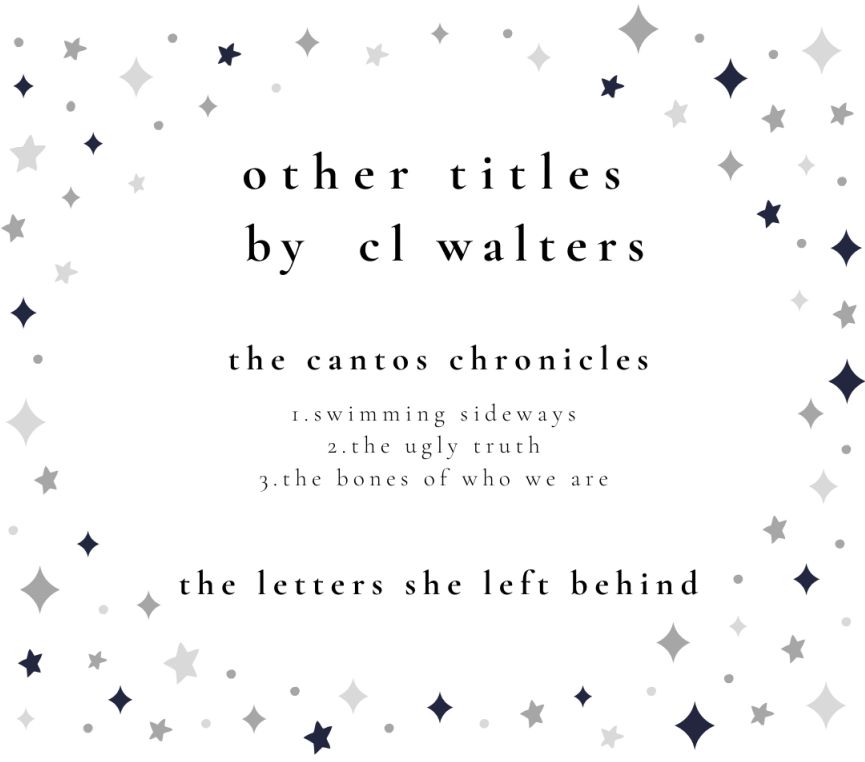


the stories stars tell



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the stories stars tell

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mixed plate press

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, publications, and events portrayed or mentioned in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.



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d e d i c a t i o n

To all the good girls trying to be perfect: perfection is impossible, so be bad every once in a while.

To all the good boys trying to be bad: it's okay to be vulnerable. The world will be better for it.

part one

senior year
(14 days to graduation)

“I stood staring at the never-ending wasteland of the mess I’d created and decided the only way out of it was to go to sleep; reminded myself, there wasn’t anything that couldn’t be cured by a good, soul-sucking sleep. I just had one problem: I was an insomniac.”

- unnamed protagonist, *Kaleidoscope Concussion* by Saul Annick

e m m a

I squeeze my eyes shut, terrified I'm about to screw this up. Three deep breaths. Slow. Steady. In. Out. The sound of my breath echoes in my head like the rush of the wind through the tree leaves in my backyard, and the fear of failure, which always sits in the front of my brain, drips down through my body into my stomach.

I could be sick.

I could forget my part.

I could ruin everything.

I picture Cameron, standing in front of his dad's red Ferrari in his khaki pants and suspenders over his dark brown shirt ranting about conquering his fear right before he kicks the shit out of his dad's car. Okay. He's a fictional character from one of my favorite movies of all time, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, but still. I'm going to kick the shit out of this, like, speech-Ferrari.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

"Emma?"

The sound of my name, as though it's being called through a tunnel, draws me back.

I open my eyes and look into the familiar bright blue eyes of

my best friend, Liam. “Emma? It’s almost time. You’re doing your breathing thing?”

He’s dressed in a business suit, charcoal gray and red tie with those chic pants and shoes that make him seem like he’s stepped out of a male fashion magazine. Far more fashionable than most males in these competitions who look like they’re wearing their father’s Sunday suits. He is beautiful. Dark haired, thin and fit, handsome and not into me at all (I’m not into him either). We’ve been best friends since third grade in Mrs. Hale’s class.

My insides shimmy, but I nod. “Cameron. Remember Cameron.”

“What?” He adjusts his black-framed, hipster glasses which he pulls off to perfection.

“Just channeling Cameron.” I tug on the bottom of my matching charcoal gray jacket.

Liam reaches out, fixes my collar, and then takes both of my hands in his. Leaning forward, he presses his forehead to mine. He smells like wintergreen mint, familiar and comforting. “We’ve got this. We’ve practiced this. We know it. We. Know. It.”

I close my eyes. “We do,” I repeat, and my heartbeat slows to the rhythm of his words. Liam. My best friend. “Our last time in duo,” I whisper. Tears threaten to fall. “What am I going to do without you?”

He pulls back but keeps hold of my hands. “Do. Not. Cry.” Hand squeeze. “You have to keep your make-up looking good. Game faces. Let’s kick the shit out of this speech, like Cameron did the car.”

I smile, because he knows me, and I nod. “Let’s do it.”

Our names are called. We walk from the wings out onto the stage and take our marks.

We slay it. Of course we do, because that’s who we are.

Later, Liam and I are at my house for our usual Saturday night John Hughes movie of the week. It’s what we always do on a Saturday night, except for that one Saturday junior year when I went

off the rails. The popcorn is made, drinks are chilling, and *Pretty in Pink* is cued up. While we wait for Ginny — our other bestie — to arrive, we both scroll through Instagram.

“Look at this one,” Liam says. He’s on the floor with his back against the couch. His legs — fit in cotton twill — are stretched out in front of him, crossed at the ankles. He holds up his phone.

“What is that?” I ask.

“It’s Baker’s house.”

“Baker? As in Atticus Baker?”

He nods. “Party there tonight.” He continues to examine his phone, and I watch him.

Instead of scrolling through the feed, he stops and scrutinizes Atticus Baker’s page. Picture after picture, even reading the comments. It strikes me, because Liam hasn’t ever expressed an interest in anyone specific (he’s kind of private like that). As he looks through Atticus Baker’s feed, it dawns on me how much of a risk Liam took to tell his truth. How lonely it might be in our small, conservative town. Lately, with graduation impending, I’ve thought about what kind of risks I’ve taken in my life (that one time junior year notwithstanding), and the answer has been none.

“I see you, Liam. You think Atticus is hot,” I say with a giggle.

“Who doesn’t? He’s gorgeous.”

He continues to study every single picture Atticus has posted, and I recognize familiarity in his actions. I’ve done it. My own phone, at the moment, is open to Tanner James’s IG feed, as per usual. I press on his story and watch a video of him walking into Baker’s party, but I don’t show Liam. He doesn’t approve of my infatuation with one of the biggest f-boys at school. I don’t blame him; it’s suspect.

Instead, I reach out and ruffle Liam’s hair, which I know he hates. “But you like him like him.”

“Stop!” He lurches forward to get out from under the destructive force of my hand and adjusts his hair back into place, not

that I could have done much to those product-laced locks. “And shut up. I don’t.” His ears turn red.

“You are so lying.” I grin and search for Atticus’s IG feed on my phone. “He is really handsome,” I say when I find it.

I select a gorgeous picture of Atticus and turn my phone to show him. Liam glances at it but looks away, aloof and noncommittal. Even I can’t detach from the beauty. Atticus is gorgeous: tall, black, stylish, fit. He’s a basketball player at our high school and got a full ride to St. Mary’s in California. All of his pictures have this low-key, I’m-so-casual vibe in a matching filter, so there’s no way it’s casual. But, damn. “Liam. He’s so hot, you have my approval,” I tell him, even though I know how horrible and objectifying it sounds. Not that Liam needs my approval.

He groans. “Stop, Emma. For real. Atticus is like—” He pauses and turns his shoulders so he’s facing me. “Look—”

“Mr. Liam, sir, I don’t much feel like one of your lectures,” I interrupt in my best patronizing student voice, because Liam is always lecturing me. Mansplaining. The jerk.

“Atticus is like — out of my league. And that’s *if* he’s gay.” He looks down at his phone again. “I mean, I think I got some vibes, but my vibes are inexperienced. I have no idea what I’m doing. Besides, how many openly gay men do you think there are in this backwater, hick-horrible town?” He offers an old man grunt of disgust and readjusts himself with his back against the couch’s seat again. “I can’t wait to get out of here.”

I understand his sentiment, though my prison is of a different kind: Christian family, striving for perfection where nothing real ever happens. Okay, maybe that’s not fair, but it’s how I feel sometimes. I can’t wait to leave and distance myself from stifling expectations to experience my own version of freedom.

I try to give Liam a pep talk anyway. “None of us know what we’re doing. We’re all faking it. Ferris is the only one who seems to have it all figured out, and he’s a fictional character. No one is like that.”

“Has what figured out?” Ginny asks from behind us. Liam and I turn and watch her walk into the finished basement from the stairs. “Your dad said to come down, and he’ll bring us some fresh cookies when they’re out of the oven.”

The third of our Bueller troop flops onto the couch next to me with her fresh-coated vanilla scent. She’s been on a new kick to live as a 1970’s hippie in order to explore the ideology of antidisestablishmentarianism, mostly to annoy her dad and stepmom. The outfit today: tie-dye cotton maxi-skirt she made herself and a black shirt without a bra (which is very noticeable because of her gorgeous boobs and high beams she’s been very proud of since she got them). The whole no bra thing has really pushed the buttons of her stepmom which Ginny loves to do more than anything. She lays her head on my shoulder and threads her arm through mine.

“Life,” I say, in answer to her original question.

“Our parents don’t even have life figured out. Obviously,” Ginny replies. “Case in point: my dad and step-monster. How could we — mere eighteen-year-olds? I take that back. We might have it more together.”

“Something new?” I ask. The last installment of *The Life and Times of Ginny Donnelly* had her stepmother forcing her to paint her bedroom since she’s leaving for college soon. Her stepmom is determined to convert Ginny’s room into a fitness haven and has been taking measurements for her equipment.

“Besides Operation Kick Ginny Out of Her Room? Nothing new. I don’t want to talk about them, or the fact that she made me go through my closet to consolidate everything into boxes for storage.”

“Sorry, Gin.” I squeeze her arm with mine. “On a happier note, we were discussing something intriguing. Specifically, Liam’s crush on Atticus Baker.”

He turns his back to us and resumes his stylish leaning against the couch, looking like a modern James Dean. He’s got it all: the hair, the glasses, the pout.

Ginny sits up. “Atticus Baker? Man, he’s hot.”

“That’s what I said.”

“Is he gay?”

“We could run a new operation: Find out if Atticus Baker is Gay,” I offer. “We could all slide into his DM, and see?”

“Emma.” Liam’s voice is threaded with a warning, like a brother who has reached the threshold of annoyance.

I smile. “I’m sorry, Liam. Am I hurting your feelings?” I lean toward him and nuzzle his ear.

He moves to get away from me again. “No.” He swats at me. “And no offense, but we know how the last operation you planned went.”

I glance at Ginny, who raises her eyebrows and tilts her head. “He has a point.”

I know they’re referring to the junior year debacle. To be fair, if I was going to sneak out and go to a party, I was going to go all in. Especially if getting caught by my parents was a risk. I hadn’t gotten caught, but I had gotten what I’d been after: a kiss — a gorgeously memorable hot kiss that I hadn’t been able to forget. From Tanner James. “Everything turned out okay. We didn’t get into trouble. Really, when you list out the successes against the failures, that was a win-win.”

Liam looks at me like I’m delusional, and perhaps I am. “Emma, if you think you won in that situation, you’re wrong. You haven’t stopped infatuating about the school’s biggest douchebag since. And for someone who claims to be a feminist, that’s some contradictory bullshit.”

I look to Ginny for backup, which I don’t get. “He’s right.” She shrugs and flops against the couch. “It’s been over a year, and you’re still struggling with it.”

They’re both right. I sigh because I *am* infatuated with Tanner James, and I know better. “It doesn’t matter. Graduation is two weeks away. We’re going to kick ass, say our smarty-pants speeches, and leave for college. Which I will cry about later. Tanner James will be old news. My infatuation with him will be spent as I walk onto a

college campus as a co-ed surrounded by beautiful men and women and a playground of sexual awakening.”

Ginny and Liam glance at one another with saucer-shaped eyes and then collapse with laughter.

“Emma! I can’t believe you just said that.” Liam laughs even harder.

“Sexual Awakening. Emma.” Ginny shrieks, falling away from me at her waist.

“Wow. You’re giving me a complex.”

When their laughter subsides, Liam climbs up onto the couch.

With me in between them, sulking, my arms crossed over my chest, I say, “You make me sound like a prude.”

“That’s not what we mean.” Liam pats my leg. “I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings. I just—” He pauses and looks at me over the top of his glasses, reminding me of his dad. “Emma, you’re pretty conservative when it comes to stuff like that. And scared about, like everything.”

“What? Sex?” I say, still pouting but knowing he’s right. I haven’t done much in my eighteen years besides masturbate. I’m not ignorant about sex. I may have been raised with Christian parents, but they have been open and frank about sex. While the discussions have moved around the naturalness of the act, the underlying message has been an expectation to wait until marriage. Besides the junior year operation, I’d kissed a couple of other guys. Add to that my date for junior prom, Chris Keller, who tried to pressure me into sex and went so far as to grope me in the limo. I’d slapped him (so much for uncomplicated). Without a doubt, I’m curious and interested in sex, but it’s clear my wiring leads to the red wire, not meaningless romps in the back of limos.

“Yeah, sex,” Ginny says. “You overthink everything. Sex, like, isn’t a thinking endeavor. It’s all feeling.”

I stand up to get away from them and their words, which I recognize as true but don’t want to. “I’m not scared of sex.”

Liam stands and mirrors me. “Emma — you’re Claire.” He points at the TV screen where *Pretty in Pink* waits for us.

I narrow my eyes at him. “I’m not Claire, who’s in *The Breakfast Club*, by the way. I’m not a stuck-up, snobby, princess, tease.”

“No. Not like that part. Like the sexually repressed part,” Ginny says. “The one who secretly likes the bad boy but won’t act on it.”

“Except—” I hold up a finger for emphasis— “I went into the closet with bad boy John Bender just like she did, only it was junior year with Tanner James.” I want to lash out at Liam who’s checking out a guy but is too scared to find out if he’s gay. And Ginny, who slept with her last boyfriend because she wanted to “get over” her virginity. With my hands on my hips, ready to deflect, I pause and bite my tongue. It’s petty and mean, and I love them too much.

“Emma.” Ginny’s chin falls against her chest, and she stares at me under her lashes. “You had to be drunk to do it.”

She’s right. *Operation Kiss Tanner James* required me to be drunk, because I couldn’t muster up the courage to be bold. But then when had I ever? If it wasn’t about church, or school, or duo with Liam — things that I could control — when had I ever been brave?

“Fresh cookies, hot from the oven.” My dad with plate in hand maneuvers down the steps into the basement. He looks up with a smile when he reaches the bottom and pauses a moment, assessing the tension in the room. “Everything alright?”

“Perfect.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“Those cookies smell delicious, Mr. Matthews,” Liam says, turning on the couch to face my father.

Kiss ass.

“How many times have I said it’s okay to call me Mo?”

Liam snags a cookie from the plate as my dad sets it on the table between the couch and the TV. “Thanks, Mo.”

Dad straightens, walks over to me, and gives me a side hug.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“*Pretty in Pink* night?” His eyes bounce from me to Liam to Ginny. He lingers and clears his throat. “Not many of these left, huh?”

We all mumble affirmations at him. I’m sure none of us are truly ready to come to terms with that fact yet, even if we say we’re ready to leave.

“I’ll leave you to it, then.” He squeezes me against his side once more and then disappears back up the stairs.

After he’s gone, I look at my friends feeling hurt and vulnerable. They might as well have just said I was the most boring person on the planet — and they’d probably be right.

Ginny pats the couch cushion next to her and holds her arms out to me.

I walk into them, flop forward, and lay against her awkwardly.

“Your Emma-think isn’t a bad thing. It’s an Emma thing. You’re awesome. When you’re ready — you’ll know,” she says. “In fact, because you’re you, you’ll probably have the best first experience of us all. All that thinking and analysis to make sure.”

I move off of her to sit.

“And,” Ginny says, “believe me. You don’t want a Dean on your hands.” Each of us snorts in reference to her first, the aftermath of just trying to “get over it.” She shudders and takes my hand in hers. “Maybe it will be like a sexual awakening in college next year, or maybe it will be a hot someone this summer. Perhaps it will be in four years, or maybe it will be on your wedding night. It doesn’t matter. What matters is YOU get to decide that for yourself, and that will make it perfect.”

Liam sits down on the other side of me and takes my hand. “And I’ll be there cheering you on for your first encounter with the D, or the V — whichever you prefer.”

“I don’t know why this suddenly became about me.”

“Here. We can make it about me,” Liam says. “I’m still a virgin.”

“A status you’d like to change with Atticus Baker.” I wiggle

my eyebrows at him.

He smacks my shoulder. “Shut it, bitch.” Then he chuckles.

“Let’s get this John Hughes night moving already. Turn on the movie. Wait, *Pretty in Pink*? Maybe we should switch it to *The Breakfast Club*.” Ginny lets me go and leans forward for popcorn. “We’ve got some analysis to do on that dialogue between Allison and Claire tonight, I think.”

After an argument about sticking with our planned movie schedule, we watch *Pretty in Pink*. Ginny relents because Andie needs analysis of her attitudes about men: douchebags versus the best-friend. I point out one of my best friends is gay and the other one isn’t; it’s not an option in all circumstances. We’re all in agreement that Andie should have ended up with Duckie (cue giant eye rolls), but as the movie plays, I’m distracted. I attempt to stay in it with my friends since our John Hughes movie nights are dwindling down to a handful. My mind keeps turning back to junior year. I think about how I’d played that night and the aftermath and wish I’d been braver.

tanner

We walk into Atticus Baker's party like kings: Griff, Danny, Josh and me. Senior year, three years of running the party game like professionals, and stories to never tell our kids (I'm not convinced I'm ever having any). The news of our arrival moves through the house like a sound wave. This scene used to be fun. It used to make me feel like I was relevant. We pose for someone's IG story, throwing deuces. Always the same story. Now, I'm bored as fuck, trailing behind the crew but smiling at the greetings, because that's the role I play.

"Tanner." Baker slaps a hand on my shoulder.

I look up at him. Basketball god at school, he's taller than me by at least four inches, and I'm six-one. "Hey, Baker."

We shake hands with a half hug, and then he greets the rest of my crew while I glance around the room. It's an ultra-modern place with a retro feel. The sunken living room is littered with bodies talking, laughing, drinking. Lights are low, with a moody lo-fi glow, and the air is heavy with tension. Bass pulses through the house speakers, and people dance. I hear someone scream, which draws my gaze beyond the sliding glass doors, and I watch as a girl gets thrown

into the pool outside.

“This is lit, Baker.” Griff scans the scene.

I look down at the floor instead of at Griff because, lately when I do, I just feel angry. For some reason, I feel like I’m in a play reciting the lines and making my set marks on the stage. The next scene has us getting drunk — not sloppy drunk, just enough to take the edge off. Then we’ll hook up with whichever conquest for the night. Danny and Josh might, or they’ll find stoner haven, and spend the night smoking out and talking philosophy. I’ll have sex with someone because that’s the role I play; it’s what I usually do because by the time I’m drunk, I’m blocking loneliness. Griff will find a willing body, too, for whatever his reasons are. Our friendship isn’t deep enough to have real conversations about it, so his motivation is a mystery to me. It’s become a boring, predictable production.

“Glad you guys showed.” Atticus directs us through the house to the booze.

Glad you guys showed. The statement hangs like a wet towel on a line in my mind. Because we’re the party, I suppose, bringing the clout with us. It’s the story we’ve written. I’m not feeling it and glance around the room at all the faces. Most of them I know. There are a few I don’t. Eyes follow me. I notice mouths move, and then eyes slide back with knowing, curious, and inviting smiles. It makes me feel bored, tired, and wish I was at home reading. I started rereading Saul Annick’s *Kaleidoscope Concussion* for the billionth time, and I picture it sitting on my nightstand next to my bed, waiting.

I turn my back to the telegraphed invitations and follow Atticus into the kitchen. He hands me a beer.

“Thanks.” I take a sip and feel the bitterness hit my gut like acid.

I shouldn’t have come. It isn’t that I don’t like Atticus. I do. He’s a solid guy, and we’ve always gotten along. Hell, I get along with almost anyone. I just hadn’t wanted to come, but Griff whined me into it like he always does lately. I let him, because he’s my best friend. My bro. But after three years of the party life and not a whole

lot worthwhile to show for it, I'm weary.

I take another sip, wondering when that began. I picture Emma Matthews in my mind a few months ago, outside The Revolution club, breath coming from her pretty smiling mouth like puffs of magic. She'd waved at me, well, back at me. I'd inexplicably waved first. I'd raised my hand without thinking about it the moment I saw her, and that kiss junior year moved through my body like muscle memory, as if it had just happened. When she'd raised her hand, a tentative wave and a smile to match, as if she doubted I was waving at her, my lungs had tightened. I'd overheated with unspent energy despite the January cold. Emma. Her laugh. Raising my hand. Her smile. Her wave in return. Now, I shake my head as the golden liquid in the cup comes back into focus, and I take another sip.

Griff bumps my arm and nods toward something behind me.

I turn my head.

"Laura Hoff." Griff sips his drink. "She's effin' hot. You could hit that."

I turn away and lean against the gigantic kitchen island. I'm not interested in Laura Hoff. There was a time a couple of years ago, I would have been. Meaningless sex. No complications. I've grown weary of that too. "Why does it always feel like you're pimping me out?"

"What the everloving ef, T? You're being a bitch tonight. Did you lose your balls and grow a vagina?"

"I told you I didn't want to go out."

"My point exactly."

I don't tell him to *fuck off*. It would be a waste of my breath.

"It's senior year." Danny joins us, leaning against the island next to me. He smiles, one of those innocuous smiles that never presses anyone's buttons. "Kind of like the last hurrah before we go our separate ways." Always so positive. Danny's joining the military. He swears in after graduation.

"I don't want to invoke it, but I might have to remind you of Bro Code, T," Griff says, which sort of feels like a threat and climbs

onto my back like added weight.

Bro Code is a bullshit agreement we made when we were fifteen after I lost my virginity to my mom's friend Pam (no, my mom doesn't know). I'd filled in the boys on the facts of life as I saw them (and everything she'd taught me), and the pact to support the sexual conquests of one another was born. The Bro Code: always have one another's back for the effort of a lay. The thing was, most of the time, for whatever reason, the Bro Code always came down to me leading the way. I'm a better talker than Griff, whose idea of flirting is throwing around disjointed one-liners that resemble insults. I'm funnier than all of them. Josh is nicer than me. Danny too, but he's shy. I'm the de facto lead — the first of us to pop his cherry — though Griff is our social director. In considering the Bro Code agreement, Griff has probably gained the most.

At one time, the Bro Code made me feel connected to them. All for one, one for all sorta thing. They are my family, my missing brother turned into three. With the wreckage of my family — the death of my brother followed by the explosion of my parents' marriage — being important and necessary to my boys, being wanted by women, made me feel something. Fulfilled, I guess. Now, it feels like a trap, because I can see the chains, and the bars attached. I have this horrible sense that Bro Code never had anything to do with actual friendship. That makes me feel unsettled.

I sigh and stare into the cup.

“Bro Code?” Josh says, stuffing his face with chips and salsa. “Why would you throw that out there, Griff? Tanner's always game.”

Except I'm not. Not anymore, and this is a new awareness. I don't want to be here. I don't want to get drunk or stoned. I don't want to have sex with someone random. I want something else, something different, even if I'm not sure yet what *it* is. I set down my drink and walk away.

“Yo!” Griff yells at me. “Tanner!”

I ignore him and slide past gyrating bodies out through the glass door into the night. I shove my hands into my pockets; the cool

night clings to my skin. There aren't too many people poolside — a few — which makes it easy to find a spot to isolate myself, to take a moment to figure my shit out. Except I have a feeling this has only just begun, whatever that means.

“Hey.” A voice draws me away from the darkened landscape beyond the house.

I turn my head and find Laura Hoff, no doubt sent over by Griff, who's interested in smashing with one of her friends. I lift my eyebrows in a greeting. “Hey, Laura.” She's pretty: short blond hair, pretty brown eyes and pouty mouth. Petite. I glance behind me and see Griff in the window. He's talking to a girl. I look away and resume my moody contemplation of what's beyond the light of the pool deck where we're standing.

“Everyone wondered when you guys would get here.” She mimics my stance, turning so we're shoulder-to-shoulder looking out into the darkness.

I notice her cross her arms over her chest to keep out the chill, or from insecurity; I'm not sure which. I wonder why she's out here. What does she have to gain from talking to the notorious f-boy Tanner James? I'm shit and have nothing really going for me except a job at my dad's construction company after graduation. Whoop-de-doo. No one really sees me. They see the persona, the party boy, because that's the legacy I've made.

“Why?” I ask.

“You guys make it fun.”

I hum a response. “People can't make their own fun?” It feels as acidic as it sounds.

She isn't sure what to say to that, maybe a bit surprised by my vibe. “You okay?”

“No. I'm not.”

Her face relaxes and sort of slips toward added insecurity and doubt. I see her glance back at the house and then back at me. “Griff thought you might like some company.”

I sigh and shake my head, though I doubt she'd catch it.

Predictable. “I’m good,” I tell her in an effort to channel Danny’s kindness or Josh’s *laissez faire* approach to life. Josh would tell her more than he needed, and Danny would feel like he needed to make her feel better. I don’t need to do either. I don’t really know her that well.

“You want company?”

“Not really,” I say and push my hands deeper into my pockets.

An awkward silence settles around us until she mutters, “Okay,” and then turns and walks away.

I take a deep breath. I should leave before I hurt anyone else’s feelings. Instead of leaving though, I pinch the bridge of my nose, and then sit on one of the deck chairs to hide. I’m not ready to face the inevitable conflict that will occur with Griff.

I lay back in the chair to stare at the sky. It’s a clear night, and Atticus lives a little out of town, so there are lots of stars. The starry sky settles me.

Before Rory died, we’d sneak out onto the roof of our house to stargaze. Well, Rory did. I just followed my older brother, content to bask in his shadow. He’d tell me about space stuff he learned, and thought was cool because one day he was going to be an astronaut. Then — because I was little — I’d ask him to tell me star stories. He did. Made up stuff about pretend planets, aliens, monsters, and all of the adventures stringing them together. I loved it.

After he died, I’d sneak into his bedroom during my parents’ fights. I’d duck through the window, scramble across the shingles of the roof like Rory and I used to do on our star adventures before he got sick. I’d tuck myself into a spot near a dormer — the farthest we could venture onto the steeply pitched roof. If the sun was still up, I’d watch the neighborhood. Watching the cars drive past on the street or walkers meander by blocked the yelling of my parents with all the walls between us. They never looked for me. Never knew where I was.

If it was dark, I’d look up at the sky to find Rory’s and my

favorite star, broken hearted because I wasn't sure which one it was. I hadn't thought to ask my big brother to clarify because I'd been too little. So I just looked up into the sky and hoped I was speaking to the right one. I'd tell him about Mom and Dad. I'd cry, staring up at the vibrant sky, feeling alone and invisible.

The sound of approaching footsteps interrupts my thoughts, and I brace myself for Griff, pissed that I sent Laura away. I mentally prepare to tell him to sleep with her himself if he thinks she's so hot, but it isn't Griff who draws up a chair next to me and sits down. It's Atticus.

“Yo.”

I give him a head nod.

“Can I join you?”

“Your house, dude.”

He smiles and hands me a cup. “Thought you might need a refresher.”

“Thanks.” Silence walks around us for a bit. “What're you doing out here?” I finally ask.

“Didn't really feel like a party.”

I look over at him, confused. “It's your house, Atticus.”

He shrugs, smiles, and takes a sip of his drink. “Teammates wanted a spot tonight, and my parents were out of town.”

“Could have said ‘no.’” And I realize I could have tried harder to stick to my ‘no.’

“What's one party? I figure everything's about to change.” There's something in the way he says this that is heavy with what has remained inside of him.

“You good?”

He doesn't answer right away. Waits. Then he says, “Everything good with you? Isn't like you to be at a party, turn down the prettiest girl, and then sulk in the dark.”

I chuckle. He's right. “I just didn't feel like a party,” I parrot back to him, then add, “I'm just over it.”

“I feel you.”

“Really? How’s that?”

“Probably most of us are carting around shit inside that won’t make it out into the light until we start the next book of the series.”

I nod, though I realize my next act is here. I won’t be leaving, still stuck between my parents and their perpetual war. He’s got a scholarship to play basketball at the collegiate level and the grades to keep it. “You feel like talking about it?”

“Do you?”

It’s my turn to be quiet, but eventually I say, “Party shit is old, and Griff wants everything to stay the same.”

“And he’s your boy.”

“Yeah.”

Atticus takes another sip and then stares intently at the cup. “I don’t think my boys would get who I really am.”

“If they’re your real boys, then they will.” I hear the wisdom in my words that I hadn’t considered. If Griff, Danny, and Josh are my real friends, they’d respect any changes I want to make, right?

“Sounds easier than it is, though.”

I nod. “Yeah. Who knew things would feel so complicated?”

We sit for a while, listening to the party happening behind us, lost in our own thoughts.

“Maybe living the truth is all we got though.” Atticus’s voice slices through the comfortable silence. “Like anything less is frontin’.”

“And anyone who matters is going to understand.”

Atticus nods.

There’s a loud crash from somewhere inside the house.

“Shit. I better check on that.” He stands up. “Good talk, T.”

We slide palms and finish with a fist bump.

I stay a while longer in the darkness pondering his claim: anything less than living our truth is a front. I suppose he’s right as long as one knows what their truth is. I’m untethered from whatever the want is and instead chained to an expectation.

junior year
(a little over a year earlier)

“The truth about routine: it’s fucking boring. Change that shit up! The bullshit of my drab monotony of grays was rooted in the drugs dealt by my psychiatrist pusher: ‘Take this. Take that. It’ll fix you right up.’ Only I still couldn’t sleep, and when I melted into the routine of not taking those little, dull, white pills, I started seeing brilliant colors which my jagged mind cut into like a stained-glass kaleidoscope.”

-unnamed protagonist, *Kaleidoscope Concussion* by Saul Annick

tanner

I was at the crossroads of just enough to drink and too much, so I waved off Griff's offer of another. Penelope Jordan had been staring at me earlier, practically gave Deb Sheffner a lap dance and watched me while she did it. The invitation had been clear. Not the most original tease, but enough for me to figure she was DTF. That was what I did, after all, fuck. It sounded bad, but it was working for me on a couple of levels. First, there was the superficial level of enjoyment and release, but it wasn't just the alcohol or even the sex. That was the second level: the momentary numbness and visibility. Here was the thing: I'd found myself tired of the whole predictable game, and in the quiet moments by myself, was beginning to realize I was sad more than happy.

I stood. "I'm going," I told Griff, who had a girl sitting on his lap I didn't know.

He smiled over her shoulder at me and presented his knuckles. The girl whispered something in his ear, and Griff laughed. She was attractive. Dark haired.

My mind drifted to Emma Matthews (which was strange since we weren't friends). I'd seen her the day before with her friend,

Liam, hanging a poster for some club or function in the hall after school, heads together about something. Under usual circumstances, I wouldn't have noticed, but in this case, I had because I'd noticed Emma and how cute she was. I had noticed her for a while, but she was out of my league.

Emma wouldn't be partying like this. She definitely wouldn't be sitting in Griff's lap, and if she were, it would piss me off, but I didn't consider why. She was probably at home, doing something productive, like homework, or a group study session. Perhaps she was doing something fun and wholesome, like a movie with her friends. I wondered if she went to the movies. Though I wasn't exactly sure why I wondered, because I wasn't a big movie goer (too boring to sit in one spot for too long).

Why was I even thinking of Emma at all?

It wasn't like we talked. Sometimes, I thought she might be looking at me in the cafeteria at school or in the hallway as we passed one another. Her pretty eyes always slid away, but they made me curious. What color were they? Was she just glancing at me, or was she looking? I used to think about her. A lot. That started in the eighth grade when she yelled at Cole Butler in science during a lab. She'd been so fiery and funny. The memory still made me smile. We hadn't had many classes together — one or two, maybe — because she actually tried at school.

I shook my head to get my errant thoughts about Emma out of my mind. Leaving Griff and Wannabe Emma behind, I walked through the living room.

Deb stopped me with a hand on my chest. "Hey, Tanner. Want to dance?" An invitation.

The message was clear: I could have stayed there with her and gotten laid, but it made me tired. Instead I said, "I'm looking for Penelope," and even as I said it, I was hoping she'd already left.

Deb shrugged, because that was as much as I meant to her. "Upstairs," she told me and returned to grinding to the music with her group of friends.

I moved through the crush of people toward the stairs, even though I wasn't sure why I was going through these motions. A different choice seemed an impossibility, though I couldn't articulate why that was so. Josh and Danny were sitting in a group smoking weed, and they offered me a head nod as I passed. I gave them an eyebrow raise in return and started up the stairs.

Near the top, I almost tripped on someone sitting on the steps. "Whoa." It was a girl folded over on herself, and because I'm not a complete douchebag, despite what I know has been said about me, I leaned down and asked her, "You okay?"

The girl tipped her head up to look at me, and suddenly, I was looking into the face of...

"Emma Matthews?"

She smiled, and it lit up her eyes — dark blue with swirls of gray — like stars in a dark sky. "Tanner James."

"Are you drunk?" I asked. I was too, but not enough to help me forget that Emma was the object of my secret fantasies, along with the fact I'd just been thinking about her. I shook my head to make sure I wasn't dreaming. There wasn't anything in our experiences that should have contributed to our paths crossing, and yet, there she was, as if I'd conjured her. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm feeling really good." She smiled again, and I remembered feeling that smile in my stomach like a lead weight had melted into molten liquid.

"Why are you sitting here on the stairs?"

"Waiting."

"For what?"

"You." She giggled.

That made no sense. First, why would Emma Matthews be at this party? Second, why would she be drunk? And third, why would she say she was waiting for me? I wondered if someone was playing a joke on me and even looked around, but it was just the two of us in the hallway. I slid down the wall and sat next to her. "You're definitely drunk if you're waiting for me."

“Did I say that?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh. That’s a secret.” She pressed a finger to my lips, and that touch dove all the way from the top of my neck to the base of my spine like I’d been zapped with electricity. “I’m supposed to find Liam.” Then she moved her finger from my lips to hers, her dark blue eyes — flecks of green and aqua too — never leaving my mouth. “Shh.”

My heart pounded in my chest, excited by the form her lips took against her finger. “Damn, Emma. I didn’t know you drank.”

“Me either.”

I attempted an inconspicuous adjustment of my pants, because I started feeling that tingle in my crotch and needed to calm that shit down. I chuckled, amused, because I hadn’t caught wood from just a look and a touch since I was, like, fourteen. I decided the honorable thing to do was help her find her friend, which led to the decision to dump looking for Penelope. I hadn’t really wanted to be with Penelope outside of sex anyway, and that left me feeling dirty. “Shall we go look for Liam?”

Her eyes roved over every inch of my face. She reached up and touched my lips with her fingertips again; it was tender. “You have a nice mouth, Tanner James.”

My stomach tightened. I tried to remember that reaction. It was a hungry craving, the anticipation of the satiation of a voracious appetite, but it was also so distant. I hadn’t been aware I’d been missing it until it resurfaced inside of me.

“You want to hear a secret?” she asked and leaned closer to me, though I had the impression she thought she was whispering. “I’ve wanted to try and kiss it.”

Her admission made me smile, and my heart thumped a little more. I realized that while I’d been fantasizing about her, perhaps she’d thought about me too. Knowing that made me feel buoyant. “You have? Well, I could remedy that for you, but I’m afraid you wouldn’t remember it. I would want you to.” It was a truth. I wanted

Emma to remember me.

“I would,” she said, wide-eyed, and nodded. “I promise.”

I stood up, needing the distance, because I was afraid I might kiss her. As I did, she held my arm, and I almost toppled onto her. I self-corrected and took her hand to help her up. Once upright, she stumbled against me, and I caught her waist with my hands while her other arm wrapped around my neck. My heart was now knocking against the wall of my ribs. She was so close, so pretty, so pressed against me. I looked at her mouth, heart-shaped pink. She licked her lips, and my belly buzzed. I wanted to kiss her so badly, but I chickened out, which was part of why I didn’t; it also felt wrong on some level. I could take advantage, but I didn’t want to. On the other hand, I wanted to extend my time with her, so when I said, “Come on. Let’s go look for Liam.” I took her deeper into the house instead of down the stairs, which was probably the more likely place to look. I wasn’t being altruistic.

She put her hand in mine.

I noticed how soft her skin was, and I wondered about the rest of her.

“I don’t want to find Liam,” she insisted as we walked down the hall. “I want to wait for Tanner.”

“I’m right here.” I looked over my shoulder at her.

Her eyes brightened again, the outside corners scrunching with joy. “Oh! It is you.”

“How much did you have to drink, Em?” I asked.

She held up four fingers. “Two.”

“We should get you some water. Let’s find a place for you to sit.”

I started testing doors in the hallway. Honestly, on one level, I knew what I was doing. I wanted to be alone with her, even if I didn’t want to cheapen the moment. I think I justified it to myself. I needed to find her a place to sober up. Deep down, though, it was a lingering understanding of a latent wish buried in the darkness of my fantasies attached to what she’d said: *Waiting. For you. You have a nice*

mouth. I've wanted to try and kiss it.

Emma Matthews was waiting for me.

The knowledge made my heart swell even if I couldn't believe it. Even if I didn't — couldn't — trust it. I wanted to keep the idea close, to remember it, to hold it tight. I knew the moment this was over, it would slip away.

"Em?" I asked as I tested another door.

She made a moaning noise to indicate she'd heard me.

"Why were you waiting for me?"

"I like Tanner. I want to be brave."

My brain wasn't quick enough, because it was slugging through the marsh of alcohol. I understood what she was saying, but I didn't quite comprehend it. "You like me?"

She nodded emphatically. "I saw him."

"What did you see?" I asked her as I tested another door.

"He helped Connor. At lunch. I saw him. I see him.

Everyday. He helps Connor."

Lunch time. Connor Festner, a kid I help with his tray. Griff gives me shit for it, but Connor is pretty badass and probably beats Griff's butt playing Duty online. Connor's given me tons of gaming pointers.

She had been watching me at lunch. I'd known it. My expanded heart compressed, constricted in my chest with a pressure that somehow made me feel like I might be floating off into space without oxygen.

I tested another door. This one opened. The bedroom was empty, and I took a deep breath. Relief. "Here." I helped her sit on the bed. "Let me have your cup, and I'll fill it with water."

She handed me her red cup, and I took it into the bathroom. I rinsed it out and put in water. Before I walked back into the room, I glanced at myself in the mirror. I stared into my own eyes and whispered to my reflection: "It's Emma. Don't be a dick."

When I returned to the room, she was curled up on the bed, eyes closed. "Here, Em."

She turned her head, looked at me and smiled as if it was the first time she'd seen me that night. "Tanner!" She reached for me, and I had the impression she wanted me to stretch out next to her. *Don't be a dick*, I reminded myself and helped her to sit back up. "Drink some water."

She took a sip. "Liam says I'm dumb."

"That isn't nice of him." Her statement annoyed me. I sat down next to her, suddenly absolved we weren't looking for him.

She shook her head. "No. Not like that." She stopped and took another sip. "Because I wanted to come to find you."

"Why?"

"I'm scared."

"Of what?"

"Of everything." She took another sip and then leaned her head against my shoulder.

I could smell her — a nice scent that was clean and slightly sweet, like vanilla or cotton candy. I resisted the impulse to press my nose into her neck to find out for sure, or to run my tongue across her skin to taste it. Instead, we sat like that for a long time — her head on my shoulder, my hands in my lap and my brain chastising me for smelling her like a freak.

The doorknob wiggled several times as people tested the door; I was smart enough to lock it. Habit. I tried to tell myself it was because I was trying to protect Emma from my reputation, but it was also the temptation to maybe just get to kiss her once. I didn't make a move though, and that was unfamiliar — and kind of exciting — territory for me.

"Tell me what you're afraid of," I said eventually, ending the silence, and also because I wanted to know if she'd fallen asleep. I needed to keep my mind occupied with other things besides thoughts about kissing her. I was beginning to feel more coherent and sober.

"I told you. Everything." Her hands flailed out, and when they settled, one landed on my thigh. My skin tingled under her touch, and heat spread like radiant light from a lightbulb to illuminate

all the dark parts of me.

I swallowed and closed my eyes to focus on her words. The words. “Well, name me one thing.”

“Failure.”

“Everyone’s afraid of that.” I looked down at her hand. Casually rested. On my thigh. Emma’s hand. Her fingernails were painted a bright green and matched her hoop earrings.

“Disappointing my parents,” she said. “Disappointing God.”

I looked at her then, the candor of her statement running through me almost as hot as her touch. It wasn’t practiced. It wasn’t her act of being flirty or a ploy to seduce me. It was just an honest statement. Maybe I couldn’t relate to either of those, even if I wanted to. My parents were so blind to me outside of the tug-of-war they played, using me against one another. And God? Never experienced that in my life, unless having an orgasm counted as prayer. “And?”

She moved her head from my shoulder and turned to look at me. “Never kissing Tanner James.”

My stomach did another of those nose dives into my body, toward my groin. The heat of her hand still warmed my leg. I noticed her eyes, fringed in thick lashes, rove over my face. They came to rest on my mouth. Under different circumstances, I probably wouldn’t have cared and would have provided what she wanted. I wanted it — bad — but I’d found some weird sense of honor I hadn’t been aware I had. “I can’t, Em. You’re drunk.” These were those different circumstances. Emma represented a different kind of life I didn’t think I deserved.

“You don’t like me.” She moved back, slumped a little, her shoulders rounding, and folded her hands in her lap. “It’s okay.”

I missed the weight of her hand on my leg. “It isn’t that.” I leaned forward to try and meet her gaze. “I do like you.”

She sat up quickly, her eyes big and bright. “I got it! I will kiss you. Then you don’t have to kiss me. I’ll do the kissing.”

This made me laugh, because I thought it was one of the cutest things I’d ever heard. And she was so excited by the prospect,

as if she'd discovered something new. I couldn't remember having more fun on a Saturday night.

"Unless, you think I'm — ugly." Her eyebrows arched over her wide eyes, but now she couldn't look at me.

I shook my head. "Nope, Emma. I don't think that. At all."

Her eyes met mine again, and she said with a slight frown, "The easiness is wearing off. We better do this fast, before I come back."

I scrunched up my face. "What?"

"If I come back—" she tapped her head— "I'll be too scared. My head will get in the way. My bravery will melt off."

"Liquid courage." I tapped her cup.

She nodded. "I made a plan. I was waiting for you."

"Really?"

"I, maybe, drank a little too much. Miscalculated."

I smiled. "And you were waiting for me. Why?"

"To kiss you." She laid her hand on my arm.

I took a deep breath, as if her touch returned a missing piece of my soul, and I needed to breathe it in. Her admission had me unbalanced, however. My usual practiced lyrics receded from the surprise. I've had girls try and lure me with their sexuality, but this? This was totally new. "Why again, Em?"

"Because I saw you. You helped Connor. That's nice, Tanner. And I think it's sexy. And I don't want Keven Bennett to be my only kiss."

I glanced at her mouth, thought about her kissing Keven Bennett, and was annoyed by it. Then I looked at my hands in my lap. She saw me not because of how I looked. It was because I helped Connor that made me sexy to her. It wasn't partying or being drunk. It wasn't a rumor that I knew how to have sex. It wasn't being smart at school. It was because I'd done something unselfish. "Keven Bennett, huh?"

She wrinkled her nose. "He has a lizard tongue."

I chuckle. "That's not good."

She adjusts her body. “So, is it okay if I kiss you?”

“Who would you be kissing? Just for clarification.” I was testing the truth, not believing it.

“Tanner James. You.” She faced me, drawing her knees up between us, where they pressed against the outside of my thigh. “I see you. I’m not that drunk anymore.”

Her words were enough for me to nod, to give myself permission to cross the line, and indulge my curiosity. “Yes. Okay.”

“You have to turn.” She directed me with her hands on my arms, turning me toward her but with her knees between us.

I watched her working out the problem, completely satisfied in the moment, enjoying her and her cute pout. Her dark, curly hair fell around her heart-shaped face as she looked down at our legs.

“This won’t do.”

“It does seem rather awkward.”

She stood. “Stand up.” She remained steady, the alcohol wearing off, and held her hands out to me.

I took them and stood. When I looked down at her, my heartbeat quickened. The movement of her eyes caressed my face, and for the first time, I understood what it felt like to be seen — really seen. For me, Tanner. Not because of some rumor about what I could do, or because there was enough alcohol in my system to lower my inhibitions.

“Tanner?” She reached up and put her hands on my face.

“Yes, Em?”

“Can you bend down? Just a little bit?” She drew me closer.

I leaned forward, cataloguing all of her attributes. My heart went bat-shit crazy inside my chest. I noticed the width of her blue eyes, the fullness of her dark eyebrows, the way her bottom lip was a tiny bit fuller than the top, the way her pert nose was slightly upturned and kissed with tiny freckles that reached out across her cheeks.

I couldn’t believe she didn’t have a boyfriend. Did I want to be a boyfriend? Why was I thinking about that? I wasn’t boyfriend

material.

Her gaze flicked to my lips — her tongue darted out to wet her own — then her eyes slipped up to my eyes before sliding shut as she pressed her lips to mine.

It was a gentle kiss, soft. Her mouth was warm and pliable against mine. My heart tripped into a more intense speed. Then her lips parted, and she used her tongue to coax me to be an active participant. As much as I tried to not be a dick, that was the last straw of my self-control. I answered the tease of her tongue with my own. Suddenly, where the kiss started as one-sided and tentative, it exploded, because my whole body was an exposed nerve ending. Every sensation — her hands in my hair, her mouth, her tongue, the whisper of her clothing when she moved, the soft noise she emitted because I became involved — was enough to light me on fire.

I'd dreamed of Emma.

I lifted her.

She wrapped her legs around my waist and hugged me closer with her arms around my neck.

Our tongues moved together, and it all felt like a first time. It was. With her. Exciting. Novel.

She moaned into my mouth.

I stumbled forward until her back was pressed against the wall and then my hands wandered, molded, massaged. I forgot myself. Just let go and felt. I didn't think about how or who or why. I got lost in all of the sensations. Then I returned back to myself, because I remembered who I was kissing. Emma. She was worth more than a bang at a party. By me. She was worth more than me. "Emma," I said into her mouth, and I continued kissing her, allowing myself just a little more.

"So good, Tanner." She moaned it.

Her sound almost broke my resolve to do the right thing, but I drew back. "We should stop."

Her eyes fluttered open, and she studied my face.

"Okay." She laid a hand against my cheek. "I thought I was

supposed to kiss you.”

I searched her face, looked for the lie but found only honesty and naivety there. “You did.”

“You kissed me back.” She smiled. It was shy and tentative, beautiful and endearing.

“I did.”

“I liked it.”

“I liked it, too.” I stepped back so she could stand.

Someone pounded on the door.

We both jumped.

Something was yelled about the police, followed by retreating footsteps which pounded down the hallway.

“Shit.” I ran a hand through my hair. “You’re going out first, okay?”

“We can go together.”

“No.” I shook my head. “You know we can’t do that.” There was no way I wanted Emma affected because of who I was.

“But—”

“No. Em. It’s better this way.”

She straightened her clothes, seeming far more coherent than however long it had been since I’d stumbled upon her in the stairwell. She opened the door while I pressed out of view against the other side, but she hesitated. It was as though she wanted to say something. I waited, my breath caught in my lungs, hopeful. What did I want her to say? But she didn’t say anything and instead, disappeared through the door.

I waited — counted to fifteen — and willed my heart to slow down so my head could reorient; then I left the room and closed the door, as if I were shutting off the feelings Emma awoke in me. But I looked for her as I walked out of the house, even though I scolded myself for doing it. When I got outside, I saw her across the yard. She’d found Liam and her other friend, Ginny. Emma was turned, watching people move as if looking for something — or someone. I wanted her to see me, but I knew it was impossible. I was who I was,

and I would only drag her down.

I turned, cut through the flowerbed, and walked away wishing things were different.

e m m a

Liam and Ginny were waiting outside as the party surged through the front door, and the house vomited people.

“Oh my god, Em! I couldn’t find you, and I got so worried.”
Ginny drew me into her arms.

We stood in the street like stones in a moving river as a current of bodies flowed around us.

“It was fine.” I scanned the faces, glanced back at the front door, hoping to catch one more look at Tanner. Hoping beyond hope that he hadn’t asked me to leave before him because he was embarrassed to be seen with me, but afraid perhaps he was. When he’d found me at the top of the stairs, I might have been too drunk, having miscalculated how much and how quickly to consume it. The whole plan could have failed, but Tanner had stopped. Tanner had stayed. Now, still buzzing but wide awake with Tanner’s kisses, I’m buzzed with residual warmth from his mouth and hands.

“What happened?” Liam wasn’t smiling. Instead, his eyes were over bright with concern.

“Operation Kiss Tanner James was a success.”

“You had sex with him?” Ginny’s voice climbed ten decibels.

“No! Of course not.” I smacked her arm.

“No! Of course not,” Liam said at the same time I did.

We looked at one another. “Pinch, poke, you owe me a Coke!” we both chanted. He beat me with the matching movements.

“I owe you.” I looked at the house again as the sludge of partiers moved past us. “That wasn’t the plan, Ginny Donnelly!”

“What happened, then?” Ginny asked, drawing my attention back to her and Liam.

“We kissed.” I kept the juicier tidbits to myself to savor later.

“We should go. I heard the police are coming.” Liam pulled on my sleeve.

The three of us turned to move with the flow of revelers leaving for the night. We had quite a few blocks to walk to get to Ginny’s house. I glanced over my shoulder one more time to look for Tanner but didn’t see him.

A latent alcohol haze remained as we walked, and I kept the movie playing in my mind. Waiting on the stairs. Tanner stopped, sat down with me in the hall. We talked and laughed. I knew I was more forward — braver than I had ever been in my life thanks to the healthy buzz — telling him the truth of what I’d planned. He hadn’t been bothered by it. He’d been a gentleman. He hadn’t even tried to kiss me until I’d made the move.

I wondered if my forwardness was a sin. I knew King Solomon in *Song of Songs* warned, *do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires*. I knew this because my dad and mom had recited the verse whenever we had the sex talk. But Solomon had 700 wives or something ridiculous like that. I’m thinking he wasn’t a very reputable source in regard to female sexuality. Tanner didn’t seem to mind my forwardness. I smiled recalling it and touched my lips with my fingertips. The moment I’d looked up into his brown eyes, and they twinkled like brilliant stars offering light, I’d forgotten to be afraid.

“So?” Ginny asked. I could hear the smile in her voice despite the darkness. A streetlamp illuminated us a moment as we continued

walking. Liam had his hands in his pockets, slightly ahead of Ginny and me, head down. Ginny looked at me, her eyebrows raised, with a knowing grin.

I couldn't contain my smile. Instead of saying anything, I squealed and did a little dance. Ginny joined me.

"Oh my god."

I knew Liam was rolling his eyes. "Shut it, Liam." I turned and threw my arms around him. Then I kissed his cheek. "Just be happy for me."

He pulled away from me and wiped his cheek against his shoulder without removing his hands from his pockets. "I don't want Tanner James spit anywhere on this body."

"Uh. Are you sure about that?"

"Yes!" he said. "Ew. He's nasty. And I think you deserve better too."

"Are you slut shaming her?" Ginny asked.

"No! I just—" But he didn't finish the thought.

I stopped in the middle of the road. Ginny and Liam continued walking until they noticed I wasn't still walking with them.

"Wait. Liam?"

"What?"

He turned to look at me, and if I wasn't still buzzed, I probably wouldn't have asked the question. "Do you like Tanner? Like like him a little?" Liam had come out to me and Ginny a few months prior, so I was still trying to understand his world.

He shuddered. "No. I mean, there is no denying he's hot, but I do not like him. And newsflash: he doesn't bat for my team."

"Why so adamant?"

He walked back to me. "Because, Em." He reached out and grasped the tops of my arms. "I love you; I don't want you hurt. And Tanner James — well — he isn't the kind of guy who takes care of a nice girl's heart."

"Then why did you go along with this plan?"

He dropped his hands to his sides and shrugged. "Because

you need to do you. Who am I to get in the way of your journey?”

“One of my best friends.” I looped my arm with his. We walked toward Ginny, and I linked my other arm with hers, me between them.

“Would you have listened?” Liam asked.

“Nope.”

We all laughed, and then I started singing our anthem from *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, “Please Let Me Get What I Want.” Their voices joined me, mostly off-key, and we walked down the road arm-in-arm like Ferris, Cameron and Sloane.

On Monday after the party, I looked for Tanner. Hopeful. Though to be honest, I knew before committing to the task of *Operation Kiss Tanner James*, I was taking a risk. There was a high probability that Tanner wouldn’t be as affected by the kiss as I was. I wasn’t a complete fool about his lifestyle, but I couldn’t help but wish he’d felt something too — like I had. In my mind, I conjured Samantha from *Sixteen Candles* and the way she’d captured hot-guy Jake’s attention. I’d imagined that if I went about it the right way, Tanner would see me like I saw him. And maybe we’d sit on a table and eat a birthday cake (okay, I knew better than to fantasize that; it hadn’t even been a real cake!).

When he responded to the kiss, but then hadn’t wanted to walk out with me, I hadn’t been prepared for the way disappointment and confusion would mar up the inside of my heart. I couldn’t blame him, really. I was Emma Matthews, and he was Tanner James. It was like trying to cross a social divide like Andie and Blaine in *Pretty in Pink*. I made the assumption it was because he was embarrassed that he’d kissed me. I knew that wasn’t the only possibility. It just seemed the most plausible in my mind.

Then, at lunch, when I walked into the cafeteria, and I finally saw him, all the fears rolled up into a ball and sat at the center of my chest coated in hope. He was sitting with his friends, Griffin, Josh, and Danny. They acted like their normal obnoxious selves with their raucous talking and laughter. Greta Mills squealed, reaching over

Tanner's back, her boobs pressed up against him as he held something out of her reach. It was clear she didn't really want whatever he was holding away from her. She wanted what I wanted: his attention.

Suddenly, his gaze connected with mine — just a moment — and my spine buzzed with anticipation. I just wanted a smile. *Tell me you remember*, I thought. *Let me know it wasn't just me who felt something*. Then his brown eyes shifted, and he turned away, looked up at Greta to offer her the sunshine of his smile.

Nothing.

My stomach clenched with self-loathing and constricted with want, even as tears burned the back of my eyes. I couldn't stop thinking about how stupid I was being — still wanting him. I knew it. I knew it walking into that party. I knew it was a possibility, but my smarts couldn't keep my emotions from making the leap from kiss to something more. I knew there was nothing about me that would be something that would hold Tanner's interest. Yet, foolishly, I'd hoped, and that was what I got for letting my guard down and taking a risk.

I slunk over to the lunch table where I sat with Ginny and Liam, but I'd lost my appetite.

"So, I was telling Ginny," Liam stopped speaking when he looked at me. "Emma? What happened?" He reached across the table and offered me a reassuring squeeze.

"Nothing. It's nothing." I couldn't help but glance at Tanner again. Greta was squealing like a pig now, though Tanner wasn't looking at her anymore and had passed off whatever he'd been holding to Josh. Greta was still laying across his back reaching, making sure Tanner had all the feel of her he could get. I rolled my eyes.

Liam followed my gaze and turned back to me. "Emma. I told—"

I held up my hand. "Don't Liam. Don't say 'I told you so.' Please. I got what I wanted."

His eyes softened around their almond-shaped edges behind his glasses, and his lips pouted, just a little. “Did you?”

I knew what he was asking. He knew me too well. He knew I had a mad crush on the wrong kind of boy — a boy that didn’t look twice at a girl like me. But like all my plans (just like all of my efforts at school), it worked. I thought if I just got a kiss, the infatuation would be served. I could let it go. Chalk it up to a great kiss. Move on. I hadn’t considered it would awaken something more in me.

“He’s an asshole, Emma. He doesn’t care about anyone but himself,” Ginny said.

I knew she was trying to make me feel better. It didn’t. It served to make me feel like more of a weakling for wanting someone who didn’t want me back.

I sighed.

Counted to three.

Then with another sigh, I straightened my spine and resolved to climb back into the box of safety where I’d insulated myself. Maybe that’s what King Solomon meant: avoid the physical, to avoid the awakening, to avoid the hurt. He might not have been a good source about the roles of women, but maybe he had something on emotions; he was considered a wise king, after all. Whatever. I needed to focus on what I could control: school, my extracurriculars, planning, implementing, applying to college.

“I got what I wanted,” I told my friends. “I set out to accomplish a task, even if it was a bit unconventional and, perhaps, not within the scope of my usual projects.” I looked up from the table to Liam and Ginny and smiled to reassure them even though I was talking myself into my feelings. “So, when viewed that way, I was successful, right?”

“When you put it that way—” Ginny held up her fork— “you gave him a taste of his own medicine.” She giggled before taking another bite of her salad.

I looked down at my lunch. It didn’t feel good to think I’d used him, but maybe it was the same, in a way.

When I raised my eyes again, I saw Liam smile, but his eyes watched me with his old-soul wisdom and far more knowing than I wanted from him. I offered him a bright smile to reassure him. “I’m fine. I promise. Case closed. Moving on.” I pulled an apple from my lunch bag and took a bite as a symbolic action to prove it to him. Even though I knew I could say it until I was blue in the face, it wouldn’t make it true just then. The thing was, I had this awesome gift: when I set my mind to doing something, I was usually able to think my way into it.

t a n n e r

I glanced at Emma across the cafeteria. She was sitting with her friends where they always sat, creatures of habit. I knew all I had to do was glance up and find her there whenever I needed my Emma fix. She was usually studying, and sometimes she was telling a story, but most often she was listening to her friends talk with a content look on her face. Now, she wasn't looking my way — which I knew was a good thing even if it felt terrible — and the look on her face wasn't easy to see. Instead of her usual joy, the corners of her mouth were weighted. With a cheek pressed into her hand, she leaned against the table. Her body was turned away from me.

I'd noticed her the moment she'd entered the cafeteria. Truth: I'd been hoping to see her all day. She'd stalled, and then her eyes locked with mine. In their depths: hope and anticipation. My heart moved, recognizing her look, because it matched how I felt. My heart twitched with want, but I shoved the feeling back into its cage. I couldn't go there. It wasn't safe to connect like that to anyone. I squashed any seedlings that might have been sprouting in that freshly tilled soil, looked away, and smiled at Greta, who was flirting shamelessly with me. It made me feel like shit, but that was the exact

reason for not doing anything to encourage Emma or the feelings inside me.

After that kiss, I'd spent the rest of the weekend at home by myself. Griff had tried to talk me into going to a party with him the next night, but I just couldn't do it. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw her, felt her lips, tasted her tongue, heard her soft moans, reimagined the curves of her in my hands. I didn't want to lose it to anything else, so I'd holed up in my room with video games and my books content to just sit in my memory for the time being. I wasn't ready to let the moment I'd shared with Emma go. It had been — perfect.

Now, though, as my want strained toward her, I knew I needed to get her out of my mind, otherwise she was going to grow and spread. I knew where feelings led, had a healthy dose of stay-away-from-that by observing my parents. "What's up this weekend?" I said to anyone around the table listening.

"My parents are out of town," Melanie said.

My stomach turned, but I ignored it.

"Is that an invitation?" Griff looked at her.

"For you guys, yes. But we should keep it — intimate." Her smile was suggestive.

Greta, still draped across my back, wrapped her arms around my shoulders and leaned forward so she could touch my chest. I had the urge to push her off but reminded myself I had some forgetting to do.



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