

## **Sex is Always Better When You Hate Each Other**

I sauntered into math class ten minutes late and took my usual seat behind Alena. She hunched over a sketch of the same doe eyed girl she'd been drawing since her sister died. I leaned forward. She had improved the facial proportions today, less blocky, fleshier. I'm impressed with her progress in the last month.

"Try not to be late tomorrow, Miss Elliot." Mr. Jefferson handed back my math test. A red ninety-six shone at the top of the page.

"Sorry Mr. Jefferson, I had some," –I motioned toward my pants– "womanly problems."

Mr. Jefferson cleared his throat, and continued down the row of desks.

I glanced over Alena's shoulder. Forty-nine. Better than her previous thirty-six. I've never seen anyone take such detailed notes, and fail so miserably. The trees rustled outside the open window as Mr. Jefferson began an animated explanation of Trig equations. The sun gave way to clouds, and the pavement shaded dark grey in the oncoming storm. I opened my notebook. Dust motes danced in the corner of the room.

Alena scribbled through three pages. Her hand swept across the page in harsh lines and bubble letters; the numbers and symbols left ink stains on the side of her palm. She slid her notebook aside to reveal her sketch. Alena pushed her hair back– dark curls contrasted against the pale blue sweater that hugged her small frame–and put pencil to paper. She traced the girl's lips. I've never been jealous of a picture before.

~

The grass squelched a soggy tune beneath my Converse. I grimaced as splatters of mud hit the white soles.

Cassidy stood beneath the overhang in the smoke pit. He wore dark wash jeans, and a light grey sweater. His gelled hair formed a small poof above his head.

“I need a favour.”

The cigarette in his mouth burned red as he looked me over. “What’s in it for me?”

“Helping this gorgeous damsel.” I waggled my eyebrows.

He fingered the hem of my skirt. “Friday night, and I’ll get you whatever you want.”

“Alena.”

“Alena Thompson Alena?”

“No, the other Alena that lives in this tiny fucking town.” I smacked him in the back of the head.

“You need anger management classes.”

“I know you’ve got an in with the pretty little office assistant.”

“Or you could just ask Alena.”

I pinched his cheek. “How many times have we been over this, Cass? Always recon first.”

“One of these days you’re—”

I hopped over the mud puddles— “Get me the info.” —and left him in the rain.

I doodled castle designs in socials while Mrs. Terry prattled on and on about the fur trade—a long monotonous drone like in Charlie Brown. She wore the same white blouse every day, and every time she pointed at the projector screen that monstrous sweat stain clawed its way into view. Alena sat diagonal to me; her pencil flew across the page in long arcs. We used to swap

drawings. Hers of people she loved, mine of architectural feats I dreamt of building. It stopped when Emily died, and Alena's only friend became her sketchbook.

Giggles erupted from Angelica's group beside me. Her short spiked hair and pointed nose reminded me of a pixie. The evil kind that made children run around with scissors. She spit a pink wad into her palm, and went to place it in Alena's hair. I elbowed my textbook, and it fell to the floor with a *smack*. Angelica squealed like a little pig, and I smirked as the gum fell to the floor.

After school, I waited on the couch outside the office. An old Crusaders banner hung on the wall, the red and yellow accents on the sword and helmet now faded. Appropriate, considering we hadn't won any crusades in the last several years.

Cassidy strolled over and handed me some loose leaf papers.

"You always did finish fast."

"What can I say, girls are irresistible."

I sifted through the small stack. "Alena's too good for you."

"But not for Mrs. I'll-fuck-anything-that-moves?"

"STFU, Jackass."

Cassidy plopped in the seat next to me. "She seems quite content with her adopted loner status."

"It's been five years."

"Exactly, so why the sudden interest?"

I paused on last year's transcript. "She stopped saying hello."

“You asked me to siphon Alena’s personal information because she stopped greeting you every morning?”

“As if you weren’t begging for an excuse to fuck Trish again.”

“Touché.”

“Whore.”

“Slut.”

Alena walked passed and disappeared through the front doors.

I shoved the papers in my bag— “See you Friday, Cass.” —and hurried after her.

“Melissa.”

I turned halfway through the open door.

“Don’t be late this time.”

I flipped him the bird, and he barked a laugh.

The rain had stopped sometime in the last half hour. Water drops fell from the roof, and splashed puddles at my feet. I scanned the street until I spotted Alena climbing into a skeevy pickup with her grandfather. I fished one of the sheets out of my bag and programmed Alena’s new email into my phone. What kind of sixteen year old didn’t have a cell phone?

~

The school library smelled musty, like moldy paper wrapped in leather had been stewing on the shelves for fifty years. Maybe that’s why I avoided it. A sign above the doors read *No food or drink*. Mrs. Fitzgerald sat at her desk in the office behind the checkout counter. I likened her to a shriveled prune, or maybe a raisin. The lighting accentuated the crevices in her face.

I set up by the nearest bookshelf and plucked a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*. The spine crackled as I opened to a random page, and I buried my nose in it. I almost laughed at the section that caught my eye. *“–girls. Every time they do something pretty, even if they're not much to look at, or even if they're sort of stupid, you fall in love with them, and then you never know where the hell you are. Girls. Jesus Christ. They can drive you crazy.”*

The doors banged shut, and I peeked over the top of the book. The light gave Alena's cheeks a rosy glow. She dropped her bag on the counter, pulled out a Ziploc container, and sat at the desk with our librarian.

I slipped behind the next bookshelf and strained to hear their conversation.

*“–not cut out for academics. Mom's going to be so disappointed.”*

Mrs. Fitzgerald placed a container on the desk. *“Have a brownie, dear. The chocolate'll help.”*

Alena shoved a whole square in her mouth.

*“Math isn't the be all end all to life, you know. Why don't you do something with your drawing?”*

Alena slouched in her chair. *“I wanted to be smart like her. I can't make money drawing.”*

*“Who's telling you that?”* Mrs. Fitzgerald slapped her hand on the desk. *“You do whatever makes you happy, Alena.”*

*“But Emily was good at Math.”*

*“You aren't Emily.”*

*“I guess so. It's just Mom–”*

The book slipped between my fingers. It crashed into the metal shelf and hit the carpet with a resounding *thud*. “Shit.”

Alena’s head poked out the office door. “Hey, Melissa. Need help finding anything?”

I scrambled to pick up the book. “I’d like to check this out.”

Alena scanned the book and handed it back. “You practically cursed Ms. Bjorkman for making us read this.”

“It’s a terrible book.”

“Not willing to give it another chance?”

“I titled my English paper ‘Ten reasons why Holden’s a stuck up little shit in need of a good lay’.”

“Mrs. Bjorkman commended you for the strong argument, but still gave you detention for swearing.”

“You remember that?”

“It was last year. I’m not going senile.”

The bell rang and I shoved the book in my bag. “See you in class.”

~

“Goodnight. Love you too.” I closed my bedroom door, and pressed my ear to the wood. Mom and Dad’s muffled voices drifted from across the hall. The toilet flushed, a door clicked, and bedsprings creaked. After five minutes of silence I threw off my pajama bottoms, revealing the jeans that hid underneath, grabbed my jacket from the closet, and opened the window. Fall air hit my face and goosebumps flashed across my skin.

I hit the ground, and my boots sank into the rain soaked earth. My footsteps echoed down the empty streets. It took me eight minutes to get to Cassidy's pasty white apartment building. He buzzed me in just passed 11PM. I shied away from the stained wallpaper in the hallway. The smell of stale cigarettes hung in the air.

I looked up and down the corridor and turned the knob to his apartment.

"You're late." Cassidy removed an empty take out container from the black leather couch and sat down. "Again."

"Nice digs." A litany of game consoles filled the empty spaces in the TV stand, and game cases littered the floor. The beige walls begged for a paint job or some kind of artwork. "I'm really feeling the whole bachelor vibe."

"I hope you didn't come all the way here to talk."

I leaned against the arm of the couch. "If you're expecting a lap dance it'll cost you a whole helluva lot more than Alena's information."

"Hilarious." Cassidy placed a scrabble board on the table and threw a small grey bag at me. "Take your goddamn letters."

I sat on the floor across from him. "You have issues."

"How are those library visits going?"

I placed the word STORE on the board and threw the bag back at Cassidy.

"That good, I see."

"Do you want to win the Scrabble Championship or not?"

"Just ask her what's up?"

"I didn't come here for a pep talk."

“It’s Alena. She’s not going to throw you to the wolves.”

“Just play the goddamn game.”

“At least she said,” –Cassidy placed the word HELLO on the board.

“So what, you’re following me now?”

“You are viewed best from the back end.”

“You’d know.”

“I’d like to know a lot more.”

“Take a hint.” I placed the word DREAMS on the board.

“All I need is your yearbook photo.”

“You make me sick.” I wandered to the fridge, cracked open a bottle of Wild Rose and chugged half.

Cassidy leaned against the doorframe. “We’d be good.”

I handed him a beer. “Dysfunctional at best.”

“Sex is always better when you hate each other.”

“You’re the expert.”

Cassidy blocked the doorway with his free arm. “Wanna test that theory?”

I pushed my body into his. “You’d like that wouldn’t you.”

He shoved his hand in my back pocket and squeezed. “Don’t play games you can’t win.”

I gripped the back of his neck. “There’s no one better at this game than me.”

“Is that why I’m up seventeen points?”

I marched back to the living room and swiped the score sheet off the table. Cassidy had played the word REASON for a whopping thirty points. “Jesus Fuck, Cass.”

“Kinky porno.”

I grabbed five new letters and played the word LOVE. “Just play the goddamn game.”

Cassidy placed the word OKAY. “You smell like Mrs. Fitzgerald anyway.”

“Fuck you.”

“If I forfeit can we start now?”

I emptied my beer and threw the bottle at him. He caught it. Asshole.

“Is that a wrinkle?” Cassidy poked my cheek.

“Get me another beer, Jackass.”

“Yes, your majesty.”

~

I parked my truck outside the Co-Op. The weather had cleared for the weekend, but the bitter chill that set in spelled snow in the near future. I grabbed a basket by the door, and took up residence at the end of the cereal aisle. A display of Cornflakes boxes advertised family sizes for \$3.99 this week. I poked my head around them. Alena weaved through the bakery with her mom, and disappeared around the corner. I perused this week’s bread deals as I inched my way to the dairy section and almost dropped my basket when Cassidy appeared.

“Hey Alena, how’s it going?”

“Cassidy, hi. Things are fine, I guess.”

Cassidy glanced in my direction and raised his eyebrows. “Your mom mentioned you were looking for a math tutor?”

Alena’s shoulders slumped. “Something like that.”

“You’re more than welcome to come by if you need help. I’m not a professional, but I’m free.”

“It’s okay, I know you’re busy with college applications.”

“It’s not a bother, I actually just moved—”

I marched into the aisle and bumped shoulders with Alena. “Sorry.”

“Hey Melissa.”

“Hi.” I dug my fingers into Cassidy’s arm. “Cass, can I please speak with you?”

“Actually we’re kind of in the mid—”

“Now!” I yanked him into the bread aisle. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“You could at least pretend to shop.” Cassidy dropped a loaf of Smart bread in my basket.

I smacked his arm. “A math tutor, really?”

“Have you thought of a job as a dominatrix? I hear it’s good money and you’d get paid to hit me.”

“You couldn’t afford me.”

“You’re giving it away for free right now.”

I looked over his shoulder at Alena, who’d occupied herself with a jug of apple juice. “Keep your skeevy, manipulative hands off her.”

“Quite territorial for someone who hasn’t managed a full conversation with her yet.”

“I know what you’re capable of.”

“Jesus Mel, I’m being polite. Our moms are in the same book club.”

“You hurt her, I will kill you.” I shoved my hands in my pockets and wandered back over to Alena. “Still love apple juice?”

“Best thing for an upset stomach.”

Cassidy slung his arms around mine and Alena’s shoulders. “What do you say we get ice cream?”

“Are you two dating or something?”

“Depends why you’re asking.”

I pushed Cassidy’s face away. “Absolutely not.”

“What flavour should we get?” Cassidy led Alena in the direction of the frozen foods.

“I’m kind of busy right now.”

“You can keep the apple juice in my fridge.”

“I’m not supposed to be out late.”

“Mel’ll drive you home.” Cassidy gave me a knowing look. “I’m sure she won’t mind.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “She said she’s busy.”

“I told my mom—”

Cassidy grabbed a tub of mint chocolate chip. “Come on Lena, when was the last time you hung out with anyone?”

“Leave her alone, Cass.”

“One movie. It’ll be fun.”

Alena glanced from the ice cream to me. “Could we maybe get gummy worms?”

“You do *not* dip them in that half melted mush you call ice cream still.”

“It’s the best dipping sauce.”

Cassidy leaned over. “Can we do body shots with it?”

“You’re not invited, Jackass.”

“But I have the biggest movie collection.”

“Of porn maybe.” I grabbed Alena’s arm and dragged her to the candy aisle.

“Are you two always like this?”

I perused through bags of bite sized Rolo and Aero balls. “Maybe we should get chocolate too.”

Cassidy groped me from behind. “What she meant to say was yes.”

I smacked his stomach. “Why are you still here?”

“*Someone* polished off my entire case of beer last night.”

“I had, like, four.”

“You owe me half a case.”

“He has permanent brain damage.”

Cassidy pouted.

“Or he will if he doesn’t—”

Alena erupted in a fit of giggles.

Cassidy grinned. “I think she likes us.”

“Does Cass *have* to come?”

Alena took the ice cream. “If he gets bad you could dump this on him.”

“And waste perfectly good ice cream?”

“Come on Mel, my intentions are one hundred percent pure.”

I laughed. “Watch your nose Pinocchio.”

“It’s not my nose you have to worry about.” Cassidy waggled his eyebrows.

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll keep a bucket of ice water on hand.”

Alena placed a container of gummy worms in my basket. “We should watch The Princess Bride.”

“I love me some Buttercup.” I grabbed one bag each of Rolo, Aero, and Kit Kat. “Get whatever you want Alena, Cass is paying.”

“He is?”

“I am?”

“Don’t be modest, Cass.” I gripped his shoulder. “Fifty bucks is a lot of money to spend on treats for us.”

“F-fifty?”

“Come on Alena,” –I took her hand– “we’ve got the whole chip aisle to get through.”

“Would it be okay to get Mountain Dew too?”

I led Alena down the aisle. “Meet you at the checkout Cass.”

~

I don’t know how we ended up in my living room watching movies, but here we all sat. Together. I reached over and dipped a gummy worm in Alena’s melted ice cream. “I can’t believe you’re making me eat this.”

“You’re the one who’s eaten half the container.”

“Whatever Miss second-bowl-of-ice-cream.”

Cassidy smacked my leg. “Shush, you’re ruining the best part.”

Alena’s ice cream dripped from her spoon in thick globs. “The poison cup is the best part.”

“Fire swamp.”

I flicked Cassidy’s ear. “Wrong.”

“Man eating rats, Mel.”

I popped another gummy in my mouth. “Mawage iz what bwings us togeva tooday.”

Cassidy groaned. “That part is so over quoted.”

“I’m going to hire someone to remix that speech for my wedding.”

Alena put her hands up. “Let’s just agree that the whole movie is pretty fantastic.”

“Fine, but only because you’re cute.”

I shoved Cassidy’s shoulder. “Stop hitting on her.”

“What? I can’t say nice things?”

“No, you can’t.”

“He’s just joking, Melissa.”

“But I’m not—”

“Mid-movie break time.” I grabbed the remote and hit pause. “I need a drink.”

“Then I’m having a smoke.” Cassidy grabbed his jacket and headed out the front door.

I fished through the baking supplies in the pantry until I found my dad’s stash of alcohol, and plucked the bottle of Absolute vodka off the shelf. After pouring a hefty dose in my glass, I filled the rest with Mountain Dew and headed back to the living room.

“Hey Alena, do you want—” An empty couch sat in front of me. “Alena?” I walked around the corner into the foyer, and voices drifted in from the half open door. I picked up Alena’s voice first.

“Why wouldn’t she just ask me?”

“It’s the Royal Tyrrell Museum all over again.”

“Ohmygod, the trunk! My mom flipped when she found her.”

“All because Mrs. Holly wouldn’t let her carpool with you.”

“God, she did some crazy stuff.”

I crept up to the door and leaned against the wall. Alena and Cassidy sat on the porch steps.

“You just left, Alena. After Emily—”

“I know, Cass, but I can’t—”

“We all miss her.”

Alena’s hair glimmered in the light from the porch. “I still need to coax Mom out of bed some mornings. It’s empty without her, Cass, and I can’t replace her.” Tears fell in tiny drops down her cheeks. “I can’t even pass math. I mean, what kind of person—Why can’t I be smart? Why can’t I be that one thing for Mom?”

Cassidy put his arm around her. “You shouldn’t be doing this on your own, Lena.”

“Look at me. I can’t burden Melissa with this.” Alena wiped at her face. “She needs to get into UBC and be an architect.”

I stepped into the doorway. “How could you think that?”

Alena whipped around. “Melissa I—”

“You honestly think getting into university is more important to me than our friendship?”

“You know that’s not what she meant, Mel.”

“And you Cass, what the fuck are you doing? I asked you for a favour, not to charm her into bed.”

Alena stood. “Now that’s not fair. Cassidy’s just being a friend.”

“You don’t know what he’s like Alena.”

“And you do?”

“If you think for one second he isn’t manipulating you so you’ll sleep with him—”

“You ever think maybe I’m trying to be a nice guy, Mel?”

“No, actually, because you’re a dick.”

“And look where you ended up.”

“With you going behind my back?” I balled my hands into fists. “Because that’s just swell, Cass, thanks so much!”

“Jesus Christ Melissa, when was the last time you and Alena laughed like you did tonight?”

“Because you’re doing all this out of the kindness of your heart?”

“I’m doing this because I like you.”

“Bullshit.”

“Fuck you, Mel.” Cassidy stuck a cigarette in his mouth and strode down the driveway.

I leaned against the doorframe. “Son of a bitch.”

“You didn’t know?”

“You did?”

“I guess you didn’t hear that part.”

I rubbed my temple. “Jesus Christ.”

Alena walked over and pulled me into a hug. “Things got complicated while I was gone.”

“Why didn’t you talk to me?”

“And say what? I miss Emily? I have this hole that I can’t fill no matter what I do?”

I took Alena’s face in my hands. “Yes, Alena. You tell me exactly that. And then we cry for hours *together*, because I love you and you shouldn’t have to deal with all that shit alone.”

Tears welled in her eyes. “But you need to study and get A’s.”

“You idiot. Being best friends isn’t going to flunk me.”

“But my family’s high maintenance.”

I rolled my eyes. “If it makes you feel better we can study together.”

Alena nodded. “What’re you gonna do about Cassidy?”

I snorted. “Fuck, I don’t know.”

“You should talk to him.”

“Probably.”

Alena rubbed my arm. “Sometimes I wonder if his reputation is mostly rumours.”

“Most of my reputation is true.”

“Did you really sleep with Thomas?”

I grimaced. “I do have standards you know.”

“See what I mean?”

“Shit.” I rubbed my face. “I have to talk to him.”

Alena took my hand. “Come on, it’s too cold to cry outside.”

~

Two fucking hours to get to the fancy ass hotel in Edmonton. I can’t believe I let Alena convince me into this. I paid the atrocious parking fee and pulled a flask from my inside jacket pocket. Half the alcohol had disappeared by the time I reached the conference room. I put the flask back in my pocket, and sat in one of the seats lining the edge.

Cassidy hunched over one of the tables in the middle. He had dressed up in black pants and a dark blue dress shirt. His normally gelled bangs swooped across his forehead and hid his furrowed eyebrows.

His partner, a guy named Craig according to the scoreboard, sported square glasses that sat on a hooked nose. The red argyle sweater he wore did nothing for his ruddy complexion, and the flab around his middle jiggled with the slightest movement.

Cassidy led by thirty points. I tapped my foot against the chair leg and counted fifteen tables before taking a swig from the flask. The scores updated. Flabby led by two points. I chewed on my index finger. Fuck me if Cassidy lost. We had worked way too hard for this.

The game ended thirty minutes after I got there. Final score: Cassidy 378 points and Flabby 306 points. I resisted the urge to jump from my seat and opted to casually wobble down the row. I swiped Flabby's letter holder.

"Hey, you can't take that!"

I stuck out my tongue. "Losers don get a say."

"Melissa? What the hell are you doing here?"

"Alena said you needed moral sh'pport."

"Lady, you can't help your friend cheat."

I waved the holder around. "Cass won, Fucktard."

"I'm calling security."

"No need Craig." Cassidy stuck out his hand. "This game was challenging, I'm sad to see you go."

"You and me both. Good luck in the next round." Flabby's flab jiggled like pudding when they shook hands.

I flipped him the middle finger as Cassidy dragged me into the hall.

"Are you trying to make me look bad?"

"I'm sorry. Alena said I should talk choo."

"Are you drunk?"

I pulled the flask from my pocket and took a swig. "Possibly."

"How'd you get here?"

"I'm insulted you accuse me of drive-ing. I started when I got here."

We walked outside and Cassidy pulled a cigarette from his pocket. "I'm going to go out on a limb and say Alena didn't condone the drinking part of my moral support."

I put my finger to my lips and shushed. "Don tell I'm drunk."

His cigarette burned red as he inhaled. "Why *are* you drunk?"

I chugged the rest of the alcohol. "I can't confess choo sober."

He peeled the flask from my fingers. "Jesus Mel, was this thing full?"

I poked him in the chest. "You... are a dick."

"I believe we ascertained that last weekend."

"A dick you likes me."

Cassidy snorted and took another puff. "I'm starting to wonder why."

"Shuck the fut up—"

Cassidy placed a finger to my lips. "Stop talking."

I grabbed his hand and leaned in closer. "Choo wanna kish me?"

"Maybe later."

"You playing wiff me, Cass?"

"How'd your talk with Alena go?"

I grabbed his cigarette and took a puff. "She said we gotta finish the movie."

“Am I included in that we?”

“Alena said we could make an exception for you to come.”

“She did, did she?”

I nodded. “When’s a next round?”

“An hour.” Cassidy finished his cigarette and tossed the butt in the trash bin.

“What we doing?”

“First I’m taking you to the restaurant and getting you a meal and some water.”

“We can hang out tonight?”

“If you’re sober enough to drive home.”

“Can we play Call of Duty?”

Cassidy put my arm around his neck and led me back inside. “Whatever you like.”

I leaned my head against his shoulder. “I wanna shootchu.”

“I feel loved already.”

I pinched his cheek. “Alena said you’re not bad. She say I should datechu. Whatcha sink?”

“Dysfunctional at best.”

“Sex is always better when you hate each other, right?”

Word Count: 4307