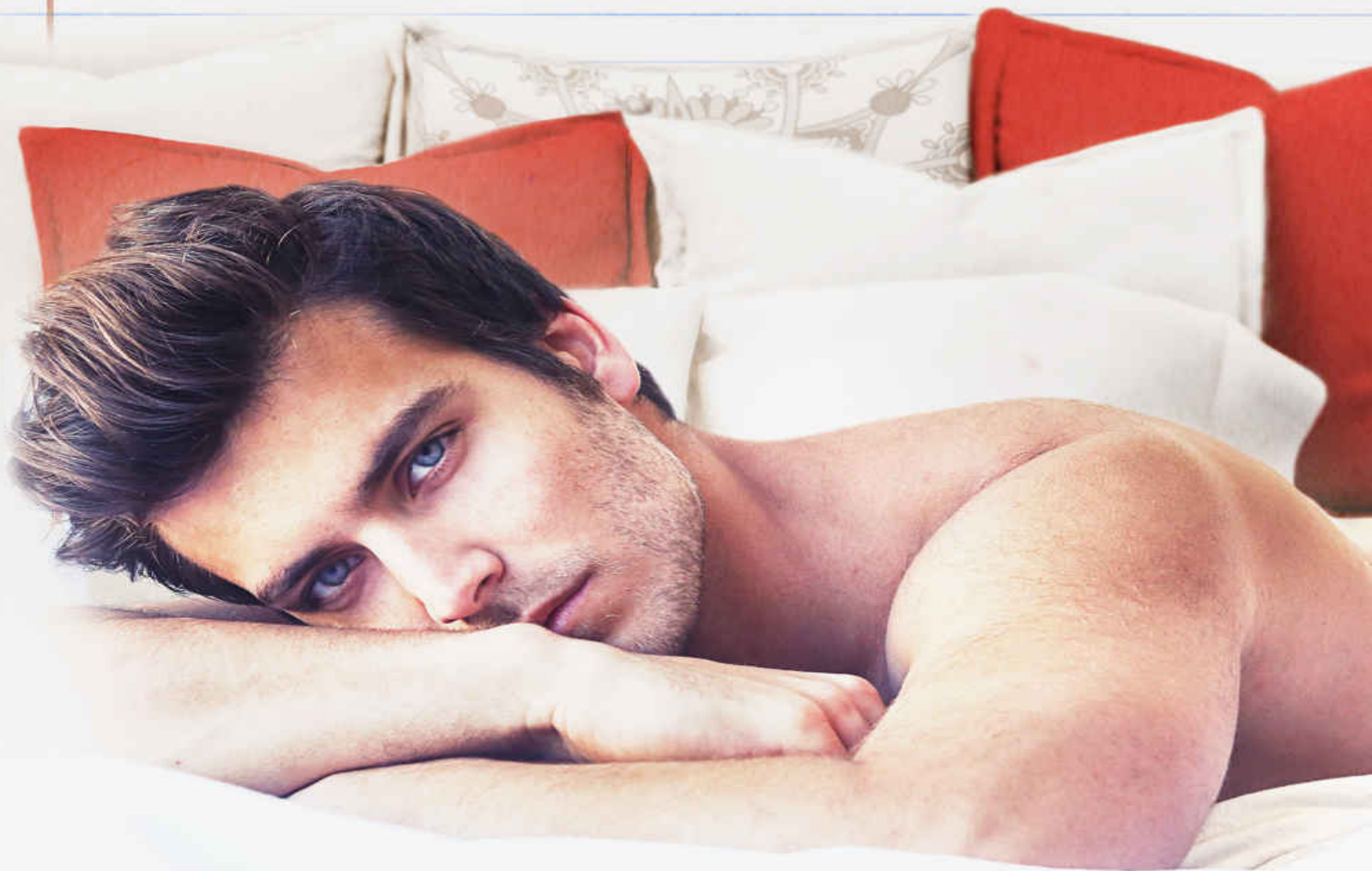


*What happens when you fall for your worst enemy?*

# *Forget You, Ethan*



NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**WHITNEY G.**

# **Forget You, Ethan**

*a novel*

WHITNEY G.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2018

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without prior permission of the author.

Cover design by Najla Qamber of Najla Qamber Designs.

# Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Forget You, Ethan](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

[Back Then: 7½ Years Old](#)

[Track 1. This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things \(4:00\)](#)

[Track 2. So It Goes... \(4:23\)](#)

[Track 3. Should've Said No \(2:41\)](#)

[Track 4. Bad Blood \(3:22\)](#)

[Back Then: 9 ½ Years Old](#)

[Track 5. Gorgeous \(3:12\)](#)

[Track 6. Tell Me Why \(5:01\)](#)

[Track 7. Getaway Car \(4:16\)](#)

[Back Then: 15 ½ Years Old](#)

[Track 8. ...Ready for It? \(3:11\)](#)

[Track 9. Don't Blame Me \(4:25\)](#)

[Back Then: 16 Years Old](#)

[Track 10. Style \(3:59\)](#)

Track 11. Sparks Fly (2:42)

Back Then: 16 ½ Years Old

Track 12. Mine (1:57)

Track 13. Dancing With Our Hands Tied (4:49)

Track 14. Dress (2:14)

Track 14A. Reputation (2:18)

Track 15. Delicate (3:27)

Back Then: 17 Years Old

Track 16. King of My Heart (3:30)

Track 17. End Game (3:37)

Track 18. Don't Blame Me (4:27)

Back Then: 18 Years Old

Back Then: 18 Years Old

Track 19. Call It What You Want (3:22)

Track 20. I Know Places (1:13)

Track 21. I Did Something Bad (4:09)

Track 22. Shake It Off (2:22)

Track 23. Wildest Dreams (2:09)

Track 24. Mean (3:47)

Track 25. Look What You Made Me Do (0:20)

Back Then: 18 Years Old

Track 26. Welcome to New York (3:04)

Track 27. All You Had To Do Was Stay (4:10)

At Sea: First Week Gone

At Sea: Three Weeks Gone

At Sea: Six Weeks Gone

Track 28. I Almost Do (3:11)

Track 29. Breathe (2:39)

Track 29A. Begin Again (1:39)

Back Then: 18 1/2 Years Old

Track 30. This Love (3:53)

Track 31. How You Get The Girl (2:46)

Forget You, Rachel

*For those of us who grew up during a time when it took more than a click of a button for someone to be your friend, a time when the internet was still in dial-up mode, and a time when we thought everything would remain the same ...*

ALSO BY WHITNEY G.:



***SERIES & STANDALONES:***



**STEAMY COFFEE READS Collection**

*Naughty Boss*

*Dirty Doctor*

*Cocky Client*

*Filthy Lawyer*



**REASONABLE DOUBT SERIES**

*Reasonable Doubt #1*

*Reasonable Doubt #2*

*Reasonable Doubt #3*



**FALLING FOR MR. STATHAM Series**

*Resisting the Boss*

*Loving the Boss*



**THE ONE WEEK SERIES**

*On a Tuesday*

*On a Wednesday*

*On a Thursday*

*On a Friday*

*On a Saturday*

*On a Sunday*

*On a Monday*

*Sincerely, Carter*

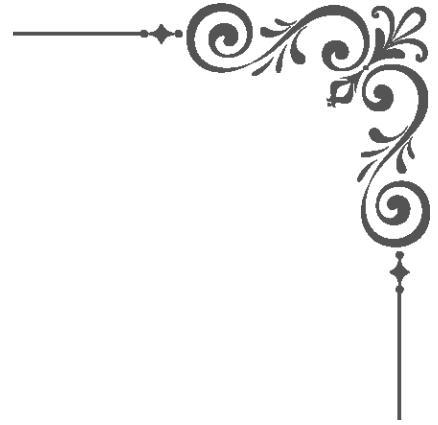
*Forget You, Ethan*

*Turbulence*

*Over Us, Over You*



*Two Weeks' Notice*  
*The Layover*



# PROLOGUE

*Rachel*



THE FIRST LETTER I ever wrote was addressed to a boy in my first-grade class. His name was Nate Cloud, and even at six years old, my crush on him (and his light blue overalls) was overwhelming. My words were written in bright green crayon as a simple, “Do you like me? Circle yes or no.”

That asshole circled no.

The second letter I wrote was to a girl in my library class. Her name was Ashley Donovan, and I desperately wanted to be her best friend. I wrote a full three lines telling her all the things we had in common—all the things that would make us the perfect set of friends. (Pink jelly sandals, a Barbie Dream House, and a collection of bright Beanie Babies.) My words were written on notebook paper, with a final question that read, “Will you please be my best friend? Circle yes or yes.”

She didn’t circle either one.

She created her own option: NO.

I made it through first and second grade with a broken heart and zero friends, so I kept the rest of my letters to myself.

Until I met the boy who lived on my brand-new street, the boy who became my first best friend.

For all of *three seconds*.

He was the worst person I’d ever met in my life, and the very moment he quoted some bullshit about “keeping [his] friends close and [his] enemies closer,” all while throwing me off my bike and kicking me to the ground, I was convinced that the word “friend” would never be a part of my vocabulary. I thought I’d never find someone who loved letters as much as me.

That is, until he became the first person in my life to ever write me back.

Not just once.

Not just twice.

*Always.*

Even though we hated each other down to our marrow, and we could never get along for more than twenty minutes at a time, we always wrote back...



## Back Then: 7½ Years Old

*Ethan*



*I COULD'VE SWORN THAT my new neighbor was supposed to be a boy...*

That's what my parents told me when the house down the street from us finally sold. They said, "Oh, they seem like such a nice family! They even have a son for you to meet. How nice will that be?"

It *would've been* very nice because every family on our street was full of stupid girls. Not a single one of those girls liked me, and I didn't like any of them either.

So, when my dad came into my room today and told me to get dressed to meet the neighbors, I was shocked when he took my action figures and returned them to my nightstand.

"I don't think so," he said. "Rachel probably won't want to see those."

"*Rachel?* Who is Rachel?" I asked.

"Your new neighbor down the street." He smiled so easily, as if those five words didn't ruin any hopes I had of finally having a friend in this neighborhood. It was bad enough that we lived in the suburbs and it took half an hour to get to anywhere decent like the movies or the skate park. But now, the last house on our block housed the worst thing on the planet. A girl. *Again.*

Groaning, I slipped headphones and a CD player into my backpack—ready to tune out everything as soon as my parents talked about the boring stuff. I made my way downstairs and grabbed my mom's usual "Meet the New Neighbors" cake off the counter. I followed her and my dad out the

front door and down the sidewalk—rolling my eyes at the Cramer twins who were playing in their front yard.

“Hello, Mr. & Mrs. Wyatt!” They waved. “Hello, Ethan!”

“Don’t wave at me,” I said.

“*Ethan ...*” My mom narrowed her eyes at me. “Be nice.”

“Hello, Clara. Hello, Joan.” I forced myself to smile. The second my mom turned her back, they flipped their middle fingers up at me. I happily returned the favor.

*Ugh.*

When we made it to the new neighbors’ house, a red-headed woman and her husband stepped out and smiled at us.

“Wow! I wasn’t expecting you to really bake us a cake!” The woman looked surprised. “It’s been a long time since I’ve had something home-made.”

*She bought it at the store. It’s not home-made.*

As they ushered us inside, I hoped that their usual new neighbor conversation wouldn’t last as long as it usually did. They always talked about the same exact thing with every new family. *Are the schools here as good as they say? What do kids do around here for fun? How cute would it be if our kids became friends?*

“Well, look at you!” The woman bent down to my level. “I waved at you the other day when you were playing in your yard, but I don’t think you saw me. I’m Mrs. Dawson. What’s your name?”

“Ethan Wyatt,” I said.

“Well, Ethan Wyatt, I have a daughter named Rachel Dawson who looks like she’s about your age. Let me guess. You’re seven, right?”

“Seven *and a half*.”

“She says the same thing.” She laughed and pointed to the staircase. “Why don’t you go introduce yourself to her while I pour your parents a glass of wine? It’s the first room on the left.”

“No, that’s okay.” I shrugged. “I don’t want to meet another girl. I’ve met enough of those already.”

“*Ethan Wyatt.*” My mother warned under her breath. “Go say hello to Rachel, now.”

I rolled my eyes and took my time walking up the steps, stopping when I saw the posters in the hallway. They were all superheroes and artists. Superheroes and artists that I liked.

*Maybe she has a brother after all.*

I knocked on the Spiderman that covered the bedroom door, and a girl with uneven bangs and ugly freckles opened it.

“My mom said you were a cute boy.” She crossed her arms. “She *lied*.”

“Like you can talk.” I scoffed. “You look like a Raggedy-Ann doll, and your hair looks like you cut it yourself. With a broken razor.”

“I *did* cut it myself.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “And I did use a razor.”

I glared at her, and she glared right back at me.

I contemplated knocking some of her stuff over or pushing her to the floor to show her who ran this block, but the huge *Jurassic Park* poster on her wall caught my attention. Beneath it, on her dresser, she had a collection of *Star Wars* action figures and a massive stack of comic books.

“Do you have an older brother?” I forgot why I was mad at her. “Is that why you have all this stuff?”

“No, this stuff is all mine.” She flopped onto her bed. “All the girls at my old school thought I was weird, but I don’t care. Superheroes beat Barbie any day. You have a sister?”

“Nope. I’m an only child.”

“Me, too.” She looked me over, and then she let out a breath. “Is this a good neighborhood?”

“It’s a boring one,” I said, stepping closer to her second set of comic books. “You’ll have no problem making friends, though. Every family on this block and the next has daughters.”

“I noticed.” She groaned. “I met some twins yesterday, and they invited me to play dress-up and tea this weekend.”

“See? You’re going to be best friends with the Cramer twins before you know it.”

“I *hate* playing dress up.” She scrunched up her face. “I hate tea, too. I’ll just pretend to be sick.”

I smiled. Maybe Rachel wasn’t so bad after all. Well, she was still a girl, but maybe she was a cool girl. For now.

“It was nice meeting you, Rachel.” I headed to the door once I heard my mom call my name.

“Wait.” She pointed to my headphones. “What are you listening to?”

“Good music, trust me, I’m sure you wouldn’t know anything about that.”

“Try me.” She tossed me a box of CDs, so I pulled my CD keeper from my backpack and tossed it to her. I flipped through all her cases and felt my eyes widening as I read the names of each artist. With the exception of a few terrible pop bands, she listened to almost every artist I did.

“I guess your taste isn’t that bad.” She returned my CDs, and I returned hers. “And you know, neither are you. Do your parents let you use the internet?”

“Yes and no,” I admitted. “My parents always check the computer before and after I use it, so I don’t really use it.”

“Okay, well ...” She pulled out a note card and scribbled her full name and address. “I prefer writing letters anyway.”

“You want me to write you a letter from right down the street?”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re *right down the street*,” I said, laughing. “I’m always outside. Just come by if your parents let you. Besides, from the looks of things on your corkboard, it looks like you can barely spell. ‘Forget’ is spelled with an ‘e,’ not an ‘i.’ It clearly would be unfair for me to expect you to write a decent letter if you can’t get a simple word like that right.”

“Ugh.” She rolled her eyes. “Okay, fine.”

“Fine.” I walked to the hallway, but before I could set my foot on the first step, I felt her pressing her hands against my back. Felt her pushing me forward, and before I knew it, I was tumbling down the steps. *Hard.*

*What the ...*

I held back a cry when I hit the bottom and looked up the steps for an explanation, but all she did was cross her arms.

“I changed my mind,” she said. “I *don’t* like you and I don’t want to be your friend. Besides, the word ‘forget’ is spelled exactly how I spelled it, so maybe you need to get your eyes checked or learn how to read. *Take that*, Ethan.”

“I don’t want to be your friend either.” I glared at her as I stood to my feet, knowing that I should’ve never trusted a stupid girl. “*Forget you*, Rachel.”





## Track 1. This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things (4:00)

*Ethan*



*Present Day*



*I STILL HATE RACHEL Dawson...*

I looked over the most recent letter she'd sent me from her "Semester at Sea" program, and I still couldn't bring myself to write her back. It'd been three months since our last exchange, and my blood was boiling like I was reading her words for the first time.

*Dear Ethan,*

*I'm pretty sure your girlfriend is cheating on you. Like, all the SIGNS are there, and they were there eight letters ago. As a person who honestly loves seeing you miserable, I can't say that this makes me happy. (Only because I don't like cheaters, though. If you were upset about anything else, I'd be laughing my ass off right now.)*

*Maybe she's just not impressed with all those accolades you LOVE to throw in my face all the time: The fact that you were Mr. Popular in high school for three years in a row (I still believe you stuffed the ballot box, and it was high school. Time to let that shit go.) The fact you drive a classic blue convertible (What the hell does that have to do with anything? Like, ever?) And the fact that you're supposedly "running shit on SBU's campus." (I've*

*been on this ship for three years, and none of the students who do single semesters have any idea who you are when I ask. No. One.)*

*Thank you for the unwanted advice about MY boyfriend, but seeing as though I know what it takes to make a relationship work, I don't need it.*

*Forget You,*

*Rachel*

*PS—Maybe you're not as good at sex as you thought you were? (That's probably it. I can send you some 'How to' books on that topic if you like. Let me know!)*

I reread her letter one last time, putting it away in my glovebox. Then I looked up at my girlfriend's windows for the second hour in a row, watching her grind against one of my closest friends.

I was supposed to be surprising her with a "four-month anniversary" gift right now since she'd thrown not-so-subtle hints all week, but after watching her get pounded by someone else, I knew I was returning everything to the store the second I broke up with her. Today.

*I can't believe Rachel was right about this shit.*

Not wanting to wait for them to finish, I stepped out of my car and walked to her front door. I used the key she gave me months ago, the one labeled "Ethan and Lisa forever," and walked into the living room.

"Ohhhh god!" She moaned. "Oh god, yes!"

"Yeah?" My friend, Brody, slapped her ass. "Is this what you like?"

"Yeah, she loves that position," I said, and he immediately stilled. His eyes went wide, and all the color left Lisa's face.

He pulled out of her, quickly moving away. Then he stared at me in shock for several seconds before picking up his jeans and rushing to the bathroom.

Lisa stood in front of me, stark naked and red. Keeping her eyes on mine, she walked over to the couch.

She bit her lip, looking as if she was searching for the right thing to say.

"Hi, Ethan," she said, finally. "I know this looks really bad, but I can explain."

I said nothing, and she picked up her clothes.

"Can you stop looking at me like that first, though?" She pulled her bra over her head. "Like, please?"

I didn't move. I watched as she struggled to put on the rest of her clothes. Blue jeans. Faded shirt. My high school varsity hoodie.

“It’s like you’re a zombie or something right now,” she said. “You haven’t said a word to me since you came in. At least let me know what you’re thinking so I can know where to start.”

Brody stepped out of the bathroom and looked between us, grabbing his jacket and walking over to me. “We’ll still be cool after this, right?” He held out his hand for a handshake, and it took everything in me not to knock him to the ground and beat his ass.

“So, we’re *not* cool?” he asked. “I mean, don’t tell me you’re willing to flush years of our friendship down the drain over something like this.”

“Depends,” I said finally. “By ‘something like this’ do you mean the fact that I sat in the driveway and watched you fuck my girlfriend for almost two hours?”

He paled, and Lisa adjusted her shirt for the umpteenth time.

“I know this looks foul,” he said, lowering his voice. “But bros before hos, man. She was the one who called me over here. I said no, but she was insistent, and then she said—”

“Get the hell out of my face.” I glared at him. “*Now.*”

He looked as if he wanted to say more, but he didn’t. He looked over his shoulder at Lisa for a few seconds before leaving the two of us alone. The second the door slammed shut, Lisa paced the floor.

“I’m sorry about this, Babe,” she said, giving me her worst poker face. “It was a stupid thing to do, and if I could take it back, I would.”

“Which part?” I tapped my fingers against the counter. “There’s more than one thing wrong with this situation.”

“Oh, come on, Ethan!” she said, stepping closer. “This was a huge mistake, and if I had known that you were coming back into town today—”

“You would’ve done it yesterday?”

“No.” She sighed. “I am sorry, okay? I don’t know how else you want me to put this. I got lonely and wanted sex, and since you haven’t been in town for a while, I guess I just got carried away.”

“I was gone for two days. *Two. Days.*”

“Well, since what we have is real, I’m sure that we can get past this. I still have feelings for you, and I know you still have feelings for me.” Her mouth was moving a mile a minute, and I couldn’t help but tune out her voice and stare at her.

Red-haired and green-eyed, Lisa was hands down one of the most attractive girls on this campus, and she knew it. She couldn’t help but flirt

with any guy in her radius, and although I'd long accepted that as one of her worst flaws, sleeping with my close friend (Well, ex-friend) was the ultimate deal breaker.

I mentally rewound the past few months of our threadbare relationship—skipping through all the new tears and tatters, all her fake promises and lies.

*"Oh, me and Brody are going to go study together." "No, don't worry, Brody can take me home." "Oh, Babe. That's what your friend Brody is for."*

"I think we can get through this with a little bit of communication." She was still talking. "This doesn't have to be the end of us."

"It is the end of us." I pulled her apartment key off my keychain and set it down. There were a few things of mine in her room, but I was honestly willing to do without them if it meant I didn't have to listen to her anymore.

I looked her over one last time, wanting to say some final words for closure since "Fuck you" was too good for her, but I was done. I turned around and walked out, heading down her apartment's steps.

"That's it?" She followed me, yelling. "You're not going to give me a chance to explain?"

I slid my shades over my eyes and continued walking.

"I'm not the only person who has ever made a mistake in this relationship, Ethan!" She walked faster, stopping in front of my vintage blue convertible. "I've seen the way you look at other girls sometimes, and I don't say a word."

I slipped behind the wheel and cranked the engine.

"Oh, and let's not forget the fact that you didn't write me a birthday card this year."

"Are you shitting me right now?" I glared at her. "Are you honestly trying to compare me not writing your birthday card to you fucking someone else behind my back?"

"No, but—" She sighed. "You did neglect me sometimes."

I looked at the clock on my dashboard. I was giving this conversation two minutes, and then I was reversing like hell out of her driveway and never coming back again.

"I know you work and all, but somehow you always found the time to hang out with your friend Emily all the time."

“Emily was my study partner, and I always invited you to come along with us.”

“Well...” She tapped her lip, searching for more excuses, more ways to hold on to something that was long gone. “You never kissed me in public to show people we were together. And you always found the time to write a certain someone a letter every week, and you never wrote one for me.”

“*Bullshit, Lisa.*” I rolled my eyes. “If the certain someone you’re attempting to talk about is my old neighbor Rachel Dawson—who I’ve told you time and time again that I honestly can’t stand, I haven’t written her back in three months. You and I have only been dating for four.”

“Ethan, I am sorry. Is there anything I can do to rebuild your trust?”

“Yes, you can step back onto the grass.”

“Okay...” She stepped onto the grass and smiled. “Is that it?”

I slammed my car in reverse without answering her, beating my fist against the steering wheel as I made it onto the backroad. I’d suspected something was off with her months ago, and I knew that this wasn’t her first time cheating on me. I also knew that I was going to have to drink her away tonight and make sure that she was a distant memory as soon as possible.

Approaching a red light, I pulled out my phone, and double checked the address for my new apartment. Since this year was my first year living off campus, I was looking forward to not having to deal with drunk first-year students, endless dorm parties, and well, trouble. I had two strikes with the campus police after hosting several wild night parties in the past, and I knew they weren’t going to be so lenient with my next strike.

I opened my glove compartment to find the house’s entry pass number, and a slew of purple envelopes and letters fell onto the floor.

*Ugh, Rachel.*

I picked them up and locked them away again.

Turning into my new subdivision, I sped past all the white houses—looking for the only one in blue. I slammed the brakes once I saw the heap of burnt wood and metal in the place where my house was supposed to be.

*I must be on the wrong street...*

Refusing to believe that this was a reality, I blinked a few times. Then I circled the block, but when I returned, 3376 Sun Swept Lane was still the same.

Burned down to the ground.

*What the hell?*

I turned off the engine and stepped out of the car.

There was yellow tape where my fireplace was supposed to be, and a red smiley face button was staring at me from where my kitchen counters should've stood. There was also a charred "Welcome Home" sign next to the mailbox.

"About time you showed up!" My randomly selected roommate for the year, Greg, tapped my shoulder from behind. "I've been waiting on you for hours, man."

"What happened to our house, Greg?"

"It looks like it burned down."

"I can see that." I crossed my arms. "What the hell happened?"

"You have to promise that you won't get mad first."

"No, you need to tell me what happened first."

"I need the promise," he said, smiling. "I've heard about what happens when you get angry. People tend to get their jaws broken."

"What? You just made that shit up."

"Is it true, though?"

I gave him a blank stare.

"Okay, okay." He shrugged. "Well, while you were away, I threw a little housewarming party with a bonfire. When we ran out of alcohol, we took the party a few blocks down to a football player's apartment, and I might've forgotten to put out all the embers before leaving. At least I'm alive and well, right? I think that's all that truly matters in this unfortunate situation."

I stared at him in utter disbelief. The main reason why I'd picked Greg to be my roommate was because he *wasn't* my close friend. He was a fellow honors student who swore he just wanted a break from campus life like me, and he swore that he was responsible.

"I take it that our three-thousand-dollar security deposit is down the drain?" I asked.

"Hell yeah." He laughed. "We're never getting that shit back, and I don't think we're getting a reference."

"So, are we supposed to live out of our cars while we make insurance payments for the damage?" I clenched my jaw.

"Not at all, my friend."

"You and I are not friends."

"We're going to be." He smiled. "The landlord was pretty chill when he found out about the fire. Well, he wasn't necessarily 'happy,' and I think he

called me a dumbass, but the insurance company is going to cover everything on his end.”

“Then where does that leave us?”

“Well, I asked him if he could let us rent the house next door, but he said hell no. So, I spent yesterday house-hunting and I found us a new place that’s ten times better than this.”

I refused to believe that. All of the best campus houses were already rented for the semester, and our house was a significant upgrade before he burned it down.

“Okay,” I said. “Show me where this new place is.”

I slid behind my wheel again and followed him down a winding road that was dotted with massive houses that overlooked the beach. Each one was four times the size of our burnt house, and each one looked as if it wasn’t meant for college students.

*Is that a pool on the roof?*

He pulled into the driveway at the last house on the block—a huge white beach house with light grey shutters, and I was hoping like hell that this place belonged to someone in his well-connected family.

“You have to see the inside of this thing!” Greg got out of his car and walked up to the wraparound porch. He opened the door, and I knew from the moment I stepped inside that we’d never be able to afford this.

*There’s no damn way.*

“Four bedrooms, four bathrooms, and a hot tub out back.” He walked through the kitchen. “It comes furnished, too!”

“Does your dad own this place?”

“Ha! No. He would only let me stay in his beach house if I agreed to go to his alma mater.” He opened the door to a guest room. “By the way, please don’t vote for him in the next mayoral election. I’m voting for his opponent.”

I wanted to laugh, but I was still pissed at him. “How much does this place cost?”

“The beach is right outside our back door, and the deck wraps all the way around the house,” he said. “Oh, and check this out.”

He picked up a remote and the shades in the living room moved up, revealing a beautiful ocean view. Seconds later, the fireplace in the living room came to life.

“How much does this place cost, Greg?”

“You’ve got to see the basement! There are two pool tables and a wet bar. And let’s not forget the temperature-controlled pool on the roof—Like, *the roof!*”

“*Greg.*” I blocked his way. “How much does this place cost?”

“Seven hundred and fifty a month.”

“Really? That’s it?”

“Well, it’s seven hundred and fifty per person if it’s just you and me. Oh, and that doesn’t include any of the bills which are like four hundred bucks easy, but it does include the view. It goes to five hundred a month if we get a third person. It’ll be even less with four, but I know you didn’t really want to do four roommates for your senior year.”

*I barely wanted to do one roommate...* “Please tell me that this is some big-ass joke.”

“It’s this or the Lobos Street condos, man. I mean, those Lobos places are only two hundred and fifty dollars per person, but availability is scarce so we’d probably have to share a studio at this point.” He looked around.

“You did say that you wanted to live somewhere super quiet.”

“What we had before was super quiet.”

“It didn’t have a hot tub, though.” He pressed the remote again, and the doors to the deck slid open, revealing a huge, steaming bath. “You can’t say I didn’t try...”

“I can say a lot of things to you at this moment, but something tells me it won’t matter.”

“It really won’t.” he smiled. “Mostly because I already signed the lease...Oh, and um. I also forged your name. You were out of town, and since homelessness wasn’t an appealing option, I had to make an executive decision for us both.”

*What the fuck?* “So, we’ll definitely need a roommate.” I gritted my teeth and walked over to the refrigerator, shaking my head at the ‘*I’m sooooo sorry, dude!*’ note he’d placed in front of a six pack of beer.

“Preferably one by the end of the week. That is unless you’ve already covered the first month of rent?”

“Yeah, right.” He laughed. “The new landlord took one last look at my last name and gave me the benefit of the doubt because of my dad. We have until the end of the week.”

“Have you listed an ad anywhere yet?”



“I’m ten steps ahead of you.” He smiled and showed me a copy of the latest student newspaper. “People have already emailed me about the space, and a few are coming by Thursday. Well, unless you want to ask your girlfriend.”

“Ex-girlfriend. Even if she weren’t, I’d rather live with a goddamn stranger.”

“Wait, ex?” He raised his eyebrow. “Weren’t you two just together last week?”

“We were before she cheated.” I opened a beer and chugged it. “Want to invite a few people over for drinks to help me forget about her?”

“Absolutely.” He smiled, pulling out his phone. “You know, if you want me to host another backyard bonfire so I can show that I *do* know how to put one out—”

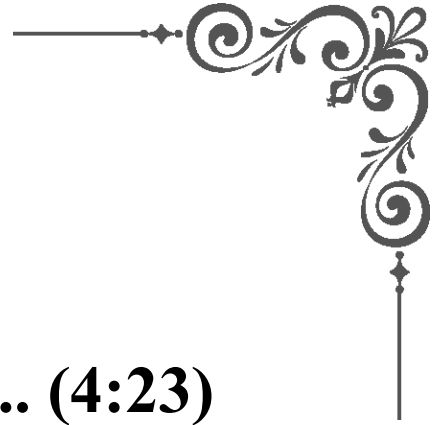
“No more bonfires while you’re living with me, Greg. *Ever.*”

“Yeah, that’s—” He cleared his throat. “That’s probably a good thing. For now, anyway. Sorry about your girl cheating on you, by the way. I’m sure you didn’t see that coming.”

“I really didn’t,” I said, thinking about how Rachel somehow saw it coming miles away (literally) in her smart-ass letter. “I’ll be right back.”

I headed outside to my car and opened my glove box. I pulled out Rachel’s port schedule and a blank sheet of paper.

I finally knew how I was going to respond to her latest letter.



## Track 2. So It Goes... (4:23)

*Rachel*



I HONESTLY WISHED THAT romance authors would start tacking some type of *Warning: This Shit Will Never Happen to You in Real Life* stickers on all their books. That one little thing could save me from getting my hopes up, from expecting each of my new relationships to end differently than the one before.

And maybe, just maybe, if we started with the stickers on the romance books, the trend could spread to colleges who mislead people into thinking that the phrase, “Semester at Sea: Fall in Love with Your Education as You Sail,” isn’t total bullshit.

When my academic advisor first uttered the words “Semester at Sea,” I swooned over all the things the program offered. A “cruise ship remodeled for the classroom,” a way to “take your classes on the water,” and a way “to expand your worldview by spending time at the numerous port stops in foreign countries.”

I envisioned endless nights by the pool, countless hours spent watching the waves roll by, and making friends for a lifetime. I even convinced myself that I’d find the love of my life onboard and we would share the seas together.

Since I was a seventeen-year-old freshman who wanted to get the hell away from my dad, Ethan Wyatt, and all things that reminded me of our small beach town, I signed my name on the dotted line for three years of the sea in a row.

I now regretted the hell out of that decision, and the only nice thing I could say was that all the traveling might give me a slight advantage in my post-college career since I was a Visual Arts & Design major. (Keyword: might.)

The “endless nights at the pool” were nothing more than false hopes since the pool was always crowded, and it closed at eight o’clock. The constant sight of rolling waves became a reminder of how much I missed seeing the shore at home, and the “friends” I made weren’t for a lifetime. They were only mine for a semester at a time.

Most people—*smart* people, chose to do the “one-semester” option and treated the trip like a summer of studying abroad, and all of their “I’ll keep in touch!” promises always fizzled away after a few weeks.

Between the nonexistent Wi-Fi, the predictable daily food in the dining hall, and the never-ending seas, this didn’t feel like the education of my dreams anymore. It was a nightmare.

Not only that, but my hopes of finding love at sea were just as dismal. Most of the guys who joined the program were only looking for sex, and the few that weren’t? They were only good until the end of the voyage.

In fact, my latest relationship was yet another reminder that only a sad and misinformed person would sign up for three-years aboard this ship.

“Hey, Babe.” My boyfriend of two semesters, Tate, smiled as he walked into my room. “What are you up to?”

“Writing down some thoughts,” I said, pointing to my calendar. “I’m also counting down the minutes to my last day aboard.”

“Cool.” He shut the door and handed me a stack of envelopes. “I checked your message box for you. Want to take a break?”

I nodded and closed my notebook. “Let’s get coffee at the café for an hour.”

“Well, I was thinking I could have *you* for an hour instead.”

“You want to have sex?” I smiled.

“Well, our special version of sex.” He walked over to me and pulled me up, walking me over to my bed. “We’re still not ready for the real thing yet.”

Sighing, I lay back on the bed, fully clothed in a sweatshirt and jeans, and he flipped me over—positioning me on all fours.

“You look so sexy in your sweatshirt, Babe,” he whispered into my ear as he held my hips. “Are you ready to feel me?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“You can’t say ‘Yeah, sure,’ at a pivotal moment like this, Rachel.” He whined. “I told you what you’ll need to say to make this work for me, what I need to make sure that you’re the one. Say it.”

“I’m beyond ready to feel you, Babe,” I said, as convincingly as possible. “I want us to become one soul.”

“What else are you supposed to say after that?”

“Hurry up and make me feel good, *Big Bear*.”

“Yes, that’s it.” He growled. Like a goddamn grizzly. He kissed the back of my neck—moving his tongue in circles, before pushing my head down onto the mattress. He whispered something about taking things slow, and then he began grinding his sweats against my jeans. Like all the other times before that we’d done this, I could only feel a small, hard nub between his legs, and I knew I was going to have another case of jean burn on my ass cheeks when he was finished.

“Babe, I feel like you’re not here in the zone with me,” he whispered into my ear. “Are you there?”

“I’m here.” I faked a moan. “*Oh, yeah.*”

“Oh yeah, *Big Bear*.” He corrected me. “Say it louder and growl with me.”

I didn’t respond to that.

He picked up the pace, and I felt my body begging me to do something more fulfilling with my time.

*Something like sleep...*

“Ohhh yeah,” he said. “Imagine me deep inside of you, slipping inside of your greedy wet sponge.” He grabbed at my breasts like they were detachable, growling even louder than before.

“*Ahhh....*” He grinded his nub against me a few more times, and then he let me go before flopping onto the bed.

I turned around and noticed that his entire face was coated in sweat as if we’d actually had sex.

*What is that stain on the front of his pants? Did he really come after THAT?*

I let out a sigh and grabbed a small towel from my bin, handing it to him.

“Was it good for you, *Little Bear*?” he asked.

I nodded, still refusing to verbally answer to that name.

We sat in silence for several minutes, and I was about to suggest that we grab an espresso from the dining hall, but he cleared his throat.

“Do you love me, Rachel?” he asked.

“What?” I raised my eyebrow. “We just met last semester.”

“So?” He sat up. “I can say with all honesty that I love you.”

“We barely know each other, Tate.”

“Well, that’s kind of why I wanted to talk to you before we arrived at the next port ...” He sat up. “I mean, even though what we just shared on your mattress was magical—just like all the other times, I don’t think you’re my soul, Rachel.”

“You mean your *soulmate*?”

“No, I mean my soul. Like, the other half of it.” He looked as if he was struggling to find the words. “I feel like you don’t get excited about the things I like anymore.”

I leaned against the wall. “Is that because I’m not always excited about all the dry humping?”

“It’s not *dry humping*, Rachel.” He looked offended. “It’s preparation for whenever we finally make love. Something I don’t think we’ll ever get to now.”

“Okay, but—” I sighed. “Outside of the preparation for making love, I thought we were on the same page about everything else.” *Well, almost everything else.*

“Ha!” He snorted. “I’ve written you tons of love notes on post-it paper, and you’ve never responded. Not once.”

“That’s because you write all your notes in Russian.”

“So? If you were truly in love with me, you would *learn* Russian,” he said. “It’s called Google translate.”

I didn’t bother reminding him that the Russian alphabet looking nothing like the English alphabet and I wouldn’t even know where to start.

“I find it quite telling that instead of you giving me the written devotion I need, you’d rather write letters to your friend Ethan back home.”

“For the umpteenth time, Ethan is *not* my friend.”

“Yeah.” He rolled his eyes. “He’s your enemy who you supposedly can’t stand, yet for some reason, you write him letters all the time. Is that right?”

“We haven’t written each other in over three months.”

“*And?*” He stood up and walked over to my desk—sending envelopes flying everywhere as he yanked the left drawer open.

“Let’s see...” He picked them up one by one. “A letter from Ethan Wyatt. A letter from Ethan Wyatt. A letter from Ethan Wyatt. A letter from Richard Dawson? Who the hell is Richard Dawson?”

“That’s my dad.” I stood up and snatched that envelope from him.

He continued to pick up the letters, repeatedly saying Ethan’s name until he’d picked up the last one.

“This is over thirty letters, and that’s just during the time we’ve been dating.” He walked over to the bins where I kept all the mail I’d ever received, and then he picked up a few of those envelopes. “I don’t know what type of guy would keep up with your port schedule and send you letters at each one, but if I had a real-life enemy, I wouldn’t send him shit. Also, I need to be the only guy in my girl’s life. If anyone is sending her letters, it needs to be *me*.”

“It’s not like that, Tate. It’s just—”

“A natural habit.” He finished my sentence. “A natural habit from your childhood because you’ve both communicated like this since you were seven and a half years old, I know.”

“So, you finally understand?”

“*Hell no*.” He scoffed. “That excuse is utter bullshit.”

I rolled my eyes. I was tempted to tell him to read one of Ethan’s letters so he could see the truth for himself, but the possibility of not having a jean burn on my ass for a few months was looking pretty appealing right now.

“I honestly thought you were going to be the one for me, Rachel,” he said, returning the letters to my drawer. “I hope you find your soul soon, too.” He tried to kiss my forehead, but I stepped back.

“See?” he said, smiling. “You failed the final test. My *real* soul would’ve begged for forgiveness and a second chance.”

“I’m not begging you for shit.”

“My soul would never be this unapologetic.”

“Please get the hell out of my room, Tate. *Now*.”

“My soul would never speak to me like that either.” He shook his head. “She would love me enough not to utter a single swear word my way.”

I pointed to the door and waited for him to leave. Then I slammed the door behind him for dramatic effect.

Walking over to my wall-calendar, I wrote the words “break up” in bright blue ink, placing them right in the center of today’s date. This was my umpteenth relationship since boarding this ship, and not a single one of them ever resulted in anything more than an eventual breakup.

In all of my relationships, we only scratched the surface level. We learned enough small facts about each other to feel like we were more than casual strangers, but our foundation was never built on anything stronger. At this point, I’d accepted that all semester-at-sea relationships were a way to pass the time until the next voyage. And I knew that by the time I jumped into my next one, I’d forget all about the one that came before.

I took a seat at my desk and flipped through my latest mail, finding a recent letter from Ethan. I hesitated to open it, wanting to save it for after we returned from next week’s port at South Africa, but I couldn’t resist.



DEAR RACHEL,

*My girlfriend was cheating on me. I would say thank you for the heads-up, but I caught them fucking in her living room, so I would’ve found out whether you gave me your unwanted opinion on the situation or not.*

*Since you brought up my accolades, allow me to correct you on a few things: 1) I was voted Mr. Popular for FOUR years in a row. (I’m the only freshman to ever achieve this feat at Azul Mar High, and I’ve never needed to stuff the ballot box since you’re the only person in the entire school who didn’t vote for me.) 2) My car is a 1968 Alfa Romeo Spider which is the best classic car of all time. (It has to do with the fact that the only thing you’ve ever “driven” is a bike, and you’ve still managed to get into multiple car accidents.) 3) I do run shit on this campus, but seeing as though you’ll be spending your next year of college on a boat—again, you’ll never know the truth. (Everyone at this school knows who I am, Rachel. Everyone. It’s time to stop lying to yourself.)*

*Thank you for the unnecessary advice about my now ex-girlfriend. Then again, I’m not sure I should ever take advice from someone whose boyfriend dry humps her three times a day and makes her call him Daddy Bear. (Or is it Big Bear?)*

*I tried to send you some itch cream for your chafed ass, but it didn’t clear Japan’s customs. (If you’d like, I can send you and your boyfriend a few porn flicks so you can know what real sex is like.)*

*Forget You,  
Ethan*

*PS—I'm starting to think that the closest you've gotten to sex this year is through the pages of one of your romance books. Is that why you own so many? (If so, allow me to share my latest short love story: Rachel Dawson murmured as Daddy Bear rubbed his cock against her jeans. Moaning louder, she shut her eyes and decided that her life had been absolutely pathetic all the way up until this point, so there was no point in changing it now. THE END)*

*PSS—Epilogue: She lived happily ever after with her Daddy Bear, and he taught her how to come in her pants, too. ☺*



*UGH!*

I tossed his letter across the room and groaned. I stared at it for several minutes, as if it was going to get up and place itself where it belonged, then I finally picked it up.

With the exception of our most recent correspondence, I kept all of Ethan's letters in a locked trunk. And whenever my newest shipment of romance books was read from cover to cover, I made time to re-read his letters since he often bragged about how much fun life was on the "real campus." He'd always had a way with the written word, and I never did understand why he was pursuing a major in business instead of writing. Not that I gave a damn what he did with his life, though.

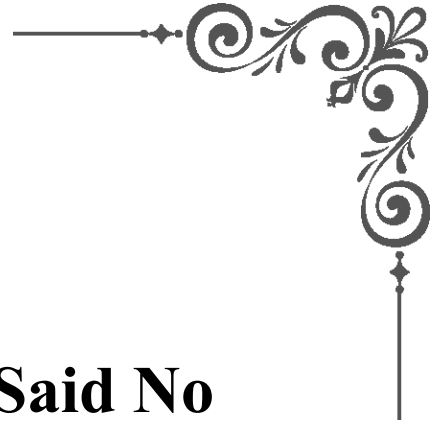
I reorganized all the envelopes Tate had touched, making sure they were in order by date received, and then I made a new space for them in my trunk.

When I was finished, I took out a new purple envelope and a blank sheet of paper—ready to fire back a response, but the lights in my room flickered, and the ship began to rock.

*I don't need to respond to this since there's only one port left, and I'm not telling him that I'm coming back for my senior year. It's not like I'd ever hang out with him on campus anyway.*

I moved onto my bed, resisting for all of ten minutes before rolling over and picking up my vibrator...and a romance book.





## Track 3. Should've Said No (2:41)

*Rachel*



WEEKS LATER, I SNAPPED a few final pictures of the *SS World Odyssey* as I disembarked for the last time. I made sure to capture several shots of the rock wall that I often climbed alone, the towering decks that I walked every morning, and the part of the ship I was certain to miss most. The stern where I spent most of my down time sipping coffee and writing letters to “friends” who hardly ever wrote back.

Tucking my camera into my bag, I let up my umbrella and walked to the luggage holding area. I pushed my way through all the teary-eyed reunions and found my two suitcases. One for the romance books, one for the clothes.

I pulled out my phone and saw what I hadn't seen for more than minutes at a time in over three years. Actual bars for cell phone service.

I scrolled down to my father's name and hit call, hoping like hell he wouldn't answer.

“Rachel?” He crushed my hopes after one ring. “Rachel, you're back today?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow. For some reason, I thought it was tomorrow.”

*Because I told you it was tomorrow.* “Well, no. I just got off the ship, and I'm about to catch a cab to my apartment for the fall. I can send you the address when I get there.”

“Well, if you want to wait twenty minutes or so, me and Stella can come and get you. It looks like it’s about to storm.”

“No, that’s okay.” My stomach churned at the mention of his second wife’s name. “I’ll get a cab and hit you up later.”

“Okay, well...” He paused. “I’m so glad you’re back home safe, and I’ve enjoyed the correspondence and pictures that you frequently sent home. I also appreciate you using the ship’s phone to call me every other Sunday. It almost feels like you never left.” He was quiet again. “I love you.”

“Love you, too, Dad.” I ended the call, feeling a familiar ache in my chest. Whenever the two of us spoke, the words “I love you” always rang hollow, and I always felt like something was missing.

As the soft drizzle became a downpour, I made my way to the taxi platform and waved down the first yellow car.

“Where to, Miss?” The driver opened the back door for me before placing my luggage into the trunk.

“235 Beach Tree Cove.”

He nodded and sped off onto the street.

As he drove, I stared out the window and took in all the things I truly missed about this town. The open-air cafes that lined Main Street, the boutique hotels and carnival pier that sat on the tourists’ side of the beach, and the white sand that stretched along the entire side of our town’s beautiful coast. Even in the pouring rain, the town was perfectly picturesque, and I couldn’t wait to explore it all over again in the sunlight.

Half an hour later, the cab stopped in front of 235 Beach Tree Cove, and I double checked to make sure the address was correct. I gave the driver a tip for rolling my luggage to the front door, and the second he drove away, I rang the doorbell.

No answer.

I rang it again.

No answer, again.

Confused, I knocked on the door as hard as I could.

It immediately swung open, and I found myself face to face with Meredith Green, a girl I’d shared a voyage with the previous semester.

“Rachel Dawson?” She smiled. “I can’t believe you’re finally off the ship! What the heck are you doing here?”

“I’m living here, remember?” I handed her an olive branch that I’d preserved from Greece. “I sent you a letter in the mail and told you I was

willing to be your roommate. I can get the deposit money from my dad tomorrow.”

“Huh?” She looked confused, but she opened the door. “I never got a letter from you, Rach. I swear. And I already have a roommate.” She scratched her head. “Why didn’t you send me an email or hit me up on Facebook?”

I resisted the urge to groan. It never ceased to amaze me how quickly some people (some of the very people who’d experienced Semester at Sea) forgot that the ship didn’t have Wi-Fi, and from what I remembered, she spent the first five days of her voyage crying about not having access to Facebook.

Before I could give her the nicer version of my thoughts, she laughed.

“Oh, duh!” She hit her forehead with her palm. “No Wi-Fi and no Facebook. I’m so glad I’m off that goddamn thing. I had to wait four whole months to share my pictures online, and I felt like I was going to die. Let’s see if I can find your letter.”

I followed her into the living room, looking around at the piles of clothes and trash bags that covered every inch of the floor.

“Is today a laundry day?” I asked.

“Ha! No, I haven’t gotten around to cleaning since I moved in. I’ll have to do it after classes start next week.”

A blue-eyed Siamese cat purred and sat atop her high pile of bras, and I followed her into the kitchen.

She opened a cabinet under the sink, and I squinted at the rusty roach and rat traps that were sitting under the pipes. At the dying beetle that was waving its legs as a final sign of life.

“I have so much unopened mail,” Meredith said, pulling out two grocery bags full of envelopes. “There are credit card applications, bills, and the IRS keeps sending me the same *Urgent Tax Notice* envelope month after month.”

“Um.” I cleared my throat. “You may want to open the ones from the IRS sooner than later.”

“Eh.” She shrugged. “It just gets so overwhelming. If someone wants me to read something, I don’t get why they can’t just send an email. The IRS can do the same, you know?”

“Yeah...” I noticed ants crawling across her countertop. They were making a line toward crumbs of Fruit Loops cereal. “My letter should be in

a purple envelope.”

“Well, that makes this a lot easier.” She dumped the mail bags onto her other counter and pulled out two of my stationery envelopes.

“Wow!” She stared at them for several seconds. “These are really pretty!”

“Thank you.”

“I honestly can’t believe you took time to write me something!” She smiled and walked over to her tea kettle, ignoring the line of ants. “I’ve never gotten a letter from a friend in the real mail before. I want to make sure I savor it properly.”

“You want some tea?” she asked, pulling down two cups.

“I’d love some.”

She handed me one with a tea bag and I nearly gagged. There was a ring of yellow crust and a dead ant on the inside of it.

When the water boiled, she filled our cups and sat on the counter. Then she opened my letter and read it aloud as if I wasn’t already aware of what it said.

*Dear Meredith,*

*Happy Birthday from the SS World Odyssey! I hope you’re having a great time on land, and I hope you have a few strong shots in honor of your special day!*

*With Love & Sails,*

*Rachel Dawson*

“Awww!” She smiled and tore open the second one.

*Dear Meredith,*

*I hope this letter finds you well! I’m writing you because as you know, the Wi-Fi on the ship is nonexistent and I wanted to make sure I reached out long before the fall semester begins. You mentioned needing a roommate before you left, and I’d love to be the one! I can pay for the first two months’ rent and the security deposit at the rate you mentioned the second I return this fall.*

*Write back and save my room,*

*Rachel Dawson*

“Aw!” She stared at the letter. “Your handwriting is so pretty, Rachel. I wish I could write like this. Anyway, I’m sorry I can’t help you with a place this semester. Then again, you could’ve tried sending an email when you got to a port city, and maybe I would’ve been able to hold a spot for you.”

I bit my tongue. This conversation wasn't worth it, and from the looks of her apartment, I was certain we wouldn't mesh well as roommates anyway.

*Why is she STILL ignoring all those ants?*

"Here's something that might help you out," she said, handing me a copy of the student newspaper. "This is the edition that just came out. Tons of people are still looking for roommates for the semester, so maybe you'll have luck finding a place to stay that way. Oh, and don't forget Craigslist."

"Thank you."

"You're more than welcome to stay on my couch for a few nights if you like." She walked over to her couch and pulled a pair of panties from the cushions. "Let me get it cleaned up for you first."

I forced myself to smile and nod. Then I watched as she pulled a used condom from under a throw pillow, so I immediately flipped the paper open.

*There's no way in hell I'm staying here tonight.*

The "Roommate Wanted" ads were listed in alphabetical order by their street names, and from what I could tell, the monthly rental prices were less than half of what Meredith previously quoted me.

"Okay, I may have to spray this couch before you sleep on it," she said, making me look up at her. "Looks like a few ants are still enjoying my Snicker bites from last week, but they're just ants. I'll make sure they're dead and vacuumed in no time."

She left the room before I could respond, and I pulled out my phone to call a new cab.

I looked over the ads one more time and noticed a beautiful photo ad for a house that was several streets away from the main campus. The house was huge and absolutely stunning with its sandy colored shutters and private deck that let out onto the beach.

*Is that a pool on the roof?*



*301 Rose Bay Avenue. Two male college students seeking roommate in a luxury beach home. (Yes. That's a POOL on our roof, bitches!) Hot tub, pool, game room, and plenty of space for you to study (or not, if you're a senior like me) You will have your own bathroom & your own furnished bedroom with an oceanfront view.*

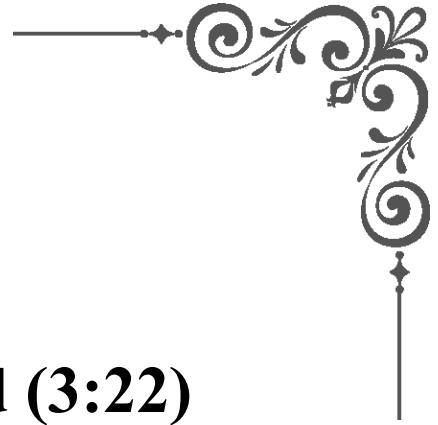
*MALE NONSMOKER HIGHLY PREFERRED*  
*Text Greg Charleston III at 555-8718 for more info + tour*



I LOOKED AT THE AD again, frowning at the “preferred” line in the description, but I saved the contact information in my phone anyway.

“Hey Rach, will you put that paper down and come help me with the couch?” Meredith stepped out with a bottle of bleach and a hand-vac.

“Turns out, all these bugs aren’t ants...”



## Track 4. Bad Blood (3:22)

*Ethan*



*WE'RE OFFICIALLY SCREWED...*

"So, what do you think about the place?" Greg coughed as he walked our latest potential roommate onto the deck.

I leaned back in our hot tub and waited for the guy to answer. He was so high that I smelled the marijuana on him the second he stepped into our house, and he couldn't make it through a single sentence without laughing. Unfortunately, he was the best person we'd met so far.

"It's amazing." He bent down and dipped his hands into the hot tub, laughing. "Really amazing. There's plenty of space for me to have my runners over here for meetings."

"Runners?" Greg asked, coughing again. "You're on the track team?"

"Ha!" The guy laughed. "Not that type of runner. Runner like *runner*. Like, people who handle the delivery of my products."

"So, you *sell* things for the track team?"

"He's talking about drugs, Greg." I shook my head. "He's a goddamn drug dealer."

"I don't deal any heavy drugs, though," the guy said. "I'm strictly a weed, pills, and roofies guy. None of the hard stuff. I'm always looking for people to join my team if either of you is interested. I even have a competitive health care plan."

I rolled my eyes, but Greg kept his composure. The second he mentioned how much the rent was, I was confident that the guy would run the hell out of here, just like everyone else did.

“So, the rent is five hundred dollars each a month,” Greg said. “And we have to split the bills evenly. Well, the water bill anyway. My dad will cover all the other ones for us.”

“Cool.” He nodded. “That sounds more than doable. I can pay an entire year upfront.”

“Um. Well, before we get to that point...” Greg scratched his head. “You smoked like two cigarettes and a blunt during the house tour, and it only took twenty minutes for me to show you everything. So—”

“So, *what?*” The guy raised his eyebrow.

“So, if we vote for you to move in, can you limit your smoking to maybe three to four puffs a day? Neither of us smokes, so it’ll throw off the whole aura of the house if you do.”

“Nah, I need my weed and my smokes,” the guy said, crossing his arms. “They’re a part of me, and if I’m paying five hundred dollars a month for shared rent, I should be able to do whatever the hell I want.”

*He has a point...*

The guy pointed to the beach. “Are there any cameras from the house that can see out there?”

“Not that we know of,” Greg said. “Why?”

“Good.” He stared out at the water. “Just making sure I have a secure place to discipline my runners if the time comes for that. The two of you won’t be able to sit on this deck if any of that shit ever goes down, alright?”

I shot Greg a look, and he held his hands up in surrender.

“We’ll be in touch with you after our vote, no matter what.” He motioned for the guy to follow him.

I watched as Greg walked him out of the house, and then I reached over a stack of towels to grab my cell phone. There were no new emails from my posting in the Business School newspaper, but there were plenty of text messages from Lisa and Brody. They were repeating the same fake apologies, so I deleted them.

“Okay,” Greg said, returning and pacing the deck. “So, it’s between the drug dealer, the guy who does creepy ass magic tricks with roaches and rats, and the guy who can only pay us half of the rent but says he’ll take my Sociology class and get me a guaranteed B minus... I don’t know about you, but I’m leaning toward guy number three.”

“Shut up, Greg,” I said. “Has anyone contacted you from the Craigslist ad yet?”



“Yeah. There’s been tons of interest from the Craigslist ad.”

“Okay, so why haven’t you let any of those people see the house yet?”

“Because I accidentally listed it in the males looking for sex section, so I don’t think we should answer any of those for a while. Unless that’s something you’re interested in doing on your own time.”

I shook my head. I refused to believe that he was an Honors student.

“We have one more potential roommate coming today, but since she’s twenty minutes late, I don’t know if we should keep her in the running or not.”

“A she? As in a female roommate?”

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “Unless you have a list of people who are interested from the Business School, I think we have to open it up to women at this point.”

“Fine. Just make sure it’s not my ex or anyone who is friends with my ex. She’s an automatic no, and your ex-girlfriend is also a no since you’ve told me about some of the things she’s done.”

“Even if she has the money?” he asked. “And I mean, my ex only keyed my car one time. If she hadn’t done that, I wouldn’t have known that it was time to get a new car. She technically did me a favor.”

I gave him a blank stare.

“Okay, okay. No ex-girlfriends. What do you think of officially opening things up to a non-college student, then?”

The doorbell rang before I could answer him, and he stepped off the deck.

I opened my calculator app and tried to figure out how many extra hours I would need to work this month if we didn’t get a roommate. How many hours I was going to suggest that Greg work as well since he was the one who got us into this unfortunate situation.

“Oh, wow!” a raspy voice said from inside. “This place is amazing. The picture didn’t do it justice at all.”

I didn’t bother looking up.

*An extra ten hours a week should cover us for at least three months.*

“Please step further into our humble abode and get as comfortable as you’d like.” Greg’s voice sounded giddy as hell. “Have you been going to SBU all this time?”

“Yeah.” She laughed. “I’ve been getting that question a lot this week.”

“I’m sure you have.” He cleared his throat. “How come I’ve never seen you around? I mean, don’t take this the wrong way, but I would *definitely* remember seeing you around here.”

“I did Semester at Sea for three years.” She paused. “I was in the full opt-in program, but I decided not to renew for the final year.”

I immediately stilled, hoping that the raspy voice didn’t belong to who I thought it did.

“Well, I’m glad you’re deciding to join us on the real campus, then,” he said. “Let me introduce you to my roommate. I’m Greg Charleston, by the way. What was your name again?”

“Rachel. Rachel Dawson.”

*Jesus Christ...*

I sat up and slowly turned around in the hot tub, ready to tell her “hell no,” but I found myself looking at a woman who looked *nothing like* the Rachel Dawson I remembered. She wasn’t even close.

Gone were her oversized black glasses that covered half her face and ruined every yearbook photo with their glare. In place of the frizzy, wild hair that always looked like she spent too much time sticking her fingers into electrical sockets, were sleek curls that fell to her breasts. She’d even tamed the thick, brown caterpillars that she once called eyebrows.

I tilted my head to the side in utter disbelief, unable to stop staring.

*What the hell?*

Her brown eyes gleamed as she spoke to Greg and I noticed honey-colored highlights in her hair. As I looked her up and down, I couldn’t believe that wasn’t wearing her “every-damn-day” outfit from high school. The one she bragged about wearing in all her recent letters to me.

*“All I ever wear on this ship is baggy grey sweatpants and a casual T-shirt.”*

There was nothing baggy or casual about her current outfit at all. She was dressed in a light blue skirt that hugged curves I’d never noticed and exposed long and toned legs that she used to keep wrapped under tons of layers. Her white and grey sleeveless top was see-through, revealing a bright red and pink bra.

I didn’t want to admit it, but *this* Rachel Dawson was fucking beautiful.

There was no denying it.

“This is my roommate,” Greg said when they finally stepped onto the deck. “We just met each other few months ago, but—”

“*Ethan?*” Rachel’s eyes met mine, and she stepped back like she’d seen a ghost.

“Oh.” Greg smiled. “So, you guys know each other?”

“*No*,” we said in unison, narrowing our eyes at each other like we’d just met for the first time, all over again.

“Ha! Okay, great!” He clapped his hands. “Rachel, let me give you the official tour.” He escorted her into the house, and I knew that my vote for her living here was still going to be a no.

*A definite “hell no.”*

Dealing with her smart mouth and hot-headed-ness via snail mail was one thing. Seeing her in person, even though she was now stunning as hell, wasn’t going to work for me at all.

In fact, despite the letters we consistently sent each other over the past few years, there was always a palpable tension and sense of loathing between us, and I could never understand where it was coming from. I just knew that it was the main reason why we’d sometimes take breaks in between sending letters. When we became upset with each other over a written revelation we didn’t want to read, or when we dealt with a girlfriend or a boyfriend who didn’t understand our “enemies with an understanding” relationship.

“You’ll have access to the pool, hot tub, and all the other crazy stuff we have...” Greg’s voice trailed off as he walked her to the other side of the house.

I climbed out of the hot tub and dried off, grabbing a beer inside. I needed to make sure Rachel received my answer face to face.

“Now for the bad news,” Greg said, walking Rachel into the living room. “The rent is five hundred dollars a month—*each*, and this tour is just a formality. We still have to vote on who we want for our third roommate since Ethan prefers a male.”

“Yes, I do prefer that,” I said.

She ignored me. “What about the utilities? How much are those?”

“The only one we have to split is the water bill. All the others are handled.”

“Oh. Well, I’m definitely interested in being considered—gender aside. Regardless of the vote, I’d appreciate it if I could sleep on your couch for a few nights. I can pay for that as well.”

“There’s a homeless shelter down the street,” I offered.

Greg shot me a look. “Of course, you can crash on our couch for a few days, Rachel. Do you have any other questions about the house?”

“Not that I can think of.” She avoided looking at me as she tapped her lip. “Can I call someone in private to see if I’ll be able to pay that amount?”

“Absolutely.” He gestured for her to go to the deck and waited until she was out of earshot. “Holy shit. She’s sexy as hell, Ethan.” He looked her up and down as she paced the deck. “Please don’t tell me that she’s an ex of yours.”

“I would *never* date Rachel.”

“Well great, then.” He was still staring at her, looking as if he was seconds away from drooling. “She officially has my vote.”

“Then we’ll need a tiebreaker.” I crossed my arms. “I vote for the drug dealer.”

“*What?*”

“I’d rather deal with him and his runners than Rachel.”

“Wait, wait. I’m confused.” He tapped his lip. “I thought you two knew each other. I thought you were friends.”

“We’ve *never* been friends,” I said. “We have a history.”

“Does that history include her paying all her bills on time?”

“It’s complicated.”

“It’s really not.” He looked at me. “We need a third roommate to help us pay the bills by the end of this week. Since she’s the most normal person we’ve interviewed thus far, and you can vouch that she’s not a psycho, what’s the problem?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Give me the CliffsNotes.”

“I’ve hated her since I was seven and a half, and we just don’t get along. We can be cordial for a few minutes here or there—hell, sometimes we can be cordial for a few hours at a time, but we always end up arguing or fighting.”

“Well, seeing as though the two of you are grown as hell now, I think that you can get over your petty childhood,” he said. “I mean, there’s no way you two actually *hated* each other when you were kids, right?”

“Right.” I sipped my beer. “We *despised* each other.”



## Back Then: 9 ½ Years Old

*Ethan*



*DEAR RACHEL,*

*I want you to know that no one at our school is going to miss you after you move away this week. You were the ugliest stupidest girl in the class, and everyone always laughs at you because you are the only one who always fails the spelling tests. Your hair also always looks like a wet dog is sitting on top of your head.*

*GOODBYE and don't you dare write back,*

*Forget You FOREVER,*

*Ethan*

*PS—I know that you stole my Captain America toy so I burned your Wonder Woman doll at my cousin's camp party last week. Hope you weren't looking for it.*



*DEAR ETHAN,*

*I am so happy that I'm finally moving away from you and out of this boring neighborhood! I can't tell you how glad I am that I won't have to deal with you anymore. I promise I won't ever write you another letter and I promise I'll make WAY MORE friends than you when I get to my new house, and I hope your new neighbor is another girl that won't like you.*

*I've already forgottin you,*

*Rachel*

*PS—I was the one who burned your box of video games last year.  
THEIR. You deserved it.*



*UGH! IT'S T-H-E-R-E! Why does she always use the wrong one?*

I looked out my window and watched as Rachel stomped away from my mailbox, heading back to her house.

I grabbed my pen from my drawer and began writing my response. I had two hours before Rachel's family moving van was due to take off, and I wanted to make sure I got this letter to her in time. I wanted to make sure I got to write the last word.

I'd never been so happy to see someone leave this street and I couldn't wait until she opened her box of comics to see the "gift" of dog shit I'd left inside when she made it to her new house.

"Why don't you two just call each other?" My mother asked, setting down a glass of juice. "It must be exhausting walking up and down the street every hour to pass notes."

"These aren't *notes*, Mom. They're letters."

"Oh, I see." She laughed. "Are they love letters?"

"Ugh, never." I rolled my eyes. "Rachel is the ugliest girl on this block, and everyone knows it."

"Ethan!"

I shrugged. "It's the truth."

"It's mean, and I know that you don't really mean it," she said.

"Hopefully, you two will get closer and become friends over time. I think this is just a phase."

"Nope." I printed the 'Forget You' neatly in my letter and signed my name. "Now that she's moving away, I don't plan on ever talking to her again."

She laughed and patted me on my shoulder. "We'll see about that." She started talking about all the reasons why I should be "nicer" to Rachel, but I tuned her out. Rachel didn't deserve any niceness. *Ever.*

She was a liar who snitched whenever things didn't go her way, and she blamed me for everything. The only time I took sympathy on her was when the other girls made fun of her and hurt her feelings, or when they refused to play with her and told her that she dressed like a boy. Then again, she deserved it, and she *did* dress like a boy.

*We have some of the same shirts...*

"I know your father grounded you for throwing Rachel off her bike last week," my mom said, lowering her voice. "But how about I take the two of you to the movies this weekend while he's at work?"

"You can take me by myself," I said. "I don't want Rachel anywhere near me."

Before she could say another word, I walked out the front door—ready to place my final letter in Rachel's mailbox.

It was already too late, though.

Her family's yellow moving van was pulling onto the street.

Sighing, I tucked the letter into my back pocket and looked at the bright side of things. Rachel was leaving.

Rachel was leaving. Rachel was *LEAVING*.

I waved at the van as it began to move faster, rolling my eyes at Rachel as she threw up her middle finger from the back seat. I was tempted to rush out to the street and toss my parting letter to her anyway, but the van suddenly started to slow down.

Then it turned into the driveway right next to my house.

Then it stopped.

*What is happening?*

Rachel's parents parked the truck, and they didn't back out of the driveway. They just sat there, as if they belonged. As if this was where they were planning to move.

"Oh, that's so sweet!" Rachel's mom stepped out first. "I don't know why you always give Ethan such a hard time, Rachel. He's here waiting to help you move into your new room."

"What did you say?" My jaw dropped. "Rachel is moving *right next door*?"

Her mom didn't hear me.

My dad was suddenly at my side, patting my shoulder. "They wanted a house with a pool like ours and the James' had finally put their house up for sale. Isn't it funny how life works out sometimes, son?"

I was speechless, and from the way Rachel's jaw was hanging open, she was speechless as well.

"I think we made the right decision by not telling them until move-in day." Her father laughed and opened the back of the trailer. My traitorous

parents laughed as well, and then they began helping them unload their things.

Rachel remained glued to the back seat, and I stood rooted in the grass. It wasn't until several minutes later when my mom placed a box marked "Rachel's new room" in my hand that I realized that this was really happening.

The dog shit I'd left for Rachel was seeping through the box, onto my shoes.

I set it down and looked up at Rachel, wondering if I should be the "bigger person" and offer a truce, but I saw my Captain America toy in her hand. Saw her smiling at me as she held it up high.

I looked around, ready to show my mom how evil Rachel really was, but our parents were all inside.

"Give me my Captain America, and I won't burn any more of your stuff," I said as she rolled down the window.

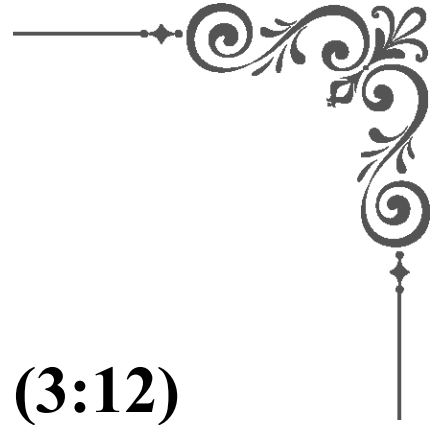
"Okay, that sounds fair." She shrugged and stepped out of the van. She held out the figurine, but she didn't hand it to me.

She dropped it, down the sewer drain. "*Oops!*"

I knew I was supposed to snitch on her for doing that, that I should run to the house and get her into trouble, but I was sick of her shit.

I kicked her to the ground, and she quickly pulled me down with her. I didn't give a damn that she was a girl. She fought harder than any of the boys on this block, and being grounded for hitting her again wasn't going to kill me.





## Track 5. Gorgeous (3:12)

*Rachel*



THE ETHAN STANDING in front of me was nothing like the Ethan Wyatt I remembered at all. He'd always been tall and muscular, always given off an air of cockiness, but he'd never been remotely attractive. At least, to me.

And as much as it pained me to admit it, this Ethan Wyatt was fucking gorgeous.

It was undeniable.

In place of his slightly chubby cheeks from our high school years, was a well-defined and chiseled jawline, and in place of the "bird chest" that I use to tease him about, was a full set of glistening abs and a black and grey tattoo on the right side of his chest.

His ocean blue eyes were still the same, but when he smiled, I noticed that they complemented the deep dimples in his cheeks.

The fact that he was slightly more attractive now didn't change anything, though. Shortly after his eyes met mine while he was in the hot tub, once the initial shock of attraction faded away, I felt awkward. I silently questioned if we should even consider being roommates, if we were still the hot-headed kids who could be completely cordial one minute and engaged in a fiery argument the next.

"Okay, we're going to vote now," Greg said, setting a stack of blankets on the couch for me. "Ethan, can you join me in the kitchen so we can officially discuss our next roommate?"

Ethan headed toward Greg without looking my way, and as if I wasn't standing close by, Greg began to speak.

“So, let me lay out my reasons why I’m saying yes to Rachel. Then you can say your reasons, and then we can vote.” He held up one finger.

“Number one, she’s sexy as hell, but she also has the money according to her dad. I do sense a smart mouth, since when I opened the windows to the deck and said, ‘This is an example of an ocean view,’ she responded with ‘No shit.’ I’m not sure how I feel about that yet.”

Ethan’s lips curved into a slight smile, revealing his deep dimples again. “That’s pretty mild sarcasm for her. You need to know that it will only get worse.”

“Okay so, that’s one strike in my book,” he said. “But back to the positives. Once again, she has the money. She also claims to have taken Sociology on the Semester at Sea ship, and she’s willing to share some of her old notes with me.”

“Greg, Sociology is one of the easiest classes on this campus. Why are you so hell-bent on getting help for that?”

“Because the only professor I could get is Swanson and he’s failed me in two of his other classes.” He paused. “He clearly has it out for me, and I need at least a C to graduate.”

“Any other positives?”

“Did I mention she was attractive as hell yet?”

“You did.” Ethan picked up a bottle of beer and sipped it, still not looking my way.

“Well, let’s put it to a vote.” Greg cleared his throat. “All in favor of Rachel Dawson being our third roommate, say I.”

“I,” I said, in unison with Greg.

Ethan turned around to face me. “You don’t live here. You don’t get a vote in this.”

“Like hell she doesn’t, since it sounds like two to one.” Greg laughed and walked over to me, handing me a beer. “No need for you to sleep on the couch tonight, but we will need your first month of rent by the end of this week.”

“No problem.”

He clinked his beer against mine and looked at his phone. “I’ll be back a little later. I’m about to go fuck—I mean...” He paused, clearing his throat. “Rachel, are you seeing anyone? I’m asking for a friend.”

“Who’s your friend?”

“Me.”

I laughed. "No, I just got out of a relationship."

"Okay, well, if you ever want to go out with me, I'd be totally up for that." He headed toward the door. "I mean, after I get done with what I'm doing tonight. Not now." He said goodbye and rushed out of the door, leaving Ethan and me alone.

"So, you *did* break up with Daddy Bear?" Ethan stepped in front of me, smirking. "Did he cry?"

"First of all, his name was Tate," I said. "His bedroom name was *Big Bear*, and he dumped me."

"That makes him what? The umpteenth boyfriend that dumped you on that ship?"

"I'm aware." I stood up. "Thank you for reminding me. Which of the guest rooms am I getting?"

"Neither," he said, walking over to my suitcases and rolling them forward. "Me and Greg have decided that the new roommate should get the master suite."

"Really? Why?"

"It's the only room that isn't completely insulated." He smiled a perfect set of pearly whites, and I tried to remember if his smile ever looked like that when we were younger. "Oh, and since it was an addition to the existing house, it's also the only room in the house that doesn't have central air conditioning."

*Of course.* "Just when I thought you were being generous to me."

"*Never* with you." He walked me down the hall, rolling my things into the massive suite.

Sure enough, the air inside felt warmer than the hallway, and I knew that all the fans in the corner and the boxed air conditioner were going to be put to major use every day.

I opened the doors to the balcony and stepped out on the ledge, smiling as I looked at the bathroom which was five times the size of my entire cabin on the *SS World Odyssey*.

"The only thing we don't have in this house is a washer and dryer," he said. "So you'll have to take your stuff to the Super Suds laundry mat down the block." He opened a closet. "There are plenty of canvas bags in your closet, and the walk is only ten minutes."

"Walk? Don't you have a car?"

“Yes, I do have a car. But seeing as though you don’t, I don’t understand what that has to do with you.”

“You’re not going to offer to let me use it when I need to do my laundry? Not even if I go on the same day as you?”

“If I considered you to be my friend, I would. Seeing as though I don’t?” He shrugged, and I rolled my eyes.

The second he placed my smallest suitcase onto an ottoman, I unzipped the side pocket and pulled out a framed envelope. I set it at the center of my dresser.

“You still haven’t opened your mom’s last letter to you?” he asked.

“No.” I shook my head. “The back of the flap says to open it when and if I’ve run out of people to turn to for advice.”

“Interesting,” he said, lifting my other suitcase on top of a dresser. As he heaved it, my baby blue “reading companion” fell from the top pocket and fell to the floor, buzzing.

Gasping, I reached for it, but he grabbed it first, rolling it around in his palm.

“Hmmm,” he said, smiling. “So, you only need three inches when you’re playing with yourself? Maybe that’s why you always settle so much when it comes to guys.”

I snatched my toy from him and tucked it into my purse. “Thank you for your help. You can leave my room and return to showing your true hateful colors now.”

“After we discuss the rules.” He eyed the open flap of my suitcase, and I zipped it up before any of my other vibrators fell out.

“First rule,” he said, looking serious, “no bonfires or parties. Ever.”

“Noted.”

“Second rule, you need to make sure that you close your shutters every night.” He pointed to the massive grey shutters that framed my windows. “They’re connected to the alarm system, so whenever you’re done for the night, make sure they’re shut.”

“Got it.”

“Third rule, no male company in your bedroom.”

“Excuse me?” I crossed my arms. “What type of rule is that?”

“A brilliant one.” He looked me up and down. “It’s also a non-negotiable one.”

“Do you plan on having any company in your room? Like, are you and Greg seriously saying that you won’t ever invite any females over?”

“The only reason I’m instituting that rule *for you* is because dating on land is different than it is at sea, and the words “Want to come back to my room and talk?” make a completely different impression.

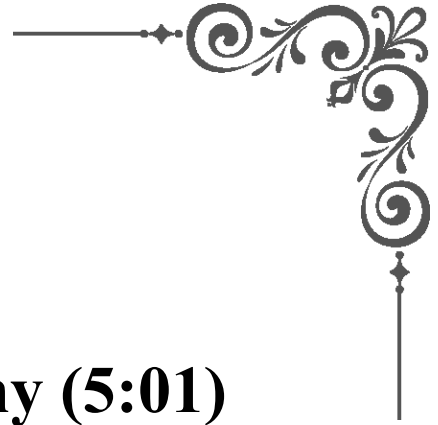
“Oh...” I cleared my throat. “Right. Well, thanks. I didn’t know you cared so much.”

“I really don’t.” He looked as if he wanted to say something else, but Greg suddenly barged into my room.

“Okay, change of plans!” He held up his hands in surrender. “My ex didn’t want to give me any break-up sex for old times’ sake, so I think Ethan should drive us to The Umbrellas to celebrate our new roomie and a senior year we won’t forget. My treat.”

“Your treat?” I smiled. “Really?”

“Yeah, of course. I’ll buy you both one drink.”



## Track 6. Tell Me Why (5:01)

*Rachel*



THE UMBRELLAS WAS A perfect example of something I'd sorely missed out on by being away from a college campus for so long. Set on the edge of Main Street, it was an indoor bar that served discounted drinks in rain-boot shaped glasses. Unlike on the ship, where I could only get two drinks a night—and only on certain days, the bartenders here weren't counting anything but money. As for the bar's namesake, the ceiling was comprised of colorful open umbrellas that hung high above the dance floor. That, and every table was carved into a perfect round, canopy shape.

I was sitting in a "rainforest" booth for a second hour, listening to Greg complain about his ex-girlfriend. He had yet to buy me and Ethan the promised drinks, but several guys were sending me free ones every twenty minutes.

To my surprise, women were sending Ethan free drinks as well, and he was completely unfazed by their attention. He smiled each time and raised his glass in their direction—turning away at the exact moment that they glared at me.

*What the hell?*

"You know something else I'm going to miss about my ex-girlfriend?" Greg asked. "Even though she was crazy as hell, she gave me the best head of my life. Like, her deep throat game was amazing."

"You're still talking about this?" Ethan laughed and sipped his beer. "Thank you so much for sharing the intimate details with us, Greg."

“I mean, the things she could do with her tongue were out of this world.” He was still talking. “I don’t know if I’ll ever find someone else with a special tongue like that.”

I stifled a groan and pulled out my phone. Needing a distraction from Greg’s words, I sent a mass text message to fifty phone numbers I’d saved from all my voyages.

**Me:** Hey everyone! It’s me, Rachel Dawson from the SS World Odyssey/Semester at Sea! Just letting you know I’m back on campus, and I’d love to hang out again. Sea friends are friends forever, right?

My phone buzzed in seconds with responses.

**555-6754:** I think you have the wrong number...

**555-3216:** Dude, I did Semester at Sea two and a half years ago. Don’t remember you.

**555-0965:** The ‘Rachel Dawson’ who refused to go out with me? Fuck off.

It didn’t buzz again for hours.

“Hey, I have a question for you.” Greg waved his hand in front of my face when Ethan stepped away. “How long have you and Ethan really been friends? Just tell me because Ethan has lied to me about this twice tonight already.”

“We’ve never been friends.” I sipped my drink, refreshing my inbox. “We’re enemies who’ve learned how to tolerate each other.”

“True enemies can’t be cordial.”

“You can if you have to be,” I said. “Aren’t you trying to be cordial with your ex?”

“She blocked my number a few minutes ago.” He tossed back the rest of his shot. “You want to help me find someone to sleep with tonight? That is, unless you’re interested.”

“I’ll help you when I get back,” I laughed, standing up from the table. “I need to make sure I’m making the most out of my first on-campus drinking experience.”

I made my way over to the bar, and the bartender smiled, handing me a new orange drink and winking at me.

“Must feel nice being you tonight,” a familiar voice on my left said.

I looked over and found myself face to face with Brody Huntington, the guy I had a crush on during my senior year of high school. I’d told Ethan

back then that he was untrustworthy, but he never took my advice when it came to his “real friends.”

“Wow.” Brody looked me up and down, his green eyes gleaming under the dim lights. “You look *different*.”

“In a good way or a bad way?”

“A great way.” He stared at my legs. “I didn’t know you were back on campus. Did you have fun doing Semester at Sea?”

“Yeah, probably the same amount of fun that you and Lisa had fucking behind Ethan’s back,” I said. “Is she here with you tonight?”

He sucked in a breath and his eyes turned to slits.

“Don’t worry.” I stepped back, needing to sit down again. “You never stood a chance with me anyway. I didn’t like you when we were kids, and I damn sure don’t like you now.”

“Fuck you, Rachel.” He pushed past me, and I grabbed onto the counter for balance. I collected myself for a few minutes before ordering another drink and returning to the booth.

Greg was long gone—grinding against some girl on the dance floor, and Ethan was busy swiping his phone’s screen every few seconds.

“Why do you keep doing that?” I asked him. “Is something wrong with your phone?”

“No, it’s Tinder,” he said. “Welcome back to the wonderful world of Wi-Fi.”

“Is Tinder the sex app?”

“I prefer the term *hookup* app.”

“If you’re so popular on campus—*supposedly*, why do you need to go on a website to find a hookup?”

He looked up at me, letting a slow smile cross his lips. “Because I’d prefer to sleep with someone I haven’t slept with before.”

“Seriously?” I rolled my eyes, now remembering all the unnecessary details he gave me in his letters about his sex life during his freshman and sophomore semesters. “I almost forgot how much of a man-whore you are.”

“*Were*,” he said, correcting me. “I’m just trying to erase Lisa from my memory for good.”

“You didn’t even love Lisa, though.” I shrugged. “What’s there to get over? And last time I checked, random sex does nothing for you. At least, that’s what you used to write in your letters all the time.”



He looked at me for a few seconds, as if he was considering my words. Then he put his phone away. "Good point."

"Speaking of sex," he said. "I meant what I said in my last letter to you. I think if you had less fictional sex with your book boyfriends, you wouldn't be such a hothead all the time. I think that's why it's so hard for you to stay in relationships or make friends."

"First of all, book boyfriends are real," I said. "Second of all, I *used* to be a hothead when we were kids, but mostly because a certain neighbor of mine went out of his way to torture me every day. He has yet to apologize for making me hate my childhood."

"You made me hate mine, too." He sipped his drink.

"Also, I have *plenty* of friends, Ethan." I smiled at the bartender who sent over a margarita. "They're all excited for me to be back on campus."

"Then why can't you go live with one of them instead of me?"

I didn't answer that. I leaned back and watched everyone on the dance floor.

"Wait a minute." I spotted a familiar face in a blue polo shirt. "Is that Jordan Hampton by the DJ booth?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"He's not sick anymore?"

"Anymore?" Ethan raised his eyebrow. "When was he sick the first time?"

"When we dated two voyages ago," I said, watching as he caressed a brunette's ass. "He stopped writing because he found out he had stage four cancer, and he said that he wanted to spend his final days with his family and closest friends."

Ethan's lips curved into a smile. "Please tell me you're kidding."

"I'm not." I kept my eyes on him, remembering how we'd bonded over our love of painting abstracts, how we'd wake up early in the morning and ride the exercise bikes around the top deck. "Out of all the guys I dated at sea, I liked him the most. He told me he had feelings for me, and he was the first guy friend I met who actually read romance."

"I don't think I've ever seen him pick up a book for any of the classes we took together, so I highly doubt he read anything—let alone romance."

"So, why would he say all that stuff to me, then?" I asked, feeling my skin heating. "Why would he lie about being sick? Or, wait. Maybe he got better and forgot to write me?"

Ethan gave me a confused look and took my margarita from my hand. "Look, Rachel. He's *never* been sick to my knowledge. He clearly just wanted to break up with you. Don't take it personal, and don't get into your hothead mode over something like this. I'm not dealing with that shit in college."

"I'm not a hothead anymore, Ethan." I reached for my drink, but he didn't give it back. "And like I've said before, I was only like that when *you* pissed me off."

Jordan's eyes suddenly met mine from across the room and he looked as if he was going to rush away, but I stood to my feet and stormed right over.

"Oh...Hey there, Rachel." He smiled uneasily. "I thought you were doing all four years on the *SS World Odyssey*."

"I chose not to renew for the final year." I crossed my arms, glaring at him.

"Well, good for you," he said. "You look really good tonight."

"Yeah? Well, so do you. You look pretty damn great for someone who supposedly died."

"What can I say?" He smiled. "It's a *miracle*."

"I believed you, Jordan," I said, raising my voice. "Why would you lie to me about something like that?"

"Okay, look, Rachel don't take this personally but..." He sighed, running his hand through his hair. "You're a nice girl and all, like really nice, but..."

"But *what*?"

"I was trying to fuck and you weren't, okay?" He placed his hands on my shoulders. "That's it. You were talking about a long-term relationship after we'd only dated for two months, and we hadn't even fucked once. I liked you, but not enough to keep writing you letters and shit like we were in a long-distance relationship."

"You did write me a letter. One."

"Well, I'm honestly shocked I wrote that." He laughed.

"It was the one where you clearly *lied* about having a life-threatening disease!" I pushed his hands away. "Thank you for finally being honest, but just so you know, I would've fucked you eventually!"

Everyone in the bar suddenly became quiet, and the DJ turned down the music.

“I’m very sorry, Rachel,” he said, lowering his voice. “I shouldn’t have lied to you.”

“No, you shouldn’t have. You should’ve said, I’m an asshole and the only reason I joined this program is because I want to fuck!” I felt someone grabbing my hand from behind, someone trying to tug me away from him, but I jerked it back. “Like, do you know how many times I prayed for you! Are you really that much of a coward that you couldn’t break up with me like a normal person?”

“I didn’t want to hurt your feelings.” He looked around, noticing that other people were watching us. “You’re the type who wanted something serious, and I didn’t. I mean, let’s be real, Rach. We wouldn’t have been able to keep up with each other via social media, and the email service only worked every now and then. Did you really think we would last once my semester on the ship was over?”

“You told me that you read romance books,” I said. “Was that part true, or was that a lie too?”

He sighed and shook his head, and before I could get my next word out, I was being lifted up and tossed over someone’s shoulder. *Ethan’s* shoulder.

Undeterred and still feeling some type of way, I shouted, “I hope you get the help you need for that flesh-disease on your cock, Jordan Hampton! Sorry we didn’t quite work out, but I’ll keep you in my prayers!”

He glared at me as I was carried away, and the second I was outside, I heard everyone inside laughing. The DJ turned the music right back up.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the DJ said, laughing. “I guess this is a perfect time to play you my new *Days of Our Lives* mix.”

Ethan carried me to his car and opened the passenger door, setting me right on the seat. He buckled my seatbelt and placed the child safety lock on the door before sliding behind the wheel.

He shook his head as he pulled off onto the street, and as we approached a red light, he looked over at me. “So, what were you saying about *not* being a hothead anymore?”

“I was saying that I hate when people lie to me.” I looked at him. “I really liked him.”

“You like *every* guy you date, Rachel,” he said. “You’re so in love with the idea of being in love that you’ll fall for damn near anyone.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “What do you know about dating anyway? Every girl you’ve ever dated is the product of a drunken one night stand or

you wanting someone to sleep with for the summer.”

“We’re not talking about me right now.”

“We should be,” I said. “Who are you to give me any type of advice on my love life?”

“You’d have to have a love life for me to help you with it.” He rolled his eyes, slowing at a stop sign. “I’m just pointing out the fucking obvious.”

“Can we stop talking now?” I asked. “I think we’ve used up all our cordial conversation points for the week, and I just want to get back to my room.”

He clenched his jaw, but he didn’t say anything else.

I spent the rest of the ride staring out the window, more upset with him than Jordan Hampton. Even after we’d spent years apart, he was still so damn arrogant, and he honestly thought he knew me.



*Later that night...*

EVEN THOUGH I WAS BORDERLINE drunk, I decided not to spend the rest of my night cramped in my room. I took a campus shuttle to the student center and stepped aboard one of Salt Beach’s Midnight Freshmen Bus Tours. A university tradition, they ran every hour on the hour, and they were supposed to be the best way to meet and make new friends.

I’d seen the glossy pictures of the decked-out busses in the university’s brochures, heard amazing things about the “first ride” from all my former shipmates, so I figured I might as well try it since it was my first and last year on campus.

As blue and red fireworks lit up the dark sky, I leaned back in my seat and quickly realized that I would not be meeting or making any new friends tonight. I also realized that there was such a thing as “a stupid question,” and freshmen girls had plenty of them.

“Since this is a ‘wet campus’ that means that we can drink, right?” someone asked.

“Only if you’re twenty-one.” The tour guide, a redheaded senior, smiled as she stood at the front of the bus.

“Well, why not just make it a ‘dry campus’ so nobody can drink and all can be fair? Oh, and speaking of fairness, why is it that only the students who are twenty-one are given the opportunity for the university-sponsored trips over vacation breaks?”

“I’ll answer that in just a minute,” she said. “Ladies, if you look to your left, you’ll see the newest addition to our campus, The Beach Wave Complex & Study Center. This state of the art building houses two connected libraries, four media rooms with theater seating, three cafes, and an extended balcony of desks that face the beach.”

Everyone “Oohed” and “Ahhed” as the bus slowly drove by the massive white building. I held out my phone and snapped pictures.

“We’re now about to make a U-turn and re-discuss any of the places you may want extra information about on the way back,” the tour guide said. “Does anyone have any questions for me?”

“Are there any hot guys at this school?” A girl at the front of the bus asked. “I haven’t seen too many yet, and I’m trying to get married by graduation.”

“There are plenty of hot guys here. Since our football team hasn’t won a game in three years, you’ll find most of the cute players at the after-parties. Our basketball team is just as terrible and a lot of those players are just as available as the fraternity guys you’ll see this weekend. Oh, and our homecoming king for the past three years in a row is the sexiest guy you’ll ever see in your life. *Trust me*. Any other questions?”

I raised my hand. “Can you tell me the hours that The Beach Wave Complex & Study Center will be open?”

“No, wait.” The girl next to me interrupted. “Is the homecoming king you mentioned on the football team?”

“Ha! No, but I’m sure he could be if he wanted to. He’s pretty athletic.”

“What’s his name?” The girl in front of me waved her hand. “I want to look him up on Facebook right now.”

“Ethan Wyatt,” the guide said. “His last name is spelled W-Y-A-T-T.”  
*What?*

I leaned back and rolled my eyes. Then I pinched myself to make sure that this was really happening.

Ethan was the most braggadocious person I knew and I couldn’t believe that 1) He never told me that he won Homecoming King at our college three times in a row. 2) He still had a Facebook page since he often complained about the random “pokes” and messages he received on a daily basis. And 3) Women were swooning over him like he was some type of Sex God.

“Jesus...” “Oh my god...” “Wow...” Every single girl on the bus made sounds as his profile lit up their screens. I waited for the tour to resume, but even the bus driver played along and looked at the tour guide’s phone.

*She sat there and missed a green light for this?*

I leaned over and looked at the picture my seatmate was intensely gawking at. In it, Ethan was standing in front of a huge pool, sporting nothing but white swim trunks and a smile. His perfectly carved abs were dripping wet, and some of the droplets were sitting on his well-tanned skin. A light trail of hair was leading down to his “V,” and the black and blue tattoo on the right side of his chest looked even sexier in person than it did in his photo. The look in his ocean blue eyes was playful and tempting, and he was giving the photographer one of his “I know you’re attracted to me” smiles.

Seeing him like this, without his mouth moving, made me (halfway) understand why so many women fawned over him. Only halfway, though.

The girl next to me zoomed in on the picture, at the crotch area of his shorts. Then she took a screenshot.

*Ugh!*

“So, about those library hours...” I stood up at my seat. “Can you tell me what those are since the website still hasn’t updated them?”

My words might as well have been tossed into the wind.

“Is Ethan a senior?” “Do you have any classes with him?” “Where does he usually hang out?”

The rest of the informational tour came to an abrupt end, and for the rest of the ride, I sat and listened as they all went on and on about Ethan.

By the time I took the campus shuttle back to the beach house, it was two in the morning, and Ethan’s powder blue convertible was nowhere in sight.

Smiling at that fact, I walked inside, wanting to spend an hour in the hot tub before bed. But instead of steaming waters on the deck, I saw towering flames.

*What the...*

I rushed outside and saw Greg fanning the fire with a T-shirt. For a second, I thought he was trying to make the flames bigger. It wasn’t until he screamed, “Holy shit! They’re not stopping!” that I realized the T-shirt was his attempt to put it out.

Shaking my head, I walked over to the fire extinguisher that was hanging right behind him and pulled the pin—spraying the flames to ashes within seconds.

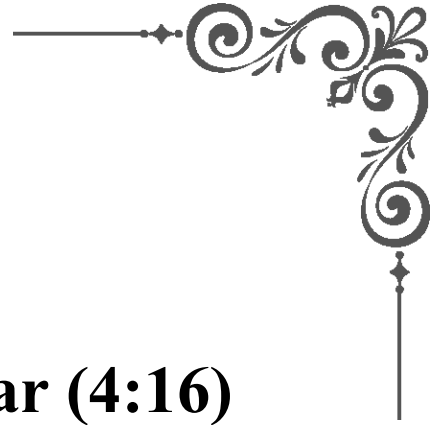
“I could’ve sworn that Ethan said no bonfires, Greg,” I said.

“He did.” He kicked at the metal container that had held the flames.

“That’s why I bought a fire pit. Completely different thing and way safer. I just forgot to put a cover on it before lighting it, so the flames caught me off-guard.” He held out his pinky like a five-year-old. “As new friends, this will be our first secret. We will not tell Ethan a goddamn thing and I won’t light any more fires.”

“Promise?” I laughed and held out my pinky.

“I fucking promise.”



## Track 7. Getaway Car (4:16)

*Ethan*  
*One week later...*



“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!” My Econ IV professor stood at the front of the classroom. “I want to personally welcome you to a special class called *Hell on Earth*.”

Everyone in class laughed as he hit the lights.

“I’m not joking,” he said, his voice terse. The laughter dissolved into silence, and everyone opened their notebooks as he wrote a few words on the whiteboard.

“Hey.” The girl on my left cleared her throat, making me look at her.

“Yeah?” I whispered.

She smiled and just stared at me. Then she snapped a picture and left the room.

I held back a laugh.

*Definitely a freshman...*

“My name is Professor Hughes,” my teacher continued. “For the next semester, you need to be prepared to be pushed like never before. My job is to weed out the people who won’t make it in business school from the people who *might* survive a week or two in business school.”

He began passing out his syllabus as the screen behind him lit up. The words on the screen read *You have until next week to drop my class without penalty.* When he reached my desk, he raised his eyebrow, but he didn’t say anything.



“If you want to pass this class, you will need to eat, breathe, and sleep economics. You will have a test every other Thursday, an analysis paper due every Tuesday, and you’re responsible for presenting a fifteen-page thesis paper on a topic that I must approve by the fifth of next month. Are there any questions?”

A few people raised their hands.

“None at all?”

More hands flew into the air.

“Very well, then.” He smiled and hit the lights. “Class dismissed.”

A few students tried to approach him with questions, but he only said, “Class dismissed” repeatedly until they walked away.

I shut my notebook and stood to my feet.

“Mr. Wyatt?” He said looking at me. “Can you join me down at the podium for a few minutes?”

“Sure.” I made my way down, and he waited until no one else was left in the classroom.

“Mr. Wyatt, why are you taking my class this semester?”

“Because I need it to graduate.”

“You took the more advanced Econ V last year, and it pained me to give you my first A in six years,” he said, smiling. “You’ll more than likely breeze through Econ IV, and I’ll be forced to give you another one.” He tapped his chin. “That might affect my reputation around here as the ‘C-plus & B-minus professor, and I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

I blinked. I could never tell if he was joking or being serious.

“Aren’t you double majoring in Creative Writing? Can’t you take one of those classes instead of this one for the semester?”

“I’ve already completed all the required courses for that major,” I said, somewhat upset that the rest of my classes for my senior year would be devoid of any writing.

“Tell you what, Mr. Wyatt,” he said, clapping his hands together. “I’m going to give you an S-grade for this course, which means you don’t have to show up, but it comes with two conditions.”

“I’d really prefer an A.”

“Let me finish. Condition number one: I’m always in charge of overseeing the final logistics of annual senior lodge trip, and I’ve never once worried about the students who were voted to be in charge of it. This year is the first year that I’m concerned.”

“What do you mean?”

“The mayor’s son, Greg Charleston III, is the committee president. Yesterday he came into my office and asked if there was any extra money in the budget for a TF-fund. He said he wanted to make sure that everyone has a good time.”

“What’s a TF-fund?”

“I had to ask him that same question.” He rolled his eyes. “It stands for *The Fucking Fund*. He wants to purchase three packs of premium condoms for every person on the trip.”

I held back a smile.

“He’s already spent ten percent of the budget on alcohol and S’more ingredients, and yesterday I saw a charge for some type of specialty fire lighter.” He shook his head. “I’m too old for this shit, so you’re officially responsible for handling the oversight on this trip as of today.”

“Noted. What’s the second condition?”

“The one that might actually help you put your business skills to use,” he said. “My wife owns a floral store on Main Street that only makes a profit during the summer season,” he said. “I’ve been meaning to have some students complete a semester-long research project on it so I can get some answers on how we can make it profitable year-round, but —” He paused. “I don’t trust any of them. There. I said it. So, in exchange for a recommendation letter and an S-grade—”

“A recommendation and an *A-grade*.”

“I’ll still have to take a super hard look at the work you turn in if you want a real grade, Mr. Wyatt,” he said tersely, as if giving me another A would kill him. “Anyway, I’d like for you to do a thorough analysis of my wife’s shop for the semester instead of showing up to class and wasting my time. What do you say?”

I hesitated to answer, not wanting to give away the fact that his offer was perfect.

“I accept your offer, Professor Hughes.” I extended my hand, and he shook it. “What’s the name of the store?”

“Oh, right.” He opened a briefcase and handed me a business card. “It’s called The Silk Stem, and it’s right across from The Ripped Bodice. It’s that bookstore that only sells romance books.” He laughed. “I’m sure you have no idea where that is.”

*I know exactly where that is...*



AN HOUR LATER, I STOOD across the street from a pink and white building – looking up at the glittering silver *Ripped Bodice* letters.

I came here every few weeks out of habit, armed with a list of Rachel's favorite authors. Since she made it a point to beg for a shipment of new books whenever we were on good terms, I always checked for new releases.

Sure enough, Rachel was already inside the store—staring at the *New Releases* shelf. She was dressed in bleach white shorts with a bright yellow tank top, and her hair was tossed to one side in loose curls.

All last night, while I was at a bar, I'd listened to all of my friends talk about "the new Semester at Sea girl."

*"Sexiest girl on campus. Hands down." "Where the hell has she been, and who the hell is she dating?" "What do you mean she's your roommate?"*

Before I could make my way over, my phone sounded in my pocket. A call from my father.

Groaning, I debated whether I should answer it.

"Hello?" I caved before it went to voicemail.

"Hey there, son." My dad's voice sounded less condescending than usual. "How are you doing today?"

"Good. What's up?"

"I'm wondering why you've canceled all your work hours at the site for the next few months. I logged into the system, and I can't figure out why the hell you would ever think that this is okay."

*Spoke too soon about you not being condescending today...*

"I have a new assignment that's going to take up a lot of my time this semester. I need to get an A."

"Son, in case you've forgotten, you're on track to take over this business the moment you get your MBA. If you think for one second that anyone here gives a damn about whether you make a C or an A in your college classes, you're sadly mistaken."

"The grades are for me."

"Yeah well, you can work at least fifteen hours a week, can't you?"

I didn't answer him. I didn't feel like arguing about this today.

"You've been telling me the truth about completing the business degree, right?" He asked. "You're not going to pull a fast one on me with a degree

in that pansy-ass shit you were talking about last year, right? What was it called again? Creative penmanship?”

“Creative Writing.”

“Yeah, that.” He laughed. “The one that doesn’t make any money. I’ll try to find someone to fill your shifts over the next few weeks, but next time, a heads-up would be greatly appreciated. Anyway, let me run this week’s numbers by you.”

I didn’t listen to a single word he said. I muttered “Um hmm,” and “Yeah,” every few seconds so he would think I was paying attention.

My father had yet to admit it, but he lived vicariously through me. He wanted us to have the relationship he never had with his own dad. Wanted to hand over his company to me, in a way his father *didn’t* for him.

The idea of this was cool when I was younger — when I was tagging along to his construction worksites all week, dragging Rachel along with me to some of the more exciting meetings at baseball games. But as I grew older, I realized that although every subject in school came easy as hell to me, the only one I actually enjoyed was writing.

I told him this on my thirteenth birthday, showing him an essay called, “I Hate My Next-Door Neighbor,” but he never read it. Instead, he laughed and said, “If you ever plan on knowing what it’s like to get a girl, I highly suggest that you don’t tell anyone what you just told me about wanting to be a writer.”

So, I buried the thought and never brought it up again. But when I came to college, I couldn’t help but pursue it as my second major. And although I would never admit it, I enjoyed writing letters over the years; it kept my skills sharp.

“Can I expect to see you at the grand opening of the Perlman offices next week?” My father asked, finally done talking about the numbers.

*I doubt it...* “I’ll let you know later,” I said, watching a guy approach Rachel in the store. She smiled at him, quickly gave him her phone number, and blushed once he left.

“Hey, Dad.” I watched Rachel pick up another book. “I have to go. I’ll call you later.”

“You better, son.”

I ended the call and crossed the street, stopping when I made it into the store. The walls were freshly coated in pink, and with the exception of the cashier and Rachel, no one else was here.

“May I interest you in some erotica today, sir?” The cashier smiled.  
“Each purchase comes with a set of fluffy pink handcuffs.”

“I’ll think about it.” I smiled, and her cheeks turned red.

I walked over to Rachel, and she immediately turned around.

“Why are you in this store?” she asked, making her way to the register.  
“The sign out front says, No Romance Haters Allowed.”

“This place is across my senior research assignment.” I noticed light pink makeup on her eyelids. “And I’ve told you before that I don’t hate romance. Since you know flowers, I may need your help from time to time. If I can’t find someone else who I can tolerate better, that is.”

“Well, in that case, I’ll need your help giving me a ride to campus every day and not leaving me like you did this morning.”

“I’ll think about it.” I pulled out my wallet and paid for her books.  
“How are you adjusting to the first week of classes on land so far?” I held the door open as we stepped out of the shop.

“The classes are fine. The social life isn’t what I thought it would be.”

“Why not?”

“Because I think I’ve ruined my chances of making any life-long college friends since I was away for so long,” she said. “Everyone already has their set group of friends and we’ll all be going our separate ways in less than nine months.”

“Well, if you can’t make life-long friends, try making life-long enemies,” I said, smiling. “You’re great at making those.”

“Thank you for that excellent advice.” She rolled her eyes. “Always good to remember why the two of us will never be friends.”

“I’m always happy to remind you of that,” I said. “Just go to some more clubs and parties this week. It’s not that hard. Hell, you should probably go to one of the bars up the street right now and meet someone new. That would also save us from this conversation.”

“Does that mean that you’re not willing to give me a ride home?”

“It means that I’ll do it, but only if you can agree not to talk the entire way there.”

“Ugh. Fine.”

As we walked, I couldn’t help but notice how every man who caught sight of Rachel did a slow and noticeable double-take, and for some strange reason, I felt some type of way about that.

When we made it to my car, I took one long look at her as she tossed her stuff onto my back seat.

“Why are you staring at me?” she asked, looking up.

“I’m not staring at you.” I rolled my eyes. “I’m waiting on you to remember how to ride in the front seat of a car and put on your damn seatbelt.”

“Would you like me to sit in the back seat, then?”

“If Greg’s stuff wasn’t back there, I’d highly suggest it.” I cranked the engine.

“Well, if you’re going to be like that—”

“You agreed not to talk,” I said. “If you don’t want a ride, feel free to get out. If you do want one, I would prefer driving in silence.”

She glared at me as she clicked her seatbelt.

*She really is gorgeous as hell now...*



## Back Then: 15 ½ Years Old

*(Well, Rachel is still 15 ½. I'm 16. It's why I'm far more mature than she is...)*  
*Ethan*



### **SUBJECT: RIDING IN Your Car**

Dear Ethan,

It's bad enough that I don't have a driver's permit (By the way, no one cares that you got to take one of the last tests right before our county changed the age requirement), and my parents insist on me getting a ride to and from school with you every day, but the least you can do is not be rude as hell to me the whole time. You could at least give me time to get your car and not start driving once I step out the front door.

But you know what? Since I'm clearly the bigger person, I think the time has come for us to just be cordial with each other and nothing more. Since I'll have to wait another year and a half to get my permit, do me a favor these next few months and don't speak to me unless we're in your car. And even then, anything other than "Hello" and "Goodbye" would be far too much.

Fuck off and Forget You,  
Rachel



### **SUBJECT: RE: RIDING in Your Car**

Dear Rachel,

First of all, it's bad enough that we even know each other—the specifics of why don't really matter. If you started stepping out of your house *on time*, I wouldn't have to do that.

You're NOT the bigger person at all. I told you that I wanted to be “just cordial” with you weeks ago before you snitched on me about seeing cigarettes in my room. Cigarettes that weren't even mine. (Is your life really that dull to where you have to look out your bedroom window and into mine for entertainment?)

Your latest snitching stunt has ended any shit about us ever being cordial again.

Fuck off and Forget You, Too,  
Ethan

PS—We both know you're never going to get your driver's permit because you consistently fail the written exam in Driver's Ed. (Newsflash: The shit isn't that hard)

PSS—Congrats on learning how to use spellcheck for the first time in an email this year.



**SUBJECT: RE: RE: RIDING in Your Car**

Dear Ethan AND Rachel,

Please log off your computer stations and report to the principal's office right now. I've warned you two, time and time again, to stop using the school's server to email each other these petty little notes.

Do you have any idea how this can be misconstrued as cheating? Any idea how reckless you two are?

You're in the middle of taking an exam!

Forget BOTH of you,

Miss Washington



I STARED AT MISS WASHINGTON'S email from yesterday, wondering why she didn't end our conversation sooner since we'd sent twenty-five emails before the one she decided to randomly interrupt.

Thanks to Rachel's pettiness, we'd been forced to leave school via an afternoon suspension for the rest of the day, and today was supposed to be a



“fresh start.”

And of course, she was late.

I honked my horn at 7:05, knowing that she was just standing in her living room and staring at the clock. Waiting until her “preferred” pick up time of 7:15.

At exactly 7:15, she opened the door and let up her flimsy umbrella, rushing across her front yard and into my car.

“Would it kill you to pull all the way into my driveway?” She shook her hair, getting water all over my dashboard. “Especially on the days when it rains? That’s what a true gentleman would do.”

“I never said I was a gentleman, especially not for you.”

She rolled her eyes and buckled her seatbelt. Turning up the music, she pulled a bag of donuts from her backpack and handed it to me. I pointed to the fresh cup of vanilla coffee I always picked up at the new corner cafe for her.

Even though we were hardly ever on speaking terms, we had an unwritten rule between us for the morning drives. She was responsible for getting breakfast the night before and I was responsible for picking up the hot chocolate (Well, *coffee* for her) before I honked at her house.

We didn’t have to like each other to adhere to that at all.

I headed to my girlfriend Valerie’s house and pulled into her driveway. (I was a gentleman for *her*.) I let up an umbrella and walked to her porch, smiling at her bright pink dress and grey raincoat.

“Morning, Ethan.” She blushed and kissed my lips.

“Morning.” I returned her kiss and grabbed her backpack.

“Wait, before we go can I show you something?”

“Now?” I looked at my watch. “We’re going to be late if we don’t head out at this moment.”

She kissed me again and bit my bottom lip, whispering. “It’ll be worth your while. I promise.”

I sighed and obliged, following her inside her house and into her living room.

“What do you think?” She pointed to two canvas paintings. One of them was a picture of a couple kissing (I thought...) and the other was of the new hotel that was across from our high school.

“I painted ‘us’ as a present for you!” She smiled. “And since that hotel always distracts us during lunch I decided to paint it for you, too. You want

to put them in your car now or later?”

“*Later*,” I said, quickly softening my tone. “I mean, it’s raining outside and I don’t want them to get wet.”

“Oh yeah.” She smiled. “Good point.”

I held back a sigh as she covered them with a sheet. Rachel would never stop talking shit about those pictures if she saw them this morning. Mostly because Rachel knew how to draw better than anyone in our school and she never let me forget it.

*Ugh. Rachel’s good at almost everything. Except spelling...*

“Okay!” Valerie kissed me again. “I’ll bring them to your place this weekend.”

We took our time walking to the car and I opened the back door for her.

“Ugh!” She huffed and slid onto the backseat.

I didn’t bother asking her what was wrong. The rain was falling even harder now and we were now running late thanks to her anyway.

As I pulled onto the street, she cleared her throat.

“Ethan,” she said, sighing. “Why does Rachel always get to sit in the front seat of your car?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, why is it that Rachel—the girl who is *not* your girlfriend, is always in the front seat when you come to get me?”

I looked at her through the rearview mirror, noticed that her arms were crossed and her face was beet red. “It’s because Rachel lives next door to me and she’s always sat in the front seat since I got this car.”

“That’s not a good reason, Ethan.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “I’m your girlfriend and you claim that she’s your so-called *enemy*, but you sure do treat her better than any enemy I’ve ever had. You treat her like she’s your best friend—more than just your best friend.”

I rolled my eyes. This was the third time she’s picked a fight with me about Rachel and I wasn’t sure what else I could say to convince her that Rachel was just Rachel.

There was nothing but hatred between us and there always would be.

“Don’t you think this is messed up, Rachel?” She was still talking.

“How would you feel if your boyfriend—Well, girlfriend because you’re a lesbo right?”

“I’m not a lesbian.” Rachel shook her head, looking completely unfazed.

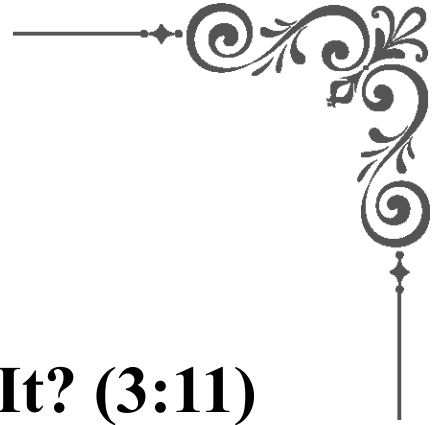
“Well, that’s what the rumors around school say. Based on the way you dress and the fact that you only hang out with guys, I’m certain you can see why people think that way. Not to mention the fact that you don’t have a single girl as a friend.” She flipped her hair over her shoulder. “Would it bother you if I sat next to my boyfriend, please?”

“*Whatever.*” Rachel unbuckled her seatbelt when we approached the next red light and climbed into the backseat. Valerie took her time letting up her umbrella and stepping outside to take two whole steps to get into the front seat.

She kissed my cheek before buckling her seatbelt and smiled as I drove away. Then she picked up the donut bag. “How sweet of you, Ethan! Did you get these donuts and that coffee for me?”

“Actually, those are me and Rachel’s donuts,” I said. “Do you want me to stop somewhere so you can buy yourself some?”

She gave me a blank stare, and then her face reddened. “Are you fucking serious?”



## Track 8. ...Ready for It? (3:11)

*Rachel*



THERE'S A SOUNDTRACK to this town that I've always known by heart. It's a compilation of sounds with special, real-world lyrics that I'd recognize anywhere. The morning tracks are always a mix of waves hitting the shore or tourists scattering across the beach to stake their claims on chairs. In the afternoon, the tracks slowly give way to the loud laughter and horns from the trolley lines, with the hard beats of residents ordering ice cream cones and cold coffee. And at night, the final tracks steal the day when the sand softly sifts back into place, and the couples share secret kisses on the beach.

Today, I was learning the sound of a brand-new morning track. The silence of being stood up for the fifth day in a row.

"Are you sure he didn't call and say that he wasn't coming?" I asked the barista at The Creamery. "Like, he had to have said *something*."

"I'm sure he didn't call," she said, flipping her long red hair over her shoulders. "Just like I'm sure that the guys from the past few days didn't call and say anything either. They would've called you, not the coffee shop."

"Right..." I blew out a breath, and she moved from behind the counter—handing me a coffee.

"It's on the house," she said. "What's your name?"

"Rachel."

"I'm Penelope, Rachel." She extended her hand. "And something tells me that you've been out of the dating game for a minute."

“Kind of. I met all those guys at a bar, got their numbers, and after we texted for a few days, we set a date. Then, because I thought it was nice, I looked up their campus addresses and sent them a handwritten note saying how excited I was about our date later.”

Her eyes widened. “You did *what*?”

“I sent them all a note.” I shrugged. “I did that all the time when I was at Semester at Sea.”

“Ah.” She nodded, laughing. “Okay, so you’re one of those sea-leg girls.” She picked up my cell phone and tapped the screen. “You know what? I’m going to give you my phone number and help you out from time to time.”

“Why?”

“Because I work all the time between my classes and I need to make some new friends,” she said. “We’ve talked every day while you’ve been stood up this week, and since you don’t strike me as a psycho, I think we’ll get along. Just don’t look up my address and send me a letter.”

I laughed. “I won’t.”

“I’m here every morning, and this is our pre-rush time if you ever want to drop by,” she said. “I’m off on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but other than that, I’m usually in class or stuck here. Feel free to text me whatever land-dating questions you may have, whenever you want. In the meantime, download Tinder and set up Facebook, since I know most of you sea-leg girls wait until the last minute to do that.”

“I will.” I smiled. “Looking forward to it.”

“Well, good morning, *Rachel*.” Greg walked into the café, smiling at me before gawking at Penelope. “Who is your friend here?”

“I wasn’t interested in you yesterday,” Penelope said, crossing her arms. “And I’m still not interested in you today, whatever your name is.”

“We didn’t even speak yesterday.” He winked at her, giving her one of his playful grins. “If we had, I would’ve asked you something important.”

“What is it?”

“Just that I can’t stop staring at a certain something that’s on your lips.” He smirked. “Would you like me to help you take it off with mine?”

“Seriously?” She rolled her eyes. “Get the hell out of my coffee shop, Greg. Now.”

“I thought you didn’t know my name.” He looked her over one last time and winked before leaving the store.

I held back a laugh and stood up as customers began trickling inside.  
“I’ll text you sometime this week.”

“Looking forward to it. Oh, and Rachel?”

“Yeah?” I headed to the door.

“For the record, if another guy suggests that you meet him at a coffee shop at seven thirty in the morning, for a first date, he probably *will* blow you off. That’s the standard brush-off hour.” She smiled and returned to the counter, and I stepped outside.

Fresh out of “make a new best friend” options and officially done with Plans A through Y when it came to finding someone consistent to talk to, I decided it was time for Plan Z.

I made my way to Crème and Cocoa, a hot chocolate shop Ethan mentioned the other day. When I stepped inside, I spotted him sitting near the back, writing.

“You’re awake early,” he said, looking up. “Do you have an eight o’clock class today or something?”

“No. I can’t help but wake up super early every morning. It’s a habit.”

“How uninteresting.” He shut his notebook as I took a seat. “What do you want?”

“I came here for the hot chocolate, Ethan,” I said. “I didn’t come here for you.”

“You don’t like hot chocolate, Rachel.” He rolled his eyes. “Even though I’m willing to guess that to this day you’ve never tried it.”

“I have tried it.” I lied.

He stared at me blankly. “What do you really want?”

“Okay, fine,” I said. “I came here to talk to you about something, but you have to promise not to laugh.”

He crossed his arms. “I’m listening.”

“I would like to propose an arrangement.”

“What type of arrangement?”

“A temporary arrangement that will highly benefit me.”

“What about *me*?”

“You have every girl on campus fawning all over you for some strange reason,” I said. “You don’t need any benefits.”

“So, you’re finally admitting that every woman on this campus is attracted to me?”

“No. I’m admitting that this proposal is my last resort, and every woman on this campus is brainwashed.”

“Jealousy isn’t sexy, Rachel.”

“Neither are you.”

He laughed. “What’s the proposal?”

“I want us to pretend to be friends for a few weeks until I find some real ones of my own,” I said. “I don’t want to have a lonely senior-year, you know? No one I’ve texted has gotten back to me, and even Meredith—who I thought was great when she was on the ship, seems to have had a brain transplant since then. I’ve had coffee with her twice, and all she wants to talk about are her selfie-taking skills and her social media accounts.”

His lips curved into a slow, sexy smile, and he sipped his coffee.

*Has his smile always looked like that?*

“I would also like to have someone who I can talk to about personal stuff from time to time,” I said, pausing. “But this would only be temporary, and the moment I’m convinced that I’ve made a new, and genuine friend, the two of us can go back to not standing each other. What do you say?”

“Define ‘pretend to be friends.’ What does that entail?”

“I just told you what it entails, Ethan.”

“I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Okay, fine.” I stood to my feet. “Forget you. *Literally.*”

“I’m kidding, Rachel.” He motioned for me to sit down. “If we’re going to pretend to be friends, you’re going to have to work on not being a hot-head all the time. You’ll have to *see me* as your friend and not your enemy.”

“Fine,” I said, sitting down again. “I can do that.”

“Also, since you have little to no experience in this department, you should know that friends talk without arguing, and they tell each other the truth about things. No matter what.”

“This is only temporary, Ethan.”

“I’m aware.” He smiled, leaning forward and lowering his voice. “And as your temporary friend, I’d like to let you know that from the moment you walked in here, I could see your nipples through your bra, and I could also see your red lace panties through your shorts.”

“What?” I felt my cheeks reddening.

“You heard me.” He glanced at my chest. “In exchange for my temporary services, I’ll need your thoughts on the Ripped Bodice’s

inventory whenever I ask for it since it ties into my Silk Stem project. Deal?"

"Deal." I extended my hand, and he shook it.

Then the two of us sat in silence and stared at each other.

"So, what are we supposed to do now?" I said. "If I was your friend Rob or Michael, what would we be doing?"

"They wouldn't be awake right now." He laughed and pulled out his phone. "But since we're 'friends' now, I guess I can tell you about two things that you might be interested in doing so you can meet some new people."

He showed me his screen. "First, you need to sign up for this fall's senior trip to Peak Ridge Lodge."

I opened my purse and pulled out my notebook, but he took it away from me.

"No need to write this down, just start a Facebook account."

"Okay." I took out my phone. "What's the second thing?"

"Depends. Do you still have a dream of running your own art school someday?"

"Always."

He clicked on his screen, and a group called Ultimate Art Lovers appeared. "You should probably look into this and try to make some friends there."

"I will."

"Good," he said. "Now, give me your phone, so that I can set up your Facebook and Tinder accounts. I highly doubt you'll know how to pick the right pictures..."



*A few days later...*

I SWIPED LEFT ON MY fiftieth Tinder guy of the night, approved another ten friend requests on Facebook and set down my phone. Social media and handling e-friends were already starting to feel like a full-time job.

Since I was only taking elective courses this semester, I was starting to wonder if I should pursue a part-time job or something that would prevent me from spending half of my days scrolling through the newsfeed.

I sent Penelope a quick, "Spent time on Tinder like you said! Met a cute guy named Ryan who happens to be in my art class!" message, and then I



turned on the music system in the living room.

I waited for Ethan or Greg to join me as usual, but neither came.

Relieved to finally have the house to myself for a change, I opened the windows that overlooked the beach—letting the salty air waft inside. I made myself a cup of hot coffee and sat on the couch, picking up one of my favorite romances.

I made it halfway through the first chapter when I heard a loud crashing noise coming from my bedroom.

Remembering what Ethan said about locking my windows at night, it suddenly hit me that I hadn't done that earlier. Nervous, I jumped off the couch and grabbed a baseball bat from the coat closet. I tiptoed down the hallway and held the bat high, prepared to bash the intruder's head in.

Just as I was about to enter my room, Ethan stepped out of it bare ass naked.

"What the hell are you doing?" He snapped, looking up at the bat.

"I should be asking you the same thing! Why the hell are you naked?"

"Last time I checked, I *live* here." He didn't make a move to cover himself, and my gaze wandered down past his perfectly chiseled abs, to his perfectly defined "V," down to—

*Oh. My. GOD!*

His cock was huge. *HUGE.*

I felt my jaw dropping as I stared at it, and after several seconds, I had to force myself to look away.

"Can you grab a towel or put on some clothes?" I felt my cheeks warming. "*Please?*"

"Why would I do that?" He stepped closer. "You seem to like what's in front of you."

*"What?"*

He laughed and slipped into the bathroom. Then he returned with a towel around his waist.

"Why were you in my room?" I asked.

"Two reasons. One, your smoke alarm was going off every five minutes because you didn't change the batteries like I told you to last week. Two, you forgot to lock the shutters. *Again.*"

"I know...Sorry about that."

"Don't be." He looked me up and down, setting my nerves on fire as he smiled. "Do you have plans for tonight?"

“Yes.”

“Like what?”

“Like enjoying the entire apartment to myself for a change.”

“Those are my plans as well.”

“Ugh...Can I please, for once, have the place to myself?” I asked, unsure of why there were butterflies fluttering around in my stomach.

“I guess that would be fair.”

“Glad you finally learned how to be that way.”

He smiled, looking me up and down one last time before slipping into his bedroom. He was dressed within five minutes, and he gave me one of his sexy smiles—sending the butterflies fluttering all over again, before walking out of the front door.

I let out a breath and shook my head.

There was no way I was feeling an intense attraction toward him right now. I was just having a long day. Had to be.

*He's still the boy next door I hated...Nothing more. Nothing less...*



## Track 9. Don't Blame Me (4:25)

*Ethan*



“SOCIOLOGY IS THE STUDY of the development, structure, and functioning of human society.” Greg repeated for the umpteenth time tonight. “Sociology is the study of the development, structure, and functioning of human society...”

“Please tell me you’ve gotten farther in your book than that, Greg.” I watched as he paced the floor of our living room.

“I have,” he said. “I’ve committed the first seven chapters of the text book to memory so far. The test is on the first five this Friday, but just in case this asshole tries to pull a fast one on me, I went the extra mile and memorized the next two, you know?”

My friend Michael shook his head from across the room. “I think I’ve officially been replaced as your craziest friend.”

“I agree.” I laughed and motioned for him to follow me into the kitchen. “Good knowing you’re still alive.”

“I could say the same for you, my friend.”

The two of us didn’t hang out as much as we used to since his pre-med major was kicking his ass these past few semesters, but the reckless times we shared during our freshmen and sophomore years would always be something for the record books. Something we could always remember.

“Okay,” he said, getting a beer from my fridge. “I came over to ask you for a huge favor.”

“You could’ve just called.”

“I did call. You didn’t answer.”

I looked at my phone and sure enough there was a missed call from him, but there were also forty new missed ones from the phones that belonged to Lisa’s friends.

*Ugh. Take the hint, Lisa.*

“What’s the favor?” I asked.

“It’s simple. I need you to take out the best friend of a girl I’m interested in.”

“Why do I feel like it’s slightly more complicated than that?”

“Because you have a great intuition.” He laughed. “This needs to be an extended type of thing since I want to um, get to a certain point with her by the senior trip.”

“Is there something wrong with the best friend?”

“Besides the fact that she hates me and thinks I’m bad news for her friend?” He shrugged and showed me her pictures on his phone. “Not really. And call me crazy, but outside of that, I think that the two of you would really get along.”

“She’s cute,” I said, then I shook my head. “So, out of all the things you said, should I just assume that your girl said that she was willing to go out with you, if you hooked her friend up with one of your hot friends?”

“The word ‘hot’ was never used, Mr. Conceited.” He laughed. “But yes, your intuition wins again. Can I give you her friend’s phone number? Her name’s Teresa.”

“Of course.”

“As I was saving it to my phone, Rachel walked into the kitchen wearing a sports bra and a pair of black booty shorts. She went straight for the refrigerator, moving around all the alcohol and beer until she found her SAS water bottle.

Me and Michael stared at her, and I started to envision her on top of me, in the backseat of my car.

*Shit...*

“Hey, Ethan.” She finally turned around, extending her hand to Michael. “Hey, Ethan’s friend.”

“Michael,” he said, looking her up and down. “And you are?”

“Rachel.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “Ethan’s ‘gone at sea’ friend.”

“We’re not friends,” we said in unison, a habit.

“For a while there, I thought he was making you up.” He continued talking as if he hadn’t heard our intrusion. “I must say that his description didn’t do you any justice.”

“I’m sure.” She laughed. “But if you’re the Michael Han he wrote about from time to time, he never talked shit about you.”

“Good to know.”

Another image of her wrapping her legs around my waist crossed my mind and I didn’t shake it away.

“Guess what?” she said, looking at me.

“What?”

“I just got asked out on a date! Like an actual date that won’t take place on a cruise ship or at an international excursion.”

“Somehow the cruise ship and international excursion sound much more appealing.”

“Not to me,” she said. “I just wanted to run the guy’s name by you before I said yes. Do you know a Brett Gallagher?”

“Brett’s an awesome guy,” Michael said, still looking her up and down.

“He’s an old associate of mine,” I said, making a mental note to hit him up this weekend. “We were closer before he joined a fraternity, but he’s a good guy.”

“Great! Someone you can vouch for.” She hugged me—catching me completely off guard, and the second her breasts hit my chest, I started to get aroused. “If this date goes well, and we go out a few more times, I’ll ask him to share my buddy ticket for the senior lodge trip!”

I stepped back. “When’s the date?”

“This weekend. Can I run a few outfits by you so I won’t give off the wrong impression?”

“Of course.”

“Great,” she said. “You know, you’re a pretty good temporary friend, Ethan.” She rushed away and Michael stared at her until she was out of sight.

“What the hell?” He walked over and hit my shoulder. “You never told me that the girl you ‘supposedly’ hated looked like *that*.”

*She didn’t...*

“Hell,” he said, laughing, “I probably would’ve written her back all those times, too. Especially if I knew she was coming back and living with

me.” He lowered his voice. “Have you hit yet?”

“No,” I said, enjoying the new images of Rachel bent over the couch that were currently playing in my mind.

I took out my phone and tried to stay focused on the favor at hand. The Teresa girl.

As I texted her number, I tried to convince myself that the feeling in my chest when Rachel mentioned Brett Gallagher wasn’t jealousy. It couldn’t be.

*She’s still the girl next door I hated...Nothing more. Nothing less...*



## Back Then: 16 Years Old

*Ethan*



**SUBJECT: TODAY'S RIDE.**

Dear Ethan,

I won't need a ride home after school today. I'm getting a ride with my new boyfriend.

Forget you,

Rachel

PS—I didn't vote for you for Mr. Popular.



**SUBJECT: RE: TODAY'S Ride.**

Dear Rachel,

Seeing as today is April Fool's Day, I'm not sure whether to take this joke of an email seriously or not. I'll wait for you at the car for five minutes.

If you're not there by then, I'm leaving.

Forget You,

Ethan

PS—Thanks for letting me know. The teachers were wondering who cast the lone ballot in the other guy's box...



RACHEL NEVER SHOWED up to my car, so I assumed she wasn't lying about having a boyfriend. I was also sure it wouldn't last too long. The first two guys she'd attempted to date dumped her because she refused to "dress like all the other girls" whenever they hung out, and she refused to comb the mop that she called her hair more than three times a week.

Heading home, I went upstairs to my room and texted my newest girlfriend, Chelsea.

**Me:** Hey. What are you up to?

**Chelsea:** Getting my nails done with Sarah. (Ugh. Her new hair is so gross) What's up?

**Me:** I was wondering if you wanted to come over and watch the new horror series tonight.

**Chelsea:** LOL No. I'd rather you take me to dinner...Can you come pick me up in a few hours?

I didn't text her back. We'd only been dating for a few weeks, and all she ever wanted to do was go to dinner (spend my allowance money), and gossip about her friends. She never did anything that I wanted to do, and I'd already told her that horror series and movies were a big deal to me.

Her response? "Aren't horror movies whack?"

I took out my notebook and started writing a plan to dump her next week.

I was tempted to go next door and ask Rachel if she was going to watch the horror series tonight, but when I looked up, I saw Glen Easton through her window.

He was sitting at her desk, giving her a smile I'd seen him give to tons of other girls at our school before.

Even though Rachel was lame as hell, she could do better—way better, than Glen Easton.

Last week, he'd bragged to all the guys in gym class about how he'd fucked Taylor Redding and how he was going to "bang another virgin this month."

I highly doubted Rachel had ever had sex. She still rolled her eyes whenever I begrudgingly told her about my escapades (only because my guy friends weren't available), and even though I hated her, I didn't think Glen should be her first.

Her second? Maybe.

Her first? Not a chance.



I made sure my blinds were completely closed and decided I wouldn't say anything unless I thought Rachel would try to go all the way.

I watched Glen run his fingers through her hair. She laughed as he tried to touch her, and I finally accepted that she would forever be lame, until she leaned forward and kissed him.

Glen slid his hands under her shirt as he caressed her chest, and she was smiling against his mouth.

I suddenly felt angry and I wasn't sure why. I didn't want Rachel—at all, so I figured that the feeling in my chest was anger from Rachel showing my mom where Brody had hid his cigarettes in my room last week.

*It's definitely that...*

I spotted her mother's car in the driveway and decided to do what any "concerned" friend would do.

**Me:** Hello, Mrs. Dawson. I'm across the street and I heard a loud scream coming from Rachel's room. Is she okay? I know she has those stomach pains every month...

**Mrs. Dawson:** Such a good neighbor, Ethan! I'll go upstairs and check on her. Thanks!

It took all of ten seconds for me to hear the aftermath. Rachel's mom had the loudest set of lungs on the block, and I didn't have to lean against my window to hear every single word.

"Sneaking a boy into your room, Rachel Marie Dawson? Are you out of your mind! You are grounded! Indefinitely!"

A part of me almost felt bad for snitching.

Until I saw her mom pulling a pack of condoms from a drawer.

*She was really going to have sex with him?*

Her mom's yelling went on for two hours, and it was so harsh and brutal that it made me never want to sneak another girl into my room...



LATER THAT NIGHT, RACHEL glared at me from her window—holding up "Fuck You, Ethan!" on her whiteboard each time I happened to look her way.

I was about to ask why she couldn't just turn on her TV for the horror series and leave me alone, but I noticed her flat screen was gone. That her mother had taken it in the grounding aftermath.

Sighing, I let up my window and pushed my TV as close to the edge as possible.

Rachel looked up from her desk—still glaring at me, but a faint smile crossed her lips. I turned up the volume as high as it could go and watched as she picked up the paper cup that was on her side of our makeshift phone line from years ago.

“Ethan?” she said.

“Yeah?”

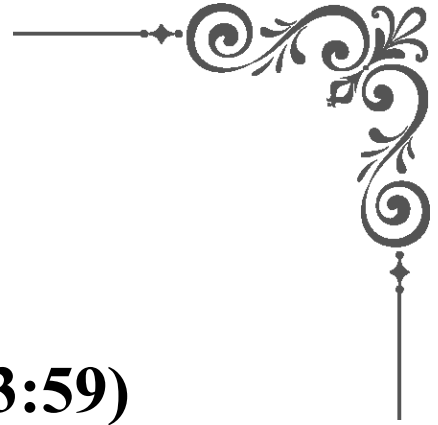
“Can you tilt the screen a little bit more?”

I obliged, pushing it out a bit further.

“Thank you.” She opened a bag of chips. “Oh, and Ethan?”

“Yeah?”

“I fucking hate you.”



## Track 10. Style (3:59)

*Rachel*



THERE WERE A FEW THINGS I'd always looked forward to about having my first real date on campus, a specific list of "shit I definitely need" that was inspired from all my favorite love stories. I knew most of the things by heart, but the moment I was asked out, I made sure to pull out my list and reread the top three.



*Shit I Definitely Need on my First Real Date:  
(Fuck what Ethan said about this being unrealistic. He doesn't know anything.)*



1. A CONVERSATION THAT I never want to end (Preferably one about books, but I'll settle for one about art, our dreams, or things we love to do)

2. A great location that I will always remember. Bonus points if this location is under the stars, somewhere along a private beach, or at a five-star restaurant.

3. A soul searing kiss that seals the night and leaves my mind spinning with thoughts about endless possibilities. (Plus, butterflies. There need to be some goddamn butterflies.)



SO FAR, TONIGHT, MY list was looking unrealistic as shit, and I was batting zero.

Brett Gallagher was definitely attractive as hell, and after talking on the phone with him every night this week and laughing at all the things we had in common, I was hoping for butterflies or sparks when he picked me up in his car.

It'd been an hour and I was still waiting.

I didn't feel anything when he smiled and complimented me, and I was still trying to figure out why the hell he thought a pizza bar was the perfect place for a date. Not only that, but he was dressed in sweats and a T-shirt, as if he'd rolled out of bed seconds before picking me up.

*I can't believe I wasted half of my day getting ready for this...*

"I kind of feel like I should've dressed up more for you," Brett said, smiling. "You look great, by the way."

"Thanks." I forced a smile. "Are we just getting a bite to eat here and then heading out for the rest of the date?"

He laughed. "No, this *is* the date. I personally think its best if we get to know each other in a place like this since this is more affordable for me." He smiled and winked at me. "You're not a gold-digger, are you?"

I held back a sigh and smoothed my hands over my grey dress. "Not at all."

"What can I get you two tonight?" The waiter stepped in front of our table. "We have four new pizza combos and three specialty drinks if you're interested."

"We'll have the samples," Brett answered before I could. "With water. Large cups of water."

The waiter rolled his eyes and quickly returned with our water and a box of miniature pizza slices.

"I don't know why people come here and *pay* for their pizza," he said. "The samples are free, and you can get full with two orders of those. Well, we'll probably need three since we're sharing, but they don't limit the samples at all."

He pulled out five miniature slices for himself and slid the box toward me.

There was only one slice left.

"So, in the car, you were telling me something about loving to draw," he said. "Are you an Art major?"

“Yeah, I’ve always wanted to be an artist.”

“Sounds cool.”

I waited for him to elaborate, to say or ask me something else, but it never came. Instead, he devoured his first few slices—smacking loudly as he swallowed them.

“Do you want to eat the pizza outside on their patio?” I suggested, wanting to salvage this night. “I think our conversation may be better out there.”

“It’ll be better when we’re back at my place watching Netflix,” he said, pulling out his phone. “Let me find something to set the mood before we get there. We can even vote on it.”

“Right...” I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “Will you excuse me for a second? I need to run to the restroom.”

“No problem. It’s in the back, on the left.”

I stood up and made my way down the hall, shutting myself into the first stall. For this “date,” I’d had my hair pinned up in curls at a Main Street salon, splurged on a manicure and pedicure, and bought new nude stilettos to complement my thigh-length grey dress.

I debated texting Ethan, asking him if he thought I should leave, but I didn’t want to get too comfortable with our temporary friendship. I texted Penelope instead.

**Me:** Hey...I’m on a date right now and need some advice.

**Penelope:** Yes, you should make him wear a condom.

**Me:** That’s not it LOL...We were supposed to go on a date, and we are...But he brought me to a pizza bar...

**Penelope:** Which pizza bar?

**Me:** O’Malley’s. The one with the free samples...Is that normal?

**Penelope:** Depends. He may be in between paychecks and may take you out for a real date next time. It’s only a deal-breaker if he’s a cheap-ass (only gets the samples) and mentions going back to his place to watch Netflix.

**Me:** He did mention going back to his place to watch Netflix.

**Penelope:** Get the hell out of there. Now. (PS—That Ryan guy you’ve been grabbing coffee with in between your art classes seems like more of your type...Just date him for a while.)

I stepped out of the stall and looked myself over one last time before stepping out of the bathroom. When I opened the door, Brett was standing

in the hallway, looking wide-eyed and panicked.

“Um, Brett?” I asked. “Is something wrong?”

“Yeah, I need you to stay in there for a little while.” He looked over his shoulder. “Until I tell you it’s okay to leave.”

“I’m sorry, *what?*”

“Stay in the bathroom, Rachel.” He motioned for me to go back inside. “I need you to go in there for a second. I don’t want my ex to know that you were with me here.”

I blinked. “You said that you were single.”

“We’re on a break,” he said, shaking his head. “We still hang out from time to time, but we haven’t officially given the green light to date other people yet.”

“So, why did you ask me out in the first place?”

“Seriously?” He looked me up and down. “Why do you think?”

A waiter squeezed past us, and he looked over his shoulder again.

“Shit...” He placed his hands on my shoulders, pushing me into the bathroom. Then he poked his head through the door. “Stay in here!”

*What the fuck?*

I opened the door slightly, debating how the hell I should handle this, and I saw him locking lips with a blonde at our table. She smiled against his mouth, and he squeezed her ass.

He ran his fingers through her hair, and I felt myself getting hot. Felt myself wanting to step out of the room and tell him how big of an asshole he was for getting my hopes up this week. I took a deep breath and prepared to yell at him for ruining things, but I suddenly heard Ethan’s voice in my head.

*“You’re so in love with the idea of being in love that you’ll fall for damn near anyone...”*

I sighed and watched as Brett and his “break” kissed for several more minutes. When he finally pulled away from her, she walked over to the bar.

I crossed my arms, waiting for him to come my way and apologize, but he didn’t. He didn’t look my way at all.

Annoyed, I stepped out of the bathroom and walked to his table—right as his girlfriend returned. I picked up my water and took a long sip. “Thank you so much for tonight’s date, Brett. I had a really good time.” I looked at his girlfriend. “He told me he was single.”

I walked away, not staying around for the aftermath.

I walked straight into the bar next door, ordering four shots and knocking them down back to back. I sipped a Long Island Iced Tea, slurped a huge margarita, and topped it all off with a couple of Amaretto Sour drinks before the bartender told me I had to wait a while to order anything else.

Not wanting to wait, I stood up and made my way outside. As luck would have it, a slight drizzle was falling. As it always seemed to do on my shitty days.

Not caring, I headed toward The Umbrellas.

"I thought you were supposed to be on a date tonight, Rachel," a familiar deep voice said, making me look to my left.

I turned around and saw Ethan sitting in his car. His blue eyes were gleaming under his roof's low lights, and a sexy smile formed on his lips as he looked me over.

"You were supposed to be on a date as well," I said finally, feeling a sudden and intense bout of butterflies.

"I was," he said. "I just got back from taking her home. You want a ride?"

I stood still as the rain fell a bit harder. I wasn't sure how to handle this. Every time me and Ethan were around each other in the past, there were no sparks whatsoever. Just a mutual hatred that occasionally gave way to a truce long enough for us to get through the rest of the day. But lately, whatever was between us was definitely not hatred. That, and I was spending far too many of my nights fantasizing about his lips on top of mine with my vibrator in hand.

"*Rachel?*" His deep voice snapped me out of my thoughts. "Get in the goddamn car."

I opened the door and slipped inside.

"Here." He grabbed a few beach towels from the backseat and handed them to me before pulling off onto the street.

We didn't speak as he drove, and when we made it past the exit that led into our neighborhood, we found ourselves in the middle of stop and go traffic. The rain tap-danced on his roof for several minutes, and then he pulled over into the emergency lane.

"Construction hours end in twenty," he said. "Makes no sense to attempt to get through this right now."

I nodded, feeling tipsy. "Yep..."

“Where did Brett take you on your date?” he asked, putting the car in park.

“I would tell you, but I’d hate to make you jealous.”

“I’d have to be interested in you to be jealous, Rachel.” He let out a low laugh. “Tell me where he took you.”

“Multiple places,” I said. “First, he took me to the carnival at the pier, and we played a few games and ate lots of food. Then he took me for a walk on the beach where we shared the most amazing kiss, and then he took me to try something new at a private restaurant. Oh, and at the end, he treated me to a long and dirty, passionate kiss where he put all other men’s words and tongues to shame.”

“He did all of that within *one hour*?” He smirked.

“Yes. He was very efficient.”

He gave me a blank stare.

“Okay, fine. Brett took me out for free pizza and water. If that wasn’t bad enough, his girlfriend showed up, so he shoved me into the bathroom.”

“Interesting.” He laughed. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Are you really?”

“Not at all.”

“How was your date with Teresa?”

“Far better than yours,” he said. “I took her to dinner at Rosie’s.”

“The five-star restaurant near the pier?”

“The very same,” he said, smiling. “They don’t serve free samples there.”

I rolled my eyes, feeling a slight pang of jealousy. “Does she believe that you’re really interested in her?”

“Doesn’t matter.” He shrugged. “I’m breaking things off after the senior lodge trip. Are you still going?”

I nodded. “I’ll just go with Ryan from my art class since we seem to get along. He’s pretty cute, and he’s a perfect date and gentleman. Unlike someone I know.”

“You and I have never dated.”

“And we never will.”

“After all the expectations you had for the guys you dated on the ship, I’ll count that as a blessing.”

“You know what?” I turned to face him, feeling liquor running through my veins. “I made like half of those things up, Ethan.”



“You did *what*?”

“Don’t act surprised,” I said, unbuckling my seatbelt as the traffic line became longer. “I may have creatively or purposely lied about some of those guys.”

He turned off his car. “I’m *beyond* surprised...How much of it was made up?”

“Not the parts you’re thinking about,” I said. “All the good stuff was real. Like, kisses against the pier from the guy whose looks put you to shame. Well, not now, because you’re sexy as hell these days and if I didn’t hate you, I’d consider fucking you. Also, the sex on the deck that you wish you would’ve had. It was better than your best nights here, I’m sure. And most of the dates were real.”

He didn’t say anything.

“No rebuttal?” I smiled. “Nothing smart to say?”

“I didn’t hear anything past you saying that you’d consider fucking me.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” I said, glad he couldn’t see the color of my cheeks. “I wouldn’t even consider kissing you, so fucking you would be a bit of a reach.”

“Is that what you really feel?”

“That’s what I really *said*.”

Silence.

Without another word, he leaned over and pressed his lips against mine, and I wrapped my arms around his neck. Gently biting my bottom lip, he slid his hands around my waist and lifted me into his lap.

He deepened our kiss, and I moaned against his mouth, shutting my eyes as he rubbed his hands against my exposed back, as his fingers tugged at the lace of my panties.

“*Ethan...*” I whispered against his mouth. “*Ethan...*”

He didn’t answer me. He ran his fingers through my hair and briefly pulled away from my mouth, trailing hard and rough kisses up and down my neck.

I felt his cock hardening under me, and I gasped as I felt him. I ran my hands against his shoulders and then down to his chest as his mouth met mine again.

“Fuck, Rachel...” he whispered against my lips. He moved his hands down to my waist, then lower, briefly cupping my ass.

Pushing the front of my dress down, he palmed my breasts and sucked a nipple into his mouth. Softly biting it, he twirled his tongue around until it hardened, and then he sucked my other nipple between his lips.

I shut my eyes as his hands skimmed the band of my panties—as he slowly ripped them off.

As he slipped a finger inside of my pussy, the loud sound of knocking invaded our silence.

His mouth returned to mine for an even greedier kiss, but the knocking became even louder, and I realized someone was tapping on the driver's side window.

Immediately pulling away from each other in shock, we adjusted our clothes, and I moved back to my seat.

Ethan looked over at me, making sure I was decent before rolling the window down.

"You alright out here in this rain?" It was a police officer. "Are you having car trouble?"

"No sir," he said. "We were just waiting on the traffic to stop."

"What traffic?" He raised his eyebrow, and I wiped the fog from the windshield.

The road ahead was perfectly clear.

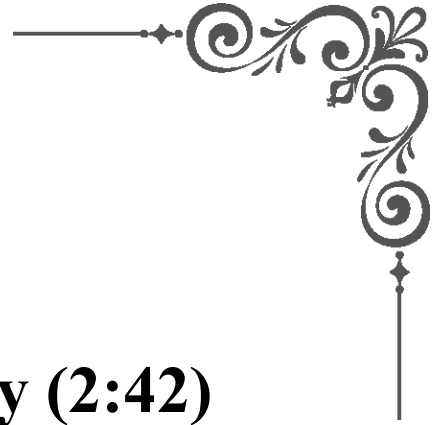
"Off you go," the officer said. "Out of our emergency lane."

Ethan cranked the car and sped off, looking over at me every time we reached a stoplight.

I leaned back against the seat and kept my face forward the entire way home, resisting the urge to touch my swollen lips.

The second we made it home, I avoided Ethan's gaze and rushed right to my room.

*What the hell just happened?*



## Track 11. Sparks Fly (2:42)

*Rachel*



THE NEXT MORNING, I rolled over in bed—hoping like hell that last night’s kiss between me and Ethan was just a wet dream. A very vivid and repeat-worthy wet dream that I wished could’ve lasted a bit longer and gone a bit further.

I stood up and walked to the bathroom, gasping when I saw my reflection. There was a huge bite mark on my neck, and my lips were still swollen from how thoroughly he’d kissed me. My thigh even had a print from where it’d been pressed against his gearshift.

*So that shit actually happened?*

I stepped into my shower and stood under the streams, shutting my eyes as the water fell over me. I wasn’t sure what I was going to say to him the next time we were alone, but I knew *that* couldn’t happen again.

Even if it was the best kiss I’d ever had in my life. Even though I was sure I would be thinking about it for the rest of the day.

*The rest of the year...*

I waited until my skin was wrinkled and red, and then I quickly dressed in a teal shirt and jeans. Opening my cosmetics drawer, I pulled out my concealer pen and rubbed it against my neck until all remnants of Ethan’s kiss were gone.

I stuffed my pencils and brushes into my bag and headed into the kitchen.

“Good morning,” Ethan said, looking up at me from the bar.

“Hi...” I stared into his blue eyes. “Don’t you have Econ right now?”

“I told you I’m excused from that class since I’m doing the report on The Silk Stem. Speaking of which, did you start on those questions I sent you about the romance store?”

I nodded. “I’ll have them back to you tonight.”

“Okay.”

“Okay...” I moved past him and grabbed a bagel off the counter. I headed toward the door, but I couldn’t help but turn around again. “Can we talk about last night?”

“What about it?”

“Well, for starters, I think we took things too far.”

“It was just a kiss, Rachel.” He looked me up and down. “A very good kiss...But nothing else happened.”

“Well, I’d like you to know that nothing else will ever happen,” I said. “You know I would never willingly kiss you—no matter how well you’ve been pretending to be my friend lately.”

“I would’ve thought that *before* last night.” He smiled.

“It still stands true today, Ethan. I was clearly drunk.”

“You weren’t *that* drunk.” The way he was looking at me was making me wet.

“Yes, well...I didn’t want to tell you this, but while we were kissing I was thinking about Ryan. You know, the guy I’m sharing a seat with for the senior lodge trip. I was picturing him instead of you.”

“You said my name.”

“By default.”

“You said it *twice*.” He looked upset, but his expression slowly softened. “You’re overthinking the kiss, though.”

“So, it didn’t mean anything?”

“It meant that I can no longer assume that you’re a terrible kisser.” He tapped his fingers against the counter and changed the subject. “What else did you *purposely* lie about in some of your letters?”

“What?” My face paled. I didn’t remember mentioning that to him at all, and I’d sworn long ago that I would never bring it up.

“Last night, you told me that certain incidents you wrote about weren’t true,” he said, standing to his feet. “I wanted to wait for complete clarification, though. So, what else did you lie about?”

“Um...” I stepped back. “I have to be on time for class.”

“Your class doesn’t start for another thirty minutes.”

“The shuttle comes in fifteen.”

“I’ll drive you there in twenty.” He stood up and walked over to the door, blocking my exit. “What else did you lie about?”

“Minor things.”

“Okay.” He shrugged. “Feel free to elaborate.”

“I’m sure you lied about things here or there, too.” I shook my head. “It’s not that serious.”

“I’ve been truthful about hating you my whole life,” he said, smiling. “I’ve never had any reason to lie.”

“Right...Well maybe I had a really good reason to lie, then.”

“I highly doubt that. Tell me.”

“Fine.” I paused. “Well, I only dated a few guys while I was away, so I may have lied about some of those guys I wrote you about at first.”

“Come again?”

“I didn’t date that much on the ship,” I said. “All those guys I told you about during my freshman and sophomore year were lies. I didn’t start dating guys until my junior year.”

“So...” He tilted his head to the side. “Mark Williams, your first onboard kiss under the stars, when you swore you felt butterflies and shit...That wasn’t true?”

“Why do you remember the details?”

“Was it true?”

“No,” I said. “Mark Williams was a character in one of the books I was reading.”

“John Kline. The first guy you invited into your room and had sex with...Was that true?”

“Yes and no.”

“It can’t be both.”

“I got seasick on the deck and he walked me back...It wasn’t as romantic as I put it.”

“Was there sex?”

“No.” I shook my head. “My first time wasn’t until my first-semester, junior year. With Holden Connors.”

“The guy who was too aggressive with you?” he asked. “That was your first time?”

“Yeah...”

He shook his head. "Rachel, why would you ever lie about some shit like that?"

"Because you were telling me about all the girls you were hanging out with, and all the fun you were having on campus," I said. "I didn't want to seem as lame as I was in high school. I wanted you to think I was having more fun since I was still pretty upset with you."

He stared at me, still shaking his head. "We've had a policy from when we were seven and a half years old, Rachel. Utter honesty, no matter what."

"I was trying to make my life appear more fun," I said. "That's not a crime."

"So, you've only had sex with two guys?"

"Yes. Stop looking at me like I'm pathetic."

"That's not how I'm looking at you at all," he said, opening the door. "I'm looking at you like I should've seen this shit before."



## Back Then: 16 ½ Years Old

*Ethan*



*DEAR ETHAN,*

*I would like to thank you (again) for snitching on me. Thanks to you, my mom won't even let me out of the house to check the mailbox. She took my phone, and I can't use the computer to send emails without her permission.*

*You have messed around with PLENTY of girls at our school and not once did I ever tell your parents (even when you were messing around with some of them at the same damn time) that you were bringing them up to your room. You ALWAYS bring girls up to your room, and I never snitch!*

*(Payback is going to be one hell of a bitch, and I'm still not talking to you on the way to and from school.)*

*Forget You,*

*Rachel*

*PS—Mandy Banks is telling everyone that you're a terrible kisser and your cock is small. So, since you're going on a date with Shelby Hannah tonight, you may want to keep it in your pants since its clearly not that impressive.*

*PSS—Please toss your response letter through my window as THANKS TO YOU, this is my only means of communication O\_o*



*DEAR RACHEL,*

*You're very welcome. Given the fact that you were about to fuck Glen Easton, she should've also had you committed to a mental wellness institute, so consider yourself lucky.*

*Mr. Popular usually does date the most girls at school, Rachel. That's the whole point of being me. ☺ The only reason you haven't snitched is because you were too busy taking notes.*

*(I prefer the quiet rides to and from school anyway.)*

*Forget You,*

*Ethan*

*PS—No comment on whether it's impressive or not. (That type of conversation can't be had with someone who has never seen a cock in real life) I'll be sure to give you all the details tomorrow since that's as close as you'll ever get to having sex.*

*PSS—You're very welcome.*



STEPPING OUT OF MY car and into drizzling rain, I crumpled my letter into a ball and threw it up through Rachel's window. As usual, it went in on the first attempt, and I waited to see if her lights would come on, but they didn't.

My "date" tonight with Shelby wasn't a real date at all, and I honestly felt like I'd wasted my time. When I took her to the drive-in theater, she spent most of her time talking about how "cute" of a couple we made and asking me if I thought she was prettier than Rachel. (Every girl I went out with asked me this shit for some strange reason) I spent most of my time texting the girl I went out with a few days before and telling her that I thought *every* girl was prettier than Rachel.

Our sex in the backseat of my car wasn't good at all, and for some reason, I wanted to talk to Rachel about it.

The lights in her room were off, and I was tempted to throw a few rocks to wake her, but I knew she was still too pissed to talk to me. That, and she definitely wasn't waking up at three o'clock in the morning to do so.

I made sure that my car was locked, that the lights were still off in my parents' room, and then I climbed up the ladder that led to my bedroom. Gently moving the books I'd wedged in the frame, I tossed them to the grass so they wouldn't make a sound. When I was sure that all was clear, I pushed the window all the way up and climbed inside.



The second I hit the floor, the lights in my room came on, and I was face to face with my parents.

*What the fuck?*

“Where the hell have you been, son?” My dad’s face was beet red. “Do you have any idea what time it is?”

I didn’t get a chance to answer.

My mother sucked in a long breath like she always did when she was about to yell, and all hell broke loose.

“We told you that curfew was eleven o’clock, Ethan!” She screamed. “*Eleven o’clock!* And that’s more than generous given what most of your peers get, don’t you think?”

I stood up and held back a sigh.

“Every time we try and trust you—” My mother shook her head. “You try to push the limits and do something like this.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” She hissed. “You’re sorry? Well, that’s nice. You’re also *grounded*.”

“For how long?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about that.” My dad snapped. “Be grateful that we *might* let you go to the prom during your senior year. That’s probably the only thing you’ll be able to do over the next year and a half. Are we clear?”

I nodded, too pissed to answer. I couldn’t believe they caught me. I’d done this numerous times before—with way less effort, and come back even later. I’d covered all my tracks, made sure the alarm didn’t sound, and even created a fake body mass on my bed.

By the time they were finished yelling at me, it was five o’clock in the morning, and I only had two hours before I needed to get ready for school.

As I was slumping at my desk and looking out at the rain, my eyes caught sight of Rachel smiling at me through her window. The lamplight on her desk was glowing pink, and she was fully alert.

She held up her whiteboard, and I squinted to read the letters.

*HOW DOES THAT FILL, ETHAN?*

*Jesus Christ...*

I started to hold up my whiteboard and correct her spelling, but it wasn’t worth it. I pushed my window all the way up and motioned for her to do the same.

“So, you snitched on me?” I asked. “Really, Rachel?”

“Someone had to do it.” She smiled. “I was genuinely worried about your well-being. I mean, it was three o’clock in the morning and you were hanging out with Shelby Hannah. Who knows what she had you doing, and who knows why you wanted to hang out with her anyway.”

“She puts out.” I hissed. “Unlike someone I know.”

“I have class.”

“You have *cobwebs*.” I narrowed my eyes at her. “And I swear to god, I will pay you back for this shit.”

“This is payback for the Glen Easton thing, Ethan.” She glared at me. “You deserved it. You deserve for me to kick your ass for all of the other things you’ve put me through, but I figured this would be a lot easier than punching you in your face.”

“You want to fight me, Rachel?” I rolled my eyes. “Seriously?”

“I do.” She looked dead ass serious. “I really fucking do.”

“Okay, fine.” I took off my jacket. “Meet me in my backyard in twenty.” I decided I would let her get two hits in before pinning her to the ground and making her promise that she would stop this snitching bullshit once and for all.

When I made it down there, she was dressed in her worst set of pink pajamas. The ones with bunnies that looked like they belonged to a four-year-old. She was muttering to herself and pacing the grass, looking completely non-threatening.

The rain was falling harder now, and I knew that at any minute, her hair was bound to frizz up and look even worse than it did right now.

“Okay.” I sighed. “You can hit me anywhere but my face. Also, try not to—”

She jabbed me in the stomach before I could finish, knocking the wind out of me.

*What the hell?*

“That’s for Glen Easton.” She stepped back, then she hit me again—making me remember just how good of a fighter she used to be when we were younger. “That’s for making my parents think that me and him were having sex.”

“Everyone knows *you’re* not having sex.”

She kicked the back of my legs, forcing me to the ground. “That’s for always making me walk to your car on the rainy days.”

“I can guarantee you that after tonight, that shit is going to continue.”

She kicked me again, in the same spot. “That’s for being an asshole since the day we met,” she said, raising her leg for a final blow. “And this is for burning my collectible Wonder Woman. Do you have any idea how much that toy would be worth right now? Do you have the slightest—”

I grabbed her leg before she could make contact and pulled her down to the ground. Pinning her arms to the grass, I moved on top of her. “For the umpteenth time, Rachel Marie Dawson, you deserved for me to burn your Wonder Woman toy. You torched half the toys I owned before I burned your first one, and I think it’s about time that you got over it. Get. The. Fuck. Over. It.” I tightened my grip on her arms. “Furthermore, why do you always seem to forget that you started this shit? Who pushed who down the steps on the first day we met?”

“Who insulted who about her grammar on the first day we met?”

“For the record, every word you’ve ever written is an insult to the word *grammar*.”

She pushed me back, and we rolled across the wet grass—fighting for control.

By the time we reached the gate around my pool, her hands were in my hair, and I was struggling to keep her pinned down.

“Just say you’re sorry for being an asshole, Ethan.” She fumed. “Say it right now.”

“Say you’re sorry for fucking up the rest of my junior *and* senior year.”

“I’m not sorry for anything.”

“Then I’m not sorry for shit either.”

I glared at her, and she glared right back at me. Neither of us said a word, and before I knew it, my lips were crushed against hers, and she was shutting her eyes.

“Fuck you, Ethan...” She hissed against my mouth. “Fuck. You.”

“I don’t fuck virgins.”

She tried to slap me, but I grabbed her wrist, and we began rolling across the grass again.

Under the pouring rain, we kissed and fought—our lips saying one thing, our hands saying another.

When we crashed into the gate around my pool, my backyard lights flickered.

“Ethan?” My dad bellowed. “Are you trying to sneak out on the very same night, son? Are you really that brazen?”

“No, sir.” I stood up, pulling Rachel up with me. “I was just telling Rachel about being grounded.”

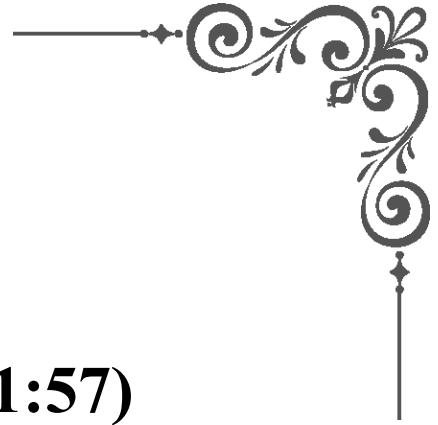
He stepped out onto the deck and hit the other set of lights. “Oh, it’s just Rachel, hon!” He called up to my mom. Then he shrugged. “Maybe the two of you should finally discuss how you *both* plan on staying out trouble for the rest of the year. Be back inside in ten minutes and get ready to spend your after-school hours cleaning my offices from top to bottom for the rest of the week.”

The second he stepped inside, I glared at Rachel. “I want you to know that I will never forgive you for this.”

“I don’t recall asking you to.” She rolled her eyes and stepped back.

“This shit isn’t over, Rachel.”

“It never will be.”



## Track 12. Mine (1:57)

*Ethan*



*I SHOULD'VE KNOWN...*

“Is something wrong with you, Ethan?” Teresa rubbed my shoulder as I drove to the bus station a couple of weeks later.

“Nothing at all.” I lied. “I’m just thinking about something.”

“Oh.” She blushed. “Is it spending time with me at the lodge this weekend?”

*No, it’s spending time with Rachel at the lodge this weekend...* “Of course.”

She blushed and leaned back in her seat, and as the bus winded through another snow-covered road, my mind spun with thoughts of Rachel. It was bad enough that my fantasies of her were completely out of control since she’d moved into my house, that I’d tasted her mouth and wanted more. But, the fact that she made up most of the things in her letters for the first two years when she was away made me realize that I should’ve called her out on it back then—when I halfway suspected that’s what she was doing.

Since the night she’d told me about her made-up love stories, I’d reread her first two years of letters and looked between all the lines, shaking my head at the obvious plays on book character and author names that I never thought to question.

She’d used Dick Charles (Charles Dickens), Chris Grey (Christian Grey), Jon Grislem (John Grisham) and so many other obvious variations that I was shocked I never caught it. A part of me wanted to laugh about it, but another part of me wanted to tell her that sometimes I went extra hard

partying and dating because I was trying to keep up with what *she* was writing to me.

“I’m really excited to spend an entire weekend with you,” Teresa said, kissing my cheek as we pulled into the parking lot.

“Me, too.” I forced a smile and was about to give her one of my standard lines, but I spotted Rachel getting out of someone else’s car. Spotted a guy kissing her on the cheek, then her lips.

This time I knew it wasn’t a slight pang of jealousy in my chest. This time it was full blown envy.



## Track 13. Dancing With Our Hands Tied (4:49)

*Rachel*



THE “SENIOR LODGE TRIP” might as well have been code for “sex filled weekend with unlimited alcohol.” Add in the fact that it was Halloween, and that made things even crazier.

From the very moment we boarded the bus, flasks and red cups flowed up and down the aisle, couples made out like no one else was watching, and those who were beyond drunk led a large group in singing off-key nineties songs. As for the “crazier” part, a masked Spiderman passed out weed-infused gummies, Cinderella gorged on whipped cream, and Queen Elsa (Well, all five of them) chugged a fresh beer every other hour.

Since this was a loosely sanctioned event, there were no officials from our college onboard. There was only a group of organizers who demanded that we abide by three simple rules.

*Don't get into any fights.*

*Don't overdrink.*

*Wear condoms.*

I stared ahead as the bus coasted down a winding lane, hoping like hell we would make it to the “amazing lodge” soon. My heart was beating an aching rhythm I'd never felt before, and I needed to get the hell off the bus as soon as possible.

From the moment I saw Teresa sitting next to Ethan—resting her head on his shoulder and whispering into his ear, I felt some type of way.

*What are they up there talking about?*

“You okay, Rachel?” Ryan tapped my shoulder, making me look at him.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You sure?” He smiled and handed me a bagel. “You’ve been pretty quiet for these first few hours. Don’t tell me I’ll have to spend this entire weekend talking to myself.”

“Not at all,” I said, returning his smile. “Sorry about that. Did you bring any small canvases we could work on while we’re here?”

“Of course not.”

“What do you mean? I thought you said you wanted to spend time painting together.”

“Rachel, whenever we’re on campus, we spend time painting together. And whenever we’re not doing that, we’re getting coffee together.”

“So?”

“So...” he said, leaning forward and pressing a kiss against my lips. “I think we can find other ways to spend our time while we’re at the lodge this weekend.” He kissed me a bit harder, gently parting my lips with his tongue before pulling away.

“Okay.” I smiled and looked toward the front of the bus, catching sight of Ethan staring at me.

His jaw was clenched and I knew he’d seen the entire kiss. I also knew that I didn’t feel a goddamn thing in my chest until just now when his eyes locked on mine.

“Okay everyone, I need you to listen up.” He spoke into the mic as the bus made its way through a gate. His eyes remained on mine, and he narrowed them as Ryan draped his arm around my shoulders.

“When the bus stops, you need to go inside the lodge and get in line at one of the three check-in tables,” he said. “Some of the seniors who helped organize this are already there, and they should have a packet with your room information and the catering schedule on it.” He paused and gripped a headrest as the bus drove against a bumpy road.

“Every person has his or her own room, and each room has a panoramic view of the mountains. There’ll be unlimited hot chocolate, S’mores, and coffee at all five of the lodge’s fireplaces, unlimited access to the row of hot tubs at the bottom level, and—” He stopped talking when Ryan began threading his fingers through my hair. “And the rest of the information will



be in your packet.” He glared at me and tossed the mic to Greg before returning to his seat.

“Thanks, Ethan.” Greg smiled. “Um. You left out like, eighty percent of the shit you were supposed to say, but maybe it’s because you’re already ahead of everyone and tired from all the sex you’ve had?”

Everyone laughed.

*Except me.*

“You’re responsible for your own shit,” Greg said. “There is no lost and found here, but if you find something in one of the common areas that isn’t yours, feel free to bring it to me and Ethan and we’ll send out a mass text so someone can claim it.” He flipped a sheet of paper. “There is no curfew, but the hours for breakfast and lunch are pretty strict since an outside company is delivering them. Dinner will be pizza and salad every night. Any questions?”

Someone in the back raised a hand.

“Yeah?”

“Are you going to tell them about the ‘fucking rules’?”

“Oh, yeah.” Greg smiled. “We’re all adults here, and I’m sure lots of that will be going down this weekend, so to save your floor-mates and your fellow lodge-mates from any unwanted walk-ins, put a sock on your door. And don’t fuck in any of the common areas because none of those doors lock and everyone has a camera phone. Anything else?”

Another guy raised his hand.

“Yeah?”

“Can we get back to the alcohol and music now?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” He turned off his mic and the terrible nineties singalong commenced.

“I think we’re going to have a great time together this weekend, Rachel.” Ryan kissed my cheek. “Don’t you?”

I nodded, unable to say anything else. I faked a smile for the rest of the bus ride, pretended to be as excited as he was about “getting to know each other better,” and I even kissed him convincingly when we arrived at the lodge.

Ethan saw every second of that kiss, too...



BY THE TIME WE CHECKED in and grabbed our registration packets, it was mid-afternoon and most people were making their way to the row of steaming hot tubs downstairs.

Well, everyone except Ethan and Teresa who were cuddling on the common area couch. Ethan's gaze had barely left mine since we got off the bus, but Teresa's lips found their way onto his more than once.

I knew right then and there that I was going to do my best to avoid him for most of this weekend.

*I really am jealous...*

"You want me to walk you to your room?" Ryan asked, rolling my suitcase toward me.

"I'd love that." I turned away from Ethan and let Ryan clasp my hand.

As we walked down the hallway, I admired just how beautiful the lodge was. With five levels, it featured three eat-in kitchens, a massive game room with pool and air hockey tables, and a deck of rocking chairs that overlooked the mountains. It was honestly the perfect backdrop for a getaway, but something told me I would need to come back by myself if I wanted to enjoy it without an ache of jealousy in my chest.

"Here you are," Ryan said, stopping in front of a door. "You're in 421, and I'm on the other side in 513."

"Thank you." I unlocked the door, and he rolled my luggage inside.

"I'm going to take a shower," he said, kissing my forehead. "Want to meet me at the main fireplace in an hour or so?"

"Sure." I smiled and waited for him to leave. I pulled out my phone, wishing I had a best friend to call and vent about this. I was about to ask Penelope what she thought, but an email from Ethan appeared on my screen.



**SUBJECT: TALK.**

Rachel,  
We need to talk. Now.  
Forget You,  
Ethan



**SUBJECT: RE: TALK.**

Ethan,

I'm spending this trip with Ryan, and you're spending yours with Teresa. I think it's best if you ask me to talk when we get back to campus.

Forget You,

Rachel



**SUBJECT: RE: RE: TALK.**

I wasn't *asking* the first time.

Forget You,

Ethan



I SET MY PHONE DOWN and it buzzed again, but I didn't answer it. I undressed and slipped into the shower, hoping that this lodge was big enough for us to avoid each other for the next few days.



ALL MY HOPES WERE SHATTERED later that night.

A heavy snow was falling and the power in most of the common areas had gone out, so everyone was hanging out around the massive fire pit that stood in the center of the lodge. There was a long table full of red cups and liquor bottles pressed against the windows, a collection of sleeping bags and flashlights near the doors, and multiple S'mores stations stacked high with marshmallows.

I stood in line behind Teresa and one of her friends—biting my tongue since they failed to whisper.

"Have you fucked him yet?" her friend asked.

"Not yet," Teresa said. "But I'm thinking it'll definitely happen tonight, Hell, with the power out, what else is there to do?"

"I can't believe he's waited this long to sleep with you." Her friend giggled. "Maybe he's really into you?"

"I think so." Teresa damn near swooned. "He's been pretty gentle with the kisses, too. I feel like they're not the 'I just want to fuck you' kind. They're sweet and light. Kind of passive as well, but God...His cock. Like,

it was rock hard on the bus today, and I'm pretty sure that whenever he finally fucks me with it—"

I stepped out of line and made my way to the other S'more station, not wanting to hear the rest of her words. Before I grabbed a plate, I adjusted the skirt of my Tinkerbell costume and set down my wand.

"*Rachel.*" Ethan grabbed my elbow from behind, spinning me around to face him. Dressed as a king, his eyes were narrowed, and the vein in his neck was swelling as if we'd just had a huge argument. "We need to talk."

"About how good of a job you've done with the trip?" My voice was hoarse. "Even with the power temporarily out, I'm really impressed with how much you guys planned ahead and thought of everything."

"That's not what I want to talk about." His voice was terse. "And you know that."

"Is this about me leaving the shutters open in my room? Because I can promise I double-checked before we left so—"

"Are you planning to fuck him?" He cut me off.

"What?"

"I didn't stutter, Rachel." There was a hint of hurt in his eyes. "Are you planning to fuck him?"

I stepped back. "You can't ask me that."

"I just did." He kept his gaze on mine. "Try not to *purposely lie* if you can help it..."

"Are you planning to fuck *her*?" I crossed my arms. "Either way, I didn't know you cared so much."

"I really don't."

"There you are, Ethan!" Teresa linked her arm in his. "Come help me finish making the plates for our S'mores. I wasn't sure if you wanted the spiked marshmallows with extra toppings or not." She looked at me and rolled her eyes before pulling him away.

With my heart racing, I stacked my plate full of everything and returned to the fireplace.

Finding my place right next to Ryan, I picked up a stick and stabbed a marshmallow with it, holding it over the fire.

Ethan and Teresa sat directly across from us, and his eyes immediately met mine. Ryan placed his arm around my shoulder, and Teresa offered Ethan a piece of her S'more.

Through the dancing flames that separated us, I watched his every move and he watched mine. He let Teresa take off his jacket and wear it over her shoulders. I let Ryan rub his hand against my exposed thighs.

When Teresa finally left his side, I considered walking over to him, to assure him that I had no intention of sleeping with Ryan—*ever*, but Greg picked up a foghorn and silenced everyone.

“Hey guys!” Greg yelled from the center of the room. “I just got off the phone with the owners of the lodge and they said the power will be back on soon!”

A loud applause filled the room.

“Until then, we still need everyone to stay here in the main building just in case it takes longer than they think.” He held up a bucket and shook it. “But, while we wait, I would like to share my contribution to this trip with you all.”

“You finally paid your share for the food?” someone asked.

“Hell no.” He scoffed, laughing. “I did buy a shit ton of his and her pleasure condoms though. The premium brand.”

A bunch of guys cheered, and I resisted the urge to roll my eyes as he made his way around the room with his contribution.

To my surprise, Ryan grabbed a few condoms from the bucket when it came around.

“Just in case you want to later,” he whispered pressing a kiss against my cheek. “No pressure.”

Ethan slammed his plate down and walked over to me, glaring at me as he extended his hand. “I need to talk to you, Rachel. *Now*.”

The look on his face made me hesitate to argue in front of everyone.

“Will you excuse me for a second, Ryan? My roommate wants to discuss something about the house, I think.”

“Of course.” He smiled, and Ethan tugged me up, pulling me into the pool table room.

Shutting the door, he crossed his arms and glared at me.

Swallowing, I took a step back, and he took a step forward. I stepped back I was up against an ice cold window, and he followed me.

He placed his hands on the glass, on both sides of my head, trapping me to the spot.

I looked into his eyes as he looked into mine, waiting for him to say whatever the hell he had to say, but words never came.

Without warning, he pressed his mouth against mine and kissed me—hard. My hands went to his hair and I moaned as he deepened our kiss.

Keeping his eyes on mine, he slipped his hand under my skirt and ripped off my panties in one smooth motion. He tucked them into his pocket and pinned me against the glass with his hips.

I felt his cock hardening against my thigh and dropped my hands to unbuckle his belt.

Stepping back slightly, he raised his eyebrow as I unzipped his pants, as I failed to free his cock.

Grabbing my hand, he pressed it against his stomach—guiding it down past his navel, and into his briefs.

I gasped as his cock hardened against my touch, as he guided my hand up and down his long and thick length. My cheeks reddened under his intense stare, and I gripped his cock a bit harder—making him groan as I continued moving my hand up and down.

“Pull it out,” he said, his voice hoarse.

I obliged and pulled it from his pants—blushing again when I saw how huge he was.

He pulled a condom package from his pocket and placed it into my hand—silently commanding me to put it on him.

I pulled at the wrapper, struggling to open it, so he took it from my hands and tore it open for me.

As I rolled it onto him, he gently pulled my tiara from my hair and set it on the pool table. Unzipping the front of my costume, he stared into my eyes and pressed his forehead against mine.

I tugged the hem of his shirt—pulling it upward, but he pushed my hands away and smiled. He pulled his shirt over his head and let it fall to the floor, revealing his perfect set of washboard abs.

With his eyes still on mine, he slid his hands against my sides and gently lifted me up, setting me on top of the pool table. He slid his fingers against my pussy, groaning when he felt that I was soaking wet.

Slipping two fingers deep inside of me, he pressed his mouth against mine and teased me with a long and slow kiss that ruined every other kiss that came before it. Stroking me with his fingers, he sucked my bottom lip in and out of his mouth.

“Wrap your legs around my waist,” he whispered.

I didn't move. I was still returning his kisses, still struggling to focus as he gently bit my bottom lip.

"*Rachel.*" He pulled his fingers out of me, moved his mouth away from mine. "Wrap your legs around my waist."

I obliged, and he guided his cock against my pussy—burying himself deep inside of me with one stroke.

Before I could scream out in pleasure, he muffled my mouth with kisses. He gripped my ass and squeezed it, lifting me up and against the wall. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kept my legs around his waist.

I shut my eyes as he pounded into me, as he fucked me harder and deeper than I'd ever been fucked before.

"Look at me," he warned, his voice soft. "*Rachel, look at me.*"

My eyes remained closed and his rhythm became faster. He groaned as my nails dug into his skin, and when I finally opened my eyes, I saw the door opening.

I started to say something, but Ethan muffled my mouth all over again.

Someone stepped inside and tossed something into the trash, quickly closing the door as if they hadn't noticed us at all.

"Ahh..." My head hit the window when Ethan let go of my mouth, and he gripped my waist a little harder.

My pussy began throbbing against his cock as he switched up the tempo. It was still fast, less reckless. Still dominant.

"Hmmm." He pressed his mouth against my neck, right where he'd left the last mark that I'd covered in concealer. Then he whispered, "I left that mark for a reason..." He trailed his tongue against my skin in a circle, teasing me with his teeth—definitely giving me another reminder from his mouth.

"Ohhhh..." I felt myself losing control as intense tremors ran up and down my spine. "Ethannn..."

He didn't get a chance to answer.

I screamed out in utter bliss as an orgasm wracked its way through my body, as he attempted to soften my sounds with his kisses again.

My entire body shook and he set me down on the pool table—sliding his cock into me a few more times before he found his own release. As he came, he kept his arms locked around me, kissing my forehead every few seconds.

Panting, we stared at each other—remaining entwined.

He trailed his fingers against my collarbone after my breathing steadied, smiling at me and making my heart race. “You okay?”

I nodded.

“Good.” He slowly pulled out of me and I gripped the edge of the table to keep my balance.

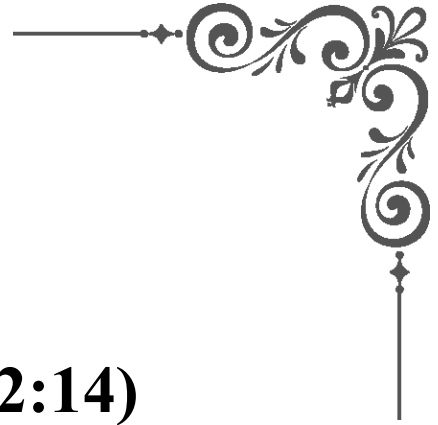
Tossing the condom into the trash, he looked at me again—making me wish we’d had each other *years ago*.

He lifted me off the pool table and set me on the floor. Then he kissed my lips again and whispered, “Come to my room so we can finish this.”

“Okay...” I said, breathless. “What about Ryan and Teresa?”

“What about them?” He trailed his finger against my lips. “They’ve never mattered to either of us.”





## Track 14. Dress (2:14)

*Rachel*



ETHAN LED ME THROUGH the emergency exit doors of the pool room and across the snow-covered yard that led to the back entrance of the lodge. He held me against his side as the harsh winds and snow smacked against us, and when we finally made it to his room, he pulled me to his fireplace and sat in front of me.

Slowly peeling my costume off my body, he kept his gaze locked on mine. He slid his hand up my back and unclasped my bra—pushing it off my shoulders and down to the floor.

“Take off your heels,” he said, once he tossed my dress to the floor.

I obliged and he placed them closer to the fire.

He took off his shirt and jeans, placing them near my costume to dry, and then he clasped my hand and walked me over to the bed.

Without a word, he pushed me onto the mattress so my back was against the sheets.

He climbed on top of me, kissing his way up from my thighs, to my stomach, to my breasts—taking his time to caress every inch of my skin with his tongue. Then he set every nerve in my body on fire as he repeated the route with his lips one more time.

“I have a question,” he whispered, once he made it up to my neck. “And I need you to give me an honest answer instead of one of your creative lies...”

He covered my mouth with his before I could respond. Controlling my lips, he rubbed his hands against my legs and spread them a bit.

“In one of your letters you wrote that there was an older art major guy you dated during your junior year,” he said, whispering. “You said he ate your pussy for hours and it was so good that he ruined you for all others...” He briefly bit my bottom lip and looked right into my eyes. “Was that true?”

“Part of it...”

He raised his eyebrow. “Which part?”

“The part about him being an older art major guy,” I paused. “That’s it.”

He let out a low laugh and shook his head. Then he moved back and pressed kisses against my thighs, rendering me absolutely useless.

Moving to the floor, he got on his knees and stared at me for several seconds. Then he grabbed me by my ankles and pulled me forward in one smooth motion, draping my legs over his shoulders.

Without giving me a chance to react, he buried his head in my pussy and sucked my swollen clit into his mouth.

“*Fuck, Ethan...*” I immediately sat up and grabbed at his hair. “Wait, slow down a bit...”

He didn’t.

He continued swirling his tongue against me, using his own rhythm to devour me. Each time I called for him to slow down, he paused and slid two deep fingers inside of me—all while letting his tongue kiss my lips the way he wanted to.

“Ahhh...” I cried out as my pussy began to throb against his tongue, as my hips writhed against his face.

I couldn’t hold back if I tried, and I fell back against the bed as an intense orgasm overpowered me and made me scream his name at the top of my lungs.

Shutting my eyes, I still felt him kissing my thighs. Then my stomach. When he stopped, I lay still for several minutes.

I heard the sound of water running in the bathroom and rolled over on my stomach.

Minutes later, I felt a warm cloth between my legs, felt him kissing the small of my back.

“We’re not finished, Rachel...” he whispered. “Not even close.”

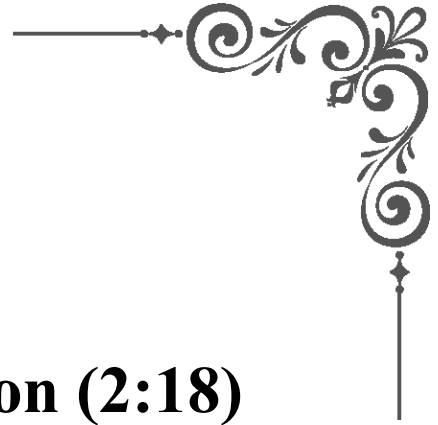
“*What?*” I could barely hear my own voice. “What did you just say?”

“You heard me.” He slid his hands against my sides, positioning me on all fours. “We’re just getting started...”

Gripping my hips, he slowly slid his cock inside of me—making me cry out as he pushed himself in inch by inch. Making me remember just how fucking good he felt when he was inside of me the first time.

He whispered, “You feel so fucking good...” against the back of my neck when he was completely buried inside of me. Then he slapped my ass. “Grab the headboard...”

We didn’t leave his room for the entire weekend.



## Track 14A. Reputation (2:18)

*Rachel*



ON SUNDAY MORNING, I rolled over in Ethan's bed—feeling soreness in every single muscle. I couldn't believe I'd slept with him after all these years. Couldn't believe I desperately wanted to do it again.

As I forced myself to sit up, I spotted several empty condom wrappers on his floor.

*One, two, three, four, five, six, seven...Oh my god...*

I picked up my phone and saw that it was Sunday and we needed to board the bus in a little under two hours.

"Ethan?" I called out.

No answer.

*"Ethan?"*

Still no answer.

*Shit.*

I walked over to the fireplace and put on my costume and heels again. I grabbed one of the robes from his bathroom, and checked the hallway before rushing to my room.

When I made it, I immediately slipped into the shower—holding back groans as the hot water stung and revealed every one of my sore muscles.

With a little over an hour to go, I made sure I wasn't leaving anything behind, and then I tried to rush toward the bus. It took me all of one minute to realize that I wasn't going to be able to "rush" anywhere. My legs were too damn weak.

“Did you have a good weekend?” I asked Ryan, trying not to wince as I sat next to him.

“Really, though?” He rolled his eyes and stood up, moving to another seat.

My phone buzzed with a text from him.

**Ryan:** You fucking ghosted me after the first night and never came back...Saw you tiptoeing back to your room this morning, though. Go talk to whoever you’ve been fucking.

I sucked in a breath and put my phone away.

“I didn’t see Ethan that much this weekend,” someone behind me whispered. “Was he sick or something?” Someone else offered.

Teresa boarded the bus minutes later. She glared at me as she put away her bag and made her way to the back. Before I could process that, Ethan stepped onto the bus looking sexy as ever. His eyes met mine and he placed his bag in a bin at the front. Then he made his way down the aisle, but I stood up before he could sit down.

“Where are you going?” he asked, moving with me.

“I just want a better view.” I shrugged. “That’s all.”

“Hmmm.” He smiled, making my stomach flip. “Are you still sore?”

I blushed. “Can we talk about what happened when we get home?”

“I don’t see what we need to talk about.”

“Us.” I looked at him and lowered my voice. “And people thinking that we’re fucking.”

“We *are* fucking.” He smiled. “Well, we were up until an hour ago.”

“You know what I mean, Ethan.”

“I don’t. Did you not enjoy it?”

I didn’t answer, and he raised his eyebrow.

“Tell me if you enjoyed it before you make your next flawed point.”

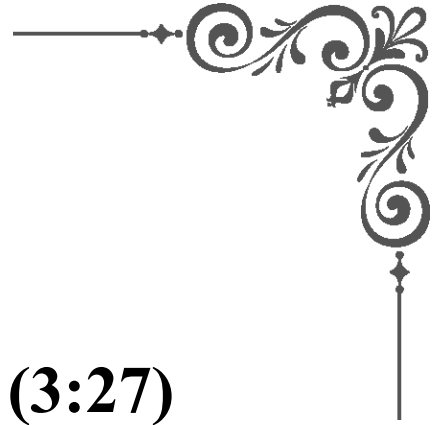
“Yes, I enjoyed it, Ethan,” I lowered my voice. “Happy?”

“I am. Now what’s the problem?”

“We’re not together, you’re not looking for anything serious, and I have no interest in dealing with speculation from anyone about—”

He pressed his lips against mine, kissing me long and hard in front of everyone—silencing every excuse I had. There was a chorus of gasps when he pulled away from me, a few approving utterances from the guys.

“There,” he said, whispering against my mouth. “Now there’s no speculation about anything at all.”



## Track 15. Delicate (3:27)

*Ethan*

*A few days after the lodge trip...*



**UNKNOWN NUMBER:** So much for Rachel Dawson being “an old neighbor [you] can’t stand” huh?

**Unknown number:** I knew you two were fucking and you were using me as a way to fill your time until she got back.

**Unknown number:** I still miss you...Let me know if you ever want to make up. (I’ll drop everything if you just say the word.)

I deleted Lisa’s latest string of desperate text messages and considered finally texting her the “Fuck off” she deserved, but she wasn’t worth my energy.

*Didn’t I see her with a new boyfriend?*

Restless, I slipped out of bed and walked down the hall to Rachel’s room. I knocked on her door, and like the nights before, there was no answer. Since we came back from the trip, she’d gone out of her way to avoid me, and we had yet to cross paths again.

I knocked on her door one last time before slowly opening it. Her bed was empty, and her cell phone and purse were long gone.

Confused, I sent her a text message.

**Me:** Hey. You up?

She didn’t text me back.

I headed to Greg’s room, stopping when I saw him plopping onto the living room couch. “Have you seen Rachel tonight?”

“Maybe.” He crossed his arms. “Before we can discuss that, there’s something important we need to discuss. We need some new rules around here.”

I braced myself for bullshit.

“If you and Rachel are going to date under my roof—and yes, this is *my* roof just as much as it’s your roof, there will be no sex on the living-room couch.”

“You had sex on the living room couch last week.”

“Oh, yeah...” He laughed. “Speaking of which, if a sex-tape comes out this semester and our house happens to be in the background, and you think that the guy in question looks like me...It’s not me. It’s someone else.”

“Are you really this dense, or are you pretending today?”

“Well, I am pursuing a minor in Theater Arts, so maybe I’m pretending.”

“I hope so.” I shook my head. “Where did Rachel go?”

“There’s one last rule,” he said. “You must put a sock on your bedroom door whenever the two of you want alone time, so me and my company won’t walk in, and you need to ask Rachel to hook me up with her newest friend. End of discussion.” He looked at me as if he’d just closed the deal of a lifetime. “Anyway, Rachel’s probably at the same place she was last night.”

“Which is?”

He shrugged. “Like I know. The only thing she said was that she wanted to get away from ‘all the mother-daughter week bullshit’ on campus. She also stole your bag of quarters and told me not to tell you.”

I gave him a blank stare.

“*What?* She didn’t share the quarters with me, so I’m under no obligation to keep her secret.”

I laughed and grabbed my car keys, realizing where Rachel was. “I’ll be back.” I headed outside and slipped into my car, heading straight for Super Suds.

When I arrived, the shades for all the windows were drawn shut, and there were no cars outside. I opened the door and made my way through the maze of washers and dryers, stopping once I spotted Rachel in the corner.

Dressed in a set of flannel grey pajamas with several pink rollers in her hair, she smiled as she sketched in her notepad.

“Is this where you plan on sleeping tonight?” I asked, sitting across from her.

“No.” She looked up at me. “I’m pulling an all-nighter and getting my laundry done at the same time.”

“How did you get here?” I asked.

“Uber. Since my roommate said I can’t use his car.”

“Is this where you were last night?”

“Maybe.” She set down her pencil. “Is doing my laundry at night going to be a problem?”

“It is if you’re avoiding me.”

“I’m not.” She blushed. “I’m studying for a test and doing my laundry.”

“Rachel, it’s one o’clock in the morning. You don’t have any upcoming exams.”

“I just wanted to get out of the house for a few nights, you know? For a change of scenery...and celibacy.”

“So, you think I’ve been stopping by your room in the middle of the night?” I smiled. “For sex?”

“Have you?”

“I’ve stopped by and noticed you weren’t there,” I said.

“And you weren’t hoping for sex?”

“I definitely was.” I pulled one of the rollers from her hair, forcing curls to fall to her shoulders. “Seeing as though sex with you is the best I’ve ever had, I think it would be normal to want it again.”

Her cheeks reddened again. “It was just okay for me.”

“Once you hit five orgasms in a night, it becomes more than just okay.” I trailed my finger against her lips. “Tell me the truth. Why are you avoiding me?”

“I don’t want sex to affect our relationship—the fake one or the enemy one,” she said finally. “I don’t want it to change anything.”

“You know, I’m starting to think that our friendship was never fake.” I looked into her eyes. “I’m also starting to think that we’ve never really been enemies.”

“I started Semester at Sea because I wanted to get the hell away from you after high school, and I vividly remember fighting all the time before that. We even fought in the first series of letters we sent. We’ve always been enemies, Ethan. Always.”



“So, the times you came through my bedroom window at night and slept in my bed under a ‘temporary truce’ don’t count for anything?”

“Not when part of the truce was to act like it never happened.”

“We both know it did.”

“So? Anytime I climbed through your window to talk about something, I was only using you because I didn’t have anyone else.”

“I didn’t have anyone else either, Rachel.”

“You had plenty of friends.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I *thought* I did.”

Silence.

I pulled another roller from her hair, keeping my eyes on hers. “True enemies don’t look out for each other, and they damn sure don’t care about each other’s personal lives.”

“Exactly. We never have. So, what’s your point?”

“I can’t think of a single milestone or important moment in your life when I wasn’t right there with you.”

“I know. You were there to *ruin* all of them.”

“No.” I laughed. “I mean, I was there when you needed me, and you were there when I needed you. And it was never by default, Rachel. It was always by choice.”

She shook her head. “What are you trying to say, Ethan? We should fuck again because we have a history?”

“We should fuck again because sex with you is incredible,” I said, watching her blush. “That said, I think we should take the ‘temporary’ tag off our friendship for the long term. And because I know you—” I paused, letting her say the seven words she always said whenever I mentioned that.

“You don’t know me *at all*, Ethan.”

“Exactly.” I smiled. “Anyway, I can promise you that sex won’t ruin anything between us. Since every other guy has failed at it, you should give me a chance to be the one thing you’ve wanted since I’ve known you.”

“You want to try being my best friend?”

“I’m already your best friend,” I said, looking into her eyes. “I’m talking about being your boyfriend.”

Her jaw dropped and her eyes went wide. She was still blushing, but she wasn’t saying anything.

“Is that a yes?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t think you know what being a boyfriend requires.”

“I’m sure you have a list,” I said. “Would you like me to take a look at it?”

“I don’t have a list, Ethan.” Her eyes gave that lie away. “But if I did have a list—hypothetically speaking, my number one says that real boyfriends don’t cheat.”

“I’ve never cheated.”

“Number two says that real boyfriends insist on making sure that there are romantic outings every week.”

“You have another list about the requirements for real dates as well, don’t you?”

“Absolutely not.” Her cheeks reddened again. “Number three would say that there’s no sex, but lots of intimate moments.”

“I’d be fine with that if I wasn’t already addicted to our sex.” I pulled a few more rollers from her hair. “But I’m looking forward to these intimate moments.”

“I haven’t said yes yet.”

“Only because you want to hold out and make this shit dramatic.” I smiled. “That’s what all your favorite heroines do, correct?”

She smiled, not answering.

“I can deal with that.” I moved her sketch pad to the side and stood up. “I’ll give you a few hours to give me a yes.”

“I think it’s going to take me more than a few hours to think about this.”

“I doubt it.”

“In that case, I’ll have an answer for you in a few weeks.”

I laughed and kissed her, gently biting her bottom lip. Then I gripped her waist and lifted her up, setting her on top of a dryer.

Unbuttoning her pajama top, I whispered against her mouth, “I think you’ll have the answer I’m looking for the second I’m done with you tonight.”



## Back Then: 17 Years Old

*Ethan*



DEAR RACHEL,

(This is a truce message)

Your AP Art teacher asked me why you've missed class for the past two weeks. I don't know if you want me to tell him that you've been spending it at the hospital with your mom, so I made up a lie. I also asked him for your homework assignments. (I asked all your other teachers, too.)

I put everything in your mailbox.

Forget You,

Ethan



DEAR RACHEL,

(This is another truce message)

Your painting, *I Hate Him*, won first place at the state art fair over the weekend. (I thought you said that you were done painting me with knives in my chest?)

I was already there since I won the essay contest, so I told them I lived next door to you, and they let me accept the blue ribbon and cash prize on your behalf. I don't want to put it in your mailbox, so I'll keep it on my desk.

Let me know when you want me to bring it over.

Forget You,

Ethan



DEAR RACHEL,

I'm sorry about the passing of your mother.

Sincerely,

Ethan



I CRUMPLED MY LETTER and tossed it through Rachel's window. It landed on her desk, right on top of all the other letters I'd thrown.

When her mom was diagnosed with stage four cancer months ago, Rachel refused to believe it. She stormed out of her house and up to my room whenever her mother started to say things like, "When I'm gone, make sure you..." or "When it's you and your dad, don't forget to..."

She was too convinced that her mom would beat it, and she didn't want to listen.

Even though my parents (and a lot of other people in the neighborhood) wanted to be hopeful, they braced for the worst.

Rachel was the only one who didn't.

Ever since the funeral, she'd sat on her bedroom floor, crying.

Her extended family paraded casseroles and flowers through her front door for the first couple of weeks—waving at me as I looked on, but they eventually stopped coming by.

I tossed tons of letters through her window, telling her how sorry I was, asking her if she needed anything, but she never tossed one back to me.

The few friends she had at school (Well, "classmates" since she didn't have any real friends), never stopped by her house to see if she was okay, and from what I could tell, they never called or sent letters either. When I confronted one of her art club-mates, to see when she was planning to visit, she said, "Why can't Rachel visit me? I mean, she's a pretty tough girl. I'm sure she's not crying about something like this for all this time, right?"

Standing up from my desk, I decided it was time to stop waiting on Rachel to write me back. The sympathy flowers on her porch were dying, and she and her father hadn't left the house in forever.

I made a few calls to places in town and changed clothes. Then I picked up a bouquet of lilies from her mother's favorite floral shop, and parked my car in her driveway.

I rang her doorbell, but there was no answer.

I rang the doorbell again.

Still no answer.

Knocking as hard as I could, I waited five minutes before walking to the edge of her porch. I lifted up the fourth flower pot and picked up her spare key.

Stepping inside, I noticed Mr. Dawson sitting in the living room. He was staring at the television, and tears were falling down his face.

"Do you, Richard Dawson, take Marie London to be your lawfully wedded wife?" A deep voice came through the speakers.

Mr. Dawson nodded and sobbed as he continued to watch his wedding video.

I walked through the dining room and headed upstairs, but Rachel wasn't there. I checked all the other rooms, and made my way down to the kitchen.

Rachel stood in front of the oven, looking pale and several pounds lighter.

Her brown eyes met mine and she crossed her arms. "Ethan Wyatt, if you're here to tell me that you're sorry, or that my mom is in a better place, please don't." Tears fell down her face. "I've heard those phrases enough to last me a lifetime."

"I'm not here to give you one of those." I handed her the lilies.

"Oh..." She tapped the blooms. "My mom used to give me these on the last Sunday of every month." A slow smile spread across her face. "Her favorite shop always had extra so—" She paused. "She *used to*..."

"Today's the last Sunday of the month," I said, stepping closer. "Now's the time when you two usually head out for your brunch at The Blue Lake Café, right? Even when you're grounded?"

She nodded. "Yes. Even when I'm grounded."

"Well, I called the café as soon as they opened this morning." I pulled my brand-new car keys out of my pocket. "They're going to hold a special boat on the lake for you all day."

She didn't say anything. She just stared at me.

“If you don’t want to go, it’s okay,” I said. “I thought you might want to get out of the house.”

“That cafe is near the college. It’s outside of our county’s permit driving zone.”

“Not anymore.” I handed her my wallet, and she flipped it open.

“You have your full-fledged driver’s license now?” She looked up at me. “Is this real?”

“Yeah. Got it two weeks ago with my new blue convertible.”

“*What?*” she raised her eyebrow. “Well, why didn’t you immediately rush over here and rub all of this in my face?”

I didn’t answer.

“Congrats on the car,” she said. “As far as the test, I’m sure you cheated somehow, or you scored a cougar-teacher who has no taste and thought you were cute.”

“It was definitely the latter.” I smiled. “She also treated me to ice-cream afterward.”

“I figured.” She rolled her eyes. “I’ll be ready in a few.” She left the kitchen and rushed upstairs, returning in a baby blue quote shirt that she and her mom used to wear. A shirt she designed and hand-painted herself. *A mother is a daughter’s first best friend...*

Carrying the lilies with her, she headed toward the front door.

Her dad was still staring at the television, so I readjusted the pillow behind his head and poured him a glass of water before leaving.

When we walked to my car, I opened the passenger door for Rachel and she slid inside. Holding the flowers in her lap, she cleared her throat.

“Your new girlfriend is cheating on you with your ‘real friend’ Mike Harper who lives down the street,” she said. “I’ve seen them come home together all this week during fifth period. They mess around in his room and then they go back to school.”

I cranked the engine and looked over at her.

“I was going to tell you the next time we got into an argument,” she said. “But, since I know you really like her and you’re being nice to me, I think you should stop wasting your time and dump her as soon as possible.”

“I will.” I handed her a box of Kleenex and pulled onto the street.

Our conversation ended there, and she kept her gaze forward. We rode in silence for half an hour, and at every stoplight, I leaned over and pressed a fresh Kleenex against her cheeks.

When we arrived at The Blue Lake Café, a waitress rushed out to my car and opened Rachel's door. She pulled Rachel into her arms and held her close.

"I'm so sorry, Rachel." The waitress cried, hugging her even tighter. "I am so sorry."

The manager came out next, and then one by one each staff member took turns giving Rachel an embrace. When the last hostess said her words, the manager took Rachel's hand and motioned for me to follow them to the dock.

He walked us to a picnic boat that was already set up with the best lunch entrees, and waited until we were settled inside.

"You'll be the only two on the water today. Okay, Rach?" He handed her a bouquet of white roses. "You can stay out there all night if you want."

"Thank you." She smiled. "I really appreciate it."

He nodded and untied the boat from the dock, whispering to me, "Take good care of her today, Ethan."

"I will." I steered the boat to the middle of the lake, then over to where Rachel and her mother always stopped to get the best view of the downtown skyline. After that, just like her mom, I pulled out a small bottle of sparkling juice and poured two glasses.

"You have to say, Cheers to living your best life every day, Rachel." Tears fell down her face. "That's what my mom always said when she did that."

"Okay." I handed her a glass. "Cheers to living your best life every day, Rachel." I waited for her to drink before following suit.

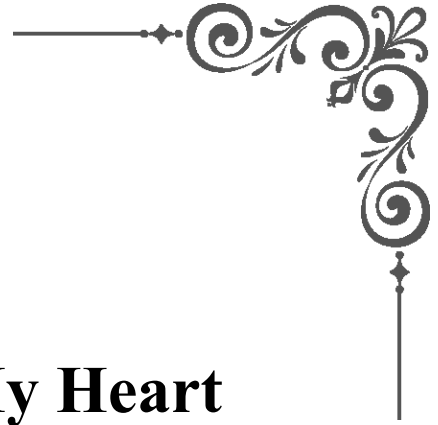
When she was finished, she set her glass down and looked at me. "Do you know what comes next?"

"I think so," I said. "Is this the part where she typically says, I know we have our differences from time to time, but I want you to know that at the end of the day, I love you more than you'll ever know?"

"Yes." She nodded, a faint smile crossing her lips. "After that, she always asked me if I still hated Ethan Wyatt."

"Okay." I dabbed her eyes with another Kleenex. "Do you still hate Ethan Wyatt?"

"Yes." She leaned on my shoulder. "More and more every day."



## Track 16. King of My Heart (3:30)

*Rachel*



I STOOD IN FRONT OF my mirror and changed my outfit for the hundredth time. I'd never cared what I wore around Ethan, but since he insisted that he wanted to "finally" take me on my first real date, I was questioning everything.

*It's just Ethan, Rachel...Just Ethan.*

Reapplying my makeup, I settled on a pair of white jeans and a glittering purple tank top. Then I slipped into a pair of my silver wedge sandals and walked to the living room.

"Where the hell are *you* going?" Greg sat up on the couch, looking me up and down. "It's a Tuesday night."

"I have a date."

"With your enemy?" He smiled. "Or your boyfriend? What are you two calling yourselves today?"

I laughed, avoiding the question.

"I was telling Ethan about some new house rules I've established for the two of you," he said. "Feel free to buy me a drink this week, and I'll tell you all about them."

"You still owe me a drink from my first week here, Greg."

"Friends don't hold grudges, Rachel." He lay back on the cushions. "It's way past time to let that drink go. Also, tell Ethan he owes me fifty bucks for our bet."



“Will do.” I walked to the front door. “What exactly was the bet?”

“That you both were full of shit,” he said, laughing. “Now, get out so I can rest before my company gets here.”

Laughing, I stepped outside and saw Ethan leaning against his car. He smiled at me—his dimples deepening, as he looked me up and down. “Are you ready this time, or do you need another hour to change jeans again?”

“I need another hour.” I headed to the other side of the car, but he blocked me.

“We’re not going in my car,” he said, pulling two helmets from the front seat. He pointed to the two mountain bikes near the mailbox.

“I thought you said that you were taking me out on a date.”

“I am.”

I stared at him, waiting for him to say, “just kidding,” but those words never came.

“You may want to put some different shoes on for the ride,” he said, popping his trunk. “You left a pair of tennis shoes in there.”

Confused, I took them out and tucked my wedges into my purse. I put on my helmet and buckled it, following him to the bikes.

“Try to keep up with me,” he said. “And if you fall off, try not to blame me for it like you did when we were nine.”

“I blamed you because you literally picked me up and threw me off my bike, Ethan.” I showed him my elbows. “I still have the scars to prove it.”

He smiled and looked me over one last time before pedaling down the street.

The wind hit my back as I followed his head, and by the time we reached the stop sign, we were side by side like we used to be when we were forced to ride together as kids.

As the sun set ahead of us, we pedaled through the back lanes of campus, past Main Street’s shops and eateries, and by the time the sun’s light was fading, he slowed a bit and led me to a part of the beach I’d never seen before.

Clear of tourists and residents, there was a long row of pastel-colored park benches, a small coffee shop, and a lone vending machine that was full of chocolate bars.

“This is it.” He stopped his bike in front of the machine. “Do you like it?”

I stopped and took off my helmet, looking around. As if he could tell how confused I was, he stepped closer and motioned for me to get off my bike. Then he locked it against the machine for me.

Clasping my hand, he walked me over to a yellow park bench. He wrapped his arm around my shoulders, and we stared at the ocean waves for several minutes.

“How am I stacking up against your first date list so far?” he asked.

“I told you I don’t have any lists anymore.”

.He blinked.

“Okay, fine. If I’m being honest, you’re failing.”

“I don’t see how,” he said, tilting his head to the side. “You’re not going to give me any bonus points?”

“Why would you get bonus points for making me ride my bike to a park bench, Ethan?”

A slow, sexy smile spread across his face, and he pressed his fingers under my chin. He tilted my head up, forcing me to see a blanket of stars against the darkening sky.

I stared at them in disbelief, feeling my heart skip a beat.

“Okay,” I said, looking at him again. “You definitely get bonus points for that, but I still don’t think that a park bench counts as a—”

He pressed his mouth against mine, and my sentence ended on his lips. He kissed me until I was breathless, making butterflies flutter wildly inside my chest.

“This part of the beach doesn’t allow cars,” he said softly, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “And the reason they don’t allow cars is because the five-star restaurant that’s down past the other park benches is owned by another hopeless romantic like you. She doesn’t want her dinner guests to be distracted by anything other than their conversations and the sound of the ocean.”

My jaw dropped, and he kissed me breathless all over again.

“Now...” He smiled and stood to his feet, pulling me up with him. “You have the stars, a private beach and a five-star restaurant, and a kiss.”

“It wasn’t a soul-searing one.”

“I beg to differ.” He pressed his hand against the small of my back.

“Were there butterflies?”

“Not at all.” I blushed. “I think you’d have to kiss me again before I can tell.”

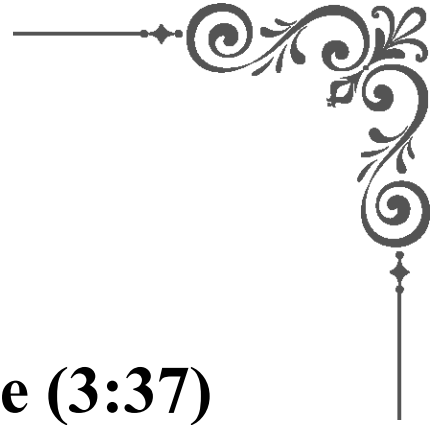
“Are you sure?” He smirked. “Or should we wait until after our mandatory conversation about books, art, and the things we love to do?”

“Did you keep a copy of my list?”

“I didn’t have to,” he said. “I’ve always remembered it.”

“Well, why did you tell me all the things I wanted were unrealistic?”

“Because they are.” He laughed, covering my mouth with his. “With anyone else who isn’t me.”



## Track 17. End Game (3:37)

*Ethan*



I THREADED MY FINGERS through Rachel's hair as she lay against my chest the next morning. The second we returned from our date, we'd dropped everything to the floor and had sex against the living room windows. Addicted and unable to stop, we moved to the kitchen, then to the hallway, and then to the deck that surrounded the hot tub. We made it to her bedroom balcony shortly before sunrise, and we passed out mid-conversation in her bed.

Since I doubted that she was going to wake up anytime soon, I grabbed my phone off the nightstand and checked my text messages.

**Dad:** Hey son. Call me when you get a chance. I've got some amazing news about your future...And some not-so-amazing news about something else.

I rolled my eyes and deleted his message, opening the next ones.

**Greg:** Dude. I never want to hear you complain about me and my friends being too loud ever again. After the way Rachel was screaming your name last night, I'm sure all our neighbors know your name...

**Greg:** Okay. They definitely know your name. The grandma who lives next door asked if I was "*Ethannnn*" this morning and fucking winked at me.

"What's so funny?" Rachel stirred, looking up at me. "I want to laugh, too."

"Text -messages from Greg. Inside jokes."

"Oh, okay." Her voice was hoarse. "Was I loud last night?"

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I know I had a decent amount of wine at dinner, and you had to get us an Uber, but I don’t remember anything else but sex and screaming. Was I loud?”

“No.” I kissed her forehead and held back a laugh. “Do you feel like going out today?”

“I have a ten o’clock class.”

“That you missed hours ago. It’s four o’clock.”

“What?” She struggled to sit up. “Why did you let me sleep that late? I have a project to turn in for a contest. No, two projects. I wonder if they’ll let me do an email entry and bring it in tomorrow.”

I raised my eyebrow. “We talked about this before we fell asleep, Rachel...”

“Can you take me to campus so I can try to turn my boards in before the department closes? If that doesn’t work, can you take me to the other campus branch across town since they’re open a bit later?”

“No.” I pushed stray hairs from her face. “But only because you made me leave your art by the door, and Greg took it to campus for you.”

“Do you think he took it to the right department?”

“You made me draw a map.” I laughed. “Besides, when I told him he could find new people to date in the art school, he insisted that he was going to make sure he got there early.”

“Let me see.” She rolled over and grabbed her phone, checking her email. “My confirmation email says he came in at eight o’clock,” she said. “And my professor said that my ‘friend’ spent two hours standing outside of his Nude Women Painting class. He says I’m supposed to tell him not to come back.”

We both laughed, and I slapped her ass.

“You’ve got an hour to get ready. There’s something I want to do with you today.”

“Can we do that after another round of sex?”

“Absolutely...”



FOUR HOURS LATER, AND after multiple rounds of sex, we took separate showers and met in front of my car.

“No bikes?” Rachel asked.

“After looking at the way you’ve struggled to walk straight today? Probably not.”

“Fine.” She blushed. “Are we going back to the pastel park benches?”

“Not at all. I want to take you to see some other things you’ve missed out on since you’ve been at sea.” I tossed her my car keys. “We’ll start at the east end of Main Street, and you can drive.”

“Oh, no I couldn’t.” She tossed them back.

“You can.” I shrugged and opened the driver’s door for her. “You complained about my driving every day when we were in high school, so I’d love to finally see how yours compares.”

“I meant to say that I *can*’t,” she said, setting the keys on the hood. “I never got my permit...Or my license.”

“What? Why not?”

She shrugged. “The summer after we graduated high school—when we weren’t talking, I failed the test like three times. They said that if I failed it again, I’d have to wait an entire year to take it.”

“So, instead of walking next door and asking me to help, you decided not to take it?”

“I didn’t want to see you again after graduation.” She smiled. “Hence, Semester at Sea.”

“I forgot how mature you were.” I shook my head. “What part of the test did you fail? Parallel parking, lane switching and speeding, or gear knowledge?”

“All of it.” She paused. “On the last test, I forgot to move the car out of reverse, so I backed into a group of cardboard people at full speed.”

“And the test before that?”

“I never made it out of the parking lot. I tensed up once I got behind the wheel and forgot everything.”

“Okay.” I grabbed my keys and opened the passenger door for her. “We’ll catch up on the campus stuff you missed this weekend. You need to learn how to drive.”

“I’ll get my license eventually.” She slid onto the seat. “It’s not a big deal.”

“It is to me.” I cranked the engine. “I’m going to spend the rest of this week teaching you how to drive whenever you’re not in class, and you’re going to pass the test next week.”

She leaned back in her chair and rolled down the window.

“Buckle your seatbelt.” I looked over at her. “They give you five points just for that. Please tell me you always did that without them pointing it out.”

She laughed and shook her head.

“Jesus, Rachel.” I reversed out of the driveway. I clasped her hand behind the gearshift and drove to the other side of town, to a long and secluded stretch of sand where my father taught me how to drive.

Shutting off the car, I looked over at her. “Lesson number one, sit in my lap.”

She blushed. “So, you were only kidding about teaching me how to drive?”

“No, I was quite serious.” I unbuckled my seatbelt and pushed my chair back. “But, if you weren’t able to learn the regular, boring way, I don’t see why we need to repeat that...” I leaned forward and trailed my finger against her lips. “Besides, I think the first thing we need to do is make sure all the stress is out of your system.”

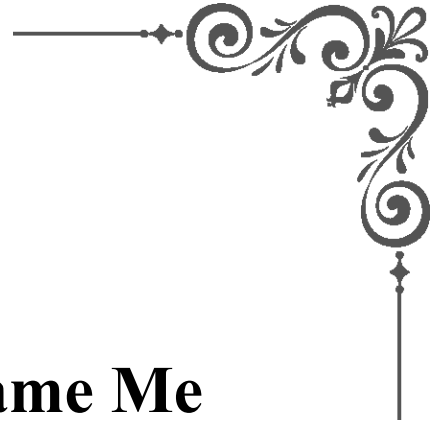
She sat there looking at me, not moving, so I unbuckled her seatbelt and slid my hands under her thighs, lifting her into my lap.

“Lesson number two.” I paused as my cock hardened in my pants. “The longer it takes you to learn the basics, the longer it takes us to have sex on my front seat.”

“I’m not the one who wants that,” she said, looking over her shoulder. “You may want to come up with something else.”

I slid a hand under her dress, sliding my finger through her soaking wet panties. Then I slipped two fingers inside of her, immediately feeling how soaked she was.

“I think what I came up with is perfect.” I kissed her shoulder. “Now, tell me what you remember about the first things to do when you get into the car...”



## Track 18. Don't Blame Me (4:27)

*Rachel*



**SUBJECT: URGENT. MEETING Needed ASAP.**

Hey Rachel,

I hope your first semester on land is going well. (Are you missing anything about Semester at Sea yet?)

Something important has come to my attention, so is there any way you could meet me during my office hours when I return from leave next month?

PS—Congratulations on both of your pieces winning top honors at the Rose Awards.

Arnold Hinton

Academic Advisor



**SUBJECT: RE: URGENT. Meeting Needed ASAP.**



MR. HINTON,

My first semester on land is going great. (Not missing anything at all ☺  
)

Can we do the first Friday of next month at 3:00?



PS—Thank you very much.



I REFRESHED MY EMAIL, waiting for his reply, and a text message from Ethan appeared on my screen.

**Ethan:** I think I deserve to be paid for my services since you finally got your driver's license...

**Me:** I'm low on cash...Will you accept my mouth and a blow job?

**Ethan:** Depends on if you'll give them to me while I'm driving my car or not...



“ARE YOU GOING TO SPEND this entire dinner looking at your phone, Rachel?” My Dad's voice made me look up. “You haven't said a single word for the past twenty minutes.”

“My apologies.” I set my phone down and sighed.

I'd managed to avoid spending more than a few minutes with him since the semester started, and before I could call to reinitiate contact on my own terms, he'd shown up at the house today and insisted on whisking me away to a “family dinner.” The only problem was, the woman sitting between us would never be considered family to me.

*Never.*

“I love your house, Rachel,” his wife said. “And I think it's really cute that you and Ethan are cordial enough now that you can live under the same roof. I would've never thought the two of you would be on good terms.”

“Dad, can you pass the salt, please?”

He passed it to me.

“So, um...” His wife smiled. “Did you two keep in contact while you were away at sea, or did you just run into him when you returned?”

I salted my mashed potatoes and stuck a spoonful into my mouth.

“Rachel.” My dad softly scolded me. “Stella is trying to talk to you.”

“Is she? What did she ask?”

“She asked if you and Ethan Wyatt kept in contact while you were away at sea, or did you run into him when you returned?”

“We kept in contact while I was at sea.” I sipped my wine, avoiding Stella's fake smile.

“So, he kept up with your port schedule and sent you letters?” Stella asked.

I picked up a knife and smeared butter on a roll.

“Rachel Marie Dawson...” My father set his napkin on the table. “I’m not sure why you insist on being disrespectful to my wife, but—”

“Because she’s disrespectful to *me*!” I snapped. “You two bringing me here of all places is also disrespectful to me. Why would you even do that?”

His face paled as he looked down at The Blue Lake Café’s menu. Then he clasped his wife’s hand. “I’m sorry. I didn’t even realize... It still doesn’t change how rude you’ve been to her over the years, and I would appreciate it if you at least tried to accept this.”

“Let’s go ahead and talk about why that’s never going to happen, shall we?” I felt my blood boiling. “I believe she took on that ‘wife’ title about sixteen months after your first wife, my mom, died right?”

“Rachel...” There was hurt in his eyes. “Rachel, please don’t do this right now.”

“Please don’t do what?” I shrugged. “Ask how the hell you could marry my mother’s best friend less than two years after she was gone? I’m sure that’s not something your daughter should ever dare to ask.” I looked Stella straight in her eyes. “You were my godmother. How the hell do you sleep at night?”

She looked as if she was on the verge of tears.

“If you’re expecting me to ever accept the two of you being together,” I said. “You’re wasting your goddamn time.”

“Rachel, look.” Stella swallowed. “I know it looked as if it was fast at the time, but if you would just listen for a few seconds.”

“I’ll never be interested in a single word you have to say.” I stood to my feet and looked at my Dad. “The next time you want to ‘catch up’ with me over dinner, don’t bring me here, and don’t bring her either.”

I walked away before he could respond, rushing past the parking lot and down the street. I made it to the café on the corner and took a few deep breaths, trying to calm down.

It was no use. I’d inherited part of my mother’s “hot-head” personality, and I knew it was going to take me a long time before I felt okay again.

I started making my way to a bus stop and felt my phone vibrating in my pocket. A text message from Ethan.

**Ethan:** How is the dinner going?

**Me:** It's great ☺

**Ethan:** You used to only send emojis when you were upset...How is it really going?

I didn't answer.

I continued walking to the bus stop, feeling tears prick my eyes with every step. When I made it to the shelter, I looked at the schedule and realized the next bus wouldn't be coming for thirty minutes.

As I was slumping onto the bench, Ethan's blue convertible pulled up next to the stop.

"Something told me to get dinner over here so I could be close by," he said, smiling. "You want to get in?"

I stood up and got into his car.

His lips met mine before I could buckle my seatbelt, and he looked into my eyes. "How long did you last?"

"Twenty minutes."

"That's five minutes longer than I originally thought," he said. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

"Would you like to bend over my lap and generously caress my cock with your mouth for the ride home, then?"

"Seriously?" I looked over at him and laughed. "That's the real reason you're close by, isn't it? Because you wanted a blow job while you drove?"

"Of course not." He smirked. "I was close by because I care about your emotional needs."

"Sure." I rolled my eyes and unzipped his pants. "That's a first."

"It isn't." He kissed me before I could unbuckle his belt. "I always have."



## Back Then: 18 Years Old

*Ethan*



### **SUBJECT: PROM. GET Jealous.**

Dear Ethan,

I want you to know that I'm really happy that our principal decided that you can't run for Prom King. (You winning *Mr. Popular* three times in a row should be more than enough for your big-ass ego. Not that I would've voted for you, anyway)

I also want you to know that whatever you have planned for your night (with Shelby Hannah #ugh) will pale in comparison to my night. Since my date is Clive Harrison, a perfect gentleman and last year's football MVP, he will be picking me up for pictures at six o'clock, taking me to a five-star dinner downtown, and treating me to the best dance of my life at the prom.

I've also decided that if all goes well, I'll go back with him to his downtown hotel room afterward. (He got us a room at the Marriott!) I'm sure you and Shelby will just fuck in the front seat of your car...

Hope you're jealous.

Forget You,

Rachel

PS—Do you think my dress looks okay? Like, do you think Clive will like it?

PSS—Am I too excited about this?



**SUBJECT: RE: PROM. Get Jealous.**

Dear Rachel,

Thank you for reminding me why you'll always be my number one hater. (For the umpteenth time, I've won *Mr. Popular* FOUR times in a row—all without your pointless, wasteful vote.)

No wonder Clive has been quiet about who he's taking to prom this weekend. Somehow telling everyone he's taking the most unknown person in our class isn't a great conversation starter. My night probably *will* pale in comparison to yours, but only because I think the prom is more than enough for someone I don't even like that much...

I refuse to believe that you'll ever have sex, so I'm not even going to say anything about him getting you a room at the Marriott. (Except that his older cousin is the general manager there, so I highly doubt it took him much effort to do that...) Me and Shelby will be fucking in the *back seat* of my car. ☺

I'm far from jealous.

Forget You,

Ethan

PS—If you're talking about the red dress you've been waltzing around your room every day for the past two weeks...Yes, he'll like it. (*Everyone* will)

PSS—If you were anyone else, yes. Since this is your first time actually going out, no...



ON THE NIGHT OF PROM, I double checked to make sure I picked up the right violet corsage for my date and made sure there wasn't a dirt spot anywhere on my blue convertible.

As I was putting on my tuxedo jacket, I looked outside my window and noticed that Rachel wasn't waltzing around her room in her prom dress like usual. She didn't even look like she was halfway ready.

Instead, she was sitting at her desk, crying.

Confused, I pushed up my window and tossed a pen at her window.

She looked up and wiped her eyes before pushing it open. "Yeah?"

"Does your perfect dress not fit anymore or something? Why the hell are you crying?"

"I'm not going to prom anymore."

“What?”

She sniffled and held up her cell phone.

“I can’t see the screen from over here, Rachel.”

“He invited me out as a joke. He said he thought I knew that he wasn’t being serious, and that no offense, but if he was going to have a date he would never pick me. He’s going with Theresa Kline—Homecoming Queen. Why did I think that he would pick me over her anyway when they were still dating? How could I be so blind and dumb?”

I knew I was supposed to say something thoughtful or meaningful right now, that I should probably say something like, “You should go anyway. Show him what he’s missing,” but I was running late so I could only shrug.

“Well, that’s highly unfortunate,” I said. “I guess I’ll tell you all about the prom when I get back.”

Her jaw dropped and her face reddened as I shut my window, and I waved at her before leaving the room.



## Back Then: 18 Years Old

*Rachel*



I TOSSED ANOTHER KLEENEX into a flower pot and plopped down onto my porch's rocking chair. I'd been tempted to go to prom without Clive and have a good time anyway, but my make-up was a disaster, and the second my dad's new girlfriend (i.e. my mom's best friend) showed up to "help" me with it, I fucking lost it.

As if my dad's idiocy wasn't enough, Clive's cruelty cut me deep. He was the first guy at our school to ever ask me out, and I thought he actually liked me.

My heart felt heavy and I couldn't believe that he could be so mean. We'd texted each other nonstop for three weeks straight about all the things we were doing to prepare for our big night and he'd said, "I want to share my prom with someone I've secretly had a crush on for a long time."

*I can't believe I fell for that shit...*

I picked up my phone and sent him another string of nice texts to prove that I was the bigger person.

**Me:** FUCK YOU, Clive! I hope your dick falls off!

**Me:** I can't believe you played me for all those weeks!

**Me:** Fuccckkkkkkkk Youuuuuuuu!

Shaking my head, I tried not to think about how much fun everyone else was having. Tried not to picture the parade of luxury vehicles that was standing outside the ballroom and the nonstop nineties music hour that our principal had promised.

I was tempted to text some of my friends (Well, “associates”) and ask them how everything was going, but I held back. Not a single one of them returned my text when I said I wasn’t able to come to prom anymore.

They didn’t even ask me why.

As I was contemplating how I was going to spend the rest of my night, Ethan’s blue convertible cruised down the street and into his driveway next door.

Stepping out of his car, he tossed his jacket over his shoulder and I waited for him to walk over to the passenger side and escort Shelby up to his room, but he didn’t.

As he let the top down, I realized no one was sitting in the passenger seat.

He took off his bowtie and tossed it onto the backseat, then he made his way over to me.

“Don’t you dare think about stepping onto my porch, Ethan Wyatt,” I said. “I will scream bloody murder.”

“I’ll take that risk.” He smiled and sat in the rocking chair next to me anyway. “How was your night?”

“Seriously?” I snapped. “Like, you have the audacity to sit there with a straight face and ask me that?”

He didn’t say anything. He just stared at me.

“I just want you to get it over with,” I said, sighing. “Go ahead and rub all the salt in my wounds. Tell me everything I’ve missed out on tonight, and try not to say it with too much enthusiasm if you can.”

“Trust me, I really want to, but there isn’t that much to say.”

“You could at least tell me who won Prom King,” I said, surprised that he was being somewhat decent about this. “The fact that it’s not ‘you’ is the highlight of my night.”

“There was no Prom King because we never got to that point,” he said. “Prom was cancelled.”

“What?”

“Well, more like postponed on the account of a certain incident.”

“Oh...Was the incident something awful? Like, did something fall from the ceiling?”

“Not necessarily.” He shrugged. “Halfway through the nineties hour, the fire sprinklers came on and everyone got drenched within seconds.”



“Right...I don’t believe that at all, Ethan,” I said. “You’re just making that up to make me feel better. How was the prom, really?”

“You honestly think I would concoct a story to make *you* feel better about anything? After you got me grounded for most of my senior year?”

“No, not really.”

“Exactly.” He leaned back. “The night was overrated to begin with. For starters, the DJ we all wanted called in sick at the last moment so they brought in the guy from Boomer FM.”

“The oldies station?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “The caterer only brought enough food for half our class, so the only thing that was left after an hour was crackers and caramel popcorn. Oh, and the photographer bailed after he realized that the class president didn’t have a check for his services. For me, though, these weren’t even the most annoying parts.”

I leaned forward. “What were the most annoying parts?”

“Well, for one, your asshole date was going around the ballroom bragging to me and the rest of his teammates about how he had “that frizzy loser Rachel” going for weeks, and how you were sending him tons of mean text messages. He said he almost felt bad about it.”

“*Almost?*”

“Yeah, almost.” He let out a breath. “Anyway, I got tired of hearing about that, and I also got tired of Shelby begging me to compliment her every few minutes, so I stepped outside. Next thing I knew, everyone was rushing out of the ballroom and to the parking lot since the sprinklers went off.”

He was silent for several seconds. “There’s going to be a make-up prom next weekend and the dry cleaners are offering free presses and cleaning for every wet dress.”

“What about the guy’s tuxedos, though? And all the money people spent on cars and stuff?”

“Mr. Walsh said he’ll try to work some discounts out with all the rental companies. So, looks like you’ll get to go to prom and wear your red dress for everyone to see after all. Maybe this time, you should go to the prom by yourself.”

“I will.” I looked down at his soaking wet pants and shook my head. “You were outside the building when it happened and you still got wet?”

“There are fire sprinklers outside as well, Rachel,” he said.  
“Unfortunately.”

“I never noticed,” I said, shrugging. “Who the hell would pull the fire alarm and ruin the prom for everyone? I mean, I’m sure the DJ wasn’t who everyone wanted and the night wasn’t perfect, but why would anyone—” I stopped talking and looked at him, my eyes widening with each second that passed.

*There aren’t any sprinklers outside that building at all...And he shouldn’t be wet unless...*

“Do you think that the *someone* who triggered the alarm will eventually get caught?”

“I doubt it.” He smiled. “I heard he disabled the cameras before turning on the sprinkler system. Something tells me he has plenty of experience doing that when he sneaks dates into the school’s pool overnight”

“That’s what you *heard*?”

“Verbatim.” He looked at me. “Funny how life works out sometimes, isn’t it?”

“Yes, very funny...”

We stared at each other in the darkness, not saying a word.

I cleared my throat and broke the silence. “So, did you and Shelby Hannah fuck in your backseat, or are you going back there tonight?”

“No.” He laughed. “We didn’t get a chance to do anything. She was pissed about the night being ruined—on top of me looking like I wasn’t focused on her, so she thought it was a sign from the universe that she shouldn’t sleep with me anymore.”

“Maybe you should go by yourself to the next prom, too.”

“I will.”

Silence.

He stood up and handed me a white rose corsage. “It’s a satin one, so it won’t die. I bought it at a floral shop on my way home tonight. I figured you’d need it since you won’t have a date to give you one next time.”

“Thank you.”

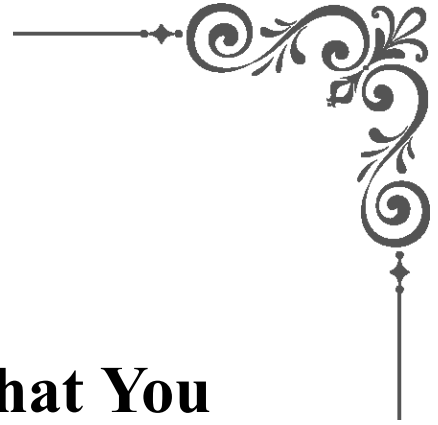
“Yep.” He started to walk off my porch.

“Hey, Ethan?” I called, making him look over his shoulder.

“Yeah?”

“I still hate you.”

“Good.” He smiled. “I still hate you, too.”



## Track 19. Call It What You Want (3:22)

Rachel



WHENEVER MY PROFESSORS asked me to create a painting about love in the past, I kindly refused and asked for another assignment. In turn, they threatened to fail me, so I always had to flip through the pages of a local magazine or a fictional book to get inspired. I'd have to listen to a long playlist of love songs until I heard the right note.

Unfortunately, those pieces were never my best work, and each time my professors said something along the lines of, "Surely, you've felt passion for *someone* in your life, Miss Dawson. Surely you can bring out that love in your work."

For years, that topic was my biggest weakness, but after dating Ethan—even for such a short time so far, I knew I would never have that problem again. That no matter how long we lasted, I could always look back and remember our recent nights of spending hours in the hot tub, our mornings making loud love in the kitchen, and the weekends of never-ending dates that made me feel like this was definitely my first real romance. My first true love.

"Rachel?" Ethan waved his hand in front of my face, pulling me out of my thoughts. "Rachel?"

"Yeah?" I looked to my right and realized he was standing in the pier's parking lot.

“When do you plan on getting out of the car?” He smiled and unbuckled my seatbelt for me. “Tonight would be nice, but I can wait until tomorrow if you like. If we wait that long, I won’t be able to take you to Blue Falls in the afternoon, though.”

I laughed and stepped out, shutting the door behind me. “I didn’t know you were serious about bringing me to the carnival. We came here all the time when we were young, remember?”

“I only remember leaving with bruises because we fought the whole damn time.” He pressed his hand against the small of my back. “They’ve changed a lot of this since you’ve been gone.”

He purchased our tickets at the entrance, and we walked down the boardwalk hand in hand. The only things that remained the same were the Ferris Wheel and the paddle boats that lined the dock. All of the former snack machines were now replaced by full-blown food stands that featured funnel cakes, cotton candy, and fried sweets.

I could still remember all the times we chased each other across the pier as kids, and I was wondering how the hell I’d never managed to guess that the guy who would become my first real boyfriend was my enemy next door.

Leading me toward the rides, Ethan stopped in front of a bright blue food truck that read, *Gayle’s: New Specialty Sweets. Inspired by Carter & Arizona James*. The menu on the side door was full of waffles and breakfast themed-desserts, and for some reason, the word “Crack” was posted on all the tins of waffle batter.

“Before we get on any rides, I need you to finally try this so I can make sure that you’ve had it at least once.” He held out a few bills for the attendant. “Can I get two hot chocolates please?”

The attendant began making our cups, and I stared at the menu.

“Isn’t there a café near our campus named Gayle’s?” I asked.

“There is, but you have to wait for at least an hour to get a seat. They have the best breakfast and desserts in the country.”

“Better than the waffle place we used to stop at before school?”

“A million times better.” He smiled and handed me a cup, motioning for me to take a sip.

I braced myself to hate it, to feel justified in rolling my eyes each time he insisted on ordering this instead of coffee when we were growing up, but it was love at first sip.

“It’s okay,” I said, taking an even longer sip. “It’s still not as good as my coffee.”

“Would you like another one before we get in line for the rides?”

“Yes, please.” I downed the rest of it as he laughed and ordered me another one. “Can I ask you something, Ethan?”

“Of course. Anything.”

“In your letters, you said that you took ‘plenty’ of girls out on dates,” I said. “You said you brought quite a few of them here, especially during your junior year.”

“And?” He raised his eyebrow.

“Well, earlier today, when we were in the pool, you said I was about to be your first date to the pier. You said you never brought another girl here because you didn’t want to give her the wrong impression...Which one is it?”

His lips curved into a smirk. “It’s the latter.”

“So, you purposely lied in some of your letters to me, too?”

“I might’ve lied about the locations, but the dates were real.” He handed me a fresh cup of hot chocolate and looked into my eyes. “I was trying to compete with all the places you said you got to see with the guys on your ship. Somehow the pier was as close as I could get in comparison to places like Japan, Morocco, Portugal, and Italy.”

“So, you were jealous?”

He smiled. “I didn’t *know* I was jealous...”

“Do you know that now?”

“I know that you’re mine now.” He kissed me, making me blush all over. “Nothing else matters.”

His lips met mine one more time, for so long that I knew everyone around us was staring, and by the time he pulled away from me, the nightlights on the pier were aglow.

We walked to the Ferris wheel and stood in line for half an hour, not saying anything—just letting the laughter from everyone around us fill the air. When it was our turn to get onto the ride, he motioned for me to slide onto the seat first, and then he wrapped his arm around my shoulders.

The cart slowly rose into the air, and I felt my heart racing a mile a minute. From the top of the wheel, I looked out over the pier—at all the twinkling lights and soft rolling waves below.

“Rachel?” Ethan gently threaded his fingers through my hair.

I didn't answer.

"Rachel?" He placed his hand under my chin and turned my head to face him. "You've barely said anything over the past hour. Why?"

"Because I'm still trying to process what the hell has been happening over the past couple of weeks. That, and I can't believe I'm dating the guy who burned my collectible Wonder Woman."

He smirked. "It's way past time for you to get over that."

"Are you over what I did to your Captain America?"

"I'll *never* be over what you did to my Captain America."

"Well, then we're even." I leaned against his chest, smiling. "And Ethan?"

"Yes?"

"Stop running your fingers through my hair."

He smiled and ran his fingers through my hair for several more seconds, locking his eyes on mine. "Do you really mean that?"

"Not at all."

He tilted my chin up and kissed my lips. "I thought so."



## Track 20. I Know Places (1:13)

*Ethan*



### **SUBJECT: YOUR WORK + A Unique Offer**

Mr. Wyatt,

I don't say this too often (and I'll deny ever saying it if you repeat it), but your work thus far on my wife's floral shop has been nothing short of incredible. The suggestions on how to better streamline the service and products are far beyond the scope of what I was expecting, and you've proved that the last place you belong is in my classroom.

After speaking to a few of the other professors in the department and realizing that your core business credits will be fulfilled after this semester, we've agreed to recommend you for an accelerated MBA program. (It's the top program in the country)

Please let me know if you're interested.

Hope to hear back,

Professor Hughes



### **SUBJECT: RE: YOUR WORK + A Unique Offer**

Professor Hughes,

Thank you for the compliments on my work. I'll bring the final parts of my project to you this week.

I would definitely like to hear more about the MBA program. I do have a few offers from other top schools for next fall.

Ethan Wyatt



**SUBJECT: RE: RE: YOUR Work + A Unique Offer**

The key word is “accelerated,” Mr. Wyatt.

This particular program starts this coming winter/spring.) It’s super intense and the classes are six days a week, but we’re confident that you’re a great fit.

We’ll talk about it when you stop by,  
Professor Hughes





## Track 21. I Did Something Bad (4:09)

*Rachel*



“WOULD YOU LIKE ANOTHER cup of coffee, Miss Dawson?” My academic advisor, Mr. Hinton, sat across from me Friday morning. “What about some tea?”

“I’ve already had two cups.”

“Oh, yeah.” He stared at me. “Would you like some extra cream, then?”

I held back a sigh. I’d been sitting in his office for twenty minutes and he’d filled the time with questions about beverages instead of explaining what his “urgent” and “important” email from weeks ago was about.

“I have someone I need to meet in an hour,” I said. “Is this just a regular check-in meeting?”

“Not exactly.” He shook his head. “This is about your credits here at the university.”

“Okay.” I smiled, knowing where he was going with this. “I’m aware that I’m still missing the required writing classes, but I plan on taking them both next semester since spelling and written analysis are still my weaknesses.”

“The writing classes aren’t the problem...” He pulled out a spreadsheet and handed it to me. “Right now, you’re technically classified as a junior at this university.”

“No, I’ve already taken three years of classes and I’m currently on year four. That makes me a *senior*.”

“Yeah well...” He cleared his throat. "Turns out, I forgot to tell you a little about how the credits work under the adjusted Semester at Sea policy. It was changed during your sophomore year, and it completely slipped my mind since you opted to do multiple years.” He had the audacity to smile. “But not to worry. It’s rather simple.”

He looked at me as if he was waiting for me to smile in return.

I didn’t.

“Okay, then," he said. "So, here on campus, every class is worth a total of three credit hours. On the ship, the same holds true for the core classes in your major, but your electives are only worth one and a half credits, as SAS partners teach those classes and not official university staff... You are awarded an additional half credit per course in the summer months, though, and the courses you took during the four-week stays in Thailand and Australia did result in two full credits so good for you.”

“Mr. Hinton, what are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying that if you want to graduate from this university, you have two options. Option number one, you can take three more semesters of courses here. That would mean this upcoming spring, this upcoming summer, and this upcoming fall. Or, you can attend a spring and part-summer session aboard the next Semester at Sea sailing. There's a repositioning voyage this winter as well—if you want to get a super head start. ”

My heart dropped. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

His eyes widened. "Miss Dawson, there's no need to use foul language. I'm just the messenger."

"You're the messenger who has just fucked up my plans." I narrowed my eyes at him. "I'm planning to pursue a graduate degree next fall."

"And you can still do that... You just, you know, will have to pick the option that allows you to do so." He shook his head and looked down, not making eye contact. “I’m very sorry.”

“Why didn't anyone tell me about this policy change before?" I was seconds away from screaming. "Surely someone on the ship could’ve let me know. I would’ve gotten the hell off and completed the rest of my work here.”

Still refusing to make eye contact, he leaned back in his chair.

With every second that passed, all I could think about was how a little over three years ago, he'd sold me on this "once in a lifetime" program and

assured me that the courses were the same as they were on campus. He'd said it was "better than regular college," and I wouldn't have to make up any credits when I returned. He took my dad and me out to dinner every week to discuss it, wooed me with all new brochures, and made it his business to stay in contact with me as I made my decision.

I remembered writing his words verbatim in my letters to Ethan, insisting that I was the one who was doing college "the right way."

I had no desire to complete another term at sea, and I didn't want to spend the next year and a half taking pointless, fluff courses.

"Is there a way I can talk to the dean, Mr. Hinton?" I asked, feeling tears prick my eyes.

"You can," he said. "But you need to know that he's the one who instituted the policy. He wanted to be sure that students weren't trying to take the easy way out."

"There's nothing easy about living on a ship with no Wi-Fi and strangers for three years." I rolled my eyes.

"Well, I truly understand that you're upset but—"

"You don't understand anything." I cut him off and stood to my feet. "You're telling me that I completed three years of college on a boat for shits and giggles."

"I wouldn't necessarily say 'shits and giggles,' per se. I'm sure you learned a hell of a lot while you were away, and I'm sure you'll treasure those experiences for a lifetime."

"I *would've* if you'd told me that I was going to be the only freshman onboard for the first year, or if you would've told me that most people only do a semester at a time." I glared at him and picked up my purse. "I should've known you were full of it when you let me sign up for the program as a freshman."

"A lot of freshmen do Semester at Sea, Miss Dawson." He looked offended. "It varies from year to year. And you were *happily* signing off on all the final forms from what I remember."

"Do you get a kickback or a bonus for every student who signs up for the longer terms?"

"What?" his face paled. "What the hell are you trying to say?"

"Nothing." I headed to the door. "Your face says it all."



LATER THAT NIGHT, I sat in Ethan's lap in the hot tub, looking out at the ocean. He was eyeing me intently, trailing his fingers against my lips. Even though I was pissed about the state of my college career, I was sure that being with Ethan was what it felt like to be in a great relationship. If not, it had to be pretty damn close.

"Are you going to say something?" he asked. "You've been quiet all night."

"Would you care if I did Semester at Sea again?"

"Depends." He moved his hand away. "What would be the reason?"

"Because my dumbass advisor screwed me over." My voice cracked. "Twenty-five percent of the credits I got onboard don't count, so I'm technically still a junior. He said I can either do a spring and a part-time summer semester on board or do an additional year and a half here on campus. He even said I can get on board on the next winter departure, which is utter bullshit."

"What did you tell him?"

"I haven't told him anything yet. I need to think about it."

He caressed my back. "Well, if you go back, it's not like we haven't written each other letters before."

"That was before we were a couple and started having sex."

He smiled, letting out a low laugh. "You honestly think I would cheat on you while you were gone?"

"No..."

"Okay, then. What's the problem?"

"I just need to think about it." I leaned against his chest. "Can we talk about something else?"

"Sure," he said. "I have good news."

"Is it that Greg finally has a new girlfriend?"

"He does, but that's not what I'm talking about." He kissed my lips. "I was accepted into Hudson University's Accelerated MBA program. It's in New York."

"Oh." I forced a smile, feeling my heart sink. "That's... That's great. What makes it accelerated?"

"The fact that I start next semester." He kissed me again, much longer this time. "See? We'll be separated again no matter what path you choose."

"What happened to pursuing the writing programs, Ethan?" I asked. "You hate business."

“Is that why I have all A’s in it?”

“You have all A’s in it because math and everything that’s remotely connected to math has always come easily to you,” I said, looking into his eyes. “For someone who was always so hell-bent on telling me to pursue art, you going to Hudson makes you look like one hell of a hypocrite.”

He raised his eyebrow. “You’re upset about this?”

I didn’t answer.

He blinked and gently gripped my hips, moving me out of his lap. Then he stood up and stepped out of the hot tub.

“I believe the word you’re looking for is ‘Congratulations,’ Rachel,” he said. “That’s typically the first thing someone says after finding out about an accomplishment.”

“I’ll give you a ‘congratulations’ when you get into a program you *want* to join. Something writing-related that’ll help you finish the novel you’ve been working on since you were a freshman. You’re still working on it, right?”

“Yes...” He clenched his jaw. “I told you I was going to finish it sometime next year.”

“In your letters, you said you were eighty percent finished with it. Why not just complete it and apply to a few writing programs, instead of doing what your dad expects you to do? Instead of working toward receiving a company that you don’t even want to own?”

Silence.

“I don’t want to argue with you about this, Rachel,” he said. “Not right now, anyway.”

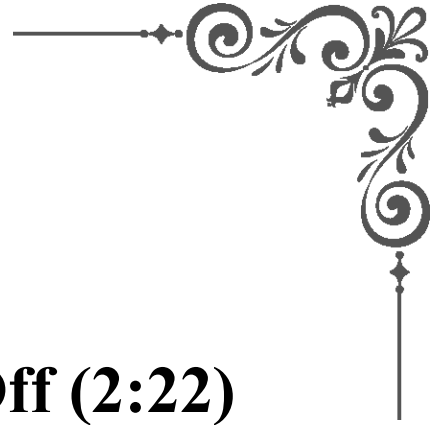
“You’re the one who’s making a scene and getting out of the hot tub.” I crossed my arms, and his lips curved into a smile. “It wasn’t me being a hot head this time. I was just giving you my honest thoughts as your so-called girlfriend. I don’t remember reading about you arguing with any of your others.”

“I honestly don’t remember any of the others.” He laughed and bent down, pulling me out of the water. “How about we talk about something other than the future for the rest of the night?”

“I’d like that. What do you want to talk about?”

“I think we should discuss the fact that Greg is out of town for an entire weekend, and we have the entire house to ourselves.” He tugged the string

of my bikini bottom, letting it fall into the hot tub. “And by 'discuss,' I'm not really interested in talking...”



## Track 22. Shake It Off (2:22)

*Ethan*



*“YOU GOING TO HUDSON makes you look like one hell of a hypocrite...”*

I pulled a blanket over Rachel the next morning, kissing her forehead before getting dressed. Despite having sex all over our house for the entire night, I hadn’t been able to get some of her words out of my head, and I was still slightly upset.

She didn’t even give me a chance to explain that the program was only for a year (Hence the word “accelerated”) and I was guaranteed a six-figure job upon completion. I was going to tell her that I planned to take a gap-year afterwards and pursue writing for a while.

Then again, I should’ve known that she would react that way.

*She’s still a goddamn hot-head...*

“Where are you going?” She murmured, rolling over. “Ethan?”

“To my dad’s office. You want something on my way back?”

“Yeah...” She looked at me. “Can you let me see the first few pages of your novel? You never let me read it.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said, walking over and kissing her forehead. “By ‘something,’ I was referring to what you may want from a store or a café.”

“Hot chocolate from Gayle’s. Two cups.”

I laughed and hit the lights. “I’ll be back with that in twenty.”



FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, I walked into the office suite at my dad's construction company and set my intention letter for Hudson University on his desk.

"Wow." He picked up the paper and smiled. "Now, this is the type of 'creative writing' I'm talking about, Ethan. These are the type of words that will get you someplace in life."

"I didn't come here to talk," I said. "I just wanted to let you know I'll be moving away soon."

"Well, thank you for taking the right path." He smiled as he leaned back in his chair. "I can't wait until you finish, so I can show you all the things you're going to love about running this place. Okay, well, maybe not love, but it'll pay your bills and you'll get to do things you love on your off days."

"Right." I rolled my eyes and picked up my letter. "Like I said, I'm not here to talk, and I'm not sure if I want to work at your company when I'm finished anyway. I told you I'd *consider* it."

His expression hardened. "Ethan, this is a seven-figure business that I'm willing to *give* you, no questions asked. Do you have any idea how I would've felt if my father promised the same for me when I was your age?"

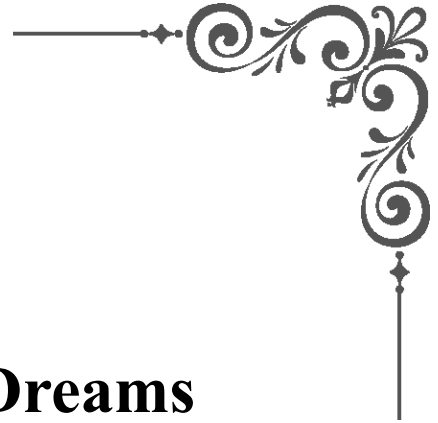
*I can make a pretty good guess...* "I have no idea."

"Well, I would've felt honored, and you should feel the same," he said, pulling out his laptop. "Show me your school's log-in portal so I can see what specialties you'll work on during the first few months. I'll do my best to tailor my lessons in sync with yours."

"You do know that Hudson University is in New York, right?"

"Yeah." He shrugged. "What better way to finally Skype each other since you'll be doing that to reach all your future clients? Oh, and since you're doing an accelerated program instead of the standard one, that means I don't have as much time to get all the transition guides ready for you." He turned the laptop's screen toward me, talking a mile a minute about shit I couldn't care less about, and for a split second, I wondered if Rachel had a point.





## Track 23. Wildest Dreams (2:09)

*Rachel*



ON A SATURDAY NIGHT, I sat across from Ethan, Penelope, and Greg in our rooftop pool as they laughed about all the crazy things they'd done over their college careers. Halfway listening, I felt my heart ache at the realization that I didn't have much to add to the conversation. That my first semester on campus was one of their last, and I wanted it to last forever.

*I don't want to get back on that goddamn ship...*

As Greg and Ethan swam to the deep end with Penelope following, I grabbed my phone from the deck and sent my advisor an email.



### **SUBJECT: MY OPTIONS.**

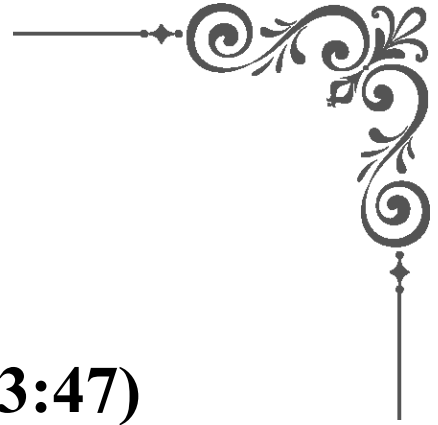
Mr. Hinton,

I would like to let you know that although I am highly upset with how my credits (and the information about them) are handled, I have decided to choose the first option to complete the necessary credits for my degree.

Since I have a 4.0 GPA and two acceptance letters from graduate programs that were due to start next fall, I would also like to request a written explanation from your office so that they may consider holding my spot when I finish my undergraduate studies.

Thank you,

Rachel



## Track 24. Mean (3:47)

*Rachel*  
*One week later...*



“I CAN’T BELIEVE THAT I’m dating Greg Charleston III,” Penelope said, taking a seat next to me at Gayle’s on a Thursday night. We’d weathered the hour-long wait for a table in the rain, and the waitress was making our night so far with endless cups of hot chocolate.

“Like, out of all the guys on this campus, I decide to go for one of the biggest ass-holes. The guy who walked up to me with the worst pickup line I’ve ever heard.”

“He’s also the mayor’s son.” I smiled, sipping my drink. “Doesn’t that make dating him somewhat better?”

“Not at all.” She laughed. “The sex does that.”

“Is it that good?”

“Good isn’t even the right word for it.” She waved at him and Ethan as they walked into the diner. “I haven’t gone a day without orgasms since we started dating.”

Ethan kissed my cheek before sitting next to me, and Greg signaled for the waitress.

“Sorry we’re late,” Ethan whispered. “Greg wanted to stop for Penelope’s birthday card.”

I raised my eyebrow. “That’s not until next month.”

“He wanted to buy it before he forgot.”

“Hey!” Greg wagged his finger. “No whispering tonight, *enemies*. It’s night one of a three week-long celebration and you’ll have plenty of time

later to do that whispering shit.”

I shook my head. “What exactly are we celebrating?”

“Us getting a new roommate soon,” he said, laughing. “But more importantly, Ethan moving to New York for business school next month.”

*WHAT?* “I’m sorry, what?” I looked at Ethan. “Next month?”

He nodded, smiling. “I made up my mind the other day. I planned to lay out all the details tonight since I know you’ll have plenty of questions. You can even join me this weekend when I leave for my pre-campus visit. I’ll be there for a full week, but I’d love for you to be there with me for some of the days.” He kissed my cheek, and my blood ran cold.

“To New York dreams!” Greg raised his cup for a toast, and Penelope and Ethan joined him.

I faked a smile and leaned back against the booth.

“To New York dreams!” they all said in unison one more time.

I sat still and listened as Ethan told them about all the things he was looking forward to in New York, all the plans and preparations he’d made without letting me in on a goddamn thing. Since he had plenty of credits and his professors had all conspired to waive his final semester of electives, he would be awarded his two degrees this winter.

Not that he would be able to attend his graduation, though.

There was a pre-campus visit this week, an orientation session two and a half weeks after that, and after one final week of intensive placement and specialty tests, he’d be taking classes six days a week once January came.

When Greg insisted on showing Penelope the famous “Carter & Ari” booth on the other side of the diner, I cleared my throat.

“Ethan?”

“Yes?” He smiled, turning me on and making me temporarily forget that I was upset.

“Can I talk to you outside for a minute?”

“Of course.” He stood up and clasped my hand, leading me through the dining room and outside into the rain. He let up an umbrella and held it over my head, walking me to a nearby alley.

“What do you want to talk about?”

“I could’ve sworn we said that we were going to talk about our futures together before we made any decisions.”

“No, we said that we were just going to talk about it later,” he said.

“That last part was never agreed to, especially since you made your

decision already.”

“My decision doesn’t count since it’s the right one.” I crossed my arms. “If you’re going to New York next month, where does that leave us?”

“What do you mean, where does that leave us?” He rolled his eyes and stepped back, letting me hold the umbrella. “We’ll still be together, Rachel. It’s just New York, and I can fly back to see you on Sundays. Or, I can fly you up to see me anytime you want.”

“Let me get this straight...” I paused, feeling my blood beginning to boil. “I’m willing to stay here for a year and a half—to take fucking fluff courses, just so I can be around you, and you couldn’t tell me that you were already making moves to go to New York? You didn’t just make up your mind about this ‘the other day,’ Ethan. You fucking knew.”

“I also fucking knew how you would react, so I thought it would be better if we talked about it in private.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, how’s that line of thinking going for you so far? Is this *better* than what you envisioned?”

“It’s shockingly worse.” He shook his head. “But I’m doing what’s best for me, and as my girlfriend you need to respect that.”

“If you truly felt that this was best, you would’ve told me before Greg,” I said. “If this program was what truly made you happy, then you would talk about it as much as you talk about ‘us’ and writing.”

“I haven’t talked about ‘us’ since you couldn’t even try to be happy for me.” He clenched his jaw. “And this may not be my dream program, but the job I get afterwards will help me with the bills while I pursue writing. If you’d listen for a change, maybe I could explain.”

“I’m fucking listening, Ethan,” I narrowed my eyes at him. “I just can’t hear through all the bullshit. If I’d known that you were going to New York, I would’ve—”

“Done *the same goddamn thing*.” He hissed. “You would stay here because that’s the most *romantic* option, because you’re incapable of making logical decisions and you base everything off how you feel and what you read in your goddamn romance books.” He stepped closer, glaring at me. “Instead of going to college like a normal person, you joined Semester at Sea because you were mad about something I said.”

“I was mad about something you *did*.”

“Same difference.” He shrugged. “Look at where that got you. You’re a year and a half behind on credits with three years of time on a ship you

hated, all because someone hurt your goddamn feelings. You're willing to stay and take pointless ass courses to be close to someone you've only been dating for a couple months."

Silence.

The rain fell a bit harder, and neither of us said a word for several minutes. My heart reeled at his cold description of our relationship, and it pounded heavily against my chest. It begged me to walk away and finish this later before I said something I might regret, but I stayed put.

"As much as I would like to stay here for another semester and spend more time with you," he said, sighing, "I have an opportunity that'll get me an MBA in a shorter amount of time, so—"

"You don't even *want* an MBA, Ethan!" I interrupted him. "That's my whole fucking point! You're just scared to take a fucking risk and do something different because the outcome isn't guaranteed."

"Now you're finally thinking like a logical person," he said, his voice terse. "Congratulations. It only took you over twenty years."

"Fuck you."

"I'm too upset to even think about fucking you right now."

"You know that's not what I mean."

"That's what you *should* mean."

"You know what?" I shook my head and stepped onto the sidewalk. "Tell Penelope and Greg I'm not feeling well and decided to go home. Or, you can tell them I left because of my *fucking emotions*. Your choice."

"Rachel..." He sighed and reached for my hand. "Rachel, stop. Let me drive you."

"Don't touch me." I jerked my hand back. "Go celebrate your new life, the one I'm clearly not that big a part of since I've only been dating you a *couple months*."

"This is exactly what I'm talking about." He gritted his teeth. "Just because I do something you don't like, you decide to walk away."

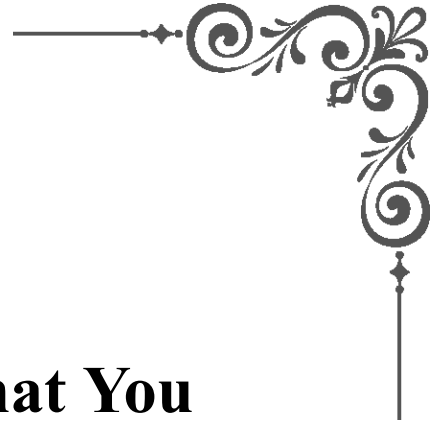
"You've done a lot of things that I don't like, Ethan," I said, handing him the umbrella as the rain fell down harder. "Some of them were even at my own expense, but they were always genuine, and they always made some type of sense."

"This decision also makes perfect sense." He handed the umbrella back to me. "And the only person who's questioning where we stand after it is *you*." He ran his hand through his hair. "I'll be around whenever you want

to talk about this like an adult. Maybe in a few days when we've both calmed down?"

"Sure," I said. "We can talk about it when you get back from your pre-campus visit in New York." I stepped back and hailed a cab. "I'm not returning to your celebration party."

"You wouldn't be the Rachel I know if you did..."



## **Track 25. Look What You Made Me Do (0:20)**

*Rachel*



**SUBJECT: RE: MY OPTIONS.**

Mr. Hinton,

I apologize for making you waste your time last week when you helped me select my next three semesters of classes for this campus.

I've changed my mind.

I would like to pursue option two, and I would like to board the winter repositioning voyage that leaves in a couple of weeks.

Thank You,

Rachel



## Back Then: 18 Years Old

*Ethan*



### **SUBJECT: THAT GODDAMN Sign**

Dear Ethan,

For the record, the only reason I'm the salutatorian and you're the valedictorian is because you made better grades than me in *English*. One class. That's it. So, can you please erase that "I'm fucking better than you, Rachel" message off your whiteboard now? I'm giving you one more day, and then I'm throwing a rock through your window.

Also, I may need a ride back from graduation if my dad tries to make me get in the car with Stella (What a bitch!) and I'll pay you with four extra cups of that disgusting hot chocolate that you love to drink.

Oh, and... (Truce moment) Four guys have asked me out over the past week and all four have stood me up at the very last minute with bullshit excuses. I have a date with Taylor Jones at Waterstones Café tonight and I'm really hoping that nothing is wrong with me... (Is something wrong with me?)

One day to remove that sign.

Forget You,

Rachel



### **SUBJECT: RE: THAT GODDAMN Sign**

Dear Rachel,



There are several reasons that I'm the valedictorian, but for brevity purposes, the main one is: I'm fucking better than you. ☺ From the way you normally throw rocks at my window (and miss), I'm willing to take my chances and leave my sign up.

Sounds like you need a *bus pass* for after graduation, but if it comes down to that, you can sit in my backseat as one of my real friends—Brody, will be sitting in the front. (I still can't believe Stella got with your Dad so soon...) I'll hold you to that hot chocolate promise.

Truce moment ::: Outside of the fact that you're the worst person I know, nothing is wrong with you. It's break up and pre-college season, so I think everyone is trying to have as much sex as possible. Those guys probably stood you up to fuck someone else. (Full Disclosure: I did the same thing to Emilia a few nights ago, remember?)

The sign stays.

Forget You,

Ethan



I PULLED UP TO WATERSTONES Café later that night with a lump of guilt in my throat. Still, I wasn't going to let it distract me from the fact that I needed to get to Rachel's date before she did and ensure that he never made it to dinner.

Unknown to her, the red dress she wore to her prom made her the talk of the locker room. Even though I could admit that she looked good that night, I wasn't saying the type of things every other guy at our school was saying. (Especially since she'd gone back to wearing her oversized T-shirts and sweatpants in the days since)

*"Who knew Rachel Dawson was so fucking sexy?" "I need to hit that before graduation..." "I'd love to slap her ass while letting her ride me..."*

That same night, a group of seniors—one from each sporting team, started a bet to see who could fuck her in the shortest amount of time. Their plan was simple and disgusting: Each guy flirts with her at some point after school this week, "before she gets into Ethan Wyatt's car," and exchange phone numbers. Each guy picks two days out of the week to send text messages and show her attention before asking her on a date. While on the date, flatter her for as long as it takes for you to fuck her. No rules on that. First guy to fuck her wins. Bonus points if you get pictures.

I wasn't supposed to know about the plan at all, but once Rachel started telling me that she'd been asked out on multiple dates in a row (by guys I knew were no good for her), I knew something was up.

I'd beat the hell out of the first guy after following him to his house after school. I told him to put an end to this bullshit, but he never got a chance to share my message, as he was still unable to speak.

So, I had to take the rest in my own hands.

I shredded the tires of the cars that belonged to the second and third guys, and they were far more concerned with getting new ones than getting to Rachel. The fourth guy cancelled his date hours before, and I was happy that tonight was the last guy in the group, and the last time I had to do this.

I suddenly spotted Taylor walking into Waterstones and got out of my car. I walked inside the café and followed him into the restroom. As he was approaching the stalls, I tapped him on the shoulder.

"Um, yeah?" he asked.

"Are you here for a date with Rachel Dawson?" I asked.

"Yeah." He smiled. "Why?"

I looked him over, realizing that he was too big of a match for me to take by myself, and I knew the only way out of this was to talk shit.

"Well, you should know that um—" I held back a sigh. "Sex with her isn't worth your time."

"Who said anything about sex with her?"

I gave him a blank stare, and he laughed.

"Okay, okay, Ethan." He held up his hands. "Why isn't she worth my time?"

"Because one, rumor has it that she's been with half the football team at Central High. Two, a few of those guys got crabs within days of me dropping her off at their place and they texted me about it. Three, she threatened to lie on the last guy she willingly slept with the other day when he wouldn't buy her dinner after sex, so I just don't want you or anyone at our school to get caught up in any of her games."

"Whoa...I completely misread her." He let out a breath and shook his head. "Thanks, Ethan. You would know since you live next door to her, huh? I appreciate the heads-up. You know, I was wondering why none of my friends had—" He cleared his throat. "Never-mind. I appreciate it."

He left the restroom, and I leaned against a stall door—grateful that this was finally over.

The door to the stall next to me opened and Rachel stepped out.

Dressed in jeans and an oversized tank top, she stepped in front of me and shook her head. “The um...” She paused, her face red and tearstained. “The women’s restroom had a super long line and I couldn’t wait, so I figured I’d come here. I’m not sure whether I should be happy or upset that I did.”

I sighed. “Rachel—”

“*You’re* the reason why all my dates haven’t shown up?” She looked at me. “Like, that’s why you’ve insisted on getting their names and the restaurants we’re supposed to go to? All of that so you can prevent them from talking to me?”

“Something like that...”

“Why would you do this to me?” She cried, wiping tears from her eyes. “Like, how could you say all those things about me? Those *lies*?”

“It’s not what you think.”

“It’s *exactly* what I think.” She pushed me. “You really do get joy out of making me miserable. I thought we had a truce for the rest of this year?”

“Rachel...” I realized that she probably should know about the bet. “*Listen*. There’s a perfectly good reason for this, I didn’t want you to get hurt so—”

“Fuck you, Ethan.” She shoved me again. “You know what? Now you can live up to your whole ‘Forget You’ bullshit because I can guarantee you that today is the last day I will ever talk to you. I don’t care if we go to the same college either. I won’t say shit else to you.”

“I just did you a huge favor.” My blood began to boil. “Like you don’t even know how grateful you should be.”

“The only thing I know is that you’re an asshole and you’ve done nothing but try to hurt me since the day we met. As a matter of fact—”

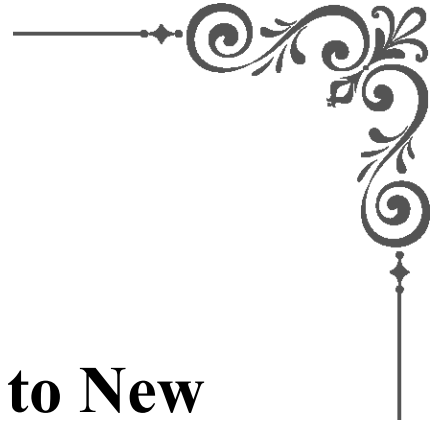
“If today is the last day you’re going to talk to me, can you start that shit now?” I interrupted her, glaring. “I don’t see a point in waiting.”

“I need to say my final words first.”

“You really don’t.”

She sucked in a breath and spoke slowly, enunciating every syllable. “I hate you, Ethan Wyatt. I fucking hate you and I have since we had the misfortune of meeting. And I swear on my life that this is the last day we’ll ever speak.”

“I’m fucking counting on it.”



## Track 26. Welcome to New York (3:04)

*Ethan*



**ME:** Can we talk? I want to make sure we're on good terms before my program starts.

**Me:** Rachel, please. I think we both said things we didn't mean.

**Me:** Can you at least text me back so I can know that you've read my messages?



I REFRESHED MY INBOX for the umpteenth time, hoping for an answer from Rachel, but there was nothing. Ever since she left me at Gayle's that night, she'd kept the door to her room shut, and ignored all my messages. The few times that we crossed paths in the kitchen, she barely looked at me, and when I tried to join her in the hot tub, she immediately stepped out and went to her room.

"Mr. Wyatt?" The tour guide's voice made me look up from my phone.

"Yes?"

"We're approaching Times Square, so you may want to snap a few pictures." He smiled from the front seat of the executive car. "This is probably the only time you'll be able to appreciate it before you start the program. You'll be far too busy with work then. Trust me."

I sighed and held up my phone, snapping multiple pictures of the flashy, glittering billboards. I sent them all to Rachel, hoping this would get her

attention, but it didn't.

“Our next stop on our private pre-campus tour is going to be Wall Street,” the tour guide said. “We’ll see plenty of amazing things along the way, but you’ll get to see why people who come here never want to leave.”

*I wanted to leave as soon as I landed...*



## Track 27. All You Had To Do Was Stay (4:10)

*Ethan*



*One week later...*

THE MOMENT I RETURNED from New York, I drove to Super Suds to see if Rachel was spending the night there. When I didn't see her, I headed home and poured two glasses of her favorite wine.

Carrying them to her bedroom, I knocked on her door. "Rachel, I'm back from New York. Can we please talk?"

She didn't answer.

"Rachel, can you please open your door so I can apologize for everything I said?"

I waited five minutes. "Okay, I'm coming in..."

I twisted the doorknob and pushed the door open. I dropped the wine glasses to the floor as I realized that all of her things were gone. Everything looked exactly how it did before she moved in and she'd left a single pink post-it on her bed.



*Forget You, Ethan.  
(For Real This Time, Forever This Time),  
Rachel*



## At Sea: First Week Gone

*Rachel*



DEAR PENELOPE,

Hey! I'm hoping we can be pen pals while I'm away this time instead of Ethan since we broke up.... (I'll try to keep my letters shorter than usual so you (and Greg ☺ ) won't be overwhelmed by my long-winded-ness.)

They've remodeled the ship so it looks far more modern, and I think they must've gotten a few complaints about only having one coffee shop onboard because we now have three.

To my surprise, I've hung out with the same group of girls every night for the past week, and I enjoy their company. A few guys have hit on me, but I don't think I'm ready to date just yet. (I don't think I'll be ready for a long time after Ethan...Do you think I was right to leave and be done with him?)

Write back and tell me what's going on back at SBU soon.

With love & sails,

Rachel



## At Sea: Three Weeks Gone

*Rachel*



DEAR PENELOPE,

Hey there, again! I'm sure you're still working on your first letter, but I wanted to let you know that today the ship sailed through waters that were full of dolphins. (You told me you loved dolphins, right?) I printed a few pictures from my camera and am including them in this letter.

Even if you just send a postcard, write back and tell me about what's going on back at SBU soon.

With love & sails,  
Rachel



DEAR PENELOPE,

(Had to write you two letters in the same week—I won't mind getting two back from you in return ☺ )

OMG! This is the first time, in a long time, that I can honestly say that I'm enjoying my time being on Semester at Sea! Perhaps I was sailing with all the wrong people before, but now I'm finally making friends and having the time of my life. (Or wait...maybe it's because everyone is a senior and they're allowing us to get more than a couple of drinks every night at the bar?)

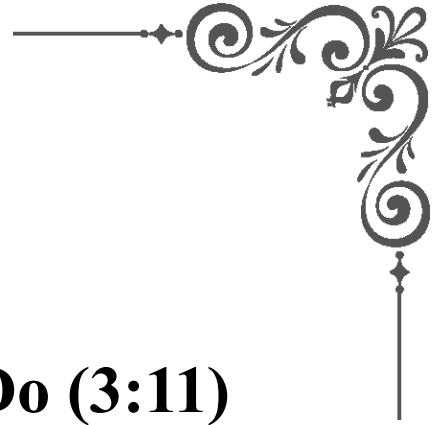
With love & sails (& please write back),  
Rachel





## **At Sea: Six Weeks Gone**

DEAR PENELOPE,  
Please write me back...  
Rachel



## Track 28. I Almost Do (3:11)

*Rachel*  
*Eight weeks aboard the ship...*



I SEALED ANOTHER LETTER for Penelope, vowing not to send another unless she finally sent me one in return. Even though I'd embellished a bit of the fun I was having, this was my best experience on the ship so far, and I wanted to tell someone—*anyone* about it.

Just not Ethan.

I'd gotten so desperate for correspondence that I'd pulled out an old "Low Clearance Prisoners Who Want Pen Pals" list and considered several new writing relationships. I couldn't bring myself to go through with it, though. Not yet, anyway.

Carrying Penelope's letter to the mailroom, I slid it into the outgoing box. I checked my personal mail box and saw a new "Hope you're sailing well!" postcard from my Dad and forty-four unopened letters from Ethan.

*He's sent five new ones since my last port...*

Too hurt to open them, I left them there and only took out my Dad's postcard.

"Miss Dawson?" The mailroom attendant called my name, making me spin around.

"Yes?"

"A package was sent to you at the last port from your father," she said, setting a pink box on the counter. "Want to sign for it and take it to your room, or do you want to save it until the next port?"

“Now would be perfect.” I smiled and signed the receiving papers, rushing back to my room to open it. My father had just sent me a care package full of sweets, beach pictures, and much-needed toiletries, so I wasn’t sure what else he would send so soon.

*He usually does one package every two months...*

Tearing open the box, I smiled at the pink envelope that was on top and addressed to me in typed blue print.

My smile faded as I noticed that the letter inside was written in a curvy handwriting I knew all too well.

Despite my pain, butterflies fluttered in my stomach, and before I could come to my senses and toss it away, I was reading the words.



DEAR RACHEL,

*I can’t believe that I have to send a package under your dad’s name to get you to open it. (I know you opened this.) I’ve sent you numerous letters with no response, and I can’t take it anymore.*

*How are you? Did they make any updates to the ship? What about the café? Is there still only one place to get coffee, or did they at least add another coffee station somewhere?*

*How about your classes? Are any of them more fun this time around?*

*I’m including a second letter about what’s going on with me in this box (A letter I’m sure you’ll put off reading for a while, but it’s there...), and I really wish you would write me back soon.*

*(I’ll Never) Forget You,*

*Ethan*

*PS—Just in case you’re itching to write someone, don’t use your list of low clearance prisoners. On the back of this letter, you’ll find a list of other artists in New York who literally thrive off receiving and writing letters.*

*PSS—I miss you*



I REREAD HIS WORDS and wiped away a few tears. Setting aside the envelope, I pulled all the white tissue paper out of the box and saw the other personal letter he’d written, along with a post-it note.

*Because I’m sure you need some new ones...*

I lifted the note and saw three new sets of romance stories from my favorite authors. Wiping away more tears, I selected the one I wanted to read most and crawled into bed with it.

When I flipped the cover open, there was one last note in Ethan's handwriting.

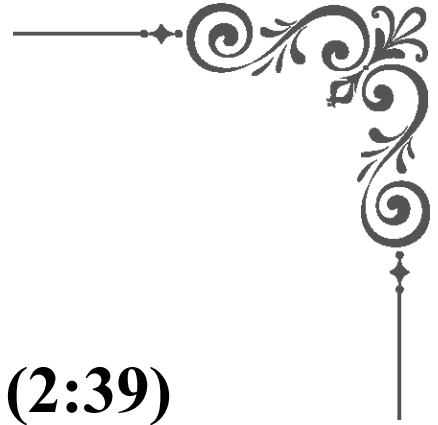


*If you picked this book to read first, I think it's fair to say that I do know you very well, Rachel. I also think it's fair to say that we both said things we didn't mean the last time we were together, but that situation was 100% my fault.*

*I should've told you about New York and I shouldn't have made fun of you for being the hopeless romantic that you are...It's part of the reason why I love you so damn much. (Why I didn't know that all these years before, I'll never know, but I do now...)*

*I really would love if you could write me back whenever you finish reading it...*

*Love,  
Ethan*



## Track 29. Breathe (2:39)

*Ethan*



IT ONLY TOOK ME EIGHT weeks to realize that I'd made the biggest mistake of my life. (Only one if I honestly counted the seven weeks of denial.)

I hated my classes in New York, despised my classmates and their cutthroat competitive ways, and I missed the hell out of Rachel. She'd been beyond right about this program, and even though I was doing the required work, I spent most of my time working on my novel.

Not a single purple envelope graced my mailbox in weeks, and for the first time in my life, I was realizing what it was like to truly miss someone.

Before, when we were apart, I never minded any of the times when it took her too long to answer, never cared when it took me longer than it should've. But after finally realizing how much she meant to me, I was going insane not hearing from her.

I checked her port schedule for the umpteenth time, knowing that she'd received all my letters and my care package. Out of desperation, I sent an email to her alternate email address that I hoped she would check when they stopped again.

Groaning, I clicked through another page of lecture notes, trying my best to focus on something other than the growing ache in my chest. Knowing just how long Rachel was capable of holding a grudge, it would be next Christmas before she finally caved and sent me a holiday postcard.

*Fuck...*

My Dad's name crossed my screen via Skype, and since I'd ignored ten of his recent calls, I decided to finally give him five minutes.

"Yes?" I answered, waiting for his face to appear on my screen. "If you're calling about the Harrison numbers, I emailed them to your personal address since the file was flagged at your work email."

"That's not why I'm calling," he said, his voice soft.

I brightened my screen a bit, unsure of what to make of his expression. His face was slightly pale, and he looked far more vulnerable than I'd ever seen him.

"Did something happen to Mom?" I asked.

"No." He smiled. "Although she did want me to let you know that she's alive and well. She would also appreciate a phone call directly from you from time to time, instead of pages of text messages."

"Noted."

He cleared his throat. "I was doing some cleaning in the attic today," he said, holding up a sheet of paper. "And I came across this."

I squinted at the sheet and made out the words *I Hate My Next-Door Neighbor*. "You found my old essay?"

"I found a ton of them," he said. "And then I went to your room and found your um—your box of all the essays you've submitted for publications and copies of stuff you sent for your mom to read and I um..." He paused. "I'm sorry."

"For going through my shit?"

"No." He smiled and wiped his eyes. "Anything under *my* roof is my shit. I'm sorry that I pushed you into majoring in Business."

"It wasn't all you. I'm good at it."

"But you're *great* at writing," he said, his expression wistful. "I'm sure I'll always wonder what *could've been* down the road if you took over my business one day, but that's not your burden to bear anymore."

"I was following up until that last sentence, Dad. What are you trying to say?"

"You're making the biggest mistake of your life by being in business school right now," he said. "You don't belong there at all."

"You mean you want me to pursue the pansy-ass penmanship shit?" I smiled.

"Yes." He laughed. "I think your true passion is in the pansy-ass shit, and I don't want you to regret not taking a chance on your real dreams like I

did...”

I decided not to tell him that I’d already decided to do that, that I’d drafted one hell of a withdrawal letter from this terrible-ass program weeks ago. “Good to finally get your approval on something for a change.”

“Don’t get used to it.” He shook his head, still laughing. “Oh! By the way, I can’t believe that even after all these years, and you telling me that you and Rachel Dawson were finally on good terms, that you both still resort to mailing petty ass letters when you’re upset. I owe your mom five hundred bucks because you’re both full-grown adults who haven’t learned how to deal with your differences.”

“What are you talking about?” I sat up a bit straighter. “Rachel sent me a letter?”

“Yeah.” He flipped through a few papers. “A postcard actually. Want me to read it to you?”

“Please.” I motioned for him to show it to me as well.



*Dear Ethan,*

*I'm sending this letter to your home address because I refuse to send anything to you in New York. (& also because I doubt Greg will forward this to you anytime soon)*

*You don't belong in business school. You know it, I know it, anyone who knows anything about you knows it.*

*Although I appreciate the well-wishes you've sent me, I will not give you the same.*

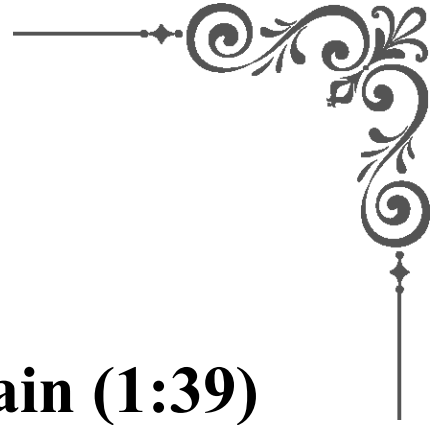
*I hope you're absolutely miserable in business school, and I won't be writing you again until next Christmas, even though I won't be on this boat.*

*How does that fill?*

*Forget You,*

*Rachel*

*PS—I realized that I used the wrong “feel” hours after I wrote this, but I can't afford to let a postcard go to waste. THEIR.*



## Track 29A. Begin Again (1:39)

*Ethan*



LATER THAT DAY, I SAT across from my academic advisor and waited for him to finish reading my withdrawal letter.

Shaking his head, he took off his reading glasses and sighed. “Mr. Wyatt, please know that Hudson University won’t take too kindly to you leaving the program within the first quarter,” he said. “Our team worked really hard to make a spot for you in the accelerated program, and an early departure might make it harder for us to consider you again someday.”

“I doubt I’ll be back someday,” I said. “Can I sign the official withdrawal form, please?”

“If you insist.” He handed it to me, and I signed my name on the dotted line in seconds.

“Thank you.” I stood to my feet and headed to the door.

“Mr. Wyatt, is there another program you’re chasing?” he asked. “If so, I can talk to the deans about getting you to reconsider and we can add something else.”

“I’m not chasing something else,” I said. “It’s *someone* else.”





## Back Then: 18 1/2 Years Old

*Ethan*



*DEAR ETHAN,*

*I want you to know that I really enjoyed all the time we spent together over the summer. The sex was really hot and amazing—especially when we did it in your car, but I think the two of us can be more than fuck buddies. (You seem like a deep guy who'd be into more, right?) Anyway, since I'm out of state at a different college, I think this is the best way for us to communicate for the time being. I know you're into letter writing, so I hope you'll find the time to write me back and perhaps we can become friends (and hopefully a little more) with time.*

*With Love,*

*Alicia*

*PS—Did I mention that the sex was really hot? We can do it whenever you want on the holiday breaks when I come back into town.*

*PSS—As long as you write me back...*



I ROLLED MY EYES AND crumpled her letter. I was done dealing with anyone from my past, and from what I remembered, our “relationship” hadn’t been much of a relationship at all. We barely talked about anything substantial, and she never wanted to do anything except have sex (I didn’t mind that) and gossip about other girls. The only reason I put up with it was because I didn’t really have anyone else to talk to.

College was officially my fucking reset button. I had no desire to date anyone seriously, and I wasn't interested in staying connected to anyone I'd met over the summer. The only people in my life were my newest roommate (who had a crazy girlfriend who screamed all the time) and my parents.

Tossing the rest of my mail onto my desk, I rushed across campus to the business department for the first day of class.

"Nice of you to join us on your own time, Mr. Wyatt," the department head said. "I guess since you're a SBU Scholar, I'll look past the fact that you're thirty minutes late."

Laughter filled the room.

I looked at my watch and realized I'd never set it to the right time. "My apologies."

"No worries," he said, still smiling. "I have a feeling that this is going to be a very interesting year for you. Seeing as though you already feel like you live in this building and all."

"Excuse me, sir?"

He picked up a purple envelope and handed it to me. "Be sure to tell your friends that your mail should go to your *dorm room*, not your major's department." He looked away from me. "Now, back to what I was saying about the intensity of this program, ladies and gentlemen. If you think the next four years are going to be easy, you have another think coming."

I tuned him out as I read the return address on the envelope.

Rachel Dawson  
Semester @ Sea—The Eurodam V.S.  
Wing B. Room 221.

*Ugh.*

I hadn't heard from Rachel since the day we argued in the bathroom. She'd permanently shut her window and covered it with newspaper, and I'd done the same to mine.

Despite the fact that we'd always run into each other every day of our lives, we'd somehow managed to avoid each other right after we graduated.

I debated burning her envelope the second I returned to my room, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I left it unopened on my desk for an entire week before curiosity finally got the best of me.



DEAR ETHAN,

I'm writing you this letter because I hope you're miserable in your major. (I still don't understand why you're majoring in business instead of writing, but I don't care enough to ask you why.)

I know you're wondering how I was allowed to do Semester at Sea as a freshman, so: I was able to talk to the dean about studying abroad for my first year of school and they agreed to let me as long as I take my seminar in art classes and keep a 3.5 GPA. (Who's smarter than who, now?)

:::Truce moment:::

Okay, in all seriousness, this ship is not what I thought it would be. I've been onboard for two weeks and in that time I've gotten seasick, homesick, and motion-sick. I'm the only freshman here, and I didn't realize that most of the people are juniors and seniors, and that most of them have already been friends for years and are taking this trip together as some sort of last hurrah before they graduate.

Our first stop will be next week in London, and I feel like I should be a lot more excited for that than I am, but maybe it'll come with time. (If I see any of those writing pens that look similar to the ones I used to burn when we were younger, I'll consider getting them for you. Maybe. It depends...) After London, we're sailing around the coast of Europe, and then we'll be at sea until we arrive in Australia.

I signed up for three years, but I plan to reapply for Semester at Sea for my senior year as well, unless they tell me that I can't do it anymore...

Anyway...I hope you're doing well (But not too well) and I hope I wrote down your address correctly and you get this before the semester starts.

I know you hate me (and I definitely hate you), but if you ever find the time, would you mind writing me back?

Forget You (In Advance),  
Rachel

PS—Could you like, once and for all admit that you were an ass to me from the moment we met? I feel like I might hate you slightly less if you finally admitted it...

PSS—I won't really hate you slightly less, but it would be nice if you finally told the truth about that.



I REREAD HER LETTER a couple times and sat down at my desk to pen a response. I sent it via express mail in the morning, and a week later, she sent me another purple envelope.

Before I knew it, not a month went by without her signature purple envelopes arriving in my mailbox, and after a while I looked forward to hearing about her travels and her troubles. The letters were short at first—a half a page here, a full page there, but after the first semester, our letters were always at least five pages each.

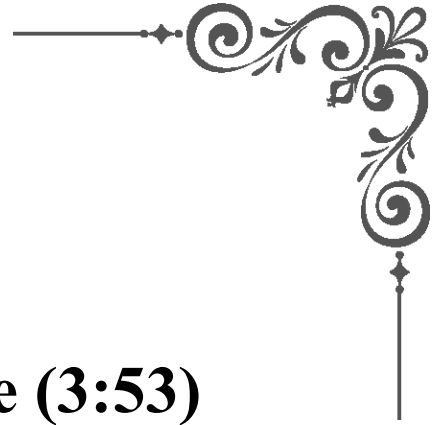
I told her everything about my personal life, and she told me everything in return. I stopped correcting her spelling and she stopped ending her PS notes with insulting questions.

Every now and then, I'd date someone new who would question me about the purple envelopes that came like clockwork in the mail, but I vowed to never explain myself until our relationship lasted longer than me and Rachel's letters did.

Sometimes she'd take too long to write back, so she'd call me at three o'clock in the morning on her phone day—Sunday, to give me her life updates. (We agreed to always act like these phone calls never happened) And sometimes, instead of saying, "I know you're still working on your next letter, Rachel," and hanging up in her face, I talked to her until sunrise.

Sometimes *I* took too long to write back, so I'd send small packages with postcards and chocolate—telling her I was studying for an exam, but my letter was on the way. (Sometimes she'd write back, "Keep your next letter. Send more chocolate!")

Even after all the letters, I still couldn't bring myself to call her a friend. She was still an enemy. I was just keeping her close in a completely different way now.



## Track 30. This Love (3:53)

*Rachel*



I SAT ON THE TOP DECK of the Eurodam at dawn, looking out at the port of Sitka, Alaska—the very city I’d lived in before my family moved to the suburbs of Salt Beach. Since our scheduled trip to Moscow was cancelled, the program was letting us stay here for two weeks, but I had yet to get off the ship.

My father had written me and told me that he (and Stella) received the notification about Alaska, and were staying at a bed and breakfast in town “desperately hoping to speak to me *together*,” but I had yet to respond.

*I’m never responding to that one...*

I held up my mother’s sealed letter and decided it was finally time to open it, since for the first time since she passed away, I officially had no one else I could talk to.



*DEAR RACHEL,*

I’m writing your letter FIRST because I have the most to say to you and I don’t want to leave out anything. (I know you’re having a hard time with me being sick, but I promise that I’ve done everything in my power to make sure that you’ll be fully taken care of emotionally when I’m gone.)

I’m including a much longer, ten-page letter behind this one, but for now, I want to tell you three main things.

First, you're beautiful, and despite how those stuck-up girls on your block used to treat you, I guarantee that most of it was out of jealousy. (I'm not just saying that to be saying that either)

Second, I've told your father not to mourn my passing for more than a year. I know him down to his marrow, and if he mourns for longer than that, he'll lose you. I've given him a list of women (women I know) should he choose to follow my words and date, and I'll be up high cheering him on.

Third, I want you to travel. A LOT. I want you to see every corner of the world as soon as you can. I know I've said the words, "Make sure you study abroad in college" countless times, but I really want you to do that. It'll help you discover some things about yourself, and it'll expand your perspective of the world.

And later in life—*much later*, if you're still single, do me one huge favor: If Ethan Wyatt (Yes, *that* Ethan Wyatt) is still single, go out for coffee with him a few times.

You're going to roll your eyes, I'm sure, but I think the two of you would make the best of friends, or even a great couple one day. The moment you pushed him down those stairs (I've always known that he didn't "trip over his shoelaces" like you claimed) and the moment you two started sending those very first hate notes to each other, I knew there was something there.

I'm laughing right now because I've never seen two people so obsessed with what their "enemy" was doing. I never told you this, but during the summer, when you'd go off to art camps for a week or two at a time, Ethan would always come over and ask when you were coming back. He would (of course) talk me into making him hot chocolate since you weren't there, but he admitted that he had way more fun with his "number one enemy" than any of his friends.

Anyway, go out with him for coffee sometime when you're in college so I can look down and see if I was right.

Don't forget to read my longer letter behind this one with more specific advice about life, but feel free to keep this one in your wallet. ☺

I love you forever and I'll be with you always.

Love You,

Mom



I READ HER WORDS AND the longer letter behind them ten more times, wiping away tears with each read. I folded the letter and made a copy in the study room, then I tucked it into my jeans and headed down to Deck Three. I scanned my ID at the port and rented a bike—pedaling all the way to where my dad said he would be eating breakfast every morning.

Dropping my bike on the sidewalk right outside, I walked into the restaurant and spotted him sitting at a table with Stella. I rushed over to them—interrupting his words, and then I cried. “I’m so sorry,” I said. “To both of you...I’m so sorry.”

He stood up and pulled me close, hugging me in a way I hadn’t felt since my sophomore year of high school. By the time he let me go, the sun had come all the way up, and Stella was asking a waiter to set a new place at the table.

“I’ll um...” She looked between us. “I’ll let you two be alone. Rachel, it’s very nice seeing you here.”

“Please stay,” I said, hugging her. “Please.”

“Okay.” She returned my hug, and then she sat across from me.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, and then I cleared my throat. “Did my mom write you two long letters, too?”

They nodded.

“She told you that you should date each other?”

“She did,” my dad said. “I told her she was out of her goddamn mind once I read it, and she must have known that would be my reaction. Days before she died, she had someone mail me another letter and it was worded in a different way. Your mother was very insightful, Rachel. She could read people like no one else I’d ever met.”

“I cursed at her when she gave me my letter.” Stella laughed. “I was so mad at her for making plans for after she’d be gone, but as you know, that’s just how she was. She wanted things to be a certain way even if she wouldn’t be there.” She paused. “She didn’t tell you about us in her letters?”

“Not specifically.” I shook my head. “But I can see what she meant now. She mentioned Ethan in mine.”

“Oh?” They said in unison.

“Yes. Oh.” I looked between them.

“What did she say?” My dad asked.

“That she knew he didn’t trip down our steps when we first met.”

“Of course, she knew that.” My dad smiled. “That’s all?”

“No, she said she thought we would be good together later in life.”

“We’ve always thought that,” my dad said. “We’d watch you two fight all day, every day, and then the next day you’d still hang out together in ‘hatred’ as you two claimed. You’re friends now, correct?”

“We tried to be.”

Stella raised her eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’ll go to the beverage station and grab us some tea.” She stood up, and for a few seconds, I swore that my mother was sitting right next to me. Like she was telling me to say what I would’ve said if she was living right now.

“Dad,” I said. “It’s a girl thing. Can I talk to Stella alone?”

“Only if you’ll promise you’ll join us here again for dinner tonight.”

“Promise.”

He kissed my cheek and stood to his feet, walking outside.

When Stella returned, she motioned for me to follow her into a private lounge area, and the second she shut the door, I couldn’t hold it in anymore.

“I still hate him.” I cried. “I really fucking hate him.”

“*Rachel...*”

“I thought our relationship meant something, that if I was willing to stay, he would be willing to stay, too.” Tears fell down my face. “He’s the main reason why I’m on that damn ship again...He insisted on being my ‘first real boyfriend,’ so I thought...I just thought he, I could’ve sworn we —”

“Calm down, Rachel.” She set the tea down and pulled me into a hug. “Calm down.”

“He said he loved me.” I couldn’t stop talking. “Like, he said it in the mornings in his sleep, and I actually believed that shit.”

She hugged me harder.

“He’s amazing at words, and I want to believe them, but at the end of the day, his actions show that this was a fling and all we had was sex. It was *really good* sex, but if we were built on more, he wouldn’t have been so anxious to leave and go to New York for a program I know he doesn’t really want to be in. He just wanted to get away from me and my ‘emotions’ and fuck other people. I’m so stupid...”

“Shhh.” She rubbed my back, waiting until I’d vomited all the words before making me sit up again. “Do you honestly think that Ethan doesn’t



love you, Rachel?”

*No...* “I have no reason not to believe otherwise,” I said. “I haven’t talked to him in a long time.”

“Are you opening his letters?”

“No, but—” I paused. “How do you know about his letters?”

She smiled. “Trust me, I’m sure him calling us to ask if we’ve heard from you is his last resort, but if the way he’s sounded over the phone is any indication, I think he’s just as hurt as you.”

“Well, good.” I wiped my eyes.

“You don’t mean that.” She let out a light laugh. “And you know it.”

“I just wish we’d never crossed the line. I wish we’d stayed enemies.”

“Rachel Dawson,” she said, still laughing and handing me a Kleenex. “If you were really enemies, you would’ve never stayed in contact as long as you have, let alone lived together.”

“We only stayed in contact with each other because no one else ever wrote me back.”

“You sure about that?” She smiled. “Something tells me he would’ve reached out to you eventually.”

“I doubt it.” I shrugged. “He didn’t even know I was doing Semester at Sea until I wrote to him.”

She smiled. “Rachel, Ethan came by two weeks before his freshman year started and asked why he hadn’t seen you at any campus events. When we told him that you were doing Semester at Sea, he demanded that we give him a copy of your port schedule and directions on how to reach you. You just happened to write him first...”



## Track 31. How You Get The Girl (2:46)

*Rachel*



I WAVED AT MY DAD AND Stella as their cab headed for the airport several days later. When I couldn't see them anymore, I walked to the gift shop that was closest to the ship, ready to collect final souvenirs before boarding again.

Tossing a new set of postcards into my basket, I walked over to the wall of monogrammed pens and searched for Ethan's name. When I found it, I picked up a matching hoodie and hat as well.

Since I had phone service here, I was planning to use my final half hour to respond to some of the text messages he'd sent.

*Or maybe I should call...Maybe I should call from the ship so we can talk longer than thirty minutes.*

Debating, I headed for the checkout line and set my stuff on the counter.

"So, you really weren't going to write me back?" A familiar deep voice said from behind. "You weren't going to contact me at all?"

*What?* I turned around and found myself face to face with Ethan. His sexy blue eyes gleamed under the lights, and his lips curved up into a smile.

My heart damn near jumped out of my chest as he looked me up and down.

"I'm happy that you you're here and not in Moscow," he said, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "Otherwise, I would've had to wait to see you in China next month."

“You would’ve flown there just to see me?”

“In a heartbeat.”

We stared at each other, and all the words I thought I wanted to say suddenly left my brain.

“Miss?” The cashier called. “Miss, do you want me to ring up your things?”

“She does,” Ethan said, stepping past me and handing her his credit card.

We said nothing as she took her time scanning and bagging my souvenirs, and when she was finished, Ethan handed me the bag and slipped his arm around my waist—walking me outside.

He led me over to a bench, but he didn’t sit down. He just stared at me.

Not wanting to waste any of my remaining minutes, I let out a breath. “I was going to write you back. I just finished writing five letters this morning, and I was about to call or text you. I was still trying to see which one made more sense, so it wasn’t like—”

“I fucking love you, Rachel.” He interrupted my spiel. “I love you.”

My heart sped up and he pressed his finger against my lips.

“You heard me,” he said, smiling. “You don’t have to ask me what I just said, but because I know you’ll still need to hear it again...” He kissed my forehead. “I love you, Rachel Dawson, and I ‘ve loved you since I was seven and a half years old.”

My eyes widened.

He ran his fingers through my hair. “I’m sorry for not thinking about you when I signed off to go to New York for a program I didn’t even want to go to. That was beyond selfish, and you were right about me doing it for someone else’s approval.”

“Did you just say that you’ve loved me since we were seven and half years old?”

“Yes.” He pulled me close and kissed me until I couldn’t breathe. “Let me finish...” He waited until I’d caught my breath, then he rubbed his hands against my back. “I’m sorry for not telling you about New York first, for not being willing to stay like you were.” He paused. “And I know you’re about to get back on your ship, but I want you to know that I’ll willing to go wherever you go from here on out to show you how much you’ve always meant to me. And as much as I enjoy writing you letters, I’d much rather see you in person every day.”

“I’ll be done in a few months,” I said, smiling as he kissed me again. “And I can give you my updated port schedule.” I opened my purse and pulled out a copy of the new port stops.

As he took it from my hands, a sound I knew all too well interrupted our moment.

The ten bells at the top of the Eurodam rang out loud and clear, signaling that the ship was about to prepare to leave the port in exactly ten minutes.

As if Ethan knew what the sound meant as well, he pulled me into his arms and kissed me like this was the last time, as if we were never going to see each other again, and he wanted to cement this moment into my memory.

Pulling away from me, he kissed my forehead and sighed. “I really would prefer if we saw each other in person every day.”

“Me, too.” I hugged him. “I’ll call you the second the phone room opens today, and I’ll send out those five letters, too.”

Seven bells rang.

He smiled and stepped back. “I’ll see you at your next port.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “Really.”

Unable to resist, I kissed his lips one more time before running toward the ship—looking over my shoulder every few seconds until I couldn’t see him through the crowd anymore. When I made it aboard, I rushed to my room to search for my telephone access card.

As I was rummaging through my top drawer, the last bell rang and a knock came to my door.

“I’ll be at the roll call in once second!” I said, opening another drawer.

The knock came louder and I held back a groan as I walked over to the door.

“I said I’d be there in once second, I was just—” I gasped at the sight of Ethan in my doorway, blinking a few times to make sure this was real.

“Like I was saying,” he said, smirking. “I really would prefer if we saw each other every day, and I will be seeing you at every port from now on.”

“You’re completing your final semester at sea?”

“Hell no.” He smiled. “I already graduated, remember?” He handed me a thick binder. “I took my girlfriend’s advice and looked up some Creative Writing programs. Turns out, there’s one that allows you to finish writing a

novel at sea, as long as I teach two classes a week. I've heard life on this ship is fucking miserable if you're alone, so I'm hoping that if the love of my life is aboard, that won't be true."

I felt tears falling down my face. "You have your own room?"

"No." He kissed me. "I have a *suite*." He looked behind me. "And from the looks of the size of your room, that's where we're going to be spending most of our time..."

I blushed, unable to do anything but stare at him.

"You may want to start making your way toward roll call," he said, stepping forward and caressing my back. "I've heard that the new teacher who is in charge of it wants to get it over with as soon as possible so he can get reacquainted with someone in his suite."

"Are you talking about kissing?"

"I'm talking about fucking." He laughed. "Well 'making love' as you prefer to say and read about."

"I like reading about both."

"Hmmm." He kissed my forehead. "Well, seeing as though my current novel is a romance that has both, I'd appreciate your opinion."

He pointed to the binder he'd given me, and I raised my eyebrow.

"You're going to write a romance?" I flipped the binder over and saw the words, *based on a true story*. "If you're putting a false sticker on your books to trick women like me into thinking this shit is based on a true story, I swear—"

"It is."

"You've only been in one relationship where you've said the words, I love you, Ethan."

"I'm aware of that, Rachel."

"Okay..." I tapped my lip, not sure whether he was serious about writing a romance or not. "What type of trope is it?"

"Enemies to lovers. Or, more like friends to lovers who think they're enemies. It's a pretty interesting story for you, I think."

"Can't wait to read it." I smiled. "Do you have a working title?"

"I do." His lips briefly met mine and he pulled me into the hallway, toward the room for roll call. "I think you'll love that part most of all."

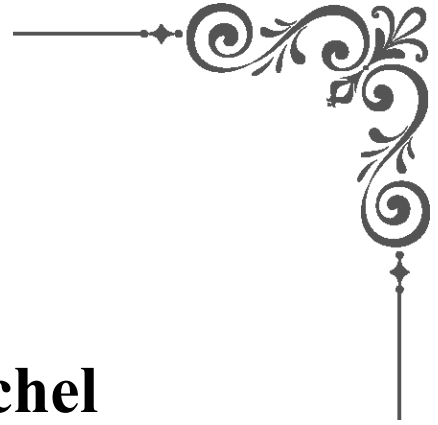
"Would you like to tell me what it is?"

He didn't have to answer. When I opened the binder, I saw it printed on the first page of the binder in huge bold print.



*Forget You, Rachel*

**\*\*The End\*\***



## Forget You, Rachel

BE SURE TO PICK UP Forget, You Rachel! The (FREE) Extended Epilogue to Forget You, Ethan! (Also, if you've read *Sincerely, Carter*, don't forget that *Sincerely, Arizona* is available as well!)





ALSO BY WHITNEY G.:



***SERIES & STANDALONES:***



**STEAMY COFFEE READS Collection**

*Naughty Boss*

*Dirty Doctor*

*Cocky Client*

*Filthy Lawyer*



**REASONABLE DOUBT SERIES**

*Reasonable Doubt #1*

*Reasonable Doubt #2*

*Reasonable Doubt #3*



**FALLING FOR MR. STATHAM Series**

*Resisting the Boss*

*Loving the Boss*



**THE ONE WEEK SERIES**

*On a Tuesday*

*On a Wednesday*

*On a Thursday*

*On a Friday*

*On a Saturday*

*On a Sunday*

*On a Monday*

*Sincerely, Carter*

*Forget You, Ethan*

*Turbulence*

*Over Us, Over You*

*Two Weeks' Notice*  
*The Layover*