



*The*  
**Pursuit**  
*of Miss*  
**Heartbreak**  
**Hotel**

**Moe Bonneau**

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And I was green, greener than the hill  
Where the flowers grew and the sun shone still  
Now I'm darker than the deepest sea  
Just hand me down, give me a place to be.

—*Nick Drake*,  
"Place to Be"

# Never-Ending Pending Love

In love, there are two ways we break our hearts on someone. Two that I know of, anyway. The first I call Never-Ending Pending Love.

The sharp, lonesome cry of Never-Ending Pending has held me in its grip for as long as I can remember, and in matters of solitude, secrets, and shame I'm a shark, a ringer, a real pro. For the past four years, it's all been for one. For her.

Ms. Hayes.

She's sitting at her desk after school, grading today's five-paragraph essays on *Siddhartha*, furrowing her brow in her hazy, faraway way. She's wearing these tight black leggings and a gigantic, frumpy sweater that could fit at least three other Ms. Hayeses inside and I'm so hit for that great big sweater, I'm always giving her a hard time about it and trying to find ways to steal it and stick my nose in it, memorize the molecules of her siren-song scent.

She peers up at the clock, sighing, and she's delicate and dazzling and golden. She's deep-down sad in the most beautiful way I can ever imagine. She kills me. She really does. She teaches me metaphors, similes, drama, the classics. She's taught me poetry in more ways than one. She's white whale, slick-wet slippery and larger than life, and I'm Ahab and will never have her, but will seek her until I go Ophelia and die.

Up to her elbows in work, I ask her if she's planning on spending the night. She says no, she's going jogging in a few.

"Beat," I say, tapping a marker on my desk. "Mind if I join? I can climb inside that enormous sweater and hang on for the ride. I could really use some air."

She laughs, holding the mass of wool in her long, elegant digits. "No way. This is my favorite sweater, and you'll stretch it all out."

"So much wool," I tease. "Poor extinct sheep. I only have one question: Was it worth it?"

And she's cracking up and I'm all aglow.  
Glow little glowworm, glimmer, glimmer.  
I laugh and hum and pick up my marker and draw.  
Shine little glowworm, shimmer, shimmer.

And yet she has no clue. She's Never-Ending Pending's longest-running practical joke. *Please, sir, I want some more*, my groveling Oliver Twist heart has squeaked out on repeat since the very first day of freshman year. And I've clutched my clandestine love tight to my heart cage like a stolen loaf of bread I'm starving for but am too ashamed to eat.

Zoë and Maya, my bestest Jacks, think I'm the lone wolf, an island of one. But my constant and unrelenting love orbits me like a distant star. Impossible, unreachable. An infinity of unrequited solitude. And Ms. Hayes, she's in it for the long haul with some zero in a photograph pinned to the bulletin board, his hairy digits gripping the wheel of a sailboat like he's master and commander of all he surveys. Which is flip, seeing as *I'm* the one soaking wet with her. But they're in "love," in Happily Never After, an out-of-bounds, full-daylight, forever variety I've never known, and probably never will. God willing.

It's like I always say, in love, there are two ways to fall apart, two ways to lose your mind and sully your soul. Never-Ending Pending and Happily Never After. I just can't decide which is the harsher ride.

Ms. Hayes sneezes and then laughs and I'm nearly

overcome and I gotta get my hands on that enormous god-damn sweater.

I fake a shiver, I start to chatter my teeth.

"It's subarctic in this cave of yours, Hayes," I say and she cocks an eyebrow. I tremble and quake, shimmy and shake, pumping my arms, and she sighs, knowing all too well what I'm after. Another second or two of my histrionics do the trick and she's peeling the wooly prize from her elegant, slender shoulders. "You're too good to me." I grin as I teeter my desk forward on its front legs and reach to snag it from her hands. She rolls her eyes, bending again to her work, and I push my arms into the enormous bulk of warm fleece and engulf myself in its depths.

And her smell.

And I'm set adrift, I'm out to sea. She is shore and I am ship and her magnificent cliffs rupture my hull and I'm filling with water. I'm half up, half down. Half in, half out. I crash and crash against her. And I sink. Glug, glug, glug.

I take a deep, Ms. Hayes-scented breath, and try to focus back on the poster I'm currently slaving away over, a tragic depiction of Romeo and Juliet, just after he knocks back the poison and she axes herself in the ribs. All those Capulets and Montagues stand around sobbing, staring at the two dead bodies, wishing they hadn't been such crank scabbrains in forbidding the illicit duo. As Ms. Hayes's teacher's assistant extraordinaire, I'm hoping our students will go

total Ophelia for all the blood and gore, and maybe even think Shakespeare's the switch for half a second. Maybe.

I grimace, squirming in my seat as an unexpected muscle cramp wrenches in my gut, just over my right hip bone. It bends me over my desk and I instantly regret that third ice cream sandwich I insisted on scarfing at lunch. I tense and feel small trickles of sweat drip inside my armpits, down the backs of my legs. I wait it out, suffering stoically in silence, until it finally releases and I can gingerly pull myself back up. Ms. Hayes is miles away, massively unaware.

I eyeball a pile of photos at the edge of her cluttered desk and slide the stack off, only to be greeted by a bright pair of baby blues, sparkling rainbows, enormous ivory teeth glowing obscenely from ear to big ear. Nate Gray. Our class' perpetual, non-controversial headline, everyday, every-guy, average hit hero. Who also happens to have found Willy Wonka's Golden Ticket to every good girl's panties in town. For the last two years, that good girl's been Eve Brooks, who also happens to be my ex-best, long-forgotten bosom buddy from the middle school days of yore.

"Ugh," I say, fake-barfing in my mouth, flipping to the next shot of Nate, leaning seductively into the grandeur of Ye Ole Sycamore Tree. Then, spread out on a virginal, white draped sheet with his three-thousand-dollar electric guitar and half-lidded bedroom eyes. And last, here's our guy, posing like a prostrate donkey in the middle of an overgrown



meadow and at least this one's on-theme, though some circling flies and a pile of steaming dung would really seal the deal.

"So, what," I say, interrupting her again, slapping the photos back down on her desk, "you gonna blow these up and frame 'em? Mount them over your desk for all the world to enjoy?"

She doesn't look up. "Think I should?"

I scowl. "Um, no?"

She shrugs, ever the diplomat. "He brought them by. I think it's sweet," and I can imagine him *bringing* them by, flirting her up with his TV-sitcom haircut and overdriven, oversexed, testosterone-fueled ego, and she, reveling in the unmasked attention, feeling young and sexy and massive ace. Which she obviously is, though I can't tell her that.

"Sweet?" I say. "Nate Gray? *Sweet*? Oh, I know. Like when your cat pukes on your pillow 'cause it missed you when you were gone. Or a pug dog dry-humps your leg 'cause he really, *really* likes you—that kind of sweet?"

"*Lu*," she scolds, but she's laughing on the inside, I can tell.

"Don't be fooled," I say. "That Jack's a phony. Tried and true. A slithering snake."

"I appreciate your prudence," she humors. "Wise words."

And I slump back, digging a fist into the vise-gripping agony that has suddenly beset my abdomen, another cramp

building in the tender depths of my run-amok guts. Goddamn frozen milky confections.

I frown down at my poster, a bitter little pill, barely able to admit that what I'm really steamed about is that it's all too clear who I'll never be. I'll never be Nathan Gray. I'll never flirt up Ms. Hayes. I'll never charm her pants off and she'll wish she were younger so she could flirt right back. I'll never be anything but me and my love will forever be wide of the mark, an unseen Icarus ever soaring to my imminent demise, like a moth to a blowtorch, my wax and feather wings flame and melt and char.

I'm a bobbleheaded, green-eyed monster and I wanna devour Nate Gray whole.

Crunch crunch crunch.

Ms. Hayes goes back to grading her papers, and I wanna make her feel young and sexy. But I never will. I'll just keep breaking my crank heart all over her, for forever and ever and a day. For this is Never-Ending Pending Love.

Welcome to hell. I'll be here all night.

That's when I feel another gripping cramp. And a wet slime emerging between my legs and I squirm in my seat to stealthily slip a finger down my pants, between my legs. Oh dearsweetgeezus no. I roll a marker off my desk and slip my head down to pick it up only to confirm the awfulest of truths—I've gone all period and gore in my pants, bleeding through my black skinnies and onto the

pristine white wool of Ms. Hayes's enormous goddamn sweater.

Somebody, please, just ax me now.



Ms. Hayes calls after me as I scoot so fast from her room, tail between my legs, sweater mashed into a bundle of yarn under my arm, and I only pray she didn't see the blood.

In the betties' bathroom mirror, my sad-sack reflection sighs as I hold the sweater over the bathroom sink and stare, devastated, into the slick-red fabric of Ms. Hayes's single most prized possession. I turn on the water and watch as horror-flick streams of red run from the wool, over my skin, and into the drain and I just don't think I can ever look her in the eyes again.

My pulse quickens. The water isn't working, and I'm afraid it's gonna set the stain. But I don't wanna use soap 'cause it could ruin the wool.

I wish I were dead.

I cut the water and the orange-brown six-inch blush of bodily fluid is a scarlet letter of shame on my heart. Sweater in hand, I dodge into the bathroom stall and my underpants resemble a battle scene, Massacre at Wounded Pride. I sop up the mess and plug up with some mashed wads of toilet paper and lean my pounding forehead against the cool of the stall wall, deep-down buried in the muck and mire of the latest episode of *Lucy Butler Blows Chunks at Life*.

I sigh, count to one hundred. Do it again. I'm working up to facing the total mortification of the betrayal my uterus has committed, when I hear this small shuffling sound from one of the seemingly empty stalls at the other end of the bathroom. And then it goes quiet. I wait, one, two, three pounding heartbeats. I tell myself it was nothing, willing everyone and everything to just disappear, leave me the flip alone.

I close my eyes again and my mind tangents to eighth grade, when me and some flap-Jacks tortured this poor betty who'd locked herself in a stall after school. *Bathroom Troll, Bathroom Troll, come out, come out, whoever you are!* we sang, camping outside for an hour, laughing through the grate. Turns out her mom was massive sick and we were torturous, psychopathic beasts. I realize now that I'm the Bathroom Troll, hiding out in here for geezsthelord knows how long. It's pathetic. I pull up my pants and stand, pushing open the stall door, and in a moment of time so thick it moves like putty, I look up and come face-to-face with a betty I know too well. I can hardly believe who it is.

She goes still as stone, eyes locked in a vise grip on mine, and I notice a small, white spatula-shaped piece of plastic poised in her hand. And I know those things all too well, from when Marta, my older sister-Jack, used to leave them lying around our shared bathroom at home, giving Dad a coronary every time he took out the trash. My jaw slams to the floor in registering the home pregnancy test as

I stare and stare at none other than the reigning priestess of the perfection personified Pretty Pennies, Miss Evelyn Brooks—aka my ex-best, long-forgotten bosom buddy from the middle school days of yore.

“Eve,” I hear someone say, realize it’s me.

She doesn’t move.

I watch her watching me, shoulders rigid, face tight with fear. Ours is an age-old tale of two betties, apple-Jacks forever, when suddenly one goes ace gorgeous and then, naturally, massive popular. Said popular betty ditches other unsaid, unpopular betty for superhit cool crowd. Girls don’t speak again for four years, until a chance meeting reunites them while they await together the results of an underage preg exam. A true, time-honored classic.

Eve gawks, owl eyes wide.

“Lu,” she finally says. “It’s you. I thought . . .”

I remember Hayes’s sullied sweater in my hand and quickly stash it behind my back. I awkwardly thrust a hand in my pocket, jingling away at my keys.

“Word,” I say. “It’s me.” I stand there, jingle-bell-jingling. We both glance back at the test and I quit with the keys. She sighs and my heart goes to sillyputty. “Clash,” I whisper.

“Word,” she says. “*Massive* clash.”

I step back and then to the side. I open my mouth and close it. “Um. This is sorta crickets. I should go. You wanna be solo.” But I don’t leave. I can’t. Plus I still have this whole menses-on-wool situation to deal with. But Eve is

watching me. "Okay, yeah." I turn and her hand darts out, grabbing my wrist. My heart stops, skips, putters back to life.

"Stay?"

So I do. And we're hush, waiting, watching for that magical minus symbol, coveted by terrified teenage betties worldwide, to appear. A light blue tint of color seeps into the small window, shimmers, disappears. Eve shakes her head slowly, side to side.

"Nate?" I croak out the obvious, and she nods. "I was just looking at his senior portraits." She frowns and I will the ensuing word vomit back into my mouth. "Yeah, that sounds weird. Never mind. Anyway, you sure it's him?" And she nods again. "Word. I guess I was just holding out hope it was someone else. Like maybe a convicted criminal, or a born-again Bible-thumping preacher-man." She looks shell-shocked, confused. I lace up my fly trap.

My hands fall to my sides and Eve notices the sweater.

"What's the deal?" she asks, her voice tight and thin. "You murder someone in that thing?"

"Um, yeah," I laugh nervously. "Pretty much." I toss it despairingly into the sink. "Basically, I'm disgusting. And massively screwed. It isn't mine."

She laughs and it echoes against the icy white walls.

"You think that's riot?" I say. She just shrugs. "Word," I say, "Well I think—"

But she cuts me off, taking the wooly carnage from me

and laying it over her arm. "Mellow." She takes my hand. "I can fix it."

"No, gimme!" I protest, but she's already pulling me out the door and we're padding down the hall and busting into the nurse's cubicle, two hot-handed crooks, and in the dark dim of cots and cabinets and pills, Eve unearths a tall brown plastic container. I'm cracking up massive at how bizarre this whole situation is, when we're sneaking it back into the betties' bathroom and I'm nearly keeling over when she dumps a mother lode of the stuff onto the wool. But then it starts to bubbling and frothing and I have a feeling that something supernatural is under way.

Eve slowly studies the stain and I secretly examine the slow curve of her swan-song neck. I silently spell her name in my head, E-V-E-(space)-B-R-O-O-K-S. Cool water in my mouth.

Then she hands me the prego pop quiz and I peer down at the test, window still a blank.

"So, you peed on this, yeah?" And Eve shoots me a look, her chin-length amber curls bobbing as she scrubs the wooly blush of my blood with her two bare hands. "I can live with that."

She pushes the sweater back under the tap and the brown bubble-froth foam washes slowly away and down the drain. She cuts the water and I lean in to look and it's like it all never happened. It's like it was never there.

"Holy magic," I say, and she's laying the clean article

out on the counter for us to admire, which we do. Until we stop and stare down at the still-blank prego test in my hand. Cue uncomfortable silence.

“Um,” I say. “Thanks.”

“Word.”

“So.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

“. . . Oh.” Her voice wavers and she clears her throat. “I heard you got a full ride for track.” And I nod. “That’s beat. For throwing the java, um. The jala-vin?”

“That doesn’t sound right.”

She frowns. “No.”

I study her face, and then the test, and then her face. She’s stunning. She’s as I remember her. She’s the most ace betty in our school. Her eye makeup is cloudy, like she’s been crying. But this blurry memento of anguish only heightens her abundant appeal as I fight every fiber compelling me to envelop her in my arms and gently squeeze the sweet, citrus sorrow from her lovely, delicate bones.

Eve’s lips twitch as a hazy blue line appears, at first faint, and then bold and straight as an ocean horizon. She inhales and I lean in. Verdict: unfertilized! Eve Brooks is not implanted with Nate Gray’s lowlife, underage seed! Hallelujahpraisethelord.

I issue a short, echoing laugh and Eve’s face softens to a small, lovely smile, the test in her hand falling heavy to her



side. I whistle, slapping my mitt on the sink as she stoops to slide the test and box deep into her purse.

“Holy. Crank,” I say.

She looks up. “Holy. *Massive*. Crank.” And we’re laughing, until we’re not and then it’s sort of crickets.

I feel the oxygen circulating again through my limbs, but see Eve isn’t recovering quite as quick. The corners of her mouth are turned down. And I’m desperate for that smile again.

“When I heard you in the stall and I had blood and guts all over myself, it’s like I was Bathroom Troll reincarnate,” I say. “Remember? *Come out, come out, whoever you are!* You were there.”

She nods. “I was so flip over that. You flap-Jacks were so clash to that poor girl.”

“Truer words,” I laugh, and she smiles, a light blush of color coming to her cheeks. She opens her mouth to say something but then the door is swinging open. And speaking of lowlife, underage seed, here comes Nate Gray’s perfect floating head peering around the edge. He sees me and grins. I show my teeth.

“Hey, babe,” he says to Eve, voice loud, sugar dripping from the curled-up corners of his slippery lips. “What’re you ace ladies up to, anyways? Talking about periods? Or me?” Eve looks at me and our eyes go wide.

“You, Gray,” I say, stifling a laugh. “Always you. What else is there?” and he grins, looks convinced.

"We weren't talking about anything," Eve says, pulling her lips tight as she yanks the strap of her bag over her shoulder. She looks in the mirror, dragging the tip of her finger under her eye, wiping away the small charcoal smudge I'd been admiring and I realize that if I admit to myself how much I want her, this ghost from my past, it's likely I'll go insane. So, instead, I robotically wash my hands and stare into the water as they lather like it's the most fascinating thing I've ever seen.

"*Clash*," Nate hisses as he feverishly scans a new buzz. "You clash cog!"

I eyeball Eve. "Crick-ets," I whisper softly and she laughs a teeny tiny bit and I wonder what it would be like to make her laugh all the time. Like as a full-time gig.

"Eve, babe, let's go!" Nate blurts, then closes his eyes, bringing it down a notch. "You look ace, obviously. But we're way tardy and I still gotta drop you off. My apple-Jacks are gonna ream me *hard* a new one."

"Better hustle," I say. "Wouldn't want him to miss out."

Nate smirks. "Ha, ha, Lucy Butler. I'm massive gay and like it up the butt. *So riot.*"

I'm surprised he knows my name.

"Okay," Eve says. "Be easy. Both of you." But she's smiling at me sidelong as she slides on peach-scented lip gloss. She steals another glance at Nate, sees he's gone mentally MIA again, and leans over. I breathe her in. "Lu," she whispers, puckering and pursing her newly shining lips.

“For real, that thing we were just talking about, y’know . . . the test?”

“Don’t mention it,” I say. “I won’t.”

She lets out a gust of fruit-fragrant air. “Switch.” She full-swing smiles, her sweet, sad eyes POW! WAM! ZAP!-ing me in the mirror. Holy infatuation, Catwoman. “Good luck,” she says. “With the, um, laundry. Stick it under the hand dryer for two shakes and it’ll be good as new.”

I open my mouth but there’s nothing, hot air.

“Kay, babe,” she chirps to Nate, straightening up and crunching a handful of ginger curls in her hand. “Let’s jet,” and she drops her makeup into her bag. She glances up at me again and her mouth is a small crescent moon. “Thanks,” she whispers, grabbing my wrist, and then she’s gone.

# History

I slow-dissolve the whole ordeal in my mind as I heel it back to Ms. Hayes. In her room, everything smells the same, looks the same, feels the same. Of course it does. But something's different. I hand her back her sweater and she puts it on and it's three o'clock and then I leave. Just like that.

I heel it across the nearly empty student parking lot to my banger and visions of an alternative reality dance through my mind. Eve: dog-tired and greasy-haired, a

roly-poly pukester perched on her chest. Nate Gray: beer-bellied and goateed, distractedly pushing a stroller with one hand as the other buzzes his flap-Jacks homoerotic come-ons in dude-bro jargon. Man-o, that betty got lucky with that negative.

I stand beside my banger and press redial on my speak. I've been trying to reach University Bloody Admissions all day. "Thank you for holding," Robo-Cog singsongs. "An agent will be with you shortly."

"Flipit," I say and slam it shut. College is chewing me an ulcer and I haven't even started yet.

I slide into my banger and stew in the wet, stale air. I think about Eve Brooks and I cook in the new, moist oven of an impending heartache. *Not this time*, I think. *Not with Evelyn Goddamn Brooks*. And I push her sad, wonderful mug from my mind, trying to protect the last feeble shreds of this quivering mass of muscle I call my heart. Eve Brooks—she's too taken. She's too straight. She's long gone. She's History.

Ms. Hayes? Ms. Hayes who?

## Sailors & Cowboys

**I**t's pouring, so I decide to take a walk. Think maybe a pack or two or twenty of tars will clear my fog-machine mind.

I slip into my rubber knee-high boots, and pull on my raincoat with the smiley-faced whales on the inside liner. I snag my blue knit sailor's cap from my bag, an old seaman's beanie that's slowly fusing to my hair from overwear. I've been sporting this damn thing all winter, cock-eyed and sly,

and I pop the collar of my shirts and coats like some secret-agent mystery man. Man-o, I'm so cool, I make ice jealous.

I pull my hood up, and with my head down and my mitts in my pockets, I stalk into the cold foggy face of spring streets, *my witness the empty sky*. As I walk, I count in my mind the one hundred and ninety-four steps up the hill and around the corner to where I can pop off the road and down into the soggy-bottomed woods, where I know Dad or my wee brother, Miles, won't drive or bike by me and throw a conniption fit.

My boots slurp through the melt and muck on the trail and I blaze like a smoldering smokestack. I think about everything, I think about Eve. I think about nothing, I think about Eve. I realize I still have her digits memorized from when we were tiny tykes and I wonder if I could ever just call. Just pick up my phone and dial. Talk for hours about nothing, like we used to.

I drag and think about sailors. Beat sailors on big, old, rusty boats that catch slick fish with thick-rope nets that require endless mending. I imagine I look like a sailor. I hold my lit tar between my lips, and inhale like the Marlboro Man, squinting as the smoke singes my eyes and fills the corners of my hood. I rub together my cold red mitts and think of the sailors rubbing together their cold red mitts just before tying massive, twined knots of figure eights and loops and twists, the freezing, pelting rain ricocheting off their rubber hats. I think I would make a kill sailor. That, or a cowboy.

I mull over the wee tykes in Ms. Hayes's freshie English class and how in school, I'm role-model teacher's assistant and I strut my stuff, presenting well the myth I know who I am. The cast of characters is the same as it was in my day; there's the class badrat, pulling a 'tude and talking back to earn the only attention she's ever gonna get; the jester, first to the punch so that his crank attendance and slipping grades aren't; the shy betty crushing on me, just as hard as I do on Ms. Hayes; and the class flap-Jack, shouting come-ons to me in mezzo-soprano tones to prove he's a big boy in front of his little buds.

I know if any of these wee-Jacks could see me now, they'd start dragging tars—if they haven't already. I remember. That was me. Though don't get me wrong—99.9 percent of me is massive repulsed by the whole crank deal and I hope they never get the nic itch. I've seen the pictures of blackened lungs, the videos of skin-and-bone elders, wheezing through an artificial larynx. Dr. Mom made sure her three children were sufficiently tobacco-traumatized as kids—that is, before she played out her vanishing act, in her wake instructing us in the mysterious merits of abandoning your brood.

All I know is, I hate myself for smoking so much. And if I ever start kissing anyone again I'll quit in an instant. This I know is truth.

Over the river and through the woods, I drag my way through four sticks and at last schlep it across the old,



potholed Murphy Farm field and back onto our street. As I'm loping numbly down the hill, Dad comes rumbling up in his truck and thank geezuschrist I'm not still dragging a tar. I pop a piece of gum in my mouth and go to the window.

"Louie, I haven't seen you in days," he says, voice husky from a long day bossing Jacks around in the hospital. His stubble is a gritty shadow on his face and the lines around his eyes are deep, tinted purple. "You okay?" He's a trauma surgeon in the ER and works crazy hours, and whenever he asks me if I'm okay, I have the feeling he'd rather be taking my blood pressure or white blood cell count than actually talking about how I feel.

I nod. "Swell."

He sighs. "I'm off to the market. Emergency cookies and milk run for your brother's Earth Scouts in Technology meeting tomorrow." I roll my eyes and he smiles. "Wanna come, stranger? Be good to catch up."

I imagine us driving into the fog, him rambling about work or my elderly Oma's innumerable health concerns, or Miles, my younger, genius brother-Jack, and his enormous goddamn brain. Or worse, the airwaves will fall dead and we'll cut a wheel in silence, the awkward hush choking our throats, words, like gas, combusted and lost, evaporating and clogging the fragile crank ozone. The ice caps will melt and polar bears'll slip tragically through sharp, gaping cracks into the arctic sea . . .

“Louie?”

I snap into it. “Oh. No. I’m beat.”

Y’know, to save the polar bears and all.

“You sure you’re okay?” he says, thick eyebrows stern across his forehead. “You’re not high, are you?” And I just laugh, walk away. He puts the truck in gear and waves, gunning the gas as I turn to watch his taillights glow smaller and smaller still.

A shivering shambles, I climb the back stairs and stomp onto the porch. I stayed out in the cold rain way too long and I’m a soaking-wet frigid village idiot. Popsicle in Boots. I tromp upstairs and twist shower knobs and pull the sop-ping layers of fabric from my red-turning-blue skin and shake my arms and pump my fists to warm my ice-cube core.

Warning: Frost Heave.

The water hits my face, chest, arms, in a singeing blast, so hot it feels cold. Glacial streams run from freezing cords of hair plastered down my back and my toes are red-hot roots screaming mercy. My chattering subsides and I’m no longer thaw, I’m simmer. I boil and take mouthfuls of steam-ing water that warm my ice-cube teeth. My bangs stick in hot slices to my forehead. And my skin tingles back to life.

I close my eyes and think of what a strange day it’s been, what a strange world it always is. And then, because it can’t be helped, I’m on the trail of Evelyn Brooks like hounds on a fox. So heartbreaking with that smudge of black eyeliner

shadowing her golden, freckled face. And her hand on my wrist. And the heat it left, and how warm it was.

My fingers travel over hip bone ridges, lower stomach, and down between my thighs. Pink streams of period wash down me, swirling about my feet, and Eve is checking her makeup in the mirror, peeking at me from the corner of her eye, a small smile curling the edges of her full strawberry lips. I wanna tell her how stunning she is. Show her. Like this. Like this.

But she's a moving target, going backward. She's Ancient History.

But she's right here, and I want to tell her. Like this.

And her mouth opens wide and she's laughing, her pearly whites shining in a Cheshire cat grin. And then Nate Gray is loping eagerly in, a sneaky, slithering snake, pulling her by her waist, cackling head back, teeth bare. The door swings shut. And I'm a blank screen, dead air, white noise.

I open my eyes and am crushed. My hands fall to my water-streaming sides and I have the impulse to put my fist through the fogged-up glass of the shower door. The hot calm the contact would bring, the mess, the glass, the pain. It's just a thought, passing like a storm cloud through my mind.

This kind of misery is the stuff suicide notes scrawled into shower-curtain mist are made of: "Too lonely. Drowned

in inch of shampoo water. For best results, rinse, and repeat.  
I hereby leave my Zippo collection to Zoë Stone . . .”

I slouch against the tile and let the water hit my head  
and run over my ears in a loud streaming rush until I’m  
numb.



## Pack of Strays

**A**fter my shower, I climb into bed naked as the day I was born, a nap-that-spans-infinity on my woe-weary mind. Instantly, my speak buzzes to life.

“Butler,” Zoë says. “What’s beat?”

“In-n-out,” I mumble.

“How did throwing pointy sticks and running in circles go?”

“Track? Canceled due to rainage.”

“Word. So, pick you up in an hour?”

I grumble, “Dunno, Zo. I’m hacked, massive.”

“Gay.”

I sigh. “Jack—”

“Unacceptable, human,” Robo-Zoë says. “Pre-evening activities will officially commence in T-minus thirty minutes.”

“You get cooler every time you talk like that.”

“Obviously,” she deadpans. “Now get your butt in gear, flippity-flap. Box chain dynasty dining waits for no man.”

I groan and we hang up. I mentally assemble an outfit, which is much simpler than actually getting dressed. I’d forgotten that it’s Thursday, aka Betties’ Night Out, starring the usual suspects—Zoë, Maya, and me. I’m pondering who this *me* character might be, without much success, when a threatening buzz arrives.

*Get ur ass outta bed or we’re U-Hauling ur sad sack by the teats into Zoë’s whip if it’s the last mortal thing we ever do. Clothes, or no.*

*It’s like that?*

*Believe.*

So I lift my *sad sack* from the warm damp of my sheets, take a fistful of pain meds, pull on my visualized outfit, and even push my shag around under the blow dryer a bit. We go out for dinner at the cheapy chain restaurant with the cute waiter Maya always flirts up, and we sneak sips of peach schnapps from a stainless steel canteen called the

Five-Fingered Flask that I pinched from a convenience store many moons ago.

After a few rounds, I find my stride. Here, with these bet-ties, I'm Queen Badrat and I'm up to no good and visions of Eve Brooks fade into the diner's faux-wood facade and knickknack trinkets strung along the walls. I'm superfreeze fly in my patterned button-up and cock-eyed navy hat and I'm one shady character with a big, sideways grin.

"Maya-Jack," I say. "Give Waiter-Shaver a sneak peek of your new PG-13 tramp stamp and he'll think you're so switch he'll finally ask what you're into tonight."

Zoë scowls as she pulls last sip from Five-Fingered. "Or," she says. "Slip him your fake and order Mama some more happy sauce."

I'm in rare form. Medium rare. "Or, flash him the Marilyns and you, my dear, can have it all."

Maya spits her water back into her glass, blushing like a 1950s hemorrhoid cream commercial spokeswoman. Zoë pounds her fist on the table—she loves when I call Maya's breasts by their proper name.

"Lu," Zoë says. "I'll show you *my* tits if you give me Five-Fingered."

"Whoa, Jack. Go Children Slow. You can offer to show me your crank water-bra bumps a million times, but you'll never get this flask. I risked my life for this thing. I'm practically an outlaw." I grin, hold up Five-Fingered with one mitt and a peace sign with the other. "Mine-not-yours."



As we heel it out, Zoë and I secretly scratch Maya's name and number on the back of the check, tell him to buzz and we'll whisk him away from his mortal hell in the Flaming Chariot of Fire, aka Zoë's hot whip. But Waiter-Shaver doesn't buzz and we don't say a thing.

We linger in the lot to drag tars and then climb into the Chariot, pour more schnapps into Five-Fingered, and cut a wheel to the club to slice it up. Into the wee hours of night we go mega robo-teckto on the floor, our blood thumping in time with thick, pulsating electro-switch beats. I grind my pelvis into slick-rick shavers all night and even manage to sneak off and talk up the sexy-betty bartender a bit. And, per usual, I'm glad I let my Jacks drag my sad sack out. I'd never tell them as much, but I'm pretty sure they know.



On the late-night drive home, Zo and My sit in the front, scattin' up a goddamn gossip storm and I'm sauced and loose in the back, fighting the urge to spill my Never-Ending Pending soul to my apple-Jacks. But instead, I zone out, watching them laugh and wondering where we'll be in two months, ten years, a lifetime.

Us three cats have been apple-Jacks forever, our small group the broken remnants of a larger clan eroded away over the years, school's high tide wishing and washing Jacks in-n-out with the moon. Freshman year, after Eve Brooks ditched my sorry behind for shinier, more glamorous

shores, the three of us crystallized into this gang of mismatched socks. These betties know almost everything about me. Almost.

I catch Zoë's eye in the rearview and she pulls a face, faking like Maya's boring her with prom speak when I know Zo's just as hyped as the next flap-Jack. I think on how much I'm gonna miss them both. Don't know what I'll do without them.

Zoë and I are partners in crime. A terrible twosome. Boris and Natasha, Cheech and Chong, Thelma and Louise without the scarves and skirts. Zoë's a tough nut, hard as rocks, stiff as a board, straight as a nail. Her mom's a drop-out and her dad's a hillbilly hick. She makes it with flap-Jacks in the city—gutter-mouthed Jacks who bartend, and rough, slick shavers who sauce up and work on whips and enlist in the Service. We got mixed up on alters a year back, rolling too hard for too long, totally strung out. Bad news bears and near disaster. But we're on the wagon with the hardgoods. She's superfreeze on the dance floor and riot as hell. She's my closest ally. My rock. Zoë's Tabby Cat.

Maya opens her eyes wide, eating it up, as Zoë interrupts to spill on some detail of the particular shape and contour of some unfortunate shaver's nether parts.

Maya, she's way into heart-Jacks. She's henna-dyed red-head, sly, mysterious, awkward, and demure. She's Wife-in-Training and she wears her bleeding heart oozing and dripping onto her perfect sleeve. Clash-Jacks pick on her,

shavers especially, who feel her need and desire and use it to wound her. Maya's a good listener and a hornet's nest of honey. Maya's Siamese Cat.

I flip open my Zippo on my pants, over and over, watching the last dim lights of the city fade as we cruise home to the burbs, thinking on what it'd be like to pull a U-ey and speed away from the familiar treetops and ramshackle old farmhouses, plastic-sided McMansions cluttering wide-paved cul-de-sacs. Don't look back, never look back.

Me, I wish I were Tom Cat, but I'm not. I'm Feral. I'm private and elusive, wild and unpredictable. Lone. I'm quick and gritty and keep my scrappy nest of secrets in a den under an old, rusty junk banger. Houdini-junkyard-hobo, that's me.

Together, we're Tabby, Siamese, and Feral. We're a pack of strays and as we pull off and into a twenty-four-hour Quik Stop, Zoë points at the machines, a cuppa joe on her mind; Maya cranes her neck to scope a group of shaver Jacks lingering by the gas pumps; and I have my eye on an ad for a carton of tars inside the store. We get out, go our separate ways without saying a word.

We are feline. Hear us meow.

## Ancient History

I can hardly believe track season's over in two weeks when Coach announces it in the quiet, tense moments before our meet begins. Last season ever, for me.

We do team cheer, stretch, and then break, dispersing to our corners to jump and parade around like possessed mechanical monkeys. I'm having (another) one of those days where sex is literally the only thing I can think about.

Javelin in hand, I try and focus my thoughts, step out the distance from start line to launch. I jog, sidestep, mime a

throw. My foot goes over the line. I sigh, backtrack, take a look around, watch the 100-meter dashers lugging their blocks across the track, scoping out the competition. I get stuck on a massive ace cornrowed betty, long legs for miles bending into her starting squat. She powers her legs, up and down, up and down, and I try and keep my jaw from grazing the freshly mown lawn.

I know I should be more focused, setting a proper example and everything. I am, after all, co-captain this year, along with my hit-Jack, Luke Castle, the team's star mile-runner, and a betty we all call Rabbit, for her Energizer-like, marathon-style masochism. Together, the three of us are tri-captains. For the past two months I've been tri-ing to care.

I look around for Dad and my wee-Jack brother, Miles—Dad said they might make it—but to no avail. Then Castle saunters by and shoots me a movie-star smirk as he helps some cute sophomore betties with the high-jump mats. He flexes his biceps at me and winks when they're not looking and I flex the middle finger of my right hand.

Every day, before practice, Castle and I drag tars at the edge of the student parking lot and we scat about how much everything sucks. *Flip this, flip that.* You know, the uje. Go-Go Captain Rabbit wheels by in her banger, equipment crowding her back seat, and she waggles her digit at us and laughs, though she really does disapprove. Don't get me wrong, I

love Rabbit. But she's in-n-out. She isn't one of us, one of the slack-stars.

At practice, I've weaseled out of my races. I pass the baton and never look back. I tell Coach I hurt my hip flexor doing the triple jump, which is mostly true.

He says, "Bloody 'ell, Butler. Doesn't mean you can't still throw that javelin. You've got a scholarship on the line!" And I hold up my digits in peace signs.

"Rinse and repeat, Coach," I say. "Rinse and repeat."

I watch Rabbit lap the track for the gajillionth time and I yank the cold metal rod from the grass and curl my wrist, laying the silver shaft across my heart cage. I jog, sidestep, extend, and then hurl the steel up and out over the field. It arches through the air and I stand and admire my skills, thinking again about Eve Brooks, Ms. Ancient History. The javelin lands, sticking with a soft, satisfying swish in the manicured green turf and I have this weird feeling—like maybe she's nearby. Delusional thinking, I believe it's called. Then I'm reminded of when all this nonsense began, this throwing pointy sticks and running in circles.

The Crush That Broke the Camel's Back.

Two words. Raine. Hall.

She was a junior enrolled in ninth-grade French. She was doubling up with Spanish, which she already spoke, *fluently*. Madame thought she walked on water. I'm still not

sure she couldn't. Cut class, forgot homework, she got away with murder.

We sat in the back of the room and talked. Raine had long hair and sported tight flared jeans, penny loafers, and hippie shirts. We both drew. We did portraits of each other. She said, "Is my nose really that curved?" and ran her finger along its lioness bridge. I said, "Lemme try again," and grew my shag and wore tight flared jeans, penny loafers, and hippie shirts.

She was hit with my Satan-souled older sister, Marta, and they dragged canna and toasted together back in the day before Marta graduated and went on to achieve absolutely nothing. Raine and I, we talked about heart-Jacks. I despised hers. Raine ran track. She said I should try out.

She threw the javelin. I threw the javelin. She did the long jump. I did the triple. She did the high jump. I was crank at the high jump. I asked her if there was a low jump and she took my head in both hands and laughed and leaped over skyscrapers.

She ran the hurdles. I could only muster the 200-meter sprint. She ran long distances in her sleep. She was Dream Queen Gazelle. I was Princess I Heart You Raine Hall.

Twelfth grade. Today. I still run track, am being paid via college degree to throw a sharp piece of steel, jump three times in a row, and run a relay for 200 meters at a time. Raine came to a meet last season and I could barely look

at her. She's the Crush That Broke the Camel's Back and I am a caged bird, perched high on my secrets and shame.

And that's when I see *her* perched on the hill.

Evelyn Brooks. Here. At my meet. I was actually, finally, maybe a little bit right. It's a new sensation.

She's watching, looking slightly confused, standing there in this beat knee-length army coat, arms wrapped tight around her too-small frame. Pretty Penny entourage nowhere in sight. I gawk, shaking off the tight weave of Never-Ending Pending memories slowly suffocating my pulmonaries and I wave and she waves, gives me a crooked-smiled, I-know-it's-random-I'm-here shrug. I'm floored.

The javelin judges mosey past and I stumble over myself getting in line. And I throw like a prince. I even take names in my 200-meter relay. I run hard and sure, and after I sprint by the coaches with their stopwatches, I fold at the waist, mitts on my knees, my smoker's lungs burning, and look to see Eve's small frame as she thumbs-ups and waves once more, heeling it off to the student parking lot.

Castle comes up, shoves a thick shoulder into mine.

"Nice sprint, Jackie Joyner. Didn't know you had it in you."

"I don't."

He pokes me in the ribs and I wiggle, turn around, and pinch his left teat. Even though we made out last year and I pretended it never happened, Castle's still my best



shaver-Jack. One of a kind. He socks me lightly in the arm and strides away and it finally hits—like seventeen tons of bricks—that high school's really going to end. And Castle and I won't run track. And Zo and My and I won't see each other every goddamn day. *And* that Eve Brooks just showed up to my track meet and I have no idea why, but I sort of maybe do, but can't believe it's true because that's impossible and I'm brain-cell-challenged for even considering it.

I look again for the small silhouette of her oversized coat, see it fading away. She really was here. Imagine that.

## In the flesh

I t's only 9:30 in the morning and I can already hear Future Dad reading me the riot act over dinner. That is, if he were ever home for dinner.

Zo and I are in it deep, up to our chins, sitting outside Principal Chandler's office awaiting what can only be described as Judgment Day. We're choking on semi-stifled fits of laughter and I close my eyes to take long, deep breaths, my impish accomplice cracking into rippling giggles again and again. We've been unhinged for a half hour straight, the

results of said hysteria landing us here after Mr. Payne unceremoniously slapped us both with the heavy hand of the law.

"Poor Mithter Payne," I say, because I can't help it and there's something mentally wrong with me. "We really thhouldn't give the guy thuch a hard time."

"Thath perpothterouth," Zoë says. "Of courthe we thould."

And it's all over for us, again. Here's the thing, Mr. Payne is a bona fide lemon. And he's got this lisp. And there we were, sitting in physics, brains oozing from our ears, when he draws the lines of a magnetic field and looks up, all feverish and giddy.

*Tho, a male magnet tellth a female magnet that from her backthide, he thinkth theeth repulthive. But from the front . . . he findth her very attractive!*

But then nobody's laughing and the poor guy's eyes are bugging from his head.

*Don't you underthand? he begs. He thought thee wath hot thtuff! A real thekthy li'l mama!*

And it couldn't be helped: Zoë and I lost our marbles. It wath the thtupiditht thing anybody'th ever thaid. So we go massive Ophelia with laughter for ten minutes straight, holding the class hostage with our hysteria. When Mr. Payne finally gave us the ax, we detoured our trip to the office by busting into the band room and pilfering these massive, two-foot-tall marching band uniform hats, blue and gold

with plastic chin straps and ornate, glittering tassels. We got busted a second time, parading repeatedly past Maya's calc class, by the crotchety old hall monitor Mr. Sproul, and now here we are, sitting in too-small plastic seats outside Principal Chandler's office, trying to lace it up, enormous pillars of school pride perched on our gone-amok heads. I'm gonna miss this so much, it's unhealthy.

"Zoë-Jack," I sigh. "What the flip am I gonna do without you next year?"

She frowns. "Seriously. Who am I gonna hate everyone else with?" And I shake my head.

"Really. You're like, you're like my—"

"Can the after-school special, Jack," she laughs, and I open my mouth but she slaps my jaw shut with her palm. She smiles. "I know."

I sigh, sit back, scope her from the corner of my eye. I knock twice on the side of her towering hat. "I dare you to wear this thing in when she calls you."

"Um."

"And you have to walk in and pretend like it's not there."

She considers.

"She might call you in first." And I realize I hadn't thought of that.

"Fine," I say, grinning, fidgeting in my seat. "I'm game."

"Me too."

We sit in silence, waiting, tick-tock, tick-tock, till the door

creaks open and we lean forward in our seats. The anticipation is deadly. Chandler coughs. And then grunts Zoë's name from inside. Zo looks at me, eyes wide.

"You can do this, Jack," I say, "I believe in you." But she's shaking her head. Chandler grunts again, louder, and I yank Zoë up by the arm, walk her slowly to the door. "Move it," I say, pushing her in. "But watch yourself," I whisper. "*Theeth a real thekthy li'l mama.*"

And my bestest apple-Jack is all but pissing her skinnies as she crosses the threshold to her doom, blue-and-gold band hat perched crooked and proud upon her head.



For a premed prospect, it's Chandler's opinion my attitude's gonna need a *serious face-lift, major reconstructive surgery*. I don't remind her I'm an honors student, aced my AP exams, and recently received the largest Division 1 women's track-and-field scholarship of any student-athlete, *ever*, in the history of the school. Not that athletics will automatically make me a viable future MD but it certainly doesn't hurt.

I'm mulling over how to get out of the after-school detention she's issued, when I turn the corner, band hat tucked under my arm, and am suddenly nose-to-nose with none other than Ms. Ancient History, Eve Brooks, in the flesh, walking up to the adjacent door of the guidance counselor's office. She's flush-faced, standing on my toes, and I

stumble back, laughing, grabbing hold of her too-bony shoulders.

“Eve Brooks,” I yammer. “I understand stalking me, but this is ridiculous.” I feel my neck get hot, remembering her tiny frame huddled at my meet.

She smiles, nods at Chandler’s door. “Whaddya in for?” and I hold an invisible pistol to my head, pull the trigger.

“Murder?”

I laugh. “Just too beat for this street.”

“Beatstreet, eh? Pretty cool.”

“What about you? They finally expelling smart kids for making the rest of us look bad?” And she laughs, but then the door opens and she’s called inside and I don’t want her to go. “You came to my meet,” I say quick, and she smiles again, points to the strangeness that is the marching band hat under my arm. And then she’s gone, her tiny body moving like a shadow. Outta sight, but not outta mind.

I pick my heart up off the carpet and heel it back to class, taking my precious time. I can picture it now: Eve smiling and nodding as Guidance Counselor UselessMcNobody babbles and banters college bull and Eve sits, starving, wasting away while the Thickly Settled cogs in charge suck grant money off of her switch SAT stats and don’t give two flying cranks that one of their best students is an eating-disorder disappearing act.

“This place is a heap of steaming manure,” I say to a glass case full of cobwebbed copper trophies frozen forever

in mid-throw. I pick up my pace and make a beeline for the cafeteria, figure it's second breakfast somewhere in the world and I can always count on my gal pal Doris in the kitchen to sneak me a plate of soggy huevos rancheros. I'll shoot the breeze with some freshies and munch a snack for the both of us. For me and Eve.

I like the sound of that. Me and Eve.