

MEANT TO BE

Lauren Morrill

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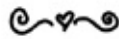
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About the Author



Down and Dirty at Thirty Thousand Feet

Have a gr8 trip—and feel FREE to do anything I wouldn't do :) —P

There are certain things in life that just suck. Pouring a big bowl of Lucky Charms before realizing the milk is expired, the word “moist,” falling face-first into the salad bar in front of the entire lacrosse team ...

“Bird strike!”

Being on a plane with Jason Lippincott is another one of them.

Two rows ahead of me, Jason is holding his hands up in mock prayer as our plane bounces like it's on a bungee cord. Not that I would have any idea what bungee jumping feels like since I would rather compete in a spelling bee in my underpants than leap off a crane with only a rope tied around me. At least I'd come away from the spelling bee with a medal.

As the plane drops several hundred (thousand?) feet, I white-knuckle the armrest. Jason's prayers may be a joke, but mine are very, very real. *God, please deposit me safely on the ground in London ... and in the process, maybe you could find a way to get Jason to shut it?*

I hate to fly. Seriously. HATE. IT. It seems wrong to be hurtling through the clouds at warp speed in a metal tube. It makes about as much sense as being flung over the ocean on a slingshot.

I tuck my pocket Shakespeare into the seat back and carefully realign the magazines that have bounced out of formation on my tray table.

“We're going down!” That's Jason again, *of course*.

The plane bounces even worse than before. My knees crash into the tray table, sending my half-eaten package of peanuts and my entire stack of magazines raining into the aisle. I instinctively grab for the armrest once more, and the businessman next to me lets out a loud yelp.

Oops. Not the armrest. His thigh. (I thought it felt a little flabby.)

I mutter an apology and adjust my kung fu grip to the *real* armrest this time.

Breathe. Breathe. I close my eyes and try to picture Mark. Weirdly, the first image that comes into my head is his yearbook picture. He has the perfectly proportioned features of a model. A bright white smile with perfect teeth all lined up in a perfect row, except for the one tooth, three from the center, that is a teeny bit crooked, which I love, because it sort of shows off how straight the other ones are. And his thick, wavy brown hair is always in the right place, mussed just enough but not too much, without the aid of any greasy or crunchy

hair product. Perfect. Just like him. I finally start to feel calm, like I'm coasting across the ocean on the back of a little songbird instead of strapped into a lumpy polyester seat.

Then Jason lets out a loud "Woooo!", shattering my Mark-inspired Zen.

I sit up straight in my seat. Jason's got his arms raised like he's on a roller coaster. A pretentious flight attendant glides up the aisle toward him. Good. If God can't get Jason to shut it, maybe she can.

I crane my neck for a better view of the scolding I know is coming his way. Instead, I see the flight attendant pass him a folded-up napkin, which he immediately opens to reveal a stack of chocolate chip cookies. From the way he's handling them, all delicately, I can tell they're still warm.

The flight attendant flashes Jason a smile. He says something to her and she laughs. He acts like a jerk and *still* scores first-class snacks!

"Oh my God. He is too much. Isn't he hilarious?" It's Sarah Finder, Newton North's resident TMZ. She's elbowing her seatmate, Evie Ellston, in the ribs, nodding in Jason's direction.

"Seriously. Adorable. And the Scarlet thing is over, right?"

"Way over. They broke up weeks ago." Of course Sarah knows. Sarah *always* knows. So far during the three hours and twenty-seven minutes we have been on this flight, Sarah and Evie have left no student undiscussed (except for me, possibly because the last time there was any gossip about me, it was in eighth grade, when Bryan Holloman taped a felt rose to my locker on Valentine's Day. The only reason anyone cared was that, it came out the next day, the rose was actually meant for Stephenie Kelley). From my vantage point in the seat directly behind her, I've already heard about Amber Riley's supposed nose job, Rob Diamos's recent suspension for smoking cigarettes in the janitor's closet, and the shame Laura Roberts was undergoing, having received her mother's '00 Honda instead of the brand-new Range Rover she'd been telling everyone she'd get.

"Think he's all wounded and needy? On the prowl for someone new?" Evie has one of those oversized mouths attached to an oversized face that makes all her vowels sound a mile long.

"Doubtful," Sarah answers. Then, lowering her voice: "He said he's trying to join the military high club."

"Seriously? Isn't that, like, when people ... you know ... on a *plane*?" From the way Evie's voice jumps to Mariah Carey octaves, it's hard to tell if she's horrified or interested in signing herself up as a willing partner.

"Shhh! And yes. Totally. You know how he is. Up for *anything*," Sarah says.

Gross. I say a silent prayer that God can add Sarah to the list of People to Render Temporarily Mute while he's working on keeping our plane in the sky. I mean, I am totally not one of those prudes who believe having sex as a teenager is some kind of mortal sin or social death. I don't have a problem with sex. I just don't happen to be having it. And if I *was* having sex, I certainly wouldn't be getting it on in an airplane *bathroom*. Who wants to get down and dirty in a place so ... cramped and dirty?

I close my eyes and try to get Mark back, but Sarah's voice keeps slicing into my vision like one of those infomercial knives. *Cuts cans, shoes, and daydreams.*

Without imaginary Mark to keep me company, there's only one way to simultaneously block out Newton North's biggest mouth and chase away visions of airmageddon. I pull m

iPod out of my purple leather satchel, which is tucked safely under the seat in front of me. I unwind my headphones and click on some mellow tunes (Hayward Williams being my choice of music of the moment. It's like someone put gravel and butter into a blender and out came his voice). But as I reach back to put in my earbuds, I encounter something wet and sticky nestled in my curls. I pull the end of my ponytail around to my face to find a wad of what looks like bubble gum, smells, and feels like grape Bubble Yum.

A fit of giggles erupts behind me, and I turn to see a little boy, maybe seven, wearing a Buzz Lightyear tee. He's grinning maniacally, his mother snoozing peacefully beside him.

"Did you?" I whisper, furiously shaking my hair at him.

"Oops!" he exclaims before dissolving into another fit of hysterical laughter, his fat cheeks burning red under his mop of blond curls.

Add children to the list of things I hate. Flying and children.

After several minutes of careful picking, followed by some full-on tugging (all while I thank my parents for making me an only child), it becomes clear: I am going to have to leave my seat and go to the bathroom, in total defiance of the pilot-ordered Fasten Seat Belt sign.

I don't use airplane bathrooms. As a rule. And I *really* don't like breaking rules. (It's kind of one of my rules.) I mean, if I'm going to plummet to my death, it's *not* going to be with my pants around my ankles. Then again, a big wad of grape gum in my ponytail definitely constitutes an emergency, no matter how little I care about my over-chlorinated, wavy chestnut waves. I carefully unfasten my seat belt, keeping my eye on the flight attendant in the galley, and make a beeline for the lavatory.

As I pick at the purple gooey mess my head has become, I can hear faint giggling coming through the wall. What is it with everyone on this flight acting like it's a day at Six Flags? I'd rather be on the *Titanic* at this point. At least there I'd be traveling in comfort, with crystal glasses and warm towels.

I finally yank the last gob of gum out of my hair and step out of the lavatory, wrestling with the little sliding door, which has grabbed hold of the sleeve of my hoodie. I fumble around, bashing my elbow on the doorframe, before finally freeing myself and whipping around to leave. Right then the plane bounces hard, and I am shot out of the bathroom like a cannon ball. A pair of arms saves me from bashing my head into the narrow doorway. I look up to see Jason Lippincott steadying me on my feet.

"Book Licker!" he says, invoking my least favorite junior-high nickname. He grins, severing freckles on his forehead scrunching together. "Enjoying your flight?"

I pull away from him. "It's Julia," I reply as calmly as possible, adjusting the hem of my pants, which have hooked themselves over the sole of my sneaker.

"Of course," he says, gesturing down the aisle. "After you."

"Um, thanks," I say. Maybe he can tell how badly I want to get back to my seat belt.

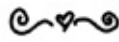
As I make my way down the aisle, I begin to notice my classmates' eyes on me. The look quickly turns to snickers and then full-on laughter. Ryan Lynch, Newton North's lacrosse captain, is grinning stupidly at me. Sarah is whispering furiously to Evie, her eyes trained in my direction. I have absolutely no idea what is going on, and I immediately wonder if there is more bubble gum in my hair or it somehow landed on my face. I reach to pat my hair down when a wild gesture catches the corner of my eye. I turn to see Jason making a thrusting motion in my direction, winking at Ryan, who reaches out to give Jason a high five.

Oh my God. No way. They think it was *us*, in the bathroom, with the mile-high club and all that. They think it because he's *making* them think it! How could they think I would do *anything* with Jason Lippincott, much less anything in an airplane bathroom! My eyes dart back to Sarah, who is still in full-on gossip mode, her gaze locked on me. If Sarah knows everyone knows, which means it's only a matter of time before the news gets back to Mark. And by then, who knows how crazy the rumor will get? Newton North is like one giant game of telephone sometimes.

One thing is certain: good, sweet, kind, thoughtful Mark is going to want nothing to do with me if he thinks I've been even semi-naked with Jason on a transatlantic flight.

Though Jason has stopped thrusting, he's still laughing and air-fiving his seatmates. Air-fiving. Yeah. First he calls me Book Licker; then he pretends I got down and dirty at thirty thousand feet!

All I can do is turn and hiss, "Stop it!" before dropping into my seat. I cram my headphones into my ears, crank the volume on my iPod, and try to drown out my humiliation with some tunes. At this point, I'm almost *hoping* for a crash.



Lattes and Long Legs

Is it too late to come w/u instead? —Jules

I spend the entire rest of the flight seething. I wish my best friend, Phoebe, were around so she would know *exactly* what to say to Jason and how to tell him to shove it. She is the queen of good comebacks.

When we land in London and I march straight up to him at the baggage claim, I'm ready.

"Listen, if you want to behave like some overcaffeinated child, that's your prerogative, but leave me out of it. I would *never* make out with you, and I certainly wouldn't ..." At the last second, I can't even say it, not with Jason still grinning at me like an idiot. I take a deep breath. "Not on a plane or anywhere else. Never. So back off. Forever. Okay?"

"Prerogative, eh?" He chuckles, unwrapping a hunk of grape Bubble Yum and popping it into his mouth.

"It's an SAT word, so perhaps you've never heard it before." Okay, that was a little *I'm rubber and you're glue*, but I didn't make it past my opening line as I was writing my script.

"Oh, I know it. Seven twenty verbal," he says, and then leans in close. The smell of grape gum wafts into my face, and I wrinkle my nose to block the odor. "But don't tell anyone. Might ruin my 'overcaffeinated child' rep."

I start fumbling for some kind of comeback, but I'm saved by a tiny terror smashing me in the knees. I look down to see the kid from the plane, his Buzz Lightyear tee wrinkled, his blond curls in knots.

"Watch it!" I say, but he's too busy giving Jason a high five before racing off toward the luggage carousel (and his parents, I hope). "What was that about?"

Jason is tearing the gum wrapper into smaller and smaller pieces until it barely maintains the molecular structure of paper. It rains down onto his shoe. At that moment, the mischievous giggle rings in my ear and my hand flies up to my hair.

"You!" I cry as I watch Jason blow a perfectly round bubble that takes up half his face. I can still see the faint outlines of freckles through the bubble, and I desperately want to jab my finger into it and splatter gum into his bangs. See how he likes it. "You can't give little kids gum!"

"Why not? He seemed bored." Jason shrugs, turning toward the baggage claim. "Jeez, Mom, how 'bout we try to take the stress level down a notch or twenty, okay? This is *vacation*."

“It’s *not* a vacation, it’s educa—” I start, but Jason cuts me off with a shush maneuver that I think I’ve seen on *Dog Whisperer*.

“You know what your problem is, Book Licker?” he says, rocking back on his heels. He gives me a quick wink. “You don’t know the word ‘fun.’ Maybe because it wasn’t on the SATs.”

He brushes past me toward the baggage claim.

I am left reeling, hating him with the heat of a supernova. I’m so flustered I miss my bag as it rolls past on the carousel, and have to wait for it to come back around again. As I crane my neck, looking for my big green duffel, twin shadows overtake me.

I look up to see that I’m flanked by a pair of human storks. They’re wearing matching skinny jeans and strappy tanks and have identical multicolored scarves wrapped around their swanlike necks. The only thing that distinguishes them is that one has a high, tight auburn ponytail, while the other has a high, tight blond ponytail and is clutching a giant iced coffee the size of her face.

“I swear to God, if our flat has bunk beds, I will walk my Manolos right onto the next flight back to the States,” the blonde says. “Last time I came for fashion week, we had to bunk for two days in a room. I felt like I was at fashion camp. I am so not doing that again.”

“I can handle the bunk beds, as long as Ursula isn’t there,” the brunette replies, hiking her tote higher on her bony shoulder. “She snores like a lumberjack.”

Holy wow. Real models, in the flesh. Or bone. They certainly *look* overcaffeinated and starving. That’s when I notice that there are a lot of women over six feet tall roaming the baggage area. The airport has been overtaken by Glamazons with hollow cheeks and black wheeled suitcases. They’re all strutting across the linoleum in four-inch heels, looking like they stepped out of *Vogue Italia* and not off a six-and-a-half-hour flight.

“Do you know which shows you’re doing yet?” the brunette on my left asks, scanning the carousel for her suitcase.

“I’ve got some go-sees tomorrow,” the blonde replies. She gives her vat of iced coffee a lazy, uninterested shake. “My agent said Stella McCartney is totally a lock, though. And of course Marc Jacobs, like, loves me.”

I catch the brunette rolling her eyes while she plucks her suitcase from the conveyor belt with one graceful, fluid movement. I’ve been so distracted by their conversation I haven’t noticed that my duffel is about to pass me by again. I dive for it, my fingers barely closing around the nylon handle. I throw my weight backward to heave it off the carousel, but thanks to all those guidebooks I packed, the bag is heavier than I thought. I feel it throwing me off my balance. I’m going down.

As I start to tip backward, though, a body breaks my fall. Unfortunately, it’s the blonde supermodel, whose waifish figure is not ready for my muscular frame and ten tons of luggage to come flying at her like a stealth bomber.

“What the—” she screams, falling backward off her platform wedges. We go down in a tangle of arms and legs, her coffee in a flood on the floor, now soaking itself into my sweatpants.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry,” I mumble, completely mortified. I struggle to scramble to my feet, and I’m nearly up when my foot catches in the handle of my duffel and I fall again, landing butt-first in the puddle. I can feel the cold, sticky liquid soaking into my underpants.

Great—after the rumors about my joining the mile-high club, a suspicious stain on my sweatpants is the last thing I need. Did I mention that I *hate* flying?

I untangle my foot, grab my duffel, and make a run for the nearest sliding doors before I'm subjected to a supermodel-style tantrum. "Sorry!" I yell over my shoulder.

"You owe me a coffee!" the blonde screams at me, but I don't look back.

When I get to the curb, I scan the crowd for my group so I don't miss the bus. I spot Jason and start to head toward him, but I quickly realize that he's not with the group. He's busy chatting up a raven-haired supermodel who's poised to climb into a shiny black sedan. Of course.

Another black sedan screeches to a halt right in front of me. The tinted windows provide a perfect reflection of my appearance postflight. My hair is a wild mess, my eyes are bloodshot, and now I have coffee splattered from head to toe, including a large wet spot on my behind.

Great. I've arrived in London looking like a homeless—and incontinent—crazy person.

I hoist my duffel over my shoulder. I finally spot my classmates gathering in front of a giant blue tour bus. Mrs. Tennison is bustling around, counting heads and checking things off on her clipboard. Nearly everyone else has boarded the bus by the time I'm dragging my monogrammed duffel toward them.

Flying, children, models, and being late. And Jason Lippincott. The list of things I hate getting longer by the minute.

I board the bus behind Deirdre Robinson and her ginormous fluff of curly blond hair and slide into an empty seat at the front, hoping it stays empty except for me. Yes, there are twenty students on this trip, and I'm close friends with exactly none of them. It's going to be a long ten days.

When everyone in junior-year lit class had the chance to go to London over spring break, I thought at least a handful of my swim teammates would come along on the trip. Yet despite my careful planning and organization, I managed to sign up and turn in my deposit before realizing that it conflicted with the MetroWest Invitational swim meet. It's the meet where I set the state freestyle record last year!

So I am here, and my teammates are not.

Missing the swim meet has me feeling sort of twitchy, and I start tapping my toe inside my sneaker. I promised Coach Haas I'd do extra laps while I'm here (our hotel has a pool, thank God), and hope he hasn't replaced me by the time I get back in ten days.

"Relax, Julia," Coach Haas told me when I told him I'd stick to my training. "Just try to have some fun while you're there, okay?"

Apparently no one understands that my version of fun includes laps, guidebooks, and following the rules.

Joel Emerson ambles lazily down the aisle, and I see him pause next to my seat, so I quickly drop my carry-on into it. Joel will spend the entire bus ride miming lacrosse play, which I'm pretty sure will make me carsick.

Dammit, Phoebe, I'll kill you for ditching me.

Phoebe's parents refused to let her skip the Lis' family reunion, hosted every five years in Chicago. No amount of pleading from either of us budged them an inch. Phoebe even pulled out the "it'll look great on my college applications" card, but to no avail. Not that Phoebe

needs to be worried about her college applications. She's an amazing artist, and she's total getting into Rhode Island School of Design. And hopefully I am going to get into Brown, and then we'll share an apartment in a big Providence Victorian with bright walls and a turret.

"Hey, at least there's a beach," I told her last week. After months of begging, I'd finally convinced her to reorganize her closet. Phoebe says it's sick, but organizing other people's stuff is sort of a hobby for me. There is something incredibly satisfying about putting everything in its proper place.

"It's Lake Michigan—that hardly counts as beach," she said, then stuck out her tongue while checking a yellow T-shirt for holes of the unintentional variety. She tossed it into the "donate" pile.

"The Chicago Chamber of Commerce begs to differ," I replied, putting a pile of brightly patterned sundresses onto hangers one by one. I held up a purple houndstooth-printed minidress with an egg-sized rip in the hem. "Is this a keeper?"

"I can totally fix that," she said, adding it to the sewing pile next to her desk before gathering her long, shiny black hair into a messy ponytail. I'm so jealous of Phoebe's hair. It would take me two hours with a flatiron and the entire Kiehl's counter to get my hair that straight. And thanks to all the chlorine, it wouldn't be anywhere near that shiny. "Anyway, even if it was a real beach, it's only warm enough to swim in for, like, three weeks in August. It's March. That's practically the Arctic in Chicago!"

I sighed. "It'll be painful for me, too! There's going to be so much preppy on this trip. I might come back with a full frontal lobotomy and a new wardrobe consisting of only skinny jeans and Tiffany bracelets." I tried to focus on folding her massive pile of screen-printed T-shirts and not on how lonely I would be. "Seriously, what am I going to do without you there?"

"You're going to enjoy London," Phoebe said, her eyes widening as she wound up for one of her famous, mile-a-minute diatribes, "a city filled with studly British scholars who read Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters. And every once in a while, you'll pause for a moment of silence for your best friend, who is busy scarfing down kimchi and casseroles made by great aunts while you're enjoying tea and scones."

So my best friend isn't here to save me. But I am in London. For free. Without any parents. With an itinerary (highlighted and underlined, of course) full of visits to places I've only read about or imagined and a duffel bag full of guidebooks, notable passages flagged with an array of colorful Post-its.

It could be so much worse. I could be traveling with my aunt Matilda, who uses up most of every visit hinting that perhaps if I spent less time in the pool and more time in a dress, I could have my very own boyfriend. I could be touring London with a convention of high school principals or infomercial hosts. All of those would be worse than this (I think). So I've decided. This trip is going to be awesome. I take a few deep breaths, pull out the itinerary, and begin psyching myself up for tomorrow's visit to the Tate. I have already printed out the online pamphlet describing the special exhibits. I plan to spend the evening (which is designated as "settling-in time" on the itinerary) rereading the Tate passages in each of my five guidebooks. Just the thought of the museum and my books, and my stress starts to eb away.

Mrs. Tennison scurries onto the bus last and begins surveying the crowd. Her palazzo pan

and floral tunic whip students in the face as she rushes down the aisle.

“Do we have everyone? Is anyone missing?” she asks, counting heads, then wringing her hands. “It appears we’re one short!” Her mostly penciled-in dark brows furrow together.

“I’m here! Never fear!” Jason bounds onto the bus, laughing, and squeezes down the aisle past Mrs. Tennison. “Thanks for holding the bus for me, Mrs. T.”

“Jason, please stay with the group. It is very important that we all stick together.” Fifteen minutes in London, and already Mrs. Tennison is massaging her temples. Clearly, this is going to be a rough ten days for her, too.

“Sorry, Mrs. T. Never again, Scout’s honor.” He grins, shuffling down the aisle. He pauses by my seat, his nose crinkling. “Hazelnut, Book Licker? I would have taken you for a black coffee kind of girl.” I clench my fists.

Babbling brooks and cool breezes. Birds and hearts and rainbows and Mark’s third tooth to the left of center ...

“Thank you, Jason,” Mrs. Tennison sighs, pulling out a thick file folder. The bus rumbles to a start, and Mrs. Tennison has to grasp the nearest seat so as not to fall into someone’s lap. She nearly grabs Deirdre Robinson’s fluffy head of crazy-curl hair, but Deirdre executes a quick duck-and-weave maneuver that I’m guessing she picked up on the fencing team (which she is the sole member).

“Okay, everyone, listen up,” Mrs. Tennison says, clearing her throat. “I’ve got some good news. There was a mix-up with the hotel, and everyone ended up in single rooms.”

A cheer rises from the bus—a cheer even I join in on. A single room means I’ll be spared from sharing with Sarah Finder and her explosion of designer jeans and faux Louis Vuitton bags. Thank GOD. This trip is getting better by the minute!

“Okay, okay,” Mrs. Tennison says, waving her hands to shush us. “Moving on. Your curfew will be at ten p.m., and you *will* respect it. I will be holding on to your keys for the night so you can be sure you’re in your rooms and not ...” She trails off, and I know that she’s imagining half the bus getting arrested and the other half getting pregnant.

All the other students begin grumbling and groaning. Evie even squeaks out, “But that’s fascist!” I’m pretty sure she doesn’t know what “fascist” means.

I don’t mind the curfew. Early to bed, early to rise and swim my laps.

Mrs. Tennison goes on: “The way we’re going to ensure that no one wanders off on their own is an old standby: the buddy system.”

All around me, people are grabbing hands with their buddies, but having attended many summers at Camp Tanasi, I know exactly what’s coming, and I feel a cold knot of dread building in my stomach.

“I’ve *assigned* partners for the duration of the trip. Not only will you be responsible for keeping track of your buddy, but they’ll also be your partner for all activities and assignments. Remember, this is an *educational* tour of the UK.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me,” Evie mutters from two rows back. Evie spent the end of the flight paging through *The Fashionista’s Guide to London Shopping*. It’s the first book I’ve ever seen her read.

“You will be responsible for your partner for the duration of this trip,” Mrs. Tennison continues, winding up for a speech I suspect she practiced in her bathroom mirror before we left. “Their success is *your* success. You’ll not only be together on our regularly scheduled

tours, but you'll be keeping each other company during assigned cultural hours. You're probably thinking, What are cultural hours?"

"Um, no." Evie's eye roll is practically audible in her voice. Luckily, Mrs. Tennison doesn't hear her.

"Your cultural hours are daily two-hour blocks of time, in which you are permitted to explore London on your own. With your partner, of course!"

"Shopping time!" Evie squeals.

This Mrs. Tennison *does* hear. She shoots Evie an evil eye before charging on. "*Cultural* hours are to be spent exploring even more of the *culture* of London," she says, not so subtly emphasizing the words, "and this does *not* include shopping. I will be keeping track of your hours via your daily reflection papers, where you will write about all the wonderful British experiences you've had throughout the day."

My classmates continue their chorus of groans. I don't know what they expected. Contrary to popular belief, this isn't a vacation. It's for credit, and I plan to get an A.

Mrs. Tennison begins running through the list of partners, and I strain to hear my name. As she moves through the list, I start to notice a pattern. Brian Arnett is paired with Jamie Barnes. Evie Ellston with Sarah Finder. Tony Harrison and Logan Hunt. Lucy Karns and Ada Landry. Uh-oh. This can only mean ...

"Julia Lichtenstein, you'll be with Jason Lippincott."

No. No no no. I *cannot* be with Jason. First of all, I just told him to leave me alone forever. I can't even *look* at Jason, much less tour castles with him. Second of all, what would we even talk about? Aside from our brief encounter today, Jason and I haven't so much as interacted since he stuffed tampons into my locker in ninth grade. He sits across the cafeteria with his lacrosse teammates and their giggly groupies at lunch and spends most of class time trying to embarrass our teachers with "that's what she said" jokes. I don't know how to play lacrosse, and I'm pretty sure he's never read ... well, a book. Plus he's going to spend 90 percent of the trip figuring out ways to meet girls, which is going to be supremely annoying for the person who has to keep track of him. Which, apparently, is me.

But before I can ask if there is any room for negotiation, Mrs. Tennison pulls out a box filled with identical silver cell phones, each topped with a sticky note containing the phone number in neat script. (Mrs. Tennison may be a psychotic mess, but she has beautiful penmanship.)

"These are your temporary cell phones—or 'mobiles,' as they say in England," she says, tittering a little, as she moves up the aisle, distributing phones. My sticky note reads

+442026415644

I stare at the jumble of unfamiliar numbers, trying to commit them to memory. The standard country code is 44, so that's easy. Twenty ... That was dad's jersey number in high school; he was captain of the football team. The numbers rearrange in my head, forming different patterns. Then I see it: 26 April, 1564. It's Shakespeare's birthday! That must be a sign.

There's only one remaining number to memorize, and that's easy enough: the last four digits of my GPA. Dad's jersey number, Shakespeare's birthday, my GPA. I mouth it silently to myself until it's committed to memory.

Mrs. Tennison is prattling on. "These phones are pay-as-you-go. They've been preloaded

with twenty minutes' worth of credit, which is exactly the amount of time you should need to call the police, a taxi, or me. This means these phones are meant for *emergencies*." She says the word with as many syllables as she can stretch. She places the last phone in Susa Morgan's tanned palm and then whirls around to face the crowd. "Any credit you use beyond those twenty minutes you will need to purchase on your own. However, I am not giving you permission to spend this entire trip on the phone. Excuse me, Miss Ellston?"

I turn around to see Evie with her nose already buried in her phone, her manicured fingers tapping furiously at the keys. At the mention of her name, her head snaps up at the exact moment she snaps her phone shut.

"Yes, Mrs. Tennison?" she says brightly.

"What were you doing on that phone, Miss Ellston?" Mrs. Tennison crosses her arms over her chest and mimics Evie's peaches-and-cream tone.

"Oh, nothing," she says. Her voice gets even more syrupy, which happens whenever she's lying to an authority figure. I've been in at least a dozen classes with her, so I'm kind of an expert.

"Miss Ellston, thank you for reminding me to bring up one final point. As I have said, these phones are for emergencies. They are *not* for texting or Twittering or Facebooking or connecting or socializing or anything else that will keep you from truly experiencing your time here in London. This trip is an opportunity for you to disconnect from technology and connect with a vibrant city full of art, culture, and history. If I discover that your phone use is proving too much of a distraction, I will confiscate it immediately. You will then have to rely on your partner's phone for the rest of the trip. Do I make myself clear?"

The bus breaks into a scattered chorus of yeses and some random grumbling. I flip my phone open, wishing I could use it to send an SOS to Phoebe. I even start typing a text. *Help! Partnered with Jason! Suicide likely, homicide imminent!* But because I'm a rule follower, I flip the phone shut without sending it.



Less Bath, More Robe

Why does every1 think a girl who prefers bks to ppl must be in want of a life? —J

The bus pulls away from the airport, and I practically press my nose against the windowpane. I refuse to miss a single second of England just because I'm stressing about Jason. We merge onto the M4 and begin speeding toward London. Everything looks greener here than at home. I gaze out over rolling hills dotted with patches of wildflowers and huge shade trees. It's a cool but sunny spring afternoon. I wish I could open my window and breathe in the air, because it looks like it smells earthy, heavy, and sweet.

The green hills give way to a vista of dense row houses and large supermarkets. For a minute I'm disappointed; we could be in Cleveland, Ohio. Then we veer off the bus motorway, and the street suddenly gets narrow, the buildings more opulent. This is the London I've always imagined. Everything looks like it is or was, at one time, a castle. Even the McDonald's, with its stone facade located beneath a stately brick apartment building, looks impressive.

Our bus disappears underground, rolling through a tunnel before emerging onto the street. We pass a lush green garden filled to the brim with beautiful flowers. I can't wait to take my old copy of *Pride and Prejudice* and read it in a real English garden. Although knowing me, I will probably get attacked by a wild goose or something. (I have goose-related issues. Don't judge me.)

Before I know it, we're in the thick of the city, passing locations I've heard my mom describe to me since I was a kid: Kensington High Street, Imperial College, Hyde Park, Piccadilly Circus. For a second my throat tightens up and I find myself holding my breath. London is where Mom and Dad went on their honeymoon, and they always talked about coming back here. Dad used to joke that Paris was the city of love for unimaginative folks. "Give me those guards in the big fuzzy hats any day," he'd say, laughing and planting a kiss on Mom's forehead. They'd even saved up for a tenth-anniversary trip, but when Dad got sick, the trip was quickly forgotten.

My parents met as teenagers attending rival high schools. Mom had watched Dad across the football field for two seasons, always wanting to talk to him. One day she twisted her ankle while out on a run, and Dad's was the first car to come by. He picked her up and drove her to the emergency room, and they were together all the way until he died. My mom has always said that it was fate, and I know she's right. It could have been any old Good Samaritan who picked her up, but fate brought her my dad.

Most people I know have parents who are separated or divorced or somewhere in between. But in all my memories of my parents together, they're always laughing or dancing around the kitchen or holding hands. They had more bliss in the decade they were married than most people get in a lifetime.

Fate worked for them, and it'll work for me.

That's why Mark Bixford is the guy. I know it. I've only been in love with him since we were *five*, when he was my next-door neighbor. We did all the usual kindergarten-neighborhood stuff: running through the sprinkler, riding bikes, trying to swing so high we'd flip over the bar. We'd pretend we were spies, war heroes, teachers, royalty, the president.... We even had a pretend wedding once. Mark went home to put on his black T-shirt (the closest approximation a five-year-old has to a tuxedo), I threw a pillowcase over my head for a veil, and an old stuffed lion I named Growly presided over the blessed event under the willow tree in my backyard. The wedding ended with my very first kiss, and I've been smitten with Mark Bixford ever since. On my sixth birthday, he presented me with a gallon-sized Ziploc bag filled with only the lemon Starbursts, my absolute favorite flavor. (They sort of remind me of lemon Pledge, and my favorite chore as a kid was helping my mom dust all the antiques in our house.) Mark had saved up his allowance to buy a case of Starbursts, then picked out the yellow ones for me.

You see why I love him?

But the next year his dad got transferred to Pittsburgh, and I thought he was gone forever. I resolved to find a new crush, but over the years I kept thinking about Mark, wondering maybe our "wedding" might have been a sign, or a premonition.

Now Mark's back. As of August 19, exactly 232 days ago today. And I haven't even looked at a single other guy since.

Unfortunately, Mark has hardly looked at me at all. Phoebe once said he's probably silenced by the force of his love for me, but I suspect he's long since lost the memories of our backyard vows, of how we each took a turn snipping off a small tuft of Growly's ratty orange mane to symbolize our eternal bond. The slightly shorn lion still sits on the top shelf of my closet, looking a little lumpy and sad.

So for the past 232 days, I've loved him quietly and from afar, waiting for the serendipitous event that will bring us together. It's not that I'm too chicken to talk to him (okay, maybe a little bit). I simply think that if he's the one (and he totally is), it will eventually happen naturally. I know it defies all logic and reasoning, but that's how fate works.

I've seen it.

Surrounded by London's tiny cars and cabs, our bus seems monstrous, like an elephant lumbering through a field of kittens. The only things even close to our size are the double-decker buses, which are *everywhere*. I keep having little moments of panic during which I think our bus driver has gotten drunk and is about to career into an oncoming car, only to remind myself that here in England they drive on the *other* side of the road.

We pass signs for the London Underground, which look like the T-shirts I've seen at Urban Outfitters. The buildings around us curve with the roads. It's exactly like I imagined, and yet still somehow better. And so far I've only seen it through the foggy window of a motor coach.

When we escape the snarled traffic of Piccadilly Circus, we turn onto a street so narrow

I'm sure our bus is going to get wedged between a pair of buildings. It's a bit cloudy now, and with the height of the buildings around us, it's hard to make out the area from my window seat.

Finally, the bus rolls to a stop in front of our hotel. I stifle a gasp. The Soho Sennett Hotel is located in the trendy district populated by theaters, clubs, and record stores. The hotel itself looks like something out of a fairy tale. As I step off the bus onto a plush red carpet, I can tell I'm not going to have any problem with this. No problem whatsoever.

"Right this way, miss." A man in a heavily brocaded burgundy jacket gestures toward the double doors, which are already open and ready for us. A red-and-gold sign reading WELCOME FRIENDS AND FAMILY sits on an antique brass stand.

The hotel is owned by Mrs. Tennison's husband's brother (or Mrs. Tennison's brother-in-law—husband—I forget which). His company bought it last year, when it was only a row of townhouses, and they recently finished a full gut renovation. Thanks to Mrs. T's connection (and the rumored need to make up for some kind of family snub), my classmates and I are going to be some of the hotel's first guests. We're here to give the new staff a good trial run. Because, really, if a hotel staff can survive twenty American teenagers, they can survive anything.

It's kind of unbelievable, really. Last year's class stayed in a hostel, and Jenny Davis's mattress had an infestation of bedbugs. She came home looking like she had chicken pox, and no one would go near her for a week.

As soon as we're in the door, Jason drops his bag on the floor and strolls over to the check-in desk, where a pretty redhead in a low-cut black wrap dress is tapping away at her laptop computer. He folds his long torso over the marble counter and peers down at her screen. Before I can even wonder what he's up to, the clerk is giggling and grinning and tossing her hair. I look away. I mean, really, I'm going to be watching this very same scene over and over again all week. No point in spoiling the disgusting film with a gross preview.

Mrs. Tennison weaves through the group, pressing key cards into our palms and checking things off on her clipboard. Once I have mine, I drag my duffel to the grand staircase. On the third floor, I stop to roll my stiff shoulders, feeling completely sore and exhausted from the long flight. I make my way down the narrow hall, papered with a rich royal-purple-and-gold pattern. At the end of the hall, I arrive at a heavy mahogany door with a loopy number 31 stamped on a brass plate. After two tries with the electronic key card, the door swings open and my jaw hits the floor.

The room is unbelievably small, maybe the size of a large walk-in closet, but it's hard to care about that, given what's inside. A queen-size bed dominates the room, anchored to the wall by a floor-to-ceiling distressed brown leather headboard with oversized brass buttons which create a quilting pattern. A mountain of fluffy bright white pillows breaks up the color scheme, and a thick bronze-and-burgundy comforter shines across the top of the bed. Mahogany end tables flank the bed, and a matching armoire is sandwiched in the corner; its door is slightly ajar, revealing a sleek flat-screen TV and entertainment system.

At the foot of the bed, on a raised bamboo platform nestled in the bay window, where one might normally find a window seat or a wingback chair, stands a lacquered bright white clawfoot bathtub. A beautiful, glistening, perfectly me-sized bathtub.

I almost do a happy dance right there. (Okay, maybe I *do* actually do a small happy dance.) Two sets of roman shades cover the window, a white set for privacy and light and

burgundy set for sleeping. A recessed light overhead shines a spotlight down on the who tableau. Outside, I can hear my classmates shouting down the halls. I hear the words “down comforter” and “Wii,” but all I can focus on is how desperately I want to climb into the tu and never leave.

Something tells me there won't be any bedbugs here.

But before I can submerge my aching feet in the bath, I need to get unpacked. I cannot live out of a suitcase for ten days (okay, technically nine, since today is Friday and we leave next Saturday). I can practically *feel* my clothes wrinkling. Plus I think some of that iced coffee may have seeped through my duffel. I heave my duffel onto the luggage rack and then open to get things unpacked and organized.

I've started separating my socks and underwear into different drawers in the armoire when I come across a pair of heels buried underneath my favorite Harvard hoodie. Phoebe insists I bring them. She came over to my house the day before I left for the trip to help me pack, toting a few “necessities” (according to her) in her bag.

“You *must* take these!” she said, holding up a pair of four-inch black leather gladiator heels with brass detailing.

I scrunched up my nose. “Um, Phoebes? Aren't those your prom shoes?”

“I decided to go with the silver dress, so these don't match.” Phoebe has great style, the kind you can't find on the pages of *Teen Vogue* or *Seventeen*. Her wardrobe is a mess, an explosion of neon and distressed denim, pieces spanning numerous decades and as many styles. But get an outfit on her and step back? She always looks effortlessly cool. Of course the designer mafia at school doesn't recognize her genius. Marc Jacobs? Yes. Vintage? In theory. But Phoebe's blend of Goodwill and DIY? They won't have it. Her outfit that day consisted of a Rolling Stones logo tee that had been refashioned into a pencil skirt, and a pencil skirt refashioned into a vest. A little bit insane, but on her, it worked.

“Don't you want to return them?”

“Hell no! They're cute, and I'll definitely wear them at some point,” she replied, dangling them in front of my face and wriggling her sparkly teal fingernails at me. Her aluminum bangles smacked together like an army marching a two-step. “And until that point comes, definitely think that you, oh best friend of mine, should break them in.”

“Those aren't exactly ideal sightseeing footwear.”

“It's London! Adventure happens.” Phoebe doesn't quite believe in fate the way I do. She says you have to *chase* your destiny, and she always expects life to be like a romantic comedy: all you have to do is dress the part of the heroine, and pretty soon you'll be kissing some hottie while fountains spew and music swells in the background. Unfortunately, my life is more often like one of those cable-access channels with the grandmotherly woman who tells you how to make pies.

“Not on a class trip,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest and firmly shaking my head. “And not to me. Besides, they won't fit in my suitcase.”

“Maybe if you leave a couple of these behind,” she said, rolling her eyes as she pulled out a stack of books. “Dude, seriously, you can borrow my Kindle.”

I made a face. I have my own e-reader, but I hardly ever use it. I need to fold down pages and flag passages with sticky notes. I need to *experience* books, not just read them. I never go anywhere without a book in my bag, and to travel across the ocean, I'd packed more than m

fair share. “No thanks,” I said. I leaned over the bed toward her, but she danced to the other side of the room with my books. “I need book smell to drown out stale-airplane smell.”

“You are such a grandma sometimes,” Phoebe said. I leaped over the bed and ran to grab them, but she held the stack high over her head, and I had to jump a little to try to reach them.

“I need them!” I protested, reaching for the stack, which she quickly tugged away.

“You don’t,” Phoebe replied, putting them back on my bookshelf. “You’re going to London, not Uganda. Even if you manage to finish your stash, they do have these things called *bookstores* there. I’ve heard tell that if you give them money, they let you leave with a book.”

“Ha-ha.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” She tossed the shoes into my suitcase, in the spot where my books had been.

Now, with an ocean between us, I pull out the heels and line them up next to my flip-flops and my sensible sneakers in the closet. At least they’ll remind me of Phoebe. I pull out the five guidebooks I brought, flagged with approximately 212 Post-it notes, wipe the travel dust off their glossy covers, and stack them neatly on the nightstand. I step back to admire my handiwork. My end table looks like a page out of a travel magazine.

Reaching back into my suitcase, I pull a small yellowed photograph from one of its interior pockets and smooth the edges, which are soft and curled from age. It’s my favorite picture of my parents, from their wedding day. My mom is wearing a simple white linen dress with an Empire waist and lace sleeves. Dad in his marine dress blues is behind her, his chin resting on her head. They’re both laughing hard at some off-camera joke, Mom starting to double over from whatever it was.

As I tuck the photo into the frame of the mirror hanging over the vanity, I start to feel a knot forming in the pit of my stomach, tears welling up in my eyes. I deal with this the only way I know how: by dropping to the floor for a few quick push-ups. I will not cry on my first day in London. When I’ve cranked out a solid twenty push-ups, the tears are gone and the knot has loosened. Now for that hot bath.

I jump up and set about lining up all my toiletries on the counter from tallest to shortest. I step out of my clothes, depositing them into the hotel-provided laundry bag, and slip into the white heavy-but-soft terry cloth robe bearing the monogram of the Soho Sennett Hotel. It clearly has been designed for the supermodel who will probably have this room when I’m gone, and I have to pick up the front like a ball gown to make my way around the room. The sash is so long that I tug it off and hang it back on the hook. I drape a towel over the edge of the tub and crank the silver faucet to hot. As the tub fills with steamy water, I grab my tube of spot cream, this amazing organic zit stuff my mom picked up in Boston. The herbs in it give off an incredibly relaxing scent, but they also turn the cream an unfortunate shade of green. I start dabbing, and when I’m done, it looks like I’ve decorated my face with split pea soup. I drop my robe and put one foot into the hot water when I hear a knock at the door.

“Who is it?” I call through the door, hoping it’s housekeeping and I can tell them to save my room for tomorrow.

“It’s Jason.”

It takes me a full minute to realize that it’s Jason Lippincott standing outside my door and not some bellboy named Jason or the hockey mask—wearing psycho killer from the movie

(who, honestly, is a more likely candidate to be standing outside my door than Jason Lippincott). I turn off the water and grab my robe. I can't imagine what he wants, which means I have to open the door to find out. I tug my robe closed around my naked body, suddenly missing the sash, as I frantically try to shake some soapsuds off my right foot and hop toward the door.

"What's up?" I ask as I swing the door open, trying to act casual despite my state of undress. But I instantly forget that I'm (for all intents and purposes) naked when I see that he's standing on the other side in perfectly distressed jeans and what looks to be a deep blue cashmere V-neck over a plain white tee. The sweater intensifies his blue eyes, and for the first time I understand why he won "Best Eyes" in last year's yearbook superlatives. The faint smell of cologne wafts through the doorway, and I notice he's added some kind of product to his hair to make it look like he walked out of a wind tunnel. This was not what he looked like during our bus ride through the city, when he had on a North Face fleece and a ratty SoCal cap over his mop of rusty-red hair. The only thing that's the same is the big wad of purple gum he's smacking away at.

As I'm standing there, taking in his suspiciously groomed physique, he fishes a pen out of his pocket, uncaps it, and steps toward me with the tip aimed straight at my face.

"What are you doing?" I shriek, swatting his hand away.

"Connecting the dots," he says matter-of-factly. My hand flies to my face and comes away with a palm full of chartreuse speckles. "Good look, by the way. Very avant-garde," he calls out as I rush to the sink to scrub the green goop from my face.

Instead of responding, I march back to the door and give it a good hard swing, not really caring if it catches his pen, or one or two of his fingers. He's too quick, though, and throws his hand up to stop it.

"Wanna hit up a party?" he asks, stepping into my room as though I didn't attempt to slam my door on him.

"A what?" I adjust the robe. Clearly I haven't heard him right.

"A party," he repeats, a wide grin spreading across his freckled face. "A lively gathering, typically involving music and drinking ..."

Too many questions are spinning around in my head to even land on one to ask. We've only been in the city about three hours, and most of that was spent on a tour bus with twenty of our classmates and one very frazzled English teacher. How did he get invited to a party? Where is this party taking place? And why on earth is Jason Lippincott standing at my door asking me to go with him? But I can't ask all of these at once, so I settle on the simplest question that comes to mind.

"What party?"

"Well, I was downstairs in the bar, talking to this guy—"

"You were in the *bar*?"

"Chill out, officer, I was having a Coke," he says, holding up his hands. "Anyway, there was a soccer game on TV—"

"Football," I say, correcting him. I have no idea why.

"Whatever. Anyway, he's got this girlfriend, and her parents are in Czechoslovakia—"

"I think you mean the Czech Republic," I say, correcting him again. I realize I sound like a shrew, but I'm kind of a stickler for history. And geography. And ...

Oh my God, I suddenly understand why people call me Book Licker.

“What?” he asks, crinkling his nose in confusion. Of course, I can’t just let it go.

“The Czech Republic. Czechoslovakia hasn’t existed for almost twenty years. So unless her parents are visiting 1992, they’re in the Czech Republic.”

“Well, that certainly would make for a better story, now wouldn’t it?” he replies, smiling as he leans into the doorframe.

My mind is drifting back to my bath and my book, so I’m ready to get this interaction over with. I pull my robe tighter around me in hopes he’ll realize I’m prepped for something other than a party right now. He doesn’t catch my drift. Body language much?

“The party?” I prod.

“Oh, right. So her parents are visiting *another country*, and she’s having some people over. So he invited us.”

“Us?”

“Well, he invited me, but you’re my buddy, so by proxy, you get an invite, too. So how about it?”

I don’t think I’ve ever been this confused by a conversation with anyone. Ever.

He’s asking me because I’m his *buddy*? When have rules ever mattered to Jason? Case in point: he’s planning on sneaking out to party. If you’re going to break one, why not break them all?

Me? I’ll go for breaking none, thankyouverymuch.

“I don’t think so,” I say. “And I really don’t think you should be going, either.”

“Why not?” He takes a step toward me. I take a quick step backward, unconsciously giving him room to enter. He lets the door swing shut behind him. Dammit.

“Because I don’t think it’s a good idea to go to a house party in a foreign country hosted by the girlfriend of a guy you met in a bar while watching soccer.” As I tilt my head to meet his eyes, I’m reminded again of how freaking tall he is.

“Football,” he says. He crosses his arms and cocks an eyebrow at me.

“Whatever!” I exclaim. I take a giant step backward so he’s not towering over me. “You don’t even know these people. They could be drug dealers or axe murderers. They could be cult leaders trying to get you to wear a choir robe and drink Kool-Aid. But all that aside, we’re not supposed to be going out on our own.”

“Ah, the rules,” he says, sticking his hands in his pockets and chuckling to himself. “You do love those rules.”

“I don’t *love* rules,” I say, starting to get pissed. “I just acknowledge their existence! And I don’t want to get in trouble for *your* ridiculousness.”

“C’mon, Julia. If it’s the rules you’re concerned about, then get dressed, because I’m pretty sure the number one rule is ‘Don’t lose your buddy.’ ”

“I’m not so sure a house party with British strangers is the cultural experience Mr. Tennison had in mind,” I reply.

“Mrs. Tennison could use a party! She needs to loosen up a bit, too. Think we should invite her?”

I don’t like the way he says “too.” I’m plenty loose. There’s a difference between preferring books to parties and preferring sixteen cats to seeing the light of day.

“The answer is no,” I say, hoping to end the conversation. I tap my toe frantically under

the robe. If he doesn't leave soon, I'm going to have to jog to Glasgow to release this stress. Besides, Mrs. Tennison will have my key. How do you suggest we get around that? Or were you thinking of sleeping in the lobby tonight?"

"That's why I have these," Jason says with a grin as he reaches into his pocket and fans out two key cards, one clearly marked 315. My room.

"How did you get—"

"I make friends, Book Licker. It's what I do best. Stick with me and maybe one day you too, will learn how to do that." He tries to thrust the key card into my hand, but I push back.

"I don't want that!" I cry, wondering what the punishment would be if I was found with a stolen key card I'd used to break curfew so I could go to a party hosted by strangers in a foreign country.

I think that slate of charges surpasses detention.

"Okay, fine," he says, dangling the key card in front of my face. "If you *really* want me to hang on to a key to your room ..."

He trails off, waggling his eyebrows at me suggestively. I snatch the key.

"That's what I thought," he says with a smirk. Just then, he catches sight of my bathtub. "Holy crap, is that a *bath*tub at the foot of your bed? That's awesome! Can I join?"

"Hilarious." I can feel heat flooding my face.

"I'm not kidding. You, me, some bubbles ..."

"You're insane," I say. My face is so hot I feel like I've already submerged in scalding water.

"It's all part of my charm." He tries to dodge me and grabs the bubble bath. I grab it back from him and turn around to place it in its rightful spot at the edge of the tub. But as I turn something tugs on me. I look down and see the white rubber toe of Jason's sneaker planted firmly on the hem of the robe.

I'm moving, but the robe isn't. As the information makes its way from my eyeballs to my brain, I feel the robe slip off my shoulder.

"Hey!" I shout, and shove Jason backward. He pitches back onto the bed but grabs hold of the front of my robe. Before this can turn into a major wardrobe malfunction, I twist away from him, clenching the robe closed, but manage to get my feet tangled in the hem as it falls down toward the floor. Instinctively, I reach out to break my fall. Without my hands holding it shut, my robe flies open and billows out behind me. With my back to him, Jason can't have seen a thing, but my terrified scream pretty much serves as a high alert. He sits up in time to see me crash to the ground in a naked tangle of arms, legs, and terry cloth. As soon as I can discern my bare butt from my elbow, I pull myself into the fetal position and yank the robe over my head like a blanket.

It feels like an eternity before Jason stops laughing. He finally slows enough to choke out, "Are you going to stay huddled under that robe all night?"

"Go away!" I yell through the fabric.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't hear you," he says, still chuckling. "Why don't I turn around, and you can crawl out from under there? Then we can discuss this party situation further."

"How do I know you're going to turn around?"

"Well, you could trust me."

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