of makeup remover.

“Ready for a fresh look?” Simone asked.

“Do you ask that to the bodies in the mortuary, too?” I took the bottle and headed into the bathroom. My hair looked like a disheveled bird nest from sitting outside in the garden. I tried to brush it out while the water from the faucet warmed.

“Sometimes I suggest something fresh to the living ones,” Simone said over the sound of the sink. “A lot of grannies caked on the eye makeup.” As she continued to talk, I scrubbed clean my cheap drugstore cosmetics with a damp washcloth. I avoided the reflection in the mirror, keeping my attention on Simone’s words instead. “I think if there’s ever a time in your life you want your makeup to look the best, it might as well be your final act.” Simone poked her head into the bathroom. “That’s why people should live everyday as if it’s the last show before the casket is sealed.”

I immediately held up the washcloth to hide my face. “Don’t come in. I look awful right now.”

“No, you don’t,” she said, stepping into the room. “Stop putting yourself down.”

I glanced in the mirror at my messy brown hair, uneven complexion, and dull features. Slowly, I lowered the washcloth and placed it on the porcelain basin. I fixed my eyes to the tiled floor.

“April,” Simone said in her soothing voice, “you’re still the same lovely person whether you wear makeup or not. You’re also one of my best friends.” She closed the distance between us, making my heart pound in my chest. Simone leaned her face towards mine. Tenderly, she kissed my cheek with a sisterly affection that while never spoken, was ever present. My pulse steadied as I looked into her eyes. Simone flashed me a smile then picked up the washcloth. She pressed it against my cheek. “I got lipstick on you.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I don’t mind.”

Back in my room, I sat at my desk. Simone slipped a headband over my ears to push the mousy colored locks away from my face. Growing out my hair had been a struggle, especially when my mother threatened to cut it off because I looked like ‘one of *The Beatles*.’ I tried to wear it in a cute bob, but I wasn’t sure what my mom would think when I came home for Thanksgiving break. I wasn’t going to dwell on her though, deciding to focus on myself for once.

With Simone’s canvas unobscured, she began her work, applying a layer of concealer, powder, and foundation to my face. I watched in my mirror as her brush danced across my skin. She narrated each of her steps, pointing out where I needed to highlight around my eyes and contour along my jawline. Her brush moved on to my cheeks, my upper lip, my nose, and my brow. Each stroke softened the reflection in the mirror, but my adam’s apple still stuck out like an unwanted protrusion.

“Don’t worry.” Simone applied more contouring powder to her brush. “I’m covering it.”

“Will this really work?” I questioned as I felt a lump swell in my throat.

“The powder’s a few shades darker than your skin, so it makes it less prominent,” she explained while she dusted over the area I often covered with turtlenecks and scarves. “I learned this tip from the lead makeup artist while working on a production of *Hamlet*.”

“Is that why you’re always randomly quoting from it?” I asked.

“Yes.” Her smile dimpled her dark cheeks, reminding me of the first day we met. “I have fond memories of that production, even if the director was a total nut.” Simone took a step back. “He insisted Ophelia and the other women had to be played by young

men like ‘real’ Shakespeare. Whatever,” she said, admiring her work. “At least it taught me something useful.”

As I looked in the mirror, tempted to run my fingers across my seemingly smooth neck, I had to agree with Simone. “You’re right. That’s incredible.” I turned to her. “It looks like it’s gone.”

A huge grin spread across Simone’s face. “Now you don’t have to wear any of those old lady scarves.”

My cheeks reddened. “I like those scarves. They belong to my Gram.”

“Your Gram?” Simone picked up her blush compact. “You haven’t told me about her.”

While I was away at college, it was difficult to think about my grandmother. I missed her and worried if my parents were treating her right. She had to move in with them as she was too frail to take care of herself. My parents ended up selling most of her worldly possessions and stored the rest in the attic. I snuck up there the week before I left for California, taking Gram’s collection of silk scarves. Each scarf was a practical and sentimental item to keep with me.

“She’s amazing,” I said. “I used to go over to her house when I was younger, and she’d let me sit and play at her vanity for hours. Gram even showed me how to put on lipstick and mascara.” I had since then learned how to apply my makeup with a more skillful hand, but to an eight-year-old child, my grandmother’s guidance meant everything. “I’m not really looking forward to Thanksgiving break, but at least I get to see her again.”

“That’s good,” Simone said while applying blush to my face. “Cherish the time you have. This will be the first Thanksgiving without my Aunt Dorris and her oyster stuffing.” She sighed and set the compact down. “I’m going to miss her cooking the most. Maybe not her bosom hugs,” she giggled. “My aunt had the kind of chest you’d get lost in, and I’ll tell you what.” She picked up the eyeshadow. “Aunt Dorris missed breakfast one morning, so I went to check on her, and sure enough, she had passed away in her sleep. Her breasts had spilled to either side like Moses had parted the Red Sea.”

I cringed at the thought of having to find a loved one dead, but Simone was indifferent.

“What’s the face for?” she asked. “It’s not like you have to worry about saggy tits. You can pick out the perkier pair you want.” She chuckled. “I always thought people called back home *silicone* valley because all the rich white ladies had breast implants.”

I went from mortified to cracking up in seconds. “If I ever need a boob connoisseur, I’ll come visit you in San Francisco.”

“You should.” Simone leaned down to resume her work. “Make sure you hold still. I don’t want to mess up your eye makeup.”

“Technically,” I said, closing my eyes, “it’s your makeup.”

“Lucky for you,” she said, “I’m leaving it with you.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I blurted out.

“Keep your face relaxed.” She continued applying the eyeshadow. “The foundation and powders I bought for Diane. She never wears them, and it’s not like they match my black skin,” she added. “You’ll use them, though, so you should have them.”



Simone lifted the brush away. “As for the eyeshadow, I think you look fantastic in it. Open your eyes.”

I looked in the mirror. The gold matte of the shadow brought out the flecks of hazel in my eyes while the blush was more eloquent and mature. For the first time, I saw myself as an adult and not an awkward teenager. I stood up and wrapped my arms around Simone.

“Thank you.”

She hugged me back. “You’re welcome, April.” Simone then patted my head, using her tall height to an advantage. “Maybe you should let Diane dye your hair.”

“As long as it’s not green,” I muttered.

Simone began to laugh, filling both my room and my heart with her mirth. Leaving for break wouldn’t be so hard, knowing I could return to her embrace.

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I stood in front of my mirror with my suitcase. Most of the clothes had remained packed since the beginning of the semester, making it easier to travel home. The hemmed khakis and red polo shirt I wore were too big on my slender frame, and the loafers my mother had purchased pinched my feet. Despite this and a lack of makeup, there was a glow to my face I had not noticed before.

Confidently, I put on my tan overcoat and scarf to catch the bus to the airport. I set my suitcase out in the hall and turned to lock my door. I was hoping no one would be up before seven, but I spotted my RA in her jogging clothes.

“April,” she said, “I barely recognized you.”

I nodded. “Good morning.”

“Going home for break, I see. I hope you have a good time.” She was so close to letting me leave, but something stopped her. “You know, I have a friend you should meet when you get back. He just loves fashion and shopping. I think you two would hit it off.”

My lips curled into a smile. I wanted to tell her *I’m not gay, I’m trans*, but I had to pick and choose my battles. “Sounds great. I have to go now. See you.” I left in a hurry with my suitcase in tow. On the bus, I thought about how my mom had made the same mistake. She had caught me trying on her lipstick when I was about four or five. The shrillness of her voice still rang in my ears as a painful memory. Maybe one day, I had hoped, she could accept me as her daughter.

The flight home was uneventful, allowing me to sleep. I was restful but nervous in the airport as people passed by through the arrivals gate. There were several families waiting for loved ones, yet my petite mother stood tall with her arms folded. When our eyes met, her jaw dropped.

“Is that my baby?” she asked.

“Hi, Mom,” I said.

My mom wasn’t afraid to push her way through the crowd. Her short arms wrapped around me, and when she was done squeezing the life out of me, she eyed me up and down like a mother hen.

“You’re so skinny, Bart. What have you been eating?” She then stroked my hair. “And you need a haircut. You look like Ringo Starr.”

“Come on, Mom. Anyone but Ringo.” I walked with her to the exit. “Is Dad in the car?”

“Yes, he’s with your Gram,” she said. “We can’t leave her by herself anymore.”

When I reached the car, my father hugged me with one arm and lifted my suitcase with the other. I'm sure he had always wanted me to take after him, but I was built like my mother. He also commented on my weight, but I figured my parents didn't need to know about my mostly vegetarian diet. We drove home to my mother rambling about the neighbors and her co-workers while I quietly sat in the backseat next to my grandmother. Gram told me my hairstyle was cute and that she was knitting me a scarf. I appreciated the gesture, though I noticed her hands shook when she held the needles. I wanted to ask about Gram's health, but my mom continued on about her own trifles.

Most of the Thanksgiving break I spent in my room, flipping through old copies of *Seventeen* magazine and talking to Simone and Diane on the phone. My dad was curious about my friends, but not wanting him to inquire if I planned on dating one of them, I lied and said their names were *Simon* and *Dan*. I at least kept some of their interests the same, telling him that *Simon* wanted to drive muscle cars and *Dan* listened to *Nirvana*. My dad didn't need to know about my and Simone's obsession with the *Spice Girls* or Diane's *Lisa Frank* collection of puppies and kitties. He also didn't need to know what we discussed over the phone, even if our conversations mostly involved our Thanksgiving family traditions.

While both my friends focused on the food, I was a parade purist. I watched the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade on television with Gram as she slowly continued work on my scarf. My father chided me for not sticking around for the game, but when it came to watching football, I'd rather peel potatoes. My mom often gave me miniscule tasks in the kitchen, but that year she had me make one of the sweet potato casseroles. She

preferred candied pecans on hers, but since Gram couldn't chew nuts, I made one casserole with pineapples and mini marshmallows.

Our dinner was relatively quiet. The most excitement at the table was asking to pass the salt. Eventually, I excused myself and napped in my room, waiting to call Simone. I wasn't sure when her family ate dinner because of our time zone differences, but she answered the phone right away when I called. Her howl of laughter made me smile as she seemed to be perpetually in a good mood. After telling me that Diane's family had to order Chinese because they burned the Tofurky, Simone prided herself in making her family of morticians upchuck their oyster shooters when she compared the mollusks to dissected testicles. Maybe I was fortunate my family's meal had been boring.

I returned to California on Sunday, knowing the cram sessions before finals would soon begin. Simone and Diane met me at the university bus stop. The first words out of Diane's mouth when she saw me in my polo shirt was that I looked like a disgruntled *Ralph Lauren* model. Simone hushed her girlfriend before telling me we had to decorate our dorm rooms for Christmas. When we weren't cutting out paper snowflakes, my friends and I baked cookies in preparation for the sugar cravings we'd have during all-nighters. Simone, Diane, and I traded off on who made coffee, and frequently I found myself crashing in Simone's bed since she slept in Diane's anyway. We avoided the library, finding the comforts of their dorm room more conducive to surviving the end of the semester.

Unlike my last trip from the university to the airport, I was anxious with the prospect of returning home. For an entire month, I would be without my friends. I knew I could call them, but I envied their families' acceptance and eccentricities. My straight-

laced household left little room for fun, except when my mom needed help in the kitchen. Whether she thoroughly enjoyed baking or was obligated to live up to the ideal image of a homemaker, our kitchen was transformed into a sugar cookie factory. Simone, Diane, and I had nothing on my mother's ability to crank out cookies. Mixing bowls lined the counters. We had two dozen different shaped cookie cutters and sprinkles galore. Even my father assisted in the kitchen as he knew holiday cookies consumed Mom's sanity. She gave them out to neighbors, people at work, store clerks, and mailed them to the family members she talked about but hadn't seen in years.

When Mom didn't need an assistant baker, I'd sneak away with a few of the softest cookies for Gram. I told her all about college and my friends while she nibbled and knitted. She listened eagerly until her eyelids began to droop. Before her nap, Gram confessed she wished she had been as brave as me to leave home. My parents didn't want me to attend school in California, but Gram supported me and my travel expenses. She had given me so much that I wanted to make sure I did something special for her.

In the attic, I remembered finding a box of old photographs in my grandmother's belongings. I decided to put together an album for her and carried the box into my room. Written dates were on the back of most of the photos, allowing me to sort through them by decade. As I grouped the photos, I thought of myself as a curious time traveler, wanting to know more about the people captured in the moment. Assembling Gram's photo album reminded me why I had become interested in journalism. I strived to do more than just retell the news. I wanted to depict the lives of the people at the heart of every story.

When I reached the bottom of the box, there was a yellowed envelope seemingly tucked away from the other photographs. I opened it, pulling out a photo with no date but the inscription ‘taken by Helen’ on the back. I flipped it over to see a young lady with a sultry look on her face as she peeked over her shoulder. She stood thigh deep in water, exposing her backside. Instantly, I was captivated by the woman’s facial expression. *I want to be like her*, I thought. *Confident, beautiful, and just a tad mischievous*. I then realized the woman was Gram.

Fearing that my mother would flip if she found the photo, I slipped it back into its envelope. I then pulled out the shoebox from under my bed and hid the envelope inside a magazine. While I worked on the album, I wondered who Gram had been before she married and raised a family. I tried piecing together her life on every page. On Christmas morning I watched as I reunited Gram with memories of old friends and relatives. She hugged me, thanking me for her gift. That meant more to me than any present under the Christmas tree.

The festivities of the holiday season wrapped up on New Year’s Eve. I was ready to return to school and knew the photo of Gram would come with me. On the last day of break, I eagerly packed for the airport. It was late in the evening when I arrived in California, but not late enough to avoid my RA in the hallway along with the friend she wanted me to meet. For once, I was thankful for jetlag and escaped another awkward conversation by excusing myself to my room. Before getting into bed, I opened my suitcase and unpacked the photo I framed of Gram. I then placed it on my nightstand along with the scarf she had knitted me. I slept soundly until morning when I heard giddy

voices outside my door followed by a knock. Simone and Diane had surprised me with breakfast.

We sat in my room enjoying coffee and doughnuts. As Simone and I chatted about our families, Diane noticed Gram's picture.

"April," she said, wiping a sprinkle from her lip, "who is that sexy little minx?" She picked the photo up to get a better look. "Have you been hanging out with us too long? Are you a lesbian now?"

I about choked on my coffee. At least Diane's assumption was better than being mistaken as a gay man. "No," I said, trying to suppress my snicker. "That's my grandmother."

Simone leaned over to look at the photo. "Damn, your granny's got it going on."

"I was just joking." Diane set the picture back down. "Well, not about grandma. She's hot, but," she said, changing the subject, "what do you two want to do before classes start tomorrow?"

I thought about it while sipping on my coffee. I didn't want to begin another semester as the meek girl in class. I wanted to be bold.

"Diane." A grin spread across my face. "Would you like to dye my hair?" She beamed with enthusiasm, but I quickly dashed it. "But not green."

She groaned while Simone started to giggle. "Fine. What color?"

"Red," I said. "I want to be as bright as a rose and just as sharp."

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Nervously, I coiled a lock of hair around my finger as I waited on hold. I looked in the light, noting the auburn red was beginning to fade. There were more important

matters to worry about, but hair dye kept me calmer than thinking about the conversation I had with my mother.

“Gram doesn’t live with us anymore.”

“What?” My voice had been sharp and startled. “What do you mean?”

“Your father and I couldn’t keep taking care of her, so we moved her to an assisted living facility. She’s happy there.”

“You mean *you’re* happy she’s there.”

“Don’t take that tone with me.” Her voice rose higher than mine. In anger, I hung up on her.

I had called to tell my parents I planned on spending Spring Break with Simone and Diane in San Francisco, but now I was trying to book a flight to see Gram. The thought of me not coming home for break sent my mom into an irrational panic, leading her to vehemently inquire what I planned on doing with my friends. I knew what that shrillness in her voice meant. I told her to let me talk to Gram since she was the one providing my airfare. That’s when she broke the news. I wondered what was the final straw. Did Gram ask my parents to drive her to the store for more yarn? Were they tired of having to make her meals soft? Or was it worse; was I too blind to realize how bad her health had become?

“Mr. Castor?”

I groaned into the phone. “Yes?”

“Your flight’s been booked for next Friday. Can I help you with anything else?”

I made arrangements to leave straight from the airport to the assisted living facility. I had to call my dad to get the name and the number of the place, followed by



another string of calls until finally I heard my grandmother's voice. Gram was delighted to have me stay for Spring Break, and even though I was swapping out sightseeing and sea breeze for paint by numbers and puzzles, I was ecstatic to see her again.

On the plane, I thought about how Simone and Diane tried to cheer me up, and when that didn't work, they let me go off on a tirade. Every pent up thought I had, I unleashed. I admitted to my friends the stark reality I didn't want to face. I could never be the person I wanted to be in the place I called home. Simone hugged me, holding me tightly against her as I choked back tears. I continued to ponder what she then said to me: *If it's no longer home, find a new one.*

Gram lived at the Heritage Hearts Assisted Living Facility. It reminded me of an apartment complex merged with a preschool, a hospital, and a high school cafeteria. There were craft stations everywhere, orderlies running about in scrubs, and trays of prepackaged meals with a side of pudding. The grounds were well-kept. Overall, the place was a relatively welcoming environment. Gram seemed content in her small apartment. Her pull out couch was set up in the living room with the coffee table pushed back against the wall. She told me we could sit together to watch her Soaps. Knitting had become too difficult for her, so she either occupied her time with television or listened to the volunteer readers from the local high school.

"They're such darlings," Gram said as she shakily poured hot water into two mugs. "Some read too fast, some too slow, but they do try." I offered to help her make tea, but she declined. She asked for my company in the kitchenette instead. "I used to love to read. I took a book to bed every night," she said before sighing. "My eyesight's not so good anymore. When you're older, things just don't work like they used to."

“Maybe you can listen to books on tape.”

“I could.” She seemed pleased with my suggestion. “Every story I hear is like a new adventure. A different life than my own.” A faint smile was etched on her face. “I do appreciate the photo album you made me, though. It’s steeped rich with memories.”

We moved to the living room. I sat quietly next to Gram, cradling my cup of tea. I thought about the framed picture on my nightstand and the woman in it.

“Gram,” I said, “there was one photo I left out of your album. It was in an envelope, so I kept it for myself. I hope you don’t mind.” I waited to see if she remembered. “It was taken by Helen.”

“Helen.” Gram’s voice was a mix of joy and sorrow. She closed her eyes and sipped her tea before looking at me. “Do you know the story of *The Iliad*?” I nodded, having read it sometime during high school. “Her real name was Ellen, but I called her Helen because I thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world.” Despite the wrinkles on her face, a sly smile appeared like the one in the photograph. “Helen was an adventurer, and I a seductress.”

I blushed, but I wanted Gram to continue. “You were close?”

“We were friends in school. Then the summer of my senior year, Helen and I spent every waking moment together,” she said. “There was a lake not too far away from our neighborhood. I liked to read while she took photos. Her father was a nature photographer, but Helen had a different subject that interested her.” She set her tea down with a coquettish giggle. “We did a lot more than photoshoots by the lakeside.”

I couldn't help but think if Simone and Diane were there, they'd want to know every explicit detail. Yet, there was one question for Gram that I knew had to be asked. "What happened to Helen?"

"Like you, she was a lot braver than me." Gram turned to me, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "I was too scared to leave. Complacency was alluring, so," she said, "I let Helen go. I then settled down with your grandfather. He was a good man, but he lacked Helen's spirit."

More questions danced in my thoughts, but they were ones without answers. There was no turning back the clock on my grandmother's life. It was her decision to stay, and I needed to make my own.

"Gram," I said. "I don't think I can go home this summer."

"Then don't. You have more things to discover than you'll ever have back there. As for your parents," she yawned, "they're fine on their own. They'll probably be upset when they find out my inheritance is going to you, but you are my only granddaughter." She had known since I was young, but Gram embraced me with her whole heart. "Just promise you'll do more than spend it on student loans. Go see the world."

That was one promise I'd gladly keep. We continued to talk until Gram grew tired and settled in for a nap. I left and walked in the garden on the grounds, noting the roses were in full bloom. I wondered if any bunnies and bees were around, or if I should have called Simone and Diane. They were probably headed towards the beach, so I decided to venture to a nearby bookstore. While browsing the shelves, looking for *The Iliad*, a guy about my age bumped into me. He commented on how cute I looked. There was a first for everything.

I spent the remainder of the week reading to Gram, and in exchange, she told me more about her life and the people in the photo album. Before I left, I gave Gram a few audiobooks to keep her company at night. I didn't know when I'd return, but Gram didn't seem to mind. *Just don't forget to call.*

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The first night in my new apartment, Simone and Diane surprised me with wine coolers and Cheetos to celebrate. Simone and I loudly sang along to the *Spice Girls* to the dismay of Diane and my neighbors, but we didn't care. I was happy with my job and my officially legal name on the lease: April Helen Castor. My parents stopped speaking to me, but I still had Gram. Every day I called her, and at night, when I went to sleep, I had her picture on my nightstand as a reminder to not only be beautiful, but bold.

## Bakers and Ballerinas

Dad.

It was the word I heard no less than twenty times a day. Both of my sons had mastered the art of manipulation. A long drawn out ‘dad’ accompanied with whining meant they wanted something. When said with annoyance, it meant *stop making jokes. You’re embarrassing me.* But the best use of ‘dad’ was with a delighted squeal. This meant Elliot or Emory had a new accomplishment or discovery to share, and nothing could make me prouder than seeing them learn and grow. My sons are my world.

“Dad,” Elliot, my teenager, said with curiosity and vexation. “Why do you have so much crap?”

We were sitting on my bedroom floor, sorting through his mother’s old belongings. Mixed in with her stuff were my keepsakes and knickknacks carelessly stored over the years. I tried to forget about my ex-wife’s side of the closet until I finally had a reason to clear the rest of it out. My girlfriend was moving in. Elliot offered to help while his brother was at a cooking class for kids. If Emory was there, he would have asked too many questions about Shelby’s things, or maybe he’d want to know why his mother left us when he was a baby.

“It’s not all crap,” I said. “Some of these hold memories.”

Elliot held up the ballet shoes he wore when he was five. “This is embarrassing.” He set down the black, worn out slippers next to his feet that sported glittery toe nail polish. “Why didn’t you throw these out?”

My oldest son didn't have the same sentiments I did regarding his four years of dance. I took the tiny, shriveled slippers and put them in my 'keep' pile. "It was your first pair," I said. "I didn't know what I was getting into, but it was fun."

I could tell he didn't want to smile, but the corner of his mouth turned up slightly. "Yeah," Elliot said, "I guess it was fun."

We resumed rummaging through the cardboard boxes. Anything that was useful and in working condition, we would donate. Shelby's purses, a curling iron, and a makeup bag made up the donation pile so far. Elliot dumped out the old tubes of lipstick and mascara into a trash bag along with the other cosmetics. I set aside the wedding album and a dusty shoebox of photos for my mom. The mementos I wanted to save, I decided to pack into a clear storage container that already held Elliot's baby blanket. The blue and white patchwork quilt was made by Shelby's mother. She had passed before Elliot even started school, so Emory's baby blanket was less elaborate and made of fleece. My six-year-old still slept with his blanket and sometimes wore it around like a cape. Despite the grape juice stains, it would eventually end up in the storage box.

"Dad, what is this?" Elliot handed me a laminated drawing of a green, scribbled dinosaur wearing pink.

The grin on my face stretched from ear to ear. "It's a T. Rex in a tutu. It's you." I pointed to his name under the picture. "See, you've always been fierce and fashionable."

He smirked. In addition to his painted nails, my son wore his favorite pink hoodie and black jeans ripped at the knees.

"When did you draw this?" Elliot asked. "I don't remember it."

---

The theater was dark in-between acts. I sat in my seat, eagerly waiting for my son's number to start. Shelby was too sick to attend the summer recital, but my mom was there and together we watched Elliot take center stage. He was the only boy in his ballet class, but that didn't stop him from practicing his steps every day. Before the music began, he looked out into the crowd and grinned. He never experienced stage fright or forgot a move. He simply performed.

Once the recital ended, I took my mom and Elliot out to his favorite diner. There wasn't anything particularly special about the place other than the strawberry milkshakes. They were served in a mason jar with a red striped straw, a strawberry garnish on the rim, and whipped cream on the top. Elliot would finish the milkshake first then eat his fries. I had to plead with him to take a few bites of his chicken tenders. He was a picky eater like his mom, but Shelby had an even harder time finding food she liked. She developed gestational diabetes after she became pregnant with Emory.

When we returned home from the diner, I let Elliot play in his room while I comforted Shelby. She was curled up in our bed with her hands on her stomach. I sat next to her and stroked her red hair. She told me she craved the foods she couldn't have and threw up the ones recommended. I made her a light meal then checked on our son while she ate. Shelby hadn't asked about the recital, but I knew Elliot wanted to show her his participation ribbon.

Elliot looked up at me with a smile when I opened the door to his room. He was sitting on the floor with his box of crayons dumped out and a drawing pad in his lap. The blue dance ribbon was stuck in his dark brown hair like a bow.

"Hi, Dad," he said. "Is Mom feeling better?"

“I think so. What are you making?” I joined him on the floor. Elliot showed me his picture. He liked drawing unicorns the most, but this time he made a big heart for his mom. He wrote ‘feel better’ under it. “I’m sure she’ll love it,” I said. I just wished Shelby had taken an interest in what he loved, too. “May I have a piece of paper?”

Elliot tore off a sheet and handed it to me. We drew together. I picked up a bright green crayon and doodled a crude drawing of a Tyrannosaurus rex. Elliot watched as I used a pink crayon to scribble what was supposed to be a tutu on the ferocious dinosaur.

“Dad,” he said. I turned my head and looked into his round green eyes. He then pointed to my picture. “Can I be like that?”

I placed my hand on top of my son’s head and ruffled his hair. I was careful not to knock off his dance ribbon. “You can be whatever you want to be, kiddo.”

Elliot handed me a black crayon to write his name under the dinosaur. We then left his room to see his mom. He gave her the drawing of the heart and showed her the blue dance ribbon. Shelby smiled faintly, but she didn’t say anything.

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I had planned on storing the drawing with my son’s ballet shoes, but Elliot took back the laminated picture of the T. Rex.

“If it’s supposed to be me, then it’s going on my door,” Elliot said. He set the drawing to the side and resumed digging through a box. “You should make Emory a Velociraptor with a chef hat,” he added. “He’s small but has sharp teeth.”

I chuckled. “I guess you remember when he was teething?”

“He had colic, too” Elliot said. “It was awful.”



After his mom left, Elliot helped me raise his little brother. We were a team. If I made dinner, Elliot played with Emory. If I gagged over a dirty diaper, he heaved with me. I taught him how to hold a baby, and in a rare moment of tranquility, Elliot would sit on the couch, cradling his brother. Those were the moments that kept me going. Together we watched Emory take his first steps and traded off on who read him to sleep at night.

It was hard to believe Emory had already grown so much. He really loved baking cakes, so I encouraged him to pursue his interest. I hoped he wouldn't give up on it like Elliot did with ballet.

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Elliot quit dancing. I told him he could take the season off while we adjusted to the new baby in our home, but this suggestion only upset him more. He had tantrums, and he liked to argue, but that night was the first time he ever slammed his bedroom door. The noise startled Emory, and I spent half an hour soothing him until he calmed down. Once I settled him in his crib, I checked if Elliot had cooled off. I knocked on his door before coming in. He was on his bed holding the blue dance ribbon. Tears had stained his cheeks, and his eyes were puffy and red.

"I don't understand," he said. "I quit ballet so Mom would come back. I know she didn't like it, but I won't do it anymore." He sniffled. "Why hasn't she come home?"

For three months, we hadn't heard from Shelby. One day she asked me to buy diapers at the store. She wanted me to take the boys so she could nap. In the short span of time we were gone, she packed some of her clothes, left a note on the kitchen table, and drove to her sister's. She wouldn't answer her phone, and her sister was curt. She told me not to come, Shelby was fine, and she didn't know when or if my wife was coming back.

“Mom didn’t leave because of you or Emory,” I said. I didn’t have answers for Elliot, but I sat on his bed and gave him a tissue to blow his nose. I then hugged my son because there wasn’t much else I could do but be there for him and Emory. “We’ll be okay. I promise.”

It was a struggle to stay true to my word. Taking care of an infant, working a nine-to-five job, and arranging for childcare was exhausting. My mom assisted me frequently, and I had a retired neighbor who offered to help when I needed it. I couldn’t give Elliot the same attention he used to have, which made him sullen. He was too stubborn to talk to his guidance counselor at school, but I knew he needed something. I just didn’t know it would come in the form of a tiny bottle of nail polish.

We went to the store one evening to buy more diapers. Emory was in his baby carrier blowing spit bubbles while Elliot walked next to the cart. I noticed he was staring at an endcap of assorted nail polishes. I could tell he wanted one when he eyed the 99 cents price tag.

“Do you want to pick one out?” I asked.

Elliot turned to me, and for the first time in months, he had a smile on his face. “Can I?” I nodded and he selected the brightest pink on the display. We checked out at the cash register, and Elliot carried the polish bottle to the car. He held it as we drove home. “Dad,” he said, “is it weird that I like pink?”

“It’s just a color,” I said. “Who said it was weird?”

“The kids in my class.” He shrugged. “I told them the same thing, but they said it was a girl’s color. Then I got in trouble for calling them stupid.”

I didn't have to ask him if his peers were also reprimanded because the answer was always the same. *No*. My kid was opinionated and at times boisterous, but he didn't shed tears when other children teased him. Bullying was the primary reason Shelby didn't want Elliot to take ballet, but it was one of the few positive outlets he had. She may have stopped our son from dancing, but he would find another way to express himself.

Once we were home, Elliot and I googled how to apply nail polish. We were both ignorant in this skill, and it turned out there was more to it than untwisting a cap and painting. Fortunately, Shelby had left behind the essential supplies, so when we messed up the first coat, we removed it and tried again. I didn't think it was a big deal that Elliot had pink nails, but his teacher was displeased the next day.

I was at work, not doing work, when my phone rang. I put down my ink pen and admired my Stegosaurus drawing before answering.

"Mr. Zander, this is Elliot's teacher."

His tone was all I needed to know that my son and I had inconvenienced him. Elliot's homeroom teacher was young and conservative. He told me my son's pink fingernails were a distraction in his fourth grade classroom.

"How exactly are they distracting?" I asked.

Instead of answering me, he continued with a list of grievances. Apparently, Elliot asked too many questions in social studies and was moody. I didn't even bother to dignify that with a response as I wedged my phone between my shoulder and ear. I drew a speech bubble above my dinosaur and wrote 'fuck you' in it. When I grew tired of hearing Elliot's teacher talk, I sighed loudly.

“Thanks for letting me know. I think my colleague broke the copier, so I need to go.” I hung up and wondered how soon I could go on my lunch break. I usually called my older brother during that time, but I decided I wanted to get something for my son.

When I came home from work, I surprised Elliot with a rainbow-themed nail kit. In addition to the seven colors of polish, it also contained a bottle of glitter and nail art stickers with unicorns on them. I told him we could also go clothes shopping over the weekend since it had been awhile since he had anything new. I let him look for clothes in whatever department he pleased.

---

Elliot found the rest of my laminated dinosaur drawings in one of the boxes. He shook his head and handed me the stack of pictures. I put them on top of the baby quilt.

“Dad, why did you draw all of these?”

I glanced at the first picture. It was a Triceratops destroying a copier machine. “If you worked in HR, you would understand.”

“You know, I used to think you were organized.” My teenager emptied the box and began to put the donation items in it. “It turns out you’re just really good at hiding it.”

I’m surprised he hadn’t realized that sooner. It took me three years after signing the divorce papers to donate the clothes and shoes Shelby had left behind. All her other stuff I didn’t know what to do with, so I boxed and ignored it. Elliot looked through her CDs.

“What do you want me to do with these?” He picked up one of the *Smashing Pumpkins* albums and looked at the back. “I’ve never heard of these people.”

“They were your mom’s favorite band. You can donate it.”

He tossed it in the box along with the rest of her music. All of the songs were already on my computer, but I rarely played Shelby’s melancholy playlist.

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Emory hated lullabies. He hated sleep, too. His first year of life, I slept more at work than at home. I told my colleagues I was meditating, but most of the time I’d sneak in a five-minute nap. My mom gave me a lullaby CD with good intentions, but as soon as I played it at bedtime, Emory screamed. I tried all the sage advice other parents gave me, read online tips on various parent blogs, but nothing worked. My infant was determined to destroy my sanity.

One night I sat in bed, holding him in one arm while I used my free arm to surf the internet. Out of curiosity, I played some of my music, but he wasn’t a fan of the 70s & 80s. I tried to turn it off, but I ended up clicking on Shelby’s playlist instead. It mostly consisted of 90s alternative rock.

“This is what your mom liked,” I said. “She loved going to concerts. In fact, I think we might have conceived your brother after a show, but he doesn’t need to know that.”

Emory giggled, and while I knew he didn’t understand me, I went on and told him what it was like becoming a father at twenty-four.

“Shelby and I didn’t know anything. When Elliot was born, we were scared out of our minds. I just hid it better,” I said. “Luckily your Nana stepped in and helped us. She agrees with me, though. Elliot had a much better temperament than you.” Emory blew me a spit bubble. “He still did that, but he at least slept through the night.” I yawned. “And

when he didn't, your mom would stay up with him. I was still the new guy at the office and thought I might go places. No such luck." I stroked his dark brown hair. It was like mine and Elliot's. Neither of the boys took after Shelby. "It's okay, though. It pays the bills, and I'd rather spend more time stressing over you than work."

Emory started to drift off. I got out of bed and gently laid him back down in his crib, careful not to disturb him. Before I went back to sleep, I whispered to Emory that more than anything, I wanted him and his brother to be happy.

---

I realized it was my voice Emory wanted to hear and not the music. If I had known that sooner, I might have had more sleep and less coffee.

"Dad, let's take a break." Elliot had put the last of his mom's books and magazines in the donation box. We only had two more boxes to sort through, but the lure of caffeine was too tempting.

"Okay, I'll make some coffee." I got up and followed Elliot into the kitchen. He sat at the table while I got down the coffee beans. I saw the boxes of tea my girlfriend had bought. Whether it was her polka dot hand towels or her favorite souvenir mug from her travels, little touches of April were slowly appearing throughout the condo.

I brewed the coffee and poured two cups. Elliot loaded his with sugar and cream while I drank mine black. We sipped rather than talked, savoring flavor and silence. Before we resumed cleaning, I checked my phone to see how much time Emory had left in his cooking class. April had already offered to bring him home since the culinary school was near her apartment.

Back in my room, Elliot had a vague idea of the contents in the box labeled 'high school.' He pushed it to me. When I took off the tape and opened it, the first thing on top was a copy of *Playboy*. My initial thought was to throw it away, but I thought it would be funnier to mail it to my older brother. He was the one who gave it to me. I moved the magazine to the side and found a picture of Liam and me sticking out of my senior yearbook. I didn't even remember taking the photo, but it had to have been before my mom threw him out. I flipped through the pages of the yearbook and found the superlatives. Shelby and I won cutest couple. Looking at our smiles, none of our classmates would have expected us to earn most likely to divorce.

---

I met Shelby when I was depressed. My parents thought I was mooney because Liam was away at college, but that wasn't it. I called Liam often, but I knew every time I hung up the phone he was never coming back home. The strife between my mother and my half-brother had escalated over the years, but her breaking point came when I was kicked off the basketball team. Liam and I were caught smoking pot behind the bleachers. I could have told my coach the truth, but my first inclination was to protect Liam. I said it was mine.

The summer Liam left, I spent most of my days asleep. I didn't want to do anything. Eventually, I remembered who Liam used to buy pot from and in a weird turn of events, I befriended my dealer. At the time, I thought he was pretty cool. He took me to a lot of parties. The night I met Shelby, I was in a den with a bunch of stoners listening to *Pink Floyd*. Her sister had dragged her along then ditched her for a guy. My future

wife sat next to me on a couch and asked how to take a bong hit. Years later we would tell everyone we met in art class.

One of the first things I noticed about Shelby, other than her red hair, was that she was more reserved like Liam. She opened up once we got to know each other, and together we redefined ourselves. We became more involved at school, our grades improved, and we chose to attend the same university. When we graduated, everyone wanted to know when the high school sweethearts would get married, but we had other plans.

I wanted to help people. I thought if someone had been more supportive of Liam, he could have done anything in the world. He enjoyed academics, though, so he stuck with it. Shelby wanted to take over her mom's bed-and-breakfast, but the bank foreclosed on it the year we graduated from college. In a similar stroke of bad luck, I couldn't find a decent job and worked in retail for a while. Shelby took care of her mom.

Everything changed one night with a pregnancy test. Shelby tried a second test to be certain. In the confined space of the bathroom in our first apartment, we stood over the sink, waiting. The positive plus sign appeared.

"Sorry, sweetheart," I said. "The pee stick has spoken."

"Ezra, it's a stick! It can't talk." The hysterics had already begun. I held her in my arms as she cried. "We can't afford a baby."

"Sure we can. I'll find a better job." I stroked her hair. "I'm not sure how, but I will."



I filled out job applications until my hand cramped. We scheduled an appointment with an obstetrician on a day I didn't work. After the long first visit, I took Shelby to the store to look at baby stuff.

"We won't know if we're having a boy or girl until much later," Shelby said as she held my hand. "What do you even want to get?"

"I don't know," I said. "I just think if we have something, it will really sink in that we're having a baby."

She picked up a brown teddy bear. "What about this?"

"Bears are boring. We need something that says *this* is our kid." That's when I saw the green dinosaur. It was a small, plush T. Rex with a chubby belly and sharp teeth. "This is it."

Shelby looked at me with her *are you serious* face. I nodded and she sighed out of exasperation. "I regret ever taking you to see *Jurassic Park*." She then smiled and picked up the toy. "I guess it doesn't matter if we have a boy or girl. Our child will have you as a dad."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm going to marry a very silly man with a big heart."

I blushed. We had only discussed hypothetical marriage, but now it all seemed real. "Well, you have to wait until I can surprise you. I have to come up with the most overblown romantic proposal."

She stood on her tiptoes and kissed my cheek. "You have less than nine months. Better start planning."

Two weeks later, I received a callback from an office that was expanding its HR department. The interviewer liked my optimism and asked me what I wanted to do in life.

“I’d like to help people,” I said.

“Conflict resolution is important in this profession, so you should fit right in.”

“Great.”

I grinned like an idiot. I had no idea what I was getting myself into, but I got the job. I bought a ring with my first paycheck.

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I was torn between keeping the yearbook and giving it to my mom. I put it with the wedding album and the shoebox of photos. The rest of the stuff in the box I consolidated into the storage container. I chuckled when I found Shelby’s notebook of poetry at the bottom of the box.

“Hey, kiddo,” I said. “Did you know your mom was a bad poet?”

“No, but that probably explains all the romance novels.” He started placing the paperbacks into the donation box. “Why would she read this garbage?”

“Those aren’t hers.” My teenager stared at me. “What? Your Uncle Liam thought it was funny to send me one, but joke’s on him because I liked it.”

Elliot continued putting the novels into the box. “Don’t ever tell that to April. She’ll break up with you over your piss poor literary choices.”

“She still listens to the *Spice Girls*. We don’t judge each other’s guilty pleasures.”

He flashed me a wide grin. “Is that supposed to be dating advice?”

“Sure is,” I said, “so whoever ends up being the lucky guy you like, don’t trash his books or music.”

“He doesn’t read books.” My son groaned. “He plays lacrosse.”

Elliot had a tendency to be more pessimistic like his mom, but I believed if I could find someone after Shelby, one day he’d find someone, too.

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Despite the animosity between my mom and my brother, both of them told me I needed to start dating. She said I needed the companionship; he said I needed the recreation. I thought both would have been great if I knew how to date. I had only been with Shelby and believed I knew everything about her. Everyone else was confusing, so I was content remaining single while the boys were still young. I ran out of excuses when Elliot became old enough to babysit Emory.

I was always up front with my dates about being a single father. This revelation would lead to the one question that would dictate the rest of the evening: *Are you divorced or widowed?* Sometimes I was asked about my kids, but most of the women I met were more interested in the wife that walked out on her family. Those dates were uncomfortable. Out of curiosity, I once said I was widowed. My date offered to sleep with me out of pity. I turned her down and took a break from the dating scene after that.

My mom remained persistent and arranged for me to meet one of her friend’s daughters. She even bribed Elliot with pizza to watch Emory that night. I reluctantly went, and midway through the date, I was honest and said I didn’t think it would work out. I paid the bill and went to the bar next door. A beer was more refreshing than talking about the prospects of marrying again. When I finished my first one, I decided to have a second. I didn’t feel like talking to anyone, so I took a cocktail napkin and found an ink

pen in my pocket. While I was doodling a dinosaur, a redheaded woman came up to the bar and ordered a shot of tequila. She let out a frustrated sigh.

“Sounds like you’re having a bad night,” I said.

She turned and looked at me. She then saw my napkin and giggled. “What is that?”

“It’s a dinosaur.” I pushed the napkin over to her. “It’s a Pterodactyl, actually, but I guess it kind of looks like a bat.”

“Do you make a habit of drawing dinosaurs in bars?”

“No,” I replied, “but I used to doodle them at work and hide them around the office.”

“You’re a little different.” She reached out her hand and smiled. “My name’s April.”

“Zander.” I shook her hand. “Ezra Zander, but between you and me, I like my last name better.”

April was on a blind date, but she said it was going terrible. I had to laugh and tell her about my night. After she took her shot of tequila and I finished my beer, she asked if I wanted to go to a nicer bar and discuss dating and dinosaurs. I gladly went and found out she was a reporter for the newspaper. In return, I told her about my job and my family. Instead of inquiring about Shelby, however, she was more interested in me.

“I don’t know how you can work in an HR department,” April said. “You must be hated.”

“I’m sure there’s more hated professions. I could be a cop.”

She placed her hands under her chin and smiled. The dark shade of lipstick complimented her auburn hair. "I bet you would look good in a uniform."

"Are you flirting with me?" I asked with a smirk.

"Maybe," she said. "Do you want any more drinks?"

"I think I've had enough." My stomach then reminded me I had left my previous date before my entrée arrived. "But I am kind of hungry."

"I can tell." She laughed. "If you don't want bar food, I know a coffee shop that has good wraps."

"Lead the way."

We briskly walked from the bar to the coffee shop. The air was refreshing, the moon was out, and the streetlights bathed the sidewalks in a dim yellow. I could smell the aroma of roasted beans from the coffee shop when a couple walked out. The man held the door open for April and me. We thanked him in unison. Perhaps the few drinks had already gone to our heads as we both began to chuckle then laugh. April took my arm and led me inside. Before we ordered, we sat down on a couch. I realized I was more focused on the warmth between us than the menu she handed me.

"Do you want to split something?" I asked.

"Sure," she said. "I've tried most of the menu. It's all delicious."

I decided to take a chance and picked a menu item at random. We shared a grilled vegetable and hummus wrap, which I never would have ordered before, but it was tasty. She offered me the last of the chips that went with it. That meal was far better than all the other disastrous and expensive outings I had been on. April seemed satisfied, too, as we

sat closer to each other. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear before blushing. “I don’t usually ask this,” she said, “but do you want to come back to my place?”

I wasn’t sure what time it was, or if Elliot was tired of watching his little brother, but for once, I wanted to do something that made me happy.

“Okay,” I said. My voice was a little uncertain, so I tried to sound more confident. “Where do you live?”

“It’s not very far from here.” April curled her lips into a smile. “In fact, it’s upstairs.”

Her apartment was small but cozy. I sat in the living room while she made tea in the kitchen. I noticed she had two bookshelves absolutely filled with the literary classics my brother liked, crime mysteries, cookbooks, and travel guides. There were also little souvenirs from foreign countries and photos of people I assumed were friends.

“Do you travel a lot?”

“Not anymore,” she said. “I studied abroad one semester in college, and after I graduated, I decided to visit a few more countries.” April set two cups of tea on her coffee table and sat down next to me. “I was living in California, but I moved here because of work.”

I picked up my mug and blew on it. “Is California your home?”

“It was,” she said, “and a part of it might always be my home, but I like to keep my options open.” She watched me take a sip of my tea. “You have very green eyes.”

I placed my mug back down. “My sons do, too.”

“Green’s my favorite color.”

We both had the same thought, but there was a moment of hesitation between us. April then leaned in and pressed her lips against mine. I cupped her cheek and kissed her back. My fingertips brushed against her soft hair. It was a bolder shade than Shelby's. The only similarity between the two women was how they made me feel.

Our lips parted temporarily. Our breathing was heavy and our faces flushed. "Do you want to have sex?" she asked.

I never answered a question more quickly in my life.

"Yes."

It was almost one a.m. when April woke me up. She looked concerned when she handed me my cell phone. I hadn't realized I had dozed off.

"It kept vibrating, so I figured I should wake you."

I rubbed my face. "Thanks," I said with a yawn. I unlocked it and saw a string of text messages from Elliot. They started off with the standard 'hey, it's getting late. When are you coming home?' to the more frantic and angrier 'damn it, Dad. Don't be irresponsible.' I laughed and showed April.

"This is my teenage son."

She snickered. "Will he lecture you when you come home?"

"Probably," I said, "but I can't blame him." I got up from her bed to find my pants. "I've never been out this late before, so I'm sure he's worried."

I decided to text Elliot back before getting dressed. I couldn't find my tie, but I didn't worry about it. April put her number in my phone and kissed me goodbye.

"I had a great evening," she said. "Don't be afraid to call."

When I returned to the condo, Elliot had already gone to bed. I checked on Emory, too. He was sound asleep in his room. I went to bed, and woke up the next morning, wondering when to text April. While eating breakfast with my sons, I sat at the kitchen table and stared at my phone.

“Dad, what’s wrong?” Elliot asked. “You haven’t touched your food.”

“I really like the woman I met last night, but I don’t know how soon I should text her. What if I seem too eager?”

“Stop being an idiot.” Elliot rolled his eyes. “Just tell her you like her.”

“Tell her,” Emory chimed in. “You can do it, Daddy.”

I don’t exactly know when my sons became my wingmen, but I texted April. We were clearing the table when I received a text back.

“I’d love to see you again,” she said. “I also found your tie.”

I met her a few days later back at the coffee shop. I left my tie at her place again.

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My son and I carried the boxes with the donation items to my car. My room looked less cluttered once Elliot took out the bags of trash. I slid the storage container back into my closet and set aside the items for my mom in another box. I then felt my phone vibrate in my pocket.

“Hey, Zander,” April said when I answered. “Emory and I decided to go to the grocery store. He’s making carrot cake for dessert tonight.”

“I guess that’s the latest recipe he’s learned?” I asked. “When are they going to teach him how to make rum cake?”



“I think he has a few more years.” She chuckled. “We’ll see you soon. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

I sat down on April’s side of the bed after the call ended. On her nightstand was an old photograph of her beloved grandmother, a snapshot of April in college with her best friends, and a recent photo of us. Two of my favorite pictures were on the opposite nightstand. One was of Elliot holding Emory and the newer one was of April and my sons at the boardwalk.

When I asked my girlfriend to move in, I wasn’t just making space in my home. I had to make room in my heart.

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There was an abundance of laughter when I walked into the coffee shop on a Saturday morning. Sitting at a table was a tall black woman, a short, spiky haired blonde, and my girlfriend. They were April’s best friends, Simone and Diane. Simone immediately stood up to hug me. Her girlfriend Diane peeled off her leather jacket while April sat next to her giggling.

“Are you done trying to be intimidating?” she asked her friend.

“Simone always ruins it,” Diane said. She then crossed her arms and looked up at me. “I don’t do hugs.”

“Don’t mind her,” Simone said as we took a seat at the table. “Diane tries to be mean, but she’s sweeter than honey.” She picked up her coffee cup and smiled. “We’re just a little overprotective of April. She’s like our sister.”

Diane tore off a piece of her pastry. “Of all my siblings, I like April the best.” She plopped the piece of danish into her mouth. “So you work in an HR department? That must be miserable.”

“Diane, you just told me how much you hated working at a bank,” April said.

“I do. It’s so boring.” She groaned. “I want my old job back.”

“What did you do before?” I asked.

The blonde smiled mischievously and glanced at Simone. “I used to drive the hearse for her family’s mortuary business, but I got too many speeding tickets.”

“Hence why Daddy’s not giving you the job back,” Simone said. Diane pouted and took a sip of her drink.

“Zander, do you want to order anything?” April asked.

I hadn’t even thought about coffee or food. I remembered April was ecstatic that her friends were coming from California to visit, but now I knew why she was so eager for me to meet them. April was spending more time at the condo and with my sons. Elliot and Emory liked having her around. It was my turn to earn Simone and Diane’s approval.

The discussion at the table bounced from college to children to careers. I ordered a second cup of coffee during a lull in our conversation. When it arrived, I noticed April twisting a strand of her red hair. The auburn had faded slightly from the last time she had dyed it.

“April, are you alright?” I asked. “You look like you have something on your mind.”

“I do,” she said, “but this is easier to say over a margarita than a Macchiato.”

“It’s not happy hour yet,” Simone said. “Besides, your boyfriend’s a good person.”

“Even if he works in HR,” Diane added. She smirked at me. “I’m starting to like you. Don’t screw it up.”

April sighed and looked at me. “Zander,” she said, blushing, “the night we met, I don’t know, there was just something about you.” The corner of her mouth turned upwards. I thought about when she first kissed me. “I trust you, and I know I could be happy with you.”

She tucked her hair behind her ear. I noticed the green studded earrings I had bought her for no particular occasion other than thinking about her. They had easily become her favorite pair. Our eyes met once again.

“Whatever you have to say, you can tell me.”

“I’m trans.”

April spoke calmly, but her eyes searched for something that my mind hadn’t fully processed, yet. My silence led her to exchange anxious glances with her friends. Simone remained collected while across from her, Diane fidgeted in her seat. I tuned out the clamor of the coffee shop, so I could focus solely on my girlfriend.

“Do you know what that means?” April asked.

I nodded, but I still needed a moment. I took a sip of coffee. All their eyes were on me. I then lowered the mug from my lips to speak, but my hand jerked suddenly. Coffee dribbled down my shirt as my phone buzzed in my pocket.

“Are you okay?” Simone grabbed a napkin and handed it to me. “Do you need me to get more?”

The vibrating had startled me, but I quickly recognized the ringtone I had set for Elliot. Dad mode immediately kicked in. “That’s all right. My son’s calling me.” I stood up. “If you’ll excuse me.”

“Okay,” April said quietly.

I walked away and overheard Diane whispering, “Maybe he doesn’t know what it means, April.”

I did, though. When Elliot first told me he was gay, I wanted to be an informed parent and read a lot. I had more to learn, but I did know the difference. I also knew that more anything else, I needed to be supportive.

I answered my phone. “Hey, kiddo.”

“Dad, Emory wants to play with that new kid that moved in,” Elliot said. “I told him I had to call you first.”

I pushed my way into the bathroom. “That’s fine with me. I’ve met his parents.” I turned on the sink and dabbed my shirt with a wet paper towel. “So what have you been up to you?”

“I’ve just been on my computer. You?”

I tried to rub the stain more vigorously. “I spilled coffee on myself. This always happens when I wear white.” I stopped and sighed. “I’m going to go. I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Later, Dad.”

I hung up the phone and splashed cold water on my face. I looked in the mirror before pressing my forehead against it.

I wanted to tell April I loved her but saying those three words was a struggle.

My girlfriend was zipping up her jacket when I came out of the bathroom. Simone held Diane's hand while I walked back over to the table. April turned to me.

"Was that Elliot?" she asked.

"Yes. He's fine." I picked up my coat. "I'm going to head out, though." Her lip quivered. I didn't have to think. I embraced her, holding her close. She put her head against my chest. "I'll see you tomorrow, April."

I then left and returned home to my sons. Elliot was in his room on his laptop. I knocked on his door first before coming in.

"Hey, did you already take Emory over to his friend's?"

"Yeah, I'm going to pick him up in an hour." He sat up on his bed and set his computer to the side. "Other than the ruined shirt, how did meeting April's friends go?"

"Fine." My eyes trailed down to the stain on my shirt. "Or it was fine. I don't know."

"Did they not like you?"

At that moment, I didn't like myself.

"Can we talk?" I asked.

Elliot listened, but he became gradually more irritated as I spoke. He finally cut me off.

"What the fuck, Dad. When I came out to you, you didn't tell me you'd see me tomorrow. How do you think she feels right now?" He got up from his bed and went to his door. "Just get out. I don't want to talk to you anymore."

He slammed his door after I left.

I went to my own room to clear my head, but I couldn't stop thinking about April. Did she think I was rejecting her because she was a trans woman? I slept more soundly when she was next to me. I smiled more at work when I knew I'd see her afterwards. I didn't want to lose her, but I didn't want to admit I never got over my ex-wife leaving me.

I fell asleep and woke up to something heavy on my chest. I then felt the full weight of my youngest on my gut. He wrapped his tiny little arms around me.

"Hi, Daddy. Are you awake?" I ruffled Emory's hair, making him giggle. "I'm back from my friend's. It was fun, but Elliot's in a grumpy mood now."

"That's my fault. I upset him and April."

His round green eyes grew wider. He gasped, and I could see where his first baby tooth had fallen out. "Why would you do that?" My son frowned. "Did you tell them you were sorry?"

"I guess that's where I should start, huh?"

Emory nodded. "That's what you told me, but if they're really sad, you should make them a cake. It always makes me happy."

I sat up and tickled his belly. "That's because you like cake, silly." He giggled and fidgeted in my arms. I'll never know why Shelby gave up moments like this with our son, but it was her loss. Emory was my joy, and it was time I moved on from his mother. I scooped him up and hugged him. "Maybe we should make a cake for April, but what about Elliot? He doesn't like cake."

"He likes pizza."

I didn't expect Elliot to forgive me easily, but he was placated with a pineapple pizza. After dinner, when Emory and I had finished icing April's cake, I sat on the couch and Elliot curled up next to me. He still didn't want to talk to me, but he wanted to be comforted. Emory came out of his bedroom wearing his pajamas and carrying his fleece blanket. He sat on my other side and cuddled me. I started the movie, but I couldn't help but think there was one person missing.

I called April the next morning.

"Zander?" Her voice was groggy. "What time is it?"

"It's after eleven."

"Shit," she groaned. "I'm hungover."

"Do you want me to bring you anything?"

She started to say no, but she changed her mind. "I'd like it if you came over."

I drove to her apartment, bringing the cake with me. When April opened her door, she was in a pair of sweats and her hair was uncombed. It was a deeper shade of red than the day before. April let me in.

"Diane dyed my hair to make me feel better, but that didn't help, so we went to a few bars." She sat on her sofa and rested her head against a throw pillow. Her coffee table had a box of tissues on it, surrounded by a bunch of discarded ones. There was a water bottle next to the box. "I was mad, so I started slamming tequila shots."

"I'm sorry." I set the cake down on the coffee table. "Do you want me to make you some tea?"

"Yes, please." I went into the kitchen while she stayed on her couch. I heated her kettle and found her favorite box of tea. We didn't speak until I came back and handed

her the mug. “Thank you.” She was careful to sit up before taking a sip. “You can sit down next to me.” I sat, but I was at a loss for words. April brushed the tissues off her coffee table and set her tea in their place. “I told Simone and Diane when we first started dating that your kids would come first, but that’s not why you left yesterday.”

“No, and I didn’t leave because of you either. It was me.” I ran my hand through my hair. We rarely spoke about my ex-wife, and I didn’t know where to begin. I started with the one thing I had noticed about them both. “You know, this might be silly, but I was glad to find out you dyed your hair. I like that you’re a lot bolder than Shelby, and I mean that in a lot of ways.” I faced April. Even when I upset her, she was still just as attentive. I tucked that loose strand of hair behind her ear. She smiled. “April, I love you because you are you. I should have told you that yesterday, but I was scared.”

She pressed her cheek against my hand. “You don’t have to be.”

“I’m afraid to have my heart broken again.”

“Zander, I would never leave like Shelby did.” April kissed my palm. She looked at me with her hazel eyes, and like her, they were full of compassion. “I care about you and your kids too much to do that.”

I took her in my arms and kissed the top of her head. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. Will you forgive me?” I asked.

“That’s why I invited you over.” She snuggled closer to me. “I want you and your sons in my life. Besides,” she turned her head to glance at the cake on the coffee table, “it looks like your little baker made me a cake. That’s a good start to an apology.” April giggled. “I think even Diane will like you again.”

“And Simone?”



“She’s understanding like you are,” she said. “She’ll be back soon with Diane, but for now, can you stay here?”

“I can do that.” I nestled April against my chest. “This is right where I want to be.”

---

Knowing I’d go to sleep and wake up to April every morning was the best part about her moving in. After she came home with Emory, we ate dinner and dessert and settled down in the living room to watch a movie. Elliot stretched out on the loveseat while April sat next to me on the sofa. Emory spread his blanket out on our laps. He put his feet on me and his head on April. Halfway through the movie, he fell asleep, but we didn’t wake him.

April turned to me and whispered in my ear, “I think I’m going to like being a mom.”

Mom. That was a word I could get used to hearing.

## **A Boy and his Cat**

The score was tied. I glanced at the clock. Forty-five seconds left. I shouldn't have been nervous. It was only a home game, but sweat was dripping down my back, soaking my uniform through. At the sound of the whistle, the ball went straight to me. I planted myself in front of the attacker from the rival team. He smelled like he had bathed in vinegar and rubbed an onion under his armpits, but I ignored his putridness to secure the ball. My feet were then in flight to escape his stench. Running into the foray of midfielders and defenders, I knew nothing would stop me from scoring and winning the game that night. A defender tried to block my path, but I spun around him, still cradling the ball. Another defender tried to slide on me, but I was faster, leaving just me, the goalie, and the goal. I threw a fake and in that split second the goalie was caught off guard, I wielded my stick back and shot towards the corner right pocket. The buzzer sounded. The Bay View High Panthers beat the Bridgeport Bandits 15-14.

Although it was pointless, we had a few seconds left on the clock to set-up for another face-off. As the seconds dwindled, I scanned the bleachers looking for Elliot. He was easy to spot in his pink sweatshirt and black horned rimmed glasses. The glasses weren't even prescriptions, but he said if he was attending a sporting event, he might as well don an alter ego to pretend like he gave a damn. Elliot was such a dick, but I loved him.

"Chuck!" I heard my name before my teammates charged me. The game was over.

Tom slapped my back. "You're a fucking beast!"

"If you all didn't run like grannies, maybe you'd get some action," I said.

“You hear that?” Drew started laughing. “We got a one-man wrecking ball right here.”

My friends didn’t know my boyfriend was in the stands or that we were even dating. It was the first game Elliot ever attended and as I watched him leave, I knew it would be his last. Lacrosse players and wannabe ballerinas were a lot like cats and dogs. And yet, we stuck together.

After shaking the other team’s hands, I followed Tom and Drew into the locker room. They talked about hanging out with some cheerleaders, but I had other plans.

“My dad wants me home,” I lied. “Maybe next time.”

“You’re so fucking lame,” Tom said. “Tiffany had her eyes on you the entire night. I know she’s not the hottest cheerleader, but she’s the most flexible if you know what I mean.”

The Virgin Tom’s innuendo was obnoxious but tolerable just like him. He piped down once Coach walked in and congratulated us. I was singled out for my aggressiveness on the field and took pride in Coach’s praise. The feeling didn’t last though when he told the team to hit the showers. Those three words made me swell with anxiety. Whether I pointed my eyes too high or cringed at the usual locker room banter, I thought every action of mine was consequential to revealing my secret. No one seemed suspicious, however, and Tom was back pestering me as we dressed.

“You sure you can’t fucking come out tonight?” he asked. “Seriously, don’t pass on this opportunity. Hook up with Tiffany.”

“I told you,” I said. “I can’t.”

“What are you going to do anyway? Jerk off and watch Netflix?”

“That’s what he does,” Drew said over his cousin’s annoying laughter. “By the way, Chuck, I thought I saw Elliot in the stands. Is he still helping you with your homework?”

“Yeah.” I shrugged, attempting my best indifference. “Not sure why he’d be here.”

“Shit,” Tom said. “That faggot really wants you, but I can’t blame you for using him to pass your classes. I’m failing mine.” He balled his hand into a fist and punched his palm. “But as soon as that fucking pansy hit on me, I’d beat his face in.”

That thought made me sick to my stomach, but I had to keep up the charade.

“Don’t worry. If he tried anything,” I said, “I’d break his goddamn nose.”

Once I finished changing, I left and headed to my car, apologizing to Elliot in my head and to God for good measure. Like sports, my boyfriend didn’t care for religion either, but his lack of faith wouldn’t deter mine. I drove to our meet-up spot and honked the horn when I saw him. He put away his phone and hurried over to the car with a grin on his face.

“Hey, nerd,” Elliot said as he got in. I leaned in to kiss him, but he placed his cold hands on my cheeks. “I need you to warm these.”

“I can do that.” I gently kissed his wrist. The lotion on his skin smelled like vanilla cupcakes fresh from the oven. That scent reminded me that no matter how sarcastic Elliot could be, he was sweet at his core. “Sorry for making you wait.”

“That’s okay. It wasn’t that bad. I even got catcalled walking over here.” He laughed, dropping his hands. “I don’t think the team from Bridgeport realized I have a dick.”

“Those guys are idiots,” I said. “Did you see me score?”

“Yes, numerous times.” He smirked. “You didn’t need to impress me, though. I already know you like to play with your stick and balls.”

“There’s only one ball in lacrosse.” Before he could attempt to explain his quip, I stole a kiss. Elliot’s lips greeted mine, but his thick black glasses slid off the bridge of his nose and bumped my face. “Will you take those damn things off?”

My boyfriend snickered. “You don’t like the gay Clark Kent?” He removed the frames, making his green eyes and thick lashes more noticeable. “How about now?”

“Much better,” I said. “Let’s get going.”

We were like any other teenagers on a Friday night. I would drive far away from our high school as Elliot blared the radio. Both of us sang loudly and off key. When we found a secluded spot, we’d pull over and make out in the backseat. There was just something about being in a cramped space while listening to two beating hearts drown out the rest of the world.

“Hey, Chuck?” I had my neck propped against the armrest of the door. Elliot was cuddled close to my chest with my lacrosse jacket over him. He lifted his head to face me. “Are you able to spend the night?”

“Yeah, I can text my dad,” I said. “I’ll tell him I’m at Drew’s. He won’t care as long as I’m in church on Sunday.”

I was the son of a preacher, attending church was part of the gig. When I was younger, I didn’t mind going. I even used to look forward to the pancake dinners and Sunday school sessions with Drew. One time the two of us had become bored making macaroni pictures, so we glued dried pieces of pasta to each other. We were always

joking around. Drew and his family left the church though when my father's sermons went from uplifting the community to ranting about the jezebels and sodomites in society. Dad was a staunch conservative who had become increasingly bitter towards progressive thinking, but his breaking point came after my mother divorced him. I stayed with my father to continue playing lacrosse with my friends, but the house we lived in no longer felt like home. I wouldn't find a place I was comfortable in until I met Elliot and his family.

It was almost ten o'clock when we arrived at the condo. Before going inside, my boyfriend adjusted the hood on his sweatshirt to hide the hickey I left behind. I forgot how easy he bruised, and we wanted to avoid another awkward conversation with his little brother. Fortunately, Emory was too excited to see me to even bat an eye at Elliot.

"Chuck!" he shouted as I walked through the door. "Did you win your game?"

"Sure did." I leaned down and bumped my fist against Emory's tiny knuckles.

"What are you doing up past bedtime?"

"Dad said I could stay up until you and Elliot came home."

His dad yawned from the living room. "And now I can go to sleep."

"I guess you're cool with Chuck spending the night?" Elliot asked.

"I was planning on it. We even ordered extra lo mein." He yawned again and turned off the TV. "Come on, Emory. They'll still be here in the morning."

Emory pouted as he went into his room and Elliot and I went into the kitchen. April was at the table with her laptop and a cup of tea in hand. She was dating Elliot's dad, but she had all the great qualities of a mom.

“Welcome home,” April said. “The leftovers are in the fridge, and there’s hot water in the kettle.”

“Are you working on an article?” Elliot asked.

“I have a deadline for the paper and a press conference in the morning.” April sat back and smiled. “I can take a break, though. Did you have a good night?”

“Yeah,” Elliot said, “if that’s what you call sitting on cold bleachers while watching a bunch of guys toss around a ball.” He shrugged and the hood of his sweatshirt drooped lower, revealing the reddish mark on his neck. April saw and smirked. “What?”

“You sure that’s all you did?” she asked.

Elliot’s face went from profound perplexity to utter embarrassment. He slapped his hand against his neck. April giggled, making me turn several shades of pink. Elliot and I decided to eat dinner in his bedroom.

We sat on the floor next to his bed. Elliot took off his sweatshirt out of spite and tossed it to the corner of his room while I picked through the lo mein. His bedroom was untidy compared to my immaculate one, but his father never tried to instill the strict yet false notion that cleanliness is next to godliness. Elliot simply didn’t give a damn if his clothes ended up in a hamper or not.

“My pink hoodie has betrayed me,” he said. I finished fixing my plate and handed him the carton. “Did you take all the shrimp?”

“I need the protein for my muscles. Besides,” I said with grin, looking at his bare arms. “You’re shrimp. You don’t want to be a cannibal.”

“Don’t knock my crustacean physique.” He angrily twirled his fork in the lo mein then stuffed his face with noodles. “Give me your jacket.”

“Why?” I ate one of the shrimp. “It’ll be too big on you.”

Elliot glared at me until I took off the drawstring jacket. Before I could hand it to him, he stole a shrimp off my plate.

“Really?” I asked.

“Serves you right.” He smiled, putting on the oversized jacket. It hung off his shoulders, draping him in a dark navy blue. “This is my new shell,” he said and sniffed the fabric. “I get to smell like you.”

“You’re so weird,” I said.

Elliot rolled his eyes. “You take selfies with your cat.”

“Nixon’s photogenic!”

There was no point trying to defend my feline’s notoriously good looks or the fact that Elliot and I were two weird peas in an oddly-shaped pod. Even if he didn’t like lacrosse, and I would never understand his fashion nonsense, I didn’t want to be apart from him. I knew that from the moment we first kissed.

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I had known Elliot since eighth grade, but I avoided talking to him because of Tom’s snide remarks about the ‘gay’ kid. That changed sophomore year of high school when Elliot and I were assigned to work together in biology. He sat next to me with his perfect painted manicure and pink plaid pants, but I wasn’t fixated on his quirky style. Rather, it was his bright red face.

“Are you okay?” I asked. “You look flushed.”

“It’s just hot in here,” he mumbled. “Let’s get to work.”



I found out after we started dating that Elliot had a crush on me since middle school. He hadn't expected us to become anything more than lab partners, but he had a gift for making me laugh. Elliot was also insightful and realized I was struggling in my other classes. He offered to tutor me. My grades improved greatly but not without ridicule from my teammates. In order to retain my dignity, I lied and said Elliot was doing the work for me, but that was far from the truth.

After school, I would study at his house until my brain could not comprehend the meaning of words. When I reached the point of overwhelming frustration, Elliot had us take a break. We either played video games or watched Netflix with his little brother. I knew I was getting in too deep when Emory started looking forward to me coming over, but I wanted to be there, too. I could be myself, and if I ever did slip back into that jock mentality, Elliot called me out on it. He was a good friend, but I wanted more from him.

On the Friday we finished our final reports for biology, Elliot and I decided to celebrate by playing *Minecraft* on his Xbox. We were so caught up building a world together, the sun went down, and it was too late for me to bike home. I could have asked for a ride, but I wanted to stay with him. I suggested spending the night, and for perhaps the first time in Elliot's life, he was dumbfounded. Eventually, he managed to recompose himself to speak to his dad. With his father's approval, Elliot and I were up until three a.m. laughing and having a good time.

"Do you think we should sleep?" I asked when we both began to yawn.

"Yeah, I guess so," he said.

Instead of getting up from the floor, Elliot leaned back and rested his head against the bedframe. His green eyes took on a glossy glow from the light of the television,

making him have an almost dream-like quality. I had never noticed how his features were accentuated by his thick black lashes or that he had full, pink lips. My face reddened with desire.

“What?” he asked. “Why are you staring?”

“I like you.”

The cat was out of the bag, but I could tell Elliot didn’t believe me. His voice became defensive.

“You’re joking,” he said. “You’re a lacrosse player. Why would you like me?” He furrowed his brow as his shoulders tensed up. “You’re friends with that asshole Tom. Did that homophobic douchebag tell you to do this? Is this some kind of sick game?”

“No,” I said. “Tom is Drew’s cousin. We just put up with him because no one else will.” I exhaled, slightly flustered. “Look, I don’t want to talk about him right now. This is about us and not some stupid jerk.” Elliot started to relax, allowing me to scoot closer to him. “Why do you think I keep coming over here?” I asked. “I like it. You and your family are pretty cool, and I want to spend more time with you.” He blushed. I reached out tentatively to touch his cheek. It was warm against my hand. “What do I have to do to make you believe me?”

“Prove it.”

I leaned in, hesitant at first, then pressed my lips against his. It was like a flame sparked between us. Elliot gripped my hair to deepen the kiss, but it wasn’t enough. He pushed his way into my lap and we locked lips again. My heart pounded in my chest. We fell back onto the floor and rolled around, making out. We only parted when we bumped

into his bookshelf and a book tumbled down on to us. Breathless, we looked at each other as our noses still touched.

“What was that?” I asked.

Elliot picked up the book and read the title. “*Moby-Dick*.”

I didn’t ask why he had a novel about a whale. He tossed it to the side and wrapped his arms back around me. We both yawned.

“Maybe we should go to bed before we wake somebody up,” I said.

“Good idea.”

We slept comfortably together. I woke up past noon with Elliot’s head resting on my chest. A drool spot was forming on my shirt, but I didn’t mind. I gently stroked his soft brown hair, hoping he’d wake up. When he didn’t stir, I whispered in his ear.

“Hey, I got to go home. I’ll text you later.”

I sat up in bed and Elliot grumbled. He reached for a pillow to smush his face back into. He kind of reminded me of a cat, too lazy to get up, but that was okay. I had a lot to think about, and I needed to feed Nixon.

It was early November, but there were no clouds in the sky. The sun made everything warm and bright, and I pedaled just a little faster and more carefree. I decided to take a detour through the park then stopped to eat lunch. The vendor and I chatted about the good weather before he noticed the lacrosse patch on my jacket. He was impressed that I played for Bay View and asked me how conditioning was going. I about choked on my hot dog. The first practice for the indoor tournament was underway, and I had completely forgotten about it. My dad was out of town, so I took the opportunity to stay with Elliot.

By the time I pulled my bike up to the driveway, I was shaky and nauseous. Coach might have been mad but nothing would compare to how angry my father would be if he knew I missed practice. The moment I opened the door, however, I was temporarily relieved as my cat ran to greet me. I picked Nixon up and he pawed his way onto my shoulder, purring loudly in my ear. He was originally my mom's cat, but she wouldn't take him when she left. She said it would be too cruel to separate us.

I walked into the kitchen with Nixon draped around me like a scarf. He waited patiently for me to open the pantry door and fix him a bowl of cat food.

"Do you want chicken or tuna?" I asked him as I looked at the stacked cans of food. On the next shelf up, I saw the classic red and white label of Campbell's Chicken Noodle soup. My mom always fixed it for me when I was sick and stayed home from school. That's when the idea to lie dawned on me, saving me from my predicament. While Nixon ate, I texted Dad and Coach that I woke up with a fever and couldn't get out of bed. Coach was quick to reply, saying he hoped I felt better and that the team missed me at practice. Dad didn't get back with me.

I went to my room and tried to catch up on some sleep. I wondered if Elliot was awake yet, or if I should've texted him, but I didn't even know what to say.

*I like you.*

I sighed, closing my eyes. I drifted off while my mind replayed the night before and woke to the sound of buzzing in my ear. Nixon had curled up into a gray and white ball next to my phone, but the new message hadn't disturbed him.

"Need anything? Be home later."

The text from my dad was curt but caring – just like him. My father was a complicated man. He had been married twice, and when it came to spending time between his child and his congregation, he often settled for the latter. Coach picked up a lot of the slack, but he couldn't offer the kind of advice I needed off the field. Neither could Dad.

The guidance I needed came from an unlikely source. The next day, Nixon and I were watching TV on the couch while my Dad was at church. I was flipping through the channels when I saw him. Kevin Kline. He was dancing to *I Will Survive*. As he shook his hips, I was captivated. It reminded me of the times when I was really little and if it was just Mom and me in the car, she'd play *Madonna* so we could sing and dance. I decided to watch the rest of the movie. Even though Kevin Kline's community at first struggled to accept that he was gay, they stood up for him when he needed them most. Nixon climbed in my lap after the movie ended. I stroked him under his chin.

"What do you think?" I asked my cat. "Should I text Elliot?"

He purred loudly. I took that as a 'yes.'

On Monday, I rode my bike to Elliot's after school. He answered the door with his pink hoodie on. His cheeks were just as bright when he saw my face.

"Hey, come on in," he said. "Emory's at his friend's, so he won't bug you."

"That's okay. I don't mind."

We walked back to his bedroom. His copy of *Moby-Dick* was still on the floor with a bunch of his clothes. I picked up the book and handed it to him.

"This novel is about the size of a brick. No wonder I have a bruise on me."

He shoved it back into his bookshelf. "Sorry. I got carried away."

“It wasn’t just you.” My palms were becoming sweaty. I wanted to end any awkward tension between us. “Elliot, I think we should date.”

He stilled for a moment then smirked. “What was that? You mumbled.”

“I’m trying to ask you out.” I was a bit flustered until I saw him grin. He had heard me the first time. It was my turn to blush. I wrapped my arms around his slim waist and pulled him closer to me. “You’re devious.” Our lips almost met. “Is this a yes?”

Elliot kissed me. “Now it is.”

I liked holding him in my arms, and I knew I’d enjoy all the other perks that came with dating. There was just one stipulation before I could become his boyfriend.

“Nobody else knows, so I don’t want to tell anyone, yet.” The thought of the lacrosse team knowing was enough to make me grimace. “I hope you understand.” He nodded, but the corner of his mouth dipped down. “Does someone know?”

“I told my dad you liked me,” he said, “but I tell him everything.” Elliot snickered. “I do spare him some of the details.”

I envied that he could be that open with his father but that soon subsided. Elliot’s dad supported our relationship and embraced me just as warmly as if I were his own son.

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I ate breakfast with Elliot, his dad, and his little brother at the kitchen table. April had already left for her morning press conference. Before heading back into Elliot’s room, I helped with the dishes. I then sat on his bed while I watched my boyfriend apply a new coat of nail polish to his toenails. I didn’t mind having a lazy Saturday after a lacrosse game. Sundays were reserved for church and homework.

“Chuck,” Elliot said, “I can only assume your fascination with watching me is that you’d like to have to your nails painted.” He chuckled but was careful not to jostle the brush. “Or maybe you have a foot fetish.”

“I do not,” I said. “I just don’t get why you like nail polish.”

“You like lacrosse. I like painting my nails. What’s there to get?” Elliot’s phone received a text message. “That must be Ashe.” He set his polish to the side to reply to his best friend. Ashe was the only other person to know that Elliot and I were dating besides Elliot’s family. I didn’t mind, though. Ashe lived out of state, so my teammates never had to know the truth.

“You remember when you painted my nails last summer?” I asked.

“Yeah, you went with black.” He set the phone to the side and smiled. “We did a lot of things together last summer. It was fun.”

“Now that I have a car, we can go places.”

My father had surprised me at Christmas by giving me the keys to his old car. He gifted himself a new one on Christmas day, including the big red bow on top of it. I was just happy to be able to drive. Elliot didn’t even have his learner’s permit.

“Why don’t we go somewhere now?” he asked. “We could go to the mall.” I liked going to places where I wouldn’t see people from our high school. Elliot knew this. “If you’re worried,” he said, “pretend we made a deal. You went shopping with me so I’d write your term paper.”

I sighed. It was one more lie I had to live with before I graduated. Elliot and I were juniors and had one more year to go before we were free.

“What do you even want to buy at the mall?” I asked. “More nail polish?”

“Maybe I want to get something for my boyfriend,” Elliot said. “He did win his lacrosse game for me last night.”

We drove to the mall. In the car, we talked about summer plans. After school ended, Elliot was going to visit his grandparents with his little brother. That was around the same time my father would leave for his mission trip. I thought maybe I could drive down later to see Elliot and meet more of his family.

“I’m sure Nana will love that,” Elliot said. “She’ll try to fatten you up with her casseroles, though, so watch out.”

“What about your grandpa?”

He shrugged. “You can two can talk about sports. I’m just looking forward to the beach.”

I took the exit to the mall. Elliot turned the volume up on the radio. The previous song had finished playing when a familiar tune began. We both recognized it immediately.

“It’s our song, Elliot!”

He put his face into his hands. “Why did we have to listen to *Madonna* when we first had sex?”

“At least it wasn’t to *Like a Virgin*.” I grinned and turned the volume up higher. I knew all the words to *Like a Prayer* and sang along. Elliot eventually got over his embarrassment and joined me. When we stopped at a red light, an old couple in the next car stared at us, but we didn’t care and kept on singing along to the radio. We laughed as I drove away.



I couldn't wait for school to end. I wanted to spend more time with Elliot. Even if we were just driving around and singing to the radio, I was doing it with him and that's what mattered.

Inside the mall, the air conditioner was on full blast as if the building already anticipated the summer heat. I offered Elliot my jacket since he easily became cold. He gladly accepted it and put it on. The sleeves hung down past his fingertips. I was reminded that I couldn't hold his hand in public, and I hated that. Elliot probably would have dragged me around anyway as we window-shopped. He loved criticizing the latest fashion trends, but he didn't say anything when we walked by the prom dresses on display. I pointed to one particular gaudy ball gown covered in golden feathers.

"Who would want to dress up like a canary?"

"Someone with poor taste," he mumbled.

"What's wrong?"

Elliot quickened his pace, but I was right behind him. He turned around, groaning. "I don't even care about prom." His green eyes said otherwise. He drew his mouth into a pout. "I'm mad I can't go with you."

I wanted to kiss him to make him smile, but I couldn't. I couldn't even hug him.

"Tom wants me to go, but I'm not going to go without you." I gave him a gentle nudge, so we could still walk side by side. "We'd look good in tuxes."

"Who said I'd wear a tux?" Elliot grinned.

I thought about my boyfriend wearing a big, poofy pink dress and tiara. I snickered to myself and put my arm around his shoulder. "Come on, I'll buy you a strawberry milkshake."

“You’re the best, pal.”

He jokingly punched me in the side. We were the worst at trying to pretend we were just friends.

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Elliot and I couldn’t risk being found out in school, but it was hard to stay apart from each other after we started dating. I had to stop myself from stealing glances in the hallway and resist the urge to scoot closer next to him in biology. I couldn’t wait for lacrosse practice to end so I could head over to his house. Elliot still made me do my homework, but occasionally I sidetracked him with a kiss.

Our togetherness made some of my teammates wary. The snide remarks had stopped once I lied about Elliot doing my bio work, but the rumors began in the spring semester of our sophomore year. We were in the same English class with Drew, which was fine since Drew wasn’t obnoxious like his cousin. He even asked Elliot to join us on group assignments and chatted with him in class frequently. Whatever Tom had said about Elliot never bothered him. Being in a class with my best friend and boyfriend was great. I’m sure Drew would have had a blast if he took video production with Elliot and me. We decided to take that elective together because the teacher didn’t care what videos were produced. From stupid skits to mock news coverage to music videos, Elliot and I could joke around without worry or judgement. Some of our classmates ended up working with us, too, since Elliot had a tendency to make people laugh. It would have been a great semester if one of the seniors on my team hadn’t found out about my supposed arrangement with my boyfriend.

“Hey, Chuckie, does your fag friend only do your work or does he suck your dick, too?”

I almost dropped the equipment bag from the storage locker. No one else was around, but I was appalled. My initial reaction was disgust because of his vulgarity, followed by anger. I tightened my grip on the straps of the bag, but I loosened it when I realized I was in a vulnerable position.

“He does my fucking work. I don’t want another guy touching me.”

“What’s he getting out of it then?” he asked.

I panicked and said the first thing on my mind. *I’m leading him on.* If my teammate thought Elliot was only interested in me, he wouldn’t mess with him. In exchange, I could protect myself by making it clear I had no intentions of ever hooking up with another guy. The lie worked, but it backfired, too. Tom praised me for deceiving Elliot and resumed making derogatory remarks behind his back. I did my best to ignore him, but sometimes I had to play along. That mistake led to my boyfriend almost breaking up with me.

At the start of the summer, my dad left for his annual missionary trip. For two whole weeks, I had the house to myself, and Elliot stayed with me. The first night he came over, I introduced him to Nixon. We were laying on my bed next to each other while my cat kneaded my chest.

“Cats are weird,” Elliot said. “What’s he even doing?”

“He’s like a little baker making biscuits.” I stroked Nixon behind his ears. “I love this cat.”

“I take it back. You’re weirder.” He reached over and petted Nixon. “That’s okay, though. I can learn to love Tricky Dick, too.”

“You know,” I said, “I’m not sure why my mom named her cat after a president. She was never a history buff.”

Elliot snorted. “Maybe because your cat has a dick on its face?”

I never realized that the two, white round markings under my cat’s nose and the strip running up his bridge resembled a penis until Elliot pointed it out. I questioned my mom’s sense of humor and wondered if my conservative father was in on the joke.

“Hand me my phone,” I said. “Now I have to look at all my selfies and see if there’s a hidden dick in every one.”

“You take selfies with your cat?” Elliot reached for my phone off the nightstand and handed it to me. I unlocked it while he rested his head against me. “You really are weird.”

I kissed his cheek. “That says a lot coming from you.” I then heard my phone ding. A new text message had arrived, but it was too late. Tom asked me if I planned to lead Elliot on until our junior year or if I’d make it to graduation. A second text arrived shortly after asking if I was done with Elliot, could he use him? “It’s not what you think,” I blurted out as I felt Elliot tense up next to me. “Tom’s an idiot. Ignore him.”

Elliot swallowed hard before sitting up. I sat up, too, making Nixon jump off me. My boyfriend didn’t speak and wouldn’t look at me. The cat stared at us both.

“I know,” Elliot whispered. “It just hurts that everyone thinks I’m being used.” He gripped the sleeve of his shirt, keeping his eyes averted. “No one in school even recognizes us as friends. I’m just a boy with a crush, and you’re a jock.”

“That’s not true, Elliot.” I wrapped my arms around him and nuzzled him. “After I graduate, the lacrosse team won’t even matter. We’ll both be at college, and the people there won’t care if we’re dating, right?”

“I don’t think it’s that simple, Chuck,” he muttered.

We both went silent. I didn’t know what to say. Elliot didn’t move until Nixon started rubbing his hand and purring loudly. My cat knew how to comfort my boyfriend better than I did.

“Tricky Dick’s trying to make you feel better.” I planted a kiss on Elliot’s neck. “Let me make you feel better, too.”

“And how do you plan on doing that?” He couldn’t resist giggling when I tickled his sides and planted more kisses on his neck. “That’s no fair. You know I’m ticklish!”

He squirmed in my arms, laughing. I pulled Elliot down to the bed. Nixon leapt out of the way and scampered from the room before any clothes came off. I took my time, showing Elliot how tender and affectionate I could be. We then lay limp in bed, our bodies intertwined. I laced my fingers with his.

“I don’t know if it’s too soon to say this,” I said, “but I think I love you.”

He squeezed my hand. “I love you, too, Chuck, but can you promise me something?”

“Yeah?”

“Try not to hurt me. It was painful watching my dad suffer silently through his divorce. I don’t want to be like that,” he said.

“Don’t worry. I don’t want to be bitter like my dad when he divorced.” I gently kissed the back of Elliot’s hand. “We won’t be like that.”

The rest of the summer before our junior year, I kept my promise. Then school started again.

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Elliot made me wait at the food court with his strawberry milkshake. I stole a few sips until he came back with a small gift bag. He handed it to me.

“Open it,” he said. I pulled out a pair of rainbow socks. On each sock, the toe area had a grey cat face. My boyfriend flashed me a wide grin. “What do you think?”

“They’re *purrfect*.”

Elliot groaned, but he was happy because I was happy. We left the mall and drove back to the condo. I wore my new socks, which Emory loved as much as I did. Until I had to go home, Elliot and I played with his little brother. I realized I forgot to take my lacrosse jacket back, but I figured Elliot would give it to me after school on Monday.

When I opened the door to my house, Nixon ran up to me. I picked him up and put him around my neck before walking into the kitchen. My dad was sitting at the kitchen table, reading through some papers.

“Hey, Dad.” I opened the pantry door to get out the cat food. “How’s your weekend been?”

“Son, I need you to sit down.” I could tell by the tone of his voice he was serious. I set Nixon on the floor and took a seat at the table. My father slid off his glasses and looked me dead in the eyes. “I wanted to watch Netflix today, but I forgot the password. I called you, but you didn’t answer, so I called Drew. Do you know what he said?” I didn’t even have to answer. “Where were you last night, Charles?”

I could never tell him I was at my boyfriend's, so I picked the one person he hated the most. "I was at Mom's."

"You're grounded."

Dad took my car keys, too. He at least let me keep my cell phone, but things only became worse when I received a text from Drew.

"Sorry if I got you in trouble with your dad. Were you at the mall with Elliot today? Christy thought she saw you two."

It was just my luck for Drew's girlfriend to spot me with Elliot. I bet she saw us at the food court.

Drew sent me another text message. "It's okay if you're friends with Elliot. As long as we're still besties."

I glanced at the damn smiley face at the end of his message. I ignored my best friend and went to sleep. I tossed and turned all night, wondering if I could keep up this charade. Graduation was over a year away, and I was becoming nervous.

My paranoia only became worse in isolation. A week had already passed, and according to my father, I was grounded indefinitely. I suppose he thought if I stared at the bare walls in my room long enough, maybe I would never want to see my mom again. Instead, I longed for Elliot. The brief moments we were together in school were not enough to sustain me, and messaging him wasn't the same as hearing the sound of his voice and laughter. I took my frustrations out at lacrosse practice, but I returned home feeling empty. The only other place I could escape from my room was church, and it was a source of irritation rather than sanctuary. My father droned on at the pulpit, speaking of his missionary work. When we drove home, he even suggested I should spend the start of

my summer with him to avoid my mother's influence. I remained silent. I wanted to be with Elliot during the summer. I wanted to meet his grandparents and become part of his quirky family. They could accept a boy and his cat.

Nixon was my only source of comfort while I served out what felt like a prison sentence. He curled up next to me and purred loudly as I texted Elliot. I fantasized about the future and college. I wanted to get an apartment so Nixon could come with me, and there wouldn't be any issues if Elliot came to visit. I didn't know if it was practical, but I didn't care. All I wanted was a quaint life with my boyfriend. I needed a plan.

I decided to consult the internet. I joined an anonymous message board and posted about my predicament. I wanted to know how I could get through one more year of high school without drawing any more attention to me or Elliot. The first messages that trickled in were from trolls. I ignored them and waited for the real responses. Most of the posters suggested I should get a beard.

"I should grow a beard?" I wrote back.

"No, you moron." One of the users replied. "Pretend you're dating a chick."

It was so simple. I texted Tom, but I felt nauseous after hitting send.

My dad ungrounded me for prom. He thought Tiffany was the first girl I liked, and since she went to our church, he was willing to forgive me. I decided not to tell Elliot right away. Once prom was over, we could make our summer plans together. I'd use Tiffany as my excuse to get out of any missionary work, and when I needed a cover story for where I spent the night, I could use my friends to lie for me. They would think I was at Tiffany's, but I would be at Elliot's. No one would suspect anything. I just had to make it through prom night.



I picked Tiffany up at her house. She answered her door wearing the canary yellow, feathered ball gown from the mall. I tightly drew my lips together and nodded quickly when she asked if I liked her dress. We chitchatted in my car as I drove to the park. Drew and Christy wanted to take prom photos and invited Tom, me, and our dates to the photoshoot. All those pictures ended up on Facebook along with the selfies Tiffany and I took. She changed her profile picture to one where I had my arms wrapped around her like I was snuggling *Tweety Bird*. It was all part of the show.

The actual prom was boring. The music sucked, the appetizers were gross, and once Tiffany's cheerleading friends showed up, she wanted to take pictures with them. I sat at a table with Drew and Christy as we watched Tom's date dump him for another guy on the dance floor. Elliot was lucky to have been spared from prom. I wore the rainbow cat socks so a part of him could at least be there with me.

I thought about how damn good we would have looked in tuxes. I would have worn a pink bowtie for him, and if we took pre-prom photos, I would have put a bowtie on Nixon and posed with him, too.

"Chuck," Drew said. "Why are you smiling like that?"

"Huh?" I was caught daydreaming about my boyfriend and cat. My cheeks reddened. "Honestly, I was thinking about putting a bowtie on my cat. Did you know Nixon has a penis marking on his face?"

"Yeah." Drew laughed. "I thought that's why your mom named him Tricky Dick. How is she, by the way?"

I shrugged. "Just as crazy as ever. No wonder I'm thinking about a prom for cats."

“That would be cute,” Christy said. “Though I think your cat might attack your date’s prom dress.”

We all looked over at Tiffany in her feathery ball gown. I couldn’t wait for the evening to be over. Tiffany’s mom wanted her home before midnight, so we left around eleven. She was content on the ride home, and when I dropped her off at her house, she kissed me. The next day, Tiffany sent me a request to make our relationship official. I reluctantly hit accept.

Monday morning, Tom and Drew congratulated me outside my locker before first period. Tom slapped me hard on my back.

“It’s about damn time you had girlfriend,” he said. “I was starting to worry about you.”

“You’re one to talk. Your date broke up with you after an hour,” Drew said to his cousin. He then turned to me. “Chuck, now that you’re dating Tiffany, maybe the two of you can do a double date with me and Christy.”

“Man, that’s gay,” Tom said.

“Gay’s not a pejorative, you stupid asshole.”

I recognized the voice first before turning around. Elliot was standing behind us. Bundled up under his arm was my lacrosse jacket. Tom stepped forward.

“What the fuck did you just say to me?” Tom asked.

“Get out of my face. I’m not here to talk to you.” Elliot flicked his eyes over to me. They were a piercing green.

Tom didn’t back down. “What’s this? Are you upset my buddy took a cheerleader to prom and not you?” He sneered. “Did you really think Chuck liked you?”

I pulled Tom back by the arm. “This isn’t worth getting suspended over. Let’s just go.”

Elliot threw my jacket at my feet. “Whatever, Chuck. It’s over.” He turned to leave, but I reached out and grabbed his wrist. I couldn’t let him go. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Wait. I don’t understand,” I said.

“You never will, Chuck.” His voice faltered for just a moment before he snatched his wrist back. “I’m done playing pretend. Go find some other boy to fuck around with.”

This wasn’t supposed to happen. We were going to make plans. We were going to be free.

I could hear Tom’s obnoxious voice in my ear. I jerked my elbow back to push him away. “Elliot, don’t leave me.” I reached for him again. “Just wait.”

He smacked my hand away. “Stop it!” he shouted. “This isn’t like last time. You can’t make this better by sucking my dick and telling me you love me!”

I reacted without thinking. My fist smashed into Elliot’s eye and he crumpled to the floor. Drew shoved me out of the way. My best friend then dropped to his knees, shielding my boyfriend from me. I just stood there. “What the hell is wrong with you?” Drew yelled over the sounds of Tom’s heinous laughter.

“I had one more year left,” I mumbled. My hand tingled. I glanced at Tom before clinching my fist and socking him in the mouth. “You fucking ruined it!”

I slammed him into the lockers with my shoulder. We wrestled to the ground, but I rolled on top of Tom and didn’t stop punching. My knuckles bloodied. I knocked his front tooth loose. I kept on hitting. Even when the security guards pulled me off him, I

kicked Tom in the ribs. My body then went slack. Before I was hauled off to the principal, I caught a glimpse of Drew trying to help Elliot into the nurse's office.

Dad kicked Nixon out of the doorway when we came home. He was silent the entire car ride from school. He marched me into the kitchen and opened the pantry door. He threw a box of trash bags at me.

"Pack your shit. I won't have a sodomite living under my roof." He dug his phone out of his pocket. "You can go live with that crazy bitch."

"What about Nixon?"

My father pushed me out of the kitchen. "No one cares about your damn cat. Get out of here so I can call your mother!"

Mom was supposed to be there in an hour. It took two. I sat on my front porch with three trash bags and my cell phone in my hand. It kept vibrating with new messages. Drew texted me that Tom's nose was broken. One of my teammates asked me if it was true that I liked to suck dick. Another one sent me a string of slurs. Coach messaged me that I was off the team. He had a zero tolerance policy for fighting. After that, I turned off my phone.

My mom parked her old pickup truck on the street. I loaded my trash bags into the back. My dad wouldn't let me take my car or my cat. While they argued, I sat in the passenger seat of the truck. I put on my lacrosse jacket that smelled faintly of Elliot.

Before she got into the driver's seat, my mom cursed my dad. "You're the one that's going to burn in Hell! Not our son!" She slammed her door and took a deep breath. Then she turned her key in the ignition. "It's going to be okay, baby. Mom's going to make everything better." The engine started and she drove away from my home. "I'm not

going to let your father keep Tricky Dick, either. I'll break in and steal the cat back if I have to."

"Thanks, Mom," I mumbled.

She smiled and pushed her cassette tape into the stereo. Mom sang along with *Madonna* to a familiar tune. I turned my head to face out the window, letting the tears roll. I knew the lyrics by heart.

## **Everyone Likes Cake**

It was supposed to be the perfect beach day until my breast floated away. A wave had crashed into my grandson and me while we were splashing in the water. I was too worried about him to realize the breast form had slipped out of my bathing suit. Emory was fine but wanted to know why my chest had deflated. Maybe Lars did have a point about the reconstruction, but I knew I didn't want to recover from surgery when I had a grandson to chase after. Now Emory chased the silicone insert as it bobbed further away in the tide. My husband and our older grandson sat on the shore, but at the first sign of distress, Elliot set down his phone to check on his little brother.

"Emory, what are you and Nana doing?"

"Nana said she lost her boob!" Emory shouted. "Can you help us look for it?"

I didn't know if more people were staring at the old lady covering her chest or her grandson as he waded into the water and pushed back the floppy brim of the sun hat on his head. Elliot thought my white hat was fashionable paired with his pink sunglasses. I had to agree with my overly expressive grandson. He took his brother's hand and they walked along the surf until they saw a group of children about Emory's age poking something in the sand with a stick. I could hear Elliot's voice carry in the breeze.

"That's not a jellyfish, you twerps. Scram!" Elliot took off his glasses and handed them to his brother. The children ran away while Emory grinned and put on the heart-shaped frames. "Just keep them on if you like them so much." I overheard Elliot as he leaned down to pick up the breast form. He washed the sand off and handed it to me when I approached. "Nana, here's your boob back."

I winced at the sight of his face. The purple discoloration around his right eye had faded to a sickly yellow and his cheek was still bruised. The altercation Elliot had at school with his friend was a painful start to the summer.

“Well,” I said, “I think that’s enough fun at the beach. Let’s go home.”

Elliot and I walked back over to Lars with Emory riding piggyback on his brother to avoid trudging through the sand. My husband scratched the balding spot on the back of his head, puzzled.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Nothing to worry about, dear.”

I dropped the breast form into my beach bag as Elliot and Emory packed up.

---

A little over a week had passed since the boys were dropped off by their dad. Ezra seemed a bit impatient to leave, but I think my son was looking forward to being alone with his lovely girlfriend. April, however, didn’t mind staying to chat. She sat on the couch next to Ezra, telling me all about their trip.

“Our flight departs early in the morning, so we should arrive in San Francisco at a decent time. I’m really excited,” April said. “I can’t wait to see the baby.”

The front door opened and Elliot walked in carrying his sleeping brother. He dumped Emory onto the loveseat, looked at us, then sat down next to his dad. He kept his pink sunglasses on and took out his phone.

“Nana, what’s the wifi password?”

“I can never remember, sweetie. I keep it on the fridge.” My grandson thanked me but didn’t get up. I turned back to April. “Now who had the baby?”

“My friend Simone,” April said. “Her and Diane had been trying for a while to get pregnant.”

“And how did that happen?” I asked out of curiosity.

April’s cheeks flushed, but Elliot answered before her. “Immaculate conception.”

Until then, Ezra had remained silent. When his snickering began, April gently elbowed him in his ribs. They exchanged glances before she tilted her head toward Elliot.

Ezra stood up. “Come on, kiddo. Let’s check that wifi password.”

Elliot followed his dad into the kitchen, slouching as he walked. The living room was quiet except for the occasional snore coming from Emory. I took this opportunity to do a little grandmotherly prying.

“Is Elliot okay?” I asked April.

“He will be. I wanted his dad to speak to him before we leave, but I think Elliot spending some time here will help.” She smiled. “He might even be happy if you can pry that phone away from him.”

“I don’t know if I can do that, but I do have a day at the beach planned,” I said.

“Sunshine can cure moodiness, and Elliot looks like he’s ready to go out with those cute glasses on. Where did he get them?”

“The heart ones?” April asked. “His friend Ashe gave them to him.”

“The lacrosse player?”

Her face soured. “No, that’s Chuck. Ashe lives out of state.”

“That must be why Elliot’s on his phone all the time,” I said. “Ezra used to do the same thing when Liam was at college. Well, there wasn’t any texting, but Ezra knew how to run up a phone bill.” I laughed. “Things sure do change.”



“He still calls his brother frequently,” April said. “In fact, we might see Liam in California before he heads off to Denver with Juliet and Daniel.”

I couldn’t remember the last time I had seen my stepson or even spoken to him. It had been over ten years, maybe fifteen, but I knew his children’s names weren’t Juliet and Daniel. I never had the chance to be a grandmother to Liam’s children, but from my perspective, he was never much of a father.

“I’m sure Ezra would like to see his brother again,” I said. “I should go check on him and Elliot.”

Unlike his older brother, Ezra was nurturing and kind. When I walked into the kitchen, he had finished speaking to his son and hugged him.

“Don’t hesitate to call if you need anything, Elliot. I mean it.”

“I will, Dad,” he said. “Can I go unpack my bag now?”

I fixed Ezra a cup of coffee after his son went upstairs. He explained that Elliot had been in a fight with his lacrosse friend which broke my heart. Those boys were so close. I made a mental note to make Elliot’s favorite cookies, but knowing I’d forget, I wrote ‘snickerdoodle’ on the fridge notepad. They were also Ezra’s favorite, but I couldn’t convince him to stay for supper or dessert. He left with April before Lars came home. My dinner table was quiet that night. Elliot picked at his meal and didn’t even try a cookie before going to bed.

---

I thought my grandsons would spend most of their time in front of the television, but they decided to occupy my kitchen. Elliot and Emory flipped through my cookbooks to find recipes Emory could make while Elliot jotted down an ingredients list. At the

supermarket, the boys filled up the cart with groceries and teased each other up and down the aisles. Their bickering continued all the way home and into the kitchen, but the banter subsided once they cleaned and prepped the counter space. Emory needed a mixing bowl which I tried to get down with a spatula, but my much taller grandson was quick to chide me and retrieve the bowl himself.

“Nana, you don’t want anything to fall out on you,” Elliot said. “I thought Grandpa Lars gave you a stepladder to reach things.”

“That ugly thing?” I looked at the antique wooden ladder propped against the wall. Despite its appearance, the stepladder was the most thoughtful and practical gift my husband had ever given me. “Sweetie, I’ve had that rickety old thing since your daddy was a boy. He used to sit on it and watch me cook.”

“Nana, can you tell us about daddy growing up?” Emory asked. “He never talks about it.”

I set the spatula back in the utensil holder. I thought about the happy little boy on the ladder and the day everything changed when Liam came to visit. Elliot and Emory were both concerned by my silence, but looking at Elliot’s face and those silly heart-shaped glasses, I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Your daddy was something else,” I said. “It was just me and him for a long time since Grandpa Lars was still working as an airline pilot. Ezra was practically my shadow around the house.”

---

Back before Lars replaced the floral wallpaper in the kitchen, and I was a brunette before the grey set in, Ezra was about to turn seven years old and wouldn’t stop pestering

me. He set the stepladder right down next to me by the counter and watched as I mixed his cake.

“Mom, why do I have to wait until tomorrow to open presents?”

“That’s when your party is, sweetie. Don’t you want your friends to be around?”

“No,” he said.

I wanted to remind him about the value of patience, but the doorbell rang and I told him to keep his fingers out of the cake batter instead. I wiped my hands off on my apron and walked to the front door. I looked through the peephole to see a sharply dressed woman with jet black hair smoking a cigarette. Standing next to her was her son. I was reluctant to invite her in.

“Toni, what are you doing here?” I asked.

A devilish smirk appeared on her face. “Melinda, aren’t you precious in your little homemaker getup. Liam’s here for Ezra.” Toni placed her hand on her son’s shoulder and pushed him gently forward. “Lars said I could drop him off early for the birthday party. I have plans.” I looked over her shoulder. There was a red convertible in the driveway with a handsome man in the driver’s seat. Liam turned to his mother. She blew him a kiss. “I have to go, kid,” she said. “See you.”

Toni, my husband’s mistress, then left me with her son. Liam was the spitting image of Lars except he had his mother’s black hair. The boy stepped into the living room with his backpack and a book in his hand.

“I wasn’t expecting you,” I said to him. “Why don’t you go into the kitchen with Ezra? I have to make a phone call.” He walked away without saying a word.

I wanted to cry; I wanted to scream. I picked up the phone, but it was no use calling. I couldn't leave a message with the airline, asking Lars why he wanted Liam there if he was never going to be around. My husband wouldn't be home until late in the evening, and I had to take care of our son and his. I returned to the kitchen. Ezra was hugging Liam tightly.

"Hey, Mom!" My child's grin stretched from ear to ear. "Liam just gave me the best gift ever!"

"What's that, sweetie?"

"He told me we're brothers!"

It was the beginning to an end of blissful ignorance. I couldn't protect my son from the truth. The boys left the kitchen to play basketball outside, and I went back to mixing Ezra's birthday cake in silence.

---

My grandchildren listened to the story of when Ezra first started school and told his class he wanted to be like his mom so he could stay at home. They both chuckled, so I also told them the time their dad hid a litter of kittens in his room, thinking I wouldn't hear the constant mews coming from his closet. Those were the days before I ever had to worry about Liam.

"What happened to the kittens, Nana?" Emory asked.

"Your daddy wanted to take care of them, but I didn't want to keep strays in the house," I said. "I dropped them off at the shelter."

Emory frowned, but his displeasure was nothing compared to Elliot's. He set the timer on the oven, checked his phone, then left the kitchen to go upstairs.

“Elliot’s so rude.” Emory crossed his arms. “He didn’t even offer to help clean up.”

“That’s okay. I can wash the dishes,” I said. “After all, I didn’t have to cook for once.”

Emory brought the dirty mixing bowls and spoons to the sink. “Can I still help?”

“You sure can.”

I thought about Elliot as I scrubbed the dishes clean. I wondered what I had said to upset him, or if there was something else that I didn’t know about him and his friend.

“Emory, do you think your brother feels sad?”

“Yeah, that’s because Chuck punched him,” Emory said. “He’s been wearing those sunglasses ever since. Elliot won’t admit it, but I think his heart hurts worse than his face.”

Children always amazed me at how insightful they could be, and no matter how much adults tried to hide the truth, children could find it.

---

Denying the existence of Ezra’s half-brother was no longer an option, but I didn’t know how to tell my son his father had an affair. Liam had a more simple approach, explaining to Ezra that their dad married me and not his mother. Ezra was somewhat satisfied with Liam’s explanation, but he still had questions that needed delicate answers. I couldn’t provide them, however. I was too worried about someone stopping me in the grocery store or at Ezra’s school to ask about Liam or Lars. I had Ezra promise he’d keep the knowledge of his brother a secret and never tell a soul.

Maybe the guise of normalcy could have remained intact if Toni herself had been normal. She was one of a kind, though, and even after Lars broke it off, he was still smitten by her. My husband would do anything to help her, including taking in their child. The two years of keeping Liam's paternity a secret meant nothing when Lars was granted custody of his eleven-year-old son.

"Melinda," he said, sitting on our bed with his shirt off and vodka on his breath. His voice was hoarse and tired. "It's my son. His mother's been institutionalized, and Toni doesn't talk to her relatives. What do you want me to do with Liam?" he asked. "Throw him out on the street?"

"Maybe if you didn't stick your prick in a stewardess this wouldn't have been an issue, Lars."

"That's not fair to Liam," he said. "You can't punish him because he's mine and Toni's child."

"And what about our child? What about Ezra?"

"He's a kid," Lars said. "He'll get used to it."

Ezra was more than amicable with the news of Liam coming to live with us. To a nine-year-old, having his older brother around meant infinite playdates and an end to shadowing me as I did household chores. I was in the middle of doing the dishes when Lars brought Liam home on a school day. I wiped my hands on my apron and walked into the living room. The black-haired child stood awkwardly with his backpack on while his father carried his suitcase up the stairs. I didn't know what to say to him.

"Where's Ezra?" Liam asked, looking down at his untied shoes.

“He’s at school. We can register you next week when we figure this whole thing out.”

Liam nodded and sat down on the couch. He took off his backpack and pulled out a book to read. He didn’t move from his spot until Ezra came home. I reminded the boys that Ezra had to complete his homework first before they could go outside to play basketball, but this wasn’t a problem. Liam eagerly volunteered to help out, and they sat at the kitchen table under my watchful eye. I was hesitant once the work was done to let them play, so I told Liam he needed to unpack his suitcase. Ezra didn’t mind chores but putting away clothes was his least favorite. I was foolish to think that task would stop him from following Liam to his new room. I let them be until dinner was ready and went upstairs. I overheard them talking and lingered outside his door.

“I don’t think she likes me,” Liam said.

“How come?” Ezra asked. “Mom likes everybody.”

“She doesn’t like my mom, and I think that’s why she doesn’t like me.”

“That’s silly,” Ezra said. “You’re so smart and cool that everyone should like you. Now one thing I don’t get is what happened to your mom. Why did she go away?”

I stepped into Liam’s bedroom. Ezra was sitting on the bed while Liam was putting away his shirts. “Boys, it’s time for supper.”

“My favorite!” Ezra hopped off the bed. “I’m starving.”

I was thankful for my child’s one track mind, but I knew Liam wasn’t thinking about food. He sat at the table but hardly touched his plate. There was only one person on that child’s mind, and she wasn’t there.

---

I was hoping the day at the beach would brighten Elliot's mood, and maybe it did a little, but I felt like a storm cloud was forming over my head. I took a shower to rinse away the sand, thinking maybe I just needed a moment to myself. Stepping out onto the cold tile, I dried off and ran my hand across my mastectomy scar. After treatment and surgery, I was known as a survivor, but I already thought I earned that title. I added cancer to the list that included the adulterous husband, his mistress, and their illegitimate child. My biggest struggle was getting used to Lars' early retirement after I was diagnosed.

Somehow, the man must have known I was thinking about him. He opened the door to the bathroom.

"Melinda, I didn't know you were in here. I'm sorry," Lars said, trying to retreat.

"Scared to see me naked?" I laughed. "How many years has it been?"

"There's no water pressure in the guest bathroom." He stepped back in, eyes averted.

I didn't know if my husband was ashamed to see my body or to acknowledge we no longer shared the same space. He had slept in the guest room during my recovery and stayed in there once I healed. Our grandsons weren't happy to share their father's old room, but I found myself more peaceful sleeping in a separate bed from their grandfather.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine, Lars. You can have the shower."

I left him alone, shutting the door. I dressed and spent the rest of the evening with Elliot and Emory in front of the television. A marathon played on the Food Network, consuming all of my grandson's attention. His teenage brother looked up occasionally but



stayed glued to his phone most of the time. I decided to order pizza for dinner, but one slice gave me indigestion so I went to bed early. That night I dreamed about storm clouds in an empty room.

---

The day Liam left my house for good, it stormed. He had one suitcase by the door and a bus ticket sticking out from a book tucked under his arm. He was supposed to stay under my roof until he started college in the fall, but we both knew I wanted him gone. Ezra sat on the couch with his head in his hands as he heard for the last time his brother and me arguing.

“After everything we’ve done for you, you’ve always been ungrateful,” I said to Liam. “This is all your fault, but you let your brother take the blame.”

“I already told you it was his choice. I didn’t make him lie.” Liam looked out the window, waiting for his father to come back from the liquor store. “I’m out of your hair now, Melinda. Maybe you’ll finally be happy.”

“Happy? I’m infuriated!” I clenched my apron with shaking fists. “Your brother was suspended. He’s off the basketball team for good because of you and your drug habit.”

“Ezra was the one that chose to smoke pot with me.” Liam turned around and shrugged. “I don’t know why he said it was his. It was just dumb luck that we got caught in the first place. Shit happens.” He smirked. “Ezra will be fine.”

My stepson’s smugness and his jet black hair reminded me of Toni and all her audacity. “Liam, you don’t care about wrecking people’s lives!” No matter how hard I tried to forget about that woman, she was always there right in front of me. “You go

ahead and leave. Your damage here is done but that reckless nature of yours will lead you down the same path as your mother – straight into an asylum!”

“Enough!” Ezra stood up and stepped between me and Liam. “Just stop,” he pleaded. “I can't listen to this anymore. I don't care what happened.” Ezra turned to his brother, and to both my and Liam's surprise, he hugged him tightly. It had been ten years since he had come to know Liam as his half-brother, but his love for him never faltered. “Someone had to look out for you,” he said in a hushed whisper. “Take care of yourself.”

A car horn honked outside. Lars had returned. He honked again and Ezra let his brother go. Liam picked up his suitcase.

“I'll remember to call,” Liam said. “Don't worry about me too much.”

“You know I will,” he said, “but we'll see each other again.”

Liam nodded then walked out into the rain. He kept his word about calling, but the two brothers wouldn't reunite until Liam's wedding day. His wife insisted his family attend the wedding, but somehow I knew that marriage would end in infidelity and divorce. I went anyway because Ezra remained hopeful that Liam could find happiness.

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I overslept the next morning. Lars shook me, probably thinking I had punched my ticket in my sleep. The look of concern on his face made me laugh. I asked if he wanted to join me for coffee since he at least woke me up. After I dressed, I went down to the kitchen and sat at the table. Lars had already started the pot which filled the air with a rich aroma.

“You sure you're feeling all right?” He set the creamer down in front of me.

“It was just a bad night’s sleep. They can’t all be good,” I said. “Where are the boys?”

“Outside. It’s a sunny day,” Lars said. “Do you want sugar?”

“The doctor says I shouldn’t, but he’s not here.”

I made coffee better than my husband, but his wasn’t bad. We sipped in silence, looking at the newspaper, out the window, and at anything else but each other. Emory came in wearing Elliot’s heart-shaped glasses and sat down to join us.

“Nana, you didn’t get up for breakfast, so we ate cereal,” Emory said. “Now Elliot’s grumpy.”

“Because he ate cereal?” Lars asked.

Emory shrugged. “It was kind of stale.” He put his elbows on the table and rested his head in his hands. “Or maybe because it was Raisin Bran.”

Lars set down his paper. “Should I go talk to him?”

I wanted to ask my husband if he planned on telling Elliot his life motto - *you’ll just get used to it*, but Emory spoke up first.

“No, that’s probably a bad idea.” Emory took off the sunglasses. “Elliot hates to listen.”

“But maybe he wants to talk,” I said. “Emory, would you like to look through my cookbooks? See if Grandpa will help you find a cake recipe.”

“Okay, Nana. What’s the occasion?”

“Everyone likes cake,” I said. “It’ll be a nice after dinner treat.”

I stood up with my coffee in hand. As I walked out of the kitchen, I overheard Emory tell his grandpa that Elliot liked pie better. Liam did, too.

Outside, Elliot was sitting on the porch in the shade. He had his head tilted back against the siding and his forearm covered his eyes. His cell phone was next to him. I set down my coffee and took a seat by my grandson.

“Do you ever get off that thing?” I asked.

“I’m off now,” he said. “It’s kind of stupid, though. Who cares about being connected to everybody if it makes you feel like crap.”

“What do you mean?”

He sighed. “Pretty much everyone from my school knows that Chuck punched me.” He dropped his arm and turned to me. His bruise was still in the process of healing. “Nana,” he said. “Chuck and me were dating.”

I felt a pain in my chest. I wanted to tell my grandson it wasn’t the physical scars that hurt the most but the ones that other people left behind. Instead, I took a sip of my coffee. He had more to say.

“What happened at school was my fault,” Elliot continued. “I wanted to break up with him because he went to prom with a damn cheerleader instead of me. He thought if he just pretended to be straight, all our problems would be solved.” He picked up his phone and glanced at the screen. “I couldn’t end it over a text message, though. I thought I could handle it in person.” Elliot then threw the phone out into the yard, scaring away a bird. “I was so stupid. I thought I was mad at Chuck, but I wasn’t. It was his friend Tom that made me snap.”

“Sweetie,” I said, “why did Chuck hit you?”

“I outed him.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I was so angry at Tom, but I lashed out at Chuck. The fight was just the beginning, though,” he said, looking

beyond the porch and down the road. “I found out this week Chuck’s dad kicked him out. I can never imagine my dad doing that.”

“He never would, Elliot.”

“I know and that’s what’s killing me. How can anyone call themselves a parent then throw their kid out on the street?” he asked.

Before I could answer him, Emory opened the front door with the sunglasses on and a grin on his face.

“Nana, I found a recipe. It’s a compromise between cake and pie,” he said.

“We’re having cheesecake for dessert.”

Elliot snorted. “That’s not a compromise.”

“It is, too! It has cake in the name but a crust like a pie.”

“Whatever.” Elliot stood up and dusted himself off. He walked down the porch steps and into the yard. Emory followed.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I’m getting my phone.”

“Why’s it out here?” Emory took off the pink shades. “Do you need these anymore or can I keep them?”

Elliot found his cell phone in the grass. “I already told you at the beach you can have them.” Emory let out a squeal of excitement while Elliot joined me back on the porch. He leaned down to help me up from my spot. “Thanks for listening to me, Nana. What happened can’t be fixed easily, but somehow, I’ll try to make it right.” He handed me my coffee and turned back to his brother. “Come on, weirdo. We’ll get started on your cheesecake.”

They went inside, but I stayed out to think. I don't know how long I was out there when Lars decided to join me. He told me the boys were driving him nuts with their cheese puns, but I wondered if he had another reason.

"Why did we never divorce?" I asked. "Would you have been happier with Toni?"

"No," he said. "I loved you both, but she couldn't be saved from her illness. I was afraid I'd lose you, too."

"Well, Lars," I said, "the only thing I lost was a boob." I chuckled and handed him my empty cup. "Thanks for the coffee. It was a tad bitter but it just needed a little sweetness." I kissed him on his cheek. "How's your back from sleeping in the guest bed?"

"Fine, I guess. Why?"

"Just curious," I said.

I wasn't ready to let him back into our bedroom, but I could at least give him a chance for us to talk, and maybe we'd even listen.

---

The day April and Ezra returned to pick up the boys, they had exciting news. Emory sat in his dad's lap with Elliot sitting next to them on the couch. April showed me her ring. It had a small emerald set in the shape of a heart.

"We had a wonderful evening one night and then he topped it off by proposing." April glanced back at my son and smiled. Ezra and Emory both had the same wide, goofy grin on their faces. "Green's my favorite color. It's perfect, just like him."

“I’m not perfect. I just pay attention,” Ezra said. He then ruffled his youngest child’s hair. “April and I decided to consult you about the cake, Emory, but from what Elliot’s told me over the phone, I might already have an idea of what you want.”

Emory slid the pink sunglasses up on to his hair and faced his older brother.

Elliot smirked. “Go ahead and say it, Emory.”

“We should have cheesecake.”

Before Ezra and April left with the boys, they spoke to Lars about their upcoming wedding in November. He was happy for them and asked who Ezra planned on having for a best man. It was Liam. I decided maybe it was time to try and mend my relationship with my stepson as well. I asked Ezra if I could have his brother’s phone number.

Lars made me a cup of coffee after our son and his family left. I sat at the kitchen table with a piece of paper and a number on it, debating when to call and what to say. Finally, I dialed Liam.

“Hi, Liam. This is Melinda.”

We didn’t speak for long. I told him that his father and I were excited about the wedding, and that maybe we could try to have a family dinner before the big day.

“I’ll think about it,” he said.

It wasn’t a yes. It wasn’t a no. It was a start.

### **The Three Spoons**

Daniel and Juliet had already crammed a third of the THC-laced gummy bears into their mouths when my cell phone rang. I recognized the number but was reluctant to answer. On the off chance it was Ezra, I picked up and instantly regretted it. His mother's saccharine voice still made the hair on my arms stand up. I tapped my fingers against the cherry laminate desk in the hotel room, listening, while Daniel went into the bathroom and came back out with a handful of complimentary toiletries. He shoved them in his bag as Juliet came up to me and pressed a green gummy bear to my lips.

"Who are you talking to?" she asked.

I bit the head off the bear first and chewed. "My stepmom," I said.

Unlike Daniel, she didn't know the whole story. Juliet knew the snippets of my life; he heard the drunken tales.

On the phone, my stepmother discussed my brother's engagement. Typically, I wouldn't endorse the institution of marriage, but I was divorced and had my own biases. Ezra was happy, and I found his fiancée to be quite charming. Maybe the two of them could make it work. My personal preferences were more fluid, unlike the departure schedule for the airport. I interrupted Melinda and told her my plane was leaving soon. She apologized. Her real reason for calling was a simple request but it left a bad taste in my mouth. I took the bag of gummy bears from Juliet.

"I'll have to think about it," I said. "Let me talk to Ezra, and I'll let you know my decision."



Once I hung up the phone, I ate a handful of the cannabis *Care Bears* and tossed them back to Juliet. Our leisure trip to Denver had been well spent, but I was ready to return home and sleep in my own bed.

“You know, we could have bought a normal bag of gummy bears and mixed the two,” I said. “You didn’t have to stuff your faces like chipmunks.”

Daniel and Juliet looked at each other before giggling.

“This is what I mean, Daniel.” She dropped the bag of candy into her purse and closed it. “He’s ingenious. Liam’s the Hermione to our Ron and Harry.”

They often rambled about books – even the ones about wizards and whatnot.

“I don’t want to be Hermione,” I said. We left the room, heading to the elevator. “If I’m going to be a character, I want to be a narrator.”

Daniel snickered. “So should we call you Ishmael?”

Juliet’s hand slipped around my back to push the down button. “That’s even better.” She pressed into me and tilted her face upward. Her eyes were full of mischief. “You’re Ishmael on the streets and Moby Dick in the sheets,” she said and squeezed my ass. I leaned down to greet her lips.

“Calm down, Ahab.” I smirked. “We don’t want to miss our flight.”

The elevator dinged and the doors opened. There were a few hushed whispers followed by a gasp.

“Hey, it’s that hot Melville scholar from the conference,” one of the young women said to her friends. “I told you he wasn’t gay.”

“Not quite, ladies.” Daniel slid his arm around my waist. He kissed me then kissed Juliet for good measure.

Mystifying strangers was arguably Juliet and Daniel's favorite pastime. We stepped into the elevator and chatted with the group of women. They were grad students and took a particular interest in Juliet. At twenty-eight, she wasn't much older than them, but the nature of our relationship was apparently fascinating.

"How do you end up with two men?" one asked. The elevator reached the lobby.

"I seduced them," Juliet said, "with my brain."

We checked out and left the hotel to find a convenience store. Halfway down the street, Juliet burst into a gleeful fit of laughter.

"Did you see their faces?" she asked. "I should have added I love sex." Daniel and I exchanged amused glances. We knew. "Oh well, those grad students don't need to be distracted from their research," Juliet said with a sly smile. "Books over boning - that's my motto."

"Since when?" I asked.

"Since now." She patted my cheek and took Daniel's hand. "Where are we going again?"

"Juliet, are you high?"

Daniel squeezed her hand, grinning. "Liam, I think our captain's baked."

If Juliet was our captain, then Daniel was our first mate who kept us on track. When we reached the convenience store, he led Juliet in. I followed.

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Like most divorces, mine was a mess involving children and property. In the end, all I wanted was my autonomy returned. I left the kids and the house to my ex-wife and moved into a fixer-upper. Daniel had just begun to work in our department, so my marital

situation was of little concern to him. We bonded over frustrations with administration and renovation. When I told him I had to remodel the bathroom, he suggested we get some sledgehammers and do the demo work ourselves. Destroying tiles and porcelain was remarkably therapeutic.

With the water turned off in my home, Daniel offered to let me shower at his place. It was a small studio but suitable for him. He didn't like being tied down, and as long as he could write, he was happy. Daniel fixed me a drink, and I had a smoke while he showered. I had never thought much of my younger colleague in terms of physical aesthetics. With his rimless glasses and argyle sweaters, he said his students often called him a dork. I'm sure their opinions would have changed if they had seen him walk out of the bathroom with only a towel wrapped around his waist. His upper body was muscular and inked. Intricate tattoos started at his shoulder blades and ran down his bronze arms, stopping just below his elbows. Daniel could roll up his sleeves with no one ever guessing what was underneath.

"It's all yours," he said. "Unless you want another drink."

What happened afterwards was only natural; we had a mutual curiosity and attraction to each other. While lying naked in his bed, slightly inebriated, I realized I wouldn't return home that night, but I didn't mind. We shared a cigarette, and I had a better look at his tattoos. I traced my fingers against the most prominent one.

"Why a lion surrounded by dandelions?" I asked.

"You ever heard about the collection of demented children's tales written by Daniel Lion?" He took a drag and exhaled. "I wrote that shit."

Daniel and I had casual sex for a little over a year. I don't really know when we started dating. He occasionally helped work on the house and liked going to estate sales with me. While I found unique furniture, he picked through old books, and we turned the downstairs den into a reading room. I was in better spirits when I was with Daniel, so I asked him to move in. We've been together ever since.

We were low-key about our relationship in the beginning, but my ex-wife still found out. Surprisingly, she was more angry that I slept with another man when we were divorced than the time I slept with another woman when we were married. She moved away and took the kids with her. Before leaving, my ex told me she regretted having our daughter and son since they were burdened to continue the doomed legacy of Liam Marcellus. She always did have a flare for the overdramatic.

---

The flight home was interesting. Juliet and Daniel sat next to each other, giggling, while a baby screamed near the back of the plane. For the passengers who had not gone deaf to the wails of the child, they eavesdropped and side-eyed the woman and man who openly discussed sex and scholarship.

"Look, I call it editing for sexual favors," Juliet said. "Every 10,000 words you edit, I reward you with a sexual favor."

"Favor?" Daniel flashed her a cheeky grin. "I think this is all to your benefit."

"That's not the point," she said. "We both like sex, so my tier system is perfect. Basic edits are like missionary with the lights on. If you want it kinkier, you have to put forth more effort."

"What if I tell you to cut an entire chapter?"

“You have to tell me in the nicest possible way.” She frowned. “And I’ll want doughnuts so I can stuff my face later and cry.”

Daniel was her source of comfort when she stressed about her writing. He placed his hands on Juliet’s shoulders and rubbed them. “Don’t worry, you’ll finish your dissertation.” He kissed her temple. “I’m not sure about your reward system, though. Maybe you should talk it over with your committee.”

I tried not to laugh but failed. Juliet heard and glared at me. “Liam, that’s not funny.”

“I know most of the people on your committee,” I said. “Yes, it is.”

Sullenly, she leaned her head on Daniel. He stroked her honey blonde hair until she saw the flight attendants handing out free snacks and sat up. Juliet’s mood immediately lightened when she received a small bag of pretzels. The male attendant chuckled at the young woman who practically danced in her seat.

“This is just what I wanted after eating all those gummy bears,” Juliet said and ripped open the bag. The pretzels flew everywhere, landing in the middle of the aisle, down by her and Daniel’s feet, and into the seats behind them. “Well, fuck me,” she muttered.

Daniel’s guffaw disturbed the baby in the back of the plane. Its cacophonous cries filled the cabin once more. Juliet pouted before turning to me.

“Can I have yours, please?” she asked.

“You’re shameless,” I said.

I still gave her my pretzels.

---

Two years ago, Daniel and I met Juliet at a New Year's Eve party. She reclined in an empty Kohler Birthday Bath with a bottle of champagne and a book. Our friends wanted us to check out their restoration work in the master bath, unaware that one party guest had claimed the room for herself. When we opened the door, Juliet spilled champagne down her black dress.

"What are you doing in here?" she asked.

"Honey," Daniel said, "you're clothed in a bathtub, reading Whitman. We have more prevailing questions."

"It's a quiet reading spot. I didn't want to be rude and actually use the bath." She reached for a hand towel and tossed it to me. "Wet this. I need to clean up. As for you," she said to Daniel, "I have half a bottle of champagne. Bring back some cheese and fruit and we'll talk." She sat up and rested her arms on the side of the tub. A cunning smile adorned her rose-colored cheeks. "Maybe if we make it to midnight, I'll kiss you both."

Juliet told us she was a PhD candidate at the nearby university and an old flame of the hostess. She stayed in the claw foot tub and captivated us with her stories while Daniel and I sat on the floor, passing her brie and grapes. We finished off her bottle and giggled at the absurdity of the evening. I commandeered two more from the kitchen as time was inconsequential for our party of three. When we finally came downstairs to leave, it was well past midnight. Daniel hooked his arm through Juliet's to keep her upright on the steps. Ramona, the hostess, exchanged goodbyes with some of the other stragglers before spotting us.

"I wasn't sure if you were still here. What did you think of the restoration?" she asked.

“It was beautiful,” Daniel said. “The girl in the bath was kind of homely.”

“That’s so mean!” Juliet let go of him, but I caught her before she lost her balance. She tilted her head back against my chest and looked into my eyes, smiling. “You have a firm grasp. I like it.” I moved my hand to put my arm around her waist. She leaned against me and attempted to whisper, “Don’t tell your boyfriend, but I think your ass is nicer.” Daniel cracked up.

Ramona shook her head at her former lover. “Darling, you have always been such a lush. Liam, can you carry her to the couch?” she asked. “My wife and I will look after her.”

“You’re a peach,” Juliet said before hiccupping. “I might have gotten some bubbly on *Leaves of Grass*, but Whitman never seemed to mind stickiness.”

Juliet stayed with our friends, but Daniel and I returned to pick her up in the morning. She called and asked if we wanted to have a New Year's Day hangover breakfast at her favorite diner. She was just as charming drinking cups of coffee as she was with a bottle of champagne. We kept in touch, and one evening we invited her to our house for dinner. After we ate, Daniel and I let Juliet tour our home. The moment she stepped into our reading room, she fell in love. Her fingers ran along the walnut shelves of the bookcase, and her eyes scanned the titles of the collection Daniel and I had put together. She turned to us with her coy smile and said she loved a good book as much as she loved good sex.

Daniel claims we fell faster for her than Faulkner penned *As I Lay Dying*. Maybe he was right. Over the several years we had been together, Daniel and I slept with various women, but Juliet was one of a kind. She knew what she wanted and was old friends with

the rest of the world. Daniel loved that she had the same unconventional sense of humor and companionship as him. My reason was even simpler and perhaps selfish. Juliet reminded me of Toni, and while she may not have been a perfect incarnation of my late mother, she was damn close.

---

It was dark by the time our plane landed. I drove home from the airport while Daniel sat in the passenger seat and finished off the bag of gummy bears. Juliet slept in the back. We were content in our silence until my phone vibrated. Daniel picked it up and read the new message.

“It’s from Ezra,” he said. “He wants to know how the flight was and if you made it home safely.”

I thought about Juliet and Daniel’s continued discussion of her tier system and equivalent positions. “Text him raunchy and we’ll be home in an hour.” My candor was often a bit too much for my younger brother, so I changed my mind. “Just go with the latter. Ezra’s a bit vanilla.”

“He doesn’t even want to have a bachelor party.” Daniel snickered. “Maybe because we offered to plan it. By the way,” he said as the humor went out of his voice, “I heard that Melinda called.”

“She did.” I sighed. I had wanted to forget. “Melinda wants a family dinner at her house before Ezra gets married. I don’t know if I want to go.” I shrugged. “I was eighteen when she kicked me out, so I guess this is her way of finally inviting me back.”



He was silent for a moment then chuckled. “I think she kicked you out the same year Juliet was born.” I flipped him the bird, but Daniel’s grin was contagious. “You have to admit, it would be pretty fun introducing Juliet and me to your parents.”

“I’m sure Lars will love her,” I said. “Maybe you can woo Melinda.”

“That’s a great idea. We should go.”

“I’ll think about it.”

When we arrived home, Daniel carried Juliet inside. She curled her head against his chest, still drowsy, as he walked up the stairs.

“Sweetheart, where do you want to sleep tonight?” he asked. “Your bed? Our bed?”

She yawned. “Yours. I like spooning Liam.”

“And he likes to spoon me,” Daniel said. “Perfect.”

Juliet had her own bedroom, but she usually slept in ours. I became accustomed to sleeping in the middle despite being the tallest. There were a lot of limbs here and there, but I liked waking up to Daniel and Juliet in the morning. We didn’t like being apart.

The next day the three of us had planned on catching up on work. That didn’t happen. Juliet drank a bottle of red wine at the dining room table and stared at her laptop screen. She hadn’t typed a single word for her next dissertation chapter. At the opposite end of the table, Daniel was writing another deranged children’s fable. He should have been working on his tenure portfolio. I looked at crown molding samples for the dining room to avoid answering the emails in my inbox.

“Why do you want to restore this room now?” Juliet asked.

“I never used it until you two moved in,” I said. “Most of the time this table was covered in junk mail and papers I needed to grade.”

Daniel stopped typing for a moment. “He hardly used the kitchen either, which reminds me,” he said. “Does anyone want to cook tonight?”

“We could order a pizza.”

“That sounds good,” Juliet said, “but I’m not allowed to call anymore. Last time I did, they told me to call back when I was sober.” She poured the rest of the bottle into her glass and held it up. “Arrivederci.” She took a swig of red wine.

Toni used to say the same thing when we lived together. After I moved in with my father and stepmother, I missed when Toni would drink and tell me about the world. It’s a shame Melinda hated her because Toni could have taught her some charm.

I needed to call Ezra.

---

Ezra called first. Usually his phone calls were about his teenage son and how Elliot knew more about sex than he did. Most of the time I had to laugh at my younger brother. Rachel, my daughter, was a few years older than Elliot, but I never had to deal with her hormonal phases. Ezra and I had younger sons as well, but I could barely remember his kid’s name or my kid’s face. Nate was a toddler when my ex moved away with him and Rachel.

“Mom told me you’d call, but I know you’re busy,” Ezra said. “I’m impartial about the dinner, but April’s excited. Mom really likes her.”

“Melinda’s pleasant if you’re not me or dear old dad,” I said.

“It’s up to you if you want to attend, Liam.”

I took a drag of my cigarette and exhaled. “Come on, just tell me you want me to go.”

“It would mean a lot to April and me,” he said. “Her friends, Simone and Diane, are coming, too.”

“Are those the lesbian moms we met in California?” I asked. “I liked them.”

“Yeah, Simone and I played with the baby while the rest of you drank. Juliet really knocked them back.”

“That was nothing,” I said with a laugh. “I’m sure Juliet and Daniel would like to see them again. I guess it’s been years since I last saw Elliot. Rachel was what? Seven?”

“She was nine,” he said. “It was her birthday party.”

“Oh yeah, it was wizard-themed or something. Elliot didn’t want any cake.” All those parties seemed to blend in after a while. “If I do go to Melinda’s dinner, I can finally meet your youngest. His name’s Emerson, right?”

“Emory. He’s eight.”

“I’m a terrible uncle,” I mumbled.

Ezra was too good-natured to take any offense. He simply laughed. “I think you have plenty of reasons to attend now, but maybe learn my kid’s name first before you come.”

“I’ll try,” I said. “You can call Melinda and tell her we’ll have a family dinner. I have to see her at the wedding anyway.”

“Thanks, Liam. Take care of yourself.”

I should have visited Ezra and his children more. I should have visited my own, but it was easier to distance myself from them all. I finished my cigarette and began to look at flight dates and departures.

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The start of the fall semester helped push the impending date of the family dinner to the back of my mind, but November crept up on me like a cold chill. I packed my suitcase with some reluctance while Daniel and Juliet joked about how they should introduce themselves to my father and stepmother.

“What if I told them you had me when you were sixteen? Could I pass as your daughter?” Juliet giggled. “Or is that too weird? Maybe I’m Daniel’s wife.”

“But I’m going to tell them I’m Liam’s husband, so I guess we’re polygamists now.” Daniel sat on the bed as I zipped up my suitcase. He touched my hand. “Are you okay? Do you want us to shut up?”

“I don’t really care,” I said. They both frowned. “Okay, fine. We’re all happily married.”

Juliet flopped next to Daniel. “Does that mean we get to have a honeymoon?”

I smirked. Daniel pulled me down to the bed. My partners were my greatest source of strength, and when we left for the airport in the morning, I felt less anxious. Our flight was short, and we had no issues with our rental car arrangements. Daniel decided to drive while Juliet stretched out in the backseat. I occupied my time with a novel until Juliet became curious about my family.

“Should I call your stepmother Melinda?” she asked. “What about your dad? Lars? Is that Scandinavian? Is that why you’re so tall?”

“Call them what you like.” I dog-eared the page I was reading and closed the book. “I don’t know much about my ancestry since Toni hated her relatives. That’s why Lars took me in after she had her breakdown.”

“You’ve never told me much about your mother,” she said. “Have you always called her Toni?”

Daniel turned down the radio. “He usually only talks about her when he has enough whiskey in him.” He glanced at me before looking back at the road. “I still have some story gaps that need to be filled in.”

“Maybe I should start from the beginning,” I said.

---

It was 1969. Toni was the iconic airline stewardess who smoked, drank, and flirted with passengers and pilots alike. She had a layover in Paris and made the most of her evening with the co-pilot. They both ignored the wedding band on his finger. Lars never suspected he’d fall for Toni, or that his wife would find out, but affairs have a tendency to become complicated fast. A year later a baby was born.

Toni lost her beloved job because of me. She wanted to keep the pregnancy a secret, but a bout of morning sickness at 40,000 feet led to her immediate termination. Toni had to tell Lars it was his. He promised he’d take care of her even though he was married to Melinda. He paid her lease on a small two-bedroom apartment above an antique store. Toni managed to talk the elderly owners into letting her work as a clerk. In the months leading up to my birth, Harold and Agnes grew fond of Toni. In a way, she became their surrogate daughter, and by extension, I was the grandchild they never had.

My earliest memories were mostly of them. I used to hide under old tables and inside of trunks to spook Harold, and when he had enough of my tomfoolery, he sent me to Agnes. She tried to make me eat liverwurst sandwiches and teach me to read. I acquired a taste for literature because of her, though I won't ever eat liverwurst again. I was content with my life above the antique store and my stand-in grandparents, but Toni wanted something more glamorous.

Most of her free time was spent with suitors. They had nice cars and cash, but no obligation to marry her. That was fine with Toni. When she came home from an outing, she'd let loose her black hair and put on her Bob Dylan record. In the bathroom, she'd take off her makeup while I sat on the lid of the commode and we'd talk. Sometimes it was about her dates but a lot of times she reminisced about her days of flying. Lars was a popular subject, too. I rarely saw my father, but he did visit on occasion. Toni explained that he had a wife and a younger son to look after, so I accepted his absence. Lars, however, wanted me to know my brother.

Ezra was five when we first met. I was eight. Our father took us to lunch and let us play at a park. I dazzled Ezra by showing him how to jump off swings and hang down from the monkey bars. No one told us we were brothers, and it didn't dawn on me until later that we were related, but none of that mattered. We liked being together, and Lars knew that. During the summer, when my father had a few days off from work, he invited me to the spend night. Lars had a peculiar sense of optimism and believed his wife would welcome his illegitimate son into their home.

I knew Melinda didn't like me the first time I stepped foot on her front porch. She was at the door with her apron on and stared me down. While she knew of my existence,

she didn't know I looked just like Lars and Ezra. The only difference was I had my mother's hair color. I decided to stay out of Melinda's way, but no matter what I did, she didn't approve of me. I was Toni's child, not hers.

Everything changed in 1981. Toni had her first nervous breakdown. While she was institutionalized, I stayed with Harold and Agnes until Lars took custody of me. Ezra was ecstatic that I moved in, but his home wasn't mine. I missed the antique shop and my would-be grandparents, but age finally caught up with them and they sold their business. I no longer had a place where I belonged.

Lars took me to see Toni, but my mother was too drugged up to know what was going on anymore. She was misdiagnosed as a schizophrenic. Years later they said she was bipolar. I didn't care. I just wanted her back, but that didn't happen.

I guess you could say I took my frustrations out on Melinda by being a pain in her ass. During my senior year, I got Ezra caught up in my delinquency. We were smoking pot, and his basketball coach smelled it. I don't know why Ezra took the blame for me, but naturally, my stepmother was pissed when she found out. Melinda threw me out the day after I graduated.

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"And that's it," I said.

"No, it's not!" Juliet always hated anti-climatic endings. She hung on to my words while Daniel drove and occasionally cursed the other drivers on the road. Even when we stopped for bathroom and smoke breaks, Juliet waited patiently for me to continue. "Liam, what about Toni? What happened to her?"

I pointed out to Daniel which street to turn down. The houses hadn't changed from my childhood, but I never knew the names of the people who lived in them. Juliet grumbled in the back until I answered her.

"She died," I said. "She had a stroke." I needed to stretch my legs and have a cigarette, but we hadn't reached the house yet. I decided to finish what I started. "Look, Juliet. Toni never managed to make it beyond halfway houses. She kept ending up back in the hospital, and it was difficult visiting her. Our last conversation wasn't ideal."

"Why?" she asked.

Melinda's front porch came into view. Four cars lined her driveway. I had to think about the last time my mother was lucid and living.

"Toni asked me if Lars had divorced Melinda, would we have been better off if she then married my father. I told her the truth." I glanced at Daniel then Juliet. "He loved them both. Melinda was his stability, and Toni was his spontaneity. He was forced to choose."

Daniel pulled into the driveway and parked behind my brother's car. I rubbed my temple before getting out. I fished a cigarette from my pocket and lit it while Juliet opened the car door. She looked up at me. I smiled faintly.

"That's it, kid. There's no happy ending."

She shut the door and hugged me. The top of her head reached my chest. I awkwardly put my arms around her. Daniel got out and shrugged when our eyes met.

"Maybe it's not over," Juliet said. "I'll see you inside."

She broke away from me and went up to the porch. Ezra opened the door and waved to me and Daniel. We could hear the squeals from Juliet after she reunited with



April, Diane, and Simone. It was as if they had known each other all their lives.

Eventually, Daniel and I went into the house. Juliet was holding Diane and Simone's infant daughter, but immediately handed her to me when I came in.

"Why are you giving me the baby?" I asked.

"Babies make people happy," she said.

Daniel grinned. "You can't beat that logic. If she spews on you, can I say there she blows?"

I grimaced. My teenage nephew shook his head and took the baby from me. "You look uncomfortable, Uncle Liam." Elliot turned to Simone. "Did she puke on you or dad last?"

"Your dad," Simone answered. "Nice to see you again, Liam. April and Diane are opening a bottle of wine in the kitchen. I think your brother is in there, too."

I thanked her and went into the kitchen. April and Diane were laughing while Ezra poured his fiancée a glass of wine and handed it to her. Melinda was in there as well with Emory. He looked just like his dad when he was younger. He even had my brother's goofy grin.

"Diane, stop trying to plan my honeymoon," April said. "We have to have the vacation days first."

"That's why I liked working for the family business," Diane said. "Simone and I had our honeymoon for over a week."

"Dad, what's a honeymoon?" Emory asked.

Ezra almost overfilled Diane's glass. His cheeks went red. "Let's not talk about that. Or google it," he quickly added. I ended up snickering, alerting everyone in the

kitchen that I was there. Ezra passed Diane her glass and the bottle before enveloping me in a tight hug. “It’s great to see you again, Liam.”

“Yeah,” I said. “You, too.”

I didn’t know what to say to Melinda. She opted for hello then the timer went off on her oven. April shooed out everyone who wasn’t helping in the kitchen so she, Melinda, and Emory could finish fixing the meal. Since there were so many people in the living room, my brother and I decided to catch up outside. On the garage still hung the backboard from our childhood. Ezra found a basketball and between shots, we talked about Emory.

“He’s a total foodie,” Ezra said. “April adores him. She loves Elliot, too, but she’s really close with Emory. He started calling her mom before I even put the ring on her finger.”

I took a shot and missed. Ezra picked up the ball, but Melinda called us in for dinner. My brother let out an exaggerated groan as if we were kids again. He still managed to shoot the ball and score before we went back inside. There was no rhyme or reason to who fixed their plate first, and the dining room was over its seating capacity. Juliet and Daniel squeezed next to Lars at the table. Emory had to sit in his dad’s lap while Elliot offered to hold the baby so Diane and Simone could eat before their food became cold. Since April was chatting with her friends about the wedding, Melinda took a seat next to me. We didn’t say much, but she did tell me to save room for dessert. She had made a bourbon pecan pie, which was one of my holiday favorites. I wondered if she had remembered.

After dinner, Melinda was in the kitchen washing dishes. I decided to help her clean up and brought in a few plates and platters.

“Thank you,” she said. “I have to be honest. I’m surprised you came. Even when Ezra said you would, I thought you might change your mind.”

“I thought about it,” I admitted. “I came for Ezra, though, not you.” Melinda turned to me. I smirked. “I know. I’m still a smug bastard.”

“I used to think that, but I misunderstood you.” Melinda smiled. “You look like your mother,” she said. “I was afraid to get to know you because you weren’t mine. I should have given you a chance.” She went back to scrubbing the dishes. “Saying I’m sorry won’t fix what happened, but I wanted to tell you that I regret how I treated you and Toni.”

Melinda and I agreed that things wouldn’t change overnight, but we could at least set our differences aside for the wedding. I went out to the front porch to have a smoke. Elliot was out there with his phone in his hands.

“Off baby duty?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “Sometimes you need a break from everybody.”

“I concur.” I lit my cigarette and took a long drag. “You ever talk to Rachel?”

“Not much, but we’re friends on Facebook.” He pulled up her profile on his phone. My daughter still had her frizzy hair like her mother and her idol Hermione. “She said she was upset you didn’t go to her graduation.”

I shrugged. “I wasn’t invited according to my ex-wife. Oh well, what about you? You’re graduating this spring. Are you excited?”

“No,” Elliot said. “I don’t really care unless you plan on giving me money.”

“That depends,” I said with a laugh. “Did you ever read *Moby-Dick*?”

“I will if you give me a dollar for every page I read.”

Daniel stepped outside and overheard us. He grinned. “Smart kid. That’s over half a grand.” He rolled a cigarette and put it between his lips. I lit it for him.

“Are you and Juliet ready to head to the hotel?” I asked.

“Soon,” he said. “We decided to be honest with your parents, and they’re pretty cool with our relationship. Apparently we remind them of Elliot.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Elliot asked.

Daniel and I laughed. “Just a little quirky and offbeat,” I answered.

“Whatever,” he said and went inside.

Out on the porch, Daniel rested his head on my shoulder. We could hear everyone’s muddled voices competing with the sound of the outdoors. None of the nameless neighbors seemed to stir, but their lights were on and the cars were there. Once the ember went out on Daniel’s cigarette, he kissed my cheek.

“I’ll go get Juliet,” he said.

I yawned. “Thanks.”

Daniel went into the house, and shortly after, Ezra came out.

“You should get some sleep,” he said with a grin. “I heard it’s going to be a big day tomorrow.”

I put my arm around Ezra and ruffled his hair. “Stop kidding around. You’re lucky you found someone like April. She really cares about you and your family.”

“I don’t think I’m the only lucky one,” he said. Juliet and Daniel walked out the front door with Lars behind them. “You have that, too, but doubled.”

Juliet hugged my father then Daniel wrapped him in a bear hug. They walked to the car giggling. I barely spoke to Lars all night, but he approached my brother and me and shook my hand.

“Liam, you certainly have some interesting partners.”

“I know I do.” I smiled. “I love them.”

I drove to the hotel. It was almost midnight by the time we checked into our room. We only unpacked the essentials from our suitcases. I sat on the edge of the king size bed, undoing my shoelaces, while Daniel tossed his argyle sweater next to me. He then took off his undershirt and stretched out his tattooed arms and back. Juliet passed him on his way to the sink. She had removed her contacts and put on her *I heart books* t-shirt to sleep in. I undressed and brushed my teeth before settling down between Juliet and Daniel – my little big spoon and big little spoon. According to them, I was their ladle because I was tall, a little bit awkward, but held a whole lot of love. Juliet snuggled closer to me while Daniel took off his glasses and turned off the light.

## Heart Shades

I was too cozy in bed to want to move, but Chuck's cat leered at me while my phone vibrated on the nightstand. *Are you going to get that?* I'm sure that's what Tricky Dick was thinking. Unless he was plotting my demise. I didn't trust Chuck's cat. I reached over to pick up my phone and looked at the screen. It was an incoming call from my dad. There was no easy way to tell him I spent last night having sex with my ex-boyfriend, so I lied and said I had a great time at my friend's house.

Dad called to tell me he booked my flight for California. I had tried spending my summer not thinking about college, but everyone else was eager to remind me. I thanked him anyway before hanging up. He was proud of me. I just hoped I wouldn't disappoint him. I glanced at Chuck.

His eyes were shut, but I didn't know if he was still asleep. I went to touch the shaved sides of Chuck's undercut, but Nixon scratched me as soon as I got close to his owner's face. I rubbed the bloody claw marks on my hand.

"I'll kick you out of here faster than your namesake was removed from office."

Chuck laughed gently. "Are you and the cat fighting again?"

"He hates me."

Nixon curled up between Chuck's collarbone and neck, purring loudly with triumph. My ex stroked his cat's gray and white fur. "He's my baby. You can't throw him out."

*No*, I thought. *It was my fault for getting you thrown out of your dad's house.* I settled back down in the covers and rested my head on his shoulder. My relationship with

Chuck was complicated in the sense that I outed him and he punched me. We didn't want to get back together, but we didn't mind sleeping with each other.

We napped for another hour before getting up to make a late breakfast. I sat in the kitchen and watched as my shirtless ex-boyfriend draped his cat over his shoulders like a scarf. He opened the fridge and took out the orange juice.

"Want some?" I shook my head. He drank directly from the carton before grabbing the eggs. I scrambled them while he opened a can of cat food for Nixon.

We once thought that after high school, maybe the two of us could have lived together. It was foolish, but I used to love the cat-obsessed lacrosse player. He didn't play anymore, though. I tried to encourage him he could play lacrosse as a club sport at college, but he didn't want to do that either. He hadn't even bothered filling out a college application.

Chuck was supposed to drive me home after we ate, but we realized his mom had taken his car. We stood on the porch and stared at the driveway. His mom's pickup barely worked, and I wasn't going to risk riding that clunker on the highway. The much nicer car Chuck used to drive was at his dad's. Last I heard, his father had a for sale sign on it.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm not sure when my mom will be back."

I sighed and leaned against the porch railing. I could have stayed at Chuck's, but it seemed like the longer we were together, the more animosity grew between us. "I'll call April."

She wasn't my first choice, but Drew was supposed to be on his way to the beach. It was funny how Chuck's best friend had become mine and now the two of them hardly spoke. I wondered if that was my fault, too. I dialed my stepmom.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Don’t Mom me,” she said. “You always do that when you want something.”

“Well, I could use a ride, but you’re probably not going to be happy where I’m at.”

That was an understatement. April told me she’d pick me up in thirty minutes. The temperature wasn’t humid for once, so Chuck and I stayed out on his porch. *This might be the last time I see him before I fly to California*, I thought. I made sure my parting words were from the heart.

“Stop being a dumbass,” I said. “Apply to college.”

“Maybe when you get a driver’s license.” He smirked, knowing that was a sore spot for me. “I don’t see the point in going to college. I hated school.”

“But that’s where you met me.” The corners of his mouth turned down. “Okay, bad example, but if you go to college, you might meet a guy who likes cats as much as you. Maybe he’ll even like sports.”

Chuck had a dopey smile on his face as soon as I mentioned cats. I could tell he was thinking about Nixon. I cleared my throat to make him snap out of it.

“What about you?” he asked. “What are you going to do at college?”

“I’ll do what I always do,” I said. “I’m going to take on the world.”

Chuck let out a flustered sigh. I don’t know if it was out of frustration, envy, or both. We then heard Nixon meow and turned our heads. The dickfaced cat was at the window, pressing his distinct white phallic patch against the screen. He started to purr when Chuck spoke to him.



“You can’t go outside, baby,” he said in his cat voice. Whenever he talked to Nixon or saw another cat, his pitch became much higher. Sometimes it was borderline irritating, but at least Chuck was happy.

“I’m really glad your mom stole your cat back,” I said.

“She’s crazy, but she knew my dad was just keeping him to get back at me.” He put his hand against the screen. Nixon sniffed him and the cutesy voice returned. “I don’t know what I would have done without my Tricky Dick.”

I pinched my temple and wondered if I’d have to listen to the damn cat voice for another thirty minutes. I decided to text my best friend while I waited. Ashe’s texts always amused me, especially when I managed to get myself into the stupidest of situations.

When April arrived, she pulled into the driveway and honked the horn. Chuck waved to her, and she waved back, but they didn’t speak to each other. I took one last glance at the boy I used to love before walking down the porch steps.

“Call Drew,” I said. “He misses you.”

Drew’s girlfriend hadn’t graduated yet, so he decided to defer for a year. I hoped maybe he’d look after Chuck while I was gone.

“I’ll think about it,” Chuck said. “See you, Elliot.”

My stepmom didn’t say anything to me when I got into her car. She waited until we were almost out of Chuck’s neighborhood and stopped at a stop sign.

“Why do you do this to me?” April pressed her forehead against the steering wheel. “You’re going to ask me to keep this from your dad, and I don’t want to be in this situation, Elliot.”

“Well, you could just not tell him.”

She glanced at me and furrowed her brow. “How about you own up and tell him yourself?”

“Dad doesn’t want to know Chuck’s my booty call.”

April groaned before muttering to herself, “Why do hormones make teenagers so stupid?” She continued driving. I felt bad for testing her role as my stepmother because she was actually really cool and understanding. “Elliot, I know you want to fix things between you and Chuck, but don’t sleep with people who’ve hurt you. I don’t have to tell you not to lie about where you stay at night,” she added. “You know better.”

I knew I did, but that didn’t stop me.

“Drew thought it was a bad idea, too. I could have even gone with him to the beach today, but I don’t know. What if I don’t meet anyone at college? What if Chuck’s it for me?”

April tucked her hair behind her ear before sighing. “Look, I get it. You’re nervous about a lot of things. I was too when I first went to college, but I met Simone and Diane and we had a great time. Meet people who let you be yourself,” she said.

“I’m a complicated mess.” I sank lower into the passenger seat. “I’m not sure who I’ll meet.” I looked out the window as the street went by like a blur. “I’ll talk to Dad, though. You’re a good mom, April.”

“I try to be,” she said with a smile. “You’re a pretty good kid, Elliot.”

April dropped me off at the condo and returned to work. My dad, with April’s encouragement and my Nana’s financing, decided to quit his job as an HR rep and return to school. Since he began pursuing his master’s degree in school counseling, the living

room coffee table had become covered in his textbooks and Emory's sketch books and crayons. While my Dad studied, my little brother would sit next to him and draw. Sometimes, Dad would take a break and draw with Emory like he used to when I was younger. They were doing just that when I walked into the living room.

"Hey, kiddo," Dad said. "I didn't know when you were coming home today. Did Drew drop you off?"

"April did," I mumbled. "Dad, can we talk?"

Emory played in his bedroom while I confessed to my dad about last night and the other times I lied and went to see Chuck. He was upset, but he still hugged me anyway.

"I wish you had been honest in the first place, but more than anything, Elliot, I want you to be safe." Dad squeezed me just a little tighter. "I don't think I've ever been more scared than the day your school called and said you were hurt."

I could have told him it was just a black eye, but honestly, being punched in the face fucking hurt. It was even worse because Chuck had done it, but I was anything but subtle when we broke up. Before Dad picked me up from the nurse's office, it was Drew that sat with me and let me cry on him. At the time, I didn't know why Chuck's best friend was consoling me and telling me it would be okay, but he kept the ice pack on my face. After that, we became friends. A few of the lacrosse players messed with him about our friendship, but their fragile masculinities weren't my concern. Drew didn't care either.

"Sorry I fucked up again," I said. "I promise I'll be smarter in California."

"Of course you will." He ruffled my hair. "You'll be studying."

"How's that going for you?"

“Want to see my dinosaur doodles?” He grinned.

Dad told Emory he could come back out and we all sat on the couch to flip through the sketch book. My little brother noticed where Nixon had scratched my hand and got up to go into the bathroom. He came back out with a Band-Aid and Neosporin. I had patched his scrapes and cuts enough times that he knew the routine.

“It’s the last *Hello Kitty* one,” Emory said.

“Good.” I let him apply the ointment and bandage. “She’s the only cat I like.”

I wondered how much Emory would grow while I was away. Dad and I had raised him, and now he had April to look after him, too. I could leave in confidence, knowing both my dad and brother were in good hands. I just wished I could be there to experience all the new changes happening. Instead, I would be on the opposite coast, attending April’s alma mater.

The day before I left, April and Emory went to the mall while I stayed home with Dad. He was reading on the couch when I came out of my room. I sat down next to him and put my head on his shoulder. We didn’t have to say anything. He put his arm around me and let me curl up next to him. All my doubts became insignificant in his embrace.

“You haven’t done this in a while,” he said after bookmarking his chapter.

“Something on your mind?”

“No,” I muttered. I buried my head into his side. “What if I screw up at college?”

“I’m confident that no matter what you do, Elliot, I’m going to be proud of you.”

I looked up at him. We had the same green eyes, brown hair, and a goofy grin that no matter how much it displeased me, was ours. “Don’t get overwhelmed. Just do your own

thing, and you'll figure it out." He pulled me closer. "And if you do need anything, call me."

"I will," I said. "I'll also try to call when I don't need anything."

He chuckled. "That's fine, too."

Dad and I didn't move from the couch until April and Emory returned. My brother ran into the living room and decided to fling himself onto me, bearing all his weight down on my stomach. He laughed, wearing the pink heart-shaped sunglasses Ashe had given me. I wore them after Chuck had punched me, but I thought they were more suited for someone yet to be jaded by love.

"Guess what, Elliot?"

"What, goofball?" I ruffled my brother's hair because despite how annoying it could be, it was our dad's affection gesture. Emory pressed back against my palm, giggling. "Did April finally realize you're just as weird as me and Dad?"

"I wouldn't call you two weird," my stepmom said. "You're a little different and very sweet." She smiled, leaning over the couch to kiss my dad's cheek.

Dad grinned. "I love when you come home." He kissed her back. "How was the mall?"

"It was good," she said. "Emory and I had a fun time finding a gift for Elliot." I sat up with my brother still in my lap. April handed me a small bag that had pink tissue paper sticking out of it. "We wanted to get you something before you left."

"Can I open it?" April nodded. I pulled out the tissue paper and put it on top of Emory's head. My dad and mom watched as I took out a pair of heart-shaped aviator shades. I immediately put them on.

“We match now,” Emory said.

I pressed my forehead against his. “We sure do.”

I knew leaving him would be the hardest. We teased each other often, argued, and otherwise got on each other’s nerves, but I had been with Emory since day one. He helped me pack the last of my things in my suitcase and watched as I zipped it up.

“That’s all you’re going to take?” he asked.

“Airfare’s expensive. If I need anything else, Aunt Simone and Diane will help me.”

“I like having aunts,” Emory said, “and a mom.”

“Me, too.” I turned to him. “April’s awesome, so be good for her.” I then stood up and looked around my room. I couldn’t remember the last time it had been that neat. Everything on the walls, my bookshelves, and covering the surfaces of my room had some kind of sentiment. Even the unicorn stickers on my TV were a reminder of childhood. None of it was coming with me.

“Elliot.” Emory pointed to my dresser. All the nail polish I owned was neatly lined up in rows. I had only taken a few of my favorites. “That’s all staying here?”

“Yeah, I don’t think I’ll be spending too much time painting my nails. Why do you ask?” I chuckled. “Do you want me to paint yours?”

“Yes!”

I had never asked him before. I realized there were a lot of things I did that he wanted to do, too. I let Emory pick out a bottle of polish. He chose green for April. We sat on my floor to paint his nails. Chuck never understood why I liked to wear nail polish, but it was simple. That’s how I wanted to express myself.

In the morning, we left for the airport. Emory fell asleep next to me in the car, wearing the heart shades. When we parked, Dad unbuckled Emory and picked him up. My little brother's green nails stood out against Dad's shirt as he hooked his arms around Dad's neck.

"Come on, sleepyhead," Dad said. Emory nuzzled his head into him. "You have to tell Elliot goodbye."

"I don't want him to go," he mumbled.

I thought leaving was part of growing up. When April was my age, she left for California. Likewise, my uncle Liam went away to college and decided to never leave by becoming a professor. I think even my mother left because she needed to figure out who she was and couldn't do that with a husband and two kids. Whatever the reason, it was her choice. Dad stayed because family was more important than anything else. They all had to realize what mattered to them whether they left home or not.

I stood outside the security checkpoint with my carry-on and boarding pass. April hugged me first. Her head reached just below my chin as I squeezed her back. "Simone and Diane will be there when you land. They'll help settle you in." She looked up at me, smiling. "It's okay if you're a complicated mess, Elliot. Life is messy, but you don't have to sort through it alone."

"Thanks, Mom." She stepped away and placed her hand on Emory's shoulder. He looked away. The sunglasses might have hid his eyes, but his feelings were evident with his frown. I bent my knees to level with him. "Stop pouting, Emory. You're going to be so spoiled while I'm gone, you'll forget all about me."

“I will not!” He threw his arms around me. “You’re such a jerk.” He sniffed. “I’m going to miss you.”

I slid Emory’s glasses up on his head. He had the same bright green eyes as me and Dad. “I’ll be home by December,” I said. “Go raise some hell at your elementary school. That’s what I did.” I grinned. “You can always bake me something, too, and send it in a care package.”

“Okay,” he muttered. “Can I use your nail polish?”

“Sure. Just get April or Dad to help you.” I stood up, facing our father. I thought about the night he first bought me polish and helped apply the pink lacquer to my nails. He didn’t know what he was doing, but he googled it and tried again until he got it right. “I guess this is it,” I said.

“Until next time.” Dad pulled me in for a hug and ruffled my hair. “You’ll do great, kiddo.”

“Dad!” I was annoyed, but I didn’t let that stop me from hugging him as tightly as I could. I hated saying goodbye to him. It was worse than getting punched in the face. He was always there for me when I needed him, and I was there for him. We took care of Emory together and made it through the divorce. I watched him fall in love with April, and he comforted me when Chuck left me a sobbing mess. We would call each other, but it wouldn’t be the same as having him right there next to me. “I’ll text you when I land.”

“All right, Elliot. Take care.” He squeezed me one last time. I took out the aviator shades and put them on because I knew what was coming. “I love you.”

I tried not to let my voice crack. “I love you, too.”



I made it through the security checkpoint and to my gate. I held it back when I boarded the plane and when I arrived in California. I didn't shed a single drop when I texted Dad after the plane landed or when Simone and Diane picked me up from the airport. The tears didn't come until nightfall when I was alone in their guestroom, over 2,000 miles away from home, and couldn't fall asleep.

## **All You Need is Love and a Lot of Coffee: An Analytical Essay**

“Life is messy, but you don’t have to sort through it alone.” - April, *Heart Shades*

I would love to claim I began writing *Heart Shades* in a small cafe in Vienna, Austria, savoring the rich Viennese coffee, but I didn’t. My trip abroad was a little more preoccupied with sightseeing, sampling the local cuisine, and sex. It wasn’t until after I returned home and the fall semester of my second year of grad school was underway that I even knew where to begin writing. I had ideas, I had notes, but like my life, it was all a mess that needed to be sorted through. This collection of short stories would not have been possible without the countless conversations I had with friends, family, colleagues, and my thesis advisor, who helped me work tirelessly to give a voice to these characters and their stories. And much like the conversations I needed to discover where I was headed, the characters, too, needed their own conversations. Over cups of coffee, tea, and the occasional bottle of champagne, the narrators are able to connect to other individuals that not only help them navigate their lives but enrich it.

*Heart Shades*, thus, is a collection of short stories that celebrates solidarity. The characters that thrive the most are the ones willing to open up their lives, allowing others in. Family, often restricted through bloodlines and marriage, is redefined throughout the collection and emphasizes the greater importance of love and support. In essence, this is how the collection functions as a whole. Each narrative can stand on its own, but when linked together, they offer a deeper understanding of the characters’ lives and their connections to each other. Therefore, *Heart Shades* is part of the literary genre known as the “short-story cycle” which is “less unified than a novel but has much greater coherence and thematic imagery than a mere collection of unrelated stories” (Nagel, 17). A

contemporary of this genre, and perhaps one of the more prominent influences regarding my own work, is Louise Erdrich.

In 1984, Erdrich published her first novel, *Love Medicine*. Her interconnecting stories span over sixty years and explore the tangled lives of two families living on the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation. While the stories are complex and at times complicated due to the extensive family trees, the novel is rich with unique voices and perspectives that help bind the overall narrative together. According to Erdrich, “the trick” to writing her narratives is her ability “to maintain control and to shape what I get” when it comes to her “ideas, voices, and images” (qtd. in “Louise Erdrich, The Art of Fiction”). Erdrich’s use of various themes helps to unify her work. In *Love Medicine*, the themes of family and the home are present throughout the novel along with her social commentary regarding cultural identity.

In a similar vein, *Heart Shades* explores the themes of family and the home but shifts focus to a commentary regarding gender and sexual identities. Each narrative helps to reach some kind of understanding of self-identity and how that self-identity connects to other people. In doing so, *Heart Shades* presents individuals who are part of or connected to the LGBT community. These narratives allow for discovery, discussion, and an embracement of individuals who have historically been silenced up until the late twentieth century. Jonathan Ned Katz reaffirms this point in his book, *Gay American History: Lesbians & Gay Men in the U.S.A.:*

For long we were a people perceived out of time and out of place – socially unsituated, without a history. ... Our existence as a long-oppressed, long-resistant social group was not explored. We remained an

unknown people, our character defamed. The heterosexual dictatorship has tried to keep us out of sight and out of mind. ... That time is over. The people of the shadows have seen the light; Gay people are coming out – and moving on – to organized action against an oppressive society. (1)

This act of erasure has attempted to gloss over some of the most profound voices in literature who raised questions about gender and sexual identities. *Heart Shades* recognizes at least two writers, Herman Melville and Walt Whitman, as individuals who challenged societal norms. Intertwined with themes of same-sex love and desire as well as cohesive group identities, Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* celebrate alternatives to monogamous, heterosexual narratives and do so without shame or judgment. In *Moby-Dick*, the narrator Ishmael states, "there is no place like a bed for confidential disclosures between friends. ... in our heart's honeymoon, lay I and Queequeg – a cozy, loving pair" (Melville, 82). Whitman, too, "rejoices in comrades" and is "no longer abash'd" (268) to do so in his Calamus poems. The characters Liam and Juliet in "The Three Spoons" are contemporary scholars of Melville and Whitman respectively and embody the need to celebrate these alternative narratives. Likewise, the rest of *Heart Shades* tries to recognize the importance of narratives that offer differentiating perspectives regarding gender and sexual identities. One can only hope that the twenty-first century continues to actively seek inclusive narratives.

The first short story in *Heart Shades*, "Finding Home," is a coming-of-age tale where the narrator, April, must recognize that in order to live an authentic life, she has to separate herself from her parents. She states, "I admitted to my friends the stark reality I didn't want to face. I could never be the person I wanted to be in the place I called home"

(20). As a young trans woman, April's identity is not embraced by her parents, and she must keep it a secret until she leaves. California offers a more supportive environment that allows April to grow, and her friends help her become comfortable in her own skin. The saying *beauty is only skin deep* rings especially true in this narrative and for the character Simone, the daughter of a mortician. Simone has a great reverence for life and understanding of other people, which is part of the reason she so readily accepts April as she is. As she tells April, "you're still the same lovely person whether you wear makeup or not" (8). This is important as often society at large only associates trans women with their physical anatomy and a "false womanhood" rather than their internal sense of self. This sentiment is reflected in Julia Serano's 2007 book *Whipping Girl*:

As a transsexual woman, I am often confronted by people who insist that I am not, nor can I ever be, a 'real woman.' One of those more common lines of reasoning goes something like this: *There's more to being a woman than simply putting on a dress*. I couldn't agree more ... Despite the reality that there are as many types of trans women as there are women in general, most people believe that all trans women are on a quest to make ourselves as pretty, pink, and passive as possible. (Chapter 2)

While April experiments with makeup, hair dye, and clothing in her narrative, as many young woman, cis and trans alike, will do, her identity as a woman never falters. She finds confidence in herself through the support and acceptance of Simone, Diane, and her grandmother. April's narrative ends on her personal reminder "to not only be beautiful, but bold" (23), which carries through into the next short story, "Bakers and Ballerinas."

Like the bedroom closet that Ezra Zander is decluttering throughout his story, his narrative is just as messy. He's a divorced, single father raising two sons who completely disregard stereotypical gender roles. Elliot loves the color pink, ballet, and nail polish while his younger brother, Emory, has a penchant for baking and will readily offer to help cook and clean in later stories. Zander never tries to stop his sons from being who they are and consistently encourages them to do what makes them happy. At the same time, Zander struggles with finding his own happiness. He's content as a father but remains broken and lonely after his wife walks out on him and their children. Instead of moving on from his hurt, he boxes it up much like Shelby's belongings in his closet until he's persuaded to start dating again. He eventually meets April and is attracted to both her beauty and her boldness. Before the two decide to become any more serious about their relationship, however, they confront their own vulnerabilities by offering full disclosure in different ways.

For April, she trusts Zander and opens up to him about her identity as a trans woman. She's nervous, though, and Simone and Diane are there to support her at the coffee shop. This nervousness is grounded in the reality that disclosure for trans women can be dangerous. Janet Mock discusses this in her 2014 autobiography:

Disclosure should be an individual personal choice based on circumstances such as safety, access, and resources. Discussions around disclosure often get heated when we discuss trans women and their romantic relationships with heterosexual cis men. When disclosure occurs for a trans woman, whether by choice or by another person, she is often accused of deception because, as the widely accepted misconception goes,

trans women are not ‘real’ women (meaning cis women): therefore, the behavior (whether rejection, verbal abuse, or severe violence) is warranted. (161)

At first, it seems Zander has rejected April, but that’s not the case. His disclosure involves his own hurt regarding his ex-wife leaving him and the fear that he’ll have his heart broken again. Like his children and his older brother Liam, Zander accepts April for who she is and will do whatever he can to support her. He never views April as deceiving and recognizes her as the woman he loves.

“Bakers and Ballerinas” ends with April moving in with Zander and his kids. She tells Zander that she thinks she’ll like being a mom, which is a role not commonly offered to trans women in popular media today. Increased awareness of trans women in the media has led to a preoccupation with their bodies, focusing on everything from clothing choices and makeup to hormones and surgeries. None of that matters to Zander or the rest of his family. He marries April because he loves her and his children recognize her as their mom because she loves them and their dad.

The focus of *Heart Shades* gradually starts to shift in “A Boy and his Cat.” The previous narratives were ones of acceptance and support, but Chuck finds himself in increased isolation as a closeted lacrosse player. He fears that his lacrosse team and religious father will reject him because he’s gay and seeks comfort in Elliot and his family. Chuck holds on to hope that after high school, he and Elliot can have a life together and “become part of his quirky family” (75). The problem, however, is Chuck’s reliance on cover stories that keep him in the closet. He tells his teammates that he’s using Elliot to do his work and takes Tiffany to prom so she can pose as his girlfriend,

which hurts Elliot. This leads to Elliot and Chuck breaking up as Elliot's not interested in "playing pretend" (78) and doesn't want to date someone who's so deeply closeted. In a similar sentiment, this happens to David and Giovanni in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*. The room, which represents the isolation of being in the closet, leads to resentment in David. He asks Giovanni, "What kind of life can we have in this room?" (Baldwin 188). Unlike David, however, Elliot accepts his sexuality but fears that Chuck never will.

Unfortunately, like many teenagers' breakups, Elliot and Chuck's breakup does not go smoothly. After years of Chuck's friend, Tom, harassing Elliot for being gay, Elliot lashes out verbally and outs Chuck. Within moments, Chuck loses his boyfriend, his support system, and his security of remaining closeted. He punches Elliot "without thinking" before beating Tom to a bloody pulp, knocking out his teeth and breaking his nose (78). Chuck's aggressiveness, which he's been praised for as a lacrosse player, reaches its peak, and the violence that erupts reflects all his years of growing up in unsupportive environments that promote toxic masculinity. The repercussions of the breakup are handled in the next narrative, "Everyone Likes Cake."

Unbeknownst to Elliot, Chuck is immediately kicked out of his home by his homophobic father. When Elliot finds out, he's deeply troubled by what's happened, and his grandmother, Nana Zander, recognizes this. By talking to Elliot, she realizes her own mistakes in rejecting and kicking out her stepson, Liam. Nana will do anything to support her own blood, but she wasn't willing to open up her home or her heart to her husband's illegitimate son. She damages her relationship with Liam, which impacts Ezra and leads him to actively support the people in his life. After Elliot speaks to Nana about Chuck, he



tells her, “What happened can’t be fixed easily, but somehow, I’ll try to make it right” (96). She decides that she, too, has to try and repair her relationship with Liam, and reaches out to him at the end of her narrative.

In “The Three Spoons,” Liam contemplates whether he wants to attend his stepmother’s dinner with his two partners, Daniel and Juliet. This triad is unapologetic towards conventional societal norms and shows that polyamorous relationships can be just as strong and devoted as monogamous ones. Liam’s relationship with Daniel and Juliet is paralleled to his father’s relationship with Melinda and Toni. Both men seek stability in Daniel and Melinda, while Juliet and Toni provide a sense of spontaneity. Lars, however, has to choose between his wife and his mistress, despite loving them both. In the end, Liam decides to attend the family dinner, but he tells Melinda “I came for Ezra, though, not you” (117). Ezra has supported Liam ever since the two have known each other, but Liam’s relationship with Melinda, like Chuck’s with Elliot, will need time to heal. Liam, however, has Daniel and Juliet to turn to for the support, and at the end of “The Three Spoons,” his love for them is apparent.

The final narrative, “Heart Shades,” sheds light on Elliot’s attempt to reconcile with Chuck. By having sex with his ex and encouraging him to apply to college, Elliot tries to reestablish some of the nuances of their old relationship without getting back together. April, now Elliot’s stepmother, is quick to criticize her stepson’s actions but understands his anxieties about the future. She tells Elliot, “Look, I get it. You’re nervous about a lot of things. I was too when I first went to college, but I met Simone and Diane and we had a great time. Meet people that let you be yourself” (125). Elliot replies that he’s a “complicated mess” and still worries about leaving to attend April’s alma mater in

California. His family is there to reassure him, however, and even when he arrives in California, Simone and Diane, whom Elliot and Emory now regard as their aunts, will be there to help him. *Heart Shades* may end on a note of ambiguity with Elliot struggling to handle his departure from home, but as Juliet states in Liam's narrative, "Maybe it's not over" (115). This is a sentiment that Whitman captures at the end of "Song of Myself" in *Leaves of Grass*:

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,

Missing me one place search another,

I stop somewhere waiting for you. (247)

Elliot can always reach out to his family, and no matter where he is, they'll always be there to love and support him.

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