



*Dear
Hattie*

CASSIE MINT

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Dear Hattie

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One

Hattie



It's ten AM on a Monday morning, and I'm sprawled in the office ball pit. With my skirt tucked carefully between my thighs, I'm buried in bright plastic balls, staring up at the skylight high, high above. It's raining.

Everything is open plan in this godforsaken building, so everyone can see me losing my mind in here.

I don't care.

I miss Simone.

Besides, dignity is overrated before lunch on Mondays. And if our corporate overlords didn't want us to play in the ball pit, they shouldn't have replaced the lobby water feature with this monstrosity. Right?

More weird looks from passers-by. A bark of laughter, somewhere across the lobby. The rain drums on the skylight, and I'm shivery beneath my blouse.

Whatever.

The Pretzel Media complex is already echoey as hell, what with all the sparkly white floor tiles and high, industrial ceilings. Classic start-up chic. But sounds are extra warped from my spot in the ball pit, and even as people whisper about me as they walk past, it sounds weird. Like they're far, far away, and I'm listening through a long cardboard tube.

Is that Harriet Fry?

Should we call a doctor?

Who's her emergency contact—that Simone girl?

I groan, scooping more brightly colored plastic balls on top of my torso. Want to bury myself alive. Want to wake up tomorrow and start over.

I'm not usually like this, for the record. Usually I march through the Pretzel building with military discipline, my Dear Hattie notebook clasped at my side, a dozen half-written columns rattling around my brain. I'm put together. Neat and reliable, with a can-do attitude.

But something broke in me when I walked up to my work pod this morning and saw Simone's empty chair in the pod next to mine. A crack splintered right down the center of my chest, and I swayed on my feet, and I couldn't stay near that empty chair for another second. I just couldn't.

So... here I am.

Publicly wallowing in plastic.

Mentally composing an email requesting a new work pod—one that doesn't fill me with crippling existential dread. Is

that a valid HR concern?

It's fine. Ten more minutes, then I'll thrash my way back out of the pit, send that email, and pretend none of this ever happened. Maybe I can work in the break-out area until I'm reassigned.

"Well, well, well. What have we here?"

Cradled by hundreds of plastic balls, my whole body goes tense. I'd know that voice anywhere. I hear it in my freaking dreams—but only the bad ones, obviously.

Summoning up my iciest demeanor, I glance up at the man looming over the pit. And at over six feet tall, he really does loom. "Not now, Wesley. I'm busy."

High up at that altitude, his mouth crooks up. "Clearly."

As always, once I'm looking at him, it's hard to look away. Like the skylight: Wesley Tanaka is hypnotic. It's those cut cheekbones; those searching toffee-brown eyes; his ruffled black hair that just *begs* to be gripped, twisted, yanked. Wesley always looks like pure sin. Like a bad decision custom designed just for me.

It's rude. No one should look that delicious, yet be so obnoxious. But that's the way of the world, isn't it? Pretty people don't need real personalities. They get by with the power of their flawless skin and straight teeth.

"I'm holding a meeting," I tell Wesley, waving him away.

His grin widens, and I ignore the flare of triumph in my chest. Making Wesley Tanaka smile is *not* on my To Do list for

today—or any day. He is my nemesis. *Arch* nemesis.

“Am I invited?” Wesley props one knee on the edge of the ball pit, like he really would crawl in here with me. Like he’d get horizontal by my side, his face inches from mine...

Without warning, a blush scorches over my whole body, rushing over my skin beneath my clothes.

For god’s sake. He’s talking about jumping in a ball pit, not crawling into bed with me. Not that I’d let him do either.

“In your dreams, Tanaka.”

It’s hard to fight your way out of a ball pit with grace, but I give it my best shot. Lurid plastic balls shower off my front, bouncing hollowly, and I grit my teeth as I wade to the edge. Wesley waits patiently as I go back for my left shoe, my whole face on fire.

“As your mentor, Harriet—”

“You are *not* my mentor.”

“—I have a duty of care. Be honest with me. Have you finally snapped?”

Scoffing, I ignore his offered hand and wobble my way out of the ball pit unassisted. A flash of something like disappointment ripples over Wesley’s face, then he’s back to a teasing smile, hands tucked in his pockets. He’s still looming.

Sounds are louder out here in the real world, and the smell of the nearby pretzel cart makes my stomach clench. Cinnamon sugar and warm dough. When did I last eat?

Simone called me on Saturday night, and after that... I don't remember. It's all a blur of misery and binge-watching cheesy detective shows. There may have been a handful of goldfish crackers on Sunday afternoon. Is that all?

My legs tremble.

Wesley sighs the special, long-suffering sigh he saves for me, and takes my elbow. "A duty of care," he repeats, and steers me toward the pretzel cart. This close, I can smell him too: soap, laundry detergent, fresh wind, green leaves. "Come on, Small Fry. Eat some sugar and tell me why you've gone insane."

"I'm not hungry," I lie, tugging on my arm.

Wesley lets go, but still shepherds me over to the break area. And I really must be at rock bottom, because I *let* him. I let Wesley Tanaka—the bane of my life, my sworn enemy—boss me around, fussing like a mother hen. I let him buy me a cinnamon sugar soft pretzel and a milky coffee from the cart; let him sit me down at a small table by the window, then drop into the chair opposite and fix me with that *stare*.

Here's something you need to know: ever since I started work here two years ago, Wesley Tanaka has looked at me like I'm a puzzle he can't solve. Like an unfinished riddle. And for a man who solves rubix cubes absentmindedly in the middle of work meetings, that's saying something. I drive this guy *insane*.

Well, the feeling is mutual. Always has been.

I clear my throat, kicking at the legs of my chair. “Thank you for the pretzel,” I mutter.

“And the coffee, you ungrateful wretch.”

I press my lips together then say, “And the coffee.”

Wesley’s eyes glitter. I fiddle with my napkin.

Usually, a secret part of me loves our back-and-forth. The constant bickering; the merciless teasing; the ceaseless attempts to one-up each other. I’m into it. Usually, I walk away from a Wesley Tanaka encounter with fifty volts of electricity humming through my veins.

Not today. Today, I raised my white flag the second I saw Simone’s empty chair, and Wesley can sense it. He’s frowning, his perfect forehead pinched with concern. When he props his elbows on the table, those sculpted shoulders bulge beneath his dark blue Henley.

Hate that I notice that detail. Hate that I’m hypnotized... again.

“Tell me,” he commands.

My nose wrinkles, and I tear my eyes away from the glory of his collarbone. “*Not* my mentor, remember? Or my boss.” Technically speaking, as the sole writer left on the Dear Hattie column, I’m now a lone wolf. A department all of my own. A sad little one-woman band.

“Tell me,” he tries again, coaxing this time. And with the low, rich timbre of his voice... I hide a shiver and shrug, biting off a mouthful of cinnamon pretzel instead.

I figure he'll get bored soon and go find someone else to torture. But Wesley Tanaka, recording studio manager and general wunderkind of Pretzel Media, sits across from me with a stubborn set to his jaw that says he has no place else to be.

Side note: that *jawline*. Life is unfair.

But I have to at least try to get rid of him. My pride demands it. "Don't your podcast ducklings need you?"

Wesley raises an eyebrow. "Quit stalling."

Ugh. Am I really going to do this? Am I really going to confess my most private, pathetic feelings to the man who lives to sniff out my weaknesses?

Huh. Guess I am.

Because apparently all it takes to break down my carefully constructed walls is a well-timed hit of sugar and caffeine. That, and a wallop of heartbreak first thing on a Monday morning. I open my mouth and blurt: "Simone is gone."

Wesley nods slowly, one finger tapping on the tabletop. "Simone."

"She worked on the Dear Hattie column with me—"

"I know who Simone is," Wesley interrupts, and something about that makes my stomach twist.

He noticed her? Of course he did. *Everyone* was in love with Simone, what with her Marilyn Monroe curls and trademark red lipstick and loud belly-laugh. Being invisible

was a natural part of being Simone's best friend. Who would see me next to her?

I'm dark blonde where she's platinum; average height where she's gazelle-tall. Neat and unnotable. The Walmart edition.

But at the idea of Wesley Tanaka liking her too, I tear off a huge bite of pretzel and scowl at the table as I chew. Suddenly I'm not hungry anymore—but I'll still stuff my face to avoid this conversation.

"I thought she moved back to her hometown and got married," Wesley says.

I grunt and chew harder, jaw aching. He kept tabs on her, huh? Bet he was disappointed that he didn't get a shot with Simone. Bet he'd have loved to take my best friend out on whatever counts as a signature Wesley Tanaka date.

A secret rooftop gig, probably. Or an after-hours tour of a planetarium. Or a Sunday morning spent racing sports cars around an abandoned movie lot. I don't know, okay? But I know it would be awesome. Something original or high adrenaline.

Can't imagine the specifics. Can't *let* myself imagine them.

Tearing off another chunk of pretzel, I keep chewing, even though my mouth tastes sour. My belly is weighed down by rocks.

“You can still see her, though,” Wesley says, nonplussed. He’s still frowning at me—still trying to puzzle me out. “You can call and video chat. You can visit. It’s not like she’s fallen off the face of the earth.”

Is this supposed to be a pep talk? Because it sucks. I *know* we can keep in touch online, damn it. Pretzel Media is a giant, digital-first company. We’re all acquainted with the wonders of technology.

But Simone is the closest thing I have to a family. A *real* one, not the stilted group of strangers I share a surname with. I swallow hard, chasing my dry mouthful of dough with a swig of milky coffee, then place the cardboard cup down harder than necessary. Hot liquid sloshes and leaks from under the lid.

“I realize that all men are emotionally constipated—”

“Very enlightened,” Wesley says, dabbing my cup with a napkin.

“—but I *miss* her, okay? She’s my best friend, and the only person I have in the whole world. It’s not the same now that she’s screwed off to the middle of a cornfield.”

These are bitter, ugly thoughts. Thoughts I’d never share with Simone—who I *am* happy for, damn it—so why do they spill so easily for Wesley Tanaka? I’m usually so guarded around this man, and with good reason. We trade verbal jabs like boxers in a ring.

It's that empty chair. My hollow chest, and the way my insides throbbed at the sight of Simone's abandoned work pod. The way I've felt so insubstantial all weekend, fading into a ghost. Like a puff of wind could scatter me to atoms.

Wesley's voice is soothing. "You'll get over it, Small Fry."

Heat flares up my neck, and my stomach does a funny little wobble. Why does he call me that? Can he see what it does to me? He's making fun of me somehow, I know it.

My chair clatters against the sparkling white tiles as I lurch to my feet. Wesley blinks, taken by surprise.

Shit, what am I doing? This man is my rival. He lives to press my buttons. And I'm giving him all this ammunition?

"Thanks for the..." My hand waves at the leaking cup and crumpled napkin. The scattered crumbs. God, I'm the worst, but I can't stay and bus my own table. Don't trust my balance, and there's a high-pitched ringing in my ears. "Good chat. Gotta go."

"Harriet," Wesley calls as I power walk away, his voice carrying across the open space. I pretend I don't hear him, walking faster. "Harriet!"

So, yeah.

Mondays: one. Harriet: zero.

And now my arch nemesis knows I'm all gooey and vulnerable. Perfect.

Two

Dear Hattie



Dear Hattie,

I'm a college student in my final year. My grades are good; I'm on a scholarship and fine for cash. I *should* be living the best year of my life, right?

But I spend every weekend holed up in my dorm room, doom-scrolling on my laptop or binge watching TV shows. Whenever I hear people laughing and talking in the hall outside, or passing by my window, something deep inside me aches with loneliness. I *know* I should be out there, participating in real life. And yet I can't seem to do anything about it. Why?

Why can't I get away from these screens?

Why do I freeze up with dread at the thought of stepping foot into a party?

How did my life get so gray?

Help me, Hattie. You're my only hope.

Stuck In My Screens

* * *

Dear Hattie,

Settle an argument between my mother and I: are there calories in water?

Determined Dieter

Three

Wesley



Harriet Fry avoids me for three days before I spot her slipping into a nap pod on the second floor after lunch. There are six white plastic pods altogether, each roughly the size of a double bed, with walls that seal together and shut out the outside world. When they're closed off, from the outside they look like giant eggs.

Another hit from the beautiful minds that brought us the lobby ball pit. I suppose management thinks that if we can eat, sleep and frolic at work, we'll never, ever need to go home again.

When I see that flash of dark blonde hair, my reaction is pure instinct. I veer off my previous path, dodging clusters of work pods and a water cooler, and slip into Harriet's nap egg right as the walls close.

"Wesley!"

She sounds shocked. It's dark in here, and we're all alone.

I clear my throat, pressing my shoulders against the pod wall. "This is creepier than I intended."

Her snort of laughter unknots the tension in my chest. At least Harriet Fry is not afraid of me. That would be... upsetting.

“Pretty sure these things are for solo naps, Tanaka.” There are some fumbling noises, then the reading light above the orange cushioned platform flicks on. Harriet folds her arms and smirks at me, her back propped against the headboard. “I’d hate to report you to HR.”

Her hair is burnished gold in the lamplight, braided over one shoulder. She’s wearing a green blouse with a fussy little embroidered collar, tucked into a knee length charcoal skirt. Always so goddamn prissy—when most people at Pretzel Media waltz around in jeans and flip flops.

I love it.

Harriet’s legs are stretched out long and crossed at the ankle. The fabric of her skirt has slithered back, baring an inch of thigh, and I drag my eyes away, heart tapping faster against my ribs.

“If they’re for solo naps, why model them on double beds?” I point out.

Harriet blinks down at the orange bench, like she’s never noticed the width before. A delectable flush creeps up her throat.

Ah, yes. This is what I chased her down for: that blush. The crackling tension between us, thrumming in the air.

Stepping forward until my legs brush the bench, I'm sizzling with energy. Haven't felt this alive in days.

But how to torment her?

"Still homeless, then?" I nod at the laptop and notebook by her knee. Harriet grunts and tugs them closer—like I might lunge forward and snatch her office equipment. "You know, there are spare work pods on the fourth floor." Near mine.

"My reallocation request is pending," Harriet says, bone dry. We both know what that means: her email has flown into the void, never to be read by a soul.

"Well, there's always room for a little one in the recording studio," I hear myself say, then force a bland smile on my face. Can't let her see that I'm shocked by my own offer, because I learned with Harriet Fry early on: never let her sense weakness. The little minx will pounce.

Besides, it makes *zero* sense that I've offered her that. Nothing beyond the telltale fact that I want this girl near.

She scoffs and tilts her head, her braid sliding further down her shoulder. "Can you do that, Wesley? Can you tuck a whole department under your wing?"

I can when the department comes in a slender five foot six package. Harriet would fit very nicely under my wing, thank you. Like she was tailor-made for me.

Strolling along the side of the pod, I sink onto the bench and kick my legs up. "Only if you promise to be very, very quiet."

Harriet stiffens when I tap her on the nose, and I bite the inside of my cheek. I've missed this. Missed our bickering. It's been *days*.

Monday didn't count, either. She was too broken already, too sad. God, it just about killed me seeing Harriet Fry brought so low. I've never felt so useless.

But it's Thursday and she's back in fighting form, squaring up to me with fire in her eyes. Good. Great.

"Did you need something, Wesley?" Shit, I love when she grits my name between her teeth. Sends a bolt of heat arrowing through my gut. "Because I have actual work to do."

Sighing, I slide down to lay flat, cushioning my head on one arm as I peer up at her. "Go ahead, *Hattie*. I won't disturb you. I don't snore."

Her mouth drops open. "You're not sleeping in here!"

"Not if you keep yammering on, no." I close my eyes, wriggling an inch closer, and stifle a grin when she curses under her breath but doesn't move away.

After a long, long pause, Harriet pulls her laptop up and levers it open. And I came in here to torture her a little, to check she's back on form, but the rhythmic tapping of keys and her warmth by my side are a hell of a drug.

Minute by minute, breath by breath, the tension I carry around everywhere seeps out of my body. My bones sag into the orange bench; my muscles relax. My breaths get deeper, slower, steady.

When was the last time I truly relaxed? I can't remember. Everyone always needs me *on*, firing on all cylinders. The wunderkind. Interns are always pestering me; bosses demanding reports.

This quiet is rare. Intoxicating.

“Why is the bench orange?” I murmur as sleep creeps up on me, muffling my thoughts like cotton wool. It's warm in here, and the air smells like Harriet's coconut shampoo. “Orange is not a relaxing color.”

Her voice is soft. Soothing. “It's the yolk in the egg. Dumbass.”

I fall asleep with my favorite hater by my side, lulled by the *tap tap tap* of her fingers on the keyboard. Solving everyone's worldly problems except hers—and mine.

* * *

Everyone turns and gapes an hour later when I stagger back into the Podcasting Zone—our cluster of assigned work pods next to the recording studio. The red light is on above the door, so at least *someone* is in there doing work. The rest are too busy gawping at my mid-afternoon bedhead.

“What happened to *you*?” one of the finance bros calls. He co-hosts a podcast about NFTs and bitcoin so, naturally, I ignore him.

Flurries of whispers follow me to my assigned work pod, right in the center of the Podcasting Zone. The eye of the storm.

Pretzel Media has this thing about how old offices and cubicle culture are *lame* and stuck in the past—like we won't notice that our edgy 'work pods' aren't basically cubicles made to look space-age. This company, I swear.

Cool podcasts, though. And the recording studio is tricked out.

When I look up, the whispers cut off and everyone looks busy. Fine.

"Harriet Fry," I mutter under my breath, tossing the notepad I've been carrying around for hours onto my desk.

Can't believe she left me asleep in the nap egg. Can't believe she let me stay there with her in the first place.

Did she seem tired? It was hard to tell in the lamplight. Is she still sad about Simone? Why didn't I ask her?

Because that's not what you do, a voice supplies in my head, and it's true. That's not how Harriet Fry and I interact. We're not friends. We're not warm and cuddly. Monday morning was an exception, not the rule.

Normally, we're at each other's throats, sniping and teasing, and...

And napping, apparently. What the hell was I thinking?

My assistant jumps when I lean over the wall separating our desks. Raj's pen clatters onto the floor, and he tries to cover his half-finished doodle of a pineapple with his elbow. Today he's in a salmon pink polo shirt. "Um. Boss?"

“Do I have a sharpie mustache?” I pitch my voice low, beneath the hum of computers and rattle of keyboards.

Raj’s eyes widen. “Uh. No?”

“No doodles on my face?” I press. “Nothing weird about my appearance?” It would be juvenile for Harriet to draw all over me the second I fell asleep, but I wouldn’t put it past her. Our rivalry transcends social rules.

“No,” Raj says, shaking his head. “Your hair is a bit...” He mimes a tuft at the back of my head. “But otherwise you look normal.”

Normal.

I look normal.

But as I nod and sink down into my own chair, the lurid green leather creaking under my weight, I don’t *feel* normal. My world is all weird. Colors are brighter, sounds are crisp.

That beautiful witch did something to me back in the nap egg. Maybe not physically, but... inside. I’m knocked off kilter. Sleeping next to her has jumbled up all my innards.

“Harriet Fry,” I say again, like repeating her name will conjure her somehow. Where is she now? Working with someone else? *Napping* with someone else? My chest twists at the thought, and I rub my gray shirt as I frown at my blank screen.

Why do I care?

I don’t care. I don’t.

But as I jam my headphones on a few minutes later, settling in to edit another episode, deep down I know the truth.

I don't want Harriet Fry to nap with anybody else. Don't want her bickering with anyone else, either.

She's *mine*.

Four

Dear Hattie



Dear Hattie,

Is it normal to be brokenhearted when a friend breaks up with you?

Everyone always talks about romantic relationships ending, and how shitty it feels to get dumped. But here's my hot take: when a friend dumps you, it's worse. Because friendship is not a zero sum game, and they don't have to miss out on other friends to pick you. It's not you-or-them.

When a friend dumps you, they just don't want to see you anymore. Plain and simple. And maybe everyone else feels fine about that, but personally, I feel like hot shit on a sidewalk.

How do I get over this, Hattie? And where did I go wrong? Am I the only person who takes it this badly? It's killing me.

Ex-Bestie

* * *

Dear Hattie,

Would it be bad if I slept with my mom's ex-boyfriend? You have three days to write back, or I'm doin' it.

Daddy Issues

Five

Harriet



As soon as the red recording light flicks off, I slip through the podcast studio door.

It's late on Tuesday evening, and most of the Pretzel Media building has emptied out for the day. Pipes gurgle in the walls, and the footsteps of late workers echo up to the metal rafters. A few determined stragglers hunch over their laptops, lost in the glow of their screens, but the water coolers are ghostly and silent in the moonlight.

I shouldn't be here. Shouldn't chase after Wesley Tanaka, so shamelessly needy for his attention. Shouldn't let him glimpse how lonely I am with my best friend gone. Should go home, cook dinner, and numb myself with another TV crime drama.

And yet...

When I slip inside the recording studio, the door shutting softly behind me, and catch my first glimpse of Wesley in days... I gust out a sigh of relief. Tension bleeds from my muscles, and my stomach unknots.

It's nuts reacting to him like this—I realize that. I'd write to my own column for advice if I could.

And I know exactly what I'd say in reply: *Sounds like you're crushing hard on this 'nemesis'. Are you sure you hate him after all?*

Pfft. Shut up, me.

The recording booth is quiet and warm, heated by banks of glowing electronics. The walls are padded to muffle the noise from outside, and it's dim in here, lit only by a single table lamp and Wesley's controls.

A pane of glass separates his domain from the microphones clustered around a table. The chairs in there are thrown back, left in disarray by whoever just finished recording. They left their papers too, and a used coffee cup. Their table is lit by a beam of light from above, like a set in a play.

"Hmm." Wesley hums and mutters to himself as he works, headphones blocking out all sound. His chair creaks as he swivels to grab a pen, jotting something on a notepad. Shoulder blades shift beneath his forest green t-shirt, and his black hair is ruffled beneath the headphones.

I hang back, mouth dry, and press my back against the wall. This is full-on creep behavior, but I can't help it. I *never* get to observe Wesley like this, looking my fill. I'm usually too busy rolling my eyes and fighting off a blush.

Not tonight. Tonight, the blush spreads over my cheeks uncontested, and I stare and stare. Is it weird to find the back of a man's neck attractive? His skin looks so smooth, and his bone structure is a work of art. Want to trace his whole body with my fingertip.

Shit! No.

That's—that's not really how I feel. It's the sleep-deprivation talking; the loneliness since Simone left. It's because I'm burned out from writing too many Dear Hattie columns, day in, day out, and I'm—I'm hungry. My blood sugar is low.

Besides, Wesley Tanaka is a well known snack. I'm only human, okay?

"Shit," Wesley mutters, tossing the pen on his desk. He leans back with a long, deep, *animal* groan, digging the heels of his palms into his eyes. My face simmers.

Pressed against the wall behind him, I bite my lip. That *groan*. It reverberated through me somehow, tingling all the way down to my bones. My tummy feels all squirmy. Does he make other noises like that?

A bunch of screens face his chair, each covered with some kind of editing software. All buttons and sliders and spiky lines. Looks like rocket science to me—and deadly boring.

Does Wesley ever get tired of this stuff? Does he ever crave a distraction?

I could distract him. That's what nemeses are for, right?

Lips pressed together, I push off the wall and tiptoe forward. The recording booth isn't huge—only a few steps from wall to desk—but as I get closer, the little hairs stand up on my arms. I shiver inside my blue silk t-shirt.

Wesley's so *big*. I forget that sometimes. He's six-foot-something of muscle and bone, dressed in soft cotton shirts and dark pants.

He stares at the screens, tapping a pen against his front teeth. Sounds buzz from his headphones, too quiet for me to make out the words. This close, I can smell him: fresh air after a storm; a wet forest; the zing of electricity. Wesley Tanaka smells like a weather event.

As I lean down behind him, my lips an inch from his earlobe, my pulse taps madly in my throat. He's so *warm*, heating the air around him.

"Boo," I say.

Wesley erupts from his chair, yanking off his headphones and throwing them at the wall. They clatter onto the desk instead, held back by the short cable. "Jesus Christ!"

My nemesis wheels around and slumps against his desk, staring at me, face pale. One large hand spreads over his chest, pressing down on his heart.

I cackle and wheeze until I'm gasping for breath. His face! Oh my god, his face. My legs go wobbly, and I grip the back of his chair for balance, still laughing.

Wesley's eyes narrow, and though his voice is calm, his pulse still throbs extra-fast in his throat. "You're playing a dangerous game, Small Fry."

I snort with laughter, tears brimming in my eyes. His mouth twitches, but he smooths it away and goes back to being stern. Raising one eyebrow, he looms over me—despite leaning on the desk.

"Don't you know it's dangerous to interrupt a genius at work?"

Fumbling his chair around, I collapse into it, still giggling. "That's too bad. I'll be careful if I ever meet one."

The chair is warm from his butt. I wriggle against it, then force myself to sit still and cross my legs.

Electronics hum, and the padded walls swallow my ragged breaths. I'm beaming. My heartbeat feels extra strong, knocking on the inside of my ribs, and I feel like I've just run ten miles, not snuck up on one man.

One tall, handsome, *sinful* man, who watches me with those toffee-brown eyes, a wry smile playing around his mouth. Trying to solve the puzzle of Harriet Fry.

"To what do I owe the honor?" Wesley says, his tone so pleasant despite the way I made him jump. I'll say this for my nemesis: he never holds a grudge. If anything, his eyes always spark with excitement whenever we start circling each other, like he's silently egging me on. Like he's desperate to see what I'll do next.

I shrug, acting casual. Like I wasn't just pacing around the empty work pods on the second floor, so antsy I wanted to peel off my own skin. The nerves started hours earlier and built through the day, until I couldn't think straight, couldn't write, couldn't do anything except pace like a caged animal.

Only one thought brought relief: *go bother Wesley.*

And he's still here! Working late on this dreary Tuesday night. Truly, the fates aligned.

"Oh, you know," I say, plucking at my skirt then spreading the fabric over my knees. Searing eyes track my movements. "I get so many letters asking about how to deal with asshole men. Thought I'd come and do some first hand research."

There's a beat of silence, then Wesley's smile is slow and pleased.

My toes curl in my ankle boots. Something throbs low in my belly, and I fight the urge to squirm again.

"I'm at your service," Wesley says softly. "For any and all research needs."

Yeesh.

I swallow, mouth dry.

And again, toffee eyes track the shifting of my throat, alight with equal parts hunger and fascination. The air in this room is getting warmer by the second—thicker, too. I can barely breathe, but I don't want to leave. Not yet.

When Wesley shifts his weight against the desk, the wood creaks.

We're inching closer. Drawn together by an invisible rubber band—one that we've been straining against for months. No: *years*.

Are we really doing this? Are we finally giving in?

"I..." I manage one syllable, my voice cracking. Then we're both moving as one, lunging toward each other, our bodies in sync even if our minds have left the building.

My arch nemesis and I slam together like waves crashing onto the shore. The chair wheels away madly and bounces off a filing cabinet, kicked by a random limb. And we're gripping and twisting each other's clothes, pressing closer, teeth bared, the heat in this room almost unbearable now.

Wesley ducks down and kisses me with a snarl, and all the chatter and white noise in my head cuts out. Finally! There's only blissful quiet, and the steady thud of my pulse, and *Wesley, Wesley, Wesley*.

Even as our movements are frantic, even as the room swirls around us with chaos—inside I'm peaceful. Settled at last.

Thank god.

Here's a plot twist: Wesley Tanaka doesn't kiss like he hates me. He kisses like I'm his only source of oxygen.

And you know what? The feeling is mutual.

Because whatever *this* is, whatever unholy chemistry makes our bodies react like this, it's addictive. The best thing I've ever felt. And maybe I'm throwing my career away, maybe I'm trusting the wrong man, maybe I'm going to hell in a hand basket, but right now I don't care. All I want is Wesley's hands on my bare skin, and his fist tight in my hair. I want his teeth, his tongue, his hunger.

"Mmph," I say, shoving at his chest until he sprawls against the desk once again. His keyboard slides back, knocking over a cup, and pens and pencils rain down onto the carpet. We both ignore them. "Help me up."

Wesley grips my ass, breathing hard, and lifts me to straddle him. My knee hits his mouse, and one of his screens goes black. I pause, gripping his shoulders. "Oh. Uh..."

"Leave it." Wild-eyed and messy-haired, Wesley ducks down and sucks hard on my throat, then speaks into my skin. "For fuck's sake, leave it, Harriet. The building could burn down around us right now for all I care."

Judging from the rock-hard bulge beneath me, Wesley Tanaka is not lying. He's as turned on by this as I am—and believe me, I'm thrumming like a plucked guitar string.

Biting my lip, I grind down against that bulge. It rubs against my clit just right through my clothes, and my breath stutters.

Wesley's eyes fall closed. His hands tighten on my ass, and his voice is ragged. "Do that again."

Heart in my throat, I grind down on him, humping him against the desk. Heat spreads over my skin, pooling between my thighs, and it's so primal, so shameless, so freaking *good*.

Can't get close enough. Never want this to stop.

This teasing friction is the best thing I've ever felt.

Better than my own hands, better than the toy Simone bought me as a joke last year, better than the shower head. The. Best.

And Wesley's barely touched me so far. He hasn't removed a single item of clothing; has only kissed me and squeezed me and panted all over me. Thrust up between my legs and made my head spin.

His mouth on my throat draws out another needy groan. "If you give me a hickey I'll trash your work pod, Tanaka."

His smile curves against my fevered skin. "I'd expect nothing less."

Not that in this state, I'd even mind. Hopped up on these pheromones, driven out of my mind with lust, I *like* the idea of Wesley leaving his mark. Claiming me for all to see. Declaring that I, Harriet Fry, she of the eminently forgettable face, drove the wunderkind halfway to madness with a few kisses in the recording booth.

Yeah.

Eyes squeezed closed, I tilt my head to give him better access.

At the scrape of teeth, I let out a desperate whimper.

And as the door in the next room flies open, muffled chatter filling the recording studio behind us, Wesley dumps me onto the floor.

“Shit!” He gapes at me sprawled on the carpet like he can’t understand how I got here. I stare back up at him, open-mouthed.

Did he seriously just do that? Did he fling me away like an old banana peel?

“I’m so sorry!” Wesley jerks forward to help me up, but I scuttle backward like a crab. The chatter dies down in the next room, and I *know* we have an audience through the glass. Oh god, I need a lightning bolt to strike me. A sinkhole to swallow me whole.

Anything but this.

“I put you on your feet!” he says, and he has the audacity to sound upset. He’s not the one flashing his damp panties at a random group of podcast hosts.

“My legs were wobbly, you gigantic ass hat.”

Wobbly for *him*. Quaking with the pleasure of being in Wesley Tanaka’s lap—being squeezed and kneaded and gripped.

Hope my thighs are learning this lesson. No man is worth losing the ability to stand—that way lies humiliation, and carpet burns on my ass.

Wesley lurches forward again, reaching to help me up, but I smack his hand away. “*Don’t.*”

The small, hot, suddenly stifling room spins around me as I tip onto my knees and struggle to my feet. My t-shirt is all twisted around my body, the silk creased, and my cheeks have never burned like this. I’m turning to magma.

“Harriet,” Wesley says, and he sounds miserable but I hold up a hand.

“You win, Tanaka.” The smile I force is ugly. I *feel* ugly, right down to my churning insides. “Though you definitely played dirty this round.”

Wesley shakes his head. “I wasn’t playing.”

“Well, I was.” My limbs are clumsy as I stumble to the door, and I’m so relieved at the wash of cool air when I yank it open that I let out a tiny groan. “Stupid game, though.”

It’s a mean thing to say, but that’s what I want. A way to humiliate him back.

And as I stagger through the ghostly clusters of work pods on the fourth floor, I feel as sour as my words.

Six

Dear Hattie



Dear Hattie,

I've been married to my husband for three years now, and I love him. We have our share of stresses—arguing over the dishes, bickering about his snoring, the usual small stuff—but overall, we're so happy together. Our relationship is respectful and comfortable.

Maybe *too* comfortable.

Because... for the last six months, since he came to stay in our guest room, I've been crushing *hard*. On my brother in law.

My husband's brother is everything I would have avoided in a man back in my single days. He's a player, always taking a different woman out on dates; he has no steady job, no fixed address, no sense of responsibility.

And yet... he's so *hot*, Hattie. When I walk into the kitchen and he's there, staring at me for a beat too long, I feel

like steam is coming off the top of my head. My legs turn to jelly. I *want* him.

If anything happened, it would destroy my lovely marriage. And it wouldn't be anything *real*—just another notch on this man's bedpost.

So tell me Hattie: how do I live for another minute with this man under my roof? How do I numb the temptation?

Forbidden Crush

* * *

Dear Hattie,

I have this recurring dream about being abducted by aliens and probed. It's *very* detailed. Should I tell NASA?

Lifted and Lubed

Seven

Wesley



“**S**o.” Raj bats the ping pong ball back at me, bouncing on his toes at the other end of the table. “Thrown any women on the floor lately?”

I return the ball, clipping it harder than necessary. Raj lunges to hit it back. “You heard about that.”

My assistant shrugs. “The podcasters are all terrible gossips.”

They really are. I sigh, scratching my neck with the side of my paddle. The ball flies past me, way over the table to the vending machines, and Raj jogs around the table to fetch it.

The break area is busy this morning, humming with chatter. People lounge at tables, sipping coffees and nibbling on pretzels. Someone is holding a loud video call, neighbors be damned, and two guys are building a house of cards in fierce silence.

Harriet Fry is not here—obviously. She’s been avoiding me for days.

And who can blame her? Ever since I dumped her on the ground, that moment plays in a horrifying loop in my brain. I watch it over and over, in sickening slow motion, inwardly screaming at myself to do something else. *Anything* else. Make a different choice. Anything but tossing the woman I desperately want onto the floor like a crumpled napkin.

Not that I litter. The only thing I throw onto the ground is my crush, apparently.

Did I hurt her? Harriet didn't *seem* hurt—except for her pride.

Shit. If I hurt her, I'll walk into traffic.

“The girls said you two were *close*,” Raj says, polishing the ball on his polo shirt as he returns. It leaves a smear of dust on the lime green fabric. “Before you threw her down.”

“Yeah.” Obviously. I flex my grip on the paddle, fighting to keep my wafer-thin patience. “I didn't just charge across the room, pick her up and toss her on the carpet. Thank them for noticing that, will you?”

Raj snorts. “The great Wesley Tanaka!” he declares to the room, throwing his arms wide, though no one is listening. Hopefully. “Bachelor of the fourth floor! Felled at last by a lovely lady—and they said it couldn't be done.”

They did? “Who said that?”

Raj serves the ball with a wink. Seriously, why do I keep this idiot around?

We play a few more rallies, but my head isn't in it. I keep staring at the table and letting the ball bounce right past me, too busy thinking about Harriet Fry and how she felt in my arms.

The needy way she moaned in my ear. The heat of her, grinding down against my lap. Her white-knuckled grip on my shirt, and the way she tilted her head, inviting me to kiss her soft neck...

And the sheer betrayal in her eyes when she stared up at me from the floor. Shit.

We had something there, right? Before I ruined it? It's not just in my head: Harriet Fry kissed me, and whatever she said afterward, it was no game. She meant it.

"She's avoiding me," I tell Raj when he jogs back from fetching our ball from a potted plant. Man, we both suck at ping pong. "Every time I get near, she finds a reason to rush away."

Raj hums, tapping his paddle thoughtfully against his chin. "Have you tried... *not* dumping her on the ground?"

A headache pulses behind my left eye, and I blow out a sigh. "Very helpful." It's hopeless, isn't it? A hopeless case. I had the woman I've been dreaming of for years—had her right there in my lap, pressed up against me and squirming so prettily. Then I ruined it.

Harriet Fry is right. I am a gigantic ass hat.

“Maybe you should even things up,” Raj says, tossing the ball high in the air and catching it. He’s way too smug for it to look cool. “Give her a chance to humiliate *you*, then she won’t need to avoid you so badly.”

That’s...

I always assume that Raj has spewed complete nonsense. And to be clear, that reaction is well-earned, because my assistant is ninety-nine percent bullshit. So why am I asking him for advice again?

Oh, yeah: because once in a blue moon, he comes out with pure gold.

“Genius.” I return Raj’s serve with a grin, my veins suddenly crackling with energy. “You’re a genius, man.” Humiliate myself for Harriet Fry? No problem. I’m there.

“Does that mean I get a raise?” he says, lunging for the ball.

I bark out my first laugh in days. “Email the void and see.”

* * *

I wait until Harriet works late again—which is more often than not these days. She looks tired, too. Drawn and exhausted, even in her neat little outfits, with dark shadows under her eyes.

She’s really missing Simone.

And I hate that she’s going through something right now while I’m not there for her. Hate that she won’t come to me

with this stuff, and let me reassure her. Won't let me make her feel... loved.

Christ. I have been so oblivious about Harriet Fry.

The Pretzel Media complex is shadowy this late in the evening, lit only by desk lamps and the occasional fluorescent beam. Moonlight spills through the lobby skylight, tinting everything silver, and I catch up with Harriet as she drifts across the tiles like a sad little ghost with a side braid.

“Small Fry,” I say. She jumps, then shoots me a glare, walking faster. It's not hard to keep up with those little legs. Her heeled ankle boots clip clop against the polished floor, the sound echoing in the gloom.

She's in a pinafore dress today, the burgundy fabric swishing around her thighs. A crisp white t-shirt glows underneath against her tan skin, and Harriet clutches her Dear Hattie notebook to her chest. Have they hired any other writers to help her yet? Or is she carrying the whole workload on her own?

It's not just the column, see. There are subscription levels; paid access to Harriet's advice. Platinum tier subscribers can send Dear Hattie unlimited questions and they're guaranteed answers, no matter how dumb. She's inundated.

This is what Pretzel Media does. They hire the best writers, podcasters and creatives in the land, then juice them all like lemons until there's nothing left. A building full of frazzled, empty husks.

No wonder Simone got out. And a surge of protectiveness goes through me at the thought, because Harriet should get out too. She deserves so much better than this. She deserves to go home in the evenings and to eat a carb beside pretzels. She deserves recognition and creativity and fun.

You could give her those things, a voice whispers in the back of my brain, but I file that thought away for later. More planning needed. And in the meantime—

“What do you want, Tanaka?”

She sounds so tired. Harriet stares right ahead as we cross the lobby, the moonlight glinting against the gold strands of her hair.

“A truce,” I say.

Her mouth forms a smile, but it’s bitter. “Not going to happen.”

“You haven’t heard my full proposal yet.” Christ, please let her hear me, because I’m sick with missing her.

There’s a long-suffering sigh, then Harriet glances at me from the corner of her eye. “Go on, then.”

Thank god.

“Here—this is our stop.” Taking Harriet’s elbow, I tug her gently to a halt in the center of the lobby. We’re directly below the skylight, in the pool of moonlight... and next to the ball pit. I let go of her and spread my arms. “Okay. Push me in.”

She scoffs. Shakes her head, then stares at me. “Wait, you’re serious? That’s your big idea?”

“Push me in,” I say again. “Even things up between us, then there’s no need to be embarrassed anymore. No need to avoid me. Go on, Small Fry—I know you want to.”

Her lips press together, and her gaze flicks past me to the ball pit. Strands of golden hair have come loose during the day, and now they form wispy curls around her temples. I’d give anything to tug on one; to tease the soft strands between my finger and thumb.

My pulse thrums beneath my jaw, and I can hardly breathe while I wait for her answer. What if this doesn’t work? What if I’ve blown it for good?

“I seem to recall landing on the hard ground,” Harriet says quietly. “Not in a nice, soft ball pit.”

I shrug, arms still spread. Please, god, this has to work. “Push me harder, then. Really shove me. Channel all that prissy, school ma’am energy and—”

Harriet charges without warning, her notebook flung to one side, and barges her shoulder into my gut. I grunt and topple backward, arms wheeling, and land in a shower of hollow plastic balls. A small, hot body lands on top of me, hands clutching my shoulders hard enough to leave tiny fingerprint bruises, and she *shakes* me.

“Shut up, Wesley! Just shut the hell up!”

Slender hands shove me under, like she could actually drown me in plastic balls. When I lunge back up for air, I'm laughing so hard the pit shifts around, sucking us deeper into its belly.

"Stop enjoying this!" Harriet's cheeks are pink, and her eyes are wild. "This is your punishment, you ass." She grips my throat but doesn't squeeze. "Wesley, you are such a tool."

A tool she's straddling, eyes bright, hair slipping out of its braid. And it's worth playing the fool for Harriet Fry when it takes her from sad and exhausted to *this*: a vibrant little firecracker, biting her lips with the effort not to smile. The ghost from a few minutes ago is long gone.

The balls shift beneath us, tipping us together, and Harriet grinds against my lap. We both freeze, breath hitching.

"Who knew?" I say after a long pause, my voice strained. Every muscle in my body strains against my bones. "Who knew a corporate ball pit could be so deeply erotic?"

Harriet grimaces. "Definitely not HR."

Then she's tugging on my hair, forcing my head back. Ducking down and *kissing* me, hard and angry and deep. Her body squirms on top of mine, her hands roaming over my chest, and all I can think is that she's close again, sealed against me, sweet and warm. I can smell her shampoo. Can taste the coffee she drank not long ago.

Thank. God.

I tip us over in a tidal wave of plastic balls, then stretch out on top of her. Harriet breathes heavily, her chest rising and falling beneath her pinafore dress, and fuck, I can't get enough of her. Will never get enough.

Her legs hitch around my hips. I send up a silent prayer of thanks.

"This is my favorite place in the whole, wide world," I tell her.

"The ball pit?"

"No. Between these thighs, Harriet Fry."

She scoffs again, but she's blushing crimson now, rocking up against me, and Christ, this *friction*. It short-circuits my brain. "You're just messing with me again. Messing with my head."

My chest shudders with pain, even as I keep thrusting down, rubbing against her too. Is that what she thinks of me?

Well, what exactly have I done to deserve otherwise? The two of us have years and years of *this* between us: sniping and teasing and hazy motives. Sparks and doubt.

"Never," I tell her, voice hoarse, and bend down to nibble her earlobe. "Not about this, Harriet. I swear."

This time, when I kiss her, she moans against my mouth. Arms wrap around my neck and tug me closer, and even though the balls shift and suck us further into the pit, I don't care.

Don't care if we're sinking into weird plastic quick sand. Don't care that someone could walk through the lobby at any moment and hear us rustling in here. Don't care that it's hot and dusty and smells faintly of chemicals.

Don't. Care.

Harriet is back in my arms, back where she belongs, and I am in this. Won't let her go ever again if I can help it. Maybe, after we drag ourselves out of this pit, I'll sling her over my shoulder and take her home forever.

"Don't make me come," Harriet whispers, cutting off with a tortured groan. My hips work above her, rubbing our bodies together through our clothes. "I get pretty loud."

She does? I bury my face in her throat. "Hallelujah."

"Wesley!" She grips my hair again, twisting the strands, and pleasure arrows through my gut. "I'm serious. This lobby echoes like crazy, and I don't want people to hear us. Hear *me*."

That slows me down. I grit my teeth and force my body to stop moving, stop grinding against my girl like it's the most natural thing in the world, because she's right. I already embarrassed Harriet Fry once. I will not do it again.

"We'd better get out of here," I mutter. Don't want her to get caught in here with me, even if the thought does fill me with possessive pride. And the lobby may be empty right now, but that could change any second. "Remind me to ravish you in a nap egg next time. Much better privacy."

Harriet laughs softly, and she takes my offered hand as I help her up. I wade to the side of the pit, still clutching her hand. Plastic balls drop off us both, pinging hollowly back into the pool, and my legs are unsteady as I step out onto the tiles. I give into my caveman impulses one more time and lift her out after me.

“There,” I say, setting her carefully on her feet. “I knew you could stand unassisted. Well done, Fry.”

Harriet growls and smacks my shoulder, but she’s grinning this time. We stand close together, chests heaving, and we both look ruffled as hell. I watch the realization dawn on her face at the same time.

“We’d better...” Harriet gestures between us, then takes a few steps back. She tugs her dress straight and clears her throat, and slips back into coworker mode. My heart sinks, but I force myself to keep smiling. “See you tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” I agree, though I’d much rather keep her with me tonight. Actually, make that every night. Every minute of every damn day. “I’ll wait for you in the nap egg with a rose between my teeth.”

Her soft laughter echoes around the lobby.

Eight

Dear Hattie



Dear Hattie,

I've been lying to my family for over a year. They think I'm in graduate school, building a hotshot academic career, and spending my weekends studying in a sleek, college-funded city apartment. In reality, I work in an admin role for a small environmental charity, share a tiny apartment with three other roommates, and can barely afford bus fare.

I don't know why I ever started lying. I really did apply for graduate school, but when I didn't get in I just... couldn't bear disappointing my parents. They've both sacrificed so much for me, coming to this country and working their fingers to the bone so I could have a better life. In return, I was meant to be this golden, successful child. But I'm not, Hattie. I've tried my best, but I'm not.

I *like* my charity job. I like my roommates. Sure, I don't love scraping for bus fare, but is this life really so bad?

How do I confess the truth, Hattie? And what do I do if my parents love me less? I'm so messed up over this.

Disappointing Daughter

* * *

Dear Hattie,

We looked it up, and there ARE calories in some brands of bottled water!! Check your facts!!!! We expect better from you.

Determined Dieter

Nine

Harriet



I meet secretly with Wesley Tanaka every workday for the next three weeks. We make out when we're alone in the elevator between floors, steaming up the mirrors. We rendezvous in the concrete stairwell after lunch, where Wesley pushes me against the wall and brings me off with his hand—rubbing me through my clothes until my cries bounce off the stone floors and he has to muffle them with his sleeve.

We kiss until we're breathless behind a potted palm on the fifth floor.

We despoil several nap eggs.

One night when everyone else has gone home, Wesley lays me out on a ping pong table and crawls on top of me, then grinds us both to oblivion.

And every time I walk past the lobby ball pit, I blush hotter than a neutron star. It's so *hot* sneaking around like this, meeting my arch nemesis for desperate embraces in hidden alcoves. It's fun, too. When was the last time I laughed this much?

“You’ve got a secret.” Simone narrows her eyes on my tablet screen, sipping her mug of sugary coffee and watching me closely. She’s at the kitchen table in her new home, surrounded by farm-life kitsch, but I swear I can *feel* her eyes boring into me like lasers. I laugh weakly and nibble on my pretzel.

“What? Of course I don’t.”

“You do. You absolutely do.” My bestie scowls and leans forward. “I know you, Harriet Fry. You get all fizzy and constipated when you’re hiding something.”

Constipated? I clear my throat, glancing around the break area to check whether anyone heard that—then remember I’m wearing earbuds.

They’re all absorbed in their own conversations or lost deep in their phones anyway—no one cares about the tablet I’ve propped against a napkin holder. Not even with the Marilyn Monroe lookalike on screen.

“I’m actually very regular, thank you. Like clockwork.”

“Gross,” Simone says, but she’s smirking. She leans back and drums her fingernails on the scrubbed wooden table, and how are they so perfectly manicured even now? When she digs up vegetable gardens every day? “Spill, Harriet. I know you’re dying to tell someone.”

I am. I really, really am. Some nights I think I might burst with all these new feelings and hopes and fears. Makes me want to sprint three times around the parking lot and howl at

the stars. Makes me want to commandeer the loudspeaker and just yell: “WESLEEEEEY!”

But I can’t say the words out loud, can I? Not here. Not now. Not in the middle of the Pretzel Media break out area, surrounded by shameless gossips with nothing to do except eavesdrop.

So I jerk my head at the nearest table, widening my eyes. Simone hums, tapping her fingernail against her front teeth. “Oh yeah, I forget you’re in public. Want me to guess? Ooh, that’s fun. Let’s make it a game.”

I shrug and gnaw on my pretzel. She can guess if she likes, but there’s no way she’ll figure this one out. Wesley Tanaka and I hooking up together... it’s unthinkable. “What do you get if you win?”

“The warm, fuzzy feeling of always being right.”

I snort. “Okay. Go on, then.”

“It’s about a guy,” Simone says immediately. I nod, cheeks pink, and she beams, so beautifully triumphant. “Well, then it’s Wesley, obviously. Wesley Tanaka.”

Um. Excuse me? I gulp down my mouthful of bread.

“What do you mean ‘obviously’?” I ask, shifting in my metal chair. My mouth is suddenly dry from the pretzel. “Wesley and I hate each other. Or we did, anyway. Everyone knows that.”

Simone guffaws. “Yeah, right. So what is it? Are you finally ready to admit you’re crushing?” She inhales sharply,

leaning close to the camera, and I feel like a bug under her microscope. A blushing, squirming bug. “Wait, are you two hooking up? Oh my god, you are. At *work*?”

My mouth opens and closes, but no sounds come out. Nothing but a tiny, strangled croak. Simone whoops and punches the air.

It’s an unfortunate moment for the video to freeze. She looks insane, and I’m overloading here. Rigid and sweating in my chair, while my brain fritzes out with all the implications.

It was obvious all this time? My crush on Wesley Tanaka?

Did *he* know? Is he... is he laughing at me somehow? Is everyone else in on the joke, and I’m the oblivious punchline?

It’s not like we see each other outside work. Not like this is anything long term or real.

“—feathery little jackass!” Simone’s video cuts back in, and the serene kitchen of a minute ago is in disarray. A chair has toppled over, there’s an explosion of flour on one counter, and my best friend is chasing a squawking chicken in and out of shot. “How the hell do you keep getting in?!”

Ooh-kay. She’s busy.

“I’ll call you later,” I say, wincing at a loud crash out of shot.

“Bye, Hattie!” Simone yells, and then I tap the button to end the call. For a long moment once she’s gone, I do nothing but stare at my own bedraggled image in the webcam. I look tired.

A chicken. My glamorous best friend, the girl who uses eighty dollar moisturizer, is chasing a chicken around her kitchen table.

My first thought is: Wesley will love this.

My second thought is: Wesley. Huh.

Did he know?

So I don't rush off to find him and tell him about the chicken. I don't text him or think of chicken-themed puns.

I bite my lip and stay firmly in my chair and wonder for the millionth time whether Wesley Tanaka will break my heart.

* * *

I sneak into the recording studio long after the workday is over. There are a few stragglers on the fourth floor, working in the glow of their desk lamps, and the water cooler gurgles as someone fills their bottle. But it's quiet and dark, and no one even glances up as I slip into Wesley's domain. This is becoming a habit.

The door closes with a soft thump behind me, and I press my shoulder blades against it. Wesley spins in his chair and watches me hungrily as I flip the lock behind my back. His black hair is all ruffled from the headphones looped around his neck.

"Small Fry," he says, and something aches deep in my chest. That nickname used to irritate me to high hell, but these days it fills me with unbearable longing.

Wesley turns and taps a button on his control station, and the red recording light flicks on above the studio door. “No one will come in now,” he says quietly, sliding off the headphones and placing them on the desk. “Not unless the roof is on fire.”

“Okay.”

It’s so natural, lunging for each other. We’re well practiced at this now. Wesley’s strong hands are familiar as they grip my sides, squeezing and palming and coasting down to knead my butt. His mouth is hungry against mine, always so demanding and possessive—but I’m used to this, too. There’s comfort in it as well as desire.

My conversation with Simone rattles around my head as we cling to each and kiss endlessly, staggering sideways until Wesley’s hip hits the desk. He shoves his keyboard back, and then I’m climbing up his body to straddle him again.

It was really obvious this whole time? Why didn’t he kiss me sooner? Didn’t he want me back then?

“You’re not gonna throw me on the floor again, are you?” I murmur, winding my arms around his neck just in case. When we’re together like this, all dignity flies out the window and I become this feral creature of pure sensation. Like now, for instance: I’m rubbing up against his toned, hard body like a cat in heat. My breasts ache, I need him so badly.

“Only if it awakened something in you,” Wesley says with a sly grin.

I scoff and nip at his throat.

And here's another thing I've been wondering: Wesley always seems so happy to just make out endlessly, grinding on each other and getting all breathless and red faced. Wrinkling our clothes and mussing up our hair, maybe rubbing me through the layers if we can risk it. But he never tries for more; never slips his hands under my skirt or undoes his belt. Even though he's hard right now, harder than granite between my thighs, he doesn't try to progress things along.

Doesn't he want to? I mean... the door's locked. The room is sound-proofed.

And *I* want to. Jeez, if I don't feel this man's bare skin against mine soon, I'll scream.

Holding my breath, I rub my cheek against his. The words are right there, on the tip of my tongue: *Take me, Wesley. Touch me. Let's do this.* But for some reason, I can't spit them out.

There's something stopping me. A knot of anxiety in my chest, weighing me down. Telling me that it's not safe yet to give this man my heart; warning me to tread carefully.

"I saw you earlier," Wesley says, rocking our hips together as he kisses along my jaw. "Talking to Simone in the break out area. You looked so fucking cute in this little librarian outfit, Fry. This flowery little skirt and cardigan. All I wanted to do was snatch you up and carry you off."

“That would have been rude,” I manage to say, breathless already. His tongue flicks across my skin, and my belly twists tight. I grind down harder in his lap, the desk creaking beneath our weight. “But it wouldn’t have made much difference. We got interrupted by a rogue chicken.”

Wesley hums, weaving one hand into my hair and gently tugging my head back. “Isn’t that always the way?”

I must be heavy, sitting on his lap like this. And it’s warm in here, the air close and still, but Wesley doesn’t make a single noise of complaint. Instead he hums and murmurs sweet nothings in my ear, and kisses me over and over like it’s the best thing in the world, and not a preamble to something bigger. Like he’d be content with just this—tonight and every night.

Does it make me a terrible person if this is *not* enough? If I want more? If I’m panting and squirming, with molten heat between my legs, feeling so needy for his touch I could cry?

“Wesley,” I wail at last when his teeth scrape my throat. “Are you *ever* gonna fuck me?”

He straightens up and stares at me. The room is suddenly so quiet.

I press my lips together, heart hammering, suddenly rigid in his arms. Why the hell did I say that? Why did I blurt it out like a loser?

God. What am I thinking, begging my enemy to screw my brains out? Talk about handing over ammunition. What if he

makes fun of me for this one day?

But: “Yes,” Wesley says slowly, and the raw hunger in his eyes makes my breath hitch. My panicked, wheeling thoughts slam to a halt, and I melt against his chest again. “But only once you trust me, Harriet. Only once you’re ready to be mine.”

Oh my god. Does he mean...?

“Like... yours in bed? Um. On table?” I bury my face in his neck and wince. Man, I suck at these conversations. How on earth am I an advice columnist?

But Wesley pets my hair. His heart is thumping so hard, I can feel it through his t-shirt. “Not just that. Mine in every way.”

I gulp, hardly daring to hope. “Not just nemeses with benefits?”

“Nope.” His palm strokes down my spine, and I arch against him with a gasp. “The real deal. The whole thing. I want it all, Harriet. Don’t you know that by now? I want you in my bed; eating my food; spilling drinks on my sofa. I want your toothbrush in my bathroom cabinet and your little lady snores late at night.”

“Hey! I do not snore—”

“And one day, I want my ring on your finger. And a family with you, if that’s something you want. I want to grow old together and terrorize our nursing home.”

Oh, wow.

Staring at the pane of glass over Wesley's shoulder, I breathe hard as my whole world realigns. Our reflections in the glass blur into one big tangle, and this is all so *much*.

And so good. Almost too good to be true.

I've been lonely for so, so long. And by some insane twist of fate, my arch nemesis feels like *home*.

"Do you believe me?" Wesley asks quietly, like he's reading my mind. He's still holding me close, like I'm something precious. Stroking my back and peppering kisses down my throat. "Can you believe me after all our hijinks?"

Can I?

It'd be pretty rich if my answer was no. Right? Because it wasn't a one-way thing, my rivalry with Wesley. It wasn't all him tormenting me. I gave as good as I got, and I instigated plenty. That's why it was always so electric between us.

And Wesley isn't holding that stuff against me. All those times I needled him and pushed his buttons, just to see how he'd react. All those times we circled each other like cats, hissing and spitting with our fur on end.

He's placing his trust in me. Opening up and being vulnerable.

I can do that too. Can't I?

Everyone leaves, a voice whispers in the back of my head. *Just look at Simone*. But with Wesley's steady gaze on mine, I push those thoughts away. What would Dear Hattie say? Enough playing small. Time to be brave.

“I’m ready now,” I say, sitting up taller in his lap. Because I *am* ready, and I’m tired of sabotaging my connection with this man. Tormenting each other was super fun for a while, but I can do that and date him too. Right?

A dozen possibilities slide into my mind at once: sneaking up on Wesley in the shower and making him jump. Flirting with him in public when he has to behave. Coming in here late at night, locking the door, and crawling under the recording studio desk...

“You’re sure?” Wesley hands tighten on my hips, and he stares down at me with something like awe. Sheer longing. It melts something deep inside me, seeing that desperation on his handsome face.

A smirk twists my mouth. “I’m sure. Oh, this is gonna be ___”

He scoops me up and stands, and I break off with a delighted shriek.

Ten

Wesley



This day will go down in the history books as one of the great victories of our time. Bards will write songs about the day that Harriet Fry finally said she wanted me. There will be a commemorative statue in the nearest town square. People will dance in the street and angelic children will throw rose petals in our path, and—

Harriet yanks on my hair as I carry her across the room in three strides. We both slam against the wall with twin grunts.

“Mine,” I keep saying, like a stuck record. Sucking kisses on her throat and pressing my face against her hair and grinding between her sweet, soft thighs. “Mine. Mine. You’re *mine*, Small Fry.”

“Yours,” she agrees, wheezing out a laugh. “So be nice to me from now on, Tanaka. Well. Nice-ish.”

Ha. That’s fair. Because we wouldn’t be *us* without this back and forth, this battle of wits. Without the sparks that fly whenever our eyes meet across a room. And giving into this

bone-deep longing for each other, finally admitting that we're head over heels—that doesn't mean our rivalry is at an end.

No: it opens up a world of delicious possibilities.

“Bet I can make you scream so loud they hear you over the sound proofing.”

Harriet snorts, thumping my shoulder. “*Wesley.*”

“It's a good start. Now let's work on volume.”

She's still scoffing as I place her carefully on her feet, then drop to my knees in front of her. Her flowery skirt is soft as I gather it at her waist, then press it into her hands. Her panties are white.

“What are you—?” she splutters.

“Come on, Fry. Context clues.” Stroking one hand up her bare thigh, I coax her stance wider. “You *know* what I'm doing. Do you want me to keep going?”

Mute, she nods her head.

Thank god. Heart thudding, I lean forward. “As you wish.”

And these last few weeks, I've touched her through fabric. Brought her off through the layers of her clothes, grinding the heel of my palm against her skirt; felt her heat seeping through the cotton.

Now I'm tasting her through fabric, too. Harriet's strangled groan soaks into the padded walls as I lick through her panties; her hands scrabble at my shoulders as I find her tight little bud and suck.

“Oh—oh my god—”

What’s he got to do with it? Growling, I hook her panties to the side and seal my mouth on her bare flesh, running my tongue up her slit.

“Wesley!”

That’s more like it.

And it’s everything I’ve obsessively imagined for the last weeks, months, years. Harriet is everything I dreamed of. She buries her hands in my hair as I lick and suck between her thighs, pressing my face greedily against her body; she rocks her hips and sighs. And when I push my tongue past her entrance, a tremor runs through her legs, and her strangled wail is the sweetest music.

It’s the most natural thing in the world, making her come. We were built for this. The two of us have always been in tune.

I wait until the shock waves have passed through her limbs and she’s slumped against the padded wall, breathing hard, then I push to my feet again. I’ve barely straightened before she fumbles with my belt.

“Yes. Oh my god, yes,” she says. “I’ve thought about this so much. I’ve wanted it for so long.”

The Harriet of a month ago would never admit such a vulnerable thing to me. We’ve come a long way. I play with her hair, so fond, as she works my pants open and draws out my hard length. “Me too.”

As if the ruddy head and aching hardness didn't give me away. I buck into her hold with a hiss, legs trembling at the feel of her small, soft palm. Her hand looks so delicate wrapped around my shaft, and I stare down without blinking, committing the sight to memory.

Harriet Fry—touching me. Squeezing and teasing and pumping her fist. Rubbing her thumb across my slit, smearing the bead of moisture gathered there. Touching me like she owns me, because yeah. She does.

“I'm not... uh. Experienced.” Her words are quiet in the padded room, but there's no doubt in her voice. No fear of rejection, and I'm so fucking pleased about that, because it means we're past that now. Settled and sure. “So this might suck for the first few times, but you'll get over it.”

“It won't suck,” I tell her, bending down to lift her by the thighs. Soft bare legs wrap around my waist, and my undone belt buckle clinks as I lean us against the wall. “That is literally impossible.”

“You say that, but—”

Harriet cuts off with a breathy moan as the first inch pushes inside her. She's already slick and swollen from where I brought her off with my mouth, her channel fluttering around the intrusion. So hot, so slippery, so *good*.

“Literally impossible,” I repeat, gritting the words between my teeth, and then I'm sinking deeper. Sliding home. I kiss her once, twice, my movements made clumsy by the fireworks

happening below the belt. It's hard to concentrate when you're sinking into pure bliss.

"Mmph," Harriet says, kissing me desperately as her hips twitch up, coaxing me deeper and deeper and *deeper*.

I hold back, muscles straining. A bead of sweat trickles down my spine. "Does it hurt? You need to tell me if it hurts."

But she shakes her head and digs her heels into my ass.

I twitch inside her.

Harriet groans.

Every muscle in my back screams as I draw out, then thrust back in. Out, then back in, and it's a blur. A hot, sweaty blur of movement and sensation, her body sucking me deeper, my gut twisting with pleasure that feels so sharp, it's almost painful.

And she's moaning loud and long, scratching at my shoulders, my back, her hips rocking up to meet my every thrust. Her eyes are half-lidded, and her cheeks are bright red.

So fucking perfect. Harriet Fry is a work of art.

No one else comes close—and she's *mine*.

When I kiss her hard, she gives as good as she gets. I straighten up and lick the coppery tang of blood off my bottom lip where she nipped it, and we're so in sync right now, weaving these sensations together. Climbing toward her peak.

Harriet's breath stutters, and she tightens on me, strangling my shaft—then looks at me with alarm. "*Wesley*."

“I’ve got you.” Christ, I’ve never felt anything better than the sweet heat between her thighs. Every muscle in my body burns, but I’d drag this out forever if I could. “You can let go,” I say, balancing her against the wall so I can reach one hand between us. A few circles on her nub, and she locks up and pants through her nose. *Yes*. “Come for me, Harriet. Show me how it feels.”

She falls apart with the world’s cutest squeak.

And I imagined this so many times, but this unexpected detail is my favorite: the way she trembles and buries her face in my throat; the way her hair tickles my nose as she comes and comes and comes.

I last for two breaths after that. Maybe three.

Then I’m wedging deep inside my girl, and pouring out my whole goddamn soul.

Eleven

Dear Hattie



Dear Hattie,

Congrats on your new column! I heard you set up your own thing, and started a podcast too. So cool. My second cousin from out west used to work for Pretzel Media and she said it was weird as hell. I'm sure glad you're out of there.

My question is... kinda a funny one. See, I've got this boss. He's a big, gruff, scary-looking fella and everyone says we should steer well clear. That he's *not* the kind of man a good girl should get mixed up with. He's got these scarred knuckles, and he rides a motorbike, and he did time in prison once and everything. The whole nine yards, you know?

Except my boss says he's ready to settle down. Ready to find a nice girl. And that he wants to practice his husband skills on *me*.

Should I let him, Hattie? He says it's my call, and the thinkin' part of my brain says it's a terrible idea. He's my boss, and—well. I'm not so good at acting cool around him. He gets

me all flustered, and I blush bright red whenever he comes into the room.

But part of me's thinking... where's the harm? It's just a sneaky little thrill. He doesn't *mean* any of it, and I'm pretty sure I can keep my heart unbruised.

What do you think? Am I crazy to think about letting him? Oh, I'm so hoping you'll tell me to run with it.

Practice Wife

* * *

Dear Hattie,

Is it true that sell-by dates are a myth? Can I eat week-old bread?

Mr Hangry

Twelve

Harriet



Three years later

My husband finds me sprawled on the rug in my home office. He leans in the doorway, smirking from high, high above and idly scratches his chin.

“Holding a meeting?” he says.

Is it really only hours since I saw him last? It feels like days. It *always* feels like days. I pat the rug beside me. “Yes. And you’re invited.”

Butterflies flutter through my insides as Wesley steps into the room. His black hair is windswept, and mussed from wearing headphones all day. The recording studio he rents for his podcast production business is only a few blocks away, but it always feels like he’s coming home from another planet.

Back to our private world. Our happy little bubble.

Wesley groans as clambers onto the floor, acting like he’s suddenly such an old man. Doubtful. Maybe he’s creakier than

a couple years ago, but who isn't? He's still strong and lean and all too happy to scoop me over his shoulder and carry me to the bedroom.

"Writing a letter?" Wesley asks once he's stretched out flat beside me. He reaches over and taps the notebook clutched to my stomach, then rests his hand on my hip.

"Yeah."

Sometimes, when the words won't come, I go back to pen and paper. Old school. And when the words *really* won't come, when the right advice feels out of reach in my brain, then I take to the floor. Something about being the lowest thing in the room puts stuff in perspective for me. Is that weird?

"What was the question?" Wesley's thumb rubs against my hip bone, warm and soothing through my cotton t-shirt and leggings.

"No question. This is... a special letter." The most special of all.

"For Simone?" Wesley asks. He brightens when I shake my head. "For—?"

"Yeah." I smile as his hand travels up to stroke my growing bump. It's not massive yet—more mango than melon. "But I can't think what to say. Can't figure out the perfect advice."

Wesley is quiet for a long time, lost in thought, and I relax too now that he's here. It may be weird, but lying on the floor

with my husband is one of my ultimate happy places.

“Maybe it doesn’t need to be advice,” Wesley says at last, his toffee eyes so earnest when they meet mine. “Maybe it can be a love letter, you know?”

I *do* know. It’s exactly the right thing to say, and everything clicks into place in my brain. Duh. Our baby doesn’t need advice—our baby needs boatloads of love. Happily, we’ve got tons to spare.

“So wise,” I say, tipping over to kiss his jaw. “Who’d have thought?”

“Don’t tell anyone. I have a reputation to uphold.”

And that’s true—but Wesley’s not known for being clueless. He’s known for his award winning podcasts, and his effortless cool, and yeah: for tormenting his wife, and loving it when she gives as good as she gets.

I love it too.

Love my arch nemesis husband.

* * *

Thanks for reading Dear Hattie! I hope you liked it. :)

For that one letter-writer’s story, check out [Husband Skills!](#)
My big, scary boss wants to practice his husband skills... on me.

And for a bonus instalove story, grab your copy of [Ride or Die](#). *She's sweet and innocent—and that's like catnip in this strip club. It's okay, though. I won't let the pretty bartender out of my sight.*

Happy reading!

xxx

Teaser: Husband Skills

It's amazing how different a bar feels once all the crowds are gone. Only an hour ago, King's was so packed I couldn't hear myself think. The thump of dozens of boots against the floorboards rattled through my bones, and the air was thick with sweat, booze and summer heat. Country music wailed from the speakers up high on the rafters, interrupted now and then with heavier rock classics. Everyone shouted to be heard.

Now, you could hear a pin drop. If a moth flapped through here, attracted by the lights, its tiny little wings would stir up a breeze.

It's just me, the heavy silence, and my boss. Kingston Holt.

Locking up together, like every Saturday night. This quiet is more oppressive than the earlier racket, somehow.

Charlene told me that when *she* locks up with Kingston on Tuesdays and Thursdays, she keeps the music on and sings and dances around the tables as she cleans. Don't know how she could *ever* be so bold with our surly boss, but the thought of her dancing just for him makes my insides go all scrunchy.

Does he roll his eyes at her?

Or does he *like* it?

Ugh. How did she get so brave?

If I ever tried something like that... well, I can't even imagine it. Can't imagine breaking the routine the boss and I have settled into over the last six months since I started working here. It's always the same, every week without fail.

Kingston spreads out his bookkeeping stuff on top of the bar, right at the end where I make sure to wipe down first. Then he pores over the numbers for the night, forehead creased as he works, the golden light from the lamp above him bringing out the deep tan on his forearms. His shoulders strain against his black button-down shirt—rolled to the elbows, like always—and his dark hair gets messier as the night goes on, his hands tugging on it absentmindedly.

Now and then, his pencil stops scratching, and my mouth goes dry. Because I know that if I look up from whatever I'm doing—loading and unloading the dishwasher for the millionth time, probably, or scrubbing down tables, or mopping the floors—he'll be watching me with those coal pit eyes.

Staring. Assessing.

Measuring me up like a bug to be pinned to a cork board.

Goosebumps prickle over my bare arms, but I keep scrubbing in silence, pretending I don't feel his eyes on me.

This here's why my Mama was so set against me bartending at King's. She's a die hard fusspot, it's true, but this time there was a kernel of truth in all her flapping.

"That man is dangerous, Danielle," she hissed at me, over and over, but I took the job anyway, even knowing what I

know. What *everyone* knows.

Kingston Holt is not to be trifled with.

He's frowning down at his books again, so it's safe to steal a glimpse. I hide behind the fall of my dark hair, peering at him behind the strands as I unload the dishwasher again, the glasses hot and sparkly clean in my hands. They clink softly as I place them on the shelves.

My boss glares at his books like he could bully them into submission—and in fairness, if anyone could intimidate an inanimate object, it's him. His nose is crooked from being broken at least twice, and there's a pale scar running through one thick eyebrow. Intricate tattoos weave across his skin under his shirt, wrapping around his forearms and peeking out from behind his collar.

And most of all, he's *big*. Kingston Holt fills up a room and then some. He's nothing but hardness—all muscle, sinew and bone. Square jawed and glowering.

Swallowing hard, I look back to my task, plucking out the last clean glass then starting to fill the tray up again with the dirties crowded on the bar. I've done this so many times, I don't have to think at all.

Some nights I have dreams about loading and unloading this dishwasher. That's the whole dream, too. No aliens or ax murderers to spice things up. Just the rhythmic task, this never-ending cycle, until my low back aches and my palms are scorched from handling all that hot glass. As if I didn't get enough while awake.

“Drink some water,” Kingston rumbles when I’m done with the glasses. Only the mopping and the tables are left, but this order is part of our routine too. I nod and crouch down to rummage in my bag under the bar, pulling out my stainless steel water bottle, and chug three mouthfuls of lukewarm, metallic water.

Like hell am I gonna dirty up one of the King’s glasses again. Those puppies are *done*.

When I clear my throat and stand up, I move too fast and all the blood rushes to my head. I grip the edge of the bar and sway in my black sneakers as white spots flash before my eyes.

“Danielle?” Kingston says. His voice is so low, it’s like on a whole other register. His hand hovers above the pages, pencil gripped tight.

This is *not* in the script, but I shoot him a wobbly smile. “I’m okay. Just woozy. I’ll be fine in a second.”

The pencil drops. And for a big man, Kingston can move in a flash, because the next moment he’s *here*, looming over me. Callused hands brace my shoulders.

“You’re dizzy?” he asks.

Well *now* I sure am. But I bite my lip and shake my head, because even though Kingston Holt is scary as hell, this is the best job I’ve ever had, and I don’t want to mess that up. He runs a tight ship, and I don’t want him to ever think me a slacker.

“I’m good. I’m fine.”

Kingston grunts and leans down, peering closely into my eyes. He clearly doesn’t believe me, and with him this close... I forget to breathe.

He smells like spice and sweat and cedarwood. *Fresh* sweat, and oh lord, why does that make me want to lick his neck?

This man is dangerous, like my Mama said. Rumor has it he did time once as a young man—and not for a nonviolent crime. Besides, he’s at *least* a decade older than me, maybe even pushing two, and he makes me look like a puny little matchstick girl next to his massive body. He could crush my shoulders with a single squeeze of his fingers.

“Sit down for a minute,” the boss says, and it’s not a suggestion. Like everything from him, it’s a command. He drags a stool over and steers me to it, plopping me down so abruptly I grab his forearms for balance.

We freeze.

Kingston drops his gaze slowly, so slowly, staring at my hands on his bare skin. They look so pale and fragile against his inked, corded muscles.

* * *

Check out [Husband Skills!](#)

XXX



Cassie Mint

About the Author

Cassie writes outrageous, OTT instalove with tons of sugar and spice. She loves cookie dough, summer barbecues, and her gorgeous cat Missy.

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