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# Green Carnation

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# Green Carnation

By

Sarah Poulsen

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in  
Professional Writing in the Department of English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw, Georgia

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College of Humanities & Social Sciences  
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Kennesaw, Georgia  
Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

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Has been approved by the committee  
for the capstone requirement for

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in the Department of English

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**Note: Jon Hansen in the Sturgis Library receives this.**

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# Party Crashers

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The bullying came to a head Freshman year when some of the guys slept over at Eoin's house. Adam found Charley in Eoin's older sister's room rummaging around the surface of her dresser and his first thought was that the boy was stealing jewelry. Adam had respect for Brittany, from one bully to another, and he wasn't about to let this crime against her go unpunished. Charley yelped when a thick hand grabbed his slender wrist, looking at Adam with wide and frightened eyes. Charley yelped again when Adam pulled him too roughly by his arm to bring him closer. Adam studied Charley's face and he could have sworn he saw traces of blush and eye shadow. His only malicious instinct was to laugh at the smaller boy who was already weeping.

Adam released Charley and left him in an embarrassed, crying ball on the floor.

Everything just went downhill for Charley from there. Adam stole his clothes in gym class and replaced them with a bra and panties. Adam lined his locker with tampons. Adam stuffed his mailbox with sopping wet Vagisil wipes. Adam even snuck dildos and lipstick into his desks at school. And while the other kids gradually got used to the idea of Charley becoming Charlotte over the next three years, Adam remained at a distance, casually taunting and teasing when the petite boy let his guard down.

While everyone else avoided Adam because he was such a theatrical bully, Charley could tell there was a lot more going on under the surface. Adam Miller had bullied and manipulated Charley since childhood. Adam pretended to be friends with young Charley Ward who lived in the blissful ignorance that the two of them truly were friends, because surely someone who paid *that much* attention to him had to be some sort of friend.

So Charlotte, as his peers now knew him, still believed that there was a reason for everything Adam had done, and he was willing to find out that reason in order to forgive his bully and maybe even achieve some kind of... relationship.

It was this desire for a relationship that had Charlotte trying to hang around Adam a little too much lately for Liam's liking. In fact, Charlotte, who was *supposed* to be *Liam's* boyfriend, had been talking about Adam quite a bit. Some gossipers at school might even insist the couple had been drifting apart lately. The lip-glossed youth always went on about what Adam posted on Facebook or how surprisingly good he was at basketball for his size or how the red shirt he wore the other day looked so good with his eyes. Liam got a new jacket last week and his boyfriend hadn't said *one word* about it.

It was this desire for a relationship that also made Charlotte insist that Grayson, the alpha dog in their small male clique, invite Adam to the party they currently planned.

"Charlotte, there's *no way* Adam is coming to this party," Liam growled.

Blue eyes looked up, now at full attention. "But that's not fair!" he insisted. "Ya'll are inviting every other kid in town!" Blue-painted nails pulled on a black sleeve. "Liaaaaaam, Adam should be allowed t'come." His dark lashes fluttered pleadingly.

Liam sighed. "It's not like he's our friend. Why should we invite somebody we don't even like?"

"Eoin and Daniel are his friends! Especially Daniel and you know what that means. Adam'll find out about the party anyway, and Daniel will help him crash it. You might as well invite him and avoid an awful scene. Besides, maybe if ya *do* invite him, he'll turn you down n' not even come."

Liam thought for a moment and mumbled, "He has a point..."

“What?!” Grayson gawked. “Whose side are you on, man?”

“Think about it. If you don’t invite Adam, he’s gonna take it personally and will do everything he can to ruin the party. If you do invite him, he hates you enough that he’ll turn you down because he wouldn’t be caught dead at one of our parties. It’s basic reverse psychology.”

“You’re so whipped, dude.”

Liam slammed his hands on the table. “Shut up Grayson! I’m trying to make a point. If we don’t want that fat-ass around, this is what we have to do!”

“Sheesh, Liam, calm down,” Charlotte insisted and gently squeezed Liam’s shoulder before wrapping his hands around his boyfriend’s arm completely. “Liam, I already told you there’s nothin’ goin’ on—”

“But you aren’t the one in control, Charlotte! There’s this invisible leash he’s got strapped around your neck and I can’t seem to break it!”

“Liam, that just isn’t true!”

Grayson leaned back in his chair with his hands behind his head. “Look, you two can get marriage counseling some other time. Right now, we need to talk about this party. We’ve got almost thirty people coming. How’re we gonna get enough booze for everybody?”

Tramaine shook his head. “Don’t look at me. My dad will notice if any wine goes missing from the cellar, and he keeps the scotch under lock and key.”

“Oh, I know!” Charlotte said and waved his hands. “Daniel’s brother can get us some! He’s 21 now isn’t he? I bet he can get us all the drinks we want.”

“You mean Kevin? Beer is the only thing that redneck is good for. We’ve got to go all out.” Grayson pulled on his Jack Skellington skullcap and groaned obnoxiously. “Doesn’t anybody have any ideas?”

He played with the little blond curls near his neck. “Just give me a list of what ya’ll want and I’ll go with him t’make sure he gets all of it. Here, I’ll just put it in my phone. I’ll get Jägermeister, tequila, Absinthe, brandy, vodka, and whiskey. I can get us stuff for shooters and cocktails too. All I need is Kevin and some cash.”

“All right!” Grayson clapped his hands and crowed. “We’ve got ourselves one hell of a party!”

\* \* \*

The next day, all four boys started sending out texts for the party during lunch period. Charlotte promised that he wouldn’t send a text to Adam, leaving that task to Grayson. Still, once cell phones started chiming across the cafeteria, he couldn’t help watching Adam, waiting to see when he’d look at his phone. Charlotte watched as both Daniel and Eoin received their invites, Adam looking over both their shoulders and then at his own empty phone. Blue eyes met with gold-brown across the cafeteria and Charlotte knew Adam would come over.

Adam’s meaty arms flexed slightly as he slipped his hands into his jacket pockets. Adam was fat on top of muscle. Like if the Pillsbury Doughboy started working out while still stuffing his face with pre-buttered microwave biscuits. Often times, Charlotte imagined how well suited Adam was for an offensive lineman position. If only their school had a football team. He swallowed as Adam approached, coming to stand right in front of him. “Charley.”

“Oh hi, Adam! Boy, that quiz in Brit. Lit. sure was hard, huh?”

Adam didn’t feel much like chit-chat and stared directly at the other boy’s thumbs, which sat poised on the tiny keyboard of his phone. “Yeah a real ball-buster. So anyway, you sent Daniel and Eoin a text about some party. What, you don’t want me there too?”

“Oh that?” He fiddled with his blue and green bedazzled phone. “I mean, it’s more Grayson’s party than my party, even though it’s gonna be at Tramaine’s house this Saturday. His parents are gonna be out of town so Grayson got the idea t’have one. It’s gonna be loads of fun. Everybody’s gonna be there.”

“So I take it you’re going then, Charley?” Adam’s voiced pitched up a bit in mischievous curiosity.

Charlotte’s glossy lips pulled into a wide smile, and his shoulders rose up cutely as he nodded, making his small curls bounce. “Well of course I am!”

“I see. I see. So, Charley, where’s my invitation?”

He frowned apologetically. “Sorry, Adam, Grayson was supposed t’text you. But I guess since you n’ I talked now, that’s as good an invitation as any.”

Adam nodded and turned around without another word. He just waved his hand uncaringly when Charlotte called out a short goodbye.

\* \* \*

Saturday night, Adam showed up to the party with Daniel at his side. ““Sup you guys? Evening, Grayson. I brought the Wii. Now if you would be so kind as to point young Daniel and me to the bar.”

“All we have is soda,” Grayson replied. “Charlotte hasn’t shown up with the booze yet.”

A dumbfounded frown replaced Adam’s smarmy grin. “You put Charley in charge of drinks? Are you retarded or something? What’s he gonna get, Kool-Aid and chocolate milk?”

“Have a little faith, Adam.” Daniel smiled and stroked the blue fur on his hood, which hid his circa 2011 Ronnie Winter haircut. “Charlotte and my brother went down to the red district. With his connections, Kev’s ID, and my generous donation, we are gonna be swimming

in liquor. You'll see." Daniel snickered and peered up at the other from under his hood. "We're here to have a good time."

After an hour, the party was in full swing, but everyone was doubly excited when the front door opened and Charlotte and Kevin walked in with large paper bags in each arm. "We're here!" Charlotte announced.

Soon the pool was full of drunken teenagers. Adam jumped in almost crushing a few of his classmates who in turn yelled at him. An obnoxious crowd was heard from above where Grayson, wearing a disturbingly tight yellow Speedo, stood on the high dive. Charlotte sat at one of the poolside tables with Liam who tried sharing a piña colada with him, but his attention was all on Adam. Liam frowned as he tried thinking of something that would get his boyfriend's attention on him instead. "Charlotte, wanna see me do a jack knife off the high dive?" When he didn't get a response, Liam reached over to touch the back of the blond boy's hand. "Hey, babe—"

"Hm?" Big blue eyes finally looked over at Liam. "What's that? Oh! The high dive? Yeah! I bet that'd be neat!" Charlotte said with a wide smile. He watched as Liam got up and climbed the ladder, looking a little eager, and then performed the promised stunt off the diving board. He clapped and cheered, giving his boyfriend that little boost.

When Grayson started giving Liam a hard time about his weak effort, Charlotte took the chance to make his own way into the pool. "Hi Adam." He smiled as he swam over. "This sure is a great party, huh?"

The brunet boy quirked a brow. "Aren't you afraid your mascara will run or something?" Adam made a point to tread backward a little bit, putting some distance between himself and the other half-naked boy.

Charlotte giggled and swam a little closer. “They make waterproof makeup, silly.”

“You guys wanna play Chicken?” Eoin called out with Wendy perched on his shoulders. “Tramaine and Laura are playing too.”

“It’ll be fun!” Wendy added with a laugh.

“Let’s do it, Adam!” Charlotte exclaimed excitedly.

Before Adam could make any protest, the curly-haired blond climbed onto his shoulders. Charlotte squealed as he tried pushing Wendy over. He didn’t count on Wendy having an expert sense of balance, and he should have known the star quarterback could keep a strong hold on her. Adam grunted as water splashed into his mouth. “C’mon, Charley! Just grab her tits!”

“Like hell you will!” Eoin snapped. He lunged forward and Wendy put her arms out. Adam’s weight wasn’t much of a handicap in the water so he glided out of the way, causing Wendy to crash into Laura. Tramaine was a tall boy, so the crash easily destroyed his balance and the pair went tumbling into the water.

Eoin quickly pivoted and Wendy found herself face-to-face with the petite boy again. “You’re going down, Charlotte!” she proclaimed with a smirk. Their hands clasped together and their elbows bent outward as the final match began.

Inches apart, Eoin noticed the red color growing on Adam’s cheeks and his bothered expression. “You okay, dude?”

“Fine…” he grumbled. This was hardly true. Adam found it increasingly difficult ignoring Charlotte’s smooth wet thighs rubbing against his ears, not to mention the boy’s groin bumping into the back of his head. He grew impatient with both the fight and himself. If the fight would just end then he wouldn’t have to endure these absurd sensations. Of course, if he would just get a *damn grip* he wouldn’t be so hot and bothered.

“ADAM!”

The blond youth’s high-pitched cry was the last thing anyone heard before he and Adam fell beneath the surface in a frenzy of bubbles and tangled limbs. When he came up for air, he saw Adam already climbing out of the pool. The larger boy looked bothered and even a little confused. Charlotte wondered if maybe he swallowed too much chlorine or maybe hit his head on the bottom of the pool. Actually, Charlotte thought about getting out and asking Adam if he was all right, but a beach ball bounced off his head, effectively distracting him into a game with his friends.

As the night went on, Daniel herded everyone back into the house. Charlotte watched as some of the teens tried finding their clothes from the community pile that formed when everyone took to the pool, while others opted to just stay in their bathing suits. He was smart enough to stay out of a game of *Truth or Dare*, which resulted in the players either crying, laughing, or doing ridiculous actions. The game also resulted in Daniel getting completely naked, though Charlotte suspected that Daniel would have ended up like that anyway before the night was over. He tried keeping an eye on Adam who resigned himself to the sofa where he just drank straight from a bottle of Scotch. He also kept glancing at his Funshine Bear watch.

2:17 AM

Suddenly, Charlotte found himself in a game of *I Never*. Like truth or dare, it was a very revealing game, and it proved the teenagers of the tiny town of Eureka, South Dakota did a lot of crazy stupid shit to keep themselves entertained. They then used one of the empty Vodka bottles for a round of *Spin the Bottle*. Liam tried sitting himself in the circle where if he spun the bottle, it was more likely to land on his boyfriend. The petite blond boy noticed this and smiled, but then he saw Adam stagger his own way into the circle as well. Didn’t Adam know what kind of

game this was? Probably not... His face was pretty red with alcohol. Charlotte wondered what drove Adam to drink so much, but then the game started.

After a few turns, Nikki spun and Charlotte watched as the neck of the bottle slowed down and pointed at Adam. His chest tightened as she reluctantly crawled forward and placed a quick peck on Adam's lips. The drunken boy didn't respond, still seeming out of it, or like he was just really thinking hard about something that made him completely unaware of anything going on around him.

"Dude, what the hell is wrong with you? Spin it." Adam looked at Daniel, hearing him for the first time in a few hours. Daniel sat beside him and made spinning motions with his fingers. "Spin the fucking bottle!"

"Shut your fucking white trash mouth, Daniel!" Without thinking, Adam actually reached out and spun the empty Vodka bottle. He looked up to see the circle made up of some ten odd kids; the ones who hadn't passed out yet. There was a round of giggles when the bottle stopped, aiming at Charlotte. Of all the people it could have landed on. A tiny gasp escaped the small boy and he turned a bright pink. Adam sighed heavily and moved forward.

Their lips crashed together inelegantly. One mewled while the other grunted. Adam could taste the watermelon lip gloss Charlotte wore. The kiss was only supposed to last a few seconds, but instead of pulling away, Adam's weight shifted down. Suddenly they were both on the floor. The small one started struggling a little, but Adam wasn't having that. One of his hands pushed on a sinuous hip and the other grabbed one of those smooth, soft thighs. A groan echoed from deep in his chest. Just when he started getting into the kiss, a fist collided violently with his jaw. Adam rolled across the floor.

"What the hell, Liam?!" he barked once he saw who'd hit him.

“What do you think you’re doing, Adam?!” Liam glared, his hands rigid, and he made a mental gesture off his temple. “You think I’m just going to let you fuck with Charlotte like that?!”

“It’s a *game*, Liam.”

“That’s the problem! You think everything is a game! Are we just pawns you get to torture on some sadistic joyride? Charlotte isn’t a toy! He’s got real emotions that you just can’t seem to leave alone!”

Adam stood up, laughing angrily. “You know what? I’m so sick and tired of everyone playing into his fantasy. Charlotte? *Are you kidding me?* If this little shit wants to be gay then that’s fine, but he shouldn’t try hiding behind some pathetic alias. Last time I checked, his name was *Charles Ward* and I’m not calling him anything else. He’s still a pathetic little faggot no matter what I call him.”

“You fat son of a bitch!” Liam lunged forward with his fists up; however, Adam saw him coming so he struck first. Liam fell back into Tramaine’s arms, who jumped up to catch him.

“This is my parents’ house. If you two are gonna fight, then get out.”

Liam shouted angrily and ran in for another attack. He landed a hit this time by ramming his shoulder in Adam’s chest. A large hand slammed into his face and pushed him back. Adam was about to strike again, but Charlotte got in the way.

“Adam, stop!” It was too late. He shoved the frail boy to the floor and Charlotte landed square on the empty bottle. He screamed as the glass shards embedded themselves in his arm. He cried when he started bleeding on the carpet.

“Jesus Christ!”

“Charlotte! Oh my God...”

“Look at what you did!”

“Get him off the floor!”

“What do we do?”

“Isn’t somebody going to call 911?!”

Eoin rubbed his forehead. “Shit... When will you learn to control your temper, Adam?”

Eoin looked where Adam stood just moments before, but he was nowhere to be found.

Even with all the other kids around him, trying to keep him seated, Charlotte pushed himself up and ran after the other boy. “Adam! Adam, wait!” The trail of blood dripping from his arm followed him through the house and eventually out into the snow. He saw Adam out on the sidewalk with his jeans still open after rushing to pull them on over his swim trunks and wrestling with his jacket. “Adam, don’t run away! We need t’ talk about this!”

“No!” Adam managed a surprisingly swift turn for someone his size on the balls of his feet. “You’re *just like* my dad! You want to ruin my life! Both of you are just lipstick fairy whores out to make my life hell!” He still looked dazed from the alcohol with a flushed nose and cheeks, but that also meant his anger was that much less under control. “Everyone acts like my dad leaving wasn’t a big deal, but those shit heads don’t know what it was like!

“I was *eight*, Charley! I was fucking eight years old when that faggot sat down to dinner in some ratty Elizabeth Taylor wig and sequined nightmare he got off the home shopping network with his face done up like a circus clown! And he wanted us to pretend like that was *okay*?” Adam seethed; spit falling off his lips as his entire body shook. He didn’t know what to do with his hands, so he kept switching between fists and wild gestures. “It’s not like his apology was any better! He *tried*, he said, but he couldn’t pretend to be *normal* anymore. And he had the *balls* to get upset when my mom didn’t take it well. So they argued all night and you know what

happened? That fucking queer packed all his bags and fucking drove away. So if that's what being gay is, then I don't want anything to do with it!"

Charlotte didn't know what to say to that. This was the first time Adam ever opened up to anyone about anything and he wasn't prepared in the slightest. His only instinct was to provide some kind of comfort, but as he approached the larger boy, all he got was a hard shove that sent him back into the snow. Charlotte hissed, holding his arm that quickly stained the snow red, and when he looked up again, Adam was gone.

\* \* \*

"Charlotte, your father and I are going out." Harriett Ward stopped in front of the hallway mirror to adjust her earrings. "There's left over spaghetti in the fridge if you get hungry. Remember, no television or computer."

"Aw jeez, mom, I already finished my homework. Can't I even watch the news?"

"Listen here young man, you're still grounded," Stephen said with a scowl. "Until you learn not to pull stunts like that anymore, you are not allowed any video games, computer, or television."

"It wasn't a stunt dad, it was an accident, and I already learned my lesson. My arm's in a cast, for cryin' out loud!"

"Don't argue with me, Charley!"

"In bed by 10:30, goodnight sweetheart."

There had been a buzz about the party Monday at school, but Charlotte hadn't been there to hear it. Regrettably, he spent the day at the hospital getting his arm fixed. Much to his further dismay, the hospital called his parents to pick him up. He knew his parents loved him, but did they still have to ground him now that he was 17 years old? He didn't even do anything wrong.

So he had one martini; it's not like he was plowed. Hadn't he suffered enough? The nurse pulled 23 pieces of glass from his arm!

With a sigh, Charlotte fell onto the couch. He winced when his arm hit the cushion a little harder than he'd meant. The house was quiet. The cold pipes up in the attic creaked subtly. The clock in the kitchen ticked softly. The windows rattled slightly when the wind blew hard enough. Among these tiny deafening sounds, Charlotte realized how lonely he felt. He and Liam weren't talking much. Things had been weird between them for a little while now. He had been genuinely sweet on Liam, but now he felt as though the feeling was fading. His boyfriend could probably sense this.

Charlotte had been living in a bubble his whole life. He didn't nearly go on the kind of adventures Adam, Daniel, and Eoin did, or even Grayson and those guys. He always stayed out of trouble. He was always good. He followed the rules

It was time to take the training wheels off.

Charlotte started by grabbing the remote and turning on the television. He surfed through the channels trying to find something worth watching. He finally stopped on the public access channel with a therapist trying to fix a relationship between two young adults. Apparently, the boyfriend neglected his girlfriend because he had feelings for a girl at work and spent more time with her. The girlfriend was upset because the boyfriend hadn't been up front with her. He hadn't wanted to hurt her feelings, but she insisted that being cheated on was much worse. As it turned out, the couple had never really said, "I love you" to each other, and the therapist pointed out that it might simply just be time for the relationship to come to its natural end.

Charlotte sat on the couch and thought for what seemed like hours. The therapist was right. He knew what he needed to do. Charlotte gathered up his courage and left the house, not even realizing that was yet another act of defiance.

It felt particularly cold out tonight, but there was no joyful presence of snow. Unable to get his cast through the sleeve, he let his arm hang inside his coat. He almost lost his balance on a sheet of ice frozen to the sidewalk. Charlotte didn't spend this time thinking about what he would say. He feared that if he thought about it too much he'd get cold feet and change his mind. He would just wing it. Charlotte would have to be strong. Charlotte would have to be honest. Charlotte would have to speak from the heart.

"Charlotte, what are you doing here?"

He looked up, surprised. He didn't even realize he knocked on the door. "Hey, Liam, can I come in?"

"Well sure, what's going on? I thought you were grounded?" Liam closed the door behind the other and took his coat.

The blond boy laughed a little. "I am, but my mom and dad went out t'night. They don't know I left the house."

"Cool, you want something to drink?"

Charlotte shook his head. "No, listen Liam, there's something we need t'talk about."

It was an age-old line that every adult and teenager alike knew. The words themselves were harmless enough, but what they really meant could tear your heart in two. If someone was lucky, they had the chance to run away from that line, but where could Liam run? He was already home, one's safe haven. With a solemn and reluctant nod, he led his boyfriend to the couch. When they both sat down, Charlotte took a deep breath and began.

“Liam, when I started going through this whole... self-discovery thing... I was afraid I wasn’t gonna be able t’be myself, but you held my hand and let me know it was okay; you made me feel so brave, Liam.” Charlotte breathed again and tucked some curls behind his ear. “You and I both know things haven’t been the same between us lately. I thought it might just be one of those rough patches people talk about. I thought we could just sorta wait it out and let it pass, but... I’ve come t’realize that just isn’t gonna happen.”

“Did I drive you away? I’ve been smothering you, haven’t I?”

“Oh, Liam, no!” He grabbed the other’s hand. “When you said you loved me four months ago, why, that was happiest I had ever been! If anything, I thought I’d been driving you away because I’ve never said it back. I’m starting t’realize, though, that I’m never going to.” Charlotte started crying. He didn’t think it was going to be this painful. “Liam, I’m so sorry.”

Liam clasped both hands around Charlotte’s. He stared down at those blue-painted nails. Charlotte looked at his nails as well. He remembered they were orange with little pumpkin decals on them the day Liam said *that word* to him. It had been a huge deal for Liam. Guys were hardly ever the first to say “I love you” in a relationship, so in a pair of boyfriends, it was anyone’s game to see who would break down and be emotional first. Not only that, but he knew Liam wanted to give him his space. Growing into Charlotte, being comfortable as Charlotte, was a sensitive process. He had been through a lot the past couple of years, facing the ridicule and the questions and the awkward tension brought on by his lifestyle choices.

But the words just slipped right out of Liam because he had such a good time at the Fall Festival and the boy looked so amazing that day and they were sharing that spice hot chocolate and... Charlotte never said it back. He just said “thank you” and kissed Liam. So Liam tried to

be understanding. Liam decided the best thing he could do was give his boyfriend time and give him space. But now he was never going to hear it.

“Why can’t you?” Liam asked softly.

Charlotte looked up, his eye liner already running. “What?”

Liam looked up into blue eyes powdered with the same blue on those neatly-trimmed nails. Charlotte always did look best in blue. “Why can’t you say it back?”

“I just don’t feel it, Liam.” He shook his head and felt his chest filling up with tears faster than they could get out. Liam was such a great guy and a lot of people would probably tell Charlotte he was crazy for letting go of such a great guy, but if there was no love, then what was the point? “I’m not gonna lie and say it just because it’s something you want t’hear. That just wouldn’t be fair.”

Liam shrugged. “I could live with that.” Even as he said the words, Liam knew it was a stupid thing to say. The last thing he should do is make himself sound like a desperate fool. In fact, Liam couldn’t say he didn’t see this coming. He knew where Charlotte would go after this, and while he disagreed with every fiber of his being, there was no stopping Charlotte now. Liam could only wish for the best.

“But I couldn’t. I’m sorry, but this is good-bye.” Charlotte gave him one last gentle kiss on the cheek. Without another word he got up, grabbed his coat, and left.

A number of indecisive emotions emerged in Charlotte. They weren’t stirring or jumbled, but rather sat in a flat pile in the bottom of his chest. He felt relieved now that he was out of a one-sided relationship, but he felt guilty for hurting Liam like that. All the mothers in the Lifetime movies he watched with his own mom always told their daughters they shouldn’t feel bad about dumping a boy. “Your happiness comes first,” each of them said. In the end, he knew

this current fleeting remorse was less than the guilt he would have felt if he continued leading Liam on.

The boy also felt a combination of eagerness and fear. He was excited over this new freedom. He could now pursue the relationship he truly wanted. It was now or never. Charlotte knew if he didn't try, he would lose his gumption and change his mind. There was a fear though; fear of rejection or failure; fear that no one would understand. Even Charlotte didn't fully understand this emotion drowning his heart. Obviously, his eagerness outweighed the fear. Armed with the knowledge he had about Adam, Charlotte would confront his bully and completely turn the tables on their relationship.

"Oh hello, sweetie, are you here to see my Adam?" While the pet names for her son's friends were nice, many of them wondered if it was because Gloria Miller never bothered to learn any of their real names.

"Yes ma'am."

"I think he's up in his room." She headed into the kitchen. "I just made a fresh batch of cookies. Why don't you take a plate upstairs for you and Adam to share?"

When she handed said plate to him, the boy smiled his thanks and went upstairs. He stood outside Adam's room trying to gather up enough courage to do this. He had to convince himself this wasn't completely crazy. "H-Hi there, Adam," he said once he finally stepped inside.

"Dude, what's the point of being in a party if you aren't gonna do any of the work?" Adam sat at his computer wearing his headset and playing World of Warcraft. Meaty fingers flew across the keyboard, filling the room with a relentless *clack-tac* sound. "Look, we aren't gonna defeat this boss if you don't put any effort in! I'm not leveling you!"

Charlotte moved in closer and set the plate of cookies by the mouse. Competing with the MMO was hard. In fact, Adam would probably notice the cookies before he ever noticed Charlotte. However, the boy just stood up a little straighter and projected his voice that much stronger. “Hey, Adam, can I talk t’you?” Not once did bright brown eyes abandon the computer screen. He slumped a little, but a shake of his head and a deep inhale saw his posture return along with a gleam in baby blues. “Please, it’s really important.”

Adam sighed. “Eoin, I gotta get rid of a pest. I’ll log back later.” He exited the game, took off the headset, and grabbed a cookie. Not that Adam needed a cookie, what with the twice-baked love handles concealed by his shirt. “What do you want, Charley?”

Suddenly, it was very difficult for Charlotte to make eye contact. “I broke up with Liam... just now, before I came here.”

“Kay... so what?” Adam mumbled with crumbs in his mouth.

When Charlotte tried biting his lip, his teeth slipped across thanks to the glittery bubblegum lip gloss coating. “So I did it for you, that’s so what.” Just as the words slipped out, the boy’s cheeks took on a bright color.

Adam raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t tell you to dump your boyfriend.”

Charlotte’s blue eyes hid behind dark lashes when he looked down at the floor where his toes pointed inward and curled inside his shoes. “I know. I did it because I want t’be with you instead.”

“No.”

The answer was so curt that it made Charlotte lose all his bravado. His shoulders curled forward, his back hunched, his fingers tangled together and his voice dropped down into nearly a whisper. “C’mon Adam, if you would just try—”

“I’m not a **fag**, Charley!” Adam slammed his hand down on the desk, which made the keyboard rattle. His voice boomed out all at once. Clearly, Adam’s vocal chords were as heavy as the rest of him. He didn’t need this happening right now. He didn’t! Charlotte had *no idea* of what he was accusing Adam. How dare this little princess come in here and...

“Don’t give me that, Adam. You can’t hide it from me. Call it gaydar, or some other nonsense, but I know you like boys. I want you t’like *me*.” He took a step closer. He had to break the bully’s bubble if he wanted to make any sort of progress. “And I’m not like your dad, Adam. Oh my gosh, I mean, I would *never* walk out on you. Never! A-And, you know... I’m really not like your dad. What I’ve got goin’ on... it’s different, Adam. Crap, your dad tried pretending for a long time that he was something he wasn’t. H-He was gay and he had these ideas of bein’ a lady, but I’m not like that. I mean sorta, but... I just like lip gloss and candy necklaces and baby tees and boys. That’s all there is to me, Adam. And you know, just because you come out of the closet... it doesn’t mean you’ll be your dad, either.”

Adam stared back coldly. “I swear to God, Charley, if you don’t take that back right now, I will take that hair clip of yours and shove it in your eye.”

“Would it really be so bad, Adam?!” Charlotte threw his hands into the air as his head canted to the side. “Are you afraid you’ll lose your image if you come out? You’ll still be a psychopathic asshole.” He blushed at the last part. It was very likely he just ruined his chance with those words.

Adam sat in the chair, clearly thinking things over. Maybe... *Maybe*, Charlotte had a point. Maybe. There could *possibly* be some merit to what the kid said. Maybe it had been more about the hiding and the lies, because if his dad had just been honest with himself in the first

place, none of Adam's childhood bullshit would have happened. Granted, Adam probably wouldn't be around, either, but that was a different story.

Adam *was* here, and Adam was being challenged. "And what makes you think *I'd* want to go out with *you*?" he asked, leaning back in his chair, chin tilted upward a little bit.

A sigh. Charlotte looked up at Adam with eyes too docile for the conversation at hand. "I'll do whatever you want, Adam." Resignation had always been Charlotte's greatest weakness. Submissive compromises weren't the healthiest way to start a relationship, but if that's what it took to get the ball rolling, then he was willing to go from there and fix things later. Just... he had to make this work. Charlotte gave up Liam, snuck out of the house, risked getting grounded even further, took a glass bottle to the arm... all for Adam!

Charlotte's tweezed eyebrows came together and he pursed his lips. Something was building up inside him and he had to let it out. "No. I take that back, because you know *what*, Adam? You've been treatin' me like your bitch since we graduated middle school and I've about had enough of it. You think me bein' gay makes me less of a person than you when that just isn't true. Bein' gay isn't what you think it is, Adam. I'm awful sorry your dad did what he did, but that was one person, *not* the community. I mean... just... damn it!" He threw his arms into the air, exploding right there on the spot.

"Maybe you're so angry 'cause you keep all these feelings inside about who you really are and you're scared and you don't know what's gonna happen and all that junk. But it's not so bad, Adam. Honest it's not. I mean, the worst is that someone doesn't like you 'cause you're gay, but heck, people also might not like you 'cause of the way you talk or the way you dress or the music you listen to. Not everyone is gonna like you, Adam, but at least *you* can like you. And I

think... I think I can show you how t'do that.” Charlotte finished with a winded huff, toes curled inside his shoes and hands in tight little fists down at his sides.

Before agreeing to anything, Adam picked up another cookie and ate it slowly. He wasn't entirely convinced coming out of the closet was a good idea until Charlotte showed some balls and offered that colorfully-worded deal. And hell, if this scrawny little girl-dresser could get away with being gay and still be such a confident spitfire, then maybe Adam could be gay and keep all his macho—as self-inflated as that macho was. “Fine.”

Charlotte took a step backward, his face blank for a moment, eyes wide and mouth slightly agape. “R-Really? Just like that?” He didn't think his speech would really go over that well, but apparently, something he said must have worked.

“Yeah.” Adam put his headset back on and turned to the monitor. “I'll pick you up for school tomorrow morning. Now get out. I have to kill this boss.”

Charlotte moved some curls behind his ear. “Um, okay, see you tomorrow, Adam.” He retreated from the room quickly, not wanting to spoil the moment. Had Charlotte taken a moment to glance over his shoulder, though, he would have seen the smallest hint of a smirk pull at the corner of Adam's mouth, as he rose in his chair, as if a weight lifted off his shoulders all thanks to the outburst from one curly-haired blond boy wearing bubblegum lip gloss.

## The Toothbrush Aisle

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If it had been a superlative category in the yearbook, Carter's peers would have voted him least likely to have kids. So how was it he had a teenage boy and girl living under his roof? The answer to that was actually quite simple: Jonas. They met each other at a Stone Temple Pilots concert back in college, moved in together after graduation, and had been together ever since. After a successful series of houseplants, a goldfish, and two dogs, Jonas started bringing up the subject of children. Carter was never a fan of these totally dependent, runny-nosed, sticky-fingered creatures. His preference was simply to get a third dog; maybe a small one that Jonas could dress up and coddle in place of a human baby. Such was not Carter's luck.

Jonas wanted a child so badly that Carter couldn't bring himself to continue saying no. So, Carter and Jonas adopted their first child based on compromise. Carter only agreed if it was a boy and old enough to talk. Coherently. That was how 12-year-old Ryan entered their lives. When Ryan turned 15 years old, Jonas got the baby bug again. Carter tried putting his foot down, but the love of his life always had a way of convincing him of anything—usually with any combination of beer, sweet talking, the cold shoulder, or so called “good reasons” that usually just seemed like words running circles—and that was how they got 9-year-old Beth.

After three years of living with them, Beth learned which of her dads was parenting material and which one wasn't. Carter stepped up now and then when he had to, like when the kids broke a bone or caught the flu. Still, Carter always noticed Beth trying to get closer to him. Whenever it was his turn to drive the kids somewhere, he didn't miss how Beth always claimed the passenger seat of the Jeep. Whenever he spent an afternoon watching his hockey games, he

noticed how Beth sat next to him on the couch, trying her best to stay quiet so he wouldn't send her off to play somewhere.

On a standard cloudy day in Portland, Carter helped Jonas pack for an emergency trip. They hadn't told Ryan or Beth about it yet, not wanting to worry the kids, but Jonas was leaving first thing in the morning. Both men knew they were running out of time to share the news. At least one opportunity presented itself when Beth appeared in the doorway. Carter fell back on his instinct of running and hiding, so he ducked into the bathroom where he put together a toiletry bag for Jonas. The man with more paternal instincts just rolled his eyes and then smiled at his little girl who, as loathed as he was to admit it, was turning into a teenager right before his eyes.

"Hey there, Bluebelle," he said. Jonas gave her the nickname when Beth first came to live with them, smitten as he was with her bright blue eyes. She still tolerated it, so he would call her the name for as long as she'd let him. "What's goin' on?"

"Are you going somewhere?" she asked, coming to stand beside his bed where the suitcase lay. Beth pulled on the zipper a bit, listening to the sound the teeth made as they clamped together and then came apart again.

Jonas' smile looked a little weak and guilty; as if someone caught him eating the last brownie from the pan after everyone else went to bed. "Yes, sweetheart, I have to leave in the morning." He picked up a pile of folded shirts and put them in next to a pile of folded jeans in the suitcase. "She's been sick for a really long time and living in a hospice. Her memory isn't very good anymore. I didn't want to make you and Ryan meet her if she couldn't form a relationship with the two of you." Jonas paused, both his hands resting on the top shirt. "But she's ready to go very soon, Beth, and I want to be there."

Carter also paused from inside the bathroom, putting the plastic safety cap on Jonas' shaving razor. He felt guilty that he wouldn't be there with Jonas. It was a time when his partner needed him most, but Carter would be here with the kids. Jonas insisted he was okay with Carter staying behind. The news about his grandmother came suddenly and they couldn't possibly ask anyone to take Ryan and Beth on such short notice. Carter knew something about having a relative who was... failing mentally, and wanted to offer his support, his empathy, but would just have to send out long-distance good vibes to Jonas.

"How long will you be gone?" Beth asked.

"I suppose I'll be gone for a week, two at the most. It depends on how quickly she passes and when we can hold the funeral." Jonas came back over and dropped a collection of socks into the suitcase. He then started picking boxers out of another drawer. Beth started arranging the socks in a neater fashion when a sudden, sharp pain hit her stomach. A tiny whimper escaped her as she put a hand over the pained spot. Jonas glanced back at the girl. He mistook the gesture and expression of pain on her face for sadness that he would leave her behind for such a long time.

Jonas gave a small chuckle. "Aw, c'mon now Bulebelle. I'll be back before you know it. You'll have lots of fun with Ryan and Papa. I bet you won't even have time to miss me." Jonas then lifted Beth off the floor and pulled her into a hug. He remembered this being easier when she was smaller. Beth wrapped her arms around Jonas' neck and rested her cheek on his shoulder. The man smiled, his brown eyes glancing upwards. "You just wanna hang out in here with me for awhile?"

Carter came out of the bathroom finding Beth curled on her side on the bed with her face half-buried in a pillow. He thought about asking what was wrong, but when he saw Jonas just

going about packing his suitcase, Carter thought better. If Jonas wasn't going to pry, then Carter sure as heck wasn't going to pry either.

\* \* \*

While Carter busied himself with cleaning dishes, he kept glancing over his shoulder at Beth sitting at the kitchen table. She'd been uncharacteristically quiet this morning. She didn't even swing her legs over the edge of the chair the way she usually did. Carter thought about asking Beth what was wrong, but then he reconsidered. Beth was 12 years old now. She'd be a teenager in another eight months. Jonas said it was called being a "tween;" transitioning between childhood and teen-hood. Teenagers were generally quiet and moody, weren't they? Carter recalled being such a teenager himself, antagonistic against the world and insisting no one could make decisions for him.

Carter listened to the sound of the chair legs scraping faintly across the linoleum floor. After watching her stare at the phone for nearly 10 minutes, it appeared Beth was finally making her move. He and Jonas hadn't allowed phones in either of their kids' rooms, and the standing rule was no personal cell phone until you were 16 years old. That rule forced Beth, sometimes to her embarrassment, to use the phone in the kitchen to talk to her friends. Carter was surprised she even tried making a call with him in the room right now.

"Daddy?"

She called Jonas? What could be so important that she had to call him all the way in Florida when she had a perfectly capable parent here at home? "Beth, you know Daddy is dealing with—" Carter stopped short when the girl turned her back towards him just a little bit more. That's what happened when you were just the *capable* parent and not the *good* parent.

"I was... um, I w-wanted to a-ask you something."

Carter watched as the girl pointed her toes together and hunched over a bit, holding the phone close enough to her ear that the plastic started sweating from her body heat.

“No, yeah, Papa is here. Just... I... I... there’s...”

The man frowned, listening as Beth’s voice wavered as if she was about to cry. What bothered her so much? Something made Beth *this* upset, and she still felt like she couldn’t go to Carter? He scrubbed a little harder at the plate in his hand, trying not to eavesdrop too obviously.

“It’s nothing, Daddy. Sorry I called you,” she finally apologized, though she sounded more defeated than guilty. Had Jonas turned her down? No... He’d never do something like that in a million years. “I love you, Daddy. Bye.” With that, Beth hung up the phone and rubbed the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand.

Carter finally set the plate and sponge down into the soapy water, grabbed a towel to dry his hands, and turned. “Beth, you know if something is bothering you, you can always talk to me about it.” A rare sentiment. Honestly, Carter couldn’t remember the last time he got this invested in his kids; probably not since they caught Ryan in the garage with a girl last year. Somehow, though, seeing his daughter struggle hit him in the chest and made him want to... help.

“It’s nothing,” Beth insisted, though her tone was full of distraught and confusion. She still hadn’t moved from her spot by the phone, posture hunched and her feet pointed towards each other. Carter could even see her toes curling tightly inside her orange-striped socks.

He sighed. “I know I don’t have the same finesse as Dad, but I—”

“I wish I had a mom!” Beth shouted. She ducked her head down towards her chest, but that did little to stifle the volume or bite of her voice. Carter actually flinched. A small, yet sharp prick actually hit his chest. He inhaled sharply through his nose, ready to scold his daughter for

hurting his feelings, but Beth ran to her bedroom and slammed the door shut before he had the chance to say anything.

\* \* \*

“Carter? Carter, are you awake?”

“Hmm...erm... wha?” Carter opened one eye so he could see who was talking to him. At first, all he could make out was a purple, yellow, and grey blur. Once he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, he could see his daughter standing a foot or two from his bed. “Beth, m'tired. Wa'izzit?”

“It is already 11:30 in the morning, how can you be tired?” she asked.

“Beth...” he grumbled. Carter didn't want to admit he stayed up a little too late drinking after Jonas called in tears saying his grandmother finally passed away. If he were more awake and sober, Carter would see Beth's nervousness and the way she only looked at the corner of the mattress instead of him directly. She clutched something red in her fist, but he couldn't quite make that out, either. Everything was a little blurry right now.

Beth squeezed her eyes shut. “I... I have a p-problem. With Daddy in Florida... I thought m-maybe you...y-y-you...”

Carter rubbed his face and groaned, not realizing how discouraging the sound was for his daughter. “C'mon kid, spit it out.”

Beth bit her lip and shook her head. “I'm sorry,” she choked.

“Well there's something bugging you.” The man's eyes glanced at the red cloth she clutched tightly in her fist. Had she been holding that the whole time? Carter could smell something like copper or fish wafting through the air, but he thought it was just from the hangover. “Look, if you have a problem—”

“I’m sorry I bothered you, Carter.” Beth turned and scurried from the room just as her choice of names sent another one of those sharp pricks through the man’s chest.

This time, Carter couldn’t just ignore the fact that something was wrong with Beth. As afraid as she seemed to talk about it, and as much of a puberty-fueled tantrum she might throw, Carter knew that as a parent he needed to step in and get this cleared up. If nothing else, he couldn’t let a grieving Jonas come home to a moody, weeping daughter who might accuse Carter of negligence simply because he didn’t care enough to ask her what was wrong. Even though he did. Twice, at least.

After crossing paths with Ryan and asking if he’d seen his sister, Carter found Beth hastily dropping towels and clothes into the washing machine. According to Ryan, Beth did laundry nearly every day since Jonas left. Why would she do the laundry four days in a row? She wasn’t one to normally do laundry, though Jonas started teaching her the basics recently with plans to make it one of her regular chores. Carter watched Beth pick up a bed sheet from her cupcake-decorated hamper and blot it haphazardly with bleach. Just as she stuffed the sheet into the washing machine, Carter grabbed a corner of it.

“Ryan says you’ve been doing a lot of laundry lately,” he said, hoping the statement might prompt some sort of explanation from her. He’d caught Beth, so now she would have no choice but to fess up to whatever was going on. Instead of giving up any sort of answer, however, Beth just stared at the man with all the color drained from her face. Carter frowned when the girl refused talking. His brown eyes roamed over the bedding still clutched in both their hands and then he saw the generous blood stain in the white fabric. “What the hell is this?”

Carter dropped the sheet only so he could pull things from the washer. It wasn’t just her sheets. Blood colored some bath towels and two pairs of pajamas as well. He couldn’t believe

this. “Are all these things yours?” Carter asked, staring right at Beth. She only nodded timidly back at him. His eyes widened. This wasn’t the usual pillowcase-ruining nosebleed, and whatever it was had the girl upset. Carter put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed gently. “Beth, you need to tell me what’s going on. I can’t help if you don’t tell me what the problem is.”

Beth squeezed her eyes shut in an effort to fight off the tears. “I have really bad stomach aches, and I... I keep b-bleeding from... You know... down...”

The word *AWKWARD* hung over both their heads as realization slapped Carter across the face like a pair of pristine white gloves. That little red cloth she clutched so tightly back in the bedroom had undoubtedly been a pair of panties. The man sighed. “Jeez, Beth, you’re just having your period is all.”

She sniffled and opened her big blue eyes, peering up at him. “M-My what?”

Carter shook his head. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you about it? I thought your health class was doing that whole... ‘Welcome to Womanhood’ video and lecture this year,” he said, making some kind of flourishing motion with his hand, like the blossoming of a flower or the flutter of butterfly wings.

Beth just shook her head. “That’s... next semester.”

“Haven’t you and your friends been talking about this stuff?” Tween girls did that sort of thing, right? Talked about getting their first periods and traded training bras and talked about cute boys?

“I... I think I’m the first?” she replied unsurely.

Carter pinched the bridge of his nose and groaned. “Fantastic.”

“Are...are you mad at me, Carter?” Beth asked with her voice still small and her blue eyes still wet with tears.

“No, Beth, I’m not mad at you.” He sighed again. “Look, your period, it’s this thing that women get...” Carter grunted, not feeling at all qualified for this. Wasn’t there a book he could have read first? Jonas had probably been pushing them to brush up on the puberty of girls, but of course, Carter never bothered listening. “Once a month you...” He stopped and reconsidered the priorities of the conversation. “First, you said you have a bad stomach ache?”

Beth pressed her hand over the belt line of her jeans and nodded. “Yeah...”

“Right, those are cramps. I can give you Advil and they’ll go away.” Carter was nowhere near ready to tackle the elephant in the room. Did that make him a shitty dad? Mother Nature just awarded his daughter the red badge of courage, but he couldn’t even give her the accessories that went with it. He shoved everything back into the washing machine attempting to buy himself more time. “Okay, so now... You’re supposed to use these things... They keep the blood from getting everywhere. What have you been using?”

The girl tugged on the bottom hem of her shorts again. “Bathroom tissue.”

“All right, sweetheart, here’s the plan,” Carter said, nodding, though it was more for his own confidence than trying to inspire the feeling in Beth. “You and I are going to the store and get you some things, okay?” He forced a smile. “There’s an entire aisle at the grocery store for this kind of thing. It will be really easy. I promise.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to call Daddy?” Beth asked as she followed him downstairs to the kitchen.

Carter flinched at the suggestion. Beth didn’t think he could handle this. Sure, he didn’t *want* to deal with this, but he *needed* to deal with this. Carter needed to step up to the plate, not just for Jonas who mourned down in Florida, and not just for Beth who doubted him as a capable parent, but for himself too. Besides, this wasn’t going away. Beth’s period would be a

regular thing in this house until she left for college. Such an overwhelming thought. But then Carter reminded himself that however bad it was for him, it was that much worse for the young teenage girl following at his heels because—as much as they both wished otherwise—Carter was the only one here who could offer Beth any guidance.

“We don’t need to call Jonas,” replied Carter. “The funeral is in two days. We don’t need to make him think he needs to come all the way back home for something you and I are perfectly capable of handling together.” He ripped a sheet of paper off the memo pad magnetized to the fridge and a pen from the basket next to the phone. He just scratched the “T” on the first line when Beth’s quiet voice met his ears.

“Daddy’s grandma died?”

Carter looked up and saw Beth leaning against the counter, arms crossed tightly in front of her, but he could tell the gesture didn’t result from her cramps. “Oh... Yeah, he called last night to tell me.”

Beth frowned a little more. “Didn’t he want to talk to me or Ryan?”

Carter pursed his lips and shook his head. “He called really late, Beth. The two of you were already asleep.”

“What, we can’t be bothered to wake up and comfort him?” she asked, tone going from mournfully curious to spiteful in a split second. Carter didn’t know how to answer that question. Was he supposed to let them hear Jonas sobbing uncontrollably into the phone about how his beloved *Gigi* would never hug him again while smelling like Chesterfields and Werther’s Original? Was he supposed to let them see *him* pouring drink after drink because he didn’t know how to console his heartbroken partner thousands of miles away? When Carter could only offer a shrug, Beth scoffed and shook her head. “Whatever. Did you finish the list yet?”

The man nodded. It was a very short list, after all: tampons, pads, and more laundry detergent. Just in case. Grabbing his wallet and keys, Carter laid a towel down in the front seat of the Jeep for Beth and drove to the Publix. He supposed going to the Walgreens might have been less embarrassing for the both of them, since it was designed more like a pharmacy, but the closest Walgreens was another three miles away and Carter didn't want to drag this out more than necessary.

He gave Beth some cash, more than enough really, and sent her inside. "It's the aisle with the toothbrushes and shampoo," Carter told her before she closed the car door. Beth should be able to find it on her own just fine, right? He didn't need to go into the store with her. Besides, it would probably only embarrass her more if her dad came in to help pick out tampons. He didn't think it would take the girl more than five minutes to buy what she needed; however, Carter sighed when he realized Beth was in the store nearly 15 minutes. What was taking so long? Even though it was the last thing he felt like doing, he went into the store and looked for Beth.

Carter found Beth in the toothbrush and shampoo aisle, down at the far end where... those things were stocked on the shelves. The good news was that she found what she was looking for. The bad news was that his daughter was in tears. "Beth, why are you cr—"

"T-These ones are cardboard," Beth said, holding up the box of tampons in her left hand. "And these ones are p-plastic," she said, holding up the box in her right hand. "Both are regular with a y-yellow label, b-but there are light ones with a purple label and super with a green label. Some are scented and some aren't?" Beth sniffled wetly. "The pads are j-just as confusing. Those ones are little liners and these ones are for overnight and... have w-wings? I don't... Papa, I don't..."

Wow. Carter could not blame his poor little girl for breaking down crying.

He put his hand around her shoulders and squeezed gently. “Don’t panic, Beth. We’ll get you sorted out, okay?” Looking over all the boxes and brands and... categories these products came in, Carter felt overwhelmed himself. Regular? Super? How should he know? Wasn’t that sort of thing relative from girl to girl? “Let’s cover our bases,” he suggested, again forcing that smile meant to boost his own confidence rather than Beth’s. “We’ll get one of everything and... figure out what works best for you. That way you’ll know for next time.”

“And you’re telling me this happens *every month*?” Beth asked, voice giving a small heave as she watched her dad put one of everything into the basket.

The smile faltered. “I’m afraid so, honey.”

Beth cupped her hand against her temple when a stranger passed by the aisle, though their attention was all on the perpendicular yogurt aisle and not on her. “Well, when is it supposed to stop?”

He sympathized with her effort to hide. Carter had the anxious feeling that people were giving him strange looks as well. What kind of grown man put his hands on menstrual pads with overnight wings? Jonas would probably insist there was nothing wrong with it and then men bought these products for their wives, girlfriends or daughters a lot more often than folks realized. “I think when you’re... 60 years old? Maybe 50?” Carter looked down into the basket and then back at Beth who again tugged on the hem of her shorts with her lips curled together. “How about some ice cream?” he offered with a more sympathetic smile and half-lidded eyes. “Any flavor you want. Just for you. I’ll tell Ryan he can’t have any of it.”

The idea of her own carton of ice cream seemed to put Beth in a slightly better mood. “Can I get Cherry Coke, too?”

“A twelve pack with your name on it.”

“And can we get Taco Bell on the way home?”

Carter raised both eyebrows while leading the way towards the checkout. The self-checkout, to be specific. He didn't want anyone seeing him be a hero. “You like Taco Bell?”

“Duh,” Beth replied, shrugging her shoulders and glancing obscurely to the side. “I'm all about the Cool Ranch Doritos Taco right now.”

He blinked before laughing. “That sounds disgusting, Beth, but if that's what you want, it'll be my treat.”

Once they were home, Carter met with an even larger predicament. How was he going to tell Beth how to use the damn things? The man didn't really think to look for directions on the outside of the box, or if there were paper instructions on the inside. He assumed it was like a trick of the trade passed down between mothers and daughters. Carter *knew* how to use one. You lived long enough and earned yourself enough common sense to figure out what went where, but he sure as heck didn't want to be the one to tell the girl. Maybe he could call one of his lady friends and get them to do it. Then again, Carter didn't like the idea of calling up one of the women from their bowling league and saying, “Sorry, but I was wondering if could tell my little Beth here how to use a tampon. Would you mind?”

People just didn't *do that*, right?

There *was* one other person he could call. He wasn't fond of the idea. The woman wasn't easy to talk to, but what other choice did he have? Carter sat Beth on the couch and pulled out his phone. As it rang, he walked more towards the kitchen so she wouldn't be able to hear him as well.

“Hello, mom? It's me.” Already he sighed heavily and leaned against the wall. “No, mom, Robert is my older brother. I'm Carter.” He clasped his palm tightly against the back of his

neck and squeezed. “Carter. No... no mom, don’t be like this. I’m 36 now. I’m too old for you to punish me like this. Sorry I don’t call you as often as Robert does, but that’s no reason to pretend you don’t know me.” Carter would never admit how much he was like his mother—known as the widow Thompson in her own neighborhood. She had children only to satisfaction of her now deceased husband, and that very fact reflected in them as adults. Carter knew she loved him and his brother, but he learned early in life that she didn’t *like* them.

“Yeah, mom, I’m doing fine.” Carter forced a smile even over the phone. “Yeah, I have a job. I’m an account manager and Jonas does graphic design.” The smile slipped away and he shoved his free hand into his pocket where he pinched a piece of lint between his nails. “Well maybe you’d know more about what goes on in my life if *you* called *me* more often. You’re just as capable of picking up a phone. Because *I* did tell you I was seeing someone. I’ve told you this almost a hundred times. You met him at Easter last year and I brought him home for Thanksgiving the year before that, remember? We have two kids. I’ve sent you pictures of us. You didn’t lose them did you, mom?” Although, “purposely misplace” might be the more appropriate accusation.

Carter started thinking this was a bad idea. The longer he dragged it out, the harder this would be, so he just needed to get to the point. “Listen, mom, I need to ask you something.” He turned a bit, pressing his forehead against the wall. “Mom, are you listening? I need your help.” His shoulders stiffened. “Robert got you TiVo for Christmas, mom, you can pause ‘The Young and the Restless’ and listen to me for five minutes. I have Beth here and—” Carter pivoted on his feet and his hand flew from his pocket so it could tangle into his hair. “Just pause it, mom! You won’t miss anything! Christ, it’s like my baseball games all over again...” The man swallowed.

“Don’t pretend like you don’t remember. You stayed home, watched your stupid soaps and drank martinis instead of coming to my baseball games. Were you ever invested in anything I did? I know you don’t give two shits about me now and I don’t care, but why don’t you try showing some interest in your granddaughter, huh?” Leaning his head back, Carter squeezed his eyes shut so tightly he saw spots. “Look she...” he whispered, “started her period.”

He squeezed the phone hard enough to make the plastic creak. “Mom...mom, listen to me, please.” Carter started chuckling brokenly and shaking his head. “Mom, I need your help.” He slumped back against the wall again and his knees buckled momentarily. Tears stung in the corner of his eyes and he knew the phone call had been a waste of time. No wonder he was such a shitty dad. “You have no idea what you’ve even done, do you, Hillary? And even if you do know, you don’t even care.” The man’s voice grew quiet and tired. “I gotta go now.” Carter hung up and dropped the phone on the kitchen table. He sat in the chair and rested his head in his hands.

Beth walked up to him, her socked feet shuffling silently. “I found a folded piece of paper with instructions inside the box,” she said, holding up said instructions. Carter lifted his head just enough to see informative, yet tasteful illustrations that told his daughter what he could not. Great. A box of tampons was more helpful than he was. “So, look... Thanks for helping me at the grocery store and everything, but I guess I can deal with this on my own from here. If I have any more problems, I’ll try waiting until Daddy gets back.”

Carter felt that guilty prick in his chest yet again. Beth *still* didn’t want to depend on him, but... he couldn’t blame her. “Hey, sweetheart... if you want to watch a movie together later or something, I’d be open to that,” he said, trying his best to at least build a bridge, even if it was weak and rickety.

His daughter looked away, making him fear she'd disregard his offer, but then she looked back at him and shrugged. "Maybe later, Papa, yeah." Beth retreated after that, taking the plastic bag of new womanhood with her to her room. He heard her door close, leaving him alone. All he was missing was a martini.

## Magnet Kisses

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So, I've been trying to ignore the fact that tomorrow is St. Valentine's Day because Brittany—this girl in my class—has spent the last two weeks gushing over the holiday. When we made valentines in class last Tuesday, she used every bit of paper doily, glitter, and gem beads she got her hands on. She made each heart-shaped sentiment bigger and better than the last. I'm not *that* into Valentine's Day. There is a lot of pink involved and I don't do pink. But I was stupid and blushed when I found Brittany's most decorated valentine of them all tucked inside my desk.

I sort of like Brittany. I'm 11 years old now and Momma says I'm almost a teenager, so it's normal for me to start liking girls. Except I'm still pretty on the fence about girls in general. Most of them still wear their hair in braids and these baby skirts with stripes on them, but Brittany started wearing her hair down and wearing jean shorts—not that floppy stuff made from New Jersey. She calls me by my whole name, Tommy Hamilton-Campbell. Everybody does because they think it's neat I have two last names, but the way she says my name makes it sound extra neat. The first time I got butterflies in my stomach was when Brittany's mom let her paint her nails for the first time and she came to school with dark blue fingernails. My favorite color.

See, I kinda feel obligated to get her a good gift as retribution for my Christmas mess up. How was I supposed to know girls didn't like salamanders? It had red and green spots down its back; perfect for Christmas! I didn't *know* Brittany made me an entire gingerbread house until we traded gifts on the playground. I didn't even think she liked me as much as I liked her. Seeing her cry made me feel pretty gross in my stomach, and I've felt obligated ever since then to give her something special the next big holiday.

So now, here I am sitting on the couch and flipping through television channels. Some Valentine's Day-themed commercial catches my eye, so I stop for a second. It's a Kay Jewelers commercial. An adult couple sit together in a restaurant booth. The man opens a small white box to reveal a ruby and diamond studded heart-shaped pendant. The woman of course smiles and looks overjoyed, but she makes sure to reel it in too. Then the commercial ends with the trademark slogan. "Every Kiss Begins With Kay."

I roll my eyes and groan. Grownups have the grossest way of expressing their *like-like* for each other. My moms never kiss like that. At least not those open mouth kind of kisses that made a sloppy wet noise. My moms always kiss each other the same way they kiss me: with a closed mouth and a dry smooch. I'm not a fan of their kisses these days, especially since sometimes, Momma leaves purple lip marks on my cheek, forcing me to scrub it away with my sleeve before any of my friends can see it. Mom rarely wears makeup, so her kisses weren't as threatening to my young masculine image, which I *do* have, by the way.

However, the commercial reminds me that I still need to get Brittany a gift, but I have no idea what to get for her. Jewelry isn't much of an option. Our relationship doesn't have the emotional capacity that requires jewelry. It's not like I let her ride on the front of my bike and take her to Wendy's for lunch or anything. I haven't even *told* her that I like-like her yet. Plus, I don't have the money for jewelry. Mom only gives me \$3.00 a week, and that's only if I remember to do all of my chores. She's pretty serious about that stuff. I guess I could buy a bronze locket from the dollar store, but I would much rather get those Transformer action figures that sold for 75¢ each. Because that's *four* action figures for one week's allowance versus *one* dumb locket. I think we all know which one is the better deal.

Mom usually gives Momma jewelry on romantic occasions, which always thrills her. Momma loves jewelry and has more than she can probably wear in a year. For their last anniversary, Mom and Momma spent the week prior talking to men who came over and only visited for a few hours. Some were nice, but I didn't like all of them. One man had *too much* hair on his arms while another didn't have *enough hair* on his head. One man wore glasses too big for his face while another wore clothes all the same shade of green. Another guy made the big mistake of laughing at Mom when found out she was a logistics analyst, saying women didn't have the "critical knowhow" to do something better suited for a "man's brain." He deserved that kick to the kneecap I gave him.

Luckily, my moms invited back a good one. His name was Allen and he wore jeans that weren't too baggy and his blonde hair was the right kind of short, and best of all, he always brought a bag of cheddar popcorn with him for me. He came over to our house five times. Allen always asked me how school was going and he let me show him my baseball cards. I liked having him around, but I guess he wasn't the kind of friend with my moms that was meant to stay.

I never learned why Allen came for those few visits, but he made my moms really happy, both of them saying he gave them the best anniversary gift they could ever ask for. Mom took Momma to a fancy restaurant and rented a room at a hotel for the night, meaning I got stuck with the oldest babysitter alive. I never saw Allen again, but Momma got suspiciously fat afterwards with my baby brother Freddy. I'm starting to think Allen might have had something to do with that. Either way, though, I can't take Britten to a fancy restaurant, and I definitely can't give her a grownup man who will just make her fat.

I growled and raked my hands through his crop of brown hair. Mom comments a lot about how my hair color reminds her of milk chocolate. Chocolate is one of her favorite things, so I take it as a compliment. I start thinking a thirty-cent drug store Valentine's Day card will just have to be good enough.

I can hear Momma's cheerful humming and contemplate going to her for help. Momma still sees me as her little boy and treats me like it, no matter how many times I tell her to tone it down. Yeah, it's nice that she loves me so much and is so invested in me, but I need room to be a dude, you know? Momma is the biggest romantic I know, though, so if anyone can help me figure out this gift thing, it's her.

Not looking forward to the thick emotional outpour coming my way, I still wander into the kitchen where she puts away the dishes. I pull up on my jeans along the way. They are one size too big, but Mom insists I'll grow into them soon enough with all the growth spurts I'm having. As per usual, Momma is wearing one of her many A-line dresses with the bateau neckline—this one red in color and the hem just short enough to reveal the tattoo of a wine glass and grape vines on her left calf—along with some matching pumps and a white apron. She has her own dark brown hair all done up in those forever perfect pin curls. A chocolate diamond necklace completes her ensemble. Mom jokes that Momma would make the perfect pin-up girl, whatever that is.

I tug on the hip of her dress. "Momma?"

"Hello Tommy!" she greets enthusiastically with a smile. "How's my *big man* today?"

I cringe at the nickname. She doesn't say it to make fun of me, but sometimes it feels that way. Next, I shove my hands into the front pocket of his yellow hoodie. Uncle Jack gave it to me for Christmas. It has a tough looking yellow jacket on the front and he says it's the mascot from

where he went to school. Mom got me a red hoodie with a bulldog's face on it the next day and Uncle Chris thought that was really funny. "Momma, can you help me?"

"Well of course, sweetie. That's why I'm here," she answers and closes the cabinet door after putting the last bowl in with the others.

I try subduing a groan—*sweetie* is right up there with *big man*. "Just promise you won't get all mushy and cute about it." Momma just nods with a goofy smile, as if she knows what I'm about to ask her. Women's intuition plus Valentine's Day right around the corner equals me having no secrets or dignity. I sigh. "See Momma, there's this girl I wanna give a Valentine's present to, but I don't know what to get her."

Silence hung in the kitchen for a moment. Momma's ruby lips purse together and her eyes shimmer behind her Lulu Guinness cat eye glasses with the tortoise frames. Ugh, I can't believe I know that's what her glasses are called. "Oh Tommy, how precious!" she coos and moves in to give him a hug. "Aren't you just the—"

"Momma!" I step back and even duck to avoid her encompassing arms. "You promised!" Why did she have to make such a big deal out of this? I just *like-like* Brittany, it wasn't as if we're at holding-hands status or anything.

Momma stops and composes herself by running her hands with those black-painted fingernails down the front of her apron. I wonder if Brittany will ever paint her nails black. "You're right, son. I'm sorry."

"Ugh, forget it." I wave in disapproval as I walk away from my mother. "This is stupid." Maybe I should wait until Mom gets home. She's less nonsense with her blue jeans, tailored blouses, and straightforward answers. Mom is good at critical thinking—at least that's what my

teacher calls it—like when she helps me with math word problems. Figuring out what to get for Brittany feels like a math word problem.

Momma raises her finger at me with a determined scowl creasing her forehead. She always gets that crease when she thinks or talks about something she has a lot of passion for. “Tommy, love isn’t stupid. Your mom and I love each other. Do you think we’re stupid?”

I slouch at the knees and groan loudly again. “I never said I loved her mom!” I look over my shoulder at her with a wrinkle in my nose that Momma usually describes as round and adorable. Sometimes I feel like she’s comparing me to a stuffed animal. “That’s so gross!”

“You’re right, but *liking* someone is just as important. There’s nothing stupid about your feelings.” It was all Momma could do to look at me without getting all weepy and exclaiming how adorable the whole thing really was. I can see her holding it all inside. I watch her with wary eyes as she smiles at me. What is she up to? “Come on, Tommy, let’s talk about it.” With yet another groan I return to her side. I stand there scowling at her shins. “Does she know you like her?”

“I guess.”

“What’s her name?”

“Momma...”

“All right, all right, I understand. Well, how about a nice bracelet?”

“Too cheesy.”

“Flowers?”

“Stupid flowers die.”

“Candy?”

“Everybody already traded candy in class.”

I shot down all the obvious options, so now Momma had to think harder. I know I'm not making this easy, but Brittany is special and figuring out what to get for her is not easy. I was Momma's precious little man, though, so I knew she wouldn't let me down. "All right then," she finally said. "What does she like?"

"My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic." That was an easy question to answer, though I was reluctant to admit I even know such a television show exists or that I even know its dumb name. It's all ever Brittany talks about sometimes. Actually, it's sort of a secret that she still likes that show. Brittany is getting too old for the cartoon stuff like My Little Pony and Winx. She and her friends are getting into the shows with real kids like the ones on Disney and Nickelodeon.

Brittany confides in me about her love for cartoon ponies. I guess that must mean she really, really likes me. Maybe she even *like-likes* me. She feels compelled to tell me about each new Saturday morning episode when we meet for recess on Mondays. I suppose it's my own fault for being a willing listener. "She's got a lunchbox and a sweater with the pink horse on them." I know the character's name is Pinkie Pie, but I've diminished my young masculine image enough for one day.

Momma snaps her fingers. "Super! I'll swing by the store when I'm done with the kitchen and pick out a toy for her. How does that sound?"

I scuff my Iron Man sneakers against the kitchen floor. Brittany doesn't know anything about the Avengers and it's disappointing. "Um... I wanna pick one," I mumble while still staring at her shins. They're kind of shiny and smell like flowers.

Momma is unusually quiet now. It's hard to tell what she is thinking and it makes me nervous. Is she about to gush again and threaten me with a hug and bright red kiss? "But Tommy, I thought you didn't want to be seen around girl's toys?"

It's true. I detest all things pink and frilly and glittery with a passion, but I've endured them a ton of time before. For the sake of Brittany's happiness, I sit through lots of tea parties and participate in numerous adventures with her pony figurines during recess—down underneath the slide where no one can see us. So, if making Brittany happy on Valentine's Day means going to the store to buy one of those glassy-eyed pony dolls, I'm willing to do it.

I nod my head from side to side and shrug my shoulders up around my ears. "Well, yeah Momma, I do, but... You know..." I'm not going to tell her everything I told you. I'd never hear the end of it.

Momma merely smiled, which came as a surprise since this time I definitely expected her to swoop in for yet another hug and plant those ruby lips on my cheek. "Get your coat and I'll meet you at the car."

Admittedly, I still wish Mom was taking him to the toy store instead, but riding in the car with Momma has its perks. Mom sticks to the law a lot, so she insisted I still sit in the booster seat because I don't weigh 80 pounds yet. I weigh 78 pounds and I think that's close enough. I can promise you, none of the other boys in my class have to still ride in *their* booster car seats. Momma came to my rescue and argued that I wasn't 8 years old anymore and that I deserve to sit in the backseat like an adult. Without the booster. Of course, I would much prefer riding in the front seat like a grownup, but both of them still agree that won't happen until I'm at least 13 years old.

"You know, mom and I watched My Little Pony when we were young," Momma said, glancing back at me for just a second and then fixing her eyes on the road. "It wasn't this new version of course. I remember running home from the bus stop every Friday so I could catch the new episode. Maybe I should try watching this Friendship is Magic version."

I just hum, not all that interested in her childhood stories, but then ask, “Did Mom get you a pony toy for Valentine’s day too?” How freaky would that be.

She laughs. “Oh no, no, Mom and I didn’t know each other when we were little. We didn’t meet until high school. Your Mom wasn’t big on Valentine’s Day back then, but she made me a mix CD for our 3-month anniversary. She put all my favorite bands on it like Garbage, The Cranberries, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and K.D. Lang. I was even into Madonna, but only your Mom knew that about me. Listening to Madonna was my guilty pleasure.”

“Your what?”

Momma laughs again. “It’s something you like to do, but don’t want other people to know you like it because you’re afraid you’ll make fun of you.”

I think about this for a moment. So, My Little Pony is actually Brittany’s guilty pleasure. Weird. Then, I try deciding if I have a guilty pleasure or not. “Like how I still sleep with my Roo doll, but I tell you and Mom not to tell any of my friends?”

That earns me a much heartier laugh from Momma. I don’t think it was *that* funny. “Yes, Tommy, something like that. And don’t worry; that’s still our little secret.”

“Good.” I nod and then add, “If anyone asks, you bought this pony doll for me. I didn’t go to the store with you to pick it out, okay?”

Momma nods in return and then makes a zippering motion over her mouth. “My lips are sealed, honey.”

Upon walking into the toy store, I feel like vomiting. At the front is this giant Valentine’s Day display of girl’s toys with obnoxious red and pink cellophane heart balloons everywhere. It’s a girly holiday, so I guess that makes sense. Still, this is a lot to deal with just coming in through the front door. Let a guy brace himself first!

We found the shelf with the My Little Pony toys; those brightly colored girl horses made out of solid hard rubber and weird shiny thread manes. Pink Pie dominated the shelves, which I guess makes sense since she's pink and kinda has a thing for parties and holidays. The only thing Valentine's Day about her is the hearts stamped on her leg, though. Looks like Rarity just comes with a plastic purple heart jewel that clasps around her hoof. Fluttershy has a pink, heart shaped brush in the package with her. This all seems pretty... lame.

"Well isn't this convenient?" Momma chirped. I just roll my eyes and shove both hands into the front pocket of my hoodie. "All right son, go take a look and find one that you think she'll like."

At first, I don't move, but then a gentle push from her gets me going. I begrudgingly—wow, look at that, a vocabulary word I actually used—approach the display. Honestly, I can't decide. Pinkie Pie is her favorite, so I guess I should get her that one, but there's nothing to the toy. At least the other ones come with something. Rarity is her second favorite, so maybe I should get her that one. Brittany can probably wear the heart thing like a ring on her finger.

I notice some bigger packaging behind these ones and then I realize there are two characters sold together. Two dolls are better than one, right? I bring it out and see it's a Cheerilee and Big Macintosh pair. Instantly, he remember Brittany going on and on excitedly about the episode when these two characters fell in love—granted, it was due to a love potion—and that it was her favorite episode by far, "*because how could you not love romantic stuff like that?*" Upon further exploration I discover that the muzzles also contained magnets, and once close enough together, the ponies pull together in a kiss. "Momma, come look at this."

"Isn't that precious," Mom ma coos. "Is that the one you want, Tommy?"

I jiggle the box a little, which makes the dolls come apart, but then the magnets pull them back into a kiss. I feel my nose turn pink and I smile without even realizing it.

“This is the one I want.”

I make sure it's a quick purchase. Momma says she wants to go look at mobility learning toys for Freddy. Now, normally I would behave myself and let her go do her thing while I looked at the Ben 10 toys, but all this pink mushy stuff was too much to handle. I try not whining when I tell her I just want to get out of here, because neither Momma nor Mom responds well to whining. Seems she's in my corner today because she heads straight for the checkout with a smile on her face. She pays for the toys and even gets a Valentine's Day card for me to sign. I don't really want to, but she convinces me Brittany will appreciate it.

“I can't wait to tell your Mom about this,” Momma sings, practically skipping out of the store. “Our little boy is growing up. Oh Tommy, where does the time go? I need to take more pictures of you!”

“Momma!” I groan. I pull the hood up over my head this time and shove my hands into the front pocket for the third time that day. Why did *like-liking* someone have to be such a big deal? Momma is so embarrassing sometimes, but I guess she does come through for me when it counts. I just hope she doesn't want to be there when I give Brittany these dolls. She'll bring her camera with her and everything; I know it. How am I supposed to look cool in front of Brittany when Momma is taking pictures of us and cooing like she always does? I'll have to talk to Mom about it; she's good for helping me be more grown up.

## Plans Change

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Paula planned this moment for too long laboring over how to make it perfect.

*“What’s this photo, lolita? The garden is beautiful.”*

*“Isn’t it? That’s the garden at Jishoin Temple in Japan. It’s my dream to see the camellia tree there. I’ve only ever been able to grow the bushes. If I could just see that tree... Do you think you could take me there, Paula?”*

*“Lolita, I love you, but nothing can get me on a plane for one hour, let alone however long it takes flying to Japan.”*

But plans changed, because that camellia tree provided Paula the perfect opportunity for planning the proposal. What better place to pop the question than under the tree in the garden Amelia wanted to see more than anything else in the world? If her little *lolita* said yes, then the ten hours of gripping armrests, two fussy toddlers, spilled Ginger Ale and the tiny bag of broken pretzels would be well worth it.

After getting a cab to pull over and pick them up, Paula announced their destination to the driver and leaned back in the seat with her girlfriend, letting her shoulders slump and letting out a soft sigh. Paula stroked a thumb over the Amelia’s knuckles, smiling softly to herself as she stared out the window. The early spring sun warmed her bones and gave her confidence, as did the little red watercolor ladybugs painted on her girlfriend’s white yukata.

“How long have you wanted to see this tree?”



Amelia sighed as well, leaning her head on Paula’s shoulder. “When I was in high school, my aunt gave me a book of gardens all over the world,” she replied. “The instant I saw that tree,

I knew I had to see it. I ripped that photo right off the book and had it framed. Every single day, I looked at the photo and promised myself that one day I would see that camellia tree with its infinite blossoms. I've waited a long time, Paula. A really long time. I can't even tell you how happy I am to finally have the chance." Her small hands grasped Paula's hands, her chest tightened, and tingles ran up and down her skin.

As for Paula... Her arm and leg muscles clenched, her knees bounced every so often, and she took shaky inhales, but the Amelia simply assumed it was part of the withdrawal. She and Paula originally decided they would wait to visit Japan after Paula graduated from rehab, but their plans changed when Paula surprised her with two plane tickets laid neatly on her pillow one night. The older woman had only been in drug rehabilitation for 10 out of her designated 60 days, but she insisted that a getaway vacation with Amelia would be the best distraction from detoxification and withdrawal. Amelia remembered how her stomach erupted with butterflies and how she could barely read the tickets because her hands shook so much.

*"I thought you said you would never get on a plane?"*

*"I had a change of heart. You make it so hard to say no to you, lolita. Besides, how could I rob you of your dream just because I'm afraid of heights?"*

*"Oh my god, Paula, you're amazing! I love you!"*

Soon enough, in the near distance, she could see the grey and brown roof of the temple with its red accents—almost like a god itself rising up over the trees—and her heart picked up speed. Finally. Finally! The cab slowed to a stop, but Amelia jumped out while the wheels still moved, the wooden geta on her feet clacking spasmodically. Luckily, it wasn't the sort of temple with hundreds of steps leading up to the main grounds. The architecture was beautiful and had no

doubt been around for centuries, still standing as firmly and proudly and humbly as it did the day the priests laid the last stone, but Amelia couldn't appreciate that right now.

She stood on the smooth rocks laid out in front of the temple. First, Amelia looked left, but she could only see a high fence made of dark wood with hearty bamboo growing up from the other side. So then Amelia looked right, and just around the corner a bit, she saw an open brown gate. The ground on the other side was rich with freshly turned earth and lush moss. Large flat stones led the way and Amelia followed eagerly. This place smelled like fresh rain and made her heart sing. Everything was so green. Just up ahead, she saw the oval stone basin from the photo. That meant...

Amelia ran as quickly as the yukata allowed her, which meant she only managed quick little shuffles. Red and white blossoms appeared on the ground and Amelia slowed. She couldn't rush this moment. She had to let it unfold slowly. And slowing down was worth it, because when the camellia tree came into view, Amelia lost her breath. It must have towered fifteen feet high with branches that spread out twice that length. Its dark broad leaves allowed the flowers to stand out even more.

And Amelia just stopped—the soft rustling of the yukata and the quick, rhythmic clatter of the geta both silencing simultaneously—standing in the middle of all those fallen petals, and stared up in breathless awe of the gorgeous tree she'd waited so long to see.



As they stood in front of the temple, Paula slumped over a little to rest and stared up at the majestic shrine. The bitter, hearty scent of the incense in the large burner and the clean, gentle babble of the water in the purification fountain both put Paula's mind at ease. It always

amazed her that hardly any temples across Japan turned to ruin or collapsed—that even after all these years, locals and tourists alike kept the temples in use and so beautifully preserved.

She breathed deeply on the smell of incense again. She actually stopped shaking as the scent flooded her senses. Wow. Maybe she should consider getting a small burner at her office. The life of an engineering manager could be stressful at times and if her rehab was going to be a success, Paula needed all the relaxation tools she could get. Having her own closed-space office also meant the smell wouldn't bother anyone around her. Amelia would probably enjoy burning incense at home, too, being such the new age free spirit that she was.

Feeling a tug, Paula watched as the young blonde-haired woman twisted away from her and hurried off towards an open gate. “Ame—!” Paula stopped herself from calling obnoxiously after her girlfriend, deciding her shouting was more disrespectful than Amelia failing to observe the temple etiquette. Blinking slowly, she smiled a bit and instead walked up the few steps to the shrine as she reached for her wallet. Paula would just observe for the both of them.

Even as she took the time watching the locals, Paula couldn't fight the lump in her throat or the feeling of having a flashing red arrow pointing at her that read *TOURIST*. It had been a few years since Paula felt so awkward even in her own skin—like when her mother dressed her in suits and ties for picture day—so she didn't welcome the feeling now. Once the purification fountain was devoid of any other visitors, the woman approached and lifted the ladle with its smooth wooden handle into her large hand. After holding the ladle under the dragon's mouth so it could fill with water, she washed both hands one at a time and then rinsed her mouth. When no one gasped, yelled, or threw her out of the temple, Paula felt assured she'd shown proper respect.

She slipped out several pieces of yen—conveniently converted at the airport when they went through customs—and smoothed them out against the well of the offering box. After she

dropped the money inside, she looked up and then raised both hands, taking hold of the large, thick rope hanging from a large bell. She tugged on it just to make it ring out once nice and loud before letting go, signaling to Kami that she was here and needed him to listen. Taking a single step back, she brought her hands together in front of herself. With her dark eyes falling closed, she took a bow—and then a second.

*Clap, clap.*

Paula spoke her wish in mind only; not even her lips moved. *Please, if she could just say yes. I want more time with her; all the time in the world. I want us to grow old and grey together. I'm so lucky to have found someone like her. I'm lucky she loves me so much despite my transformation and all the struggles that came with it. I probably don't deserve her, but there's no way I can let her go now. So if you could just inspire her to say yes...* When Paula finished, she bowed once again and stood. Smiling, she gazed up at the bronze bell as it swung slowly from the red braided rope, and then she turned around hurrying after Amelia.

The girl's pause of admiration gave Paula a chance to catch up. Amelia wasn't hard to spot in the middle of the dark, lush garden since the white yukata made her stand out like a star in the middle of a night sky. Paula smiled a little more to herself as she quietly strode after her, over the stone steps and small red bridge leading over to the blossoming, mighty tree that Amelia waited so long to see.

“Lolita...”



Amelia didn't reply. She was too lost in the tree to hear her tall lover's shoes thumping over the bridge or even Paula's quaint baritone voice. There was a moment when Amelia even forgot to breathe. Blue eyes roamed over every velvety petal and every glossy leaf and every

creeping groove in every branch. Amelia spotted a little worm spinning its fragile cocoon and prayed the tree would keep it safe until it emerged as a butterfly, colored with white and red just like the flowers. The girl looked down at one of those flowers upon the ground. A child that grew too old and the mother setting it free. Amelia picked up the flower in her hands, cupping it gently so none of the petals fell loose. It was so beautiful. Even on its own, this one fallen blossom was radiant and gorgeous and so innocent. Amelia drew the flower close and inhaled on the sweet perfume that hadn't quite faded yet.

*"How do you stand living in this tiny apartment, lolita?"*

*"Well, I got too old to live at home anymore, and my mom said it was time for me to be a big girl and move out. This is all I've been able to afford so far."*

*"You don't sound particularly thrilled to be on your own."*

*"I don't know... I guess I just don't see what's so wrong about staying at home. If parents and children love each other, then why not stay together? I don't think I could ever kick my kids out, not until they left on their own anyway."*

*"I guess this would be a good time to ask if you'll move in with me then?"*

*"Oh, Paula, really?!"*

*"Of course, lolita. If we love each other, then why not stay together, hm?"*

Slowly, with great respect, Amelia approached the tree. Step by step, she drew closer until she touched her forehead against the trunk, not even minding the rough bark pressing against her skin. She whispered to the tree, perhaps telling it a secret or sharing a story or even asking a favor. It wasn't unusual to see Amelia whispering to plants, though. Those who knew her said she'd have made the perfect flower child back in the 1960s. Amelia was the kind of girl who loved everyone and everything, putting the needs of people, animals, and plants before her

own. What a coincidence, though, that both she and Paula sent up a prayer today. Perhaps the spiritual energy of the place inspired both of them.

“I always used to think,” Amelia whispered gently, “that I would marry Gene. We took biology together in high school. I thought he was the one, and I had all these plans for moving in together and marriage and kids, but... Plans change, don’t they?” She giggled a little. “And then Paula came into my life. I never thought I’d fall in love like this, but it’s the inside of the person you fall in love with, not the outside. Isn’t that right? I know you’re just a tree, but if you could do me one favor...” Amelia paused and breathed deeply on the musky wood. “If you tell me your secret to being a good mother, I’d be so grateful. I want a family with Paula. I want us to live long lives together. I want us to have kids who will make us feel so tired and make us feel so happy. And if there’s one more thing you could do... Give Paula courage, so that she’ll give me kids of her own.”

Done with her wish, Amelia knelt down, laying the flower child against its mother tree with great care. Standing up again, a single slender hand touched the dark-colored bark as blue eyes looked up into the branches once more. Just admiring. Putting every detail to memory.



Paula didn’t dare interfere.

After calling out to her lover once, she left it at that. Whether or not Amelia heard her didn’t matter right now; this moment the girl presently had with the tree, however, did matter. Paula watched quietly as she remained standing near the end of the small bridge, smiling to herself as her arms loosely crossed in front of her chest.

It was odd to watch... The way Amelia so carefully tread on the dirt and grass around the tree or the way she so delicately lifted up a fallen flower... She saw Amelia’s lips moving against

the tree, but she couldn't hear a single word. Paula was of course curious as to what her beloved had to say to a tree, but this was a very private moment and she wouldn't intrude. Besides, she could use these few moments for gathering courage.

So, Paula just watched with that small smile on her face, shivering a little from time to time. Whether she shivered from nerves or withdrawals was difficult to tell. Paula wasn't a tall, handsome woman by accident. She went by Howard only five years ago. Paula's plan always involved hormone replacement therapy followed by sex reassignment surgery. Before turning 35, she would make the official transition from Howard to Paula. Then she met Amelia and those plans changed. It'd been a whirlwind romance and Amelia talked about children since the beginning.

Paula couldn't pass on the opportunity to give her beloved the children she wanted so badly. Children that would be equal parts Amelia and equal parts Paula. So her plans changed, as plans often do. Breast augmentation came first, but she put the vaginoplasty on hold. Without the vaginoplasty, there wasn't much point in hormone therapy, especially with the risk of infertility, but the mild dosage helped Paula feel more comfortable in her skin. It helped keep her beard away too, though she was aware of the itch along her jaw and chin that always came with creeping stubble.

Finally, after a few long minutes, Amelia turned and looked at her. The blonde girl smiled, looked down at the flower she placed beside the tree, and then made her way back to Paula. "She's exquisite, isn't she?" Amelia asked, glancing back over her shoulder at the tree. Her eyes were a little misty and both cheeks were rather rosy. "She's been here a long time, Paula. She's had many beautiful daughters, and she'll have so many more. She's seen a lot, heard a lot. I... I want to be more like her, Paula. She's so wise. I know she is. It makes her a good

mother. I'm not very wise, Paula. What would I pass on to my daughter? I haven't seen or heard anything. How can I have flowers if I'm not even an exquisite tree, yet?"

"Lolita..."

Lifting a hand, Paula stepped in a bit more closely to her young girlfriend and brushed a few of those loose strands behind one of Amelia's ears. She still smiled softly and gently. "Just because you haven't seen many years or gone through many experiences doesn't make you any less wise than her... As long as your mind remains open, you will only become wiser. I'm already 34 years old and I still learn something new almost every day."

The brown-haired woman took a moment or two and then sighed out softly, lowering her gaze half-way as she continued staring down at her beautiful lolita. With such a delicate, faint tint of pink dusting over the girl's cheeks, it made Amelia look even lovelier, coupled with the fetching white yukata she wore.

"A tree is still a tree, even when it is a sapling, right? A tree is always growing—even when they are as large as she is. She's still learning, isn't she? And so, how is it that she is any different than you?"

"I guess we're not so different," Amelia admittedly shyly. "She's just further along than me, that's all. Even so..." Slender fingers laced together a tad nervously and blue eyes glanced upward from beneath dark lashes. "Do you think I'm ready to have flowers, Paula? Because... Because I think I want flowers. I feel like I'm ready for flowers. I know I *talk* a lot about flowers, but now I really think I'm ready to *have* flowers."

Paula just stared down at Amelia with a soft smile before she stepped in a little closer, arms uncrossing, which allowed her hands to delicately take hold of Amelia's elbows. "I think... you're more than ready for flowers, lolita. But... I don't think that you should have all of these

flowers by yourself. I think you need someone to help grow those flowers. You would be great with flowers. I'm sure of it. If you could stick with me after the surgery and my addiction to pain killers, you won't have any problems growing flowers."

Pursing her lips together for a moment, Paula stared down between them as she tried collecting her thoughts in order to form them into appropriate words. She swallowed a trembling lump in her throat, wondering if maybe it was her wildly beating heart trying to escape. "And... I know that I don't know a lot about flowers but—I can't think of anyone else in this world more suited to help you... than me. After all, it's the least I can do for you, lolita, after all you've done for me.

"Sometimes... I can't believe you're still here. The first time I asked you to call me Paula instead of Howard, you didn't even bat an eye." She laughed and shook her head. "You said it so naturally, too. That was the very first time someone didn't look at me as if I was crazy or confused. You accepted it so easily." Paula laughed again, only it came out deeper this time, but she didn't mind. "When I got my breasts, you took me bra shopping. Who does that, lolita? How is someone so perfectly accepting and understanding? I've never had that before. I feel spoiled."

Paula inhaled a bit deeply before she let go of the girl's elbows, wiped her damp palms on the thighs of her pants, and then took a step back. Dark eyes lifted to stare back at the tender blue hues in front of her. With another smile, she decided to just go in for it; why bother waiting any longer? They were both so caught up in the moment, despite all of the metaphors and analogies.

One hand slipped past her coat and reached down into her right front pocket. As soon as her long, tan fingers wrapped around a small, black velvet box, she withdrew her palm and within the same motion, slowly lowered herself down to a single knee on the middle of the

bridge. As soon as she settled there, her fingers pulled open the box revealing the glistening five carat diamond ring, princess cut, with a gold platinum band and another two carats worth of diamonds to either side.

“Amelia Sherikov... I would be the most honored woman, if you accepted my proposal of starting a garden with me and of marriage—s-so will...” Paula nodded, her dark eyes softening as she gazed up at the girl who stood tall above her for once, “...Will you marry me?”



When Paula chuckled and held her elbows like that, Amelia wasn't surprised or offended. Amelia wasn't very surprised when Paula insisted she was ready for flowers. Paula had been saying for a while that Amelia should have a flower. And of course, Amelia would need someone with whom to grow the flower. That's how flowers worked! “I wouldn't want help from anyone else,” Amelia insisted with a smile. Paula was being so funny.

Amelia found it a little curious when Paula stepped back like that. Something just felt different in the way her lover moved today. Paula's face conveyed a kind of nervousness the girl never saw before, and she'd seen Paula nervous about a lot of things. Were all those nerves over flowers? Surely not. Well maybe, but... “Paula, I didn't do anything special. Being Howard or Paula doesn't change who you are as a person. I didn't fall in love with your name. I fell in with *you!* I suppose society is still uncomfortable with idea of someone who...” She trailed off when Paula got down on one knee.

Oh what was happening?

Why was Paula down on her knee like that? Why was Paula reaching into her pocket like that? What could possibly be in that box?

Oh!

Oh, this was happening!

The ring was just at flashy and loud and spoiled as Amelia. So it suited her perfectly. But when did Paula get this?! Where did all this come from? Shaking hands covered a mouth that was slightly agape. All those times Amelia imagined her proposal, it was never like this. Amelia never thought she'd be so in love with a woman that was so gorgeous and so kind and so patient and so... everything. Amelia never thought she'd be in love with a woman that was so in love with her right back.

So as Paula knelt there, holding up that spectacular ring, offering a garden and a life together, waiting for Amelia to say something, anything, Amelia had to take a moment. Because it was just so perfect. The garden looked a little greener, the flowers smelled a little sweeter, and the sun shone a little warmer. At first it was only a whisper, too silent to hear, but then the word got louder until Amelia was just laughing and shouting with tears in her eyes that, “Yes! Yes, Paula! Yes, I will marry you! Yes!”



Paula wasn't even sure if she was breathing anymore when the first “Yes!” reached her ears. It was as if her whole world just came to a beautiful but screeching halt, pausing in the moment between them as the tears rose in Amelia's sweet eyes, and she laughed and cried out. At first, the youth's constant barrage of yeses didn't register; but luckily enough for Amelia, her words finally managed through to the tall woman's ears, and Paula smiled a bit more brightly and widely.

With another deep laugh, she felt her own eyes mist up for a moment—but she wouldn't cry. There was nothing to cry about, even in this overly joyous moment. Laughing in less of a

baritone now, she pulled the ring from out of the box, set the box into her pocket, and then reached out to take her lover's left hand.

Pulling the offered hand close, she kissed over the girl's knuckles delicately as she slipped the ring slowly onto Amelia's ring finger. She glanced up and saw Amelia biting her lip. The ring caught the light just right, casting little rainbows across the youthful girl's face. Chuckling a little to herself, it took Paula another moment or two before she shakily lifted herself back up on her feet, still holding Amelia's hand within her own.

Had Amelia really just accepted? Had she really... Even if her part of the garden might be a little messy and dysfunctional and their flowers might not grow right for a while—had Amelia still accepted and told her yes?

Blue eyes looked up at her and Paula grinned at Amelia's excited inhale. "I'll be Amelia Schwartz!" she exclaimed, clearly over the moon. Amelia threw her arms around Paula's shoulder and pressed their lips together in one of the happiest, most passionate kisses they'd shared so far. Taking a step back, Paula was quick to open her arms a bit wider in order to wrap around her young lover much more securely when Amelia leaned into her. She pulled Amelia up close into her chest, dark brown eyes falling shut as she felt glossy lips pressed up to her own nude pair; with a soft chuckle, she returned it with every ounce of love and passion that coursed through her. "Oh Paula..." Amelia sighed after pulling back to breathe. "Oh Paula, I'm so happy. I am. I truly am. My heart is swelling up I'm so happy!"

"A-Amelia..." she responded with a soft breath or two, leaning her head down so that their foreheads touched. Paula slowly leaned the youth back down so that her feet touched the wooden, red-painted bridge again. "I-I'm glad... I'm so very glad! H-Heh, don't let your heart

swell up too much—you're not even my wife yet! I can't have you dying on me so soon! We're supposed to get old together!"

The blonde youth smiled. "Come on, Paula, you know I'm not going anywhere. We *will* grow old together. We'll sit together in a pair of rocking chairs, a cup of tea on the table between us, you with a goldfish bowl in your lap and me with a flowerpot and we'll hold hands until we fall asleep watching the evening news."

Just hearing Paula say "wife" sent an excited shiver up Amelia's spine. That's right. That's right! She'd be Paula's wife! And Paula would be her wife. His wife. It sounded so... good.

"I have to call everyone and tell them! Ahh!"

Chuckling again, Paula nodded as she kissed her young love just once more as she held her close again. She nuzzled the top of Amelia's head and smiled widely, closing her eyes. "That can wait, lolita... We came all this way to see your garden. Let's take a few more minutes to share it with each other."

Amelia sighed with a smile and nodded. She took Paula's hand, leading the woman across the bridge towards the tree. She knelt down a little picking up one of the flowers and put it in Paula's empty hand. "Paula, when we go back home, can I have a camellia tree in the backyard?"

"You can have all the camellia trees you want, lolita," Paula replied, looking down and turning her hand a little so she could hold the flower in her broad palm. It wasn't so bad when plans changed. At least, not when a garden was involved.

## Blanket Hog

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“You always do this.” Her voice broke over the crickets and the tree frogs singing outside. Her body slumped forward, arms crossed over her knees that she pulled close to her chest. A silver light from the window outlined her figure, showing her curled and defeated posture.

He pressed his ankles together. The pressure made his skin itch inside the blue wool socks. He tried wrapping himself deeper inside the blankets, but his wife let out an intentionally loud sigh. “It’s 4:00 in the morning. What could I have possibly done?”

She arched her shoulders. “Every night.” Her fingernails dug out little crescent shapes in her pale, freckled skin. “You leave me out in the cold. Literally.”

“Claire...”

“No. Okay? Don’t ‘*Claire*’ me, Russell.” She turned her head sharply enough to make her short curls bounce. She spent nearly two hours at the hair dresser over the weekend getting her naturally copper red hair cut into a short curly bob, but her husband had yet to pay her a single compliment. The husband she slept with every night, but like brothers on a hotel bed, they each laid on their respective edges. “I’m tired of having to get in the fetal position just to keep my toes from going numb.”

He kept his eyes closed. Maybe if he didn’t open them, the conversation would end sooner. “Well, honey, maybe if you didn’t sleep in a short satin nightgown with lace straps in the middle of February, you wouldn’t be so cold.”

Her hand made a loud *poof!* sound when she slammed it onto the bed. “Oh, so now I’m not supposed to wear the present you gave me for Christmas?”

His hand clenched around the edge of the blanket. “You mean the nightgown you exchanged the very next day?” His wife didn’t exchange it for a completely different one, but it was obvious the first time when she came to bed wearing a green nightgown instead of the rose-colored one he originally bought.

“You *know* I don’t like pink, Russell. No self-respecting redhead should wear pink!”

“I seem to recall Princess Ariel pulling it off really well. And, maybe I think you look pretty in pink.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh ha, ha, ha.”

He sighed. “I wasn’t making a joke. Besides, if you’re so cold, then why don’t you just get another blanket? There’re like, ten in the linen closet.”

“You have five on your side of the bed! Five! *Five!* It’s like you’re building yourself some kind of cocoon!” She grabbed a fistful of the top blanket and tugged. “Are you making a cocoon, Russell? Are you going to emerge tomorrow morning as a better husband?”

He finally sat up, revealing black tussled hair and ice blue eyes that didn’t match his tan complexion. “Wow. Really? Is that what you really wanted to say, Claire? Because if you’re gonna say *that*, then I have a couple things to say to you.”

She crossed her arms over her small chest. “Oh, like *what?*”

“I may be a blanket hog, but there are some things around here that you could do better.”

“What? Were my pork chops too dry again?”

He turned his chin up a little. “Maybe they were.”

Her jaw dropped. “You!”

“And how about this? You know how you’re always bitching about me not putting the toilet seat down? Would it kill you to leave it *up* after you’re done since I just might come along behind you at some point? It’s called give and take, Claire.”

She rolled her eyes. “All I see is you *taking* all the blankets and *giving* me pneumonia.”

He sighed and rubbed a chapped palm over his face. “Is this really what you want to fight about? Blankets and pork chops and toilet seats?”

“Maybe it is.”

“Well, if having the toilet seat down is *such a priority* for you, then maybe you should go live with Susan again.”

“And there it is!” She threw her hands in the air.

He blinked. “What? There what is?”

She pointed a pearl-painted finger at him. “The root of your blanket-hogging resentment towards me!”

“How could I *not* resent you a little bit, Claire? You left me for a woman!”

She groaned. “I didn’t *leave* you, Russell. It was an experimental separation, and I came back, didn’t I? I was going through a bi-curious phase and you said you were alright with it!”

“I lied, Claire!” His nostrils flared. “I lied! Do you have any idea what it was like for me in the office? When the guys found out, I never heard the end of it! They *still* make jokes in the break room, and they actually wait until I’m around to hear them. Do you get that, Claire? Not behind my back. *To my face.*”

She groaned. “That’s what HR is there for, Russell. Why do you put up with their teasing?”

“‘Teasing’ is putting it mildly, Claire. But maybe I wouldn’t have to put up with their harassment shit if I didn’t have a latent bi-sexual for a wife.”

“Oh my God, Russell, I’m pansexual, not bi-sexual!”

“You sleep with men and you sleep with women,” he said, raising up one hand and then the other. “Sounds pretty *bi* to me, Claire. Not to mention you just got done saying you were bi-curious.”

“One leads to the other,” she snapped. “And it goes deeper than that, Russell! Why can’t you be more open minded?! Maybe you should try it some time! Loving someone for who they are instead of just what’s between their legs is actually freeing and gratifying.”

“I just don’t understand why you couldn’t have just kept all of this to yourself, Claire.”

“The therapist said it was important for me to explore my options!”

“Oh, you mean that man-hating dyke *you* chose so that she’d *always* take *your* side?”

“**Russell!**”

“Maybe you should go date *her* next,” he mumbled.

“Are you seriously sulking right now? Quit acting like a child.”

“I’m allowed to have feelings, Claire. I let you go on your lesbian self-discovery field trip. The least you could do it let me express myself.”

“Oh, *now* you have feelings?”

“Stop it, Claire.” His voice dropped.

“Maybe if you showed your feelings more often, I wouldn’t have felt the need to find emotional fulfillment from another person. Did you ever think of that?”

“If you weren’t such a frigid bitch...”

“I wouldn’t be so frigid if you *shared the blankets*, Russell!”

“Are you seriously going back to that? Forget about the damn blankets, Claire! This isn’t about the blankets. It can’t *possibly* be about blankets. I know there’s something else!”

“Russell...”

“What else, Claire? There *is* something else you want to talk about.”

She scoffed and turned her head away. “What, like blankets are suddenly a metaphor for something?”

He tilted his own head a bit to one side. “Are they?”

“Maybe you should ask my dyke therapist,” she grumbled defensively.

He released the tension in his posture. “I’m asking *you*.”

“I don’t... know...”

“Claire.”

She squeezed her eyes shut. “I don’t know!”

“Claire.”

“Maybe you don’t...” She opened her eyes, but she looked out the window instead of at her husband. “I dunno... Mnh...”

He leaned forward. “Don’t what?”

“I don’t feel like you’ve been there—”

“I’m neglecting you?” He frowned. “You really meant it about me not showing my feelings towards you enough?”

“That’s not what I said!” Her fingernails made crescent moon shapes in her skin again.

“Well it sure sounds that way.”

“I wasn’t going to say ‘neglect.’ Maybe I was going to say distant.”

“Distant.”

“Like maybe you aren’t affectionate anymore.”

“Affectionate.”

“You want a cracker? Jesus, Russell...”

He clenched his teeth, but then slowly exhaled through his nose. “I’m just trying to understand, Claire. My parents were never very affectionate with each other. Maybe that’s why... Can’t imitate what you weren’t taught, right?”

“You were plenty affectionate when we first met, Russell. You cried when you recited the wedding vows that you wrote. You used to kiss me every morning and every night. Now I’m lucky if I get a peck on the cheek when you leave for work.”

“I didn’t notice.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“I’m sorry, Claire. What do you want me to say? Did you really think we were going to act like newlyweds for the rest of our lives?”

“You don’t even say ‘I love you’ anymore, Russell. But I still came back. Do you even realize that? You’re so upset that I lived with Susan for a few months, but you never seem relieved or grateful that I chose to stay married to you. That I still love you and want to be your wife. Tell me that means something to you.”

“I just can’t believe you’re insisting it’s my fault you wanted to try being lesbian in the first place.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “Pansexual, Russell. Not lesbian. Not bi-sexual. Pansexual.”

“Are you sure this isn’t some kind of... quarter-life crisis?”

“*Excuse me?*”

“I’m just saying. Or... Maybe you’re still reacting to—”

“Don’t.”

“We should talk about this. You never brought it up to the therapist either. Look, it was devastating when we lost the ba—”

“Don’t say it, Russell.”

“You see, Claire? This whole shutting me down thing is why I withdrew. We can’t just share the good feelings with each other. We have to share the unhappy ones too.”

“My pansexuality isn’t a hysterical response to the miscarriage. That’s stupid.”

“I didn’t say that, Claire. I’m not going to say I get this change you went through, or that I even like it, but even if it’s true and you like men and women... I still think you’re hiding behind it so you don’t have to face me. I was sad, Claire. I was heartbroken. I do love you, but you wouldn’t even grieve with me. How am I supposed to feel after that?”

“So all of this is my fault?”

“Claire, you’re not listening to me”

“Actually, forget it. Never mind. Let’s just go back to sleep.”

“Claire.”

“...”

“Claire...”

“...”

“Here, you look cold. Better?”

“Thanks, Russell.”

## Tread on Me

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*They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.* Mark 16:18

~

The apartment was never something of which Elliott felt particularly proud. One wall cut the space straight down the middle. On one side of the wall was the bedroom—a single mattress on the floor with two pillows and a sheet, and a lamp without a shade on the floor next to the mattress—and the bathroom—a rickety toilet, sink, and box shower with a rusty head. On the other side of the wall was the kitchen—a loudly humming fridge, stove with one working burner, and suspended cabinet with crooked doors—and the living room—a brown sunken sofa, a 19-inch television from the thrift store, another lamp without a shade, and a table made from a wire spool they lifted from a construction yard.

It was almost like a metaphor for their lives right now. Minimal, spare, crappy, dirty, and sort of broken. There was just enough room for the two of them, which was perfect because they weren't in the habit of inviting people into the apartment, let alone inviting other people into their lives. Elliott was willing to expand his horizons, but Will was still like a baby in the big new world, so Elliott became guarded for the both of them. The small, shitty apartment gave them an excuse to keep people at an arm's length, but of course, he wanted better for the both of them.

Elliott was convinced helping Will would be easier and less stressful if they didn't have to do their laundry with starchy detergent and quarters at the Laundromat a few blocks up the street, or if they didn't eat fast-food almost every night because cooking a real meal was simply

out of the question in their joke of a kitchen. Being the 21-year-old senior customer service representative at Office Depot put a roof over their head and food on the table, but it didn't put them above the poverty line. Especially when everything in New York City was so expensive. Will deserved—*needed*—better than the poverty line. If not for the fact that he just turned 18 last year, he'd still be living under the roof of those crazy West Virginia snake handlers.

Elliott tried his best being tolerant of religions and lifestyles different from his own. He'd be one heck of a hypocrite if he didn't. After all, how could he ask the world to accept his homosexuality if he didn't accept the world's many different -isms? At the same time, Will's uncle took things a little too far with all the righteous thunder permitted to him by the Book of Mark. Or so the man claimed. Will might have lived under a roof with a bunch of Appalachian enthusiasts, but at least it was a roof with central heating and cooling and a fully stocked pantry.

But Elliott knew none of the air conditioners and stocked pantries in the world could make you feel accepted by a family that didn't know the meaning of the word bigender, and who immediately labeled you a faggot when you tried telling them you were androsexual. Weren't Christians supposed to be peaceful, tolerant, and merciful? *Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.*

Who decided that force feeding your nephew strychnine from the ages of 13–17 would cure him of his “devils”? So in the long run, maybe a crappy small television and rickety toilet weren't so bad when it meant you weren't constantly judged by the people who were supposed to love you.

“Babe, I'm home!” Sporting a pair of faded jeans, grey sneakers, and a CHVRCHES t-shirt, Elliott returned home after a trip to the corner convenience store. He threw his keys on the

table before setting the plastic bag down with a bit more care. Nothing worse than broken cinnamon Pop-Tarts. “Sorry it took so long. Some old woman paid with a check, so they had to do that whole call a manager to check her I.D. thing and have her sign like, three different forms or something. Checks shouldn’t even be a thing anymore, right?” He took out the box of Pop-Tarts and the quart of milk, putting them in the unhinged cabinet and groaning fridge respectively.

“Hey, so I looked at the calendar this morning. Today makes one year since we moved in together! Isn’t that awesome?” Elliott scratched his chin and realized both his hair and beard were getting a little too shaggy. “We should make this our anniversary, celebrate when we started fresh and it was just us, you know?” Moving into the living room, he found a small box on the wooden wire spool table. The box looked like something meant for transporting animals with evenly-spaced air holes around the top. He picked it up and glanced at the return address.

The Lord Jesus Holiness Gospel Tabernacle.

Elliott felt his tongue turn into sandpaper. “...Will?”

“*Ellll-ioooott...*” Will’s voice sang out from behind the bedroom door.

He dropped the box and ran to the door. Elliott grabbed the brass doorknob with spots of tarnish that made the knob look as ill as he suddenly felt. “Will, open the door.”

“No, you’ll be so disappointed in me,” Will replied, voice whining a bit.

Pressing his ear against the unfinished wood, Elliott heard the faint, yet distinct sound of slithering and hissing. “Oh my god, Will, you didn’t!” He gripped the knob so hard his knuckles turned white. “Will, open the door! Open the fucking door!”

Will laughed. “Hey now... Hey now, what is it boy, all the things troubling you?”

Elliott groaned. He wasn't unaccustomed to this behavior. In high school, it wasn't rare for him to find Will wandering around in the family barn after a service, delusional and high from the neurotoxins in the cobra venom—the family's serpent of choice for testing their faith. "What's troubling me?!" He slammed his hand on the door, focusing hard on the dark hairs all across the back of his palm in an effort to keep his anger in check. "I go out for Pop-Tarts and milk, gone for just twenty minutes, and I come home to find you tripping on a snake bite! Damn it, Will! This was supposed to be your fresh start!"

"Don't yell at me!" the younger man whined.

Elliott's blunt fingernails scraped against the wood and his nostrils flared a few times. "Open the door, Will!"

"I'm just the selfish little faggot whore, right? That's what everyone says!" There came the sound of an arm or leg thumping against the bare floor. "You think it too!"

"Will, babe, no... That's your family talking. You know what an amazing person I think you are." Mentioning Will's family made Elliott return to the box. He turned it upside down and gave it a shake, seeing if a letter might fall out. He checked under the sofa and table too. Nothing. "Will, did you ask your family to send you the snake, or did they just send it on their own?" Elliott wouldn't be surprised at all if those people were still trying to fix their kin from practically three states away.

Only silence reigned in the bedroom for a few seconds, and then Will spoke. "...It just showed up." He sounded so miserable and defeated, like his vocal cords were too heavy to use. "I guess I took it as a sign... I just make life so much more difficult for the both of us. Sure, getting my GED was easy since I only missed my junior and senior years, but now..."

“Now you’re enrolled in the New York School of Interior Design,” Elliott insisted. He remembered their junior year in high school when Will didn’t show up for the first day of school. He was surprised because they hung out all summer together skinny dipping, hiking and skateboarding, but Will never said anything about his family pulling him from school come fall. Elliott wondered if it was legal for his parents to take him out of school so he could learn the family practice instead. “C’mon, Will, don’t you know how amazing it is that you even bothered getting a GED *and* that you got into a college? Plenty of other people who never finished high school can’t say that about themselves.”

Will moaned again, but the sound was more out of self-loathing than sickness. Elliott supposed the only grace that came from an entire adolescence of handling snakes and ingesting pesticides was that at least Will built up immunity to such toxins, which meant hopefully he wouldn’t die before Elliott got to him. Still, the pain must be excruciating. “But it’s not fair to you, Ell. My school’s so *expensive* and now we’re up to our noses in student debt after just two semesters and you have to work a sucky job just to make ends meet... And *you* should be the one in school, Elliott. You wanted to *be something*.”

That was true. Elliott wouldn’t deny he had dreams of becoming an architectural engineer. He fantasized about them as a power couple with himself designing the buildings to look sleek on the outside and Will designing the buildings to look trendy on the inside. He simply decided that after everything Will went through in his life, he deserved to achieve his dream first. “Babe, you can’t think about it like that. School and careers take time. For everyone. I’ll get my turn, so you shouldn’t worry about it.”

“It’s just so *haaaaard*, Elliott,” whined Will.

Elliott sighed. “Life is hard for everyone, babe. Growing up is awkward. School is challenging. Work isn’t always fun. You can’t let it get to you like this, though. We can talk about it, make plans, organize our time better... Let me in and we can start right now.” He didn’t get a verbal response. Instead, Elliott heard his boyfriend slap his hand a number of times against the floor. What was Will doing? That’s when he heard an aggravated hiss and a swift snap, followed by a sharp cry. “Will? Will?!”

This time, Elliott didn’t wait for a response, nor did he try fighting with the door. He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and immediately dialed 911. “Y-Yes, my name is Elliott Booth, I live at... at 530 East 159<sup>th</sup> Street #39 in the Bronx. My boyfriend, Will... Will Higgins, he’s got a snake bite. M-Maybe two. I-I-I don’t know. I can’t get to him.” Elliott slammed his hand against the wall when the dispatcher said it might take 20–40 minutes because there was construction en route to the apartment. He threatened to take Will to the hospital himself, but she advised against moving Will since the toxins would only spread that much faster.

He would just have to wait.

Just as he hung up the phone, Elliott heard a strangled noise from the bedroom. “Will! Babe! Babe, talk to me!” he pleaded while shaking at the doorknob again and making it rattle. What he wouldn’t give for a toolbox right now. The property owner was responsible for any repairs in the apartment, so it never occurred to the boys they should have their own set of tools.

“Oh God... Elliott, Elliott... All the little maggots in the mattress, they got in my head! Elliott, they got in my head! What do I do?!”

There weren’t any maggots in the mattress. They didn’t even have bedbugs. “Babe, you gotta open the door. I can’t help you if you don’t open the door!” Shit, this was bad. The second bite finally pushed him over the edge. Will’s family must have sent a cobra. They believed the

hallucinations from the neurotoxins were visions from God. Nothing about maggots in your head could possibly be a holy divination.

“The maggots are feeding on my sin! They’re gonna learn what I am! They’ll know and they’ll tell! They’ll tell everyone!”

Elliott started throwing himself against the door. How did such a shitty, rundown apartment have such sturdy doors?! He could hear Will banging his head against the floor in an attempt to dispel the imaginary parasites. “There’s nothing wrong with people knowing what you are, Will! You’re going to a design school in New York City. You *must* have met plenty of people like you by now! There’s nothing wrong with them and there’s nothing wrong with you! So what if you like wearing pumps, skirts, and neckties together? So what if you wear mini shorts, sports jerseys, and mascara? How you dress isn’t the only thing about you that matters. It’s who you are as a *person*.”

“I wore my favorite varnish and fear killers to my project presentation last week,” Will said, musing on the idea of his new classmates accepting him. “No one looked at me funny or anything. I haven’t done that since Sophomore year, remember?”

Elliott stopped thrusting his shoulder into the door and leaned his forehead against it instead. “Yeah, I remember.” Varnish was Will’s word for lipstick, and his fear killers were a pair of over the knee boots and short skirt. Will wore them to give him confidence. Actually, Will turned to his female identity anytime he felt insecure about something. Like during finals week their Sophomore year in high school. Everyone made such a big deal out of it and blew it way out of proportion. The principal even made Will go home and change his clothes, not knowing he’d hidden the clothes from his parents and changed in the bathroom at school that morning.

“After presentations ended, this girl came up to me and asked if I wanted to join the alliance group. I... An alliance group. Have you ever heard of something like that, Ell?” Will laughed, still sounding a little gargled, but at least it sounded like he stopped banging his head on the floor. “It’s like a club for people who are different. Different like me. Can you believe it?”

“That’s great, though!” Elliott put both hands on the door and leaned close against it, pressing his whole body against the wood. “Didn’t I tell you that you’d meet people like you? The city is different from back home. We’re around people who get us now, babe. It doesn’t have to be so hard anymore. So...” His right hand curled into a fist. “So why did you do this?”

Will made a whining noise. “An alliance group doesn’t get rid of the debt, Ell.”

“Everyone has debt, Will. It’s not the end of the world.”

“Joining the alliance doesn’t mean we’ll have a better apartment or that you’ll have a better job.”

“It’s not supposed to mean those things, Will. Listen, I know being away from home and living on our own two feet is scary. I’m scared too sometimes, but it’s not impossible. You have to go through the bad parts to get to the good parts. The... The prince has to fight and slay the dragon before he can have a kiss from the princess. I know that sounds dumb, but it’s true. One day we’ll have our dream jobs and our dream home and we won’t worry about money, but until then... the alliance group is the first step towards a good thing.

“They aren’t going to judge you for wearing maxi dresses one day and baggy sports apparel the next. They won’t judge you for wearing lipstick and a tie at the same time. They won’t throw snakes at you or make you recite Bible verses all night while standing in a dark corner. They won’t ask you to go home and change your clothes.” Elliott smiled, but it was only

a weak turning up of his lips at one corner of his mouth. “We can even attend meetings together. I’d love to go.”

“I was never into all those airs and social graces. Behavior of the oh-so divine.”

Elliott groaned and pressed his palms over his eyes. Will was just talking in circles. “It doesn’t have to be like that, babe. Didn’t you just hear me? We can go together and—” Will’s sudden screaming cut him off. “Babe, what happened?!”

“The maggots are back! They’re getting in through my ears!”

“Will, you have to calm down! Panicking only makes it worse, you know that!”

“The sky is spilling into the room!”

“N-No, babe, it’s just the window!” Elliott pounded his fist repeatedly against the door. Even if the effort was a futile one, he couldn’t think of anything else to do. “If you let me in, I can close the blinds.”

“Now there’s thunder!”

Elliott immediately pulled his hands back. He didn’t know what to do with them now, so his hands just grabbed at the front of his own shirt. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry... There’s no thunder. It’s gone now, babe. I promise.”

“Shit... Shit, they’re laying eggs behind my eyes, Elliott!”

“It’s all in your head, Will!”

“Elliott, help me!”

“Babe... Will, please...” He slid down, knees hitting the floor with a heavy *thud* and then he shifted around with his back against the door. “Why did you have to go and do this? Why couldn’t you just talk to me? You should have just left the snake in its damn box.” It sucked. Elliott worked his butt off getting Will away from his family, but they still controlled him even

from 500 miles away. He did everything in his power to make sure his boyfriend felt loved and accepted, but he couldn't even do that.

Elliott could only listen to Will screaming and sobbing and rolling around on the floor.

When the paramedics finally arrived, they pried the door open with a crowbar they kept in the ambulance. Inside the bedroom, the snake sat coiled up in a patch of sun on the floor, looking as if hadn't done anyone any harm. Sweat covered Will from head to toe, his skin pale and grey, and with dark rings around his eyes. It wasn't a sight Elliott hadn't seen before, but that didn't mean it was easy for him. After administering the antivenin and stabilizing Will on a stretcher, the paramedics set about the task of getting the snake back in its box.

Elliott slowly approached the stretcher and pushed some blonde bangs away from Will's sweaty forehead. His normally blue eyes almost looked grey. "You have to stop doing this. I love you and I'm glad you're going to be okay but... I can't keep going through this with you, Will. It's too hard."

Will swallowed, but he only managed moving the thick lump up and down in his throat rather than actually dispelling it. "Nothing is easy, though, right?"

Elliott let out a laugh through tightly grit teeth. "Don't even pretend this is the same as college or a job. Babe... if I ever lost you..."

"Grab my varnish from the dresser, Elliott? I can't face the doctor without it."

"...Yeah." Elliott leaned down, kissing Will's forehead. He fetched the lipstick, though not paying attention to which particular color. His boyfriend would just have to be happy with whatever he grabbed. The paramedics were already wheeling Will out into the hall when he came back out of the bedroom. Elliott heard a quiet hiss from the box still on the table. He walked over to it, kicking the cardboard container on the ground. The cobra fell out, disoriented

and angry. One of the paramedics shouted at him to stop, but Elliott already brought his grey sneaker down on the serpent's head.

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*They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. Mark 16:18*