RESURRECTING JANE AUSTEN:
AN EXPLORATION IN WRITING AS A READER (AND VICE VERSA)

Michelle A. LaRue

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Explanatory Text

Introduction

This Research Honors Project comprises two main components: a creative writing portion and a corresponding critical analysis piece. The project was devised as a way of combining the literary analysis skills taught and developed over the course of the English major with concepts of creative writing. The project required rigorous application of literary analysis to the creative writing process by approaching the writing portion of the project from a literary standpoint centered in Jane Austen’s writing. The basic concept of the project involved the development of four short stories incorporating and responding to Austen’s style of humor. The project later developed a focus on thematic similarity to Austen’s work in the thematic concerns of the short stories. The course of the project began with reading three Jane Austen novels, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*, which followed the progression of Austen’s writing career. These novels were then analyzed, not only for their literary worth but also as an example of talented writing. The development of the creative portion followed this analysis, though the novels and Austen’s writing style remained a continual reference point.

Throughout the process of reading and writing, the first two parts of this explanatory text (the critical component of the project) were developed in conjunction with the short stories, and the third part added during the final completion process of the project. The first part of the critical text focuses on text-based analysis and the results of the reading portion of the project. The second part examines the creative writing process, including how Austen’s influence on the short stories changed as the creative work was completed as well as developments specific to the writing process that affected the project. The third part of this text primarily reflects on the
project as a whole, including self-evaluation of the resulting short stories, how they work
together as a unit, and how the stories reflect the original purpose of the project.
Part One: Analysis

The main concept behind this thesis project was the connection between reading and writing. For this particular project, the literary analysis component was meant to enhance the writing process by providing both a starting point for the creative portion and a literary source for learning. Though I was originally interested in Jane Austen’s style of humor as the basis for my analysis of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*, what I found was that I was more interested in the way Austen portrayed the nature of relationships throughout the novels.

Jane Austen remains, two hundred years after her first publication, a popular, widely read, and relatable author, at least in part because of her novels’ thematic relatability. In addition, her heroines are middle-class women facing real life domestic situations. Her characters all have flaws and they aren’t always heroic. Things go wrong and people say things they later regret. Austen’s stories are real to readers because they were real to her, and as a result, they have retained their staying power despite all of the social changes since then. Austen wrote to explain her world, and by extension explains ours as a product of hers, and she wrote to find the humor in situations that were far more dire in real life.

However, the situations in which Austen’s heroines find themselves, while contained within the small realm that was the extent of the feminine world in Austen’s time, speak to the larger social concepts in place within her world. A family’s economic circumstances held great influence over the opportunities granted to the children in that family, and particularly the females. Though the situations and the concerns faced throughout the novels are often those of a domestic or social nature, they are the same situations and concerns that continue to resonate with audiences today. Underneath the social graces, the balls, and the desperate search for a
desirable suitor lies something so entirely innate to the human condition that it maintains its relatability regardless of the novel’s relevance to societal structure today. Despite changes to the social implications of actions, at the most basic level, Austen writes about love, marriage, and family; in other words, she focuses thematically on the nature of relationships and the way society shapes our choices regarding relationships. Austen’s writing crosses decades and centuries, yet still captures the human experience of relationships regardless of changes to the social structure.

In her novels, Austen perfects the complicated balance between writing about larger themes or issues and writing the everyday, ordinary kind of details that breathe life into her writing. It is necessary, however, to consider the historical context of marriage options for women. Austen writes from the perspective of a world of manners and limited choices for women, especially middle class women who have neither the privilege of the upper classes nor the obligations of the lower class. Stuck between the upper class freedom provided by money and the lower class freedom of choice (in relationships and in job opportunities), the social expectations for middle class women effectively cripple them by limiting their viable choices to marriage or else finding a position as a governess.

Furthermore, these women are expected to marry a man of at least the same station, and preferably one of a higher station. More often than not, when women in Jane Austen’s novels refuse marriage, they risk economic insecurity for themselves and their families. However, when women choose to marry, they sometimes risk their happiness in accepting a man who cannot offer them economic security or in accepting a man they do not love. Both produce potential misery in different ways. Austen’s novels also suggest an inextricable link between this idea and
Austen’s use of humor. She seems to suggest that sometimes laughing through the horror of a potential marriage to a laughable character is the only way to survive the proposal. The only identifiable and desirable solution within Jane Austen’s novels is to be lucky enough to marry for both love and money. *Pride and Prejudice, Emma, and Persuasion* all include prime examples of the social conditions surrounding women’s marriage options. By looking at the three novels in comparison, the progression in Jane Austen’s opinion of these social conditions, as expressed through her heroines and their choices, becomes readily apparent.

*Pride and Prejudice*, as the first of these novels to be published chronologically in 1813, reveals the beginning trajectory of Austen’s opinions about love and marriage. This novel is the most youthful and optimistic of the three novels examined for this project; Elizabeth and Jane, the two main heroines of the story, both marry for love and money and consequently end up in happy marriages. However, the novel also shows the unlucky marriages: those between characters who were not lucky enough to resist marriage to a laughable character. For instance, the novel provides Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, Mr. Collins and Charlotte, and Mr. Wickham and Lydia as examples of marriages made for love or for money, but not for both. Throughout the novel, Mr. Bennet shows an active awareness of the evils of a marriage without either love or money and the necessity of both for a happy marriage. The conversation between Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth following his assent to Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy’s marriage particularly suggests this when he says to Elizabeth that Mr. Darcy “is the kind of man... I should never dare refuse anything which he condescended to ask” (*Pride and Prejudice* 273). The implication here is that Darcy’s wealth makes Elizabeth’s acceptance of his proposal unobjectionable. However, Mr. Bennet goes on to add, “I know that you could be neither happy nor respectable unless you truly
esteemed your husband... Your lively talents would place you in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage,” which affirms that Mr. Bennet recognizes the need for love (and respect) as well in order to have a happy marriage (Pride and Prejudice 273). It is likely that his comprehension of the need for a balance of love and money as motivations for marriage arises from a self-awareness about his own marriage.

Emma, originally published in 1816, falls next chronologically, and shows the beginnings of Austen’s altered view of marriage. Rather than writing a so-called ideal love story as she did with Pride and Prejudice, the couples Austen writes about in Emma are more complex, and the marriages seem less stable than those in Pride and Prejudice. Still, although Emma sorely lacks insight into marriages between others, she obviously does understand on a basic level the need for both love and money in a marriage. However, she does not always take into account the social prospects that affect the level at which love and money can have an effect on the couple. This oversight creates much of the conflict in the novel and causes her to set Harriet up for failure at every turn. While she is encouraging Harriet to hope for relationships in which both love and money would be present, she does not consider Harriet’s social standing with regard to money, nor does she very seriously consider the men’s level of affection for Harriet. Instead she persuades Harriet to refuse a suitable match both in affection and in money, to hope for relationships of questionable affection and great discrepancy of social and economic standing. Emma displays a knowledge of the need for love and money early in the novel when she encourages Harriet in her admiration of Mr. Elton, outlining the advantages of the match and particularly emphasizing that they would be “happily married” and “well married” because of his “amiable character,” and “comfortable fortune” (Emma 56). The application of this
understanding to her own life comes only when she realizes she wants to be the one to marry Mr. Knightley, and she begins to recognize “the real cause of that violent dislike of Mr. Knightley’s marrying... anybody else” (*Emma* 328). Emma’s belief that Mr. Knightley is the only man who fulfills both requirements for a happy marriage as someone who matches her in economic and social standing and who can inspire respect and affection in her allows her to realize she could be happy in marriage. Although she had never considered it possible before, Emma still finds that a happy marriage is within her reach, despite the number of botched matchmaking attempts it takes to get her to realize this.

Austen’s last completed novel, *Persuasion*, published in 1818, furthers the idea of the necessity for love and money for happiness in marriage, and even seems to act as reinforcement against any doubts Jane Austen may have been having in her own life, having been “briefly engaged in 1802,” but choosing to break off the engagement (*Persuasion* v). The tone of this novel represents a far more disillusioned Jane Austen and acts as the rescue from singleness that she never got in real life simply in the act of choosing a heroine whose “bloom had vanished early” and who remains unmarried at twenty-seven (*Persuasion* 5). *Persuasion*, more so than the other two novels, reinforces the idea that happy marriages require both love and money. From the beginning, Austen establishes that her heroine has been forced to turn down the proposal of a man she loves because he “had no fortune” and “had realised nothing” (*Persuasion* 20). Although Anne is consequently miserable for years, she later concludes that she was “right in submitting” and breaking off the engagement because she would have “suffered more in continuing the engagement than [she] did even in giving it up” (*Persuasion* 179). As such, the statement seems to reinforce the decisions Austen made about marriage in her own life.
Moreover, it supports the previously outlined view of marriage as presented in Austen’s novels.

The overall arc of Austen’s portrayal of the nature of relationships throughout her career, traced through *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*, follows her outlook on life and the events which were exerting their influence at the times she wrote each of the novels. In particular, as Austen grew older, her outlook on marriage grew more disillusioned, which can be seen over the course of the novels.
Part Two: Process

As I began the process of writing, I was focused on incorporating Jane Austen’s style of humor into my short stories. However, as I wrote, I realized that my stories were connected to Austen’s writing in a way I had not expected. Rather than replicating Jane Austen’s humor, my stories housed a deeper thematic response to Austen’s works. Austen’s novels, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*, are often classified as romance novels, and they examine relationships on a surface level, but also include a deeper and more complex level focused on the nature of relationships.

Over the course of this project, it has become clear to me that while a writer can choose sources they want to study, the influence that evolves from these studies may not always be what is expected, nor does it always work out as intended or planned. When beginning this sort of research process, it is necessary to accept the presented information and learn to follow it until one hits a dead end or comes out with something worthwhile. For me, following Austen’s humor, or rather chasing it, resulted in too much time spent devoted to salvaging a story that was not worth saving. After realizing this and incorporating that lesson into my understanding of the creative process, I was able to move forward and explore what I was working on in terms of how it was different from Austen rather than how it was the same. As opposed to evaluating my work based on how well I captured the essence of Austen that I was aiming for, I began to see my work as a separate entity needing to stand on its own while at the same time responding to the influence of preceding authors, and in this case, Jane Austen.

As I worked, I came to the realization that there is a delicate balance between having an end goal and purpose in writing a story and understanding that the concept of a story may change
during the writing process. However, I have also come to understand that while it is necessary to be open to changes during the writing process, as the author, it is important to remain in control of those changes. I found that those moments when I was not exerting control over the story and engaging with changes to the story were the moments the story became chaotic.

My first story for this thesis project, “Promises unBroken,” represents my most successful attempt at humor, which takes the form of farce, or exaggerated comedy, in this story. Although farce exists in Austen’s novels, such as in the form of Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen does not use physical comedy, which is part of the farcical humor in “Promises unBroken.” As a story concept I developed in another creative writing course, the humor in “Promises unBroken” more closely represents my ideas and preferences for writing comedy and humor previous to this project. “Promises unBroken” underwent substantial revisions during this process and ended up far stronger than its original version. Throughout these revisions, however, as I was considering Jane Austen and learning about my own creative process, I found that it was surprisingly difficult to incorporate another author’s style into my writing, especially when my writing differed so greatly from Austen’s style. As a result, the focus of my project later transitioned from the stylistic focus on humor to a thematic focus.

This struggle to mesh very different styles of writing became particularly clear during the month I spent working on what ended up being an unsalvageable story following the completion of “Promises unBroken.” The time I spent working on this story, trying to incorporate elements of humor seen in Austen’s work, failed miserably, in part because I am writing in a different time period than she was, and therefore have different authorial influences and a different understanding of writing. In my continued attempts to capture Austen’s humor in the abandoned
story, I realized that while it is important to understand writers who came before, it is also important to understand that as a writer, I have the prerogative to pick and choose what influences to focus on in my work based on which elements mesh best with my style of writing in the current world. Thus, the abandoned story can, at the very least, be seen as useful because I learned what I don’t want to do in the future and what elements cannot be smoothly woven into my writing style despite my best efforts.

However, I have also found that as a writer, it is also necessary to challenge myself and push beyond the limits of what I know sometimes. To this end, my main characters’ lives are so different from my own, which forced me to think beyond the situations I am familiar with. Had I, like Jane Austen, focused on characters whose lives were similar to my own, the creative process for this project would have been very different. Focusing on characters that would have been easier for me to understand might have forced me deeper into the examination of conflict because I would have spent less time trying to find the conflict and more time exploring it. Still, the use of characters so different from myself allowed me to explore some very different decision making processes, and to go beyond myself in order to understand the decisions another person might make. The ability to understand others and the opportunity to see life from other perspectives is one of the most valuable aspects of being a writer.

Following the completion of “Promises unBroken” and the abandonment of the attempted second story, I moved away from my focus on humor, and found a more thematic trend that enabled me to better work within the parameters of Jane Austen’s writing. “Fidelity,” the second story in my final thesis collection, was very much an exploration in the stylistic element of point of view, but the result was a very different point of view structure from Jane Austen’s consistent
third person narration. Just as Austen’s world influenced her work, my position as part of a postmodern world influences my approach to narrative structure and subject, among other things. While Jane Austen was constrained in the style of point of view she could use, I am able to experiment with point of view and I can explore what different points of view (in this case, what a changing point of view) can do for a story. Furthermore, during the writing process for “Fidelity,” I began noticing a thematic trend developing in my stories in terms of the ways in which I was examining what relationships mean and how they work in society. I found that it was this thematic focus that connected my writing to Jane Austen’s writing more than the element of humor did, and as a result, I began to view my project as a response to Austen’s thematic concerns, which opened up possibilities that the element of humor had not.

Additionally, when I reached the revision stage for “Fidelity,” I noticed a commonality between the character relationships in “Fidelity” and those in “Promises unBroken.” As a result, I made the decision to connect the two stories with what I termed “transition characters,” and to continue using these transition characters in the rest of my stories. In doing so, I was able to add a cohesive element to the collection of short stories written for this project. However, it was important to recognize the need for the stories to stand alone and only use the connections between the stories as a way of enhancing the collection without detrimentally affecting the quality of the individual stories. In relation to Jane Austen’s novels, my project again differs greatly. Whereas Austen’s novels all have a thematic connection and similar narrative structures, my stories are connected most strongly by the transition characters, though their broad thematic concern ties them together as well.

As a continuation of the theme that developed during the writing process for the first two
stories, I once again focused on the idea of what is at stake in terms of marriage. As the story “Probabilities” evolved, it underwent extensive revisions, the focus of the story changing from the ways we view love to the way we truth-tell as a society. The story also addresses the ways truth is navigated in response to others. In simplifying the focus of the story from the many possible views on love at first sight to opposite and more complex views on love at first sight, the story began to respond more effectively to the thematic ideas laid out in Jane Austen’s novels. Instead of remaining only a surface examination based on the different declarations people make about love, I was able to deepen the complexity of the story by adding a layer of conflict based on the difference between the things people say and the reality of what they believe or feel.

As the last story in the collection, “Truth” addresses the nature of relationships when there is no actual relationship. Instead of watching characters interacting within a functional relationship, the story focuses on characters who have unintentionally been thrown into an unavoidable relationship with each other. This allowed me to experiment with the complexities of negotiating characters who are entirely unaware of each other, but have to interact. However, the story also adds a second layer as part of this collection by expanding on the ideas developed in “Probabilities.” Simply stated, “Truth” represents a fundamental perversion of the concept of love at first sight, seen in “Probabilities,” by juxtaposing it with the idea of lust at first sight, which can be seen in “Truth.” The juxtaposition of the two stories creates a link between the two ideas, highlighting the similarities between the two concepts.

Throughout the process of writing these stories, I found the idea of incorporating and responding to Jane Austen’s writing in my own work incredibly daunting. However, as the project developed and as the stories came together, I was able to pinpoint notable areas of
improvement in my writing. The challenge of writing to the standards of an established and
celebrated author like Jane Austen forced me to go beyond my comfort zone to address areas of
my writing I had never focused on before. Knowing that this project was designed to examine
my own writing in terms of Austen’s writing further pushed me to improve my writing because
the concept of the project would inevitably lead to a comparison of my work to Jane Austen’s,
which is an intimidating standard for writing. As a result of the ambitious standards I set for
myself, I was able to improve my creative writing ability and achieve more than would have
been possible if my goals had been lower.
Part Three: Reflection

As seen above, my project did not remain the same over the duration of its completion, but actually changed greatly from the original proposal. However greatly altered the project ended up being, the project more closely represented the original intention for the project: to explore Jane Austen’s writing and create corresponding short stories in the process. While I intended to focus on Austen’s humor when beginning this project, choosing to focus instead on the thematic concerns in Austen’s writing allowed me to explore her writing more fully and with more breadth but no less depth than had I focused solely on her style of humor. Additionally, altering the focus of my project gave me the opportunity to get a better sense of my own writing. The actual process of changing focuses provided me with knowledge of more than one aspect of Austen's writings, which was helpful, but the ultimate focus of the project (themes of marriage and the nature of relationships) meshed with my writing style far better than Austen’s humor did. As a writer in a postmodern era, my approach to writing differs greatly from Jane Austen’s and changing my focus to marriage and the nature of relationships afforded me a greater opportunity to explore my own style while still remaining within the confines of the project’s purpose. That said, throughout the writing process for my short stories, Austen’s style, including her use of humor, point of view, and narrator, remained a central point of comparison for my work, whether what I was writing resembled Austen’s work or fell to the complete opposite side of the spectrum.

Each of the stories written for this project, when seen individually, acts in a very different capacity from its function within the collection of stories. “Promises unBroken” remains as my first and only successful attempt at humor, and represents the difficulty of reproducing a style of
humor in a world so entirely different from that in which Jane Austen was writing and setting her stories. My focus when writing and revising this story was still humor, though early on, I recognized that the style of humor I was employing differed greatly from that which Jane Austen uses. However, in continuing to write with this in mind, the project became an experiment in recognizing the ways my writing differed from Jane Austen’s in addition to exploring how my writing reflected her style. This provided valuable insights into my writing and the ways in which I, as a postmodern, twenty-first century writer, can reflect and respond to other authors, and the ways in which I can’t.

“Fidelity” became an experiment in point of view, again in a very different way from the point of view Jane Austen employs. Because of my postmodern position as a writer, generations after Jane Austen lived and wrote, I suffer from the advantage of developments and changes to ways of writing fiction. While Jane Austen uses a consistent point of view, I am not constrained to this formula, and am able to experiment with this aspect of my writing. Furthermore, “Fidelity” represents a break from my focus on humor, and the beginnings of the switch to focusing on marriage and relationships.

“Probabilities” functions individually as a manifestation of a focus on characters and on situating characters in psychologically contradictory positions. While the revision process greatly altered the story from its original form, the discussion of love at first sight and whether or not it can form a lasting relationship acts as the point around which all the characters are centered. This also required practice negotiating characters on the page because by adding numerous characters, all of whom needed space to speak, and often at the same time, the necessity of exerting control over the characters and their conversations rose to the forefront of stylistic focuses.
On an individual level, “Truth” plays with the idea of narrative voice, among other things. While the narrative voice in “Truth” differs from the narrative voice in Jane Austen, this story provided me with what was really the first opportunity I’d had in a story to place emphasis on narrative voice and tone, and to experiment with it some. Rather than the external focus of how to negotiate characters across a page physically and psychologically, “Truth” focuses more on the internal negotiation of a character’s psychological progress.

As a unit, the stories’ focus lies much more along a thematic line. By the time I had written “Fidelity” and was developing ideas for my next story, the pattern of a thematic focus on relationships had arisen, with special attention to marriages. When considered further after the completion of all four stories, I recognized in the collection the absence of marriages rather than the presence of marriages. Those marriages that are present in the stories are by no means healthy or ideal marriages. From this, in comparison to Jane Austen, whose characters always get to the wedding, but are not shown much past that, I saw in my story collection a response to the idea that comedies are defined by the fact that they end with a wedding. This idea combined the aspect of humor with the theme of marriage and my stories represent a perversion of this idea. Instead of writing comedies (as defined by the conclusion in matrimony) that end in marriage, my stories explore what it means to write a comedy without the wedding. While at the same time being a product of my analysis of Jane Austen’s work, my collection more closely displays what can be seen as a response to Austen’s novels when approached from the opposite perspective. In other words, if Jane Austen writes about a relationship to the point of its culmination in marriage, my work presents either a removal of that ultimate conclusion or the destruction of it following the wedding.
Additionally, on top of simply being placed in a collection together, the stories are more closely linked by the presence of what I call transition characters. On the most basic level, this means that a character from the previous story appears in the next. Alternately, depending on the story, this can mean that a minor character from one story becomes the main character of the next or that the main character from one story becomes a minor character in the next. In following this pattern, I found that my story collection functioned as a stronger and more cohesive unit. The advantage of this was that it also provided the potential for the collection to act not only as a representation of the nature of relationships but also as a commentary on the nature of relationships. By tying the stories together, their subject matter becomes more meshed, inextricably linked, and each story functions as a commentary on its own moment in time while doubling as a commentary on the story preceding it.
Conclusion

As a collection, these stories follow the trajectory of Jane Austen’s views on marriage. Though both my stories and hers reflect the deterioration of the nature of relationships, my stories do this in a completely different way. The stories progress along a line of ever-increasing relationship difficulties. With each progression in the collection of short stories, the couples are wrenched further and further apart, moving from the functional, if slightly eccentric, relationship between Mel and Charles in “Promises unBroken” to the nonexistent relationship between Madison and Billy in “Truth.” Although the project’s outcome has been almost entirely different from its original goal, the resulting project represents a substantial amount of work, and despite the numerous changes made over the course of the project, the outcome illustrates the creative writing process: inspiration and influence, write, revise, edit, repeat.
Works Cited


Promises unBroken

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today, in the sight of God, to unite Charles and Melanie in holy matrimony. Marriage was created by God as a covenant between...”

As the pastor continued to drone on about covenants and commitment and the wondrous and difficult aspects of marriage, I stood there in my pearl white dress with creamy lace that made me look more like a fluffy pastry than a bride, trying to focus on his words, and I began to feel nauseous. The pastor’s words droned on. Camera flashes punctuated my every movement.

The day I told my mother we were engaged, she’d exclaimed, “I’m so glad I set you up with him. I just knew he would be the one!” and now her voice resounded in my ears, sounding like thunder in a cavern. I shut my eyes tightly and looked down, resisting the urge to shake my head to stifle my mother’s voice. My car was just outside the church, waiting for the two of us after the reception. It was most likely decorated with “Just Married” and some obnoxious streamers, but the keys were probably still in the ignition. My brother had driven it to the church today, and just this once, I’d forgive him for leaving the keys in the car.

I jumped, realizing that Charles was squeezing on my hand to get my attention. I came back to my senses soon enough to catch the smile that heralded his proud and declarative “I do.”

“Do you, Melanie, take Charles to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health...” I scrutinized Charles’ face as he watched the pastor, beaming.

Charles turned to look at me, waiting for me to answer in the affirmative. As I stood there with my mouth half open, speechless, Charles squeezed my hand again. He glanced at the hoard of guests my mother had invited and looked back at me. I choked out “I can’t do this.” I tugged my hand from his, hiked as much of my dress up around my calves as I could, and tore down the
steps and then the aisle as fast as the stiletto heels my sister had chosen for me would allow. As I reached the first pew, I saw my parents stand to watch my escape.

I made it to my car, and yanked open the unlocked doors, throwing out balloons the best man had stuffed into the car. Thankfully, my brother had in fact left the keys in the ignition, apparently assuming that no one would steal a car from a church parking lot. I pulled off the cathedral-length veil that my mother had attached to my hair earlier, wincing as the comb got tangled in my perfectly arranged brown curls, then wadding and stuffing and wadding and stuffing it over the driver’s seat headrest. I climbed in the car, grumbling some unintelligible choice words, reminded of my irritation at the five thousand pounds of lace, ruffles, and other poof my mother had paid something like seven thousand dollars for, not to mention the four hundred fifty dollars she’d spent on the veil. At least no one could say we hadn’t gotten the amount of material she’d paid for. I still would have preferred the simple (and much less expensive) lace dress with no train and no veil.

I stuffed my dress in around my feet as much as I could and pulled on the car door to shut it. The door closed, but didn’t stay shut. The remaining two to three feet of ivory satin train that still hung outside had stopped the door just short of latching. I shoved more of my dress in the car, but with each shove, twice as much dress seemed to escape. I finally yanked on the door again out of frustration, and apparently enough material had miraculously gotten out of the way for the door to latch, but without the satisfying thunk the door usually made. I turned the key and listened to the engine sputter to life. I needed to get those damn stiletto heels off so I could actually drive. I bent and started fumbling with the straps of my heels, my face mashed into the steering wheel. The car jumped and stalled when I mistakenly took my foot off the clutch.
Through the passenger-side car window, I saw Charles burst through one of the church’s double doors. He paused at the top of the church stairs to locate me before hurrying down them.

Charles reached the car and pulled open the passenger door, stepping aside to avoid the cascading balloons before bending to look in at me. He watched for a minute as I continued to attempt the Guinness-Book-of-World-Records feat of getting my heels off. “Playing Cinderella again, Mel?” I chucked my glittering high heels at his head. One smacked against the dashboard and fell to the passenger side floorboard, popping a balloon as it landed, while the other thumped against the car door and fell out of the car and onto the parking lot. I yanked on my seatbelt to pull it across me. Charles tossed out the rest of the balloons that were in his way, some bouncing off his leg and back into the car for him to throw out again, then started to fold all 6 feet and 3 inches of himself into my tiny car, shaking his head.

“What do you think you’re doing, Chuck?” I asked, stopping in the middle of my struggle with the seatbelt when I noticed what he was doing.

“I’m getting in the car, and you know I hate being called Chuck.”

“Well, I hate you,” I said.

“And I hate you, too,” he responded with a grin.

I narrowed my hazel eyes at him, but he stared right back. I gave up on the seatbelt and said, “Are you getting in or not? We can’t just sit here all day.”

He rolled his eyes and climbed the rest of the way in as I restarted the car, shaking with adrenaline. He closed the car door with far fewer problems than I’d had. I revved the engine as he put on his seat belt. I tore out of the parking lot, glancing in the rearview mirror to see three dozen purple and white balloons bouncing and rolling on the ground, and my mangled shoe lying
in the middle of them. I smirked with satisfaction over the shoe’s destruction and looked back at
the road, speeding up. I needed to put some distance between us and all the noxious flowers,
purple bows, and bewildered guests.

“Sooo… What happened after I ran out?” I asked Charles. He sat, seeming satisfied to
watch the road, in his typical nonchalant manner. I shifted to fourth gear, grinding the gears and
forcing the car to convulse. My feet were suffocating in cloth.

“You know there’s a stop sign right there?” Charles asked. I slammed on the brakes,
sending the car into more convulsions and sudden death when my left foot couldn’t find the
clutch in time. Charles was gripping the door handle white-knuckled. I restarted the car, and
attempted to inch forward to make sure no one was coming through the intersection, but I let the
clutch out too far and the car jerked to a stop, sputtering as the engine clunked and died again.

“Maybe I should drive,” Charles suggested.

“I can drive, Charles!” I shouted defensively.

“I know you can, Mel, but not in that dress,” he answered in a patronizing tone.

“Fine. You drive, I’ll sit in the back,” I said, giving him a haughty look followed by
sticking my tongue out. The door popped open easily as my dress preceded me out the door.

“Mel! Get out of the middle of the road! Mel! You can’t just leave a car sitting in the road
at a stop sign!”

“Too late! You better hurry up, Chuck. The nonexistent people lining up behind us are
getting impatient.” I pulled open the driver’s side back door and shoved my massive veil at
Charles, who got a face-full of lace as he tried to unbuckle his seatbelt. As I began tossing
balloons out of the backseat, Charles pulled the rest of my veil into the passenger seat. When I’d
gotten out as many as I could reach, I climbed headfirst into the backseat. My left foot came
down on my hem as I stepped onto the floorboards, and I pitched forward, catching myself on
the center console and backseat. I twisted until I was facing up, popping a few of the remaining
balloons while I was at it, but now I was wedged between the front and back seats. I kicked
against my dress and the floor until I had maneuvered myself into a position where I could grab
the passenger-side headrest, and finally managed to pull myself out from between the seats. Once
I was up onto the backseat, I scooted to the right seat, dragging the rest of my train into the car.
Charles, who had made it out and around the car in time to watch most of this spectacle, stuffed
the last bit of my train through the door and closed it, then jumped in the driver’s seat and
restarted the car. I refused to even bother with trying to put my seatbelt on this time.

“So, really. What happened when I left?” I asked again, still breathing hard from the
effort of extracting myself from between the seats.

“I didn’t see a whole lot,” he answered. “My dad got up and came to talk to me and my
mom just sat there crying. Your parents’ faces were pretty priceless when I finally got away from
my dad and came after you. I’m not sure what the rest of the guests were doing. There was a lot
of talking.”

“What about Shawna?” I asked.

“She started yelling at me. What did you do? Did you cheat on her?” Charles mimicked.

“She’s very protective of you,” he added.

“She’s my sister...” I answered, and fell silent.

I shifted in my seat, crossing my arms over the bodice of my dress, to look out the
window at the fields passing by at 50 miles per hour. My hair crunched as I leaned my head
against the headrest.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“I don’t really know. Where do you want to go?” Charles replied, adjusting the rearview mirror to see me.

“Home, I guess?” I answered. Charles pulled off to the side of the road, waiting for the car behind us to pass, and then made a U-turn.

“Music?” he asked.

“97.9?”

“Deal,” he said, turning the radio on, and then pushing the third preset button. He immediately started drumming on the steering wheel and nodding his head in time with the beat. I grinned. He glanced in the mirror, and started getting his shoulders into it when he saw my face. Twenty seconds later he was belting “Man, I Feel Like a Woman” at the top of his lungs, complete with Shania’s high-pitched hoots, and I had collapsed in the backseat, struggling to breathe from laughing so hard while still constricted by my corseted bodice. When the song ended, Charles glanced at me in the rearview mirror again, and turned the radio down. I gradually stopped laughing. HIC! Crap. I noticed Charles’s cheek muscles twitch in response to my hiccup.

He glanced at me over his shoulder to give me a smile that was not nearly as exuberant as the one he’d been wearing moments before. I hiccuped again, and Charles turned back to watch the road, carefully avoiding looking in the rearview mirror. He cleared his throat, and asked, “Why’d you leave, Mel?”

“I guess I just hic panicked a little hic bit…” I said, the hiccups coming faster.
“You didn’t do that because you panicked. I’ve seen you panic, and that wasn’t you panicking,” he replied.

“Do we have to have this conversation when I have the hiccups?” I took a deep breath and held it in.

Charles snorted a laugh at my last hiccup before getting serious again. “I know you didn’t run out because you changed your mind about marrying me, but you still left me standing there at the altar like a dolt. You don’t get to do that and not give me an explanation for it.” Charles’s brow furrowed. I let the breath go.

“I know. Hic!” Breathe in, and hold. Charles watched the road ahead. Twenty seconds later, I let the breath go. “It wasn’t us. It wasn’t our wedding. It was everyone’s except ours. All I could hear was Mom going ‘I told you so’ and there were so many people. I just had to get out of there.” I wiggled my engagement ring off my finger and looked at it. “Should I keep this or not?” I asked, looking up.

Charles glanced in the mirror, and reached his right arm back between the seats. I inched forward to put my left hand in his and he pulled my hand forward, turning his head to kiss it. “You ran out on the wedding, not the marriage,” he said. “If you didn’t want to marry me at all, you would’ve chucked the ring at me before you left, and you probably wouldn’t have let me get in the car,” he winked at me in the rearview mirror. I grinned and tried to lean back, but Charles wouldn’t let go of my hand.

“Seriously, I’d love to sit here like this, but I kind of can’t breathe.” He chuckled and released my hand. I scooted back in my seat and straightened up, lengthening out my spine so the dress’s bodice wouldn’t feel as constricting.
Charles downshifted, slowed to a stop and put the car in reverse, expertly backing the car into the gravel driveway. He turned the car off, and jumped out. He opened my door with an exaggerated hop, step, and bow, holding out his hand. “Your Highness,” he said. I chose to stick my tongue out at him and proceeded to stubbornly try to extricate myself from the car without his help. Instead, I managed to get my right ankle tangled in the yards of tulle swarming around my legs, and in the process of untangling my feet, I decided I should climb out feet-first instead of headfirst this time. I slid across the seat, sticking my feet out the door and bracing my hands on the doorframe and door to pull myself forward and out. I felt my feet hit the ground as I stood and I winced, my bare feet unhappy to be standing on sharp gravel.

I lifted one of my feet to shift my weight, but it got lost in the petticoats of my dress and landed on the hem of my dress coming down. I had already started shifting on my other foot, and I lost my balance, pitching to the side into Charles, who caught me, but lost his balanced too, and both of us fell to the ground. Charles let out an “Oof!” as I landed on his chest. After a moment and with some effort, Charles grunted, “I’m happy to pretend I’m secret service or James Bond if that’s what you want, but I’d really rather you not lie on my chest. If I can’t breathe, I can’t pretend to save you...”

“Shut up, Charles!” I said as I rolled off of him and flopped onto my back. We looked over at each other and started laughing. After a moment, when our laughter began to dissipate, I looked at Charles again and said, “This is uncomfortable...” I still had no desire to fight my dress to be able to sit up, let alone stand up, though.

“It’s gravel,” Charles groaned as he sat up. He got to his feet, dusted his pants off, and held out both of his hands to me this time. Reluctantly, I let him help me to my feet.
“Ugh! I need to get this thing off, off, off,” I said, gathering as much of the skirt in my arms as I could, then gingerly and unstably tiptoeing my way across the gravel until I made it to the sidewalk to my house. Charles scrambled to shut the car door, and caught up with me.

“You want some help with that?” he asked, grabbing my waist and snaking his arms around me, placing his grinning face right next to mine.

“Oh! geeze! stop that!” I laughed as I squirmed to extricate myself from this newest constriction. He planted an exaggerated kiss on my cheek and let me push him away with my hands. I regathered my dress, stuck my tongue out at him, and then raced up the walk, leaving him there laughing. When I made it to the front door, I opened the screen door and then thumped my head against the door with a laugh. “Charles?” I called, turning to see him yanking my veil through the driver’s side front door of the car, looking like a magician performing a never-ending handkerchief trick.

“Yeah?” he answered, turning to face me with an armful of lace.

“I need the keys. I can’t get in the house,” I responded. Charles laughed and jogged up the sidewalk to toss me the keys, then returned to the car to get my mangled veil. I unlocked and opened the front door, placing the keys on the stand next to the door and leaving the door open for Charles.

I managed to climb the staircase, and made it to my bedroom, with its half-empty closets waiting for Charles’s clothes to be unpacked, but once there, I realized that I had forgotten that my dress had buttons all the way down the back. Buttons I couldn’t reach. I turned, knocking a lamp over in the process, and when I finally made it back downstairs, I could see Charles sitting on the porch stairs. He jumped and looked back at me when the screen door creaked as I opened
it to poke my head out. He raised his eyebrows in question. I screwed up my face at him, and said, “I need help...”

Charles laughed, and followed me back inside to the foyer to unbutton the dress, shutting the front door behind him. I turned around and pulled my now limp curls over my shoulder to make sure they wouldn’t be in his way. After a moment, Charles began the tedious task of popping each tiny cloth button out of its loop. We stood in silence until he got to the eighth or ninth button and paused. I glanced over my shoulder to see him staring at the buttons.

“Charles?” I ventured.

“Yeah,” he said, seeming to snap out of a trance. “Sorry. I just-- This wasn’t really how this was supposed to go.”

“Right,” I responded with an intake of breath. I hadn’t thought about that. I glanced away from him only to see my veil piled in the corner.

I looked forward again quickly, closing my eyes as Charles started unbuttoning again, his fingers unaccustomed to dealing with such tiny buttons. I could feel his shaking hands brushing against the silk of my dress and then pressing into my skin as he tried various ways of unbuttoning the dress. I could tell he was trying to be clinical, but the delicate work was making it difficult. Charles cleared his throat behind me and his hair brushed against my back as he bent over to look more closely at the button he was working on. As his fingers reached the small of my back, I couldn’t remember how many more buttons were left. The veins in my throat drummed out my heartbeat as I stared up at the ceiling, wishing that my mother hadn’t been so intent on the dress having buttons detailing the back all the way down to below my waist.

I stretched my fingers, then balled them into fists again, gripping and twisting the
material of my skirt. Charles shuffled his feet, his shoes scuffing against the floor and making my skirt rustle. A few moments later, I felt him straighten back up behind me and realized that I could breathe more easily. I closed my eyes and drew in as much as air as I could before letting the breath go and turning around to face Charles, holding the bodice of my dress to my chest. I met his eyes, bluer and more intense than usual, and glanced to the side quickly, still feeling slightly lightheaded. “You--” my voice failed and I cleared it to try again. “You should turn around.”

“Oh! Yeah!” he jumped, resuming natural movement, and turning around to stare at the wall. I shimmied out of the dress, dropping it to the floor and quickly grabbing a pair of jeans, a bra, and a pink cotton blouse from the laundry basket that I’d thankfully neglected to carry back upstairs in the midst of all the wedding fuss. I hooked the bra swiftly and then pulled the jeans halfway on before noticing that I was still wearing my garter. I shoved it down to my calf and pulled the jeans up over it.

“So what do we do now?” Charles asked, still facing away from me, as I put my blouse on and buttoned it up the front.

“Uh--” I grunted as I felt for the garter up my pant leg and then hopped on one foot to pull it off. Charles turned his head in response to the noise and movement, and I quickly shoved the garter down inside the laundry basket underneath some shirts.

“What are you doing?” Charles asked as I straightened.

“Nothing. Lost my balance. I’m starving. We missed out on eating at the reception,” I said as I walked toward the kitchen. “You want a sandwich? I think all I have is peanut butter and jelly.”
“Yeah. Wait-- what?”

“I got rid of anything perishable...” I answered.

“The honeymoon,” Charles said as he stopped in the hallway.

“Yeah,” I said, “I figured we’d go to the store when we got back.” I shrugged and headed towards the kitchen again, and Charles followed.

As I got the bread out of the freezer, Charles pulled two plates out of the cabinet. “You realize your parents spent thousands of dollars on this wedding right?” Charles asked as he set the plates on the table and moved to the refrigerator for the peanut butter and jelly.

“I know. But I didn’t ask them to,” I replied, pausing as I pulled glasses out of another cabinet. I glanced at him as I set them on the table. Charles looked back at me from across the table as he set down the peanut butter and jelly. After a few seconds, he looked away and became intent on opening the peanut butter as I turned to grab a knife. I jumped and dropped the butter-knife I had just pulled from a drawer when I heard sudden pounding on the front door. Charles and I looked at each other and headed back to the foyer quietly.

“Mel? Are you in there? Are you okay?” came a voice from the other side of the door. It was my sister Shawna. Charles winced.

“Mel! You get your butt out here right now! We know you’re in there.” And that would be my mother. My father would be outside, too, then.

Charles moved forward to the door and reached out to throw the deadbolt. With the click of the lock my mother pounded harder. “Mel! You open this door right now, young lady!”

Charles moved back to me and whispered, “So, your parents are furious...”

“Really?” I answered sarcastically at the same volume.
“What if we got married today anyway?” Charles asked.

“WHAT?!” I responded, more loudly that I had intended, rousing more pounding on the front door.

Charles pulled out a folded piece of paper out of his inside jacket pocket. “I grabbed the marriage license on my way out. It was sitting near the altar and no one was paying attention to me when you were on your way out. I grabbed it before my dad caught me.”

“You... You’re serious,” I stated, my mouth slightly ajar.

“We can go. We can get married like we wanted to, not how our parents wanted. We can do it because we want to without anyone else to pressure us. Let’s go. Please?” Charles said, bending slightly to look into my eyes. He smiled, half coaxing, half begging me to go with him.

“My family is on the porch...”

“We’ll go out the back. Just go with me,” he said, placing the license back in his pocket and grabbing my hands, holding them in his. I stared at him, considering it.

“They are going to kill us,” I said.

“I’m willing to risk it,” Charles said, his face lighting up as his smile grew wider. I smiled in response, and then jumped at renewed pounding on the door. Charles tiptoed to the table by the door, picking up the car keys from where I’d left them, grabbed my hand and pulled me down the hall into the kitchen. “Leave it, Mel,” Charles said when I pointed to the bread, peanut butter, and jelly we’d left sitting on the table. He opened the backdoor, scooting me through first, following, and then locking the door behind him.

“How responsible of you,” I remarked teasingly. Charles just grinned and grabbed my hand again, pulling me down the back-porch steps and around the corner of the house, slowing
and crouching when we reached the intersection of house and porch. I clapped my hand over my mouth to muffle my giggling. There was too much adrenaline coursing through my system again.

Charles looked at me and smiled, then mouthed, “Three... Two... One!” and we took off running, Charles pulling me along. When we reached the car, Charles yanked open the passenger side car door, the noise drawing my mother’s attention, pushed me towards it, and then attempted a Dukes of Hazzard hood slide. I laughed aloud as he rolled off the front of the hood, smacked onto the gravel driveway, then scrambled to get up and dust himself off with a wince. The conspiratorial grin he threw me as he ran the rest of the way around the car made me laugh harder and I jumped in the car with him, hearing my mother yell, “Melanie Dawn Schwartz, you get back here!” as I pulled the door shut behind me.

The engine sputtered to life again and Charles sped down the driveway, turning the car onto the road as my mother hurried down the stairs in her lavender mother-of-the-bride dress. I looked back to see my father standing at the railing, laughing, as Charles pulled away from the house, tires spinning on the gravel road when he pressed the gas. As I turned back to face forward and the car careened down the road, Charles looked over at me and then in the rearview mirror. I glanced back one more time before the house was out of sight, and my mother and sister were both standing at the end of our driveway. Charles grinned as he asked, “Isn’t two getaways in one day a new record for us?”
Fidelity

Shawna climbed the stairs to the porch, dragging the suitcase she’d been living out of for two weeks up the steps one by one. The vein in her forehead pounded with each lift from the effort she had to exert. When she made it to the top of the stairs, she paused on the porch for a breath, and then rolled the suitcase to the door, propping open the screen door with her foot as she dug through her purse. Once she had extracted her keys, she opened the front door to the house, and rolled her suitcase inside, jerking it a bit to get it over the threshold as a light breeze blew a few dead leaves skittering through the doorway after her.

Leaving her suitcase standing just inside the door and dropping her purse on top of it, Shawna noticed her husband’s briefcase sitting at the base of the stairwell. “Cal?” she called out. “Cal? I’m home!” she said, pulling off her driving gloves and unzipping her jacket.

“Mel and Charles said to tell you hi,” she said, still talking loudly as she shrugged her jacket off. “She’s doing wonderful. Her stomach is so huge, but she’s still getting around pretty well. She keeps wanting pickles and nacho cheese though. Poor Charles ran to the store at three in the morning for her at least five times while I was there.” Shawna draped her jacket over the top of her suitcase and purse, and headed down the hall toward the living room, where Cal usually watched sports whenever he got home from work. “Anyway,” she continued at the same volume, “the nursery is adorable - they decided to decorate with hippos, and you wouldn’t think that would be cute but it really is.” Shawna grabbed the doorframe and swung herself half into the room with a smile. She paused, let go of the doorframe, and straightened up, her eyes narrowing slightly. Cal wasn’t there. “Cal?” she called again, looking around and then wandering back up the hallway.
When she reached her suitcase, she hung her purse and jacket on the coat rack, and rolled the suitcase to the base of the stairs. She gripped the suitcase’s handle and stepped sideways onto the first stair, pulling the suitcase onto the stair with her. As she looked behind her to take another step up, she noticed that a jacket lay crumpled on the stairs above her and a tie a few steps further up. She nudged the suitcase off the stair with her foot, and she turned to climb the stairs again, taking them two at a time.

“Cal, where are you?” she called, pausing at the top of the stairs and looking towards the bedroom. She heard the bed springs creak. Shawna grinned and hurried down the hall. She pushed the door open, and said, “Cal, honey, I’m home,” but her voice faltered and fell on the last syllable as she saw the sheets wadded at the foot of the bed and the comforter on the floor. Looking to her left, Shawna saw Cal pulling his jeans on over the boxer-briefs he’d managed to put on backwards. His belt was still threaded through the jean’s belt loops. Shawna took a few more halting steps into the room and looked around the corner to the right.

A black-haired woman stood in the corner, tying the belt of a faded silk robe around her hourglass waist. Shawna blanched, and said, “What are you doing? That’s my robe!” She turned back to face Cal and pointed at the woman behind her, saying, “She’s wearing my robe, Cal! My sister gave me that! Oh god!” Shawna took a shaky breath as she pinched the bridge of her nose and leaned against the wall.

“Shawna, I-” Cal started, shrugging on a shirt and moving towards her, but Shawna shook her head and held up her other hand to him. Standing up, she walked across the room as Cal stood silently. Shawna picked up their wedding picture from the dresser, looked at Cal, and then tossed it on the bed without waiting to see it land. She was moving past him towards the
door, when he reached out and touched her arm. “Shawna...” She jerked her arm away from his touch, and punched out at his chest, her fists making solid thumps as she connected. Cal moved towards her, wrapping his arms around her and trapping her arms between their chests. Shawna began to cry.

The woman in the corner of the room moved forward, pulling the robe down a little lower on her thighs, and said, “I’m just gonna grab my things and you know, go...”

“You!” Shawna snarled as she twirled around with tears still coating her cheeks, and pointed her finger at the woman, who jumped back slightly at being addressed. “How dare you! That’s my robe! My bed. My husband!” Shawna sputtered some incoherent sounds.

“Babe, it’s not her fault,” Cal said as placed his hands over her shoulders.

Shawna spun, throwing off his hands, and shouted, “You’re hardly in a position to be defending her! You’re in just as much trouble as she is.”

“Come on! I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I just can’t-- I thought-- You-- Out of your mind--,” Shawna said as she put her hands to her forehead. Cal stepped closer to her, and gripped her upper arms lightly.

“Oh, get off!” Shawna said as she shoved Cal backwards with her right arm. Cal stumbled back a few steps, and watched as Shawna hurried out of the room, holding her hand to her mouth.

Cal recovered his balance and moved toward the door to go after Shawna as she rushed down the stairs, but hands grabbed his bicep before he’d even made it halfway to the door. He turned and said, “Let go of me, Mariel,” as he tugged his arm out of her grasp easily.

The woman stepped back, her eyebrows jumping up a notch. She crossed her arms over
her chest and popped her hip as she said, “Well, that’s not what you wanted me to do ten minutes ago.”

Cal rolled his eyes and said, “Just wait here, alright? I’ll sort everything out,” before rushing from the room to follow Shawna downstairs. Cal yanked on the door to close it behind him, but Mariel jumped forward, grabbing it before it could slam, and followed close on his heels.

“Cal! You can’t just leave me here!” Mariel hissed. Cal gestured with his arm for her to stay back, but heard her follow him to the head of the stairs anyway. “Cal!” she hissed again pausing at the top of the staircase. He hurried down the stairs away from her. Halfway down, Cal noticed his tie lying on the stairs and Mariel’s suit jacket just below it. Stooping as he passed the jacket, Cal flung it up the stairs at Mariel, who had just reached the landing. Just as Mariel grabbed the jacket out of the air, intending to continue following Cal, she heard Shawna utter a sound that could have rivaled the Confederate rebel yell in ferocity, and saw Cal duck right before a vase flew over his head and shattered against the wall behind him. Thinking better of her plan, Mariel quickly backtracked a few stairs to crouch by the stair railing above the landing as Cal hurried down the rest of the stairs.

“Shawna, stop!” Cal said as he held out his hands, palms facing her. “Don’t. Just... Put down the picture,” Cal implored as he moved towards her. Mariel crept down a step to see better, laying her jacket on the stairs beside her. She looked down to see Shawna gripping the frame of a picture she had pulled from the nearby end table.

“Why should I? It’s our wedding picture, but seeing as it doesn’t mean anything anymore, why shouldn’t I throw it?” Shawna shouted as she lobbed the picture frame at Cal’s head. Mariel
tensed and let out a small yelp as Cal dodged to the side, the wood frame clipping his arm before falling to the floor and splintering in two. Mariel mouthed the word “sorry” when she saw Cal glare up at her before quickly looking back to Shawna.

Mariel caught movement from the corner of her eye and looked down to the left in time to see Shawna move for another picture, but Cal noticed this as well and shouted, “Just stop! Listen to me!” She paused and looked at him, her hand still stretched towards the table.

“You were gone for two weeks...” he said. “Men have needs. I thought you got that!” Mariel winced and shook her head as she watched through the railings.

“Needs! Hah!” Shawna yelled as she snatched another picture frame from the table. “You always used to take care of those needs just fine on your own!” she shouted at him, gesturing with the picture frame. Mariel snorted, and clapped her hand over her mouth.

“And you used to tell me not to!” he shouted back. Mariel leaned forward as she saw Cal’s face redder and his arms flex as his hands tightened into fists.

“That’s your excuse?” Shawna yelled, her voice reaching a new octave. The hand holding the picture frame that Mariel had been waiting for Shawna to throw, dropped to her side.

“It’s not an excuse! You told me to - and I quote! - keep that porn out of this house,” Cal mimicked. Mariel’s eyes widened slightly as she shifted to see Shawna better through the stair railings.

“So making love to someone that’s not me - your wife! - sounded like an acceptable solution?” Shawna asked.

“See, that’s just—” he started.

“No! It’s not just anything! You’re insane! How could you think that’s better!” she yelled,
interrupting him.

“It is just! It’s just everything! We weren’t making love, we were just messing around! It was just for fun and it was just until you got back from Mel’s. It was just sex!” he shouted back at her. Mariel flinched.

“I can’t even-- I can’t believe...” Shawna said as she carelessly threw the picture frame back on the table. “If you think I am ever getting back in that bed you have got another thing coming,” she answered.

“You can’t mean that...” Cal said, taking a step forward and reaching towards her.

“Oh no, I definitely mean that. I am never going near that bed again.” Shawna said. “I just-- what on earth were you thinking, Cal? Why her? I have to know. Please,” Shawna said, her voice breaking. Mariel hugged her knees to her chest and looked away for a moment, then back down at them, resting her cheek on her bare knees.

“Shawna, it could have been anyone... You were gone so long, babe... I missed you. I would’ve done anything to stop missing you,” Cal answered.

“Don’t you mean anyone?” Shawna retorted. Cal looked down at the floor and then back at Shawna.

“I deserved that, but can’t we just forget about this?” he asked as Shawna rubbed her forehead. Moving forward, he reached out and gently pulled her into a hug, kissing the top of her head. Mariel looked away, unfolded herself, and plucked her jacket from the stairs as she crept back to the bedroom. She left the door cracked behind her as she entered the room, and hung her jacket over the doorknob.

Mariel tugged on the bottom of the robe she was wearing as she looked around the room...
from where she stood by the door. The bedroom was well-lit by the sun, especially compared to the hallway, but it was stuffy. Mariel walked across the room to open a window and let some of the brisk fall air in.

She glanced across the street and noticed an elderly couple sitting in a swing on their front porch. She paused for a moment and watched as the old man set down the mug he had been drinking from and pretended to yawn, sneaking his arm around his wife’s shoulders. The woman laughed and elbowed him, but scooted closer to her husband, kissing his cheek and then leaning her head on his shoulder. Mariel smiled slightly and shook her head, wondering how often they’d cheated on each other. She turned away from the window and began gathering her clothes from where Cal had tossed them. Her crimson blouse was draped over the arm of a chair, and her skirt lay crumpled in the middle of the floor.

Her underwear was a bit more difficult to locate, so Mariel dropped the clothes she had in her arms on the bed and knelt to look under it. When she didn’t see her underwear there, she picked up the sheets at the end of the bed and tossed them, flapping them in the air when they tangled. Her underwear dropped onto the bed. Mariel snatched them and as she pulled them on under the robe, she saw her bra across the room draped over a lamp. She snorted, mumbling quietly to herself, “How did we manage that one?” as she walked over to the lamp.

Undoing the robe’s belt, Mariel dropped the robe as she grabbed her bra, slipping it over her arms to her shoulders and latching the hooks in the back. She picked the robe up and placed it on the bed, arranging it neatly. She snatched her blouse from the other side of the bed, pulled it on, and buttoned it, then grabbed her skirt from the floor and stepped into it. Not bothering to tuck her blouse in, Mariel picked up her clutch from where she’d thrown it as Cal had pulled her
blouse off. She picked up her shoes, and then slid her jacket off the door knob and folded it over her arm. She opened the bedroom door and tiptoed into the hallway, creeping back to her spot on the stairs just above the landing. Cal and Shawna weren’t in the foyer anymore, but Mariel barely breathed as she tiptoed down the stairs, wincing and slowing down when the stairs creaked.

Glancing down, Mariel saw that the stairs just below her were littered with shards of glass, which were interspersed with a handful of brown, wilted flowers. She moved her bare foot to take the next step, and then, hesitating, pulled it back, trying to figure out how to safely navigate the glass. She considered climbing over the banister, but saw that there was still a three to four foot drop to the floor, which was guaranteed to result in a loud noise.

“I guess I could slide down,” she muttered and began situating her belongings so she would have at least one hand free. As she did so, her right shoe dropped from her fingers, landing on the staircase with a hollow thunk. Mariel stared down at it for a moment before huffing and bending to pick up the shimmery gold flat. She mumbled “idiot” under her breath and tipsily raised her right foot off the stair to slip on the shoe. Leaning against the wall, she lifted her left foot and slipped the other shoe on, then continued down the stairs, gripping the banister and wincing as the pieces of glass crunched slightly under the soles of her shoes.

The sound of voices floated from the back of the house and Mariel paused, stuffing her clutch between her knees momentarily so she could yank her suit jacket on. She grabbed her coat, which was hanging from the coatrack by the door, and paused to listen for footsteps. Hearing no sounds of movement, she opened the thick wooden door and slid through, opening the screen door as she went. She latched the front door behind her and closed the screen door lightly so that it didn’t smack the frame. She shivered as the chilly wind penetrated her suit
jacket easily, and she tugged her coat on.

Mariel moved down the porch stairs quickly, encouraged by the cold. When she reached the main sidewalk, she slowed and glanced back at the house. Turning her head forward again, she watched the wind scatter leaves over the half-raked yard of a neighboring house. A rake had been propped against the porch railing, and the yard abandoned to the dead leaves. A coffee mug sat on the porch by a swing, and Mariel realized it was the same house where she had seen the elderly couple sitting together. The wind picked up and a gust of cold air snatched at the folds of Mariel’s coat, forcing it to billow out around her. Grabbing the flaps of her coat and stuffing her clutch under her left arm, she buttoned her coat, flipped up its collar against the wind, and moved on as she pulled her clutch from beneath her arm.

Regretting that Cal had driven them to the house and not her, Mariel hugged her arms around herself against the cold, and walked on briskly, shuddering from the cold. The wind abated slightly, and Mariel paused to open her clutch, digging past the mints, the mauve lipstick, the extra condom, and the wad of money to find the small red pouch she was looking for. Pulling it out, she opened the pouch and dumped her rings into the palm of her left hand. She slipped one onto her right middle finger, and the other two back on her left ring finger. She poked the pouch back to the bottom of the clutch and closed it. Looking down at her left hand, she twisted her engagement ring to center the diamond on her finger. Bowing her head and hunching her shoulders, Mariel tucked her clutch under her arm, dug her hands into her coat pockets, and walked on quickly as the wind picked up again, tugging at her skirt and whipping her hair into her face.
“Pete-ayyy! Gimme a drink down here!”

“Hey Marcus. The usual?” Pete asked, glancing up from filling a mug of beer at the tap as Marcus plopped himself onto a barstool and loosened his necktie.

“Of course,” Marcus replied.

“Just checkin’,” Pete answered as he slid the beer to a man seated at the opposite end of the bar. The man slumped against the bar looking a bit worse for wear as he drew the beer towards himself. “You’re here a little early today, Marcus,” Pete said as he grabbed two glasses.

Marcus shrugged, “I thought I’d get home to Mariel a little early tonight. It’s our fifth anniversary today.” He grinned and glanced down at his hands, rubbing his right thumb against the palm of his left hand.

“Really? Nice! Congrats, bud,” Pete answered as he pulled out the scotch and poured some into one of the glasses he held.

“Congrats, Marcus,” slurred the man from the other end of the bar at the same time.

“I have this whole surprise planned out. I just hope she likes it...” Marcus said as he twisted the gold band on his left ring finger.

“I’m sure she will,” Pete replied. “This one’s on the house,” he added as he set the glass of scotch down on the bar in front of Marcus. He then busied himself filling the second glass with ice and poured scotch into it as well. Marcus picked up his drink, tipping his head back and swallowing the entirety of his drink in a few gulps. Pete set down the second glass of scotch and picked up Marcus’s empty glass.

This drink Marcus picked up and swirled in a circular pattern, but only stared at it,
wringling his brow slightly. He watched the ice cubes clink together and against the sides of the
glass. Pete had just begun wiping down the bar when they heard the door open.

A gust of cold air heralded the arrival of someone buried beneath a coat, a scarf, and a
hat. Marcus turned his head towards the door as the figure stomped and dusted the light pattern
of snow from its shoulders. The figure pulled off the purple gloves and the purple hat. A mane of
curly red hair spilled out as the person began unwinding a matching purple scarf, revealing a
woman’s delicate facial features.

Marcus turned his head back around to stare at his drink again when she paused to look
around the barroom in the middle of shrugging off her coat. The woman folded it over her arm
and surveyed the room as if looking for someone. When she didn’t find them, she seated herself
in a booth and rubbed the base of her palm against the window to peer out through the fog that
had condensed there.

Pete came out from behind the bar to go take her order, pausing by Marcus to murmur,
“She’s hot.” Marcus glanced over his shoulder again and nodded.

“Very,” he replied and then looked back at Pete. “Don’t tell Mariel I said that...”

“She’s going to kill you,” Pete grinned, turning to face Marcus.

“Not if you keep your trap shut,” Marcus stated.

Pete laughed as he turned and ran straight into the woman, who had left her booth and
approached the bar during their conversation. He grabbed her arms to steady her, but quickly
released her. “I’m so sorry! Are you okay?” Pete asked.

“I’m good. Can I get a glass of merlot?” she asked.

“Sure thing,” Pete hurried back behind the bar, pulling down a wine glass and picking up
the bottle of merlot from the counter. The woman climbed onto the stool to Marcus’s right and leaned on her elbow, propping her chin on her fist as she looked at him. Setting the wine glass on the bar in front of the woman, Pete uncorked the bottle, and began pouring. He placed the bottle back on the counter when he finished.

“Do you believe in love at first sight?” the woman asked, tilting her head slightly.

Marcus, who had just taken a sip of his scotch, choked and some scotch dribbled down his chin.

“Sorry?” Marcus asked, recovering himself as the woman picked up her wine glass.

“Do you believe in love at first sight?” she repeated, taking a sip of wine.

“I’m married,” Marcus blurted.

“I almost made that mistake once,” she answered, uncurling her index finger from around the glass to point at Marcus in acknowledgement, her wine glass tilting slightly towards him in the process. She added, “It ended badly,” as she redirected her gaze to Pete and took another sip of wine. “What about you?” she asked.

“That whole concept of love at first sight seems pretty crazy to me,” Pete replied.

“Ever been married then?” she said.

“That’s as likely as a pig piloting a plane,” Marcus snorted.

“That would be Marcus’s way of saying I’m perpetually single,” Pete replied with a shrug and a half-smile. “Hi, I’m Pete and I like taking long walks on the beach,” he continued in a smooth, slightly higher pitched and lilting voice.

“I hate those dating ads, too!” she exclaimed. “I’m Ameline, and I like candlelit dinners and taking bubble baths,” the woman added in a mimicking tone, dramatically placing her right palm over her chest as she spoke. They dissolved into laughter as Marcus rolled his eyes.
“I have candles and food! Will you marry me?” the drunk man at the end of the bar called loudly, over their laughter.

“Shut up, Wade!” Pete responded dismissively.

“Gotta have something in common if you’re gonna get married,” Marcus inserted. Pete rolled his eyes at Marcus and turned his attention back to Ameline as she began speaking again.

“My friend just got engaged,” Ameline said, taking a sip of wine, “She’s known the guy a total of two weeks or something ridiculous like that.”

“I want to marry you and it hasn’t even been two hours,” Wade piped up from the opposite end of the bar.

“Shut up, Wade!” Marcus groaned automatically.

“Anyway,” Ameline continued, “she says it’s love at first site, which I find ridiculous, but she’s meeting me here because apparently I have to meet her new fiancé.”

“Shouldn’t you be happy for her?” Marcus asked. “Marriage is great. You get to wake up next to the same person every day for the rest of your life. It’s comforting.”

“It’s boring. And pointless. You can do that without marrying a person,” Ameline exclaimed. “Plus, no lawyers have to be involved when you inevitably want out,” she added, her wrist rotating outward as she spoke, her wine sloshing in the glass she held.

“My parents have been going strong for thirty-five years,” Pete inserted as he began wiping down the bar again for lack of anything else to do.

“They’ve almost called it quits any number of times. I’d guarantee it,” Ameline replied, and turned to Marcus. “You’re married. Haven’t you wanted out, at least once?”

“It’s our fifth anniversary today, and we’ve never been happier,” Marcus answered.
“I’d say that you being in a bar and not at home with your wife on your anniversary, in the middle of a blizzard no less, is more of an answer than that was,” Ameline commented.

“I don’t smother her, and she doesn’t smother me. Besides, it’s hardly a blizzard out there,” Marcus replied.

“Weather Channel said ten to twelve inches overnight,” Pete inserted.

“I hate shovels,” Wade posited as Marcus pulled out his cell phone to check for missed calls or texts, and then set his phone next to his drink on the bar. “Useless things,” Wade continued, “I can never get them to work right. I pick the snow up,” he continued, now miming his words, his speech progressively deteriorating into a mumble, “and I put it over there, and then I always hafta move it again. It jus’ ne’er goes away...”

The conversation lulled as Wade continued to mumble incoherently and gesture to himself in the background.

“What if two people truly believe they’re meant to be together?” Pete asked.

“Then they’re just plain naïve,” Ameline answered with a shrug.

The door to the bar opened, and a burst of wind and snow slammed the door against the wall. The taller of the two people that had entered jumped after the door and pushed it closed, fighting against the growing snow storm outside. The two people unzipped their coats and pulled off gloves and scarves to reveal a man and a woman who hurried towards Ameline, the woman pulling the man behind her. As Ameline hopped down from her stool, the woman squealed and dropped the man’s hand to spread her arms with a smile that almost matched her arms in breadth. The woman enveloped Ameline in a hug, swaying side to side and practically jumping up and down.
“Okay, okay, yes, I’m excited to see you, too, but can we stop jumping now?” Ameline asked, trying to keep her head above the second woman’s shoulder, but failing as the question became muffled by the woman’s coat. The woman finally released her, and reached behind her with her left hand to gesture for the man to come closer. He took her hand and she pulled him forward.

“This is Jeff,” she said, beaming.

“Hi, Jeff. Nice to meet you,” Ameline said politely, then glanced around. “Madison, this is Marcus, Pete, and that’s Wade,” she said, pointing to each of them respectively. Marcus and Pete responded with a nod, but Wade slid off of his barstool and tottered towards them, pausing a few times in an attempt to keep the ground from tilting back and forth beneath him. When he reached them, he stopped abruptly, almost pitching forward, and held out his hand to Madison.

“I’m Wade,” he said as Madison shook his hand. “Ameline and I are getting hitched. She likes bubble baths.” He held his hand out to Jeff who shook it, as Wade said, “Us fiancés gotta stick together. Petey!” he shouted, “Another round, and one for my friend, Jeb.”

“It’s Jeff... I’m fine,” Jeff added, shaking his head and waving Pete away. Wade collected the beer Pete handed to him and wandered back down to his stool, beer sloshing over his fingers and dripping to the floor.

“I mean, he’s not that bad looking... The drunkenness might be a problem, but...” Madison said with a grin.

“Shut up, Madison!” Amy laughed, pulling Madison closer to the bar and sitting back down on her stool. Madison joined her and sat down on the empty stool next to hers. Jeff moved to stand behind Madison, placing his hand on the small of her back.
Madison nodded to Pete, asking, “Can I get a moscato, please?”

“Yes,” Pete acknowledged her question, and pulled open the bar refrigerator, grabbing the bottle of moscato.

As Pete placed a glass in front of Madison, Ameline prompted “Tell me again how long you’ve known each other?” Pete poured the moscato, then put the bottle away.

“Two weeks,” Madison answered, admiring the diamond on her left ring finger as Ameline reached for her wine glass. Jeff rubbed his hand up and down Madison’s back a few times, then rested it on her shoulder.

“That’s something, alright...” Ameline replied as she took a drink. “You haven’t even known each other for six months. You haven’t even known each other for one!” she exclaimed. Jeff opened his mouth as if to say something, but closed it again when Madison piped up.

“Amy, you just--” Madison started.

“Ameline,” she interrupted.

“What?” Madison asked.

“I go by Ameline now,” she replied, taking a sip of wine.

“Whatever. Jeff and I are getting married in two weeks. It’ll be one month to the day from when we met,” Madison continued. She picked up her moscato and took a drink as Jeff began stroking her back again.

“That’s what my wife and I did,” Marcus inserted. “Sorry. Not meaning to eavesdrop.”

Madison leaned forward around Ameline to look at Marcus. “You got married really soon after you met?” she asked. Ameline and Jeff turned towards Marcus as well.

“About two months after we met,” Marcus answered, nodding.
“And you’re still together?” Madison asked.

“Of course,” Marcus replied, taking a swig of his scotch.

“Not for much longer if you don’t get home,” Pete inserted as Madison leaned back with a satisfied and relieved smile that matched Jeff’s. “Mariel is going to be so pissed if you don’t make it home for your anniversary plans,” Pete added.

“Speaking of which, I should go call her and make sure she made it home alright,” Marcus said as he stood and moved to one of the corner tables.

“Madison!” Ameline said, snapping her fingers twice to get Madison’s attention back. “One month is not long enough. I don’t care what Marcus said, this is a bad idea,” Ameline stressed. “For all you know, he could be a serial killer!”

“You’re being ridiculous,” Madison replied, “If he was a serial killer, he probably would have, I don’t know, killed me by now!”

“For the record, I’m not, but I’m just gonna go sit over there... Let you guys talk this out...” Jeff inserted, gesturing to the right, towards Wade. “Lemme know when you guys want...” Jeff pointed down the bar again, and backed away, moving a few paces towards Wade. As he plopped himself onto a stool, Pete moved down the bar to take his drink order.

“It’s happening, okay? And I want you to be a bridesmaid,” Madison added as she took a sip of moscato.

“I know you. You’ll regret this later,” Ameline replied as Madison turned her head to look at Jeff, “and when you realize you’re not supposed to be together, the fallout is going to be on a nuclear level. No one falls in love that fast.”

“You did,” Madison said, turning back to look at Ameline.
“I did not!” Ameline exclaimed.

“You told me Liam was the one after your first date—” Madison responded.

“I said could be,” Ameline inserted.

“--and you were in love with him by the end of your second date. You told me so,” Madison finished.

“Fine. Maybe I did,” Ameline admitted with a scowl, “but look how that turned out.” She raised her glass to take a drink.

“You called the wedding off. I know. But I also know Liam still loves you, too,” Madison answered.

“What?” Ameline choked.

“I ran into him at the store yesterday. He asked about you. Apparently neither of you has had a date since you broke it off. It’s been three years,” Madison said.

“Your point?” Ameline asked, looking away.

“You called off the wedding because you were scared!” Madison exclaimed. “Not because you didn’t love him.”

“It was too soon. It wouldn’t have worked,” Ameline replied, “The same way it’s not going to work for you and Jeff.”

“I’m right here... I can still hear you,” Jeff piped up. Pete gave Jeff a sympathetic one-shouldered shrug as Marcus stood up from the corner table he’d been sitting at, staring at his phone blankly as he walked back to the bar. A look of concern crossed Pete’s face, and he walked down to Marcus, who was standing at the end of the bar. Pete leaned his folded arms against the bar, and began a quiet conversation with Marcus.
“I’d rather try than be alone like you,” Madison declared. “At least then I’ll know for sure instead of just waiting around and pining.”

“I do know,” Ameline responded vehemently. “I know that I had a momentary lapse of sanity and that we never would have survived our first year. And that would have been worse than pining,” she added, her throat紧绷。 “I also know that if you go through with this, and you marry Jeff, you’re going to hate yourself for it later.”

“Stop it. I’m not you, and Jeff isn’t Liam, and we’re going to be fine,” Madison answered, her voice climbing to a shout. Ameline’s her jaw muscles twitched. Wade and Jeff looked at Ameline and Madison at the same time Pete and Marcus did. “Either do something about it or get over it!” Madison added, sliding down from her stool. Ameline’s hands were forming into fists on the bar.

“How dare you--” she began, but Madison spoke over her.

“Always how this ends, isn’t it? Don’t mention Liam. Liam never happened! Amy doesn’t make mistakes. ” Madison ranted.

“Stop saying his name!” Ameline shouted, shooting off her stool to face Madison.

“He loves you!” Madison shouted into Ameline’s face.

“I know!” Ameline yelled back, her voice breaking. Madison simply stared at Ameline for a minute.

“Is it jus’ me, or does she seem upset?” Wade asked in a loud whisper.

“Shut up, Wade!” Madison shouted, and then pressed her hand to her forehead as she took a deep breath. She looked at Ameline, and in a quieter voice this time said, “Liam loves you, you love him, and yet you’re not together. Fix that.” Ameline bit her lower lip, folded her
arms over her chest and looked down.

“\text{It was nice to see you, Madison. Good luck planning the wedding,}” she said before sitting back down on her stool and picking up her wine.

Madison turned to Jeff and gestured for him to get up. When he neared her, she said, “\textbf{Go get the car.}” Jeff nodded and went to the door to put on his coat, gloves, and scarf. He hurried into the snow as Madison turned away from watching Ameline and moved to retrieve her own coat, gloves, and scarf.

The door opened again, and Jeff returned, a gust wind following him in. “\text{The snow plow went by. Our car is buried. You got a shovel?}” Jeff asked Pete, who nodded and disappeared into the back room to find it.

“How bad is it out there?” Marcus asked, still standing at the bar, his brow furrowed.

“The roads look pretty awful,” Jeff replied.

“\text{Mariel hasn’t been answering any of my calls. I should be going,}” Marcus said as he placed money on the bar next to his drink. “\text{I’ll see you, Petey!}” he called, and dragged on his coat.

“It’ll be fine, Marcus,” Pete said as he returned with the shovel Jeff had requested. Marcus nodded, looking no less worried, and exited, slamming the door shut against the wind as he went.

“\text{Please don’t make me shovel,}” Wade pleaded looking at Pete.

“No one is making you shovel,” Pete assured him. “\text{But I am closing up, so you’d better get your coat on,}” he added as he handed the shovel to Jeff. Madison followed Jeff into the snow to help clean off his car, and Wade stumbled off of his barstool, picked up his coat, and began a
valiant attempt at locating the armholes. Pete returned to the bar to help Wade get his coat on, settled his tab, and saw him to the door. Turning back, he noticed Ameline still sitting at the bar, staring at her now empty glass. Pete squeezed her shoulder as he passed her, and retrieved the merlot to refill her glass.
Madison stared at the mirror and smoothed her pencil dress over her stomach again. Maybe she could wait another week or two before telling her parents. She would have to buy new clothes. She turned to the side and examined her profile again, regretting her penchant for buying tight clothing that showed off her figure. Madison bent her back slightly and twisted to the side, watching for any swelling of her stomach, then straightened and sucked in her gut. There. The slight, unavoidable bump had surfaced.

Maybe no one would see it today, but her clothing was designed to make people look. Someone would eventually. Madison released the breath she’d been holding in with an audible huff, and moved to pick up her heels. She sat on the edge of her bed and then flopped back onto her bed with a groan and stared at the ceiling. The water stain over her bed was starting to look like Russia. The superintendent must not have done anything about the leaking shower upstairs yet. But she needed to get to work, and lying there was only wrinkling her dress. Madison sat up with a grunt and then stood, tugging on the skirt of her dress, which had risen and bunched around her thighs. Grabbing her purse and keys, Madison slammed the door to her apartment behind her.

Fifteen minutes later, Madison had boarded the subway and successfully situated herself between a heavyset older woman and the metal railings enclosing the seats, and placing her purse on her lap, she pulled out a paperback. When the woman sitting next to her got off three stops later, Madison scarcely glanced at the man who was taking the seat beside her, and returned to her book.

“What are you reading?” the man asked. Of course.
“Frankenstein,” Madison replied, tilting her book so he could see the cover but without looking over at him.

“Mary Shelley. Fantastic book - it’s one of my favorites,” the man said as she felt him turn towards her. Madison held her purse closer to her stomach, but continued in her attempt to read. “Maybe we could get lunch sometime, and talk about it?” he suggested.

“I’d love to, but I don’t eat,” Madison answered, throwing him a smirk as she shrugged. The man let out a full-bodied laugh that she wouldn’t have labeled unpleasant.

“Nice. That’s nice,” he said, the remnants of laughter still tinting his voice, “That’s a new one.” They’d reached the next stop and the intercom system began squawking unintelligible announcements as passengers got on and off. The noise momentarily eclipsed his attempts at engaging her in conversation, but a minute later, he spoke again. “What would you say to skydiving?”

Madison looked up and noticed the lingering stares of a few women near them. She looked at the man next to her more carefully, and she was startled by how intensely perfect his features were. “A more interesting suggestion, but still no,” she replied.

“Would you go out with me if I let you choose what we do?” he asked with a smile.

“I don’t think you’d like me much in a few months,” she replied and stood as the subway slowed down for her stop. She found a strange satisfaction in knowing that if he’d known what she knew, he probably would have run away screaming.

“That’s it?” he called after her, but Madison only shook her head as she exited the subway car.

The floor was already buzzing with the sounds of her arriving coworkers when Madison
got off the elevator. “Hi, Paula,” Madison greeted the overworked senior receptionist she had been working under for a little over three months, before sitting down and switching on her computer. Paula grunted in response, sipping black coffee from her “#1 Grandma” mug. Madison turned back to the computer and logged in. She sat back, listening to the gossip Susan and Phil were not-so-quietly whispering back and forth to each other as they passed her desk. Darla had been offered a job at a different company, but turned it down because she was secretly dating Jack, but Jack was planning to break up with Darla because he’d been seeing Carmen at the same time. Madison rolled her eyes.

Mr. Hansen, the company’s owner, got off the elevator and approached the reception desk. “Good morning, Mr. Hansen,” Madison greeted him.

“Caroline’s out sick, so I need you to cover for her today. I’ll send you a list of calls I need you to make,” Mr. Hansen replied. “When you call Milton Barrow, make sure you speak with him directly though - his secretary’s a dunce. My son Billy is coming in today, so just send him in. He’s supposed to be here at nine thirty,” Mr. Hansen added, before walking around the reception desk.

“We’ll send him in when he gets here,” Madison called after him.

“Thank you,” Mr. Hansen replied without turning as he headed to his office. Paula was still absorbed in her coffee, with both hands wrapped around her mug.

Madison turned back to her computer and pulled up the appointments for the day, wincing at the full schedule. She would be busy all day. Paula turned to Madison and said, “I’m already on my third cup of coffee for the day. The grandkids were in this weekend. Trying to keep up with them is exhausting.”
“But you do love your grandkids?” Madison asked.

“Of course I do,” she said as she slurped the last dregs of coffee from her mug. “Lovely,” Paula remarked, staring into the empty mug. “Oof. I’ll be back,” she said as she adjusted her pants. “The ladies’ room calls,” she said, rising from her chair. As Paula made her way to the restroom, Madison began reviewing the list of calls Mr. Hansen had just emailed to her.

Madison picked up the telephone receiver and punched in the number at the top of her prioritized list. As she waited for an answer, she tucked the receiver between her ear and her shoulder, and opened the drawer for a pen. “Milton Barrow Associates. How may I help you?” said a feminine voice on the other end of the phone.

“Hello,” Madison said. “This is Madison from Plymouth Publishing. I’m calling on behalf of Mr. Hansen to set up an appointment with Mr. Barrow. May I please speak with him?”

The elevator doors across from her desk opened, and Madison’s jaw followed suit. A casually but impeccably dressed young man had gotten out. She’d only seen him here once before, and she had assumed, even hoped, she would never see him again.

“I can take care of that for you,” the woman on the phone replied, “What time is best for Mr. Hansen?” Why was he here? She hadn’t seen him in over three months.

“Hello?” she heard in her ear.

“Oh! I’m sorry, but Mr. Hansen requested that I speak with Mr. Barrow directly about scheduling the appointment,” Madison replied.

“Please hold,” replied the disembodied voice after an uncomfortable and judgmental pause.

The man reached the desk, and said, “I’m here to see my father.”
“What?” Madison asked, just as the man on the other end of the phone answered.

“This is Milton Barrow.”

“Hello! Mr. Barrow,” Madison said, holding up a finger to indicate that the young man should wait. What was he doing here? “This is Madison from Plymouth Publishing. Mr. Hansen would like to meet with you regarding Sarah Fields’s manuscript, Falling Shadows. He’s spoken to you about it before.” The young man ran his fingers through his perfect hair, and Madison could feel his eyes tracing the seams of her dress as she leaned forward to scroll down the schedule Mr. Hansen had emailed her, looking for open appointment slots.

“Of course,” Mr. Barrow replied.

“Mr. Hansen has an open appointment Thursday afternoon from three to four. Does that work?” Madison asked. She glanced up at the young man who was leaning against the desk now. He couldn’t possibly know. He shifted on his feet, and Madison was conscious that he had moved on to surveying her front as she was double checking the schedule.

“Thursday at three is perfect,” Mr. Barrow said after a brief pause. What had he said his name was? “Hello?”

“Yes, sorry,” Madison said as she typed his name into the schedule. “Alright, I have you down for three o’clock, Thursday, April 24th. We’ll see you then,” Madison replied and hung up the phone. As soon as she’d done so, she looked up to stare at the man who had been waiting patiently.

“It’s... Madison?” he asked, fingering the name plate resting on her desk. She nodded.

“Right, well, I’m here to see my father. Can I just go on back?” he asked.

“You’re Mr. Hansen’s son?” Madison croaked.
“According to my mother I am,” Billy replied with a wink. “William Hansen,” he said, holding out his hand.

“You don’t remember me,” Madison said, not doubting for a second that this was the truth.

“Should I?” Billy asked, tilting his head slightly.

“Probably,” Madison replied, her voice rising in pitch.

“Did we meet at one of my dad’s parties?” he asked, his brow creasing, but immediately answered his own question. “No, that wouldn’t make sense.”

“It was a bit more intimate than a party,” Madison stated.

“Was it?” Billy asked with growing curiosity in his voice.

“Can we talk later maybe?” she asked quietly, leaning forward a bit. She could see Paula on her way back from the restroom.

“What did you have in mind?” Billy asked, also leaning forward, his arms resting on the desk and one corner of his mouth crooking upwards as he raised his eyebrows.

“Lunch,” Madison suggested, “Euclid’s at noon? It’s about two blocks east of here.”

“Sure,” Billy replied, still looking at her with interest.

“Billy, you can go on in, if you like,” Paula said flatly as she returned to her desk.

“But he always expects me to be late, and I hate to disappoint,” Billy answered jokingly.

Madison and turned back to her computer.

Paula looked over disapprovingly and said, “You’d better go on.”

“You’re right. Off I go,” Billy replied, walking around the reception desk and down the hall.
“Billy really is a good kid deep down, but I wish he’d grow up,” Paula commented. A moment later, she turned to Madison and said, “I bet a girl like you could do him some good... You’re wrapped up in a divorce right now, but maybe in a few months? Maybe you could get him to settle down, get married, have some kids?”

“My life’s complicated right now,” Madison replied, immediately going back to her work. The next three hours passed quickly, but she was kept busy, and didn’t notice whether Billy had left the office or not. At ten till noon, Madison logged out of her computer, the onslaught of people subsiding for lunch hour. Madison tidied her desk quickly so that she could get to the restaurant as soon as possible. Paula got out her purse, and turning to Madison, she said, “I’m going over to the sandwich shop if you want to join.”

“Thanks, but I have to meet someone,” Madison answered as she retrieved her own purse.

“Who are you meeting?” Paula asked.

“Some guy I know,” Madison replied as she stood and repositioned the skirt of her dress over her thighs.

“That’s exciting,” Paula said as she stood and picked up her jacket.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Madison asserted. “But I really do have to go,” she said as she hurried off.

Madison walked the two blocks east to Euclid’s Cafe, a hole-in-the-wall restaurant Madison knew few people from Plymouth Publishing frequented. It was why she liked it.

Madison pushed open the glass door and glanced around for Billy, but he wasn’t there yet. She ordered soup and a sandwich, turning her head to look at the door every time it opened.
Once she’d paid, Madison located an open table by the window, and sat down facing the door. The smell of her soup wafted upwards and she realized she had forgotten to eat breakfast this morning. Who knew if he would show up anyway. He was already fifteen minutes late. But in the middle of her fourth spoonful of soup, she saw him push open the door to the restaurant and her heart leapt into her throat. Billy headed straight towards her when he saw her.

When he reached the table, Billy placed himself in the chair opposite Madison. They looked at each other for a moment without saying a word. Finally, Billy leaned forward and asked, “What did you want to talk about?”

Madison swallowed her mouthful of soup and nodded as she began, “I presume you haven’t remembered how we met?”

“No,” he replied as he shook his head. Madison cleared her throat as she set her spoon down.

“We met a few months ago...” she began, “I was in the bathroom and I was upset and crying, and you opened the door and just walked right in.” He was simply staring at her waiting for her to continue.

“And?” he prompted.

“And somehow you managed to convince me that the way to get over Jeff was to move on,” she said, surprised he still showed no signs of recognition. “With you,” she added, her cheeks reddening, “In the supply closet.”

“Well, it’s nice to see you again,” Billy said as he scanned his eyes over Madison’s body. “Sorry I didn’t remember you... I usually do,” he added with a shrug, his eyes locking onto the skin showing between the two undone buttons at the neck of Madison’s dress.
Madison grimaced and waved her hand in front of his face and said, “My face is up here.”

“Right,” Billy responded, moving his eyes upwards. “So, why the sudden desire to see me?” he asked, slightly hesitant.

“I’m pregnant,” Madison answered bluntly. Billy stared at Madison for a moment, his eyes narrowing slightly as he assessed this statement. Slowly his face cleared.

“Congratulations,” Billy replied after the momentary silence.

“What?” Madison asked, astounded by his response. Billy leaned forward, placing his forearms on the table.

“I assume that’s what you wanted, or you wouldn’t be pregnant,” he continued.

“Excuse me?” Madison exclaimed.

“Why else wouldn’t you be on birth control?” he asked with a shrug.

“I was, you nitwit! You think I wanted this?” she asked, her voice rising in pitch.

“Weren’t you still married?” he responded, tilting his head and pointedly raising an eyebrow in question.

“It’s yours, you idiot!” Madison shouted. The noise in the restaurant immediately fell dead silent. Every face in the restaurant turned towards them. Madison turned a deep red, and shouted, “Is this any of your business?” to the restaurant at large. The observers quickly turned away, knowing expressions, some judgmental and some sympathetic, were exchanged between dining partners, and gradually the buzz of small talk began to reemerge as the restaurant returned to a normal noise level. “I hadn’t slept with Jeff in months. And it’s not like I go around having sex with just anybody!” Madison hissed.
“That’s not really what the track record suggests...” Billy said as he leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I really didn’t think I could regret that decision more than I already did,” Madison muttered to herself, leaning her elbows on the table and pressing her fingertips against her temples. “You walked into the wrong bathroom on purpose, didn’t you?” Madison suddenly accused, looking up from staring at the table.

“It worked,” Billy replied nonchalantly, shrugging.

“Who does that?” Madison exclaimed, barely in control of her voice.

“The same kind of person who willingly jumps in a supply closet with a stranger,” Billy responded calmly. Madison’s mouth popped open. “We’re the same, you and me,” he continued, propping one elbow on the top of his chair and draping his other arm over the chair next to him.

Madison gritted her teeth to keep from orating the choice words that were streaming through her mind. “We are not the same,” she said, her fingernails digging into the palms of her clenched fists.

“I may have suggested the supply closet, but you didn’t even hesitate,” Billy replied. “If you want someone to blame, take a look in the mirror.”

“That’s all I’ve been doing,” Madison answered. “You know, I didn’t understand how I ended up here, but I get it now,” she said as she began stacking her dishes. As she stood, she added, “I was vulnerable, and you’re a manipulative player.”

“Where are you going?” Billy asked, straightening in his seat.

“Back to work,” Madison replied, “May as well tell Paula. She’ll find out eventually.”

“If you tell Paula, she’ll tell my father,” Billy said, panic seeping into his voice.
“Maybe you should’ve thought of that before you tried to get me into the supply closet,”

Madison retorted with a smirk. She picked up her things, returned her dishes, and left Billy
sitting at the table, open-mouthed.