

Something New

I stare at the door of the reception hall, debating whether I should head in or turn around and completely forget. I'm at least three hours late, the snow and the ice have thrown me completely off schedule. I can't help but feel that in more ways than one, my timing is completely off. With two weeks left in the semester, rather than sitting in the library, re-reading books and highlighting potential theories and cases that could appear on my exams, I've driven all the way home—and I'm still trying to figure out what my logic was. I remember some kind of rationalization, about not spending all my time out of class focusing on class, about one weekend not spent sitting in my freezing apartment, studying. I stare at the sea of unfamiliar faces, and just as I'm about to turn around I hear my mother's voice.

"There she is!" A little of the uneasiness inside me melts once my mother pulls me close for a tight hug, the kind that leaves me hungry for air. "We've been waiting for you!"

"The roads are really icy," I gasp, sucking air back into my lungs as my mother leads me back to the table where my family and a few of my old teachers are sitting. "I tried to make it to the ceremony—I mean, I left really early this afternoon, but I didn't know about the snow and ice. I didn't even watch The Weather Channel...hi everybody," I add shyly.

I can feel my face turn red as I stare around the table at my old high school teachers, my mother's friends and co-workers. I'm caught between reminiscing and staying silent, unsure of what to say or how to act. These people taught me in junior high, when I was at my most awkward, wearing thick glasses that constantly slid down my nose. They put up with me as a senior in high school, when I sure that six months after graduation, I'd already be well on my way to changing the world. I'm not sure whether I should be embarrassed because of how I used to act in front of them, who I used to be, or let them get to know the person I am now, the person I'm still becoming.

"We were a little worried when you didn't show up at the church," my Mom admits as she wraps her arm around me. "But I figured if you hadn't called, you'd be at the reception. It's a shame you missed it though," she sounds wistful for a moment. "It was beautiful...Natalie looked *radiant*."

I nod slightly, and again I'm not sure how to respond. Nat was one of my closest friends in high school, but I hadn't seen her in years...and I wasn't even sure why I was at her wedding in the first place.

"It's not as if you don't get snow in Boston, right?" My former math teacher quizzes me, motioning to the chair next to her.

"*Cambridge*," my mother quickly corrects. "The college isn't really in Boston."

"It snows in Boston *and* Cambridge, Mrs. Gouldman," I sigh. "But it wasn't today. And besides, I'm terrible driving on ice and snow."

So you weren't just trying to figure a way to weasel out of a weekend at home?" someone jokes. "Are we too dull for you now?"

"Yeah, we had a bet going," my younger sister Kate says, grinning wickedly. "Whether or not you'd actually show up."

I roll my eyes, trying my best to make it look as if the thought never occurred to me. "You know I'd never do anything like that." *I only wish I could.* "I'm always glad to come home." *Most of the time.*

"Then we started another bet on whether or not you'd bring that guy you've been seeing, what's his name, the pharmacist?"

"Will," I supply, narrowing my eyes at my little sister. "And we broke up last month."

"What'd you do?" She asks eagerly. "Who dumped who?"

I stare at her coldly before turning to Mrs. Gouldman. "So," I smile cheerfully, "I was just curious, what kind of grades is Katie pulling in Calculus?" The self-satisfaction is instantly gone from Kate's face as she looks up at me, defeated.

"She could use a little *help*, to be honest," the gray-haired teacher shoots a withering glance at Kate, whose face flushes. She mumbles some excuse about looking for our father and starts to head off.

It's my turn to look smug. I point my index finger at her, shooting an imaginary gun. "*Gotcha*," I mouth silently as she slinks off in embarrassment.

"So what classes do you have this semester?" Mrs. Gouldman turns to me, smiling.

"Civil Procedure, Criminal Law, and Legal Reasoning and Argument in the afternoons. LRA's my weak spot," I explain. "We have to argue hypothetical cases, and it feels like there's barely any room for mistakes even though there's still so much I'm not sure how to—" I suddenly notice everyone at the table is listening, hanging on my every word. I bite my bottom lip uncomfortably, unsure of what to say next. "I don't want to bore you with the details."

"Don't be silly," Mrs. Willard, my History teacher assures me. "This is interesting, one of our former students at *Harvard*!"

I force a smile on my face as I slide back down in my chair, hoping somehow to disappear. Whenever I tell anyone at home where I go to school, they all look back at me with awe and wonder before suddenly falling silent. It's almost like they aren't sure what to say to me, the girl that used to sit beside them in government, the girl that streaked her hair red and wore a lot of black, the girl that used to hang out with that guy, the genius. They suddenly want to use the biggest words they know, as if they have to prove that they're intelligent, too.

The funny thing is, most of them could be at Harvard, probably more than I should. But you don't tell people things like that. You smile and nod and reinforce how hard you have to work, the studying until the wee hours of the morning. Only I know about eating Rice-A-Roni every night, keeping the thermostat at sixty-five to make rent each month.

"It's always sort of fascinating to see where all my students end up," Mrs. Willard muses. "Usually I'm around ninety percent accurate with my predictions. Wasn't it you that did the research project with all the statistics on how many high schools hire mostly male teachers with coaching backgrounds?"

"No, that wasn't me. That was Alex," I remind her. My stomach twists into a knot the very second I mention his name—*Alex*, the genius.

"How could you ever forget Alex?" My mother laughs. "By the way, he stopped at the school just yesterday."

"Oh, I couldn't forget him," Mrs. Willard shrugs, smiling. "But it's hard to separate the two, considering you didn't see one without the other back then. What's he been up to, anyway?"

"Still at Bowling Green State, I think," I swallow hard when everyone looks at me. "He'd be a senior now." I have a million excuses whenever anyone mentions the great Alex Jacobs. I want to make any kind of excuse and run away, like Katie had done moments earlier. I want to sit and discuss him in the finest of detail, think about him for a few moments without feeling guilty or wondering, "What if?" I'm desperate to talk about Harvard again, any topic but the one we're on.

In all my life I've never met anyone who has the ability to do all of the things he does to me. It's not as though both of us haven't moved on; it's been nearly two years. But just hearing his name fills me with a strange sense of longing, almost an aching. It's almost like a childhood bruise—it's sore and it hurts, but somehow, no matter how painful, you keep pressing on it just to see if it still stings.

Every once in awhile I'll catch myself sliding into a familiar daydream... where it's just Alex and I, sitting together somewhere. I state my case clearly, with brilliant opening remarks followed by hard evidence, strong examples, and a meaningful closing argument. I can name every emotion going through my mind; I can pinpoint every free-floating anxiety that I could never quite understand before. I tell him everything, exactly how I feel. There's no confusion, no hurt when I explain myself, and I'm not worried about how he'll react or what he'll say.

My best defense at the moment is to dissolve into my own little world and completely lose track of the conversation. I stare out at the dance floor, at the sea of unfamiliar faces when Natalie appears, still in her wedding dress, making her way across the dance floor. When she spots me she rushes over, arms wide open.

"Sarah, I'm so glad you came!" She sounds cheerful as she hugs me warmly.

"Thanks for inviting me," I smile politely. "I'm sorry I missed the ceremony, but—"

"Oh, the roads are horrible," she assures me, waving away any further explanation. "You should have seen me this morning. We planned the wedding in November to avoid the winter weather. It was a disaster! Christian's family was coming in from Michigan, and I was *convinced* it was a conspiracy," she closes her eyes in exhaustion. "Perfect fall weather until the day of the wedding, and now it's like January."

"I'm sorry, that must have been horrible," I frown sympathetically, ready to change the subject. "By the way, your dress is beautiful. And your hair—you look great as a blonde."

Natalie laughs, smoothing out her hair and stepping back so I can get a better look. "You think? I went platinum for the wedding, but I wasn't sure I liked it or not. And if you only *knew* how many fittings I had to go through! This dress better look good or somebody's in trouble."

I can't get over how giddy she looks as we both laugh again, like the perfect picture of happiness. "So, how have you been? Besides the obvious, I mean."

"Oh, well, I graduated from Mount Union last spring, and I started teaching Special Education at the high school this fall. Your Mom is the most incredible person, Sar. She's been helping me learn how to enter my grades into the computer."

"I think she told me you were teaching," I say slowly, trying to remember. "That's really great, I'm glad you're happy. So, how did you meet your husband?"

"My *husband*," Natalie grins. "I'm going to have to get used to that, it's still so *weird*-sounding. Christian and I met at school, he's an engineer. He actually just got a job in Cleveland, so we're trying to find a house someplace where we can both commute. You know, the halfway point." She stops for a moment. "How's everything going for you? You look so much thinner than the last time I saw you."

"I haven't been dieting or anything." *It might have something to do with the fact that I live off Rice-A-Roni.* "Maybe it's just because things are so hectic right now, with the semester almost over—"

A sudden twinge of jealousy sweeps over me. Natalie looks so happy and content, already settled into the life she's always wanted for herself. She wakes up every morning and goes to work, gets complete fulfillment out of showing handicapped children things they've never known, helping them do things they've only dreamed about.

She eats lunch with my mother every afternoon, sees her family, and after grading papers, she actually has free time to spend with her husband. They go out to dinner and a movie; when she gets home, she goes to bed knowing she gets the chance to do it all over again.

She doesn't spend hours searching for obscure facts or random cases. She doesn't eat Ramen Noodles everyday, or rationalize that going without sleep actually makes you stronger. I suddenly wonder what that kind of life would be like.

"Everybody's just so *proud* of you! I mean, I ask your mother about you all the time, I have to get my 'Sarah update'. I mean, it's just so *exciting*, our small town girl! At Harvard Law!" I cringe at the way she says the word, *Harvard*, under the impression that it's this ethereal, mystical place where people go around musing philosophically twenty-four hours a day, a place of over-intelligent humans.

"It's really not that impressive," I smile. "I mean, I pull a lot of all-nighters, and spend way too much time at the library. I'm constantly working to keep my GPA high enough to satisfy all of

my grants and scholarships. Plus, I still have rent, which is unbelievable at the student apartments, and food—" I trail off, realizing this may not be the kind of rant she wants to hear at her wedding reception. "It's just not all it's cracked up to be."

"But, it's exactly where you want to be, isn't it?" She grins, raising her eyebrows.

I bite my bottom lip, not sure of how to answer. I'd spent weeks, years, wondering if law school was the place for me. After I'd made one decision, there were thirty more in front of me. Where to apply, where to go, and then the late night calculations on how I was going to pay for everything. Natalie's life seemed so uncomplicated; as if she knew what she wanted from the moment she stood beside me at graduation.

Memories flash through my mind—how happy I was when I received my acceptance letter in the mail, how ecstatic I became while moving into my tiny apartment. I remember how my hands shook when I got my first real law school paper back with the bold "A" at the top. I think of those moments when I'm rushing to class, bleary-eyed and sleep deprived and I look around the common and it suddenly hits me: I'm actually *going to Harvard*. Even though Natalie's life sounds comfy and cozy, I feel like I've made all the right choices, however agonizing they may have seemed. "Yeah—" I finally reply, a wide smile spreading across my face. "I'm exactly where I want to be."

"You've worked really hard for it," she insists. "We're all just so *happy* for you."

"Thanks, Nat." I sigh as she hugs me tightly. "I'm happy for you, too."

When she finally pulls back, she wipes her eyes quickly. "Look, I should go find Christian. Stick around, okay?"

"I will," I promise. "I wouldn't leave without cake."

"It's really good to see you, Sarah." She repeats before heading off through the crowds on the dance floor.

I make my way back to the table where my mother and her friends are sitting. Just as I'm ready to go get a drink at the bar, Kate returns and wraps her arms around my neck. "You'll never guess who's here," she tells me breathlessly.

"Dad? I'm beginning to wonder if he's here," I respond. "Did you ever find him?"

"I didn't really look for him," she admits. There's a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "But, I did find Alex." I stare back at her in shock, my mouth falling open slightly.

"What, *my* Alex?" I blurt before I can catch myself. Technically, he wouldn't be *my* Alex anymore. "I mean, Alex *Jacobs*?"

She looks at me strangely. "How many guys named Alex do you know?"

"If you're joking—" I warn her, trying hard to make my shaking voice sound threatening. "Katie, if you're joking, you're going to wish you weren't."

"Seriously," she sits beside me, continuing. "He asked how I was and I told him you just got here and he said maybe he'd look for you."

My breath catches in my throat as I find my voice. "I swear Katie, if you're fucking with me—"

"I'm being completely honest with you, Sarah." She blinks innocently, waving politely at someone behind me. "Oh *hi*, Father McDonough."

I whirl around in horror, getting ready to apologize to a very shocked priest, only to find there's nobody behind me. Katie laughs gleefully, pointing her index finger and thumb at me, shooting at the air. "*Gotcha*," she whispers.

"Very funny," I grumble, standing up to leave.

She smiles slyly. "You don't think Father McDonough would like your impressive new vocabulary?"

"Bite me," I mutter fiercely as I push past her. "I'm going to look for Dad."

"Right."

I head to the small bar towards the back of the room, not sure who I'm going to run into, the clichés running through my head as I wind my way around the crowds of smiling and laughing people. *Damned if I do, damned if I don't, stuck between a rock and a hard place, caught between the devil and the deep blue sea.* I'm still lost in my thoughts when I see him, his dark hair, hands in pockets, making polite small talk with someone I don't recognize. I'm living the clichés now, praying he'll see me while hoping he doesn't. I'm still frozen in place when his deep brown eyes find mine.

I'm flooded with a million separate emotions at the sight of him, some of which hardly make sense to me. What little self-confidence I did have is suddenly gone, and I'm filled with a nameless fear and anxiety that completely overwhelms me. There's so much that I want to say to him, so many things I need him to know, but my words turn against me and stay jumbled up inside, permanently stuck.

I casually smooth out my hair as he makes his way over to where I'm standing, suck in my stomach and run my tongue over my teeth to check for lipstick. I'm still struggling to say something, anything to him. I've forgotten how to say hello, how to start the simplest conversation. Alex looks at me shyly and self-consciously, as if he's searching for something to say as well.

"Hey Sarah," The awkward smile is still on his face as he greets me. "It's good to see you."

"Hi," I manage, fighting to keep my voice even. "I wasn't sure if you'd be here."

He sticks his hands in his pockets, relaxing a little. "Well, I was home this weekend anyway," he explains. "I stopped in and saw your Mom when I got in yesterday, and she said you were coming home."

"I haven't really gotten the chance to talk to her much," I admit. "I just got here, really. I haven't even seen my Dad yet." I stare at him, wondering what happens next. Now is as good a time as any to state my case, the one I've thought about so often, into motion. I start out slow. "I'm glad you're here."

"You look really good," Alex eyes me up and down. "You're all dressed up."

"I'm even wearing hose," I add, pointing to my satiny-sheer legs. "How often does that happen?"

“Did you drive all the way down here dressed like that?” He looks shocked.

“You’re impressed, aren’t you?” I spin around, pirouetting so he can get the full effect of the dress. “I feel kind of funny in black, though. Not really a wedding color, is it?”

“I *am* impressed,” he laughs. “I wouldn’t drive that far in a dress.” We’re both silent for a few moments, as if we’ve run out of things to say already. I’m contemplating what to do next when he suddenly turns to me. “Would you like to get a drink? You’re one of the few people I’ve seen I wouldn’t mind talking to for awhile.”

“That would be great,” I throw him a pleading look. “I could really use some wine.”

He laughs, glancing around before lowering his voice. “Then I’m pretty sure you’re at the wrong wedding. It looks like they spent a fortune on flowers and food, but I think they bought the wine in boxes at the K-Mart winery.”

“That sounds about right,” I assure him. “You remember Nat’s parents, the ones who bought stock in Jolt Cola?”

“Right. Do you think *that* company has a vineyard?” He hands me a glass, trying to keep a straight face.

I slosh my wine around the rim of the glass, sniffing it as if I know what I’m doing.

“Interesting bouquet. You’re suggesting this is a rare Jolt vintage zinfandel?”

“I’m beginning to wonder, because I’m telling you, it’s bitter.” He points to an empty table. “Would you like to sit down?”

“Close to the bar?”

“That’s the idea,” Alex ushers me over to the table, playing the perfect gentleman as he pulls a chair out for me. “So, how’s school? Are things good at *Haa-vad*? I mean, classes and all *that*?”

“For the most part,” I nod. “I’m passing everything. I consider myself a success so far. How about you?”

“Pretty good,” he replies casually. “I’ll graduate in May, and I’m just now starting to gather med school applications.”

“Really? I don’t think I knew that,” I shift in my chair, surprised. “I mean, that’s great.” I pause for a minute, a wicked grin spreading across my face. “Would you be offended if I told you the very thought is a little frightening, though? I mean, to think that *you*—”

“Oh, I’m not offended,” Alex assures me. “You don’t think it scares me that *you’re* going to argue cases before a judge? I mean, if I ever got arrested, to think that *you’d* be the person fighting to keep me out of jail—”

“Don’t worry,” I promise him, “I’ll defend you the first time you get sued for malpractice.”

“Thank you, that’s very reassuring.”

“What schools were you looking into?” I ask innocently.

“Nowhere specific,” he shrugs. “I’ve been looking into different programs. I was actually thinking about *Haa-vad*, but I haven’t applied just yet.”

"Do it," I encourage him. "What do you have to lose?" He nods slightly, as if he's thinking about it. We're both silent for a moment. "Is anything else going on with you? Are you still seeing—I'm sorry, *what* was her name again?"

A familiar crooked grin appears on his face. "You mean Beth?" He's on to me, completely aware of what I'm doing. I didn't forget her name.

"*That's it, Beth.*" In the few times I'd actually talked to the infamous Beth, I'd become convinced that if looks could kill, she wanted me to die a slow, deliberate, painful death. No matter how sweet I tried to be to her, or how I tried to make the best of a bad situation, she made no secret out of the fact that she considered me public enemy number one. "So, how is she?"

"We broke up about six months ago," Alex sounds very matter-of-fact. "Irreconcilable differences, I guess."

I nod solemnly, but I can't keep the smile off my face. Not only because of his flagrant use of a legal term, but at how *right* my intuition had been. Seeing Alex with Beth made that strange, unexpected ache return. I tried my best to be polite and courteous around them, but the only thing that ran through my head was how different the two of us were, and how if we were meeting under different circumstances, she would have been the person I intuitively stayed the farthest away from. I couldn't help wondering if that could be one of the things that attracted her to Alex. "I'm sorry," I try to sound sympathetic and sweet before I take a sip of my wine. "God, that *is* bad."

"I told you." Alex finishes off his glass with a grimace.

"About Beth," I sigh, taking another sip. "Now, I'm not saying I didn't like her, but—okay, I'm not saying she *was* Satan, but I definitely sensed some demonic connections."

Alex smiles knowingly, as if he completely expected this kind of reaction. The feeling is so familiar, so warm that I stop worrying about everything I want to say for a moment, my daydream and my well-planned arguments. The rest of the world can twirl around on the dance floor, but I'm more content than I've been in months right where I am. It's only when I'm sitting beside Alex that I feel like I'm truly home.

"Do you know the sad thing?" He stares down at the floor. "I wasn't even that upset about it. I mean, we hardly saw each other any more and it's like it was turning into some courtesy thing."

"What do you mean, *courtesy* thing?" I finish off my first glass of wine with a shudder.

"I would come home for the weekend and she'd have plans, but out of *courtesy* she'd go to dinner with me," he explains, heading back to the bar and grabbing two more glasses. "Or she'd drive to Bowling Green without telling me, and even though I had an O Chem. exam, out of *courtesy*, I'd change my plans for her."

"And that kind of relationship can't last," I finish for him.

"Are you speaking from experience?"

"In my experience, they *shouldn't* last." I sigh. "So, it wasn't messy or anything?"

"Not really," he sighs, his eyes meeting mine. "It wasn't like us." I nod, looking away

suddenly. I'm determined to block out the memories. "She called me one night and said she didn't think she could handle things anymore. She felt like I didn't really have time for her."

The smile is permanently stuck on my face; I try to hide it by looking extremely involved in what he's saying. "That's it? I mean, end of story?"

"Basically," he shrugs. "But it was kind of good, in a way. More than anything else, I was kind of relieved we didn't have to play games with each other anymore. Last I heard, she was seeing this guy that goes to school with her. She's been going to 'the family vacation house on the lake' every weekend with him."

"Ah, I think I get the picture," I mutter into my glass, mentally congratulating myself for continually being on the mark about her. "Do you want to know what I think?"

"Here it comes," Alex groans. "Sarah's brand of truth. It's all right. It won't be the first 'I told you so' I've heard."

"I would never say anything like that," I insist. "Just that I think you're better off, since you haven't sold your soul to the devil herself."

"Do you know what our last fight was about? I ended up telling her I wasn't completely sure I knew what I wanted after graduation. I mean, I'm not completely sure I want to go to grad School at all, let alone med school. This decision is going to change me life. I just need to be sure, you know?"

"It's your life," I automatically respond, letting him in on the first half of my own personal mantra from when I was his exact position. "It's your life and it's your decision."

"Yeah, well. We didn't exactly see eye to eye on that."

"Did you love her?" I ask suddenly, before I'm completely convinced I want to know the answer.

"I'm not sure," he sounds calm, as if he was prepared for the question, as if he was disconnected from it. "And maybe that's a good thing."

I sip my wine thoughtfully, maybe to distract me from everything. I want to find a way to let all the words out; I'm waiting for the divine inspiration I've thought about so often. The Jolt wine is beginning to go to my head, and I can't keep everything to myself anymore. "You want some more Sarah-brand truth?" I set my glass on the table with a clatter. "It really doesn't matter if you apply to Harvard Med. School, live next door to me, become the most famous doctor in the world and cure every disease on the face of the Earth."

I pick up my glass up and finish it off before I lose my nerve. Thoughts are flying through my head faster than I can put words to them. "Or you could totally change career plans, and decide to go to law school. You could help me with my Legal Reasoning and Argument, whatever works for you."

I stare into his deep brown eyes, getting lost in them momentarily before I continue my argument. "Maybe you've decided college just isn't for you, and the perfect career would be making Slurpees at the 7-11 for the rest of your life, which is fine—as long as it makes you happy."

“What I’m trying to tell you, Alex, is I don’t care if you’re famous, or how much money you make, or what college you go to, you are still one of the most remarkable people I know. I’m going to care no matter where you are or what you’re doing.”

Alex stares at the floor for a few minutes, silent again. Suddenly, I wish I hadn’t just poured my heart out to him, and I feel the need to smooth it all over.

“And I’m not sure if that’s normal or maybe it’s just pathetic, but sometimes I’d rather not dwell on that kind of thing.”

He takes a deep breath before looking up at me, rubbing his eyes. For a moment, I’m not sure if he’s going to laugh or cry. “I really don’t think you should drive home,” he jokes. “That wine may be stronger than we thought.”

“I mean it, Alex.” I whisper. “I just want you to be happy. It’s not just the bad wine.” We’re both staring out at the dance floor, at Natalie and her new husband twirling around, engrossed in each other, both beaming.

“I wondered if you’d be here,” Alex sighs. “I was going to ask your Mom if you were coming, but I really didn’t know if I should. Did you and Nat keep in touch after high school?”

“Not really,” I admit, biting my lip again. “All right, do you want to know the real reason I came home this weekend? I mean the wedding, and I wanted to see my family and everything, but it’s just—” Alex stares at me expectantly. “I need the space heater.”

“Sorry?” he asks, trying not to laugh, the amusement playing on his face.

“Just because I make rent every month doesn’t mean I’m rich,” I protest, beginning to giggle myself. “I have to keep the heat so low sometimes I wear three pairs of socks to keep warm. I practically live in those old flannel pajamas, the cow print ones? And it’s not even winter yet.” Before too long, we’re laughing so hard we’re gasping for air. “Besides,” I tell him. “It’s come to my attention that Katie needs some serious help in Calculus.”

“This is great, Sarah,” Alex manages. “How exactly are you planning on sliding that into the conversation? ‘Hi everybody, I love you and miss you, things at school are fine, by the way I’m freezing to death and I’m stealing the space heater out of the bathroom?’ That’s *classic*!” We’re both laughing so hard that people begin to stare at us.

“I miss that convoluted logic of yours,” he sighs, “that lets you drive all the way from *Cambridge* to steal a used space heater when you could have bought one at your local Wal-Mart. And besides, I visited your Mom on Friday, remember? If Katie needed help in Calc, I think she would have mentioned it to *me*.”

“And just what are you implying?” I narrow my eyes at him.

“I’m *implying* that the only reason you got such good grades in Calculus is because I spent hours explaining it to you. I wasn’t even *in* Calc then; I was a only a junior.”

“Whatever,” I groan, trying to calm myself down. I’m afraid we’re going to be thrown out of the reception for being so loud. The warm, secure feeling sweeps over me again when I turn back to him. “I came home for all the right reasons.”

The knowing smile returns to Alex's face as he sighs, almost contently. "You know, sometimes I miss you, Sarah."

No words are coming. It's a perfect moment; it's almost exactly the fantasy I've played out perfectly so many times in my mind. I've been honest with him, I've told him exactly where I stand—it was a perfect opening argument, and now I can feel myself freezing up again. I want all the emotion to come out. I want to ask him if we're being completely honest with each other now, if I can tell him how much I think about him, how often I lie awake and ask, "What if?" I wonder what he'd say if I told him all the things you don't tell people, like the Rice-A-Roni and how he should be at Harvard more than I should. But something inside stops me; a warning light goes off in my head. I like whatever we're doing too much to ruin it by wanting more.

"If I could just have everyone's attention please," a deep voice interrupts. I turn to face the head table where the best man stands with his glass raised, prepared to make his toast. As he begins explaining how long he's known the groom and never thought he'd live to see this day, I find I can hardly concentrate on his words. I try to make sense of what just happened, trying not to focus on what could have been the biggest missed opportunity so far.

I'm still lost in thought when the best man finally finishes his speech. "So here's to the happy couple!" I have to bite my lip to stop myself from laughing as everyone sips their wine, waiting to see if anyone grimaces. I can't look over at Alex or I know we'll both start laughing again.

"To Natalie and Christian!" everyone echoes, applauding and laughing. Alex turns to me and holds out his glass.

"To space heaters," he begins. Neither of us can keep a straight face as we dissolve into laughter. Alex quickly regains his composure and continues. "To space heaters, to cow pajamas, to *Haa-vad*, and to you, Sarah."

I hold up my glass. "To hell with *convenient* relationships," I can't help but throw him an "*I told you so*" kind of smile or contain more laughter when he rolls his eyes. "To knowing what you want, to Slurpees and to bad wine, to med school applications, and here's to you, Alex."

The words aren't profound or poetic, but when our glasses touch and Alex looks up at me, I realize there's no reason for them to be—and there never has been. There's not one word I can say, clichéd or otherwise, that Alex doesn't already sense. He knows everything I'm thinking, most everything I'm going to say five seconds before the words leave my mouth.

No matter how uncomfortable I get at the thought of the two of us being alone together, once we are, the apprehension melts away, and it's just Alex, the same guy who beat me at Monopoly, the same guy who used to borrow my CDs and never return them. He recognizes my wicked smile. He's categorized every expression, every motion. And I've let myself forget he knows me better than I know myself. I suddenly realize that my fantasy is completely useless because Alex already understands all of the emotions I can't seem to put into words. Maybe not in the grandiose terms or phrases I dreamt of using, but he gets the general idea of everything. I can see it in the crooked smile.

Another voice from the head table brings me down to reality. "If all of the single ladies would gather in the far corner by the stairs, Natalie's ready to throw her bouquet!"

I watch, silent, as a large crowd of women makes its way to the corner, laughing and challenging each other. Alex stares at me, as if he's waiting for me to jump up and join them.

"I can't help but notice—" he muses, "That you're not hurrying over there."

"I'm really not in the mood to get pushed around," I snort. "See, as soon as the flowers fly from Nat's hand, it's going to turn nasty. They'll turn into a ruthless mob, complete with pushing, shoving, biting, and punching—it doesn't matter whose nose you break just as long as you walk away with the roses. I'm fine right here, thanks."

"Maybe you're just afraid of catching it," he suggests.

"I'm not sure where you're going with this," I point out. "Are you going to be in some big rush to catch the garter?"

"That entire tradition doesn't make much sense, does it?" He has that look in his eyes, as if he's about to launch into a detailed explanation. "I mean, generally you could consider catching lingerie getting lucky—no pun intended."

"Right."

"But this is the lingerie of a married woman, so it's useless. I want to see the scientific evidence the percentage of newly wedded men that caught a garter at a wedding, show me numbers."

"Yet I shouldn't expect statistical proof for bouquets?"

A strange, almost stunned expression spreads across his face, as if I've caught him off guard. "Fair enough," he shrugs, the deep brown eyes locking onto mine. "So, do you want to be like Natalie?"

"What, you mean married, or blonde?" I joke, flashing back to my momentary jealousy of Nat earlier.

"Do you want the family, the house in the suburbs, all that?"

"I think so." I stare out at the dance floor. "But not today. Someday the house with the kids splashing around in the backyard swimming pool sounds nice."

"Someday?" Alex repeats, his gaze meeting mine.

"I'm pretty sure." I narrow my eyes a fraction at him. "What about you?"

He shrugs again, the familiar smile spreading over his face. "Not today," he repeats, looking distracted. "You really like it in Massachusetts?" he asks suddenly. "I mean, you'd recommend applying to Haa-vad?"

"Of course." I pick up a matchbook off the table. "And if they let me in, they won't even have to think twice about you. If that's what you want."

"Well, it's just that you've made it sounds so *nice*." He scans the table and hands me a pen, the grin reappearing on his face. "Would you be willing to give me your address so I can contact you if I have any further questions?"

"Absolutely." I scribble my address and phone number on the back of the matchbook. "I live in one of the student apartment complexes called Holden Green. It's really close to the law school though, so maybe you won't live *right* next door."

"Maybe I like walking," he smiles, taking the matches from my hand.

"You could always call one of the offices to schedule a campus visit," I remind him. I decide to skip my elaborate closing argument and throw myself on the mercy of the court. "Or, you could just come visit *me*."

Alex sticks the matchbook in his pocket, the crooked grin reappearing on his face. I don't have to elaborate, there's no reason to go into all the implications of what I've just said. He understands completely, and he's smiling back at me. We're not saying a word, but suddenly things seem much clearer to the both of us. I can't help but believe that at this moment we both came home for the right reasons, and that we're both exactly where we're supposed to be.



photo submitted by Amber English