

Part 1:

The Laws of Motion

An object in motion stays in motion, unless acted upon by an outside force

One.

Ellie Beckett was in her favorite pub the first time she saw Mia Sharpe.

She was twenty-five and it was just after eight at night. It was early September, just before her birthday, and they were in a damnable heatwave, even though it was only a few weeks from autumn in Massachusetts.

Ellie was great at remembering details like that.

The pub in question was her favorite place to be, due to the fact that it was a total fucking dive. And not, like, a trendy, hipster dive, but like... a genuine hole in the wall, with the only entrance being in a back alley.

She'd enrolled in college a year early at seventeen, and had been surrounded by college students nonstop ever since, given that she was now in her final year working on her PhD.

Cambridge was full of college students, given it being a home to MIT – Ellie's drug of choice – as well as Harvard, Lesley... yadda yadda yadda. Education capital of the country and all.

So, it was great for her chosen profession. It was less great for the fact that she'd always been kind of a loner with issues making friends, and she *did not* want to hang out with most of the people she knew from university. Or most people in general. And honestly, it felt like they were everywhere.

Except for here at The Witching Hour. *Her* place.

It was popular *enough* for her to not feel like she was a lone weirdo holding the establishment up, but not so popular that she couldn't hear herself think. The floor was dirty, the beer was cheap, and the fried pickles were delicious. Most of all, though, it was a haven for her to simply *be*.

And Megan, the bartender, always let Ellie stake a claim to her own seat at the bar and exist there for hours while she did her research a few times a week.

She didn't have what most people would call a *thriving* social life, but then again, she never had. Mostly, it revolved around hanging out with Riley – her twin sister – and Riley's band of friends whenever the occasion brought them together. Sometimes, she had get-togethers with Dominic, her advisor/mentor, but, according to Riley, she wasn't allowed to count him as part of her "social circle."

Oh, and Megan. But Riley always gave her an exasperated look whenever Ellie referred to Megan as her friend.

Overall, Ellie was generally content with the way everything had turned out in the last few years. Things were good. She was good.

The pub was good. Tame and lowkey, Ellie enjoyed being there by herself a couple days a week. She enjoyed having a single drink on her nights there, always taking a long deliberation before making her decision. She'd brought Riley a handful of times, but... not often.

This place, it was hers. She even had the barstool with her name on it.

Okay, so it didn't actually, but she always sat in the same one every time since she'd wandered in three years ago. And the one time Ellie had sat in another seat, Megan had mocked her about being in the wrong place and had feigned not recognizing her.

Ellie took that to heart.

And Ellie was sitting right there, in her spot where the stool faced the door, when *she* walked right in.

The woman's hair was long and dark, falling loosely over her shoulders, as she wore a buttoned-up linen shirt, tucked into a tight pair of jeans. Her hands were slipped into the back pockets of said jeans, and her hips swayed with confidence as she walked.

It should have been funny that she seemed like she owned the room, really, because she had to have stood at just over five feet, if an inch. But her eyes took in every single nook and cranny, measuring everything and everyone – Ellie included – and she emanated such an aura that she knew exactly who she was and where she was and that she wasn't afraid of *anything*.

She wasn't alone, either; she was followed by a small group of people – mostly men, with one other woman – who were a little rowdy.

Ellie wasn't entirely certain why, but she couldn't look away. There was just a feeling in the pit of her stomach like she could barely breathe, and it was... unfamiliar.

Ellie didn't really care much for the unfamiliar. It was why she loved science and didn't exactly mind being alone. Everything in this crazy fucking world made *sense* when you were able to rationalize it and study it in scientific terms.

And people didn't really like that about her, historically.

"First round's on me," she heard the woman say to her cohort, before she started that strut right over to the bar.

And Ellie diverted her gaze down into her notebook just in time for the woman to come to the bar. Far, far closer to Ellie than was typical for people.

Part of the reason Ellie liked her seat was because of how far off to the side it was; no one ever even stood *near* her when they ordered drinks. Because it would be inconvenient for them.

But this woman did. She stood one stool distance away. So, she wasn't right up in Ellie's business, but it was marginally closer than most people ever came unless it was super busy. She froze with the proximity, staring intently down at her notes, but not actually *seeing* them.

"Hey, can I ask what you're drinking?" The woman's voice sounded even better without having to carry all the way through the pub. Ellie didn't quite know how that made sense, but it somehow did – she sounded clear and purposeful, with a register a little huskier than Ellie's own.

Ellie froze, staring intently down at her notes, trying to make herself focus. The woman likely wasn't talking to *her*, why would she be?

Focus. Just another eight months left in her PhD and that was it. The notes she was working on for her dissertation for her next meeting with Dominic were important and –

“Excuse me, I’m sorry,” the woman’s voice cut in again, this time a little closer. Close enough that they still weren’t touching, but it was unmistakable who she was talking to. Ellie froze again. “Just – your drink. What is it?”

Ellie slowly turned to look at her, blinking widely. “Me?”

The woman gave her a slow smile. And when she grinned, dimples popped and... just, wow.

“Unless you’d prefer for me to fuck off. That’s fine, too.”

Usually when she was approached in the bar, she *did* want the approach-er to fuck right off. But normally it was a creepy dude who thought he was being clever or charming or whatever. And they never, ever offered to.

She didn’t realize she hadn’t spoken, until the woman’s smile slowly dimmed and those dimples disappeared. “Got it. Sorry. I’ll go order over there.” She tilted her head toward the front of the U-shaped bar.

Ellie’s eyes widened as the woman turned and took a step, and she spluttered out, “I-it’s a Widow Jane.”

The woman stopped.

“Bourbon.”

“Bourbon,” the woman said at the same time, and for some reason, it made Ellie snap her jaw shut, her cheeks burning. “Awesome. I thought that’s what you were drinking, but I wasn’t sure.” She shrugged, re-tucking her hands into her pockets. “I really like something when I can just sip on it? I’m kind of always looking for the single perfect drink when I go out.” A self-deprecating grin flashed over her face. “Trust me, I know it’s stupid.”

Ellie only blinked at her, lightly – nervously, she realized – tapping her pen against her notebook. But she was... well, she was surprised. Because she felt the *same* way. Riley commented about whether it was healthy or not to hang out in a pub at the bar, but Ellie wasn’t there to drink in excess.

It – well, it definitely wasn’t something anyone else had ever had in common with her, not that she’d found.

“If, uh, you want bourbon, they also have a really good Maker’s Mark 46.” She cleared her throat, before cutting her gaze back to her notes when the woman’s eyes stayed on her.

The woman opened her mouth to speak, but Ellie never got to hear whatever the words were, as Megan appeared on the other side of the bar. “Can I help you?” She asked slowly, running her eyes back and forth between them.

Ellie bit the inside of her lip and kept her head ducked down, curtaining her long, sunny blonde curls over her whole face.

“Yeah, sorry,” the woman ordered a variety of drinks Ellie assumed were for her group, before she finished by saying, “And a glass of the Widow Jane, neat.”

She smiled to herself, hunching her shoulders up around her notebook. But she liked that the woman was getting what she was drinking, that she seemed to get Ellie on that little, weird *thing*. That was new.

“Thanks for the rec,” the woman said to her, as she reached out and took the tray Megan had served up for her to take back to her table.

“Erm, yeah,” Ellie managed, with a jerky shrug, not looking back up.

It felt... too weird. She didn't know.

She didn't look up from her notes again for a solid ten minutes, sending a fleeting look across the pub to where the woman was sitting. She'd pulled up a chair at the end of a long booth, and the chair was backwards while the woman straddled it, laughing at something someone said, while she delicately traced her fingers over the top of the glass of bourbon. Their shared drink of the evening.

The thought made her rip her gaze away... landing right on Megan on the other side of the bar.

“What?” She asked, a defensive feeling settling in her stomach at the lifted eyebrow of her bartender.

Megan grinned. “Nothing.”

Whatever. Ellie shook her head and took a hold of her pen, forcing herself to not look toward the back of the room again.

It was the first time she saw the woman, but far from the last.

Because Dimples, as Ellie started to refer to her in her head, returned to the pub only a week later. She'd waited for it – for her to approach again – the next time she saw Dimples. She held her breath and her stomach had clenched in anticipation, and she wondered if she should mentally prepare a conversation rebuff: *sorry, I'm a little busy* or *I'm working on something really important*, should she *say* what she was working on? But, it didn't really matter in the end.

Because Dimples didn't approach her again the second time she came in.

Or the third time, a few days after that. Or the fourth time, the week after.

She was a regular before Ellie even realized it, almost as regular as Ellie herself. Maybe just as much of a regular, really, even if sometimes their nights at The Witching Hour didn't coincide.

“She was here Tuesday,” Megan casually informed her as Ellie sipped a coke one night while she was poring over the Encyclopedia of Biomaterials to work into her annotations.

“What? Who?” Ellie asked, furrowing her brow as she ran a hand through her hair.

She'd just had it cut, so the thick, buoyant curls that were often the bane of her existence now settled right above her shoulders to be slightly more manageable.

“The woman? With the dimples? Dark hair? You were just looking over in the corner where she likes to hang out?” Megan arched an eyebrow at her.

Ellie shot her a confused look. “I was not.”

“You were.”

“No, I wasn't. I think I'd know if I was looking for someone. I don't even know whoever it is that you're talking about.” With that, Ellie propped her elbow on the bar and buried her face against her hand and she slumped down closer to her book.

She *wasn't* looking.



Just because Ellie wasn't *looking* for Dimples at the pub, though, didn't mean she never *noticed* her. They were two different things.

She could be a very observant person, after all.

And it didn't take a super observant person, anyway, to notice that Dimples never came back to the bar with the group of people she'd come in with the first night.

Sometimes she came back alone, but more often than not, she brought a woman.

Scratch that – she brought *women*.

At first, Ellie kind of marveled at it. At the idea of having so many friends, people that you seemed to genuinely want to spend time with. Who wanted to genuinely spend time with you. And it always looked so easy for her.

She'd stuck with that idea until she'd seen Dimples back one of her "friends" into the wall, both arms on either side of the other woman, caging her there. But the other woman was smiling, not seeming to mind in the least...

Before Dimples rocked up and kissed her.

It only lasted a few seconds, but the playful smile before it, the teasing lilt of Dimples' head... it made Ellie's stomach clench, her eyes go wide, and her cheeks heated, because *oh*.

It made more sense, then, why the women who accompanied Dimples swapped out so often. Because they weren't just *friends* at all.

It made less sense for Ellie as to why she felt the need to down her scotch instead of savoring it, before burying her head right into her book and not looking up again, trying to calm the feeling in the pit of her stomach.

This was a feeling she couldn't quantify, at all. It wasn't like it made a difference to her whether Dimples was straight or gay or bi or – whatever she defined herself as. Ellie was straight, plus she didn't even *know* the woman.



She was playing pool when she finally met Dimples, on a chilly night in early December.

It wasn't that she really *wanted* to be playing pool, but her usual seat had been taken at the bar when she'd come in a half hour ago, and normally, she didn't ever come to The Witching Hour on Tuesdays. It wasn't part of the routine, and that threw her off a little bit, in general.

She wouldn't even *be* there, if Riley hadn't staunchly insisted Ellie leave their shared apartment.

“El, you haven’t left our apartment in over four days,” Riley had said, taking a hold of her shoulders and staring her in the eye. Identical twins as they were, no one had ever had trouble telling them apart.

Riley hadn’t worn her hair in its natural curly state in... Ellie didn’t know how long. She’d been getting it treated at a salon routinely ever since they’d been in high school, and she always dressed stylishly, wearing makeup to match.

Ellie stared into green eyes, identical to her own, as she’d refuted, “I have, too.”

Riley arched a disbelieving eyebrow.

“I took the trash out yesterday. And picked up snacks on Sunday.”

“Taking the trash right outside and going to the convenience store *across the street* doesn’t count! You need a breather. You can come out with me and Gianna?” She offered, giving Ellie one of her trademark, sunny smiles.

“Yeah, come with us!” Gianna, Riley’s best friend since they’d met at freshmen orientation in college, had called from where she was laying on their couch. She’d twisted around to face Ellie. “I can get you in like *that*.” Gianna snapped her fingers.

She was a social media influencer and she could get them in... anywhere, basically.

But the idea of going to the new club Riley and Gianna were *dying* to get into, squeezing into the underground space with tons of other people... it made Ellie shudder. She shook her head. “I think I’m going to definitely pass.”

Riley shook her shoulders. “You’ve been holed up here worrying about your final thesis defense for days! Your thesis is brilliant! Science is all you think about! You need to take a break or your brain is going to literally turn into mush.”

“Literally turn into *mush*? Is that a scientific term?” She’d joked.

Riley didn’t budge.

Instead, she’d made puppy eyes at Ellie, beseeching, “Just take *one night* off this week, just a few hours. It’s not healthy, Ellie! Take a break away from your books and your notebooks and your laptop and do *anything else*. You know I get worried when you get like this.”

She always had worried about Ellie when she got super focused. *Too* focused, she supposed. She always had been, but it had gotten even worse when their dad had died when they’d been eighteen.

Which had led to Ellie’s hospitalization the year later, after six months of not eating or sleeping enough, pushing herself as hard as she could. As much as she could to distract herself from how shitty life had felt.

In the years since, she’d been better, and set breaks and limits for herself. Which Riley enforced if she felt Ellie wasn’t doing it enough on her own.

And since there was an extremely small list of people who could actually get Ellie to bend to their will, and her sister was on that list twice, Ellie had sighed and left her books at home. She figured she’d hang out at the pub for a little over an hour – long enough that her sister would be long gone and out enjoying herself – before she went back.

“Hey. Can I possibly interest you in some friendly competition?” A voice shook her out of her thoughts. “All of the other tables are pretty full.”

“You can have it.” She was already shaking her head as she looked up, intending to give the table up and leave soon, anyway. “Here you can have my—”

Her breath caught in her throat, eyes widening when she saw Dimples, and like, dimples. Those deep creases in both cheeks, smiling up at her. Right here, up close and personal.

All of her other words completely fled from her vocabulary, and she could only stare.

Dimples continued to smile up at her. “I can have your...?”

Ellie quickly offered her pool cue, so fast she nearly struck the other woman in the head with it. Luckily, the woman seemed to have the reflexes of a cat and she dodged it. “Sorry! I... um, I just, you can use the table. I’m sure you, uh,” she cleared her throat and flicked her gaze beyond Dimples’ shoulder, “You’ll probably want some privacy...” she trailed off, trying to spot who Dimples might have brought with her tonight.

But she didn’t see any attractive women around, looking like they were waiting on their date.

She didn’t see anyone that Dimples was giving any attention to, except for her.

“No, I was actually hoping you’d want to play against me. It’s okay if you don’t want to; I get it.”

Ellie felt paralyzed and tongue-tied and the fact that she couldn’t quite calibrate *why* exactly that was, messed her up.

Still, she managed to find words when those dimples started to dim. “Yeah! That’s okay. Playing pool together, I mean. That would be okay.” She continued to offer her pool cue – manners.

The other woman reached out and the tip of her index finger slid along the underside of Ellie’s hand as she wrapped her fingers around the cue, then... *stayed* there. She looked at Ellie with a small head tilt, before she offered her other hand. “Mia Sharpe. I’ve seen you around here a lot.”

Mia Sharpe. She really liked the way that fit.

She slid her hand into Mia’s, a little surprised at the serious calluses on her hand. An intriguing combination of soft and rough.

“Beckett. Eleanor Beckett.” She frowned. *What?!* Was she some sort of, of fictional action hero? She’d never even seen those movies! And *Eleanor*? “Ellie. No one calls me Eleanor, except for my mom, sometimes, so, it’s just Ellie.” She took a sip from the water she had resting on the high top next to them, trying to cool herself down and simultaneously quell her confusion as to what Dimples – no, Mia, was doing talking to her. “I’ve seen you around here, too.”

She downed the rest of her water, giving herself a moment to wonder if that was weird to admit. But, it should be fine? Because Mia admitted it first.

Mia only grinned at her, arching an eyebrow as she gestured toward the pool table. “So, a game?”

Ellie racked the balls quickly, before gesturing *safely* this time, with the new cue she’d grabbed. “You can start.”

Mia stepped up to the table and set up her shot to break... which did very little. She seemed extremely unperturbed by the fact that she barely made a difference to the set up as she stepped back. "Your turn?"

Ellie bit her lip and nodded, feeling the nerves settle in her stomach. She was, well, a lot better at this than Mia. Should she take it easy on her?

The thought made her frown as she lined up her shot – she never took it easy on someone playing pool. *Never hide your talents*, her dad used to say. Why did this make her so nervous?

Closing her eyes to take in a deep breath, she focused solely on the task at hand and blocked out everything else. She was good at that.

And by the time she missed a shot, she'd sunk six out of seven solids.

Only when she backed away from the table did she allow herself to look at Mia again. Her eyebrows were lifted in a look that was obviously impressed. That was also new. "Wow. You really know what you're doing, here."

Ellie dug her teeth into her bottom lip as she shrugged. "I mean, it's just science and math."

Mia leaned her cue against the table and perched herself against the small high top across from Ellie, dark eyes glinting up at her in question. "How so?"

Like a match ignited inside of her, Ellie nodded vigorously. "I mean, at the root of pool is physics, right? It's an elastic collision of equal masses, so we're just working with the laws of momentum and energy." She reached out and took one of the balls remaining on the table, holding it up. "See, this ball is going to be in motion."

She slid the ball toward another, making them crash. "The amount of force I use creates the momentum that this ball is going to use to crash into the other one, and because of the conservation of momentum, the exact momentum of the first ball *has* to then be transferred to the second. And in terms of the conservation of energy – well, the balls only have as much energy as you give them."

She slid the ball again, harder, making the collision more intense. "The laws of physics dictate how much I'm in total control, here. Boiling down to a science, all you have to do is figure out the force needed to get the right momentum. And then, logistically, it's only a game of geometry from there, in terms of the angles you need to..."

She trailed off, quickly taking her hand off of the pool table, only realizing in that moment how caught up she'd been in her explanation. Embarrassed, she put her hands behind her back, clasping them together as she cleared her throat. "Anyway. That's pool. But I guess I ruined our game," she gestured at the table, where she'd clearly tampered with the placement of the balls. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to." She was more than a bit crestfallen that she'd ruined it.

Almost afraid to look at Mia, she peeked out of the corner of her eyes.

But instead of looking annoyed or giving her the look she'd gotten in her youth of *you're a fucking weirdo*, Mia had her chin propped in her hand, and her pink lips were curled into a small grin.

“You know, I really never thought of pool like that. But I guess it makes a lot of sense. And don’t worry about the game,” Mia waved her other hand toward the table, “Clearly, I was losing miserably, so you did me a favor.”

She let out a laugh that had Ellie laughing, too, even though she didn’t quite know why.

“Well, where I come from, loser buys drinks. Can I get you something?” Mia tilted her head toward the bar, where Ellie noticed her seat was now empty.

Even though Ellie knew she had plans to go back to her and Riley’s apartment and keep working on getting ready for her thesis meeting, she found that she couldn’t say no. She didn’t want to. That was such a surprising first for her, that she could only nod.

Making their way to the bar, Mia looked up at Ellie. “What’s your poison tonight?”

“I’ll just take a Guinness Draught.”

“Two, please,” Mia said to Megan, who had sidled over to her side of the bar when she must have seen them coming.

Ellie slid into her seat as Megan placed their bottles in front of them, shooting Ellie an encouraging look that she didn’t quite understand. She frowned at her bartender in question, only to have her attention immediately pulled back to Mia, as if magnetized to her.

“Funny thing, you were in the pub the first night I came in; I remember you sitting right here. We spoke, very briefly.” Mia gestured at her stool as she adjusted in her seat, balancing her feet on the bar at the bottom of the stool and knocking their knees lightly together.

Ellie felt herself flush, either from the contact or the comment, she didn’t know.

She took a sip, playing lightly with the label on her bottle. “Um, yeah. This...”

“It’s her seat,” Megan supplied with a grin, before she turned to serve the people at the other end of the bar.

Ellie huffed out a breath at her back, and she could feel Mia’s amused eyes on her. “I’m not, like, a lush or anything. I just...” She shook her head, feeling her curls bounce with the motion. “Anyway... I think, I remember that night you came in, a few months ago? With a group of people.”

She aimed for super casual, and she really, really hoped she achieved it.

Dark brown eyes seemed to sparkle up at her in the slightly dimmed lighting of the pub. “You remember that?”

Her fingers made a tear in the label. “Yeah, sure. It’s not every day that big groups of people wander in here.” She totally lied. It *wasn’t* every day, but Ellie would be hard-pressed to ever remember any other group of people. “It... makes an impression.”

By *it* she meant *you*, but she didn’t know how to say that and definitely didn’t think she should.

“Huh. For observant people, I guess.” Mia took a sip of her drink and leaned in a little closer and a hint of a warm citrus-y scent hit Ellie, as she froze with the enhanced proximity. She held Mia’s gaze, though, entirely confused and enthralled in equal measure as Mia whispered, “All right, Ellie-not-Eleanor Beckett. I *need* to know.” She leaned in even closer, leaving only inches between them, as Ellie sat shock-still.

“What in the world are you always working on when you come in here?” Mia’s face lit up in a dimple-popping smile as she leaned back, her voice returning to normal volume.

Ellie's eyebrows lifted as her mind scrambled a bit because – Mia *had* noticed her. *Her*. Even though she was usually with other people – on dates.

She realized Mia was giving her an expectant look long moments later, and she averted her gaze to the bar top, her leg bouncing against the stool. "I'm working on my PhD, in biomedical engineering. I'm over halfway done with my thesis, so that's usually what I'm working on here. And at home. And the lab."

"At MIT," Mia supplied.

That stopped Ellie up, surprised. "How'd you know?"

Mia winked, using her bottle to gesture at Ellie. "You're wearing the sweatshirt, so I figured I'd take an educated guess. Tell me more about your PhD."

Ellie brushed her hair behind her ear. "It's – it's not all that interesting. I mean, it is to me? But Riley, my sister, she's told me that I need to figure out other conversational topics and figure out how to pare down my shop talk."

Mia's hand landed on her forearm as she rambled, warm even through her sweatshirt. Ellie's gaze landed on it, staring, as Mia's thumb rubbed against her arm. "Well, I'm asking for the details. I'm interested. Will I be able to follow everything? Maybe not," she flashed a grin, then gestured for Ellie to keep going. "But I think there's a good chance I'll be learning something new tonight, and I like that."

She nodded and tried to tamp down on her excitement at the topic and at her audience of one who, for some reason, wanted to hear it. "My thesis, and all of my lab work, is concentrated around mapping genomics and using genomic research in furthering the ability to assist in creating organs from biomaterials."

She glanced at Mia, who still seemed interested, and it sparked inside of her all over again.

By the time she was done with explaining her thesis, over forty minutes had passed, and she had a few pieces of paper and a sharpie that she'd borrowed from Megan – of *all* the nights not to have her notebook! – covering the bar in front of them, where she'd drawn out examples of the genome mapping she was working on, as well as how the use of biomaterials could work.

Ellie, herself, learned a lot of things over the hour following her science word vomit.

She learned that Mia really didn't find science boring, that she'd given Ellie a look that looked honest and impressed, as she'd smiled self-deprecatingly. "Well, I only have an associate's degree in fire technology, but you managed to make it all sound... actually, pretty interesting."

"Fire technology?"

"It's kind of the beginning step to becoming a firefighter. It's not necessarily a requirement, but you can really never have too much knowledge."

"I so agree," she nodded emphatically, turning completely in her stool to face Mia. She looked her up and down, taking note – not for the first time – that she was several inches shorter than Ellie's own five foot six. "You're a firefighter?"

"Don't knock me just because I'm small," Mia quipped, arching a challenging eyebrow at Ellie.

She shook her head quickly. "No, no, I wasn't... I only--"

Mia laughed, kicking her foot lightly against Ellie's. "I'm messing with you; everyone sees me and thinks the same thing. But, truck engineer at Engine 7, at your service. Engineer as in, I have to know that rig up and down; not engineer as in creating human organs from dust."

Ellie snorted out a laugh.

She learned that Mia was two years older than her, having just turned twenty-eight last month, in November, that she loved hiking as much as Ellie did, and that her favorite movies were the horror flicks that she loved and Riley refused to let them watch during movie nights together.

She learned that when Ellie spoke animatedly about science again, mentioning that she'd be finishing her PhD a full year early, that Mia would call her a nerd, but with a wide, warm smile and no mockery.

She learned that Mia was impressed with her, and she learned that she liked that. It was a very full night.

Ellie didn't know for sure that night that they would become friends, but she did know at the end of the night, that it wasn't the end of them hanging out. Because Mia smoothly put her number into Ellie's phone and challenged her to a game of pool the following night, too.

And in a first for Ellie? She actually was looking forward to it.

Two.

Ellie had never been nervous to show up to The Witching Hour before. It was her place. One of the only places she didn't feel nervous – her apartment, her lab, and her pub.

But she'd never been meeting someone there, either. And meeting new people often made Ellie feel a bit off-kilter, like she should burrow into herself and hide from her usual tongue-tied feeling.

She didn't get a chance to feel off-kilter the second night she met with Mia, though.

Instead, Mia welcomed her into the pub with a grin and an exclamation of, "Hey, you came!" as she stood next to a pool table. The same one they'd sort-of played at the night before.

The jangle of nerves that had tangled in her stomach all afternoon, even as she'd tried to focus at the lab, settled in the oddest sensation. Ellie was relieved, even as she wanted to frown at that. She needed to reflect on those feelings, later. Study them.

For now, she was going to be glad. It wasn't hard to smile in the face of Mia's, as she approached the table. "I told you I would? I don't normally say I'm going to do something unless I really intend to do it."

"I can definitely see that about you. And, I'll be honest, I love that in a woman."

Feeling inordinately pleased at the comment, she put her hoodie over the back of the chair at the high-top table and then took her jacket off and hung that off the chair as well.

Mia arched an eyebrow at her. "I get that it's December and all, but you know you're already wearing a sweatshirt, right?"

There was no judgment in her tone, still, and Ellie relaxed into the fact. "Oh, well. Yeah. I know. But I run cold."

Mia's bomber jacket – definitely not winter-ready – was hung over the opposite chair and she was wearing a tight henley with the sleeves pushed up, tucked into high-waisted black jeans, her long dark hair tied back into a high ponytail. Ellie blushed and ran her eyes back to Mia's, who tilted her head as her smile slowly returned. "I run hot."

"Yeah," Ellie nodded, before she realized it, and frowned at herself. *What?*

She felt so ridiculously relieved when Mia only gestured to the table. "You ready?"

Ellie slowly reached for a pool cue before she paused. "Are you sure you want to? Have you played pool before?"

Mia laughed, the sound so bright, it could have lit up the whole pub, as she nudged her shoulder against Ellie's arm. "Ha-ha. Yes, I have, thank you. And I'm well aware that I could... be better. Tonight, you're teaching me how to be better."

"I didn't realize I was giving lessons."

"I'll buy you a drink and some apps."

“I would have done it for free.” Ellie grinned victoriously, “But it’s too late to back out now.”

Mia held her hands up. “I wouldn’t, either way.”

By the time they were on their second game, Ellie realized that either she couldn’t give instructions that well or Mia just didn’t grasp it that well. It could be either one, and she shook her head. “No, it’s... you...”

She huffed out a breath at her inability to properly communicate what she needed to say.

Mia gave her a look over her shoulder. “What am I doing wrong here?”

Ellie took a step forward before she realized what she was doing. Close to Mia, very close, before her nerves set in and she froze. “Do you – um – mind?”

Mia shook her head. “Not at all.”

Ellie nodded and stepped up behind her, and when her thighs bumped into the back of Mia’s, she had to pause to let out a shaky breath. Shaking herself out of it – sure, it had been a while since she’d had human contact that wasn’t a hug from Riley, but still – she took a deep breath and bent over Mia’s back. She did her best to keep contact light; she was sure Mia didn’t want her, like, *all over her*, but some of it couldn’t be helped.

Biting her bottom lip, she placed her hands over Mia’s, noting how absolutely soft they were. Small, too, as Ellie’s were definitely larger, and she had to wonder about Mia’s firefighter job. She had to be capable, there were definitely tests for that – Ellie had done some light research the night before on what it took to become a firefighter and what the job entailed, but if they were going to keep being friends, she had to do way more.

She felt Mia take in a deep breath, her back pressing against Ellie’s chest and she coughed with the way it sent her stomach spiraling.

“Uh. Right. Here. Like this.” She instructed and used her own hips to shift Mia’s stance, and slid Mia’s hands to the right place, as she bent her arms to what she believed was the right angle.

She didn’t remember the last time she’d been this close to *anyone*, she thought, as her heart stuttered in her chest, and her neurons seemed to go crazy as Mia shot her a grin over her shoulder.

Ellie shook her head quickly and frowned as she quickly moved back. “There. You... you should do it better now.”

By the end of their third game, as they paused to move to the bar and eat, Mia improved slightly, but didn’t seem to mind that she didn’t do that well at all.

“This was fun.” The words fell from Ellie’s lips before she even realized it, breaking the comfortable silence as she wrapped both hands around her beer.

She marveled at the fact that the silence *was* comfortable. That in and of itself was such a rarity.

“Why do you sound surprised?” Mia raised her eyebrows, an easy smile falling from her lips. “Should I be concerned? Offended?”

Ellie ran her fingers through the condensation left in a ring on the table. “I don’t mean like, *surprised*, I guess.” Not after they’d had a good, not awkward time the night before. “I just, don’t do this often.” She gestured between them.

She didn't know what exactly it was that she'd said that made Mia tilt her head up at her with a considering smile. But it was a nice look.

"I kind of got that impression." Before Ellie could think about it too much, Mia held up her hands. "So not in a negative way. The opposite, really." Mia rolled her lips. "So... I'm somewhat new around here and don't know a ton of places yet, outside of the very nearby area. Anywhere you have in mind for a good night out?"

"Night out?" She parroted in confusion.

"Like, a date." Mia clarified. "Somewhere you like, other than the pub, however great it may be here. There's a few holiday-specific things coming up, but..."

She frowned and scoffed out a laugh, mostly at herself. "If I don't do *this* that much, you can imagine how little I date. Besides, it, um, kind of seems like you have that all under control?"

She tilted her head to the corner of the pub where Mia usually hung out with her dates – near the darts, rather than the pool tables – as she felt her cheeks heat in a blush. "It seems like you, uh, do pretty well. You know, with the women and everything. I mean, they always seem like they're having a good time."

Mia's light, teasing smile that she'd worn for most of the night had slipped into a small frown, as if she'd stolen Ellie's confusion from her, as her eyes searched Ellie's own.

It made Ellie feel that much more self-conscious as she shuffled her feet a bit. "It's interesting, I guess, that you don't bring them here that much, other than once or twice." She cringed at herself; was that okay to mention? Was it weird? She needed a *save*. "Even that group you came in with the first night, you don't... well, you've never come back with them, either."

Mia seemed to recover from whatever had been on her mind as she took a long pull of her beer, and then put it down and rubbed her forehead roughly, as she let out a laugh that Ellie couldn't quite get. "Ah, yeah. They – the group I came in with the first night – are my engine crew; we work on shift together. We actually came out that night to celebrate my first shift there."

Ellie only realized in that moment, at the second casual comment about how long Mia had been in town, that even though they'd hung out for over two hours the night before, Mia hadn't really shared many *facts* about herself.

"Where'd you move here from? I mean, I'm not from *here*, necessarily, myself; I grew up in Green Ridge, in Vermont. There's a population of less than a thousand people, but it's the biggest mountain resort in New England, so, that's why anyone's actually heard of it. I mean, my mom and dad are – were..." She bit her lip, caught up the way she usually got when her dad came up. "So, I'm not from *here* here, either. But New England, still."

Mia's eyebrows were raised, but she was giving Ellie a soft smile at the end of her accidental tangent. "I moved here from L.A., about a week before the first time I came to The Witching Hour in September. Put in for a transfer, did all of the paperwork, and then—" She snapped her fingers. "Here I was. Did my first official shift the week I moved, came to The Witching Hour with the guys, and the rest is history."

Her tone wasn't *short*, but it was... final?

“And you like The Witching Hour but don’t want to come back with *the guys*,” she summarized. “You don’t like them?”

Mia paused for a moment, before she shook her head. “No, I do. I mean, I’m on shift with them for days at a time, and I – literally – trust them with my life. Plus, there’s no sexist bullshit I was a little worried about at the start, either, which is a huge plus. But, I guess outside of the job, I never really played well with others.”

And Ellie *could* empathize with that. “I don’t, either.”

They shared a grin as Mia tipped her bottle out for Ellie to clink with her own.



Ellie figured a few things about Mia over the next month.

The first, was that she kept showing up to The Witching Hour, which Ellie was ridiculously relieved by. Without any dates in tow, either, seemingly just to hang out with Ellie, which she was more than relieved by.

Second, whatever she was drinking, Mia would usually have the same. A coke, a whiskey, a water, a beer – she wasn’t picky and she always looked effortlessly cool when she held up two fingers for Megan. “I trust your taste,” she’d said as she bumped her shoulder with Ellie’s.

Third, she was the most attentive person Ellie had ever met.

She learned that over nights playing pool and kicking Mia’s ass – even when she *tried* to let Mia win! She learned it over nights of Mia sitting with her while she talked about her thesis and lab work. She learned it over nights of Mia falling into the stool next to Ellie’s and regaling her with the stories of her most recent shift at the station.

Fourth, Mia was always reticent around sharing her personal information.

And she was so good about ducking personal questions that Ellie didn’t even realize until she told Riley about her.

“El, I know you like your alone time and you love hanging out at the pub – and that’s great. But it’s been, like, a month since you’ve gone out with actual people.” Riley stood in her doorway, arms crossed, as if Ellie would try to barrel by her.

Ellie hesitated as she combed her fingers through her hair, before she cleared her throat. “Um. Well. I’m not alone, at the pub.”

“Megan doesn’t count!”

“It’s not Megan! It’s – her name is Mia. We’re...” She hesitated to call them friends; sure, they hung out a couple times a week for the last three weeks, but... “We’re hanging out.”

Riley sat on the edge of her bed, excitement and shock written all over her face. She didn’t have to voice her surprise; they both knew that Ellie hadn’t really hung out with someone who wasn’t a lab partner in... embarrassingly long. “Tell me!”

So, Ellie did. All of it. In a tumble of words, Riley’s excitement ratcheting up her own.

“She sounds great,” Riley said, her trademark bright smile in place even with the surprise still in her eyes.

“She is,” she quickly agreed.

“You said she’s new around here? Where’s she from?”

“L.A.”

“An L.A. native?”

Ellie hesitated; she didn’t actually know. She’d asked once, over pool, and Mia had seamlessly changed the topic to Ellie’s own hometown without Ellie even realizing it until much later.

“Why’d she move here?” Riley asked and Ellie paused again.

She *hadn’t* asked this, but... she wasn’t sure Mia would tell her, if she did.

The idea of it made her frown and her stomach churned. Mia always listened to her, but she never shared anything much about herself, and she wasn’t sure what that made them, but she didn’t think it was exactly friends.

Riley must have sensed her quandary, as she reached out jostled Ellie’s shoulder with her own. “It doesn’t matter!” Her sister shifted so she could wrap her arms around Ellie in an enthusiastic embrace. “You go out and have fun!”

Riley bounced out of her room, leaving Ellie feeling far less *bouncy*.



Ellie was in her MIT sponsored lab a week later when that doubt was put to bed, and she learned that they *were* friends. Like actual *friend* friends, who hung out more than at a pub whenever they had a free night.

She was leaning over her lab table, scribbling notes with one hand while absently counting her microscope slides by brushing over them with her index finger, and she hadn’t even realized someone entered the room.

Until a throat cleared, and in spite of having a sister who’d found it *hilarious* to sneak up on her throughout their entire childhood, and sometimes still to this day, she jumped.

Her collection of slides clattered together as her hand knocked into them and annoyance zipped through her as Ellie took a deep breath and turned. “This is a private—”

As soon as her eyes landed on Mia, the rest of her admonishment, her annoyance, faded away to nothing.

Instead, she was just – surprised.

“Mia? What are you doing here?”

And Mia was in uniform, which... Ellie had never seen her in before – it’s not like Mia wore it to the bar. But she was in dark blue pants that showcased her butt and the matching long-sleeved shirt that made her look all professional, her hair swept up into a high ponytail

and... and it just, it looked good. She had an official jacket that was so oversized it only accentuated how form-fitting the rest of her outfit was.

Ellie guessed that “loving someone in uniform” was a thing for a reason, and logically, it made sense. Her hands fell to her sides, feeling absolutely useless, as she tucked them into the pockets of her lab coat.

Mia grinned, that kind-of crooked yet completely-dimpled grin. “We just responded to a fire alarm at the high school down the street – a prank. But it’s the fourth one in two months and there’s a special place in hell for the person who thinks it’s funny to make all of their classmates stand outside in February. So my Captain is giving the students a *serious talking to*, and I have some free time on my hands. I thought I’d swing by your lab and see the fancy digs you’re always telling me about.” Mia walked closer, coffee cups in both hands, as she ran her eyes over the room. “And it is just as impressive as it sounds.”

Ellie felt herself flush as she reached out to fiddle with her slides and keep her hands occupied, because, well, she *had* been the sole recipient of a grant for a bunch of new, expensive equipment and her work had warranted it, so... she was proud.

“And you brought me a coffee?”

Mia came to a stop right in front of her, holding up both cups between them. “Nah, these are both for me.”

She laughed and the sound filled the lab up and brought it to life in a way that Ellie had never experienced before, despite having basically lived here at times. She didn't know quite what to make of that.

Mia handed her a cup. “You told me about the coffee cart you basically live off of that’s right across the street from your lab. All I had to do was provide a description of you and the guy gave me your favorite.” She leaned in and whispered, “Colombian dark roast, one cream, two sugars... you really do have the best taste in drinks.”

She tapped their cups together and took a sip through her smile.

Ellie didn’t often feel, well... dumb. But she kind of did right now, as she bit her lip and gripped her coffee with two hands. “You just, came to visit? Me?”

Mia’s eyebrows furrowed together as she made a show of looking around the lab. “I mean, I didn’t come to visit all of the other people in here.” She scrunched up her nose and laughed again. When she realized Ellie *wasn’t* laughing, her smile slowly fell from her face.

Ellie hated being the cause of that, even though she couldn’t quite help it.

Mia tilted her head, gaze searching Ellie’s. “Is this not okay? I just figured, we’ve been hanging out for two or three days a week for, like, four weeks.” In a very uncharacteristic move, Mia reached up and rubbed the back of her neck with her free hand, and Ellie didn’t think she’d observed Mia look uncomfortable before now. “Maybe I should have texted you first. I kind of felt like we’d become the type of friends who could do this sort of thing, but—”

Seeing Mia like that, listening to her ramble in a way that was much more akin to Ellie’s own mannerisms, warmed her inside. “We are!”

Mia cut herself off and blinked widely at Ellie’s interjection.

She blushed, shaking her head. “We – I mean, I wasn’t exactly sure we were *friends*, or if we just happen to get along and have similar schedules and like the same pub? It’s like, I

didn't know if we were like "work" friends, you know, people just happen to be in the same place and like each other more than most people there, so happenstance hangout while in that place. Only instead of *work*, it would be *pub* friends."

She had to bite her lip to make herself stop.

Mia seemed to be both amused and thoughtful. "I guess I see what you mean. But... just so you know, the pub is great. But I'm not going there to hang out by myself two or three times a week."

Ellie's smile blossomed even bigger and she buried her free hand in the pocket of her lab coat as she gripped her coffee tighter. "Oh! Okay. Me, neither. I mean, I guess I kind of always did, before, but not anymore. And I didn't really know, about you, because I don't really know... well, you don't really share that much about yourself. Like, where did you grow up? And why did you decide to move here? And that kind of feels like "work friends" to me."

Mia nodded slowly. "Well, honestly, I'm just a... a really private person. It's actually something that's caused some problems in things like relationships." She flashed a self-deprecating smile. "But I actually consider you a real friend, Ellie."

Ellie ate up every word Mia spoke, grinning from ear to ear.

"Awesome. Cool." She bounced to the balls of her feet and back, absurdly pleased. "Do you want a real tour? If you have time?"

"I've got time."

As they walked, Mia bumped her shoulder into Ellie's. "For the record, I grew up in Texas."

Three.

Ellie wasn't really in the business of having close friends. The reason why she was so well-acquainted with what it meant to be work friends was because that was essentially all she had, except Riley, who definitely didn't count because she was her twin sister, and maybe Gianna, and Riley's other friends Joel and Aaron. And they didn't *really* count, either, because they were just always... around.

The thing was, friendships never really *mattered* that much to her; at least, they hadn't mattered to her for a long time. When she'd been little, she'd cried over how hard it was for her to make them. And she'd had a very close best friend throughout most of middle and high school, Catelyn Cooper, but that had crashed and burned when they'd hit sixteen and Catelyn had gotten a boyfriend. And it had *hurt*.

It had really been the final straw that pushed Ellie to really focus on *school*. Which had been a good thing, because it had been the catalyst she'd needed to power through her work and graduate a year early.

She'd taken it all to heart – her difficulty making friends in her youth, the friend-breakup with Catelyn – as signs that she just wasn't... designed to have those friendships. The ones where you texted daily and called just to talk and wanted to shift around your own personal schedule to make time.

And now, she had Mia.



Weeks started to slip into months, as winter melted into spring.

Months where they continued to hang out in the pub, like she always used to, but instead of sitting alone at her stool, she got to regularly beat Mia at pool easily, and then had to actually try to win at darts, since Mia was much better at those.

Months where they actually started hanging out *outside* of the pub, too. Where they'd go to the Museum of Science, because Mia had asked where her favorite place was and Ellie initially was a little embarrassed to admit it, but all Mia had said was, "Of course, Nerd."

Months where they take little day trips around New England because Mia wanted to explore and stated that, "There's no one better I know to explore with." They went to the ice castles in New Hampshire before the snow melted, to see and hike around Acadia National Park in Maine as the weather turned, took tours of the Newport Mansions in Rhode Island, before visiting the beach there.

Months where they hang out in Mia's apartment, and she learned that Mia was obsessively neat – which Ellie could relate to – that Mia ate very healthy – which Ellie could somewhat relate to – and that Mia was an exceptional cook – which Ellie could very much not relate to.

As she'd stared at the homemade pasta – like, literally homemade. Mia had made the actual pasta and the sauce and the bread – in shock, Mia laughed.

“How can you do this?”

“How can you *not*?” Mia challenged, sliding her fresh bread onto her table. Her kitchen was small and cute, and had the perfect table for two. She'd shown Ellie around her first time here, commenting that she'd been slowly collecting a mish-mash of furniture since she'd moved eight months ago. “Just found this table at an antiques shop in Essex last week,” she'd proudly proclaimed as she'd tapped the table.

Ellie groaned. “You and antiquing.”

One of Mia's little quirks that she'd discovered on their road trips.

Mia nudged Ellie with her hip, bringing her back to the moment. “Cooking is – it's a science. That's why I'm shocked you can't do it.”

She gestured for Ellie to sit down, and she did, as she considered what Mia said. “I suppose you're right. I guess I've never really tried that hard? My mom cooked when I was growing up, Riley loves to cook now.” And food wasn't that important to her; it always felt like a waste of valuable time when she could be reading or researching or in the lab or catching up on shows she liked that she'd missed because she'd spent so much of her time on those other things, to spend so much of it cooking when there were so many easier, faster options.

Plus, the year she'd been at MIT on her own, before Riley had moved in with her to go to Boston University, had been the year her father died. Which was the year Ellie didn't really like to think about too much, and had also been the year she hadn't taken much care of herself at all. Her weight had... suffered.

Clearing her throat to get her out of *that* headspace, she arched an eyebrow. “How come you *can* cook so well?”

Mia rolled her lips as she served them both pasta. “Well, we take turns cooking at the station, for one thing.”

Ellie both waited to hear *the second thing*, but also dreaded that this was going to be one of the times Mia clammed up.

Mia hesitated, then seemed to force out, “And for another, I kind of had to take care of myself pretty young.”

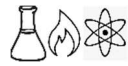
Quickly, Mia doled out the bread and slid her a glass of water, before she flashed a charming smile, as if the previous minute didn't exist. “Plus, it's always been a pretty impressive thing to women.”

Ellie didn't push. She didn't read people very well, she never had. But reading Mia... she was better at that than for most. And she definitely didn't want to push.

“I mean, it's impressive to me with this, and I have to imagine you pull out even more stops for... them,” she finished lamely, in reference to Mia's dates.

Mia just chuckled. “No, I like to impress you, too. Consider it a character flaw of mine.” She sipped her water. “But I think it’s time you start learning something from me for a change.”

Ellie had to pause for a second, because the truth was, she learned from Mia all of the time already.



She only brought Mia to her apartment for the first time when Mia questioned it in late June –

“You know, I still have never met your sister. For all I know, she’s a mythical creature you’ve made up,” Mia commented as they’d left her favorite café, The Bean Dream, iced coffees in hand.

Ellie had been venting about how Riley had vetoed her request to put a second desk in their living room, and she cut herself off.

“You... haven’t,” she spoke slowly.

Mia arched an eyebrow at her, a gentle smile in place. “Nope. And you don’t have to introduce us or anything, that’s not what I’m saying. You just – you know, you talk about her a lot and she literally lives with you, but after over six months of hanging out, she’s nowhere to be found.” Mia shrugged. “Just feels a little interesting.”

Ellie bit her lip. “Yeah, that – it is a little weird.” She forced a laugh. But it was weird. Really weird, actually. And the words bubbled up in her chest, even as she wrestled whether or not to let them out. “She, uh, she hosts a game night with her friends the last Friday of every month. If you wanna come this week.”

Mia stopped completely on the sidewalk and reached out to touch Ellie’s wrist. “You don’t have to invite me to something like that just because; I mean it.”

Ellie shook her head. “No! No, I want you to – I think you’d have fun. And Riley would like to meet you. Plus, it’s a pretty good time.”

These statements were all the truth, yet it didn’t stop her nerves from getting all shaken up.

Mia’s grin was so bright, though, Ellie couldn’t regret it completely. Not even as her nerves built leading up to Friday.

Riley squealed as soon as she saw Mia, and shot across the room like a rocket to give her a hug. “You came! I’ve heard so much about you!”

To say Riley had brought up meeting Mia a couple of times would be an understatement of the year.

Mia’s surprise at Riley’s demeanor was palpable, eyes wide as she’d given Ellie a look over Riley’s shoulder. “I’ve heard so much about you, too!”

Riley pulled back, still holding onto Mia's forearms in that naturally personable way she had. "I really thought we'd meet at Ellie's graduation ceremony a couple weeks ago, but you weren't there."

Ellie blushed, ducking her gaze from Mia's arched eyebrow.

"Uh, yeah, I guess I missed the memo on that."

Oh, no.

"You're here now." Riley shrugged, dropping her arms from Mia only to step to the side and drape her arm around Ellie's waist in a move that was so natural for her sister, she could likely do it to anyone and have it feel normal. "And seriously, you're a godsend. Pulling Ellie away from her books and the lab? Not an easy feat. Honestly, game night might be the only consistent time she used to hang out with other people during the month."

Ellie's cheeks burned, and she pinched Riley's hip. "That's enough."

Mia's eyes skated between them and Ellie couldn't for the life of her place the look on her face. "I mean, she does have the whole *I'm super intimidating, don't fuck with me* kind of vibe."

Riley laughed and Ellie did a double take. "I do?"

"You so do," Joel, who Riley had been friends with since she'd interned with him at NBC during their college years, called from across the room. "I thought you were going to kill me the first time we met. Well, the first few times. And any time I came over when you were studying."

Aaron, Joel's boyfriend, shook his head. "I didn't think you were going to kill me, for what it's worth." He paused. "I did think you might kill Joel."

"Ha-ha," Ellie rolled her eyes. Joel had the tendency to talk a lot and was easily excitable, without the ability to read a room.

Ellie shared that last quality with him, but when paired with the other two traits, it often meant that he interrupted her study time. Still, she liked him... enough.

"Ellie's basically a teddy bear. A lab-coat wearing, frown-y, anti-social teddy bear," Gianna commented with a wink as she passed.

Ellie pursed her lips and Riley squeezed her waist, before releasing her and clapping her hands together. "Game night! God, this is so exciting. We never have even teams!"

Mia took Riley's vacated spot next to Ellie's side. "I guess that makes us a team."

"Better you than Riley and Ellie!" Joel lamented. "They dominate. And then they gloat."

Ellie narrowed her eyes at him, cheeks burning, as her stomach turned through this whole interaction with nerves she couldn't *quite* name – and some nerves she could name. But Mia scoffed. "You think Ellie and I *won't* dominate?"

By the end of the night, Ellie knew she'd been right to bring Mia here – it was a good time. Riley did love Mia. And Mia seamlessly fit right in. *So* seamlessly, that if Ellie wasn't so full of admiration over it, she might hate her for it.

Still, her stomach twisted up tighter and tighter as the evening wound down and the games gave way, after a few hours, to just – hanging out. This was never her best part, and she excused herself into the kitchen to get more snacks as everyone seemed to huddle in closer to Mia.

Mostly, she took a minute to close her eyes and take it all in, as she heard the laughter explode from the other room.

“Psst. You okay?” Mia whispered from the doorway.

Ellie snapped her eyes open. “Um. Yeah. I’m good.”

Mia’s look was more doubtful than any words could possibly be. She didn’t push, though. Just slid along the counter to stand next to Ellie. “You never told me you and Riley were twins.”

Ellie bit her lip. “No?” She feigned ignorance, staring hard at the floor. Mia wore cute red socks with a Wonder Woman logo on them.

Mia hummed. “Hmm, an associate producer at NBC, best friend of Gianna, club-goer, BU alum, lover of ice cream, overall great cook, amongst other things. But not twin.”

“Oh. Yeah. Well, she is. We are.” Ellie continued to stare at the ground as she shoved her hands into her pockets.

She watched those cute socks pivot as Mia spun to face her. “Hey,” she spoke softly, ducking her head to catch Ellie’s eyes. “Why didn’t you mention that? It kind of feels like... you know, one of the big fun facts you’d mention. That there are two of you who look the way you look is kind of an accomplishment in and of itself.”

She knew it was to lighten the suddenly serious mood, but the comment made Ellie tense more. “Yeah. She straightens her hair, though,” she informed Mia, gesturing to her own mass of curls; people inevitably always asked whose hair was the natural version.

“I saw that,” Mia acknowledged, her tone still understanding and patient and soft. Still, her eyebrows scrunched up in confusion. “And... I didn’t realize you had a graduation ceremony? You never told me? I would have come if you had.” She cleared her throat, hands coming to rest on her hips, as a look crossed over her face, a dawning almost. “Ah. Oh. I mean, it’s also fine if you didn’t want me th—”

“No!” She rushed out, shaking her head. “No, that’s not it.” She couldn’t stand that Mia might have spent the whole night thinking so. “I met up with you afterwards at the pub and it was – you didn’t realize it, but we had a celebration ourselves.”

Ellie closed her eyes tightly, and pushed out the words to explain the whole – *ugh* – feeling she had. “I didn’t mention the ceremony or that we were twins, because it *is* a fun fact that people always ask more about. And then inevitably, they ask about Riley. And when people learn everything about Riley, they want to meet Riley, because who wouldn’t?”

Ellie got that; her sister was really, really cool. Objectively and subjectively.

“She’s friendlier than I am, she’s more outgoing than I am, she’s more exciting than I am, she’s sweeter than I am, she’s more normal than I am.” She let out a hard breath, dislodging those feelings from where they sat on her chest. “No one ever thinks Riley is too intimidating to approach, or thinks she gives *fuck off* vibes.”

It was something she hadn’t had to deal with in a long time. Not since high school. The fact that Riley was so effervescent where Ellie was so... not. How people gravitated toward Riley and Ellie could never emulate that quality, no matter how much she’d tried. And eventually, she’d stopped trying, because it just wasn’t her. But whenever she’d made friends

in her own classes when they'd been little, when people met Riley – well, it always became very obvious that Riley was the one they'd want to be friends with.

And that was how it went with most people. Ellie always felt it, even though Riley never seemed to see it and had always included her.

“That’s tough,” Mia said and reached out to take Ellie’s hand, giving it a light squeeze. “Loving your sister so much but also…”

She didn’t say it aloud, but they both knew *resenting her* was what Ellie used to feel.

“It’s fine now,” she was quick to say. “I got over it.” She caught Mia’s dark eyes with her own, before she confessed. “I just haven’t had someone that was all, um, mine, in a long time.” As soon as the words were out, she regretted them and groaned.

But no matter how hard it had been in the past, she’d figured out over the last months that it would be… unbearable, if Mia ended up like so many others had.

Mia squeezed her hand again. “Look. Riley’s awesome, it would be a total lie to say she wasn’t and I know you wouldn’t like it if I thought otherwise. But, I like your *don’t approach me* vibes.”

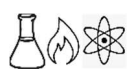
Ellie scoffed. “Mhmm.”

“I do! Honestly, I thought about asking you what the hell you were doing when you were writing in your notebook at the pub so much before I actually did it. But you gave off this air that you did not give a shit who was around you and that you wanted everyone to fuck off, and I respect the *hell* out of that.”

Ellie’s lips pulled up into a smile of their own accord, Mia’s words settling warmly in her stomach. “I’m glad you decided I didn’t actually have that vibe.”

“Oh, you do. You sure do.” Mia laughed and didn’t drop her hand. “I just like it even more now that you include me and make it a *don’t fuck with us* vibe.”

Ellie laughed with her, her entire body relaxing for the first time in days.



She invited Mia back to her apartment a few weeks later, for Ellie and Riley’s twenty-seventh birthday party.

She was always *going* to invite Mia, because she was – well, kind of Ellie’s only friend, and she’d never been able to truly get out of their birthday soiree, as Riley calls it, no matter how much she’s tried to over the years. But she felt much more comfortable extending the invite, now, after game night.

“Our dad always joked about how we were born on independence day, and that was why we both were the way we are. Doing our own things,” Ellie shook her head, the nostalgic ping in her heart happening along with a little smile. “But, yeah, it was pretty fun to always be able to not be in school for it. And Riley always throws a big… thing.”

She'd looked brightly at Mia, feeling like a total fool for feeling so nervous and excited for inviting a friend to her birthday party like she was turning seven instead of twenty-seven.

But Mia's frown pulled that excitement down. "I'm on shift that night," she'd said, looking genuinely disappointed.

"Oh! That's totally okay," Ellie shook her head. "Don't worry about it. It's just – just a house party in the apartment. Not a big deal. I don't even really *love* it, usually."

She didn't hate it, either. It was a night of socialization that Ellie could condone.

She was still feeling a little let down the night of the party, admittedly. She sipped the sake Joel had brought back for the party from a tech conference in Japan that he'd recently been to, leaning against the wall as she looked over the people in their living room.

Riley, Gianna, Joel, Aaron – the usual suspects. A handful of Riley's coworkers that, if pressed, Ellie could identify in a lineup, along with some of her college friends. Riley was pretty big on a fun party, but liked to be able to have time to truly mingle with everyone she invited.

Riley had taken it upon herself to invite a few of Ellie's fellow PhD candidates that she'd been working with for several years.

Megan was here, too, and Ellie didn't even want to think about it what it said about her that her sister thought to invite her bartender to her birthday celebration. Or, even worse, what it said about her that she had been more excited to converse with Megan than most of the people she worked with.

She was having a good time. But... not as good of a time as she usually did, and she frowned at the feeling.

Despite hanging out in her pub and liking to try her new drinks, it was only a couple times a year that Ellie drank enough to feel any effects of the alcohol. Her birthday was one such night.

Her light buzz wasn't making her feel very buzzy, though.

No, parties weren't her thing. But she distinctly knew that this party would be much more her thing if Mia were here.

She didn't know how in the last seven months things had felt weird when Mia wasn't around for something like this, but apparently, that was exactly what had happened.

The knock on the door next to her also made her frown. No one ever knocked when they came to their birthday party...

She pulled it open, already informing the person, "It's a party, you don't have to–"

Mia's smile greeted her, as she held a small wrapped gift in one hand and a card in her other. "Hey!"

Ellie's buzz immediately dialed into the happy place at the sight of those dimples, and she grinned, a little wider than normal. "I thought you were working."

Mia stepped through the doorway, and Ellie ran her eyes over Mia; she definitely didn't *look* like she'd come from work, in the tight tank top that was tucked into high-waisted shorts. Her thighs were just, *so* well-muscled. Ellie knew that Mia worked out regularly – she had to – but an outfit like this was almost obscene with how toned she was.

“And miss your birthday? Not a chance. It’s all in the power of misdirection.” Mia winked. “I got Flores to cover for me tonight; I’ll owe him one, but it’s worth it.”

It’s worth it sounded a lot like *you’re worth it* and Ellie couldn’t stop herself from smiling even more as she reached out to take the gift and the card from Mia’s hands to set them on the table.

“The gift is for you,” Mia pointed at it, and whispered, “It’s a watch.”

Ellie warmed all over both at the feeling of Mia’s breath on her cheek, and at the fact that Mia had taken it upon herself to replace Ellie’s broken watch. She’d been perturbed by it given her penchant for punctuality. and put-out at having to shop for a new one for the last couple of weeks.

Mia gestured at the card. “I don’t love giving people gift cards for presents, but I don’t think I know Riley well enough yet for a gift-gift. It’s just a certificate for a mani-pedi, because you said she gets them every week.”

So ridiculously thoughtful.

“She’s going to *love* it.” Still, she arched an eyebrow. “You know, you aren’t necessarily supposed to say what’s in the gift.”

“Don’t be rude to me.” She grinned as she spoke, though.

“Sorry,” she offered, matching Mia’s grin with her own, and a little laugh. It was amazing how fast the night could turn around.

Mia rolled her eyes, dimples still showing. “Okay, Beckett, I’ll let it slide if you give me some of whatever you’re drinking that’s clearly doing its job.”

Ellie did pour Mia some of the birthday-gifted sake, and by the time Mia had her own buzz going, they’d teamed up in a trivia game. They won – though it was a close call when it was down to only them against Joel and Aaron – and as people were cheering them on, Mia turned and pressed a kiss to her cheek and whispered, “Happy birthday” against Ellie’s skin.

Ellie’s cheek burned for the rest of the night.



Ellie was in the pub, in her stool, *alone*, when she realized she was gay.

She hadn’t intended on being alone tonight. It was the first Saturday in September, and the pub was having a billiards competition. And – fine, Ellie *was* competitive by nature. And normally, she didn’t enjoy competing in anything with a team. It was why her two favorite activities growing up had been snowboarding and chess.

But she and Mia had planned to partake in the competition together, and she’d been looking forward to it.

Until two days ago when Mia had showed up at her lab after she’d gotten off her shift at the firehouse. She just *did* things like that, these days. Show up at Ellie’s lab, persuade her to go out to lunch in the middle of the work day.

They saw each other regularly. Like every few days, usually, unless one of them was really busy – which Ellie has been, because she’s been essentially slaving over her research because she was making actual headway on her organ research, so the grant she’d been given had extended past her graduation date. Along with her research assistants, they’d used bioengineered materials to simulate actual liver cells and – it was a big deal.

Anyway.

Ellie had just come off that high when she’d noticed that Mia was *fidgeting*. And Mia... she didn’t fidget. Like, ever.

She, by nature, unlike Ellie, wasn’t really a nervous person. When Ellie had once commented on it, she’d given her a smile and a shrug and said, “You can’t walk into a building that’s literally on fire if you can’t have the confidence that you’re coming out alive.”

And – yeah, that made perfect sense.

Ellie had pulled her safety goggles up and eyed Mia curiously as she pattered around the lab. Never touching anything – which, god, did Ellie ever appreciate – but... fidgety.

“Are you okay?”

“Me? Hmm. Okay? Yeah.” Mia leaned over the desk and looked at the 3D liver design pulled up on the computer monitor.

Ellie frowned and pulled off her gloves, tossing them in the trash as she went. “That... doesn’t sound okay.”

Mia didn’t bounce back or deflect, as she usually did. Instead, she straightened and crossed her arms over her chest, as she stared out the window onto the courtyard that the lab overlooked. If Ellie was a poet, which she was certainly not, she would say something like, Mia was the picture of pensive.

“My ex is going to be in town this weekend,” she muttered, and her jaw flexed with the words. As if just *speaking* the word was painful.

Ellie stared, blinking far too much, but... “Ex?”

Mia turned to look at her, her words short, “Kristin. My ex. From L.A.”

Still, Ellie could only stare blankly as her stomach twisted. Not once in almost six months had Mia mentioned a real *girlfriend*.

Ellie, obviously, knew Mia was gay. And Mia still dated. She dated fairly often, even to normal person’s standards. Which, Ellie knew from before they were friends, but... she never had *girlfriends*. The women Mia dated faded in and out so quickly that Ellie was never even really told their names and it wasn’t really worth asking.

Sometimes they lasted just the one night, sometimes a couple of weeks. And Mia didn’t really talk about them that much, never anything substantial.

Ellie liked it that way.

The nights Mia was out with women were... fine. Ellie spent extra time at the lab or hung out with Riley, on occasion, she came to the pub by herself. Just like the old days.

“I didn’t know you had... girlfriends,” was all she could say.

Mia squeezed her eyes closed and crossed her arms across her chest as she deflated and sat on one of the stools. “I haven’t since I moved. But...” She tapped her fingers on the table. “I moved because of Kristin. And a really, really bad breakup.”

Ellie had sat next to her and stared at Mia's hands as she'd splayed them out on the lab table in front of them, toying with her own fingers, as she'd explained in fits and starts all about how she'd met Kristin Rhodes when she'd been twenty-two, right when she'd moved to California. How they'd moved in together two years later, never moving anything too fast.

Ellie imagined Mia never moved too fast with the serious things, with how reticent she was.

"Things were... right." Mia swallowed, shaking her hair back as she'd turned to look at Ellie. "I *thought* things were right? I – I opened up to her, like. Really. She was... she was the person I had to turn to. And around this time last year, she got offered a contract in Boston for work and we decided that a move would be a good idea for both of us, together. I put in for a transfer, too, and I had this whole – god, this is stupid." Mia bit her lip and stared intently across the room, as if re-seeing her past.

Ellie was utterly fascinated by this side of Mia, even as it made her feel shaky inside. It wasn't... seeing Mia this sad, it wasn't any means how Ellie wanted to know *more* about her. "It's not. At all."

Mia reached out and squeezed Ellie's hand, her fingers wrapping around Ellie's and staying. "I had this whole night planned, for us to talk about the next step. What getting engaged would look like, moving somewhere together. We'd talked about all of it, about marriage, figuratively, before. But – when I went to have *that* conversation... Kristin talked about how she wanted to see other people. And how – how we'd been together since we were so young, and how did we know we were all each other would want? Was this something we should be doing together?" Mia's jaw clenched tightly as she clearly thought of something else.

She just shook her head, dark hair shifting over her shoulder as she rolled her lips and held whatever it was in.

Ellie's mouth had fallen open and *she* squeezed Mia's hand back, both in shock and support.

"It – I was completely blindsided." Mia confessed, not letting Ellie go as she turned to look her in the eye, dark eyes so full of frustration and sadness and disbelief, still. "I thought this was *it*, and she thought... otherwise. So. She decided she wasn't taking the contract and was going to stay in California. I could have taken back my transfer request, but... being in L.A., where I'd only ever been with her, was stifling after we ended things, and I needed a fresh start."

"And, here you are."

"And here I am."

"Fresher than ever." It was all Ellie could think to say, and she cringed at herself for it as soon as it left her mouth.

But Mia's laugh made her regret it far less. "Super fresh, Beckett."

Mia took in a deep breath and lightly traced the fingers of her free hand over Ellie's knuckles on the hand that was still interlocked with Mia's. It tingled. "She's here for a conference and she asked if I was free for dinner this weekend, to clear the air between us."

Ellie's heart froze right in her chest in that moment.

And it hadn't really *unfrozen* since.

Because tonight, Mia was out with Kristin Rhodes. The woman who broke Mia's heart so badly she'd moved across the country to get a fresh start.

Ellie knew she wasn't an expert in interpersonal relationships, and was maybe kind of the opposite. Even empathizing with Mia's breakup was a little hard, because she'd never really had a "real" relationship with a guy before. She'd had... short flings? A few sexual partners. But they were mostly an experiment to see what all of the fuss was about and there was no one she'd ever really cared about sticking around.

But what she did know was that Mia had been really, really hurt by Kristin and that she must have really loved her. You didn't stay with someone for five years and plan a future with them otherwise, right?

She knew that Mia had fidgeted continuously when she'd told Ellie that she'd agreed to meet with Kristin.

And she knew that the women Mia casually dated never made her fidget. She knew that those women didn't make Mia fidget, and her hypothesis was that Mia didn't care overly much about those casual women and that she wasn't dating to get attached. Her hypothesis was that Kristin broke her heart hard enough that Mia was skittish to feel that way again.

Ellie had a lot of variables in the Mia quadrant of her brain, and none of them before the last few days included *Kristin Rhodes*.

And none of them, before tonight, included the idea that Kristin wanted to see Mia. And that Mia clearly wanted to see Kristin back, right? Why else would she have gone?

"Where's your sidekick?" Megan's voice pulled her out of her thoughts.

Ellie jerked her head up from where she'd been blankly staring into her rum and coke that she'd hardly had a sip of for the last forty-five minutes. "What?"

"Your sidekick?" Megan wiped down the bar around Ellie's drink. "You know, been attached to your side for the last six months or so? Laughs at your nerdy comments. Doesn't mind when you hustle her in pool? Is Miss November in the Firewoman's Calendar?"

"She is not." Ellie frowned, tilting her head. "Is that a thing?"

Megan smirked.

Ellie took a sip of her now-watered down drink and grimaced, both at the taste and the way the words felt in her throat, "She's out with her... ex."

She felt like her heart was being squeezed all over again, which was so – it was so new to her. This strong, visceral feeling.

It had only started two nights ago, when Mia had told her about Kristin coming to town. And it had only gotten stronger in the last couple of hours, on the very evening they were meeting up. So, logically, it had to be a direct correlation.

And it felt tighter and tighter as the questions swirled around in her brain.

What if Kristin wanted Mia back? Why *wouldn't* she want Mia back? Mia was thoughtful and funny and loyal and beautiful. Then again, Kristin hadn't wanted that before, so... why now?

But what if Mia left with Kristin? What if she left Cambridge and went back to L.A. to have that *future* she'd talked about? What if she left Ellie?

And what if Mia wasn't over Kristin? She'd assured Ellie that she was, with a quiet, soft smile, after she'd thanked Ellie for listening to her the other day. But what if it was a front? Ellie might not be able to tell. What if Mia was still in love with her ex, like *really* in love with her?

And why did it matter so damn much to Ellie if Mia was in love with Kristin or not?

Sure, they were friends, but Ellie had done without friends for a long time and she'd been just fine.

"Out with the ex? Ouch," Megan let out a low whistle cocking her hip against the bar and giving Ellie one of those looks that Ellie didn't quite understand.

"I just – I want her to be happy, you know? She's my friend. My best friend. The best friend I've ever had. And if being back with Kristin makes her happy, then... I want that for her," Ellie rambled through her confused thoughts.

God, she hated being confused, but she just – she was *missing* something. She knew she was missing something.

Megan only nodded slowly, lifting her eyebrows as if urging Ellie to continue.

Ellie frowned, tilting her glass to the side with precisely the right angle so the liquid went to the top but didn't spill.

"I *should* want that for her."

No, she did. She definitely did, she assured herself with a nod, rotating her glass in a half-circle and watching the liquid catch the rim but still never spill over, as she sifted through her thoughts to concentrate.

Ellie knew she wanted Mia to be happy. Because there were fewer things Ellie liked more than seeing Mia's dimpled smile or the way her eyes did that sparkle thing when she laughed. And they really did *sparkle*.

"Did you ever notice that?" She demanded from Megan, still holding her glass in stasis, but looking up at the bartender. "That Mia's eyes, like, twinkle at you. It's almost as if the sun gave off extra converted hydrogen to give to her eyes, along with the stars. Right?"

Megan lifted her eyebrows a bit higher.

Ellie frowned deeper. She was still missing something. There was a variable that didn't fit into any equation, yet.

She wanted Mia to be happy. She just...

She just wanted Mia to be happy, here. *With her*. With Ellie, in the same way she'd be happy with Kristin.

The thought slammed into Ellie like a freight train and her fingers slipped from the glass, letting the half-full contents spill over the bar, as she gaped and her thoughts whirled and her heart thundered in her chest.

Was that what she wanted?

Oh, god. It was.

Because she hated when Mia went out on dates; it didn't scare her, like this night with Kristin-the-ex did, because she knew they weren't going to last. But she always was in a worse mood those nights. And she really hated the brief times she'd seen Mia kiss said dates in the past whenever the memories crept up on her... and they *did* creep up on her.

And she definitely did not hate the thought of Mia kissing her.

Though she'd never consciously thought of it before, the image flashed through her mind, now. The way Mia looked during that moment right before a kiss, but the nameless woman was *Ellie*, and...

She groaned, burying her head in her hands.

Her lips tingled and body felt entirely too hot at merely the thought of being with Mia; it was more than the reaction she'd gotten from actually being with any of the men she'd attempted being with in the past.

"Fuck," she whispered, her eyes squeezing tightly closed.

That was the variable. It made sense now.

She only looked up when Megan placed another glass down in front of her, having wiped up the spilled liquid, as she gave Ellie a sympathetic look. Damn it, all of her looks made sense now.

Ellie wanted to ask if she'd been an obviously gay mess for months now and if she was the only one who hadn't noticed, but she was worried she wouldn't like the answer.