

CATHERINE

By: Mary Kay Holmes

PROLOGUE - THE NAMELESS

I have never run so fast, the sound of my sneakers slapping against the damp cement in a steady rhythm of terror. My breath was loud and strained, my lungs burning with the fire of survival. Adrenaline punched through every pore in my body, driving my legs and forcing my body to continue at all costs.

I knew he was there but I didn't hear a sound. A breeze through the trees, the sound of someone giggling under their breath in the distance. My eyes ached and I felt the tears streaming along my cheeks toward my hair as I sprinted.

I turned to look over my shoulder, a whimper leaving my lips as I realized there was no one, nothing, there.

When I twisted my face back toward my car, which was only a few feet away, I immediately slammed into something and fell to the ground. I looked up, unable to move, incapable of making a sound. His head awkwardly tilted to the side as he studied me, a terrifying smile creeping across his lips. I felt as if I may pass out, could vomit, wanted to wake up. Wake up! I screamed inside my head to no avail.

"Shhhh," he calmly whispered as he crouched before me, caressing my tear-drenched cheek, "it hurts less if you just give in."

1-CATHERINE

The door slammed with a saccharine jingle, and as his keys hit the floor I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. There was an intoxication in the air, a scent more magical than I had ever encountered. I felt a warmth across my chest, a tingling between my legs, and my mouth began to fill with saliva. As he glanced in my direction and our eyes locked, he froze like a terrified squirrel, the lightning between us immediately shutting his system down. There was pure panic in his eyes, the vein in his neck throbbing more quickly than before. I smiled over my laptop then returned my eyes to the screen, feigning interest in the flickering facade of my words. I could see him in my peripheral vision, could hear his mind turning the options around and around like an automatic clothing dryer. He didn't know what to make of me, and I couldn't let him know that for the first time in my existence I had the exact same problem.

I watched him slowly bend down to retrieve his keys, a tentativeness in his movement as if he was unsure if this was the right thing to do. As he deliberately dropped them into the front pocket of his jeans, he also instinctively placed his phone in his back pocket, clearly worried he'd drop it next. I felt him sheepishly look toward me before noticing I wasn't looking and snapping back to reality when the perky girl behind the counter said, "Uh...next?"

When he sat at the table on the other side of the room, in a chair facing me square on, I pretended not to notice. My lips were parted slightly, my tongue almost invisibly at the corner of my mouth, so I could taste his breath as the fans on the ceiling kindly pushed it my way. I was struggling to be still but enjoying the challenge of my chosen stoicism. I sensed his nerves, the pheromones leaping joyfully from his skin, and could hear the faint sound of his teeth gently gnawing at the inside of his lip. This man's plan was not to stay, he only wanted to grab a quick coffee and be on his way, but here he was. No laptop, no books, no reason to be here, just a poorly hidden fumbling in an attempt to buy time until he figured out an angle. I didn't want to talk to him, couldn't have him close to me, so I did what I shouldn't and sent him a message. The phone in his pocket buzzed and my eyes stayed fixed on my computer screen.

"Do not come over here and talk to me. Stay where you are. You can look, I'll give you five minutes, then you need to proceed with your day and I'll see you tomorrow at the same time."

He stared at the screen. Slowly his eyes looked up at me, his head cautiously following. I met him with my eyes, subtly nodded, then returned to my screen. I could hear his beating heart in my head — the terror, the excitement, the titillation...

I watched his fingers type, knowing the message he was sending before I even received it.

"How did you do that?"

"Is that really all you want to ask me? You only have four more minutes."

“What’s your name?”

“Not yet.”

“Can I come talk to you?”

“No.”

He paused, his breath quickening as he struggled to think of what to say next. I could tell he was considering getting up and coming over anyway but was listening to me and respecting my wishes, despite his desire to do more. Good boy.

“Why am I afraid to stay, but even more scared to leave?”

“That is the correct way to feel. You have three minutes.”

A quiet determination embraced his being, he sat up straight in his chair and looked at me square in the face, his eyes fixed. I looked up, raised my glasses to the top of my head, and allowed him to lock eyes with me. Watching each inch of his skin relax into my gaze was fascinating, the echo of his racing heart slowing to a manageable and almost drowsy rhythm as if I was gently running the tips of my fingernails over his forehead. I held him in the palm of my hand, and like an obedient and dependent puppy, he dopily complied. Here we sat, unmoved until his time was up.

The phone buzzed in his hand and he jumped, gasping loudly. The woman at the table next to him audibly huffed, shot him a weird look, and moved her purse to the other side of her chair. His perfect lips whispered “sorry” as he looked at his phone in a fluster, eager to receive my message.

“Time’s up. See you tomorrow, Dez.”

I lowered my glasses back onto my nose and went back to work while he tentatively stood, hovered at his table questioning himself, and left without looking back. I smiled to myself, momentarily wished he would come back, then took a sip of my steamy macchiato.

2-DEZ

I walked out into the sunlight and felt the coffee shop door close behind me with a whoosh and a click. What in the actual fuck just happened? I felt like I was going a little crazy as I walked toward my car, sipping my deliciously strong black coffee and reviewing the last ten minutes. I had never been to this cafe, I'm still not sure why I stopped here instead of my normal place a couple of blocks up. I parked in the lot and was thinking about this ridiculous project at work as I mindlessly headed inside, the little bell on the door jingling as I entered. Suddenly it felt like someone cocked a loaded gun in the center of my forehead and I was filled with a rush of terror as my eyes rested on the single most intoxicating woman I had ever seen. My keys dropped from my hand. My muscles didn't work. I couldn't move, and I was simultaneously more frightened than I had ever been, yet somehow incredibly turned on. Flashes of movement and insanely delicious and unrecognizable scents filled my nose as I spun a little, the room went fuzzy, and I abruptly lost my balance. It was the exact feeling of briefly falling asleep and dreaming of tripping down the stairs when you jolt yourself awake. A slap in the face, a wash of warm air, an arousal. There was something strange and addictive about this seemingly unassuming woman with her mountain of dark curly hair piled on top of her head, her thick hipster glasses, and well-worn flannel. It was like she was hiding in plain sight — a clearly stunning woman trying to look average while I tried not to come in my pants with a single glance.

Jesus.

And the phone thing? I mean, she wasn't even typing. There wasn't a phone anywhere on her table...wait, was there a chance it was someone else texting me and I misunderstood...no, no way. Is there some new messaging technology I didn't know about? I felt insane like I left reality as I knew it on the table inside.

Those lips, those perfectly gorgeous, dark berry-colored lips made my mouth water. I can't imagine what they would feel like on my skin, or if they would taste as exquisite as they looked. I smiled to myself, imagining her at close range, my name a whisper between her lips.

My phone rang and I jumped straight up into the air again, damn it, this woman was really under my skin. The screen read "Jenna" and had one of her kissy face photos behind the name. Man, that girl was determined, you had to give her that. I bet she took that pic when she was at my house the other night and I had fallen asleep watching whatever reality TV disaster she was binging.

I stared at my phone and considered not answering, but then I did.

"Hello?"

"Hey you, what's up? You on your way to work?" I could hear the flirty tone in her voice, I bet she wants to drop by the office for lunch, despite my constant hinting that we weren't exclusive

and I needed a little space. I mean, I barely considered what we were doing dating, but I kept that to myself. Jenna was dying to get to know people at work, constantly asking me if she could stop by, and I genuinely wasn't that interested in weaving her into my life at that moment. We hadn't been seeing each other that long, and it was pretty much a sex thing, but she was nice and hot and I was bored and lonely so it worked.

"Yeah, just grabbed a coffee and am about to drive. What's up?"

"I thought maybe I could come over tonight and bring some food? Or we could actually go somewhere?" Her voice drifted off in that way I recognized as her wanting to be in public together and hold hands and have people see us. Shit. I wish I could be honest and just say, "Yeah I really just want to go home and whack off and think about this woman I just fell for a second ago...I need to obsess over seeing her tomorrow if that's ok," but clearly I couldn't do that.

"Sure. I should be home by about 6, wanna come by then?"

"I do!" she chirped. "Have a good day and I'll see you tonight. Byeeee."

I hung up the phone and had that sinking feeling in my chest I recognized all too well. Meet a girl, have some sex, like her enough to do it a few more times, and suddenly find yourself weighing how much you like her vs. how much you would hate to start over. I'm so good at finding and fucking them, but shit at all the other stuff. Just as my brain began slipping into a self-hate spiral, I stopped and thought about the woman inside. It was as if she was calling to me from the coffee shop, telling me to refocus and abandon all that self-doubt. I felt myself getting hard again as I imagined burying my face in her dark mane, and realized I'd have to find a way to take care of my rock-hard dick before I walked into work. I bet she smells like fancy body oil and tastes like heaven...

I sat in my car for what seemed like an hour but was probably more like five minutes, rolling the encounter over and over in my brain like a broken record. I briefly considered going back inside, but a voice inside me cautioned I had better not. For some reason I didn't want to disobey or disappoint this woman in even the slightest way, I only wanted to please her. It seemed my new mission in life was to hang on to each and every breath this woman shared with me, so I drove to work fantasizing about a person I knew nothing about and would probably never see again. A person who could text me without texting me, and knew my name. Shit, I'd give a million dollars to hear those lips whisper my name.

3-CATHERINE

I walked into my downtown loft and hung my laptop bag on the hook by the door, my mind still a little confused and excited by what had just occurred at the coffee shop. I briefly paused, smiling to myself as I looked out over the city and knew he was out there...somewhere.

“What the hell are you doing?” asked Julien as he waltzed out from the bathroom in nothing but the bottom half of baby blue doctor’s scrubs and a smile.

“Save it,” I tossed back.

“In all the years I have known you I have NEVER felt that level of heat from you, he must be quite an exceptional specimen. Who is he? Have you seen him before?” Julien asked as he settled into the couch like a teenage girl at a slumber party, eagerly awaiting my response. Julien lived for situations like this, the possibility of excitement and drama filling him with adrenaline, and the glee was spread all over his face. Unlike him, I tended to be a little more stoic and reserved when it came to sex and human interaction. Julien would hop into the bed of any gorgeous specimen he was drawn to, allowing himself to open up and experience it fully and loudly. Yes, I loved sex as much as anyone, but have always viewed it more as sustenance and life force than an exhilarating thrill or something to dwell on.

“I have no idea,” I honestly replied as I poured myself a glass of green tea and smiled to myself.

“I was sitting and working on that tedious report I needed to submit today, but was slightly distracted and found myself a tad on edge for no reason. I had this strange buzzing sensation all morning I didn’t recognize, but I figured I was just hungry or run down and ignored it. Then the awareness grew gradually stronger and more intense until I caught a heavenly scent that made me tingle, and the door to the cafe opened and I felt a hot wave wash over me. So strange and foreign...” I thought back to the instant I saw him and drifted off, enjoying reliving the sensation of him trickling back into my skin.

“Do you think he knew?” Julien leaned in with his eyebrow cocked, slightly concerned yet thrilled at the notion.

“Hell no, Julien, relax. I think he thought I was some hot chick who made his dick hard, but the texting definitely messed with his head a little,” I chuckled to myself, amused despite the impulsive choice not being the most responsible.

“That was pretty fantastic,” Julien agreed as he giggled under his breath and looked out the wall of windows overlooking downtown. “So now what?”

“I don’t know, probably nothing. What I really wanted was to bring him back here, devour him and chain him to the bed, but I know that’s probably a terrible idea,” I sighed and sipped my tea.

“Sometimes I wish it were just a little easier to do the simple things,” I could imagine myself kissing his neck and sipping the air between his lips.

“Feel him out,” Julien said, “this could be one of those extra special finds for you. How old was he? Could you get a few years out of him before he’s gone?” Julien perked up at the thought. “Yeah he was a baby, maybe thirty, so he’d be around for a while if he was game. I’ll have to think about it, there is definitely something about him that feels menacing, mortal.” As the words left my lips I knew I’d have to tread carefully with this one and take my time, I didn’t want to scare him off or make a deadly mistake. Not to mention if I got overly excited I could have misstepped and screwed up any chance I had at being near him, and for some reason, the idea of losing him was upsetting. I wondered what that meant, then decided I couldn’t let my brain go there.

4-DEZ

“Can you pass the Pad Thai?” Jenna asked as she dug her tiny toes under my thigh on the couch and looked at me with a huge childlike smile on her face.

I handed her the cardboard container and smiled back, less sure of my feelings for her at the moment, but still enjoying the company. I did like her, but that day it was weird being with her. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but I felt a little guilty as if I were cheating on someone in broad daylight and might get caught.

“I’m so excited to watch the Met Gala red carpet, you know how much I LOVE red carpet,” she said, almost shivering with excitement, “so sweet of you to order food.”

“No problem,” I dutifully said back. I was relieved when she texted and asked for a raincheck on going out so we could stay home and watch whatever it was we were watching. My brain had been spinning all day and I felt like I needed to zone out and let the non-stop, out-of-control fantasy take a rest.

I was unable to stop thinking about the mystery woman, I couldn’t figure out if it really happened or if I somehow imagined it. When I looked back it felt like a dream or some sort of weird movie I watched half-asleep or something, but the sensations in my body were definitely real. It had been a long time since I whacked off in my office bathroom but I had to do it twice that day, the mere idea of her sending my body into an erotic tornado. Maybe I could have used that to my advantage that night with Jenna and...oh, man, I was such a dick. Jenna was a nice girl who really liked me and I was sitting there with my hand on her thigh thinking about someone I may or may not have actually seen, someone who may not have even existed outside my brain.

“Oh my god, look at her dress,” Jenna whispered as she pointed at the television. A stunning woman stood on bright red carpeted stairs in a giant billowy yellow dress, her poor date standing

a few feet away in a boring tuxedo, waiting while she had her photo taken by what seemed to be a million people. He held a little black satchel that was disguised as a trendy man-bag and probably filled with make-up, the sparkly purse in his other hand about the size of a tennis ball. I could almost hear him thinking, “Can I just go in and get a beer while you do this?” I smiled at the thought and chuckled to myself as I took a bite of curry, guessing that for most of the evening he would be clutching a tiny sparkly bag full of tampons and lipgloss behind his back while she kissed cheeks and took selfies.

Then I saw her, the unmistakable aura of power in the stream of people behind the yellow dress lady heading up the stairs. I froze and was instantly covered with goosebumps, a stirring in the front of my pants I couldn’t control. I could hear my heart in my throat and had to take a sip of beer to make sure I didn’t choke on the bite of food trapped in my mouth.

Holding hands with a man who looked like an Italian Barbie Doll, she was the single most exquisite thing I had ever seen. In a body-hugging black dress and heels, kissing someone on the cheek and smiling, she outshined the woman in the foreground like diamonds on a pile of dirt. I felt like I was floating toward the television screen when she looked right at the camera and through me. My eyes must have bugged out of my head like a roadrunner cartoon because she subtly smiled and winked before turning to the man, that goddamn man touching her, and went inside. It was seconds, it was achingly painful, it was heaven.

“Helloooooo,” Jenna was sarcastically saying to me, “earth to Dez!”

I turned and looked at her and she was laughing under her breath, “You really like that dress, eh? And here I thought you were doing me a favor watching this with me.” She took a tiny bite of her noodles, trying to use chopsticks but really just shoveling the food with them. I took the plate from her hands and set it on the coffee table, grabbed her by the ankles, pulled her down flat on the couch, and was on top of her in a flash, the taste of soy sauce and beer on her tongue. I didn’t remove her dress, just slid her underwear off and entered her without a thought. If I kept my eyes closed, if I held on to this feeling for just a minute, maybe I could make it real. I wanted to possess it, to associate a sensation with the fiery air on my skin. It’s not her, but maybe I could make it her if I tried hard enough. I didn’t care if it was wrong, I didn’t care about anything at all anymore, only her.

When we finished I was overwhelmed with a sudden urge to cry, a rush of unexplainable emotion filling me. Shit, I can’t cry in front of Jenna, she’ll think it’s a thing and that will be bad. I kissed her quickly and jumped up off the couch to sprint to the bathroom.

“Hey, where are you going?” she asked.

“I’ll be right back,” my voice cracked a little, “want another beer?”

“Yes, please! Wow, what got into you? I guess we need to watch red carpets more often!”

Her post-coital giggles trailed off, and as soon as the bathroom door closed I buried my face in a towel and sobbed. Years of pent-up emotion and stress and confusion and pain flowed out in the

craziest way, totally out of nowhere. I was feeling things I hadn't let myself, seeing them for what they were, and experiencing life in a different way. Normally after I had sex with someone I crammed whatever I was thinking down into a dark place and then just did whatever was easiest. I didn't connect, I didn't share, I didn't feel. What the fuck was happening?

I sat on the toilet seat and took a deep breath. I felt good, unburdened, strange. When I was little, and I would get into trouble, I always felt the guilt so deeply I would lie on my bed and cry until I fell asleep. When I woke up to the smells of Ropa Vieja, galletas, and my mom singing in the kitchen, I felt like a new person. I remember running down the stairs and burying my face in my mom's apron and feeling whole, an awareness I'd completely forgotten as I had grown up. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, exhaling weight. I could almost smell the dish soap on her hands, the onions sautéing in the pan nearby. So strange.

A quiet PING sang from my iPad next to the toilet, and when I glanced at it I saw a notification that simply said, "It's ok."

I leaped off the toilet and flung the bathroom door open, looking side to side down the hall, and practically ran into the living room. Jenna had my t-shirt on, her tiny dress hung over the back of the chair, and had returned to her plate, face intently fixed on the TV. My manic eyes scanned the room, hoping to catch a glimpse of her walking out the door or driving away but I suddenly realized the impossibility and found myself paralyzed, unable to do anything. There was no possible chance in hell she was there ... right?

"Jeez, Flash, what's up with all the zipping around being weird? What the hell is up with you?" Jenna teased from the couch, a look of confusion on her face.

I wanted her to leave. I wanted to be alone. I wanted to sit and think and figure this whole thing out. I didn't want Jenna, I wanted HER, and it wasn't optional any longer.

I smiled at Jenna, not enthusiastically, but enough to placate her.

"Let me grab you that beer," I said as I turned to walk out of the room, the emptiness creeping back into my chest and wrapping its hand tightly around my throat.

5 - CATHERINE

I sat on the edge of my Cal King in the loft, still wearing the dress I'd worn to the gala that evening, and watching the whiskey swirl around in my glass. I wanted to see him and this nagging longing, well, caring in general, was simply not my style. I guessed it was possible this was the person you hear about, the one who takes a hold of you in a way no one else can. I hadn't ever thought it was possible for us, but I had been wrong before. Rarely, but it did happen. This shouldn't have worked on me, this shouldn't have happened.

The guilt he felt being with that other girl, the fear he carried thinking I'd be disappointed in him...it was fascinating. It hadn't even been 24 hours and he was already in my skin.

"Under your skin," Julien said from the door, his tuxedo tie undone and a big smile on his gorgeous lips. "They say 'under your skin,'" he repeated.

"I knew that. Get out of my head." I loosely commanded with a smirk. Julien blew me a kiss and headed off to bed, pulling the tie from his shirt collar like a well-oiled Chippendale.

I took a sip of my bourbon and thought about Dez. It was 3 am, and I wondered if he was sleeping...if she was still there. There was a feeling in my stomach as I thought about her — what was it? I felt uncomfortable and frustrated, no, upset? Jealousy. What a funny emotion, nothing good ever came of it and humans consistently clung to it. I needed to test that theory and go see him for myself.

The streets of Los Angeles were empty, a light mist leaving the roads looking damp and shiny. With each block taking me closer to him, I felt exhilarated. The streetlights seemed to dance along with the hum of the car, the sound of the tires like ocean waves. I shook my head as I felt Julien creep in and tease me, "You have no self-control." Shut up, Julien. You are one to talk. Dez was naked, lying face down on his bed with a messy sheet draped over his perky backside. His skin was smooth and tan and beautifully decorated with colorful tattoos that clung to his defined muscles. His arm was outstretched toward the empty side of the bed, and his hand twitched slightly along with his dream. I watched his torso raise and lower and heard the breath flow in and out of his slightly parted lips.

As I gently laid my palm in the center of his back I heard him moan as if he were making love in his sleep. A deep, longing sigh wrapped in relief. I delicately traced my finger down his spine and his hips slightly thrust into the sheets, his gluteus muscles contracting as he did so. I was puppeteering his thoughts, planting seeds of desire, and embedding myself in each and every heartbeat. His breath was quickening, and I could feel his pulse as I laid my palm flat against the gorgeous vein on the side of his neck. I could smell the perspiration beginning on his skin and placed the tip of my finger on his lower lip as I gripped his throat slightly tighter, the blood pumping through his throbbing veins, screaming to be released. I leaned down and grazed the back of his neck with my lips and heard him come, his pulse climaxing and relaxing in my hand. As he began to stir I slipped outside his window and watched him as he opened his eyes and longingly gazed at the space beside him in bed. His hand caressed the sheet, his brain allowing him to pretend I was there for a brief second before the disappointment hit and his eyes teared up. For whatever reason, my presence, or lack thereof, was ripping him apart inside. Passion stirs passion and something about me had his mind swirling.

My heart ached and I realized this could be the big IT, the thing these humans make tedious movies about. What a stupid saying. When they talked about being obsessively in love, being addicted to another being, this must be what they meant. The beauty, the pain, the permanence. It

was silly, but I honestly felt as if I couldn't live without him, and it was a risk I hoped I'd never have to deal with...but there it was. Interesting.

6 - DEZ

I woke up feeling lost. I thought about Jenna being here, how I'd told her I wanted to sleep alone and how hurt she'd been. I tried to blame it on being tired from the week but we all know there is no real excuse for telling someone you don't want to be around them. When you crave someone you'll sacrifice sleep without so much as a thought. I'd have to call her later and maybe we could meet up for that drink after work she'd been longing for. I felt confident I was leading her on but I couldn't tell, I was so freaking scrambled up over this other woman.

As I stared at the ceiling I was consumed with the idea of the mystery woman from yesterday, how she'd somehow taken over my brain. If I closed my eyes I swore I could smell her in the air surrounding me, but how would I even know what she smelled like?

My hand twitched and brushed against an envelope placed neatly on the pillow beside me. 'Dez' was written on the front in beautiful cursive. I bolted up in bed and leaned against the wall behind me, tearing into the paper, yet delicately trying not to ruin the contents. My heart was racing, I felt like a kid on Christmas morning.

"Dear Dez-

I know this all must seem very strange to you, and I apologize for all of it. When I packed up my laptop and went to work in the cafe yesterday I had no idea you would be there, or that you would have the effect on me you did. I honestly didn't think I was capable of this, and I am so surprised by it all, I'm not quite sure how to proceed.

I do, however, want you to know that no man has ever made me feel this way. I don't want you to put your life on hold while I sort this out, but if I'm being sincere, I do want you to be mine. There are things you need to know, and until I can figure out how to share them with you, we can't do this.

Please be patient with me, this is uncharted territory. I'll be thinking of you and the way your skin glows in the moonlight when you sleep.

xo"

No name — she didn't write her name and I had no way of writing her back. I smelled the paper, hoping to take in some of the scents I had imagined minutes ago. This was so silly, a grown man sitting in his bed smelling stationary like a middle school girl. Well, she did say she'd see me so maybe she would be there if I stopped in to grab another coffee. I leaped out of bed and into the

shower, taking extra care to thoroughly wash my hair and face (unlike most days when I just do what I can to get to work on time). I brushed my teeth and flossed, followed by mouthwash and a mirror check for leftover Thai food from last night. I sloppily styled my hair with a goopy product (I should really learn how to do this) and tried to choose an outfit that made me look stylish and casual, whatever that means. Deodorant and...where was that body spray my ex bought me? Ah ha! A little mist of that and maybe it would do something it was supposed to do. I hadn't put that much effort into getting ready to go somewhere since mom's funeral — she would have been so pleased. I smiled to myself at the idea of her looking down from wherever it is people go when they die and giving me a thumbs up. "Good job, son, now go find that woman who can text with her brain and maybe try not to masturbate at work today. Ok, love you!" I chuckled to myself under my breath. My mom would have loved this story.

I perused the cars in the lot of the cafe hoping to find something that looked like her, but in Los Angeles, every lot is filled with slick and pristine BMWs, Audis, and Range Rovers so it's impossible to know which fancy pants go with each.

Deep breath, I was so nervous. My palms were sweaty and I kind of felt like I needed to pee — how old am I? I don't think I was this nervous to go to prom or lose my virginity. I seriously needed to get it together, it was ridiculous.

The door jingled and I tried to play it cool, heading straight to the counter in a determined manner before looking around. I knew she was there, I could feel the warmth coming from the table in the corner like a space heater. Don't look, don't look, order coffee, act normal, thank you, yes I would like a receipt. I took my black coffee from the counter and turned to see her looking at me through her black reading glasses, a subtle smile on her glossy lips. Her dark wavy hair was pulled back in a messy bun but a few stragglers danced near her cheeks and I envied them. I casually leaned against the wall where I stood and looked for an empty chair but there were none.

My phone buzzed in my pocket.

"You look handsome today, the body spray is a nice touch." I smiled to myself, and despite the insanity of what was happening, I was giddy to write back.

"Thanks for the note. Are you sneaking into my house now? Isn't it a little soon for that?" I looked up coyly to flirt a little and she was gazing through me.

No sooner had I sent the text than a response popped up, jeez she's fast. Wait, her hands are folded in her lap. How is she doing that?

"There will come a time when you wish that's all I did," she wrote. A wave of terror, anticipation, and excitement rolled over me as I momentarily pondered what that meant and realized I was desperate to know.

"I want to know everything. What's your name?" I frantically typed, knowing she'd somehow already planned her response.

“Catherine.”

Reading her name felt familiar and comfortable. I was so happy to have a name, I couldn't wait to hear myself say it out loud. It was perfect.

“Nice to meet you.” I wrote.

“Likewise.”

“So can I come to talk to you?” I desperately hoped she'd say yes, but nothing. I looked at her and she subtly shook her head. Her eyes were a dazzling hazel green and wanted to look at them at close range, my skin touching hers.

“Soon,” my phone buzzed, “I promise.” I stared at her, taking as much of her in as I could. The way her collarbone poked out from beneath her v-neck t-shirt, the thin chain that ran down her neck and disappeared between her breasts. Skin as flawless and smooth as Cafe Con Leche, her powerful yet delicate hands with perfectly manicured nails. I bet touching her is pure heaven. When her eyes hit me I felt vulnerable, yet beautiful. I could just stare at her in silence forever.

“Dez?” I heard a familiar voice behind me and turned to see Ben from work.

“Oh, hey,” I said back nervously, hating the interruption. I started to turn back toward her when Ben stopped me, “This place is the best, isn't it? They have the hottest baristas,” he winked at me knowingly, and I nodded in agreement. Funny, I hadn't even noticed the baristas, or literally anyone else in this entire building. I can't imagine ever looking at another woman as long as I live.

“That's Tessa,” Ben whispered, subtly pointing at the woman behind the counter with his chin. “I come here as often as I can just to see her.”

Tessa was a petite redhead with freckles on her tiny jeweled nose. She was young and peppy and had a sweet but dangerous smile. I could always spot one of those troublemaker smirks, they were one of the many ways I knew I could charm a girl into meeting me in the bar bathroom or the front seat of my car. That guy seems so far away now, the young man who loved women so much he had to put his hands on as many of them as he possibly could to avoid the reality that all he really wanted was to wait for the one.

“Yeah, cute,” I replied under my breath as we reached the counter for Ben to order. My teeth were tightly clenched as I endured this hopefully momentary distraction. Fucking Ben, what are the odds?

“Well, hello, to you two,” Tessa smiled and flirted, sizing us both up. “What can I get you?” I held up my coffee as if to say “I have one already” and waited for a natural moment to turn back to Catherine.

When I finally snuck a second and slyly turned to look back at her, she was gone.

I wanted to sprint out the door, to find her and scoop her up and never let her go. A panic filled me, an anger, a frustration, a disappointment.

I took a sip of my coffee to conceal the quiver in my lip. I didn't think I would ever forgive Ben.

7-CATHERINE

“Let’s go out, maybe then you’ll be thinking clearly and you’ll know what to do,” Julien toyed from the doorway, raising and lowering his eyebrows in that mischievous manner he’d mastered.

I took a sip of my wine and realized I was utterly and completely drained. Perhaps a taste of something different, a change of scenery and a little “mingling” as Julien called it, would take my mind off this man.

“OK,” I said, “get dressed and we can swing by that party at your fancy boyfriend’s house,” I teased.

“Uh, I think you mean YOUR boyfriend, darling,” Julien tossed back, “I can’t manage to get him to spit in my direction when you are around.”

“Well, maybe tonight we can have him look in OUR direction,” I winked at Julien.

“There she is!” Julien exclaimed. “Nice to have you back to business, love.” With that he took the last sip of his wine and zipped off to his room to primp.

Yes, maybe he was right, a little fun may just do the trick.

8-DEZ

“You wanna join us for a beer?” Ben asked as he strolled by my desk at 6 o’clock. The sound of his voice was an absolute annoyance after his interruption at the coffee shop, but it wasn’t his fault. I couldn’t hold that grudge forever...or could I?

I absolutely could not handle another night with Jenna, and all I was able to think about was Catherine, so the idea of a few beers with some dudes I didn’t know well sounded more appealing than usual. I talked myself down from my anger with Ben, convincing myself there was nothing anyone could have done, and honestly, I was being a baby.

“Sure thing. You’re going to the corner?” I asked as I scrolled through my email one last time.

“Yep! See you there, mate.”

I longingly looked at my phone, the messages from Catherine sitting in a message window with no phone number, no email address, no way of contacting her. I wondered if I just texted her if it would work — why didn’t I think of this before?

“Hey,” I typed.

Hey? Jesus, that may have been the lamest text I’d ever sent. A woman of that caliber deserved a goddamn sonnet on a silver platter.

The word just hung there in the emptiness of the screen, as alone and unanswered as I felt. I guess not. I longed for that little typing bubble so intensely that I caught myself holding my breath.

I had Google stalked her all over the internet, tried every little trick I knew for finding people, and came up with nothing. I scanned every photo of the Met Gala, including the ones of the woman in the yellow dress, and nothing. It was as if time had stopped for the two-seconds it took her to cross everyone's lenses and I was the only one who had seen her that night. Amazingly, that was exactly how she made me feel like I was the only one on earth she saw. The only one. I carried her letter from last night in my pocket and looked at it frequently, the only tangible proof that the last two days actually happened and I wasn't losing my mind. "Fuck it," I thought, "I'm going to drink myself silly and see if I can't think about something else for a while."

The corner bar was packed to the gills with people decompressing from work. Summer hung in the air and with it brought hopefulness and excitement for longer days and sunshine-filled weekend getaways. Everyone was talking about Memorial Day like it was just around the corner, men far too old for spring break clinging to the idea of a raucous vacation including hot chicks, benders, and wild all-nighters. Even some of the married men were trading family trips for "men's weekends" in an effort to "blow off steam," whatever that meant. Well, I knew what it meant, it just seemed sadder when it came from this particular group of gentlemen. I smiled and drank and chimed in enough to seem present but not enough to support their off-color comments or desire for crazy sex with a menagerie of women. Some of us had that, well, have had that, and it's honestly not all it's cracked up to be. I briefly thought of Jenna and how these guys would have busted my balls so hard if they knew I had a gorgeous, sexy, younger woman waiting by the phone for me to call her. I briefly felt bad for blowing her off and made a mental note to text her later.

As I sipped my beer I felt slightly nudged as a stool pulled up between Ben and me, it was Tessa, the girl he liked from the coffee bar. There were three beers in her hands, and she set one in front of each of us as she took a long draw off hers.

"Hey you," she elbowed me, "fancy meeting you here." I could tell she was flirting with me but I chose to ignore her for many reasons, the greatest of which was that Ben clearly invited her here to talk to him and not me. Ben leaned over as I aloofly tilted my beer to cheer her and said hello, trying to get her to refocus her attention on him. Poor guy, he was so awesome but we all knew girls like Tessa could smell desperation and it's like poison to their sexual energy. I needed to quietly excuse myself after that beer and call Jenna anyway, I was starting to feel guilty all around. I slammed the last bit of my beer, thankful to have the fresh one sitting patiently in front of me. It wasn't a brand I would have chosen for myself, Miller Genuine Draft was the choice of frat boys and high school girls, but we can't all be beer snobs I suppose.

“So, Tessa, you want to go grab something to eat after these drinks?” Ben asked her casually yet very hopefully.

“Sure,” she tossed back, “where are you guys headed?” she looked back and forth between the two of us with her eyebrow cocked and for the first time, I noticed her low-cut top and amazing breasts. It took a minute, but it finally sunk in, wow I was really off my game. It wasn’t me she wanted, it was both of us. Good girl, Tessa, get after what you want. I mentally saluted her but she was about to be very disappointed when I finished this beer and ducked out of here. I chuckled to myself and hoped Ben could step up his porn game and handle this woman the way she wanted, otherwise she was about to eat him alive. I closed my eyes and downed about half the beer, wishing I was drinking in bed so I could just lie down and go to sleep.

Suddenly I sensed something, smelled something, a distant sound dancing in my ear I couldn’t recognize...it was Catherine. I don’t know how I knew, I just did. I looked around the bar, scanning each and every face, then saw her and that mannequin man walk past the window out front. They were holding hands, and as soon as our eyes locked the world was trapped in slow motion. The mere sight of her made my heart ache, but she smiled and winked to comfort me as she floated by.

I leaped up from my seat and flew outside, the guys at the table calling after me, “Hey, man, you ok?” I didn’t stop, I couldn’t risk wasting a fraction of a second to respond. I heard Tessa ask Ben, “He’s coming back, right?”

Just as I was about to call out for her she turned around and stopped in the middle of the sidewalk about ten feet in front of me. The man turned too and looked at me, a pleased smirk on his somehow equally perfect mouth. “Jeez,” I thought as the realization hit me that this dude was crazy handsome and very intimidating in person. Before I had a chance to start the self-deprecating or jealous meathead dialogue inside my head she started walking toward me, the click of her heeled boots in sync with my heart. I couldn’t speak, I could barely breathe as if a bear was walking toward me and I was frozen in my tracks. She paused about a foot from me and placed her hand on my cheek, the feeling so intense I closed my eyes and inhaled. With one touch she was telling me so much, every atom in my body fizzling around as I opened my eyes to look into hers at close range. This. This is where I wanted to be for the rest of my life.

“Catherine,” I heard the man say behind her, “are you going to introduce me?”

“I should probably introduce myself first,” she said to me quietly as she kissed me lightly on the opposite cheek from her hand. “I’m Catherine, nice to meet you.” The words were like a symphony on the breeze, her subtle accent and tone were perfection. I did not do her voice justice with my imagination, it was more exquisite and melodic than I could have dreamed.

“I’m Dez,” I said back clumsily, the sound of my voice rough and clumsy compared to hers.

“Nice to meet you,” she said and moved her hand to mine, tangling her fingers around me, her skin the perfect temperature and soft as a fawn’s back. “Julien, this is Dez.”

Julien walked toward me and shook my hand in a firm and very gentlemanly way, looking me directly in the eye. "Very nice to finally meet you," he said as if he had heard about me for years. Strangely, it did feel that way. "Would you like to join us?" he asked, "we are going to a party up the street."

Catherine shot him a look and he casually shrugged and smiled like a teenager stirring a pot, turning to give us a little space and walking a couple of steps away. Before I could answer something told me not to, and I waited for her to respond. I desperately wanted her to agree with him, but no ounce of me was willing to risk being controversial.

"Dez, I want you to come. I was going to give you a little more time but if Julien thinks it's time for you to join us, I can't argue anymore. Well, honestly, I really don't want to." She smiled, an edge of concern in her smile as she squeezed my hand and turned to walk.

We walked up the street silently, holding hands in the warm night air and it was enough. It was perfect.