

Benny Goetting
English 372 Final Portfolio

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That's it, have fun.

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Sequoia Nagamatsu
English Whatever Number We Are

Revision Statements and Revised/Continued Version of “I Did Something Bad”

Revision Statement of “For Her Life” (Flash Fiction Section)

This piece initially came from a podcast/TV idea I came up with amongst my internet friends who I frequently create things like podcasts with, so I was delighted that my small group chose my idea to build a world upon. For this piece, I wanted to concentrate on something that made Sophie special and touched upon the overarching conflict surrounding this family of Witches within our world, also while connecting it to the more general themes and specifics. One of the first things I would revise is possibly reworking interactions between Sophie and her moms during the actual fights to maybe keep the parental surprise more of an actual surprise. Minor changes would include formatting like separating new dialogues with new paragraphs, omitting some gratuitous dialogue tags which are very much a tick of mine and will be mentioned in each revision statement, and just clarifying things like the use of powers to really establish who is doing what, making sure that readers know what’s going on in a confusing world of magic. If I were to possibly continue the story or extend it, I would add more asides to clarify the idea of Sophie not getting to use her powers as Eve implied, but like that’s not what I was supposed to imply; confusions like that would be the first to get clarified. Overall, I would probably draw out the big in-depth convo at the end to elaborate more on the more grand situation, get more of Rosemary and Sophie’s views in it because it’s a family story after all, and pretty sum it all up on a wholesome note!

Revision Statement for “Chemistry”

Chemistry comes from a snippet of a TV show idea I have/am currently in the process of outlining and writing, and this short story was a really fun way of getting to put a few of my characters into a real story and test out the waters of how I write them. However, while the story focuses on Durr, the TV show actually focuses on Gabe as the main character. But I wanted to challenge myself on a supporting character I happen to like a lot: hence, Durr! My sassy, blunt, antisocial baby. There are a couple bit additions I would want to add to this piece. First, I need more buildup to where Durr reaches the point of being self-conscious about people’s perception of her icy attitude. It was slightly off-character for her to become self-conscious after one popular girl made a slight comment, but surrounding that moment there should be more buildup, more little examples that really make it an underlying issue that

finally builds up within Durr. Secondly, I would add a scene at home with Durr and her parents, and we'd get more context about who she is, like learning that she's adopted with two white parents who aren't completely the best people, but just give readers context to Durr's life outside of school. Finally, I would add a scene on at the end where she and Maggie are serving Saturday detention for the glass breaking (on top of Maggie burning her scarf, which she got in-school suspension for), thus missing Alice's dance recital. There we would see an emotional heart-to-heart between the girls where they actually learn about each other and come to terms with differences and unexpected similarities. Also, I just don't like how I wrote Alice in this story; I like what I did with Gabe, but Alice needs more work because I just don't enjoy what I did.

Revision Statement for "I Did Something Bad"

A note that stuck out to me during the workshop class for this piece was how Grace called it "like watching a movie" and I very much enjoyed that point, because that's the effect I want to go for. IDSB is basically something I wanted to do as a spin on *Heathers* and *Kingsman* but with gayer main characters. So far, I'm very happy with how Zoe is coming together as a sympathetic psychopath, which is kinda my favorite character trope to do but it's tricky to make Zoe realistic and not just so generic and predictable. As for Ian, I want to work a little bit more at giving more substance to him concerning his moral compass and how he'll evolve to find himself at a moral crossroads concerning Zoe. The *biggest* addition I'm making to this excerpt is adding two whole more dates before the third date with the attacker and the basement. I really want that build-up so readers can grow closer to Ian and Zoe before discovering Zoe's dark intentions. I also want to add a scene at school where we can sort of get more Hannie and Noah and have them all discuss their opinions of Zoe and build more trust around him before that becomes questionable. Most importantly, we're gonna get IN PERSON with Gary and perhaps change some minor details to keep his and Zoe's past relationship a secret. Also, the reason why none of Gary's friends know about the relationship is that the relationship itself was largely a secret because Gary is not out of the closet, hey. Ok! Onto the revision.

I Did Something Bad

1. Zoe

Ian had never seen a gun up close before. They were always something that seemed fictional to him; of course Ian knew guns were *real*, but he had never held one, shot one, or had one pointed directly at his face. Except one of those things changed that night as Ian stood in Zoe's dim basement, surrounded by swords mounted on walls, rifles laying on tables, and the pistol in Zoe's hand that floated inches away from Ian's nose.

To Ian's surprise, his face and body felt quite relaxed, especially compared to Zoe. Zoe's brows were raised and scrunched together, making him appear quite worried -- concerned, even. Ian, on the other hand, kept his face expressionless. His arms weighed heavy at his sides; they didn't even fly up above his head like how everyone does in movies and TV. Ian was almost surprised at his own instinct to be utterly calm, as if a sudden move would frighten Zoe like an animal; of course if this were an *actual* animal, Ian would know well enough to run, but this animal was different -- this animal had a gun.

Ian had no idea how long they'd been standing there, face-to-face with only a gun and silence between them. The only thing Ian could find himself looking at was Zoe's gaze, trembling back at him. It was odd, more confusing than scary. Ian had never seen him like this before. At any given moment, Zoe's eyes were steady, engaged, and alive. But now...now they were different. They carried a fear that Ian didn't particularly enjoy seeing.

Zoe swallowed. He adjusted his grip on the weapon.

Despite feeling the need to say something along the lines of, "Hey Zoe, what'cha doing?" or "Would you maybe *not* wanna point that at my face?" but Ian remained quiet.

A trembling breath left Zoe's mouth. "Just...*don't* freak out, 'kay?"

2 Months Earlier. [added time for more dates/development]

It was on a sunny afternoon on Tuesday, September 3rd that Ian entered The Loose Leaf Cafe, accompanied by his friends Hannie and Noah.

This coffee shop that the trio had claimed as their home-away-from-home since their freshman year was typically a cozy haven; a quiet safe house amongst the downtown bustle of St. North. The shop's coffee bean aroma accompanied its earthy colors and aesthetic. Along the walls were bookshelves, stuffed with pages to be shared and read. But today, the peace and serenity of the cafe was disrupted by a shouting match between a customer and the barista behind the counter.

Ian stood with his friends by the door hesitantly, unsure of whether or not they should even bother trying to go to their usual sofa and order their usual drinks. The two young men at the

counter spoke so loudly and practically at the same time, making their argument nearly incomprehensible. Ian's gaze was drawn to the barista, as he was a face Ian hadn't seen before. The boy, probably not much older than Ian, was quite tall with a thin frame. His dark hair was smushed underneath a red beanie that was the hue of a rose, making him appear very barista-chic.

"That's not Grace..." Hannie mumbled. Grace was the name of the barista the gang had first met years ago and became a regular and friendly face to their trips to the cafe. Grace's demeanor was always quite pleasant, and she never rose her voice, which made this little scene very unsettling to the three friends. Noah glanced between his friends. "Do we...do we sit? Or like, what do you guys wanna do?"

Hannie frowned. "Maybe we should just leave."

"Right, but here me out: if I don't get coffee sometime today I'll snap." said Noah.

"You sound like an addict, calm down," Hannie said, just a bit stern.

"How 'bout you guys just go sit, I'll order for us," Ian suggested. His friends looked uneasily to the shouting pair at the counter.

"You sure about that, bud?" Noah asked. "Seems like a lot of...conflict."

"I can handle conflict!"

His friends remained silent and judging.

"Shut up, I can handle it," Ian said more assured. "Really. Just go wait."

With a comical synchronized shrug, Noah and Hannie beelined to the seating areas, directly for their usual large leather couch that was nestled up against a wide bookshelf near the window. Now on his own, Ian hesitantly approached the counter and the yelling pair surrounding at. As he took his position a polite distance behind the shouting patron, trying his best to form what society would call an orderly line, Ian could start to hear the specifics of the shouting.

"You can't infringe upon customers' rights to go in the park if they're willing to pay their own money!" the patron yelled. His arms flew up in rage, yet the barista across the counter stood firm with his arms folded, nonchalant.

"I don't care how much you pay," he said, "If someone doesn't vaccinate their little crotch goblins, they can't bring 'em to the Magic-fucking-Kingdom! It'd be a cesspool of microbes and a nightmare to the concept of herd immunity." The barista's speaking voice was a little on the higher side, but it had definite volume and ferocity behind it.

"C'mon, that's impossible! How're you gonna check to see if every damn kid trying to go into Disney World got their shots?" The patron crossed his arms as well, very satisfied with his point.

The barista shrugged. "I dunno, digitized health records? Don't have fuckin' kids? The list goes on," he answered. The barista's eyes darted to above the patron's shoulder, spotting Ian, and then looking back to the angry customer. "Sorry, you're gonna have to put this on pause because there's an *actual customer* who needs me." The barista playfully finger-waved off the patron, showing off the numerous rings on his right hand. The patron looked over his shoulder angrily. Ian met the harsh gaze and could do nothing but stand their and smile both politely and quite uncomfortably. The man looked back at the barista.

"Nah, whatever, I'll just go. This conversation is clearly a dead end with you," he said, beginning to stride to the door. "Just like they always are."

Just as the man put his hand on the door, the barista put both hands on the countertop and leaned over, craning his head to look at the man. "HEY!"

The man paused and looked back.

The barista gave him a wild glare and hissed through his teeth like a pissed off honey badger, "*I'm gonna marry your dad, Steve.*"

The man let out a frustrated "UGH!" before shoving the door open. "Quit saying that! Don't make no fuckin' sense..." he muttered to himself as he disappeared down the street. Quite satisfied, the barista leaned back up and smiled a very smug smile. After a pause, the barista met Ian's frozen and slightly fearful gaze. A wide, customer-service-ready grin appeared on his face. "Hi! Sorry about that."

Ian took a small step forward. "Uh...no, yeah, that's ok. Is, uh...do you know Steve?"

"Who?"

Ian paused. "...that guy. The guy you called 'Steve' before he left." He thought to himself how thankful he was that he and his friends were the only customers there; not many people would be keen to stick around amongst the shouting and swearing.

"Oh! Him. Yeah, that's Josh. He's a friend. I just say the Steve thing 'cuz I know he doesn't get it whatsoever," the barista said, shrugging.

Ian nodded in the beat of silence. "Um, I dunno if this is rude, but...are you new here?"

The barista grinned. "Yup! It's like my third week. Started in August."

"Oh, ok! Cool! Sorry, I was just asking 'cuz my friends and I always come here during the school year, but we're pretty used to Grace," Ian explained.

The barista nodded. "Ah, I get that. Well she ain't here anymore. I keep telling other customers who ask where she is that she's dead. But since that's literally not true--she moved to

Wisconsin, so she may as well be--my boss recommended I stop saying that." The barista spoke at a blazing speed; even the brief aside in his conscious train of thought seemed rehearsed.

Ian let out a small laugh. "Yeah, it's not my favorite place either. But it's nice to meet you..." Ian's eyes traveled down to the nametag pinned onto the barista's yellow apron. "Er, Zach."

"Zoe. Call me that; it's much cuter than Zach. Or at least I think so," Zoe said. He then shrugged playfully. "Would you agree?"

Zoe raised his eyebrows at Ian, causing him to feel the smallest flutter in his gut. "Yes, I would say it's cute."

Zoe released a scoff that was mockingly pompous. "Oh, stop, *you're* cute, whatever your name is!"

The two boys laughed. "I'm Ian. Ian Phipps."

"A pleasure. So, what can I make for you, Mr. *Ian Phipps*," Zoe asked with a certain swing to the name.

Ian's brow rose as he just then remembered what he was actually supposed to be doing. "Oh, um, a medium vanilla latte, large campfire mocha, and a large hot chai," Ian listed.

Zoe nodded while he scribbled on notepad he had retrieved from his back pocket. "What an order. You sure you can handle all those drinks by yourself?" he asked. Zoe glanced up from the pad and raised his right eyebrow suggestively.

Ian felt a blush form on his face. "Heh, no, the chai is for me, and the other stuff is for my friends over there." Ian turned and pointed at the sofa in the corner where Hannie and Noah were looking intently at his interactions.

Zoe sent them a smile. "That makes more sense. It's a nice little trio you got there," he observed. Despite the innocent nature of this comment, Ian suddenly felt the impulse to give this boy he literally just met the impression that he was more popular than he actually was.

"Well, I mean, I have more friends than just them." Ian shrugged as nonchalantly as he could.

"Really?" said Zoe, his tone playfully skeptic.

"Yeah! Well, just one. I have another friend--Gary--but he..." ~~doesn't like it here for whatever reason~~ Ian said. Zoe let out a shiver and a verbal "Blech" as he packed the espresso into the large silver machine.

"Sorry, I just dated a Gary. Did *not* end well," Zoe muttered. While Ian wanted to say something along the lines of an "Oh, sorry about that," he just remained silent with excitement to hear that Zoe was also attracted to men.

After a beat, Ian managed to say "That's rough buddy," which received a relaxed laugh from Zoe.

"It's fine, nothing to be sorry about. Now I'm just..." Zoe shrugged, exaggerated, "...always consumed with fiery hatred and hurt feelings, y'know?" Zoe looked up from his work to Ian, who nodded silently. "But that's whatever. I'm moving on the best way I know how!"

"And that's good!" Ian replied. "I support that."

"THANK you!" Zoe spoke with an unexpected volume, but Ian was beginning to think this was just a common pattern with him. "Also, follow up question: would you rather have your name change from Ian Phipps to Phian Ipps, or never be allowed to have your favorite food ever again?"

"Er...any reason for this spontaneous question?"

Zoe grabbed a tin cup of milk and held it up to the steamer as he shrugged. "You're nice, these are good get-to-know-ya questions, the list goes on," he said once more.

Ian tilted his head to the side; he couldn't argue with that logic. "In that case then...call me Phian, 'cuz I can't give up my BLTs for anything."

2. Chai With Caramel

This was how the next month went between Ian and Zoe. He, Hannie, and Noah would arrive at the cafe on average around 3:30 every week day. Each day Zoe would have a new "Would You Rather?" for Ian to ponder and discuss while Zoe made their group's drinks. Ian particularly enjoyed the lack of rhyme or reason between the questions, with things like "Would you rather be forced to eat twelve cucumbers in a minute or have to call your parents by their first names for a whole year?", and "Would you rather have to tell everyone about how much Crossfit you do despite not actually doing any Crossfit, or have to give a eulogy at your grandfather's funeral entirely in Pig Latin?" The morbidity of these questions, however, were often overlooked as just dark humor in Ian's mind. ~~Soon, Ian began to notice just how happy he was speaking with Zoe.~~

And Ian wasn't the only one getting closer with Zoe. Occasionally, when he brought over the group's beverages, Zoe would strike up conversations with Hannie and Noah. Soon he and Hannie were laughing and making plans to get their nails done at the mall, and sometimes Zoe would sit right down next to Noah and debate him about some detail of Star Wars lore that neither Ian or Hannie could understand. Of course Ian warned Zoe that both Noah and Hannie were in senior debate club at school, but Zoe liked a challenge. And with all this conversing, Ian now had a laundry list of facts about this new boy: he was 21 and going to The U of M Lake Crystal for Studio Art but

lived at home with his dad, he enjoyed going to the mall and Airdropping memes to random people's phones, enjoyed drawing little illustrations on his favorite customers' coffee cups, and that Zoe eats Kit-Kat bars whole because, "I don't fear God." This went on for about a month until Ian found himself sitting on his usual couch with his usual group on Friday, October 4th, as his mind was floating off elsewhere as Hannie and Noah talked beside him.

"I just don't think Jack puking when he saw a dead frog is a good reason to get rid of dissections in school science classes," Noah said, recalling the topic of his and Hannie's earlier debate topic from school that day.

"I'd agree that Jack's weak stomach isn't a valid reason to get rid of *all* of it, but what about digital or online dissections? They can still have merit," Hannie replied.

"Nah, I think the principle of it all is to use your hands, get down and dirty. Fake dissections will make you soft, and if you're soft, the government will win."

"I don't even know what that means, but I *know* that's a reach." Hannie turned to Ian, who was looking at the floor vacantly. "Anything to add on the matter of dead frogs, Ian?"

Ian finally looked up. "I think I wanna ask out Zoe."

Hannie gasped. "Really? Oh, cute! You should go for it!"

"But I don't know how. Or if I even should. Or if he would say yes. Or if he even--" Ian explained, speeding up before Noah held up a hand to stop him.

"Ok, stop with the 'or's, you sound like a seal. But I agree, you guys seem to get along great, so what's the harm?" Ian nodded, a bit more relaxed thanks to Noah's encouragement. Noah paused before then adding, "But if you fuck up, then we might have to find a new coffee place and I don't wanna do that."

"And that's an issue too! I don't wanna make things awkward," said Ian with a tired flip of his hand. "I dunno if he even likes me."

"If who likes you?" Zoe's voice came from above them. The trio looked up to see their barista friend standing behind the couch and carrying a tray with their drinks resting on it.

"Oh! Uh...it's Gary," Ian answered. "We just, er, we invited him to come with us again today but he still said no." This wasn't actually a lie, but Ian answered nervously nonetheless.

Zoe shrugged. "His loss. Anyway! Got your drinks, you may now feast." He grabbed the cups one by one and gingerly offered them to the gang. "Enjoy!"

The three gave their thanks as Zoe made his way past tables of other customers back to the counter. Hannie then held up her cup, looking at her illustration. "Let's see...looks like today Zoe

drew me Kirby, but he's holding a knife," she said. Hannie turned the cup to display the adorable character created from Sharpie smiling sweetly at them while brandishing a large butcher's knife.

"Cool," Noah said with a nod. "He drew a duck on mine."

"How surprisingly tame," said Hannie, sipping her drink.

"No, literally, he just drew 'a duck,'" Noah added. He turned his cup to show the words 'A Duck.' written with the Sharpie on his cup.

Ian laughed and looked at his own cup. It, too, had a message that he read aloud. "'Tried putting caramel in the chai for more flavor. Hope you're not deathly allergic!' And then there's a heart," he finished, allowing himself to smile warmly to himself.

Hannie let out a scoff. "And you're not sure he would like you back? He put a heart on your cup! That's like sending an extremely tasteful nude!"

Noah shook his head. "Definitely not the same."

"It *is*," Hannie went on, nodding confidently. "Ian, if you don't ask Zoe out today, I'll do it myself because that would be a waste of an opportunity."

Just as the knots forming in his stomach made it hard for Ian to think of a response, the casual music playing throughout the cafe faded slightly, indicating someone was using the intercom system. A voice crackled through the static. "Ian Phipps, if you would like to ask me out, then I kindly suggest you come to the main counter and do so. Thank you!" Zoe's voice rang out with satisfaction as the music increased once more. Ian could feel his heart jump up into his throat as Hannie and Noah failed to suppress their laughter.

"Well, I guess you kinda have to now," Noah said as he smirked. Ian rolled his eyes and stood up with hesitation. Somehow working past the embarrassment, Ian willed himself to turn and walk towards the counter where a smiling Zoe awaited him. Ignoring the glances from other customers, he focused solely on Zoe as they became face-to-face.

"Hi! What can get for you?" Zoe joked.

Ian blushed. "So...how'd you know I was talking about you?"

Zoe shrugged. "I just happen to have this whole place bugged. But also, and more likely, I have excellent hearing, also this isn't a very large store, *also* also it's very obvious."

Ian couldn't argue with that. He shrugged as well. "Then, uh....I guess I should ask."

"You should."

"Would you maybe wanna..."

"Maybe? Is this a hypothetical date?"

Ian laughed. "No, no it's not. Would you..." He looked up and into Zoe's gaze. "Would you wanna go out on a date with me?"

Zoe cracked a grin. "I would love to. Next Saturday at 9 after I close? Sorry that I can't do this weekend, my dad and I are going on a fishing trip this weekend."

Ian returned the smile. "Yeah, that would be great! But...where?"

Zoe opened his arms wide. "Here!"

3. Pros and Cons

Ian spent the weekend on a cloud. The rest of Friday, Saturday, and Sunday had passed, and he still couldn't believe it: Zoe said yes. A boy that was older, had a job, and was comparatively cooler said yes to a date with Ian. But of course, now Ian was under the pressure of actually having to plan said date. What does someone like Zoe do? Ian considered taking Zoe to another fun cafe he knew of, but late night coffee isn't always the best idea. Plus, as a barista, Zoe might be sick to death of coffee like any other normal person would. More and more ideas were bumping around inside Ian's head as he sat at the kitchen island of his apartment home across from his mother Linh as they ate breakfast. It was a peaceful morning on Monday, October 7th.

Linh sipped from her porcelain mug with content. "Exciting stuff going on at school this week, sweets?"

Ian's eyes were looking down emptily as he poked at the yolk of his eggs. "Uh-huh."

Linh glanced to her son above the frames of her thick dark glasses. "Uh-huh? Like what?"

Ian blinked himself back to reality, correcting his posture. "Uh, I got a partner presentation to work on with Gary that's gonna happen in psych on Friday, and I'm going to the mall with Noah and Hannie after school today."

"Mall. Sounds fun," his mother replied with another sip. "What for?" Linh grabbed the newspaper beside her and began to read. Ian could read this body language immediately. He and his mom were close enough to know Ian doesn't actively go to the mall; any destination other than school or the Leaf would be cause of suspicion. So now it was up to Ian to choose between telling his mom about needing to buy a new shirt at the mall for his date or make up some lie.

He chose to be honest. "I need to buy a new shirt." Mostly.

Linh looked back to her son. "Sweets, if you need a new shirt I can buy you one. You've managed to survive three years of high school without going into the 'Ugh I Hate My Mom' phase, so I'd rather you not start now."

Ian chuckled nervously. "Fine, I shall comply. But you can't freak out, or start yelling or whatever."

Linh slapped the newspaper down. "My freak out is prepped and ready. Go." She smiled.

"Ok, fine, I guess. Have I mentioned the new barista at the Leaf I met last month? His name's Zoe," Ian began. "Well, it's Zach, but he prefers Zoe. And I don't *think* that's, like, a gender related thing? I dunno, I haven't asked. Well, anyway, I kinda...asked him out on a date."

Linh gasped happily. "Ian! Excitement! When's the date?"

"This Saturday," Ian said between mouthfuls of egg. "I have no idea what to do. Or where to go. I mean, if this goes badly I'm gonna have to find a new coffee place."

"Hm, yeah. Finding a good coffee place can be so hard these days," said Linh with a nod. "What about the movies?"

"Good idea, but we couldn't talk a lot there. Just sorta sitting in silence."

This back and forth continued for some time as the finished getting ready for their days, eventually getting into Linh's car in the lot behind their complex and driving through downtown St. North, filled with its usual morning bustle. While Ian already had his license, only his mom and dad had their own cars to get around town. Additionally, St. North High was on the way to the bank where Linh worked, so Ian commonly hitched a ride with her to school each day.

"Mini golf? Or paintball?"

"Alright, but consider: I'm not in eighth grade."

Linh laughed. "The fun of mini golf and violence of paintball knows no boundary of age, Ian."

Their typical drive came to an end as Linh pulled up to the front drive of Ian's school. Dozens of students meandered around the front entrance, enjoying the last moments of freedom before the first bell. Linh turned to her son. "So I've given you many amazing suggestions which you've turned down--"

"You gave me, like, three sugg--"

"--but I think you might just need to ask him, sweets. Can't hurt."

Ian thought to the moment after he asked Zoe out and was given his number, then thinking to how he's been too nervous to text or call it. But perhaps now would be as good a time as any to do so. Ian gathered his things as his mother pecked his cheek, releasing himself into the crowds of his school. Ian walked aimlessly, looking at the phone in his hand at Zoe's contact page. He wandered to his locker, racking his mind of an opening phrase. Before long, he was in his first period study hall in the library, sitting alone and awaiting Gary. While Gary had a heart of gold, his tardiness was another staple of his personality.

Finally, Ian willed his thumbs to move as he typed his first text to Zoe. His mind tried to be ambitious by typing something flirty or sassy, something like a simple "Hey you ;)" or a dumb pickup line like "Are you a parking ticket? 'Cuz you have fine written all over you." Instead, Ian typed up and hit send on:

Hey, it's Ian! :)

Perfect, he thought. Ian set the phone down on the table with a satisfied smile. He glanced around his section of the library. Still no Gary in sight. Sighing, Ian flipped open some books and his notebook to get working on his and Gary's psychology presentation. A minute or two passes before the hum of his vibrating phone calls his attention. Ian brought the phone back to his face.

Phian lpps! I was wondering when I'd have the
honor of you texting me!
What's goin on?

Yeah, sorry I took so long!

I was actually thinking of something to do for our date,
but I'm drawing a blank. Do you have anything in mind
you would want to do?

Not every man can easily ask for help when they
need it, good on you, Ian.

But yeah, I'll think of something, don't worry your
pretty and reasonably-sized head of yours!

Ian's concentration was interrupted as a large body *thumped* into the seat across from him at his table. Ian looked up to see Gary and his messy light brown hair and cheesy grin greeting him. Gary let his backpack slump off from his shoulder and onto the floor. "Ian! Hey, good morning, hi. Sorry I'm late."

Ian glanced at his phone. "You're good, it's only five minutes." He looked back up to notice Gary's heavy breathing. "You ok? You're breathing a lot."

"Yeah, sorry, I wanted to run and get a breakfast burrito at that Taco Bell. Y'know, the one a couple blocks from here?" said Gary as he un-packed his things onto the table.

"...where is it?" asked Ian, noticing an apparent lack of anything Taco Bell-related on Gary's person.

"Where's what?"

"Where's your Taco Bell, Gary?"

Gary glanced into his bag, then around his legs. "...huh." An excited look then came over him. He reached down into the bag once more and retrieved a bottle of Diet Pepsi. "Got this for you, though! Stopped at Kwik Trip on the way back." He placed the bottle on the desk and slid it over.

Ian gave him a smile. Despite tardiness and the habit of losing things at a record pace, little things like this very much reminded Ian of Gary's heart of gold. He took the bottle and slid it into his own backpack. "Thanks, Gary. As much as I'd love to start my day off with a healthy helping of my favorite pop, I think I'll save it for lunch." Just then, Ian's phone awoke and vibrated once more.

iMessage from

Zoe :)

A wave of bashful anxiety overcame Ian as he slapped his hand over his phone and dragged it away in a flash. However, not before Gary got a glance at the smiling emoji next to the name. "A smile? Who in the phone of Ian Phipps has got a smile next to their name?" Gary wondered aloud, his tone full of intentional gossip.

Ian hoped Gary couldn't see his accumulating blush. "Just a new friend...well, a friend I *happen* to be going on a date with this weekend..."

Gary's large hand slapped down on the table -- gathering a few glares from nearby students -- and cracked an excited grin. "Phipps! Finally got a date with a boy! Who is he? Someone I know?"

Ian returned the grin. "No, I wouldn't imagine. I just met him about a month ago at the Leaf. He's the barista there."

Gary nodded in approval. "Nice, a chance to get free coffee. Don't fuck that up. But really, any guy going on a date with you is very lucky. You're gonna sweep him off his feet!" Ian was warmed by Gary's sentiment; sometimes Ian forgot about Gary's ability to build people up, but it definitely was one of his best traits.

"That's very sweet of you to say. Only problem I have, though, is I have no clue what to do for the first date. I've thought about the movies, paintball, mini golf..."

Gary held up a silencing hand and leaned back in his chair, ever so confident. "Yeah, no, those ideas are garbage. If you really want a first date to go well and lead to more, you gotta get to know him more. So I *humbly* suggest going to Zitti's."

Ian thought of the name. "That's the Italian place with the--"

"Endless soup entree? Yes, that's indeed the place. I would know, my record is eighteen bowls."

"Christ almighty."

"Agreed. But! It's the perfect balance of just slightly fancy, good food, and just the right place to do some good talking. Trust me. I've gone on at least three first dates there, each of 'em leading to at least an average of four-point-seven following dates," explained Gary. His calculations took Ian by surprise, but the suggestion had just the right appeal.

"And so Gary suggested Zitti's! I think that'll be where we end up going," Ian explained from inside the dressing room. He was inside an H&M with Hannie and Noah as they waited outside the dressing room while Ian tried on a plethora of shirts Hannie helped find.

"That's the place with the endless soup, yeah?" asked Hannie.

"Yes, that was a point Gary made sure to bring up. He also brought up his record of having eighteen bowls of soup in one night."

"That's a lie," added Noah. He sat on a bright red chair near Ian's door, casually flipping through a magazine.

"Really?" Hannie asked.

"Yeah. It was *nineteen* bowls. I was there, but he probably forgot the last bowl 'cuz he passed out shortly after they told us to leave."

Ian emerged from the fitting room wearing a dark blue button-up with white polka dots and a slimming pair of tan pants. "Right, well I'll try to keep my own soup consumption to a minimum on Saturday. Does this look good?"

Hannie gave him a smile. "Yes! Ugh, you look so fucking cute. Doesn't he look good, Noah?"

The two looked to Noah. He looked up briefly from his magazine. "...yeah."

Hannie rolled her eyes. "Great, raving reviews from everyone. You'll look great for Zitti's."

Ian gave a small thanks before heading back into the fitting room to change back into his own clothes. Noah tossed the magazine onto the small table beside his chair. "Hey, not to get too 'debate club' on this whole thing, but have we really weighed the pros and cons of Ian going on this date with Zoe?" he prompted.

"Do we need to?" Ian asked as he struggled to remove his pants over his foot. "Can't I just go on the date and see how it goes?"

Hannie shook her head. "No, I agree with Noah. Pros and cons would definitely help."

Ian groaned. "Just one day, can we have *one* day without you two constantly flexing on everyone with your passion for debate club?"

"Of course not," Noah answered as he straightened his posture in his chair. He looked to Hannie who then stood up straight after previously leaning against the wall. "You take the affirmative, I take the negative?"

"Sounds good," Hannie replied. The two locked eyes for a heated moment before Hannie spoke with the speed of a bullet.

"They would be cute together, objectively. Ian has a cute face and Zoe has good bone structure, they complete each other."

"Looks are too subjective. Think of the real consequences: if the date goes badly, the Leaf will essentially be ruined for all three of us because of awkward tension between Ian and Zoe."

"I'd doubt we would have to find a *permanent* replacement; time heals all wounds. Zoe can make good coffee and other drinks and useful skills like that are nice perks to a relationship."

"Using Zoe for the things he can provide and not him as a person, I see. What if he turns out to be a serial killer."

"This is supposed to be factual! Ian, care to weigh in?" Hannie and Noah both looked to the fitting room only to see the door wide open and Ian nowhere inside of it. Glancing around, the two spotted Ian some distance away at the checkout, paying for his new shirt and pants.

"Your debate was giving me stress so I decided to leave, sorry!"

4. That's A-Spicy Meatball

The night of Saturday, October 12th had finally come. Before leaving his home, Ian had spent a solid twenty minutes examining every minute detail of his outfit in the mirror of his bedroom. The new shirt was polka dotted and fresh, and Linh ironed his pants to ensure a wrinkle free pant leg on both sides. With just a spritz of his dad's cologne and the right amount of spray on his hair, Ian drove to the Leaf with confidence. The Leaf was located near the edge of the more urban area of St. North; just a couple other businesses around, an apartment complex here and there. As he drove, Ian took in the very Goldilocks nature of St. North: it was large enough and had enough attractions to be considered a city, but plenty of suburban neighborhoods to balance it all out for Ian's liking.

After a brief drive, Ian pulled up to the front of the Leaf. The sun had just set and the area was illuminated with yellow glowing streetlamps. Just outside the front door with his back to Ian was Zoe locking up the door. He wore a long floral sleeveless dress that reached just past his knees and black converse shoes. Zoe then dumped the ring of keys into his small red purse that was slung

over his shoulder. With a confident spin, Zoe grinned at Ian. "I'm ready to be romanced, Ian Phipps. Take me away!"

Zitti's was a bit on the crowded side that Saturday night. Many parties surrounded the rich mahogany tables and filled the red leather booths to the brim. Ian and Zoe were seated at a small two-person table nestled against the dark wood walls which gave the restaurant a dark yet glowing ambience, coupled with the small lamp that rested on the middle of the table. The two lazily looked around at their surroundings, as well at the large menus in their hands. In his head, Ian began to run through the possible conversation starters he had planned. Should he start with elementary school experience? Or was that too far in the past? Or maybe movies they both liked? Or maybe that would run the risk of Zoe turning out to be some movie snob with really heated opinions? Ian listed off the possibilities silently before Zoe spoke up and said,

"That painting is scary as shit."

Ian looked up to see where Zoe was pointing and somehow just noticed the large oil painting looming on the wall over the two boys. It depicted a comically sad clown with faded makeup and a single strand of spaghetti leading to a larger plate of it that was held in his hands.

"It's...haunting," agreed Ian.

Zoe sent a grin to Ian. "Right? I wanna steal it and hang it in my bedroom for the rest of my life." He then looked back to his menu. "Funny, though, I haven't sat here before, so that's probs why I only now noticed it."

"Sat here before?" repeated Ian. "Do you come here a lot?"

Zoe shrugged playfully. "Oh, psh, only a couple of dates occurred here. Mostly firsts, it's a popular choice. But really, it's not that often I'm here."

As Zoe finished, a young waitress with blonde hair pulled tightly back into a bun approached the table with a wide open smile on her face. "Zoe! You didn't tell me you were coming tonight!" she squeaked. Zoe matched the wide smile and hopped up from his seat with a squeal, hugging the waitress tightly.

"Ah! I didn't even know you worked tonight!" Zoe said amongst the enthusiastic hug.

"...not that often, yeah?" said Ian, awkwardly watching from his chair.

Zoe sighed as he finally separated from the waitress and spoke as he sat back down. "I know, I know, that doesn't help my case. But Ian! This is Lauren. Not only is she the best damn waitress here--"

"Oh, stop," Lauren said, twirling her hair.

"--but she goes to the U! See, I didn't even know she did, but I had gone on so many dates here she and I just got along so well, until one day I was like 'Hey, you're like my age, right? Where do you go to school?'"

"And I was like, 'I go to the U,' and Zoe was like 'No way, me too!' We just never see each other on campus, it's so wild. It's like magic. Agh! I'm so happy you sat in my section tonight!" Lauren excitedly retrieved her order pad from her black apron around her waist. "Do you know what you want?"

Zoe placed a decisive finger on his menu. "I'll have the linguini platter with the breadsticks side, sub the salad for more breadsticks, and can I get that with..." he paused to look up at Lauren with earnest as they said simultaneously, "extra spicy meatballs on top!" The two laughed as Zoe handed over his menu, all the while Ian watched in quiet awe.

Hannah looked to Ian. "And for you, hun?"

"Can I please get the four cheese ravioli with the side of chicken soup?"

"Can I please," Zoe repeated with endearment. "How much cuter could you be?"

"Pretty cute, indeed," Lauren agreed with a wink. She took Ian's menu. "Those'll be ready soon! Have fun, you two, I'll get out of your hair."

She gave the two of them a wave and walked off with purpose. Zoe laughed to himself once more. "Sorry about that, Ian. Don't worry, I'll keep my shouting with Lauren to a minimum. Tonight is all about you and me, and all the goddamn carbs I'm gonna shovel into my fucking mouth."

From that point on, the conversation seemed to flow more naturally than Ian had expected. Zoe asked him about school, and about Hannie and Noah. That continued into how Ian met them in sixth grade when he and his mom moved to St. North. Zoe then talked about himself and his close relationship with his dad, their recent fishing trip, and other things they enjoy doing together like going to breweries and the movies.

The conversation lasted right up until the point when Lauren brought them their entrees. After giving her a quick thanks, Zoe delicately picked out a single long noodle from his plate. "Ian, Ian, look at this." Ian looked up from his ravioli. Zoe draped the noodle over his pursed upper lip like a moustache and stabbed his fork into one of the two large meatballs atop the dish. He held up the skewered meat and declared in an exaggerated Italian accent, "*That's a-spicy meatball!*" Zoe dropped the noodle and meatball back onto his food and laughed at his own joke.

Ian cast him a glare and his tone was harsh. "Zoe. That's incredibly racist towards Italians."

Zoe's laughter faded, and his smile disappeared. "Wh...oh, I...god, guess I'm sorry about that, if my joke was rude or--"

Ian's demeanor cracked as he laughed. "No dude, I'm shitting you. That was really funny."

Zoe sighed out a relieved laugh. "Ha! Oh, thank god. 'Racist to Italians,' you had me for a sec there."

Ian smiled back as he ate his ravioli. After a pause, Zoe gave him a very soft look and reached across the table, gently placing his hand over Ian's--his hand that wasn't the one helping him eat ravioli, of course. Ian looked down at the unexpected gesture and looked to Zoe. "Yeah?"

"Hey. I just wanted to say this has been a very nice night. I know it probs wasn't easy asking me out--especially after me calling you on the intercom to come do it--but I just wanted to let you know I'm very happy you did. Full homo, bro." Zoe concluded by scooping a noodle onto his fork and *slurrrping* it into his mouth.

Ian felt a warming wave of relaxation come over him. Finally he could forget about the lists in his head, worrying about his clothes, or doing something embarrassing. Ian flipped his hand so that he held Zoe's palm. "I'm happy I did it to." Although it was a very small movement, Ian willed his thumb to gently rub against the top of Zoe's fingers. The two simply smiled to each other for a moment before Ian's gaze darted to something just above Zoe's shoulder.

Someone was looking at them.

About fifteen feet away, sitting alone in a booth was a man who was quite large. He had broad shoulders underneath a dark leather coat. His face and eyes were quite stern as he looked directly into the face of Ian. Ian's heart skipped a beat as he quickly withdrew his hand from Zoe's and placed it onto his lap.

Confused, Zoe laughed nervously. "You good? What was that for? Am I sweaty?...or something?"

Ian shook his head just barely. "No. I'm fine." He went back to eating his meal.

Zoe pressed his eyebrows together in suspicion. "That word does not actually mean 'fine.' What? Is it something you saw, or...?" As he continued, Ian glanced up to see and confirm that the large man was indeed still glaring at them. Zoe noticed the glare and immediately whipped around in his chair to see the man in the booth, his gaze was still aimed at them. Zoe turned back to Ian with an angry huff. "Is it that dude? That dumb fuck?"

"Zoe, just don't pay attention to him, we're fine--"

"No, Ian!" Zoe's voice was beginning to rise. "That asshole doesn't get to shame you, ok? He should know this is a gays-only event!"

"Isn't this...just a restaurant? Not a gay bar?" asked Ian.

"Yes! But *everywhere I go* is a gays-only event. Straights can go home!" Zoe turned to return the man's glare. "Especially him."

Ian reached over the table to grab Zoe's shoulder, turning him away from the man. "I know, you're right, I get it. But *please*, I...I've never gone on a *real* date with a boy before and...I really don't want it to end badly."

Zoe's aggression died down as his face turned softer. "Oh." Zoe looked down thoughtfully. "I had no clue. But you still don't deserve to feel afraid."

Ian shrugged. "I agree, but...but hey, what're you gonna do."

Just then, Lauren rejoined the table. "Hi friends! Everything tasting good?"

Zoe looked up at her in a flash. "Lauren, can you please take our meals, box them up, and leave them outside on the hood of a white sedan?"

Confused, Ian looked up to see Lauren nodding like this was some normal request. "Sure! Anything else?"

"Yes, how much did this all cost?"

"Twenty-nine dollars and forty-five cents."

Zoe retrieved a \$50 bill from his pocket and handed it to Lauren. "Keep the change. Lastly, could you go open the front door please?"

Ian glanced to the large man, who had now averted his gaze and was looking down at his empty table.

Lauren nodded, picking up the plates. "Of course!"

"Thank you, sweetie," Zoe said as he grabbed a single large meatball off the plate as Lauren took them. "I'll be needing this!" Lauren nodded once more before walking off briskly with the food.

Ian gave Zoe a cautious look. "Zoe, what're you doing?"

Zoe stood from the table and held the meatball between his hands, keeping it nearly concealed against his body. "~~You'll see.~~" His voice almost scared Ian; the way he spoke had a growl to it, almost. A ferocity, an assurance of chaos to come. Zoe moved slowly, gliding towards the man's table. Ian watched with unbelievable tension as Zoe got closer and closer. The man was still looking down as Zoe was right next to him.

Suddenly, Zoe released an exaggerated, "Woah!" and mockingly tripped forward. As he did so, he palmed the meatball and let it come down onto the man's head, squishing the sauce-covered meat all over his hair. A couple nearby guests--including Ian--gasped at the event, looking at the scene with worry. The man finally looked up at Zoe, who looked back at him covering his mouth with mocking embarrassment. "I'm so sorry, sir..."

The man pounded his fist against the table. "What the *FUCK!*"

Zoe broke out into a grin as he sprinted back to Ian, grabbing his hand and barely slowing down as he said, "RUN!" Zoe nearly yanked Ian from his seat as the two bolted to the doors. Trying his best to keep up as he glanced over his shoulder, seeing the man standing from his booth, but not following them. The two sprinted to the door, passing Lauren as they went.

"GoodbyeLaurenthankyouforexcellent servicedon'teverchangeBYE!" exclaimed Zoe as he and Ian zipped out the front door.

About twenty minutes later, Ian and Zoe were sitting on the hood of Ian's car as it was parked by the river. The two sat and ate their meals from their to-go containers amidst laughter about all the chaos that had just unfolded at Zitti's.

"But really, not only did you smush a meatball against his head," laughed Ian, his mouth full of lukewarm ravioli, "but that fuckin' 'WOAH!' right before! HA! I'm dead!"

Zoe laughed along, shrugging at the compliment. "I mean, that ass hat shoulda seen it coming. No one gets to make my date feel uncomfortable and get away with it." He slurped up some more of his spaghetti. "And I'm really glad you think it's funny. Some people don't seem to always enjoy my... 'brand' of chaos."

Ian shrugged. "Well, not gonna lie, I was really freaked out at first. Like, you fucking meatballed a guy in public. And like...I dunno, I felt like I should've been really worried and nervous and stuff, but like...I'm just not!" He smiled and finished the last of his ravioli. Closing his container, he set it beside him and turned his gaze to the drifting river. "It was a pretty exciting end to a good first date."

"First *ever* date," added Zoe. "And I'm proud to say I was your first. Well, not in the way that would imply. *Wink.*"

Ian laughed. Zoe then too finished his meal. Setting his box aside, he scooted closer to be beside Ian and looked out to the river. After a pause, the two looked at each other.

"I had a lot of fun," said Ian quietly.

"Me too. And it's only gonna get funner from here," Zoe said. The two kept their eyes connected before Zoe lowered his head, letting it rest on Ian's shoulder.

5. This Movie Sucks

[Ok so I'm not going to add a whole other chapter because this excerpt would be way too long so I'll give you the bullet points list of important things that happen in this chapter]

- Ian talks about his date with Noah and Hannie
- Date number 2: Zoe takes Ian to the movies
- We meet Zoe's friend M.J. at the movies
- Ian briefly sees someone familiar (like the man from the restaurant) but he's doubtful
- During a moment when Ian leaves the movie to use the restroom, he spots M.J. right outside an exit talking to someone heatedly in the darkness
- Zoe is like "fuck this movie" and decides to take Ian on his Plan B date which is
- A nighttime picnic in the park!
- Zoe mentions one time playing paint ball at his cousin's birthday party years ago and holding another kid hostage during the game for shits and giggles
- Zoe and Ian have their first kiss!!!

6. Sorry, We're Closed

[Section with Hannie at Ian's home omitted in favor of scene with Ian, Hannie, and Noah at the mall in chapter 3]

~~20 Minutes Later~~

Ian had parked up the street and around the corner from The Loose Leaf the night of Friday, November 1st. He didn't want to pull up right to the front window and possibly be considered awkward for whatever reason. The night was pleasant for one in November, without a cloud in the sky and a cooler breeze as Ian walked down the empty sidewalks of downtown St. North. Just as he rounded the corner, [phone call with Gary omitted in favor of the earlier scene with him and Ian at school] he came upon the Leaf on his right, and glanced through the large front window. The interior was mostly dark except for little twinkle lights lining the walls above the window and around the perimeter of the room. As he came upon the front door, the sign hanging on the glass from within said in big and bold red letters "CLOSED" and directly below that was a sticky note that read "Except for Phian lpps. Get in here, you cutie." Ian chuckled and opened the door.

Ian sat at the small two-top table, patiently enjoying the atmosphere that Zoe had crafted. The twinkle lights shone nicely amongst the warm wood interior, and smooth jazz played delicately from the speakers. The open door behind the cafe counter was the only other source of light, which

led to the kitchen where Zoe was cooking something up. Looking around the room, Ian decided to make some conversation.

"So...how did you get your boss to let you keep the place after closing?" he called to the kitchen.

A couple clangs and clatters came from the kitchen. "Uh, I didn't! My boss is an almost completely senile old man who still doesn't understand that our cash registers are touch screen. *But* M.J. gave me the go-ahead," Zoe responded. With a final clank, Zoe emerged from the door holding two large square plates. He came out from behind the counter, accompanied by the clicking sound of his suede black heeled boots, striding to the table. Ian enjoyed taking in Zoe's outfit, which probably looked twice as good with only half as much planning as Ian's did. Zoe's hair, now freed from the typical rose red beanie, was dark and stood tall and somehow windblown. He wore a dark red sweater dress that went just past his knees, showing off impressive legs.

"Wait...M.J. from the movie theater? She works here too?" asked Ian.

"Yup. The economy's in shambles, Ian. We gotta do what we gotta do." Zoe set down the plates before allowing himself to sit. "Bone zap your teeth, bitch," he said with a grand gesture. Before them were two impressive crepes, dusted with cinnamon and powdered sugar and filled with a thin layer of a sugary white creme. Ian raised his eyebrows to Zoe.

"These look amazing, Zoe. How'd you learn to make crepes? I thought *you were just a barista*?" he asked as he grabbed his fork and helped himself to a mouthful of the pastry.

"Just a barista? You should know better, Ian; *What can I say*, I'm a very versatile being. Just a goddess among men," he said with a playful smile. The two kept on eating their crepes and making pleasant conversation about tastes in music, preferred memes, and embarrassing elementary school memories. Ian recounted the marvelous tale of asking out a female classmate of his in the fourth grad, just because she mentioned to their mutual friends she thought Ian was cute. What followed was two months of awkward avoidance, hand holding, and a break-up through a note.

Zoe snorted with laughter at the end of the story. "Fuck, I hate to say it but that's *objectively* hilarious. Like, don't get me wrong: totally awkward, super unfortunate, and it'll haunt you forever--"

"I don't think forever, th--"

--but hey, look at you know! Lookin' fresh as shit, on a third date with *moi*, and living a better life! *Most boys don't usually survive 'til the third date with me.*"

Ian chuckled. "I mean, dating now is a lot better overall knowing who I like. Also, not being a fourth grader really helps."

Zoe nodded, sipping his water. "Agreed, completely." He paused to think. "I'm having a lot of fun. And it's...y'know, pretty refreshing. All of it has been, so far."

"Oh yeah?" Ian prompted.

"Yes, definitely. I don't like getting into exes on a date or anything, but I was sorta...stuck in a bad space for a while and I kinda didn't even see it. Bad for my head, bad for my heart. He just..." Zoe paused to collect his thoughts. "All he would do is break me down. And that's not something you should go through from someone that's supposed to love you. He wasn't *always* like that, but little things just pile up, like they do. But at a point, I just gotta take care of me, no matter how bad the stuff he did to me was." Zoe nodded to himself in conclusion.

Ian was quite surprised by the eloquence Zoe used to articulate his thoughts. Up until now Zoe's vocabulary was mostly swearing and meme references, so it was quite refreshing. "I'm sorry you went through that. But I'm glad you're handling it well and moving on."

"Thank you, I would say that I am." Zoe sipped his water once more as another thought occurred to him. He swallowed quickly and held up a finger. "I'm gonna murder him, though."

Ian laughed. "Right, well, people move on in different ways. I support you."

The two laughed and resumed the more pleasant date chatter and eating the rest of their crepes. Another half hour of laughter and conversation passed like a breeze until Zoe suggested they go on a walk by the river that ran through the lower half of downtown.

"A walk at night? Isn't it a little dangerous?" Ian asked.

Zoe shrugged as he picked up the empty plates. "Maybe? I have, like, four different knives in my purse, we'll be good." Zoe walked back towards the kitchen as Ian sat there still unable to tell if Zoe was joking or not. So Ian decided to laugh. He also rose from the table and walked towards the counter, waiting patiently with his arm resting upon the wood. The sounds of the running sink and clatter of dishes came from the door. Then, another sound came to Ian's ear: a knocking.

Ian turned around to see a very large man standing behind the front door. He was about five inches taller than Ian's perfectly-average 5' 10", had dusty blonde hair, and wore a large black leather coat. Somehow he looked familiar, but Ian couldn't quite place the face. The man stared through the glass directly into Ian. His gaze was harsh, demanding. He knocked on the glass loudly once more and pointed at the door handle. Ian stood there, awkwardly silent, for another beat before saying, "Erm...we're closed?"

In a flash the man rose his leg and with his large black boot *slammed!* the door open, sending the flimsy fixture flying on its hinges and displaying a large crack in the glass running from top to bottom. Ian exclaimed a panicked "Jesus!" as the man took three great strides through the room. It

only took those three long steps before he was towering over Ian, pressing up against him with intimidating power.

"Where's Zoe." It was a question, but his growling tone spoke it as a demand.

Ian trembled where he stood, unable to say anything else. The man frowned and reached an arm past Ian's torso to place it down heavily on the counter. "Where the *fuck* is he? He's here, isn't he?"

Ian listened for the sound of the sink but was surprised to hear it had gone silent without him noticing. From the corner of his eye, he could just barely see the light of the kitchen was off. Ian swallowed hard. "He's not here."

The man reached into his coat pocket and flicked open a knife, holding the blade pointing at Ian's chin. "Don't you fucking lie to me. You do that and I'll open up your throat. Now TELL ME." His voice rang harshly against Ian's ear. He couldn't help but worry where Zoe actually was, but Ian knew he had to think, and he had to do it fast.

"He and I were closing together, but I let him go early 'cuz we were so slow," said Ian, attempting to keep his voice level. "He went h---...he left almost an hour ago."

"So you work here?"

Ian nodded.

The man grunted. "Then how about you just deliver a message for me. You tell that monster to stay away, ok? If we see him near our house, near my family, ever again, his life will be *over*. We will go to the police..."

As the man continued his threat, Ian spotted something odd: a dark figure crawling on the floor behind the man's legs. The man continued his threat, unaware of who or whatever was crawling up behind him. Ian remained quiet.

"And he will go away for the rest of his fucking life. He's sick, he's fucking messed up. So you just tell him that for me, ok? Need to be sure he gets the mess--AUGH! FUCK!"

The man bellowed out as Ian witnessed a knife of considerable length stab him directly in the back of his calf. Ian noticed this knife was in the hand of the person crouching behind him: Zoe. He jumped to his feet, pulled out the knife, and slammed the bottom of his foot into the bend of behind his knee, causing the man to buckle down to his knees and drop his own knife to the floor. Ian gasped and backed up as much as he could against the counter, a witness to the fast violence in front of him. Once the man fell to his knees, Zoe wrapped his long arm around the neck of the large man and held on tight, holding his knife towards the man's throat as well. Ian watched in shock as Zoe was able to keep the man struggling on his knees, unable to break Zoe's grasp.

"Don't you dare lay a fucking hand on him. I will fucking gut you like a pig without a second thought." Zoe spoke with an unexpected ferocity, the same kind of growl he had only heard before during their first date.

The man managed to strain out a laugh. "You can't kill me, you'll get thrown in jail for it."

"You're so sure? Because according to the cameras," Zoe pointed to a corner of the ceiling where a small white security camera pointed down at the room, "you came in here after hours, breaking open the door, and threatening my friend with a knife. If I ended you right here and now, a court of law would call it self-fucking-defense. Not to mention I *already stabbed you*, dipshit. I'll do it again."

Zoe looked to Ian. "Do you have your keys?"

Ian nodded.

"And do you feel ok running in those shoes?"

Ian nodded.

Zoe smiled.

"Good."

In a flash Zoe moved his knife-wielding arm to bring the weapon down into the man's *other* leg, causing him to cry out again. Zoe released him, letting him fall completely onto the floor, clutching vaguely towards his legs in pain. "Alright let's BOUNCE!" Zoe yelled, leaving the knife plunged and darting for the door. Energy somehow flooded through Ian as he sprinted behind.

The two ran out to the sidewalk and paused, their breathing already exhilarating. "Where'd you park? I biked here--like a fucking idiot--so we need to *yote* outta here," Zoe said between breaths.

"This way," Ian said with a jut of his chin. He resumed running up the street with Zoe close behind as he grabbed his phone from the black purse slung over his shoulder. He dialed and held up the phone to his face. After a pause he greeted the recipient.

"Hey! It's me! *gasp* I just wanted to let you know there was a two-nineteen at The Loose Leaf, and the guy is still there.....yeah, he's got injuries from the weapon in both his legs, he won't go far.....alright, yes, I'm on my way home. My date's gonna drive me there.....yes, I will tell you about it later! Go do your job!.....yes I'll see you later, have fun!" Zoe disconnected the call and dropped the phone back into the purse.

Ian struggled to keep himself running for his car, but connections were starting to form in his mind.

Where have I seen that guy before?

He thought back to his large stature, his dark coat and messy hair.

Just as Ian and Zoe reached the car, Ian froze as he grabbed the door handle. "Zitti's! That was the guy we saw at Zitti's! *And* the movie theater!"

Zoe, however, launched himself into the passenger seat of the vehicle. "That's a stunning revelation and all but can we PLEASE FUCKING LEAVE NOW."

[Chapter break omitted, condensed into one chapter]

Ian and Zoe were pretty quiet in the drive from the Leaf back to Zoe's house. The most talking that occurred was Zoe giving the occasional "Turn here" or "Left up here" to his silent driver. Ian was shell-shocked. His knuckles were white around the wheel, his jaw clenched. Zoe looked over to him from the passenger seat, worried.

"Ian?"

Ian was silent.

"...Ian, we can talk about it. We're ok, the cops and Sheriff Stockley are probably already there getting that guy."

No response.

Zoe thought, then prompted. "Hey, would you rather--"

"Zoe, you stabbed a guy."

"Let me finish! Would you rather--"

"*Twice.*"

"Seriously! Would you rather eat ice cream for the rest of your life but it always has to be at least, like, ninety percent melted, or would you rather get shot just once in the foot with a nail gun by a total stranger and at a time you don't expect. But it's just once."

Ian let out an exasperated grunt of a noise. "Those things aren't even fucking comparable! And seriously, can you stop ignoring it? You stabbed him twice! Sorry if I seem a little fucked up from that, but--"

"He was threatening you! Putting a fucking knife up to your face, kicking down the door, Jesus!"

"Ok, yeah, but twice? That's just excessive!"

Zoe sighed in frustration. "I was fucking protecting you. Not to mention he was looking for *me*, not you. All I'm saying is I was pretty justified in defending us." Zoe paused. "Also, I would choose the ice cream thing."

Ian rolled his eyes. "Are we almost there?"

Zoe nodded. "Yeah, up there on the right. The brown one."

Ian spotted a large brown house hidden amongst a couple large trees. He pulled over to the curb, wet from the night dew, and turned off the car. Sighing again, Zoe looked down. "Listen, if you wanna go, it's fine. I get it. But if you wanna come in for a bit and talk about it, I'd be up for that too. No 'would you rather,' I promise."

Ian contemplated the offer. His brain rationalized going home and possibly not seeing Zoe again for a while, but his heart said otherwise. *Think of how you've felt about him, how much fun the date was...until the stabbing part.* Ian sighed. "Sure, I'll go in for a bit."

Zoe smiled warmly as they both exited the car. Once inside the home, Ian found himself in a home with a very open and warm interior for what looked like an old house. In front of Ian was a narrow hallway with a long wooden staircase along the right side of the wall, and on the left side of this hall was a door at the very end and another door that was built in to the side of the staircase; probably a door to a basement. On the sides of Ian were two large doorways to other rooms: a living room to his left, and dining room to his right. Zoe closed the door behind them and pointed down the hall at the two doors.

"My room's the one at the end. Um, I'm just gonna go to the basement and grab a thing. If it's ok with you, I might need a sec? You can just wait anywhere if you want."

Ian nodded. Zoe whispered a quick thanks and walked down the hall, entering the door in the staircase. Ian heard the steps of Zoe's boots echo down creaking wooden stairs that got quieter and quieter. After just a moment, Zoe's footsteps traveled back up the stairs and he emerged from the door. In his hands were about five inches of wide red ribbon, a small pair of scissors, and a purple beanie baby resembling a bear. Zoe looked down to Ian and held up a finger to say "Just a moment" and opened the door to his room, leaving the basement door ajar.

As Zoe let the door to his room drift to almost closed, Ian exhaled and leaned against the banister, just trying to collect his thoughts. He rewatched what happened at the Leaf in his head over and over again. He thought back to how Zoe overpowered that gigantic man, and how his voice sounded when he threatened to gut him like a pig. Ian dwelled on this for a bit before checking his watch and seeing that almost seven minutes had passed with Zoe in his room. A bit concerned, Ian looked down the hall to the slightly open door and the small amount of light coming from it. In the silence of the house, Ian began to pick up on a small noise coming from the room. The sound of whispering. Slowly, Ian crept down the hall towards the room, beginning to pick up more of what was being said. It was only the voice of Zoe, repeating over and over...

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

Ian was inches from the door. Keeping his feet absolutely still, he leaned towards the opening, seeing what he could observe. From inside the room, Ian saw Zoe sitting on the edge of a bed, clutching the beanie baby in his hands with what looked like the strength of a vice grip. Ian also noticed the red ribbon was tied around the doll's head, covering its eyes like a blindfold.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

Confused, Ian made the mistake of leaning closer, causing the aged wood beneath his feet to *creak* lightly. The repeated phrase from Zoe came to a stop at the drop of a hat. A jolt of panic surged in Ian. He spun and saw his closest exit: the open door to the basement. Sliding across the floor, he opened the door and sped his way down the steps into the darkness, thinking to himself *Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuck...*

After about a dozen stairs and gripping onto a metal rail along the wall of the narrow staircase, Ian felt his feet hit solid concrete floors. His hands on the wall felt the stairwell end and the room open up. He placed his hands along the wall of the nearly pitch black room before shortly finding a switch. With a flick, the room was illuminated.

And Ian's heart dropped.

The room Ian found himself in was what could be best described as an armory. The walls to the left were lined with long, shining, and deadly swords of varying lengths, widths, and designs. On the wall to the right, guns of all makes and calibers hung with power. As his eyes darted around the room, Ian surmised there could have been upwards of twenty-five guns and swords all together. But Ian's eyes were then drawn to the furthest wall directly in front of him. Ian approached it slowly, walking past tables and work desks that had more guns, more swords and knives, and random papers on them, and examined a wall covered with cork board with dozens of papers and pictures pinned to them. In the center of all the chaos of papers pinned to the wall, there was a photograph of a person standing, but the top half of the photo was covered with another piece of paper containing the words **KILL** in large red letters. Ian slowly reached to the paper, his morbid curiosity telling him to see who was underneath.

Then he heard the click of a gun behind him, dangerously close.

"I won't freak out."

Zoe swallowed hard. "Promise?"

Ian nodded very slowly.

Zoe sighed in relief and smiled to himself. "Alright, good. 'Cuz I *really* did not want to have to shoot you." Zoe's arm fell as he clicked the safety on the gun and tossed it with reckless abandon, letting it *clang* onto the metal desk with other guns.

Ian breathed out, finally allowing himself to do so. "Zoe...what is all of this?"

Zoe opened his arms wide. "My collection! Pretty fuckin' sick, right?" He walked over to the wall of swords. "My dad trained me in a bunch of sword techniques when I was little. We also traveled a lot after my mom died, so we collected swords from different countries. Oh! And over here..." he walked like an excited child to the other wall, eyeing the guns like a wall of candy, "we also got some dope ass guns, too. They're not as pretty as knives or swords but like, hey, they're loud and get the job done. Also it's, like, *scary* easy to get guns nowadays."

Ian looked at the walls and then to Zoe. "You seem in a lot better mood than just a couple minutes ago," he observed.

Zoe shrugged and leaned against a table. "Well yeah, I was in my room doing this thing my therapist helped me think of--"

"You *go* to therapy?"

"--yeah! She helped me think of a way to deal with my violent urges or actions in a way that helps grief or discomfort leave my mind. Very releasing, I'll admit." Zoe clapped his hands. "So! Let's discuss. I'm sorry again for everything that happened; I swear, most third dates I go on *don't end like this, if you know what I mean.....wink.*"

Ian racked his brain for what first possible topic he wanted to discuss. "Where's your dad?"

Zoe raised a brow, as if Ian should already know this answer. "Um, downtown? At the Leaf?"

Ian couldn't decipher this answer. "Wh...why would he be there?"

Zoe raised his hands to his shoulders. "'Cuz I called him? I told you, Sheriff Stockley would be at the Leaf after I called him.

Ian's eyes went wide. "Sheriff Stockley is...he's your *dad*?"

Zoe nodded. "Yeah. My name's Zoe *Stockley* for fuck's sake. Wait, did you even ever ask my last name?...I don't think you did. Huh, kinda rude. But I'll get over it."

Ian closed his eyes. He shook his head, trying his best to make sense of the crumbling world around him. "Wait, then why do you keep calling him Sheriff? Why not just dad?"

Zoe rolled his eyes, laughing. "I dunno, he prefers everyone calling him Sheriff when he's on duty. Maybe it's a power thing? Even my mom and I do it. Sorry for the confusion, though; force of habit."

Ian sighed, convincing himself to ask about a different topic. He turned to face the board of papers and pictures behind him. "Ok, well is *this* something your therapist recommended you do, too?" His eyes landed on the big red letters of KILL once more. "Pretending like you're gonna kill whoever's in that picture?"

Zoe leaned to look past Ian at the board. "That? No, that's all me. And I dunno what you mean by pretend. That's a picture of my ex-boyfriend on there. Didn't you listen to me at dinner? I said I'm gonna murder my ex-boyfriend. Like, *those* words exactly. Are you not a good listener? 'Cuz if you aren't this is gonna be a rocky relationship."

Ian didn't take his eyes from the board. "So why are you telling me? Weren't you just about to shoot me?"

Zoe shook his head as he rose and approached the board. He stood beside the blocked picture of his ex-boyfriend and looked softly into Ian's eyes. "Yes, but I really didn't want to. And you said you'd be chill! Plus I really like you, so this isn't a sort of 'If I tell you I have to kill you' situation. Actually, I think you could help me!"

Ian scoffed at the suggestion. "Zoe, I've really, *really* liked our dates and getting to know you. But...*actually* killing someone would be crazy."

Zoe shuddered. "I don't like that word. And hear me out! My ex did a *lot* of bad shit to me; he is a *bad. Person.*"

Ian couldn't help but roll his eyes. "Really? Am I allowed to see who it is, then?"

"Be my guest!" said Zoe. He then grabbed the KILL label and ripped it from the push pin.

Ian saw the full picture, and his heart stopped.

His eyes went wide.

A chill spread throughout each and every inch of his body.

He knew that face.

Zoe smiled at the picture.

"There he is. Gary Bradley."

He looked to Ian with the same smile.

"And we're gonna kill him."