

EARTH TO MICHELLE

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Earth to Michelle

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This creative piece was written to explore self-discovery in a new age. College has become an experience that more and more people are going through as they attempt to invent or reinvent themselves, and the protagonist of my story struggles with the big questions people face at this stage of life. As she is feeling lost, she sees how her life could have been different, had chance or her choices been different. In one of these lives, she sees what her life could have been like had she been born genetically male. My question was: is biology or societal construct is what creates a person's gender identity. I predicted that there would be a heavy biological influence to gender identity. Another question that is explored is that of sexuality, with the prediction that sexuality would be more fluid for women than men. These questions were researched through analyzing a mixture of gender theory research and biological gender studies. The thesis was upheld. In regards to sexual stimuli, straight women reacted with positivity when shown naked images of their same sex while men were averse to nude images of their same sex. Studies thus far have not pinpointed a chemical in the brain that influences sexuality for women as they have for men, indicating that homosexuality is a trait men are or are not born with while most women have some desire for both sexes. This research bred the decision that, though the

female protagonist will struggle with her sexual, her male counterpart will not do the same. He will be a straight male because that is likely the genetic inclination he would have, as most men are straight. His life will be different, however, due to what he was able to do as a male in American society (football player instead of a dancer) and how he was raised. Finally, no question of gender identity will arise, as it is unlikely that both characters would have been exposed to the prenatal hormones that can cause transgenderism.

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SECTION I

RESEARCH QUESTION/MOTIVATION/ARTIFACT

The motivation of Michelle, the protagonist of the novella I have constructed based on this creative thesis, is to feel a sense of contentment with the life she has created for herself. She is approaching the end of her time in college and must face her future alone. After a breakup she regrets, she struggles to see a clear or bright future for herself after college. As she struggles with questions of identity and her future, she sees in “dreams” what her life could have been had she stayed with her ex, if she had pursued a career in dance with greater fervor, and if she had been born male. The question for her is, where and how can I be happy? As she goes through these lives where she gets to see what would have happened if she had made different choices, she discovers that she does not want to be them. She must confront the difficult fact that she cannot go back in time and alter her life. Michelle lives these other lives through “dreams” in which she is given the opportunity to see the world through their eyes and access their memories. After the final “dream” where she experienced life as her male counterpart, Michael, she must confront her sexual preferences head-on after living as a straight man. This answers the research question by acting out the research. If there were to be a man created with the same genetic makeup as Michelle, he is statistically likely to have the chemicals working in his brain making him be a straight man. She struggles with questions of her sexuality because female sexuality is different than male’s. Neither of the characters will exhibit desire to change their sex, as transgenderism can be identified by chemicals in the brain that are highly unlikely they would exhibit, for it would mean there had been exposure to hormones during pregnancy that if one was subject to, both would have been affected by.

SECTION II

LITERATURE REVIEW/BACKGROUND/HISTORY/SOURCES

The literature that will be analyzed for my novella is a collection of biological and sociological gender studies. I examined these to discover what my female protagonist's male life would be like and how she would react to experiencing the life of her male self through his eyes. It was important to be accurate in my portrayal as this is a topic that can be contentious. I began with theoretical research, looking into the relatively new area of study: Gender Theory.

Around 1950, Simone de Beauvoir birthed a movement as she boldly argued “that women have gender-based behavior thrust upon them by a patriarchy” (Alexander & Young 7). In 1981, Gender Schema Theory came into being through Sandra Bem's book that outlines the ideology that gender studies scholars, feminists, and many others around America understand today. She argues that gender is overwhelmingly determined by the sex-typing and gender stereotypes that society holds (Bem 354-364). Gender Studies researchers uphold the theory anthropologically. For example, seeing different definitions of what is “male” and powerful aversions to those traits in different cultures as examined in Blechner's study showing American males' fear of phallic penetration (265-288). Similarly, theorists in this area argue, “Our sanctions for deviant boys (“sissy,” “gay”) are much stronger than for girls (“tomboy”). This pattern speaks volumes about the overall tendency in our society to prize masculine and devalue feminine activities... Given this reasoning, boys' deviations commit a much bigger mistake than girls'” (Yoder 84).

University Gender Studies students look at “gender and sexuality studies in the fields of literature and language, history, political science, biology, sociology, anthropology, economics,

visual arts, media studies, human development, law, religion, and medicine to analyze gender (Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality, The University of Chicago). Though they may look at biology, Gender Studies is an area of theory without much biological *testing*, so I turned to what science there has been done on the subject to gain knowledge on the validity of the theories. Alexander and Young's book used some well done studies by others as well as their own research and experiments to dismantle the famous words of Simone de Beauvoir, exhibiting that "Test after test has shown that if you put a typical little boy or a typical little girl in a room with a mix of toys... the boys play with the "boy" toys, like cars and trucks, and the girls play with the "girl" toys, like dolls" (21). Gender schema theory tried to counteract this fact, saying, "socializing agents treat girls and boys differently, but also girls and boys can become gender-typed themselves so that they encourage gender-typed treatment" (Yoder 83). Young and Alexander dismantle this argument to its core as they point out "Culturally speaking, monkeys don't have any particular toy prejudice," and, when monkeys were presented with toys, "specifically, plush dolls... as well as a selection of wheeled toys... 73 percent of males preferred trucks and cars and only 9 percent preferred plush toys. High-ranking females showed a pronounced preference for the dolls" (21).

The other biological evidence showed the science of sexual attraction. LeVay exhibits evidence of a gene that influences homosexuality in men and also shows that transgenderism can also be linked to brain chemistry (LeVay 136-139). Finally, research indicates that women "did not show a difference in reported sexual arousal between heterosexual or female homosexual films" and, "women spent more time looking at the female compared to the male actor in photos depicting heterosexual intercourse (Rupp & Wallen).

SECTION III

EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT/VENUE

This novella is meant to show the conflict that Undergraduate students face internally as they leave their college days behind. It can be difficult to get a handle on exactly who you are and what you want to be, and as one leaves the comfort of what they have known for four years, they could find themselves asking questions they never knew they had. In this story, the main character looks at her life and has the opportunity to see what it could have been had she allowed herself to make different choices, or if chance had altered it.

In this time of complex questions of identity, Michelle faces questions of her sexual preferences. I created a character that was a male version of Michelle and had her inhabit this man for a short period of time. Leaving his life, she did not experience struggles with her sexuality because of the research that found there were parts of the brain that had a sense of gender that acted independently of one's genitalia or socialization measures. However, experiencing life through a male lens, she was confronted with the hard truth that she was not as strictly heterosexual as she had thought in her female life. In the end, she had to acknowledge that fact and decide that it was not something she needed to fear. Overall, Michelle's story is one of self-discovery.

To create Michelle's male counterpart, Michael, the differences in one's lives if they had been born and raised male rather than female introduced questions of: how are men and women different? How are they treated differently? Michael was the genetic twin of Michelle with the exception of one chromosome, thus it would be vital to fully comprehend the immense magnitude of the differences that this single chromosome caused in people's lives.

From analyzing studies, I was able to determine what my male counterpart character would look like. Michael was constructed based upon my research findings. He is a straight male. Though in many of the lives she visited she was female, his brain's chemistry was likely to make him straight from birth. The side of Michael that could be attributed to nurture should be noted, as these bring together the gender theory research and the scientific. Though he enjoyed playing football, the values that fathers instill in their sons were impressed into Michael. He became more practical and set on having a good, stable job while Michelle could be more creative and aloof. He was unable to express his creativity outside of the confines of his private notebooks that he feared being discovered as he did not want to be a social deviant.

Leaving Michael's life, there was the important question on how this would make Michelle feel when she returned to her life as a female. My research helped me answer this question. Researchers found a gene that specifically indicates homosexuality in men. There are likely more genes to be found, but this was a huge step in understanding homosexuality in me. In women, however, things are quite different. There is not clear indicator of decided that Michelle would begin to grapple with her sexuality based on the experience. Recognizing that she would openly question her sexual preferences after being Michael, I was pointed into the direction of what the story became. At first, there was no clear plot, but it became self discovery mixed with love story as she accepted the sexual feelings she harbored for her friend.

After her experiences, she must ask herself who she wants to be and allow herself to be become that. She must also recognize that her identity will change based on who she chooses to be and must come to terms with what she chooses. At the end, she acknowledges her ability to change her identity and her ability to question her beliefs.

SECTION IV

REFLECTION

Researching for this project heavily impacted my writing. I found there were significantly higher amounts of theories that had been posited and researched by Gender Studies researchers than those looking into the science of how the brain operates. The major difference was in the Gender Studies analyses, they primarily examined the effect of stimuli on the human brain. However, the scientific studies done in the works of Young, Alexander, and ____ ran through studies with both animals and humans that often went beyond reactions to external stimuli. They went into where in the brain was stimulated by the responses, what hormones were secreted to cause the actions in question, and overall, they did well at explaining on a molecular level why humans behave the way that they do. This gave me an accurate and balanced view of how my character, Michelle, would react to being a male as well as what her male counterpart would be like. With research to back up the actions of my character, I illustrated that she would likely have no crisis of gender identity while she may have a crisis in sexual preferences.

The research also affected the story I told. With the research guiding my creative writing, I was focused as I wrote on building up the stage for my thesis to play out. The story that I had thought I would write ended up being quite different from what I produced, and I believe that the final product is better than the meandering concept that had been in my mind when I began. With the focal point of the novella being questions of gender and attraction, erroneous side plots were erased to make way for the real story I was trying to tell. It gave my writing clear purpose and goals.

My novella adds to the work that had been done in these fields as it makes a complex topic feel personal rather than clinical. It brings together the gender conditioning of society, differences in how one is raised as a daughter/son, and the biological differences in Michelle and her male counterpart to create a woman that must take in these differences and conflate them with her reality. I create a character that experiences her life as it would have been had she been male, thus I constructed the male counterpart to her. All of my research constructed the male Michelle, Michael. The characters actions, memories, and existence all examine the research questions that had been posited.

The novella was written with my peers in mind as the audience. Undergraduates leaving the relative comfort of college and encountering the difficult job market, a new home, and potentially doing so entirely alone. The question of “What company do I fit in well with” goes hand in hand with deeper questions like, “What makes me happy? Where would I be happiest? Who am I?” These answers change multiple times for most people over the course of their four years of higher education. At this point in life, it seems to be the end of changing one’s mind. This tale of self discovery comes as Michelle arrives at this complex crossroads. She recognizes that she must take pride in the choices that she made in the past and attempt to be hopeful about the future after encountering what her life could have been.

My public presentation occurred quite early in my writing process. This had the major benefit of having eyes on my raw work, which allowed me to see how my the work needed to be improved moving forward. More importantly, the story was in development as I came into the presentation, so their comments were easily added in. I took their comments and altered the story to help my audience understand the “dreams” with ease.

However, there were downsides to having exposed my work in its fledgling stages. In some ways, it was not developed enough to withstand criticism of the writing itself because the audience understood it was only a first draft. Additionally, the plot changed through my research and writing process. What people viewed in “Beginnings” was ultimately extremely different from what is in the final product. The baseline concept is the same, and the general plot is the same, but I altered almost every line.

From my experiences, I took away the benefit of having a professor that was willing to assist me in my writing. The feedback was vital to my writing process. Additionally, audiences may help guide your work generally, but when it comes down to the individual words used to express one’s ideas, it is better to work with others more individually.

Overall, I accomplished my goal in writing a novella that explored sexuality through a journey of self discovery. Young and Alexander brought together many scientist’s works to create a picture of love, sex, and attraction that most people dislike and people will deny despite all the research surrounding it. The truth is, all of these feelings are chemicals in the brain that we cannot help from secreting. Powerful biological basis surrounds every desire one has. That is not something to fear, but to embrace. Everyone still gets to choose the life they want to live: how much they will indulge in what they may consider base desires. It is important not to despise those desires, otherwise one despises a part of themselves they cannot control, as was explored here. Acknowledgement and acceptance within oneself is necessary for self love. Do not deny yourself that.

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CREATIVE ARTIFACT

Earth to Michelle

Chapter 1

My fingers traced along the lines of my wooden kitchen table. The lines and swirls and different colors gracefully danced together. Symphonies must've been created about this.

Loudly grumbling, my stomach interrupted all thought. I stifled an eye roll. My stomach had been acting like I was starved for weeks. I would eat more than usual, yet my stomach would protest that it wasn't enough.

I could vaguely hear my friends speaking around me. Sonia jabbering on about her day, with Jenny and Ally listening intently.

Meditatively wandering over the pattern in the wood, I was pulled into a daydream so strong, I was completely transported out of the room. I was in a nice restaurant with my ex-boyfriend John sitting across from me. His brown hair was freshly cut, and he was cleanly shaven, which was so shocking it took my breath away. Though he thought that shaving made him look young, it brought out his high cheekbones and warm brown eyes. He hadn't looked like that since we had started dating.

The daydream was so clear I was experiencing it in real time. I could feel the makeup on my face and see the outline of my mascaraed lashes in my vision. I was smiling and breathing with a freedom I hadn't felt since I had left him. The pain that had sat in my heart since then was gone, and I was smiling.

Michelle, He said. My heart melted. He said my name like he felt lucky to say it.

Michelle? This time, it was his mouth opening and closing, but a different voice. This one was higher pitched and a little frustrated.

Michelle! Shouted Sonia's voice, Did you hear anything I just said?

My head snapped up from staring at the table. My eyes burned like they had been open for a few minutes, so it took me a few seconds of rapidly blinking to regain my composure. Sonia looked pretty pissed off. I tried (and failed) to remember what she had said.

Not knowing what to do or say, I looked for help from Jenny and Ally. Jenny just kept eating her food, not looking at me. She probably wanted to see me get embarrassed and fail. Ally looked at me helplessly, saying sorry with her giant blue eyes. It wasn't that I hadn't heard Sonia, it felt like I hadn't even been in that room. The only way out was to be me: a sarcastic nutball.

Were you talking about the apocalypse? Dying by fire, ice, disease, or White Walkers? I asked, remembering she'd been binging Game of Thrones.

Sonia threw a grape at me, smiling, Oh you've got jokes now? She challenged. Her natural, jet black hair was styled into perfect, tight curls framing her face. The mane highlighted her light brown eyes perfectly.

Fresh out of jokes, I said as I stole her grapes, but I've got ammo.

She squealed and tried to duck below the table. I hit her in the head twice, then she tilted her head up to catch them instead. It became a game, and Jenny and Ally joined in. We formed teams, having contests of most-made shots and then best trick shots.

After Jenny caught behind-the-back throw from Sonia from five feet away, Ally and I admitted defeat.

We need to test them to make sure they're not doping. Ally whispered to me. There's no way they performed that well clean. I giggled.

We went back into the kitchen. There were leftover smiles clinging to our faces like the leftover heat that was barely hanging onto our food.

I quickly got my bowl of pasta (and two energy bars) and started up the stairs, when Jenny asked, How was the interview?

Of course Jenny remembered. Her voice sounded innocently curious, but I saw through that facade. She could tell I didn't want to talk about it and had to bring it up. Her blonde hair braided down her back reflected her personality: fake. Her murky brown and green eyes were like a snake's.

It had been great to have fun for a minute. Now, my ravenous hunger was back in full force. Feeling frustrated and defeated from my long day, I said, It went okay. They were nice, but I don't think they loved me.

They all looked like they understood. We were going through this process together, and all of us had plenty of experience with rejections. The interviews were the worst, though. Rejections often followed, and it hurt way worse after meeting them in person.

I'm pretty tired, guys. I'm going to take my food to go.

I heard your stomach, Sonia said. She gave me a look that could kill. You better eat all of that food.

I promise I will. If you need proof, it'll be fully digested and I'll be there when it comes back out in a couple days, so you can check back with me then. I laughed heartily. Ally and Sonia laughed a bit.

I know you're kidding, but I'll say, for the record, hell no.

Ally interjected, Go get some rest. You must need it with how funny you thought you were just now. She mischievously smiled at me. Jenny laughed at that joke. Of course.

I practically sprinted to my room and ate dinner at my desk. Every morsel of pasta and energy bar was eaten up and my stomach still screamed at me.

It was hard to think. I felt exhausted fighting it, too. I laid down in bed and tried to meditate. Ally had told me it helped her focus and sleep, and if the most put together human being I knew meditated, it was probably a good idea. The discomfort I often felt in my own body might be eased by this, too, I hoped.

Laying down, I thought of what she told me. Notice your breath, and if your attention sways, bring it gently back to your breath.

I felt my chest rising and falling, and paid attention as well as I could until my stomach flipped over in my body. It churned so powerfully I thought I was going to throw up.

Chapter 2

Suddenly, I was on my feet. There was a man in front of me that I had never seen before. Tall, black haired, with a thick mustache and beard. His sweaty hands rested on my shoulders, squeezing me like he was trying to literally hold me together.

Alright Michelle, I know you're nervous, but tell that anxiety to go away! It has no place here. You've been practicing hard for months. Go out there and do what you've been doing every day in rehearsal. You look fantastic, now relax and perform! He gave me a hug and I felt my eyes tear up. Who is this kind soul?

My body relaxed as I let out a deep breath. My lips responded, I'll do my best.

He smiled, spun me around, and released. The lights went down outside, and I moved like I had done these movements a hundred times. I stood in the dark until the orchestra's music swelled. The spotlights lit up my vision, blinding me and heating me up.

Then, I danced. My soul's emotions expelled as movements. Every note that rang throughout the hall was connected with a movement seared into memories I had but weren't my own. They were hers. Tonight, they were mine, too. My body moved powerfully and elegantly. It was a feeling I had been missing that brought me a rare feeling of comfort in my own body.

The music bloomed, became anew. A partner became a part of my dance. He knew me and my motions as well as I knew his. I spun and flipped and clung to him. It felt like it was just the two of us. Really, there were so many others alongside me. My friends-- her friends-- briefly caught my eye moving about all around the stage.

We sped up together, all in unison, preparing for the end. In our hastened pace it felt like we were caught in an emotional battle as we performed more erratically. At the height of what I thought it possible for my body to do (honestly, I never thought my body could do anything that great), I fell.

For one horrific moment, I thought it was an accident. Then he came to me, trying to rouse me, and when I did not get up, he fell beside me. The other dancers fled the stage until our crumpled figures laid alone.

The lights dimmed and the curtain closed. Everyone came back out to meet us. I grabbed the hand of my partner and another friend of mine as the curtains opened back up. There was a big applause from the audience that had been hidden from view shortly before. I felt overwhelmed with the amount of people that had just seen me so vulnerable, yet I was able to bow with everyone else and leave the stage.

Backstage was a whirlwind of people congratulating each other. My chest was still heaving with the effort of bringing in enough air to make up for all the energy I had lost. I wasn't able to talk to anyone for a minute. Without nerves and adrenaline to fuel my body, the stomach pain was back with a vengeance. I felt ravenously hungry, but I didn't look for food. The Michelle that was in control sat and made me take the pain until she could breathe again.

Then, we got up and walked through the crowds of people. I scanned the crowd until I saw my mom. Walking toward her, she spotted me and turned to Ally. They pushed through people until they reached me.

You did fantastic! Ally said, pushing a bouquet into my arms. She had dressed up to come to my performance, and god did she look incredible. It'd been forever since I'd seen her in anything other than casual clothes, and these flattered her figure in a way that was honestly distracting.

You look beautiful. Your performance was incredible, sweetie, my mom said in her thick southern accent.

I was enveloped in a huge bear hug. The kind only my sweet mom could give me. Then, Ally attacked me with a big squeeze hug too. You're crushing me, I managed to choke out. She separated from me, her cheeks red. Thank you guys so much for coming, I said. I was smiling so much it hurt.

Even with all the happiness around me, I couldn't ignore my stomach as it screamed. I wanted to scream too, but I wasn't in control. I couldn't eat even though that was all I wanted to do. I couldn't influence anything.

Then, memories flooded my brain, pulling me out of the conversation with my mom and Ally. I sat talking with the other girls I performed with on a small apartment floor. There were

moments where we talked about deeply emotional life occurrences, but mostly we talked about trashy TV shows. We would have joking competitions comparing worst injuries and show each other our bruises from that day's rehearsals. The memories were mine, but not mine.

I felt a montage of what it was like to become a part of this ballet company. The sore muscles, the aching joints, toenails falling off, all of that became mine. I saw no friend but Ally stick by me from high school as I practiced day in and day out to be the best there was.

Then, I remembered the first time that my stomach screamed at me like it was today. It was accompanied by the memory of overhearing a couple of the dancers saying I didn't have the body for ballet.

Real me knew that memory. I went home afterwards and cried for hours. Then, I asked my mom if we could start a diet together. She asked me why and we had a long talk about what they had said. My mom said we would do the diet together, and she tried, and slightly succeeded, in boosting up my confidence.

This Michelle had had a different reaction. I saw as I went home, opened the fridge with the leftovers that mom would leave there for me, and threw them in the trash can. It was hard with her dance schedule to eat little meals, and sometimes she would forget to eat. Mostly, though, she would opt out. I felt starving because I, as this Michelle, hadn't eaten in over a week and had been exercising like a professional athlete.

I wanted the pain to go away. I wanted to go home.

Refocusing on my breath, my stomach did another big flip and I felt my bed beneath me again. I laid in bed for a minute, feeling overwhelmingly calm. Slowly, I opened my eyes.

Chapter 3

I hesitated before I sat up. I wasn't sure my body would answer my cries to move. Thankfully, when I tried wiggling my fingers, they moved like I wanted them to. I picked up my arm, grabbed my phone, and read the time: 9:00 p.m. No texts. Typical.

Meditating for over an hour would have been impressive if I had done it right. Still, I was sitting on a cloud of bliss. That's when I noticed my stomach wasn't on fire any more. No wonder I felt like the buddha. Finally, I was free.

I was ecstatic to be whole again, but my heart ached knowing I would never see that life again. I'd never know if she would survive her disorder. I'd never see Ally's eyes light up in Times Square, or my mom holding her purse tightly on the subway. Unfortunately, it seemed I was stuck where I was.

Looking around, I took in my room. I designed it to be as relaxing as possible, with hues of blue everywhere. White comforter and sheets with a blue accent pillow, walls decorated with posters my friends had given me and a giant colorful tapestry framed by Christmas lights. There was no question that a twenty two-year-old girl lived in there. It looked like the style had been directly lifted off of a page of Basic White College Girl magazine. It was my oasis.

The sea of blue around me was great at lulling me into thoughts and dreams. That Michelle, dancer Michelle, had made the choice to avoid eating. She later also made the choice to pursue a dance school instead of going to the college that I went to.

Though she had her issues, she had an incredible life. She might be able to get past her disorder, then she will be left with a life with great friends, a family that was proud of her, and maybe even fame. I had no clue what I wanted to be. No clue what I was going to do.

The dark parts of my brain were whispering to me yet again. You're a failure. You can't accomplish anything. No one will hire you. Why would they? You have done nothing. What you have done that was good, you destroyed.

Instinctively, these thoughts turned my head toward the empty picture frames sitting on my desk. Pictures of me and my ex-boyfriend smiling together got depressing when I laid in bed alone, so they had been put in the trash along with the rest of his stuff.

Stop thinking that way Michelle! I thought frustrated with myself. You made a good choice. You did the right thing. Chill out.

My rational brain was overwhelmed with the fear and sadness being stirred up by my dark unconscious. I gave myself over to the wave of depression and felt my spirit wander into another vessel.

Chapter 4

I was lying in a different bed. It had a smell that I knew down to my core. The brown sheets. The denim comforter. I was in my ex boyfriend's bed.

John was in the bathroom getting ready to come to bed. It was cleanly shaven John. That mystery wrapped in an enigma that I had seen in my daydream.

Wondering why this Michelle was wallowing in regret along with me, I started to dig through her mind. Her current thoughts were invisible to me, though I could access her memories like I could in the last dream. I hadn't been able to feel the dancing Michelle's emotions, but this sadness registered at a visceral level. Maybe her memories could show me why we were connected.

As soon as I began to access her subconscious, one memory thrust itself into my mind. It wanted-- needed-- to be heard.

This was a fresh memory. It was clear as day for both of us. I had this same memory. Mine only ended differently.

In my boyfriend's apartment, he sat on the bed bawling. I had never seen him cry so much. His legs wouldn't support him to stand, but I stood by the door, turned toward it.

I'm sorry, I said lamely. What else do you say when you're trying to leave someone that you loved for years? I wanted to comfort him, but that was officially not my job anymore. I excused myself from that when I said our relationship was over.

Here was where the difference was. In my world, when I made to leave, he said nothing. In this memory, he calmed down his crying and said, Me not wanting to travel and you thinking I don't do stuff would be a stupid reason to end things after three years.

I can't stand it though. We literally sit around all day doing nothing and I'm sick of it. I want to see the world, too. I applied to grad school in New York and London, and I'm looking at jobs all over the country. I'm not staying in Georgia. I'm definitely not going to keep trying to make lists of things we can do together and have you do one thing on it and then give up, saying they all sound too difficult.

He looked up at me, eyes red. His hair fell over his face and his beard was grown out to be over an inch long. He said, Okay, I'll be better. I promise we'll do dates or whatever. I'll pull up stuff from the list. Give me until the end of the semester at least. I'll change.

Then, he begged, Please, stay. Give me until graduation. You'll see.

She walked over to his bed and sat next to him. I'll stay, she said.

He cried telling her he had been so worried. He said he loved her and went on and on for a while blubbing.

I left the memory, and was back sitting on the bed. Michelle wasn't upset because they weren't together, was she upset that they were together?

I could see that the daydream from earlier had been this Michelle's life. He was taking her on dates. He was cleanly cut and making a clear effort.

Look at him, I wanted to tell her. He changed for you! He really did it. I never imagined that he would have (or really could have) done it, but he did. He cares about you. This is all we have ever wanted to see, and you're wallowing?

Yet I laid there still feeling that panging pain. Another memory nagged at me, and I followed along.

I re-experienced our shared past. Flashes of many moments coming together in a symphony of boring. It began slow, with one of our first dates. I went over to Netflix and chill. We were sitting on his couch, curled up, debating what to watch. A new Star Wars movie was coming out soon, so he asked if I wanted to watch the old ones.

You haven't seen Star Wars? He asked, looking at me like I was an anomaly. Any of them?

No, I admitted sheepishly. The new movies came out, but I never went to see them. I hadn't seen the originals, so there wasn't a reason for me to watch the new stuff. Plus, if I mentioned that I hadn't seen them before, I would get the look that he was giving me.

We're going to fix this. I promise, you'll love it! He said with the most excitement I ever saw him express.

He pulled out an ancient DVD and put it into a Blu-ray player. As we watched, I tried to... distract him. He got seriously upset, accusing me of not enjoying it. So, I quietly watched the whole thing keeping my hands to myself. The movie was okay.

Did you like it?

It was great!

I knew you would love it. He sighed like he had accomplished a great life mission, It's a great movie.

This time, when I tried to distract him, it worked. The experience was like the movie, it was just okay.

After that, the memories sped by. I saw us go through that cycle with each movie in the Star Wars series, then hundreds of episodes of TV shows went by in the same fashion with the same boring end.

Then, it took me through my days where I wouldn't see him, and I would actually get more of the things done that I loved to do. I wouldn't veg out in front of a screen, instead I would read or dance or exercise or look at jobs.

I would get to spend time with Ally, where we would make up stupid stories one sentence at a time. My favorite nights were the ones where Sonia and I agreed to stay at the apartment and all of us would have dinner and play a board game.

These memories must have been close because she was imagining all of the reasons she had wanted to leave John, and she felt like she made the wrong choice in staying with him. I knew that feeling all too well. I had felt that when I tried to leave him before.

Freshly showered, John walked into the room. His smell was so familiar it was like the beat-up yet perfectly broken in couch that you should sell but could never bring yourself to. I, I mean she, laid into his arms.

You're so ridiculously beautiful, he said.

My, her, cheeks flushed. I couldn't handle this any longer.

I searched for some tether, anything I could use to get out of there. It was too much to handle seeing him that way. The tether was a thin cord that stretched out of this mind, and I held onto it for dear life.

Going back to myself didn't feel as smooth as before. It felt like I was being tugged behind a speedboat on waterskies. Since I've never been waterskiing before, I imagine my experience would be like being dragged behind a speedboat trying and failing to breathe for an hour.

When I sat up in bed, my head was spinning, and I immediately threw up right between my legs all over the bed. I was too weak to get up and clean it. I crashed back down on the bed and passed out.

Chapter 5

I woke up feeling like I had the world's worst hangover. Also, it smelled horrible.

Correction, I smelled horrible.

It dawned on me when I rolled over in bed that in my sleep I had rolled into the puddle of puke. Grunting, I got out of bed and walked into my bathroom.

I looked like hell. Luckily the puke hadn't touched my face, but the feeling of being hit by a truck showed. My brown hair was sticking up at odd angles. My hazel eyes were deciding to err on the side of vomit colored. Figures. The bags under my eyes that basically never go away were prominent and puffy this morning. Oh shit, I thought to myself, what time is it?

The clock read 9 a.m. Thank god I didn't have class that early, because I would've been skipping it. I needed to deep clean or maybe, if that didn't work out, burn my comforter.

Cleaning the comforter didn't go very well from the start when I used my fresh white towel to do it. It didn't matter how hungover I was, I was mad that I could be so stupid to soil my nice towels like that. I cleaned off the comforter to the best of my ability then tried to clean the towel. It was a horribly disgusting process full of chunks and smells that turned out to leave a big water stain. I pleaded to any power that would hear me that there wouldn't be stains when I came home, and went to get ready for the day.

Getting into the shower had to be the best feeling that I had had in a long time. I had been surrounded by vomit for so long that I felt like good smells had ceased to exist. The smell of the soap and shampoo made me sigh with relief. I hadn't realized how shallow my breathing had been as I avoided inhaling the putrid stench of my pasta and nutrition bar dinner.

Showers being the best place for me to think clearly, my brain played back last night. I kept thinking of John and thinking I made a mistake in breaking up with him. Michelle that was still with him seemed like she didn't really want to be. I can see why, but anything is better than waking up in puke, alone. The single life was worse than she could possibly imagine. I didn't know it was possible, but somehow my headache intensified.

After my shower I pulled on a t-shirt that said Have a Day on it surrounded by a light blue tie dye pattern with athletic shorts and ran out the door. Mentally went through to make sure

I had everything for school, thanking my lucky stars that I had finished my homework yesterday morning. I grabbed a protein bar on my way out and hopped in my car.

Campus had a few parking areas, and I was one of the few who had a parking pass. It would be lucky if you could find a spot, though. It took me about ten minutes, but one opened up. I was going to be in class on time. It was a miracle.

Today was bullshit day. There were two classes that were requirements for Math majors that I had put off until this year. For my English credit: Intro to Shakespeare. For my second history credit, the second part of US history. I should've taken them Freshman year, but young me chose to make myself slightly miserable in my last semester rather than add on to the stress of Freshman year. When thought of that way, it seems understandable that young me would do that. However, she could've chosen to do these stupid classes in any of six semesters and it would've been better. I think I forgot about senioritis. While I applauded myself for practicing my already expert-level procrastination skills, I hated past me for making me do this now.

I ran into class, sat down, and immediately tuned out. I had a lot more to think about than these classes today. It was hard to think with the professor yammering on, so I went online for a while like I could see several others around me were doing. Twitter consumed another hour of my life, and the most fun thing I saw was a heated debate on whether or not a hotdog was a sandwich.

I wasted away an hour, but history went by so much better. It felt in some ways like elementary school storytime with characters whose actions each molded the world I lived in. My professor was great at getting across the drama of the past and bringing it into the classroom. I took great notes in there and was able to disconnect myself from my brain's overactive shenanigans for a little while.

When the professor dismissed us, I wished I didn't have to leave. As soon as I left the class I didn't need to focus on anything but myself again. The biggest problem was, I didn't know what to think of any of the... dreams?

They didn't feel like dreams, but that was the only way to explain them that made sense. Weird, ultra-vivid dreams that were great at showing me how much I could have accomplished in life. They loved illustrating that I was a failure who couldn't hold down a relationship, didn't follow my dreams, and didn't do much of anything with my four years in college.

As I thought, my feet shuffled across the ground toward Rob Hall where I was meeting Ally for lunch. I was so in my own head, I stared at my beat-up running shoes like they were the Mona Lisa. On my first days of school, this had been my favorite area. It was spring and the trees were blooming with flowers, the grass was speckled with dandelions and people sitting on blankets. That day, I didn't see any of that. I knew the route well enough to barely register I was passing by something beautiful.

There was Rob Hall. The name was short for Robert Hallows, which is an incredible name. I wished everyone called it by its full name, but people are lazy, and I guess normal people don't want to feel like they go to Hogwarts. Rob Hall was an old, beautiful red brick building with high ceilings that was our largest on-campus eatery. Only the best of the best for a huge private college, I thought ruefully. This could be all I would get out of my education: some good food, a few good memories, and crippling debt.

After me and Ally's freshman year, it became our tradition to meet here twice a week to get some time for us to hang out one on one. With her job and busy schedule, there were weeks where this was the only time I would see her. Seeing her made bullshit days the best days of my week.

Ally always got there first, and she didn't even text me to let me know she was there any more. She was patiently waiting on a bench outside, working on something on her laptop.

Now was time to see if I could be stealthy. I quickly blended in with the crowd of people that had all gotten out of class with me. Hurriedly, quietly, I tiptoed up the side ramp. The stairs were short and right in front of the Hall, so early no one used the ramp that led from the side of the building and wound around to the front. She'd never see me coming.

I peeked around the corner, and she was laser focused on the screen in front of her. As quietly as possible I ran up to her and grabbed her sides with a "boo!".

Ah! She scream-laughed, Michelle!

I laughed. I felt momentarily proud of myself for being able to surprise her. I also loved making her laugh.

You ready for some stir fry? I asked.

Yeah let's go, she said.

We go into the building, order our food, and sit down. It was a long process because there are always lines for stir fry, but this was an important time where we talked about little to nothing. This was where we got the small talk part of discussion that is inevitable in a friendship out of the way. We both hate small talk, but mutually agree that this is a rare case where we actually care about whether or not we each had a good day.

When we finally sat down, I said, I must look like shit. I feel like I barely slept.

She looked beautiful as always.

What're you talking about? I came by to be sure you were doing okay and you were sleeping like a rock. She said.

I had the weirdest dreams, I said. I explained them as well as I could. I probably didn't do a great job. She seemed interested, but it didn't feel genuine. I wasn't sure if I should tell her about the fact that I slept in vomit. In spite of me, the disgusting truth came out of my mouth as unintentionally as the vomit.

Ally was the best listener in the world. Our relationship was one of total honesty. She always told me what the truth was, unafraid of hurting my feelings. She wasn't afraid to hurt my feelings because she knew that I would be mad for awhile, then come back apologizing for being mad and better able to see she was right. Having someone in your life to call you out when you're being ridiculous is vital. After knowing her since eighth grade, I almost dumped her as my friend in my sophomore year because I didn't want to hear the truth. I loved that she would've sacrificed everything for me to have the chance to change, even if I didn't take it.

When she finally spoke, she said with a little smile on her face, Maybe you should have more weird dreams if you're getting to bed before three a.m.

With life feeling heavy on my shoulders, I was glad she kept a decent sense of humor. What do you think about the dreams? I asked. Before she could speak, I continued, What if this is a sign? What if this is the universe saying I made bad decisions and I should try to fix them?

I swore I saw a stifled eye roll. She said, You can't go back in time. Also, you said yourself that dream you was unhappy being with John. Are you saying you wish you'd stayed with him? Do you wish you continued to dance and went to New York?

Yeah, right now I do. I could've been incredible.

Starving would be incredible?

I wouldn't do that.

You did though. Remember your freshman year? I sure do. You were skin and bones when you left the dance team.

It was a diet.

A diet where you barely ate anything. We were all worried about you. It might not have been on purpose, but it wasn't healthy for you. You know that, too.

She was right, but I wasn't in the mood to go there. I was so busy with dance and school back then that sometimes I wouldn't have time to eat a full meal. I tried to eat snacks, but sometimes I would forget to eat them. It wasn't a disorder. I was fine.

She took my silence as an opportunity to change the subject, As far as John goes, you wanted to leave him months ago. If you stayed with him, then what?

Then we'd still be together.

If we're going to believe your dreams, if you had stayed, you'd be wishing you left. When he was around you, you'd be content and happy enough with the life you were living. But, when he was gone, you didn't want to be with him. You hated doing nothing, which is all you guys did together.

I remembered that feeling well. I still felt the pain in my chest from his absence, though. I'd spent three years on our relationship and I loved him. I'd made a huge mistake.

While I was thinking, she continued talking, saying, You felt yourself being sad when he was gone, then as soon as he came into the room you were filled up with happiness. That's what you used to say you felt all the time. You guys would be all cuddly and you'd feel loved. Then, you'd start to get restless after a couple weeks of doing nothing. We'd go out together. Guess who would never come.

Then, you'd start complaining to me (again), saying he doesn't do anything. He's not romantic. He doesn't want to try going to a nice dinner, let alone going on a fun trip. He's not spontaneous. He doesn't want you to move away from Georgia. So, you'll say you want to break up with him. I'll support you and give you a pep talk. The next day, you'll tell me that you couldn't do it. You had a fight but then you guys had an incredible evening where you laid in his arms on the couch.

He wasn't and isn't going to change. He might meet some nice Southern girl and they'll get married and have babies and live in a house and never leave the South. That isn't what you want. You've told me a hundred times that's not what you want.

She grabbed my hand across the table, I'm so proud of you for being strong enough to leave someone that you still care about. You did the right thing putting that dying relationship out of its misery. Going back would be undoing all of the impressive things you did and doing what you have done a hundred times before.

She finished talking, out of breath. I squeezed her hand. Thank you didn't quite cover it. The pit of despair in my chest was weakened by her words.

I sighed a bit, You're right. I just don't want to be alone. After this year, I might be completely on my own.

You can't get rid of me! Ally said defiantly, I'll be sitting on your porch knitting when I'm old and gray. I'll be bringing over jars of my homemade peach preserves and a casserole. I know you can't cook for your life, so someone is going to have to make sure you eat when you don't have a meal plan anymore.

We both laughed. Knowing there was genuine sentiment behind her silly statement meant the world to me.

Talking about the far future was way easier than the near future. For a moment, I didn't worry about looming uncertainties in my life. I was content eating my stir fry with Ally, debating what our old lady hobbies would be.

Chapter 6

After lunch, Ally and I split up. I went to read Shakespeare in the grass, hoping that the fresh air might help me feel better.

I laid down on my belly in the grass with my book, enjoying my favorite place. It can be easy to lose the ability to notice beauty when you see it every day. This was one of those places for a lot of people, even me like earlier. Taking time to notice and appreciate all that was around me made me feel a little better. For a second, I was able to remember there was more to the world than my existential crises.

The book was boring. I read the same paragraph for about half an hour. To try to focus, I laid on my back and tried meditating again. Last time, though I don't think I did it right, I felt better afterward.

I focused on my breath, thinking about nothing at all. The smell of the grass filled up my nostrils. Suddenly, I felt the ground underneath my feet.

I opened my eyes to see a scene of several men standing around me. They were all my age, looking to me for some reason.

The whole area smelled like fresh cut grass. I was on a football field. Then, I started naming off positions and plays for the guys to run. I know it's tight, I said, but we can pull through. Ready? I asked, Break! We said in unison.

We ran out to the field. As I jogged into the center, a memory popped out in my head. I followed the tether into his mind.

I was playing football with my dad in the house. Still not a perfect thrower, he said, Learning where not to throw is just as important as knowing where to throw.

We tossed the ball back and forth for a long time as he recounted his football days to me. I was glad to hear those stories in a memory, even though it wasn't really mine.

Michael! My mom yelled when she came home. I apologized, but dad just tousled my hair, saying He's getting really good sweetie. Nothing broken today, he smiled coyly. She fumed.

God, I missed him. Correction, I missed him sober.

The scene shifted. I was applying to college. I knew exactly where I would go, there was no question. I would go where my mom and dad had met. Where my dad had played football. It was the same choice that I, Michelle, had made.

I snapped back into the game when I yelled, Hike!

The football flew through the air toward me. As soon as I gripped the ball, I turned to fake a hand off to our running back. He sprinted past me, pretending to hug something close to his chest, drawing the defense to the left side of the field.

There was my opening. I sprinted to the right. This was the fastest I had ever moved. The wind whipped through my short hair and I felt powerful and graceful, like I did when I danced.

Thinking about dance, I was pulled into another memory. I, as Michael, was sketching comics in my notebook that were part of a long series that spanned across the bottom of my notebook in high school. Drawing with these large, rough hands seemed like it would feel unnatural, but the movements felt as natural and life giving as breathing.

I used color to solidify the images and breathe life into them even more. After class, I would go into the bathroom and rub my hands raw to eliminate every trace of what could expose me as artistic. I knew my father would disown me if he saw that his son was drawing.

Snapping out of the memory, I was flying again. My feet thudded in the grass as I ran through the line of defense, covered by my friends. I was light as air and quick as a bird. I crossed into the end zone holding the ball high in the air.

My friends ran up to me pounding me on the back. We celebrated as the clock continued counting down. There wasn't time for the other team to have possession of the ball. It was over.

The whole team rushed the field and we celebrated like we had actually won something important. It was really just intramural flag football, but you would think we had won a legitimate championship.

Our few fans that were on the sidelines were on the field now. They were congratulating their friends and significant others. Through the small crowd of people, I saw Ally making her way toward me.

When we locked eyes, I was pulled into a memory. It was my first day in my political science course, and there was Ally. She was sitting alone intensely doodling in her notebook.

I sat down beside her, intrigued. When she sat back from her drawing, I saw there was a drawing of a ballet shoe perfectly sketched on the paper. I introduced myself, saying Hi, I'm Michael.

She looked at me like she hadn't noticed someone sat down beside her until that moment. Her blue eyes looked startled, but then she smiled. She outstretched her hand and said, Ally. We shook.

What's your major?

Kinesiology, you?

Mechanical Engineering. What do-- I was cut off as the professor stood at the front of the class and went over the syllabus.

After class, I asked where she was headed. Her next class was across campus. I said I was headed that way, too. My class was in the building next to hers.

We walked together, and I asked her all about herself.

Why kinesiology? I asked.

I want to be a doctor.

Why a doctor?

Because I want to help people. That's why I'm going to be an EMT. Until I can be a doctor, I can help people out in other ways. Right now I'm a lifeguard.

What pool do you work at?

I work at the rec pool on campus.

Got it, I said as I pulled out my phone. I pretended to type something in, then said, I added to my calendar for tomorrow, pretend to drown in rec swimming pool.

She laughed and shoved me with her shoulder. I'd consider saving you. She smiled.

I promise, I'm a lot heavier than I look.

You're not helping your case.

From there, the conversation was deep, yet light and joking. She laughed at my jokes the whole way there. When she reached her class, I asked for her number. She gave it to me, and I quickly walked back to the building we came from, trying to make it to class on time.

After that, there was a rapid parade of memories. We held hands at the movies and at dinner. We had our first kiss at a carnival. I put my hand on her waist in pictures as we got ready to go to semiformal and formal dances.

The dresses she wore were beautiful and more revealing than anything I had seen her in. My heart skipped several beats.

Then, I saw her in bed with me. More than once.

I jumped out of his head feeling like a voyeur. I felt gross.

Back in the present, Ally ran up to hug me.

Congratulations! She said. She released me from her massive squeeze hug she gives, but I had her trapped. You're so sweaty, let me go, she laughed.

I picked her up and said, You love it.

Smiling, she said, You think you're funny, huh?

I put her down, and my face got close to hers, Sometimes.

We kissed. I felt like I was floating on air.

Then, my female body's deep breathing caught my attention once more, I followed the relaxed breath until I felt the cool grass under my body again.

Chapter 7

Opening my eyes, I saw the golden color of the sun starting to set. My hands were folded over my stomach.

My exposed skin felt like it was on fire and my body felt like an alien skin suit. Hours had passed, but it had only felt like one.

I packed up my things slowly, adjusting to the feeling of being in this body again. Walking felt like I was a baby again, trying to figure out how to be a bipedal organism. I might've looked drunk, but I made it back to my car without falling on my butt.

Fortunately for me and everyone else on the road, driving wasn't a problem. No music played on the drive back. I was accompanied by my thoughts. Ally was my best friend. Yes, she was beautiful and talented and kind and a million other things, but I couldn't be thinking of her like we could ever be together. It was okay for Michael, but this was real life. That would never happen.

If she knew I was thinking of her this way, she'd probably be as disgusted as my dad. It was unnatural. Wrong. Gross.

I got back to the house with a sinking feeling in my gut that let me know I was in the wrong. I was a failure. My world wasn't right.

On autopilot, I got out of the car, walked to the door, unlocked it, and walked in. With every step, my mind thought another negative thing. Failure, deadbeat, lazy, stupid, lonely. I walked to the fridge to get out a snack, when Ally walked in. We exchanged heys.

You got back late. She said. Ally and I talked every day after one of us came home unless she was staying the night at the hospital, waiting for emergency calls. We had known each other so long that she knew by the way I breathed and moved around the room that it was me. She always entered with a soft sigh, and her light steps would walk into the kitchen. Sometimes, I met her in there, other times I would wait for her steps to recede into her room, and lightly knock, she would always let me in.

I had a lot of studying to do, I said back bluntly. Usually, no matter my mood, I could make conversation. If it was a bad day, Ally could always brighten it. Making her laugh was so

fun. No matter the circumstance of the day, I would try to make her smile. Today, looking at her felt like it was wrong. I could feel blood rush to my cheeks.

Do you have a test coming up? She asked.

I changed the subject, Where are Jenny and Sonia?

Sonia went out. Jenny should be in her room, though. We already ate, She reminded me.

I need to go to bed, can we talk later? I asked.

Sure. She said, eyebrows creased.

I remembered to grab an energy bar and stole off into my sanctuary. Though my stomach was growling, the bar looked unappetizing, and my bed called to me. If these really were strange, vivid dreams, they didn't help me wake up well rested.

Lying down, I wrapped myself up in my fluffy, cloud-like comforter that comforted me every night. My head hit the pillow and I was asleep.

The next several days, I stayed in bed. Nothing too important was happening in my classes, and the concept of getting out of bed sounded horrific.

The pit in my stomach had widened and it felt like it was going to take everything with it. My heart and mind ached with feeling as if I would never be able to escape this life. I had trapped myself into a horrible situation and there was no way out. I couldn't go back and make myself more like the other Michelles or Michael.

Seeing them had put into perspective how alone I was. I left my significant other, and had no one. I would never have Ally as that kind of person. She would find a person that was like Michael in this life. Someone who was talented, had a future ahead of them, was a little nerdy, always cracking jokes, and, obviously, male.

I saw what it would be like to be successful and was awakened to the fact that I had nothing. They had rising careers, passions, people they loved, and I had none of that.

What was I supposed to even do with my math major? I did math thinking it gave me the freedom to go anywhere I wanted and would let me pick from a plethora of jobs. Realistically, I could go absolutely nowhere because no one wanted to hire me.

Every application I sent out read: 3.5 GPA. Math major. No job experience. Clubs: Actuarial Science club for four years and Dance team for one. No one really cared that I was the president of the actuarial science club. Familiar with a couple coding languages. I had no experience. No one had wanted to hire me as an intern either.

Bed was better than out there. My classes didn't matter any more. I needed to pass and get out of school and get a job. Getting a job would mean I would move away from all of my friends. I would be wholly alone soon, if I found a job at all.

The thoughts that widened the pit the most were the thoughts of Ally. John was dead to me. I said goodbye and couldn't take it back. Why would he want me back anyways? He wouldn't trust me after leaving him to suffer for weeks. Now, Ally wouldn't leave my mind. I got to see a whole life where we got to be together, and I was so happy.

When I was in a funk, a mini bout of depression, like I was right now, Ally would pick me up. She would come in and remind me, It's not the end of the world. Everything is going to be okay. She'd say, Quit being grumpy, you're no fun when you're this way. You're going to get your butt out of this bed and stop acting like the world is against you. It's not.

Now, though was different. When she came by my room, I couldn't bear to see her. I wanted her to be with me in a way that we couldn't be together. What if she found out I was thinking this way and left me? I don't think I could handle losing her right now.

Every time I thought of her I felt disgusting. She was beautiful and I loved her. As a friend. Right?

The more I thought about her, the sicker I felt. I would think of me leaving John and feel sick too. I only left the bed for food, water, and the restroom. I would run outside my room to get food. For a few days, Ally wasn't home because she was at work overnight. She was a first responder.

A week went by and I hadn't left my room hardly at all. I got a couple texts that I ignored and binge watched old seasons of The Bachelor. I was clearly in a very dark place.

On the seventh day of my self inflicted solitary confinement, I ran into Jenny in the kitchen. She didn't say anything. She just watched me heat up my ramen and walk back into my room. That was when she followed me.

When we got to my door, I asked, Can I help you?

I want to talk to you, she said.

She hadn't ever wanted to talk to me alone before. I didn't feel like I could say no. She didn't really ask. So, I walked into my room and let her enter. She shut the door behind her.

Chapter 8

I was sitting back in my bed, but I didn't feel the security that my room usually brought me. There was a snake in my nest and I was very worried about my safety. The pit of despair shut a bit and was dammed up by a tightness.

I'm worried about you, she said.

I sincerely doubt that.

You don't think we haven't noticed that you haven't been going to your classes? She asked.

She notices when I leave?

We all notice when you leave! The walls are pretty thin, and I got used to hearing you come and go. I noticed when I hadn't heard you showering in the morning. I didn't hear you come in from class and talk with Ally. I haven't heard you do anything in forever.

I really was being trapped. She was quizzing me again. She got off on exposing my negative qualities, and now she was trying to make sure I knew I was being lazy.

So? I asked. The tightness only further closed up the despair as I went on the defense. I was ready for another attack.

She slid closer to my bed. I felt like I was suffocating.

I just want to know what's wrong. Ally said you won't talk to her. I wanted to make sure you're okay.

I'm fine, I spat. If I didn't give her much to go on, she would have to leave. Please all the powers that be make the viper leave.

She sighed, and seemed about to stand up, when she changed her mind. Resolutely, she turned to me and asked, Why do you hate me? Though she was sitting up straight, she had one foot on the ground, ready for flight.

What do you mean? I asked. My eyebrows knit together, confused.

Since the day you met me, I swear I have been nothing but nice to you. I feel like I've tried to really get to know you a hundred times. I only really know you from the conversations I overhear sometimes between you and Ally. Through that, I know we have a lot in common, but

every time I try to talk to you, you give me one-word answers. It's clear you want me to go away. I truly cannot figure out what I did.

I realized then that I wasn't the vulnerable one here. In reality, I had been the snake to her. She was the little bird that had entered a viper's den and was just hoping to escape with her life. Look big and you might not get bitten.

The thought made me uncomfortable. I was caught off guard, and answered, I thought you were the one who hated me.

I paused as that sunk in for her as it had for me. She looked at me with an expression of surprised confusion. I explained, You would always ask me about my day, and if I told you what was wrong, you would say that obviously I should do blah blah blah about it. It made me feel like it was stupid for me to even get worried.

I was just trying to help, she said, sounding hurt.

It never crossed my mind that you were actually interested in me when you asked how my day was. I felt like you were just asking to pretend to be nice, but you didn't really care. I said in a rush.

I did care! She said, upset now. Eyes watering. I tried so hard to ask you questions to maybe get you to open up. You never would when it was just us. Only if it was all four of us together, but then you would talk mostly to Sonia or Ally. When it was just us, you would never ask me about myself, either. It was like talking to a brick wall.

There was truth to that. Jenny made me uncomfortable. When she was home in the evenings, she would often talk with Sonia, so I hadn't realized that this could bother her. She also seemed like she was out all the time.

Then, I thought about it. How well did I even know Jenny? I knew a vague bit about her classes from when we would all sit in the kitchen together and chat. I knew that she had been single for a long time and interned in Seoul. That was it though. I didn't know her favorite food. I didn't know her major. I didn't even know what her room looked like and I had lived with her for two years.

I'm so sorry. I said. I meant it, too.

I felt the pit want to deepen again. It wanted to swallow me whole. I was a truly horrible person.

She reached out and touched my leg, Thank you, she said. She sounded breathless and relieved. I think that was the first time she ever touched me. It was also the first human contact I had had in a couple days. It warmed me to my core.

I feel terrible. I don't really know anything about you, I said.

What do you want to know? She said with a huge smile. She lifted the foot that had been planted on the floor up onto the bed. She settled into my nest, smiling. It felt like the first time I had really noticed her smile.

We talked for hours. I had never known this girl at all, and it felt fantastic to have someone on the outside to talk with. Not just that, but for a while, it wasn't about me. I learned everything about her. She could talk about a paperclip and make it interesting. I felt more whole in hearing her talk than I had in a long time.

She eventually asked again why I had trapped myself in my room. I told her all about the dreams. Every bit of them. I told her about me feeling like I had made massive mistakes throughout my life. I told her about not talking to Ally because it felt weird. Then, she told me something surprising.

You didn't mess up.

You aren't them. You're you. You're smarter than Michelle that stayed with John. From what I know, you had wanted to leave him for a long time. You're stronger than Dancing Michelle because you care more about your health than a career. That's a good thing that you recognized you should stop dance when you did. You might miss it, but you are healthy and will live longer because of your strength in letting it go. As far as Michael goes, you never got the chance to be a man, but you are the best woman you could be.

She was smiling, looking at my face. I wasn't sure what she read there, but she said, You know Ally loves you, right?

I smiled, Yeah, she's my best friend.

Her smile turned coy, Are you sure that's it? When I'm alone with Ally sometimes it seems like there could be something more.

A part of me still said, This can't be true. Another mischievously said, We'll see.

Blushing, I changed the subject. After talking for a while more about her life, we went out of my room to grab some late-night food. My ramen had sat on my bedside table throughout our conversation, and I was craving my favorite food.

As I was about to open up the door, and Jenny was saying, I get that it's a southern staple, but you can't call it a delicacy! Ally came out of her room.

Hey, she said quietly. She looked at me with her massive blue eyes. She was shockingly beautiful in a t-shirt and sweatpants. For a second, I wanted to run away again, but I remembered what Jenny said. I don't need to be ashamed.

Where are you guys going? She asked.

I couldn't speak. Thankfully, Jenny saved me, We needed sustenance. Michelle wanted fried chicken.

Of course she did, Ally said, smiling as she shook her head a bit, can I come?

Jenny looked at me, brows raised.

Yeah, of course, I said.

Excited, Ally practically skipped over to us. That was when the door opened, and Sonia made her way into the room.

What's this? She asked.

Late night chicken run, you in? Jenny asked.

Girl, I'd kill for some good fried chicken.

We left the apartment together, and I left all my worries behind. Ally put her arm around my waist and asked, You okay?

The pit in my gut was gone. I had great people all around me, and when I needed them, they would be there for me. This was the life I was given and the one I created. There was no other life I would rather live.

Yeah, I'm okay.