

A photograph of a man and a woman lying on their backs on the ground in a forest. The man is on the left, wearing a light-colored button-down shirt and jeans, with his eyes closed and a slight smile. The woman is on the right, with long, wavy blonde hair, wearing a light-colored button-down shirt, and is leaning over the man, kissing him on the cheek. Her hand is resting on his forehead. The background is filled with green foliage and brown leaves, suggesting a natural, outdoor setting. The lighting is warm and soft, creating a romantic and intimate atmosphere.

AMANDA GRACE

The  
Truth  
About You  
& Me

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## Dear Bennett,

You might not read this, but maybe *they* will, and maybe somehow that will help you. This letter can't help *us*, because there is no us, not anymore.

Just saying that makes it hard to breathe.

I hope you *do* find it in yourself to read this letter, right down to the very last word, because maybe if you remember the way things unfolded—if you see it all through my eyes—you won't be able to hate me.

You never said you hated me, but I can't help but think maybe you do, because of what I did. What I made you believe.

I had to do it, though. I had to lie because I needed you, and if you'd known the truth, you never would have set the gears in motion, wouldn't have started something like two freight trains barreling down the tracks.

The crash was inevitable, because I wasn't who you thought I was.

I'm still two years from being who you thought I was.

Those falsehoods and half-truths started something that ruined you, and I know you can't forgive me, but I want you to remember me the right way, the *real* way it all happened, and not the ugly way they'll try to make it sound.

So for you, for me, for *them*, here it is:

The truth about you and me.

\*

THAT DAY I walked into your classroom, I was a basket case of nerves. Maybe that's cliché, being nervous when starting a new school, but this wasn't just any new school.

It was college.

I felt like a kid, and the sad part of it all is that according to the police, I am one. So maybe I should have just listened to my gut. If I'd acted like I felt, you would have known the truth. You would have seen it coming a mile away, and you would have just fiddled with your MacBook and not met my gaze and smiled in that way that made your warm blue eyes crinkle up.

But I didn't act like I felt. I put my head up and my shoulders back and I walked through the door to your room. I'd been nervous before that moment, and when our eyes met, the butterflies turned to seagulls. I turned and walked to the back row so you wouldn't see me blushing. I found a seat next to a tall, pretty girl whose exotic dark eyes seemed sultry, sexy, without her even trying.

I'll never understand why you saw me at all, sitting next to a girl like that. I've spent my whole life being invisible because of girls like her. Girls who ooze the sort of sex appeal I can't even fake in my bathroom mirror.

But maybe the real world is different. I haven't seen enough of it to be sure. It sure seemed like it was different when we were together.

The class was Biology, but then you know that already. I guess I have to write some of this for *them*, too, so they know the truth. You'll just have to forgive me for saying things you already know.

Biology I was good at. Really good at. I didn't really enjoy it the way I enjoyed things like *Wuthering Heights* and Shakespeare, but it came as easy to me as brushing my teeth.

Math, too. You know I tested into Calculus, even though I'd never taken the prerequisite class? I skipped right over Pre-Cal. I think that's why my parents trusted me so much back then. It's easy to trust a smart girl.

Smart girls aren't supposed to do stupid things.

That day was beautiful, the late September sun filtering through those big evergreen trees, dappling the surface of my new desk as I plunked into my seat and pulled out a brand new spiral notebook. My mom wasn't so happy to

discover that my school supplies and textbooks cost over three hundred dollars, but it's not like we had to pay tuition. Enumclaw High School paid that as part of the Running Start program. They paid for all of my classes at Green River Community College, and all I had to do was maintain a C average. I would get college credit and high school credit at the same time.

Maybe someone has explained all that to you by now. They probably mentioned it once before, too, but maybe you didn't pay attention, didn't give it a second thought. I bet you do now.

As I uncapped my pretty purple pen—something that seems so immature now—you stood up from your leather desk chair and walked to the center of the room, those long legs of yours making it just a few steps.

Right away, I liked the layout of your class—the desks were assembled like a horseshoe, so you could walk right into the center, so that we were all wrapped around you when you talked, smiled, gestured with those perfect hands of yours, just rough enough to seem masculine.

“Welcome to Biology 101,” was what you said, and though there was nothing special about the words, the way you said them mattered. It was like you were telling us we were being invited into something extraordinary.

I don't know if it was love at first sight. Do you believe in that? Love at first sight? I wish I'd asked you this weeks ago, when I had the chance. I wish I'd asked you this days ago, when we were wrapped up in one another.

I probably won't get to ask you much of anything anymore, and maybe you wouldn't answer my questions even if I did. Maybe you have too many of your own.

You smiled as you handed out the syllabus, as you wrote your name on the whiteboard—*Mr. Cartwright*—in perfect, manly-but-not-ugly handwriting. It sounded British.

You look British, you know. Your face has that lean and rugged look, with the faintest line of stubble even at nine a.m., and your strong nose has the slightest bump in the middle, like maybe once upon a time some old chap in a pub punched you.

I know now that's not true, but that first day I imagined you sipping a pint of ale somewhere in the UK, wearing a sports coat with leather on the elbows. I

guess that would have made more sense if you were an English professor. But you seemed worldly, and that's the image my mind made up for you.

To me, at sixteen, even the image of you sipping a frosty mug of Budweiser at the bar just outside campus seemed exotic. The guys at my school—my *high school*—were more likely to be found shoving one another out of the way in front of the Coke machine at McDonald's.

When the last syllabus slid in front of me—printed in pale green—I slipped it into my binder and then looked up again as you dimmed the lights and turned on your PowerPoint presentation.

As you had your head bent over your MacBook, the girl seated next to me leaned over. The faint smell of her perfume and hair spray washed over me.

“He's kinda cute,” she whispered, her lips curling up in a devilish, confident sort of way.

I blushed, like she somehow knew I'd thought the same thing. “How old do you think he is?” I asked under my breath.

She studied you for a moment with her eyes narrowed, and I almost wished I hadn't asked, because I didn't want her watching you. I guess that's weird, that I already felt the tiniest twinge of possessiveness, but it's not so different from scoping out guys in the cafeteria. There's a girl code that says you can't go after a guy once a friend has a crush on him, and with you ... it wouldn't take much to get a crush.

“Twenty-four? Twenty-five maybe? But that seems kind of young, I guess ... ”

And then you looked over at us, like you'd heard the whole thing but I know you couldn't have. She didn't seem to care that you'd caught us whispering, and you didn't say anything as your eyes swept over me and made me feel warm all over. Then you looked away and walked to the front and pulled down a big white screen, and the words *Cellular Composition* flashed across it.

“I'm Katie,” she said, sticking her hand out. Her nails were cute—pale pink, but trimmed short.

I shook it. “Madelyn,” I said.

“Pretty.” She smiled and turned back to look at you. I wanted to tell her she was the pretty one, but I had a feeling she heard that a lot.

“Most of this unit is going to be a repeat of what you learned in high school Biology, but it's the building blocks for what comes next, so we'll talk about it

as a refresher before we move on,” you said.

But I didn’t need a refresher. High school students take Biology as sophomores—for me, that was last year. For everyone else, it was more like three years ago.

You glanced back at the screen again and clicked that little remote in your hand, and a cell diagram popped up. And as you discussed the mitochondria and the nucleus, talking in an enthusiastic way with your hands motioning all over the place, it was poetry. Once or twice, you’d run a hand through that shaggy brown hair of yours, messing up the part so it was sort of ruffled but in a good, effortless kind of way.

You were right. Everything you talked about was familiar, and so I let myself daydream while you talked, watching your lips move but not listening to the words, and the two hours drifted by and you were closing your MacBook and I was shocked it was over so fast, that I’d gotten so lost in thought.

“Tomorrow will be our first lab day,” you said. “In 3A, across the courtyard. See you all there at nine sharp.”

Desks creaked, chairs screeched, and feet shuffled. Everyone else was halfway out the door before I even packed up my things, still blinking out of my stupor. I’d been thinking about a million things, none of them having to do with cell diagrams. Even Katie, her hips swinging, slipped out before I could say another word, her effortlessly stylish ballet flats slapping against the tiled floor.

I think it’s because I was last to leave that you noticed me. Really looked at me, a smile tugging at one side of your mouth, a look so attractive it was hard to breathe.

“Everything sounding good so far?” you asked, adjusting the silver band of your watch as I strode toward the door. I blushed for a second, thinking you meant the sound of your voice, not the curriculum, before realizing I was being silly.

“Yeah, I think I’ll manage.” I paused at the door, and a long tangled strand of my wavy, dark-blond hair slid forward, off my shoulder. For a split second, your eyes followed it down before you looked back at your computer.

You stared at the apple symbol on your closed MacBook without blinking, and I wasn’t totally sure what had just happened.

But I know now. I know you were scolding yourself for letting your eyes dip where they weren't supposed to go.

I know, when *they* read this, that maybe they'll think it means you planned everything, that you're attracted to underage girls. But I hope they remember that this was a community college campus, and so you thought I was eighteen or nineteen, like everyone else was.

You were annoyed with yourself because of that quarter-second glance at a student, because it was unprofessional.

Not because you thought I was underage. You didn't know.

*You didn't know.*

"Great," you said, your eyes still trained on that bitten apple. Did you think of the irony, then? That you were staring at the forbidden fruit to avoid looking at me? Because even though you thought I was eighteen, I was still forbidden. Students and professors aren't allowed to date.

I didn't know any of this then, not that day. I just thought you were embarrassed. But then you did glance up again, your eyes soft, warm, inviting. "I hope you enjoy my class, Miss ... ?"

"Hawkins," I said. "But you can call me Madelyn."

"Well, in that case, you can call me Mr. Cartwright," you joked, your lips curling just enough to show that you had one funny tooth. Your smile was a little crooked. The whole thing was so at odds with your sophisticated flair, it caught me off-guard.

I laughed, and it wasn't a pretty laugh, either, but an ugly sort of bark of laughter, one I would cringe about for the rest of the day.

I stood a moment too long, so that it turned awkward and I realized you were waiting for me to leave, or at least ask a question. "Okay then, bye, Mr. Cartwright, see you tomorrow," I said, finally heading out the door just as the first few students from your next class slipped into the room, bringing with them the hum of voices.

"Yes, until then," you said.

I wanted to hear you say my name—just Madelyn, not Miss Hawkins—but that didn't happen until the second day.



\*

IT WAS JUST past noon when I got home. That's what was nice about Running Start—a full-time schedule was only three classes. Two of my classes were an hour long, five days a week, but Biology—my two-hour class—was only on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. The rest of my friends were still sitting around at EHS, listening to the same old gossip, eating in the same old cafeteria, taking the same old classes. How could they be happy with that? How did they not feel like the ugly cinder-block walls were slowly closing in, like a coffin meant to trap them forever?

The house was empty because my parents work full time. My mom is an engineer at Boeing, and my dad is a Phys Ed teacher.

At Enumclaw High School.

He's not the sort of teacher people like, either, which never won me any points with my classmates. Dad, if for some reason you're reading this, I'm sorry to say that. It's not because you're not good at what you do. You are. You just expect a lot, and you're not the "cool" sort of teacher that students like. Even you must know we prefer teachers who are easy and fun, not the ones who are always pushing. Pushing is what you do, though. Who you are. You push your students just like you always push me.

To be fair, you only push as hard as you know you can. You just want everyone to live up to their potential. I know that. You were right last year; Ben Phillips *was* lazy, and if it hadn't been for you, pushing him at tryouts, he never would have made the football team, which is what he'd always claimed to want but never quite managed to pull off.

At one point, before high school, I took it all as a challenge. Almost a passion, really—the pursuit of perfection, the pursuit of that hug, the reward, the knowledge I'd succeeded. I thrived on the validation I got from Dad, from Mom.

And that's why every report card of mine in the history of everdom has a glossy *A* next to *Every Single Class*. Even PE, Dad's domain, which was nearly impossible to pull off since I inherited Mom's athletic ability and not Dad's.

See, the thing is, somewhere along the line I realized that I'd climbed aboard a plane and watched it take off, and all I could do was sit there with my seat belt

fastened, waiting for it to land at a predetermined destination. One I wasn't sure I wanted anymore.

At some point I decided I didn't want to be pushed. I didn't want to be perfect at everything, charting the exact course that leads to Harvard or MIT. Somehow I just wanted to stop completely—unbuckle my seat belt, and jump off the plane—but I wasn't sure if I had a parachute, a safe landing.

And for Mom and Dad, backup plans were a must. You couldn't turn without a new place to go to. But the validation my mom and dad gave me for being perfect just wasn't enough anymore. The “good job” comments, the pats on the back ... they meant nothing.

That day, as I stared at the television, instead of feeling stifled and stuck, my mind spun with images of *you*, Bennett, smiling at me. I replayed that moment when your eyes dipped low, and even hours later, my cheeks flamed hot and I hoped with all my might that I hadn't imagined that moment, because it made me feel ... different. Alive. Desired.

At three o'clock I got off the couch and went to my room. I spread my books out on the floor, along with a few random print-outs from my classes, and then I sat down right in the middle of all of it.

Like clockwork, the garage door hummed. Then the back door opened and swished shut, and I listened as my father's sneakers strode across the aging hardwood floors, each board creaking as he passed.

I crossed my legs and leaned forward on my elbows, picking up the syllabus to your class and staring at it as if it held the meaning of life.

Dad stepped into my room, his shadow splashing across the floor, and I glanced up, feigning surprise. “Oh, hey,” I said, setting the syllabus down. For effect, I yawned and stretched.

Dad smiled as his eyes swept over my books, playing his part to a T. “Getting ahead already?”

I nodded, deciding that rubbing my eyes would be too much, so instead I played with a strand of my hair, twisting it around my fingers, remembering all the times Mom had pinned it up into a perfect, sleek bun back when I'd danced ballet. “Yeah. Some of my classes will be pretty tough, I think.”

“Nothing you can't handle,” he said, his eyes snapping up to meet mine.

It wasn't a question, just a simple statement. He expected me to agree, to rise to the challenge, just like I always did, because he'd been there to see me climb aboard that airplane and buckle up. He'd watched my trajectory for years, and this was just another mile closer to my destination.

I'd never understood the phrase, "You can't see the forest for the trees." To me, it seemed more like you can't see the people standing right next to you if they've been there all along. Can't see the moment they change, the moment they want to be someone else, because you'll forever see them as the person they've been.

"I've got it," I said, sliding my legs out from under me so that I could lie on my stomach as I reached for my English text.

And then just as the script progressed to *exit stage left*, he creaked his way back to the kitchen to go make dinner.

Every day, Bennett, it went just like that. Every day, I did things just the right way. Living up to my potential. Challenging myself. *Thinking of the future*.

Blah, blah, blah. Day after frustrating day, I stayed in the airplane, staring straight ahead, wondering why I no longer wanted to go to the place that had once seemed so promising.

And that day, he never questioned my act because he only saw the person I'd been for years. The perfect, studious daughter I didn't want to be anymore. I was six the first time he told me I'd go to an Ivy League school, just like Mom. I was going to make smart choices, like her—not have lofty, idiotic goals that could shatter just like his kneecap, not have dreams that could be stolen away like his dream of the NFL draft.

I was going to chart a careful course and find success in a calculated way, or else I'd be cursed to a third-rate career as a football coach and PE teacher. Because to settle ... that was to fail.

See, Bennett, I was tired of all this. So tired.

I chose Running Start because I saw the freedom in it. I saw the hours to myself. I saw escaping to a campus where my father wasn't teaching in the B Gym.

And that night as I fell asleep, I saw you.

\*

I HIT TRAFFIC on the way to school the next day, and I whipped into the parking lot with my heart racing, worried, not sure if there was such a thing as a tardy slip in college.

I was late, ten whole minutes, to my eight o'clock English 110 class. When I walked through the door, breathless, my professor was already at the front, talking about our first essay assignment. My face flamed hot as every student in the room looked up at me when the door squeaked open. I thought I'd be reprimanded, but I wasn't.

College really is different. It didn't take long for me to figure out that no one cares if you come and go. If you chew gum, or stare out the window, or never turn in a scrap of homework. The more I got to know the rules of community college, the more I realized that high school teachers are sort of babysitters, and at college there is no babysitting.

And I really liked the sound of that, liked the idea that maybe when no one was looking, I could become someone else.

When class finally ended, I slipped out the door, ahead of the rest of the students, not wanting to be late for my second course of the day.

It's funny how, on that day, I was so consumed by the clock. If I could have a superpower, I think I'd wish for the ability to speed up time. Do you wish that, now? Now, when so much is happening so slowly, and you must be just sitting there waiting and thinking and waiting to see what happens next, what's going to tumble down or be rebuilt?

If I had that power, I'd give it to you. You must need it more than me.

I strode across campus that morning, the dew sticking to my cute little black flats, pleased that I didn't have to pull out the map again to remember where I was going. The campus, sprawled across a hill, was surrounded by evergreens. I felt so adult, so in control, as I navigated my route, cutting between buildings to get to the lab. There would be no bell ringing out the next class period, no hall monitors looking for passes.

Lab 3A was empty when I walked in, or at least I thought so. But as I stepped past an open closet door, you turned into me, and we collided.

You reached out to grab my arms, and you held me up.

You touched me, to keep me from falling, and I was so close I could smell you, a clean, aspen-like cologne washing over me. Something so different from the Axe body spray favored by high school boys, that sort of burning, overwhelming smell that follows them around like a cloud. Yours was subtle, sophisticated.

“Madelyn!” you said, your strong hands gripping my arms.

I stared, wide-eyed, back at you as my cheeks flushed hot. I’d smashed right into you, like some dorky little high school girl who couldn’t look where she was going.

“Sorry,” I said, hoping my face wasn’t nearly as red as it felt. And that’s when my brain caught up with my ears and I realized you’d said “Madelyn,” and it made me smile so wide I must have looked pretty crazy.

“No, it’s my fault, I didn’t realize it was nine already. I was just hanging up my jacket.” You jutted your thumb over your shoulder at the closet behind you.

That day you didn’t have a V-necked sweater over your button-down, and it was easier to see the line of you, the way that cotton hugged your body.

“I’m actually a little early,” I said, to make you feel better.

I’d never been more happy to be early, to get this serendipitous moment when our bodies collided. That’s how it was with us. One day we were two separate people and the next we collided, and neither of us stood a chance.

I wish I could tell you I regretted everything that happened after that.

I walked farther into that room, and instead of sitting in the back like I had the day before, I plunked down at a table right up front, so that when you sat down at a desk in the corner, we were just a few yards apart.

I wanted to say something else to you, something witty, but a couple of other students arrived then, two guys who were laughing as they stepped through the door. It shattered whatever moment we could’ve had, whatever impression I could have made.

They took the table in the back and the room filled up, and then Katie sat down next to me, flashing her pretty, easy smile. “Hey, Madelyn,” she said, tossing her backpack onto the table.

“Hey,” I said, even though I was a thousand miles away.

No, I was twelve feet away, in that place I’d stood when you touched me.

“Cool if I sit here?” she asked, playing with the newly pink-streaked ends of her dark hair. How did she have time to add something so cute in the twenty-four hours since I’d seen her last? “I’m betting we’ll need lab partners.”

“Sure,” I said, finally forcing myself back to the present. Katie looked cute that day, in figure-hugging jeans and a sweater that dipped low over her cleavage.

I wondered, then, if I’d look like her, act like her, in a couple more years. She seemed so comfortable in her skin, so casually confident. The girls in high school, the pretty ones ... their confidence seemed forced, fragile, all smoke and mirrors.

But not with Katie. With Katie, I’d bet anything she felt confident right down to her core.

Katie kind of grimaced, then. “It’s only fair to tell you I’m miserable at science.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I’m really good at it. I took Advanced Bio last year.”

She brightened. “Really? What school did you go to? I went to Kentlake. We had to do it as sophomores and that seems like a million years ago. I barely squeaked by then, and whatever I learned has officially leaked out of my brain by now.”

“Oh,” I said, my voice kind of falling. “Uh, Enumclaw. We have Physical Science as sophomores and Biology as seniors, so the class just ended a few months ago.”

It was my first out-and-out lie, and I’m not even sure why I said it. You weren’t listening or anything. But I liked Katie, I guess. I liked her warm smiles and easy chattiness. I didn’t want her to think I was too young to be worth her time.

“Huh. Weird,” she said. “But I guess that makes it my lucky day!”

But it was my lucky day, because friends didn’t come that easy to me, and yet that’s exactly how it seemed with her. I really was different, in college. I was changing and evolving, even on that second day.

“Starburst?” she asked, fishing a piece out of the front pocket of her backpack.

You watched me unwrap it. You watched me put it in my mouth. And then you looked away from me and stood up.

“Okay, guys, before we start let’s go over a few ground rules for safety in the lab. Rule number one,” you said with an amused sort of lilt to your voice, “absolutely no food or drink.”

Katie and I shared a look, and she shoved the still-wrapped candy she was clenching in her hand into her backpack.

I used my tongue to push the Starburst to the side of my mouth, and I’m not even sure why because you’d already seen it.

Why did you watch me eat that candy and not stop me, Bennett? Were you letting me get away with it, or were you being playful with me?

“Rule number two: there are no make-up labs. Missed labs are simply going to show up as zeros, and that’s going to hurt your grade. If you miss a lecture day, you can read the textbook. If you miss a lab day, you miss the lab. Period.”

You walked around the room, passing out little packets of stapled paper. You wore nice shoes that day: pretty brown leather ones, not quite boots, not quite loafers, but something between. I liked the way those steel-gray slacks brushed the soles.

You dressed so differently than the boys at my high school, boys who wore nothing but ripped jeans and faded T-shirts. You cared about the way you looked, and it showed.

Katie shuffled our packet in front of me, and I trained my eye on the paper as she leaned toward me. “Teachers should not be allowed to look that good,” she said.

I giggled. “*Seriously,*” I whispered.

You returned to the front of the room, and your shaggy hair slid into your eyes as I looked up at you. “Today’s lab is really quite simple, but it will provide you with the tools for future labs. We’re working on the basics of any good experiment: maintaining an adequate control group, creating reasonable hypotheses, and so forth. Please read over the material and then get to work. If you have any questions, please do see me, either during the lab today or during my office hours, which are outlined on the class syllabus. Today they’re noon to two,” you said.

Katie and I leaned together so closely our heads nearly touched and she read the instructions out loud, quietly. “I can grab the beakers,” I said when she was finished.

“Great. I’ll get the food coloring.”

We shoved our chairs back and walked to opposite ends of the room, me to a bay of drawers right next to that closet housing your coat.

In high school, boys wear letterman’s jackets, or fleece pullovers, or North Face snow jackets if it’s super cold. I wondered, as I fished out a cylinder and two beakers, what your coat looked like.

When I walked back to our table, you were standing there, asking Katie what our hypothesis was. She was stammering something about a rainbow, and when I approached, her eyes looked up at me, pleading.

“We’re hypothesizing that each of the colors, combined with water, will boil at the same temperature,” I said, brushing past you to take my seat. It was a silly lab. A high school lab. But it accomplished what you wanted from us.

“Good. Very good,” you said, your eyes meeting mine in a way that made it feel like a spark zipped between us. “I’ll leave you to it,” you said, going to the next table.

It went like that for the rest of the morning, with you floating around the room, me always aware of precisely where you stood, who you talked to.

Although Katie didn’t know a dang thing about science, she was a good partner. She did exactly what I told her to, and her handwriting was perfect. I trusted her with our log book and I explained the experiment as we went along, and when you caught me talking about the difference between the control group and the experimental group, comparing them to drug trials and sugar pills, you paused, smiling in that special way of yours.

I wish I could see that smile now.

I wonder if you even smile anymore.



\*

SATURDAY MORNING, YOU changed your routine, and for that reason, our paths crossed.

Do you think it was fate, Bennett? Do you believe in fate?

I do. The same way I believe in soul mates and love at first sight. I don't think you can believe in just one of those things. Seems to me you have to believe in all three.

I was leaning on the trunk of a gnarly, drooping cedar tree, trying to catch my breath. I was only halfway up Mt. Peak. You always called it Pinnacle Peak, remember? Because that's what it's called on the maps. But nobody from Enumclaw calls it that.

To the locals, it's just Mt. Peak. I guess that's a weird name, like a river named water.

In any case, I was looking down at my battered hiking boots, trying to calm my burning lungs, when I heard a dog barking. I glanced up as a gorgeous golden retriever bounded up the trail, his reddish-yellow fur waving in the wind, his long tongue lolling out the side of his mouth.

I'm not afraid of dogs or anything—you know how much I love that dog of yours—but when he jogged right over and put his paws up on my chest, nearly knocking me down, I was less than thrilled.

"No! Down!" you said, and when I glanced up, my heart stopped. Doesn't seem like a heart can beat when it's way down in your knees, anyway.

Your face was flushed and your long-sleeved T-shirt clung to your muscled frame, the faintest outline of sweat shadowing your shoulders. When you looked up and met my eyes, you'd been about to say sorry. But instead you smiled and said, "Oh, hey, Madelyn."

Like we knew each other, like we were friends. You stepped up close to me so you could snap a bright red leash onto your dog's collar as he danced around at my feet. I no longer cared that he'd left two muddy paw prints on my T-shirt, that he was stomping on my feet.

"Hi, Mr. Cartwright," I said, wondering if my ponytail was jacked up, if my face looked as good as yours when flushed with exertion or if I just looked sweaty and ugly.

“I think we can dispense with the formalities outside of class,” you said, reaching out like we were just meeting for the first time. “It’s Bennett.”

You have a nice handshake, you know. A solid, firm grip.

In that moment, an intense desire washed over me. I wanted our hands to be clasped in a different way. I wanted to casually hold yours, our fingers interlaced, and I wanted you to want that too.

That’s what I was thinking, anyway. I don’t know what you thought as our skin touched, palm to palm. All the time we spent together, all those talks, and I never did ask you how you felt about the first time we’d really touched. Voluntarily, that is. The crash into each other in the lab hardly counted.

Your dog chose that moment to take off, yanking you away from me, and you sort of pulled me with you for a moment before releasing my hand.

That’s how we came to be hiking together on that quiet, foggy morning. *They* might think it was something you planned, that you asked to see me outside of class, but it was pure serendipity.

Normally, Mt. Peak is busy, but maybe people didn’t want to climb the mountain knowing that the town was shrouded in fog and the view would be obscured. We only passed two hikers that morning, and neither of them paid much attention to us.

I liked that, too. That neither of those hikers thought it was odd that we’d be together.

“So, come here often?” you asked in a cheesy voice, as you cracked a smile.

You have a great sense of humor. Maybe that’s past tense. I don’t know at this point.

“Yeah. Most Saturdays,” I said. “I like the quiet of it. Before the rest of the world wakes up.”

You looked at me then. *Really* looked. Your blue eyes have this way of seeming kind of intense, you know. Not in class, but when it was just me and you and you let your guard down, let me see who you really are. You’re more flippant in public, but that quiet sincerity of yours took over when it was just me and you.

“I know what you mean,” you said. “It’s relaxing.”

“Exactly.” We’d been hiking a few minutes, and our breathing had grown labored. We were only halfway up the mountain, but I made up my mind I would

keep up with your long strides. You're at least six inches taller than me, so it was no small feat (feet? Ha ha, get it?), but I couldn't stand the idea of falling behind like some silly kid left in the dust. "How about you? You come up here a lot?" I asked.

"I've been hiking it every weekend, but on the other side," you said, jutting your thumb over your shoulder.

"The road?"

"Yep. I didn't even know there was a trail on this side, until I was standing at the top last week and someone appeared on the opposite side, where the trail emerges."

"It's prettier," I said. "I've always preferred this way."

You nodded. "Yeah. I like this side better."

You were talking about the trail, but I imagined you meant something about me, too, like you enjoyed hiking together.

"Can I ask you a question?" you said.

"Sure."

You glanced over at me, still breathing hard. "My class seems easy for you. You were the first one done with that pop quiz. How'd you get to be so smart?"

I smiled and looked down at the trail, concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other. "I don't know. My dad's a PE teacher at Enumclaw High School. He's really driven, wants me to succeed. He's always been there if I needed help, and I knew what the expectations were. If that makes sense."

You blinked. "Wow, did that suck? That you went to school with your dad there?"

Two things occurred to me in that moment:

(1) I wanted nothing less than to talk about my father with you.

(2) You'd asked that question in past tense, because you assumed I had graduated. But it was past tense, Bennett. It still is. I was never going back to high school because I was in college. Maybe I didn't have a diploma yet—I won't for two more years—but I was in college, and that's what mattered.

That's why, when I answered, you have to know I wasn't lying to you. I know it was still a deception in every way that matters, but I liked the way you were talking to me. Like we were equals, just a boy and a girl on a hike.

They say we weren't just a boy and a girl but a man and a girl, and so they should know that when I responded, I led you to believe I'd graduated. It was the first of so many half-truths. Just remember, Bennett, that at this point I still never dreamed you'd come to care about me, that we'd really become something. I just wanted someone to talk to me like you did. Someone who didn't see me as the same old bookworm, too studious, the wet-blanket sort of girl, but instead could build a whole new picture of me based on what I told him.

That's what I wanted. To paint my own picture for once, instead of taking over the one my parents had so carefully outlined.

"It was kind of unfortunate," I said, laughing like it was no big deal. "I'm just glad that part of my life is over."

"I bet," you said.

"What's your dog's name?" I asked, desperate to change the subject as I watched him walk right into the trickling creek bordering that part of the trail, his paws squishing in the mud.

"Voldemort," you said, grinning at me in that special way of yours, the one that was crooked and perfect in the same instant.

I laughed, and you joined in, and the moment held a certain kind of glow.

"He chewed up my favorite pair of shoes the first day I brought him home, so I couldn't help it," you said. "I usually just call him Mort because, you know, I'm probably too old to have a dog named Voldemort."

"And how old is that, exactly?" I asked casually. My legs were burning by then, but I couldn't bear the idea that you'd think I was out of shape, unable to keep up.

"Older than you," you said.

Maybe in that moment you were trying to put that wall up between us, erase the easy camaraderie. Your tone hadn't been sharp, but your meaning was clear.

You were telling me you were too old for *me*, that if I saw you that way, I shouldn't, that I should reel it all back in now, stamp down any childish ideas I had.

But it was too late for that. I'd started falling for you the moment I'd lain eyes on you, even if I didn't know it that day on the mountain.

"Oh come on," I said, my legs burning with the exertion of our hike. "Give me a hint."

Your eyes sparkled as you looked over at me, like you were enjoying the easy back-and-forth of our conversation.

“Let’s see. I’m told the most popular song the year I was born was ‘La Bamba.’” You reached out and snapped off a twig as we passed a little bush, then you started stripping off the leaves, leaving them behind us like a trail of bread crumbs.

“You really are ancient,” I said. “Isn’t that song from, like, the Middle Ages?”

Your laughter was infectious. I hope I haven’t taken that from you. I couldn’t bear to know you don’t laugh like that anymore.

“The ’80s, thank you very much. What about you?”

“What about me?” I asked, staring at the trail again, realizing too late I’d opened a door I should have left alone. Why had I asked you how old you were when clearly that only shone a light on my own age?

“What song was popular when you were born?”

If I’d told you it was a song by Diddy, before he was P. Diddy, back when he was Puff Daddy, would you have known? Would you have known I was just a kid, that I wasn’t worth your words and your smiles and your laughter?

So I waved my hand in the air and said, “I’m not sure exactly. But it has *got* to be better than ‘La Bamba.’”

“Hey, some great music came out of the ’80s,” you said, your voice both playful and indignant.

“So did Pee Wee Herman.” I shuddered in an exaggerated way.

“Oh please, like the ’90s were better,” you said, bumping your shoulder with mine. You knew I was born in the 1990s—knew I was younger than you—but I’m sure you were thinking of the other half of that decade, the early part.

I grinned at you and bumped back. “We *are* responsible for Nirvana,” I said.

I looked it up when I got home that day. Kurt Cobain died before I was born, you know. Three *years* before I was born. I don’t know why I brought up Nirvana at all. I don’t even like them. But when people think of the 1990s and Seattle—Enumclaw being a suburb of Seattle—they can’t not think of Nirvana.

So maybe in that moment, on that quiet mountain trail, I unknowingly planted the idea that I was older, that I was around when Nirvana was still together. If that was true, I’d be at least nineteen, and that would make everything that happened okay.

“And how can I possibly argue with that?” you said.

We were nearing the top by then, a place where the trail plateaus. Voldemort ran ahead, chasing a squirrel into the brush, and you let him go, turning to see the vista before us.

I’d been wrong about the fog. By the time we reached the top, it was little more than wisps hanging low over a few distant fields, clinging to the edges of the big red barns.

“This view never gets old,” you said, your breathing still labored as we stared out at the sprawling dairy farms and green foothills. “I could see it every day and never get tired of it.”

Did you know you can see my high school from the top of that mountain? I didn’t point it out that day, for reasons that must be obvious now, but if you ever go hiking there again, look to the west. You’ll see its tan buildings stretched out in the distance, where the green farmland meets the infinite blue sky.

“Yeah, it’s gorgeous. I just wish we could see the mountain,” I said. By “the mountain” I meant Mt. Rainier, of course.

You turned around and glanced back, but the higher elevations were still shrouded in gray clouds. On a clear day it’s breathtaking, all craggy rock and snow-covered peaks, the kind of thing that sells on postcards all over Seattle. In Enumclaw, it’s up close and personal. Zoomed-in.

Voldemort jogged out of the tree line then, and I reached down to scratch him behind the ears. He sat down, leaning into my leg, and this time I didn’t cringe at the slobber and mud that was sure to adhere to my clothes, because if he was yours, how could I not adore him?

“He likes you,” you said.

I smiled up at you, still patting the dog. “Golden retrievers like everyone,” I said.

“Ahh, but he is no ordinary dog,” you said, your blue eyes bright, alive in a way they weren’t inside your classroom.

“Oh?”

“He’s Lord Voldemort!”

I laughed and we headed back down the trail, which was much more leisurely than the strained hike up.

We fit together, me and you, like two pieces snapping into place.

Ten years isn't so much, you know. If I'd been twenty and you'd been thirty, would anyone have even cared? It seems cruel that four little years were so important, so life-changing.

It was only two that mattered, really. The difference between sixteen and eighteen.

The difference between love that can span a lifetime, and love that can never happen at all.

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