

Day 50 — 2:07pm

Adam looked across his room at all of the heads of his students supporting their heads as they started down at the paper on their desks. Some of them were scratching their chins, some were rubbing their hand through their hair, some looked up every now and then with the sole intention of biting their nails, and some of them just stared, motionless, at the test.

"Alright, time's up," Adam said casually, standing up from his desk chair. He braced himself for an uproar of disapproval over what must have felt like a very short test for the class. His expectations were met. He had given them a three-hour long test and only given them an hour to take it, simply to see how various students went about taking it. He intended to give anyone who put forth even a mild amount of effort full credit; it was an, admittedly, a fuzzy metric, but he was okay with that. Given that the students didn't know this, though, he reassured them: "Don't worry about the test, guys. Chances are that most of you will end up getting full credit for your work."

The classroom uprising, which had paused for a moment while Adam spoke, changed quickly into laughter and grins amongst the students. Adam sat at his desk and put the exam papers into a clean pile at the side of his desk as the students left the room.

Adam looked through some of the papers he had scattered above his desk around the pile of exams. He was so focused on trying to find a working pen amongst the mess that he was completely surprised when he heard a voice from his right, "I'm sorry, Adam."

He looked over and saw Pam's frail body, still drowning in the clothes that she once attractively fit in. "Hey, kid," he said, and smiled at her. Then softly added, "Where have you been? I have — I mean, your friends have been worried sick about you."

"I know. But be...between—" she seemed to be uncomfortable with what she was about to say. "Between Drew's death and what... What I had felt like before that, I just couldn't..." And although she tried to continue to the sentence, Pam's voice gave out. She coughed into her arm and cleared her throat. "I needed to be alone."

Adam thought to himself for a moment; he had forgotten how close Pam and Drew became after he introduced him to her more than two months ago. He never even realized how much of an effect his death would have on her. Fucking hell, he thought to

himself, he should have kept a far closer eye on Pam as soon as he found out. For some reason, he found himself surprised by the fact that she was still alive. "Have you talked to your dad about this at all?" He asked her.

She tossed her head back and laughed loudly. Almost unnaturally so, Adam thought. "Stepdad, Adam. Why the hell did I even get sent along with him and not my mom?" She sighed. "I miss her, you know."

Adam knew. He remembered Pam saying that her mother, while a very good person in the general sense, was just a stay-at-home parent. The remarriage to Pam's stepfather, a state representative for California, was something that Pam said she never could understand. It's easy to figure out why he was brought along, Adam thought, as it was easy to understand why Pam, a four-point student at the big-name private school he sent her to, was brought... But Adam never saw the logic in why so many families were split up to come here. He supposed that Pam's mother had some sort of psychological or physiological problem that deemed her *unworthy*, to use Kain's word for the chosen, but he never ventured to ask Pam if there was any truth to that.

"But still, kid, you can talk to him," Adam lied. He knew the man, Jesse Towner, well enough to know that he was the kind of guy who married a mother with no intention of ever becoming a father. He laughed to himself at the realization that, of course, someone like that would be a big part of Kain's most trusted shelter politicians.

"You and I both know that's bullshit," Pam said.

Adam gave a soft laugh, "Yeah... It was worth a shot, though." And then Adam realized how he could try and help out the girl. "You know, if you want, you can stay at my place for a while. Rachel is always looking for some extra company, and while it isn't the biggest place in the world, there is a very comfortable couch. And, basically, you'll just have to put up with me at night. Jack too, on occasion. I suppose."

"Really?" She hopefully asked.

"Really," he responded, smiling at her. "If you want to, just pack whatever you need from your house, and I'll talk to Jesse for you at work later. I'll be by afterwards to get you... So around 8:00pm."

She quickly hugged Adam, thanking him profusely, and then ran out the door. Adam smiled, and turned back to the papers on his desk. He noticed a letter placed above

the stack of papers which hadn't been there earlier. It was badly folded and had Adam's name scrawled in a messy show of some teenage boy's handwriting. He was about to unwrap it, when he heard someone walking into his room. He put the paper in the front pocket of his brown button-up shirt.

"Well, that was awfully nice of you, Adam," a soft, though confident, feminine voice said.

He looked over to the source of the voice and saw Evelyn Smith, who refused to acknowledge any name except "Marie," one of the few members of the school's faculty who he legitimately enjoyed knowing. Her exceptionally slim figure was accentuated by a well-fitting pair of loose black pants with a relatively formal blue button-up shirt which she had rolled halfway up her forearms.

"Ah, heard that, huh?"

"Only because I was eavesdropping since I saw her walk into the classroom," she said as she set her black courier bag down against the side of Adam's desk. She gently ushered a few rogue strands of her dirty blonde hair behind her ear. "God, Adam, do you remember how beautiful that girl was shortly after we started up classes for the kids?"

"Yeah. And look at what this shit-hole has done to her. It's sent a pretty, incredibly intelligent teenager into a downward spiral into suicide," he said, looking down at his desk. "You realize that we've lost eleven physically healthy, mentally stable kids in about five months? Why the fuck did they even send some of these kids here if they couldn't always be accompanied by their families?"

"... Adam, this isn't your problem. We just have to accept that you can only do so much," Marie said.

Adam looked up at her. He stared into her dark green eyes. "Maybe," he said, disheartened. He knew she was right, but he also knew that he didn't really care. "But I know I can do something for her, if nothing else."

Adam remained in his seat, staring around the classroom. Marie walked over to one of the small student desks and sat down.

"You know, Marie, it's people like Pam's father that make me hate people. You know, in general."

"Isn't her father Councilman Economou?" She asked.

"Yeah, Jesse," he answered. "The man is living proof to that idea that fucking someone's mother doesn't make you a father." Adam realized too late that he wasn't talking to Jack. Though, to his surprise, Marie laughed.

"Well, now we're seeing a side to the ever-composed English teacher that we've never seen before," she said, still smiling.

"Composed?" Adam asked despite knowing how he was considered by people. She grinned, "Like you don't know."

"Yeah, well—oh shit, what time is it?" Adam asked.

Marie looked down at her thin, silver-gold watch, "Almost 3:00. The mayor beckons?"

"Yup. He wanted me for a meeting at 3:00. Or 3:15. Or 3:30. Something along those lines." Adam grabbed his bag and slung it over his shoulder. Marie walked over to the desk and grabbed hers as well. "Sorry to run off so quickly."

She laughed, "Oh, I thought you realized I was escorting you."

"Nah, that's alright, you don't have to."

"I don't believe I mentioned it as an obligation."

* * * * *

March 13th (About Five and a Half Months Earlier)

Adam was sitting at the all-encompassing black leather chair in front of his desk in his study. He stared down at the blank notebook page in the tidy, only-used-once, blue notebook that lie in front of him. The subdued folk music he had playing softly in the background did little to put him at ease as he sat, his mind blank, in front of the notebook. Eventually, he decided that he'd write the date in the corner of the page. He then wrote her name:

Rae

And then he wrote down the events of the day:

I took the day off today to see you. Ha, I'm hilarious; I get any day I want off, really. But I suppose that it sounds even more willful and important if I told you that I took the day off, a day off from my ever-so-busy "schedule," just to come see you. I bought a bouquet of flowers for you -- a dozen irises. I also brought along a

steaming white Tupperware container filled with freshly-made spaghetti... Which, if your opinion can be trusted, was your favorite of the four dishes that reside in my cooking repertoire.

I sat outside in the car and simply stared up at the large, black glass building where you worked. And just as I was about to get out of the car, I saw your figure dimly visible in the window which I knew belonged to your office. I can't say with any certainty, but I'm assuming you were staring out at the city through your fortieth-story office space, while you were talking to your mother. Like you always do at 1:30 every Tuesday afternoon.

About eight-years ago, you and I hit our first big roadblock in our relationship. Until that point, while we had a couple spats or "nothing fights" along the way, it was the most carefree, pleasant, and easiest relationship I'd ever been in. Things that didn't come naturally with past girlfriends came like a snap with you. I was never one to really "settle down" in a relationship — always questioning things, even if something had been going perfectly fine, and eventually ending a relationship on the whim that what I was doing was the *right* thing to do. Whether it actually was or not, or whether there was even an inkling of logic to it, didn't really matter. But, the first nine months with you were simply, for lack of a better word, *fantastic*. What you and I had from the moment we met at the bar seemed to me, and the people who saw us together, like it was straight out of some romance novel.

Adam looked up from the page, and looked at the monitor of his computer. He wasn't focusing on anything on it, and eventually the pixels of the panel formed a singular, multicolored entity in front of his eyes. His head started to ache and he broke the stare. Searching around his desk, he picked up a random red pen — forsaking the one he was actually writing with — tossed it into the air. He caught it and twirled it through his fingers, and then tossed it back into the air. He did it repeatedly for a couple of minutes then, looking back down to the page, he tossed aside the red pen and started writing again.

I'm trying to think of what happened that triggered it, but after that one night, you and I talked casually for a few days, and then I ended it. "I can't be who you want me to be," was my actual reasoning, if I remember correctly. Solid logic there, for sure. Not a single flaw whatsoever.

Except that the following days with absolutely no contact from you whatsoever were some of the longest days of my life. I never told you any of this, but I suppose now is as good a time as any... The night I broke up with you, I drank myself to sleep. Woke up with a hangover and I cured that by drinking more. I actually went to class that first day, drunk as all hell. The reason I remember this is because I saw a number of my friends who "heard the bad news" about us. Then one of them, Alex (who you later told me that you hated, and the one person in our group of guys who no one really liked anyway), asked me if I could give him your number. I punched him in the face and walked out of the lecture hall. As I walked home, I looked at the buildings around the new campus you and I chose to go to for grad school, and it's like every building I saw reminded me of something you and I did together. There was the time we made out in one of the aisles between two bookshelves in the library because we always wondered what people had done back there that I remembered when I saw the stone columns of the graduate library which had the stain glassed nameplate (though it never did have a name, did it?). Then I walked past one of the two campus "food courts" where we had our first meal on the new campus together to celebrate the beginning of our "graduatemuhcation," as you used to call it.

It took me four days to realize what needed to be done. I called your roommate at the time, who I got along fairly well with. I told her that I needed her to try and keep you in the apartment at around 5:00pm that afternoon. She told me that wouldn't be a problem, since you, literally, hadn't left it in days. After that, I went out and bought a bottle of champagne. If you remember, that twelve dollar

bottle was the best I could afford, unfortunately. I still think that you really deserved much better champagne, given the situation. And once I had the wine, I went back to my apartment and cooked one of the, then two, dishes I knew how to. But, dammit, I knew how to cook it *well*.

At ten to five, I had all of the food on some cheap porcelain dinner plates, the ones with the floral border, on a big dinner tray. I put an oven lid over the top of each plate to create some sense of mystery, and had a cooler of ice to keep the wine in. I put it all in my car, drove to your apartment (not that it was a long drive, but it seemed an indefinitely better option than walking), and knocked on your door. Your roommate answered, winked at me, and said the door was for you. You walked over in pajama pants and a white tank-top. At the risk of sounding melodramatic: I smiled the moment I saw you, for the first time since before we broke up.

"I'm sorry," I told you. And, oh, how I meant it.

A single tear flowed down the curve of your left eye, bottled up for a moment at the bottom of it, and then streamed down your cheek. I was hoping that you'd react in some other way, but all you did was look down to the floor. I remember that I walked in, and set the tray of food on the counter behind you. Then I faced you, brought your chin up so I could look into your eyes, and I said I was sorry again. And in a display of absolute wit and conversational creativity, I just asked: "Hungry?"

And you smiled. And I realized that everything would be okay.

And figured out that the reason I ended it wasn't due to the fight at all. It was because I was in love with you.

* * * * *

"I don't think I'm ever going to get used to this," Marie said to Adam as the two of them left the school building and the synthetic sunlight which, at that moment, was unnecessarily bright in its attempt to mimic a hot summer afternoon.

"What's that?"

"Leaving the building and not seeing a bunch of open fields with kids playing football, baseball, frisbee, or, you know, whatever," she sighed. "The school I had been teaching at for the last... Oh, the last ten years, I suppose, had a lobby just like this one does. So, every time I leave, I just expect to see something that isn't *this*." She waved her hand at the area in front of them. The grey, colorless pavement. The occasional tree or patch of grass. The numerous speaker/light poles. The hospital which was about five hundred yards in front of them was, really, the only pleasant visual distraction, Adam thought.

"Where was that? I mean, where you were a teacher before."

"A high school in Iowa; it was a fairly small school, maybe about five hundred kids or something," she said, absently, and then laughed. "You know, two years ago I was invited to a dinner with the governor of Iowa out of the blue? I had absolutely no idea why. I wasn't politically active in the slightest—hell, I've only voted once since I turned eighteen—never knew the lady, or anything like that.

"So, I showed up to the dinner after spending what felt like an entire day just trying to figure out what someone would wear to that kind of thing. I eventually settled on some business suit—kind of like what I have on now, actually. So I get there, and we shake hands, talked about the weather. And then she reached over to her large, beautifully-carved oak desk, and hands me this big, heavy, glass plaque with some silver engravings on it. I read them, and then was just in awe. I tried to say something simple, but nothing came out. I was just in standing in front of the governor of the state like an idiot."

"So... What was it?"

"An award. 'Exceptional Teaching in the Field of English Studies.' Then she served up an exceptional steak dinner. I was so dumbfounded that I completely forgot that I didn't meat. That was the day I quit being a vegetarian, as it so happened."

Adam laughed. He was about to say something, but he then realized that she had stopped walking a few paces back. He walked back towards her, "Are you alright?"

She nodded, "Yeah, of course. It's just... I mean, after that, I was nominated for some national educational award—I mean, I didn't win, but that didn't really matter. I mean, I never would have guessed that this is where I'd end up."

Adam put his hand on her shoulder, and rubbed it a bit, then withdrew it. "I know the feeling."

"I'd hope you don't, actually. The day I found out about this place by some random black guy in the archetypical government suit, I was thrilled. My fiancé and I had just split up the day before... And, well, the idea of getting away from everything was so perfect. It was like a sign. Or something," she let out a seemingly bitter laugh.

"The whole situation seemed that way for a lot of people," Adam said. It was true, too, even if it wasn't a sentiment he shared.

"Maybe," she said. She said it in such a way that Adam felt that she was thinking about whether or not to say what she wanted to. She started to speak a moment later, but apparently thought better of it.

"What's up?" Adam prodded.

"I'm still not sure that I even feel bad about what happened, Adam," she said quietly; looking up to him as they still stood facing each other where she had stopped walking earlier. "And I'm scared about what that means."

Adam thought to himself for a moment. He looked around the shelter from where he was standing and saw the rows of speakers. Above him, he saw the thin, dense layer of mist which were supposed to be reminiscent of clouds but were, rather, just enough to obscure the massive grid of spotlights that made up the shelter ceiling. Then he looked back at Marie, who was staring down at her pants, and smoothing out a crease on her right leg. He realized that, for the first time, he actually was having a real conversation with a woman in the five months since he had been exiled from the world which was, just now, a mere two miles above them. He also wondered how Marie had managed to keep her pants so clean.

"It doesn't mean anything, Marie," he eventually said. "Stuff happens. Stuff that neither you nor I are responsible for. We all cope with it, or think of it, in our own ways."

"And how do you cope with it?"

"I don't," he said, plainly.

"Ah," she said, and brushed some of her blonde hair back. "Well then. Let's get you to your meeting."

Adam smiled as he began walking with Marie again. He noticed that she was walking a bit slower than before. "Why did you and your fiancé break up? I mean, if you don't mind me asking."

She laughed, "I wouldn't have brought it up if I didn't want to discuss it. Well, let's see... To begin, let me say that my fiancé, John, and I got engaged way too quickly. He was one of those guys who fell fast and fell hard. We had only been dating for about three months when he proposed. Things had been absolutely great between us by that point, and my mother had been telling me that if I didn't get married before I turned thirty-two—which would have happened shortly after the day he proposed—that I was going to grow into an old, single, lonely lady living in a house of cats."

"Ah, parents," Adam remarked.

"Anyway, we were engaged for three months before we broke it off," she sounded surprisingly casual about the whole thing.

"And why'd that happen? Just realize you weren't right for each other?" He asked.

She gave her bitter laugh again, "Nope, I honestly felt that I was making the right move with this guy. But he was cheating on me with, most likely, another girl who he had fallen faster and harder for, so I'm I guess he felt like that meant something more."

"How'd you know he was cheating?" Adam asked. He had a girlfriend or two that had cheated on him in the past, but he never actually had any concrete evidence of it. Not that he felt that mattered, as he was always sure that they had been, even without proof.

"Little stuff really. Black, leather lingerie with white ruffles which had been... Well, let's say it had been *worn in*. And not by me. Then there was the diamond ring that I found in his coat pocket with 'Roxanne' on the nametag.

"Anyway, I eventually approached him on it, and he confessed everything without too much effort. Now that I think about it, he probably wanted to be caught, because it was a fairly anticlimactic confrontation. I kicked him out of the house and then he came back the next day to move all of his stuff out," she seemed to start becoming more comfortable talking as the story went along, Adam thought. "In fact, he arrived to do that almost immediately after I found out about the shelter for the first time."

They were almost towards City Hall, which disappointed Adam. He started walking a bit slower, though he tried to be subtle about it.

"What about you? Ever married?" She asked, apparently looking at the featureless black structural mass, Block D, far to the right of City Hall.

"No," Adam said.

And then he wasn't even sure why he lied. He still wore his wedding ring—though he moved it to the ring finger of his right hand shortly after he moved to the shelter. He kept walking, still at a slow pace, with Marie, but all he could think about was the way she looked the last time he saw her. How her dark brown hair moved like silk, and the warm glow her dark blue eyes seemed to give off in a dim light. And—

"You alright, killer?" Marie asked.

And his thoughts came back to the present. "Yeah, sorry," he said, dismissively. He tried to think of a way to deflect the mental trip, "Just trying to figure out how to talk to Jesse about Pam."

"Well... Better think quickly, he's walking down the steps over there," she pointed towards City Hall at the tall, thin man in a grey business suit who just descended down the building's staircase. "Hey, he's even heading towards us. What *luck!*"

"Wait a second," Adam said to Marie as she appeared to be walking away from him. She nodded in response and walked alongside him towards Jesse.

"Hey, Jesse, got a minute?" Adam yelled in an attempt to get his attention. He looked up from the papers that he was glancing at.

"Not much more, but sure," he said. He shoved the folder of papers into the side pocket of the black bag he had slung over his shoulder.

"Well, I'm sure you know that your daughter has been having some troubles as of late..."

Jesse looked at him, nodding.

"She has a fairly large amount of work that she needs to attend to in order to catch up in some of her classes, and said that she didn't really have anywhere she could work on it without distraction, so I offered her my house to stay at for a few days while she, you know, caught up," Adam said, struggling to find the words he needed without telling too much of the truth of what Pam was really trying to get away from.

Jesse nodded again.

Adam looked at Marie, who just shrugged. "Is... That alright?" Adam asked.

"Yeah, sure thing. Gives me more time to get work done in the office. Just tell Pam to come see me at my office if she needs anything," Jesse said. He looked down at his watch, "Now, I'm sorry, but I have to go, good day to the two of you."

Marie and Adam watched as Jesse quickly walked towards wherever he needed to go. "Huh," Adam said.

"I believe you said it best earlier," she stood upright and tried to mimic Adam's voice, "*Ah, parents.*"

He laughed, "Yeah, already starting in on the mocking. That's adorable, really." She smiled. "Anyway, I should get going... Thanks for the escort. It's nice to feel safe and secure as I walk from place to place."

She let out a soft laugh. Adam now saw that she had a preoccupied look that he had noticed when she stopped walking earlier. "Hey, what's wrong?"

Marie looked up at him, and smiled, "Nothing."

"That's... Good, right?"

"It's surprising, is all," she responded, and moved closer towards him.

Adam's mind went blank for a moment. He felt his heart beating loudly, the sound pulsing in his temples. And then he simply said, "I should... Go, now."

She smiled, but Adam couldn't help but think that she felt disappointed. He turned away and slowly walked towards City Hall. And then he heard Marie call his name and he turned around. She walked up to him smiling, the momentary disappointment gone from her demeanor. She said to him "Alright, since you're not going to do it, I'll just do the man thing and ask you out for dinner sometime," Adam laughed, "and, by sometime, I really mean tomorrow night. At 8:00."

"Sounds good to me."

She reached into the left pocket of her pants and pulled out a piece of paper. She slipped it inside the front pocket of Adam's shirt. "I wrote that when I sat down in your classroom. It has my address. I started writing my phone number down, then realized that even if you did figure out a way to call it then the phone it would go to is probably lying in a field of ashes in the middle of Iowa. So, yeah, scribbled that part out."

"Alright, I'll be there."

She smiled at him quickly and then turned around and walked away. Adam looked at the gold ring on his right hand and sighed. He walked up the stairs to City Hall, and then followed the well-known path to his office on the second floor. The hallway to his office was part of what was, apparently, the "important" branch of City Hall. The office next to his as well as the two across the hall belonged to the three "lead councilmen" and then at the end of the hallway were large, heavy-set wooden double doors that lead into the mayor's, Kain's, office.

He walked across the dark red carpet of the hallway until he came to the last door on the right. He pushed it open and was greeted by the stuffy air that his office always had when he walked into it for the first time in any given day. He glanced over the contents of his bare office; his desk was the only aspect of it which showed any semblance that it was in use, as papers were scattered across its surface. The red carpet from the hallway continued into the room and met the walls at the gold-painted base trim of the white walls.

Adam walked over to sit at his desk and set his bag on the ground near his chair, and tried to find the note he had which could remind him of the meeting time and location he had to get to. He eventually found it. The meeting wasn't until tomorrow.

"God dammit," he said aloud as he leaned back in his chair. He stared at the ceiling until he remembered the address that Marie had put in his shirt pocket. He reached in and grabbed it, but was surprised that there was another piece of paper there. Oh, shit, he thought, he forgot that Pam had given him a letter when she had come to see him before Marie. He quickly glanced at Marie's address—she lived in the same area as Adam, Block B. He put the memo back in his shirt pocket.

He unfolded the letter that Pam had given him; the paper had obviously endured a bit of wear-and-tear and had a strong smell of sweat. He looked at the contents of the letter and realized that it wasn't actually written by Pam.

"Huh," he muttered. "Drew?" He guessed, assuming that writing was from Drew Roberts, whose handwriting he had seen many times before. It was handwriting which was similar to his own, almost disturbingly so, when he was younger. He looked at the name under the very short body of the letter. It was from Drew and, from the date on the

letter (the name and date were noticeably added by Pam at some point), had been written three days ago. Adam read it:

Adam, I didn't do what Kain will say. But I did see him do something during the storm—

Adam swore aloud in his office. He read the note repeatedly over the course of the two hours he sat in his office, waiting for Kain to show up at his office; Adam's daily tasks were always decided by Kain, so if he wasn't there, Adam just assumed there was nothing to do. Though, Adam realized, he had never missed a day in the four months since he had been chosen by Kain to be his assistant. Up until that point, he had just been one of the seven councilmen, a seemingly random position that he never understood why he was chosen to fill.

"What the fuck is going on?" He asked. The walls of his office remained silent.