

girl friends

a short story

by Jill Marbach

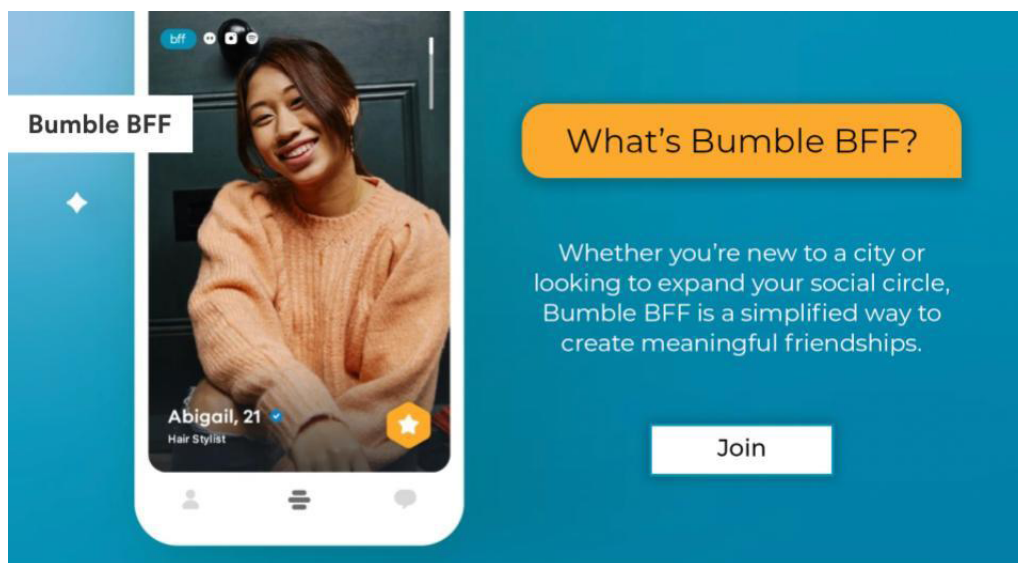


Emmie was staring at her phone, alone on a Friday night because apparently that was who she had become. If she was still in college, she would be out at a bar with Jess and the rest of their friends. If she still lived at home, her mom and dad would have whipped out Scrabble or Yahtzee.

Instead, Emmie was by herself in her new apartment in Philadelphia. She had been so excited to get a job in the city and finally live on her own, but now that she was doing it, reality looked a little different from her fantasy. She liked her recruiting job at a big finance firm, but the business bros she worked with didn't make for the best company outside of the office.

How was she supposed to make friends at this age anyway? People complained that dating was hard, but finding friendships in a new city could be just as bad.

If downloading Tinder helped her meet men, maybe Bumble could help her make friends. Emmie downloaded the app and got to work on her profile.



For Ash, swiping through dating apps had become a mindless pastime. She wasn't proud of that, but it was who she had become. She would spend a night swiping, looking at picture after picture of beautiful women, reading witty or unimaginative bios, hearing girls' favorite fun fact or two truths and a lie. Then, she would spend the rest of the week trying to chat with the women she matched with. Sometimes it went well, and other times the conversation was doomed before it even started.

It was all a game of narrowing down the many, many options. She only swiped right on some ladies; a few became matches; *even fewer* led to a conversation; *even fewer* were willing to go out on a date; *even fewer* followed through on that date. By the time Ash found someone she wanted to go on a second date with, she felt like she left dozens of women in her wake.

Still, that was how it was done. She wanted to put herself out there, so this was how she was doing it.

Ash swiped left (AKA said "no thanks") on a girl whose perfect first date was "cutting right to the chase" and swiped right on an artsy looking lady who offered to give tarot readings. They did not match.

Then, Ash found herself looking at a photo of a girl named Emmie. She had long blonde hair, bright blue eyes, and a super cute nose ring. There was a photo of her sipping a bright pink drink, one of her and a dog, and one with a group of girls dressed up in a park.

"I'm the kind of person you want around on the weekends," her bio read. "Weekdays...well, hit me up and we'll find out."

Ash could use a little more fun in her weekends. The fact that she was spending her Friday night on Bumble, half watching a Marvel movie with her roommates only proved that. She swiped right and was excited to see that they matched. She knew the odds of talking to Emmie at all were better if she made the first move so she got to work figuring out what to say.

About me

I'm the kind of person you want around on the weekends. Weekdays...well, hit me up and we'll find out.



Emmie had done some swiping and found some BFF matches, but her first message was from a girl named Ashley.

"hey Emmie, I'm Ash! how's your week going??"

Ash. Emmie made a mental note of that as she clicked on her profile. Ash was cute with a super short, kind of androgynous haircut and brown glasses sitting on top of round cheeks. Emmie scrolled through her profile and was reminded why she swiped right. She had pictures of her with friends, pictures of her being outdoorsy, but what really took the cake was her prompt that read, "*I will never shut up about...*" 12 time Grammy winner, 2019 Woman of the Decade Taylor Alison Swift."

Emmie was always down to chat with another Swiftie, especially to speculate which album the artist would rerecord next. There would be time to

I will never shut up about...

12 time Grammy winner, 2019 Woman of the Decade Taylor Alison Swift



discuss that later, though. For now, Emmie just answered the question at hand.

"Hey Ash! Nice to meet you! My week has been good so far. I just started a new job so I've been settling in there and am finally finding time to try and meet new people. How's your week been?"

The conversation took off from there. Emmie told Ash about her worst interviews as a recruiter and Ash told Emmie what classes she was taking while getting her master's degree in architecture. They kept chatting throughout Friday and Saturday, talking about the city and pop culture and anything else that came to mind.

"Any plans for the rest of the weekend?" Emmie asked at one point, knowing full well she didn't have any besides buying groceries and doing laundry.

"I'm trying to coax my roommates into getting Sunday brunch with me. so far no takers but I'm not giving up until I have pancakes and mimosas in me!"

It honestly felt to Emmie like they knew each other forever. The conversation flowed so easily, and meanwhile she could barely get more than a two word reply from anyone else, let alone a thoughtful question.

On Saturday night, after they had talked all day, Emmie asked, "Did you ever get your roommates to agree to go to brunch with you?"

"no :(they're 'not morning people' apparently. laaaaame," Ash replied.

"I know it's last minute, but I'd love to go to brunch with you tomorrow if you're down."

"for real?? I'd love that! I know this great place--I'll send you the details!"

And that was how Emmie suddenly had a friend date scheduled for Sunday morning. After spending the rest of the weekend on her own, she couldn't pretend she wasn't excited to hang out with anyone, especially someone as cool as Ash.



Ash tended to treat first dates like job interviews. You dress up, meet someone, ask a bunch of questions, and try to figure out if this is the right fit for both parties. She had a bunch of standard questions to ask, but she quickly realized they wouldn't be necessary.

For every typical question Ash thought about asking, Emmie had a way of phrasing them to make them so much more engaging.

"What's your family dynamic like?" Emmie asked her. Ash would have just asked how many siblings she had, but this was so much more open-ended.

"Okay, let's see. It's me, my parents, and my older brother. He's 27 and married, still living in the same town we grew up in."

"So you're the youngest, got it," she said, nodding.

"Yep, I'm the rebellious child who moved as far away from Wisconsin as I could. I'm the artist in a family of business folks, and that's been known to cause some tension. Overall, though, I think I have a pretty good relationship with them, my mom especially," Ash explained. "How about you?"

"I'm a middle child, all sisters. My younger sister just started college in DC, I just moved out, and my older sister has been living with her fiancé for a little while now, so my parents suddenly have the house all to themselves. I know they're going to keep busy between work and their side hustles, but it's still an adjustment."

The server came over with another round of mimosas. Ash barely even noticed they finished their first round. How long had it been? An hour? More? Something about Emmie made time move differently.

This definitely didn't feel like a job interview.

"Sounds like a lot of change very fast. How has the move been for you? Do you have roommates you came here with?" she asked.

"Nope, I live on my own. I tried to convince my college friends to make the move with me, but they weren't having it," Emmie explained. "I found this nice one bedroom, though, with a super sweet landlady so I can't complain about that. You said you live with classmates, right?"

Ash nodded. "We met in an orientation Facebook group before classes started and agreed to move in together. It was a bit of a gamble, but it's worked out well. They're all super fun and good at cleaning up after themselves."

Emmie laughed at that. "Sounds like my kind of people. I'd love to meet them; I'm always looking for more friends."

Something about the way she said it made Ash do a double take. Did she mean she was just looking for friends, like something casual? Or did wanting to meet Ash's friends mean they were really hitting it off? Or maybe that was Emmie's way of friendzoning her altogether and Ash had gotten the vibe all wrong?

Ash felt herself start to spiral and tried to bring herself back. "Yeah, that'd be awesome," she managed.



Emmie felt something shift in Ash after that comment. She tried to think through what she might have said wrong. Did Ash not want Emmie to meet her friends? Maybe her roommates weren't as close as Emmie assumed? Or maybe there was something else about Emmie that Ash wasn't ready to share with them. After that, Emmie tried extra hard to bring back some lightheartedness. There was no way she was losing her best shot at a friend over a silly comment.

"So what are you into?" Emmie asked. "Reading, TV shows?"

"Both, really, but actually finding time to read has been hard," Ash told her.

"I get that. What kind of stuff do you read when you can find the time?"

Emmie swore she saw Ash's cheeks turn red. "Mostly cheesy gay romance stories," she said with a nervous giggle.

"That's awesome," Emmie said, though she couldn't say she had delved much into that genre. "Any you would recommend?"

At that, Ash lit up again. She started talking almost too quickly for Emmie to follow about a novel with a queer protagonist who gets married to a woman she met that night in Vegas and then goes on to have a crisis about being an adult after grad school ends. "I think what I liked most about it," Ash finished, "was that it told the queer, twenty-something experience super well."

It took until that exact moment for the reality of the situation to dawn on Emmie. Maybe it should have been obvious when Ash first brought up gay romance novels, or by her carabiner key chain and button-down shirt, or just from her whole vibe. Ash was definitely queer. Emmie made a mental note of that along with everything else she learned about Ash that day and offhandedly wondered if she was seeing anyone.

The conversation continued as Emmie talked about her own hobbies, and she was struck with the same feeling she had when they had been texting: she felt like she already knew Ash. There was none of that awkwardness that often comes with meeting new people. It just felt natural.

"Can I get you ladies anything else?" their server asked.

"I think we're good," Emmie told him. "We'll take the check anytime." She realized as she said it that she was reluctant to go. Brunch had been really nice, and she still had so many things she wanted to talk to Ash about.

As if reading her mind, Ash said, "We should do this again sometime. I had a lot of fun."

"Definitely, me too! We'll make plans soon," Emmie agreed. She couldn't help grinning as she said it.



Ash was the type of person that could get a little too eager with the girls she liked. She tended to rush head first into things without thinking it through. She came on strong, and that didn't always work in her benefit. That's why Ash resolved to let Emmie reach out to her after their date. No matter how long it took, no matter how badly Ash wanted to talk to her again, she would wait.

She only had to wait a couple of hours.

"I found this cool building and thought you would like it!!" the text read, along with a photo of, in fact, a cool building.

Ash found herself grinning like an idiot over such a simple text. Here was proof that Emmie was thinking about her. Emmie wanted to talk to her more. Emmie might actually like her as much as she liked Emmie.

She sent a response asking about where Emmie saw the building and added, "wish I had a photo of, like, a cool resumé to send you."

Emmie's response came in the form of several laughing emoji and info about where she saw the cool building. It wasn't too far from her apartment. "If you come up this way, I'll have to point it out."

If you come up this way. There was a hint of something flirty there. The idea that Ash might come over Emmie's place at some point. Nothing set in stone, not outright saying it, just something for Ash to latch onto.

"I'll have to make a point to see it :)," she sent back, hoping it was enough. It felt like flirting with women always went like this, always a game of coy hints and subtle flirtations. Ash was still working on being more direct, a process that meant fighting against her instincts. She promised herself that next time she would say how she really felt: *I like you, Emmie.* ● ● ●

Emmie and Ash kept talking throughout the rest of the week. Emmie felt like they should have run out of things to say at some point, but she never felt any awkward pauses or struggled to find a new topic to talk about.

The end of the week rolled around, and as Emmie contemplated her weekend plans, she realized she wanted to see Ash again. Before, she would've been happy to hang out with anyone to stave off the boredom, but she found herself thinking about what Ash was doing this weekend and how great it would be to hang out again.

They were talking anyway, so Emmie figured it was worth at least seeing if she was free.

"Got any plans for the weekend?" she texted in between her response to Ash's thoughts on superhero franchises and her commiseration over terrible landlords.

"I'm pretty free at the moment, hbu?" she replied right after explaining that Loki, while not technically an Avenger or even one of the good guys, was her favorite hero, but before going on a rant about how unethical the concept of landlords was.

Emmie knew this was her opportunity to try and make plans. What do you do on a second friend date? What was a normal friend activity?

"I'm free too. Would you maybe wanna go bowling on Saturday??"

As soon as Emmie sent the message, she felt stupid. Ash was artsy and cool,

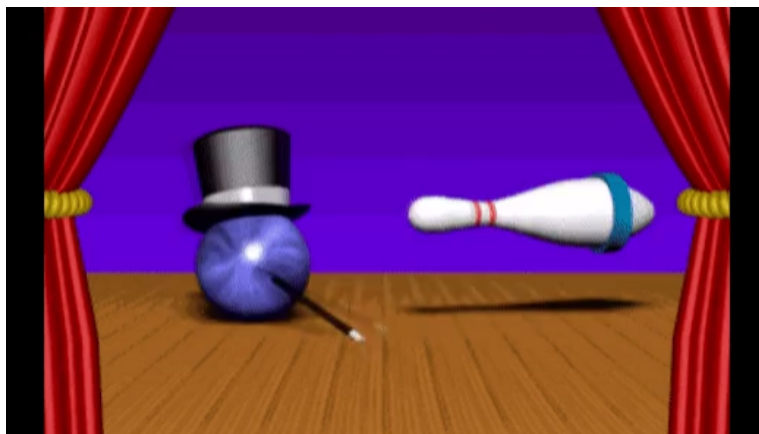
and bowling was the polar opposite of those things. She was about to say “haha jk!” when Ash responded.

“say less, bowling is my JAM! I’m so in.”



“This is unfair. I agreed to this under false pretenses!” Emmie said.

“Spare!” the screen announced, followed by a prehistoric animation of a bowling ball using a magic wand to make a pin disappear.



“You invited me here!” Ash reminded her.

“And you failed to mention that you’re a pro bowler,” she pointed out, standing up for her turn. She dropped her eight pound ball near the middle of the lane, and they both watched it roll directly into the far corner.

“One!” the screen announced.

“I just bowled in high school for a few years, nothing major,” Ash tried.

“You have your own ball. And shoes.”

“It’s cost effective not to rent shoes every time.”

“And a *technique*,” Emmie said before throwing her ball again. She managed to wrack up four pins.

“Fine, okay, I know what I’m doing,” Ash relented. “I didn’t know you were so competitive.”

“It’s a family trait. Game nights are brutal in my household.”

For half a second, Ash let herself picture playing games with Emmie’s parents, laughing and nitpicking the rules and cursing over a bad turn. Then she made herself snap out of it. This was their second date. Ash didn’t even know if Emmie was out to her parents. She didn’t know a lot about the woman she was on a date with.

Ash let it go for the moment, filed away as something to worry about later, and continued smoking Emmie.

On her final throw, Ash threw a strike. Both girls cheered at the same time before bursting into a fit of giggles.

"Looks like you win," Emmie said.

"What's my prize?" Ash asked. She knew what she wanted her prize to be, but there was no way she was actually going to be able to say it. *A kiss*, she thought, finding her eyes wandering to Emmie's lips.

"I'll treat you to dinner," she said with a grin.

Ash managed a smile back and tried not to be disappointed. "Sounds good to me."

Dinner ended up being Chinese takeout in Emmie's apartment. They ate it on her couch while scrolling through Hulu, trying to decide on what to watch. Ash found herself trying to glean insights about Emmie based on her watch list. *Love Island* was on it, along with *Schitt's Creek* and *Grey's Anatomy*. Midway through, a familiar poster caught Ash's eye.

"Whoa, they have *Twilight* on here?" she asked.

"Oh yes they do, the entire saga," Emmie said in a voice that told Ash she was very well acquainted with the series.

"I would love to watch the first movie if you're down to. It's been way too long since I've seen it."

"Say less," Emmie said, clicking play. "Are you Team Edward or Team Jacob?"

"As a tween I was Team Edward, but after the *Twilight* resurgence that's been going on, I've switched to Team Alice. She and Bella have a ridiculous amount of chemistry, and she never watches Bella sleep or falls in love with her daughter."

Emmie laughed at that. "I can respect it. I'll have to watch it through a queer lens this time. I'm Team Jacob. Despite his flaws, he looks great shirtless."

They hit the lights and sank into the couch as the movie started.



Two hours later, Emmie and Ash watched the credits roll as Bella and Edward danced at the nicest high school prom imaginable. As Emmie moved to close out of the movie, she realized how close she and Ash had drifted. Their arms were pressed together, and Ash's legs were curled up so that her knees just skimmed Emmie's thigh. For a second, she was stuck like that, afraid to move and ruin the moment. Then she snapped out of it; they were just friends, comfortably watching a movie that was ending. There was no moment to ruin.

Emmie got up and closed out of Hulu. She hit the lights and returned to the couch, this time a safe distance away from Ash.

"What a masterpiece," Ash said. "I mean, a mess in so many ways, but a masterpiece."

Emmie laughed. "I couldn't agree more. It's truly iconic. This was fun."

"A lot of fun. I should get going, though. It's getting late."

There was a moment of hesitation between them. Just like the last time they hung out, Emmie didn't want Ash to go. It had been such a nice night, and Ash was so fun. Then Emmie thought about how their legs had just barely touched and her stomach did a somersault and she knew she couldn't risk sending Ash the wrong message.

"That's a good call. Let me know when you get home," Emmie said, leading her to the door. They said goodbye, and Emmie felt herself let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding as she shut the door.

I'm just looking for friendship, Emmie reminded herself. Ash is just a friend.



Ash found herself rethinking that interaction on her walk to the subway. She was so sure they were going to kiss and then they just...didn't. Ash had never been good about making the first move, especially when she wasn't sure how the other person felt. She was risk-averse, and diving into something only to be rejected felt like the biggest risk she could take. It could also have the biggest payoff, though.

She imagined what it would be like to kiss Emmie, being able to call her her girlfriend, holding her hand out on a walk. It could be so great, or it could all blow up in her face. Was she willing to risk that?



The week went by like the one before. Emmie got friendlier with the finance bros at work. They really weren't as bad as they seemed. The highlight of her days, though, was still talking to Ash. They started randomly calling each other over the smallest things.

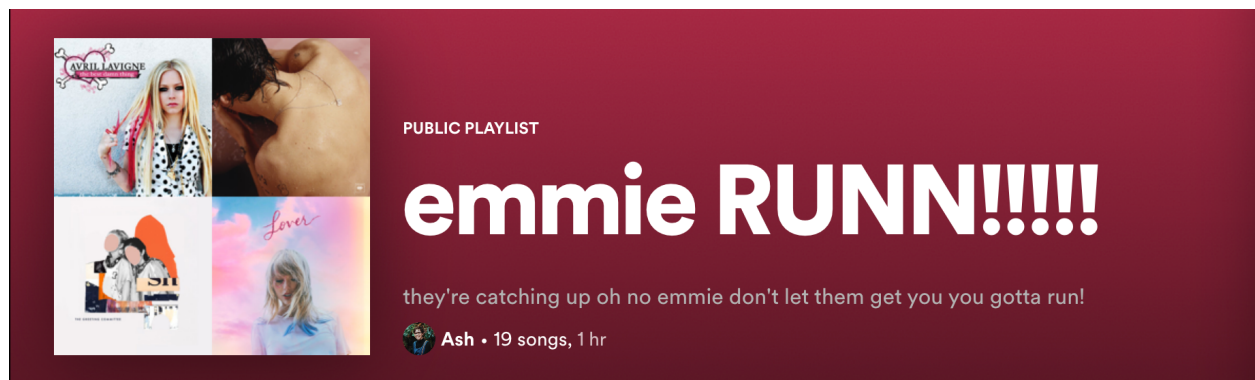
"Emmie, I need you to settle an argument," Ash said with no other greeting. "My roommates—you still need to meet them, geez, I gotta get on that—they're saying that Red Lobster's cheesy biscuits are the best pre-meal restaurant roll, but I think the Cheesecake Factory's brown bread is superior. Thoughts?"

"Nice to hear from you too," Emmie said with a laugh. "First of all I think a discussion about Olive Garden's breadsticks needs to be had, but Red Lobster is winning for me. You just can't beat those biscuits."

"I called you looking for support! Unbelievable!" Ash said in mock disappointment.

The next day, Emmie called. "I'm going for a run and I hate every song I've ever listened to. Give me some music recommendations."

"I've waited for this day my whole life. Prepared for a flood of texts. No wait, should I just make you a playlist? I should. Send me your Spotify details, this is happening."



Emmie was sure she looked like an idiot, grinning too big as she ran through Philly, listening to Harry Styles, The Greeting Committee and a lot of Taylor Swift.

When Emmie had another incoming call from Ash, she wasn't too surprised. "What argument can I ruin for you now?" she asked.

"No arguments this time, I just need you to keep Friday night open. Can you do that?" Ash asked.

"Sure, what are we doing?"

"No questions. Just be free. I'll pick you up."

"Can I get a time at least?" Emmie asked, but Ash had already disconnected.

"Okay, it's right on this corner," Ash told Emmie, leading her down the street. She had eventually texted Emmie a time to be ready and picked her up on Friday, as promised.

"Should I, like, close my eyes? Do you want this to be a big reveal?" Emmie didn't have much experience with being taken to surprise locations. She didn't know what the protocol was.

Ash stopped at the corner. "No need, we're already here." She motioned to the building in front of them. It looked to Emmie like a graffiti covered warehouse, but she was learning that some of the best places in Philly were hidden behind nondescript walls. A line was forming on the sidewalk to enter the mystery building.

"I'm not sure what I'm looking at," Emmie admitted.

"This is The Warehouse. It's like a part bar, part club, part event space, and they do theme nights." Ash gestured toward the line, as if that should explain everything.

Emmie took a look at the people waiting and tried to deduce what the theme could be. It was nearly all women, plus a few folks that looked like they fell outside the gender binary. They were all varying levels of dressed up, some in crop tops and

skirts, others in button downs and boots. Emmie couldn't make any connections between them. She looked at Ash again, who was grinning at her. She was wearing a shirt striped with every color of the rainbow and black jeans. Nothing about it pointed to any theme.

"I give up. What's the theme tonight?"

"It's Lesbian Night!" Ash declared.

"Oh," Emmie said. "That, uh, sounds fun but I—I don't want to occupy someone else's safe space."

"That's just the title, it's not like actually just lesbians. All queer folks are welcome regardless of your label," she explained.

"That's really great, but I kind of feel like there might have been a miscommunication. I'm not—I don't identify...I'm just trying to say I'm straight," Emmie said. For a moment she wondered if this was how coming out felt. She didn't expect it to be so tough to find the right words.

"You're...straight?" Ash echoed like she didn't quite believe it. "Sorry, I'm confused."

"Uh, me too, honestly. Did I do something to make you think otherwise? It seems like wires got crossed somewhere in all of this."

"Well, for starters, we've been going out on dates, so that gave me the idea that you were into women. Or, ya know, into me at least," Ash said, still sounding dumbfounded.

"Dates?" Emmie repeated. The knowledge that Ash thought she liked her hit Emmie hard in the chest. Ash wanted to date Emmie. Ash thought she was dating Emmie. Her brain didn't know how to compute that. "I just wanted to be friends. I thought we were just hanging out—I didn't realize."

"Emmie, we matched on a dating app. If you were just looking for friends, why were you swiping on gay women?" Ash asked slowly with an edge to her voice. Emmie had never heard her get mad, but she guessed this was the closest Ash got. She was searching Emmie's face, trying to find the answer in it.

"We...no, we matched on Bumble BFF. We were both looking for friends..." Even as she said it, the pieces started to click. The compliments women messaged her, the questions about what she was looking for. "It's possible I made a mistake."

"You wouldn't be the only one," Ash mumbled.

"I'm sorry," Emmie said, realizing she probably should have said it sooner. "This is really shitty. I didn't mean to lead you on or anything. I think you're great..." Emmie couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence.

Ash was willing to do it for her. "But you don't see me like that. You don't have to let me down gently. Believe it or not, you aren't the first straight girl I've caught feelings for." She said this last part with some humor, but neither of them laughed.

"I'm sorry," Emmie repeated quietly. "I'm going to go. It really has been great getting to know you, and if there's any chance you want to be friends after all of this, I would really like that."

Ash put on a clearly forced smile. "It was great getting to know you, too." That was all Emmie needed to hear. It was over.

She got back on the subway alone, replaying everything. Their conversations, the first time they hung out, everything that happened after. *How could I have missed something so obvious?*



Ash was asking herself the same question on the street outside the club. How did she not know?

She wasn't kidding when she said Emmie wasn't the first straight girl she had fallen for. The first time around, Ash knew it was fraught. The other girl had a boyfriend—a really childish, misogynistic boyfriend, but a boyfriend nonetheless. As much as they hung out and the girl told Ash how much she loved her, she always went home with him. Ash knew her feelings would never be requited but continued pining over her. Eventually she got some distance from her crush and vowed not to develop feelings that stupid again.

And now here she was.

Ash wanted to be mad at Emmie. She had every right to be. Emmie strung her along and then dropped the truth on her right as Ash was really falling. At the same time, none of it was intentional. It was all a miscommunication—a really stupid, really painful miscommunication. Knowing that didn't make it hurt any less, though.



"Hey girl heyyy!"

Emmie was relieved when Jess picked up her FaceTime call after only one ring. She committed the cardinal sin of calling without sending a text first, but Emmie's best friend didn't fault her for it.

"Hey Jess! Are you free to chat? I'm in a situation and need some perspective."

"Always, you know I'm here for some drama," Jess told her. "Does this call for wine? I was just about to pour a glass."

"This very much calls for wine," Emmie agreed, pulling a bottle of Chardonnay out of the fridge. Once she poured a glass, Emmie settled in and got started.

She explained it all: downloading Bumble and thinking she was on Bumble BFF, the friend dates, talking all the time, and ultimately realizing her mistake.

"I'm just so mad at myself," she concluded. "I hurt Ash just as we were really starting to get to know each other."

"You made a mistake. It happens. The outcome sucks, but once things cool off, she'll realize that none of this was intentional," Jess consoled.

"I think she really liked me, Jess."

"Does that make you feel weird?"

"No," Emmie said quickly. "I mean, not in that way." She wasn't uncomfortable with the idea of Ash liking her. It made her feel something she wasn't sure she could articulate yet. "I've never had any sort of feelings for a girl, but all of a sudden..."

"You're considering this?" Jess finished gently.

Emmie sighed. "I don't even know how to begin considering this. And what if I did have feelings for her? Would Ash even hear me out at this point? Would she even believe me?"

"It sounds to me," Jess began slowly, "like you two had a real connection. I can't make any promises about how she'll respond, but I think if this is really something you think you want, you have to go for it."

Emmie stayed on the phone with Jess two glasses of wine longer. They stopped talking about Ash, but she was still racing through Emmie's mind when they hung up.

It had only been a few hours since she and Ash had talked. Emmie barely had enough time to sort through her feelings. She knew she should give it time, get some rest and make a better decision in the morning.

Instead of doing any of that, she called Ash.

"Hello?"

"Oh my gosh," Emmie said. "I thought I was about to leave you a ridiculous voicemail. I really didn't prepare to actually talk to you."

"Uh...do you want to hang up and call back? I don't have to pick up."

"No, no," Emmie said, although secretly she sort of did. The words that were bouncing around in her head weren't ready for an immediate reaction.

Ash seemed to sense this. "I can just stay quiet and listen, and we can both pretend this is a voicemail."

"A live drunk voicemail, okay," Emmie agreed. "I'm not actually drunk. Well, I kind of am, but drunk enough to say things that are hard, not drunk enough to say things that aren't true. Does that make sense?"

"I'm just an answering machine," Ash said. Emmie could hear her smiling, and that was enough.

"Of course. Okay. Hey Ash, it's Emmie calling. I know you probably don't want to hear from me right now so feel free to just delete this—or in your case, just hang up." Emmie waited a second, but Ash stayed on the line, still silent. "I wanted to tell you how sorry I am. I know we haven't known each other long, but I really care about you and I didn't mean to hurt you. Maybe I'm being selfish now, calling you when you clearly wanted to be left alone, but I didn't want to leave things like that... especially when there's more I need to say to you.

"I really did think we matched on Bumble BFF as friends, and I thought we'd just been hanging out as friends this whole time. But honestly, I feel a deeper connection to you than with any of my other friends. I feel like I can be my real, unfiltered self around you. I feel...well, if I'm being honest, I feel the way I usually do when I have a crush, but I've never had one of those on a girl before and I don't know what to do with that.

"So if this doesn't look like a typical friendship, and it doesn't look like a typical crush, where does that leave us? Am I trying too hard to put a label on these feelings? Is this in vain anyway because you hate me and don't want anything to do with me?"

"I don't feel that way," Ash said, speaking up for the first time. "I don't hate you. I was upset, and I still don't know how to feel, but it sounds like we have that in common."

Emmie let herself chuckle at that. "That's a very insightful observation."

"Well, I am a grad student." They both laughed at that.

"So..." Emmie said after a moment.

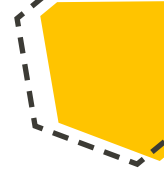
"So..." Ash echoed. "It clearly sounds like we have more to talk about, but I think we should do it tomorrow when we're both a little more sober."

"That's a good idea. You want to come over tomorrow? I'm around all day."

"Yeah, I'll text you in the morning." There was a beat of silence, like Ash wanted to say more. "Okay, well, see ya then."

"See ya," Emmie said as Ash hung up. The alcohol and Ash's crypticness both left her head spinning.





Ash approached the door of Emmie's apartment building and hesitated. She knew things were going to change after she walked in.

She didn't have any idea how this would go. Emmie's "voicemail" made her think that there might be a chance for them, but she wasn't willing to bet her heart on some drunken rambling when Emmie had so easily walked away hours before. Ash was keeping herself guarded, but she couldn't deny that she was holding out hope.

She sent a text, and a moment later Emmie let her in. They walked up the stairs in silence, no trace of the easy friendship that had been there the day before.

"I'm glad you're here," Emmie said once they made it to her apartment. They both sat on the couch with a safe amount of distance between them. "I know I rambled a lot yesterday, and I really just want to hear how you're feeling right now."

Ash was caught off guard by this request. She found herself so often editing her feelings for the sake of someone else that it was a rare thing that she talked about how she felt first with no idea how it would be received. It was sort of scary and sort of exhilarating.

"I was hurt yesterday. I still kind of am hurt, I guess. I know that you didn't do this intentionally, but it felt like I was being strung along and now..." Ash hesitated, but only for a second. She knew how she felt. She knew what she was secretly hoping for when she suggested they meet. She knew what she wanted Emmie to know if this was the last time they ever talked. "I like you, Emmie. I think you're funny and kind, and I feel like we have a real connection. I can see us being more than friends, but I get that this is all new for you. If that isn't what you want, I totally respect that, but I'm going to need some space to move past this."

Emmie reached over and took Ash's hand. Ash felt a jolt as she did, but she couldn't tell if it was a sympathetic gesture or something more. She looked from their hands to Emmie's eyes, trying to understand.

Emmie took a deep breath. She couldn't explain the relief she felt at Ash's declaration. She had been so sure she ruined things, but now she had another chance.

"I like you, too," Emmie said. "We do have a real connection, and I'm still figuring out exactly what that means for me and how I see myself, but I don't want that to get in our way. I don't want anything to get in the way of this. We can figure out labels and identities along the way. I just know that I want to be with you. I think I've wanted to be with you for a while now, and it took the idea of losing you for me to really see that."

Ash, still holding Emmie's hand, squeezed gently. "I'm glad we're on the same page." Despite herself, despite the uncertainty she still felt, she smiled. "So, do you want to watch the second *Twilight* movie?"

Emmie burst out laughing at that, all the previous tension defused. "That is not what I thought you were going to ask."

"What'd you think I was going to ask?" Ash asked innocently.

Emmie blushed. "I just thought..."

"Just thought what?" Ash asked, leaning a little closer.

"I thought you were going to ask to kiss me," Emmie whispered. Her eyes flicked between Ash's eyes and her lips, which were now grinning.

"Do you want me to kiss you?" Ash whispered back.

Emmie was already closing her eyes and leaning in as she said, "Yes." Then the distance was closed between them. Their lips met tentatively, but only for a second. Then Emmie pulled Ash in deeper, and they were moving together, taking each other in. Emmie couldn't believe she hadn't thought about doing this sooner. Now it felt like all she ever wanted to do.

They made out for a while and then ended up putting on *The Twilight Saga: New Moon* and then ended up making out some more. They both couldn't get enough. Any lingering denial Emmie had over her feelings for Ash completely vanished. There was just something about this that felt right.

The movie ended, and Ash moved to get up.

"I don't want you to go," Emmie whispered, reaching for Ash's hand. She thought that to herself the last time they had been here like this, but this time Emmie got to say it and mean it.

Ash squeezed her fingers around Emmie's. "I don't want to go either," she said, "but I also don't want to rush things."

Emmie giggled. "I thought queer women were known for rushing into things."

"Yeah, yeah, insert UHaul joke here," Ash said, but she was smiling too. "I'll text you, okay? We'll make plans soon."

"Deal," Emmie said as she walked Ash to the door. This time, when they said goodbye, they did it with one final kiss and no doubt lingering between them.



"Emmie!" Ash cooed, opening the door to her apartment. She wrapped her in a hug and gave her a quick kiss before letting her in.

"This is for you," Emmie said, handing Ash a bottle of wine.

"Wow, not even in a box! How classy!" Ash had to speak up as they walked into the apartment. Music was already playing, and people were chatting in the living room. Ash set down the bottle of wine in the kitchen and turned to Emmie. "Sorry this is how you're seeing my place for the first time. I promise it's usually a little calmer."



"You mean you aren't throwing ragers every night?" Emmie joked. "What kind of college students are you?"

"The stressed out, grad school kind," Ash countered, making Emmie laugh.

"Don't sweat it, I'm happy you invited me. It'll be cool to finally meet your friends."

"Speaking of," Ash said, taking Emmie by the hand and pulling her into the living room, "this is Zoey, Roxanne, and Amber, my roommates. This is Emmie..."

"Her girlfriend," Emmie said without a moment's hesitation.

Ash couldn't help but grin. "Yep, my girlfriend."

Ash watched as her friends cooed over Emmie, saying things like, "We've heard so much about you!" (To be fair, they had.) Ash allowed herself to take a step back and enjoy watching the moment unfold.

Then the song changed, and Emmie turned to Ash with a huge grin.

"We have to dance!" she announced.

"We have to?" Ash echoed as the lyrics began.

You're on the phone with your girlfriend, she's upset.

Emmie took both of Ash's hands and promptly started jumping up and down and singing along. Laughing, Ash joined in.

I'm on the bleachers dreaming 'bout that day when you wake up and find that what you're looking for has been here the whole time!

"One of the big reasons I matched with you in the first place was because you mentioned Taylor Swift on your profile," Emmie said in between verses.

"I'll add that to the list of reasons why I love her," Ash said. "I matched with you so you could bring more fun into my weekends."

They danced for the rest of the song, belting out the final lyrics. *"Have you ever thought just maybe you belong with me? You belong with me."*

"How am I doing? Am I making the weekends more fun?" Emmie asked.

Ash grinned and leaned in close to her girlfriend. "Oh this is fun, alright." Then she kissed her.

