

## The Cut

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The chair at Katelyn's station was imitation leather, black and utilitarian but cushioned enough to give the impression of luxury. Cora made her way toward it through the well-lit salon. She was overwhelmed by the scents of jojoba, lavender and bergamot, with an undertone of ammonia. The gift card for the cut and conditioning treatment was a Valentine's Day present from Sean. It wasn't her regular salon, but she knew if Sean picked it, it must be a high-end place.

"We'll start with the treatment and the guy on the phone said you're also getting a trim, right?"

"Yeah, sounds good." Cora said.

Sean liked it long.

"Keep it long enough to touch your nipples," he said before she left for the appointment.

Laying back at the sink, the plastic bowl digging into her neck, she closed her eyes.

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The booths at Orchid Bar had been hard as well, the benches made of wood with no padding. Easy to clean. The neon lights reflected in the wood. The whole place smelled of cedar and sweat.

She felt the heat on the back of her arm and the gentle touch of a hand on the small of her back as she stood in the drink line. She was at the bar celebrating her twenty-sixth birthday with friends. The nutmeg, lemon and musk of Old Spice reached her first.

“What are you having?” said a voice in her ear

She sighed as she turned around intending to refuse the drink.

They met a decade before in high school but he didn’t recognize her at first.

“I noticed you because of your hair,” he told her as they sat on the same bench of the booth, “it caught the light. I don’t remember it being this long in school.”

He delicately caressed a small section that draped her neck. She noticed his hands. They seemed simultaneously strong and nimble. They brushed against her arm and her skin tingled. She fought the urge to catch them mid gesture. She wanted to feel the contour of his knuckles with her own fingers. She wanted to drag them against her lips.

“I know, I usually like it short but I’ve just been lazy lately. I’m back in school and everything is so expensive.” Every time he leaned in to hear her, she could smell his neck. He was an active listener and she could tell he liked to look at her.

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“But you *have* met his family, right? You’ve been sleeping together for what? Like five months?” Becca asked one Sunday morning at Denny’s brunch. Cora’s best friend Becca was annoyed that Sean had become too ‘busy’ to join them for a double date with Becca and her fiancé the night before. The strawberry from her crepe turned sour in Cora’s mouth. She swallowed hard.

“Yes, we ran into his mom and dad at a restaurant a few weeks ago.”

“So, it wasn’t even intentional?” Becca raised her eyebrows, “has he called you his girlfriend yet?”

“Yes,” said Cora, “his roommate’s cousin was visiting and he had to introduce me.”

“Wait, did Sean call you his girlfriend, or did the roommate call you his girlfriend?”

“Does it matter?”

“K, I think I have my answer.”

“He did clear his throat too many times, I thought he might be choking.”

Becca snorted into her coffee, “Damn that’s hot.”

Cora smiled stupidly as her mind drifted back to the previous evening. Sean had come over really late after Cora got home. She was wearing her reading glasses and a pair of pink,

waffle knit, reindeer pajamas her grandma had given her at Christmas. She wasn't expecting him.

"Wow," he said when she answered the door.

"What?"

"You look really beautiful."

Cora had been startled by his sincerity and just said "oh."

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Cora tried to busy herself in a side room when she spotted Alanna strolling through the doors of the vet clinic. The rest of the front-end staff were taking phone calls and dealing with a litter of hyperactive golden retrievers as Alanna approached the desk. Reluctantly Cora sidled behind the desk and scanned her items.

"Oh my god, so you're actually together? No way, that's incredible. I wondered when I ran into the two of you but I just figured maybe you met there by accident, I didn't think you were actually dating. I mean how did that even happen? And you're back in school now too? Girl, good for you. He is just-" Alanna made a grunting noise and two of the golden retriever puppies bounced toward her, "so cute. I don't know if I've ever seen him date anyone. Ugh, you're lucky."

Cora's face burned as she handed Alanna her cat food and receipt. Since high school Alanna always had a knack for making her feel like a toddler.

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“Why did flowers become such a thing?” Sean asked. “I don’t get it. They’re expensive and then they just die.”

“I don’t know, they’re pretty. I guess it’s just a nice way to say you’ve been thinking about someone.” Cora said

“I’ve been thinking about you,” He smiled at her and pulled her onto his lap.

“I shouldn’t expect any flowers from you then?”

“Nope.”

They both laughed as he ran his hands through her hair.

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The couch in Cora’s one bedroom apartment was an old futon. She laid it flat and dressed it with fresh sheets. The twin bed in her bedroom was fine for a lot of activity but she hoped he would spend the whole night. Sean told her he planned to come over around seven thirty. A familiar lump throbbed in her throat as she checked her phone after feeling a phantom buzz on her thigh. Nine seventeen and no new messages, just her own unanswered text: *are you still planning to come over?* followed by the notification: *READ 8:23pm*.

The peach light of morning, streaming through her living room window, woke her before her alarm had a chance to ring. The only new message on her phone was from Becca asking how

the ‘sleepover’ went. It was followed by four laughing emojis and one eggplant. She didn’t reply.

Cora was almost through her shift at the vet clinic when she saw the stale text from Sean on her phone. *I guess you’re probably mad at me now. SENT 12:49pm.*

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Cora was slow to respond when Katelyn asked if the water temperature was too hot or cold. Her hair lay heavy across her shoulders as she made her way back to Katelyn’s chair, threatening to soak the clothes beneath the cape. She noticed the potted orchid on Katelyn’s station.

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The futon was folded back into sitting position when he buzzed her apartment, purple and yellow carnations in hand. It was spring and they were on sale at Save-On-Foods. It was the second time he ever gave her flowers.

The first time he was trying to one-up her college friend. Cora’s friend Mark had stopped by her apartment with a bouquet on his way through town. Until that point, she hadn’t told Sean that she and Mark had the same taste in men, or that the flowers were the result of a 7-year-old inside joke.

Mark once convinced Cora to pose as a nude model so he could complete a drawing requirement for a class he missed due to a nasty hangover. He was generous when drawing her

proportions and she pretended to be wildly offended when he only got a B on the assignment. The bouquet came with a card that read: *for the boobs that got me through art school - love always, Mark.*

When he saw it, Sean scoffed, appearing unphased. The day after, white lilies were waiting for her at work with a card saying: *If anyone is getting you flowers, it's me - Sean.*

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“Maybe you could come with us to Mexico.” Cora said

“I can’t,” he said as he scrolled through his phone. “It’s right in the middle of my shift.”

They had been together for eight months when Cora’s mother had used her Avion points to purchase the plane tickets. Cora knew it would annoy everyone else if she asked her mom to change the dates. She was disappointed but unsurprised by Sean’s refusal. Three days into the trip Cora was sitting at the swim-up bar with her dad. She was deep into her third margarita and fantasizing about the towel boy when Sean appeared. It took at least nine minutes before she was convinced that she wasn’t hallucinating. She told Sean she loved him on the seventh day of the trip. He put his hand on her cheek, touched her bottom lip with his thumb and untied the drawstring of her shorts.

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“So, did you find out why he didn’t come last night?” Cora’s mother asked. Sean had been invited to Cora’s parents’ house for her dad’s birthday barbeque. When he neglected to show up or answer his text messages they decided to eat without him.

“I guess the beers after golf ran longer than he expected and his phone died. I think he just forgot.”

“Fool me once...” Cora’s mom muttered behind her coffee cup.

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On Cora’s twenty-seventh birthday Sean booked a weekend away at a Nordic Spa. They groped at each other in-between hot and cold plunges. When the condom broke later that night Sean frantically searched his phone for the closest pharmacy that could provide them with Plan B. When he found one Cora refused to leave the room. She had been on the pill for over a decade by this time.

“This *is* the back-up protection,” she said.

He was short with her until they arrived back in the city the following day.

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It was spring when she bought a pregnancy test. Two periods had come and gone since their spa weekend, but this one



was late. She planned to use it after returning home from the salon.

Katelyn combed through Cora's wet hair.

"How short are you thinking?

Cora felt a familiar cramping sensation in her lower abdomen. She blew out slowly and began to grin. She ran her little finger alongside her jaw.

"Here."