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Anglofile

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ANGLOFILE

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Kaci Carpenter

May 2011

ANGLOFILE

Date Recommended 4/19/11

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I dedicate this piece to every Anny still in search of her Prince William.

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ANGLOFILE

Kaci Carpenter May 2011 Pages 145

Directed By: David J. Bell, Dale Rigby, Elizabeth Weixel

Department of English Western Kentucky University

Anny Sterling is stuck. After a freak accident that left her father disabled and without a steady income, she returned home after one semester of college to help pay the bills while her older sister Emily fled to Europe to spend her time chasing dark-haired men named Franco and Pablo. At twenty-five, Anny now spends her days at the local insurance agency running errands for other people and reciting the alphabet song in the file room. There's little to no hope for advancement as she is short the required college hours to qualify for even an associate degree, but she can't leave the job.

The only thing keeping Britophile Anny sane is her daily dream of one day winning the lottery and moving her family to an old English castle. However her weekly daydreams come to a halt when not only does she encounter her real-life Prince William, but Emily decides to make a return appearance after a nearly six year absence. Ultimately, Anglofile is the story of a girl too wrapped up in a culture that's not hers to notice what's happening in the one that is.

CHAPTER I

Buckingham Palace contains over 77,000 square metres of floor space. Tapestries hundreds of years old, priceless paintings, as well as 760 windows and 1,514 doors make up the interior of Queen Elizabeth's official London residence, the interior of which is kept in perfect order and cleaned by a portion of the over four hundred people who call the palace their workplace. Queen Elizabeth II meets with the Prime Minister and various foreign dignitaries in the Queen's Audience Room, a high-ceilinged chamber covered in white and enhanced with gilded edges, mahogany furniture with curved feet, and the smell of sweet pink and white blossoms.

Twelve hours a day, I alternate between sitting and standing on the dirty floor of a room smaller than my closet. Six head-high beige filing cabinets press against the walls, all but obscuring the 35-year-old wallpaper (the roses so faded that the flowers themselves look wilted). The room is a permanent shelter for these musty scents of paper and ink, as well as a long burnt-out strawberry candle that no one in the office will throw away. The only window in the room faces inside to the lobby of the office, where rests a bare couch and coffee table arrangement that has not changed since I was twelve.

I pick up a thin manila folder from the gargantuan "To Be Filed" stack and examine its tab ("Alex McWherter- Misc. Claim Reports") before heading to the corresponding cabinet and rifling through its bottom drawer. Gradually, my ankles begin to complain so I slide to the dusty, uncarpeted concrete. Three weeks into working at the Franklin-Watson Insurance Agency and I learned the hard way not to wear my nicest black slacks to work on filing day. Six years into this job I had learned not to care; dust was an accepted way of life, just like Parker-Bowles was an accepted mistress to Prince

Charles during the Lady Di years. We all knew about it; it just wasn't proper to mention its existence.

Picking up the next folder on top of my stack, I begin to sing under my breath. "Aye bee cee dee ee eff gee, ach eye jay kay elleminopee. Cue arr ess…"

Despite being hard at work in the same room since eight this morning, I still have yet to make a sizeable dent in the huge stack of un-filed folders remaining from yesterday. Every half-hour one of my coworkers comes in with a new sheaf of papers (unalphabetized messes with staples sticking out just ready to prick me in the finger). The folders are dropped atop my file tower, disrupting my "alphabetize first, then file" system. Thanks to my family's history with minor obsessive compulsive disorders, I stop and re-alphabetize the folders before beginning work again just in time for someone else to come in with a new stack of processed claims to mess my system up again.

As if said God wanted to present an immediate demonstration that this would be my fate for all eternity, my coworker Frank enters with a messy bundle tucked under one arm. I smile hopefully at him (as if it will change the workload he is about to thrust on me), but he is too busy typing on his Blackberry with his free hand to notice the mid-twenties crone in the corner. He makes his second deposit of the day and strides out of my second home without a word.

"You're *welcome*," I hiss after his retreating form, and after a brief moment of internal debate, shuffle my feet over to take a peek at the new files. My shoulders sag in looking at the topmost name ("Alexander"). After briefly debating committing hare-kari with the stapler, I glance at the clock above the door frame. Eleven-thirty. I deserve a break.

I settle myself in the office secretary's chair, sinking myself into the black padded material (with extra lumbar support, according to the Office Max catalogue). Paula has been here longer than anyone, and seniority (and Paula) demands nice office supplies. There's a note on the monitor that she left me before departing for lunch reminding me a Mr. Ellis from the Nashville office would be calling for my boss Jules in the next half-hour, but I ignore it. In a matter of minutes I am deeply involved in continuing an old episode of Monty Python on YouTube, one that I started when I took my first break at nine forty-five this morning.

Before I know it, my eyes are closed and I'm just listening. Listening turns into daydreaming, and William and I are back to sitting on the terrace arguing about what to order the kids for dinner again. I'm thinking a takeout curry; he wants to go downtown for kippers. Occasionally, William (my charmingly fantastic British fantasy of a spouse) will talk about taking the kids to Buckingham for a quick visit tomorrow because come on, Anny, the kids have to have a little culture. I don't even have the strength to protest any more, too in love with both William and my city. The London Eye blinks at us in the distance, while the smell of left-handed traffic and thousands of years of history drifts upward. It forms a sweet perfume of the Isle that I get an urge to bottle and sell to the poor girls at home in the States, those who didn't land their British hunk and are still back in Tennessee filing papers.

I muse over my life with William as I continue to spin, the rotations slowing as the details increase. In my dream I speak with a flawless accent. A posh, trippy accent that makes me seem one thousand times more intelligent and charming than I am. I've been known to write emails of a particular colour and practise, but have never worked on

the auditory element of my fantasy, a fact I decide to null in the twenty minutes I have left.

As I dwell on the thought of practicing my accent on the unsuspected town folk of western Tennessee, the phone rings. With both Jules and Frank (sadly, my immediate superior) gone, who are they to question my telephone answering habits? I've watched enough British movies and television to have a decent grasp of how they pronounce certain words. I could do this.

"Cheerio, there. Franklin-Watson Insurance. This is Anny Sterling speaking. To whom may I direct your call today?"

"I'm sorry, I think I may have the wrong number," answers a male voice, the velvety sound of which makes chills run up my spine. I haven't heard someone pronounce "sorry" like that since I watched E! interview Orlando Bloom last night before going to bed. I'm momentarily stunned, the combination of fear and pure adrenaline-induced excitement rendering me absolutely silent. "Is this the Clarksville, Tennessee Franklin-Watson location?"

"Yeah…I mean, yes, this is Franklin-Watson. Sorry about that. Can I help you?" Dropping my disastrous accent, I'm too flustered by the real live Brit on the other end to even feel overtly embarrassed. Perhaps I could listen to him read the phone book out loud for several hours. Or read anything, really. Dr. Seuss, Harry Potter, the Magna Carta…I'm not picky.

On the other end, the owner of the magical voice chuckles. It sounds one million times more sophisticated than I could ever hope to muster on my own. "I was told to call Jules White. My name is William Ellis, from the Nashville office."

“Oh my God,” I whisper before I can stop myself. Becky has to know. William Ellis is on the phone, and he’s British. He’s supposedly from the Nashville office and British. It’s William. My British pub-owner William who wants to take little Joe and Kimberly to Buckingham next weekend.

“Beg pardon?” William Ellis says. *Shit.*

“OhmyGod---iknewit!” I finish lamely, catching a glimpse of myself in the computer’s reflection. Thank goodness William Ellis can’t see me, or he’d think he was talking to a beetroot instead of a (semi)intelligent human being. My cheeks are now flushed, deer in the headlights eyes out full-force. I laugh nervously. “I knew that’s who you were—William Ellis—and what you were, um, calling for. I just like to, uh…”

“Let God know?” William Ellis chuckles. I’m not sure if he’s making fun of me or not, but I’m beyond caring what he thinks of me. After all, I’m the freak who first makes fun of his country and then trips over her tongue taking the Lord’s name in vain like an overly excitable sorority girl. Even though I know, from my minor obsession with all things England, that Britain has become progressively secular over the past thirty or so years, it would be my luck if William Ellis was a devout Catholic who was going to toss some Hail Marys at me.

“Well, I like to think of it as making you feel special,” I word vomit, wishing that Paula would come back from lunch early and snatch the phone away. Clearly, I’m not fit for human interaction. Not now, not ever. “Letting God know, making you feel important…not that you’re not important. I mean, obviously you are; you’re William Ellis from the Nashville office. You’re way more important than I am, but that…That’s it.”

"Well, I'm glad to see religion and southern geniality still thrives in the Bible Belt," William Ellis says, and my heartbeat picks back up. He's teasing me. A British man with a lovely young-sounding voice is teasing me over the phone (maybe things aren't completely hopeless after all). I can't even speak, my brain's neurons moving as if through Yorkshire pudding. After a long silence, William Ellis manages an uneasy "I'm teasing you, love. No need to clam up on me."

"Oh," I manage. He called me love. *Love.* "I knew that." Sorry, William Ellis. Sorry I'm a complete idiot who can't even string a sentence together right now because I am so affected by someone who simply has a different way of pronouncing "sorry" than I do.

"Is Ms. White in her office?"

I force myself to straighten up, a hint of the semiprofessional masquerade gradually seeping into me. "Actually, Ms. White's on her lunch break. She should be back in thirty minutes if you'd like for me to take your number and have her call you back."

"No need," he replies easily. I can do this. Little questions, little answers. No long blurty train-of-thought speeches. "I just wanted to let her know I'm about forty-five minutes away and should be in the office a quarter before one this afternoon. She asked for me to phone in advance, and I wasn't quite sure how advanced I should be."

I swallowed hard. William Ellis was not only charming over the phone, but he was bringing his charm here. Here, to Nowheresville, Tennessee to stop by Nobody's Insurance Agency. Could his visit be the culmination all of my years spent being patient

and good finally paying off? “Well, I’ll just leave her a note letting her know you phoned. Like I said, she’ll be in before one.”

“Thank you very much. Looking forward to making your acquaintance,” he says and our call is disconnected.

I stare at the receiver for a long time, hardly believing the conversation that had just taken place. William Ellis was coming here. During my lunch break. He’s going to see my file room, my empty chair, and my back room office decorated solely with Frank’s phone answering guide and the little Beanie Baby owl my father gave me for my high school graduation. He’s going to see all of that and then go away back to Nashville. That will be the only time I’ll ever be in contact with someone from England (even indirectly) and he will go away seeing me forever as the stupid American who not only takes the Lord’s name in vain, has various cases of verbal diarrhea, and has a brown dust spot on her pants that won’t come out, but makes fun of his country’s way of speaking to boot.

Maybe it’ll be a good thing. Maybe it’ll be good that I’ll never see him. I’ll never blush and stammer in his presence like I did over the phone. He will never see the shade of red currently fading from my cheeks, never see the way I curl my toes when I’m a complete idiot. Paula returns from lunch, and I leave her desk and wander back to my office to grab my purse before heading out the door to meet Sean and Becky at Florence’s for lunch.

Maybe meeting William Ellis, my very first real-life Brit, will be a good thing. He could have short term memory loss; he could forget, like most people I come into contact with professionally, that I even exist. These all sound completely plausible.

I just wish I could convince myself they might have a snowball's chance of being true.

"She's terrible. Absolutely terrible," I can hear Becky complaining from the front door of Florence's. She and Sean sit at our usual table, coffee for three steaming in the white mugs already in front of them. Florence's is a tiny Southern Eats restaurant two blocks away from Franklin-Watson Insurance. My grandfather ate there on his lunch break, my father ate there, and now, by default, I eat there. I know each waitress by who her mother is (who worked there before she did), and the patrons know me by who my grandparents were. I suppose a group of twenty-four-year-olds should be eating somewhere fancier or at a more modern restaurant, but I crave the simplicity and familiarity of Florence's (and occasionally the blueberry pie, which is amazing).

I wade through the crowd of familiar faces already sitting in their usual booths, waving hellos to my father's former coworkers and stopping to chat with Amber Morales, who I went to high school with (and who is our usual waitress). As I reach the table, my foot clips someone's purse in my eagerness to reach them and I fall gracelessly into my chair.

"Hey guys-"

"I mean, it's like she's bipolar almost," Becky interrupts, acknowledging my presence with a flick of her head. Her dark eyes are wide, her long reddish hair twisted up in a knot; she's clearly in what my father refers to as "rare form" today. Her ten dollar manicured hands wrap around her mug and she takes a long, luxurious drink. Becky

drinks caffeine like a smoker inhales a cigarette, and it is only when she is completely filled with the drug that she detaches the mug from her lips and grudgingly sits it back on the table.

"Who's bipolar?" I ask. Becky, on the last leg of her master's in business management, has worked in the same bank since college. She goes to class in the evenings, which means during fall and spring she's a bit of a pain to eat with as she's been known to spread her books across our little corner booth the more finals approach. It renders a comfortable meal absolutely impossible, so on those days Sean and I take the booth behind her. During summer she's relatively school-free so she's less stressed and more apt to complain about her coworkers than the thesis she's supposed to be working on. "Hi, Sean."

"Janelle," Becky sighs dramatically, her eyes lifting to the ceiling as if hoping God was going to come down and pat her on the back for putting up with her bank's loan officer. I move William Ellis to another side of my brain. Becky may be the best female friend I have, but for her to process what I'm about to tell her I need to have her undivided attention or I won't receive any feedback on the situation until her own problem has been cleared.

Sean nudges me from across the table and, despite his mouth being set in a firm line, I can see he's relieved I'm finally here. Dealing with Becky when she's going through her "poor me" stage has never been Sean's strength, especially when it is just the two of them. Sean and Becky and I have been friends since we could remember, but when Becky came into her constant complaining/boy-crazy phase, the friendship between the two has evolved into that of a more of a reluctant acquaintance.

“She’s just so weird, Anny. I don’t think I can take it anymore.”

“She’s not the only one,” Sean whispers, and I kick his shoe.

“What has she done?” I ask, not bothering to reach for the menu as Amber strolls by. Not breaking her stride, she asks if I want the usual and I nod. Twenty four years old and I have a “usual.”

“She’s just…gosh, it’s hard to explain.” Becky’s tanned forehead wrinkles as she thinks. Taking a sip of my coffee, I immediately make a face. Used to this daily ritual, Sean pushes two Sweet’N’Low packages across the table towards me. “So, I come in every day at seven-thirty, right? And then I walk in the door and say ‘hi, how’re ya doing’…and then she just sits there.”

“So?” I say, stirring the contents of my cup with my spoon. “Maybe she’s not a morning person. After four years of working mornings with her, have you not noticed that?”

“That’s the thing!” Becky says, pointing a finger at me. I love Becky, but she does have a tendency to delve into the theatrics. “It doesn’t happen every day. Sometimes she talks back. Says hi, asks how my evening was…nice, friendly stuff like that.”

“Well, what’s the problem?” I shrug. Becky stops for a moment, and for an instant I think I may have made enough of a point for her to stop rambling and let me announce I’d spoken to my future husband less than half an hour ago.

“Why doesn’t she do it every day? Why can’t she be consistent?” Becky argues, leaning back into her seat.

“Maybe she’s not always in the greatest mood at 7:30 in the morning, Becks,” Sean says, rubbing his temples. “Not everyone can be super chipper and excited to be alive at an hour when half of the workforce is still asleep.”

I nod. “And the other half wishes they were still asleep.”

“She’s bipolar,” Becky repeats to herself, mind already made up. “Or maybe she’s been working in a bank so long that all of the fun has been sucked out of her brain and she’s sustaining herself on the joy of stapling her papers with the staple at the same angle each time. No Personality Patty.”

“I hope not,” I say, a more than a little self-defensive. “If that’s true and she’s been working at the bank for twenty years, I’m over a fourth of the way to joining her. Soon I’ll be just like her. *Oh no, today I stapled that claim at a 47 degree angle instead of a forty-five. Do you think I should fix it*?”

I start to rise from my chair, exaggerated horror spreading across my face. Becky makes a face as I sit down. “Very funny. I’m serious.”

“Yeah, we know,” Sean says, leaning back as Amber places his hot ham and cheese in front of him. I catch his eye and he winks before taking a huge bite of his sandwich. “That’s the scary part.”

My own grilled chicken sits in front of me, smelling delicious. The apple of Knowledge of William Ellis’s forthcoming British Invasion. Once it’s gone, the punishment for sin will begin. Becky, still caught up in whining about her socially bipolar coworker, perks up: “I’ve been thinking and you know who she reminds me of? Do you guys remember that time in high school when we used to go to the Hardees Anny’s sister worked at, and that one girl who—”

"There's a British guy coming to my office in fifteen minutes," I interrupt, swallowing a large gulp of soda. I don't want to hear anything about Emily. Certainly this new information will distract her enough.

Becky's response is predictably amused, through a mouthful of Caesar salad: "Wow, I wonder if he's cute."

"Wouldn't make a difference if he was," I say, picking up a fry and swiping a bit of catsup from Sean's plate. "He probably thinks I'm a lunatic." I tell them the story, leaving out his charmed attempt at lightening the mood by taking the mickey out of me. When I finish, Becky's eyes look like mine had looked reflected in Paula's computer screen, Sean's like they are about to close shut from sleep deprivation.

"Who cares if he thinks you're a lunatic? Obviously, he's not going to be here very long, and from what you've said, probably will never see you long enough to put two and two together. And, he's probably forty-seven. With *a kid*." Sean looks like he'd rather be talking about anything but the current topic. Both Becky's and my fascination with the opposite sex (excluding him, of course) always succeeds in making him uncomfortable to the point of his leaving the table for the restroom on numerous lunches. "So there."

"Ignore Sean," Becky says dismissively, leaning forward. Her Caesar salad, half eaten, nearly fell to the floor via her unrestrained elbow, but Sean saves it. "This could be Prince William we're talking about. Literally."

I try to hide the redness that instantly flickers across my cheeks. When we were seventeen, Becky and I, after sneaking a few wine coolers from her parents' refrigerator, compiled a list of the qualities our future husbands had to possess: deal-breakers,

attractiveness, donations to various charities of cultural significance, etcetera. I'd titled my perfect man Prince William (she'd chosen "George Cruise") and for the ensuing years every one of my dates had been examined by Becky using the same list compiled years ago under the influence. The number one prerequisite, the qualification each boy over the past nine years had failed to possess, happens to be the one thing I know about William Ellis.

"I can't believe this," Sean says, rolling his eyes and checking his watch (telltale signs of male restlessness). "I thought we were going to have lunch, not recreate *Sex and the City*."

"Just because you're uninterested in a love life doesn't mean we have to abide by your rules," Becky tells him, her newly-plucked eyebrows rising in my defense. "Besides, there are three people at this table, and two of them happen to have estrogen. You talked about your dumb job interview with the detective two months ago more than Anny's ever talked about her stupid Brit obsession." There's silence as Becky takes another drag of her coffee.

"First of all, it's not *dumb* and it's not an *obsession*." I put down my chicken and swallow. "Let's not fight, please."

"We're not fighting," Sean speaks up, straightening up in his seat. "Becky and I just agree to disagree."

Becky nods. "Besides, it's not our livelihood at fault here. You're the topic at hand."

"My *livelihood's* at fault?" I echo feebly. "I just thought it would be interesting lunch conversation."

"The List, Anny."

I shake my head. Typical Becky. I mention that someone's cute and she reminds me of the maid of honor pact we made in high school. Sean walks through Wal-Mart without his badge, and she asks (loudly) if he's going undercover. She jumps to more conclusions than many Olympic athletes jump across pits of sand, and *subtlety* has never been a vocabulary word she's executed properly. "Listen, Sean's right. Probably right, anyway. In all likelihood, he's gone by the time I get back to the office, leaving only a hint of cultured perfume for me to sniff."

"And if he's not…"

"If he's not, I'll probably listen to him talk for fifteen minutes, he'll leave, and I'll rush home to write a new diary entry: 'Dear Diary, Today the most wonderful thing happened! I breathed the same air as someone who calls a flashlight a torch and eats something called bangers and mash.'"

Sean tries to hide a snide chuckle, but fails: "You keep a *diary*?" just as Becky rolls her eyes and declares me impossible.

"Whatever happened to your sense of adventure? Your romantic gene?" she pleads.

"She's been hanging out with Joanne too much, obviously," Sean says ("Janelle!" Becky protests). "And I'm hanging out with the two of you too much. I've got to check in at the station."

"Have fun hanging out with Harv," I say. Harv is the next-youngest policeman in Clarksville, and therefore the only one Sean talks to during off hours. Harv also has three kids, one of whom works in Becky's bank part-time.

"I will. We're still on for tonight, right?" he asks, getting up and grabbing the check before either one of us can make a grab for it. Sean was finally moving out of his student apartment near the university and into his first actual house. The move was a week in, and we were almost physically finished, thanks to many exhausting evenings filled with paint wars and appliance installation.

I nod, and make one last attempt to filch the check before he smiles and departs to pay the bill, leaving me alone with Becky and her endless barrage of questions. Sometimes I think she's more concerned about my impossibly high romantic standards than I am.

"Five minutes to go on your lunch break," she sing-songs before draining the remainder of her coffee. "I bet he's looking at your pictures."

"I doubt it," I dab a lone fry into the paper soaked with ketchup remains. The shaking of my fingers betrays my cool exterior to be a complete façade. I *don't* want to go back to work; I *can't* go back to work. I force myself to picture Gareth from *The Office*—well, he *was* kinda cute in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. In a British annoying officemate turned dirty pirate way. Okay, Mr. Bean then. He had a *turkey* on his head at one point. There's no way I could be legally sane and find that sexy. *Right?* I force myself to concentrate on bringing fry to mouth, biting, and chewing. Rinse, lather, repeat.

…Mr. Bean *did* have a girlfriend, though. *Someone* found him attractive…even a turkey over his head couldn't rid him of that raw—I don't know…*Britishness*—quality that just drew women to men across the pond like clegs to torches.

"He's probably sitting by your desk," Becky says, looking aghast that I'm remaining so calm about the entire thing (apparently my acting skills have improved from

our sixth grade productions of "Princess and the Pea"). Internally, I'm about to either throw up in nerves or just scream in frustration.

Of course, the one time a British guy would come to *Tennessee* I would embarrass myself beyond any reasonable degree of redemption. I couldn't behave calmly, normally, like a functional human being. No, I would have to insult him, word vomit all over myself and through the telephone lines, and then have to confront him face to face in a professional setting. Of course.

"Mhmm," I murmur in what I hope is a noncommittal tone. Keep picturing Mr. Bean. A massive piece of poultry decorating his head. Not sexy at all. *At all.*

"Sitting in your chair, rubbing his British bum against your---"

I drop my sandwich. "Okay, I'm outta here."

I walk back into work, noticing through the window that my "To Be Filed" box has grown. It's even spawned a smaller twin. From the looks of it, there is at least one positive thing: William Ellis is nowhere to be seen. As my heart drops, I *think* that's positive. No Mr. Bean, no Gareth…no Orlie Bloom, no Colin Firth, no Hugh Dancy---Nope. Just another day at work. Mindless paper shelving and organization for four more hours with no, and I repeat *no,* British interaction other than my own projections.

Assuring myself that the worst of my day is behind me, I pass Paula's desk, hoping to get past her without a tell tale—

"Anny?" Drat.

I turn around, silently praying to God that He will not put me through any more torture today. “Yes?”

“Julia wants to see you in her office. Bring a steno pad, from the sounds of it.” I nod, squishing my face into what I hope is an expression of content passivity. *Well, there goes my uneventful afternoon.* ”Bring a steno pad” is practically universal for “You’re getting loads of work to do this afternoon; might even want to go ahead and start cancelling any plans you’ve set for next weekend.”

I knock before entering Jules’ office, hoping she just wants to know how many pages are in a Steno pad in order to win a radio contest. Surely, there is nothing in the wild world of small town insurance going on that is going to merit a steno pad’s worth of work. The Fourth of July and storm season, yes, but the business end of May barely brings anything except a senile person claiming to suffer from heatstroke. “Come in.”

“You called?” I ask as I enter, eyes fastening immediately to her beige carpeting. I hope she doesn’t want me to go out and call each of the adjusters individually again. I don’t think Tony in Indianapolis has recovered from the time I called his home at two in the morning, begging for premium rates for a sixty-eight-year-old female with no preexisting medical conditions except explosive diarrhea.

Jules turns around in her chair. “Yes, take a seat.”

My father and Jules went to college together, and I used to call her Aunt Jew-ry before I knew better than to run around naked with a diaper on my head. Knowing that your boss has once changed your diapers makes one very humble. I stumble over to my usual spot on her desk, my foot clipping the leg of her leather “customers-only” chair. When I glance back, I stop. My bottom (still dusty from the filing room), is inches from

Jules' stool when it halts in midair (the muscles in my lower back begin protesting). There's a man sitting in Jules's customers-only chair. A man who, by dress and carriage, *has* to be William Ellis.

"Hi." My aural Judas of a voice greets the man that has to be William Ellis, who smiles. His teeth show and with his smile he strikes down one stereotype of British dentistry. "Hello, there."

Jules makes introductions, confirming my suspicions. Screw my pride, William Ellis *is* the List. Mid-twenties, dark hair, green eyes, rounded chin with a tiny dimple in the middle, and best of all a *genuine* British accent. A decent dresser too, from the looks of it. Probably has a dog named after a dead Romantic poet. He doesn't look exactly like George Clooney or Ben Affleck, but that's beside the point. Becky would *die* if she were here. *I'm* about to drop dead right now.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Ellis," I say, praying to the same God that disappointed me earlier William Ellis will never put two and two together and realize I am the girl on the phone.

"Didn't we speak earlier?" William Ellis asks, and I want to jump into Jules' file cabinet and lock myself inside. *Of course* he would remember! It's not every day your entire country is insulted during the course of a routine business call. I mumble the affirmative and return my gaze to the floor, wishing Jules would go on and give me my assignment. A tiny part of me (okay, all of me) wants to stay so I can listen to every word that comes out of William Ellis's mouth, but that part is disappearing quickly.

"Mr. Ellis is going to be helping us out on the Oglemans' case," Jules says, and I stare at her desk legs in response. I know the most out of everyone about the plethora of

Oglemans that Franklin-Watson currently covers, so I know immediately who she's referring to. Teddy and Gemma Ogleman have been clients with Franklin-Watson nearly longer than Jules has been alive. The two of them started having trouble with their account a few months ago when their premium (in laymen's terms: their monthly payment) began to skyrocket in size for no foreseeable reason. Frank has been working on it on and off for the past few months, and I've taken so many messages from the Nashville office about the account that I know nearly as much as he does. "He'll be coming in and out of the office until this thing is solved."

"Hopefully, it should not take too long," William Ellis says, his voice directed more to me than Jules. "It seems to be a simple case of fraud, but both sides have come across some snafus, so to speak."

"Frank's tired of the case, I'm tired of the case, we're all tired of the case," Jules remarks, turning around in her chair and beginning to shuffle through her papers. "I just hope we can get this thing sorted out before the next payment period."

She continues to talk about what William Ellis will be doing while he is here, how he's working abroad from England, etcetera etcetera until all of it fades into a faint but steady buzz of information that I process as quickly as the information provided by my Monday morning newspaper skim. I sneak a glance and William Ellis looks nearly as interested as I do (and rightly so; he's the one having his "About the Insurance Agent" bio being rattled off), and I decide that it's safe to uncurl my toes and move from my still-frozen position. Jules' back is still turned and she's still talking, more to herself than anyone in the room.

“How’s the religion coming?” William Ellis whispers as I sit down on the stool I frequent when Jules tells me to bring a steno pad. Once I get over the fact that the boss is breaking the usual polite business-speak protocol to speak to me, I see that as cheeky a comment as it is, his eyes are gentle, teasing. “And you can call me Will.”

“It’s pretty much failing me now,” I say before I can stop myself. Immediately, I feel my toes curling again. *Damn it*. William Ellis—I mean, Will— looks at me.

“The old ‘wish the floor would open up and swallow me’ plea not working today?” In response to his correct guess, a sound escapes from my throat---a funny half-gasp half-chuckle.

“Close. I actually wanted the filing cabinet to swallow me whole.” Did I really just say that? Out loud?

Will cocks his head to one side. Even without speaking and using that dashing accent of his, he still manages to look a thousand times more sophisticated and poised than even my aunt could after thirty five years working in foreign business. My toenail embeds itself in the rubber insole of my shoe as he says, “Makes sense, the file clerk choosing death by cabinet. Gruesomely poetic.”

The familiar foot cramp gradually subsides. My reverie breaks when Jules turns around in her chair, holding out a stack of manila folders. “…and so, would you mind running these to Frank and telling him to drop by when he gets a moment?”

“I’d like him to help finish up this case,” she explains to Will as I automatically get up from my stool, sadly coming to terms with the fact that my time of being a coherent, semi-normal human being with someone across the pond is soon approaching its end. “I know it’s minor and probably not what you would prefer in having a partner,

but I'd like to have someone from our team working with you. Here at this branch of Franklin-Watson, we try to provide each customer with a personal touch--but you know that already. Anyway—"

Reminding myself that I *should* be blindingly happy that I have been dismissed and my steno pad remains untouched, I am halfway to the door when a new thought grips me. Maybe I could work on this case. I went to high school with the Oglemans' granddaughter Penny; I even ate at their house before senior prom (Penny's mother Alice has yet to move out of her parents' home, even at fortysomething). *I'm* a personal touch. Much more personal than Frank, who gives his email address out to people who aren't sure how to turn on their computers.

"Actually, would you mind if I work on this one? Frank's been so busy, and I know he's wanted a break." I rush before she can open her mouth to say no. I'm going to make this sales pitch if it's the last thing I do in Will's presence. I know, I know: *Who do I think I am? Is it just because William Ellis is charming and British that I think I'm Superwoman? I'm the file clerk. I answer the phones and get coffee.* "And I know nearly as much about this case as he does, and you've been saying I could use some experience, and—"

Will beats Jules to cutting me off. Only, to my surprise, he doesn't look entirely disagreeable. He looks almost…eager?

"Actually, that sounds like a good idea." I can't breathe. If she lets me work with him I'll do enough work to fill ninety-six steno pads. "I'm sure Gemma and Teddy would appreciate another fresh outlook on their case. As I told you before, I'm a big proponent

of getting as many points of view on a case before making a final decision. Ms. Sterling seems eager enough. Perhaps the two of us and Mr. Barber could work on it together?"

Maybe Jules nods to appease him, maybe she nods to give me my break, or maybe she nods just because her neck hurt. I will think about the reasons why she does this for weeks following, but it all dissipates in the end. Reasons may never be clear, but that's not what I need to understand the actions of my boss. Most importantly, *she nods*.

CHAPTER II

When I was almost eight years old, my family moved. My grandparents had decided, after 30 years of living deep in the Bible Belt, to abandon their weekly church-sponsored van trips and lunches at Cracker Barrel in order to become beach bums in Florida, leaving behind a rent-controlled house inside a small Southern gated community for their only daughter and her family. From birth, I had lived in the same split level two-bedroom home on the outskirts of Clarksville, Tennessee with my parents, my Scottish terrier Telly, and my older sister Emily. We lived close enough to town that immediate medical care wouldn't necessarily require an airlifted ride in a helicopter, but far enough to where my father could (to my family's *complete* embarrassment) walk out on the front porch in his underwear early Saturday morning without fearing anyone seeing him.

Our backyard was an overgrown forest; my mother had an occasional garden (when she remembered to take care of it) and my father and I would spend hours in the gravel driveway playing basketball with the hoop I had gotten one year for Christmas. On cool June evenings, even my sister would venture out into the elements and lay on the back porch swing with her disc player's earphones turned up as loudly as they would possibly go, napping as the breeze would play Mother Nature and push the swing gently. I vastly preferred playing in the shade under the maple tree, picking out " 'copters" and watching their little kamikaze piloted seeds whirl to the ground. I found a home under the maple tree and in the backyard. I was safe.

At the time, I didn't understand why we were moving; words like "morgage" and "bank loan" made little sense to me (come to think of it, they made as much sense then as they do now). One weekend in September, I stood outside the house, wearing my new backpack (plain blue; Becky had told me that backpacks with cartoon characters on them were *so* second grade) and holding onto Telly's leash as my mother and father carried my now-empty toy box and placed it in the tailgate of my father's (ironically) cheery red 1980 pickup. A single tear ran down one cheek; I didn't want to go.

"Jeez, we're only movin' 'cross town," my sister had said, skipping past me. The majority of her Claire's Accessories vinyl purse had thwacked me on the elbow, adding insult to injury. Even at the tender age of eight, I could already tell the seven year gap between my sister and I would never shorten to the "best friends" relationship my mother assured me would take place as the two of us grew older. We were polar opposites in every way. I was short and dark-haired, she tall and blonde. I played basketball and ran pee-wee track, involving myself in as many activities as possible; the week before we moved, she had gotten caught smoking in the woods surrounding our school. When I finally learned enough in kindergarten and first grade to be a decent playmate, she discovered boys. Years later when I became aware of the opposite sex, she discovered alcohol. She moved to Europe when I was 18 with some foreign man she met in a chat room; I'm still in Clarksville, with no immediate plans to get out. I see home as comfort; she saw (and probably still sees it) as an inconvenience.

"Not even switching schools," I remember her muttering, rolling her eyes as she smeared Bonne Bell Lipsmacker over his lips. "Shut your cryin' and help Mom and Dad instead of just standin' there like an idiot."

But on moving day I wasn't concerned about my sister. I was leaving the only home I'd ever known, and for an eight-year-old kid the event was more than traumatic. My sister was ecstatic about getting her own room (even if it was the size of a closet), my parents thrilled to be moving to a location where it wouldn't take us ten minutes to drive to Wal-Mart or Target. I, on the other hand, was obsessed with the fact that when it came time for my teacher to ask "Has anyone ever moved before?" during the upcoming "personal narrative" unit in language arts class, I'd have to raise my hand. I didn't want things to change.

"Anny, could you help with your sister with the boxes in your room, please?" my mother had asked as she passed my motionless figure. I remember taking one look at her, bursting into tears, and running full-tilt into the comforts of the overgrown backyard where I curled up inside my father's old tool shed, my usual spot of refuge.

My father, who rarely "built" anything (the tools in there were only used for emergency repairs) rarely ventured inside the stained siding-constructed building. It was old when my parents had first moved into the house, and through the years it had fallen into various states of disarray. When it rained, the roof leaked, thus coating every tool in a fine layer of rust. There were more spiders in there than grass blades in the backyard; when I ran inside crying, Telly hesitated at the door, barking at the spiders as they fled my footsteps. I climbed up on an old work table and curled into a ball, skinning my knee on the edge of the table in the process. After the spiders cleared, Telly ran inside and put his paws on the seat of the workbench, wagging his tail.

After leaving me alone to cry myself dry, my father came inside. He eventually coaxed me back outside after a long talk that included pretty pictures of a neighborhood

filled with new boys and girls that would want to be my friend, and promises that despite what she said, Emily was wrong in calling me an idiot and she would (to my inner glee) be punished for calling her sister names. He reached over and wiped my last drying tear with a fingertip.

"Are you sure it's gonna be okay?" I asked, narrowing my eyes. Dad laughed before swinging me up into his arms like I was much younger than seven and three quarters. Working for twenty years assembling steel belted tires had left him stronger than most fathers; I remember my mother scolding Dad for picking me up when I was, according to Grandmama, much too old to be carried. Dad just laughed and swung Mom up on his shoulders, and I laughed as she shrieked but then winked at me when he couldn't see her face.

"Promise," he swore, nudging the door open with his toe as he sat me down. Satisfied, I took my father's offered hand and walked outside with Telly into the warm September sun.

Sixteen years later, I climb out of my dad's 1982 F-series truck, dusting my black work pants off as I walk inside the house. The lights in the foyer are off, but I can smell dinner cooking. Lately, Dad's been obsessing over this new chicken recipe I found a month ago in an old *Southern Living*. Tonight will mark the third time in a fortnight that he's decided to make the same dish for dinner, and I have been devising numerous ways to subtly let him know enough is enough, even when it comes to a certain high-power Food Network Chef's buttered and fried chicken fricatta ("Just say it's the best one yet, and then maybe he'll be satisfied and stop making it!").

"I'm home, Dad!" I call, shutting the front door behind me and flipping on the light switch. My father and Telly's daughter Dot both lay asleep on the couch, but as the room is flooded with light, they both open their eyes. I whisper an apology and reach for the switch, but my father raises a hand to stop me.

"No use, Ann," he says as Dot hops off the couch and disappears down the hall. He struggles to pull himself upright, blinking rapidly as his eyes adjust to the light. With his slightly graying hair, even sixteen years later my Dad is almost identical to the man who drove Telly and me to get strawberry sundaes on moving day.

I say almost identical due to one large difference, what my father likes to refer to as the "elephant in the room." When I was eighteen years old, Dad was working his usual job as a factory line man when he was called in for a routine mechanical check by the plant foreman. To make a long, gory story short, there was an accident: a "freak accident" according to the medical reports. Now my father, instead of standing behind a machine operating levers and assessing pressure quota control every day, sits in his wheelchair doing desk work for half the pay.

When it happened, I was a freshman in my first year at the University of Southern Arkansas. I happened to be getting ready to run in my first collegiate cross-country meet at the time; I was already lined up with my teammates at the starting point when my coach called me over to the sidelines to deliver the news. After finishing that semester, I quit school to take care of my father.

I sometimes think it's ironic that I work in insurance, because if it weren't for the insurance screw-ups, I might not have to be working to help support Dad. The plant that my dad worked for had terrible worker's compensation insurance, a fact we didn't learn

until after he'd had the accident and there were bills to pay. Jules offered me a job, and now all of my money, save a few hundred for gas, goes into paying off the loans that took care of the majority of Dad's medical bills. The same day Dad was admitted into the hospital, Emily called from Europe asking if we could spare her some cash.

"I've been pretending to take a nap since before I started cooking," Dad says as I drop my purse by the door and rush over to lock the wheels of his wheelchair as he helps himself off the couch and into a sitting position. I know most of the time it drives him crazy when I offer to help ("I'm a grown man, not an overly-inflated My Buddy doll" he grumbles), but usually when he's tired or has a headache, he lets me help him without complaint.

I smile and drop a kiss on top of his head settling first his right, then his left leg into the well-worn foot straps. "I'm going to ignore the implications of you falling asleep with a hot oven of food going. I'm assuming we're having chicken again?"

He reaches over and helps me, grimacing slightly. "I don't know which is going to kill me first, the pain in my back or the fifty pounds of poultry I've eaten this month."

"I'll put in a request for ibuprofen for dinner," I promise, picking up my purse and following Dot down the hall to change out of my work clothes.

I enter my room, startling the cat who hops off my bed with an angry meow. My bed is unmade, and I toss my dirty clothes atop it. My room is pretty much unchanged from high school. My old running trophies and ribbons are still atop my bookshelf, and I dust them occasionally when I get into one of my rare cleaning spurts. My high school diploma is framed on my wall, hanging directly above my bed. Next to it a picture of me with my dad on graduation day. Dot is curled up by my closet, the only aesthetic element

that's substantially changed since high school: it's now filled with the "Career-Wear" section from the local TJ Maxx instead of cutoff sweatpants and Nike windbreakers. After throwing on a pair of running shorts, I pull on my University of Southern Arkansas sweatshirt and make my way toward the kitchen.

When I enter, my father is eye-level to the oven, fanning at its open door with the knitted potholder I made my mother in elementary school. I usually keep the kitchen organized as best I can since my father spends so much time at home, but occasionally I come home from work to find the room looking like a Mr. Clean commercial, except it looks identical to the "before" picture instead of the after. Even the photos that hang around the kitchen sink seem to droop when I come in after work, through no fault of Dad's. I know I sound like a bitter housewife with 2.5 kids on my hip in saying this, but ever since Mom left I feel like I'm supposed to make sure no dust ever enters the kitchen and that no one ever leaves grime on the kitchen sink faucet. Mom wasn't a stickler for cleaning (if she was, she'd never have left as there was always cleaning to be done in the house), but sometimes a little Mary Poppins in me emerges when I come home and stop at the kitchen entrance.

I glance at the sink, piled high with dishes, and the dishwasher that's been silent for the past six months. We are too cheap to fix broken appliances now, especially since my father has a perfectly acceptable human substitute (that was his rationale when the washer broke, anyway). Rolling up my sleeves, I tuck a towel on the counter between the sink and me to save splashes before I run the faucet.

"How was work?" Dad asks, beating away the heat from the oven with renewed vigor. From across the room, as the steam reaches me, I can feel my pants beginning to

de-wrinkle. After a moment, he rolls back to the kitchen table and grabs the stained magazine, right hand running through his hair as he bites his upper lip. “I just don’t get it. Three times and it still doesn’t look right. I think these instructions must be messed up.”

“Did you follow them to the letter, Dad?” I ask, waiting for the inevitable fumbling for an explanation as to why he substituted this for that and why he couldn’t cook the chicken in the glass bowl exactly like the directions stated. I guess I am more like my father than I thought, in that we both flail around for pointless answers when under pressure as opposed to just owning up to our own occasional stupidity. After no reply, I look up and he’s still peering into the blackness of the open applicance, shaking his head. “You know, Dad, they’re called directions for a reason.”

“Don’t get smart with me,” he snaps, although I can tell he isn’t really mad, just frustrated. Sitting back in his chair, he slumps slightly and cocks his head to the side. “I’ve been cooking longer than you’ve been alive. I know what I’m doing.”

I continue scrubbing last night’s dishes as I hide a smile at the all too familiar words. When I was little, I would sit at the kitchen table listening to Mom and Dad bicker good-naturedly back and forth with each other while Mom prepared dinner. Most of their squabbles ended with Mom pulling the “cooking longer than most people have been alive” trump card, to which Dad would concede and pull me into the living room to watch cartoons. My mother may be physically absent, but I believe her excuses will remain for all time.

In the present time, I add a little more Dial to the water in the sink saying, “I know, and you’re a pretty good cook. It’s just that perhaps on this specific recipe the chef intended for it to be followed exactly. Maybe it’s a chemistry thing.”

Dad, now apparently satisfied with his efforts, pulls the chicken from the oven. As he wheels past me I take a peek; definitely not what Fran Greene had envisioned when she sent in her recipe for Chicken a La King (Southern Style!) to Good Housekeeping twenty five years previous. Despite the runny sauce and mushrooms that looked like Dot had picked on them, I was happy that at least the meat didn't look like it was about to cluck (unlike Monday's attempt). "Much better, Dad. It looks *and* smells delicious."

"What have I told you about sarcasm?" he says, setting down the chicken on the counter and beginning to sprinkle a few pimentos on top of the dish. I finish up the dishes and set them aside to dry. "Now, go wash up and change. I'm going to finish those green beans and then I'll be ready for dinner."

Feeling very much like I was back in junior high, I began walking out of the kitchen only to stop and bolt back to the kitchen when I hear the familiar sound of my cell phone ringing. Saved by "Love Me Do." Despite my father's admonishing—"It's just a telemarketer, Anny. Put the phone down"— I answer it.

"Would you mind if we started moving stuff a little early tonight?" Sean asks. I tell him that it's a good thing he called; our conversation at lunch had completely exited my mind. I take one look at the bubbling chicken and salad as my stomach flips over. Negatory, Ghostrider. The question is no longer *if* I can come over, but how early.

"Dad, I'm going over to help Sean move," I say, clicking off the phone as Dad wheels himself into the room, his during-dinner crossword already propped up on his tray. After Dad's accident, he became obsessed with crosswords, even to the point where he'd do them during dinner. He gives me a warning look; he's not one for suffering through meals alone. I shrug in return, eyes wide; however, he knows exactly what I'm

thinking (we've had this silent conversation too many times for the innocent ploy to work on him). As if on cue, something in the chicken bubbles and spits a large amount of sauce on the table, some of it landing directly on the recipe. Before he can say anything negative, I grab my keys and run outside to the truck, calling goodbye. Even an evening of ramen noodles and bottled water wouldn't hold a candle to what I was leaving behind.

"What do you keep in this thing, dead bodies?" I say, lifting up my end of the desk. There's no response (in my mind, I can see Sean rolling his eyes at the cliché of it all), but the south end keeps moving toward the door so I know Sean's not exhausted and gone quite yet. Out of the corner of my eye, I see one of the drawers start to slide out of its section, accompanied by the famous groaning that any mover knows signals a soon to be lost piece of cargo. I try tilting the desk to save it, but I hear Sean's "NO!" and stop.

"Just let it fall," he grunts, and said drawer obeys almost immediately, scattering magazines and paperclips galore on the sidewalk outside of his new house. I take one look at the fallen soldiers of old *Men's Health* and *Time* magazines before rushing inside with my end of the desk, careful not to let the edges slip out of my fingers and create an even larger casualty. When we reach the inside of the living room, we set the desk down with a loud thump.

Stretching my hands above my head in relief, I immediately rub for my loudly-protesting lower back. "How much more of this do we have left?"

Sean emerges from the other end of the desk, the tip of his nose gray with dust. His old Austin Peay University t-shirt, once white with red trim, will after tonight forever

be dingy with the years of gathered dust we are moving around. Complementing the dusty beige is a large black grease stain from when he picked around a box filled with old bicycle chains. My own yellow cross country t-shirt, usually worn only during sleep, now has a series of several rips at the armpit (a gift from the set of drawers we moved earlier that snagged itself on my sleeve). Looking outside through the open door to the rear of his pickup truck, all I can see is a tiny mountain of brown and white boxes. I start walking back outside, throwing a "Never mind" over my shoulder.

"We don't have to do all of these tonight," Sean says, joining me as I pull the three closest boxes toward me. He looks at his watch, and then the sky which is almost finished turning its nightly liquid black. By the emerging light of the streetlamps, I see houses up and down the block filled with normal familial activities (mothers at the front stoop telling their kids to come inside, fathers turning lights on in the garage so they can work longer on the car). None of these normal activities include two very sweaty twentysomethings hauling ton after ton of wood and plastic furniture and the squishing it through a standard door hole for any longer than another hour or so, but I don't tell Sean.

"No, let's finish it up right now," I say, stacking the boxes on top of each other and towing them into the house. A dog barks down the street, and conjures up horror-movie images of kidnapping and death by the plunger I'm carrying, which causes my stride to quicken. "That way we won't have to do it later."

"Just say it: you hate me." Sean follows me into the living room. Balancing a box on his knee, he flips the light switch on. The room, crammed with boxes and secondhand "college" furniture from Sean's student apartment, looks tinier than the filing room at work. "Just so you know, I'm not using you just for your legs and upper body strength."

“You’re right,” I say, dumping the boxes on top of the desk. I turn back as he places his own cargo on the threadbare couch (and hold my breath as the springs under the cushions do not give way). “Not about hating you, but about using me. I’m providing a service, and I expect to be well-paid.”

“Through tea and BBC, I remember.” Sean grins at me as I shrug.

“Would you rather we work out different terms? I’m sure monetary amounts could be substituted for both demands, with absolutely no complaint from me.”

“No, tea and BBC are fine,” Sean says quickly. Back at the truck, I grab at a box marked FRESHMAN YEAR. Judging by the way my arm muscles struggle to carry it, said box must be old bowling balls from his bowling elective. I struggle with its weight and end up running the last few steps into the house, the toe of my sneaker catching on the threshold. I stumble, and the box comes loose and lands with a terrific thud on the floor, its contents bursting out as if freed from a cage. Sean saunters back inside, a box marked “Kitch and B-Room” in his arms. “You okay?”

“Hope there was nothing in that box extremely breakable,” I say, looking at what used to be four cardboard sides but what now act as roadblocks for the waves of numerous binders and folders struggling to free themselves from their prison. A thick blue folder survives the surf and lands at my feet, and I scoop to pick it up. Out of habit, I open the front cover. Frowning, I ask, “World Civ notes? From five years ago? I know you accuse me of living in the past sometimes, but—“

“Those aren’t mine,” Sean breaks in, scooping down to shuffle the papers and binders back together. I show him the front page, where next to his name is doodled Mickey Mouse. He shrugs, opening up the box he’d set on the couch. Pulling out a hair

dryer that looks like it has seen better times, he offers it to me. “Those notes are yours. Do you want this thing? My mother gave it to me like three years ago and I never use it.”

“What?” I say, struck dumb. Sean knows full well my college experience, limited as it was, did not involve any history class. He was the first one I’d called when I’d decided to come home for good.

“This hair dryer. Do you want it?” His tone is the same as if he’s asking if the sky was blue when I woke up the morning.

I shake my head, “No I don’t want it. Stop avoiding the question. What do you mean, these are my notes? You know full well I didn’t take civ in college.”

“Not yet. I figure you’d need them sooner or later, and why waste them?” He wraps the cord around the hair dryer and tosses it into the Hefty bag functioning as our impromptu wastebasket. I pick up some of the binders, and after affirming that they too were nothing but general education college notes, attempted to send them the same way as the dryer.

“Well, let’s do some spring cleaning while we’re here and just toss these out with that hair dryer. I can’t believe your mother actually gave you that thing.”

“Don’t make fun of my hair dryer. And you’re not throwing those notes out.” He fishes out the binders and places them on the closest table. “You’ll need them soon, and when you do you’ll regret 86ing them.”

“Sean, I highly doubt I’ll be needing knowledge over the War of 1812 anytime soon. Just because you’re a pack rat—“

Sean, who'd started back toward the door, turned around. "Listen, some of the guys at the station were talking, and I remembered that registration for the fall semester doesn't end for another two weeks or so."

I shake my head and begin following him out to the truck. "What does that have to do with me? Sean, we've been over this. My family can't afford me quitting my job right now to pursue an academic career or whatever."

"Who said anything about quitting your job?" Sean says, hopping onto the tailgate of his truck. "I just thought you could take a class or two. Ease into it. You've always talked about going back to school."

I follow him, the notes still clutched in one hand. He's in the bed of the truck, grappling with the largest boxes in the very back. The sky is now fully dark, and his face is so shaded that I can't make out his expression. "What's up with this sudden interest in my academic career? Not that I don't appreciate it, but you know it's not going anywhere. My dad's still injured, both our paychecks are still the same, and we still have bills coming in for our insurance. You should know the most out of anyone—"

He ignores my reasoning. "I don't know, maybe me moving has made me more self-aware or something. All I know it that you've spent six years helping out your dad. I know you don't blow your paychecks on anything but groceries, and I know you hate being stuck in the insurance office every day."

"It's not too bad," I say, thinking of Will and the way he made my toes curl this afternoon.

I lean my back against the truck, picking absently at a scratch on the red paint. After a moment of rich, pregnant silence, Sean hops out of the back end of the truck, and

I pick up the nearest box and follow him into the house, leaving the civ notes sitting on the truck bed and fluttering in the breeze. “Lying to yourself isn’t going to help anything, Ann. All I’m saying is, as cliché as it sounds, you’ve spent a large part of your life helping out everyone around you, and you just seem to forget about helping out yourself sometimes.”

Sean enjoys his job as a police officer, despite his lunchtime complaints. Becky’s thrilled to be getting a master’s degree, and my dad, before the accident, enjoyed going to work every day. I look around at Sean’s small living room, taking in the dollar store décor and discounted furniture from Salvation Army. The paint on the door overhang is slightly chipped, and there’s an echo of a patiently-scrubbed stain next to the doorjamb. Here I was surrounded by the spoils of the academic victor, the starter home and mortgage payments. My eye catches the box of notes, still splayed on the floor. Something in me catches, but I turn away: I’ve accepted my challenge, and I enjoy it. “Even if I wanted to take a class this summer, I couldn’t afford it.”

Sean stops midway in the living room and gives me a long, frustrated look. “Are you going to find an excuse for everything? I thought you used to want to *be* someone. Get out of the South. Run away….literally.”

When we were kids, Becky and I spent nearly every bus ride from school playing the playground favorite paper and pen game, MASH. Every time when we picked places to live, she’d choose relatively close locations, even as a kid: Nashville, Owensboro, Knoxville, Little Rock. Even as a kid, Becky was comfortable with living in this area for the rest of her life. I was the exact opposite. I’d pick exotic locales, ranging some weeks from Tokyo to Timbuktu. Later, when Sean and I had English class together, he’d make

fun of the two of us (although Becky told me he was just mad we never picked his name for a "Marry" option). Back then, never had I envisioned my life to turn out to what it was, but we can't all pick our futures, right? "The past is the past, okay? I made my decision, case closed."

"You're impossible. For someone who's so open about helping others, you're awfully close-minded when it comes to making decisions for yourself." He drops the box on the couch, and doesn't go to pick it up when it bounces off the cushions and falls to the floor with a muted crash. Our Taco Bell dinner choice earlier was fitting, considering the Mexican standoff we were now having in the living room.

I don't say anything. Sean sighs.

"Listen, I don't want us to fight tonight. I just wanted to let you know that it's okay to try new things, even if you're rusty. And if you decide to go back to school, or stay here and work for Jules forever, I don't care. I just don't want you miserable."

"I'm not miserable. I have a father who loves me. My friends have never gone behind my back. I have a job that, while it may not be the most exciting in the world, pays reasonably well for someone who only has fifteen hours of college experience under her belt. I don't think miserable people could number those things among their assets." Sean gives me a swift nod and heads toward the door. The defensive tone in my voice diminishes slightly. "Thank you for the concern, though. I appreciate it."

"Yeah." He turns to look at me, and there's softness around his eyes I can't quite place. Then, as quickly as I can identify it, it's gone and he's walking back outside. I hear the tailgate slam back into place and he reappears, wiping his hands. "So, I think we're

done for tonight. You've got your big case with the Brit tomorrow, and I guess you'll want to go brush up on your *Ab Fab* and monarchy trivia."

I stare at my hands in response. I'd forgotten all about the situation with Mr. William "Please, Call Me Will" Ellis. "Yeah, I guess I'll have to try and salvage that mess tomorrow morning. Whatever's left of it."

"You'll be fine," he says, hopping on the back of the couch. All of the boxes are scattered around the living room, but the important thing is his tailgate is now empty, which signals quittin' time. "Tea before you go?"

I cock my head to one side as I join him on the couch, settling myself on the cushions. The couch springs complain slightly, and Sean's eyes twinkle at my discomfort. "Earl Gray?"

He pretends to mull over the proviso, but I can see the "Kitch & B-Room" box he brought in earlier already has a box of my favorite flavor sticking out of the top. Assuming his officer of the law "Ma'am do you know how fast you were going?" demeanor, he studies me and his eyes flick to the box I had just set down, marked "AV Equip" in black Sharpie. "An episode of the British version of *The Office* will last the duration…if you're not in that big of a hurry."

"I always have time for tea and telly," I say, getting up from the couch.

"See, you're getting posh-er by the second," he says as I offer him my hand to pull him off the back of the couch before he falls off and breaks his neck. He bails out on the other side, hitting his knees on the floor and cursing loudly in a not-so-protector-of-the-free-world way.

“Posh-er is not a word,” I laugh, taking my house key out of my back pocket and slitting the duct tape binding the AV Equip box together.

“Never stopped you before.” He winks at me, and I throw my keys at him.

CHAPTER III

Is it possible for someone to die of boredom?

I open up a Google search engine on my work computer and send the thought out into cyberspace. I've been at work for close to three and a half hours today, and all I've done, save for filing a few claims, is sit at my desk and stare at the black phone resting on top of it, willing someone to call. I hate filing, but even worse are those days where I have nothing to do and I sit alone in my desk in the very back of the office and stare at the networking router as it blinks yellow and white light at me. My desk, since I spend so much time in the filing room, is bare, minus Frank's phone answering guide. I recently acquired a computer, but it's so ancient I'm surprised it gets the Internet at all. My little graduation owl is propped up next to my keyboard, and in real moments of boredom, I use his beak to peck the names and addresses of our clients.

"Hullo," a very male, very British voice says. I stop banging Hootie's head on the keyboard, and try to look somewhat competent. Before I went to sleep last night, I decided that if I was going to work with William Ellis, I had to stop looking like an idiot.

And I was off to a terrible start, apparently. "Hi."

Silence. Never ending silence. My brain screamed at me, DO SOMETHING, ANYTHING!, but all my fingers were concerned with was propping up Hootie, who wouldn't stay upright no matter how hard I mashed him against the computer tower.

William Ellis looked amused, and then backed away from the doorframe slightly. “Well, I’ll be in the conference room if you find anything interesting. Just wanted to check in.”

I nod and he turns his back to leave. Then, I blurt out, “Oh, I wanted to tell you thanks. About letting me work on this job with you and Frank. I know Jules has probably told you my duties rarely get out of the copy room, so I really appreciate the opportunity.”

There. I can be assertive if I need be.

“You’re welcome. Is that your--" He motions to Hootie, who looks like he was out late partying with the Tootsie Roll Owl and has face planted back onto the keyboard. I feel my shoes getting tighter.

“My owl? Yeah, it’s nothing, really. My dad got it for me for graduation. Stupid little trinket really.” At this slander, Hootie rolls off the keyboard and into my lap. I pick him up and dump him into my right drawer, where he will most likely live until William Ellis leaves this town for good.

“I think it’s cute. Adds flavor to this cheery little place back here.”

On the other hand, Hootie’s not too bad. I pick him back out of the drawer and sit him next to the computer, adjusting his little mortarboard. “Yeah, it’s either back here or stuck in the filing room. This usually wins because it has a computer. Breaks up the routine every once in awhile.”

Will’s expression hardens. “Which you do work related things on only, right?”

I flush. *Stupid, stupid Anny. He may be cute, he may be British, but he is the most superior out of everyone in this building, including Jules. And I just told him that I’d*

rather check my email than work. Isn't that confessing to a crime? Like, stealing company time? Am I going to be reprimanded? Will he report me to Jules? I laugh, a noise that rings completely false and makes me wish he'd go away so I could crawl under my desk and text message Becky about what a failure I was as a member of the feminine gender. I scramble for an explanation. "Of course. Those proofs of insurance are just so…fascinating. They keep me occupied all the time. And about what I said about the filing room, I really don't think it's that boring. I mean, it's not boring at all it's a really fulfilling job and without it I don't know what we'd do. Not that I have a superiority complex or anything; I think every job is equally important---"

Thankfully, he cuts me off mid-blab: "I was kidding."

"Oh." Well, color me an idiot. Actually, since it's Will, colour me an idiot (which looks so much smarter on paper anyway). He's smiling at me, and for a brief maddening moment, I think he enjoys watching me flail around like a dying fish. If he wasn't my superior (or British, and therefore flawless), I'd confront him about it.

Then, he pulls out the big guns: "You know, you are quite cute when you lie."

My mouth is devoid of any sort of function, and my brain is processing so many different responses that it has quit trying to relay information. I'm *cute*? I haven't been called cute since I was six years old and my mother dressed me up as Winnie The Pooh for Halloween (even though Becky, whom I wasn't even "best friends" with at the time, told me that any girl who didn't come to the class Halloween party dressed as Barbie was no longer allowed to sit at her lunch table).

"Thanks?" I say. What else are you supposed to say when your British boss calls you cute? Fall to the floor in shock? Call HR? Cry? Luckily I don't have much time to

muse over the correct protocol as I hear Frank coming down the hall, calling Will's name.

Despite what Jules told him, Frank still believes this is Will's and his case, and I will have nothing to do with it in any form or fashion. He pops his head into my cube, his beady eyes taking in the nondescript setting. Superior standing next to the desk of the subservient, not doing anything that would draw attention whatsoever. Certainly didn't call subservient adorable less than a minute ago. In his hand are ten of the files I put away just this morning, and now would have to do again tomorrow morning.

"I have a free moment and thought we should go over these papers. Oh, hello Anny," he adds as an afterthought. Will nods his head and, excusing himself to me heads to join him. I want to pipe up that I'll help too, but my apparent adorableness prevents me. A few minutes later, before I can even begin to process what happened, Frank, with Will behind him, is back in my cube.

"Anny, would you mind running next door and getting the two of us some coffee?" He throws a few dollar bills in my direction. They hit the edge of my desk and fall to the ground. I nod and reach down to retrieve them, seriously debating if I should sarcastically ask if he requires a blueberry muffin to go with their order. Before I can grab the bills, Will picks up the cash and hands it to me, winking as he stands up.

"Actually, Frank, you didn't let me tell you but I stopped in the coffee shop next door before I came in. I believe there should some decafs left in the kitchen."

"Oh," Frank accepts his crumpled bills, unfazed. "Well good. Let me get a cup and I can show you what I've been working on."

"Sounds good." Will follows Frank out of my office, not looking back.

Was he…*flirting* with me?

I whip out my phone and shoot a text message to Becky, who should be on her way downstairs from the fax room at the bank. I type in "boss flirting with you" in a Google search, and hit search just as my phone vibrates with her reply. *Flirting with you? Explain.*

I'm getting to the part where Will tells me that I'm adorable when I hear someone clear their throat. It's Jules, and she looks less than excited to see me texting. Maybe Will would just call it adorable, but Jules looks like she wants to kill me. Her suit is yellow, a color I usually associate with happiness and sunshine and rainbows, but which right now looks like the flames from the fires of hell into which she looks like she wants to dump me. And then have the adjusters reject my life insurance policy on grounds of willful death. "Hello, Anny."

"Hi, Julie." I rack my brain for a reasonable explanation as to why I'm text messaging during office hours instead of waiting ten minutes for my lunch to begin. Not that my off the cuff explanations have done me much good lately, but that's beside the point. Then "I was just going to come by and tell you. I got this message from Gemma Ogleman. She wants one of us to stop by her house; she's found some new papers or something. I was just replying back to her, saying we'd get someone."

I hold up the phone, hoping she'd buy it. Luckily for me, Becky's number is listed as "Unknown" in my phone book (long story), so to the naked eye my excuse does look plausible. To my utter disbelief, I see her nod. She's buying it! Even though Gemma Ogleman is over 75 and probably thinks Verizon is some blue pill hawked by Bob Dole (beside the fact that she probably wouldn't know a text message if she was the one who

invented it). Whatever; I was just glad she didn't press the issue. "Hmm. Interesting. Did she say what kind of papers?"

"No, not really. Just some old life insurance stuff. Probably nothing incredibly important, but maybe worth a look at. I could go and get them if you want."

Jules considers this. "Actually, why don't you. This would be good for you, learn a few things."

Ecstatic at my good fortune, I turn to start to gather my things. Visions of a long lunch, perhaps even dessert, flicker in front of my eyes. I'll pick Becky's brain of all of its general psychology knowledge, and then have a piece of pie to smooth it all over. Even Frank's treating me like the hired help didn't bother me that much anymore.

"Mr. Ellis?"

Wait a second. What? I hear Will making his way back to my office. I drop my phone into my purse and it hits the bottom of the shelf it's sitting on, the sound amplified a thousand more times by my brain. She wouldn't. She *couldn't*. But when he reappears and Jules turns around, I know she has. "Anny says she got a text message from Mrs. Ogleman, saying she found some new papers. I thought that since you're now in charge of the case, you might want to go down there and introduce yourself."

"Sounds like a good idea. Will Ms. Sterling be accompanying me?"

"Yes, that's an excellent idea." He smiles at me and heads down the hall. I assure Jules that I'll drive and start heading after him, feeling about as excited for this car ride as I did for the move across town on that moving day in September sixteen years previous.

CHAPTER IV

Will leads the way outside after we pass through the office's double doors and into the summer sun. After we reach the parking lot, I turn and head towards my father's pickup, observing that in direct sunlight all of its dents and chipped paint is magnified. This was especially noticeable seeing that it was parked between Jules' coupe and (what I was assuming was) Will's shiny Audi. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Will giving the pickup the old once-over as he slides into the passenger seat. I plop into the driver's seat, noting the worn seat covers as Will moves the stack of newspapers I am going to take to the recycling plant after work today over to the middle seat.

Why oh why did I have to inherit my father's penchant for a messy truck? I mumble an apology for the clutter, and he tries to wave it off. However, I can see he's a little shell-shocked. And why should I be surprised? He's the perfect man; knowing my luck, he probably folds his underwear. *Well*, I think wryly as I crank the motor and pull out of the parking lot, *see him call me adorable now*. As if to prove my thoughts, a few empty Vitamin Water bottles roll across the floorboard when the truck makes its first turn.

For a long portion of the drive, we make pointless small talk about the weather, the traffic, anything but the Ogleman case. After awhile, I realize I'm not even going in the direction of the Oglemans' farm. All the while, I'm trying to come up with a reasonable excuse to turn back around, one that doesn't make me sound like a lazy moron

slash pathological liar. Time passes and as we go by red-bricked house after red-bricked house, I still haven't the faintest clue as to what I'm going to do.

As we navigate a particular suburban road, I try rationalizing: perhaps if we drive long enough he'll fall asleep. Then, I'll turn the truck around and head back, waking him up right before we pull in our parking lot. When he asks about the Oglemans I'll say I went in and out of the house while he was napping because I didn't want to wake him up. Excited with the best excuse I've thought of yet, I take a quick look out of my peripherals: he doesn't look the bit tired. And he's just had coffee, I remember, recalling the earlier exchange with Frank. I blow at a stray piece of my bangs in frustration. So much for that plan.

"We're not going to the Oglemans' are we?" Will asks as we pass the same green-roofed house road for the third time. There's a hint of laugher in his voice, but I keep my eyes on the road.

"What do you mean?"

Will reaches over and adjusts the volume on my car's radio without asking. Girls Aloud's "The Promise" dies down. "I've met Gemma Ogleman. She doesn't even own a touch tone phone, more the less know what a text message is."

I don't say anything, just drive past the house a fourth time.

"I've also been to the Oglemans' farm twice," he continues. I take my eyes off the road for a moment and look over. He's turned so that he can almost prop his arm on the dash, and he's smiling. Still, my shoulders remain somewhere around my ears. "So really, there's no need for the two of us to be doing this, right?"

"Yeah," I relent nervously, glancing at the rearview and wishing Sean was assigned this road, and then I could speed and get pulled over. "I guess this is a waste of company time, then. Billable hours down the drain."

Will shifts over, placing the Ogleman folder on top of the dash. "Not really. I think working on employee-employee relations is very important."

I exhale a tiny bit, relieved that he's not furious with me. *I will not lose my job because of this*, I chant silently to myself. Then, an idea hits me, so akin to the idea of faking a British accent while answering phone calls that I know the second it leaves my mouth I will regret it. But since there is no dam between my brain and my mouth (only when Will is concerned, apparently) it spills out, sounding several degrees more stupid than it sounded in my brain.

"Could you do me a favor?"

He drops the empty Vitamin Water bottle that he was reading onto the floor. "What?"

I take a deep breath. "Could---could you just *talk* for a moment?"

"Talk?" The word sounds more like *towk*, which sounds incredibly more sophisticated than the *taahlk* I've heard every day of my life. I can't make out his exact expression, but I'm willing to bet it's far more sophisticated, too.

We near an intersection and I slowly begin braking for the older woman standing by the crosswalk. As she inches across the street, I feel myself flushing. "Yeah. I know, I'm really weird, and I know you probably think I'm insane and a compulsive liar and a slacker and….whatever. I just like listening to you talk."

"You Americans and your fascination with our accents. Especially you," Will laughs, an amusing chortle that only adds to the list of things I find charming about him. I shrug nonapologetically, and all of a sudden that hot feeling one feels when he or she knows the opposite sex is scrutinizing every inch of his or her being washes over me. "I thought you had pretty good version yourself."

My fingers are gripping the steering wheel at ten and two with such force that I can see the hard leather wheel cover giving way to the pressure. Focusing on a spot on the horizon, I confess: "I'm a bit of an anglophile. My father got me hooked on the Beatles and James Bond when I was a kid and it sort of evolved from there."

"Well, I'm not sure how to take that exactly, but thank you?" It sounds remarkably like the same thing he said during our conversation earlier at the office. Relenting, he asks what I want him to say.

"I don't know. Something British-y."

"Something British-y," he repeats slowly. As he thinks, I turn the truck back towards town. Becky will want full details about my morning with Will, but somehow I don't think this road trip and ensuing conversation will be what she expects. "Well, I don't exactly know what specifically British you want me to say."

"Well, anything." I didn't bargain on his actually being serious about it. However, every time he asks what to say, I hear his lilting tone and am satisfied. My toes uncurl as he is silent in thought. Then:

"What about a date?"

I nearly crash as I skid to a stop. Luckily, there is no one behind us at the intersection. I abandon my intentions of getting us back to the office as soon as possible

and turn in my seat. With the noonday sun streaming behind his head, Will looks perfectly normal, as if he just asked if I wanted sugar in my tea. “What?”

“What about that? Wasn’t that British enough?”He cocks his head to one side as my heart takes temporary residence somewhere in my throat.

Of course. Something British. That’s all he means. He wasn’t seriously asking *me* on a date. As I realize this, my pulse begins to lower. I pull an about-face in my seat and press the gas pedal so quickly the engine whines before we lurch forward. The Ogleman folder crashes to the floorboard, its contents spilling. One form settles under my heel. “Oh, sure. Thanks.”

There’s an undistinguished silence. I reach for the radio to bring the Beatles back, but then realize we are mere inches away from the parking lot. “Well?”

“What?” Retracting my hand, I turn the truck into the lot. There are five minutes until lunchtime, a period of time I’ve learned through the years that I can certainly waste by dawdling. I kill the engine and open the door, keeping my gaze focused on my feet.

“What about it? Want to go on one?”

I look over at him, astounded as my keys slip out of my hand and hit the ground. His tone is sincere, and his eyes scan my face in search on an answer. I repeat shakily, “A date?”

“Do you call it something different here?”He winks, and I scramble for my keys. While on the ground, I chant: *You’re strong, you’re in control, and you’re not an idiot. You’re strong, you’re in control, and you’re not an idiot. You’re strong*--

“No, it’s the same thing,” I say casually, straightening my top as I start heading toward the office.

He follows behind me, and when we reach the double doors, he opens the left one for me. Before we go in, he reiterates, "Well, what about one? Say Friday around seven?"

"Yeah." I'm trying to mute my smile a little, hoping to look as indifferent as possible. I'm trying my best to put off an "I could care less" attitude, but I also feel like my cheeks have reached their full capacity. Once again, betrayed by my own self. "Sounds good."

"So, Friday."

"Friday," I say, and pass through the doors, heading back to my office at a near skip. This is something Becky definitely didn't plan on hearing about.

Less than 48 hours later, I sit in a booth at Clarksville's finest in date-night dining: Applebee's. I haven't gone on a real date in two years (and that disaster was with Becky's mother's hairdresser's son), so when I called up Becky that afternoon it was with great desperation. Two hours later and we stood in front of the makeup section at the drug store like two junior high school girls, goggling at the Bonne Bell selection in wonder. After a long consultation of this month's *Cosmopolitan* (and a covert peek at *my* stashed copy of last month's *Seventeen*), we headed back to Becky's apartment. Five hours and two chick flicks later, I left with no noticeable change in demeanor, but a definite physical alteration.

Now I sit here in an uncomfortably high bar area seat, picking absently at the chopped steak I ordered (#3 Rule in *Cosmo's* First Date Guide: Don't Let Him Think You're Picky. Men like a Woman who Eats). I'm wearing Becky's too-small heels, a

strapless knee-length burgundy dress I deemed way too dressy the moment I put it on (but kept it anyway), and a nervous expression that I'm sure Will saw right through. My hair has been straightened, curled, and teased to an impressive height, and my eyelids even have glitter on them (Becky and I fought over this little detail). As per normal, I feel like a thirteen year old girl playing dress-up.

Will, on the other hand, looks so at ease I can tell he's not unfamiliar with this concept. In fact, he looks so comfortable and at ease that I start to feel nervous he's a bit of a serial dater. He's wearing a shirt I haven't seen him wear before (Sign #3 in Cosmo's First Date Guide: He May Not Be That into You if He Can't Change Out of Work Clothes). When we first got here, he ordered a beer. I've tried to analyze the importance of drink choices since we first sat down, but with no luck. We've had a lovely dinner so far: he's intelligent, witty, and seemed genuinely interested in the few things I've had to say. There is only one truly down part about this evening: he hasn't stopped talking about work since we sat down. His commentary is boring, but right now listening to his accent is making up for his topic choice.

I mean, it's not like I don't find insurance fascinating. When people call in their claims I do enjoy learning about the events that unfolded and what the family is going to do about it. But then there's the downfall after they finish up their story: I have to take down the "pertinent" information in order for the claim to process (information that usually includes numbers and an impersonal "adjuster"). Then there's my absolute least favorite part of the job: when they call back weeks later to complain that their premiums are now too high.

"So, I looked over the chap's file and it turns out…" I shake my head, listening to Becky's earrings click together in my ear. There's a family of four behind him, two booster-seated kids waving coloring book pages and knocking over their plastic cups. The parents are too busy keeping their glasses away from their kids to notice that their food has gone cold. They are sitting under a Wizard of Oz poster, and I watch as a jet of milk from one cup squirts and lands on Toto's tail. Will keeps talking animatedly and I smile.

Our waitress Daisy comes by, asking if we want dessert. Remembering Cosmo's article, I blurt out, "Yes!" a little more loudly than intended. Will stops mid-talk, probably startled at the first sound of my voice since we ordered. I smile hesitantly, and grab a dessert menu hoping to bury my flushing cheeks behind it.

"We do have a lovely chocolate cake," Daisy pitches. I nod and look over at Will, whose expression is unreadable. Sounds delicious, but I'm not sure. I've had such good luck with Will that karma is bound to strike at any time: he probably doesn't even like chocolate. To my immense surprise and sadistic delight, my cell phone begins to ring. Will looks amused as Billy Idol croons to the restaurant patrons while I reach for my purse. Remembering Rule #6 (Don't Answer Your Cell Phone During a Date, Even If He's So Awful Your Ovaries Curl Up and Fall Out), I hesitate before hazarding a glance at the caller ID. It's Becky.

"Do you mind if I…?" I ask (as thousands of *Cosmo* girls shriek and fall over) and he shakes his head. I push away from the table, flickering a final glance over the dessert menu. "Just order whatever you want, I'm not particular."

I pass a table of men in dark police uniforms and feel the urge to stop and chat to see if anyone knows Sean, but more pressing matters are at hand. Making my way to the back of the restaurant until I'm near the restrooms, I flip open my phone and whisper a hello.

"The date is tanking, isn't it?"

"What?"

I hear Becky sigh. I can just picture her, sitting on her couch in front of her *Veronica Mars* DVDs, a pile of psych books sitting on the coffee table and the copy of Cosmo we bought at Walgreens tucked in the folds of her thesis binder. Even when Becky slacks on her work, she likes to hide the evidence from herself. "Well, if it was going well, you wouldn't have answered the phone."

"How do you know I'm not in the bathroom, reapplying lipstick or something?" I reply, feeling a bit defensive about my less-than magical date. As unexciting the evening was turning out to be, I at least had the sole right to pass judgment on it, and certainly not someone who hasn't even seen the date-ee in question.

I lean against the wall of the restaurant, and peer over at our table. The waitress is still there, smiling and laughing, but Will's head is in the menu, not paying attention. After all, the date isn't *tanking* completely. Will is still as cute and charming as if I'd custom-ordered him from a Prince Charming catalogue. Obviously, he knows how to dress and when to pass compliments. Plus, when he wasn't yammering on about his love for insurance, he is a nice voice to listen to. He isn't a flirt either, evidenced by the disappointed look that the waitress wears as she leaves our table. Technically he is the best date I have had in a long time, and a great guy to boot.

"A great guy?" she repeats doubtfully. I look up and catch Will's eye. He waves in my direction, toothy grin out in full force and a plate of something calorie and sugar filled sitting directly in front of him, untouched. The only thing the image lacks that would make him complete the mold of perfection would be a backdrop of the London Eye or Buckingham Palace, and even I'm not *that* superficial.

"Yes," I tell her firmly, turning away so that I face the wall and obscure myself from his view. "We're having a great time. You know what, it's actually the best date I've ever had. And I need to go. I've been in the bathroom too long. I'll call you tomorrow with details."

I hang up and make my way back to our table. *Perfect date, perfect man, perfect little accent…perfect, perfect, perfect.* When I return, Will is scrutinizing the dessert sitting on our table, a white chocolate brownie covered in slightly-melted vanilla ice cream.

"I wasn't really sure what you would like," he apologizes as I sit down, tucking the phone into my purse. I smile brightly and grab a fork.

"Looks great." Even though I hate white chocolate. I knew karma was going to turn up sooner or later. Still, I dig in exuberantly, loading up my spoon with a tiny bite of brownie and enough ice cream to fill an empty Ben & Jerry's pint. Will looks relieved that he's made the right choice, and grabs his own fork.

As I swallow, I can't help but fill a twinge of guilt. He's charming, definitely. Either that or his accent is so hypnotizing I've lost the ability to think straight. Probably both, I think as a second bite (this one just a slight more ice cream than brownie) slides down my throat. Besides, what isn't there to like about him? Little things like dessert

choice certainly isn't a rule-breaker. Why should I write this guy off after just two hours of a meal? If that was so, Sean and I would have never been friends (he likes to mix things like ketchup and potato chips, while I…just don't). *Open your mind Anny*, I silently chide myself, smiling broadly at Will.

"So, you were talking about Mr. Newsome's February fifth claim?" I prod, trying to look interested. I deal with this stuff every day and have fooled Jules into thinking my interest is genuine; surely a British man distracted by dessert wouldn't be too difficult.

He launches into the continuation of his story, where I continue to smile and nod, laughing at the appropriate moments and commenting the right things at the right time. As we make our way through the brownie (which I am trying my hardest to enjoy, even after the ice cream is gone), the conversation gradually turns to topics other than insurance (the *colourful* local atmosphere, Frank's inability to take even the slightest joke, and a shared adoration of people-watching) and I perk up. As we continue talking, the evening is actually improving, and I find myself genuinely laughing at one of his jokes about actuaries when a shadow falls over our table. "Hi, there."

I look up, startled. "Oh, Sean! Hi!"

Dressed in full uniform (he usually works Friday nights, mainly because, as I tease him, he has no social life), Sean looks far more imposing than he normally does; I feel for a moment, like my father has walked in and caught me drinking. There's an awkward silence as Sean and Will stare at each other. Sean's hip radio beeps through the silence, cutting through it like a ball-peen hammer. Finally realizing that the reason no one is saying anything is because of a lack of introductions, I swallow the last bit of ice cream and wipe my mouth on my napkin.

"Oh, um, Sean, this is my…"

"Friend—" Will cuts in.

"—friend, Will Ellis. Will, this is my best friend from high school, Sean Edwards."

"Oh, so this is Will," Sean says. He looks down at the emptying dessert plate, and when he sees the white brownie, he quirks his eyebrows up in surprise. Every time the two of us have eaten at the restaurant, he's begged me to try the thing, only to be met by my consistent refusal. I can tell what he wants to say, so I take a big gulp of my water. In a bad Cockney accent, Sean says to Will, "Hullo there, mate."

"Hullo." Will looks at me and after I finish giving Sean a Look, I meet his amused glance. "Is this a habit you Yanks have, imitating our accent?"

"No—"

"Just on this side of the Mississippi. Although being friends with Anny has taught me more about your side of the pond, so I feel like I'm almost a member of your British brood." Sean chimes in. His voice is loud and his chuckle false. "So. What are the two of you doing here?"

"We're on a date," I say, a little bit irritated that my date is being interrupted by Sean, who was probably sent to bust it up by Becky. "And having a lovely time."

"Really?" Sean says, hands on hips. "I was just talking to Becky…"

Bingo.

"Oh, how is she?" I cut him off, a catch in my voice making Sean's arms drop. "Haven't spoken to her in a long time. A *really* long time."

“She’s doing fine,” Sean says, luckily dropping the subject. He glances at his watch and then nods his head in the direction of the policemen’s table. “Well, I best get off to my table. Harv sends his best, by the way.”

“Likewise,” I say, nodding my head tightly. I watch him disappear from the table, an odd feeling in my chest.

“Nice chap,” Will says, watching him retreat. “I remember you saying something about your policeman friend. Not very much, though.”

I nod, uncomfortable as always when my work life and personal life run into each other and have awkward conversations. “I don’t really talk too much about myself.”

“Well, I could tell that,” Will smiles as he picks up his drink. “I’ve been yammering on so much you haven’t had much of a chance to say much other than *yes* and *no*.”

“Oh, that’s fine,” I lie. Finally someone other than me recognized how steamrollered the conversation was going. “I don’t talk that much anyway. Not a big fan of it.”

“Doubtful,” Will winks at me. “If what I’ve observed from you at work is right, on our second date you’ll be talking a whole lot more.”

“A second date?” I ask. It escapes before I can process what I’m saying. Was he serious? Two, approaching three, hours of nothing but eating and watching me turn oxygen into carbon dioxide and he wanted another date? We he *mental*?

His forehead creases as he drains the remainder of his beer. After wiping his mouth off with a napkin, he asks, “Unless you don’t want one? I just assumed since you said you were having so much fun you wouldn’t mind another date.”

"Mind?" I repeat, thinking: *No, I wouldn't* mind *at all. It's just I'm not quite sure if* you're *sane, seeing as you want another date with me.*

"Good." He pushes away from the table and is up helping me out of my seat before I can gather my things. I thank him, and the two of us make our way to the exit. We pass Sean's table, but I don't chance a look at him. I'm too busy trying to examine what in heaven's name I did in a previous life to meet this cute British man who wants to go on a second date with *me*.

"I have a question," I ask as we reach the door. "What did you mean when you were talking about what you observed from me at work?"

"Oh nothing," he smiles, opening the door. I walk outside, feeling the June air wrap around me like a soft cloud. He follows behind me, and we head to his Audi, which, as I'd originally thought, was as neat as a pin and a thousand times as big. "Just watching your antics when you think no one else is looking has become quite the amusing pastime."

"Glad to know my antics amuse someone," I say. I didn't even know I had antics to begin with. Yet another item to add to the "What the hell does Prince William See in Me?" list I'd been compiling ever since the first "cute" had dropped from his lips. Perhaps in two weeks, I'll work up the spunk to ask if we can talk about something other than work-related humor, but for the moment my luck is, to me, still holding strong and I am not about to bet against it.

“So, how was it?” Becky asks the following morning. I roll over in bed at 6:45 and grabbed blindly at my ringing phone, knocking over my alarm clock in the process. Dot flees the room yipping in fear, and as I answer, I know I now have the beginnings of a lovely bruise on my forearm. “The date, I mean.”

I roll over in bed, pressing the phone right-side up into my pillow and laying my ear directly on top of it as if I were going right back to sleep. Closing my eyes, I managed a, “It was fine. The same as it was when you called me last night.”

“I was just curious,” Becky says, sounding hurt. If my eyes were opened, they would be rolling.

“Sorry.” I yawn widely, my mouth opening so wide my tonsils hurt. Opening my eyes, I flip onto my back so that I’m now staring at the ceiling. “We had a great time, Becky. After dinner we drove around in his car and talked for awhile before he left to go back to his house.”

Becky reminds me a lot of my aunt Amy, in that “It was fine” never suffices as adequate explanation for any experience in life. She wants to know every detail; what we ate, what kind of car he drove, if our waitress looked familiar (of course she looked familiar; in a relatively small town like this, you pretty much know everyone). Thirty minutes of good cop/ bad cop interrogation later, I had adequately (in her opinion) described last night’s evening to her and she hung up.

I was still tempted to roll over and go back to sleep, but without the presence of a furry canine pillow I knew it was time for me to get up. After throwing on an old t-shirt and shorts, I padded downstairs. Not surprisingly, Dot and I were the only two awake. After my father’s accident, he’d receded back into his teenage habits of sleeping in. He

wouldn't be up for a little while, so I made sure to start the coffee pot before heading outside. The June morning was bright and a little nippy for summer, but it was perfect running weather.

In his younger years, my father ran marathons for fun. When I turned ten, I started running with him. I was easily hypnotized by the pounding feeling of my feet on the ground and the early morning air circulating through my lungs. When I entered high school, I joined the cross-country team, and for that one semester I ran competitively in college. Now, I run just for the solitude.

It's about twenty minutes of silence, listening to my own breathing, before I stop at the first crosswalk impatiently, waiting for the pedestrian light to change. My thoughts, naturally, are on one topic: *So, Will is a great guy. And there will be no doubt that our second date will be great. He's my Prince William. It was probably just first date jitters, anyway.* The light changes and I charge forward with a toss of my ponytail. A twig crunches under my right tennis shoe, and a quick breeze flits through the air as I charge forward resolutely. *No one has that kick in the solar-plexus feeling on the first date; love at first sight is overrated, anyway. Look at Romeo and Juliet. All that love at first sight crap brought them was a premature death claim...*

Tripping on my (what seemed to be) perpetually untied shoelaces, I stumble forward, catching myself before I make an elegant face plant. Luckily there's no one around to witness…well, never mind. My shoulders droop slightly as I catch sight of a familiar white pickup truck parked in the parking lot across the street. Just my luck.

"Enjoy your trip?" Sean asks, coming up alongside me. His blond hair is curled slightly with perspiration, and the seventies-style terrycloth headband I'd given him a few

years ago as a joke is slightly damp on his forehead. I had forgotten that this was his running route. I continued running, hopefully communicating that I was as nonplussed by his appearance as if I'd planned to run into him.

"Ha ha. You're so funny," I remark, picking up speed as he struggles to catch up. Sean and I used to be running partners until he graduated; now with his work hours so erratic we'd only jogged together a few times. I enjoy teasing him about gaining an affinity for doughnuts now that he has joined the force, and from the heavy way he was breathing I not too far off the mark. To prove my point I turned around and poked his stomach and then took off, a mischievous glint in my eye. "Just how many long johns are you working off today, Mr. Policeman"?

"Why so angry, little Brit?" he asked once he caught up with me. To punish me for his sprints, he leaned over and wiped his arm on my t-shirt. Ew.

I gave him a sideways glance as I loped forward. "I'm not angry."

"I know," he smiles, bumping my side with his elbow. "Just testing your mood. We haven't done this in awhile."

"I know. Becky woke me up this morning at 6:45, wanting all the details of last night." I rolled my eyes. "Maybe I should videotape every date I go on and just hand the tape to her as I go home. Then I could get some sleep."

"Too archaic," Sean says. "I'd try a DVD first. She'd want a director's commentary."

I shudder at the thought of an all-Anny, all the time reality show as we run past the police station. "Maybe a reality show. Appearing once every two years, a three hour episode about eating greasy food and making awkward small-talk."

We turn at the next stoplight, and I can see downtown looming about a mile and a half away. I don't have any money on me, but my mouth starts salivating immediately at the proximity of the diner downtown. As if he was reading my mind, Sean nods toward the older buildings. "Last one to the diner buys breakfast."

"Not hungry," I say, slowing down. My stomach growls (the traitor), but I ignore it. If I turned back now, my morning jog would equal roughly five miles, a shorter distance than what I used to run. However, I knew it would still be enough of an exercise to wake me up for the day. "Besides, no money."

"Well, you better win then," Sean says, picking up the pace as he leads the way toward the familiar dive. I decide not to argue and trot along behind him, my mouth already watering at the prospect of a country ham breakfast. Of course, running home on a country ham breakfast would not be ideal, but I was willing to administer the punishment to myself. Several streets pass before Will slows down to join up with me, mentioning lightly, "So how was your date last night?"

"Okay, *Becky*." Might as well tell Sean the truth. He has the weird talent for knowing exactly when I'm being untruthful, and (usually) to what degree the untruthfulness is.

Sean's eyebrows rise. "Just *okay*?"

I shrug. "No, it was fine. He's a nice guy. Charming, even."

"Of course he is. Boring?"

My shoulders tighten and I ball my fists automatically. I know if I keep it up, said shoulders will be killing me on the run home. "No. Very intelligent, funny. Great date."

“So, it goes from okay to great,” Sean muses out loud, running a hand through his hair absently. “He must be one of those chaps that improve upon reflection.”

I don’t say anything, but continue on. We reach the sidewalk outside the diner and I slow down a little bit, avoiding the Saturday morning antique-ers. Sean pauses, then catches up with me. “Honestly, you looked bored out of your skull last night.”

“I wasn’t!” I protest, feeling offended. Who is Sean to say what I looked like last night? Will obviously didn’t share the same opinion; he wouldn’t have asked me out on a second date if he had. I tell him so, hopping on and off curbs as I wind my way around streetlamps.

“A second date?” Sean echoes. We reach the outside of the diner and I lean down to tie my shoes. I breathe deeply, taking in the scent of eggs, hash browns, and sizzling bacon. This diner-style breakfast of fat and carbohydrates will be just the punishment I need. “Huh.”

“Why, do you think I’m not second date material?” I say, offended. Sean rolls his eyes as he helps me stand up, not even dignifying me with a response. Before going in, Sean takes the opportunity to bring up the sign outside the diner’s front door.

“Look,” he says, pointing. The sign is an eight by eleven inch flier advertising a party going on at the local university, supposedly in support of some sort of charity. I didn’t go to college long enough to reach either of the rebelling-against-your-parents and party-every-day phases but even I know the only charity that will probably see that money will be one sponsored by Anheuser-Busch.

“That’s not the location of our second date, if you’re worried you’ll run into us,” I tease, rerolling up the sleeves on my t-shirt after I push the door open and the air-

conditioning hits my chilled skin. I had heard once that air-conditioning was bad for athletes, but I also knew bacon and sausage was far worse for an athlete's body than a slight muscle tightening.

"No, I was thinking more about the thing we spoke of the other day," Sean says as we sit down at the counter. Immediately after I sit on the hard cushioning, I spin on the bar stool like a kid, soon so dizzy that all of the local décor has melded into one big blur of black and white newspaper clippings.

"What do you mean?"

"The next semester. Of college," he reminds me as Grace Ann, a woman who used to babysit Emily and me until my mother came home from work when we were kids, comes over to take our orders.

"I told you, I'm not doing it," I say after giving our orders to Grace Ann, who asks after my dad's health before disappearing into the kitchen with our orders. "There's no point in it, I don't have the money for it—"

"You're scared to do it—"

"False." I sip my water, swirling the straw around in my glass and watching the ice cubes caught in my current. "I'm not scared to do it."

"If money were no object, would you do it?"

"If money were no object I'd do a lot of things," I say offhandedly, and Sean jabs my arm with his elbow. Relenting, I add, "School *is* down on the list, but it's on the list."

"Good," Sean says as he takes a gulp of his water. "Because in the truck I've got a scholarship application for you to fill out."

"Wha-?" I say, finding myself shuffling through the file cabinet in my brain, trying to come up with an excuse of some sort. Why is he so adamant about this school thing? His persistence as of late is even driving me crazy. "Sean, even you have to know that this close to the semester, there's no money left."

"I've got some pull. Alumni benefits." He smiles helpfully from behind his glass, but I'm too irritated to smile back.

"I'm sure you do," I intone sarcastically. "I'm sure a three-year-old bachelor's degree gives you as much push around there as the president himself."

After my words come out, I immediately regret them. Before I can apologize, Sean's brow furrows. "Are you going to make excuses all the time? You know, I'm only doing this to help you."

"Well, what's with the God complex all of a sudden? For nearly six years you haven't said anything about me going back to school, and now you're acting like if I don't the world will implode," I retort, the vestiges of regret vanishing rapidly. I turn away, staring at a framed copy of front page of the July 4th paper six years ago.

Sean ignores the bitter tone in my voice. "Well, you said it yourself. It has been six years, Anny. Close to it."

"So?" I know I sound like a stubborn child, but I don't care.

Sean turns away, recognizing my tone as one akin to Becky's when she doesn't get her way. "I don't know. Maybe since I've moved on, I was kind of hoping you would too."

I turn around, my own brows crossed. "Move on?"

"High school was a long time ago," Sean says vaguely.

My eyes widen, and I drop my elbows off the counter. “And so now you’re saying I’m stuck in high school. Thanks.”

“I don’t mean that, and you know it.” Sean rolls his eyes, looking more like my high school best friend than a policeman. It’s probably my fault, my own stubbornness coming out and biting me once again, but I’m so irritated that I don’t care. “Gosh, you’re touchy today.”

There’s a long pause, during which the two of us, backs to each other just stare at opposing sections of the wall. Finally, Sean says softly, “I just want what’s best for you, Ann. I’m not trying to make you mad, despite what you think.”

I soften. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“I’m usually a fan of split personalities, but not this one,” Sean says matter of factly as Grace Ann brings us our food. The country ham I ordered moments earlier still looks delicious, but now there was a tight twist inside my stomach where hunger pains had resided just moments before. “Please let me know the next time you’d like to bite my head off for helping you so I can bring some duct tape to wrap around my neck.”

“I’m sorry,” I repeat softly. Deciding then and there that this was a Saturday and there was no need for me to argue anymore, I change my tone. Sean can make me angrier in a shorter span of time much more quickly than normal human beings, but ultimately we never stayed angry at each other for long. Besides, all he wants to do is help. What harm will it do to appease him, besides a possible blow to my dwindling self-esteem? “Well, I’m going to stop it right now. No more negativity, only positivity.”

“Good,” Sean says, reaching for the salt. “And that scholarship application?”

I sigh, and yank the salt away before he can reach it. We can't all have our ham and salt it too. "Fine. If it'll make you happy, I'll do it."

CHAPTER V

"Would he mind if I jammed this above the sink over there?" I ask Harv, holding up a large stuffed bass nearly the size of my torso. Harv is in the middle of assembling a set of shelves with Larry, another off-duty policeman, and after nailing in the other side of the shelf he is working on, he looks over at the catch and shrugs. Slightly disheartened at his lack of response, I survey the brass plaque identifying the fish: a twelve year old fishing trip souvenir of a lazy afternoon at Lake Barkley. Marble eyes stare out sightlessly, and its gaping mouth is large enough to stick the neck of a Coke bottle inside the entire fish with room to spare. It reminds me of those singing fish that Sean and I once bought as Chinese Auction gifts for a high school track Christmas gathering; they were the life of the party for a little while, but no one ever wanted to be stuck with them when the auction was over. I open the door to an empty kitchen cabinet and placed the fish in there. I'm just going to operate on the thought that it will take several weeks for Sean to discover his prized piece of taxidermy is in the cupboard. Perhaps then he'll give up the idea of letting it to grace his dining room and I won't have to talk him out of it again.

Sean is in the final stages of his move, and has enlisted half of the Montgomery County off-duty police force to help him. Becky has begged off due to finals, but I have no legitimate excuse ("Not *yet*" as Sean constantly reminds me, all while pushing that application in my face). Seeing as I am the only female in the house and the only one

who Sean trusts to go through his things and not make fun of them (to his face), I am the only one who has been able to touch the years of college frat boy memorabilia. I've done quite a bit of my own version of "tidying" as well; so far my inventory tally says Sean will be need new dishes (broken in the move), new cookware (minus the starter apartment microwave and age-old George Foreman grill), and new toiletries (I'd taken one look at his things and decided friends don't let male friends wear hair gel unless they wanted to look like Jersey guidos).

Judging from the box marked "Décor" that I'd recently opened, he'd also need quite a few trips to Bed Bath and Beyond, as neither Becky nor I can set foot into a house with a large set of antlers acting as a hat rack. Sean's decorating taste ranges from one part humor (a miniature plastic flamingo wedged between a set of garden gnomes), one part country (the aforementioned antlers and dead fish), and one part trashy-chic (the neon bar sign and the twenty five cent shell lamp he'd bought at a yard sale). After I'd gone through the majority of his boxes there was considerably less trashy, but also a clearer need for a few Saturdays spent (supervised) at Target.

We are nearly finished moving the final bits of furniture from Sean's old apartment to his new house, and are working steadily toward having the move completed before the end of the weekend. Several of Sean's work buddies have dropped by at various times to help assemble shelves and load up truck tailgates; even Will, who was driving up here to work on some extra paperwork, had decided to volunteer his afternoon. I was surprised as much as Sean when Will called, saying he'd love to drop by and help. After our subpar first date, Will and I went and wandered around the local park where we had a decent two-sided conversation (after I was actually able to get past my mental

block regarding Will's accent, a feat in itself). It's been a few weeks but I don't think anyone would count us as being together quite yet. We'd kissed a few times, but not anything I would count a serious progression towards a Facebook-official relationship or anything.

"How's it going?" I ask as Sean and Will stagger into the kitchen. Between them they are carrying an oak kitchen table, which I recognize as once belonging to Sean's mother. I glance over and see their tight grips and red faces, giggling slightly; the behemoth probably weighs as much as the refrigerator. Sean doesn't say anything, but Will looks up, unruffled from my laughter.

"It's going great!" he responds heartily, maneuvering his side of the table so that it doesn't smack me in the rear as they pass. "I haven't lifted anything other than dumbbells in years. This feels amazing, actually."

"Good!" I say, giving him a bright smile before turning back to the large dusty box. Pushing aside a Jeff Gordon commemorative plate as I dig deeper into the box, I hear a loud thump; Sean's dropped his edge of the table and disappeared into the living room, leaving Will to meet my puzzled glance. He shrugs before setting down his end and following him outdoors to (most likely) retrieve yet another large piece of furniture.

I'm not exactly surprised at this behavior; Sean's been acting weird all day, ever since Will called and offered to help Sean move. I don't exactly understand what brought on this attitude; Sean and Will have met on more than one occasion, with Sean even telling me what a great person he thinks Will is. It's like there is a tension between the two that only emerges when they meet face to face. Becky, ever wanting to infuse dramatics inside perfectly normal relationships, has told me one explanation for his

attitude: because Sean has always been the only guy in my life besides my dad, he feels defensive and the need to retaliate whenever Will is around. Then she added a whole bunch of psychological theories to which I nodded blankly, and then she changed the topic to her thesis presentation the next week.

After examining all of the contents of the box (and taking it upon myself to decide that garden gnomes as interior statues were never going to come back en vogue), I picked it up off the counter and staggered into the living room, where Harv and Larry were still hammering away.

"Any idea where I can toss this stuff without him noticing?" I ask Harv, indicating the Décor box. He stops his work and takes a brief peek inside, then inclines his head towards the hallway.

"Hide it in his shower for now, and I'll get rid of it later. I want that garden gnome for my daughter." He picks up a pocket level and tests it on the newly nailed shelves. I don't stop to muse after Harv's logic (I'd learned over the years that males have their own separate way of thinking, and sometimes it's best to ignore it than try to work through its logistics) but walk down the hall toward the bathroom regardless.

On the way there, I pass the master bedroom. The door is open, so I poke my head inside, eager to see if there's been any of the work Sean had been talking about for weeks actually being done to the room. The walls are still blank (no navy paint job) but there's actually a hint of human effort. More than a hint, I realize as I see Sean, who I thought was helping to move the last of the furniture with Will, sitting on his bed staring blankly out the window to the streets outside. The plastic wrap is still on his mattress, and when

he sees me it makes a terrific ripping sound as he jumps off of it. Guilt flashes across his face and he begins stammering meaningless excuses.

"I thought I'd come in here to find you working away, but then I see you're nothing above Tom Sawyering," I tease, sitting down the box next to the door where it is out of his line of sight and then moving to sit on the bed. After a moment of hesitation, he joins me. "Strain of moving too much for you?"

He leans back on the mattress, propping himself up by his elbows. "No, not really. Just wanted some time to myself. Soak it all in, I guess."

We sit there in silence for a moment. Outside, I hear some of the policeman arguing over the proper way to lift a couch; inside, it sounds like Larry or Harv hits a body part with a hammer. Sean and I exchange glances, and for a moment I feel like I'm seventeen again, hanging out at Sean's house after school and listening to his brothers as they bicker. "You know, you have a badge that you didn't buy out of a machine, you've bought a house that dolls are too small to permanently occupy, and soon you'll be paying bills without the use of Monopoly money. Sounds to me like you've hit it big."

"I guess so," he says, more to himself than me, the edges of his mouth curling up slightly as he rolls over on his stomach, staring at his headboard.

"Well, while you contemplate, I have your stuff to take care of," I say, sliding off the bed and moving back toward the door. "Now, I don't know what sort of payment plan you're expecting this time, but I don't think tea and *The Office* is going to do—"

"So, how are you and Will?" he cuts me off. I stop, surprised at the first bit of energy I'd heard coming from him all day.

"—and that's not random at all," I say, my hand on the door's frame. "We're…fine, I guess. Why?"

"Nothing," he says, rolling over so he is staring at the ceiling. His hair, a week outside of a trim, lays flush against the plastic. It's times like these, when I see him outside of his uniform, see hints of the Sean I knew in middle school, when I feel like we're playing dress up. He in his Halloween Cop uniform, me in my Profession Wear. Doesn't even seem truly real. "It's just that less than a few weeks ago you were so iffy about him even going on a second date, and now just to see you he's driving an hour here on his weekend."

"I know! People wanting to go out of their way just to see me? Crazy talk." I manage a smile and turn to head back out the door.

He calls after me. "I'm serious!"

"I'm just teasing you," I say, stopping at the doorframe and turning back into the room. Wading through the boxes and miscellaneous junk, I finally find an opening on the floor and with a small leap over a bag of towels collapse next to him on the bed, punching his shoulder lightly with my own as I hit the mattress. "Don't worry, brother dear. Little sis can take care of herself. She won't let the big bad Brit sweep her off her feet or anything."

I look out the window at the empty truck tailgate as I continue, "Where is Will, by the way? I thought he was helping you move the last bit of furniture."

"He ran out to get some lunch for everyone," Sean says, pulling his knees up so his feet no longer hang off the bed. I copy him, but still can't shake the feeling that his mother is going to come in and yell at us for having shoes on the bed. "We've moved it

all, pretty much. There are just a few things left, but I thought I'd just drop by the apartment and get those later. Rome wasn't built in a day. Or moved," he adds. I smile, and close my eyes.

For the first time in a long while, I'm completely at peace. There are no deadlines for me to worry about, no paychecks to cash, and no bills to worry over. There's only a football game later tonight, a yearbook meeting Sunday night, and a chapter of problems to do in algebra. I let out a sigh, stretching out my toes. Completely content.

"So, this Will guy," Sean says, breaking my perfect vision. I roll over and prop myself up using one elbow.

"What about him?" Before he can say anything, I rush in, "Please don't do the 'I don't think he's good enough for you' big brother act again. It's old, cliché, and frankly, I expect better of you."

"No worries," he says lightly, still staring at the ceiling. "I just was curious how you liked him, because he hasn't shut up singing your praises all day."

"Really?" I say, and then immediately wish I hadn't as I realize that I sound exactly like a middle school teen with her first movie date. Reversing directions, I shrug nonchalantly. "I mean, that's cool."

Sean looks over, a knowing smile on his face. "You don't have to hide it, Ann. I'm not going to freak out on you for doing the girl thing where you jump up and down telling me how he resembles various Greek gods."

"Well, I won't be doing that, so don't even prepare yourself for it. I'm just…happy, that's all."

“Good,” he says, staring off into the distance. “Still, I’m a little shocked after what you told me about that first time out with him.”

“Well, I decided that love at first sight is a big myth, and got past it. Now, I’m pretty happy with my decision,” I rush, sitting up on the bed. I really should be hiding that box of stuff before Sean realizes it’s there and starts asking questions. I don’t want to have to tell him what I did with his antlers.

“Good,” he says, nodding as if that settles the conversation. The sound of a car pulling into the driveway fills the room, and Sean glances out the window. “Good...well, I guess it’s time for lunch. Prince Charming is riding in on my white Ram, with delicious treats galore, I’m sure.”

I look out the window; Will is indeed pulling Sean’s white truck into the driveway. It looks like the Ram’s been through the car wash since he’s been out with it, as there is a surprising amount of white surface gleaming from the sun. If he is that obsessed with cleaning when he borrows a car, no wonder he always volunteers to drive when we go out. He’s probably written Dad’s old truck off for scraps.

“You let him drive your truck,” I say, slightly offended. “You still don’t let me drive yours. Sexist much?”

“Not so much sexist as in starving,” Sean says, standing up and offering me his hand. “Plus, I thought you’d be glad I’m getting along with your Prince. Sounded like the older protective big brother thing to do, and who am I to disappoint?”

He’s smiling, but there’s stiffness to his words and the glint in his eyes have diminished slightly as he pulls me to my feet.

“And speaking of disappointment,” he says as we start down the hall (after I kick the décor box down the hall into the shadows so he can’t see it), “that scholarship app you filled out doesn’t do a thing for you if you’re not enrolled at the school.”

I shrug, sneaking a quick peek down the hall to reassure myself of the décor’s box’s total absence from the light. “I’m getting on it. I still have a day or so.”

“A day or so before the final deadline,” Sean snorts quickstepping around me so that he blocks my entrance into the kitchen. He’s looking at me with his “officer” eyes, which makes me squirm inside. “Listen, Anny. *You* have to do this. I can’t push you anymore. This has to be your decision.”

“Really?” I say, not really irritated but also pretty tired of the constant reminders. I wasn’t seventeen anymore; perhaps he’d forgotten that. “I haven’t noticed, what with the constant hounding, the emails, the text messages…”

“Fine,” Sean says, and his eyes soften. For the first time since he’d brought the whole returning to college thing up, he looks more like my friend Sean than my father in police officer’s clothing. “I just want what I think is what’s best for you. “

“Sorry if I don’t agree,” I say, stepping past him with a half smile on my face. “I have my own ideas of what’s best for me. Let me figure it out on my own. I’m a big girl.”

A few days later, my application remains incomplete and I am still embracing laissez-faire as the perfect approach to completing it. To be fair, I have been rather busy and preoccupied with my own thoughts and the new heap of work Will had unknowingly orchestrated. I’ve never really helped with any of the individual claims (or cases, as the

Sherlock Holmes in me liked to think they were) before, other than the few times I'd copy claim forms by hand when Frank was too "busy" to do them on his own. Now, I look through the different forms and records with new eyes. No longer were these forms things to copy, file, and forget, but the numerous numbers and dates actually *meant* something.

It has taken me nearly six years, but now as I pore over the Oglemans' doctor bills and reports from the previous year, I realize that these aren't just scraps of paper specially designed to make my life less exciting. Granted the forms are still uninteresting, and their existence makes my life more miserable when dumped in my to-be-filed tray, but now we've reached a silent truce. I won't complain too much about the pointless existence I feel because of my job, and these forms won't drive me to resort to FarmVille as much.

Well, the tediousness *is* something I could deal with, I suppose. I glance up at the computer screen, taking in the new screensaver I'd spent the morning downloading. Besides being a bit of an anglophile I'm also a self-professed lover of early 90s pop culture; which is why the flying toasters (circa 1989) speeding across my screen are currently still far more interesting than any of the work I'd been handed all month.

Tearing myself away from the winged carbs, I scan a copy of Mr. Ogleman's doctor bill from the past year. Truth be told, I'm a bit blind at exactly what I'm looking for: Will is in Nashville this week, and Frank has himself so shut up in his office that even Jules doesn't bother him. From what I can see, on the doctor bill there are a few miscellaneous charges for various checkups and prescriptions, but nothing entirely out of the ordinary.

I make a note about Mr. Ogleman's Xanax prescription and then move on to the next form, glancing up at the clock haphazardly as I do so. Lunch had come and gone several hours ago; I'd eaten alone in my truck, what with both Becky and Sean at their respective jobs unable to join me. I take a glance at the next paper: the Ogleman's youngest daughter Collette has attached her own claim sheet, and from the looks of it, reviewing *this* form will be a job for Frank and not me.

Nevertheless, I stand and start to gather the new forms in my hands before I stop, noticing that the page numbers are a bit off. I thought I'd copied all of the forms Frank had given me, but apparently I'd missed one. With one last glance at the flying toasters, I head toward the door only to be blocked by Frank, who has decided to make an appearance. In my haste to get out of the office I can't stop myself from bumping arms and dropping the papers in shock, sending them askance all over the floor.

"Good, you're here," he says, not even looking at the winter wonderland he caused the floor to become. I throw out an apology and bend down to gather them, frantically scribbling the papers into an upside-down pile so he wouldn't see his precious documents out of his normal apple-pie order. I feel something hit the top of my head and seconds later a twenty dollar bill falls down my shoulders and comes to rest atop the pile of documents. I look up, irritated.

"My usual," Frank says, leaving as abruptly as he came. I glare at his retreating back, feeling the urge to kick something.

"You're welcome," I hiss to no one in particular, tossing the haphazard paper pile aside. For every time I feel the tiniest bit confident or that my job wasn't the black hole I'd convinced myself it was, Frank comes along and dumps money on my head like I am

a servant instead of a coworker. I'd worked here one year less than he had; I remembered seeing him move into his office when I dropped off the monthly premium check after school one afternoon. However, when I started work here it was like he owned the company, not Jules. I stand up and automatically dust my knees off, remembering the number of times he's barked orders at me, rolled his eyes at my "ineptitude", and then ignored me every time I saw him outside of this tiny building. I grab the twenty and head to the coffee shop next door, a part of me relieved to get out in the sun and stretch my legs.

I open the door to the store, a small bell ringing to signal my arrival. Hank, an older gentleman who'd been with the shop when it was a grocery store and before when it was a downtown diner, is at the cappuccino machine. He waves when I come inside. He strings the hand towel he is carrying through his belt loops and walks over to the counter.

"The usual, Anny?" he asks, and I nod. Thanks to Frank's penchant for throwing money and barking orders at me, Hank and I have developed a sort of code. He pretends to take nearly thirty minutes in making Frank's caramel mochalattecinno whatever, all the while passing me free coffee in exchange for entertaining him with stories of my day at work. How anyone finds stories of my work entertaining, I'll never know, but I'm more than happy to appease someone if said someone is giving me free mocha lattes to do so.

The store is pretty empty with only an older couple reading the paper and a girl dressed in a suit far too expensive-looking to have been bought anywhere near this town typing away on her telephone. Hank's store isn't what one would imagine to be a typical coffee shop, not in today's day and age of chrome and forest green Starbucks and silver

coffee flasks. Instead, Hank covers the walls of his store with everything local and rustic. Sean's antlers would fit in perfectly here. I take a seat at the counter, containing the urge to spin around on the bar stool like I was eight (and like I had done at the diner). Hank turns back to the cappuccino machine as he asks, "How's your dad doing?"

"Just fine, thanks," I say. The smell of coffee, so rich to some, was muted as it ran through my nostrils. I was sick of coffee, sick of caffeine as a whole, but never told Hank as I didn't want to hurt his feelings, nor his hospitality. He passes me a cup of steaming black liquid and I fight the urge to gag. Instead, I manage a tiny sip and weak smile. "He's working too hard for too little money, same as us all."

Hank props his elbows up on the counter, an amused expression on his face. "Girl, you are sounding more and more everyday like you've been working sixty years instead of six."

"I feel some days like I have been," I say, obliging Hank with another tiny sip out of my cup. "And to think, I'm not even one third of the way to retirement."

Hank shakes his head and pushes away from the counter. "Young girls like you talking about retirement and you not even being in your mid-twenties mean something's wrong. Ever thought of going somewhere else?"

I shake my head wistfully. "Can't. No degree, nowhere to go."

"Pigeon-holed," Hank says, and there's a catch in his voice. I look up and his eyes are twinkling.

"I don't see what's so funny," I say, my brows crossing. "Misery and depression, and you look like you're going to burst out laughing any minute. Remind me to never watch *Schindler's List* with you."

He chuckles and wipes the counter once, twice. “No need to get testy. Just find it amusing, that’s all.”

I force myself to smile. “You know if I had a dollar for the number of times someone has told me that I’ve been acting testy these past few weeks, I might be able to pay Frank to go get his own coffee.”

“Maybe that’s telling you something.” The cappuccino machine beeps, and Hank goes over it. “Miss, your drink will be right up.”

“No rush,” the girl in the expensive suit says. Curious, I turn around. What I see makes me jaw fall open, just like those terrible actresses in soap operas do when they’ve been directed to show shock. Except now, this is legit.

“Tamara Watson?” I say, a tiny bit flummoxed.

“Yes?” she says, her eyes flicking to her phone, which has just lit up and begun to vibrate. Its clatter on the table causes the older couple to raise their eyes above their papers. “Can I help you?”

“Tamara, it’s Anny Sterling,” I say tentatively, standing up. “From high school?”

“Oh my gosh!” Tamara says, her eyes lighting up in recognition. Leaving her phone to vibrate and clatter about on the table, she runs over to give me a hug. Separation from high school’s strict directory of cliques and rules of association render fake affection incredibly easy to produce, especially for girls who have grown up in the South and were taught by their great aunts to slop sugar on everyone who they had ever exchanged a sentence with (whether it was a civil sentence or not was unimportant). Still, today affection was as easy to fake as genuine distain was easy to show. “Wow! I haven’t seen you since we graduated.”

"Looks like graduation has been good to you," I say, meaning it. In high school, Tamara was a mousy bookworm with frizzy red hair who followed the popular crew around to the point of irritation. She dressed like them, tried to hang out with them, and even followed a few of them to the state university; if the Graduation Plans section in our Senior Salute had been really truthful, it would have said "Tamara Watson aspires to be a drunken sorority girl just like the top half of the varsity pyramid." However, from what I see, she's done *much* better for herself than any of those girls she followed around.

"Thank you," she says, brushing a blonde ringlet off of her forehead. With the gesture, a large diamond ring she wears on her left ring finger glints in the lights. I see her give me a quick once over, taking in my work pants (still dusty from the morning's bout with the filing cabinets), my slightly faded button-down shirt with the black ink stain on the hem (a tiny souvenir from a tryst with the copy machine a few weeks ago), and my hair, which was falling out of the knot I'd tied it up into this morning (with an old rubber band I'd found in the back of my desk drawer). She stops, and her smile tells me she's about to lie to me. "You look great, too."

I just smile and nod like I agree with what she said. I reach up and stroke the back of my hair, feeling more and more hair fall out of the knot and onto my shoulders. I retract my hand immediately, smiling brightly as Hank pushes Tamara's cappuccino towards her. "So, where are you working, Tamara? Haven't seen you in awhile."

"I work for First Equity," she says, nodding at the bank across the street. I bob my head; my parents have been lifelong members of the Liberty bank uptown; no wonder I'd never seen her around.

"As a teller?" I ask casually, looking over her smart clothes once more. There was not a single loose thread on her shirt or even a minute wrinkle in her pants. Her black heels were higher than any I'd ever seen, and when she shifted her feet, I could see their bright red soles.

Tamara laughs a little uneasily, taking a sip of her cappuccino. "Actually, no. I'm in management, you could say."

"Management?" I repeat, trying hard to remember if Becky has said anything recently about someone in our class being promoted. Becky knew more of the old high school gossip than even I did, and she had gone to college.

"Yes…I'm director of the First Equity branches on this side of the state," she says quickly, looking a tiny bit embarrassed. I flush, staring at the floor.

"Director?" I manage after a long pause. "Well…that's very nice. You *have* done well for yourself then."

She smiles sheepishly. "Really, it's just luck. I did my internship for First Equity my junior year, and when I graduated they offered me a job right away. I only just got promoted a few days ago, and I'm making the rounds getting to know everyone before I fly home tomorrow."

"Fly?" I ask.

"First Equity is Atlanta-based," she says, taking another sip of her drink. "I've been living there for a few years now with my fiancé, Alan. He works for Turner Broadcasting downtown. "

"Congratulations," I say sincerely, squeezing her arm. "I'm really happy for you, Tamara. Sounds like you're doing wonderfully."

"I am," she says, a healthy glow in her cheeks. Her tone darkens slightly, and she places a hand on my wrist. "I heard about what happened to your father. Becky Neil told me when I saw her in town a few years back."

"Oh," I say. The years have passed and time marches on and all of that, but I still don't know how to make what happened to my father a less uncomfortable topic for discussion.

"I think it's really brave what you did, stopping your college education to help him out. Much braver than anything I'd ever do." There's a gentle catch in her voice, similar to the one my dad would get when he was telling me what a good girl I was for studying for my spelling test. For the second time in the past week, I feel seventeen. This time, however, everyone else has shot way above me, leaving me behind. "Especially after what happened with your mom and Em—"

"Thanks," I interrupt, wishing Hank would hurry up with the coffee.

"Well, what are you doing now?" she asks, trying to bring the conversation back to its initial cheery (cheery for *her*) tone.

I feel Hank's eyes on me as I struggle for words. "I'm an administrative assistant and a file clerk for Franklin-Watson down the street."

"Still?" Tamara says, and immediately clasps her hand to her mouth. I shake it off, knowing exactly how she feels. I feel like it nearly every day when I talk to Will; it's what Sean refers to as my "open mouth, insert foot" way of speaking. "I am so sorry about that, I don't know why I said it. I mean, I know you'd worked there a little bit in high school and all but I didn't think—"

“It’s fine,” I interrupt before the apologetic verbal diarrhea begins to explode in a full on gastric catastrophe, even managing a small smile. “I say that to myself all the time; you just happen to voice it.”

There’s a pause, and Hank finally has the intelligence to pass me Frank’s coffee, steaming hot. I grab it before he has a chance to put a cardboard sleeve around the cup’s outsides, ignoring the immediate pain that courses through the calluses on my palms. Somehow, it doesn’t burn nearly as badly as the resentment I now have for Tamara. “Well, it was nice to run into you, Tamara. Good luck with the new job and congratulations again on the engagement.”

“Thank you,” Tamara says. “Take care of yourself, Anny.”

“You too,” I say. Hank hands me my change, and I duck out of the shop before my toes begin cramping in my work flats.

The sunlight hits me in directly in the eyes, and I wince. Out of one spotlight and into another. Frank’s coffee burns into my hand, and I barely make it back into the office before I have to set it down out of concern for keeping my left hand. Paula looks up when I enter, watching as I set the coffee on the payment counter and then commence to wringing my hand until the pinkness and burning sensation is nearly gone.

“You were gone awhile,” she says from her desk.

“Ran into an old friend at the store,” I manage, shifting my change to the burning hand and letting the cool metal coins press into my skin. I pick up the cup with my fingertips, trying not to think about the heat. “Is Frank still in his office?”

“He left about twenty minutes ago, saying he was going home early today,” she says, and I stop.

"So, he left about five minutes after he sent me to get him this?"

"You could try Jules," Paula suggests. "I bet she wouldn't mind a cup."

I shake my head, defeated. "There's no one in this office other than Frank who'll want to drink this mess. "

I make my way to the back of the office, hands nearly shaking in fury. When I reach the kitchen, I wretch the top off of the cup, the action causing a few droplets to fall to the floor. The strong blast of Colombian beans hits me violently; the smell shoots through my synapses like fire ripping through kerosene. I sling the cup into the sink, not caring about the echoing sound the cup makes when it hits the bottom of the sink and ricochets to land on the floor. Coffee is everywhere, dripping from the counter and onto my shoes. I lean back on the counter facing away from the sink, breathing hard. I can almost hear Sean's voice: *"Well, are you happy now? You made a bigger mess that the one you're in, and nobody but you has to clean that up."*

"Oh, hush," I say to his phantasm, and then grab a rag from underneath the counter.

After I finish up cleaning up the kitchen, I duck into my office, where to my immense relief I find nothing sitting in my "To Be Filed" tray (except for the rubber band I'd flicked into it earlier). After sitting down in my chair and making the flying toasters disappear off my computer monitor with the flick of a mouse, I look over and realize that all of the Ogleman papers have disappeared entirely. Luckily enough, Frank had left behind my notes ("*Doesn't even care about what you have to say,"* hisses the Sean-induced devil over my shoulder), which I immediately tuck into my desk drawer, a place where I know even he wouldn't stoop to snooping around. To make up for a lack of a

much needed Brookstone stress ball, I grab the computer mouse and begin clicking through website upon website, trying (unsuccessfully) to find something to calm me down.

To a normal person, that distraction would not involve a History Channel sponsored website on the evolution and use of medieval torture devices, but there is where I find myself. JPEG upon JPEG of long dangling metal contraptions, rusted with time and overuse but now in presentations suitable for framing, should one put the Xerox printer and copier to use. Leathery straps hung from these giant jaws, which were intended to be wrapped around the victim's legs so that the unfortunate person was wired to their pain, unable to move while their metal appendages did the brunt of the work, inducing blood, tears, and hopefully the truth. Of course, the majority of medieval prisoners who were tortured using this particular contraption died immediately after the machine did its job thanks mostly to the extremely poor medical care of the plague-ridden Europeans, but now these death traps were literally being put on display and studied. Like they were positive aspects to be remembered from the reign of the Henrys. If there was a global apocalyptic meltdown and four hundred years from now people wish to study American pain processes under the current presidential administration, I can tell you for damn sure no one is going to be studying my filing cabinets or reading the passive aggressive emails sent to me from Frank ("please remember to refrain from wearing heels next Tuesday, as I am meeting with a client in my office and don't wish to be disturbed as you go clomping up and down the hallway to get my coffee") and believe they are important enough details of this society to make a whole History Channel special on them.

I exit out of the page and take a few deep breaths. This technique would always work when I ran; a few deep breaths and true to form, I was back to normal. I can't allow myself to focus on the negative or I know I'll never get out of that mood for the rest of the day. I click around on a few websites, but there's nothing that seems overly appealing (and I'm not going back to the medieval torture devices). I have new emails from various adjusters, but there's really no use in answering any of them until tomorrow; most of the people on that list are like Frank and have already decided to take their mid-afternoon sick day. I reach for my extension and dial Will's number, but when I'm connected it's only to his secretary who says he too has already left for the day. Instead, I sit there at my desk watching the time pass on my computer's task bar. The clock is digital, so it's much less climactic than watching Big Ben whoosh his giant arms around, or the device Britney Spears watches when she pretends to be a naughty Catholic schoolgirl.

Moments later, my blank glaze has slid over to a pile of equally blank printer paper when a shadow passes over me. It's Jules.

"Would you mind filing this for me?" she asks. I'm thrilled her face isn't showing what it probably should: the irritation she feels every time she walks into my office and finds me having a stare down with a box of Staples printer paper. I take the folder from her, leaping up like what I imagine a person who lived for her job would. Her thanks echo after me as I nearly skip down the hall, stopping as soon as I am sure I am out of her line of sight.

Closing the door of the filing room behind me, I check the folder. The claim inside is for Austin Peay; I remember Jules and Paula discussing the incident as I passed through the kitchen the other day. Apparently there were a few critical pages missing in

the final claim submission to the company and there had been a brief mix-up in their office, as well as huge scramble in our office to make the cutoff before the next semester began, but it had all worked itself out. Apparently it had, anyways.

I reach for the corresponding drawer and automatically begin singing the alphabet song under my breath.

You could do that. The little angel on my shoulder has thrown itself at the devil, and the two wrestle in my mind as I search for the correct place for the file. *Everyone says you can; you* know *you can. There's no use trying to make up excuses any more. Tamara Watson did it, and she couldn't even run around the high school once without getting out of breath. Sean did it, and he barely passed algebra. Even Becky did it…and she's Becky.*

It takes me a few seconds to realize that I've stopped breathing, much less singing. I look again at the manila cardstock in my hand, examining closely the name I myself had written on the little flap a few years ago when we'd gained the account.

I *could* do this. The conversation with Tamara this afternoon had done nothing but confirm to be me that I *was* better than all of this. Sean, as much as I'd love to disagree with him, was right: now, there was really nothing holding me back. My father now worked from home, the bills are being paid continually on time, and *Jersey Shore* would still exist in repeats and DVDs for the foreseeable future. My little nest egg of non-family deposited paychecks does nothing but simply sit around in my bank account, waiting for me to spend it on useless junk.

When I reached my desk I sat down, pulling open my own desk drawer to reveal the paper application I'd stuffed in there. Even though I knew paper apps were passé,

there was something about having that piece of paper in your hands that made everything seem much more real. It was like my own Magna Carta. Writing it down only solidified the intentions I had, and would force me to follow through in a way that an easily-deleted PDF file never would. Of course, I also knew the perils of that paper application as well, because it received more direct blame in the case of the many excuses I had used in not fully completing it during the past few years; this was not, after all, the first time I had been handed this particular application. I had planned to complete it whenever the mood hit me, but the mood failed to ever hit me. Instead, it ducked around, made excuses, and the application thus remained unfinished. Pulling out a pen, I bent over the paper, face set. I could do this.

Even if I didn't, I reminded myself as I began to fill in the information header with my name (*last, first, middle initial*), anything would be better than coming home smelling like I'd raked the Colombian coffee fields.

CHAPTER VI

Being bitten in the ass, whether literally or metaphorically, is really one of the best things that could every happen to a person (well, perhaps not if the biting is literal and the biter is something like a tiger or rattlesnake, but I'm sure the sentiment and action spurring remains the same). After Sean and nearly every other person in my life had treated me like the five year old I was acting like and nearly picked me up under the armpits and thrown me into the life of a collegian, I submitted the application a week ago and been accepted. So, there it was. I am now officially a freshman at APSU, beginning in a few days with the fall term. Becky, who had passed her thesis defense and was now completely exiting from academia as she headed toward the even more complicated job market, is being considerate enough to help me make the transition from full time insurance lackey to fulltime lackey, part-time student. The first step, she claims, is to *assimilate* oneself with the campus and its atmosphere.

"It is only then," she intones, sounding more like Yoda or the Prime Minister, "that you can fully *be* the student you have had the potential *to be*. Until you have fully grasped the entirety of the world you are about to enter, never can you wholeheartedly leap forward into the abyss, charging away with the tenacity of a Cromwell or a Lee—"

"You're full of shit, you know," I say, swallowing a mouthful of chicken sandwich. We are eating at Austin's, a diner on campus near the bookstore. Apparently, consuming vast quantities of campus food and checking out college freshman who had

never been alive in the 1980s was the only true way to *fully* embrace the collegiate lifestyle. What had started as a quick Saturday jaunt to campus to pick up the book required for the class I was taking was, in Becky's mind, an opportunity for her to brag about her superior knowledge about this campus and its inner workings. However, as I constantly reminded her during the umpteenth spiel over how a college works, I *had* attended college before (however briefly), and so pointing out the efficiency of the meal plan card and the location of the coin laundry—despite that I was still a part-time student who would be living at home—was downright redundant as I wasn't eighteen any longer. "You didn't want to show me the realities of college life. You were merely hungry."

Becky rolls her eyes but doesn't deny my accusation. "As a part-time student, Anny, when you are not on campus for class you'll be here for one reason or another…this was just an example of how one might spend her time. Just trying to be helpful."

"Of course," I say, gesturing to the large milkshake in front of her now-empty plate, "Considering my classes are nearly all night courses, after nearly everywhere to eat on campus is closed. You also might be trying to teach me how to gain the freshman fifteen too, which in that case I may just have to pass. Speaking of, isn't there a keg party we should be attending? Or perhaps a panty raid on the girl's dorm?"

"Very funny." Becky sounds offended, but I knew it to be a front; you aren't friends with someone for over half of your lifetime without registering a few triggers of faux anger/sympathy enticers. I could have been crueler and demanded that the entire evening had been a wash for her and she'd be much better off editing her Linkdin profile, but as this was actually one of the few times we'd been able to get together and her not be

buried chin-high in textbooks or behind a laptop screen, I was actually content in blowing off the rest of the evening in lieu of spending hours at home on a Saturday having awkward Skyping sessions with Will or watching *Deadliest Catch* in the living room with Dad.

I was secretly thrilled about being able to go back to school, even though it wasn't in the manner I'd expected. When I graduated high school, I was a decent enough cross country runner to get a scholarship to run for a small Division Two school in Arkansas. I have always been a little bit of a homebody, but the fact that I found being over four hours away from anyone I was blood related to didn't, to my surprise, fill me with imminent fear and dread. My father, who I had grown more and more close to since both my mother and sister were gone, was saddened that his Friday night dinner buddy would no longer be able to accompany him to the all-you-can-eat catfish buffet, but he accepted that I was much better off getting an education (a semi-free one at that) and "spreading my wings" (my father listened to too much country music in his pickup on the way to work every day). This rationale allowed his misgivings to give way for the potential of my becoming more than a professional fast-food worker (a noble profession, but during the summer I worked at a nearby eatery, the smells brought in from my clothes—grease, fries, stale wafts of the meat freezer—was enough to make me want to do anything else).

And so off I went, eighteen years old to a new place I'd hardly ever visited. My father's family was from Oklahoma, so on certain Thanksgivings and Christmases we'd driven through the state but never had we stopped for longer than a pee break or a few hours of shopping detour. Becky and Sean, who had both taken advantage of the in-state school discounts and would be staying at home to attend APSU, had gone with me on a

few visits to the campus. I felt a tiny bit proud when they walked into my dorm the first time and they both exclaimed over how much privacy I would have and opportunities to live life how I wanted to now that I wasn't going to have a parent breathing down my neck twenty four hours a day (both of them planned on staying at home to save money). When my freshman orientation rolled around I wasn't sad at all; in fact I was quite the opposite.

My dad's pickup, loaded with everything on the *Teen People* "Must-Haves For College Dorms" in its bed, made the journey; I didn't have a car, but was saving up for a Civic that was on the Toyota lot at home. After two years of saving my fast food paychecks and every birthday check from Grandma, I was close to two hundred dollars away and I had figured that the first semester I could get by using a bicycle (*cross-training*, my father assured me) or the bus. After Christmas break, according to my plan, the little champagne car would be mine.

I had never been an outstanding student, but I had never been an abysmal one either. In elementary school, I was the type of kid who would answer "recess" when asked what my favorite subject was, but as I grew into middle and high school, I began to see education as not the enemy, but a burden to be conquered in order to produce better things. I entered that first semester undeclared, but with a full schedule of not only basic courses (your Art Survey, your College Algebra), but of courses I'd never heard of in high school that seemed more like fun than actual learning (I could take Bowling for a *grade?* And it would count towards my *degree?*). I had no idea what I wanted to do for the big "C" career, but thought that it would hit me somewhere between sophomore and

junior year. Until then, I was going to embrace the wackiness of the collegiate offerings wholeheartedly in hopes of for once enjoying getting an education.

"This chicken tastes amazing," I say in an attempt at a faux-peace offering to the girl across from me who is still faux-stewing in her faux-anger. Becky, who is cautiously consuming her milkshake like a hesitant recovering alcoholic approaches his first cocktail, gives a halfhearted shrug.

"Yeah, it's okay I guess. I liked to come here between classes when I was an undergrad and sit by the window and study." She nods her head outside, and we watch students pass. The semester doesn't officially start until tomorrow, so the students who are here are free of the challenges of academia and the accompanying backpacks stuffed with books on topics I can't even pronounce. Becky and I had gone to Target a few days ago and I'd picked up a few things for school ("*No* backpacks with wheels. I don't care if they're handy or easy on your back. Buy one of those with wheels and a handle and you'll be labeled "rolly-backpack lady" the first time you walk into class or walk in front of someone who is in a hurry on campus"), and just watching students, people just a few years younger than myself, fit in so comfortably like they'd been born to be a carefree college student wearing sweatshirts with Greek letters stamped across the chest filled me with the tiniest bit of anxiety.

I could feel Becky's eyes on me, watching. "Nervous?"

"No," I lie. I lay back in the booth, trying to mask the growing anxiety I had gathered during the span of watching Sally Sorority and Frank Fraternity pass by the window. "Just ready to get this going, you know? I've been away from it for so long, it's

high time I finally do something about it instead of sitting at home after work watching BBC and feeling sorry for myself."

"You'll be fine." The learned authoritarian on all things college has returned. "It'll all come back to you in time; you're young enough. Besides, you are starting small with just a few classes. Next semester, once you have your footing on APSU's way of doing things and expectations, you can take more classes."

I nod. I have decided that it will be best for myself, both financially and scholastically, to only take three courses this semester, and one I consider to be relatively easy (according to the online course directory and both Becky and Sean): ENG 2010 Introduction to Lit. With my past few years of doing little besides reading the British "classics" during lunch time (when I wasn't on Facebook or watching Monty Python clips on my computer), I figured that whatever we would be reading would be easy compared to Brontë and Shelley. With my first semester at University of Southern Arkansas transferring my credits, I would still be a freshman, but I would only be a few credits shy of being a sophomore after completing this course. With the scholarship money I had gotten (via the application Sean had been nagging me about), this first semester would not cost me nearly as much out of pocket as I had originally envisioned.

My phone, which I had placed next to my plate as per the normal practices of technological co-dependants, vibrates violently, causing the two of us to start in our seats and the ESL students sitting at the table next to us to look up from their lunch with such alarm that I worry briefly that I am going to be subjected to internal insults in more than just the usual English language. I pick it up quickly and tap the screen; it is a text message from Will, enquiring to see if I would be free for dinner tomorrow instead of

tonight seeing as his flight into Nashville has been delayed. I send back the affirmative and look up to see Becky looking at me with a bemused grin.

"Will again?" she asks, and I shrug my shoulders nonchalantly. "Tell me, just how is the British dreamboat? Is he everything your little anglophilic heart has ever desired?"

"We're fine," I say, reaching for my sandwich. The pickle slid out and hit the plate with a *thunk*. "We're really not that special. I'm a girl, he's a boy. I live with my father, he lives in London. I drive a Chevy, he drives a Benz. I'm still his employee, he's my boss. The only difference is he occasionally sticks his tongue in my mouth."

The ESL students, who had been using their time sitting next to us to eavesdrop on our conversation, looked aghast and murmured under their breath while staring. Obviously, their English teachers had done a semi-decent job in educating them in American slang, but not in discretion. Becky, to her credit, rolls her eyes and angles her body to block them from further overhearing.

"Just making out?" Becky sounds aghast. "Wow, it is true about the British prudishness. He hasn't grabbed your boobs or stuck his British hand down your American jeans?"

"BECKY!" I hiss, looking around. I'm not a prude (not as much as Will, obviously), but I also do not think a public diner (despite being located in a college setting) is the most appropriate place to be talking about my lack-of sex life. Sure, I was a little concerned that we'd been dating a few months and he still handled me like a little China doll, even when we were alone, but I was chalking it up to taking things slowly. He was, after all, still my boss, and if we were to have loud, raucous sex on top of Franklin-

Watson's copy machine, Jules and Frank (especially Frank) might have a few problems. Paula, however, would applaud.

"Well, I can't pass judgment until I meet him," she says in sing-song, sounding far more like my mother than my friend (who was only, mind you, three months older than me). "You've got to bring him to the house, make sure he comes inside, doesn't wait in the car and honk…"

"I'm not hiding him from you," I tell her, although the knot in my stomach screams at me for the lie it conceals. "He's just busy…all the time. He's a supervisor all over the south, you know. He can't be expected to establish home base in Clarksville, when there are 99 billion other cities that are much larger, much busier, and much more interesting than here."

The explanation was half-true. It was correct that Clarksville should be no big executive's home base (especially if they were internationally located), but Will had been staying around here, driving to his apartment on the outskirts of Nashville on some days and catching flights to whatever cities corporate deemed him to be in on the others. I suppose this should have added on to his mystique (My George Clooney *Up in the Air* fantasies), but it didn't. All that I gathered from this was that not only did I have a British boyfriend (according to *Facebook* and Will, who'd asked me "what we were" like we were in junior high all over again a week ago and brought the "label" conversation to the forefront) who was not only physically and aurally perfect, but one who also bored me to tears with work talk and constantly jetted off to wherever the faceless CEOs of insurance had deemed it necessary he be. A real winner, but I would be damned if I gave him up for tiny things like boredom and lack of physical presence. We Skyped nearly every

day...and for the large majority of that time I was actually interested and we had decent conversations. In fact, it seemed like every time we chatted online, he became much more impressive and much more British. It's like my Dell had a Brit-enhancer filter on its screen.

"Well, what's he doing today?" Becky asked.

I thought for a moment.

"I know he told me he's somewhere in Alabama…not in one of the big cities, but this random little Podunk that has a similar case to the Ogl- the one that we've been working on." I stop and correct myself. I know Becky wouldn't tell a soul, but it's one of the first rules of dealing with someone's private business: keep your mouth shut. How she's a teller in a bank and never gotten written up for gossiping about huge withdrawal or declarations of bankruptcy I'll never know. I'm fairly good about keeping my business private (hell, I've done it ever since dad was hurt and Emily left), but sometimes I'm dying for a good "What do *you* think?" Luckily enough, Will is one of the people I can talk to about this outside of work hours and not feel guilty; I sometimes feel he'd prefer talking about the Oglemans than the two of us messing around. "He's supposed to be home sometime tonight or tomorrow. I don't remember which flight he's on."

"Such a good little girlfriend," Becky intones, looking to make sure the ESL students had left. "Come on, let's get out of here. Then, on the way back to my car, you can tell me about the names of his family members you've forgotten, the high school he might have been to, and the dog he may or may not have."

I roll my eyes, but get up and follow Becky to the door after dumping my trash. So, I don't remember everything he says. So what? Do people remember everything

Henry V said? Can they recite Winston Churchill's World War II address to the nation? No, but they remember the gist of it. Exact words are only for specific things, like recipes and last night's episode of *East Enders*.

Pushing outside, the warm air flooded through me and instinctively my legs pick up. Today would be a beautiful day for a few miles around campus; if he were here, Sean would join me, but any instance of exercise that I mention to Becky that doesn't involve Jillian Michaels workout videos or the necessity for buns of steel go ignored. She believes, she's told me, that "outdoor exercise is completely unnecessary. That is what God made gyms and YMCAs for. If He wanted me to exercise, He would have made their invention impossible." Not wanting to mess with spiritual matters, I've taken to calling Sean for my running jaunts instead.

"Nice day," Becky says nonchalantly as she steers us back toward the direction of our parked car. I nod, kicking my heels from side to side like a filly ready to break through the gate at the Kentucky Oaks. "Want to go the gym and run off that sandwich?"

"The gym? No way," I say, seeing a sidewalk that looks like the perfect beginning for a mile and a half long leisure run. You can take the girl out of cross country, but I'll never stop running. "Let's jog around campus. That way you can continue to point out all the stuff an eighteen year old undergrad would do so I can add to my list. Then, afterwards, we can go for a soda and try on poodle skirts."

"Funny," Becky scoffs. She continues to head to her car, calling back over her shoulder, "You have a fun time running in your jeans and button-down…I'm going home to change and hit the elliptical."

“Boring!” I call after her, but secretly I’m thrilled. I take off down the street, eager to have a little alone time and exploration.

I am about halfway down the sidewalk I’d lusted after earlier when my cell phone, which had been bopping around untethered in my pocket, vibrated. Ugh. What happened to running being an outlet, a time to get away from the dramatics perpetrated by the so-called real world? Isn’t that the very source of the idea of running away? Regardless, the vibrations are messing with my mind as they concentrate right on the socket of my hip, so I extract the damn thing and press talk, praying it’s not Will or Becky…I’m not in the mood to talk with him about the Oglemans’ case or listen to her whine about a chip on the paint of her car that hadn’t been there two hours earlier. “Hello?”

It’s not either one of them. “Hey.”

“Hey, Sean; what’s up?” I say breezily, hoping he can’t hear my panting breath. I *am* out of shape, it seems.

“Your sister’s home.”

“What?” I stop in the middle of the street, skidding like Wile E Coyote who’s just seen a train ahead. “Emily’s *what*?”

“Home,” he repeats, sounding distant and a tad anxious. “I just drove by your house and she was in the driveway, lugging around some big suitcases and heading towards the front door…did you know she was coming? I would have thought you’d have mentioned it or something. I thought you hated—”

I hang up the phone abruptly and take off in a sprint.

CHAPTER VII

"Baby SISTER!"

I stop just short of walking through the back door of my house. I'd tried to sneak in, hoping no one would see me so that I could put off *her*. My sister, Emily, the nearly seven foot tall Amazonian queen who has spent the last thirteen years popping in and out of European bars, African villages, and her family's ranch-style home, was sitting at the kitchen table, drinking the purple Vitamin Water I'd bought to take to class tomorrow. My father was sitting next to her, beaming. "Look who it is, Anny! Emily came home for a visit!"

"*Extended* visit," Emily corrects, jumping up to squeeze the breath out of me. Her long, orange nails dig into my back as she envelopes me in a whirl of foreign poncho and overly flowered fragrance, vaguely covering the scent of cigarette smoke that emanates from her pores. She pulls back and grasps me by the shoulders, looking at me like a curious aunt who was going to pronounce me "darling" and ask if I have a man to keep myself occupied. "How *are* you, darling girl? It's been *too* long!"

In her years of scrounging around the globe with every Josef, Pierre, and Juan, my sister had developed this weird accent. When I happen to answer her annual Christmas call (how nice of her to grace us with the sound of her voice once a year), it changes according to whatever place she happens to be inhabiting at the time. One year she was in Scotland and was speaking in such a thick brogue that had I not been putting my Billy

Connolly CD in heavy rotation in my car the previous week I would have never understood her. *You're from fucking Tennessee*, I wanted to scream at her. I wonder if the true Scots ever walked up to her and told her she sounded more Scrooge McDuck than she ever would a true Scotswoman, because now her voice didn't have a trace of brogue.

"So happy to be home!" she trills, pulling me by the sleeve toward the kitchen table where she jerked me toward the empty seat next to Dad. I plop down in the wicker ladder-back chair like a rag doll, glancing over to my father who watches our interactions with stars in his eyes. He beams glancing at the two of us, and I can read his mind as clearly as it had been a Dr. Seuss book. His two little girls, home at last. Just how it should be.

"We're so happy to have you home!" Dad says, reaching for her hand. His palm lands a few inches short, so I reached over and wrap my hand around his instead, flashing him a tight smile. "Emily, we've missed you more than you know. Right, Anny?"

I nod slightly, not wanting to upset him. Truth be told, if I had never seen Emily again it would have been too soon. This is the happiest I have seen Dad since Mom. Never mind that this oldest daughter had abandoned the family right when she hit eighteen, less than a year after his wife had left the family. Never mind she took her half of the checking account and all of the savings and never bothered to tell anyone where she was going. Never mind that ever since his wife had left he was struggling to provide for himself and his youngest on the salary of a factory worker. Never mind that on the day his youngest daughter had called his eldest to inform her their father had been in a life-altering accident, the oldest had said "oh" in a flat voice and in the next breath asked if she could be wired twelve hundred dollars to pay for her idiot boyfriend's hospital bill

after he'd been slightly trampled running with the bulls in Pamplona. No, never mind all that. *Emily* is home.

"I have missed my darling family so much," Emily grins, her smile so straining that her eyes slit. She looks like a Siamese cat. A Siamese cat that I'd like to tie up in a bag and drop off into the Mississippi. "I have forgotten how *quaint* and beautiful our little abode is."

Dad absolutely glowed with happiness that his eldest daughter had missed him. Missed his *quaint* home. Missed his *darling* family. Missed him and his *darling* money, most likely.

"Sorry, but why are you here?" I ask blankly.

"Anny!"

"What?" I ask, pivoting in my chair. "I haven't seen in her in six or seven years and then she just shows up at our door without a call ahead or a hint she might be popping in. I have a right to know why now she's decided to become everyone's favorite daughter."

"Oh *Anny*," Emily trills, reaching over to pat my hand, which I jerk away. "Can't an older sister miss her family and wish to come home and reconnect? Is it so difficult to imagine that after years of being away, traipsing through youth hostels and climbing every mountain, that any woman, even one as self-secured and happy as I am, would want to see her family? Her roots?"

She looks over at my father, who nods agreeably. "I've missed this town. I've missed this country. I've missed my *family*."

I roll my eyes. “What made you miss us so much? Come across a charity case in Europe and take their money? Wanted to do it again with your family?”

“Anny.” My dad’s voice is low, warning. I barge on, not caring.

“You’re one of the most selfish people I’ve ever met, and you do nothing without a personal gain. Don’t play that drama major card with me, Emily.” I stand up, nearly knocking my chair over. I know I look like an overgrown six year old throwing a tantrum, but I don’t care. “So, what happened this time? Pierre break a leg? You need money to buy him a greenhouse of get well soon flowers? You want a new purse? Want to take a weekend to Amsterdam?”

“Anne Marie Sterling—“

I march out of the kitchen, not wanting to hear my father’s lecture or my sister’s stuttered false explanations. When I reach my room I barge inside, tempted to slam the door (but that would be a true return to adolescence and infantile mannerisms). Dot jumps up from her nap on my computer desk chair, tail wagging.

Quickly, I grab the glasses and contact case resting atop my nightstand and heave them into the new green backpack Becky and I had bought at Target, not caring that one of the lids wasn’t properly fastened and saline solution was now spreading all over the new binder and brand new package of 100 count college-ruled lined paper. I’m not staying in the same home with her. I don’t care what miraculous recovery she is claiming to have undergone, what personality transplant she’s become host to; my sister’s stolen from my family before, both monetarily and emotionally (well, I’m pretty sure she has done the former. I can’t prove it, but I’d nearly stake my job on it) and I’m not about to

welcome her into the home that I pay more than half of the monthly mortgage payment on with open arms and a kiss on the cheek.

She's so reformed, let her live in my shoes for a night. I'll get a phone call begging for my help five minutes after I walk out the door. I'm positive.

There's a knock on the door. "Anny. Let me in."

I ignore it, sweeping an old t-shirt and shorts into my bag. Sean has to have an extra toothbrush; if not, I'd stop at Dollar General on the way.

"Seeeeriously. Let me in."

Really? If she thinks after a moment that there is any chance we are going to sit down in my bedroom and have a Bill Cosby sister-sister chat that results in my no longer being furious with her, than she is sadly mistaken. Soft thuds on my door, the result of knees being propelled forward by overly expensive designer shoes, only serve to irritate me more. Get off my door, woman. It never deserved to be raped by an overly enthusiastic head case, no matter how many times I've slammed said door in irritation or accidentally kicked it while watching polo matches on tape delay.

My phone chirrups at me and, distracted, I pick it up without looking first at the caller ID. "HELLO?"

"Is this not a very good time?" Will asks me meekly, and I'm thrown momentarily from hating my sister to feeling quite awful about yelling at my hot British boyfriend who sounds very hesitant on the other side of the line because he probably thinks that this crazy American broad is going to become the next Rosemary West.

"Depends on what you want," I say hurriedly, walking into my bathroom and clearing the nighttime essentials (floss, toothpaste, a stolen razor from my Dad's

bathroom) from the top of the sink into a Wal-Mart bag. “My sister just showed up, so I’m getting out of the house for the night.”

“Oh.” Will pauses and I throw the wrapped bag into the top section of the backpack. Zipping it closed, I look around the room one more time for any vital items I might need before I (come to my senses) return home the next day.

Never one to be called not persistent, Emily’s taken to wiggling my locked door handle and shoving what sounds like her bony ass against the door frame. The rhythmic thudding, in combination with her (toned-down) pleas to let her in “so we can talk…I want to discuss this with you, baby sister!” has formed a steady buzz in my non-phone covered ear, rendering me nearly half-deaf. It’s because of this rudeness that I can barely hear Will’s offer: “Need a ride somewhere? A getaway?”

“What? You just texted me you were still in London tonight,” I say, slamming the heel of my Asics tennis shoe in the middle of the door. There’s a brief pause before the pounding starts again, tentative at first but growing more steadily I try to continue the conversation. Typical child; this whole incident is giving me flashbacks to right after Mom left.

“I was, but my flight into Nashville was changed and I was able to come here earlier. I thought we could have dinner and go over the Ogleman files tonight, perhaps watch a little telly,” Will pauses. “However, if your sister is in town…”

“No, no that’s fine,” I say, my heart sinking slightly at how my evening, even though improved slightly by the riddance of myself from the presence of my sister, would now be clouded by the presence of work, something I didn’t imagine myself spending the last few precious hours of my weekend even allowing my brain to touch. It would be a

prettily decorated evening of work, but I knew Will enough to know that the files would make an appearance sometime. As if to echo this, Emily shrieked, cried, "I WISH YOU WOULD STOP BEING SUCH AN INFANT, ANNY!" and stomped down the hall. I could just picture my father, still sitting in the kitchen table with a dreamy look on his face, imagining all of the activities he could do with his two-year-old daughters.

"I'm about packed; I'll be over to your apartment in a few minutes." I click the off button on my phone and then hoist my backpack over one shoulder. Sean would be disappointed, but he'd have to understand. As I survey my room one final time, searching for one last toiletry item that I'd forget and regret not packing in a few hours, my door flies open, Emily looking triumphant with the emergency key we kept sitting on the living room bookcase clutched tightly in one hand.

"Baby sister, can we just talk, *please*?" she says. Her voice is raised so that even if Dad was deaf he could still hear her politeness. I roll my eyes and try to push past her.

"Can I go, *please*?"

"Why?" She looks hurt. "I just want to talk, Baby—"

"Stop it," I cut her off. Stepping back, I fold my arms and look her straight in the eye. "Stop it with the baby sister bull. The fake niceties, the Prodigal Emily routine. *Stop it*."

For a moment, Emily look hurt, like my words actually struck a chord. I feel the tiniest bit of guilt; perhaps she has seen the error of her ways and come to apologize. Perhaps there is room in that 110 pound body for remorse and a slice of nonfat humble pie. Then, after I'm on the verge of sighing and apologizing for my childish behavior, the shield falls and the Emily I know emerges.

“Fine,” she huffs, pushing past me and shutting the door behind her. I turn around and already she’s examining my closet’s contents, kicking around my shoes like pebbles on a gravel road. After a quick dig with her toe, she reaches down and holds up one of my running shoes, the new pair Dad bought me at the Easter sale at Hibbetts.

“This looks cool. Can I borrow it?”

“No,” I say firmly, feeling more like Emily’s mother than her sister. “Please leave.”

She shakes her head, and ducks back into the closet. I want to leave; I know Will is waiting and the drive is not something I look forward to, but I know my sister even more.

“No, I’m gonna borrow these,” Emily pronounces, holding up the other matching shoe. “Don’t worry, I’ll give them back. Or I’ll buy you new ones.”

“Emily you cannot just *take* my stuff!” I say shrilly.

“Anny, I need clothes,” she says, dropping even the dumb foreign accent pretense. She gestures to her loud wardrobe and kicks off the sandals she was wearing when she came in. “I can’t really wear this out and about, you know?”

She stops, and cocks her head to the side. She’s right, and it is just clothes. Just a pair of sneakers that I hardly wear. However, they are *my* sneakers. *My clothing*. Not hers. I’ve paid for all of it myself, and she’s going to wander in and take it all, because she’s *Emily*. The guilt of the family. The one we are supposed to feel badly for. The one who needs to be catered to because of what Mom---

“Fine,” I say, not wanting to start an argument. I don’t want Dad more hurt by my behavior than he already is. At times like this, it’s best to give in and go on, minimal

damage incurred. If not, the shoes might disappear on their own later. “Please, just get out of my room now; I’m going out.” After more prodding, I manage to get her outside of the room with just the sneakers and only a few pairs of my jeans. The fact that she doesn’t resist and try to paw through my tops and dresses is actually surprising; maybe she *is* changing.

“Thanks for my stuff, Anny,” Emily calls after me as I stalk down the hall, irritated with myself that, once again, I’d let her get to me.

Will, being a semi-permanent presence in Tennessee, decided when he was first transferred to the state to not tie himself down to a locale too much like his native London, where, he says, the traffic and noise pollution alone kept him up at all hours. He claims it caused him to have a headache that began in 2003, only ending when he hit the midpoint between London and New York over the Atlantic on an emergency trip to Dallas nearly five years later. Although Nashville I’m sure has not one iota on London, neither in traffic nor noise creation per capita, his fear of ending up with a constant bout of claustrophobia-induced tinnitus made him fearful of not only large cities, but cities and large groups of people in general. As a result, his apartment is one of a series of cottages tucked into the country between Clarksville and Nashville; on a map, it is only twenty miles from my father’s doorstep to his, but once one accounts for the winding roads and hilly climbs and drops, the trip has doubled, nearly tripled in time. He finds the quiet time good and an ample time for valuable reflection and thought; I find it annoying and bothersome, especially as I whip around the curves in Dad’s truck and try not to cross the center line.

I was slightly disappointed that Will had called as I was leaving. I know I shouldn't be; he was being sweet and an excellent boyfriend to offer his house as a place to seek refuge. Actually, his number should have been the first I called when Emily had set foot onto my street. However, despite his sweetness, his Britishness, and his ability to make me somewhat look forward to going to work on a Monday morning, the camaraderie between the two of us was still stuck in to what Becky had christened a "perpetual state of underdevelopment." To wit, the first time I went to Will's apartment: we spent nearly the entire time indoors where he tried to show me his latest ideas as to the Ogleman case and I tried to play spot the vocabulary difference between his Harry Potter collection and my own.

Despite living in an apartment far from even a gas station, Will's apartment does not, contrary to what one might believe, resemble a Unibomber-esque shack. His home is one of a series of connected bricked bungalows, set off from the main road and linked by a well-worn gravel road. When it rains, the road strongly resembles a muddier version of the Thames due to the numerous close-connected potholes the road has formed over the years. According to Will, the landlord refuses to fix the oft-flooded roadway "unless someone falls into a hole and drowns, there is simply no need to waste money on landscaping granite!" I pull Dad's truck up the lane, swaying side to side slightly as the tires tread atop the gravel path and splash in week-old puddles.

His apartment is (of course) located furthest from the road; I see his silver Audi parked under the large maple tree that overhangs its branches and shade into the parking lot. My cell phone, tucked into my jeans pocket, continues to vibrate. Tired of hearing the Beatles telling me to "love them do" over and over, I had switched it to vibrate at the last

stoplight; I don't want to talk to anyone. Dad had done little to stop me when I had swept into the kitchen and grabbed my purse; he knew me too well to try and talk sense into me or even persuade me to stay.

As I pull the truck into the spot next to his car, Will steps out of the front door and onto his front stoop. Dressed in his Sunday Casual khakis and polo, he looks for all the world like a Prince William knockoff doll, propped up in front of his little bricked apartment cottage. I roll down the window and call out: "Hey. Sorry you've elected to shelter a refugee; I must warn you; she may have not had her shots and could be poisonous to the thoughts, attitudes, and general happiness of those who choose to surround her."

Prince William smiles and comes over to help me get my things out of the truck. "How long is your sister going to be in the area?"

I shrug, getting out and shutting the driver side door behind me. "She never said. Of course, I didn't give her very long to talk to me, considering how I wanted to take the Kate Spade bag she was toting around and stick it right up her Tower of London."

"This is the first time she's been home in how long?" We walk up the path and into the apartment. Will's sitting room, with its minimalist couch and its square cut edges, provides little physical comfort, but aesthetically, as a so-called "bachin' pad" fits the *Elle Décor* bill perfectly. Besides the chocolate brown couch, the first thing I see when I walk into his living area is that Will's television is on. He fails to be the perfect British man as I see that he's not watching football or rugby, but rather an ESPN report on what teams are, based on preseason polls, were projected to make the American football playoffs later this year.

Will sets my backpack on a pile of cushions on the floor; the first time I visited, I thought the cushions were beds for a large litter of puppies. However, I was quickly proved wrong when, after dinner, he set up a large yoga mat in the middle of the floor and the two of us became one with our meal; the cushions only served to protect the walls for when we attempted to imitate praying mantis or worshiping lotus or whatever the positions were called. Afterwards, I came to the conclusion that I greatly preferred running.

"I don't remember," I say honestly, sitting down on the couch and grabbing the remote. As I start flipping through the channels, I try to think back. I've been working at Franklin-Watson fulltime for nearly five years. In high school, Jules had let me work part time during the summer and non-track seasons; because of my previous experience with the company (and the four weeks notice given by the current file girl two weeks prior), when I moved home I was able to pick up immediately as a full employee of the company, despite the absence of any insurance license (or, as Sean said jokingly, "any idea as to what I was doing").

My sister had failed to come home at all during those five years; the only time I had been in contact with her had been immediately after Dad's accident, and once three years ago when a tax document of hers had been accidentally sent to the house and I was forced to play "Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?" all over Eastern Europe to locate her. "I do believe that the last time she actually came to Clarksville, I was deeply concerned about the welfare of my Beanie Baby collection and if my Tamagotchi pet was being properly taken care of." Will, who had disappeared into the kitchen, chuckled.

"Well, I'm sure that there must be a reason she's stayed away so long; she can't be completely void of emotions." Poking his head out of the kitchen, he asks, "Tea?"

Biting my tongue, I shook my head and concentrated on flipping channels. My sister's motives for coming home I'd long since decided I had no interest in learning. The same also went for why my mother left my father, the date when I was going to die, and the real reason Anne Boleyn didn't go kicking and screaming to the executioner's block. If Emily were to stay for longer than a week or two, a month even, I might be slightly concerned with why she decided to return and grace the family with her presence. As I know her being there is more on an hour-by-hour basis than one countable by twenty-four hour time periods, I can't bother myself to be interested in her true motivations.

"I brought you a Toblerone bar," Will says, folding himself up next to me on the couch cushions. I manage a weak smile. Will, after seeing the *Friends* episode where Ross' British girlfriend brings his roommate Joey Toblerone bars from the airport because he believes them to be the only example of true, legitimate British candy, thought it hilarious to imitate and brought me chocolate bar after chocolate bar home from the trips to London he took during the next week; the idea was charming, even funny at first. However, I obviously preferred *Coupling* to *Friends* and know that Patrick would have done the joke much better. "It's on the kitchen table if you get hungry later."

I nod, my interest caught briefly by an advertisement for Crest toothpaste.

"Do you want to talk?"

"No."

He pauses. I feel a little guilty; he is, after all, only trying to make me feel more at ease in regards to a situation I've not let him be privy to. It's certainly not his fault that

Emily turns me into a shrewish whiner. I drop the remote (settling back on ESPN) and reach for his hand, intertwining his fingers with my own.

While the commercials and highlight reels conglomerate into a single, steady low hum of voices and music that I barely register as audio, I close my eyes. For the first time since Sean's phone call, I feel my heart rate begin to slow, the slow steady buzzing sound in my ears begin to fade. I should not—I cannot let Emily's presence ruin what should be a good week. Yes, she is obnoxious and annoying and makes me wonder how we share DNA, but ultimately she is just a small part of my life. Soon, she will be gone again and I won't see her for years, perhaps never. This small occurrence is not allowed to shape my life and, more importantly, the next few days.

"I went and pulled the Ogleman files before I came home today," Will mentions absently. The buzz starts up again.

"That's nice." *Please, oh please do not suggest—*

"Want to look through them?"

I paused, weighing my options. Saying yes would doom me to a few hours of excruciating tediousness in which being trapped in my room with Emily banging on the door would be far preferable. However, I also know that Will nearly lives and dies on working out this Ogleman case, and to entertain his wish for research would not only keep him happy, but also keep him too busy with work and away from asking more pressing questions about why I had bolted from my house in such a rush. "Not really, but if you want to—"

"Oh, no; I understand," Will says, but I can tell from his tone that he's disappointed. "Your classes begin tomorrow morning, do they not?"

"Yeah," I say dully. Truth be told, the enthusiasm built up after my lunch with Becky and our romp through campus today had disappeared, and not all of that disappearance could be attributed to the sudden reappearance of the prodigal sister. "First one's at eight, so I'll only be a little late to work tomorrow."

While I was scheduling classes for this semester, I worked it out with Jules to where I would only be missing just a few hours of work here and there. My classes on Monday were at eight and noon; Franklin-Watson did not open until nine, so I would only be missing half an hour in the morning and my lunch hour that afternoon. It sounded, on paper, like a near suicide mission in regards to my constantly sprinting from campus to work, but in actuality (and don't tell Jules this) anything that keeps me away from the file room and stimulates my brain a little more than keeping me constantly humming the alphabet song I cannot view as taxing.

"That sounds splendid," Will says, taking a sip of his tea. "Are you nervous?"

"No," I say instantly. "Just going to a couple of Gen Ed classes. No big deal."

"That's a good outlook to have." Will leans over to set his tea mug atop the coaster on the side table before relaxing back into the smooth, stiff cushions of the couch. The light being projected via *Sportscenter* catches his dark hair, and I am momentarily struck by not only how handsome he looks by television light, but his general amiability. How could I close myself off from dream Will? Sure, he wasn't exactly the most exciting person in the world, but I wasn't looking for excitement and constant thrills. If I were, than I'd never be satisfied unless I found a British Indiana Jones. Instinctively, I lean towards him and lay my head on his shoulder. "Tired?"

"Yeah," I say, closing my eyes. "Long day."

Will says nothing, and for a moment we both lie there in the stillness. The only sound, besides the television, was the whirr of Will's refrigerator. I shift my eyes to the side of the room absently, looking over the bookshelf in the corner. Will's *Harry Potters* sit on their shelf slightly askance, the victim of my untidiness. Luckily, Will wasn't too anal or he would have adjusted them himself; perhaps there was hope for us after all.

"You know what makes me the *maddest?*" I say suddenly, staring at the blades of the ceiling fan. Before Will has the chance to answer I wriggle out of my spot on the couch and stand. Remembering it all made me want to do something active. Couldn't sit. Could be still. Had to move. "Here she walks in, fully believing that we're just going to accept her, free room, free board. Free meals. Emily the mooch. Never done a thing to help the family, and you know she's going to keep on doing it. Come home and take advantage of someone else's hard work. Bullshit."

"Well, is that not what most expect when they return home? Family comfort?" Will asks lightly, trying to take an edge off of my explosion. He leans forward trying to reach and grab my hand again, but I am too busy pacing.

"It's *selfish* is what it is." I sound like a broken record, but venting to anyone who would listen is making not only the tension in my neck go away, but allowing word vomit to spill from my lips at an alarming rate. "You know where she gets it from, don't you?" Not letting him talk, I answer my own question. "My mom."

My mother, one of those forbidden topics, like asking someone how much weight they've gained or if they think the president is doing a swell job or not. Any conversation involving her is bound to end negatively.

"My mom left when I was eleven, you know. Never saw any sign of it. Just woke up one morning and she was gone. Dad was sitting in the kitchen, same as he always did. Cereal on the table, OJ glasses on counter. When I left for school that morning, I thought she had just left early for work. Only when I got home, Dad was still in his sleeping t-shirt and runner's shorts."

Will opens his mouth, and then after a moment closes it. I plough on: "Decided she didn't feel like being a mother anymore. Nineteen years of marriage and wanted something new. Left Monday morning at 7 AM; no goodbye to either me or Emily. Just a Post-It on the fridge saying 'I'm done' and her house key on the dining room table."

I stop, remembering the scene. Dad walked around for days, didn't go to work. Emily took this as an excuse to consistently skip out on the last half of her senior year. I was a latchkey kid for the first time in my life, forced by circumstance to grow up and be the female adult in the house. Emily was far too flakey; her solution to major childhood trauma was to revert to childhood, being babied by our father with allowances and gas cards for the car she has inherited from Mom by default. She never had to worry about helping Dad learn to cook or how to put hair up in a ponytail. After Mom, she was once again the child. My mother had always picked me up from school, been the PTA sponsor and Brownie scout troop leader. It was all gone in one day…one. She'd moved out that morning; I have not seen or talked to her since the night before she left when I had kissed her goodnight and whined that my bedtime was far too early for a sixth grader. "Skipped out like the heroine of a damn country song. Like a *fucking* country song."

"She always listened to country. Every morning, she would get up, turn the radio on and get me ready for school. Every morning it would be those damn songs. Those 'I'm

gonna leave my man and make a lot of money' or 'My man don't appreciate me' whiny songs that were more twang than poetry. I guess now that I look at it, maybe she was looking for more than just entertainment."

"Oh." Will's uncomfortable. "I'm quite….sorry, that sounds awful."

"Well, I don't like talking about it," I say, folding back up again. My unpredictable explosiveness has rendered me tired. I tuck my hands into my pockets and absently touch the toe of my sneakers to the one of the yoga cushions. It falls over and lands on one side, propped up against the wall. Only Sean knew the full story about my mother's disappearance when it happened. Becky knew that something was wrong and my parents were no longer together, but in middle school I'd satiated her with a few "tons of fighting, they love me just not each other" lies that succeeded in not only calming her questions, but making me feel better as well.

"I'm going to go get the chocolate," I say, shifting gears as I head towards the kitchen. When I reach the doorway, I stop and turn. "Do you want something? Some more tea? Water? Some *crisps*?"

At my mocking pronunciation, Will smiles.

"Gimme a candy bar and some chips," he returns in a somewhat decent, yet still flawed mock of the American Southern accent. "And then I wan' a donut and some nacho cheese. And sweet tea."

"*Hot* tea and *crisps*," I say with my overtly posh accent. "I shall return, good sir." From our initial meeting, Will has yet to let me forget our awkward introduction, as he finds it fascinating that I am so fascinated with his homeland. Truth be told, that is a major part of his appeal, but his overblown fascination with something as utterly dull as

my job is is beginning to grow on me, despite his constant desire to untangle the ever-shifting world of insurance fraud and then watching American football like every other man in the United States.

When I return from the kitchen, a package of Hula Hoops under one arm and a shaky cup of tea on a tiny porcelain coaster, Will comes over to help.

"You know, we normally do not drink strictly tea. We do have other beverages," he mentions. On my look, he adds, "I just wanted to get you past the misconception that the British are stuffy prudes whose lives revolve around tea time and watching *Ab Fab*."

"You mean you don't have sticks up your bum?" I say in faux disappointment, smirking as I set the teacup down on the coffee table. "I daresay I am quite disappointed."

"Well, I live to disappoint," Will says, sitting back on the couch and seizing the remote.

His long legs unfold as he stretches out on the brown leather, looking more content and at home than I had seen him. Perhaps Becky was right. Perhaps just time and presence would help the two of us. Not all relationships begin with sunshine, daisies, and immediate thoughts of marriage. Especially a one like ours, where major culture clash occurs. We are beating the odds. We are the winners. *We shall overcome*.

"Hey, can I stay here tonight?" I blurt out.

I can't exactly describe Will's expression. He looks, on one hand, like he swallowed part of a lemon and on the other like he is being chased by a tiger who was in pursuit of that lemon. He swallows his tea hard, and then coughs as he puts the cup down. Comforting when you've asked your supposed boyfriend, who allegedly wants to spend

every day with you, if you could stay over for the first time in your months-old relationship. “Listen, I don’t have to; I was just wond—”

“Yes,” he cuts in. If this were a sitcom, he would sound like Peter Brady undergoing a voice change. “Yes, yes of course. Sorry…hot tea there. Couldn’t talk.”

He exhales, and I quirk an eyebrow. If this is the reaction I get when I ask to stay over for the first time, I don’t even want to think about what will happen if we have sex. Thus expires my hopes of being a modern girl who isn’t stuck in the Bible Belt conservatism surrounding her and who actually has healthy sexual relationships with men.

“Well, I don’t want to bother you or anything,” I say quickly. “It’s just…well, I don’t really want to go home now, obviously, and I was already here, so I just thought—”

“No, no imposition at all!” Will says with a touch more brightness. He gets up from the couch and heads toward the bathroom. “I have some extra linens in the wardrobe. It is about time they got some use!”

Wait. So my “boyfriend” (now official, as of last week on *Facebook*), who is handsome and British and overall quite considerate, is fine with letting me stay at his apartment, but only if I use his spare bed linens on his *couch*? I look at the offending piece of furniture with more than slight disgust. I know Will and I have only been seeing each other a few months, and while the Brits are notorious prudes, I still don’t understand why, for the duration of one night, I am resigned to sleeping on the hard-as-a-rock (but aesthetically pleasing) couch.

“Here!” Will says cheerily, coming back into the living room with both a stack of linens under one arm and the rolled-up yellow egg crate I had bought for him a few

weeks ago at Target tucked under the other. “I took the pad off of my bed; I know this sofa is not the softest of furniture, but I thought this would perhaps let you rest more comfortably.”

“Thanks,” I say slowly, before accepting the linens and dumping them on the couch. There’s my boyfriend. Tall dark and considerate. Just the recipe for a fun night on the couch.

Will checks the clock readout of the DVD player. Ten thirty six.

“I was actually going to go to the loo and then prepare myself for bed. Would you like to go in first?” he asks. My heart jumps. I hadn’t realized just how late it was.

“Of course,” I say, turning to the door. “I just need to go get some stuff out of my car. I’ll be back in a second.”

You know, I think as I walk outside and head towards my car door. *I may have been looking for comfort and a little warm bodiness tonight, but ultimately a bed’s a bed. Even if that bed is a couch.* Unlocking the car, I open the door and reach inside for my purse. *So he’s a little reserved; he may not have known my intentions. There were no intentions of mine to jump his bones tonight when I asked to stay; I’m far too concerned with everything else going on right now to even think about sex.*

That might not be the best feeling to have in regards to your boyfriend, but I shoved it aside as I shut the car door and catch a glimpse of my backpack, looking innocent in the backseat. Ultimately, I can worry about Will’s standoffishness (or just simply his Britishness) later, but I had more worries. Tomorrow was my first day of class at the university and I am, as the not-quite-so-stuffy Bridget Jones would say, “absolutely fucking terrified.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

"As a member of this class, you will complete four out-of-class essays. Your final essay will number ten pages in length and include both a topic proposal, to be approved by your instructor as well as your classmates, and an extensive annotated bibliography."

My first class on Monday was, on paper, supposed to be the easiest part of my day. As it was my first semester after a five-year break, I had decided, with help from both my assigned advisor and Becky, to take just a few classes. Only one would be in my chosen secondary ed. major; I did remember that, according to the collegiate coda, in your first two years you were supposed to take primarily general education courses. This was designed so that those who either weren't sold on a major or those who had not yet selected a major would be able to sample from each discipline before ultimately deciding their chosen path. Or if you wanted to be a tenth-year senior, you could skip those classes completely and be a thirty year old one class away from graduation.

However, thanks to years of being trained to wake up at 8 AM and be at Franklin-Watson by nine, getting used to waking up one hour earlier was more than I had prepared for; what was supposed to be the easiest part seemed now to be the hardest. But unlike the normal cycle of early to bed early to rise, I had not banked on being up until 1 AM going through a nerve-induced cycle of both hot and cold sweats. I can only hope that Wednesday's class will be a little easier to adjust to.

Sitting in the back row of the tiered lecture-style classroom in my hard plastic chair, I scan the syllabus my new English instructor had given me. Despite being out of school for quite some time, I still feel the same quick rush of internal panic when an instructor was discussing future assignments and class expectations. It keeps me balanced, but the fact that everyone surrounding me had been four when Princess Diana died distracts me more than I had prepared myself.

"Dude."

One row in front of me, the petite girl in the Juicy Couture jacket, whose mask of perfume and bath and body products overwhelmed me and nearly made me choke, pokes the lanky sweatsuit-clad boy next to her. The boy, whose name according to the roll call at the beginning of class was Ron (and not, despite Juicy's thoughts, simply "Dude"), adjusts his cap before looking over, apparently finding her blonde ponytailed perkiness intriguing. "Hey."

Juicy leans over: "Dude, this is sooo dull."

"Way dull." Ron's quick jerk of the head toward his fellow classmate on his left illuminates that one of our peers had taken this opportunity to take a deeply scholastic nap.

"Gimme your number and I'll text you."

"Do you two mind?" I broke in. I hate to label myself as the older "non-trad" who's a total boffin and stickler for obeying the instructor. However, this was the first day and *already* some of my classmates were blowing off this class. We were only going over the syllabus, not diagramming sentences or writing bibliography entries. The syllabus, also known as the outline for the entire class, and one of the few times the

instructor is actually going to lay out her reasoning for assigning the huge amount of work she would undoubtedly require of us throughout the extent of the semester. Certainly, for fifty-five minutes—

"Is there a problem in the back?" Our instructor, an older slim woman with peppery hair and silver-rimmed glasses who, according to the syllabus, was named Dr. Mary Kant, raised an eyebrow over the syllabus copy she was reading. I slunk back in my seat; of course, the student who was trying to get people to focus would be the one called out for being disruptive. It's the old "bread will always land jam-side down" dilemma. Dude/Ron and Juicy shake their heads, looking back at me with murderous glares. It's a good thing group projects aren't required in this class; I'd be forced to partner with Dr. Kant.

"Also, this class will include both a final and midterm essay exam, in which you will be tested not only on your ever-improving writing skills, but concepts that we will be discussing in class through readings of the assigned literature. These concepts include, but are not limited to argumentative reasoning, dramatic movement, symbolism—"

Juicy and Ron/Dude both angle their faces to look back at me. Okay, so while this might not be the most exciting material in the world, it still has to be vitally important to the successful completion of the class. Thus, I ignore them. Years of working with Frank, as well as living in a file room for the majority of those years, has refined my ability of listening to even the most dull exchange of information and latching on to it to remember months down the road.

"—Does anyone have any questions?"

A silence falls over the room. Looking around, I notice everyone's eyes are fixed on the large black and white clock positioned directly above the teacher's head. Good to know that even in my five year absence in academia that little has changed in the matter of student (well, freshman) priorities, and that even in said absence my devotion to the clock at Franklin-Watson was not out of the ordinary. Juicy yawns, and shuts her notebook. A group of boys in overalls and camouflage sitting nearest the door reach for their backpacks. If Dr. Kant had not yet dismissed the class, her students were doing it for her.

"I had a question about the textbook," I venture meekly, raising my hand. The self-dismissed students ignore me, continuing to put away their notebooks and smashing their syllabi into the bottom of their bags. Regardless of my interjection and possible voicing of a question many of them also were silently wondering, I was clearly the only student who had even the tiniest interest in having queries answered before heading to Starbucks or back to the dorm for a nap.

"Class is not yet dismissed!" Dr. Kant, although soft-spoken during the rehash of class expectations, was ultimately the voice of not only scholastic authority for the class but behavioral as well. With the gift of a quiet yet firm voice, her declaration had stopped even the camo boys from leaving. Casting eyes back at me, they slunk back to their seats, probably disappointed that they had to spend a precious minute longer in the classroom because some idiot was nitpicking the syllabus. *Come on…the first day of class is always a guaranteed early dismissal…*

"I just saw that we are supposed to purchase both textbooks, but according to the tentative calendar on the back, we don't start using the second book until nearly after

Thanksgiving Break," I say, flipping to the back of the syllabus. "I was wondering if that means that we can put aside buying the second book until that time, or if we need to go on ahead and buy the book now."

"Even though we're not going to use the book until later in the semester, I would suggest purchasing it now." Dr. Kant says, looking out first at me, and then the class. "Out of the two books assigned, when I called the bookstore to place the order for this class they did say they were short on the Fredericks text; apparently the students last year didn't take advantage of the buyback policy. Of course, I like to hope they all wanted to become English majors and kept both books by their bed for midnight reading, but I'm also a little more realistic than that."

A few students chuckle at the last addition, while some roll their eyes. *Not sell a text back the second after you're done? That's more than dumb*.

"Any other questions?" asks Dr. Kant, closing the large two ring binder she had been reading from. After a pause, she nodded and turned to gather the extra syllabi she had put on the lectern behind her: the universal sign for "class dismissed."

Amid the shuffle of students sliding past me in the aisle, knocking backpacks against each other and pulling out hidden cell phones, I remain behind, putting away my pens and removing a folder. It isn't my intention to paint myself as a stuck up, brown-nosing teacher's pet, but I figure that a brief introduction of myself to the instructor would not hurt my chances at doing well in my first college class in over five years. Dr. Kant, in her class introduction, appeared to be easy going and fairly friendly; last night's midnight search of RateMyProfessor.Com had rendered little outside information other than one student considered her to be "the world's leadingmost expert on Peruvian

feminist literature" and another said "her Intro to Comp class sucked major ass." Considering I was taking her for the basic Introduction to Literature (with no intentions to move beyond a gen. ed. course in literature, much less Peruvian feminist), I am hedging on the "sucked ass" comment to be the product of a Prince Harry partier who had not been able to persuade Dr. Kant in allowing him to make up assignments missed due to Thirsty Thursday binges. Tucking the syllabus inside, I put the folder under my arm and swing my backpack up on the opposite shoulder.

Looking up, I notice the room nearly empty and Dr. Kant nowhere to be found.

"Hey, where'd she go?" I ask to no one in particular. A short, dark haired Italian-looking male behind me who had started telling Juicy he thought she had a "beautiful soul" the moment class was let out (only to be ultimately rejected after she sprinted to the door after Dr. Kant's telltale head nod) leans over the row of chairs separating the two of us.

"Who are you looking for, gorgeous?" he says, winking at me.

Nevermind.

I leave the room and walk down the hall. Students lean up against the walls, chatting as they wait for classrooms to clear. A few look at me curiously, but I tuck my head down into my chest, watching my shoes as I leave the lecture hall. I know that being closed off and non-approachable isn't probably the best plan for my first class; however, I also figure that university campus life is beyond my reachable goals target list for this first semester. Self-consciously, I adjust my backpack strap and fold my arms, making a beeline for the exit. I had told Jules I would get to work as soon as possible; she understood my desire to start this new phase, but at the same time she wanted her

employee ASAP (despite the fact that I'd be in the copy room, scanning documents all day).

"Hey!"

Passing a booth designed to catch the attention of freshman girls (that's what I deducted from the enormous amount of pink and purple scribbled on the sign, as well as the fact that Juicy was animatedly chatting up the girl behind the booth) I keep walking, not wanting any of the chipper Alpha Gamma Omega Pi Omicrons to flag me down to try to become their sister. I had enough problems with my own sisterhood.

"Excuse me! Green backpack! Wait a second!"

I turn around. A girl with long brown hair jogs towards me, holding an obnoxiously squalling object in her hand. After a split second, I realize that it is my cell phone in her hand which is making the earsplitting racket.

"Hey, you left this under your desk in Kant's class," says the girl, who hands it over. I quickly hit ignore on the call, rendering everyone surrounding me much immediate eardrum relief.

"Thanks," I say. "I didn't even realize I'd left it."

"Well, I saw after Patrick started to drop his bar lines on you that you might have wanted to get out there a little quicker for reasons probably not involving English class," the girl grins. "I didn't want you to be cut off from the outside world because you were awkwardly hit on on the first day of class."

I laugh a little, and tuck the phone in my pocket. "I hoped the shutdown wasn't too obvious, but it seems I failed."

“Don’t apologize,” the girl says frankly, hooking her thumbs in her jean’s back pockets. “This is that guy’s tenth semester here, and trust me, his moves and pursuits haven’t changed since semester one. A public shutdown seems to be the only one that works. “

“Well, that’s good for me, I suppose,” I say. Knowing that the stacks and stacks of files that Jules had found Friday shoved under the safe were needing me, I couldn’t stay and chit chat with the girl, no matter how much I want to. “Well, I have to get to work, but thanks again!”

“Anytime,” the girl says brightly. “I’m Sarabeth Stevens on the roster if you ever want to get together and do some homework or anything for Kant’s class. I heard she’s good, but she won’t take any B.S. off of you.”

I smile. “That sounds pretty consistent from what I’ve heard too. I’m Anny. Anny Sterling, actually.”

“Sterling? Cool, maybe we’ll be in some alphabetical group project or something.” The girl waves and we depart. I pull out the offending technology that had caused Sarabeth and my’s meeting, and, noticing the caller id, quickly hit Redial and hold the phone to my ear as I continue walking towards the main door.

Two rings and he answers. “Hey there, college student. How was your first class? Glad I pushed you now? Everything you hoped for and more?”

“It’s okay,” I say, slowing down as I exit the building. Thanks to campus traffic, I had ended up parking several blocks from my first class. I could take a little time in making the walk; I didn’t want to arrive at work looking like I had just run a marathon. “It’s a gen ed. course, so you get the usual mix of kids. Freshman, adults, a thirty-eight-

year-old twenty five year old…the same things I remember when I was in school the last time."

Sean laughs. "Oh, my little friend who has tangled with premature aging. How long-suffering and taxing it must be to sit in English 105 again."

I ignore his dig at my complaints. "Professor seems nice enough, though. Not a hardass but not a walk-over either. I think I should do pretty well.

"Good." Sean pauses, and I know what he's going to ask before he even speaks. "How was last night? Was Emily gone when you got up this morning?"

"I don't know," I say. "I stayed at Will's last night."

There's a pause.

"You stayed with Mr. Insurance himself?" Sean asks finally, a forced teasing tone in his voice. "Was it fun? Did you drink tea and look at case files?"

"No," I say, my teeth slightly clenched. I wouldn't dare tell him that Will was so disappointed I had turned him down on both of those options that he wouldn't even let me watch the rugby game on BBC last night as he went to bed ("You have to get up early tomorrow" was his excuse, but I knew the real reason). "Not that it's any of your business, but we just hung out and I spilled the case files of Emily vs. Anny. I was so mad that I even started telling him about Mom."

"Wow, you were ornery," Sean says. "How long is she staying?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask."

"Figured."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

“Anny.” Sean sounds exasperated, even moreso. “I know you hate your sister and while you do have justifiable reasoning, you have to admit that sometimes you do take it a little too far.”

“Too *far*?” I ask, reaching my car. Unlocking the backseat, I sling my backpack into the back. “Sean, need I remind you—“

“Yeah, I get it,” Sean cuts me off. “She left you guys, she asks for money, she doesn’t fit the perfect sister, perfect daughter mode. But ultimately, she *is* your sister.”

“Sean, she stole money from us,” I break in, starting up the car.

“You *think*,” he corrects. “I think you’re over-exaggerating, but I don’t want to get into it.”

I sit there for a moment, steamed. Yeah, I know that I am overly hateful toward Emily, but there *is* root in my thinking; I’m not an irrational person. If I were, I would have hopped a plane to England to live in a London flat the first time I had my paycheck. If I think Emily stole money from the family, I have my just reasoning. I mean, when you look at your bank account and there’s thirty dollars that’s unaccounted for every other month, it’s not because the banks are terrible at math. It can’t just disappear into “Savings.”

“Me neither,” I say shortly. I look outside and notice the other cars pulling out of the parking lot; if I wanted to make it to work by 9:30, I would be pushing it. “Anyway, I have to go. I’ll talk to you later.”

“No lunch today?”

“No, I have a sociology class at noon. I should be able to eat with you guys on Thursday, though.”

“Thursday? Why not Tuesday?”

“Biology lab.”

“Dinner tonight then? I’ll pay.”

“Biology class.”

Sean exhaled. I know that he was thrilled I was actually embracing college, but at the same time I could tell he was disappointed.

“Well, tell the files ‘hi’ for me,” he says finally. “I’ll see you around.”

Sean may have said that Will didn’t bother him, but, call me an over-exaggerator if he wasn’t a wee bit jealous of not only Prince William, but my new life. Well, sorry to say, this wasn’t going to be a problem. Not if I could help it.

CHAPTER NINE

After hanging up with Sean, I made my way to work where, as usual, I was greeted by not only a sky-high stack of "To Be Filed," but the news that, thanks to the newly installed servers, Franklin-Watson was going to gradually revert to a paperless filing system. Rough translation? Anny was now going to spend not only hours in the filing room, but now also get a tan from the scanner as she input over thirty years worth of claims, home photographs, adjuster reports, and assorted information deemed imperative to doling out insurance checks and bills.

For the past two hours, I had planted myself in the filing room, a landscaped addition to the foliage created by the faded rose-covered wallpaper. After conquering the morning mountain, I was now set on putting away a dust-covered stack of miscellaneous papers and folders found shoved under the safe before I began to unload the contents of the Aa-Al drawer and take up new residence in the back room.

"Hey remember Alex McWherter?" I ask, flipping through a stack of papers. "Here's a bunch of old papers from him."

"I haven't thought of him in years," Jules remarks from her spot in the kitchen. Alex was a claims adjuster who came in the office occasionally; he was based in Nashville (most that worked with us were) and worked primarily with home and auto insurance; however, few of our clients dealt with Mutual Home and Auto, so we saw him almost the least of all our adjusters. He had retired years ago; I'd barely known him in the

short time I'd worked fulltime for Franklin-Watson. However, when I was a temp in the summertime he would come in, smelling of tobacco and his Mercedes, and demand a coffee and Danish before going over claims with Jules in her office. "Was he even still working when you started?"

"A few months," I say, flipping through the papers, noting Alex's scrunched signature at the bottom of assorted claims and related letters. "I think he decided to retire that day I walked in and I caught him nicking a piece of the Christmas fudge Paula had put in the fridge. Apparently keeping his paws to himself wasn't a big priority of his."

"That was the only thing of his that wasn't big," Frank says cattily as he walks through the file room, heading for the Ly-M-N-Ob cabinet in the far right corner. I look up from being nosy, a little struck by not only the tone, but the implications of my most irritation-inducing co-worker.

"Well, someone's not McWherter's biggest fan," I say carefully. It had never occurred to me before that while Frank got on my nerves most of anyone in the office that there could be a person who he disliked in a similar fashion.

To his credit, Frank does not break from his usual Frankish ways of address. "The man was a poor example of not only the insurance game, but of the game of business ethics as well."

"Did he cheat at cards or something?" I say, smiling.

Frank barely looks up from the filing cabinet he's searching through. "No. He just conducted himself several times in an unprofessional manner. I believe his retirement suits us just as much as it suits him."

I exchange a look with Jules as Frank continues, clearly moved by some emotion that he hardly ever lets break the surface of his steeled exterior: "We have no room for someone who refuses to report all of the proper information necessary for claim processing because he simply did not feel like coming into the office that day. It was not only poor professionalism; it was lazy and inconsiderate to those who need that information to do his or her job."

Okaaay, I thought, making a mental note never to bring up McWherter again; clearly any more discussion on the subject and Frank would be apt to pull out a knife and do some serious damage. Not that I believed violence and Frank would ever belong in the same sentence, but perhaps he might spill some coffee on some of these miscellaneous files and try to persuade me to just throw them away before scanning copies to put in the online database.

I take the folder of offending McWherter files and put it at the bottom of my "to-be-filed" stack; Frank's slanderous words had intrigued me, but I didn't want to play the role of snoop or detective with either him, Jules, or even Will breathing down my neck. "Hey Frank, here are some older papers from Gemma Ogleman…I don't know if they would help us out any, but I found them in this stack."

Frank looks over, and then away almost immediately. "Anny, those are *home* insurance papers. The Oglemans' case involves *health* insurance."

"I didn't say that they would be helpful," I say between gritted teeth. Honestly. After working with claims and filing more of them than I could count, I think Frank still wonders if an infantile bottom-feeder like myself can read. "I just thought you might

want to look at them. They might have some information on them pertinent to understanding—“

“Those are Alex McWherter’s papers?” Jules asks. I flip back.

“No, they were just misplaced in his file. The adjuster on this claim is Paula Douglas.”

Frank snorts derisively. “Anny, Paula Douglas died ten years ago. The Oglemans didn’t even switch their health insurance to us until six months before you started working here.”

“Well, *sorry,”* I say. “Obviously, this shows us that we keep unnecessary files way too long.”

“They aren’t unnecessary,” Jules breaks in. “This is a prime example of why I want us to switch to an online filing system…it’s much harder to lose ten year old files in the nooks and crannies of a digital system, especially if we have it backed up like I plan on having you do.”

“Well, they’re outdated for the purpose of our investigation,” Frank says swiftly, picking up the files he had gone through and walking out the file room towards his office.

Despite what Frank says, I stash the files underneath my crossed legs. He could say what he wanted, but I want to look at these suckers on my own.

Later that afternoon, after I had gone to and returned from my sociology class, I manage to steal some time away from the endless parade of filing and help complete some paperwork for Paula, who, after the thunderstorm a few nights ago, was bombarded

fielding calls from homeowners and fancy hail-damaged car owners alike. Sociology at first glance appeared to be remarkably similar to the morning English class in that it was filled with freshmen and a few older adults who were going back to school; I did note, however, that three out of the five "non-trads" carried Becky's dreaded "rolly backpacks." Sarabeth Stevens, to my surprise, was also in this noon class, so it was comforting having someone to sit by who I had some past history with.

After finishing the Subway sandwich I had bought after leaving class, I put the remnants of plastic covering and used napkins in the bin beside my desk, and then pulled out the McWherter file I had stashed from this morning. Something about the whole issue bothered me. I'd met Alex McWherter before; he'd never given me the time of day, but that *didn't* bother me. My own superior did the same on a daily basis, and yet I could care less about his goings on. McWherter's files being found stashed under the safe where, unless someone did deep cleaning (like me, a few weeks ago) they would go unnoticed, did raise my cause for alarm. We all misplace things; even though I do work in an insurance office, a place notable for employing less than generous hearts, machines and robotic attitudes of perfection we do not posses. Not even Frank. These files were shoved under the safe with purpose. To what? I don't yet know, but I seriously doubt being tidy is the motivation.

I open up the folder and pull out its contents, arranging the paperwork all over my desk so that I could see each claim and each piece of red tape. There was the Oglemans' house policy from five years ago; it didn't have anything suspicious about it. The Oglemans' switched their policy two years ago, and all the information on this paper was null. As I sweep the majority of the papers back into the file, my eyes rest on something I

hadn't seen. The Oglemans' daughter Alice was listed on the homeowner's policy as the beneficiary. In a way, it made sense; she was their only daughter, and if the home was completely destroyed with them in it, it would be only logical that she would receive all the money. It wasn't the most traditional claim structure, but it wasn't really something to be alarmed by. What was alarming, however, was that Gemma Ogleman's signature was nowhere to be seen on this policy. Just Alice's.

Looking more closely, I find a paper stapled in the back of the policy. It's a claim, which also isn't anything to be alarmed by. To help keep papers and slips and photographs organized, we often staple copies of claims, especially older ones, to the original policy. This way we can keep track of what has occurred without wading through a sea of correspondence and printed emails. This claim was dated six months ago, right when the Oglemans started having problems.

I look at the claim dates more closely to be sure if what I was seeing was true. One was, as per Frank's original filing, January 14th, with their new homeowner's policy under their new home insurance carrier. However (and I look at the date twice to be certain) , according to Alex McWherter's claim filed later that same week, the same claim was made, and processed, under their old policy.

I flip through the folder frantically. I know somewhere, if it is in the folder or another, that there is a copy of their cancellation. I've seen it; I filed that thing! There's no way they could have two policies for the same house, unless…

I catch my breath. So stained and wrinkled and crumpled that I could barely read it, is a letter from the original company, thanking Alice Ogleman for the reinstatement of

her policy. Nearly fifty years old, Alice Ogleman still lives with her parents. Alice Ogleman is less of a homeowner than I am.

I look at the folder again. Here are numerous copies of claims the Oglemans have filed the past few years, all done by Alex McWherter. McWherter's claim on the house; tree damage, payout awarded. McWherter's claim on auto insurance; hail damage, money awarded.

My stomach began to stir. Clearly, we'd known from the start the Oglemans' situation was a case of fraud, but up until now I'd never known who was responsible. None of us did. Not Frank, Not Jules, not even Will. Still, I was confused: McWherter was an auto and home adjuster; he had nothing to do with health. Why then, is it their health insurance policy premium that is rising…?

I stop. Clear as day, I see the problem. The same company who signed off on the Oglemans' claims also carries their new health insurance policy. With double the claims, both in health, home, and auto, no wonder the premium was going up. Despite working closely with the company (that's an understatement; I'd slept on his couch just last night), they'd never caught that the true culprit wasn't the health issues; it was Alice Ogleman who was using her mother and father's policy to withdraw her own extra money once a claim was made on the house. Once a claim on the house was processed and money was awarded, two checks would be issued automatically: one to Alice, one to her parents. There was hail damage, and her parents could now afford to fix the roof; Alice could now afford to get a new car.

The only policy in our computer was that of the Oglemans themselves; Alice was not even mentioned. All we had known was the Oglemans premium continued to increase

at twice the normal rate, despite their not incurring more than the usual claim payouts whenever they filed a claim. Will and Frank had torn their health insurance policy apart, but no one had thought to look at the home insurance policy. Not until now.

"Oh my God."

I need to tell someone. Someone needs to know.

I pick up the extension, my fingertips shaking slightly as I dial. If I am right…if this means what I think it means, the case is solved. McWherter and Alice would be in for a world of trouble; while I hate what it might do to Teddy and Gemma knowing she had been duped by her only daughter, finishing up this bear of a case would have far more an impact than I could even think about right now. A picture of Frank's face, irritated that I had finally one-upped him flashes in front of my face. Jules, promoting me for my extensive work. My father's beaming grin. Sean, thrilled that I had finally achieved something of significance at work, after years of me telling him it would never happen. Emily's pinched, thin face screwed up in seething jealousy…yes, I must be on to something here.

"Hello, this is William Ellis," says the cool, British voice on the other end. He pauses, and I take a deep breath. What if I am wrong? What if this was, as it normally would be, a big red herring? Once again, Anny would be right where she started from. "Anny? I am on my way to the office right now; can this wait? I am actually on the line with Frank."

I exhale, prepared to do whatever it took to get this paper and its incrimination seen. "Will, I was going through some old files and…Well, you might want to take a look at this…"