

♥ One ♥

Wake Up Call

Something woke Rose with a start. She tried to pinpoint the source of the noise, but it stopped before she could locate it. Peeking at the alarm clock sitting in silence on her bedside table, she saw it was only nine a.m. Good, she thought. It's Saturday, so I don't have to get up for at least two more hours. She rolled over in bed, humming and stretching.

As Rose was drifting back to sleep, the noise started again. Since she was already half-awake, she was now able to identify it clearly. It was Tyler's phone, ringing somewhere in the distance. The sound wasn't coming from the adjoining room, where Rose assumed he was sleeping. No, the sound seemed to come from somewhere on the lower floor of Tyler's townhouse.

Rose waited, curled under her soft covers, for the sound of his quick footsteps down the stairs, but it never came. He must be fast asleep; she doubted the faint noise of his ringtone was enough to wake him. Tyler was a heavy sleeper, and he hadn't been at home when

she'd gone to bed at three a.m. last night. She guessed he wouldn't wake up until at least noon.

Rose waited for the phone to stop ringing so she could go back to sleep. But Tyler's vintage *MC Hammer—U Can't Touch This* ringtone started playing again almost immediately. Throwing the blankets away from her body in frustration, Rose sat up and swung her legs off the side of the bed. What the hell! Who was so eager to talk to Tyler this early on a Saturday morning?

Georgiana was the first name that popped into her mind. She was the only person who'd obsessively binge call him on a Saturday morning and not get the message people wanted to sleep. It had to be her; even Tyler's mom would've given up after two missed calls. Why was Georgiana so desperate to talk to him? Did they have a huge fight? Did he finally ditch her? No, that'd be too good to be true; they probably just had some kind of argument.

The carpeted floor felt soft and warm against her feet as Rose sat on the edge of her bed, tense, listening. The phone had gone quiet again. While twisting her long brown hair in a side braid she waited, still skittish, to hear if it was going to ring again. It did. Irritated, she hopped off her bed, opened her door, and stepped onto the landing.

Tyler's door was shut. She walked up to it, pressed her right ear to the wooden panels, and heard the faint, regular breathing of someone sleeping. Listening more

closely, she tried to make out the sound of a second person breathing, but she could only hear Tyler. It seemed he was alone.

Rose stepped away from the door, disappointed. So the argument had not been about Tyler cheating on Georgiana with some other girl. Rose was surprised and annoyed that Tyler had been faithful to Georgiana for as long as he had. It had to be a record. Not that she supported the cheating—she was just eager for Georgiana to be out of their lives. Considering Tyler cheated on every girl he was ever with, it was just maddening that the one girl he'd decided to be faithful to was an obnoxious mean girl.

The house was silent again. Rose shivered; Boston always felt too cold compared to Texas, no matter the season. Also, the sorry excuse for PJs she was wearing—a turquoise tank top with a frilly trim and matching shorts—wasn't helping in the warmth department. Rose usually preferred to wear oversized sweaters when she went to sleep, but she hadn't had much of a choice last night. She'd used up all her regular, cozy PJs, and she hadn't done laundry in weeks because she'd been too busy with her Summer Academic Fellowship for Harvard Law. So her Victoria's Secret PINK set was the only clean thing she'd had left, and it was either that or two drops of Chanel number five.

Rose massaged her arms with her hands to warm herself up as she turned around, away from Tyler's door and toward the bathroom. Since she was up, she might as well go before she went back to bed. The only time she got to sleep in was on the weekend, and she was determined to enjoy her well-deserved rest.

Rose finished her business and was about to exit the bathroom when she caught a flash of herself in the mirror. She stopped in front of it and checked herself out. She looked good in her mini-pajama. Yes, not bad at all. Too bad she felt like a popsicle when she wore them.

Rose moved her gaze away from her body and up to her face. Her eyes were almost black, and her skin tone made her look constantly tanned. Not like Georgiana, who had impossibly white skin, long licorice-black hair (dyed), and startlingly light blue eyes. Did Tyler prefer blue eyes? Over the years, he hadn't shown any particular trend in his women. Tall, short, curvy, androgynous, brunette, blonde, red-head—it didn't matter to him. As long as they were attractive, he liked them.

Rose was distracted from her musings by Tyler's phone ringing again downstairs. Like an angry cat, she wheezed at the mirror. How was she supposed to sleep if that damn thing was going to go off every five minutes? She exited the bathroom and ran down the stairs, the carpet muffling her steps.

She had a quick look around the living room but couldn't see the phone anywhere. Then she moved into the kitchen and there it was, lying innocently on the table—lifeless. Rose looked at its black screen accusingly just as it started ringing again. Georgiana's smiling face darted up on the screen. So it *was* her calling. Rose grabbed the phone, turned it to silent, and put it back down, relieved. Georgiana's face remained lit for a few more seconds; then disappeared. The phone had been neutralized and wouldn't disturb her any more. She could go back to her peaceful sleep-in day.

As Rose turned to leave the kitchen, she saw a speech bubble suddenly pop up on the screen. The temptation was too strong; Rose snatched up the phone and read it.

Georgiana: I'm sorry, ok? Can you please pick up?

So they definitely had an argument. And it looked like it was Georgiana's fault. What could she have done? Nothing too bad, Rose was sure. Georgiana was all sweetness with Tyler. Rose had seen her act nasty only when he wasn't around, during the rare times when Georgiana and Rose were alone together.

Georgiana was jealous of her; of this, Rose was sure. The sentiment was strong and reciprocated. Georgiana didn't like the idea of her boyfriend living with his attractive female best friend. As for Rose, she didn't appreciate Georgiana's intrusion in their friendship—or

the intrusion of any of Tyler's girlfriends, for that matter. And Georgiana was more annoying than most of the girls he dated; she went to Harvard Law with them, so she was able to not only impose on their free time, but on their school time as well. In class, she sat with them—Rose on one side, Georgiana on the other, and Tyler sandwiched in the middle. At lunch, she ate with them. When they were studying, she followed them to the library. And she was at the house so often that Rose wondered if she was trying to move in without Tyler noticing. Georgiana being beautiful and rich didn't help. Nor did the fact that she was the daughter of one of the most powerful and recognized lawyers in Boston.

This was the first time since high school that Tyler had dated someone who was in school with them. Rose had forgotten how hard it was to have a daily reminder of him being with someone else. Not to mention the unwelcome novelty of being in the next room when Georgiana spent the night. Contractors should make thicker walls. Rose was certain Georgiana had made it a personal mission to make sure Rose knew just how satisfied in bed she was.

When Tyler had first started going out with Georgiana, it hadn't been so hard, Rose thought. Not while she'd been with Marcus, her longest relationship to date. The two years she'd spent with Marcus had been Tyler's first time to be jealous, instead of the other way around. She remembered being actually glad when he'd

started dating Georgiana, so that she could finally stop feeling guilty for spending all her time with Marcus. Rose also hadn't told Tyler she was moving in with Marcus, and hadn't been sure how he would take the news. Then everything had collapsed when Marcus had been offered a huge promotion in LA. In less than a month he'd left Rose heartbroken, with a cancelled lease, and nowhere to live. Of course, Tyler had stepped in immediately and invited Rose to stay in his spare bedroom. She'd accepted, grateful to have her best friend near her 24-7. Georgiana hadn't been happy about it.

Rose sat in a chair at the kitchen table and rolled Tyler's phone in her hands; she was tempted to snoop. She didn't know why, but it seemed important she find out why Tyler and Georgiana had argued. But if Tyler discovered her at it, he'd flay her. He'd always been protective of his things, especially his phone, at least with his girls, and usually with a good reason. Although lately he'd been growing increasingly private with her, too. Rose felt she was being left out, and she couldn't help but blame Georgiana. Georgiana, who was sorry for something she'd done. What was it? She contemplated the black screen, trying to make up her mind. To spy or not to spy?

“What are you doing?”

Tyler's voice put a sharp end to her dilemma. He was standing at the foot of the stairs, wearing only sweat pants.

"Oh, you're awake, good!" Rose said, faking anger to cover up her embarrassment at nearly being caught in the act. "Next time if you leave your phone lying around, do me a favor and put it on silent so it doesn't wake me up."

"Rose." There was an edge to his voice. "Why were you looking into my phone?"

"I wasn't looking into your phone," she said, and dropped the phone on the table. "This thing has been ringing non-stop for almost an hour. I couldn't sleep, and it didn't seem like you were getting up anytime soon, so I came downstairs to silence it."

"If you were just putting the phone on silent, why were you sitting on a chair with it in your hands?"

Ah, always the lawyer.

"I was trying to decide if your cuckoo girlfriend had ruined my sleep-in," Rose said, getting up. Her chair scraped loudly on the kitchen's floor. "Or if I could still try to go back to bed."

Tyler knew that aggressive tone Rose was using. She brought it out when she was feeling guilty about something, and wanted to distract attention away from herself. When she brought up Georgiana, he was planning a sharp retort—but then she stood up, and he was thrown off-balance by her look. His eyes widened and his mouth dropped open as he stared at her. He was used to seeing her in faded, loose t-shirts three or four sizes too big for her. Not in mini shorts. Definitely not in mini shorts.

Rose seemed to notice his staring, because she blushed bright red. But she didn't lower her gaze or back down.

“Anyway, Georgiana says she's sorry,” Rose said, brushing past him as she continued toward the stairs. “And before you ask, no—I didn't spy. The message just popped up on the screen.”

Tyler followed her, not quite able to tear his eyes away from her departing derrière as she began to climb the stairs. He was shocked into silence. Seeing her like this felt like being slapped in the face. He hadn't tried to sleep with her, sober or drunk, for how long now? Almost two years. Not since she'd been with Marcus; not since her fierce refusal of his advances. Tyler had lured himself into the false idea that he'd finally managed to see Rose only as a friend—a sister, almost. But his reaction now to her lack of clothes told him without any doubt that he'd been kidding himself.

Tyler collapsed onto the living room couch, taking a couple of moments to steady himself, to reboot his brain. He'd always thought Rose was beautiful, but he'd never considered her sexy. However today, the combination of her outfit and her defiance just made her irresistible to him. He had to know what was going on with her that was making her act this way.

Standing, he followed her up the stairs, as if being pulled by an invisible rope. His phone remained forgotten and lonely on the kitchen table, Georgiana's face surfacing on the screen yet again.

♥ Two ♥

Bigger Things to Sort

At the top of the stairs, Tyler looked toward Rose's room and saw she'd left the door half-open. Was it an invitation? He approached it, stepping carefully so his bare feet were silent on the carpet. He peeked inside and saw her lying on the bed with her back resting against the wall on a mound of pillows, and her legs stretched in front of her crossed at the ankles. She was playing with her phone. To his delight, she hadn't changed, or put on a sweater.

He knocked on the door; then stepped inside.

"Oh," she said, surprised, looking up at him. "I thought you'd be downstairs, making peace with Georgiana."

"What's up with the shorts?" he asked, ignoring her comment.

"Yeah, I know," she said, looking down at herself. "I was a bit behind with my laundry, and I only had these left."

“Weren’t you against Victoria’s Secret and their objectification of women?” Tyler retorted.

Rose shrugged. “They were a present from Marcus.”

She’d said it casually, but he knew her well. He could detect the lingering sadness hidden behind that simple response. He knew that, as a loyal friend, he ought to feel sorry for her and for the abrupt way her relationship with Marcus had ended. Instead, Tyler couldn’t help but feel relieved Marcus had moved to LA and out of their lives for good. But there was a new feeling in the mix, now—a fierce jealousy he’d never experienced before. He was jealous that Rose would wear something so not like herself for Marcus.

Tyler sat on the bed next to her. He took her right ankle into his left hand, placing it in his lap.

Rose was extremely aware of Tyler’s hand on her ankle. How long had it been since he’d tried to sleep with her? Almost two years. He’d been “well behaved” since that last time, when she’d refused him with no room left for interpretation. Rose flinched at the memory. She’d been so taken with Marcus that she’d been harsh with Tyler. She’d treated him almost with contempt—certainly not in their usual playful way. She hoped Tyler had been drunk enough not to remember how badly she’d turned him down. But given that he

hadn't tried anything ever since, not even after her break up, some of it must've sunk in.

A tingle rose up her legs from where he was touching her with the tips of his fingers. It had been easier to say no to him when he was hitting on her once a week. But now she was out of practice, and she felt vulnerable.

"So what's up with Georgiana?" Rose asked, putting her phone down on the bedside table and looking at Tyler expectantly.

"Oh, nothing," he said, brushing off her question.

"It must've been something if she felt the need to call you ten times on a Saturday morning." Rose didn't know why, but she wasn't ready to let it go.

"I've already told you it was nothing," Tyler said, looking annoyed at her persistence.

"So why was she sorry about nothing?"

"Why do you have to always press me so much when it comes to Georgiana?"

"And why are you so adamant about not telling me? You used to tell me everything!" she retorted accusingly.

Tyler stared at her for a few seconds before lowering his gaze to the floor, embarrassed.

Rose narrowed her eyes at him as comprehension dawned. "It was about me, wasn't it?" she hissed, leaning forward. She folded her legs, her ankle slipping away from Tyler's grip. "Why does she hate me so much?"

“Come on, Rose, she doesn’t hate you. Don’t be melodramatic. She’s just a bit jealous, that’s all.”

“Why am I your only friend she’s jealous about? Especially when I’m the only one you haven’t slept with.”

“Well, you’re the only friend who lives with me. And Georgiana has this theory that the fact we haven’t slept together is more meaningful than if we had. She actually said she wished we’d done it before I met her and got over it!”

“And what exactly makes Georgiana think sleeping with me would make you get over it?”

“Would it?” Tyler asked with a hint of flirtation, making one of his cutest, mischievous faces.

“We’re not going to test it.” Rose kept her sulky frown. “So, what was she going on about this time?”

Tyler finally gave her an answer. “She wanted to know when you were planning on moving out.”

Rose shot out of the bed as if it were made of burning coals.

“I didn’t know I’d overstayed my welcome,” she spat, furious that Georgiana would stick her posh nose into her life like that.

It was true that she felt a bit guilty about living in Tyler’s swanky apartment without paying any rent. But it was Tyler who didn’t let her pay her share. To compensate, she did what she could. She bought most of the groceries and paid all the bills—and even though

she and Tyler had never spoken about it, she thought he was fine with their arrangement. Georgiana had already made a snarky comment once to her: “How nice it must be to live rent-free in such a nice neighborhood.” Rose could only imagine what other things along that line she was telling Tyler. The thought made her livid.

“I can start packing immediately,” she said, and moved to grab some discarded clothes from a chair.

“Rose, will you calm down?” Tyler said, grabbing her wrist and pulling her onto his lap. “I’ve told her to piss off.”

“You know I feel guilty about not paying rent,” she protested, trying to ignore the fact that she was sitting on top of him and that they were both half-naked.

“And you know I don’t want you to. Plus, I know you sneak around and pay off all the bills before I even have a chance to open them.”

He put his hands around her waist. It felt good.

“Are you sure?” She needed more reassurances, besides the physical ones.

“Rose, my life has improved a lot since you moved in with me. My fridge used to look like a war zone, but now you make sure I eat all my vegetables,” he said jokingly.

“I bet she just wants me out so *she* can move in,” Rose couldn’t help saying.

“As if.” Tyler snorted, making Rose happier than she’d been all morning.

She beamed at him, looking him straight in the eyes. He looked back at her intensely, and suddenly she wasn't smiling any more.

Tyler was bewildered by Rose's beauty as he watched the smile disappear from her face. She was now looking at him with a serious expression, one he'd never seen before. Could it be that after all this time she'd finally give in to him? Today, when he'd least expected it, when he hadn't tried one of his many stunts to seduce her. He leaned in closer as if to kiss her. He felt her stiffen, but she didn't move away as she usually did when he tried something like this. Nor did she make any motion to get up. Her eyes widened, but she didn't move.

Tyler didn't need any more hints. This was his opportunity; he wasn't going to give Rose time to think about what was happening or to change her mind. He bent her backwards and pressed his lips to hers.

A few miles away, in another posh neighborhood of Boston, Georgiana was pacing around her living room. She was nervous and impatient. She was seething with

hatred for Rose, anger for Tyler, and resentment for Marcus. Whom she didn't exactly know, but who she was positively sure had ruined her life by moving to LA.

She tried Tyler's number another time. When he didn't pick up, she threw her phone across the room in frustration. Luckily, it hit the couch and bumped on its soft cushions. It landed on the carpeted floor in two bounces with no hard damage sustained. Not that she cared.

It wasn't going to work this way. *She* living there wasn't right. How could Tyler not see it? And why wasn't he picking up his damn phone?

Georgiana checked the time on her Rolex: nine forty-five in the morning. She'd been calling him for almost an hour now. She stared out of her floor-to-ceiling windows without focusing on anything in particular. Maybe he had the phone on silent and was still asleep. It wasn't unusual for him to sleep in on weekends, and they'd been arguing until late last night. He'd left her apartment at, what, three, four a.m.? By the time he'd gotten home and to bed it must've been really late.

That was it, she decided, he was still sleeping. Ah, men! They could sleep through everything. Unlike her, who had barely slept and had been forced to use all her willpower not to call him before nine—she didn't want to come off as the hysterical girlfriend. Georgiana had gotten up at six o'clock, when she'd been too fed up with tossing in bed. She'd showered, completed her

beauty routine, and gotten dressed. By eight she'd already had breakfast, and she spent the next hour sitting in her apartment, willing time to pass faster.

Anyway, Tyler asleep or not, the problem remained. The sneaky little ho was after her boyfriend; Georgiana knew it for a fact. She'd probably been since puberty. Oh, why did Marcus have to dump Rose and give her the perfect excuse to move in with Tyler? To sink her claws even deeper into his skin?

If Tyler and Rose stayed under the same roof much longer, something was bound to happen. Georgiana could sense their relationship wasn't strictly brotherly and sisterly—no matter how many times Tyler sworn it was. There was tension between them; she could tell from their body language. The fact that they hadn't done the deed wasn't an assurance it wouldn't happen in the future. It was even worse, in a way. It helped build up the pressure, making Rose—the one girl Tyler had never had—too big of a temptation for him to resist.

Why did everything have to go down this way? Why now?

Georgiana felt as if a cosmic conspiracy was in place to undermine her relationship with Tyler. But she wasn't a "live and let live" kind of girl. She was used to taking action and gaining control over things. She'd even tried to convince her brother, Ethan, to provide a distraction for Rose. He, five years their senior, was drop dead gorgeous and a womanizer. But he'd refused without

even meeting Rose. To hell with him, too. She needed another plan, something that'd keep Tyler and Rose apart for good.

Georgiana turned away from the window. She started pacing around the apartment in search of an inspiration. It took her a few laps of the room before an idea started forming in her mind. At first she couldn't quite grasp it. She was sure she'd overlooked something, but couldn't put her finger on what. Then, out of the blue, an illumination hit her. She stopped dead in the center of the living room, unable to believe how stupid she'd been not to think of it sooner.

Grabbing her bag and car keys from the coffee table, Georgiana hurried toward the door. Halfway there she paused, turned around, and went back for her phone. She picked it up and checked the screen, only half-hoping to see if Tyler had called her back. He hadn't.

Never mind, he could wait. Right now she had bigger things to sort out. With a feeling of purpose, Georgiana plonked the phone into her bag and exited her apartment. She felt strangely calm and regenerated. It was good to finally have a plan.

♥ Three ♥

Friends with Benefits

Tyler lay in Rose's bed, staring at the ceiling, stunned. He was mesmerized by what had just happened. He thought he finally understood what making love meant as opposed to having sex. Being with Rose had felt right on so many levels; he couldn't believe they'd waited this long. Why had they waited? Tyler felt as if the last ten years had been a total waste of time. But that was over. Everything was going to change. He'd have to break up with Georgiana first thing. He wasn't looking forward to that. He was sure Georgiana would not make it easy for him. But there was no space left in his life for her, not now that his friendship with Rose had transformed into something new, something better ... Love? The word scared him a bit. But he wanted to see where things would go with Rose. Take it one day at a time and see where their relationship would bring them.

He looked down at her. She was snuggled against him, her head resting on his chest, her eyes closed. He brushed the hair away from Rose's face to have a clear

view of her beautiful features while she slept. Yep, he was in trouble.

Rose kept her eyes tightly shut, pretending she'd passed out. She was lost; she didn't know what to do next. She was sure the loud thuds of her heart beating in her chest would soon give her away. And then what? She had no idea how to handle the situation. Was her friendship with Tyler ruined forever?

She was mad at herself; she'd been weak. She hadn't been able to resist. Not with Georgiana being a bitch. Not with Marcus dumping her and throwing her off her game, leaving her as insecure as ever. And not with Tyler being Tyler.

Oh Tyler! He was a lost cause. It'd never work romantically between them. There was a time when she'd had hope for them. She'd waited years for him to change. Not dating anyone, always waiting for him to mature, or for the girl of the moment to be dumped. Until she'd finally accepted he'd never change.

Unbidden, her mind began a mental recap of all the girls Tyler had dated over the years.

He'd had sex for the first time during their sophomore year in high school, with Amanda Lockwood, a junior. She was a popular girl, and after his conquest Tyler had become the hero of the school.

Despite girls finding him irresistible, he remained faithful to Amanda for a whole year; after all, she'd been his first. That was, until Amanda's nemesis, Charlotte Pierce, had decided to seduce him during summer break. Amanda had been away on vacation for a month, and teenage Tyler had been easy prey for Charlotte.

When Amanda had come back from her European trip, there'd been a lot of drama. Amanda and Charlotte became the first entries on a long list of girls who would end up hating Tyler for dating, cheating, and dumping them. By twelfth grade, Tyler had become the most popular guy in school. He'd basked in the glory of fooling around with a never-ending stream of girls. He'd been juggling at least two of them at any given time.

Rose had hoped college would steady him a little bit, but she couldn't have been more wrong. He'd gone on an even wilder spree in their freshman year at Harvard. He'd slept with a different girl almost every night. Rose had told herself it was only their first year; that once he'd gotten it out of his system, he'd finally be ready for something serious. In their second and third year, she'd almost believed in Tyler's redemption. He'd been in a serious relationship with Jessica, an English major he'd met in the library. Tyler and Jessica were together for two years, but when Rose found out he'd cheated on her eighteen months in, she officially gave up on him. If he couldn't stay true to Jessica, the closest thing he'd ever

had to a long-term girlfriend, then how could Rose trust him with her heart?

After Jessica, it had been pretty much the same with every new girlfriend. He'd cheated on all of them—he couldn't help himself, it was just the way he was—and they'd all ended up loathing him. Rose didn't want to end up loathing him. He was her best friend; he was the most important person in her life besides her parents. He was family. And she knew a romantic relationship would lead exactly to that. In the end he'd cheat on her—maybe not in a year, but in five, ten, it was a given. He simply wasn't a monogamist. She would end up bitter, with her heart shattered to pieces. She could not let it happen, not to them. Today had been a mistake, a big one. But they could fix it. They had to.

Rose stirred, pretending she was just now waking up. She looked at him shyly, blushing.

“What?” she asked, self-consciously pulling the sheets around her body.

“I find it funny you choose to blush now.”

“I didn't choose to, and don't look at me like that.”

“Like what?”

His wolfish smile was making it hard for her to keep a steady mind.

“As if you want to eat me.”

“Maybe I do.” He bit her hand affectionately.

“Pff.” She felt her face burn red; she buried it in his chest to cover up her embarrassment. She still couldn't

believe they'd done it! She was hoping to discover this was one of her dreams about him.

"Don't play shy, Rosalynn," he said, using her full name. He planted a soft kiss on her collarbone. *No, definitely not a dream.* "After today I won't believe you."

After today. That was the problem.

"So," she said, shifting positions so that he couldn't kiss her.

"I know that expression, Rosalynn Atwood. It's your serious-talk one."

"Tyler," she said sternly. "This is serious."

"What is serious?"

"Me, you, naked in bed."

"Relax, Rose. It's not the end of the world."

"No, but it could be the end of our friendship. Doesn't that scare you?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, frowning.

"Oh, Tyler. I don't know! I think it was a mistake."

"Why?"

"All your exes hate you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You cheated on all of them."

"I didn't cheat on all of them."

"Name one you haven't."

He thought for a while.

"I haven't cheated on Georgiana."

Rose snorted. “Oh right, your girlfriend!” Hearing him say her name sent her into a frenzy. “The one you just cheated on!”

“But it was with you, so it doesn’t count.”

“I don’t think Georgiana would agree.”

“I can dump her if that’s what’s bothering you.”

“How nice of you,” she said sarcastically. “Please, don’t dump her on my account.”

“Rose, I wouldn’t cheat on you.”

“How do you know? Do you really expect me to believe you’d be fine sleeping with me and only with me for the rest of your life?”

“Yes. No. What the hell do I know! I haven’t even had breakfast and you’re already talking marriage. Why don’t we choose the name of our kids already and be done with it.”

“Well, it’s not like we can date and see how it goes, right?” Rose snapped.

“Why not? What’s wrong with that?”

“Everything’s wrong with that.”

“Nothing’s wrong with that”

“Tyler, please stop talking, you’re making it worse.”

“I don’t get you, Rose. What do you want me to say?”

“Nothing. You’ve already said enough.”

“Why do you girls have to go cuckoo the moment the sex is over?”

“See, Tyler, that’s the problem. I’m not one of your girls, and I’ll never be,” Rose said, raising her voice. “This was a big mistake. I wasn’t thinking.”

“I preferred you when you weren’t.”

“Well, I am now. This,” she added, pointing at the two of them, “shouldn’t have happened. It won’t happen again.” Rose gathered the bed linens around her, transforming herself into a human cocoon to shield her naked body from him. She retreated to her side of the bed, away from him.

“Don’t worry, Rose,” Tyler said, grabbing his pants and pulling them on. “I’ll get out of your way.” He jumped off the bed and was out of the room in three quick strides. He slammed the door behind him.

The moment Tyler left, Rose felt dead inside. She reached out her hand to his side of the bed, where the sheets were still warm from his body heat. She felt tears prickle her eyes. She wasn’t ready to let him go, not yet.

She followed him out of the room; she could hear the shower going. She tried the bathroom door and found it unlocked. Turning the knob, she pulled the door open and tiptoed inside the room. He was in the shower; she tapped on the glass, making a rasping sound.

He opened the glass door and stared at her, surprise written all over his face.

She stepped into the shower with him.

Tyler raised his eyebrows in a silent interrogation. He was probably thinking she was crazy. She’d just told

him she didn't want to have anything to do with him. Yet, here she was, jumping him in the shower not two minutes later.

"Today doesn't count," Rose said curtly, answering his unspoken question. Going up on her tiptoes, she pulled him toward her in a wet kiss.

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The next day ended up not counting as well. And the next. And the next. Rose and Tyler fell into a weird routine of having sex (making love?) wherever, whenever, without ever talking about it. Afterward, they would pretend nothing had happened. Rose knew she was playing a dangerous game, one she couldn't possibly win. She knew Tyler wasn't ready for a serious relationship with her, and that what they were doing was wrong, but she couldn't help herself!

Georgiana was still in the picture. Tyler had the decency not to bring her over to the house anymore. But on the odd nights on which he didn't come home, Rose cried herself to sleep in her room. The next few days she would pout and ignore Tyler, but eventually she'd break. Then she would jump right back into his arms, and their unhealthy routine started all over.

It was driving Rose crazy. She knew it was a mistake. This situation couldn't go on forever, but she couldn't stop. She'd wanted Tyler for too long to be able to keep

saying no. Rose told herself it was better to be the one he was cheating *with*, instead of the one he was cheating *on*. But after a month, even this excuse was running thin.

She'd told him he didn't have to leave Georgiana for her, but that had been ages ago! Couldn't he see things had changed? She wasn't going to ask him again—what if he said no? What if he said *yes*? They'd get together, most probably, and then he'd cheat on her, and that was the last thing she wanted. They were such a mess. She was a mess. On one hand, she wanted Tyler to leave Georgiana and be with her officially. On the other, Rose was scared to death of it really happening. She wasn't sure of anything anymore. The only thing Rose knew for a fact was that things couldn't keep going like this.

Something had to change, soon, but Rose didn't know what, or how.

Tyler was confused. He knew the situation with Rose and Georgiana was about to explode in his hands. He didn't understand Rose. She'd been adamant they couldn't be together. Not unless he proposed right then and there, and he wasn't ready for that. What the hell, he was only twenty-four. He didn't want to be tied up already. But Rose had become a drug for him. He couldn't go back to just being her friend.

On the other side of the fence, Georgiana was catching up on the fact that something was going on. The few nights he was at her apartment he pretended to be tired to avoid sleeping with her, and he never invited her to the house anymore. They were arguing more often than not, and he was getting tired. And school had not even started yet. What would happen when he'd have to spend all his days in class squeezed between the two women in his life? The whole situation was a disaster. He should dump Georgiana, but the thought scared him. If he did, what would happen with Rose? And what would happen if he didn't?

Tyler didn't know what to do, or how to behave. He wished girls came with an instruction manual attached to their backs. The only thing he knew was that things couldn't keep going like this.

Something had to change, soon, but Tyler didn't know what, or how.

Georgiana knew something was up with Tyler. They hadn't had sex since the night of their fight about Rose moving out of his apartment, and that had been a month ago. He'd mumbled some lame excuses about being tired on the few nights he'd been at her house. Usually he couldn't keep his hands off her, and now that he'd

also made it clear she wasn't welcome at his apartment anymore ...

Had he slept with Rose? She was almost certain he had. Georgiana was hurt at first, and she'd had a dark couple of days. Her first instinct had been to burn Tyler's car and dump him without ever looking back. But then she decided she didn't care if he'd cheated on her—she was in love with Tyler. He was hers, and she was ready to fight for him. She wasn't going to let that ho snatch him away from her. No matter what it took, things couldn't keep going like this.

Something had to change, soon, and Georgiana knew exactly what, and how.

♥ Four ♥

Party Girl

A couple of weeks later, Rose, Tyler, and Georgiana were having lunch together in a cafeteria on campus. The fall semester hadn't started yet, but the campus was already buzzing with students for the orientation period. Rose couldn't get over how weird it was, the three of them eating together. When Tyler had invited her out, Rose hadn't realized Georgiana would be present as well. Since Tyler had been going out of his way to avoid unnecessary contact between Rose and Georgiana, Rose suspected Georgiana had somehow orchestrated the lunch.

Rose watched Georgiana as she sat possessively next to Tyler, eating all his fries. Did she know Rose loved eating his fries? Was her dominion over his French Fries a metaphor of their love triangle? Rose hated that out in the open Tyler belonged to Georgiana, and that she was powerless about it.

“Do you have any plans for this coming Friday, Rose?” Georgiana asked, all sweetness.

“No, nothing in particular,” Rose said cautiously. She couldn’t help but feel like she was walking into an ambush—Georgiana never asked about her “plans”, not to mention she was being uncharacteristically nice. Rose didn’t like it—it was easier to sneak around with Tyler behind her back when Georgiana was being a bitch to her. If she thought of Georgiana as a nice, normal girl, then Rose knew her guilt would overwhelm her.

“Oh, that’s perfect!” Georgiana exclaimed. “I’m doing a dinner with some friends for my birthday. I want you to be there. Do you think you can make it?”

Rose couldn’t think of a polite way to say “no”. “Um ... yeah, sure. Where?”

“Great. I haven’t decided yet. But you can come with Tyler straight from your house. I’ll meet you there.”

“Okay.” That was even more peculiar. Georgiana not bugging Tyler to pick her up, and suggesting they went in the car together instead. Something was definitely up.

Tyler followed the exchange, at a loss for words. He pushed his plate away, his stomach churning. He didn’t know what to do, or what to think. What else was Georgiana planning? She’d already thrown him a curve ball impossible to catch; what else could she possibly want? He felt trapped and didn’t see a way out. He was

still angry with Georgiana for the way she'd manipulated things. He should've left her when he'd had the chance. He should've known Georgiana wasn't going to stand by idly while he was having his way with Rose. That she was going to fight. And she had. That morning, Tyler had been called into Professor Hendricks's office and his life had changed forever. He had no proof, but he was sure Georgiana had orchestrated everything, leaving him no choice. But the damage was done and there was nothing he could do at this point; all there was left to do now was to tell Rose. He looked at her with longing; he'd have to talk to her soon, but he couldn't bring himself to do it, not yet. He couldn't bear the thought of losing her. And after talking to her, he'd consider himself lucky if she ever spoke to him again.

~ * ~

Friday night, on the way to the restaurant, Tyler still hadn't spoken to Rose. He'd made a resolution he'd tell her tonight after they got back home. But while he was driving, it crossed his mind that maybe it had been a mistake to wait so long. It'd only make Rose angrier. And the idea of Rose and Georgiana in the same room for a whole dinner made him nervous. He had an ominous feeling about the party.

Rose was sitting in silence beside him, staring out of the window. She was holding a little gift-wrapped package in her hands. He'd told her it wasn't necessary to buy Georgiana a present, but Rose had insisted she should. Thinking about it, he had no clue what was in the box. Poison ivy? He could only hope.

At home, Rose had stunned him again. She'd emerged from her room dressed in a tight black jumpsuit with cutouts around the waist, and an almost bare back. She was also wearing very high-heeled black shoes and a furry-leathery jacket thing. In short, she was Catwoman. She was just missing the ears, whiskers, and tail. Again, these were clothes he'd never seen before. He was discovering a whole new secret side of Rose. It was great to see Rose under a different light, but sometimes Tyler wished he was still oblivious. His life would be much simpler. This sort of gear was probably reserved for Marcus; Tyler couldn't help but think bitterly. But tonight she had it on for him, or to compete with Georgiana—he didn't know for sure which one, if he had to be honest. *Georgiana*, thinking about his girlfriend made him slightly nauseous, he wasn't used to not being in control and he didn't like it.

Tyler's mood worsened as they entered the restaurant. Georgiana and some of her guests were already there. They were sitting at a long, rectangular table laid for at least twenty people. Georgiana was sitting at the head of the table with an empty space on

her left, followed by a couple of nicely dressed girls. On her right, there was a rather plain-looking guy, followed by two other girls and another good-looking man who seemed three to five years older than everyone else. There were fifteen or so empty places left at the table.

The older guy fixated his gaze on Rose the moment she entered the door, and didn't seem to be willing to leave her any time soon. The fact was not lost on Tyler, and he felt an immediate, irrational surge of hate for the man.

Walking inside the restaurant, Rose watched Georgiana rise to her feet to greet them. She looked beautiful in a short dress made of lace flowers with a white blouse and a pink skirt.

"Tyler, Rose," Georgiana said. "You've made it! Meet Joselyn, Kate, John, Mel, Alicia, and Ethan." She did a counterclockwise round of introduction.

Rose stood there awkwardly, looking around the table at these people she'd never met before. Suddenly she was feeling self-conscious. Especially when she met the gaze of the guy sitting at the edge of the group, Ethan. He had bright, unsettling light-blue eyes that looked somewhat familiar, and short black hair. He was arrogantly good-looking, and was openly staring at her

in a way that, if possible, made her even more uncomfortable.

Rose delivered her gift to Georgiana—a noncommittal make-up palette—who thanked her without opening it. The seat beside the birthday girl was obviously intended for Tyler, and Rose didn't want to be anywhere near the couple, so she backtracked to go sit at the opposite end of the table. Georgiana protested mildly that she shouldn't sit so far away, but Rose assured her she would be fine, and Georgiana didn't insist further. Her head down, Rose shuffled away as quickly as possible.

Rose had a bad feeling about this night. She'd never seen Georgiana look so radiant, so smug. Georgiana was at this very moment watching Rose with an expression in-between triumph and pity. Rose wondered why. Why had Georgiana invited her tonight? Did she have an ulterior motive? A hidden agenda? Rose felt something was going on, and she was the only one who didn't know what. Tyler had behaved strangely in the last week, and she couldn't tell what had changed. Somehow, tonight she felt as if she'd walked herself into a trap. The evil stare hidden behind Georgiana's smiles only served to increase her anxiety about this party. What on earth had made her say yes to this night?

The moment Rose sat down, Ethan got up and whispered something into Georgiana's ear. He took his half-empty cocktail with him and moved toward Rose.

He was tall, Rose noticed—maybe not as tall as Tyler, probably an inch or two shorter, but still tall. She peeped at Tyler for just a second. There was a look of pure hatred on his face as he followed Ethan’s movements. Good, it should serve him right to be the jealous one for a change.

Rose looked around at the other guests and spotted a pair of eyes filled with hatred, staring straight at her. They belonged to the blonde girl who’d been sitting next to Ethan, who didn’t appear at all happy with his sudden move over to Rose. *Don’t glare at me, lady, I didn’t ask your guy to come talk to me. Is he even your guy?*

“Hello,” Ethan said, interrupting Rose’s thoughts as he took the seat next to her. “It didn’t seem right to have you sit here all alone. I’m Ethan, Georgiana’s brother,”

Ah, that explains why the eyes looked familiar.

“And you are Rose, right?” he pressed.

“Right.” She smiled at him, blushing slightly under his piercing gaze despite herself. Was this what Tyler felt whenever Georgiana looked at him? Her heart sank into her chest.

Ethan was intrigued by the faint blush that appeared on Rose’s cheeks as she spoke to him. In fact, he was intrigued by everything about Rose. When his sister had begged him to seduce her boyfriend’s new roommate,

she'd described Rose as austere-looking, but pretty. The woman seated next to him was neither austere nor pretty. To call Rose pretty had been the understatement of the millennium. She had a dark beauty with her long brown hair, olive skin, and almost-black eyes. And to think he hadn't wanted to come tonight. He was glad now that Georgiana had insisted so much.

"So, how do you know my sister?" he asked, pretending he was clueless.

"We're at Harvard Law together, and she's dating my best friend Tyler," Rose said.

"You came here together?"

"Yeah, I'm crashing at his place until I can find one of my own. I had a bit of a lease mishap."

"What kind of mishap?" Ethan asked. Georgiana had already filled him in on all of the drama with her ex-boyfriend, but he wanted to see if Rose was going to volunteer the information.

She did. "Oh, nothing serious. My boyfriend dumped me a month before we were supposed to move in together, and I'd already cancelled my lease on my old place." She shrugged, smiling awkwardly.

Ethan realized he liked her even more after her straightforward answer.

"So, being Georgiana's brother, can I safely assume you're a lawyer?" Rose asked.

"I am afraid you can't," he said, smiling a naughty smile.

“You didn’t go to Harvard Law?” Rose asked, surprised. “I thought every offspring of the Smithson family went to Harvard.”

“I did go to Harvard Law, as did many of my siblings and cousins before and after me,” Ethan replied, amused by the way she’d wrinkled her nose in confusion.

“And after all that pain, you didn’t become a lawyer?”

“Actually, I did.”

“I don’t understand,” Rose said. “What happened?”

“I tried the big studio, with the big cases, and the long hours for a year, and hated it, so I quit.”

“And your father let you?”

“He didn’t have much of a choice. I’m over eighteen, you know.”

“You stood up to Bradley Smithson. I’m impressed.”

Ethan roared with laughter. “To me, he’s just my father.”

“So he didn’t make a fuss?” she asked curiously.

“Of course he did. But in the end, when he saw my mind was set, all he could do was make me pay him back my tuitions.”

“For law school?”

“And college, too.”

“Ouch. And you managed?”

“Just about. I’m still paying. Having him as a creditor makes me regret not taking out student loans.”

“So what do you do now?”

“I’m into real estate.” Ethan scrutinized her face for a reaction. Was she going to give him the downright sorrowful look of contempt other lawyers reserved for him when he told them his new occupation?

She didn’t.

“My father is in real estate,” Rose said. “What do you do, exactly?”

“I usually buy places that need refurbishing, restore them, and when I’m done I re-sell them or rent them out.”

“If you have some nice studio apartments to rent, you could show them to me.” She blushed and looked away, like she immediately regretted asking him.

“So you’re looking to move out?” Ethan said, piercing her with his blue eyes.

He saw her throw a furtive, guilty glance at Tyler, who was looking back at her pointedly. “I mean, not that I have much of a budget,” she backtracked.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he promised. “If something interesting pops up, you’ll be the first I call.” Ethan meant the words. For once, he felt himself united in his sister’s desire of not wanting Rose to live under the same roof as Tyler. Not that it was going to be a problem much longer, from what he’d gathered from Georgina on their way here when he’d picked her up from her apartment. But Ethan wanted Rose out of Tyler’s house anyway. Why? He wasn’t sure yet. He just recognized it as a fact.

♥ Five ♥

A Bitter Pill to Swallow

When all the guests had arrived, menus were distributed, and Rose picked one up as an excuse to interrupt the conversation with Ethan. She stared at the pages, not really reading them. She felt bad she'd lied about her need for an apartment, or for it to be on a budget. Well, not exactly lied. Her dad was in real estate; she'd just omitted that his company owned half of Dallas, where she and Tyler were from. She wasn't as comfortable as Tyler in displaying her family's wealth. She asked her dad to cover only her tuition and limited living expenses. So it was sort of true that she was on a budget for her rent, even if the budget was self-imposed. What wasn't true was that she was looking for a house. She had no intention of moving out of Tyler's home.

Rose focused back on the menu. Three items in, she realized Georgiana had taken them to a sushi place. She looked at the names written on the pages, not understanding any of them. What were a Nigiri, a Maki,

or a Miso? She had no clue, and there were no pictures to help her, as the restaurant was definitely too classy for those. She knew everyone was supposed to eat sushi, and that it would be unsophisticated of her not to, but she simply couldn't digest the idea of eating raw fish. The thought made her slightly nauseous.

"Pssst," she whispered, with her face hidden behind the leather menu.

"Are you talking to me?" Ethan asked, cocking his head toward her.

"Mmm-hmmm. Are you a sushi connoisseur?"

"I've had my fair share. Why?" He too was talking with his whole head hidden behind the black menu, and had his face turned toward hers.

"I don't have the faintest idea what any of this is. Can you help me out?"

"You've never had sushi?" He seemed shocked.

"I'm from Texas; eating something that hasn't been barbecued, or at least grilled, is considered a state offence."

"You're from Texas! You don't have a southern accent."

"My mom is from Chicago. But we moved here ages ago for college."

"We?" Ethan asked.

"Oh, I meant Tyler and I." Rose shifted uncomfortably in her seat, not sure she wanted to start talking about Tyler with Ethan. "We've know each

other since pre-school. He's like family."

"Family, huh? You don't say."

Ethan appeared skeptical. Was she such an open book?

"So," she said, deliberately changing the subject. "Will you order for me?"

He laughed. "Sure."

"I want something like a beginner set of the less gross things."

"By gross, I'll assume you're referring to the raw fish. In case you didn't know, they also have cooked stuff here—you want me to get you one of those?"

"You know what? I don't think I'll give sushi another try any time soon, so I might as well just go all in and try the uncooked bits."

"Mmm, you're the adventurous type," Ethan said flirtatiously. He winked one of those blue eyes at her, causing her stomach to do a little involuntary flip. "I like it."

When their food arrived, Rose found herself in another predicament—she had no idea how to use chopsticks. She tried to handle the two wood sticks, but soon found she was hopeless.

"Ethan?" she murmured. It was the first time she said his name, and she liked the sound of it.

"How can I be of assistance?"

"Do you think they'd flay me if I asked for a fork and a knife?"

“Oh Rose, you’re helpless, aren’t you?” He chuckled.

“I’d like to see you fight a full rack of greasy barbecued pork ribs with your bare hands in your neat white shirt,” she joked. “Then it’d be my turn to laugh.”

He chuckled again. “Japanese actually eat sushi with their hands. It’s supposed to be eaten that way, at least for real hardcore sushi diners. Chopsticks are for sissies. If you do it, you’ll impress everyone at the table.”

“Will you do it with me?” she challenged.

His blue eyes hardened—Rose got the impression he wasn’t one to back down from a challenge.

“Sure, why not,” He said, and set his chopsticks back on the table.

Rose hesitated at using her fingers, so Ethan took a roll in his hand to show her he wasn’t joking. She followed his lead, raising one of her rolls halfway to her mouth.

“Cheers!” she said, bumping her California Maki into his before bravely putting the whole thing into her mouth.

“Cheers!” he responded, smiling.

After she’d tried a bit of everything he’d ordered for her, he said, “So, what do you think?”

She swallowed the last mouthful of the piece she was chewing and answered, “To be honest, I’ve had better food...”

“Like a barbecued rack of greasy pork ribs?” he

teased.

“Exactly.” She nodded. “But I thought this was going to be a lot worse.”

“So I haven’t managed to bring you over to the raw side.”

“I’m afraid not. Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask—what’s this?” She pointed at a lime-green ball that looked like Play-Doh.

“That’s wasabi.”

“What’s it for?”

“It’s to add spice to the rolls.”

“Oh, I like spicy food.” She grabbed the ball.

“Don’t,” he warned. “It’s really spicy.”

She considered him for a second, the little ball still held between her thumb and index finger. Then she placed it back on the wooden tablet that was used in the place of a regular plate and used one of her discarded chopsticks to split the wasabi in two identical halves.

“Is this better?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Not really. It’s still too much.”

“I think I can handle it,” Rose decided.

Ethan was clearly trying and failing to suppress a grin as she raised the wasabi to her mouth. He had a face that said, “If you want to find out for yourself, I’m not going to stop you.”

So it was a dare. Rose put the half ball in her mouth and decided to win this one. But after just a few gnaws, her eyes started to water and her cheeks burned. Her

nostrils flared wide as she tried to swallow the offending substance. She was sure she must look like a dragon breathing fire. To her credit, she managed to keep an almost straight face throughout the whole ordeal. When she finally managed to swallow the whole thing, she grabbed her diet coke, shoved the straw aside, and downed the whole glass.

“Don’t say anything,” she hissed at Ethan once she’d gone back to normal breathing.

She needn’t have admonished him, as he didn’t seem able to talk at the moment. He was too busy laughing his head off.

When the dessert menu arrived, Rose disappeared behind it once again.

“Pssst,” she whispered at Ethan again.

“You need help with the dessert?”

“No thanks, I can figure out ‘Green Tea Ice-Cream’ all on my own. I wanted to ask you if there’s something going on between you and that blonde chick.” Rose jerked her chin toward the other end of the table. “The one two seats down from Georgiana. She’s been giving me the look of death all night.”

“Ah, yes,” Ethan admitted, reluctantly. “That’d be Alice. We hooked up a couple of times, and now she probably thinks she’s my girlfriend.”

“Oh, phew.” Rose made a swatting gesture with her hand, still well-hidden behind her menu. “How old fashioned of her to think so.”

So Ethan was a player, just like Tyler. How big of a player, she wondered? Then she dismissed the thought; what did she care, anyway? Tonight had been a nice evening, sure—way more fun than she could've ever expected—but it wasn't as if they were going to see each other again after the dinner was over. So, player or not, it really didn't make any difference to her.

Clink. Clink. Clink. Clink. Clink.

Georgiana was batting one chopstick against her glass to attract everyone's attention. She was on her feet, looking down at all her guests. The chatting groups of two or more quieted down, and twenty sets of eyes fixated on Georgiana. It was clear she loved being the center of attention. What was the big announcement, Rose wondered—a new Prada bag? A new Mercedes from daddy?

“I wanted to thank you all for being here tonight for this special day...”

Ow, she was really going to make a speech. Rose was about to roll her eyes at Ethan when she remembered he was Georgiana's brother, and caught herself just in time.

“Tonight is special,” Georgiana continued, “not only because it's my birthday, but also because, as most of you already know—” Georgiana looked pointedly at Rose. “—I won't be seeing you all for quite a while, as I'm leaving in two weeks.”

Did she say leaving? In two weeks? For where? For how long? Rose couldn't believe her luck. Georgiana

out of the way meant one less complication for her and Tyler. She looked over at him, filled with hope and trepidation. But he'd gone very pale—he looked almost ill as he stared fixedly at the tablecloth. At that moment, as if feeling Rose staring at him, he lifted his head and looked at her from across the table. She knew that expression: it was a guilty one. Why was he feeling guilty, if Georgiana was going away?

Rose's question was answered by the end of Georgiana's speech. "I couldn't believe my luck when Professor Hendricks told me there'd been a reshuffle in the Semester Abroad scholarship, and that Tyler and I would be able to join the program in the upcoming fall term! We're going to spend the next six months in Paris. How exciting is that?" Georgiana addressed her question directly at Rose. As the table erupted in cheers and applause, Georgiana kept her gaze fixated on Rose, her lips twisted in a smug little smile. Rose could practically feel the triumph wafting off her.

Despite feeling like a knife was slicing deep into her heart, Rose didn't give Georgiana the satisfaction of crumbling right before her eyes. She managed to maintain an impassive expression on the outside—but inside, oh, it was mayhem.

Tyler and Georgiana, leaving for France in two weeks. They were going to Paris together, and he hadn't even bothered to tell her. She knew he and Georgiana had applied for the scholarship almost a year ago. She

remembered being genuinely sorry for Tyler when he hadn't gotten into the program. Of course, at the time, she'd still been with Marcus and nothing had happened with Tyler. The idea of Tyler being abroad with Georgiana for six months hadn't been daunting in the least. But now, now it was a nightmare.

Rose's brain was a whirlwind of thoughts, and her heart was pounding so fast in her chest she was afraid it was going to escape. She hadn't bought Georgiana's explanation of a "reshuffling" in Hendricks's exchange program. He was one of the sternest, most revered professors at Harvard, and he wasn't one to play favorites—Rose could only imagine what strings Georgiana's father must have pulled to get Tyler and his daughter in.

Whatever he'd done, it had worked. Tyler was leaving her. Rose felt the beginning of a sob forming in her throat, and she choked it into her glass of diet coke, pretending it was a hiccup.

Ethan had watched Rose closely during Georgiana's speech. To the casual observer, she might have appeared as if she hadn't been affected at all by the news. But his close scrutiny had not missed the flicker of hope that had appeared on her face when Georgiana said she was going away. He'd also seen her expression become much like the one she'd had while trying to swallow

wasabi when Georgiana had added that Tyler was going with her.

So, there was something between them; his sister had been right again. But Ethan was sure Georgiana had succeeded in crushing whatever it was that was going on, judging by the icing stare Rose had thrown Tyler just after the end of the speech. He'd been taken aback by how quickly Rose's warm eyes could turn to such a frosty wall of black steel when she was angry. Ethan prayed he'd never be at the end of that stare. He felt almost sorry for Tyler. But, most of all, Ethan felt happy for himself. For once his sister's scheming had proven quite useful. Rose fascinated him, and he intended to pursue this new interest in the future. It wasn't often these days that Ethan Smithson found a girl interesting. If he thought about it, it hadn't happened since Sabrina, and that had been a very long time ago.

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