

These scenes (or a version of them, anyway) were in the draft that I queried to agents, but I cut them during the edit round before we went on submission to try to get the wordcount down and tighten the pacing in the last third. Once it sold, I wrote the scenes of Ethan getting too drunk at dinner/the morning after to replace them. Even though it was the right choice narratively to focus on amping up the tension & angst between Grey's birthday party and Ethan's breakdown in New York, I do miss having these additional moments of fun and tenderness between them before everything falls apart.

This date scene was originally much longer (like, many different locations and activities), but this was the only part that got axed entirely– the conversations they had in the other sections were important enough to get reworked into the new chapters, so I didn't include them here.

Over the next few weeks, it felt like Grey ate, drank, slept, and breathed Ethan. Though Nora's warning was never far from her mind, his behavior had, so far, been beyond reproach. He'd have a beer or two at dinner and the occasional glass of bourbon as a nightcap, but she couldn't even remember the last time she'd seen him visibly drunk. She only saw her favorite Ethan of all: sweet, goofy, and utterly devoted to her.

They spent most of their time at his house, only sporadically venturing into the outside world. Now that their status as a couple had been officially confirmed once again, the scarcity of their public appearances meant that they created nothing short of a frenzy whenever they stepped out together. Photographers were parked outside Ethan's gate whenever she entered and left, same as always– but now, Audrey didn't even have to call them in advance.

Since they couldn't go out much, they started hosting dinners– Nora, Jeff, and the girls; Cal and Lucas with Squidward fifth-wheeling. Kamilah and Andromeda came over often, with Kamilah and Ethan regularly getting into good-natured film buff sparring matches, Grey and Andromeda exchanging amused looks over their vegan chocolate mousse as the two of them heatedly debated whether *Perfect Blue* or *Millennium Actress* should be considered Satoshi Kon's masterpiece.

Even so, Grey felt a little stir-crazy. When she'd mentioned it to Ethan, he'd smiled to himself, but said nothing. She assumed he'd forgotten about it, until one morning, she opened her front door to head back to Ethan's after a rare night alone and was greeted by a cardboard box on her front step with her name on it. She tossed it in the passenger seat of her car without opening it.

Ethan must have been waiting at his front door for her, since he flung it open while she was still hunting for her key. She burst out laughing at the sight of him: he was sporting an enormous fake mustache, waggling his eyebrows at her like Groucho Marx before dipping her into a dramatic kiss.

"Eugh! Stop! It tickles!" she squealed. "What is this?"

"Did you get your present?"

"What? Oh." She looked down at the box under her arm. "I haven't opened it yet. It's not his 'n' hers mustaches, is it? Because you could've used a much smaller box."

She set down her bags next to the kitchen island and placed the box on top of it. Ethan came up behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders, kissing the top of her head as she broke the tape. Her brow furrowed as she took off the lid, and uncovered what appeared to be a dead animal.

"Is this..." She lifted it carefully and realized it was a long, center-parted black wig. Underneath was a pair of thick-framed black glasses and a denim shirtdress. When she looked back up at Ethan, he had a shaggy, sandy blonde wig haphazardly placed over his dark hair, making her crack up again.

"Hey, you said you wanted to be able to go out without being noticed," he said.

"What, as Sonny and Cher?"

“Are the sideburns too much? I can lose them.”

“Maybe a little.” Grey ran her fingers over the wig in the box. It was soft and smooth, not like the cheap, sticky plastic ones she’d worn over the years on Halloween. She’d been in enough hair trailers to know an expensive wig when she saw one. This was the real deal.

“Where are we going?”

“Get dressed first. I have everything all planned out.”

Grey obediently followed Ethan into his bedroom, parking in front of the full-length mirror. She braided her hair and tucked it under the wig cap, carefully pinning the wig in place. Meanwhile, Ethan changed into a pair of ill-fitting cargo shorts and a loud Hawaiian shirt. She then tried on the dress, which hung shapelessly to the middle of her shins.

Ethan came up beside her as she slipped on the glasses, wearing his own pair of wire-framed clear-lensed aviators. She reached up to straighten his wig, and he inclined his head to give her a better angle. As she pulled her hands away, he grabbed her wrist and planted a light kiss on the inside, and even though he was always touching her like that— like it was involuntary, like he couldn’t get enough of her— it sent goosebumps up her arm anyway.

They both turned to face the mirror and immediately started laughing.

“We look like we’re recruiting for our sex cult,” Grey said, pushing the long black strands behind her ears.

“Who says that’s not part of the plan?”

“Wow, bored of me already. I see how it is,” Grey teased. Ethan instantly pulled her to him and kissed her so deeply her glasses dug into the bridge of her nose and she had to put a hand on her wig to ensure it stayed in place. “Nevermind, nevermind, forget I said anything,” she gasped, giggling helplessly as she pulled away.

“I feel like we need new names,” Grey said as they piled into his Bronco.

“Who do you want to be? Pewter?”

She snickered, flipping the mirror down to study her unfamiliar reflection as Ethan put the car in gear and pulled out of the driveway. “I think I feel like a Harriet. What do you think?”

He grinned. “Definitely a Harriet. Who am I?”

She studied him. “I want to say... Rocky?”

He glanced at his own reflection in the rearview mirror, and she was amused by the subtle shift in his posture, like the name was all he needed to get invested in the character. “I can work with that.”

They drove out of his front gate, which, for once, was clear of parked cars milling around waiting for them.

“Where are all our friends?” she asked, craning her neck.

“I paid them to leave us alone for the day.”

“I hope you’re getting some kind of write-off.”

“If that’s not a business expense, I don’t know what is.”

Grey turned up the air conditioner– which thankfully seemed to have been fixed since their trip to Palm Springs– as Ethan merged onto the highway, heading east. He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, belting out “You Shook Me All Night Long” along with the radio. She tried to press him for clues about where they were going, but all he did was sing louder, turning his head to serenade her, his smile growing wider under his mustache.

A bubble of joy swelled uncontrollably beneath her collarbone, like her chest might burst open from it. As annoyingly hot as he was when he was all grumpy and brooding, this was the

side of him that really made her knees weak, the side she felt privileged to even be allowed a glimpse of— laughing, playful, stealing glances over at her like her happiness was the sole mechanism pumping blood through his veins. She fought the urge to climb over the console and wrap herself around him like a koala. Instead, she settled for taking his hand where it rested on her thigh, lacing her fingers through his and squeezing.

Thirty minutes later, they turned onto Hollywood Boulevard, and Grey couldn't stop herself from laughing when she realized what he was up to.

“*This* is where we're going?” she asked, looking out the window at the Walk of Fame as they crawled through traffic.

Ethan grinned. “Why not? I thought it might be fun to play tourist.” His smile faded slightly. “Unless you don't want to.”

“Lead the way, Rocky.”

Ethan left the car at an overpriced valet, and the two of them strolled down the busy sidewalk hand in hand. Grey was startled by how she automatically assumed a defensive posture, as if at any second the hordes of people streaming around them would hone in on their presence and swarm them. It hadn't been that long ago that she'd been able to walk among them, relatively undisturbed. Even a month or two of notoriety had been enough to rewire her synapses, making her jumpy and anxious in public.

She glanced up at Ethan, sure he must be as unnerved as she was, but he seemed calm, his expression unreadable under the mountain of fake hair covering his face. Sure enough, nobody around them paid them any notice, their eyes passing over them blankly.

Grey came to a halt in front of a building with a garish red facade, a red carpet surrounded by plastic palm trees leading up to the front door.

“Can we go in here?”

Ethan tilted his head back to look at the sign, then grinned. “Sure.”

He paid for their tickets and they took the elevator up to the top of the building. When the doors dinged open, a room full of the biggest celebrities on earth stared back at them.

They continued staring, motionless and blank-faced, as Grey and Ethan approached.

“Creepy,” Ethan said, walking in a circle around a three-time Oscar winner. “Are we allowed to touch them?”

“I think so,” Grey said, scanning the room to see what other people were doing. Nobody else seemed to have any reservations about wrapping their arms around the life-sized wax statues.

They wandered through room after room of iconic pop culture tableaux, every now and then pausing for a picture. Ethan reclined on a late night talk show couch that Grey remembered seeing him appear on annually, posing like he was mid-conversation with its wax host. Grey, for her part, had her long-overdue reunion with Morgan Mitchell, as Ethan photographed her mirroring Morgan’s eternally frozen hand-on-hip posture as if pitching a sequel for *The Sister Switch*.

“This whole thing feels a little macabre as a concept, right?” Ethan mused, as they passed by a scene of Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, and James Dean sharing a milkshake in a 1950s-style diner. He nodded at them. “A lot of pain and tragedy to go around between those three. But even now, they don’t get to rest in peace. Someone’s still making a buck off of them.”

“I guess that’s the trade-off for immortality,” Grey said.

“Getting exploited in the afterlife, you mean?” he asked wryly.

“Maybe. This seems pretty harmless on the exploitation scale, though.” She slipped her hand through his and they kept walking.

“I read that there’s this wax museum in Ohio that has like, full-sized Biblical dioramas,” Grey said, as they descended the stairs to the next level. “But if you look closely enough, some of the people in them are actually recycled celebrity wax figures that these museums threw out. So they have, like, Elizabeth Taylor dressed up like the Virgin Mary. Or John Travolta as Jesus.”

They paused in front of another wax statue. Unlike most of the others, this one wasn’t dressed as a signature character: just a simple suit, hands in its pockets, on a fake red carpet.

“What Biblical figure would you cast him as?” Ethan asked.

Grey cocked her head, considering it.

“Job, maybe?” she deadpanned.

Ethan chuckled. He turned around and touched the arm of a middle-aged woman behind them.

“Excuse me, would you mind taking a picture of my wife and I?”

Grey bit her lip, trying to ignore the pleasurable thrill that went through her at how casually he called her that.

He handed the woman his phone, and the two of them posed on either side of the wax figure. Grey stood on her tiptoes to plant an air kiss on its cheek, as Ethan slung an arm around its shoulders.

“Your wife, huh?” she murmured in his ear, once the woman was gone again. He smiled, wrapping his arms around her neck and kissing her forehead.

“Oh, yeah,” he said as he pulled away, resting his hands on her shoulders for an extra beat before dropping them back to his sides. “We had a small ceremony on the beach last year, it was beautiful. You don’t remember? You cried.”

“That does sound like me.”

“But I was crying a *lot* harder, so nobody noticed.”

They stepped back to regard the statue again.

“Is this really what I look like? What’s wrong with my face?” Ethan muttered. He was right; there was something a little droopy about his wax facsimile.

“I don’t think they’ve been storing you at your optimal temperature,” Grey said. “Don’t worry, you’re much more handsome than that.”

“But where does Rocky rank?” he teased, draping his arm across her shoulders as they headed for the exit. She automatically curled her arm around his waist, leaning into him as much as possible while still being able to walk.

“Oh, no contest. Rocky, then Ethan, then Wax Ethan.”

“That’s it. I’m keeping the mustache.”

I was sad to lose this one mostly because their big sex scene happens at like, 50%, and then... no more, lol. I think I sent the revised draft back to my agents with the note "R.I.P. roof sex." But now roof sex lives on, I guess! (In the final version, they miss this party because their flight gets delayed, and their New York trip picks up the next morning instead.)

The *Dirtbags* screening was part of a week-long festival honoring the work of Perry McCallister, who'd directed it. Ethan had been relieved to learn that; at least someone else would be the center of attention. Plus, it had been years since he'd seen Perry.

They skipped the opening night screening (Perry's first film, *The Big Sky*), but showed up for the afterparty on the top floor of the Standard Hotel. As soon as they entered, Nora made a beeline for Grey, pulling her into a conversation with a potential investor. Ethan went to the bar to get drinks for them both, but hung back by the window to observe her. She was mostly just smiling and nodding, but whenever she spoke, it seemed to excite Nora and the investor, triggering another round of even more enthusiastic smiles and nods in response.

To most people it would look convincing, but he knew how nervous she was about her movie's future. He could see the strain behind her smile, the way it didn't quite reach her eyes—but when her gaze drifted, catching his, that missing spark returned instantly. His stomach did a little flip as one side of her mouth curved higher, her expression warming under his watch, before she quickly refocused on the conversation.

He started to make his way over to join them, but was intercepted by an old acquaintance, the executive director of some nonprofit or other that he and Nora had supported. He hadn't realized how long he'd been caught up in conversation until he felt Grey lift her vodka soda out of his hand and introduce herself.

When the crowd parted, he caught his first glimpse of Perry, who immediately excused himself from his conversation.

“Ethan!” Perry boomed, charging across the room and wrapping Ethan in an enormous bear hug. A few cameras flashed around them, and Ethan shut his eyes. Eventually, Perry released him and held him at arm’s length, appraising him.

“It’s good to see you, old man,” Perry grinned, the familiar affection in his voice warming Ethan from head to toe.

“It’s been too long,” Ethan said, before turning to introduce Grey.

“I’m a huge fan,” she said with a smile, shaking Perry’s hand.

“Thank you. You have excellent taste. Except in men, clearly.” He winked at her. “How long are you two in town?”

“We just got in this morning, we’re here through the end of the week. Then we’re going down to Cape May for a little,” Ethan replied.

“Wonderful. That’s wonderful,” Perry beamed at them. “I hope we can get together at some point, lunch maybe? I want to know how you’re doing. None of this five minute how’s-your-mother small-talk bullshit. Being celebrated is *exhausting*, people won’t stop pulling on my arm.”

“I’d love that,” Ethan said. Perry clapped him on the back before the festival planner placed a hand on his other shoulder to guide him away.

He and Grey spent the rest of the evening drifting in and out of conversations, separating and reuniting, like they were connected by an elastic band. Whenever it stretched too far and they spent too long apart, inevitably one of them would soon end up back at the other’s side.

He'd be thrilled if he never had to go to another industry party in LA again— no need to specify which industry, there was only one that mattered. Here, though, the guests mingled from the worlds of art, politics, journalism, publishing, theatre. This crowd was particularly eclectic, and Ethan wasn't sure what was more surprising: the fact that he was willingly at a party at all, or that he was genuinely enjoying himself.

It seemed like only minutes had passed, but Ethan looked up and the room had mostly cleared out. He and Grey wandered over to the floor-to-ceiling windows, nursing the ends of their drinks, staring down at the panoramic view of Lower Manhattan. Grey stood in front of him, leaning against his chest as he wrapped his arms around her.

"I missed this," she murmured, gazing out at the illuminated skyline.

"Me too." He ducked down and kissed her temple. "I love this color on you."

She was wearing a dress in a deep, rich shade of blue that made her eyes sparkle and her skin glow. It was somehow both modest and revealing all at once: a high-cut neck with a bare back, a floor-length hemline and a dangerously high slit. She'd been wearing this color the night of the movie premiere all those months ago. The first time he'd kissed her.

An idea occurred to him.

"Do you want to see the roof?"

Her throaty laugh told him she knew exactly what he had in mind.

He took her hand as they climbed the back staircase. The air was clear and cool, the noise of the street dulled to a hum by their altitude. There was another bar up here, surrounded by a variety of seating, but it seemed to be deserted. They made their way over to an alcove that was sheltered by a large pillar, granting them privacy if someone else were to come through the door.

He pressed her up against the pillar, her eyes immediately fluttering shut. He could tell she expected him to kiss her, but he brushed his lips against her jaw instead, teasing, scraping his teeth lightly over her throat, ending in a gentle bite where her neck met her shoulder, making her sigh with pleasure.

She'd admitted, after much prodding, the way she'd fantasized about him after that first kiss. How it had made her realize how much he wanted her, even before he'd admitted the full extent of it to himself. While this wasn't exactly the public display of her dreams, he figured they'd had enough witnesses to their sex life to last a lifetime.

She opened her eyes as he pulled away, clearly thinking the same thing.

"Is this a good idea? What if we get caught?" Her arms were already inside his suit jacket, though, pulling him close, hands skating up and down his back, sending tingles of electricity in their wake.

Honestly, even though they were out of range of the security cameras, it probably wasn't a good idea. But there was something about her that made him want to be reckless, his better judgment taking a backseat to the thrill of chasing her— *their*— gratification.

He ran his hands down the sides of her body, resting on her hips, leaning in to press a soft kiss to the shell of her ear. "I think my line is... 'I don't fucking care. Let them watch.'"

She laughed, twining her arms around his neck, pulling his face back to hers.

God, he loved kissing her. It sometimes felt like she could read his mind, perfectly anticipating when he wanted her to yield and when to lead. Her hands on his body or on his face or in his hair the moment it occurred to him he wanted them there. Every once in a while, they would find themselves on his couch making out like teenagers for hours, groping and grinding, peeling off items of clothing agonizingly slowly.

But tonight was not that kind of night. They had to be quick.

She leaned back against the pillar, his thigh nudging her legs wider. The movement spread open the slit in the side of her dress, offering the sleek expanse of her upper thigh to him. His hand moved to it automatically, starting at her knee and sliding higher, finding nothing but smooth, firm skin all the way up to the dip of her waist.

He looked up at her, and something in his expression made her laugh.

“I can’t wear anything under it. The fabric is too thin.”

His gaze drifted over her body, the sharp outline of her nipples through the silky material. He moved his hand back down to the meatiest part of her hip and squeezed hard enough that she shuddered.

“So you’ve just been walking around naked under that all night?”

“Well, if you think about it, I’m naked under pretty much everything I wear.”

He laughed, but it caught in his throat. “I know that’s a joke, but it’s kind of doing it for me.”

He brought his hand to her face, two fingers tracing her kiss-swollen bottom lip as it curved into a smile. When he pressed gently, she opened her mouth to him, a groan rumbling through him as she sucked eagerly, the sensation of her tongue swirling around his fingers shooting straight to his cock.

Slowly, he pulled them out and slipped his hand beneath her dress. She gasped, bracing an arm against his shoulder as he pushed both fingers inside her at once. She was already wet enough that he didn’t need to linger, but the sight of her flushed face, eyes closed, as she rode his hand was worth savoring. He bent his head and took one of her nipples in his mouth, sucking through the fabric, and he heard her breath quicken even more.

“God,” he rasped, kissing his way back up her neck, “What did I do to deserve you?” As he said it, he curled his fingers inside her, pumping harder, and she whimpered, her knees buckling, more of her weight sagging against him.

“*That*, for starters,” she said shakily, half-laughing, clinging to his neck with one arm to stay upright. She reached down to fumble with his belt with the other, freeing his cock from his pants moments before he was sure they were about to rip. She lightly ran her thumb over the sensitive tip, and he groaned involuntarily. This would *definitely* be quick.

“Where do you want to do this?” she asked, looking back up at him with heat in her eyes.

With the last remaining scraps of his concentration, he considered their options. He could wrap her legs around him and take her against the pillar, but the stone surface looked rough and her entire back was bare. But if they went over to one of the couches or lounge chairs, they’d be completely exposed as soon as someone came up the stairs.

His eyes flicked over to the hip-height cement wall surrounding the edge of the roof, which had an intricate wrought-iron fence on top that stretched up above their heads.

“Hold on to the fence.”

Without a word, she turned and bent over the wall, gripping the wrought iron. He came up behind her, nipping and kissing her exposed spine as he pushed her dress up past her hips.

He buried his hand in her hair and tugged hard as he eased into her with a strangled curse, pleasure spiking hot and intense through his whole body, her knuckles white against the iron as she exhaled sharply. “Good girl,” he murmured, smoothing a hand over her back, sending a shiver rippling through her.

He rocked against her hips, slowly at first, then with even, driving strokes. He could tell she was trying to stifle her moans, so he ground his hips into her and leaned over to brush her clit

until something resembling a scream escaped her throat, followed by his name, the desperation in it driving even closer to the edge. A wave of raw emotion crested in his chest, threatening to overwhelm him.

“You’re mine, you know that?” he growled, giving her a sharp slap on the ass, not caring how loudly it echoed out across the deserted roof. “All fucking mine.”

He wasn’t sure where this possessive caveman shit came from when he was fucking her, but she seemed to like it, at least. Maybe it was because she understood that what he actually meant was, *I’m yours, I’m yours, I’m yours*, the thought thrumming rhythmically through his body to the beat of his galloping pulse. Sure enough, at his words, her hips snapped harder against his, their pace becoming frenzied, neither of them capable of trying to be quiet anymore.

It didn’t seem right, that he was allowed to feel this happy again. To feel this kind of pleasure, this level of connection with another person. This fucking *alive*. Every moment with her still felt stolen, too good to be true, like it would all slip through his fingers if he didn’t hold on as tightly as he could. He tried to remind himself that this was supposed to be fast, fighting his instinct to draw it out, to revel in every gasp and shudder.

She looked back over her shoulder at him, her expression searing.

“I know,” she breathed, “I’m all yours.”

Heat surged through him, his heart feeling like it was about to pound straight out of his chest, and it was all he could do not to lose himself right there. In a superhuman feat of self-control, he somehow managed to hold on for several more bottomless seconds until he felt her orgasm rip through her as she cried out, clenching and spasming around him, her muscles gripping so tightly he thought he might pass out from the sensation. A few hard thrusts later, he tumbled over the edge after her.

As they headed back indoors, he pulled her into his side, pressing his lips to her hair and inhaling deeply, still more than a little dazed, trying to ground himself. “I love you so much,” he murmured. It amazed him how easily it slipped out now, how naturally, how deeply he meant it every single time. She looked up at him, her face glowing.

“I love you more.” She leaned up to press a tender kiss to his lips.

He shook his head. “Not possible.”

She blushed even deeper, and he couldn’t resist crooking his finger under her chin and kissing her one more time.

They rode back to their hotel in contented silence, Grey’s head on his shoulder, her fingers loosely intertwined in his. They abandoned their idea of a nightcap at the hotel bar and went straight upstairs, where they stripped, showered, and were buried under soft linens and mountains of pillows within half an hour.

Ethan held Grey tightly against his chest. As he drifted off, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so peaceful, so sure that the fucked up fragments of his life were finally, finally becoming whole once more.