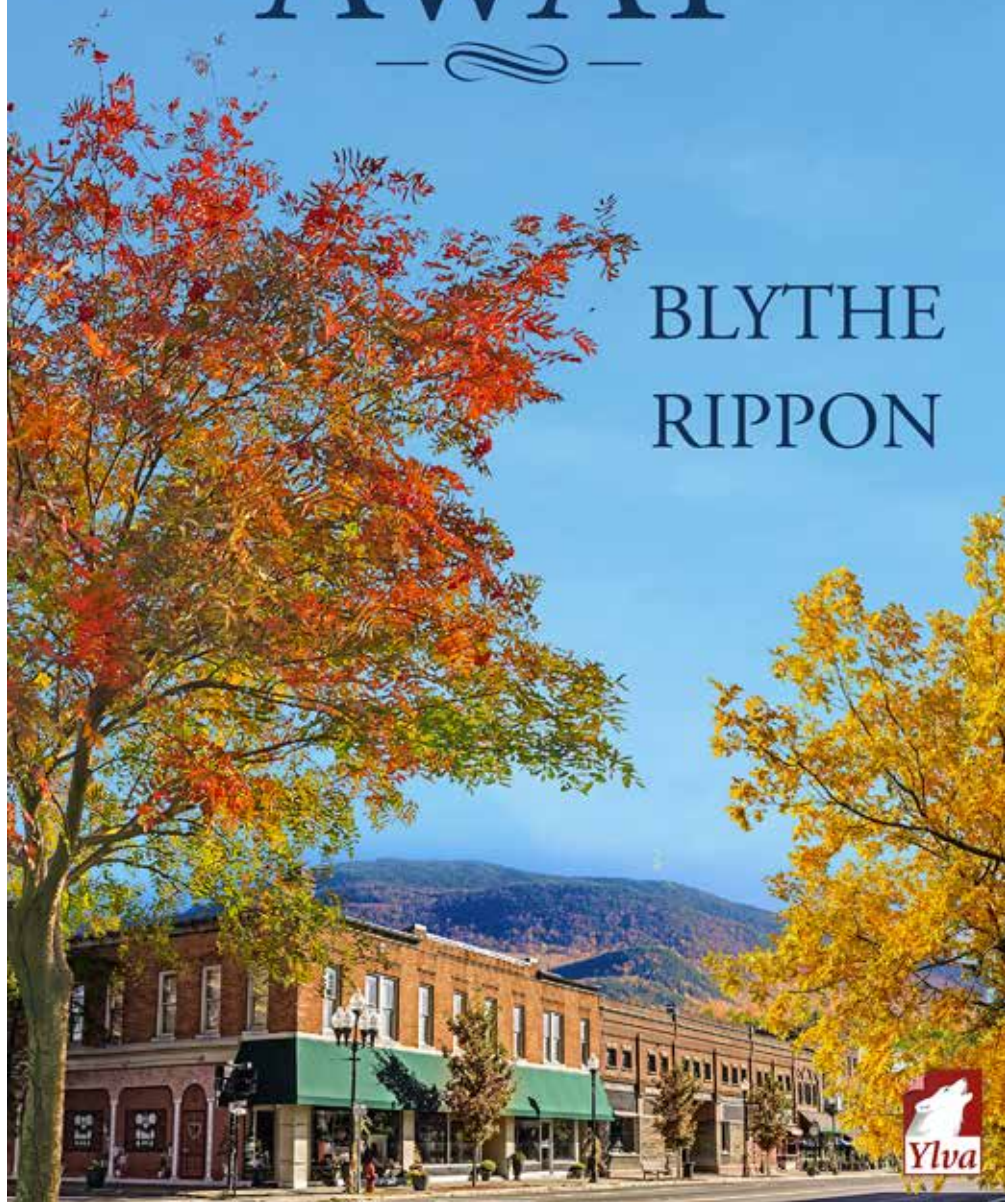


STOWE AWAY



BLYTHE
RIPPON



PROLOGUE

AFTER

IT'S A BIZARRE THING TO mourn a life lost when the person in question is still living, and Samantha Latham was mourning two.

The fact that her sense of loss—the loss of the life she had worked so hard to make for herself—felt commensurate with the physical loss her mother was living every day since being hospitalized, made Sam feel small and petty, but she couldn't seem to stop. From the time she was twelve, she had designed a clear and specific future for herself, and only minor variations had altered that vision in the intervening decade. Now, she didn't have it in her to imagine tomorrow. It wasn't worth her time, really, since tomorrow would be the same as today.

Her mother snored softly in the living room, dozing in her easy chair. Seated at the kitchen table, a glass of orange juice and a piece of toast in front of her, Sam opened the *Stowe Circular*, a mind-numbingly dull local publication whose pedestrian concerns had frustrated her as a high school student even before she had left Vermont for grander pastures. Now that circumstances had forced her to return to Stowe, she didn't have the stomach to read the most cutting-edge medical research or science journals or anything else that reminded her of the life she could no longer access. So, sighing for probably the hundredth time that morning, she read the *Stowe Circular* cover to cover.

Apart from a single cover article of national news—Obama had won the North Carolina primary the day before but was edged out by Clinton in Indiana—the contributions to the paper were singularly focused on local gossip, and there was actually an article about a cat stuck in a tree. A lengthy piece detailed the talents of the high school baseball team.

Mrs. King's class at the middle school would be taking a field trip to tour the Ben and Jerry's factory next Wednesday. The board of Fletcher Allen Hospital in Burlington was holding a fundraiser for a new wing dedicated to palliative care. She sighed heavily at the last one; she would probably be giving that institution large sums of money soon enough.

The newspaper at Stowe High School, which, naturally, she had edited her senior year, boasted more robust offerings; or at least it had under her guidance. She had made no efforts to keep abreast of the goings-on at her alma mater after leaving Stowe for Yale.

As she closed the paper, the pages not quite returning to their original tight creases, her mother's cat brushed against her shin, purring softly. "You want food, Aphrodite?" Sam asked, reaching down to stroke the white Persian underneath her chin. Of course the cat wanted food. Aphrodite knew exactly what she wanted and exactly how to get it. Sam envied her. These days, there was only fog, and a wish for clarity that itself seemed to dim like the light in her mother's eyes.

Growing up in Stowe, most of the people who knew her had told her she was the smartest person they had ever met. A perfect score on the ACT and SAT in sixth grade will win someone a certain amount of respect, coupled with a not-insignificant amount of fear. Now, vast swaths of things she didn't know stretched out on all sides, and she had no idea where to turn.

Instinct, or habit, made her reach for her cell phone. But bringing up the only number she could imagine calling also brought up a bitterness she couldn't swallow, and she slammed the phone down onto the table. People can be a lot like drugs, she thought; the first step to overcoming addiction is admitting you have a problem. And her problems with Natalie were too dense and fraught to wade through now.

When Eva moaned gently in the other room, Sam fixed a weary smile on her face and headed toward her mother's frail form.

PART I

BEFORE

FRESHMAN YEAR, YALE: FALL 2003

OVER THE TOP OF A leather-bound notebook, Sam watched while her roommate Tracy primped. In fifteen minutes they had a residential hall meeting for incoming freshman, and Tracy had been getting ready for the past hour; Sam had been rolling her eyes for about as long. How could anyone spend that much time on eye makeup? She tried to focus on the first draft of a poem she was writing, but the unattractive faces Tracy made as she used an eyelash curler kept distracting her.

Her writing had stalled, and, for lack of anything better to do, Sam mused on how to calculate the mathematical function that would generate the same perfect parabola that Tracy seemed to demand of her eyebrows. Sam had played differential calculus games in her head since learning how to graph equations in ninth grade.

No mathematical equation would produce the bizarre pattern on Tracy's too-short dress.

Sam glanced around the two-room double she shared but wasn't allowed to decorate. When they first met, both of them hauling boxes and sweating, Tracy had made no effort to hide her disdain at Sam's baggy jeans and T-shirt that read, *Let's eat, Grandma. Let's eat Grandma. Punctuation saves lives.*

"If you don't mind, I'll handle the wall art," Tracy had said, leaving no room for argument. Framed posters of classic movies hung in their common room, and Klimt's "The Kiss" hung in their bedroom. Sam would have chosen the periodic table for the common room and Frida Kahlo for the bedroom, but what did she know? Her mother was only the premiere artist of a small town in Vermont.

When Tracy was finally satisfied with her smoky eyes, she turned to Sam and issued a terse, “coming?” Sam rolled her eyes and hopped off the bed.

They walked into the common room of Yale’s Trumbull College, which showcased an impressive display of collegiate gothic architecture—stained glass windows, dark wood wainscoting, couches and chairs of soft brown leather that looked like they belonged in a CEO’s office, a fireplace, and leather-bound books lining built-in shelves. The room seemed to single-handedly represent everything Sam had ever imagined about an Ivy-League college.

The chairs and couches had been moved into a circle and were half-filled with other freshman. Once Tracy started flirting with a tall, tanned boy who looked like he belonged on the cover of *GQ*, Sam supposed her roommate would ignore her for the duration of the meeting. Tracy seemed singularly put out to be sharing living space with someone who cared so little about fashion.

Sam selected the chair farthest from the door, opened her notebook, and resumed writing, ignoring the jitters bouncing around her stomach. Students trickled in slowly, typically in pairs, which Sam guessed meant roommates. She glanced up occasionally to note newcomers, but was happy that her writing enabled her to avoid awkward introductions and small talk. The leather of the chair next to her squeaked as another student shifted in his seat, and Sam took solace in the fact that most of her classmates seemed as nervous as she was. If their attire gave anything away, they were for the most part preppy, sporty, or outdoorsy. So she was surprised to see a blonde girl enter wearing ripped jeans, scuffed cowboy boots, and a belt with a horseshoe buckle. Silver and turquoise jewelry stood in stark contrast to a black tank. She was alone and took a seat opposite Sam, gazing at her with open curiosity.

Sam blinked and dropped her eyes back to her writing. She didn’t really expect to be able to concentrate on poetry in a common room filled with anxious freshman, but neither did she expect that her stomach would suddenly feel like a piano string strung too tightly, its pitch not quite matching up with its appropriate tuning. When she stole another look at those sharp green eyes, she discovered they were

no longer studying her but were scanning the room. Whatever it was that made Sam's stomach sink, she told herself it wasn't disappointment.

Her new Residential Advisor headed to the middle of the room and said in a commanding voice, "Welcome to Yale, everyone. I'm Dustin Davis, a senior here in Yale's best residential college, Trumbull. I'm also a freshman advisor. I've met some of you individually as you were moving in, but I wanted to say in a more formal setting that I'm always here for you if you have questions or need someone to talk to. I'm an artist, and I'm pretty much always painting or sculpting something. So feel free to stop by my room any time, day or night. I'm really looking forward to getting to know you all better, especially since it's rare that freshman get to live in Trumbull—most of the residential colleges are too small to accommodate freshman and they live in Old Campus. So, the sixteen of you are really lucky."

Sam certainly felt lucky—Trumbull was closer to Science Hill than Old Campus.

Dustin continued: "Um, also one of the best things about college, to me, is meeting new people and having engaging conversations in the classroom, or in the laundry room. You're all here because you're smart and interesting. So, you know, with that in mind, how about we go around the room, and you each can say a little bit about yourself."

Sam typically struggled with remembering people, so she made a point to repeat names in her head and study the faces with which they corresponded, surreptitiously counting people using sweaty fingers pressed against her jeans. Some girl named Claire who came in late said she hadn't decided on a major yet, but definitely wanted to join an *a cappella* group. There was a boy named Dan—no, Doug?—whose parents ran an animal sanctuary in Montana. As they went around the circle, Sam practiced in her head what she would say when it was her turn, and she waited with a twinge of impatience to hear how the girl with the belt buckle and arresting eyes would introduce herself.

"I'm Natalie Romano." The cowboy-chic girl crossed her legs, and Sam may have dreamed it, but she seemed to speak straight to Sam. "I'm from San Francisco, and I think I'm majoring in psychology. Or archeology." She turned to the *a cappella* girl: "Hey roomie, I sing too,

so we should talk.” She paused a moment, then asked Dustin, “That piano over there. Can we play it?”

Sam glanced over her shoulder and noticed a black grand piano in the corner, the perfect accent to an already-perfect Ivy League room. Of course she played, Sam thought. Piano players, in Sam’s mind, were possessed of a unique combination of romance and rationality. It had been a seductive amalgam for Sam once in high school—not that that particular crush had gone anywhere. Sam had been the only out lesbian in her school—for all she knew, she was the only *actual* lesbian in Stowe. Just another reason she had been impatient to get out of that place. She’d tried to convince her parents to let her skip a grade—or more—but they’d informed her that emotional development was as important as intellectual and insisted she remain with students her own age.

“Sure, help yourself. Just not if student groups are holding meetings here, okay?” Dustin said.

Introductions continued, with Sam’s roommate Tracy bragging that her dad had an Academy Award. A cute boy whose name Sam forgot immediately offered to teach anyone who was interested how to swing dance, and a gangly one named Angelo confessed his love for science fiction. A cross-country runner shared the requisite personal details and then excused herself, saying, “Since I’m doing ten miles at six a.m., I guess I’d better hop to. Or, well. How would you say that without ending it in a preposition? Um...”

Sam’s mouth started moving before she could stop it. “The sentence structure you are seeking would be ‘hop to I had better.’ Contemporary linguists agree, however, that placing prepositions at the end of sentences is perfectly legitimate. Still, a precocious grammarian might try simply to rephrase the troublesome clause, such that ‘to’ isn’t even present in the sentence. You could just say ‘I had better get going.’”

When Sam stopped, she could feel the whole room staring at her. She swallowed. “I’m Sam. I’m from Stowe, Vermont. I write poetry, especially sonnets. I’m double-majoring in chemistry and biomedical engineering.” Willing the heat from her cheeks, she glanced up to find Natalie Romano smiling at her, while everyone else turned their attention to the boy seated on Sam’s left.

Much to her relief, the rest of the meeting passed uneventfully, and afterwards, while Natalie chatted with the girl named Claire about the various personalities of different *a cappella* groups, Sam quietly slipped out the heavy wooden door.

* * *

No one had ever accused Sam of being a dreamer, but she did like to stargaze. Liked it so much, in fact, that her father Jack had given her a high-end telescope when she was named high school valedictorian. Intent on graduating Yale with honors and preparing herself for an illustrious career as a doctor, Sam didn't allow herself much in the way of extracurricular activities. But it was a clear September night, and she was already a week ahead in her reading, so she gathered up her telescope and notebook and headed to the Trumbull courtyard.

The cool evening breeze was a welcome change from the stale air in her dorm room. Being outside with her telescope reminded her of home, and she could almost hear father's oft-repeated instructions talking her through the process of fitting parts together. She was still focusing the scope when she heard voices coming from the entryway next to hers. Willing herself to concentrate on the night sky, Sam caught snippets of a conversation between Natalie and Claire, who were evidently headed to *a cappella* rehearsal. As she crouched down to adjust the telescope's legs, she could faintly hear them discussing the songs they expected to sing later. Claire said something about an upcoming essay for European history.

Sam tried not to eavesdrop, but as they passed her, Natalie's voice grew louder, and she suspected that Natalie wanted to be overheard. "So have you met Sam? She seems really clever, and I think she'd be fun to get to know." They continued past her, and Sam stood up, watching their backs recede.

She was about to turn back to her telescope when Natalie glanced over her shoulder. The soft light in the courtyard flickered across her cheek, and Sam couldn't be sure, but she thought Natalie winked.

The night sky stretched on forever, and even with an impressively powerful telescope, she could never hope to penetrate its depths. Night

skies, she decided, had a lot in common with the subtle tones of Natalie's rich voice and the kaleidoscope of greens in her eyes.

* * *

There was nothing particularly special about Natalie—except to Sam, everything about her was special. Sam drowned in Natalie's easy smile, the melody of her laughter, and the flash in her eyes when they lighted upon Sam's. Natalie matched Sam's five-foot-seven height, and they were both lithe, bordering on skinny. But Natalie lived in her body with the ease and grace of someone who probably took ballet as a child. Sam was more comfortable relating real-life events to quotations from classic literature or reducing life's patterns to their underlying molecular structure. Where Sam was pale, Natalie's skin had a warmer hue, and despite her foggy Bay Area origins, she always appeared as though she'd just come in from a sunny beach. Her layered, dirty blonde hair begged to be tousled. Sam was smitten, and they'd never even had a real conversation.

Two weeks later, Sam got her first opportunity when she received an invitation from Natalie and Claire for a screening of *Casablanca* in their room. The e-mail was addressed to all the freshmen in the Residential College group, and Sam was torn between jealousy and relief that so many other people would be present the first time she'd be in Natalie's room.

When Sam walked in, the first to arrive, she was face to face with Natalie, alone together for the first time. God, how could she be this crazy about someone she barely knew? And what on earth could she even say to someone she'd thought about so much—fantasized about so much? It was like she'd bypassed actual getting-to-know-you conversation and they were already on intimate terms.

She needed to rewind. Hoping to create space between her emotions and the situation, she glanced around the room and was surprised to find framed portraits of Shakespeare, Austen, Poe, and Angelou hanging on the walls of the common room. Natalie stared at her, gauging her reaction. "You certainly have eclectic literary taste," Sam said.

"Claire let me decorate the common room if she could have the bedroom," Natalie said.

“So, what’s in there?” Sam asked, hoping she didn’t sound nervous asking about Natalie’s bedroom.

“Janis Joplin, Blondie, and Joan Jett. Claire, at least, has consistent taste.” Natalie bit her lip. “I’d offer you something to drink, but, um, we don’t have anything. We’re a little unpracticed in the art of hosting.”

“No worries. My mini-fridge is stocked. I’ll be right back.” Sam headed for the door, and Natalie followed her.

“The RSVP list was pretty big. You’re going to need some help.”

Although she was more or less indifferent to fashion, Sam noted that Natalie was sporting the J. Crew look in pressed chinos, boat shoes, and a lightweight salmon sweater. It was a far cry from the ripped jeans and cowboy boots. As she walked behind Natalie heading toward her dorm room, she tried not to stare at the way Natalie’s pants clung to her hips. Or to wonder how Natalie knew the way to her dorm room. She seemed hard to pin down, but that wasn’t going to deter Sam from trying.

Natalie was asking something about Vermont when Sam interrupted.

“So, you’re gay, right?”

Sam’s face flushed; God, she really needed to acquire a filter. There was something about college—or maybe it was something about Natalie—that made words just rush out of her mouth unbidden. “I mean, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked that. I didn’t mean to offend you. I think you make me nervous. Wow, you have really broad shoulders—do you swim?”

Natalie turned and stared at her, her face impassive. She leaned a bit closer to Sam, an insignificant gesture that somehow cut off all the airflow to Sam’s lungs.

Sam wondered if she was pissed or interested or something else altogether. The pause that followed felt like forever. She tried again. “So, you’re gay though, right?”

“No. No, I’m not,” Natalie said.

“Oh,” Sam said, entirely unable to keep the disappointment from her voice. Her shoulders dropped, and although Natalie offered her a small smile that enabled her to breathe again, her shallow inhaled and exhaled were essentially pointless now. A crush on a straight girl was the last thing Sam needed.

Everything she knew about lesbians she’d learned from AfterEllen.com during her junior year of high school, and as she stared at Natalie,

she tried to pinpoint what had tripped her gaydar. Maybe it was the slight swagger to Natalie's walk; or the interested expression on her face whenever pretty women walked by; or the raw sexuality she radiated which—when contrasted with her gentle demeanor, make-up, and feminine haircut—struck Sam as just a tad masculine. Maybe it was just hopeful thinking.

Natalie grinned at her. "You didn't offend me though. You're funny." Something in the way she looked at Sam made coming out entirely unnecessary. Really, Sam never seemed to need to say anything—even in high school, people just intuited.

Natalie turned and continued toward Sam's room. It took Sam a moment to follow. "Has anyone ever told you that you look and sound a little like Jodie Foster?"

This time Natalie laughed out loud. "Isn't that just another version of the same question? Besides, she has blue eyes, doesn't she?" They reached Sam's door, and Natalie leaned against the frame. "Mine are green. Like yours. Also, she's prettier than me." Those eyes turned jade with mischief and as Sam stared into them, she realized she was in big trouble.

Unable to shake the feeling that Natalie was flirting with her, Sam swallowed and tried to regroup. "That's not true," she said. With Natalie staring at her like that, Sam lost track of where they were. Of what day it was and who was president. Of what her own name was. All she knew was Natalie's eyes and the pounding of her own heart in her ears. Eventually, Natalie nodded at her door, and Sam fumbled for her keys.

"So, what've you got in your fridge? I don't drink soda."

"Of course you don't, California. Let me guess...coconut water? No, wait, something even weirder and healthier. Aloe water?" At least her composure was returning.

Natalie made a face. "That stuff is vile."

Sam unlocked the door and walked to her mini-fridge, grateful for the cool air on her face and a minute to slow her racing thoughts. Sam's crush aside, maybe they could still be friends. Very good friends. Hell, it was college—people change and try new things in college all the time. Maybe Natalie would, too...

No, that line of thought would only make Sam miserable, she decided with a sigh. She handed a Pellegrino to Natalie and claimed one for herself.

Natalie clinked their bottles together. "I think this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship," she said, smiling.

They gathered as many bottles of sparking juice and water as they could carry and headed back to the party. As Natalie watched Rick, Ilsa, and Victor navigate the waters between politics and love, Sam stole glances at her. Bogart's captivating performance aside, Sam was pretty sure she would start a war before she'd let Natalie board a plane and fly away from her with someone else.

* * *

"Hey there, Sporty Spice. Nice pigskin," Sam said as she approached Natalie, who was sprawled in the grass of the Trumbull courtyard, her head pillowed on a football. Her casual posture was so inviting, it seemed to make the pointed arches of the college's windows soften. "May I join you?" Sam asked.

Natalie patted the ground next to her. "I was actually hoping if I hung out in this courtyard long enough, some shy chemistry major would happen by, and I'd persuade her to play catch with me." In a San Francisco 49ers hat and Giants baseball tee, Natalie had apparently dressed for the occasion. Every time she saw Natalie, Sam learned something new about fashion; today, it was that mixing sports in one's attire wasn't the *faux pas* she would have expected.

The invitation to lie next to her made Sam's skin tingle, and she tried not to read too much into it. The ground was a little damp, there were sticks in all the wrong places, and still there was no place Sam would rather be. "You know, you won't be able to play the piano every night if you jam your fingers playing catch."

Natalie's eyes were closed, so she followed suit, enjoying the cool breeze drifting across her face. They relaxed in silence for a bit, smelling the sweet decay of fallen leaves. The sound of feet crunching on brown grass filled their ears as students passed nearby, talking about classes, or parties, or nothing at all. Fall was in full effect, and the bright sunlight had little power to do more than warm their skin. The thin T-shirt she

was wearing offered scant protection from the chill seeping up through the ground and leaving goose bumps on her skin. Still, the moment felt supremely perfect.

She was hyperaware of Natalie's breathing and the heat coming off her body. She had never associated temperature with a smell before, but she knew now she'd never be able to stop smelling something faintly citrusy whenever she felt Natalie's warmth.

When Natalie spoke again, Sam had almost forgotten what they had been talking about. "Sorry, does it bother you that I play piano so late?"

It was a good thing Natalie's eyes were closed. Heat crept up Sam's neck and into her cheeks as she realized she'd just given herself away. For the past six weeks, every Monday through Thursday evening at eleven thirty p.m., Sam would sneak into the back of the Trumbull College common room and listen while Natalie poured her heart out into the eight foot Bosendorfer. Sam had checked the name painted above the keyboard once, just in case she had an opportunity to impress Natalie with her knowledge of piano makers. She'd also done some research on classical composers and the characteristics of different time periods. It would seem that the late Romantic and Impressionist periods were Natalie's favorite, and she alternated between Chopin, Ravel, Debussy, and Prokofiev. One night, after a particularly dynamic performance of a Rachmaninoff sonata, Natalie had wiped tears from her eyes, and Sam wondered what it would feel like to be the piano keys underneath Natalie's hands, being played over and over again by passionate and knowing hands.

Careful to respect Natalie's need for a private outlet, Sam always slipped away from the common room before she was noticed. "Actually." Sam cleared her throat. "I was wondering...if you'd teach me."

Natalie bolted upright. "Really?" She squealed. "I'd love to! What kind of music do you want to learn—classical or pop? Or jazz? Jazz is hard. But there's a lot of freedom in jazz. Of course, pop is hard too because you'll want to sing while you play, and that's more challenging than patting your head and rubbing your stomach."

"Hey, you're rambling." Sam propped herself up on her elbows, carried away on the wave of Natalie's enthusiasm. She took a deep breath, and, for once in their relationship, managed to say something

measured and thoughtful. “Let’s just start with ‘Twinkle Twinkle’ and go from there.” When Natalie beamed at her, she felt like she had to say something more. “I’m excited. You’re really talented.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. But I am a good teacher,” she said softly.

Sam laughed. “Oh yeah? How do you even know?”

“Oh. I, uh, well, I give lessons.”

“You do?” She’d never seen anyone else in the common room with Natalie. The idea of Natalie teaching someone else made sparks of jealousy flash through Sam.

“Yeah. On Sundays, I go to this homeless shelter called Open Door in downtown New Haven, and I give lessons to the kids. I discovered the place after the first week of classes.”

Sam was a little stunned. She rolled onto her side and propped her head up on her hand. “A homeless shelter has a piano?”

Natalie mirrored her position. “Well, I bought them a keyboard. When I decided to go to Yale for college, I vowed that I wouldn’t get wrapped up in Ivy League money and snobbery and all that. It’s too easy to forget that not everyone comes from privilege, that there are different ways to be smart. That it’s important to give back.” Natalie paused and studied Sam for a moment. “You can come sometime, if you want.”

“Um,” Sam rubbed the back of her neck. She’d never knowingly met a homeless person. “Yeah, sure. I’d like that.” Because, if Natalie would be there, of course she’d like it.

“It’ll be fun. Hey, speaking of fun...”

Sam groaned.

“Brent’s throwing a party this weekend. You should come.”

Sam had no desire to watch Natalie and her new boyfriend Brent find creative ways to be constantly touching each other at the party, like they had done all over campus. If she were being honest with herself, she’d probably admit that there was little wisdom in spending more time with Natalie, who was clearly unavailable to her. But every now and then she was convinced that whatever spark she felt when they exchanged glances was mutual. She hadn’t expected that one of the first things she would learn in college was the intractability of hope.

Regardless, if anything was going to happen between them, it certainly wouldn't be at a party thrown by Natalie's boyfriend. And watching Brent attack Natalie's mouth as if it were a hot dog would hardly help Sam move on. "Thanks, but I have plans."

"Spending the weekend in the lab again? You know, college ain't just about book learnin'. There's this thing called 'letting loose.'"

"Yeah, I know. I just like what I do." It was true, but that didn't make the words sound any less lame to Sam.

"Ugh, I envy you. I don't think psych is for me. I was thinking architecture for a while, but I don't own enough black clothes to fit in. I've finally decided against music. Not sure what that leaves me with." Natalie poked Sam in the ribs and giggled. "Not sure with what that leaves me."

Ignoring the tingling Natalie's fingers produced when they touched her, Sam said, "I did tell you that modern grammarians find it acceptable to end sentences with a preposition. So does my Aunt Marian, who happens to be a librarian."

"You're kidding, right? Marian's a librarian? That's so obvious."

"Isn't your Uncle Art an artist?" Sam asked.

"Yeah, but I think he was trying to do it ironically. I can't imagine librarians doing things ironically."

"I assure you, librarians have an impressive capacity for all literary devices. Anyway, I hope you have fun at the party." Sam stood and extended her hand to help Natalie up.

"You wanna play some catch before you go back to cloning sheep or whatever it is you do in your lab coat?" Natalie batted her eyes and pouted prettily.

In that moment Sam realized that no power on earth could make her say no when Natalie pouted.

* * *

Sam walked back toward her dorm room after a particularly frustrating afternoon. Her lab partner hadn't shown up, and she was torn between moving on alone, which might be interpreted as mean, and waiting, which was undeniably unproductive. The middle ground she had opted for was the worst of both worlds: she had gone through

the motions to familiarize herself with the project, but hadn't turned anything in and wouldn't receive any credit for the work she'd done. At the beginning of the semester, she had briefly considered asking Natalie's roommate, Claire, who was also in her chemistry class, to be her lab partner; she decided against it, worried about things getting messy if they didn't work well together. Now she was regretting opting for a stranger, an unknown quantity who was proving disappointing.

Juggling people always seemed harder than juggling science or poetry. Maybe that's why she would never take a creative writing class, even at Yale, which had an excellent poetry program; there were just too many *people* in classes.

Come to think of it, it had been a while since she'd carved out time to write. Maybe an evening alone with her notebook and some Miles Davis could be her reward for refusing to throw her lab partner under the bus. If the past two months were any indication, Tracy could be counted on being out, getting beyond drunk at some frat house, and stumbling home around four a.m. Sam entered the courtyard with unseeing eyes, as lines of poetry formed in her head. She ran into something and, startled, leaned back so that she could get enough distance to focus on Natalie. As if literally running into someone wasn't disturbing enough, she could smell the mint on Natalie's breath, an undeniably common smell that nonetheless made her lips tingle.

Natalie grabbed Sam's shoulders to steady her, and Sam was grateful that their near-collision provided cover while she remembered to breathe. She couldn't prevent her gaze from dropping to Natalie's lips, and a ripple of desire surged through her.

"You have to come with me. Right now," Natalie said.

Sam took an inordinately large step back and tried to catch her breath. "I do? Is everything okay? Is there some kind of emergency?"

"Yes, a fashion emergency."

Sam glanced at Natalie's clothes, relieved to be looking at something other than her lips. "Sweater vests aren't exactly fashion-forward, but I hardly think this qualifies as an emergency."

She probably deserved the eye roll she got in response. "I want to try out a new look for the *Coyote Ugly* party tonight, but I need another set of eyes. And some wheels to drive me to the mall. Please?"

Sam glanced down at her baggy jeans and T-shirt that read *Geology rocks!* “I hardly think I’m qualified to offer opinions in this area.”

Natalie looked at the shirt and laughed. “You’ll do just fine. There’s ice cream in it for you.”

As if she really needed bribing to go somewhere with Natalie. “I’m parked in the lot.”

Twenty minutes later, Sam fiddled with the zipper on her jacket and waited for Natalie to come out of the dressing room. Department stores made her uneasy. There were too many designers, too many racks, and too many digits in the price tag. Convinced that agreeing to this excursion was a terrible idea, she vacillated between hoping and dreading that Natalie might ask if the leather pants she took into the dressing room made her butt look good.

The latch on the dressing room door slid open, and Natalie emerged wearing said pants, which might as well have been painted on, stilettos held together by straps and a thin silver chain, and a top that was more of a corset than anything else. “Well, what do you think?”

The zipper tag on Sam’s jacket slipped out of her sweaty hands and she swallowed hard. “It depends on what you’re going for. This is a far cry from the cowboy look you had on the first time we met.”

“I’ve moved on from that.”

“To Julia Roberts before she meets Richard Gere?”

Natalie looked down. “I guess it’s a little much. But I tried the sporty look, and that definitely didn’t work for me.”

“You mean the other day in the courtyard when we played catch? I thought you looked good.” God, being asked to critique Natalie’s attire was such a double-edged sword which seemed to slice through Sam’s stomach—on the one hand, it gave her an excuse to stare, but on the other hand, it was tortuous to gaze at something she’d probably never have. Natalie looked good in everything, and she probably looked good out of it too, and maybe Sam needed to stop spending so much time with a straight girl.

“It’s not about looking good, Sam. It’s about figuring out how to express who I am through a particular style. So I’m just going to keep trying them until I find one that works.”

“Well, I’m sure Brent would like this one.”

“Brent? Oh, I’m with Marcus now. He’s way more open-minded—Brent was always so judgy.”

How Natalie knew this about Brent, since they never seemed to use their lips for talking, was anyone’s guess. Sam was glad Natalie had dumped Brent, and not just because that whole Wolf’s Head Secret Society thing he was always going on about was downright creepy. Natalie had said, “At least he’s not interested in Skull and Bones,” but all of the Ancient Eight secret societies at Yale seemed equally awful. And Sam wasn’t sure why a freshman would be obsessed with them anyway—they were for seniors. Sam hadn’t met this new guy, which was just as well, considering she’d been having the worst dreams lately in which Brent kept interrupting conversations she was having with Natalie to kiss his girlfriend, put his arm around her shoulder, and walk away with her, leaving Sam alone and pathetic. “Well, Marcus then. He’d like it.”

“Nah, you’re right. Wait here—I’ve got another idea.” Natalie disappeared into a sea of clothing racks and Sam sat down on a bench. She studied her own clothing, wondering if she had found a style that expressed her essence. If so, she was boring and nerdy. Which was more or less fine with her, she supposed.

Natalie breezed past her with an armful of clothing and shut the dressing room door. “Have you thought about what classes you want to take next semester?” she called, her voice muffled by whatever she was pulling over her head.

“Organic Chemistry, Molecular Biology, Math 215, Physics 217, and Advanced Latin.”

Natalie opened the door and stuck her head out. “That’s too many classes. But, more importantly, you’re not taking a single fun course. Where’s your sense of adventure?”

Never having particularly valued a sense of adventure, Sam was pretty sure she hadn’t properly cultivated one. “Well, I’ll admit the math course sounds dull, but I’m excited about everything else. Why, what are you taking?”

Natalie closed the door again. “I don’t know yet. There’s a class in the English department on American bestsellers that sounds great. I was kind of hoping we could take it together.”

Sam hesitated before answering. The path toward excellence in medicine was specific and direct, and didn’t allow for other interests.

But she had always believed herself possessed of an infinite capacity for expansion; while others might struggle to balance a rigorous premed course load, she felt confident she could fold in a couple of unrelated courses and still maintain an impeccable GPA. Besides, if there was anything she could make room for, it was Natalie—in her course schedule, in her always-churning mind, in her heart, in her bed. She checked that line of thinking before she did something embarrassing like ooze into a puddle on the floor. “Actually, that does sound great. I don’t need to take my math requirement until next year anyway.”

She heard the door latch open, and Natalie walked toward her wearing acid-washed jeans and a midriff-baring white tank with “U.S.A.” in rhinestones across the chest. She twirled. “Do you like it? In the movie, it’s basically what Piper Perabo wears the first time she works at the bar, before she gets all corrupted and stuff.”

Sam was pretty sure John Goodman would be as pissed at this outfit as he was at whatever his daughter wound up wearing at the end of the movie, but at least this was slightly more conservative than the leather ensemble Natalie had just discarded. “You look great,” Sam said, trying not to stare at her taut stomach. “And, your outfit relates to the movie, so, you know, that’s cool.” Sam put her hands in her jacket pockets before her fingers reached out of their own accord and caressed Natalie’s exposed skin.

Natalie glanced at herself in the mirror and fussed with the pocket of the jeans. “Yeah, this works.”

On her way back into the dressing room, she started removing the top, and Sam couldn’t look away. How the hell was she supposed to be just friends with this girl? She wasn’t even sure if she’d survive a romance with her—being near Natalie made her feel like she was on one of those carnival rides that take you straight up in the air, really high, and then drop you. When she asked, “So who’s teaching this bestsellers class?” she was pretty sure her voice cracked.

“A new professor named Bell. Elizabeth Bell, I think. I looked her up on the English department website, and she looks really young. Cute too. Dark hair, dimples, librarian glasses.”

Sam tried not to read anything into Natalie’s description, but seriously, how many straight girls would call a potential female professor

cute? She quickly tamped down the flicker of hope. “I don’t know about young professors. I’m not sure they know what they’re doing yet.” Blinking, she was startled to hear those words come from her mouth; historically, she believed people new to their field were cutting edge and, frankly, better at their job. They had something to prove, which made them work harder. They were also typically more self-aware and familiar with the latest schools of thought in their discipline. It was possible, she supposed, that she was hedging about taking a class with Natalie. While they enjoyed easy repartee about non-academic topics, she wasn’t sure they could maintain their connection in a class together.

“Well, we can sign up and if she’s awful, drop it later.”

On the other hand, Sam reasoned, maybe if she spent more time with Natalie, or saw her dozing in class, she’d find a way to get over this infatuation that wasn’t doing either of them any good. “I suppose. Sure.”

Natalie breezed past her, holding her new outfit, and headed toward the cashier. “And even if she’s a bad teacher, at least we’ll have something nice to look at.”

Sam thought about teasing Natalie for picking a class just to spend time with a pretty girl, but something about the pot and the kettle both being black stopped her.

Natalie paid, grabbed her bag of new clothes, and walked past Sam toward the door, giving her a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks for your help, Nerd. Oh, there’s a little something in here for you, too.”

Sam’s cheek burned, and by the time she could get her feet to move, Natalie was halfway across the parking lot, leaving Sam to hurry after her. “You got me something?” she called, and a T-shirt hit her in the face. She pulled it off her head and read it: *Adorkable*. When she got to the car, Natalie was waiting for her. “Are you calling me adorable or a dork?”

“Yes.” Grinning, Natalie deposited her purchases into the back of the car and dropped into the passenger seat.

Sam struggled to come up with a reply. Hope coursed through her veins, and if she closed her eyes, she could easily imagine her girlfriend Natalie giving her a thoughtful and slightly flirty present in the early

stages of courtship. She braved a look at Natalie, swallowing the image and concentrating on the fact that she was straight.

“Ice cream?” Natalie asked, the picture of innocence.

“Um, yeah. Of course,” Sam said, sliding into the driver’s seat. There was something about the easy way in which Natalie commanded situations that made her feel as though she was a passenger in her own car. Hell, if she wasn’t careful, Natalie might make her feel like a passenger in her own life.

“What’s your favorite ice cream flavor?” Natalie asked questions about mundane issues as if the answer mattered more to her than any other possible thread of conversation they could ever pursue, and it was more than a little addictive. As Sam pointed the car toward Ben and Jerry’s, relief washed over her that she wouldn’t be expected to give a response to Natalie calling her adorable. It was also possible that she was collecting bits of insignificant information about Natalie to catalogue and obsess over when, alone in her dorm room, she attempted to sleep that night.

* * *

There was something very visually appealing about her chemistry problem sets. Sam had never been that interested in drawing, much to her mother’s disappointment, but sketching the bonds between molecules for her problem sets made Sam feel like an artist. She could envision her mother’s take on the images she’d created, water colors on a canvas, framed and hung above Sam’s bed at home. Eva would paint it if she asked, but Sam had never been comfortable commissioning work from her mother. Eva had given her so much already.

Because she was significantly more adept at painting with words than oils, when she completed her last problem set before Thanksgiving break, she wrote a sonnet about the images on the pages. It was better, she reasoned, than writing poetry about a straight woman she didn’t have a chance with. Besides, she had seen a flier on the corkboard in the Trumbull Hall common room inviting submissions for the annual *Yale Undergraduate Poetry Anthology*. Maybe she could submit anonymously.

On her way to chem class the next day, she swung by the English department and snuck the paper with her sonnet on it into an envelope

labeled *Poetry Anthology Submissions* pinned by the office mailboxes. It was a bit disappointing to walk away knowing she hadn't written her name or e-mail address on her submission. If they accepted the poem, she would find out only when the anthology was released. But she didn't write it for the recognition—not really. It just captured for her the artistry of chemical bonds.

She was still musing on her decision to show the poem to other people when she handed in her problem set before chem class started. Before she could take her seat, however, Dr. Jeremiah West asked for a moment of her time.

“Samantha Latham.” He crossed his arms and gazed at her through thick glasses. “I have been assuming you wish to major in chemistry. Please disabuse me of this assumption if I'm off base.”

Considering Dr. West wasn't one for small talk, Sam felt distinctly awkward standing there with an entire classroom of students glaring at her back. “That's correct, sir.”

“Excellent. I'm in search of a new research assistant. Would something like this interest you?”

Sam's neck almost hurt from looking up at her exceedingly tall, broad-shouldered professor. As if he weren't tall enough, his salt-and-pepper hair added another couple of inches to his height. His eyes were so black, she couldn't see really discern his pupils, and while his jaw was set in a grim line, those eyes seemed to smile at her. Truth be told, she had been a shade nervous about signing up for his course; his research on DNA replication and repair was having international effects on medical treatments for chromosomal abnormalities. It was no secret that he wasn't much for teaching; but since even the most world-renowned researchers appointed at Yale had pedagogical requirements, once a year he taught a first-year undergraduate course in chemistry. No one could quite figure out why he preferred teaching beginners, but Sam suspected it might have something to do with grooming bright-eyed freshmen. “I'd be honored, sir.”

His smile made him a lot less foreboding. “Please e-mail your TA before the semester is over—he or she can put you in touch with my scheduler. Once we've talked through what I'm looking for in an

assistant, you can take winter break to decide, and we'll hit the ground running next term."

Sam wished she had more to say than "yes sir," but she was distracted by all the whispers behind her. The *s* in her name had a way of cutting through a room, and she always knew when people were talking about her. She shook Dr. West's absolutely huge hand, wondering briefly if he ever played basketball, and took her seat amidst dirty looks from some of her classmates. Claire caught her eye, though, and gave her a thumbs-up.

Between her excitement at being singled out by a brilliant professor and her edginess about the poetry anthology, class was a blur. Thanksgiving break was coming just in time—she was looking forward to clearing her head.

* * *

The day before Thanksgiving break, Sam walked through the Trumbull College courtyard, her feet crunching on snow that reflected light from the arched windows all around her. She glanced, as was her habit, at the tree she and Natalie had laid under when Sam first asked for piano lessons, and smiled at the memory. Flags with the three bulls, signifying Trumbull College, hung on both sides of the door to the common room, which she managed to open and close silently. She didn't really need to sneak in, since she was having a scheduled piano lesson with Natalie instead of surreptitiously watching her play, but some habits died hard. The grandeur of the room washed over Sam, reminding her that whatever else was going on, she was at Yale, a singularly impressive university that prized both history and innovation and analytic rigor and creativity.

Relieved that Natalie was the only other person there, she walked slowly toward the piano, gazing at Natalie's back as she played a mournful piece Sam had never heard before. If she had to guess, Natalie had had a bad day. But what did she know about making music? Instrumentalists seemed infinitely capable of summoning emotion to match whatever piece they were playing. Stopping at the side of the piano, Sam had a clear view of its keyboard and the way Natalie's fingers danced across the keys. Piano playing required such strength, such percussive motions

from each finger, and yet the music coming from the instrument in front of her lilted across the space between the strings and her ears, each note trickling over the one before, cascading seamlessly from high to low until it ended with a dark chord. The song perfectly suited the atmosphere of the room itself; the walls, the vaulted ceiling, and the ornate rugs seemed just as likely as the piano to produce the somber harmonies.

When she finished, Natalie put her hands in her lap and gazed at the keys for a minute. Whatever it was she was experiencing, she blinked it away and turned to Sam. “Hey you. You ready for this?” She scooted over on the piano bench and patted the impossibly small free space next to her.

Fervently hoping her fingers weren’t shaky and that they wouldn’t slip off the keys from sweat, Sam perched on the bench. Try as she might, she couldn’t create any space between her hips and Natalie’s on a bench that small. The heat from Natalie’s body made Sam lightheaded, and the piano keys swam in front of her. She cleared her throat.

“Okay, do you know where middle C is?” Natalie asked.

Sam pointed, remembering some of the basics from grade school music class. Natalie put her index finger on the key, brushing against Sam’s, and suddenly this whole thing seemed like the worst idea Sam ever had.

“Good, so, can you identify all the keys?”

Sam nodded, not trusting her voice. She felt like a puppy when she looked at Natalie, waiting for instructions and validation.

“Full scales have eight notes, but let’s just start with pentascales.” As Natalie explained the intervals comprising five-note scales and then showed Sam, she poured her energy into teaching with single-minded determination. It was a side of her Sam had never seen: confident yet generous—and focused. Above all, focused. So, she did have the ability to stick with something. That had to mean that she had the ability to stick with someone—despite the string of boyfriends she’d had in the first few months of college.

“Very good, that’s the five-note scale in C. Each key can have its own scale—you just change the starting note and adjust the intervals accordingly. So the C-sharp scale looks like this, see?” She played, and

Sam imitated her movements. Music was basically math, with pitch and rhythm fitting into recognizable patterns.

“Okay, five-note scales are relatively easy—the fingering is pretty much straightforward.” Natalie took Sam’s hand in hers. “Other skills will require you to master fingering. This is number one.” She gently squeezed the tip of Sam’s thumb before moving on to the index finger, which she held briefly. “Number two.” When she moved on to the middle finger, Sam’s throat went dry. “Three.” Sam barely heard her say “four” as Natalie took her ring finger; her heartbeat seemed to drown out all thought. “Five,” Natalie said, and Sam’s legs trembled.

Natalie described the intervals that comprised eight-note scales, then demonstrated, then accompanied Sam. She was attentive when Sam faltered, offering gentle feedback and soft words of encouragement, and Sam gave herself over to Natalie’s care. Eight-note scales led to arpeggios, with their fingers, wrists, arms, moving in synchronicity. Natalie’s breath sounded louder than the piano, and Sam’s chest rose and fell with it. Making music together seemed to join their heartbeats as much as their fingers, and it was the most erotic experience of Sam’s life.

Eventually, Natalie glanced at her watch. “Oh, wow, we’ve been at it for two hours. I’m so sorry, Sam, but I have to run—I’m meeting Travis,” she said, kissing Sam’s cheek.

“Thanks,” Sam murmured, reeling from the connection they’d just shared, and the abrupt way Natalie severed it. As Natalie slipped out the door, Sam was aware for the first time of the chill in the air of the drafty common room. Someone might have turned off all the lights and heat, she might have been locked in that room by herself for hours—that’s how alone she felt. She walked slowly toward the door, her legs made of wood. The intensity of their lesson couldn’t have come from her alone—it just couldn’t have.

Maybe Natalie just needed time.

* * *

Considering neither of her parents would tolerate her presence in the kitchen for more than ten minutes at a time, Thanksgiving morning was a dull affair. Her repeated offers to help with the feast rebuffed,

Sam wandered from room to room until she finally admitted it was no use pretending she wasn't going to e-mail Natalie. Besides, she'd started composing the e-mail in her head during the drive home the day before, and she was generally pleased with its tone and arc. As she settled down with her laptop in her father's downstairs office, Aphrodite purred at her feet.

Hey Natalie,

Salutations from the Northeast! I trust your travels home were uneventful—I seem to remember you mentioning that you often fall asleep before the plane leaves the gate, and a flight attendant usually has to wake you up to exit. You seem to have quite a talent for sleeping.

My visit home has thus far been nothing short of dull. My mother has been laboring in her studio over some new project, and my father has been seeing patients in his office downtown. Well, to the extent that Stowe has a downtown. Both of them, independently and repeatedly, instructed me not to bring work home for the holidays. So while they spend the better part of Thanksgiving toiling away, I'm quite pleased to have sneaked my chemistry textbook home in my suitcase underneath my socks. I've been reading it in front of the television, a blanket on my lap ready to hide my contraband, should either of them reenter the house.

The Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade has just wrapped up, and the bird for tonight's dinner is now resting on top of the stove. I might have followed my father around the kitchen all morning in a vain endeavor to snag snacks from his ample supply, only to have him repeatedly instruct me to whistle so that the sound would confirm for him I had neither sticky fingers nor a mouth full of food.

That concludes my account on the morning's activities. I'll continue my report later tonight, provided we all survive the gastronomic catastrophe that is overeating. Happy Thanksgiving, Natalie.

*Best,
Sam*

* * *

Unlike the typical Thanksgiving feasts at the Latham house, organized by Jack and attended by various Stowe residents he invited, dinner this year was a quiet affair: just the three Lathams and their neighbor Dolores, whose constant chatter relieved the rest of them from talking.

“Jack, you simply must talk to that man who drives the snow plow, before the weather gets worse. Every year, he plows in my mailbox and you have to come and shovel it for me, and it’s just ridiculous. My friend Alice knows his son—Asher or Aaron or something—and she says the son says his father is very open to constructive critiques about his snowplow driving, since he’s only been doing it a couple of years.” She reached into the pocket of her cardigan and extracted a slip of paper. “Here, I wrote down his number. I would call him myself, but you know how I am with talking to people I don’t know.”

All indications were that Dolores would talk the ear off anyone who picked up the phone and said hello to her, whether she knew them or not. Eva pushed her turkey and stuffing around her plate. Sam hadn’t seen her put a single bite of food into her mouth. Jack pocketed the plowman’s number.

Putting a forkful of potatoes in her mouth did nothing to deter the cascade of words flowing out of Dolores. “Eva, I was hoping we could talk about having a garage sale in the spring. I’ve got so much stuff—and I think it’s breeding. Every time I look around I seem to have more stuff. I’m sure you have art projects you could sell, and maybe even some of Sam’s clothes and such from high school.”

The pointed look from Dolores made Sam squirm, and she glanced down at her sweatshirt, which read *Stowe Junior High*. She hadn't grown much since then and had never bothered to purge her clothes.

"And listen, both of you," she continued, pointing her fork at Eva and Jack, "they still need volunteer couples to lead off the dancing at the hospital charity event this Christmas. You two are so photogenic, and Jack is one of the few men with rhythm in this whole state. So can I tell the committee you'll do it? It would be such a relief to have decent dancers this time."

Jack stabbed at his turkey as though it might still be alive.

Eva looked up from her plate. "I don't think we can make it this year, Dolores. Sorry."

Dolores looked at Sam, who shrugged. "Well, I'll just have to ask someone else, then. Samantha, tell me about your classes at Yale. I remember when my boy Ronnie went away to college. He wore a jacket and tie to class every day. I hear the students are wearing sweat pants these days; my, how things change. Are you meeting new people? I've lived in this town my whole life, me and my Reginald, God bless his soul. We always planned on travelling together after he retired. Well, we missed our chance, and I'm not up for going it alone. Besides, this town is chock full of interesting people. Mind you, we've got our share of dummies too. Have you heard about that girl who works the ticket booth at the movie theater? She got fired because she told people PG-13 meant they had to be *under* thirteen to see the movie. She was turning away grown men from that new Tom Cruise movie. Not that I can understand why grown men want to see a Tom Cruise movie to begin with."

Sam wondered why Dolores bothered asking questions when she never gave people a chance to answer. Still, it was unusual that her parents weren't cracking jokes and teasing Dolores; this year, even her constant chatter couldn't thaw whatever ice separated Sam's mom from her dad. Sam was relieved when they all surrendered their forks and declared themselves full.

Dolores made some vague offers to help with the clean-up, but Eva shooed her away. After walking Dolores to the door, Sam went straight to the kitchen to tackle the dishes, hoping to give her parents some space to talk. Sadly, her parents refused to let her do all the work; they

washed and dried in silence, and eventually Sam hummed to fill the void. Once the kitchen was cleaned, she headed to her father's vacant office with a book, pretending to read and clicking *get message* on her laptop every couple of minutes. So it was merely coincidental and not at all obsessively planned that she retrieved Natalie's return e-mail as soon as it was sent.

Dearest Sam,

I'm glad you wrote. Your family sounds funny and sweet. I hope I get to meet them someday.

I used to love our family trek after Thanksgiving dinner from our house in the Presidio to the Land's End beach, but I've grown more acutely aware of my family's failings during this little voyage. My aunt complains the whole walk about her knee, but she refuses to see a doctor about it, and a journey that used to take us twenty minutes now takes forty. My two older cousins were stoned, and they spent the entire time giggling at nothing. And my uncle was belligerent and ranting about politics after too much Jack Daniels. It's funny as we get older, how we realize the faults in the adults around us. I never noticed that kind of thing growing up. My younger brother remains oblivious, which I suspect is for the best. His idealized visions of our family will probably collapse when he leaves for college in three years, like mine did. I think leaving the nest changes your perspective.

How are your parents getting along? I remember you saying there had been a lot of tension there recently. Is there snow in Stowe? Hey, what do you know? That rhymed.

*Ciao,
N.*

Knowing she might seem desperate and needy, and feeling disgusted with herself for it, she hit *reply* immediately.

N.,

Why don't you sign your actual name? Do you dislike it? Did typing such a lengthy epistle leave your fingers too weary to strike those six additional keys? Are you writing from a secret personality you possess but have thus far been nervous about revealing?

There is indeed snow in Stowe. The sloping ground is aglow. The glistening white blanket stretches across many a furlough. Mother Nature has put on quite a show, sending twinkling flakes to embrace the rosy cheeks of those below.

I miss school. I imagine I'm supposed to be too cool to say things like that, but I trust now that I'm in college I can embrace more openly my love of learning. I'm at home in the lab among glass containers waiting to be filled with solutions, both liquid and metaphoric. Here I'm lost between my mother's infectious sadness and my father's anger. Even in the same room, the three of us are often solitary, separated by seas of troubles, waves of past accusations or slights, tsunamis of fear and resentment. No lifeboats to unite us in the struggle for survival. Only individual life vests, garish in their brightness and insufficiency.

I digress. School. Science and medicine and the time-honored, noble goal of working for the betterment of your fellow man. Or woman. Fellow person just doesn't have the right ring. Fellow fellow would alliterate, but alas is similarly male-centric. Fellow failures, my mother might propose. Fellow fakers, might be my father's cynical rejoinder.

BLYTHE RIPPON

Repeated digressions. Must be the late hour. We were discussing school. I return on Saturday. I hope to see you shortly thereafter. May your travels be safe and free of turbulence in all its forms.

*Best,
Sam*

* * *

It was the day after Thanksgiving, and Sam felt like a small child again. Although things had been strained between them for years, Sam's parents had rarely fought, her father knowing Eva was too fragile to handle it. The few times when they had disagreed about something serious, Jack simply fled to Boston to stay with his bachelor brother, and Eva retreated inside herself, the bout of depression which followed often lasting up to a month. Sam alternated between calling her father, pleading with him to return, and sitting by Eva's side, encouraging her to eat or work.

But this rift differed in significant ways, the raised voices not the least of them. Sam didn't know what precipitated this particular altercation, but she escaped to Bear Pond Books to get some studying done, and when she returned, her dad was thrusting a stack of boxes haphazardly into the back of his car.

Sam put her car into park and walked toward his Mercedes. "Dad? What's going on?"

Jack straightened. "Hey there, peanut. Look, I'm sorry about this. I really am. But I have to—I can't take this. Your mother and I aren't good for each other anymore." He put his hands on Sam's shoulders. "Listen, I want to talk about this with you. I do. But right now I just need to go." He picked up a box of books from the ground, wedged it between his medical bag and tennis racket, and slammed the trunk shut. "I'll call you from Boston tomorrow after the dust has settled." He kissed her cheek.

Anger bubbled through Sam's veins and threatened to erupt, and she stood rooted in place, trying to access a logical argument that might convince Jack to stay. Her father was immune to emotional pleas, prizing

rationality over all else. Surely there was a sensible reason to unpack the car and go inside.

Jack walked to the driver's side and opened the door. He was sliding into the seat when she pulled herself together. She rushed to the door and used her body to stop him from closing it. "I don't know what the heck happened between you two, but you can't just abandon her. She needs you." It was the best she could come up with, and the begging in her voice made her cringe.

"That's just the problem, Sam. That's not a marriage. That's dependency. I'm not her husband any more." He paused. "And I'll be damned if I'm going to be her nursemaid."

Sam dropped her hands from the car door and took a step back as though the blow he dealt was physical. "Jesus, Dad, that's harsh."

"It's honest." He reached out for the door, and Sam blocked him again.

"Look, I get it. She's challenging. But you're not a quitter, and—"

"Sam? Sam, are you home?" Eva's voice came from the living room window.

Torn between planting her feet by her father's car to obstruct his getaway and hurrying inside to comfort her mother, Sam opted for a middle ground that turned out to be the worst of both worlds. Taking a step back from the car and toward the house, she called out, "Yes, Mom, I'm here."

Ever the opportunist, Jack seized the moment to close the car door. At least he rolled down the window to say good-bye. "Go. Take care of her tonight. I'll call tomorrow." He tried to smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Love you, Samantha."

Sam stood there helpless and watched her father drive away, taking her childhood with him.

* * *

Sam's legs felt like there were weights around her ankles as she trudged up the walk to the front door. The living room was empty, so she headed to the kitchen.

"Are you hungry?" Eva asked, her head in the fridge. "Sit down. I'll make you something." After guiding Sam to the table, she began

depositing Tupperware after Tupperware of Thanksgiving leftovers onto the counter. Dazed, Sam mutely watched her mother bustle about the kitchen, surprised at this role reversal.

“I’m not a child, you know. I don’t know who he thinks he is, but he wasn’t my caregiver. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself. Always acting so put-upon and playing the victim, like my depression happened more to him than to me. I know I can be difficult, but all marriages are hard. And he’s no angel either.” Eva continued muttering softly, and Sam was relieved to learn her mother’s reaction to Jack’s departure involved anger and resentment, rather than self-pity and fear.

A profound sense of loss settled inside her. She stood, thinking she would assist her mother in reheating turkey, stuffing, and mashed potatoes, but Eva waved her back to her seat.

“I don’t need your help either, you know. I’m still the mother here, Samantha, so you please just sit there, and I’ll make you lunch.”

Watching her mother take control of the situation, Sam appreciated how important it was to let Eva mother her. She hoped she wasn’t overdoing it when she said softly, “Mom, can I have a glass of milk, too?” Eva barely broke stride when she deposited the glass in front of Sam on a trip between the fridge and the stove.

She knew better than to ask, but it didn’t stop her from wondering how Eva would support herself now. Art sales always contributed to the family’s finances, but it was Jack’s private medical practice that afforded the Latham family the lifestyle to which they had grown accustomed.

The food plated and served, mother and daughter poked at the leftovers and tried to pretend they were hungry.

Eva sighed and dropped her fork heavily. “Tell me more about school, please. Tell me about your friends there.”

It seemed bizarre that they would be talking about her life at Yale now, instead of how Eva felt about Jack’s abrupt departure and what her future might hold. But this moment wasn’t for her to dictate. “My roommate asked me last week if it was midterms yet. I told her they were a few weeks ago, and she didn’t seem too fazed. I think she might have been high.”

“How did you do on your midterms?”

“Good.”

Eva paused. “I take that to mean you got all As.”

Sam smiled. "Yes ma'am."

Wiping her mouth with a napkin she had made herself, Eva looked older than Sam had ever seen her. "You know, Sam, I've always been proud of how hard you work. But I never had these kinds of expectations for you. It's great that you're at Yale and you're passionate about what you do, but, you know, college is supposed to be the best years of your life. Are you getting out at all? Making friends?"

This wasn't the first time Sam heard such a speech from her mother. It gave her what she knew was a disproportionate amount of pride that her academic success was entirely self-motivated. Still, when she was feeling particularly lonely, she had to admit her mother had a point. "I made a new friend. Her name is Natalie. She's from California and has confusing fashion sense."

"Well, you have no fashion sense, so I wouldn't be too quick to judge."

They smiled, and Sam felt some of the pressure in her stomach dissipate. Her throat still ached with unshed tears, but she could take something approximating a deep breath now.

Glancing at their plates still full of food, Eva pushed hers away. "Why don't we stop pretending to eat and go see a movie? *Love Actually* is playing at Stowe Cinema."

Sam wrapped their plates and put them in the fridge and Eva grabbed their coats.

The movie was saccharine but charming, and exactly what they needed. They even laughed a little. When they returned home, Sam reheated their lunch while Eva made hot chocolate. They sat at the kitchen counter snacking and sipping until Sam said, "I was thinking, Mom, maybe I'll stay an extra couple of days, instead of going back to New Haven tomorrow."

Eva sat very still for a long moment. "You will do no such thing," she said quietly. "I will see you in a couple of weeks for Christmas. I do not need you to take care of me, Sam."

Sam opened her mouth to say something, then closed it. Eva's tone brokered no argument. "I understand," she said.

* * *

After Sam loaded the car with her bag and the leftovers her mom insisted she take, she shared a long hug with Eva, holding her mother's tall, thin body tightly against hers, hoping to convey the love and support she felt for her. Eva pulled away first and, placing one hand on each of her daughter's shoulders, imparted motherly advice. "Don't you work so hard you forget you're in college. You have the rest of your life to put in endless hours. Go out, Samantha. Try new things. I bet that Natalie could show you a good time." Sam blinked at the last comment, trying to figure out if there was a hidden meaning there, but her mother's expression offered no signs of double entendre. "I love you. Drive safely, and call me when you get there." Kissing Sam on the cheek, Eva spun her toward the car, and swatted her butt. "Off you go now."

She watched her mom in her review mirror until she rounded a curve and could no longer see curly red hair billowing in the wind and long, delicate fingers waving good-bye.

She thought briefly about driving to Boston, where her father was likely staying with his brother, but the possibility of losing a confrontation with him sucked all the air out of the car. The road swam as tears for her mother, her father, and their broken home flooded her eyes.

* * *

Sam was even more nervous than usual as she glanced over at Natalie, who was fussing with the radio from the passenger seat. The homeless shelter was another ten minutes away, and that seemed awfully little time to prepare.

It wasn't just that she was going to be meeting homeless people. It was that most of the people she would encounter as Natalie's assistant music teacher would be children. Never mind that she had little musical knowledge herself; she never knew what to say to children. Even if she did possess the ability to pinpoint their relative ages, she could never seem to calibrate the level of her questions appropriately, and so ended up condescending to eight-year-olds or expecting kindergartners to be proficient readers.

Natalie landed on a Top 40s station playing Justin Timberlake, and Sam adjusted her mirrors unnecessarily.

“Okay, so. You remember the scales I taught you, right?” Natalie asked.

Sam had forced herself to practice alone, without the distraction of Natalie’s skin and smell and warmth, and while she might not have Natalie’s graceful touch when it came to piano playing, she was certainly proficient at the fundamentals. “Yep, got ‘em. The arpeggios too.”

Natalie swatted her leg. “See, I told you I’m a good teacher.”

“It’s possible that I’m just a really good student.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Natalie shrug. “Maybe we’re a good team.”

Willing the warmth away from her cheeks, Sam pulled up to a stoplight and raised her eyebrows at Natalie.

“Turn left. The students who were there last week should be moving on to the Twinkle Variations, and the newbies will start with the technical stuff. They’re going to want to play songs, not scales and arpeggios, but it’s important to start with the fundamentals.”

Sam nodded. “Which group should I take?”

“I assumed you’d want the first-timers. Is that okay? It’s there, on the right.” She pointed, and Sam turned into a parking lot labeled with a sign reading *Open Door*. The building bore all the markers of a converted warehouse, including drab brick walls and identical windows on the first and second floors. It could have been a YMCA once.

She drove through the lot with unnecessary caution and slowness, buying herself more time to prepare. “How many kids?”

“Probably five or six total, and we’ll split them.”

Sam nodded, turning off the ignition and unbuckling her seatbelt. “Here goes nothing.” Natalie extracted her personal keyboard, which had full-sized keys but was only a few octaves, from the trunk of the car, and tucked it under her arm. They walked to the door in silence, but before Natalie opened it, she turned to her. “Remember, they’re just people, like anyone else. They want and need the same things.”

Natalie’s words might offer comfort if Sam had any skills at understanding people. She followed Natalie to the front desk, where an older woman smiled and waved them through. They entered a large open space containing rows of bunk beds, each one sectioned off with three-panel room dividers. At the foot of each bed were two small metal

cubes that looked like high school gym lockers, presumably to prevent theft. Only a few occupants were in the room, sleeping.

“I thought there’d be more people...” Sam said softly.

“It’s lunch time. They’re all in the dining room, I imagine. It’s through here,” Natalie said, crossing the room and walking through an archway leading to an equally large, open room. This one contained long, rectangular tables and benches and about a hundred and fifty people. Lines for a basketball court had been painted on the floor, and two freestanding basketball hoops were at either end, suggesting that the residents collapsed the tables when it wasn’t mealtime. There were a few kids running around the borders of the room, evidently playing tag. One of the kids spotted Natalie and yelled her name as he sprinted into her arms.

“Hey kid,” she said, picking him up. “Have you been practicing?”

He nodded, and Sam put his age at seven. Or four.

His diversion from the tag game drew the attention of the other kids, and four newcomers joined them, one of them hugging Natalie and one giving her a high five. The other two stood by shyly, staring at the floor and swaying from foot to foot.

“And you two. Do you have names?” Natalie asked.

“Rufus,” said the taller boy. His jeans were ripped, and Sam wasn’t sure if it was a style thing or the result of poverty.

“Donnel,” said the smaller boy, extending his hand politely. “I used to take lessons. Before.” Something about his demeanor and confidence made Sam think he was older than Rufus, even though Rufus had about six inches on him.

“Great—let’s see what you can do!” Natalie led the way to a comfortable sitting room off of the gym. Couches and easy chairs were scattered here and there, and a television showing football was in the corner. The first kid who ran to Natalie turned it off and then pulled a keyboard, identical to the one under Natalie’s arm, out of the closet.

“That one’s for you, Sam,” Natalie said, and Sam accepted it from the boy. “Everyone, I want you to meet my good friend Sam. She’s going to help us out today.”

A chorus of “hi, Sam!” filled the room, and it bolstered Sam’s resolve to be helpful. This whole affair, after all, wasn’t about her. Besides, the kids seemed eager to learn, and that was something she could relate to.

“Hi, everyone. I hear you all are going to teach me how to play piano,” Sam said with as straight a face as she could muster.

“Noooooo!” the kids all said together.

“*You’re* supposed to teach *us*, silly,” Rufus said.

“Well, then. Rufus and Donnel, come with me to this side of the room, and let’s see what we can learn.”

Donnel, it turned out, knew how to play a few basic songs, including “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” and “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” but no one had taught him scales. It took a bit to bring Rufus up to speed on the names of the keys, and Donnel was thrilled to help. They worked on five-note scales, and by the time Sam was ready to leave, the two boys could play with their right hands, ascending scales as a duet. Rufus gave Sam a high five when they were finished, and Donnel gave her a big hug and whispered, “See you next week, right?”

“Right,” Sam said, without thinking. It didn’t matter, really, since when she did stop and consider it, all thoughts she had on the subject followed the same line: it was the best Sunday Sam had had since she moved to New Haven.

* * *

Clearing the last book off of Natalie’s futon and placing her pillow at one end, Sam kicked off her shoes and sat down. “I brushed my teeth before I came over,” she said, wondering what Natalie thought of the glasses she only ever wore right before bed. Pulling her contact case out of her pocket, she placed it on the floor just under the futon. “Thanks for letting me stay the night. Again.”

Natalie rolled her eyes at Sam. “Look, I love that you sleep on my couch when your roommate annoys you, but I think we’re going to need some ground rules here. You can’t sleep in jeans. You just can’t. It’s bad for you.”

Sam wasn’t about to say that it didn’t matter what she was wearing—what was bad for her was sleeping in the next room while Natalie was wearing boy shorts and a white see-through T-shirt. “Please. Explain

to me the health hazards of sleeping in denim. Does it cut off my circulation? Will it give me a weird rash? Will it make me sneeze?"

"Smart ass. I don't know how or why it's bad for you. It just is."

"Persuasive, but this is all I have."

"You could sleep without pants." Natalie smiled pointedly.

Sam coughed and sputtered some words about propriety and Claire being in the other room before pulling a blanket over her legs.

Sighing, Natalie sat next to her. "Fine, wear what you want to bed. So what did Tracy do this time?"

"Tracy?"

"Yeah, you know, the roommate whose annoying antics drive you out of your own bed at least three times a week?"

"I don't remember." Truth be told, she hadn't seen Tracy for weeks. What had started out as a legitimate excuse to sleep on Natalie's couch had evolved into, well, habit. "Hey, are we still going shopping tomorrow?"

"You know it. Wouldn't miss the chance to drag you around a mall. Besides, we don't want your car battery to go dead from lack of use."

"With you around, it's more like the tread on my tires wearing thin."

Natalie quickly asked, "You don't mind, do you? I can give you money for gas."

"You know I like driving around with you," Sam said, bumping her knee against Natalie's. They sat in comfortable silence a few moments, admiring the waist-high fake Christmas tree in the corner of Natalie's common room. A handful of small packages wrapped in candy cane paper littered the knitted tree skirt. "Are those all from Claire?"

"I think she finished her Christmas shopping the day after Halloween. Tomorrow's shopping spree will be my first attempt at buying presents for everyone in my family, and I'm hoping we're very efficient. Anyway, Claire's present to me is the tiny one with the silver bow."

"Have you shaken it yet?" It was endearing how poorly Natalie handled secrets, especially when they involved gifts.

Scooping it up, Natalie deposited the present in Sam's lap. "I think it's dangly earrings, since the box is so small."

Shaking the package gave Sam no new insights into its contents, which might have had something to do with her general lack of knowledge

about jewelry. “Maybe it’s a car,” she suggested, leaning over and placing it back under the tree. Before she could straighten, she caught her name written on one of the packages. “Claire got me something?”

“Yeah, she says you’re practically a roommate at this point.”

“Oh.” Sam rubbed her neck.

“That doesn’t mean you have to get her something, you know.”

“Come on. It would be totally awkward if I didn’t. I don’t know her that well, though,” Sam said, hoping Natalie would offer suggestions.

“I’m sure you’ll think of something. Did you decide what you’re getting your dad?” Natalie asked.

Sam wanted to be frustrated at the gentle understanding in Natalie’s voice, because it reminded her, however inadvertently, of how absent Jack had been since Thanksgiving. Frankly, Sam was surprised Natalie even brought him up, but more surprised to find she didn’t mind talking about him—at least, not with Natalie.

“You mean, besides a kick in the...proverbial...you-know-what, as they say?”

“You can say ‘ass,’ you know. If you’re going to be a sometimes-writer, you should be comfortable using all the words in the English language.”

“I am. What he did to my mom was really—” She choked on the word but managed to get it out—“shitty, and I don’t feel like giving him something this year. Besides, I wouldn’t know what to get him. Sometimes I can’t blame him, because Mom’s no picnic. He obviously cares, right? I mean, he sends money, and he’s going to keep paying the mortgage.”

“That seems a cold way to care for someone,” Natalie said, articulating something Sam’s defense mechanisms hadn’t allowed her even to think.

“Well, he’s got to look out for himself too, and I get that. But it doesn’t explain why he had to move so far away. I mean, he doesn’t have any family in DC, his estranged wife and brother are in the northeast...” The touch on her shoulder startled her before she leaned into it, highly aware of the slope of Natalie’s fingers and the warmth emanating from them.

“It’s okay to say that he left you too.” It was both nerve-wracking and completely compelling that Natalie seemed to have a knack for voicing things Sam would never dream of saying out loud.

“I can take care of myself. She can’t.”

“Samantha Latham, you’re nineteen. I get that you’re independent—maybe the most independent person I’ve ever met—but stop pretending. Missing him is natural.”

For a moment, Sam wondered if her inextricable attachment to her best friend stemmed from the lack of stability in her home life. “I feel torn in two on multiple fronts,” she admitted.

“Fair enough. This is new, and you need time to process it. But from the stories you’ve told me, it sounds like things haven’t been good between your parents for a while. It’s possible they were only staying together for you.”

“I guess I didn’t see.”

“It wasn’t your job to see. You were their baby, Sam. It was your job to enjoy the happy childhood they gave you. You’re in a different place now—literally and symbolically. They are so proud of the independent, intelligent woman you’ve become. And that’s the gift you can give back to them: you are now adult enough to set them free.”

“So I should stop trying to convince my dad to come back?”

“You should listen to him. And to your mom. Try to really hear what they say, and what they don’t say. That’s the best you can do. And even while you’re being diplomatic, you can also miss him. There’s nothing wrong with admitting that you’ve always adored your father, that you want to be just like him, that he’s why you hope to be a doctor. The painful truth you’re confronted with right now is that he’s not superhuman. He’s just a guy with weaknesses and limitations, like everyone in the world.” She hesitated briefly and removed her hand. “He doesn’t have your strength.”

Sam’s gaze shifted from the Christmas tree to Natalie, who stared at her with such open admiration that it took her breath away. “I’m not so very strong,” she said softly, feeling weaker in the face of the love Natalie was giving her than at any moment since her parents had separated. It was too much, and she dropped her eyes to study the hands folded in her lap.

The touch on her cheek was so soft that, for a moment, Sam thought it was her imagination, until Natalie gently caressed her jawline. “You are strong, Sam. I hope you never have to find out how strong you really are.” Natalie opened her arms and Sam allowed herself to curl up into the comfort she offered. As a lone tear wended its way down her cheek and dripped onto Natalie’s T-shirt, Sam tried to remember the last time she cried—a movie probably. Other people’s stories afforded her the opportunity to feel things she refused to indulge in when it came to her own life.

While being in Natalie’s arms warmed Sam to her core, she didn’t want to stay there in sadness. Maybe the next time Natalie held her, she would be laughing—or sighing in contentment. She sat up and changed the subject. “Hey, I was in the English department today to scope out our professor for next semester. You were right.”

“About the dimples?”

“Definitely cute.”

“Told ya.” Natalie was clearly pleased with herself—Sam just wished the grin on her face was about her rather than their good-looking teacher.

“Yes, you told me. You’re very smart.”

The grin faded, and Natalie adjusted her position on the futon, putting her arm across the back of it. “No one ever says that to me.”

Sam was surprised. “Obviously you’re smart. You’re at Yale.”

“Doesn’t seem to convince people.” As a flicker of a shadow crossed Natalie’s face, Sam thought perhaps she understood at least part of the reason Natalie was scared to definitively select a major. She resolved to convince Natalie that she was more than a pretty face—maybe taking a class together next semester was a good idea after all.

* * *

Sam wished she didn’t feel the need to come up with excuses to see Natalie. Never once had Natalie seemed surprised or put out to see her when she had crafted elaborate plans for a simple run-in. Still, she didn’t feel comfortable just stopping by the theater where Natalie, trying her hand at directing, was rehearsing Diana Son’s *Stop Kiss*; it was seven p.m., and she suspected Natalie hadn’t left the theater all afternoon, so she picked up a mushroom pizza.

Ever since the unfortunate incident with the bunny costume and the tambourine during her first grade Christmas pageant, theaters had given Sam the creeps. When she stopped just inside the door of the auditorium and squinted for her eyes to adjust, an involuntary shudder passed through her. After a few blinks, she picked out the blonde head in the third row, gesturing toward the lights as she gave instructions to someone Sam guessed was the designer. Their conversation grew louder as she approached, and she stopped in the aisle a few rows behind them.

“I’m the first to admit I don’t know much about lights,” Natalie said, “but given how old these units are and how hard it is to get an even wash with such few lighting positions, what if we just dropped gobos into the front light and embraced lighting holes as, like, a look?”

The designer chuckled. “Not sure I buy your theory, but I’ll give it a whirl. I can do it by tomorrow’s cue-to-cue.”

From her hiding place behind them, Sam observed the way Natalie pointed at various lighting units hanging above them and the areas on the stage that needed “more fill.” Deep in concentration, nibbling on the earpiece of her glasses, she exuded confidence and ease, and Sam found her far sexier in unguarded moments like this than when she was scantily clad and in full-on seduction mode. Natalie tossed her head, flicking overgrown bangs from her eyes as she contemplated color options for the sidelight, and Sam’s stomach clenched, her heartbeat doubling its pace. When Natalie’s hand swept across the air in front of her, responding to a question about top light, fantasies of those hands on her body flooded Sam’s mind, and her face grew hot. Natalie sighed about something, and Sam closed her eyes, wishing the warm air from that heavy exhale was on her skin.

Dimly, through a haze of desire, Sam heard the designer say something that sounded like a good-bye, and she pulled herself out of her longing. Willing her body to cool, she walked closer to them on unsteady legs.

“Everything else looks beautiful,” Natalie said to the designer. “I’m doing some character exercises with the actors for the rest of rehearsal, but after that you can have the space until six tomorrow night.”

As they said good-bye, Sam took a minute to absorb Natalie’s smell and take in her attire. Rectangular glasses, black dress pants, high-heeled

black boots, and some confusing but flattering layers of black clothing on top. Sam supposed this was the “Broadway director” look.

The designer smiled at her as he left, and she took a moment to thank the old lights in the theater for failing to illuminate the flush that still reddened her cheeks.

Natalie looked at her in surprise, and she cleared her throat. “Madam Director, I know how hard you’ve been working, and I come bearing sustenance,” Sam said, formality being her default response to potentially awkward situations.

“Hey you!” Natalie leaned over the seat and kissed her on the cheek, giving no indication that she was aware of Sam’s discomfort. “You are an angel. God damn, that smells good. If there are mushrooms on it, I’ll love you forever.”

Sam coughed.

“You okay there, Adorkable?” Natalie patted Sam on the back.

“For a nice little Protestant girl, you sure throw God’s name around a lot,” she said. The oversensitive patches of skin Natalie had just touched—her cheek and her back—trembled with tension, and the weakness in her legs morphed into jelly.

Natalie noticed her staring, and as their eyes locked, a flash of something hot flitted across her face. As quickly as it appeared, it vanished, and Sam was left wondering if the lust she thought she saw had been only wishful thinking.

She swiftly turned away and exited the theater.

* * *

“Merry Christmas, everyone!” Claire said as she poured them all mugs of apple cider and then sat down on the floor in front of her little Christmas tree. Natalie and Sam joined her in a little circle, and it all felt very much like camp. “I’m sorry I don’t have much time tonight, but maybe if *someone* wasn’t leaving for winter break tomorrow, we could have had a more leisurely exchange.” Claire poked Natalie in the ribs, almost spilling Natalie’s cider.

“I’m sorry I didn’t consult you when I made my holiday plans. How was I to know you had a *date* tonight?” Natalie practically sang her question.

Sam was never one for gossip, but Claire always went out of her way to ask about her life, so she tried to return the favor. “Who are you dating, Claire?”

The silly grin on her face was priceless, and Sam wondered if she ever looked that way when someone asked her about Natalie. “Um, it’s Dustin. You know, our RA? He’s so sweet, and he comes to listen every time our *a cappella* group sings. Last night, he asked me to dinner, and I said it was about time.”

“That’s great! You seem really happy,” Sam said, hoping she’d said the right thing.

If possible, Claire’s smile grew even wider. “Thanks, Sam. Here, open it!” she said, handing Sam a beautifully wrapped gift. Inside were a handful of brightly colored, plush, stuffed microbes, as well as a heart and a brain. Surprisingly, the brain looked the cuddliest. “You can snuggle with them, put them on your desk in the lab, throw them at annoying lab partners, whatever!” Claire said.

“This is absolutely adorable,” Sam said, and she pulled Claire into a hug. “Thank you.”

Claire whispered in her ear, “I wish I could give you what you really want for Christmas.” When they pulled apart, she tilted her head slightly at Natalie.

Sam felt her cheeks grow red, so she quickly pulled a square box in snowman wrapping paper from under the tree and handed it to Claire. “Merry Christmas.”

Claire was cute when she opened presents, carefully tucking her long black hair behind her ears and gently placing the package in her lap before meticulously sliding her nails underneath the tape. She nearly made it through every corner without tearing the paper. When she opened the box and found a mug with the elements Cobalt, Fluorine, and Iron spelling *CoFFe*, she chuckled. “It’s perfect, thanks Sam.” They hugged again. “I’m glad we’re in chem together. It can be so intimidating, surrounded by all those stress cases. With you there, at least one other person in the class feels normal.”

It was, perhaps, the first time someone had ever called Sam normal.

“You too,” Sam said, and hoped Claire understood the rest.

“Okay, okay,” Claire said, “back to the task at hand. Natalie, you and I should exchange, and then I’ve got to run. You two can do your presents without me.”

Natalie gave Claire tickets to a jazz concert in New Haven that they could attend in the spring. In return, Claire gave Natalie tickets to an art show in Boston and a pair of simple, dangly earrings. Evidently, they had agreed to give each other experiences. There were more hugs as Claire gathered her things to leave.

“See you in organic chemistry next semester, Sam!” she said as she practically skipped out the door.

“Have fun on your date!” Natalie and Sam called out.

Once they were alone, they relocated to the couch, bringing their presents and cider with them.

“Merry Christmas, Sam.” Natalie said, holding out a shallow, rectangular box.

Sam placed the box on her lap and snatched up a larger box from the floor. “Merry Christmas yourself. By the way, is this your ski instructor look?”

Natalie looked down at her gray and black turtleneck and the white North Face puffy coat on the couch next to her and grinned. “No, silly, I’m actually *going* skiing. Tom’s parents have a cabin. That’s where I’m going tomorrow.”

“Oh. Well, please don’t break any lungs or collapse any bones.” Sam tried to remember which unlucky fellow Natalie had abandoned when she turned her attention to Tom.

“Weirdo. C’mon, open yours.” Bouncing up and down on the couch, Natalie had all the enthusiasm of a Labrador puppy. That she was more excited to give gifts than receive them was absolutely adorable, Sam decided.

Sam carefully removed the wrapping paper and lifted the lid. Nestled in white tissue paper were a pair of green and blue plaid pajama pants and a T-shirt with the outlines of Vermont and New Hampshire that read *Vermont: Spooning New Hampshire since 1781*. “Since you’ve taken up residence on our couch...” Natalie trailed off.

Sam was equal parts touched and amused, and she leaned over and hugged Natalie briefly, careful to pull back from something she knew

she'd enjoy too much. "One good turn..." she said, indicating the box in Natalie's lap.

Natalie tore into the wrapping paper and whipped off the lid in a flourish. The box contained a random assortment of presents, including drumsticks, an architectural scale, a snorkel and mask, a book on pointillism, and a canister of racquetballs. Natalie grinned sheepishly.

"Contained herein, my friend, are accouterments for all the activities you have expressed an interest in learning since we've known each other. You'd never said anything about skiing, or I would have put a pair of those hideous goggles in there too."

"Samantha Latham, you are too much!" Natalie threw her arms around Sam and held on, even as Sam tried to pull away. "Oh, no you don't. You're getting a proper hug, and you'll suffer through it." Her voice was warm and musical in Sam's ear, and she succumbed, basking in the comfort of Natalie's arms and the tickle of her hair. This time, when Natalie tried to pull away, Sam held on. Natalie chuckled softly, and with one hand she put their presents on the floor. Leaning backwards and pulling Sam with her, she resituated them so they were snuggling. As soft strains of "Let it Snow" came from the speakers on Natalie's desk, Sam lost herself in the way their bodies melded together, the way their breath synchronized, and how their chests rose and fell together. Closing her eyes, she was surprised to find herself remarkably comfortable and not nervous or overexcited.

More than a dozen Christmas songs played while they remained in each other's arms. Sam was fighting sleep when Natalie inhaled and asked softly, "You gonna be all right at home these next two weeks? You can always call me—day or night, okay? You know that, right?"

Her voice muffled by Natalie's turtleneck, Sam said, "I know." As they held each other, she gave silent thanks for the love they shared and tried to let go of any expectations she still held.