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NEW NEVERLAND

Rowan Lopez Forkey

May 2020

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Fiction Writing
Sarah Lawrence College

This is a linked short story collection exploring the themes and characters of J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*. The setting is modern day London, wherein the Lost Boys are a gang of teenage orphans, led by Peter Pan. Their rival gang is the Pirates, comprised largely of older, adult men. Peter meets Wendy, a studious middle class girl from a happy family, and starts spending much of his time with her, to the chagrin of his best friend Tink, who is wealthy but has few friends outside of Peter. This portion of the thesis ends with a Greek chorus-style musing from the mermaids. Each story treads the same general plot points, each taking on new meaning of the story (and the other characters involved) through different unique viewpoints. Following the Peter Pan stories are two other selected short stories: one about two male hustlers trying to survive in Portland, Oregon and another about the first son of the United States as he comes to terms with various relationships in his life.

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WENDY DARLING

They first meet when she's standing behind the register at a candy store. He's a stark contrast to the children running around the bins of sweets, shoving gummies into their pockets as if she won't notice. Despite her quiet demeanor, Wendy is all-business, even when she's away from work. And with two younger brothers, she's good at scolding children who misbehave. This isn't to say that she's *boring* or anything, she simply cares about rules and doing things the right way. Her over-active imagination, however, is her defining trait. She spends more time reading books and dreaming about interesting people than actually interacting with them.

He walks up to her, both hands gripping bags of sour gummy worms and chocolate kisses. She tells him to place them on the scale, but he doesn't seem to be listening. With one elbow on the counter, he leans over the register and towers over her, his eyes roaming her face like he's deciding whether to take her home instead of the candy.

She's not sure whether he's sixteen or twenty, but either way, at almost-eighteen herself it doesn't exactly matter. Something about him is so *young*, though she can't quite place what it is. Maybe it's the mess of his auburn hair, like he doesn't even own a brush. Or the way his clothes have clearly been slept in, the scent of smoke and cheap beer clinging to the fabric. His face proudly displays fresh bruises and cuts, all purples and reds. Altogether, he should probably read *danger*, but his smile is so genuine and playful that she has trouble thinking he could possibly be someone she should fear.

"Hello," he says pleasantly, apparently done making up his mind. "I've never seen you here before."

"You come here a lot?" She knows she should repeat her request for him to weigh his purchases, but nobody else is in line, so what's the harm in making light conversation? "I'm new."

His eyes flit down to her name tag. “Well, *Wendy*, it’s nice to meet you. I’m Peter.”

Despite the common name, something like recognition flashes in her eyes and she wonders if he ever intended to pay for the candy in the first place. “Peter, would you mind terribly weighing your bags so I know how much to charge you?”

He laughs and slides his bags farther away from the scale. “I thought we were friends.”

“Already? Just like that?”

“Just like that, why not?”

She supposes they can be friends. “You still have to pay, though.”

He exhales a breath through his teeth and straightens up. “I hate to do this, Wendy, darling, but I have a bunch of sugar crazed boys to feed and as their fearless leader, who just so happens to be dirt poor, I’ll have to be going now.”

Before the sentence even finishes leaving his mouth, he’s pulling the bags from the counter and dashing out the door.

There’s no alarm, of course there isn’t, and even if she thought she could catch him, she can’t leave the store unattended. So instead of chasing him, she bites her lip and hopes her boss is used to Peter Pan looting the place and she can’t be blamed for that. By sheer reputation alone, she knows he gets away with stealing far more often than not.

A little girl, witness to the tall quick-footed boy escape the shop, walks up shyly a minute later, Wendy’s face still red in embarrassment.

“Um, excuse me, but there’s a kiss here.”

“What?”

“A...um, a Kiss, the candy.” The girl picks up the wrapped chocolate hidden from Wendy’s view by the register and hands it to her.

She decides it wasn't left by mistake and tries not to feel overwhelmingly endeared by the action.

After all, he's a thief, a punk, a troublemaker.

But he left her a kiss.

•••

They meet again at night.

Wendy doesn't usually wander the streets after dark, not because she's scared, but because she's not stupid. Her neighborhood isn't bad, exactly, but nothing good happens after the sun goes down, as her father always says.

She has a car, though she's required to share with her mother, and when her destination is a few blocks away, it seems like an unnecessary detriment to the environment to drive when she could just as easily walk. Wendy is also keenly aware of how much money she spends on petrol.

Instead of being met by a big bad wolf, it's Peter who seems to materialize in front of her, blocking her path to the grocery store.

"Hey, Wendy."

"Hey, thief."

He makes an almost inaudible *ooh* sound, offended. She brushes past him

"Harsh."

"True, actually."

He trails after her for half a second before he's matching her strides, hands in his pocket for a moment until he decides they can't be confined and he starts drumming against his legs as they walk. "There's a lot more to me than that. I'd be happy to tell you all about myself sometime. Bring popcorn, I'm *awfully* interesting."

“Awfully, huh?”

...

He is, as it turns out, the most interesting person she’s ever met. She thinks she’s halfway in love with him by the time she meets his friends. With a pocketknife each and scuffed knees and matching broken bones, they aren’t the most put-together group of boys. They’re all like him – no, that’s a lie. They all *want* to be like him, but they can’t be Peter. They all secretly want to grow up, not that they even know this themselves. They long for families of their own one day, to make up for all the time they lost with their own parents. To them, being an orphan is a hardship to contend with, but for Peter, it’s a gift. Wendy is the only girl they’ve ever been friends with, and she certainly feels special, even when she winds up mothering all of them.

Her brothers idolize the band of boys their age who get into fights and come to life at night, who don’t have to go to school or report to parents. Sometimes she lets them come out with her. Since meeting Peter, she’s started keeping things from her parents. She feels rotten about it, but they’d never let her out late on school nights or allow her to associate with someone like Peter. He’s a *bad influence*, she can practically hear her mother say, and she wouldn’t be wrong. But she can’t imagine living the way she used to, before she knew him and knew how exciting being a teenager could be. She has always been so eager to grow up that she forgot what it meant to enjoy her youth.

They steal more than candy, she quickly learns. Purses, clothing, jewelry, wallets – it seems nothing is off-limits. It’s after this that she stops telling her brothers about outings. Even when she isn’t making all the right choices for herself, she will continue protecting her brothers for as long as she can. She always wants for John to have those perfect grades and for Michael to think the world is full of magic. John can’t get side swept by the allure of cigarettes. Michael

can't start to believe that the only way to feel like he's flying is by stealing the most expensive thing he can find at Harrods. She recognizes that Peter and his friends are not the people she ought to be spending her time with, but she also knows herself, knows that she cannot be so easily swayed or convinced of things she already believes to be wrong. With her brothers, it's not a risk worth taking. And she can feel their resentment, the way their eyes burn into her when she comes home late without any explanation aside from a murmured apology to her parents. Even when she makes it home in time for dinner, they watch her with suspicion as she adjusts her wrinkled uniform skirt.

When Peter swings by her home at night and throws pebbles at her window, she climbs outside without any word to anyone inside the house. They go for joy rides in cars scooped up from the street, and Wendy can't believe she willingly rides in the backseat with Peter. But then he turns his head to look at her and she can't decide who leans in first, all she can think about is how much she likes his hands in her hair or on her hips while she's half in his lap because they're always forced to sit with six people shoved in the back. She wonders why they never "borrow" a mini-van. She wonders why all of the boys have to come with them when Peter is the best at hot-wiring, anyways. She wonders why she, as the only licensed person among them, isn't the designated driver. She wonders why they all worship Peter when he ignores them all the second Wendy is within view.

And that last question silences the rest of them.

...

When he's not throwing pebbles at her window in the dead of night, he's keeping her awake in other ways.

Wendy has always been a good sleeper. Consistent, heavy, peaceful. She has never been a person who struggles to fall asleep and she stays asleep throughout the night. This is, all in all, extremely impressive considering the number of school-related stress dreams she accumulates throughout the year.

But Peter doesn't sleep, or he doesn't seem to. He must sleep while she's at school because it's the one time of day where she isn't receiving messages and pleas from him.

She's lying in her bed, too paranoid about being up past 11pm for a seventeen-year-old, with the covers pulled up over her head in case any sign of light can be seen underneath her door from the hallway. Peter texts in a flurry, auto-correct doing much of the work for him, and he clearly types and presses send before any sort of mental filtration can take place.

(Peter): *I can be there in fifteen.*

Wendy purses her lips. She shouldn't. What's more, she doesn't *want* to get out of bed, to leave her home where the rest of her family is already asleep. She only wants to see him.

(Wendy): *And then what will we do?*

She's not trying to challenge him, but she is in a constant battle with him and his restlessness. Wendy only wants him to stay the night, to sleep for once and stay out of the kind of trouble she only vaguely knows about.

(Peter): *Oh, I can't imagine...*

(Peter): *Come with me and find out*

The perfect response is hard to formulate. She types and deletes a number of attempts. The three dots must be menacing him, agonizing, but she's only a little bit sorry. It's only because she doesn't want to say the wrong thing.

(Wendy): *Or you come inside and sleep for a change?*

(Wendy): *I promise my bed is more comfortable than whatever you have in the warehouse.*

She isn't sure what to call his home, the Lost Boys' headquarters and the only roof above their heads to speak of. Wendy has never seen where Peter and his boys live, either because Peter doesn't want her to or because she's afraid to see the state of his homelessness up close. It seems to be what they both want, to pretend, at least while they're together, that some aspects of his life don't exist.

Peter doesn't reply for a few minutes. No dots, even.

The blanket is suffocating so she whips it off and is finally nearing sleep when her screen lights up once more.

(Peter): *We could try that. The other boys will be jealous, though.*

(Wendy): *Good.*

Even if his ragtag group of delinquents aren't used to being around girls, the same certainly isn't true for Peter. He knows *heaps*. And they all adore him, of course they do, because it is impossible not to fall for Peter. Dirty, childish, handsome, charming Peter. But he's hers now, don't they know that?

Apparently, they do. They're none too nice to Wendy and she starts asking Peter if they can stay in more nights. She doesn't want to spend any time with those mean girls.

“What's wrong with them?”

She gives him a short laugh. “Are you serious?”

“Never. But c'mon, Wendy. They're my friends.”

“They don’t like me.”

“That’s mental.”

He can’t imagine anyone not liking her, and she knows it, and it means everything to her, but it doesn’t change anything. “At the beach last week, they tried to *drown me*, Peter.”

“Oh, they were just playing around.”

It hurts how he’s so quick to dismiss her. She sniffs, trying not to cry as she remembers the way Fiona had called her bathing suit *precious*, how Heidi had sat atop a rock and watched her swim, silently whispering something to Gigi, them both laughing loudly enough for her to hear. And how, just as she was thinking about going home, Ellie and Sonya had pulled her down by the legs, dragging her beneath the water, and held on for far too long to for it to be funny, then acted as if her gasps for air when she finally surfaced were melodramatic. And all the while Tink was sitting in a beach chair with her sunglasses on, typing away on her phone with a poorly concealed smile.

Wendy can tell, has pieced together from the gossiping among the others, that Tink was once the girl they tortured like this. She is, according to Peter, “the best and truest” friend he has. And the only thing more threatening to the other girls than a best friend is a possible girlfriend.

“Ellie said you’re just with me because I’m naïve and I’ll do anything you say.”

“*That’s* mental. You never listen to me. I’ll talk to her.”

He’s already leaning into her as he speaks, a hand reaching up to brush hair out of her face before cupping her cheek. He kisses her and she knows that the conversation is over, even though he barely listened. He’s not good at listening to anyone who isn’t him. She furrows her eyebrows in annoyance but kisses him back because Ellie is right; she *is* naïve and she *will* do anything for him.

...

She watches the way he breathes out smoke, like it's escaping his respiratory system rather than coming out in puffs after drags from a cigarette. She absolutely *detests* smoking, or at least she did, or she thought she did. So many things about him should put her off or rub her the wrong way, but somehow, these become the things she loves most about him. The way he smiles at her around a fat lip or how he winces as she tries to ice a black eye. The way he watches her as she wraps his bloody hands, like it doesn't hurt anymore, because she's there and she's taking care of him. She loves taking care of people, and few people require as much care as Peter. Her brothers once needed her so desperately, but they've grown out of this neediness.

It's different with Peter, though. He's not that young, he just tries so hard to be. While she thinks it's silly and irresponsible, it's hard to remember how against his immaturity she is when they're alone together, or even in a group together. He makes every single thing in her life ten times more interesting just by sprinkling his pixie dust. Which isn't a euphemism for anything – Wendy would never do anything like *that*. Drinking isn't even so bad, but she still wishes it was something Peter indulged in more sparingly.

Which is why, when she tries to surprise him on his turf, for a change, and he's not sober, she's quick to turn on her heel and stomp back to her car. Angry is so much better than sad and she'll never cry in front of Peter, especially not *because* of him.

But he's fast on his feet, so much faster than her, and she feels him tug at her arm. She turns, clinging to her anger to avoid tearing up.

“Wendy, don't leave—”

“I don't want to be here anymore, I've changed my mind.”

She yanks her arm free, but a second later he has his hands on her waist, firm yet gentle. If there's one thing she knows, it's that he would never hurt her, no matter what. Wendy has never once been afraid of him, at least not like that. She's afraid that she's in love with him and he's not willing to admit he can feel such a serious emotion.

His lips are at her neck and she can feel tears welling in her eyes, but she rubs the heels of her hand over them before he can take stock of the situation.

“Don't go.”

He kisses her jaw and she leans back into him, not because she's forgiven him, but because she's too tired to make this into a fight tonight. She had gone straight from school to exam prep to work and she's *exhausted*. She knows that she should be sleeping, but stupidly she thought visiting her not-boyfriend would be a better use of time.

“I'm so tired, Peter.”

He knows what she means but pretends not to and wraps his arms around her waist to hug her against his body. “We can go back to your place. We can go to sleep. I promise.”

His promises aren't usually worth anything and he's never once actually stayed the night after saying as much, but she wants so badly to believe him that she tricks herself into thinking she does.

...

Sometimes, rarely, they do fall into her bed and go straight to sleep. Peter, at first, insisted on not being the kind of boy who likes to cuddle but she often wakes up in the middle of the night with her body folded into the crook of his, her back to his front, sometimes his arm wrapped around her waist. So in this, as with various other matters, he is a liar.

Usually he just wants to get her out of the house and do nearly anything. Wendy would think that a boy with no home would enjoy spending time in her cozy house, but she supposes he spends a good deal of time at Tink's, and her house is much more impressive. It's flattering in a way that he wants so much time with Wendy, but she has a life outside of him, she has certain obligations and responsibilities to attend to during the day.

There are also the occasions when he climbs in through her window with a certain look in his eyes and the moment she turns from her desk to look at him, he's already in front of her, taking her face in his hands. At the beginning, she'd manage a surprised "*Peter!*" because he kissed her, but now she knows what to expect and her eyes flutter closed before their lips even meet.

He's leaning down to kiss her where she still sits at her desk – sometimes he even kneels in front of her so for once she's the taller one. She surges upwards because he has a way of always making her want more of him, and in an effort to accomplish this, she stands from her desk to wrap her arms around his neck, only breaking the kiss when she starts to feel light-headed.

The only thing scary about being with Peter like this is how strongly she feels towards him, because she's never felt like this before. In love, or more than that, so thrilled every time he kisses her. She has kissed boys before, but this is different, maybe because all the other boys she has met in her life are so timid and hesitant, while Peter is completely unafraid of asking for what he wants.

As they both catch their breath, they make eye contact, an unspoken question and answer passing between them. Wendy nods so quickly he might not even catch it before she pulls him down for another kiss, but he knows what her actions mean, and in response his hand fans out

across the bare skin beneath her pajama top. She's used to the feeling of his calloused fingers on her soft skin by now, but she shudders a breath against her will, and suddenly he's picking her up and carrying her to the bed.

He is not, as she had first guessed, the kind of person who throws her roughly against her sheets. Instead, he sets her down slowly without his lips ever leaving hers, and his hands slip under her shirt but he doesn't undress her immediately. Peter's fondness is expressed more accurately through his actions than in what he says. Feelings are difficult for him, and she knows why. He has been an orphan for so long that, he has admitted in his more vulnerable moments, he can't picture his mother or father any longer. If they loved him once, he doesn't remember the feeling, and it's easier to survive on the streets without sentimentality.

When he's with her, especially alone in her room, the quietude and intimacy brings out the best in him, and she's reminded all over again why she cares so much about this boy.

He pauses above her, her shirt half riding up her torso, and she can't help but feel self-conscious about her hair strewn about her pillow and the redness of her lips. She has to resist the urge to squirm nervously.

But then he smiles, exhales, and says, "How can you be real?"

And it's funny only because she often wonders the same thing of him. There's no time to respond, though. The way he begins to trace her jawline with his lips distracts her completely.

"I got in."

"Come again?"

"I got *in*, Peter!"

He blinks at her. She has never in her life been happier or prouder of herself, years of studious work at her prestigious private all-girls school and dedicating her afternoons to student council meetings and leading various other clubs finally paying off. Oxford thought she was good enough. She can't believe it.

And apparently neither can he.

“Peter? Aren't you going to congratulate me?”

He fumbles around in his jacket pocket for his pack of cigarettes and pulls one free, putting it between his lips and flicking his lighter open before answering. “Yeah, congrats. You're officially on your way to joining the ranks of boring adults everywhere.”

Wendy purses her lips and tries not to feel too stupid for being surprised. “I'm still me. I'll always be me. But you can't keep yourself from growing up, no matter how much you pretend.”

“I'm not pretending. I'm never going to be like you.”

She slaps him across the face before she even fully decides to do so, his freshly lit cigarette flying to the concrete.

“Fuck you, Peter.”

It's the first time he's ever heard her curse, in fact it may be the first time she's ever said something un-ladylike in her entire life, but she isn't ashamed. He can't hide the shock on his face as he raises a hand to rub his reddening cheek.

She angrily marches down the street, towards her home, out of view.

...

They don't speak for months.

It's an overreaction on his part. Wendy is so much easier to track down than Peter, and his failure to seek her out is telling. But it's not as if she has tried to find him, either. At first, she would walk past the rundown playground and glimpse the other Lost Boys, but Peter was never with them. The looks they gave her told her not to try her luck again. Some of them looked remorseful, like despite only hearing Peter's side of the story, they still felt he was in the wrong. They were her friends, too, but they would always be loyal to Peter. And if any of them thought about making a move now that Peter seemed to have run off somewhere, they knew better. His punishment wouldn't be worth it.

Wendy manages to stop thinking about him so much, but she still sees him sometimes. Except, it's never really him. It's a boy with similar hair at the shops or another with a smile resembling his crossing the street towards her. She comes home one day, and there's even an imposter waiting on her front porch.

She closes her eyes, counts to five, and then opens them again.

It's still him. This particular not-Peter is not only standing outside her house, but wearing a very Peter-like grin. Wendy doesn't move. It's not until he's walking towards her, pulling her into a hug that she believes he's real, and even then, it feels more like a waking dream.

"Hey, Wendy-bird," he whispers, his lips against her ear.

"Peter," she breathes, pushing away to look at his face. Even after seeing it in various crowds for months, it's astounding how much he's changed, at least on the outside. Maybe he thinks she's different now, too.

Wendy runs a hand along his cheek, down to his chin. "Ouch," she jokes, fingers brushing over poorly shaven stubble.

He rolls his eyes. "Tell me about it. It's awful."

Her hand still holding his chin, she tilts his face down to give him a quick peck on the lips. “Not so awful.”

“*Oh*, you like it?”

“I wouldn’t say *that*.”

He offers her a smirk in response before he wraps his arms around her waist and pulls her in for a real kiss.

Her arms wind around his neck and she almost doesn’t notice how he untucks her school blouse from her uniform skirt.

“Peter...”

“Yes?” He mutters against her lips, before kissing her again, more deeply this time.

Her hand finds his, Peter’s thumb hooked on the top of her skirt, and pulls him away. Wendy ducks her head down so his lips can’t find hers again.

“You can’t just...”

“Just what?”

She looks him in the eyes now, hers harder than before, even if looking at him still causes a stutter in her chest. He is beautiful in a way that boys so rarely are, soft in his youth yet rugged from the harshness of his everyday life. Peter is full of contradictions like this: lanky and thin from malnutrition but strong and capable from constant physical activity, his kisses often tasting like both cigarettes and chocolate shakes, his shortness with her when he doesn’t get what he wants and the gentleness of his tone when she’s cross with him.

“You can’t just leave for *months* and then expect me to pretend as if nothing’s changed.”

“Nothing *has* changed!” He says indignantly, so much like a child.

“They have.” She drops his hands and hugs herself around her middle. “*I* have.”

“Well, I haven’t.”

“No, you wouldn’t.”

Wendy knows how this goes, this fighting with Peter thing. She doesn’t want to do it, not when kissing him just a moment ago felt so much better than anything she’s done over the past two months. But she’s not that girl, the one who lets the guy do whatever he wants without any consequences.

“It’s good to see you again. I’m glad you’re back. But don’t expect me to open my bedroom window for you tonight. We can’t go back to the way things used to be just like that.”

Peter looks at her for a long while, his expression too hard for her to decipher. Finally, he says, “S’all right. I was going to see Tink tonight, anyways.”

Maybe he’s right. Maybe nothing has changed. She hates how just hearing that name makes her eyes water. “If that’s what you want.”

He hears the waver in her voice and a brief shadow of regret flashes in his eyes. “Can we do something tomorrow night?”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Wendy smiles, even if it’s sad, because she knows she can’t count on him to remember a promise he made today once it’s tomorrow, but she wants so much for him to remember. She wants so much for him not to disappear again.

•••

It’s August and she has to go to orientation, then start classes a week later. The summer went by in a blur of scattered moments: catching fireflies with her brothers, an attempted mall outing with Tink, falling asleep on Peter’s shoulder during an outdoor film festival.

Somehow, she isn't as excited as she thought she would be. Peter's reluctance to admit that he is now seventeen and that much closer to being a *legal adult* may have rubbed off on Wendy. She can't believe she's about to start college and he will be in the exact same place he was when they met.

It's a small victory when he agrees to help her pack. He loads the heavier boxes into the boot of her car (finally *her car*, all hers, no more sharing with mummy dearest) before soon there are no more boxes and they're left standing there, goodbyes stuck in the backs of their throats.

"It's not so far away, you know," she reminds him, though he doesn't need reminding. "I'll visit all the time."

"It's fine. You'll have new friends."

She smiles sadly and cups a hand over his cheek. "But I'll never love any of them as much as I love you."

He doesn't smile back, sadly or otherwise. Peter takes her hand in his own and grips it tightly. Just like the first day they met, his eyes flit across her face, but this time it's like he's trying to memorize her features.

Peter lifts her hand to his mouth and kisses her knuckles. "I love you, too, Wendy."

She never expected to hear him say it, even if they both know it's true. And she had accepted that as a part of who he was, something she would never dare try to change even if every part of her ached to hear him admit that he was in love, even if love wasn't real, even if love was for adults and he certainly *wasn't* one of those.

Wendy can feel the water welling in her eyes but Peter just releases her hand to run a thumb across her cheek. Then his lips are on hers, anchoring her to this place, to the home where she learned to walk and speak and obey every word her parents uttered.

She can taste the salt of her tears and knows he can, too, but he doesn't say anything. He just keeps looking at her and she has so much she wants to tell him but no time to tell it all.

“Bye, Peter. I'll see you soon.”

“Bye, Wendy.”

TINKERBELL

Sometimes she wonders why she ever bothered to buy him a phone at all.

A portion of her sizeable allowance each month goes towards paying his cellular bill so she has immediate and constant access to him, but his phone is usually dead, despite the fact that she sprung for a portable charger. Peter is not the type of person to remember that things need to be charged regularly and it's clear that he prefers his pager.

But Tink doesn't have a pager, because she is not the leader of a gang of homeless delinquents, or even a member of said gang.

So instead, she is staring at her phone screen while lying in bed on a Saturday afternoon. Her anger at Peter rises with each passing second. She knows that he is just about the least reliable boy on the planet, but *he* knows just as well that she requires semi-regular attention, at the very least, and that without validation from others she is likely to drop dead. Unfortunately for her, she is what some refer to as *prickly* or, when being brutally honest, *unlikeable*, and her circle of friends includes few others outside of Peter.

Most of the time, this is all right. She enjoys being alone and even Peter will proudly admit that she is his best friend, which gives her a certain leg up on the Lost Boys and the vapid Knightsbridge girls he sometimes wastes his time with. The problem is that he doesn't carve out specific windows of time for her, he detests plans, and he is unlikely to stick to the ones she tries to arrange for them. Instead, Peter will drop by her house unannounced, if he's bored, and propose an outing. If he stinks enough, she will insist he showers in her bathroom, and while he's filling her bedroom with steam, she will toss his clothes into the washer and grab something from the stash of men's clothing she keeps in a chest under her bed.

If she had parents like the ones she sees in movies and TV, they might notice their frequent house guest. But she has parents who occupy themselves with work and social

engagements. They rarely eat dinner as a family. Tink spends a lot of time in her room and experiences her mother and father primarily through the sounds outside of her bedroom door: her mother's heels clacking against the marble floored entrance downstairs, her father speaking in his booming voice on the phone, instructions given to the maid and personal chef. They often come home fairly late and immediately go to sleep. So, it's easy for her to sneak her best friend in and out, to make sure he's cared for.

Peter never questions why she does the things that she does, perhaps because he knows that she is horrendously in love with him, and he would rather not destroy a friendship that means so much to him by rejecting her. He would also prefer not to acknowledge how she feels, or how he doesn't. Not that they haven't walked down that path before. Not that their friendship is breakable.

Finally, her phone lights up with a winking face and she smiles for the first time all day.

Tink has started wearing bobby pins in her hair just in case Peter needs one to break into a thinly secured building after hours. When they arrive at the library, it's almost pitch black outside. The moon is doing a lot of heavy lifting, with the two street lights outside of the library flickering rapidly and offering little help. Peter holds out his hand for a pin and Tink doesn't notice for a moment, stunned as she is that he would *ever* step foot in a library. Perhaps it's the breaking and entering that makes it interesting for him.

Once they're in, he walks back and forth between the rows of books, as if in pursuit of something specific. Tink settles down at a table and turns on the desk lamp, dim enough not to draw any unwanted attention from passersby.

"Peter, what could you *possibly* be looking for?"

“Just a book someone mentioned to me the other day.”

Her eyebrows furrow, knowing perfectly well that none of the Lost Boys would ever talk about literature with one another.

“You know people who read now? Other than me,” she tacks on hurriedly. Even if Peter cares little for schooling or intelligence, she doesn’t want him to forget that she has a brain.

Peter is silent for a moment, and she hears him pawing at book spines, his flashlight’s beam no longer darting out into the aisle. He emerges with a book and pulls out the chair across from her. She scoots in close to the table to get a better look at the title, and to move her short legs slightly closer to his much longer ones. Their knees still don’t touch.

“*Treasure Island*?” Tink says, somehow surprised that this reveal doesn’t help explain anything.

“Yeah, she thought I’d like it.”

Tink stiffens, frost coating her veins. *She?* “Hm? Who?” She asks, tone as innocent as she can muster.

“Wendy. New girl at the candy store.” He stops thumbing through the book to smile, looking somewhere past Tink’s shoulder. “She goes to the Ridgewood Academy for Girls. Basically a genius, I reckon.”

“Impressive,” she says stiffly, then forces a tight smile as Peter’s eyes drift over to her. “And she knows you so well, she thought a *book* was the thing you’d most enjoy?”

Peter shoves the book into the inner pocket of his ratty old jacket, the one thing he wouldn’t let her put in the wash. She plans to clean it when he falls asleep, exhausted as always, on the plush pink couch in her room.

“I read,” he says defensively, as if he actually believes it. “It’s the easiest way to go places.”

He, annoyingly, does have a point, but Tink has never seen him with a book. It seems fairly obvious to her that he would rather live in the real world than escape into a good novel.

“Okay.” Dropping the subject entirely, she gets up from the table and shoves her hands into her coat pockets. “You got your book. Can we go now?”

Peter saunters over, and she dreads whatever he’s about to do next, but her guts feel all twisted up inside with the possibilities. “What’s the rush?” He asks, arms encircling her petite frame, leaning down down down to rest his chin on her shoulder and quietly into her ear say, “Not trying to get rid of me, are you?”

“Never,” she breathes, answering honestly, the scent of her own shampoo in his clean hair overwhelming her. “I’m just tired. I thought we could watch a movie at my house instead.”

Pulling away, he heaves a sigh as if she is asking the world of him, and then smiles. “Fine, but I get to choose.”

He always gets to choose. She doesn’t know why he even bothers with the proclamation.

She saw Peter for the first time at the library, a fact that seems untrue, to the point that she’s fabricated all kinds of other meetings that make more sense in her memory.

But no, it was the library, the summer before Tink started grade four. She was hard at work on her summer reading list, all Peter Rabbit and Madeline and Winnie the Pooh, when a boy darted out from the nearest aisle. Tink looked up, startled, her gaze following him to the vending machine tucked into the corner.

The boy was clearly struggling as the machine refused to take his ratty looking £5. Tink abandoned her stack of books and walked up to him. “That money’s no good,” she said, matter-of-factly.

“Oi!” Peter exclaimed, surprised by the high-pitched voice beside him. “I don’t remember askin’.”

“Want a better one?” She pulled out her tiny wallet, bright pink and sequined, and stuffed full of small bills. “I’ll trade you.”

He hesitated. “Trade?”

“Yeah? You wanna or what?”

“But you said my money’s no good, why would you want it?”

She sighed in annoyance and started putting her wallet back into her pocket. “Never mind, then, I was trying to *help*—” In grade three, teachers were very big on preaching the importance of *sharing* and *kind gestures*. Tink wasn’t entirely sold on the whole idea, but she figured that was because she never tried. It turned out she was right to be skeptical.

“Wait! Yeah—let’s trade.”

She was jarred by the desperation in his voice, but she reached into the wallet and produced a sleek £5 note from within. “Here you go.”

“Thanks!” He said, grabbing the money and immediately shoving it into the machine.

As the machine did whatever it did, Tink kept her eyes on the boy. He was tall, taller than her, anyways, and his hair was a messy mop of dirty brown, *literally*. It looked just as unwashed as the rest of him.

“Why are you wearing a jumper? It’s summer.”

Peter didn't look at her, instead watching his candy move closer within the machine. He had yet to collect the change pooled in the coin deposit. "I like it. That's all."

It had holes and needed some mending, she thought. His pants were frayed at the bottom and his shoes looked to be falling apart. "Why don't your parents buy you better clothes?"

"Don't have any," he said quietly, just as the candy bar *clunked* into the slot at the bottom of the machine. He reached in and tore open the bar, eating nearly a third in one bite.

"Oh," Tink said, feeling a bit bad about asking. Then, "Well...I can get you some clothes. And more candy bars. Loads of stuff."

Peter eyed her suspiciously, but behind that, he looked almost hopeful. "Really?"

"Yeah, sure." Tink had more toys than she knew what to do with. It'd be a relief, for her, to pawn them off on this kid. "Wanna come to my house? My nanny can take us to get some things." Her nanny wasn't in the habit of doing whatever she said, actually, but Tink had a feeling she would want to help the boy just as much as Tink did.

He didn't say anything, but he gave her an expectant look.

"I'm Tink," she said after a moment, then turned back towards her table. As she began gathering up her books, he watched on, as if afraid to speak. "Well? Don't you have a name?"

"Peter."

She learned later that evening that he didn't even know how to read, but the library was a nice, clean, cool place to stay and when he had the money, he could buy himself something to eat at the vending machine. He was awful with keeping track of money, and in fact, had she not reminded him about his change the day they met, he wouldn't have thought to grab the leftover coins. While her parents were off pretending she didn't exist, Tink took it upon herself to make sure Peter was fed and clothed and given a dry place to sleep.

Tink pointedly stares at the lacy collar of the other girl's blouse. How old is she, a hundred? Peter had mentioned that she was older but she dresses like a grandmother. She even has a ribbon in her hair. With her light brown tresses pulled back, her face is on full display, and Tink can't find a single speck of make-up. She doesn't even need it, her skin is the dermatological perfect definition of milk and honey. She might be wearing tinted chapstick. It's obvious why Peter is drawn to her. Tink purses her lips, then forces a closed mouthed smile.

"So nice to finally meet you," she says, her cheerful tone so obviously put on that Peter shoots her a pleading look behind Wendy's back. "I've heard so much about you."

"Really?" Wendy asks, as if this could possibly be a surprise, he's so head-over-heels it's frankly embarrassing, and Tink hates her anew for not even noticing.

Tink blinks a few times, then looks up at Peter, fake smile still plastered on her face. "She's so modest, Peter. It's like she's never had a boyfriend before."

The two of them bristle at the word. Peter stops playing with the ends of Wendy's hair and Wendy rubs nervously at her arm, not daring to look at Peter. Tink lets the awkwardness settle in around them, the corners of her mouth twitching with a genuine grin.

"Haven't you...?"

"No," Wendy says with a false confidence that's betrayed by the reddening of her face.

"Sides, I'm not her boyfriend," Peter says, just like Tink knew he would, needlessly and as if these words wouldn't crush any girl unfortunate enough to fall for him.

Tink shrugs, feigning ignorance about the rift she's just opened, then throws an arm around Peter's neck, forcing him to bend down to her level. "To the festival, then."

In preparation of this day, Tink had numbed herself to the idea of being a third wheel to Peter and Wendy, but after her earlier comments, he's been attached to her side and it's poor little Wendy who trails behind them.

Tink plucks a piece of pink fluff from her fairy floss and holds it in front of Peter's face, laughing when he eats it right off her fingers, leaving behind the sugary residue that she has no choice but to lick off. She glances behind her at Wendy's sullen expression and feels victory radiate throughout her chest.

Then she sees a pair of photo booths nestled between the dunk tank and the ring toss and grabs Peter's hand to pull him inside the unoccupied one. "We'll be just a minute, Wendy!" She says, pushing Peter into the booth ahead of her. "There isn't room for three people," she explains sympathetically, frowning as if this is bad news for both of them.

Inside the booth, Peter has barely composed himself before Tink shoves the money into the coin slot and settles down on his lap.

He gives her a look that suggests he's onto her, but she simply brushes him off. "It's not *my* fault your manspreading is taking up the whole bench, now is it?"

Mercifully, he laughs, before wrapping an arm around her waist. "All right, all right."

She smiles as the camera flashes once, and without even consulting, they both make silly faces in unison in time for the second photo. Just before the third, she tilts back against him, then reaches upwards to kiss him on the cheek. If she were to kiss him on the lips, he might not even be mad, but she would be mad at herself. Her intention is to hurt Wendy, not get hurt by acting too impulsively.

Peter turns towards her and shakes his head. "You're trying to start shit. I know you."

"Me? I'm doing no such thing."

He doesn't argue with her and instead disentangles their bodies and waits for her to exit the booth first.

Hopping out, she finds Wendy just where she wants, looking down at the freshly printed photos. Tink snaps them up, smiling down at the black and white images. "Precious," she comments, before holding the second copy up to Peter. "You can keep this one."

Peter takes the photos, barely glancing at them before pocketing them in the back of his jeans. "Thanks, Tink. I'll make sure the boys don't touch them."

Mostly, because she can't bear the alternative, she believes him.

She is trying to be nice, to the point that her mouth hurts from all the fake smiling she's been doing. Tink isn't sure if it's the force of her falsity or the unfamiliarity of making this particular facial expression, but either way, she's in an even *worse* mood by the time they get to the cinema.

Peter had suggested they *hang out*, and after she was finished gagging, Tink asked, *what, pray tell, did he suggest they do?* He listed off a number of things he has learned from watching TV in her room: go to the mall, a diner, bowling, the movies. She latched onto the last one, because it required no speaking to one another. And in the dark, she wouldn't even have to *look* at Wendy, to question for the hundredth time what it was she had that Tink lacked.

Although Peter being her only friend would make it appear as if Tink doesn't talk to other people, that she perhaps is shy or low in self-confidence, neither of those things are true. She is, rather, selective, and confident to a fault, often saying things with too much conviction. In a way, she scares people with her certainty. A girl her age, any age she's old enough to have ever been, shouldn't speak with such surety. A girl as sheltered as she's always been shouldn't act as if she

knows everything. But she's not as sheltered as people think, because she has Peter to tell her, to show her, exactly how awful the world can be. And he accepts her for who she is, so why should she have to water herself down for others?

Wendy...is kind. She does not come from money as Tink does, but she offers Peter things that she can't, like warmth and sympathy. Tink loves Peter, and she knows that he knows, but it's her actions more than her words that show the true depth of her feelings. And Peter has a gigantic ego, one that Tink has never been able to stroke properly. Wendy says nice things and brings Peter sweets from work and gently bandages his hands. Tink is too aggressive in her caretaking, her stitches always biting into his skin all loose and crooked, but for the longest time, she was the only person taking care of Peter. Now he's found someone better at it, someone with maternal instincts who speaks softly, whose lips don't tremble when she smiles.

Then, naturally, because it's Peter, Wendy is also beautiful. Not in the way Tink is pretty, with her eyeshadow palettes and crease cuts and blush brushes. Peter has seen her without make up countless times, and even then, she has sharp edges and defined features that would look proper on a magazine cover, but she would never be cast as the girl next door in a film. That's Wendy, who either, because she can't afford the upkeep or doesn't care enough to try, only knows the very basics of cosmetics and uses them sparingly. She's a lip gloss over lipstick, neutrals over bright colors girl. Tink doesn't think they're in competition when it comes to their appearances (it's a compliment to Wendy to even think they're on the same playing ground), but Wendy has a certain effortlessness that Tink will never possess. Everything in her life is so painstakingly organized and thought through. Peter is the one uncontrollable variable she allows.

So they're at the movies, and Tink even lets Wendy choose what they see. She tries not to let her surprise show when Wendy chooses the thing Tink would have picked, anyways, and when they sit down, the previews begin quickly enough that there's no forced small talk.

The movie has quiet bits where, were she with Peter, Tink would make comments. But since she is with Wendy, she says nothing, and Wendy says nothing, and by the end Tink is left with the incorrect impression that they've had a pretty good time, because the movie was good. They leave the theater and as their eyes adjust to the bright lobby lights, there's an awkward pause before Wendy asks, "Do you...um, are you hungry? Because I'm..."

Tink blinks at her, as if this will convince her to finish that thought. Briefly forgetting to be polite, Tink sighs and then puts her arm through Wendy's. She's like a lost puppy and maybe that's something her and Peter have in common, though Peter would swear up and down that he has *never* resembled such a thing. In a different way, Tink has a similar urge as Wendy does, to protect the hopeless, to help them. "All right, Wendy, we'll find something to eat. But for God's sake, stop being so bloody *awkward* about it."

In very Peter-like fashion, one day he disappears.

Her fingers curl around the knots in the fence around the dilapidated playground angrily, her tone growing more and more impatient. "*Hey!* Tootles, come *here!*" It's awfully rude how they treat her when Peter isn't around. Even if he isn't there to see them ignore his best friend, she always complains to him later, and the punishment for their disrespect is said to be swift and painful. And yet.

"Sorry, Tink," he says, wiping sweat from his forehead with the back of his slightly bloodied hand. "I didn't hear you."

She rolls her eyes. Every time she is forced to yell at teenage boys playing their own rather violent version of British Bulldog, she grows incredibly tired.

“Whatever. Did you also not hear me ask when Peter will be back?”

Tootles looks back at the others, but the only ones who notice are the twins, who shrug in unison. “We’re not really sure, to be truthful to you.”

Tink releases the fence with a snarl and a heavy sigh of disappointment. “Right. Well. You’ll tell me when you find out?”

He looks unsure about the likelihood, but for her sake, Tootles smiles reassuringly. “Of course, Tink, one of us will come round.”

She leaves the boys behind, disappointed but not surprised.

For weeks, she’s furious, texting him daily until eventually she gives up and nearly throws her phone against her bedroom wall. She pulls the chest of clothes out from under her bed, balling up the jacket she had washed before he left. It’s spring, nearly summer, but it’s London and it’s rainy and she starts wearing it to school, ignoring the disgusted looks she gets from her classmates. Although the jacket is clean, it’s full of holes, the sleeves are falling apart at the ends, and it couldn’t have cost more than £15. Her school hallways are full of designer clothes and shoes and handbags but they’re also full of people she couldn’t care less about and it’s possible she’s experiencing a slight emotional crisis.

The person who means the most to her in the world has vanished, but he’s an orphan with no known address and a lengthy criminal record, so can’t even report his disappearance. If anything, the police will be glad to be rid of Peter Pan.

Wendy and Tink don't actually go to school that far apart. In fact, Tink almost went to Wendy's school, but opted for a good school with a less uptight dress code. It's not surprising that a thing like that wouldn't be a factor to Wendy. Besides, she goes to school on a scholarship, which Tink, despite her own privilege, knows means she can't be picky.

When she sees Wendy walk out in her uniform, descending the stairs to the school's entrance with her hands gripped tightly to her backpack straps, Tink rushes forward as if she hadn't been half-hiding behind a corner.

"Wendy!" Tink had intended to sound cheerful and casual, but instead sounds terse and annoyed. Oh well, it's the thought that counts, or something like that.

"Tink!" Wendy, on the other hand, sounds surprised and almost even scared. But she quickly smiles, a little nervousness still showing in her eyes.

She knows the polite thing, perhaps even the normal thing, to do would be to attempt mindless small talk before getting to the entire reason she was there at all. But she already skipped her own last class in order to catch Wendy after hers and she really can't be bothered.

"Have you seen Peter lately?"

Wendy's eyes widen before cutting sharply away from Tink's face. She looks down at her uniform saddle shoes and shakes her head. "Um, no, I haven't." Her eyes meet Tink's again, her eyebrows scrunched together. "Have you?"

Tink thinks her reaction is odd, but then again, Wendy is a freak. So she brushes it off and frowns in response. "No, he's...missing." The word feels big, like it's a lie, but she knows it must be true if even the Lost Boys haven't seen him. "I asked Tootles and he hasn't a clue where Peter's gone. Or he's lying to me, but Tootles wouldn't." She gets the feeling that Tootles doesn't just like her more than the other boys, he *likes* her in a way that none of them do but the

thought makes her feel nauseated so she focuses again on the most important issue, namely the fact that her best friend could very well be dead and she'll never see him again.

She feels her eyes prick at the idea and Wendy is useless, anyhow, so Tink exhales in annoyance. "Well, assuming *you're* not lying, I suppose I'd better go."

"I'm not lying," Wendy says immediately and Tink is surprised that she sounds hurt at the suggestion. She doesn't know why. Tink doesn't feel she owes Wendy anything, let alone the truth. It takes her a moment to understand that, of course, their minds do not work the same way.

"Sorry," Tink says, not really meaning it, and not sounding like she does. Then she turns back towards her car, parked a block away because all the damn *students* had taken all the decent spots.

Tink bolts upright in the dead of night, soaked in a cold sweat, still wearing the ratty old jacket. She sleeps with the AC on high, anyways, so the fact that summer arrived weeks ago is hardly a concern.

Somebody is throwing pebbles at her window. Hesitantly, she approaches the window sill, ready to shout out a big fat lie of a threat about having a Rottweiler and a bodyguard and a cricket bat just waiting to meet an intruder's skull. Instead, she's rendered speechless at the sight of Peter bathed in moonlight. She can just make out his broad smile, bright as ever.

"Peter," she breathes, before running down the stairs to let him inside.

Tink unlocks the door, unsurprised to find Peter already waiting on the porch, and catapults her tiny frame into his lanky body. She's hugging him as tightly as she can, with all of her strength, before eventually pulling away, her eyes full of tears as she punches him soundly in the arm.

“Ow!” He yelps, rubbing at his arm.

“Shh! You’ll wake my parents,” she says angrily before stomping back up the stairs and into her room, knowing he will follow.

Peter has the good sense to close the door behind him, then slowly walks closer to Tink, who has taken to sitting with her arms crossed on her bed. “You absolute *wanker*.”

“Tink, come on, I only—”

“There’s no excuse! You didn’t tell me anything. Not a word! You didn’t say you were leaving, you didn’t even say goodbye.”

He sits down next to her on the bed, putting an arm around her shoulders and pulling her against him, his hand stiffening slightly when he feels the familiar fabric under his palm.

“I’m really sorry.”

Peter is not a boy who apologizes. Not ever. It’s almost enough to earn her immediate forgiveness. But for the last couple of weeks, she had convinced herself that he was dead, that the Pirates had finally gotten to him and killed their rival gang’s leader. She can’t let him off that easily.

“Just tell me why,” she says quietly, her voice muffled by the relieved sobs she refuses to let escape.

“I got into a fight.”

“With Hook?” Tink sits upright, seized by worry again.

“No, with Wendy.”

It feels as if all the blood in her tiny body rushes to her face all at once, and for a moment, she just looks at him. Then her resolve melts away completely.

“*Wendy?! You ran away for months because you got into an argument with Wendy?*”

“It’s not that simple, Tink—”

“To you it is!” She accuses, ripping herself free of his grasp and clambering off the bed. Tink stands in front of him, trying feebly not to yell as loudly as she wants, trying not to forget her parents sleeping on the other side of the house. “When will you get it through your incredibly *thick* head, Peter? She’s not the only one who loves you!”

He reaches out to touch her again but she jumps out of the way as if his fingers could scald. Usually, she knows exactly what to say around Peter, how to behave, but right now she wants in equal measure to tell him to leave and to make him promise never to leave her again.

Crying openly now, she rubs at her eyes with the sleeve of his jacket, and doesn’t fight it when he gets up to pull her into a hug.

She’s not sure why she pauses by the narrow side street a block away from her house. Walking home just before sundown, annoyed by the incompetence of her project group for school, she thinks she might hear a groan. Tink pauses, considers writing it off as a trick of her imagination, but with a sigh she doubles back to see if there’s something to her suspicions.

It takes a moment for her brain to process the image filtering in through her eyes, the fact that there’s a substantial pool of blood spreading across the concrete, that the boy bleeding to death is the only person she herself would die for without hesitation. Dropping her backpack to the ground, she rushes to his still body, pulling his head into her lap and hurriedly pushing the hair out of his face as if she must prove to herself that it’s really him, and then she jabs her fingers against his neck to check for a pulse.

Just as she’s panicking over whether she’s pressing hard enough, he coughs, weakly fighting against her touch to sit up.

“No, Peter,” she insists, pushing him back against her lap. “Don’t move.” Her tone is full of false calm, a determined authoritativeness, pretending that this isn’t the single scariest moment of her life. “I’ll be right back.” Tink forces herself to leave him, looking away as he reaches out weakly to stop her.

It’s a quick run to her house but every passing second feels like a lifetime in which she was too late and Peter is dead. Peter was always destined to die young, long before her, no matter what she did to protect him.

But he doesn’t have to go yet, not if she can help it.

She yanks open the passenger door of her car, hating herself for walking to school that day, how much time she had wasted with her leisurely pace on the way home and how sprinting to her house now could have been time better spent driving Peter to the hospital. Tink, frankly, hates driving, she doesn’t trust her temper or anyone else’s, for that matter, but her parents got her a car because it was what people like them were supposed to do.

For once, Tink loves her parents more than she can say.

Tearing out of the driveway, she speeds back onto the empty street spotted with her best friend’s blood, nearly running over her backpack. Annoyed, she hops out of the car and throws it into the passenger seat.

“Peter, can you stand?”

“I...” He coughs again, spitting blood on the ground, his knees barely bending. “I don’t know.”

“Peter,” she says again, pleading. “I can’t do this without you.”

The twelve-inch difference in their heights has never felt so insurmountable, and while Peter is thin and lean, Tink has no muscles to speak of and if her physical weakness is the reason he dies she will never be able to live with herself.

Adrenaline lightens the load as she grabs his arm and hoists him around her shoulders, encircling his waist with her arm and desperately pulling him towards her car. She manages to set him down in the back, more throwing than placing him, and she winces at the idea that she's hurt him even more.

On the way to the hospital, she keeps glancing at him in the mirror, his face contorted with pain as he stains her leather seats dark red, the crimson seeping from multiple stab wounds. She wants to scream at him, again, but it never helps anything. It's almost impossible to speak through her tears but she's desperate to hear his voice, to make sure he's still there.

“What happened? You weren't anywhere near Pirate territory.”

“Was,” he chokes out, barely a breath, with his eyes closed.

Tink narrowly avoids a red light, her forehead creasing with confusion. “What?”

His face is beaded with sweat, his breathing shallow, but he forces out the words. “They jumped me...on the border. I tried to...to get...to you.”

She purses her lips, blinking away the moisture that continually threatens to blind her and get them into an accident. “Me?”

“Course,” he says and she thinks he might even be trying to smile. “I knew you would save me.”

She's so tired of the beeping machinery, the way the constant noise only punctuates how silent it actually is in Peter's hospital room. How silent it is without his voice. Tink can say with

absolutely certainty that she has never been relieved to see Wendy before – so this would be a first.

When the taller girl quietly enters the room, Tink immediately gets up from her chair and pulls Wendy into a hug.

After a moment of shocked hesitation, Wendy hugs her back.

“How is he?” She asks quietly.

Tink pulls back, and though she *hates* it, she sniffs. Because she’s been crying, and of course she has, nobody could blame her, certainly not Wendy. Tink is only annoyed that Wendy gets to see her vulnerable, when so few people ever do. But her best friend is lying in a hospital bed and the only reason he’s not dead is because Tink happened to find him in time.

She gestures vaguely in Peter’s direction before reclaiming her seat next to his bed.

“He’s...breathing. None of his organs were punctured, but he lost a lot of blood.”

After this, she plans to be *extra* obnoxious about the importance of keeping one’s phone charged, and she’ll make sure Peter is always sharing his location with her. If he wasn’t a boy who is constantly putting himself in danger, she would think it too invasive, but he’s proven that he needs the protection. And often, it feels like she’s the only person who can really offer any.

Wendy walks over to the opposite side of the bed, nervously resting her hands on the bedside railing.

“You found him?” Wendy asks, so softly that for a moment Tink thinks she only imagined it.

“Yes.”

“How did you get him here?”

It feels like a trick question, though she knows Wendy is only trying to picture Tink lifting Peter's tall body by herself. "In my car."

Wendy smiles to herself, thinking a private thought, then seems to decide to share it when she says, "Stronger than you look."

They look at him in silence for a number of minutes before he stirs, though his eyes don't open immediately.

"Peter?" Wendy asks in a tentative whisper.

"Wendy-bird," he answers with his eyes still closed, and he reaches out blindly towards her voice, her hand grabbing his as if on instinct alone.

Slowly, he opens his eyes, and Tink keeps her silence on the other side of the bed.

"Peter," Wendy says again, her voice cracking this time.

"I'm sorry."

"Good." The water is still pooling in her eyes, as if she's making a concentrated effort to keep the tears from spilling over. "Don't you dare scare me like that again."

She bends closer to examine the few cuts on his forehead, and moments after her free hand brushes the hair out of his face in search of hidden injuries along his hairline, his reaches upwards to brush his fingers along the side of his face.

It's what she hears more than what she sees that makes Tink resent Wendy. In the way Peter says her name, the constant praise he has for her, even when he complains about her mothering, Tink can still tell that he loves her. And seeing them almost without being seen herself, she doesn't envy them. She feels uncomfortable, like she's intruding on something, even though she's the one who has been sitting by him for hours and trying not to think about how his blood is smeared across the backseat of her car.

It feels like she should leave, but leaving would only draw more attention to her once presence, and besides, she *can't*. Even when she wants to be an unselfish person, she can't leave Peter when he's like this.

So instead, Tink clears her throat.

Wendy's head whips up to look at her, her face reddening immediately.

Peter just exhales a long breath before slowly turning to face her. He grins lazily before saying, "my savior."

She smiles back. "That's me."

MERMAIDS

We wait for parents to come home, deposit car keys. We wait for one another outside each of our houses, sometimes honking horns, sometimes shouting out of open windows. We wait for the line outside the ladies' room to die down, but we can't wait that long. We wait for the mall to close so we can drive out to the beach and run across the warm sand going cold as the light fades and the freezing water floods our ankles. We sneak home after our parents have gone to sleep, some through back doors and others through windows. They scold some of us, but others don't care, or they don't ask. Our parents are all so different, which we think is what makes us so different from one another, too.

We sneak booze from the liquor cabinets and wine cellars. We sneak out of the house instead of in. We sneak notes to each other, when we don't want the others to see. We sneak shared giggles and sidelong glances and eye rolls. Friendships like ours, we have learned, require a fair amount of deceit. If we were honest all the time, we would discover the foundation was actually made of glass. We would discover that sometimes our smiles are as fake as our eyelashes. We would discover that we all like the same boys and then pretend not to when some of us start dating them.

We are the sisters we never had and the bullies we never saw coming, all the princesses from all the movies and all of the villains they suffered under, all the sweetest compliments we've ever heard and all the slanderous insults we have to rise above. We are swimming in the ocean and washing the salt from each other's hair. We are lying about unflattering outfits and sharing waterproof mascaras. We are taking care of one another the best we can.

LOST BOYS

They learned long ago how to grip blades between their teeth, crawling on all fours one after the other in the rafters above an abandoned building. The absurdity rarely dawns on any of them, though Tootles sometimes wonders what else he could be doing with his life, while Peter never ever second guesses or doubts himself. This is why they follow him. This is why they always do as he says and not one of them has ever wanted the power he holds for themselves. In the end, they're all more or less the same – orphans without a home that doesn't involve one another. Peter is, above all else, a savior. He plucked them from the streets and put a roof over their heads, even if that roof has leaks and it's drafty in the winters and sweltering in the summers. He gave them a sense of purpose, to defeat the Pirates, something much more noble and exciting than simply trying to survive. Though, that's a part of it, too. As much as he's helped them, he's also painted targets on their backs. There are areas of the city they can't go, but there's areas that belong to them, too. Walls spray painted with the Lost Boys tag proclaiming their belonging and, for the most part, their safety.

After Peter cut off the hand of their leader, the Pirates are smart enough to stick to their own territory. There's a rumor among the Lost Boys that he's kept the hand, that it's buried in a box somewhere in a trick panel behind the walls of their home base or subtly concealed under the floorboards. But none of them have ever seen it, they've only seen the glinting hook that the Pirates leader replaced it with, proving the unbelievable story of its loss true. Nobody else saw it happen, as Hook and Peter were the only two there that night.

It's up to Peter whether they risk their hides and cross over into the streets ruled by the Pirates, whether it's to steal from them or prove their superiority. It's pathetic, really, a group of adult men in a turf war with a group of teenagers. But just like the Lost Boys, the pirates grew up in a gang and know no other life. They were raised on the streets instead of by parents. If they

weren't fighting Peter and his boys, they would find others. It's cyclical in this way. The Lost Boys, sometimes, look at the Pirates and see their future. What more can a boy do when he's got no proper education and a lengthy criminal record?

Most of them were young enough when they became Lost Boys that they didn't know what being in a gang entailed. All they were after was a sense of belonging, somewhere to call home. Now it's the same sort of things day by day: protecting their turf, but more than that, keeping up a certain reputation. And there's selling, which is the crux of what they do, the only way they're able to survive. It wouldn't be their first choice, but choice has never been a luxury any of them can afford. Peter himself, perhaps unfairly, tries to stay out of it as much as he can. He doesn't care about money or power, he barely even cares about the Lost Boys name, but he has been at this longer than any of them and he knows what is expected of them. He oversees the bigger hand offs, pretends that he can tell if anyone steals more than their share of the cash. Tootles is their accountant, for all intents and purposes, the one who makes sure everything is in order. It's one of the reasons why he's Peter's second-in-command, even if it's not much of an official title. They all know, and they defer to him when Peter is gone accordingly.

It's sort of unspoken amongst them that they avoid the harder stuff, which in a way makes them less of a threat to the other gangs in town. What they're into is lower stakes, less money, but less danger, too. As rebellious as they pretend to be, avoiding the police is of the utmost importance, considering their status as truant minors. They also stick to their own. While some of the Lost Boys are more daring than others (Nibs and the Twins have been known to make stupid decisions with little provocation, often just to prove that they can) none of them are interested in risks that could spell their ends. Peter alone will venture into Pirate territory to steal

something, sometimes not even something he needs. He does it just to taunt Hook. The other boys do their best to keep an eye on him, to make sure they can go along and make sure he doesn't get himself killed, but Peter is evasive when he wants to be. And he knows that his boys will stay if he tells them to stay. Their relative inexperience shows most often in their obedience to their leader.

The Lost Boys have only ever been Lost Boys, but Peter, he was once a Pirate.

None of the boys know much about girls. The only ones they know, really know, are whichever ones Peter brings around. For a long time, it was just Tink. Peter's known her longer than he's known any of them, so they'd never dare voice their complaints about her or be outright gits to her. But when Peter isn't paying attention, they often ignore her. It's clear that she has no interest in being liked by anyone besides their leader and the feeling is rather mutual. She's always buying things for Peter, things like cell phones and bicycles, and washing his clothes and forcing him to take showers at her house and if they weren't all so used to it, they'd be worried about her impact on the group.

But they know, after years of experience, that there's nothing she could do to change Peter or his *true* priorities, which is of course his Lost Boys and their petty crimes and whatnot. Luckily for them, she never tags along. She wants Peter to herself or not at all. So maybe it's unfair of them to half hate her, seeing as they barely know her, but they can't help it. She not only has parents, she has *rich* parents and all the things that none of them have ever known (except Slightly, and none of them truly believe his claims), all the things that none of them will ever have.

Only Tootles treats her with common decency, but he's like that with everyone. None of the other boys know why. They tease him sometimes about fancying her, none suspecting that maybe it's a little bit true. Although he loves being a Lost Boy, it's not as if he was given much of a choice. He can only withstand so much stale bread and stolen candy bars. He fantasizes about pot roasts and big Sunday dinner. Even just having a proper bed, a proper shower, would be nice every once in a while. And on the rare occasions he does see Tink, she always looks so perfectly put together and the clean scent of her shampoo and the expensive perfume she wears always seem to linger far after she's gone, no matter how briefly she's there. He sees her in only a handful of places: the beach, the schoolyard, the park. Public spaces, mostly. Probably she likes the idea of a convenient escape.

Nibs, specifically, is especially nice to any girl who reminds him of his mum and still passably polite to all others. This is probably why he is so fond of Wendy, although, to be fair, they all are. Unlike Tink, she will suffer through their company if it means getting to see Peter. But even more than that, whenever she drops by the warehouse they call home, she brings with her tooth brushes and soaps and tiny little deodorants. It means even more, knowing that Wendy has so little compared to someone like Tink. Her kindness comes freely, without strings. When Tink is nice to them, they all know it's because she needs something.

Peter decides one day to have a huge bonfire. He will invite only his closest friends, he says, but most of the Lost Boys know this means he will be inviting everyone he knows. The Twins don't seem clued in, though they never are. So when the pair of them arrive at the beach last, they are surprised to see a number of girls they hardly know. There's Wendy and Tink, as to be expected, but there's also the posh girls Peter sometimes spends time with. They sit in a

cluster, looking over at the Lost Boys and cackling with laughter when Curly accidentally drops his banger into the fire. Then there's Wendy's brothers, sitting apart, with the oldest one talking to Lily.

“Oi!” Starts the first twin.

“I thought it'd just be a few mates?” Finishes the second.

Tootles, always the one saddled with duties Peter himself does not wish to perform, offers the boys a gentle smile as he approaches them. He places a hand on either of their shoulders and speaks in a quieter tone. “You know how Peter is. He invited anyone who'd listen.”

The Twins glance at one another, then shrug in unison. They go off to sit together on a piece of driftwood not yet inhabited by the others.

Michael looks the most out of place, not just as the youngest one there, but as the only Darling without someone to put his arm around. The Lost Boys aren't the most perceptive about these matters, but they could tell Peter had met a girl the moment he got home with their candy the night he first saw Wendy. He was tight-lipped only until they nagged him enough that, eventually, his mouth split into a toothy grin and he started describing the prettiest girl he'd ever seen working behind a register. And they had speculated, though Slightly could be credited with being the first to notice, that something seemed to be going on between Lily and John. It wasn't their fault, though – they hardly ever saw Lily anymore. She seemed to be Peter's childhood friend who had grown sick of them all ages ago. But she showed up, sometimes, if it was a group get together. If John was going.

Curly and Nibs sit down on either side of Michael. Curly slings an arm around his shoulders. “Enjoying the view?” He asks, then laughs, too loudly in Nibs's opinion.

Nibs follows their gaze to the girls huddling together on the rocks, all of them in their revealing bathing suits with coverups laid open. *Why do they even bother coming?* He wonders, only the slightest bit resentful. *They never talk to anyone but themselves.*

“Er...No, I was only...” Michael stammers. The familiar feeling of being thirteen, even though to the pair of Lost Boys, it seems as if it was a lifetime ago.

“You know what we call ‘em?” Curly asks with a lowered voice, leaning in conspiratorially, and Nibs takes this as his cue to roll his eyes. *“Mermaids.”*

Michael furrows his brows, looking from the girls to Curly and back again. “Why?”

“They always hang out at the beach! Not that they give us the time of day if Peter isn’t around.” Slightly has claimed that he’s snogged one of them, though when asked which, his story suddenly grew very thin. Well, no, it was thin to begin with.

Nibs pipes in now, nudging Michael in the side. “We ought to call them the sirens. You know, like in mythology? They entice you with their beauty, then they drown you.”

And Nibs would know a thing or two about that, considering he actually *does* snog one of them on a semi-regular basis, not that anyone could guess based on the way she looks at him now, or the way she’s *doesn’t*, more aptly. Sonya has made it clear that she doesn’t want to be seen with him, ever, and if she acknowledges him in public it’s only to tell him to bugger off and then laugh with the rest of her friends. And yet, they keep making plans to see each other, and he’s always surprised when she actually shows up. He tells himself that he deserves better...probably, anyways? But it’s not like anyone else is offering, least of all someone as beautiful as Sonya, and the way she speaks to him privately is so different than the front she’s displaying currently, though sometimes he catches her eye and she holds his gaze for just a little too long.

He tries to think of their relationship in these terms: *what would Peter do?* But he doesn't know, refuses to ask, and he doesn't have the wherewithal to break things off.

“Yeah, but with any luck, at least you get a kiss first!” Curly says with yet another unattractively loud laugh. Nibs gets up, sighs, and heads over to see what the twins are up to, passing by Tootles on his way.

Tootles surveys the scene, deciding where he should sit now that everyone's accounted for. Peter's been making the rounds all night, trying to chat to everyone he's invited, perhaps mostly out of concealed shock that they've all come. Especially the group of rich girls who rarely spend time with the Lost Boys. Tootles has heard Wendy complain about them, in her tentative way, and Tink mostly can't stand them, though she does find it amusing when they turn their judgmental gazes on Wendy instead of her. He thinks they'd be wise to band against a common enemy, but they seem content to make enemies of one another.

By this time, Peter is sitting beside Wendy, an arm slung over her shoulders. It strikes Tootles as a number of things: affectionate, protective, possessive, chivalrous – with the wind, and all. Tink is watching, too, with her mouth pursed tightly to hide what he assumes is a massive frown.

He can be chivalrous, too. Tootles marches right up to Tink and smiles widely.

“Mind if I have a sit?”

She exhales in annoyance but doesn't say no right away. Instead, she turns her head slightly to avoid looking at him as she says, “No, guess not.”

It's a nicer response than he'd expected, truthfully.

As he sits, she scoots farther away and wraps her arms around her knees, hugging them to her chest. While Tootles has been enjoying the rare opportunity to talk to people he doesn't often

see, he can imagine this is something of a nightmare for Tink. He's not the most well-spoken of the boys – that might be Slightly, or Peter, in his own way – but he is the most honest and he finds that he never feels he must prove himself to others. It allows him to be more vulnerable and a better listener, though the other Lost Boys aren't much for talking about real things.

“Not quite what you expected, I reckon?”

Tink glares at him and her eyes look faintly shiny. “I don't know what I expected.”

“Well, you definitely expected Peter. And Wendy, and us. I'm surprised to see everyone else, too, honestly.”

“Doesn't Peter tell you everything?” She asks, coldly and slightly mocking but not enough to hide the jealousy behind her accusation.

“No, that's you,” he answers truthfully. “If anyone knows all of Peter's secrets, it's you, no doubt about it.”

For a moment he thinks she might smile. For a moment, maybe she does, but it's so fleeting he can't be sure. “All right, then...if you say so.”

He sits with her for a lot longer than he had hoped for, but eventually Peter does remember she exists and pulls her to her feet to dance along to the record player they recovered from a Dumpster a year or so ago. Each of them stole an album of their choice from various stores and it's the Clash, Curly's choice, that rings out across the sand. Nibs immediately claims the now vacant spot beside Wendy, but she only politely talks to him for a few minutes before saying she'd better get home. She stands and heads towards her brothers.

“You're leaving?” Peter asks with a pout, immediately jogging over to her and leaving Tink to look out over the water.

“Yeah, I don't want to worry my—”

He cuts her off with a kiss. As his arm wraps around her waist to pull her closer, the Lost Boys pretend not to think about the intended end of her sentence. Though they have each other, and that's family enough, they don't often forget about the fact that none of them will ever see their parents again.

Wendy breaks the kiss, pushing against his chest lightly. "*Peter*," she scolds under her breath, but she's grinning, probably pleased that he is willing to partake in obvious displays of affection in front of all his friends. She likely doesn't know that he's kissed half the people he's invited.

She promises to text him tomorrow morning and escorts her brothers from the beach. The rest of them get back to the party, but Slightly watches as they grow smaller and smaller in the distance. He can't hear her car door closing but he imagines that he does. Somewhere in his subconscious, he remembers a life where he had someone ushering him into vehicles and securing his seat belt.

Tootles passes out the workbooks, some boys more willing to grab their copy than others.

"Okay, boys, today we're working on grammar."

"Why bother?" says one of the twins.

"Yeah, this stuff is rubbish," says the others.

"Not so!" Tootles says, *far too cheery*, Nibs complains to Slightly, and earns a stiff nod in return.

Slightly doesn't agree, or he agrees to only a certain extent, because he would like to know more. He would like to know *anything*. They don't talk about it a lot, especially not when Peter is around (their leader, so fearless, yet so terrified of change) but he assumes the others

don't plan on doing what they do now for the rest of their lives. He believes what they always say, *Lost Boys for life*, but more on a conceptual level. At heart, where it matters, he is a Lost Boy until the day he dies. But a real, respectable grown up isn't in a gang. His worst nightmare is to be grow up to be anything like the Pirates.

And if there's one thing they surely all have in common, it's their hatred for the Pirates.

Tootles opens up his own workbook and waits expectantly for the others. After some moaning and bellyaching, the others follow suit.

He's aware that they all resent him a little for his insistence on these regular lessons, but he loves these boys, his *brothers*, and he wants them to have some sort of a chance at a normal life. All of them have been out of school for years, but sometimes Tootles has university aspirations. It doesn't hurt to dream, after already being so well-acquainted with disappointment.

"Okay, who can tell me the difference between an independent and dependent clause?"

He blinks a few times at their utter silence. Curly coughs into his fist.

"All right," Tootles continues, unbothered, "I'll start."

It's Nibs who brings it up first.

"Does...*anyone* know where Peter is?"

The boys look amongst themselves. They all shake their heads, no.

Tootles, silently, has been preparing for a day like this. Maybe even hoping for it – not because he'd be forced into the leadership role (he *hates* that bit) but because it means that Peter has moved on from this life. But he knows Peter too well to believe that, so instead, he's worried but now it's his job to put on a brave face for the rest of the boys, the way Peter always does.

“I’m sure he’ll be back soon,” he lies cheerily. “He probably just got carried away with some new idea.”

They all look at each other again, but they don’t ask questions. Tootles doesn’t know any more than they do.

He goes to Wendy for answers, catching her just at the end of her shift. What luck! Tootles brought Slightly with him, mostly because he insisted, and he figures any help would be appreciated.

“Hey, Wendy!” Tootles yells, slightly out of breath as he jogs over to her outside of the candy shop. Slightly trails behind. He’s not in any kind of rush. Even *if* Wendy knows something, which he doubts, it won’t make Peter come back any sooner. Mostly, Slightly just wants some peace of mind, to hear an answer that at least assures him that Peter is still alive.

Wendy looks surprised, then worried, and ultimately her smile comes too late, and it looks more sad than it does reassuring. “Good afternoon, Tootles, Slightly.”

“Hello,” Slightly says finally, pushing up his glasses.

For someone so seemingly disinterested, Tootles is a little annoyed he bothered to come at all.

“We were just wondering if you know where Peter is.” A tiny part of him hopes that she’ll reveal he’s been staying with her, in a real house that probably has a bathtub and real food in pantries and maybe even decent heating. Tootles has never been to Wendy’s house, but she’s Wendy. He pictures it as being modest but beautiful.

Her face falls and so does Tootles’s heart. “He’s not with you lot?”

Slightly shakes his head but leaves the talking to Tootles.

“Fraid not. We hoped maybe he was with you.”

“Oh, no,” she says quickly, her cheeks turning slightly rosier. “I could never, I think...if anything, he’d be with Tink.”

That’s what *Slightly* thought but Tootles vetoed the idea for whatever reason.

The reason is that Tootles, while not necessary jealous of Peter and Tink’s friendship, thinks that for Peter to cut off contact with them all in favor of hanging out with Tink is unfair to Wendy, above all else. And he doesn’t like thinking about Peter and Tink...in *that way*, if he is being perfectly honest, because though she’s made it abundantly clear that he is lower than a rat in her estimation, he can’t help that he fancies her.

And unlike Wendy, who is more like an open book, Tink has never allowed the Lost Boys to know where she lives, nor has she allowed Peter to tell them her address. He barely even talks about his home, though he’s mentioned its size and the needless number of spare rooms and bathrooms. *Two* kitchens? An entertainment room, basically a home theater, and a dining room that they sometimes eat meals in when Peter is too lazy to go upstairs to Tink’s room. Sometimes the family personal chef eats with them, a man Peter has known for many years.

It sounds...wonderful. Ideal. Yet Peter is so content to leave all of that in favor of bumming it in an abandoned building with them, and though *Slightly* got some guys to come by and fix it up so they at least had electricity and a number of locks on the door, it doesn’t compare to Tink’s home. Tootles doesn’t have to see it for himself to know that.

“Hey, Wendy...” *Slightly* starts. He’s suddenly tense and Tootles eyes him warily.

“Yes?”

“Could you get us some free candy?”

Tootles exhales in annoyance. So *that’s* why he wanted to come along.

Things are different after Peter comes back. It's inevitable. The Twins don't trust him, because he abandoned them, and as two people who are always together, they take abandonment to be a serious offense. Nibs is hurt, thinking his disappearance means he doesn't care about them anymore. Slightly and Curly seem indifferent, because they've decided to act as if it never happened. And Tootles just wants everything to go back to normal.

So maybe he and Peter are more similar than he thinks. Tootles is just as afraid of change as their leader.

Then again, when Peter goes and nearly gets himself killed, Tootles can't help but wish that he'd grow the hell up.

When he comes home, all bandaged under his t-shirt, Tootles has half a mind to punch him in his too-attractive face, but it seems Nib has a similar idea and he slugs Peter in the arm. Not in the friendly way they sometimes do.

"Bastard!" Nibs says, and his tone is confused, somewhere between anger and relief. "Why'd you enter Pirate territory *alone*, you bleeding lunatic?"

Peter clutches his side with one hand and his head with the other, wincing. "Can you *please* stop yelling at me, for fuck's sake? My head is killing me."

"You're lucky it's the only one," Nibs spits out before walking away with the shake of his head.

Pleadingly, Peter looks up at Tootles. "Can't you talk some sense into them?"

Tootles averts his gaze and looks at the floor. "No, Peter, they're right. You've been acting...more reckless than usual. It's about time you realize you're not invincible." Not even Peter Pan can outrun death and the Lost Boys aren't going to always forgive him no matter how out of bounds he behaves.

Peter keeps looking at him until finally Tootles meets his eyes.

“I had a good reason. You don’t have to believe me, but it’s the truth.” Without another word, he heads to his makeshift room in the back.

Tootles hadn’t been expecting an apology but it would have been nice to hear.

Peter is different after Wendy leaves. She’s not even so far away – it takes just over an hour when she drives home for long weekends and school breaks. But since Wendy isn’t the type of girl who will leave her school every weekend just for a boy, Peter spends most of his time missing her and pretending not to and he’s doing a poor job of it, since all the Lost Boys know exactly where his moodiness stems from.

It may be even worse with Tink going to school abroad, some fancy American school that Wendy couldn’t even afford to go to had she gotten in herself. It’s for the best, though. At least that’s how Tootles sees it. With two of the most important people in his life leaving to, essentially, prepare themselves for adulthood, slowly Peter starts to do the same. Slower than the rest of them, but it’s not nothing.

Tootles sees about finishing out his preliminary education, and when a few of the other boys ask questions about it, he arranges for all of them to finish high school. There’s a lot they don’t know. Curly feels stupid and gives up, though Nibs talks him into studying together during their downtime. The Twins don’t have much interest but when it becomes clear that the rest of their friends might leave them for higher learning, they start showing more of an interest. What’s the alternative?

It’s not a secret from Peter anymore, and he’s not angry, but he’s hard to read. Tootles has a suspicion that Wendy helps him with all the same sorts of things when she visits home.

Maybe he's less afraid of her judgment, as if the rest of the Lost Boys will think he's stupid for how little he knows. They understand entirely – he hasn't gone to school for many years, longer than any of them. When he was younger and Tink still had private tutors, she would force him to participate in her lessons and he'd complain about them even years after the fact.

But he's no longer a fourteen-year-old boy striking out on his own to form a rival gang. As much as the Lost Boys fear the future, they fear nothing ever getting better even more. Slightly wants his own house, something small with two bedrooms, where his children can share a room and a bunk bed and hopefully not murder one another. Nibs wants a job that will help him track down his parents, if they're still alive as he's always suspected. The Twins want to live together in a nice apartment, where they will go next door and ask for a cup of sugar just because they can. Curly wants to travel and see, if not the whole world, at least more of it. And Tootles wants to one day have a respectable job, with good pay and a nice house out in the country.

Peter still insists on Lost Boys for life and they don't discuss their future aspirations around him. But Tootles has found notebooks filled with Wendy's neat handwriting under Peter's bed and he has hope. The next time Peter disappears, Tootles might imagine him off at Oxford with Wendy or working behind a desk somewhere.

If nothing else, it's a nice dream.

TWO EASY TARGETS

We wore matching raincoats, not by choice but thanks to convenience. A blue so dull, I forgot the exact shade whenever I wasn't looking at it. Sleeping on park benches was never our top choice, but sometimes there was no alternative, and it was bearable if we had something to cover up with, even when it wasn't raining. But it always seemed to be raining. The cheapest coats we could find came in the one color and we weren't often in a position to be picky. Tony used to joke about this back when we first met. He had been right, partially. We'd become friends because nobody else was offering. It was easier getting through the day knowing there was at least one person you could count on, and splitting one-bed hotel rooms made sense.

Ideally, we didn't like paying for our own place to sleep. But we might splurge, although the word seemed wasted on rooms with crusty sheets and leaking fixtures. Sometimes we just wanted to sleep in on a Sunday or take a shower without an audience. We weren't always together, just most of the time. Not everyone wanted us both, and we never expected any differently. Some preferred blondes and I'd trail along, leaving Tony to find better offers while I was gone. His dark hair off-set his green eyes in a way that made him more popular than I was, a lot of the time.

Our friendship, in addition to being convenient, was also pre-destined. We were more sought after than the others, which wasn't saying much, only that we could afford things like raincoats and meals in diners. It was basic business sense, the two of us pairing up. We were the prettiest packages that something unsavory could be boxed up in. We managed messy hairstyles that people actually liked, but if a haircut was offered, we would always say yes. Our appearance was curated for the enjoyment of others and hair, at least, grew back. We drew the lines at preferences towards piercings and tattoos. Tony was adamant about keeping our clothes as clean

as possible. Nobody expected us to be pristine, but for him, it was about pride. In what, I wasn't really sure.

As time went on, we became both more and less than partners. Most of the business but little of the romance. We were best friends, making it easier for the other guys to get a hold of one of us through the other. Tony always knew which payphone to call to get to me. He knew how to reach my regulars, and which days I was most likely to be retreading old territory. Nothing against the other guys, but we usually worked alone, as alone as we could be together. People didn't like to open up and we could only really guess why someone would end up here, someone who wasn't us. Tony and I knew the whys and hows about each other. Although, to me, Tony had more of a choice than most of us. His parents had overreacted to the news that he was gay, his brother had been downright awful about it, but they'd never told him to leave.

Like me, he was a runaway. Unlike me, he had a family to return to. Most of the time I wished he would, because I saw how hard some nights were on him, even when we tried to laugh off the alleyway mishaps and the guys who excited too quickly or had less cash than they promised. But those nights were hard on me, too, and only made easier by the fact of Tony, of knowing that once jeans were pulled up and re-zipped, I could leave and find him and know that there was one good thing to come out of my family's absence.

One of the first things you learn about the clientele is that they're usually old, and were probably never that alluring even when they were young. Maybe it was just me who attracted that kind of attention, because Tony could pull someone a decade older, but it was those twice my age who would seek me out again and again. Some of them hardly knew how to carry a conversation. I understood immediately why they'd have to pay, not for sex only, but for

companionship. I wondered if any of them had grown up the way I had, without a father and with a mother who was always off somewhere else in her own mind. If they didn't have siblings to stave off the loneliness. It was hard to judge them when the only significant relationship I'd ever had was with Tony. I could have been on the other side of our encounters, if my life had been altered ever-so-slightly.

Tony always had one foot out the door. I could tell his work-ethic was a distraction technique, to keep his mind off of things. Sometimes I'd wake up in the hotel room and he'd already be gone. There was always a flicker of panic that he'd left for good, but then I'd finger the loose bathroom tile where he hid his cash, and it'd all still be there. I knew this meant he would come back, though I also knew that if he was returning to where he'd come from, he might leave the cash for me. I'd need it more than him, if he got tired of this routine, if he gave in and did what was easiest.

I asked if he would go home and he said no, but wouldn't tell me where he wished he was instead. The city was tainted with too much information about the kind of activities most people never thought about. We knew all the best clubs and street corners and dive bars for tricks. It was hard to see anything else. I couldn't imagine Portland without him. I couldn't imagine frequenting the Old Town or Waterfront Park or even shooting pool with anyone else. I'd have to go back to sleeping under the bridge, or springing for my own hotel room. It was easier to keep the same room, so we could hide our money reliably and worry less about someone stealing our loose bills.

We found ourselves half asleep down by the water, a location that was usually good luck for us but at 4am, there was nobody else around. The only sounds to be heard were those of the insomniac squirrels running along tree branches and the wind whipping up fallen leaves. I was

the kind of tired where it didn't matter where you fell asleep as long as you didn't have to stand up while doing it. With my head against Tony's shoulder, I wasn't sure whether he was awake or not. I kept nodding off, each time my nose brushing past his armpit on a collision course with his chest. But the jolt would wake me up enough to reorient myself, and the scent of Tony's sweat somehow always came as a surprise. I inhaled a little too audibly the last time and Tony shouldered me awake.

“Art, c'mon, we should go.”

I grunted, unable or unwilling to give a real response. Then he stood up, so quickly I nearly rolled right onto the pavement.

“Shit, man.”

“It's almost 6am.”

Two hours had passed without me noticing. The time was not, in itself, an issue. The location, and the time, were the issue. In the mornings there would be women jogging and men in business suits. Even when it was chilly out, people would visit the park before work and none of them were interested in our kind of offerings.

I reached my hand out blindly and Tony grabbed onto it, helping me to my feet even as I wobbled to get steady. He kept hold of my hand as I yawned, and as I rubbed at my eyes with my free hand, and he kept holding on until I asked where we were going.

“I've got enough saved for a room. We'll have more luck after we shower. And I heard there're a couple of guys on the third floor who only pay in 20s.”

It was understood between all of us that, no matter your numbers or endorsements, none of us could afford to be too choosy. All of us were technically homeless. I'd turned down people before, so had Tony, so had almost anyone, but it was something you could only do sparingly.

We tried not to get ourselves into too much trouble and I was someone who didn't like to enter situations that were too unorthodox. Tony was more open-minded, or at least that's what the pills he took every so often made him believe. I didn't like it, and neither did a lot of people once they figured out what was going on. So Tony would always hide the drugs or hand them off to me when he got picked up. Mainly, we didn't like to get too risky about protection, never eager to accept no condoms as a stipulation, no matter the money promised.

These guys were safe, Tony said. Although we were likely to take what we could get, someone who liked to pay more than a lot of people thought we were worth was a solid opportunity, especially if they weren't a health risk. And if they were in our hotel, it couldn't get much more quick and easy than that. Or it could, in club bathrooms pressed up against the side of a stall or between dumpsters in an alley, but hotel rooms were better, because it meant they had money to spend on things like hotel rooms. The close proximity worried me a little, that we could gain too much attention and find ourselves constantly followed or confronted by the same group of people, but there were worse things. They probably weren't living out of the hotel the way we were.

I reached over to grab one of Tony's fries and he swiped at me lazily, long after my hand had left his plate. I never wanted fries until somebody else ordered them, but I always thought there was a chance I might not want them for once, so I never made the decision to order them myself. Tony was accustomed to my strange habits and far as I could tell, none of them bothered him, especially not enough for him to complain. It was another way of looking out for me, because if we didn't look out for one another, nobody else would. Sometime he'd even sweet talk the waitress into giving us extra fries, in case I planned on eating his food.

It wasn't long before we'd drawn a crowd, the faces familiar but some of the names escaping me. Most of them just went by nicknames, anyways, and there wasn't much point in learning them all. The guys grabbed at Tony's plate, and for them he didn't restrain his glares. It only took about half an hour of their loud company before Tony tapped me on the arm and gestured with his chin towards the exit. I managed to extricate myself from the booth, Tony following right behind to avoid being dragged into a conversation and he looped his arm through mine so we resembled a single unit. Nobody tried to stop us, they just called out their goodbyes, only one yelling out obscenities that visibly alarmed the other patrons, and Tony muttered under his breath about missing certain aspects of a privacy he had given up years ago.

"We've got to stop coming here," he said, releasing my arm as he felt around in his pocket for a cigarette.

"They have good fries."

"Good fries are everywhere, Art. We just have to find them."

Just as he lit his cigarette, it started to rain. Misting, more like, but we knew the mistiness could give way to a torrential downpour in an instant. "Dammit. Forgot our coats."

We didn't forget them, what we forgot to do was check the weather forecast in the paper. I'm not sure it would have made any difference. It's hard to catch someone's attention from the curb when you were covered in a raincoat, especially once their windshields were obscured by a downpour. If the weather was to get in the way of cruising, then none of us would ever get any action.

I removed my hoodless jacket and held it out over our heads as the rain picked up in intensity. "Don't worry about it. Long as we don't catch a cold, we'll have nothing to regret tomorrow." Statements like this always had the possibility of turning on me later, but I had a

good feeling. Even though it was rainy, there was no fog, and the sky was remarkably clear aside from the one storm cloud visiting misfortune upon us.

“Think we should head to the bookstore?” I offered, because it had an overhang, and an almost certain chance of earning us a few bucks before the night was over. The neon sign advertising 99 cent dirty mags was always lit up, attracting attention at all hours of the day.

Tony had his hand cupped around the cigarette as if my jacket wouldn’t protect it thoroughly enough from the rain. “Yeah, might as well. Otherwise you’d be freezing your ass off for nothing.”

I hadn’t noticed the cold without my jacket on until he said something about it. “Oh, yeah. I’m really shivering.”

A few months later, Tony’s family was waiting for him at the entrance to Chinatown, standing right under the archway as if they weren’t blocking the path for other tourists and locals alike. It was strange seeing them so close to the places where we most often found quick tricks. As we approached, neither of his parents moved, and his brother directed all of his attention, intently, on me. All of his ire over Tony’s “lifestyle” was heaped on me, but I wasn’t the one sleeping with him. I usually wasn’t even much help getting him laid. Tony did a lot of the leg work while I was preoccupied with wandering through my own life like a visitor.

Tony stood in front of them, his hands in his pockets, not bothering to introduce me to them or vice versa. Nothing for a tense minute, and then all at once, I learned all of the details he had kept from me about his departure from home. He hadn’t left a note, deciding to pack a few clothing items into a duffle one night and disappear, and a year passed before he told them anything about where he was or what he was doing. The latter was still, for obvious reasons,

murky but our outfits spoke volumes. I could tell from the shadow that passed over his mother's face when she laid eyes on us that she'd had fears, and that these fears had been confirmed.

"Anthony, please," his mother started in a terse whisper, but she never finished the sentence. Her pain was almost tangible and I looked away, my eyes trained on my shoes. It was uncomfortable, seeing a mother who cared like that. I didn't think I'd ever known that feeling.

"Your mother and I think you ought to come home, son." His father put a hand on his wife's shoulder. I expected a snide comment from the brother, but he kept his silence.

"Our life...it couldn't have been worse than this." It hadn't been bad, not at all, his tone implied. And then, as if he was afraid to ask, he tentatively added, "Could it?"

I waited for a response just as anxiously as his family, but one never came. Tony put a hand on my shoulder to turn me away once he decided he was done listening. He hadn't even said a word. If I saw my family again, I'd say...something. Anything.

None of them tried to follow after us, and after a few weak shouts of his name from his mother, there was silence again.

We had enough money to leave, at least for a while, but we couldn't decide whether to go north or south. The soonest bus out was to San Francisco, so south won. It wasn't so much impatience as it was indecision, and while neither of us believed that the quickest things were also the best, we were excited to see another city. Our reputation in Portland was, for what it was worth, a positive one, and it earned us a good portion of the money we were using now to move on. But it was a reputation all the same, and we both missed the days when we were anonymous.

"Think we could ride one of those cable cars around? It'd sure beat walking up those hills."

Tony frowned. He'd forgotten about the hills. "We'll figure it out," he said after a beat.

We bought out tickets but still had a few hours before the bus came. I sat down, an early morning chill reverberating down my spine, wishing we'd been able to buy better coats before leaving. In California, I hoped, we wouldn't need them.

"Come here," Tony said, holding out an arm and gesturing with his fingers for me to huddle closer.

I moved over to his side of the bench, huddling against his warmth, though his neck was cold against my nose as I attempted to fit myself into the hollow of his body. "Thanks."

He wrapped his other arm around me and I didn't mind it when he rested his chin on my head. "You, too."

FIRST SON

It wasn't as biting that night as forecasted. Then again, alcohol had a way of warming a person from the inside out. Sam fingered the bottle of travel sized mouthwash in his suit pocket as he took another sip from his vodka-laced lemonade. He owned far too many tiny bottles for a sixteen year-old with parents who would always be preoccupied with matters more important than the occasional underaged drinking of their son. He could have walked out with a giant bottle of Grey Goose, he could have left the mouthwash behind entirely. But he would never be that cavalier, never knowing when one of his parents might pull him into a conversation and introduce him to some world leader. Boozy breath was not the kind of first impression he liked to make.

Sam didn't even *like* alcohol, it's just that he liked uptight parties with hundreds of guests even less. Perhaps he was leaning a little heavily into dramatics, escaping to go drink alone, but it was only because his sister had ditched him for her new boyfriend. Typically, he could trudge through anything, if Sofia was suffering by his side. They were not codependent, at least it wouldn't be his choice of words, there was just something undeniable about sharing a womb with another person. Whenever someone said something stupid in front of their mother, his first impulse was always to make a face in Sofia's direction, and always she would reciprocate with one of her own.

"You want a smoke?"

The unexpectedness of the address made him jump slightly, just enough to send lemonade spilling over the side of his glass. "No, thanks," he answered, rubbing his hand along the inside of his suit jacket where it couldn't be photographed, reprimanded, or thought of again.

The other boy shrugged and Sam watched the way he cupped his hand around the cigarette to shield it from the wind as he flicked his lighter on. The action probably shouldn't

have struck him as beautiful, but it was a thought that arose without warning, and he shook his head as if this would banish it from his mind.

Sam stared into his cup with fixed concentration, but his new company didn't seem to mind. It was after a few more minutes that he spoke again, and Sam didn't realize he'd been waiting for the other boy to break the silence in-between exhales of smoke.

“Hey, you're President Huerta's son, aren't you?”

If only he had said anything else.

“Yeah. That's me.”

It was one thing to be known as the first son, but he wondered if this guy even knew his name. Sofia was more well-known, because in some ways she played along with the constant attention. She put care into her appearance when she left the White House and Sam could wear the clothes all right, but he often read descriptions about how he looked tired or bored, while Sofia was described as “effortless” and “elegant.”

“Sam, right?”

Realistically, there wasn't a single guest there that night who didn't know his name, but his pulse quickened as if this boy had paid special attention when Sam came up in the news.

“Yeah. That's me,” he said, again, not realizing until a second later that he had repeated himself exactly. Sam winced, turning away at the same time to hide his face, and coughed into the crook of his elbow as if that had been his intent. He turned back to the boy with a smile. “And you are?”

“Sisto.”

Sam waited a beat too long for him to reveal his last name. He was only sixteen, and had gone to school and lived almost a normal life for the first twelve years of his life, but even then,

introductions had always involved the use of full names. His parents had fallen in love at the White House, working for a president who was out of office by the time he was born, and he had gotten used to the constant political energy around him before he moved into the White House himself.

“Cool. Um...nice to meet you.”

Sisto laughed, taking a long drag from his cigarette before speaking. “I always thought they forced the president’s kids to, like, take a shit ton of etiquette and public speaking classes. Just in case, you know?” He shook his head, smiling. “Guess not.”

Sam forced a smile in return, but it looked self-deprecating, even in the thin light streaming out from inside the White House, aided only slightly by the moon.

Giving Sam a sideways glance as he tossed his cigarette on the ground, Sisto let out a much quieter laugh this time. “I’m not saying it’s a bad thing.”

“Oh. It’s not?”

“No. You don’t seem as robotic as you look on TV.”

It was, surely, supposed to be a compliment. But Sam just looked at the ground, every fear and insecurity he’d ever had about standing silently behind his parents in front of a sea of cameras and reporters instantly validated.

“Hey,” Sisto said, his voice much closer than before, and then his hand was on Sam’s shoulder. “Sorry. I never took any etiquette classes either.”

“It’s okay, I get what you meant.”

“You sure? I feel like I oughta apologize better.”

“Really, it’s fine—”

Sisto took him by the elbow, tugging once. “C’mon. I want to show you something.”

They were supposed to be greeting the public during an afternoon tour of the White House, but Sam was too busy texting to notice the crowd shuffling into the Blue Room. Sofia elbowed him, much more roughly than necessary, and smiled sweetly as people started filing into the room. He only had time to scowl at her for a brief moment before he mirrored his sister's expression and stepped forward to welcome everyone to his home, and even though it was exactly what he was supposed to say, it never felt true. It still felt like living in a museum or a history book, with Zachary Taylor's ghost floating between the various rooms, and members of the Huerta family regularly greeting guests in the room uncreatively given its name by Martin Van Buren.

Sam shook hands and posed for photos, though he doubted anyone actually cared about his special brand of celebrity. At first glance, the tour group had been elated to see the first children, but he knew they would have preferred to see the president herself. As was often true, their mother had more important matters to address, and Sam and Sofia could never use that same excuse.

Once the group moved on, Sam turned his attention back to his phone, not even noticing as Sofia stood on tip-toes to look over his shoulder. "Who's Sisto?"

Sam whipped around, narrowly avoiding a shoulder to Sofia's face. She would have deserved it. "Could you *not* invade my privacy?"

"What privacy?" Sofia asked as she dropped into one of the room's blue and gold cushioned chairs. "Twenty people just took our photos and then immediately posted them all over the internet."

Begrudgingly, he sat down across from his sister. No matter his level of annoyance, they would both have to wait for the next tour group together. “That’s different, and you know it.”

“All right, I know it. But *why* would you not tell me about someone you’re obviously obsessed with?”

He exhaled deeply, shoving his phone into his pants pocket where it was safe from unwanted glances. “You always have to make things so salacious. I never ask *you* invasive questions about whats-his-name.”

“You know his name. But I appreciate the feigned disinterest.”

Not only did Sam know his name, he also knew what Sofia’s boyfriend looked like, and not that he would ever voice the thought to Sofia, but it was uncanny how similar their tastes were. Sam was hoping to put off any twin jokes about the matter for as long as possible. But when it came to their parents, particularly their father, nosiness was not something that could be avoided entirely.

Sofia stared up at the ceiling, her eyes drifting towards the gaudy chandelier that hung in the dead center of the oval room. So many ovals in this house, something about George Washington preferring them to circles. “I wish dad would catch on.”

“Well. Keep wishing.”

It was easy for him to say, he could hear her already, the accusation in her voice completely justified. Had Sam ever wanted a love life before now, his father would not have paid the least bit of attention. But when it came to Sofia, he tried to keep track of her comings and goings as closely as possible.

“Tony is just so...non-threatening. Dad acts as if I’ve started dating the literal antichrist.”

“Hey, maybe next time.”

This time, it was Sofia who barely managed a glare before hopping out of her chair and hurrying over to the door in preparation for the next tour group.

It wasn't until Sisto pushed him up against a wine rack, immediately sending a \$110 bottle of Pinot crashing to the floor, that Sam considered maybe he was the one dating someone antichrist adjacent. Not that spilling wine was satanic – no matter how much the pooling of dark red liquid looked eerily similar to blood.

“Shit,” Sisto muttered against his mouth, and Sam didn't want to open his eyes again, he would prefer to pretend the glass and wine spreading across the wine cellar floor was just his imagination.

Sam wasn't sure what to do in this situation, or any awkward situations. When Sisto had suggested they break into the White House wine cellar, he had laughed. A little cruelly. They need not break in, really, just open the door and enter. The look of disappointment on Sisto's face when he saw the cellar was exactly as Sam had predicted.

“*This* is the president's wine supply? It's...it's even worse than my uncle's!”

“It's not all of her wine. But, officially speaking, this is it.”

They stood inside the closet-sized room, the two of them barely able to look at any of the labels without bumping into one another. The first few times, Sam told himself he wouldn't let it happen again, but after the fourth time, Sisto abruptly stopped reading the labels and pulled a bottle out from the rack.

“Here. This one is good.”

Sam looked it over, not knowing enough to either agree or argue otherwise, so he nodded. Sisto produced a Swiss army knife from his pocket, expertly removing the cork in a way that made clear how many times he had done so in the past.

He put both the knife and cork in his pocket, then leaned his head back to take a generous sip. “Like I said,” he offered the bottle to Sam with a grin. “It’s a good one.”

Sam took the bottle tentatively, the neck almost slipping from his clammy hands. Before Sisto could comment, he took an ambitious swig from the bottle, swallowing more than he had anticipated. He handed it back to Sisto nervously, hoping he wouldn’t be forced to take another sip. While Sisto had aspirations of talking about wine for a living, Sam would happily never sample another bottle again.

He raised his hand to wipe away the stray wine from his lips, but Sisto reached out to grab him by the wrist. The wine lover was about to scold him for daring to waste a single drop, he thought, the only logical explanation for his action.

“Sisto, I just—”

But Sisto kissed him before he could finish protesting, an argument that was never going to be made in the first place, and as soon as Sam processed this, his head rushed to meet up with his lips, his hands, his legs. All at once, he kissed Sisto back with intention, the wine tasting much sweeter from the other boy’s mouth, his hand breaking free from the now slackened grip, reaching upwards to clutch at hair and jaw, his thumb swiping over Sisto’s cheek as he stepped in closer.

Of the few things he never discussed with his twin, romantic intricacies of relationships was one of them. They talked about whether or not they were seeing somebody, eventually, but

even that took time, and they never dared speak about first kisses or dates. For Sam, there had never been anything to talk about, anyways.

Sam took a breath, and something in Sisto must have instructed him to steal it back, and that was when the pushing and the wine bottle crashing interrupted them, though Sam could have convinced himself that he hadn't heard anything after all, if Sisto had been willing to play along.

They looked at the spilled wine, neither saying anything or moving for a moment, then Sisto looked back at Sam, his hands still gripping the collar of his shirt, and he offered an unapologetic smile. "Well, if it's already broken."

And their lips met again.

When Sam stumbled upstairs to the second floor, still tipsy from the half drunk bottle of wine, he noticed Sofia's bedroom door was open and gave a courtesy knock with his knuckles.

"Knock knock," he said as if it was a joke, somehow, not noticing his sister's faintly red-rimmed eyes.

"What do you want?" She asked, but her voice sounded wrong, and she turned onto her side to face away from him on her bed.

"Wait, what's wrong?"

"Do you *care*?"

Although he was in a spectacularly good mood, and buzzed enough not to fully grasp Sofia's mood, he felt offended that she could possibly ever believe he wouldn't care that she was upset. "I always care, Sof."

With a sniff, she hesitantly turned back to him, slowly sitting up and wrapping her arms around her middle. Sam entered her room fully, closing the door behind him in case one of their parents came upstairs, and sat down beside her. “What happened?”

“Pretty much exactly what you’d expect. Dad said I’m not old enough to date. Girls my age get married every day!”

“Not a great argument, but I understand.”

Not even bothering to complain about his criticism, she leaned into him, putting her head on his shoulder. “It’s not like I was going to listen to him, anyways. But he got Tony removed from his White House internship, so I’ll probably never see him again.”

“If he cares about you at all, he’ll make sure you still see each other.”

“*Of course* Tony cares—”

“I meant dad.”

Sofia peered up at him, disbelief temporarily replacing the sadness in her eyes. “He cares about me. He just doesn’t express it the right way.”

“Mom will talk to him. And she’ll get Tony his internship back. They kind of *have* to listen to her.”

She let out a weak, watery laugh. “Maybe you’re right.”

He was right. But he felt guilty, unsettled. It wasn’t fair the way their father treated them. Sam wouldn’t say that he had a favorite, or even a preference. But he went easier on Sam and expected less from him in the public eye. Part of him understood this – his sister was, in fact, under far more scrutiny from the media and the American people than he was or would ever be.

Because she was a young woman and people were determined to judge her, whether it was her latest outfit or whoever she was dating.

Naturally, Sofia had never gone out with anyone publicly. Never even had an official boyfriend, as far as Sam knew. But there was speculation. They linked her to anyone she spoke to on Twitter, anyone she was ever photographed near. If they'd breathed the same air, they were fair game.

People liked to imagine him with starlets and foreign princesses, though this was more like a fun exercise involving their wildest imaginations. Sam had kissed a governor's daughter, once, in her state's capital building. That was the closest he ever got to being involved with someone likewise *political*.

For that reason, among others, he was drawn to Sisto. His uncle had some pull abroad, but little to no power in America, and it was a relief not to think about the international implications if their relationship got out. If it was a relationship. Sam was too afraid to ask, and so, more likely, he'd never know the answer to that—

“Sam.”

“Oh—uh, yeah?”

Sisto ran a hand through Sam's hair, and Sam glanced up at him upside down. They were sitting in front of a bookshelf in one of the 132 rooms of the White House, and this was one that Sam was pretty sure neither of his parents had never even set foot in. It was riskier but more comfortable than spending time in the bomb shelter that was deemed essentially useless two decades ago.

Sam was leaning his head against the older boy's chest, in a position that might have made him fall asleep if he hadn't been so busy caught up in his own thoughts.

“Do you think I’m your boyfriend?”

His breathing stilled abruptly, something Sisto would no doubt take notice of, but it wasn’t exactly by choice. He panicked, and when his panic lessened slightly, and the seconds dragged on, he started to believe it was a trick question.

He tried to read Sisto’s face as he answered. “N...Ye...?”

Sisto laughed a quiet laugh, all breath. “Just tell me. Honestly.”

Being honest was not a problem for Sam, but he couldn’t help but believe that Sisto was too cool for labels, and more importantly, too cool for *him*. First son or not.

“No.”

There was no reaction from Sisto, and good or bad, he desperately needed one. He pressed on.

“Only because...I didn’t think you wanted to be.”

“Is that so?”

Sam just nodded his head, the material of Sisto’s sweater making his hair staticky.

“Sam?”

It was more of a question the second time, but this time he didn’t have to respond, because Sisto leaned down to kiss him, soft and slow and sweet, unexpected. Sam had just grown to believe that boys didn’t kiss each other that way.

“I want you to be.”

He had to caution himself not to sit up too quickly, lest he headbutt his *boyfriend* in the chin.

Tony had been rehired as an intern, but his relationship with Sofia was not restored.

He was acting coldly towards her, evasive most of the time if not downright rude. Sam didn't know for sure what the hell his problem was, but he had a good idea. If there was one thing Sam couldn't take, it was his sister crying all the time, her eyes slightly puffy in all the photos popping up in tabloids and major news outlets.

Without even knocking, he threw open the door to his father's office.

"Sam? You can't just—"

"I can just!" He said, immaturely, and too loudly for this part of the White House.

Quickly, his father rose to close the door, then turned his annoyed gaze on his son. "I didn't raise you to—"

"Oh, can the bullshit, Dad!"

He turned back towards his father's desk, slamming his flat palm on the surface.

Truthfully, it kind of hurt and it wasn't as loud as he was hoping, but his point had been made.

"Why are you being so unfair to Sofia?"

At least his father had the decency to consider his words this time before speaking. That didn't make the words any better, though.

"That's none of your business—"

"Of course it is! Sofia is always my business. We shared a womb!"

Although Sam and Sofia were close (and in a way they had no say in that, having been born mere minutes apart) they didn't always act that passionately about one another. But Sam loved his sister more than anyone. She was his best friend, even if they both had difficulty opening up and talking about their feelings. Was it any wonder, when their father was so harsh? Sam knew that they were loved by their parents, but it would be nice to *hear* the words from his father occasionally.

He was sick of being allowed to get away with anything while Sofia was watched with a critical eye.

“What’s wrong with Tony?”

“You want a list?”

Sam threw his hands up, a slightly crazed smile on his face. “I’d *love* one.”

“Don’t tell me you think he’s good enough for your sister.”

He faltered briefly and pursed his lips as he considered the most diplomatic answer.

“That’s not the point. I mean—I don’t know yet. He’s barely gotten the chance to prove himself one way or the other. The point is he makes her happy.”

Sam couldn’t tell whether or not he was getting through to his father. The man had an impeccable poker face.

“And, anyways...I have a boyfriend and you’ve never said anything about him.”

His father froze, as did Sam himself. Because he wasn’t sure what he was about to say until he said it and while he wasn’t ashamed of anything, he had never explicitly talked to his parents about his sexuality. There was no time, and little to no desire to be candid on his end.

“I didn’t know.”

Sam didn’t want to ask whether he meant Sisto specifically or something else. He wanted to know without asking.

“Well, now you do. So, what? Are you going to get him banned from the White House? His record’s clean, by the way. I already checked for you.”

His father was a smart man. He’d worked his way up the White House ladder and it was only by chance that he happened to fall in love with the future President. Sam tried to read his face and deduced that he had figured it out, *finally*.

“No. But you’re introducing him to us ASAP.”

“And Tony?”

His father grimaced but he had no other choice. Sam had successfully backed him into a corner by pointing out his double-standards. “I’ll be...easier on him. And I’ll make sure he talks to Sofia.”

Sam still didn’t know what his father had said to Tony to make him treat Sofia that way in the first place and he couldn’t help but wonder if Sisto would do the same if his father decided he wasn’t a good match for his son.

“Great, well...” Sam turned to leave the office.

“Wait.”

He turned, unsure what more his father could have to say, and was immediately pulled into a hug. Sam couldn’t remember the last time he’d hugged his father, but he didn’t question it. He just hugged back.