



My best friend's body is being lowered into the ground and I'm thinking about how unfair it is that her vintage nineties maroon doc martens are going with her. She'd think it was fucking ridiculous that her boots are being buried with her. She'd laugh with me at the idiocy. *Why bury something that could be of use to someone else? You should have them, Alex,* she'd say. But then, most people, especially young people, don't have a will on hand to navigate how they'd want their material possessions to be distributed.

An image of Lucy inside her casket comes to the front of my mind, all decked out in her favorite dress paired with her docs. Her parents asked if I wanted to see Lucy at the funeral home, and as much as I wanted to see my best friend one last time, I couldn't bring myself to do it. I didn't want to remember her like that. Still and made up with more makeup than she'd ever have worn in real life.

I miss five days ago. My life was so uncomplicated then. Hell, it wasn't just uncomplicated. It was good...no, great! Lucy and I had just gotten through our college graduation (hers from *Princeton*, mine from *Rutgers*), and were both planning to move into an apartment in the city soon.

We'd written up a little manifesto when we were kids. I was going to be a famous singer, and she was going to make the food at a Michelin star restaurant. We would live in a beautiful brownstone apartment together and have slumber parties every night. She'd make the popcorn fresh, or as she called it, the right way, without all the palm oil used in microwave popcorn. I'd make the movie selection, something pompous and artsy like *Bicycle Thieves* she'd no doubt complain all the way through. The really crazy part was that up until five days ago, we were well on our way to achieving our preteen dreams. Minus the brownstone, of course. Neither of us had millions lying around. At least, not yet.

It occurs to me at this moment that I've never been to a funeral before, and that I hadn't ever thought to appreciate that fact. Then again, most of the people around me have also never been to a funeral so it's hard to know what's normal. The whole ceremony seems like some big manipulation to make you cry buckets and subsequently feel embarrassed in front of a room full of strangers. I know logically that I shouldn't care what these people think of me. So I'm a basket case. I'm supposed to be one, right? My best friend just died. But even so, I can't stop feeling like I'm on display. Like I'm being judged for being too upset or something.

My eyes flicker to Lucy's parents, standing on the opposite side of the casket. Their heads are downcast and Lucy's mother is paler than her usual shade of alabaster white. Lucy's dad stands tall and stoic in his immaculate suit. He could be in line at the DMV for all the emotion his face is showing. Meanwhile, I've cried so much that my throat aches with all the snot that's built up. I'm more than a basket case. I'm a wreck. I wish I could leave. I don't want to go to Lucy's house after this and have to be asked how I'm doing every two minutes. There's only one answer to that question: pretty fucking terrible.

The Rabbi is going on and on about how perhaps Lucy's death is meant to teach us a lesson, and I swear to the God I don't believe in that I'm going to scream. Just then, Ethan, Lucy's brother, arrives, and haphazardly throws a yarmulke on before joining his parents. He's not wearing a suit. He's not even wearing black. If I had to guess by the state of his appearance, I'd say he only recently woke up, his mop of brown hair twisting in every direction, a distressed band tee and jeans, his funeral uniform. Ethan's three years older than Lucy and I so even though we grew up together, it often felt like we were living in different worlds. He was outgoing and athletic. Lucy and I were creative and shy. I wouldn't say he was ever mean to us. It was more that he ignored us. Sometimes I'd forget Lucy even had a brother. And once Ethan had gone away for college, all the way to sunny California, he'd barely come back to visit. Certainly this was the first time I'd seen him since my high school graduation.

The Rabbi mentions Lucy's love of Cacio E Pepe, and for some reason, that's when I lose it, a high-pitched wail escaping my lungs. I feel my insides twisting and it feels like my head is going to explode. I can't even bring myself to care about everyone staring at me because the pain is too great. *Will it be like this forever?* Is this pain I'm feeling going to be like a kidney stone that won't go away? Just a dull aching shard of glass in my upper abdomen. Something about that thought takes the wind out of me, and I feel myself crumpling to the ground, my vision becoming hazy. And then like Lucy and I did in high school after ingesting one too many shots of tequila, I pass out. --

Someone's breathing on me. I can feel their hot breath near my face, but there's a sweetness to it. Cool mint. Like someone just had an Altoid. The unconsciousness has a lovely warm feeling to it. It's heavy and protected. I don't want to come out of it.

“Alex?” Someone’s calling my name. A man, I think. And he sounds...worried? Why would anyone be worried? I’m just asleep. Sleeping the sleep of a girl who hasn’t slept in five days. Oh. Five days. Reality comes crashing back. *Lucy is dead.* My eyes blink open and I see Ethan’s green eyes staring down at me, his hair falling along the sides of his face. His brow furrows and I look down to find his hand gripping mine.

It doesn’t take much looking around to realize everyone is staring at me. The embarrassment I felt a few minutes ago is nothing compared to what I feel now. My face gets hot and I feel nauseous.

“Alex, it’s Ethan,” he says as if I don’t know where I am.

I can’t help rolling my eyes as I move to get up. “Yeah, I know who you are. I’ve only known you my whole life.” I’m not usually antagonistic or rude, certainly not in social situations where I have an audience. But I can’t help it. I’m just so angry. He tries to help me up but I push his hand away forcefully. As soon as I’m fully standing again, bright stars dance in my eyeline and I’m unsteady on my feet. Ethan quickly snakes an arm around my waist. The Rabbi tsks, giving Ethan a nod.

“Why don’t you take Alex to the office and get her some water?” Even though he’s a man of God and supposed to love everyone, the Rabbi doesn’t seem particularly sad at the thought of me leaving.

Ethan wastes no time turning me around and walking me in the direction of the temple office that’s next door to the cemetery. I can hear the Rabbi start back up again as soon as we’re a few paces away, and my throat threatens to close up again.

“I’m sorry,” I say because I feel like I have to.

Ethan gives me a look which tells me he thinks I’m crazy.

“No really,” I go on. “I know it’s weird I’m so emotional when your family is...I mean I can’t claim to feel what your parents feel. Or you do. We were only best friends.” Even as I say the words, I don’t believe them.

He looks at me then, his eyes growing softer. “You were closer to her than I ever was, Alex.” He looks slightly embarrassed to have admitted that. “If anyone deserves to be upset today, it’s you.”

I turn my face away. “I don’t know if your parents would agree with that.”

Lucy’s parents had never liked me. It wasn’t that there had ever been some big fight or something. They’d never explicitly said those words to me, but it was always a feeling I had. Eventually, we only had sleepovers at my house because I always felt like an unwelcome interloper at hers. I know Lucy felt it too because she told me so.

“My parents,” Ethan begins. “Like most people of their generation, they have never been, and will never go to therapy, so I wouldn’t take anything they do or say personally.”

I take a deep breath in then. “Why are you being nice to me?”

“Have I ever been mean to you?” he replies in confusion, sounding offended I asked the question at all.

“No,” I answer honestly. I want to say more but don’t. No, he was never mean to me. But, he was never anything else to me either.

We reach the temple office then, and he opens the front door for me. The office has an antiseptic feel to it and the scent of lemon lysol wafts up my nostrils. He sits me down in a chair near the reception area and walks across the room to the vending machine, fishing a dollar out of his wallet to pay for a bottle of water. When he returns, bottle in hand, he gives me a rueful expression as he hands it over.

“Where were you?” I ask him because today I apparently have no filter. “You showed up late.”

He runs a hand through his hair, taking the yarmulke off his head. “Yeah, I slept through my alarm.”

“How?” I reply, only realizing after I say it, how judgmental my reply sounds. “I mean, I haven’t been able to sleep much...since everything.”

Ethan purses his lips, folding his hands together like he’s getting ready to tell me something really heavy.

“I guess I thought if I didn’t wake up today,” he starts before drifting off. “Well, anyway...it doesn’t matter.”

The last five days I’d been making bargains with the God I don’t believe in to go back in time and force Lucy to take the cure, so I have no room to judge anyone.

“Did she talk to you before?” I ask before I can overthink it.

He only shakes his head. “No. I don’t think Lucy ever felt like she could really confide in me. You would probably know better what was going through her head those last few days.”

I did, and I didn’t. Historically, she told me some things, but not everything. In the days before her birthday, I could feel her holding truths back from me. Maybe she didn’t think I’d be able to handle it. And considering the way I’d reacted today, perhaps she would have been right.

We fall into a loaded silence, and after a minute or two, I change the subject.

“So, when do you head back to San Francisco? Lucy told me your company has like five-hundred employees now.”

A few years ago, Ethan started his own tech company. They did something with robotics I think, but neither Lucy nor I understood the specifics of it.

He rubs the stubble on his chin, and sighs. “Yeah, it’s going good. But, I’m not sure when I’m going back. What with my mom and dad here and everything, I don’t see how I can just skip back to the west coast and pretend like everything isn’t different now.”

I finally untwist the cap of the water bottle and take a long swig, suddenly realizing how thirsty I am. In thirty seconds, the whole bottle is gone and somehow I still feel parched. I must still be dehydrated from all the crying.

I look back at Ethan to find his eyes on me, studying my face like it holds some mystery he’s trying to decipher. My eyes travel down to his barely parted lips and I’m not sure if I imagine it but it feels like his eyes are on my lips too.

Just then, the door to the office swings open, my mother raising her hands in frustration.

“There you are!” She exclaims as if I’ve purposely evaded her. “I’ve been waiting out front for ten minutes. Don’t you check your phone?”

I blush at her admonishment, and stand up. “Sorry, I’m coming.” Mom walks out ahead of me all in a huff, as Ethan grabs the sleeve of my dress.

“Maybe we can hang out sometime?” His voice nearly goes up an octave and he shifts on his feet. “While I’m back, I mean.”

Mom yells my name from outside, and I clear my throat.

“Sure, sounds good,” I reply quickly, putting my hand up in a small wave. I bolt before he can say anything else, and halfway down the hill, I realize that I’ve gone the past few minutes without thinking about Lucy at all, and that thought sends my stomach tumbling. How easy will it become to just forget her?

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The cure was invented in nineteen-thirteen. When it was first reported in the news, no one believed it. After centuries, there was an elixir that could keep humans from the indignity of growing old and dying? This was the stuff of fables. But lo and behold, the cure was very real. Thus the reason FDR has held the U.S. presidency for over a century.

At first, only the extremely wealthy could procure it. The cure for mortality was looked at as just another way to separate the poor from the rich. But eventually, about thirty some odd years later, the cure dropped in price and became more readily available to the masses.

Citizens receive the cure at the age of twenty-two. Something about its properties apparently makes the cure ineffective if taken when you're older. It's given out much the same way one gets a driver's license. You have to sign a waiver of course in which you agree you can't sue the government if anything goes wrong, and then, without much fanfare, the cure is administered, and you become frozen. Frozen at the very moment the cure passes through your system. From that millisecond on, no new cells are made. Not even one hair on your head will change.

There are, of course, still extremist groups which continue to protest, calling the cure 'a deal with the devil.' They believe it goes against nature for people to live forever. I'd say I understand but growing up with the cure being as normal as cars driving on the road...*this* world is all I know.

Now to the question on everyone's mind: can you die before you take the cure? The short answer is yes. This is why there are so many security measures in place beforehand. Kids still die but those cases are rare. The people who lose a child usually end up moving to the outskirts of society, not having anyone in their community to relate to. The other unintended consequence of that fact is that society as a whole never really has to contend with the discomfort of death.

All of that being said, on your twenty-second birthday, regardless of all the propaganda we've been fed, we get a choice. We can either take a vial of the cure, or a vial of something else. A tonic which supposedly stops your heart and helps you to go as peacefully as possible. Whenever you decide you've had enough of living. Most people who don't take the cure wait until they're old or until life becomes so uncomfortable they feel like they have no other choice but to end it all.

Lucy turned twenty-two five days ago, and took the tonic the same day. Her parents found her an hour later, dead in her bedroom. Contrary to what everyone else thinks, she didn't tell me before. In fact, we had plans to celebrate her birthday later that night. To say I was blindsided would be an understatement. I felt betrayed. After all, this kind of pain is supposed to be antiquated now. No one is supposed to know firsthand what grief actually feels like. We watch it in movies or read about it in books, but for most of us, the idea of losing someone is just a story. It *isn't* real life.

And of course, as soon as Lucy's body was discovered, my parents feared I had the same plan. I can't exactly blame them since Lucy and I had, up until her death, virtually planned our entire lives around each other. My twenty-second birthday isn't for two more weeks and I know without having a conversation about it that I'll be watched like a hawk the whole day. It's funny, I've never given the cure a second thought. I never even considered making another choice. But losing Lucy has made me feel emotions I didn't know existed. I worry about forever now in a way I didn't before. Because I'll have to live with this feeling forever, and with the cure, forever is a very long time.

A few days after Lucy's funeral, Ethan texts me. *what are you doing right now?* comes through first, followed quickly by *this is ethan*. I put my phone on the edge of my piano bench

and go back to my vocal warm-ups. *Vaccai* is somehow comforting in all the inconstancy. The Italian soprano exercises I learned as an eight year-old in voice lessons are intense, but I've built up my range and learned how to use my diaphragm to the point where it's automatic. Sense memory. Singing has always been how I process things. The only time I reveal anything of myself to anyone else is when I'm singing. It's intimate and emotional. It's therapeutic too, if I'm being honest. I segue into the song I've been working on recently: *Voila* by Barbara Pravin. With singing, there's no greater feeling than the moment you master a song, but this one has been a real bitch. The speed at which the French phrases go is hard to emulate, especially because I don't speak the language. Not fluently anyway.

After about an hour, I give up and close the piano's lid, still feeling the hum of giving my voice box a workout. I tap my foot for a moment and then pick up my phone, looking down at Ethan's messages. The idea of my having plans for the day is a joke. Now that Lucy's gone my social life is practically nonexistent. My thumbs hover over the keyboard as I try to decide what to say, when all of a sudden, my phone rings in my hand. He's calling me. Panic hits me hard in the chest. I answer, breathless.

"Hello?" I say, putting the phone to my ear, my anxiety skyrocketing. I may have been able to talk to Ethan the day of Lucy's funeral, but that was a special situation. I was a raw nerve then. Completely unfiltered. But now, I'm back to regularly-scheduled Alex. And regularly-scheduled Alex doesn't know how to string coherent sentences together. Certainly not when talking to Ethan Kaplan.

"Hi," I hear Ethan's low voice through the phone. "I texted you—"

"I saw," I interrupt. "Sorry, I wasn't looking at my phone. I was practicing."

There's silence for a moment and then he says, as if distracted, "Practicing? Practicing what?"

"I sing," I explain. "I have to practice every day." Could I sound like more of an idiot? He doesn't care about my singing. I'm tapping my hand on the piano lid, for some reason nervous Ethan will think I'm lying.

"Oh, okay. Well, are you done now...practicing?"

I nod and then remember he can't see me. I clench my eyes together in embarrassment.

"Yeah, I'm done. Why?"

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Lucy and I used to go to *Bowl O'Cherries* every Thursday night in high school. Then, the lanes were fairly clean and the whole place smelled of some cherry spray we were certain they'd gotten at *Victoria's Secret*. The place is less popular now than it was a few years back, but teenagers still hang out here, if for no other reason than to go out back and smoke in the one spot where there's no security camera.

I wait outside for Ethan, rocking back and forth on my feet, pretending to do things on my phone while other people pass me to go in the front entrance. My heart beats fast in my chest. I feel like it's been beating this way since I lost Lucy. I seem to be perpetually stressed out.

"Hey," Ethan greets me, rushing up the bowling alley stairs. "Sorry I'm late. My mom didn't want to let me leave."

I appraise him then. His hair is wet but combed through and he's wearing what could almost be the exact same outfit he wore to Lucy's funeral. But the band is different.

"*VampireWeekend* today..." I say the words without thinking, nodding down to his shirt. He glances down at it.

He shrugs. "I guess so. Have you been waiting long?"

"No, no. I just got here," I lie easily. I've been waiting a half hour in this spot, but he doesn't need to know that.

His eyes travel from my face down my body. I'm wearing an outfit Lucy would have lovingly deemed my "slutty librarian" look. The top has puffed feminine sleeves and a V-neck cut that's just an inch short of showing any actual cleavage. My jeans are vintage 501 *Levi's* Lucy helped me find at the thrift store last year, and the cardigan is deliciously weird with little oranges plastered all over it.

"You look..." He seems to be searching for a way to describe my style. "Is this what you wear everyday?"

I furrow my brow. His words don't exactly sound complimentary. "Not everyday, but most of the time. The cardigan I only wear on special occasions." I don't mean to sound defensive, but I can hear in my inflection that I do. "I like my clothes to be weird."

After a beat, his mouth tugs up in a smile. "I like your weird clothes too." He gestures to the front door. "Shall we?"

After getting inside and picking up our shoes, Ethan offers to grab us some cokes and fries from their cafe. I deter him from ordering hot dogs. I threw up after having one at an eighth grade birthday party and have never been brave enough to try one again.

Once we're all set up on lane four, things both normalize and get awkward at the same time because I realize I'm kind of enjoying myself...without Lucy. Something must show on my face because Ethan clears his throat.

"So, when was the last time you were here?" he asks me as he pops a fry in his mouth.

I don't want to answer him because I know where my answer will lead us. Lucy. It all comes back to her. Even when I was with my college boyfriend, or during the three-month stretches when Lucy was in a relationship, we were together at least seventy percent of the time. But it's impolite for me to not answer his question, right? So I do.

"Lucy and I came here last month when we both found out we'd passed our finals," I tell him with a small smile, feeling that shard of glass in my side light up like a Christmas tree. "How're your parents doing? Since...y'know..."

Ethan sits down next to me and sighs. "I don't really want to talk about my parents tonight, if that's okay? I'd rather hear about you anyway."

Oh, boundaries. I wonder what it's like to have those. My need to be polite and have everyone like me usually overrides my inclination to draw any lines in the proverbial sand.

"What do you want to know?" I ask, letting out the breath I've been holding.

He appears to think then, tucking a stray piece of hair behind his ear that has fallen in his face. "I want to know why you never went to any parties in high school."

I nearly scoff at that. "I went to parties. I just hated them."

"I always extended invites to Lucy, and to you. If you guys had come, I would have included you. Looked out for you both." He makes it sound like we were children he would have had to babysit, which at the time, I guess we were.

"How can I explain this to you?" I ask rhetorically. "You were popular. Lucy and I had read every book in the school library. A party was kind of our worst nightmare. At least, in high school. College parties were a little better, though I wasn't a very big fan of those either."

He cocks his head, giving me a look like he kind of can't believe what I've just said. "I don't think I was that popular in high school."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes at him. I hate it when the beautiful people pretend like they don't know they got treated differently. "I'm not even going to dignify that with a response."

He laughs then, getting up for his turn. He casually throws the ball down the center of the lane, and subsequently knocks over all the pins. He barely reacts though. He just smiles like strikes are a normal thing for him which they probably are.

"Bowled a lot then, have you?" I say, nervous to take my turn and knock down the resident three pins I always seem to hit.

He intercepts me before I can go to grab my ball, taking hold of my shoulders. I instinctively shake out of his grip, confused. "Why did you do that?"

"You were shaking," he tells me, looking me square in the eye. "Did you know you were shaking?"

I feel my cheeks flame with embarrassment.

"Yeah, it's kind of a tic I have whenever I feel anxious or nervous," I hear myself explaining, kind of shocked I'm telling him this. No one knows about it outside of my parents, my therapist, and Lucy. "It's not a big deal. But it usually flares up in social situations like this one."

His expression softens and he crosses his arms, like he's got a lot to think about.

"And you're nervous? Right now?"

Every impulse in my body tells me I should lie to him and say what I usually say, that I'm fine. But, I don't.

"Yes," I reply. "More nervous than anxious. But there's anxiety in there too."

“Because of me?” He questions, jabbing a thumb in his chest, as if the idea of him making me nervous is ludicrous.

“Yes, a bit. But it’s not your fault. It’s the situation. And also anytime I have to do something vaguely athletic...” I gesture to the bowling lanes, though my attempt at a joke doesn’t seem to amuse him.

He bites on his lip. “Is there anything I can do that would make you feel more at ease?”

The question takes my breath away because I realize no one in my life has ever asked me that before. Not my parents or my ex-boyfriends. Not even Lucy, though she was usually able to recognize when I got nervous and tried her best to make me feel more comfortable.

“Maybe I could ask you some questions,” I offer. “Just so the attention isn’t solely focused on me.”

He smiles at me then, before handing me my bowling ball. “Sure. I don’t think I’m that interesting but I’ll do what I can. Hit me with your most burning question.”

I roll the bowling ball down the lane, actually hitting five pins this time. Not bad. I turn back to him. I know the question I most want the answer to.

“At Lucy’s funeral, why did you ask me to hang out with you?” If my goal was to lessen the nervous energy inside of me, my asking this particular question didn’t really help. A few hundred emotions cross his face then, and my stomach turns over as I wait for his response.

“If I’m being honest, I think I asked you to hang out because I thought you might be the only person alive who kind of knows how I feel.”

Ah, it’s because of my friendship with Lucy. That makes sense. I’m not surprised but I do feel a twinge of disappointment. And then I feel guilty for feeling disappointed. I shouldn’t be worrying about whether Lucy’s brother has a crush on me.

“That’s a lie,” he says, scratching his temple. “Well, not a lie exactly but it’s not the only reason. I like you, Alex. I always liked you. I’d like to get to know you better.” He pauses, staring at me. “Assuming you want to get to know me too?”

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After that night, Ethan calls me once a day, always following the same pattern. It’s as if he knows the familiar pattern of events is comforting to me. He says hello, ascertains that I, in fact, have no plans, which, duh, of course I don’t, and then invites me to do something. Eight days later, we graduate from bowling to the mundaneness of Ethan coming over to watch me practice. It should make me nervous, but surprisingly, the more time I spend around him, the more my nervous system seems to calm. And it isn’t like he’s staring at me as I sing. He has a book in his hands. Am I ninety percent sure he’s pretending to read in order to make me feel more comfortable? Yes. But, after a bit, the idea of him actually watching me doesn’t make me feel that nervous anyway. I do wonder what he sees though. Is my voice cracking? Does my brow furrow when I’m learning a new bridge? Does he see me biting my nail when I’m trying to figure something out?

“So, singing, huh?” he says to me, when I put the lid of the piano down after an hour of practice. “You’ve got a voice.” He says the words like I’m worthy of national acclaim.

I smile because that’s my default reaction when anyone compliments me. “They say practice makes perfect.”

His smile drops. “It’s not practice. It’s you, Alex. It’s like you go somewhere else when you sing. Your guard drops and I can see everything. Feel everything.”

My stomach balloons with both glee and trepidation. “Uh—”

“Will you teach me something?” he asks, cutting me off. I’m taken off guard.

“Oh. Uh, sure. You mean something on the piano?”

He nods and I sit back down on the piano bench, motioning for him to sit next to me. He takes a moment to join me, but when he does, he’s sitting so close I can feel his leg pressing against mine. I wonder if he sat this close to me on purpose. I pull the piano lid back up, and he immediately puts his hands on the keys, pressing his fingers across the keys like he’s a toddler who’s just discovered a new toy. His head is bowed and my eyes dart to his shirt. Looks like today’s band is *Modest Mouse*. He shifts on the bench and I smell some mix of soap and a sweet musky smell that I’ve learned is purely Ethan. Turning to me, his lips part, and I think for a moment that he might be about to kiss me. But then he clears his throat.

“So, what are you going to teach me? *The Saints Go Marching in? Twinkle, Twinkle?*”

I give him a sarcastic eye roll. “Do you have a particular interest in learning those songs?”

Ethan lets out a small laugh. “Not really, but they’re easy right?”

I sift through my various sheet music on top of the piano and finally find what I’m looking for. “I think piano might be a little hard for one afternoon. How about we try a little singing instead?”

He opens his mouth, no doubt about to protest, but then sees the song title and shuts up. I smile, smug.

“I’m assuming you know it?” I say, opening the sheet music and laying it against the music desk.

I lay my fingers on the piano, lightly playing the opening notes to “Creep” by *Radiohead*. I’d gotten the sheet music in high school when I was going through my emo nineties phase and thought singing the song at a school talent show made me the coolest singer in the world.

“A far cry from what you were playing before,” he observes, transfixed on my hands gliding along the keys. I start to sing and motion for him to join me. After a beat, he does, albeit timidly. I stop and start, giving him a few suggestions to elongate a note or where to take a breath, but he sounds good. Better than me actually with this song. He’s got the vocal range of a beautiful tenor and I’m pleased to find that it compliments my soprano voice well.

As we sing the last note, I turn to him. He cocks his head to the side, his grin matching mine, and it’s then that I decide to lean in and kiss him. At the first press of his soft lips, I feel weightless. Greedy. I part his lips with my tongue and deepen the kiss, one of his arms shifting to cup the side of my face. I don’t want it to end; this kiss. I move myself closer, and my movement makes his elbow hit the keys on the piano. Something about the sound makes Ethan break our kiss. He gets up abruptly, face flushed.

“I have to tell you something, Alex.” The words come out all in a rushed garble.

I can’t think of what could be so important he needed to ruin the moment. That kiss is the first moment good enough that I actually forgot the last week and a half happened.

“Okay,” I turn on the bench to face him as he paces. I hear something and look down to my leg shaking. Guess the nervous energy is back. “I’m listening.”

“My business in San Francisco?”

I nod, still confused. “What about it?”

He crosses his arms. “A week before Lucy died, we filed for bankruptcy. So I probably would have been here anyway. I’m not what you think I am. I don’t know what I’m doing. And the worst part is that I’ve been so consumed with my own shit that losing Lucy almost feels like...I keep forgetting she’s gone. So basically, I’m selfish *and* a failure, and you really shouldn’t want anything to do with me.” He sounds on the verge of tears and I can’t take it anymore.

I get up and cross the room to where he's standing and throw my arms around his neck, hugging his body tightly to mine.

"What's this for?" he asks into my hair, his arms circling me.

I breathe out, or rather breathe in, the smell of him calming *me* down. "The best way to calm your nervous system is to hug someone. Do you know we need four hugs a day for our survival?"

We stand in that hug for a long moment and I almost wish it could last forever. Right now, in this one second, everything feels right.

"I should hug people more," Ethan says quietly after a moment. The next moments are blissful, and then he says something which changes everything.

"Lucy left a note." The words leave his mouth but I'm not there for them. A ringing starts in my ears. Lucy. Lucy left a note? Lucy left a note and no one told me? Lucy left a note and Ethan didn't tell me. "She said she was sorry, that she knew we'd all be upset and shocked, but that forever wasn't right..."

My eyes blink up at him and I unlatch myself, stepping back. "Did she say anything else?" Like how about something for her best friend who she was supposed to meet an hour later?

"That was it. I wanted to tell you at the funeral, but my parents thought it would make you more upset. Now, I think it's really because they were embarrassed or something..."

I feel sick and try to get ahead of the dizzy spell by putting my head between my legs. "So why didn't you tell me? We've only been hanging out every single day..."

I feel Ethan sit down on the floor next to me, his arm trying to move around me comfortingly. I shirk it off.

“I’m sorry, Alex. Look, I made a mistake. I didn’t want to do the wrong thing. I can see now I did. Please. Forgive me.”

“What did she mean?” I ask quietly, less to him and more to the universe. “About forever not being right?”

Ethan takes a deep breath in. “Again, I feel like you would know better than I would. I hadn’t spoken to Lucy for a few weeks when it all happened. I wish I could ask her.”

Forever isn’t right? Well of course it’s not. But science made it possible like it’s made so many other things possible. What could have made Lucy change her mind? Then the thought occurs to me; I’ll never know. I can never question her or yell at her or hug her again, and suddenly the sick feeling in my stomach manifests into something real. I run into my bathroom and shut the door behind me, puking up my lunch in the toilet in one big heave. I hear Ethan call to me to say he’s getting me water, but the thought doesn’t comfort me. I lay back on the cold tile and stare up at my ceiling, wishing just for a moment that I’d never have to get back up.

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I’m not suicidal. Even with Lucy gone, I want to live a big life. I want our preteen dreams to become a reality but knowing what Lucy wrote in that note sends me down some mental rabbit holes. The big sucker: how can I possibly live until the end of the world without my best friend? Will I forget the sound of her voice? The smell of the cookies she’d bake when one of us was going through a breakup? Or perhaps worse, will I remember all of it...forever? Will the memories be as present as they are now? Will they haunt me for eternity?

At my request, Ethan gives me space the next few days. I need to think through things. I need to feel objective. Not like the emotional basket case I very much am now. My twenty-second birthday lingers in the periphery, and for the first time ever, I seriously begin to

question what decision I should make. Don't misunderstand me. I'm not thinking of doing what Lucy did, ending it all on my twenty-second birthday. But I am thinking for the first time ever about *not* taking the cure. Of aging naturally. Of dying when I'm supposed to. I know my parents won't understand and part of me just wants to make them happy. I want them to be proud of me. But at what expense? Will my choices ever belong to me if I always do what everyone else wants me to?

When I call Ethan the night before my birthday and ask him to meet me at the cafe inside the campus bookstore on third street, he says yes immediately.

I lay out the situation for him, everything I was feeling a few days ago, and everything I'm feeling now, and he patiently listens, waiting for me to finish.

"You're not going to take it, are you?" he asks me when I finish speaking, his voice tinged with sadness. "I should never have told you what Lucy wrote in that note. Alex, you're not thinking clearly."

"I think I'm thinking clearly for the first time in my life actually. I don't think I can live with these feelings for infinity. A lifetime maybe, but not more than that. I think Lucy was right. Forever is all well and good if you know you can be protected from this kind of pain, but that spell's been broken for me. I'll always have this pain now, and no amount of time will heal it. Many will never be able to relate to this feeling, and I can't stand that isolation, that loneliness. It's not right." My voice breaks as I parrot Lucy's words, and a few tears slip down my face. But unlike I've done a million times before, I don't turn my face to wipe the tears away. This conversation...the words I just said to Ethan...it's the realest I've ever been in my life. The most honest. And surprisingly, I don't feel embarrassed about it.

Ethan grabs one of my hands and locks it in his, holding it up to his chest.

“I know what it feels like too, Alex. Like a chair’s been pulled out from under you. Like you can’t take a full breath without a stabbing pain all over your body. Like the life you imagined for yourself isn’t the one you can live now. But, I can be here for you, if you let me. We can be here for each other. Take the cure...for me. I can’t lose you too.”

Another emotion hits me like a ton of bricks except this time it’s not painful. Instead, it’s warm and gooey and soul-affirming. I love Ethan, I realize. And the instinct to assure him that I’ll do what he wants is so strong. The arguments play in my head. Ethan has already taken the cure. I can spend my life with him. I can spend forever by his side, without all the struggles that come with growing old. We can be together until the literal end of the world. We can remember Lucy together. Like characters in a young adult novel, the fantasy of our possible future is romantic and beautiful. But I know that I can’t make that choice because while Ethan’s love means a lot, it doesn’t erase the love I felt for Lucy, or the piercing loss I now feel in my life. It doesn’t fix what’s broken.

My hand floats to his cheek and I say the only words I can. “I love you.”

I know he knows what I’m not saying at this moment because he bursts into tears. He leans his forehead against mine and we stay like that for a long time.

The decision to *not* take the cure is the first real choice I end up making in my life, and I know it’s the right one as soon as I make it because my nervous system feels instantly calm. There’s something exhilarating about knowing concretely that your life will end one day because it means that the things you do, the lives you touch, the decisions you make...they’re all important.

When I go through an anxious spiral now and I hear myself thinking *will it be like this forever?* I like that I know it won’t be.