

## Erin Cunningham

### In the Meantime

It had been three years since the last time Christopher set foot in the city. After he'd moved back home to Ohio, where he'd spent most of his life, he still liked to tell people he was from New York even though it wasn't true. Living in the city for college and less than a year after barely warranted him the title of a New Yorker, but Ohio gave him nothing. The second his foot first met pavement, New York had felt like his chance at finally living.

Eight years after that first arrival, Christopher was glad to be returning to his home. When he flew over the city, he saw Central Park and his collegiate naïveté swarmed back to him. The crowded skyline reminded him of how in awe he'd been of the city when he'd first arrived, fresh out of high school and ready for a new life. He'd learned quickly that the heights of the buildings were things only tourists admired. The places that Christopher learned to love couldn't be seen from the sky: the underground clubs he'd discovered by accident, the hole-in-the-wall coffee shop he'd learned to rely on during exams, a friend's apartment he'd adapted as a second home.

The joy of arriving in the city only lasted a few minutes before hesitation began to set in. When he got in the cab, as overjoyed as he was just to be standing on the ground he used to own, he felt lost. Things had changed in his three year absence and what troubled him most was that he couldn't pinpoint if those things resided within him or the city. He couldn't remember changing. Maybe he had grown up a little: got a desk job that paid more than minimum wage, bought a house so he no longer had to share a roof with his parents, and was able to stay in one committed relationship for an entire year - though it had long since ended. Maybe he could have done those things in the city, allowing it to grow to fit his needs. But he hadn't given the city a chance to prove itself.

When the cab stopped abruptly on an unfamiliar street on the Upper East Side, his discomfort remained. During his time in New York he'd never known anyone with enough money to live on a street like this, on a grown-up corner of town where a majority of the units were inhabited by one single person instead of five. It was the kind of neighborhood Christopher grew up believing he'd never be able to afford and thus never had a true desire to live in. As he stepped onto the street, suitcase dragging behind, he dug into his pocket to fish out the directions Lilla had left in his inbox. True to her style, she hadn't left an actual address.

"It's a shortish building towards the middle of the block. It's brownish red. There's no awning, most of the other buildings have awnings. If you look up and see a tiny flowerbox with red flowers, that window's right next door to mine."

He smiled to himself as he walked to where she'd directed him and he wondered whether she knew the building's actual address or not. He stopped in front of the building he assumed to be hers, looking up to use the flowerbox as a verification. The red flowers were starting to wilt, the owner doing what they could to cover them up with newer yellow flowers that didn't look like they would last much longer themselves.

Lilla opened the door after three soft knocks from Christopher and just seeing her face behind the freshly painted door was enough to push aside some of his uncertainties. He

took her into his arms like he always had during their friendship. He let her go and left a delicate kiss on her cheek.

“You haven’t changed,” she said, leading him into the back room to put down his bag. He had expected more affection in return for his own.

“Why should I?” he asked.

Her apartment was neat and richly furnished; it belonged on the street she lived on. Leather furniture, white carpets, amateur paintings in large frames and a synthetic smell of fresh pine. It differed from the clutter-filled brownstone he’d last seen her in, where she’d used a rug as a bedspread and had a television that only picked up basic cable. He stood in shock, wondering how she managed to keep a place so neat and what had possessed her to model her apartment after a Pottery Barn catalog. He recalled her job at the gallery, a career path certain to sway her sense of style to some degree. Standing in her space, Christopher assumed the uneasiness he felt was more from his and Lilla’s recent lack of communication than her change of surroundings.

“It’s so good to see you,” she said with a smile as she watched him place his suitcase on the floor near the doorway. “You look great. I can’t believe it’s been this long.”

He sat cross legged on the floor in front of his suitcase and began to open it. “Nothing like a wedding to bring friends back together,” he said, unwrapping his scarf from around his neck before he began to dig around for a t-shirt.

“I’m not sure how many of the rest of us will be there, honestly,” Lilla said, sitting on the foot of her bed, placing her chin in her palms.

Christopher looked up at her. She had always looked angelic to him. Eccentric yet peaceful, her feet were always planted firmly on the ground, knowing exactly where she was going and how she was going to get there. She didn’t look much different than she had last time they spoke. If anything she had become prettier, and maybe her hair was a shade or two lighter. He imagined Lilla would look more gorgeous at sixty than most women looked at thirty. There was something eternal about her, a trait he wished he possessed.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean Matthew really distanced himself from us recently. I only spend any time with him because we work together. John, Raina and Jess haven’t talked to him in over a year and none of them were invited.”

“You’re joking?”

“Nope. To be honest, I was shocked when I found out you were invited.”

Christopher stopped searching for the old t-shirt and stared blankly at Lilla. “I’ve spoken to you more than I’ve spoken to Matthew,” he said. In fact, he wasn’t sure he’d communicated with Matthew at all since he’d left the city, excluding the two or three months following where the two of them were still desperately single and spent countless hours on the telephone together just to forget that they were alone and apart. But after Matthew started seeing Clyde on a more regular, serious basis—something Christopher only found out about through Lilla and a Facebook album depicting Clyde and Matthew in Paris for the summer—the contact between him and Christopher had shut off entirely.

“You guys used to be so close though, I mean...” Lilla trailed off, and her next words felt carefully chosen. “It was hard for me to picture either of you ending up with someone else

whenever you were together.” Christopher felt tears in his eyes and bit down on his lip, turning his head aside from Lilla in fear of her noticing. Even if she had, he figured she would possess the grace to not comment on his emotions. “I guess Matthew just felt the same, and couldn’t have his wedding without you there... even if you haven’t talked for years.”

“I just can’t believe,” Christopher said, “that it’s Clyde he’s marrying, of all people!”

“Clyde is a really great guy, Christopher. He’s different now; I couldn’t even imagine him messing around behind Matthew’s back anymore.”

Christopher bit his lip again. He found it impossible to see Clyde as anything different from what he’d always been.

“Matthew’s really happy with him,” she said, her voice sounding weary of having to reassure him.

Christopher yanked the t-shirt he’d been searching for from his suitcase. “Yeah, because he was so happy with him back in college,” he said, knowing Lilla couldn’t argue. Matthew and Clyde had struggled; seldom would a month pass where Matthew wasn’t at Christopher’s door past midnight, requesting to stay the night, if not the weekend. Christopher never took Matthew and Clyde’s relationship seriously because neither of them ever gave him a reason to. The spark that Christopher caught in Matthew’s eyes during their late night walks home from a Ninth Avenue bar, or the Sunday morning smile permanently frozen on Matthew’s lips as they spent countless hours in bed, tangled in old sheets—those were never present at Clyde’s gallery opening cocktail parties, where Clyde would introduce Matthew as his “new friend” despite the fact they’d known each other for years.

Christopher asked Lilla, shaking his head, “He can’t honestly go through with this, can he?”

“People change,” she said standing from the bed and placing a soft hand on his back before leaving the room. “It doesn’t have to be bad.”

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On Christopher’s second night in the city, he took a cab alone to the Plaza Hotel for the rehearsal dinner. Lilla had explained that she couldn’t leave until her date showed up. Christopher watched the fading sunlight cast its shadow over the Saturday night crowd making its way into the night and tried not to be angry. He had been wrong to assume Lilla would be his date to the rehearsal dinner and the wedding. He had never even thought to ask if she was in a relationship with anyone and that, he reasoned, was why he would be attending his ex-boyfriend’s wedding on his own.

He arrived at the Plaza and immediately felt underdressed. The doormen were wearing more expensive suits than his. He checked himself quickly in the lobby mirror: this was how Matthew and Clyde would be seeing him for the first time in three years, and he needed to make an impression. The pants he wore fit too tightly on his long legs for a formal event, but he was aware of it and had chosen the pair on purpose. They hadn’t been his original pick but after sitting on his thoughts the night before, he knew he had to impress Matthew. Anything he could do to make an impact would at the very least be an attempt to stir something long forgotten within his ex. He decided to pull another button open on his navy blue shirt, tuck the shirt in a little tighter and open up his suit jacket, revealing a glimpse of his bare chest.

Christopher knew if he hesitated any longer he’d be late but being early and alone

felt almost worse. He turned back to the mirror to give his hair a quick tousle and to experiment with hiding his eyes behind thick framed glasses. He decided to keep the glasses on; maybe they would give him the sophisticated edge he seemed to have been missing his entire life.

The hall stunned him. It was ornate to say the least, and decorated to perfection with money that Christopher knew didn't belong to Matthew. However, he found himself unable to focus in on any of the details of the room's design and was left only to think of how misplaced he was amongst the crowd. The room was large but looked smaller with the amount of people filling it. He looked into the sea of guests, initially unable to pinpoint a single familiar face. Everyone looked cold to him, distant. This was not a gathering for his skintight black jeans; everyone else was decked out in perfectly tailored suits and cocktail dresses straight from the shop windows on Fifth Avenue.

The first pair of eyes he caught was Matthew's, something he was half grateful for and half terrified by. He shot him a lazy smile and Matthew grinned in return before turning back to a woman Christopher didn't recognize. His cheeks burned at the thought of what Matthew was thinking of him for showing up alone or even for showing up at all. For a moment he felt like he had three years prior, remembering the reason behind his departure from the city. It was a mix of bitterness of not being the only man in Matthew's life, the disappointment of never coming in first, and the increasing notion that leaving Matthew behind might his only option if he was ever going to move on.

But God, it had been too long since he'd seen Matthew. He almost resented how good Matthew looked because Christopher was more than aware of how he was beginning to age – his hair wasn't the same light hue it'd always been, and his skin was hinting at forehead lines and eye wrinkles. Matthew looked just as youthful as he had in college, his hair still bounced, his skin still glowed, his body was still fit. If Christopher noticed any differences in Matthew, it was that he was better groomed. His hair, usually a much darker brown, looked like it'd been lightened and sculpted to perfection, and his gray suit was unlike anything he'd pick on his own; he could only imagine the smell of his cologne, no doubt recommended by Clyde, from across the room.

Christopher strode forward with faux confidence, his stomach twisting into the same knots Matthew always caused. He could almost feel the warmth of Matthew's body as he stood within just a few inches of him, placing a hand on his shoulder and attempting to calm his quickening heart rate. "Hey, handsome," he said, hearing how cheesy he sounded. He pushed that thought away with a smile as he pulled Matthew into a hug, interrupting a woman in her early forties wearing a long pink caftan.

"Christopher! So glad you could make it." His words sounded rehearsed, but Christopher convinced himself that the smile was genuine. It had to be. "This is Clyde's sister, Deborah."

Christopher turned to the woman and grinned. "Christopher," he said holding out a hand to her. "Old friend of Matthew's."

"Oh yes, I know who you are," she laughed, which set Christopher back. Someone he'd never heard of seemed to know enough about him.

Matthew cleared his throat and attempted to recover the moment. "So glad you could make it out here," he said, giving another wide-eyed grin to Christopher.

"I'll see you at dinner," Deborah interjected, leaning in to kiss Matthew's cheek before turning to leave, giving Christopher nothing but a quick flash of her fake white teeth.

"She's a real charmer," Christopher joked, meeting Matthew's soft brown eyes.

"Some of his family can be a little stuffy," Matthew admitted.

"Hell, they paid for this mess; might as well take it."

"Oh yeah, I'm not complaining."

"I can't believe you're the first one of us to get married," Christopher said, looking around the crowded room. "Especially since you were so against it in college." He laughed at the thought of it; he remembered thinking how wise Matthew had seemed at the time, like he was so much more mature because he was above long-term monogamous relationships.

"I guess I was, wasn't I?" Matthew laughed. "Looks like times have changed."

"You could say that again."

"You look the same," Matthew's eyes rolled down the length of Christopher's body. "I think those are even the shoes you wore the last time I saw you."

Christopher looked down, having forgotten that he'd opted to wear his old worn-out Converse that night. He never wore them back home but he'd always worn them in New York, so it felt wrong to walk around without them.

"You look so you," Matthew continued. "Even the new glasses. That's what I've always loved about you; you're always you."

Christopher smiled, lips parted slightly, and the pair fell silent. It was like old times, mindless flirting in the heat of something much more important. Christopher hadn't even noticed they were doing it, and then it was over, Matthew leaving to greet a slew of new guests that had entered the party.

"This is his wedding," Christopher reminded himself as he grabbed the glass of champagne that he had desperately needed about ten minutes prior. "He's getting married." But somehow it still didn't seem real.

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The night dragged on. Christopher found Lilla and her date not long after parting with Matthew. Her date was gorgeous. Dark, handsome, tall; the perfect guy to accent Lilla's thin frame and blonde head. Christopher wanted to guess he was from South America, maybe Brazil, but he knew better and assumed he was probably just from Brooklyn.

They consumed their dainty meals at their assigned tables. Christopher felt lucky he was seated beside Lilla, her boyfriend and a few other familiar faces. They were people he hadn't seen in the years even before he left, and the dinner was full of questions he didn't have the answers to. *Where's your date? Are you happy in Ohio? Will you be in the city for long?* It came to the point where he realized that sipping champagne just wasn't going to get him through the night and that the open bar was positioned just close enough to Matthew's table. He didn't usually order Bourbon, but he felt it was more appropriate to the party than a beer. He leaned his back against the bar to get a better view of the room full of rich folk intent on their tiny meals and Cristal. Christopher felt bad for Matthew for getting into this mess with Clyde. He wouldn't want to be caught up with this crowd, even if it did ensure a stable future.

"Christopher!"

He jumped at the sound of Matthew's voice.

"Are you alright?" Matthew turned to order a drink. Christopher could tell that Matthew was already a little drunk; he was never that perky when sober.

"Yeah, I just..."

"Need another drink?"

Christopher held up his current glass. "Hoping this will help."

"I always thought other people's weddings were stressful; turns out your own wedding is worse."

"I can only imagine," Christopher said, sipping and indulging in the Bourbon burn at the back of his throat.

"I wish you hadn't left New York."

It took Christopher a moment before he was able to meet Matthew's eyes.

"Do you ever think," Matthew joined Christopher in leaning against the bar, "how different everything would have been had you stayed?"

"I couldn't have stayed. I didn't have any money." Christopher looked into his drink. He had hoped to avoid this conversation with Matthew, or at least avoid providing an explanation or apology for leaving. But reuniting with Matthew in the hopes of their relationship returning to how it was at its peak was a short-sighted wish.

"I offered you the free room at Clyde's place."

"I wouldn't have been able to deal with that. I can barely deal with this." Christopher downed his drink in hopes he could erase what he'd just said. It had never been about the money, and Matthew knew it. Christopher could've found a job, he could've kept his place and he could've stayed in the city where he belonged. It had been Matthew's alternating between Clyde and himself that had put Christopher on a plane back to the Midwest. He'd convinced himself that living at his parent's home in Ohio was better than having to see Matthew draped across Clyde's arm at every group outing.

"I don't think we'd be here had you stayed," Matthew said.

"What do you mean?" Christopher laughed, unable to tell if Matthew was joking or not.

"I don't think I would've settled with Clyde had I had other options."

*He's not joking*, Christopher thought. "You're getting married tomorrow."

"You're leaving in two days. Then when will I see you?"

"Maybe never."

"Meet me in the bathroom in ten minutes."

Christopher felt like a hesitation was a necessity, but his mouth formed a soft "okay" before he could stop it. Matthew had turned back to his table in a second and Christopher was left alone with no other option than to order another drink.

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"Lilla, Lilla!" Christopher said, rushing into the seat beside her. He'd passed her boyfriend on his way to the bar.

"Someone's perked up," she joked, sipping her half-empty champagne.

"I just talked to Matthew again," Christopher said, keeping his voice low.

"You do realize this is the rehearsal dinner for his wedding, right?" Lilla said.

"I didn't do anything!" said Christopher. "It's all him, I swear."

Lilla rolled her eyes and finished her drink, placing it on the table among several other empty glasses. "Don't do anything stupid, Christopher."

"He told me to meet him in the bathroom in ten minutes."

"You're joking?" she said, clasping her palm onto his knee. "You have to be joking."

"I almost wish I was."

"You're not going, are you?"

He laughed at her worried glare.

"Christopher!"

"What if I stayed in New York? You know, moved back."

"I've been telling you that you need to for months," she said. "But if you do, it can't be for Matthew. He's marrying Clyde! *They want to be together.*"

Christopher shrugged.

"You're really going to meet him?"

"I'm not going to say no to him."

"I can't believe you," she looked around at the table. Most of the chairs were empty, the guests having gone to dance. "Do you even notice how selfish you're acting?"

"He invited me, Lilla!"

"Who cares? If you think that—no matter what goes down in that bathroom—anything good will come from this, you're completely delusional. This isn't college anymore. Matthew and Clyde have grown up. Clyde isn't going to leave Matthew in the middle of the night with no explanation again. Matthew isn't going to come crying to you when he's alone. You're not going to get to fall in love with him again. You missed that opportunity when you moved away."

"Like Clyde didn't miss his opportunity with Matthew a thousand times over," Christopher scoffed, reclining into the chair and checking the time.

"Clyde was there for Matthew. Hell, I was there for Matthew more than you were! Do you know what I went through with him when you moved away? He was devastated. He really loved you."

Christopher still wanted to tell himself that wasn't true, that he had never known it. "We talked for months after I left."

"You still left."

He fell silent, unable to put up any more of an argument with her.

"I know he asked you to go, but could you think maybe...maybe it's not the best decision for either of you?"

"I'm sorry, Lilla," he said as he stood up from the table, pushing the chair in lightly and leaning in to kiss her on the cheek. "I have to do this."

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Standing in the vacant bathroom made Christopher think of the days when he and Matthew had first gotten to know each other, before they were legally allowed to drink as much as they did in environments much less bourgeois than this. Any second, Matthew would push through the door and slam Christopher's back against the wall. Their lips would crash together, their hands would grab desperately at each other's clothing. They'd hesitate before drifting into

the stall. They'd escape this world for each other, just like they always did.

He closed his eyes and took in a deep, drawn out breath. Any second.

The mirror and the fluorescent lighting taunted him. The thought of anyone but Matthew walking into the bathroom terrified him. He removed his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves to wash his hands, just to pass the time.

Any second.

Lilla's voice played like a broken record in his head.

*This isn't college.*

*Do you even notice how selfish you're acting?*

*They've grown-up.*

He needed another drink. He needed Matthew to come in to clear his mind.

Any second.

They want to be together.

Christopher didn't want to believe he'd been standing alone—staring at himself in the mirror, splashing water on his face, untying and retying his shoes—for twenty minutes, but he had. Matthew wasn't going to show up. Christopher wanted to melt into the floor, sink into the Earth and stay there until this whole mess was over. But he couldn't. So he left the bathroom and saw no other option than to leave the party all together, to step outside into a city that was beginning to feel less and less like home every second.

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He found himself that night back at Lilla's apartment with his suitcase on top of the bed, opened and packed tightly with every item he'd lugged into the city. He had to get out before morning, he couldn't go to the wedding, he couldn't face Lilla again. His time in New York was up and once again it was time to run back to Ohio, where he didn't constantly struggle to keep up with what happened around him.

Standing at the foot of Lilla's bed, the tears came; it all reminded him too closely of the night he first left New York. No one else in the apartment, night shrouding the city, a packed suitcase in front of him that he hesitated to close completely.

Christopher looked to the window in Lilla's bedroom, the one overlooking the street. Though he couldn't see much, he felt drawn to it and walked toward it to view what he could of the city one last time.

The yellow flowers blossomed in the neighbor's flowerbox. Up close they looked so much more beautiful than they had from the street. The wilted red flowers that previously occupied the box had been removed completely by the owner. The yellow flowers flourished and glowed; even in the night, they were their own source of sunshine. Christopher found himself hoping they would last through the coming winter and into the springtime. He wanted them to last forever. He pressed his fingertips against the glass, wanting to open the window to pick a flower to carry with him even though he knew it didn't belong to him.

Christopher had a hard time removing himself from the window, with taking his eyes off the street and what he could see of distant buildings. He knew that he didn't really want to leave, though his head kept repeating: *leave now before Lilla gets home, leave now so you can catch an early flight, leave now before you change your mind.*



He turned back to face the bedroom, to stare at the open suitcase. He thought about the city wanting its chance to grow with him. "You could be making another big mistake," he said aloud, startling himself with his own shaken voice.

Above all else, Matthew was his friend, Lilla was his friend and New York was his home. No matter how much it hurt to watch Matthew walk down the aisle with someone else, to see Lilla as the adult he had never pictured her becoming, to find memories he could never relive on his own familiar streets, he had to do the right thing for himself, and he had to stay. Maybe not forever, and maybe not with Matthew, but for the rest of the weekend and for the wedding, he had to stay. He had to experience change.

Christopher picked up the suitcase and placed it on the floor, not to wheel it out the door and onto the street but to tuck it gently back in its place near the door, as if it had never been displaced.