

Hannah Virginia Harrison

Dr. Peter Caulfield, First Reader

Dr. Cynn Chadwick, Seminar Director

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Don't Let Me Down

I open the glass door to Subway and there he is. There he is, standing in line, and there's nothing I can do about it.

He turns. He sees me. And there's nothing he can do about it. If he'd seen me walking up to the store—God, I wish he had!—he could have ditched the sandwich line and run to the bathroom. He would have waited in the bathroom for far longer than necessary—half an hour, two hours—for however long he thought it might take me to order a sandwich and be on my way. He would have hidden in the bathroom and waited for me to order my sandwich, sit down and eat it, and then read a Russian novel. He would have sat whistling on the toilet seat, tapping his toes just not to face me.

But he didn't see me before it was too late. The back of his neck turns purple, and I can't catch my breath. I'm shaking, and I think probably visibly panting right here in line at the Subway. Four people stand between us, thank God. It's lunch rush.

I don't spend much time on Tate Street for fear of just this occasion. I knew it was bound to happen—running into him—but I'd hoped (and prepared many times) to run into him some night at some bar downtown when I looked really hot and had a gaggle of girlfriends giggling around me. But I don't have that kind of luck.

He orders a meatball sub. A meatball sub! How can anyone eat a meatball sub at a time like this?

I remember two years ago when I used to bring him sandwiches from the joint where I worked downtown. It was after my sophomore year in college, and I'd come home to live with my mother for the summer, wait tables, save some money. Charlie and I had known each other since junior high school, but we fell in love again. We fell in love again a lot.

I used to feed him. He was really poor. He's probably still really poor. I'd bring him home my shift meals because I didn't realize how pathetic he was. Gourmet sandwiches and salads. Luscious lasagnas if I worked the dinner shift. He'd eat fistfuls of food at a time, gurgling and smiling with satisfaction. He loved me for it.

But I hardly ate at all those three months. Not just because I fed him my shift meals, but also because it was very hot. A hot, dizzy summer. The pavement sweated all day long, and I couldn't eat anything that wasn't light green or made mostly out of water. My mother had air conditioning, of course, but I don't remember being at her house much. I'd come home to live with Charlie, really, and he definitely didn't have AC. He roomed with some guys in an awful little place with slimy blue carpet and cigarette smoke that lingered in everyone's hair. I couldn't eat for the stench and the heat and my nerves.

One time I actually was at my mother's. We hadn't seen each other in several days, Charlie and me, that is. I don't think things were going very well between us at the time, but I can't remember now what was wrong.

At any rate, he'd offered to make dinner. I don't know if he offered, really. Probably I suggested it and he complied. So he was going to make spaghetti with meat sauce and I was going to bring the wine.

I got in my car, looking good, wearing a blue and brown dress. I had to go by the gas station on the way to the grocery store. I called him to let him know I was running late. I picked up a bottle of wine and a spontaneous red rose for him.

When I got to his house, he'd already eaten. He kind of laughed.

"I was hungry," he said.

I tried to smile and said I thought we were going to eat together, I thought that was the whole point.

"You can still eat. I'll sit with you." He pulled a chair out from under the table and motioned to the seat with a grandiose bow.

"You'll just sit there and watch me eat?"

He stood and shrugged. "Why not?"

I made a plateful of spaghetti and meat sauce. I pulled the wine and red rose from a paper bag, and sat down across from him at the table. I twirled wet noodles onto the end of my fork.

He picked up the flower and fingered its petals. "What's this?" he said.

"A rose." I poured a glass of Pinot Noir and hid my blushing face behind it. "I got it for you."

He chuckled and tossed the rose to the table. "Why'd you do that?"

I shrugged and put a bite of spaghetti in my mouth. I chewed and swallowed.

“Excuse me.” I got up from the table, my chair screeched across the floor as I stood. In the bathroom, I kneeled in the beige puddle that oozed from the base of the toilet, and puked.

“I can’t eat,” I said when I returned to the kitchen.

“Why not?”

“It’s too hot in here,” I said, and lit a cigarette.

Now he’s waiting in line for a meatball sub from Subway. What an atrocious downgrade from the masterpiece meals I used to bring him. He seems ashamed of it. He mumbled his order so quietly to the college kid with zits behind the counter that the dude had to ask him to speak up. It’s because of me, I know it is. His shuffle and mumble are on account of me.

I don’t want to eat now. What am I doing still in this line? What am I waiting for? I could drink a soda-fountain full of Diet Coke, but who can eat at a time like this?

Meatball sandwich in hand, he heads for the door. It’s pouring rain outside, and he doesn’t have an umbrella or a jacket, just one of those thin, pale blue collared shirts that he always wears. He and his shirt and sandwich are going to get soaked, and I stand in line waiting to order. I don’t even speak to him.

He’s gone. He’s outside on the corner, crossing the street. I break out of line and run to the door. I fling it open.

I call out to him. “Wait.”

He crosses the street like he doesn’t hear me but I know he does. He takes long strides, like his feet don’t need to touch the ground. I rush forward and almost get hit by a

fucking car. I catch up with him in the rain. He keeps walking. My red t-shirt clings to my stomach, and I wish I'd worn a rain jacket.

"This was bound to happen." I stride alongside him. Water drips from his flat nose and strong chin. "We might as well acknowledge each other."

"Why?" he says without looking at me. I talk to his profile.

"Because it's silly not to. It's too obvious and awkward," I say. My chest heaves, hot puffs of grey breath billow out my mouth in the chilly rain.

We're a block from the lone white picket fence that encloses my best friend's yard. I'm supposed to have lunch, but instead I'm bringing drama. My nerves flurry so badly I can't breathe, can't catch my breath. I'm sure my face is pink and bloated the way it gets when I run on the treadmill at the gym. I don't want to stop in front of Emma's house, risk her sitting on the porch where she's doubtless waiting for me. Oh God, she'll see me chasing Charlie down the street (not that she hasn't been privy to the two of us chasing each other around for all these years.) Lord, it's like a soap opera.

I reach out for Charlie's wrist to get him to slow the hell down.

"Don't touch me," he says. I catch only the slight softness of his sleeve. He stops and finally looks me in the eye. "What makes you think you can touch me?"

"I don't." I don't know what to say. "I just wanted you to slow down."

"Why should I slow down for you?" He looks away, somewhere down the street.

"Look," I say. "A lot has happened since we last saw each other. Shouldn't that make a difference?"

"I'm still angry at you."

"I know."

“Can you blame me?” The question feels more like an accusation.

“No. I don’t blame you.” I drop my face down and stare at the concrete like a little girl. “I just want to talk to you. I have a lot to say to you.”

“Then say it.” He looks at me like he just made a very good point.

“Well, I can’t right now,” I whine. He shakes his head. He starts walking again.

Now I’m desperate. “Can’t we just hang out sometime? I mean, it’s raining here. My feet are wet. Your sandwich.”

He looks at me, almost smiling. “You’ve got an umbrella in your hand.” He points.

I look at the thing like it has just grown from my fingers.

“I’ll call you,” he says.

I stomp my foot in a puddle and shake the unopened umbrella. “Don’t tell me you’re going to call if you’re not really going to.”

“Don’t I always call when I say I will?”

I nod my head like a child that knows what she did wrong. Yes, he always calls when he says he will. Not that he ever calls without my asking. Not if we haven’t been speaking, anyway. But if I ask him, he calls.

I continue to Emma’s house in a daze, in a flurry. He goes the other direction. It’s too late for sandwiches now, I figure. I won’t be able to eat for hours anyway.

I ring Emma’s doorbell. The house is old, historical. It’s soothingly pink with a pretty porch and floral cushions on the porch furniture.

Emma whooshes into the hall, her hair fanning out in long wisps behind her. I can see her beyond the lace shade on the other side of the glass door. She's singing something, some tune she's probably making up on the spot about what she's doing at the very moment.

She opens the door with a buck-toothed, gorgeous grin. She stops mid-song to laugh at me.

"My, you're soaked," she says.

I look down. "So I am. But can we please have a cigarette? You won't believe what's just happened."

I relate the drama of the past few moments to Emma. She barely smokes, the ash on the end of her cigarette grows long, and she holds it erect.

"Emma, you're going to lose that." I point to the ash.

She jumps and it comes off in flakes all over her arm.

"He's still angry about the way it all ended." I moan and bury my face in my hands. "He's angry that I left him and went back to school at the end of that summer when we were...hanging out again. He begged me not to go, and you know he's got abandonment issues because of his mother's death. I promised him I'd never leave him, but I think he took it pretty literally."

"Well," Emma says and stubs out her cigarette, "do you think he'll call?"

"Of course. He always calls and shows up when he says he will. Like that time when Miles died."

Emma frowned. "When was that?"

“Just before sophomore year. I guess that’s when Charlie and I started seeing each other again, really,” I say. “Miles’s death started the reaction that exploded that summer when I lived here again.”

My friend died in a car accident in our college town on a road everybody uses everyday. It was August, and hordes of students were hanging around, drinking and waiting. Miles got hit head-on by an ice cream truck at 7:00 in the morning, and we were no longer children. I cried and cried, and the wind blew for a week, and I called Charlie.

I hadn’t spoken to him in six or eight months, and of course, that conversation hadn’t ended well. He’d cursed me out for being so happy and telling him about it because he’d been living in his Isuzu Rodeo drinking forties for dinner for several weeks. But by the time I spoke to him again in August, he’d found a job and picked up a few paychecks and a girlfriend with an apartment.

He met me at Tate Street Coffee.

“You wanted to see me?” he said, and slid into the chair across from me without looking me in the eye. He’s always looking off somewhere beyond my shoulder, blue eyes searching for some kind of out.

“My friend died.”

He looked at me. Suddenly, we were in the same room. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m really sorry to hear that. Can I do anything?”

“This is it.”

“You want a cup of coffee?”

“I have one,” I said, and tapped a fingernail on porcelain.

He looked at the half-drunk mug in front of me. “So what do you want from me?”

“I just had to see you. I’ve never really lost anyone unexpected like this before. I thought maybe you could relate,” I said, instantly regretting it.

He looked at his shoes. “Well, I knew my mother was dying. I had time to say goodbye. And I was real young. Ten or something. At that age, you bounce back.”

I didn’t believe him, I knew he was putting up a front, but I figured I’d better change the subject. “I’ll be fine,” I said. “I just had to see you. I love you, you know.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said, still looking at the floor.

I didn’t know what else to say, really. That was basically it. I wanted to see him, tell him I loved him. Still, with him there in front of me, I felt reluctant to let the moment go, to let him go again, disappear into the next six or eight months.

“I know we don’t see each other very often anymore,” I said after watching him bite his bottom lip for a moment. “But maybe we should.”

“Maybe.” He leaned forward in his chair, bringing his face closer to mine, entering my life again.

“What are you doing tonight?”

He smiled. “Hanging out with you.”

And that’s how it all began. Again. That time. With the death of a friend and a cup of cold, cinnamon latte.

Now I sit on Emma’s front porch, deliberating. “Should I do this?”

She shrugs and hums. “What do you want?”

“I want it to work. I want it to be easy again. And fun. It can be so much fun.”

Emma snorts. "Like when?"

"Like when it all begins again. It's always great in the beginning."

"Isn't that true for every relationship?" she asks.

"Most relationships don't begin again over and over. It's like Charlie says: 'With us, there's an act and an intermission.' We just never know how long each is going to last."

One August night, not long after Miles died, Charlie and I were just starting to spend time with each other again. We went to a neighborhood park. We swung on a rusty swing set and rolled around in the grass like children. Our faces were wet with each other's kisses and dew when he went home to his grown-up girlfriend, five years older than us both, and I told myself I didn't care. I went back to school.

We talked on the phone every few weeks. I saw him in October during fall break, I saw him at Thanksgiving, I saw him at Christmas. In January we began writing letters, and then in February he came up to see me, on Valentine's Day weekend, no less. Not that we cared about his girlfriend all alone at home. It snowed and we made breakfast for every meal and listened to records and had no idea what day, month or century it was. But I'm sure his girlfriend wished he was with her.

"Those eyes of yours," he'd said. We were lying in bed.

I snorted. "What about them?"

"You're like a bird. You stare through me."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't hide anything from you," he said.

I sat up. “What do you have to hide?” I asked, though I knew the answer. Charlie’s pain over his mother’s death had haunted him since childhood. He was the class clown when we were kids, but I always looked right at him, right into him. I called his bluff.

He said, “I don’t mean it like that.”

He thought I meant something I didn’t. I knew he didn’t belong to me, though he was heating up my bed.

He slid his warm hand up my back, reached around and squeezed my breast. He leaned his cheek into my side, kissed my thigh. “I don’t have to speak and you still know what I’m thinking. Somehow you know me.”

I laid back down. “There’s something of me inside of you,” I said.

He crawled over me and eased himself into me. “And now I’m inside you, too.”

It’s still raining on Tate Street. “We should go in the house,” Emma says.

I don’t think I’ve blinked for ten minutes.

“Aren’t you cold?” she asks.

“Yes, but I don’t care. I don’t care about anything.”

“That’s hardly the case. In fact, you care too much about everything. What were you thinking about just now?” She stands and extends a hand. She pulls me up, leads me inside.

“It’s warm in here.”

“Ya-huh,” she says. “And dry. Let’s get you some clothes.”

We go up to her room. She offers me a fluffy towel and draws me a bath.

I drag a disposable razor up my leg, suds stream down both sides and drip into the tub. “I wonder what the hell Ashley’s doing,” I say.

“Who’s Ashley?” Emma asks. She’s in her room doing something. I call to her from the tub.

“His girlfriend. Remember?”

“Oh her. Is he still with her?”

“I assume so. I can’t imagine he’d get rid of her. She does too much for him. Laundry, dishes, takes out the trash. Drives him around, gives him a place to live. And as he puts it: ‘She never asks any questions.’”

“What do you see in this guy?” she says, and slides into the bathroom with an *Our State* magazine. “He’s gross.”

“I agree.” I melt underwater. I blow bubbles out my nose and resurface when I can’t wish for gills any longer. “We don’t even really know each other,” I say.

“You’ve known each other for ten years.”

“On and off.”

“That’s true. But that’s why you love him, isn’t it?”

I squint. “Why?”

“Because no matter how much time off you guys take—‘intermission’ as he calls it—you still know each other in this... way.”

Later that night, I take Spring Garden Street through the campus of UNC Greensboro to get home. What would it have been like to go here, I wonder, with those giant oaks and pine trees? What if I’d stayed in my hometown for college? It’s a nice school. It’s big,

it's busy. I took a class here that summer I was home. I liked the anonymity of a lecture with seventy-odd students. At my tiny liberal arts university in the mountains, you had to keep up appearances. Maybe that's why I failed out a semester. The semester after Charlie and I spent the summer together, we stopped speaking and hadn't seen each other until today, three years later. I guess I felt like I had to prove something to my university, to him, to myself. I could fail, too, you know. Fail at getting my life together and doing something for myself, just like Charlie.

A group of girls run across the street in front of my headlights. Red lights flash behind me, and a siren pulls me from my thoughts. I pull over and a fire truck wails by. A block ahead on Elam, a car wraps around a lamppost, blazing.

It's a fucking Rodeo, a black Isuzu Rodeo, just like Charlie's. I can't tell whether anyone's in the car. Those girls huddle next to each other and head toward a crowd that's collecting around the accident.

I pull into the nearest parking lot. I can feel my pulse beating even through the veins in my feet. I get to the sidewalk and cross the street. Why hasn't Charlie called me yet?

"Is everyone okay?" I approach the half-ring of young people clumped together. Everyone stares at the consumed car.

"The guy got out just in time," some dude says without turning from the fire. His face glows orange in the light. "He's standing right over there talking to the cops. Sucks about his car."

A guy with short, jet black hair stands with his back toward me. He's hunched over, wearing a blue collared shirt. I run toward him.

Another cop grabs me. I yell Charlie's name.

"Calm down." The cop holds me firmly by the shoulders. "Do you know this young man?"

Some guy I don't recognize and the other officer stare at me. They look more surprised by me than the burning car.

I can hardly speak. "I thought I did."

The cop releases me. "Have you been drinking?"

"No sir," I lie. "My friend has the same car. He looks like this guy."

The cop judges me for a moment. "Get on out of here," he says, and I back up a few feet. I turn around and almost bump into someone in the crowd.

I go back to my car. Could have happened to me a thousand times. Why do I ever get in the car drunk? I'm asking to be jailed every time I do it. I'm asking to end up hugging a tree, my car drowned in flames.

I grab my purse and grope through the bag for my cell phone. I call Charlie.

"Hello?" He always answers the phone as if he doesn't have caller ID, as if he doesn't know who it is.

"Hi. What are you doing?"

"Hold on. I'm watching a movie."

"A movie? What movie? Are you in a theatre?" Only now do I feel convinced it wasn't Charlie in that wreck. He could have been in the trunk of that Rodeo for all I know. I don't think I would have believed he was alive until this moment, hearing his voice.

The line quiets for a moment, but stays connected. His voice comes back over the line.

“What are you doing with your phone on in the theatre? Did it ring?”

“Of course.” He laughs. “I thought you might call.”

“Think you know me that well, do you?”

“Don’t I?”

I don’t answer. I just beam.

“Listen, I’ve got to get back in there,” he says.

“Why haven’t you called me yet?”

“Because I’m at the movies. Geeze.” He coughs, clears his throat. “Ashley’s in there. I’ve got to go.”

“Fine.”

“I’ll call you after,” he says.

I sit in the driver seat of my car, grip the wheel. Where do I go now? Do I go home? Do I go to Emma’s? Do I go get a drink and wait? I crank the engine and pull out of the parking lot. I drive down Market Street with its undulating Piedmont hills. I love this street for its ups and downs. I love Cornwallis, too. I head in that direction. I drive down Cornwallis with its curves and dogwoods illuminated in my headlight.

At the corner of Cornwallis and Elm, my old middle school rests in the dark. All the classroom lights are off, the playground deserted.

That’s where Charlie and I first met, in the 6th grade at Catholic school. I was the goofy new girl with a brown ponytail, and he had dark blue eyes. My dad used to pick me up

from school sometimes. He'd see Charlie and me holding hands in the carpool line. Dad still says Charlie was a pretty little boy, but scared to the bone, even at that age. I didn't care either way. What I saw in his eyes I knew no one else did, and he reflected me in them.

I remember the first time I spoke to Charlie. It must have been the first month of school. After a few weeks of eyeing each other in the hall or in Mass, I'd approached him in the cafeteria. I gripped my lunch tray with two hands and smiled like I had no where else to sit but wouldn't sit alone. He was eating with a group of skinny smart alecks, but I didn't care.

"Do I know you?" I asked.

"*Do* you know me?" He chewed a bagel. My eyelids fluttered, his stayed still. I was surprised he'd stood his ground; usually I made guys like him pretty nervous. I looked at his friends, who looked around at anything but me. One of them failed at covering his embarrassed smile, which boosted my confidence.

Charlie swallowed the bagel lump, still looking at me. I placed the tray on his table, then my hands on my hips. I squinted and tossed my ponytail to the right with one sideways bob of the head. I tapped my left foot three times, and then plopped down into the chair across the table from him, arms flailing in the air a bit as I landed. Thumping the spikes of my boney elbows onto the tabletop, I brought my hands to my mouth and proceeded to gnaw on a thumbnail.

Now here I am, ten years later, still biting my nails over Charlie. And he can't stand to look at me. He loves this girl, Ashley. Why else would he still be with her? Who am I? Some irreconcilable detail from childhood?

I drive to the movie theatre. Maybe I'll catch them coming out. The parking lot is bright under orange streetlights. I pull my car into a spot under a tree. Figure its shadow might do me some good, hide the fact that I'm behaving like a creep. I can see the doors of the theatre. I can see into the empty front lobby where a high school chick stands behind the counter popping Raisinets into her mouth.

What am I doing here? I tap furious beats on my steering wheel with my thumbs. I need a drink. He could see me, I know he could. Wonder if his car is in the lot, or if they brought hers? Wonder if it's parked near here. What if it's the car right next to mine?

People fill into the lobby like popcorn spilling from a paper bag. Guess the movie just got out. Who even knows if it's their movie. God. I'll just wait and see if they come out, and if they don't come out with this crowd, I'll leave. This is absurd.

And there they are. I see him with her among the straggling few couples left exiting the lobby. Her hair is a bland blondish-brown, heavy on her shoulders, with thick bangs in her eyes. I can't see her face clearly enough to compare it to my own. He's got his arm around her. Looks like it must have been a tear-jerker because she dabs her eyes with a sweatshirt sleeve. They're nearing the door, but I still can't make out her face. I lean towards my windshield, as if moving a couple feet closer might reveal her features to me. To hell with it, they might see me. I know I'm cuter anyway, so what difference does it make? Charlie says I'm better looking than her. He calls me "doll face."

She points somewhere down a hall. He nods and she leaves him with his hands in his pockets. She comes back and hands him her purse. He rolls his eyes and looks around, then takes it from her and points outside.

He lights a cigarette. Black shoes make his feet look big and floppy. He leans against the brick wall of the building, props a gigantic foot up on the wall and takes his phone from his coat pocket. He dials and puts it to his ear.

My phone rings. Fuck!

“Hi.” I duck down and then realize he’s not looking for me. He doesn’t suspect I could actually be this fucking crazy.

“Well, I’m calling you now. I don’t have long to talk though,” he says and moves away from the wall. His back faces me now, and I assume he’s watching for Ashley.

“Yeah, that’s fine,” I say. “How about tomorrow?”

He agrees to call me tomorrow when he gets off work. Five or six o’clock.

“And you promise we’ll hang out?”

He promises.

Ashley pushes open the glass door just as he hangs up. He extends his hand, and they walk in the other direction. As they walk away, she pushes him in the shoulder, smiling. He tickles her and she squeals loud enough for me to hear from my car.

“Well aren’t they adorable,” I say aloud, and crank my engine.

The next morning, I wake up with the sun in my eyes. Mom left a list of chores and errands by the coffee maker. I down a couple cups, take out the trash, clean off the counter-tops, put away the dishes. After a shower I blow dry my hair, apply make up,

pick out a cute dress that shows off my legs. No cleavage. I'm not a cleavage kind of girl. But boots, tall boots with heels.

In town, I drop off a stack of clothes at Goodwill. My grandfather has tomatoes and squash from his garden for me to pick up. We visit for a while. He's proud of me for graduating and doing so well. I kiss him on the cheek before leaving.

It's only four, so I've got some time to kill. There's a local store I like a lot close to downtown, so I head to Ed McKay's Used Books & More to wander around.

There is only one other person in the Fiction Q-T section, but she's crowding the shelves near my favorite author. I'm convinced she's going to swipe the very last and only copy of *Franny and Zooey*.

I slow my gait and pretend to be interested in some no name Andrews or Anderson or somebody who wasn't even worth placing back on the shelf in alphabetical order. I sidestep inch by inch closer to the girl.

She looks like an old friend of mine. She looks so similar to this childhood friend that I think it might be her. Her face surprises and distracts me. She has the same sandy blonde hair, awkward red nose, dull grey eyes. Pitiably acne.

She doesn't lift her bent head from the pages of what turns out to be *The Catcher in the Rye*, but her eyes dart up from the text like a startled tabby cat.

"That's my favorite book," I say to set her at ease. She sighs with audible relief that I'm friendly. She nods her head in a staccato up and down.

"I've never read it, but I heard it's good," she says.

"What else have you got, there?" I ask for my own benefit.

She mumbles a couple other titles, and shit, she's got my copy.

“My boyfriend recommends books to me all the time,” she says with a stronger Southern drawl than mine, “and Salinger is his favorite author, but I’ve never read any of these books.”

I’m amused she’s willing to carry on a conversation with a stranger. I smile and look her warmly in the eyes. For some reason, I feel a need to reach out to this girl, protect and nurture her or something.

I start rambling. “My friend, Charlie, he loves Salinger, too.” I don’t know why I use his name in conversation with someone I don’t know. He’d probably hate knowing I talk about him, probably think I’m ridiculous going on about him like this.

I continue. “Of course, he’s like the real life Holden Caulfield, so I guess he’s biased. Actually, I was the one who recommended *Catcher* to him when we were fourteen or whatever. I haven’t read all of Salinger’s books, but he read them one after another.”

I realize I’ve been talking to the bookshelf and remember to make eye contact with the girl. Her smile is gone. She stares at me with a strange expression on her face. I assume she’s trying to place how she knows me.

“You look so familiar to me,” I say. “Have we met?”

“No,” she says, “but are you Hannah?”

I cock my head to one side and narrow my eyes at her. “That’s right,” I say. “Are you Heather from Summerfield Elementary School?”

“No, Ashley.” My mind races. I try to match this girl’s face with someone I once knew named Ashley, some old classmate or bus rider from the past.

“I’m Ashley,” she says again, and it clicks. Every molecule of oxygen flees my lungs.

I stick out my hand. What else can I do? It trembles in the air until she takes it.

“Charlie cares a lot about you, you know,” I say. “You’re good for him. You take good care of him.”

What else can I say? In intense moments, I find I can only be overly honest.

She tears up. Charlie’s girlfriend is actually starting to cry in front of my face as we stand here in Ed McKay’s Used Books & More, awkwardly holding hands.

“I don’t know about that.” Like Charlie, she’s unable to look me in the eye. She drops my hand. “He’s crazy about you,” she says.

I guess he’s mentioned me. Odd. I would imagine he wouldn’t mention me to his girlfriend if he still had any interest in being with me.

She squeezes out a little smile, her teeth long and rabbit-like. “I think you’re a good person. I can tell just from meeting you these few minutes.” Clearly he’s mentioned something about me.

“I am a good person, Ashley,” I say. I think what I mean is *I’m sorry*.

Somehow, I bring the conversation to a close. I can feel her watch me as I leave. I pull my Aviator sunglasses from the top of my head where they perch like a tiara, and step into the late afternoon sun. I have the uncomfortable feeling that she admires me, wants to be like me.

I drive to Emma’s because I don’t know where else to go. Charlie’s supposed to call me to go out anytime now.

Hours later, the sun has set. Emma and I have about made it through a bottle of wine and a pack of cigarettes. Charlie finally calls.

“It’s late,” I say.

“It’s not that late. I got tied up with something.”

“Have you spoken with Ashley?”

“She told me you guys ran into each other this afternoon. At Ed Mckay’s or somewhere?” He laughs.

“She’s a nice girl.”

“I know it.”

“I’ve been thinking about it a lot,” I say. “I feel compelled to write her a letter or something.”

“Why the hell would you do that?” He clears his throat. “Did she give you her address?”

“I know where you guys live. You took me there. I’m sure I could figure it out.”

“Don’t do that. Why would you want to do that? And don’t come anywhere near our neighborhood, either.”

I don’t like how uneasy it makes him. “She loves you. I guess I can relate to her on that level. It’s not easy to love you, you know.”

“Are you drunk?”

“A little wine.”

“Of course I know she loves me, Hannah. And she’s never hurt me. I should do her the same courtesy,” he says, and hangs up.

The next morning, I get up when my mother leaves the house. A grey dawn breaks through the blinds of my bedroom windows.

This time, I don't shower. I pull on a pair of blue jeans, pick up my keys and a pack of cigarettes from my bedside table, and I'm out the door.

Emma's at Tate Street Coffee when I get there.

"What are you doing here so early, love?" she asks.

"I'm on a mission."

"Oh, no." She rolls her eyes but can't help from smiling.

"Are you amused?"

"Thoroughly." She pulls a cigarette from behind her ear. "Share a butt?"

"I've got to get a cup of coffee first."

She walks up to the cash register. "Little Italy," she says to the barista.

"How'd you know that's what I want?"

"You think I don't pay attention or something? That's what you always order."

Charlie's Italian.

We step outside. She lights the cigarette.

"You're up to no good," she says.

"I'm going to Charlie's apartment."

She raises an eyebrow. "You mean Ashley's apartment?"

"Whatever," I say. I blow a stream of smoke.

"And just what do you think you're going to do there?"

"I don't know. You can come along and watch the drama unfold if you want.

We'll be just like little actors in a play."

Emma crosses her arms. Guess she's not going to come. "Don't you think that's a little out of hand? If he wants to see you, he'll call."

I flick the cigarette. "Thanks for the latte," I say, and pull my keys from my pocket. I walk towards my car.

I drive up the hill to Charlie's apartment. The sun is still pulling itself up. Bright rays slice through the trees. I stop the car a little way from the brick building where he lives. His black Rodeo is parked out front.

I light a cigarette, and the car fills with smoke. I crack the window.

Charlie appears on the front stoop with a big black trash bag. He takes it to the trashcan beside his car. He unlocks the passenger side door of the Rodeo, and pulls out a bundle of wildflowers. He strides slowly back up the sidewalk to the apartment building. He stops on the stoop, sits and lights a cigarette. The flowers lay beside him.

Ashley opens the door. She steps out in heels and a pantsuit. Guess she's going to work.

Charlie picks up the flowers. He holds them overhead. She takes them from him as he takes another drag from his cigarette. Ashley leans over and kisses his ear. She returns the flowers to him and walks down the sidewalk. She gets in his car and drives off. Guess they share the car. Guess they share a lot of things.

I watch Charlie finish his cigarette and disappear into the apartment. I crank my engine and drive back to my side of town.