

December 21 | 8:25 p.m. | Gilbert, Arizona

Fitz Wilding is an idiot and a love addict, and I enable both.

Get out of the car? Or stay in the car?

The familiar uptick in my heart rate is the first sign that something is wrong.

No, that's not true. The letter in my back pocket, and the fact that I felt compelled to write it, is the *first* sign. The racing heart is an inevitable side effect of seeing Fitz. And of making a hard decision.

The driving rain has slowed to a misting, and I flip off the windshield wipers. Twinkle lights from the neighboring restaurants cast a hazy yellow glow across the slick pavement. My headlights have been off since I pulled into the parking lot three and a half songs ago, because I didn't want him to see me. I *don't* want him to see me. Not until I've decided what I'm going to do with the letter.

Get out of the car?

Stay in the car?

My palms break out in a cold sweat as my phone buzzes with a text from Fitz. **Quit stalling, Collins. It's not that cold.**

Followed quickly with: **I'm dying.**

I've been caught. A smile tugs at my lips as I tap out a quick response. **You're not.**

Poor Fitz. Always so dramatic.

I take the keys from the ignition and open the door to the chilly December air. It's tempting to be disappointed in myself, especially when I spent the evening sitting in my room penning the world's most unnecessary breakup letter, but the reality is this: It wasn't ever a choice. He asked me to come, so of course I was going to come. That's what best friends do.

I pull the sleeves of my sweater over my palms and walk slowly through the festive stretch of downtown Gilbert. Christmas lights are strung in shop windows and the old-fashioned streetlamps proudly display a dozen matching wreaths. Joy and cheer ooze from every brick and windowpane, a stark contrast to the sludgy sick feeling pooling in my stomach.

Despite my slow tread, I reach the water tower in no time at all. Certainly not enough time for me to have made a decision. I stop short in front of the ladder that ascends five stories into the air.

Climb or don't climb?

Another decision to make. I run an inventory of my physical symptoms. Increased heart rate? Check. Sweaty hands? Check. Numb lips? Not yet.

I might avoid a panic attack, after all.

"Paige!" I hear the smile in Fitz's voice. In the dark, I can just make out the brim of his baseball hat sticking over the platform as he looks down at me. "Be careful. The ladder is slick."

"If I die because of you—" I mutter as I put my foot on the bottom rung and begin to climb.

"I'll serve gummy worms at your funeral." He flashes a dazzling smile, and my annoyance begins to slip. At the top, he holds

an umbrella over my head with one hand, using the other to help me step from the wet ladder to the platform.

“Hang on,” he says before I sit. He shrugs out of his jacket and dries a place for me on the narrow aluminum ledge. When that’s done, we sit side by side, our legs dangling in the night, our backs leaning against the cold silo.

“Based on the fact that I’m here right now, I’m assuming tonight didn’t go well,” I say.

“It did not,” he agrees, grim faced and sullen again.

“And what was the plan?” A gust of wind blows, whistling through nearby trees. Without his sodden jacket, goose bumps erupt over his forearms. I pretend not to notice.

“It was supposed to be romantic,” he moans, rubbing his hands over his face.

“Rain is a romance staple,” I say indulgently. “What happened?”

“I blindfolded her, told her I had a surprise. I set up this whole picnic.” He motions to the damp basket next to him, filled with soggy sandwiches and limp chips. “As it turns out, she’s deathly afraid of heights.”

I can’t help but laugh. Fitz is always creating elaborate romantic scenarios, but they go up in flames at least as often as they’re successful; .500 is a great batting average but less impressive in the grand gesture department.

“You didn’t know that?” I ask. A touch of pink blooms on his cheeks. “No wonder she dumped you.” He and Molly have been dating for seven months and ten days, and that’s plenty of time to discover his girlfriend’s deepest fears. I don’t say that part out loud, though. Don’t want him to know I’m counting.

“Is there something wrong with me? Why does this keep happening?” His tone is self-deprecating, but the current of truth running under his words makes my chest swell.

My instinct is to take him by the shoulders and say: *No. You’re perfect. It’s the girls who are wrong.* Instead, I keep my hands to myself and say: “Maybe you’re trying too hard.”

He scoffs. “What does that even mean? Trying too hard? How can you try too hard for something or someone you really want?”

“Don’t ask me. I don’t try for anything I want.” It’s meant to be a joke, but it’s too true to be funny.

Maybe coming here tonight was a bad decision, after all.

The average person makes thirty-five thousand decisions every single day. I read that somewhere and it stuck in my brain, because that number? It’s big. Overwhelming. Paralyzing. Enough to make me stay in bed all day and pull the covers over my head. I also read that super successful people like Barack Obama and Mark Zuckerberg wear the same clothes every day to avoid decision fatigue.

Decision fatigue is something I understand. I feel it in my soul. Take school, for example. I couldn’t decide which elective to take this year. Drama? Clay? American Sign Language? What if I’m destined to be a famous sculptor, but I waste my talent reciting poorly memorized Shakespeare instead? Or what if taking clay, which is only available fourth hour, means that I get put in the opposite lunch period as all my friends, and I spend the entire year eating alone in the bathroom? Or what if there’s a carbon monoxide leak in the languages corridor and all the ASL kids drop over dead in first period? Grim. But possible.

“I thought she was the one,” Fitz says quietly as he lets his head fall to my shoulder.

My heart collapses. Not because he’s talking about another girl. I’m used to that by now. But because he can *lean his head against my shoulder* without combusting. Being this close to him makes my hands shaky and my heart wild. In contrast, his touch is casual and thoughtless; when he observes the metadata on his activity tracker tonight, skimming it for peaks in his heart rate, this physical contact won’t even register.

“The one who what?” I snap. The amount of energy I expend to not look jealous or insecure when he talks about other girls could power an entire city, but tonight, with the letter in my pocket, my mask is slipping. “Did you think you were going to get married and have tiny, gorgeous babies?”

Fitz’s role models are two disgustingly in love parents and three sisters in their twenties and thirties, all of whom raised him on a steady diet of nineties rom-coms. No wonder he’s constantly stumbling into love, trying to one-up himself with the grandest of all the grand gestures. For any guy not blessed with Fitz’s effortless good looks and impressive batting average, his romance obsession could be fodder for locker room teasing. As it is, almost everyone I know (guys included) has been in love with Fitz at some point.

Molly is not the first girl who he’s called “the one,” and she won’t be the last either. I’m horribly jealous. Practically dripping with poison-green envy. Not only because of those other girls (although that’s part of it) but also because he has a fearless heart. It’s the thing I love most about him.

It’s the thing I hate in equal measure.

“She is gorgeous, isn’t she?” Fitz says longingly.

Not actually my point. I allow myself an eye roll, thankful to the dark sky for hiding it. “What was the final straw? The height, the rain, or the unfortunate combination of both?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” He lifts his head and fiddles with the band on his activity tracker. The school baseball coach makes all the players wear them, even in the off-season.

“Since when?” I ask, thrown by his departure from our usual script. This is the part where he relays every last word and brutal text, describing in heart-wrenching detail how her tears rolled down her cheeks while she yelled at him or kissed him or whatever it is that happens during a breakup.

Fitz looks up at me from under his lashes and my breath catches in my throat. Why does my breath *still* catch? Like one of those girls in one of his movies. When will my brain accept the fact that I’m not the heroine in Fitz’s love story? His expression shifts from mopey to serious, his blue eyes trained on mine. Even after all this time, one look from him can make my stomach falter and my mouth dry. And suddenly I want to burn the letter in my pocket, the one that highlights all the reasons why we can’t be friends anymore. It’s messy and vulnerable and written in excruciating detail, and it boils down to this: I hate how much I love him. For the first time all evening, I’m certain I won’t give him the letter, because I don’t want to live in a world where he doesn’t look at me like this.

“Wanna see something cool?” he asks, turning his attention to his phone. His bad mood vanishes and the weird tension between us breaks. He opens his weather app and pulls up the forecast for Williams, Arizona, a tiny mountain town near

Arizona's northern border where Fitz's family owns a cabin. Snowflake icons begin the day after Christmas and continue for the rest of the week.

"Are you trying to kill me?" I moan enviously. As a born-and-raised Gilbert kid, snow is nothing more than a fairy tale. Only as real as the stories Fitz tells me.

"I know it's a few days early, but merry Christmas."

"Excuse me?"

"This is your present." He gestures to the screen.

"What do you mean?"

"It's about time I made good on my promise." His eyes search mine, looking for the answer to a question he hasn't asked. I'm transported back to a night two years ago. My face flushes hot, despite the chill nipping at my cheeks. I wonder if he's thinking about it too.

"Are you serious?"

"It's not Venice, but—"

"Who needs Venice?" I grip the railing in front of us with both hands to stop myself from throwing my arms around him. Hugging Fitz is a clear violation of my rules.

My rules for touching are as follows. It is only acceptable when it is:

- accidental (bumping my knee against his when we're watching a movie)
- helpful (brushing a bug from his hair)
- or necessary (swatting his shoulder when he's being annoying).

Maybe I should add another category for spontaneous, cannot-be-helped touching. How many categories is too many?

“You do,” Fitz says, bringing my attention back to our conversation. “You need Venice and Florence and Milan and Rome. And that’s just one country.”

“Okay, okay, I get it.” I laugh, giddy at the thought of spending winter break with him and his family.

“I can’t give you those places, but I can show you a snow-covered town at the mouth of the Grand Canyon. You in?” He rubs his hand on the back of his neck, a dead giveaway that he’s nervous. As if I’d say no.

“Of course! I don’t expect you to give me all of Europe.” I laugh again, because how ridiculous would I have to be to turn my nose up at his cabin because it’s not nestled in the Swiss Alps?

Fitz knows as well as anyone how deep my wanderlust runs. When I lie in bed at night, surrounded by pictures ripped out of travel magazines, I imagine future lives as a ranch hand in Montana and a shepherd in Ireland and a churro maker in Spain. I don’t know if I love sheep or even churros, but nothing summons a panic attack faster than the realization that if I’m extremely lucky, I’ll get one of those imagined futures.

One.

I’m paralyzed by the fact that walking through one door essentially means slamming shut fifty or a hundred or a million other ones.

“When do you leave?” I ask.

“Tonight. The truck’s packed and ready. I’ll pick you up early the day after Christmas; we’ll turn around and be back before the snow hits.”

“*Snow!*” I shake my head, still in disbelief. “Do I need special clothes so I don’t freeze to death?”

“My sisters have plenty that you can borrow.”

“As long as my mom says yes, which you know she will, I guess I’ll see you in a few days.” I get to my feet, unable to suppress my grin. I’ve been dying to go to Fitz’s cabin for ages, and he’s invited me up a few times during the summer, but the timing never worked out. Until now.

“What’s that?” Fitz plucks the letter out of my back pocket, raising an eyebrow at his name scrawled across the envelope.

“Hey!” I lunge for it, my feet slipping on the damp aluminum. My arms scramble through the air, my fingers slipping off the metal railing.

“Whoa!” He grabs me by the waist, steadying me. “Are you okay?”

I nod, too shaky and breathless to say anything.

“Holy shit. I thought you were gonna fall.” He tilts his wrist so we can both see how high his heart rate has spiked.

“So did I.”

He slowly removes a hand from my waist and gently presses two fingers to my neck, tracking my pulse. I nearly stop breathing. A lazy smile spreads across his face. “Damn. You *were* scared.”

“Mm-hmm,” I agree, secretly thinking that the feel of his warm fingers on my cold skin is having more of an impact than the near fall. His hand drops, and he releases my waist.

We both look over the edge, taking in the fifty-foot drop.

Get out of the car or stay in the car?

Climb or don't climb?

Tell him or don't tell him?

This is what I mean about decisions. I could be smashed against wet cement at this exact second, and it's impossible to untangle the reason why. Is it because Molly dumped Fitz? Because I drove out here to either break off our friendship or cheer him up? Because I climbed this tower?

When bad things happen, I want to know where to put the blame. I hate the swampy maze of endless regret that comes with wondering.

"So." I take a shaky breath, steeling myself for the trek down the ladder. "I'll see you after Christmas?"

"Unless you bail on me again," he says softly. Surprised, I meet his eyes. We don't ever talk about *that* night, and I'm not sure what to say. "Never mind." He shakes his head. "See you after Christmas."

I'm sorry. I messed up. I regret it.

I could say any of those things, and mean it. But I'm dealing with a racing heart, shaky hands, and only a fraction of the bravery I'd need to say the words out loud.

My mind spins as I retrace my steps backward: down the ladder, past the warmly glowing twinkle lights, and into my car. I think about decisions and paralysis and regret the whole way home, and it's not until I pull into my driveway that I realize tonight's tragedy will not be almost falling off the water tower.

It'll be the fact that I left the letter with Fitz.