

# The Meet Market

This is an excerpt from the book *Sarah's Menagerie*. You are welcome to share this file.

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Sarah let her head rest on the bus window as she watched the streetlights tally her journey home. College was long today and she looked forward to settling for the night. Her phone beeped softly and she checked it.

Hey it's Toni, want to hang out tonight?

She brightened in surprise. As much as she knew Toni was a stranger Sarah had been wondering the whole week if she'd get to see her again. The chess tournament seemed such a long time ago. Eager to reply she tapped out a quick "Sure" and sent it. Toni replied with an address and a late time.

The bus pulled into her stop and she hurried back to her apartment. She looked up the address and stopped dead in front of her door. The web map had pulled up an intense looking nightclub. It was called Itches. The blood rushed out of her face. A dance party?

She shut herself into her apartment and dropped to the floor of the doorway. In an hour? She thought Toni said they would go shopping together or do something, something that wouldn't be like this. She suffered a look at the nightclub's webpage again and tightened up.

But she had already said yes. How could she say no? What kind of reply would that be? "No, sorry. I can't go, because I don't want to." She forced herself off the ground and to her closet. The timing was abrupt, she had too much to plan and think about. She stared at the clothes she had, trying to see which ones would work. What do they even wear at dance clubs? She dreaded the mental pictures of her outfits, underdressed, poor, ugly, cheap. She reached in and shoved the entire clothes line to the side and looked into the back section. Far into the back she found her high school graduation outfit, some Easter dresses, and an old prom dress.

On the very end a black mound of fabric was scrunched up and pressed into the corner. She pulled it out and held it up. The Little Black Dress. She remembered back in high school overhearing two girls talking about it. One said that *every* girl needed a little black dress, just in case. She never knew what case needed it, but made sure to get one so she was prepared for that case. She shook it out and threw it into the dryer to straighten out the wrinkles.

This must have been what they meant. It must be.

Sarah wrestled with the dress and tugged herself into it. It fit exactly as it did in high school, the fabric gripping the curves of her body. She tugged and straightened to try to make it more comfortable. Her olive skin cooled in contrast to the deep black.

She spun and twisted to feel more at home with it, she liked the heart-

shaped collar and the firm straps but the length of the bottom was too short. The dress couldn't cover her knees, when she bent down to give it a yank the full weight of her cleavage rolled forward. She snapped up in surprise and yanked the front up.

"Uh oh." Sarah looked at the mirror and slowly arched forward. Everything started rolling forward again, and she realized when she scrunched her shoulders someone could almost see her bra. She grabbed her chest and shot straight up. As long as she squares her shoulders she won't accidentally reveal anything. For the rest of the time she stiffly marched around her apartment gathering her shoes and things to prepare the rest of her body for this night out.

Her ride-sharing app beeped happily at her while she was wrangling her dark curls into an updo. The pins exploded out of her hair and scattered across the bathroom floor. Attempting to retreat from this hair battle with something, she sighed and swept it all to one shoulder. The tangles and messy strands looked like chaos. She couldn't control the messiness.

She hopped into the car, her usual driver nodded a hello. He probed her casually for her plans, but mainly she spent her time allocating confidence. It grew more and more difficult to find it within all of her doubt. What if she couldn't find Toni? What if Toni canceled on her? The text was pretty clear but what if Toni expected her to bring something she didn't have? She didn't have any time to research or think about this kind of stuff or look at a map or look at club reviews...

The car halted and the door automatically opened. She hopped out of the car and tried to catch her balance with the crazy shoes on her feet. She looked up at the purple neon sign that flashed "Itches" and felt all the blood drain out of her face. She spun around to throw herself back into the car and found her ride was already gone.

The entire street was completely devoid of people. It was an upscale meat market. All of the other vendors were clocked out, the only option was to go into the dance place. So she turned and pulled open the metal door and descended into the darkness.

Sarah passed through the long hall and found herself inside the pulsating heart of the place. Mingling smells of heat and human vacuumed the fresh air out of her lungs. Strobe lights and lasers colored the darkness and embraced the nameless, faceless hordes of bodies moving and flowing with the pounding beats. Nobody was wearing black, and everybody had their flesh on display. She had never seen so much skin, and so many colors to hardly flatter the inkling of modesty. Sarah was washed into the multitudes, deafened by the electronica music. She couldn't stand still or find a way to navigate, so she stayed at the mercy of the rhythm and at the first chance of an escape she threw herself into the direction of the bar and seized a chair. The bartender auctioned off drinks and cash flowed to and from the fluorescent counter. Sarah tried to shrink herself and gain a better bearing of her situation. The overbearing sounds of the dance club was inside her head now, and she couldn't think clearly enough to see everything around her.

It was a mishmash of electric colored hair and crazy outfits. The bartender

tapped her and asked for her order, she pointed to the sink for tap water and he picked up the vodka on the shelf above. She wanted to signal "no" but it was already poured in front of her, so she paid. She didn't touch it, instead desperately tried to cast her eyes out to find anyone that looked like Toni.

The patrons beside her sipped their drinks and mingled. Eyes would catch eyes by accident, others met hers with fully purposeful looks. She flinched away from their stares and fell back into the direction of the bar. On her left was a greasy-looking guy with spiky hair, his irises were glow-in-the-dark, his shirt reflected light like scales. Her other side had a beautiful Asian lady, she wore a maroon leather jumpsuit without sleeves and an intricate multi-color braid in the back. Sarah tried not to stare in one place and let her eyes scan the masses.

Her eyes found themselves looking to the rafters above, the upper floors had tons of occupied tables. Scores of people leaned into each other and conversed. She couldn't possibly guess about what, they were speaking in foreign languages for all she knew. The patrons beside her had changed without her notice, to her left now was a nimble looking blonde with pearl jewelry draped all over her and her silver dress. The way she sat everybody could see up her dress. Sarah clinched her crossed legs closer together.

She turned away and found herself face to face with a guy leaning on the bar between her and the other seat. He was tall and beefed up, the rayon shirt he wore seemed to settle in every contour of his muscular body. She felt that it put himself on display as much as any of the slinky outfits the girls wore.

He leaned in and shouted "Buy you a drink?" She leaned away and shook her head. His voice tuned up in amusement, "A bit shy?" And beside her another shot of vodka appeared beside the other glass. She forced herself to answer, "Waiting". "What?" He called back, her voice grew only slightly. "Waiting."

Her face was flushed coral pink, before he could say anything the girl behind him leaned forward and tapped his shoulder. She had straight obsidian hair, flat cropped bangs, and a smile curled right up the side of her face. She stretched and said something into his ear, and he leaned backwards to catch what she was saying. Her outfit was a white, cross-sleeve crop top and an earthy colored, asymmetrical skirt that revealed her long legs. She was head to toe in body glitter. Her bid for his attention surpassed the interest in Sarah.

She watched the him get pulled into the dance crowd by the girl, Sarah wasn't the only one admiring the newly formed couple. She noticed several spilt milk type expressions from some of the girls in her peripheral. Then suddenly dance floor seemed to lighten the jumping and grinding around the couple, people formed a clearing for them. The girl with black hair flowed and moved unlike anything Sarah had ever seen. Sometimes she was smooth, painting an almost ballerina-like routine but before Sarah's eyes could settle with the motion she could turn or jerk suddenly into a pose. It fit fluidly, and as flexible as she was her outfit kept on her perfectly. The woman's bust was massive, Sarah couldn't even guess how much it would cost to have a job done like hers, or how it could possibly not inhibit her. Yet she spun and performed for the likes of her appraisers with an effortless fatale.

Suddenly she stopped her pirouette and pointed to Sarah. All vision turned to her as she frantically looked around for whom this woman was diverting attention to. But everyone was trained on Sarah.

The woman waved her to the dance floor. Sarah furiously shook her head. She looked away and closed her eyes. *Nobody is looking at me, nobody is looking, I'm not here. Where is Toni? I don't want to be here, I'm not here.* Sarah felt her whole body wash over with anxiety. She berated herself for leaving home, everything frightened her. She thought of the hoards of eyes that were seeing through her, weighing her, rejecting her over and over. Her head throbbed with the beat of the music. It was in her chest, her back, her bones. She couldn't breathe or open her eyes. She was on sensory overload, inside the urge to cry started swelling up.

She felt fingers wrap around her palms. "Come dance with me!" She heard a strange accent say.

The fingers let go and Sarah opened her eyes, she saw the girl with dark hair readjusting her shoe on the stool beside her. The black hair curtained her face, she couldn't see Sarah shaking her head.

Sarah had to say something. Her voice shook, and her throat was dry and painful to speak through. "I-I-I" Her voice couldn't even come out. She was on the verge of collapsing into sobs. The woman looked up, "You're waiting for someone. I heard." She straightened up and looked at her. With a swift motion the woman pulled something out of the top of her head and swept all of the black hair away. Blonde locks with spiky black tips fell to her shoulders. Sarah froze in shock at the sight of a grinning Toni.

"Now that I'm here, let's go dance!" Toni said in her regular voice.

Sarah felt an unexpected laugh burst out of her lungs.

Toni laughed in response and happily jumped up and down. "Come on, we're going to have so much fun. I'm so glad you are here."

"You-you were so different. I thought you were from another country." Sarah shouted.

"Hmm. Do you like my characters? The exoticness really drives the guys nuts." Toni slipped into another accent, "You give me purse, must have." Sarah handed over her purse. Toni stuffed her wig into it, she then slipped it past Sarah to the bartender.

"Come, life is a bowl of cherries, we go dance now." Toni pursed her lips and gave Sarah her best runway model look. Sarah giggled and Toni collapsed into a big laugh.

Toni started forward to the masses of bodies, and Sarah abruptly froze. "No. I don't know how to dance." Toni looked back and reached for Sarah. She flinched backwards and Toni could only catch two of Sarah's fingers. She gave Sarah a gentle tug for encouragement. "It's okay, I don't know how to dance either." Sarah heard her say.

Sarah grimaced, but reluctantly Sarah let her tow her close to the dance floor. Sarah looked uncertainly to the waves of gyrating humans. The doubts returned and she got closer and closer to the main body. She didn't want to get swept into the current. She was afraid Toni would lose her. She floundered at the thought, dreading the dance floor.

It was too loud, too scary. Sarah ripped her hand backward. Toni spun around. "Maybe the next song." Sarah proposed.

Toni's face fell. "Okay." She walked just inside the perimeter of the dance floor and turned to lock eye contact with Sarah. Toni stood perfectly still, her expression tuned to neutral.

Sarah tried to pretend she wasn't there. She trained her eyes on the ground, the ceiling, to her fingers.

Toni waited.

Sarah fidgeted and swayed quietly.

Toni was a statue. Motion breathed and curved around Toni, and it was starkly interrupted by Toni's erect figure.

Sarah made the mistake of looking at Toni again, Toni instantly reacted with a smile. She stepped into the floor and tried to start dancing. Toni erupted into animation and found perfect symbiosis with the musical crowd. Sarah didn't know how to move, she kept her feet moving in a way that could almost look like dancing. It felt all wrong though. She couldn't feel what they were feeling and it was so painful to know that. She tried and tried to move for a very long minute.

Toni effortlessly reached over and locked arms with Sarah. She spun Sarah around like she was square-dancing. Sarah looked at Toni's feet then and followed the steps she took. The motions and the timing. Sarah felt her lean close and say "You are perfect."

She let go and locked around Sarah's other arm. They square-danced the other way. Sarah started to feel what everyone else was feeling, like the moment a limb finds circulation. With less and less difficulty Sarah could follow into the music. And then Toni let go and started jumping around and wiggling in a silly way. She leaned forward and backward, then swayed and goofed. Her motions looked completely out of sync with the music, but they fell perfectly with the step up the beat. Sarah was on her own then, and she felt her attention gravitate away from her lack of confidence and closer to the girl that wanted to dance with her.

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Together they stumbled out of the emptying night club, they poured out onto the street and walked beside the road. Sarah didn't know how many hours had passed but she didn't care. They leaned on each other and synced their steps, chatting and trying to hear each other with nearly deaf ears.

Sarah opened her phone to text her ride-sharing app but noticed Toni opening the passenger side of a car for her. "I'll give you a ride home." She closed her screen and slid into the expensive car. Toni dropped into the driver seat and stretched. "Want your seat heated?" She said through a yawn.

"Oh, no. That's okay. I-"

Toni cut her off in a loud voice "Jean-Luc, driver seat eighty-five degrees, make it so." The car dinged in return and answered "Driver seat heater, engaged."

Sarah gasped, "You like Star Trek too?"

Toni's face lit up. "Yes! Isn't The Next Generation great?"

Sarah nodded. "They're so technical. I always hang onto every word they

say.”

Toni glowed, “I have every season back at home. Let’s go watch some!” Sarah nodded. “Okay.”

They chatted happily the whole ride back to Toni’s place, debating which episodes would be the best to watch. They went over season premiers, bad guy introductions, and season endings. Finally they pulled into the underground parking lot beneath Toni’s building. Sarah followed her through the stairs and hallways to get to the elevator that would reach Toni’s floor. It was the tallest building Sarah had ever been in.

Toni tapped her feet on the ground and spun so that her skirt fluttered around her. “Do you like the Borg episodes?”

Sarah nodded, watching the floor numbers click up. Toni hopped to Sarah’s other side and leaned on her. “Do you like season three?” She questioned.

Sarah looked up and rolled her eyes down to peak at her friend. “Maybe.” Sarah tested.

Toni hopped in front of Sarah and took her hands. She leaned far back and used Sarah as a support to keep herself from falling over. “Then I know exactly which one we should watch!”

The elevator doors popped open at the thirty-second floor. They skipped down the well lit hall and when they arrived at Toni’s door, she tapped in a code to the keypad next to the handle. Sarah couldn’t help but see the entry code she used. The door swung open and Toni led her inside. Toni flicked her feet and the shoes flew off. Toni pointed to a small table by the door and Sarah dropped her things on it. She rubbed the heel of one shoe on the other leg to loosen her foot, when they were off she delicately tucked the shoes under the table.

“You’re welcome to anything in the kitchen, I might get a midnight snack myself.” Toni mumbled as she disappeared into the room to the right. Sarah’s eyes grew wide at the luxurious apartment. Across the hall from the room Toni was closed in Sarah could see a huge bathtub. Sarah poked her head inside and looked in awe of her large bathroom. The walls were tiled and matched the floor, a beautiful mosaic of circular patterns laid out from corner to corner. Everything was spotless and new looking, Sarah had never seen such an elaborate bathroom in person.

Sarah explored more of the apartment. Down the hall it opened into a wide room. The left side had a long counter that divided the kitchen from the dinette. There were no outer walls, just gigantic windows that opened the apartment to an all-seeing view of the city below. Sarah wandered into the kitchen, there were shelves instead of cabinets. It seemed all of the dishes were propped up on display above her. Every cup hung on its own knob and the only doors she could find were just below the sink.

She hesitated to touch anything, and instead waited silently for Toni to be done. Eventually she emerged from the other room, and Sarah realized that it was a bedroom sized closet. Toni was dressed in a short, silk kimono with a koi fish design that decorated her sleeves. She slid past her and plucked a cup for herself. Sarah realized when she saw Toni’s figure from behind that Toni wasn’t

wearing anything under the robe.

Sarah blushed at the thought and looked away.

Toni spun around and handed a glass to Sarah and then sped off to the other side of the room. There wasn't a couch. The only thing on the other side of the room was a king-sized bed with tons of body pillows on top. Toni flopped on the bed and opened her phone. Suddenly the window at the foot of her bed darkened and clicked on to a news channel. Toni pressed a few buttons on her phone and the screen changed again to a browsing interface for movies.

Sarah quietly moved to the bed and looked for a place to sit. She looked backward to the dinette where there was a table that seated eight. She thought to grab one of those chairs. Without looking up Toni patted the open side of her bed. She perched herself at the edge of the bed at first. Then moved a little closer to the middle. She held her glass with both hands and sipped from it while Toni picked the episode. She knew which one it was. It was the big one. The season finale. By the way Toni smiled at the screen she knew that was the one Toni had in mind.

When she pulled the glass away from her face she blushed in embarrassment. There was a big lipstick mark on the rim. She took it away from her face and looked for a place to put it down. There was a nightstand across from Toni, but Sarah didn't want to rudely reach over her.

As if reading her mind Toni reached over and took the glass from Sarah and placed it on the nightstand. The episode faded in and a spaceship glided across the window. A wide surround sound filled the room with the familiar introduction. "Captain's Log..."

A rush of excitement flowed through Sarah. Years of childhood giddiness crept into her veins, the personalities of the characters snapping right back into her conscience as each familiar face made their introduction. Abruptly the screen paused. Sarah snapped her head to Toni.

"You want some popcorn?" She asked Sarah.

Sarah shrugged, and Toni scrambled off the bed and sped away to make the food.

Sarah wiggled around in her spot, the bed was so fluffy. The sheets were beyond soft. She wanted to stretch out on it and dig her feet into the covers. She stayed tightly wound into herself.

"Okay, here we go Captain." Toni was back on the bed with her big bowl. Toni scooted up against Sarah and shook to bowl. Sarah reached in and picked a few pieces for herself and adjust a little to balance Toni's weight on her. Then she fidgeted a little more and leaned on Toni.

*Space, the final frontier...*

Toni rested her head on Sarah's shoulder as they watched. Sarah in turn leaned her head on Toni.

*There were some unusual magnetic resonance traces. – A Borg footprint?*

...

*Early bird gets the worm!*

Toni abruptly jerked up and hopped off the bed. Their bowl was empty and Toni swung by to drop it off at the sink. "Ugh. I hate Riker's story-line in this one. Why would he pass up so many opportunities to be a captain of his own spaceship?"

Sarah leaned back on the pillows. "Because, there's more to life than moving up in the world."

Toni returned to the bed, "But he has so much potential. He's primed for so much, and he knows it! Why would being first officer for a whole career ever be fulfilling?"

Sarah was surprised at her irritated tone. It seemed so obvious to her. "If you are always reaching up how can you enjoy where you are? He knows that where he is is more special than any place in higher command." Sarah shook her head, "He believes in where he is, with his friends."

Toni's face was filled with disagreement.

Sarah looked at the frozen screen. Commander Riker was standing beside Commander Shelby, Riker was just about to chew out Shelby for aggressively changing the mission orders. Then Sarah looked at Toni, "It's Shelby that I don't like. She's exactly what you were describing. Cold, meticulous, calculating, I-I can't believe she can't see all of the trouble she is causing. She can't see the amazing team that's all around her, or at least she can't become apart of that team. She's too self-oriented." Toni flopped backwards into the pillows.

"I don't think so." Toni ended, but she provided nothing to return to the discussion. Instead she pushed play on her phone.

*You're in my way. - Really?- All you know how to do is play it safe. I suppose that's why someone like you sits in the shadow of a great man for as long as you have. Passing up one command after another.*

Toni shook her head at commander Shelby's attack. But she didn't press pause.

*When it comes to this ship and this crew you're damned right I play it safe.*

Sarah smiled at Riker's counter.

The show passed and fueled Sarah's love for the show. Each conversation was a dangerous back and forth. She watched the captain struggle with private conflicts and then keep his stoic nature in the face of charging death.

When the crew was investigating the enemy warship Toni seized Sarah's hand and held it tight. Sarah squeezed back and held on to the intensity of the scene. They both relaxed when the crew was back in safety. They both wiggled in excitement when the *To Be Continued...* card appeared on screen.

The autoplay turned on the next episode and they watched the second half of the story. Aliens and spaceships, logic and courage, friendship and humanity. They watched the battles as the all assimilating Borg threatened to smother their free will and individuality. Sarah and Toni were right in the



middle of all of it.

By the end the captain and earth was saved. Sarah felt like she had been on a long adventure, she looked down and noticed that Toni was still holding her hand. Toni squeezed her palm and Sarah looked up at her. Toni's eyes were blue like still water. She watched her lips turn up into a subdued smile. Sarah reflexively returned a similar expression but felt there was something off about it. Something she wasn't quite seeing.

Toni broke away and slid off the bed. She tapped a few things on her phone and swung around the edge of the bed to fidget with some wall switches. The windows and their expansive view of the twinkling city shaded opaque. The kitchen lights went low, so followed the other lights.

Darkness enveloped the place, all except a red glow coming from behind Sarah.

She turned to see it was the alarm clock, and Sarah turned back to look in Toni's direction. A barely visible outline of a body was in her sight. She watched it stretch, her long sleeves fanning out. Her arms open, as to embrace the coming darkness.

Toni then scrunched the kimono into a ball and tossed it onto the clock dousing all the remaining light.

The darkness was now absolute.

She could feel Toni crawl onto the bed and move next to her. Sarah was at a loss to think, a shock of fierce heat brought her whole body flush. *This is all wrong.* A stern voice called inside of her. A surge of memories from tonight flooded her mind, trying to see where she made the mistake to be here.

Even in this absurd darkness she could find the door. Her mind jumped off the bed and planed the route there. It was so simple.

A moment passed and Sarah felt finger tips touch her arm. They traveled up to across her shoulder, up the side of her neck, across her cheeks to the other side of her face as Toni's longest finger went under the edge of her jaw. Sarah was completely frozen. She isn't this kind of person. She nearly flinched at the thought being so.

Toni's fingers moved up to Sarah's ear and traced behind it. A tingle went down the side of Sarah's body that caused her eyes to flutter for a moment as her heart raced. Sarah caught Toni with both hands and pulled her away from her face. The gesture was clear as Toni instantly retracted her hand.

Then they were both frozen.

Sarah tried to listen for Toni but could not hear her own breathing.

Suddenly Sarah was floating in in the depths of starless space alone.

Sarah reach out to try and find Toni's hand. She touched some part of Toni's body and dared not guess what it was, pulled back and tried again. After a couple of pats she found Toni's forearm and then down to her hand. She pulled it to her side and clasped her hand to hold it just like before when they were watching the show.

Sarah waited for Toni to say something as they sat there in the darkness. What seemed like an eternity passed as they sat there together. Sarah looked down to where their hands were together even though she could not see them, she was glad she could still feel Toni.

"I had a lot of fun tonight" Sarah tried to say. It came out too weakly and quickly.

"I did too." Toni replied there was something wrong with her voice. There wasn't any confidence in the sound. They were just words.

Suddenly a huge, gravity bearing mass loaded itself onto Sarah chest. It seized her with overwhelming despair. Sarah wanted to cry, she felt like she broke something important. "Do I have to leave now?" Her voice begged the question.

"You don't have to. It's your choice."

The room was still for a long moment. And then Sarah straightened up and pushed out of her spot. She reached over and wrapped her arms around Toni for a brief moment. Then Sarah went back to her side.

She felt Toni start to move around the bed and then the covers they were sitting on top of started to be pulled out from under them.

She heard scrunching sounds and a whoosh. The covers gently feathered down on both of them and Sarah laid her head down on one of the pillows. Toni then rolled Sarah over to her side and reached around her waist as she pulled them together tightly. Toni futzed with the covers a little bit more to make sure they were both snug under cover and then put her arm back around Sarah's waist.

Sarah felt Toni tuck her head into Sarah's shoulder, she lifted her leg and rested her bent knee on Sarah's hip. Seconds later Toni's fell completely still. At first Sarah kept herself balled up tight, conflicted about how she was supposed to feel. The problem was that Sarah didn't want to be anywhere else.

The little black dress that Sarah was wearing was protecting her from having direct skin contact with Toni, but Sarah started to feel the consuming warmth from Toni's body. It seeped into her feelings and her muscles and her thoughts. It traveled with her quietly as she could feel herself sinking into unconsciousness.

Thank you for reading this excerpt.

If you want to find out more about Sarah's life visit [MorganRouth.com](http://MorganRouth.com).