

Kennedy Essmiller. *Peculiar Faith: A Collection of Short Stories*.

Peculiar Faith is a collection of four short stories that focus on LGBTQ members of conservative organized religion. Each story focuses on a member of the LGBTQ community as they navigate their faith, their sexuality, and their interactions with conservative religious organizations. *Peculiar Faith* is meant to provide examples of queer people being persecuted and unwelcomed because of their sexuality.

The first story follows Rachel and Louise, two queer women of the Christian faith. Both left the church when their sexuality came out and the church and other Christian organizations suggested that if they were to continue to be gay, they might find a better church home elsewhere. Louise believes the two of them to be standing up to Christian organizations together, while, in reality, Rachel has been attending a church for the past several weeks and has not told her girlfriend. This story follows Rachel and Louise as they navigate their relationship with each other, their relationships with the church, and their relationships with their friends. The second story follows a young adult trans man named Alex as he comes out to his church as trans. After facing severe backlash and attempts to “re-convert” him, Alex chooses to leave the church and Christianity behind for good. The third story follows a teenage girl named Laura as she struggles with coming to terms with her sexual identity and coming out to her very conservative family as a lesbian. The fourth and final story follows an adult gay man called Morrison married a woman because that was expected of him, having grown up in a conservative organized church. This eventually led to divorce, and Morrison found himself alone and without a community. This story follows Morrison as he struggles to find and define his community.

Peculiar Faith

Lou and I have been lovers for almost a year now. She tells me stories about the summers she spent at Bible Camp, always making sure that I know it's with a capital B, capital C. In turn, I tell her stories about the years I spent at Christian school. Not Catholic school, oh no, Christian school, where our greatest rival was not sin but Mount St. Mary's. We swap anecdotes about our different youth leaders, share favorite quotes from sermons, tell each other Bible jokes.

Whenever one of us does something even remotely wrong, the other will yell, "Crucify her! Give us Barabbas!"

She hasn't been back to church since her pastor found out we were dating. I had often visited before, when we were just friends. Pastor Chris always made me feel so welcome and begged me to come visit them again soon. That was before he found out I was a lesbian whore, of course.

Bisexual, actually, but that only translates into "confused lesbian whore" to Pastor Chris. Not that he called me that, ever, or even kicked Louise out of church. When he found out about us, he ditched his sermon on the grace of God and instead preached about the purity and sanctity of marriage. Between a man and a woman. A few weeks later, he suggested to Lou that if we were to continue dating, we might find a better church home somewhere else.

I've been lying to Lou. She hasn't been to church in the past sixth months, though she still likes to read the Bible. She doesn't tell people she's a Christian. She tells people she *loves* Jesus and Rachel. Jesus and me. She thinks I haven't been to church either. The thing is, though, I have. I've been going to a church in town for the past couple of months.

And Lou doesn't know.

I had never planned on going to church behind my girlfriend's back. Lou was still so angry with the Church and any organization claiming to be Christian, especially for how they treated me.

My Christian school had also suggested I might find a better home elsewhere when rumors went around school that my friend Anna and I had kissed when I was sixteen. The rumors weren't true but still prompted the administration to meet with me and ask me if I wouldn't prefer going to a school that were able to meet my needs more specifically. I told them to fuck off in the most Christian way possible, which meant I said, "I'll pray about it," and then I never talked to them about it again. By the time Lou's church made a similar suggestion, I was out and used to the fact. Lou wasn't, and she told Pastor Chris to fuck off in the traditional sense, meaning she told him straight to his face.

"Rachel, baby," she told me after she left her ex-pastor's office, the door slamming behind her. "We are too good for that place." She wrapped her arm around my neck and pulled me down for a slobbery kiss in front of the choir director and his wife who had yet to finish putting everything away after the service.

She never told me exactly what Chris said, always changing the subject to how he couldn't handle our awesomeness or how he was just jealous that we know where the clitoris actually is. "We don't need a church that will tell us how we are allowed to talk to Jesus. Wasn't that what the whole goddamn Reformation was about anyways?"

"I guess. I don't think Luther would appreciate you calling it the 'goddamn Reformation' though, Lou," I responded.

That was about seven months ago. We agreed that if the Church didn't want us or think we were good enough, then we didn't need them. Jesus still wanted us, and that was enough.

I started going to a church nearby three months ago. That's nearly twelve Sundays and a few Wednesdays that I have been going to church and not telling my girlfriend.

Nearly twelve Sundays and a handful of Wednesdays I have been lying to my best friend, the person who has been there for me through everything. All for the sake of continuing to go to a community that has consistently ostracized me and the people I care about. And I can't help but wonder if it's even worth it.

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Starbucks coffee in hand, I knocked on Lou's door, more as a formality than anything else. She never locked the door, and she didn't live with anyone else, so it wasn't like I couldn't just walk in. The door's green paint was chipping, revealing the beige it used to be. I tore off a piece that was curling out, peeling it like a sticker off of a sheet.

Lou yelled from inside, "Come in, it's open!"

"Morning, gorgeous," I said as I strolled in through the entryway. Lou poked her head into the living room from the hallway.

"Coffee?" she asked eagerly.

"No, I'm Rachel. But it's nice to see how happy you are to see me," I said sarcastically, shrugging off my jean jacket as I was assaulted by the excessive heat of her apartment. It was more of a furnace than a living space. "About ready for class?"

Lou groaned and disappeared into her room. I tossed my jacket on the back of the recliner before following her.

"Lou, babe," I began. I needed to tell her the truth before I chickened out. "Um, I have to talk to you--," I cut off as I walked into her room. Her clothes that usually hung in pristine condition in her closet ordered by type and then color were instead strewn across her floor.

“What?” she asked, looking up from the pile of shirts she was digging in. She was half dressed in jeans, a bra, and fuzzy socks.

“I have so many questions,” I said, laughing. “First off, why do you have socks on before a shirt? Did that really seem like the most pressing issue?”

She threw a discarded sandal at me. “Haha, you’re very funny. Help me find a good shirt to wear for today. I want to feel cute, but also comfy, y’know? Don’t want to wear real clothes but still want to feel good about myself.”

I knelt down to the pile of miscellaneous dresses and blouses at my feet and began searching.

“What’s the occasion?” I asked as I dug around. I pulled out a yellow striped long-sleeved shirt and held it up for her to consider. She shook her head, her short brown curls bouncing like rubber bouncy balls and then said, “No occasion. It’s just been a while since I felt pretty. I dunno, it’s been a while since we made an effort to look nice for each other.”

I frowned. It had been a while.

“Well, your bra is pretty. I like the little bow,” I winked at her. She half-smiled at me.

“Seriously, babe, we haven’t had a real date in, like, forever. I miss romance,” she complained, twirling her hair as she emphasized the word romance. She tossed a teal cardigan back into the pile.

“No, you’re right,” I said. “It has been too long. I guess I’ve just gotten so caught up in school and work and everything. We should plan a date night soon.”

“What about tonight?” Lou asked, trying on a soft pink button-up blouse. She grimaced at her reflection in her vanity mirror before pulling the shirt off. The static from the shirt caused her

curls to cling to her face like it was the last life vest on a sinking ship. “I could make you dinner, and then we could, y’know, bow-chicka-bow-wow.”

I snorted. “Yes, that sounds great, I love bow-chicka-bow-wow. But can we do it tomorrow night instead? I’m supposed to watch *The Bachelorette* with Alan tonight and eat shitty pizza.” I folded one of the discarded jackets and set it on the rocking chair behind me.

Lou groaned. “You love him more than me!” she accused. “I’ve been replaced! And by some gross boy roommate, no less!” She threw her arm over her eyes, falling backwards onto her bed.

I threw a shirt at her. “Don’t be so dramatic. You don’t even like that show. Aren’t you glad I don’t force you to watch it with me anymore?”

She lifted her arm a fraction, looking at me with one eye. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. I do hate that show. All of that melodrama.” She slid down her bed and onto the floor into the pile of clothes.

“Oh, yes, the melodrama,” I said. “You couldn’t possibly relate. Aha!” I tossed a shirt at her. “There! It’s cute because it’s pink and has the little criss-crossy thing at the top, but comfy and loose.”

She caught the shirt and pulled it over her head. “You’re brilliant, as always,” she said, admiring her reflection in the mirror and shaking the static out of her hair.

She pulled on her boots and ran to the living room to get her backpack. I let out a long breath, turned off the lights in her room, and turned to follow her, shutting the door behind me.

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That evening, as we watched one beautiful brunette give roses to seven other beautiful brunettes, I broached the subject with Alan.

“What kind of lingerie does a person wear when they’re going to break somebody’s heart?” I asked.

Alan folded his piece of cheese pizza in half before responding, “Red. Definitely red. With lace.”

I looked up from him from my spot on the floor. My feet, always cold, were curled under me and a fuzzy orange blanket with an embroidered R on the corner draped around my shoulders like the cape of a hero set off on a spectacular adventure.

“You think? I kind of thought red would be too pretty when you’re tearing someone’s heart out and stomping on it. I thought maybe black would be more appropriate.” Like the grim reaper, slashing a scythe through our relationship.

He rolled his eyes. “Rachel, you’re not tearing her heart out. You’re telling her you’re going to church. Don’t you think you’re being a bit dramatic?” When I didn’t respond, he said, “Honestly, probably no lingerie is the way to go. And that removes the problem of what color you should wear.”

I turned back to the television. “I don’t know how to bring it up. Every time I try it doesn’t seem like the right moment and I chicken out.” I picked at imaginary dirt and lint in the gray-brown carpet that stretched across the floor like dead grass with no hope of ever growing.

He slid down the couch and sat next to me. Putting his head on my shoulder, he said, “Honestly, I don’t even see how it’s worth this amount of guilt over something so mundane as church on a Sunday morning.”

The woman in the shimmery green dress on our television screen called out another generic name, bringing another brunette boy with blue eyes to her side as she pinned a rose on his lapel.

“It’s not just because it’s some place that I’m going,” I said, clutching the blanket tighter around me. “It’s what it will look like to Louise. What if she thinks I’m picking them over her? It’s not like we’ve had great experiences so far.”

I had been to several different kinds of churches, and none of them seemed to keen on an openly gay couple of women holding hands while singing hymns.

Alan shrugged. “It’s organized religion,” he said. “What do you really expect?”

I handed him my crust, saying nothing.

I shifted positions, stretching my legs out towards the tv. “Not to mention,” I said after the host of the show revealed the last rose of the night. “Because I’ve been feeling so guilty, it has been hell on our sex life.”

Alan groaned, leaning his head back on the couch. “Rach, I adore you, you know that, but you have got to stop talking to me about your sex life with Louise. I am here for you in most anything, but not that. I do not want to help you out with that. Lingerie is about as far as I will go on the subject.”

I rolled my eyes and leaned my head on his shoulder as we watched a man cry to a camera about losing the love of his life that he’s known approximately three weeks.

“And we’re the ones ruining the sanctity of marriage,” I muttered under my breath.

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Lou had made my favorite for dinner for date night—a dish we affectionately called Creeper Chicken. It was actually supposed to be called Caper Chicken as it was chicken breast on rice with capers, but the first time she had ever made it for me, I thought she had called it Creeper Chicken. The name stuck. My mouth watered as the smell of the marinated chicken assaulted my nose.

“Smells amazing, darling,” I said as I walked in the living room. She wasn’t in the kitchen. I knocked on her closed bedroom door.

“Babe? Are you in there?”

She opened the door and stepped out of her room. I caught a glimpse of the now-clean room as she closed the door behind her.

“Hey, you can see your floor again,” I smiled. She laughed halfheartedly, causing me to frown.

“Dinner smells excellent,” I said, following her back to the kitchen. “I haven’t eaten since this morning, so I am starved.” She remained silent as she dished out rice and chicken into two dark blue bowls. Handing one to me, she adjourned to the dining room—or rather the dinner table that we had found at a garage sale that now sat in the corner of her living room.

I sat down after her. Her brow was furrowed, and she stabbed at the chicken with her fork.

“Real dishes,” I joked. “Must be a special occasion.”

She hummed in response.

Setting my own fork down, I folded my hands under my chin.

“Louise, what’s wrong?” My stomach flipped as I waited for her answer. When she didn’t look up at me, I continued, “Your room was a mess a few days ago, now we’re eating out of real bowls with real forks, you’re murdering your food, and you’re not saying anything. Did I do something wrong?”

Louise didn’t look up at me. “Are you breaking up with me?” she asked. Her fingers clenched around the fork.

“Babe, no, of course not,” I said. I reached out across the table to grab her hand, but she pulled it away and folded them in her lap. “Why would you think that?” I asked. Finally, she looked up at me.

“You’ve been so distant,” she said, furrowing her brow. “And spending all of your time with, well, Alan. And it’s been so long since we did something like this, just the two of us, and I don’t know, I thought maybe it was because you were done.”

I shook my head, running my fingers through my hair. “No, Lou, he’s not why.”

Looking down at the table, I traced the scratches on the old table with my pointer finger. The scratches were left there from when I helped her bring the table in when she first moved in. She had been pushing faster than I had been pulling, I had tripped, and the table had fallen and slid along the gravel slope that led to her apartment door from the car.

When I looked up at her, I saw that Louise’s eyes had started to fill with clear tears that mixed with the mascara on her lashes. Her eyeliner was smudged across her left cheek from her wiping her eyes.

“I’ve just been going to church, and I didn’t know how to tell you. I didn’t want you to feel like I’d chosen them over you or pressure you to go again,” I said. Louise frowned at me.

“That’s why you’ve been so distant these last few months?”

I nodded. “I am so sorry, Louise, I never wanted to hurt you.”

There was silence as Louise stared at me. Silence except for the whirring of the fan above the stove in the kitchen that Louise had forgotten to turn off. There was a hiccup in the whir every few seconds, as if the blades of the fan were catching on something over and over again. Then, she started to laugh. It was a breathless laugh, not one filled with humor, but one that seemed to escape from her lungs in a desperate attempt to fill the room with some other noise.

I folded my hands in front of me, twisting the ends of my sleeves. “Why are you laughing?” I asked.

She put her hand over her mouth and ducked her head. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be,” she said. “I thought you were breaking up with me for your boy roommate, but you’re not! You’re just going to church!” She laughed again.

Frowning, I leaned back in my chair and slumped down. I pulled my hands into my chest, covering my fingers with my sleeves.

“I’ve been so anxious about telling you. You’re not mad?” I asked.

Still laughing, she shook her head. “No, I’m mad. You’re not cheating on me with your roommate, you’re cheating on me with your church,” she snorted. She leaned back in her chair and picked up her fork. Cutting the chicken into little pieces to stir into the pasta, she asked, “Where do we go from here?”

I shrugged, following her lead and picking up my own silverware. “You could come with me?” I suggested.

The laughter that had escaped her before was completely absent. Only the whirring of the fan and the clinking of the silverware filled the air.

“I am not going back to that place. Any of them,” she said.

I couldn’t blame her. Why go back to a place that constantly told you that you weren’t good enough?

“Are we okay?” I asked after a moment, guiding a piece of chicken into my mouth. I focused on chewing while waiting for her to answer.

She put down her fork, wiping her mouth with her napkin. Her eyes stared into mine.

“Are you okay with them? Because I am not, and I don’t understand how you can be either. After all they’ve done to you, to me. To us.”

My fingers found their way back to the scrapes along the tabletop.

“You need to figure out where you are with them. Then I guess you can figure out where I fit into your life,” she said.

She stood up and took her dinner to the sink, leaving me to the silence filled only by the whirring of the fan and the clanging of dishes being cleaned.

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The smell of coffee woke me the next morning. I stumbled into the bathroom, gathering my hair into a ponytail as I went. The woman staring back at me from the mirror had streaked mascara that didn’t even manage to hide the bags under her eyes. Her ponytail sat cockeyed on her head, and her eyes were bleary. I brushed my teeth, avoiding eye contact with her, and made my way to the kitchen, following the smell of the dark roast.

Alan was already pouring me a cup when I found him standing shirtless in sweats and socks covered in whales. He handed it over to me without a word. The coffee cream plopped as I poured a splash of it in my cup. I held the cup close to me, breathing deeply.

“You look like shit,” my roommate said after a while. We were both leaning against the kitchen counter. I held my cup with both hands close to my face. He had one hand resting on the edge of the counter with the other hand holding the cup to his mouth every few seconds.

“Thanks,” I said. “I call it the ‘My Girlfriend Hates Me and I Deserve It’ look.”

He nodded. “So she’s pissed?”

I glared at him.

“What’s the big deal about it all, anyway?” he asked as he took a sip of his black coffee.

“Our relationship isn’t what’s considered to be a typical Christian love, what with the whole gay thing.” I flinched as my coffee burned my tongue.

We sipped in silence.

“Are you patient with one another?” he asked.

I scoffed. “The majority of the time, sure.”

“Are you kind to one another?” he continued. I nodded. “Do you honor one another? Are you honest with each other? Do you protect each other, trust each other?”

“What are you getting at?” I asked, setting my cup down on the counter.

“Do you two persevere through everything?”

“I mean we try, yeah, of course. We try to do all of those things,” I said. I crossed my arms in front of my chest and narrowed my eyes. “What’s your point?”

“It seems to me, then, that you have exactly what Christian love is meant to be. At least if I’m remembering our years at private Christian school together correctly.” He tipped the last bit of his coffee back like a shot.

I rolled my eyes. “How would you know?” I asked. “You ditched the church as soon as we graduated, if *I’m* remembering correctly.”

“Ditched it, but unfortunately not soon enough,” he replied, winking at me. “Some of that shit still nestled itself in my mind forever and ever, amen.”

I picked my cup back up, nursing the now cooling drink. “Nobody else seems to think that way,” I said. “Everyone else seems to think we’re horrible and not good enough because we’re together.”

Alan scoffed, standing up straight and turning to look at me. “Yeah, and since when have you cared what everyone else thinks? Do you think you’re horrible and not good enough?”

I frowned and shook my head. “Of course not!” I said, shoving his shoulder back.

He shoved my shoulder in response. “Then what exactly do you think you’ve done wrong?” he asked.

“I fell in love with my best friend,” I said. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

Alan looked at me, his eyebrows raised. “Am I the one you need to be having this discussion with?” he asked.

“She doesn’t want to talk to me,” I said, leaning back on the counter and raising my coffee to my lips again.

Alan didn’t budge. “So that means you shouldn’t try?” he asked.

I let out a breath of air. Putting my coffee down in the sink with a thump, I went to the bathroom to clean up. I washed the mascara stains from my face, and I took my cockeyed ponytail out. In a few minutes, I was out the front door.

Neighbors

Alex stared as the doors to the men's and women's restrooms swung open and closed. Freshmen to senior boys poured out of the men's bathroom quickly, while the line for the women's restroom had been nearly out the door when Alex first sat down on the couch outside of them. The couch was blue and falling apart; it had a musty smell that seemed to follow unsuspecting souls who sat upon it during their fleeting breaks between classes. Alex knew this, but he also knew how long it would most likely take his best—or rather, only—friend to use the restroom, and Alex would rather sit on a musty couch than sit on the scuffed up floor with dust bunnies gathering in the corners as he waited for Amelia. It wasn't just a quick trip to relieve herself—it was an ordeal, an event. The bathroom was where you discussed the day's gossip, refreshed lipstick, and strengthened bonds. Alex knew this, too, from his own trips through the women's bathroom at the small Oklahoman town's only high school Wilcox High.

Alex watched multiple boys enter and leave their restroom before even one of the girls in the line for their restroom had even gotten through the door. The line seemed to be shortening, though, as the ten-minute break between classes was almost at an end. Freshmen ran through the hallways like chickens, frantically searching for their next classroom. School had been in session for nearly three weeks, but the babies had barely figured out where the cafeteria was located, much less their own various classrooms. Alex remembered scurrying along with Amelia the same way through the same halls back when they were freshmen—although the walls back then had been a peeling gray rather than the marigold yellow it was now. Now they were seniors, the ennobled upperclassmen. Alex had hoped that this would mean he didn't have to worry about pretending to be something he wasn't in order to avoid being ostracized by the older kids or be

the focus of rumors that spread around the town faster than wildfire, but he quickly realized that he—and his family—would suffer if he stuck a single toe out of line anyway.

The signs on the bathroom doors declared the division between the boys and the girls of the high school—a division of which Alex was uncomfortably and painfully aware. He usually made a point of relieving himself at home in the mornings just before he left, and then he would avoid drinking too much water to avoid needing to go at school. His mom had been in such a hurry this morning, though, that he hadn't had the time to go before he was shuffled into the one car that the family shared and dropped off in front of the school's doors. He couldn't go now. Not with everyone else around.

Amelia finally exited the restroom, her red lipstick freshly applied and female friendships strengthened. Her curled dirty blonde hair pooled neatly at her shoulders like several of those tiny cinnamon rolls Alex liked to get from the donut shop down the street from his house. She came out laughing, a high-pitched laugh that Alex knew as her fake laugh—the laugh she used when she wanted to seem cute and flirty. She hated her real laugh because it made her snort, which she thought to be very unladylike. Alex always snorted when he laughed. Before she could make her way over to where Alex was sitting, she was stopped by one of the boys the two of them had gone to school with for the past six years named Logan. Amelia had claimed to be in love with him on more than one occasion. Alex saw Amelia discretely move her purity ring from its place on her left-hand ring finger to her pointer finger behind her back. Logan and Amelia always had a playful and flirty interaction whenever they saw each other, like they were dancing with the idea of being in a relationship. Amelia was always the one to stop the music. Her parents had never approved of him.

Alex leaned back into the couch, sinking where the springs had become broken and collapsed. He knew from experience that Amelia and Logan could carry on for a while. This time, it seemed that Amelia was more interested in finding her way over to Alex instead of dancing with Logan. Her floral skirt swayed with every step she took, and her kitten heels clipped on the tiled floor, reminding Alex of a trotting horse.

“Did you not need to use the bathroom, Alex?” she asked as she reached him, standing a few feet away from him as he stood up and slung his heavy backpack over his left shoulder. Amelia would never sit on the couch, no matter how long she might have to wait. “The line’s not nearly as long anymore.”

Alex shook his head. “No, I don’t really have to go,” he lied. He would just go during class. Algebra with Mr. Prince was up next, and he didn’t give a crap what the students did during class as long as they turned in their assignments every week and showed up for the tests.

He knelt down to tie his sneakers. The shoelaces were getting so worn that they had more split ends than Alex used to have before he chopped all his hair off.

Amelia groaned. “I don’t know why you insist on wearing those disgusting things,” she said. “In fact, I don’t know understand what happened to your style overall,” she gestured to his entire body. “You used to have such cute clothes. Remember that dress you wore to Easter service a few years back? You know, with the lacy front and the cross straps in the back? God, that dress was to die for.”

Alex nodded, but didn’t respond. He shifted his backpack onto the other shoulder, giving his left shoulder a break from the strain. Amelia continued, saying, “I’ve actually been looking for a dress sort of like that for church next week. I’m singing, you know.”

Alex did know. “I remember you mentioning it,” he said. About a thousand times in the last two weeks, he added to himself.

“Anyway, where did you get it?” she asked, flipping her cinnamon-bun curls over her shoulder.

Alex shrugged. “I don’t know, my mom got it for me. I still have it, if you want it. It’ll probably be a little shorter on you, but it’ll still fit.”

Amelia’s shoes stopped their clops as she paused and turned to Alex.

Putting her hands on his shoulders, she said, “Are you for real right now, Alexis? Because that would be such a huge help.”

“It’s fine,” he responded, biting his tongue to keep himself from correcting his friend. Now was not the time, he had to remind himself. “I don’t wear it anymore. It’s just sitting in the back of my closet collecting dust. My mom won’t care.”

Alex tried to imagine a scenario in which his mom wouldn’t care that he gave away the most expensive dress she had ever bought him, but he couldn’t quite picture it. What he could picture was his mother’s frown and how she would run her chipped nails through her graying hair like she always did when she was stressed. “We can’t afford to go around giving away dresses like that,” she’d say. “Alexis, we can’t afford a new dress. What will we do for the Christmas service? The pastor, the congregation, they’ll all expect you to be in a beautiful dress, and now you’ve given away our most expensive one.” She was always worried about their finances what with his dad out of the picture. Her job at the restaurant in town was barely enough for them to live on, and she’d already lost one job because of Alex. He didn’t want to be the cause for any more of her stress.

Instead of saying that, Alex just shrugged and said, “It’s no big deal. Let’s get to class.”

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There had been a time in their friendship when Alex would have told Amelia everything. In fact, he did tell Amelia everything. When his parents were first separated when he was eleven, Amelia had been the one to comfort him with a stuffed bear—his favorite animal. When the divorce was finalized a couple of years later, she was the one who invited him over for a sleep over where they watched movies and ate ice cream to take his mind off of it. When he was just figuring out how to be himself, and he had tried to ease himself into it, Amelia had been the first one he had told. They had been the same freshmen scurrying around the hallways like mice. She was searching for her math class, and he was looking for his Earth science class. The rest of the students had seemingly managed to find their own classes. The hallway was so silent Alex imagined he could hear the walls groaning at the prospect of being in high school yet another year.

Amelia was talking about a senior boy who she was sure smiled at her at lunch when he saw his opportunity.

“Any boys you’re interested in?” she interrupted herself, smirking at him. She knew he hadn’t had a crush since Jonathan Jones in the first grade who had proposed to him. Needless to say, it didn’t work out. “There must be someone.”

“Ames,” he said, curling his then-shoulder-length curly hair around his fingers like the snakes of Medusa’s hair. “I need to tell you something.”

“What is it, babes?” she asked, tucking her then-bleached-as-blonde-as-sand hair behind her ears. “You’re not already dating someone, are you?” she’d asked. “You have to tell me when these things happen! I have to be able to celebrate it with you and obsess over him with you!”

Alex opened his mouth but nothing came out. “Ames, that’s the thing,” he started, staring at the dingy walls that felt about as welcoming as prison bars. “It wouldn’t be a him.”

Amelia had squinted. “What do you mean?”

“I’m gay,” he said quietly, a small part of him hoping she wouldn’t hear. She didn’t respond, so he wasn’t entirely sure if she had actually heard him. Then she laughed.

“Alexis, you are not gay.” She pulled her hair up into a ponytail, glancing at him sideways. “For one, you’ve never hit on me, and we all know I’m a catch.”

Alex stared down at the scuff marks on the hallway floor as they walked.

Amelia shook her head. “You just haven’t found the right guy. It’ll happen for you, don’t worry.”

Amelia never mentioned it to him again, but later that week his mom heard that a rumor had gone around school that he was a lesbian. Then, later that year after the rumors had gotten worse when Alex kissed a girl a year above him, his mom lost her job as the chef at their church. She told him it was because of budget cuts, but Alex knew better. He stopped talking to Amelia about important things then.

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Alex’s Algebra teacher just waved Alex away when he asked to use the bathroom. He was too busy focusing his attention on cleaning imagined smudges from his silver glasses that always sat tilted on his crooked nose to really pay attention to his students. When Alex got back, he made his way to the last remaining desk in the room in the back left corner. It wobbled as he sat, rocking back and forth with his every movement. He pulled out his phone, ignoring Mr. Prince’s powerpoint as he scrolled through social media to pass the time.

The Bible study he and Amelia attended was advertising for their annual back-to-school bash that night at the only church in the town. The theme that year was loving one's neighbor as oneself, so members of the study got extra tickets in the raffle if they brought guests. The grand prize was a Polaroid camera bundle, and Amelia had already signed four new people up.

The desk rocked backwards as he continued to scroll. He saw a series of photos of Amelia with a few of the boys they went to church with. She was posing with her left hand on the chest of one of the boys named Samuel, her purity ring sparkling in the flash of the camera. The ring had a medium-sized diamond in the center surrounded by smaller pearls. It was fake and from an outlet store out of town, but she told everyone that it was real and that it used to belong to her grandmother who passed away when she was four. She didn't let anyone close enough to really inspect it, and Alex only knew because he had been there when her parents let her pick it out. It was a whole ceremony of Amelia's family—the purity ring, the pledge of chastity before God. And, of course, it was all a sham. The desk rocked forwards.

Alex's mom had never liked the idea of a purity ring, so she had never given Alex one when he was a kid. She had sat him down when he was fourteen, a few weeks after Amelia had gotten her ring. She had sat across from him at the dining room table, grabbed his hands, and said, "Alex, I need you to understand. I want you to wait until marriage, of course, but I do not want you saving yourself for the man you will marry because it's what you're supposed to do. You are not saving yourself for your future spouse, and you are not worth any less if you have sex before marriage. You are protecting your heart. I want you to remember that."

He had appreciated that more than he could explain at the time, but he couldn't imagine what she would say if he told her that he wasn't exactly interested in men. That he found himself daydreaming about holding a nameless, faceless girl in his arms and caressing her soft skin. That

his own picture for his future was almost the complete opposite of what his mother envisioned for him. They hadn't talked about the rumor or her job since it had happened, and Alex had avoided any situations that might recreate what he thought of as the freshman incident.

The bell rang, dismissing the students from class and dislodging Alex from his thoughts. Mr. Prince waved the kids away as they crowded the door like cattle on their way to slaughter. The chairs were pushed haphazardly around the classroom. Alex packed up his backpack and navigated the maze of chairs before he made his way to the cafeteria where he and Amelia would be eating lunch with the other members of their study, much like they did every Wednesday. They would all be advertising to the underclassmen and other seniors about the bash. They wouldn't mention the fact that if the guests came that they would have a better chance of winning the camera.

Alex stared at the options for lunch that day as he stood in line. There were tuna salad sandwiches and a slop that would have resembled mac and cheese if mac and cheese was soupy and had a brownish-green tint. The girl in front of him turned to her friend and made a gagging noise as she pointed to the slop.

Alex saw that Amelia had already staked out a table right next to where students exited the line with their food. It was a prime place for preying on unsuspecting students and ambushing them with a promise to save their soul for the small price of a raffle ticket.

Amelia was perched on the top of the table with her ankles daintily crossed to the side and her feet resting on the bench. As people walked by, she smiled at them and captured them in a brief conversation. A few of the other boys from the study were also sitting around the table, arguing over who got to talk to the next student. One of the boys was Tucker, the boy whose

family owned the restaurant Alex's mom had been working in for the past two years. He barely even glanced at Alex as Alex walked out of the lunch line and to the table.

Alex's tray clattered as he set it down on the plastic table next to Amelia. She was chatting to one of the freshmen girls who had recently transferred from a private school in Texas.

"You should come," she was saying. "It'll be so much fun! I can show you around, tell you all of the best spots to grab coffee, give you all the details on the boys," she said this last one quietly and winked at the girl. "You'll fit right in!"

After the girl promised to sign up and walked away, Amelia turned to Samuel who was sitting at her left. His hair was drooping in his face as he leaned over his food, and she used her polished finger nails to push it off his forehead.

"You really should get a haircut one of these days, Sammy," she teased. He gently pushed her hand away.

"Well, I don't want to be confused for Alex, now do I?" he responded.

Alex shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Did they know?

Amelia laughed her high-pitched laugh and flipped her hair behind her. "Nobody could possibly confuse you with Alex. You two are about as different as can be."

A senior girl exited the cafeteria line, but Amelia made no move to engage her in conversation.

Alex frowned and turned to his friend. "Aren't you going to invite her to the bash?" he asked. He knew she had more guests than anyone else so far, but that didn't usually stop her from continuing to try to outshine everyone around her.

Amelia glanced in the senior's direction and then scoffed. "No," she said, raising her eyebrows at Alex. She lowered her voice and leaned in as if sharing a secret and said, "She's a lesbian."

And lesbians hate to party, Alex thought sarcastically to himself.

"What has that got to do with anything?" he dared to ask.

Amelia rolled her eyes. "Well, don't you think she'd make the other girls feel uncomfortable? We don't want to force her, you know, *lifestyle* on anyone at the study."

She then turned to Sam. "Of course," she began. "They would definitely be welcome. After all, love the sinner, hate the sin, right?"

Sam nodded, his brown hair falling into his eyes once more. "Absolutely," he agreed. "I have tons of gay friends. Just because we don't agree with their lifestyle doesn't mean we can't love them. After all, isn't that what we're called to do? Love our neighbors as ourselves?"

Sam was Amelia's latest target. He was tall, fair, and had, according to Amelia, "the most soulful blue eyes." He was also the pastor's son who was good friends with Amelia's parents. He, too, wore a purity ring that his parents had given him on his fourteenth birthday, although his was a simple silver band that was beginning to turn a coppery color where it made contact with his skin.

"What happened to Logan?" Alex had asked when Amelia had mentioned how hot Sam was after study a couple of months before.

Amelia had groaned at the mention of his name. "Oh my god, don't even talk to me about him. He's such a loser. I *cannot* believe I even let him near me. My parents were right about him. Absolutely no motivation. Samuel has ambition, *and* he's so hot I want to jump his bones."

To win Logan's attention, Amelia had only to smile and toss her hair in his direction. Sam, though, was a different story. He wanted to follow in his father's footsteps and become a pastor himself. When Amelia discovered this, she decided she wanted to become a pastor's wife. That was when she started to volunteer more at the food bank with the church and joined the choir. Next Sunday would be her first big solo, and she wanted it to be perfect, just to show Sam how good she would be for him. "Plus," she'd say to Alex. "It looks great on a college resumé."

"We wouldn't want them to feel uncomfortable," Amelia continued saying to Alex, glancing over at Sam to see if he would agree.

"That community is just as loved by the church as everyone else," Sam said in response.

Alex remained silent. He had heard Sam's father give the same sermon a few weeks previous. He could remember the way his stomach churned like choppy ocean waters as the pastor had talked about the LGBTQ community and how God doesn't make mistakes, that the bodies people came in were the bodies they were meant to be in, and that men and women were created to balance one another out. The LGBTQ community was not damned, he said. They were just lost in the dark and needed God's light to find their way out.

Except, it seemed to Alex, not at the Bible study's annual party.

Another student walked by, and Sam stood up from the table to talk to them about the study back-to-school bash. Amelia stood up, too, moving to sit on the bench next to Alex. She leaned her back against the table and crossed her legs, smoothing her skirt over her knees.

"Besides," she said. "I totally saw her check me out a few days ago, and it was totally skeezy. I don't think she would fit in at all."

Alex imagined that maybe she thought she was extending him a courtesy by pretending the freshmen incident had never happened. Maybe she saw it as giving him a second chance by

ignoring the fact that she was trashing a lesbian to her friend who had once come out to her. Or maybe she thought Alex didn't count because he had never checked her out.

Alex looked up from his food as one of the junior boys who was known around school to be gay walked up to the table.

"Can I help you?" Amelia asked, her voice laced with a sickly-sweet tone.

The boy was wearing a buttoned-up shirt with penguins patterned over it. He said, "Hi, I'm, um, I'm Trevor. I heard there was some sort of back to school party thing tonight, and that you guys were the ones to ask about it?"

He tucked his hair behind his ears, glancing at Alex. Alex began to answer him, but before he could, Amelia said, "Um, yeah, there's a little get-together tonight, but I don't know how comfortable you'd be at it. It's going to be mostly the church kids, you know? It's not really going to be that big of a deal. Just a few of us hanging out, probably."

Trevor nodded and shoved his hands into his pockets. "Oh, yeah, sure," he said. "Sorry to bother you." He left without looking at Alex again.

"Why'd you tell him that?" Alex asked, frowning.

Amelia glared at him. "He's been to church stuff before, and he looked uncomfortable every second of it. I'm just trying to spare him the awkwardness of being at a party he doesn't want to be at."

Alex stared down at his food on the pale white tray in front of him. The banana was more brown than yellow, and the tuna salad sandwich resembled wet dog food more than a sandwich. He tried to ignore Amelia as she continued to list people who went to their school who would not fit in at the bash, or as she referred to them, people who would feel uncomfortable or awkward. There was Oscar, the boy who listened to rap and wore camouflage cargo pants with chains

hanging down from the pockets. Kristen had had sex with more than two of the boys on the baseball team, so she was obviously out. Alex had to refrain from asking if she wouldn't fit in because she'd had sex or if it was because she'd had sex with baseball players instead of football players like the ones Amelia was fond of. She hadn't actually slept with them, of course, but that didn't stop her from doing other things with them. The difference, it seemed to Alex, was that Amelia was better at hiding it than Kristen. Amelia's words about their fellow classmates left a bitter taste in Alex's mouth like he had drunk sour orange juice and the taste still hadn't disappeared. With every student she judged, Alex clenched his fists harder, his nails digging into his palms.

Amelia started gossiping about a sophomore boy Alex had heard just came out as trans to his parents when Alex stood up, shoving his tray aside as he did. Amelia looked up at him in surprise.

"Just shut up, Amelia. Just shut up," Alex said.

"Excuse me?" asked Amelia.

"Shut up. The whole point of this stupid party is to make people feel welcome. That's the whole damn theme!" The whole table had stopped talking to stare at Alex. "Love your neighbor as yourself. That's the whole point."

"We want people to feel comfortable," Amelia said again. He imagined he saw a glimmer of sympathy in her eyes before she said, "We don't want to make people feel awkward because they don't fit in, right?"

Alex didn't respond as the last few stragglers exited the lunch line, clutching their own trays of "barf on a bun" as they went to find their seats.

“Sometimes loving your neighbor is calling attention to their mistakes,” Tucker spoke up. “Wouldn’t you agree, Alex? Helping people recognize their mistakes before they cost them? Or the people they love?”

Tucker stared at Alex. Alex didn’t respond before he broke eye contact, looking down at the cockeyed plastic tray on the gray table in front of him. Pink and purple speckles combined with the gray. If he stared at it long enough, he could make faces out of the spots. Tucker was right; Alex couldn’t cost his mother another job. He nodded his agreement, swallowing his anger and fear like gravel down his throat.

“Right. Tough love,” he said, his voice not even convincing himself as he sat down.

Alex took a bite of his tuna salad sandwich, ignoring the gooey texture of the soggy bread and the tuna salad. He couldn’t imagine what his friend would say about him behind his back if she found out. He supposed that she would eventually know, but he assumed that it would be long after he had graduated and moved away. He wouldn’t be able to cost his mom her job anymore at that point. He would be too far away to matter to the small town and the small church that seemed to govern it. He swallowed the bite and washed it down with a swig of the cold milk. Amelia couldn’t know a minute before he was out, though. He still had two full semesters of high school left before he could make his escape. Two full semesters of work and paychecks that he could cost his family. He would play along with Amelia’s and Sam’s acts, with the whole church’s act, and participate in the exile of his classmates until he could escape the church and everyone in it.

Alex peeled his banana and ate it in silence except for the occasional hum of agreement he offered whenever Amelia glanced his way. He stared at the spots on the table, creating faces

that seemed to laugh at him for his cowardice. When lunch ended, as he picked up his backpack to sling over his shoulders, he slouched under the weight of it all.

Bittersweet

Laura's arms wrapped around her torso as if they were the only things preventing her insides from spilling out onto the pristine white tiles that covered her mother's kitchen. Ingredients for cupcakes covered the stone counter island above her, seemingly forgotten as she leaned her head forward onto her knees. The nausea would pass, she knew, but the time it took before it passed was hell. She had finally gotten her breathing back under control; hugging herself usually helped her steady her breaths.

Letting out a deep breath, Laura sat back up and let her arms fall to her sides. She looked down at her toes. The second one was longer than the first one, which made her feel self-conscious being barefoot around other people. She tucked her toes underneath herself, removing them from her vision.

Her cell phone shrilled loudly, making her dog who was sleeping peacefully on the tile next to her empty water bowl lurch upward into a sitting position. Her body was awake, but her eyes were still drooping, not willing to agree that it was time to be awake.

"Sorry, cutie," Laura whispered, kneeling down to kiss the mutt on her partially-masked snout. Half of her face was covered with a dark brown spot while the rest of her snout was white. Laura liked to call her the Phantom of the Pup-era, and she even named her Angel after her favorite musical. Katie liked to tease her about that, calling her a pretentious snob from whom her dog couldn't even escape.

The alarm had gone off to remind Laura to take her birth control. Every day at 5:30 in the evening, she faithfully swallowed a little turquoise (or lavender, depending on whether it was her placebo week) to ward off unwanted pregnancy. And also to help her period feel a little less like

death, but Laura's dad was mostly concerned with the unwanted pregnancies. Not that it would really be a problem for Laura. At least not from the traditional method of sex.

Standing, she washed the pill down with what was left of her now-warm Diet Coke that was sitting on the counter next to the carton of eggs before tossing the bottle into the trash at the foot of the island. Clapping her hands together in front of her, she turned to the task at hand. Baking cupcakes. Something that would take her mind off of things as well as give her something to offer as a peace offering to Katie when she saw her next.

A car beeped twice outside, and Laura took a deep breath.

"What's the occasion?" her mother asked as she walked in the front door, eyeing the empty cupcake tray.

Laura hesitated before replying, "No occasion. Just eating my feelings." Her mother dropped her large purse that more resembled a small backpack into the floral love seat that occupied the threshold from the front door into the kitchen.

"Well, save me a couple!" her mom said, dropping a peck on the top of her head before she made her way upstairs to the master bedroom.

In truth, the occasion was that Laura's girlfriend had threatened to break up with her again. "Threatened" seemed like a strong word to Laura, but that's what it was when you got down to it. Katie was tired of feeling like a dirty secret, and she had told Laura that she was done being someone Laura was ashamed of. Laura filled in the blanks.

Laura had hoped that Katie would cool off after a couple of days like she usually did when she voiced this particular frustration, but it had been nearly a week, and she still hadn't heard from her girlfriend.

Hence, the cupcakes.

Katie's favorite food was cupcakes ("They're like cakes, but they fit perfectly in your hand!"), and Laura was making the kind she never said no to—vanilla with bittersweet chocolate chunks. No frosting on the cupcakes, but a can of chocolate frosting with a spoon on the side. Exactly how Laura made them after their first real fight, when they worked like a charm to mend their budding relationship.

Although being too afraid to tell your parents that you're a lesbian with a girlfriend might be a slightly bigger fight than how many imaginary pets you'd have when you grew up.

"What do you think, Angel? Do you think my cupcakes will be strong enough, or is being ashamed of my sexuality going to be too big of a hurdle?"

Angel yawned and curled up in a ball, her tail covering her nose.

"Well, you don't have to be that harsh about it," Laura muttered as she poured baking powder into the bowl with flour and salt, whisking it together swiftly.

The first time she made these cupcakes, she hadn't even known where to find a whisk in their massive kitchen, so she used a fork instead because it was right there and easy to find. She had also misread the directions and put two tablespoons of vanilla extract instead of teaspoons. That combined with her overzealous pouring of the salt led to bittersweet cupcakes that were more bitter than sweet. Katie ate a whole cupcake before Laura got the chance to try one. When Laura did have one of them, she immediately spit it back out. That's how she knew Katie loved her—she swallowed every bite of the nastiest cupcakes Laura ever tasted in her life, just so that Laura didn't feel bad.

After whisking the dry ingredients together, she focused on mixing the wet ingredients together in a separate bowl. Cracking the eggs was always her favorite part—she loved the feel of the fragile egg shell crumbling in her hands after the egg slipped out into the bowl. She used a

handheld beater to mix the eggs and sugar together, adding butter slowly when the eggs and sugar were foamy like the waves that hit the beach every year when she went to Tybee Island with her family. Her dog didn't like the sound of the beater—she got up and, after making sure that it wasn't going to attack Laura, retreated into her crate in Laura's bedroom.

Once the batter was mixed thoroughly, Laura poured about half the bag of bittersweet chocolate chunks into the mixture. Some of the larger pieces began to sink like rocks in molasses, but some of them still needed some encouragement. Using a wooden spoon, she slowly mixed the pieces in until the chunks seemed to be distributed evenly, looking like freckles dotting pale skin. Now all she had to do was pour the mixture into the tin and bake the cupcakes.

Laura's phone was set tilted up on the bowl that had had the flour and salt in it. The screen flashed, alerting her to a notification from her social media page. Someone had liked the picture she had posted of the cupcake ingredients—it had been a not-so-veiled attempt at capturing Katie's attention, but she hadn't seen the picture yet. Or, if she had seen the picture, she simply didn't like it. The lockscreen of her phone showed a picture of a butterfly that had landed on Katie on their first official date. It had freaked Katie out—she hated bugs touching her—but Laura had coaxed the monarch butterfly onto her index finger and took a picture as it opened its beautiful Halloween-colored wings and took flight. Laura watched as the screen faded to black.

Wiping her hands on her jeans, she picked her phone up. Clicking on the notification, she scrolled through the various people who had seen and liked her picture. Katie's name was nowhere to be found. Laura exited out of the app and pulled up her messages. Her finger hovered over her and Katie's conversation that was starred as important.

Laura's mother trotted her way back down the stairs. Hearing her, Laura clicked her phone off, making the screen go blank. Laura's mother wore a dress now, rather than the pantsuit she wore to work, and she had changed from her day kitten heels to slimmer and taller heels that clopped like horse hooves when she walked. Her auburn hair was wrapped up in plastic curlers on the top of her head. The smaller curls that wouldn't fit in the curlers sprang out at odd angles like the snakes of Medusa's hair refusing to be tamed.

Laura slid her phone into her back pocket as her mom waked up next to her.

"Your father called," she said, using her artfully manicured index finger and thumb to carefully pick one of the chocolate chunks out of the bag. She popped it into her mouth.

"He got out of a meeting late, so I'm meeting him at the banquet." She sucked on the piece of chocolate. "That means I'll have to take the car, so will you be okay here tonight by yourself? Did you want to have anyone over to maybe spend the night?"

Laura shook her head and pushed the bangs back off her face. "No," she said. "I don't think anyone would really be interested in coming anyway."

"Not even Katie? It's been a couple weeks since we've seen her. Is everything okay? You'd tell us if it weren't right?"

"Yeah, Mom, of course. Everything's fine. Just regular friend drama," Laura muttered. If regular friend drama included ultimatums and threats to break up.

Her mom sighed. "Alright. Well, I still think it would be a good idea for you to have someone over. I don't like the idea of you sitting in the house alone all night. You know how you get stuck in your own head."

Laura didn't answer and began to place the paper cupcake liners. Pastel pinks, purples, and greens lit up the gray tin. The store had only had pastel paper liners or liners with planes and

trains all over them. While Laura liked trains in theory, she hated planes, so she went with the pastels that made the tin look like Easter had thrown up all over it.

Her mom looked at her face, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Are you sure everything’s okay, ladybug?” she asked.

Looking into her mom’s face, Laura only saw love and concern. She wanted to tell her everything, ask for advice about how to navigate her first real romantic entanglement. She opened her mouth, but then remembered watching an episode of a cop drama show her family had been watching together.

One of the secondary characters, a defense lawyer, had shared an onscreen kiss with his boyfriend in an episode a couple months back. Her dad had grimaced at the image and said, “I don’t mind them living their life, but do they really need to force their lifestyle choices on us? I mean, we don’t watch this show to see two men making out.” He had gestured emphatically to the screen before standing up and walking into the kitchen. He didn’t come back until the scene was over, and they hadn’t watched the show as a family since.

Laura couldn’t risk seeing that grimace on her parents’ faces directed at her.

“Yeah,” she said, forcing her mouth to smile at her mom. “Everything’s fine. Maybe I’ll go ahead and invite Katie over, if she’s not too busy.”

Her mother grinned as Laura pulled her phone back out to text her girlfriend.

“Good. I have to go finish getting ready. Let me know when the cupcakes are done so I can sneak one before dinner.”

Laura promised to do so as she pulled up her messages with Katie once more. This time, instead of hesitating, she typed out a quick message.

Parents at a banquet tonight. Want to come over? Making your favorite cupcakes. With the appropriate amount of salt and vanilla.

Send.

As she waited, she poured the batter into the liners. The larger chunks plopped wetly into the tin reminding Laura of the fat raindrops that splattered her bedroom window during spring thunderstorms.

Her phone buzzed.

Ok.

She was coming over. Laura smiled in relief. She would finally be able to fix this.

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The cupcakes had just come out of the oven when Katie rang the doorbell. Angel ran out of her crate, barking and jumping on the front door, nearly as excited to see Katie as Laura was. Laura unlocked the door and opened it. Katie was wearing shorts and a tank top, contrasting with Laura's jeans and jacket. They used to joke that Laura was cold-blooded and needed a heat lamp even during the warmest days of the summer. Her thick black hair was pulled back into a braid that reached halfway down her back, and her skin was tanner than it was the last time Laura had seen her even though it had only been a week.

"Come on in," Laura said, leaning forward to hug her girlfriend. Katie leaned in, too, but only wrapped one arm around Laura before retreating. She walked past her, leaning down to embrace the overzealous puppy.

"I know, Angel baby, I missed you, too," she cooed. Angel licked Katie's nose. Katie stood back up, moving the satchel out of the chair and onto the floor. She sat down, and Angel plopped down on the floor at her feet, her tail thumping on the floor.

“The cupcakes are ready to decorate,” Laura said, gesturing to the tray of pastries on the counter. Katie nodded but said nothing.

Laura bit the inside of her cheek, turning around to take her place in front of the bare cupcakes. She picked up a knife and her can of frosting and began spreading the sugary coating on the cupcakes. She tried to move slowly, but her hands were shaking. She ended up moving faster to obscure the fact as Katie sat wordlessly in the chair, petting the dog on her feet.

Katie eventually stood up and walked over to Laura’s side with Angel on her heels. Laura had frosted a couple of the cupcakes already, but she was planning on leaving most of them without for Katie to enjoy with her can of frosting. Wordlessly, Laura handed her girlfriend the shaker of assorted sprinkles. Katie began shaking tiny pink and blue butterflies onto the frosted cupcakes after careful consideration. A couple of the candy insects landed on the tile where Angel was waiting to lick them up, spit them out, and then lick them up again.

“I almost told her today,” Laura said quietly without looking over at Katie. Katie switched containers and began showering the cupcakes in small emerald crystals.

“Almost isn’t good enough,” she responded a few minutes later. “Not for this.”

Laura nodded even though Katie wasn’t looking at her. She had focused her attention on a stray butterfly that had fallen into a blob of forgotten frosting on the counter. Half of its pink body was submerged in a chocolate sludge. Only one wing and antenna were visible.

Reaching out to her limp arm, Laura slid her fingers over Katie’s hand. Katie wiggled her fingers in response, allowing Laura to weave her own fingers through. They stood like that for several moments, fingers interlocked, slathering cupcakes in frosting and showering them in crystal sprinkles. In those moments, Laura dared to hope. She dared to hope that maybe they

would be alright, that maybe her first love could be her forever love. That maybe they could move past Laura's fear and shame.

Hearing her mother's high heels echo on the wooden stairs behind them, Laura slid her hand from Katie's grasp, placing it on the counter in front of her. Katie looked over at her, but Laura did not want to see the injured look of betrayal she imagined would paint Katie's face, so she looked behind her at her mom.

"These look wonderful, girls," she said, wrapping her arms around both of their shoulders. "I cannot wait to try one. Save me one with sprinkles, alright? Your father and I have this food bank banquet tonight, so don't wait up." She began to walk away, winding her scarlet scarf around her neck. "And Katie, sweetie, you're welcome to stay the night and come with us to church in the morning," she continued.

Katie didn't look at Laura as she answered. "Thank you for the offer, Mrs. Roberts, but I can't. I'm really busy with college applications and stuff. This is probably the most you'll be seeing of me for quite a while," she said.

Laura's mom clicked her tongue and said, "Oh, that's too bad. I understand, though, it can be really stressful. Laura's dealing with that exact same stuff. Good luck, and I hope to see you again soon!" She shut the door behind her.

Laura tried to ignore the tears that pricked her eyes. Without looking over at her, Katie stuck her finger out and pushed the butterfly completely into the blob of frosting.

Resurrection

Morrison's son and daughter were practically throwing punches in the back seat. Two minutes ago, they had been laughing together at something one of their friends had said. He wasn't sure if they were now arguing about the thing their friend had said, or if they had managed to find another reason to be angry with each other in the last ninety seconds. Then again, he felt like he hardly ever knew anymore. Once they had hit fourteen and twelve years old respectively, Morrison felt like the children he once watched Scooby Doo six times in a row with and tucked into bed at 8:30—or 9 if Mom was out of town—were nowhere to be seen.

His daughter Anne dug her nails into his son Andrew's arm, causing him to yelp in pain. Her nails weren't at all long, but they were gnawed at, and the ragged edges evidently made for a powerful weapon against her older brother. He retaliated by pulling her hair that was braided down her back in one sharp tug. Their seats were right next to each other with hardly any space in between them due to Morrison's new Sonata—they were crammed closer than they were used to in their mom's or Andy's car. Morrison should have predicted that this would happen long before they got to their mother's house.

Or maybe he should have predicted this before he even bought the car and then bought a GMC instead. One with lots of space for his teen and nearly-teen.

They came to the stoplight right before the turn onto his ex-wife's neighborhood, and Morrison turned around as best he could in his seat.

"I don't want to have to explain any bruises that pop up in the next couple of days after you spent the weekend at my house to your mom," he warned in his best Dad voice.

Andrew shoved his thumb at his sister and said, "She started it!"

Anne rolled her eyes. “Did not. And besides, we weren’t even hitting each other. There won’t be any bruises to have to explain to Mom.”

Of course not. They had long ago figured out how to hurt each other without leaving physical evidence except for what might look vaguely like a nail imprint. Whatever damage they did usually faded away before Morrison or his ex-wife saw it.

Morrison faced forward again, breathing deeply before turning into his kids’ neighborhood. It was right up next to a creek, so the trees on one side grew dark and close together. On the other side, houses that did not match lined up next to each other like schoolchildren on their way to recess. The houses didn’t seem like they should belong together, as if they had each been rejected and scooped up from various parts of town and plopped into this neighborhood. There were large houses with grand pillars and tall windows and wrap around driveways, as well as smaller houses with doors painted a wild color that offset the peeling paint of the one-story house. In the middle of all of them, there was a small ranch-like house with fields for horses and Shetland ponies shrunken down to fit into a suburb neighborhood.

He pulled into the driveway of a one-story brick house with a bright yellow door. On the door hung a cutout of a newly-hatched chick with an eggshell still on its head, chirping, “Happy Easter!”

Andrew and Anne unclicked their seatbelts before the car even turned off, pulling all of their bags out of the car behind them. Morrison turned the ignition off and followed his kids up the driveway.

Andrew went to find his keys in his pocket, but Anne scoffed and just opened the door.

“Come on, Andy, it’s Mom. Have you ever seen her lock anything on purpose?” she said as she walked in.

“Chubbs!” she said, dropping her backpack, pillow, and overnight bag in the entryway.

“Chubbs! Where are you, kitty? We’re home!”

“Probably hiding from you, like always,” Andrew said. He waded through Anne’s bags and dragged his own down the hall on the left to deposit in his room. Morrison stood at the door, twirling his car key around his finger.

His ex-wife appeared, walking briskly from the kitchen. Her hair that matched Anne’s was thrown up into a bun on the top of her head. Stray pieces escaped and stuck out in different directions as if pleading to be let down for once. She was wearing an apron that had once been white, but now had yellowed and browned with age and countless stains, looking similar to how Morrison felt.

“Hi, baby,” she said, pulling Anne in for a hug. Anne grinned as she returned it.

“Where’s Chubbs?” she asked. Her mom rolled her eyes at Morrison and said, “Do I ever know where that damn cat is?”

Anne shrugged and pulled away, walking off to find her cat. Her mom smiled again and turned her attention back to the man standing at the doorway.

“How are you?” she asked, tucking one of the escaped hairs behind her ear. It sprang back out almost immediately.

“Good, good,” Morrison responded. “We had a good weekend. Anne got all of her homework done, and Andrew, well, Andrew beat his newest videogame. So, all in all, a productive weekend.”

She grinned and nodded her head. “Good. And Jeremiah?”

“Oh, yeah, he’s good. On a trip to Columbia this week. He’ll be back Saturday. How are you, Alex?” he asked. “Cooking something? Easter isn’t for another week, you know.”

Alex frowned before looking down at her apron. “Oh!” she said, wiping her hands on the apron. “Right. Yeah, no, I’m making a cake for Anne’s best friend. Her birthday party is tonight, and *somebody* volunteered to bring the cake as her gift. I guess I should be thankful. At least this way I can get some housework done while it’s in the oven, and I don’t have to worry about taking a preteen shopping in the mall.”

She laughed, and Morrison laughed, too, although he didn’t think he really understood the joke. He thought Anne liked the mall.

“Easter dinner is next week, though, so I’ll probably be looking like this again in a few days,” she continued. Morrison nodded, fingering the key in his hand.

“Hey, you should come,” she said.

“To what?” Morrison responded.

“Easter dinner. And Easter service. I’m sure the kids would love it. Anne’s helping the older kids hide the eggs this year, and I don’t think she was even this excited when she was the one hunting for them.”

Morrison hesitated. The key hung still on his finger.

“And Jeremiah is more than welcome to come, too,” she added, sensing his hesitation.

He breathed a short laugh. “That’s kind, but Jeremiah isn’t really interested in brightly colored eggs and bunnies.” Or being stuck in a room with people who smiled at him while they judged his “lifestyle” choices.

“I’ll pass the invitation along, though. He’ll be happy you asked,” Morrison continued.

Alex nodded. “And you?” she asked.

He opened his mouth and closed it again.

“Just think about it,” she said before he could properly form a kind way to say thanks, but no thanks.

He nodded. “Yeah, of course. Thank you.”

Turning around, he twirled his car key around his forefinger and said, “Well, I should probably head out. I have some stuff I need to finish up before work tomorrow morning.”

“Thanks for bringing them home,” Alex said. “I appreciate it. I know they have a good time at your place.”

Morrison wasn't so sure, but he smiled anyway and walked out the door.

His car seemed larger than it had been only a few minutes before as he made the fifteen-minute drive back to his house. He and Jeremiah had moved across town when Jeremiah got a new job. The house itself was under Morrison's name, but it belonged to them both.

The drive seemed at once longer and shorter than it had been to Alex's house. He also hit more stoplights, so he supposed that had something to do with it, but he usually felt this way after dropping his kids off after having them fill his house for a weekend.

He parked his car in his garage and made his way into the large empty house. Jeremiah was away, and now that the kids were on the other side of town, the silence was suffocating. He pushed the button on the wall to shut the garage door. It groaned like his son did whenever he woke him up early to go fishing. When it shut, the echo seemed to reverberate through the house.

Morrison dropped his key into the brown pinch pot on top of his dryer as he walked through the laundry room and into his living room. Grabbing the remote from its place in the coffee table drawer, he turned the television on. ESPN was set as the default channel. He flipped the channels, finally settling on a news station. Turning the volume up, he dropped the remote onto the couch and went into the kitchen.

As he filled a pot with water and turned the stove on, he tuned out the words of the newscasters warning of incoming thunderstorms. Soon, it was like white noise. Just something to fill the silence.

He stared at the pot of water, willing it to boil. Just as the first few bubbles began creeping up to the top, his phone rang.

He looked at the caller id. Jeremiah. A photo of the two of them on their cruise to Alaska popped up on the screen with his name emblazoned at the top. Jeremiah had been wearing a white sweatshirt with the crimson symbol of the University of Oklahoma in the center. Morrison was wearing a purple windbreaker with the wildcat mascot from his own alma mater Kansas State on the chest. Morrison's hair was streaked across his forehead. Jeremiah was covering his balding head with an OU baseball cap. The wind had blown his cap off of his head moments after they had taken the picture.

Answering, he said, "Hey, babe, how are you?"

"Good! Just finished dinner with Tashia and Greg—you remember them from that Christmas party—and they bet me I wouldn't try one of the fried ants—they kept telling me, 'They're a delicacy in Colombia, eat one,' and eventually bet me fifty dollars."

"And did you?"

"Absolutely not, who do you think I am? I don't eat stuff that crawls in the dirt. That's why I'm good, I did not put insects into my mouth," Jeremiah said, disgusted.

Morrison laughed, holding the phone between his ear and shoulder as he poured spaghetti into the now boiling pot of water, breaking them in half to fit.

"You're right, I don't know what I was thinking," he said.

“How were the kids? I got Anne a sketchbook with the Monserrate mountain and church etched on the cover and Andrew a shot glass. It’s in the shape of a boot!”

He could hear the smile in Jeremiah’s voice.

“I’m sure they’ll love them,” he said. “Thank you.”

He absentmindedly stirred the noodles with a thick wooden spoon that Jeremiah had brought him back from Maine on yet another of his business trips. He hesitated. Should he tell his boyfriend about the invitation to Easter service and dinner with his family and ex-wife?

“How’s Alex doing? Did she have a nice weekend to herself?” Jeremiah continued inquiring about the family.

“She invited us to Easter,” Morrison said.

“Dinner? That’s great! I love Alex’s cooking, that ham with the honey glaze from Christmas was to die for, and—,” Morrison cut him off.

“And church.”

Jeremiah was silent. Morrison turned the heat lower on the noodles that were beginning to boil over. The steam from the pot caused the automatic fan above the stove to start whirring like an old air conditioner.

Finally, Jeremiah said, “Dinner would be great.”

Tacitly, he was rejecting the idea of joining Morrison’s family at the Easter service.

“Yeah, it would,” Morrison agreed with him. He listened to the fan whirring.

“So, tell me about Colombia,” Morrison said, ending their previous conversation. “Did you have time to explore?”

As Jeremiah recounted the adventures he had between business meetings in countless conference rooms, the stove sizzled in complaint as drops of water began to boil over and fall to the hot surface.

The week passed without incident. Morrison bounced back and forth, debating whether he wanted to attend Easter service with his family and leave his boyfriend behind or not go to the service and leave his family to spend the holiday morning without him.

Saturday morning, Morrison woke up early to the not-so-soothing tones of the “Morning Flower” AT&T alarm. Dressed in his favorite gray hoodie and jeans, he ran some gel through his hair to get ready to go to the airport. When he pressed the button to open the garage door, the groaning seemed to scream through the quiet neighborhood that was still under the covers of darkness.

Morrison was ready for Jeremiah to start booking tickets home during the day hours rather than the ungodly hours before five o’clock in the morning.

Only a few people were on the roads that early. He passed only four cars on his way from his house to the airport. Once he got to the airport, he started seeing more lively people—at least as lively as you can be at the airport before the sun even wakes up.

Jeremiah’s flight had already landed by the time Morrison found parking and made his way to the arrivals gate. Jeremiah walked out of the gate, a large grin plastered on his face when he saw Morrison. Morrison felt his own face stretch to mimic his. Jeremiah was rolling a small carry-on bag behind him that had one squeaky wheel so that there was a rhythmic squeal with every step he took as if one of his shoes was a dog toy in disguise. His balding hair was laying

down flat on his head, and there was a u-shaped travel pillow snugly wrapped around his neck in an intimate embrace.

When he got close enough, Morrison reached out and pulled him into a hug. Breathing in his Bleu de Chanel cologne, he let out a deep sigh.

“So, you didn’t miss me at all,” Jeremiah laughed. “Baggage claim?” he suggested.

Morrison followed his boyfriend down the escalator, his arm wrapped around Jeremiah’s shoulder, smiling so hard his face began to hurt.

Jeremiah chatted the entire twenty minutes back to the house, and then immediately collapsed on the couch and fell asleep. Morrison let him sleep most of the day—he knew from experience that Jeremiah would not be able to function after a business trip like this until he’d had at least a full seven hours of sleep. Morrison busied himself with tidying the house and preparing the ingredients for the early dinner they were cooking that night. When he finished with that, he settled into his recliner and watched reruns of *Friends* until he nodded off.

Jeremiah was already up and milling about the house when Morrison woke up from his nap—which ended up being three hours instead of forty-five minutes like he had planned. The washer was running, clanking every so often. Morrison made yet another mental note to remind himself to get that checked out. Jeremiah was in the study, filling out the next month of his calendar, moving the information from his paper calendar to his digital one. He looked up as Morrison walked through the open glass door.

“Already moving on to next month?” Morrison asked.

Jeremiah rolled his eyes. “I just like to be prepared. Look.” He pointed to his phone’s calendar. On the coming Sunday he had scheduled, “Dinner with the family at Alex’s.”

“My stomach is ready for that honey-glazed ham,” he said. “Really, I’ve been doing stretching exercises for it.”

He continued, “You know, June is having a brunch that morning. I thought it might be fun to drop by her house, see how the kitchen renovation is coming along. She keeps complaining about it, so it would be nice to see it in order to have a complete mental picture. Y’know, to fully be able to imagine it when she inevitably talks about it at every meal and event for the next two months.”

Morrison nodded. “That would be helpful.”

“Well, that’s a non-committal answer if I’ve ever heard one,” Jeremiah frowned. He put the cap on his pen and set his phone down on the desk. “What’s going on?”

Morrison blew air out of his lips and sat down in the chair across the desk. Folding his arms across his chest, he said, “I’m thinking about going to the service. With the kids.”

When Jeremiah didn’t say anything, Morrison added, “Maybe. I’m not sure yet. I mean, I want to see them. Alex says Anne is helping hide the eggs, and she’s so excited. It would be fun to see her trying to find that balance between in plain sight and too difficult to find. And Andrew got a new hair cut the other day. I think there’s a girl at church he’s wanting to impress.”

Jeremiah nodded, crossing his arms across his chest like a mirror image of Morrison.

“I can’t do it,” Jeremiah said finally. “I won’t do it. I won’t sit in a pew that’s not even comfortable and listen to an old white man talk about a savior dying for everyone out of love, and then pretend to ignore people side-eyeing me because I want to hold hands with my boyfriend.”

Morrison nodded. “You’re right,” he said. “We shouldn’t have to do anything that would make us uncomfortable for holding hands.”

Jeremiah leaned forward onto the desk. “June’s also going to have those miniature personalized chocolate pies at brunch,” he said. “I’m not saying we have to go, but I just want you to have all of the information before making a decision.” He grinned, and Morrison laughed.

“Food?” Morrison asked.

“God, yes,” Jeremiah agreed.

Together, they stood up and left the study, abandoning the calendars and planning behind them.

After dinner, while Jeremiah was in the shower cleaning the plane off at last, Morrison went into their shared closet. His suits for work were on one side, with his shirts and jackets on the rung below them. Jeremiah’s clothes occupied the majority of the closet space, overflowing with colorful patterned button-downs and t-shirts from the various places he went on business trips.

Morrison pulled out a dark blue button-down shirt and a pair of khaki slacks. He began to take them off the rack to put them on the ironing board in their room, but then he hesitated. Shaking his head, he separated the clothes and put them back in their spots on their rungs. Then he took them off again. Holding them in his hands, he debated about what his morning was going to look like. Finally, he placed the hangers together, set them on the doorknob of the closet, and then went to bed to wait for his boyfriend.