

## ELLIE

Ellie walked quickly up the dorm stairs with her shampoo and other bath crap in a cracking plastic carryall. The women's bathroom on her floor was full, and anyway she preferred the showers one floor up. The stairs were cold and grim, fluorescent lights and concrete with the occasional bit of graffiti, written in small letters. There was a bit of Poe: "Beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears," and while she thought she was overemotional, the quote made her sad as she ran her fingers along the wall day after day. She always wondered who had written it and had they survived Princeton and were they now happy.

She heard the slam of the heavy metal door upstairs, footsteps, and then saw him: Amos Cullen. Ugh. Why now, in her bathrobe?

He stopped, half blocking her way. "Hey," he said, with his usual practiced nonchalance.

"Hey," Ellie answered, and kept climbing past him.

"Wait. I want to ask you something." His voice, always a little scratchy, sounded raw as if he'd overdone it screaming on the sidelines of a rugby match.

"Okay," she said slowly. "What?"

"Come up to our room after your shower. We're having a little get-together. Nothing major. My dad sent some wine from California—sort of a tasting thing." He waved his hands to wipe away her concerns. "No shots, no puking, all very civilized."

Ellie fought against a blush, and the desire to lean toward him, which would surely be a colossal mistake. She told herself to keep it together. "I don't think so," she said.

“Why not? Even you have to take a break from studying.” He climbed one step up toward her, and she could smell a subtle cologne, deodorant, whatever. “You should give me a chance,” he said. “It’s the charitable thing to do.”

She should have laughed and kept walking, but she didn’t. Amos Cullen shone the light on her pathetic evening: no plans, no friends, no boyfriend. She said, “Charitable, huh? You are so full of shit.”

“Yeah, but I’m charming. Come on, say yes. Come see if I really am the asshole you think I am.”

She was getting nowhere with Julius, a guy she liked, and her relationship with a soccer player from high school had long ago flamed out. And she hadn’t been pursued like this in a long time, if ever. “Okay, just for a few minutes,” she said. “I have to meet some friends later.” Lie, but she thought it was worth it to set up the safety net.

He smiled. “Good. Twenty minutes, and I’ll be back. Going to get some crackers and stuff at the WaWa. It’ll be great. Trust me.”

Sure, trust Amos Cullen. She must be out of her mind. But it was Friday night, and she’d been meaning to learn something about wine anyway. The chemistry interested her, tannins and aldehydes and the complexities born of time and a patch of soil’s legacy. Her sister Helen would say she was thinking way too much about this, and she’d be right. But for Ellie to walk alone into a room full of Amos Cullens was like heading downhill on skis for the first time.

She showered, spent some extra time getting up her nerve, because now it really was a dare. She put on jeans, a new too-tight pair Helen made her buy. Hard to argue with Helen about how to look hot.

Just some wine, Ellie told herself. Just to prove she wasn't chicken. Sweater on. Blue, her favorite, with little shell buttons on the sleeves, and slip-on clogs (which horrified Helen, who had called her Heidi and offered to braid her hair and teach her to yodel), but Ellie thought wearing them might mean she wasn't trying too hard.

She knew exactly which room was his because she had seen him hanging out of the windows plenty of times, yelling down to one of his buddies in the courtyard. She knocked, wondering if she should just go in, if knocking was stupid and she didn't know it. But he answered and cleared his throat and actually seemed as nervous as she was.

The room was empty, Pink Floyd on the stereo. The four boys who shared the room had hung an old wool Princeton banner from 1927 behind the couch, which was leather and much nicer than the castoff Ellie and her roommates had. On a sturdy wooden coffee table were several bottles of wine and two glasses. The enormous television in the corner was off, and the two small bedrooms on either side of the common room were dark. The floor was covered in a kilim—Native American looking—something her dad would have liked and that lent the room a homey feeling.

After her survey of the room, she looked up at Amos, who stood fidgeting a little, something she had never seen from him. “So, it's quiet, isn't it, Amos?”

He shrugged. “Everybody else bagged out on me.”

She crossed her arms. “Doesn't speak well for your 'trust me' line.”

“I just wanted you to come up. I knew you'd never give me a chance out at one of the clubs, Ellie. And probably not with a bunch of people here either.”

“Probably not.”

“I’m just going to pour some wine.” His hands shook a little as he fumbled with the corkscrew.

She sat down on the slick surface of the couch and waited for her wine. He’d gone to some trouble to get her there, and Julius sure as hell wasn’t in full pursuit. She appreciated his focus on the uncorking, the pouring. “May I see the bottle?”

“Oh, sure. This is a Cab, from Napa. My dad bought a share in the winery, I guess.”

The label was lovely, a pastoral scene with a red barn off to one side. “Looks nice. I’d love to go to Napa one day. I’ve never even been across the Continental Divide.”

“It’s nice out West. Better than over here. Less serious, though. Maybe not your thing.” He swirled the wine in his glass, sniffed it, and sipped, as if he knew what he was doing.

Ellie smiled; she let the seriousness comment slide. “Is there really a point to the swirling?”

“Honestly?”

“Yeah. How about we try a little honesty.”

“I have no idea.”

She nodded. “You look good when you’re honest. You should try more of it.” She glanced at the couch. “It’s okay if you want to sit down.”

“Are you okay with the music? Want something else?”

“It’s fine. A classic, right? I was expecting Barry White.” The glass was solid in her palm, very grown-up. She liked the Cab, the warmth, and she settled back into the couch.

“Not really?” he asked.

She laughed. “Not really.”

“You’re pretty when you laugh. Really pretty. I remember freshman week seeing you in the dining hall, and you were laughing with your friends. I’ve tried to get your attention ever since.”

“You’ve been obnoxious ever since, mostly. What were you thinking?”

“I just get nervous. I’m not really like that.” He reached for the bottle and refilled their glasses.

Nervous she understood. Besides a couple of crackers, she hadn’t eaten dinner. Now the wine meandered through her, both slowing and lightening her. She reached for the possibility that she might shed her nervousness, that she might, for now, forget her history of stilted, unsure encounters with boys. Forget Julius. Live on the Helen wild side of life.

Within a half hour, she had forgotten herself as a pathetic, overly studious girl and slipped into normal, fun young woman, as she’d imagined the caricature. She was cool, relaxed, sexy, and this was *her*, really her. “I love this wine,” she said.

“I feel a lot of love in this room,” he said.

She laughed and drank more. She felt a lot of everything, and a lot more than she had expected. He seemed, now, like a nice guy, a little nervous, really trying to impress her, and he thought she was pretty. When was the last time anybody said that to her, besides her father? They were slouched down on the couch, their feet up on the coffee table and the music louder, or so it seemed, as her thoughts and vision began to blur.

“So, can I kiss you?” He was looking straight ahead, not making a move.

She thought about it, weighing the risk, which seemed small. She’d find out, if nothing else, if she still remembered how to kiss. “Yeah,” she answered. “You can.”

He turned her face to his with the tips of his fingers and gently kissed her. The faint vinegar and berries of the wine floated in the air between them like an invitation to tip back the bottle and really take in its flavor, each from the other.

They fell into a tangle that could not be blamed on the wine or the music. He kissed her with his hands in her hair. They kissed as if they'd been doing it for months and had already worked out all the kinks. They pressed their bodies together like magnets. She didn't want him to move. This was something she had never felt, and had even imagined was impossible for her, as if there were different models and hers was not wired for this kind of physical desire. She pulled Amos's shirt up over his head and let herself go, for once, let herself be undressed and carried to the floor; Amos was stronger than he looked.

Maybe it was the wine, maybe it was hormones, maybe a sense of acting outside of time. They moved slowly, exploring each other, feeling the music and moving from the floor to sitting again as they made love. She couldn't get close enough to his skin. His body, the muscular layout of it, was surprising, a thrilling discovery, and she found herself running her fingers along each muscle, reciting the names: pectoral, latissimus dorsi, deltoid, rhomboid, like poetry in her mind. She laughed then and he did too, though his laughter was forced and completely reactionary.

“What's so funny?” he asked.

“Nothing. Just my mind.”

“Ah.”

They were silent other than small sounds of surprise and pleasure. He climaxed, she did not, but she didn't care, not really. The whole of it was good enough. Much better than the few

fumbling attempts she'd endured in high school. They lay close to each other on the floor, still not talking, waiting for their breathing to settle.

He tentatively reached for her, trailing his hand along her stomach. "Did you?"

"No. Sorry. But it's okay, really."

"Don't apologize. Just let me try something."

She began to protest in her usual overly formal manner, but he touched her and gently circled with one finger. Her upper lip went numb, and her arms pressed down into the floor. Holy shit, she thought. He'd found the spot. She didn't want him to stop, ever. Her hips moved of their own accord. She moaned. None of this was within her control. He bent to her nipple, and she went over the edge, shaking and arching in a series of perfect, lovely shudders. She couldn't feel most of her face. She couldn't move. She was panting, and he sighed with pride.

As she lay there the cold crept in and jogged her back to reality. She was grateful to him, or should be, she thought, but did it have to be Amos? She hardly knew him and began to resent him just a little for finding his way to such an intimate place in her.

Ellie sat up, her back to him. "This isn't like me, you know."

"Okay."

"I just want to be clear about that."

"Okay."

Ellie sighed, her head clearing rapidly and her skin good and cold now.

"Do you want a blanket? You're shivering."

"No. I should go."

"Are you sure?"

Ellie nodded and began to collect her clothes and slip them back on, cursing the jeans. What had she just done? What did it mean? She looked around the room, taking snapshots for later, and one last look at Amos Cullen, bare-chested, sitting up and waiting for something from her that she could not, would not, offer him. "I'm going to go now."

"Ellie . . ." He seemed not to know what to say.

She shook her head. "Bye, Amos." She knew she looked sad, a little shell-shocked, and she was leaving him confused, or maybe he didn't give a shit and was just happy to have gotten laid. Another girl, another wine tasting, another night of Amos Cullen's bullshit. She talked to herself along this vein all the way down the stairs, back to her own quiet room, where she began a new course of self-criticism: slut, stupid, no condom (she was on the pill and pretty good about taking it, but he could easily have a disease), why hadn't she waited for someone she cared about, why was she any better than him, and so on. The thing was: he *was* more than she'd thought. They had connected, and he'd been nothing but decent, and she would no longer be able to despise him in the easy way she had for so long. She didn't sleep for hours, and when she did, she had not changed her clothes and woke up smelling of his skin.

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