

## Shift

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# Shift

by [thirtypercent](#)

## Summary

What if Jim never went to Stamford? What if Pam started making life changes a little sooner?  
An AU look at season 3.

Originally posted on MTT ages ago, archiving here for posterity.

## Notes

Thanks so much to the fantabulous Sweetpea for beta-ing most of this thing!

# I won't rest while you break my will

## Chapter Summary

Pam visits Jim the day he leaves for Australia.

## Chapter Notes

Chapter title is from Xiu Xiu's "I Luv the Valley OH!" If you're looking for eerie, angsty desperation, look no further.

He knows he's been alternating between tossing crap into a suitcase and staring at the wall for the last two hours, but he has no idea what he's packed. Did he remember toothpaste? Socks? What the hell is the weather like in Australia right now? The travel agent said June is the best month to visit, but isn't it winter? Fuck if he knows. He slumps to the ground, back against the foot of his bed, surrounded by t-shirts and jeans and a pair of sneakers.

Shit. He's supposed to be excited about this. He's supposed to be starting his life over. It's time to move on, snap out of it, stop living in something that isn't real. No matter how right it seemed or inevitable or perfect or *necessary*. It doesn't matter, it's not happening. Sometimes life sucks. It happens to people every damn day. If they can handle it, so can he. He's just got to suck it up and get on with his life. End of story. And he's always wanted to travel, right? But there's just one travel companion he always imagined, and now that familiar wave of panic is washing over him again.

What is he doing? He can't start over without her. He's just... gone. She has all of him. He can't forget it all. She means everything, *everything* to him. What can he do, why can't he do *anything*? This is killing him, and he's just trapped, and nothing he does can take it away and his entire happiness is caught up in another person who just... doesn't... *care*. Not like he does. He presses the heels of his hands to his eye sockets and tries to steady his breathing.

He hasn't seen her since that night. He took extra vacation time, and wouldn't set foot in the office again until he came in on the weekend to pack up his desk for Stamford. Maybe it was cowardly. He hasn't read email or listened to messages from his coworkers. He thinks if he

hears anything about her impending wedding he just... might... shatter. Broken heart-initis. *Terrible*. Terminal cardiac fracture. *Better*. Pam would like it. She'd probably draw a cartoon on a post-it and stick it to his monitor – *god, get a hold of yourself*. This is pathetic. He can't do this anymore. He has to put it all behind him. Just, stop.

He's just so tired. *Screw it*. As long as he has his passport and wallet, he'll be okay, right? He squashes the contents of the suitcase down and zips it up. He looks at his watch and sighs -- hours left before he has to be at the airport. Every day, every hour, every minute seems to pass more slowly than the last. The nights he spends staring at the ceiling instead of sleeping probably don't help. Or the lack of eating. He should probably do something about that.

He wanders downstairs and into the kitchen in a daze. He pours cornflakes and milk into a bowl, then collapses into a chair at the kitchen table. He's hunched over his bowl, staring blankly at his spoon when he hears a knock at the door.

His heart starts to beat faster. *What if...?* It's a horrible game he plays with himself. Every time the phone rings or he gets an email or there's a knock at the door he thinks *maybe*. Maybe she feels it too. Maybe he's not alone in all this. Maybe she'll say the word and he won't feel like his life is ending anymore.

He forces himself to stay calm as he walks through the living room. He pauses by the door, bracing himself for disappointment. He can't decide if he's an eternal optimist or a pathological masochist. Why has he been at Dunder Mifflin so long? Why does he hover at reception every day, hanging on her every word even though he *knows* she's going home to another man? He can't say he didn't know what was happening. He knew, every single day. How many times is he going to keep doing this to himself?

*Still*. Still, he takes a deep breath as he opens the door.

And there she is.

She's standing there awkwardly in a t-shirt and jeans, hair in a messy ponytail. She looks so young. A version of herself he's rarely seen. He's always prided himself on knowing her so well, knowing how to make her laugh or sputter in mock outrage or give him that soft smile. But now it hits him with sudden force – everything they've come to know about each other belongs in carefully constructed boxes that leave so much unsaid. Now she's standing on his

doorstep and he just wonders how he can be so in love with a woman whose bare elbows still take him by surprise.

He realizes he should say something. He tries to hide the jittery, slick combination of hope and terror that courses through his veins and sneaks into his voice, but still it comes out scratchy and higher than usual. “Hi.”

She shifts, and her gaze falls down to a box she clutches protectively in front of her. “Um, hi...”

He steps aside, gesturing for her to come in with limbs that suddenly feel awkward and out of place. After a moment she steps past him, head down and shoulders hunched. He follows, trying to divine her thoughts by the curve of her spine and failing miserably.

She comes to a halt in his living room, turning around, but still not meeting his eyes. Her voice is small and hesitant. He’s heard that tone before, but always directed at Roy. Never at *him*.

“You haven’t been at work, so I, um... brought you these. Uh, cookies. For the flight.” She places the box on the counter bordering the kitchen, and lingers there, fingers tracing over the edges.

“Oh... thanks.” He tries to think of something to say. Neutral, easy. “So, uh, how’d you escape the loony bin? Um, Dwight isn’t following you, is he?” he finishes lamely.

Slowly she turns to face him. Her face is pale. “I had some last-minute... um, I had some errands to run.” Her fingers tangle together awkwardly, and the light catches her engagement ring.

Last-minute errands. For her wedding, in two days. Her wedding, the one he’s traveling halfway across the world to escape. The one that leaves him sick to his stomach when he sits in pews watching friends or relatives exchange vows. He can never decide which is worse – imagining it’s himself standing there at the altar with her, or imagining it’s her with Roy.

Both scenarios make him feel pretty damn pathetic. He's become used to plastering an imitation of a smile across his face and hoping no one notices the difference.

But right now, he can't hide anything. The endless pretense exhausts him. He slumps against the wall as hope drains out of him like blood, pooling at his feet. He shoves his hands into his pockets and stares at the ground. Doesn't say anything. If he does, too much will come out.

Tentatively she moves closer, until she's standing right in front of him. He can't look at her. He can't. "Jim, I..." Her hand comes to rest on his arm, and her palm feels hot against his skin. He knows he's shaking and he wishes he could hide it. Her fingers tighten on his arm, and she moves so close he can feel her body heat.

She murmurs his name again, just one broken syllable, almost inaudible. "Jim, don't..."

Don't what? Love her? Cry in front of her again? Make her doubt herself?

Her other hand curls against his ribcage as she leans into him, her body just barely brushing his. She rests her forehead against his shoulder. Her breath is uneven and now he can feel her trembling, too. She sniffs, then lifts her head. Her hair brushes his jaw and her breath caresses his ear.

Even so close, he almost doesn't hear her when she speaks. Her voice sounds small and broken.

"Did you mean it?"

It takes him a second, but then his jaw tightens. His words come out raw. "Of *course* I meant it."

Her fingers press into his arm briefly before sliding up to rest on his shoulder. She turns her head to press her lips to his jaw. Her eyelashes are wet against his cheek.

He shivers, and his hands leave his pockets to drift up her back.

Her voice is shaking now. “That’s not what you said before.”

Again, he’s confused.

She presses her damp cheek to his. “You said you used to… like me… but then you stopped.”

The breath leaves his lungs in a frustrated puff of air. “Pam, what did you expect me to say? You’re getting *married*.”

“I *believed* you.”

Whatever he was about to say dies on the tip of his tongue as her lips brush across his cheek and she presses a soft kiss to the corner of his mouth.

His eyes close. What should he do? What’s going on? Does it matter? He stays perfectly still, afraid to break the moment.

She hesitates, but then her hand slides up to cup his jaw as she stands on her toes, finding his mouth with hers.

He tries to stifle his reaction, but still he moans. Her hand slides up into his hair as she deepens the kiss, her tongue touching his. He wraps one arm around her back and cups the nape of her neck with his other hand, pulling her closer.

She makes a soft sound in the back of her throat, and her fingers tighten in his hair.

There's no space between them, now. The heat coming off of her and the feel of her body pressing against his is turning him inside out. His breathing is ragged and his heart feels like it's about to beat right out of his chest.

God, it feels so good. He could do this forever. Her skin and her hair and her mouth and her scent all around him. It's almost enough that he doesn't wonder. But even as he tries to lose himself in her, fear intrudes. What is this? Is it just like last time? Is she just going to kiss him and touch him like *this*, and run back to her fiancé? He wants to say he just doesn't care, he'll take what he can get. But he can't. He has to ask her. He's terrified. *Shit*. He has to do it.

He tightens his arms around her and kisses her just once more, deep, before loosening his hold and pulling back. Slowly he lets his arms slide away from her.

It takes him a moment to gain the courage to look her in the eyes. She looks about as flushed and dazed as he feels, but her eyes are wide and glassy with shock. He supposes making out with him against his living room wall probably wasn't on her list of *wedding errands*. But this *has* to mean something. Can she really say this didn't matter to her? That she can just get married in *two days* with no second thoughts?

"Pam... what does this mean?" He can't even manage to keep his words steady.

She starts to shake her head, and her breath grows choppy and panicked. "I... I don't know. I'm sorry. I should go."

She spins, stumbling toward his front door, fumbling with the handle briefly before opening it and hurrying through. It stands open, but he doesn't move. He hears her car start, and tires peel out. Then silence.

He doesn't know how long he just stands there, but eventually he turns and sees his bowl of soggy cornflakes sitting on the table. Vision hazy, he walks over to it, wraps his hand around the ceramic. The urge to fling it at the wall is so strong his hand is shaking.

But he doesn't.

He drops the bowl back onto the table, and milk sloshes over his hand. In a flash, he feels desperate to get her scent off of him before he goes crazy. He strides toward the bathroom, stripping clothing as he goes. He turns the water on as hot as he can stand it, stepping under the spray. He grabs the soap and a washcloth and scrubs himself off, but still, he swears he can smell her. She's in his head.

*Fuck.* Why can't he just crawl out of his own skin, just have one fucking second when he could just *stop thinking*, to be able to close his eyes for just one minute without seeing her, smelling her, feeling her body pressed against his and her hands in his hair.

The soap and washcloth fall to the tub at his feet. He braces a forearm against the tile wall, closing his eyes and letting his head drop forward. Her touch feels burned into his skin. Her fingers, curling into the hair at the nape of his neck. Her mouth open under his. Her breasts, pressing against his chest. Please, just a second, just a second to forget. With a groan of defeat, he reaches down and begins to stroke himself. Just one more time. One more time, and maybe he can forget.

What if he hadn't stopped her? What if he hadn't said anything? Would she have stayed? What if he just turned and pinned her against the wall? Slid his hands under her shirt, over the skin of her stomach until her breasts were heavy in his palms. Would she arch against him? If he slid her jeans down her hips, hooked a finger under her panties, would she be wet and aching for him? If he slid his fingers inside her and stroked her, would she moan? Would she fumble with his zipper, tugging his jeans to the floor? What if he wrapped her legs around his waist and fucked her against the wall, sliding into her again and again, hot and slick and tight? Would she come, tightening around him, clutching at his shoulders, hair, gasping his name?

Would she still say he was misinterpreting their fucking *friendship*?

When he comes, he has to clench his teeth to keep from moaning her name.

It doesn't help.

He feels worse than before.

He leans his forehead against the tile and sobs.

# Sometimes everything is wrong

## Chapter Summary

Jim returns from Australia.

## Chapter Notes

Chapter title from R.E.M.'s "Everybody Hurts" (of course).

Married.

Married.

She's *married*.

He focuses on these words, mentally reciting them until they blur into an unfamiliar collection of syllables. But as hard as he tries, the phrase still doesn't lose meaning, and *married* still sounds like a particularly ugly adjective. He never thought he'd *missengaged*, but now all he wants is to return to a time when his demise had merely been hypothetical. Theory had become fact, and he's still struggling to wrap his mind around it.

He gives up the litany for now, slumping against the door of the cab. He leans his forehead against the cool glass of the window as he stares unblinking at the passing Scranton scenery. Everything looks about the same as he left it. Late afternoon sunshine angles through the trees, casting his neighborhood in a nostalgic glow, light patterned with shadow.

Australia was... terrible. On the flight over, he had developed some notion of spending his time there in a drunken haze. He can't say it was his usual style, but desperate times, desperate measures, right? Maybe if he were lucky he'd lose track of time, be completely oblivious to the moment she said "I do" to another man.

That plan had developed a kink, however. He couldn't actually keep anything down long enough to reach anyone's definition of drunk. After a couple of drinks he was already leaning over a toilet, sweaty and shaking, but it had little to do with alcohol consumption.

He'd tried, though. He'd leave the bathroom and return to the bar, resolute, ordering another shot as the bartender eyed him warily. Despite his best efforts, though, he was acutely aware of the time, unable to stop himself from calculating time zones and giving an internal play-by-play of every Scranton event.

He spent the hours of her ceremony and reception with his head in his arms on the bar, eyes closed to quell nausea as he thought *now she's walking down the aisle*, and *now she's saying 'I do'* and *now she's Roy's wife*.

Eventually, afternoon became evening and evening became night and night became closing time. One of the hotel staff came to escort him back to his room, disbelieving his protestations of *I'm not drunk, I'm not drunk*. He couldn't even bring himself to feel embarrassed at the obvious pity in the eyes of a stranger.

He feels hollow. Like something inside of him is broken. His body doesn't feel like his own, and it hurts to move, hurts to breathe, hurts to think. His stomach seems gnaw away at itself, all the time. The effort to appear normal in front of others, to carry on ordinary conversations and show ordinary reactions, exhausts him. He spends his days desperate to escape the speculative stares of strangers, but once he's alone his own thoughts threaten to crush him.

When the cab pulls up at his driveway, the effort it takes to pay the driver and grab his luggage seems monumental. He stands motionless for a moment, staring at feet that feel like lead and trying to work up the energy to make the trek to his front door. Finally he looks up.

She's sitting on his doorstep.

His stomach drops. He can't take it again, he can't take another... he just can't do it. Especially not *now*.

Her knees are pulled up to her chest, arms wrapped around her shins. She stares at him with wide eyes.

He's not sure how long he just stands there, staring at her in dread and shock, before taking hesitant steps forward. His mouth has gone dry and his hands are slick with sweat.

The walk that seemed so long just moments ago ends far too soon, and he comes to a halt in front of her. He can't think of a word to say. Isn't sure he'd even be capable of speech if he could.

Her eyes are red and she's clutching a tissue. Her voice sounds hoarse and congested and exhausted.

"I... thought you were getting back today. But I didn't know when." Her eyes meet his. Why does *she* look so damaged and heartbroken?

"Pam... what are you doing here?" His own voice sounds far away, muffled by the pounding in his ears.

She starts to speak twice before finally forming words. Her eyes fill with tears. "Jim... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. About before." Her gaze falls to her hands as she begins to shred the tissue, bits falling like confetti to the cement beneath her feet.

The anger that overtakes him is a welcome relief from the emptiness. "Pam, do you really think this helps? Just... go home to your *husband*." He wishes his voice hadn't cracked on the last word, but at least he's not just... well, at least it's something different.

She flinches, and hunches in on herself. For a long moment silence falls, interrupted only by the sound of her breathing as it grows labored, almost panicked. Suddenly she speaks, the words falling from her mouth in a frantic rush.

*"I didn't marry him."*

For a second he feels so light-headed that he thinks he may actually pass out. Instead he collapses onto the step next to her. He stares straight ahead, heart pounding and mind racing, before gaining the courage to turn and face her.

His eyes meet hers for only a moment before she looks away. Tissue annihilated, her hands move reflexively to toy with her engagement ring. But it's gone. No engagement ring. *No wedding ring.*

He's shocked. He's actually dizzy with relief, vision swimming, heart pounding. Feeling like he's just sprinted a mile. Somehow, it happened. An eleventh-hour reprieve.

"Is he... did you guys...?" He can't bring himself to say it.

She nods, mutely, staring at her fingers as they tangle together nervously. A tear slides down her nose until she reaches up to dash it away impatiently.

She sniffs. "We broke up." She takes a strangled breath and corrects herself. "*I* did. I broke us up." She starts to laugh, but there's an edge of hysteria there. She takes a deep breath, and rubs her eyes. Shaky hands move to smooth back her hair, then link behind her neck as she rests her forehead on her knee.

"*Ten years.*" Her voice is small and muffled. "I don't know...." Her voice grows unsteady, and she swallows. "I don't know what I'm doing."

She looks so fragile. He's petrified. The desire to touch her is trumped by gut-wrenching fear. Twice he's known real hope, and twice....

Her eyes close for a moment and she takes a deep breath. She speaks tentatively, as if testing the words. "I got my own place."

He's at a loss for a moment. "Wow."

"Yeah, I couldn't really... stay. I went to my parents' for a few days, and they helped me find an apartment. Actually, they're in town now. Helping me move."

"Wow." His brain seems to have short-circuited.

She's silent for long moments. After a few false starts, she starts to speak again. "Roy... cried." Her voice sounds almost bewildered. "I never made him cry, the whole time we were... never." She stops to take a shaky breath. "He kept asking *why*."

Cautiously he responds. "What..." he clears his throat. "What did you say?"

"I said that... we're not really right for each other. And... when we were together... I didn't like myself anymore. And sometimes, I didn't really like him."

He swallows. "Oh."

"It's true, right? All those reasons."

He doesn't respond. She doesn't really seem to be asking him.

After a moment she continues. "It's funny, though."

"What?" he murmurs.

"It's just... I never used to care about any of those things. Before I met you."

His heart feels like it skips a beat. Or two. And then redoubles its efforts. He reaches toward her, but as his palm starts to slide up her arm, she flinches. He freezes, then draws his hand back slowly.

She turns sad eyes on him, then reaches out to catch his retreating hand in her own. She brings his palm to rest on her bent knee, and strokes trembling thumbs over his knuckles. She shivers despite the warmth of the evening.

It seems unfair that the happiest moment of his life should also be her saddest.

Long moments pass as she struggles to find words. He watches the last rays of sunshine disappear behind the horizon. Her features grow vague and indistinct as twilight falls.

Finally she speaks, her voice hushed. “Jim, I’m sorry. I’ve been doing everything wrong.”

He hesitates. When he speaks it feels like he hasn’t used his voice in days. “Well, I didn’t really... I didn’t exactly do everything right either.”

She laughs. It’s small and hesitant, blurred by tears, but it’s something.

She curls her fingers around his. Her eyes close for a moment. When she opens them, her gaze falls to their hands again. “Jim... I can’t... be what you want me to be.” He tenses, and she squeezes his hand before continuing. “Not right now.”

The breath leaves his lungs in a whoosh. “Pam... just... anything....” He’s not even sure what he’s trying to say, but hopes she understands.

Her fingers tighten around his, and she lifts his hand to press her lips to his fingers. A tear slides down her cheek and over his knuckles.

Her phone rings, startling them both. She checks the caller ID and lets out a shaky breath. “It’s my dad.” She sends the call to voicemail, putting the phone back in her pocket. She scrubs her palms over her face and stands slowly. “I should probably get back....”

He stands with her. He still feels shell-shocked. She looks fragile and tired and scared. He faces her, shifting uncomfortably. He rubs the back of his neck, and takes a deep breath. Feeling a little ridiculous, he lifts his arms cautiously, taking half a step toward her. “Can I...?”

She opens her mouth as if to speak, but instead presses her lips together as she nods silently. She steps forward in a sudden motion, wrapping her arms around his waist and collapsing against his chest.

He pulls her close, one arm wrapping around her shoulders, and the other moving to the back of her head. He closes his eyes and presses his cheek to her hair. The tension in his body starts to dissipate. Actually, now he feels like he could sleep for days.

She takes a shaky breath and her arms tighten around him. Suddenly she jolts, and steps back, regarding him closely. Her eyes jump from his face to his body and back again. He stares back, puzzled by her scrutiny.

She looks stricken. “You’ve lost weight.”

He feels oddly embarrassed. “Oh... yeah maybe.”

“Why?” Her voice sounds strange.

“Oh, I dunno... haven’t really been... eating much I guess.”

Her hands cover her mouth and her eyes fill with tears. *Crap.*

He brings a hand up to her shoulder. “Pam...”

She lets out a strangled sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob. She starts to shake her head. “I don’t know how this happened.”

“What?”

“Me, just, somehow... I’ve hurt... everyone. Everyone I love.”

They lock eyes silently a few moments. He’s still trying to process her words when her phone rings again. And again, they both jump.

One heartbeat, then two. She blinks. “Okay, um, now I really should go.”

“Okay... okay. Um... I’ll see you later?”

She starts to nod. “Yeah. Yes. I’ll see you later.” Her voice grows softer. “Bye, Jim.” She walks backwards a few paces, then turns toward her car. She pauses by the door, watching him for a moment, before cautiously lifting her hand and giving him a small wave. He waves back, and for some reason, of all the fateful moments of their relationship, this one strikes him as the most surreal.

She climbs into a car he doesn’t recognize and starts the engine, slowly pulling away from the curb. It’s not until he’s watching her round the corner that he remembers his impending transfer to Stamford – in three days.

# Never betray the way you've always known it is

## Chapter Summary

Back at work.

## Chapter Notes

Chapter title from The Shins' "Caring is Creepy." What's that you say? The Shins are hipster! Jim's stereotypical favorite band? Well, then that makes it all the more appropriate, right?

"Dunder Mifflin, this is Pam."

Jim's head snaps up. He's long since given up the pretense of indifference to her voice floating across the room; his only concession to the appearance of work is to keep his hands on his keyboard to avoid another lecture from Dwight. He doesn't want any distractions in this new business he has of analyzing Pam's every word for clues.

These days, their conversations are short and stilted. The look of guilt in her gaze every time she sets eyes on him feels like a punch in the gut. And the new Roy with the puppy dog eyes and the beard and the new workout regimen and the stupid *chicken or fish*. He can't even catch her eye for hours after Roy shows up. She just huddles over her keyboard looking guiltier than ever.

The feeling of possessiveness that washes over him is absurd, really. But every time Roy shows up he wishes he could tell him to fuck off, Pam's not his anymore. That it's his own damn fault for being such a jackass. That she deserves someone who actually likes to talk to her and cares what she wants. It's especially ridiculous because Pam may not be Roy's, but she's certainly not Jim's, and probably wouldn't want to be referred to as belonging to either of them anyway.

So he listens, whenever he can. He's starting to think he'll soon be developing an uncomfortable kinship with stalkers, but he's desperate for any clue as to how she's doing. He hasn't heard her laugh in so long. But he pays special attention when she's answering the phone. He doesn't want a repeat of that one time. Not that he'd be able to do anything about it, but still.

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*It's the first day they're both back in the office, and he thinks the tension might suffocate him. He's on edge, like he's waiting for the other shoe to drop, and he can't seem to stop his knee from its rapid, nervous bouncing under his desk. His heart seems like it's been beating double time ever since he saw her walk in the door. He came in early, just so he wouldn't miss any moment there with her, which is kind of pathetic when he stops to think about it, but if he's being totally honest with himself he left 'pathetic' behind long ago. This wouldn't even rank very high on the list of his obsessive behavior he engages in when she's involved anyway. Come on. Hot sauce packets? Really?*

*Sometimes he has nothing else to do, so he measures his pulse discreetly under the desk, and thinks all this heart-racing business probably isn't very good for him, and is it possible to give yourself an anxiety heart attack? But then he thinks that's stupid, he's never heard of someone suffering a heart attack waiting for a sign from a woman who just dumped her fiancé, maybe for him or maybe because of him or maybe neither, and what the hell is wrong with him anyway, and why is he sitting here all day staring at reception and contemplating the likelihood of a self-induced heart attack?*

*He's so distracted he can't even effectively fend off Dwight when he gets wound up over stray pencil shavings. His lack of attention costs him when Dwight launches into a twenty-minute diatribe on the importance of a work area unspoiled by coworkers' detritus. Finally Phyllis of all people can't take it anymore, so she dumps the contents of her own pencil sharpener onto Dwight's desk, unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on your perspective) sullyng the vicinity of his bobbleheads. It's a brave stand, and while it does not decrease the volume or frequency of his monologue, it does at least cause him to stomp off and call for Michael, brandishing a bobblehead like a medieval weapon.*

*Jim starts trying to catch Pam's eye sometime around the use of the word 'detritus', but to no avail. She shows no signs of even noticing Dwight's latest temper tantrum, let alone cracking a smile. She stares at her monitor, expression unreadable.*

*The day drags on and on. Periodically he tries to play it off like any other day, strolling over to reception and pulling jellybeans from their dispenser, throwing an offhand remark in her direction as if he hasn't been rehearsing it in his mind for the last half hour, striving for a perfect balance of humor and nonchalance. But even tried and true conversation-starters crash and burn in the face of her monosyllabic responses.*

*Even standing directly in front of her he can't catch her gaze – when he comes near, a flush creeps up her cheeks and she just stares down at her hands as they lay motionless on the keyboard. Her gaze moves no higher than his collar, and even then for only a briefest of moments.*

*She spends the entire day at her desk, picking at her lunch next to her keyboard. She only ventures from reception for quick trips to the bathroom, making eye contact with no one along the way.*

*Finally, mercifully, the minutes of the afternoon tick away and five o'clock draws closer. Desperate to talk to her away from their coworkers, to hear her say something to him, anything, he practically crouches at his desk, ready to jump up the moment she sets off for the elevators. Not that he has a clue what he'll say. "So, I understand you're overturning your entire life. How's that going? Oh, and by the way, is your ex-fiancé going to try to beat the crap out of me at any point?"*

*Still. Maybe inspiration will strike when the time comes. He watches her shut down her computer, grab her purse. The phone rings one last time. She hesitates, glancing at the door, before picking up the receiver and reciting her standard greeting.*

*Almost immediately, she turns her back to the rest of the office, shoulders hunching. Her voice drops so low he can't hear her anymore, but he can see her fingers tangling in the phone cord as she wraps her free arm around her stomach. The conversation can't be very long, but it seems like an eternity before she returns the receiver to its cradle.*

*She's still for a long moment. He still can't see her face, and stands cautiously. He's gathering the nerve to approach her when she springs into motion, heading for the bathroom at a near-run. She doesn't look at him as she rushes by, staring at the floor.*

*He stands there, frozen, trying to decide what to do next. His first inclination is to follow her, but she probably wouldn't appreciate him accosting her in the women's room. Instead, he collapses back into his desk chair, and waits.*

*The rest of the office gradually clears out, even Dwight, though not before a low-level interrogation and numerous suspicious glances. Soon the only sound is the hum of his computer. Still he waits, growing so still he can hear his watch tick. Finally, breaking the silence – the hesitant squeak of the bathroom door.*

*Quiet as a ghost, she appears in the doorway. He looks up, and their eyes meet for the first time that day. Hers are red, puffy, and widen in alarm as she realizes he's still at his desk. Her gaze darts away to focus somewhere near his feet.*

*"I thought everyone was gone." She hasn't even finished mumbling the words before she's rushing past him, barely slowing down to grab her purse from the reception desk.*

*He's momentarily stunned, but recovers soon enough that he's right on her heels as she pushes through the doors.*

*"Pam, wait!" She doesn't answer. "Pam, what happened?"*

*She comes to a sudden halt in front of the elevators and jams the 'down' button frantically. "Nothing."*

*"Who was that?"*

*"Just... nobody."*

*"Are you serious? You just spent an hour in the bathroom!"*

*"It doesn't matter, Jim." Her voice is starting to break.*

*The elevator doors open with a ding, and she hurries through, stabbing the button for 'lobby.' She moves into the corner of the elevator, fingering the strap of her purse and tapping her foot anxiously. He follows, standing next to her and staring down at her bent head.*

*He pauses as the doors slide shut, then softens his voice. “Was it Roy?”*

*“No.”*

*“Are you sure?”*

*She shoots him a brief look of incredulity. “Yes!” Okay, he has to admit, that was a stupid one.*

*He exhales loudly in frustration. “Then who was it?”*

*“Jim, you don’t have to know everything.”*

*“Okay! Okay, but, right now I don’t know anything, and you won’t talk to me, and you’re upset, and I just want to know if you’re okay.”*

*She stops tapping her foot and looks up at him as they reach the lobby and the doors slide open. She sighs. “It was Roy’s mom.” She turns and steps out of the elevator, leaving him behind.*

*Surprise leaves him motionless for a moment, but he catches up to her quickly.*

*He shoves his hands into his pockets and forces himself to stay calm. “What did she want?”*

*She laughs a little, but doesn’t say anything as they cross the lobby and leave the building. He starts to think she’s not going to answer; just drive off and leave him staring, but suddenly she stops and spins to face him. The long summer days mean warm afternoon sun still spills over the parking lot, casting them both in unfamiliar hues, rarely seen under the harsh fluorescent lights of the office.*

*“She wants me to marry her son.”*

*He swallows, shifts from one foot to the other. “Oh.”*

*She folds her arms in front of her and looks at the ground, toeing at a piece of gravel. “She’s been telling me it’s just cold feet.”*

*He hesitates, afraid to hear the answer. He lowers his voice to match hers. “What do you say?”*

*"I tell her... it's not. But she keeps insisting, like she doesn't believe me... until today, I guess. She got mad. Said she never thought I was that type of girl. You know." Her voice starts to waver. "To dump her son at the altar. But apparently I'm not part of their family anymore." She takes a strangled breath and puts a hand over her mouth.*

*He hopes soon he won't have to see her struggle to keep from crying. He wants to tell her that he has a mom who'd love her, that she doesn't need Roy or his family, but the timing seems inappropriate.*

*"Pam, it's not like that..."*

*"It's exactly like that!"*

*He jumps at the sudden increase in volume.*

*"There's... this whole... thing." She gestures wildly at the space between them as if it's a living, breathing being. "Which apparently means I've been cheating on Roy every day for the last four years. So, I guess I am that type of girl!"*

*She spins and walks off, again leaving him in the dust. And again he starts to follow, but she stops him in his tracks when she calls back over her shoulder. "You can't help me, Jim. And don't follow me."*

*He doesn't.*

\*\*\*\*\*

The next day he came into the office to find her already at reception. She glanced up at him when he walked in, and while she hadn't smiled, she did at least meet his gaze for a moment. When he reached his desk, he found a folded piece of paper on his keyboard, his name staring up at him in her neat cursive.

He glanced over at her, but she was typing away diligently. So he sat down and picked up the note with nervous fingers. Slowly he unfolded the paper to read her message.

*I'm sorry, Jim. I just need time.*

He read her words again and again, trying to discern mood in the way she formed the letters of his name. Eventually he looked up to see her watching him. Slowly he nodded. She gave him a sad half-smile.

In the weeks since, he's become used to that smile. He sees it in the mornings, her eyes lingering on his with a melancholy air. He sees it when he strolls up to reception to comment on Michael's latest brainchild, and when Dwight issues his latest bit of survival advice. But he doesn't think he's seen her teeth in... well, since before everything.

"Jim?"

He jumps, his reverie interrupted by Toby, who's standing about two feet away holding out a piece of paper. "Oh, sorry. Didn't mean to surprise you. I need you to sign this."

"Another one?"

"Yeah. It's a change of address form for your benefits. Back from Stamford to here."

“Oh. Thanks.” He wipes a palm over his face and grabs the paper, pressing it to his desk to sign on the dotted line without glancing at the text above.

Undoing the transfer had not been pleasant. To say Jan was livid would be putting it mildly. Experiencing her wrath directly rather than as collateral damage to Michael’s stupidity was not something he’d care to repeat. But when all was said and done, his utter disregard for whether or not he kept his job probably saved him.

After Pam left his house that day, he’d decided he’d rather be fired than transfer to Stamford, and had no qualms about telling them so. Of course, Michael was on his side, which... well, may not have actually helped, but he did end up keeping his job. They would’ve had to replace him had he gone to Stamford, anyway, and young, resourceful, up-and-coming salesmen weren’t exactly clamoring to work for Dunder Mifflin.

So here he is, still in Scranton. And still signing transfer-related paperwork. He hands the form back to Toby, who’s fixing him with an uncharacteristically piercing stare.

Toby opens his mouth once, then closes it. He shakes his head. “Why didn’t you just take the transfer?”

Jim’s slightly taken aback. “Oh. Well, you know, at the last minute, I found out they were going to change my benefits package. And... I just have such a sentimental attachment to this one. I couldn’t do it.”

Toby does not look impressed (though really, he never does), but he does turn around with a mumbled “thanks” and heads back to the annex.

Jim shakes his head in confusion, and decides now is definitely the time for his break. He strolls up to reception, grabs a jellybean, and announces “I think I’ll have some coffee,” like he always does. She nods and says “okay” like *she* always does. He’s all but given up hope that she’ll join him, but... he wants her to know he’s there. Just in case.

He wanders into the kitchen, grabbing a cup of coffee, really more for something to do than anything else. He makes his way to the break room and sits at a table with a stray piece of

newspaper. A review for *The Devil Wears Prada*. Hm. Breaks were much more fun when he took them with Pam.

He's sitting there, blowing on his coffee and contemplating whether or not he's bored enough to read about Meryl Streep as fashion maven when a shadow falls over the page.

He looks up, and there she is. Holding a mug of tea and fidgeting. She meets his eyes briefly, then glances down at the chair in front of her. "Hi."

He's speechless for a moment. "Hey!" He gestures for her to take a seat, feeling for a ridiculous moment like he should be getting up to pull her chair out for her or something. She sits, wrapping her hands around her mug.

Now that he has her here, he's at a complete loss for subject matter. "So... how's everything?"

"Um... good. Actually, yeah. Not too bad. I, uh..." She stops to trace her finger around the rim of her mug. "I signed up for an art class." Her gaze rises cautiously to meet his.

It's the first time she's *really* looked at him in so long, and he wonders – now that she knows all his secrets, can she see them in his eyes? It's strange, now, feeling so exposed, and it seems about as intimate as a kiss. "Really? That's awesome!"

"Yeah? Well, it doesn't start until next month, but... I'm excited." Her shoulders straighten, and slowly a smile spreads across her face. It's the best thing he's seen in weeks.

Something tight in his chest relaxes, and he must be wearing the dopiest grin of all time as he smiles back at her, but he doesn't care. "Well, this is a momentous occasion. The first step on your way to becoming famous. Maybe I should just get your autograph now, before you forget about me. Actually, maybe a few. I'm gonna need a retirement fund."

She starts to giggle, and he feels almost giddy with relief.

The next day he gets in before her, and leaves two things by her keyboard: a new paintbrush (which the store employee had assured him was high quality and ideal for watercolors), and a pad of sketch paper (with a note that says “fill with drawings or autographs, your choice”).

He’s waiting anxiously as she gets in fifteen minutes later. Too much? Too early? He watches her find the paintbrush, and read the note. She grins and looks up at him. So far so good. He winks.

Michael barrels through the front doors. “Pamzoni! You’re looking chipper today! Glad you’re not bummed out about your failed marriage anymore. Do I have any messages?”

She rolls her eyes, but for once doesn’t look stricken at Michael’s daily Roy-related faux pas, and mouths *thank you* before turning reluctantly to face their boss-child. He can’t stop grinning to himself for fifteen minutes.

Today when he visits reception and announces his intention to drink coffee, she stops typing and looks up to regard him seriously. She smiles. “Oh yeah? I think I’ll have some tea.”

# Oh, you're changing your heart

## Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Feist's "1234."

"Pam, come on! Pleasepleasepleasepleaseplease! It'll be soooo awesome, you don't even know."

"Um... I don't think so, Kelly. Like I said before."

"But Alan is like, so great, even Ryan thinks so! Right Ryan?" Ryan's shoulders twitch as he pours coffee in the kitchen, but he offers no other response.

Kelly continues blithely on. "He draws cartoons and they're soooo funny and don't you draw like paperclips or something? Oh, he could totally give you advice I bet, too! C'mon, we're going out tonight, it'll be fun fun fun fun pleeeeeeease!" She claps her hands together for emphasis, bouncing on her toes and flashing her most winning smile.

"Actually, I... don't think he's my type."

"Oh my god, Pam! Beggars can't be choosers!"

"I'm not a beggar...."

Kelly gasps in sudden dismay. "Oh no!" Her voice rises an octave in horrified sympathy. "Is it because you're still in love with Roy? That's like, so romantic, but also kinda pathetic because Pam, it's been like, a zillion years. Is it because he's all hot now? Is it the beard? Because usually when I see a guy with a beard I'm like, ugh, what are you covering up? But on Roy it's actually pretty hot in that like, burly macho way. And he's all skinnier now too,

and no offense, but maybe you already lost your chance anyway, because he can probably get soooo many girls right now. I mean, I might've considered him if I wasn't already like, so so happy with Ryan."

Pam blinks. "Um... no, Kelly."

At Kelly's squeak of disbelief, Jim finally decides it's time to intervene. He strolls over to reception and affects a serious look. "Hey Kelly, I think Ryan might want to talk to you about... what to wear tonight." He gazes past her toward the kitchen and nods. "Yeah. Chartreuse? Is it in or is it out?"

In the kitchen, Ryan's head snaps up and his eyes grow wide. After pinning Jim with a betrayed stare, he spins on his heel and heads for the annex at a brisk pace. Kelly disappears after him, a determined bounce in her step and a lilt in her voice.

Jim turns to face Pam, grinning and leaning over her desk. "You're welcome."

She lets out her breath in an upward gust that flutters her bangs. She narrows her eyes. "Do you even know what chartreuse is?"

He lifts one shoulder. "Nope. Do you?"

"Hey, I'm an artist, remember?"

"Is that a no? I think it's purple. It sounds purplish."

"Sorry. Light green, smart guy."

"What about... vermillion? Isn't that green?"

She shakes her head. “Red.”

“Oh. Well, that’s all I got. I guess you *are* an artist.”

“This is what I’ve been saying.”

“No, this is what *I*’ve been saying.”

She looks at him seriously for a moment, then smiles. “Yeah, you have.” Suddenly her gaze shifts over his shoulder and her eyes widen. She slips off her chair and ducks down behind the reception desk.

“Uh... Pam?”

Her muffled voice emanates from somewhere below him. “Shhh! She’s coming back.”

He straightens and turns just as Kelly approaches reception.

“Jim! Where’s Pam? This is important! I need to tell her – if she’s thinking about wearing anything with chartreuse in it, *don’t*, because Ryan and I haven’t decided if we’re wearing it or not, ok? I mean, normally I would say that chartreuse is *not* my color, but Beyoncé totally pulled it off like, two weeks ago, and I never would have believed it, but it worked for her, so it might for me too. But I’ll have to reevaluate my wardrobe, and see if I have the right nail polish, and Ryan and I can’t clash, and ugh. So much to think about. So tell Pam, just in case, no matter how much she wants to, *no chartreuse*, because we don’t want to look like the Olsen twins or something. And besides, she’d look way too washed out anyway.”

He stares. “Okay. Will do.”

“Thanks Jim, you’re the best! Okay, I have to go talk to Ryan about his ties. He doesn’t even know if he has a tie that complements chartreuse! Ugh, men, right?” She spins and heads

back to the annex without waiting for a response.

He turns and slumps back over the reception desk, heaving a sigh. “Okay, now you really owe me.”

Cautiously Pam straightens from her crouch, climbing back into her chair and slumping over her desk. She props her head against the heel of her hand and groans. “She’ll never go away.”

He leans closer, injecting a wheedling note into his voice. “But Pam, he’s a *cartoonist*.”

She scrunches her nose at him and starts to shake her head again. “Not my type.”

“Oh yeah? What *is* your type?”

As soon as the words are out of his mouth, he realizes this is new territory. They’ve never crossed this line before. Actual flirting. The kind two single adults might engage in. Sure, things have gotten better. So much better that he can’t wait to get into work every morning. He’s awake before his alarm goes off and in the office before Dwight does his morning perimeter check. He tells himself he’s not the only one who feels it, because she’s been getting in earlier too, and that smile, it’s so much like it was before but so different because now it looks like *hope*.

He likes to remind himself how things have changed by looking at the colored pencil sketch she did for him. Right after she bought her new car, her first *very own car*, a tiny blue Yaris that looked like it weighed about twelve pounds, she couldn’t stop telling him how much she loved the color, and the cupholders, and the CD player, and the new car smell. Eventually he had started teasing her, calling it her clown car, and inquiring after the whereabouts of Gonzo and Skippy in the mornings.

After her retort that he just had freakishly oversized limbs seemed to have no effect, she finally drew a picture to illustrate her point. In it, she sat happily in the driver’s seat of her blue Yaris, captioned “Vehicle of Perfectly-Proportioned Awesomeness.” A sad clown labeled “Jim ‘Big Foot’ Halpert” stood outside the car, bemoaning his oversized clown feet and big red nose. That night he bought a picture frame for it, and now it sits on his desk next

to the picture of his brother. She thinks he framed it to make fun of her for giving him such a ridiculous drawing, but he loves it. To him, it looks like *possibility*.

He's drawn back to the present when she straightens in her chair. Still. Still. Possibility doesn't equal actuality. His heart starts to thud.

"My type, huh?" She tilts her head, regarding him thoughtfully for a moment. "Hmm...." She nods decisively. "Tall." Satisfied, she places her hand on her mouse, returning her attention to her monitor.

He tries not to let the air leave his lungs too quickly as he remembers to breathe. He strives for casual interest. "That's it? Tall?" He grabs a jellybean and starts to shake his head. "So superficial." Now he's just pushing his luck.

She sighs. "Okay, fine." Her gaze slides over to meet his, then sweeps over him, lingering on the jellybean he's rolling between his fingers. She looks him in the eye again for a moment before returning to her computer. "And has a sweet tooth."

The jellybean slides right out of his fingers and lands on her desk with a click, rolling onto the floor. He stands up straight for a moment, fingering his tie, before leaning over her desk again. "Oh?" He's sure his voice just cracked, but that's the least of his concerns right now.

She nods at her monitor with affected nonchalance, but the blush slowly staining her cheeks is starting to give her away. She presses her lips together, but she can't quite contain the smile that threatens to break her cover.

Suddenly she sits up straighter in her chair and her eyes widen. "Oh my god."

"What?"

She leans forward, staring at her monitor intently. "Oh my god, oh my god."

“Pam, what?”

She starts to grin, reaching over and squeezing his hand. “Oh my god, Jim!”

“Okay, Pam, I need words, here.”

She gestures wildly toward her monitor. “C’mere, read this!”

He circles the reception desk and stands next to her. She grabs his arm, pulling him closer, until he’s leaning across her and directly in front of her monitor. “Read that email!”

She rests her free hand on his shoulder and presses her face to his bicep as he looks at the screen. It takes him a moment to focus on the words, his attention caught up in the feel of her hands on him, her breath warming his skin through the fabric of his shirt.

He blinks, and forces himself to read an email from Corporate.

*Dear Pamela Beesly,*

*We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted to the Dunder Mifflin internship in graphic design, autumn of 2006. Please see the attached files for more information. Congratulations, and we look forward to seeing you in New York!*

*Best Regards,*

*Sharon Brenner*

*Dunder Mifflin , New York*

*Program in Graphic Design*

“Wow. Oh, wow. Pam!”

“I know, right?”

He turns to face her and she looks up at him, her hand still on his arm. Her grin is a mile wide, her enthusiasm contagious. There’s an unmistakable note of pride in her expression.

He grins back at her, and on impulse he leans forward and captures her in a hug. She slides off her chair and wraps her arms around his neck as he pulls her closer.

“Congratulations,” he murmurs.

A giggle bubbles out of her and she tightens her arms around his neck. Her breath tickles his ear. “Jim, I’m going to *New York*.”

After a long moment, he leans back to look at her, his hands moving to her ribcage. Hers slide down his arms to rest just above the crook of his elbows.

He can’t quite find the right words. “Wow... new apartment, new car... New York. You might be too fancy for Scranton pretty soon.”

She laughs. “Yeah, I’m gonna be a real jet-setter. Just give it... oh, a million years.”

He shakes his head. “I dunno... you could turn into Jan any day now.”

Her eyebrows rise. “I hope you’re not suggesting I’ll be hooking up with Michael.”

“Um, gross. That is *not* what I’m suggesting, and please leave your creepy little fantasies out of this.”

She makes a face, but otherwise ignores him. “Actually... she did help me apply. She recommended me.”

“Wow. When did you do all this? I had no idea!” He has to admit, he’s a little thrown. He never thought she’d do something like this without at least mentioning it to him. He’s sure he’d have heard all about it if she were still with Roy. Why not this time?

“Oh, like... a month ago.” She ducks her head a little, and takes a moment to continue. “I dunno, I didn’t want to get too excited or anything.”

“So... you’re still taking your class though, right?”

She brightens. “Yeah! Jim, it’s perfect! I go to New York on the weekends, and then for two weeks at the end. But it’s after my final art project, and I already talked to the teacher, and I’m gonna be super busy, but...”

“You’ll be awesome.”

The softness that steals over her expression as she smiles up at him makes his heart flip over. Her voice grows hushed. “Thanks, Jim.”

For a long moment he can do nothing but return her smile.

“What the *hell*?”

Roy.

Pam jumps, and her hands drop to her sides.

Roy stands frozen in the doorway, mouth agape. As they both turn to face him, he begins to stride toward reception, full of purpose that he’s lacked for the last few months. He has a target, now. “What the hell, Halpert? Are you trying to move in on my –” He cuts off what he had been about to say, jaw tensing.

The sudden burst of adrenaline makes Jim feel light, the scene unreal. His mouth starts to move before he even realizes what he’s going to say. His voice is loud, sarcastic, free of the carefully cultivated deference and indifference that used to accompany his conversations with Roy. “She’s not *your* anything anymore, so no, Roy.”

“Yeah right! I saw... *this*.” He gestures toward the two of them, still standing behind the reception desk. “Pam!”

He turns to her for encouragement, maybe, the placation he had come to expect when it came to Jim. Instead he sees only her flushed face, eyes darting between the two of them.

His face registers shock. “Pammy? What... is something... was this going on... before?”

“No, Roy! I told you why everything, the wedding, it was wrong....”

“You didn’t tell me *this*.”

“There wasn’t anything to tell!”

“Well that’s not what it looks like. Don’t lie to me!”

Jim answers before she can respond, the words falling from his mouth in an angry rush. “It’s none of your business anymore, okay? She doesn’t have to explain anything to you.”

Roy clenches his jaw. His eyes dart to Pam again. She jumps into motion, hurrying around her desk and rushing Roy out the door by his elbow.

The last thing Jim hears as they step through the door is her hushed *just stop it, Roy*.

He strains his ears to catch their conversation by the elevators, but hears nothing but the cadence of a tense, angry exchange.

When she returns without Roy, gaze downcast to avoid the eyes of her curious coworkers, she heads straight for her desk.

Jim approaches, still keyed up, wishing he had told Roy off in one of the thousand ways he'd imagined over the years. He thrums his fingers against her desk impatiently. “What happened?”

Her face reddens again and she won’t quite look him in the eye. Her voice is strained. “Nothing, I got him to go back downstairs.” She turns to her monitor, moving her hands to her keyboard and starting to type. The click of the keys is louder than usual as she hits each with a sharp, precise stroke.

He flattens his palms on the countertop, letting his breath out in a gust as he realizes she’s not going to elaborate. “Well... okay then.” His voice is clipped. He spins and returns to his desk, frustrated.

He sighs. Two steps forward, one step back.



# I can make your heart beat short

## Chapter Notes

Chapter title from New Young Pony Club's "Ice Cream."

“*What?* Jimbo, you have a responsibility to this office. And that responsibility... is to increase the hotness quotient. Of the ladies. Because obviously, we have enough male hotness to go around. Am I right? I *am* right, because *I*” – he gestures toward his ankle weights, a bright pink – “have been working out. And my thighs are, to be frank... spectacular. I expect Carol will be seeing them soon, so... they’ve got to be in tip-top shape. Rock hard. ...That’s what she said.”

Jim raises his eyes to the ceiling and nods.

“Where was I? Oh... hot men. Yeah, Ryan just blows that category away, so... no need to worry about that. But we need more... girls. You know. *Twins*.” He gestures toward his chest, grinning. His grin fades into a frown, though, when Jim just stares. “You know. *Boobs!*”

Jim scrubs his palms over his face and leans back in his chair. He looks up at Michael and sighs. “I’m still not bringing Katy to the Diwali party.”

“Oh, is it because she’s not Indian?” He scoffs. “Jimbag, the Indian people are not racist. They are... beautiful... and kind. And wise.” His gaze grows unfocused as his mind enters that place only he understands. “And portly. And... good luck.”

“You’re thinking of Buddha.”

“Well *obviously*. Come on, Jim! You’re supposed to be my buddy. Buddies bring their buddies eye candy.”

“Michael, Katy and I broke up. A long time ago.” He steals a glance at Pam. She’s writing something, eyes on the notepad in front of her.

“Ohh. I *see*.” Michael grins and his eyebrows shoot up. He bends to elbow Jim in the ribs. “You like to roll stag? Keep your options open? Play it by ear, hit five hot parties a night? I know how that is.”

“Hot parties? In Scranton?”

“Well, sure. You don’t know... how it was. Back in the eighties. Early nineties. It was wild. I mean, nonstop action. You kids today. Don’t know how to let loose.” He shakes his head in disappointment.

“You know, you are right. I’ll go stag. Don’t want to, uh, limit myself.”

“*Great* idea. I’ll be your wingman. I bet Kelly has some hot cousins. Exotic. Do you think they speak English?”

“Well, actually....” His phone rings. He pounces on it, an overenthusiastic *Hello, Jim Halpert* out of his mouth almost before the receiver reaches his ear.

“You’re floundering over there, Halpert.” Her voice is soft.

His gaze shifts to reception. Her chair angles away from him, head tilted downward to evade detection by Michael.

He pauses. “You know, Mr. Buttrill, you’re absolutely right.” He flips open a book of prices and rifles through it. “Let me check on that.” He covers the receiver with one hand and glances over his shoulder at Michael, lifting his brows apologetically. “Sorry, gotta take this.”

Michael deflates and retreats to his office, Dwight hot on his heels. “Michael, you can be my wingman!”

“Ugh, Dwight. No. You would scare them away.” He strides into his office, shutting the door in Dwight’s face.

Jim checks to make sure Michael isn’t peering at him through his office blinds. “Wow, that took you long enough,” he murmurs into the receiver.

She spins her chair back toward him, and her eyes meet his. She matches his tone. “Well, you walked right into that one.”

“Hey, unfair. How was I supposed to know what ‘can you bring the appetizers?’ meant?”

“Um, *how* long have you worked here?”

“Good point.” He glances at his watch. “Lunch?”

“Um, yes.”

They both hang up, and she follows him into the kitchen. When she pulls a bagged lunch from the refrigerator, he mentally congratulates himself again for surviving the “chicken or fish” stage. Once the uneaten meals for her canceled wedding were finally, mercifully, eaten, she had started having lunch with him again. And Roy had lost his excuse to show up every day.

Not that he didn’t still appear for a soda, or to talk to Michael, or to grab something from the supply shelves or deliver a ream of paper to Pam personally. Jim swears the entire office grows hushed when Roy walks through the doors. The ritual is always the same. Roy glances at reception, then pins Jim with a warning, suspicious glare for a long moment, then returns his attention to Pam.

There've been no repeat performances of that first, charged confrontation, but Pam seems to be getting steadily more impatient with Roy's show of possessiveness. She offers only brief, cool responses to his suggestions that they eat lunch together, or his offers to inspect her car. Jim can't help but take pleasure in the role reversal, though he can't say that he has much progress to show for it himself, either.

But at least they eat lunch together.

They sit down at a table and start arranging their food. With her attention directed at her salad, he takes a moment to study her profile. She's taken to wearing short sleeved blouses, and her hair in a ponytail, so that she can work on charcoals or oil pastels at her desk. He had no complaints about her appearance before, but now she's... vibrant. That animation he used to see only in scattered moments comes so easily, now, when she talks about her class or a painting or her apartment.

He lets his eyes trail over her jaw, the exposed line of her neck, the hollow of her throat where her necklace rests. He thought self-control was difficult before, when she was with Roy, but now the need to touch her seems to grip him more strongly with each passing day. When she lifts her hand to lick salad dressing from her thumb, he's trapped. He doesn't even think to look away when her eyes shift and meet his.

He swallows heavily. The moment is broken when her attention flicks back to her food, and he finally tears his eyes away. He blindly pulls a sandwich out of his lunch bag clears his throat. "So, yeah... thanks for saving me from myself. And Michael."

"Oh... yeah. Can't believe he didn't know about, uh, you and Katy..." Her voice trails off.

"Yeah, that was awhile ago. Like, months." He forces his eyes to stay on hers, and not drop to her mouth. "And... months." He fights to keep his voice light as her eyes slide away and she fidgets in her chair. A little guiltily, maybe.

To distract himself, he stands and starts feeding quarters to the vending machine. "Want anything?"

She starts to shake her head, but a yawn takes over. She props her head against her hand.  
“Actually, yeah. Caffeine and sugar, please.”

“Coke it is.”

He waits until two cokes drop into bottom of the vending machine with a hollow *clunk*, then collects them and returns to the table. He slides one in her direction and sits down next to her again. “So, how’s the project?”

“Uuuugh. I hate computers. I think the cavemen were on to something. Can’t I just finger paint on walls?”

“That well, huh?” He unwraps his sandwich and takes a bite.

She yawns again. Between the weekends in New York, her art class, and the assignments for each, she’s been running a little ragged. Sudoku and solitaire have given way to charcoals and animated GIFs. Even the time she usually spends with him thinking up ways to harass Dwight has dwindled. He waves off her apologies, but not before extracting promises that she’ll draw him something. She always asks him to clarify ‘something,’ but he claims he wants to be surprised. Really, he just wants to see what she’ll come up with. Will it be silly or serious? Light and friendly, or something more?

So far he’s received an image of Dwight’s head photoshopped onto a Christmas elf’s body (*so unprofessional, Beesly*), a charcoal sketch of Michael asleep on his desk in a post-pretzel coma (*aw, a still life*), and a watercolor of the Dunder Mifflin, Scranton offices as seen from the parking lot.

He loves the first two, but the third... he likes to think is special. If the painting itself hadn’t hinted at a deeper meaning, her countenance as she awaited his reaction would have. The Dwight and Michael pieces she had given him early in the morning, bouncing over to his desk with that “you’re going to love this” grin. This one she hadn’t given him until the end of the day, when most of the office had cleared out. She approached him with an open sincerity rare between the two of them, handing him the painting with only a brief, shy moment of eye

contact. Instead of laughing over his shoulder while his eyes slid over the paper, she fiddled with her necklace and looked up at him through lowered lashes.

A painting of their office building seems innocuous enough, but... the only two cars in the parking lot are his red one and her blue one, side by side. And he can't help but read years of happiness, frustration, and heartbreak into that near-empty parking lot.

He remembers, now, as she sits next to him eating her lunch. How her breath had hitched when their eyes met. How he'd completely forgotten what he had been about to say. How her eyes had gone glassy and her lips had parted.

How *Dwight* had appeared from Michael's office, and proceeded to interrogate them on their after-business-hours presence for five minutes. No prank would atone for that sort of injustice.

He finishes his sandwich, and forces himself back to the present. He pulls an orange out of his lunch bag, and flattens the paper with his palm. The smell of citrus permeates the room as bits of peel fall to the paper below. "So... when's this thing due, anyway?"

His fingers start to move more carefully as he concentrates on not mangling the orange segments, pulling off all that white stuff, whatever it's called. He hates peeling oranges, actually, but Mark was the last one to go shopping. It takes him a moment to realize that she hasn't answered. He looks up.

She's frozen with her fork halfway to her mouth, staring at the orange in his hand.

"Pam?"

She starts. "What?" Her eyes jump to his, then back at her own food. To his astonishment, she starts to turn pink.

"I asked when your project is due."

“Oh. Um, Thursday.”

“If you want some of my orange, Beesly, just say so.”

“What? No... oh. Um, yeah. Sure.”

He’s a little confused, but he pulls off a segment of orange and offers it to her. She seems distracted, and her cheeks are still flushed. Her gaze flicks back and forth between his face and his hand.

Finally she takes the orange segment from him, and her fingers brush his. Now *he*’s starting to feel flustered. What’s she thinking about? He reaches up to rub the back of his neck, and her eyes follow the movement. She’s... staring at him. With a look on her face he’s not sure he’s ever seen from her before.

She makes no move to eat the orange, and just holds it in front of her as her eyes meet his again. She opens her mouth as if to speak, but no sound comes out.

“You can call Katy, you know,” she blurts.

He gapes at her. “What?”

She turns pink, and starts to stammer. “I mean, you don’t have to... you know, not... *date*... anybody.”

He’s floored. The warm feeling in the pit of his stomach disappears. He starts to feel sick. Is she trying to get rid of him? Does *she* want to date other people? Explore her newfound freedom? Did this whole breakup have nothing to do with him? Has he been misreading her this whole time, *again*?

He can barely speak. “What... why? Why would I...? Do you *want* me to?” He thinks he might lose it, right here, in the break room at work.

She grows even more flustered. “No! I mean, um. I just don’t want you to be... waiting. Just. I’m sorry for not... you know.” She waves her fork in a vague pattern in his direction, then at herself.

His panicked thoughts slow. Wait. Is she saying what he thinks she’s saying? “Um... you might have to clarify ‘you know’ for me.”

She turns even pinker. “I just didn’t mean... you couldn’t, uh, you know, do anything with other... that I’m not, uh, ready, so you had to be, like... not having any, um....”

“Any what?” He starts to grin.

“Sex, okay! I mean, just, I didn’t want you to be like, waiting, and not be having any ever, and oh my god, stop looking at me like that.”

“Wow, Pam. I *cannot* believe you just said that.” Relief makes him giddy. He starts to laugh. She looks about ready to fall through the floor. Maybe he shouldn’t find this quite so funny, but right now, he can’t recall the last time he was this amused.

She drops her fork and shields her face from his gaze, directing her attention to her salad. “Okay, okay, you can shut up now.”

“No, come on. This is a good conversation.” He’s practically gleeful now.

“I was just trying to... think about you.”

“And I appreciate it. But do you have any suggestions? Because Katy and I didn’t exactly part on good terms. I don’t think she’d be up for a booty call.”

“Oh my god! Shut up! I take it back!” Despite her attempts to hide her face from him, he can see even her neck is red.

“Nope, too late. What about Kelly? I think she and Ryan are having a fight.”

Her hands drop from her face and she stares at him in indignation. “No... *hooking up* with Kelly!”

He sighs and shakes his head. “So controlling.”

She starts to gather her lunch debris, frantically shoving it back into her paper bag. “Oh my god, please stop talking.”

“Okay, okay. But Pam?” She pauses in her movements, meeting his eyes cautiously, her face still a bright red. “Thank you for worrying about my sexual needs.”

Her eyes widen, and she smacks him on the arm, then looks frantically around the break room for eavesdropping coworkers. “Shut *up!*”

“What? I’m not gonna lie, I do miss... *you know.*” He leans closer and lowers his voice to a murmur. “Don’t you?” Apparently he’s feeling bold today.

Her eyes meet his and he swears he can see her pupils dilate and her gaze jump to his mouth and back.

“Um, I don’t think, uh... think now is the time for, uh, you know....” Her eyes widen at her choice of words. She scoops her garbage into her arms and heads for the trashcan at a decidedly brisk pace. “Okay, we should probably work, or something.”

“Woah, Pam, I never thought I’d hear you say *that*.”

She turns to leave, and he thinks she’s going to bolt back to her desk, but she stops in the doorway and spins to face him. She pauses, and her fingers move to her necklace. Her voice grows soft. “Jim, just... do you know how much you....” She swallows, and gives a brief shake of her head before turning to walk back to her desk.

He sighs as he watches her go. Sometimes he thinks he’ll go crazy sitting ten feet away from her all day, every day. Somehow *almost his* is more physically agonizing than *not a chance*.

Well, at least he’s not the only one feeling it.

Her face is pink for the rest of the afternoon.

# I'm a young soul in this very strange world

## Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Yael Naim's "New Soul."

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly  
Subject: I made it!

Jim!!!!!!

Hello from New York!!!!!!! Ok, yeah, I know I've already been here, but now I've got two weeks! I don't even have my car. I feel so cosmopolitan. And classy. Maybe I should have a cosmo in the \*hotel lounge.\* Cosmos used to make me think of Sex and the City, but now they remind me of you and your new BFF Michael.

Come on Mr. ARM, lighten up about the promotion! Without it, you'd never have gone to Philadelphia and bonded with Michael over pink girly drinks. I still say it's a good thing, even if it gives you the heebie jeebies. Come on, you have actual authority over Dwight now! What's not to love?

The bus wasn't bad at all. I'm telling you, you don't have to pick me up. It's like a 2.5 hour drive each way. I'm a big girl, Jim, I promise. I even cross streets by myself these days. Yeah. I walk on the wild side.

Ok, I'm going to go to my room and unpack! Training starts tomorrow at 8.

I'm almost done! So excited!! :)

Pam

P.S. Are you and Michael going to braid each other's hair at lunch now?

P.P.S. There are 24 exclamation points in this email.

To: Pam Beesly  
From: Jim Halpert  
Subject: Re: I made it!

Hey. Quit abusing the exclamation points over there. Some people. Don't know how to preserve our country's natural resources.

And stop making fun of my beautiful new friendship. Sounds like somebody's a little jealous. You know, you might have reason to worry. Maybe you're being replaced by Michael. Wait... scratch that. Gross.

I hope you're having fun, though, because I am going to be MIND-NUMBINGLY bored while you're gone. What did you do all day at DM before I was around to distract you? How'd you avoid the onset of insanity? Wait... you haven't been faking all this time, have you? Is your head going to start spinning around and spitting green vomit the next time Michael asks you to check him for male breast cancer? If so, aim away from me, please, cause that's just gross.

And yes, I'm going to pick you up. You said I could see your demo, and I want to see it. Besides, I haven't been to New York in awhile. We could both have cosmos. Well, actually, you could. I'd have a beer, cause I only drink cosmos with my BFF. You know how that goes. Sorry.

Jim

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly  
Subject: tiiiiiiired

eaaaaaaaaaaaaazzzzzzzzzzzrrrrrrrrrr. i'm going to collapse of tiredness. maybe on this keyboard.

i met the woman i'm shadowing. i'll be doing a project for her while i'm here. and then we had a bunch of orientation stuff. tell you more later. going to sleep....

To: Pam Beesly  
From: Jim Halpert  
Subject: Re: tiiiiiiired

What? No witty repartee? No capitalization? I'm disappointed, Pam.

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly  
Subject: resurrected, sort of

Whew, ok, I've recovered, mostly. And today I actually have some time to myself at lunch, which I'm using to email \*you\*, I would like to point out. My own mother isn't even getting an email right now. So cut the complaining, Halpert.

For the next two weeks I'm going to be shadowing this graphics designer named Amanda. I'll be doing a project for her, designing a logo for this new local small business to use on their letterhead. Apparently that's why Dunder Mifflin started this internship. They want to sell customized logo design to small companies along with paper. I guess it makes sense. They can't really compete with Staples in paper prices, so they're trying to go with personal touches. Once I finish the training, assuming I don't completely suck, I'll start doing logo design for Scranton-area businesses. At first it'll basically just be freelance, but if I start getting more customers I can do it full-time! Just think, one day I could be designing Alfredo's new logo. I'll try not to let the fame go to my head.

Ok, I have to go, but tell me a Dwight story!

Pam

P.S. Ok, ok. You twisted my arm. I'll catch a ride with you, since you insist.

P.P.S. I'm buying you a cosmo.

To: Pam Beesly  
From: Jim Halpert  
Subject: Re: resurrected, sort of

Ok, the scene is this:

Ryan is at your desk, trying to fill your shoes (inadequately, I might add, and not just because your shoes don't fit him).

Michael has been making "hot secretary" jokes all morning, and claiming that if Jan can have a boy-toy, so can he. Ryan points out repeatedly that he's not Michael's secretary. It doesn't help.

Dwight has decided that if Ryan graduates from The Temp to taking over your job permanently, he must be properly initiated. He's been explaining the benefits of employee initiation down at the beet farm. Something about how he'll give Ryan the "warrior's spirit." The high point was when – wait for it – he told Ryan "I will plant my seed in you." The horror in Ryan's eyes. It's not something I think I'll ever forget.

Ok, Beesly, are you trying to buy the BFF title with a cosmo? It's been done already. You're going to have to come up with something new.

Jim

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly  
Subject: Re: resurrected, sort of

He did NOT. That's almost as good as his dead grandfather's tux. Well, at least they've found someone else to sexually harass while I'm gone. You know, so they don't miss any lawsuit opportunities.

By the way, you made me snort with laughter in the hotel lobby. A little old lady stared at me.

Dammit, now I want that BFF title!! I am well aware that you're exploiting my competitive streak. And yet, it's working completely. Damn you, Jim Halpert. Ok, I'll be thinking about this....

To: Pam Beesly  
From: Jim Halpert  
Subject: Re: resurrected, sort of

Would I do something that conniving?

And I'm still waiting....

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly  
Subject: Re: resurrected, sort of

Yes. Yes you would. Shut up! I'm trying to create some digital shadows over here.

To: Pam Beesly  
From: Jim Halpert  
Subject: Re: resurrected, sort of

Well, you're never going to win the title with THAT kind of attitude....

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly

Subject: Re: resurrected, sort of

Ok, if you're going to distract me, at least help me out – which color says “we're hip, edgy, and have our fingers on the pulse of American youth” to you: orange or acid green?

To: Pam Beesly  
From: Jim Halpert  
Subject: Re: resurrected, sort of

Orange.

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly  
Subject: Re: resurrected, sort of

That's it? No explanation?

To: Pam Beesly  
From: Jim Halpert  
Subject: Re: resurrected, sort of

Well, you didn't ask for one. My time is valuable, Pam.

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly  
Subject: Re: resurrected, sort of

I understand. You'd better go back to selling paper. Mr. ARM.

To: Pam Beesly  
From: Jim Halpert  
Subject: Re: resurrected, sort of

Wow, low blow. I'm hurt.

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly

Subject: Re: resurrected, sort of

Liar.

To: Pam Beesly  
From: Jim Halpert  
Subject: Re: resurrected, sort of

You're so mean to me. Now you know why Michael's my BFF.

And orange – well, if you had YOUR finger on the pulse of young America, you'd understand. These things can't be taught, Pam.

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly  
Subject: Re: resurrected, sort of

Ok, fine, you've sold me. Orange it is. Just so you know, I'm about to embark on an icon-creating frenzy. Photoshop will fear my wrath.

To: Pam Beesly  
From: Jim Halpert  
Subject: Re: resurrected, sort of

Ok, ok, go back to work. Just one more thing: good luck. You'll be great.

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly  
Subject: Re: resurrected, sort of

Jim Halpert, I may not be your BFF, but you are mine.

To: Pam Beesly  
From: Jim Halpert  
Subject: Re: resurrected, sort of

Ok, you can be my BFF too. Just don't tell Michael.

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly  
Subject: Re: resurrected, sort of

My lips are sealed. Thanks, Jim. I'll talk to you later. BFF.

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly  
Subject: booya

Ok, you'll be happy to know I went with orange, and so far Amanda likes it. I think it's looking pretty good. I have a week left to finish a few different versions and go to some meetings and workshops. It'll be busy, but I think I'm in good shape so far. And after that, I'll be on my own! Eek.

I'm trying to decide what to do this weekend. I'm thinking I might go to the MoMA tomorrow. Modern art isn't really my thing, but there's some stuff there I really want to see. What about you? What do happening young paper salesmen get up to on the weekends these days?

To: Pam Beesly  
From: Jim Halpert  
Subject: Re: booya

Yeah, you go and be cultured. My plans? Basketball, video games, poker, beer and pizza with some dudes. Very manly. I may burp in front of others. Hear that? Mothers, lock up your daughters.

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly  
Subject: Re: booya

Ok, the MoMA was amazing. Van Gogh! Starry Night! Ahhhh! No words. Andy Warhol, so awesome. And Picasso and Klee and Klimt and Dali. Just... !!!!! Some of the stuff I really didn't "get" – like, stripes on a canvas? It just doesn't have much of an impact on me. But shh, don't tell anyone, or they won't let me into the artists club.

But Jim, there's all this amazing stuff out there. These people do things with paint and paper that I'd never think to do in a million years. It's like... completely humbling. But it makes me want to try harder to do something amazing myself. Does that make any sense?

I also did a bunch of sketching, which I haven't had time for in forever, and walked around a lot and people-watched even though it's FREEZING. How was your manly weekend of manliness?

Pam

To: Pam Beesly  
From: Jim Halpert  
Subject: Re: booya

Oh, the testosterone flowed. Rivers of it, I'm telling you.

Actually, I hadn't played basketball in awhile, so that was cool. And I took some money in poker, so, even better.

That's awesome that you got inspired. And I'm sure you'll come up with something great. Just as long as it's not a toilet masquerading as art. LAME.

Jim

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly  
Subject: Re: booya

Hey, you'd better support my toilet aspirations or I won't give you your present.

To: Pam Beesly  
From: Jim Halpert  
Subject: Re: booya

Oh, right, did I say lame? I meant "a symbol of protest toward the elitist art world." Clearly it's meant to de-deify the artist. A manifestation of the Kantian sublime, if you will.

What's my present?

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly  
Subject: Re: booya

Ooh, someone's been on wikipedia again.

Jim, do you know nothing of proper gift etiquette? It's a surprise!

To: Pam Beesly  
From: Jim Halpert  
Subject: Re: booya

Ok, fine, don't tell me. But I suspect one of the following:

- Statue of Liberty bobblehead
- Preserved slice of New York-style pizza
- Brooklyn accent

Also: Dwight's been repeatedly tapping a pencil on his desk for the last hour because he suspects it has termites (he's checking for hollow parts, obviously). I want to use those pencils to stab myself in the brain. And him. Not necessarily in that order. How long until you come back, again?

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly  
Subject: Re: booya

Nope, nope, and nope. You'll just have to wait and see.

You can do it! Just a few more days until the weekend. Hey, what if you tell him that the army genetically engineered termites to eat rubber, rendering the enemy's tires useless? Ooh, and one of their secret research labs is in Scranton, but they had a security breach and some escaped. That's also how you found out, because your neighbor's car was attacked. I bet you could get him to go check his tires. Also, tell him they're engineered to be tiny and black so they blend in. He should use a magnifying glass to find them.

To: Pam Beesly  
From: Jim Halpert  
Subject: Re: booya

You are brilliant.

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly  
Subject: Re: booya

Yes! Please tell me it worked!!

To: Pam Beesly  
From: Jim Halpert  
Subject: Re: booya

Like a charm. He's convinced he found some. I think they're ants from the bushes outside. When I suggested that, he told me that they've clearly cross-bred ants and termites to achieve the desired appearance. And then he denigrated my understanding of genetic engineering and its application to contemporary warfare.

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly  
Subject: Re: booya

That makes me happy.

More happiness: I finished a couple of icons and Amanda loves them. I'm meeting with the client on Friday to show him what I've come up with. I'll admit, I'm nervous. I really want him to like it.

To: Pam Beesly  
From: Jim Halpert  
Subject: Re: booya

You've got nothing to worry about – I told you what color to use, remember? You're GOLDEN.

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly  
Subject: Re: booya

Right, how could I forget? Jim, finger, pulse, youth. Undeniable connection. I mean, look at that haircut.

To: Pam Beesly  
From: Jim Halpert  
Subject: Re: booya

Hey, what are you trying to say about my hair?

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly  
Subject: Re: booya

Nothing! I love your hair.

Finished the rest of my stuff up today! Amanda's really happy with it. I'm all ready to meet with the client tomorrow. Woo. And, eek.

To: Pam Beesly  
From: Jim Halpert  
Subject: Re: booya

Oh yeah? What else do you love about me? My biceps? Because I *\*have\** been working out.

Dude, you'll blow the client away. Don't worry about it.

To: Jim Halpert  
From: Pam Beesly  
Subject: Re: booya

HE LOVED IT! Asldkjfowienfcjknk!!!!

Ahhhhh!!!!!! I'm done, Jim! I finished the internship and passed! I'm going to have business cards, and they're going to say "graphic designer" on them!!!!!! I'm going to have clients! I'm going to do art at work, and not because I've been stuck in Michael's office for 3 hours and resorted to drawing staplers!

We have a party tonight at the hotel to celebrate. The other interns and the graphic designers will be there, and they're going to show everyone's work. Then after that, all of it will be on display at the corporate offices for a week, so I can show you this weekend.

Have I mentioned, AHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Pam

P.S. Your hands.

To: Pam Beesly  
From: Jim Halpert

See!! What did I tell you? I always knew you'd be great! Can't wait to see everything this weekend.

Jim

P.S. Yours aren't so bad, either.

\*\*\*\*\*

Jim yawns as he tugs off his sweater, tossing it in the direction of his closet. He unbuckles his watch, dropping it onto his desk, along with his cell phone. He unbuttons his jeans and lets them drop to the floor before kicking them toward his dresser. He wanders into the bathroom in his t-shirt and boxers, and brushes his teeth as he leans against the doorframe.

He misses Pam.

Strange to think, no matter how strained their relationship may have become at times, no matter who else came and went in their lives, they've rarely spent more than a couple of days apart in the last three years.

He realizes the last time they'd been apart for this long was his trip to Australia, but that thought makes his stomach clench, so he pushes it aside. At least the week's over. He'll be seeing her Sunday, driving up to New York. She dumped Roy, took an art class, finished the graphics internship. She's taking chances, doing what he'd been wishing she'd do since the day he met her. She's *single* and she's taking chances.

With that thought sending a flutter of hope through him, he flips off the bathroom light and returns to his bedroom.

He's just turned off his bedroom light and climbed into bed when his cell phone rings. The flashing lights bounce off the walls of the darkened room as the phone vibrates merrily across his desk. He fumbles for it, flipping open the clamshell and holding it to his ear.

"Hello?"

"Jim! Hello! Hi Jim."

"Pam?"

"I'm drunk dialing you!"

He starts to laugh. "Oh *really*? I couldn't tell."

"It's true! I'm drunk."

"Yeah, you are. I never knew those graphic designers got so wild."

"Jim, there was an *open bar*." She whispers the last part conspiratorially.

"Wow."

She starts to say something else, but her voice grows muffled.

"Pam? I can't hear you."

Some more shuffling, then her voice. "Mm, sorry. 'Kay. Was laying on my face."

“Beesly, you are *drunk*. You’re not in a gutter, are you?”

“Nope, my bed.” She lets out a deep sigh that crackles statically in his ear. “Okay. Now I’m comfortable.” Her voice sounds relaxed and drowsy.

“I’m glad.” He clears his throat. “Are you going to fall asleep on me now?”

“No. Nope. I’m awake. Are you awake?”

“Yeah, I’m awake.” Silence falls for a moment before he continues. “So, you just called to tell me you’re drunk?”

“Yes. No. I missed your voice.”

His stomach does a slow flip. “Yeah, I guess email isn’t the same.”

“No. Can’t hear you talking. See you talking. With your hands.”

“Yeah, you said something about my hands.”

She lets out a dreamy sigh. “I *love* your hands. Don’t you notice me staring at them, like, all the time?”

His heart starts to thud. “Is *that* what you were doing?”

“Yeah, like, your fingers... and your knuckles....”

“Wow.” He’s at a loss for words.

There’s a long moment of silence, and he wonders if she’s fallen asleep. He’s about to say her name when she starts talking again, the words falling out in a rush. “I almost kissed you.”

“What? When?”

“The other day. At lunch. During the most embarrassing talk *ever*.”

“Oh. Yeah. Sounds familiar.” He can’t keep the grin out of his voice even now. His smile fades. “So... why didn’t you?”

“Because. It would be too easy.”

“That... does not sound like a bad thing.”

“No, no. It would be *really* easy. Like. Just to kiss you, and be together, and you’d be Mr. Awesome Guy, and I’d be the same *Pammy*, and be the same as I always was. Forever. And then you’d get tired of me, and I’d be tired of me.”

“I’d never get tired of you. I... like you the way you are now.”

“But I don’t like me. Didn’t. I like the me better now... the me now better than the me before.”

“Why didn’t you like the you before?”

She sighs. “*You* know. You didn’t like it either. I just, didn’t do anything myself ever. Just let Roy decide everything.”

“It wouldn’t be like that with *me*.” He tries to keep the defensiveness out of his voice.

“*No*, you don’t understand.” Her voice grows frustrated. “*I’d* be like that. I’d always ask you about everything. And what I should do. I don’t wanna be like that.”

He doesn’t answer for a long moment, unsure of what to say.

She continues. “It’d be really easy to just be like... Jim, take care of me! But I have to do stuff myself. For once.” She pauses. “You know?”

“I... think so.”

“I’m sorry, Jim. I’m really, really... really really sorry.”

“For what?”

“For... leaving you like... hanging. And before. After you told me... you know. I was like, a horrible person. Why don’t you hate me? You should hate me.”

“I couldn’t hate you.”

“You could at least be, like, dating someone a thousand times awesomer than me.”

“I doubt it.”

“It’s true!”

“Pam, I don’t *want* to date someone else.”

She laughs, and it sounds a little watery. “You’re ridiculous.”

Now he laughs. “Uh, thanks.”

“No, I mean, like... how’d you get so awesome? You’re like, the awesomest person I know.”

“Pam...”

“I’m serious! Do you know how awesome you are?”

“Pam, you just used ‘awesome’ like, five times. I think you’ve been hanging around Kelly too much.”

“Jim, Listen! You’re like... funny, and smart, and nice. Not the fake nice, the real nice. You’re like, nice to Michael. And you get along with everybody. Except Dwight. But you kinda actually do. And you’re so... *cute*. No. Hot. Hot in a cute way.”

“Wow.”

“Jim, seriously, how’d you get so hot? It’s really not fair.”

“Um... practice?”

“No, just, like... your hair. And your eyes. And... your hands. And arms. And shoulders, and... tallness.”

He’s actually starting to blush. “Uh... thank you.”

She sighs. “Jim?”

“Yeah?”

“I miss you.”

He swallows. “I miss you too.”

“It’s weird not seeing you every day.”

“Yeah... I was... just thinking about that.”

“Hey! I have an idea.”

“Okay. Shoot.”

“You should come up here tomorrow instead of Sunday.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah! We can hang out in the city the whole weekend.”

“Um... I don’t have a place to stay....”

“Stay with me! I have the room til Sunday.”

His heart rate starts to pick up. “Oh... sure. If you think it’s a good idea.”

“It’s a *great* idea! It’ll be so much fun!”

“Oh. Great! Yeah, definitely.”

“Good! Good.” She yawns into the receiver.

“Getting tired over there?”

“Mm, kinda.” She grumbles. “But when I close my eyes it all gets spinny.”

“How about... you go drink a glass of water.”

She sighs. “But then I’d have to get up.”

“It’ll be worth it, I promise.”

She yawns again. “Kay. But will you stay on the phone with me?”

“Sure.”

For a minute all he hears is shuffling and the sound of the tap running.

“Okay. I have water.”

“Are you drinking it?”

“Yeah, yeah. Hold your horses.”

He laughs, and reminds himself to tease her about this later as he listens to the sounds of the glass hitting the phone receiver.

She sighs. “Okay. Done.”

“Okay. Ready to go to sleep now?”

“Uh huh. Are you?”

“Yep, already in bed.”

“*Oh.*” She pauses. “What are you wearing?”

He huffs out a laugh. “*Wow*, Pam, I never knew you were so... depraved.”

“There’s *lots* of things you don’t know about me.” She yawns again.

“I guess so. Okay, how about this. You go to sleep now, and I’ll see you soon.”

“Okay. You’re still coming tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah, if you want me to.”

“I do.” She’s mumbling now, the words growing indistinct with sleep. “G’night Jim. Be thinking about you....”

*Jesus.* She’s trying to kill him. “Good night, Pam.”

He clicks the phone shut. There is *no way* he’s getting to sleep anytime soon.

# Spinning on that dizzy edge, I kissed her face and kissed her head

## Chapter Summary

Here's where we earn that rating, folks.

## Chapter Notes

Chapter title comes from The Cure's "Just Like Heaven."

He finally gives up on going back to sleep around 7 a.m. He rolls out of bed and makes some coffee, takes a shower, eats breakfast. It's still just past 8, so he goes for a jog, comes back, watches some TV, takes another shower, cleans his bathroom, and sorts the three piles of neglected mail on the kitchen counter. When it's almost 10, he finally decides it's late enough that Pam should be recovering from her Friday night binge.

He still can't decide. Was she serious? Would she even remember inviting him to come up today?

He spends twenty minutes composing a text message. His thumb is hovering over 'send' when the phone buzzes to life in his hand. It's a text from Pam.

To: Jim Halpert

-----

Hey! When are you coming up? If you leave soon, we can meet up for lunch. I know a place. (I've always wanted to say that). Emailed you hotel address.

Well. That answers that.

To: Pam Beesly

-----

I'm on my way in 5 minutes.

For once he can't think of something funny to add, something light to deflect the earnestness of his words, so he doesn't even try. He bounds up the stairs and throws a change of clothes and a few other necessities into a duffel bag in about two minutes.

He prints off directions to her hotel, and then... he's ready. He grabs his phone, his wallet, his keys, his bag, his coat. He stands at the door, surveying his living room one last time. He's not sure what he's looking for. Inspiration? Moral support? He shakes his head, but still, when he clicks the door shut everything feels... new.

His heart pounds as he strides toward the car, and his feet don't seem to register the journey. His attention span is much too short to listen to his ipod or a CD. Instead he spends the miles flicking compulsively between radio stations. A line here, a chorus there. He chooses the loudest music he can find, drumming his fingers against the steering wheel and bouncing his left knee. He actually starts to sing along to White Snake until he's reminded abruptly of Dwight's pre-sales call heavy metal ritual. He limits himself to humming and discreet finger tapping for the rest of the drive.

About half an hour before he reaches the city, his phone announces the arrival of another text message. He scrambles to read it, eyes darting between the small screen and the road in front of him, telling himself this isn't *that* dangerous.

To: Jim Halpert

-----

Hey, I'm in central park! You can take the 1 train to columbus circle from the hotel.

Even in his current state, he can't convince himself that composing text messages while driving is a good idea, so he waits until he's navigated the streets of New York City and paid an exorbitant fee to park his car at the hotel.

He's always liked to think he at least garners a *few* cool points for living in the vicinity of New York, so it's a little embarrassing just how unfamiliar he is with the city. He spends a few minutes consulting the subway route map, imagining a glowing neon sign over his head proclaiming him *small town tourist*. Still, he makes his way to Columbus Circle without much trouble. When he's once again standing in the light of day -- biting cold sunlight -- he wanders over to a big pedestal bordering Central Park.

His breath plumes out in front of him as he pulls out his phone and finds her number. He clicks 'send', and strains to hear the ring over the hubbub of traffic and pedestrians behind him.

"Hello?"

He just talked to her last night, but still, somehow, the sound of her voice takes him by surprise. Sends something unfamiliar trickling through his veins.

"Jim?"

He clears his throat. "Yeah, I'm here, I'm at Columbus Circle. Where are you?"

"I'm in the park. Where are you exactly?"

"I'm standing next to, uh... the USS Maine memorial."

"Oh, okay. Follow that path to the left."

"Okay." He shoves his free hand into his coat pocket and follows her directions. He passes trees denuded by winter, and as the bustle of traffic dies down, he becomes aware of the sound of her breath in his ear.

He glances through the trees as he walks, hoping to catch sight of her. "How far away are you?"

"Not far."

He reaches an intersection and pauses. He's about to ask her which path to take when the phone goes dead. He frowns down at the screen, and starts to dial her number again.

"Jim!"

He looks up just in time to catch a fleeting glimpse of movement before she's flinging herself into his arms.

He stumbles backwards, laughing into her hair, his arms moving around her so easily, like he does this every day. The puffy pink fabric of her jacket obscures the lines of her body, but slowly her body heat seeps into him. "Hi," he murmurs.

She only tightens her arms around his neck in response, making a soft humming sound into his scarf, and he thinks he can feel the vibrations on his skin.

He closes his eyes for a moment. He just wants to *feel* this, her in his arms. His eyes flicker open again when she leans back, but only for a moment, because now her lips are on his and her hands are in his hair. Her nose is cold on his cheek but her mouth is warm against his.

This should feel strange, he thinks, momentous, but it feels so... simple. After everything, everything, of *course* they'd be kissing in the middle of Central Park on a cold, sunny afternoon in December. It's easy, so easy, and he thinks maybe he wants to stay in New York forever.

When she finally draws back, her cheeks are pink and her eyes bright. Her hand slides down from his hair to his cheek. Her voice is fragile in the cold. "I missed you."

He swallows, and his fingers toy with the fabric of her jacket. "I missed you too."

She hugs him, again, pressing a kiss to his jaw. She's smiling when she meets his eyes again, and her fingers trail down his arm to link with his. He can't help but smile back, and she swings their clasped hands together as they just stand there grinning at each other for a long moment.

When he finally asks her what's for lunch, she gets that look in her eye, the one that he knows means she's up to something, the one he waits for every day, that Dwight never seems to recognize. She guides him through the park as she tries not to grin.

When they leave the park and reach a street corner and she gestures toward a hotdog cart with a flourish, he has to laugh. He loves it, but he has to tease her anyway, about mystery meat, and her twelve-year-old eating habits, and the way she's clearly out to impress him.

She insists he dress his hotdog a *certain way*, and looks so excited as she waits for his reaction that he can't even pretend not to like it, he can't do anything but nod and close his eyes with exaggerated pleasure, and the way she grins at him makes him think he may just want to eat hotdogs every day for the rest of his life.

After they toss their trash, on impulse he wraps an arm around her shoulders and presses his lips to her hair, just because he *can*, and when she looks at him, when her eyes meet his, he sees it. *Change*.

\*\*\*\*\*

When he asks her what she's been doing out here in the cold, she produces a camera from her pocket, and tells him she's been taking pictures to she can sketch later in Scranton. She surveys him with a glint in her eye, and tells him it's time for his photo shoot.

They wander back into the park, and she skips ahead, walking backwards along the path and snapping his picture. When she's distracted, pushing a strand of stray hair behind her ear and looking up at him, and he snags the camera from her hands and claims it's time for the tables to turn.

She blushes a little and makes faces at him, but he cracks a few jokes, and soon he has a few shots of her gazing at him with that amazing smile.

\*\*\*\*\*

When she guides him into the still offices of Dunder Mifflin Corporate, he tries not to think of the last time he was here. It's infinitely different though, now, her hand in his and the memory of her lips and her body pressed against him in the elevator on the ride up.

She checks in with the security guard, and they traipse into a dimly lit conference room. She flicks the switch, and lights blink to life.

Monitors line the walls, along with sample sheafs of Dunder Mifflin's finest stationery and cardstock. She tells him that they plan to bring clients in to show them the kind of graphics and logos they can make, and what they'd look like on letterhead or business cards.

She grows quiet as they cross the room to the third monitor. Her designs look great, they look professional, they look like she does this for a living. He tells her so, tells her she's earned those 'graphic designer' business cards and hey, maybe she should get her *own* corporate car and secretary.

She just stares at him for so long, he thinks he's done something wrong, until she's telling him *I love you, I love you*, and she's in his arms and planting kisses on his face and then her lips are on his, and he can't even say anything back, but it doesn't matter, because she already knows, she knows, she knows.

\*\*\*\*\*

For dinner, he convinces her to eat at a place with chairs and tables and waiters. They wander the streets until they find a small Italian restaurant with murals on the walls and candles on the tables and stereotypically checkered tablecloths. They have wine and laugh and share each other's food and it's just so *easy*.

When she suggests they take a taxi back to the hotel and links her fingers with his and their eyes meet, he feels warm, so warm, and his heart starts to pound.

When her lips move behind his ear in the elevator and his eyes close, he thinks yes, this was worth waiting for.

\*\*\*\*\*

They stumble into her hotel room, the keycard falling to the floor as her fingers tangle in his hair. Her mouth never leaves his as the door swings shut, the echoing clunk disappearing behind the sounds of her moan, her purse dropping to the floor at her feet. He wraps one arm around her waist, pulling her closer as his other hand slides from her jaw to her hair, cupping the back of her head. She stands on her toes to press her body to his, her arms twining around his neck.

*God, oh god.* She's warm and responsive against him, and she's making these sounds that he thought he'd never hear as his hand slides up over her ribcage, his palm grazing the side of her breast.

But he can't shake the feeling that he's waiting, though, waiting for her to pull away, go cold, tell him they shouldn't be doing this, push him away.

As if on cue, she tears her mouth from his and leans back to look at him. Her cheeks are flushed and her hair is coming loose from its barette. Her eyes are dilated, her mouth red from kissing him.

"Jim." *Oh shit*. She pauses, her breath coming in pants. He waits for it. "You don't... you don't need to be careful... anymore. She looks straight at him, no hint of uncertainty in her eyes.

He must be just staring, mouth hanging open, because she leans closer, her forehead almost touching his, her hand gliding over his jaw. Her voice drops to a whisper. "Jim... " She swallows. "I've wanted you for so long." Her lips move over his cheek, and when she speaks again he feels her words against his skin more than he hears them. "Please touch me."

He's still for one stunned moment, and then he's backing her against the door, his mouth finding hers again, his hand sliding up her shirt to cup her breast and his thigh moving between hers before she can say another word.

She moans again, a low, throaty sound, and her nails bite into his shoulders through the fabric of his t-shirt.

*Jesus, oh shit, oh fuck*. Her hand slides down his chest and around his waist, fisting in the t-shirt at the small of his back, pulling his hips closer to hers. He's so hard it almost hurts.

His thumb grazes over her nipple, finding it hard and sensitive. She arches against him, and her hands slide under his shirt, her palms hot against the skin of his back. He does it again, and her hands scramble for the hem of his shirt, tugging at it insistently.

He wastes no time in taking the hint, leaning back just far enough to yank the shirt over his head, then reaching for hers. The collar tangles in her hair, and the tension breaks for a moment and she giggles as he fumbles with her barrette, finally freeing her hair and pulling off her shirt with unsteady fingers. He's grinning when he kisses her again, but soon they're both lost as his tongue slides into her mouth and her hands roam over his naked back and shoulders.

His hands move up and down the bare skin of her ribcage a little desperately, then slide behind her back to unclasp her bra with shaky fingers. He leans back to push the straps off her shoulders and toss the fabric to the floor, then groans at the sight of her naked breasts in front of him, nipples pink and hard. His hands move to cup both, fingers moving over her nipples, mouth leaving hers to move over her collarbone.

She gasps, and bends her head to brush her lips over his hair before he moves downwards, mouth traveling over the tops of each breast. She whimpers his name, and it sounds like a plea, her hips moving towards him.

His hands leave her breasts to fumble at the button of her jeans. Her fingers move over his, hurrying him along, then scramble to work on his pants even as she wriggles out of hers. She manages to toe off her shoes and kick her jeans away without moving her hands from his body. He doesn't even bother getting rid of his jeans after they pool at his feet, instead crowding her back against the wall again and reaching between her thighs.

He hooks his fingers under her panties, and *oh god*, she's so wet, so wet, and hot and slick, and when he strokes her, she cries out and wraps one leg around the back of his, moving restlessly against him. He strokes her again, and this time her head thumps against the wall as she leans back and gasps his name, her eyes closing. His fingers move faster, and suddenly she's coming, taking them both by surprise, gripping his shoulders and pulling him closer. He shifts to slide two fingers inside her, and he just about loses it completely when he feels her tighten around him.

And then she's tugging frantically at his boxers, and trying to pull off her own underwear at the same time, and it might be comical if he weren't so hard, so close to coming right there when her fingers graze the head of his cock. She has his boxers down around his ankles and he's managed to get her underwear mostly off, only tangled around one foot, and then she's wrapping her hand around him, stroking him from base to tip.

*Oh holy jesus fuck.* His eyes close and he groans. Wait. Fuck, fuck. His eyes pop open. "Oh shit! Wait, shit, I don't have, shit." He looks around the room frantically.

"No no, pill, it's okay."

"Okay, okay." He thinks maybe he should come up with a smart response, but that's just not going to happen right now.

She pulls him closer, wrapping one leg around his waist as he slides his hands under her ass, lifting her against the wall. She wraps her other leg around his body and reaches down to guide him inside her. They fumble for a moment, and when the head of his cock catches slickly against her he has to clench his teeth to keep from coming, but then they find the right

angle and he's sinking into her, and she's so tight around him, and *fuck*. When he's buried all the way inside her, he stops, doesn't move a muscle, tries to hold her completely still because he's *so close, so close*.

"Shit, okay, this isn't going to last long." He pants into her ear.

"God, Jim, I don't care, I just need..." she pauses to catch her breath, her nails biting into his shoulder, "Jim, please, just... fuck me."

He groans, a long, low sound he doesn't recognize, and pulls back to sink into her again, deeper this time, and then again, again.

Her hair, the smell of her hair's been driving him crazy for years, and now his nose is buried in it, and she's crying his name with each thrust, deeper, deeper, harder, more, her breath coming in a puff of warm air against his ear as he grips her tighter, he's so close, and he's fucking *Pam*, it's *Pam* who's panting his name, who's slick and tight around him as he sinks deep inside her again and again, and it's so good, so good, and just one more deep, hard thrust and then he's gone, he's coming so hard he can't see, saying words he doesn't even hear, his breath coming in a near sob, his lips against her ear.

He doesn't try to move for a long moment, body still shuddering, heart pounding in his chest. Her fingers tremble as they sift through his hair, and her lips brush against his ear.

Carefully he shifts, sliding out of her and easing her feet onto the floor. She wraps her arms around his waist and rests her head in his shoulder. She sighs and presses her nose to the crook of his neck.

He brushes his lips over her hair as he waits for his breath to steady. "So, um... I thought that first time we did this might be a little more, you know... romantic." His voice feels almost hoarse, like he hasn't used it in days.

He feels her smile against his skin. "*I* thought it was romantic."

He shifts to look down at his feet. "I'm still wearing my shoes."

She follows his gaze and giggles. "You're right. Your footwear totally killed the romance."

He sighs. "Too bad I wasn't wearing... tassled loafers."

"Yeah. Just try to do better next time, okay?"

He feels a dopey grin stretch across his face as he realizes, *there will be a next time*.

She presses her body closer to his and kisses his jaw. She murmurs his name on a sigh. "*Jim*."

"Hm?"

"Nothing. Just... reminding myself. That it's... *you*."

For a moment he feels like he can't breathe, but then he catches her mouth with his and kisses her, kisses her, as they move to the bed.

The second time is smoother, steadier. He can focus, now. He can watch her face flush and her lips part, hear that soft intake of breath and then a moan as he slides into her. He can feel her hands drifting restlessly over his back, then tangling in the hair at the nape of his neck. Her legs, wrapped around him, urging him closer. He can hear her soft whispers in his ear as he sinks into her again and again, growing louder as she gets closer, closer. He feels her tighten, shudder around him, and moments later, hear words like *love, Jim, yes* when he pulses into her with one last cry.

# All the night's magic seems to whisper and hush

## Chapter Notes

Chapter title comes from Van Morrison's "Moondance."

For once, everything just feels... quiet. His thoughts aren't racing before he even opens his eyes. His heart hasn't started to pound. His limbs lie heavy and relaxed against the sheets. He's about to slide back into sleep when a jaw-cracking yawn overtakes him.

And then the scent of her hits him, a visceral punch in the gut. His eyes snap open.

*Pam.* Pam is warm and naked and draped across him, her leg hooked over his thigh, her head on his shoulder, her hand on his chest.

His relaxed languor evaporates, and his heart starts to pound as everything comes back to him in a flood. His arm tightens around her shoulders, pulling her closer before he can think to let her sleep. His palm slides up her thigh, her hip, her back. He sinks his fingers into her hair and tries to resist the urge to wake her up to kiss her, hear her voice, look into her eyes and see... love, lust, *need*.

But still, he must be holding her too tight, because she starts to shift against him. Her breasts press against his chest as she moves until her face is buried in the crook of his neck. Her breath warms his skin as it escapes on a soft sigh. She murmurs his name - *Jim* - and presses a sleepy kiss to his neck.

He bends his head to press a kiss to her hair. She wraps an arm around his neck and turns her head so their lips meet. He brushes one kiss, then another over her lips, her jaw, her nose. Her fingertips drift to the side of his face, stroking his cheek.

Her eyes drift open and her gaze meets his. He's at a loss, now, for words.

She speaks first. "Hi." Her voice, hoarse and intimate with sleep, sends a spiral of warmth twisting through his insides.

He swallows. "Good morning." He barely recognizes his own voice.

She stretches, making a soft humming sound against him, before sitting up abruptly.

Anxiety trickles into his blood. "What?"

"Your present!"

She scrambles out of bed, dragging the sheet behind her. He manages to catch the departing bedspread with his foot, narrowly avoiding finding himself stark naked on an equally-naked bed.

Soon she returns, plopping cross-legged on the bed, pinning the sheet in place with one hand. She's holding a plastic bag in the other. He sits up. He's having a hard time focusing on whatever she's holding, considering instead how difficult it would be to undo her makeshift toga.

She holds the bag out to him. "Here. It's not a Brooklyn accent, but... I hope you like it."

With some effort, he focuses on the bag. He takes it from her. Something large and square and flat is inside. He pulls the plastic away to find an early Kinks LP. The edges of the paper sleeve are a little worn, but otherwise it's in great condition.

He says the first thing that comes to mind. "The Kinks are so underrated!"

She starts to laugh. "I know, you've told me before."

"Where'd you get it?" He flips it over to read the back.

"At the flea market last week. There was a guy with a bunch of old records. I dunno, you probably can't even play it, but I saw it and thought of you."

He meets her eyes and grins. "No, but I was thinking about getting one, and this is the perfect excuse. You know, they even have ones that plug into your computer now."

She murmurs *oooh* in dramatic fashion, and seeing his chance, he sets the album aside and pulls her into his lap. He presses his lips to her ear, her cheek, her jaw, her neck. He murmurs *thank you* against her skin.

She makes a soft humming sound as her head rolls to the side. "Mmm. I think you should always thank me like this."

He leans backward onto the bed, pulling her on top of him. Now the sheet is gone and he runs his hands up her body. Yeah. This is a good morning.

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By the time they drag themselves out of bed, it's almost noon, and they barely make the hotel's checkout time. They leave their bags in his car, and eat sandwiches at a nearby deli for lunch. It's right around the corner from the hotel, but she's never noticed it before, and swears it wasn't there last week. He teases her, but really, he thinks if he lived here for a year he still wouldn't know half the businesses on his block. There's just so much *more* here, in every square foot, than anywhere else he's ever been.

Afterwards, she takes him to her favorite coffee place, and it's warm and friendly inside, so they spend the better part of a lazy afternoon with coffee and pastries and a New York Times

Sunday crossword that's far too difficult for either of them.

They eventually wander outside again, visiting a flea market, a used bookstore, and a crepe stand before they finally decide it's time to head home.

\*\*\*

Walking back to the hotel to retrieve his car, they linger on a bridge with a fortuitous view of the setting sun. Maybe once this would have felt cheesy or clichéd, but right now, it's... perfect. She leans back against the cement railing, and wraps her arms around his neck, pulling him closer. He bends to kiss her, hands moving over her shoulder blades. Her nose is cold against his cheek, and her lips smile against his.

"You're missing the sunset," he murmurs against her mouth.

"Mm." Her mittened fingers ruffle the hair at the back of his neck.

"Seriously." He loses his train of thought when her lips move over his jaw. "It's... uh... pretty."

"I'll bet." She stands on her tiptoes to press her body closer to his. His heartbeat starts to feel heavier, loud in his ears.

But the moment shatters when a black lab appears at his side, snuffling his pockets and gazing up at him with soulful brown eyes and a mobile tail. Jim drops his hand to the dog's head, scratching behind the ears. Soon the owner catches up to his dog, though, and they both continue on their way.

Jim watches him go. "I want a dog like that."

"Like Murphy?"

For some reason he's taken by surprise. He thinks he remembers everything she's ever told him about her childhood, but it never occurred to him that she might be listening just as closely.

"Yeah... like Murphy."

She turns in his arms and props her elbows up on the railing, finally watching the sunset. "I've always wanted a dog, too."

He forgets himself for a moment. "Well, then we should get one."

His feels his eyes widen at his own words. He holds his breath until he hears her soft response. "Yeah, we should."

She straightens, and leans back into him. His arms cover hers, and he finds a spot just below her ear that isn't covered by her scarf or her curls. He kisses it, and she shivers against him.

His chest feels funny, and he has the insane urge to propose to her right now, this very second. This is it, he knows it. He's always known it. His heart starts to thud and his head grows light. He's about to squeeze her hand when he manages to stop himself. There's no hurry, really. He can wait. He's good at waiting. But, New York. It'll definitely be in New York.

\*\*\*

Once they're in the car, the miles tick by with abnormal speed. The weekend already feels unreal. As the Scranton city limits draw closer, absurd nerves start to creep into his thoughts. Should he just drop her off at home? Can he invite himself in? Does this still count as a first date? What the hell counts as gentlemanly now? Is he supposed to give her space now or something? God knows he's become good at that. Going home alone tonight seems impossible, now, but since he's managed to walk away from her every day for years, he supposes he can manage once more. The weekend has already gone better than he could have possibly hoped for, really.

He tries to fish around for clues. "So... you're probably pretty tired now, huh?"

On cue, she yawns. "Yeah, I'm wiped out. I want to sleep for like, twenty hours."

"Oh." *Crap*. "What, and miss the magic of Dunder-Mifflin at eight a.m.?"

"Ugh, don't remind me."

As he nears her street, he slows the car to ask for directions. Though they've been "friends" these past months, he's never seen her apartment. The delicate dance they perfected at the office was difficult enough, he supposes. Maintaining the façade of simple friendship would have been impossible in her living room. Or his, for that matter.

She directs him into her apartment complex, and he finds a visitor's spot without trouble. Scranton may not boast the glamor and excitement of New York, but he has to admit, at least it never lacks parking.

He cuts the engine, and the silence of nighttime in suburbia is suddenly deafening.

Nerves creep back in. He rubs his palms against his jeans. "So, how's it feel to be home?"

"Hm... quiet."

He grins. "Just what I was thinking."

He pops the trunk and hops out of the car. He's jittery, now. Restless energy has him moving more quickly than necessary. Pam pulls on her jacket and follows, stomping her feet a little in the cold. He starts pulling her bags from the trunk.

She blows into her clasped hands and looks up at the sky. “You can see the stars better here. I missed that.”

He pauses, a suitcase in one hand and one of her sketchpads in the other. He takes two steps forward until he can bend and kiss her. She reaches up to cup the sides of his face with both hands.

Long moments pass as his mouth moves lightly over hers. Eventually he pulls back to rest his forehead against hers. He swallows, then starts to speak twice before he actually makes any sound. “Your hands are *freezing*.”

A soft, surprised laugh escapes her. She leans back to shoot him an innocent look. “Oh really?” Her hands drop to his chest and slide down his body to toy at the hem of his sweater. Her sudden grin is his last warning before her fingers dart under his sweater and she slides her cold palms up his stomach.

He makes some sound that he suspects is rather unmanly and jumps backwards, twisting away from her. “Not cool, Beesly!”

“I disagree. I thought it was *very* cool. Get it?” Her smile is triumphant as she takes the sketchpad from his loose grasp.

“Ha ha. You’re hilarious.” He contemplates revenge as he watches her lean over the trunk to retrieve the remaining art supplies. The moment has to be right. He suspects ice cubes will be involved.

When she finishes grabbing her things, he starts to close the trunk.

She interrupts. “Wait!”

“What?”

“You forgot your bag.”

*Oh.* “Oh! I didn’t know if, uh, you wanted me to...”

“Yeah, no, I mean, if you don’t want to stay...”

He grabs his bag out of the trunk and closes it so fast she starts to laugh.

His face feels a little hot, but at least the darkness hides it. “Yeah, yeah. Okay, time to show me your pad.”

“Okay, but I’m warning you, it might not live up to the fabulous standards set by Chez Halpert.”

“I’ll try to hide my disappointment.”

“Thank you. That’s all I ask.”

She turns and precedes him down the sidewalk. The building is all one level, the doors facing the outside. As they round a corner, she turns to face him, continuing her walk backwards. She smiles widely.

“What?”

“Nothing. Just... you’re here now. I’ve been wondering what it’d be like.”

He swallows. “Yeah. Me too.”

“And?”

“Well... It’s kind of dark here. You might want to do something about that.”

“Good point. I’ll talk to the landlord.”

She turns back around, and stops so abruptly that he almost runs into her.

“You know, you really need to practice this forward walking thing...”

One of her drawings slides out of her sketchpad and drifts to the concrete.

He drops his duffel bag and starts to reach for the sheet of paper.

She catches his wrist. “Jim...”

Confused, he looks past her. On her doorstep, a man slowly rises to his feet.

*Roy.*

# Over the rocky cliffs that you leap

## Chapter Notes

Chapter title from "Fineshrine" by Purity Ring.

Roy's mostly obscured by shadow, but a nearby street light illuminates the expression on his face. His eyes are wide with shock, but his blank look quickly morphs into a scowl.

*"I knew it!"*

Jim's stomach sinks and he looks toward Pam, waiting for her hand to drop, her arms to cross, her gaze to skitter away. Instead, she squeezes his hand more tightly.

"Roy, what are you doing here?" Her voice isn't hesitant or ashamed. Instead, she just sounds... annoyed.

Roy doesn't answer, and instead tumbles down the steps, gaining momentum as he goes. A half-empty bottle of whisky dangles from the fingers of one hand, and a wilted bouquet of flowers lies abandoned on Pam's stoop. *Not good.*

Roy's coming up on him fast, now, and puts both palms out as he approaches to shove Jim in the shoulders, hard. *"What the fuck?"*

Jim drops Pam's hand to put his palms up in a vaguely appeasing motion. "Look, it's not, uh..." He's not sure how to finish the sentence. *It's not what it looks like?* Because it's pretty much exactly what it looks like: he and Pam, hand in hand, overnight bags in tow. He almost grins maniacally at the thought, before he remembers the situation at hand. *Focus, Halpert.*

Pam grabs at Roy's arm. "Go home, Roy, you're drunk."

He shrugs her off. "No, no, I'd really like to know. What the fuck? I mean, here I get this crap about *we're just not right together?* And the whole time, you're banging this skinny motherfucker?" He moves to shove Jim again, but this time Jim sidesteps.

“I love him, Roy! We weren’t together before, but we are now, and it’s none of your business anymore!”

Jim’s so startled, gazing at Pam with warmth blooming in his chest, that he doesn’t even see Roy’s punch coming. Luckily for him, Roy’s too drunk to aim properly, and the blow glances across his cheek rather than breaking his nose.

Still, it fucking hurts, and Jim reflexively socks Roy in the stomach.

Roy slumps to his knees in the damp grass. “Fuck, it’s none of my business? I’ve been... going to work, every day, while *this guy*, was there, stealing my fiancée. That’s just, not cool, man!”

Pam stares at Jim with wide eyes, and moves close enough to run her fingers over his cheekbone. She turns to look back at Roy and at pulls out her phone. “I’m calling Darryl to come pick you up. And don’t you dare move a muscle, or I’m calling the police.”

His pained gasps give way to an aura of dejection. “*Pammy*. I can’t believe you let this guy ruin our marriage.”

“Stop blaming Jim. You lost me all on your own.” She sighs. “Look, you’ll be much happier with someone else, anyway.”

Roy’s shoulders slump and he folds his arms. He doesn’t say another word until Darryl arrives to cart him off.

\*\*\*\*

Pam shoots Jim guilty glances from under her lashes as she unlocks the door to her apartment. She flicks on the light and guides him to the couch with her hands on his shoulders before moving into the kitchen. She opens the freezer and frowns at the contents before emerging with a pint of Ben & Jerry’s ice cream.

She returns to the living room to perch on the couch next to him, legs curled under her as she holds the ice cream to his cheek. “Sorry, this is pretty much the only thing in my freezer.”

He smiles, even though it pulls at his growing bruise on his cheek. He could get used to this. He reaches up to slide a hand into her hair and pulls her closer, brushing a light kiss across her lips.

Her voice is soft as she leans her forehead against his. "I'm sorry my declaration of love got you punched in the face."

"Worth it," he murmurs.

Her answering smile is everything he needed.

# **I belong with you, you belong with me**

## Chapter Notes

Chapter title from "Ho Hey" by The Lumineers.

He wakes up first, lazy and relaxed, half-drowsing in the morning light as it slants buttery and warm across the bed.

He'd wanted their six-month anniversary to be as much like their first time in New York as possible, but he's glad he chose this place rather than the hotel they stayed at last time. Instead of an aggressively air-conditioned hotel room, they're in a little studio apartment with art on the walls and flowers on the windowsill. It feels like home.

Pam's still sleeping, face buried in the pillows, but her back is bare, sheets pooled around her hips in the spring warmth. He can't resist reaching out a hand to trail his fingers down her spine.

She shifts, and her hand emerges from the pillows, her engagement ring catching the light, and his heart with it.

He'd proposed, on the bridge, just like he planned six months ago.

He'd nonchalantly suggested a stroll in Central Park near sunset. May in New York: it couldn't have been more perfect. Instead of bare trees rustling in the wind and sleet lining the walkways, everything was in bloom, the sun dappled and warm, the light breeze ruffling Pam's hair as they wandered through the park.

They'd just so happened to pass that same bridge (well, as far as she knew), and while she'd been distracted gazing down at the passers-by, he'd dropped down on one knee. When she turned back to him, her eyes went wide and she clapped a hand over her mouth.

He'd said his spiel (voice nearly shaking), she said yes yes yes and threw her arms around his neck and kissed him as he knelt there on the pavement... and then a group of teenagers clattered across the bridge on skateboards and shouted obscenities at them.

It was perfect.

He suppresses a grin, now, at the thought.

She stirs again, and shifts closer until she's buried her nose against his collarbone. She lets out a contented sigh. "You're thinking. I can hear it."

He smiles into her hair. "I was just remembering our little audience last night."

She yawns and nuzzles closer, her palm slipping around his ribcage to drift across his lower back. "Just jealous," she mumbles.

"True, our lives *are* the stuff of eighteen-year-old dreams."

"Shut it, Halpert. Enjoy the moment."

"Mmm. Well, *Beesly*, you're going to have to come up with a different retort pretty soon."

She shifts backward far enough to meet his gaze. "Yeah, I guess I will."

She smiles.

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