

After the Party

By Georgina Lees



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Prologue

The moon is high tonight, casting an ominous glow over the dusty blue fields.

She moves slowly between the rough tree bark, treading carefully over stray branches and undulating roots masked in trailing ivy and thick weeds. As she moves further and further into the woodland, the misty haze trickles down through bare branches, guiding her to an untouched spot.

This is where she'll stop.

This is where they'll find her.

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Chapter 1

Sometimes I think he'd notice me if I had superpowers. I daydream about it. Floating into the sky, beams projecting from the palms of my hands as I descend onto the enemy. I'd save the world from a deadly alien attack and then he'd see me. I'd be the only one he'd see, as I drift down and land among the cheering crowd, our eyes lock as he smiles at me in amazement.

'Lizzie.'

I blink, realising where I am. Rebecca is standing next to me, her hand poised trying to open the fridge door.

'Sorry Lizzie, I just need to get the milk.'

'Yes, of course,' I say, taking a step backwards.

'You looked like you were in deep thought there,' she says, smiling as she closes the fridge and clutches the milk in her hands.

I shake my head. I watch him pass the kitchen door, but I haven't had time to speak to him yet, since he got back from visiting family in Scotland for his grandad's funeral, and I desperately want to know how he is. To see him. His figure becomes blurred behind the frosted glass as he strides down the hall, back to his desk.

'Just got a lot of my mind, a new project's come in,' I reply.

'Oh yeah, that's exciting.' She pours a drop of milk into her tea and smiles at me. 'How long have you been a project manager now?'

'Not long, this will be my first client.'

'Nervous?' she says, clutching her hands around the mug. 'You shouldn't be,' she adds, a smile drawn across her face. 'You'll do great.'

'I'm not really nervous,' I say, taking the milk from beside her.

'Good. Anyway, I better get back to work,' she says, striding out of the kitchen.

I turn to my bowl of bran flakes and splash milk over them. I need to be careful to not let my mind wander, my eyes linger, I don't want anyone to suspect how I feel about him.

How do I feel about him?

I hover in the hollow kitchen doorway and stare down the corridor at the busy office floor.

I catch him sitting by the window pointing at a computer monitor. He's smiling as he leans over someone's shoulder, his dark brown hair skims the top of his full cheeks as his tall, lean frame stoops over the top of the chair. People walk past and he flashes in and out of view. The early morning managers' meeting floods from the nearby conference room and they pause, towering over someone's laptop. Now he's out of view and I stare down at my bowl of cereal. The bran flakes are swollen and have turned to mulch so I walk back into the kitchen to throw them away.

How long can I keep this up? I feel sick with anticipation every time I arrive at work in the morning. I'll find every excuse I can to speak to him, to be in the same room as him. It's been three years now since we met and I knew instantly. Knew what? I gnaw the inside of my mouth and slowly pour the sludge of bran flakes into the bin. I throw my head back and turn my thoughts to work. I walk back to

my desk with a new purpose. Sliding into my office chair, I boot up my laptop and see a pair of teeth baring into the black screen. I twist my head to the side as Marie rolls her chair next to me.

‘Morning,’ she says, still grinning.

‘Why are you so happy?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ she says, pressing her finger to her lips and flickering her eyes away coyly.

‘Really, what is it?’

She drops her jaw playfully, ‘Can’t I see how my best work buddy is doing on a Monday morning with a smile and...,’ she pauses, swivelling back to her desk and rotating back around holding a cup of coffee. ‘... her favourite gingerbread latte.’

‘Marie you never smile, let alone on a Monday morning,’ I say. ‘But thanks.’ I curl my lips upwards and extend a hand to take the cup from her. Then I notice a glint on her ring finger. I pause, a limp hand half wrapped around the coffee.

I stare up at her, my eyes wide. A Cheshire grin slides across her slim features. Her amber eyes glistening as it dawns on me.

‘You’re engaged,’ I say, the words only a whisper.

She nods enthusiastically. I don’t know why, but I search the office for him, because out of all the emotions I should feel for my friend, before I can find happiness, jealousy probes me like an electric shock. Marie doesn’t notice, her attention is drawn away from me by the coos of congratulations and people asking her questions about how he proposed. I look down at the cup in my hand and take a cold swig of coffee, the sugary remnants stick to my tongue and frothy milk cloy at the side of my mouth. Then it subsides and I lean through the crowd and grasp Marie’s hand, she catches my gaze through the other people in our department. She squeezes my hand back and then I feel happy for her. It should have been my first emotion, I think guiltily.

The crowd disperses and Marie winks at me, before swivelling her chair around to her desk.

‘Thanks for my coffee,’ I say to the back of her head.

I see her head bow slightly, she half turns and glances at me through tense narrow eyes, all of her elation lost in the creases of her brow.

I go to ask her what’s wrong, but she turns away and I lean back into my chair. I’m now aware of myself, of my feelings, shame creeps into the back of my eyes and I blink away the tears.

‘I’m really happy for you,’ I say gently, but Marie folds over into the keyboard and we all go about the day, silently tapping away, answering phones and pacing back and forth from meetings.

The agency where I work spans the top floor of a three-story office block and sits on the outskirts of Norwich. I’ve been here for seven years and I know every inch of the office. The delay in the lift when it passes the first floor. The cupboard to the left of the fridge that’s been stuck shut since I joined. The comfy chair we all fight for in the second meeting room.

Marie turns to me at lunch, she exhales a deep sigh and pulls my chair away from my desk towards the window. I giggle, desperately trying to grasp my desk, but I lose my grip and tilt my head back as she pushes me down the aisle.

‘You’re having lunch today,’ she demands. ‘I just got engaged.’

‘You’re going to be using that a lot aren’t you,’ I tease.

She pushes her lips to the side of her cheeks and blows back her long, dark fringe. 'Shall we go to the café?'

'Not today,' I say. 'We'll go for drinks tomorrow night, let me take you out.'

She looks disappointed, but nods anyway. 'Yeah, of course, I'll ask the rest of the team as well.'

I glance at his desk, but he's not there. Marie catches me and grimaces. 'He's out at meetings this afternoon for a new project that's starting in the new year, I saw it in his calendar.'

'Who?' I ask, blushing. Heat prickles the backs of my hands as I shift uncomfortably.

Marie nods, but says no more.

We stare out the window as rain drizzles down the glass panes. Fields disappear behind the lines of silk droplets and murky grey clouds flood the treeline, masking the usual view.

'I've never seen it look so menacing,' Marie comments. 'I hate winter, makes me feel miserable.'

'You're not allowed to feel miserable, not today.'

'You should draw it,' she says, pointing out the window.

I smile. 'I've drawn it before.' I bite my lip. 'I've drawn it a few times.'

'Not like this you haven't, not while it looks this depressing.'

She rises from her office chair. 'Right well I'm going on the hunt for food.' she grasps my shoulders, 'Get your sketchpad, draw it.'

I pat her hand and she leaves me staring outside. I lean forward and wipe a hand across the condensation on the window. I watch the lunch crowd spill into the car park below and beyond that endless rolling hills dusted in gold-tinged crops and segmented by rows of different shaped trees. It's the time of year when burnt oranges and flashes of vibrant yellows and reds slowly fall away, making room for nothing at all. I stare at the familiar branches of the tree that bends across the office window, they sway rhythmically to the beat of the wind and rain, lightly tapping against the window. A crisp brown leaf falls away, as the branch twists painfully, as if extending a hand. I reach forward and rest my palm on the window. I've seen this view so many times, but today it makes me feel sad.

'What are you doing?' says a familiar voice behind me.

I look up at Rebecca, her soft brown hair dangles next to her flushed cheeks. Her dark eyes are alive with concern as she looks down at my damp hand resting on my lap.

'Are you okay?' she asks.

'Yes,' I smile, 'I was just, wiping the glass to see the view.'

She rolls her eyes, pulling her bag from her shoulders and throwing it onto her desk by the window.

'I'm sick of that view.'

'Really, I was just going to get my art stuff and sketch it.'

'I didn't know you drew,' she smiles, producing an apple from her bag. She leans back in her chair and raises her feet onto the desk. Her slim tanned legs stretch across the table as her brown boots clip the keyboard. Mud flies across the desk, but she doesn't pay it any mind.

'What else do you draw?'

I shrug. 'Landscapes, mostly.'

She nods. 'Of what?'

'I don't know,' I say awkwardly, desperately searching for an answer. 'Things like this.' I point out the window.

'How romantic, I'd love to be able to draw.' She takes a bite out of the apple and chews it slowly and her eyes glaze over as if she's remembering something.

'Do you draw people?' she asks.

I shake my head. 'Not really.'

'You could draw me, if you wanted.' She takes another bite out of the apple and her eyes rest on mine. 'You don't have to,' she adds.

'No, I can try, I just don't know if it will be any good.'

She shrugs, throwing the remains of the apple into the bin. She jumps up and brushes down her suede caramel dress and pulls her limp hair forward to rest on her slim shoulders.

'Where do you want me?' she says.

'Well,' I say, getting up and resting Marie's chair in front of the window. 'Just sit there, in front of the view.'

I go to my desk and open the top drawer, pulling out my sketch stuff, a few pencils, an eraser, and my sketchpad.

'You're brave,' I say when I return.

Rebecca frowns. 'What makes you say that?' she says.

I shake my head, 'No, I just mean, letting me draw you.'

'It's a way to pass the time.'

I start work, skimming Rebecca's outline and shading in the backdrop. People start milling back to their desks from lunch, glancing over my shoulder as they do.

Rebecca smirks. 'How's it looking?'

'I won't have time to finish it.'

'Well, you can always finish it tomorrow lunch, there's something quite relaxing about sitting here.'

I lift up my pencil. 'I better get back to work.'

'Can I see what you've done so far?'

I hesitate, then lift the sketch pad. Rebecca's mouth falls open slightly and she takes the pad with both hands. 'Lizzie,' she says softly. 'It's really good, you're very talented.' she hands it back.

'I can finish it tomorrow, then you can have it if you want?'

She smiles at the picture. For a moment her eyes glaze over, the corners of her mouth turn down slightly and small lines buckle under her dark eyes. She really is beautiful, maybe my picture doesn't do her justice. I look at it with her, seeing the dark shades under her eyes, there's a sadness to the picture. I realise I've made her look tired. She blinks quickly, and the colour drains from her cheeks.

‘No, I don’t want it, there’s something odd about having pictures of yourself, isn’t there?’ she says, tilting her head to the side. ‘You keep it.’

Marie appears behind us, she slots her chin onto my shoulder and digs it in slightly.

‘I thought you didn’t draw people,’ she says sullenly.

‘I don’t, it just happened,’ I reply, defensively.

‘It’s very good,’ Marie chimes, ‘You should keep it for your portfolio.’

I laugh slightly. ‘I gave up on that a long time ago.’

‘Your portfolio?’ Rebecca queries, ‘You want to be an artist?’

I go to reply, but Rebecca interrupts. ‘Good, because I didn’t peg you as a project manager,’ she flashes me a look and turns away. She lowers herself back onto the chair and pulls it up to the desk. I’m left standing with the picture, Marie hovering at my side.

‘It is good,’ she says again, before returning to her desk.

I hold the picture up to the window and compare it to the view. The tree isn’t right, I’ve made it too large. Its branches are as thick as Rebecca. I look harder and notice everything is disproportionate, just slightly. The fields slant in the wrong direction and the windowpane is too imposing. But, it’s not that at all, it’s how small I’ve made Rebecca, shrivelled and hunched in the chair. How all the other elements consume her. I look up at her and she’s biting her lip, staring out the window – completely still, just the way I’ve drawn her.

Chapter 2

When I leave work that evening the sky has transformed into a black canvas. Shadows of trees arch over the cars in the car park, illuminated by the few lonely streetlights. I wrap my coat tighter around my body, as I wave goodbye to a couple of work colleagues. I look up at the office building still alight with late night stragglers preparing for a morning presentation.

I think back to what Rebecca said, not how she meant it, but what she said. She didn't peg me as a project manager. The statement bites at me like the whips of hair from the icy wind. I sit in my car for a while, watching other people disappear from the car park and onto the long stretch of country road that leads straight into the small town where I live. Maybe she's right, I agree, as I start the car and back slowly out of the car park.

There aren't any lights along the main road into the village where I live, but I know the route so well, the small dip and the oak tree that juts out just before the roundabout. The slight curve in the road that signals the village is less than a mile away. How many times have I done this drive? I think. But is that what's really bothering me?

I didn't set out to be a project manager, far from it. I went to university to study art and I spent all my free time refining my skills, sketching, painting, and trying to figure out what to do with them. It's not practical, my mum had said. She's right, of course. I realised that when I left university, that it was a selfish notion to want to be an artist, to think that I could create for a living. I spent a lot of time and energy setting up a website, I taught myself some code and web design skills so I wouldn't have to fork out the expense of asking an agency to create one for me. I put up all my best pieces on the website, large canvases I'd stored in my parents' garage, so full of hope that when the website went live they'd sell instantly. Months went by, no luck. I've never been socially savvy and social media seemed like a daunting place to try and plug my work. What if it's not any good? It is, I'd been told by a countless number of people. But, what if it's not? The question still plagues me.

Maybe I never gave it a proper shot, a real chance. But, that would mean taking a chance on myself. How would I pay the mortgage or afford to eat? By the time I've pulled up to my small, one bed cottage, I've reasoned with myself and I push the thought away.

I reluctantly climb out of my warm car and open the small, rusty black gate sat a small way back from the pavement. I linger for a moment, the emptiness of the house looks back at me. I turn away and stuff my hands into my coat, heading through the narrow alley for the village centre.

My road is tucked away behind the church and I see a side door propped open by a chair. There's a promising orange glow emanating from inside and the sound of a choir practicing Christmas hymns. I can't help but think of Eleanor Rigby every time I see it, then the memory of when I first met him. I press on, past the car park and out onto the main high street. The road is full of offbeat ramshackle cottages and small independent shops tucked away down cobbled alleyways. There's a small village shop for essentials like milk and bread, and next door a bakery with now empty shelves and today's bakes wrapped lovingly sitting in baskets behind the counter. The smell of sweet dough lingers in the air and I smile fondly as I turn away and head towards the chippie. My phone vibrates in my pocket against my thumb, I pull it out and see 'mum' flash across the screen.

I stop in the middle of the street and let the silence of the town and cool night air gleam over me until I can't ignore it anymore.

'Hey mum,' I say, pressing my phone onto my cheek.

'Where are you?' she replies.

'Just walking to the chippie.'

‘That’s not very healthy,’ she says, disdain in her voice.

‘I know,’ I say.

She softens. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Yeah, I just had stuff on my mind, needed the fresh air.’

‘Is work okay?’ she asks, her tone changing to concern.

‘Yeah, it’s fine, it’s just...’

I think about the paintings hanging in my hallway, how I can’t even bear to look at them anymore. A constant reminder that I failed as an artist. I think about him. How I’d lied earlier to Rebecca. I have drawn people. A person. I’ve drawn him. I shake my head.

‘What is it?’ Mum presses.

‘I just don’t know what I’m doing,’ I say slowly.

She’s silent on the other end of the phone. She’s thinking of what to say to me, she’ll be pragmatic and reasonable. She’ll tell me to not overthink, but I can’t listen to her voice of reason, not anymore.

‘Mum?’ I say after a while.

‘I don’t know what to say,’ she says. I know she’ll be sitting in the large leather armchair in the lounge. Dad will have the fire on for her and our family cat Penny will be fussing around her ankles. I scrunch up my face at the thought of it. Am I too old now to need my mum so much, to want to sink into the gap next to her thigh and curl up on her lap.

I stand outside the fish and chip shop, the front door swings open and the warmth tinges my face. The smell of salty fish lingers in the air and my stomach drops, I suddenly feel sick and I slowly walk away back towards my house.

‘Can I call you tomorrow Mum? I just don’t feel like talking right now.’

‘Of course you can, you could always pop round if you want.’

I shake my head, ‘Maybe at the weekend?’

She sighs. ‘Of course. I can cook for you, I worry that you’re not looking after yourself.’

I say goodbye after agreeing to visit for dinner on Saturday. As I traipse back to the house, I pass my favourite white cottage. It’s double fronted, with a smart black door and a charming, thatched roof. It’s set a little way back from the road, but only just, so it’s still on the main street and the sash windows are large and plentiful. I imagine myself in that house when I’m older, Dean sitting in a big leather chair by our open fire. Me in a nook in the corner of a big bay window, painting and watching all the passers-by and the commotion of the village. From the downstairs lounge you can see the village green and in summer there’s a market brimming with stalls caked in sweet treats and rows and rows of fresh bread and fruit and veg. At the back is a fairground, not a bright, tacky one, but full of antiquated, retro activities like tombola and croquet. We’d watch it all from our little white cottage, people would walk past and marvel at its beauty and say ‘That’s Dean and Lizzie’s place.’

Now it’s dark and the house is silent. The village green is empty and waterlogged, slops of mud surround it as if they are a warning not to step any further.

The silence carries me all the way back home and I hover at the front door. I push it open and the darkness envelopes me. The stillness looms in the background like an unwanted guest. I don’t know when I started feeling so resentful of this house. I bought it a year ago when I’d finally saved enough

from living at my parents, with a little help from them with the deposit. It felt like the easiest decision at the time, just another step in the right direction. Get a job, buy a house. Is that what's missing, the next step?

'Fall in love,' I say aloud to the house, as I flick on the light.

The hallway is lined with my artwork, framed in two neat rows that lead into the kitchen. I stare at each piece as I walk through, dropping my bag and peeling back my coat. My paintings are all deep acrylics of different views around the town. I pause at one, a mustard cottage at the forefront of a small street, tall red trees just visible in the background. It's my parents' cottage, the place where I grew up. I graze my finger across the front garden, a solitary bench sits next to a hedge swollen with white roses and behind it a willow tree. A lot of summer days spent laying across that bench, my stomach digging into the planks as I looked out at the view, practicing water colour and textures. I turn around and see the view in another painting. It's not as bright as I remember, grey smudges the sky and flecks of auburn smear the roads. It must have been cold that day, or raining, the whole scene looks muddy and solemn.

I walk through to the kitchen and flick on the kettle. Placing two hands face down on the small island, I close my eyes, then open them widely and force myself to look at the painting that sits over my desk in the corner of the room.

It's a picture of him. Not completely noticeable, of course. It's just an outline. A shadow. He's sitting at a piano in a bar shaded in scarlet reds and caramel tones. I remember painting it a couple of months after we met. It was subconscious when I started out, but when I looked at it afterwards, to me, it was so clearly him. The painting isn't like my others, it's romantic, passionate, it's flooded in emotion and pain and everything I want to say. The black outline is consumed by the piano and other colourful outlines mill around the lavish room, light floods the ceiling from the giant chandeliers dangling above the bronze surface of the bar. There's something wildly horrifying about it, like something bad has happened, or is about to. Like there's a secret buried in it, on the lips of figures draped across the bar, champagne flutes clutched in their hands. I guess there is a secret, but it's in the music the shadow plays, it's in how I feel when I look at it.

Chapter 3

I arrive early the next day at work. I'm already sitting at my desk with a grapefruit and strong black coffee when Marie swans in. She winks at me with devilish eyes and then frowns at my breakfast.

'That is not breakfast,' she says, disgusted. 'No wonder you're a string bean.'

I laugh. 'You're not allowed to say that,' I say. 'it's rude.'

She shrugs. 'Since when have I had to filter what I say to you?' She slumps down next to me.

'Sorry,' I say. 'My mum gave me shit last night for what I eat, I just didn't need to hear it again this morning.'

Marie puffs out her lips and leans over to me. 'Give her shit for mollycoddling you then.'

'You do realise that's a reflection on me as well,' I rebuff.

She shakes her head dramatically. 'No, I've met your mum remember, I know what she's like.'

More people start to arrive and Marie flashes me a supportive smile before retreating to her desk behind me. Rebecca marches past us, her face unseasonably covered in oversized glasses. She pulls them back once she's at her desk and sighs heavily.

'I'm hungover,' she states.

'Then you won't be making my drinks tonight?' Marie teases.

'Of course I will, I'm not a monster,' she says, without smiling.

'You look like a monster,' Marie continues.

'Thanks for that,' Rebecca says, pulling her hair down from a bun and running her hands through it. I catch a glimpse of her sallow complexion. She looks hurt. Marie can be cruel sometimes, I can never decide if it is intentional or not. It's never really bothered me, but I can see it bothers Rebecca. She rummages in her bag and pulls out a makeup bag and starts collecting mounds of foundation on her fingers and slapping it on her face.

'Where did you go?' I ask.

'A bar in Norwich.' She looks up at me. 'You should really come into Norwich some time, I'll take you to some good spots.'

'Okay.' I grin, 'It's not like I never go there.'

'No, I didn't mean that,' Rebecca says.

'She does never go there,' Marie interrupts.

I exchange a look with Rebecca and we turn back to our desks. I spend the morning trying to focus on work, typing monotonously through spreadsheets. I exchange a few emails and catch up with some clients on the phone. Once I've finished, I stretch out my legs and risk looking up towards his desk. He's not there.

I collect my mug and walk towards the kitchen. I haven't seen him all day. I've looked up sporadically throughout the morning, and now wonder if he's in at all. When I reach the kitchen door, I see him. He's looking out the window whilst slowly stirring a mug of tea. A dash of milk and one and a half sugars, sometimes two if he's tired or worried about something. I hover for a moment, before purposefully placing my mug onto the counter to make a soft clang.

He turns, his dark hair falls to the side and he looks lost for a moment, before smiling, 'Lizzie,' he says.

'You're back.'

'Yeah. I got your messages. Sorry I didn't reply.'

'You don't have to explain yourself. How was it? Silly question. I just...'

He smiles sweetly. 'Your messages really got me through it, just knowing how much you cared. How have you been? The last time I saw you...' He frowns. 'It was that Italian we went to in Norwich.'

He's right, that's the last time me and him were alone properly and we could relax into each other without anyone else around. He'd just found out that his grandad had passed away and he wanted company. He wandered over to my desk after work and hung around until everyone left before rolling a chair over and slumping down, leaning forward with a furrowed brow.

'My grandad passed away last night.'

'Oh Dean,' I had said turning to him. I instinctively reached over to clasp my hands around his and he didn't object. We sat like that for several moments. 'Why did you come into work?'

'I didn't know what to do.'

'Were you close?'

He nodded. 'I haven't been back to Scotland for a while. I haven't seen him in almost a year, but we spoke regularly. He called me once a fortnight, and I loved to hear his voice, laconic and tempered.' He winced. 'My poor nan.'

'Will you go home?'

'Yes, next week, for the funeral and to see my family. I should have gone home before.'

I shook my head. 'Don't blame yourself.'

'I don't want to be alone tonight. Do you want to get some dinner or something?'

'Of course, anything you need.'

'I know an Italian place, I've wanted to try it for ages, but...' he trails off.

'Let me just close everything down and we'll go.'

When we arrived at the restaurant it's more intimate than I expected. A dark canopy silhouetting rough brick and a slim gold sign overhead illuminated by a wall light.

Dean opened the door for me and we were welcomed by the aromas of basil, warm dough and sweet pecorino. We sat in the corner and Dean ordered a nice bottle of wine, its velvety tannins and subtle cherry flavour went down almost too easily. We both ordered pizza and a side of garlic bread, something to mop up the wine, which was starting to take effect.

He was so vulnerable that night. So lost in thought but present at the same time. He shared stories about his grandad and spoke fondly about Edinburgh saying I should visit one day, how I'd love the cobbled gothic streets and whisky soaked pubs. I loved to watch him speak, the way his mouth moved and his eyes widened with excitement. He always said I was a good listener.

Once we'd finished the last drop of wine, Dean ordered another couple of glasses without hesitation. He gazed at me across the table, so serious and morose.

‘I don’t want to go home yet.’

I almost replied, almost. *Let me go home with you.* I wanted to be with him, even if it was just lying next to him, pushing his dark fringe away from his flawless complexion. I’d sooth him to sleep and fetch us coffees in the morning. But I didn’t. Instead, we sat for a while longer and it was the most intimate night I can remember between the two of us. He asked me about my art and I told him I just doodled and sketched mostly, nothing serious, but maybe I would one day.

‘It’s good to have things for yourself.’

I nodded. He understood, of course he did. That night reminded me that there’s no one like Dean, no one that can make me feel as comfortable and relaxed, yet charged and excited as he does. I was never scared of the corners our conversations turned round. Except once.

He leaned in, so close I could smell his sweet plummy breath and it took every ounce of me, the weight of the situation to anchor me to my seat and not lean forward and kiss him. He smiled and leant back.

‘What about you then Lizzie? Anyone on the scene?’

‘No, not really.’

He frowned. ‘I find that hard to believe.’

I shrugged. ‘What can I tell you.’

‘Is there nothing to tell?’

I shook my head. ‘Afraid not.’

‘So, there’s never been anyone?’

I took another sip. ‘Maybe once.’

‘Oh yes, and what was this mystery man like?’

I laughed. ‘Not a mystery. Someone I met at an art fair ages ago in my early twenties, it was before you started at the agency.’

‘Is that right?’

‘We weren’t together long.’

‘How comes?’

I looked at him, so fiercely, so full of anguish.

‘I didn’t love him.’

He was surprised. ‘Well, that sounds like a good reason.’

I didn’t love him, because I didn’t know what love was until I met Dean. I didn’t know how all-consuming, how utterly gut-wrenching and wildly life-threatening it can be.

He didn’t ask any more questions. He didn’t push it and I was glad. I wasn’t ready to tell him how I felt, but now he’s back and in front of me and I want to embrace him and kiss him, like I should have done the last time I saw him.

‘Busy. How did everything go in Scotland? Are your family okay? Are you okay?’

‘It was nice to see my family.’ He smiles. ‘To say my goodbyes the best I could.’

He picks up the mug of tea. 'I've been meaning to thank you, for taking my mind off things that night. I don't know what I'd do without you sometimes.'

I go to reply, but he cuts me off. 'We've got a really difficult client at the moment, feel like it's taking up all my time now and a new client coming on in the new year. It's been non-stop since I got back yesterday.' He raises his eyebrows, his blue eyes rest on mine. 'What's new with you?'

I snort. 'Nothing, same old.'

'No, you got promoted didn't you while I was away, to project manager? Congratulations,' he says. 'We should go out and celebrate.'

I flick the kettle and fish out a green teabag from a jar sitting on the side and turn to him. 'Yeah, maybe we'll be on a project together.'

'Maybe, Marie's my project manager at the moment and she's ...' he hesitates. 'I know she's your friend,'

I laugh. 'I know how she can be, just know it's never personal.'

He doesn't respond, instead he throws the spoon into the sink and raises the mug to his lips, he stares at me, his eyes fall to the ground when I catch him and he turns away awkwardly.

'She talks about you a lot,' he says.

'Who? Marie?' I question.

'Yeah, says you're very talented, I have to agree.' He peers up at me under the weight of his fringe.

'What do you mean?' I ask panicked.

'She sent me your website, your portfolio.'

I start shaking, my hands tense and I knock the full mug, murky water spills over the kitchen surface and I make a small yelp.

'Oh shit,' he says, rushing across the kitchen clutching a tea towel. He mops it diligently and I risk looking up at him. His glowing cheeks and red lips. I take in his smell, sweet, floral, and natural. There's nothing artificial about it, nothing fake or deceitful. He moves away.

'Sorry,' I say. 'You saw my website?' I continue.

'Yeah, I hope that's okay. It's just, you told me about your art and I got in a conversation with Marie about it and it's a lot more serious than you let on.' He grins. 'I always knew you were a talented artist, you've shown me the sketches from the office window, but I never know you could code.'

'Really?' I say, holding up my hand. 'I can't code, I know the basics, that's it.'

'You're being modest.'

'I really can't, you're the developer, I've seen your websites, and they're amazing,'

'You could have asked me, you know, if you needed a website, I could have helped.'

'I built it ages ago, before I even started working here.'

He raises his eyebrows. 'That's even more impressive.'

I blush, mopping up the last of the water.

'As far as celebrations go, we're going out tonight, for Marie's engagement drinks if you're around?'

He smiles. 'I'm around.'

'Okay,' I nod, holding up my mug. 'I better get back to work.'

'Yeah me too, before Marie gets on my case, she's block booked my time this afternoon and she's very terrifying for someone so small.'

I laugh. 'Well, you have to be happy for her tonight.'

He clutches his chest. 'What makes you think I'm not happy for her?' he says, half offended.

'I know you're not her biggest fan, but she's nice, just, look past it.'

'There,' he says, pointing at me. 'You're nice and I don't have to look past anything, that's just who you are.'

'I'll see you tonight,'

'Tonight.' he smiles.

I stride back towards my desk, a stupid smile splayed across my face. Am I imagining it? The way we speak, the way we are together. I catch his eyes and I feel something, not something you'd feel if it was one way, it's a current, flowing between us and as I lower myself into my chair, I see his eyes dart away. It's there, but what do I do about it?

I've known Dean since we started working together. He's a couple of years older than me. He moved here from Scotland and when we first met, I regularly poked fun of his thick accent and the number of times people would ask him to repeat himself in meetings.

We became friends instantly; I saw he was listening to The Beatles over his shoulder on his laptop in a meeting room. I immediately started humming 'look at all the lonely people' and he grinned at me, screeching the words in an incredibly surreal McCartney impression. I laughed dumbly then, and I laugh dumbly now at how easy it is for us to connect.

There's a tap on my shoulder and I expect to see Marie staring at me expectantly, but it's Rebecca. She's twirling her sunglasses in the other hand and I see the desks next to her are empty.

'It's lunch,' she says.

'I completely lost track of time.' I look up again and see Dean. He's looking straight at me, but this time his stare is concentrated and serious.

'Do you want to finish your picture?' she asks.

I break away from him and turn my chair slowly. She's so pale she's almost green. Her eyes are bloodshot and there's a clamminess to her skin.

'We could get a coffee instead?' I say.

She blows her mouth upwards at her fringe and nods frantically. 'Let's do that.'

As we're walking to my car, Rebecca sways slightly and leans on the passenger side to steady herself.

'That bad?'

She looks up at me. 'That bad.' She lays against the side of the car and takes a deep breath, a mist forms in front of her and she retreats towards the small park bench next to the ground floor of the office.

'Where are you going?' I call after her.

'I can't bear the motion,' she says, collapsing onto the bench. 'I feel so shit.' She wipes her hands across her cheeks and presses her fingertips into her eyelids. 'The fresh air is helping.'

I sit opposite her, zipping up my coat to my chin, I reach down and pull my socks further up underneath my black trousers.

'I don't mind, it's nice to get away from my desk,' I look up at the office block, to the top floor. Dean's desk can see this bench from his seat, I wonder if he's looking. I bend my neck consciously away. Rebecca is oblivious, she's staring at the cluster of trees at the other side of the car park.

'I'm a fucking mess,' she says bluntly.

'Is everything okay?' I ask.

She's still clutching her sunglasses in one hand and clasping her forehead with the other. She stares intently into the woodland, like she sees something I can't.

'I just needed some fresh air.' She pauses. 'You live in that little cottage with the red door in the field by Tom's farm, right?'

'That's the one.'

'You can see it, you know, across the fields and all the way from the farm.'

'You can.'

'It's very pretty, I noticed it before I knew you lived there, I was walking along the public footpath by the chicken factory.' She turns to me intently. 'Does it have a good view?'

I nod. 'I can see all the way to the farm.'

She nods like this an acceptable answer. 'I like walking by myself in the fields, I'll miss it.'

'Miss it?' I ask.

She rises from the bench and ignores the question. 'Let's go finish that picture.'

I follow her back upstairs. She throws herself into her desk chair and rolls it over to the window.

'Is this okay?' she asks. 'This is where I was yesterday.'

I dive into my drawer and produce my sketchpad and pencils. 'That's fine,' I say, resting in front of her. I continue to finish the sketch, but it's difficult to capture Rebecca today, instead I draw around her. The view is clearer and I can make out the chicken factory in the background and the field of cows to the left. I focus on them instead and Rebecca melts into the picture, her already small frame grows smaller, until it's swallowed in the confusion, caught up in the shades and textures. Rebecca is still, her eyes glazed over as she stares over my shoulder.

'It's good.' A voice, I recognise as Dean's.

Rebecca doesn't flinch, she stares impassively forward as if frozen in time.

'I have a good subject,' I say, and I hear Dean giggle.

'How you feeling Rebecca?' Dean asks.

'Fantastic,' Rebecca says sarcastically, her slim jaw burrows into her chest.

'I'm finished, if you want to take a look?' I ask her.

She sulkily lifts herself from the seat and stoops over my shoulder.

‘Do you like it?’ I ask.

She nods, but she’s not looking at the picture, she’s looking outside.

‘It’s an impressive view.’

‘It is,’ Dean agrees.

‘Thanks,’ Rebecca says, reaching out and taking the picture, she hesitates with it grasped in her hands, then passes it back to me. ‘You should keep it,’ she says. ‘You’re good at drawing people, you’ve captured me perfectly.’

There’s something about her tone that I can’t place. She bites the words, chews them, it’s not sarcastic or indignant, she means it.

I’ve captured her perfectly.

Don’t forget to preorder your copy of [After the Party](#) to find out what happens next...

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