Pastel Shirts and Miniskirts
An Ethnographic Novella
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As her father signaled left and pulled off the highway, Belle started crossing and uncrossing her legs. She instinctively put an unmanicured finger in her mouth and began nibbling the nail until it grew pliable with her saliva and began to tear. “Almost there, honey!” her mother announced, twisting in the front seat to look behind her, “Oh and you really should stop biting your nails.” Belle kept silent. What she really wanted to do was scream, “Yes, obviously we’re almost there, we’ve been driving for long enough! And I’ll bite my damn nails if I want to. They’re mine to bite.” Instead she busied herself by pressing her forehead to the warm window and gazed outside. The mandatory Mobil, Shell, and Citgo stations streamed past with gas prices within the same two-cent range, followed by dingy blue-trimmed motels, fast food chains, and a Salvation Army. Ah, the joys of living near an American highway!

She pulled away and examined her reflection; limp light brown hair (greasy right now from way too much time spent in a car), blue-green eyes (piercing, but not the color of the ocean nor the sky, more like worn-in turquoise), and a pale complexion (she burned after about four-and-a-half minutes in the sun). She wasn’t impressed. If she had been granted the buoyant curls of her older sister Jasmine, that would be one thing, or if she had been so lucky as to inherit the tanning qualities of her younger brother Zach, that would be another. But unfortunately Jasmine and her curls were bouncing their way through senior year at UCLA, while Zach and his perpetually golden tan were soon to be initiated into the excitement of high school. In the meantime, Belle was virtually a third of the way across the country, far from anything she knew and felt comfortable with, while her friends were all at home partying at Ohio State University.

She envisioned people from high school barhopping in Columbus during orientation week for OSU, rushing together for fraternities and sororities, walking around the city streets she knew so well, and meeting people in the slew of the fifty thousand other students. Out of the hundred people in her graduating class at the highly-regarded public school she had attended, more than half were enrolled at OSU. I didn’t want that, that’s why I’m here, Belle feebly persuaded herself. Big state school? People I’ve grown up with? Nope, time for something new.

At this nervous moment though, she racked her brain for convincing reasons as to why she hadn’t chosen Ollard. Like Branksome, it was a liberal arts school, and with its conservatory of music it was even a little artsy-er than Branksome. On top of that, it was only about two and a half hours from the suburb of Columbus that Belle called home, and a few people from her high school went every year – close enough to be comforting but far enough that she could have her own space. The admissions office had even sent a handwritten note saying, “We love local Ohioans! Please come to Ollard,” but at the time it seemed too quaint and safe, not adventurous enough. Plus, her parents strongly encouraged her to get out of Ohio; they thought it was “character-building,” whatever that meant, and Jasmine running away to glamorous LA didn’t help Belle’s cause. So after much pondering Belle made a hasty decision to tick the “accept” box on Branksome’s acceptance card. She shoved the check for the deposit in the envelope and quickly sent it off before having time to doubt her choice. With first-day-jitters overtaking her, she began to question her selection. She wondered what could have been if she were now cruising on the winding roads to Ollard rather than this long road to Branksome.
They continued driving further towards the heart of town and astonishingly quickly the scenery turned from drab and depressing to Maine-chic; cafés with outdoor seating occupied by young families, an outdoor adventure outfitters, an organic market, a bookstore, a couple of pubs, and a hot-dog-and-lemonade stand perched on the edge of the park. Maine Street (pun intended) was just a little wider than you might imagine in a quaint small town, a tip-off that this was some sort of destination.

Off the highway and desperate for the taste of a non-recycled non-air-conditioned breeze, Belle rolled down her window and tilted her face up to the late morning sun. In truth, it hadn’t been the drive today that killed her – it had been only two and a half hours since they had left Boston – but rather the thirteen hour trek from Columbus, Ohio to Boston. It was the kind of drive where your butt gets sore from sitting too long and you find yourself snacking on beef jerky and munchkins because you have nothing better to do. Although Belle had done nothing but read, eat and vegetate in the backseat, the drive still exhausted her and the night before she had quickly collapsed in the sterile hotel room cot next to her parents’ king-sized bed.

And now, after almost two days of driving, three days of goodbyes, six days of packing, three weeks of graduation parties, two months of hostessing at the Cheesecake Factory, and eleven months of planning, stressing, studying, SATs, essays, and filling out forms, she was finally here. Branksome. Her new home.

They approached the campus which kissed the edge of town, and slowly cruised, following the signs pointing to the first year dorms. The campus looked different from what Belle remembered. The late-August light did wonders for the old brick buildings and the trees were pregnant with green glowing leaves. Flowers clumped together in lavish yellows and reds, hinting at the northeastern fall foliage that would soon follow. What a drastic change from the downy, snow-enveloped cocoon she remembered from her college tour. The quad was visible now! No need to stay on the snowplowed pathways, you could walk straight across the grass to your art class in the Visual Arts Center or your music class in Gribson. In fact, most of the academic buildings at Branksome surrounded the quad or extended slightly outward. Walking from one end of campus to the other would take you ten minutes, tops.

Despite the beauty of the buildings, Belle sensed something undeniably eerie. Maybe it was that the campus seemed relatively deserted or that she just wasn’t well oriented in terms of directions, but ironically the warmth that she had felt on the biting winter day of her tour seemed worlds away.

“Dad, left here,” Belle announced, her voice catching in her throat. Turn around! she almost cried, Let’s go back to Boston! She didn’t of course, not after the journey it took to get here. Instead, her father steered onto a road that pierced into the epicenter of campus. “This is Whitney. This is it,” she continued with slight reverence and awe. Although it was virtually identical to the other seven first year dorms (some of which they had already driven by), and although she had not only seen it before but also been inside it on her tour, it was undeniably daunting.

She opened the door of the car and stepped out, stretching her legs in a little side-to-side dance. Levi’s hung loose around her hips and she wore a plain navy blue crewneck shirt given to her from a 5K run she completed that summer. Like most girls at Branksome hauling in their stuff that August day, she had spent at least a little time analyzing what she was going to wear, but in the end she sacrificed cuteness for comfort.
and figured that one outfit couldn’t matter that much. Her parents were on the same page: mom sported a men’s Hanes white T-shirt, tight exercise capris with bright yellow stripes down the sides and matching yellow Crocs, while dad wore jeans perpetually stained with earth from the garden (“They’re clean! Newly washed!” he insisted when Belle called him out on their filth), and a shirt that stretched across his belly thanks to the extra pounds he accumulated over the past few years. Belle was torn between finding her parents endearing or embarrassing in their outdated unfashionable outfits, but then she looked down at her own attire and figured she wasn’t that different.

People – students – in bright yellow shirts bounded over to their car. “Hi! I’m Ali,” said a girl with a messy bun of brown waves. “Can we help you bring your bags up?” Belle forgot the girl’s name immediately after she heard it, but she let the yellow-clad army of students carry her gear up to the third floor. Not that there was really all that much to carry; only a duffle bag of clothes, a smaller bag of sheets, towels and pillows, and miscellaneous items like loose shoes, a mini-fridge left over from her father’s tool shed days, and random picture frames, posters and books she thought might be useful. Who didn’t love their Mirriam Webster dictionary?! Belle thought.

Her mother, chatty as always, asked Messy Bun where she was from (just outside of Boston), what her major was (undeclared as of now), and what class year she was (a sophomore). A sophomore? Belle wondered. She seemed so much older. She knew her stuff around here. Just carrying the bags up a couple of flights of stairs Messy Bun had already said hi to three people, and referred to two of them by name! Granted, they were wearing similar yellow shirts, but still…

“What are the yellow shirts for?” Belle’s mom continued her grand inquisition.

“Oh we’re all living in the same social house, it’s called Wade. I’m sure you’ve heard of Branksome’s social house system? We got rid of fraternities about twelve years ago because we felt they didn’t represent the feeling of inclusiveness we wanted to propagate on campus, so instead there are college houses, otherwise known as social houses. Each freshman, uhhh, first year brick is paired with a social house and people have social house buddies, just like an older friend or person to know on campus. Social houses throw parties, but like, any student is welcome to come. They also host professor dinners, have documentary and film screenings, smaller a cappella concerts, things like that. So I’m in Wade, assigned to Whitney. Double W!” and proceeded to giggle at her own joke. Belle didn’t laugh, she couldn’t handle someone else’s ditziness while simultaneously dealing with her own nerves.

They reached the third floor and leading the way, Belle cautiously moved down the hallway, glancing at the numbers next to each entrance and peering in the rooms with open doors. The white, ascetic boxes were slowly transformed into more comfortable spaces with frilly blue curtains, colorful lamps, cushy futons, pictures from home and posters of early nineties movies or Johnny Depp. “Three-oh-nine,” Belle muttered quietly. She Shakily took a breath, paused at the top of her inhale, and pushed the propped door open.

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The first thing her eyes focused on upon entering was a butt, lime green in color, excitedly high in the air like the dot to an i. For a moment Belle couldn’t locate the head that went with it. “Oh hey,” came a scratchy and blasé voice from the dangling head a good two or three feet below the butt. She jerked to standing, brushing dirty blonde hair
from her forehead, and came over to Belle. “I’m Charlotte,” said lime butt. She was wearing running shorts so bright they probably could have supplied the whole campus with electricity, a bra-like exercise top, athletic socks pulled mid-shin, and sneakers. This girl looked like a soccer mom ready to hop into her Volvo.

“I’m Belle. Where are you from?”
“Colorado. Outside of Denver.”

“Nice,” Belle responded, “I’ve never been there but I hear it’s beautiful.” Nothing. Silence. Did this girl Charlotte have no social graces? When someone, when your roommate, is attempting to make awkward conversation, it’s the unspoken rule that you ask easy-to-answer, small-talk type questions back! Apparently Charlotte hadn’t gotten the memo. Okay, fine. Take two.

“So why did you choose Branksome?”

Charlotte had already gone back to work, butt in the air, separating her underwear from her shirts (she had clearly stuffed her bags at the last minute). “I love trees.”


“Yeah, but not near the ocean. I wanted ocean and trees.” Oh, of course, it all made sense now. Crystal clear.

Belle’s mom shot her a look, one raised eyebrow, the other tilting downwards in confusion or questioning, and for the first time in the past few hours Belle appreciated that her mom was there with her. Despite how annoying, talkative or nosy she could be, it was nice to have someone to commiserate with.

Belle wondered how she had been paired with Charlotte – perhaps they had similar tastes in music? Were they both early birds? Or maybe the ideal roommate pairs had already been made by the “big men in charge” and her room was merely the leftovers and rejects thrown together.

Instead of dwelling on the slight eccentricities of her roommate though, Belle and her parents got to work unpacking and reorganizing, working around Charlotte with few exchange of words other than an “excuse me” here or a “do you mind if I put up this poster?” there.

A couple of hours quickly passed before an angry growl erupted from Belle’s stomach. Amongst the excitement and nerves of moving everything in, they had completely forgotten to eat lunch. She glanced at her watch, 4:45, and slowly looked up to find her father standing in her bedroom, her mother standing in front of her closet, both clearly pleased with themselves for completing their assigned tasks.

“Well Bellaboo, I think our job here is done. And I was looking through the first-year orientation guide; don’t you have a floor proctor meeting at 5?” Belle nodded. “We better get out of here then!” her mom responded with a smile and forced excitement.

The walk down the stairs seemed as drawn-out as the walk up. With an instant sudden force, Belle didn’t want her parents to leave, she didn’t want them to drive back to Boston, to spend the night on the outskirts of the city, to drive the thirteen hour achy-hip-inducing ride home without her. She didn’t want them picking all the vegetables that had yet to ripen in the garden, she didn’t want to miss out on the last shorts-wearing days of summer, driving an hour or two out of the city to go to her grandparents’ cabin,
swinging on the rope swing to precariously plunge into the pond. Who would she be friends with at this place? Charlotte was essentially non-social or at least non-interested, and of course there were another 493 people in her class in the same boat as her, arriving here with at most one or two friends but most likely none. How do you find the people you’re going to click with in a throng that huge though? There were less than a hundred people per grade at her public high school in Columbus and that was big enough for Belle.

Standing at the front of their worn-in, slightly dented Subaru, Belle’s mom interrupted her anxious thoughts and opened her arms wide, “Come give me a big hug.” Belle didn’t need the invitation. She crumpled into her mother’s arms, allowing her eyes to fill with tears but policing the boundaries and making sure they didn’t spill over. “I love you very much Belle, I know you’ll have a fabulous time here. I have a good feeling about this,” said her mother as she kissed her on the cheek with enough force to knock Belle over.

“And now my turn,” said her father as she was guided by the shoulder into his reassuring hug. For the last time in a while, she allowed herself to be a child, steered by her parents and protected by their thoughts, their words, their arms. He too, kissed Belle on the cheek. Belle lifted either arm for one more group hug, mom on one side dad on the other, then pulled away as she forced a feeble-yet-hopeful smile. With that, her parents hopped in the beaten-up Subaru and pulled out of the driveway, waving out the window as they turned the corner into the dappled afternoon sunlight.

When Belle ascended the stairs yet again, she was out of breath and a little sweaty, plus she was wearing the super-comfortable-not-so-cute shirt from earlier – not the way you want to make a first impression on your floormates sitting with your proctor – which was exactly how she found them. She took a seat in the circle and examined the makeup of the group. Aside from Charlotte (who was now wearing flood pants resembling those of a South American farmer, orange Crocs and 5K fundraiser shirt), most of the other girls were wearing jeans and tight t-shirts or colorful sundresses, cardigans, and one staple “stand out” piece, like a bow in their hair, a Tiffany’s necklace, or pearl earrings. The guys were divided between shorts and a sports t-shirt, or khaki pants and a button-down pastel shirt. Ubiquitous among both the guys and the girls were brown leather flip-flops (Belle quickly learned they were called Rainbows). Where did these kids get clothes like that? Although some were in casual jeans and shirts, they were all dressed impeccably despite a day of traveling and unpacking. Not a single tear, smudge, stain, rip, hole or even fray to be found (except for those done purposely on designer clothing, of course).

The proctor introduced himself as John from Jersey, a sophomore with reddish hair who played club rugby and didn’t seem to take himself too seriously. “We’ll have all kinds of talks, debriefings, rules and info sessions later during orientation, but I’m sure all of you are hungry and tired, so let’s just go ahead and introduce ourselves.”

They went around the circle saying the requisite name-and-hometown combo, then John threw in ‘your favorite dance move’. Out poured relics from the eighties: the funky chicken, the electric slide, the shopping cart, the moonwalk, and the sprinkler. Names and faces blurred into each other. Between Trents and Wills and Kyles and Sarahs
and Alexandras and Lindsays, Belle couldn’t keep them straight. They all sounded the same, looked the same, dressed the same. Until someone caught Belle’s eye…

Cascading white-blonde hair and ocean grey eyes, for a split second Belle assumed that the girl fit the WASP mold perfectly. Except this anomaly clearly didn’t. She was far too funky in skinny black acid wash jeans and yellow high top Converse, and far too relaxed leaning back on her thin lanky arms. When she spoke, she took command of the laughs and tamed them into a reverent silence, oozing confidence that made her appear older than her eighteen years. She calmly introduced herself as Lola from “the city,” as though the only city that ever mattered was New York. How obnoxious, thought Belle. This girl is a pompous little brat. The clincher was her dance move: the Cotton-Eye Joe line dance. Yeah right, Belle thought, like this girl ever got off her high horse for long enough to even make it to the dance floor.

If Belle was consciously intimidated by anything, Lola represented the epitome of that intimidation. She was beautiful and worldly, well-spoken and suave. She was the type of girl who guys would jump off waterfalls to please and who girls would malevolently whisper about purely out of jealousy. She was what threatened Belle’s self-worth. Belle was well-aware that being moderately popular in high school did not guarantee anything in college. Moreover, she hailed from a small suburban public school outside of Columbus, Ohio, for Christ’s sake. Belle knew that popularity was flexible and defined along different lines in college than it was in high school, but making friends still happened on comparable grounds. She felt like small change compared to crisp hundred dollar bills.

Out of the nineteen people on her floor, Bella could recall precisely three names: John’s, Lola’s, and her own. She could tell she wasn’t the only one who remembered Lola’s name. As they walked together to the dining hall, the guys on their floor approached her like birds darting from the flock to dive for fish. One individual would attempt it at a time, carefully preparing himself and swooping in. She would graciously entertain their questions, but her eyes darted away examining the trees, the buildings, other groups of people, until the dude eventually ran out of questions, dropped back to join his pack, and another one decided he had enough confidence to risk bruising his ego.

Entering Thorton was like entering a little kid’s Mecca (apart from maybe Toys ‘R Us). FroYo station in service breakfast, lunch and dinner? Check. Hamburgers and hot dogs at every lunch? Yup. Cereal available whenever? Of course. Come to think of it, it was a nutritionist’s Mecca (fully-stocked salad bar at lunch and dinner), a vegetarian’s Mecca (vegan and vegetarian options always offered and clearly marked), and a hippy’s Mecca too (local and organic food whenever possible). After swiping your ID card, you turned left to enter a spacious, high-ceiled room filled with a plethora a food; a sandwich bar or display cooking depending on the meal, two lines of hot food along the back wall, a salad bar in the middle, and cereal, drinks and coffee to the rightmost side. Belle didn’t know where to start first and grabbed everything that looked remotely appealing. By the end of her tour around the space, her tray was piled high with white spinach lasagna, curried butternut squash soup, homemade bread, a side of salad, and blueberry crumble for dessert. She joined the rest of her floor sitting at a long table below three-storey high ceilings and windows that stretched the entire length of the walls. The late evening sun shone in so certain people facing the light had to squint to see those
sitting across the table from them. With the sun on her back and her plate full, Bella felt serene in the first time for days.

“You really wanted to try out everything, huh?” said a plain and mousey girl sitting across from Belle.

“Sorry?” said Belle. She didn’t understand.

“Nothing, never mind. It’s just like, you got one of every main dish. I just figured you wanted to try everything.”

Belle looked at Mousey’s tray. A plateful of salad. Doctored up with some peppers and cucumbers, a few chunks of tofu, maybe a chickpea or twenty, but it was nothing to be impressed by. She looked around; the guys were eating similarly to how Belle was eating, but all of the girls were sticking to a piece of chicken, a bit of fish, a tofu steak, and some salad. Except for Lola.

“I think the lasagna is delicious,” announced Lola as she forked a messy, cheesy bite into her mouth. Lola didn’t look into her eyes, no sign of sympathy or commiseration, just a declaration and Mousey instantly shut up.

Belle finished the rest of her lasagna in peace.

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Orientation, Belle concluded, was like tying blindfolds on a gymnasium full of people, spinning them around twenty times, then telling them they should open their eyes and run to the other end of the room. In other words, pure mayhem. No one knew what they were doing, where they were going, or why they were there, and everyone was asking the person next to them who was just as clueless.

At 8 AM the next morning, Belle walked over to Thornton in the misty haze. Alone and (slightly) calm, she helped herself to a plate of eggs and toast, sat down with a glass of milk, and opened up the New York Times thoughtfully provided by Branksome Student Government. Just as she was biting down on her first mouthful, a screech of laughter cut across the dining hall. It was an extended, forced shriek – no one holds their initial surprise that long – designed to garner attention from others. Belle looked in the direction of the piercing sound and saw Mousey sitting at a table with people from their floor; the Kyles and Jessicas looked good together in matching pastels. Belle thought about how she would ruin the color scheme if the were sitting there in her denim shorts and plaid shirt (she got it from Urban Outfitters not some country store though!). It was Mousey who had laughed and that didn’t surprise Belle. As much as she found the girl obnoxious, Belle couldn’t help but feel slighted that she hadn’t been invited to this intimate gathering. Even Lola was there (wearing purple jeans and a loose cut-off tank top), albeit looking pretty bored as she too flipped through the New York Times. “She would,” thought Belle, though she was secretly pleased that they had at least one commonality. The serenity of the early morning meal shattered, Belle quickly finished her breakfast and put her tray away before awkwardly running into the big hoard.

She walked back to Whitney still troubled by the sight of half of her floor eating together without her and she didn’t hear someone walk up behind her.

“Hey Belle,” said a cool voice. Belle turned and saw Lola keeping pace beside her, coffee cup in hand. New Yorker through and through.

“Hey,” responded Belle, surprised that Lola even knew her name. “How’s it going?”
“Probably the same as it’s going for you. We’re all pretty much doing the same thing at this point, right?” said Lola with a tinge of sarcasm. Belle couldn’t tell if Lola was making fun of her or of the entire situation in general.

“Right…” said Belle, deciding to play it safe and agree. Discomfort ensued (at least on Belle’s part) and they walked for a few paces in silence. Belle couldn’t help herself, “So how was breakfast? I saw you were there with a bunch of people from our floor,” she prodded.

“Yeah, Annika organized it last night. We were all hanging out and she suggested we go together in the morning. Where were you last night? You could have come.”

“I was really tired, I conked out at like, 10 o’clock,” admitted Belle.

“Well don’t worry, you didn’t miss anything. Last night or this morning. I only went because Annika is my roommate and her alarm went off at 6:30,” said Lola reverting again to her chilly self.

So Mousey was Annika. And Annika was Lola’s roommate. It made more sense now. Belle never would have imagined Lola willingly hanging out with a brown-nose prepster like Annika.

They walked up the steps to the door of Whitney and both reached for the door at the same time. “Go ahead,” said Lola as she held the door open. Again, Belle couldn’t tell whether Lola was being facetious or genuine. She did as she was told though, and walked through the doors and up the stairs where she found John patiently waiting to lead them to their first day’s activities.

The hours passed innocuously enough, even if the procedure was rushed and boring. One meeting after another: class welcome from the president, meet your academic advisor, reconvene with your proctor group for lunch, break into your assigned summer reading discussion groups, free time for an hour, proctor group dinner, then carted off to some sort of presentation or show. The routine was virtually identical for the next three days except that the meetings also included choosing first-year seminars, seeing different parts of the campus, choosing classes, and the like. On their fourth night John escorted them to their evening activity – a sex talk or presentation of which Belle wasn’t exactly clear on the details.

Now, she had talked about sex before, a little with her parents, sex ed. in school, and definitely with her friends, but never before had she been in a room with 494 strangers listening to a guy and a girl pretend to be fifteen years younger than their thirty-five-year-old selves and comment on the awkwardness of a drunken hookup. It was painful just to watch and Belle giggled at the jokes while tuning out much of the rest. Yes, get consent. Of course, wear a condom. Duh, don’t be unconscious. She didn’t know where she stood amongst all these other people though. How many of them had had sex? She hadn’t. She had come pretty close with her boyfriend back home, Ryan, but after dating for five months they broke up in March on the grounds that they were probably going to different schools. Together they decided that the sooner they get over each other, the better and the easier it would be.

The man and woman on stage continued their performance and were now miming drinking at a party. Her thoughts now turned to drinking; how many people in this room had gotten drunk before? She had been tipsy with her parents off of wine, and a couple of times she and her friends had snuck into her parents’ liquor cabinet and taken a shot of rum, but it was always clandestine and in small groups, swallowing barely enough
alcohol for them to feel it. Belle was excited to explore drinking further, but she knew that she wouldn’t go crazy with it or anything.

The skit left her with more questions than answers. Not questions about sex per se, but more about how it worked at Branksome. It’s not like she was necessarily looking for a boyfriend or anything, but it would be nice to find someone (especially before Ryan did).

“We hope you enjoyed the show today,” the man on stage was saying. “You’re now going to go back to your proctor groups and have what we hope is an honest and thoughtful conversation. Thanks for coming and enjoy your evening!”

A sex talk with her proctor group? This night is getting worse by the second, thought Belle, wishing she felt comfortable enough to whisper it to a friend sitting next to her.

Sitting in a circle for the umpteenth time in the four days they had been at Branksome, the floor began to feel like a second home. People had established their general spots by this point – Annika and a few of her preppy followers to Belle’s right, Lola a few people away, Charlotte and most of the guys filling in the other side of the circle, and Belle bridging the gap between the two and facing the stairwell that led both up- and downstairs.

John sat down. “Okay look,” he prefaced, “I know that performance can seem kind of stupid, and when I was a freshman we all laughed at it, but it definitely brings up some important points. One thing I want to mention is that all proctors have condoms on their doors, feel free to take them whenever you need them.” The guy to Belle’s right whispered something to his buddy, then cracked up and gave him a high five with a reverberating palm-slap. Belle nonchalantly looked down and picked her nails eager to avoid this topic in public.

“Obviously you all know to use a condom when you have sex, but it can be difficult to put on correctly when you’re drunk or it’s dark in the room or you’re nervous or whatever. So I have a little project for us…” He turned to rummage in some plastic bags behind him. “Here’s a reminder of middle school. Everyone take a banana,” he passed the bag around, “and here are the condoms,” a brown paper envelope followed the banana bag. “Just to add in an extra challenge, everyone put a blindfold on,” he said as strips of fabric were also passed from one person to the next. John explained, “So the deal is you put on the blindfold, open the condom and put it properly on the banana, raise your hand and I’ll tell you if it’s okay, then you can open your eyes and watch everyone else struggle.” He was clearly trying to make a joke out of it, but Belle wasn’t feeling so jocular. From the exuberant giggles of Annika’s Posse and the hooting from the dudes to her right, Belle sensed that no one else was getting the sweaty palms that she was.

“Okay, ready?” said John, and everyone rushed to put their blindfolds on. “Set. Go!”

Belle held the banana between her feet as she sat in butterfly position. The round packaging of the condom was moistened by the dampness of her hand. She tried to tear it but it wouldn’t give. The plastic packet stretched but wouldn’t open. She ran her finger around the edge. Once. Twice. She heard laughs from the guys, a girl muttered, “This is harder than it seems!” which slightly calmed Belle down. There! She felt the one
perforation into the edge of the wrapper and tore it open. The slimy condom rested in her hand.

“Done!” yelled a guy. “Me too!” said Annika, clearly happy that she came in second place before any other girl. Done already? Belle hadn’t even found which way the condom rolled open. Now those two would have their blindfolds off and they would be able to see her fumbling with the condom-banana action.

She put the condom over the tip of the banana and tried to pull it down. It wouldn’t budge, the roll seemed to be on the inside. She took the condom off and tried to inverse it to roll down the banana the other way. Meanwhile, a slew people called out, “Done!” “Finished!” “Ta-da!” and Belle lost more and more coordination. She tried to inverse it, it fell on the floor. She scrambled to grab it, she didn’t know which side was which. She was positive everyone was staring at her; she would be known as the inexperienced, uncoordinated girl from the Midwest who had never had a sexual experience before in her life. Her metronomic pulse quickened and she had to stop herself from nervously rocking. She knew they were all looking at her, she could feel it. “Just get the goddamn condom on!” she told herself. “Let’s get this over with!”

She placed the condom over the banana and pulled. The roll must have still been facing inwards because the condom stretched as Belle yanked, giving it just the right leverage and energy so that when Belle let go, it shot off the banana with a satisfactory SNAP. She imagined it soaring high into the air, over people’s heads, over the edge of the circle, into the stairwell. “SHIT!” came a male voice Belle didn’t recognize from about ten feet away.

“Shit,” said Belle dejectedly in response.

The circle burst out not in laughter, but in stomach-roaring guffaws. Deep-bellied hysterics. Belle peeked out from below the blindfold and glanced out towards the stairwell. Standing there was a tall guy, a little lanky with sandy hair, sporting a red t-shirt and slightly tapered jeans – pants not skinny enough to be metrosexual, but fitted enough to insinuate that these were stylish. He was holding his hand to his cheek and wincing in moderate pain. “I know I might have walked by during a private conversation, but flinging condoms in my direction isn’t exactly the best way to make friends with your dorm-mates,” he joked. “Who’s the offender?” he scoured the group.

Belle’s cheeks flushed the crimson of tulips. She looked up at the boy, he was cute, in a lanky kind of way. He was the kid who was probably two heads taller and five times gawkier than everyone else for most of high school, and was only starting to fill out now. Surveying the circle, she saw that everyone waited in anticipation for Belle’s response. Suddenly it came to her; instead of running a way from this, she should laugh. This way, they would be able to laugh with her and not at her. Make a joke out of it, show how chilled out and cool she could be.

“It was me,” she said as she raised her hand and looked him in the eye. Sounding way more confident than she felt, she continued, “Condoms are our weapon of choice on third floor Whitney. Watch your back next time you walk by…”

Her floormates hooted and cheered at her response, relieved that they didn’t have to suppress their laughter and visibly happy that she was able to laugh at herself.

Condom-Whipped smiled at her over his shoulder and replied, “See you guys later, just make sure you don’t take out any eyes,” and he turned the corner and jogged down the stairs.
“Good job,” said Annika, as she made her way towards Belle after the circle disaggregated. “That was funny. I think I would have died if it had happened to me but you handled it well.”

Was that a compliment or an insult? Maybe not an insult but at least a judgment, “I would have died if it had happened to me.” What was that supposed to mean? Belle was taken aback enough that Annika was going out of her way to talk to her, never mind that it was a (partial) compliment.

“So a few of us were thinking of going to Crack House tonight. You’ve heard of Crack right?” said Annika.

“Ummm, no actually,” said Belle. “Should I know what it is?”

“Uh yeah. Definitely. It’s crucial to your social life.” Was this girl serious? “It’s an off-campus house where lacrosse guys live. They throw the best parties,” she said with certainty, “and a few of us are going to their first one tonight. You should come. Lola’s coming,” as though Lola’s approval validated its worth.

Belle was surprised, why was Annika inviting her after being so exclusive the past four days? What do I really have to lose though? wondered Belle.

“Okay, sure,” said Belle, “I’ll come.”

“Cool,” said Annika. “Come to my room at ten or ten-thirty. We’ll pre-game a bit before heading out,” and with a slight smile-smirk she turned and walked back to her room, leaving Belle – confused about what had just happened – standing in the middle of the hallway.

Ten-thirty rolled around and Belle put the finishing coat of mascara on her lashes. She normally wasn’t a big wearer of make-up, but she figured the night called for a few touches. She had no idea what everyone else would be wearing so she opted on the safe side – jeans, a black tank top and black ballet flats – not super-fancy, not super-casual, easily flexible for any situation. Meanwhile, Charlotte was busy listening to some über-county music and singing along off-key. Not that Belle necessarily had a problem with country music per se, but it wasn’t exactly her pump up/going out music of choice, and plus, Charlotte hadn’t even bothered to ask if it was okay that she put it on at maximum volume. Belle wondered if maybe she shouldn’t have written that she listened to music of all genres on her housing questionnaire. At least it wasn’t death metal…yet.

Belle was happy to leave her room which was quickly turning into Hickville Central and made her way down the hallway. She hesitated only a brief second before knocking on Annika and Lola’s door and waited. No one answered. Were they ignoring her? Had Annika changed her mind? Music was blaring from inside, some Beyoncé tune or something, and Belle decided to knock a second time, a little more forcefully. “Come in!” shrieked a voice from inside.

“It’s locked!” said Belle.

Annika came to the door, slightly out of breath, and as Belle peered inside she could see a bunch of other girls dancing in the middle of the room, some with red plastic Solo cups in hand, while others had set theirs down to jump and dance more freely. “Hey, sorry. We closed the door ‘cause of the alcohol,” explained Annika. Hard booze was forbidden on campus, and they were all underage anyways which would be doubly as bad.
Belle flashed back just a couple of days earlier to one of the many times their floor congregated in a circle and John’s lecture explicitly forbidding them hard alcohol. “I’ll pour it out if I see you with it. I’m not joking,” he threatened. “And I’m one of the most forgiving. If security or if some of the other proctors catch you with it, you’re guaranteed a meeting with the head of security and with your dean.” Meetings, letters home to parents, and the threat of social probation (two or three strikes and you’re out of school) was enough to convince Belle to pass, thankyouverymuch, or at least enough to make her thing twice.

“Where did you get it?” asked Belle.

“Oh, my parents got me this one,” explained Annika, “but I have a fake ID and I know people who are juniors and seniors, so don’t you worry about our access!” Belle was taken aback that Annika’s parents had bought her booze with the knowledge that she would likely drink it until she was hammered. She would never in a million years feel comfortable asking her own parents to buy her hard alcohol, no matter whether she drank casually with them or not.

They walked into the room together and Annika put her arm around Belle’s shoulders as though they had been best friends for years. Belle didn’t know whether to shrink away – she found it weird that all of a sudden Annika was being so nice to her – or to embrace the sense of inclusion that she had been craving for the past few days.

“Do you know everyone in here?” inquired Annika in a concerned voice.

“No, I don’t think so,” said Belle.

“Well you know Lola, obviously,” she pointed to Lola who was standing in a corner talking to a girl with black shoulder-length ringlets. As usual, Lola looked fabulous but casual: black denim shorts, a red eighties-style off-the-shoulder shirt and high-top black Converse (how many pairs of Converse did she have?!). “That’s Jacqueline from upstairs” Annika continued, pointing to the curly-haired girl who Belle had never seen before. “Then you have Alex, Sarah and Kat,” she named from right to left, all with straight or wavy hair in varying shades of brown. The girls waved but then continued their conversations or their dance party. Everyone was wearing some variation of tight jeans and a low-cut shirt, or a mid-thigh length tunic with leggings. It wasn’t as though Belle stood out or looked drastically different, but it was clear who had spent more time and energy manicuring themselves and picking their outfits.

“Let’s get you a drink,” Annika continued her mothering qualities. They meandered over to the mini-fridge and Annika grabbed a Solo cup from a stack on her desk. She prodded open the fridge door with the toe of her luscious leather riding boot and squatted down. “Okay, we have vanilla vodka, gin or rum. Which one do you want?”

“Any, I guess. I don’t really have a preference.” Truth of the matter was that Belle didn’t really know the difference, but she wasn’t about to admit that here.

“Let’s give you some vanilla vodka,” she said as she poured the cold viscous liquid into a shot glass and dumped it into the cup, and then repeated it a second time. “You can thank my parents for that one,” she giggled. “And mix it with some Diet Coke, I think there’s a half empty can right up there.”

Belle followed the orders and then took a sip. As the drink touched her lips, her first thought was of the diner she used to go to with her parents when she was younger. Housed in an old railway car, it was polished until the sun gleaming off could practically fry the eggs itself. It was on the way to her grandparents’ country house and they would
often stop when making the trek for the weekend. As a kid, Belle would always order the vanilla Coke, and sipping this drink momentarily brought her back to her nine-year-old self; the innocence of vanilla cola, the quaint quirkiness of the diner, the dependence on her parents. What would her parents think of her drinking? Would they expect it, would they be surprised, would they be pissed off? She wasn’t sure. The bite of alcohol, acrid and sharp down her throat, burrowing in her belly, quickly jolted her out of her reverie and brought her back to the hot dorm room with pounding beats.

“Shots!” announced Annika. “You’re not even halfway done your drink!” she jokingly criticized Belle, “Drink up.”

Lola, Jacqueline, Alex, Sarah and Kat crowded around as Annika allotted the shots and opened a couple of cans of soda as chasers. “Ready?” Everyone raised their shot glasses and Belle followed their lead. “One! Two! Three!” declared Annika, and synchronously they put the small glasses to their lips and emptied the cutting liquid into their mouths by tilting their heads backwards vigorously. Around the circle there wasn’t a grimace-free face. The cans of soda quickly passed hands as people unsuccessfully tried to wash the taste of cheap vodka from their tongues. The Coke wouldn’t stop the clawing of booze deep in her stomach though, like a witch’s hand digging her nails in and twisting.

Over the next twenty minutes, the evening began to gain a softened glow; Belle found herself talking to Alex, Sarah and Kat about what it was like to grow up in Ohio, she let herself be silly for the first time since she had arrived at Branksome and sang along to old Spice Girls songs with everyone else, she spoke to Lola about Converse shoes and learned that Lola was not only way less scary than she projected, but she also bought both her pairs at TJ Maxx (!). Belle loved TJ Maxx and always found awesome deals there. The two girls made tentative plans to scour the racks together one of these days. Maybe I was wrong, thought Belle, Lola doesn’t seem as uptight as I originally thought… Belle finished the rest of her drink and before she knew it, it was 11:30 and they were putting on fleeces and cardigans and early fall jackets to begin the journey outside.

Annika led the way – she was the only one who knew where Crack House was – and they walked past freshman dorms, crossed streets where the campus boarded town, passed the field house and the hockey rink, traipsed through parking lots and by upperclassmen housing, until they had walked about a mile and stood outside an inconspicuous little blue house. It looked like someone’s grandmother would live there – small and polite, there was a driveway to the right and a porch lining the front. The curtains were drawn and from across the street they looked like they might have even been lace, although upon closer inspection it was clear they were makeshift screens from old sheets so no one would be able to see in. The only apparent hints that an elderly lady didn’t inhabit the place were the littering of beer cans and Solo cups strewn across the balcony and the rhythmic thump-thump-thump-thump of music emanating from the basement.

“Here we are,” said Annika, although that fact was already clear considering they were standing outside, tentatively staring at the building. For all of their chattiness earlier, no one spoke a word. They watched a guy and a girl stumble out of the side door where the driveway was and, loudly laughing, run behind the house until their sounds were muffled by distance.
Belle wasn’t entirely sure why she was nervous, but looking around it seemed as though everyone else was too. Even Lola. She bit her nails and stepped from one long converse-wearing leg to another. Maybe because it was her first college party, maybe because she knew it was predominantly filled with upperclassmen, maybe because she was worried that everyone would instantly know they were freshman, but there was a palpable tenseness in the air.

Belle hated to be melodramatic, but it felt like this was a make-it or break-it moment; convince the upperclassmen that this group of freshman girls practically shaking with fear was worth hanging out with, or say goodbye to Crack House for the rest of their college careers. Although they hadn’t even been inside yet, Belle smelled the possibility of social death if you behaved incorrectly as a freshman at Crack.

“Well…we’re here…may as well go in, right?” said Annika, sounding, for the first time, less sure than she had all evening long.

“Oh and please,” she added, regaining a sense of authority, “Don’t act like freshmen.”

Don’t act like freshmen? Belle didn’t even know what that meant. Don’t travel in packs? Don’t congregate in corners? Don’t say anything stupid or juvenile? Pretend like you know people even when you don’t? She barely had time to ponder it though, because Annika had already crossed her arms, crossed the street, and waited for everyone else to follow.

They walked to the side door that the inebriated pair had staggered out of, and saw a tall brawny guy with flowing black hair, seersucker shorts, and a pink button-down shirt guarding the door. “Okay, okay, time to go,” he said, ushering people towards the door. Next followed an outpouring of men, scrawnier and less put together than the first guy. He put his hands on his hips and looked proud that he successfully got rid of these underclassmen boys. Only after surveying the scene did he realize that seven girls were standing at the door, patiently waiting.

He then turned to Annika and questioned, “What year are you?”

“Freshman,” she stated as she looked behind her at the gaggle of girls.

“Come on in!” he stepped aside. “I’m Max, nice to meet you all,” he said, and Belle noticed his eyes lingering on Lola’s bare legs. He looked up and Belle caught his gaze. She almost raised her eyebrows in a what-do-you-think-you’re-doing kind of way, protective of her floormate who captivated her for one reason or another. Before Belle had the chance though, Max smiled a dashing wide grin, causing a little dimple to emerge on his right cheek, and turning him from a threatening wolf-like upperclassman to an endearing puppy-dog. “What’s your name?” he said kindly. Belle looked behind her, was Lola there? How embarrassing would it be to respond if he had been talking to someone else?

Max tilted his head back lightly and chuckled, “No, I’m talking to you.”

“Oh well I…I was just checking,” Belle stammered. “I’m Belle,” she said as she thrust her hand in the empty space between them.

“Nice to meet you Belle,” he said and waited a moment before casually reaching out to take Belle’s hand. “I’m Beast.” He paused for a second. Belle looked at him, stumped.

“Oh, that was my favorite Disney movie,” she finally got it. “I used to refuse to get out of my princess costume. I think I wore it until I was like twelve.” Shit. Shitshitshit. That was stupid, she seemed like a little girl who never stopped playing with
dolls. This whole ‘don’t act like a freshman’ thing was crashing and burning damn quickly.

“Right. Well, I’m sorry you didn’t don it for tonight. I’m guessing this is your first time at Crack? Enjoy,” he said quickly before turning to talk to the next person who had just walked through the door. Belle gave him a confused little smile and turned to follow the rest of her crew.

They meandered through the kitchen to a room packed with couches where they tucked their coats into the corner, then turned to find the stairs to the basement. Just before venturing down, they passed a room with a partially-opened door, a bare mattress on the ground, and a sign on the door that read Freshman Laxers Only. “What’s a ‘laxer’?” Belle wondered aloud.

“It’s someone who plays lacrosse. A lax daddy, a lax bro? Please tell me that Ohio isn’t so far in the boonies that you haven’t heard of them,” replied Annika as she marched down the stairs.

“Well, they’re not that common there,” said Belle.

“It’s cute that you don’t know these things,” Jesus! This girl was the queen of backhanded compliments. “I’ve heard rumors that it’s a ‘sex room’ but I don’t know anyone who’s actually had sex in there.”

Belle was about to contemplate the absurdity of room itself when she reached the bottom of the stairwell and was hit with a wave of moist heat. They were in an unfinished basement with concrete walls and exposed pipes, beer puddles dotting the room and a table where four people were playing beer pong, a game that consisted of attempting to toss a ping pong ball into beer-laden cups. Past the table was an open area where a cohort of people were circled around the keg, and others were socializing, mingling and flirting. For the most part it was nothing explicit, but Belle could tell which pairs were aiming for the latter just by their body language; certain pairs left less distance between them as they talked and were completely oblivious to their surroundings, girls played with their hair more often, and both guys and girls looked for joking excuses to touch or lay their hand on the other.

As they walked into that portion of the space, Belle saw another sign. It was the kind you get made at ski resorts with a double-back diamond on the left and you choose what you want it to say on the right. This one said Boom Boom Room. Unlike the rest of the basement, it was dark and only lit by black lights. Belle’s curiosity got the best of her so she walked over and peered in. There were a number of people dancing; groups of girls, a few couples grinding and rhythmically moving their hips together, but most of the people were in the middle area talking. Under the black light, people’s white shirts fluoresced a bright purple, and when Belle looked down she saw that every microscopic piece of dust glowed against her black tank top as though she had rubbed lint all over her body. People were holding SOLO cups of beer and dressed as most others were dressed at the party: guys in jeans and t-shirts, polos or collared shirts, girls in tight jeans and pretty little tank tops, or tights and tunic-type shirts.

“It’s either Crack House heaven or Crack House hell,” came a voice from behind her. Belle turned and saw Max standing there, hands on his hips again. “The Boom Boom Room.” He stated, although she hadn’t asked. “People either love it or hate it. It gets way more packed, give it twenty minutes. Until then, want a beer?”

“Uh, sure,” said Belle.
She watched as he strolled over to the two guys working the pump and distributing the beer from a thin hose, reached for two cups, and cut the entire crowd of waiting people while his friends filled up both shiny red cups. “Here you go,” he presented the cup with visible pride.

“Thanks. I wasn’t about to fight for a spot in that line,” said Belle

“No problem. I’m going to go make the rounds, I haven’t seen a bunch of these people since last spring, but I’ll see you later,” he explained before being swallowed into the crowd.

Belle wandered looking for everyone, anyone, she came with. “Belle!” Lola called out from across the room (she was the only one tall enough to see above the crowd). Belle rushed over. She looked around at the girls. Someone was missing.

“Where’s Annika?” puzzled Belle.

“Over there. She seems to know a bunch of people. I guess her brother played lacrosse here and graduated a year or two ago,” said Lola. Was that contempt Belle heard in her voice? Jealousy? Resentment? Belle couldn’t even begin to imagine Lola having any sort of insecurity. Maybe she was wrong though…

Belle watched Annika’s exaggerated motions as she talked with some guy – laughing too long, hand flirtatiously touching his chest or forearm, hips shifting from one side to another to accentuate her curves. Belle couldn’t decide if it was comical or upsetting, if she wanted to be like Annika or make fun of her.

Alex, Sarah and Kat decided to try to vie for beers, while Belle, Lola and Jacqueline explored the room. All around them people were talking in raised and slurred voices, boys were taking off their shirts and parading the room bare-chested, exclamations of joy came from friends reunited after the summer, and coyness abounded. Belle, Lola and Jacqueline were like wallflowers clumped together for fear of drowning in the hoard.

“Let’s go dance,” said Jacqueline, “There’s no one here except you guys who I really know, and plus, I like this song.”

They wined through the densely-packed crowd and squeezed by two people to get into the Boom Boom Room. As Max had promised, twenty or thirty minutes later the place was packed: larger groups of people bounced and sang with pep and excitement in the middle, while the walls of the room were lined with heterosexual couples. Now, Belle had seen grinding before and she wasn’t particularly prude or completely sheltered, but the dancing exhibited by these pairs was unlike anything she had ever seen: one partner pressed up against the walls, slow and sensuous grinding, booties dropping low and rolling back up, moist and dirty sex with clothes on. Belle couldn’t take her eyes away. It was like rubber-necking at a car accident; you know it’s wrong, you know you should avert your gaze, you know that it’s only going to make you feel badly about something in your life, but for one reason or another there is a magnetic draw forcing you to stare.

This one guy was getting particularly nasty, lifting his leg and reaching up and down the girl’s thighs while she groped his back. Belle felt like she was watching a soft-core porn movie – didn’t these people feel weird that everyone was watching them? That they were exposed for the whole campus to see?

Belle took a step closer. Wait a minute…she knew that shirt, she had seen it before. She took a closer look at the guy. The reddish tinge of the hair looked familiar…it was John! John was guilty of heavy-duty sex-like grinding! Maybe it was that innate
sensation to turn when someone is staring at you or maybe it was just timing, but as Belle stared, John turned around.

It took him a moment to put two-and-two together, clear by the fact that he continued to dance for a few seconds, then he tapped his dance partner, whispered something in her ear, and walked towards his proctees as the girl giggled and joined her friends bopping up and down in the middle of the dance floor.

“Hey girls,” said John, “How’s it going?”

“It’s going okay. Not as well as you, apparently,” said Lola with a little sass. Belle was thankful Lola was doing the talking and not her. She had no idea what would come out of her mouth if she dared to open it.

“Give me a break,” he said with a smile. “It’s Crack House, it’s the one place on campus where Branksome students can let go for a few hours and not worry that everyone is judging them. Or that judgment is suspended because of alcohol. Look around, everyone’s dancing that way. And I would never do it in a situation that was inappropriate – I would never dance with a proctee or with a girl who wasn’t into it. I’m really sorry if it made you uncomfortable to see me here, but I’m a student too, you know.” He had a point. There was a reason why proctors were other students and not hired adults – they had been there, they understood what it was like to be a Branksome student because they still were Branksome students. Still, it wasn’t necessarily pleasurable to see someone normally viewed as innocuous in a highly sexualized way.

“No, you’re right,” said Lola.

“It’s just a little weird for us. It’s weird not knowing anyone here,” added Jacqueline.

“I get it,” replied John. “Well, think of it this way: it’s probably weirder and more uncomfortable for me than for you, so now you have something to make fun of me for. Deal?”

“Sounds good,” said Belle.

“Okay well, have a great rest of the night,” said John, ending the conversation.

The three girls looked around for a second, slightly dumbstruck and a little lost. “Want to get out of here? Let’s go back,” said Belle.

“I’m down,” said Lola. Jacqueline nodded in agreement. “I’ll send the other girls a text letting them know we’re going,” she stated as she whipped out her iPhone.

They made a beeline for the stairs and grabbed their coats from the couches. As they walked out the door, they had to push through a large mass of people – mainly boys – outside who were blocked from getting in by a dude standing at the door. Evidently he had taken over Max’s post.

“Leaving so soon?” called out a melodic voice. All three girls turned in unison. “It was nice to meet you Belle,” said a shirtless Max, standing with his arms propped on either side against the doorframe. Despite the cliché, his chiseled muscles gleamed with sweat under the light of the house. No wonder he took his shirt off.

“Nice to meet you too, Max,” Belle replied. And this time, with a glimmer in her eye, she was the one who turned away first.

“Ohhh girl! He is cute!” said Jacqueline as she elbowed Belle jokingly in the ribs. This could get fun.

* * *

Pastel Shirts and Miniskirts

Maxime Billick 18
The trio walked up the stairs of Whitney, ready to crawl into bed and fall asleep (the overdose of awkwardness at Crack had exhausted them), when hooting and hollering rumbled in the stairwell. Where’s the party at? wondered Belle. They reached the third floor landing and heard the sounds thundering above them. Each girl looked around, making eye contact with the other two as though they were communicating some extrasensory message. “Let’s check it out,” said Lola, confident again now that she, and not some upperclassman boy, controlled the scene.

They arrived upstairs to moderate madness: a door propped half-open with music pounding and freshman squished inside dancing to the beats, another room with country music blaring and a group of guys playing beer pong, people running up and down the hallway wreaking havoc by writing obscenities on people’s whiteboards, and a scattered few pairs of people sitting on the ground and talking.

As they stood for a moment absorbing the scene in silence, the guy who Belle had so gracefully whipped with the condom the other night came out of the bathroom and strolled back towards the beat-pounding room. He apparently didn’t recognize them at first and began to walk by like strangers on the street. Just as he approached though, there must have been a split second turnaround, for he jokingly put his hands up protecting his face, jumped back a couple of feet, and said, “Please don’t pelt me with condoms! What did I ever do to you?”

Belle stared, unsure of what was funny enough to say next.

“Hey, I’m just kidding. Let’s have a truce though, okay? I’m Isaac,” he said as he sauntered over and put out his hand in front of Belle. She took it, and noticed his firm, confident grip, with the softness of someone who doesn’t take themselves too seriously. Belle was rarely one to shy away from eye contact, but as her eyes met his there was an electrical exchange – she was almost relieved at the reduction of intensity when he pulled away and introduced himself to Lola and Jacqueline.

Isaac invited them into the room and the atmosphere was instantly more comfortable that it had been at Crack. No judgmental upper-classmen, no one who seemed to know everyone, no elbowing for a spot in line for the keg, just a bunch of kids throwing back a few beers while dancing and talking. With time, the trio (still buzzed off of all they had had to drink earlier) distributed around the room – Lola talking in a corner to a guy with longish curly hair, Jacqueline dancing with a boy from her floor, and Belle with Isaac, talking a little, dancing too, although it was nothing like the grinding she had seen earlier that night.

Sweat and moisture filled the room, and it didn’t take long before upper lips tasted salty and people were wiping their brows. “I’m going to go outside for a second. It’s an oven in here,” said Isaac. “You’re welcome to come if you want.”

“Sure, I’d like to cool down too,” responded Belle.

They walked into the hallway and instantly felt the fresh air encase them and wick their dampness away. “Whoa! Dancing does a number on me,” stated Isaac as he sat on the ground, knees up, back leaning against the wall. Belle sat down next to him careful to leave at least six inches between their arms.

Once sitting on the ground, the rest of the world blurred into the background. They first talked about the predictable stuff: home (he was from just outside of Boston, like the rest of the world at Branksome), their high schools, and why they had chosen Branksome. She learned that he had played soccer in high school (which probably
accounted for his lanky frame) and that he was going to audition for a cappella here. Like Belle, he was a middle child and they both had a brother and a sister, although Isaac’s brother was older than him while his sister was younger. They both loved old-school mobster movies like The Godfather and thought that the comedian John Stewart was a genius. Before they knew it, people had streamed out of the dance party, Lola and Jacqueline waved tiredly as they meandered toward the stairs, and Belle and Isaac were left alone. They continued their conversation, the relative quietness allowing them to broach more serious subjects: they spoke about politics and the benefits and drawbacks of Obama’s healthcare proposal, about readjusting to college, about the party that Belle had just been to and the differences between being a freshman girl and a freshman boy. Belle hinted at her insecurities, particularly when she had first arrived at Branksome, and Isaac listened patiently. Not only did he agree, but he elaborated in ways Belle thought guys didn’t sense. It hadn’t occurred to her that boys might miss home too, or that they were apprehensive about approaching girls. She hadn’t thought about guys feeling excluded from roommate pairings or friendships; she just always assumed they picked up a football and everything was hunky-dory. Isaac told her that he missed his buddies from home, and insinuated that he felt a little left out since he wasn’t fixated on ‘pumping iron’ or ‘lifting’ like some of the other dudes at Branksome. She learned that they were in Biology 109 together. She was secretly happy that she would have a reason to see him at least three times a week.

She wasn’t sure why, but that excitement brought a momentary flash of curiosity about Ollard. And about her ex-boyfriend Ryan. She had tried not to think about it while at Branksome because she knew it would only exacerbate any feelings of discomfort or loneliness, but she knew that Ryan had eventually picked Ollard. Had Belle chosen to go there, who knows where they would be as a couple right now. They might be together. They may have already had sex. Then again, they may have broken up and she might have felt more isolated at Ollard despite her connections there. Why are you thinking about this now? she asked herself. STOP.

“Oh god, it’s already 3:30?” said Belle as she looked at her watch, “I better get to bed. I’ll see you tomorrow though.”

“Sounds good,” said Isaac. “You’re keeping me up late! I’m missing out on my beauty rest,” he said as he jokingly punched her in the arm. He paused for a second. The silence of the dorms pregnant with sleeping people surrounded them, and while Belle knew that the silence could be interpreted as awkward, it felt good. Isaac broke the stillness, saying a little too casually, “Hey, can I get your number? I mean, I want something to give the police if they’re looking for the criminal who flings condoms at people.”

Belle wanted to jump up and down inside, but instead kept it together and said coolly, “Sure, just try not to turn me over to them if you can help it. I really don’t want to blow my cover,” and with a smile, she recited her number. “See you later,” she called as she trotted down the stairs. With an earsplitting grin on her face, she tiptoed into her room where Charlotte was intermittently snoring, stripped off her clothes, tossed on an oversized t-shirt, and hopped into bed. Ugh, I forgot to pee, Belle realized. The walk to the bathroom down the empty hallway was cold and Belle was already in skimpy PJs...I’m lazy, I’ll wait until tomorrow morning, she figured.
Belle thought she would immediately fall into slumber, but her mind wandered, neurons fired and she was excited about all that had happened that night. She thought about Isaac, his tight little lanky body, and wondered what he thought of her. Had he been flirting or was it all in her head? He was one of those guys whose sexual experience she could not gage for the life of her; did his slight quirkiness result in him being super-experienced or did it hinder his opportunities and was he sexually naïve? Max, on the other hand, oozed sex appeal. She knew it was so cliché, but all she wanted to do was run her hands the length of his chest to hipbones and have him trace his neck kisses from her shoulder to her ear. She could tell he was probably a hot commodity, being so cute and so charming, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t think about him, right? She realized that the rest of campus saw freshman as newbies – they were – but she wanted him to think she was a cute and sassy newbie, one that brought something different to the table. These two male options almost made her forget about Ryan, at least for the time being, before plunging into delicious and enveloping sleep.

* * *

Her warm and cozy slumber was rudely interrupted by an uncomfortable sensation in her nether regions. Immediately, Belle’s need to pee was intense and immediate. She sprung out of bed, slipped on her flip-flops, and sprinted out her dorm room to the communal girl’s bathroom in the hallway, barely remembering to grab her keycard on the way out. She made it into the stall with not a moment to spare, and yanked her underwear down before peeing all over herself like a six-year-old child. The pain was stinging and unbearable; lemon juice on a paper cut; little glass shards traveling down her urethra. She waited for the burning to stop. As she pulled up her underwear and went to wash her hands, she felt like she hadn’t expelled all that she needed to. Try again? Sitting on the toilet nothing was procured. The fire was still roaring down there. Doubled over, head to knees, she rocked a bit. What a sight this must be, she thought, as she continued to wince in agony. She tried, she really did, not to make any sounds, but she couldn’t rein in the cries any longer. She wailed shaky ooooooh’s, sniffling in between, wishing her mom was there to rub her back and tell her what to do. She was all alone, no one to make sure she was okay. The sentiments of abandonment amplified her pain, and she moaned again in anguish and despair.

Despite the fact that the dorms were only a few years old, there was still a squeak as the bathroom door opened. Belle muted her cries. Water running. The rhythmic scraping of bristles against teeth. Spit. Rinse. “Hey are you okay in there?” asked a concerned voice.

“Ummhmm, I’m fine,” said Belle weakly.

“Belle? It’s Lola. What’s the matter? Did you drink too much last night?”

“No, I’m not nauseous. I-I…it…” she stuttered. Was she going to divulge this to Lola? Wincing as another driblet squeezed out of her, she couldn’t withstand the pain any longer. “It burns when I pee!” she wailed, finally allowing herself to cry fat wet tears.

“Aw honey, don’t cry,” Lola soothed, “It’s probably just a UTI. Hold on, you’re not wearing any pants, huh? I can see your legs from under the stall door. Hold on a second.”

A minute later Lola returned with worn-in grey sweatpants and a purple zip-up sweatshirt that she held out to Belle under the door. “Here, put these on. I’ll take you to the health center.”
Belle emerged from the stall, swimming in Lola’s pants that were a good seven inches too long, hunched over like an elderly lady. “All you need is a bit of antibiotics. I’ve had UTIs before, they’re no fun but they go away in a day or two,” Lola continued as they walked together to the health center.

Sure enough, Lola was right: the nurse practitioner prescribed Belle antibiotics and sent her off with a tube of yellow and red pills that looked like candy, advising her to rest and relax for a day or two.

“Lucky! You get to miss a day of orientation,” said Lola, as she helped Belle get back into her bed. “Sleep it off, you’ll feel better. Do you want anything from brunch? I can bring it back for you,” Lola offered.

“Just an apple or some fruit,” said Belle. Was it weird that Lola was helping her and being so nice? Or had Belle misjudged her the whole time? “Hey. Lola…” Belle paused, unsure of whether what she was going to say next would completely out her as a dork or if it would be appreciated, “Thanks for helping me out. It really meant a lot to me. I’ve never had a UTI before and sitting on the toilet in pain I was scared shitless. Or rather, scared pee-less.”

To Belle’s surprise, Lola giggled at her nerdy joke. “No problem. Anytime,” she grinned. “Sweet dreams. I’ll be back in a few hours,” she said as she gently closed the door.

* * *

Two days later, gone was Belle’s UTI, but not her nerves; it was her first day of classes and she still wasn’t totally sure which buildings were which on campus. After consulting her handy map, she sketched out in her mind where to go when: Bio 109 (with Isaac!) in Cunningham followed with only five minutes leeway to run to her first-year history seminar, The Cold War, in Hallard. She then had a few hours off for work and lunch (and potentially naps?) and class again at 2:30, Mona Lisa and the Mafia. These classes were held Mondays and Wednesdays, although she was in a Bio lab Tuesday afternoons, and then Tuesdays and Thursdays she had Intro to Gender and Women’s studies at 11:30. So much less time in class than in high school! She didn’t expect it to be a walk in the park, but it still sounded pretty cool – sleeping in when you wanted to, skipping a class in the middle of the day if you didn’t feel well instead of calling your parents to take you home, doing things essentially on your own schedule.

She thought about all of this as she walked to Cunningham – anything to get her mind off of the feelings of nausea that was tumbling around in her stomach and intermittently making its way up her esophagus (wouldn’t her bio professor be proud? She was already thinking in scientific terms). She calmed herself down with the obvious: it was an introductory level bio class so most people in it would be freshman also, and for those who weren’t, they would know what it felt like to be clueless as freshman. Also, bio wasn’t the type of class where professors necessarily called on you to comment or give your opinion, so she was safe in that respect. Lastly, Isaac was in the class, which was on one hand comforting and on the other ratcheted up her nervousness by another ten notches. Would he save her a seat? What if she got there and there were no seats near him? What if he sat all the way in the back or all the way in the front, neither of which where Belle wanted to sit, would she sit with him or was it insulting not to? What if he wasn’t there yet and she saved him a seat, and then he went and sat with someone else? Belle, calm doooooooommmmm, she told herself. Deep breaths. Room 04, room 16, here it
was, room 20. She walked inside, heart palpitating a little faster than normal, but not so much to make her sweaty or flushed.

And there he was, in the perfect spot: a few rows back from the front, on the mid-left side, with – Belle couldn’t believe it – his bag on the seat next to him. Was he saving it for someone? Maybe for her?

She walked through the aisle and said, “Good morning Isaac.”

“Hey! How’s it going? I saved you this seat.”

God, he was so thoughtful. And cute. Particularly in the morning when most other people donned shorts and a sweatshirt, he was wearing a nice collared shirt. Belle had a momentary flash of what he would look like in the morning, a little less dressed. Like in her bed perhaps? No, push it out of your head! she scolded herself.

“Really? Thanks!” she said as she sat and unloaded a notebook and pen from her backpack. Their conversation was cut short at that moment since the professor came in and began introducing herself and the course.

Class passed by quickly enough, and nothing really surprised Belle about the course material or assignments on the syllabus. She had already taken Advanced Placement biology in high school, and was taking 109 here at Branksome because it was a prerequisite for other, cooler, upper-level biology classes.

She and Isaac strolled out of class together when it ended. He held the door open for her as they walked outside into the early September sun hinting of sweet apples and crunchy leaves. They spoke briefly about nothing in particular – starting classes, biology, the day after they had stayed up too late talking – and Belle noted how much more clumsy their conversation was now compared to the other night. Maybe it was because of the social lubrication of alcohol, or maybe because parties (and sneaking away from them) foster a better arena for conversation as compared to a couple of minutes between classes, Belle wasn’t sure. He was still cute though, and such the gentleman. Who knows, maybe he sensed the smidgen of discomfort, too.

Belle suddenly realized that she didn’t have time to contemplate any of this though. “Shit! I have to run halfway across campus for my first-year seminar,” she said hurriedly. “I’ll see you later? Send me a text! Maybe we’ll get breakfast before class on Wednesday.” Planting some seeds. See if they grow.

Belle busted out her fastest non-dorky-looking power walk to make it in time for her next class.

* * *

She leapt up the stairs of Hallard and, glancing first at her watch (it was 9:59) and then at the numbers on the doors (110), entered the classroom with more gusto than she intended. She took a couple of steps forward before pausing to look around and take in the elements of her surroundings. It was a cozy seminar room with an old-school vibe thanks to a thick wooden table and sturdy chairs labeled with the Branksome insignia. Straight out of Hogwarts, the walls were covered with old books and hundred-year-old paintings of former Branksome presidents. Home to the Economics, History and Government departments, Hallard was by far the most stereotypically collegiate building on campus with its vine-covered red bricks and lofty ceilings.

Belle glanced around the room and quickly realized that she was one of three girls in the swarm of thirteen men. Eyes on the ground, she walked towards an empty chair next to one of the other girls and fumbled as she untangled it from the legs of the table.
pastel shirts and miniskirts

below. Finally sitting down, she grabbed a pen and her notebook from her backpack, placed them on the table, and finally had the chance to take a good look at her fellow classmates.

She didn’t recognize anyone – not from orientation, not from the dining hall, not from bio 109. In fact, the guys looked a lot bulkier than many of the other first year guys she had seen so far. She heard a stifled male giggle and looked in the direction it came from. Max was sitting there eyeing Belle with a sly grin on his face. What was he doing in a freshman seminar?

“Hey Belle,” he said.

“Hi…”

Wait a second…bulkier guys, older-looking girls, and Max’s presence…Belle suddenly couldn’t swallow. She felt her cheeks blush and her palms get sticky with sweat. Her belly dropped like the first moment of freefall in a roller coaster. Was she in the right place? Before she had the chance to open up her planner and check, the professor walked in the room. With salt-and-pepper grey hair, wire-rimmed glasses, a straight back and reverberating voice he announced, “Good morning everybody. Welcome to your senior government seminar, Conflict Stimulation and Resolution.”

Senior government seminar? Belle was definitely in the wrong place. What to do now? Did she sit there for the rest of class? No, that was stupid and a waste of her time. They would totally know she wasn’t a junior or a senior in this class. Did she raise her hand and tell the professor that she made a mistake, or should she just bolt for the door? She was stumped, and in the meantime getting more and more antsy and uncomfortable in her seat. She finally pushed back her chair, shot Max what she hoped was a look that said ‘why didn’t you let me know?’ and stood up.

“Can I help you?” asked the professor, probably genuinely, but Belle could only hear it in a condescending tone.

“I…I…I think I’m in the wrong place,” she stuttered. “I’m sorry.” Again with eyes to the ground and her armpits damp from a cold nervous sweat, she made a beeline for the door.

No doubt they would talk about the stupid freshman who walked in on the upper-level gov seminar. No doubt everyone in that class would think she was a ditzy idiot for the rest of the year. Belle’s vision was blurred with the salty tears in her eyes, but she refused to let them spill over.

Once outside and door closed, she grabbed her planner to check what classroom she was supposed to be in: it was 210 not 110. Obviously she would be the one to make a mistake like that. She sprinted up the stairs and found a door in essentially the identical same place as the floor below, and slowly opened it to find virtually the same room: seminar style, rich wood table and chairs, creepy paintings of old dead guys.

“Is this The Cold War first year seminar?” she asked. Judging by the lost look on everyone’s faces, she figured she had the right place.

“Yes, welcome!” said the professor, a man with long brown wavy hair, warm eyes and a sweet comforting voice. “Take a seat,” he pointed to the last empty chair, and Belle followed his directions thankful to be where she belonged.

*   *   *

The mornings began in the same way: hit snooze once, flop out of bed, throw on some semblance of a cute outfit that’s still comfortable, rush to Thorton to grab breakfast,
and run to class. Scribble down some notes, attempt to understand/try to keep eyes open, briskly walk to class two and repeat note-taking. Braving the long lunch line with Lola and Jacqueline, sometimes Annika, Alex, Sarah and Kat, always tested her patience. Lunch was a welcome break in the day, but simultaneously stressful when half of the campus flooded the dining hall. It felt like elbowing people out of the way would be the most efficient tactic to get to the sliced turkey, but the dirty looks garnered from doing so hardly made it worth the trouble. After lunch Belle would lock herself in the library for a few hours. She found the library to be her new second home and would venture to say that she spent almost as much time there as she did in her own room. The program was always the same: Read. Write. Print. Edit. Read. Write. Print. Edit. Read. Write. Print. Edit. Over and over and over again, to the point just before monotony sets in and then what rolls around? But dinner to break up the repetition. Sometimes dinner was with the girls, sometimes one-on-one catching up time with Isaac, and once and a while she got a bag dinner (handy take-out food) when she had a film screening or bio review or club meeting to go to. Nighttime was filled with more reading, some writing. Trudge home. Strip off clothing. Hang out in the hall or someone’s common room for about twenty minutes. Collapse into sleep. Repeat the same thing for fifty or so days. What was initially new and frightening all too soon became Belle’s new routine.

Belle never distinctly recognized at what point she began to really feel settled at Branksome, but by mid-October she thought that she had a good chunk of it figured out. She knew when she had time between classes to do work, and when she could afford to dawdle and procrastinate by checking Facebook. She knew who she could go for lunch with on which days, and whose room she would likely pre-game for parties in. She knew where all the major buildings were on campus and the shortcuts between them.

The one thing she didn’t know though, was how she felt about Isaac. They would eat lunch together certain days, and grab breakfast before bio. They would sometimes watch movies together on nights when nothing was going on, but they never cuddled and each stuck to their respective sides of the couch. He kept her in hysterical laughter most of the time but she felt completely comfortable having serious and intellectual conversations with him too. He was very much her friend – the other girls like Lola and Jacqueline got along with him and he was friendly back, but they would have never have gone for lunch together or hung out one-on-one. They asked Belle, prodded her, made inquisitions about whether she liked him and what was happening, as though the moment a girl and a guy began to spend time together the only consequence could be a crush or a hookup. Belle wrestled with this – she had been friends with guys in high school and there had never been such implicit sexual pressure. Why was it emerging now? Was it growing up, the close quarters of college, or was everyone else was right and there were undercurrents of lust and attraction? Belle was stumped, for more reasons than one.

Bottom line: Belle couldn’t read him, and she was unsure of what she wanted too. Yes, he was cute, but if she pursued anything and he wasn’t interested then what would become of their friendship? What if Belle was completely making up the idea that he was attracted to her? What if something did happen between them and then it was awkward and their friendship dissolved? If it happened drunkenly was that more or less justifiable? Most of the time, these questions were just too annoying and time-consuming for Belle to
even ponder, so she just pushed them out of her head and resolved to enjoy the moments they spent together.

As for Max, after the whole walking-in-on-the-wrong-class fiasco Belle was much more hesitant to interact with him on campus. The first time they ran into each other afterwards, he made a jovial poke at her mishap, but Belle wasn’t quite ready to be made fun of – even jokingly – by a senior guy. The subsequent times they saw each other it was always a simple exchange of “hi’s” or the predictable question at Branksome, “How’s work going?” with the standard reply, “Ugh, I’m so stressed, I have so much to do!” Needless to say, Belle hadn’t found anyone more appealing than Max (apart from her wandering thoughts about Isaac) so he remained her number one crush despite the fact that she was tongue-tied whenever they interacted.

Whether it was her heightened sensitivity to all things Max-related, or whether the freshman class was starting to take note that there were attractive men in the older years, she began to hear more and more girls talk about Max. Most of the time it was just fleeting comments: Kat saying, “God he’s so hot,” as he sauntered by their table with his tray at lunch, or Annika mentioning that he had invited “you and your friends” to Crack on Saturday night. Belle even noticed people she didn’t know turn their heads and stare just a few seconds too long when he passed the computers in the library.

On one hand, Belle wanted to scream, “He’s mine! I spotted him first that night at Crack. Stay away girls!” On the other, she knew that she had no right to claim him – he was as much everyone else’s as he was ‘hers.’ Plus, she could barely even form full sentences around him anyways.

* * *

Saturday night came around and Belle found herself doing the usual routine: dressing up in either jeans and a sleek top, or leggings and a borrowed tunic (she hadn’t realized their ubiquitous popularity when she had lived in Columbus. Luckily, there was always a friend who was willing to lend her one), leaving Charlotte to do her homework or go to a movie or do whatever she did on Saturdays, and meeting up in one of the girls’ rooms to drink, dance and talk before rushing off to a social house party.

As the girl who helped Belle move in that first day had explained, social houses replaced fraternities when they were phased out at Branksome about a decade earlier. In theory, social houses were said to be a mixing point of where academic life and social life met on campus, hosting different events, dinners, open mic nights, speakers, concerts, and parties. In truth though, the more cultural events were far less attended than the “campus wide” parties which were frequented by mainly freshman and sophomores.

That’s where Belle and crew were headed tonight. Her affiliate house, Wade, was throwing a graffiti party, so instead of donning the usual outfit, they all wore versions of white tops. The jist of the party was to wear white, have black lights as the only lighting throughout the entire place, and go around writing on people’s shirts with highlighters so the shirt itself as well as the writing would fluoresce brightly – not rocket science but people seemed to get a kick out of it.

The night was like many others, and at this point Belle was desensitized to the plethora of people paired off on the dance floor, making out and sensually grinding. She preferred to dance with her friends; Lola was always sensitive to Belle and declined guys’ requests to dance (sometimes in the form of outstretched hands, but more often they merely walked up behind her and tried to match their hips with hers until she realized
what was going on and pulled away). Instead, Belle and Lola jumped up and down together and belted out lyrics to all the popular songs, ignoring the unromantic seduction that surrounded them.

Belle was often torn when it came to dancing at Branksome: she loved dancing with her girls and didn’t want to base the success of her night on whether or not a guy approached her sketchily from behind to grind. However there was some sort of twisted compliment buried deep within the grinding advance; that she was attractive or sexy enough for some guy to want to dance with her although he barely knew her. Despite that she knew it was twisted, it still boosted her confidence and wasn’t yet something she was willing to completely relinquish.

When security came at one A.M. to make sure that the keg was untapped so that no one would drink anymore (as per Maine state law), the music was turned off and the party dissolved. “Want to check out Crack?” asked Jacqueline, “I hear it’s going on tonight.”

Despite her drunken state, Belle paused to think about it for a second: she hadn’t been there since that fateful night, and wasn’t really willing to go back and feel like a nervous naïve girl all over again. She was also far more comfortable at school now than she had been eight weeks ago, she had good friends and knew a handful of people in older grades…maybe it was worth checking out one more time. And although Belle wouldn’t admit it to anyone else, she secretly wanted to see Max and hoped that the social lubricant of alcohol would make him easier to approach. Or would at least help her put together coherent sentences.

This time there was no pacing outside, no wondering where the door was or if they were in the right place. They confidently walked up the path (or as confident as a group of freshman girls can be when faced with senior boys) and walked inside with a mere “hey” to the guy manning the door.

It felt completely different than the first time. Of course, there were still things that were intimidating, but Belle smiled and said hello to people she recognized from her classes, she was able to break away from her friends a little bit and have other conversations, and she wandered back to find them when she was done.

She kept an open eye out for Max though. Where was he? If this was the one weekend he wasn’t on campus, for whatever reason, Belle was going to be pissed. She scoured the room, walked upstairs, through the kitchen where some older people were just talking, and down the back stairway feeling both stumped and annoyed. Walking down the stairs with just a touch of angry stomp in her step, she finally found what she was looking for. There he was, bare-chested and all, playing beer pong with some other lacrosse guys, completely oblivious to the world (and party) around them.

Belle knew better than to attempt to interrupt boys playing drinking games – no way you would ever successfully get their attention unless you yelled “free pizza!” or something like that – but just Max’s presence watered the little bulb of hope that grew within her.

By 2:30 Crack was starting to clear out, and Belle, Jacqueline and Lola could feel the temptation of sleep seducing them. They meandered up to grab their coats before walking home, and as she turned the corner, Belle almost walked right into Max.
“Hey!” he exclaimed as he slowly wrapped his arms around her. “How was your night?” all friendly and eager, as though nothing embarrassing or awkward had ever happened between them.

“It was good,” Belle nodded, still against his (delicious) chest.

As they separated, Lola approached and said in a muted tone, “We’re going to head out, do you want to stay?”

Belle nodded and said, “I think I’m going to hang out here for a bit,” and was she ever glad she did.

Max led her to the room of couches where everyone threw their coats for safekeeping, and they sat on one and talked late into the night. Max tried to keep up his whole ‘lax bro’ persona, but the further their conversation progressed, the more he let down his guard. Although he did do a damn good job of pretending, he wasn’t a rich boy from New England who had gone to prep school and summered on the Cape. He was from northern Maine, of all places, and spent his summers on dinky fishing boats lobstering for extra cash. His family was working class, a mill family before Maine was abandoned for cheaper labor abroad. He was the first in his family to go to college and although he was only a couple of hours from home, he rarely saw his parents because he only gave them permission to come down and see him once in a blue moon.

“They just don’t get it,” he tried to explain, “and people here wouldn’t get it either. My parents speak with a thick Maine accent; they misspell ‘their’, ‘they’re’ and ‘there’; they don’t fit in with the rest of the parents and students here at Branksome. They’re proud of me and I love them, they’re very talented at what they do, but I’m going different places. I…I’m embarrassed to have them around, I guess.”

His display of sensitivity melted Belle’s heart. She knew how he felt – maybe not to the same extent, but she knew that desire to fit in, she knew what it was like to question how much of your past you would give up to be successful today, she knew how frustrating it was the first time you realized that your past and your future are incompatible.

“I know,” she said soothingly, “I know,” and placed her hand on his knee without thinking, intending to be comforting and not sexual.

The moment she did it though, she wondered if it came across as inappropriate. She couldn’t pull away now, that would make it obvious, but she also didn’t want him to think she was too forward.

In his charming and understanding way, he placed his hand atop Belle’s and held it there, looking up, catching her gaze and seeming to thank her with just his eyes. Although it was Belle doing the consoling, he made her feel safe in his presence.

“I should probably get going,” she said, although she didn’t really want to leave him.

“I’m heading back to Orrswell, walk that way and then we can call a shuttle?” he said.

Whether he had ulterior motives or not, she wasn’t sure, but when they did call for a shuttle, they were briskly informed that “the shuttle stopped running thirty minutes ago. Click.”

“Look, you might think it’s sketchy, but it’s dark and cold out and a far walk home. You can sleep over here if you want. I promise I won’t pull any moves, I’ll even sleep on the floor if you want,” he offered.
Sleep in his bed!?! There was no way she was passing this chance up. She appreciated his offer to restrain his raging hormones, but it made her want him even more. No, no. Pace yourself, Belle, she scolded. Play your cards right.

“That sounds nice,” she said coyly, “Thank you. Don’t sleep on the floor though, I like being little spoon.” He laughed, and spoon they did. Nothing else, not even a kiss, they merely cuddled until ten A.M.

* * *

When Belle woke up and got ready to leave the next morning, she was pleased to find that Max was his usual jocular self, without awkwardness or pretenses. He kissed her on the forehead while the open door blew a brisk late-fall breeze, and she bounced her way back to her dorm, fired up with the pep and excitement she had tempered all night long. She couldn’t keep it to herself; it would definitely cause her brain to explode. Who to tell, who to confide in?

She leapt up the stairs of Whitney and pounded on the first door to the left. “Lola! LOLAAAAA!” she called. Shuffling. Door handle turning. A half-asleep Lola with messy hair, a big t-shirt and mascara residue opened the door.

“It’s ten-thirty on a Sunday morning. This is sacred sleeping time. Can I help you?” she teased.

“Do you have extra PJs? Let’s get in bed, I’ll tell you all about it!” Belle quipped, excited to tell her friend all that had happened the night before. “Let’s just say I definitely have a crush.”

* * *

The rest of the week Belle yo-yoed between self-psychologist and psycho-stalker. She would counsel herself: don’t get your hopes up Belle, nothing really happened between you and Max, he might not be thinking about you, etc. etc. All rational arguments, all fair statements in the given situation, all plausible assertions. On the flipside though, she wondered if he was daydreaming about her, she thought about what it would be like to actually hook up with him (other-worldly, she was positive), and her number one procrastinating technique was to stalk his profile on Facebook (he had accepted her friend request several hours after she had put it in on Sunday). She quickly learned that some of his favorite movies were *The Big Lebowski* and *Zoolander*, he was a fan of the book *1984* and *The Things They Carried*, he was a member of the group “Thursday Nights at the John McGhee’s Pub and Grill,” and his birthday was February 24th. Hmmm, she liked *Zoolander* too…she added it to her profile; it was one more thing to connect them, however subtly. She had also heard that people went to go dance and party at the Pub in the student union on Thursdays…she joined that group too; better chances that they would be at the same party. She studied pictures of him through his college years and saw he was just as cute as a freshman as he now was as a senior, albeit a little younger and softer looking.

All of this was done in clandestine. She joked to Lola about it who always listened willingly but never really responded with anything particularly profound, and confided in Jacqueline who was better about giving advice about how to play hard to get, but kept it from Annika and the other girls. Not for any reason in particular, but because she didn’t want to publicize it and Annika never really came off as the most trustworthy person.
Facebook stalkage was accomplished largely while pretending to write papers and responses. Belle would write a sentence or two, click to his profile, flip through a few pictures, then go back to writing for a bit. When curiosity got the best of her, she would go back to his profile and peruse more pictures or read his wall posts (essential for deducing who he kept in close contact with). Most of this was carried out in the library, so she had to be careful that no one nearby or walking behind her could see what she was doing. What if they knew him and mentioned that she had been looking at his profile online? That would be enormously embarrassing. Even if others admitted to checking people out on Facebook once and a while, it was another thing to have a younger girl assiduously memorizing your profile. And even worse to be caught doing it. It was as though the more you tried to hide it, the more culpable you became. Belle knew this, but she couldn’t help it; she needed her Max fix – even if only on the computer – before the next weekend rolled around.

And roll around it did, with little excitement in between except for a few run-ins and “Hey, how’s you week going?”s at Thorton. It was Saturday and Belle was a focused archer; everything around her – getting dressed, pregaming, the social house party – was extra noise, blockades to her final goal and destination for the night: Crack. Max would be there and she had already decided that she was going to go for it. It was several months into school and every other freshman around her had already hooked up with someone. Well, she thought they had hooked up with someone. Actually, Lola hadn’t, and Isaac hadn’t, and come to think of it, Jacqueline and Kat hadn’t either, but that wasn’t the point. Belle had a crush, she wanted Max, and that was that.

Unlike her first venture to Crack, this time when she peered into the Boom Boom Room she wasn’t appalled by anyone’s dance moves, and instead of Max startling her with knowledgeable advice regarding “Crack house Mecca or Crack house hell,” he approached coolly but purposefully, put his hand on the small of her back, and asked, “Want to da dance?” Belle couldn’t even speak. She just nodded and followed.

The best part of it was that he didn’t pull the quintessential “I’m going to hold onto you for fear that you’re going to run away” that Belle had experienced dancing with other, younger guys at Branksome. He was fun and silly, twirling her across the room, dipping her with confidence and a supportive hand, jumping up and down to techno songs and swinging her to oldies like Jackson 5. He stumbled every once and a while, but Belle figured it was just because it was dark in there, it was hard to see, right? She hadn’t noticed that he had been working the keg earlier and therefore had unlimited firsthand access to the booze. Belle was so engrossed in dancing that all of this went over her head.

After the platonic twirling and jumping, Belle was starting to get bored. Was he ever going to make a move? Finally Belle was the one who had to grow a pair of balls and do what she perceived as the first step: during a hip hop song with a sultry beat, she pulled him close, wrapping one arm around his waist and a second grazing the back of his neck. He was instantaneously responsive, doing the same and bending his knees lower and lower.

They meandered through the dark room eventually making it to one of the side walls, and using it as support, they continued their sensual dance. I’m one of them, Belle automatically realized. I’m one of those girls hard-core grinding in the Boom Boom Room. She had found it so distasteful the first time, so dirty and unnecessary, crude almost. Now though, it felt right, like her and Max were the only two in the room,
oblivious to all that was going on around them, perhaps previewing what might come later? Here and now, Belle, she reminded herself, here and now.

Max leaned his forehead against hers creating a triangular space between them. Inches from his lips, she torturously restrained herself as best as she could. “I don’t kiss people in the Boom Boom Room,” said Max, “It’s just one of my things…it seems too generic.”

“Okay,” said Belle with a pause. She didn’t know what he was getting at.

“Can I kiss you outside?” So old-fashioned, what a romantic!

“Let me get my coat,” Belle grinned. “I’ll meet you at the door.”

“Wait, I don’t think I have your number,” he said.

“614 794 3444. I’ll be right back,” she replied.

Phones, phones. Right. She should let her friends know where she was going. Leaving with max (!) call you in the morning xoxo, she texted to Lola and Jacqueline as she simultaneously grabbed her coat and threw it over her shoulders.

Max was waiting at the door as promised, and as they strolled outside she saw people waiting for the shuttle, others smoking, some just shooting the shit. “Max, think you need another beer?” someone shouted, followed by group laughter.

“Hmm, plan foiled!” Max joked. “Want to walk to Orswell? There are a ton of people out here.”

His room was no different than she had remembered it the week earlier: some clothes (dirty? Clean? She couldn’t tell) piled on a chair, posters of movies and lacrosse tacked to the wall, textbooks and notebooks stacked high on his desk. She sat on his bed, leaning back on the blue plaid pattern as he shed his jacket and threw it with the rest of the clothes. “Can I take your coat?” he said close enough for her to smell his minty breath, closer than necessary if this were just a platonic invite. He slipped the coat off her shoulders and placed it on top of his own. Shit! Where had he gotten gum? She knew she should have bought a pack! What if her breath smelled like alcohol? Gross. It’s fine, he won’t notice, she calmed herself.

He tripped over his own feet on the short walk from his chair to his bed, but sat down next to her as though he didn’t even notice. Max smiled and Belle realized that finally she was alone with him, alone in his room, and she didn’t have to worry who was watching, what people would say, or whether he wanted her there or not (he had invited her, hadn’t he?). She stood up and turned to face him. “Where are you going?” he asked softly with his hand gently holding her thigh just above the knee.

“Just readjusting,” Belle said, biting her lower-lip to coyly hide her smile, “Is this okay?” she whispered into his ear as she lifted first her right leg and then her left, straddling him.

“It’s better than okay,” he said looking into her eyes. He leaned forward, and finally, with his cool, soft lips, he kissed her. Belle tasted wintermint and smelled a hint of body wash and clean laundry, she felt the beginning of stubble retaliating from a shave earlier that day, his arms were protective but not constrictive around her. She felt sexy and relaxed. For the first time since being with Ryan, someone else had made her feel safe.

It progressed, getting more and more heated with fewer and fewer clothes until the only thing separating them was space. Belle didn’t know exactly what caused it, what flipped her switch. Maybe it was that she felt comfortable with Max at this moment, that
she could be silly around him, maybe it was his chivalry, maybe it was merely the fact that they were in bed together, he was attractive and she was horny, but suddenly sex didn’t seem like a big deal, it seemed easy, it seemed pretty damn close to what they were already doing.

With a surge of self-assurance Belle asked, “Do you want to get a condom?” Yes he did. She let him open it and put it on – after her banana-and-condom fiasco during orientation she wasn’t about to expose anyone’s delicate regions to her clumsiness – and rolled underneath him. She waited, embracing herself for the pain others had told her about. Her heart pounded like she was about to give a speech to three hundred people, and her palms were moist like the time she walked into the senior gov seminar. He moved himself forward. She felt him, felt it outside her body, but as he readjusted and tried again, she realized that he wasn’t actually entering her. He did this several times, pausing at points with his head down, not looking in her direction. “Is everything okay?” she asked.

“Yeah. Yeah, I just...maybe this isn’t the best time for this. I’m pretty tired actually, and I drank a lot tonight,” he said as he hiccupped.

“Oh. Okay...” said Belle, her softer tone now not out of seduction but out of embarrassment. She was about to lose her virginity to this guy who didn’t even know it was her first time, and she wasn’t even hot enough for him to stay hard! On top of that he had the hiccups? How romantic. Half of her wanted to curl up and cry, the other half wanted to yell and scream and punch the wall.

Max hiccupped intermittently. “Let’s just go to bed,” *hiccup* “Little spoon?” Max said, as though this could all easily be remedied.

Belle didn’t say anything, she just turned on her side as he flopped his arm over her waist pulling her close, and kept her eyes open until she heard the cadenced breath of sleep behind her. That was it? That was her first attempt at sex? Unimpressive. Pathetic. Unsuccessful. She wondered if this was as good an idea as she had originally thought or if maybe it was a huge mistake...

* * *

She left in the morning with a goodbye almost identical to the week before – Max walked her to the door, gave her a kiss on the forehead, said something along the lines of “don’t get lost on your way home,” and she walked herself back to her dorm. This time though, the bounce was missing from her step, all the pep and enthusiasm that had overtaken her the week before was deflated, now replaced by an anxiety she couldn’t place. The night had been fun, and Max was definitely attractive, but had she really been that bad in bed that he couldn’t even get it up around her? She wasn’t embarrassed. She was mortified. Here was this attractive funny upperclassman, and she couldn’t even be sexy enough to get him turned on? What a first-time college hookup experience! The more she teased the elements apart, the shittier she felt, until she started wondering how she compared to everyone else he had been with. Definitely not as good. Why hadn’t she done that thing that Ryan had always liked so much? In the heat of the moment she had completely forgotten.

By the time she reached her dorm, she was in such a worked-up tizzy – thoughts erratically leaping back and forth through her brain, intricate analyses of every single move, chastising herself for individual actions – that she just curled up in a little ball and lay in her bed, desperately hoping sleep would take over.
She made some rules: only look at your phone when it buzzes, no texting anyone if they don’t text you first. That one wasn’t all that hard to follow. Only check Facebook every two hours. Who was she kidding? Every hour. Every half hour. What if you only checked it intermittently but stayed on way too long looking at people’s profiles? Picture Sundays were the best – everyone put up photos from the night before and you could stalk people through their evening provided you knew who their friends were. Belle knew who Max’s friends were – she had already done enough investigation. Her homework was clearly not getting done this lazy Sunday afternoon, largely because her mind was obsessing over Max and her stalkage was thorough and complete.

Why hadn’t he called or texted? He had asked for her number, wasn’t that the point of having it? To get in touch? Maybe a phone call the next day would have been a little forward, but a witty text message in the joking voice he always used wouldn’t be all that ridiculous to ask of him. Maybe she would write on his Facebook wall. Was that too forward of her? Too slutty? What if it was a friendly message, an inside joke? She brainstormed. For an hour. Okay, finally got it: Didn’t get lost, although I had to fight off some rabid coyotes. She thought it combined a little bit of comedy with attention to the details he himself had said (“don’t get lost on your way home”). Thoughtful but funny. It was good. She wrote in the little box before taking a deep shaky breath (who knew you could get so nervous for a tiny action over Facebook?!), moving her cursor, and pressing the Share button. Done. Now she just had to wait until he responded. If he responded. Oh Jesus, the torture of waiting for Facebook responses.

She went to dinner with Jacqueline and Lola and kept her mouth shut about the whole ordeal, not because she wanted to hide it from them or anything, but because she was still sorting out what the hell happened and how she felt. “I have to print out a few things at the lib,” Belle said as they briskly walked out of Thorton and into the winter-tinged night. “I’ll see you back home.”

She did the usual: logged in to the computer, printed out her PDFs, scanned her ID card and waited for her double-sided readings to emerge from the laser printer. Mundane. Predictable. Routine. And then he walked in while talking to his buddy. For a tenth of a millisecond Belle could have sworn that they made eye contact. How could they have not? He walked right by her, less than ten feet away, close enough to toss a crumpled piece of paper, close enough to feel the cold air still clinging to his jacket. He was that close, and he didn’t say hi. He didn’t even acknowledge her presence. Didn’t flinch. Didn’t hesitate. Didn’t pause to think about it. Her eyes trailed after him as he turned and made his way towards the stairs.

Belle steamed with frustration. After forgetting to call or even text and ignoring her Facebook post (which, by this point, she knew he had seen since he had written comments on pictures posted that day), he could have at least said hi instead of completely snubbing her in the library. She walked home, distraught and annoyed, with that feeling when your heart beats too low in your belly and you feel like something bad is going to happen.

Belle sat at her desk, her internal monologue running on overdrive, and didn’t even notice her door open until it closed again and hit the brick keeping it propped.

“Hey, how was last night?” asked Annika. Weird that she was coming to say hi, she rarely came into Belle’s room without other people or an explicit motive.
“It was good,” Belle waited.
“I saw you leave with Max. He’s so hot!” she gushed. “Did anything happen?”

Belle was skeptical: on one hand, Annika had been a bitch at the beginning of the year and didn’t really seem like the most trustworthy person. On the other, she had been pretty nice recently, she knew the lacrosse team and how they functioned, and she was here now, when Belle really needed to talk. She gave in, explaining the general idea of the night before (omitting the whole almost-having-sex-but-not-getting-hard part for both her and Max’s self-preservation), and telling Annika how he hadn’t texted her or responded to her Facebook wall post.

“Oh girl! Did you really post it so soon?” Annika asked.
“Ummm, yeah. Was that stupid?” Belle wondered in a small voice.
“No, not stupid exactly, but there are like, rules to follow,” said Annika.
Belle didn’t get it. “Rules? What kind of rules?”
“I mean, you wouldn’t necessarily know them if you hadn’t hooked up at Branksome before, but my brother told me a few things beforehand, and I also just learned them through experience.” See, there was that hint of pretension! She continued without noticing Belle’s apprehension. “Okay, so first of all, after hooking up here, guys and girls aren’t supposed to call each other the next day or even a few days after that. Maybe you do if you’re friends, or if you actually want a relationship, but for the most part guys and girls both don’t. Also, it’s not the best idea to hook up with someone you actually like for the first time if you’re both wasted. It’s easiest to hook up drunkenly – why do you think so many people grind drunkenly in the Boom Boom Room? If all you want is a hookup, then go for it. If you’re expecting anything more than that though, it’s better to actually get to know them soberly; ask them to lunch or dinner in Thorton, go see a movie, study in the library, hang out, whatever.”

“But we did talk. We hung out for a while and had a good conversation a couple of weeks ago. I mean, yes, we had been drinking, but that doesn’t necessarily take away the fact that we spoke…” Belle trailed off.

“You really think he remembers that?” scoffed Annika, “He was probably wasted out of his mind. I’d be surprised if he remembered going home with you this past weekend, never mind talking at Crack a week earlier.”
Belle fumed and pulled out her defense, “Look, we had a really good conversation that night. We’ve been flirting for a few weeks, and I’m not saying he’s in love with me or anything, but I get the feeling that he likes me. He told me all kinds of things about his personal life.”

“What like the sob story that he comes from northern Maine and doesn’t fit in here?” Annika quipped. “Bullshit. He told my sophomore friend Jill the same story a few weeks ago. It’s all just to make girls feel like he’s divulging some innermost secret, he makes it seem like they’re special or they’re different.

“Look, Max is a sweetheart, but he’s also a player,” Annika continued. “He’s a laxer and can get pretty much any girl he wants – you’re one of his many conquests. He hooks up with a bunch of people and while the girls might not be too happy about it, why would he stop? His buddies think it’s great and that he’s the man, he gets to hook up with hot girls, and he doesn’t have to deal with all the emotional drama that comes with a relationship. Plus, from what I’ve heard he never lies or explicitly says anything hinting at future hookups, so can he really be blamed?”
YES HE CAN! Belle wanted to scream. You don’t treat people that way, it’s not nice. But Annika was right about a couple of things: Max hadn’t said that he would call or text or write, and he hadn’t said anything about “next time” or “next week.” At this point, Belle didn’t know what to think or how she felt. She was confused whether she was acting like a psycho-bitch, or whether Max was being a juvenile baby by ignoring her. Were her expectations unrealistically high or was he being a let-down?

Annika gave Belle a light hug and walked towards the door. “I’m not trying to be a bitch, I just don’t want you to make a fool of yourself,” she said. “This is how it works at Branksome. Get used to it or else you’ll have a pretty lonely four years here,” and Belle was left in her room, alone with her thoughts once again.

* * *

Belle’s confusion was all-consuming throughout the week; her nails were nibbled down, stumpy and jagged, and her thoughts were drawn to Max like a magnet to a fridge. Self-questioning and self-analysis, Facebook stalking and email checking. Getting any sort of homework done was tortuous and tedious, and she locked herself in the library until late at night, foregoing the thirty minute interactions and wind-down time she usually allowed herself with her friends in her dorm. She hadn’t seen them in days and it didn’t seem worth it to rehash and explain everything that had happened; Annika had apparently already said all she needed to say. Lola was distant and appeared disinterested, and Belle could barely fathom explaining her sexual escapades to Isaac – that would ruin any chance she would ever have with him, now or in the future.

On a night like any other this past week, Belle made a beeline from the library to her bedroom and began preparing for bed. Charlotte was out and about, not uncommon for her erratic sleep schedule, and Belle was about to disrobe to put on pajamas when there was a soft knock and a “hello?” at her door.

“Come in,” Belle responded, not expecting anyone.

In walked Lola, comfy in a tattered oversized sweatshirt. “Hey, what’s up?” she asked automatically. Without really waiting for a response, she paused for a moment and asked, “Do you have a couple of minutes to talk?”

“Yeah, of course,” said Belle. She sensed something was askew; Lola wasn’t her usual vibrant self. Come to think of it, it had been a while since Belle had seen Lola carefree. Granted, Belle herself was pretty consumed with Max and everything surrounding him, but she had barely spent time with Lola at all in the last week or two apart from in large group settings and hadn’t really had the chance to check in with her. “Come, let’s sit here,” said Belle as she made her way to the couch.

Lola fidgeted with the silver ring on her thumb, turning it round and round. “Look, I ummm…I wanted to apologize. I feel like I’ve been really distant lately. I’ve kind of been in another world…” Her voice trailed off.

Belle waited for her to continue but Lola was silent. Transfixed, turning and turning her ring. “I mean, I’ve been out of it too. This Max thing is driving me up the wall…” Belle offered.

“I know. I know it has,” said Lola. “And I feel like I should have been there for you. I should have been there to listen. I knew you were upset and I didn’t even come to you to talk about it. I feel really bad about that.”

“It’s okay,” replied Belle. She had never seen Lola nervous like this before. Repeating portions of sentences, fiddling and fumbling, looking down instead of into her
eyes. Belle itched to fill the silence. Maybe Lola has an opinion about Annika’s so-called “rules,” Belle thought.

“Lola, do you think there are rules about hooking up at Branksome?”
“What do you mean?” Lola asked.

“Like is there a given amount of time you have to wait before calling someone after hooking up? Or is it different if you hook up when you’re sober versus when you’re drunk?” She waited momentarily for an answer before continuing, “Or what about grinding in the Boom Boom Room? Does that count? Can a guy actually like you if you’re grinding with him in there?”

“I…I don’t know Belle,” said Lola, at a loss for words.

“And what about sleeping over? If a boy invites you back to his place and you just cuddle, it has to mean more than a random hook up, right?”

“Belle, I’m not sure,” Lola said again.

Belle barely registered Lola’s response and continued rambling. “Do you think that guys just look at us as silly little freshman? And what about players? Do you think that a guy who’s a player can be like, reformed? What if he meets a girl he really likes or connects with?”

“Belle,” Lola finally firmly interjected, “I’ve been going through my own shit recently. That’s…that’s why I wasn’t there for you and that’s why I really can’t answer these questions. I just…I need to tell you something…” She took an audible breath. “I have trouble answering those questions because I’m gay Belle. I like girls.”

Girls. Lola liked girls. Not boys, but girls. Belle was speechless for a moment. Thought number one: but Lola was so pretty, she could get any guy she wanted. Thought number two: had Lola ever liked her? Thought number three: no wonder she perpetually ignored guys’ advances. Flashback to orientation when she casually dismissed every guy who approached her, or social house parties where she meticulously avoided dancing with boys. It wasn’t totally out of the blue, Belle just hadn’t paid enough attention to ever realize it.

“Really?” she gently probed.

“Really,” said Lola. “I dabbled in high school, but it was expected. New York City, prep school atmosphere – it was practically guaranteed that girls would make out with each other. I just always knew it was something else, that it meant something more to me. So when I graduated I promised myself that I wouldn’t do what I wasn’t comfortable with anymore, namely, hooking up with guys. And I haven’t, which I guess is good, but it’s harder than I thought it would be here at Branksome. I mean, I know people are really liberal, but there’s just not a huge gay or lesbian community. Sometimes I…I just feel really lonely.” Red-rimmed lids could not contain her tears, and they spilled over and down her cheek. Watery blue eyes.

Here was her friend, Belle’s best friend at school, so vulnerable and delicate. Belle couldn’t help but feel guilty and selfish for being so preoccupied and consumed with a stupid conceited guy.

“Lola. Lola, come here,” she said as she scooched towards her on the couch. “I don’t care if you’re gay or not. You’re my closest friend here. I love you and I know it sounds cliché, but I’m here for you. Honestly, it doesn’t matter to me who you want to hook up with. Your friendship is what I care about.”

“You really mean that?” she said through dewy eyes.
“Yes, I really mean that!” Belle said. “Come here, give me a hug,” she said, pulling Lola in tight. “Whatever you do in bed is totally cool with me. Can I ask you a question though?” she said as she pulled away. She didn’t usually have to muster up courage when asking Lola a question, but this time she wanted to balance sensitivity with her own curiosity. “Did you ever have a crush on me?”

“Belle,” Lola said, drawing out her name, looking straight into her eyes, and breaking into the first smile she cracked all evening, “I love you, but you’re not really my type.”

Belle giggled and gave Lola a little push. “Well you’re not really my type either, so there!”

With the tension lifted, the two girls delved into a discussion of crushes, frustrations and epic escapades, ignoring the fact that work awaited them and instead catching up on all that they had missed.

* * *

Belle wanted to write Max off as an asshole, she really did, but it was difficult to wholeheartedly believe that he was a dick when he had acted so kindly all the other times they had interacted. She made excuses: maybe he didn’t see me, maybe he was really busy and didn’t notice my Facebook wall post, maybe he was embarrassed. All possibilities, all probably untrue. The most annoying part was that despite Max’s blatant ignoring tendencies, deep down Belle still knew that she wanted him. She was counting down the days until the next Friday night so she would have an excuse (hypothetically bring drunk) to be forward and seductive. Knowing that she could track him down and have it mistaken for running into each other on such a small campus gave her relief – before Annika’s lecture she hadn’t seen anything wrong with Facebook stalking or being honest about wanting to see him. Now though, she realized how strict the rules were: yes, it was acceptable to Facebook stalk in the privacy of her own room or in a deserted corner of the library, but you don’t tell anyone – save for your closest friends and allies – who you’re looking for on a given night unless you want to completely foil your chances. Belle didn’t want that.

The party she figured Max would be at was in Burnham Apartments, campus housing lived in by mostly juniors and seniors. It was a Friday night and few people were throwing parties (fall athletes had games the next day – you couldn’t party without athletes there, right?) which practically guaranteed that all kinds of people from different years and social groups would funnel into the same place. Belle momentarily wondered if Isaac would be at Burnham before quickly pushing the thought out of her head. Finding Max was her goal tonight, better to stick to that.

Belle, Lola, Jacqueline and Annika made the trek in skirts and heels from their dorm at around 11:40. By this point in the year, Belle was much more accustomed to multitasking and mentally pieced together her outfit while she was showered. Tonight was tricky – nothing too short (she didn’t want to seem slutty or easy) but nothing too plain either (if she wanted Max to notice her, she would have to stand apart from everyone else). The parameters were narrow, and although most people would be too drunk to remember or even notice a girl’s outfit, one wrong move, one V-neck plunging dangerously low, one skirt hiked up past mid-thigh, one markedly transparent top, and you could be written off as a whore for your next four years. Some people would forget,
Pastel Shirts and Miniskirts

Belle settled on a simple red tank tucked into a high-waisted cotton black skirt that was tight on top but flouncy until her thigh, lace tights, and ankle booties with a heel. Fancier than the typical jeans-and-a-pregnant-woman-shirt, but nothing so outrageous as to make people wonder why they hell she was wearing it.

The four girls approached the apartments, searching the doors for the correct letter. “H. H, where is H?” wondered Lola aloud. The apartments were arranged around a grassy quad and part of their allure was the fact that they were slightly removed from the physical campus. With four apartments in each letter, as well as a kitchen, living room and bathroom in each, they had a homey quality to them that wasn’t easily replicated in other places on campus. Burnham parties usually took over at least two apartments, if not all four in a given letter, and people jetted between them, running up and down stairs, congregating in the narrow hallways, and hanging out in the kitchens – virtually, wherever you could find space, you staked out territory.

“H! Here it is,” said Lola largely to herself since Annika was already leading the way into the building.

There was a palpable and overwhelming change in temperature as they walked into the apartments. Steamy and damp, sticky and sweaty. The girls removed their coats immediately. They peered into the apartment on the left, and – lights off, tables and chairs pushed to the side – they saw students dancing to hip hop and pop in the middle of the living room. The apartment on the right was populated with people talking, drinking and attempting to squeeze in and out; probably a safer place to deposit their coats. They put their outerwear together in a tight little ball on a bookshelf in a corner, and meandered through the crowd to get a beer.

Belle scoured the place looking for the dark hair she had run her fingers through a week earlier. Nowhere to be found. Maybe he was wearing his baseball cap. What color was it again? Yellow? No yellow hats around either. Belle stood in little groups and pretended to participate in conversation, but was completely disengaged. Her gaze wandered off. With every flash of yellow she turned her head. She instinctively whipped her phone out hoping for a drunken text message. But to no avail.

“Girl, you need to calm down. Tell yourself that you’ll have a good night whether you see him or not, and that way you won’t be disappointed,” whispered Annika in Belle’s ear as they ventured back to the kitchen for their second beers.

“Is it that obvious?” worried Belle.

“Maybe not to everyone, but to me. I know how these things work,” said Annika.

While she may have been kind of pompous, she was completely correct. “You know what?” said Belle, “you’re right! Screw that, I’m going to have fun. Let’s check out the other side.”

“’Atta girl!” joked Annika, as they walked together, beers in hand.

The apartment across the hall was exactly the same as the first, except a mirror image – fridge and table on the opposite side, bedroom arrangement identical, and living room precisely in the same place. Except that this living room was packed with sweaty people bopping around. And boys dancing shirtless on the coffee table. And a black-haired, yellow-capped guy pressing a girl against the one un-furniture-occupied space of the wall. Max. Making out with another girl. Max was kissing. Another. Girl. Right here,
right in public, right in the middle of the makeshift dance floor. Belle’s stomach didn’t drop, it plummeted. It slammed against cold hard tile, cracking and crumbling until she thought she might summon it all up again and spew her beer all over the unknowing dancers. She didn’t, but it felt like she could.

Who was it? Belle couldn’t quite see in the dimmed light. Brown hair, plain, stereotypical. Some sophomore bitch. Belle had seen her at Crack house before. Wearing tights and a boring old tunic. She was kissing him back.

Belle stared for what felt like eons but couldn’t have been more than ten or fifteen seconds. Then. He momentarily looked up and for less than a split second, they made eye contact. She tried to give him a deathly stare, tried to drill holes of disgust and desperation into his head, but instead of responding to any element of her presence, he hastily looked away and refocused on the sophomore bitch as though he hadn’t just seen Belle standing there. As though he and Belle barely knew each other. As though Belle didn’t exist.

She was able to hold back the tears until she got outside, until she had a little elbow room, until it wasn’t the moist sweat evaporating from other people that dampened her face, but rather her own tears.

She cried for the fact that Max had forgotten about her in less than a week. She cried for his blatant and purposeful ignoring actions. She cried for how foolish she had been and for harping on him, Facebook stalking, fantasizing. She cried for missing her bed and for missing her parents, for being an absent friend to Lola when she really needed someone there and for the general stressors of college. She cried for ignoring Isaac for so long. She cried because she was crying, and she knew that she shouldn’t. She knew that it would all get easier with time and space and experience, but she cried because she didn’t have that yet and because she couldn’t help not having it.

Despite her hiccupping, she regained some awareness of her surroundings and realized that Annika, Lola and Jacqueline encircled her, rubbing her back, playing with her hair, and hugging her close. “I think I should probably go to bed guys,” sniffled Belle.

“I don’t mind walking you home,” offered Lola, “Parties at Burnham always make me claustrophobic anyways.” She gently linked her arm though Belle’s and they walked in comfortable silence back to Whitney.

The following days Belle wanted to pretend she wasn’t hurt, but her free-falling emotions were out of her control at this point. It was one thing to hear about your crush hooking up with someone else, it was quite another to witness it right it front of your face. With the former it was much easier to make up stories and excuses about why or how it happened, but with the latter, with visual evidence, what excuse would hold strong?

Belle was caught in the repetitive haze of homework, reading and scouring common spaces for Max, simultaneously wanting to run into him and dreading it too. It was only when Isaac said in bio Wednesday morning, “Belle, I feel like we haven’t hung out in a while,” that she really saw how this whole dramatic affair infringed on her relationships. How it infringed on her life.

“You’re totally right,” she said. “Can you grab dinner tonight?”

Belle had barely been nervous around Isaac since that first day in class, but for some reason anxiousness and insecurity plagued her before dinner. She checked her
watch every few minutes and concentrated on gnawing the nail of her ring finger until it was late enough to go meet him.

She met him in the Thorton lobby and they both went off in their own directions, filling their trays with food and sitting down at a long wooden table. Belle hadn’t anticipated telling him the Max story — somehow it didn’t feel appropriate, as though it would seem like she was doing it just to make him jealous — but as the conversation ebbed and flowed, she started wondering his opinion. Would a male perspective bring some clarity? Would it be completely off since Max and Isaac were so different? As with Annika, Belle withheld the details, but this time it was more out of politeness and their negligible importance than self-preservation. Isaac wasn’t the type to go around spreading rumors and didn’t have a gaggle willing to hushedly disseminate the juicy gossip around campus.

“Look, I can’t really comment on this particular guy, I don’t know him, but he seems a bit like a douche,” said Isaac. “It’s also way easier for guys who have that kind of clout. If you play one of the ‘macho’ sports like lacrosse or hockey you have girls falling all over you. Throw in the fact that he’s a senior which means there’s no one who’s off-limits for him here, and that totally widens the pool.”

“What about rules though? Do you think there are rules about hooking up at Branksome?” asked Belle. She knew she was stuck on this idea, but it fascinated her.

“What kind of rules?” responded Isaac.

“Like do guys feel like they should call or text girls the day after they hook up? Or is there a difference between hooking up sober and hooking up drunk? And what about all the guys who are in relationships versus those who aren’t – what’s the difference there?” she pummeled him with questions.

“Yeah, I think there are rules here. On both sides though. Like guys probably wouldn’t call a girl the next day, but he might text her if he likes her or just wants to be nice. Definitely a difference hooking up sober versus drunk, but I feel like that’s anywhere, not just at college. Girls have rules that guys have to play by too. Do you think it’s easy to dance with a girl? You set yourself up for rejection every time. Girls will walk away from a guy who’s trying to dance with her without thinking twice about how that’s insulting or upsetting to him,” Isaac explained.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. I never really thought of it from that point of view,” said Belle.

Isaac continued, “And as for relationships, I think that’s something you either grow into as you get older here, or you have to really like the girl and be able to withstand your friends’ harassment.”

“I don’t get it. What do you mean?” asked Belle.

“I’ve seen guys give each other a lot of shit when they talk about dating or start dating. I don’t really know why, but it’s like you’re considered less of a ‘man’ or something, like ‘real men’ hook up with as many girls as possible.”

“Huh. I never knew that guys even talked about that stuff, never mind made fun of each other about it,” Belle said.

“Oh yeah, definitely. I guess it just makes it a lot harder for two people to get together when or if you actually do find someone you like. You have to be willing to stick out all of the stupid banter,” Isaac explained.
The rest of dinner was comfortable as usual, and once finished they stood up and deposited their trays on the nifty rotating tray-holder-thingy. As they walked out, Belle looked up at him. Isaac gazed straight ahead unaware that Belle was staring until he turned his head and made eye contact. She smiled. “Thanks for everything Isaac,” said Belle as she swung her arm around his waist.

“All right,” he replied, putting his arm on her shoulder and pulling her towards him. “That’s what friends are for…”

Maybe he would be more than a friend, maybe not. Actually, Belle never got the point of that phrase, more than a friend? What more could you need apart from friends? Maybe Isaac would be a friend as well as something else, maybe not. But for now, Belle was just happy to spend time with him.

As they exited Thorton together, Belle was so busy laughing at one of his dorky jokes, she didn’t even notice that she almost walked right into Max.

“Watch out!” he said. “Hi Belle.”

“Hi. Max! Hi.”

They each continued walking in their respective directions. No stop, little interaction. But for the first time in a while, Belle felt good. Belle felt really good. She turned to Isaac and said, “Just so you know, that was him…thanks again,” this time without a goofy grin on her face.

They walked out to greet the icy fall night, the kind of night that smells a little sweet and causes your breath to turn into cloudy white fog in the air, and headed towards the library together. There was a whole night ahead of them and lot of bio homework to be done…