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“Under the Maple Tree”

Angela Roberts

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

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**Canada**

## **Abstract**

### **Under the Maple Tree**

Angela Roberts

Set in a fictional Canadian suburb, this episodic novel centres on a group of characters of varying ages, social statuses, sexual orientations, and origins who are connected by relationships to each other and to their community. The lead protagonists of the novel are Violet Addams and Lucas Gibson, 20-something roommates, unwillingly sharing a townhouse. Lucas Gibson lives and works in the suburbs as a software engineer for a high technology firm. As the novel opens, Violet Addams, a recent university graduate, editor, and aspiring writer who finds herself at loose ends, moves to the suburbs to stay with her brother and his roommate, Lucas, and also to escape from the heartbreak of a failed relationship. Initially believing her circumstances to be temporary, Violet suddenly finds herself responsible for her brother's share of expenses when she discovers that he has fled his dissatisfying home life and complicated social life before she arrived. Violet and Lucas' time together begins. From this start, the narrative moves to stories about their immediate friends, relatives, and neighbours to create a portrait of the complex suburban experience. As time goes on, we see this group of characters evolve as we track their lives and loves.

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## Violet

Violet watched the taxi make a u-turn and drive away past the identical houses. On one side of the street were two-storey condos and on the other were tall, narrow townhouses. One condo further down didn't have grass yet on its lawn. A couple of the townhouses were grassless too, but the houses on this end were older. She went up the brick walk of her brother's townhouse and put her suitcases down on the stoop next to her. It was a nice enough house from the outside. The grass was cut and there were a few evergreen bushes that had probably come with the house. There was no mailbox; at the short end of the crescent were a bunch of post office boxes. Peter had complained about that when he moved in. The postal workers wouldn't even drive from house to house anymore.

This was very different from what she was used to. There was an odd quiet to the street. Other than an old couple puttering in their garden a few houses down, there was no one around. A few kids biked past the intersection. She heard distant laughter. Violet appreciated the quiet, the seeming isolation. It was what she had come for. She wanted to get away. She wanted to get away from everything that reminded her of her ex. The university and the city all carried too many memories. She needed something new, something totally different. But nothing too extreme. There was something familiar and yet strange about living in the suburbs. It was isolated, yet it was also about 10 minutes away from the city. When Peter offered to let her stay with him till she got back on her feet, it had seemed like a good idea.

Violet pressed the doorbell and heard a muffled musical ring over the sound of voices coming from the TV inside. She counted slowly to ten and pressed the button

again. This time she heard footsteps coming from far inside the house. The door opened halfway and a tall man with reddish brown hair and a goatee eyed her for a moment.

“Sorry, we’re not interested,” he said, and shut the door.

Violet was confused. She looked at the door number. Yes. This was the right house. She punched the doorbell.

She waited. The man re-opened the door and frowned. “Can I help you?”

Violet composed herself. “Uh, hi. I think we met once before... I’m Violet, Peter’s sister.”

“Hello.” He spoke cautiously, as if he was trying to figure out what she was doing at his doorstep. They stared at each other. Violet wasn’t sure what he was expecting her to say. He looked like he was expecting her to say something. Then he suddenly seemed to notice her bags. “Uh, what’s with the suitcases?”

Violet’s eyes narrowed. “Peter said I could stay here for a while.”

His eyebrows shot up. “What?”

She frowned. “Listen, um...”

“Lucas.”

“Right. Lucas. Peter said you were fine with this. Didn’t he tell you I was coming?”

“No. Pete conveniently forgot that.” He darted a glance outside then beckoned her into the house. “Look, we can talk about this inside.”

She handed him a suitcase and he stepped back to let her in. She entered a small foyer with stairs leading up and down into the house, and a mirrored closet. Violet caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. She was shorter than her brother’s friend, barely



average height. Her long brown hair was curly and thick, often unmanageable. There were freckles on her face under her green eyes, but not as many as if she was the type who spent a lot of time outdoors. She wasn't, and you could tell by her pale skin and hippy body. She wasn't overweight, but she wasn't slender either, and what she noticed the most in that mirror was the fact that she could stand to lose a few pounds. Violet was wearing the only articles of clothing she hadn't packed or given away, her favourite boot-cut jeans and a green sweater. She'd been amazed that she could fit her wardrobe into two suitcases.

He placed her bags next to the door and led her up the stairs into the living room. It wasn't a very big room, but it was made to look bigger by a prominent bay window. The furniture was IKEA-quality, and the room was neat except for the bowls of snack food on the coffee table in front of the TV. A soccer game was playing. A white rectangular device and a black one shared space on the TV stand. She'd seen them in an electronics store once but never been particularly interested in them. The white one was a Nintendo Wii and the black one was a Playstation Two. Or Three, she wasn't sure what the difference was. Violet's gaze lingered on the bookshelf. There were shelves of computer books and science magazines. On the bottom shelves were magazine holders full of individually wrapped comic books. The couch and bookshelf were flanked by tall CD towers and DVD racks. Her brother's friend was a geek. *Great.*

The kitchen was small, but, other than a few dirty dishes in the sink, it was neat also. It was a little strange. She thought homes in the suburbs were supposed to be bigger, but this was a lot like being in a condo in the city. It had seemed bigger on the outside.

Lucas took a beer out of the fridge and handed it to her. "Beer?"

“No, thank you. Could I have some water?”

He shrugged and poured her a glass from the Brita pitcher, opening the beer for himself. They took their drinks to the adjacent dining room. There was more IKEA furniture here, a round table and four chairs. The raised platform of the dining room connected the living room and kitchen, and patio doors led to the small deck. There was a modest in-ground pool in the backyard, but not much else. Lucas distributed coasters from a metal holder and put down his bottle. “Look, Violet, Peter’s gone.”

Violet started. “Gone? What do you mean, gone?”

“Gone. As in, left. As in, he took all his stuff and skipped town.”

“What? Are you sure he’s OK? I mean....” Irrational visions of her brother lying dead in a ditch somewhere or jumping from a bridge flew through her mind.

“Pretty sure he’s fine. He took all his clothes, CDs, and his guitar. He took some of my CDs too, frankly.”

Violet fiddled with a coaster, flipping it back and forth on the table. “Crap,” she muttered.

“Excuse me?”

She looked up. “Nothing.” Violet’s mind raced. This trip was a bust. What was she going to do now? She didn’t have money for a plane ticket home, and she really didn’t want to call her mother to help her out. She didn’t know anyone else here either. Damn her idiot brother! Why did she ever listen to him?

He seemed to sense some of her dilemma. “Are you OK?”

Violet forced a smile. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.”

He shifted uncomfortably. "What are you going to do? Do you have somewhere to stay?"

She could feel a headache coming on. "Not really. I was supposed to stay here with you guys."

Lucas started. "How long did Peter say you could stay?"

"For as long as I needed to." Violet frowned as Lucas began to object. "Look, I came here in good faith. I was under the impression that my brother paid his fair share here and had the right to invite people over."

"He didn't have the right to invite people over to live." He half-rose in his chair. "I know what your brother was planning. He was planning to wait until you arrived so I couldn't say no."

Violet's cheeks heated. "That's not my fault! I would never have come if I thought you didn't know. This isn't exactly the welcome I was expecting."

They were silent for a long moment. Then he said, "I'm sorry. I don't want to seem rude. But we've met, what, twice? And, well, it's just a really bad time for me to have guests right now. I'd have you here if I could, but I can't."

There was definitely something about this man's manners that irritated her. "Obviously I can't stay now. I'm not going to impose."

"Well, where are you going to go?"

"Give me a minute to figure it out!"

Lucas drummed his fingers on the table. He looked at her, her chin on her hand, then took a swig of beer and looked at her again. She watched him out of the corner of her eye, puzzled at his behaviour. Finally, he said, "Look, I can't just toss you out if you

have nowhere else to go. You're still my buddy's sister. You can stay for a few days. You know, till you find something else."

For a second, Violet was tempted to respond in a sarcastic manner. Something flippant, like 'Gee, thanks' or 'Don't put yourself out'. But then she told herself that that wouldn't be the best thing to do. As patronizing as she thought his tone was, he was probably sincere. So she quietly replied, "Thank you."

"OK. Great."

Violet stood and wandered over to the couch. She perched on the leather back then slipped off when she saw Lucas frowning at her. She crossed her arms and said, "So, what happened? Didn't Peter say anything before he left?"

Lucas' lips tightened almost imperceptibly for an instant. If she hadn't been looking right at him, Violet probably wouldn't have noticed. He shrugged. "No. I just woke up this morning and all his stuff was gone. I don't know, maybe he said something. I've ... been distracted."

Violet frowned. "But still, it's weird, don't you think?"

He picked up the empty glass and beer bottle and brought them to the kitchen. "I don't think there's much your brother can do to surprise me anymore. All I know is he left me with a whole mess of responsibilities that I don't have time for."

"Anything I can help with?"

Lucas seemed to consider whether or not she was being serious, then, deciding she was, he replied, "You don't have to."

She sighed. "I want to."

"I don't know what you could do."

“There must be something,” she pressed.

He fidgeted. “Uh ... I don’t know. I don’t think Peter cleared out his desk at the school. And there’s probably forms and bureaucratic crap that have to be taken care of.”

He paused. “You know, I don’t even know if he actually quit.”

Violet sighed. “I guess I could take care of that.”

Lucas perked up. “Seriously?”

She shrugged. “Well, yeah.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “That... that would really help.” He turned to face her. “Christ, Violet. You must be tired from your trip. Come on. Let’s get you settled.”

Violet watched Lucas go back to the foyer and pick up her bags. As soon as she had a moment alone, she was going to call her idiot brother and find out what the heck was going on. What kind of joke was he trying to pull, inviting her and not telling his roommate, and then just disappearing? She knew he could be flighty and self-absorbed, but this was ridiculous. Violet, not for the first time, wondered why she was always trusting and depending on her irresponsible brother. Over and over, she would trust him and over and over he would let her down.

Lucas gestured to the basement stairs. “I guess you can stay in Pete’s room. Since he’s not using it.”

Violet frowned and followed him down. Knowing Peter, his room would be a pigsty. “That’ll be fine. This is just temporary, eh?”

He shrugged. “Sure. Whatever.”

\*\*\*

Violet had been staring at the computer screen for the last fifteen minutes. She couldn't focus on the work in front of her. She had twenty pages to edit for Thursday. But she couldn't concentrate on the text. So far she'd done everything except what she was supposed to be doing.

Lucas had connected her laptop to his wireless network. She was alone in the house now; he had left for work early that morning. Lucas was pretty cagey about the work he did. He seemed to talk more about the massive stress he was under than about what he actually did. All he'd really told her was that he was a software engineer for some company in some big high technology industrial park off the highway. She couldn't quite picture it anyway, this forested area full of office buildings and factories smack in the middle of the suburbs. It sounded secretive and conspiratorial.

She had been a little annoyed with his reaction to her profession. Like she had no job. Editing paid the bills. Mostly. Anyway, what she really wanted to do was write. No one seemed to understand that. Her professors. Her parents. Josh (not that he'd ever really cared). Her mother had been furious when she'd announced she wasn't going to pursue her PhD. She didn't know what she wanted, but it wasn't that. Editing was safe and unspecific. Freelancing gave her freedom.

Some editor she was. So far she'd checked her email (twice), her MySpace, her Facebook, *his* Facebook (he was still single), and played ten hands of Solitaire (won two, lost eight). She'd read the news, dawdled on the gossip, and fiddled with iTunes looking for a good radio station. Then she'd opened up the Word file she'd received that morning. And nothing.

She was hopelessly distracted by what Josh had said to her when he broke up with her. *I'm sorry. You don't deserve this. I can't lie to you. I'm not in love with you. I don't see a future for us. You're not the one.* If he was sorry and she didn't deserve it, why did he do it? Bullshit. She had been dumped with clichés. It was humiliating. She was so angry at first. She'd erased him from all her electronic devices. Her cell-phone, her computer, her camera. It was an annoyance of the digital age that there was so much work to be done erasing someone from one's life. She kept finding things that reminded her of him. Her mom would still have his number on her cell-phone, or she would find an email in her inbox. She couldn't stop thinking about what happened. She just missed him, missed his touch. She'd known there was something wrong. But she hadn't thought he would just dump her the way he did.

Violet spun in her chair and looked around her. Peter's room really was a mess. There were books and papers all over the place. Her suitcases sat in a corner, still packed. Peter had emptied out most of his closet, leaving only laundry and old clothes she couldn't believe he still owned. She should hang up her clothes. They'll get wrinkled in the bags. She didn't know how long she'd be here.

Violet realized suddenly what bothered her so much about her relationship with Josh. Relationships were like a big shared closet. It can often be messy, stuffed full of things, some old, some new, some sentimental, some from old relationships. Often the things are mixed together rather than separate, her shirt next to his, etc.

He had treated the relationship as if it was only his closet. When he found it too messy, he took it upon himself to clean it out. Sorting out the closet should have been a

joint project. He should have told her that he didn't like their closet. He should have asked her to help him sort things out.

Maybe she should write this down.

She wondered if she should do something around the house. Wash some dishes. Vacuum. She didn't know where the vacuum was, but how hard could it be to find? But what was the line between houseguest and roommate? Guests didn't do chores. How long would she have to stay before some sort of contribution would be expected? Lucas didn't seem very comfortable with her touching his stuff. Probably shouldn't do any cleaning. Except perhaps here. She could only live so long with this mess.

She was annoyed enough with her brother. Violet had called Peter's cell as soon as Lucas left her. There had been no answer. Wherever he was, his phone was off. As it was this morning when she'd tried again. She left him messages. She texted him. Where on Earth was he? Violet called the high school where Peter worked. He'd never formally quit. He was being more than rude now. He was being irresponsible. What kind of message was he sending his students, leaving like he did?

Violet sighed and closed her laptop. She wasn't going to get any work done today. She got up and put her laptop on the bed. She went downstairs and gazed out the window.

The street was quiet. Clouds of dandelion fluff swirled around in lazy miniature tornadoes. A woman in a track suit jogged past. She sneezed loudly as she ran through a cloud of fluff. The sneeze barely caused her to break her stride. Violet wondered who these people were who were out walking or jogging at any time of the day. It seemed like every time she looked out the window, someone was walking past. Yesterday, as the taxi



turned on to Peter's street, she had marvelled at the long line of cars going in the opposite direction. At 3 o'clock on a Sunday. Where was everybody going?

A silver car drove past. It seemed like every car in the suburbs was silver. There were several in the driveways of Lucas' neighbours. Silver and black. Lucas' CRV was black. Where was the originality? Did car manufacturers suddenly run out of all other paint colours? Lucas was unique in having only one car in his driveway. Either no one seemed to use their driveways or they all had too many cars, because cars lined the curbs on both sides of the street. Lucas' portion of the curb was one of the few blank spots. Even in the middle of the day, when one would think most people would be at work, the volume of cars was only slightly lessened. It made the street a narrow two-way. She imagined it was a nightmare in the winter.

Violet jumped as a bird hit the window. She scanned the ground below, but she couldn't see it. Maybe it had just been stunned? *Christ*, she thought, *even the birds here are suicidal*. She looked up at the window. It wasn't filthy, but it was certainly not worthy of a Windex commercial. Her grandmother used to say that a bird hitting the window meant that it was trying to tell you something. She used to say that the spirits of the dead would visit us as birds when there was something important about to happen. Violet missed her grandmother. Her mother, of course, would call them both ridiculous for attaching any kind of significance to something so trivial. Superstitions are the product of an irrational belief that future events are influenced by certain behaviours. And usually Violet would agree with her. Violet always agreed with her mother. Or at least she used to. She'd begun over the last few months to question what she had always taken for granted. No one had quite gotten over her 'big rebellion' yet.

Violet sighed. She was going to go crazy sitting here all day.

\*\*\*

Violet perched on a picnic table in the park, eating an apple she'd found in Peter's desk. The park was right next to the school, and a young soccer team was running through drills on one of the fields. Teenagers streamed out of the high school in an unruly, loud, laughing, vulgar mass. There were no school buses to pick them up; instead, they spread out towards the public bus stops. Many of them were headed straight to the big mall not very far away.

She had been struck by the manners and attitude of the students. The kids swore like sailors and defied their teachers almost to the point of threatening physical violence. She'd seen a boy, maybe fourteen or fifteen, stalk a teacher to her office door and try to prevent her from entering, just because he wanted his cell-phone back. It took two adults to get the boy to back off. After that, Violet picked up the pace as she went through the halls to the office her brother shared with the rest of the math teachers.

One of the receptionists had helped her with the forms she had to fill out and with sorting out Peter's possessions from the school's property in his desk. Because of his contract, the administration couldn't go into his desk without his permission. Things had been awkward at first, and she suspected a few rules had been bent, but it was only Peter's fault that no one could get a hold of him. Apparently all he'd done was send a hasty email to the principal the night he'd left. Violet supposed he had technically breached his contract anyway. So, the plump dark-haired receptionist (whose name she

couldn't remember) helped pack up a green milk carton with his books, sheet music and knickknacks, and took charge of the ungraded tests and Peter's drawer of confiscated cell-phones and super-balls. There didn't seem to be an office for the music department, so Peter had kept his math and music materials jumbled together in the same desk.

Sitting here, under the muted orange and red leaves of the maple trees, she was reminded of when she and Peter were kids, waiting after school for their parents to pick them up from some after-school activity. They were enrolled in a lot of after-school activities.

Violet looked down to see the receptionist walking towards her. The woman stopped in front of her and gave her a short wave. "Hi."

Violet managed a thin smile. "Hi."

She pointed at the table with a "May I?" gesture and Violet shrugged. The receptionist sat down next to her and held out a pack of cigarettes.

"No, thanks. I don't smoke," said Violet, lifting a hand to decline.

The other woman shrugged and lit a cigarette for herself. "Mind if I do?"

Violet shrugged. They sat in silence for a few minutes, the smoke from the receptionist's cigarette wafting in the space between them. There was something unsettling about the other woman's easy camaraderie. Violet didn't recall anything from their previous encounter that would make them any more than strangers. Violet had never been one of those people who could make friends with anyone they happened to meet.

She shifted uneasily on the table. "Did I forget something at the school?"

"No." She glanced sidelong at Violet and laughed. "You're in my smoking spot."

Violet wasn't sure if she should be offended. She frowned. "Oh."

They were quiet again, the other woman exhaling long curls of smoke. Violet thought about getting up and leaving.

“You look a lot like him. Around the eyes and your hair.”

Violet started. “Huh?”

The receptionist tapped ash off her cigarette. She was looking right at Violet.

“Your brother. You look like Peter.”

“Oh! I guess.” She’d never thought about their family resemblance. She turned and looked at the receptionist. “Do you know my brother well?”

She shrugged. “We’re smoking buddies.”

“Peter smokes?” He never smoked around her or the family. Their mother would have lectured him if he had. She was a huge health nut.

“Sure. Everyone here does.” She gestured toward the school. “Bloody smoking ban hurt the teachers more than the students.”

“I can see why,” Violet said, thinking of what she’d witnessed in the halls.

“Yeah. You’d think sometimes we were one of those inner-city schools you see in movies.” She held out the hand that wasn’t holding her cigarette. “I’m Christina, by the way.”

Violet shook her hand. “Violet.”

Christina nodded. “Your brother talks about you a lot.”

“He does?”

“Yeah. You just got your M.A., right?”

“Yeah.” She peered at Christina. “I’m sorry. I never realized how little Peter talks about his life here.” Violet immediately regretted her words. Her cheeks heated. “That

didn't come out right."

Christina laughed. "Typical. Actually, Peter and I dated a little. For, like, five minutes. No offense, but even the *word* relationship causes your brother to head for the hills."

"That I know." Violet felt a twinge of guilt at never taking enough of an interest in Peter's life. She'd never asked him about his job, his friends, or his girlfriends. The only reason she knew anything about his social life was because their mother would ask him every Christmas when he was going to settle down, and every year he'd evade the question. No wonder she didn't know why he'd disappeared. What did she really know about him?

"You're OK with that?"

Christina shrugged. "It was a while ago. We're just friends." She put out her cigarette on the table and flicked it into the grass. "So, you're staying at the house with Lucas?"

Violet nodded. "For now." She paused, wondering how to word her question. "Is he always so...?"

Christina smirked. "Standoffish? Weird?"

"Yes."

She laughed. "Lucas is just shy and reserved. He takes some time to get to know."

"That's good to know." Violet shifted. Her butt was falling asleep. "I meant to ask, was everything all right this morning? With Peter being gone and all."

"There was some confusion at first, but Greg (that's the principal) put in the request for the sub as soon as he got Peter's email this morning. We only had to cover

first period.”

Violet sighed. “That’s a relief. Lucas wasn’t sure he’d even quit.”

Christina shrugged. “Yeah, I don’t know what’s up with Peter these days. I know they’ve been talking about shutting down the music department next year, but still…”

“They’re closing the music department?” asked Violet.

Christina nodded. “Something about budget cuts. But I didn’t think it would be reason enough to skip town. I just wish he’d pick up his cell.”

“Yeah. He’s not answering my calls either,” said Violet, thoughtful. This woman knew so much more about Peter than she did. She did consider the weirdness of this complete stranger knowing all this stuff and imparting it to Violet like they were neighbourhood gossips who’d known each other for years, but there was something about her that made Violet instantly believe anything she said. Even if she reflected at the same time that she probably shouldn’t. Maybe it was that sense of camaraderie. She didn’t know. All she knew was that she was starting to wonder if she knew anything at all about her brother. Had she really been so absorbed in her own problems that she hadn’t noticed his?

Christina watched her ponder this problem, and then asked, “Can I ask you a personal question?”

Violet turned and replied, “Sure. I guess.”

“Peter told me about your break-up. Are you OK?”

Violet almost jumped off the table. “What?”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry if I was prying.”

Violet took a deep breath. It wasn’t Christina’s fault. She was going to have a lot

to talk about with Peter when she finally got a hold of him. Maybe it was best for him that he wasn't answering his phone. And hadn't she just been thinking of how comfortable she felt around this woman? "No. It's fine. What did he tell you?"

Christina visibly relaxed. "Mostly, he vented. He was really angry at your ex."

"Oh." Violet sighed. "I don't know. It all still feels fresh, you know? And now Peter runs off when I need him. I don't know what I'm doing here."

Christina laid a hand on Violet's shoulder. "This might sound useless, but it does get better. You'll find someone else."

Violet felt tears gather in her eyelashes and blinked them away. She wasn't going to cry here. "So I've heard. Thanks anyway."

"My grandmother used to say that men are like squash. You have to peel them and hack them up and beat them to a pulp, but eventually the squash (and men) are finally of some use."

"That makes no sense." They looked at each other, and suddenly, Christina burst out laughing. Violet was stunned for a second, and then she joined her. The two women giggled and guffawed until they were both hoarse. Violet wiped tears from her eyes with the heel of her hand. "I don't get it at all."

Christina grinned. "Me neither. But it always seemed to make sense to her." This prompted another fit of laughter. They both fell back against the picnic table and laughed till their stomachs hurt.

When she could breathe again, Violet turned her head towards Christina and said, "It's not just about him, you know? I needed to get away. From all of it."

"I hear you." Christina turned her head towards Violet. "I still live with my

parents.”

“You do?” Violet was a little embarrassed at how shrill that sounded.

“My mother’s Italian.”

Violet nodded sagely. “My mother’s a psychologist/self-help guru.”

“Harsh.”

Violet smiled. Then she saw the dark orange and violet colour of the sky through the leaves. “Shit! What time is it?”

They sat up. Christina glanced at her watch. “4:30ish.”

“I’m going to miss my bus!” Violet bounded off the picnic table and landed shakily on her feet.

Christina waved to Violet from the picnic table. “Don’t forget. If you need to talk, I’m around.”

“OK! Bye! It was nice meeting you,” she called behind her as she ran across the grass.

\*\*\*

Violet curled up on the couch and flipped the channels until she got to *Judge Judy*. A woman was suing her ex-boyfriend for some loans and totalling her car. It was the same old story. She said it was a loan; he said it was a gift. Judge Judy was reading him the riot act.



She was only half-watching. Weekday afternoon TV sucked. She didn't want to watch *Oprah* or *Dr. Phil*. She didn't want to get sucked into some soap opera. Court shows were mildly amusing and strangely satisfying.

The front door slammed and Lucas trudged up the stairs. He dropped his bag and jacket at the top of the stairs and acknowledged her as he slumped onto the couch. "Hey."

She folded her legs in closer to herself. "Hi."

He gazed at the TV for a minute. "Are you watching this?" he asked. She shrugged. Taking that as a no, Lucas got up and put a disk in the Wii. He strapped on a remote, plugged in a secondary controller, switched the channel on the TV, and sat back down. Pleasant music accompanied the appearance of the Wii menu on the screen.

Violet frowned. She hadn't meant that she wanted to change what was on. He ignored her and clicked on the game in the menu. The title credits for *Super Mario Galaxy* played.

She sat in sullen silence and watched him play. The little Mario character ran around weird 3D planets, avoiding dangers and beating up mushroom opponents. The goal of each level seemed to be to gather triangular pieces of some star that allowed Mario to travel to other worlds. Lucas controlled with practiced deftness the character and the little cursor he used to collect multi-coloured stars. It seemed like a very childish game, but Lucas was focused on it.

"Why are men such pricks?" she muttered under her breath.

The little Mario character walked into a wall. "I...don't know," Lucas said after a long pause.

She sighed and turned away. She was a little embarrassed at her outburst. “Forget it.”

He returned to his game and she gazed at the window without seeing anything. Violet didn’t think she really cared what was on the television. Her spirits were just low and she had wanted something mind-numbing to distract her.

She almost didn’t notice when Lucas pointed the Wiimote at her. “Want to play?”

She stared at the proffered remote. “No, thank you.”

He rolled his eyes. “Have you ever played with the Wii before?”

“No. I’m no good at video games.”

“Anyone can play this. Senior citizens play Wii games.” He exited the game and got up to put another disk in the machine. “Here. Why don’t you try *Wii Sports*? It’s easy.”

The *Wii Sports* icon appeared in the little menu box and Lucas clicked on it. Another musical sequence played, and then another menu came on. Violet poked the remote. “Maybe....”

“What would you like? There’s baseball, tennis, golf, bowling, boxing. Bowling’s pretty easy....”

“Boxing.”

“Boxing? Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

He shrugged and showed her how to hold the Wiimote and put on the wrist strap. He had her select the boxing game. It gave her a weird disembodied feeling as she

watched the little cursor move around on the screen. She couldn't quite control it at first, but eventually it obeyed her.

The game asked her to choose an avatar. She turned to Lucas. "You can just choose one of the guest avatars." Violet picked a brown-haired girl with round spectacles and clicked. Then the game opened with animated instructions. "You just follow the tutorial. Maybe you should stand. It's easier."

She got up and followed the instructions. They showed her how to use the Wiimote and the other controller (Lucas called it a nunchuk) to jab and swing at her virtual opponent. It was harder than it seemed. The instructions would pause until she grasped the move. She got them all eventually.

Then the first round started. She floundered around, trying to connect. Her long-haired, beady-eyed opponent was more successful. Her health, represented in the corner by a red pie chart, disappeared rapidly until her character fell over. The game counted down. She started to sit back down. "Crap."

Lucas stayed her with a hand. "Wait for it."

The counter stopped at 6 and her avatar got back up with partial life. Surprised, Violet stood back up and swung at her opponent. Her avatar smacked him in the jaw with an uppercut. One of his little pie slices was eliminated. She laughed. "Cool!"

"Good! Keep doing that!"

Violet continued swinging and jabbing, beating the other character into submission. It fell over and there was another countdown, but it got back up. She continued her assault as soon as she could and the character collapsed before the rain of blows. The round ended in a KO.

She bounced on her heels as she waited for the next round. This was fun! She was actually breathing heavily. It was probably the most physical activity she'd had in a while. The round began and she set to again, knocking her opponent's lights out.

This time, her opponent barely got a shot in. She hammered him mercilessly. She would kick him in the balls if the game offered that feature. The game ended.

She bounced like a little girl. He watched her, an amused smile on his face. "That was great! Can I go again?"

He got up from the couch. "Sure. Go ahead."

The doorbell rang. Lucas' smile vanished.

Violet placed the Wiimote and nunchuk on the coffee table. "Someone coming over?"

Lucas nodded and went to the door. Violet followed to the top of the stairs and hung around the railing. He opened the door and a tall, bald Middle Eastern man entered the foyer. He didn't seem to notice Violet. Lucas sighed. "I said I didn't feel up to going today."

The man smiled sympathetically and put a hand on Lucas' shoulder. "You never miss dinner at the restaurant. What would I tell Isaac?" He squeezed his shoulder as Lucas attempted to respond. "I know you're hurting, but you can't let it control you. She's not worth it."

Lucas flicked a furtive glance up the stairs. His friend followed his gaze and saw Violet. Surprised, he said, "Oh, hello."

"Hi." Violet could almost see the wheels turning in the well-built man's head.

Lucas gestured to Violet. “Sean, this is Pete’s sister, Violet. She’s staying here for a few days.”

Violet started. Here was another friend of Peter’s. He took the steps two at a time and landed in front of her. What did she know of him? She couldn’t quite remember. He took her hand firmly in his and gave her a two-cheek kiss. Violet clumsily returned the greeting. *Right! He was gay!* As soon as she had that thought, she thought how ridiculous it was that she had recalled that one detail. She could have thought of something else. Like that he was half-Egyptian, for instance.

Sean turned to Lucas, Violet’s hand still in his own. “Well, you have a reason to come to dinner then.” He turned to Violet, who cringed a little under that enthusiastic gaze. “Would you like to come enjoy a gourmet meal, Violet? My Isaac is the best chef in town.”

Violet looked over Sean’s shoulder at Lucas. He frowned at his friend’s back. “I guess. Um, I mean, sure.”

Sean took her agreement as full approbation and nearly whirled her down the stairs. He wrapped his other arm around Lucas’ shoulders and guided them through the door. “Great! Let’s go. I’ll drive.”

Lucas managed to turn halfway and lock the front door before they were swept down to Sean’s SUV.

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“Voila.” Isaac, Sean’s boyfriend, lifted the round metal cover with a dramatic flourish, revealing a plate on which was an elegantly constructed tower of food. He pointed with his slender fingers at each item as he named it. “Organic chicken breast stuffed with sautéed cranberries on a bed of linguine Alfredo and wilted greens with a cranberry-lemon coulis.”

His audience oohed and aahed appreciatively. Violet, Lucas, Sean, and the business-like woman who’d been introduced to Violet as Brooke, the owner of Isaac’s restaurant, were seated at a round table in a quiet corner. They had finished a sumptuous dinner and were now lingering over coffee. With the dinner rush over and only a few couples and groups still at their tables, Brooke and then Isaac had come to join them, Isaac with his newest creation. The chicken smelled delicious to Violet, and even though she was pretty full already, she was curious to try it. They had all tried one of his spontaneous creations already, a little appetizer of grilled tuna and red pimento tapenade. The tuna had melted in her mouth like butter.

Violet had enjoyed the evening immensely. She could see what her brother saw in these people. Sean was easy and outgoing, always ready to take up the conversation and possessing a healthy, self-deprecating sense of humour. He seemed to take pains to never treat her like an outsider, explaining the occasional inside joke or local reference. Even Lucas was more open and engaging around his friend. Lucas seemed to have put aside his grave countenance for the evening. He laughed or spoke animatedly about whatever subject they discussed, whether it was politics, television or travel. Brooke treated her in a dignified manner, politely asking Violet about herself and her impressions without ever seeming intrusive.

Violet had always been too busy with school to maintain many close friendships. She'd almost forgotten the simple pleasure of sharing a bottle of wine with friends. That was what they treated her like: a friend. Her brother's friends seemed to have accepted his absence as yet another of his eccentricities and taken his sister under their wing.

Isaac stood over the table like a cooking school teacher, his back erect and one hand languidly placed on his waist. He was an inch or two taller than Violet, maybe 5'7" or 5'8", and had a slender frame. He wore a white chef's jacket and multi-coloured camouflage-print cargo pants. He'd removed the cylindrical cap he wore in the kitchen and tousled his light brown hat-flattened hair with his fingers. His voice didn't precisely have that stereotypically effeminate gay male nasal quality, but it still rose higher than the voices of the other men at the table. "Well? Go on and try it," he commanded, taking a seat opposite Violet.

"It looks great, babe," said Sean as the group dug their forks in to take a morsel of chicken. The rest murmured agreement as they ate.

The cranberries gave the chicken a delightful bittersweet flavour. "This is delicious," Violet exclaimed.

Isaac smiled confidently, as if he had already assumed that there could not be any objections to the meal. "I'm glad you like it." He leaned forward. "So you are the famous Violet. How are you finding things in Greendale?"

Violet hesitated. "Fine. I haven't really seen much."

"Oh, honestly! Luke, you're a terrible host," Isaac scolded. He leaned back in his chair and speculated, "I suppose you've both been just sitting around the house, suffering from your respective love crises."

Violet and Lucas both straightened in their seats, startled by Isaac's comment. Violet didn't notice Lucas' agitation, however, focussed as she was on the revelation that Isaac too seemed to know her business. She was seized with a fit of pique. "Does everybody know every detail of my breakup? Did Peter tell the whole town?"

All eyes turned toward her. Violet blushed. They all looked stunned and uncomfortable, except Isaac, who dismissed her outburst with a wave. "Yes. Everybody at this table knows that Lucas finally broke up with his lying, cheating girlfriend, and that you broke up with your jerk of a boyfriend. Ow!" He paused and glared at Sean, who was frowning back at him.

Brooke held up a hand. "I didn't know all that."

"I told you," Isaac said. He turned back to Sean. "Will you stop that?"

"I don't think either one of them wants to talk about this right now," replied Sean.

Violet was watching Lucas during this bit of conversation. He frowned deeply and clenched his fists. What Isaac had said about Lucas had finally dawned on her and she looked at him in a new light. Was that why he was so moody and rude? He was depressed like her? She placed a hand sympathetically on his arm. He turned sharply at her touch, his expression confused. They shared a look of understanding and then Lucas turned away, his grave mask back on.

Isaac and Sean didn't notice what passed between Lucas and Violet, arguing as they were. Brooke tried to mediate between them.

"No, I think Lucas needs to hear some sense. He knows what I think of that Westridge bitch. He's better off without her," Isaac was arguing.

"Try to be more sympathetic," Sean remonstrated.



“I am sympathetic.” Isaac turned to Lucas. “You need to wake up and understand that you have already wasted too much of your life on that woman. Make a clean break and be done with it.”

Lucas looked like he could no longer contain his anger. He retorted, “You act like I can just sweep it all under a rug. I was with Layla for years. We practically grew up together!”

“Yes, and you’ve grown apart. What kind of relationship did you two ever have? She has used and abused you the whole time. Hasn’t she, Sean?” Isaac turned to Sean for support. He reluctantly nodded. “See? If it wasn’t for your parents and the country club and all that shit, she would have moved on to some other victim by now.”

Violet was confused. She leaned over to Brooke. “I’m lost.”

“Layla is Lucas’ ex. He caught her cheating and they broke up. They’d been together since high school,” Brooke explained. She continued softly as Violet only looked somewhat less perplexed. “Lucas grew up in Westridge. His father is the head of a big engineering firm, Gibson and Cole.”

They were startled from their conversation by Lucas brusquely getting up and walking out. Violet looked at Sean, who fidgeted anxiously. “Where is he going?”

Sean gave her an awkward smile. “He just needs to cool off. I’m sure he’ll be back.” He turned to Isaac. “You, my dear, should go apologize to Lucas.”

“I’m not apologizing for being right,” he snapped. Isaac poked at the remnants of the chicken with a fork. “I should get rid of this. It’s gone cold.” He put the cover back on the plate and picked it up.

“I’ll go with you. I need to start closing up,” Brooke said, getting up. She held out a hand to Violet. “It was nice meeting you, Violet.”

Violet shook her hand. “Yeah, you too.”

Sean stopped Isaac with a hand on his arm. “I’m going to take Lucas and Violet home. I’ll see you at home, eh?”

Isaac smiled and kissed Sean on the forehead. “Of course.” He looked at Violet. “Lovely to meet you, Violet. Thanks for coming.”

Violet managed a half-smile. “Thank you. The food was delicious.”

Sean got up as Isaac walked away, and Violet followed him. She glanced towards the restaurant entrance. “Should we wait for Lucas to come back?”

Sean shook his head. “No, maybe we should just go find him. It’s getting late.”

“Oh. OK.” Violet followed Sean out of the restaurant.

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Violet stood on the balcony, looking out at the night sky. She could see the street lights of the highway from Lucas’ backyard. The multitude of lights gave the sky a grey cast, so that the sky was only really black high above her. The fields and road far ahead of her seemed misty and insubstantial: the lights points of brightness in the distance illuminating cars and warehouses. The porch light created a pool of light a few meters in front of her, and the rest of the yard was in shadow. A few stars shone behind her, but the lamps obscured any stars in front of her. The whole thing gave what usually looked like a barren soulless space a beautifully mysterious quality. She could imagine living here,

could imagine seeing an aesthetic in the land of consumerism that people she'd known in the city had always warned her about.

Her cell-phone buzzed in her pocket. Wondering who would call her at this hour, she took it out and flipped it open. "Hello?"

"Hello? Violet? You called me?"

Violet nearly dropped the phone. It was her brother. "Peter? Yes, I called you. Like a hundred times. Where the hell are you?"

"I'm in London."

"London? London, England? What are you doing there? Why aren't you here?"

He paused. "Oh. Right."

She ground her teeth. "You forgot, didn't you? You forgot I was coming."

"I didn't forget! I just had something come up."

"In London."

"That's kind of how it went, yes."

Violet sighed. "What are you doing in London?"

"I needed a life change."

She had to take a deep breath before she could respond. Even so, her voice sounded shrill. "You needed a what?"

"Violet, I'm almost thirty years old. What have I done with my life? I haven't accomplished any of the goals I set out for myself."

"Are you kidding me? Peter, you have a job and friends and responsibilities here. You just dropped all of that because you're dissatisfied with your life?"

He paused, perhaps choosing his words. "I can't let anything stand in the way of my dreams. Maybe that's wrong, and I'm sorry if I've caused anyone any problems, but what's done is done."

"I don't know what to say to that. I really don't."

"Look, this call is really expensive, and if we're just going to argue in circles, then I have to go. I'm sorry, Vi, I really am. We'll talk about this more another time, OK?"

Violet, realizing she was never going to win this argument with him, like she rarely won any argument with him, said, "OK."

"Bye." He hung up.

Violet closed her phone and stared at it. Her brother had gone nuts. Truly nuts. He acted like it was perfectly easy and understandable to just drop everything and run away from his problems. Like you could just pick up and start over, just like that. True, it was sort of what she wanted for herself, but it was completely different. At least, she believed it was. She didn't think she would ever do it the way he did, just running off without a word to anyone.

She turned as she heard the sliding door open and Lucas stepped out onto the balcony. He stood next to her and leaned on the railing. "Hey. I heard voices."

Violet stashed her cell-phone in her pocket. "Yeah. Guess who finally called? Peter."

Lucas arched an eyebrow. "Where is he?"

"Would you believe London?"

“That’s far.” There was something very carefully controlled about Lucas’ voice, like he was purposely trying to speak as neutrally as possible.

“You’ll never believe the reason he gave me.” She looked to see if he was interested in hearing what Peter had said, but Lucas’ thoughts were elsewhere. He wasn’t really listening to her. They were silent for a long moment, and Violet returned to contemplating the landscape.

“I’m sorry you had to hear any of that tonight,” he said suddenly.

“Huh? It’s OK,” she said, startled. “Are you all right?”

Lucas replied, “Sure. I’ll be fine. I know Isaac really means well, but he can seriously piss me off sometimes.” He gripped the railing and stood up straight. “You know, I bought this house with my own money. My father didn’t help me with a single cent. Layla never understood why I wanted to leave and move to the suburbs. She always accused me of slumming.”

The more Violet heard about this woman, the less she liked her. She hoped sincerely at that moment that she’d never have to meet her. “You just want to be independent. That’s not hard to understand.”

Lucas smiled. “Yeah.” They were silent again for a minute then he said, “I’ve been thinking…”

Violet turned to look at him. His expression was very serious and a little apprehensive. “What?”

He took a deep breath. “You can stay here as long as you like. In fact, you could take over Peter’s room and share. It doesn’t look like he’s coming back any time soon, and I could use a roommate to help with expenses.”

“Seriously?” Violet was stunned. She hadn’t expected this at all.

“Yes. What do you say?”

Violet frowned. “I haven’t got the same type of income as Peter. I couldn’t contribute as much. At least in the beginning.”

“That’s fine.” Now that he’d finally made the proposal, she could tell that he was trying unsuccessfully to hide his impatience for a response.

Violet pondered his offer. She did like the house and Lucas wasn’t such a bad guy. She did like him, despite first impressions. Violet also had no money to set herself up in her own place. She looked up at him. “Sounds like a good idea to me.” She held out her hand.

He shook it. “Great.”

They stood there for a second, unsure of what to do or say. Lucas let go of her hand and they turned back to the railing. Violet shivered.

“Are you cold?”

Violet nodded. “A little.”

Lucas nudged her elbow. “Let’s go in.”

He opened the patio door and followed her inside.

## Nana Michaels

Sean, murmuring thanks, handed Violet a large white box tied with pink ribbon. He shut the car door behind her and pressed the remote to lock the car. The headlights flashed and the car chirped. Lucas came around the other side and held out his arms to take the box, but Violet just shrugged and held the fragile burden carefully before her as they walked up the pavement to the Hebrew Rehab Centre.

The centre looked like a cross between a hospital and a nursing home. It was three stories high and fanned out in two wings lined with plain rectangular windows. In every window were the same white linen curtains. The façade was dull beige concrete. The building was surrounded by grass, old maple trees, duplexes, and apartment buildings. Sean had parked on the street rather than in the small parking lot.

“Thanks for coming, guys,” said Sean, walking between Violet and Lucas.

Lucas shrugged. “No problem. I love Nana Michaels.”

Violet concentrated on keeping the box as stationary as possible. She had had no particular reason to come along, except for curiosity. She was curious to meet this woman who was so important to both of her friends. “Isaac couldn’t come?”

“No, he had to work.” Sean paused. “He doesn’t really like hospitals anyway.”

As they came up to the glass sliding doors, they met up with a woman and her teenage son who immediately approached Sean and greeted him with a two-cheek kiss. The woman was of average height with long straight chestnut hair and a severe look to her face. Her son was taller than his mother and rail thin. He stood docilely behind her, regarding the hand that Sean extended to him with some reserve before shaking it.

Sean half-turned towards Violet and Lucas. "You know Lucas. And this is his roommate, Violet. Guys, this is my cousin, Mia, and her son, Matthew."

Mia shook both their hands, sticking a thermos under her arm to do so. Her son carried a plastic container full of coffee mugs. She gestured inside and they entered, Mia falling in next to her cousin. "So, is there somewhere we can go with all this stuff?" she asked him.

Sean nodded. "I called yesterday. They said there are some tables in the cafeteria where we can set up." They walked past the security desk and into the lobby where the elevators were. There was a small café/gift shop on the side, but it was already closed. Sean took the box out of Violet's hands and put it into Lucas', along with the plastic shopping bag of utensils he had been carrying. He pointed down a corridor marked "Chapel". "I think it's down there past the chapel. Luke, how about you help Mia put things together and we'll go get Nana."

"Sounds like a plan." Lucas nodded and followed Mia and Matthew down the corridor.

Sean smiled politely at Violet as he pressed the button for the elevator. They waited a minute and then the green arrow above them lit up and they went inside. They were silent for a moment, Sean half-smiling at Violet and fidgeting. The interior of the elevator was grey and metallic. A couple of weekly schedules of activities were tacked on to a corkboard along with a "Stop Smoking" ad from the Canadian Cancer Society. Bingo was held every Tuesday and non-denominational prayer services every Wednesday evening. She wondered idly why Sean's grandmother was at a Jewish rehab when she



wasn't even Jewish, but she supposed that you didn't have to be. The elevator seemed very slow to Violet. "Has your grandmother been here long?" she asked.

Sean stopped fidgeting. "Hmm? Oh, about a month and a half. Since she got out of the hospital after her fall."

"Is she OK?"

"Oh yeah. She was lucky that she only bruised her hip. Her physiotherapist says she's doing very well now." The elevator stopped with a slight jolt and they got out. Sean led Violet past the nurse's station and through the corridor to his grandmother's room. He moved through the hall like someone who knew his way around. In the hall, Violet noticed a large magnetic white board with coloured disks and the names of patients. The disks were arranged in columns marked with information for the care of each patient.

His grandmother's room had four beds occupied, one of which was curtained off. They passed one of the other occupants, a wiry old black man who smiled at Violet before turning back to the loud French soap opera playing on his little television. On their right, a woman with dark grey curly hair looked up at them from her crossword book as they stopped next to the bed nearest the window. She wore a black pencil skirt and a cream-coloured blouse. "Hi, Mrs. Riklis," Sean said. Violet gave her a half-smile. Mrs. Riklis only looked at them with a pinched frown on her face before going back to her book.

Sean shrugged and turned to the woman in the other bed. This was Nana Michaels. Violet hung back while Sean approached his grandmother. She was on the phone when they arrived, but her whole face lit up when she saw her grandson. Nana Michaels was short and somewhat round, with a plump wrinkled face and bright white

hair. She wore big square-framed bifocals, and was dressed in black slacks and a navy blue sweater. Her room space was small, although bigger than that of the others because she was near the window. She had a hospital-type bed, a small dresser, a rectangular table on wheels, some visitor chairs, a phone, and a small TV suspended on a mechanical arm. The dresser and window sill were covered in family photos and small pots of flowers. A large bouquet of purple flowers dominated the dresser.

Sean hugged and kissed his grandmother and then she handed him the phone. "It's your mother calling from Florida," said Nana Michaels in her soft raspy voice.

He nodded and took the receiver. "Hey Mum. How's the weather? Good. Good. Uh huh. OK. I'm going to give you back to Nana. Love you too. Bye."

She took back the phone and spoke a few more minutes before saying good-bye to her daughter and hanging up. Sean beckoned Violet over. Nana Michaels smiled at Violet. "Who do we have here, Sean?"

Sean spoke loudly like one would to someone who was hard-of-hearing. "This is Violet, Peter's sister. She's Lucas' new roommate."

Nana Michaels tapped Sean on the arm and pointed to her ear. "Goodness, boy. I can hear you just fine. I've got my hearing aid on, can't you see?" Sean mumbled an apology.

Violet crossed her hands in front of her and said politely, "Happy birthday, Mrs. Michaels."

The old woman smiled at Violet. "Call me Nana. Everyone does." She appraised the young woman before her. "So you're Peter's sister, eh? Aren't you lovely? A pleasure to meet you, dear."

“Pleased to meet you too, Mrs...uh, Nana Michaels.” Violet couldn’t keep her gaze from drifting from the old woman’s face to the room around her. There was something unsettling about that steady gaze, as approving as it seemed to be.

Sean gestured to the vase of purple flowers. “I see you got our flowers.”

Nana Michaels beamed at her grandson. “Oh yes. They’re very pretty, dear.”

He took a wheelchair out from among the visitor chairs. “Ready to go downstairs?”

“Downstairs? What for?”

“We brought some cake and coffee. There’s a place in the cafeteria where we can all sit down.” He pulled open the chair and set the brakes. “Can you get in on your own or do you need help?”

“No, I don’t need any help.” She pointed at the grey metal walker in front of her bed. “Push that over here.”

Violet hastily nudged the walker closer. It gave her an uncomfortable feeling to touch it. A tingly, creepy-crawly feeling. Nana Michaels took the handle-bars of the walker and levered herself up and around into the wheelchair. It looked like a slow painful process. Sean gently reached around her and put down the foot supports. He helped her place each foot on the metal plates.

“Ready to go? Are you comfortable?” he asked, undoing the brakes and gripping the handles of the wheelchair.

Nana Michaels shifted a little on the cushion. “Yes, yes. Let’s go.”

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Lucas pointed with the cake box to a doorway on their right. Mia and Matthew walked past him into the Rehab Centre's cafeteria. It was a moderately-sized room with a few food counters that were empty and dark, and long beige tables lined with chairs. Most of the cafeteria was darkened, except for a tiny section behind some pillars where two or three people sat at a table near the big brown vending machines. The walls were the same dull cream colour as the rest of the centre.

Mia peered at the light switches on the wall and flicked one on. A part of the darkened section lit up. She put her thermos down on the nearest long table and directed her son and Lucas to put down their burdens. "Put that there, Matthew. Careful! Don't let them rattle. Do you have the knife there, Lucas? Give it to me, please," she said, pointing as she gave her various instructions.

Lucas handed her the knife Sean had brought for the cake. Mia cut the ribbons on the box and peeled back the cover. She reached in and pulled out the birthday cake Sean had bought for the small party. It was round with white icing and ringed with large glazed strawberries. A rectangular chocolate card had the words "Happy Birthday Nana" on it in white decorator's icing. Lucas pulled away the box and shoved it to the back end of the table so Mia could put the cake down. "That's good. Nana likes strawberries," she commented.

Mia took a plastic bag from her son and removed a package of paper plates and a fistful of plastic forks. She paused. "How many are we?"

“Six,” Lucas replied. He was waiting patiently for something more to do. At the same time, he wondered how much longer Sean and Violet were going to be. Mia had never been one of his favourite people. Even when they were kids, she tended to be bossy and annoying.

She passed out plates and forks while Matthew distributed coffee mugs. The mugs, a mismatched set of bright colours and various sizes, were decorated with miniature Thomas Kinkade-like paintings or cartoonish slogans like “#1 Mom” or “I’d rather be golfing”. Mia rummaged around in the plastic bag then dropped it back on the table. “Shit.”

Lucas raised an eyebrow at the comment. He noticed that Matthew didn’t even flinch. Clearly it was a word he wasn’t surprised to hear from his mother’s lips. “What?” he asked without really caring about the answer.

“I forgot the cream.” She had her hands on her hips and was looking about her like the omission of cream for the coffee was a serious crisis.

“So? There’s probably some here somewhere. We just have to look for it.”

Her lip twisted in distaste. “There’s no cream here. It’s not kosher.”

“What do you mean, it’s not kosher? There’s such a thing as kosher cream.”

“They don’t buy it, so you can’t have cream at all. I’ve looked before.” She gestured widely at their surroundings. “You can look if you want, but they don’t have any.”

Lucas shrugged impatiently. “So we’ll just use milk. Nana Michaels isn’t going to mind.”

Mia shot him a look as if to berate him for presuming to speak for *her* grandmother. "I don't like milk in my coffee."

"Fine. Let me see what I can find." He turned away quickly to keep from saying what he was really thinking. If her son hadn't been there and Sean wasn't about to come down with Nana Michaels, his response might have been different. For her sake, Lucas would quietly tolerate Mia.

He wandered over to the vending machines. There was a coffee machine and an old-fashioned-looking white fridge along with candy and sandwich machines. Lucas peered at the coffee machine. Maybe they could get coffee with cream out of this thing. But there was something wrong with it. The digital display was off. He looked around and behind it. Was it even plugged in?

"The coffee machine's broken," a voice said from behind him.

He turned. A middle-aged woman with reddish-blond hair sat next to an old woman in a wheelchair. The woman was connected to a big IV bag full of clear liquid hung from a tall pole on wheels. He smiled shyly. "Oh, thanks. You wouldn't happen to know where I could get some cream?"

The middle-aged woman shrugged. "You could try the fridge. Or ask at the nurse's station." She went back to chatting one-sidedly with who he assumed was her mother or aunt. The old woman seemed only able to stare at her. He felt a twinge of pity as he noted her almost too erect posture and her somewhat bug-eyed expression. She looked like she wanted desperately to speak and yet couldn't. *God, I never want to live like that*, he thought.

Lucas nodded his thanks and went to the fridge. He pulled it open. The fridge was mostly empty, except for a container of something with someone's name on it. He passed it over without reading it; it wasn't what he was looking for. In a corner was a metal bowl of miniature creamers. He took one out and inspected it. It wasn't cream. It was coffee whitener. He didn't know you could even get coffee whitener in this size.

Lucas shrugged. This would have to do. He took out the bowl and brought it back to the table. He held it up for Mia to see. "All I could find was Coffee Mate."

Mia barely looked up. "That's fine. Whatever."

Lucas ground his teeth in frustration. All that effort and she didn't even care anymore? He placed the bowl down on the table just hard enough to produce a small bang without looking like he was slamming it. Mia flinched but ignored him.

They both looked up as Sean and Violet entered, pushing Nana Michaels in the wheelchair. Lucas and Mia visibly brightened and approached her as she was wheeled to a stop at the head of the table. She exclaimed over all of them, kissing and hugging her granddaughter and great-grandson, and mussing Lucas' hair into a spiky pouf. Violet snickered as Lucas combed his hair back into place with his fingers.

They all took their places, except for Mia, who stood up with a small paper packet and Nana's mug. She leaned over her grandmother's shoulder. "I brought you a Sanka, Nana, because I know you're going to want a decaf at this hour. I'll just make it for you in the microwave, OK?"

"Sure, dear. That's good," Nana replied, waving her off. Mia walked off before she even stopped speaking. Nana Michaels ignored her and admired the cake. "Very pretty cake. Was it you that brought it, Sean?"

Sean nodded. He poured coffee into everyone's mugs. He paused at Matthew and the boy nodded. With a shrug, Sean filled his cup. Violet drizzled milk into her coffee from the little carton Mia had brought. "Too bad there aren't any candles," she commented.

Sean shook his head. "Not allowed. Can't have open flames around here."

Mia returned with the Sanka and placed it in front of Nana Michaels. "You can't have a lot of things here," she half-muttered.

"Every place has rules," said Sean, slicing down through the cake with the large knife he'd brought.

"Here they go overboard. You can't even get cream. You know that the information sheet that she got at admission says that any dietary inquiries should be brought to the rabbi?"

Sean just looked at Mia for a second, his hand holding the knife paused over the cake. He opened his mouth to respond, but Nana Michaels interjected, "Look at those strawberries! They're gigantic!"

"They're like mutant strawberries," Matthew agreed.

"Reminds me of the strawberries you grew at the old house, Nana," said Lucas, taking a bite of cake.

Nana Michaels smiled. "I don't think I ever had any like these in my garden."

"I remember those strawberries. There were tons of them. And raspberry and blackberry bushes. Lucas and I used to stuff ourselves sick with them," said Sean, waving his fork for emphasis.



“And made a big mess of ourselves.” Lucas turned to Violet, who was regarding the exchange with great curiosity. “When I was a kid, my parents would go away for a few weeks every summer, so I would stay at Nana Michaels’ house with Sean.”

Nana Michaels chuckled. “I still remember when you first came to my house, dressed in your little designer polo shirt and pants.”

Lucas smiled. “I was a real handful back then.”

“Boys always are.” She paused, a wistful look on her face. “That was a good house.”

They were all silent for a moment, eating their cake quietly. Mia was the first to break the silence. “Did I tell you, Nana, that Matthew got a hundred percent on his history test?” she said, a hand on her son’s shoulder.

Nana Michaels looked up from her plate to smile at her great-grandson. “That’s very good, Matthew.”

Mia beamed. “His teacher said he shows great potential in history and social sciences. He’s at the top of his class.”

Nana nodded. “Lovely. You know, your granddad loved history too. I still have some of his old books if you want them.”

“Sure, Nana, we’ll come look at them when you’re back home.”

They were quiet again, and then Sean said, “How’s your confirmation going, Matt?”

Matthew looked stunned for a moment at being addressed, then shrugged. Lucas felt bad for the boy. He seemed uncomfortable sitting with all these adults. His mother, on the other hand, was ready to talk for and over him. “Matthew has been doing fine.

He'll be confirmed next Easter. But you'll never believe how ridiculous the Church has gotten lately. I have to take him to church every Sunday to get his little book stamped but the classes are on Saturday so we end up going twice."

"It stands to reason that if he wants to be confirmed then he has to go to church," said Lucas wryly.

She frowned at him. "Of course he does. But they make you go. If he misses three stamps in his book, they won't confirm him."

"That's not very fair. I don't remember Father O'Neill ever being that strict," mused Sean.

"Father O'Neill retired a couple years ago. Now it's this Father Richardson. He's some sort of ultra-right-wing nut," replied Mia. "You know, last week, some women were passing out this stupid pamphlet protesting the new World Religions course Matthew's taking next year. It actually said the kids would be in *mortal danger* if they took the class."

"There was a big demonstration downtown last weekend about that," added Violet.

Mia stared at Violet for a second, seeming to just notice her. "Right. I went up to those women and I said to them, what are you talking about? How dare you stand in front of the church giving out pamphlets that claim my son is in mortal danger? From who? From what?"

"To be fair, I think they meant mortal danger to their souls," said Lucas. He couldn't help baiting her. It was too easy.

“I’m well aware of that, Lucas. It’s just the way they worded it. I don’t know whose values that church thinks they’re representing anymore,” she retorted.

“Well, stupid people exist everywhere and belong to all walks of life,” said Sean, closing the discussion. He began to clear the empty plates. Violet stood up and helped him. Matthew looked a little longingly at the cake as Violet removed his plate and fork. Mia poured the last of the coffee into her and the others’ mugs then closed the thermos and stuffed it into her over-sized purse. Lucas helped Sean put the remains of the cake back into the box and set it aside. Through this all, Nana Michaels sat quietly drinking her Sanka and watching her family, blood and friends alike.

When they settled back down to drink the last of the coffee, Lucas smirked at Nana Michaels and asked, “So what happened, Nana, too much excitement at Bingo? Jump up too quickly when you won?”

Nana chuckled a little at his impertinence and replied, “No, my dear. I slipped getting out of the bath. Didn’t catch the darned hand-rail in time.”

“See, this is why you need to wear your panic button, Nana. I still don’t know why they don’t have anyone to help you at that place,” griped Mia.

“I don’t need any help!” said Nana Michaels sharply.

“It’s a semi-autonomous retirement community, Mia. They all have their own condos and there’s a nurse downstairs. It’s what she wants,” admonished Sean.

“It’s still terrible. She was on the floor for an hour before anyone knew something was wrong.”

“Well, it’s hardly Simon’s fault that he found me when he did. We were only meeting for lunch,” said Nana.

They were all stunned for a moment, except for Violet who had not detected the reason for their surprise. Lucas, grinning insolently, asked, “Simon? Who’s Simon, Nana?”

She smiled shyly and a hint of a blush glowed in her wrinkled cheeks. “Just a friend.”

“A gentleman friend?”

“None of your beeswax.”

They all laughed. Even Nana Michaels joined in after a moment of half-hearted glowering. They were interrupted by a voice from the hallway.

“Excuse me? You can’t eat in this section.”

They looked up to see a nurse in pink scrubs standing in the doorway of the cafeteria. She had the expression on her face of someone who was trying to be both very firm and very polite.

Sean was the first to think of a response. “Uh, sorry. I was told that we could use the cafeteria to celebrate my grandmother’s birthday.”

The nurse wrung her hands a little as she spoke. “You can, but you’re in the kosher section. Outside food has to be eaten over there.” She pointed at the lit section near the vending machines.

Mia half-rose from her chair. “We didn’t know that. We just chose this table.”

The nurse seemed to stiffen some at Mia’s tone. “Well, the lights are usually off to indicate a section is closed. I’m just telling you the rules.”

Mia was about to say more, but Sean interrupted her. “It’s all right. We were finished anyway. Thank you for informing us.”

The nurse nodded and walked away. Sean stood and picked up the cake box.  
“Well, I guess we should pack up. Someone needs to bring Nana back to her room.”

Mia looked like she was going to say something to her cousin, but changed her mind. She motioned to her son. “Matthew, take Nana upstairs.”

Matthew shrugged and frowned. “I don’t know where Nana’s room is.”

“I’ll go with him,” volunteered Violet before Mia could snap at him. She gave Violet a withering stare.

Nana Michaels raised her hands above her head and exclaimed, “Fine, let’s go. Mia, Sean, Lucas, put your things away in your cars and come join us up in my room. Matthew, be careful with my wheelchair and don’t go too fast. Jesus, don’t just stand there all of you!”

At that last command, they all sprang into action. Violet undid the brakes on the wheelchair after Matthew tried to pull the chair away from the table and nearly jerked his great-grandmother out of it. The boy mumbled apologies and Nana Michaels patted him on the arm although she had a queasy look on her face. Matthew gripped the handles of the wheelchair tightly and, turning carefully, pushed Nana Michaels out of the cafeteria so slowly that Violet had to shorten her pace to keep up. Sean and Lucas pushed in the chairs of the table. The three of them picked up the party supplies and followed the wheelchair out. Sean gave the table a quick brush with the side of his hand as he left the cafeteria.

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“I don’t know why Nana even comes here,” sniped Mia as they walked down the long driveway to their cars.

“She likes the service here,” said Sean, glancing sidelong at his cousin.

“I don’t know why. I can’t get any good service here,” she said. Sean and Lucas looked at each other and rolled their eyes. “She’s not even Jewish!”

Sean frowned at her. “There are plenty of non-Jews here. You don’t have to be Jewish to be treated here.”

“This is because of what happened in the cafeteria, isn’t it?” asked Lucas, a wry look on his face.

“Yes, actually. It’s undignified getting kicked out of a hospital cafeteria just because we weren’t eating kosher food.” Mia turned sharply from the two men and walked over to her car, which was parked in front of Sean’s.

“We didn’t get kicked out,” protested Sean.

“Just because we didn’t know we were breaking the rules, it doesn’t make those rules not apply. People are allowed to have their own rules in their own places,” Lucas shot towards Mia.

Mia stuck her key in the lock, twisted it, and jerked her car door open. “Yeah, well, last time I checked, we live in Canada, and maybe certain people need to remember that and join the rest of us.”

Lucas was about ready to lose it. Mia was bossy, annoying, and prejudiced. He placed the cake box on the roof of Sean’s car and turned to face her. “Yes, we do live in

Canada. And in Canada, we believe in a little thing called multiculturalism. Oh yeah. And tolerance.”

Mia glared right through Lucas. Lucas glared right back at her. He could see her lips compressing in mute rage. She didn't like being told off. Especially when she couldn't think of a good comeback.

They jumped at the loud chirping sound of Sean's car unlocking. He opened the back door, tossed the plastic bag he was carrying in, grabbed the box off the roof and slid that inside the car, and then slammed the door closed. All the while, he had a pinched look on his face. “Will you two just stop? Seriously, Mia, you're one to talk like you're part of the great English Establishment. Your dad's Greek, your husband's Ukrainian. Hell, Nana's Irish.”

Mia seemed to rally a little. It was easier going up against her cousin. With Sean, she had all the reserves of elder cousin contempt to draw upon. With Lucas, she had always been a little in awe of the outsider who never had to nor never bothered to defer to her. “I don't know what you're talking about, great English Establishment. But you proved my point. Our ancestors all learned to integrate into Canadian culture. Even your Muslim father.”

“My dad's not Muslim.”

“He's Arab.”

Sean sighed. “My father is an Egyptian Christian. And I haven't proven any point of yours. I meant that you should be more tolerant of other cultures and beliefs because you and I and everybody else, frankly, come from immigrant ancestors. Canada has an immigrant culture.”

She was silent for a long moment. Lucas couldn't quite tell if any of his or Sean's arguments had sunk in. She had that petulant look on her face like the one she'd have when they were kids and she was argued into a corner. He could imagine a dozen things going through her mind, all negative. Finally, Mia closed her car door and turned towards the Centre. "I need to go get Matthew. It's a school night," she said, marching towards the building.

"Mia!" Sean called after her. She ignored him.

"Forget it. She's not going to listen," said Lucas, stuffing his hands into his pockets. The evening was getting cold.

Sean whirled on him. "Can't you keep your mouth shut for five minutes? Do you think Nana needs to have her family tense and angry with each other? She needs peace and quiet."

Lucas was actually forced a step backward by Sean's tone. "I'm sorry."

Sean sighed heavily and turned back towards the Centre. Lucas followed him as he trudged back to the concrete building.

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They got back to Nana Michaels' room a few minutes after Mia did. The other patients had drawn their curtains and Violet sat next to Nana Michaels, her attention fixed on the small TV. Mia, Matthew mute behind her, was in the process of saying good-bye



to her grandmother, asking if she needed anything and if she was comfortable. Nana brushed off her questions good-naturedly and smiled at Sean and Lucas when they approached the bed. Mia just glanced at them with a flash of irritation then returned her attention to Nana Michaels.

Mia's good-byes were short and to the point. Nana Michaels protested a little at first but agreed that it was time for Matthew to leave. Soon it would be 9:00 and visiting hours would be over anyway. Mia shared an indifferent kiss on the cheek with Sean and ignored Lucas on her way out, son in tow. Sean shot Lucas a look. Lucas winced. Mia was going to be angry for a while. She was the type to hold grudges.

Sean and Lucas slumped down into visitor chairs. Sean spread his legs out and settled his chin on his fist. Lucas watched Violet mouthing letters. Nana Michaels was watching the TV almost as intensely as Violet was.

"The Sistine Chapel!" exclaimed Violet suddenly.

The two men were roused from their funk. Lucas asked, "What?"

Violet snapped to attention and replied, "It's the Sistine Chapel. That's the answer."

Nana Michaels peered at the TV. "You're right. You're very good at this, Violet."

Violet chuckled. "Yeah, if they ever came to Canada, I'd be rich."

Lucas had to see what they were talking about. He got up and stood behind Violet. They were watching *Wheel of Fortune*. The sound was so low that he hadn't noticed what they were watching until he actually looked at it. Vanna White was pretending to turn the big letters on the board. It was obvious, however, that she was just touching them as they lit up.

“Mia is angry at you boys,” said Nana Michaels without looking away from the TV.

Violet started. She looked at each of their faces inquisitively. Lucas turned away from her gaze. Sean lifted his chin from his fist and said, “It was just a disagreement, Nana.”

“Uh huh. Listen, you two, I know the failings of my own granddaughter, even if I don’t know where she gets it from. But you get nothing good out of spending your time provoking her.” Nana Michaels looked Sean and Lucas in the eyes.

“She just drives me crazy,” Lucas protested lamely.

Nana Michaels sighed and turned back to the TV. “Yes, dear. She drives me crazy too.”

They were silent for a moment. Violet, Lucas, and Nana Michaels watched the TV. Lucas could see Violet observing him from out of the corner of her eye. Their eyes met and she gave him a sympathetic smile. He smiled back his thanks. At least someone understood his position. As the *Wheel of Fortune* contestants headed into the bonus round, Sean got up suddenly and said, “It’s nearly nine, Nana. We better get going.”

Nana Michaels looked up at her grandson. “All right, dear. Thank you for coming.” He bent down to kiss her on the cheek and Lucas heard her say softly in his ear, “Bring that boyfriend of yours with you next time, Sean. I’d love to meet him.”

Sean jolted up. “I...yes, Nana.” He smiled shyly and sort of stumbled away.

Lucas nudged Violet’s elbow. “Come on. We’re going.”

Violet turned away from the television as if she was surprised to be addressed. She’d been too absorbed in the show to notice what had passed between Sean and his

grandmother. She got up from the bed and nodded politely to Nana Michaels. "OK. Good-bye, Mrs....um, Nana Michaels." She went and stood next to Lucas.

Nana Michaels smiled at her. "Good-bye, Violet."

Lucas smirked at Nana Michaels. "Happy Birthday, Nana."

"Thank you, dear. Be good."

Lucas and Sean rolled their eyes as the three of them walked out. Nana Michaels had been telling them to be good since they were kids. "Yes, Nana."

## The Mayor

Camilla Richley was tired of driving over the potholes on her street. The potholes her husband the mayor had promised he would take care of months ago. It seemed ridiculous to her that not even the mayor's own street was in good repair.

That was why she decided to run for mayor.

It was also because of the conversation she'd had with her husband about the potholes he had promised to get fixed months ago. When she had reminded him of his promise, and the danger to her car's axle, he had said, "Don't worry, honey. It'll be taken care of."

"That's what you said months ago," she said.

"The road workers will get around to it. Don't worry."

"That's all you say: Don't worry, don't worry! Aren't there enough city workers? This whole city is full of potholes!"

Here he took on a patronizing tone that she never found attractive. "Honey, I have a lot to do as mayor. If you think you can get the union to work more than I can, then you be mayor."

She knew he hadn't meant it. He'd never seriously make that suggestion. But it had started the germ of an idea in her head. It was an election year, after all.

Roderick Richley had been mayor of Greendale for nearly twenty years, longer than their daughter had been alive. Every four years he ran virtually unopposed. He was a fixture in the community. Many city employees had been working for him their whole careers.

Camilla had been known as the mayor's wife for so long that very few people remembered her as anything else, even though she had been born and raised in Greendale. She'd had their daughter, Penelope, in his second term of office. She went into labour at the Police Department's Annual Spaghetti Dinner and got a full police escort to the hospital. She served on the high school's Governing Board, the Women's Auxiliary, and the Parks and Gardens Improvement Committee. She smiled and shook people's hands at campaign fundraisers.

She passed another fixture of the community on her way up the hill to City Hall. This was Tom Ippolito, the independent candidate for mayor who sat resolutely in a folding chair on the front lawn of City Hall every election year holding a large poster board with his name on it. He'd been doing it so long that people both expected his presence and no longer noticed him. He was there in all weather; he had a big beach umbrella over him rain or shine. Tom looked up from his newspaper and waved to her. "Morning, Cam," he called over.

She waved back. "Morning, Tom."

She went through the doors and paused. She didn't quite remember where the office of the Returning Officer was. It had been some years since she'd been involved in the practical aspects of her husband's election campaigns. He had assistants to handle paperwork now; gone were the days when they'd sat on the floor of their first little apartment making posters and phone calls. So although Camilla knew the woman she needed to see very well, she didn't know where she was, and was too shy to ask Bob the security guard. She looked around for some indication of where she wanted to go, wondering how long it would be before she called attention to herself, until finally her

gaze landed on the guide board next to the security desk. Returning Officer. 3<sup>rd</sup> floor.

She took the elevator and found the office, a brown wooden door in a hallway of brown wooden doors and the occasional piece of art. Roderick had made a policy of filling City Hall with the works of local artists. It had been a popular move ten years ago but the city had hardly bought anything since. The gilt frame on the river landscape she passed was dusty.

There was a small bronze plaque next to the door that read “Megan Mclean, Returning Officer”. Camilla knocked on the door and after a second, she was buzzed in. She blinked, not realizing the door would be locked. She came back to herself in time to turn the knob on the end of the buzz. As she entered, she realized it made sense. Megan Mclean’s office handled all of the electoral information for the town.

Inside were tall bookshelves full of file folders and a broad oak desk with a computer and office accessories on it. Seated at the desk was Megan Mclean, a woman who held a considerable amount of personal power in the city government, reporting as she did to the Chief Electoral Officer of the province directly. She was a short, average-sized fortyish woman with a Laura Bush bob. Megan looked up from her computer, and smiling, said, “Camilla! What can I do for you?”

Camilla took a deep breath. It was now or never. “I need a nomination paper, please.”

The other woman looked confused. “Was there something missing from Rod’s papers? I gave Bill everything last week.”

“It’s not for Rod. It’s for me.”

Megan's eyes glittered with amusement. She tapped her cheek with one long manicured fingernail. "For you? What are you running for?"

"I'm running for mayor," replied Camilla, annoyed at the other woman's tone. She didn't find anything funny.

"You're kidding!" She stared at Camilla for a moment, and then her smile vanished as she realized that she wasn't joking. She cleared her throat. "You want a nomination paper? Are you running as an independent candidate?"

Camilla hesitated. The utter flatness of Megan's tone was disconcerting. "Uh, yes."

Megan went to one of the shelves and pulled out a sheet of paper that she handed to Camilla. "Fill this out. If you are designating yourself as your official representative and your official agent, make sure you put your name in the box in Section 3."

Camilla took the paper, glanced over it and put it in her purse. "Thank you."

Megan held up her index finger to stop her. "You need an official authorization if you want to be able to solicit campaign contributions or incur election expenses."

Camilla gripped the strap of her purse. "Oh. Is that another form? Or...?"

Megan selected another paper from a folder. "You can apply for authorization at the same time you apply for nomination. Fill out this form. You also need to collect five hundred signatures and attach that to your nomination form."

"Five hundred signatures?" How was she going to do that?

Megan shrugged. "Those are the rules. You have six weeks. You need to file all of your documents by 4:30 PM on the twenty-third day before the election, which I believe is the tenth of next month."

Camilla's head reeled. This was more complicated than she remembered. "Is that all?"

The other woman plucked a colourful glossy pamphlet out of a holder on the desk and handed it to her. On the cover was a brightly smiling grey-haired man in a suit and the words, "Running for Office? Here's how!" Megan's expression was one that Camilla could only interpret as disapproving. "That's all I've got for you. If you need more information, you can check the website."

Camilla put the pamphlet into her purse along with the other documents she'd been given. "Thank you, Megan."

"Mmm." Megan went back to her desk and sat down. She turned to her computer. After an awkward silence, Camilla left the office.

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Roderick Richley sat smoking contentedly in his plush leather chair at the Beaver Club. Roger Osborne, city union boss and condo landlord (a combination that had made him a considerable amount of money), yammered into Rod's ear about vacation benefits and surveying expenses. His talk was almost a comfortable drone as he sipped at his brandy and puffed on his cigar.

Something Osborne said about vacations caught Roderick's attention. "How much more vacation do your boys need? There are several roadwork projects that haven't even been started." There. He'd brought it up. He hoped Camilla would be happy.



Osborne made a placating gesture. He was shorter than Roderick and naturally thin with white hair. He always looked a little like he was being swallowed by his chair. “There are never enough hours in the day for what one wants. And we have very strict rules governing how long the men can work and how many. All will be attended to at its own pace.”

Roderick ran a hand through his own thinning blond hair. He’d turned fifty last summer and he was constantly conscious of the rate at which he was losing his hair. “But what does that have to do with more vacation time?”

Osborne pressed his emaciated, wrinkled hands together then opened them outward. He often gesticulated when he spoke. Especially when he argued. “My boys do not have adequate vacation time for the number of hours they work. By my calculations, they should be getting another week per year.”

Roderick sat back and frowned. “Impossible. And I suppose that’s paid vacation?”

“Of course it is.”

Roderick touched his two index fingers to his chin. It was a gesture that anyone who knew him would know meant he was thinking out loud. “I will get you your vacation time if you will guarantee me earlier snow removal crews working on call and for as long as necessary.”

Osborne raised an eyebrow and said, “Well, I don’t think the union will like that. They need prescribed hours. You can’t just call them in whenever, Rod. After all, it could be hard to keep track.”

“Do you think Mother Nature cares about prescribed hours? Come on, Roger, I have my constituents to think about.”

Osborne leaned close to Roderick and looked into his eyes, all traces of amusement gone from his expression. “You’re a good friend and business associate, Rod. I would hate for any little disagreement to damage that warm relationship. Especially with the election coming up.”

Roderick sat back sharply, his blood running cold. Osborne straightened slowly and nonchalantly, as if he’d been talking about the weather. He affected total comfort but Roderick could feel his grey eyes boring into him. His mouth curled into a self-satisfied smile as he noted Roderick’s discomfort. He was Roderick Richley’s biggest political supporter. He couldn’t afford to lose him.

Roderick was saved from having to respond by the entrance of his chief of staff, Bill. The bald, heavysset man who had been at Roderick’s side since that very first city councillor election either didn’t notice or pretended not to notice the tension in the room. He nudged over a leather armchair and sat down, pouring himself a glass of brandy. “H’lo, Rod, Roger.” They nodded. He sank down into his chair. “You’ll never believe what I heard.”

He waited for one of them to speak. Finally, Osborne said, “What news, Bill?”

Bill clasped his hands and hunched his shoulders, a mischievous smile on his face. “It seems we may have a new opponent for mayor.”

Roderick looked up. “What? Who?”

“Mrs. Richley.”

There was a sudden silence. The others stared at Bill. He sat back in his chair. After a long awkward moment, Roderick blurted out, "What are you talking about? That's ridiculous!"

Bill shrugged. "I had it from Megan Mclean herself. Camilla came into her office today and got a nomination paper."

"But she's a ... she's my wife!"

"Bit of marital discord at home, Rod?" Osborne was decidedly amused at the whole thing. Roderick wanted to smack that smirk off his face.

He got up out of his chair, glaring at Osborne. "This must be a mistake. I'm going to get to the bottom of this."

"Oh well, Rod. It's not like anyone votes in municipal elections, anyway," Osborne called after Roderick as he hurried from the room. Roderick could still hear him laughing as he shut the big oak doors behind him.

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Camilla sat in her Lexus, gripping the steering wheel and trying to build up her courage to leave her car. If she was totally and truly serious about running for mayor, now was the time to do something about it. She had to get those signatures for her nomination. All she had to do was get out of the car and go door to door. All she had to do was get out of the car.

She'd thought of trying to mobilize her family and friends, her social circle, perhaps with a party or something. But if there was anything that her encounter with

Megan Mclean had impressed on her, it was the difficulty she would be facing from that quarter. She couldn't even canvass her own neighbourhood. They were all staunch supporters of her husband. They would laugh in her face.

Camilla knew they all thought that she was a Stepford Wife. She could hardly blame them. She'd played that role very well for quite some time. It was the image a politician's wife had to project. Voters expected no less. But it wasn't who she was. She was certain of that.

It wasn't like she hadn't considered the fact that she would be running against her own husband. She wasn't stupid. There would be an interesting conversation when they finally crossed paths at home. Not that that happened all that often. He would not be happy. She knew that. But it was time she did something for herself. And for her city. Roderick had changed over his years of power. Greendale too, and not in a positive way. It wasn't just about the potholes. There was more crime, more poverty, more and more urban development of green spaces. More forested land had been allocated to condo developments than to park land over the years. And the man she'd fallen in love with so long ago, who was always so full of fire and ideals, seemed content now to just maintain his position. She'd watched his fire and ideals slowly burn out over time just as she'd buried her own beneath the mask of the perfect mayor's wife. She was a lawyer, damn it, even if she hadn't practiced in a while. She wasn't just some rich bubblehead.

So she'd come back here, to her old neighbourhood. She almost didn't recognize it. The only thing that was the same was the street name. Even the layout had changed as new streets were built to accommodate new development projects. Every inch of space around the slowly decaying 1950s/1960s era houses of her childhood had been used for

cookie-cutter, quick-built condos and townhouses. The condominiums, most for retirees, towered over the bungalows and duplexes. Some parts looked even more like those surreal 1950s suburbs you saw in TV and movies than her neighbourhood ever had in the actual fifties. At least when she was young, people's homes were individualized: different shapes, different sizes, a decorative storm door here, a meticulously designed rock garden there. Now the Italians' house on the corner with the carefully trimmed hedge and the big Virgin Mary statue on the front lawn just looked tacky when contrasted with the great modern *Canadian Living* Order of the new developments.

A billboard on a grassy knoll advertised this neighbourhood as "Urban Meadows: An Osborne Industries Project". This sign was a little ragged around the edges, and someone had spray-painted some sort of tag (that was what Penny called those designs, she thought) on the back, but she recalled seeing similar boards all over during her drive. Roger Osborne was a busy man.

Finally, Camilla got out of her car and locked it. She adjusted the strap of her purse, and, clutching her clipboard to her chest, went up the front walk of the first house on the right. There was a silver Toyota in the driveway so there had to be someone home. She rang the doorbell and waited. After a few moments, the door was opened by a grey-haired woman in her 60s wearing a pink sweater and beige polyester slacks. The woman regarded her critically and said, "Sorry, we're Catholic."

Camilla blinked. What was she talking about? Then she understood. She looked down at her grey pantsuit. Did she look like a Jehovah's Witness?

The woman started to close the door but Camilla thrust her clipboard in front to stop her. She held the door still. "Sorry, hi. I'm not here for that. My name is Camilla Richley. I'm running for mayor and I'd like to have your signature for my nomination."

The woman pulled the door back open. "Isn't the mayor now a Richley?"

She put on the smile she'd long ago developed for Roderick's campaigns. "Yes. He's my husband." There was no point in hiding that.

The woman frowned at her. "You're running against your own husband?"

Camilla's dimples hurt. "I believe that we need a new government in our city to address the problems that have only worsened during the current mayor's regime. I would run against this mayor's government were I his wife or not."

"But you're still his wife."

Camilla couldn't hold her smile any longer. She was getting frustrated. Was she going to have to go through this conversation with everyone? "Yes." She held out the clipboard. "Can I count on your support?"

"Sorry, no." The woman shut her door.

Camilla sighed. Well, it was her first try. Still, she didn't feel too bad about crossing the woman's grass to get to the next house. Dead maple leaves crunched under her pumps.

She could hear foreign music and someone yelling inside the next home that looked like it had someone in it. Camilla rang the doorbell and the sound of running feet became a little Indian or Pakistani girl of five or six who stared at her with big eyes. The girl wore pink embroidered pants and a tunic. Camilla smiled at her. "Hello. Are your parents home?"

The girl just gazed at her. Suddenly, her mother rushed to the door, yelling at her daughter in what Camilla assumed was Hindi. The girl backed away and was replaced by the plump mother who regarded Camilla suspiciously. The silk fabric of her sari was blue and purple and grey all layered together. Camilla thought it was fabulous. “Yes. Can I help you?” asked the woman in a thick accent.

“Hello. My name is Camilla Richley and I’m running for mayor. I’m looking for signatures to support my nomination,” answered Camilla, holding out the clipboard.

The woman stepped backwards. “Sorry. No.”

Camilla held up a hand to stop her. There had to be a way to get through to people. “Wait. I know it can seem like a waste of time to get involved in city affairs. But I want to bring some real change. Is there nothing you would like to see the city do to make life better for yourself and your neighbours? For your daughter?”

She stopped closing the door and opened it further. “Are you being serious?”

Camilla blinked. “Yes, of course.”

“The park needs fixing. I cannot take my children there. And the Indian Association needs more money, and more parking.” The woman blurted everything out quickly then just stopped, waiting for Camilla to respond.

Camilla was silent for a moment, her mind racing. “If I promised to make those issues a part of my platform... I mean, if I promise to make these concerns of yours part of my plan, will you give me your support?”

She looked at Camilla narrowly then reached out her hands for the clipboard.

“Give it to me. I will sign.”

Camilla gave it to her eagerly. The woman signed the paper and handed it back to her. Then, with a pleasant nod, she closed her door. Camilla clutched the clipboard and grinned. How satisfying was one's first signature! It made her feel like she might actually accomplish something. She went cheerily on to the next house, and the next, and the next, criss-crossing the street as she made her way down to the house on the corner. She met with mixed success; some signed, some didn't, some weren't even home. At every house where people were interested in her, she listened to their problems and worries. She gained a new appreciation of the small and large concerns of her community. Traffic lights, school zones, police actions, high property taxes, green initiatives, parking, roads, and so on were all on the minds of her prospective constituents. They told her so freely as soon as they became comfortable with her. She talked to people of all ages, races, and creeds. There were a lot of Arab immigrants in her childhood neighbourhood now, and they were hoping for city initiatives that would help them set up their own businesses or pursue their studies. As one man said, all of the cab drivers in Greendale were Lebanese, and every one had been a doctor or a lawyer or an entrepreneur in their birth country.

Finally, she came to the Italians' house on the corner. This house was very familiar to Camilla. She'd lived the next street down from this one, but she had known some of the family. She wondered if they were still there. The Virgin Mary was, so perhaps they were. She went up the front walk and rang the doorbell. After a minute, the door opened and a plump thirtyish woman with long dark curly hair greeted her. Camilla smiled and said, "Hello. My name is Camilla Richley and ...."

"You look really familiar. Do I know you? Wait! It's uh... Camilla Saunders, right?" the woman exclaimed. Camilla's eyes widened. How did this woman know her



maiden name? The woman seemed to realize some of Camilla's confusion, and explained, "I'm Christina Dotello. You went to high school with my aunt, Antonia Dotello? You used to babysit me for my mom, Maria Dotello?"

Camilla nearly did a double-take. This was the Dotello house! How could she forget? And this woman before her was the little baby she used to take care of so her friend's sister-in-law could get out of the house every once in a while? She frowned. Nothing made you feel old like meeting adults you'd known as children. That past, that time when she had been Camilla Saunders, felt like ages ago. She looked up at Christina. "Yes, I remember you. You've grown up! Wow!"

Christina looked herself over and shrugged. She asked, "What brings you by? My mom's not home right now, and my aunt lives over in Greendale West."

Camilla came back to herself and her purpose. "Oh! Well, that's great to hear. I hope they're well. Actually, I came by because, as I was saying, I'm Camilla Richley now and...."

"Hey, that's right. You're the mayor's wife," interrupted Christina.

Camilla sighed. "Yes, I am. And I'm running for mayor."

"You're campaigning for the mayor?"

"No. I'm running for mayor."

Christina regarded Camilla for a long moment. There was something simultaneously disconcerting and irking about being scrutinised by someone you'd known when they'd been in diapers. It gave her a creepy-crawly feeling between her shoulder blades. Finally, Christina stepped to the side. "Huh. Do you want a coffee or something?"

Camilla raised an eyebrow. That wasn't exactly the reaction she'd been expecting. Not that she'd really had any idea. She *was* tired from all that walking. Camilla shrugged and said, "If it's not any trouble...."

Christina closed the door behind her and led Camilla down the hall to the kitchen. This was the house she remembered; the wood floors, the baroque wallpaper, the bronze knickknacks. The kitchen was small but airy, with big metal-framed windows and hanging spider plants. A slimmer, dark-haired woman who looked about Christina's age was sitting at the white dining table with a mug in her hands. She looked up at them curiously. "This is Camilla Richley, Violet. Mrs. Richley, this is my friend, Violet."

Camilla shook the woman's hand and sat down at the table. Christina got a mug from a cabinet and filled it with coffee for her. Camilla accepted the mug gratefully and put in her milk and sugar from the containers on the table. Christina sat down between the other two women. "Camilla used to babysit me when I was young, Violet."

"Oh. Really?" said Violet. Camilla looked at Violet. She could only detect a mild interest in the woman. Not a hint of recognition when Christina had introduced them.

"Yes. It's been a long time. How have you been keeping yourself?" Camilla asked. It was an odd conversation they were having, but Camilla was willing to see it through.

Christina took a sip of her coffee and put it down. She reached behind her and took the coffee carafe off the counter. She poured some more coffee in her cup and left the carafe on the table. "School and work, mostly. I work at reception at Greendale High. I'm doing my M.A. in political science."

“Really? Your parents must be proud. Are you almost done?” It seemed the polite thing to ask.

Christina nodded. “I’ve got a little over a semester left.” She turned to Violet. “Camilla is running for mayor.”

Violet gave Camilla an inquisitive look. “Really?”

Camilla nodded. “Yes.”

Christina put down her mug. “I’m very much in favour of women running for office. My thesis is on women in politics. Every woman who runs chips away a little at the glass ceiling.”

Camilla shrugged. “I didn’t really think of it that way. I don’t know how much of a glass ceiling there really is.”

“We had a female prime minister,” volunteered Violet.

“An unelected female prime minister. Who was in office for what, 18 months? And she was knocked out as soon as there was an election. No, ladies, there is definitely a glass ceiling in this country. Did you know that only twenty percent of parliament is female? Not a single major federal party leader is a woman; only the Green Party and they’re hardly worth mentioning. And any prominent female politician gets heavily criticized, usually in a sexist manner. Think about it,” said Christina, counting off her points on her fingers.

“I suppose I see your point,” said Camilla.

“And women still don’t have wage parity. How long ago was it that it was reported that female federal employees made eighty cents to every dollar a male

employee did?” continued Christina. She patted Camilla’s wrist. “Honestly, it takes guts for any woman to throw her hat into that male-dominated ring.”

Camilla looked at the hand on her wrist. She had a distinct feeling of being manipulated, but her gut told her to roll with it. She’d ignored her gut for quite some time until this morning when she’d made this decision to run for mayor. It seemed a good idea to continue trusting her intuition. “You have no idea,” she said.

“Is there anything we can do to help your campaign?” asked Christina. Violet gave her a startled look, a sort of “we?” look.

Camilla held out her clipboard. “You can sign my nomination list.”

Christina took the clipboard and signed it vigorously. “Of course. I meant, though, in a more practical way. Do you have anyone to help run your campaign? A manager, a speechwriter?”

Violet passed the clipboard back to Camilla when Christina pushed it towards her. “Sorry, I’d sign, but I can’t vote in the election,” she said.

“What? Why not?” asked Christina.

“Lucas said I can’t get on the list of electors until I’ve lived here six months.” She shrugged when Christina looked at her narrowly. “I don’t know. He votes in everything apparently.”

“You’ve been spending a lot of time with Lucas, lately, haven’t you?” asked Christina suggestively.

Violet blushed a little. “I don’t see him that much. We’re too busy.”

Christina turned back to Camilla, who had delayed answering as long as she could. “Well, how about it? My friend here is a writer and an editor. I could help you manage things.”

Camilla watched Violet stare incredulously at Christina. Camilla said to her, “Violet, do you know anything about speechwriting?”

Violet stared at Camilla, at Christina, and back again. “Um, well, not much. I was on the debate team in high school. And I helped edit my mom’s conference papers. Those are kind of like presentations. But it would be good experience, I’m sure.”

Camilla looked at both of them very carefully. She could use the help. And her gut, her women’s intuition was telling her this was a good idea. There was an odd serendipity to this moment, to her meeting these women who were strangers and yet not strangers, and who offered just the kind of assistance she needed. She held out her hand. “I accept your offer.”

They both looked at her hand for a moment then joined their hands with hers, making a sort of three-way handshake. Camilla, Christina, and Violet all nodded and smiled at each other.

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“Mrs. Richley, why are you running against your husband?”

“Mrs. Richley, how has your husband reacted to your nomination?”

“Mrs. Richley, how do you think your regime would be better?”

“Mrs. Richley!” “Mrs. Richley!” “Mrs. Richley!”

Camilla stared at the four or five reporters shoving microphones in her face, the cameras behind them, and the news vans parked in front of her house. Christina and Violet stood in front of her, forming a sort of barrier to keep the journalists from getting too close. The news of her candidacy and the unusualness of its circumstances had made Camilla the fluff piece of the week. All the networks from the city had driven up to Greendale to gawk at her.

One reporter caught her gaze. He poked the microphone between her protectors. “Who are you wearing?”

Camilla looked at her clothes. That was probably the last question she had imagined. “It’s from a little boutique on Brand Street called “Idyll,”” she replied.

Another reporter, seizing on the opportunity, asked, “Are we looking at a possible Richley dynasty? Will we see your daughter as the next candidate for mayor?”

Camilla frowned. What a stupid question. “If she wanted to.”

Christina stepped forward, and Violet shielded Camilla as she unlocked her front door. “Thank you all for your interest in Mrs. Richley’s campaign. Please submit your questions to our campaign’s official email and they will be answered. Thank you,” said Christina, dispersing the crowd with hand gestures.

No one moved. The three women squeezed themselves into the house and shut the door, much to the evident dismay of the reporters. They stood with their backs to the wall and took deep breaths. They looked at each other and giggled. This was certainly a new experience for all of them.

“I hope you’re happy.” They looked up to see Roderick standing in the hallway with his hands in his pockets and his face grim. “Those people have been out there for two days now. I had to get Penny an escort just so she could leave the house today.”

Christina waved his concerns off. “Don’t worry, Mr. Richley. They’ll get bored soon. No one in the city really cares about suburban politics.”

He glared at her. “Was I talking to you? What are you even doing in my house anyway?”

Christina backed off, her mouth working with her intended response. Camilla stepped forward instead and led the other two women past him. “Christina is my campaign manager, Rod. She’s allowed to be here. I don’t object when Bill comes over at all hours, do I?”

He followed his wife into the den, where her companions had already sat down on the leather sofas. “I thought we’d agreed you weren’t going to continue with this foolishness.”

Camilla gritted her teeth. “*We* didn’t agree to anything. *You* told me to stop and didn’t ask for my opinion. *I* don’t feel myself obliged to comply under those circumstances.”

He paced around the room, holding his forehead like he had a headache. Like she was giving him a headache. “Have you gone out of your mind? Do you realize what kind of a laughingstock you’ve made out of me? Of my administration? Of this election? Of our family?”

She watched calmly as he ranted, then sighed. “Not this again. Everything is about you, isn’t it? Can’t you ever just think of someone else?”

“No. I have to think of myself. I’m the breadwinner in this family. I’m the damn mayor. You’re my wife. You’re supposed to support me, not oppose me,” he replied, poking himself in the chest.

“I have supported you. I’ve supported you for nearly twenty years. And whose fault is it that you’re the breadwinner? You never let me do anything! I could have had a very successful practice by now, but no, I had to be the mayor’s wife!” She sat down heavily on the sofa when she was finished speaking. Violet, who sat beside her, put her hand on Camilla’s arm. Camilla realized suddenly that she was airing her dirty laundry in front of the other two women, her friends surely, but still outsiders. The thought made her suddenly self-conscious.

But Roderick wasn’t finished, and he didn’t seem to care that the others were there. “You never seemed to care about that when I bought you this nice house, or your clothes, or your diamonds, or got Penny into that prestigious private school. It was all fine being the mayor’s wife then!”

His words stung, not just because of his contemptuous tone, but because they were somewhat true. She had allowed herself to be bought. “What is it exactly, Roderick? Are you angry because I’m running against you, or because I’m running at all?”

“You don’t get it, do you? Why mayor? If you really wanted to enter public service, why not run for city council? Or the National Assembly? I would have supported you in that. I would have helped you.”

She stood back up to face him. “Because you need to learn that you’re not omnipotent. You need to be seriously challenged. And don’t give me that crap. Your ego is far too big to support me if I ran for parliament.”



“What, are you doing this only for spite then?” he asked incredulously.

She nodded reluctantly. “At first, I was. But then I started talking to people. Something you obviously don’t do. Greendale has a lot of problems, Rod, and you’re ignoring them to line your own pockets and those of your friends.”

Roderick shook his head. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You think I don’t know what you’re doing? I’m your wife, Rod. I’m not stupid. I know the power and influence you’ve handed over to Roger Osborne,” she shot back.

He paused, visibly disturbed by her allegations. “Roger Osborne is a powerful businessman and a loyal supporter of my administration. He’s an old friend, that’s all.”

“Roger Osborne is a crook, and that’s all he’ll ever be,” she said.

Roderick stood there for a moment, speechless, and then he turned on his heel and walked out. “Have it your way then. Just don’t cry when my campaign crushes yours, *honey*,” he called over his shoulder.

It was that moment at which Camilla realized there was no turning back from her decision to run for mayor.

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Camilla walked up the lawn of City Hall, troubled. Her campaign had been progressing well. Christina reported that most of the people she’d spoken to were enthusiastic about her candidacy. Her posters were all up and her volunteer staff had grown. But things had only gotten worse at home. Roderick behaved like they were living

in separate houses, and Penny, feeling the tension between her parents, threw adolescent tantrums when she would even communicate with them at all.

She spotted Tom Ippolito sitting in his usual place and on a whim, walked over and stopped in front of his lawn chair. If there was anyone she could think of asking for advice right now, it was him. He was probably the only person she knew who might understand what she was going through.

He looked up at her over his newspaper for a second and then back down.

“Morning, Cam,” he said.

“Morning, Tom,” she said. She fidgeted a little before asking, “Mind if I sit?”

He shrugged. “Free country. There’s an extra folding chair over there,” he pointed with his elbow at a lime green deck chair leaned against a nearby cardboard box.

She picked it up, opened it, and sat down next to him, brushing the seat off first. They were quiet for a while. Camilla looked around her, at the sky, at City Hall up the hill above her, at the intersection and the office buildings and the houses and school nearby, at Tom and his “Tom Ippolito for Mayor” sign. She saw the campaign poster with her face on it sitting on the traffic light pole beneath the one with her husband’s image on it.

“So I see you’re running for mayor,” said Tom.

Camilla was jolted from the distracted state she was in. “Um, yeah.”

“What’s Rod think about it?”

“Uh, he’s not pleased,” she replied.

“Blew his top, eh?”

She sighed. “Yes.” She paused. “What do you think? Was I wrong?”

He turned his head to look at her. “Cam, I don’t know everything about it. How can I give you my opinion?”

She shrugged. “You’re my opponent too. And you’ve been in this race for years. What do you think?”

He paused. She thought he was thinking about her question, but she could never be sure about him. He might just be waiting her out. Finally, he said, “I think you have a better shot than I do. And I think you made a good decision if you made it for the right reasons.”

Tom looked at her pointedly after this last remark. Camilla couldn’t help cringing a little, but she scolded herself for it. “I am. I am now anyway. I won’t deny that I didn’t start that way.”

“Do tell.”

She shifted uncomfortably. She couldn’t quite remember why she’d come out here. “It’s not important.”

He nodded. “You found out about the girlfriend, didn’t you?”

Camilla almost fell out of her chair. “How do you know?”

Tom shrugged. “My dear, I’m here everyday, remember? I know everybody’s business.”

She settled herself down on the chair. “Fair enough.”

“How did you find out?” asked Tom.

She crossed her arms. “I picked up the wrong cell-phone. I probably wouldn’t have noticed anything at all if I hadn’t blown my tire going over that huge pothole on our street.”

“Does he know that you know?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Don’t you think you should tell him?”

She shook her head emphatically. “Absolutely not. I’m not in this for spite anymore. I really want to help people. I’ve been listening to people, Tom, really listening. The way Rod used to. If I tell him about finding out about his little affair, Bill will figure out some way to use it against me and we’ll have four more years of Rod’s government.”

He nodded sagely. “Are you going to divorce him?”

She hesitated. “I don’t know. I don’t see anything improving as it is.” She thought a moment and drummed her fingers on the arm of the chair. “The real question is whether or not all this really is worth my marriage and possibly my family. Do you know what I mean?”

Tom was quiet. Then he said, “Tell me something. You don’t seem terribly upset about the fact that your husband was cheating on you. Why is that?”

She raised an eyebrow. Why wasn’t she upset? She hadn’t given it much thought. “I...” She paused, collecting her thoughts. “I was. I was shocked and I cried when I saw the message from that girl, but I don’t know. I’m more angry than sad. I don’t know what happened to us. What happened to *him*. He really thinks I’m an idiot.”

“Then I think you answered your own question. Public service isn’t something we do on the weekend. You have to be willing to make sacrifices. Do you think my wife likes that I spend every day here? But I do it. And when it comes down to it, you have to make the decision that’s right for you. Your daughter will understand in time. Just don’t leave everyone hanging.”

Camilla smiled at him. He was right. “Ever consider becoming a psychiatrist?”

He made a face. “Blah. I did that for a while. It’s depressing, listening to people’s problems all day.”

Camilla chuckled a little to herself and stood up. “Thanks, Tom. For listening.”

He went back to his newspaper. “Any time, Cam.”

Camilla walked back down the lawn. She knew what she wanted and what she had to do.

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Camilla walked up to the podium, squeezing Christina’s and Violet’s shoulders as she passed them. She had the speech that Violet wrote for her in her hand, ready to spread out before her. Christina had managed to parlay the remaining interest the media had in Camilla’s campaign into a small press conference at City Hall. She could see Roderick standing against the wall with a couple of his more partisan city councillors, talking and occasionally looking her way with a sour look on his face. He clearly didn’t like her speaking from *his* City Hall.

Penny sat in a chair at the back, her arms crossed and her expression bored. Camilla still hadn’t figured out how she’d convinced her daughter to come, but she was glad of it. She wanted her daughter to hear her speak.

Camilla cleared her throat. It was time to begin. She banished the butterflies in her stomach. “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen of the press, friends, family, councillors, and all of you: Thank you for coming to hear me speak. Tonight I intend to tell you about

my platform and the change I wish to bring to the municipality of Greendale, and I hope this method will bring my message to as many of my constituents as possible. I have chosen the venue of City Hall not as a slight to our current mayor, but because it is the most appropriate place in our fair city to discuss policy with all of you. Before I begin, I'd like to clarify one point that seems to be of great interest to everyone. Yes, I am the legal wife of the current mayor, Roderick Richley. But I come before you all not as the mayor's wife, and all that implies, but as a concerned citizen, just like many of you, who wants to bring important and lasting change to Greendale and her inhabitants. I ask only that you view me with an open mind.

“The people of Greendale have a lot on their minds right now. The current worldwide economic situation has everyone thinking about their livelihoods and their children's futures. Consequently, everyone I've spoken to has had something to say, something they want to see become better in their city. It's not fair to say that people don't really care about municipal politics; the truth is that everybody cares but most people think they can't do anything about it. They think that no one will listen to them. Well, I'm here to tell you that I will listen to you. I will make all of your concerns part of my platform. Some of you have told me about your worries about traffic control and zoning. You worry about the safety of your children crossing the street around their schools. You worry about their safety travelling on the municipal transit system. Others have mentioned parking and road quality concerns. I can tell you that if elected I will set up a special committee to review all of the transportation-related issues concerning our city. We will fix the roads, we will redraw the school zones, and we will look at how we can expand parking access where it is needed.

“Many of those I spoke to told me their fears about security and safety. Some had stories of increased crime and witnessing police actions in neighbourhoods they had always believed safe. The highest priority of a city’s administration should be to ensure the safety and security of its citizens. To that end, my administration would work on increasing funding to our police and firefighters, upgrade our facilities and capabilities, and encourage consultation with neighbourhood watch groups. I will also work to improve transparency within and surrounding our public safety professionals. You have a right to know what your government is doing to keep you safe. You or your family chose Greendale because you believed it was a safe, excellent environment to build a life. I want that to always be true.

“Many of those listening to my speech with a critical ear are probably wondering right now how I expect to pay for all of these initiatives I’ve brought forward. I do not intend to raise property taxes or any other taxes. People need the money they have. Instead, I believe that a thorough analysis of the budget will yield me the funds I need to make these projects work. Perhaps I will have to cut the fat a little, and perhaps not everyone will like it, but in the long run, I believe that the city of Greendale can only be better for it.

“That’s all I have to say for now. I urge everyone to get out and vote. Don’t leave your city’s future to chance. Get involved. You may find that you have a greater voice than you think. Thank you.”

She took a deep breath. It was done. There was utter silence in the room, and for a split second, Camilla worried that she had completely bombed the speech. Then the room erupted in applause. Even Penny was clapping enthusiastically in the back. Camilla

risked a glance at Roderick. He was gazing at her, with an expression she couldn't quite read. Astonishment? Interest? Pride even? She didn't know.

Roger and Bill stood in the very back of the room. Bill whispered in Osborne's ear. Osborne watched her intently, his bony hands pressed together under his chin. Camilla almost felt dirty, being observed in that minute, calculating manner. She looked away and tried to forget he was there, but she could still feel his eyes on her. She needed to get away from him and this room.

Camilla waved her appreciation and gestured to Christina and Violet that it was time to depart. They followed her out one of the conference room's side doors.

She didn't notice Osborne leave the room and follow her.

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Roger Osborne stopped Camilla in the hallway with a quick shout. He stood there, a skinny wrinkled man the same height as she was, as she turned around. Christina and Violet waited a little ahead of her, having not stopped as quickly as she did. She returned his penetrating gaze. "Impressive speech, Mrs. Richley," he said.

Camilla nodded politely. "Thank you, Roger." She started to turn away, but he closed the gap between them before she could get far and held up a finger to stop her once again.

"Might I speak with you? Alone," he asked, looking significantly at the other two women.



Camilla narrowed her eyes. What could he possibly want? Nevertheless, she nodded. "Fine." Camilla turned to the others, who frowned at the man. "Please wait for me outside, ladies. I won't be long."

Their eyes widened. But they each nodded, meeting Camilla's eyes with a supportive look and walking away. Camilla turned back to Osborne and crossed her arms in front of her. "What do you want, Roger?"

Osborne put on an oily smile and leaned backwards, his hands in his pockets. "Really, Camilla, you don't need to take that tone with me. I only want to congratulate you. You seem to be pulling quite far ahead of your dear husband. Opinion polls are looking good for you. And after tonight's speech," he shrugged. "Well, who knows? We may have a new mayor."

"Fine. But why come out just to tell me all this?" she asked. There had to be more to this than he was saying. There always was.

He seemed to smile even more broadly, if that was possible. "Well, I think we both know that I've always been one for the winning team." He put a hand on Camilla's shoulder. His bony fingers were oddly tight on her sleeve. "I'm a very powerful man, Camilla. You could use someone like me on your side."

Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw a person standing in the doorway of the conference room she had just left. Then Osborne leaned into her view. She frowned. "And what do you want for this show of loyalty?" she asked acidly.

He inclined his head. "We can hammer that out once you've won. Which you certainly will if you accept my help. All I require of you now is an assurance of friendship."

With the movement of his head, she was able to see the door again. But the person was going back inside in what looked like a huff. She realized with a start that the person looked like her husband. And then she had to concentrate on the individual before her. Osborne squeezed her shoulder. "What do you say?" he asked, his grey eyes watching her intently.

Camilla blinked. Is this what Roderick had to deal with on a regular basis? She frowned. She would not make any deals with a devil like Osborne. Camilla yanked her shoulder away so quickly that Osborne actually had to step back a bit because of the force of her movement. She advanced on him in that space of opportunity. "Do you honestly think I would ever make a deal with you, Roger Osborne? I know what kind of scum you are. And I'd appreciate it if you never touched me again."

His face darkened with anger. "Clearly you don't know who you're talking to, or you would be much more polite. I could ruin you, you know. All your little plans will run into the ground without my support."

"I'd like to see you try."

Osborne pointed a finger in her face. "You really don't."

"Get your finger out of my face," she spat back at him. He was stunned enough to drop his hand. "Listen to me, Osborne. It seems to me that the city workers' contract comes up very soon. If and when I become mayor, there will be some serious revisions made to that contract, I promise you. And no amount of adolescent bullying on your part is going to change that."

His lip curled in disgust and he stepped away from her, his hands back in his pockets. "You're nothing like your husband. And you have no idea of how politics

works. You won't last five minutes as mayor. You'll be crushed, just like anyone else as idealistic and foolish as you." He turned on his heel and walked away.

"Like you crushed my husband?" she said under her breath.

When he was out of her sight, she finally breathed a deep sigh of relief and collapsed against the wall. She had done it. She had stood up to Osborne. Not even her husband seemed to be able to do that.

Then she remembered seeing Roderick in the hall and felt a pang of guilt. What did he think was going on, to storm off like that? What did he think of her? She realized suddenly that she did care what he thought of her. No matter what, he was still her husband. It was a feeling she both accepted and hated. Why *should* she still care what he thought? Because, after all, she still loved him.

She loved him. She actually loved the bastard. Camilla covered her mouth with her hands, ashamed and shocked at the same time. A tear trickled down her cheek. What kind of mess of their lives had they made that they had forgotten that simple truth? She loved him. But did he still love her?

Camilla had to confront him. It was the only thing to do. She hurried back to the conference room, but it was empty, except for a few interns cleaning up. She went up to one and asked him where Roderick was. The young man started a little at first seeing her then explained that everything was finished and he figured everybody went home. She squeezed his shoulder kindly and fled the room. Camilla would wait for him at home then, if that was what she had to do.

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The house was dark when she got home, except for the porch light and a light in the den. Camilla thought at first that there was no one home. She knew Penny was staying over at a friend's house, and she assumed that the housekeeper had already left for the night. But as she passed the den, she noticed a figure sitting in an armchair by the light of a single lamp. She flipped on the switch for the ceiling light and entered the room. It was Roderick sitting in the chair. He sat with his two index fingers pressed to his chin, and his gaze flicked towards her as she entered and then away again without saying anything. She stood before him, her heart thudding in her chest. "Rod? What are you doing sitting in the dark?"

He sat back and looked at her, his narrowed eyes not angry or sad. Perhaps disappointed was the best way for her to describe what she saw. She would have preferred anger or sadness to disappointment. "What do you care?" he replied.

Camilla sat down on a sofa opposite him. She wrung her hands, trying not to cry. The callousness with which he spoke was like a dagger in her chest. "I care," she said lamely.

Roderick looked away. "I was going to tell you how impressed and proud of you I was after hearing your speech. I haven't heard you speak like that for years." She perked up and he looked back at her, his expression displeased. "But I see how you deceived me, how you deceived everyone in that room. You should be ashamed of yourself, claiming ideals you clearly don't have."

Her back came up right away. She was not the bad guy here. "I didn't do anything. If you must know, if you'd stayed a minute longer, you would have seen me tell off Roger Osborne once and for all. Yes, I know you were there." She allowed herself a self-satisfied smirk at the way his expression changed to one of surprise. But then she remembered why she was angry with him. "You're one to talk about ideals. I thought fidelity in marriage was something you believed in once."

His surprise suddenly became confusion. "What? What are you talking about?"

Camilla frowned. Was he really going to drag it out of her? "Don't play innocent with me. I saw that message from that girl. I know about your little affair."

He stood abruptly and paced. "What message are you talking about? When did you see this message?"

Now she was confused. Why wasn't he just admitting it? "I... It was on your phone. That day I blew my tire on the pothole on our street. And I know there's some girl that's been hanging around you lately."

He mouthed the word "girl?" and thought a moment, and then his eyes lit with a horrified look. He covered his mouth with his hand and said, half-muffled, "Oh my God. Those bastards. Those *bastards*."

Her eyes narrowed. "What is it? What are you going on about?"

He composed himself and faced her. "Cam, I am not cheating on you. You have to believe that."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Right. Then how did that sexually explicit text message get on your phone? Wrong number, I suppose?"

"You could say that."

“Oh come on!”

He knelt down in front of her and grabbed for her hands, but she kept them away from him. “Camilla, that message wasn’t mine. I mean, it was sent to me, but I didn’t ask for it. That girl, she sent it to me without my consent.”

She glared down at him. “Do you seriously want me to believe you have a stalker?”

Roderick ground his teeth and groaned. “I’m not explaining this very well.”

“No, you’re not. Who is this girl? How did you meet her?” asked Camilla, both dreading the answer and hoping there was a better one than what she was expecting.

“Meet her? I hardly know her!” He sighed. “Bill and Roger have this game. They compete to see how many female interns they can sleep with.”

Camilla stood up, shocked. “Are you nuts? That’s... that’s disgusting! It’s probably even illegal! How can you allow it?”

He paused for a moment, taking in her reaction, and then he said, “I don’t know. The women are all willing as far as I know. Look, the point is, they tried to get me into it too. Bill started bringing this one intern around all the time, pushing her on me. He must have given her my number. Who knows what he told her? But I swear, Cam, I refused to join their game. I never even saw the message you’re talking about.”

Camilla was torn. She really wanted to believe him. He seemed sincere. She’d known him long enough that she thought she knew when he was lying. Was she kidding herself? Willing to believe something this preposterous-sounding simply because she loved him? There was nothing unbelievable about Bill’s and Osborne’s game. Bill’s three wives had all divorced him for infidelity. And Roger Osborne’s wife was a highly

medicated alcoholic who Camilla never liked being around. All this time, she had been willing to think her husband had been unfaithful, on the most circumstantial of evidence, and she'd been so afraid to be proven right that she had never confronted him about it till now. Had it been instinct or jealousy? She was no longer sure. Camilla looked at Roderick. She could believe that he hadn't cheated on her, if only because she needed to, but could she forgive his weakness in allowing his friends to exploit his female employees? "What about the intern? What happens to her?" she asked.

He looked grave. "I fired her. I had no choice," he said quickly as she reacted. "She was using her affair with Bill to get out of working. And she kept on harassing me. I gave her a good severance package."

"So she became inconvenient, and you fired her, and you paid her off," she said, her voice as neutral as she could make it. Inside, her emotions were roiling. Just how far did his administration's corruption go? How could she ever reconcile this moral weakness of his with her love for him? All she seemed to have were questions, half of which she couldn't bring herself to voice. But one she could. "Why did you never tell me about any of this? Did you really think I couldn't handle it?"

He got up and faced her. "No, it's not like that. I didn't want you to worry. I was handling it myself. You make what I did sound worse than it is, but I realize that the whole situation was wrong. I was just trying to fix what I could."

"Who's in charge at City Hall? You or Bill and Roger?"

He stared at her then sighed and looked away. "I don't know anymore. Are you satisfied?"

She felt a sudden pity and compassion for him, and placed a hand on his shoulder. “What happened to us, Rod? How did we get so far apart that you no longer felt like you could tell me your problems?”

Roderick reached out and touched her cheek. “Around the time I decided that you should never have any problems ever again.”

She touched foreheads with him and looked into his eyes. “That was stupid.”

“I know.”

“You have to fire Bill.” She continued quickly before he could voice the objections she saw in his eyes. “And you must get rid of Roger. Don’t you see? They’re an integral part of the corruption in your government. They’re working together against you.”

He sighed. “That will be the end of my career. Not that it matters. I may as well drop out now anyway. You’re going to win.”

Camilla stepped back suddenly. She put her hands on her hips. “You will not drop out. I am not going to win that way.”

He smiled. “You better win. That’s the only way you’ll be able to take Bill and Roger’s hooks out.” She paused, out of things to say, and he reached around her neck and pulled her to him. He kissed her in a way he hadn’t since they were younger, a full-on French kiss that made her knees weak. How she had missed being kissed like that.

“How can I refuse when you put it that way?” she said.

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Camilla sat next to Christina and Violet, each with a hand in hers, as they waited for the election results in the council chamber at City Hall. Roderick stood off to the side with some of his supporters, including Bill and Roger, who watched her sullenly from their seats. Every once in a while, Roderick would glance over at her and smile, and she would smile back. It was the only communication they could have openly at the moment, and she cherished every stolen look.

Tom Ippolito sat in another corner with his wife, who calmly did her knitting. She was used to sitting in this room and waiting for election results. Camilla supposed that she had been like her once, kind of bored with the whole thing, there just for moral support. It was a very different feeling, being in the hot seat. She felt nervous and excited and sick all at once. She just wanted it to be over.

Megan Mclean sat at a desk in the middle of the room with a phone and a stack of papers. Her deputies were all at the polling stations counting the results. Camilla wasn't sure if her being in the middle was purposeful, but it seemed so. Every ten minutes or so, her phone would ring and cause Camilla's heart to jump. She would answer, note something down on one of her papers, and then announce the updated election results. Christina said it was the provincial Ministry of Elections that had called. Mclean's deputies had to transmit their results to the province before telling the Returning Officer. Camilla was a little ashamed to think that she was actually relieved by this. She had never had a real reason to suspect Mclean's honesty.

Camilla and Roderick had been going back and forth for the lead, but Camilla was pulling ahead. This was probably the longest count she'd ever been at since Roderick was first elected. It seemed that her speech had garnered a greater voter turnout than there had

been in a long time. Usually everything was done in a half hour; there wasn't much to count and most of it was for her husband. Now, she looked at her watch and realized that they had already been sitting here for an hour.

Finally, after one longer phone call, Megan Mclean stood up and said, "Here are the final election results according to the count. Tom Ippolito, two thousand three hundred and nine; Camilla Richley, seventy-five thousand five hundred and thirty-five; Roderick Richley, fifty-five thousand six hundred and eight. The new mayor is Camilla Richley."

Christina and Violet both jumped up and cheered. Camilla sat still, stunned at what she had heard, until she felt their hands under her armpits urging her up. She had won. She had actually won. The room reeled around her a little and she doubted for a second that she had heard what she had heard. But then Christina and Violet were hugging her and others were coming up to congratulate her. Penny wrapped her arms around her mother's waist and squeezed. Camilla felt a particular glow of pride and happiness when she felt her daughter's arms around her. She squeezed back.

Tom and his wife came up to shake her hand. She reached around her daughter to clasp hands with him. He winked at her and she smiled. Then they moved on, shaking hands with Megan and Roderick before going out the door.

Then the group of people around Camilla parted as Roderick walked up to her. He tried to keep a straight face, but she could see the merriment in his eyes. It was the same joy she was sure he could see in her eyes. She knew the others around her were watching with almost bated breath, but she had no worries about his reaction. He still surprised her, however, when he wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her bodily off the ground

in a bear hug. She laughed until he lowered her down for a kiss. Behind them she could hear people clapping, but they seemed irrelevant in the circle of that embrace.

He let go of her and they stood next to each other, holding hands and receiving congratulations. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Roger Osborne quietly slip out of the room. He was something she would have to deal with later. And she would deal with him. Bill, on the other hand, she could see over Roderick's shoulder snatching the tally sheet out of Megan's hand and staring at it, before coming over. Camilla watched him warily.

He frowned at her. "Well, you've won."

Roderick surreptitiously squeezed her hand. He was chatting with someone behind them. Camilla squared her shoulders and faced Bill. "That's right. And you can clear out your desk immediately. We won't need your services anymore."

He gave her a contemptuous look. "I don't work for you."

"That's true. You work for me," said Roderick, turning to look Bill in the eye. "And you're fired."

Bill's eyes widened and he spluttered incoherently. Camilla slid her arm around her husband's waist as he stared the other man down. Finally, with a muttered curse, Bill backed down and left the chamber in a huff. They looked at each other and smiled. *One down, one to go.*

Camilla turned to her most loyal supporters, Christina and Violet, and grasped their hands, pulling their attention from the people they were talking to. They gave her an inquisitive look. She said, "You both have jobs waiting for you, I want you to be sure of

that. I will need a chief of staff, after all, and I'll always need a speechwriter. You are going to see this through with me, aren't you?"

Both women grinned, but it was Violet who responded for both of them. "We'd be honoured to serve you, Madame Mayor," she said. Christina nodded vigorously.

Camilla smiled and hugged them both. *Madame Mayor*. She liked the sound of that.

## The Snow Day

On the night before Christmas Eve, there was a freak snowstorm that dumped thirty centimetres of snow on Greendale. This added to the snow accumulated from previous snowfalls that month to create tall snowdrifts that reached up to the bay window where Violet stood looking out on Christmas Eve morning. It was still snowing, and the wind blew the white powder into big dunes along the unploughed street.

“I don’t see any ploughs,” Violet said without looking away.

Lucas placed two plates of eggs and bacon on the table and sat down. “They probably haven’t come around yet. Come have breakfast.”

Violet sighed and turned from the window. She stopped short. On the table were two plates heaped high with scrambled eggs and bacon, a pitcher of orange juice, a carafe full of coffee, and a little stack of toast with jam and peanut butter on the side. “What’s all this?”

Lucas spread peanut butter liberally on a piece of toast and gestured at the table with the butter knife. “Breakfast.”

Violet pulled out a chair and sat down. The smell of eggs and bacon made her stomach rumble. “I can see it’s breakfast. What inspired you to make so much of it?”

He shrugged. “I always make a big breakfast on Christmas Eve. For the first day of my vacation.”

She took a bite of egg. It was surprisingly good. “I didn’t know you could cook like this, Lucas.”

“Scrambled eggs and bacon aren’t that hard,” said Lucas, smirking.

“I can’t make scrambled eggs. Mine always come out burnt,” she said, dipping a folded piece of toast into her eggs. Lucas left just enough softness in the eggs that they were neither too runny nor too dry.

“You’re probably not stirring fast enough. Or you cook it too long.” Lucas poured them both coffee and they ate quietly for a while.

Violet sighed and looked back at the window. “If those roads don’t get cleared, the taxi is going to have a heck of a time getting to the airport.”

Lucas gave her an annoyed look. “I said I would drive you.”

“You don’t have to go to any trouble.”

Lucas set his mug down hard enough that the liquid sloshed a little but didn’t spill. “What trouble?” he exclaimed. “You’re my roommate. Why would I make you spend thirty or forty dollars on a cab to the airport when I can take you myself?”

“OK. OK. I have to be there two hours early,” Violet said, giving in.

Lucas looked up as a clump of snow fell from the roof into the mound in front of the bay window. “Maybe you should call and make sure your flight hasn’t been cancelled.”

Violet’s eyes widened. “You don’t think that could happen?”

“There is a blizzard going on.”

“Well, that would suck.” Going home for Christmas without her brother would be difficult enough. She would have a hell of a time getting away with not going at all. Even if she had a good reason.

“Why don’t you turn on the radio? It’s almost time for the news,” suggested Lucas between bites of toast.

Violet nodded and got up to turn on the stereo. Steppenwolf's *Magic Carpet Ride* was playing. She listened somewhat indifferently to the music, although she did like this song. She was too busy worrying about the weather. But her attention was caught by the sight of Lucas mouthing the words of the song and bobbing his head during the long guitar solo. His fingers worked a little as if he were tempted to play air guitar but self-conscious enough not to. His reddish-brown locks swayed over his forehead as he moved his head. She'd never seen him do this before.

He noticed her watching him and stopped. "What?"

She looked back at her plate. "Nothing."

He gazed at her for a minute then went back to his breakfast. She could feel her cheeks heating although it seemed ridiculous to her that they would. This thought only made her blush harder, however.

She was saved from having to think any more deeply about it by the newscaster beginning her report. The quick-talking woman started with local news, then world news, none particularly pleasant, then the sports, to which Lucas let out a startling whoop at the news that his favourite hockey team had won the night before. Then came traffic and weather, and none of that was good. Blowing snow warnings, zero visibility, accidents and stranded cars on the highways already. But only a few flights had been cancelled so far and they weren't specified. The radio station went to commercial.

Lucas switched off the radio. "See? I'm not sending you out in a taxi. We have to be careful on the highway. All those accidents and stranded cars are because the land is all exposed and there's nothing to break the wind. So nobody can see where they're going and 'bam' they hit the car in front of them or skid off the road."

Violet frowned. Was any of that supposed to make her feel better or just make her worry more? “Fine. I guess I better call the airline.”

Lucas gathered his empty dishes and brought them to the sink. “I should start shovelling if we’re going to get out of here today.” He went to the patio doors and stood there, shocked. “Shit!”

Violet looked up from her last bite of egg. “What?”

He looked at her over his shoulder. “It looks like I’ll have to dig my way to the shovel.”

She got up and looked out the doors at the backyard. The balcony was piled high with snow. A half-buried snow shovel leaned against the railing. “What? That one?”

Lucas shook his head. “No. That’s for the stairs. I have a big scooper next to the shed. I’ll have to dig a path to it though.”

She had no idea what he was talking about. “What’s a scooper?”

“A scooper? You know,” he tried to demonstrate the shape of the big shovel with his hands. “It’s like a big scoop with a sort of handle, good for clearing the driveway...” He paused. “I’ll show it to you if I ever manage to liberate it.”

Violet shrugged. “OK. Do you have one I can use to help?”

“Sure. When you’re ready.” Violet was still in her bathrobe. Morning person Lucas had been dressed for hours.

She rolled her eyes. “Hint taken.”

Lucas started. “I wasn’t ... I didn’t mean....”



Violet patted him on the shoulder. "I'm kidding." She smiled and turned to go downstairs to her room. Feeling his eyes on her back as she descended, she turned around but he was looking at something else. Violet shrugged and continued on down.

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Violet was annoyed. All she'd got from the mechanical Air Canada voice was the announcement that all flights were suspended until further notice. When she'd tried to get a human being to talk to, she'd been put on hold. After forty-five minutes of "Please stay on the line. Your call is important to us," she had given up. It appeared that she was stuck for now. She dreaded the unavoidable call to her parents, and weighed the pros and cons of delay. She still might get a flight tonight or tomorrow.

With a sigh, Violet went to put on her coat. She would call when she was sure. For now, she would help Lucas shovel them out. He had teased her about her coat since winter started. It was a black wool coat she'd gotten at The Bay that, as he said, was wholly inappropriate for anywhere but the city. He had a parka, a bright blue one with a thermal hood. She knew he was right because she was cold no matter how many sweaters and scarves she wore, but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of being right. Besides, it was the only winter coat she had, had been pretty expensive when she got it, and was still in good condition, so she wasn't going to waste money on a new one. She'd seen plenty of people with lighter-looking coats than hers. She would survive.

Violet opened the door and hesitated. There was a lot of snow and it was still falling, although she wasn't sure right away if she was seeing snow falling or just the wind blowing it around. There were other people along their street out shovelling their driveways in ski jackets and heavy coats. Lucas trudged towards her carrying the shovel from the back porch. It looked like he'd at least made a dent in the driveway snow. He wore his big parka, tall faux-fur-lined boots and tough jeans.

He stopped in front of her and held out the shovel. His cheeks were pink and he had a tiny icicle hanging from his nose. "Here. You clear around the car. I'll do the drive," he said.

She gripped the handle of the shovel with both hands. "My flight seems to be cancelled."

"Cancelled? Will there be another later?"

Violet shrugged. "I don't know yet."

He sighed. "Well, the snow needs to be cleared anyway. Come on."

Violet waded through the snow after him. He'd cleaned up the front walk, but she had to get through knee-deep snow to get to the car. She cleared the snow cautiously, poking at it with the blade of the shovel and then lifting the thick white powder in huge clumps up and onto the lawn. Lucas went back and forth from the front of the driveway to the backyard, transporting huge piles of snow along in his scooper like he was pushing a wheelbarrow. Violet thought the shovel resembled a wheelbarrow with its big plastic scoop and long handle. Even the 'push and lift' way of emptying it conveyed that image to Violet's mind.

At first, she was careful, afraid she might damage a tire or scratch the paint, but after a while she began to feel the cold and was tired, so she sped up her shovelling to try to get it over with. She became less diligent about the area nearest the car and just started lifting the snow and flinging it onto what she assumed was the lawn. She had to assume it was, because half the time she instinctively had her eyes closed from the effort.

A strangled exclamation made her stop and look up from her task. Lucas stood nearby, frozen in his tracks and covered in snow down one side of his parka. Within the hood, she could see his annoyed glare. She grinned sheepishly. "Sorry!"

"Onto the lawn, Vi, *onto the lawn,*" he said, bending back to his shovelling. She went back to what she was doing also, turning her back to him.

An instant later, she felt the distinct chill of a small round missile landing square on her back. She almost jumped out of her boots and whirled around. Lucas was smirking at her and working on rolling another such missile. Violet put up her hands in self-defence, letting the shovel drop to the ground. "Hey! What was that for?" she cried.

Lucas just pelted her with the snowball in his hands. Violet had to get out of his range, make herself a harder target to hit. He put down the scooper and sort of chased her across the lawn, tossing little balls of snow at her. Violet scooped makeshift snowballs with her gloved hands and threw them behind her, letting out a high-pitched shriek when one of his missiles hit her. She could hear him breathe hard with exertion. She was breathing hard too.

Finally, she turned to the instigator of their comical little chase and snowball fight, and just flung two handfuls of snow at him. He stopped at the same time she did, not far from her, and received a good dusting down his front because of it. Violet laughed

and clapped her hands. She was cold and wet where snow had gotten under her coat, but she was having lots of fun.

Lucas brushed himself off and, rolling his eyes and smiling, he stepped towards her. His parka was covered in snow too and his hood had fallen back. They were both out of breath, Violet bending with her hands on her knees. Suddenly, his foot slipped on a patch of ice under the snow and he fell forward with a yelp of surprise. His hands caught at the air and instead caught Violet's arm, pulling her down into the snow bank with a shriek of her own.

They landed in a tangle of limbs in the deep snow on the lawn, she on her back and he half on top of her. The snow broke their fall and she was glad it was so soft. They paused there, looking at each other in a frozen instant, and she thought, *Wow, his eyes are an amazing shade of blue.* Then he rolled off her and said in a serious voice, "Are you OK?"

Violet sucked in a breath, waking from that odd reverie, and said, "Yeah. You?"

He lolled a little in the snow, in no real hurry to get up. "Yes. You broke my fall."

She smirked. "You're welcome."

He made a sound like he was bursting fitfully into laughter and then began unashamedly chuckling. The image of the two of them circling each other over Lucas' small suburban lawn, weapons in hand, like ten year olds, sent Violet into hysterics herself. They lay there on their backs in the snow bank laughing for a good five minutes.

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“Yes, Mom.” Violet rolled her eyes, letting her mother’s words wash over her. Lucas smiled at her from the kitchen. “The storm should be clear by tomorrow. I should still be in time for dinner. No, the roads are still bad here and I’ll just end up sitting around the airport anyway. OK. I love you too. Say hi to Dad.”

She put down the phone and went over to the kitchen. After they had come in, dried off, and changed their clothes, Violet had spent most of the day on the phone with Air Canada’s voice recording. She knew that voice well now. Still no human service. And no better news. Finally, Lucas suggested she give up and wait for tomorrow. He could still drive her to the airport before he went to his parents’ house for Christmas lunch.

Then she had to finally call her mother and tell her that she’d be late. It had not been easy or smooth. Her mother had not been happy with her moving out to begin with, and this situation provided an inevitable opportunity to slip a few digs in to erode her willpower. *If you were home, you wouldn’t have to depend on unreliable transportation. I suppose I won’t have your help at all for tomorrow then. Are any of my children going to make it for Christmas?* For a psychologist and self-help expert, there was an annoying amount of times when her mother didn’t take her own advice. The further Violet got from her mom, the more she realized that there was a pettiness to her mother’s character that had probably always been there. If this was how she would be over a simple delay, Violet could just imagine what Christmas dinner would be like. She really wished Peter was around to share in the misery.

Lucas looked up at her as she approached the kitchen counter. He was filling a large pot with water. “Everything OK?”

She shrugged. “Yeah. They’re disappointed, but there’s nothing anyone can do.”

He nodded and put the pot on the stove. Then he took out a steel skillet and poured a little oil in it. She watched everything he was doing with interest. Violet had never been much of a cook. Neither was her mother, whose idea of dinner was often something brought home from a local bistro and bread from the bakery down the street. Even for dinner parties, she usually ordered party platters from Loblaws. It was Violet’s grandmother who’d done all the cooking on holidays. Violet was actually curious to see what her mother was going to have for the family on Christmas now that she had to finally do it herself.

Lucas went to the fridge and took out a package of hamburger, an onion, and a green pepper, piling each on top of the other in his arms and releasing them onto the counter. His fridge, despite the few additions of yogurt and vegetables she brought in, was still very much a man’s fridge. There was milk, juice, water, beer, and meat in the freezer. He also kept various sauces and condiments that she saw him occasionally take out. And there was an unopened bottle of sparkling wine in the bottom.

He handed her the green pepper and a knife. “Would you chop this up for me?”

She sort of stared at it for a second. Chopping was not her forte. “How much do you need?”

“Half should be enough,” he replied, dicing the onion.

She cut the pepper in half and removed the seeds. She rinsed the half to get the rest out that she couldn’t with her fingers. This much she knew to do. Lucas broke apart the hamburger meat and put it in the hot pan with the onions. It sizzled and the aroma of

cooking beef reached Violet's nostrils. "What are we having?" she asked, peeking over his shoulder.

He shrugged. "I thought we could just have some spaghetti. Are you done with the green pepper?"

"Um, no. Almost." She was very slow, struggling to get the knife through the pepper's glossy skin.

He turned to look at her progress. "Oh. There's a better way of doing that. Here," he said, and suddenly he had moved behind her and grasped her wrists. Lucas guided her hands carefully. "There. See?"

He was helping her cut up the pepper more quickly. He turned the pepper over and sliced down through the fleshy part, making thin strips that he then lay on the cutting board and diced. The knife went up and down, methodically striking the wooden cutting board. But more importantly, Lucas was standing extremely close to her, so close that she could feel his breath on her neck, his chest muscles on her back. The sensation caused her heart to flutter for an instant. She hadn't had a man's arms around her, intentionally intimately or not, like this in months. It was hard to concentrate on what she was doing. His muscles were taut under his shirt. She hadn't really realized before, but Lucas had a fine body. And he smelled so good.

The meat in the pan sizzled and popped. Lucas let go of her and hurried back to the pan, scooping up the chopped green pepper and tossing it in. He went to the cupboard and took out a can of tomato sauce, darting a quick unreadable glance at her. She avoided meeting his eyes and he went back to what he was doing, emptying the can into the skillet and mixing everything together.

Violet exhaled. What was she thinking? Why was she attaching meaning to random events? Was she that lonely? Could she actually be considering this man, her brother's friend? She resolved to stop letting her mind and her hormones wander. She was an adult, not a horny teenager, and she ought to act like it. Violet truly meant it.

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"I seriously suck at this," said Violet as her virtual golf ball missed the virtual hole once again. The ball actually skirted the rim and rolled away.

Lucas laughed. "So do I."

"You're not twenty over par." Her avatar appeared on the screen ready to play. The brown-haired girl with glasses was hers now. Lucas had helped her enter the profile in the Wii's memory. "Oh look. It's my turn again."

"We can stop if you want."

Violet pointed the Wii remote in front of her and took a few practice swings, trying to match her movements to the avatar's putting. "No. I'm finishing this game."

"OK. Fine."

She found the rhythm she wanted and just tapped the ball. Whether she had gotten it right or the game was finally taking pity on her didn't much matter to Violet as the little collection of pixels rolled over to the hole and dropped in. "Finally!" she said as she slumped back down on the couch next to Lucas.

He smiled and manipulated his Wiimote without bothering to get up. His little red-haired avatar swung his putter back and forth. "It's all in the wrist," he said. The



avatar hit the ball and it skidded across the green into the cup. Lucas smirked at her as she stared at him with her mouth hanging open. “Believe it or not, *Wii Golf* is harder than real golf.”

“Right.”

“It is.” He got up to tee off on the next hole. Seemingly for the fun of it, since Violet couldn’t see how it made much of a difference onscreen, he performed a perfect golf swing. She looked away quickly when she realized that she was staring at the way his back and buttock muscles rippled as his whole body followed the arc of his swing.

Violet resolutely turned her gaze to the television screen. His avatar swung the golf club and the ball travelled over trees and water to land somewhere on the virtual fairway. “Do you play real golf? Or just this?” she asked.

He sat back down and nodded. “Sure. Every good Westridge boy has to play golf. It’s in our genetic code.”

She looked at him as she got up to tee off. He had his arms crossed behind his neck and an amused look in his eye. “Peter used to caddy when he was in high school. He used to make something like a hundred or two hundred dollars a day in tips.” She swung and her golf ball made a similar trip and landed somewhere behind Lucas’. “I always wanted to also, but the golf course didn’t hire girls as caddies.”

“Huh. I never knew that about him.” He crossed his ankle over his opposite knee and half-turned towards her as she sat back down.

“Oh yeah. It’s why he was able to go to university out of town. He saved up and was able to pay pretty much his whole way.” Violet’s turn was up again and she considered getting up, but decided to just swing from the couch. She did as well as she

did when standing. “I, on the other hand, had to take the employee tuition discount at my parents’ university and work a crap job at Zellers to pay my expenses.”

Lucas chuckled. “I caddied a bit for my dad and his friends when I was young, but I never made any money at it. I interned at my dad’s company for a while in college, but that was more for experience than anything else. Of course, I had an allowance that paid for everything I needed.”

She watched him swing the remote. His ball landed on the green. “What was my brother like in university?”

He had a distant look in his eyes for a moment, and then he smiled. “Absolutely insane. Up all night drinking and playing in bands. Half asleep in classes but still able to charm all his profs into passing him. I don’t even remember how we met.” He paused. “No, wait. I do remember. It was at Frosh. Sean dragged me down to the pub crawl and there was Peter, piss drunk and sitting on two guys’ shoulders, singing *O Canada* at the top of his lungs.”

Violet laughed so hard that she snorted. “I can just imagine,” she said.

He rested his chin on his hand and looked at her curiously. “What was that?”

Violet stopped laughing under that scrutiny. “What?”

Lucas pointed at her nose. “You snort when you laugh.”

“I do not!”

“You just did it.” He laughed, and she gave him an annoyed look, which made him laugh harder. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of. It’s ... um,” he cleared his throat, pulling back whatever he was going to say.

They stared at each other for what seemed to Violet to be an eternity. She found herself intensely curious about what he'd been about to say. Cute? Normal? Involuntary? She almost wished he'd said it just so they could avoid this awkward moment, even if it led to another awkward moment. She felt completely awkward with him tonight. It wasn't as if they hadn't been living in the same house for three months at least. But, she realized, this was probably the most time she had spent alone with him since she arrived. With his engineering work and her job for the mayor, they hardly ever saw each other.

But it wasn't just that. She'd spent much of her time since she'd moved here looking at men with the perspective of a jilted girlfriend, or she'd viewed him simply as her brother's friend. He hadn't made any obvious moves on her (and with Violet, it would have to be very obvious). She assumed it had been out of respect or propriety or his own heartache or simply because he wasn't attracted to her. She could accept that. In fact, she hadn't really thought of any of this until now. But the prospect of a Lucas who might be interested in her, who might even be flirting with her, was one that she had no idea how to deal with. Not because she wasn't attracted to him, but because she wasn't sure if she *should* be.

Violet's gaze flicked to the television screen. Lucas' avatar was waiting patiently with his club ready. Lucas was looking at her kind of strangely, almost like he was daring her to say something. She pointed to the TV. "It's your turn."

He blinked and sat up, like he'd just been woken up. "Uh, right. Right." He turned away and went back to the game, setting up a putt that looked like it would be successful until the ball stopped right on the rim of the cup. Lucas made a contemptuous sound and tapped the ball in on the next stroke.

He got up as she was preparing to lightly hit her ball onto the green. He fidgeted for a second and then he went to the kitchen. She swung a touch too hard and the ball ended up on the opposite end of the green. But she could putt.

He took the bottle of sparkling wine out of the fridge and held it with the cork pointing away from him, twisting off the wires that held it down. "Want a drink?"

She ducked, trying to figure out the trajectory of the cork if it flew off. "I thought that was for a special occasion."

He shrugged. "It's Christmas Eve." He turned around slowly with his hand on the cork, trying to figure out the best place to open the bottle and settling on the sink. "I wish I could do that thing with the machete or knife or whatever. Have you seen that done?"

The cork came off with a loud pop and a little foam spilled into the sink. It wasn't champagne so there was no dramatic show. "One of the bartenders did the thing with the machete at my cousin's wedding. It's pretty cool," she said as Lucas came back to the couch holding the bottle and two champagne flutes. The glasses came from Lucas' small collection of liquor glasses.

He poured the wine and set the bottle down on the table, arranging two coasters underneath it so it wouldn't leave a ring. They clinked glasses and drank. The beverage was golden and lightly flavoured. Violet held the flute to the light of the Christmas lights in the window and watched the rainbow colours sparkle and refract off the crystal. "You know, the problem with these glasses is that you drink so little at a time that you don't realize you're drunk till you fall over," she said, taking another sip.

"Violet, you're not going to get drunk off half a bottle of sparkling wine. You might get a nice buzz, maybe," he said, pouring another round.

“Fine then.” She pointed her Wii remote at the screen. “Let’s finish the game.”

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“You know, I’ve never seen *It’s a Wonderful Life*,” said Lucas.

“Me neither,” agreed Violet. They had put away the *Wii* console and drunk all the wine. And a quarter of a bottle of Bailey’s. Now they sat back on the couch and flipped channels. “It’s supposed to be a tradition or something.”

“It’s an American thing, I think.”

She nodded. “Yeah, probably.” She turned on the couch towards him. “So what do we have? As Canadians, I mean.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know.” He clicked off the TV and put down the remote.

A glint of silver on his hand caught Violet’s attention. She grabbed his hand and held it up. He wore a tiny steel band on his pinkie finger. “What’s this?”

Lucas wiggled his fingers. “This? It’s my engineer’s ring. You get it when you graduate.”

She held his hand up close. The ring had corrugated ridges. “But you’re a software engineer.”

He pulled his hand away. “I’m still an engineer. I have an engineering degree.”

“OK. Sorry.” She reached for his hand again and he gave it to her. He wasn’t terribly serious about keeping his hand away from her.

He pointed to the ridges on the ring. “My dad, my brother, and my grandfather have these rings too. If I wear the ring enough, it’ll become smooth like theirs.”

She stroked the ridges with the tip of her finger. "That's a lot of pressure. How come you don't work with your father?"

"Because. I needed to get out on my own, be my own man." He turned his head to face her. "I wanted to see if I could succeed on my own merit, you know?"

"Yeah." She let go of his hand. "What is it with guys and that whole 'lone wolf' thing? Peter was all about that when he went to college. You know, my mother was really against it. But he was like 'I need to be independent blah blah blah.' I think the only time I ever saw my dad bother to get involved and stand up to my mom was to defend Peter."

"Huh." He blinked. "We probably shouldn't have had the Bailey's."

Violet shrugged. "I don't think we're drunk, exactly." She leaned her head on her hand and pulled her knees up onto the couch. "Lucas?"

"What?" He mimicked her somewhat, pulling one leg up onto the couch.

"Can I ask you a question?"

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, of course."

She lifted her hands in appeal. "Why the suburbs?"

"What?" he exclaimed. "Why did you come here then? Do you really need to ask?"

Violet shrugged. "I came here because Peter lived here. And look where that got me."

He straightened a little. "It hasn't been all bad, has it?"

She shook her head. "No, of course not. I'm just saying, clearly my brother was unhappy."

“Oh, don’t start with me about that suburban ennui stuff. Oh, I’m bored. Oh, I’m lonely. Oh, I’m mired in crass commercialism.”

“Clearly Peter was unhappy, otherwise he wouldn’t have left so abruptly, would he?”

Lucas frowned. “Peter didn’t leave because he was unhappy, or dissatisfied, or whatever. He left because....” He stopped suddenly.

Violet sat up. “What do you mean? What do you know?”

He turned away and put a hand over his eyes. “Violet, I’m drunk and I don’t know what I’m saying.”

She pulled off his hand. “You’re not drunk, remember? You just have a nice buzz.”

He looked at her, his face, and especially his eyes, very serious. “Fine. I’m buzzed and I don’t know what I’m saying. Just forget it.”

She searched his face. He wasn’t going to change his mind. She turned away. “Fine.”

They were silent a while. She couldn’t think very coherently, but she was annoyed with Lucas. For still holding back, for not telling her something she thought she should know. She was even annoyed with him for making her annoyed with him. Hadn’t she resolved not to let her emotions wander?

He touched her hand. “Violet....”

“What time is it?” she asked abruptly.

Lucas withdrew his hand as if he’d been stung. He looked at his watch. “About midnight.”

Violet looked up. "Midnight? It's Christmas then!"

He raised an eyebrow. "Yeah." Then he had a sudden thought. "Yeah, it is." He got up and went to the closet in the foyer. He came back with a small rectangular box wrapped in Christmas paper and decorated with a bow. He handed it to Violet. "I might as well give this to you now."

She stared down at the box in her hands. "You got me a gift?"

Lucas shrugged. "Yeah. It's just a little something."

All of Violet's annoyance melted away. It had been petty anyway, an overflow of her own bitter feelings projected onto him, as her mother would say. She was reminded suddenly of the box she kept hidden in her closet downstairs, the gift that Sean had helped her pick out for Lucas. She wasn't going to give it to him until she got back, but since they were exchanging gifts....

She got up and put the gift from Lucas on the coffee table. Violet hurried downstairs. "Where are you going? You haven't opened it!" he called after her.

"Back in a minute!" she called over her shoulder. She went straight to the closet and pulled out the box she wanted. Violet was glad she'd taken the time to wrap it.

She came back upstairs and handed the box to Lucas, who'd seated himself on the couch to wait for her. He received the sizable rectangular box with some surprise.

"What's this?"

Violet sat down next to him and picked up her gift. "Open it."

He looked at her sidelong and picked at the tape on the end. He was one of those people who insisted on unwrapping a gift with a view to keeping the paper as intact as possible. After some fiddling with it, he got the paper off and opened the box. Lucas



pulled out the item, a soft long-sleeved navy blue sweater. He held it this way and that, marvelling at the manufacture. “Nice. Thank you.”

“Sean helped me pick it out. He said you’d admired it one day,” said Violet, her hands clasped around her small box.

He looked at her. “This is that sweater? No way! You shouldn’t have!”

Violet blushed. “You’re welcome.”

Lucas carefully folded the sweater and put it back in the box, placing it next to him on the table. He pointed at the box in her hands. “Now you.”

Violet nodded and ripped open the paper. She opened the box, a jewellery box as she had guessed, and removed a small silver pendant on a silver chain. The pendant was shaped like a heart made of silver vines with pink and green leaves surrounding a delicate pink Tudor rose. She held it lightly in her palm and just gazed at it. “Oh my God, Lucas. This is beautiful.”

“Do you like it?” he asked tentatively.

She looked incredulously up at him. “Like it? Lucas, this is the most amazing gift that anyone’s ever given me.” She opened the clasp and put the necklace on. “Can you help me with this?”

“Sure,” replied Lucas, and without thinking, he reached around her neck and closed the clasp of the necklace. His hands rested on her shoulders, however, as he admired the necklace on her breast. “Beautiful.” She blushed. His gaze travelled from her shoulders to her long brown hair and her neck and finally to her face where he stopped and looked into her eyes. “Violet....”

She could feel her heart thudding in her chest. The entire moment was intoxicating. She didn't even need the buzz from the wine and liquor. "Yes?" she breathed.

He leaned in close to her until their noses barely touched. He eyes were half-closed. "I..."

Violet reached out a hand to stroke his cheek. Lucas grasped the back of her head and kissed her, awkwardly at first then confidently once she reciprocated. He slid one arm down around her waist and they pressed their bodies together, Violet running her fingers through his hair.

Somehow, she forgot all of her worries and reservations in that one charged moment.

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Violet sat on the edge of Lucas' bed, naked except for the sheet wrapped around her and the heart pendant cool against her chest. Lucas lay sleeping next to her, similarly disrobed. In the moonlight streaming through his window, Violet agonized over what she'd done.

It wasn't that it hadn't been a pleasurable experience. Lucas was a gentle and attentive lover, better than her ex. And he was so handsome and serene sleeping there beside her. Without thinking, she brushed off a piece of hair from his forehead. He smiled dreamily but didn't waken.

What had she done? How could she have lost control of herself like that? Had she not resolved that evening to not let her hormones run away with her? They barely knew each other! It had been too fast, too impulsive and their friendship would be ruined. She could see it clearly. What did they really know about each other? What kind of relationship could they have? If they started something from this one-night stand, it would just be hollow and end in heartache.

She didn't want that. She didn't want to wake up one day and realize she'd lost him, his companionship, his friendship, his affection. Violet couldn't give in to animal lusts when so much was at stake.

And what kind of girlfriend or lover could she be? She'd barely gotten her head on straight from her last relationship. She wasn't ready for another one. Was she? Was he? Violet knew very little about his own grieving process. How much of this night had been born not of their mutual attraction, but of loneliness and physical need? She was starting to sound like her mother. But it all sounded right in her head.

Violet looked over at Lucas. She had to leave, get some space between them. She would get a cab to the airport and that would be that. Maybe just leave him a letter. By the time she got back, hopefully the whole incident would be behind them. Part of her saw the cowardliness of this plan and despised her for it, but the rest of her feared losing her resolve if she had to speak to him tonight.

She rose from the bed and hunted down her clothes. Violet had gathered up nearly all of it and was looking for pen and paper on his desk, when she heard movement from the direction of the bed. She froze. Maybe he was just moving in his sleep.

She almost jumped out of her skin when he approached her in the dark and kissed her shoulder, “Where are you going?” he asked, wrapping his arms around her waist.

Violet straightened and tried to assume the coldest demeanour she could think of. It was difficult when her own body was working against her, reacting to his caresses. “Lucas,” she said matter-of-factly, her voice trembling a little.

He stopped kissing her immediately. This was not the tone he was expecting. “What’s wrong?”

“I... I don’t think we should do this again.” He let go of her. The suddenness actually hit her physically for a brief second but she continued on. “This was just too impulsive. You’re a good friend and I wouldn’t want to change or jeopardize that friendship.”

“I see.” His tone was completely flat.

She risked a look at him. His face was grim as he sat on the bed. “You do understand, don’t you?” she asked, troubled by the distant look in his eyes.

He gave her one of his usual half-smiles, but his eyes were still hard. “Yes. I understand. Perhaps this was a bad idea.”

Somehow those words hurt her more than she thought they would. She frowned and looked away. “I’m going to take a cab to the airport. I’ll see you when I get back?”

He didn’t answer right away and then he sighed. “Of course. I’ll be here.”

Violet picked up her clothes and left the room. He watched her until she was gone, and then he went back to bed. She shut the door and leaned against it for a moment, praying to God that Christmas dinner would be less eventful and less stressful than Christmas Eve.

## Isaac's Big Fat Gay Wedding

Sean rose from his seat, champagne flute in hand, and tapped the side with a butter knife. The party guests looked up at the ring of the glass and quieted. Weaver's was full with the well-dressed members of Greendale society. At a signal from Brooke, the owner, the band put down their instruments. Isaac smiled up at Sean. His confidence in the way he looked at his waiting audience gave Isaac the urge to pull him into the cloakroom. "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for attending the Greendale Gay and Lesbian Society's third annual benefit gala. Your contributions tonight will help fund the numerous programs and educational services the Society provides. But we have something more to celebrate this evening. All of us are here, I think, because we share in a singular dream, a dream of equality for gay and lesbian couples. Last month, we took a significant step towards that goal. So, I propose a toast. To the Supreme Court for finally legalizing gay marriage!"

The ring of champagne flutes was deafening as the guests at the tables took up the toast. Sean touched his glass to Isaac's and the others immediately around him, but remained standing. Isaac tugged at his sleeve and gestured for him to sit down, but Sean put his flute down on the table and held up a finger. Isaac shook his head, confused. What else did he have to say?

Sean tapped the side of his glass again for quiet. "I'd like to say one more thing if I might." He turned suddenly to Isaac and clasped his hands in front of him. Isaac heard Brooke squeal with glee. Isaac had the sinking suspicion that she knew something he didn't. He was puzzled by the shy expression on Sean's face. "Isaac, the first time I ever saw you I gave you a parking ticket. I didn't think I would ever see you again, but then

you took me to traffic court, and lost.” Isaac laughed along with the audience. Where was he going with this? “You gave me that invite to your restaurant opening, and I didn’t know if I was going to go right away, but I did, and if I hadn’t, we might never have hooked up. And five years later, you’re still the shining light of my life. But times are changing. We can do more than we ever could before.” Isaac swallowed. Sean smiled as he paused for dramatic effect. “So, Isaac Hayes, will you marry me?”

Isaac froze. Of all the things he had considered would come out of this evening, this wasn’t one of them. The strangest sense of dread took hold of him. He had no idea what to say. He stared at Sean, who waited patiently for his answer. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the rest of the party guests watching and waiting for him. His cheeks flushed red. But still he couldn’t get his brain to work. All he felt when he looked at Sean was the overwhelming love he felt for him, but all he could think of were his parents and how horrifying the thought of marriage was. Visions of his parents stalking each other through the house as they argued played behind his eyes.

Brooke pinched him hard in the back. “Say something, stupid,” she whispered in his ear. He resisted glaring back at her. He stood and looked into Sean’s eyes. He looked so hopeful. Even worried. It pained Isaac’s heart.

“Yes?” He cleared his throat, realizing he sounded too uncertain. He took Sean’s hands in his own. “Yes, Sean, I will marry you.”

The tension fell from Sean’s shoulders and he pulled Isaac into a bear hug. The restaurant erupted in applause. The couple parted and people began getting up to congratulate them. Lucas slapped Sean on the back and joked that it was about time they made things legal. Violet, his roommate, kissed each of them on the cheek. Brooke’s

boyfriend, Gordon, came around from the stage and shook their hands. Isaac put on a smile and accepted their congratulations.

Brooke stood, dispersing the others to their seats. She held her champagne flute in one hand and pushed a strand of dark hair behind her ear with the other. "Well, I think another toast is in order. To Isaac and Sean," she raised her glass and the others followed suit. She turned to the audience and Isaac suddenly realized that she was about to announce something that she had already been planning. "Weaver's would be very pleased to host the wedding of our head chef, whenever the happy couple set the date," she turned back to the couple, "My restaurant is your restaurant."

Sean squeezed Isaac's shoulder and chuckled gratefully. "Thank you so much. We'll be happy to take you up on your offer, right Isaac?"

Isaac regarded Brooke sceptically. She was so good at turning everything into free publicity for the restaurant. "That would be great, Brooke. But I'm not cooking."

She laughed. "Of course not. You can even pick the chef." She put down her glass. "Well, now that's settled, let's get back to the party!" At her words, the band started up again and people returned to their conversations. A few couples drifted to the dance floor. Gordon was back up on the stage, leading the band in a rock ballad that Isaac didn't recognize. Brooke admired him, her chin in her hand. Isaac started to sit back down but Sean took his hand and gently pulled him to the dance floor.

Isaac and Sean wrapped their arms around each other and turned slowly to the music. Isaac rested his head on Sean's shoulder. He felt so comfortable that he didn't hear when Sean spoke. "Huh?"

"I said, are you happy?"

“Yes, of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?”

“You didn't answer right away.”

“You surprised me. I mean, we've hardly ever talked about this.”

“I thought it was something you would want.”

Isaac looked up at Sean. The look in his eyes told him that it was definitely what *he* wanted. “I do. I just would have liked some warning.”

Sean looked relieved. “Sorry. You're right.” That settled for him, Sean moved on. “Ok. I think you'll agree that we don't need a long engagement. I want to start planning now.”

Isaac coughed. This was too fast. Too hard to digest. “Now?”

Sean nodded. When he was focused on something, Sean didn't hear anything except what he wanted to hear. “Yes, now. Tomorrow at the latest.” He increased the pace of their dancing as he thought aloud. “Brooke lending us the restaurant took care of that worry. I'm sure Georgina's would love to do our suits. I'll call her tomorrow. Do you think Gordon and his band would play? Who are you going to get to cater?”

Isaac blinked, unable to follow the myriad directions Sean wandered in. “I don't know. Someone. When are you going to have time for all this?”

Sean scoffed at the idea. “I have time. I can reduce my hours at work. I have a ton of paperwork that I should get to. Do you remember the name of that printer we saw downtown? The one next to the Museum.”

“No.”

“Well, it doesn't matter. I'll just swing by. We need to get the invitations out as soon as possible.”



Isaac tried to bring him back to earth. What was he getting into? “How big a wedding are you planning?”

“We can afford it. Anyway, you only get to do these things once.”

“Hopefully.”

“That's not funny. I just want this day to be special. When should we do this anyway?”

“I don't know. There's a lot of planning to do.”

“It's not that bad. How does a month from Saturday sound? That shouldn't be a problem for the restaurant, right?”

Isaac couldn't help frowning. It was so close. “I don't think so.”

Sean let go of Isaac's waist. “Good. I'll go tell Brooke.”

Isaac watched him jog back to the table and say something in Brooke's ear.

Brooke nodded, taking out her PDA and making a note with the stylus. Stuffing his hands in his pockets, Isaac shuffled back to the table of well-wishers.

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Isaac spread a large handful of carrots on the cutting board in front of Violet. It was poker night at Violet's and Lucas' house and Isaac was “helping” her make supper. The other players were watching TV in the living room. Some sport was on, hockey or curling or whatever. Isaac didn't care. It felt good to have some normalcy after the

whirlwind first week of Sean's wedding planning. He handed Violet a peeler. "You do the carrots. I'll start the chicken."

Violet frowned at the easy task and set to work. Isaac washed the chicken breasts and arranged them on a greased cookie sheet. He frowned at the spice selection and finally settled on some sage. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Violet hacking away at the carrots with the peeler.

He caught her hand in his. "Gently. You're going to peel away all the carrots."

Violet grumbled something under her breath and went back to work, slower this time. Isaac turned back to the chicken. Something was missing. He opened the fridge and rummaged through the fruits and vegetables at the bottom. He found a solitary lemon at the back. He rolled it on the counter and sliced it in half, sprinkling the juice over the chicken breasts. Satisfied, he put the chicken in the oven.

"Done." Violet held the carrots out to him.

"Good. Slice them thinly. On the diagonal." Isaac inspected a package of asparagus and decided to use it. He snapped the ends off one by one.

"I don't know how you guys can slice stuff so easily. I can't get it." Violet's cutting was painfully slow by Isaac's standards. She sliced each carrot with the speed of a surgeon.

Isaac placed the asparagus spears in a bowl for later. "It just takes practice. Or you could cheat. I should have brought my mandolin."

"What's that?"

"It's a French cutting instrument. It makes perfect slices every time. I got mine in Paris."

“You were in Paris? When?”

“Hello? Cordon Bleu certified? I went to school in France. Didn't I tell you?” He was almost offended. Did she think he was trained at the Joe Blow School of Cookery?

She had worked her way through her fourth carrot and plodded on. “Oh. Your parents must have done well to be able to send you to France.”

Isaac's fists clenched. “No, I saved up myself. I was gone as soon as I turned eighteen.”

Violet looked up from her growing mountain of carrot slices. “Oh. Because of your sexuality?”

Isaac could still feel their perpetual disapproval. Their scowls were like a shadow on his mood. “They probably would have disapproved.”

“What do you mean? Didn't you tell them?”

“I never got the chance.”

She stopped cutting. “You never came out to your parents?”

Isaac busied himself cleaning up. “No. It's not a big deal.”

“What does Sean think?”

“I don't tell Sean everything. It's not important. Can't we change the subject?”

“OK.” She turned back to her carrots and they worked in silence for a moment.

“You should really do something with this kitchen. Personalize it. There's a lot of Lucas in this room and not much of you.” Isaac frowned at his environment.

Violet gathered the carrot slices and put them in a bowl. “We don't have that much of a kitchen. We do what we can. It's not like we have a walk-in pantry like you do.”

“Sean and I put that pantry in ourselves. That didn't come with the house.”

Violet leaned against the counter, a hand on her hip. “I don't really care about the kitchen. Lucas does most of the cooking anyway.”

“You should care. You act like you're still a visitor.”

“Despite what you may think, Lucas and I are not a couple. We're just friends.”

“Things change.”

“Are we talking about me or you?”

Isaac frowned. “Not me. We were talking about you.”

“Right.” They were silent again. Violet ran a dish towel through her fingers, back and forth. “Isaac, do you *want* to marry Sean?”

Isaac's fists clenched again. “What? Of course I do.”

“You just don't seem all that excited about it. I'd be if I was getting married.”

“Your time will come.”

“I'm serious. Are you having second thoughts?”

*Yes. Very much.* “No. Where do you get that idea?”

“Well, you've been late for everything lately and didn't even show up for one of your appointments.”

“Has Sean been telling you all this? It's none of your business.” He regretted it as soon as he said it. Violet's little fist tightened on the dish towel.

He could see she was getting frustrated. “Isaac, I'm your friend. It's OK if you're getting cold feet. But you can't just hold it in.”

His heart ached to tell her everything. His fear. His rage. How he felt himself sinking further and further out of the conversation whenever Sean talked about the

wedding. But he couldn't. He disliked himself for it, but he worried that anything he told her would get back to Sean. That couldn't happen. He wouldn't understand. Sometimes it felt like Sean still knew nothing about Isaac. And Isaac wondered what he didn't know about Sean. It was these doubts that made Isaac so angry. After five years, two people should understand each other, right?

A victory cry from the living room jolted Isaac. Violet and Isaac popped their heads into the living room. Sean and Lucas were doing a victory dance in front of the TV. Sean looked up and their eyes met. He smiled at Isaac and turned back to the TV. Violet and Isaac went back to the kitchen.

There was that smile again. No matter how angry or frustrated he got, Sean's smile was an instant remedy. He couldn't give up the confidence and love that came from that smile. He felt safe with Sean. Isaac would do anything to keep those feelings, to keep Sean in his life. Even get married.

He filled a pot with water and set it on the stove to boil. Violet poured the carrots and asparagus into the pot. Isaac took her hand. "I appreciate that you care. It's like you said. Cold feet. But let me deal with it on my own, OK?"

Violet hugged him. After a second, he hugged her back. He did need a hug. "But we're here for you, got it?"

Isaac smiled. "I know."

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“There you are!” Sean turned from the mirror and frowned at Isaac as Georgina's assistant fussed with the pins in his sleeve. The wedding party had taken over Georgina's small boutique. Lucas and Violet were looking through ties and matching them to his suit, and Brooke stood on a platform while silver-haired Georgina herself bent over the hem of her gown.

Georgina looked up from her work and peered over her granny glasses at Isaac. “You are late, Isaac. Please go sit by the changing room.”

Isaac, chastened like a schoolboy, sat down where he was told. Georgina called one of her other assistants and sent her to get Isaac's suit from its box. The assistant dropped the suit into Isaac's hands and urged him into the changing room, closing the door on him. Isaac shrugged and changed into the suit. “I know I'm late. Sorry.”

“This is the second time this week.” Sean was annoyed. Isaac knew he was right to be. He hadn't been on time to anything this week.

“I know. I'm sorry.” Isaac pulled on the pants and stuffed the shirt into the waist. He considered buttoning the cuffs then changed his mind, and pulled on the jacket instead. “I'll be on time tomorrow.”

Sean sighed. “Right.” Isaac stepped out of the changing room and Sean pointed without looking at a slim binder labelled Rhoda's Flowers on the front in gold lettering. “I brought the catalogue from the florist so we can pick the floral arrangements.”

The assistant directed Isaac to a chair and had him stand on it while she pinned the hems of his pants. He tried to put his hands in his pockets but she batted them away. With his perspective so high, Isaac stared at the ceiling to wait out the time till he could get down. “Whatever you pick will be fine.”

“Could you try to show a little more interest? This is your wedding too.”

Conversation had stopped in the store. Isaac looked away from the ceiling to see neither Violet nor Lucas paying attention to the blue tie she held at his collar. Brooke pretended to be absorbed in Georgina's work. Sean's expression in the mirror was impatient.

Isaac scowled from on high. “I'm just saying that I trust your judgment. You don't need me to pick flowers.”

“Fine, but I've been doing everything. Have you chosen a caterer yet?”

The assistant patted Isaac's leg and he got down from the chair. She moved him over to a mirror and began pinning his jacket. “I'm working on it. Henri can't do it; he's got the Cancer benefit that night.”

“You've had two weeks to find someone. Henri isn't the only other chef in town.”

The assistant working on Sean's jacket carefully removed it and had him lift his arms so she could check the fit of the shirt.

Brooke stepped off the platform and admired herself in a mirror while Georgina pulled on the back of her gown. “Why don't you just ask Jennifer?”

“Jennifer is a sous-chef. She's not ready to handle a wedding on her own.

Certainly not this one. I'll call Emmanuel tomorrow.” Isaac's assistant buttoned his cuffs, sighing through the pins in her mouth.

“I thought you said Emmanuel couldn't do vegetarian.”

“How many vegetarians are coming? He can do it; he's just not all that creative.”

Isaac jumped as he was stabbed with a pin. The assistant apologized absently.

“Don't wait to call him. You can't expect him to come up with a menu at the last minute.” Finally released from being poked and prodded, Sean was sent off to a changing room.

Isaac frowned at his reflection. He had that same feeling of dread when he looked at the suit. It was the same feeling he got when he tried to look at the swatches and samples that Sean continually brought to him over the past weeks. It was getting harder and harder to mask his ill feelings for his impending marriage. He had begun to resent the whole affair more than fear it. He had never liked the idea of marriage. If anything, he'd been relieved when he'd realized he was gay; there seemed to no longer be that societal pressure. Gay rights were Sean's passion, not Isaac's. Even if he had ever been as involved as Sean, gay marriage would be last on his list of goals. Until he'd met Sean, he hadn't any idea why homosexuals would want to engage in what he saw as the worst part of heterosexual life. Marriage was a trap; it was so final. One person every day for the rest of your life. Always there. Till death do you part.

But Sean was different. Marriage was a positive institution to him. It was a vow that two people in love made to be together always. It was romantic. And marriage made Homosexual couples equal to Heterosexual couples. They could have the same rights. They could adopt children, inherit property, hold joint accounts, and all that stuff that heterosexuals took for granted. Common-law was good, but only went so far. Marriage was the basis of most laws, in one way or another. Isaac could tell that Sean was losing his patience with him, but Sean was so absorbed in his own point of view that he thought Isaac was only being lazy and not discontented. It was partly Isaac's fault. He couldn't



bring himself to confess his unhappiness to Sean and risk losing him. Nothing was worse than losing Sean's love. He was Isaac's rock, the part of his life that gave him stability.

“Did you hear what I said?” Georgina's assistant had finished the fitting and was urging him to the changing room. Sean leaned against the other one, arms crossed in front of him, already dressed in his street clothes.

Isaac ducked the woman's pushing and entered the stall. “Yes. I won't forget to call Emmanuel early.”

“I said my parents are arriving Friday morning.”

Isaac changed as quickly as possible without damaging the suit. He would catch hell if he ruined all that work. He pulled on his shirt and jeans and stepped out. “Your parents?”

“Yes. I told you they're coming to the wedding.”

Brooke stepped between them. “It's good that your parents are coming, Sean. Are they staying with you?”

Sean turned a pleasant expression on Brooke. “No, they're staying in a hotel. I'll bring them by before the wedding.”

“That would be lovely.” She fingered the waist of her dress and addressed Georgina. “Do you have everything you need?”

Georgina, standing behind the counter, waved them off. “Yes, you can pick up your clothes next Monday.”

Brooke placed a hand on Isaac's and Sean's shoulders. “Well, why don't I change, and we can go get a coffee? Anybody up for a Timmy's run?”

Isaac almost heaved a sigh of relief, now that the spotlight wasn't on him. "Yeah, sure. I'm dying for a mocha. Bring it on."

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Sean's parents arrived early Friday morning, and Sean went out to meet them. Isaac stayed in bed. He had to be in the kitchen by ten to get things set up for the rehearsal dinner. He'd managed to get his fellow chef, Emmanuel, to cater the wedding, but the rehearsal dinner was still his job since he couldn't trust anyone else to do it. He didn't mind. Cooking was the best way to avoid his problems. Especially when he had a whole staff to yell at.

The restaurant was a mess of noise and bustle when he arrived. The wedding was a day away and Brooke had actually closed down for the preparations. Workmen scurried in and out carrying all sorts of objects: plants, chairs, tables. Isaac spotted Sean standing with Brooke in front of what looked like a stage with a red carpet rolled out in front of it. He was speaking animatedly to a man and woman. Sean saw him over their shoulders and waved at him. Caught, Isaac walked over.

Isaac was relieved to see Sean's Nana Michaels standing with the group. She leaned on her cane and smiled at him sympathetically. He had met her a few months ago for the first time, and it had amazed him how easily he got along with her. There was something about Nana Michaels that instantly put him at ease, something he'd had to see for himself that he couldn't believe when Sean or Lucas told him about her. Maybe it was because he had always been closer to his own grandmother more than he ever had been

with his parents. Maybe she reminded him of her. Or maybe it was because Nana Michaels had this quality of treating everyone she met like they were family. He wasn't sure, but he was happy to see her. She understood him. There wasn't much he could hide from her piercing gaze, and yet that realization didn't make him as anxious as he thought it would. He hugged her gently and she stepped aside to let her daughter and son-in-law see him.

The couple turned as he came over. The man was middle-eastern in his sixties and had a bushy grey moustache. The woman was white, with blondish white hair, and shorter than the man. Sean's mother embraced Isaac, kissing him on the cheeks. His father shook Isaac's free hand. "Good to see you again, Isaac," she said.

Isaac extricated himself gracefully from her arms. "It's been a while." He looked around at the stage and tables set to face it. "Is this a wedding or dinner theatre?"

Brooke laughed. "It's for the ceremony. Since we're integrating the reception and ceremony areas, we thought a stage would make it easier for everyone to see."

Isaac surveyed the dining room. There had to be place for two hundred people. "Right."

Mrs. Sadek tapped Isaac on the arm. "So, Isaac, when do we get to meet your parents?"

Sean put down the clipboard he was reading. "Oh, Ma. Isaac's parents passed away while he was in Paris, remember?"

She looked sheepish. "Oh yes, I'm so sorry. What am I saying?"

Isaac smirked. "Don't be embarrassed. I try not to think about it either. The way they were, especially in the car, I've always imagined it was a kind of murder-suicide."

“What?”

Sean scowled at Isaac, giving him a look that seemed to ask if Isaac was drunk.

“Don't listen to him. He's just making a sick joke. His parents died in a car accident.”

“Yup. Just skidded off the road one night.” Everyone was uncomfortably silent.

Isaac saw his cue to escape. “Anyway, it was nice seeing you again, but I've got to get into the kitchen.” He shook their hands and turned to go.

“Oh, don't go yet. I want to talk to you about the ceremony.” Sean took Isaac's elbow and guided him to the stage. He shifted his hand to Isaac's. “Now, when the music starts, we're going to walk slowly down the carpet and up the stairs to the stage,” Isaac reluctantly followed Sean up the stairs to the floral area where the ceremony was to be performed, “Lucas and Brooke will be standing here and here, and the Mayor will be here between the bouquets.”

Isaac interrupted the tour. “The Mayor?”

“Yes, didn't I tell you? Mayor Richley said she would officiate. Anyway, we will walk up to here and then the Mayor will perform the ceremony. What do you think of the setup?”

Isaac stared at the empty space between the floral bouquets. Everything seemed so much closer now. More in your face, more real. He was really getting married. In front of a couple hundred people. By the Mayor. He felt ill.

“I can't do this.” Isaac let go of Sean's hand and sprinted down the steps. He brushed past the others and made a beeline for the kitchen. He was so fast and focused that he didn't hear Sean calling after him. Before he knew it, he had burst through the

swinging doors and ploughed through the kitchen to his office. It was only when he closed the office door behind him did he realize that he'd been running.

Isaac leaned against the door to catch his breath. He'd finally said it. He'd finally admitted to himself that he couldn't go through with it. But had Sean heard? It occurred to him that he'd run off so fast that it was possible that he hadn't. But still, he somewhat felt better saying the words. He went over to his desk and sat down, holding his head in his hands. Now what would happen?

Sean swung the door open about five minutes later and walked up to the desk. "What is the matter with you? I only asked you what you thought of the stage."

Isaac looked up at Sean. He was livid. And yet still so handsome. What would he do if he lost him? "I can't lie to you anymore, Sean. I really don't want to get married."

"What do you mean, you don't want to get married? Since when?"

"Since this whole thing started."

Sean sat down in the chair in front of Isaac's desk. "Why didn't you say anything? I made all these preparations. Brooke lent us the restaurant. My parents came all the way here."

"I thought I could do it for you. I really did. But I can't. I can't go through with this." Isaac ran his hand through his hair. Isaac could hear every minute sound in the office: the fan, the clock, Sean breathing. He wished there was more going on in the kitchen so he could have some more noise.

"You should have told me."

"I know."

"Do you not want to be with me anymore? Is that why?"

Isaac's heart lurched. "No. I love you. Look, why do we have to get married anyway? Why can't things just stay the way they are? We were happy before."

Sean looked at the ceiling. "Because we have a chance to make things even better. Marriage is important. There are certain rights that we're entitled to that we can't have unless we're married."

"I don't think we have to worry about that any time soon. We're both healthy, we have good jobs. I'm not worried about that stuff."

Sean gave him an incredulous look. "What if I died in the line of duty? What if I got injured and ended up on a respirator or something? What if something happened to you? Legally neither of us can make the decision to care for the other. You wouldn't have access to my union benefits. I worry about these things. All the time. Why do you think I worked so hard for gay marriage?"

Isaac was suddenly even more uncomfortable. Sean had thought these things through so clearly. Isaac wasn't the kind of person who would. "Logically, those are all great arguments. But I still...I just can't. Marriage means something completely different to me."

"What do you mean?"

Isaac sighed. He resented talking about his family. "You wouldn't understand. Your family is normal. Your parents love each other. You know? They fight, but they don't mean it, and they make up after. Like a normal loving couple. My parents...my parents should never have met, let alone got married. When my parents fought, they fought for years. They would fight about the same things over and over. They meant all the shitty things they said to each other."

“But what does that have to do with us?”

“That's marriage to me. My parents were miserable and they made me miserable for existing. I left home when I was eighteen and still when I think of marriage, I think of them. Whenever I think of me getting married, I have this ball of ice in my stomach.” Isaac realized as he finished talking that he was crying. Two fat teardrops made their way down his cheeks.

Sean took a Kleenex and wiped the tears from Isaac's cheeks. “Isaac, we're never going to be like your parents. We don't have that kind of relationship.”

“I know.”

“Then don't compare us to them. We're never going to be a common married couple. You know, I don't understand you sometimes. What we're doing is important. We're special.”

Isaac moved away from Sean's ministering hands. “Politics. Is that all you care about?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then it shouldn't really matter if we get married or not. As long as we're together.”

“Of course it matters.”

“Why?”

“For all the reasons I've already told you.”

Isaac's breath caught as he heard himself speak. “So, what, you'll love me less if we're not married?”

Sean crossed his arms in front of him. It was a gesture that signalled his unwillingness to bend. “Why are you turning this on me? I love you. I will always love you. It's you that seems to be the one with doubts.”

“Don't be ridiculous.”

“Oh no? Way I see it, you're just making excuses. The truth is that you just don't love me enough to marry me.”

“You don't love me enough to respect my wishes.”

“What do you want, Isaac? Do you think we can just go back to the way things were? Tell me. What do we do?”

Sean's words hung in the air between them. Isaac couldn't stop crying. Why couldn't he be a man and stop crying? He hated the direction this conversation was going. He feared to speak in case he said something wrong. And yet the path they were on seemed inexorable.

Sean wiped at his own tears as he stared down at the desk. His face was a turmoil of emotions. Suddenly, he covered his eyes with a hand. “Shit.”

The lump in Isaac's throat grew larger. “Sean, don't.”

“Is that what you want? I don't know if I see anything else.”

“No! I don't want to lose you. Can't you just see my side of things?” Isaac was on the verge of panic. He didn't want to be alone. Never again.

They were silent for a long moment. Sean reached out across the desk and took Isaac's hands in his. “Would it be easier if we didn't get married like a heterosexual couple would? If we just went to a judge and made our vows?”



Isaac relished the warmth of his hands in Sean's. He made him feel safe and confident. But the tone of Sean's voice was final. This was the most compromise he was willing to make. And suddenly, Isaac realized what a problem his feelings had become. He was letting his parents get to him again. To control his life. And that was something he'd sworn never to allow. Certainly not from beyond the grave. He thought that when he'd left their house, he'd left his pain behind. But there it was. And now he was a few words away from ruining the best part of his life. How could he have been so blind? How could he not realize how much he was hurting Sean? "I think so. But what about all the planning you've done?"

Sean perked up, sensing the change in Isaac. "Screw the plans. Let's just grab some witnesses and go to the courthouse. I don't care how I marry you."

Isaac laughed. "I'm a frigging mess. You want to go now?"

"Sure, why not? Almost everyone's here. I can call Lucas and Violet on the way."

"OK." Isaac's shoulders felt lighter. The ball of ice had melted. It felt kind of exciting, ditching everything and running off.

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"I now pronounce you, husband and ... husband. You may kiss," the judge finished, stumbling on the last words. Isaac and Sean smiled at each other, and then Sean took Isaac's head in his hands and pulled him into a deep kiss. The court was filled with enthusiastic clapping from their relatives and even a few strangers. A couple of hookers waiting for trial cheered them on. He hadn't bothered to look, but Isaac was sure they

were men. The image of the courtroom brought a smile to his face that interrupted their kiss. Their family and friends gathered around the couple.

They looked up as the judge slid a piece of paper to them. "Do not forget to sign the marriage license and bring it to the fourth floor. Congratulations."

Sean took the license and the group took that as their cue to leave. Sean slid an arm around Isaac's shoulders and showed him the license as they walked down the aisle. Isaac laughed. He had actually gotten married. What he had been so afraid of before seemed ridiculous in the face of this piece of paper.

"You know, it would be a shame to waste all those decorations," Brooke said next to him.

Sean looked uncertain. Isaac smirked. "You know, you're right. And we are getting Emmanuel at a discount."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure. Even if he can't do vegetarian, it would be a shame to waste his services. Besides, I feel like a party."

## Losing Your Way

The Morgans piled into the family van after breakfast Saturday morning to visit the local Wal-Mart. As usual, getting everyone ready and in the car was a big production. Thirteen-year-old Diana had to get her lip gloss just right before she would *dare* be seen outside her house. Andrew Morgan frowned at his slim daughter dressed in a revealing tank-top and miniskirt. His wife, Sarah, gave an exaggerated sigh and called him a prude, then hustled her daughter back into the house to put on a cardigan. As they went up the stairs, Sarah caught a glimpse of herself in the hallway mirror, and thought about how frumpy and old she looked in her t-shirt and jeans next to her nubile young daughter. This prompted her to spend another fifteen minutes selecting a nice top and applying a layer of makeup. With the women ready, that left only the men. Tim, their youngest, was in an odd phase where he liked to wear his shirts backwards and slide around the house on his roller sneakers. Sarah managed to catch the speeding seven-year-old, reversed his shirt, and helped him tie his sneakers. Finally, with everyone seated and belted in, Andrew suddenly ran back into their semi-detached bungalow to go to the bathroom.

Five minutes later, they were on the road and headed for the on-ramp of the highway. The kids sat in the back, Diana with iPod ear buds firmly planted in her ears and texting away, and Tim quietly immersed in his PSP and idly kicking the back of his mother's seat. "So where are we going?" Andrew asked casually, his eyes on the road.

Sarah glared at her husband. "I told you. I need to go to Wal-Mart to get school supplies for the kids." She whipped around suddenly. "Stop that!" Her son didn't look up

from his game but his leg paused in mid-swing and settled back down. She switched her glare to her daughter. “Who are you talking to?”

Diana looked up at her mother with a flicker of annoyance. “Nancy,” she said in that adolescent tone of ennui that she used when she thought her mother was being intrusive.

Sarah turned around and stared out the window in sullen silence. They merged onto the highway and she watched the flat scenery pass by. Sparrows flitted among the bushes and a groundhog poked its head out of its burrow. Sarah perked up and turned to point out the rodent to Tim, but stopped in mid-breath when she saw how oblivious he was.

“What are we getting school supplies for? It’s barely August,” Andrew complained suddenly.

Sarah rolled her eyes. “If we don’t go now, there won’t be anything left by the end of August.”

“And how much is this going to cost? I don’t get paid until Friday, you know.”

“So we’ll put it on the Visa.”

“Those lists are stupid. Why do I have to buy pencils for the whole class? And the specially coloured duo-tangs. Jesus Christ.”

Sarah shrugged. “That’s what the school wants. What do you care? You’re not the one who has to label everything.”

He grimaced. “That’s stupid too. You know what you get when you treat kids like idiots? You get idiots. Shit!” Andrew blasted his horn at a red Toyota that had just cut him off.

“What’s the matter with you? Watch your language!”

Andrew darted a sheepish glance at the backseat. His children were lost in their own world. “I hate driving on the weekend. People are crazy,” he grumbled.

“Just try to get us there in one piece,” said Sarah, turning back to the window.

The rest of the trip was silent except for the beeps coming from Tim’s PSP.

Andrew took the off-ramp and pulled into the mall parking lot. The lot was almost full.

He parked a few rows away and took out a paperback from the glove compartment.

Sarah paused in opening her door. “Aren’t you coming?”

Andrew shrugged. “What do you need me for?”

“To help. You could at least come in with us!”

He dropped the paperback. “Fine.”

They all got out and Sarah held her hand out to Tim. “Give me the PSP. You can’t play with it in the store.”

Tim gripped the toy harder. “I’m not finished.”

Sarah reached for the toy but Tim ducked it away. “You can have it back when we leave.”

Andrew activated the car lock with his remote. The car chirped. “Let it alone, Sarah. No one’s going to care.”

She gave him a frustrated glare then, teeth clenched, she snatched the handheld game out of Tim’s hands and stuffed it into her purse. Sarah took Tim’s hand and led her family stiffly past the parked cars to the store entrance, Tim sniffing all the way. She was humiliatingly aware of the critical looks of other shoppers as her husband and daughter followed sullenly ten paces behind and her little boy sobbed over his game. She

deliberately didn't meet their eyes. She could imagine what they thought of her. *Look at that terrible mother.* Why did she always have to be the bad guy?

Sarah waited at the door for Andrew and Diana to catch up. She turned sharply as she felt a small hand reaching into her purse. Tim froze under her gaze. "What did I say?!" she snapped, pitching her voice low enough to keep others from hearing her.

Tim reluctantly pulled his hand out of her bag. "It's not fair!"

"I said no!" She switched her purse to her other shoulder. "You are cruising for a time-out, mister!"

Andrew and Diana finally joined them after what seemed an eternity to Sarah. Diana sneered at her brother. "Look at Timmy the baby."

Tim glared at his older sister. "I'm not a baby!"

"Are too."

"Am not!" Tears welled up in Tim's eyes and he shoved his sister.

"Are too!" Diana raised a hand to push him back, but Andrew caught her arm.

"Enough. You two be good and we'll all have ice cream at McDonald's when your mom is done shopping, OK?" Andrew released Diana's arm.

Tim stopped sniffing and brightened. "OK."

"Whatever." Diana affected disinterest but the gleam in her eyes said otherwise.

"Good. Let's go already." Diana and Tim skipped ahead through the automatic doors. Sarah fell in next to her husband with an irritated look. "What now?"

"You know very well 'what now'."

Andrew frowned at his wife. "Jesus, Sarah, it's just ice cream. It worked, didn't it?"

“That’s not the point.”

A cacophony of voices, bubbly pop music and the honking of the alarm assaulted them as they entered the store on the heels of their children. The elderly greeter was busy checking a woman’s receipt at the exit. She shrugged helplessly as the alarm went off every time she walked through. The woman glanced sidelong at the other shoppers who regarded her curiously or waited impatiently behind her as the greeter inspected her bags. Finally, he took her bags over to the refund counter and ran them through the de-magnetiser again. The woman hurried out with an embarrassed look on her face.

The refund counter had a long line of people waiting for service, their arms full of items they no longer wanted. The bins behind the counter were so full that there were carts next to them full also. Sarah glanced at the contents and arched an eyebrow. Someone had actually returned a box of cereal!

On the other side of the entrance, the seasonal racks of beach gear were giving way to shelves of school supplies. A big red banner announced the ‘Back to School Sale’ in bright lettering. Sarah pulled out a cart from the interlocked lines near the displays of cheap Tide and spring water, and steered toward the racks.

She stopped suddenly as Andrew walked off in the opposite direction. “I’ll be in the electronics,” he called over his shoulder.

Sarah frowned helplessly. “What?”

Diana huffed. “If he gets to go, I want to go.” Before Sarah could respond, Diana asserted, “I’m *so* old enough to shop on my own, Mom.”

Sarah ground her teeth. “Fine.” Diana darted away. “Keep your cell-phones on!” she yelled at the retreating backs of her husband and daughter. She looked at Tim, his

small hands on the edge of the cart's basket. "Don't you go anywhere." Tim shrugged innocently.

She browsed the racks, peering at the two lists she'd received with the kids' report cards. Sarah grimaced at the price of the name brand copybooks and pens she had to buy. The generic ones were much cheaper, but the incredible protest the teachers had made the one year she hadn't followed the list perfectly convinced Sarah to just give them whatever they wanted. That had been the year Diana got her braces.

Sarah filled the cart with copybooks, pencils, rulers, duo-tangs, dictionaries, and locker accessories until she'd crossed everything off the lists. She hoped Diana wouldn't make a fuss over the stuff she'd picked for her, but it was her fault for not being around. Sarah paused, wondering if there was anything else she needed while she was here. She could get some groceries, she supposed, or.... Tim was fidgety, hanging off the end of the cart and shuffling in place. Sarah pried his hands off and moved forward. "Stay close. Mommy needs to look for a new coffee-maker."

To get to the housewares section, they needed to navigate the crowded main aisle and pass the alluring toy department. Getting through the main aisle was complicated by the giant displays that turned the wide thoroughfare into two narrow channels. She hated going this way, but it was the shortest route through the store. Sarah proceeded at a snail's pace as she ground to a halt every few feet when she ended up behind some slow-moving old lady or browsing shopper. She was convinced she had some sort of curse for finding these people. Tim gazed at everything around him, reaching out to touch objects that caught his attention. Sarah batted his hand away when she caught him.



Finally, after avoiding two near-collisions and actually kissing bumpers with one other shopper who didn't have the decency to even shrug an apology, Sarah and Tim left the main aisle and approached the toy department. She could see housewares just beyond the shelf of baby toys. Sarah caught her son's eyes lighting up at the sight of rows upon rows of action figures, and determined to pass the section as quickly as possible. She would not be guilted into buying him another toy.

She got about halfway before she was stopped by the sudden appearance of a woman and her daughter. The girl held a Bratz doll above her head and whined to her irritated mother. There were two other dolls in the woman's cart. The woman patiently reminded her daughter that they were getting gifts for her cousins, but the girl pouted. The woman finally gave in, and the girl screamed with glee. Sarah suddenly remembered when Diana would be so pleased to get a new doll.

The way now clear, Sarah ploughed through, certain her son would follow her. She turned into the aisle with the coffee-makers without incident, and browsed the selection. None seemed quite right. They were all very big. She didn't need a 14-cup coffee-maker.

Suddenly, a chill ran down her back, and she looked around her. Her son was nowhere to be seen. She blinked in confusion. "Tim?"

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Tim looked up from the shelves of Dragons play-sets he'd stopped to look at, and found that his mother was no longer beside him. "Mom?" he called.

No one answered. He was alone among a crowd of strangers, a forest of knees, thighs, and shopping carts from his vantage point. “Mom!” he called again. None of those bustling legs paused to notice him, and none were his mother. Tim jumped as one pair of legs stepped around him.

Tim panicked. He forgot everything his parents had ever told him to do if he got lost, and, clutching the red dragon box to his chest, ran from row to row looking for his mother.

He darted a worried glance into each of the toy rows. No Mom. Then housewares, past rows of appliances, dishes, and storage containers. No Mom. He raced down the opposite rows of cleaning products and dry goods. No Mom.

Tim paused, out of breath. Where was his mother? He couldn’t see her anywhere. Tim had the sickening thought that he would never see her again. His eyes brimmed with tears. “Mom!” he screamed.

Tim ran down the nearest row. If he couldn’t find his mother, maybe he could find his father. He only dimly remembered the direction his father had gone in, but that wasn’t important to him as he dashed around and between the legs and carts in his way.

He slid to a stop. He was lost. The way back to the toys was no longer visible, and he couldn’t tell if he was anywhere near his dad. Tim was surrounded by shelves of pillows and bedding. The scent of French fries drifted to his nostrils. His stomach grumbled. He missed his mother. And his father. And even his stupid sister. With a loud sob, he hugged the Dragon box and began to cry.

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Sarah retraced her steps, hoping to God that Tim had stayed wherever he was. She was alternately furious and terrified. He would be grounded for a month for giving her such a fright! She clung desperately to her shopping cart as she searched the rows. There was no sign of her son anywhere.

She went up and down the toy and house-wares departments twice, then stopped and looked around her in confusion. Where had he gone to? And why hadn't he done as he was told and stayed near her? He was in so much trouble! She was going to have a long talk with him about staying put as soon as she found him.

Sarah's heart jumped into her throat. *If* she found him. How could a little boy disappear into thin air? Her anger dissolved into fear. What if he wasn't just lost? What if someone had abducted him out from under her? What if...? She dashed about like a madwoman calling her son's name, alternating between threats and pleading. Shoppers leapt out of her way as she passed.

She stopped and took a deep breath. People around her were giving her weird looks. This was getting her nowhere. And to let her thoughts go in that direction... She needed to stay calm. Running around just made her look crazy. But what was she supposed to do? What did people do in these situations? This sort of thing wasn't exactly covered in those parenting books her mother sent her for Christmas. *Her little boy! Her baby!*

Sarah was painfully conscious of how alone she was. She rummaged around in her purse and pulled out her cell-phone. She needed her husband, useless as he was.

Sarah couldn't go through this alone. It was unfair. She listened to the phone ring, growing more and more apprehensive.

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Andrew admired the wall of big-screen TVs. The football game showed in varying degrees of picture quality. He particularly liked a 50-inch widescreen wall-mounted TV in the center of the shelf. The quality was gorgeous. He couldn't help imagining what it would look like in the family room.

Andrew had felt a pang of guilt at abandoning his wife in the store, but he'd felt like he was going to explode if he'd stayed any longer. Sarah seemed to get more difficult to handle as time went by. It was like she was another person. That happy, easygoing woman he'd married had somehow been replaced with a moody, bitter nag. He didn't think he'd changed. Why did she have to?

He supposed it was somehow his fault, since he was always away for work. She certainly told him so, with her complaints, her veiled insults, and the way she turned to stone in his arms. It wasn't his fault he'd gotten his dream job after he was married and had kids. It wasn't his fault she'd lost hers and chosen to stay home with the kids. But somehow everything was his fault.

Andrew's cell-phone rang. He took it out of his pocket and checked the caller ID. It was Sarah. For a second, he let it ring, seriously considering not answering. Then he thought better of it. He sighed, and flipped it open. "Done already?"

Sarah babbled something unintelligible into his ear. “What? Sarah, calm down. I can’t understand you.” His wife was in hysterics. “Sarah, if you don’t talk slower, I won’t understand you.”

He could hear her take a deep breath to compose herself. Andrew had never heard her so shaken. When she finally spoke, she sounded like she was going to cry. He listened with a mounting sense of dread. When she was finished, he involuntarily exploded with, “What?! What do you mean, you can’t find him?!”

Andrew ignored the looks he got from the people around him. He was too angry to notice. “Weren’t you watching him? How do you lose a seven-year-old boy?”

She started to cry and he immediately regretted his harsh words. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Honey. It’s not your fault. I’m coming over there. Where are you?” She told him. “OK, I’m coming. Don’t worry.”

Andrew snapped his cell closed and stormed off toward house-wares. Almost as an afterthought, he flipped it open again and dialled his daughter.

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Diana held a camisole over her chest and examined herself in the mirror. It was a nice top, with lace and a ‘sweetheart’ neckline, and it would fit her perfectly, but there was something wrong. She wished she had boobs, like Nancy. And she thought her arms were fat. No, she would just look fat and ugly in it. She flung the top over a clothing rack and frowned at her reflection.

Her eyes widened in surprise as she spotted Scott Brewer in the mirror walking towards her. Diana quivered with excitement. Hastily, she pulled off the cardigan her mom had made her wear and tied it around her waist. She fluffed her hair and let slip one spaghetti strap for good measure before turning around to catch his eye.

He saw her and sauntered over, hands in the pockets of his baggy jeans. He wore a two-colour t-shirt with the words 'Just Relax' on the front and black Skechers skater sneakers. His hair was a longish sandy brown and he had gorgeous blue eyes. Diana had heard from the other girls that Scott did modelling in his spare time. He flipped a piece of hair out of his face and sort of nodded to her nonchalantly. "Hey."

"Hi." Diana tried not to grin too broadly. Her cheeks felt so hot that she thought she would faint.

He looked bored, but she could feel his eyes looking her up and down. Her heart fluttered at the attention. Scott Brewer was looking at *her*! "What's up?"

She tossed her hair a little over the shoulder with the fallen strap and shrugged. "Nothing. You?"

"Nothing."

Her cell-phone rang. She suddenly regretted the *High School Musical* ringtone. Diana gritted her teeth and tried to pretend it wasn't hers. They stared at each other for a long moment as the music played. Finally, Scott pointed at the pink leather holder attached to her purse. "Isn't that yours?"

Diana started as if she'd just noticed. "Oh, right. Excuse me." He shrugged and looked past her at the mirror. She flipped open her cell. "Hello?" It was her dad. She frowned. "Do I have to go now? I'm busy."

Her father sounded like he was in a hurry. And angry. “But Dad....” She glanced at Scott. He was checking out his hair in the mirror. “What? OK. I’m coming.”

Her stupid brother! He just had to get himself lost, right when she was with Scott Brewer! She snapped her cell closed and looked up at him.

Scott turned to her. “You OK?”

Diana smiled shyly. “I...uh...yeah. I gotta go. Family stuff.”

He shrugged. “OK. See you.”

She grinned foolishly. “OK.” Diana ran off.

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People walked past Tim as he cried in the aisle with the pillows and comforters. Most didn’t notice him. Some frowned at him like he was being bad. Tim recoiled from those looks.

Three adults, a dark-haired woman, a tall bald man and a shorter sandy-haired man, were standing nearby looking at those big bags his mother liked to buy because they had everything you needed for a bed. She got him a Spiderman one last year, and he had Spiderman sheets and pillowcases and everything on his bed at home. The adults noticed him and the lady commented, “Poor kid. Where are his parents?”

The bald man glared at the adults who were walking by Tim without looking at him. “What’s with people? Doesn’t anyone care that there’s a crying kid there?” Tim realized suddenly that the man was walking purposefully over to him. Tim wasn’t sure what to do. He froze.

“Sean, it’s none of our business,” said the other man. Then they looked at each other and shrugged. They followed the bald man.

He crouched next to Tim and spoke gently. “Hey buddy, are you lost?”

Tim was still frozen with fear. What was he supposed to do? He was so afraid, he wanted so much to get help, but this was a *stranger*. “I’m not supposed to talk to strangers.”

The man nodded. “That’s very smart. I’m a policeman. See?” He took his badge out of his back pocket and handed it to Tim. He stared at it. It didn’t look like the toy one he had at home. And his teacher said policemen could always be trusted. He sighed in relief. The man kept speaking. “I’m Sean, and these are my friends, Violet and Isaac.” Tim looked up at the two other adults and they waved shyly. “What’s your name?”

He sniffled. He was so happy that he’d found a policeman to help him.

“Tim... Tim Morgan.”

“OK, Tim. Now, what happened? Did you get lost?”

Tim sobbed. Everything came out in a rush. “I can’t find my mom! I looked and I looked, and I don’t know where she is. And...and I don’t know where my Dad is either!”

Sean nodded. “We’ll help you find them, OK buddy?”

Sean’s friend, Isaac, grabbed the sleeve of a guy in a blue Wal-Mart vest. “Hey, this kid’s lost.” The guy just stared at him and pulled his arm away. “Well?”

The guy glanced at Tim and shrugged. “You could call his parents from the service counter.”

“Where is it?”



He pointed out of the department. “That way. In front of Aisle Seven.” The guy straightened his sleeve and walked away.

Sean smiled at Isaac. “Sounds like a plan.” He turned back to Tim and offered his hand. “OK? We’re going to go call your parents.”

Tim hesitantly put his hand in Sean’s and they made their way to the service counter, Isaac pushing the cart and Violet still with arms full of the bag she’d chosen before they had met Tim. They found the counter easily enough and it wasn’t busy. Sean sat Tim down on a bench and approached the counter. Two ladies leaned on the back wall chatting. He waited patiently for them to pay attention to him. They ignored him.

Violet dropped her bed-in-a-bag into the cart and walked up to the counter. She leaned forward and called, “Excuse me!”

The clerks exchanged looks and one of them came over. “Can I help you?”

She gave her an irritated look. “Yes. This little boy is lost. Can you make an announcement or something and call his parents?”

The clerk looked over at Tim, then at them, and asked, “What name?”

“Just call for Tim Morgan’s parents.”

“OK.” She picked up the phone receiver and pressed the intercom button.

“Attention Wal-Mart shoppers. Could the parents of Tim Morgan come to the customer service counter? Tim Morgan’s parents to customer service please.”

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Sarah waited nervously for her husband to arrive. The cart full of school supplies stood nearly forgotten next to her. She was a wreck. The way Andrew had reacted had shaken her. He only intensified the self-loathing she was already feeling. *She really was a bad mother. How could she have been so inattentive?*

She didn't want to move from where she was now that she'd called Andrew. He was coming to help, and she needed him. She just wished that he could be more supportive. But then he hadn't been supportive of her in quite some time. He hadn't supported her enough when she'd been down-sized from the only job she'd ever loved. He didn't help out with the kids enough, hardly helped at all really, since he was always away for work. She knew it wasn't fair, that it was petty, but she resented the fact that she was stuck at home and he got to go to work everyday, got to fly all over the world. She'd wanted so much more for her life than being at home. And she *was* stuck. Nobody wanted a forty-year-old accountant. There were tons of young people willing to work for the salaries being offered by the firms. She couldn't help support two kids on the salary of a junior accountant, even if she could get hired. They were barely getting by on Andrew's salary and credit cards. He thought she'd chosen to be a homemaker. The truth was that she had given up because she couldn't find work. Sarah wasn't even a very good homemaker. Her mom was always finding fault with her skills in that domain, and often she found those faults herself too, but she couldn't bring herself to really care except for when her mom came over.

They just didn't talk to each other anymore. But he never wanted to talk. He wanted to just blame her for all the problems they had. And she just got angrier and more resentful and she didn't want to see him half the time. She actually caught herself feeling

relieved when he left for a business trip. Sarah just didn't know how to talk to him anymore. It was like he was a different person. She didn't know what they would do when the kids were all grown up and out of the house. When he was retired. How would they live with each other?

Andrew emerged from one of the rows and walked up to her. "I didn't see him anywhere on my way over. What happened?"

Sarah started. She had been lost in her thoughts. "I don't know. He was right behind me and then he wasn't."

"How long has he been missing?"

"Fifteen or twenty minutes, I think."

Andrew looked around him. "I thought we were just here for school supplies."

Sarah shrugged. "We need a new coffee-maker."

He glared at her. "The one we have is perfectly good!" She crumbled into tears. She couldn't take his harsh tone anymore. "I'm sorry. That was counter-productive." He gathered her into his arms and she wept on his shoulder.

Diana ran up. "Did you find him yet?"

Andrew shook his head. Sarah peered at her daughter over her husband's shoulder. At least one of her children was with her. "Diana, put on your cardigan."

Diana sighed and obeyed. "I didn't see him anywhere."

Andrew let go of his wife. "We'll have to split up. He's got to be somewhere in this place."

"Attention Wal-Mart shoppers. Could the parents of Tim Morgan come to the customer service counter? Tim Morgan's parents to customer service please."

The Morgans stared at each other. “Oh thank God!” Sarah cried.

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Tim hugged the Dragon box close. The policeman, Sean, sat next to him. His friends, the nice lady and the man, stood next to them with their cart. Tim liked Sean. He trusted Sean.

Sean smiled soothingly. “Your parents will be here soon. What’s that you have there?” he asked, pointing at the box.

Tim opened his arms to show him. “It’s *Dragons*.”

“Cool. Is that your favourite? The red dragon?”

Tim nodded and let Sean take the box to look at. “Uh huh. The red dragon is the strongest of all the Dragons. And he comes with a cat...a catap....”

Sean handed him back the box. “A catapult.”

“Yeah.”

“There you are!” Tim’s head snapped up at the sound of his mother’s voice. He dropped the box and ran into Sarah’s waiting arms. She almost squeezed the breath out of him. “Oh my baby! Where were you?”

His father and sister hurried up behind her. Andrew ruffled his son’s hair. Diana stood to the side, but her expression was one of relief. “Don’t do that again, you dork.”

Sarah finally noticed the three adults and hugged her son closer. “Who are you? What were you doing with my son?”

Violet gave her an indignant look. “Excuse me?”

Andrew spotted Sean's badge in Tim's hand. He laid a restraining hand on Sarah's shoulder. She almost shook him off, but then she saw what he was looking at. She had made a mistake. Andrew said, "I'm sorry, my wife's upset. Thank you for helping Tim. Give the officer back his badge, son."

Sarah frowned in embarrassment as her son handed the bald man his badge back. The man shrugged. "You're welcome. Glad to help." He crouched down and addressed Tim. "Now you stay out of trouble, OK buddy?"

Tim nodded. Sean got up. "Nice to meet you all." They left.

Andrew looked around at his family. "OK. Who wants ice cream?"

His children's hands immediately shot up. "Me! Me!"

Sarah shrugged. How could she refuse now? Her family was back together. "OK."

Tim held up the Dragon box. "Mom!"

She sighed. "What?"

"Can I have this?"

Sarah took the box from Tim's hands and put it in the cart. "Yes, dear."

Tim placed his hand in hers and the Morgan family went to McDonald's for hot fudge sundaes.

## Fine Wine

Lucas stood awkwardly between his mother and his aunt, greeting mourners as they came up to speak to his uncle's widow. He'd already paid his respects to his Uncle Dennis, and he wasn't sure how he'd ended up pressed into replacing his cousin at her mother's side. His own mother could be implacable at times.

His older brother, Mark, and sister-in-law, Sharon, came up to offer comforting words to Lucas' aunt. His brother nodded to Lucas when their eyes met, and Lucas returned the curt greeting. His family were not fans of physical affection. Lucas heard Mark and his wife murmur something about condolences and Heaven to Aunt Cathy, who sniffled into her handkerchief. Mark looked a lot like his younger brother, except he was more filled out and his hair showed signs of thinning. But it was the same reddish-brown hair and he had the same blue eyes. Mark was a structural engineer and a full partner in their father's firm. One day he would inherit their father's seat on the Board of Directors. Sharon reminded Lucas of a lot of upper class women of her age; well-dressed, tanned, coiffed, gym-thin, and tightly-skinned. She had a tendency to be brusque and imperious with anyone below her income bracket. But they seemed content with each other so Lucas kept his thoughts to himself.

They only stayed for a few minutes then moved on. Then came an almost endless parade of well-wishers; old friends, business associates, golf partners. His cousin, Jackie, returned bleary-eyed to her mother's side, and Lucas considered whether or not he could slip away quietly. But then the one person he didn't think to, or want to, see walked up and embraced his aunt and his mother. His ex, Layla.

Layla. Willowy, tanned, perfect long dark-haired Layla. Layla who he had dumped when he literally walked in on her cheating on him. He hadn't wanted to discuss with his mother the reasons behind his leaving Layla, especially since his family and hers were so close, so he had never explicitly explained why they'd broken up. The downside to his reticence was that his mother now greeted his ex like an old friend, and pushed her towards him enthusiastically. His mother had always brimmed with approval for the relationship; he liked to believe that this was because she never knew the particulars.

Layla affected indifference when she greeted him, although he could see the interest in her eyes. It was a sort of predatory interest. She had always looked at him that way. In the beginning, it had drawn him, fascinated him. Now, he found it irksome, and not just because he'd slowly realized that that look wasn't only reserved for him. She seemed to be gauging his response to her in those few words of greeting. He found that irksome as well, that she was already calculating how to manipulate him.

His mother nudged him in the ribs when it became apparent that he would say nothing more than hello. He cleared his throat and looked at Layla. Somehow he couldn't get past the image of the last time he'd seen her, defiant and naked except for a hastily wrapped bed sheet. "How have you been?" he asked.

She sort of shrugged. "Fine. Busy. And you?"

"Same here." How much longer was he going to have to talk to her?

Layla examined him up and down with that predatory look again. "Sorry for your loss."

"Thanks." He looked at his watch. His mother began to look at them anxiously.

“Lucas, dear, I think we’ll be fine without you for a while. Why don’t you get yourself a drink?” suggested his mother.

He could hardly believe his luck. A chance to get out. But at the same time, he was suspicious. His mother only called him ‘dear’ when she wanted something or she wanted to convince him of something. Pet names were just not done in his family.

Lucas decided to take the opportunity anyway. Maybe once at the relative safety of the buffet table, he could slip away. It wasn’t like he didn’t like Uncle Dennis, but he’d had enough of this uncomfortable family affair. So would Uncle Dennis, for that matter. “Sure, Mom.”

Lucas nodded politely to Layla, gave his mother a peck on the cheek, considered giving one to Aunt Cathy and Jackie but decided not to when he couldn’t get their attention, and hurried away as quickly as he could without looking like he was hurrying away.

His cousin, Bobby, met him at the small bar. Bobby was already pretty sloshed. Lucas suspected he’d been at the bar the whole time he’d been here. “Escaped the land of women,” slurred Bobby.

Lucas ordered a glass of wine. “Yes, thankfully.”

Bobby pointed over Lucas’ shoulder. “Don’t look now, (Don’t look!), but that ex-girlfriend of yours is looking right at you.” With that revelation made, Bobby suddenly switched his attention away from Lucas. Lucas turned enough to see what Bobby had been looking at, and saw Layla observing him as his cousin described. She stood in a corner near the door to another room. When she was sure he was looking at her, she crooked a finger at him.



Of all the audacity, he thought, for her to think that she could still command him to come at the crook of a finger. He shook his head. She wasn't daunted, however. She nodded in an insistent manner and crooked her finger again.

Lucas frowned. He didn't know what she was up to, but whatever it was, he wasn't going to let her get away with it. Even if he had to tell her so himself. He could be strong. He wasn't going to melt for her.

He would just go over there and tell her off.

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"I think there are more decorations in the storage room in the back, Violet. Do you think you could go look?" asked Isaac, juggling cardboard boxes. The restaurant bustled with activity as staff hurried about preparing for the special fifth anniversary party that night. There were decorations to put up, reservation lists to go over, deliveries to be taken in, food to be made, and just to add to the cacophony, the band was rehearsing. Isaac and Brooke were everywhere, signing for something here, instructing someone there.

Violet, finding herself with a day off, had come to help, and had her arms full of boxes as soon as she walked in the front door. She hardly had time to drop off her jacket and purse in Isaac's office. Now, she shrugged as Isaac waddled past her with boxes in his arms and gave her another task. "Sure," she said. "The storage room is where, exactly?"

He stopped and peered around the boxes at her. "Second door next to the bathrooms. Down a little stair." She nodded and started to walk away, but he grabbed at her sleeve. "Hey, I forget to ask. Lucas is coming tonight, isn't he?"

"He's supposed to. He had a funeral to go to today, but he said he'd be back in time," she replied.

"A funeral? For who?" exclaimed Isaac.

"His uncle. Or great-uncle. I'm not sure. Anyway, I'll go find that stuff, shall I? Second door next to the bathroom, right?" she said, turning away.

"Yeah." Isaac stared after her for a bit. There had been an odd coldness between Violet and Lucas lately. He couldn't quite put his finger on when it had begun, but it was there. Just as she was almost to the storage room, a thought suddenly occurred to him.

"Oh, Violet! Watch the door! It sticks!" She waved behind her as she opened the door.

He turned away. He had more pressing things to think about. Like where had he been going with these boxes? Isaac nudged one of the boxes around with his nose until he could read the label. Spinach?! The kitchen, then. He hurried over, deposited his burden in the refrigerator, tasted a sauce held up for inspection by his saucier Marco, scolded a junior sous-chef about the cleanliness of his workstation, then burst back out the doors to find something else he had to do.

Isaac was suddenly struck by the view before him. He could hardly believe that it had been five years. His life had changed so much. Five years ago, he had been a single, out-of-work sous-chef bitter about getting fired from one of the best restaurants in the city and full of dreams of showing them all what a great restaurant could be. Back then, his only friend in the world had been Brooke Weaver, the hostess with entrepreneurial

dreams of her own who'd quit her job in protest against the treatment he'd received from their slime-ball boss. Isaac glanced at the wedding band on his finger. Yes, much had changed. More than he'd ever imagined.

He could still remember when the restaurant had just been empty commercial space. He remembered the day he and Brooke had come to see it very well.

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Isaac tapped his foot on the grey concrete floor. It returned a solid thunk. He looked at Brooke. She was looking around her. The walls were plain drywall and metal beams surrounding the plate glass windows. It didn't look like much, empty as it was, but he could see the potential. There was a lot of space to do with as they wanted. And the location was good. The real estate agent said this area was 'Restaurant Row'.

The agent was eager to have them see the building's potential as well. She was a short plump woman who lacked fashion sense. She flitted about pointing features out. "The toilet fixtures are already installed; the wiring and plumbing are done; the gas lines and pipes are all set up in the kitchen; this would be an excellent spot for a bar," her voice sort of trailed off as she moved on without them.

Brooke nudged Isaac and said softly, "What do you think? At least it's in our price range."

Isaac nodded. "I think it's great. Don't tell her though. She'll jack up the price."

Brooke rolled her eyes. "Don't be ridiculous. She can't do that on the spot."

He shrugged. "I'm just saying. Don't look too eager or too desperate."

“It is in the suburbs,” she said doubtfully.

“That’s fine. There are lots of restaurants opening up here. Besides, no one actually eats at home in the ‘burbs.”

She smirked. “Right.”

Isaac took her hand in his and closed his eyes. “I’m serious, B. Close your eyes. Come on. Do it. OK. Now picture all this the way I do. There’s gorgeous terra cotta tile in the entrance and a dark red, maybe wine red, carpet all over the restaurant. The walls are cream-coloured with oak wainscoting, and there are leather sofa benches along the walls at the entrance for people to sit. The maitre’d’s podium is there and there’s a small fountain, nothing tacky, it’s not a Chinese buffet, but tasteful, maybe a Grecian statue or something. There are tables and some booths, leather and fine wood also, and maybe space for a small dance floor. The dance floor is because there’s a small stage for a live band or a piano, whatever. There’s a bar on the left, nice mahogany countertop, and a coat check near the entrance. The lighting is just right, dark enough to be intimate and bright enough that you can see your food, which is important because it’s going to be the most beautifully prepared, most delicious food that any of these people have ever tasted, made in the best kitchen in town. Can you see it, B?”

She sighed. “Yes, I can see it. Although I’m getting white marble for the entrance, not terra cotta.”

Isaac shrugged, his eyes still closed. “That’s good too.”

And then four words that no man wants to hear spoken in a dismayed tone were said by the real estate agent. “Isn’t that your car?”

Isaac opened his eyes and shrieked a girlish shriek. A tall, well-built cop with a rather cute ass was standing next to Isaac's car and writing on a notepad. Isaac let go of Brooke's hand and ran outside. "Officer!" he called as he jay-walked across the street. He stopped next to the cop, a little out of breath from the anxiety. "Officer, what seems to be the problem?"

The policeman was writing out a parking ticket. Without looking up, he said, "This your car?"

Isaac tried to look around the cop's shoulder at the ticket. "Uh, yeah."

"You're parked in a no-stopping zone."

"I am?" he asked innocently. "I'm not from around here. I didn't know."

The cop looked up from his notepad. His gaze locked onto Isaac's and Isaac felt his knees go weak. There was definitely something about a man in uniform that drew him. The cop pointed above them with his pen. "There's a sign right here."

Isaac looked up. "Oh." Somehow he never noticed these things when he was driving. Of course, he'd been in a bit of a hurry at the time. He reached out to the policeman, coming within an inch of grabbing his arm. "Can't you just let me off with a warning? Please? I don't need any more demerit points."

He looked at Isaac's hands and held up his notebook. "I've already written your ticket."

"Oh. But come on, Officer. I'll move my car. I swear." Isaac sort of cringed and made a ripping motion with his hands. "Couldn't we just, you know, rip that up and go on our merry way?"

The cop turned on him and raised an eyebrow. There was a strange gleam in his eye. “That would be illegal. You wouldn’t be asking me to do something illegal, would you?”

“No?” squeaked Isaac. This wasn’t the most dignified of moments for him.

The cop seemed to advance even closer. He had his hands on his waist and his shirt was just tight enough on his muscular chest to show a little definition. “Because if you were, I’d have to cuff you right now, shove you up against my cruiser, and frisk you.”

Isaac had a brief mental image of that and had to struggle not to get aroused. Even so, he was pretty much speechless. “Uh....”

He smirked as he tore off the ticket and put it into Isaac’s hand. “Too bad.” He turned and walked away. “And pay that ticket,” he said.

Isaac watched him leave, a feeling of butterflies in his stomach, his jaw drooping open. If he didn’t know any better, he’d say that cop was flirting with him. Isaac took a deep breath when he got in his car and drove off. *Man, he had a nice ass.*

He looked around him. This had seemed like such a good spot when he’d found it. The little parking lot next to the future site of his restaurant was almost packed. That wasn’t very good. If they were going to open here, they would need a better share of the strip-mall’s parking lot. In any case, there were a few spots empty and he needed to find somewhere else to park his car. The last thing he needed was another ticket on top of this one.

Isaac moved his car and walked back to the building. Brooke and the real estate agent were waiting for him. “What happened?” asked Brooke.

He held up the ticket. "I got a parking ticket." He glanced at the paper. "For a hundred bucks? A hundred bucks for parking in a no-stopping zone?"

Brooke looked at the ticket and nodded. "That's a poor omen for this place."

"I certainly hope not," said the real estate agent.

Isaac smiled to himself. That cop was hot. Probably worth the hundred dollars just to meet him, even if he wasn't gay. Would he see him again, he wondered, if he contested it in court? It was almost worth the effort.

"Isaac?" He came back to himself. Brooke was speaking to him.

"Huh? What?" asked Isaac.

"I was saying that this might not be what we're looking for," she said, obviously a little annoyed that he wasn't paying attention.

Isaac put an arm around his friend's shoulders. "What? Are you kidding? I think this place is great." He squeezed her shoulders. "I think we're going to be a phenomenal success."

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Violet found the light switch in the small dark storage room and turned on the lights, managing by some miracle to make it down the three or four steps in front of the door without tripping and falling. What on earth was the purpose of those stairs anyway? There was no good reason she could see for this room to be slightly recessed in the ground. It was a ridiculous design flaw.

She supposed she was just irritable. Lucas left that morning with hardly a word spoken to her. Ever since that disastrous Christmas Eve, they had drifted farther and farther apart. She had been right. It had been a terrible mistake. They couldn't go back to the way it was. And when Isaac asked her where he was, she had tried to sound neutral but at the same time she had been kind of annoyed with the question. She wasn't Lucas' keeper. She wasn't even his girlfriend. If Isaac really wanted to know Lucas' schedule or plans, he should call him.

She sighed. Why couldn't life ever be simple? Violet looked around her. Time to get to the task at hand. The storage room was not very big and mostly filled with cardboard boxes. There was also what looked like a wooden case of wine in a corner and a long metal coat rack along one wall. Violet had heard Isaac's warning and was careful to leave the door partly open to avoid getting locked in, but in such a manner that the door, which opened outwards, would hopefully not be in anyone's way.

The boxes were mostly full of paper products, toilet paper and paper towel and other stuff. She ran her fingers down one particular stack of office boxes that had been marked with a Sharpie. Extra linens. Christmas decorations. No, that wasn't what she was looking for. Next to those boxes, she finally found the one she was looking for under the coat rack. She opened it to be sure. There were streamers and balloons inside that looked like the same green and gold decorations they were putting up in the restaurant. Underneath that was a tangled mass of white mini-lights. Violet shrugged, closed the box, and stood up with the box in her hands.

"Ow!" she cried out. She'd forgotten the coat rack was above her and hit the top of her head on it, not hard enough to feel dizzy, but hard enough that it hurt like Hell. She



bent down and sort of scuttled her way out from under the metal rack, put down the box and held her head with both hands.

It was at that moment that she had the strangest feeling that there was something familiar about this room. She could swear that she had been here before, even though she knew for sure that she'd never been in or had any reason to be in this storage room since she'd moved to Greendale. But she still had this sense of *déjà vu*. Was it just the bump on her head?

Then suddenly she remembered. She *had* been here, nearly five years ago, with her brother.

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Peter pulled off Violet's coat and hung it on the coat rack. The place to which he'd brought her was so packed that they had to set up a second coat check in a storage room. There wasn't even an attendant. She looked around her dubiously. "Are you sure our stuff will be safe?" she asked her brother.

He dismissed her worries with a wave. "Sure. Just don't leave anything valuable."

She frowned at him. "You know, we could just go somewhere else. The hostess said there was a thirty to forty-five minute wait."

Peter shook his head. "We already put our names in. Besides, I hear this place is fantastic. I mean, look at the line-up." He put an arm around her shoulders. "Come on, Vi. Live a little. You're only here for one night while Mom's at that conference. Let your favourite brother treat you to a gourmet meal at a fine dining establishment."

Violet gave him a wry look. “You’re my only brother.”

He steered her towards the door. “And thus your favourite.” He scratched his scalp. He wasn’t used to having his messy curly brown hair cut so short in the gelled style he had it in now. It was actually respectable-looking. “No more complaints. Tomorrow, I start my job working for the Man and I want to have fun.”

She let him push her towards the exit. “The Man? Who says that anymore?”

“I do. Now come on. Some of my friends said they’d be here too.” He pulled her out the exit.

The restaurant was busy and bustling with activity. There had to be at least forty or fifty tables as far as Violet could reckon, and partitions separated the sections. The tables were all full of patrons eating under the muted orange light of the lamps. A woman played a piano on a stage at the back, but Violet could hardly hear her over the multiple conversations that were going on. Her stomach grumbled as they passed the tables nearest the coat check and the foyer. The food looked really good.

The floor of the entrance was a creamy off-white marble and met the burgundy carpet of the main part of the restaurant in a wide arc. A fountain topped with a statue of a Grecian lady draped in flowing stone cloth and holding a pitcher sat in the center of the floor, and plush leather benches were on the sides for waiting customers to sit on. Peter and Violet found places next to a rather fat middle-aged couple who were busy talking about movies and barely noticed the siblings squeeze in.

“I don’t suppose your friends are waiting for us,” she said next to Peter’s ear. She wasn’t sure how loud she needed to speak to be heard.

He heard her, however. “What? No. This is our time. Brother and sister time.” He patted her knee absently, not even looking at her as he spoke. He was looking at a statuesque blonde near the maitre’ d’s podium.

She rolled her eyes. “Since when?”

Peter paused. “Uh, all the better to make up for lost time.” He drummed his fingers on the front of the bench. “Look, it’s not like I wouldn’t want you to meet my friends. It’s just that one of them has his girlfriend with him and I have a strict (strict!) policy of staying far away from her. I don’t like her, she doesn’t like me, and that works fine for both of us.”

“Then why bother telling me about them at all?” she exclaimed.

The blonde had noticed Peter’s staring and was checking him out, despite the fact that her husband or boyfriend was standing oblivious right next to her. He smiled suggestively back at her. “Well, I’m not going to ignore my buddies if we run into them.”

She shook her head in wonder. “You say the most random things sometimes.”

“I try.” The blonde and her significant other were finally led away by the hostess. She winked suggestively at Peter over her shoulder. He turned to Violet, who regarded him with one raised eyebrow. “What?”

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Layla ran her fingers down Lucas’ tie as she tugged him into the other room. He went with her unwillingly yet without protest as he thought of the attention any fuss would likely draw to them. Once they were in the deserted viewing room and she had

closed the door, however, he yanked back his tie and said to her in a fierce whisper, still unsure if they could be heard, “What is wrong with you? This is a funeral!”

She purred, “I love when you get mad at me. It’s so masculine and hot.”

He spluttered incoherently and stared at her. She had a talent for making him feel awkward and inarticulate. It was like all she had to do was look at him and his senses would leave him. He became that shy little nerd awed by the inexplicable attention of the beautiful girl again.

Lucas took the only option he could still think of and turned to escape. But just as quickly, as if she’d known already that would be his choice, Layla grabbed his arm and stroked it with her long tapered fingers. “Where are you going?” she asked in honeyed tones.

He turned back. “I don’t want to do this with you.”

She smiled. “I was hoping that maybe you’d gotten over all that.” She went back to his tie and stroked his collarbone. “I’ve been thinking about you a lot lately.”

He tried not to look at her. Instead, he noticed details about the room; the dim light from the window, the floral arrangements, the model coffin at the back of the room sitting open, the waiting-room-type chairs along the walls. This was hardly a romantic setting. Not that he was considering that, he thought, catching himself. “You cheated on me, Layla. I meant it when I said it was over.”

She pouted and tried to get his attention. “So I made a mistake. I know that. But you need to accept some responsibility too. Maybe if you hadn’t been neglecting me, I wouldn’t have found another outlet for my needs.”

He had to look at her after that. He was just so shocked. “You call what you did finding another outlet? You know, not everyone who feels neglected cheats on their lover.”

Layla let go, apparently convinced that she wasn't getting anywhere with this tack, and walked over to the window. She looked out for a second then turned around to face him, her hands behind her back and her face in shadow. “I realize that I hurt you, Lucas. I do regret that. But I also feel there are plenty of good reasons why you should perhaps be a little more open-minded and consider starting over. That's all I ask. A second chance.”

Lucas was puzzled by this new serious tone. There was a trick in it somewhere, he was sure, but he was having trouble finding it. Why was she suddenly being penitent? Nothing with Layla was ever as simple as it appeared. “I appreciate your apology. But I'm not seeing those reasons you're talking about.”

She stepped forward just a little, not enough to seem like she was advancing on him, although it was perhaps her ultimate goal. “I know you, Lucas. I know you better than anyone. How long were we together? A relationship like ours can't just be switched off.”

Lucas stepped back a bit. He had a feeling that he knew where this was going. “I think it can be argued that we made each other miserable for a great deal of those years.”

She inclined her head in agreement and stepped forward again. “Every relationship has its problems. I think the love we shared far outweighed the petty difficulties.”

He stepped back again and said, “Until the final straw.”

Again, she stepped forward. “Perhaps. I don’t need to remind you that our parents are very supportive of our union. Your mother still wishes we’d get back together and finally get married.”

Again, a step back, but Lucas realized that he was running out of space. “And I don’t need to remind you that if I did everything my parents wanted, I’d probably be living another life.”

She advanced again. “True, Lucas, but one day you’re going to have to grow up and realize that you have certain obligations to your family. So why fight it? You can’t live out your little fantasy forever.”

He frowned and backed up again, but this time he felt the wall up against his ankle. “Is that really what you think I’m doing? Playing out some fantasy?”

She finally advanced to right in front of him. Her brown eyes bore into his. “Isn’t that what you’ve been doing? Playing the bachelor in your little house as far away from your own society as possible? You had years to marry me after college. But you preferred to move in with your buddies and play video games like you were all still roommates. At least Sean grew up and moved out of the frat house, but you’re still there.”

Lucas swallowed. That wasn’t true. Was it? “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Layla smiled and laid a hand on his collarbone, toying with the top buttons of his shirt. She was ready to lay down her final argument. “Is there someone else?” she half-whispered.

He tried to look away, but he couldn’t. There wasn’t anyone else. That was the hard truth. His only romantic attempt in years had failed horribly. Violet didn’t want him.

He'd thought she was what he was looking for. There was just something about her. And that night, that night when he had finally held her in his arms and made love to her, he thought would be the beginning of something new and better. But she'd rejected him, and he found it harder and harder to be around her. "No," he admitted.

The look of triumph on Layla's face was immediate and unabashed. She wrapped both hands around his neck and leaned in close. "Then come back to me. You know you want to."

With her this close, it became harder to resist her. And it suddenly seemed less necessary to do so. Maybe she was right. Maybe he had been at fault for her cheating on him. Maybe he had been neglecting her. Maybe another had filled a void he had left. And, really, who better than Layla, the woman he had known and loved for years, to be the person he spent his life with? Wasn't it right that she be his One? Wasn't it logical? He ducked his head a little to bring his lips in line with hers and said, "You're right."

She smiled insolently. "I know." Then she kissed him in the old way. It was one of her passionate forceful rough kisses where she mashed her body up against his until they were almost one being, and he fell back into it with ease.

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Isaac stole a moment in his office to recuperate his equilibrium. He was pleased to see that the volume of paperwork had shifted finally from his inbox to his outbox. He still, however, had to file all of the invoices for the orders he received today. And pay them. He'd never realized as a sous-chef just how much paperwork was involved in

running a kitchen. His old mentor had made it all look effortless. Maybe Isaac just needed a secretary. He chuckled to himself. Where in this little office would he put a secretary?

A knock at the door disturbed these musings. The door opened and revealed Miranda, their sommelier. The tall blonde woman smiled at Isaac and stuck a leather-bound menu through the door opening. "Hey, Chef. I have the wine list. Care to look? Brooke's busy."

Isaac sighed and beckoned her in. "Miranda, how many times have I told you to call me Isaac? Chef is for the kitchen."

She came in and sat easily in the chair in front of him. She shrugged. "I like Chef."

He took the wine list from her hand and looked it over. Isaac wasn't much of a wine expert, but he knew enough to look over the wine list. He trusted Miranda to take care of the details. "This looks good. Nice choices. What are we having for the wine and cheese appetizer?"

She pointed at the bottom of the list. "It's right there. See, there are no prices."

Isaac nodded. "Man, I remember when we couldn't afford half of these."

She smirked. "I remember when you couldn't afford a sommelier either."

He laughed. "And look at us now." His attention was suddenly caught by one listing in particular. "Hey, I have a whole case of this somewhere."

Miranda leaned forward to see what he was referring to. "Of what?"

"The Chateau Bernier 1992 Special Dry Chardonnay." He drummed his fingers on the menu. "I bought it the year we opened to be drunk at our fifth anniversary."



“Well, that’s specific. It’s an excellent year.” She took back the menu and skimmed through till she found it on the list. “Geez, Chef, this must have cost you a lot, even five years ago.”

“Yeah. It’s in the storage room. Can you find it?”

She stood and went to the door. “I’ll get it as soon as I can. It would be nice to have tonight.”

“Thanks,” he said, waving to her as she left his office.

He smiled to himself. He remembered buying that case. Brooke had been livid.

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“What is that?” asked Brooke from across their half-built restaurant.

Isaac picked his way around builders, electricians, paint and building materials. He carried a large wooden crate. He set it down on the makeshift worktable next to where Brooke was varnishing the bar. “This, my dear, is an investment in the future,” he announced with a flourish.

She got up, put down her paintbrush, and looked at the box. Brooke was wearing an unflattering set of coveralls and her hair had been messily tied up. “It’s wine,” she said.

“Ah, but not just any wine,” he said, producing a bottle from the crate. “Chateau Bernier 1992 Special Dry Chardonnay.”

Her eyes narrowed. And just how much did this *special* wine cost?”

He put the bottle back in the crate with an offended look on his face. “It was well worth the expense.”

Brooke frowned. She knew what that meant. “Isaac! We can’t afford that sort of thing. We’re barely staying afloat here at all what with the costs of building the restaurant!”

He rolled his eyes. “B, the restaurant will pay for itself in five years at least. You just have to have some faith.”

She was so angry with him that she actually seemed to shake with rage like a cartoon character. “Seriously, Isaac, I wish you would think before you do things, just once, you know? Just once!” Brooke ended with an inarticulate yell of frustration.

He was about to respond when the sound of a man singing a 90s rock ballad suddenly interrupted them. It was a familiar song but Isaac just couldn’t remember the name of it. They both looked to the source of the singing. The singer was a tall, handsome man in his thirties with longish brown hair who sang directly into his microphone like he was a professional and not some reality show wannabe. The man had obviously been in front of a microphone before. Then it finally occurred to Isaac. The stage was already built and set up with sound equipment. What he assumed was a technician was fiddling with a sound board as the man sang a few bars of the frustratingly obscure song. Isaac pointed at the man. “Who’s that?”

Brooke blushed. “Oh, that’s Gordon Summers. He’s helping set up the sound equipment. He’s my neighbour.”

The man noticed them staring at him and smiled. Isaac looked from Gordon to Brooke. Clearly, that smile wasn't at all directed at Isaac. "He's adorable." Isaac leaned next to her secretively. "I think he likes you."

Brooke started. She pushed a strand of hair behind an ear self-consciously. "Oh, I don't know. It's not like that."

Isaac smirked. "If you don't want him, can I have him?"

"No!"

He laughed. They looked at each other and smiled. Brooke sighed. "You're still an irresponsible jerk."

He shrugged. "You love me anyway."

She inclined her head in agreement. "Yeah." Then she lightly slapped him on the chest. "What about you and your handsome cop?"

"I haven't seen him again! But I have a court date next week. So who knows?"

"Are you really going to contest that parking ticket? You'll never win," said Brooke.

"Oh, I know. But it's more about getting him somewhere I can see him again. It's all in the game. I make this effort and I give him an invite to the opening, and then we see if he makes the next move."

She nodded, amused. "Uh huh. So where are you going to put this ridiculous case of wine we can't afford?"

Isaac looked around the room theatrically. "Do we not have some sort of storage room in this place?"

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Violet's head didn't hurt so badly anymore, so she hefted the box of decorations and carried it up the few steps to the door. And stopped, puzzled. The door was closed. She stared at it. She hadn't closed the door. She had specifically left it open because it stuck sometimes and she didn't want to get locked in. She hadn't even heard it close. But here it was. Closed.

Calmly, she went back down the stairs, put down the box, and then rushed back up the steps and pushed and pulled furiously at the door handle. Some small part of her knew it was absolutely futile, but that part of her brain wasn't in charge at the moment. She pulled and she pushed and she kicked but the stupid door would not budge. Violet also yelled and screamed for help, but no one heard her. It was a sturdy door and there was too much noise on the other side for one woman's cries to be heard. She swore and called the door every name she could think of, but that only made her feel a little better.

Finally after what seemed like forever but in reality had probably been only five minutes at the most, she exhausted herself and went back downstairs. Violet picked a low stack of what looked like durable cardboard boxes, and sat down. She felt the box sag a little under her, and she almost jumped off to avoid having her seat collapse under her, but it held, and she calmed down. There was nothing for her to do but wait. She regretted leaving her cell-phone in her purse in Isaac's office. A fat lot of good it was doing her there. But someone was bound to miss her eventually. At the very least, Isaac had to be wondering where she was and where his decorations were. Any minute now, someone would come by and release her.

With that resolution made, she was free to let her gaze and her mind wander over the room. It had been weird, remembering that trip of what felt like long ago. She had completely forgotten it. As if it had never happened. And then she remembered, as if the memory had been waiting for just the right spark. She wondered what her mother would call that. She'd probably dismiss it out of hand. Probably say she imagined it or that she had remembered all along but hadn't thought about it. Or maybe she would expound on the uses and perils of repressed memories. Violet remembered the conference she'd accompanied her mother to, and she remembered coming to this restaurant with her brother. It had been the year Peter had decided to move to Greendale with his college buddies rather than come back home. He'd told her early that evening, but he waited until they were almost going in the gate at the airport to break it to their mother. That had been a very unpleasant plane ride with her mom afterwards. But her brother was good at that sort of thing, dumping his consequences on her. No wonder she'd repressed those memories.

And then she really looked at the room around her, at the boxes and the concrete walls and the white fluorescent lights in the ceiling. At the long steel coat rack. At the wooden crate full of wine bottles. And she realized that there was something else she'd forgotten. She remembered something else that happened that night.

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"Wait! Don't close that door!" said a man's voice seconds after Violet had absently shut the door of the cloakroom behind her. She looked down from the top of the

few steps to see a man with reddish-brown hair who was perhaps the same age as her brother frowning up at her. He was a stranger and she had definitely not expected to find anyone else in here when she'd decided to come here to escape the noise and her brother flirting with every woman he saw or who saw him. It had started to become annoying. They could barely have a conversation. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Do you have any idea how long I've been stuck here? The damn door locks itself," he replied.

Violet's eyes widened. She was locked in here with a stranger? She turned and pulled frantically at the door but it wouldn't move. She cursed the door as she struggled, but that only tired her out.

"Don't bother. I tried that. And I'm probably stronger than you," the man said behind her, sounding resigned.

She sighed and turned around, walking down the steps into the cloakroom. Violet stopped in front of the man, who looked up at her from where he was sitting on a box.

"What do we do now?"

He shrugged. "Somebody's got to come for their coat eventually. Hopefully they won't end up in this predicament with us."

"I get it. But I didn't know the door was going to lock itself." She looked around her for somewhere to sit and settled on a wooden crate on the other side of the room.

He watched her get as far away as she possibly could from him. "I didn't say anything."

"Uh huh." She sat down on one of the slats of the crate. It wasn't particularly comfortable, but it was sturdy enough. The only problem was these circular things poking

her in the butt. She shifted her weight, reached under her, and suddenly pulled up a bottle of wine. Violet stood up and looked at the crate. She had been sitting on a case of wine.

“Oh, sweet. Bring that here,” said the man.

“Why?” She held the bottle by the neck and looked at it. Chateau something.

He gestured to her. “So we can drink it. Come on, let me see.”

She frowned, but she brought the bottle over anyway. “We can’t drink this. It’s not ours.”

He looked at the label on the bottle and unwrapped the foil on the top. “I think they owe it to us for all of this inconvenience.” He glanced up at her. She was regarding him with one raised eyebrow. “Look, I’ll pay for it when we get out, OK? Sheesh.”

She sat down next to him. “It has a cork.”

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a red Swiss Army knife. “I have a corkscrew.”

“Well, aren’t you prepared.”

“An engineer always is.” He picked open the little corkscrew on the knife and twisted it into the cork of the bottle. She was fascinated by the way he bit his lower lip with the effort, scrunching up his handsome face. Finally, the cork came out with a loud pop. “Success!”

Violet looked around her dubiously. “We don’t have any cups or glasses.”

He rolled his eyes. “Complain, complain. You don’t have to have any if you don’t want it.” He waved the bottle under her nose. “I promise I don’t have any communicable diseases.”

She glared at him as he took a swig of the wine. What, was she in high school again or something? Was he going to get her with peer pressure? She was smarter than that. But, on the other hand, she wasn't particularly interested in being alone in a locked cloakroom with a drunken stranger. If she drank with him, the odds were that he wouldn't get as drunk as he would otherwise. She knew it was a flimsy excuse, but it was good enough for a rationalization. Violet held out a hand for the bottle. "Give me that."

He handed her the wine. She took a big gulp, swallowed, and nearly spat it back out in a fit of coughing. Her eyes watered and she could feel her cheeks turn red. The man patted her gently on the back. "Careful there. Not so fast."

She eyed him sidelong as she recovered. "It just went down the wrong tube." She took another drink, this time more of a sip, before he could take the bottle back.

"Yeah, I know," he said, smiling knowingly around the neck of the bottle as he took a drink.

They progressed in this way, passing the bottle back and forth between them, until it was finished. It was a sizable bottle, nearly as big as a champagne bottle, and the alcohol within sent them into a pleasant state of inebriation. Not wasted, just happy. They talked at the same time, mostly about nothing special, small talk punctuated by the occasional silence. As they became less inhibited, personal subjects came in, but with no names. Violet didn't even notice that they hadn't exchanged names, and wouldn't, until it was too late.

He held the bottle upside down to show that it was empty. "Well, that's that."



Violet nodded. Somehow, in the intervening time, they had moved close enough to each other that she could easily put her head on his shoulder. She toyed with the option now. “So, how’d you end up here, anyway?”

He glanced sidelong at her. “I didn’t just come looking for my coat, if that’s what you mean.”

“Yeah.”

He sighed. “I ... I needed some privacy. My girlfriend and I are having some problems.”

“Oh.” She leaned back a little. There was a big soft fur coat behind her.

The coat was big enough for both of them to lean against. He sat back too and murmured appreciatively at the softness of the fur. “What about you? Forget your keys?”

She shook her head and the coat shook with her. “No. Same as you. I needed to escape.” She paused. “My brother is a jerk.”

He turned his head to look at her. “Why?”

“Well, it’s like he has no control over his hormones, or something! He’s probably still grinding away on the dance floor with that blonde.” She frowned when she noticed him regarding her quizzically. “That’s not what I mean! He could, you know, just have a sense of propriety or common courtesy. It’s embarrassing.”

“Ah. Well, that puts my problems to shame.”

Violet leaned back further and lost her balance. She almost fell backward but for the man’s arm shooting out to arrest her fall. He raised her up with him as if she were light as a feather. Although that could just be the alcohol affecting her judgment. “Thank you,” she said.

“You’re welcome,” he replied. She was aware, even if he wasn’t, that his hand was still resting on the small of her back. They looked at each other and suddenly Violet felt nervous in a way that she hadn’t yet with him. Not uncomfortable or afraid, but expectant. As if something were about to happen. They stared at each other for a long moment. Then, as suddenly as the moment began, she blinked and it was over. They looked quickly away from each other and he withdrew his hand.

They were silent for a few minutes and then Violet asked, “Won’t your girlfriend be wondering where you are?”

He shrugged. “Probably not.”

“Really? If I had a boyfriend and he suddenly disappeared, I’d be asking myself where he was by now. I’m sure yours would be too.”

“You don’t know her.” He paused. “You said ‘if’. You don’t have a boyfriend?”

“No.” She blushed. “I don’t really have time for relationships. I have work and school.” He gave her a doubtful look and she added hastily, “Plus, I’m kind of a nerd.”

He laughed. “What? Come on.”

“No, I am. A Lit nerd, but still a nerd. It’s OK. I’m not ashamed of it or anything.”

He stopped laughing but still smiled at her. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of. If anyone here is a nerd, it’s me. You know, engineer?”

She chuckled. “Where are your glasses and pocket protector?”

“Left them at home.” He smiled. “Seriously, I used to have these big-ass Urkel glasses when I was a kid.”

She laughed harder. “What do you have now, contacts?”

“No, laser eye surgery.”

“Oh, so you’re a reformed nerd.”

He shook his head. “No, I’m still a geek.” He paused. “Seriously, though, being a nerd is not a reason for you to not have someone.”

She gave him a bemused look. “That’s because you’re a guy.”

“Exactly. And I know guys. You can’t tell me that there’s no one at all.”

Violet blushed. She’d never been good at meeting men. Always too shy. But there was this one guy in a couple of her classes who’d been kind of courting her. Josh. But she didn’t actually think anything would come of it. “Well, I don’t know,” she finally admitted.

“Uh huh.” He patted her shoulder. “Maybe you need more confidence. You’re attractive. Hell, I’d do you if I wasn’t with someone.”

“Gee, thanks.” She frowned at the crude comment.

He surprised her by actually blushing. “OK. Probably not the best way to say that. But it’s basically true.”

She perked up and turned to face him. “Really? You think I’m attractive?”

He turned towards her, looking a little taken aback. “Sure. You have good looks; you seem intelligent. What’s not to like?”

“And that’s not just the wine talking?”

He smiled. “No, it’s not the wine.”

She looked down, a bit embarrassed. There was a white piece of lint on his shoulder that must have come off the fur coat. Instinctively, she brushed it off. He caught her hand in his and she looked up into his eyes. He had amazing blue eyes.

He hesitated, seeming to wrestle with his thoughts. Then he said, “You know that moment when you look at someone and you think, no, you *know*, that the person you’re looking at is *the One*, the person who, I don’t know, completes you or something....”

Violet’s heart was pounding. “Yes?”

“I don’t really believe in that stuff, but....”

Violet did something that surprised even her. She took the back of his neck with her free hand and pulled him down into a kiss. It was a messy, awkward kiss. She almost missed his lips and their noses smashed together. But it was fierce and it lasted a good few minutes before they finally parted, breathless.

They stared at each other. She wasn’t sure how to read his expression. She thought he might be filled with the same crazy emotions that she was. Wonder. Confusion. Arousal. Elation. Had she really just done that? Then he smiled and she smiled back. He dug his fingers into her hair and kissed her. This time it was gentler, less urgent, but just as long, and when they parted for the second time he didn’t let go of her right away but held her cheek to cheek. “I don’t even know your name,” he whispered.

“It’s...”

They heard a loud bang and then someone said, “Hello! Are you OK?”

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Violet woke with a start from her reverie. She realized that someone was calling her and looked up at the door. Miranda, the restaurant’s sommelier, was standing in the

doorway with a concerned look on her face. “Are you OK? The door was closed and I know it sticks. We really need to get this fixed.”

Violet wiped the confusion from her eyes with her hand. She had been off in her own little world for some time and hadn’t heard Miranda come in. “Yeah, I’m fine. I came in here for decorations.” She stood and picked up the box.

Miranda came down the steps, leaving the door open, and looked around. “Glad I could help. You wouldn’t happen to have seen a case of Chardonnay down here? I’ve looked everywhere else and I can’t find it.”

Violet pointed to the case of wine in the corner. “Is that it?”

“Oh! Maybe,” she knelt down next to the box and pulled out a bottle. “This is it. Chateau Bernier 1992 Special Dry Chardonnay. Great. Chef will be pleased.”

Miranda browsed the wooden box. Violet, seeing no reason to stay and preoccupied by what she’d remembered, started up the steps. She was at the top when Miranda suddenly said, “That’s odd.”

Violet stopped and asked, “What?”

Miranda looked up at her. “There’s a bottle missing from the case.”

Violet almost dropped the box of decorations. As it was, it nearly slipped through her fingers and she had to struggle to keep hold of it. There was no way now that she could deny that her recollections were true. She remembered it all now and she couldn’t believe that she’d forgotten. That man she’d met in the cloakroom of this restaurant. Before she’d begun that terrible relationship with Josh. The man she’d thought about for months afterwards, who she’d pestered her brother about for weeks but he’d never been

able to help her find him. The man she'd lost track of in the whirlwind of confusion surrounding their rescue from the cloakroom. Whose name she'd never learned.

That man, when she examined her memories, had been Lucas Gibson. She was sure of it. His face, his voice, his kiss. He had been in front of her the whole time. And she'd been so blinded by her own self-absorption, her problems, her vanities, her doubts, that she hadn't seen it. She'd never seen *him*, not at all the way she should have.

And then she wondered, did he know? Did he remember her? Eventually her memories of that night had become a blur after she'd given up on finding him. Did that happen with him? Or had he known all along and been disappointed when she hadn't seemed to know him? Violet inhaled sharply. She had completely screwed up. She had driven away the man of her dreams right when she had him back. She had told him that she didn't want him. Her heart raced. She was such an idiot.

Violet almost jumped out of her skin when she felt Miranda's hand on her shoulder. "Are you OK, Violet? You look a million miles away."

Violet shook herself. She looked at the slender woman. "I'm fine. It's nothing."

The other woman regarded her dubiously but didn't press her. "OK. I need to get this up to the restaurant. Coming?"

"Uh, yeah. Of course. Wouldn't want to get stuck here again," Violet laughed off the awkwardness of the concern being shown her by a woman she hardly knew. She tightened her grip on the box of decorations and followed Miranda out the door. Her thoughts, her worries, would have to wait.

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Isaac stood at the table with his friends, looking at the crowd of raised glasses that had come up in response to his own. There had been just enough of the Chardonnay to give everyone in the restaurant a small glass of wine with which they could join in toasting the restaurant's fifth anniversary. He looked around at his friends; Sean smiling proudly at him; Brooke and Gordon with their arms wrapped around each other's waists; Miranda with her teenage daughter who held a glass with a tiny quantity of wine in it; Violet and Lucas standing on opposite sides of the round table. He looked preoccupied and more serious than Isaac would expect him to be at this moment. Violet's expression troubled Isaac even more; she seemed to dart troubled and anxious glances at Lucas as if she was trying to get his attention. Isaac would have to talk to both of them at some point. He had no idea what was bothering them.

But he realized that everyone had been waiting for him while he pondered his friends' problems, so he put his resolution aside and turned to the crowd. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us on this momentous occasion. Tonight we celebrate the fifth anniversary of our restaurant's being open in your fair city. I see some new faces tonight and some that have probably been coming here since that big night five years ago (Hi Mrs. Torini, enjoying the quail?). We appreciate you all, and we hope you continue to tell your family and friends about our little restaurant. Honestly, if we have any success today, it's because of the excellent word of mouth spread by our loyal customers. I'm honoured to be able to share my love of great food with all of you. This is what makes it all worth it." He paused and a few people clapped, thinking he was done, but he looked at the wine in his glass and continued, "I bought this wine five years ago to drink on our

fifth anniversary. Thank you all for the last five years and for the blessing of many years to come. Thank you.” He raised his glass to the group and drank, and the rest did the same simultaneously after him. The patrons clapped as he sat back down next to Sean, who seemed to be beaming even more at Isaac, if that was possible.

Sean leaned in close to Isaac’s ear and said, “I love you.”

A warm feeling filled Isaac’s breast, and he turned to his husband. “I love you too.”

Then Isaac’s attention was swept up in well-wishers, regulars who came up to the table to tell Isaac how much they liked his speech and his cooking and to reminisce a little about their favourite experiences at the restaurant. Isaac listened patiently to each and thanked them for their regard. Sean, too, was addressed by these people and he received their comments with open appreciation, even when Isaac had grown a little tired of it all. Brooke was fielding her own compliments and kind words. They looked at each other and he winked. She winked back.

At one point, he caught the attention of Violet across the table. Isaac made a gesture with his hand saying *what’s wrong?*

She squinted and then she waved dismissively. *Nothing.*

He frowned and held up his hands, signing *Come on!* It was hardly American Sign Language, but they understood each other well enough.

She sighed and tapped her head, mouthing, I’m *stupid.*

He raised an eyebrow and mouthed *what?*



She waved again. *Forget it.* Isaac rose to go over to her, but then another patron came up and took up his attention. Out of the corner of his eye, Isaac saw her drink the last of her wine and leave the table.

Finally, later that evening, the interruptions ceased. Isaac and Sean sat alone at the table. Brooke and Gordon turned slowly on the dance floor, lost in each other's eyes. Isaac liked watching them together. He was always happy that his best friend had found someone to love.

Lucas had disappeared to some corner to answer his cell-phone. His furtive movements when he'd received the call had not been lost on his friends. Something was going on there and Isaac wanted to know what it was. Violet, claiming she had to get up for work tomorrow, had hitched a ride home with Miranda, who'd left early to take her daughter home. What was going on with his friends?

Sean rested his chin on Isaac's shoulder and said, "Hey babe. What's wrong?"

Isaac smiled. Sean always knew when something was troubling him. He'd know what to do. "Have you noticed a certain strangeness about our favourite couple-who-should-be?"

Sean sat up. "Is that what all that signing with Violet was about?"

Isaac nodded. "But she wouldn't tell me what was wrong."

Sean was thoughtful for a moment and then he said, "They have been behaving strangely tonight. But I don't know how much we can do about it if they don't want to open up."

"Still... It bothers me that they seem so out of sorts."

"Me too," agreed Sean. "I'll have a talk with Lucas. As soon as I can."

Isaac smiled. "I'll do the same with Violet. We'll get to the bottom of this."

They nodded in agreement. Isaac really did want all of his friends to be happy.

## Homecoming

Lucas watched with some trepidation as Sean brought their coffee to the table. He needed his best friend's advice badly, and he dreaded bringing up the subject he absolutely had to bring up. But he could wait until they had started in on their Timmy's coffee. Perhaps the Tim Horton's coffee with its familiar and comforting flavour and the whole quintessential setting of the Tim Horton's would make this easier to tell Sean.

They had been coming to this Timmy's since they moved to Greendale. The counter ladies, elderly Iris and Maddie and their young protégé Marie, knew Sean's and Lucas' orders by heart. A large double double for Sean and a black with two sugars for Lucas. A blueberry muffin for Lucas and a fruit explosion for Sean, heated up with a pat of butter. Sometimes Lucas would think they were getting too predictable and he'd order a chocolate chip muffin instead. Violet liked croissants and milk instead of cream in her coffee. *Violet*. How had she suddenly popped into his train of thought? He'd been so wrapped up in Layla that he'd hardly seen Violet in the last three weeks. And now... this was why he needed to talk to Sean.

But Sean tended to take forever to get back to their table. First, he had to chat with the counter ladies. Then he'd stop at the table of some silver-haired regulars who knew them both by name. It amazed Lucas that his coffee wasn't cold by the time Sean got it to him.

Not that there weren't other distractions. There was actually a good crowd today. Old people chatting. Students with their books spread out on the table in front of them. Families with small children who never wanted to sit still. One golden-haired two-year-

old caught Lucas' attention at the table next to him. The child was rolling around a chocolate Timbit in its little hands, perhaps trying to decide what to do with it. Then, sensing Lucas watching her, the child turned and smiled a big gap-toothed grin at him. He smiled and made a silly face. The child giggled and then suddenly held the Timbit out to him. Lucas shook his head and the child pulled back, puzzled. He made another face and the child giggled again. This time, her mother finally noticed the exchange and put an arm around her daughter, smiling apologetically at Lucas as if for disturbing him. Lucas just shrugged at her. He wasn't disturbed. The little girl reminded him of his little nieces. He didn't get to see them as often as he would have wanted.

Sean finally returned and laid the brown tray in front of them. He sat down and they began to eat and drink in silence. But Lucas could feel his friend's eyes on him, and when they were about halfway through their muffins, Sean could wait no longer and said, "So, you wanted to talk?"

Lucas sighed and put down his coffee. "I have something to tell you and you probably won't like it."

Sean just looked at him for a second and then said, "OK. So what is it?"

"Layla and I are back together," he said and braced himself.

Sean regarded him silently for a long moment, so long that Lucas began to wonder if he was going to say anything at all. He wondered if Sean was expecting more. But then Sean said, very calmly, "Since when?"

Lucas wasn't sure if he should be happy that Sean wasn't reacting very strongly. No exclamations, no explosions. He had been preparing for more of a fight. This quiet reaction was unsettling. "Since Uncle Dennis' funeral. We reconnected."

Sean took a sip from his coffee. “And you didn’t think to tell me earlier?”

Lucas frowned. “I know you don’t like her.”

“It’s your life. If you want to keep screwing up your love life, that’s your decision,” said Sean with an air of dismissal.

Lucas straightened. “I’m not looking for your approval. I can be involved with whomever I please.” Before Sean could respond to this, Lucas continued, “Anyway, you and Isaac have always been unfair to Layla. Just once I wish you would be fair to both of us and try to see her more positively.”

“I have tried to see her more positively, Lucas, but even you have admitted that you two do not work out on a fundamental level. I have given her plenty of fair shots, and consistently, I see her hurting you.”

Lucas shook his head stubbornly. “Well, you’re going to have to suck it up then, because I’m going to marry her.”

“What?!” This was the explosion Lucas had been expecting. But Sean, restrained by the presence of so many other people, took a deep breath and said more calmly, “Have you asked her?”

Lucas drummed his fingers on the table, his coffee forgotten. “Not yet. But it is what she wants.”

“So soon, though? You’ve only been back together for three weeks. Shouldn’t you give it a bit more time?” *To collapse* were the words that hung in the air between them.

“It’s been fifteen years, let’s face it. I had the chance years ago to marry her and I almost squandered it.”

“And you don’t think that maybe that should tell you something?”

Lucas was silent. He knew exactly what Sean was driving at, but this plan was fixed in his mind. Layla had been right when she said he was trying to avoid growing up. So he was going to start. “Look, Sean, I don’t want to fight with you. I really do want your advice. It’s not like I’m not listening to you.”

Sean sighed. “Fine. But you seem really unclear on what you want. You tell me stuff that you don’t want my opinion on, and you leave me half-informed on other stuff. How can you expect me to help you when you aren’t open with me?”

Lucas ran a hand through his hair self-consciously. “Point taken.”

Sean took this as an invitation and ran with it. “OK. For instance, what actually happened between you and Layla and Peter?”

It was Lucas’ turn to be surprised. “How...?”

He rolled his eyes. “Do I look like an idiot? You think I can’t put two and two together, especially when it concerns my best friends?”

Lucas crossed his arms in front of his chest. This was a very uncomfortable subject for him. “Look, I’m not sure of anything.”

“But, you suspect...” Lucas nodded. Sean asked, “And you’re all of a sudden OK with all that? Am I missing something?”

“I’ve decided to put it in the past. To give her another chance,” replied Lucas.

“Which chance is this? Number six? Seven?” sniped Sean. Lucas frowned.

“Sorry.”

Lucas leaned forward. “Sean, I’m just trying to do something right for once. If that means that I need to do some soul-searching and forgive them both, then that’s what

I'm doing. And I think it's time I grew up and treated my relationship with Layla in a mature manner."

Sean chewed on his thumbnail. A few times, he looked like he was going to say something but then didn't. Then, finally, he said anxiously, "But what about Violet? What about your feelings for Violet? Don't tell me there's nothing there."

Lucas frowned. What about Violet? She didn't want him. Why should he want her? "There's nothing between me and Violet. There never will be."

Sean sighed sympathetically. "Oh, Lucas..." He rested his chin on his hand. "So now you're going to marry Layla. Where does that put you? She'll never move to Greendale."

"I've thought about it. I'm going to put the house up for sale. Not right away. Violet... Violet should have as much time as possible to find a new place. But she's self-sufficient now. She'll be fine," he said.

"You're absolutely sure of all of this, aren't you? What did you need me for?"

Lucas shrugged. "I guess I needed a sounding board. I don't know."

Sean patted Lucas' arm. "I'll always be that for you. Even if that's all you want." He squeezed Lucas' arm suddenly. "But before you do anything, please be sure you're doing it for the right reasons."

Lucas was suddenly sobered by this warning. "OK."

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Violet was sitting on the couch, working on a speech for the Seven City Mayors' Annual Luncheon, when the doorbell rang. She put her notepad down and looked out the window, but all she saw was a taxi driving away. Curious, she went to the door and opened it. Who she saw on the doorstep was the last person she ever thought she would.

Peter, shaggy-haired and bearded but in a bohemian way rather than a homeless one, threw open his arms and hugged Violet. He wore ragged jeans, a Metallica t-shirt, and a leather jacket. She tried to disengage herself gracefully but he held her tight. Finally, he let her go, and she stared at him, still stunned. He grinned. "Well, Sis? Are you going to say something?"

"What are you doing here?" was the first thing that tumbled out of her mouth. It wasn't the best thing to say, she reflected, but it was the first thing she thought of.

He seemed undaunted, however. He probably wasn't even listening to her anyway, she thought. "I'm home! And," he said, gesturing to someone or something behind him, "I have someone I want you to meet."

From behind him emerged a similarly dressed woman with shiny black hair who regarded Violet a little shyly. Peter put an arm around the woman's waist and declared proudly, "Vi, this is my wife, Daniella."

This time, Violet could feel her own eyes nearly bulge out of their sockets. She was so surprised that she just stood still, speechless. It didn't help that the woman greeted her warmly with a two-cheek kiss. Peter, figuring out that Violet was completely stunned into motionlessness, took her by the shoulders and walked her into the house and up the stairs back to the living room. His wife followed, closing the door behind them.



In the living room, Violet seemed to regain some of her senses. She whispered fiercely to Peter, “What the hell are you talking about? What do you mean, she’s your wife?”

Peter regarded her with his fists on his hips. “I mean exactly what I said. Daniella is my wife. I married her in Europe.”

Violet bit her lower lip. “Mom is going to freak. Do you understand that? She is going to be furious. How could you just go and get married without telling your family?”

“It wasn’t like it was something where there was a lot of time to plan. We could have a little ceremony here, I suppose.” He shrugged.

Violet glanced at Peter’s wife and smiled politely. She stood apart from the siblings, observing the room around her. “Does she speak English?” Violet asked her brother.

“Perfectly,” said Daniella, who was looking out the window.

Violet reddened with embarrassment. Peter gave her a triumphant look. She floundered about, looking for something to say or do. Finally, she suggested, “Um, why don’t you two sit down? Would you like some tea or coffee?”

Peter flopped down on the couch like he’d never left. He extended a hand to Daniella and she took it and sat on the armrest. “Tea’s fine, Vi. It’s all I drink in England.”

“OK. Right,” she said, going to the kitchen and putting the kettle on. She got out some cups and the teapot, into which she placed a couple tea bags. She watched her brother with his bride as she waited for the water to boil. They cuddled and petted each other, whispering what she assumed from their reactions were sweet nothings into each

other's ears. Violet didn't think she'd ever seen her brother so content and tender with a woman. And to be married! She certainly found that hard to believe. But that was apparently the case.

The kettle whistled and Violet poured the water into the teapot. She brought the cups and tea to the coffee table and pulled a chair over from the dining table to sit on. Violet poured tea for the three of them when she was sure it had steeped enough. It was just orange pekoe so it didn't take long. Then they drank in silence, and Violet observed her new sister-in-law. She seemed too elegant to be wearing those jeans and t-shirt. But she also seemed to wear them with a familiar comfort. She looked to Violet to be the kind of woman that could wear anything and look comfortable. Violet, on the other hand, felt a little self-conscious in her jeans and blouse. She hadn't even had the time to change.

Peter looked around him. "Well, I see there have been some changes around here. I don't suppose my room is still intact, eh?"

Violet shook her head. "No. I took it over."

He nodded. "I'm glad to hear it. I hoped you would."

Her lip twisted ironically at that comment. "Did you?"

"Yeah, sure." His gaze rested on the coffee table and the notepad she'd left on it. "What's this?"

Violet went to pick up the pad, but Peter got to it first. "It's just a speech I'm working on for the mayor. That's my job now."

"You're working for the mayor? No way," he said, leafing through the pages. "This is pretty good."

“Thank you.” She retrieved the notepad from him and put it aside. They were silent again for a while and then Violet, to break the awkward silence, asked, “So, what have you been up to, Peter?”

He shrugged. “This and that. I got a job as a roadie for the Noir Orchids, they’re this progressive rock band, and we went on tour for eight months. That’s how I met Daniella here, at a concert in Milan.” He patted his wife’s ass, and she leant down to French kiss him.

Violet waited for them to stop making out. It was a little sickening; their affection and cooing at each other was becoming cloying. And not because Violet’s own romantic life was so screwed up. It was just cloying. When they stopped, Violet said, “Are you staying for good?”

Peter shrugged again. “I said I would show Canada to Daniella. I’m not booked right now, though. We’ll see.”

Violet raised an eyebrow. Some things never changed. Peter never had a plan for anything. “You are going to see Mom and Dad, I hope.”

“Probably.” He stood suddenly and patted Daniella’s knee. “Babe, I’m going to the loo. I’ll be right back.” He left the room.

The two women sat in silence, both smiling politely at each other. Violet racked her brains for something to say to her brother’s wife, but she was tongue-tied. She was spared from saying anything, however, by the sound of a key in the front door and the door opening. Lucas and Sean entered and came up the steps into the living room. Her heart skipped at the sight of Lucas. She had hardly seen him in the past three weeks, but the mixture of passion and awkwardness she felt around him since she had remembered

their first true meeting was just as strong now as it was then. She wanted desperately to be alone with him, to talk to him, and at the same time, she was terrified of talking to him, terrified of what he might say.

Then she remembered that Daniella was there, and she had no idea how to introduce her to Lucas and Sean. The two men stopped in their tracks when they noticed the dark-haired stranger and Lucas looked inquisitively at Violet. Violet gave him a nervous half-smile and opened her mouth.

But another entered the room at that moment who took all of the men's attention. Peter came back from the bathroom and stopped short next to the couch, staring at Lucas, who stared back at him. Violet couldn't quite read their expressions. Surprise was certainly part of what she saw, but there was also a fierce, almost territorial, menace in the way the two men regarded each other. She thought for a moment that they would look at each other in that tense way forever, and then suddenly Lucas took two steps toward Peter and punched him so hard in the jaw that he actually floored him. Daniella screamed something in Italian. Sean took a step forward, but before he could get to them, Peter recovered some and swept his leg under Lucas' and tripped him.

The men fell together in a heap and began to wrestle ferociously. Violet grabbed Daniella's arm and pulled her to the kitchen to get them out of the way of the fighting men. She didn't know what was going on or why, but she wasn't going to be in their path. Daniella struggled against Violet's grip, trying to go to her husband's aid, but Violet held her fast. Lucas and Peter rolled around the floor like boys on the playground and smashed into lamps and CD racks that came crashing down around them. Violet was too distressed by the whole thing to really think about who might be in the wrong, but

even so, she was conflicted about who she was most worried about. Daniella, on the other hand, knew exactly who she was rooting for. She cheered on Peter and cursed Lucas, and cried out in triumph when Peter punched Lucas so hard that his lip was cut by Peter's wedding ring. Violet winced at the pain she imagined he must be feeling, and unthinkingly squeezed Daniella's arm so hard that she actually shut up for a second. It looked like that might be the end of the fight, but then Lucas punched Peter in the side and they went at each other again.

Sean watched the conflict with a grim expression on his face but not interfering for the most part. Violet looked at him, wondering what he was waiting for. Finally, he seemed to have seen enough, and walked over to the tangled fighters. Calmly, he took both of them by the back of their collars and pulled them apart, as if they were two criminals who'd been fighting in jail instead of his best friends in a now messed-up living room. "Enough!" he exclaimed in his deep authoritative voice that he used for his job as a policeman. Violet had never heard that quiet angry voice come out of Sean before. He stood between them with his arms extended. They glared at each other, but obeyed Sean.

They were both bleeding from the nose and mouth, and Peter's right eye looked like it was swelling up. "You fucker! What is wrong with you?" he yelled at Lucas.

Lucas touched the cut on his lip and growled, "You know full well what you did. Did you think you could just come back into this house after you slept with my girlfriend?"

Peter's eyes widened and he stepped backwards. He still frowned, however, and retorted, "I didn't go seeking that out. She came to me all on her own."

Lucas snarled and stepped forward, but was stopped by Sean's firm hand on his chest. Sean looked at them and commanded, "OK. You can finish up your little bromance drama later." He grabbed Lucas' collar and shoved him towards Violet. "Violet, get this one cleaned up, will you?"

Violet let go of Daniella's arm and the woman rushed to Peter's side, repeating "Ai! Mi Amor! Mi Amor!" over and over as she fussed over his wounds. Peter let her fuss over him, but his gaze was locked on Lucas'. Lucas looked at Daniella quizzically, seeming to just now understand what she was doing in his house. And then Violet was at Lucas' side, taking him by the hand and leading him upstairs where she could administer first aid to him without any fear of him going off half-cocked again.

He followed her willingly, and only asked when they were halfway up the stairs, "Who is that woman?"

Violet glanced down, "That's Peter's wife."

"His wife?!"

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Lucas watched Violet dab alcohol on his cuts with a cotton ball. She had seated him on his bed and raided the medicine cabinet for supplies to deal with all of his injuries. He winced when she touched his lip. She frowned at him. "Don't be a baby."

"I'm not. That hurts." He was uncomfortably aware of how close she was to him. He could feel her thigh against his as she sat next to him and twisted to face him so she

could work on him. The last time they'd been alone in this room, on top of his bed, it had been under very different circumstances, and he couldn't help thinking about it.

Violet's face was grim. "You deserve it." She grabbed his neck and stuck her thumb under his chin to steady his head. "Don't you know any better than to fight my brother? He was on the boxing team in high school."

Lucas raised an eyebrow. The expression hurt like heck. "You're not mad at me for beating on Peter?"

She smiled indulgently and stroked his hair off his forehead. "I think that my brother needs to have the consequences of his actions beat into him every once in a while. What you say he did was wrong." She paused. "I wish you'd dealt with it in a more civil way. And that you had told me what you knew."

He blinked. He could get lost in her caresses so easily. "I didn't really know for sure. I didn't want to burden you with my suspicions."

"I wish you had. Maybe I wouldn't have been so surprised when you attacked my brother." She looked into his eyes searchingly, and he felt sudden warmth at the attention she was paying him. They had forgotten the cotton ball and band-aids. "Lucas, I..."

His heart pounded. What was going on? Why was she being so affectionate with him all of a sudden? "What?"

She smiled, and it was an odd sort of smile, one filled with anticipation and dread. "Do you remember five years ago, getting stuck with a woman in a cloakroom and sharing a bottle of expensive wine?"

He puzzled over her words for a moment, trying to understand where she was going with this. And then in a weird second of clarity, he remembered the night she was

talking about. And the woman. The woman he'd kissed in that room. Whose name he'd never learned. Who haunted his dreams sometimes late at night. Who he realized was sitting right next to him. Lucas looked at Violet and reached up to touch her cheek. "Yes, I do remember. How could I forget you?"

She kissed him gently, afraid to hurt him, and he pulled her closer and kissed her properly, despite the sting in his lower lip. He could endure it for this embrace. He held her as if he was afraid that she would disappear when he let go. And he almost believed that. He couldn't believe that she was with him finally, and he wanted to prolong this moment as long as they had breath to sustain it.

But then other thoughts began to intrude on the moment. He remembered what else had happened in this room, and he couldn't help wondering how her feelings had apparently suddenly changed for him? And what was he doing here with her when he had just been telling Sean that he was going to marry Layla? Lucas let go of Violet and got up off the bed. He turned his back to her. "I'm sorry, Violet. I'm not a machine you can just switch on and off."

"What?" said Violet. Her voice had a tremble to it he had never heard from her before.

He turned around to face her. The mixture of sadness and confusion in her face almost made him falter. But he held fast. He would not be used, not by her, and not by Layla. Maybe he shouldn't be with Layla, if he couldn't get rid of his feelings for Violet, and if as Sean repeatedly warned him, she didn't really care for him as much as he wanted her to. But he wouldn't go through the same thing with Violet. Not again. "How can I trust your feelings, Violet? I thought you wanted me before, but then you changed



your mind. I already have one woman who does that to me; I don't need another. Hell, I was going to marry her."

She started. "You're back with your ex? Is that why you beat up Peter? Because he slept with your actual girlfriend?"

He demurred. "I wasn't thinking when I hit him. I guess I was thinking about all of it."

Violet looked away. "I see. Well, if you would rather be with her, I won't stand in your way."

Lucas frowned. Some small part of him was disappointed by Violet's reaction, by her willingness to give him up. It was like she was confirming his fears. That part of him wanted her to react more strongly, to argue with him, to tell him he was wrong. And then he realized what Sean had meant when he had said that Lucas should be absolutely sure that he was doing what he was doing for the *right* reasons. He wanted Violet. He wanted her to want him. He would always want her. He always had wanted her. And he couldn't give himself fully to anyone else when he wanted her so badly. Not even Layla, the woman who supposedly knew him so well and should have been his ideal mate, his One. She didn't know him at all. But Violet did. He never had to explain himself with her; he never felt like his relationship with her was a power struggle. She had appeared in his life right when it was all upside down and turned it back around even if it was without knowing it. She had become such a comforting and welcome presence in his life without his even realizing it.

And here she was, sitting on his bed, looking sullen and tired. And he realized how he had screwed up completely. How he had allowed his hurt to overwhelm his

happiness. How he had allowed Layla to twist him around again. How he had thought he was so smart and was so stupid. And he realized that there was no way he could make this better. No way he could take back his last words to her and pretend they'd never happened. So, he turned back to the door, and started to leave, feeling heavy in his limbs and in his chest.

“Do you remember what you said to me, five years ago? You said that there was a moment when you could look at a person and know that that person was your One, the person who you want to spend the rest of your life with,” she said suddenly behind him.

He turned back to her. He couldn't believe he was hearing what he was hearing. She stood and walked up to him. “You're my One, Lucas. I think you always have been, even when I was blinded by my own arrogance and selfishness. I know I made a mistake when I rejected you. I knew it as soon as I made it, but I was too proud to correct it. If you can't accept my apology, then say so now, but that won't change my feelings for you.”

Lucas couldn't contain himself any longer. He wrapped his hands around her neck and kissed her in that passionate gentle way he had those five years ago, and when they parted, out of breath, he held her cheek to cheek as he had done before. “I'm a jerk,” he whispered.

She smiled. “So am I. That means we're made for each other.”

He laughed and kissed her again.

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When Violet and Lucas finally returned to the living room, they came back arm in arm, and they hardly had eyes for anything or anyone else. Peter braced himself for another physical or verbal attack, and his wife moved protectively over him. But Lucas extended a hand to his former friend and Peter, not quite understanding what was going on, shook it warily. Peter surprised Violet by running a hand through his messy hair anxiously, and saying, "I'm sorry, man. I betrayed you and I betrayed your friendship. I was a dog." He looked at Violet, who regarded him with such amazement that he was actually taken aback. "Yes, Sis. I'm apologizing for something. I'd apologize to you, but we'd be here all day, and you forgive me anyway, don't you?"

Violet laughed and pinched his cheek. "Sadly, yes, I do. You're family, even when you don't want to be."

Lucas patted her hand on his arm and said, "I forgive you, Pete. You probably did me a favour."

Peter batted away Violet's pinching hand and looked from one to the other. Then he smiled. "Oh."

Sean, who needed no prompting to understand what had happened, was on the cell-phone with Isaac as quickly as possible telling him the news. He leaned next to them all and said, "Isaac says it's about bloody time you two figured out what he and I have known all along."

Violet smirked. "Well, tell him that he damn well should have said something if he was such a know-it-all."

They laughed.