

WAVING THE RED FLAG

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Crumbling Castles.....3

Waving The Red Flag.....8

Now You See Me.....25

CRUMBLING CASTLES

A child's entire imagination can revolve around a single object.

When I was five, I had a green bucket. Small in size. Perfect for sandcastles. Wet sand overflowed the rim. I erected impenetrable mudbrick structures. Dug a deep moat around the perimeter. My bucket gargled under the waves as I filled it with water for the moat. The sun was high in the sky. My moat was thirsty. It drank all the water I gave.

Mom dropped me off at school and kissed me goodbye. I remember drawing dinosaurs. The brontosaurus was my favorite. He had a big neck and I colored him blue. Ms. Donna told me it looked wonderful. I drew a pink triceratops next, but before I could finish coloring it in, Ms. Donna told me and my classmates that we were going home early. She wouldn't say why. She sounded scared. Mom picked me up shortly after. We went to the beach to look at the waves.

She looked sad.

What is happening? Oh, dear God, what is happening? Mom says. She has my dad on speaker phone.

They've grounded all flights in and out of the country, Dad says.

How many people? Mom asks.

Don't think about it, Dad says. I love you.

My sandcastle was the best on the beach only because it was mine. I wanted it to survive for as long as possible. I imagined returning to the beach at a later time to find my walls still standing. My towers opposing the test of time. The castle built by the family to the north was too

large to maintain. The walls were stepped on by invading toddlers. Their moat was dug too close to the castle walls, and the water they poured into it melted the foundation. I watched a wall come crashing down, dissolving into mud. I turned my attention to the castle to the south. This kingdom was constructed by twins, but it could not handle the siblings contrasting ideas. One wanted to build a tower extra high while the other wanted to keep it low. Their fighting caused their castle to enter a limbo of construction and destruction. I watched a time lapse of Rome rising and falling over and over again, though I didn't know what Rome was. Only one king could rule a castle, I thought. I felt the wind at my back and saw sand grains shift. Flakes of sand eroded from my castle. Perhaps this castle wouldn't survive until my return. After all, a king cannot rule away from home.

What happened, Mom? I ask.

Bad men stole a plane, she says.

I gaze out the car window, content with the answer. I wanted to fly in a plane. But did I have to be bad to do so?

I learned quickly, how fragile sand truly was. My castle was struck by an aerial assault from seagulls searching for food. One of my towers was damaged. I drove the invaders away, but the damage was done. I decided to build a wall that would rise to the sky. That would surely keep out any winged rats. I filled my bucket with sand and poured a new foundation. The sand and mud were not enough to support. It continued to crumble the higher I built. The seagulls won this battle.

Mom and Uncle Alan planned our beach trip the day before. A big storm named Erin was close and the beach was going to have giant waves. Mom packed all my toys, she placed my prized green bucket on top. That bucket was the source of my beach imagination. I had built many sandcastles with it. When we found Uncle Alan at the beach, he looked just as sad as Mom, but he hid it with a smile when I hugged him. He kissed the top of my head and pushed me along to the sandy shore.

Waves look big, Mom says.

Hurricane is right off the coast, Uncle Alan replies.

Barely missed us, Mom says.

I wish it didn't. Never thought I'd ever pray for a hurricane.

Can we really talk about the weather? Given everything that—

It's life, Uncle Alan interrupts.

Mom lost a step in her stride. She looks up and sighs.

It doesn't feel right.

It's not. Damn towel heads, Uncle Alan says.

What's a towel head? I ask.

I sat in the warm sand beside my completed castle, gazing proudly over my kingdom. The sand that I sat in was too fragile to build with. It fell through my fingers into heaps. I shifted my feet and created trenches, building up hills of vast deserts. I pretended this was the farmland and villages that lay outside my castle walls. I collected small strands of brown and green seaweed which I stuck into the ground. These were the crops that my people sowed. I knew

plants needed water, however, so I decided to bring rain to the deserts that I created. Make an oasis for imaginary villages to grow around and prosper. Filling my bucket with water, I accidentally drowned my new lands. The water dried quickly, leaving behind a brown crag that no loyal subjects could farm. All the crops that I carefully planted were washed away.

At least I don't have to fly out for work this weekend, Uncle Alan says.

When do you think everything will return to normal? Mom asks.

Normal? Sissy, after all this, normalcy will be a dream... Does he know what happened?

He knows something is wrong. Let him play.

You're going to have to tell him something.

He's five, Al. I barely even understand what's going on.

The tide rose against me. Waves lapped at my land. I hurriedly built a wall of mud and pebbles in front of my dry moat, but the waves kept coming. The surging swells smashed through my defenses. My moat drowned in a sea of foam. I dropped my bucket beside the crumbling walls and used my body to block the water. I was powerless to stop the forces of nature. The tower damaged by the seagulls fell into a heap. Another tower followed shortly after. Ramparts crumbled. Battlements disintegrated. The moat overflowed. My favorite green bucket, my machine of imagination, washed away into the rough surf. I chased after it as quickly as my legs could carry me, but I felt Mom grab me from behind before my feet could enter the water. The waves were twice as tall as me. I could not swim. I turned around and through my tears, I could see the final foundations of my castle fall into ruins.

I mourned the loss of my kingdom. Cried for my bucket. Mom cradled me. She glanced

at a woman walking past us. If only he knew, she said.

That night I played in the living room with my many-colored blocks. Stacking. Collapsing. Stacking again. My parents watch the news. The newsman had a lot to say. Four planes were stolen... Casualties are expected to climb... This has been a declaration of war against the United States...

Was war like hide-and-seek? My bucket was stolen by the ocean. Did the ocean steal the planes?

I knock over my blocks and they clatter to the floor. My parents shift in their seats. I love to break my stacks because I could rebuild them and do it again. I don't understand why they are so upset about two buildings falling to the ground.

Waving the Red Flag

Jason loved patrolling Amelia Avenue.

It was one of the nicer parts of town, currently full of shops and tourists wrapping up the end of the summer season. Students of all ages roamed the streets trying to enjoy the last bit of freedom before they started the new school year. Jason smiled. This time last year he was entering his final year of criminology. Now he sat behind the wheel of a sleek police cruiser.

There was something about the historic town that created a calm atmosphere. He passed the stone parish of St. Vincent and the grocery store run by old Mrs. Luttel. The storefront had become a little overgrown since Mr. Luttel passed. Jason made a mental note to swing by on his day off and help clean up a little. Mrs. Luttel made the best apple pies.

A group of rambunctious children followed by a very stressed mom on a cell phone waited at the crosswalk. Jason let them pass. The biggest kid in the group thrusts his fist in the air. The others followed suit. Jason took the cue and hit the siren. They screamed in delight. The mom glared at him. He laughed it off. He did the same thing to officers when he was a kid.

The narrow street turned into a bustling stretch of road. Florescent colored boutiques, shops, and restaurants lined the touristheavy street. He pulled to a stop next to the local monument, a green-stained statue of the town's founder which overlooked Tilly Harbor. He didn't know much of the town's history, but there was always something about the centerpiece that he liked. Tall ships with their sails tethered bobbed in the shallow waters. He could see a huge yacht moored in the docks. Someone with a lot of money was visiting the town. He stuck his arm out the window and felt the cold sting of September rear its head.

His radio chirped a request for an officer to head to a location a few miles away for a

Code 1 APB, non-emergency situation. Disgruntled, Jason slowly reached for the receiver and was happy to hear his partner, Patrick Bruno, respond instead.

“10-4. This is Bruno. I’m on my way.”

Jason chuckled knowing he was blessed with at least another few minutes of leisure.

Thank you, Patrick. Much appreciated. I owe you a beer.

Amelia Avenue was his favorite because it was the quietest part of town. He watched a familiar looking girl walk past the founder’s statue. A lanky man about Jason’s age ran up behind her. Jason sat up straight and focused on him. The girl seemed more agitated than afraid when he placed his hand on her shoulder, but the way she jerked her shoulder away from him told Jason something was off. She bounced back several steps from the man and kept her hands clenched. Jason exited his car and swiftly made his way across the street.

As he walked over he practiced an authoritative voice in his head. He was still getting used to the initial confrontation. *What’s going on over here?* No to stern. *Hey! You bothering her?* Hmmm, too aggressive and one-sided. *So, what’s going on in this neck of the woods?* Nah, way too casual. He settled on “Everything okay over here?”

The girl wrenched her neck when looking towards Jason. The man ceased his pestering. Jason was six-feet tall and made of stocky muscle. He was comfortable with becoming the center of attention around unruly people.

“Jason!?” the girl said with a shock of surprise.

Jason examined the girl from head to toe. It was Claire, his best friend’s girlfriend. He had known her for years, but in this state, he hardly recognized her. She looked physically exhausted. Her normally straight hair was tangled and in knots. Her clothes were wrinkled like they had been worn to bed. Normally she’d be happy to see Jason but for whatever reason, her

face expressed more horror than joy.

Shocked himself, Jason lost his authoritative composure. “Oh! Heya, Claire! Didn’t expect to see you. Everything all right? Who’s your friend?”

Jason looked to the man who was attempting to crawl into the shadow of the statue. He had a patchy 5 o’clock shadow and ruffed up hair as if he had just gotten out of bed although it was nearly one o’clock. He knew most of Claire’s friends as well. This guy was unknown.

“He’s no one!” She suddenly declared. Her tone was high-pitched. The way she shifted her feet suggested that she was ready to turn and run.

The man nodded and shoved his hands into his pockets.

Jason raised a brow in suspicion. “If you’re no one, would you mind leaving her alone?”

The man lifted a hood over his head in a sad attempt to hide his identity. “Yeah, no problem officer. I was just leaving. Sorry, Claire.” He hurried away as quickly as his sagging pants would allow.

Jason turned to Claire who was still fidgeting in place. “You mind telling me what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. Don’t worry about it.”

Jason didn’t believe her. Day old makeup was beginning to crust off her face. She was wearing low-cut sneakers. One of her socks was missing.

“Look, Claire, don’t try to hide anything. If he did something to you I need to report it.”

Her eyes grew stern. “Jason. Please. Nothing’s wrong. Nothing happened. He’s just a random guy who was asking for money.” She adjusted one of the straps on her tank top that had slithered down her shoulder.

Jason hummed in disbelief. “I was talking to Andrew this morning. He says he hasn’t

heard from you since yesterday.”

Claire’s eyes kept darting to and from his gaze. “Just been super busy. Bout to fly halfway across the country for school, you know? I really have to get home. Talk later?”

Jason placed a hand on her shoulder as she walked past. He felt her muscles tense.

“Can I give you a ride home?” Jason asked.

“No. It’s fine.”

“My patrol is going to take me by your house. It’s really not an issue.”

“Fine, sure, whatever, I was just out for a walk anyway.” She tugged her handbag tightly on her shoulder.

Claire’s house was nearly eight miles away. She did not walk to Amelia. He guided her to his car and let her in the passenger seat. As he climbed in, he noticed she kept staring at the path where the mystery man walked away.

“So, you excited to head back to school?” Jason asked.

She shrugged meekly. “I guess.”

“Any interesting classes?”

“Not really.”

It’s like pulling teeth, he thought. He hated small talk, but she normally was not this disinterested in conversation. Her sullen behavior was bizarre to him.

“Claire, are you sure nothing is bothering you?”

She yawned and stretched her arms in front of her. “I’m just really tired.”

Jason again hummed in disbelief. He pulled on to the road and continued his meditative drive down Amelia. As the wind blew into the car, he caught a whiff of Claire. Her perfume was nearly nonexistent, mixed with the stink of a day’s sweat. It was clear she hadn’t showered in a

while.

A green stoplight far in front taunted as he approached. “Come on, come on. Stay green,” he mumbled. No sooner did he say that did it turn yellow. “Ah, you suck.”

Claire chuckled but kept her indifferent expression.

He glanced at her. “No sleep last night?”

“Yeah. School is stressing me out.” She yawned again.

“Not like it’s your first rodeo. You’re graduating this year, right?”

“Yep,” she sounded unenthusiastic to this achievement which was odd. Jason remembered her being extremely giddy just a few weeks ago.

“Last time I saw you, you were nearly bouncing off the walls for your last year. You sure nothing’s bothering you?”

“Oh my God Jason! I’m fine! Sheesh just drop it already.” She coughed into the crook of her arm.

“Were you shopping this morning?”

“I told you. I was out for a walk.”

“Eight miles away from home?”

“You know Andrew and I like to run. What’s with the interrogation, detective? Lay off.”

She turned away from him, impartial in continuing conversation.

“Your story doesn’t add up,” Jason said finally. Claire ignored him. He could see her glazed eyes staring into the side mirror. “That guy you were with. You say he was just someone asking for money, but he knew your name... You look like a hot mess, I barely recognize you. Why would you take a stroll all the way here for the hell of it? That’s a sixteen-mile round trip. Pretty certain there’s a nice park by—”

“What the hell do you want me to say?” she snapped. Her dirty-blonde hair swayed in her face.

Jason remained silent for a few miles. As the lovely sights of Amelia faded, the scenery decayed in beauty as they entered the industrial side of town. Jason had to answer a great many calls in this area; mostly domestic disputes, drug violence, or the occasional theft. Many of the buildings they passed were old abandoned warehouses for factories that have been defunct since Jason’s dad was a kid.

He passed an alleyway where he once had to respond to an emergency call. A young woman had been assaulted and left in the snow. She refused to allow Jason anywhere near her. He was forced to stand by and wait for a female officer to arrive on the scene to take care of her. He observed the way she confided in his coworker. Stiffly answering questions without much detail. Very slow movements.

He glanced at Claire and was trying not to compare the symptoms. Her responses to his questions were extremely defensive. An old hardware store that had gone bankrupt several months prior was completely vacant. He veered off the road into the empty lot. He put the car in park and sat still for a moment.

Claire looked worried. “What are you doing?”

Jason blew a deep breath. “You’re not replying to Andrew. You are miles away from home being heckled by a shady guy I’ve never seen before...” He pulled his sunglasses over his head and looked her dead in the eye. “Claire. I need you to tell me if that man assaulted you.”

Claire’s eyes widened. It looked like she wanted to cry but also was holding something back, as if she could not place what she wanted to say. Jason didn’t need an answer.

“I’m taking you to the hospital,” he said as he put the car in drive and prepared to head

back to the road. Keeping his foot on the break, he pulled his phone from his pocket. “Do you want me to call Andrew?”

“No!” she grabbed the phone from his hand.

“Whoa! All you had to do was say no!” Jason was not expecting this kind of defensive outburst. “Give me my phone back.”

“Only if you promise you won’t call Andrew!”

“Alright. Okay. You need to get treatment. Your parents’ home?”

She slapped the dashboard. “No! No! No! Jason, wait! Good God, it’s not what you think!” That was the most confident she had sounded since he found her. Jason’s head was going into overdrive. He didn’t take his eyes off her as he turned off the car. They sat looking at each other in tense silence.

“Okay. What’s going on?”

She handed him back his phone. “I don’t want to talk about it.” She crossed her arms over her chest and looked away from him. Jason could tell she was shaking from stress.

“I’m not driving until you tell me what’s going on.”

“Then I’ll walk!” She grabbed her handbag and went for the door. Jason brushed his finger over the lock but decided against it. She slammed the door as she got out.

He got out of the car and put his hands on his hips. “You shouldn’t walk alone here.”

She flipped him off as she walked away.

“We’ve got about six miles to go and we’re in a neighborhood where a girl like you should not be walking alone. Unless you actually want to be assaulted.”

“Fuck off.” Claire’s tone turned venomous.

“I’m going to call Andrew if you walk away from me.” That stopped her in her tracks.

“Get back in the car, Claire.”

He had her. She trudged back over to the car and got back inside. He waited a moment before climbing back in, looking into the sky to clear his head.

“What happened?” he asked authoritatively.

“Just take me home and I’ll tell you later.” She was clearly trying to avoid the subject. That much was obvious. Another suspicion was creeping into his head.

“Andrew... He said that you’ve been kinda spotty with communication lately. The fact that you don’t want to talk to him tells me something is fucked between you two... or you don’t want him to know something.”

Claire avoided all eye contact with him.

“I want you to look me in the eye and tell me you didn’t just spend last night cheating on my best friend.”

Claire opened her mouth, but no words came out. She lowered her head; he had guessed correctly.

Jason gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white. His stomach tied itself into knots. “Jesus H. Christ, Claire! You and Andrew have been together for three fucking years! What the hell were you thinking!?”

“I don’t know!” she cried.

“Don’t know what?!”

“I just don’t know! Please don’t tell him! Please!” she pleaded repeatedly.

He kept his eyes closed and grounded himself. He felt the rubber of the steering wheel around his fingers. The smell of the dusty air wafting into the car. He imagined it was twenty minutes ago, thinking about the taste of Mrs. Luttel’s amazing pies. Claire stared nervously at

him; her eyes glossed over with tears.

“Do you love Andrew?” Jason said, nearly through clenched teeth.

“I don’t know—” Claire choked on her words. Jason presumed she didn’t mean to say that.

“How could you do this to him? What the fuck did he do that you had to go where yourself out?!” Jason was losing his temper.

“Don’t call me a whore!” she punched his arm. The blow barely made him flinch. She, however, started massaging her knuckles.

Jason’s radio sparked to life. Dispatch was sending out another Code 1 APB. He prayed Patrick was available for another one. He was running out of time before dispatch would personally send him over. He had to deal with Claire. *Fast.*

Jason turned the key and once again started the car. “You need to tell Andrew. You cannot keep this from him. It’s not fair to him.” Claire fiddled with the strap of her bag.

Jason began driving towards her home. The rest of the ride was a tense silence. He struggled to hold back the idea of throwing her out of the car at fifty miles an hour.

Claire’s house resided in a copy and past suburban neighborhood. All the houses were identically bland. The same shade of sandy yellow, the same garden layouts, same black mailboxes. It made Jason sick. As he pulled in front of her house her dad who was mowing the lawn looked up with caution. At first, he seemed troubled to see his daughter in a police car, but as soon as he noticed Jason he smiled and waved. Jason gave a polite wave back but felt very awkward knowing that his daughter just cheated on her boyfriend of three years.

“Are we done or am I just going to sit here looking like a felon?” she said.

“What are you going to do?” he asked plainly.

“I’m going to tell him. Right now.” She said pulling her phone from her bag.

“Holy shit, do not text him!” Jason was very tempted to grab her phone and hurl it out the window but decided against mimicking her childish behavior. “Okay. I’m going to give you some advice cause I *really* wish someone told Maggie this before she broke up with me over a fucking text. I hate what you did. I’m furious at who you turned into, but you are in ‘freak-out’ mode right now. Get your ass inside. Take a shower. Relax. And tell him face-to-face.” Jason put a lot of emphasis on that last sentence. “When do you leave for school?”

“Two days.”

“You’re going to tell him before you leave. That is not a suggestion.”

“I will...” she replied sheepishly.

“Promise? Think about Andrew. It’s not fair to him.”

Claire pouted. She took her hand off the door and turned to face him. “I’m not proud of what I did. Please believe me. I’ll tell him... I just... Goodbye, Jason.”

Jason reluctantly watched her leave. There was nothing more he could do. Nothing that he could change no matter how much he wanted it. He pulled away from her house without looking back. He was not looking forward to Andrew’s reaction. He knew his friend better than anyone.

The Code 1 dispatch previously called was elevated to a Code 3 APB emergency situation. It was just what Jason needed to get his mind off everything that just happened. He activated his lights and sirens and sped down to an area off Johnston Road.

“That was one of the worst car accidents I have ever seen. They were lucky to have walked away from that.” Jason sat in the local bar after his shift had ended. His partner, Patrick,

sat next to him, already halfway through his second beer and stuffing his face with peanuts.

“Jush glad you were around bud,” Patrick said through a mouthful of nuts. “Not somethi I coulth have ‘andled on my own.”

Jason looked at his partner disgustedly. “You want to stop gagging on those nuts and talk to me like a human being?”

Patrick pounded his chest as he attempted to swallow the inhuman sized mouthful. Jason was the first to arrive at Patrick’s aide and the entire event was a blur. He wasn’t expecting to get yelled at for saving a kid from a wrecked car.

Patrick belched loudly and took a swig of his beer. “So the lady thought you were a kiddie grabber taking advantage of the accident. You saved the kid’s life. Doesn’t matter what Miss Dashboard Face back there thought. Keep in mind that no matter how stupid a person is normally, they can only get stupider when stressed out... Or heavily concussed,” he grumbled.

“Dashboard Face?” Jason said.

Patrick laughed. “The EMT’s were calling her that. Listen if you want to check your email when you’re going fifty miles an hour, you deserve what you get. Just glad her kid was alright.”

Jason looked to the floor. Normally he would laugh, but Claire kept resurfacing in his head. Patrick smacked a firm backhand against Jason’s chest.

“You’re thinking about your girl, bud?” Patrick gave a knowing smile.

Jason looked at him incredulously.

“It’s the same face you had when she broke up with you. But wasn’t that like a year ago?”

Jason nodded. “How do you remember the face I was making?”

Patrick shrugged. A sardonic smirk stretched across his face. “Years of experience. That was a year ago, bud. Plenty of more fish in the sea. But you know what else is in the sea? Garbage. A lot of fucking garbage. Just so happened a piece got snagged on your line.”

Jason sighed. “Yeah. But this time it’s not about Maggie.” He remembered the pain of his breakup. It had happened around this time last year. He had only just started his police work. The whole event took away the excitement of his new job. He chugged through a quarter of his beer.

“Not about Maggie, eh? You got yourself a new girlie in your life?”

Jason shook his head. “I just found out my best friend’s girlfriend was cheating on him.”

“Oh shit.” Patrick barely sounded phased. “What are you going to do?”

“I have no idea man. She expressed a lot of guilt. Maybe I shouldn’t get involved and just let them sort it out?”

Patrick finished off his beer and signaled the bartender for a refill. “Probably a good idea. It’s not your business. If she does it again, he’ll figure it out for himself. If not, they’ll just keep going like nothing happened.”

“That’s not fair to him. He’s my best friend. I know what it feels like to be cheated on. I can’t let him stay in that situation.”

“Yes, you certainly can.” Patrick confidently said. Jason looked at him wide-eyed. “You don’t have to say anything. Why should you have to get involved in their shitty love life?”

“I can never tell if you’re a pessimist, an optimist, or just one crazy bastard.”

Patrick chuckled and reached for more peanuts. He rattled them in his hand. “Let me tell you something that has saved my ass from being grilled lots of times. Don’t get involved. If it’s none of your business, keep it that way. No sense in wasting your time and energy on something that may just sort itself out.”

Jason wondered if that was true. Maybe Claire was going to take the high road and confess. He watched the bubbles rising from the bottom of his beer, stacking on top of each other, unable to escape from the foamy surface.

Jason avoided Andrew until he knew Claire had left for school. He dodged a couple of his texts. Claimed he was pulling double-shifts at work. On his day off, he made his own promise and stopped by Mrs. Luttel's store. He washed the front windows, chopped away the weeds and brush creeping into the walkway, and even went so far as to repaint an aging shelf. He loved the way the wet turquoise paint shined in the sunlight. All the while, the burden of Claire's actions was pressing harder on his shoulders. He wanted to tell Andrew the truth but also wanted him to be happy. Andrew loved Claire. Maybe one mistake wasn't enough to ruin it?

"I may be old but I'm not blind, Jay." Mrs. Luttel tapped him on the shoulder with a crooked finger after he was done with his work. "I was married for sixty-two years before Harry passed. I could read him, and any man for that matter, like a book. What's bothering you?"

"I don't want to bother you with my own issues, Mrs. Luttel."

"That's Granny to you! You worked your tuchus off getting this store back into shape. I just took a strawberry-rhubarb pie out of the oven. Come have a slice."

Jason figured a slice of her legendary pie was enough enticement to tell her what had happened. Mrs. Luttel was a small but well-built woman. Sharp as a tack as well. Her brown eyes reflected years of experience as Jason spoke in between bites of pie. His mouth exploded with sweetness.

"Sounds like she wasn't as happy with the relationship as you all believed." Mrs. Luttel nodded with a relaxed frown on her pale face. "I can't tell you what to do, but this girl is a

menace to your friend. Do you think she told him?”

“I’ve been avoiding him, to be honest. I’ve no idea. I don’t know what to do.”

Her frown turned more serious. “Gobbledygook.”

“I—what?”

“Don’t be thick. The well-being of your best friend comes first! If she didn’t tell him it’s up to you. Otherwise, you’re not being a good friend.”

Mrs. Luttel’s advice left Jason feeling enlightened but he still had a boiling conflict within his head. To come to any sort of conclusion, he had to talk to Andrew.

The next day, Jason was fortunate to get off his shift earlier than scheduled in the late afternoon. He texted Andrew to see how he was doing.

I’m doing great man! was his first response.

Shit, Jason thought. She didn’t tell him after all.

I saw Claire the other day. Jason replied.

Oh yeah! Said you gave her a ride home. Thanks for doing that!

Shit. Shit. Shit. Jason had two options now. Believe Claire wanted to continue the relationship and left without saying anything because she believed the secret should stay secret, or she left knowing Jason would tell anyway and she wouldn’t have to deal with the fallout. It was up to him... Destroy his friend’s happiness or allow him to stagnate in a toxic relationship. He didn’t want to be the one that made the decision.

You free tonight? Haven’t seen you in a while. Jason responded.

Yeah! I’m at Tilly Beach right now doing my miles. Meet me at the pavilion. I’m about a mile away.

Aight dude. Be there in a few.

Jason quickly changed out of his uniform into his streets. He rode his bike to work today. Easy to do when you live in a small town. It was only five minutes between the station and the beach. Andrew's best mile was seven and a half minutes. He'd probably have a spare ninety seconds before he had to settle on a choice.

The ride to the beach was the most strenuous bike ride he'd ever done. His legs felt like jelly. His heart was beating horrifically fast. His instincts were telling him to run. To just forget that everything even happened. Jason turned on to Amelia Avenue and pedaled down the sidewalk. He passed several late afternoon shoppers who barely gave him any room to pass. He passed St. Vincent's and waved to Mrs. Luttel who was locking up the store for the night. He passed the shops and the monument with the ships in the background. He passed the path where Claire's mystery man retreated.

He wished he hadn't been patrolling Amelia that day. He'd never be able to enjoy the sights again.

Andrew had beaten him to the pavilion. His shirt was off, tucked into the lining of his shorts. He had his phone strapped to his bicep with earphones wrapped around his neck. His body glistened with sweat. He waved Jason over.

"Hey there, sexy. What took you so long?" As confident as he tried to sound, he was totally out of breath.

"You just raced me, didn't you?"

Andrew held up his hands. "You got me, officer, don't shoot! I shaved thirty-seconds off my best mile!"

They both laughed. The sun was setting. The way its light reflected off the ocean made

the water shimmer like glass.

“So, what’s up dude? Haven’t heard from you in a while.” Andrew said. Jason tried to keep a confident face, but Andrew was already reading him. “I don’t like the look on your face. Last time I saw you like that was when you and Maggie broke up. Is everything all right?”

He was getting annoyed with people reading him so easily. “We’ve been hanging out too long if you can read me that well.” Jason tried to prolong the inevitable.

“We’re basically brothers at this point. Come on,” he playfully punched Jason’s shoulder. “You’re waving a red flag in my face. What’s wrong?”

Jason sighed heavily. “Did Claire tell you anything before she left?”

Andrew looked surprised at the mention of his girlfriend. “Claire? Uh, nothing super important. Haven’t heard from her since yesterday though.” Andrew’s expression was growing grim. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Let me ask, how are you and Claire doing?”

Andrew raised a brow. “She mentioned something, didn’t she? I’d be lying if I said we hadn’t considered taking a break while she finished school. It’s tough being long distance for so long. Been like that since we started dating.”

“And?”

“And... we chose to just do what we’ve been doing for years. Stay in contact and play it by ear. She seemed almost afraid of taking a break.”

“Anything else?”

Andrew crossed his arms and leaned against the railing. “I’m already planning on surprising her over Thanksgiving. The ticket will cost a fortune, but it’ll be worth it.”

Jason grimaced. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Dude,” Andrew was growing impatient. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Jason looked into his friend’s hazel eyes and imagined a scenario where he never found Claire. A scenario where life was without flaws. One where one red flag, one mistake, didn’t mean permanent consequences. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The wind whispered through his ears.

Now You See Me

I am the only person in the world to have seen through someone else's eyes.

I see everything my targets see. Feel everything they feel. Learn everything they think. Life became so much easier knowing how everyone around me ticked. Yet there was a perverse boredom that resulted from my knowledge. My friends could keep no secrets. Lying was ineffective. Knowing everything at all times made me stagnant in my own desires. I could achieve whatever I wanted wherever I wanted. Exams, job interviews, friendships, and relationships... there was little challenge for me to walk through life.

That is until I met Garth.

Garth was terribly average. He was not particularly handsome or in shape. He had short blonde hair which was always stuck in the same wavy position from copious amounts of gel. His entire wardrobe consisted of what I could only assume were two pairs of beige cargo shorts and several striped polos of varying colors. His transitional glasses always kept his eyes darkened and away from the gazes of those in front of him. Some would find that mysterious. Personally, I found it infuriating. My ability only works on those with whom I make solid eye contact.

On a particularly humid spring evening, I was seated in the peeling green leather booths of the popular Mallard Diner. Sitting at the foot of our college campus, the twenty-four-hour establishment was normally popular at all times of the day. As of now, only a few other people aside from me were seated. Garth was taking his sweet time. He wanted to meet here to study but was running late. I hated how obsessed I had become with him.

A chime rang as the door opened. I turned my head to see a group of five walk in. No one of immediate interest, but I was bored of waiting by myself. The lone girl of the group, a tiny

brunette, and I made brief eye contact, just enough for me to peer inside. Her head was a tangled mess of math equations and stress. A mirror hung on the wall behind the reception counter. She kept staring at her bangs which were sliding out from underneath her beanie. Turns out her hair was falling out from the stress of schoolwork. She was failing several of her classes. If I couldn't read my professor's minds and just pull the answers from them, I'd probably be in her shoes. I left her and her scraggly hair behind when she blinked.

Though I pitied her, she was not the reason I was sitting in a diner that smelled oddly of boiled cabbage. As the hostess seated the group, my waitress tailed behind them and scurried over to my table. She barely lifted her feet as she walked, and the scuffing made me want to strangle her.

“Anything I can get for you or you still waiting for your friend?” she asked.

“He's taking his sweet time. I'll have a chocolate milkshake, please.” I said.

“You got it. Be right over.”

There was something about her smile that bothered me, but she turned before I got a good look at her eyes. I made a mental note to check her out when she came back.

The door chime rang again, and I felt a smile of relief stretch across my face as Garth walked in. The relief was not for his arrival. It was for another chance at seeing his eyes. The less time I spent with him the better. I waved at him to get his attention. He nodded at me and sauntered over with an overly enthusiastic swagger. As always, he was wearing his damned tinted glasses.

“Hey, Jilly! Sorry, I'm late. Had to stop by Jasper Hall to print out the PowerPoint.”

“I hate it when you call me that,” I vocalized my thoughts with little malice, not wanting to insult him.

“And that’s why I do. Cause you hate it,” he said. He had an English twang in his speech which I grew used to after spending so much time with him. I felt a shiver send up my spine. It was odd. I always felt an odd tingle appear in my head every so often when we spent time together.

The waitress came back with my milkshake as Garth was settling in.

“Anything I can get for you?” she said to Garth.

“Oh, a root beer float if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Not at all! I’ll be right back.”

I was too focused on getting a glimpse at Garth’s eyes as he looked at her. Damn. Missed my chance again. The secret of the smile continues.

“Have you looked over Dr. Mosseed’s PowerPoint? It’s a little wonky, yeah? I can’t make sense of how the hell her notes are supposed to relate to the exam.” He and I had been study partners throughout this past semester of college, though he has believed we were more than classmates. I do not see him as a friend. Frankly, I’m not interested in who he is in the slightest, but for the past four months in which I’ve known him, not once has he given me an opportunity to look into his eyes.

“Jill? Yoohoo. Earth to Jill.”

I focused on him sitting across from me.

What do you want? “Hmmm? Oh, sorry. Spaced out for a second.”

“You’ve been doing that a lot lately. Need to go to the doctor?” His words sounded concerned, but was he really worried or just making fun of me?

“I’m fine. Just overwhelmed. You got plans for graduation?” Small talk was rarely something I resorted to. Usually, I knew everything I needed about someone within the first

thirty seconds of meeting.

“Didn’t I tell you the folks and I are heading back to England?”

Good. Get out of my life so I can stop obsessing over you. “Oh, right. That’s great! I’ve always wanted to go to England. I’ve never been able to leave the States.”

“Oh, you should come to visit then! My grandmum lives near Stonehenge. Beautiful place. Been years since I’ve seen it.” The excitement in his smile made me sick. I don’t know why I’ve been devoting so much of my time to a boy I don’t even care about; there was something about him that always drew me back. The tingling sensation shot up my spine again. I scratched at it curiously. It wasn’t love. I felt nothing but curiosity for him. He was a wild animal that I’ve been carefully stalking for weeks. I just needed one glance at his pupils. That’s all it took for me to access someone’s mind.

He stuck a finger under his glasses to reach an itch on his eye. My heart skipped.

He lazily glided his finger underneath the lens and scratched, flicking something off as he retreated it. If my ability functioned by looking at the sides of people’s eyes then it would be a different story, but no. Apparently, full-on eye contact is the only way to see someone’s thoughts. If it weren’t such a pain I wouldn’t be sitting across from this dorky kid.

“Hey, my roommate has a late lecture tonight. Should have the dorm to myself if you want to come over and study?” Garth said.

Only if you take those damned glasses off. “Sure! That sounds great. This psych test is going to be the end of me.” I had grown accustomed at feigning excitement around Garth whenever necessary. We’ve been on more pseudo-dates than I care to admit. In my never-ending mission to remove his glasses, I’ve brought him to a waterpark, “accidentally” sneezed in his face, smacked him during a pillow fight. *Nothing.* He wouldn’t even let me try them on when we

got into discussions about eyesight.

It's like those damn lenses are glued to his face.

Garth scratched at the stubble on his chin as he looked over the menu. I glanced around the room, milkshake in hand. Several of my peers kept glancing my way. I made eye contact with one and decided to enter his mind. My eyes blurred as they always do when activating and for a moment, I was staring at myself as I entered my peer's head. His name was Bryan. He and his friends were gossiping about "why a babe like me was dating the lanky Brit." Funnily enough, Bryan was not focused on the gossip. Bryan was secretly gay and had some crazy feelings about his friend beside him. I left his head and sipped my shake to prevent myself from laughing out loud. It was cute. Good for him.

But his friends were still gossiping about us. I hated that they thought Garth and I were dating, but at this point, it was my last resort. He was the most challenging puzzle I've ever faced, and if I didn't crack the code soon, I'd obsess about it for the rest of my life.

"You've been looking really dazed lately. Everything all right?" Garth said, swapping his menu for study notes.

"Yeah. I think I just need to go to bed early tonight. I haven't been sleeping well."

I looked over at the giant wooden duck mascot that hung over the counter. Its beady black eyes were taunting me. "Haha, you can't see what I'm thinking either, huh?" I pretend it says.

Our waitress came back over with pen, paper, and infectious forced smile in hand. "Have we decided what we're having?" she giddily said. I finally got my chance to peek into her mind and immediately found she was screaming with stress. Something about paying off her boyfriend's dealer. I didn't bother probing for much more. I knew the smile was forced.

“I’m going to have the four-stack of waffles. And could I get a pile of whipped cream on that?” Garth said.

“Oooh. I love breakfast for dinner.” The waitress’ forced giggle was painful to listen to.

“You got it. And for you?”

“Just a grilled cheese and fries for me.”

She scribbled our orders down. “Okay! It’ll be out shortly!”

“Thanks love.” Garth’s slight movement on his brow told me he winked at her.

With all other attempts to get close to him failed, I’ve decided to take the flirty route.

“Sounds like you’re flirting with her. Should I be jealous?”

“Pfffft. No way. Wouldn’t waste my energy on a bird like that. Plus, back to England in a couple weeks. Not gonna be ‘round much longer. No sense in forming any relationships. At least, nothing permanent.” He gave me a sly smile.

Gross.

Our meals came out a few minutes later. Garth drowned his waffles in a sea of syrup. The waitress had made sure his waffles were smothered with whipped cream. I contemplated slamming his face down into them. Maybe all the syrup and cream would act as an adhesive for his glasses.

“These are delicious!” he exclaimed rather loudly. *Good God, close your mouth while you eat.* As if he heard me, he covered his mouth. “Oh, sorry. That was rude.”

I shrugged, gave him a smile and nibbled on my fries. I pulled some notecards out of my backpack and tried to ignore Garth’s waffle massacre. No matter how much I asked myself why I’ve spent so much time chasing after his inner thoughts, I could never find an answer. It’s like he’s the forbidden fruit that I’m not allowed to eat no matter how tempting. He was a prize. A

challenge to be conquered. *I just wish he was cuter. It'd make this a lot easier.*

A few of my friends walked in and called for me. I didn't fully acknowledge them save for a wave and a nonchalant "Hey!" Garth's attention shifted from his waffles to my friend Liz, a tall, skinny, redhead with gorgeous blue eyes. It didn't surprise me that Garth was eyeing her but looking into Liz's mind told me something I was not expecting. Despite her looks, she was always a very shy and anxious girl. I knew she wasn't promiscuous, but the way she looked at Garth was mortifying, and I knew exactly why.

She had slept with him a few days ago!

How? Why? What in the hell? A storm of questions blew through my mind. I glanced at Garth and he had a slight but cocky grin as if remembering the night he spent with the college equivalent of Emma Stone.

"I need to talk to Jill really quick," Liz said to the group. I could hear my friend's voice through her ears. Feel the air push through her mouth as she pronounced each syllable. I've done this thousands of times, but the experience never ceased to be alien to me. It was always a thrill. I stayed inside her as she walked over. She wanted to warn me about Garth. She blinked and then I was back in my body.

Liz walked slowly as if counting her steps along the way. "Hey, Jillian. Can I talk to you real quick?" she glanced over at Garth whose mouth was full to the brim. "Hi Garth," she said timidly.

Garth gave her a cheerful nod and a wave. I rushed out of the booth.

"Yeah, no problem. What's up?"

She crossed her right arm and grabbed her left. Her body language screamed nervousness. "Outside, if you wouldn't mind."

I looked at Liz quizzically to pretend I was confused. I followed her out of the diner and was met with liberating cool air. I hadn't realized how stuffy it was getting inside the diner.

"So, you're hanging out with Garth again," she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

"You've been with him a lot."

"I'm not trying to date him if that's what you're implying."

"Oh good, because I found out he wasn't looking for a girlfriend."

I tried to sound shocked. "Oh, my God, Lizzie. Did you sleep with him?"

Lizzie's face turned redder than her hair. "I hate that you can read people so easily!"

"You were the absolute last person I'd expect to be sleeping around. Especially with that geek."

"Geek? You sound like that's a bad thing. He's a lot nicer than I thought. What're you doing with him?"

"He's just a study partner. I want nothing else to do with him." That statement was only partially true. I really wanted nothing to do with him, but I just couldn't pull away from the one person whom I can't read at a whim. I didn't care what lay in that quirky head of his. It could be anything from nuclear codes to nightmarish porn. I didn't care. I just had to know. No one has been able to hide anything from me. I am not about to let my record become tarnished.

"Okay. Cool. I just wanted to warn you just in case. He's definitely not looking for anything permanent." I felt really bad for Liz when she said that. My eyes glazed over, and I peeked inside her head again. She was hiding a lot of loneliness. I made a mental note to find her a decent guy that wasn't going to screw her over.

To lighten the mood I asked her, "So, how was he?"

Liz's blushing could pass for a stoplight. "Really good, I guess."

“Lizzie. This is really important but a super weird question that I’ll try to explain later.

What color are his eyes?”

Liz looked aghast. “His eyes? Really?”

“I’ve never seen them before. I’m assuming he had his glasses off, when you, you know...”

She averted her gaze and shook her head. “You could just ask him, you know? He’s got really pretty green eyes. Almost like yours. Why is that so important?”

He took his glasses off when he was with her. That’s all the information I needed.

I looked through the window and barely saw Garth’s profile. It looked like he was stealing fries from my plate. “Thanks, Liz,” I said without looking back at her. “I appreciate the heads up.”

I heard her say “No problem” in a mumbled pitch as I walked back inside.

I was right. He was stealing my fries. I smacked his hand when I got back to the table. “So. Just you and me in your dorm tonight?” I bit my lip seductively. “Lizzie told me you and she had a great study session a little while ago.” I nearly gagged saying that.

He instantly took the queue and his shoulders stiffened as he sat straight up. “Yeah. We’ll have a couple of hours to ourselves. Bet we can get plenty of studying done.”

Once in his dorm, he was on me. I barely even had a chance to take my shoes off. He paused only for a moment to turn off all the lights save for a bedside lamp. Our clothes kicked to the floor in jumbled piles. I climbed on top of him and pressed my hands to his head. He shook his head out of my grasp.

“No, don’t.” He said.

“Come on. Let me see your eyes.” I tenderly kissed his neck and whispered into his ear.

“Let me see who you really are.”

“My eyesight is terrible. I won’t be able to see you.”

“You won’t need to see. Just feel.” My fingers glided up the back of his neck and brushed through his hair.

I felt his body shiver. His hands relaxed and he let me take his glasses off, allowing me to plunder his mind. His eyes were radiantly green as Liz said. Unfortunately, every single one of his thoughts was on me; I couldn’t find anything else past the sexual cloud that was fogging his head. Even so, I was filled with such an immense egotistical fantasy at that moment. I never saw Garth as attractive. I never wanted it to get this far. But now I had him. Now I could finally see inside his head. It was me in there. Just me.

I had solved the puzzle. I had won.

The more I watched myself gyrate on top of him, the more I could feel his excitement. I’ve been with many other guys in the past, but none of them looked at me as Garth was at that moment. His eyes switched focus from my breasts to my face which made me much less uncomfortable than I had previously imagined. His heart was pounding against his chest. I could hear his inner voice saying: *This is finally happening. I could die right now, and it’d be fine. She’s more perfect than I could ever imagine.*

My self-fueled ego was intensifying. To have him in such a vulnerable state was more stimulating than the sex itself. Despite my clear victory, I still wanted more. I wanted to know what else lingered in his mind when he wasn’t entirely focused on me.

Leaving his head, I focused solely on the act. Our breaths intertwined. His stubble felt like smooth sandpaper as he kissed me. Our bodies moved together in a summersault of limbs

and sheets. Shivers went down my spine and as much as this was the last resort, I was in ecstasy.

We lay side-by-side breathing heavily. I had one arm over my eyes, the other dangled off the bed. Garth started laughing through his heavy breathing. I looked at him with intrigue and disinterest at the same time. A rather bizarre conflict, I admit, but my view of him had changed. Maybe it was the reason why Liz had slept with him after only one date. Deep down, he was caring and compassionate.

I felt him shift in the bed and heard an odd clanging sound. I removed my arm from my face and looked over at him, he was sitting up and twirling a butterfly knife around his fingers.

“Whoa! Careful with that!” I exclaimed.

He chuckled. “Relax I’m not going to cut you. Just a fun thing to do when I’m thinking.” He twirled the blade around his fingers and under his wrist. It was fascinating watching him move it without fear of cutting himself. One mistake and he could cut something a bit more important to him than his fingers. I sat up and held a blanket to my chest, mesmerized by the metallic movement. He reached over to his bedside table and retrieved a notched ruler. The ruler had been cut ten times already, and on the eleventh inch, Garth added another notch. It was obvious what he was doing.

“Are you kidding me?” I said almost laughing. “You’re a notch on the bedpost guy?” Garth was the first person that ever genuinely surprised me. No one else in my life had ever kept their true personalities away from me before.

“Bedposts can’t be carried home discreetly. Rulers can. Something to gloat about with the blokes back home.”

I chuckled. It was clever. “I cannot believe you...” I was going to say something more, but our eyes locked and I felt a cold malice within his mind.

“I’ve got to say, you have been the biggest challenge I’ve ever faced.” He said as he twirled the ruler around his fingers. “I can normally work most girls into bed with me with only three or four dates with the stuff I learn from them. Your friend Liz was easy; girl’s so insecure it only took one date and a slew of compliments. But you... You took four months of my time and the satisfaction *alone* was worth it. I knew that my normal methods wouldn’t work on you. Oh Lord, the number of times I had to prevent from laughing every time you had a little inner monologue about how much you hated me.”

“What are you saying?” I jumped out of his bed taking the blanket with me to cover myself.

“I was smart enough to hide my eyes from you, Jillian. Clearly, you didn’t know to hide yours from me. Game over, love. Thanks for playing.”

He looked at me and the familiar tingling sensation that I experienced every time I was around him traveled up my spine to the back of my head. His once-calming green eyes glazed over just as I imagine mine do when reading someone’s thoughts. A strange voice manifested in the back of my mind.

You’ve been manipulating people all your life. How does it feel to know you’re not the only one in the world who’s special?