



Secrets

Sometimes it takes doing for others to make one look at themselves. Gwen and Andy discover each other and each other's needs through honesty. Can this be enough to repair what is hiding deep inside of them?



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Gwen has one pet peeve.....egos. She never understands how one person could be so full of themselves that they forget that there is a whole world of people around them. The kind of person who looks in the mirror every morning and are impressed with what they see, then expects everyone else to be equally as impressed merely because they exist. Gwen finds that people like this, often times, have some sort of secret and they are hiding behind that wall of cockiness. Sure, she has her share of secrets too but she holds them to herself that's why they are called secret. Unfortunately, she has yet to find a friend she feels comfortable enough to share any of them with, so for now, they stay inside her, and only her.

At the age of 22, Gwen has already had her share of egomaniacs in her life as well as secrets revealed. Take her old boss for example. He walked around the restaurant with his nose so high it was a surprise to her that he never had a nose bleed. His outward persona told people that he did not have a care in the world, that he was so sure of himself and the world around him. He was the man in charge and never let anyone forget the fact. But then came the day she stayed late to close the store and she caught him in his office crying. She knocked on the door to make sure he knew he was not alone, but by that time he was far gone into his misery. He was crying as if he was a child who lost his favorite toy. When in reality, he was on the phone and in a fight with his wife. Apparently, she was the real boss. He waved Gwen away and the next day acted as if nothing happened but was always watching her as she spoke with any other workers. She couldn't work there under this increased scrutiny, her every move was being watched by him. He sometimes followed her to the back where everyone hung up their aprons. Not a moment went by that he wasn't watching her. Lucky for her, she found another job quickly and she is almost finished with school, so she will soon be able to find a full-time job, one that will be a stepping stone in her actual career; at least she hopes she can find one easily.

Before the boss incident, there was her dorm counselor who thought she was the best gift to mankind. She pranced around the dorm floor telling everyone what they were doing wrong with their clothes and paraded around her "perfect modeling body" she would tell them. This counselor never let anyone forget how perfect she was. Gwen's day of secret discovery on this person was when she was sick for three days. In the haze from her bed she watched her counselor roam around the dorm. The one thing that was clear was that the counselor was thinking that she was alone on the floor, she walked out of her room wearing a body suit. The kind that pulled everything in and shaped your body into what you want it to be, there was even more than one place that had padding to enhance her natural curves, as the dorm counselor referred to them as. 'Ms. super model' spoke loudly so no one questioned her and she had her perfect model walk down pat. Everyone around assumed she was natural in all ways. Gwen kept both of these secrets to herself - she had no reason to spread the news. Wouldn't change anything anyway. Besides, there was an opening in one of the off-campus apartments and she grabbed it, if for no other reason than to leave the dorm and all the nonsense that went with living in this crazy, non-reality group setting.

Her most recent nemesis, or group of them actually, is the boys from the fraternity house right next to her apartment building. The only one allowed off campus, or maybe they were told to be off campus, she isn't sure and wouldn't be surprised at the answer. Gwen is in her final year of

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school and this year she is doing more clinical work than class work so she actually has a little more free time but not much. Which is why she is even around more and has the pleasure of seeing these boys, not men, act as if the world revolves around them. Ugh, can't people be themselves without feeling the need to outdo the next guy? They have no other objective other than to stroke their own and each other's egos. Conversations always end with a "you're the man!" or a high five and sometimes a fist bump.

Every Thursday, when Gwen finishes her clinical rotation, she heads towards the beach. This is her favorite place to plug in to her music and relax. The part she loves the most is listening to her own music and not the piped in stuff that she hears at the hospital all shift. This is her time to unwind to the relaxing sight of moving water and the amazing sounds of an orchestra playing classical music or jazz right into her ear. These couple of hours each week help her recharge for the next week. It's the point of her week that she looks to the most, well, that, and when she gets a chance to help out at the children's home, some of those kids really make her laugh.

Today Gwen did not have her normal rotation, she had the overnight one, she came home to change and leaves her apartment particularly early to find a good spot on the beach. Pulling up to the parking lot, to her dismay, she sees the group of neighbor boys getting out of their cars as well. She will not get any peace with them around that's for sure. She decides to start her car up again and move down the beach to the quieter side of things. Gwen is determined to have her solitude, however, when she gets to the next parking lot, she sees that it is already full as well. She sits back and concentrates, why is everyone out so early? Don't college kids like to sleep in late? The only reason so many people would be out is if classes are she stops her thought mid word and quickly checks her calendar on her phone.

"AGH!!!!" she screams and bangs her hands down on the steering wheel. Today there are no classes because of some stupid professor's conference that happens to be on their campus. Gwen's entire week is now ruined; she sits back and contemplates her choices. "Stupid frat boys, don't ever get up before noon except on vacation days." She glances around her car and sees her music player, "I guess if I plug in I can at least attempt to ignore them and still get in the nap I want." Once again, she starts up her car.

Now that she is back to her original parking lot, she finds the last spot possible and glides in easily. Gwen rests her head back on the seat and takes a deep breath. She is comforted by the fact that the beauty of the beach cannot be destroyed even by a group of rowdy boys. She grabs her music, and her bag and heads over towards the beach. She knows a couple of corners that most people don't go to and she walks in that direction for maximum solitude.

Once there, she puts out her towel carefully and sets herself up, a spot as close to secluded as she can get on this busy beach day. Right before she puts in her earphones, one of the frat boys approaches her, "Hey Gwendolyn, how many times have you wished you could see me like this?" He points to his naked chest and shiny swimsuit. His confidence may be big but her interest is small. She turns to face the water, gets herself in a comfortable position and plugs in to her music. Andy is without words, the whole gang is watching him, he can feel their eyes on him, he has been publicly humiliated before and knows what it feels like, but he can't do this again today. What better way to get out of a tight spot than turn around and lie, or try again. He decides to do a little

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of both. Since they can’t hear her, he nods as if to say yes and goes to sit down behind her, so close in fact that she jumps and turns around – she is about to slap him when she looks into his eyes. He holds her attention for a split second, and in that time, he leans in as if he is about to kiss her but instead he says, “please take me home – I can’t stand being here today and you are my only ticket out. I promise to make the favor up to you.” Then he leans back as if the kiss is done. To play along, she swings her hair back and starts to pick up her fallen music player and takes out her earphones. The next thing she knows she is leaving with this frat boy and all the rest of them are hootin’ and hollerin’ as if he scored the winning touchdown.

He stops by and grabs his towel and clothes, the guys are continuing to slap him on the back and even his behind, then he jumps over to Gwen and gives her a peck on the cheek. He puts his arm around her shoulders and whispers to her again, “You can’t possibly know how thankful I am”.

Gwen decides this is the craziest thing she has ever done but he looks so desperate, almost like a lost puppy. Clearly, she is not meant to be at the beach today. No worries, she will find some other way to relax today. With everyone at the beach maybe she will go to the roof of her building and hang out there. At least she knows the boys won’t be spying on and whistling at her this time. The ride is only about 20 minutes but the first 10 of them, both Gwen and Andy are quiet. He is sitting and watching out the window. Every so often he looks over at Gwen and wants to say something but his words are failing him today. He has made such a fool out of himself in front of her ever since she moved in, that he feels ashamed of himself and here she is doing him the biggest favor of his life and he can’t even find the words to say thank you.

Finally, Gwen speaks, “I’m not sure what is going on here but I am assuming this is a one-time deal, right? I mean, I’m not really interested in a relationship with you or any of your buddies. I’m sorry for being so blunt but it is what it is.” She tries not to sound too stern but she needs to make sure there are no expectations and no misunderstandings.

Andy fidgets in his seat for a moment and plays with the ties on his swim suit. He didn’t have time to get dressed before they left. “I, well,” he pauses a moment and takes, what looks like to Gwen, a deep cleansing breath. He looks like he needs a real friend right now so Gwen veers the car off the main road. Andy watches carefully where she is going but chooses to stay quiet, he is way too nervous to focus or even care.

Gwen pulls into a private looking driveway, he looks around to figure out where they are. At the end of the road Gwen pulls over to the left and parks. “You look like you need someone to talk to, welcome to my private oasis. Well, I don’t really own this spot, I don’t tell anyone about it either. I believe this area is part of the parks and recreation department of the city here. I found this particular spot when I was searching for a place to hide. Doesn’t cost anything to come in and park here, to the left there is a pond with a path we can walk along. To the right there is a gazebo over that hill, but that is usually full of the picnic/family crowd. Personally, I like to walk on that straight path in between them, takes you to a stream and I enjoy sitting down on one of the big boulders listening to the water rush by. So which direction do you think you’d be most comfortable in?” She is watching him now and he finally looks around the park, then back down

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on his own lap. Pulling his jeans out from the pile of stuff he had thrown on the back seat, Andy opens his door to get dressed behind the cover of the car door.

Gwen takes this to mean that he is ok with going to at least one of those places. She turns off the car and grabs her purse. She meets Andy at the front of the car where he is leaning on her hood. “I think the boulders sound nice.” They walk together, not holding hands or anything, simply as two friends enjoying each other’s company.

“I’m sorry I got angry at you before.” Gwen initiates the conversation.

“That’s ok, I’m impressed it took you that long. I think I would have lost it at the beach. Thank you for saving me and my reputation. I will apologize ahead of time though, because now I’m afraid the mob will think we are seeing each other.” Andy still is having a hard time meeting her in the eye. “Or worse, that we are having a one-night stand.”

“I gathered as much.” Gwen answered.

“They’re not all bad you know. Some of them actually make it to class on time and take their studies seriously. Mostly the seniors like us though. The younger ones are still trying to figure out life. I’m a math major, headed for engineering masters next year, and you?” Andy is starting to get comfortable with the situation at hand.

Gwen is still trying to understand how she saved him but looking at him she realizes she is safe and that he is possibly more scared than she is, so she resolves herself to staying until he is ok. Heck, who can’t use another good friend? Besides, with the schedule she kept her first three years she really didn’t have much time to make any real friends. She made some acquaintances but she wouldn’t call them friends, no one she would confide in or bring here to her quiet place. Wow, after all this time she really has never brought anyone here – not even Grandpa when he comes to visit.

“I majored in bio and finished in three years, now I’m doing some clinical work for a pre-nursing situation. I am able to get this all done now so that when I’m done with this year, I only have rotations and boards left. I should finish within a year, no more summer or winter vacations for me.” Gwen says this proudly, she hasn’t mentioned this to anyone except her parents and they think she is nuts. They keep telling her that nursing is for med-school drop outs. But she knows the truth, she knows that doctors cannot function without a good nurse, and she is awesome in this position. All her clinical patients love her and she has received high marks from her supervisors and even a couple of the doctors she has worked with.

Andy looks at Gwen and studies her for a moment, “Someone as giving as you will make a great nurse. I mean, if you weren’t giving you would have never agreed to take me now, would you?” he says kind of sheepishly.

“Yeah, about that – are you in some kind of trouble with them or anyone else?” Gwen asks in as soft a voice as she can, she does not want to be accusatory.

Andy gets up from the boulder he is sitting on and walks over to the stream, he takes his shoes off to feel the cool water. It’s so peaceful here, he wishes he could stay here all day. Bending down, he fills his hands with some fresh water and takes a drink, then he turns around to answer Gwen, he owes her at least that much.

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Rubbing the back of his neck, he contemplates how to do this. Honesty is probably best, straight out and done. “It’s like this...” he begins to pace. “I’m here on scholarship – not the academic kind but the ‘oh you’re so poor and come from a bad situation’ kind. The guys recently found this out – I’m not sure how, but they did. My sole reason for pledging this particular frat was because they have housing off campus that’s free if you get in and I didn’t have to worry about trying to get yet another loan for the dorms, the other ones I looked into had some sort of payment involved in living there. I don’t know how they work anywhere else, but at this campus, this seems to be how things work.

Now that they know I’m from the other side of the tracks, as they like to say, they are constantly getting on my case about how I am not as good as them. How I couldn’t possibly pull off the grades I have by myself and that most of them are probably pity grades because I couldn’t possibly be that good in bed that the female professors give me good marks.” Andy feels the tears building up in his eyes, there is no way to stop them, he knows they will come, they always do. To try and prevent this and save some of his dignity, he walks back over to the stream and splashes his face with the cool water. Standing up slowly he suddenly feels a warm hand on his shoulder.

“No big deal, my own parents think I’m going to fail out of school and that I’m getting a bogus degree. I still don’t understand how leaving today helps you though. Are they getting on your case about other things as well?” she asks

Andy’s face turns as red as a beet, he looks back down at his feet. Slowly, he picks his head up and looks Gwen in the eye, “No, not really, they think I am watching them. I don’t know if you’ve ever given us a second glance but you may have noticed I space out a lot. But recently they have decided that I’m not spacing out – that I’m watching out....for them. I’ve been beat up twice so far this semester, and it’s not even winter break, because someone there thought I made a pass at them. Leaving with you will hopefully change that perception of me at least. Don’t get me wrong – I’m not against anyone whose lifestyle is different than mine, I’m not one of them though. I think once they realized I was different from them, that I was from a different social class than them, that I became anything and anyone that they don’t like and they make any scenario fit their newest perception of me.” Andy takes a deep breath, he cannot believe that he spilled everything in his heart and in his head to Gwen.

Ah, Gwen, the beautiful and most powerful of woman – the independent kind. The kind that make the gang in the frat house wriggle in pain. They wouldn’t know what to do with someone who can think for themselves. None of them do, Andy has put up with a lot of garbage from them over the past two years but this third year has proven to be the pinnacle of stupidity and he has had enough, if he knew a way out, he would take it in a heartbeat.

“Listen Andy, I’m not around much this year, but if it would help you, you can use my apartment to study in. I live alone. The living room is big enough and has two couches – I get the mushy one, you can use the straight back one. I don’t know if you are contractually tied to the frat house or not, but my apartment has two bedrooms also, if you need one – I suppose you can hang out there when you need to. I will say this though – if any of this is a lie and you are doing this to support your own ego – I have ways of making big egos become very, very small, is that

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understood?” Gwen starts out soft but she ends off not so friendly. She didn’t plan it that way, the words came out that way though. A flaw of hers, she knows.

Andy stands there motionless. Did she offer him to move in with her? Is he hearing things? They don’t know each other very well, why would she do this? Out of the pot and into the fire – the one thing he hates the most is a pity party, immediately he snaps, “I don’t need your charity!! Maybe we should go now.” He starts walking back to the car but Gwen does not.

He turns around, “What? You’re expecting me to walk back now? Not good enough to be in your fancy car anymore? Well, you can stuff that where the sun don’t shine honey.” Turning away, he starts back towards the car. He can feel her eyes on his back so he turns around again, this time slowly. Gwen has not moved. She is still as a board and there is a single tear running down her cheek, he can see it glistening in the sun. “Oh crap” he says quietly to no one and starts back towards her.

As he gets closer Gwen reaches out her hand to shake his – he obliges her and puts his hand out too. “Hello, I’m Gwen – daughter of two of the biggest intellectual snobs this side of the Mississippi. However, I am also the granddaughter of the world’s most wonderful man in the world. Without him, I would not be in school. He is the one footing the bill for me. I said the same line to him years ago, ‘I don’t want your charity.’ To which he said, ‘horsefeathers – it’s not charity with family and besides that daughter of mine, well she is mine alright but not *from* me. I would have never said no to you reaching your own ambitions.’ You see Andy, if I didn’t take his money, I would not have been here at all. I would have been in some stuffed shirt university that doesn’t even offer nursing or worse, I would have been on my own begging for loans and scholarships to make college work. I’ll take you to meet him if you’d like, Grandpa won’t mind I promise..” Gwen knows how he feels, abandoned by those whom you thought loved you. Even if it’s a bunch of frat boys.

“Consider this a pay forward to my community – not charity. Besides, seriously, with my schedule we won’t even see each other much. You said, engineering, right? Grandpa knows a lot of people at ERGON – he might be able to help you. I usually have dinner with him on Thursday nights – come with me. The guys will think it’s part of our wonderful all-day date.” Her hand is still holding his. Something about this feels right, she is not sure why though.

Andy is staring at Gwen, holding her hand. This is the strangest thing ever. He pulls on her hand and brings her over to the really large boulder where they can both sit down. He inhales and slowly releases his breath, “Look Gwen, we don’t know each other very well. I’m a misfit – the runt of the litter. No one wants me around too long. Sure I’m cute to look at, but get to know me and you’ll want to throw me out too. By leaving with you today, I am hoping to have saved my reputation. That means more to me than you could possibly know. In other words, I’m hoping this small act of kindness is all I need.”

Andy looks for the right words, “Originally, when I saw you today, I was thinking about how I could actually meet you and get to know the real you – not the one the boys think you are.”

“And what, pray-tell, might that be?” Gwen asks

“Since you moved in all kinds of rumors have started, first, they thought you bribed your way into such a nice complex. Then they went on to think that you were giving a lot more than care

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to children down at the clinic. How they knew you worked there, I have no idea so don’t ask. Maybe you treated one of them once. Either way, you went from recluse, to slut to lesbian within a span of less than four months. Oh, and let’s not forget the moment or two where the rumor was which one of them you were sitting on the roof to attract. That’s how they work – no logic, no facts – all perception.” Andy says

“I’m sure that I am the last person your grandpa wants you hanging out with. The offer to study sounds intriguing though and I’m sure I will take you up on that from time to time but if you’re not there often how will I get in?” Andy is trying to give her a way out of this. Trying to make her feel she is not obligated to honor her knee jerk reaction to this situation.

“Look Andy, I like living alone tis true but having someone around that I could banter ideas off of once in a while wouldn’t be such a bad thing. Hold on.” She pulls out her phone and dials, “Hello Grandpa? Gwen here. Yes, I know you know who it is but my manners tutor taught me to always identify myself and never assume people remember my voice when I say hello.” She laughs

Gwen takes a couple steps towards the stream and continues, “Well, no I don’t plan on canceling tonight on the contrary, I was wondering if I could bring a friend in need?” She pauses and listens to what he has to say, she responds in a quiet voice and then her grandfather response with this, “Don’t worry, I’ll figure him out within the first two minutes, let’s meet at that little Italian place down on Elm – see you then, love you.”

Gwen turns around to see Andy still leaning on the boulder, he did not move since she had been facing him before. ‘Oh Gwen I hope you didn’t mess this up’ she says to herself. She starts back towards him, “Sorry I had to walk away, personal stuff you know. Anyway, Grandpa says we should meet him for Italian tonight. Since I didn’t get to relax at the beach today, do you mind if I lay down here for a couple hours? This is always my second choice if for some unforeseen reason I can’t use the beach. Or, I could take you back and come back by myself, we’re only 10 minutes from home from here.” She says rather matter-of-factly.

Andy pushes off his boulder, “stay here I’ll get our towels from the car.” He walks slowly over to Gwen’s car. His head is currently reeling with her words she said and didn’t say. He has always been good at reading what’s in people’s thoughts. Andy is pretty sure that she gave her grandpa his name and that he is checking him out as the two of them lay peacefully by the stream. He should put back on his sneakers and take a run back to the frat house. His gut and his heart tell him to stay though, he is not sure why. Gwen is a nice person, maybe they will end up being real friends. That would be nice, he hasn’t made any real ones in all his time at this school. All the guys are superficial and once they realize their friendship to him won’t get them any leads to jobs or anything else for that matter, he is dumped like a hot coal. Gwen hears the same news and , only after that, does she offer her hand in friendship – not before. Does that mean this is a pity friendship or is she happy for the familiarity?

“Here you go Gwendolyn” he says trying to get back his cocky smile, it isn’t there – because he never was that person. He is not one of them, not even close.

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Gwen shoots him a look that means, ‘don’t go there’ but then she sees him smile and she begins to laugh. “You know only my grandpa calls me Gwendolyn. No one else ever has until I moved into the apartment and met you. What makes you say my full name?”

Andy feels a bit uncomfortable being called out but honesty worked well before so he decides to try again. “I was the scout that was sent out to your apartment building to see the new name on the mailbox, that’s how they got to know your name and which apartment you were in. Sorry, seems that this group of frat boys holds everything over your head forever, it was my ‘well, if you’re not scared than you must be brave – so go do it’ thing. Again, they are not all bad guys – but they certainly are not so socially smart.” He takes a moment to look at her eyes and see if she believes him. So far, yes.

“Then one day the guys caught you on the roof and started to whistle and holler things at you that I found totally inappropriate so I kind of yelled at them.” Andy sits up with his knees bent and his arms around his knees, staring off at the stream.

“Ok, they’ve done that a few times so far but that doesn’t explain why you call me Gwendolyn, not that I mind you should know – no one else does so I am curious.” Gwen is watching Andy try and figure out what to say, “Give it to me straight out – we seem to work better that way.”

Andy takes yet another moment and looks sideways at Gwendolyn. “I told them that they were being rude and that a person such as yourself doesn’t deserve their immature high school behavior. That is when they all decided that I must bewell.... that I must be gay because otherwise I would have joined them. I think one of them even said, ‘she is laying there to tease us anyway – but you wouldn’t understand that would you pretty boy?’” Andy hangs his head down onto his knees, he can’t look at her right now. There is far worse that they said, this is the only one he is willing to repeat to her and even thinking about their words embarrasses him to even be associated with the group.

Gwen stands up and walks over to the stream. She splashes water on her face. How could she have been so stupid – thinking that the roof is clear of their view, thinking that she can get and deserves to have some form of privacy? She sighs and decides to walk into the stream up to her knees. She leaves Andy to be alone for a few minutes, he looks like he needs some private time. The cool wetness is rising on her legs as the edges of her skirt are dangling in the water. She watches as the water runs over the rocks, you can see into this stream because it has yet to become polluted by all the surrounding industry pollutants.

Whatever is bothering Andy is probably way more than she deserves to know; she decides not push him anymore. She has learned more about him in the past 30 minutes than she had ever thought she would know about him or any of the guys in that place. Besides, she is sure Grandpa will know all about him. He always seems to know about any person she mentions to him. All the same, she likes his company and is actually looking forward to becoming friends. Gwen senses Andy is behind her so she talks out loud to no one in particular – sharing one more tidbit about herself that not too many know about.

“My parents are so dead set against me going to this school and pursuing my dream of being a nurse that they declared out loud at a family gathering that they will no longer be a part of

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watching me falter and bring down the family at the same time. Therefore, from then on, I've been cut off from them. No holidays, no Sunday picnics, no birthdays and most of all no financial support. I've been on my own since I finished high school. If it wasn't for Grandpa, I don't know what I would have done." She speaks to the stream.

She turns to see he is staring at her with big empathetic eyes. "My parents felt sure that I would come running back to them and that I would be a good girl and go the school they decided I needed to be in and become what they had dubbed, 'a respectable part of society.'" When she finishes talking Andy starts to laugh, he is not sure why but he is. At first Gwen's reaction is to be angry at him, but seeing him laugh she realizes it does sound kind of funny, she smiles at him. "And which part of that do you find funny?" she asks trying to sound stern but she herself is smiling.

"The part where your parents think they can control you. You!!! I can't picture anyone trying to control your inner thoughts. You are a strong person Gwendolyn, you take your life and your work seriously - couldn't they see that? You are probably the only person I've met over the course of three years in this school that has actually stayed on the track they came in on. Funny to think someone could feel they could squash you. I'm sorry if I'm being disrespectful to your father. I'm sorry really." He ends with a very solemn voice, he is sincerely sorry. That should not have come out the way it did and here is going to meet her grandfather - how much more damage can he do to himself?

Gwen finds herself rooted in her spot. No one has ever called her strong - no one except Grandpa and he is about as biased as they come. No one has ever defended her honor to a group of unruly boys - 'who are you Andy?' She asks herself. 'and why have you come into my life now?' Andy watches Gwendolyn's face, she is twisting her lips around as if contemplating something. Her eyes are peering right through him and his gut is writhing trying to figure out if she is angry at him or not - it will kill him if he did anything wrong to ruin what looks to be a great friendship. "Gwendolyn, my friend, please say something you're scaring me."

Gwen takes a deep breath - all she could think to say is, "You defended me against those guys? You call me Gwendolyn like in the tale of nights and princesses. You say you are a math major but I have a feeling you are also a big book worm. Am I wrong?" She watches as the sun catches his smile.

"Ahhh, another secret out in the open, yes I am a closet book worm. I hide my books inside my text books so my professors never know - I look like I'm studying. That and Gwen sounds too stunted for you - I feel you need to embrace the whole of you and that would be Gwendolyn - corny as can be, huh?" Andy looks down at his feet and kicks the rocks beneath him into the stream. "Listen Gwendolyn, I'm not a complicated person really I'm not. I am, however, a private person and this whole living in a frat house with your everything on display has been really hard on me. I have to come clean - I have been hoping for a friendship so that once in a while I could come over in silence. I'm sorry. I am really - you can hate me now if you'd like or take back your invitation for tonight. I'd understand."

"Andy, I was surprised at myself that I agreed to do this in the first place - then I shocked myself even more when I brought you here - I haven't even shown this place to Grandpa. Here we

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are basically meeting for the first time and all we have done is spill our guts to each other. I may go out on a limb here for a second but somehow, I feel we were supposed to meet - supposed to be friends. Ok, last question - really a princess?" she says smiling in the end.

Andy walks into the stream and takes both of Gwendolyn's hands - "Yes, princess in one book - good witch in another but beautiful in both so does it really matter?" He asks as he puts his arms out for a hug and his eyebrows go up as if to invite her and question her at the same time. Gwen jumps into his arms and the two of them hug for a minute then pull away laughing. They continue to laugh as they walk out of the stream, grab their shoes and towels and head for the car. "Pizza or tacos?" Gwen asks.

"Excuse me?" Andy asks as he gets in the car.

"Pizza or tacos - one is to the left one to the right - so which will it be? Quick I'm almost there!" she jokes.

"Agh!!! So much pressure - um, um, um.....tacos - ok whew don't do that again - I can't handle the pressure." He jokes

The two friends laugh all the way to the restaurant. They spend the next hour eating lunch and finally start back home. "What should I wear for dinner tonight? Is it formal?" Andy asks as he gets out of the car and grabs his beach stuff.

"The Italian place is pretty casual - a tux would be fine." She grins

"Black or white?" he response with a smile then he runs over to the frat house before the guys see him leave her car so many hours after he left the beach. "See you later" he waves. Gwen watches him and a slow smile comes to her lips. Even though she didn't get her regular relaxing day, she definitely had a good one. Grandpa is going to like him, she is sure he will. She still has a couple of hours she can go take a nap before their big meeting tonight.

~ ~ ~

At exactly 6:00pm she hears a roar from next door. The boys are hooting louder than usual so Gwen quickly goes over to her kitchen window to look outside. She starts to laugh out loud. She grabs her purse and keys and takes the stairs faster than it is probably safe to but she has to get outside to see this for real.

Standing in front of her car Gwen smiles a big smile as she sees Andy walking over towards her wearing a black and white tux, a delightfully put together combination of pieces from a black tux as well as some from a white one. She can no longer hold in her laughter as he approaches with arms straight out. The guys from the frat house are whistling and laughing so hard some of them have begun to sit down on the floor and hold their stomachs.

All Gwen can think to say to him is; "Grandpa is going to love this." she says with a smile and opens the door on his side of the car. He gives her a peck on her cheek before he sits down in the car. One look over at the gang in front of the frat house and he cringes at their reaction. His stomach lurches and he tries to keep his lunch down.

Gwen sits down smiling and pulls out of the parking spot. Soon as she gets onto the road she glances over at Andy and sees that he is not smiling any longer. As a matter of fact, he looks worried. Gwen is getting a nervous feeling in her stomach watching him transform from that happy

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dressed up guy to a sullen and sunken friend. “We haven’t started with secrets Andy so let’s not start now.” She says to him as she pulls up to a red light and puts her hand on his for a moment. Andy shakes his head no, he is clearly holding back tears. Gwen drives on in silence. “This is not good” she says to herself. She can’t bring him to Grandpa in this mood. He will drag it out of him whether he wants to talk or not. How can she save him from even more pain than he is in?

Something must have happened back in the frat house. But what? What could be so bad about the outfit? A bet? Is there money involved here? Oh my, they must have him over a barrel for this one. She has to do something quick. OK...got it. “Andy, I have got to use the bathroom – guess that lunch is not working for me any longer. There is a gas station at the next intersection – give me five min ok?” He cannot answer her – this is really not good – he won’t even look up, maybe he is thankful for the five min reprieve.

Quick as she can legally, she gets to the gas station and walks in to use the lady’s room – only she takes this time to call her grandpa and with the speed of lightening she explains everything she knows about Andy. “Ok baby, got it – just come on by – I’ll be in my birthday suit.” She laughs and comes out trying not to show her smile.

She comes over to the driver’s side and sits down, but before she can start the car she pulls Andy into her arms – thankful for front bucket seats – and gives him a big kiss straight on the mouth. He responds in kind and holds on to her as if it’s the last thing he will do today, or ever. As she slowly pulls away, she is still holding onto his shoulders. He looks her straight in the eye and says, “I can’t meet Grandpa – look at me. Can we go back to the park and talk – I promise I’ll explain everything. Please don’t make me go out in public like this. I don’t think I can do this.”

“Andy, look at me. I mean really look at me. I don’t care what you are wearing and if it helps you any, I’ll change into some of the clothes I keep in the trunk – and we will be matching mismatches. Grandpa is looking forward to meeting you. I promise, that if you are even one iota of uncomfortable you tell me you need a banana and we will be out of there.” She explains.

“Banana? That is the best code word you could come up with?” Andy at least is smiling now. “Gwendolyn, how have you come into my life right now? How is it that when I needed you most – you showed up and stayed – no line too corny for you – no realization too weird for you – no secret too scary for you. I can’t get rid of you even I wanted to, could I?” Andy says this while still holding onto her, he is so afraid he blew this friendship – that this is his last chance for a friend and he is doing what he always does – and pushes them to the brink of having them leave on their own.

“Sorry Andy man – you are stuck with me – maybe you haven’t really acknowledged what that could mean to you. After meeting Grandpa, maybe you won’t want to be seen with me anymore – ever think of that?” She leans over and gives him a quick peck on the cheek, “We had better not keep him waiting any longer, the restaurant is only six more minutes from here. We good?”

“Yes, my dear Gwendolyn, we are good.” Both people slide back into their rightful places but their fingers remained intertwined. The rest of the trip is quiet but peaceful.

Arriving at the restaurant Andy notices one thing – this place seems to be in a ritzy neighborhood. Part of him is dressed for the part in the sense that he is wearing pieces of a tuxedo,

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but he is no longer confident that he can pull this off. He steps out of the car and waits for her to come around. She is fiddling with her phone for a moment, her phone was wildly going off while they were driving.

“Um, Andy, we have a bit of a problem, seems Grandpa had to run out of his place because he was sleeping after lunch and is running late. He said he may not be dressed appropriately and that I should forgive him.” She takes Andy’s arm and leads him into the restaurant.

Right before they get to the front door, Andy freezes. “Gwendolyn, I can’t.” She notices he is visibly shaking. “Andy, do you trust me at all? I mean really, if you have even one piece of you that trusts me, you will come in with me.” She waits a minute, then she clasps his hand into hers, pulls him down a bit so she can reach his face – kisses him lightly on the cheek and whispers, “it will be good – I promise.”

With a good tug, she gets him into the front door. It takes but two seconds for her to spot Grandpa, “he is over there” she points. Andy follows her hand to the man who is standing up with nothing on but his boxers and a tie on, he is waving and smiling. Andy looks at her and she shrugs, “Guess that’s what he was sleeping in.” she says.

Andy is so tunnel focused on the man in front of him that he barely has time to notice that there is no one in the whole restaurant who is wearing matching clothes. He sits down and then he looks around again to verify what he thinks he saw, “What the hell Gwendolyn?”

“Welcome to Grandpa’s restaurant. Where everyone can be themselves or the selves they can’t be anywhere else. An understood rule. No one comes here who hasn’t been here before, and all newcomers come with someone who has been here before so there is nothing to hide. Oh, and by the way, the food is amazing.” She says with a smile.

‘Ahhhhhh, that smile’ Andy says to himself, she probably called him ahead of time – what she won’t do for a friend. He is glad to have her in his side. “Do they know how to make g’noche here?” he asks Grandpa.

They all laugh. Grandpa stands up and so does Andy, he wants to greet him the right way, the way any grandpa would towards his best girl’s new friend – with a hug – only he doesn’t think this would be so comfortable for this young man. “Normally I hug all new friends, but I think a handshake would do right now, huh?” Grandpa asks.

“Why? I don’t have cooties?” Andy smiles. The two men hug and then sit down to get to know each other.

“Frat boys can be.....well...., but I don’t think they really mean harm. Can you talk about today’s outfit son?” Grandpa is a straight shooter. Andy doesn’t mind, these people are nuts but make him feel comfortable all the same.

“I was in the shower – I had both of the tuxes laid out on my bed – I wasn’t sure which one I would want to wear tonight. My thoughts were to impress your granddaughter sir. I have seen her from afar for some time now and it is only today that I finally had the nerve to even say hi to her. She has been nothing less than amazing to me. I guess I’m that lost puppy she never found so she is taking me home instead. I promise I’m housebroken.” He says this while looking directly at Gwendolyn. She gives him a nod of encouragement.

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“I came back to my room and the whole place was trashed,” he is hanging his head down at this point. “all my clothing was out on the floor. And by all, I mean every drawer emptied, every part of my closet was on the floor. No one was around at first, then two minutes later as I was walking around my room, five guys walked in and shut my door.” Andy takes a deep breath and shakes his head, his shoulders have fallen as well.

Grandpa moves closer to him and puts his arm around his shoulders, “Whatever happened – I will handle within 10 minutes of you telling me. You have to understand that.” Grandpa pulls Andy’s shoulders in to him a couple times then scoots back over to his seat.

“Gwendolyn here has already offered me some space in her place so I can escape the reality that is mine, but I’m afraid I’m stuck there. I’m on scholarship and can’t afford to be in an apartment other than the free frat house.”

Another deep breath and Gwendolyn puts her hand in his and intertwines her fingers with his, “go on.” She says softly.

Holding her hand gives him the strength he needs to finish. “Outside of the scholarship letter which one of the boys was holding - they also found my underwear drawer. Now that shouldn’t sound too bad except - well, sir - mine don’t cover as much as yours. As a matter of fact, all I have is pastel colored underwear b/c I like them. This only confirmed to them that I am gay, as they thought I was. They told me they had a no tolerance rule when it came to these things and that I could get kicked out if they so choose; that if I didn’t do everything they asked me to do exactly like a new pledge has to, that they would make my life a living hell. As opposed to the hell I’m already living in with them. They had me by the balls, so I picked up one of the suits and I was about to get dressed when they forced themselves on me and dressed me the way they wanted to dress me - the comments horrid - I was being forced against my will but no one would believe me and no one will say anything against it either. I assume, they are all involved. I lost my will to fight and let it happen.

I’m sorry sir, I know that you are one of them but this is how my life has been during my so-called fun college years and after today’s humiliation - I feel as if I might as well have been raped. Gwendolyn here is my savior and I will be forever at her side - making sure nothing or nobody hurts her ever. That much I can promise you man to man.” He squeezes her hand tightly and proceeds to stand up and walk out - he does not think anyone will want to be with him now that his biggest secret is out.

Andy only gets a couple feet away when from behind he feels Gwendolyn’s arms around his waist, her head leaning onto his back and in that same moment Grandpa is standing in front of him. “People wear what they want - this could be a phase, this could be permanent but that doesn’t change who you are. I’m going to make a phone call. Go back to the booth in the back - I’ll be right there. I’m sending out my best soup and bread. Go on now my granddaughter is starved I can tell.” Grandpa says encouragingly.

Slowly Andy turns around and Gwen picks up her head to see his face, he is scared and she sees this. “Nothing ever leaves this place Andy - nothing at all.” She pulls away from him and leads him back to her favorite booth. They slide in together, he will not leave her, and he realizes she won’t leave him either. “Why?” he asks softly.

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“I saw those puppy eyes when you asked me to save you on the beach and I couldn’t resist.” She says smiling. “I’m kidding, I saw something in you that I needed as well – a friend. I realized that I have spent these past three years killing myself for school but I have not had a life. All those people who introduce each other later in life and say ‘this is so and so I’ve known them since college’ I got nothing.” Gwen bows her head now. The thought of being friendless is pretty heavy.

The soup comes to the table. They both look up and laugh. “What do you think Grandpa is doing Gwendolyn? I insulted everything he holds as dear to him. He is part of that frat’s alum. I realized after I spoke with you this afternoon, I remembered seeing your last name on the mailbox and his name is on the wall of fame in the house. I guess since your parents dropped you, you probably took on his last name. He did some amazing community service work.”

“Don’t worry about Grandpa, he has more pull than gravity around this town.” She pushes him with her elbow and they both begin to eat.

Meanwhile, back in his office, Grandpa makes a frantic call to the dean of the school. “You heard me right Frank – if someone doesn’t get over there immediately and check out that boy’s room and all the boys in the house – my money is as good as gone. You’ve got half an hour – I’m sure they haven’t cleaned up yet, in fact, I’m almost positive they’ve made the situation worse. ONE half hour – I expect to hear from you.” Then he hangs up and laughs – “Oh I wish I could be a fly on the wall in his office right now – to see him squirm. Damn fool – always was – but if he drops the ball on this one – he will regret his actions for a long time to come.” Grandpa talks out loud before he leaves the office.

Grandpa heads back to the booth. “Soup good?” he sits down with the kids, as he calls them and smiles. “that sure is one hell of a promise you made back there bud – I intend to hold you to it you know.”

Andy looks up, “I would expect nothing less from you sir.” Everyone looks to each other and laughs.

“So here is how I see things – I put in a call to my old buddy Frank,”

“Grandpa? The dean – do you really think you had to go that far?” Gwen doesn’t want to cause waves – never does.

“Listen Gwendolyn, your papa might sit around and let people walk all over him but this grandpa won’t, your mother knew that too, not sure why she ever marriedwell, that’s a tale for another day. Anyway, yep, he ought to be scrambling around right about now. Should be funny to watch but hell, I have a business to run.

So this is what we are going to do – no questions asked. First, Andy you and Gwendolyn are going to move back home, and by home, I mean my place on the lake. Someone has to keep it running and I hate to pay for the upkeep when I’m not there – and I’m never there come to think of it. Ok, sidetracked. Second, Andy you will be finishing school on the scholarship of Grandpa – ah ah ah – I said no questions asked. Look Gwendolyn may not have told you this but through investments and my previous career I have more money than God – this restaurant is for the eccentric in me. More of a hobby than anything else.”

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He pauses for a moment and lets the information all sink in, usually he never reveals that to anyone, but in this case, it needs to be said - he doesn't want Andy to think he believes him to be a charity case - Grandpa wants him to think he is part of the big picture. Andy had a mouthful of food when that little piece of information was said.

Finally, he swallows, "Sir, as much as I'd love to live in a beach house - I only have this year left, I think that maybe I could eek out on my work-study program. I do have..."

"Horsefeathers! Gwendolyn, tell your friend here that when I decide to spend money - I do as I see fit. Besides, it will piss off Frank and any chance I get to do that is fun for me. Before I called Frank, I had already called my guys to go in and take pictures of your room, they assured me that everything was untouched. They will be there when Frank gets there and if he doesn't show up himself, there will be consequences that Frank won't want to have to explain to the board of directors. Once he leaves, my boys will be packing up everything in the room and bringing it to the beach house - yes, Gwendolyn, they will be getting yours too and no, you don't have a choice in this. Both of you need to be as far away as possible from the campus when you don't have classes. My driver will be taking you to and from campus for the rest of the year.

Oh, and Andy, if you have any family members that want to come out and visit you - please invite them - the house has eight bedrooms. My late wife built it thinking that someday all her kids would want to vacation there at the same time. One by one my children have shown me their ungratefulness to her and all she did for them- except for Gwendolyn here and her cousin Marvin who is a Naval officer at this point - he loves that house and stops in every so often, unannounced by the way."

Grandpa stops talking, he watches as the kids eat and realize he is rambling on again - that scares him. He doesn't want to be that kind of old guy that doesn't shut up. He wants to be friendly without scaring more people away. His own children have decided his eccentric ways are an embarrassment to them so they rarely even talk - it's as if talking on the phone will make his ideas contagious.

He has saved more than one grandchild from the ills of their parents and all of them are quite thankful - he has been paid back in spades by them. Their care and love and their presents - not actual ones but the ones that count - one stayed in school- one in front of him, one became a naval officer after almost being kicked out of his school, one ventured out on their own and started up a successful business, and he will never forget the one who gave her life in the war so others could live. Yes, he has his secrets with them and they all know it but no one will tell - they live as if this is what life is supposed to be. He gives them the courage to be themselves which their parents never gave them. Although he has yet to understand that because that is not how they were brought up. He mostly blames the spouses of his kids, they came into this family thinking that his money would be shared. When he said he will only give when he deems it necessary, each one decided to poison his children against him.

Once a year all the cousins, who have been recipients of Grandpa's love, get together at his beach house, not his children, they always have the best time. Everyone shows up every year for the past 10 years. It's a blessing he feels that Andy probably never has had and will be fully accepted in.

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“My mom would love the place, but I’m not sure she can get away. This soup is amazing sir, you should sell it.” Andy says smiling.

Grandpa laughs and so does Gwendolyn, he hasn’t seen her genuinely laugh in years. Oh, this is a good friendship – and by the way they are looking at each other – he is sure it will be more – the other grandkids will approve. He already does.

Grandpa’s phone rings and he laughs out loud as he sees the caller ID. “Yeeeeees,” he answers slowly.

“Oh, Frank, how good of you to call – how are things with the Mrs.? Joke? Me? I would never.” All the while he is holding in his laughter. “I see, hmmm, that so? Five boys involved you say? And how many of them are being suspended Frank? What? You haven’t decided punishment? Well, don’t worry I’ve done that for you – the national commissioner has already been informed of the incident – with pictures – I’m sure he will help you decide what to do. Oh, and Frank, in the meantime? The boy, the victim, will be leaving the frat house so kindly step out of the room so my boys can do their job.” He hangs up.

“Well, if I didn’t hear it with my own ears I never would have believed that a grown man can cry and beg like that.” Grandpa says.

“Grandpa did you threaten to withdraw your yearly donation? That’s not nice.” Gwen gives her grandpa a disappointed look.

“Do you think I am going to support them forever? No honey, you are leaving after this semester, Andy is leaving then too – if he wants graduate school, I’ll be happy to give to that school instead. You will no doubt have a job in a good hospital and I’ll have cause to give money to a wing they need repaired. Do you have any siblings Andy?” Grandpa asked matter-of-factly.

“No sir, me and mom. I have an aunt that sometimes lives with us, a few cousins scattered around – but no one I would introduce you to. They aren’twell, let’s keep it as they aren’t really the appreciative type either. Me going to school means I’m not one of them anymore. If you understand what I mean.” Andy looks from Grandpa to Gwendolyn – she is smiling at him again – damn he could really get used to that.

“Andy, I keep in touch with a few cousins here and there – family reunions are at the beach house each August right Grandpa?” he nods “other than that it’s the two of us here. I don’t go back to my folk’s place anymore – not wanted there because I’m not ever going to make something of myself being a nurse – their words not mine. My brothers both side with my father and yet still haven’t become successful in their own right. – They are riding the daddy’s shirttails and loving the, not working for it, gig. All I’m trying to say – is we are all a bunch of runts – misfits – or any other word you want to call us, but my cousins? Well we are real family.” She sighs.

Gwen is watching the two men interact – once everyone had unveiled a secret to the other it seems as if more and more doors are opening for her. The possibility of a great friend has the possibility of turning into more. Grandpa loves him and that is approval beyond belief. She introduced Grandpa to one other person in college and the guy could hardly wait to get out of the restaurant and never spoke to her afterwards.

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Everyone has secrets, everyone has skeletons in their closet – finding that right person to share them with is a special occasion. This is one of those moments she will always remember. On top of that tonight she sleeps in the beach house!!! WooHoo!!! Only fond memories there. Gwen’s phone begins to ring to a tune that sounds like pirates, “speak of the devil, Hey Marvin!!! You on leave?” she pauses for a moment, “yes, I’m with him right now, hold on” she hands the phone to Grandpa. He takes the phone and walks away for a moment.

“That’s my cousin the navy officer – he yelled at me saying why the hell is my stuff being brought in and I’m not doing it myself. Then he asks, when did I become such a princess. I asked him if he is on leave and that’s when he laughed and asked for Grandpa. Guess you’ll be meeting him tonight then. OK with that?”

“If he is as you say he is and such a part of your life? Then I can’t wait to meet him.” Andy says as he takes her hand in his again and curls his fingers around hers, only this time it doesn’t feel like a friendship squeeze to either of them.

Grandpa comes back laughing and hands the phone to Gwendolyn. “Well, my dear looks like someone was woken up by a bunch of guys with suitcases and boxes. He got in this afternoon and has been sleeping on the white couch. He said he nearly fell off which made him grab his gun. Fortunately, my boys recognized him and called his name before he focused and fired. They all had a good laugh. You’ll probably be wanting to go unpack and get settled in – I ordered dinner for a couple days, I don’t think the fridge is too stocked right now.”

Everyone stands up – there are hugs all around. Double for some people. This time, Andy walks with Gwendolyn in his arms – and he is standing tall, not slouching down in embarrassment. ‘this has to be the weirdest day of my life’ he says to himself.

In front of the car Andy has to ask, “Has this day been for real? I mean all that has happened has happened in the course of one day. Not even, only the waking hours of one day.” He finishes putting the food into the back seat and is leaning on the hood of her car now.

Gwen is unsure of how she feels right now – this is all new to her, probably not to him but for her it’s all new. She dated in high school but it was more like group dating and this – well this feels real and she has never done real before.

“Dinner will be cold, come on, we’ll talk in the car, it’s about an hour in the other direction till we get there. Not sure how Grandpa’s guys got there so fast, not sure I want to know.” Andy notices a hint of nerves in his rock of a friend

Both people are so lost in thought that the hour passes without conversation, and yet it passes quickly because what felt like only a few minutes passing he hears Gwen is announcing, “We’re here.” She gets out of the car and honks before she reaches in the back for the bags of food. Grandpa must know there are other people here because this is clearly not three dinners. Andy opens the other back door and takes a couple of bags too.

Marvin comes running towards them. Big hugs for everyone and then he takes the bags from Gwen’s hands. “I’m so excited for you to meet my friend. He is simply the best there is. We are both on leave for a couple of weeks, after that my dear I only have six months left then I am released from my obligation and I can go practice medicine wherever I want. Grandpa told me all about you Andy – welcome to the family. The guys put your stuff in your usual room Gwen but he



put Andy’s on the boy’s side of the house – I assume by accident – we can move it later if you want.” Marvin is the rambler in the family – always has been – Gwen always wondered how he controlled that in the navy.

Stepping into the kitchen Marvin looks at Andy, “nice suit by the way – however, I suggest we burn it with the rest of our bad memories. We look about the same size – if you need more than what you had in the dorm – feel free to borrow – I’m a clothing person so I have more than my fair share. Ah, here he is – my dear friend and partner --- Larry. Larry, Gwen – Andy, Larry.”

Gwen shakes his hand but his eyes are not towards her or Andy – they are all on Marvin. Another private moment shared by all. What a way to announce it – not that she didn’t know this already but wow. “Not sure what kind of food Grandpa sent – but I think we could feed half your ship Marvin.” Andy says.

Larry laughs – everyone helps sort out the food, some of which is put into the fridge right away, clearly too much. “I’ll go to the grocery store in the morning and stock up here on the fresh stuff we need. No reason to eat such heavy food for breakfast, lunch, AND dinner.”

The four of them sit comfortably, conversation is easy with people you let in. Each one of them has a story to tell, but not now – they all know that too. Tonight will be spent unpacking and getting acclimated to new surroundings. New friends.

On the second floor there is an alcove with its own balcony that separates Gwen’s room from Andy’s. She finishes unpacking first, mostly because she knows where she usually puts everything, it’s been her room forever. When Andy finishes, he comes out of his room and is going to look for Gwendolyn’s room, no way is he going to let the evening end without a real kiss. He sees her standing outside looking out towards the back.

Andy tries to open the door slowly so she doesn’t hear it, she can sense him so she doesn’t turn around when she hears the door – better to give him the illusion he is looking for. Slowly, his arms slip around her waist and he bends down to kiss her neck. Her head tilts to the side for full access.

‘What is he doing? This is not me, I don’t let people hold me like this let alone kiss me. But those lips and his hands and hisooooo that is interesting. Could it really be her that is having this effect on him?’ Gwen thinks nervously to herself.

She slowly turns to face him and his eyes are burning with desire – that much she can see.

“One more secret before the day is through?” she asks nervously

Andy picks his head up enough to really look at her, he has no idea what she can possibly reveal at this moment. “Ok but don’t make it too long – I have a really good bedtime story to tell you.” His bedroom eyes are doing things to her she is not sure are allowed on the day you meet someone. But this is no ordinary day so clearly it will not be an ordinary night.

“I have never been with anyone – and when I say been – I mean never ever. Uncharted territory.” Gwen looks down because she is a bit ashamed of what he might think of her.

Andy pulls her closer in and leans back down towards her neck again, only this time he whispers, “me either – so let’s take it slow and see what we like and don’t like about each other – but I can’t imagine not liking any part of you my dear Gwendolyn – you have pulled me out of the depths of darkness and into the sun – take me as much or as little as you want but know that I want

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only you.” His words are sincere and the whisper sound of them make Gwen’s heart, mind and body respond.

“Maybe we should go inside?” she whispers back

“Too dangerous – how about we try and make it to that couch.” He answers rather breathy.

~ ~ ~

Word of Gwen’s and Marvin’s new friends spread faster than anyone could believe through the cousin grape vine. Arrangements are being made by everyone to get there before Marvin leaves. As each new cousin moves in – the house becomes more and more lively. When the last one comes in, she calls Grandpa and tells him to bring enough for 16 – he is more than happy to oblige them. Many of the cousins came this time with significant others, hence the larger crowd than normal.

With everyone gathered around the fire pit in the back, Grandpa stands to make a toast, “Here is to us – the family we have always wanted – handpicked to be the best. Welcome to the newcomers and welcome home to the rest of you. I know you are here for a short time this time but coming out for Gwen and Marvin at the drop of a hat.....well, I couldn’t be prouder. Truth be told, I’m not sure how many reunions I will be making so let’s appreciate the ones we have.” He lifts his drink and so does everyone else.

But the biggest secret of them all is hovering above them. No one wants to hear that secret – Grandpa won’t live forever and now it will be sooner than later. A silent vow goes around the room as each person shakes their head yes – they will not stop meeting – this is their family – this is what it’s all about.

As the oldest cousin, Marvin stands, “Here is to the world’s greatest gift to mankind – Grandpa.” “Here, here” comes from everyone but the drinks didn’t go up, the arms did – hugs all around – each one a special hug with Grandpa.

With all the kids tucked in and good night wishes made to each, Grandpa finds his way down to the sea where he likes to talk to his wife, “Ok Helen, I’ve taken care of all of them, the Will is all set. They are ready, you can come take me now. There are no more secrets – only an honest, fun-loving family.” He lifts his last drink to her and goes to bed with a smile on his face and a hum in his heart.