

You met Rachel, Noah's twin sister, in my last book THE LESSON PLAN, Book 3 of the Extra Credit series. I'm currently working on a spin-off sequel about Rachel and the guy she's sorta kinda maybe curious about. Or *could be* if she had time and a life. She's pre-med and, yep, he's a jock. Check! She's tutoring him. Check! It takes place on a college campus. Check! But it's not your typical friends to lovers, opposites attract, or enemies to lovers story.... because I wrote those already in the first three books. You'll just have to wait and see what happens between them, but here's a sneak peek at the intro to what I'm calling THE EXPERIMENT.... ([subscribe to my newsletter](#) to keep getting more! or [add it to your TBR here](#)). REMEMBER that this is a *Work in Progress* and be gentle with it!

Chapter One: Rachel

By the time I was five six years old I knew I wanted to be a doctor. By the time I was ten twelve I knew I wanted to be a surgeon. A week at home with mono, which I spent binge-watching the first four seasons of Grey's Anatomy, convinced me that cardiothoracic surgery was my only possible future destiny. Dr. Cristina Yang was my heroine. She's so awesome! Since then I've devoted myself 24/7 wholly and fully to that goal, even when it required great sacrifices.... --RachelBerman1stdraft.doc

“Don't forget to read chapter two and answer all the questions that follow by next class. And...” The professor looks down to shuffle papers on his podium. “I want to speak to Yuri... Valichenko and Rachel Berman for a moment, please.” He looks up from his reading and pushes his glasses up his nose, scanning the lecture hall. He clicks a button and the projector screen starts to rise back up into the ceiling.

I grab my stuff and juggle books, phone, and notebook with two hands as I descend the shallow steps to the front of the room. I'm fighting the tide going the other way as row after row of students push against me to leave out the back doors. I'm not sure what Gunderson wants with me. I've never exchanged two words with him before. There are hundreds of students in this Biostatistics class and we only interact with the T.A.s.

“Miss Berman?” The professor studies me as I approach. He's not completely bald. Wisps of white hair float from his scalp. His shoulders stoop so his eyes meet mine.

“Yes, professor. I'm glad to have a chance to speak to you because I'm enjoying this class so much and I...”

He cuts me off. “You got the best grade in the class on the test I returned today.”

I flush a little, pleased. “Thank you! I mean, thank you for telling me yourself. I haven't seen the grade posted online yet. As I was saying, I'm learning so much....”

“Pre-med?”

I frown a little. Does he talk over all his students like this or just the women?

“Yes. I’m applying soon and Johns Hopkins is my first choice.” I hesitate here, aware that Johns Hopkins is *everyone’s* first choice.... His unblinking stare is not encouraging me. I clear my throat. “In fact, I sent you a request for a letter of recommendation recently and I’d really appreciate it if...”

“I thought your name looked familiar. I’m still working my way through the list.”

Way to make me feel special. But what do I expect? He’s got hundreds of students and they all want the same thing: the highest possible grade and the best possible letter against the worst possible odds of getting in to Johns Hopkins Medical School. *Four percent acceptance rate!* And I’m rounding up.

Professor Gunderson looks over my shoulder and I turn to see that there’s someone else hovering nearby, listening. Gunderson beckons him forward with one hand and the other student approaches slowly.

“You’re Yuri...?” The professor glances back at his papers.

“Valichenko.”

Gunderson stuffs his papers into his briefcase. “I want you to work with him on the midterm.” He points a finger and draws an imaginary line between the two of us. We stand there facing him side by side like two tin soldiers.

What? I dart a sideways glance at my co-victim but he looks impassive. Before I can say anything else Gunderson continues.

“You got the highest grade on the test last week.” Again with the finger. “You got the lowest grade.” I flinch on the other guy’s behalf. *Yuri*. Aren’t teachers not supposed to reveal stuff like that? You know, privacy laws? Or just plain politeness? Yuri doesn’t react.

“Professor Gunderson,” I begin carefully. “I’m taking five classes and working on my med school applications. I really don’t have time to spare. As much as I’d like to help you out. And Yuri,” I add. I steal another sideways glance and now I can see the tension in Yuri’s face, which is still in profile to me as he stares straight ahead.

Gunderson pauses. “Do you want that letter, Miss Berman?”

“Well, yes, I...”

“Do you want me to tell them that you volunteer your time to help other students who are less disciplined than you are, that you have mastered this material fully, and you have the exceptional drive it takes to succeed in a competitive environment like Johns Hopkins?” He peers over his eyeglasses at me.

I inhale a deep breath and shift on my feet. “Yes, of course. That would be very generous of...”

“Then work together. And I will take his midterm grade as a sign of your dedication.”

What the what? And now Gunderson’s actually walking away! I start shaking my head but I’m too speechless to say anything.

“Is that clear?” He turns to look back, his gaze sweeping over the two of us, still standing like scolded children.

I gulp and nod. He nods back and disappears out the door behind his podium. With a sigh I turn toward this guy who now holds my future in his hands. It’s four weeks into the semester, we’re in the same class, and I’ve never seen him before. But maybe he’s not a lost cause, maybe he can be taught or motivated or at least bossed around.

“I’m not undisciplined.”

My mouth falls open. “*That’s* what you heard him say?” I’m pretty tall but I have to look up to meet his eyes. They’re gray. Dark hair falls over his forehead and his expression is hard to read. In fact, I’d call it *stony*. He’s looking at me, but I can’t even tell if he sees me. He seems to be thinking hard: a slight wrinkle between his brows gives him away.

When he still says nothing, I sigh and get out my phone. “Okay. Give me your number. We’ll figure out when and where to meet.”

He recites a number and I enter it swiftly with my thumbs. “I can only meet weeknights after seven,” he says in the same flat tone.

I eye him again. It’s going to be like that, is it? He doesn’t look hostile or mad or jerky though. I swing my bag over one shoulder and march back up the stairs. “I’ll be in touch then.”

There are four weeks til the midterm so with any luck this *extracurricular* project will all be over soon.

Chapter Two: Yuri

I puzzle over it for the rest of the day. If each question was worth five points and there were twenty questions I only had to get fourteen correct to pass. So how did this happen?

I think about it through practice, as the ball beats a tattoo against the floor of the gym and my arms lift and shoot, lift and shoot in a familiar rhythm. I think about it as I sit in the dining hall, sketching in my notebook. I think about it when I finally get back to my dorm room, collapsing with weariness, and check online for the test results. A *60??*

Confusion makes my head throb as I look over the scoring. I got six questions wrong which should have earned me a 70. Except two of those questions were worth ten points, not five.... I groan and smack myself in the head. How did I miss that? I sink into my desk chair and recalculate swiftly. It's a tricky game I'm playing. I double check the syllabus to see how the tests are weighted and drag myself through the rest of my routine. Shower. Homework. Crash. Repeat tomorrow. By the time I fall into bed I've realized two things: I need an 80 on the midterm and my new tutor—*Rachel*—is in trouble.

I'm not surprised when I hear from her the next morning. She seemed pretty stressed about that letter of recommendation. I reread the message over breakfast, wondering how to play this. Absently I nod back at the people who nod absently at me. I'm not sure of their names so it's better not to say anything. I'm at my usual table near the back where I'm mostly out of sight.

The way I like it.

Rachel's text is direct to the point of rudeness. *Meet me at 7 at the library café. Read chap 2 and bring your test.*

I gaze out the window while I ponder my options. The glass is slightly reflective and I'm distracted by the faint overlapping images of students moving around inside and trees reaching skyward outside.

I don't care about my grade. All I need is a C in this course and I can pull that off all by myself. But if I don't meet with her she'll be the one in trouble. It's not her fault she got caught in my mess. I can't think of anything I less want to do tonight than meet with some uptight pre-med and go over the test I failed, but by the time I clear my tray I'm resigned to the inevitable. Show up. Go through the motions. It's the story of my life.

Still, I'm not exactly happy that evening when I dump my heavy backpack on the floor and drag out a chair next to her. I sink into it and stretch out my legs, wincing. My hamstrings ache and the season hasn't even started. I roll my shoulders to ease the tightness across my back. It's early enough in the semester that the library café is pretty empty and I appreciate the quiet.

"You okay?"

I force my attention back to the girl across from me. She's watching me closely from across the table, which is already covered by her open textbook, laptop, and notebooks. A cup of coffee is so far to one side that it might topple over any minute. Instinctively I reach out to move it closer and her eyes follow my actions. I think they're brown behind a pair of nerdy glasses. She looks a little concerned. Or maybe just puzzled. I sigh.

"Sure."

We study each other for a moment. She's pretty in a low-key sort of way. Big eyes. Wide mouth. Clear, pale skin. Long hair in a fat braid over one shoulder. Her face reminds me of a painting I've seen somewhere. I wrack my brain, searching for it while I process her. She looks like money.

Her mouth turns down. "Really? This can't be fun for you."

I'm jolted out of my thoughts and shrug. "Not for you either."

There's another long pause and I'm confused. It's not exactly awkward but it's not exactly normal either. Usually people fill up my silences. Usually they're happy to.

"Okay then. Let me see your test. Here, you can look at mine." She shoves her laptop around so it faces me. I glance at it before leaning down to get mine from my bag. She got a 95. So I only need to know one thing.

"Which question did you get wrong?"

She gives me a funny look before reaching over to scroll down the page toward the end. "That one." The cursor blinks at me.

"Yeah, I got that one wrong too. And five others." Suddenly it seems kind of amusing and I smile to myself as I balance my computer on my lap and log in. A few more keystrokes and I'm on the same page. When I hand her my laptop she's shaking her head at me.

"You don't mind failing?"

I backpedal. "Of course I do." Fidgeting, I watch her scroll through my test. She's frowning again and biting her lower lip. Five minutes must tick by as she reads through the whole damn test. I pull out my notebook and turn to a blank page. Setting pencil to paper I wonder where this new line will take me. It arches and doubles back on itself and I follow it curiously. There's a column and a vine....

"Are you pre-med too?"

I look up to find her leaning back in her chair, head tilted, studying me. I nod warily. What's up with her?

"And you don't care that you're failing?"

"I didn't say that."

She cuts me off and snaps the lid of my laptop shut. "I don't get you."

What? I bite back a retort but her eyes just narrow and I feel like a specimen under her microscope. When I don't say anything she shoves my laptop back at me and scoots her chair closer to mine. I jam my notebook under the laptop before she can see it.

"When are you taking the MCATs?"

The question seems absent-minded, like she's just making conversation while the reading for next class loads on her screen, but when I don't respond she looks at me sharply.

"You are taking the MCATs right? You are pre-med?"

"Yeah, that's what I said. I just haven't decided yet."

She stares at me. "Why aren't you stressing about this? You have to sign up for a prep course now so you can take it by March. You have to line up your letters of recommendation. You have to draft your personal statement." She's ticking things off on her fingers.

"Really? You're already working on your statement?" I snicker, folding my arms over my chest. Because the best defense is a good offense. "Let me guess. Your little brother is allergic to peanuts and you owe it to him to specialize in autoimmune disorders so future generations won't suffer as he has."

She pushes her glasses up her nose and her cheeks flush. "How dare you? You have no idea what my brother went through before he passed away!" She hangs her head and makes a little gasping sound.

I straighten, aghast. "Oh my God, Rachel. Really? I had no idea..." I trail off as her face lifts.

"Gotcha!"

"Fuck you," I grumble, but I can't help grinning and we both start laughing. She's got a great laugh.

"You know peanut allergies are serious, Yuri."

I sigh and lean back in my chair, studying her. "I know. That was funny/not funny. What are you going to write your statement about? See, I'm being polite and expressing normal interest here."

"Hmm." She doesn't look impressed. "*Grey's Anatomy*?" One eyebrow lifts.

"I bet they've never ever heard that before."

"Right? I want to be the first one."

"Go for it."

“What about you? How are you going to stand out from the hordes?” She’s smiling now.

“I’m going to go with being the only applicant named Yuri. You know they have quotas for everything, right? I mean, it wouldn’t work for a Rachel, but I’m lucky that way.”

She nods solemnly. “Go for it.”

We both seem to realize at the same moment that we’ve gotten off track and we turn back to her computer awkwardly. We go over the next reading and I hear all about her coursework: the experiment she’s supposed to design for her Junior Honors Seminar and the T.A. in her advanced genetics course who can barely stay ahead of the class. My attention drifts and I try to pull it back.

“That’s a grad course. Why are you taking it?”

She blinks at me. “To get ahead for next year, dummy.” She winces. “Sorry.”

I’m amused. “Sorry for calling me stupid? Or sorry you’re so boring? Don’t you have anything else to talk about besides med school?”

“Okay, I’m not sorry for calling you stupid. And don’t tell me you’ve figured out how to be pre-med and have a life.” She shakes her head til some hair comes loose of her braid and floats over her cheek. She swipes at it with a huff.

“I have a life.” It depends on how you define it, but sure.

Rachel doesn’t even say anything. She just gives me a skeptical look. “Then you can’t really want to go to med school. If you really wanted it, it would be your whole life. It would have to be.” She sounds a little wistful.

“I do want it. That’s always been the plan.” I can’t think of anything else to say and I should be better prepared for this. But her eyes seem so knowing, like she can see into my brain and I’ve been talking way too much

“Fine. Have it your way. But don’t think you’re fooling me for one minute.”

Panic floods me and I tense up, my eyes darting to hers. *What the fuck??* With a sigh she seems to back down, rambling on about our study plan and how we’ll divide up our time to cover this thing and that thing by the midterm. It all goes in one ear and out the other because I’m freaking out inside.

Chapter Three: Rachel

My favorite course is Advanced Genetics because [?!?] I have a passion for genetic research and hope to go into biomedical engineering. It's a field discipline where women female scientists can make a difference can stand out will could excel... Crap! — RachelBerman1stdraft.doc

“It doesn't make sense. *He* doesn't make sense.”

“Mmm?”

“Are you even listening to me?” I march up the stairs to my room, still a little out of breath from my work out.

“Uh huh.”

I roll my eyes as I shift the phone from one ear to the other and dig my keys out of my waistband. I use one hip to push open the door and shift my phone back again.

“You see what I mean?” There's a long pause. “Holly??”

I hear the rustle of motion through the phone. “Oops. Sorry. Noah got out of the shower and he's... umm...”

“Oh my God! Stop it!” I can hear my brother chuckling in the background. Then rustling. I'm grossed out but also happy for whatever it is they have now. Noah's had it bad for Holly since he met her and I'm glad things are finally working out for them, even if they don't seem to know what to call it yet.

“Okay, now I'm listening, I swear! You said you're tutoring this guy and he's weird. I got that. If he's perverting on you you should tell someone, Rachel.”

I flop backwards onto my bed and stare at the ceiling.

“No, it's not that.” I struggle to explain what an enigma Yuri is. “It's his test. And his attitude. They don't match up.”

“Maybe he's just lazy. Or he has issues with schoolwork or something. Or he had an off day. There are lots of reasons why people don't do as well as they should on some test. Why do you even care? Just meet him and get it over with. Wait, is he hot? Are you into him?” Her voice rises to a squeal and I can hear my brother grumbling in the background. Great.

“No! That's not what I mean either. I can't explain it.”

I close my eyes in frustration and I can see him. *Yuri*. The alarm he couldn't hide when I said he wasn't fooling me. His gray eyes widened and he almost flinched. Then there was his weird

attitude when we went over his wrong answers. He didn't have any questions. He just listened to my explanations and nodded. This must suck for him but he didn't complain or resist.

Maybe Holly's right and he has some "issue," but what could it be? I turn over options in my head, like flipping through flashcards. But I'm on edge because it doesn't matter if he has "issues." I just want to know what's up with him. Because he's so confusing.

While I'm mulling this over I hear more scuffling over the phone, then my brother's voice.

"Hey, Rache. What's going on?"

I inhale. "You know."

"So..."

I exhale. "Yeah, I'm fine. Don't worry."

"I just—"

"I know, Noah." I hate it when he worries about me, but of course I worry about him too. It goes with the territory. And I already know *he just wants me to be happy*.

"Another jock." His voice is glum and I can hear Holly in the background again.

I shake my head though he can't see me. I can't help smiling. "Nope. He's in my bio elective and..." I pause, think, and face palm myself. *Valichenko*. I'm such a dope.

"Can I have Holly back?" I finish carefully. Noah makes that reluctant sound I've heard a zillion times. There's next to zero chance I've hidden anything from him, but I'll try anyway.

"Wow. That was a prime example of Twin Talk," Holly says, sounding awed. She teases me and Noah about that a lot. And we take it because we both love her. Maybe it is a little hard for others to get how Noah and I understand each other. Noah and I aren't really *alike* as much as we are *akin*. I thank the stars above that he's with someone who's not threatened by that. And who makes him so, so happy. He deserves it. They deserve each other. But I'm straying from the urgent point at hand.

"Okay, okay. Just don't tell him Yuri's an athlete, okay?" It's just easier.

Holly snorts. "He got that, Rachel." Her voice is dry and I hear Noah in the background again. She can't keep anything from him anyway. I learned that the hard way when I told her about my last hook up and got an earful from *my brother* about using protection.... Better not to share too much.

“I gotta go!” I announce, jumping up from the bed. It’s true. I have only twenty minutes to shower and get out the door to bio class, where I can collect more intel. Without waiting for Holly’s reply I end the call and start stripping off my sweaty clothes, brain racing.

The leaves are starting to turn and a cooler breeze feels cold on my still damp hair. I didn’t have time to finish drying it but that’s not too noticeable in my usual braid. When I get to the lecture hall I scan the room for Yuri. It takes me three passes to find him. He’s sitting on an aisle way over to the side. No wonder I never noticed him before.

“Excuse me. Sorry. How’s it going?” I mumble to people as I push my way across the room. Finally I plop into the seat next to Yuri’s and absorb his look of surprise. Today he’s wearing an oversized hoodie that hangs to his thighs, track pants, and high tops. I should have seen it earlier. I really should have. He’s long and lean too, though not NBA-tall.

“Sixteen,” I say, chin up. It’s an accusation.

“Huh?” Those gray eyes have narrowed though. His dark hair is just long enough that he’s tucked it behind his ears.

“You’re on the basketball team.” When he doesn’t respond I lean over to see what he was doing and he slams a notebook shut. It’s one of those bound books with blank pages and I guess it’s another thing he doesn’t want to share.

“So?”

“I saw the game against Maplewood last year. Number sixteen with six assists. Impressive.” I’m annoyed at him and I’m not even sure why. I look up to where the professor is setting up the lesson. I feel Yuri’s gaze on my profile.

“You’re a basketball fan?” His voice is low and skeptical. I press my lips together to stifle my reaction. I get that a lot.

Gunderson starts talking and I’m saved from responding because I don’t know what to say. I make a show of getting out my notebook and writing the date in big swirling letters across the top of an empty page.

Yuri pulls out a different notebook and mimics my motions with his left hand. He leans back in his chair, writes for a moment, then leans forward again until I can feel him almost at my shoulder. I tense. He seems bigger now that he’s so close.

“Why are you so annoyed?” He sounds confused, concerned even, and I know I won’t be able to explain it. I blink and shake my head as I shush him into silence. He leans back in his chair again and we spend the rest of the class without exchanging another word.

When we meet up the next time I'm distracted. I hate to admit it (and I'd never admit it to my brother) but learning he plays ball changed my attitude toward him. Suddenly I'm aware of him like I wasn't before. I just notice more. His long legs when he stretches out in his chair. The way his body tapers from shoulder to waist. He's not built like the football players I've gone for recently. Basketball players are long-limbed, with big hands and lean muscles. Not that I'm checking him out, but I'm aware of the way he moves now. And I've seen him play; I'd just forgotten. He's not flashy, but he's fast and focused. Yes, focused is a good word for him.

"Have you always played point?" I ask, then flush immediately. We are analyzing different methods for setting up clinical trials and my mind wandered.

He frowns, tapping a pencil against the table. He always seems to be holding one. Who writes in pencil?

"You follow basketball?"

Now I frown. Why is it always so hard dragging information out of him? "Is it a state secret?"

"You're not answering me either."

We eye each other. "You're a Russian spy," I gasp.

He leans forward and mutters something in a foreign language. It's kind of hot.

I'm delighted. "You really speak Russian? What did you say?"

He smirks, one side of his mouth twisting. "If I tell you I'd have to kill you."

"No, really." I'm giggling now but I can't help myself.

"Really. I said *if I tell you I'd have to kill you.*" We both grin and I realize this is kind of fun, despite the pressure hanging over me.

"Where are you from? How do you know Russian?"

His expression stills again.

"Oh come on, Yuri! Give me something. Don't be a total cliché."

He heaves an exaggerated sigh. "My parents are from the Ukraine. We speak Russian at home."

"Wow." I'm impressed. "Was it your first language? Your English is perfect. I wish I were bilingual. Four years of Spanish and I can't even follow *Sabado Gigande.*"

“Hey, I grew up in Brooklyn. I’ve got English.” He looks annoyed so I put up both hands in surrender.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry. It just seems glamorous to me since my life is *so boring*.” I sign quotation marks around the words and his expression eases.

“No more stalling,” he says sternly, arms crossed over his chest again. “Answer my question.”

“Okay. I follow basketball.” I raise my eyebrows in challenge and then he raises his. He makes a hand gesture for me to continue but the stare off continues for a few moments. Until I get a little flustered and break it. He’s got this way of narrowing his eyes at me that makes me squirmy.

“I have friends who play.”

“Here?” He looks surprised.

I shake my head.

“Where?”

I feel my face heat further. “What is this? Twenty questions?”

“Seriously, Rachel? What’s the matter? You were totally annoyed this morning when you found out I played.” He shakes his head and starts collecting his books. We’re almost done anyway, but I realize I’m offending him.

“Syracuse,” I bite out. “UConn.”

His eyes widen and it’s kind of cute.

“*Syracuse? UConn?*”

I nod and he asks the question I’ve been dreading. “Who?”

I study my fingernails. “Deirdre Ballister was my best friend in high school.”

The eyebrows skyrocket and I can see the pieces click into place. That’s the thing. Yuri is way too smart to be failing bio!

“You went to Castleton.” I nod and he looks wary. “So you’re friends with Ty Riley too.”

It’s another statement. I shrug. My high school has a national rep now.

“Rachel…” His voice holds a warning tone I’m starting to recognize. “Why the secrecy? I know he’s a big deal, but what’s that got to do with you?”

“Nothing.” I sound sullen and bitter but I can’t help it. Yuri still looks confused but his gaze hasn’t left my face.

“Is he entering the draft this year like they say?”

“How would I know?” I dig for a tissue at the bottom of my bag and take off my glasses to clean the lenses, looking down at my lap. This will feel more manageable when Yuri is a big blurry blob.

His hand grips my chin and turns me to face him, looming near enough that I can see he’s studying me closely and looking deep into my now unguarded eyes. “Because you just said you’re friends with him?”

I take a deep breath, feeling a little shaky. “I didn’t say we’re friends. You did. I’m friends with Dede. Or I was.” That stings too. I plow forward because Yuri’s right. What’s the big deal? Just because I don’t like to talk about it doesn’t mean it’s a secret. “Ty is my ex.”

Yuri blinks and his hand drops away from my chin.

“You’re kidding.”

“Why? Because he’s a big bad basketball star and I’m a *boring* pre-med? Because he’s going to be on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* and I’m not in the swimsuit issue? Because he’s black and I’m white?” I challenge. I remember this is why I don’t like to talk about Ty. Yuri is shaking his head slowly.

“Nooooo,” he starts. Then stops.

“Then what?” I tip my chin up and cross my arms over my chest as I’ve seen him do. He doesn’t answer so I grab my backpack and start shoving things into it haphazardly.

“Look at the time! I’ve got to go.” I pause to glare at him. “But next time answer those questions before we meet. Don’t half-ass this and waste my time.”

He pushes his hair back off his forehead and slumps backward to stare at the ceiling. “I don’t get it. Why are you angry with *me*? Is it him? Ty? I’ve met him. He seems like a good guy.”

I look at Yuri, startled. “He is. He’s a great guy.”

This doesn’t seem to appease Yuri though, who clenches his jaw and throws his hands in the air. “Then what the fuck’s your problem?”

Anger rises in me and I know it’s irrational. “He’s an ex! Don’t you have exes who stir you up? It has nothing to do with you!”

His head goes back as if I've slapped him and he rises to his feet, so close that he towers over me. He's not as tall as Ty but he's got five inches on me and he's glaring.

"Nope. Not biting."

In one swift motion he grabs his things and pivots away from me. My heart is pounding and I'm still not sure why I'm so agitated. But like I said, this stirs me up. And does this mean he has exes, or not? A girlfriend, or not? I chew my lip and watch him go, wondering what just happened.

Chapter Four: Yuri

What the hell just happened? Rachel's mad and I don't know why. *I'm* mad and I don't know why. I'm so wound up that I head to the gym to shoot for a while. It's calming. Over the next few days she sends me snarky texts reminding me to study for the practice midterm. I don't bother to reply. I can handle this and I don't need her help. I was cooperating with this bullshit because I didn't want to jeopardize her recommendation letter. But fuck that. I've got enough to worry about without taking on her problems too.

As if on cue, my cell rings as soon as I get back to my room. I groan when I see my mom's name but I can't avoid her forever.

"Da?" I slip into Russian.

"Yuri, when are you coming home?"

"Thanksgiving, Ma. I told you. We have games...."

"They take too much of your time those games. I saw Katya and she said Dima is already applying. He has a list of schools and a transcript and letters."

Fucking Dmitri! This is just what I need tonight. I pull out my notebook and flip to an open page. I'm still sweaty and stressed out but drawing will help. I listen to my mom and make all the right noises until she runs out of steam.

"You know your father and I only want what's best for you, Yuri. You know what it means to us."

I know.

"You can do so many things. You have so much freedom and opportunity. And you will be such a wonderful doctor."

I make another vague noise as I feel my whole life slipping away from me. *Yeah. Freedom.... Opportunity.*

“I’ll be home for Thanksgiving, Ma. We’ll talk and sort this out. I promise.” I’ll steel myself this time.

“You’re such a good son. I’m so proud of you.” She sniffs a little and just like that I weaken again as I get off the phone.

How can I take her dreams away from her? It’s just work, right? If I spend forty hours a week at it (unlikely for a doctor, but whatever) I’d still have 128 left for myself. . . . I fight the urge to laugh hysterically because I don’t know what else to do. I bear down on the pencil until it almost snaps and stare at the drawing I made. It’s a grid with cross-hatched lines of various thicknesses. But right now it just looks like the window of a prison cell.

“What the fuck, Yuri? A 72?”

Rachel enters the cafe like a whirling storm, her eyes snapping at me and her hair coming loose from a ponytail. She wears it in a braid so much that I hadn’t realized how long it was. Her cheeks are flushed and she balls her fists as she stands over me, glaring.

I take a sip of my tea and resolve not to get baited this time. I’m usually pretty calm, pretty quiet but Rachel gets me talking too much. I close my notebook carefully.

“It’s better than the 60 I got last time.” In fact, it’s *exactly* the score I was aiming for so I’m pleased. Even though it’s just for practice.

Rachel deflates, sinking into a chair across from me. She chews on her lip, studying me. It makes me nervous when she does that. I shift my legs and shove my hands in my pockets, hoping to wait her out. And for a while it works.

“Why?” Her voice when it comes is quiet.

I look away and inhale. “What do you mean?”

She sighs and when I look back her fingers are laced together on the table. With the glasses and her hair pulled back she could be an earnest schoolgirl. I’m kind of amazed at the transformation. A minute ago she was a warrior maiden on a rampage. Honestly, it was kind of hot and that makes me uneasy. Now she’s appealing in a totally different way and that makes me even uneasier.

“Why aren’t you trying?”

I hesitate. If I lie she'll see through me, and besides it's not like I want her to think I can't do this. Though why I care about her good opinion I do not know. So I hedge. "I am."

"No. You're not. You're way smarter than this and we talked through those questions and you know the answers. So you're throwing this game and I don't know why."

Her eyes hold mine and they're super intense now. It's like I can see her brain whirling away and maybe she can see mine. I swallow and say nothing. Because sometimes that works for me.

"You don't want to go to med school. You don't want to be a doctor, do you?"

Fucking hell! How does she do that? She must read something else on my face now because she goes all soft.

"Oh Yuri, don't do this to yourself. Just admit it." She sounds sad and it bothers me. I need to toughen up.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because."

"You sound like a child now, you know that, right?" There's a glimmer of a smile on her face, which is heartening even if it's a sad, resigned smile.

"Yeah," I smile a little too and our eyes hold. Then she sighs again.

"I really need that letter—and Gunderson has tied it to your grade. Can't you just work for the midterm then tank the tests after that? I'm sure you can fail the final, can't you?" Her lips lift a little more as we both appreciate the absurdity of this conversation.

"I can't actually fail the class or I'll get kicked off the basketball team." She may as well understand the whole picture. I've never talked to anyone about my ridiculous juggling act and it's kind of a relief.

She laughs and her face lights up. "Wow. You're good! So you've managed a steady C in all your pre-med classes? Enough to stay on the team but not good enough to get into med school? I'm impressed."

Warmth fills my chest and I feel better already. "It's not that hard," I protest.

But it is and we both know it and smile at each other again. It's like we're sharing a hilarious joke, though both of our futures are at stake.

As if she realizes that too her expression shifts again. “Please, Yuri? Just the midterm and we’ll be done with this. You won’t have to deal with me any more.”

That doesn’t sound so great actually. I shake my head, not trusting myself to speak. My fingers itch and my hands feel empty but I can’t watch her and draw at the same time.

She bites her lip again, and again I can see her thinking, mulling over her options. It’s like they’re written on her creamy skin, just visible through the faint flush. I flash back to the memory of the moment she took off her glasses and I saw her eyes close up. They’re the warmest softest brown, like chocolate, with the longest darkest lashes.

“Why should you do this for me, after all? If you don’t care about the grade then there’s nothing in it for you.” She mutters to herself. “So what could you get out of it? What do guys want?” She still seems to be talking to herself and I’m starting to feel like an asshole. I open my mouth to stop her because I can just do this to help her out when she opens hers too.

“A blow job.”

My jaw drops and Rachel turns beet red. I wait for the words to mean something else but they hang there still meaning what I think they mean.

“What?” I manage finally, like I’m choking on something.

Rachel twists her hands together. “Umm.” She can’t even look at me and that’s probably a good thing because this is awkward as hell. So I take pity on her.

“Ha ha. Very funny.”

Her chin goes up in a way I’m starting to recognize. It means don’t fuck with me and it makes me want to fuck with her. Like now. When I shouldn’t be thinking about fucking at all.

“Would it work?” she demands, her eyes raised in challenge.

And I have no idea what to say. What’s the right answer here? This whole game has depended on me knowing the right and wrong answers but now I have no clue. I gape at her and her eyebrows rise.

“Uh.”

“Of course it would,” she says smugly. It’s enough to get my brain working again. And my eyes dropping to her lips, which are pink and look soft. I clear my throat.

“We are not sitting here talking about exchanging grades for sexual favors, Rachel. That’s so wrong. Let’s be clear on that.” I try to sound as stern as possible.

“No, we’re not. I don’t grade the tests! This is just to...incentivize you.”

I grimace. “I think I’ve been insulted.”

She frowns and tucks a curl behind one ear. I wonder what her hair would look like loose.

“Why?” She drums her fingers on the table and continues before I can explain why it’s insulting that she thinks I can be so easily manipulated. “It shouldn’t be too easy for you though. Let’s say you get an A on the midterm and I’ll give you a blow job. Deal?”

“You sure you give A-level blow jobs?” I smirk, hoping to cover my discomfort and keep from squirming in my chair.

“Yes,” she says, looking me straight in the eye. The tip of her tongue darts out, maybe involuntarily. And holy shit, that’s hot! While I’m still reeling she flips open her laptop. “Now,” she says calmly. “Let’s get to work.”

Maybe I can be manipulated pretty easily after all.

Chapter Five: Rachel

One key moment The turning point came when In a summer internship at the prestigious Baltimore iInstitute for bBioethical rResearch I attended a panel on the implications of genetic engineering. Agribusiness was patenting new kinds of tomatoes, the FDA was struggling to figure out how to regulate products that had never existed before, and consumer groups were up in arms about dangers to future generations. Suddenly I realized that what seemed like theoretical debates had real life consequences.....—

RachelBerman1stdraft.doc

To say that I’ve never done anything like this would be a serious understatement. I ponder that in the hectic days following what I think of in my head as The Experiment. It’s like a clinical trial, I tell myself, in which I try out a solution and see if it has the desired effect. But like with clinical trials, I’m afraid there may be some significant complications.

Where did this idea come from? One minute I was sitting with Yuri at our usual table in our usual library café at our usual time. He was lounging in his chair with that impassive expression on his face, as if he could make sure no one could see him. It’s like he has this weird invisibility-ability.

Now that I’ve spent so much time studying him I realize how good-looking he is. His features are severe but striking, with wide low cheekbones and a sharp jaw. His eyes are surprisingly pale in contrast to his dark hair, which hangs straight to his jawline like he hasn’t cut it in a while. And when he tucks it behind his ears? And the grin I surprise out of him sometimes? Yeah, they work. And he’s a jock so why isn’t he swarming with girls? But I know why. He sends out a don’t-talk-to-me vibe. I’ve never met anyone so self-contained.

Which is maybe why I wanted to rattle him a little. And it worked because for the rest of our time together he seemed even more shut down. As if he wanted to fidget or speak or...something and wouldn't let himself. I caught him gazing at me uncertainly a few times, then we'd both flush a little and turn back to the homework. By the end of the evening, when we mumbled good night and scurried apart, I was practically hyperventilating.

I have to admit it. Yes, I want that letter of recommendation from Gunderson. I couldn't be more serious about my medical career. And yes, I want to help Yuri, get him motivated and out of this weird limbo he's in about medical school. But now I want *him* too.

Arrrgh!

Not for the first time, I wish I still had Deirdre to talk to. But it used to be easy to talk to her because we were always together. Now, with her intense schedule playing at UConn and my studies getting more and more intense as application deadlines loom there's just no time. Even last summer when we were both home in Baltimore we couldn't find time to hang out. And I think we played together once.

The whole thing makes me sad.

De Vere College is just outside where I grew up in Baltimore but I live in the dorms so I can have a "real college experience." I wasn't desperate to leave home though. I've always gotten along fine with my folks, though these years apart from Noah have been tough. But we knew that he'd choose the best humanities program he could get into and I'd choose the best pre-med program I could. So it was no surprise when he ended up at Carlyle outside New York City and I ended up here at De Vere. Then he got hooked on classics and Holly....

Since she's from California I have a sinking feeling that he may be moving even further away after graduation. Losing Noah and Ty and Deirdre left big empty holes in my life that I haven't yet filled. My studies easily took over all the time and energy I used to devote to basketball, but the people haven't been so easy to replace.

I don't want to think about that so I head to the nearby playground where it's easy to find a pick up game. Most of the guys there know me and if there were snide comments at first there aren't any now. Saturday mornings there are the usuals: the young stay-at-home dads who need to do something for themselves, the former college players who hate to give it up, the athletes in their off seasons from other sports. The great thing about basketball (one of them!) is that it has something for everyone. All you need is a hoop and a ball. You don't even need a whole team, as is clear when I join a three on three game. I like these because you can play some strategy but it stays pretty simple: the pick and roll not the zone defense.

I jostle and lunge for the ball. Since I'm never the strongest person out there I don't fight for rebounds. I focus on stealing the ball and hitting my shots. And I'm good at that. Not good like Ty and Deirdre maybe, but good enough to enjoy it and win. This morning some asshole I've never played with keeps fouling me with hip checks that send me sprawling to the ground more

than once. The guys who know me tell him off but I get my revenge on the free throw line. Five for five and my team wins by three so *suck that, asshole*. Those fouls cost you the game.

We play game after game until it starts to rain—that autumn rain that sends leaves fluttering to the ground. I wipe my sweaty face on my shirt and slap hands with the guys before collecting my stuff and turning back into Pre-Med Rachel, who carries a heavy load. I groan as I feel the weight of my bag across my shoulders, and the return of real life. Instantly I think of Yuri. The season starts soon and I've been wanting to go to a game, but I don't want to mix my worlds. I've spent the first two years of college keeping the parts of myself separate and Yuri is threatening to smash them together. I tip a water bottle up and squirt water into my mouth.

Two weeks til the midterm and the testing of our hypothesis. Will I be relieved if he doesn't get an A and I don't have to go through with it? Will he even try, a small voice wonders. Maybe it's the game I just played but my competitive juices are flowing. I better get ready. I should treat this like the lab experiment it is and do some research on male sexual response, like a good pre-med would. I grin to myself as I head back to campus. It will be a pleasure.

So yeah, I'm a little distracted when I meet with Yuri now. And yeah, there's some tension there. We stick to the library café but it still feels intimate. Like now he's across the table working in his notebook while I lean my hand on my cheek, studying him. I can just see the light dusting of dark hair on the back of his taut forearms as his pencil moves across the page, his fingers long and elegant. I run my eyes down his torso to the waistband of his jeans, which is as far as I can see and wonder what he'll like, how he'll sound, how he'll move.

When I look up again, my gaze unfocused, he's caught me, his eyes darkening. I straighten with a start and flip open my book at random. I stare at it blankly until Yuri reaches over with a sigh and swipes through the pages til I'm on the right one. When I glance up at him, still feeling flustered, I see that he looks tense. And suddenly, more than anything, I want to help him relax. I know we could help each other relax. I drop my eyes back to the book before I go any further down that road.

We don't talk about the experiment.

The next time my eyes get dragged back to him I really see what he's doing. "What are you drawing?" I ask.

He looks up from his notebook like he had forgotten I was there. Whenever he has a spare moment he's drawing something. Before class. During class. After class. While waiting for me at the library cafe. Once I even caught a glimpse of him in the cafeteria, sitting by himself and sketching. He seemed so perfectly absorbed in it that I couldn't bear to interrupt him. Sometimes he seems to have a force field around him.

His gaze only flickers to mine before dropping back to his sketchbook, his hand moving swiftly over the page in smooth strokes. "Nothing."

Okay.... “*Why* are you drawing?”

“It helps me concentrate. It’s like dribbling. Something to do with my hands while I’m thinking.”

I nod slowly. That makes sense. “Or shooting free throws?”

He glances up again. “Yeah. Meditative.”

I watch him for a while longer. That’s meditative for me. “You’re a lefty.”

This time he doesn’t look up. He just nods. I close my book and stop pretending I’m working.

“An only child?”

“Yeah.” He gives me a puzzled look and I shrug.

“You seem like someone who’s used to being alone a lot.”

His mouth tightens and I think he’s not going to respond but then he says quietly. “My parents were older when they had me. And maybe there were cultural differences in their background, but I definitely didn’t hang out with them like some of my friends hung out with their parents.”

I absorb this, thinking back on my family. “No, my parents weren’t the hanging out type either. We talked over dinner every day but we didn’t do anything else together. They were pretty busy with work. But it didn’t matter because I had my brother.”

Yuri flips a page and his hand stills as he ponders the blank space. “Older or younger?” He still seems distracted, as if he’s talking on autopilot as he scans the room, searching for something.

“Neither. A twin.”

His gaze comes to a stop on me then and I feel his attention returning, warming me. “Really? One of you must be older, right? By minutes?”

I smile and shake my head. “Nah. One day when we were five Noah came home from a friend’s house and complained that someone had asked him that. I was just as indignant. Because we were equals. Exactly the same age. We made our parents promise never to tell who was older. And they haven’t.”

A warm feeling swells in my throat. Because my parents have their problems but they have their moments too. And that was one of their best gifts to us. A smile floats to my face, unbidden.

Yuri studies me, his mouth quirking up too. “That’s a great story.” He glances down, his hand back in motion, then up again. “I can’t even imagine.” The quirk stretches into an actual smile, briefly.

“No. It’s impossible to describe.” I shake off the fuzzies and come back to reality. “Did you know that 1 in 10 people is left-handed but only 3 in 100 are twins?”

Yuri smiles again—this one is tiny, as he keeps glancing between me and his notebook. “You’re more special than I am. I’m not surprised.”

I flush, then blink at him. “Are you *drawing* me?”

He pauses, his hand still in midair. “Do you mind?”

I don’t know, do I? I wonder, feeling agitated. “Will you show it to me?”

He doesn’t hesitate. “Umm. No.”

“Then, umm, I mind.”

His hand drops and he closes the book without looking at me. “Fine.” His expression gives nothing away. I feel a twinge of guilt. Or regret.

“Yuri—” I reach out a hand, then snatch it back.

“It’s okay. But I don’t share my drawing. They’re private.” He avoids my eyes and shrugs, slouching back in his chair. He folds his empty hands together on the table and stares at them.

“Why do you have to be so weird?” I sigh. “And difficult.”

His face lifts as he ponders that. “I don’t know. Having second thoughts about our little experiment?” His eyes bore into me.

I flush and fiddle with the zipper on my hoodie. “Do you want to be an artist?”

His eyebrows rise at my obvious change of subject—but, hey, if he can bring up stuff I don’t want to talk about then I can bring up stuff he doesn’t want to talk about.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Why don’t *you* want to be an artist?”

I snort. “Because I can’t draw for crap? Because museums make my feet hurt as soon as I get inside? Because I actually love medicine and *want* to be a doctor? There are oh so many reasons to choose from.”

“What’s wrong with museums?”

I throw up my hands. “What’s wrong with *you*? Why can’t you answer questions like a normal person?” I give him my squintiest look, trying to get some kind of rise out of him but I get only the tiniest twitch of his mouth as he stares back at me.

“You’re so pushy.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “Yes. Yes, I am.”

“Why?”

“Can we please keep to one question thread at a time? We’re on why you don’t want to be an artist, which is still unanswered. Then queued up after that we’ve got me and museums. Then I get to ask another question of you before we can get to why I’m pushy.”

I don’t expect a full smile but I get one anyway and it feels good.

“Most people just give up,” he says, as if to himself.

“Answer me, please!” My voice is loud enough to turn a few heads in the café. Yuri looks amused and he answers slowly like he’s talking to a child.

“Art isn’t a real career. It’s a hobby.”

“That’s ridiculous. If you’re talented you could make it as an artist. Or make a career in the art world.”

He rolls his eyes. “I’m not talented. And what kind of living is that?”

The light breaks. “Oh, it’s about money! You’d rather be a rich doctor than a starving artist.”

“Like you?” Yuri smirks. “Wild guess. You’ve never worried about money, have you?”

My mouth opens and closes. “Maybe,” I hedge uncomfortably. “But it’s not about me. I don’t like art. I like medicine. But youuuu,” I stretch the word out for emphasis, talking to him slowly, “seem to actually enjoy drawing, judging by the data in front of me. So my radical idea is that you might actually choose a career based on something you like doing.”

He remains unruffled. “I disagree.”

“With what?”

“Everything you say.”

I goggle at him as he continues.

“I don’t think careers should be about enjoyment and I do think money is obviously a consideration.”

“A consideration but...”

“And,” he cuts me off, looking stern, his voice lowering. “I live in the real world with real limits on people’s choices. Not some imaginary utopian place where people do whatever they feel like.”

He looks a little ruffled now actually. His focus on me is unnerving and his breathing has sped up.

“But what about happiness?” I can hardly get the words out.

His chin goes up. “What about it? You’re being melodramatic. It’s not all or nothing, happy or miserable. There’s plenty in between.”

I study him and I can’t quite disentangle how I’m feeling. Sad? Sorry? Frustrated? All of the above? “But why...?”

He cuts me off again, breaking our gaze. “Again with the why! Tell me something, Rachel. What kind of world do you come from that assumes your life will be a journey with a happy ending? People like you live in cushy bubbles and don’t even know it.”

“*People like me?*” I squeak, astonished.

He shakes his head, moving to go. Because he always just leaves when we disagree. “You know what I mean. Look at you. Newest iPhone. Straightened teeth. And I don’t know clothes but even I can tell yours come from some fancy mall in the suburbs. What is your brother studying? What do your parents do?”

My face feels hot. He’s already standing so I have to tilt my head up. His dark hair falls over his forehead as he collects his things and I watch his shoulders bunch and release under his white tee shirt.

“My folks are psychiatrists,” I admit reluctantly. “And my brother is a classics major...” I bristle at his smug expression. “You shouldn’t make assumptions about people, Yuri!”

“I came up with a hypothesis and I tested it. My assumptions turned out to be true. Better?”

I grit my teeth.

“It’s time to go anyway.” He nods politely at me as he leaves. And I sit there, wondering why nothing with Yuri ever goes quite as I expect.

Chapter Six: Yuri

I finish the sketch over the next few days. Between classes and practices, meals and sleeping, I'm drawn back to that page, trying to capture that fleeting expression on Rachel's face. It was tender and sweet and lit up. I want to see it again. But that conversation made it blindingly clear how different we are, how different our worlds—and our world views—are. I knew she was money. She probably doesn't even have student loans. She probably pays full price and her doctor parents don't sweat it. For two kids at the same time. I shake my head. Unreal. What would you have to make to manage that?

As the midterm gets closer I avoid her. Our season is about to start so I'm slammed. And that last evening with her was intense. I'm not sure how I feel about the way things are shifting between us. When this started Rachel seemed nice, smart, pretty. Too driven, for sure, but pre-meds are all like that (which is why I don't hang out with them even if I had time to). But now she's something else. Complicated. She's bold and bossy one minute and sweet and sympathetic the next. She's blushing one minute and checking me out the next. Yeah, I notice that.

And suddenly I'm noticing more than her facial expressions too. Like the curve where her neck meets her shoulder and the hint of a bra strap when she extends her arm. Like the long legs and tight ass showcased in her skinny jeans. I bet her body's toned and soft and I bet all that long wavy hair is crazy sexy when it's loose.... And that wide sweet mouth promised me a blow job! Am I really going to collect on that? I could easily throw this test and get out of this awkward "experiment." That would be the right thing to do, wouldn't it?

When I sit down to take the midterm I'm a nervous wreck, my knee jittering up and down and my hands practically shaking. I slide into my usual chair and open my laptop to sign in to the test page. In a few moments it will go live. From the corner of my eye I see Rachel approaching. When I look up, feeling like a deer in the headlights, she flutters her fingers in a little wave and takes a seat several rows away from me. She gives me a big smile that sends my breath rushing out in a loud whoosh, then just as I'm starting to relax a little she winks at me. I grit my teeth and try to focus again. She makes everything *harder*.

It takes me longer than usual to get into a zone and when the test is over I'm really not sure how I did. All I know is that I wasn't in control like I usually am, weighing each question carefully and choosing which ones to get right and which to miss. So now it's in the hands of fate. I manage to get out of the lecture hall without interacting with her again and I keep it that way for the next few days. It will take the T.A.s at least a week to get the scores back to us and in the meantime we have our first home game. It's good timing because I need distractions, both physical and mental.

In fact, I'm thinking I need to get laid. I mean, it would help either way, right? If the blow job happens it'll keep me from coming too fast and if it doesn't happen it will keep me from blue balls. This logic makes so much sense that I stop by Carla's room when I get back from the last practice before our first game.

“Hey!” She answers with a big smile, already opening the door wide for me. “Long time no see, huh?” I duck my head and smile, feeling a little abashed as usual.

She closes the door behind me and saunters toward her bed. I automatically watch her ass before dropping into the chair that’s still pulled away from her desk. The room reeks of nail polish and I can see with a glance that she was in the middle.

“Bad time?” I gesture toward the supplies on her desk.

She wiggles her fingers at me as if to dry them off. “Nah. No problem. I’ll finish them later. I haven’t seen you in ages,” she says again, tilting her head so her hair falls over her undercut.

I guess there’s a question there but when I don’t answer she clarifies. “What’s up? Is this a booty call?” She grins because she knows the question will embarrass me.

Even though we do this all the time and we’re both cool with it (as far as I know, so far, and all that). I’m still kind of uncomfortable with using this girl just for sex. I mean, I like her—we’re friends even, I guess—and she’s really pretty, but I’m not sure if it’s okay. Usually when I wonder that out loud she just laughs and starts stripping and that’s that.

But this reminds me of another ethical question. “How’ve you been?” I ask, stalling.

“Same old, same old. Come here.” She pats the bed next to her and it sags as I join her. Instantly she slings one leg over my lap to straddle me. I hold her waist gently.

“Do you think it’s okay to accept a sexual favor?” I blurt out.

Her face had been leaning in toward mine and now she leans back out, eyebrows raised. “In what context?”

I frown, trying to figure out how much I can explain. “Say you have a friend who’s like ‘if you take this challenge I’ll blow you....’” That doesn’t sound quite right.

“Like a dare?” Carla sounds skeptical. Her hands are on my shoulders and she’s peering at me.

“No... more like a reward.”

“A friend, huh? Male or female?”

“Does it matter?”

Carla’s eyebrows shoot higher. “Well, if it’s a guy then he’s definitely telling you something.” She pauses, pursing her lips. “Scratch that. If it’s a girl she’s telling you something too, but being indirect about it.”

“Telling me what?” That’s what I can’t figure out. “I mean, telling *the person* what?”

Carla sighs loudly and rolls her eyes. “Really, Yuri? I know you pretty well and still you astonish the shit out of me. The *friend*, male or female, is hot for the *person* in question.”

I think this over, feeling warm, while Carla stays perched on my lap. I guess I knew that but it’s good to have it confirmed. “But does that make it okay to accept or not?”

“Dude, it’s the same as any other sexual encounter: if it’s two consenting adults who are both into it and they’re not harming anyone else, then why not?”

I gaze over her shoulder as I ponder this. Until she pokes me in the chest to get my attention back. “Sex can be simple, you know. *Hint, hint.*”

My eyes go to hers and I flush a little. “Oh. Yeah. Sorry, Carla. I know. I...appreciate that.”

“This isn’t a booty call, is it?” she sighs, pouting.

I’m as confused as she is. “I guess not.” She climbs off my lap and I stand awkwardly.

“Next time then,” she says brightly, giving my arm a squeeze.

I nod and give her a one-armed hug. “Next time for sure. Thanks, Carla.”

I’m tired anyway, I figure as I continue down the hall to my own room. Somehow I think I got what I came for.

Chapter Seven: Rachel

In my junior honors biology seminar I had to choose develop my own year-long research project and spend the year and work independently on collecting and analyzing the data before writing it up as a 25-page paper. I will be conducting a series of experiments on the relationship of sensory feelings to emotional feelings. My hypothesis is that sensory stimulation can in fact be isolated and differentiated from the interpretation of those feelings, which we usually think of as emotions. While the topic is too broad to come to any significant conclusions, I think I can establish that [FINISH SENTENCE!] I’ve never done anything like this before.... —RachelBermanFirstDraft.doc

“What did you get for that last equation?” My neighbor leans over to peer at my notebook and I slam my arm over my scribbles and doodles because they are all about Yuri and experiments and what I should try with him next.

“Sorry. I spaced out. Not done yet.” I avoid her eyes as I scramble to finish the problem set. I’ve been in this study group all semester but I can’t remember her name. I keep my head down and try to focus.

When our hour is up I can see through the library window that dusk has fallen and the streetlights have lit up. Chairs scrape against the ground and the conversation takes on a different tone. I stack up my books and get to my feet, still feeling distracted. Ever since that night with Yuri I’ve been in a sort of sensual haze. It feels good but it sure is inconvenient.

“What about you, Rachel?”

I look up and the guy across the table is waiting for something. “Hmm?”

With a sigh, he repeats himself. “We’re all heading to the pub for a beer. You coming?” He’s watching intently, and I glance around the table. Everyone has paused to see if they should wait for me or not. One girl taps her foot impatiently.

“Uh. No, sorry. I have some more work to do tonight.” I wave a hand in the air vaguely.

“Of course you do,” I hear someone mumble. And I’m prodded out of my bubble for a minute. I look around the circle of faces slowly. They’re all pre-med like me. How do they have social lives?

“But it’s Halloween!” What’s-her-name protests. I glance out the window and register the costumes, the decorations, the sounds of partying.

“I got to catch up when the basketball team’s away.” I make that up on the spot. I have a life too!

The guy across from me raises his eyebrows. “Oh. A boyfriend?”

Is he fishing? He’s got a pleasant face, round and open. He’s a little taller than me and seems polite. I blink at him. He’s probably better boyfriend material than any of the jocks I’ve dated or hooked up with or *experimented* with. I straighten and swing my backpack on one shoulder.

“Nooo. I just like basketball.”

The group of them exchange looks that I can’t quite read. Some shrug. They walk out chattering among themselves and I slow down on purpose to avoid the awkward goodbye when they turn to fun and I turn to home.

Outside the library I hug my arms around myself because it’s getting late and dark and cold. I need to dig out my winter clothes because this flannel shirt isn’t cutting it any more. I trudge along the path back to my dorm room, kicking leaves and feeling low for some reason. No one is there either and I hear the sounds of a party whenever a door opens or shuts down the hall.

I want to wallow so I shuffle towards our shared kitchen. If there was ever a good time for the emergency ice cream we keep in the freezer it's now.

But it's gone! Someone must have eaten my Phish Food and now I really want to cry because my life sucks and I'm just drowning in work. I fling myself face down on the sofa. My med school essay depends on my independent study experiment, which is completely confusing and unsettling me and I have no one to talk to.

I'm bored and restless. I keep turning the TV on and off but there's nothing on. Even when I flip through allll the channels.

ME: I'm bored. And restless.

It's ten minutes before I get a response.

YURI: <eye roll> don't you have homework???

ME: har har.

But he probably wasn't joking so I defend myself.

ME: It's Friday.

YURI: And Halloween. Why aren't you out?

Because I have no friends!

ME: Why aren't you??

YURI: I am out! Back an hour ago.

Wha??

ME: where?

YURI: Addams.

Addams House hosts a haunted house party every Halloween. For obvious reasons. Now I hear the chatter and bass in the background.

My phone rings while I'm still mulling this over.

ME: Gotta go. It's Noah.

YURI: ???!

ME: MY BROTHER!

If Yuri answers I ignore him to swipe over to my brother's call.

"Hey!"

"Hey."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

We're both silent for a minute.

"Holly?"

"Yeah."

"*Talk* to her, Noah. She adores you."

More silence. "I've got the marathon Sunday."

Crap, I forgot!

"You're ready though."

"Yeah. Trying to rest up. What about you? You going out later?" I can tell he's trying to be cheerful for my sake.

"Nah. You know."

"Hey, we can't both be pathetic loners. Go. Hang out with that jock you're hooking up with now. Just don't tell me about it later."

I squirm. Ew! And am not, I want to say, like a loser.

"And don't dress up as Pre-Med Barbie. No one got it."

I chuckle. True that. But it gives me an idea.

"Gotta go, bro."

He hates it when I call him that.

But now I feel energized because I have an IDEA. It only takes me twenty minutes to change my clothes and race out the door.

I don't see him anywhere. I push through throngs of drunken dancers, swaying in clumps, and crane my head to peer around the Sponge Bobs, Bridezillas, and Iron Men. I've got only one reason to be here and it's just one punchline. I'm about to give up when someone grabs my arm and turns me around. I'm about to blister his hide when my eyes meet Yuri's.

"Really?"

Because it's Yuri he doesn't smile but I'm getting better at telling when he's amused. And I think he's amused.

"Like it?"

He leans against the nearest wall and crosses his arms over his chest to survey me from head to toe. My breathing hitches and then takes a hike up a mountain.

"You could show more skin, but yeah."

I flush. The blue scrubs and white lab coat completely cover me from neck to ankle. "Hey, I didn't wear the surgical face mask. What are you anyway?" I cock my head to look him over, since I can. He's in his usual track pants and hoodie.

"I never dress up for Halloween."

I squawk. "What? Not even as a kid? How did you go trick or treating?"

He shrugs. "I didn't. I don't care about candy. So what's the point?"

"Because it's fun, dude." I have to lean in to yell into his ear over the cacophony. He points to a corner and we move in that direction.

"Oh and you're the expert on fun?" His smirk is back.

"Relatively speaking? Sure. I'll take that role." There are no chairs anywhere so we find ourselves leaning against a new wall, but at least we can hear each other.

"You're not playing a role now. You're not in costume either. This is you. Pre-med Rachel."

"I'm Dr. Cristina Yang!"

"You're hiding behind that lab coat." For a moment it seems as if his eyes heat but I can't tell in this dark room. "Is it supposed to be a red flag?"

"Ummm?" Because I don't know what I meant by it. I just know I wanted to get his attention.

He snorts and pulls on the low ponytail that hangs over one shoulder. I flinch and he notices. “Sorry,” he mumbles, looking away.

“No, it’s okay. I…” I don’t know how to finish that sentence so I don’t.

He studies me, his expression grave. As usual.

“What?” I’m inexplicably nervous. It’s just Yuri.

“What are you doing here?”

“What are *you* doing here?”

He shrugs. “The same as you?” I can see the tiniest smile escape.

“You should smile more,” I blurt out.

I get side-eye. “Why?”

I throw up my hands. “So people will like you?”

“I have enough friends.”

I laugh. “Sure you do. Like where are they then?” I make a point of looking all around. No one seems to notice us.

“You’re one to talk.”

I slump back a little, resting my arms on my knees and my head back against the wall. “Yeah. Fair enough.”

He pats my arm awkwardly. “Don’t worry about it. Friends are over-rated.” We look at each other and break into smiles at the same time. Something inside me eases up and I’m grateful to him for that.

“Why don’t you have a girlfriend?” And there I go again. I almost clap a hand over my mouth.

He gives me a measured look. “How do you know I don’t?”

A hot wave of embarrassment floods me and I start to jump to my feet. I need to get away and figure out an excuse later. But Yuri grabs my hand and anchors me down.

“Hey. Sorry. I thought we were just talking trash. Obviously I don’t have a girlfriend, Rachel.” He looks confused by my reaction, but contrite. My heart is still beating fast and I’m struggling to catch up to my own feelings. Yuri is still holding on to my hand and I’m confused too.

“Why obviously?”

“*Obviously* we wouldn’t be talking about our... experiment then.” He glares like he’s offended. And embarrassed. Kind of cute.

“And besides....” He waves his other hand around the room. I frown. What does that even mean? His hand is still warm in mine and his body is becoming familiar, its long limbs and lean muscles. In the dim light of the party his face seems carved in marble—stern in its severity.

“If you smiled girls would notice you.” Ugh. Enough blurting, Rachel!

He almost smiles then but catches himself. “That right?”

My mouth curves too. “It’s a hypothesis anyway.”

He chuckles and I’m glad to be sitting on the floor in a corner with him, just talking. I look down at my Dansko clogs (so suitable for a long day in the O.R.!) and feel a little pang. I scratch my neck so I have an excuse to take back my hand.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Yuri sighs, folds his arms again, and looks at me without blinking. How does he do that?

“I guess I was hoping for more of a reaction,” I admit, feeling foolish. “Maybe I should have come as a sexy nurse instead.” I smooth out a wrinkle on my lab coat. What was I thinking? We sit in silence, side by side, while I get more and more uncomfortable. Music thumps through the room and someone stumbles over my stretched out legs. “Watch it!” I snap.

“What’s sexy anyway?” Yuri’s low voice breaks through my discomfort. I can’t tell if it’s because he doesn’t want anyone else to hear us or...something else. His head turns to face me again and I can feel his gaze.

“What do you think?” I whisper, my cheeks heating.

He leans his head back against the wall then and I can tell he’s thinking. “Confidence. Humor.” He pauses to clear his throat and I’m on tenterhooks, my fingers tensing on my knees. “Surprise. Mystery....There’s nothing mysterious about a sexy nurse. I like to picture what I can’t see. God, I sound like a chick.” There’s a flush creeping up his neck and I’m fascinated. “What about you?”

I inhale and blow out a breath, buying time. “Umm.” Honestly I haven’t really thought about this—beyond my jonesing for jocks, which I’m hardly going to confess to Yuri....

“Candor.” I have to give him that, though I feel exposed myself. “Vulnerability.” I grimace and fidget. “God, I sound like such a chick too.”

“Did you say big dick?”

My head whips around and he’s smirking. “What?? No. Oh. Fuck you for fucking with me.” I punch him in the shoulder but I’m laughing too because it relieves the awful tension of being too close and too honest. “You left big tits off your list.”

“Nope. Not my thing.” He looks serious again so I consider believing him.

“What is your thing?” I dare out loud. And hold my breath.

“Athletes,” he says promptly. He’s facing away from me so I can only see his profile, which I admire for its clean lines. “Those girls have the whole package: the confidence, the bodies, the stamina...” He’s got that little smile again. The one that kills me.

“Yeah, athletes,” I sigh, then catch myself. “And boobs do get in the way of most sports. Guys are lucky.”

“Balls get in the way too.”

“Huh. I suppose so.”

We share the quiet and I’m enjoying this strange conversation. Maybe it’s our own weird way of flirting.

“So what sports have your girlfriends played?” I don’t know why I’m asking this but I just want to keep going.

“None.” I turn to face him and he looks thoughtful. “My high school girlfriend was in the art program at our school. That was cool.”

“None?” I repeat, baffled.

He shrugs. “You can’t always get everything you want.”

I slump back against the wall with a groan. “Not that again, Yuri! Would you stop with the martyr complex?”

“Martyr complex? Did you learn that from your psychiatrist parents?”

We’re turned to face each other and his eyes are bright with laughter. His hair falls forward and he tucks it back behind one ear.

“Maybe.” I like it when he teases. He’s too serious. Though I like it when he’s serious too. Ugh.

Our gazes hold and there's something weird going on between us that I can't figure out. I get a little freaked and pull back.

"It's probably late and I should get back."

Maybe I want to be convinced to stay, maybe I want to resume our experiment, but Yuri just nods and rises gracefully to his feet, offering a hand to pull me up. I scramble awkwardly after him, fiddling with my clothes and my ponytail while he watches, still silent.

"I'll tell you a secret," he says suddenly.

I freeze, all my nerve endings on alert. He bends slightly so his mouth brushes my ear and I shiver, wanting to grab hold of him to keep my balance.

"I like picturing what's under those scrubs, Rachel. That's sexy." He sounds as breathless as I am. "See you in bio class. Maybe we'll get that test back."

I blink as he grins and turns away. With an effort I head in the other direction, both thrilled and thwarted.

And yeah, mystery is sexy.

Chapter Eight: Yuri

93. I'm glad I'm already sitting down because I feel stunned. There were so many possible numbers to get on this test, so many possible outcomes, but now there's only one. I could still lie about it, I could.... My brain seems to have stalled out. I could *what?*

Before I can prepare myself Rachel leans over and sneaks a look at my laptop. Her ponytail brushes my shoulder and I flinch. She smells like shampoo and girl. I hear a gasp and she tenses too, then straightens. Then, after a moment, her voice comes out, sounding strangled. She's not meeting my eyes.

"Congratulations! That's awesome! See, you can totally do this."

"Rachel." My voice sounds funny too and my heart is beating too fast.

"Later," she hisses. And the class begins. I hastily log out of the course website and slam my laptop shut.

I have trouble concentrating though. Rachel and I act like two middle schoolers. Tensed up and awkward. My arm brushes hers and I gulp out "sorry!" She drops a pen, then loses her notebook while searching for it. I snag it and hold it out to her without a word. But our eyes meet.

“Thanks,” she whispers, looking like I caught her sneaking candy into a movie theater. “And Yuri, thanks, you know, for trying on the test and helping me with my letter.” She nibbles on her lip. *Do not think about her mouth!*

I squirm a little. “You don’t have to....”

With a look she cuts me off again and refocuses on the lecture.

As soon as it’s done she stands abruptly and I realize she’s already quietly gathered her things. “Can you meet me later?” Her cheeks are pink and she’s still not looking at me.

“Sure, but....”

“I’ll text you then. Gotta go!” She’s already moving in the other direction.

“Rachel!” I call after her, feeling frustrated. We have to talk about this!

She turns reluctantly. “Later, okay?” she says again. “We’ll figure it out.”

I nod slowly because now there are students milling all around us and whatever moment of privacy we might have had is over. Not that we’ve ever really been alone together. In private. *Why am I thinking about this?*

When Rachel texts me *later* turns out to be 8PM and in her dorm room. Which makes me nervous. What is she planning? Why didn’t I laugh this off earlier? Why did I let this go so far? *Because you were curious to see how far she’d take it*, an inner voice whispers. *Because you want to make out with her and this gives you an excuse....* That seems kind of pathetic but about right.

I stifle a groan and knock on her door. I’m going to be clear that all bets are off, so to speak. She’ll be relieved and I won’t feel like a douche who’s taking advantage of her.

The door swings open and my plan goes to shit. She’s wearing cotton shorts like you’d sleep in and a thin tank top and she’s holding a towel as if she just got out of the shower. And fuck me if her hair isn’t down and damp. It’s the first time I’ve seen it loose and it’s just as wild and sexy as I imagined, falling in a long tangle down her back. Have I mentioned her legs?? Because they’re long and toned and *bare*.

“Sorry, I’m a little behind schedule. Come on in.” She turns and motions me into the common room of her suite. And now I get a great view of her overachieving ass. I clear my throat and wonder if I can adjust myself without her noticing.

She half turns as one arm sweeps toward the sofa. Even that arm looks crazy sexy to me at this moment, pale and silky-skinned and drawing my eyes back to her neck and slender shoulders.

Helplessly my eyes skate over her body. I've never seen her so exposed and her curves are perfect handfuls. I want her wrapped around me now.

"You want anything?"

I gape for a second before I realize she's talking about a beverage. I shake my head wordlessly, trying to remember my plan. Breathe. She disappears for a moment, which gives me a chance to sink into the sofa and try to re-set myself, physically and mentally.

As soon as she comes back, I launch into my speech.

"Rachel, you don't have to follow through with the...uh..." I don't want to say the words *blow job* right now. "You know," I finish lamely. I feel heat climbing up my neck. "I wasn't serious and you know, a good grade is its own reward.... What are you doing?" My voice drops and panic rises. She's plopped down next to me on the sofa and her hands are tugging at my shirt.

"Making you comfortable. You seem uncomfortable." Her cheeks are adorably pink again but she's looking at me and smiling, as if everything is perfectly fine. What the fuck?

I bat away her hands but they are everywhere and somehow my shirt comes off. I'm backed up into a corner of the sofa and she's leaning over me, her hands running slowly down my arms, drawing heat and lingering.

"Didn't you hear anything I said?" I croak.

"Mmm hmm." She sounds distracted and in fact her gaze feels as hot as her hands as she scans my torso. So I waste no time in checking her out too, as her tank top gaps a little with her movements, revealing taut skin at her waist and a faint shadow of cleavage. Her hands reach the waistband of my track pants and she must have noticed how hard I am.

"Rachel!" I'm losing control of this situation.

She lifts her head and her hands pause while she meets my gaze. And I'm stunned: she looks turned on and sexy as hell. Her mouth is pink and moist as if she's been licking her lips, and her brown eyes are heavy lidded and dazed. I suddenly realize she's not wearing her glasses.

"What?" She licks those lips and I'd do anything to have them on me. My body is already molding to hers, my hands reaching for her hips, my legs widening to cradle her, my chest expanding with every long-drawn breath.

"Uhh. Are you sure about this?" I whisper, our eyes locking.

"Yes. Are you?" Her voice is clear and firm, but her breathing hitches as my hands move to her ass to tug her against me.

We both gasp and she feels so amazing my eyes sink closed. I nod frantically and she chuckles. Her hands resume their exploration of my chest, sparking little ripples of pleasure. I lean in to kiss her but she eludes me, scooting down my torso so I can feel her nipples through her top against my skin.

“Rachel—” I buck my hips against her because this is deliriously good but I want more. Now. I want relief.

She licks my neck, her tongue sending shivers down my spine so I tremble.

“My dick is lower down,” I hint, feeling desperate.

I can feel her smile as she continues to drag her warm mouth against my collarbone. Her long hair brushes against my naked skin like its own caress.

“I know. I’m pre-med, remember?”

“Then what are you doing?” This ends on a gasp as her fingers brush against my nipple.

“Regular blow jobs are too quick. The deal was for A-level and this is deluxe. I want to know what you like.” Her voice sends vibrations across my skin, and I groan.

“Damn you,” I manage, flexing my hips for more contact.

She just snorts and even that makes something inside me ache for her. Then the torment begins as her hands and mouth seek out every pleasure point I never even knew I had, stretching me tight with lust. By the time she gets her mouth on my dick I’m afraid it’ll be over. But again she slows down, lingering and teasing until I’m out of my mind, reduced to vague pleas and incoherent sounds. My hands thread through her wild hair and tighten on the silky strands.

“Ahhh... Rachel!”

There’s a warning there that I hope she gets because I have no other words. Her light fingers slip lower and explore, making me arch into her mouth as she moans around me. And that’s it. All that dreamy, teasing pleasure explodes into white-hot bliss and I’m coming and coming in her mouth and clinging convulsively to Rachel as my only anchor.

My chest is still heaving and I feel like I just played four quarters of the best basketball ever—exhilarated and exhausted and deeply satisfied. I reluctantly disentangle my fingers from Rachel’s hair and open one eye. She sits up and drags the back of her hand across her mouth, then leans one elbow against the sofa to study me. Her face is flushed and alight and suddenly she’s so sexy I lose my breath again.

“So?” Her mouth tilts to one side. That mouth! I shake my head to clear it but I still can’t come up with the right words.

“Do I get an A too?” Her voice is so sexy like this, all husky and amused.

“Hell yeah.” I nod, holding her gaze as she blushes a little and bites down on her lip. I brush a thumb against the pulse beating at her throat, then curve my hand around her neck to draw her closer.

“Now you,” I murmur. But she pulls back before I can kiss her.

“Oh no!” She wriggles away and my reflexes are still too mushy to do more than watch as she scuttles to the other side of the couch.

I frown. “Why not?” My voice sounds rumbly.

“That wasn’t part of the experiment.” She looks wary.

“So?” I sit up too, and lift my hips so I can pull my pants the rest of the way up. Reality is rapidly returning and I’m feeling vulnerable and exposed in more ways than one.

“That’s not how it works, Yuri.”

She’s way too calm and it’s exasperating. Wasn’t she into it? Isn’t she turned on? I look her over. Her nipples are peaked under her top. Her hands are clasped tight in her lap. Her lips are parted and swollen. Hell yeah she’s turned on! And I want her to feel what I felt. I want to stroke her skin and find out all the places where she gasps and shivers. I want to tease her til she’s writhing like I was.

She takes a shaky breath and says, “No,” as if she could hear my thoughts.

Frustration fills me. Why does she get the pleasure of exploring my body and I don’t get the same treat? How come she gets to stay in control and I don’t? Why can’t I get the satisfaction of making her come as hard as I did?

That makes me pause. What does that mean about satisfaction? Coming always seemed to be the whole point of sex, the obvious finale but I’ve just had the best orgasm of my life and I still want something.... My head struggles to catch up to my body. What’s going on?

If I don’t get my turn to reciprocate, if I don’t get my mouth on her body what am I supposed to do now? I can’t just leave. It would be way rude to just blow and go. I press a hand against my forehead and close my eyes, praying for patience and guidance. A few choice phrases come to mind, then out my mouth in Russian.

When I open my eyes again Rachel is still huddled at the other end of the sofa, studying me cautiously. With a long exhale of frustration I stand up, still feeling drained and wobbly.

“Fine,” I bite out. “Anything *else* I can do for you?”

She shakes her head, flushing more.

“Then thanks.” I feel like stomping out the door but I realize what an asshole I’m being.

She nods, still silent.

I pause. “You okay?”

She nods again. Her hair is tousled and loose around her shoulders and I was right: it’s crazy sexy like that. She’s made a bewildering transformation from nerdy good girl to bombshell and I can’t seem to catch up.

“You sure? Why aren’t you saying anything?” Guilt swamps me. But it was her idea! I stop there because I sound like an idiot even to myself.

She nods, her eyes huge in her face. “I’m fine. That was great. I mean...”

Her voice trails off awkwardly. Her head drops and I have no idea what to say so I head to the door, angry with myself, frustrated with her, and generally overwhelmed.

“Okay then. I’ll see you in class. Glad I could help you out.” I don’t know why I’m acting like such a dick except some part of this stings. I open her door, then pause, reluctant to leave like this.

“By the way, what did you get on the test?” The question comes out of nowhere.

“A 96.” Her voice is subdued.

My mouth twists. “Figures. Congrats.” I sigh. “I should have made the same deal with you then.” And with one last level look, I flee the room.

##

Chapter Nine: Rachel

[The thing about these med school applications is it’s impossible to succeed. You have to be yourself, but perfect. Individual, but not weird. High achieving, but not fake. Confident, but not arrogant. It’s a f*\$%&* nightmare!!!!] —RachelBerman1stdraft.doc

I avoid him. There are two days until the next class we have together and I feel them ticking away like a time bomb. We don’t text. We don’t speak. De Vere College has a typical Ivy League style campus with an enclosed quad and clusters of brick buildings. It’s hard not to run into people but I’ve gotten good at darting into doorways when I catch a glimpse of Yuri’s long lean frame. We haven’t crossed paths so I guess we’re both hiding. Because what have I done?

I'm angry at myself, angry at Yuri, and yes twisted up with frustration. Because that was hot as hell and Yuri didn't help by offering to.... I gulp, getting turned on again.

I should have let him.

No, it would have been even more awkward now.

But it would have felt so good! My inner voice turns whiny.

Yeah, and we would have had closure....

But do I want closure? The voice goes quiet.

I sulk and stomp around enough that even my uber-calm roommates, chosen for their exemplary study habits, notice. The three of us met in an Org Chem study group last year and were so equally devoted to our never-ending workloads that we decided to room together so we'd always have peace and quiet at home. They at least understand that there's no time for boyfriends, for parties, for socializing. It's worked out perfectly and their schedules are so predictable that it was easy to devote so much time to Yuri that night.

But when I stub my toe and curse the sofa (that sofa!) Andrea lifts her head from her laptop and asks mildly if anything is wrong.

"No!" It comes out too loud.

Gayatri pokes her head into the common room. "What's with all the yelling? I've got a lab report due tomorrow."

I grind my teeth. "I know. I'm sorry." My roommates exchange a confused look.

"Are you having trouble with your junior seminar experiment? You could talk it through with us," Andrea offers.

Yeah, that. Despite hours of research, supplemented by staring out the window, I can't settle on a project and I'm falling behind. I lean against the sofa and rub my toe absently. Why did I have to have Yuri here? Where I'd remember it all over again. The feel of his muscles flexing and tensing under my touch. His sharp inhale whenever I uncovered a sensitive spot. I should have anticipated that he'd offer to do me and I should have designed this experiment better, where I was more in control of all the variables, where I could have left instead of having to push him away so he'd leave. I should have....

Andrea is still talking though I've tuned her out.

"...subjects who will help you and test their response to stimuli. Maybe design a post-stimulation questionnaire to gauge how the physiological response gets translated by the verbal centers of the frontal lobe?"

I'm jerked back into the conversation and gape at her. How can she know about what went down with Yuri? But her tone is mild and instantly I realize it's just me making that connection. No one else is suggesting that I turn that sexual experiment into my seminar experiment. My brain blanks. That would be too easy, too efficient, too convenient....

I slide down onto the sofa, feeling even more confused and disoriented. It's wrong, right?

Andrea continues but my inner debate drowns her out. I reach out a hand and stroke the fabric of the sofa, noticing its stubbly texture. How do my fingertips "understand" that? What words do I use to describe it? I could manipulate the conditions, isolate the variables. It wouldn't have to be about sex at all, I tell myself. It wouldn't have to be with Yuri. It's just an idea.

"Rachel? You okay? You look weird."

I startle, and can't help hearing the question in Yuri's low voice, still husky with pleasure. I shiver all over again even as I nod slowly.

"Yep. Just thinking. I better get going." On autopilot, I rise and start packing my bag. If they respond I don't notice.

I slink into the next Biostatistics class late and sit on the opposite side of the lecture hall, but I can't help sneaking glances at Yuri. He's bent over his notebook, as usual, so I can't see his expression but his presence alone is still enough to make me hyperventilate and I struggle with my response. Then he looks up and our eyes meet before I can tear them away. His narrow to glare at me and my anger rises to meet his. We both break away at the same time and my insides clench with tension. Again I can't concentrate in class and I blame him.

"Berman. Valichenko. Come here, please."

I groan inside because now that class is over I just want to get away. But I have no choice and I can tell with one glimpse across the room that Yuri is just as reluctant as I am. Damn him! We both drag our asses as slowly as possible down to the front of the room where Gunderson stands at his podium.

"Miss Berman. Mr Valichenko. I see our little experiment worked."

I flinch at the word experiment and keep my eyes on my shoes, like a twelve-year-old. There is a pause while the professor waits for one of us to speak but neither of us does.

"Well." He clears his throat. "I don't know how you pulled it off, Miss Berman, but you must be quite a talented tutor."

"Thank you, professor," I manage in a choked voice. My face feels so hot I keep it down.

“So she’ll get her letter?” Yuri asks, his voice sharp. I can’t bear to look up. “She worked hard for it.”

My head pops up then and I shoot death rays at him through my eyes. His expression is all innocence. Fuck. You, I say loudly in my head. It must have shown on my face because he smirks.

“Of course, and you have your grade so you both came out ahead.” Aaaand there’s another awkward pause while I blush harder and Yuri just glowers.

“Yes, hmm. Mr. Valichenko, aren’t you in need of a letter of recommendation for med school as well?”

Yuri hesitates, frowning.

“No,” I pipe up. It’s my turn to smirk. “He doesn’t want—or need—one. He’s perfectly satisfied with what he got.”

I hear Yuri swear at me under his breath. In Russian, which just isn’t fair.

“What was that, Mr. Valichenko?” Gunderson leans forward. He snaps his briefcase closed and seems done with us.

“Nothing, Professor. Rachel is right. As usual.”

I’m ready to blister his hide and for a moment we just stare at each other.

“Good! That’s it then. Whatever you’re doing is working, so keep it up for the final.”

With that awkward suggestion Gunderson trundles away and Yuri and I are left under some sort of heightened force field of tension. The other students have all left and we are alone in the room.

“What’s the matter with you?” he bursts out just as I say, “how dare you!”

Within seconds we’re facing off, yelling and swearing at each other, eyes flashing and hands flailing. One part of me can’t help feeling thrilled just to be standing here within two feet of him, able to finally release some of the bottled up feelings he raises in me.

“I’m so done with this!” Yuri throws his arms in the air and I’m vaguely aware that this is unlike him. He turns to stomp away and when I follow I know for sure this is unlike me. I’m always calm and together. He’s always so reserved, except when....

“What do you have to be mad about?” I protest. “You got what you wanted!”

We're only halfway to the door when he whirls on me. "Oh, don't you start as if this dumb ass experiment was my idea because it wasn't. I was going along with you and if it backfired it's your fault." His voice is heavy with emphasis and he's jabbing a finger at me.

My breathing accelerates and I'm trembling with emotion. I'm embarrassed and annoyed and turned on. "As if you didn't enjoy it!" We're both flushed now.

"As if you didn't?" he throws back at me. "Did you get everything you wanted, Rachel?" he demands, leaning in.

And I want to grab his head and crash his mouth down on mine. And I want to press up hard against him to feel all of him against all of me. My mouth goes dry and no words come out.

"I..." I swallow hard. "I didn't even get to finish the experiment. I didn't get to ask you about it or..." I break off at his expression.

"What are you talking about?" He's gone very still and I have the feeling of having stepped in some very deep doo doo.

"Uh."

"What kind of experiment are we talking about?"

And then he's talking so fast I can hardly follow him as he rails about guinea pigs and blow jobs and nerdy pre-meds who are too fucking hot for their own good and I must be heading for a heart attack because my heart is slamming so hard in my chest when he switches into Russian and somehow that's even hotter because I've never seen him so emotional. Except that once and the flashback is killing me. His hair falls forward and I want to push it back because I never really got to touch it and it looks slippery smooth.

"Does that mean you don't want to do it again?" I interrupt in a meek voice.

Instantly he freezes and I wince. For God's sake, Rachel, I ask myself, what next? Why can't you just walk away? But I can't.

Yuri stares at me blankly. His chest is still heaving distractingly but his anger seems to be subsiding.

"What?" He sounds deceptively calm.

"Umm," I stall. I take a step backward and he follows me.

"You want to do it again, huh?" He advances another step til I can almost feel the heat of him. I wring my hands together to keep them off him and tilt my face up because he's hovering. Too close.

“Yes?” It comes out as a whisper and he leans in closer.

“What’s that, Rachel? Just so we’re clear. You want to go down on me again, tease me with your tongue, make me come in your mouth?” His voice is very low, his gray eyes dark. I can feel how turned on he is by how turned on I am, by the thick coils of tension in my stomach, the hammering of my pulse. My body wants his now, now, now.

I nod shakily and he inhales, still holding my gaze.

“No.”

He shakes his head slowly.

Wait, what?

“You don’t get to experiment on me any more. But if you need more data I’m happy to experiment on you.” His eyes are glittering.

I blink, trying to catch my breath and process his words and my feelings and his sheer nearness all at once. Does he mean...? But....

“Okay,” I murmur. And through all the swirling chaos in my head I feel a small smile break through. I’m getting more time with him, more pleasure, more feeling. There’s no need for closure yet.

And after the first flash of surprise, Yuri breaks into a matching smile.

##

Chapter Ten: Yuri

We have an *appointment* for our next *experiment*. Tonight at 8. After classes, practice, dinner. It’s crazy, ridiculous, bizarro, hot.

In the meantime, we text. I bump into someone as I walk to Microbiology and grunt an apology. I have to glance up from the phone that’s been glued to my hand for the last hour just to make sure I’m heading in the right direction.

Ha. What’s the right direction anyway?

ME: *stop texting me. I gotta get to class.*

HER:

I watch the bubbles and almost skid on some wet leaves but catch myself.

HER: *heads up dude!*

My head snaps up and I scan the quad til I see her on the other side, standing ramrod straight with the wind fluttering her hair. She gives me a little finger wave and I can almost see the smirk on her face. I give an exaggerated shrug and duck my head again to hide my grin.

She must be heading to her bio seminar, which means she walks this way on Tuesdays and Thursdays.... Shit, now I'm tracking her. I hustle toward my next class, feeling foolish. But that's the bio seminar she's designing experiments for, which gets me thinking. I spend Microbiology dreaming up experiments I can run on her. After class I'm more than ready, but we've got five hours to go.

ME: *protocol?*

HER: ?

ME: *methodology?*

HER: :)

ME: *n=2 ok?*

The idea of her collecting "data" from other guys is a no go. This is just the two of us.

HER: *it'll invalidate any results but yeah :)*

I exhale my relief and see she's still typing.

HER: *talk first. I have a list of questions for you. Then your turn. Then debriefing.*

I hold back a snort. Bossy, isn't she? I should have known.

ME: *you mean YOUR turn.*

She better get that straight—and I can't take my eyes off those stupid text bubbles even though my next class is starting. I'm going to have to put the phone away any minute now.

HER: *no, last time was my turn ;)*

Holy shit, this girl knows how to turn me on. My face feels hot. I only have a minute while they circulate a handout to dash out another text. I never would have picked this History of Science course but it fulfills my Gen Ed elective and it turns out to be pretty cool.

ME: *gonna take my time then*

It's weird to know when you're going to have sex. I mean, know for sure. I check my watch again and it's still 7:52. I prowls around my tiny dorm room—which only takes about three paces—straightening books and fluffing pillows. *Fluffing pillows!* I try to shake out the tension like I would before a game, but I just end up staring at my bed. It never looked so big and...obvious.

When I was with Amber we never knew when we'd get to do it. There were always people at our homes—her mom, my dad—so the only options were her brother's car, the occasional empty room at a party if we were quick enough to snag it, or the back of the movie theater for some making out. That was about it for privacy. Then we were rarely on the same page anyway. Sometimes we were fighting. Sometimes she'd want to hang with her friends. Sometimes I'd just rather be by myself. She didn't always seem into it and I'd wonder if she was doing it for me, which just made me feel guilty and torn. But she never wanted to talk about it so I didn't know what to do. It was fine with me when we went in different directions for college.

But now I've got privacy so why don't I take advantage?

The knock on the door snaps me out of this loop and I jump to open it. And there she is. In glasses, sweatpants, and a De Vere hoodie—in case I forgot this wasn't a date. Her hair is up in a loose knot. For a moment we just stare at each other. Then her mouth parts and I stare at that. She swallows and my gaze drops to her throat.

“Can I come in?” She shuffles her feet.

I feel my face heat. “Uh. Yeah. Obviously. Of course.” I want to smack myself. She looks a little pink too as she moves slowly into my room, taking stock. She turns to face me, hugging her backpack to her chest, and I wave her to the only chair. We needed privacy more than space, which is why we chose my room over hers.

I clear my throat and get a grip on myself. This is Rachel. We've been meeting up for weeks. She's had my dick in her mouth. We can do this.

“So...,” we both say at the same time.

“It's weird, huh?” Her eyes meet mine.

“Yeah.” I make an effort to relax by sinking down on my bed, which is the only other place to sit. “Let's just go for it. You said you had questions?” I lift one eyebrow and shift back to lean on my elbows.

She pulls a clipboard out of her backpack and I snicker. “Really, Rachel?”

She throws me a sly look. “Too much?”

“Nah. Perfect.”

She takes out a pencil and pushes up her glasses and I think for sure she's messing with me. Because she must know how hot this nerdy librarian thing is.

"Next time wear that lab coat from Halloween."

She laughs.

"I'm serious."

She gives me a prim look that's even hotter, then clears her throat and consults her checklist. "Okay.... On a scale of one to seven with one being the worst and seven being the best, how would you rate our last sexual experiment?"

I gape at her. "You want me to score you on a Likert scale?"

She nods, straight-faced.

"To rate a blow job?"

She's not meeting my eyes.

"You get that this is ridiculous, right?"

She sighs then and puts down the checklist, shoulders slumping. "Yeah. I do." She looks so discouraged.

"Six."

Her face lifts and it's flushed. It takes her a beat and then her brow wrinkles. "What? What could have been better?"

"Come here and I'll tell you." I pat the bed. She rolls her eyes a little but moves quickly to sit at my side. I toy with the zipper on her hoodie before starting to drag it down. I'm vaguely aware of the usual dorm sounds out in the hall: voices, music, banging doors. But I'm zeroing in on Rachel.

"You could have let me touch you. Like this." I stroke one finger over her collarbone as her sweatshirt falls open. Her skin is warm and her breath is speeding up. The tank top underneath emerges bit by bit and I'm mesmerized.

"You could have let me taste you. Like this." I lower my head to her neck and suck on the place where it meets her shoulder. It's delicious, smooth and warm. I linger there while I get her arms free of her sleeves.

Rachel makes a strangled sound that makes me smile against her silky skin. She pushes her discarded sweatshirt off the bed while I gently pull the clip out of her hair so the waves tumble

out. God, her hair is amazing. So soft and thick. I reluctantly disengage from her neck so I can admire her like this—and the effect is stunning. The heavy dark waves fall every which way around her bare shoulders, covering her chest. How did she get so sexy? I reach up to remove her glasses while she watches me, eyes wide and dark, her breathing unsteady. Her hands come up to clutch at my biceps but I shake my head.

“Nuh uh. You’re getting the same deal you gave me,” I warn, as her fingers start stroking down my arms. I take her two hands in one of my mine and move them firmly to the bedspread. “No touching back.”

Rachel pouts, her mouth adorably mulish, then shifts restlessly so her hair falls behind her shoulders.

“Damn.” Her tits are outlined by a thin tank top and her nipples are poking through. I brush my thumbs over them and she wriggles, gasping.

“I had more questions....” Her words become a moan as my fingers skim over the cotton.

“Yeah?”

“Mmmm.”

There’s a moment where the only sound is our heavy breathing. Rachel leans back with her hands behind her, her hair floating around her shoulders. Her lips part.

Then, “Yuri?”

I grunt, distracted.

“Take off my shirt.”

Yeah, that takes about two seconds. And now I’m just staring.

“What?”

Did she say something?

“Uh.” I should probably look her in the face.

“They’re just boobs.” She sounds a little amused now so I glance up, reluctantly.

“What?”

She presses her lips together like she’s trying not to laugh. “You know, mammary glands.”

I shake my head as I try to keep up. “This.” I trace the tip of a finger around the velvety softness of her areola, which is a dark circle against her pale skin. Because I guess I have a few words left.

She bites down on her lower lip and I’m afraid I’ll spontaneously combust because she’s so sexy just like this, topless and still in sweatpants on my dorm bed, all tousled and turned on. I want to look and look so I can draw her later, like this, but I want to touch her and taste her now. Her tits aren’t big but they tilt up with a perfect, sweet line of a curve, drawing my eye to their dark peaks. Rachel arches a little under my gaze and I take it as an invitation.

“So pretty,” I murmur. And then there’s no talking or thinking because I’m exploring her curves with my fingers and mouth, drawing little cries from her that have me throbbing. I pull on one swollen nipple, wrapping an arm around her back to keep her close to me. She pushes even closer, still braced on one arm while the other hand has moved to grip my hair, pulling and scratching at me.

“I think...oh! Yeah, umm. Maybe we better stop now.” She’s panting.

The words sink in and I lift my head to look at her. “Stop?” I repeat, feeling stupid. My jeans are tight. My body is tense and full of heat. Her eyes, half closed, open slowly. She looks like she’s surfacing from a very good dream.

She blinks again and speaks slowly. “To finish the questions.”

“Are you serious?” I flop backwards onto the bed next to her and stare at the ceiling in an effort to cool down. I feel Rachel turn on her side to face me and I wonder if she’s still topless because there’s no way I can look at her right now....

“What’s our hypothesis?” she whispers. “And we need a protocol, like methods...” Her voice trails off when I groan, covering my eyes with both hands.

“Gimme a minute, okay?” I don’t want to feel frustrated with her but I’m frustrated, period. She’s got to notice the boner trying to break free of my jeans.

The silence extends awkwardly for too long as I pull myself together.

“On a scale of one to seven with one being...”

I roll toward her and hold her gaze. “No. It’s *your* turn, remember? So on a scale of one to seven with one being the worst and seven being the best how would *you* rate that sexual encounter so far?” I’m tense with lust and impatience. We’re lying side by side on my bed, facing each other and I better not tear my eyes away from hers or they’ll be pulled, magnet-like, back to her bare chest.

She chews on her lip, her lashes lowering. “Seven?” she whispers.

Some of my tension uncoils a little. “Damn straight. So what is the point of this experiment anyway? Are you really going to pass this off as research?”

Rachel tips her head to one side and her hair swirls over one shoulder again.

“Maybe. I want to study the relationship of feelings, like sensation, and Feelings, like emotions.”

I must not have all my wits back because that doesn’t make any sense to me. She tucks some hair behind her ear and my eyes linger on the smooth hollow there that I want to suck on.

“Like, why would you get turned on by touching me anyway? I mean, it makes sense for the recipient—me—to be aroused, but not the giver, right?” Her brow furrows.

She must see my incredulous expression because she starts again and her fingers start making little distracting circles on the cover between us. I want those hands on me.

“Arousal is about the stimulation of erogenous zones that send powerful signals to the brain and release dopamine. But,” she pauses, blushing a little, “your erogenous zones weren’t stimulated.”

“Is this the best you can do for dirty talk?” I smirk. But I have to face away from her again because damn if she isn’t turning me on and I don’t even know why.

She smacks my shoulder and whines, “Yuri!”

I laugh then and pull her closer so her head rests against me and she scoots til her legs tangle with mine. I make sure to keep my hands off her bare skin but I can’t help digging my fingers into her hair and smoothing through the tangles.

“On a scale of one to seven...”

I snort, but she uses her free hand to pinch my arm.

“...how turned on were you?” Her voice is so low I wouldn’t hear her if she weren’t right up against my neck.

I don’t need to think about it. My dick is still aching. “Seven.”

She rubs her head against my shoulder and it feels nice. We’re quiet for a moment while I think about this “experiment” and wonder how we got to this strange place. Finally I roll over with her so she’s pinned under me, leaning up on my elbows so I can look down into her flushed face. She draws a deep breath and I can feel her chest moving, nipples brushing against my tee shirt.

“Okay. You want to separate feelings from Feeeeeelings.” I draw out the word and she smiles, distracting me. “And you want to separate what the giver feels from what the recipient feels.” I am trying hard to take this seriously and trying hard to tune out my body’s response to her body, under mine. She fits perfectly against me.

She nods, licking her lower lip nervously.

“Don’t do that,” I scold. She smiles a little again but it’s more like a smirk as she squirms to reach for her top.

Her voice is still muffled by her shirt over her head when I hear her mumble “Why is this so hard?” Then as her face pops back out, her hair tousled and her face pink, we both burst into laughter. I can feel her under me, shaking with it. Her face is alight and it’s like a bubble closed over us. Just here. Now. Us.

“This is ridiculous, you know.” I’m brimming over with *feelings* though.

She nods, her mouth curving wide. “Indeed.”

The laughter fades and then I’m just stretched out on top of her, and we’re staring at each other. I can see a few faint freckles on her pale smooth skin and each dark eyelash. Her hair springs away from her face in long dark waves and her eyes gleam with warmth. I smooth one curl down and my thumb brushes her jaw. I can feel her shiver but I’m not going anywhere.

“What the hell?” she murmurs, as if to herself. I know what she means but I don’t get it either so I shrug.

“I have a question for you too.” I have to admit this is kind of fun. Weird, but fun. And hot. She shifts and I think she may push me off her but she settles back with a little sigh.

“Mmm?”

“When we’re pressed together like this how can you tell who’s the giver and who’s the recipient?”

She flushes a little and her gaze drops. “It’s complicated?”

That’s for sure.

Those warm brown eyes meet mine again, so very near and intimate. “What are you feeling?”

And I inhale deeply to buy some time because damned if I know. And damned if I’ll say. And she’s so damned brave. Rachel watches me as I sort and discard words and phrases. They all seem too trite or too deep or too....

“Yeah,” she smiles softly. “Me too.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN: Rachel

Chapter 11: RACHEL

In my junior honors biology seminar I had to choose develop my own year-long research project and spend the year and work independently on collecting and analyzing the data before writing it up as a 25-page paper. I will be conducting a series of experiments on the relationship of sensory feelings to emotional feelings. My hypothesis is that sensory stimulation can in fact be isolated and differentiated from the interpretation of those feelings, which we usually think of as emotions. While I'm only a freaking college student the topic is too broad to come to any significant conclusions in one measly semester, I think I can establish that [FINISH SENTENCE!] —RachelBermanFirstDraft.doc

“What did you get for that last equation?” My neighbor leans over to peer at my notebook and I slam my arm over my scribbles and doodles because they are all about Yuri and experiments and what I should try with him next.

“Sorry. I spaced out. Not done yet.” I avoid her eyes as I scramble to finish the problem set. I’ve been in this study group all semester but I can’t remember her name. I keep my head down and try to focus.

When our hour is up I can see through the library window that dusk has fallen and the streetlights have lit up. Chairs scrape against the ground and the conversation takes on a different tone. I stack up my books and get to my feet, still feeling distracted. Ever since that night with Yuri I’ve been in a sort of sensual haze. It feels good but it sure is inconvenient.

“What about you, Rachel?”

I look up and the guy across the table is waiting for something. “Hmm?”

With a sigh, he repeats himself. “We’re all heading to the pub for a beer. You coming?” He’s watching intently, and I glance around the table. Everyone has paused to see if they should wait for me or not. One girl taps her foot impatiently.

“Uh. No, sorry. I have some more work to do tonight.” I wave a hand in the air vaguely.

“Of course you do,” I hear someone mumble. And I’m prodded out of my bubble for a minute. I look around the circle of faces slowly. They’re all pre-med like me. How do they have social lives?

“But it’s Halloween!” What’s-her-name protests. I glance out the window and register the costumes, the decorations, the sounds of partying.

“I have to catch up when the basketball team’s away.” I make that up on the spot. I have a life too!

The guy across from me raises his eyebrows. “Oh. A boyfriend?”

Is he fishing? He’s got a pleasant face, round and open. He’s a little taller than me and seems polite. I blink at him. He’s probably better boyfriend material than any of the jocks I’ve dated or hooked up with or experimented with. I straighten and swing my backpack on one shoulder.

“Nooo. I just like basketball.”

The group of them exchange looks that I can’t quite read. Some shrug. They walk out chattering among themselves and I slow down on purpose to avoid the awkward goodbye when they head for fun and I head for home.

Outside the library I hug my arms around myself because it’s getting late and dark and cold. I need to dig out my winter clothes because this flannel shirt isn’t cutting it any more. I trudge along the path back to my dorm room, kicking leaves and feeling low for some reason. No one is there either and I hear the sounds of a party whenever a door opens or shuts down the hall.

I want to wallow so I shuffle towards our shared kitchen. If there was ever a good time for the emergency ice cream we keep in the freezer it’s now.

But it’s gone! Someone must have eaten my Phish Food and now I really want to cry because my life sucks and I’m just drowning in work. I fling myself face down on the sofa and inhale upholstery. My med school essay depends on my independent study experiment, which is completely confusing and unsettling me and I have no one to talk to.

I'm bored and restless. I turn the TV on. I turn the TV off. On. Off. There's nothing on. Even when I flip through allll the channels.

ME: I'm bored. And restless.

It's ten minutes before I get a response.

YURI: <eye roll> don't you have homework???

ME: har har.

(But he probably wasn't joking so I defend myself.)

ME: It's Friday.

YURI: And Halloween. Why aren't you out?

(Because I have no friends!)

ME: Why aren't you??

YURI: I am out! Back 1h ago.

(Wha??)

ME: where?

YURI: Addams.

Addams House hosts a haunted house party every Halloween. For obvious reasons. Now I hear the chatter and bass in the background.

My phone rings while I'm still mulling this over.

ME: Gotta go. It's Noah.

YURI: ???!

ME: MY BROTHER!

If Yuri answers I ignore him to swipe over to my brother's call.

"Hey!"

"Hey."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

We're both silent for a minute.

"Holly?" I guess.

"Yeah."

"Talk to her, Noah. She adores you."

More silence. "I've got the marathon Sunday."

Crap, I forgot! My brother has been training for the New York City marathon. I can't figure out what that has to do with Holly but they've been the main parallel lines in his life for the past six months....

"You're ready though."

"Yeah. Trying to rest up. What about you? You going out later?" I can tell he's trying to be cheerful for my sake.

"Nah. You know."

"Hey, we can't both be pathetic loners. Go. Hang out with that jock you're hooking up with now. Just don't tell me about it later."

I squirm. Ew! And I'm not, I want to protest, like a loser.

"And don't dress up as pre-med Barbie. No one got it."

I chuckle. True that. But it gives me an idea.

“Gotta go, bro.”

He hates it when I call him that.

But now I feel energized because I have an IDEA. It only takes me twenty minutes to change my clothes and race out the door.

I don't see him anywhere. I push through throngs of drunken dancers, swaying in clumps, and crane my head to peer around the Sponge Bobs, Bridezillas, and Iron Men. I've got only one reason to be here and it's just one punch line. I'm about to give up when someone grabs my arm and turns me around. I'm about to blister his hide when my eyes meet Yuri's.

“Really?”

Because it's Yuri he doesn't smile but I'm getting better at telling when he's amused. And I think he's amused.

“Like it?”

He leans against the nearest wall and crosses his arms over his chest to survey me from head to toe. My breathing hitches and then takes a hike up a mountain.

“You could show more skin, but yeah.”

I flush. The blue scrubs and white lab coat completely cover me from neck to ankle.

“Hey, I didn't wear the surgical face mask. What are you anyway?” I cock my head to look him over, since I can. He's in his usual track pants and hoodie.

“I never dress up for Halloween.”

I squawk. “What? Not even as a kid? How did you go trick or treating?”

He shrugs. “I didn't. I don't care about candy. So what's the point?”

“Because it’s fun, dude.” I have to lean in to yell into his ear over the cacophony. He points to a corner and we move in that direction.

“Oh and you’re the expert on fun?” His smirk is back.

“Relatively speaking? Sure. I’ll take that role.” There are no chairs anywhere so we find ourselves leaning against a new wall, but at least we can hear each other.

“You’re not playing a role now. You’re not in costume either. This is you. Pre-med Rachel.”

“I’m Dr. Cristina Yang!”

“You’re hiding behind that lab coat.” For a moment it seems as if his eyes heat but I can’t tell in this dark room. “Is it supposed to be a red flag?”

“Ummm?” Because I don’t know what I meant by it. I just know I wanted to get his attention.

He snorts and pulls on the low ponytail that hangs over one of my shoulders. I flinch and he notices. “Sorry,” he mumbles, looking away.

“No, it’s okay. I....” I don’t know how to finish that sentence so I don’t.

He studies me, his expression grave. As usual.

“What?” I’m inexplicably nervous. It’s just Yuri.

“What are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here?”

He shrugs. “The same as you?” I can see the tiniest smile escape.

“You should smile more,” I blurt out.

I get side-eye. “Why?”

I throw up my hands. “So people will like you?”

“I have enough friends.”

I laugh. “Sure you do. Like where are they then?” I make a point of looking all around. No one seems to notice us.

“You’re one to talk.”

I slump back a little, resting my arms on my knees and my head back against the wall. “Yeah. Fair enough.”

He pats my arm awkwardly. “Don’t worry about it. Friends are over-rated.” We look at each other and break into smiles at the same time. Something inside me eases up and I’m grateful to him for that.

“Why don’t you have a girlfriend?” And there I go again. I almost clap a hand over my mouth.

He gives me a measured look. “How do you know I don’t?”

A hot wave of embarrassment floods me and I start to jump to my feet. I need to get away and figure out an excuse later. But Yuri grabs my hand and anchors me down.

“Hey. Sorry. I thought we were just talking trash. Obviously I don’t have a girlfriend, Rachel.” He looks confused by my reaction, but contrite. My heart is still beating fast and I’m struggling to catch up to my own feelings. Yuri is still holding on to my hand and I’m confused too.

“Why obviously?”

“Obviously we wouldn’t be talking about our... experiment then.” He glares like he’s offended. And embarrassed. It’s kind of cute.

“And besides....” He waves his other hand around the room. I frown. What does that even mean? His hand is still warm in mine and his body is becoming familiar, its long limbs and lean muscles. In the dim light of the party his face seems carved in marble—stern in its severity.

“If you smiled girls would notice you.” Ugh. Enough blurting, Rachel!

He almost smiles then but catches himself. “That right?”

My mouth curves too. “It’s a hypothesis anyway.”

He chuckles and I'm glad to be sitting on the floor in a corner with him, just talking. I look down at my Danskos (so suitable for a long day in the O.R.!) and feel a little pang. I scratch my neck so I have an excuse to take back my hand.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Yuri sighs, folds his arms again, and looks at me without blinking. How does he do that?

“I guess I was hoping for more of a reaction,” I admit, feeling foolish. “Maybe I should have come as a sexy nurse instead.” I smooth out a wrinkle on my lab coat. What was I thinking? We sit in silence, side by side, while I get more and more uncomfortable. Music thumps through the room and someone stumbles over my stretched out legs. “Watch it!” I snap.

“What’s sexy anyway?” Yuri’s low voice breaks through my discomfort. I can’t tell if it’s because he doesn’t want anyone else to hear us or...something else. His head turns to face me again and I can feel his gaze.

“What do you think?” I whisper, my cheeks heating.

He leans his head back against the wall then and I can tell he’s thinking. “Confidence. Humor.” He pauses to clear his throat and I’m on tenterhooks, my fingers tensing on my knees. “Surprise. Mystery....There’s nothing mysterious about a sexy nurse. I like to picture what I can’t see.” There’s a flush creeping up his neck and I’m fascinated. “God, I sound like a chick. What do you think?”

I inhale and blow out a breath, buying time. “Umm.” Honestly I haven’t really thought about this— beyond my jonesing for jocks, which I’m hardly going to confess to Yuri....

“Candor.” I have to give him that, though I feel exposed myself. “Vulnerability.” I grimace and fidget. “God, I sound like such a chick too.”

“Did you say big dick?”

My head whips around and he’s smirking. “What?? No. Oh. Screw you for screwing with me.” I punch him in the shoulder but I’m laughing too because it relieves the awful tension of being too close and too honest. “And you left big tits off your list.”

“Nope. Not my thing.” He looks serious again so I consider believing him.

“What is your thing?” I dare out loud. And hold my breath.

“Athletes,” he says promptly. He’s facing away from me so I can only see his profile, which I admire for its clean lines. “Those girls have the whole package: the confidence, the bodies, the stamina....” He’s got that little smile again. The one that kills me.

“Yeah, athletes,” I sigh, then catch myself. “And boobs do get in the way of most sports. Guys are lucky.”

“Balls get in the way too.”

“Huh. I suppose so.”

We share the quiet and I’m enjoying this strange conversation. Maybe it’s our own weird way of flirting.

“So what sports have your girlfriends played?” I don’t know why I’m asking this but I just want to keep going.

“None.” I turn to face him and he looks thoughtful. “My high school girlfriend was in the art program at our school. That was cool.”

“None?” I repeat, baffled.

He shrugs. “You can’t always get everything you want.”

I slump back against the wall with a groan. “Not that again, Yuri! Would you stop with the martyr complex?”

“Martyr complex? Did you learn that from your shrink parents?”

We’re turned to face each other and his eyes are bright with laughter. His hair falls forward and he tucks it back behind one ear.

“Maybe.” I like it when he teases. He’s too serious. Though I like it when he’s serious too. Ugh.

Our gazes hold and there’s something weird going on between us that I can’t figure out. I get a little freaked and pull back.

“It’s probably late and I should get back.”

Maybe I want to be convinced to stay, maybe I want to resume our experiment, but Yuri just nods and rises gracefully to his feet, offering a hand to pull me up. I scramble awkwardly after him, fiddling with my clothes and my ponytail while he watches, still silent.

“I’ll tell you a secret,” he says suddenly.

I freeze, all my nerve endings on alert. He bends slightly so his mouth brushes my ear and I shiver, wanting to grab hold of him to keep my balance.

“I like picturing what’s under those scrubs, Rachel. That’s sexy.” He sounds as breathless as I am. “See you in bio class.”

I blink as he grins and turns away. With an effort I head in the other direction, both thrilled and thwarted.

And yeah, mystery is sexy.

CHAPTER TWELVE: Yuri

“This isn’t tutoring,” Rachel grumbles. I look up from our Biostatistics homework to find her watching me from across the table. “You don’t need my help.”

I lean forward to glance at her laptop screen. She’s done with her questions and we seem to be getting the same answers working side by side. “Sorry,” I shrug, not sorry. “But it’s not been ‘tutoring’ for a while now, no?” I put air quotes around the word and grin at her.

She bites her lip to keep from grinning back and it’s adorable. Her mouth is so pink. And I’ve never kissed it, I realize. I blink, taken aback. It’s Monday night and we’re leaving here together. For another experiment. I think. I’m too nervous to confirm with her.

“If we’re done we can leave,” she says. Because she’s the brave one. I just nod, not trusting my voice. She sees something in my face because instead of collecting her stuff she leans forward and whispers, “It’s your turn, you know. And I have an idea.”

Holy shit. Rachel and her ideas really do it for me. I gulp and nod again. She gives me a big smile then and stands, twisting to reach for the coat she hung on her chair. Her tits briefly press against her sweater, nipples tight. I swallow again, enjoying the view. Her long neck, strong body, the thick tumble of waves hanging over one shoulder. I know what I’m getting now and it’s good. I adjust my pants before standing up, grateful for my usual baggy clothes.

Without discussing it we head toward my room since we’re more likely to have privacy. It’s already dark out and we pass through little haloes of light under each street lamp. I grasp for conversation topics to distract me from the arousal surging through my body.

“How did you pitch this research assignment anyway?” That’s not really off-topic but it’s the best I can do.

“I’m studying how sexual stimulation gets translated or interpreted by the brain into emotional feelings. The specific questions about neuron pathways, perception, and cognition would be clinical research. I don’t have the resources to do that kind of lab work. But the bigger question suggests how the body and mind interact and how physical feelings can become emotions. We use the same word, feelings, to describe two very different things.”

I’m drawn in despite myself. “So you’re assuming that during sex physical stimuli are conveyed to the brain and *interpreted* as pleasure?”

“Yeah. There’s nothing in an electrical current running through nerves that labels a sensation as pleasure or pain. The brain does that. Or some part of it.”

I mull that over. The rub of fabric against my wrist. The smell of dead leaves. The faint thud of our sneakers hitting the brick path. All that—and more than I’m not even consciously aware of—collected, sorted, and labelled by my brain simultaneously, constantly, in every moment. Kind of mind-blowing when you think about it, which we don’t. My foot catches on a piece of broken

pavement and I feel a dull smart in one toe. Huh.

Rachel hunches her shoulders, hands hidden in her coat pockets. Then she glances up at me, her expression serious. “But I told you I can’t really use our experiments. They’re just sort of...” She hesitates, flushing. “Brainstorming, I guess. For ideas.”

I nod slowly. I don’t know what to say. It doesn’t really make sense to me, but it’s not like I want her to stop.... “It’s just sex,” I say out loud.

She shoots me a glance I can’t interpret. “It’s just *science*,” she corrects.

Our eyes meet briefly and I try to shake off my confusion. I take a deep breath and plunge forward.

“What’s your idea for tonight?”

She smiles, looking ahead as we reach my building. “We have to isolate the variables.”

“Say what?”

She grins wider as I swipe in and hold the front door for her. A gaggle of girls heads out, whispering, as we head in but I hardly notice.

“Well, where does physical stimulation come from? Touch, taste, hearing, sight, smell.... Tonight we’re taking touch out of the equation.”

“Um...” I grab the handrail for balance as we climb the stairs to my room. Rachel is ahead of me, which means I’ve got a good view of her fine ass.

She gives me a sly glance over her shoulder and it’s way hot.

“No touching.”

“This is actually kind of awkward. It seemed like a good idea at the time.” Rachel is standing in the middle of my room, looking at the floor and chewing on her lip.

Some of my tension eases. She’s nervous too. Good. I take off my coat and throw it on the bed, rubbing my hands together because it’s cold out there.

“Spit it out.”

She looks up and squares her shoulders because she’s brave that way. “I just thought that maybe you’d like to draw me. Since you like to draw.” Her gaze is searching, her eyes big and serious. I don’t know what she could see in my face besides confusion.

“Um?” I move toward my bed and clear some books off so she can sit down but she hovers

uncomfortably, standing stock still. She takes a deep breath.

“I mean naked. Draw me naked.” She rushes on before I can close my gaping mouth. “But I don’t know if you do that. Draw people. Or nudes. Or if it’s even a good idea. Whether you’d even think that’s hot.” She pauses when she sees my expression, relaxing just a little.

“Was that a question?” I can’t resist teasing her a little because I’m relieved and uncomfortable and turned on all at the same time. But I can hardly contain my grin.

Rachel sighs. “Dammit, Yuri. Yes, it’s a question. Do you think that would be hot?”

I swallow. Is she for real? “No joke? You’d really do that?”

She nods, eyes wide and fixed on mine. And I don’t get her—how open and brave she is. Who does this? And who am I to turn it down??

“Gimme your coat. If you’re going to get naked we may as well start there.” She starts to peel off the sleeves and I reach out to help, full of wanting.

“Hey, I said no touching!” Rachel swats my hands away and my grin escapes. She gives me a shy smile back and I retreat, sinking into my desk chair to watch. She’s still standing in the middle of the room, her coat at her feet, slowly unraveling the scarf from around her neck. Her hair tumbles out and I stretch my legs in front of me, crossing my arms over my chest and settling back to watch. Damn!

“Hmm,” she grumbles. “I didn’t totally think this through. Don’t you have to get supplies or something?” She leans over to pull off her boots and I enjoy that view immensely. They hit the floor with a loud clunk and she darts a glance at me before pulling her sweater over her head.

“Nope. Got what I need right here.” Without taking my eyes off her I reach for the notebook and pencil on my desk. Have I ever drawn a nude before? Nah. She thinks I’m some sort of artist, which makes me cringe, but I know I’m just a doodler. Still, I can’t believe how eager I am to try this. Rachel strips slowly. The jeans slide down her legs one at a time and I’m riveted by all the pale skin. She’s not even trying.

“Should I put on some music?” I’m screwing with her but it’s also awfully quiet in here.

She makes a face at me, then her shirt comes off and I lose my smirk. Her tits plump up over the edge of her bra and I swallow. She’s really doing this. Then she’s briskly taking it off and sliding off her undies. And she’s... naked. In my room. And there’s no way I’m going to do justice to this. To her.

She faces me squarely again, wearing only a faint flush on her skin. We’re both silent for a moment and the tension between us crackles in the air.

“Uh, no touching?” It comes out raw and I clear my throat uncomfortably. I have to ask. Because. I widen my legs a little because I ache.

Rachel shakes her head, lips parted. Her eyes fall and that's how I want to draw her, looking shy and so sexy all at once.

"I can't just stand here though." She turns and I almost groan out loud at the view as she stretches out on my bed, lining up on her side to face me with her head on her hand. Damn, her legs are long and curved with muscle. She's a dream of soft and sweet and, I bet, silky. *My dream. Right now.*

"How about this?" she says softly. "It looks like a painting, doesn't it?" Her hair falls over one shoulder and I want to bury my hands in it.

I nod because I can't speak and fiddle with my notebook, swiping to a fresh page. It calls out to me and I turn it sideways, blocking out an invisible form. It's my job to make that visible. To capture the warm curves and hollows into lines and shadow. It's pulling me in—she's pulling me—and I've rarely felt this focused or engaged.

"You okay? Cold?" Her nipples are tight and her throat moves as she swallows and shakes her head. "Hot," she murmurs.

We share a tiny smile, eyes holding, and it feels magical, so sexy and so restrained. I don't even know what to call this thing with her any more. Then I just sink into it, my eyes moving over Rachel's smooth pale skin as my hand traces a path across the empty page. She's perfectly still but I am watching so closely that I can see her chest shift ever so slightly as she breathes. I'm painfully aware of her skin reacting to my gaze, tightening, blushing, trembling. But she doesn't say a word.

As I get drawn deeper into the work, I wonder about that. I have no attention for conversation but I've got her beautiful form to focus on, to figure out. What is she thinking? The question surfaces and disappears again, like my awareness of the room. I'm in a zone. This shoulder is sharp here and hollowed out there. Her hair has volume that's different from flesh. Her left breast is slightly fuller than her right and the dark shadow between her legs is different than the shadow between her breasts.

I'm not sure how much time has passed. I'm hard and aching but weirdly content. My brain clears again for a moment, like pushing away cobwebs.

"What about you?" But we're not actually in the middle of a conversation and her expression shifts to puzzled. I glance between her face and the page, adjusting. "Is this good for you?" No, that came out wrong too. I inhale and summon my scattered thoughts. "I mean..."

"Yeah," she whispers. Our eyes meet and the tension deepens. I close the notebook carefully. The drawing is probably as good as it will ever be.

I really want to touch her.

She shakes her head though I haven't asked. She shivers a little, then curls her legs under her and

sits up in one graceful move.

“Can I see it what you drew?” She rubs her hands over her arms, which pushes her tits together. The long waves of her hair block my view but she looks so enticing I don’t mind. Like a mermaid. But better. Way better. Obviously.

I shake my head, not trusting my voice. She purses her lips and frowns, reaching for her clothes on the floor. I can’t tell if she’s mad, disappointed, or as frustrated as I am.

She shakes her hair back as she pulls on her tee shirt, and I mourn the loss of her nakedness. I see the hint of another tiny smile.

“So on a scale of one to seven with one being the....” She’s already losing it though and her grin breaks free just as mine does.

“Seven.”

She grabs her jeans and pulls them back on. “You don’t even know which end of the scale is which.” Her mouth is perfectly curved and her eyes are glowing. That’s another thing about Rachel. Even when things are awkward they aren’t awkward. I don’t really get that.

I fold my arms behind my head and watch her snap her waistband, fish for her shoes under my bed, and steal glances at me. I can’t believe how turned on I am even without any touching. Maybe it’s not sex but it sure doesn’t feel like science either.

“If the experiment is over why don’t I get to touch you now?”

She pauses, her feet still bare, and I want to draw this too. Rachel, poised between coming and going, suspended here with me in this jittery zone. Just as I’m accepting defeat she glides closer, straddling my lap and leaning in to frame my face with her hands. Then her mouth is on mine and it’s just as sweet and soft and lush as I ever imagined. I groan and our tongues are licking and teasing and greedily exploring. My hips automatically press up to grind against her, wanting relief. But just as I’m about to pull her even closer and bury my hands under those clothes she retreats, breathing hard.

“No, you can’t touch me.” Her eyes are dark and smoky, her mouth irresistible. “But I can touch you.” And then it’s my clothes that are coming off and her hot gaze on my body as her fingers light up the electrified nerve endings under my skin.

“Your turn,” she whispers against my throat, licking into the hollow under my ear. I collapse backward into my chair, and just give in. I know what’s coming this time, memory and anticipation mingling with that long tense foreplay so I’m already fit to burst. This girl! Like I said, *damn*.

##

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