



LEAD US NOT

KATE MCMURRAY

“Lead Us Not”

by

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**Jess**

There's a deli on Rivington that has the best soup I've ever tasted. It's cheap, too. Or it is for me, anyway; I think Mrs. Lowenstein, who runs the place, took pity after she saw the fingers on my gloves were just worn through and not those fancy gloves with the fingers deliberately left off. Sam says it's just as well because New Yorkers need to use their fingers so much, and if the fingers weren't worn through, I'd just be pulling my gloves on and off all day. Which, yeah, probably, but my hands sure get cold.

So I'm drinking a cup of tomato basil, my favorite, and sitting at a table in the corner, just watching the people. The table has tiling on it meant to look like the inside of a subway station, I think, all chipped blues and whites with mosaics of numbers and street names. That was the scariest thing to me when we first moved here, the subway I mean, but I got used to the noise, to the homeless guy at the Delancey stop who talks to wayward pigeons, to fearing that someone was going to come along and push me onto the tracks.

This tall, lanky guy walks into the deli. I've seen him around before. Sam and I have been living in the Lower East Side long enough that it's starting to feel like its own small town. Maybe that's why I have a hard time with the subway, too; I don't like leaving the neighborhood. It's safe and familiar. There's a whole huge city out there, and it terrifies me.

The lanky guy's name is Matt, which I know because he hit on Sam at a bar once when I was standing right there.

Matt orders half a sandwich and a can of soda from Mrs. Lowenstein. He turns and gazes at me while he waits. "I know you, right?" he says.

"Dunno."

"You're the pretty little thing who buzzes around Sam Beatty. What are you, his assistant?" He leers at me.

“I’m his *partner*.” I muster up what I think is an appropriate amount of indignation. Sam and I don’t really refer to each other this way—he usually introduces me to new people as his *boyfriend*—but I like the gravitas of *partner*, the permanence of it, and after eight years together, I think we’ve earned it.

“Right,” says Matt. He slides into the chair opposite me and traces the grout pattern in the tile on the table with his fingers. “Sam and I both auditioned for the same part last week.”

“Really?” I didn’t see how that could be possible. Matt is so skinny, all long limbs, and he has tousled dark hair. Sam is bulkier, more filled out, and there is never a blond hair out of place. “Which part?”

“Billy Bigelow in *Carousel*.”

“Oh.” I want to disarm this guy. “Sam got a callback. Did you get a callback?”

“No.”

Mrs. Lowenstein interrupts my smug victory when she calls for Matt to pick up his sandwich. He gets it to go. On his way out the door, he says, “I heard a rumor that one of the actors who got a callback fucked the producer. I’m not saying it was Sam, but...”

I know he’s just saying this to make me jealous, so I shrug. “Sam is completely faithful to me.”

Matt raises an eyebrow. “You sure about that?” Then he’s gone.

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**Sam**

The library has one VHS tape that displays in all its grainy, black-and-white glory the original 1945 production of *Carousel*, starring John Raitt as Billy. Through the haze, I can discern that he's handsome and his voice is smooth and robust. I don't always watch previous productions of shows I intend to star in; I want to add my own spin to any performance and not copy what's been done before. But I really want this part, and I need anything that will give me an edge. I'm too young, I've figured that much out, but I can play older. I'll have to. Every Broadway actor between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five auditioned for this role.

John Raitt is soaring through his rendition of "If I Loved You" when Jess comes into our apartment. He pulls off those stupid fingerless gloves and tosses them on the kitchen counter before shrugging out of his coat. He's wearing a hang-dog expression.

"Hey, babe," I say from where I'm sitting on the floor in front of the TV. "How was your go-see?"

"They want someone younger," he says.

I find this surprising. Jess is twenty-six, but he's still got a trace of teenage gangliness and such a pretty face that he could easily pass for a teenager. He's hardly changed at all since we met when he was eighteen. He often gets mistaken for being a teenager, in fact. Just last week, he got carded at a bar, and the bartender kept shooting me looks like I was some pedo. I'm only two years older than Jess, but that's often mistaken for ten.

He drops onto the couch. It breaks my heart how sad he looks. I pause the tape.

"Fashion week's coming up, right? You can get some runway work."

He shrugs.

“Jess,” I say.

He looks up at me. A tear smudges his eyeliner. He wipes it away, but that just makes it worse. He says, “This was never going to be a permanent career.”

“I know, but—”

“I like doing photo shoots and stuff, but I’m only doing this modeling thing because no one will cast me for acting jobs.”

I nod. I know this. Everyone tells Jess that he’s too pretty. I didn’t think such a thing was possible, but apparently his more femme qualities stamp him as being gay, and his agent doesn’t like that because he’s only good for a narrow range of roles.

Of course, it’s these qualities that drew me to him to begin with.

His eyes are amazing. That’s what makes him a good print model. When you look at pictures of him, it’s like he’s looking into your soul. They’re hazel, I guess, with green-ish accents, and I could stare at them all day.

“Maybe I should go back to working at Lucky’s,” he says.

He used to bar back at a gay bar in the East Village, but I talked him into quitting when I started getting enough acting work to support us. I know he doesn’t like me to carry him, that he has a lot of stubborn pride that makes him want to earn his own money, but there’s really no need for him to have a job on top of the modeling stuff. That, and I know he flirted with customers to get bigger tips; not to be a jealous asshole, but I’m not such a fan of that.

“You don’t have to do that,” I say.

“It’d be nice to have more money.”

“If I get this part, we won’t have to worry about it.”

He sighs and crosses his arms over his chest.

“What else is going on?” I ask.

He looks at me, his expression surly, like he’s looking for a fight, but he doesn’t say anything.

“Jess.”

“It really is nothing. I’m just in a bad mood. I’m sorry.”

“Hey, it’s fine.”

I scoot back and then lift myself onto the couch. I put an arm around him. He leans his head on my shoulder, and the gesture is soft and familiar.

“What are you watching?” he asks, placing a hand on my waist.

“*Carousel*.”

“Doesn’t the movie have the mom from *The Partridge Family*? And isn’t it in color?”

“It does, yeah, but this is recording of the original Broadway production. I’m studying.”

Jess nods, his face rubbing against my shoulder. “You think you’ll get it?”

“I’m going to do anything I can to get it.”

Jess lifts his head. “Anything?”

I am not sure what he's implying. "Why do you think I'm studying?"

He pulls away from me and squirms. He grabs the edge of his tee-shirt and pulls on it, his tell that he's nervous. "What about, you know. Like, the casting couch?"

Is he really—? "Jess. You know that I would never—"

"I know." He looks away.

He doesn't know. That's what this is about. "It's sleazy, and it's sure to backfire. If I can't get this part on my merits as an actor, I don't want it. Besides, I'm with you. I would never cheat. You know that."

He sighs and rests his head back on my shoulder again, but he's still twisting the edge of his shirt in his hands. "I know you wouldn't."

"I love you."

He presses his face into my neck. "Yeah," he says.

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## **Jess**

He was in a campus production of *Hair*, which seems both unlikely and kind of stereotypical now. Sixties nostalgia is so over, and the show doesn't make any sense, but everyone knows the cast gets naked, and I think that's why colleges still do it. Like there's something subversive about nudity, like we don't look in the mirror every day. But that was the first time I saw him. He played Berger and wore this ridiculous brown wig that went to his shoulder blades. He sang all the songs about having life and hair and how The Man was oppressing all the free-spirited

youths in New York City. At the end of the first act, he dutifully disrobed with the rest of the cast. It was ridiculous. I was mesmerized. I came back every night they put on that show.

I wanted to be that fearless.

My roommate was in the ensemble, so he invited me to the cast party when the show wrapped. The party was held in the spartan apartment of one of the other cast members, where the walls had peeling paint and the furniture all looked like it had been passed to a succession of college students since the seventies. It was ugly but had that starving artist cachet. And there was Sam, standing as if under a spotlight, still in his makeup from the show but minus the insane curly wig. The peace sign drawn on his cheek was smudged, but I didn't mind. He had a crowd around him, everyone talking and laughing, him grinning.

This would be a trend in the years to come. This still happens, in fact. Sam just has *It*. He's handsome and charismatic and everyone flocks to him. He knows how to talk to people, how to pretend to be interested in what they're saying, how to agree with them even if he doesn't. He's jovial and friendly, dishy when it's appropriate to be. He's everyone's favorite guy.

At the time, I was a freshman theater major who hadn't managed to get cast in anything more exciting than a part as the Soothsayer in the drama department's production of *Julius Caesar*. My only line was, "Beware the Ides of March!" and I wore a robe that obscured my face.

I was nervous about talking to him, but I couldn't stop staring. He noticed and looked over at me. Our eyes met.

Geoff, my roommate, distracted me by handing me a red plastic cup. I sipped it. I had no idea what it was, but it tasted like fruit punch. "You're not trying to roffie me, are you?" I asked.

Geoff laughed. "Nah, man. I'm trying to hook up with Julie, for one thing. But I know you don't like beer."

He looked at me for a long moment and then followed my gaze, which had drifted back over to Sam. “Oh,” he said softly. “Let me introduce you.”

That made me panic. “No, that’s all right, I’ll just—”

I really would have been content with admiring from afar. Sam was really hot, blond with a square jaw and a fit body, and he had a self-assured confidence that was hard to look away from. I liked looking at him. But then, before I knew what was going on, Geoff had pushed me to be standing in front of Sam, just as the rest of his hangers on moved on to gawk at someone else.

“Oh, hey Geoff,” he said. He lowered his eyelids and smirked. “What have you brought me?”

So I was the dessert course.

“This is my roommate Jess,” said Geoff. He glanced to his left. “Oh, hey, Julie!”

And so suddenly, I was alone with Sam Beatty. I was also completely unable to speak. When I opened my mouth, no sound came out.

“You an actor?” he asked.

“Theater major.” My voice sounded choked. I cleared my throat. “I had a small part in *Julius Caesar*.”

Sam nodded. “A Shakespeare guy, eh?” He softly sang the first few lines of “What a Piece of Work Is Man?” from *Hair*. His voice was like caramel.

“Ha, yeah,” I said. I really had no idea what to say to him. He intimidated me. He was better looking than me, a better actor, a better singer, more popular, more successful. I knew even then he was going to be a star. I’d be lucky to get cast as a dead body.

He started to talk, and I was having a hard time paying attention, because my mind swam with everything that was happening: he was talking to me, I was attracted to him, I had a hunch he was gay but I wasn't totally sure, I liked the smoothness of his voice, I liked the way his real hair fell on his forehead, I liked the way his tee-shirt fit over his pecs, I liked his long eyelashes, I was such a dweeb, I was too skinny, I was too small, I was too femme, he'd never like a guy like me.

"I like Shakespeare," he was saying when I managed to tune back into his chatter. "I was in *Twelfth Night* when I was a freshman and..." He trailed off and stared at me for a long moment. "Gosh, you're pretty."

I laughed, startled and surprised by his assessment. "Oh, shut up."

He smiled. "No, I'm serious. Surely people have told you that."

My face heated up. I'd been hearing that description, "pretty," for most of my life, and I hated it. Girls were pretty. Men were strong and handsome. Sam was classically masculine and attractive, angular, big. He had broad shoulders defined muscles. He was everything I thought a man should be.

I shrugged. "I get that a lot, I guess."

"You say that like it's a bad thing. It's really not."

Before I could stop myself, I said, "Pretty isn't hot. Pretty's what you call the nice-looking guy you don't want to sleep with."

Sam's eyes widened. "I amend what I said, then. You're hot."

"Really?" It was hard to contain my own skepticism. I felt like he was patronizing me.

Sam laughed. “Yes, *really*. I really want to sleep with you. You are one hundred percent the type of guy I usually go for.”

I’m not sure what I said, but I think it was something bashful and self-deprecating. Or I stared at my feet, shuffled back and forth, and said nothing. I still didn’t believe he could possibly be interested in me.

But then he said, “I’ll prove it.” He grabbed my hand and pulled me through the crowd that had gathered in the room. “Hey guys! I gotta run. Great party. See you later.”

Then we were outside. I looked back at the building from which we’d just come and then looked at Sam. “Uh...”

“You’re the hottest guy I’ve ever seen. Don’t let anyone ever tell you otherwise.” Then he kissed me.

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## **Sam**

Tyler is standing in the middle of the studio stretching such that he has to be showing off before the rehearsal begins. The sunlight streaming in from the windows highlights his skin in a way that emphasizes how good-looking he is, makes his body seem to glow. Several people, other actors and company dancers, are looking on, not even pretending not to gawk.

I hate Tyler.

Part of me had hoped he was also auditioning for Billy, so that when I got the part he’d go away, but instead he’s been cast as Enoch, and now we’ll be sharing this space every day for the next three weeks.

He's tall and thin and handsome in the way Hollywood actors are, though the dark shadow of a beard on his face is making me think he hasn't shaved in a week, and something about that is the epitome of arrogance and laziness that is Tyler.

He smirks at me as I walk in.

"Why Samuel! Rob told me you'd been cast. I'm delighted to be working with you again."

"Likewise," I say, though obviously I'm not, and I'm pretty sure he knows this.

He stretches by holding his elbow over his head and pressing down on it with his other hand. He stands on one foot for good measure. "How is the tiny boy you brought with you from Ohio?"

"You mean Jess? My boyfriend?"

"Oh, is that what we're calling him? Seems to me he's a pest." Tyler drops his arms and stands with both feet on the floor. "You could go to bed with a real man, you know."

"Jess is a real man."

Tyler tuts and turns away. "Well. My offer still stands if you need a change of scenery."

You better believe I roll my eyes at that.

It's handy that the nature of our roles means we won't share the stage much at all, and our first rehearsal goes pretty well. I'm basically done for the day and am in the process of changing out of my character shoes and into sneakers when Rob, the director, barks, "Sam!"

I stand, just in my socks, and say, "Yes, sir?"

"Will you show Tyler these steps?" His voice is full of exasperation.

Tyler's a better singer than a dancer, and I guess the casting makes sense now because the part of Billy requires more dancing. It's clear soon enough that Tyler skipped the part of whatever dance classes he took in which they taught the ballet basics, because he isn't even placing his feet right. Rob explains what Tyler is supposed to be doing, so I try modeling the steps.

When that doesn't work, I get frustrated. I drop to my knees and physically put Tyler's feet in the right spots. I realize too late that this puts me in very close proximity to him, and I can smell his sweat. I'm ashamed to find it arousing. I back away and say, "Keep your feet like that." I model the steps again. He's better this time, but he's not moving his hips at all, and it has the effect of making him look like he's stomping.

"Now move your hips like this," I say, demonstrating.

He stares at me and tries to ape the movement, but it's all wrong and he looks uncoordinated. Again, without thinking about it, I grab his hips and move them the way they should move.

His skin is warm under the soft fabric of his yoga pants. His hipbones seem sharp, too. Hell, his whole body is hard, which is evident up close. And I do mean his *whole* body; the fabric of his pants can't hide his erection. I've been in enough dance classes that I know this is hardly unprecedented, but I have to fight to keep my eyes away from it.

"Better," Rob says. "Now pretend Sam is Carrie."

Tyler chokes on his laugh. The actress playing Carrie, a gorgeous girl named Evie, is close to a foot shorter than I am. But Rob glares at us, so Tyler obeys, moving behind me and putting a hand on my waist. I don't know these steps well, and it's clear that Tyler is supposed to lead me, so I do my best to follow him through the routine. He *is* improving; he already looks less awkward than he did earlier in the rehearsal.

When Rob is satisfied, he declares us done for the day. Tyler says, "Thanks."

“No problem.”

He follows me back over to my shoes. “Look, I know you don’t like me.”

I shrug. I figure, though, that it’s a good idea to bury the hatchet, particularly if we’re going to have to work together after all. “Just don’t make fun of Jess, all right? Leave him out of this and we’ll get along fine.”

I sit on the nearby folding chair. I pull my sneakers on, aware that Tyler is hovering over me. I opt to ignore him. I grab my bag and stand up.

But he’s right there. He’s standing very close to me. Considering all the ways he touched me while we were dancing, his invading my personal space doesn’t feel as weird as it should.

Man, he’s hot. The beard makes him look masculine instead of scruffy. His blue eyes are piercing.

“Let’s leave Jess out of this,” he says. He leans in.

I hop back and throw my bag over my shoulder. I move toward the door.

He chases after me. “I’m sorry, Sam. I’m so sorry.”

When he doesn’t say anything more, I glance back to look at him. His gaze is cast downward and he’s chewing on his thumbnail.

I sigh. “It’s all right.”

“I like you.”

“I know. But I’m in a relationship. I’d like *you* a lot more if you respected that.”

“I do.” At my dubious glare, he adds, “I will. I promise. Friends?”

I don’t want to be Tyler’s friend, but in the spirit of show camaraderie, I nod. When he extends a hand, I shake it.

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### Jess

After finally getting some work—four modeling gigs during Fashion Week, so nothing permanent, but decent money just the same—all I really want to do is go home and go to bed. I spent most of my last go-see of the day dreaming of my soft, warm bed at home, perhaps with my sexy boyfriend—*partner*—there, but that’s not even a requirement. I’m so tired I can barely keep my eyes open. But Sam called just before I got on the subway and asked me to meet him at a bar on Ludlow, so even though I don’t want to, I’m headed there instead of home.

Sam’s not there yet when I get to the bar, but Matt sure is. He’s sitting on a stool, sipping from a beer, and he gives me such a lecherous once over as I walk in that it makes my skin crawl. I look around, hoping Sam really is there but not in my initial line of sight. Unfortunately, it’s a small bar. Unless he’s in the bathroom or hiding behind the jukebox, he’s not here yet.

“So we meet again,” says Matt.

I’m sure it’s a coincidence—we all live in the same neighborhood, there’s no reason for us *not* to run into each other—but I wonder sometimes if Matt is stalking me. Or, more likely, if he’s stalking Sam. I shrug to acknowledge I heard him.

“You know, I don’t know your name,” he says.

“Jess.”

“Is that short for something?”

It is, but I hate my real name, and I sure as hell don’t want to give Matt the power of knowing it. The only people in the world who know my real name are my parents and Sam. I shrug again.

“Look, maybe we got off on the wrong foot,” Matt says. “Can I buy you a beer?”

I glance back out the glass door. I don’t see Sam coming. And, well, free alcohol. “No, but you can buy me a cocktail.” He owes me for all the anguish he’s caused.

I haven’t mentioned to Sam that I keep running into him. I bet Sam doesn’t even remember his name. Not that Sam and I have had much time to talk these days, since he’s in rehearsal all the damn time. This is the first time all week he’s left the studio before dark. Or it would have been if he were here, but he’s not. I wonder how much longer he’ll be.

“Not gonna lie,” Matt says once I’ve got a gin and tonic in-hand. “Sam is hot. I’d give anything to—”

“He’s off the market.”

“Yeah, I get that.” He looks over at me. I don’t like his gaze. It seems to be analyzing me carefully, scanning for flaws and imperfections or whatever it is about me that he’s going to exploit for personal gain. Or, I don’t know, he’s probably just trying to figure out what Sam sees in me. He nods as if he’s figured it out. “You *are* very pretty.”

I like when Sam calls me pretty now, but the word on Matt’s lips sounds like an insult. I bristle.

Matt doesn’t seem to notice. “How long have you been together?”

“Long time. Since college. We moved here together.”

Matt stares into his beer glass. “Ah. So you’ve never had the strange and wonderful experience of dating in New York.”

“No.” But I figure it’s just as well. I’ve heard horror stories.

Sam comes in then. The first thing he does when he gets to me is pull me off my stool and into his arms. He folds me into a tight hug. Everything about this is familiar, from the fabric of the tee-shirt he’s worn a hundred times to the smell of him to the way the stubble on his chin scrapes over my forehead when he sort of nuzzles at me. It’s weird because it’s so *public*, but then I decide that I can exploit the moment, really prove to Matt that Sam is mine. I hug Sam back tight. I glance at Matt over his shoulders.

“So sorry I’m late,” Sam says. “Sick passenger on the subway.”

It wouldn’t even have occurred to me to ask, but now doubt creeps in. Could something else have detained him? I think back to what Matt said about someone sleeping with the director to get the part. It’s probably some actress. Sam would never. He said he wouldn’t and I believe him.

When he steps back, Sam looks at me and then follows my gaze toward Matt. “Uh, do I know you?”

Matt looks startled. “I guess not. I live in the neighborhood. I’m Matt.”

“How was rehearsal?” I ask, both because I want to know and because I want to rub in that Sam got this part over Matt.

“Not so great. Tyler’s still being a dick. Then I kept flubbing the words to ‘If I Loved You,’ which is dumb because I totally know what they are.”

He puts an arm around me and pulls me close, so I kiss his cheek and put my arms around his waist. I try to comfort him without saying anything, because he doesn't need my platitudes, just my support and love. I remind myself that he's working hard, but he always comes home to me, and he's never done anything suspicious. I try to tell the doubts in my mind to shut up and calm down. Being in Sam's arms is familiar and comforting and just exactly the same as always. The way it should be.

Without loosening his hold, he orders a scotch and soda from the bartender. Then he kisses the top of my head and eases away.

I glance at Matt. He is staring into his pint glass.

Sam sits on a stool with his legs wide and motions for me to come near him. He's barely aware that Matt is even there, which fills me with a perverse glee. The bartender slides him his drink, and he takes a sip. Then he puts his hands on my waist and pulls me close to him. When he's seated like this, our faces are at about the same height. He kisses me for longer than is probably appropriate in public.

When I glance back at Matt, he's scowling.

Sam suddenly realizes Matt is still there. He pushes me away gently, but keeps a hand on my waist. He says, "So, Matt, what do you do?"

"Uh." Matt takes a sip of his beer. "I'm an actor."

"So are we," says Sam, in a "you don't say..." tone.

"I hardly act anymore," I point out. "I mostly do modeling gigs these days." I feel like such an ass when I say that. Modeling still sometimes feels like the consolation prize. I'm attractive enough to be on TV or in magazines, but not talented enough to actually get cast in anything

besides the occasional commercial. Not to mention, as my agent keeps pointing out, I have a very specific look. I tried making myself look more generic for a while, but that didn't change jack, so I just do what feels natural now. Which means I look like a pretty weirdo.

I'm fully aware that this career has a shelf-life, too. No one wants to hire a model with gray hair and crow's feet unless it's to do Viagra commercials, which, no thanks.

Sam smiles at me. "And someday, you're going to be in just your underwear on a billboard in Times Square and we'll both be able to retire."

"Ha," I say. "You'll have to settle for me walking during Fashion Week." I rattle off the names of the designers I booked shows with.

Sam's eyes widen. "That's amazing. Congratulations!" Then he laughs. "I do love telling people that my boyfriend is a model. You're so hot, of course they booked you." Sam kisses my cheek.

Matt glares.

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## **Sam**

We didn't sleep together the first night. When we got back to my room, Jess got bashful. We didn't sleep together after our first official date, either. Jess begged off. After that kiss the night we met, we didn't even kiss again until after the second date. I started to wonder if I had bad breath or something. And then I figured it out.

On our third date, I took him for ice cream at the local creamery. I watched him lick ice cream off his fingers and the cone and it was about the most erotic thing I had seen in my life to that point. He was so goddamn beautiful it hurt to look at him. In those days, his light brown hair was always artfully disheveled, and he had a light dusting of freckles over the bridge of his nose.

Plus, I really liked him. A lot of that was intangible and tangled up with lust, but he was friendly and affable and had a self-deprecating sense of humor. These were all qualities I admired.

So I said, “It’s okay to admit that you’re a virgin.”

He almost dropped the cone, but I reached out and grabbed his hand before he could. Ice cream dripped onto my fingers, but I didn’t care. He just stared at me.

“I want to be the man who... shows you,” I said.

He continued to not say anything, although he turned his intense stare toward his ice cream cone and my hand, which was still cupped around his.

“I know that all the gay guys on this campus act like they’re total sluts,” I went on, “but most of them have even less experience than you do, I’m guessing. I know it can be intimidating, but the guys around here are all talk.”

Jess hadn’t blinked in at least a minute, as far as I could tell. He looked back at me. “But you’re not a virgin,” he said quietly.

“No.”

He nodded slowly.

“But I think it’s better this way,” I said. “This way we won’t both be just fumbling in the dark. I know a few tricks I think you’ll like.”

He smiled faintly, but his shoulders relaxed. He pulled his hand away and resumed eating his ice cream.

Not that I was even that worldly, but at twenty, I thought I had it all figured out. And what I knew then was that I'd known that fear once, had gone through these first steps into really owning my sexuality already. I knew that, to Jess, everything must have felt capital-I Important.

I wanted to treat this like it was no big deal, but my stomach was churning, too. Jess wasn't just some guy. I had real feelings for him. I saw our relationship going somewhere.

I wanted this to be no big deal because that's how the first time was for me. My first lover had been some guy I'd met when I was seventeen and so horny my skin itched.

And yet.

"We could have something great," I said. "We could be great together."

"Yeah?" he said, taking a bite out of the cone.

"Yeah. You and me. Love story for the ages."

He smiled, genuinely this time.

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## **Jess**

During his last two years in college, Sam lived in a standard-issue off-campus apartment with three roommates and a big shaggy dog. He had his own room, luckily. I had that room memorized. I knew where the floor was scuffed, where the wall was nicked, where Sam had a tendency to toss his shirts when he took them off. We were in that room the afternoon I helped him pack for a three-week trip to upstate New York, where he'd be playing Biff in a summer stock production of *Death of a Salesman*. We'd been dating about three months by then.

I was terribly sad that he was leaving. The semester was winding down, but my parents lived thirty miles away from campus, so I wasn't going far. I'd gotten a job at a bookstore in town, in fact. The plan was for Sam to come back after his summer stock gig and work as a counselor at a theater camp nearby, so we'd still get to spend the rest of the summer together. But those three weeks stretched before us then like an eternity.

"I'm coming back," he said.

"I know." But why was I so upset?

"I'll miss you," he said.

I supposed that was the issue. I reached over and put a hand on his shoulder. "Me too."

"You'll miss yourself?"

I laughed and pulled him into a hug. "I'll miss *you*."

He laughed with me and hugged me tightly. "I'm totally reachable by phone, you know. Call me anytime. Your parents get on your nerves, your job sucks, even if you're just bored, you can call me. Okay?"

I pressed my cheek into his shoulder. The fabric of his tee-shirt was soft and he smelled wonderful, like sweat and minty aftershave. Warmth spread through my chest as I touched him, as I pressed against him, as I let his words settle in my brain, in my heart. Then the thought just popped into my head:

*I love you.*

In books and movies, they always say, "You just know." I always thought that was bunk, because how would you know if you love someone? With family, it was just this innate thing,

something I felt without thinking about it. With a boyfriend, I figured it would have to happen over time, that I'd slowly come to realize it after weeks of going on dates and hanging out together, that it would be this process. But, no. It just... happened. *I love you*. Just like that.

And suddenly I was paralyzed. I couldn't possibly say that out loud. What if Sam didn't love me back? What if my brain was just being crazy?

He kissed the top of my head. "Hey, Jess?"

"Mmm?"

"Before I go, I have to tell you something. It's kind of a weird thing, and it's hard to say, but I thought that you should know."

Panic set in. I pulled away from him as my pulse kicked up, as my veins suddenly went icy cold. He had bad news. The expression on his face—the furrowed brow, lip-between-the-teeth look I'd figured out meant he was nervous or worried about something—gave him away. I hadn't thought that this moment had been leading toward a breakup—we'd had a conversation just the week before in which we agreed that we should stay together through the summer even though we wouldn't see each other much—but suddenly I worried that he was about to leave me. That he'd gotten into my head somehow and read my mind and now was freaking out.

He said, "I think that I'm falling in love with you."

That was about the last thing I expected. I was so surprised that I laughed.

He frowned. "Aw, Jess. It wasn't that funny."

Nerves were making me laugh even harder.

Sam threw his hands in the air. "Fine, forget it. I take it back. Ha, ha."

It took some effort, but I managed to catch my breath and stand up straight. “No, no, you don’t get it. I... I’m in love with you, too. I was just... it’s such a relief. It’s great!” I meant what I said. I couldn’t keep the smile from my face.

He still looked at me doubtfully, so I grabbed his face and kissed him hard, hoping to assuage his fears. He wrapped a hand around my wrist and pushed me away slightly.

“Holy shit, really?” he said.

“Yeah. I love you, Sam. I really do.”

Then he laughed and kissed me again. “I love you, too. I love you, I love you, I love you! Man it feels great to say that. I think I’ll say it a hundred more times.”

He didn’t get a chance, because then we started making out. But that was maybe one of the greatest moments of my whole life.

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## **Sam**

On the way to rehearsal, I see a scarf in the gutter. It’s more an ornamental than a practical scarf, made of some kind of thin, green material with silvery stripes woven throughout. It’s just the sort of thing that Jess would wear. I briefly wonder if it’s his and he lost it, but that minty green is one of his least favorite colors. Actually, now that I think about it, he hasn’t worn any of those sparkly scarves in a while. He’s squirreling away his money, maybe, not spending it on frippery like that. Which is a shame, because I’ve always liked how he looks in a scarf.

I ride the train uptown and wish that I could see Jess instead of going to rehearsals. We haven't seen much of each other lately. I'm glad he has steady work, but I miss him being around at home during the day.

I forgot my book at home, so I'm stuck looking at the ads on the train. It's the same typical stuff: community colleges, dentists, beer. The city recently launched a campaign to help victims of domestic violence, and there's one ad with a somewhat disturbing photo of a young man with a black eye and a split lip. The copy is in Spanish, so I'm not entirely sure what it says, something about there being no shame in seeking help. It takes me a moment to feel disgusted that I'm assessing how those cuts and bruises could have been added with makeup or Photoshop. Am I really that cynical? Is this what New York has done to me?

When we first moved here, it felt like it was me and Jess against the world. Lately, it feels like the world might win.

Of course, Tyler is already at the studio when I get there. He's practicing a dance routine right there in the middle of the floor. He's flubbing every fifth step or so, turning his foot in when it should be turned out. I shout this at him, which only makes him stop and stare at me. I wave, hoping that will get him to go back to what he was doing, but instead he just stands there, his feet in an awkward ballet third position.

I want to yell at him. His reappearance in my life has disrupted things in a way I don't like.

The director keeps asking us to help each other out, and I think he's getting off on the tension between me and Tyler. The actress playing Carrie has the flu, and though she showed up for rehearsal, she was sent home promptly so as to not make the rest of the cast sick. So I, of all people, am standing in for her during one scene, trying to show Tyler dance steps he should have mastered a week ago, each of us all up in each other's dance space.

"Frame!" I shout at Tyler. I jostle his arms. "If you hold your arms more stiffly, that keeps distance between us, and you won't keep stepping on my foot."

Tyler grunts but holds his dance frame correctly.

“Come on, Ty, this is Dance 101.”

That’s when it occurs to me that Tyler is deliberately flubbing to get closer to me. There’s no way a guy this inept would ever get cast in a role in a Broadway production that required this much dancing, not unless he were Hollywood famous, which Tyler definitely isn’t. Lots of good actors auditioned for the part, guys I know who can sing and act and dance with the best of them. Which means Tyler can’t be as clumsy as he seems.

I’m thinking about this while I demonstrate something, and it literally trips me up. I falter, shake my head, and manage to do it correctly, but I’m unnerved by this new realization. Tyler has a thing for me, but would he really disrespect Jess this way after I told him not to?

After rehearsal, Tyler sidles up to me and says, “I’ve got a bead on small part in a movie.”

“Yeah? You planning to quit this one-horse town for the bright lights of Hollywood?”

He shrugs. “Maybe.”

I wasn’t expecting him to say yes. Most of the theater actors I’ve met, especially the gay ones, will do the occasional TV appearance but don’t really want to venture into film, don’t want to deal with being under the Hollywood spotlight. I can’t imagine giving up a major role in a Broadway musical for a tiny part in a movie. Plus, I don’t like Tyler, but if he leaves, we’re kind of screwed.

“Really?” I say.

“Entertaining the possibility. My agent is tight with this casting director. I’d be playing the gay sidekick to the female lead in a rom com.”

I sit down to change out of my character shoes. “Well, gee. That’s not a walking stereotype.”

“It’s a role. It pays more than playing second-fiddle to you on a stage.” He spits out the words, sounding not a little bitter.

I scoff. I put my shoes in my bag and slip on a pair of sneakers.

“Sorry,” he says. “Look, it’s a good opportunity, good exposure. I’m sick of struggling to pay rent every month. I bet you are, too. I can get you an appointment with the casting director.”

“What, and leave all this?” I gesture around the room. The studio is clean and well-lit, but plain, the floors scuffed. It’s every studio I’ve ever been in, basically. A thousand grueling rehearsals play through my memory.

Tyler rolls his eyes. “Sure, this is every theater geek’s dream, huh? Maybe this was what you aspired to when you were a sixteen year old plaintively singing along to the *Les Mis* soundtrack and gazing out your bedroom window, but I want bigger things for myself. Besides, revivals like this are on their way out. You can’t put a show on Broadway without a big name anymore.”

“That’s not true.” But I know better.

“It *is* true. You try to do something spectacular, but you’re just another kid who came to the big city in search of a dream that can never be fulfilled.” He shrugs. “I’m just trying to keep my options open.”

“Yeah.”

“Feel free to continue trying to live your hopeless dream.” He turns on his heel and starts to waltz out of the studio. Before he goes through the door, he turns his head and says, “But holler if you want to talk to this casting director.”

And damned if I'm not tempted.

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**Jess**

Sam is out of sorts when he gets home but won't say what's bugging him.

I don't feel like talking anyway. I'm exhausted. That's pretty stupid, because all I did today was walk back and forth down a twenty-four-foot catwalk five times, when you think about it. Sure, there were three hair-and-makeup sessions and four wardrobe changes and lots of backstage chaos. One of the designers yelled at me for almost five minutes because I've got a tattoo on my hip that showed in the stupid low-waist pants she put me in, and there was apparently nothing in my dossier that said I had a tattoo. But most of the physical activity I had today was walking twenty-four feet and then walking back.

I have to do a trunk show tomorrow. This means I'll be on my feet all day and I have to be outgoing and friendly, and I find that exhausting, too. I'm not naturally an extrovert. I got into acting because it gave me a chance to be someone else. Modeling is like acting in a lot of ways, because you have to be a chameleon, you have to look how the designer wants you to look. In the years I've been modeling, I've gained and lost weight, my hair has been dyed six different colors, I've gotten my photo taken in various states of dressed and undressed, I've had every part of my body painted with makeup, I've been rendered completely unrecognizable. I'm a vessel for a product. It sounds weird, but I like that aspect of modeling.

People assume models are narcissistic and arrogant. This is rarely true in my experience.

Sam is quiet through dinner, and quiet as we watch a stupid reality show on TV, and quiet as we climb into bed, and finally I can't take the quiet any longer and I say, "Did something happen at rehearsal?"

“No, it was fine.”

“Did something happen outside of rehearsal?”

He hesitates. He says, “Eh, not really.”

I’m not sure if I should push this. I’m tired and cranky enough that I might say something to start a fight, which I can’t deal with right now. But there’s that doubt again, wondering what he’s hiding from me, wondering if it’s as bad as I fear. In the end, I don’t pursue it because I don’t want to know the answer, don’t want to know if I’m right. I settle onto the mattress and pull the covers up to my shoulders.

He flips off the bedside lamp, which pretty effectively tells me that we’re just going to sleep. Fine by me. But then he says, “Is this enough?”

“Is what enough?”

“What we have.”

“Yes.” Although I don’t know what he means. What we have in our relationship has been enough for a long time, and I demonstrate that by rolling over and snuggling with him. He puts an arm around me.

Sam was my first everything. I can’t imagine wanting anything else.

But maybe he’s asking about the apartment or money or our jobs. Maybe he’s asking about something he wants that I can’t give him. I don’t know. He doesn’t elaborate.

“Are you unhappy?” I ask.

“How could I be? I have you, I have a great job, I live in New York. I have everything I ever wanted.”

It takes me a few minutes to realize he didn't actually answer the question. By then, he's asleep.

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## **Sam**

The plan was for us to move to New York and become actors, but it became obvious pretty quickly that Jess was always going to struggle with getting work. When his agent suggested he start taking modeling jobs, I told him he should. I, meanwhile, am far more generic-looking, which I guess gave me an edge as far as casting went, or at least more options. The theater world is strange that way. For all that people will tell you talent matters over looks, that casting is blind, that doesn't actually pan out most of the time.

We'd been in New York about a year when reality came calling, and we had to adjust our expectations. We were so fucking naive. People tried to tell us that it wouldn't be easy, and we ignored them because we were young and in love and everything seemed possible. But a year of sharing a shitty studio apartment, living mostly on ramen noodles and peanut butter sandwiches, has a way of running you down.

It was around that time that I got my first break. I landed a role in an off-Broadway play that wasn't very good but still ran 149 performances. I had a co-star, a super hot Japanese guy who I thought was brilliant. He'd struggled to get roles despite his immense talent because, he said, no one wanted to cast Asian actors. He also had an apartment near Lincoln Center. When I asked what he had done to earn enough money for that, he said, “I don't have any furniture.” I worried that this would be my fate as well—I had no intention of ever closeting myself, but I didn't know any gay leading men.

In those days, we'd walk around our neighborhood and Jess would torture himself by looking at the fine clothes in shop windows. We'd walk up to fine restaurants and consider the menus posted outside as if eating there were a viable option. We'd pretend we had access to all of the wonderful things we imagined we'd have when we moved to the city, even though we had nothing.

Change came gradually. I got better at auditioning, better at coping with competition I hadn't had back in Ohio, better at choosing roles I'd be well suited for. Jess started modeling and took the bar back job. We moved into a better apartment—still in an old tenement building, because we liked the Lower East Side, but a clean one-bedroom.

Those lean years, they sucked in a lot of ways. There were weeks when we couldn't afford groceries, days when we had to mend clothes ourselves because they'd torn but we couldn't replace them, months when all we could do was worry about when our next paycheck would come. But through all of it, we had each other. We'd spend three dollars on a movie rental and huddle on the battered futon that doubled as our bed while we watched it, and we'd hold each other and laugh and make love when it was over. There always seemed to be the potential for something, and I don't think either of us ever gave up hope that someday, we'd both be greater than this, that our time was coming.

Now the time has come. I have enough money in my bank account to buy Jess all the sparkly scarves he wants. Instead, though, I'm lying awake in bed one night—in a real bed, because we chucked the old futon when we moved—and he's fast asleep, turned away from me, snoring softly. I examine his back, because that's what there is to look at. He's still super thin, but not as starved-looking as he once was. At first glance, he's more muscle than bone. His hair—dyed a rich dark brown—is a little on the long side these days and the edges of it touch his pillow and cover his long neck, which leads to his narrow shoulders and the long line of his naked back, which is all I can see. He's so beautiful. I still ache sometimes when I look at him.

I roll onto my side and put a hand on his waist. He stirs but doesn't wake up, because he's used to these late night intrusions. I scoot over and press my front to his back, pull him into my arms.

He murmurs something but stays asleep. I press my hand to his stomach. I take his hand. I hold him close. I kiss his shoulder.

“You okay?” he asks sleepily.

“Fine. Just getting comfortable.”

“Mmm.” Then he’s asleep again.

I love this man so much. I have, I think, since the moment I first set eyes on him. Now we’re poised to have everything we ever wanted. Except maybe each other—we’re drifting apart. That sense that the two of us are a team out to conquer the world, out to save each other, we don’t have that anymore. We just drift along, go to work, come back at night. We exist. It’s not like it used to be, because it doesn’t have to be that way anymore. And it breaks my heart.

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## Jess

Sam’s been acting weird all morning, quiet and kind of distant, but I’m still afraid to ask him what’s wrong. It’s a cliché, isn’t it, this fear? Like I’m a lonely housewife just waiting to find lipstick on her husband’s collar. But I can’t shake the idea that he’s hiding something—maybe not infidelity, but *something*—and I can’t bring myself to find out what.

He stands in the kitchen and pours himself a bowl of cereal. I grab a sticky bun from the fridge and eat it with my hands while I lean on the counter and watch him. He turns around and gives me a little half-smile. All these years of living together means this isn’t awkward like it was sometimes when we first moved here together, when we were so worried that one wrong move would mean the end of everything.

He says, "I found out yesterday. We're going on the road. Two weeks in San Francisco and then two weeks in Chicago. We leave three weeks from Friday."

My heart sinks. On the one hand, maybe that's all that his weird behavior signifies. On the other, I hate when he goes out of town. "Oh."

"You could come with me, you know. Evie is bringing her husband."

"But then I won't be working."

"I told you. You don't have to work. With what we've got in savings and what I'm making on this show, we're good."

Both choices feel wrong. "Let me think about it."

Sam puts his bowl on the counter and walks toward me. "I hope that you do. Really think about it. I want you to come with me. I understand if you can't. But we never see each other anymore, or it sure feels that way, and this could be good for us."

"You'll be working the whole time. Rehearsals, performances. What will I do?"

He shrugs. "Enjoy yourself. Be a tourist. Take some time off from working."

That sounds perfectly boring. "I don't know..."

He puts his hands on my waist and then swoops down and kisses me. "Think about it, Jess. Okay?"

"I'll think about it."

I'm still thinking about it five hours later when I get hungry for lunch and go to the deli on Rivington. Mrs. Lowenstein put up a sign advertising a special: a cup of tomato soup plus a grilled-cheese sandwich. I've got just enough cash in my wallet to make that happen.

I'm about halfway into it when the bell over the door rings and Matt waltzes in. He doesn't even pretend to be surprised, just walks right over to my table and sits across from me. "We have got to stop running into each other like this."

"I agree."

He smirks. "You're not just a little happy to see me?"

I shrug. I want to say "no," but I don't want to be rude. I take a bite of my sandwich and add, "Sam's not here."

"I know. He's not the one I want to see."

That surprises me. I swallow and put my sandwich down. He gets up without explaining himself and walks up to the counter. I hear him ordering corned beef, and then he's back, smiling at me.

Does he not learn? I don't get why he's transferred his affections from Sam to me, but either way, it's creepy and weird that he's pursuing me now, because I'm not any less single than Sam is. If that's even what this is, which I can't really tell. Matt has certainly gone into flirt mode—I see this expression on the face of guys who hit on Sam all the time.

We eat in silence for a few moments. Then he says, "You seem sad."

"I'm all right."

He nods. "We're friends, yeah? You can tell me what's going on."

“It’s nothing.” I want to shout, *Back off, creep!*

But he’s got kind of a soft expression on his face, his eyebrows raised as if to say, “I am not a threat.” “Well. How’s your day so far?”

It’s an underhanded way of asking the same question. I could reflexively say, “Good,” but he already knows that’s a lie. “Sam’s going on the road with the show. He’ll be gone a month.”

“That bites. I’m sorry.”

Matt’s basically the last person who should be helping me make a decision, but still I say, “Sam thinks I should go with him.”

“Could be fun.”

“Yeah. I’ve never been to San Francisco. Sam says I could be a tourist. Take a break from working.”

“Sam says. What do you say?”

“I haven’t decided.”

Silence stretches out around us a like a cat waking up from a nap. I glance out the front window and watch people bustle by. There aren’t a lot of offices in this part of the city, so everyone outside looks like a young hipster killing time while he lives off a trust fund and pursues something artistic.

“You always do what Sam says?” Matt asks.

“No.” Although I kind of do. Sam usually knows what’s right. I know how that sounds, but it honestly doesn’t bother me. I can make a decision when it matters. Current evidence to the contrary.

I start to doubt myself as Matt stares at me skeptically.

“That doesn’t get tired?” he says. “Always doing what your boyfriend tells you to do?”

“Why do you care?”

He shoots me a little half-smile. “You intrigue me, Jess. I’ve never met anyone like you.”

I don’t know how to respond to that, so I don’t say anything.

He picks it up anyway. “The latest *GQ*. There’s a cologne ad. I forget the name of the cologne, but there’s a black and white picture of a guy. Of you.”

“I told you I model.”

“You’re gorgeous. I don’t know why I didn’t notice sooner.”

The sincerity in his voice puts me on edge. I want to turn him down, tell him to fuck off, tell him I want no part of his friendship or anything else he’s offering. But turning guys down, which doesn’t happen that often, is like a routine. I’ve got Sam at home. But do I really? Things with us have been weird lately. I still love him with all my heart, but he won’t even tell me what’s going on. Something is definitely up with him, but he won’t tell me what it is. Even if it’s not what I think, if he won’t tell me, what kind of relationship do we have?

I look at Matt, who really isn’t bad looking. He’s handsome, actually, in sort of a bland, unthreatening way.

Matt pulls something out of his pocket and hands it to me. I pick it up and see it's a business card.

"You feel like making decisions without Sam, give me a call," he says. Then he gets up and leaves the deli.

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### **Sam**

It's easy enough to throw myself into rehearsal to put my mind off the sinking feeling that I'm about to lose everything. Part of me knows I'm being melodramatic, but the conversation I had with Jess this morning about him coming with me on the road makes me think it's all just sand slipping through my fingers. He's seemed sad lately, but I don't know why. We hardly see each other unless we're in bed together, but even then, we haven't had sex in a while because we've both been so tired.

I'm only twenty-eight. I can't be half of an old married couple.

I don't see Tyler at all until I'm about to go. "You okay?" he asks. He follows me into the hallway.

"Rough day," I say, pushing the button for the elevator.

He nods and hoists his bag over his shoulder. "Anything I can do?"

I turn to tell him off, but then the elevator pings. The doors slide open and I walk onto it. Tyler follows.

There's nothing Tyler can do, although suddenly, I flash on some moments in rehearsal when I was teaching him the dances, when our bodies were close and the smell of him, of what we could

be together, was all around us. Without wanting to, I think about him naked, about fucking him. He just stands there and smiles at me.

The elevator pings again and the doors open to the building's lobby. I walk through it and wave at the doorman. Tyler trails after me, following me out onto the sidewalk.

I think about everything he represents. He's a successful actor. He's done lots of Broadway. He's going to be in a movie. He knows a casting director. He wants me. He wants to help me succeed. He wants me sexually. He's not Jess. *He's not Jess*. He wants me.

I start to panic. I should turn away and walk toward the subway or, even better, just walk downtown to my apartment and blow off this steam. What I should do is call Jess, have him meet me at the bar—no, wait, too many other gay guys there, too many distractions. What I should do is grab takeout, take it home, eat with Jess, make love to him like the world is ending, and fix my fucking life so I'm not so unhappy, because I have everything and yet I'm miserable suddenly.

But what I do instead is stand on that sidewalk, look at Tyler, and say, "I don't know."

"What don't you know?" he asks, taking a step forward.

"Anything. What I'm doing. If I need help."

"Are you asking for help? Because you've helped me so much that it's only fair for me to return the favor."

"Maybe."

He reaches over and dusts something off my shoulder. He smiles.

"I should go," I say, gathering my wits finally.

“Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Then he steps forward again.

I know he’s going to hug me before he moves to do it, then I let him hug me, then I let him kiss my cheek, then I turn my face, then he’s about to kiss me.

I hop away.

*He’s not Jess.*

That’s what’s wrong with my life. That’s the problem. I have everything except Jess. He’ll be there at home, he’ll come running if I call him, but I don’t really have *him* because of this weird distance between us, like the creaks of a house settling at night. I have this great job and these opportunities, but the love of my life is drifting away from me. I’d give up all of it and move back to Ohio in a heartbeat if it meant I got to keep Jess. Because he’s what really matters to me, he’s why I do all these things, he’s why I wake up in the morning and come home at night. I have to fix this, I have to fix us. Then I will truly have everything I’ve ever wanted.

“Sorry, Tyler,” I say. “Go... I have to go. See you tomorrow.”

Then I do turn and run down the sidewalk.

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## **Jess**

Orchard Street makes me think of pushcarts and immigrants and huddled masses yearning to breathe free, even though these days it’s all posh shops and cafes. I read a book about Ellis Island a few years ago that said that most immigrants to New York City settled in this neighborhood, whole families crammed into apartments even smaller than the one I share with Sam. I think it was a natural place for me and Sam to land when we got to New York. But now—I’m sitting on a bench in front of an ice cream shop and look up at the row of red-brick tenements on the other

side of the street, all of them with fire escapes painted dark schoolyard green, and there's something weird and festive about that, Christmas colors like a memory against the late winter sun.

Sam walks down the street. He waves, so I know he sees me. He's wearing his leather jacket over a pair of warm-up pants, and there's a duffel thrown over his shoulder, so he's coming from rehearsal. When he gets to me, he sits on the bench and throws his arm over the back, not touching me but close.

"Hi," I say.

He nods. He says, "I miss you."

My first instinct is to make a joke about how I haven't gone anywhere, but I feel what he's saying deep in my gut. "Yeah," I say.

He looks at the buildings across the street, the weird crosshatch of green fire escapes and red brick, and he says, "Tyler, the actor playing Enoch, he's been driving me nuts. I think he feigned incompetence to get close to me. He also offered to put me in touch with a casting director who got him a small part in a movie. And I started thinking that maybe I should be trying to get more parts, maybe I should be trying to do more, maybe there's more out there for me than a part in a Broadway revival. But there isn't. It's... I'm playing the lead in a Broadway musical! That's it, that's the dream! I've got it! But it's nothing, because I feel you pulling away from me, and I feel a strain between us lately, and it has me looking to fill the void with other things, but at the end of the day, all I really want is you. And I'm worried that I'm not what you want anymore."

And there it was.

"Sam. How can you...?" But I trail off because I know what he's talking about. I know how he can say that. I take a deep breath. If we're confessing things, I suppose it's time for mine. "I

knew something was wrong, but I couldn't figure out what. For I while, I thought you were cheating on me."

"Jess. How can *you*...?" He shakes his head and laughs ruefully.

I keep going. "I know you would never do it. I *know* that. But I'm worried. I'm worried I won't be able to work much longer because everyone will want someone younger and hotter. I'm worried I'm not good enough. I'm worried I'm not worthy of you, of New York, of this life that we've chosen. I'm worried about everything and I feel so totally lost all the time lately."

"You're good enough," he says.

"You're what I want. Always. You're my first and only."

"Let's go home."

I read somewhere that our building had once housed six different families, crammed onto four floors. The building is now divided into eight apartments, one of which is our cozy one bedroom. Just the two of us share a still-crowded space, and I sometimes try to imagine what it would be like if I had extended family and kids living here, too. I can't picture it. Probably because when Sam is there, he fills the space.

We're both in the living room, looking at each other. Just sort of standing there. We're on the edge of something.

"It's harder than I thought it would be," he says.

"What is?"

“This.” He gestures around the room. “Remember how it was supposed to be so easy. How we’d sit in my room in Ohio and plan out what would happen when we came here. We were sure to succeed and live in the glamorous penthouse and have all the fame and fortune we desired.”

“I remember.”

“But even when we didn’t get that, it was okay, because we had each other. We faced the world with our heads high, and we held hands, and everything was okay because we knew it would get better. And it did. Our dreams are coming true. But this success, it feels hollow, because this thing with us is not as strong as it used to be. I want to fix it.”

He’s right. I feel guilty suddenly for doubting him, for briefly letting myself be tempted by Matt’s friendship, for thinking that my relationship with Sam is failing somehow. Maybe it is, but it will only really fail if we let it. “I want that, too,” I say.

Suddenly, I’m in his arms. It strikes me that this is safe and familiar, everything from the way he smells to the way his body feels under my hands when I hug him back to the softness of his well-worn tee-shirt. I wonder how I could have been letting this go, how I could have been holding onto some resentment toward Sam, how I could have thought for even a second that he was capable of cheating. This is *Sam*.

“I don’t think I want to be a model anymore,” I say. “I’m thinking about getting a real job. Not because I need to but because I want to.”

“What will you do?” Sam asks near my ear.

He doesn’t tell me not to work, so I say, “Not sure yet. I could go back to the bar—” He tightens his grip on me. “Or I could get an office job or wait tables or sell clothes or a thousand other things. I like modeling, but I won’t be able to do it forever.”

He sighs. “I know.”

“So maybe I go with you on your road trip, but then when we get back, I try to get a job. I try to do something new.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I’ve always wanted to see San Francisco, and a month without you would be unbearable.”

He doesn’t really react at first. I worry maybe I’ve said the wrong thing. But then his lips are on my jaw, my neck, his teeth scrape against my earlobe, his hands are in my hair. Then we’re kissing like we haven’t kissed in a long time, mouths open, tongues tangled, sweet and slow and sensual. Against my lips, he murmurs, “I love you so much. Did you really think I was cheating on you?”

“I... yeah, maybe, sort of. I didn’t really believe it, but I was trying to figure out why things between us had gotten weird.”

“I just lost track of what was really important.”

“I love you, too, you know.” And I’m reminded of that trip he took upstate when we were still in college, right after we said “I love you” for the first time, when we couldn’t stop saying it, when every phone call was just, “I love you! It’s awesome!”

We still have that in us somewhere, still have the power to surprise and delight each other, still have all this love and hope and fear bottled up inside just waiting for the other to hold it or set it free.

I’m glad it’s not lost. I don’t know what I would do without Sam.

“Tyler wants me,” Sam says.

“Your costar?”

“Uh, huh. He’s been pursuing me, but I never did anything with him. I keep turning him down.”

I believe him. I also tell him the whole truth. “That guy Matt? I thought he was stalking you, but today he hit on me.”

Sam kisses me again. “We have to stay honest. We have to talk through our issues without making assumptions. And we have to come back to each other. Sometimes it’s not easy to say no.”

“But sometimes it is.”

He smiles. “Yeah. You’re still beautiful, you know that? My beautiful boy. Don’t let anyone ever tell you otherwise. Designers, casting agents, none of them know shit.”

I shrug. “I don’t care what they think as long as you think I’m beautiful.”

“I do. I know it. I will always come home to you.”

“I know.” I kiss him. “I think you’re beautiful, too. And smart and talented. And the best guy I know.”

He smiles. “Come to bed with me. I have to have you right now.”

“Yes.” Because there is no other answer.

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**Sam**

In this lighting, I can see the lighter roots of his dyed-dark hair, and I can see the eyeliner and the manicured nails. But these are affectations. He's got my name tattooed on his hip, but that's just ink. These things are gorgeous, but they don't matter; they're a part of him but they're changeable—well, maybe not the tattoo—and they're not his essence. They are not the long lines of his nose, his arms, his chest, not his laugh, his brain, his heart, not all the parts that make up this man that I'm so deeply in love with.

He's splayed on the bed, on his back, naked. I climb onto the mattress. I hover over him. I'm naked, too. He smiles and it's like a thousand smiles and yet like none because such a smile is so rare these days. But it's real and I love him and he loves me and everything is fine. I dip my head to kiss him and he puts his arms around my neck, holding me close, forcing my body to line up with his.

How could I have ever overlooked this? When did sex become perfunctory, just this thing we did to get our needs met. My need for Jess is deeper. I need him close to me, I need him to love me, I need to love him, I need for us to be together.

We kiss languidly, like we've got all the time in the world. And maybe we do.

We make love with the rising moonlight bouncing off the walls of our bedroom—mingled as it is with the streetlights outside, with the sounds of backfiring motorcycles and car horns and people shouting, reminders of our urban existence—and he's everything and everywhere and so fucking beautiful it *still* hurts to look at him sometimes and it's perfect.

Afterward, we lay together, sweaty and panting but happy and satisfied, our fingers and legs tangled.

“We still have a future to look forward to,” he says. “Life is always changing. We age, we have money, we lose money, we change jobs, we succeed, we fail.”

“Yeah.” He’s right. “And we can face anything together.”

He turns his head and kisses my cheek. “We can do anything.” He laughs. “That’s such a cliché.”

“Sure, but it’s true.”

“And that’s how I know we’re just fine.”

**About The Author**

In addition to writing romance novels, Kate McMurray is a nonfiction editor. Also, she is crafty (mostly knitting and sewing, but she also wields power tools), she plays the violin, and she dabbles in various other pursuits. She's maybe a tiny bit obsessed with baseball. She lives in Brooklyn, NY, with a presumptuous cat. Visit her website: <http://www.katemcmurray.com>

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