

Lucky Caller

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To Hannah, from your Little Excess

1.

IT WAS CHRISTMAS, AND DAN was in the middle of proposing to my mom when there was a knock at the door.

All five of us looked that way—me, Mom, Dan, my sisters Rose and Sidney, all of our heads swiveled en masse like something from one of those Golden Age musicals that Sid made us watch sometimes. Like we were a “five six seven eight” away from breaking into a tap number.

“Is this . . . ?” Mom looked a little confused when I glanced back her way. Confused but happy—she still looked really happy.

“No.” Dan frowned from where he was standing in the middle of our apartment’s living room/dining room combo. My mom was in one of the chairs by the window, which we had pushed to the side to accommodate our little artificial tree. “Not . . . part of it.”

Mom let out a laugh, her hand flying up to her face. “Uh-oh.”

The knock sounded again, gentle but insistent.

“Should I—” Rose went to stand.

“Nina’s closer,” Sidney pointed out.

“Yes, Nina, please.” Mom grinned at Dan. He looked flustered but grinned back anyway.

I stood and went to the door.

Until this moment, nothing about the engagement had come as a surprise. The truth was, Dan had—albeit awkwardly—asked for “permission” from Rose, Sidney, and me a few days prior. It was oddly endearing, putting aside the notion of my mom somehow *belonging* to us and needing our *approval* to remarry.

Though Mom, too, had asked for our permission in a way, without formally asking for it, even before Dan had. She had taken us to Lincoln Square, the breakfast place near our apartment building, to celebrate the start of Christmas vacation and had cut her pancakes into increasingly small pieces, fiddled around with her napkin for a while, and eventually said, apropos of nothing:

“Dan and I are thinking.”

“Wow, I had no idea you guys had achieved telepathic communication,” Rose had replied, because Dan wasn’t out with us at the time, and also because, despite it being exactly the kind of thing that any one of us would say, as the oldest, Rose often got there first.

“Dan and I are *thinking*—” Mom repeated, really hitting the word to imply that the rest of the thought would be coming momentarily, “—about our future together. About all of our futures together. And we were thinking—we’ve been talking—about . . .” Historically, Mom would get more and more measured the more uncertain she was of how to approach something. By

this point, each word was treated to its own sentence:
“The. Idea. Of. Us. Getting. Married.”

Sidney looked up from her southwest scramble.
“Married?”

“Yes.”

“Like, in a church?”

“Probably not.”

“Like, white dress, something borrowed, the Dantist is our stepdad now?”

“You know how I feel about that nickname.”

“There’s nothing mean about it,” Rose said. “It’s a portmanteau. His name is Dan, and he’s a dentist. If anything, it’s efficient.”

“Why does Dan have to be defined by his career?”

“Why does his career have to fit so seamlessly with his name?” was my contribution.

“Nina.”

“Mom.”

She sighed. Picked up her fork and speared one of the minuscule pancake pieces. Rose’s phone was on the table, and it vibrated once, and then again, in the silence. A freshman in college, Rose’s semester had ended a week earlier than mine and Sidney’s, and she had gotten a flurry of texts from high school friends over the last few days, people coming back into town for break. She looked like she wanted to reach for the phone, but she didn’t. Mom had a *forks up, phones down* policy. The fact that it was even on the table was a direct violation, but I think Mom must’ve been too distracted to really care. Now I knew why.

“How do we feel?” she said eventually.

“Sleepy,” Sidney replied.

Mom looked toward the ceiling. “How do we feel *about Dan and me?*”

“Oh, that,” Sidney said, and then grinned at me. At thirteen, she was the baby of the family. We let her get away with too much.

“We feel . . .” Rose paused. She could be measured like Mom sometimes. “Okay. Right?” She looked from me to Sidney. “We feel okay? About Mom and the”—Mom opened her mouth to speak—“*Dan* making it official?”

The Dantist, or Dr. Dan Hubler, DDS, was twelve years older than Mom. He always wore khakis. He made his own almond milk. He and my mom had met online just over a year ago.

It wasn’t the first time she’d dated since our parents split up—it had been almost ten years since they divorced. But it was the first time that it seemed like . . . something substantial, I guess. It was the first time that she seemed settled, and not in a bad way. Just in a way where she never acted any different around Dan than she did around us. She still seemed completely herself with him—still laughed as loud, still got just as exasperated sometimes.

Rose looked pointedly at me and Sidney when we didn’t answer, and Sidney bobbed her head and said, “Sure, I guess,” around a mouthful of eggs and bell peppers. I didn’t respond. Just divided a piece of pancake in half with my fork and then halved it again. I guess I came by it naturally.

Truthfully, I wasn't exactly sure how I felt. I knew that Mom would be happy. I knew that I liked Dan well enough. But it had seemed abstract there in the booth at Lincoln Square, and even still when Dan had asked us afterward. Like something hypothetical.

But now here we were, in the middle of the afternoon on Christmas. Mom had found the box that "Santa" snuck under the tree after lunch, and it was right in the middle of happening—of becoming something entirely . . . *thetical*—when I swung open our front door to see who had unknowingly interrupted the start of this very real engagement.

It turned out to be Mrs. Russell, an older lady who lived a couple floors down. She used to babysit us after school when we were younger. Her grandson, Jamie, was in my class at school, and he lived with her and Mr. Russell.

She was holding a loaf of something wrapped in red cellophane with a silver bow stuck on top, and she smiled at me, eyes crinkling at the edges behind plastic lilac-colored frames.

"Hello, Nina! Merry Christmas!"

"Hi . . ." Saying *Mrs. Russell* out loud felt weird. We used to call her *Gram* like Jamie did when we were kids, *Grammy* when we were even younger. "Merry Christmas."

"Our mom's getting engaged!" Sidney called.

"Oh my!" Mrs. Russell said. "Congratulations!"

"Technically, it's still in progress," Sidney added.

"I'm sorry?"

Mom jumped up and joined us at the door just as Mr. Russell appeared next to Gram in the hallway, leaning on Jamie's arm.

My heart rate ratcheted up a little.

"Eleanor, Paul, Jamie, hi. Merry Christmas!" Mom said, and Mrs. Russell's eyes widened, clocking the box in Mom's hand.

"We are so sorry to interrupt—" she began, but Mom shook her head, and behind her, Dan said:

"Please, join us. This is the kind of thing that's even better among friends," though I wasn't sure if he had ever even met the Russells before.

"We couldn't intrude—" Mrs. Russell said, and there was a fair bit of back-and-forth before we all cleared out of the doorway and the Russells finally entered, Gram still looking apologetic, Mr. Russell (*Papa*, I thought absently) and Jamie shuffling in behind. Dan greeted Mrs. Russell, clasped hands with Mr. Russell and Jamie, and ushered everyone to sit, offering coffee or cider or hot chocolate or champagne.

"We don't have—" Mom started to say, but Dan winked, and when everyone was situated, he turned to my mom and said, "Michelle."

Mom's eyes shone. "Daniel."

"About . . . what I was saying before . . ."

"Yes," Mom said. "Yes. Obviously."

Mrs. Russell burst into applause, and we all joined in while Mom moved in to kiss Dan.

"Jamie, take a picture," Mrs. Russell said, and Jamie pulled a phone out of his back pocket. "In front of the

tree!” she added, and I recalled all at once her gentle forcefulness. Camouflaged in a cheerful demeanor was Gram’s iron will. “Arms around each other!”

Jamie took some pictures of Dan and Mom posing in front of the tree while the rest of us looked on like we were the crew of a Christmas catalog shoot. Afterward, Mom went to cut up the zucchini bread that Mrs. Russell had brought, and make a platter with some Christmas cookies. Dan and Mr. Russell started talking, which left Rose and me on the couch, Sidney on the floor looking through a new book, and Jamie hovering awkwardly nearby, still holding his phone.

I could see part of his screen from where I sat. He was thumbing back through the pictures he had just taken, my mom and Dan in nearly identical shots, faces pressed close, smiling wide. Past those pictures were a few of what must have been Jamie’s Christmas morning with Gram and Papa. He paused on one of Papa with an array of shiny plastic bows stuck to the front of his sweater.

Rose cleared her throat in a way that wouldn’t draw Jamie’s attention but that I knew from seventeen years as Rose’s sister was meant specifically for me. In confirmation, she looked from Jamie to me and back again, widening her eyes as if to make a point.

I blinked at her like I didn’t understand. She blinked back like she knew exactly what I was doing. I turned away from her exasperated face, glancing in Jamie’s direction again.

He had always been cute in a goofy sort of way, with brown eyes that could be by turns serious enough to make you feel guilty about whatever ridiculous childhood scheme you had tried to rope him into, or mischievous enough to get you into the scheme in the first place. His face had always communicated his feelings all too plainly—we used to call it the Jamietron, like a Jumbotron at a basketball game or something.

It was hard to read him now. He looked taller than the last time I had seen him, though the red-and-white-striped sweater he was currently wearing was approximately three sizes too big. The sleeves trailed way past his fingers. It still had the tag on the collar.

“New sweater, James?” Rose asked eventually. I guess she had given up on me.

Jamie looked up from his phone with something like surprise. “Oh. Yeah. How’d you know?”

“You got, uh—” Rose gestured to the back of her neck.

Jamie reached up and felt the tag, chagrin flashing across his face—there was the Jamietron of old. He gave the tag a yank, crumpling it and shoving it in his pocket. “Gram got it for me. I’m . . . supposed to grow into it.”

“Did she also give you a vat of radioactive waste? ’Cause that might help things along,” Sidney said. I nudged her with my foot, but Jamie just huffed a laugh, and then it was quiet again among the four of us.

“How’s . . . stuff?” he said eventually, looking at Rose. She was always the default.

“Stuff is good,” Rose replied.

He shifted a bit closer to where we were sitting. He really did seem taller. And broader, maybe? I would go down to the gym with Rose to use the ellipticals sometimes, but I never saw him down there.

“Still working at Bagels?” Rose said with a smile.

Bagels was a shop in the big strip mall by the Target uptown, sandwiched between a UPS store and a kids’ clothing store. It technically had a real name—The Bagel Company or something like that—but the sign hanging above the place simply said BAGELS in bright red letters. So we just called it *Bagels* and left it at that. You had to say it like there was an exclamation point after it, though, like jazz hands were implied: *BAGELS!*

“I am,” Jamie said.

Sidney looked up from her book. “Can you get us free bagels?”

“They usually sell out, but I could bring you a bag of leftovers sometime if they have any. It helps if you like pumpernickel or jalapeño though because those are usually the only kinds left.”

Sidney wrinkled her nose.

Jamie looked back at Rose. “So . . . Do you like college so far?”

She shrugged noncommittally.

“How about eighth grade?” he asked Sidney.

“No one likes eighth grade,” Sidney replied.

One corner of Jamie’s mouth ticked up. “That’s fair.”

“How about you?” Rose said. “One more semester, and then you guys are done. Got big plans? Anything fun coming up?”

“Not really.” He shifted from one foot to the other for a moment, and then: “Oh—I’m, uh, taking that radio class.”

“Oh! So is Nina.”

He glanced at me. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I said. Meridian North High School’s radio broadcasting class was open only to seniors and was reportedly one of the most fun electives you could take.

“Cool.” A pause. “Hey, you’ll probably be great at it. You know, because of your dad and stuff.”

My dad hosted a breakfast radio show in San Diego—*Conrad and Co.*, KPMR 100.2, mornings from six to ten thirty.

“I mean, I don’t think it’s . . . genetic or anything,” I said.

Jamie bobbed his head, smiled tightly. “True.”

Silence.

Mom crossed into the living room with the cookie platter, and Rose hopped up to join her as she placed it on the dining room table.

“Sorry,” Jamie said after a moment. “For just showing up in the middle of . . . an important thing.” He grimaced a little. “I told Gram we shouldn’t bother you guys, but . . .” He trailed off.

“It’s not like it was a surprise,” I said. “I mean. You were a surprise. You guys. Coming here. But we basically knew already about . . .” I waved a hand.

“Good.” He nodded. “That’s good.”

It would never not be awkward around Jamie. The trick was to spend as little time with him as possible.

So when Rose came back with cookies, I got up to get some too. He didn't follow.

That night I stared up into the dark recesses of the ceiling in the room I shared with Rose and Sidney and knew deep down that I should've tried harder with Jamie. Like asked him what he was up to besides working at *BAGELS!*, or if he had picked out a college yet. Was he even planning to go to college? I didn't know, and peeling back the layers on why that was baffling and sad was too much for this time of night.

There's something a little sad already about going to bed on Christmas. You know it'll be 364 days until the next one. And Christmas at our apartment building, the Eastman, was one of my favorite times of year. They piped Christmas music into the lobby 24/7. There was a massive white tree decorated in gold and silver with a sprawling pile of gold-and-silver-wrapped boxes underneath it. White poinsettias everywhere. It was a historical building—more than a hundred years old—and it felt at its most authentic at Christmas, I think.

We had lived there for years. I had some early memories of the house we had shared with our dad before, a one-story place on the east side of Indianapolis, but the bulk of my life thus far had taken place in our two-bedroom at the Eastman. My mom took the smaller room—it was barely big enough for a bed and a dresser. The three of us shared the other room, which

was larger due to a small bump-out in the back where the room abutted the elevator and the laundry room. I remember fighting Rose for that space when we were little—she was ultimately triumphant, but more fool her, because she had to learn to sleep through the sounds of the washer and dryer (at the far wall) and the sounds of the elevator (immediately adjacent). The elevator dinged when the doors opened, and we could hear the whir of it going up and down the eleven floors of the Eastman all hours of the day.

It dinged once faintly now, and I could hear the shift of the doors opening on our floor. People getting back late after an extended family Christmas, maybe, laden with gift bags and leftovers.

It had been a good Christmas overall. It was our second one with the Dantist. Last year, he gave us each a Polaroid camera and all the fixings—packages of film, photo albums, kits for decorating. We had since dedicated a portion of our wall to Polaroids—the first one was a blurry shot of the five of us, Sidney’s face the only one entirely in frame, everyone else just a chin or an eye or a corner of forehead.

I guess it was our first family photo. Since we were going to be a family now, apparently.

We had visited my dad over the past summer, and there were Polaroids from that trip too: the beach, my dad’s house, elaborate ice cream sundaes. Sidney posing in front of a display at the zoo. My dad and Rose on rented bikes, making funny faces.

He had called earlier—of course he had. Outside of

major holidays, he usually called every Sunday night. We always talked to him in turns, Sidney first, then me, then Rose, and my mom would round out the call sometimes, but not often. He had sent us money for Christmas, because “I never know what to get you,” he said on the phone to me tonight. “I feel like you’re all always changing what you like. I can’t keep up. Is it makeup this year? Do we hate makeup? Are sneakers in? Is green cool?”

“Was green ever, like, especially cool?”

“Is it uncool?”

“I mean, I don’t have strong feelings about it either way?”

“We’ll ask Rose, she’s the artist,” he said, and Rose later said it depended on the hue, and intensity, and saturation. There were too many parameters to make a definitive call.

This year, the Dantist had given us each a piece of jewelry—his mother’s jewelry, specifically. She had passed several years ago, and Dan told us he couldn’t bear to sell it.

It was the real deal. Rose got a necklace with a diamond pendant on it. Sidney got pearl earrings. I got a ring—a thin gold band with five small opals set into it in a row.

“I know it’s all a little old-fashioned looking,” Dan had said tentatively. “Not the most . . . current thing. But I thought maybe . . . well, I thought you might like it.”

“It’s really nice,” Rose had replied. “Thank you.”

“Thanks,” I said, and Sidney chimed in too, throwing her hair back and gesturing to one ear.

“Do I look *glaaaamorous*?”

“Very glamorous,” Dan replied with a smile.

I was still wearing my ring that night, and I rubbed at the stones absently as I lay in bed. The light filtering through the curtains from the street below caught the gold a little, glinted.

Sidney must have been watching me through the dimness, because she spoke:

“The Dantist’s presents were like something from Kingdom. Like he gave us magical relics. Gems with special properties. Mine would be for invisibility.”

Kingdom was a make-believe game we invented when we were younger. Rose and I were ten and eleven, and Sidney was just six. Only Sidney still mentioned it from time to time—I think she had the fondest memories of it, being the youngest. It was very involved and deeply embarrassing, as childhood make-believe games often are.

“Mine would be for making people quiet when other people are trying to sleep,” Rose said from her side of the room.

“The pendant of tranquility,” Sidney replied, and after a beat: “Say what yours is, Nina.”

“The ring of silence.”

“We can’t have overlap in our powers.”

“You can’t have earrings of invisibility.”

“Why not?”

“How would that even work? You have two earrings and two earring backs. Does it only work if you have both earrings? What if you only have one ear-

ring in? Are you half invisible? Which half? Top to bottom, or like, left side, right side? And it's not even efficient anyway, like, what if you needed to go invisible really quickly? Like, gee, wait while I get both of these attached. Let me just fumble around with the earrings and the backs and like try to punch one through the closed-over skin if I haven't worn earrings in a while—"

"Okay, fine, they're not earrings of invisibility, they're logic shields. They're immune to your dumb logic. Invisibility is just a bonus side effect."

"That doesn't even make—"

"Rose!" Sidney squawked.

"Pendant of tranquility," Rose said.

"You're not even wearing it," Sidney muttered. It was quiet for a little while, and I thought maybe Sidney had fallen asleep until she spoke again. "Why did we stop hanging out with Jamie?"

"Yeah, Nina, why is that?" Rose asked.

"Ring of silence," I replied.

"No overlap!"

"Ohhhhhh my god."

It was quiet for a moment. Maybe the ring actually worked.

"Do you guys feel weird?" Sidney said eventually. "About the whole . . . engagement thing?"

"Define *weird*," I said, just as Rose replied:

"It's okay to feel . . ." She didn't finish. "It's okay to feel. Whatever you want to feel."

"I know that. But what do *you* feel?"

I swallowed. Rose didn't answer, so I did.

“When there was that knock at the door . . . did you have like a split second, like, totally stupid moment where you thought that maybe it was Dad?”

“What, like busting in to stop it from happening?”
Rose said.

“I don’t know.” A pause. “I said it was stupid.”

Neither of them replied.

“I’m happy for Mom,” Rose said eventually. “But also, yeah, it’s a little weird. Things are going to be different.”

“How?”

“I mean, we’ll definitely have to move.”

I sat up in bed. “Wait, what?”

2.

Conrad: This is Pete Conrad. You're listening to 100.2 The Heat, and we're about to, uh, do the resolution thing.

Will: Yeah?

Conrad: Yeah, yeah, yeah. New year, new you, all that crap. Nikki, what's your resolution?

Nikki: I mean, it's always the same, isn't it? Go to the gym more, eat better, blah blah blah.

Conrad: How'd that go last year?

Nikki: How do you think?

Conrad: Well, I think you look great. You look great all year long.

Will: Awwwww.

Nikki: No, I don't like when you're nice. It makes me suspicious.

Conrad: What? Why? I'm always nice.

Tina: Uh-huh. Yeah, right.

Conrad: I am! Tina, don't pile on with them. You guys always gang up on me. It's always three against one.

Nikki: You're a lot of things, Conrad, but nice isn't one of them.

Conrad: I am . . . offended. That's what I am. Truly. I think we'll find a lot of support out there for me, lotta people on my side. Call in if you think that I'm nice and these other three are full of—

Tina: Probably not helping your case.

Conrad: We're gonna put it to the listeners. You guys'll see. And call in if you've already given up on your resolutions. God knows I have.

Will: It's January third.

Conrad: I know—it's my longest record yet. 555-1002, give us a shout.

TOP 40 MUSIC TOOK OVER, and I paused the show.

I was always a day behind on my dad's show—with the time difference between Indianapolis and San Diego, I rarely ever caught it when it actually aired. Luckily, they archived them online.

It was the first day back to school after break. Everything had gone by quickly after Christmas. Rose still had another week off, but it was back to business for me and Sidney. No more sleeping in, lying around, eating cereal for lunch, and listening to Mom and Dan doing the crossword puzzle.

I had asked my mom the day after Christmas if the

engagement meant we were going to move. I don't know why I hadn't thought about it before except that I never really thought too deeply about much of anything if I didn't have to.

Mom answered in the affirmative.

"Sidney's finishing up middle school this year, so she can transition into high school anywhere. Rose has graduated, and you're almost done. Our lease is up in the summer. It just makes sense. The timing is right."

"So that's why you guys decided to get married now? For, like, the sake of convenient timing?"

"It was a factor," she said, "but obviously a marriage isn't founded purely on timing alone."

"Are we gonna move into Dan's house?"

She shrugged. "We might find a new place. Some place between Dan's job and mine. We've also been talking about . . ." She paused, considering. "Well, I'm thinking about going back to school."

My mom worked in a core facility at the School of Medicine downtown. A core was a place with shared machines that a bunch of research labs used since the machines were too expensive to buy individually. Mom's core did flow cytometry, which was a technique used to separate cells into different populations. I remember her explaining it once with M&M's when we were kids—pouring a bag out on the tabletop, all the different colors mixed together, and then separating them out into yellows and reds and blues. Flow cytometry used lasers to separate the cells out by different

properties, just like you could separate M&M's by color.

She had mentioned going back to school to get her PhD before, but I didn't know it was an actual thing that was actually becoming real, like the marriage and the apparent move.

"So I'd still be working downtown," she continued. "If that were to happen. But we can find a place that will fit all of us if we want. If you want to keep staying with us for college, like Rose is."

"*Staying with us?*" I said to Rose later. "Can you believe she said it like that? Like it won't even be our home. Like we'll be *strangers* or something. Seriously?"

Rose just shrugged and said, "I mean . . ." and then she turned back to her sketchbook like she had expressed a complete thought.

I thought of her response to Mom at Lincoln Square: *We feel . . . Okay. Right? We feel okay?*

I felt okay with it only so long as nothing changed. That's what I should have said, but stuff like that never came in the moment. The perfect comeback only comes to you way after the offending incident, most especially when you're alone in the shower with no one but the shampoo bottle to tell it to.

When I reached my locker the first day back at school, Alexis Larsson was already there. She was someone who had probably never shared searing rejoinders with her shower products. Truthfully, she was the kind of person who probably warranted those comebacks herself, but she was something

like my closest friend at school now that Rose had graduated.

Alexis had appeared in seventh grade, a transfer from some fancy junior high on the north side. None of those new-kid-is-an-outsider tropes applied. No, Alexis instantly became the coolest person in our grade. It was like on a reality show when they introduce someone new and controversial midseason for ratings.

The mystique and hype surrounding Alexis had mellowed out by now—there were so many more people at Meridian North High School to dilute it—but I still had that feeling every now and then of being twelve and completely awed by her. Hoping she would like me despite the fact that she must have, or we wouldn't still be friends.

“One more semester,” she said by way of a greeting, holding one hand up for a high five and adding in an ominous voice: “*The beginning of the end.*”

“Hooray.” I slapped her palm and then set about getting into my locker.

“How was your break?” We had texted a little, but she was gone for the bulk of it on a family ski trip to Colorado. All the Larssons got together at Grandpa Larsson's cabin in Breckenridge—it was an annual tradition. I caught the pictures and videos Alexis posted throughout, seated on a ski lift or posing in front of a massive fireplace or holding up a snowball with a devilish grin. Alexis didn't know I knew this, but one time she handed me her phone to look something up, and there was already a page open on the browser titled

“Become Instagram Famous in Eight Easy Steps!” I couldn’t say what step she was on currently, but she had a couple thousand followers, so she must have been doing something right.

I shrugged. “Pretty good.” I didn’t feel like going into it. “How was skiing?”

“I snowboarded, mainly,” she replied. “But it was everything.”

One of Alexis’s favorite phrases—things were often *everything* or *nothing*. She left very little room for the in between.

“What do you have this afternoon?” she said.

“Radio broadcasting.”

“Ah.” She grinned. “Ready for your big debut?”

I made a face. “No?”

“You’ll do great. Shit, I’m gonna be late. Text me after,” she said, and then quickly strode away.

I didn’t care what Jamie said—the fact that my dad worked in radio didn’t give me much of an advantage in radio broadcasting class. It didn’t mean I automatically knew everything there was to know any more than Josh Epton’s mom being our sophomore English teacher meant he inherently understood symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter* better than the rest of us.

Although since my mom worked in science, we always did have pretty great science fair projects growing up. So maybe we did have a bit of a leg up on that one.

The radio broadcasting course had a lot of components—learning about the history of radio, learning how to work with editing software, producing promos and stuff, and most importantly, creating and producing a weekly radio show for the student station.

“And keep in mind, a lot of these skills will be transferrable to podcasting,” the teacher, Mr. Tucker, told us that first afternoon of class. He was a youngish guy with a beard and thick locks that he pulled back with a headband. “If you happen to be, uh, somewhat more interested in that medium.” He went through the syllabus with us and gave a brief intro presentation. In the last part of class, we would need to divide up into groups of four for our radio shows.

“I’m good with however you guys want to do it, but you’re going to spend a lot of time with your group over the course of the semester, so choose . . . mindfully, that’s how I’ll put it. Maybe your friend is here, but maybe working closely with them is going to drive you up the wall or get in the way of your productivity. Definitely keep that in mind.”

The thing about Meridian North was that it was so massive, you could definitely get put in a class without any of your friends whatsoever. I knew some of the people here for sure. There was this girl Sammy—we had French together sophomore year—and her boyfriend who played on the soccer (baseball?) team. A kid named Fletcher who I knew from when I disastrously tried debate club in ninth grade (Prompt: “Does technology make us more alone?” Me: “Uhhh . . . I mean,

yeah? But if you think about it . . . no?”). But there was no one I was an instant lock with, unlike the group of girls turning to each other at the front of the room or Sammy immediately grabbing her boyfriend’s arm.

The girl sitting in front of me turned around. She had deep brown skin, tight curls cut short, and extra long legs stretched out into the aisle. I realized that I knew her—she was in the team sports class I took junior year. Her name was Sasha, and she played on the volleyball team. She had picked me for one of our class matches once even though my volleyball skills were about on par with my debate skills.

So maybe we weren’t exactly friends, but we were friendly at least. “Want to be in a group?” she asked.

I shrugged like I wasn’t supremely grateful to her for initiating, like I wasn’t just sitting there hoping someone would. “Sure.”

“We need two more.”

We scanned the room, but groups of four were rapidly materializing.

“Uh, maybe . . .” Sasha began, but then a guy sidled up to us from the back. He was wearing a T-shirt with giant neon letters that said “GREATEST OF ALL TIME” on it, but in weird typography, stacked up into a column in chunks like GREA/TEST/OF/ALL/TIME.

“*Grea test* of all time?” Sasha read as the guy opened his mouth to address us.

He looked caught off guard. “No, it says—”

“What kind of test is that?” I asked, because I couldn’t help it. “Like a diagnostic kind of thing?”

“All right, how are we doing?” Mr. Tucker called. “All grouped up?”

GREATER/TEST/OF/ALL/TIME looked back at us, hesitating like maybe he had changed his mind, but then he plowed ahead. “Group? Us three?”

“Sure,” Sasha replied, glancing at me. I nodded.

“Cool,” the guy said, but a bit flat like it really wasn’t cool, like maybe he didn’t want to partner with people who pretended not to understand his T-shirt. “He’s with us too.” He gestured toward the back of the room, and a few rows behind us, Jamie Russell—wearing the same red-and-white-striped sweater he had worn on Christmas—gave us a little wave.

There seemed to be no way out of it.

“Works for me,” Sasha said, and I echoed it weakly:

“Yeah. Great.”

The Greatest of All Time was named Joydeep Mitra. He gestured Sasha and me to where Jamie was sitting in the back. As we followed him, he looked up at Sasha appraisingly.

“You’re really tall.”

“Thanks, I hadn’t noticed.”

“No, but for real. Is the atmosphere, like, different up there?”

Sasha’s expression was unwaveringly placid. “I don’t know, what’s the gravity like down there?”

A smile flickered across his face, but he didn’t respond, just plopped down at the desk next to Jamie’s.

“You guys know Jamie?” Joydeep said, and I nodded. Jamie nodded back, but not without a flash of

that same kind of embarrassment he had worn on Christmas. *I told Gram we shouldn't bother you guys . . .*

Sasha greeted Jamie too, and then we were a group, I guess, officially. Mr. Tucker told us we needed to brainstorm the concept for our show—we would have a proposal due at the end of the week, and then we'd get our time slot. Once we officially started broadcasting, we would be on the hook for one show a week for most of the semester.

“The live broadcasts are a large portion of your final grade,” Mr. Tucker told us after everyone had rearranged into their groups. “Since I obviously can't listen live to every single time slot, you'll be responsible for archiving each show as an audio file. Think of these audio files as assignments—failing to archive means a zero for that assignment for the whole group. No exceptions.” He leaned on his desk, his pants riding up on one leg to reveal socks that were a shock of neon stripes. “I want you to be creative with your concepts. And I want you to have fun. And”—he smiled—“to make it a little more interesting, we're going to have bonus points for the group that has the highest average listenership at the end of the semester.”

When we were turned loose for brainstorming, Joydeep said with no preamble, “Who here is just so fucking psyched about radio? Anyone? No one? Good. Because my brother Vikrant took this class three years ago, and he told me the secret.”

“There's a secret?” Jamie said.

“Of course there is. There's a secret to everything.”

“Okay,” I said. “What is it?”

“Are you ready?”

I looked at Sasha, who just raised an eyebrow skeptically. “Pretty ready?”

Joydeep held his hands up like he was framing it in the air: “The nineties.”

“What about them?”

“That’s our theme.”

“But why?”

“The station’s catalog is full of nineties music. The school doesn’t have access to a lot of the current stuff, but they do have permission for a shit-ton of stuff from the nineties. So if you pick the nineties as the theme for your show, you have a ton of music to choose from. All you gotta do is queue it up and do a few breaks where you say what the songs are, and that’s it. Coast on by for the rest of the semester.”

Jamie was frowning. “What do you mean by *nineties* though?”

Joydeep frowned back. “Music that was released between the years 1990 and 1999?”

“No, I just mean—that could be anything. Gin Blossoms or Boyz II Men or Chumbawamba or Nirvana or Biggie—”

“That’s a lot of dudes on your list,” Sasha said.

“Britney Spears or Aaliyah or Celine Dion or Lauryn Hill,” Jamie amended.

Joydeep frowned. “What the fuck, did you *study* nineties artists?”

“I just like music,” Jamie mumbled. “All I’m saying is, I think nineties is too broad.”

“So you want us to narrow it down to, like, hip-hop recorded in a basement in February of ’92?”

“That’s kind of an extreme way to put it, but we could at least . . . pick a genre or something.”

Joydeep shook his head. “No. Come on. The point is that there’s a bunch of stuff to pick from. If we limit ourselves too much, we’ll have to do actual work. If we say we’re only doing hip-hop or whatever, we’ll have to actively search out hip-hop in the catalog. Too much work. I’m telling you, all we need to do is search the year and queue up songs at random.”

Jamie didn’t look convinced.

“How about this: If you want, you can be music guy. Do you want to be music guy? Do our programming?”

Jamie looked to me and Sasha. “What roles do you want?”

“I don’t care about being music guy,” I said.

“Me neither,” Sasha said. “And I don’t want to be the host.”

“Me neither,” I echoed.

“I’ll do that part,” Joydeep offered.

“For real?” Jamie said.

Joydeep shrugged. “Sure. That’s like the easiest part. All you have to do is talk.”

“I mean, I don’t think it’s as easy as that,” I said.

“Why not? I’m talking right now. Putting words together one after another. Still at it. Little to no effort involved on my part.”

“Great audition,” Sasha muttered.

“So we’re decided?”

“Wait, no.” I peered at the syllabus. “Someone has to be the producer. And someone needs to . . .” I scanned the requirements. “Do publicity and prepare on-air features.”

“What’s that?”

“Like weather, or news and stuff.”

“That’s fine for me,” Sasha said. “Running the equipment would freak me out.”

“Yeah, okay,” I said. “I’ll produce.” It mainly involved pressing buttons. Sometimes modulating volume. I could do that.

“So in summary,” Joydeep said, “I’m the host. Wonder Woman’s gonna do publicity and shit. Where’s Waldo over here will do music.” Jamie looked down at his sweater, frowned. “And, uh . . .” Joydeep waved in my direction. “You . . . are the producer.”

“I don’t get a nickname?”

“Let me chill on it,” he said with a grin. Then he slapped his hands on his thighs. “Great. It’s decided. Nineties it is.”

“Shouldn’t we . . . vote or something?” Jamie said.

“Anybody else got any great ideas?”

We shared a look. The truth was, no. Like every other class I was taking this semester, I just wanted to get this done as painlessly as possible. I was willing to be a nineties power hour (or two hours, as the case may be). *Maybe Dad will have some recommendations*, I thought absently, before shaking that thought away.

I glanced over at Jamie. He met my eyes but just as quickly looked away.

“Excellent,” Joydeep declared. “Get ready to party like it’s—”

“Please don’t,” Sasha said.

3.

IN NO WAY DID I want to be in charge of our radio show. But technically, I was the producer, and technically, we needed to submit the show proposal by Friday. So we had to meet up outside of class to discuss more details.

It was Joydeep who suggested we meet in the student art gallery. We couldn't talk in the library, and he claimed the cafeteria was too "exposed."

We don't want anyone taking our idea, he texted in the chat we had started for our group.

We already talked about it in class, Jamie replied. *Any other group could've heard us.*

I know. Wasn't thinking. Won't make that mistake again.

The student art gallery was off the main hall, next to the lobby outside the auditorium. It was smaller than the average classroom, with gray carpet and white walls lit by fluorescents, and tracks of gallery lighting throwing additional light on the art. There were two doors facing the hall, I guess to facilitate traffic flow

should there be an incredible stream of people coming through.

The truth was, though, no one really went in there except during parents' nights and stuff. The wall facing the hallway was made of windows, so it wasn't really a place where students could get up to any kind of shenanigans since you were visible to everyone in the hall. A bench inside ran along that glass wall, a round table was pushed up to it, and a couple of chairs sat around the other side. There were signs on both doors that read: WHEN THE DOORS ARE OPEN AND LIGHTS ARE ON, PLEASE COME IN AND ENJOY THE ART.

I had been in the gallery more often than most, probably, since Rose had always had something up in there, and her group of friends—my friends too—liked to hang out there at free period sometimes.

Paintings, drawings, prints, photographs, and paper cuttings lined the walls. A long glass case held items made by the Intro to Jewelry Making class (an actual course offered in Meridian North's extensive catalog), and there were a few big rectangular stands with pottery pieces on top of them. Rose had taken all of these classes and aced them. She was *Visual Arts Student of the Month* half a dozen times.

When we were all gathered there after school on Tuesday, I flipped open my notebook and pulled out the handout with the requirements for the proposal.

"So we need a name for the show."

"Okay, well, Joydeep is hosting," Sasha said, "so how about . . . *Into the Deep*?"

Joydeep made a face. “No, god, why are we going into me?”

“It’s wordplay.”

“I hate it.”

There was a pause. “*Nice to Mitra*,” Jamie suggested.

“No! Veto. Veto times a thousand,” Joydeep replied.

It was quiet again. Sasha tapped her fingers against the table. Jamie had a bottle of water out on the table, and he ran one finger under the seam of the label, slowly tearing it up.

I absolutely did not want to take the lead on this. I was definitely not putting myself in charge. But “How about something to do with the theme?” came out of my mouth, seemingly of its own volition. “*Nineties Jam? Sounds of the Nineties?*”

Joydeep snapped his fingers. “*Grab Your Joystick.*”

Jamie was taking a draw from his bottle of water and choked.

“You just said you hated wordplay!” Sasha said.

“That was before I thought of a good one.”

Jamie was still coughing.

“Does that mean you like it?” Joydeep asked, slapping him on the back.

Jamie caught his breath. “Wouldn’t say it’s an endorsement.”

“*Into the Deep* is good, though,” Sasha insisted.

“It’s garbage,” Joydeep said definitively.

“I’m putting *Sounds of the Nineties* in the proposal unless someone thinks of something better,” I said.

“I did,” Joydeep said.

“No,” Sasha replied.

“This is a democracy!” Joydeep looked out into the room as if the art was going to back him up. “We need a vote.”

“All opposed, raise your hand,” Jamie said, and three of us raised our hands.

“*Sounds of the Nineties* is fine, Nina,” Sasha said. Joydeep crossed his arms, face sunk into a pout.

“You guys suck.”

By the end of our meeting, it was official.

The show would be called *Sounds of the Nineties*. And Joydeep had solved what he called Jamie’s “it’s all too broad” problem.

“It wasn’t my *problem*,” Jamie replied, “I was just pointing out—”

“Each week is a different year of the nineties,” Joydeep said. “That way, we narrow it down a little, but not so much that it’s any more complicated than just searching 1994 or whatever in the catalog.”

Jamie frowned. “We have to do more than ten shows, though. What happens when we run out of years?”

“We start over again,” Joydeep said. “Or you can play all of Britney Spears’s albums back to back, fuck if I care.”

“That would take way longer than two hours. She has a ton of studio albums,” Jamie said.

I cracked a smile.

“Not that I’m saying we should do that,” Jamie continued, glancing between us. “Not that I’m *not* saying that, if people are into it—”

“One year a week sounds good to me,” Sasha said, and it was decided.

4.

WE USUALLY WENT TO DAN'S house on Sundays for an early dinner.

He lived in Carmel, on the north side of Indianapolis, an area rife with yoga studios and car dealerships and traffic circles. *To rid us of the horror of unsightly traffic lights*, Rose joked, and Dan replied, *You know, they really have been proven to help with traffic flow.*

He had a house there, smallish but still way bigger than our apartment, with white siding, black shutters, and a plush green lawn. I knew from my mom that he had lived there for about eight years, ever since he and his wife got divorced. They never had any kids.

He had a lot of hobbies, though, the most curious being his YouTube channel. It was called *The Artful Heart*, and he did paint-by-numbers tutorials, with tips and suggestions for the beginning painter (paint-by-number-er?). His most recent video was titled “COLOR-INVERTED LIGHTHOUSE!!!” (All the dark values were swapped for light ones, and vice versa.) It had almost ten thousand views.

That was the strangest part—Dan was something of a sensation. I don't know how much of a market there really was for paint-by-numbers instructional videos specifically, but among the comments here and there from people thanking him for the tips or sharing their own suggestions were things like “this is so pure” and “why is this wholesome as fUCK????” and “i dont know him but id trust him with my life.” Something about Dan—his quiet demeanor, his calm but enthusiastic advice—had made people on the internet like him.

He even had an online persona—worried about online safety, Dan went by the pseudonym of Mr. Paint.

So we found ourselves at Mr. Paint's house on Sunday, as per usual.

Rose had cried off, out for one last hurrah before her semester started again. “Tell Dan I'm gonna send him the updated design,” she told Mom before we left. She was into screen printing and had agreed to make T-shirts for *The Artful Heart* after enough of Dan's viewers (fans?) had requested it.

We talked about the shirts over dinner, among other things, including the new equipment at Dan's dental practice and Sidney's upcoming audition for the Meridian North Middle School spring musical. It was “kind of a huge deal,” she had stressed to us, since the spring musical got to be in the high school auditorium, “on the *actual* mainstage.”

“As opposed to the imaginary mainstage,” I said, and she rolled her eyes at me.

Sidney and I cleaned up in the kitchen after dinner.

Whoever didn't cook had to clean, and neither of us had cooked, nor did we usually. We were restricted to only the simplest of meal prep since the frozen pizza debacle of some years ago. (We tried to bake the thing whole, with the plastic on, cardboard, everything—Sidney had convinced me it was like making a microwave meal, where all you have to do is poke holes in the plastic wrap across the top. The smoke from it triggered the fire alarm, and the entire building had to evacuate.)

This evening, as Sidney halfheartedly stuck the dinner plates under the faucet before loading them in the dishwasher, I couldn't help but ask:

“What if we move in with the Dantist?”

I had been staring at one of the many completed paint-by-numbers paintings that hung in Dan's house. This one hung by the fridge—it depicted a small cabin nestled among some thick-trunked trees.

“You'll have to go to Carmel High School instead of Meridian North,” I continued.

“So?”

“Sooo . . . doesn't that suck?”

Sidney shrugged. “School is school. Doesn't really matter to me.”

How could she be so chill about this?

“What about all your friends?” I said.

She took her phone from her back pocket and held it to her chest. “They're right here.”

“Broadway soundtracks are not your friends, Sidney.”

“Okay, number one, you're wrong. Two, I meant I can *reach them* through here. We don't have to be in the

same place all the time to be friends. We *transcend* just, like, being in the same class together.”

She said this with the implication that I couldn't possibly understand, and maybe she was right. Alexis was probably my closest friend at school now that Rose had graduated, but it was a casual kind of friendship. We'd text, grab lunch together, hang out occasionally on the weekends, but I wouldn't necessarily say we *transcended* anything.

I scraped a plate vigorously into the trash. Too much wisdom coming from Sidney made me feel untethered. I was older. I was supposed to be wiser. I was supposed to be the one *transcending*. Then again, I was the one who went along with the frozen pizza plan way back when.

“I just feel like everyone's being really okay with everything,” I said eventually.

“That's bad?”

“I don't know.”

She gave me a skeptical look.

“I mean obviously it's not *bad*, it's just . . .” *Unsettling*.
I didn't finish. Just shrugged and kept on scraping.

5.

BASED ON EVERYONE'S AVAILABILITY, OUR radio time slot was to be Thursdays from 5–7 p.m. Sasha volunteered as a tutor a couple of days a week, and her Thursday session knocked us out of a 3–5 block. Jamie initially floated the idea of going for a morning time slot, but it was resoundingly vetoed by the rest of us.

“I’m not getting up earlier than I have to,” Joydeep said. “And anyway, we can’t stomp on *Maddie in the Morning*’s turf. She’s a certified legend.”

The student radio station was populated with not only shows from the radio broadcasting class, but also from student volunteers who were just, as Joydeep put it during our first class, “so fucking psyched about radio.” Maddie, of *Maddie in the Morning*, was one such volunteer. She was Meridian North’s equivalent of a breakfast show host: On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, Maddie was on-air from 6–8 a.m. Evidently, she was the only person who wanted that time slot, which is how she somehow acquired three of them.

Maddie had a remarkable ability to talk about

nothing—it was almost hypnotic. Even though it was terrible, you couldn't stop listening. A typical link or break, as Mr. Tucker told us the on-air bits were called, was something like:

Homecoming. Everyone's got an opinion on it. E-ver-y-one. My opinion? I'm okay with it. I didn't always feel that way. But I think I feel that way now. [long pause] But if you think about it . . . it's not that great. Actually. Now that I think about it. Anyway, here's Wham!

One rumor was that for music programming, she just put the catalog on shuffle and let it ride. She played the most random things: Norwegian rap followed by The Beatles followed by Shania Twain, followed by Maddie's opinions on electric vs. manual toothbrushes. (*Should we call it a manual toothbrush? You call it a manual car, and there are electric cars too, but also automatic cars. So should we call it an automatic toothbrush? Let me know what you think. Anyway, here's the third movement from Beethoven's fifth symphony.*)

A 5–7 p.m. time slot meant that I had two hours to hang around and do nothing after school since it didn't make sense to get the bus home, turn around, and take it right back. So I hung out in the library watching videos online, wasting perfectly good time I could've used doing homework in favor of doing it later and complaining about not having enough time to finish it.

The evening of our first show, we met in the studio. We were given a code from Mr. Tucker to get in since it was an after-hours show.

He had taken us all on a tour of the station during

class, showed everyone the booth where we would do our shows and the editing bays where we would work on promos and stuff. Everything was carpeted and a little run-down looking. Shelves of CDs lined the walls of the sound booth, and there were even racks that must have held tapes at one point, but now sat empty. An L-shaped table was set up with the soundboard, three computer monitors, and a few mics. There were also several rolling chairs, and a beat-up looking black leather loveseat shoved in one corner.

When I arrived, Jamie was already there, browsing one of the CD racks.

“What do you think the point of the CDs are?” I said. Jamie looked up, startled. “I mean, it’s all digital anyway, right?”

“Oh. Yeah. I guess it’s just like . . . set dressing.”

“To really nail down the authentic radio feel?”

He smiled a little. “Exactly.” He nodded toward the loveseat. “I was more trying to figure out why this was here. Kind of unexpectedly chilled out.”

“I guess that’s the vibe we’re going for?”

Sasha arrived then, Joydeep just behind her.

“I already got the playlist queued up,” Jamie told us as we all got into position: Joydeep and I sat in rolling chairs, side-by-side at the soundboard so that I could operate the controls and he could see which songs were coming up on the monitor. Sasha sat across from us, on the other side of the bend in the table near one of the guest mics, with her laptop open. Jamie settled in on the couch.

“Way to go, Waldo,” Joydeep said. He took out some headphones and plugged them in, and then swiped at his phone for a moment before holding it out to Sasha. “Take my picture?”

“Sorry?”

“The public needs to see how cool I look,” he said, putting on the headphones and pulling the mic on its holder toward himself. He posed with several approximations of a smolder and then spent the next few minutes on his phone, selecting, filtering, and posting the best one.

(I would later follow him—username deepz715—and discover the caption for that very first studio pic: *First time catching those waaaaves.*)

“What waves?” I would ask, and he’d look at me like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Airwaves. For real?” A scoff. “*What kind of waves.*”)

At five o’clock on the dot, I faded out the music and cued Joydeep.

He took a deep breath and then leaned into the mic.

What happened next was . . . unexpected.

“I am Joydeep,” he said, and for some reason, it came out . . . incredibly weird. “You’re listening to . . . the radio. This station, on the radio.” His voice spiked by turns an octave lower or higher than usual, like a scrambled audio file. “You know the one, because . . . you chose to listen to it. Anyway. This is us. The *Sounds of the Nineties*. You’re about to hear a song, and . . . this is that song.”

He pointed at me, and I hurried to switch off his mic and switch on the music.

Joydeep pulled his headphones off and flashed a thumbs-up.

I blinked. “What was that?”

“Link number one! We did it!”

We all stared.

“Why was your voice like that?” Sasha asked.

“Like what?”

“Like you were . . . slowly melting,” Jamie said.

“What?” Joydeep looked genuinely confused.

“Also, did you forget the name of the radio station?”
Sasha said.

He threw his hands up in the air. “I’m doing my best! It’s not like it’s real radio anyway. Nobody’s even listening!”

“It’s definitely real, though,” Jamie said.

“You know what I mean.”

“There are three people listening right now,” I supplied.

“What? You can tell?”

“There’s a counter, remember?” I pointed to one of the monitors. Mr. Tucker had highlighted it in our “radio operations crash course” lecture—*You can track your audience in real time!*

Sasha and Jamie gathered behind me and Joydeep rolled closer in his chair and we all peered at the little box in the corner of the screen that contained a numeral 3. As we watched, 3 changed to 4 momentarily and then dropped back to 3.

“Someone just noped out of this song,” Sasha said.

“We should write that down,” Joydeep said. “They

hate whatever band this is. We shouldn't play them anymore."

"We can't be a nineties station that doesn't play Green Day," Jamie said.

"We could be if we wanted," Sasha murmured, and I grinned up at her.

Joydeep leaned back in his seat. "So what am I supposed to do different? I was just talking."

"No, you're just talking now. That was more like . . . awkwardly giving a presentation that you didn't prepare for," Sasha said.

"Being more specific might help," I added. "Also, yeah, maybe try talking in a more . . . conventional sort of way."

"I was!"

"No," I replied.

He looked exasperated.

"Just talk like you're talking now," Jamie said. "Like, conversationally. 'Hey, this is Joydeep. You're listening to 98.9 The Jam.' Like that."

"Be punchier," Sasha said.

"Punchier?"

"More excited. Radio deejays are always, like, hyped about shit."

"Normal or punchy? Which one am I going for?"

"Normal," I said, at the same time Sasha said, "Punchy."

"Tiebreaker?" Joydeep looked Jamie's way.

"Normal," Jamie said.

"I'll thread the needle."

“It’s two to one!” I replied.

“Hey, you guys decided this isn’t a democracy when you vetoed *Grab Your Joystick* without the slightest consideration.”

“Okay, we actually did vote on that, in a very democratic manner, and anyway, why ask for a tiebreaker if you’re just going to ignore it?”

Joydeep gestured to his throat. “I’m sorry. I think I should be saving my voice.” We sank into silence until the next air break.

“Hey, this is Joydeep, and you’re listening to . . . the radio.”

He looked my way, and I waved my hand to indicate more.

“That song was . . . something, right?” He paused as if someone was going to answer. “This is our show, and you’re listening to it. Which is cool, so. Thank you. Here is another song, and . . . hope you’re having a great day. Okay, bye.”

“You’re not ending a phone call!” Jamie squawked as I started the next song.

“And *why* are you talking like that?” Sasha said.

“Like what?”

She made a face. “I’m JoyDEEP, and this is the RADIO. Here is A SONG.”

“I was threading the needle!” he cried.

“You have to give like actual information, though,” I said. “You have to be, like, specific about stuff.”

“I was!”

Sasha raised her eyebrows. “That was specific? God, I hope you never witness a crime.”

Joydeep folded his arms. “Tell me, why is it ‘gang up on Joydeep’ day? Why is that what we’ve all decided to do today instead of having a very nice and fun time doing radio?”

“You were the one who said you wanted to host!” I said. “And that it was *the easiest part* of this whole thing!”

“Well, I’m doing my best,” he replied.

“It’s not personal,” Jamie said, in his reasonable Jamie tone of voice. “We all just want to do well. Plus Nina has, like, a legacy to uphold.”

Sasha frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” I replied quickly, shooting Jamie a look. “It means nothing.”

We parted ways in the hall after our show wrapped up for the night: (“This has been Joydeep and *Sounds from the Nineties*—uh, *of the Nineties*. Thanks for listening, and uh . . . yeah. Bye!”). Joydeep and Sasha headed toward the west entrance, but I followed Jamie in the opposite direction.

“Hey.”

He turned and looked mildly surprised, like we hadn’t just been sitting in a small room together for the last two hours. “Hey.”

“So. About . . . all that.” He didn’t jump in—though I don’t know why he would’ve—so there was an awkward beat before I continued. “Maybe, like . . . lay off the radio stuff?”

Jamie frowned. “The stuff that we were just doing? Where we do radio?”

I squeezed my eyes shut briefly. “I mean, like . . . the stuff about my dad.”

“Oh.”

“The whole . . . *legacy* . . . thing,” I continued. “I just . . . I kind of just want to leave him and everything out of it. I don’t want it to be about that. I just want to take this class and be done with it.”

He nodded. “Yeah, sorry.” He scratched the back of his head. “I shouldn’t have mentioned it. I just think it’s cool.”

“It’s really not.”

He nodded again, and it was quiet.

“Are you taking the bus?” he said after a moment.

“Rose is picking me up.” I paused. I couldn’t not ask. We were going to the same place, after all. “Do you . . . want a ride?”

Surprise flashed across his face again. “Uh . . . sure. Yeah, that would be great.”

Rose pulled up to the front of the school in Mom’s car, exhaust billowing out the back tailpipe, plumes of white in the cold January air.

Jamie and I piled in.

“Well, what a surprise,” Rose said, glancing back at him. “I charge by the quarter mile, you know.”

Jamie looked like he wasn’t sure if this was a joke.

“I’m kidding,” she said after a moment, and Jamie huffed a laugh.

Rose had some kind of indie band playing, soft bleating with acoustic backing. It was a far cry from the “Best of 1990”—or at least the “Best of 1990” according to Jamie—playlist we had just broadcast.

“What were you still doing at school this late, James?” she said as we pulled through the parking lot.

“Our radio show,” Jamie said.

“Oh.” Rose cut a glance at me. “That’s right. You guys are in the same group.”

I hadn’t mentioned it to her.

“How was work?” I said. A very subtle and nuanced change of subject.

“It was fine,” Rose replied. She worked at the fancy mall on Eighty-Sixth Street, at a store that specialized in weird, boho kind of clothes. *That macramé stuff*, my mom always joked. Rose was dressed in some of it now, thick fringe spilling out the bottom of her winter coat. *I figure I’d better just lean into the whole art student thing*, she had said when she first started working there. *Just fully embrace it.*

Rose was now in her second semester at IUPUI, at the Herron School of Art + Design. (The “+” was a very deliberate stylistic choice: “Did they workshop that plus?” Dad had asked. “I’ve been in meetings like that, and lemme tell you, they make you want to off yourself. Should we put an exclamation mark after ‘Summer Slam’? Let’s talk about it for forty-five minutes. Make sure we consider every conceivable consequence of

the exclamation mark.”) She was studying visual communication design—something I wasn’t entirely sure I understood.

The secret was: She wasn’t entirely sure she understood it either.

I was the only one who knew it, but Rose had been struggling in her classes in the fall. She had almost failed a couple of them but just managed to squeak by with grades high enough to keep her scholarship. She played it off to Mom and said it was because she had been doing too much—working and all that. Mom tried to get her to cut back on her hours, and she had a bit, but I knew that wasn’t the real reason.

We never talked about it, though. It was kind of our thing, Rose and me. We could pretend with each other, and that was okay.

At least most of the time. “So how did the show go?” she said, not quite as accepting of my subject change as I would have hoped.

Unconsciously, my eyes flicked up to the mirror. I could see Jamie looking out of the window in the back.

“It was . . . something,” I replied.

Rose snorted. “Enthusiastic.”

Alexis had texted me partway through the show: *Listening right now and I need to know if you’re holding your host at gunpoint or like what the situation is in-studio that’s making him sound like that*

No offense lolol

But seriously though

“Nah, we just need a little . . . practice,” Jamie said. “Just gotta iron out a couple wrinkles.”

That was being generous, but that was Jamie in general. I flashed suddenly on him in second grade, when we were in the same class at Garfield Elementary. We were growing seeds once as a class project—everyone got a little Styrofoam cup full of dirt, got to press their fingers in to create divots and plant the seeds. We left them along the window ledge, everyone’s cups printed with their names. It’s wild looking back how something that sounds so boring now can be so exciting to you as a little kid, but it was. I guess when you haven’t experienced very many things, lots of mundane stuff becomes exciting simply because you’ve never done it before.

One boy in our class, Ethan Lowe, was really sad because everyone’s seeds had sprouted but his. One day, when the teacher was occupied on the other side of the classroom with Ethan and some other kids, I caught Jamie hunched over two of the Styrofoam cups, quickly but carefully digging several of the thin green shoots out of the one labeled JAMIE and transferring them to the one labeled ETHAN.

“You’re gonna get in trouble,” I hissed.

Jamie didn’t reply, just continued his covert transplant. Ethan was ecstatic when he later noticed that his plants had finally grown.

That was something I liked about Jamie—he was an optimist, but the kind who knew that optimism alone wasn’t enough to make Ethan Lowe’s radish seeds

sprout. He was willing to take matters into his own hands.

“No, the show’ll be great,” Jamie continued now as we waited at a traffic light. “We’ll get there,” he said in a way that, despite all evidence to the contrary, made you think we just might.