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## The Re-Conception of Cate

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THE RE-CONCEPTION OF CATE

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Writing

Cortney Palmacci

Farquhar College of Arts and Sciences, Division of Humanities

Nova Southeastern University

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Farquhar College of Arts and Sciences, Division of Humanities  
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We hereby approve the thesis of

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ACCEPTED

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## I

Okay, I admit it. I'm not the best flyer. I am always nervous on a plane. No matter how smooth the flight is, I find myself contemplating the false sense of security the floor gives. A superficial look around and I see that I am in a long and boring tube. Smooth, rounded, tan walls surround rows of maroon seats. The air smells stale and the vents whistle loudly as the oxygen is pumped into the tube. The floor looks solid. But then I remember there is nothing between it and 35,000 feet below. I drink cheap Pinot Grigio and Valium to help me forget.

A red-eye is never a comfortable flight in coach. The flight from Vegas back to Fort Lauderdale International is about four and a half hours, a manageable time at a more reasonable hour. But it's almost 1:00 a.m. Vegas time. The hour, the wine, the Valium—I should be resting peacefully in dreamland. My best girlfriend Erika gave me the window seat. I know she meant well, and I was grateful for the wall to lean my head against, but now the confined space and lack of easy access to the aisle makes me feel trapped and restless.

Our Vegas plan was simple. There for Erika's wedding, we would drink and gamble before and after the ceremony in The Chapel at The Luxor. In five days, I have had less than 20 hours sleep. Erika and Stephen were unconscious before the plane had even started taxiing down the runway. It's two hours into the flight, neither of them has moved an inch, and I really have to pee.

"Erika. Erika." I try to raise my voice to my loudest whisper. I will her to wake up, but she doesn't stir. "Erika. Erika." I'm a little louder this time. My voice fills the silence at 35,000 feet. She is motionless. I shake her, hoping to shock her into consciousness. "Erika." Before I can say her name again an older man sitting in the row behind us leans forward and

looks at me through the space in the seats. I can only see a bald head and graying goatee but his grunt tells me he clearly isn't happy with my noises. Great, I managed to wake up this guy, who's now glaring at the back of my seat, but not Erika.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to him and shrug my shoulders as if to say, *what can you do?* Defeated, I settle back into my seat. At first, I want to eat or drink something out of sheer boredom, but that isn't an option. I have some chips and a Diet Coke I bought at the airport newsstand in my laptop bag, but Stephen put it in the overhead compartment—a lot of good it's doing me now. I could try to call the stewardess, but I'd run the risk of disturbing my back-row neighbor again. Plus, I don't know when they will wake up and I can't risk an accident. A small bladder and big nerves is a bad combo.

I fidget in my chair. I undo my ponytail and let my hair down, but I instantly pull it back again. I adjust my red, squishy neck pillow for optimum comfort and settle on watching the television in the back of the headrest in front of me. On the flight to Vegas, the plane only offered one channel. Luckily, it ran two episodes of *The Office* in a row. This flight also only has one channel but it isn't offering much tonight. The in-flight magazine tells me the recent Renée Zellweger film *Miss Potter* is starting soon. Since I have no choice, I change the channel on my armrest controller to three and wait.

The urge to pee is getting worse. In a feeble attempt to ignore the urge, I turn my attention fully to the film. It isn't the princess-finds-her-prince story I expected, and I'm intrigued. Renée's character is freethinking, liberal, independent. She doesn't want a husband. She only wants to write children's books. *What's so weird about that?* I don't exactly have stories leaping out of me, but I do want to live my life as I see fit. I don't

understand why we all have to fit our lives into the same neat boxes. I get what Miss Potter is after, and I realize I probably should have seen this movie in the theater.

Suddenly, Ewan McGregor appears on screen and I can see it coming. This confident, self-sufficient woman will be swept off her feet by the dashing prince charming. This is such bullshit. And everyone I know seems to be falling for it except me. I used to be surrounded by liberal, free-thinking women. Now I have happy-housewives as best friends. Erika is just the latest in a long line of friends to *settle down*.

Suddenly, a loud noise upsets my internal disquiet. It sounds like someone choking and blowing his nose simultaneously. I look over at Stephen. He didn't wake himself or Erika, but he scared the shit out of me. My eyes linger for a moment on the two seated next to one another. Side by side, breath by breath. Even while they sleep they seem to be in harmony with one another. Erika's golden brown hair is tied back in a ponytail. A few bangs lie loosely on her forehead falling over her purple sleep mask. She has a perfect, well-proportioned figure—not too skinny, but petite. She looks casual and comfortable but still feminine in her green Victoria's Secret sweat pants and matching cropped sweater. Stephen's standard American Eagle tee-shirt and plaid shorts match the color and laid-back style of her outfit.

On leave for two weeks from his second tour of duty in Iraq, Stephen has spent five of those days in Vegas with his new wife and her best friend. Along with some friends from California, the three of us arrived in Vegas before and stayed later than the other guests. A constant parade of liquor, slot machines, sight-seeing, and night clubs—this was, by far, the best wedding I have ever attended. For a second I almost saw myself in one of those white

dresses, but I was quickly reminded how unappetizing that would be. Stephen and Erika proceeded to call themselves Mr. and Mrs. Andreadis for the rest of the trip. Yuck.

In their hotel room the day before the wedding, Erika handed me a gift bag. We had been getting ready to meet everyone in the lobby for the rehearsal dinner. Stephen was ironing.

“I got something for ya,” she said off-handedly. The black gift wrapping matched the bridesmaids’ dresses.

“For me? It’s your wedding. I’m supposed to have something for you.” I wasn’t expecting a gift. Underneath the black tissue, I found a black, velvet jewelry box. Before I could fully remove it from the bag, I was crying.

“Catey, you’re my best friend. I love you so much. I don’t know what I would do without you, what I would have done without you.” As she spoke, I opened the box to find a white gold and diamond star on a white gold chain. “A star for my rock star. I love you, babe.”

I put it on immediately and haven’t taken it off since. On a plane somewhere over the Gulf of Mexico, I’m holding the star between my index finger and thumb, sliding it back and forth on the chain around my neck, while crying and remembering the moment from a few days before. And I really have to pee. The urge is making me more agitated. All I want is for her to wake up so I can get up and go to the bathroom. I return to the movie to find the happy couple dancing and in love. My silent tears fall faster.

It smells musty on this plane. It’s typical airplane smell, canned and recycled. My stomach hurts. I can’t even look at the two newlyweds next to me. They are my best friends in the world, but I hate them in their wedded, blissful sleep. I start chewing on my nails. I

cannot stop obsessing over the couples in my life. Erika and Stephen are married now. Rose, a friend at work, and her boyfriend Edgar just got married, and now they have a kid. Even Lily seems to be settling down with her new boyfriend Daniel. The pressure in my bladder lessens, but I begin to hyperventilate. Although I have been aware of it all along, I am the only one not blissfully attached. With the exception of Emile, my best guy friend, I am the only single girl left.

There is no way to say this—no simple, casual way to put it, so I'll just come out with it: I am a virgin, a twenty-five year old virgin. No, I'm not super religious. I'm not married to Jesus or anything like that, and I'm not saving myself for my soul-mate. I don't have some hideous deformity, and I don't live under a rock. It's hard to put into words, but relationships and everything that goes along with them—sex, love, compromise, dependency—I am just not interested in them. That's probably an understatement. Let's face it: I like things to be, well—let's be honest—I like things just as they are. I like to spend time with my friends. I like non-attachment. I like my career. I don't like mess. I really hate tears.

It sounds cold when I say it like that. Being a virgin isn't *hip* or *cool*, but I don't feel comfortable letting someone get that close. Remember that magical time when boys transformed from dirty, annoying cretins to dreamy objects of desire? I'm still waiting for that to happen to me. One night, my friends and I were singing New Kids on the Block songs and watching R-rated movies after our parents went to sleep. The next night, the only thing my girlfriends wanted to talk about was playing Seven Minutes in Heaven and how far they could go with a boy before being considered a slut. In the time it took Brenda and Dylan to break up and get back together in one episode of *Beverly Hills, 90210*, my friends went from being fun, secure girls to self-conscious, giggly children whenever boys came around. I

watched as they split in two: a new, boy-approved version of themselves and then the confident, intelligent young women I knew and loved. The version I preferred seemed to be relegated to the privacy of our bedrooms at sleepovers. My personality didn't split. There is only one Cate.

The divide in my friends worsened in high school. The life of a teenage girl is a special circle of hell that Dante never imagined:

*Did you hear Jason and Jessica broke up?*

*Did Jesse invite Camille to his birthday party?*

*Daryl said he'd call, but he never called. I waited all night.*

I couldn't wrap my head around the all-consuming appeal of love. I have watched my friends be consumed by it for over a decade. Love infects; love is messy. I like things neat. No drama. No suspense. No surprises. I especially don't like the messiness that sex brings. It's heart-breaking and dream-crushing. I can't afford any of that. I just don't have time for some trial-and-error period. The way I see it, what I want will come around. One day a guy just like me will show up. Somebody who doesn't have time to waste on games. Neat. No drama. No suspense. No surprise. Until then, I'll just hang out and have a good time.

As the credits roll across the miniature TV screen, Erika begins to move. "What time is it?" she asks groggily, stretching in her seat.

"Time for me to pee. Move, move, MOVE." I push past her, waking Stephen when I jump into the aisle, running to the back of the plane. I don't talk to them for the rest of the flight. I can't think of anything to say that I think they'll understand. I stare out my round window into the cloudy darkness looking for some solution to my worries and a piece of my old, self-confident self floating in the clouds.

## II

I have been sleeping for twenty-four hours, ever since we landed. That is pretty impressive, even by Emile's standards. He doesn't sleep, he goes into a coma. It's Saturday and sunny, so I contemplate walking to Brew for some coffee. I try to walk everywhere. It's fairly easy living in downtown Fort Lauderdale where just about everything, including my office, is within walking distance.

My bedroom, the master suite in my condo, has two full-sized closets, most likely meant to be shared by two people. (There is only one bedroom, but the floor plan for my condo still said "master suite." I guess that is meant to make people feel more important than they are.) Even though I am one person, I still ran out of closet space. I had to buy one of those temporary wardrobe things from Target to accommodate my ever expanding wardrobe. It takes up an entire corner of my room and blocks part of my bookshelves, but I need to hang my clothes somewhere. After scanning the closets and wardrobe, I realize I can't find anything that looks comfortable. My black-and-grey-striped pajama pants and black tank-top seem like the best choice, so I don't change. I give up on Brew and make toast.

Around ten, the phone rings. This one would make sixteen missed calls since we landed yesterday morning. I really don't want to answer, but it is Emile. Ten is far too early for him to be up so, figuring something is wrong, I answer.

"Where are you?" he barks before I can get out a full hello.

"I'm at home. I was sleeping. Since yesterday morning." I am sure even he can understand this. I take my cell to the couch and begin to flip channels on the television as we talk.

“Everyone is calling you. You aren’t answering. They are calling me. Your *sister* is calling me. She doesn’t do that. So now I have to call you again, track you down. Make sure all is well in the Kingdom of Kitty Cate,” he says mockingly.

“I’m bumble bees and sunshine. It’s all Christmas cookies, babe. How are you? Didya miss me?” Will he take the bait and change the subject?

“Of course, I missed you. But honestly, what the hell is up? You can’t just fall off the grid for twenty-four hours and then say it’s all dandy.” He is stern when he scolds me. Emile has been one of my best friends since high school. My oldest friend, if you don’t count my sister who has an unfair advantage. We’ve known each other since he thought he had to act straight and I thought maybe he was the guy I should be dating. Looks like we were both wrong there.

Oh, I know what you’re thinking. A gay best friend, how original. But trust me; Emile is no George from *My Best Friend’s Wedding*. George is so suave and cool, so British, you know? Emile’s nerdy Jewish gene outweighs the cool gay gene. Poor thing. I might actually know more about dating than he does. About history and politics, he beats everyone I know, but when it comes to fashion, he’s clueless. Anything fashionable he owns was bought by yours truly. It’s like Straight Chick for the Queer Guy.

“It was just the wedding. I was detoxing from all that sappy love shit. I was immersed in it for days; I needed to sleep it off. It was my own version of rehab.” There is nothing on TV so I give up, flipping to the digital music channel that plays *alternative*. Whatever that is. At this moment, it’s REM’s “Everybody Hurts.” Good times. I hold the phone between the left side of my face and my shoulder. I start to French-braid my hair while he lays into me.

“If you think I’m falling for that bullshit, you *must* still be dreaming. No one, except me, sleeps that long. You *certainly* don’t sleep that long. I didn’t want to force you into this, but I *am* coming over. First lunch, then Wii, then movies. Eventually, we will run out of things to talk about and then we will have the truth. It’s a plan, Stan. See you in an hour.” Before I can protest, he hangs up.

The day goes just as he said. We walk to Brew to get coffee and bagels for lunch. Brew is my favorite thing about living downtown. It’s this really cool little coffee shop by day, wine bar by night, hidden away on a small quiet side street behind the bars of the downtown scene. The interior is filled with comfy brown leather chairs and chrome and rust-colored vinyl booths, like in a 1950s diner. There is food-themed artwork on the walls; my favorite painting is of an Aunt Jemima bottle and pancakes, and plasma TVs playing old black-and-white films hang from the ceiling. I find two unoccupied leather chairs and curl up in one that faces the big picture windows in the front of the shop, slowly sipping my Iced Café White Latte while I watch people walk by. “Good coffee.”

“That was the absolute worst attempt at trying to steer the convo. Worst. Ever.” He looks at me from the other side of a huge mug of cappuccino. As promised, Emile arrived at my condo exactly one hour after we spoke. He looks good, although a bit rushed. His jeans are tight against his thin frame. He’s wearing a tee shirt that reads “Jews do it for 8 nights” with a picture of a menorah. His dark hair is hidden beneath a black newsboy cap.

“It’s a little early for Hanukkah, no?” I ask, in a shameless attempt to get him to follow me to a subject far from my lonely heart.

“Never too early for Hanukkah, you silly gentile! But still not good enough. I know something happened. Level with me. You know I love you and support you no matter what. So spill the beans. Did you marry K-Fed in a secret Vegas wedding?”

“Nothing that glamorous.” I push my black Wayfarer sunglasses onto the top of my head like a headband but immediately draw them back over my eyes. My hair’s in a messy bun on top of my head. I’m wearing a jean skirt and a black tee shirt I bought at a Brand New concert a few months ago. I stare down at the white, pristine rubber of my new Converse All-Stars. I cherish the times when my sneakers are virginal; after one concert they will be scuffed and dirtied. “The wedding was nice—pretty short though. Without all that God stuff, it’s basically, Do you? *Yes*. Do you? *Yes*.”

“And how was it being the odd man out?” he asks, getting to the root of my problem.

“No one ever makes me feel like an odd *woman* out, Em.”

“But you go to a hotel room all alone at the end of the night.”

He was right. No matter how hard people try to include you, when you walk down the street and everyone pairs off in twos while you walk alone, it’s hard to miss. My little breakdown on the plane was probably a long time coming. Our Friday girls’ nights had been filled with stories of boyfriends and weddings and moving in together for a while now. The boys had even begun tagging along. The climate has been changing. It’s heating up for everyone else while I sink deeper and deeper into an ice age.

“Yeah, that’s true.” I stop and stare for a moment. Coffee shops always distract me. I often get lost in watching the baristas steam milk and brew espresso shots. “But it isn’t just the trip. It’s been coming, Emile. You know what this year is? Three years since college. And

I am still in school. Granted, I'm working at one now, but I'm still there. I'm in the same place, just in a different capacity. No change."

"And everyone else is so much better off?" He pauses for my nod to his rhetorical question. "Cate, you have an amazing condo and fabulous job. You're the hippest chick I know. Your wardrobe is awesome and you go to every concert that comes to the tri-county area. You have everything you wanted. You've achieved your goals. Don't take this the wrong way, but if you aren't where you want to be, whose fault is that? What's missing? It isn't something you *didn't achieve*; it's something *you didn't know you needed*." He finishes his speech with a quick raise of the eyebrow and pursing of the lips.

"Well, aren't you the voice of wisdom?" I whisper, head lowered.

"That is exactly who I am, and exactly why you keep me around." He's right. He starts to lay out a plan. "Okay, so step one. I know you. Right now you're thinking coulda, woulda, shoulda. It's been three years all right, but you aren't talking about college. You're talking about Jonah. I always hated that fucking name. Jonah wasn't the one that got away, Cate. This isn't about Jonah."

Okay, so earlier when I said that I hadn't found that magical twinkle in a boy's eye yet? That wasn't true—well not 100% true. In my sophomore year of college I met Jonah, the teacher's aide in my Fundamental Business Statistics class. He was getting his grad degree so he had to help teach the class for credit. We became really good friends over that semester and kept in touch after the term ended. He had this girlfriend he seemed to really like. But the more I got to know him, the less I understood what they saw in one other. I'm not being some jealous other woman here; I think she was a total peach. She just didn't seem like his peach. Their advanced accounting degrees seemed to be all they had in common. It never

crossed my mind that he and I should be together. I didn't think of him like that. Not at first, anyway.

Jonah started out as the perfect study partner. Like me, he enjoyed math and music. Plus Max, his girlfriend, didn't like concerts. She was really good at microeconomics. She helped with our homework, and then sent us off to shows together while she stayed home and graded papers. It was pretty much common knowledge that I didn't date much, so no one was worried. But then she started to act differently towards me. I should have seen it, but I didn't. I was so certain that I didn't have a type that the signs flew over my head.

A combination of her friends whispering negative things about me in her ear and her insecurities about their relationship as they got closer to graduation took a toll and Jonah and I stopped talking. They got married shortly after they graduated. Like the clueless heroine of a novel, never seeing the one who was right for her until he was gone, I hadn't realized how much he meant to me until I got their Save the Date card in the mail. I was just like Antonio finding out Talia was moving to another town on *One Life to Live*. It was only clear when it was too late. I skipped the wedding.

After Jonah, I tried dating. I was scared that I was missing out on something. I thought there was a lesson to be learned in the Jonah situation. He wasn't the one who got away because I never had him in the first place, but for a while, I didn't want to risk "not having" a guy again. Quite often the dates were super fun. But they always ended the same. On the second or third date, the guy expected to be invited up or invited me up to "watch a movie." I'd tell the guy how awesome he was but let him know I'm a virgin, and poof, I'd get one of two responses. Some guys thought it was some kind of challenge, as if my virginity were a prize for them to win. The rest freaked out. Either way, it was the same

vanishing act each time. I don't like magic and the trick got old. About two years ago, I swore the dating off totally.

“Jonah is old news, Emile. He has nothing to do with this.”

Before I can elaborate and protest anymore, he stops me. “Good, I hope it doesn't. It's a moot point. This isn't TV; it is real life, and *Jonah* isn't coming waltzing into your life to sweep you off your feet. There will be no speeches about how he always loved you. We aren't those people and this isn't that kind of story. This is the kind of story where you get dressed up and go to the movies with your gay best friend on a Saturday night looking for guys who like the same films you do.”

“That was weak, babe.”

“Yeah, well, I watch films. I don't write them.”

### III

My plan to mope around all day was foiled by Emile yesterday, but I will not be defeated today. Soap Net is running a marathon of *One Life to Live* and I will be damned if I don't eat an entire package of Colby Jack cheese and a box of Triscuts before it's over.

My phone is still flashing fifteen missed calls. I check the messages just to be polite. I'm not calling back today. "Where are you, Cate? Cate, my Cate. Wherefore art thou? Please call me back. I miss you, Rock Star." This is the fourth message from Lily.

Tomorrow is Monday and I plan to go back to my life then. For now, I am content to watch *One Life to Live* and eat junk food. I know. I know. I am a walking contradiction. Someone who detests drama in her own life is obsessed with soaps? Hell, yeah, I'm living vicariously through my favorite characters. I let them get hurt for me.

The second episode is about to start when there is impatient knocking at the door. "Cate!" I recognize the voice of my younger sister, Regan. "Kitty Cate, open up."

I drag my feet, brushing a path in the tan, Saxony carpet from the couch to the door. "Regan, my special princess. Come in." I reluctantly move aside to allow her to enter. "How the hell did you get up here?"

It's Sunday, which can only mean one thing in the fall—Dolphins football. "A cute guy on four held the door open for me. Where's your jersey? It's game day, babe." She breezes past me, light and airy, as usual. Regan is the light to my dark. For every uptight, structured rule I live by, Regs has an open space. Today her chin-length, blonde hair is pulled away from her face by a plastic, orange headband. She's taller than I am, about 5'8" in heels. Her hazel eyes, a family trait we share, hide behind oversized, white sunglasses, a trademark of hers.

“Well, I’m not dressed yet. Hence pajamas, not jersey.” If I couldn’t bring myself to go out on a Friday night, I certainly wasn’t planning on having my heart broken further by a football team that couldn’t win an honorable mention ribbon in a third-grade science fair. Normally my family gathers at my parents’ house for away games, but today, I didn’t even plan to turn the game on.

“Well, get dressed. And what the hell are you watching? *One Life to Live*? Are you fucking kidding me?” She reprimands me while reaching for the remote. Regan is wearing navy blue shorts and a white and orange Dolphins halter top. Her white Reeboks set off the Dolphins’ logo embroidered on the side and her white ankle socks trimmed in orange.

Before I can even say “first down,” Soap Net is replaced with a pre-game show. “But I am not in the mood, Regs.” Do I detect a slight whine in my voice? Oh, this day is going to get ugly.

“Um, and what would the Dolphins say if they knew you weren’t supporting them?” Anyone else would say this in jest, but she’s dead serious. Her hands are on her hips, her head cocked to the side. “What would Jason Taylor say? You’re abandoning our team, Cate. Your team! You can’t choose when to love your team.” Her eyes are accusing, designed to extract guilt.

I sigh loudly, giving in to her plan. Slowly, I make my way to the shower. I rinse the sleep away from the night before. The shower seems to close in on me. What will become of Nash and Jessica on the soap? I suddenly feel so overwhelmed by the prospect of their not ending up together. Tears start pouring down my cheeks mixing with the water from the shower head.

Showers are supposed to leave you feeling fresh and new. I feel like shit. I part my wet hair into two ponytails and tie them with orange ribbons. I've been growing it out for over a year now and it is finally reaching past my shoulders. I pull on jean shorts and my Taylor jersey, and then pause to ponder my reflection in the mirror. Overall, I am happy with what I see. I've gained weight since high school, but haven't we all? I like being a size eight. It's a nice healthy number. My cheeks are getting fatter than I like. Can you do exercises to fix that? Before I can become obsessed with researching face exercises, I brush aqua and orange shadow on my eyelids, fasten my orange hoop earrings, and slide aqua and orange bracelets on my left wrist. I am outfitted for game day, but I am not prepared to face my sister.

I pause before walking back into the living room. Erika and Stephen have arrived and are seated on my oversized olive loveseat, snacking on chicken wings. Erika's child-sized jersey is short, exposing her stomach. She wears a teal stone in her gold belly-button ring. Stephen's plaid shorts are blue today, matching his Patriots jersey. In a circle of Fins' fans, he loves The Pats. I don't think he's ever even been to New England, but he loves Tom Brady. The front door opens and my sister's on-again, off-again boyfriend Jeff enters. "Who's ready for some football?" he yells, dressed—from sweatband on his shaved head to sneakers on his feet—in Dolphins attire. He passes me, heading for Regan. They both let out a spirited *Whoop* before kissing. Coupledom has invaded the sanctity of my living room, and I opened the door to let it in.

"I need a drink," I reply sourly. My nice weekend getaway with myself has been infiltrated by my perfectly-coupled friends and football. I open a bottle of Pinot Grigio.

“And when you say Miami,” Erika sings as she enters the kitchen interrupting yet another solo pity party. I am becoming uncomfortable with the frequency with which these mini-breakdowns are occurring.

I sing the next line in the Dolphins’ Fight Song in an attempt to mask my sudden distress and disdain for the ritual of game day, “You’re talking Super Bowl.” The tears I’ve been holding in since the plane ride from Vegas return with a vengeance. “Erika, you think I’m crazy don’t you? You think I’m nuts.”

“Cate, why would I? What *are* you talking about?” She genuinely looks confused, but that’s what friends do. They pretend as though everyone hasn’t been sitting at the Palm Grille for the last two days talking about your odd behavior. I’m sure she’s trying to spare my feelings.

“Rik, do you consider me successful?” I genuinely wonder.

“Heck, yeah man. You’ve always known what you wanted. I felt like the biggest asshole after that first weekend we hung out. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do the next weekend and you had this life plan. I still don’t know what I’m doing and you’ve got it all. Kick ass job, killer place, gorgeous hair, awesome friends.” She takes another empty wine glass from a cabinet and commandeers the bottle. “You know how proud I am of you.”

As she winds up her pep talk, Regan calls to us from the living room. “Kick off, ladies!”

We join the group just in time to see the Dolphins return the ball only two yards. Most of the Pats’ defensive line is piled on Teddy Ginn, Jr. The rest of the first half plays out in a similar fashion. At halftime, Regan, Stephen, and Jeff run to the store for more beer.

“So tell me more about what you meant earlier. You are the most secure of all of us, Cate. What was that?” Erika stretches out on the couch, resting her feet on the arm of the love seat.

The quality time with my friends hasn't made me feel any better. In my own home I feel out of place. During the first half, I had ended up squished in the corner of my couch, one couple to my left and the other in my love seat to my right. The Colby Jack cheese was filling my belly but wasn't making me feel any better about being the only single in a group of couples.

“We are twenty-five, Erika! Twenty-five. I can't believe we got this old so quickly. Can I be honest with you? Lips sealed for secrecy? I thought I would have a boyfriend by now. I really thought there would be at least one guy who got me. But they all dash.” I grab some more cheese from the coffee table and wash it down with the last of my wine.

“You know, in some other town, maybe, but Fort Lauderdale sucks for that. Good guys are so rare here.” She is lying on her back now, knees into her chest as she stares at the ceiling. “The city is filled with the shallow types, you know? So much about this city is fake, man. I mean, fifteen years ago, this wasn't even a full-fledged downtown. These buildings weren't here. But suddenly now we have to think of it like a mini-New York or something.” She rolls over on her side to reach for her empty wine glass, then sets it back down. “I can't wait to get out of here. You should come with us to Texas when Stephen gets back.”

This is a conversation we've had before. Stephen is stationed in Killeen, Texas. After he returns from Iraq, she's moving there to be with him. Shallowness and fakeness aside, this is my city. I'm not moving to Texas. “No, no. Let's not go there again, sweets. I think I just need to get out there again.”

“Are you sure you want that? I know college was rough for you.”

“Look who’s enabling me now, Rik.” She not so secretly thinks Emile encourages me to remain single to keep me to himself. If I date, then he will need to date, thus opening himself up for rejection. “I’ve been thinking about it. And dreaming about it. And soap operas suddenly seem to be revolving around my life story. Basically, if *he’s* not willing to wait for me, then it’s his loss. He’s got the problem, not me. It’s what I should have been thinking all along.”

“You sound sure of that now; I hope you can stick with it. It sounds good on paper, but the next time someone bolts after the *I’m a virgin* speech, it won’t seem so easy.”

“All I can do is try, Rik.” Just then, Regs and the boys return with the beer and the third quarter is about to start.

#### IV

That night, I lie in bed for over an hour before I fall asleep, mulling over yet another Dolphin loss and the prospect that Jessica and Nash from *One Life to Live* really might break up. When my alarm goes off at 6:00 am, I realize I'd spent the night dreaming of Landview. In every dream, I run into a character from the show, first Nash, then Rex, then Todd, only to realize I have grown old and gray. The vivid nightmares have left me with a dull pain behind my eyes, but it's Monday so I get up and go to work.

Southern Florida School for the Arts is right across the street from my condo off of Las Olas Boulevard. I pass a Starbucks, an Einstein's, and a Dunkin Donuts on my five-minute walk to work. The lines are usually out to the sidewalk with busy professionals and laid back tourists waiting for their early morning caffeine fix. If I have time, I walk the extra few blocks to Brew for coffee. I don't like the mass-produced java available at the other shops. I try to stop at least once a week for a morning treat, but I'm not much of a morning person, so finding the time is sometimes hard.

All of the administrative offices for the school are located in one centralized building and my office sits on the third floor. It's not much of a view now that most of the downtown buildings are towering high above our modest campus. Hurricanes and soft soil used to stunt the buildings' growth. But our skyscraping neighbors have grown tall now and our older building is lost in the skyline.

I was lucky enough to start here right after graduation. I knew I wanted to move back home. Four years in sleepy Tallahassee had been slowing me down and draining my soul. I needed South Florida again. The school is filled with artists of all kinds: sculptors, painters, glass blowers, designers. I can't draw a stick figure, but someone needs to do the math

around here. I fit in perfectly with their burgeoning financial aid department. I started as a counselor and moved up quickly. Now, the Associate Director of Financial Aid, I play an important role in most students' lives. Private school is expensive and I help these kids, most of them not much younger than I am, find the money to pay for it all.

Monday is cleaning day. I love to wipe my desk, computer, and phone with glass cleaner and Lysol wipes after a weekend of dust settling in the office. Today, training on federal regulations and Federal Financial Aid practices is scheduled to be held at the Pier 66 hotel on 17<sup>th</sup> Street, so I'm forced to leave the comfort of my little downtown bubble and put the cleaning-up off until tomorrow. I skip the walk and the coffee and head to the garage to get my car. I drive my little red Mini Cooper to the hotel on the intercoastal.

We have been sitting in the ballroom eating scrambled eggs and breakfast potatoes for about thirty minutes when the presentation begins. "I can't believe they sent us to training," Rose, one of my closest friends at work, whispers in my ear. We both laugh.

"At least there's food." I'm always down for free food. This is the fourth meeting off campus we've attended this year. It's boring, horribly boring, and my Blackberry keeps vibrating, constantly reminding me how busy I should be. I have 90-day orientation reviews to complete for two employees and a final report to write for a hiring committee, not to mention the financial aid responsibilities I have on any regular day. My third cup of coffee and blueberry muffin seem to have dulled my headache.

The presentation is led by Doug Milar, the Director of Financial Aid and my boss and pseudo-older brother mentor-like figure. There are financial aid people in attendance from all the universities in the area, but Doug is presenting to the group. We are a small school, so putting our name out there in any way possible helps build our reputation. As Doug finishes

the welcome portion of the agenda, the door to the banquet room opens, bringing the presentation to a grinding halt.

“Sorry. I’m sorry.” A well-dressed guy in his mid-twenties enters and heads for the empty seat at our round, ten-person table. Who is this guy? I’ve never seen him before. Interrupting the Director of Financial Aid for our university might cause some to enter quickly, quietly, and apologetically. But not this guy. His posture is straight. His suit is nice; I think it’s Ben Sherman. The three-button navy suit and light, lime-green shirt works somehow. But it looks slightly wrinkled. His blue and green tie looks like it was tied correctly months ago, probably by a girlfriend, then hung on a hanger and placed in a closet. His medium-length, dark, thick hair is purposely disheveled. I bet it took him twenty minutes to screw it up just right.

“Who’s that?” Rose hisses in my ear.

“I’ve never seen him before. New guy, I guess. Maybe with Florida Atlantic?” No one looks over at him as he sits down, but I’m slyly tracking his movements. Immediately, he settles his coffee cup into the saucer and reaches for sugar, adding more noise to his tardy entrance.

“Can you pass the coffee?” He asks me, but I keep writing. “Excuse me,” he raises his voice.

“Oh, sorry.” I hand the stainless steel carafe to Rose, who passes it along to him. Without looking at him, I can feel his stare.

“He’s cute. Stop being a bitch,” Rose whispers again.

“He’s late.”

After a morning of fighting sleep through yet another lesson on ethics and predatory lending practices I didn't need and dodging eye contact with the mystery man, I bump into him at the line for the lunch buffet. Before I notice him standing across the table from me, I am staring into his clear blue eyes.

"Did I offend you in some way?" He's glaring across the salad.

"What?" This mystery man is very forward. For a moment, I am speechless. "No, I don't . . . I don't even know you." I'm fumbling and stumbling, searching for a reply. This guy has a lot of nerve.

"Well, you didn't respond when I asked for the coffee. You ignored me, and you and your friend were whispering, not so discreetly. I saw you sizing me up a few times during the presentation. I was just wondering if that's the typical welcoming committee or if it was just special treatment for me." Rose let out a quick, sharp laugh at his speech and he smiled, but I didn't see the humor in it.

"Excuse me?"

"Let's start over. Well, let's start, since we haven't really met. I'm Nick Hodgeson. I just moved from Orlando. I accepted the open position in your office." As he speaks, he never loses my gaze, but continues filling his plate with romaine lettuce and cherry tomatoes, and smiling, without looking down. I am frozen in place on the other side of the salad bar.

"I wasn't aware the position had been filled." This messy, tardy man with the unkempt tie is my new employee? What was Doug thinking? I realize he's moved along to the grilled salmon and roasted chicken breasts and I'm stuck on lettuce, holding up the line, standing there, dumbfounded, salad tongs in hand.

“Doug told me that I could expect to be in good hands with you. I didn’t realize how, um, particular those hands would be.” He laughs in a half-hearted attempt to back peddle from his arrogant introduction. The damage is done for me and I see nothing funny about the conversation.

I start moving again, spooning some macaroni salad onto my plate next to a small pile of spinach salad. “How do you even know who I am?”

He motions with his head towards my blouse and says, “You’re wearing a name tag.” I look down to see *Cate Waterton, SF School for the Arts* on a white rectangle stuck to my black top. He walks away.

V

Two days later, the girls are all buzzing about the new guy when I arrive at the office. Rose has told everyone who will listen about our encounter. As I walk up, I overhear Juliana from loan disbursement say, “Well you know Cate hates people who aren’t punctual.”

“Tardiness is a lack of attention to detail, girls,” I reply. I know they hadn’t seen me coming so I laugh when they all jump at the sound of my voice. I continue walking toward my office to settle in for the morning.

“So, Miss Cate, tell us about Nick.” Rose slides into one of the chairs at my desk, looking at me unyieldingly. I place my purse on my desk and open the shades to let the morning sun in. I know this is a command and not a request.

“What is there to say?” In the two days since our first encounter, I haven’t seen Nick in the office more than twice. I was worried he would be attached to my hip because of this silly mentorship program that pairs the new guy up with me, but luckily he has kept himself scarce. I know Rose’s big mouth has been telling everyone who will listen that she thinks the two of us would be a cute couple. Juliana is the third person in the office to comment on him. “Tell me, Rose. What should I say?”

“I only speak the truth. He obviously ruffled your feathers, Cate. And before you can begin to spin this into your account of the situation, let me state my case. I know you are riding this whole virgin thing for as long as you can. You know I don’t mean this in a mean way, but babe, we know, you know, everyone knows, in this case, *virgin*,” she makes quotation marks in the air with the index and middle fingers of each hand, “is a code for some deeper-rooted shit. That being said, this guy . . . something about you completely changed since that day. You are a different girl, ever since the Salad Bar Incident.” As she

speaks she looks around my office, as if searching for something to prove her point. Her black, pin-striped skirt and white blouse are ironed perfectly, not a wrinkle anywhere on her ensemble.

“Salad Bar Incident? It has a title? You make him seem like some life-changing event. He isn’t a hurricane or a terrorist attack; he’s some guy in the office. A new coworker. Seriously, Rosie, seriously.” Rose was only partially right and the part of her interpretation that was wrong was giving me the courage to remain adamant. As if this guy could change my entire outlook on life. I had been rethinking things, but Nick is inconsequential to this, this re-conception of myself. “And let’s concede, for just a moment, that you are correct. Let’s say he did ‘ruffle my feathers,’ as you so elegantly put it. And let’s say the whole ‘virgin thing,’ to quote you again, is some code. It’s a code I made up. Am I really going to give that up over one random guy? This is an act twenty-five years in the making.” Before I could stop them, the words were free. I knew I was busted.

“Ha!” Rose’s yelp startled me and everyone else whose desks were just outside my door. I didn’t bother to close the door. I didn’t think there was any real conversation here. “You said it! You called it an act! You never conceded this could be an act before. You said, after all these years,” she trails off into silence for a moment. “Aye, mama, jokes aside.”

The mockery, the outward ridicule of my life-choices—I was used to all of it. Everyone was always looking into the back-story of my decision to abstain from sex. Before college, I had never felt compelled to date or was attracted enough to anyone enough to date him. I did succumb to peer pressure a couple times; I had kissed a few boys. But, apart from Emile for that brief period in high school, no one seemed worth the time. So the teasing that inevitably came once a new friend heard about my virginity was familiar. But something in

Rose's tone was different today. This wasn't friendly ribbing. For the first time, she seemed to realize that this was a serious choice and that on the other side of her jokes is a girl with feelings. A girl who, if she is deciding to change her life, just might be rewriting the script of her life story.

"Spill it, mama. Just say it," Rose holds my hand and looks at me with concern.

"I am going to date." Those five words might well change the world as I know it.

## VI

The rest of the week is uneventful. I help Nick with work-related tasks, but I steer clear of him otherwise. He spends his breaks and any downtime throughout the day near the coffee machine chatting with the gossip girls. When I hear laughter, I usually find Nick at the center of it. He's only been here a week and he's slacking already.

That Friday night over drinks and dinner, everyone acts warily of me. We meet at Tarpon Bend, as usual. The restaurant's maritime theme draws locals as well as tourists. It's really noisy, but it's a Ft. Lauderdale institution. Filled with a mixture of tables and booths, the restaurant has a huge bar in the center and a small stage area against one wall. On weekends a local band usually plays but it's still too early. Instead, a random Top 40 channel on the satellite radio is blasting from speakers. Our little gang has been splitting Friday night dinners between here and the Himmarshee Bar and Grill since I moved downtown two years ago.

I retell the story of meeting Nick earlier in the week as we wait for our nachos and cheese fries to arrive. "Well, someone knocked you off your high horse!" Erika laughs uncontrollably at my embarrassing lunch tale. Her deep blue eyes sparkle with tears. "'How do you even know who I am?'" That is fucking rich, Cate. Rich." She pauses to take a sip of her beer before yelling over the music, "So, this guy must be pretty hot."

"Oh, definitely. She hasn't been this thrown off since she thought she saw Jason Schwartzman on South Beach. It's funny—I like this fussed Cate," Regan adds. Songs from the neighborhood bars on the block all mix together into a techno, hip-hop, live-band remix of Trick Daddy, Tiesto, and The Violent Femmes. All my girlfriends—Regan, Erika, and Lily—enjoy a collective laugh at my expense.

“Look, you guys are way off base. This asshole, who can’t even tie a tie properly, waltzes in, disrupts the meeting, and then tries to be cute with me in the line for the salad bar! Then I find out that Doug has assigned me as his mentor. It’s truly annoying. And then he spends his days entertaining the ladies in the office by telling jokes by the coffee machine and interrupting the workflow. And he isn’t Adrian Brody. Hell, he isn’t even Adam Brody. I am pissed off, not fussed. What does that even mean, ‘fussed’? Don’t get your hopes up.” They are really starting to aggravate me. This is ridiculous. More and more people begin to pass by our sidewalk table, even though it’s only eight o’clock. I scan the crowd, mentally rating outfits on the passing girls.

“Cate, I think you should tell them what you told me last weekend.” If it were anyone else besides Erika, I could distract her and quickly change the subject. But I know if I don’t share with the group, she will share for me. She plays with a sequin on her tube top, downplaying the serious intent behind her request. To look at her sweet expression and nonchalant attitude, you would think she requested I recite what I had for lunch rather than admit a flaw in my own design. I hesitate and say something flippant about the cooling temperatures. It’s a typically mild November evening in South Florida. The temperature is about seventy-two degrees and none of us carries a sweater. We are relishing the fact we can finally party on the weekends without sweating.

“Well, I’m sure you’ve all been discussing me,” I say loudly while gesturing towards them and their ever present cellphones. “It’s true. I haven’t been feeling like myself lately. Ever since the plane ride back from Vegas, I’ve been doing quite a bit of thinking.” I pause to take a big gulp of my mojito. This is really awkward. I look down at my dress, hoping for a distraction, but find nothing. The black, stretch cotton fabric is draped over my legs, black

knee-high boots extending from underneath the dress. “I’ve been reprioritizing some things. Re-conceptualizing myself, if you will. And I’m thinking that maybe it’s time for me to date. Well, actually, I have decided I am going to date. So, I guess starting now.” I chase the sentence with another mouthful of my drink.

They all laugh again. Lily offers, “Aw, lovey, I applaud your decision. I’ve been waiting for it for years! I didn’t expect that silly high school vow to last more than a few months, let alone ten years. But this is quite sudden.” Short and sassy, Lily is the most likely to tell you exactly what’s on her mind, with no thought to how you might feel about it. We have been friends since high school for that very reason. She wears her cherry red hair down this evening, dusting her bare shoulders. She gathers it with one hand and throws it behind her back, like a scarf in the winter. “It’s a bit drastic to set your values aside. It isn’t you.” She seems concerned about my decision as she speaks. But clearly she misunderstands.

“I didn’t say I was just going to start fucking whatever guy I can get to lie down, Lil. I was dating a few years ago. I’m just thinking that I’ll start dating again. Put some feelers out there so to speak.” I feel as if I’m making perfect sense, but Regan rubs her eyes, careful not to disturb her purple eye shadow. I shrug it off and continue with my defense. “Look at all of you. Lily, you have Dan now. Mrs.-I’ll-never-get-married is talking about weddings and children, and Regs and Jeff are so obviously together, despite the fact that no one seems to be talking about it. And Erika got fucking married, man. And Cate, where’s Cate? She’s at home, watching television. Soon, all I’ll have is Emile. How clichéd, the single girl, her soaps, and her gay best friend. Seriously, I thought we’d get older and dating would get easier. I was planning on skipping over the bullshit and getting right to the mature stuff. I thought I could skip over the games. I was expecting to meet someone who would give me a

shot and stick around through the *getting to know you* phase and get past my craziness. But they all ran when they heard ‘virgin’ so I stopped giving people a chance years ago.”

Lily shoots me an understanding gaze. “But dating is a game by definition and not mature at all.”

“So what now, you’re just going to start dating, just like that?” Regan is almost gaping at me. I can tell she is upset that Erika knew something she didn’t.

I’m not in the mood for her jealousy or any further criticism. “Yes.” I pick up my mojito and walk away from our sidewalk table and head inside the restaurant. I’m slowly strutting towards the bar, feeling comfortable with being flirty for the first time in my life, when a guy, out of nowhere, backs up, hits me with his elbow, and spills my drink.

“Watch out!” I yell as I barely escape the waterfall of rum and mint leaves. The jolt, followed by my sudden outburst causes the man to turn around. “You?”

My life turns into a soap opera before my eyes when I recognize the klutz in dark jeans and a black blazer as Nick, my new coworker. *Could this actually be happening to me?* He’s also wearing all black Converse All-Stars and a vintage Clash tee-shirt. Hah, I wouldn’t have pegged him for thrift store chic. His hair is messier than he wears it at the office. Bangs I never noticed before hang in his face. He laughs uncontrollably while shaking liquid from his hand. “Cate, nice to see you again.”

His apparent amusement at the situation only irritates me more. “You owe me a mojito,” I say as I take a napkin from his hand to dry off my shoes. My tone is sharp. There are no coworker pleasantries here. “And how are you, um,” I know his name is Nick, but my lips won’t form the word.

“Nick, and fine, thanks. But how do I owe you a mojito?” He stares. He always stares. Even in the dark lighting at the bar, his blue eyes are piercing. Should I really be able to see his eyes so clearly? “You’re a klutz, so I owe you a \$12 drink?”

“I’m sorry? You can’t be serious.” Is this guy serious? “You hit me, you rudely hit me and now I *am* wearing that \$12 drink on my \$300 boots. So, etiquette tells us that you should buy me a drink. They do have etiquette in Orlando, I assume?” He really brings out the bitch in me.

“They do.” He looks shocked, most likely because I called him on his rudeness. I expect him to bite back, but instead he says quietly, “I’m sorry we ran into each other like this.” He begins to walk away but turns back for a second, as if he had something else to say. He has a look on his face I don’t recognize as disappointment and with that he’s gone. He leaves me standing next to the bar inside Tarpon Bend alone, mouth gaping, again.

I turn to check if any of my friends witnessed the scene, but they aren’t looking this way. The waitress stands next to our table taking the order for the next round, so I hurry back to order something to replace my spilled mojito. “Mandy, can I have a Jack and Diet, please?” I catch her just as she walks away.

“Kitty Cate, who was that guy you were talking to? Very hot.” Regan, so sweet and so off-base. In just two minutes, she has forgotten she was upset with me. “Cool shoes, dressy yet comfortable. Nice jeans, worn but not too worn, not trying too hard. And that hair. You could really grab a handful of that stuff.”

“No, Regan, I don’t want hands-full of anything he has. That was the Nick guy. What a dick. He spilled my drink, then just took off. He actually said he wished we hadn’t run into each other.” I ease myself back into my white plastic chair.

They laugh in unison at a joke I didn't know I told. "Oh, Cate, he said that?" Regan is retelling the story while holding my hand in an attempt to help me interpret what just happened.

"Yes! Well, something like that." I say, annoyed. I really don't get what's going on here.

"And that pissed you off?" She acts as if she is stating something that should be obvious to me. She turns in her chair to look me directly in the eyes. The conversation suddenly seems so serious. "Okay, let's review. You start the week with some guy royally pissing you off by being late and having a messy tie? Then, the same guy playfully calls you out on your hostile attitude. Finally, you bump into him, you *literally* bump into him. He leaves you standing alone in the bar, drinkless, but instead of blowing him off, you let him get to you, and you trade up your Friday night cocktail for Jack Daniels?"

"Yes," I say, playing with a balled up napkin.

"Remember that guy in college, Cate? Was his name JP?" Lily jumps in on the roasting. "He tried so hard to get you to go out with him. He cooked you breakfast. He brought you smoothies at the library when you were studying. Three years in a row he asked you to his fraternity's formal. You didn't give him a chance; you said he wasn't your type." She pauses to pick at the fries before she adds sharply, "You were happy to hang out with us or that Jonah." JP was definitely not my type. His major was liberal arts! How could I date someone who couldn't decide on a major so he chose to study a little bit of everything? Get a plan!

"What about Jonathan in high school? You guys were on debate together. Did you know he only joined that club to be with you?" Regan takes her turn to argue her case against

me. She cranes her neck to summon the waitress and order dinner. When she can't find her she stands up, pulling down her short, black shorts and adjusting her white tank top to adapt to her change in position. She finishes with, "You said he was a little stalker-ish," she says as she finger combs her hair. Stalker-ish is right. She said it herself; he joined a club for me. I barely knew him; that creeps me out, man.

"Oh, and what about my cousin from New York?" Erika quips. "He wrote you every day on Facebook. When he came to visit, you didn't even hang out that weekend." His idea of good music was Nickleback. Had he mentioned that in his profile, we could have saved each other a TON of time.

"And your point is?" I am looking anxiously for Mandy with my drink now too.

Erika concludes, "The point is, you say no guy ever gave you a chance. But that isn't true. Some did; they just weren't the ones you hoped would. When nice guys actually acted interested, you were annoyed and disturbed. Never once did they bother you like this Nick guy does. After five days Nick has driven you to bitchery and whiskey. Oh, and your cheeks are flushed."

I fidget uncomfortably under the weight of their observations. Just in time, Mandy appears with a tray of drinks to rescue me. Maybe fresh drinks will derail the conversation. "Yeah, well, whatever. He just brings out the worst in me, seriously."

Erika looks at the other girls and finishes. "Oh you can't *whatever* this lady. This is probably the guy, ladies. I hope we like him." Laughter again, as they all shake their heads in unison.

Regan lifts her glass of beer and says "To Nick!" This causes them to laugh even harder. I mute their cackling by tossing back my drink. We spend the rest of the night

hopping from Dicey Riley's to Art Bar to Himmarshee Sidebar. We finally settle on the side of the dance floor at Capone's. I dance with the girls, pretending to have a good time. I can't stop thinking about how upset Nick makes me. I constantly scan the crowd, hoping he doesn't appear on the dance floor. I can't believe how harsh the girls were. I thought they understood me, but apparently not. I hope Emile can see this from my point of view.

## VII

The Tuesday after my collision with Nick downtown, I'm sitting in the kitchen at my office. It's three in the afternoon, which means one thing—break time and fifteen minutes of *General Hospital* while I sit Indian style in a chair, drinking coffee. It's my afternoon ritual, like meditation or yoga; it settles me.

Today has been a particularly brutal day for me. My phone will not stop ringing. A technical glitch has prevented a few thousand students from receiving their financial aid and the natives are restless. Calls alternate between profanity-filled rages and tearful pleas for money. All meet the same answer; unfortunately, there is nothing I can do to help. Honestly. There isn't. I'm not being a bitch. Seriously.

My favorite mug is periwinkle and it's huge. It's probably meant for soup, but I fill it with coffee at least twice daily. With my left hand cupping the handle and my right cradling the bottom of the mug, elbows resting on my knees, I am quietly calmed while watching Spinelli vie for LuLu's attention. When the door to the break room opens I don't even turn my head to see who's entered and dared to disturb my moment.

"Hey, Cate. They told me I could find you here," Nick says, standing just to my left. "Wow, that's a lot of coffee."

"Can this wait," I check my watch, "Seven minutes?" I never look up. I'm an intense viewer.

"Sure, what are you watching?" He plops himself in another empty chair.

Can he be serious? Does he really want me to talk to him? After this weekend? I guess we are playing this professionally. I can do that. "GH. *General Hospital*. And I have

seven minutes, so shhh until my break is up. Please.” I threw the “please” on the end just to sound pleasant.

“Okay.” He mimes zipping his lips shut, and then throws the key over his right shoulder. I smile just a little.

A few minutes later, just as the show comes back from commercial, the alarm on my cell phone rings, ending my meditation session. I don’t feel much better. My flow has been disrupted. So I turn to him. “So what can I do for you, sir?”

The one thing I can say about Nick is that he sure can dress. Today he wears a baby blue dress shirt and a tie striped in different shades of blue. The tie is skinnier than the traditional businessman’s tie. His black shoes are square toed and shiny. When he crosses his legs, he exposes blue-striped socks that match his tie.

“About Friday, I am sure we both had a few drinks that night.” He uncrosses his legs as he speaks and leans forward, closer to me. He rests his elbows on his knees, leaning in so he can lower his voice. “So let’s just chalk that up to alcohol talking?”

Coolly I say, “It’s forgotten.”

“Rad. I was just wondering—tomorrow we have that meeting in the Call Center. Do you want to go together? I’m happy to drive if you navigate. I don’t know my way around, so I thought you could be the tour guide, if you’re up for it.” I can see he’s excited about the proposition of doing a little sightseeing on the way to the meeting, but I feel awkward. Getting in his car? Do I know him that well?

On days when I have off-campus meetings, like the one at Pier 66, I normally drive to work then drive myself to the meeting. The Call Center is about twenty minutes away in

Davie. I have no legitimate reason why I wouldn't drive with him, so I improvise with bullshit. "Well, Rose and I usually carpool." I reply. Good job, that sounds totally legit.

"Yeah, well I don't think she's going to this meeting." He leans in close when he says it, as if to let me know he knows I am full of shit. Did he just wink at me?

Shit, what do I say now? Can I trust his driving? Why does he even want to drive with me? He can't think we're friends. Is he some kind of tree hugging granola muncher hell-bent on carpooling? We haven't spoken too much, and usually it's about work-stuff.

Yesterday, I helped him set up his computer, but then he was off to training for the rest of the day. Today, he spent the morning in more training and the beginning of the afternoon shadowing me. He was in the bathroom when I slipped away for my soap opera snack break. He's smothering me here. This feels like a relationship.

I soon realize I can't get out of this. Professionally speaking, there isn't a good excuse to decline his offer. "Oh, I didn't know she wasn't going. Sure, I'd be happy to be a tour guide for you."

After our conversation, I see my original impressions of him weren't completely inaccurate. He is cocky. He knows he's a cute guy, and he enjoys the attention it gets him. He likes to joke around with everyone, but it's friendly and he makes fun of himself more than anyone. Rose thinks there is a "twinkle in his eye." I think she's secretly planning our baby names.

The next morning I wake up before my alarm. Dare I say birds were chirping and the sun was shining through my cherry wood blinds, filling my room with a golden glow? It's like some kind of fairytale morning. At any moment I expect two little mice wearing coats to bring my slippers as a trio of blue jays carry my robe from the chair. Something about the air

is makes me feel like today is going to be a good day. My twenty-minute morning shower flies by in ten minutes and I pick out a particularly cute outfit. I pair the brown plaid Michael Kors pants my mother just bought me with a tiny brown tee shirt and a brown vest. My hair is agreeing with me and easily lays straight, no fly-aways today. A little gold eye shadow and pink lip gloss and I'm ready and out the door early. I have time to stop and get bagels and coffee for my team. I should totally play lotto tonight; this is my lucky day.

“Look who brought bagels, kittens!” I exclaim as I walk to my desk.

“Cate, your hair looks awesome today.” Rose meets me at my desk to fish for an everything bagel in my bag o' treats.

“I know, right? What is up with me today? I practically floated out of bed this morning. I literally hopped out of bed. I picked out this totally adorable outfit, my hair is behaving, and there was no line at Einstein's.” I am beaming when Nick stops at my desk to check out the commotion. “Normally, I prefer Brew, but their food choices are a little lacking.”

“Are these for everyone?” he asks as he tilts the brown paper bag and peeks in. Before I can answer, he spots a power bagel and goes for it. “Got any peanut butter?” he asks, holding the small brown loaf between two fingers.

“Yes, they are for everyone. And yes, here is the peanut butter.” I offer him the jar from a desk drawer. I love power bagels too and keep a jar of PB for just such occasions.

I don't see Nick again until 10:45, when it's time to leave for the meeting. “I figured we could go to the meeting first, and then drive through campus on the way back from lunch, if that's cool with you?”

Carpooling to the meeting and lunch? What's up with this guy? "I really have to get back," I say. It's the first thing that comes to mind. "I have lunch plans." Why am I lying?

"No, it's cool. Don't worry. Another time." He smiles, dropping the subject. He doesn't seem to give it another thought as he leads me to his car in the garage.

When we exit the garage elevator on the second floor, a shiny new Mini Cooper is parked directly in front of us. The tail lights flash as Nick unlocks the doors. "Is that yours?" Before he can answer, I blurt out, "I have a Cooper! Mine is a '06 though. Solar red," excitedly breaking the quiet.

"Cool, cool. Yeah, she's new. I got her right before I moved down here. Cool." I feel more comfortable as he turns the car on and I make myself at home in familiar surroundings. The car is suddenly filled with loud music.

I ask, "Is that the new Spoon CD?"

"It is," he answers. "Rad. I didn't picture you for a rock girl."

Even though most people don't picture me as a rock girl and I'm guilty of pre-judging him, I still feel insulted. "Really? Well, what kind of girl do I look like? How did you have me pegged?" I ask snidely, quickly turning towards him, wanting to watch him choose his words carefully.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend." He sounds offended now. "I meant I was impressed. Not many people know Spoon in general and I haven't met anyone down here yet who does. I didn't peg you as anything." He looks at me, waiting for my response. I don't immediately have one. He skips over the misunderstanding and says, "I love Britt's voice. It's so distinctive." With that, he quickly backs out of the spot and heads south. I direct him

towards Broward Boulevard. His attempt to bring the conversation back to the band doesn't work, the awkwardness is thick. He can't just decide what kind of girl I am? I'm not letting him off the hook for this.

## VIII

I receive a text later that evening that reads, “I’ve got a guy for you.” Lily prefers communicating through texting. I respond, “Who?”

“David, a friend of Dan’s. Work friend, School friend, I’m not sure. His friend requested you on Facebook. Check him out.”

I approve his request and check out his page. He looks cute in pictures. He’s a concert reviewer for *New Times* (the same place Dan works). Likes to travel. We chat through email for a few days. He seems nice enough. I notice he lists Spoon as one of his favorite bands, so we decide to meet at their concert for our first real life encounter. He doesn’t seem weirded out when I tell him my friend Erika is going to the concert with me. I’m super glad Emile can’t make it to this show, once I realize this will be a date-like event. Emile skips “school-night” concerts unless he really loves the band. This one’s on a Tuesday. Whew. No first degree this time.

Two weeks later, Erika and I meet David by a bar in the back of the patio at Revolution, a club we frequent. The night is unseasonably warm, even for Florida. The sun is down, but the air is hot and muggy. There is no breeze. Just a few weeks ago we were relaxing in the cool breezes, now we are sweating again, like it’s the middle of summer. Typical Florida weather. My jean skirt is mid-thigh length. I wasn’t sure if I should wear boots or flip-flops, so I decided to compromise. I went with black suede knee-high boots with no heel. I bought a new-to-me Rolling Stones concert shirt on eBay just for the concert. My hair is down and a bit curly tonight, but I wish I had pulled it back. I’m starting to sweat and it’s sticking to the back of my neck. I’m nervous as I lean on a bar in back, attempting to strike a pose of coolness and hipness that I usually feel. I don’t really think it’s working for

me tonight, though. Erika is in jeans, a tank top, and flip-flops. We scan the crowd in silence, sipping beers and waiting for him to show.

I check my watch. Three minutes shy of us giving up on him, he startles me from behind.

"Cat, how's it going?" It sounds weird to hear him call me that. I'm almost always just Cate, sometimes Catey, but never Cat. I can feel Erika react to this expression of intimacy, although she is behind me and I cannot see her face.

"David, hey." I immediately recognize him from his Facebook pictures. His profile made him seem pretty vanilla. I remember pictures of him with a little kid, pictures of him riding a mountain bike, pictures of him skiing—standard Facebook stuff. But in real life, he seems to have more flavor. His arms are covered in tattoos I couldn't see in the pictures and his clothes are more Urban Outfitters than Abercrombie and Fitch. For a moment we just sort of look at one other. It's hard to believe the meeting is more awkward than the planning of it was.

Talking to someone online and then meeting him in person is discomfoting. He isn't a complete stranger; he knows Dan after all. But the switch to actual reality still takes getting used to. He has on a short sleeved black tee-shirt that shows off his two full sleeves of tattoos. One arm seems to be a map of the solar system, the other a Nintendo-themed mural. His midnight blue jeans are on the tight side. His sandy hair reaches the nape of his neck and is tucked behind his ears. Cute.

I assume he asked Dan about me because he thought I was pretty, but we've never discussed it. So far our conversations have been about music and movies and *How I Met Your Mother*. Things might be a bit flirty but I am trying not to jump to conclusions,

especially since I'm not that experienced in this whole courting thing. I'm waiting for him to make the first move. This is awkward.

I put my arms around his shoulders to hug him. I have to stand on my toes to reach. He is taller than I thought he was, at least six-feet. His arms wrap around my torso and he pulls me closer. This seems like a move to me. I'm positive Erika is thinking the same thing as I hear her clear her throat.

"David, this is Erika. Erika, David." They shake hands and smile. She is obviously sizing him up, but he is polite and just smiles.

"Do you ladies need another drink? This round's on me," he offers.

Erika takes the opportunity to talk to me while he's off getting our drinks. Even though the band hasn't started, I can barely hear her over the DJ spinning the New Armor for Sleep CD. "Interesting, Cate. I like the Converse; nice black shirt, too. I am unsure about the tattoos for you, but good smile." She sized him up in the two seconds it took her to shake his hand.

David buys three Miller Lites and turns to me. We lean on the bar, trying to appear cool. We're all a bit uncomfortable striking our poses.

When Spoon finally comes on stage later that night, it seems that we have finally had enough beers to loosen up the clumsiness of the evening. I comment on how much I love the lead singer's voice, but I'm drowned out by the clamor of guitars and drums.

"What?" he yells before proceeding. "Doesn't Britt sound awesome tonight? I love his voice."

I try to agree but my words are lost under the thunderous mix of music and lyrics, again. If a girl screams at a rock concert, can anyone hear it?

Frustrated, he bends down. Placing his lips near my left ear, he shouts, "I can't really hear you."

Before I can speak, he places his left hand on my right cheek and pulls my face closer to his. Our skin touches and I forget what I was going to say. His two-day beard tickles my cheek, and I panic. I scramble mentally to think of a reply but instead blurt out, "I like your hair." Stupid, stupid, stupid! My inexperience is showing. I usually do a better job of disguising my handicap but tonight it must be painfully obvious.

Without releasing my face he says, lips still brushing my cheek, "Um, thanks." He motions with his head towards the back of the club. "Maybe we can hear each other better back there."

I grab Erika by the arm and pull her towards a dark corner, further from the speakers. The change of location alleviates the thunderous sound of guitars and suddenly we can hear again. "So how was your editor? You had a deadline today, right?" Whew! And with that I am back in the game. He'd told me online about problems he was having with an editor. At this moment I am so entranced by his stubble and head of messy, brown curls I can't even remember what the story and the dispute are about. I hope the conversation doesn't go much deeper than this.

"Well, I guess we'll have to see. Too early to tell now. I only submitted it three hours ago." He pauses, exhales, and releases me from his grasp before ordering three shots. Erika is busy texting Stephen. He returned to Iraq a couple of weeks ago, but that has done nothing to hinder their communication. He is always online. She pauses to raise the cough-syrup-cup-sized shot glass David offered and drinks it, then returns to her SideKick.

His lips return to my ear to continue our conversation after the drinking the shot. He tells me about his insecurities with freelancing and his desire to find a full-time gig. I hadn't realized he had moved to Florida from New Jersey for this job. I really love Spoon's new album, but I barely notice when they play their new single, "The Underdog." The horn section is disrupting our flow and I am annoyed. We are standing close when we speak; he is staring intently into my eyes. The conversation feels like a damn break. Before we started talking online, Dan was his only friend. It occurs to me that guys don't open up to each other like girls do because he mentions having no one to talk to. Months of his concerns about job security and worries about ever finding anyone to connect with in this town are washing over me and I am grateful that he confided in me, but I feel sad that he has had no one to share his life with for a year. The only break in conversation occurs when someone orders another round. I occasionally peek over at Erika, but she doesn't seem bothered by the fact we are completely ignoring her. She texts away happily moving her head to the beat of the music.

After a few hours and several shots the lights come on and the mass exodus of sweaty people files past us towards the exit. It's a work night for Erika and me so we part ways as he heads for the Poorhouse to check out a local band. Again, we hug. This hug lasts longer and he pulls me to the tips of my toes with his embrace. Erika and I walk away and I am torn between elation over our instant connection and disappointment that it has come to end.

He begins to walk into the bar but turns to yell my name. "Cat!" He startles me again.

I turn around and he walks back in our direction. "Yes?" I say.

"I hope this isn't too forward," he warns. He takes the final steps towards me on the sidewalk, reaches his hand out, brushes a loose hair behind my ears, and kisses me, first

slowly then faster, as if the time allotted for our kiss is limited and he is fearful it won't be complete before the buzzer sounds.

When it does end, I feel him pull away but my eyes are still closed. I open them quickly, hoping he didn't notice. Softly he says, "Breathe, Cate, remember to breathe." I realize I am, in fact, not breathing and exhale. He laughs, then turns around and walks away yelling, "I will definitely talk to you later."

"Holy shit, Cate! That was one hell of a kiss." She looks amazed to see me in the actual act. What image have I been portraying all these years? That wasn't my first kiss or anything. I'm not an alien. I'm just in the minor leagues when it comes to displays of affection. Reactions like this make me feel like a defrosted cave woman.

"Yeah, it was, it was. But he's gone. Off for drinks with a band. Then, when the bar is about to close, he will run into some pretty blonde in a tube top who is drunk on peach schnapps. They will start talking and end up having sex in the bathroom. And I'm going home to *Boston Legal* on DVR." We only walk for two short blocks before the busy nightlife gives way to my apartment building.

"Well, that was fairly detailed. But peach schnapps? Is this girl he meets in seventh grade in 1975? He wouldn't have kissed you like that if it didn't mean something. You guys have been chatting online for weeks." Erika tries to encourage me by placing her hands on my shoulders as we stand by the front door of my building. "I have had plenty of kisses that lead to empty sex, and none of them looked like that. Certainly not like that. That looks like the real deal to me, Cate."

"Promise, Rik?" I beg for her reassurance like a child. She bends the corners of her mouth down in a playful frown and nods her head yes. I try not to get my hopes up too high.

It's too early in our *relationship* and I am too tired to think about it clearly. I was feeling buzzed from the drinks and that kiss put me over the edge for sure. But before I can voice my concerns, Erika and I kiss once on each cheek and she walks to her Honda Civic parallel parked a few car-lengths down. Alone in the elevator on the way to the thirteenth floor, I smell my shirt hoping for a faint trace of David. Instead, I smell my own perfume and cigarette smoke. My dreams that night are filled with the scratching sensation of his beard against my skin and the sound of voices struggling to be heard over loud music.

## IX

It's three days after the concert, and I'm still floating. Just a little, maybe six inches off the ground. Despite my best efforts not to get too excited, I can't help it. It goes against my very nature, but a part of me is suspecting this may be what I have been waiting for. Twenty-five long years spent waiting for a music reporter who keeps odd hours.

He didn't call all day on Wednesday. I was just about to fall asleep when the light of my ringing phone illuminated the dark room and caught my eye. It's after twelve, and much later than when I would normally take calls. Don't let my penchant for late night clubbing and early rising for the workday fool you; I'm not a morning person. If I am out doing something, I can stay up all night. But once I hit the sheets, I don't like to be disturbed. It makes me grumpy. I make an exception for David. The same thing happened Thursday. I got a text just before eleven-thirty asking me to call him. Today, I received a message on Facebook, but no calls. I get it though; his office hours don't start until after eleven. I should get used to the late-night calls. Besides, tonight is girl's night anyway and I have plans. I can't wait to tell them all how successful my dating is, and only a couple of weeks into the commitment.

As soon as the clock on my computer says 5:00 pm, I rush out of my building. I wait impatiently for the elevator, tapping my brown suede flats on the tile as I stand there at the mercy of the machine. Luckily, I make it into the first car and beat the crowd. Walking quickly through the lobby towards the exit I start to dig for my Blackberry in my large brown patent leather Hayden Dooney and Burke shoulder bag to call Regan, but I can't find it. Faceless coworkers bid me a good weekend, and I politely reply, "Yeah, thanks. Same to you," but I never raise my head and have no idea who I'm talking to. I can never find anything

in this damn bag! I stop short just outside the door when I touch my phone, hidden in the depths of my purse. I pull the phone into view and notice raindrops landing on the screen. When I look up the clouds come into view immediately. I look down quickly, attempting to save my eye shadow, but it's too late, and plum eyeliner runs gently down my left cheek.

Pouring rain? This is not part of my evening plans. Tropical downpours are a huge spoiler of downtown bar hopping. Florida rain isn't like the rain most people are used to. It comes down in buckets and soaks everything that isn't protected. I don't have an umbrella today. I'll resemble a drowned rat in just a few seconds. I slip my phone back into my purse, hoping to protect it from the water, and start to walk quickly towards my apartment building. The unexpected rain will definitely put a damper on my evening.

I reach my apartment in no time, running the last block at full speed. When I recover the phone in the comfort of my dry apartment, I see I've missed two calls: Regs and Erika. I call Regs first. She agrees with me and doesn't think the bars will be much fun in this weather. The weather isn't scheduled to clear until tomorrow; this is apparently the beginning of a cold front. She has no suggestions about what to do instead (no surprise), so I call Erika.

"Rik, why is it raining?" I beg her to explain our bad luck.

"Well, the rain clouds are full of condensation," she jokes. "Simply stated, the universe hates us."

"What did we do to deserve this? Why, God? Why?" I play along with her dismay. "But seriously, what the heck are we gonna do now?"

There is silence. "Well, we should eat dinner. We could eat at Chang's." She sounds proud of her solid start.

I contemplate the idea while I take off my wet clothes. Luckily, I was wearing a brown shirt: three-quarter sleeves, buttons down the front, and khaki slacks with flats today. Easy to run in, not see-through when wet. I let the garments fall into a puddle on the bathroom floor. “Chang’s, good, I like it. Then what?”

“Hey, I came up with something. It’s your turn!” she calls me out.

I suck my teeth while I think. “Chang’s, Chang’s, Chang’s ... Blue Martini?” Blue Martini isn’t our regular scene. It’s a bit out of the neighborhood, but we can move from restaurant to bar with little exposed walking. Both places, located just outside the Galleria Mall, are connected by a covered sidewalk.

Surprisingly, Erika agrees quickly. This is a treat. Our planning sessions can last for hours and consist of *I don’t know; what do you want to do? I don’t know; what do you want to do?* I happily agree to call Regan. Erika will call Lily and we will meet at my place. Great, T-Minus two and a half hours until I need to be ready.

The rain forces me to wash my hair again, but I know the humidity will murder it when I go out, so I don’t put much effort into it. A simple bun will suffice for tonight. It takes longer than usual to pick out an outfit. I hate being unfamiliar with the place and the crowd where I am going. Blue Martini is, well, maybe a little yuppie. A little gold-digger. A little Boca Raton. Although I’ve never actually been there, I’m certain it’s filled with older men cruising for young ladies who enjoy the finer things in life. Arm candy, if you will.

I choose a black, empire-waist dress with gold accessories. The dress has a draped, sleeveless top and a flirty, flowing skirt. Sure, it’s flashier than a normal Friday night outfit, but when in Rome, you know? I love to wear dresses out. It makes me feel so feminine and special. Dresses make any event an occasion. The girls arrive on time and we head out in

Reg's Mercedes C230 Kompressor. She drinks less than the rest of us and was declared designated driver years ago. Most nights she nurses one drink all night, just for show.

When we arrive at PF Chang's the rain hasn't let up, and the streets are flooded. The line for valet parking is long, but we all agree it's worth the six bucks and fifteen-minute wait. They seat us in a booth in the back of the restaurant, and we order drinks and lettuce wraps immediately. I get an Asian Pear Mojito, Regs a Sex on the Beach. Erika goes for wine and Lily sticks with her Gin and Tonic. Over appetizers and alcohol I begin to tell them all about David and our conversations this week, when I'm interrupted.

"Cate, excuse me. Hey, what's going on?" Nick butts into my story. He's still wearing what he had on at work today. Black slacks, black dress shirt, royal blue tie. Why do I remember that? It annoys me.

"Hey, Nick. How are you?" I ask hollowly. He can't be too different than he was at work today. I just saw him three hours ago. Hopefully, this surprise encounter won't last too long.

"I'm well. Anyway, just wanted to say hi. Sorry to interrupt. Stay dry ladies." He places his hands in his pockets and leaves as abruptly as he appeared.

"Nick? Wow, what a coincidence. We see him everywhere," Regan observes. Like Nick, she wears black and blue. Her black Capri pants come to mid calf. She has on a satin button-down, short-sleeve blouse with puffy sleeves. She wears black ankle boots and white gold jewelry. Her hair is plain and straight--too short to be affected by the rain, too short to be pulled back.

"Everywhere? Hardly. We've seen him two times." I take a bite of chicken and lettuce and wash it down with a mouthful of my drink. "Anyway, back to what I was saying."

I finish my David story and expect squeals of delight. The other girls always get these giddy, loud reactions to their stories of new men. I get blank faces.

“Why does he always call so late?” Lily asks, her eyes peering over her gin and tonic. Her red hair is curly tonight, an attempt to beat the weather at its own game. She wears skinny jeans with a brown sweater. Her brown boots elevate her an extra three inches.

Erika has a dress on as well, but luckily it isn't black. It's red and I'm not sure if I'd rather have her match me or show me up. The color is bright and eye-catching. The tube-top dress is short, revealing. “It would make me nervous, but he seemed interested. I say let's wait and see.” She winks at me, but I am not as reassured as she intended. I've sat through enough of these dinners to know they think something is wrong.

After Mongolian Chicken and fried rice, we head next door to the bar. I'm stuffed. I always eat too much at Chang's, another reason I love to wear dresses. No pesky waistbands. It seems that everyone shares our idea about avoiding the rain because the place is packed. Lily made a reservation earlier so we are seated quickly. Just my luck. Who's there, just one table over? Nick. Perfect.

He nods in acknowledgment as we walk up, but that's it. He's sitting at a booth with a group of guys. They seem to be asking who we are. He answers, and they shake their heads, saying they know what he means. What did he say?

I can't stop looking at Nick's guys' night out for the entire evening. He doesn't seem to notice me watching. In fact, he barely notices that we are there. Eventually, I push him out of my mind and relax. The bar isn't quite the sleazy meat-market I thought it'd be and I actually have fun. The music is a mash-up of Top 40 dance, 80s hits, and mainstream rap

music. I'd choose that over most club music any day. I prefer rock, but what can I do? There just aren't many rock dance clubs around.

Some of the women in the crowd are definitely tanned, fake-boobed gold diggers, but there are plenty of girls who look just like us, too. Whether they are regulars or just escaping the rain, I can't tell. Every bar has a predetermined number of greasy older men, the "too old to be here" guys. Surprisingly, Blue Martini seems to be on par; the number is normal. Their pomegranate martinis are good—pricey but the perfect combo of sweet and sour. Around two-thirty, we're tired and sweaty from dancing so we head out. Regs leaves another half-drunken Sex on the Beach on the table when we leave.

I look for Nick as we head for the door, but I don't see him. I hadn't seen him in well over an hour, so I didn't know if he'd left already. I accidentally make eye contact with one of his friends, though. He smiles. I return an uncomfortable nod and half-smile, and then turn quickly to catch up with the girls. When we get outside, we find the rain has stopped, but there is another line for the valet; this time of course, people want their cars back. I shuffle back and forth from one foot to the other, trying to relieve the pain of the blisters I've developed tonight.

Regan leans in close, motioning with her head towards a few guys standing near the door. "Hey, is that Nick over there? Don't turn too fast. Be casual."

Disobeying her order, I turn and see him there. Although he isn't looking our way, one of his friends is. At that moment, the valet brings the car around and we move quickly. I can't stop myself from taking one last look in Nick's direction. The friend's eye meets mine and he nudges Nick and points to me. I hear one of them yell, "Good night, Cate!" as I close the car door. What the hell is that all about?

## X

It's finally December and I am really looking forward to the holidays. For the first time in years, I will have someone to kiss on New Year's Eve. David and I are great together. He still keeps weird hours, but I've started to take naps after work to make up for the sleep I'm missing at night. Things with Nick are better as well. I'm tolerating him more now, laughing at his jokes. He never mentioned seeing me out that night at Blue Martini and he no longer completely ruins my day, so that must be a plus. Sometimes, I have to admit, I might even enjoy him. But I don't let him know that. Or Rose. I'd never hear the end of that mess.

David and I have been on three dinner dates and two lunch dates. Both times he's come up to my office to pick me up for lunch. Oh, the gossip girls loved that. For the first time, I was all the talk at the water cooler that afternoon. Secretly, it's pretty rad.

AND, he took the big news in stride. In the interest of full disclosure and truth and honesty and all those good old-fashioned American values, I told him. It certainly wasn't easy, but he took it surprisingly well. I was on the phone with Emile the day after the Spoon concert, rehashing the gory details when my call waiting beeped.

"Oh, hold, please!" I ordered Emile.

"Me? Hold! I don't hold!" he protested.

I laughed at him as I lowered the phone from my ear to check the caller ID to see who it was. "Lookie, lookie, it's David," I reported. "You are holding."

He disconnected the call before I could put him on hold saying, "Call me back, love goddess."

I pushed the button to take David's call. "Hello," I said, trying to sound casual and unaffected. It had been a long day at work and I was still in my work clothes. I unbuttoned

the top button on my gray slacks in an attempt to be as comfortable as possible. I tend to pace when I talk on the phone, so I wandered over to the mirror to check my reflection. I looked tired. This should be a slow time at work since it is the end of the semester and people already have their aid money. But people take vacation and the office is like a ghost town. It's usually murder on the people who stick around during the break.

“Hey, Cate. It's David. How are you?” He sounded excited.

“David, hey, what's up? I'm well. How are you?” My hair was pulled into a low ponytail that day. I pulled the elastic hair tie out, letting my hair fall in loose waves around my shoulders. I used my free hand to try to tame it.

“I'm actually really good today. I had an awesome day. I met a really good group of guys last night after you left, an awesome band called Eat Junk Become Junk. It was a pretty good night, all in all, and it sorta carried over into an awesome day.” I could hear the smile in his voice, the genuine happiness of finding a new local act to write about. “How about you, young lady? You must be tired.”

“Nah, I am an old pro at this. I can stay out late and get up early. I have spent years perfecting that routine.” I don't mean to sound braggadocios, but it is a badge of honor to be out until the wee hours and still be up with coffee and donuts the next day for the morning meeting. A daywalker and a nightwalker in one body.

“Well then, sorry to insult. I didn't realize you were queen of the nightlife.” We both laughed at his joke and spent the next fifteen minutes talking about my day and the band he'd met. One of our associate directors had been fired on Friday, so there were meetings galore to clean that mess up. It turned out I knew the bass player of the band he met that night and they

had a show coming up in a couple of weeks. Things were easy and breezy when he suddenly sounded serious.

“Cate, I have to tell you something. And I hope it doesn’t freak you out and scare you off.” He thinks he could scare me off? Ha.

“I’m not easily scared. Try me.” I said this as I rifled through my fridge, trying to figure out what I was going to have for dinner.

“I don’t think Dan told you, and I don’t know if it matters to you. But it would definitely matter to some chicks.” He paused.

“Well, I think you should just spit it out.” I’m not sure if that sounded rude, but the build-up he was mounting was a little nerve-wracking.

“I just got out of a relationship. A really long relationship. It was actually an engagement.” Silence on his end. “It was pretty recent, like right before we started talking. I don’t know if that makes me the asshole. I know there is supposed to be *time* in between. Two months for every month you are together or something like that. And I know that might make you seem like a rebound. So, I just thought you should know.” He was almost breathless when he finished. At first, I wanted to be pissed, and then I remembered I was keeping something to myself as well.

In the time it took him to get all that out, I’d made myself comfortable on the couch with a Diet Coke. I just wanted to laugh, but I thought since he didn’t know my issues, he would be hurt by my laughter. “Dave, it’s okay.” That is all I could think to say.

“I just—I don’t know how quickly I will be willing to move with you. And I feel like this could be something, but it’s feeling kinda fast and I don’t know if I could handle any

faster.” He was genuinely concerned with my feelings. And he was telling me he wants to take this slowly. Am I dreaming?

“Seriously, I understand. And I think it is unbearably sweet that you would tell me all that. I mean, you don’t owe me anything.” I turned on my television and switch to a digital music channel. Jenny Lewis’s voice filled my condo. *Under the blackliggghhhttt.*

“I do owe you. As short lived and new as it might be, we have something happening here. And I like to lay my cards on the table. I’m an awful poker player.” We both laugh again.

By now, I knew I would have to tell him. This darling man was being so honest with me, so truthful. I couldn’t lie to him, lead him on, and let him think he was the one with the issues.

“Well, I have something to tell you as well. You’re inspiring me tonight.” I paused to take a deep breath and used the exhale to force the words out of my mouth. “I’m not interested in moving fast either, David. My thing is a little bigger than yours, though. So I hope you don’t feel jipped. Like you were excited to have the big news.” Stop stalling, Cate. “I’m a virgin.”

My past experiences with this statement have resulted in multiple versions of good-bye. I was prepared for the worst, but he surprised me. “Wow, are you serious?”

“As a heart attack, my friend.”

Thirty seconds dragged, feeling like thirty minutes. “Cool. I like it. Surprising. You *are* an original, you know that?”

“Um, duh.” Laughter again. “You don’t want to ask me a million questions? Hang up the phone? Run for the hills?” My insecurities ran wild.

“No. You’re thoughtful and complicated, Cate. That isn’t scary. That’s actually a good thing.” The smile had returned to his voice.

“Awesome.” I really began to think he was the reason I had waited so long in the first place. Then I put the guards back up, although I was secretly hopeful he could destroy them for good.

Tonight is date number four. I’m really on a streak with this one. Since that conversation, David’s been chipping away at my carefully erected wall, brick by brick. Tonight’s date is a big deal. We’re doing dinner, and since there aren’t any movies in the theater to see, I’ve invited him up to my condo to watch a DVD. My condo is a sacred space. Not that it ever got this far before, but I’ve never invited a guy up. It’s weird to think of a guy in my space. I’ve been cleaning for days.

I check my appearance in the mirror by the front door for the hundredth time, nervously waiting for him. I’ve stopped trying to clean after nearly wiping the wood off my coffee table. I’m wearing a pair of black gauchos, the perfect length for my favorite black knee-high boots, the same boots Nick spilled a drink on. I have a slightly over-sized white button up shirt cinched with a black and silver belt, creating a blousing effect. I finish my look with a short black, crocheted sweater. I accessorized with a long silver and black necklace and big hoop earrings. My hair is gathered in a low side ponytail, to the left because David always stands on my right. I am rethinking my outfit, and my hair, and my makeup, when the phone finally rings, letting me know David is downstairs looking to get buzzed in.

I pick it up and before I can speak he says, “Buzz me in, babe.”

“No, I’ll meet you downstairs.”

I make my way downstairs and exit the front door of my building, spinning to show off my outfit.

“Wow, who is this hot girl going out with? What a lucky man.” He hugs me and kisses me on the cheek. “Where to, my lady? I’m in the mood for Mexican.” He is well dressed, as usual. He has a very particular, nerdy yet expensive designer look, vintage, yet modern. I call it Glamour Geek. Tonight he’s wearing khaki colored slacks. He has on a navy Calvin Klein polo shirt, with a white long-sleeved tee shirt underneath, covering his tattoos. His hair falls down by his cheeks. The night is too young to have it tucked behind his ears, yet. And I love his navy blue Converse All-Stars. Over his right shoulder is his ever-present tan leather messenger bag. Like a true reporter, he always has a notebook and a book with him.

“Taco Bell?” I answer sarcastically.

“Ha. Ha. Ha. Aztec Grill?” he asks. Before I can say yeah or nay, he says, “Of course.” Aztec is a Mexican place at Riverfront, on the second floor. Their food is only decent, but their sangria reminds me of Mexico and their salsa is spicy with big chunks of tomato. After ten o’clock it turns into a club, just like most downtown Fort Lauderdale restaurants. It’s only eight o’clock so we definitely have enough time to eat before the place is filled with eager booty shakers and deafening rap music.

I try not to picture this man sitting on my couch watching television with me, but I keep thinking about it all through dinner. Will we sit next to each other? Will he put his arm around me? Will we lie on the couch, my in front with his arm around my torso and his left leg draped over mine? Already it’s awkward and we aren’t even back at my house yet.

An hour and a half later we're waiting for the elevator in my building. In silence. I nervously push the button five times in quick succession, hoping to make the machine run faster. Finally it arrives and we step inside. I quickly push the fifteen button, again multiple times in quick succession.

"You know, that could break the elevator," he scolds me.

"What? No way." Shit. What if I cause the elevator to jam and we are stuck in this box all night? When the fire rescue finally gets us out we would be all over the news and everyone I know would see I was inviting a guy up to my apartment. That would really give the gossip girls something to talk about at work on Monday.

"No, it won't. I'm kidding." He senses my nerves and quickly takes his joke back.

"So here it is!" I say, attempting to sound warm and welcoming as my front door swings open.

He breezes past me, like Howard Carter venturing into a lost tomb of some ancient pharaoh. I expected to give him a tour, but he seems to prefer to show himself around. Is this normal? Do dates normally just look into bathrooms and bedrooms like this? He quietly walks into each room, sticking his head in the doorway. He is curious, but careful to not be too intrusive. I didn't have to tell him this was a milestone in my life. He guessed it.

He flips on the light in my white and red bathroom. White tile, red walls, red towels, white soaps. He turns the light off and heads to my olive and beige kitchen. Again, he turns on the light, inspects the matching appliances and small, wicker kitchenette set. Again the light clicks off and he heads to my bedroom. As we head across the apartment to the darkened room, I instantly flash on my bed, him, kissing, and some X-rated things I'll keep to myself. I hold my breath as he inspects. The wall opposite the door of my bedroom is faux

exposed brick. I did it myself using red brick pavers the weekend I moved in. I have hardwood floors and a black wrought iron canopy bed. One wall is covered with floor to ceiling bookshelves. I made sure I zipped up my temporary wardrobe and closed my mirrored closet doors. He shakes his head up and down in approval and backs out of the room.

The final stop on his self-guided tour is my living room. My couches are oversized; the olive cushions with brown piping are as wide as a twin-sized bed and maroon throw pillows add contrast. My fifty-two inch TV sits on a glass and wood stand. Underneath are a DVD player, digital cable box, and my Wii.

Finally, he speaks. “This is a really nice place.” He sits himself on my love seat taking one last survey of the room before staring at the view of the city out the three picture windows above the couch. “Really nice.”

“Thanks. Guess you didn’t need the audio tour.” Nervous laughter. I haven’t had anyone new over in so long, it feels good to receive a compliment on something I worked so hard on. “I decorated it and did most of the work myself, except the floors. My Dad did the floors.”

“That’s amazing. Most people’s places have a bland, Rooms-To-Go vibe. What about that wall in your bedroom?”

“The brick? Yeah, that’s my baby. I love that exposed brick look. It took an entire weekend.” I almost begin to explain the technique of using pavers and grout to make it look like a real brick wall, but stop. I’m sure he doesn’t want my home decorating tips. “So how about that movie?”

“I know we talked about watching one of your DVDs, but I bought a killer bootleg version of *Juno* yesterday in Miami. Did you see it?”

Did I see it? I actually saw it twice in the theater with Emile and once on-line when I was super bored at work. Will he think I’m crazy if I want to watch it again? “Let’s watch that. Jason Bateman, right? I love him. He reminds me of someone I used to know.” I decide to play it safe and act like I’ve never seen it.

Despite its unwed-teenage-pregnancy theme and troubled thirty-somethings that refuse to grow up, the movie is romantic and sweet. I love it more each time I watch it. The more Juno falls for Paulie, the closer I find myself to David on the couch. By the time Ellen Page and Michael Cera are dueting The Moldy Peaches’ “Anyone Else but You,” I am lying in front of David on the couch, he has his arm around me, and I might have let a tear or two glide down my cheek.

I reach for the remote to switch from DVD player to television. Encore is running *High Fidelity*, one of my favorite John Cusack movies. “Oh, I love this movie.”

“Top five John Cusack movies,” he says, mimicking the film and reading my mind.

“5. *Serendipity* 4. *Say Anything* 3. *High Fidelity* 2. *Being John Malkovich* 1. *Gross Pointe Blank*. You?”

“5. *1408* 4. *Better Off Dead* 3. *Gross Pointe Blank* 2. *High Fidelity* 1. *Being John Malkovich*.” He retorts.

“Oh *1408*, risky choice, but I like it. I like it. I’m very glad you didn’t say *Runaway Jury*. I hate that one.” I sigh and focus my attention on Cusack as Rob Gordon, a man reliving his top five romances, trying to find out where he went wrong with his love life. I get

a bit sad thinking that I don't even have a top-one romance. As if he can sense my sadness, David pulls me closer and kisses the top of my head.

If I were so inclined, this would be a major blockbuster, romantic-comedy-girl-wins-the-heart-of-the-dream-guy-like-ending to my virginity. This would be so perfect; Anne Hathaway would have to be cast in the story of my hip and modern storybook romance.

I turn around to face him, scooting my body up to be eye level with him as we lay. It's awkward to *make a move*. I feel silly and almost laugh. He cocks his head to the side, like a puppy letting you know it's listening. I lean in to kiss him, cupping his face in my hands. We kiss for a few minutes, the passion going straight to my head. I feel a bit drunk and way too old to be experiencing my first make-out-induced euphoria.

He pulls away slowly, holding my bottom lip gently between his teeth, tugging it slightly before letting go. "Catey, watch the movie." He says softly before kissing me once more. I roll back over but don't watch the film. I have seen John sell five copies of the Beta Band EP thirty times before and there are more pressing things on my mind. I'm so comfy that I fall asleep before the movie ends.

## XII

The next morning, I am not awakened by an alarm or sunlight, but the natural urge to pee. I quickly realize I am still on my couch and David is behind me. The television was on all night, but there is a kid's movie on now. *High Fidelity* ended hours ago.

I accidentally let out a little squeal of joy. I'm smiling. I can't believe the night I had. The. Best. Date. Ever. In the history of the whole world, I am certain. He didn't even flinch when the phone rang or when I began to shuffle around. I slip out from under his arm carefully and head to the bathroom. I hear a weird vibrating coming from the small table by my front door when I emerge from the bathroom. I notice it's David's phone, but it isn't moving, so I let it sit.

I'm going to make this man breakfast. I laugh at my own giddiness as I head to the kitchen, hoping I have eggs and bacon. I am slicing bagels when his phone vibrates again. I don't want it to fall off the table so I go check on it. Just as it vibrates itself off the edge, I catch it. In the process, I somehow put it on speakerphone.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Should I hang up? He wants to go slow and suddenly I am answering his phone. Damn, I have no etiquette for this situation. I decide to speak.

"Hello?" I whisper and walk quickly away from him, hoping not to wake him. There is no response, so I say hello again.

Another long pause, then "Hello? I'm sorry. I was looking for Davey."

"I'm sorry. Yeah, this is his phone. I didn't mean to answer it. He's sleeping. Can I take a message?" I look for something to write on.

"Yeah, well I'm sorry. Who *is* this? I was expecting Davey home last night. And he didn't make it. Are you in that Eating Junk band?" Any other girl would have seen where this

was going. My other friends would know who this girl is. But I'm naïve. I don't see this coming.

"Eat Junk Become Junk? The band? No, no. I'm Cate. Who is *this*?" Still innocent.

"I'm Betsy. Betsy Wentz. You can certainly give David a message. Tell him that if he's going to cheat, at least have the decency to cover it up better." Click. Silence.

Cheat on her? She must be one of those crazy exes. I don't have time to process it and the phone is ringing again. It's Betsy.

Reluctantly, I answer it again. "Betsy?"

"You said it's Cate? Let me ask you what kind of girl answers a guy's phone after a night of meaningless sex? Where did he pick you up? Automatic Slims? You should know, Cate, he will come home to me. He always does."

"Listen, Betsy. I don't know what to say here. I honestly don't know what's going on. Aren't you two broken up? David said he and his girlfriend had broken up. We've been dating for almost a month now." Tears are welling up in my eyes, but I will them to stay in.

She lets out a sad moan on the other end of the phone. She's crying. Finally, my tears fall. "We weren't. But we probably are now. Cate, good luck to you. You can take him." Click. More silence.

The butter in my frying pan is burning. I'm holding a bagel in one hand, his phone in the other. Raw bacon is sitting on my counter. All the fixings for my first post-sleep over breakfast cover my kitchen counter as I try to process what just happened. Movement to my right startles me. It's David, groggy and confused. He's shuffling towards me, expecting me to hug him good morning.

"Are you making breakfast, Cat?"

I take a step back. “I fucking hate it when people call me Cat.”

He stops quickly. “I’m sorry. You should have said it before; no prob.” He notices his phone in my hand. “Are you going through my phone?” he asks, accusingly. His clothes are wrinkled. His hair is a messy nest of knots in the back. If I wasn’t so pissed off I’d probably be in love with his sleepy morning appearance. Carefully he wipes sleep from his eyes, waiting for my response.

“Um, no. It rang three times and I tried to stop it to let you sleep while I cooked breakfast for you.” I walk over to him and push the phone into his chest. “It was Betsy. You might want to get home quickly; I think you just moved out.”

I try to walk away but he grabs my wrist. “Cate.” He tries to make eye contact, but I won’t give him the satisfaction of seeing me with morning-after makeup and tears. “I should have told you. We kind of got back together. But it seemed temporary.”

I stop him before he can tell anymore lies in my perfect kitchen. “I’m not just some girl, David. You knew that. You slept in my house. You slept in my fucking house. You let me believe you were holding me, but there was someone else in the embrace you didn’t mention. Betsy didn’t mention a break-up.” I make sure I use her name and look him in the eyes when I tell him, “I don’t believe you.”

“I’m not lying.” He is still trying to pull me closer.

“You let me picture us together. You let me think about a future. You encouraged me.” I rip my wrist away, hurting myself. “What was in this for you? I don’t even get it. We aren’t even sleeping together.”

He shrugs. “You really liked me.”

I throw the garlic bagel at him with all my strength. It makes contact with his left shoulder. “Get out of my fucking house.” He starts to walk towards the living room, trying to convince me that it’s all a misunderstanding. I cut him off. “Give me your phone, please.” I yank it back from him. Scrolling through the address book, I erase my name before tossing it back. “Get out of my house.” I go back in the kitchen to take the frying pan off the burner. I hear the door close behind him, and I hit the floor, sobbing.

### XIII

A girlfriend. A live-in girlfriend. A girl who woke up this morning alone in her bed and was worried about her boyfriend. Had he driven his car off the side of 595? Did he get arrested? Was he abducted by a serial killer? No, he was with me. He was with the other woman. He had made me “the other woman.” Another woman he wasn’t even sleeping with. Shortly after he left, I received a text message from him. I guess deleting my number didn’t have the effect I’d hoped. The message read,

“Cate, I didn’t want to leave. I wanted to explain, to make you forgive me. My relationship with Betsy has been DOA for months. Neither of us wants to admit it isn’t working. Being with you didn’t feel like cheating. You made me feel special and I missed that. I hope you can understand.”

I responded, “I don’t think so.”

If only it were that easy. I’m not considering forgiveness. He doesn’t deserve that. He felt special? Seriously, seriously? If he felt special, imagine what I felt like. I was the Queen of England, America’s Next Top Model, Lotto winner special. I cannot believe the callousness that men have no problems displaying. To come into my house, knowing you’re the first. Knowing you’re breaking new ground. The smug look on his face which I took as genuine interest. My dumb ass was day dreaming about he and I going to concerts and me helping him write reviews. The whole time, he must have been praying he wouldn’t see anyone he knew and laughing about how easily tricked I was.

So, now what? I’ve been rejected and hurt before, but never on this scale. I want to call Erika and Regan, but I’m not prepared for their reactions. If their reaction at Chang’s was a sign, I’m in for one hell of an “I told you so.” I can’t believe I didn’t see this coming.

I've spent that last ten years building up a meter to gauge this bullshit. I always see the scumbags a mile away when it comes to other people's lives, but when faced with the opportunity to apply those skills to my own heart, I failed miserably.

I shuffle around the house for a while trying to figure out what my next move is, but I can't seem to get comfortable. There isn't anything on TV. I don't want to watch a movie. I don't have anything on the DVR. Even *Guitar Hero* isn't appealing. I throw myself on the couch, fall backwards and sink into the pillows. The weight of my body slamming into the cushions releases a puff of David's cologne. My eyes water but only one tear escapes before I forcibly close the waterworks. I lift myself up and get the vacuum. Looks like I'm cleaning—again.

Luckily, the only room David really spent time in is the living room. I vacuum the couch and love seat, Windex the television and glass coffee table, and then finish by vacuuming the carpet. I'd woken up so early that morning that even after the cleaning, crying, and kicking an asshole out of my apartment, it is barely eleven o'clock. I could use coffee so I call Emile to see if he wants to meet at Brew.

"Hello?" he says in the form of a groggy question. It's Saturday, so this is a bit early to call. Saturdays are usually sleep-in days.

"Hey, Em. Did I wake you?" I say, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible.

"No, actually, I've been up for awhile. I'm just lying in bed, catching up on *Dexter* on the DVR. Que pasa?" I can hear him shuffle around in his bed adjusting himself to a sitting up position.

"Oh, just doing some cleaning. But I'm just about done. How about you drag your butt down to Brew? We can have coffee and sit outside. It's a really nice day. I think we

might be able to get away with long sleeves.” I’m trying to sound casual as I talk, but this is out of character for me. Emile and I don’t see each other until dinner on Saturdays.

“Um, I don’t know. I have a bunch of shows to watch. And I’m pretty lazy today.” He’s thinking about it, grunting a bit, undoubtedly, because he’s adjusting himself further. “Yeah, I mean sure. I suppose. Can I meet you in thirty?”

“It’s a plan, Stan.” I’m hugely relieved that he didn’t question me. I’ll ease into it later, but I don’t want to spill the beans about poor pitiful me just yet.

Thirty minutes later, I’m waiting at Brew alone. I threw on my favorite dark jeans and a plain white tee-shirt. It was actually a bit chilly so I grabbed a brown cardigan sweater and threw my unwashed hair in a brown and white crocheted hat before I left the house. It’s my favorite hat, but Regan calls it my “hobo beret.” I think it’s cute. I order a white chocolate double latte and find a seat inside waiting for Emile. I am clicking through my iPod, trying to decide on the perfect soundtrack. Say Anything would be angry. Dashboard Confessional would be sad, but I pick it to soothe my wounded soul. Chris Carraba is wailing about stray hairs on a pillow “screaming infidelities” when someone taps me on the shoulder.

I pull the earbuds from my ears and turn, expecting Emile. Instead, I’m confronted by Nick. “Hey, Cate.”

“Hey, what’s up?” I say with a smile and a peppy tone. I am putting on an amazing performance today. First, I keep my sad ulterior motives from my best friend Emile, now I prepare to hide my heartbreak from Nick as well. “Do you live near here? I’ve never seen you here before.”

“I do actually. I live in a little apartment just behind here. It’s modest but right in the middle of everything. You?” This is the fourth or fifth time I’ve seen him around the

neighborhood, but we'd never talked about where he lived. On the weekends, downtown Fort Lauderdale becomes the center of Broward County, for those who commute in from the smaller suburbs. I'd just assumed Nick was a commuter.

"I live that way." I point out the door of the coffee shop due east. "You can almost see my building if you step outside. It's on the other side of Andrews, close to work."

He steps to his left to sit in the chair next to me. "Do you mind?" he asks rhetorically as he lowers himself. "So, what brings you here? Coffee and music?"

"I'm actually meeting a friend." Speak of the devil; my cell is vibrating in my pocket.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Excuse me," I tell Nick. He doesn't stop looking at me so I look back as I answer the call. "Hola, Em. Donde esta?"

"I'm not gonna make it, babe. I was hoping you were running late too and I'd catch you before you left. I'm lazy today. I hung up with you and just kept watching *Dexter*. Do you hate me?" he asks with a whimper.

"No, of course not. It's cool if you aren't up to it. I understand. Are we still on for the movies?" It's becoming harder to mask the crack in my heart, made bigger by being stood up. Emile and I make a point of not forcing plans on each other. It's a rule: if one of us isn't up for it, no biggie. I know if I told him what was wrong he'd come, but I don't want to make a big deal of it. I'll break down with him later.

"Heck, yeah. Talk to you later." With that he's gone. The line goes dead.

"Sounds like she isn't coming." Nick gives me a half smile.

"He. And no, he isn't." I pout a little.

"Well, I don't have plans. Let me get a coffee and let's move outside. It's so nice out. I love long sleeve weather. That is, if you don't mind." He flashes a toothy smile that is so

damn charming. The gossip girls are always talking about it, but I never noticed before now. “You already have your coffee and all. No use drinking it alone.” He puts his hand on my hand when he speaks the last line. His eyes tell me he knows something’s up.

He’s right. There isn’t any use drinking alone with him in the same café. That would just be awkward. And I do want to sit outside. “Sure, I’ll go grab the table now.”

There’s a small line at the counter so I put my ear buds back in and watch him through the glass door. His normal two-day stubble looks to be five days old. He has on a turquoise hoodie with tight, straight-leg jeans. The hoodie is only zipped half way, and underneath I can see a white tee -shirt with part of a Radiohead album cover on the front. He’s wearing white and gray Nike Air Force Ones. I’ve never seen him with sneakers on before. He usually wears dress shoes or Converse, which I don’t count as sneakers. This must be super-casual Nick.

When he makes his way outside and over to me he sets his coffee on the table and tugs the ear buds free. “So, tell me. And don’t deny it. What’s up? I can read it on your face and I am an excellent face-reader. Something isn’t right with you, Cate. I know we aren’t exactly close, but I seem to be the best bet you have right now.” I find his good-natured cockiness rather disarming. He lets out a laugh and says, “Spill the beans, Miss.”

“No, there isn’t anything worth mentioning.” I scrunch my eyes together, as if he were crazy and then look down, escaping eye contact. I neatly place my headphones in their tiny velvet carrying bag. I’m not sure what to do with the fact that he seems to genuinely care how I am feeling.

“Pardon my French, but bullshit.” He raises his left eyebrow while cocking his head to the right. “I know I’m not your first choice for a confidante. But I’m here and I’m asking,

Cate.” He turns to the left to face the street and the train tracks that separate Riverfront from the downtown area, sensitive to the fact that I might need some breathing room.

An Amtrak train whizzes by, making it too loud to speak. After a few minutes, the bells ring alerting foot traffic the train has passed and it’s safe to cross the tracks again. I turn to Nick, biting my lower lip. I open my mouth to speak but the words don’t come out at first. I remain still, as if someone hit pause on the remote that controls my life.

“Uh huh,” he encourages me. He turns back to face me, forcing eye contact. It isn’t threatening; it’s actually soothing.

“Well, this morning was a rude awakening. I discovered I was *the other woman*.” Against my better judgment a tear gets free from my eye and rolls down my cheek.

“I’m sorry, Cate.” He pauses for a moment to give me a concerned look. Then, as if to settle into the moment, he unzips his sweater, adjusting it for comfort around his waist.

“Do you want to give me the back story?” He cups my hands reassuringly. “No pressure.”

“Yeah.” Something about this moment is absolutely perfect. He should be Emile, normally I wouldn’t tell anyone except Emile, but it seems right to open up with him. “Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

Over the next thirty minutes I rehash the tale of my short-lived, whirlwind love affair, if you can call it that. Nick listens patiently and with deep interest. He only interrupts to clarify or interject an “Okay” or “Uh huh” to show he’s listening. When I’m done, I stop abruptly. I purse my lips together and shake my head at my pathetic tale.

“Well, first off, you couldn’t have seen it coming.” He pauses before taking two more sips of his coffee. “I can tell by your tone you think you should have been able to, as if somehow you could have known this guy was scum.” He waits for me to agree. “You

definitely couldn't have known. How could you? Can you see into the future?" Pauses again.

"Is this the guy you were with at the Poorhouse like two weeks ago?"

"You were at the Poorhouse? I didn't see you." But he saw me.

"Yeah, no big deal. I was with some guys I know. You were with some people. I didn't want to interrupt you. I've said hi the times you saw me. If you didn't notice, I wouldn't interrupt. This guy, he had like this man-purse thing?" Nick mimes a strap over his shoulder to illustrate what he means, as if "man-purse" isn't clear enough.

I let a loud, sharp laugh escape at the idea that David's reporter's bag was a man-purse. "Yeah, that's definitely him."

"Well, I know this seems like, completely impossible, but there's no way you could have known this guy was two-timing you. People always think they should have seen the signs. I say bullshit." He speaks with confidence and authority on the subject. "And at least you found out now right? What if he had strung you along even further? It could have been a lot messier." His voice of reason is exactly what I need at this moment.

My only response is to rub my face with the palms of my hands and let out a small groan. I say under my breath, "Seriously, this is why I stay away from all of this." Sigh. "You know I know you are right? But I just can't process this that rationally, this quickly, okay?"

"Oh I know. I know this won't immediately repair your broken heart." He raises his coffee cup to his lips but it's empty. "Damn, I'm fresh out."

I turn my giant mug upside-down to show that there is no liquid inside mine either. "More?" I ask.

“My afternoon is yours my dear. We have three options.” He pulls his sleeve up to check his watch. “One—we can get more coffee. Two—we can get out of here. There is something I’ve wanted to do and I think it would be good for you to do today, as well. Or three—we can part ways. Your call.”

“Well what’s option two?” I don’t like agreeing to things when I don’t know what I am getting myself into. I can’t believe I’m even considering hanging out with Nick, but honestly he seems like an amazing distraction at just the right moment.

“No, no, no, control addict. It’s a surprise. Come on! Live on the edge.” He says, teasingly. “It can’t be worse than the surprise you got this morning, can it?” Smiling, he shrugs his shoulders at his own joke. “Too soon?”

“Yes,” I say, but I smile in return. “Um, yeah, let’s do it. Wait. It isn’t jumping out of a plane is it? ’Cause I won’t do that.”

Now he laughs at me. “No nothing that dangerous. Let’s take my car. I’ll drive.”

We walk to Nick’s apartment building, which is literally right behind Brew. The building’s small and hidden behind thick bushes. The exterior is painted a faint, banana cream pie yellow. He points at a second story apartment that’s barely visible from where we stand. “That’s me there.” The windows are open but the blinds are closed so I can’t see in.

I turn around looking in the direction of my shiny, glass skyscraper. The tall white and blue condo tower is clearly visible. I point up and say, “There’s mine.”

His eyes follow the imaginary line my pointing finger makes and they widen when he realizes where I am pointing. “Nice.”

“Thanks,” I say with a huge smile. I do love that building. His little Mini is parked by an expired parking meter. I notice a ticket tucked neatly between his wiper blade and the glass. “Oh, that sucks.” I motion with my head towards the yellow paper.

“Oh that!” He laughs and takes the paper, holding it up. “I paid this months ago. This is a decoy.” He smiles at his cleverness.

“Slick, very slick.” I open the door and slide into the familiar seat. This is only the second time I’ve been in his car, but the interior is so similar to mine it feels comfortable. “So, can I have a clue?”

“Sure, it’s a place on Las Olas.” That’s all he is prepared to share about our final destination. He’s a very careful driver. The car is tiny and fast, but he takes time pulling into the street, making sure no one jumps in our way. “It’s a short ride so just hook your iPod into the cord in the glove compartment. Play what you were playing earlier.”

Reluctantly, I play Dashboard Confessional waiting for the ribbing about listening to the most depressing music possible. He says nothing but mouths the words silently for the duration of the short ride. We find a spot along Las Olas and park. I look down one end of the trendy street to the other, but still have no idea where we’re going.

“You gonna pay this time?” I tease, pointing to the meter.

“Yes, I only play that game close to home. They tow for that shit around here,” he answers as he puts his credit card into the meter box.

Las Olas Boulevard is a street filled with shops and restaurants just east of the downtown area. The pedestrian traffic is heavy no matter what time of day or night. Weekdays find fashionable housewives and retired northerners window shopping and doing lunch. In the evening, wealthy thirty-somethings mix with tourists, hopping from café to bar,

sipping wine and smoking cigars. This Saturday afternoon, grandmothers holding hands slow the traffic of families with baby carriages and men struggling through their fifties with trophy blondes on their arms. I feel underdressed in my jeans and white tee.

“So where are we now?” I am super curious at this point and hoping I am not going to regret this decision.

“We are on Las Olas, duh.” His joking usually pisses me off at work, although it always causes our co-workers to crack up. I don’t know if it’s because of my already fragile mental state, but I feel myself enjoying his humor and even fawning over him a bit. “Here we are.” He points up at a sign that reads *Joe Picasso’s*.

“I don’t know what this is,” I announce, surprised. I thought I knew everything around here. On the other side of large, plate glass windows, I can see people sipping on coffee and wine while browsing through shelves of plain white pottery.

“It’s a café and a pottery studio. You can have a snack and a glass of wine while making a mug. Or something.” He doesn’t sound certain of how this place works. “That sounds cool, doesn’t it?”

Part enthusiastically and part sarcastically I answer, “Yes!” and walk to the door with purpose. I will make this cool, no matter what.

In no time, Nick and I are set up at small table by the window with wine and a bare, white mug. The hostess, Joanne, explains that we can paint it whatever color or design we like and they will fire it in the kiln for us when we’re done. We choose a mug because we both drink a lot of coffee. At first, our art project starts off innocently enough. I stare at my mug, waiting for inspiration while sipping my Pinot Grigio.

“We’re drinking and painting mugs at one o’clock in the afternoon.” I report our current status with an ironic tone. This is not how I expected to spend my heartbroken Saturday. “And honestly I don’t know what to paint. I’m without inspiration here, man.”

“So serious. Such a serious girl,” Nick taunts me, taking a break from painting to pretend to cover my nose in red paint. I pull away from him laughing and smiling. “A smile suits you better than a frown, Cate.”

I think I am blushing! How embarrassing. “Thanks,” I say meekly.

“How can you be uninspired? You work at an art school.” This is a good question.

Luckily, I have a good answer. “I’m not an artist. I can’t draw or paint or sculpt or take beautiful photos. Shoot, I can’t even draw a proper stick figure.” So many people think just because I work at an art school that I must be an artist. “I can add and subtract well. Those are the skills needed for my job.” I drink my glass of wine while I babble on without putting brush to mug. “I really don’t know what to paint. So what about you? I assume your surprise that an uncreative person works at an art school can only mean you are an artist?”

“Do you mind? Give it to me.” It’s then I notice Nick has already finished his mug. He’s painted a map of the solar system around the exterior, turning it from white to black. He’s left some spots to represent the stars. It looks like a comic book illustration. “I am an artist, actually. I applied for the counselor job for the tuition waiver. This school is expensive. I mostly paint, but lately I’ve gotten into guerilla art. I have some stencils and posters I hang on constructions sites and abandoned buildings. I plant seed bombs and draw chalk murals on sidewalks. I like working with different mediums, you know? I take pictures of everything I do; I’m trying to get a show somewhere.”

I'm only half listening, my eyes fixed on the solar system Nick has created. It reminds me of David's tattoos. "Cool," I say, half-heartedly.

My eyes must be glossy because Nick says, "What? Tell me."

"Oh, it's the solar system. David had a bunch of planetary tattoos."

Without warning he wraps his arms around me and squeezes. "Let's make a list. Tell me all the good things about this guy. I know just what to paint for you. So you talk and I'll work." He brings the mug close to his face as he outlines something in black with a thin brush.

"Shoot," I reply. I am pretty loose from the wine now. I try to think of all his positives, but they sound stupid in my head. I don't want to say them out loud. "He had a cool job. He had good taste in music. He liked good movies." I can't think of what else to list.

"All of those things are great, right? No doubt. But are you alone in the movie theater? The only one at concerts? Isn't your job awesome? Tons of jobs are awesome." He stops to look at me. He always looks to make sure I understand where he is going.

"Uh huh," I say. He goes back to painting my mug and I just sit there, replaying his words in my mind. I think about all the people we see at every concert. The girl who rips our tickets at the movies who has always seen the films before Emile and me. The kid at the New Found Glory show who told me my favorite joke: What do you call cheese that's not yours? Nacho cheese. David isn't the only one out there; it just seems like it right now.

"So those things are valuable, but they are more than just things you have in common. The movies you like, the music you like, the books you read, these things build your values, what is important to you. You aren't the only one who values the same things. You can, you

will, find someone to share them with again,” he says just as it becomes clear to me, as if he could read my thoughts.

Smiling and painting he asks, “While we are being open here, can I ask you a personal question?”

I’ve already spilled my guts. What’s left to tell? I agree.

“Tell me about this whole virgin thing.” He doesn’t stop painting to look at me. I think he wants me to remain comfortable, and it works.

I give him the Cliff Notes version of the story. I tell him I always wanted to be independent and free. I focused on school and friends, thought girls acted so silly when they got preoccupied with boys. Never found anyone worth it. Not against dating, just silly games and possessiveness. I retell my memorized speech to a guy I barely know. It’s the same story I’ve been telling for years. It’s the story of my life.

“Well, that makes sense,” he offers reassuringly, “but the virgin thing just seems extreme. I mean, I want the same things. The freedom. The sense of self. The ability to be who I want to be. But I think you can have that and be intimate with someone special, or not so special honestly.” I laugh uncomfortably at his joke. “That doesn’t mean we have to sign our lives away. And, and pardon me for saying,” he pauses and puts down my mug so he can look me in the eyes, “It isn’t going to just fall into your lap. You have to kiss a lot of frogs before you meet your prince you know.”

He turns back to my mug as I take a gulp of air. I fidget nervously and sit in silence. This conversation is blowing my mind. I’ve spent my whole life trying to put that into words, trying to make sense of myself, trying to make someone understand. And this guy just gets it.

He gets it so easily he doesn't even have to stop painting to talk about it. This is my whole life here, and he is discussing it like it's directions to the beach.

I guess my silence worries him because he says, "I didn't mean it like that. Well, I meant it. I just didn't mean it to sound so harsh." He turns the mug around to inspect his work before setting it down in front of me. He's painted a city skyline with a clear blue sky. Towards the bottom of the mug is a gray sidewalk, with small green frogs scattered about. He smiles a devilish and playful grin. "You like?"

"It's perfect." This is the best gift I've ever gotten. I quickly wipe away a falling tear before Nick notices. I feel stupid for having hated him so much for no reason.

We leave our mugs to dry in the kiln, and we stroll up and down Las Olas. An old-fashioned ice cream truck sits in a no-parking zone so we stop to get Screwballs. There is a young family in line ahead of us, the mother and father not much older than we are, and the father is trying to explain to his toddler daughter how to eat the ice cream. I realize I haven't looked at my Blackberry all day. This is the best day I could have asked for. We spend the rest of the time looking at baby miniature Dachshunds in a store window and sitting on a bench in front of the Cheesecake Factory commenting on the passers-by. After an hour, we pick up our new work mugs and Nick and I drive back to my building.

It's been a long and unusual day, but I feel at peace. As I get out of the car, I turn to say good-bye. "Thank you for today. I'm sure spending your day with a distraught and babbling chick isn't what you had in mind when you woke up this morning. You put up with my lonely and sad ramblings. I had fun."

"Aw, come one. I spent the whole day with a beautiful, smart girl." I squat down next to the car and he leans over the passenger seat to look at me when he speaks. "And I painted

a new mug. It doesn't get any better. So, do you have plans for tonight?" Is he asking me on a date? The night after another dating disaster? He's probably just being nice. "There is this Italian restaurant on Sunrise I have wanted to try."

"I'm sorry. I do have plans. I sort of have this standing Saturday night thing with my friend Emile." But I feel genuinely disappointed. I feel comfortable with Nick and I kinda wish it didn't have to end.

"Understood. No big deal. Some other time." He reaches for the door. "I'll see you on Monday. And seriously, don't sweat this guy, Cate. He's a frog, you know?"

"I know it now, but I can't guarantee I won't forget." I chuckle at myself, deflecting my misgivings and self-doubt. I start to push the car door closed when my hand grasps the edge of the window, stopping its momentum. "Do you want to join us at the movies? We can do dinner at that restaurant first, if you want." I almost don't know what I am saying.

"Are you sure? I don't want to intrude on your *date*."

"No, no, no, no intrusion. We're just friends. No date. It'll be cool."

"Awesome. So what time? Should I come over here?"

"Yeah, we can just meet here. My name is on the buzzer." My words are catching up with my brain and I suddenly have the urge to end this conversation now. "Yeah, so like 7:30-ish. Awesome. See you then. Cool. Bye bye." I am fumbling over my words trying to end this exchange and close the car door. I slam it with more strength than necessary, cutting off his good-bye.

Holy shit. I just invited another guy I barely know to my apartment in less than twenty-four hours. What the hell is going on with me?

## IVX

It's a little before four o'clock when Nick drops me off and I'm reeling. The day has proven to be so completely different than anything I could have planned. First, I discover the guy who I thought was shaping up to be my dream guy is just another nightmare. Then, I spend the day with one of the most annoying people on Earth, and it turns out to be the best time I've had in recent memory. As soon as I get home and take my sandals off, I crash. My two-hour nap ends up being more like a forty-five minute snooze because of how long it took me to fall asleep. I kept thinking of Nick's jokes and wondering what his paintings look like as I snuggled with my Eddie Bauer goose-down pillows.

When I wake up at six, I unconsciously slip into my getting-ready routine. Movies with Emile usually get super-casual Cate, but I spent the entire day in casual mode, so I feel like dressing it up a little. I choose to wear my hair down and straighten it with the flat iron for maximum drama. I pair black leggings with a royal blue and black plaid dress. The dress has a really cute scoop neckline and cap sleeves. I place a black sweater by my favorite giant black hobo bag so I won't forget it. I settle on little black ballerina flats. I choose neutral and sparkly colors for my eyes and a girly pink lip-gloss. With only an hour and a half to get ready I am just finishing my make-up when the phone rings.

"Cate?" Nick says from the buzzer on the first floor when I pick up the phone.

"It's 1508. Come on up."

I have time for just a few quick adjustments to my dress and hair. I continue to flatten a few loose flyaway hairs as I walk to the door to let him in. To my surprise, I find both Nick and Emile standing at my door.

“Fifteen-oh-eight is pretty popular tonight. Catey, are we having a party?” Emile asks sharply, pushing his way inside before Nick can speak. He grabs both of my shoulders as he kisses me on the cheek roughly. “Does this mean I am finally meeting the elusive David?” He stands next to me, our shoulders touching, his hip cocked to the side, staring Nick down accusingly.

“Ohhh, damn no. That’s a story for dinner. This, this is Nick. Nick is from my . . .”

“Office?” Emile finishes my sentence with a snide tone. “Heard a lot about you, man,” he says sharply to Nick.

Nick is still standing in the doorway. I invite him in and Emile heads to the kitchen to make himself at home.

“Do I get a tour?” Nick asks off-handedly, still standing near the front door. He seems reluctant to step too far into my condo without an invitation.

I walk him around, turning on lights and pointing out the favorite parts of my space. He is quiet and interested, never intruding beyond a doorway. We end up in the living room; Emile still waits in the kitchen. “Would you excuse me?” I ask as I head over to him, realizing I will have to do some damage control. I leave Nick sitting on my couch, flipping channels on my TV.

“Cate, what the hell? Don’t you hate this guy?” he says, his hip still cocked in an annoyed stance.

“Short version, all listening no talking.” I step further into the kitchen. I have a loud voice and I need to whisper to ensure Nick can’t hear us as he settles on a re-run of *CSI: New York* on Spike. “Today, this morning, well last night, actually, David slept here, on the couch.

We slept together, not together *together*, like sex. We just both slept there,” I say quickly while nodding towards the living room. “Anyway. I was feeling, dare I say, smitten and smug, when his cell rings and it’s his girlfriend, cussing me out for stealing her man. I kicked him out pronto after I told him what I thought about him. I cleaned, tried to rid this place of his smell, and then called you. I was waiting for you at Brew when you called and cancelled. Then, I bumped into Nick.”

“But how did he end up here, on our night?” he whines. His hip returns to its normal resting place, but he looks like something smells bad.

I wring my hands nervously, feeling like a teenager busted for hanging out with the wrong crowd. “We had coffee and talked. We started talking and, well, I have to admit, his charms started to wear me down.” I let out a big sigh. “I ended up telling him my whole sob story. He’s a really good listener.” I feel really badly that I found comfort in someone other than Emile. If there were any time to force him to go out, this was it. I completely understand why he’s upset. “After I was done, and the coffee was gone, we went to this place on Las Olas called Joe Picasso’s and we painted coffee mugs and joked and had fun. It’s this cool, wine-bar-slash-coffee-shop pottery place.”

“Cate, I don’t care.” Ouch. “So you had such a fab time you thought you’d invite him? This is the only day I get you all to myself, Catey,” he sadly reveals the true reasons for his disappointment. “Saturday is for Emile.”

He’s right. This has been our ritual since high school, and I’d be pissed, too. “I’m sorry, Em. Really, I am. But I didn’t just invite him.” I make my most apologetic face, shrugged shoulders and pout included. I take his hand, hoping to nurse his wounds with my act of contrition. “He asked if I wanted to meet for dinner, and I was excited about our day. I

told him no at first.” Suddenly, it hits me. Why should I be sorry? “But then I realized other people go to the movies with us all the time, so I didn’t think it would be such a big deal.

Regan comes sometimes; hell, *your* freaking roommate, Pete, and his girlfriend come.”

I let go of his hand. We stare at each other for a moment and I can’t help but think about what Erika said about Emile. Does he not want Nick here because he doesn’t want to share me? Is he jealous? Would I be jealous if the tables were turned? Am I Grace Adler? Is he Will Truman? Why am I living in a TV show?

He mulls that over for a moment, silently contemplating his own motives. “Let’s just make the best of this. Where are we eating?”

When we return to the living room, Nick stands and addresses Emile. “Is this cool, man? I understand ritual. I can split.”

Emile reassures him it’s no big deal, and then our triangulated image hits me. The two boys are standing in front of me, and they are wearing almost identical outfits. Emile wears a dress shirt and tie every Saturday night and tonight is no exception. His gray shirt and black-and-gray tie are accented by dark jeans and black Puma sneakers. His hair is deliberately tousled and hardened with gel. His sleeves are rolled up to mid-forearm; on his left wrist he wears a black leather bracelet.

Nick has trimmed his five-day-old beard back down to a two-day fashionable stubble since this afternoon. His hair is neatly styled, curlier than normal. He’s wearing a black shirt and the same tie as Emile. He, too, has his sleeves rolled up. But instead of Pumas, he wears black Nikes, the same sneakers from this afternoon in a different color. They match his dark jeans.

I laugh and say, “Nice outfit, guys.”

They both look at each other, then at me. I laugh uncontrollably. Nick joins me, but so far Emile is not amused.

“Let’s get out of here,” Emile orders as he turns to leave.

As we walk towards the door, Nick tosses out an off-handed compliment to Emile by asking, “Emile, is that an American Apparel tie?” We laugh for the entire elevator ride, but Emile half smiles while silently facing the doors.

## XV

The restaurant Nick chose is called Il Mulino. Coincidentally, it is right next to the Gateway movie theater, our indie theater of choice. We usually do two movies, one indie, one mainstream. We start at Sunrise Eleven on Pine Island and Oakland or the Gateway on Sunrise Boulevard. The latter is a decent trek from my condo, so I usually campaign for Gateway. Plus, they seriously have *the* best popcorn. They melt real butter, none of that butter-flavored oil. My mouth waters just thinking about it. Even though the Gateway is closer, it's still a good ten-minute drive, as is everything in Fort Lauderdale. Emile insists on driving; he always insists on driving. He likes to be in control and on a night like tonight, one where he feels like he's lost control, I don't want to argue. Normally, I would feel badly, I would feel really badly. But I'm still totally stoked to be spending time with Nick.

Dinner starts off awkwardly, and gets more awkward as the ordering starts. Nick asks me if I'd like to share a Caprese salad, but Emile wants to share mozzarella sticks. Emile wants a glass of wine, but Nick just wants soda. No one can decide between garlic rolls or Italian bread. I'm starting to regret this decision, and then my cell rings. The caller ID says Lily. I excuse myself from the stifling atmosphere of two men competing and step outside to take the call.

Immediately after I answer she starts speaking one-hundred miles an hour. "He's an asshole. A total asshole. And Dan? I don't know what the fuck is wrong with Dan. I'm so sorry. I just can't believe it." Lily is rambling non-stop about David on the other end of the phone.

“Lil, I know, I know. I’m sure Dan didn’t mean it. He didn’t know; he’s a guy, right? What do you expect?” I try to laugh it off, but I’m pretty pissed off that Dan recommended David to me.

“It’s not okay, Catey. Dan sends his apologies and I’ll be sure to punish him,” she assures me in a devilish tone.

“Ahhhh, T.M.I., babe!” I interject.

“Seriously, though. I guess we were all at Capone’s one night and Dan ran into David. They talked off to the side, but he didn’t make any introductions. The next day, David texted Dan asking about you, so Dan told him to check out your Facebook page. Dan even said, ‘You know, I thought Dave had a fiancé. Guess they broke up.’ I guess I should have known better. I truly am sorry, my love. I didn’t want this to happen to you.”

I know she means it and I don’t blame her for it. “Well, you have to kiss a bunch of frogs, right Lil?” What?

“What? Where did you get that, Catey? That isn’t you at all,” she comments skeptically.

“Maybe it should be.” I pause for a moment getting used to the feel of the new outlook that’s growing on me. “Look, gotta run, babes. Emile is waiting. I’ll need to see you girls tomorrow though. I’ll call you in the morning. Love you.”

“I love you too, Catey Cat. Have fun.”

I return to the table smiling. “That was Lily. She’s sorry for letting Dan set me up with David.”

“Your friend set you up with that douche?” Nick exclaims. “God, with friends like that, right?” He and Emile laugh at Lily’s poor judgment.

“Man, you don’t know the half of it with those girls,” Emile says. They laugh again.

“I’m gone less than ten minutes and you two are best friends forever now?” I interrupt their bonding and steer the conversation away from my friends.

“Politics,” Emile states excitedly.

Nick starts to say something about Clinton but I cut him off before he says more; no more is needed. They pretend to be hurt, but as the mozzarella sticks and Caprese salad arrive, they concede that sudden bonding and shared love of the Clintons is unexpected.

Nick pushes some tomato around his dish, smothering it in olive oil and basil before putting it in his mouth. Emile leans over and whispers in my ear, “And anyone who is friends with you is good with me, too.”

I smile and kiss him on the cheek. Our moment is interrupted by Nick flippantly saying, “Awwwww. Best friends forever!”

After dinner, we walk next door to the theater. On the sidewalk, underneath the giant old-fashioned marquee, we go back and forth between movie posters deciding which film to see.

Nick wants to see *Juno*, but three times is enough for me (until it comes out on DVD). We talk about *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* and *No Country for Old Men*, but we can’t seem to decide. We finally settle on the Bob Dylan biopic, *I’m Not Here*. While I munch on my popcorn, the two boys lean over me and talk throughout the entire film. I’m starting to feel a bit uncomfortable with how comfortable these two are getting with each other. Have I missed the signs? Is Nick more interested in Emile than he is me?

We forgo the second film for a cocktail near my condo. We sit at an outside table at Limoncello and have a beer, discussing the film and dinner, people watching. Nick excuses

himself to use the restroom, leaving me alone with Emile for the first time since our tête-à-tête in my kitchen earlier that night.

“What are you doing? Are you hitting on him?” I accuse Emile.

“What? What? Cate, he really likes you. He is not gay, babe,” he says as if I am a complete idiot. “He is only talking to me to get to you. He is smart. The way to a girl’s heart is through her best friend.”

Wow, I am stupid. “Really?”

“Really. And when he comes back I’m excusing myself and heading home.” I try to speak but he stops me. “Don’t protest. You’re staying. And whatever happens after that is up to you. Got it? Just promise me that I’ll be the first to hear the gory details. Pinky swear.” He raises his left hand, pinky out-stretched.

I don’t have time to protest because Nick is back. “Got it.” I quickly lock pinkies with him, hoping Nick doesn’t see.

“Got what?” he asks.

“Got that I am outta here, kids. Nick, it’s been a pleasure, man. Can I trust you to escort this lovely lady home?” Emile stands and extends his hand to him.

“You can, and I hope to see you again sometime soon.” He shakes Emile’s hand, folding his other hand over the shake, cementing their newfound friendship.

“Well, that’s up to Cate,” Emile says as he winks at me and walks away.

Immediately, someone snatches our empty chair, dragging it to their table. Nick scoots his chair to the right to be closer to me.

“Ready to go home? Or do you want to stay?” he asks, throwing the ball in my court.

“Let’s stay.”

“Good, ’cause I already ordered two more beers.” On cue, a waitress appears with two cans of Fosters, placing them on our table. He takes a chug of his and turns to me.

“You’re different than I thought.”

In response, I nearly spit a mouthful of beer all over him. “*I’m different? You’re different.*” I look down, embarrassed. I’ve been treating this guy like shit for months now, and I have no excuse. “I misjudged you. I prejudged you, actually. I’m really sorry about that.”

“Hey, don’t look down, sad eyes.” He places his hand on mine. It makes me feel tingly when he does it this time. I try to pull away but he holds on. “I’m serious, Cate. It doesn’t matter. We had some moments where we didn’t get each other. Let’s learn from it, and move on. What do you think?”

This is the second piece of advice Nick has given me today. It’s like he’s reading my thoughts. He’s actually getting me. No one, except Emile, ever gets me.

“I do.”

“Catey, three years ago I was you. Minus the whole virgin thing; that’s pretty extreme.” He pauses to gauge my reaction. I crack a smile so he moves on. “This is how I see it: there are two kinds of people, those who follow the crowd and those who take the long way. I’ve always found my way by taking the long way. I think you have too, and that’s hard to do. There are no expectations to live up to, no maps to follow. It’s a double-edged sword. You live how you want, which is a plus, but there is nothing to compare to. No way to gauge success or happiness.” He stops and forces me to look at him.

My eyes have traveled along the sidewalk, taking in the throngs of people, the “status quo” as Nick calls them. The girls that walk past wear miniskirts and high heels. They all

have tanned skin, pierced belly buttons, and blonde highlights. The guys have black and silver dress shirts, gelled hair and big biceps. They wear the uniform for Fort Lauderdale nightlife. My eyes return to his blue ones.

“You get to be your own person, but there’s no data to compare to. It’s hard to tell if you are making the right decisions,” he adds. Now he pauses to look away. The midnight street is busy and loud, but our conversation is quiet and personal. The passing parties aren’t interrupting our intimate conversation. “I don’t mean the decisions are bad, I just mean—”

I cut him off. He doesn’t need to explain. “It’s just hard to know what’s possible. Hard to tell if anyone else will ever feel the way you do. Will understand.”

“Exactly.”

After a long break in conversation where we both look down and away, he starts to talk again. He tells me about his ex-girlfriend. He met her in college. At first, they dated and it was casual. It got serious, but slowly and on their own terms. For years they spent time together when they wanted, did their own thing when they wanted. When they graduated, she demanded to know when they would get married. He was caught off-guard; he hadn’t thought about marriage at all. He was only twenty-two. She had assumed the reason why they didn’t make a fast commitment was because they were in college. She didn’t realize he liked what they had. They fought, she called him names, and they broke up. Everyone sided with her, suggesting he had misled her. But he had never broken a promise and he had never lied.

“And that was four, maybe five years ago. Damn, no, five, maybe six. And I haven’t really dated steadily since then. I go on dates, but when we start to talk about the future, I

make my boundaries clear, and they call me a commitment-phobe. Then they don't return my calls."

"I know that feeling," I reassure him. "What's a commitment-phobe anyway? You are just looking for something different."

"Exactamundo." He nods his head in agreement. We both feel the weight of the conversation and shift in our chairs under the pressure.

"Wanna walk me home now?" I ask.

"I do," he answers, getting up to help me slide my chair back. What a gentleman.

Our walk is brisk, as both of us seem to be energized by our conversation. At first there are plenty of drunken people to laugh at, but the closer we get to my building, the thinner the crowd gets. Eventually, we are standing alone in front of the glass double doors.

"Do you want to come up?" I ask.

Nick steps in close to me and takes my hand. "No, I think this is a good place to end the night. Don't you?" He pulls me in for a hug. His grip is firm but soothing. He smells warm and spicy when I put my head on his shoulder. When he pulls back, he keeps his arms around my waist. He places one gentle kiss on my lips. "Night, Cate. See you on Monday."

His exit is causal and friendly. I'm floating and more comfortable than I can remember being. I watch him get into his car and drive away before I look for my house keys and let myself in. Twenty minutes later when I am lying in bed, I fall asleep peacefully. I think about Nick for a moment, but pay more attention to the crime show on Discovery ID.

## XVI

The morning arrives all too quickly and I lounge in bed for an hour or so before placing my feet on the floor. Around ten, my cell rings. The caller ID tells me it's Regan.

"Morning sunshine, bright eyes!" she exclaims in my ear.

"Morning, Regs. It's game day. Are you all coming over? I'm going to invite Lily. I have much to tell."

"Whoa, whoa. One—you are in the mood for game day? Two—Lily's coming? She hates football." She's suspicious.

"Yes and yes. So come on over!"

Immediately after ending the call with Regan, I call Emile, as promised.

"Dish it," he says, still sleepy.

"We sat at the table, had another drink, and compared dating horror stories. Then he walked me home, we hugged, had one very sweet kiss and then said goodnight." I stretch myself out over my couch as I give him the play by play.

"Just one kiss?" He doesn't believe me.

"Yep, I'll see him on Monday."

"Hmmm. Well, I think that is exactly what you need," he approves.

"I agree."

"Okay, back to sleep then. I'll talk to you later, babe." He tries to get off the phone with me to return to dreamland.

"Wanna come over for football?" I add quickly before he can hang up.

"Ha. No. Love you though. I'm happy for you," he gushes genuinely.

"Thanks. Back at you," I say, ending our conversation.

Just before one o'clock, the four of us girls are congregating in the kitchen while Jeff and Dan plant themselves on the couches, watching the pre-game show.

“So, spill it,” Erika orders.

I recount my Saturday while we lean against the counters, picking at chips and dip. I start with David, the throwing of bagels and deleting of phone numbers. I share the details of Nick and our day. I show them my new mug, which they all drool over. I tell them about Emile and Nick bonding. They whine about Emile knowing before them. I finish with a synopsis of our heart-to-heart amidst the nightlife, keeping most of it to myself since they wouldn't get it anyway, and our one perfect kiss.

Erika tries to clarify. “Nick from work? The guy you hate?”

“Emile likes him?” Regan demands to know as she grabs a handful of cherry tomatoes.

“And you're over David, just like that? I was so worried about hurting you and you are out kissing a new guy, like twenty-four hours later?” Lily asks, perplexed, leaning towards me, aggressively.

“All right, so where is he? Is he late?” Regan insists on hearing the details. She isn't grasping what I'm saying. Nick is *different*, and so am I.

“No, I didn't invite him.”

“But...,” Lily starts.

“But what? I don't even know what this is yet. I don't *need* him here.” I look at them with certainty in my statement and casually pop a tomato in my open mouth. “I like my space. We both like our own space. We don't have to share every inch of our lives.”

“Well, I just don’t like that.” Regan seems the one who’s most opposed to this definition of a relationship. “It’s fishy, Cate.”

“No, Regs. Look, after all these years, I know you don’t get it. I know you aren’t sure where I’m coming from, but you trust me to do what I need to do. This should be no different.” As I explain, I fish through the fridge for the pre-sliced cheese I bought. “He isn’t going anywhere. And if he does, then that will be okay. I will wait for the next one.”

We can hear the sounds of the game starting in the living room, so we move to the other room. The crowd is cheering as the starting line is announced. Before we separate I offer, “You have to kiss a bunch of frogs before you get a prince, ladies.”

Jeff yells, “Ribbet, ribbet!” We fall into a fit of laughter as we land on the couches, ready for the game.

Erika leans over and whispers in my ear, “I told you he’d be the one. This should teach you. You should have listened to me.” I look at her, half astonished at her arrogance, half agreeing with her statement.

“I told you. You were fussed,” Regan adds.

I smile at my little sister, happy to know that, for once, I was wrong.