

The Identity
By Kristina Villarini

Chapter 1:

Drip. Drip. Drip.

I wish it were a dream and the sounds were from the faucet inside of my head. The last week has been hell, with the endless, wretched sound of a fingertip-sized droplet hitting the marble slope and bursting into tiny, clear soldiers racing toward the drain. I try to keep my eyes closed, as if it changes the sound. It changes nothing and I am here; rolling around in my sheets, boxers riding up one leg, hair tossed about – still trying to pretend I am asleep. Sad. I am desperately trying to hold on to that last...

I opened my eyes and shut them quickly. Still holding on to that moment of sleep. Wringing the sleep dry. I open my right eye, scrunch up the left side of my face as if peering through a rifle sight, and then slowly move my blurry right pupil to my nightstand. I was really trying to hold on to that last minute, I thought, sad. Maybe I should set my alarm clock to 6:01AM, so that when I wake up at 6 everyday I will be right on time. That is something to consider. Maybe I'll try it next week.

When I'm brushing my teeth and staring at myself in the bathroom mirror over that dreaded faucet – that I've had the superintendent look at TWICE – I count my beauty marks, scars, look at my eyebrows... Typical female stuff, I guess. Except for the fact that I am in no way the typical female, am I? I pull my hair back into a ponytail and I wonder what to wear to work, where I put my keys last night, where my calico, Roses, is. Some mornings, when I look at myself, when I've put my toothbrush in the holder and I know what I'll wear, and I've fed the cat, and I know where my keys are... On those rare occasions when I'm unusually organized, I take the extra five minutes and stare in that

mirror. I stare very, very hard, as if I'm looking for something. God knows what. A new blemish, maybe? Or something deeper?

I know what it is but I think I am afraid to say it aloud. Like if I say it out loud it becomes more real than if it ferments in my head for years. I'm wondering who I am, and whose life this is. Is this really mine or is it what I accepted as a subpar substitute? Gone are the loft dreams and the six-figure income of a tenured English professor at a reputable University. Insert recruiting job. Insert one bedroom apartment in Brooklyn. Insert cat. Insert long nights out and difficulty finding a taxi. Insert a benefits package Charlie Chaplin would audibly laugh at. Insert life videotape and feel your fingertips roll over the sideways triangle as it dares you to press play. Insert me. Insert you. Insert thoughts of "Why I can't just hit the rewind button, then hit the record button and start again?" I ask myself every day; don't I deserve to try again? Don't I deserve a crack at the perfect life, with the perfect person? Or just a shot as a professor with my cat, a better paycheck and a more satisfying feeling when I throw my Prada briefcase on the table as I walk into my apartment?

Why do we always want what we don't have, and more importantly, why do I get all existential at six-thirty every morning? Maybe there's something in the air. Or the tap water. My thoughts flood and I grasp at it: khakis and a white blouse. When I open the closet door, Roses hears the creaking and flees from the kitchen to the bedroom. She rests at the bottom of the closet, looking up at me. Needy, but not like a boyfriend you could get sick of, thank goodness. I pick her up, nudge her kitty forehead with my nose and put

her on the bed, where she proceeds to thank me by curling up in the strewn-about carcass of fallen bedspread.

When I leave the house, I leave behind my thoughts of what life would be like if I could rewind or fast-forward. I just smile as I kiss Roses goodbye again and wish I could sleep for sixteen hours a day.

The train ride is brief, and when I leave the station, Starbucks helps me continue existing past eight in the morning. I meet up with a co-worker already on line, which helps me skip the ninety people in front of me.

“How was your evening?” She asks, waiting for her turn.

“Uneventful by your standards. I finished the book I was reading and caught up on some DVR’ed programming,” I reply, considering my sizing options. “What was your night like?”

“I got so hosed last night. I got home at three, went to bed at four and got up at six. This coffee isn’t going to do a damn thing. I might have to order two and use the other cup intravenously,” she smiled.

I laughed. “That was actually funny, Sam. Kudos.”

We ordered our regular, extra hot, no foam, no drip, super-sized lattes and were standing by the bar when I asked, “Why do you do that? You know... Go out all the time, get home late and then feel like shit the next day?”

“Geez, you sound like my mother, Kate... It’s fun. I don’t have to drink all the time, but I like meeting people and dancing and dressing up sometimes...” She seemed to seriously be thinking about why she was such a lush, when she drank some coffee and

between gulps said, “I only have one life to live, so why would I be at home every day when I don’t consider it to be the best time I could be spending with myself?”

I nodded.

“Besides, I don’t have a cat waiting up for me when I get home,” she pouted playfully, but I wondered if she was taking a jab at me. For safety purposes, I jabbed back. “That’s because anything that can breathe and doesn’t require sex to exist wouldn’t last longer than three hours with you.”

She shot me a hurt look as we walked toward our office building. It rose into the sky like a steel and glass rocket. A lot of folks were probably jealous of our high floor status, with our carpets and a break-room the size of a studio apartment. I felt... Sam nudged me.

“What?”

She moved the top of her coffee cup to point at a guy in a dark suit happily whistling into the revolving doors.

“You ever wonder why people come to work so happy? It’s like they don’t know it’s work or something.”

I stopped in my tracks and pretended to think about it. “Well, they make a lot more money than us, probably leave before we do and overall, are just fucking retarded.”

She laughed hard, put her arm around me and gave a squeeze.

“Your sarcasm keeps me alive, healthy and depressed, Kate.”

“I’ll leave a bill on your desk.”

Chapter 2:

Punching the phones in a four-foot high convertible coffin all day sure does make a person hungry. Or insane. Sure enough, there was Sam's head, neck and shoulders peering inside my little cube.

"What's for lunch?" She asked, pleasant as usual.

Samantha Mason was the ideal coworker. Non-invasive and a genuinely smart girl, we talked about nothing for hours and she was probably one of the few "real" people at our job.

Considering we had the same job, it was easy to mouth off or make light of inter-office gossip and cattiness among others. She was the only person I would call a "friend," and the only person there I would want to.

I spun around a few times in my chair while serious considering my choices.

"Where'd you get the shirt?" She asked, ignoring my childish spins in place. She was referring to the collared, neatly pressed, white dress shirt. Tucked into my khakis with a dark brown leather belt and brown loafers, I looked more like a soccer mom than a Corporate American. I stopped spinning by dragging my foot against the carpet. I looked up at her and blew a cluster of hair out of my eyes.

"Brooks Brothers. They had a sale. Three shirts for one hundred and ninety-nine dollars."

Her eyebrows went up. "Geez, Kate, how much ARE they paying you?"

I rolled my eyes and pulled my chair back to my monitor with my feet. "Well,

Sam, unlike you... I wasn't hired after negotiating for a whopping fourteen grand to start."

She looked at me angrily, but remained uncharacteristically silent before reaching over to the shelf of my cubicle, pulling at a yellow post-it quickly, jotting something down and crumpling it up. "Lunch, in ten minutes. And just for that wise-crack, you're buying... Not to mention that the thing about me caring what you want is out the window. I'm picking the food, so salads in the cafeteria it is." She threw the post-it and a corner poked me on the bridge of the nose. I looked around to see if anyone saw me get assaulted by Samantha. No one noticed.

I sighed and typed my login info into my now hibernating computer. Despite our sometimes degrading exchanges, I always looked forward to our lunches. Ten minutes in that cubicle seemed like an eternity, while an hour of eating always seemed to go too fast.

After checking some emails and replying to the few dumb enough to believe anything I said to them, I logged out and headed to eat. Sam already left.

"Another night out, huh?"

"Oh, please," Sam grabbed a cafeteria tray and rolled her eyes at me, "As if you don't have a pitcher of beer nearby at all times."

My shoulders sank at the thought. "I can drink a case of beer alone, in my boxers, with my cat, playing XBOX." I picked up a tray and followed her as her heels plunked against the tiled floor of the building's cafeteria. There were so many other people perusing the selections and talking loudly, but I never noticed them. I only paid attention to the conversation we had, and the sound of our voices slicing through the noisy air.

“You could do that, Kate. You could.” She said, exhausted at the notion of having this conversation with me again. “But the point is: I wouldn’t be there. Neither would other people.” She moved the conversation back into the playful zone when she batted her eyelashes at me. I laughed. She looked upwards as she thought carefully about her next words. “Besides, what if you meet somebody?”

I stopped in place and turned the cafeteria tray sideways in my hands. Each side of the orange plastic rectangle touched my closed palms as I turned it, swallowing. I was getting nervous. As I rotated the tray, I thought about why I couldn’t even consider the possibility of exchanging a dialogue with someone on a romantic level without developing sweaty palms.

“I don’t... I don’t really want to meet anybody, Sam.”

She put the tray on the metal rods extending out from the salad preparing area. She grabbed a small plastic container filled with crisp romaine lettuce, and handed it to the man behind the counter. She smoothed her blue short-sleeved shirt and picked a piece of lint off of her black pencil-thin skirt.

“Nonsense. We’re going out. We’ve had this conversation in some capacity every day since I met you. You’re too cool and too pretty to be at home alone, all the time. You’re capable of having a good time, so at least give it a chance.”

I gave a shitty half-smile to acknowledge her compliments, but I really didn’t want to go out. I was considering putting up a fight, so I opened my mouth to retort, but all I heard was Samantha’s voice traveling pass me to the salad guy.

“Sun-dried tomatoes, broccoli florets, oh! Craisins! Nice.”

I was going out. It was obvious. I didn't have a shot in hell arguing with someone who liked craisins.

Chapter 3:

We sat at the cafeteria table in a far corner. The space reminded me of a high school auditorium, with the massive ceilings and bright bulbs creating a virtual highway. Shoes thud and tap against the vinyl-enhanced tiles. Sam was saying something, but I was distracted. Totally bypassing the sounds leaving her mouth, I wished that I could just leave my seat and lay my ear against the tile. I could be invisible, watching strange legs push and pull. The sounds of the unfamiliar were more important than whatever she could be saying.

I felt stinging in my eye.

“Ow... Did you just? Uh...” I shot her a glance and I saw her nod, an open salt packet in her hand. She threw salt in my eye, like a child needing attention. “Throw salt in my eye?”

“I’m here, busting my ass, planning important details for our night on the town and you’re ignoring me! Staring at the floor like you’re on the big yellow bus! What the hell, Kate, what the—”

“Stop. Isn’t it enough that I conceded? You won. What planning?” I dusted my face with cheap cafeteria napkins. It felt like limestone grinding against my skin, but I couldn’t tell whether that was the salt or the low-quality pieces of paper burning my cheek. “Christ, what is this, sandpaper? Shit. We’re going to a bar; you’re going to drink like a fish. You’ll give fake numbers to guys all night until you find one you want. But since he’s special, you’ll bring him to your sister’s place to mess around with, so he doesn’t know where you live. You’ll make your parents proud.”

I looked out of the massive windows and was almost disappointed that I wasn't blind in my eye. I visualized buying an eye patch... I think Sam's mad at me for that response. I was only looking at her through my left eye, so I wasn't quite sure.

The building cast mile-high shadows across the miniature city below, as the sun blazed through cloud free skies. City life is deceptive. I can peer from this window and watch people hustle towards their destinations. They walk, focused, intent on completing their tasks. I felt unimportant, again. I felt confused, again. Samantha was staring at me.

“Um, seriously? They have drugs for that zoning in and out stuff. Wait...” She whispered, “Are you on drugs?”

“If I was... I'd probably be a lot happier.”

“Good point. THAT'S why I'm so psyched about tonight, Kate, you're... *We're* going to have the best time. Even if I do everything you claimed three minutes ago. Besides, if you're totally unhappy, we can go somewhere else. I'm here for you, Kate.” As she emphasized the “you” part, I heard an infomercial.

“How could you possibly be here for me, if I don't even want to go? Tonight is going to suck. We're... *I'm* going for you.” As I emphasized the “you” part, you heard a suicide note read aloud.

When we dumped our trays and headed back upstairs, I joked around, but less at Sam's expense. Maybe if I'm enthusiastic, tonight won't suck. Oh, fuck this. It's going to be lame.

The elevator ride back to our office was quiet. Sam left me to my devices, and with good reason. I watched my face contort in the waxy film of hand prints and cheap

surface cleaner on the shiny interior of the elevator. The plethora of emotions exhibited by my face was probably more confusing than Anna Nicole Smith's medicine cabinet.

Hearing the chime of the floors on each stop, I wondered whether or not there was any meaning to the things we spent so much time bickering about. I mean, I could go out, and maybe, I do think a little too much, but it's nothing a little Left 4 Dead 2 on XBOX can't fix. I wondered if, even as my friend, Sam didn't have it all wrong. It wasn't so much that I hated my life or my job... Just that I thought it could be so much better. But I didn't know who to blame but myself... And I guess that made me a tough person to be around.

My over-analysis of things didn't stop when I got back to my desk, or as the day crept by. In fact, I guess it was like any other day, where I thought too much and did absolutely nothing about it.

Chapter 4:

For the first time in what felt like forever, the day sped by. As we logged out of our terminals, I considered feigning illness. Spraining an ankle. Killing my cat. Going to visit a grandmother I didn't have. A mountain of possibilities, a molehill of unreasonable excuses.

“See you at my apartment. Ten o’ clock, Kate. And wear sandals!”

“Whatever. I’m wearing jeans. And a short-sleeved, dirty t-shirt.”

Samantha sighed and walked away.

“That says: Bars are GAY!” I yelled. She heard me and glanced back over her shoulder. It didn't take long until she was one of the mass heading into the elevator. Then, I saw nothing.

A tap on my shoulder brought me back to my present state.

“Kate! Hey, walking to the subway?”

Bill Harmon. Overachiever. Future business leader of America. Probably the most successful guy in our office. Token white. “Hi Bill.” The slow drag of my voice, especially at his name, was entirely intentional. “Yes, I am.”

“Join me on the fantastic voyage to the outside world?” He was trying to be sarcastic in that overly obvious way that screams: I think I’m smarter than you. He laughed and whispered, “I didn't mean that at all. I mean, it's not a fantastic voyage. So what's up? What's on your agenda these days?”

I felt my eyebrows rise. I hated them for not consulting me before trying not to look like my entire face was hiding a secret. In my panic, I engaged “Operation: More Money.”

“Agenda to fill the needs of the Northeast by the end of the recruiting cycle?” I looked through the puzzled look on his face. “Well, Bill, I’m working on something a little more innovative than just career fairs and cold-calling. Our approach is obviously not working in the least populated regions of the country. We have to utilize new resources: the Internet, text messages. I am trying to cook up something new and cost-effective, but I don’t know if the big wigs will go for it.” I waited. I hoped he bit the lines like a pastrami sandwich from Katz’ Deli. I was patient. He thought hard about what I said, obviously torn between his after-work, normal guy shtick and his 'kiss ass, jump on the bandwagon' identity.

We walked out of the building, with Bill remaining nearby. In between glances at the pavement, he said, “Maybe you should join Marketing. They’re expanding, and they could use fresh ideas up there. I am tired of telling them to get their heads out their asses.” He chuckled. I didn’t get the joke. I guess it was funny because it was mean, or true. Or both.

The craters of city sidewalks make it difficult to look someone in the eye, unless you don’t mind risking embarrassment with a trip or possible injury mid-sentence.

“If you wanted to really move to Marketing, I’d support it. I’ll bring it up at the next department meeting, if you’d rather I broke the ice?”

“Aww, Bill, you don’t have to do that for me…” I tried to sound like I didn’t want him to, but this is my non-existent career we’re talking about.

“Well, I have it on good and secret, authority that John Cleese is resigning from Marketing in the next month or so. If we time your idea just right, you could skip right up Marketing into his seat.” Bill raised his eyebrows and smiled in between each word. A plan formulating at his own hand seemed to tweak his nipples. He was more excited about this than I was, despite the fact that I almost collapsed at the thought of becoming a Senior Marketing Associate.

Dollars signs danced in my head. Rose could get that kitty castle she always purrs at when I skim the Fingerhut catalogue.

I was beginning to plan for money I didn’t even know I had yet… And then I stopped myself.

“Bill, what’s in it for you?”

“Honestly?” He sighed, and bit his bottom lip while looking down at me. “I’m not getting any younger. The only other two recruiters who slightly match my numbers are you and Sam, and sometimes when I shadow Sam, she’s filing her nails while she’s talking to the biggest pain in the ass candidate I’ve ever heard. The fact is, if I can separate you guys, hell, even move one of you up the ladder… I’d be the best damn recruiter the company has and no one would dispute it.”

It was a good plan, and I could admit it… But it didn’t explain why he wouldn’t mind me being above him in corporate hierarchy.

“Bill, that’s all well and good…”

“Wait a second... I’m a lot more selfish than you’re aware, Kate.”

“I’m impressed by your candor.”

“We’ll see what you think in a second.”

“Shoot...”

“So... Wait, you ride what? I can only take one of these trains home.” What he has to say must be big; he wants to spend a train ride discussing it. I pointed straight to the letters on the subway sign, and moved my finger in the air across each of them. I really could take anything to get home, or away from him if he morphed into a Craigslist-style freakazoid. We began descending the stairs and entered the underground.

Greeted with hot air and the screeching of old rail brakes, he amplified his voice. It really was that important for him to get out, as he fumbled in his pockets to pull out his fare card.

“Okay, so like I was saying, uh, well, I was thinking... If I can directly contribute to some satisfaction in a job you despise, then you won’t hate it anymore, right, and then, technically... you’d owe me.”

I was offended. Not by his perceptiveness... Yes, by his perceptiveness. I didn’t even know him, really. We just work together. We’re not friends. “How do you know I hate my job?”

“It’s obvious. That’s all I can really say, it just seemed obvious to me. But I digress. If I am a part of the reason why you’re happier at work, then you’d owe me. I mean, technically, you would owe me, right?”

Black sheep? No. Black card? No. Black... MAIL. Yes. That's the word. "So you're giving me secret information to make me happier at work so you can redeem a favor at a later date? That's pretty slimy, Bill, especially for you."

"Well, not a favor, really... More of an, after-work thing."

My spider-sense started tingling. He had this boyish nervousness about him, the kind of thing cougars might find appealing. At the core of it was his discomfort. He was bargaining and it was degrading. I knew he regretted all of this as soon as the noise from his lips hit the air. This could be a huge confession for Bill and leaps forward in his life. Meanwhile, I wanted to off myself via timed leap toward an oncoming train. There is no correct way to deal with this. No handbooks, no guides, no Human Resources.

Nothing.

Sam never taught me how to shoot a guy down. Normally, I'd scribble Roman numerals on their palm and walk away before they could realize it. I forgot what this felt like. Avoidance seemed like the best defense. I averted my eyes, looking down, as if embarrassed. I realized quickly that playing it coy did not suit me.

"Well, Bill..." I tried to look flattered. I was traversing the spectrum of appropriate girl reactions. I felt like I was sixteen again. "How about this: If I get the Marketing job, with your help, of course..." I raised an eyebrow playfully in his direction, "I will go out to dinner with you."

He swallowed hard and I thought I saw a button pop off of his black Polo shirt. Suddenly, a train pulled in. Any train. I wasn't sure, but it was suddenly HIS train. He

stared at me and started to shuffle toward the doors while looking back towards me trying to mouth something.

He looked like a RC car wedged between a foot and a chair leg. I put both hands on his back and pushed him lightly into the train as the doors closed. While the train pulled away, I saw the back of his head circle for me. He turned around and stared at me through the small window. Then, gone.

I had successfully evaded this conversation tonight... But I knew I was going to have to deal with this eventually.

Chapter 5:

A heavy sigh escaped my lungs as my hand flexed around the white handle. When the tips of my fingers wrap around the back, I feel the conveniently placed grooves. The manipulation of everything for our comfort.

To drink or not to drink, I thought, peering into the refrigerator. The shelves were a sparse cluster of old Chinese takeout, Blue Moon beer bottles and cranberry juice. It looked more like a dormitory fridge than the chilly containment center for a twenty something professional.

I grabbed the beer.

In my white Miami Dolphins t-shirt, ripped jeans, flip-flops and hair loose under a knit cap, I wasn't exactly the Thursday night centerfold that frequents the New York bar scene. I thought about looking inside of my closet again, but I probably wouldn't know how to improve upon my original selection.

I chug beers alone and watch my cat sleep. I play Madden '10 on XBOX Live until 2AM. The most exciting part of my life is thinking of the opportunities to be great that have already passed me by... Or slaying some kid playing Halo.

Every slight tick of my wristwatch triggers a further sense of dread. As I consider all of the possibly vile interactions while I sit on a stool at my breakfast bar, my stomach turns itself into a pretzel. Bars, clubs; they're all the same. I don't care for dancing and I can drink cheaply while playing music that only I like right here.

I scratched my arm while thinking and spinning my phone on the couch with a fingernail. We will be paying to join the fraternity of attractive people who need

validation and predators who were once attractive. Tight, dark spaces vulgarly mimic intimacy and I'm paying for this! My own reservations made me want to run... But I had no idea why I didn't want to go so much. Fear of letting someone in, or fear of being valued at nothing at the end of the night? I battled my doubts. "But, it's a sardine can with beer," I yelled at myself, "It's a place where a conversation is as valuable as a Super Soaker in a sword fight."

Men try unsuccessfully to infiltrate groups of women, and women wait for men to buy them drinks, in an effort to infiltrate their groups. Women who want to be treated equally dumb and laugh at beer pong jokes for the evening, and men, who solely desire to hook up, pretend to care for tales of sorority sisters and women's lib.

My brain's rationalization: Don't go! I promised Sam, didn't I? But, rules, bones and promises were meant to be broken. I thought of the more productive things I could be doing at home. Watching movies illegally on my laptop. I shook the thoughts viciously from my insides. If I don't go out, I deserve to have another morning of self-criticism, another day of boredom and self-loathing and another evening of cat grooming.

I walked around. I traced my finger along the empty counter space. I began a brief checklist in my head, while avoiding the growling of my stomach. The cell phone vibrated, creating a faint rumbling sound within the kitchen space. I could barely see Sam's face and number on the screen. I didn't answer.

It rang again twice within the next fifteen minutes. Three missed calls. My guilt consumed me like a blanket. I unlocked the phone and called back.

"Hey," I tried to sound nonchalant.

“Well, are you ready? Are you coming over?” Sam asked, annoyed by my feigned apathy, “Why haven’t you been answering your phone?”

I rolled my eyes, annoyed. “It’s called a cell phone, Sam. As in a prison? I was freeing myself from the confines of your bullshit plan to get me to hang out with people I don’t want to know.”

The voice on the other end remained silent.

“Hello?” I asked.

“Call a cab. Be at my house in a half-hour or I’m never speaking to you again. I’m not letting your procrastinating, self-fulfilling prophecies of depression and apocalypse via bar come true.” I heard a click on the receiver. It was a simple click, but the sentence that preceded it made it as loud as an alligator’s jowls. I grabbed my keys and a hoodie from the coat rack in the foyer. I dialed the local cab service. Sam was right: I had to do this, if only to prove to myself that I’m not as pathetic as I think I am.

In the back seat of the car service sedan, I tried to remember when I became *this* person. In grade school, I could do anything, be anyone. In high school, I could do anything, if I was someone. In college, I could be someone, if I learned everything.

Staring at the lights of Brooklyn speeding by me in the night, I guess I’m still looking.

When I paid my fare and stepped out towards the wood and glass doors of Sam’s brownstone, I didn’t have to move very far. Sam pulled open the door as soon as I stepped on the curb.

She checked me out. “Wow! Thanks for making my job harder.”

I shrugged. “I’m not exactly expecting anyone to beat down the door to buy me drinks or what you like to call, ‘getting to know me.’”

Chapter 6:

The first of Sam's selection of bars was indistinguishably, a dive. A "hole in the wall," fitting, perhaps for the last drink of a dying blind man with seven bucks burning Washington-faced holes in his pocket. The door was heavy, like a dungeon's, and when Sam pulled it open, it creaked with a charm only a carpenter could love. A kiss of cigarette smoke and alcohol greeted us and wafted into the night's nostrils. Despite this all, we entered.

The glass sun of the streetlight lit up the bar through the open door. It was all wood; the floor and bar were a filthy conjoined mess, a manifestation of how stress or happiness unite us in the search for a good time. Sam looked at me, purse straps over her shoulder with her cell phone clutched tightly in hand. She looked around nervously. I thought I saw a tumbleweed request bottle service within the shadowy confines of the bar. It was the first time I saw her worried and it certainly didn't improve my confidence about the night's agenda.

"Citysearch.com said this place had the best crowd in town..." Sam began to explain.

I looked around. There was no jukebox, just a low hum from a vintage, neon Budweiser sign. If desolation drank, it would get shitfaced here.

"It might be because everyone is dead," I remarked. There was an old pool table in the back of the bar. A gray illusion of limbs pushed a pool cue across the dusty cloth. The crack of the cue ball against the Bakelite balls made my follicles quiver. A small light

swung above the table and the single player ignored us. In fact, Howard Roark would have noticed more.

“Sam, I know I drink beer in my pajamas like a cheapskate, but gimme some fucking credit. This place is a dead zone. I applaud you for busting out of your comfort zone to try and find a place we’d both enjoy, but this is a failure of epic proportions. I feel like you just put a Trojan horse of STDs in my Valentine’s Day chocolates. Do you hate me that much?”

Sam was deflated. She looked around trying to find an ounce of grace in the casket we were standing in. But when I looked at her, I couldn’t help but smile. She pushed some rogue strands of hair out of her face and laughed hard, embarrassed. She was wearing a flowery blouse that breathed with her laughter, and denim shorts. She had some white strappy shoes on, but I didn’t know what they were called. She matched them with a white headband. Fashionable, I guess. Another thing I lacked. I got distracted, unconsciously tracing the lines tattooed on her right calf: branches wrapping around her flesh.

“Kate, let’s make the best of it. I mean, maybe when it’s packed it’ll get awesome?” She noticed me staring at her calf. “I get a branch every time I make a poor decision that I could have avoided. I think I disqualify a lot of shit so I don’t have to get more. It’s almost torture at this point.”

I chuckled. “I bet you’d look like a redwood if you didn’t have those disqualifications.” I ran my finger along the bar top. There were no stools. Just planks

where somebody--who may have been something, stood once. The bar had scratches, cigarette burns and cracks in it.

The bartender was in the corner, nearest the pool table, reading. He was in our demographic most likely, but was a tall, lanky fellow with a beard and horn-rimmed glasses. He had a button down short-sleeved shirt on, and he looked way too studious to pop bottle-caps for a living. He could be writing a dissertation on the effects of darkness and cigarette smoke on the human psyche.

“What are you having, ladies?” He asked, without looking up.

I ordered two beers, looking at the shadows cast behind the bar. The wide terrain of liquor and accessory items... I thought of how many people, like me, came here and drank themselves emotionally dry? Is this what tonight is for me, my last hurrah?

The beers appeared. “Do you think about Beacon as a career?” Sam asked, sipping away, both elbows on the ragged bar, head turned towards me. She was referring to Beacon, Incorporated. Our workplace.

I sighed. “I don’t know what their slogan is, but it should be: ‘we pretend to pay while you pretend to work.’ Mutually beneficial, I would say.” I smiled and knocked the beer back with a gulp. Sam laughed, and coughed a bit.

This is fun, I conceded in my head. I could feel my emotional forecast changing. No more clouds and doom and gloom. For once.

“I’ve got the next round. I’m ordering four though, so Norman Bates over there doesn’t have to come back.” She motioned to the bartender, enveloped by his novel. She spoke louder to grab his attention, “Excuse me, four more please.”

“Are one of those for me?”

Sam was looking in her purse. She looked up wryly. “No. We’re alcoholics. Lesbian. Alcoholics.”

In a parallel universe, someone was kicking that guy’s cat, setting his house on fire and tea-bagging his mother at the same time. But in this universe, his balls were just set ablaze. He was *that* hurt.

I, on the other hand, choked on my beer. This suddenly was the best start to any good night I could remember ever having. And the night was still young... It could still be the best night I’ve ever had.

Chapter 7:

We were whisked away in the cool summer breeze. It was an air of irony. Here we are, breathing in the soul of the metropolis, but the very pulse of it is dead. We walked down the cavernous city streets and surrendered to the quiet. The subtle whistle of the air against my cheeks as it engulfed my ears, the sounds of tires rolling by, and my flip-flops against the pavement...

Six beers each and no sign of the gorgeous and unavailable type of man Samantha was scouring for. After all, her mission was only to get me outside; after that, no more. She was a mercenary and her target tonight? Y chromosomes.

As we patrolled the streets of the West Village, we saw a closed diner, a pizza shop and a liquor store. Gates pulled down and ATM signs in the window greeted us in our slightly inebriated exploration of the next great nightspot.

I spotted a green tarp and under its closure, a bouncer holding an ID scanner in his left hand. Empty tables and chairs rested under the canopy, and it was roped off from pedestrian traffic.

“What about this place? I can’t see the name or inside of it, but the music sounds fucking awesome,” I said, bobbing my head to faint drums.

“Whatever, at least there are warm bodies in there. Let’s go.”

“Ten dollars each, ladies. Get your IDs out.” He had typical bouncer garb: black t-shirt, pants and his head was shaved. There were diamond studs in both earlobes. He took the IDs and scanned them while a smaller, burly woman took our money and opened the door for us.

“Have an awesome time, ladies,” she coarsely instructed.

I nodded and saw utter darkness when the door was opened, save a couple of colored spotlights on the ceiling. I surveyed the crowd. The nightclub’s ratio strongly favored women, but I could see some flamboyant dancing from smaller-framed men. I swayed along with the beat.

A couple of the dancers smiled at us as we walked in. I gave a half-smile, but I wasn’t sure why. I didn’t want to be rude, but I’m not necessarily inviting anyone to talk to me either.

As we made our way through the crowd, we found a cozy spot at the bar. Sam leaned her back to the bar and closed her eyes. I thought maybe the night was wearing thin on her... But I had to get my ten bucks worth at this point. “Two beers, please.”

My eyes adjusted to the darkness and probed the bar area. Female bartenders, check. Beer? Check. Wines and liquors? Check. I knocked back my Amstel Light. As the wave of alcohol flooded my tongue, I peered up and saw a rainbow flag pinned to the ceiling. I swallowed hard and my chest tightened, as my lungs filled with the rush of burning alcohol. I began to choke. Sputtering beer all over my chin, I doubled over. I’m the girl choking in the lesbian bar. Don’t notice me, everyone.

So, enormous rainbow flag above the bar? Check.

With mouth agape, I slapped Sam’s back with the top of my right hand. It could have been her head, I wasn’t sure.

“Ow! What the hell, Kate...”

“Gay...”

“Gay what?”

“Bar.”

“Oh fuck, you don’t like this place either? That guy is kind of cute...” She pointed into the dance-floor rumpus.

It was not a man.

“That’s not a man.” I said, turning to face her.

“What the heck, Kate? Do you have to ruin, like, my life?” As she spoke, I grabbed her shoulders and forcibly turned her. I pointed to the flag.

I whispered, losing my breath, shifting my eyes back and forth. “That is a very gay flag and we are in a gay bar in a gay neighborhood in Gay York right now!”

She filled her cheeks with air as her eyes scattered around the room. She knew I was right.

“Well, fuck it then Kate, I’m going to dance.” And she walked away from me, into the abyss of thumping bass and sexual fluidity. I shook my head, abandoned and confused. I turned my attention back to the bartender, who, unbelievably, now didn’t notice me despite the fact that I was female. I noticed her, however, as she was one spray-tan away from shooting a fist-pumping instructional video.

I looked around again and corrected my original assessment: this place was all chicks, no dick. But what the hell is so wrong with me that I can’t get a bartender’s attention at a lesbian bar? “Hey, excuse me?” I waved. “Yeah, uh, can you just keep the Amstel Lights coming on this card right here? Yeah, do you guys have pitchers? No? Just

keep them coming on this.” I produced my Visa card. Maybe shiny plastic will get her randy.

I attempted to regain my bearings and when I finally stopped leaning over like an alcoholic at happy hour, there was a woman trying to get to the bar. She looked at me and mouthed “Are you okay?” I nodded, embarrassed. I shuffled over to allow her to come closer. As she waited for the bartender, I spoke. “Do you want something, because I have her attention.”

The girl wore a cutoff t-shirt and faded jeans. She was a fair-skinned brunette, and she stared at me, reading me, trying to digest whether it was a bad line or not. The girl looked uninterested, which just invited me to hear more of my own voice without any criticism.

“Think what you want, but that bartender...” I flicked my index finger at the target of my rejection currently swiping my Mets Visa. “I ordered a beer before I got on the line to the bathroom... Have you seen that thing? A new book of the Bible was written before I even saw the door. No, seriously, I celebrated the Second Coming waiting to pee and get a beer.” My audience of one chuckled. Her jaw almost unclenched.

“Rum and coke.”

“Rum and coke for...” I raised my eyebrow inquisitively. “And don’t worry; I’m not like, a lesbian. Well, a lesbian predator, at least. I mean, this is the first time I’ve ever been to a lesbian bar. I’m just trying to be nice, really.” I put my hands up in an innocent way.

“Oh. If you’re just being nice, why do you need my name?” She looked suspicious.

“Well, being friendly usually calls for names, playful glances, and jokes... Look at that, here’s your drink.” She went to hand me money but I stepped back. I needed to exit this awkward situation fast.

“Since I just freaked you out for the last five minutes, consider it compensation. We’re even.”

“No, we’re not. You paid. Here.”

I stepped away from the bar, avoiding her hand and her money. I felt like a fool. I wasn’t embarrassed... It was something I couldn’t describe. I wanted to duck into the sea of people dancing, that thick fog of bass thumping. Just forget what happened, leave this place and go back to my lame, predictable life. Fucking Sam decides it’s a good idea to go to a gay bar? Wait, I think this was my idea.

The girl shoved her money back in her front pocket. I glanced at her and saw how much smaller than me she was. Easy on the eyes by every definition; flawless skin, brown eyes, long dark hair. I thought about how many guys would stab each other in the throats to be near this girl and here I was, the non-gay who is bombing with her.

Unintentionally tanking with a beautiful lesbian at a lesbian bar? Check. What do you call a list that has all the things you didn't even know you were going to inevitably fail at before you die? It would be the opposite of a bucket list. I suppose it's a vomit bag. I found comfort in the fact that the misery of that ill-fated interaction was over. My life could be a comic book, I thought. And the Sunday funny pages closed on my face when

she walked over to me. I watched her Chuck Taylor's approach my flip-flops. She looked like she was going to speak, so I leaned in close.

“If you're not going to let me buy you a drink and you're not going to accept my money, then you're going to dance with me.”

I swallowed hard as the weight of her words pressed against my skin. “Well, that would be fair, but I'm a shitty dancer so you're out of luck. If we dance, I'm going to owe you two more drinks: during and after.”

“You're silly.” She laughed and shook her head.

“I can be, sometimes. I think the sad part about this is that I'm being brutally fucking honest right now.”

“Most people can't handle that.” She pointed towards herself.

I continued. “Smart, beautiful, honest women are very intimidating.” What the fuck? Am I hitting on this girl? She smiled again. “You're pretty smooth for a ‘non-lesbian predator.’”

“Well, I'm being myself. Wait a sec... I'm sorry...” I stepped back and extended my hand. “I'm Kate, by the way. It's nice to meet you.”

“Alex,” she said as she looked down and shook my hand. “It's nice to meet you, too. You've never been here before?”

“Nope, never. If I have, I'm pretty sure you would have heard all this ‘smooth talk’ before. This is all I've got.” I laughed nervously. It was the type of nervousness before a big speech, or before you try to crack a long ball in the 9th inning to win it all. It

was a confident, easy-going nervousness. I didn't want it to go away. She smiled warmly and shook her head. And then, she pulled me by my forearm further in the dance floor.

Chapter 8:

Strobes swung around the ceiling like searchlights. She leaned into me to talk in my ear. I inhaled and it smelled like clean laundry, rose petals, lavender, a new car and a puppy combined. It was very obvious to my usually naïve self that I was attracted to this woman. I swallowed hard again and hoped she didn't notice I was swallowing her scent along with desperately needed oxygen.

“I know you're trying to avoid dancing with me by using that sharp wit of yours, but you can't. I like this song and it's almost over.” She kept a small distance from me as she moved her body rhythmically to the music. As I stood, mesmerized by her hips, in the faint distance beyond her rhythmic sways was the ultimate buzz-kill: Sam watching me. Watching me, watch Alex and her watching both of us. I backpedaled to the bar. Sam followed. Alex continued to dance, but noticed the pow-wow.

“Hey, uh, what's up?” I tried to sound normal but a dry, grating tone substituted itself in, rather than the cutesy and innocent I was going for. I took a gulp of my beer.

She mocked me accusingly. “‘Hey, uh, what's up?’ How about you were checking out that girl! I totally saw! You're not supposed to be gay, Kate, we were just supposed to be IN a lesbian bar!”

“Well, who was the Einstein that said she was going to dance after she found out we were in a chick place? At least we're having fun. The last place was your epic fail, Sam. Besides, when in Rome-” I began to trail off. I was watching Alex. I took another large swig.

“When in Rome? ‘When in Rome,’ what, Kate, what? Fuck the Romans' women?”

You're straight! I mean, I think you are... I never asked, shit... I don't really care, I have more important issues. So, wait, are you into that chick?" Sam's concern was making me rational, depressed, angry Kate again, and I wanted out. Even on the "Richter scale of Sam," her tone was hovering around six point dramatic.

"Listen..." I sighed, shrugged and I couldn't do much else as far as looking pathetically confused. "I don't know. She captured my attention, unexpectedly. What does it matter, Sam? I'm not planning on sleeping with her... We were just talking. You're making a way bigger deal about this than you should. She caught my attention. That's all." I took another gulp.

"Okay, okay. Well, in that case, I'm glad you have such an open mind. What do you think of that girl over there? Isn't she magical?" Sam pointed to a girl dancing on a stripper pole. She wore lime green boy shorts, matching bikini top and black leather thigh-high boots. I could have sworn I'd seen her on the cover of a XXX film, or at least in an ad on YouPorn.com. She was a busty fake blonde who bit her fingers, twirled her hair and danced and spun to the music. She made eye contact with Sam and blew kisses. It was awe and vomit-inspiring.

My first reaction was to snap from being put on the defensive, but then, looking at the fake blonde, I couldn't.

Sam was staring at the dancer. As tacky and disgusting as I thought that blonde was, I was happy that the glare of Sam's accusations had passed. "Go talk to her, Sam. Here."

I waved at the bartender and she popped another beer open for me. I handed it to Sam. “Look at me...” I snapped my fingers in front of Sam’s hypnotized face. “Sam, look at me. Okay. I want you to go up to her and say: ‘This is a gift for the hardest-working girl here.’”

“But that’s corny. Is that going to work?” She continued staring at the girl.

“It will. I promise. One hundred per cent success rate. No failures or you get a free beer.”

“Alright.” She shrugged and walked over there. She tapped the dancer on the boot and I didn’t watch the rest.

I walked over to Alex with a newly ordered rum and coke. She smiled again and butterflies fluttered in my stomach. “A gift for the dancing queen,” I yelled over the music. “Listen, are you with somebody? Like, here...” I trailed off, submerged in my nervous energy. I wanted to cloak myself in darkness and scale a building like a vigilante. But alas, there I stayed, awaiting her response.

“No.” She was dismissive with her answer, and kept bopping her head to the hip-hop.

“So, why do you come here?”

“I like the scene. I like to dance. Most girls are too intimidated to talk to me, and then they say ‘I have too much attitude’ when I approach them.”

“Don’t you get tired of girls trying to pick you up?”

“It doesn’t happen THAT often.” She looked surprised. She clearly didn’t know how pretty she was.

“Good, so I won’t seem like everyone else than,” I began. “Would you want to go get something to eat? Like... With me? Some... Pancakes?” I felt like a marionette. Someone was pulling my strings and I watched my helpless limbs flail about. The air continued to spill out of my lungs. Were these my words?

She considered it. “Well, I’m here with... What about my friends?”

“Invite them. I’ll buy all of you pancakes. Besides, I’m sure it would be more fun than paying Lindsay Lohan over there.” I looked at the bartender, the bane of my existence.

She laughed and squeezed my arm. Then she was gone, vanishing into the mass, trying to find her friends. I closed my tab and glanced at the go-go dancer, now off the pole, sitting on Sam’s lap. I would have been surprised, but she had to run out of men sometime.

As I waited around, I couldn’t believe what was happening. Did I actually want to keep hanging out with this girl?

“Well, the pancakes were tempting but it seems they all want to keep dancing.”

“So I guess this is where our story ends?” I asked trying not to sound disappointed, but tracing my finger around the neck of my empty beer bottle.

“I wouldn’t go that far. It looks like you really had those pancakes in mind. Am I wrong?” I looked into her eyes, not sure if I should respond. I was scared of opening a Hoover Dam of words as soon as I parted my lips.

“What’s going on in that complicated head of yours, Kate?” She looked me in my eyes, as I tried to look away.

I chuckled, caught in the web of her beauty. “Do you want the truth or the bullshit?”

“The truth. Always the truth.”

“I was thinking how much trouble I would get into if I kissed you right now.” I looked down, at the neck of the beer bottle and let out a couple of deep breaths before looking up again.

“Oh.” She smiled slightly. She could see she had affected me, and she liked it. “Well, what if I kiss you?”

I smirked and nodded my head, trying not to look surprised. Trying to hide how loud and fast my heart was beating. Without a thought, I said, “Well, if you kiss me, I can’t get into trouble... I mean, I can’t control what you do.”

She leaned in close, closed her eyes and kissed me. Spot on, the soft folds of her mouth met mine, and I was frozen. I didn’t move, I just closed my eyes and enjoyed all five seconds of it.

“So, are you going to get into trouble for that?” She licked her lips.

The word ‘sparks’ can’t describe it. It can’t be put into words or thoughts. My body went on autopilot, not thinking or feeling foolish. I just felt us together in a place I normally wouldn’t be able to stand longer than five minutes. She was what I wanted at this moment. I felt real right now, because I met her.

“No... I’m going to get in trouble... For this.” I pulled close and kissed her. She kissed back, and I felt her chest against mine. I liked it. The connection to her. After a minute or two, we separated, still close, breathing the same air.

“That was nice.” Alex smiled.

“Yeah, it... It really was.”

We kissed a few more times before I got our coats and we exited, our hands entwined. I don't know when or how, if it was another uncontrollable reflex, but our fingers found each other and connected, like we did, and didn't release. Our hands didn't feel like strangers touching anymore, they felt safe and comfortable within the other, a compliment to the limbs we carried and the bodies they are attached to. Alex stopped in front of me and kissed me, deeply.

The tip of her tongue brushed against my lips. She put her arm around my neck and pulled my ear close to her mouth. The moisture on her lips touched my ear. I felt the heat of her passion on my spine as she whispered, “I want to come home with you.”

I could feel the blood of my cheek rising on the left side... A smirk. The most beautiful girl I have ever seen wants to come home with me and my body thinks a smirk is the best response. I cleared my throat.

“Well, ya know... I could be an axe murderer.”

“You can murder me in the morning.”

“I'm... Not sure that's a good idea.” But I wasn't sure of my answer. It seemed like the honorable, but stupid, thing to do. Alex frowned, surprised by my reply but she nodded, “Okay.”

“Wait a second, you know what? I know an amazing breakfast place.” Chivalry is not dead, only drunk and sleepy.

I stepped out into the thin night traffic with an arm raised to retrieve a taxi, which

I did, rather quickly. I opened the door and stuck my head in to give him my address, before stepping out and motioning for her to enter. Alex looked confused when I entered and closed the door behind us. The cab took off without a word exchanged between us.

“I changed my mind about the diner. I know a better place a bit further away.”

“How far?”

“Don’t worry. I promise I’ll get you home in several, neatly sliced pieces.” She punched my arm lightly before gently moving it and snuggling underneath. She was warm. Alex may not have known it at the moment or believed me if I tried to say it, but she was safe with me. She dozed off wrapped in me and even then, she was beautiful. While we were on the Prospect Expressway near my home, I woke her. She wiped the sleep from her face and she looked around.

“I’m sorry, I guess I was a bit more worn out than I thought. Where are we?”

“Going to my apartment.”

She smiled. “I thought that wasn’t a good idea.”

“Well, it wasn’t a better idea to say no... And two wrongs don’t make a right.

Through this little act right here, I’ve restored balance to the universe. Also, I make eggs Benedict like nobodies business.”

“Is that right? Well, prove it, buddy!”

We stepped out of the cab. I watched as she explored the tree-lined sidewalk and I pulled my keys out of my pocket. While we were in the elevator, I stared. In looking hard at her, I tried to see myself. Who am I? The impulsive woman who’s not gay or bisexual, but has a woman spending the night at her place, or the fearful, angry woman who doesn’t

want to be bothered at all? The chime signaled my floor and I shook the doubting from my head. What does one night mean in the grand scheme of things? She doesn't expect this to go anywhere, right, so why should I?

When we got to my apartment door, I warned her about Roses. She didn't seem to be thrilled about my cat, but I hoped it wouldn't be a big deal. I opened the door and saw Roses sleeping on the couch. I ushered Alex inside and took her coat. I showed her where I was putting everything to ease her mind. I pointed to the bathroom and turned on the light.

“So, this is my place. Can I get you something? Eggs, maybe?”

“Your place is nice. Big. I was just kidding about the breakfast. Drinking and eating makes me nauseous.” She pouted slightly.

“Wow, that's weird. Most people have to eat and drink,” I said. I turned off the bathroom light and walked into the last square corridor. I flipped the switch on the wall and my bedroom was illuminated. The platform bed, with its sheets still casually strewn about, wasn't the sexiest place at that moment. I pointed to a wooden bench against the wall. She sat down. I closed the bedroom door, sat down next to her and turned towards her.

“You know... I could sleep on the couch if this is weird.”

“Is it weird for you? I'm fine.”

“I just want you to be comfortable.”

“Thank you. You're sweet. But I'm fine.” She was sincere. I looked down. I felt

silly. I was coddling a stranger. She lifted my chin with the tips of her fingers. My eyes met hers and I leaned in to kiss her. We kissed, and we began getting closer.

After what felt like days, she grabbed my hand and walked me to the bed. We kissed and laid together in our clothes. Touching and continuing to explore one another. I felt alive.

“We shouldn’t do this,” I struggled to speak the words as she kissed my neck. She stopped and lifted up her face. “No, you didn’t do anything wrong. You feel amazing. I want you and I want this. I just... Like you, Alex and I don’t want you to think of me as some flash-in-the-pan.” She kissed me and she smiled. She understood. I held her close to me, pulled up the blanket, and kissed her forehead.

“Goodnight, pretty girl in my bed.”

“Goodnight, beautiful.”

Chapter 9:

When I felt the soft coolness of skin against my face, I didn't know where I was. Her lips brushed against my exposed cheek, while the other side of my face suffocated within the folds of pillowy softness and fabric. My eyes were closed, but I was awake. Her smell was nirvana and I didn't want to forget this moment.

“I can see you smiling,” she whispered. “It's time to get up, sleepy head.”

With my eyes still closed, I cleared my throat. “I'm smiling because I know when I open my eyes, I'm going to see your face.” I blinked, and it was like the wrapping came off a present on Christmas morning.

There was that woman, hovering over me, smiling at me. I don't believe in a higher power, but the sight of that for the first time, might make you believe in something. I saw, for sure, why men like women. I turned my face slowly, and she instinctively leaned back. As she did, I looked over at my nightstand. It was six in the morning. “Do you have time for breakfast or something? I owe you pancakes, or eggs Benedict, but it looks like you have other plans...”

I noticed her wearing my bathrobe. The terrycloth clung to her and exposed the nape of her neck. I was distracted. “I hope you don't mind. I take a shower every morning and I didn't feel like I should go digging in your closet. This was hanging on the door.” She shrugged. The moisture of the shower brought curls to the roots of her dark hair. It was loose, falling over her face, still wet. I couldn't remember if she looked this radiant last night. She looked at me with a raised eyebrow.

Was I saying something? Maybe I was... But I couldn't remember. I couldn't

think. I couldn't pretend to be smooth. I could be a goofball though, that I knew for sure. Sarcastic goofball? I play that part quite well.

“You know, I have NMB.”

She positioned herself upright, curious. “What... Is that a disease?”

“It's not a disease. But, it stands for ‘non-morning breath.’ It makes me kissable for eight-thousand, seven hundred, and sixty-six hours straight.”

Alex laughed and nudged me a little. “Where the hell did you get that number from?” She kept her hand on my shoulder. “I was actually starting to think something was wrong with you.”

I grinned. “That is the amount of hours in a year. And it is, technically, an affliction when the only one who appreciates it unconditionally is your cat.”

Alex frowned. “I'd appreciate it, if it were true. Morning breath is not to be trifled with. I have some mean breath myself in the AM. I wouldn't force anyone to endure that.”

“Try me. I'm serious, I'm not saying I can win a spot in an Orbit commercial, but compared to what most people smell like at 6... I'm a god.”

She leaned in close, hesitantly, as she lifted up my blanket and her lithe frame slid under it. She put a hand on the side of my waist. I could feel the smooth skin of her leg against my exposed legs. I was glad I changed into those boxer shorts in the middle of the night.

“Hey, what are you wearing under there?” She put her face under the sheet. “When did you put those on? You're like a heater. It's so warm in bed with you.”

She brought her face in close. She shut her eyes and swallowed. She opened one big brown eye. “Okay, breathe. I can take it.” She closed them again. I could see the wrinkles on the tops of her eyelids. I could see each curved eyelash. I kissed her eyes. I kissed her nose. She smiled. I kissed her lips and her mouth opened for mine. She moved her body closer. I put my arm around her and felt a million cloth strands brush against my palm. I tightened my arm. I wanted her to feel me holding her.

She inhaled through her nose as we kissed. I wanted her to know... That I needed her. Her tongue snaked between my lips and felt for me. The apex toyed with me, swirling slowly, awakening me. I kissed her as I closed my mouth, stopping our interaction. She opened her eyes.

She made a slight moan as I pulled away. She looked at me sensually, I assumed, but I wasn't sure. I felt tingling everywhere. “Why'd you stop?”

“I was simply demonstrating...” I started to say, nervously. I think my voice cracked.

She kissed me and moved from lying next to me, to straddling me. I immediately thought about the fact that there was nothing under that bathrobe. I did a Wile E. Coyote gulp. I'd never made love to woman before. I put my hands back on her waist, and I saw the looseness of the robe's knot.

I sat up and cradled her back. Chest to chest now, only cloth between us and sheet around us. Half of me wanted to be closer to her, kissing her, smelling her... The other half wanted to stop her from opening that robe. My heart was a pendulum swinging its way out of my ribcage. I looked up at her, hair encasing my face, Dolphins t-shirt still on.

She pushed my hair behind my ears with her hands. I closed my eyes as her fingers danced over my neck. I felt her dermal ridges. Time stopped as she touched. We kissed. I tried to speak. “Wait... Do you have work? I never asked what you do...” She kissed my cheeks.

She opened her eyes, and looked at me. I could count the freckles on her cheeks, we were so close. “I work for a gym. I’m a personal trainer. I’m off today, Kate. I usually take the day off after I go out, so I don’t feel pressured to leave early if I’m having a good time.”

She kissed my face again, getting close to my ear, sending chills up my spine. She kissed my lips and I felt her push me down onto my back. I lay there, taking it in, forgetting where I was. I absorbed it all.

She pulled my hands off her waist and untied the robe’s knot. It fell around her waist, and over her knees, still wrapped around me. She moved it with one hand and placed it on my floor. There she was, exposed and pristine, on top of me.

We kissed for a while until I rolled her over onto her back. I pulled the black micro fleece blanket over us. I feared she might get cold. I think I can figure this out, I thought, suddenly possessed by a need to satisfy her.

My ego consumed me, as did the fear of being the terrible lover she references amongst friends tomorrow. I wanted to do everything, anything, to make that moment right.

That was my first lesbian anatomy class. I called out “sick” that day, the first time in a year. I was “consumed by something indescribable.”

Chapter 10:

We sat at the breakfast bar, quiet. I had prepared the eggs Benedict as promised, complete with homemade Hollandaise sauce and cinnamon toast. She was wearing my robe again, and I looked at her every couple of moments. My heart felt swollen, engulfed by the little bit of noise she made, and when she made no noise, I noticed that she improved the silence of my apartment.

“I’ve never actually done this.” She said, looking over in my direction; fork in hand, at the pause after a swallow.

“Oh.” I said, without looking up from my plate. My eyes rolled against the top of my eyelids in her direction. The implication had been made. She put her fork down and tilted her head, slightly offended.

With a scoff, she addressed me. “So, you’ve known me all of 48 hours and we’ve had sex, so you think it’s okay to say I go home with random women all the time?”

I calmly put my fork down at the edge of the plate and wedged a piece of cinnamon toast between the middle finger and the thumb. “If rap music has taught me anything, it is that hoes always tell you they don’t do that kind of thing on the first date. But they do, and not surprisingly, they do it well.”

I braced myself for a slap. Orange juice in the face. But her facial expression looked far worse. Perhaps she was about to rip my larynx out. I held on, remaining serious. It was a necessary risk for the reward of her laughter. I continued, “Bitches ain’t shit but hoes and tricks, by the way.”

She began to laugh and she pushed me. “Oh my god, you fucker. I thought you

were serious.” She laughed again. “You’re so dry and sarcastic. How does anyone put up with you? I was so taken aback, like, ‘What is she saying?’ I wanted to punch you in the face.”

I sliced through a sauced-up piece of egg with my fork and lifted it to my mouth. In between bites, I replied, “Wow. Should I be worried? You seem to have a violent streak. Should I throw you out on your naked ass?”

“Shut up, Kate... Can you be serious for a second? I want to talk like adults for a moment, if you can handle that. God, I can’t believe you called me a whore. I should have slapped you... Anyway... Thank you for breakfast. You’ve spoiled me too much already. It’s yummy and very sweet of you to do.”

“You’re welcome. Unlike you though, I actually don’t do this. I’m not even sure what this is.” I made a circle in the air with my fork.

“When was the last time you had a girlfriend?”

I chewed my toast and shook my head.

“Oh,” she nodded. “You’re one of those girls. The noncommittal type. I usually read that type right away. I guess you were different.” She motioned with her hands really far apart. “If the noncommittal types are on the prowl over here, I’m usually over here.”

I shook my head again, while building a great pyramid on my plate with toast crust. The silence in between this dialogue was heavier than the alone I’d grown comfortable with in the last few years.

She was looking at me, waiting for more information, allowing me to formulate

my thoughts. She was listening. I couldn't remember the last time someone listened to me.

“There's no commitment to make. Or avoid. No one has seen this place. You're the first. As far as girlfriends... Never had one. And this isn't a Liz Phair 'Fuck and Run' type of thing I'm saying, either... You were the first woman I ever touched like that. So thanks for setting the bar really high.”

“Wait. Whoa. No. Uh, no way. No.” She turned her full body towards me in the stool. “First lover... Ever? As in you're not even a fucking lesbian? You don't date women? What are you, bi?!” The gears were shifting before my eyes.

“No. I mean, wait a sec, here. You're making this a bigger deal than it is, I think... I don't know, really. I know I've never really felt as strongly attracted to anyone, male or female, before you. That makes sense to me. What else is there to figure out?” I was confused, nervous, anxious. I didn't know what the fretting was about, but it wasn't good.

Her voice grew. “You don't understand because you don't know how these things work! They don't ever work! I don't date straight girls. Or bi girls! Especially confused ones! Those things never work out. I don't need to worry about my new girlfriend leaving me for a man. It's unnecessary stress. I'm no one's experiment.”

I scratched my head. “What are you talking about? Why are you so mad? I don't know why I've never felt this comfortable with anybody before. So what? I'm not going to ask too many questions. Why can't we just play it by ear? I'm not asking for marriage.”

“Why were you at the bar last night? It’s a lesbian bar!” Her voice became less pleasant as the argument ensued.

“I was out drinking. Why is that important? I mean, I wasn’t looking to meet anyone that night, and here you are. I think it hit us both by surprise.”

She wasn’t happy, and I wasn’t making it better with my nonchalance. I understood what was happening. She was ruining my first “one night stand,” which should have been a moment of triumph, but all I kept feeling was scared that she would leave. Scared I’d have to explain to myself that this was all real, and awesome, but it’s over now. Back to your regularly scheduled life, Kate.

“This was a huge mistake. You and I... This. Whatever this is... Was... It can't go anywhere. Shit. I never do this. Listen, what do I owe you for the drinks and the cab and...”

“Whoa. What the hell? Shit, leave because you hate my place. Leave because you hate my cat. Leave because I’m a shitty lay. Maybe the eggs were bad. But not because I’m not gay. Or gay enough.”

She got up and pierced me with her cold glare and angry voice. “You’re not gay! Forget ‘gay enough.’ You’re not even gay! Do you even know what you are?!”

I had never been asked that before. Normally, I’d shake it off. Ignore it. I’m not an inanimate object. I’m a real person. Skin and bones. I believed in love, perfect timing and dreams. Once.

“I’m Katharine Wilson. I’m 24 years old. I...”

She blew by me in a hurry. I couldn’t see her but I knew she was changing.

Leaving. Returning to normal form. Wiping her memory bank clear of the “mistake” she had made. I stared at my dark hallway in silence. After what felt like something longer than eternity passed, she walked out of the bedroom, returned to the self I’d initially become magnetized to.

“I just can’t do this. I had a great time, but I’ve just got too much to handle already to try... This out. Especially...” She trailed off as she watched me, still sitting on the stool. She knew the rest didn’t matter to me.

I nodded. I walked into the hall and grabbed her coat. I opened it for her. I wrapped her in it. I walked to the door. All mechanical, almost programmed; a drone of me going through the motions... The alive me, found and abandoned. Alive, but not living. I unlocked the door, turning the brass knob at regular speed. No prolonged, cinematic goodbye sequences in this story, please.

“I’d like it if you didn’t contact me. It will just make things harder and more confusing. Especially for you.” I looked at her. I had dryness in my throat. I sounded like Isaac Hayes when I spoke. “There’s nothing confusing about it. I respect your decision.”

“Thank you.”

And she was gone. A figment of real life, gone like an imaginary friend.