

government spying on us through our phones, I lose sight of Layla for just a moment. The crowd parts in a zigzag fashion and beneath the light machine, where the red, green, and blue hit the hardest, I see *her*—this statuesque beauty—hiding behind a trail of long brown hair and thick-framed glasses. With her hands folded snug in her lap, she’s looking around, sinking farther into the couch’s wilted threads as if hoping to not be seen, but *I* see her because hiding is typically what I do, too.

“My God,” I say. The cigarette hangs from my bottom lip, and this girl, who finally stops talking, is still looking at up me, glitter plummeting from her silver-tinted eye shadow. The flakes dance down to the tops of my boots like little asshole snowflakes. That shit should be banned. She follows my eyes across the floor to the big, plaid couch, letting her smile fade. Losing interest (finally), she drops my hand and disappears into the sea of people from which she first emerged.

With my heart nearly beating out of my chest, I watch Couch Girl. The way she tucks her hair behind her ears with precision, the way she nudges her falling glasses up the bridge of her nose, the way she pretends she’s not as earth-shatteringly stunning as she really is. Radiance surrounds her—not a halo, but some kind of ethereal glow—and I can’t look away. She looks up at me. Once, twice, three times; tries to avoid my eyes, but can’t. For the length of a whole song, my gaze doesn’t abandon her, and by the middle of the next song, she’s smiling at me. *Score*. Normally, I’d hang back, wait and see if we “accidentally” cross paths, but Layla’s determined eyes are on me so I up my game. To finish her.

I push through the haze and find my way to Couch Girl. She looks up at me with these electric green eyes that are more evident through her lenses, and I do something I thought I’d never in a million years do—hold out my hand.

“I don’t dance,” she says, reluctant.

“Me either. Too many germs.” A few seconds pass before she decides to take my humble offering. I pull her to her feet, and our palms smash together and slide across the dampness. This would normally gross me out, but I kind of want to linger in it with her. Gently, I lead her to the center of the floor where *we* are now gestural shapes on this dark canvas, too.

“Help me out here,” I say. “See that girl over there?” I point to Layla with my middle finger. A silent dig, if you will.

She nods.

“I need her to see us talking.”

She scrunches up her face. “I’m not getting in the middle of whatever *that* is.” Her finger is waving around, grabbing Layla’s attention. “But thanks.”

As she tries to walk away, I tug on her sleeve. Eyebrows arched, and my own full puppy-lipped pout now in full effect. “Please.”

She must sense my sadness (read: desperation), because with one sharp sigh and a roll of her beautiful eyes, she digs her feet firmly into the floor. “Okay, fine. Just for a minute though.”

We’re not dancing, not swaying or grinding, but here we are, in the epicenter of it all. She crosses her arms, I cross mine, too. “So are we going to actually talk or just pretend?” she snaps.

“Who the hell *are* you?” I ask with a smirk.

She looks down. “Who *am* I? You mean *what name was I given at birth*, or *who am I* in a general sense?”

I start to respond, but she interrupts.

“Because, in said general sense, I’m a girl at a party I should’ve never come to but did and am now trapped in this weird interaction between subjects A and B while I’d much rather be at home teaching my chunky cat how to drink from a running faucet, thank you very much.”

With my gaze pressed hard on her porcelain skin, I drop

the last bit of cigarette to the floor and twist the cinder into the grooves until it burns no more. My smile grows, and all of a sudden, I don't care if Layla's watching or not. "Fair enough."

"Who are *you*?" she replies with a touch of snark.

I look down to the holes in my shirtsleeve where the fabric has worn, and I realize I have two choices here. I can tell her the lame, true story of my life and wait for her to walk away, or I can do the opposite and hope that, for one perfect night, I'm allowed to feel this way about a girl who's way out of my league, knowing the second I leave here, this, whatever *this* is, leaves with it.

Plus, it'd totally piss Layla off, and that makes it sweeter.

"Well," I say, "in a general sense, I'm a boy at a party I should've never come to but did and am now *gloriously* trapped in this enlightened conversation with, probably, the most captivating girl in the entire house. In an even generaler sense"—she stops me, tells me that's not a word—"I'm nobody. Well, until I saw you." My smile widens. To sell it.

She blushes. Her fingers fumbling through her long, silky strands, she objects. "One, that's so ridiculously cliché, and two, statistically speaking, you're a percentage of this party as a whole house equation. Without the exact number of bodies—I estimate around thirty-seven—you're something like 2.7027 percent somebody without ever seeing me."

My heart drops through this creaky, wooden floor, and this smile that's still pasted—it's about to rip my face in two. The forces of the earth have rumbled beneath my feet and combined, climbing up through the dirt core, into my heart. We stand here, for, I don't know, what feels like an infinity (she abruptly explains infinity is a concept and there's no way to solve for  $x$ , so in reality, we can't actually stand here that long), and all these things start flying out of my mouth—how I graduated last year, I'm only in town for tonight—and with

every passing lie, I think, *You're no better than Kyle*, which makes me sick—like, physically ill with the sweats and a weird clamminess and all these symptoms that remind me how I felt when I first met Layla.

When the song ends, we hold on to this moment that, in the space between, feels like a million electrodes have begun to rattle and vibrate. I feel it fuse to my bones. It connects us together, grounds us, right here, right now. Layla's gone—*who cares now?*—but just as I start to ask for her number, or the name she was given at birth, a tiny little thing with big, springy curls that dangle over one eye pulls at Couch Girl's arm.

“Ready to go?” the friend asks. She's looking me over in this protective kind of way, and I know what she's thinking because I beat her to it.

While the two of them decide, a hand slaps the back of my shirt hard enough to leave a mark. I turn around to see Kyle's cousin's friend's college boyfriend with a worried look on his face. “Your friend might need to go to the hospital. He's, like, not waking up.”

With a heavy sigh, something that follows Kyle's hijinks often, I silently agree to retrieve my sort-of-ill-behaved dog that does as he pleases. Before I can even *think* about what to say to Couch Girl next, I spin around and she, and her tiny friend, are gone.

Just like that, it's over before it even started.

Story of my goddamned life.

Two days have passed since the house party, and I'm still thinking about what an idiot Kyle is. The only chance I had to talk to (probably) the most interesting lady specimen I've ever met, and he totally screwed me. One night to be all the things I'm not, maybe make out a little, and instead, I spent the wee hours of yesterday making sure his ass didn't die of alcohol poisoning—again. And now here we are,