

# The Maze of Your Mind

BOOK 1



Benjamin Hamon

# Information

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# Foreword

Dear reader,

This is a sample for the full book.

Please note this is a work of fiction, depicting imaginary characters and imaginary events. The Maze of your mind is a book series about women and their love stories. It is a contemporary romance with queer characters, who aims at being wholesome and hopeful while also discussing serious topics such as love, sexuality and mental health. The books feature adult themes and mental health issues, as well as some level of explicit sexual content.

Good reading,

*Benjamin Hamon*

## Chapter 1

# One cold day

*Hi there, friend. It's Kate. Remember me? I know I threw you away. Again. I prefer my memories to be hidden, lost in the deepest, darkest corner of my mind, rather than put in writing. No hard feelings, okay? You don't have to answer, by the way. I'd be hella freaked out if my diary spoke to me. I'm nuts enough as it is. No way I'm gonna get worse.*

*It's Sunday, 20 November 2016, and it's, well, it's late enough that Sunday was actually yesterday. I'm not sure I'll be able to sleep tonight. I've been antsy, for several days now. It's been a while since I've felt so out of control. Anne asked if I was all right, although she asks me every couple of weeks, so it's not that unusual. She's my friend, so I don't mind her testing me every so often. But she's my boss too, so I can't just tell her to mind her own business.*

*Anyway, that's not why I needed to write. I've been texting Sara. Yes, that Sara, Sara Fourier-Leroy, the awesome girl I felt crazy about, the friend I admired and who made life bearable, until I fucking ran away. Running away was the only thing I thought I could do.*

*Incredible, isn't it? Or incredibly sad rather, how her simply acknowledging I exist is enough to give me an adrenaline rush. Before you give me the stink eye, I haven't gone back on my decision. Sara was the one who reached out to me. So far, we've only been saying hi and complaining about work to each other, nothing more. She wasn't even aware I was back in France. When she learned that, she suggested we meet up, several times. She practically begged for it. I said yes.*

*There's no need to worry. I won't do anything stupid. My feelings have been solidly buried. I've moved on. Still, I think it'll be good for me to see her. Maybe it'll be like meeting again for the very first time. I'm so excited! And so nervous.*

*Please let this be normal. Please let this go okay.*

\* \* \*

### **Present day – Tuesday, 22 November 2016**

The weather was unnaturally frigid and stubbornly overcast. Sara was not in the habit of going out, especially when it meant facing this kind of gray sky and cold air. She could not resolve herself to look forward to the winter like she had as a kid. She had liked to play in the snow, slide on the ice and laugh along with the furious wind. She had looked up at the clear blue sky and marveled.

Adult Sara was not so innocent, nor optimistic. Winter meant forcing herself to come out of her refuge and into the biting cold of the early morning, the sun not even over the horizon, society already calling her to work. She would slip on black ice and shudder from the gale and rain.

Yet today was different. Today, Sara had a good reason to be out. She had left home not apprehensive, but giddy and warm. Coat, boots, scarf and woolly hat were good enough to ward off whatever the universe threw at her. Not that she needed any protection. Her jolly heart was sufficient in keeping her warm and energized.

Today, Sara was reuniting with Katelyn, her best friend.

At least, they'd been best friends in a distant past. They hadn't spoken

to each other, nor seen each other, in years. Nine years since they had last hung out together. Eight years since the last text. A lifetime.

Long gone were the carefree days of middle and high school, seemingly endless years when they'd been together constantly. Attending higher education and growing into adulthood had put a great distance between them, an obstacle which they should have overcome with ease. And yet, the silence had won out, their close friendship replaced with only memories. Sara was now twenty-seven, an adult woman with a full-time job, too busy to keep her friendships afloat.

The two of them had resumed texting a short while ago, clumsy greetings at first, messy reports about years gone by, common questions to estimate the temperature, then a more open discussion about how their lives were going. Finally, Sara had dared suggest they meet up, and it was happening. After all, they lived in the same city once again, there was no reason for them to stay away from each other.

Thus, Sara was standing outside, alone and cold, waiting impatiently, hoping she would actually be able to recognize her friend after so much time had passed. The opposite would make this whole thing depressingly awkward.

Would Kate recognize her?

Sara had arrived a few minutes early. She was in the middle of a mostly deserted square and was feeling a cold anxiety slowly seep into her. How rude of Kate to make her wait like this.

The few people passing by did not spare a glance in her direction. They rushed toward the train station, into the warmth of a store or café, or some distant, unknown destination. Her gaze moved between weathered cobblestone, furious frowns, pale lights and sturdy clouds. What an

ominous picture. Something within her kept hailing her, whispering about giving up, telling her she was wrong to be nostalgic, but she refused to listen. Once she had decided on something, she could be as stubborn as a mule.

Sara's phone vibrated with an incoming message. She started removing her glove to check it, when someone blinked into existence in front of her.

"Sara?"

Looking up, Sara felt ashamed that she had believed, for even a split second, that she might have forgotten that face. An adult woman was standing before her, not a high-school student, yet she immediately recognized her best friend. Kate had a cute, attractive face that always made Sara feel comfortable, a cheeky grin that instantly caused Sara's expression to brighten.

"Kate!"

"Hi. Sara. I thought it had to be you. I, uh, I texted you, to poke you from a distance."

"You were right. It's me! Come here." Sara stepped forward, dodging Kate's extended hand to hug her best friend. Kate responded hesitantly, causing Sara to pull back, embarrassed. "Ah, sorry. I did that instinctively. I was so excited to see you!"

"It's fine. Don't worry. You took me by surprise, that's all. It's been a while." Kate had the slightest hint of redness on her cheeks. And she was smiling.

"How have you been?" Sara asked, trying to kick-start a conversation.

"Good. Good. You?"

"Fine! Well, that doesn't even start to describe all the time that

passed.”

Kate rocked dark blue jeans, plain black sneakers and a leather jacket. The attire was familiar, sober yet somewhat stylish. Sara’s eyes scanned it quickly, by force of habit, and saved the details at the back of her mind. Would Katelyn Jézéquel be the same foolish girl Sara had adored, despite how the years had shifted her scrawny teenage figure into an adult body, despite how minds evolved with each new impulse? The stars themselves moved and changed endlessly, one of Kate’s favorite interests back in high school.

“What do we do?” Kate asked. She remained petite and slender, with dark hair cut very short and amazing hazel eyes. Her hands had gone back inside her jacket’s pockets. Her clothes seemed too light for the kind of cold she had walked out into. “We’re not going to stay here and turn into ice cubes, are we?”

“Right! I haven’t exactly planned anything.” Sara didn’t make plans. “I guess we might as well go back to good old habits. How about some hot chocolate? Or is it coffee now?”

Kate chuckled. “Hot chocolate sounds perfect. Do you know anyplace nearby?”

“There’s a café I went to a couple of times. It shouldn’t be more than five minutes away, if I can remember how to get there.”

They walked into the maze of streets at a leisurely pace, side by side and locked into an odd silence. It was both familiar and unfamiliar. Kate said she did not know the city very well. Sara was not much better, and she had a poor sense of direction. The situation was made even worse by how cold it was and by her inability to work her phone with her gloves on.

The café came into view after a few minutes. The name Hyperglass was



written in the middle of an artistic rendition of a spaceship moving at high speed. They entered quickly, glad to feel warm again. A server in a neat black outfit greeted them, then directed them to a table. Sara sighed in contentment, finally able to shed her heavy clothing.

The café was modern and clean, colorful and bright. And quiet. It was the kind of place Sara appreciated and where she found her comfort, a sort of crutch for her fragile introvert nature. The room was decorated with a few futuristic paintings and neon lights. The booths, neatly separated to offer privacy, had comfortable seats and were heated just right. The table was small but that only meant she would be closer to Kate, so they might be able to whisper secrets to each other.

Sara's gaze checked the center of the room quickly, where a young woman was manning the bar. She had noticed her last time, her cute smiles and beautiful red hair. She had seemed to be having fun then, joking and laughing with her male colleague. At the moment, she looked bored, locked in conversation with a middle-aged man.

Kate and Sara sat and placed a quick order for hot chocolate. Sara blew on her hands before setting them onto her cheeks and ears, in a vain effort to warm up. Kate chuckled; Sara mumbled. Kate should have been colder than her, but she appeared unaffected.

Physically, Kate's transformation was tame. She and Sara had both been short and frail as teenagers. A few years later, Sara had ended up an average-looking woman. She remained shy, inconspicuous. She'd been called pretty, but she remained convinced she was mostly unremarkable. Kate was shorter and slimmer—just above a meter and a half, Sara guessed. Kate used to hate that about herself. Sara had sometimes teased her, but, more frequently, she told Kate she was jealous of her inability to gain weight despite her appetite for sweets.

In Sara's eyes, Kate had always been well put together, effortlessly clever and pretty, and that hadn't changed. Her eyes were a complex hazel, warm and shining with intelligence and relentless curiosity. Her smile was reserved but friendly. Her expression and voice were calm and controlled. Kate had been a serious, humble and selfless person; at least, that was the persona she had assumed when dealing with most people. Sara, on the other hand, had been privy to the real, mischievous Kate. Just like she was familiar with her hair, seemingly black earlier yet now an awesome dark auburn thanks to the warmer light.

"How have you been?" Sara asked again.

"Good. Good. You?"

"Fine!"

The two of them burst out laughing, mocking the ridiculousness of their conversation. They had never liked customary courtesies and small talk. A short hi, a look and a smile were enough for them. They had been fine with not talking at all.

"So. Kate. Not in Germany anymore? You're working for the European Space Agency yet?"

Kate chuckled, shaking her head. "You really thought I was smart enough, and selfless enough, to go that route? No. I'm just another software engineer, working in the security department for a company you've never heard of, which makes hundreds of millions. That's why I'm back. I actually returned a while ago. I'm sorry I didn't poke you."

"It's all right," Sara said with a smile. "You're here now. And you're going to tell me everything!"

"There's not much to say..."

Turned out, there was. It sounded a bit too much like small talk, but they needed to reconnect. They couldn't just delve into what deep and surprising developments had happened in their lives. Not yet. They needed to get to know each other all over again. Fortunately, they were helped by mugs of hot chocolate and cookies.

Both were grinding through early working life, after each completing their years in higher education. Kate had gone to a prestigious graduate school in Germany, and had managed to land this so-called nice situation, creating software and performing security audits while locked within four walls. Sara slaved away in a junior role at a press agency, after she had somehow ended up in literary courses at her university. She hoped to be promoted to an actual writer, or perhaps to eventually replace the editor-in-chief himself.

"Journalist, huh?" Kate said. "I'm a bit surprised, but that's really cool."

"Yeah... I wouldn't have believed it myself. I want to do what I can to improve things for people. It's important to care, to be there for those who need it. It's also important to call out repeated wrongdoings and organized discrimination."

Kate nodded. She put her hands on the table. "So... not writing love stories then?" She made a heart with her fingers.

Sara giggled and pushed at her friend's hands. "Not right now, no! It's all non-fiction, horror stories. I don't write much of anything that makes it into the magazine. And honestly, my stuff is pretty bland and uninspired."

"Like hell. You've read a ton of books; you have a giant library to draw inspiration from. And you're clever and well-spoken. I'll need to read everything you've ever written."

"Don't get your hopes up. Reality and fiction are two entirely different

beasts.” Sara sighed. “What about you? Video games and space, as always? Or have you gone through some exceptional transformation? Will you tell me you’ve kept on reading, even without me to push you around?”

Kate finished her drink. She chuckled nervously. “I haven’t changed much. Well, actually... I’ve been writing too.” She munched on a cookie.

Kate had always been fairly shy when talking about herself, if not evasive. Sara was careful to respect her privacy, even though she always wanted to know more about her best friend. It was in no small part because of Kate that Sara felt invested with a mission to do good, to better the world and its people. She wondered what Kate would write about, and if she would consider sharing it.

“Not anything serious,” Kate continued. “Little things, whatever goes through my mind, whatever happens on the day. Also some short stories and attempts at poetry.” Sara smiled widely. That sounded cute. Typical girly stuff. Not at all like Kate. “I’ve also been writing code, and documentation, and reports. Obviously.”

Kate and Sara had been the quiet kids who preferred studying, playing games and reading over going outside, practicing sports or engaging with people. The two of them had hung out together constantly, usually just lazing around at Sara’s home or at a café. Kate had been lively, smart, cute, the main character in their group of friends. Even when she had been crossing the threshold into adulthood—she was about six months older than Sara—she had retained the look of a young teen, an air of childish mischief and a healthy distrust of authority. It was almost strange that she would land an ordinary desk job, but at the same time it suited their common shut-in lifestyle, the choice of going with the flow and not thinking too much.

Sara's mother had praised Kate as a model of a proper and intelligent young woman, and of a hardworking and successful student, if only to get on her daughter's nerves. Sara was certain she worked twice as hard as Kate did, even if her results paled next to Kate's. Nevertheless, she had never felt any kind of jealousy; rather she looked up to Kate, asked her to teach her a way to become as talented as she was. Kate was her best and dearest friend and that had never changed, no matter the distance between them.

That day in the café, it was like their years apart had never happened, as if the many events and encounters from their separate lives were only meant to be stories for them to one day share. They were two friends having a good time and they easily reverted to the ever-joyful teenagers they had once been.

When the second round of hot chocolate arrived, Sara noticed that Kate was staring at her with a weird expression. She politely remarked on it.

"You have blue hair," Kate said bluntly.

"What? Oh, right. There's still a bit of it." Sara checked her light brown hair hanging down to her shoulders and caught a few bluish strands. "I was trying a few things. For fun."

Sara had become somewhat self-conscious about her looks. She wanted to spice it up a bit, to make herself less bland. No, it was more than that. She wanted to be attractive; she wanted people to notice her. While the Kate and Sara of old had disregarded such concerns and were content with their natural selves, hanging around Audrey and Kristina had made Sara reconsider a great many things in life.

"Is it supposed to have a special meaning?" Sara asked.

“Uh, no. I mean, I don’t think so? I only thought that I might have been imagining it, you dyeing your hair. It looks really cool. I love it!

“Thanks.” Sara smiled warmly, pride swelling within her.

“I guess colorful hair is in fashion now.” Kate ran her hand through her own hair with a distracted look. “Not that I’d know anything about that. That’s the kind of stuff that’d make my parents crazy. I thought about doing it myself, once or twice, if only to annoy them.”

Sara laughed. “I’m sure you’d look amazing. Your parents would be stunned. With delight. What color?”

“It was only ever a thought,” Kate said hesitantly. “Deep black. Or red. Maybe even pink...”

“Damn, girl! Try it!”

“No way.” Kate shook her head, her grim expression contrasting with her friend’s enthusiasm. Sara wanted to tell her how easy it was, how exhilarating such a simple change could be, and, evidently, how gorgeous she might become. If nothing else, Kate coloring her hair would give them another thing in common.

“I mean, your hair is amazing as it is,” Sara said, eyeing the woman’s short auburn hair. Did it even need any artificial highlights? “I wonder which video game or TV character you’d model after. Because you would do that.”

“Of course I would. I was thinking about Vi. She’s quite a bit buffer than me though, and cooler. But then, who cares, right? It’s not a matter of how ridiculous I end up looking, it’s that I get to be someone else. You think I could pull off Kerrigan? Would you like to see me try?”

Sara giggled softly. She had enough video game knowledge to know

which character she meant. There were two variants, and they were not alike at all. Which one was she thinking of? The redhead psychic assassin or the overlord of a world-devouring swarm? Kate didn't leave room for her to ask.

"How about you?" Kate asked. "Why blue?"

"Take a guess. Maybe because I knew you'd like it."

Sara meant to gently tease her. Kate replied with a soft, indifferent chuckle.

"I know you by heart, Sara. You don't care what other people think about you."

"So what? There was time enough to change. And I do care what you think about me, for your information. Regardless, I just did a hint of color on a few strands, to try it out. I want to look cool, and prettier, but I still need to be presentable at work. My boss already called me out about it, asking what I was trying to turn into." She ground her teeth. "At least my parents wouldn't care."

Sara paused. Kate was eyeing her suspiciously, trying to hide a grin behind her raised mug.

"What?" Sara demanded, jokingly serious.

"What, what? Heck, you're imagining me with pink hair, but I can't check you out in turn? I can't wonder what my best friend would cook up to create a sensation? I easily imagine you with fully colored hair. I'd love it. Anyone would."

Sara had been quite joyful all day long, but hearing Kate compliment her and call Sara her best friend after all this time was something special. It triggered a burst of warmth deep within her. She suddenly felt terribly

happy.

“So... we’re still best friends?” she asked timidly.

“Of course,” Kate replied with the tiniest of stammers. “To be honest, no one particularly took over, not that the spot was up for grabs. What about on your side? I’m still your best friend?”

“Sure. Although, you might have gone down in the rankings. Fourth best friend at most. Fifth? Let’s see... There’s Kristina, Andrea, my mom—in no particular order. Obviously, there’s no way you’d be above Audrey. I’d say you’re competing with the guy from the bakery. And soon with that cute server at the bar.”

“You jerk. I hate you.” Kate pouted and reached for the last cookie.

Sara grabbed her hand to stop her. “Yes, Kate. You’re my best friend,” she confessed. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too. That cookie is mine though.”

“Damn you!”

Joyful conversation continued late into the afternoon. The night had fallen already, and it would be downright freezing, which made Sara less than enthusiastic about going back outside. Maybe a third hot chocolate?

“It’s getting late,” Kate said.

Sara glared at Kate for her matter-of-fact attitude, unchanged by the years. She allowed herself to check the time on her phone, then sighed. “Yeah. I guess it’s time to go.”

She made it obvious she was reluctant, drinking from her empty mug, arranging and rearranging her scarf ten times, chatting with the server while paying. She could not fathom going back to her stale life just yet.



This afternoon had been the kind of bliss she was yearning for, moments of simple happiness, moments to share with someone dear to her heart.

However, Kate seemed decided on moving on. She was standing up and wearing her jacket.

"Let's do this again soon," Sara suggested. "We should have dinner together."

"Sounds cool. Some other time."

"I'll pick a restaurant and invite you."

Kate looked thoughtful. "All right. Pick whatever time suits you. I'll be sure to clear my schedule just for you." She winked. She was absolutely adorable.

Sara laughed and grabbed Kate's arm. "And let's have hot chocolate every week, like before." She was reverting to her old self, someone needy, someone who had few friends but longed to spend every minute with them.

She felt bad about it. She thought maybe it was why she hadn't had a real partner besides Audrey. She had wanted to be around her lover all the time, and had wanted her lover to be around her all the time. She had known it was impossible, and she had tried to temper her needs. She was trying to grow up, to be a good person, to make others happy rather than focus on only herself. She usually made a mess of things.

Kate grumbled. "You greedy glutton. Wasn't lounging and hoarding sugar more of your thing back in the day?"

"I think both of us were lazy and happy to just cuddle and watch a movie. Although, you were the one who came up with most of our bad ideas. Actually, yes, it might have been your fault we'd spend the entire

afternoon in a café.”

They pushed past the door, and the cold cut the conversation short. They quickly walked back to the station.

“Well, this is where we part again,” Sara said. “Not for quite so long this time, hopefully. See you later?”

Kate hesitated a second, then hugged Sara. “It was nice hanging out with you again, Sara.”

Sara returned the hug and gleefully answered, “It’s nice to see you too, Kate. Take care. Until next time.”

“See you. Call me whenever, and I’ll make time for you.”

“I will. Probably as soon as I’m back home.”

That triggered a delightful laugh from Kate. Then, she waved and left with hurried steps. Sara went her own way. She felt she had not stopped smiling the whole day. She was looking forward to winter.

## Chapter 2

# Chrysalis

*Have you noticed the crow at the window? Its black eye is fixated on you. It caws once. You notice how silent the place has become. Not a fly buzzing, not a light hissing. You can't hear the television. Your own noises are faint, your thoughts distant.*

*Was that thunder? Did the baby wake? Are those cries for help?*

*Hey. Girl. You awake? You alive?*

\* \* \*

### **Present day – Sunday, 27 November 2016**

Sara tried not to pay too much mind to what was out of her control. And yet, she could not stop noticing how time passed her by. The years came and went, regardless of her life feeling fulfilling or wasted. Life happened, every second.

Her most precious moments were spent hanging out with someone dear to her, forgetting all her worries, feeling happy without the need to try. Reuniting with Kate had been such a moment, one of the best times of her life. And yet she was already worrying about it.

She worried she and Kate were quite different from who they had been as teens. Sara herself had changed a lot. Not in a bad way, and not enough to put any invisible wall between them. She had simply grown up, experienced formative years, and lived through incredible happiness and

sadness.

She was worried their lives were so completely disconnected that they could not be friends again. They had never proclaimed they were best friends forever, but Sara had considered Kate her closest friend for a significant part of her existence, and everyone had known them to be inseparable. She felt guilty about letting the two of them grow apart.

She was worried she was bothering Kate too much, since she had been texting her a whole lot. She dared not call her or invite her out again so soon, and yet she felt unusually empty, unusually wanting for someone else's presence.

She was restless. She knew she had a skill for screwing up, more than any measure of self-confidence. She had to act with caution.

Sara's phone rang. She let out a tired sigh and picked up the call.

"Yes, Mom?" she answered, her voice adequately polite, and equally uninterested.

"Good evening, Sara. How are you?"

"Fine, fine. What about you?"

"Great, as always. I'm not bothering you, am I?"

"You're not. I was just tidying up after baking."

In reality, she'd been sitting in front of the oven for a while, enjoying the warmth and the scent. There had to be many better uses for her time but what did it matter? She liked the simple things in life. Deep down, she thought she didn't really care for changing the world; she wanted to be happy, and for the people around her to be happy.

"Good. Something tasty to cheer yourself up?" Sara's mother asked.

She had that tone in her voice, the one parents used when they were concerned about their children but didn't want them to know. It was nice, and yet, sometimes, it could be incredibly infuriating. Overprotective people were all Sara had ever known.

"An apple pie. And no, just to bake something. Do I need cheering up?"

"You sounded annoyed."

"That's just how children talk to their parents, especially on the phone."

"Ah, I see. You were always quite the problem child."

"No, I was not!"

She had been an exemplary kid, and her family the most typical of happy families.

The doorbell rang. Sara went to open it while listening to her mother's usual small talk. She found Kristina standing there, beaming as always.

Kristina was a petite woman with beige skin—slightly more tanned than Sara's—and wonderful curves. She had cold black eyes and a mix of blond and brown hair that cascaded down to just below her shoulders. Today, she was rocking a warm green dress that showed her legs, pretty things covered by thick, black stockings. Kris was a gorgeous woman, ranking barely below the impossible standards set by Audrey. She was crafty, funny, and a great listener. She was also moody, lazy, and prideful. Most importantly, she was a very good friend, the best there was.

She stopped by Sara's occasionally, at the most random of times, to check up on her friend, she said, and to freak her out. Sara was considering going out more often, if only for the chance that Kris might find the door actually closed.

Carrying two bags, Kris pushed one into Sara's hands and rushed inside without more of a greeting. Ten seconds later, there was music blasting through the tiny old speakers and a board game set on the coffee table. Kris was hopping on the sofa, like an overexcited kid who had just come home and expected to be treated to some kind of snack.

Sara frowned disapprovingly. She moved to the kitchen to check on the pie and finish her phone call in relative peace.

Sara's apartment wasn't fit for having people over. It was tiny and furnished adequately for her solitary lifestyle. That was fine by her. She would stay in her bed, reading or napping or dreaming. She would eat in the kitchen, with just enough space to stand, or at her desk between drafts, or slouched on the sofa while watching the television. There wasn't much to do with friends, and there was certainly no place suited for an actual meal. Kristina had never found it reason enough to stay away.

Suddenly, arms embraced Sara's waist, and she jumped, almost dropping her phone in her panic. Kris giggled in her ear.

"You scared the crap out of me!" Sara hissed in a low voice, her phone held far away.

"Who's on the phone?"

"It's my mom. Checking up on me. Why do people think they need to check up on me?"

Kris eyed her suspiciously. "Because, otherwise, you wouldn't talk to anyone." That was absolutely false. She was not nearly as self-absorbed and asocial as she had once been. Kristina didn't let her argue. "Oh, it is Mrs. Sara's Mom!" she yelled. "Good afternoon, ma'am! Thank you so much for bringing Sara into this world! We're eternally grateful."

Sara pulled out of her friend's grip and rushed out of the kitchen. When she stopped, she realized she was being played with again. Kris was laughing her head off, and more laughter was coming from the phone.

"Sorry about that," Sara said to her mom.

"Who's the woman in your home, Sara?" The tone seemed casual, but Sara knew her mother was a perceptive one. Well, she was wrong—Kris wasn't her girlfriend.

"Kristina. A friend. I might have mentioned her once or twice."

"Right! Well, give her my love, and my thanks for bearing with you."

"She's the one barging into my home!"

The phone call ended soon after, with Sara's mother apologizing for taking over her daughter's time with her friend. Sara shook her head. She liked her family, and how supportive they had always been. However, topics of conversation with them were pretty much always focused on food, work and holidays. She rarely spoke about friends, and never about lovers. They knew she was a lesbian, and there was little doubt they were wondering about each and every female friend she brought up.

"Let's have a girls' night!" Kris exclaimed. "I asked Tiphaine to join us, but she wasn't available. You're up for a game?"

Disgruntled, Sara lay down on the sofa and wrapped herself in the blanket. She held on tight to a cushion while distractedly watching Kris circle around her to sit on the other end of the sofa. Sara sighed when she had to pull her legs under her to make room. Kris had brought glasses filled with fruit juice. It was a nice gesture, even if it belonged to Sara in the first place.

"Why are you always this fired up when you come to visit? You think

I'm actually fond of having lively, crazy people around?"

"You most certainly are! And I'm fired up because I'm staying for dinner. Anthony is at his parents'. I wasn't going to spend the whole weekend alone in my house. So it's all right if I stay for dinner, right?"

"You're already here..."

"You can still say no."

Sara sighed, but then a smile appeared on her face. "You know me. You're always welcome, Kris."

"Thanks! You're the best." Kris sniffed the air. "You smell delicious today, or is it that pie baking? I've been starving for some good food."

"It's not for you," Sara said. "It's for the colleagues."

"What! You bring homemade food to work? Who the hell do they think you are? They think it's the eighteenth century or something? Women and girls in the kitchen, while men do the hard work?"

Sara giggled. "It's nothing like that. I can't eat all of it myself, so I share it."

"Just ask me! I'll come by and take everything. I'll take you home with me, for that matter!"

"I'm not okay with you coming over every Sunday."

"Every Sunday!" Kris exclaimed. "No wonder you cook so well; you do it all the time. You know you get freaking scary when you decide to give a serious go at something, right?"

"I'm not giving a go at anything. I've been cooking for years. And you're very aware of it, you glutton."



“Okay, well, I’ll be satisfied with only dinner. For now, we play.”

Kris explained the rules quickly. It was a simple game where they had to complete missions together. Sara found she liked it, even though Kristina did not seem particularly intent on winning. After another awful decision from her, Sara facepalmed with the blanket.

“What?” Kristina asked.

“Do you ever think before you take an action? I set you up, and you do the opposite of what’s needed!”

“Hey! You learned the game fifteen minutes ago. I actually know how to play.”

“You do? When did you buy the game?”

“Uh, yesterday.” They burst into laughter. Kris was awful at games. All of them. That wasn’t why Sara was fond of her, but it helped that she could score a victory from time to time.

“What’s in the bag, by the way?” Sara asked. “The one you threw at me.”

“Uh, maybe the stuff you asked me about? You didn’t look yet? It’s all kinds of hair product, and a bunch of dye.”

“You actually got it! Thanks.”

“Well, you’d never have gone out for it. I’m looking out for you—and your wallet. Hair salons are expensive, and you only want to give dye a try.”

“I also want it to look good!”

“Don’t worry about it; I’ve done this stuff all my life.”

“Wait, you’re gonna do it?” Sara asked.

“Is there somebody else that comes by and helps you?”

“And steals my food? Yes, there is. My neighbor, Andrea. He’s a really nice guy.”

Kristina snickered. “We both know he’s not your type.”

“I’m not having sex with him! He’s just a friend, if that. You believe Audrey rubbed off on me that badly?”

Kristina’s laughter was cut short. Sara hadn’t meant to lash out. “I was joking,” Kris said.

Sara tried to calm down, inhaling deeply. “Sorry.”

She had been worked up recently, more than usual. It was a good thing Kris came over regularly. It helped with keeping her spirits up, and Sara would not have reached out by herself. She was prone to falling back onto herself, to keeping her hopes and dreams inside. Every so often, she would feel a crushing depression growing all over her, her optimism twisted until it was all the wrong way.

Kris was the person Sara called when she was breaking down.

\* \* \*

When Sara awoke in the morning, she asked herself what was so important that she needed to get up. When she got home from work, she asked herself what she had accomplished. When she went to sleep, she asked herself if she was happier now than she had been the day before.

Difficult questions, senseless. Sometimes, Sara wished it was all far

simpler. It might be a matter of willpower, of confidence. She had a life worth living for, was making good use of her time, and was happy with what the universe had provided for her. But she was always unsure, not quite satisfied. Would she ever stop questioning? Would she ever stop wanting more?

Sara was convinced she had become stuck in the monotony of a daily routine. Plain, comfortable, enjoyable, but unfulfilling. She slept, she ate, she worked, she played, she read. Yet there were so many things to do. So many experiences to go through. So many stories to hear about. She wanted happiness but she did not know how to search for it. She wanted meaning but she did not know her own thoughts. A life of pleasures and hardships, of discoveries and unknowns. Why did so much of what she did felt so insignificant? What were these bugs, these worries that would eat at every second of her life until there wouldn't be a single dawn left?

Her life was set. She had a job she applied herself to with seriousness and ambition. She worked from nine to five; sometimes she would stay until nine, sometimes she would call it quits at three. Most of the time, she spent about two hours doing extra work in the evening, alone at her place, leaving behind messy drafts and shredded paper.

She spent her free time reading. Romance, mystery, science fiction, philosophy, slice of life, classic literature—she read anything and everything. She didn't get to share it all that much nowadays. She used to gossip about love with Kristina, to debate philosophy with Audrey. They didn't see each other as often now that they were done with university. They were still friends, but they had their own lives. Kristina was settling down with her boyfriend and Audrey was expected to maintain some distance, since she was Sara's ex-girlfriend. Actually, Audrey was a big, unresolved issue, a landmine calling for Sara to trip over it, but there was

no way she would find what courage she needed to risk the quiet friendship they had settled into.

There was still her family, people she could rely on no matter what, like her mother just now. Her parents called her weekly, although they kept the day and time random, to keep her on her toes. She welcomed their unconditional love, as well as the distraction from daily worries, yet it remained just another ordinary thing, and she barely had anything to tell them.

Sara's sister, Marie, was happily married and had a baby boy. These sounded like the most wonderful things in the world. Which they probably were. A happy relationship, a happy family. Happiness.

Sara tried really hard not to be envious of people with better lives than her, people who were well put together. Her parents never pressured her about anything, never took over her projects in life, never questioned her sexual orientation, never asked about close friends or lovers, never wondered when she would be president, never told her to be someone else, never forced her to be normal and happy and a nice little girl. It was just something in the air, as if social pressure had an existence of its own.

She was on good terms with her parents, even more so with her sister. She visited Marie's family regularly, offering to babysit her nephew, Victor, so that his parents could go out. It was easy; Victor would be sound asleep, and Sara could laze around the living room, reading or watching television while devouring chips. It was one of the rare times she left home beyond the need to go to work or to get groceries.

A long time ago, an excited teenager and a total bookworm, Sara would have hung out with Kate all day long. She would have recounted every detail of every story. She would have debated the deepest nature of the cheapest romance. She would have made tier lists of characters she

shipped together. She might have been monologuing a whole lot, with Kate only lending her an ear, sympathetic but slightly bored, unwilling to go down crazy rabbit holes with Sara. Kate had preferred playing video games and venting about life, hobbies Sara indulged in as well, if with moderation.

Then there had been Audrey, and a wonderful love story. Audrey had chased any worry away from her mind. She'd made Sara use up her energy every new day, and every night she would lie down and feel satisfied. Audrey had encouraged Sara to believe in herself and to express her wants and needs. They had been so happy together. If only it hadn't ended.

Now it was back to this chronic loneliness, a deep angst she did not know how to deal with.

Last Friday, when Sara had gone out to babysit, she had spent most of the evening texting. Kate was busy playing video games and had wanted to go to sleep, but Sara pestered her enough to keep her awake late into the night, while Kate had been trying to push her away by sending snippets from her fictive horror stories.

At least Sara still had Kris. Now that she thought about it, Kris was like her new Kate. Not her new Audrey, but that was all right. That would be out of line. Despite some casual flirting, the relationship between Kris and Sara had always been explicitly limited to being friends. Sara would not risk it, no matter how comfortable they were with each other.

Sara wanted, needed, someone she could be absolutely in sync with, someone to discuss anything and everything with, someone she loved without reserve. Sara had been lucky to have Kate. And Audrey. And Kris. All things considered, she was very lucky.

“So... who’s Kate?” Kristina asked. The name must have slipped past her lips.

“Uh. She’s my best friend. From high school.”

Kristina smiled. “And what’s up with Kate?”

Right. Kristina did not know about Kate. They avoided talking too much about the past. They looked forward, made plans, debated what life could be. Keeping to themselves, going with the flow, that was done with. What they were going to be now was up to them, and they wanted to decide on that without looking back. And yet, there was still so much they wished for rather than did anything about.

“Well, I guess I’ve just been thinking about her lately. We used to hang out together all the time. Like seriously, she was at my house every other day, and she came with us on vacation. But then, during the last year of high school, she became very stressed, more than usual. There was this whole thing with her boyfriend I never quite understood, and which she wouldn’t talk about, and she was working extra hard to get into some elite graduate school abroad. Her mother is German, and Kate wanted to live there for a while. Suddenly, we were thousands of kilometers apart.”

Kris was watching her, staring at her with eyes that were all too serious. Sara chuckled.

“But people grow apart all the time, you know,” Sara continued. “We couldn’t see each other anymore, and one day we stopped texting. And that was it. I didn’t fault her. I fault myself for not keeping up with her. Anyway, I survived. I was lonely for a while, but I found new friends.” She smiled at Kristina.

"I wondered about her, once in a while. I was curious how life was going for her, if she'd made new friends, if she was happy, if she ever thought about me." Sara trailed off, then went over the latest development. "We got together and spent a whole afternoon at the Hyperglass last week. And, well, that was the best time I've had in years. It feels like we're best friends again. I want us to hang out all the time, but I'm scared she's gonna ghost me if I keep bothering her. I know I can be a lot sometimes."

Kristina looked at her with excitement. "You loved her?" she asked. "You're resurrecting your first love?"

Sara giggled, feeling the slightest bit nervous. She wished. Sure, Kate was special, Kate was half her life. But Kate had been her dear friend, close friend, best friend, not her girlfriend, not even a momentary crush.

"We were never like that," Sara replied. "Audrey was the first and only real partner I've ever had, you know that." Sara had not felt any particularly strong attraction toward women before Audrey. She hadn't even had any real sex drive or needs to speak of. She would never have even thought about Kate that way. It wasn't completely impossible, but it was unlikely, and she would remember. "Kate was my best friend. She is my best friend. It's just awesome being with her again. I'm not going to flirt with her."

"Right. Not like you flirt with me, your other best friend, all the time."

"I can have several best friends. And so what if I flirt with you? I know you very well; I know what's okay and what's not. I also know you won't go out or have sex with me."

"You've never asked."

"You're straight. And Kate probably is too."

Kris laughed at her. “But you haven’t asked.”

“Right. Kris. Will you have sex with me?”

“No.”

“See?”

“Because I don’t want to destroy our beautiful friendship and because I won’t cheat on Anthony.” Kristina was being her usual troublesome self, sporting a mischievous smile and acting just inviting enough that Sara couldn’t help but wonder what she was thinking.

Sara sighed. Kris was always infuriatingly playful around her. Kris was the one who dragged Sara into lesbian bars and set up her on dates with her friends, in some attempt to rectify Sara’s pitiful relationship resume. Why did Kristina know so many queer people and the best places to meet them?

Audrey and Kris were more alike than they would admit. It was why they remained the best of friends even while they fought several times per week. They cared, truly cared. In their own, sometimes messed-up ways, they tried to make Sara happy and to boost her confidence. Audrey and Kris constantly pushed Sara to have fun and to look for new experiences.

Meanwhile, Kristina had been going steady with the same guy for more than ten years now, and Sara was positive she would die before letting anyone seduce her away from him. They were living together. They already had a nice house. They seemed like a perfect couple, although a bit old-school. Finally, Kris swore she was heterosexual.

As for Audrey... Audrey was a disaster. A beautiful disaster. She didn’t know the meaning of settling down. She couldn’t even stay in bed for five



minutes before her hyperactivity pushed her to get up and find something new to do, something exciting, even something dangerous.

“No but seriously,” Kristina continued, “it’s not because you’re mad you can’t have sex with me that you can’t try with another best friend.” She sounded quite bitter about that best-friend thing. “You’re nice and honest. Just go up to her and ask if she’s interested. Then you’ll know.” Sara shook her head. “Suit yourself. You’ll stay single forever. When was the last time you even had sex? You’ve done it at least once since Audrey, right?”

“Not your business... But I did. One year ago. Justine.”

“Ouch. Dark times. Let’s not reminisce again. But I mean, at least she got you off, right?”

“Still not your business. And I’m perfectly fine not having sex for a while. It’s not what I’m looking for. And do not start talking about Audrey again!”

“I wasn’t gonna.” Kristina paused. “I only want to make sure you’re happy, Sara. I want you to find your soulmate and have the love story you deserve. You like love stories so much...”

Sara wanted to remind her dear friend exactly how much of a snooze-fest Kristina’s own love life was, but the snarky retort died on her lips. They talked about love all the time. Sara talked about love all the time. She had done so for as long as she could remember, and with pretty much every single one of her friends. It had begun with Kate, and Kate had been the first one to say Sara liked love stories so much she must be impatient for the real thing.

A decade later and Sara was hopelessly single. Love-deprived, sex-deprived, happiness-deprived. Well, she liked to feel sorry for herself, but the truth was she had known love and walked away from it, because she

was stupid and believed she could find something better, because she thought it was not perfect enough.

Screw Audrey. Why Sara could never stop her from weaving her way into her mind was beyond her. Kris didn't help. She liked torturing Sara about her flawless ex-girlfriend as much as she liked talking shit about the woman.

Maybe she could ask Kate. About her love life. She could tell her about Audrey, about how incredible it had been. She could tell her she was still looking for the perfect love story, and that she wasn't quite sure she would ever find another one. She could even admit that she was still friends with Audrey, tell Kate how weird and awesome it was to be able to hang around her to this day, how pitiful Sara was, that she could never be brave enough to deal with this massive thing between them, the indefinite break in their romantic relationship.

Kate might have her own stories. She would certainly offer a fresh perspective, and unending support. She would probably laugh about it too, not that she was the kind to mock others, only that there was nothing Kate loved more than to tease Sara and her great ideas about love. Oh, she would laugh. She would roll on the floor in laughter once Sara told her she couldn't decide if she'd been in love with Audrey. Perhaps Sara was still in love with Audrey at this very moment. After all, Audrey had to be the reason Sara was incapable of moving on to a new relationship.

"Just ask her out, Sara. And I mean Kate, not Audrey."

Sara sighed. She did not see herself even considering such a risky endeavor. And yet... Could she ask her best friend out, just like that? After all, she had already asked her to dinner without even thinking about it. Would Kate not think Sara was absolutely crazy? It might be completely, utterly stupid, but maybe it was not a big deal, maybe it would be the best

course of action. She did not mean to be deceitful around Kate. And now that the idea was in her mind, she knew she would torture herself over it for months and then for years, wondering about her feelings forever, wondering about her love for the women around her.

“Are you going to make us dinner?” Kris asked. “Or do you want to take a bath? Or maybe—”

Sara threw the cushion at Kris. There was no stopping her from laughing and toying with her.

In the end, even if Sara remained single and unsatisfied, she had good friends who were wonderful to hang out with, and who were there for her each and every time she needed them. She even had Kate back now. Reuniting with her had been an incredible burst of joy, and she wanted to entertain positive feelings as much as possible.

She craved some happy love story, but her few dates over the last few years had left her as scared and hopeless as ever, feeling like she was stumbling into quick sexual encounters rather than finding meaningful connections.

Perhaps the perfect love story did not exist. Perhaps she had been foolish enough to bail out on the only one life had given her.

## Chapter 3

# Intoxicated

*People like to come up with impossible scenarios and pointless questions. How would you survive if you were lost in space? What would you bring with you to a desert island? What superpower would you want? How much money would be enough to make you do some really stupid shit? What would you change if you could go back in time?*

*I'm not interested in such wild speculation. And that's coming from someone who considers herself full-on mental.*

*Aren't there way better questions, unforeseen consequences that actually happen and make sense? Would you change the world to save complete strangers? Would you want to kill yourself if people claimed you were crazy and dangerous? How would you reason with someone who was taught to hate you from birth? How would you argue your innocence if people burned you at the stake? Are you certain you're sane and always have been?*

*But then, who has time to waste by walking the paths of their mind?*

\* \* \*

**Present day – Wednesday, 7 December 2016**

Sara took a quick look at herself in the mirror. She wore warm jeans, dark blue and slightly faded, along with a white sweater that was the opposite of revealing. She thought she looked all right, which was good.

Why worry anyway? She was only going to the restaurant with a friend; there was no need to get all dressed up. Even the perfume from her shampoo should dissipate long before she met up with Kate.

Her blue hair was noticeable however. And absolutely fabulous. Kristina had done an awesome job. She hoped Kate liked it. She giggled. She worried and smiled like a girl about to go on her first date. If ever she had been trying to act like Audrey, she was utterly failing at it. The memory of an alley went through her mind, and her cheeks reddened. Sara was not planning to do anything like that! She was having dinner with her friend, and that was it.

She made her way outside hidden under a winter coat, a heavy scarf and a woolly hat, her jeans tucked into high boots. In the middle of winter, with the night coming early, her first priority was to avoid freezing, not to be fashionable. She arrived at the restaurant right on time, and soon noticed Kate's slight figure stepping toward her. They gave each other the briefest of greetings before entering with haste.

The place Sara had selected, a nondescript Italian restaurant, looked somewhat crowded. The main room was hosting a large group of customers, animated and noisy, obnoxiously so. Sara was relieved when the server guided them to the second level with its softer mood, to a table that was reasonably far from the agitation.

For a long minute, the two friends did little more than browse the menu with intent. The atmosphere was a bit tense, and a strange unease settled between them. Sara could tell. They had so often gone to the café together, enjoyed excited conversation without a care in the world. Why was it that they were suddenly afraid to utter a single word, not even daring awkward looks or inquiries?

Sara hazarded a stare at her friend, then a smile when she caught her

attention. Kate smiled in return, and suddenly, the tension was gone. Sara started the discussion, forgetting all about choosing what to eat and how special this occasion might feel.

Once the server came back, they realized they did not know what to order and burst out laughing. Kate dismissed the server politely, and their minds turned to the problem of choice.

“What would you like to eat?” Kate asked.

“No idea.” Sara’s eyes scanned left then right repeatedly. “But I’m starving.”

“I’m choosing then. And since you’re paying...” Kate started with a sly smile.

“Wait. Are you going to choose the most expensive thing just to piss me off? You want to order high-class wine or something?”

Sara seldom drank alcohol herself, but Kate might have changed from the earnest teenager she had known. Neither had been the type to sneak out for wine-tasting sessions. Rather, they would lock themselves in a room with soda and cookies, or sit down for hot chocolate and bread. Sweet snacks could have been their trademark, in a café or at home. Not that it was something special, but for aimless people like them, small things were important. They made you happy.

It was likely that Kate’s tastes had changed since then.

“Oh no, I don’t drink,” Kate answered, a bit defensively. “Meals are water only. That’s a rule.” She chuckled awkwardly. Sara’s parents had tried putting limits on their sugar consumption, and Kate had been careful about respecting their rules, making Sara seem like a troublemaker by comparison. “I also don’t like most food. I’m really choosing between only

a few options when I'm at a restaurant."

"Well, I'll be sure to cook you tasty stuff to sort that out. We can't have you only eating pizza."

"Sara, you're the one who chose the Italian restaurant." Hazel eyes stared at her, accusatory. Then her gaze relaxed. "I'll be having pasta. I had pizza the day before yesterday." Sara saw the expected impish smile appear, but it was faint.

Their dishes arrived quickly, just as the place was filling up. The cheerful discussion slowed down so they could eat while their food was hot. Sara noticed Kate looking around, sometimes scrutinizing people while she held an unreadable expression.

Kate was eating slowly and carefully. Sara eyed her own plate, tagliatelle with spicy sauce, after she had already started digging in with enthusiasm. Suddenly, she became very self-conscious, and worried about making a mess of herself. It was turning out the food she had ordered was difficult to eat while looking proper, and she cursed herself for not thinking about that beforehand.

That was a strange notion to worry about. She had never been nervous or worked up about her appearance in front of Kate before. Nor did she put much attention on her manners. Well, not consciously at least. Sara was not about to make special efforts for strangers looking at her, and she had never needed to for Kate. Yet, she realized she mimicked her friend's careful moves now. And she stared too, when Kate was busy with her food.

Sara felt herself smile. Kate was nice-looking. She always had been, but it became distractingly obvious once she allowed her focus to wander over her features. Dark, short hair, healthy and concealing alluring shades of

red. A perfect face, rich and round, with smooth reliefs. She had the slightest hint of freckles, a few discreet moles and a pale tone that easily reddened in embarrassment when Sara stared at her. A hint of pale skin was exposed below her neck, along with the metal chain for a hidden necklace.

Sara almost giggled. Why would Kate conceal it? She never wore jewelry. Was it actually Sara's necklace? It wasn't impossible Kate had kept it all these years. That would be so cute! And it would mean so much. Sara could never be sure people genuinely liked her. Not truly. But, with Kate, it had never been a question. Kate loved her. Sara wanted to hear her say it. She wished she could listen to Kate's heart, to know her secrets and discover what kind of woman she had become. Sara wanted to see more of her.

With a start, Sara urgently brought her gaze back up. Here were Kate's hazel eyes again. She usually kept them slightly downcast. Not for Sara though. When they were together, she kept them up and visible, shining proudly with light. Sara might lose herself in those eyes.

Kate was looking straight at her.

Sara thanked spicy food for offering an excuse for her sudden discomfort as she looked down and coughed into her napkin. *Oh crap*, she thought anxiously, *I was checking her out. I was checking Kate out. I was checking her out!* She felt her heart miss a beat, her mind stutter, and her whole body suppressed a shiver. She needed to pull back, to stay calm and presentable, proper. Her mind had gone there. She'd practically been undressing Kate. She'd felt a burst of raw arousal just from looking forward to what Kate hid.

Once she dared looking up, Sara found an unknown but beautiful woman, busy finishing her pasta. Sara didn't really know who Kate was



nowadays. And, similarly, Kate wasn't up to date with everything that had happened in Sara's life. Once, they had known everything about each other. What about now? Did they know each other? Were they best friends? Or were they strangers?

Why should Sara be scared? She herself was eager to discover Kate anew; would Kate not be curious herself? Did it not mean something that they were so comfortable hanging out together? They so naturally hugged each other, enjoyed each other, teased each other, admired each other.

Kate cleaned her lips and let out a soft sound of satisfaction, then did a quick scan of the room. Sara guessed she had left Kate hanging on whatever conversation they had been having, but she couldn't remember a thing about it. How rude of her. Yet, Kate didn't seem angry or troubled. Hopefully, she had thought nothing of her friend staring at her and would fail to identify her turmoil.

They shared some banter about Sara still not being finished with her food, so she tried to quicken the pace, while also staying aware of her manners and trying to look proper. She didn't think she was very successful. Her best friend waited patiently, resting her head on her hand, covering half a smile as she reassured Sara that they had all the time in the world. She wished she did, so that she would see Kate's adorable smile again. Again and again and again.

Dessert followed, and it was thankfully much less messy to eat. And suddenly, their meal was over.

"That was delicious," Kate said. "Thank you for suggesting this. Will you let me pay for the both of us?" Sara was about to protest. "I can certainly afford to invite you to dinner, once in a while."

"Sure. Thanks. I love to have dinner with you." She loved the way Kate

smiled at her, looked at her. Had she always stared at her like that? No way. There wasn't anything remarkable about it in the first place.

A few moments passed, in renewed silence. Sara had not managed to be talkative at all throughout the later part of the meal; she had not known what to say. She had been terrified to open her mouth. It should have prompted a joke from Kate, but she seemed noticeably less spirited now than she had been as a teenager. Sara winced. Was she not the one making it all awkward?

"So, I guess we're done," Kate said.

Sara nodded. They slowly made their way downstairs. Kate paid, Sara beside her, trying hard not to look. She was beginning to worry about doing anything at all, even thinking, even breathing.

It was nonsensical that she would suddenly be attracted to Kate—intensely attracted, sexually attracted. It was only that she loved women who were friendly, smart, cute, kind, caring, confident. Also, women who looked like they enjoyed having her around. She could fall in love with someone who liked putting up with her.

Kate turned to her, and again, Sara was blessed with the eyes and the smile. She beamed. Almost faltered. No. She was not that bad at controlling herself. She was acting perfectly normal. Then she realized she would have to hug Kate soon. Her best friend would notice how hot Sara was feeling, how fast her heart was beating. Damn. She needed a large glass of water, and to lie down.

"You're good?" Kate asked.

"Yeah... Yep. I mean, yes. Let's go back to the cold and dark night!" Sara didn't fake her shudder.

“No need to worry. I’m right there with you.” Kate laughed. She held the door open, giving way to Sara, who thanked her with a smile and walked outside, into the freezing, calming cold of winter.

Sara shivered and pulled her coat tighter around her. Kate bumped into her, and hastened her on. They walked quickly, close together for warmth. The station appeared, and it was time to go their separate ways. Their time together had come to an end.

“I’ll text you,” Sara said. “Let’s see each other again.” It was a weird way to talk to her best friend.

“Of course.”

Kate gave her a goodbye hug and waved, then made haste, shrinking into her jacket for protection, before disappearing completely into the underground passageways. Sara resumed moving toward home after a quiet moment, savoring the imprint Kate had left on her.

\* \* \*

The journey back felt like a fever dream. Sara’s mind was trying to focus on making measured steps and realistic statements, meanwhile her soul and heart were swaying in a sudden and unexpected storm. Her legs moved on their own, carrying her through the darkness of night, until she could stop somewhere, until she would be able to have coherent thoughts again.

She was home now. Alone. Alone with herself and her wishes and her desires. She made a single step inside her apartment, took off her coat and stopped.

“I have a crush on her.”

Sara spoke out loud, making the feeling concrete and real, testing its credibility, its sturdiness. She half expected it to dissipate like vapor and for her to burst into mad laughter.

When that did not happen, she started walking around the room, excited and energized. She fixated on her memories of Kate, her looks, her smile, her voice, the way she made Sara feel. She investigated the warmth, the spark, the fire.

*I like Kate.* She had always liked Kate. Kate was her best friend, had been for years. Reuniting with her had been magical, almost a miracle. Was it not wonderful that this friendship, this unwavering connection, might transform into some deeper passion? A new Sara was looking at a new Kate, through the fiery eye of her mind, through powerful and raw emotions in her core.

Sara’s soul yearned for someone to love, to desire, to care for. She wanted to write her own romance, her own fate. She did not want to be provided for, nor to hook up for the fun of it, nor to just stumble into some nice, good-enough life. She wanted to live the absolute happiness of the best possible love story. And she wanted to be its architect.

She wished to fall in love with Kate. It felt right. She wanted happiness again; she wanted love again. Were they not right there? Entwined by an intimate bond, ready to jump into something great with only a single step? She only had to grab Kate’s hand and whisper into her ear.

She took out her phone, looked at the wallpaper, a drawing of two happy women on the beach under the starry night sky. For a long minute, Sara considered calling Kate and telling her, confessing, before she shook her head at the ridiculous idea and put the phone down.

Sara recognized she had subpar social skills and awareness, a timidity that was often crippling, and the deepest of desires for things that were out of her control. Nevertheless, her mad mind, her loud heart, her sweaty hands, her fiery insides—they all told her the same story: a sudden and intense attraction toward Kate. Emotional, and physical. She had limited experience regarding the practicalities of romance, and the love stories she read were just that—stories—yet the intensity of her emotions left no room for juvenile wonder. Suddenly, she knew exactly how she felt about Kate, in her mind, in her body, and in her heart.

She picked up random item after random item, moved about, stared into the mirror, tapped her fingers endlessly, keeping her body busy in the same way her mind was, letting it roam freely, releasing its too-intense heat. She still had her scarf and shoes on. Finally pausing her inner storm, she laughed and undressed.

She collapsed onto her bed, strongly aware of her elevated arousal. She stopped herself from really making herself comfortable, just short of handling the issue then and there, when she realized exactly who was the focus of her fantasy. *Fuck. I'm just horny. Just horny.*

She got back up and went to grab a glass of cold water. The shivers were welcome, her body resuming its expected state for the chilly room and the minimal layers on her skin. She deliberated between taking a shower and simply going to bed, futile attempts to make this toxin go away.

What the hell was she thinking? She had no idea if Kate was remotely interested, no matter how friendly she might behave. Suggesting they date or have sex would be the perfect way to screw this relationship up into oblivion. Kate had always been overtly at ease around her, happy to tease, but they had simply been close friends, not lovers. Sara hadn't even

begun to think about her sexuality at the time. This was a new thing, which meant Sara didn't know Kate's stance on it. Sara would have to take the temperature, to open Kate's mind to the idea, to take the first steps. She would have to be the one to act. Which was what she wanted, after all.

She needed to act.

# Afterword

Thank you reading this sample for The Maze Of Your Mind. Hopefully, you liked it, and perhaps you might find the full book worth your time and money.

You're welcome to reach out to me by email to give your feedback, ask questions, report issues, invite me to a discussion, or simply chat.

Thank you!

*Benjamin Hamon*

# Credits

*Thank you to every contributor,  
the artists, editors, proofreaders...  
everyone who helped make this book a reality.*

*Thank you to my family and friends,  
for their love and support.*

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