



A Novel

THE ROM-COMMERS

New York Times Bestselling Author

KATHERINE CENTER



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For my dad, Bill Pannill, who loves words as much as I do. Maybe more.

One

LOGAN SCOTT CALLED just as I was making dinner, and I almost didn't answer because my dad and I were singing along to ABBA's greatest hits. There were not too many people I'd interrupt ABBA for—but yes, fine, Logan Scott was one of them.

Logan was my former high school boyfriend, who still felt guilty about the way we broke up, and he dealt with that guilt by sending me job opportunities.

Not the worst way to handle it.

It was the penance he paid for his unscathed life.

Though nobody's life is truly unscathed, I guess.

His *less*-scathed life, maybe.

He was a manager. In Hollywood. For screenwriters. A very glamorous job.

Technically, he was *my* manager—although I'd never made him any money. I was kind of like his pro bono case.

It was fine, he always insisted. I'd pay off eventually.

I'd placed in two different screenwriting contests because Logan insisted I submit. He got me in the door freelancing for *Variety*. And all those movie reviews I got paid minimum wage to do? Courtesy of him.

He just kept sending me work.

I told him to stop feeling guilty. I was fine. But I didn't exactly mean it. Not if that guilt of his was going to keep paying my bills.

Some of them, anyway.

All to say, on this particular night, Logan had a doozy of an offer for me.

"Emma," he said. "I'm going to need you to sit down."

"I'm flipping pancakes-for-dinner right now," I said. My sister, Sylvie, was coming home from college, so I was making her favorite meal.

"You will definitely drop them all when you hear this," Logan said, like he'd pictured me *juggling* pancakes instead.

I covered the in-progress stack with foil, turned off the music, and gave my dad a "one minute" finger from across the room.

My dad nodded and gave a hearty thumbs-up, like *Do whatever you need to do*.

"I'm ready," I said to Logan.

"Are you literally sitting down?"

"No."

"I'm not kidding. You need to do that."

I walked to our dining-slash-breakfast table and sat down at my already-set place. "Okay," I said. "I'm literally sitting."

"I have a job for you..." Logan said then, pausing for effect.

"I'll take it," I said.

"Writing a feature film script..." he went on, stretching out the moment.

"Sold," I said, like *Moving on*.

And then he got to his grand finale: "With Charlie Yates."

Logan had told me to sit—but at the sound of that name, I stood up.

Then I froze. Then frowned. Then waited. Was this a trick?

"Hello?" Logan finally said. "Are you still—"

"I'm sorry," I said, shaking my head. "I thought I heard you say Charlie Yates."

"I did say Charlie Yates."

I sat back down. "Charlie Yates?" I said, like there was room for confusion.

I could sense Logan nodding. "Yes."

But I needed more confirmation. "Charlie Yates who wrote *The Destroyers*? Charlie Yates who wrote *The Last Gunslinger*, and

Smokescreen, and *Forty Miles to Hell*? The screenwriters' screenwriter, living legend, reason half the country says the catchphrase 'Merry Christmas, cowboy'—that Charlie Yates?"

"Uh-huh," Logan said, enjoying the moment. "That one."

I took a sip of the ice water in my glass—

"He's written a rom-com," Logan said.

—and I coughed it back out.

Logan waited while I recovered.

"*Charlie Yates* wrote a rom-com?" Now I was suspicious. A Western? Sure. A horror flick? Absolutely. A dystopic space adventure where the robots eat all the humans? In a heartbeat. But a *rom-com*?

No way.

"He didn't," I said, answering my own query.

"He did."

"Is it ... good?" I asked, and then immediately shook my head to cancel the question.

Of course it was good.

I'd seen every movie Charlie Yates had ever written, and I'd read every one of his screenplays—produced or unproduced—that I could get my hands on, printing them off the internet and lovingly binding them with brass brads before alphabetizing them on their own dedicated shelf on my bookcase. And I didn't just *read* them. I highlighted them. Annotated them. Covered them with Post-its and exclamation points. *No question* it was good. Charlie Yates couldn't write a bad screenplay if you threatened to take all his awards away.

"It's terrible," Logan said then.

"What?" It couldn't be.

"It's so terrible, even calling it terrible is an insult to the word *terrible*."

I took that in. "You've read it?" I asked.

"My eyes will never be the same, but yes—I read an entire draft."

"You read a draft?" I asked. "How?"

How was my ex-boyfriend from high school just casually reading the private first drafts of the world's most beloved superstar screenwriter?

Logan paused for a second and then he said, "So, I've been waiting for the right moment to share this with you, but ... I am actually his manager."

"*What!*" I stood up. Again.

“I’ve been waiting to tell you because I knew you’d freak out.”

“I’m not freaking out,” I said, but in truth I was now clucking around the dining table in a meaningless circle, headless-chicken style. I knew Logan represented some high-profile people. But not *that* high.

“Just from the way you’re breathing,” Logan said, “I can tell that you are.”

“How am I breathing?” I demanded.

“Like a Charlie Yates superfan who is losing her shit right now.”

Fine. He wasn’t wrong.

I took a soothing breath, and then walked to our apartment door, stepped outside, and strolled deliberately down our fourth floor’s exterior walkway. Calmly. Like a non-freaked-out person.

I tried again. “You’re telling me in seriousness that you’re Charlie Yates’s manager?”

“Yes.”

“Charlie *Yates*?” I asked, like he might mean another Charlie. Then, “*Charlie Yates*?” like he might mean another Yates.

“Yes to both.”

I was baffled. “How long has this been going on?”

“About three years.”

“Three years?!” I shrieked. Then, lower, “Did you just say ‘three years’? You’ve been working with my favorite screenwriter *for three years* and you never thought to mention it?”

“It wasn’t that I didn’t think to,” Logan said, trying to steer us to a calmer place with his voice. “I decided to wait until the right moment.”

I thought about all the joy of being one degree of separation from Charlie Frigging Yates—joy I’d been missing out on for three years. Then I said accusingly, “You ‘decided to wait’?”

“Yes. Because, as you already know, timing is everything.”

Well. He wasn’t wrong there.

I’d made it to the end of our walkway. I leaned over the railing and looked down at the evening lights over the parking lot, and the car lights on the freeway beyond that, and the downtown lights sparkling off in the distance. I knew somebody who knew Charlie Yates. Everything had a bright new shimmer.

“Fair enough,” I finally said.

“I’m telling you now,” Logan said, “because, like I said before, I have a job for you.”

It all came rushing back. “That’s right. You have a job for me—”

“To write a screenplay—” Logan said.

“With Charlie Yates,” I finished, my voice glowing with awe.

“But *rewrite*,” Logan said. “Ghostwrite. I need you to *fix* this thing—hard.”

“It’s a page-one rewrite?”

“Page *zero*,” Logan said. “He’s got a handshake deal with an exec from United Pictures that if he writes this rom-com, they’ll produce that gangster thing he wrote that’s been kicking around.”

Was it weird that a screenwriter of Charlie Yates’s renown had an unproduced screenplay lying around? Not at all. Most scripts by most screenwriters never saw the light of day, in fact. You can make a great living in Hollywood getting paid good money to write scripts that never become movies. But that’s what made Charlie Yates such a legend. Getting anything produced was a feat. But Charlie sold script after script—that became movies, that won awards, that became classics, and that then had people quoting them verbatim year after year.

“I love that gangster thing,” I said. I’d found a bootleg copy on the internet and used up a whole pad of Post-its admiring it.

And I didn’t even like gangster movies.

I didn’t like drug kingpin movies, either. Or prison massacre movies. Or killer clown movies. Or sea rescue movies where everyone gets eaten by sharks.

Unless Charlie Yates wrote them.

He was that good. I loved everything he did, even though the only genre that I myself truly personally liked was ... romantic comedies.

Which was the only genre he didn’t write.

Until now, apparently.

That’s how good he was. He forced me to love him—against my entire personality.

“He loves the Mafia thing, too,” Logan said. “He spent months and months in Chicago for research and he wore a pocket watch the whole time. And he’s hell-bent on getting it made, especially now that he’s back from

his”—Logan hesitated before finishing with—“hiatus. But that can’t happen until he does this rom-com. And as I mentioned—”

“It’s terrible.”

“We’re going to need a better word for terrible.”

I gave it all a second to sink in.

“That’s where you come in,” Logan said, ready to move on to details. “It’s going to need the mother of all rewrites. Uncredited, of course—”

“Of course.”

“But for good money.”

“How much money?”

“More than you’re technically entitled to, Writers Guild-wise.”

There it was. There were levels to how much you could earn, depending on how much success you’d had. And since I’d had—and I say this with great compassion for myself—almost no success, my level wasn’t high.

Didn’t matter. Who cared?

This was Charlie Holy Shit Yates.

“Send it to me,” I said. There was nothing more to discuss. Would I uncreditedly rewrite Charlie Yates’s incomprehensibly terrible screenplay? *Of course I would.* I’d do it for no money. Hell, I’d pay *him*. I’d already mentally opened a new file in Final Draft and saved it as CHARLIE F@\$%ING YATES.

“There’s a catch, though,” Logan said next.

“What’s that?”

“You have to come to LA.”

Now I started pacing the walkway again. “Come to LA?” I echoed, like that was something no one ever did.

“Not *forever*,” Logan said. “Just for the working period of the rewrite.”

How long did a rewrite even take? I’d never done a rewrite for someone else.

Logan read my mind. “Six weeks,” he declared next. “Possibly longer. This has to be an in-person thing.”

“But—” I started, so many objections in my mind, it was hard to choose. “What about Zoom? What about FaceTime? What about Slack? Google Meet? Hell—even Skype! There are a million virtual ways to do it.”

“He’s old-school,” Logan said.

“That’s no excuse.”

“And he’s got a massive ego.”

“He deserves that ego,” I said, shifting sides. “He’s earned it.”

“The point is, he’s Charlie Yates. He gets it the way he wants it. And he’s never going to just accept virtual corrections from some unproduced writer on the internet.”

“When you put it that way, I don’t sound very impressive.”

“I know.”

“So I have to come out there and—what?”

“Woo him.”

“*Woo* him?”

“Obviously not in the traditional sense of *woo*.”

“I can’t go to LA, Logan,” I said. “I can’t go *anywhere*. Remember my dad?”

But Logan wasn’t deterred. “What about Sylvie?” he asked.

Dammit. He had me. “What about her?”

“Didn’t she just graduate?”

“She did, but—”

“Wasn’t that the plan all along? To get Sylvie through college and then let her take a turn?”

“That *was* the plan,” I said, bracing myself against how right Logan was. “But she got a very prestigious summer internship with International Medical Aid—”

“Bullshit!” Logan shouted.

“Did you just shout ‘bullshit’ at me?”

“It’s her turn,” Logan said, mad at me now. “You’ve done everything for ten years—”

“*Just under* ten years,” I corrected.

“—and the plan, all along, was for her to come back to Texas after college and take over.”

“Yes, but that was before—”

“Call her,” Logan demanded. “Call her right now and tell her she’s coming home. You will never get another chance like this. This is the opportunity of your lifetime.”

“I don’t have to call her. She’s on her way in from the airport right now. Remember the pancakes?”

“Perfect timing,” Logan said then. “Tell her at dinner.”

But I just leaned down and rested my forehead against the metal handrail as a garbage truck rumbled by down below. “I don’t want to.”

“Be fair to yourself, Emma,” Logan cajoled.

Why were we even talking about this? I had things to do and no time for nonsense. “I’m not crushing Sylvie’s dreams, Logan. That’s not on my to-do list today.”

“But what about you?” Logan asked. “What about *your* dreams?”

At that, I stood up. “My dreams,” I said, like *We’re done here*, “got crushed a long time ago.”

Two

I DID NOT tell Sylvie at dinner.

It wasn't just the first dinner we'd had together in the months since she'd gone back to college last January—it was her graduation party. A graduation that, of course, my dad and I had missed, since he couldn't travel—and if he couldn't travel, neither could I.

This wasn't just dinner. This was a celebration. My glorious, brilliant baby sister had graduated summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa from the highly picturesque Carleton College—which, if you didn't know, is the Harvard of the Midwest—and she was now, among many other things, living proof that our family had overcome all of its tragedies and was thriving, at last. Officially.

We were celebrating, dammit.

I'd made a cake in the shape of a graduation cap and stuck sparkler candles in it. I'd festooned our kitchenette with gold streamers and sprinkled confetti on the table. I'd typed out little menus and rolled them up like diplomas.

I wasn't ruining all that by *moving to LA*.

You had to maximize joy when it fluttered into your life. You had to honor it. And savor it. And not stomp it to death by reminding everyone of everything you'd lost.

Sylvie showed up in a cropped tee with her fairy-tale straight blond hair billowing, looking like the personification of youth and beauty and hope—and lugging five hundred duffel bags of dirty laundry. And I hugged her around the neck with genuine joy and jumped and squealed and kissed her cheeks. And my dad met us at the door with his walker and we sang “Happy Graduation to You” to the birthday song tune, my dad adding some one-handed percussion with a maraca. And then we ate stacks of pancakes and sausages and squirted canned whipped cream all over everything.

We sat at our little dinette and chattered away and teased each other and enjoyed every second of being back together so much that I almost felt resentful in some tiny compartment in my brain that Logan Scott had called out of nowhere with that crazy Charlie Yates news and complicated things.

Today of all days.

The longer the evening went on, and the more we sat around chatting afterward, catching up and drinking root beer floats for dessert, the more the memory of that phone call faded for me. I felt a growing and peaceful sensation that the crisis had passed—that I no longer had to make any hard decisions, and life would continue on as predictable and normal and vaguely unsatisfying as ever.

I just wanted to be happy—simply, uncomplicatedly happy—for like *one evening*. Was that too much to ask?

Apparently so.

Timing really was everything, I guess.

★ ★ ★

YOU MIGHT BE wondering why my fifty-five-year-old dad had to use a walker to come greet my sister at the door. Or why we couldn’t go to her graduation. Or why his percussion instrument of choice was *one* maraca.

I will give you the same vaguely cheery, deeply oversimplified answer that we always gave everyone: Just under ten years ago, my father had “a camping accident.”

Pressed for details, I’ll add this: He was hit in the head during a sudden rockfall while climbing in Yosemite and got a traumatic brain injury—which left him partially paralyzed on one side, a condition called

hemiplegia, and also suffering from an inner-ear issue that profoundly messed up his balance called Ménière's disease.

That's the long story short.

I'm leaving out a lot here. I'm leaving out the worst part, in fact.

But that's enough for now.

That's why my dad couldn't be left alone. That's why he moved through the world like he was ninety. That's why I worried about him 24–7. And that's why writing a screenplay with Charlie Yates in Los Angeles was totally, utterly, entirely out of the question.

I wouldn't shirk my responsibilities.

I wouldn't abandon my dad.

And I would not, not, *not* eclipse my baby sister's potential by sticking her on medical duty in this six-hundred-square-foot apartment.

I wouldn't. And I couldn't ...

Until I read the screenplay.

★ ★ ★

THE EMAIL FROM Logan with the subject “Apologies in Advance” hit my inbox just as Sylvie was settling in on the top bunk with Netflix and her headphones. Our PJs were on, the lights were off, and I stared at that attachment for a good long minute before finally giving in and clicking it open.

An hour later, I made it official:

Terrible.

We really would need a more terrible word for terrible.

First of all, it was—at least in theory—an updated retelling of the beloved rom-com classic *It Happened One Night*. Written by a person who had clearly never seen the movie.

If you haven't seen it yourself, please do yourself a favor: stop whatever you're doing and go watch it. This movie is ninety years old, and it still sparkles with life and vitality and charm. A down-on-his-luck newspaper reporter tries to help a runaway socialite travel by bus to New York in hopes of getting her exclusive story—and falls madly in love with her instead. Clark Gable is fan-yourself sexy, Claudette Colbert is sassy and gorgeous, and the romantic tension? You could *eat* it with a *spoon*. This is

the road trip rom-com that launched a thousand road trip rom-coms—and it swept the Oscars, winning all of the big five categories, including Best Screenplay. It’s a titan of the genre. It’s practically sacred.

And Charlie Yates, my beloved Charlie Yates, my gold standard, my writer by which all other writers are judged, my absolute all-time screenwriting hero ...

He mutilated it.

He besmirched it.

He *desecrated* it.

This thing he did—I don’t even want to say “wrote” ... It had no spark, no build, no banter, no joy—and no scenes that even resembled the original movie. The title was the same, and the character names were the same. But that was it. Was he *asleep* when he wrote this? Was he *in the middle of dental surgery*? How could someone so good and so masterful at writing—someone who could make you root for serial killers, and believe in ghosts, and genuinely *like* cannibal robots—take something that was already working, and had been working for ninety years, and chuck its charming soul into a wood chipper?

I mean, Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert had to be weeping up in heaven.

He had their characters going to a line-dancing competition.

A line-dancing competition!

Something was going on here. Did Charlie Yates have a stroke? Had a chat bot secretly rewritten the real script as a gag? Was Charlie Yates being held hostage somewhere and forced at gunpoint to write a career-endingly bad story?

But *career-endingly bad* didn’t even capture it.

This thing was apocalyptic.

And there it was. Somehow *that* was the tipping point for me.

Real life was allowed to be disappointing. Heck, real life was *guaranteed* to be disappointing. Living alone in a tiny apartment with my sick father? Teaching community college freshman English so we could have health insurance? Denying my own dreams so my overindulged but lovable baby sister could live all of hers struggle-free? All fine. I didn’t get to make the rules for reality.

But stories had a better option.

I was not letting Charlie Yates ruin this movie, his career, the romantic comedy genre as a whole, and *all our lives* with this nuclear-waste-fueled dumpster fire of a screenplay.

That was where I drew the line.

Nobody was dishonoring *It Happened One Night*. Not on my watch.

I didn't even make a decision, really. Just finished reading, clamshelled my laptop, swung myself up to the top bunk, and stared at Sylvie until she took off her headphones and said, "What's up?"

"I've just read a romantic comedy script," I said, "that will destroy human civilization as we know it."

Half an hour later, she had the whole story: Logan's call, Charlie Yates's situation, my life-changing opportunity. And before I even knew what she was doing, she was typing out an email to withdraw from her summer internship, citing "a family emergency."

"You can't not go to your internship!" I said when I realized what she was doing.

"Sure I can," she said.

"It's a week away! You made a commitment."

"They'll pull someone off the wait list."

"But—" I shook my head. "But it's *very prestigious*."

Sylvie shrugged. "I'll go another year."

"What if they don't take you another year?"

"I'll go somewhere else."

But I was shaking my head—ferverently. I mean, I recognized that I'd gotten this started. I was the one who'd climbed the bunk ladder and told her everything. She was a good-hearted person, after all. I could've predicted she might try to solve this.

But now that it was happening, I couldn't stand it.

What was she even thinking, giving up her internship?

Had I protected her too much? Had she had it too easy? Didn't she know how awful the world was? "I'm not sure you understand what a big deal opportunities like this are," I said. "You can't take them for granted. The world is horrible. Chances to shine don't just fall from the sky."

"You hear yourself, right?" Sylvie said. "Ditto—right back at you. Do you know what a big deal Charlie Yates is? We studied him in my film theory class."

“But you’re...” I couldn’t think of a justification. “You’re *young*.”

“You’re also young.”

“You’re full of promise.”

“You’re also full of promise.”

“But you’re—just...” I shrugged. “You’re Sylvie. You’re my Sylvie.”

“And you’re my Emma.”

I shook my head like that argument held no weight. “I can’t take your chance away from you.”

“And I can’t take *your* chance away from *you*.”

“But you’ve already said yes to your chance.”

“But your chance is bigger than mine.”

The more we argued, the more I had to pick a side. And of course, that side was always Sylvie’s. She really was my Sylvie. I’d practically raised her. Between me and Sylvie, I chose Sylvie—every time. That was a given. I didn’t know how to be her sister-slash-surrogate-mom any other way.

But Sylvie wasn’t giving up. “Guess we’ll have to flip a coin.”

“I’m not flipping a coin, Sylvie.”

Ugh. I’d created a monster. I used to win all our arguments—but now she was big enough to beat me.

“You know what?” I said. “Let’s talk about it tomorrow.”

“Too late,” Sylvie said then, looking mischievous and defiant. “I just hit SEND.”

“You *what*?”

She shrugged like she’d won. “I sent it.”

“We weren’t done talking!”

“I was done,” Sylvie said. “You’re going to LA.”

“Write them back!” I said, grabbing at her laptop. “Say it was a mistake!”

But Sylvie clutched it to her chest. “Never!”

We were just starting to wrestle for it when our dad’s voice came through the wall. “Girls!” he called. “Quit arguing!”

Sylvie and I froze and looked at each other like, *Now you woke up Dad*.

Then his voice sounded again, deeper this time—resonant and decisive, like the voice of God. “We’ll discuss this in the morning like rational people,” he said, in a tone that made it final. “And then we’ll take a vote. And then”—he paused to be extra clear—“we’ll send Emma to LA.”

Three

ONE WEEK LATER, I was on a plane.

I could easily have taken *a month* to pack up my stuff, and organize my dad's medications, and label the supply shelves, and color-code daily to-do lists, and cover every surface with sticky-note reminders.

Taking care of my dad wasn't an art—it was a science, and it sure as hell wasn't for amateurs. Sylvie was a smart girl, sure, but she'd never had any training for this, and I felt like an astronaut handing over the keys to the space shuttle to a chimpanzee.

“He has to drink a minimum of forty ounces of water every single day,” I told Sylvie as I marked water bottles in the cabinet with Sharpies. “And he won't remember, so you have to follow him around and nag him.”

“Do I really have to nag him?” Sylvie asked, like a person who had never done any caretaking.

“If you don't nag him, then he won't drink enough water, and then sodium levels in his body will spike, fluid will build up in his inner ear, and he'll lose his balance, hit his head, and wind up in the ER all night.”

“Ah,” Sylvie said. “*Nag him*. Got it.”

“It helps to keep a color-coded chart,” I said, opening up one of the kitchen cabinets to show her where the last three months were taped up. “The blue boxes are for water. Yellow is for multivitamins. Red, purple,

orange, and green are all for medications. And the unicorn puffy stickers are for sodium.”

“Dad doesn’t seem like he’d be motivated by unicorn puffy stickers.”

“They’re not for him. They’re for me.”

Sylvie squinted at the chart. “And how does the sodium thing work?”

Was it possible she didn’t know this? Had I really sheltered her that much? “Milligrams of sodium” had been the organizing principle of my life for the past decade. “We have to keep Dad’s sodium intake under a thousand milligrams a day,” I said. “Which is not easy. One slice of deli meat has two hundred.”

“But how do I even track that?”

I pulled out my frayed, dog-eared sodium guidebook. “You memorize it. Like a champion.” I tapped the book with pride. “Learn it. Live it. I can tell you exactly how much sodium is in any food you ever name.”

Sylvie looked at the book uncertainly.

“Seriously,” I said, “that’s true. Try me.”

“Strawberries?” Sylvie asked.

“Two milligrams per cup.”

“White rice,” she tried next.

“Nine milligrams per cup.”

“French fries!”

“Sixty-eight milligrams for a small bag.”

Sylvie nodded in approval.

“Try to stump me,” I said. “I dare you. I can go all day. Truffles. Pineapple juice. Beets. Mollusks.”

“Sounds like you really know your shit.”

I nodded, like *You know it*. “I will crush you.”

The obsession with sodium, of course, was about trying to control the Ménière’s disease.

Nobody knows exactly what causes it. But they do know it’s an inner-ear disorder that throws off your balance. My dad’s clearly started in the wake of his brain injury, and he had a particularly bad case that hasn’t resolved over time. He would’ve been unsteady on his feet anyway, from the partial paralysis on his left side, but the Ménière’s made it a hundred times worse.

More than just unsteadiness, though, he had a thing called “drop attacks” where he felt—suddenly—like he just got shoved to the ground. Or even sometimes like the room itself flipped upside down in one swift heave. And nobody ever saw it coming—least of all him. No warning at all. He could be sitting at dinner and just catapult out of his chair.

That’s why we had carpet everywhere, and industrial pads on the kitchen floor, and foam bumpers on sharp corners. That’s why he didn’t drive anymore, or take stairs, if he could help it. That’s why we were on a first-name basis with several nurses at the closest ER.

That’s why I did not trust Sylvie to take over.

I wasn’t sure I trusted her to run things for *six days*—much less six weeks.

And that’s why, now, I couldn’t sleep on the plane.

What was I doing? This was lunacy. I couldn’t just leave my dad with a twenty-two-year-old. Even a college graduate with a Phi Beta Kappa key needed more than one week to prepare for this. Our widowed next-door neighbor Mrs. Otsuka had agreed to check in on them after she saw me burst into tears in the laundry room, but that would hardly be enough. Leaving—actually packing up and getting on my first flight anywhere in almost a decade—felt so astonishingly irresponsible, I couldn’t believe I was letting it happen.

Sitting on that plane, wedged into a middle seat in the last row, listening to toilet flush after toilet flush, I realized I was shaking.

Like genuinely shaking. A lot.

Not just my hands, the way you might on a cold day if you’d forgotten your mittens. My whole body. From the core. And my heart was just thumping like a kettledrum—so big and so hard that when I looked down, I could see the fabric of my shirt vibrating.

Was it fear?

Was I afraid to fly? Afraid to leave my dad? Afraid of changing my narrow little life?

Sure. Yes. All of the above.

But more than that: I was going to miss him.

My dad wasn’t just a dad. He was my favorite person.

He was everybody’s favorite person.

He was a *delight*.

Sometimes a TBI will cause personality changes in people—you hear a lot about anger and depression in the wake of brain injuries like his, and reasonably so. But if it changed him, and I'm not sure this is even medically possible ... it made him sweeter.

My dad was always the dad everybody wanted. If there were a dad store, he'd be a bestseller. They'd have rows and rows of him for sale, right up front. He was always warm and encouraging and connected and goofy—even before.

But now, in the wake of it all, he was something even more astonishing. He was *cheerful*.

He lost everything in that rockfall—and he found a way to keep going. And not only that. He found a way to laugh. And sing goofy little ditties. And close his eyes and turn his face to the sun.

And he got me to do all those things, too.

How did he do it? How did he stand beside a personal Grand Canyon of suffering and manage to feel ... *grateful*?

And how on earth would I cope out in the heartless world without him?

Who even was I on my own?

Before the rockfall, my dad was a cellist.

After the rockfall, he taught himself every instrument you can play with one hand—mastering the harmonica, the bones, the zither, the tambourine, the tin whistle, and the slide trombone. He also learned one-handed crochet, and potting on a wheel, and beading. “You pick the colors,” he said, “I’ll make the magic.” He got so good at beading necklaces that he opened a jewelry shop on Etsy.

Which actually added a fair bit of cash to our monthly budget.

I would really miss him, is what I'm saying. And I found myself wondering, as we hit some turbulence and I white-knuckled the armrest, if maybe dreams were better off never trying to become reality.

Four

DON'T MEET YOUR heroes. Isn't that what they say?

Oh, god. They're so right.

Logan picked me up at LAX in his BMW SUV with a vanity plate that read KILL N IT. Which felt very LA.

Although apparently nobody ever picks anybody up at LAX.

I know this because it's the first thing Logan said to me as I got in the car. "I hope you're grateful," he said.

I was late to meet him because my enormous suitcase had gotten caught on the conveyor belt at baggage claim, and my carry-on bag had a broken wheel that dragged and squeaked like it was begging for mercy and slowed me down. Also because I'd stood so long in the airport bathroom trying to wrangle my curly red hair into something, um, *less curly and red* that I lost track of time.

I didn't hate my hair or anything. It was just ... a lot.

It was the first—and last—thing you noticed about me. As my friend Maria once said about having curly hair: *You don't control it. It controls you.*

In the end I settled for the same thing I did with my hair every day: pulling it back into a high ponytail that looked like a pom-pom and calling it a day. The other option was to leave it down—flowing out of my head

like lava. But I had to consider poor Charlie Yates. That would be a lot to take in at a first meeting. Visually.

I didn't want to frighten the poor man.

I overthought my outfit, too, for the record. Jeans, and Converse low-tops, and a little boatneck printed blouse. Was this too casual? Too cutesy? Not badass enough? Should I maybe put on a gunmetal-gray suit and some aviator shades? How did one even dress for meeting the best screenwriter on the planet?

Logan, in contrast, knew exactly how to dress—a perfectly tailored suit so crisply pressed I was almost afraid to hug him. It was the first time I'd seen him anywhere but an occasional FaceTime in eight years, but he looked exactly the same.

"You haven't changed at all," I said as we buckled up.

"Are you kidding? I'm way cooler." Then he looked me over. "You're the one who hasn't changed."

So what if I was wearing the same hoop earrings I'd worn at my high school graduation? They were sterling silver.

I thought we might stop for lunch, or coffee, but Logan drove straight for Charlie Yates's house in the Hollywood Hills—no stopping allowed.

Guess this was happening.

"Hope you peed at the airport," Logan said, in a tone like *No turning back now*.

"Like a racehorse," I said, in a tone that I hoped said, *Bring it on*.

Yes, Logan and I had dated in high school—but we'd always been friends first. His very dashing father—American, and Black, and from Atlanta—had met his elegant mother—British, and white, and a TV producer—while working as a war correspondent overseas. Logan was raised mostly in London until his dad got a job as a nightly news anchor in Houston, and he showed up as the new kid at my high school.

We bonded because we were the only two students in our English class who thought Robert Frost's poem "After Apple-Picking" had to be about sex.

Also—even though he was tall and I was not, and even though he had a posh British accent and I just sounded like a plain old American teenager, and even though his complexion was a warm beige and mine was so pale and befreckled that a guy in my photography class kept squinting at me and

saying he wished he could add some contrast ... we had the exact same color hazel eyes.

Exactly the same.

And so we started telling people we were twins.

“Not identical twins, obviously,” we’d say.

This game was so fun, and we got so good at it, sometimes people believed us. If they pointed out our obvious genetic dissimilarities, I’d say, “Genetics are complicated. Deal with it.” And then Logan would add, “The eyes don’t lie.”

If a genius noted that one of us talked like the royal family and one did not, I’d wince as if pained by a cruel memory and say, “We were separated as infants in a tragic *Parent Trap* situation.” And then Logan would lean in and say, “Please don’t trigger her any further.”

Our specialty was getting double free birthday desserts at restaurants.

Logan’s family moved away after high school when his dad got an anchor job on the national nightly news—that’s right: Logan’s dad is *Malcolm Scott*—and Logan went on to graduate from Stanford and then seamlessly transition into a wildly successful career.

He didn’t have to stay in touch with me, is what I’m saying. Me, stuck at home and not transitioning into a wildly successful anything.

But he did.

And, now, having not seen him in person since the night before he left for his freshman year of college—when he broke up with me, claiming, and I quote, “We both need some freedom”—I suddenly felt nervous.

He’d lived a whole lifetime since then—most notably, coming out in college, and calling me proudly to declare that I was the last girl he would ever date.

“I’m honored,” I said.

“Right? Exactly. No woman will ever replace you.”

I wasn’t entirely sure what Logan’s life was like these days, but I assumed it was full of awesome parties and awesome food and awesome people. So I was highly surprised when a decidedly *not* awesome guy named T.J. called on speaker before we’d even left the airport grounds.

“Lo! Gan!” This guy T.J.’s voice boomed, seeming to rattle the interior of the car. “What’s up? Did you pick up that girl?”

“I have her here.”

“Don’t tell her she’s a career-killer,” T.J. said.

I frowned at Logan.

“T.J.,” Logan said, “you’re on speaker.”

“I am?” A pause. “That’s fine. I’ll own it. The last thing the great Charlie Yates needs to do right now is to siphon off all his testosterone and write lady movies with the girls.”

Logan poked at the controls on his dash and said, “You know what? I’ll call you back.”

But before he could hang up, T.J. added, “And by the way, this job should have gone to someone who’s actually had some work produced.”

“Bad connection!” Logan said, as he hit END.

Then a long silence as the seams in the concrete moved rhythmically under the tires.

Finally, I said, “That felt a little hostile.”

“He’s not even supposed to know about you. But my assistant has a thing for him.”

“A screenwriter, I presume?”

Logan nodded. “He wrote and directed *Beer Tower*. And *Beer Tower II: The Reckoning*.”

I’d never heard of either of those movies.

“They were huge on YouTube,” Logan said.

“Were they ... good?”

“Hell, no!” Logan said. “But he synthesized a ton of horizontal integration. The sponsorship from Solo Cups alone put it in the black.”

“How have I never heard of this movie?”

“You’re not exactly the target audience.”

“Did he want the Charlie Yates job for himself?” I asked.

“Can you blame him?”

“He just seemed douchey.”

“He’s not used to not getting things.”

“Why is that again?” I asked.

“Because he’s third-generation Hollywood royalty. And he’s ridiculously well-connected. And *Beer Tower* made ten million dollars—before *Beer Tower II* made twenty.”

“And he just randomly calls you?”

“He’s just one of those people who’s everywhere.”

Logan was acting cool, but it was a strange welcome to LA. I'd barely left the airport and I already had an enemy.

Another little pause before Logan said, "You'll never see him. Charlie can't stand that guy. He's a total dude-bro."

"But he's your client?"

"He's everything that's wrong with the world," Logan said. "But, yes. He's my client."

★ ★ ★

BIT OF A rocky start there.

But here was the bigger, more important picture: I had a job working for Charlie Yates—whether dude-bro T.J. liked it or not—and I was absolutely, undeniably on my way to Charlie Yates's house right now.

I'd never thought of Charlie Yates as even having a house before. I assumed he just lived in some kind of ethereal writing-god plane.

"It's not exactly a house," Logan said. "More like a mansion. The exterior was featured in a Nancy Meyers movie."

Why did that make it scarier?

"Maybe we should stop by the hotel first," I said.

"What hotel?"

"Am I not staying in a hotel?"

"Can you afford to stay in a hotel for six weeks?"

Wow. I clearly hadn't thought this through. "Am I staying at your place, then?"

Logan burst out laughing at that and then explained his husband, Nico, ran his own knitting-classes-to-the-stars micro-empire called Knit & Bitch out of the guest room in their multimillion-dollar cottage in Santa Monica ... and had filled all available space in their home with yarn.

Guess not.

"Where will I be staying, then?"

Logan shrugged. "With Charlie."

Like a reflex: "Charlie who?"

"Yates," Logan said, like *Duh*.

With Charlie Yates? I shook my head. "I'm sorry. Wait. I'm going to be *living* with Charlie Yates?"

“*Staying* with,” Logan corrected, like that was different.

“This is way too close for comfort,” I said.

“You’ll never even see him,” Logan said. “He’s got, like, five guest rooms.” He glanced over at my stricken face. “It’s basically a resort.”

How had I missed this basic information? Was I so starry-eyed at the prospect of going to Hollywood that I couldn’t think straight?

“What other details haven’t you mentioned?” I asked as Logan zoomed us through traffic like the other cars were slalom poles.

“Just go with it,” Logan said. “Details are overrated.”

Were they?

Logan glanced over. “You look a little green,” he said.

“I’m out of practice with adventure,” I said. “And you’re a terrible driver.”

“Being a terrible driver is a power move,” Logan said. Then, from his place of power, he added, “Do you want some advice?”

“Not really.”

“Don’t sleep with Charlie.”

“Don’t *sleep* with *Charlie*?!” I shrieked, like the idea had never crossed my mind.

“I know you have a writer crush,” Logan said. “But keep it at that.”

“Are you insane?”

“You’ve got a photo of him on your bulletin board.”

“I’ve got a photo of Kurt Vonnegut on my bulletin board, too.”

“I’m not concerned about Vonnegut.”

“Yeah. Since he’s *dead*.”

“Since you’re not *moving into his house*.”

“Well, whose fault is that?”

“I’m very *pro* the professional partnership,” Logan clarified. “But I’m very *anti* anything more.”

“Why are we even having this conversation?”

“You’re lonely. He’s lonely. It’s like an incubator for fornicating.”

“You’re the one who set this up. I’d be perfectly happy to stay literally anywhere else.”

“You’ll write better in the house,” Logan said.

I gave him a look. “As long as I don’t *fornicate*,” I added.

“Exactly!”

I was still a little motion-sick from the turbulence we hit during landing—and Logan’s NASCAR-inspired driving wasn’t helping. I hadn’t eaten all day—or yesterday, for that matter—and I hadn’t slept well the night before. I still had that heart-thumping thing going on inside my rib cage. Needless to say, this little fornication-themed heart-to-heart wasn’t helping.

“All I’m saying,” Logan said, “is don’t even think about it.”

“I wasn’t thinking about it—until you got me thinking about it. Now I’m thinking about it.”

“Stop complaining,” Logan said. “I’m helping you.”

“You’re freaking me out.”

“It’s better if you’re prepared,” Logan said.

“Maybe you should stop talking now.”

But Logan went on. “He’s terrible in relationships! Why do you think his wife left him?”

He had me. “Why?”

“Because he did immersion research in Chicago for that Mafia thing, and he didn’t call her one time in three months.”

I felt an impulse to defend him. *He was working!* But then I said, “Okay, yeah. That’s a long time.”

Logan nodded, like we were finally on the same page. “Don’t let those corduroy trousers distract you. You are here to get in, kick-start your tragically delayed brilliant career, and get the hell back out.”

Five

YES, CHARLIE YATES'S house was an Old Hollywood–style mansion-slash-villa-slash-estate on a switchbacky road packed with mansions just behind Sunset Boulevard. *Of course he lives in a dream house*, I thought, as we stopped out front and Logan yanked up the parking brake. He was living the dream. And that's what the dream looked like.

After we parked, I dallied: I put on fresh lipstick, patted down my pom-pom, and pulled out a little mirror to spot-check—one more time—for pepper in my teeth. Even though I hadn't eaten any pepper today. That I knew of.

I'd already done all these things in the airport bathroom, but, dammit, I did them again.

I was about to stand before Charlie Yates.

I was about to come into contact with genuine greatness.

It wouldn't have entirely surprised me to find a throne in his living room.

I'd watched every video of him on the internet—most of them on stages at screenwriting festivals in front of adoring audiences—and practically memorized his remarks on structure, character arcs, and how to keep the mushy middle from sagging. I'd seen his face. I knew his voice. I knew that he was thirty-five, and a Gemini, and slightly duckfooted, and had an unwavering affection for flat-front, wide-wale corduroy pants. And while

no one would accuse him of being movie-star good-looking, he had a kind of disheveled, no-rules, maverick appeal that I couldn't classify as anything other than handsome.

Also? He had a habit of grabbing the front of his hair while he was talking, and squeezing it in his fist so tightly that when he let it go, it was all pointing in another direction.

Come on. Irresistible.

It was the kind of thing I'd think about sometimes, idly, while making dinner. What was it about his face that I liked, exactly? Some hidden geometry that clicked with patterns in my brain? The plumpness of his mouth, maybe? Or the angle of his jaw? Or—and this might betray how many times I'd rewatched some of those videos—something about the shape of his nostrils? Is that a weird thing to say? That a man has appealing nostrils? But he did. Friendly, straightforward, symmetrical nostrils that kind of dimpled down a little when he was suppressing a smile.

Writers, in general, aren't exactly the best-looking subsection of humanity. Like if aliens came down and said, *Show us the most perfect physical specimens of your kind*, we wouldn't go searching for the coffee-stained writers of the world, hunched over their laptops in their basement efficiencies. The bar for writers, looks-wise, wasn't exactly high. Charlie might be a normal person's eight—but he was a writer's ten, for sure. That, plus his early success—the quirky indie movie that he made *in college* was a sleeper hit and launched his career—made him a media darling. Most screenwriters? No one's ever heard of them. But we all knew and loved Charlie Yates.

He had a perfect storm of talent, charm, and irresistible nostrils.

And I really, really hoped I would not accidentally say that out loud when I met him.

A nightmare vision of my pumping Charlie Yates's hand and gushing, "I love your nostrils!" flashed through my mind—and then, at the frozen horror of his expression, my trying to make it less weird by explaining: "It's that teardrop shape they have, and how they kind of lean back against that tippy-top part of your upper lip, like they're James Dean about to smoke a cigarette. You get it, right?"

Oh, god. I really was my own worst enemy.

Logan reached Charlie Yates's front door while I was still wincing at that, and so there was nothing to do but drag my suitcase and carry-on through the gravel of the driveway at top speed to catch up.

As Logan knocked, I tried to settle my breathing.

God, I was nervous. Should I visualize the ocean? Try a power stance? Do a quick meditation? I tried to assess how much time I had before Charlie Yates opened that door.

But he didn't exactly open the door. Not in the usual way, at least.

In response to Logan's knock, the knob turned a little and then the door cracked, leaving maybe a four-inch gap. It was clear from the voice inside that Charlie was wrapping up a phone call and not *answering* the door so much as just unlocking it. So Logan held his finger up at me, like, *Give me a sec*, then handed me his phone and keys to hold, and slipped inside.

Leaving me standing alone on the front steps with Logan's phone and keys, my bags, and my backpack full of favorite pens and notebooks.

Huh.

Looking back, Logan must've thought he shut the door behind him. But it didn't catch. Which meant, minutes later, I was accidentally eavesdropping on their conversation through the slit at the doorjamb.

A conversation that got very dark very fast.

"Got a present for ya, buddy," Logan said to start off, seasoning his voice with as much bro-ish camaraderie as the Queen's English would allow.

"What do you mean, 'a present'?" Charlie asked. His voice was more gravelly in real life than through my computer speaker.

"A writer," Logan said. "I've brought you a writer."

Charlie wasn't following. "How did you 'bring me a writer'?"

I tried to assess their relationship. There was something in Charlie's tone—nice, but not warm—that made it seem like Logan was trying too hard.

"Outside," Logan said. "A rom-com writer. To work on *It Happened One Night*."

"You brought a writer here? To my house? Right now?"

And then I knew.

Charlie Yates had no idea I was coming.

Oh, shit.

Whatever was happening right now, it was not Charlie Yates approved. I held my breath. Once I knew it, I couldn't unknow.

"Yes," Logan went on, clearing his throat like it was beading with flop sweat. "She's here right now. She's here—and she's ready to help."

I could tell Logan thought that if he made it all seem reasonable enough, it would actually just *be* reasonable.

But this was Charlie Yates. He wasn't going to be Jedi-mind-tricked by his manager. And he had exactly one syllable of response for this situation: "No."

"No?"

"No. I don't need help."

"Of course you don't *need* it," Logan backtracked. "Just to make things easier."

But Charlie Yates wasn't buying it. "Working with other writers never makes things easier."

"A consultant. Of sorts. It's my friend. The one I told you about last time."

"I don't need a consultant."

"Of course you don't. More like a secretary. A typist."

A typist!

Logan was trying to push past this initial resistance. "I'll just bring her in, and we can—"

"No."

"No?" Logan asked.

"No."

"Does *no* mean—"

"No means no. No, I don't want you to bring her in. No, I don't need help with the screenplay. Or a consultant. Or even a typist. I know how to type. And how to write a screenplay, too, by the way."

Yep. He'd offended him.

"I don't need anything," Charlie went on. "Not from you—or anyone. Especially not some amateur writer friend of yours."

Ouch. But fair.

"She may be an amateur, but there were circumstances—"

"No."

"No?"

“No. This isn’t happening.”

“I just think that if you—”

“Buddy. Come on. I’d be irritated if you showed up with anybody, honestly. But some random girl you had a thing with in high school? That’s just insulting.”

“I’m telling you, she’s good.”

“I’m telling you, I don’t care.”

“I’m handing you the help you need to get this done and move on, and you’re throwing credentials at me.”

“Credentials exist for a reason.”

“Look, rom-coms are her specialty. They’re her whole thing. She can recite every line of *When Harry Met Sally* to you verbatim.”

“Please don’t let her do that.”

“I’m telling you, you’ll never meet another writer who knows more about rom-coms. She’s obsessed. And she’s got nothing else in her life. No relationship. No kids. Nothing at all. This is *all she does*. Imaginary love is the only thing she’s got.”

Oh, god, Logan. You’re killing me.

Then Logan made a fateful decision. He lied. To Charlie Yates. About me.

I can still hear it in slow-mo.

“She’s read the screenplay,” Logan said, “and she loved it.”

What!

It was all I could do to physically restrain myself from bursting in and correcting the record. I did *not* love it! I *opposite* of loved it—times a thousand. I detested it. I abhorred it. I wanted to *scorch it from the earth*—and my own memory, and all of space and time.

It was one thing for Logan to humiliate me in front of Charlie Yates with true things about my actual tragic life. It was quite another for him to *defile my writing integrity with falsehoods*.

That’s when Charlie paused. “She read the screenplay, and she *loved it?*”

I knew in an instant: Logan had *so* miscalculated.

Logan had made a guess that Charlie didn’t know his screenplay was bad. That he couldn’t help but love his own work. That if he told Charlie I loved his screenplay—the way he thought Charlie secretly loved it, too—

that would put us on the same team. United against a cruel world that didn't understand.

"Yes," Logan lied.

No!

But it was the wrong call.

"Then she doesn't know shit about rom-coms. Even I know that thing is an insult to the genre."

Thank you!

Why did I feel so relieved that he knew that?

Logan registered his mistake now. Charlie Yates knew his terrible screenplay was terrible. Lying to him that I'd loved it was not *helping me* but doing the opposite. So he rerouted: "The point is, she's a huge fan of you, man!"

"Has she seen the original?"

"Only a million times. Seen it, read it, studied it."

"Then there's no way she loves what I just wrote. She's either a liar ... or she doesn't know shit from a shoelace."

Harsh.

Harsh, but well-said.

She doesn't know shit from a shoelace. Did he just make up a new aphorism?

Logan was still trying to take the ego route. "I'm telling you. She's a Charlie Yates superfan. She's so excited to work with you."

That, at least, was true.

Next Charlie said, "Of course she is. Who wouldn't be?"

"You're being such an ass right now. I'm telling you, she's good."

"And I'm telling you to get her out of here."

A pause, where I had to assume they were staring each other down.

Then Charlie said, "Wait. Hold on. Is this the same girl from the video you texted?"

The video? He texted?

I looked down at Logan's phone in my hand. I'd known his passcode in high school. I tried it, and it still worked. Triple O Seven. Guess some things never change. The screen opened to a text he'd just sent to Charlie saying, There in 5.

Above it, I could see the bottom section of the last thing he'd sent before that.

A video.

Standing on Charlie Yates's front steps, I tried to process the domino-fall of realizations their conversation had just set off in my mind: Charlie Yates had no idea I was coming. He had not consented to work with me—nor did he want to work with anyone. The job opportunity of a lifetime that I had abandoned my sick father for and robbed my sister of her future for and dismantled my entire life for *did not actually exist*.

To top it all off, my ex-boyfriend from high school had just both lied about me and told mortifying truths ... and, apparently, sent Charlie Yates some mysterious video.

I stared down at the phone screen with dread, afraid to know for sure. *What video?*

From the format, I could guess that it wasn't the YouTube video of the writing talk I'd given for the library that now had almost three hundred views. Nor, clearly, was it the sample freshman English class that lived on our community college's home page.

No, this video was vertical.

This video was personal.

This video had come from Logan's phone.

And here I faced a choice that was really no choice at all. I *wanted* to stay and continue eavesdropping—since I no longer trusted Logan's relationship with the truth. But I *needed* to know which video Logan had sent.

Please, please, please don't let it be the bikini video, I begged silently as I snuck with my bags away from the door, out into the yard, creating enough distance to watch it without being heard.

The bikini video—that I'd regretted a thousand times. The bikini video from ten years ago that Logan had sworn he'd erased—but I never 100 percent believed him. The bikini video I'd recorded for him when he'd asked me to send him “something sexy” and so I'd gotten Sylvie to record me crawling through the surf and growling like a panther at the beach in my first—and last—bikini.

The bikini video that topped my list of Most Embarrassing Things I'd Ever Done on Purpose.

He wouldn't have. Right?

He couldn't have.

But now I knew something new. I really had no idea what Logan would or wouldn't do. If he'd trick me into flying out here for a job that didn't exist, he was capable of anything.

There was a bench in the yard, and without really noticing, I backed up and parked myself on it. Next, the fight inside the house now out of earshot, I slid the video into frame on Logan's phone and tapped PLAY.

It wasn't the bikini video.

It was a video I didn't even remember. Had possibly never seen before.

It was me. In high school. Laughing and walking away from Logan, saying, "Do it right this time!" I watched myself moving—walking the way girls walk when they know they're being watched. I wore cutoffs and a striped T-shirt. My red curls were longer and wilder then, draping down my neck like mermaid fire. I paused to tie them into a bun.

I'd forgotten that. My hair was so long in high school I could tie it in a knot.

Wow. That girl was like a stranger. Like some kid I'd walk past on the street.

She lifted her arms, stepped forward, and then kicked up into a handstand. And then she started reciting a passage from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* while upside down.

Oh, god. I'd forgotten all about this.

"O Mistress mine, where are you roaming?" the young me bellowed, walking on her hands. "O stay and hear, your true love's coming, that can sing both high and low. Trip no further pretty sweeting. Journeys end in lovers' meeting—"

As I watched, the poem was coming back to me, and I was just anticipating the next line when my dad—looking younger than I ever remembered him, with dark brown hair and broad shoulders—stepped barefoot into the frame and flipped up on his hands, too, and finished the line. "Every wise man's son doth know."

"Dad!" the other me complained. "This is for school."

It was this ordinary moment, but it was mesmerizing. There it all was: The backyard I grew up playing in. My mother's herb garden on the flagstone patio. The overgrown crepe myrtle tree we used to climb.

It wasn't *a video on a phone*. It was a time capsule.

A time capsule of everything I'd lost.

That's when I heard something in the video that stopped my heart.

Her voice.

My mom's voice.

She must've been standing right next to Logan as he filmed, because her volume was so loud—so much louder than everything else in the video, ten feet away—that for just half a second, it didn't seem like the sound was coming from the phone in my hand.

“Emma! Your shirt's coming off!” my mom called.

And it felt so much like my beautiful, long-lost mother wasn't *there*, but *here*, right here, in the present moment, beside me in Charlie Yates's yard, that I glanced down at my shirt to check it. For one heartbreaking instant, my brain thought she was with me here and now—and sent a spark of joy so bright it almost hurt.

But of course she wasn't here.

We scattered her ashes in the ocean nine years ago—as soon as my dad was healed enough to make the drive.

The spark faded. I came to my senses. The video kept playing.

“My shirt's not ‘coming off,’” the other me corrected my mom. “It's just falling down.”

“Either way, we can see your bra.”

“It's not a bra,” I said. “It's a bikini top.”

“Well, it looks like a bra. Tuck your shirt in.”

“I can't. I don't have any arms.”

“You do have arms,” my still-upside-down dad pointed out. “You're just using them as legs.”

Just as Logan, still focused on the bra issue, offered helpfully, “It's nothing I haven't seen before, Mrs. Wheeler.”

“That's not comforting,” my mom said as she stepped into the frame. And then there she was—not just a voice, but a vision. My beautiful, ethereal, ordinary mother, striding across the lawn in a jean skirt and sandals toward her goofball daughter. She grabbed my shirt while I was still upside down and tucked it in while my legs went all cattywampus.

“That's better,” she said, patting me on the butt. Then she continued off across the lawn and I tumbled down into the grass.

“Mom!” I shouted. “I was performing Shakespeare!”

“Perform with your clothes on!” she called over her shoulder, just as a spindly kid cartwheeled into the frame. Sylvie.

“I want to perform Shakespeare!” Sylvie said, her voice like a chipmunk’s.

But I was up now—and running toward the camera with a goofy grin on my face. “Cut! Cut!” I called, making the “cut” gesture across my neck. And then, just as I collided with Logan, the video ended, going still at the last frame: my mom across the yard, on the back steps, with the door halfway open, heading into the kitchen to make dinner.

What did we have for dinner that night? I wondered, and it suddenly felt so heartbreaking that now I’d never know.

For a minute, there in Charlie Yates’s yard, the phone lay quiet in my hand. I was somewhere out of time.

And that’s when I realized I was crying. The ragged kind of crying that overtakes you without your consent.

I was just about to play the video again—sensing I could watch it forever on an endless loop, gulping down that forgotten moment nonstop without ever quenching my longing to see it again—when Charlie Yates’s present-day front door slammed open, and the present-day Logan came charging out of it, yanking me back to present-day reality.

Which suddenly, in contrast, didn’t seem so important anymore.

“Emma, you’ve got to—” he started.

But Logan stopped at the sight of me—at, I’m guessing, the gully washer of tears on my face. I looked back at him, blinking—my heart tied up in a fist, my throat thick, and my face overtaken with reawakened grief.

For a second, we were in a standoff.

And then I realized he must’ve been thinking I was crying like this over Charlie, over a person who, apparently, saw me as nothing but an amateur.

Which sparked me into action.

“This,” I said, drawing an imaginary circle around my face with my finger, “is not about this”—and I drew a much-larger circle around Logan, and the house behind him, and—what the hell—the whole city of LA.

Then I held up Logan’s phone to him—frozen on that final image—until he saw what this *was* about.

Logan’s shoulders dropped. “Emma, I—”

Just then, Charlie barreled out the front door with an air like he was about to make a proclamation.

He was—and I realize this goes without saying—bigger in real life.

It was my first—and possibly last—time to ever lay eyes on Charlie Yates, and I confess, it hijacked my attention for a second. Because *there he was*. That was the hair he always grabbed with his fist. And those were the wide-wale corduroys I'd seen in so many videos. And there was one of his trademarked rumpled Oxford shirts. And that was the signature stubble on his neck that he forgot to shave more often than not.

He certainly hadn't been fretting over *his* appearance in an airport bathroom.

Of course, in his defense, he'd had no idea I was coming. But this, I knew from YouTube, was how he dressed all the time—whether he was on a conference stage or getting snapped by the paparazzi in a five-star restaurant. He was constantly showing up to industry events in flip-flops and shorts, or with bags of takeout food because he'd been writing all day and was famished. He once ate a cheeseburger and a large order of fries during a panel discussion at the Paley Center for Media—ripping little ketchup packets and squirting them onto a napkin on his knee.

That's how huge this guy was. Nobody cared.

Nobody even complained *in the comments*.

He was famously unorthodox onstage. He once took a nap during a roundtable. And it wasn't just forgiven *because he was a legend*. It was part of what made him a legend in the first place. Only later would I wonder if it was a power move. Like he was too cool to play by anyone's rules. Like *having to try* was a sign of weakness.

Point being: Here he was. Ten feet away.

At the time, all I could think was: *It's him. It's really him.*

And despite everything, seeing him in real life like that had a seismic effect on my body.

Like the nearness of him was causing fractures and fissures at deep, subterranean levels.

Like the presence of the living, breathing Charlie Yates was somehow ... fracking my soul. Or something. The sight of him, for just a second, took me deep inside my own body. Where everything suddenly felt

radically *different*. Like I might go to turn on some internal faucet and watch fire come out instead of water.

Am I overstating it?

Probably. But I know what I know.

The sight of me seemed to affect Charlie Yates, too.

What would Charlie have seen in that moment? A random, weeping female in his yard. Blotchy face. Eyes red from crying. Tear-smearred, shiny cheeks. Puffy pink nose. And so angry. Angry like a person with lightning bolts shooting from her eyes. Not to mention the hair: I always have to remind myself how carefully I had *definitely* clamped my hair back into a sensible pom-pom before we arrived—because my imagination always wants to say that, in Charlie’s first-ever sight of me, I had fire-orange medusa snakes writhing around my head.

How often do you step out of your front door in life to find a sight like that?

Poor Charlie.

Even without the snakes, I’m sure I was a sight.

But before Charlie could react, or scream, or run back into the house and dead-bolt the door, Logan pulled us back on track. “I know what you’re thinking,” he said to me.

At that, my gaze shifted back to Logan. “Do you?” I demanded.

“My motivations were honorable!”

But I was shaking my head, Charlie Yates now forgotten. “My *mom* is in this video.” I held out Logan’s phone. “She’s here,” I said. “My *mom*. My *family*. How could you just ... text it around? I”—and here I tapped my chest with my hand—“*I* haven’t even seen this. How could you just send it to—to a stranger? It’s my *mom*, Logan.”

To be honest, I didn’t even know what I was trying to say.

Rare for me.

Usually I started with words and found the feelings later, if that makes sense.

But here, all I had was a feeling. A feeling that this lost moment in time—these lost people, this lost family—was too precious to share.

Was it weird that Logan still had the video—much less that he would text it to his client without ever even showing it to me? Yes, of course.

But that’s not what had me so appalled.

This was *my mother*. Her jean skirt. Her favorite sandals. Her warm voice like butterscotch. This was my beloved family. My unbroken father, my preteen sister, my forgotten self. This was everyone who was precious to me—captured just weeks before the end. It was everyone I'd ever loved, beautiful and hopeful and frozen in time. It was valuable beyond description. It should be nothing less than cherished. And it wasn't for anyone, even Charlie Yates, to watch on some phone while he was sitting on the toilet.

Or wherever Charlie Yates checked his texts.

"Emma," Logan said, "I get it. I'm sorry. But—"

I shook my head, busy forwarding the video to myself.

"Emma, look," Logan went on. "I was trying to get you this job."

"You told me I *had* this job."

"I was working on it."

"You lied to me."

"A white lie."

"Go ahead and tell yourself that."

"It was the best plan I could come up with."

"Well, it was a shitty plan!"

"I see that now. I definitely see that now. But he needed to meet you, Emma."

"There are lots of ways to meet people. Coffee! Brunch! Dinner!"

"Would you have flown all the way across the country for a coffee?"

"With Charlie Yates? *Yes!* Hell, yes!"

"Ah," Logan said. "Well, I didn't—fully—understand that. I thought you needed ... a push."

Unacceptable. "You manipulated me." Then I added, "I gave up my whole life, and I left everyone I love for nothing. *Worse* than for nothing! For humiliation! For crushing disappointment!" I glanced over at Charlie. "For you to lie to this asshole about his apocalyptically shitty screenplay and tell him that I loved it!"

We all let that land.

Then Logan said, "You heard us?"

"The door didn't close."

Somewhere in the yard, a bird decided to tweet.

Then Logan said, "Just come inside and let's all talk."

But that was the other thing. Seeing that video made me overwhelmingly homesick. “I don’t want to talk,” I said. “He doesn’t want me here, and you never should have brought me here.” Then I added, “I just want to go home.”

I pelted Logan’s phone and keys onto Charlie Yates’s lawn, and then I grabbed my bags and started dragging them away, the broken wheel on my carry-on screeching in protest.

“Hey,” Logan said, following me. “You don’t even know where you are.”

I kept walking.

“Look,” Logan went on, “I know I did this all wrong. But at heart, I’m right. Charlie needs you. And you need him.”

“He already said no. Like fifty times. In no uncertain terms.”

Logan nodded. “Okay, that’s true. He did say no. But he can change his mind. And the only person who can make him do that is you.”

But I just kept walking.

“Emma,” Logan pleaded. “Help me do this for you.”

“I don’t want to,” I said, keeping my eyes straight ahead. “And I’m not going to. I’m leaving. And then I’ll find a fancy hotel that I cannot afford—and send you the bill. I’m going to take a scorchingly hot bath and eat everything out of the minibar. And then tomorrow? I’m going back home where I belong—to see if Sylvie can get her internship back. And then I’ll start finding another career. Because you’re the only person I knew in LA. And we’re not friends anymore.”

Six

THAT WAS A pretty strong exit. Right?

I spoke my piece, and ended on a zinger strong enough that they both mutely watched me walk off. I felt their eyes on me all the way down the street, as my broken carry-on wheel bewailed every step I took—and I held my head high until I was out of sight.

Though as soon as they couldn't see me, I felt the air that was holding up my lungs—and my posture, and my remaining shreds of dignity—release itself . . . and I deflated like a balloon.

That's how I walked after that: slumped, lopsided, lost.

I'll just call an Uber and go to a hotel, I told myself, in an attempt at a pep talk.

But I'd never called an Uber. I didn't even have the app on my phone. And I'd never been to LA. I hadn't traveled outside the five-mile radius of my apartment in almost a decade. How would I even find a hotel? I was alone, I had no idea where I was, and I was too humiliated to turn around.

I'd walked for about fifteen minutes—and was just starting to panic—when Logan drove up alongside me and matched his pace to mine. His window came down.

“Get in,” Logan called.

I ignored him and kept walking. There was a pebble in my shoe, but I ignored that, too.

“He caved, okay?” Logan called. “He gave in. He says you can stay.”

I kept walking.

“You got the job!” Logan shouted. “You don’t believe me? I have the text right here.”

He held up his phone, but I didn’t look.

“You’re not listening. I’m telling you it worked. He’s in. It’s happening.”

My broken carry-on wheel caught on a rock, but I yanked it so hard I didn’t even break pace.

“You should be thanking me!” Logan called next, a little louder. “It worked, didn’t it?” He shook his phone at me. “He says, and I quote: ‘Fine. Fuck it. She can have the guest room.’”

I didn’t really know what to do in this moment. I didn’t have a plan. All I knew was, I would not get in Logan’s car. Nothing else was clear—at all—except that.

“Are you refusing to spend the night in Charlie Yates’s mansion? Is that what’s happening now? Because I’m telling you: He’s got a wine cellar. And a pool. And a thousand-dollar coffee maker.”

But the pebble in my shoe—or was it maybe a piece of glass?—and I just kept walking.

And walking.

Until finally, faced with my wall of stoicism, Logan gave up and drove off—leaving me behind, now more triumphant and more panicked at the same time.

Really? Was that all the penance he was going to do?

Fine.

How hard could it be to download the Uber app?

I stopped to pull out my phone, and that’s when I saw the low battery alert.

Okay. No freaking out. If worse came to worst, I could find my way back to Charlie’s house and borrow his phone. I turned back to study the terrain I’d just covered.

At least, I *thought* I could find my way back.

Probably.

If it didn’t get dark first.

I turned back to face the way I'd been going again, scanning the horizon for, maybe, a luxury hotel that was having a 90-percent-off special.

What time did it get dark here, anyway?

On the heels of that thought, I heard Logan pull up alongside me again and idle. Without even looking to the side, or considering if this was the stupidest thing I'd ever do, I tilted my head to the sky and shouted, "Please! Just! Fuck! Off!"

"Really?" a guy's voice said.

A guy who wasn't Logan.

I turned, and instead of Logan Scott in a Beemer, it was Charlie Yates in a Chevy Blazer.

A cool, seventies vintage Chevy Blazer, by the way. Baby blue. Windows down. And Charlie Yates in aviators, regarding me and looking—*fine, whatever*—impossibly cool.

As impossibly cool as a guy in a rumpled Oxford could be.

Way cooler than any writer deserved to be.

I turned to face him. "Sorry," I said, vastly more polite now. "I thought you were Logan."

It wasn't Charlie's fault that Logan brought me here. Charlie wasn't doing anything wrong by not wanting to work with me. Yes, he'd said a few mean-ish things earlier. But I wasn't going to hold that against him. I wouldn't have wanted to work with me, either, if I were him. He could still be my favorite writer.

This was on me, really, for believing Logan's cockamamie story in the first place.

"Get in," Charlie said. "I'm here to rescue you."

"Oh," I said, still just wanting to stay as far away from both of these guys, and this whole experience, as possible. "It's fine."

Charlie leaned his head out the window then and checked the bright sky like an old sea captain reading the wind. Then he put the Blazer in park—just right there in the road—got out, and came around to face me. "It's not fine," he said then. "It'll get dark in a few hours. And that's when the coyotes come out."

"The coyotes?"

Charlie nodded, like *Yep*. "And the mountain lions."

“You have mountain lions?” I asked. “In the second-largest city in America?”

Charlie nodded. “Almost four million.” Then he added, “People. Not lions.”

He hadn’t answered my question. “Should I believe you?” I asked, mostly to myself.

“I can’t tell you what to do,” Charlie said. “But I have yet to mention the bears.”

“Seriously?” I said.

“It’s cool,” Charlie said then, calling my bluff. “I can tell you prefer to be”—he looked around—“alone.”

“Wait—” I said, as Charlie started to walk back around toward the driver’s side.

“You’ll be fine,” Charlie said. “Just a quick tip: If you do see a mountain lion, don’t run.”

“Don’t run?” I echoed. Can you *lose* a conversation? Because that’s what I was doing.

He shrugged. “You can’t outrun a mountain lion.”

“You know what?” I said. “I’ll come with you.”

“Naw,” Charlie said, enjoying this now, “you don’t have to.”

“I want to,” I said.

Charlie, like convincing me had been much easier than he’d expected, came back around to where I was, and, holding my gaze the entire time, stepped close and leaned in until there was less than a foot between us—close enough to spark a *What the heck?* question in my head—before I realized he was sliding my backpack off my shoulders and then picking up my bags.

He tossed both in the back of the Blazer, and then, when I still hadn’t moved, he opened the passenger door for me. “I’ve got you,” he said. “Hop in.”

★ ★ ★

AND THAT’S HOW I wound up spending the night with Charlie Yates.

Although not like that sentence implies.

On the short drive back to his house, I tried to adjust: I was with Charlie Yates. We were in his very cool, vintage—reconditioned and now hybrid, he told me—truck. The Allman Brothers played on the radio. The windows were hand-cranked down. The famous zero-humidity LA air fluttered all around us. Charlie drove one-handed, his free arm resting out the open window.

Almost like I wasn't there.

I snuck looks at his profile. Had he really just agreed to work with me? Logan said so, but now we all knew exactly how trustworthy Logan was. Still, the dialogue “Fine. Fuck it. She can have the guest room” rang true. Logan could never write dialogue like that.

“Thanks so much,” I ventured then, “for saving me from the mountain lions.”

“Not a problem.”

“I really am so sorry about all of this.”

“It's not your fault. It's Logan's fault.”

“It must have been so weird for you to see me standing at your front door with my suitcases.”

“You have no idea.”

“Logan just called me out of the blue and said he had a job for me.”

“Right?” Charlie said, like *What a douche*.

“He's found me lots of jobs in the past, so it didn't seem all that weird. But it did seem ... too good to be true.”

Charlie nodded in solidarity.

“But I trusted him,” I went on. “I took the summer off from my job. I left my family. I put everything else that mattered on hold, and I packed up my life and flew out here. With no idea that you had no idea.”

Charlie shook his head at the situation, like he really got it.

“You *are* my favorite writer, though,” I said next. “Logan wasn't lying about that. I love you more than Richard Curtis, and Elaine May, and Billy Wilder. I love you more”—and this felt so sacrilegious, like I might be smote by lightning at the words, but I had to make my point—“than Nora Ephron.”

Charlie held kind of still.

Too much?

Then he gave a small, mechanical nod that read like *Got it*.

No doubt my cue to stop talking.

But I just had to know. I had to confirm. I decided to *proceed as if* and see where that got me. “So I just want to thank you. For this opportunity. It’s not easy to change your mind. Especially not in the heat of a crazy moment. But I need to say that this is the hugest of huge deals to me.” And then, realizing it might sound cheesy but unable to find any better words to capture my sincerity, I concluded with “I will do this work with my whole heart and soul.”

I snuck a look at him.

He was frowning.

“What work?” Charlie asked.

“The rewrite?” I said.

At those words, Charlie positively detonated with laughter—the kind of *pah* you make when you are very surprised by something unspeakably ridiculous. Then he followed the *pah* with hooting, and chuckling, and slapping his hand on the door of the truck.

This went on for a while.

It was bitter laughter, I decided as he went on—but laughter all the same.

Anyway. I guess I had my answer.

“The rewrite?” Charlie kept saying. “The rewrite?”

I wasn’t laughing myself, needless to say. “Logan told me you’d agreed to everything,” I said. “He said you’d said, ‘Fine. Fuck it. She can have the guest room.’ He *showed me the text!*”

Like I might prove him wrong.

Charlie took a few deep breaths as he worked to settle. “I did say you could have the guest room. For one night. Before you fly home tomorrow.”

“Ah,” I said.

“It’s so funny that you believed him,” Charlie said. “Didn’t he *just* lie to you?”

My shoulders hunched in my defense. “Yeah, but ... he doesn’t *always* lie. Most of the time he tells the truth.” Then I had to add, “I think.”

“Well, he wasn’t telling the truth about that.”

“Fine,” I said. “Got it.”

“I mean,” Charlie went on, still marveling at Logan’s gall and my gullibility, “I don’t write with anyone. Ever. Logan knows that. And if I’m

really your favorite writer”—he glanced at me like he’d caught me—“you’d know that, too.”

“Yes,” I said, mechanically, repeating the very famous story. “You once tried collaborating with Topher James Heywood, and it ended in a bar fight where you almost got shanked with a broken beer bottle, and then you never worked with anyone else again. I’ve seen you tell that story like ten times. Though sometimes it’s a Heineken bottle, and sometimes it’s Sam Adams.”

Charlie nodded like I’d proved myself, and then he said, “I never should have named the beer. I keep saying the wrong beer and getting angry DMs about it.”

“There’s a whole discussion board on Reddit.”

“That’s disturbing.”

“I’m on Team Heineken, by the way. But only because I like the label.”

Charlie considered that. “Heineken it is, then.”

That felt weirdly good.

But then something hit me. *Heywood*.

Topher James Heywood.

“Wait,” I said. “Does Topher James Heywood also go by T.J. Heywood?”

Charlie flared his nostrils like he was not a fan. “Yes. ‘T.J.’ and ‘Teej’ and ‘Trey’ because he’s a ‘the third.’ And also...”

“Also what?”

“He has another nickname, but nobody uses it but him.”

“He has a nickname for himself?”

Charlie flared those nostrils of his again. “Yeah.”

“What is it?”

Charlie hesitated. “Jablowmie.”

“What?” I didn’t get it.

“Because of the last name?” Charlie prompted. “Heywood.”

“Jablowmie Heywood?”

“Flip it,” Charlie said, and when I still hadn’t cringed in recognition, he flipped it for me: “Heywood Jablowmie.”

I dropped my shoulders, like *Seriously?* “That’s the nickname he chose for himself? It’s not even in the right order!”

“I’ll be sure to mention that to him.”

“Why were you even *trying* to write with this guy?”

“Well,” Charlie said, like *Where to begin?* “He’s richer than God, he knows everybody in this town, and he wields a crazy amount of power for somebody who wears a backward baseball cap.”

“All because his dad is Chris Heywood and his grandfather was Christopher Heywood?”

“He’s a classic example of failing to the top.”

“But he *started* at the top.”

“Yeah. That’s how that works.”

Of course it was.

“Anyway,” Charlie went on, steering us back to the more pressing matter of why he couldn’t work with *me*, “the point is, this you-and-me thing was never going to happen. And Logan should have known better.”

“Agreed.”

“I was never going to agree to anybody rewriting my script. Least of all some unproduced, underachieving, failed nobody writer off the internet.”

Whoa. Could we go back to talking about Heywood Jablowmie?

I sat quietly and waited for Charlie to remember who he was talking to.

But he didn’t.

“It’s insulting,” he went on. “It’s ridiculous. It’s utterly, comically out of the question. It’s like hiring a crayon-toting kindergartner to repaint the Sistine Chapel! It’s like hiring a toddler with Play-Doh to rebuild the Eiffel Tower! It’s like hiring a teenager with a ukulele to rewrite Mozart!”

“Are you Mozart in this scenario?”

“Of course!”

“So your self-esteem is”—I tilted my head to emphasize the sarcasm—“healthy.”

“I don’t need self-esteem! I’ve got a whole drawer of Oscars!”

Ah. Sarcasm ignored. Oh, well. “I’d actually love to hear Mozart on the ukulele.”

“You’re missing the point.”

“No,” I said, with a little wry nod, “I think I got it.”

“Because the point is, someone like you isn’t even remotely qualified to work with someone like me.”

“You’ve made that very clear.”

“Someone who doesn’t live in LA, who’s never done any real work in the industry, and who placed in two film festivals, but didn’t even go? No offense, but that’s someone who clearly doesn’t take her work seriously.”

No offense? Everything he’d said up to now had been harsh, but not untrue. But “doesn’t take her work seriously”? That crossed the line.

“I take my work very seriously,” I said, feeling a sting of—you guessed it—*offense*.

“Incorrect,” Charlie said.

“‘Incorrect’?”

“Because if you were serious, you’d be taking every opportunity that came to you—and not just taking, *grabbing*. With both hands. Like nothing else mattered.”

“But other things *do* matter.”

“The fact that you think that is exactly why you’re a failed screenwriter.”

“I’m not a failed screenwriter!”

“Which part of your failed career gave you that idea?”

Whoa.

How to even respond? Finally I mustered a gritted “I *take* my career *seriously*.”

“Do you?” Charlie challenged. “Because the Warner Bros. internship isn’t something that writers just ignore.”

“Logan told you about that?”

“Do you have any idea how prestigious that internship is? How much it could have changed your life? It’s unfathomable that you had that chance and didn’t take it.”

“I know exactly how prestigious it is, and I—”

But Charlie kept going. “Logan thought I’d be impressed that you won. But the fact that you turned it down tells me everything I need to know.”

“Look, there were circumstances—”

“Fuck circumstances! That’s what I’m saying. If you want to do this life, you have to eat it and drink it and sleep it, and it has to come before everything else. Family—friends—sex! Anything else is second best. Anything else is *not taking it seriously*.”

Turning down that internship had been the most agonizing sacrifice out of all my agonizing sacrifices. But if this guy really thought that my own

personal writing goals should truly come before everything else, including my family—including my *dad*—then there was no use in trying to explain.

We'd reached Charlie's house. He swung us into the driveway, cut the engine, and stomped the parking brake.

"Is that what *you've* done?" I asked then, quietly. "Sacrificed everything?"

"How do you think I wound up all alone in this giant mansion?"

Was he saying that like it was a good thing? There was bitterness in his voice, and probably a whole story to excavate. But I had my own bitterness to cope with.

I'd already lost this fight, anyway.

I let out a long breath. "You must be right, then," I said. "By your definition, I guess I don't take it seriously."

"Thank you," he said, like he'd won.

"Pro tip, though," I said now, at the end of this endless day, not even able to disguise the exhaustion in my voice. "In general, if you have to add the words 'no offense' to something you're saying ... it's probably offensive."

Charlie frowned at that. Like it registered. Like once the frenzy of trying to make his point had abated, he could suddenly see the wreckage he'd left behind.

"I'll find a plane ticket home," I said then, in defeat, hearing a threat of tears in my voice, "for first thing in the morning."

Then I pulled the door handle to get out.

But the door didn't budge.

"Oh—" Charlie said, remembering. "It's broken." At that, he leapt out and came around to my side. "I have to get it from here."

He opened the door, and I swung my legs out, fully intending to grab my bags, march inside, fire up the internet, buy a plane ticket, and then defiantly ignore Charlie Yates for the rest of my life.

But instead?

Instead, I fainted.

Seven

DID NOT SEE that coming.

One minute, I was fine—or as fine as you can be when your personal hero is telling you you’re worthless—and the next minute, as Charlie held the car door, and I stepped onto the driveway, coming face-to-face with him by a matter of inches, close enough that I could feel his gaze on me like a breeze, I felt a swell of nausea, heard a rushing sound in my ears, and watched the edges of my vision go dark.

Next, I was coming to, flat on my back on the concrete, Charlie’s face hovering above mine, frowning, his eyes dark with intensity. “Emma!” he was saying. “Emma!”

But the sound was muffled, and out of sync a little.

In slow-mo, Charlie moved his head away and pressed it to my chest. Was he listening to my heart? Checking my breathing? I can still see that chestnut-brown hair of his, as if my mind paused to snap a photo. He was on his hands and knees beside me, but next I saw him launch up and run—*run!*—to the back of his truck to grab my suitcase and drag it toward me. Then he was lifting my legs and resting them on it to elevate them.

Then his face came back to my face, peering close.

“Emma?”

I could hear him more clearly now.

He was handsome. To me, at least. There was no way around it.

Don't talk about his nostrils. Don't talk about his nostrils.

Thank god I was too nauseated to speak.

I started to sit up, but Charlie shook his head. "Don't get up! You're not supposed to stand. Give it a second."

I relaxed back against the driveway as Charlie wriggled out of his overshirt, wadded up a makeshift pillow, and tucked it under my head, cradling my face to his shoulder for a second to get it placed.

Dammit. He smelled good.

Whatever his deodorant was, it cured the nausea like a tonic.

I watched him rise again, and then come back from the car with a bottle of water. He squirted some on his palm, shook off the excess, and then smoothed the water over my forehead.

"What are you doing?" I asked, better enough at last to talk.

"I'm cooling you off."

"I'm not hot."

"The internet says to."

Fine. I wouldn't argue with the internet. It felt nice, anyway.

"You fainted," Charlie said, looking genuinely worried.

"I'm sorry," I said, closing my eyes.

"You scared me. You went so white."

"I don't think I've eaten anything today," I said. "Or yesterday."

"Nothing?" Charlie said, like *Why not?*

I didn't have the energy to obfuscate. "I was nervous to meet you."

"So nervous you didn't eat for two days?"

"Uh-huh."

"I'm not that scary," Charlie said.

But I shook my head. "You're scarier. If I'd known what it would actually be like, I wouldn't have eaten for a month."

Charlie was assessing me. "Your color's coming back," he said, nodding. "Are you okay to go inside?"

I started to sit up, but he stopped me again.

"Not like that," he said, and then I felt his arms slide under me and tighten as he rose and carried me toward the house.

I was still woozy, and the motion was a little *too soon*, so I curled against his shoulder to brace myself. My view from there was the stubble

on his neck. And his square, way-too-appealing-for-a-writer jaw. And his Adam's apple.

My eyes wanted to close, but I talked them out of it.

How many people got *this* close to Charlie Yates's Adam's apple?

We walked through his front door and into a living room, where he set me down on a plush sofa.

"You leave your mansion unlocked?" I asked as he released me.

"It's on a remote," he said.

He turned now to other things: wedging a throw pillow under my head, and then grabbing a throw blanket off a chair, draping it over me, and heading off toward the adjacent kitchen.

I followed him with my eyes as he opened a cabinet, pulled out a glass, turned on the faucet.

He came back with the glass and knelt beside me. "The internet wants you to drink some water," he said, and then, with a tenderness I never would have expected from the person who'd just called me a "failed nobody writer," he worked his arm behind my shoulders to raise me up to take some sips.

"Okay?" he asked as I lay back down.

I nodded.

How long had it been since anyone had taken care of me in any situation? The last person to do it must have been my mom. Nowadays, it was me taking care of everyone else. When I got sick or hurt now, I just managed it on my own. Which I was fully capable of doing. But I'd forgotten what it felt like to be looked after. I guess I must have missed that feeling a lot—because tears kept rising to my eyes, and I kept blinking them away.

Or maybe it had just been a really long day.

★ ★ ★

LATER THAT EVENING, as I lay catatonic on the greige-colored guest bed in one of Charlie Yates's many greige-colored guest rooms, I got a text from the man himself—across the house.

He'd ordered takeout for us, and I should come to the dining room to eat.

And so I did.

I was miserable, sure—but nowhere near miserable enough to reject dinner.

Charlie was there, seated at the table. And so was half the food in the city of Los Angeles.

Charlie saw my eyes widen at the sight. “I wasn’t sure what you liked,” he said, “so I just got it all.”

I stepped closer to the table and took it in. Sushi, sandwiches, spring rolls, samosas, pizza, pastries, fried chicken ... it was all there, and then some.

Charlie was chowing down on a big plate of everything, and he’d set a place for me to do the same.

I took one butter croissant and decided to start small.

Charlie watched me chew, and then asked, after a few bites, “How do you feel? Better?”

“I’m not sure how to answer that question,” I said. Then I talked myself into a section of club sandwich, and a bit of fruit salad, and a few bites of strawberry shortcake before deciding I’d hit the wall.

Was he sneaking looks at me chewing? Was I being monitored? Did I eat like a failed screenwriter?

Just as I was thinking I’d make my escape, he said, “Can I ask you a question?”

“I guess so?” I said.

“What, exactly,” Charlie asked, “didn’t you like about my screenplay?”

Oh, god. “You know,” I said, shaking my head, “I don’t think we need to get into all that.”

“I just ... keep thinking about it,” Charlie said.

“It’ll pass,” I told him.

Charlie tilted his head. “You don’t want to tell me?”

“You’ve already explained to me in very clear terms that my opinion—in your opinion—is pretty worthless. So I just don’t really see the point.”

“What if I’m curious?”

“Why would you be?”

“It’s just—it’s that feeling—when you don’t know something and you just really, really find yourself needing to know.”

I knew that feeling. Of course I did. “An information gap,” I said.

“Right,” Charlie said, like he’d never heard the term before. Then, fainter, like he was mulling it over, “An information gap.”

“Do you not know the term ‘information gap’?” I asked.

“Of course I do. It’s a . . . gap in information.”

“It’s a writing term for how to create curiosity in the audience by leaving out crucial information.”

“Well, it works.”

How did Charlie Yates not know this term?

“The point is,” Charlie went on, “you information-gapped me—”

“You information-gapped yourself.”

“—and now I need you to fill in the . . . information.”

I gave it a beat. Then I said, “Why would I do that?”

Charlie shrugged. “Why wouldn’t you do that?”

“Because,” and I couldn’t believe I had to say this out loud, “you didn’t hire me.”

Charlie nodded, like *Interesting*.

“If you had hired me,” I said then, wanting to be totally clear, “I would happily do that right now.” I gestured toward my backpack in the guest room. “I’ve got ten pages of typed, single-spaced notes. I’ve got Post-its all over the printed screenplay—and comments filling up the margins.” Though, in truth, the margins mostly said things like *WTF??!* and *FFS!!!*—more of a chronicle of horrors than thoughtful commentary. “I spent every free minute,” I went on, “from the time Logan told me I had this job until I got on the plane to come here breaking down that screenplay and figuring it out—time I will never be compensated for, by the way.”

Charlie nodded, like he hadn’t thought of that.

I went on, “I could spend *hours* explaining what I didn’t like about your screenplay. I could go *all night*.” Then I concluded with, “But *you didn’t hire me*.”

Charlie nodded, and said, “What if I hired you now—just for that?”

“What?”

“What if I hired you for a consultation? Just for tonight? Tell me what you think, and I’ll pay you handsomely for your time and your thoughts and your trouble.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because you just taught me the term ‘information gap.’”

Well, at least he could admit it.

He could see I was considering it. “What’s your going rate? Two-fifty an hour?”

I had no idea what my going rate was. “Three hundred,” I said.

“Okay. Let’s cover three hours tonight, give or take, and whatever time you spent last week. Plus your time, your stress, your inconvenience, your fainting spell. How’s three thousand dollars?”

“Five thousand,” I countered, not skipping a beat.

That was reasonable, right? We were negotiating *in his mansion*, after all.

“Sold,” Charlie said.

Wait—what?

Wow. Three cheers for information gaps.

“Sold,” I echoed back. “You write the check. I’ll get my notes.”

Eight

ASTONISHING, REALLY—HOW A five-thousand-dollar paper check can perk a girl up.

The second Charlie handed it over, I tucked it in my bra for safekeeping.

Which felt like a power move.

We cleared the dining table, and then Charlie sat across from me with a fancy Moleskine notebook and a pen. Like he might—good god—*take notes* on what I was about to say.

Notes *for* or *against*, I wasn't sure.

He watched while I unloaded my backpack. My pen bag, my laptop, my stack of notebooks, my printed notes, all building to the grand finale of his screenplay, bound with brads and a card stock cover, absolutely bursting with Post-its, annotation tabs, and dog-ears. Not to mention a few coffee rings and a wrinkled corner where I'd accidentally dunked it in the bathwater.

A well-read script, for sure.

Charlie stared at it.

“Let me ask you a question,” I said next when I was all set up. “Do you want me to be honest? Or do you want me to blow smoke up your ass?”

“I want you to be honest,” Charlie said—no hesitation.

But that didn't mean much.

Writers always want you to be honest—but only if you love it.

“Because I didn’t love it,” I said.

“I figured that out when you called it ‘apocalyptically shitty.’”

I squinted, like *I guess you heard that?* Then I nodded and said, “Can you handle it?”

“Handle what?”

“Not being loved.”

“Sure. Easy. People *don’t love me* all the time.”

“Not like this they don’t.”

Maybe it was because he’d been so insulting and so dismissive to me back in the car. But now that I had some food in my stomach and some money in my bra, the idea of giving this guy a little comeuppance felt pretty appealing.

Did I want to tell him what I really thought about his screenplay?

Suddenly, I did.

“You sure you want to do this?” I asked him, in a tone like *Last chance*.

Charlie nodded, looking less sure.

I took a sip of my water and began: “Let me just start by saying that, up until I met you today, you were my favorite writer of all time. I’ve read everything you’ve ever written. I love your character arcs, your dialogue, your plot twists, your settings, your flawed heroes and heroines, your weirdly relatable villains, your timing, your redemption arcs, your sense of humor, and, maybe most of all, your catchphrases.”

Charlie nodded, like all was right with the world.

“But this screenplay,” I went on, “is a crime against humanity.”

Charlie frowned.

“Still sure about doing this?” I asked, one last time.

“You’ve already put that check in your bra,” Charlie said, gesturing in that direction before abruptly deciding that was a bad idea.

“Buckle up, then,” I said, with a shrug.

The teaching rule I had for myself was to never criticize more than three things about a student’s work at a time. If you hit people too hard with too much too fast, they shut down. They feel attacked instead of advised. It stops helping and starts hurting.

Three criticisms at a time was the magic number.

But was I going to follow that rule for Charlie Yates?

No way in hell.

He wasn't some beginner kid at community college. He was a ridiculously successful titan of the genre. With a mansion. And a "whole drawer" of Oscars.

He could handle it. And even if he couldn't—*all* writers are mushy goo, deep down—that wasn't my problem.

He was paying me handsomely to share my thoughts, and share them I would.

All of them.

And if they happened to crush him? That was just a bonus.

"First of all," I began, "this screenplay shouldn't even be happening. I want to register my objection at the outset. This movie is a beloved classic that brims with rare magic and its legacy should not be defiled by some appalling remake."

"Noted," Charlie said.

Now I began in earnest—and maybe I should have been intimidated to say all this to a writing god. But my outrage made me fearless. I had a higher purpose to serve. "Just for an overview," I said, "when I say this screenplay is 'apocalyptically shitty,' I mean that it has no tension, no character growth, no longing, no buildup, no anticipation, no banter, no fun, no play, and no shimmer."

"No *shimmer*?" Charlie said.

But I was just getting started. "It is a romantic comedy that is neither funny nor romantic. It doesn't do any—*any*—of the things that a rom-com is supposed to do."

"What's a rom-com supposed to do?"

"Great question. One you should have asked before you wrote this thing. But let's talk about it."

Charlie's pen was still lying idle atop his open notebook. He wasn't taking notes. But he was—and I'll give him credit for this—listening.

"The job of a rom-com," I said, "is to give you a simulated feeling of falling in love."

Here Charlie blinked, and I found myself wondering if this might be news to him.

I went on. "A rom-com should give you a swoony, hopeful, delicious, rising feeling of anticipation as you look forward to the moment when the

two leads, who are clearly mad for each other, finally overcome all their obstacles, both internal and external, and get together.”

Now I gave Charlie the stink eye.

“This is the first, most sacred rule of rom-coms,” I said, in a tone like *You know what you did*. “The leads wind up blissfully together in the end.” I paused for effect. “And you broke that rule when you made Claudette Colbert’s character marry the wrong guy.”

Charlie must have read my dramatic pause like I wanted an explanation. “It’s more interesting that way,” he said.

Ugh. The pomposity. “It may be ‘interesting.’ But it’s not a rom-com. And when you rewrite the greatest rom-com of all time, *it needs to be a rom-com.*”

Charlie considered that.

And here I weaponized my encyclopedic knowledge of Charlie’s body of work. “In *The Destroyers*, did the aliens win? Did they turn Earth into a desiccated hellscape and eject the little orphan boy into a black hole just so you, the writer, could do something ‘interesting’?”

He didn’t have to answer. Of course they didn’t.

“Did the Navy SEALs in *Night Raid* give up after the submarine sank and let themselves drown in a watery tomb? Did the sleuth in *The Maharajas’ Express* hunt down all those clues just to get to the end and say, ‘Huh. I’m stumped’? Did the protagonist of *Live and Let Kill* just lose interest in solving his wife’s decapitation and lie down on the guillotine?”

Charlie was watching me.

“Of course not! You know this! All genres have a promise. The Destroyer will save the universe. The soldiers will win the final battle. The sleuth will solve the mystery. The hunted, grieving husband will figure it out just in the nick of time. I can’t believe I have to say this to you, but *the same is true for romantic comedies*. The two leads will wind up together. That’s what the audience showed up for. The joy of it all. If you don’t give it to them, it’s beyond unsatisfying—it’s a violation of trust. It’s like sex with no orgasm! What was even the point?”

At that, I froze.

Did I just say the word “orgasm” to Charlie Yates?

Charlie looked like he was asking himself the same question.

But the point was valid. I decided to own it.

“A great rom-com,” I said, “is just like sex. If you’re surprised by the ending, somebody wasn’t doing their job. We all know where it’s headed. The fun is how we get there. Seriously—have you ever had fantastic sex that culminated in an epic orgasm and then said to yourself, *God, that was so cliché. It should’ve had a different ending?*”

Charlie tilted his head. “Do you want me to answer that question—or was it rhetorical?”

It was rhetorical, but I was so worked up, I said, “I want you to answer!”

Charlie gave a solemn nod as he conceded, “I have not.”

“Thank you! Exactly!”

Safe to say, this little tangent had not been in my notes. I had a million legitimate, academic points I could have led with, and yet here I was, just minutes in, asking—no, *demanding*—to know about Charlie Yates’s personal orgasms.

From Charlie’s expression, he hadn’t expected me to go there, either.

Though, if I’m honest, there was a brightness to his eyes like I’d surprised him.

The idea that I was seeing admiration from Charlie Yates gave me a fluttery feeling in my ... everywhere.

I tamped it down. I had to stay focused. I wasn’t here to make friends.

But that’s when he picked up that pen of his and wrote, at the top of his notebook page, “Happy ending—essential.” And then drew a box around it. Like he’d heard me, and he agreed, and he was ready to move on to the next point.

I needed to move away from sex talk. That much was clear.

I consulted my notes.

“Other problems,” I said, in a tone like *Where to begin?* “I guess the next giant issue is that none of the things that happen in this script correspond to the original. At all. It’s almost like you’ve never even seen the movie.”

“No comment.”

“Have you seen the movie?”

“Of course.”

“Recently?”

“Not sure that’s relevant.”

“I think it’s pretty relevant. You’ve got the characters going to a *line-dancing competition!*”

“So?”

“So there is no line dancing in *It Happened One Night!*”

Charlie shrugged. “They said to update it.”

“With *line dancing?*”

He shrugged again. “It wasn’t taken.”

“It ‘wasn’t taken’?”

“All the other kinds of dancing have been done. Ballroom. Swing. Latin. Hip-hop. Dirty. Not to mention the whole *Magic Mike* stripping franchise.”

“There was line dancing in *Footloose.*”

“But that’s not a rom-com.”

“You don’t even know what a rom-com is!”

“I do now.”

I gave him a look, let him have the point, and then said, “Disqualifyingly bad problem number three: there is nothing romantic here. At all. The leads don’t even like each other, as far as I can tell.”

“They like each other. What about when she falls on top of him?”

“That’s an accident.”

“Yes, but it leads to a sexy moment.”

“Sexy how? She gets a concussion.”

“But they gaze into each other’s eyes before she passes out.”

“I didn’t read that as gazing. I read it as glaring.”

“That’s on you.”

“No, that’s on *the script.*”

“I’m telling you, that’s a turning point for them.”

“And I’m telling you, that’s not how that works.”

“Fine. Fall on me sometime, and I’ll show you.”

“Fine. I will.”

We faced off for a second until Charlie said, “The point is, people fight all the time in rom-coms.”

“*At first* they do. But then it has to give way to something better. They can’t just fight the whole time and then have hate-sex and call it a day.”

“Don’t knock hate-sex. It has its upsides.”

“I’m sure it does. But it’s not love.”

Charlie paused to write “hate-sex = not love” in his Moleskine and box it.

I built on my advantage. “This’ll take forever if you keep arguing with me. We’ll be here all night.”

Charlie frowned. I was right again.

“So,” I went on, “I’m going to need you to just sit quietly and listen while I rip your screenplay to shreds. ’Kay?”

And here’s the thing: he did it.

He really sat there quietly after that, while I earnestly went through every single sticky note on every single page of that script, enumerating every single way it was terrible—from structure to motivation and everything in between.

By the time we were done, it was after midnight, my voice was getting hoarse, and Charlie Yates had taken five pages of notes. And his handwriting wasn’t large.

It felt like a triumph. Like this whole trip hadn’t been for nothing. Like I’d maybe proved at least a few of his assumptions about me a little bit wrong.

Not that I cared, of course.

But as I repacked my backpack and Charlie read over his notes, I couldn’t help but gloat a little to myself. *See that, Charlie Yates? I’m less worthless than you thought.*

Was that something to gloat about?

I would have loved to leave it there. But that’s when I remembered I had to get myself to the airport in the morning. And thus I was forced to close out the evening by leaning over to Charlie and saying, “I’m so sorry. Could you explain to me how Uber works?”

Nine

THE NEXT MORNING, all packed for LAX, I tried to make myself some coffee in Charlie's kitchen.

Big mistake.

"Nope!" He came swooping in. "That's—You know what? Don't—" He placed his body between me and the coffee maker. "I'll get that. She's temperamental. Did you need some—some coffee?"

Huh. Okay.

"It's fine," I said. "I can get some at the airport."

"No, no—I'm glad to make it. I wanted to talk to you, anyway."

He set about turning knobs and running water.

"Latte?" he asked then. "Cappuccino? Macchiato?"

"Just—whatever's easiest," I said.

Charlie got to work, saying over his shoulder, "This is the only thing my wife ever let me cook." Then he corrected, "*Ex-wife.*"

Was he making chitchat with me?

"So, you're all packed, then?" he asked next.

I frowned. I looked down at my stuff beside me. "Yep. The car comes in twenty minutes."

"And did you tell your"—he hesitated—"people at home you're heading back? Husband? Or whatever?"

What a weird question. Had Logan not told him even the most basic facts about my life?

I stood up a little straighter. "I don't have a 'husband or whatever,'" I said. "I live with my dad."

"With your dad?" Charlie asked, a hint of *Aren't you a little old for that?* in his tone.

"I'm his caretaker," I said.

Charlie turned around.

I met his eyes and went on, "He was in a camping accident many years ago, and now he needs round-the-clock care."

Charlie took that in. "Oh..." Then, "Who's with him now?"

"My younger sister." I did not add, *An amateur.*

I had no idea how they were doing. They'd forbidden me to call them or text them until I was settled. "Don't even try it," Sylvie had said. "We'll fully ignore you."

In the end, I hadn't had time to even think about calling. Instead, I'd woken up at four this morning, before my alarm even went off, because my heart was pounding so hard in my chest with so much anxiety about abandoning my dad, I swear it was causing ripples across the mattress.

Then I'd lain awake in bed, worrying.

Had I shown Sylvie where we kept the meclizine? Did my dad take his propranolol? What did they have for dinner? Please, god, tell me she didn't let him eat potato chips. Was she filling out the chart? Was he okay? Were they at the ER? Was everyone alive?

"So..." Charlie tried again. "Have you told them you're heading back?"

"Not yet," I said. And then I met his eyes, to be clear. "I can't quite face the humiliation."

Charlie nodded thoughtfully. "Because I was wondering if, rather than going back, you might ... stay."

"Stay where?"

"Stay here."

"Stay here and do what?" Be his housekeeper? Mow his lawn? Refinish his yacht?

"Stay here and rewrite the screenplay with me."

I frowned. All I could think to say was, "Why?"

As far as I knew, this guy was dead set against me.

“Because of last night,” Charlie said.

“Because I told you your screenplay was terrible?”

Charlie nodded. “That. And because you were right.”

Huh. How about that. A pompous writer who could admit someone else was right. You didn’t see those every day.

Charlie went on. “You were right about everything. I could see it so clearly after you said it. It’s been a long time since I thought about writing from anyone else’s perspective. It felt strangely good. Good enough that I stayed up half the night reading you.”

That sounded odd. “*Reading* me?”

“Reading your work. Your writing. The stuff Logan sent and begged me to read that I never read. Your two screenplays and your submission to Warner Bros.”

“He sent you those?”

“Multiple times. But you have no idea how many scripts people send me. Plus I was busy. And an ass. And I thought I knew everything there was to know.” The coffee maker beeped, and as Charlie moved toward it, he added, “About screenwriting—not about life. And of course as soon as he said *rom-com* my eyes were rolling too hard to read anything.”

I gave him a look. “Of course.”

If Charlie registered the sarcasm, he ignored it. “But then, last night ... You were just so...” And then he finished—with a little shrug like he knew the word was too much, but it was the only one that fit—by saying, “dazzling.”

Dazzling. I tried to take it in as he poured the coffee. “You stayed up half the night reading my stuff?” It was so impossible. Charlie Yates ... *reading my stuff.* And saying the word *dazzling.*

“And it was good,” Charlie said.

“What was good?” He couldn’t mean what I so badly wanted him to mean.

“Your writing.”

Oh, god. *He liked my writing.*

“Really good. I mean, romantic comedies aren’t exactly my favorite genre—”

“You’ve made that abundantly clear,” I said.

“But it almost made me believe in love. And I don’t believe in anything.”

Charlie set our mugs down at the dining table, and I took a seat facing him.

“So...” I said. “You read my writing, and now you want to—”

“Hire you,” Charlie finished. “For real. For the rewrite.”

My brain quivered from the whiplash. As excited as I’d been when I arrived here yesterday, by this morning, I was feeling the polar opposite: desperate to get home—back to safe, friendly territory with people who didn’t think I was worthless.

Like Charlie had.

But that was yesterday.

I tried to make the shift: today, apparently, he thought I was dazzling. And now, also, after reading my stuff: *someone he wanted to hire*.

“You want to hire me?” I asked. “For the rewrite?”

“Yes, but just for a week.”

“A week?” I said. Logan had said *six*. “You can’t fix that script in a week.”

“I don’t want to fix it. Just make it passable.”

I shook my head, like *Doesn’t compute*.

“Did Logan explain the whole deal to you?” Charlie asked then. “Why I even wrote this thing to begin with?”

I thought back. “It’s like an exchange? With some executive? You write this for him, and he’ll produce your Mafia script?”

“Yep. But it’s not the exec who wants this script. It’s his mistress.”

What a weird, old-timey word. “His *mistress*?”

Charlie nodded. “She loves this movie, and she wants to star in a remake. She’s pushy as hell, and she’s been nagging him, and he wants something to give her.”

“So you’re saying it’s not a real project.”

Charlie nodded. “It’s never going to go.”

I stirred my coffee.

“It doesn’t have to be good,” Charlie said. “It just has to be good enough to pass her muster.”

“Sounds like she didn’t like your first version, either.”

Charlie shook his head.

“So we’re doing all this for a vanity project?”

“We’re doing all this so I can get my Mafia movie made.”

“Does the world really need another Mafia movie?”

“I don’t know about the world,” Charlie said, “but I know *I* need it.” Then, leaning forward, like he was really sharing something tender and vital about himself, he looked into my eyes and said, “I just need to do something I’m proud of.”

Right then, my phone dinged. I glanced down. My ride was outside.

Here’s the thing. Honestly, in that moment, I just wanted to go home. “Charlie?” I said. “No.”

Then I stood up and walked over to my bags.

Charlie followed me. “No?”

I slid on my backpack and grabbed my bags, lifting the broken carry-on so it wouldn’t screech. “No.”

Charlie took both bags and led the way out. “You’re saying no?”

Was I saying no? To working with Charlie Yates? This was lunacy. But there it was. “I’m saying no, Charlie. I don’t want to do this.”

“You wanted to do it yesterday.”

“You wouldn’t even hire me yesterday!”

“I didn’t know how good you were yesterday.”

“Well, I didn’t know it was a fake project yesterday.”

We made it to the front walk, and when I didn’t slow, Charlie dropped my bag, like *Carry your own crap, then*. I circled back and grabbed it, letting the broken wheel squeal and scrape toward the waiting Uber.

But Charlie kept following. “You don’t want to work with me? It’s practically free money! You’re already here, anyway! This is an unbelievable opportunity for you! Let’s make a few minimal adjustments to this shitty screenplay, collect our checks, and move on. Do you know how famous I am?”

I’d made it to the car. I turned around to face him. “How very inspiring.”

“Inspiration isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

The Uber driver popped the trunk and got out—but Charlie held up his hand like *Halt* and then turned back my way.

“Why can’t you just help me?” Charlie asked, leaning in close.

I wasn't playing hard to get. The truth was—I really just wanted to go home. The mansion, the untouchable coffee maker, the fake project for some weird mistress. It just wasn't for me.

“Look,” I said, hoping this would kill it for Charlie. “I live in a crappy apartment with my half-paralyzed father. I work all the time. I don't have money, and I don't have friends, and I haven't even made eye contact with anyone attractive in over a year. All I've got is my writing and my love of rom-coms and my basic human dignity—and I'm not sacrificing any of those things for this weird, sad project. I am *needed at home*. I was willing to leave for something big and inspiring. But I am not willing to abandon my family for some abomination of a screenplay that doesn't even matter.”

That oughta do it. Right?

I turned toward the car, but Charlie grabbed my wrist to spin me back around.

“What do I need to do to get you to stay?”

And so I looked deep into his eyes and quoted Charlie back to Charlie: “I just need to do something I'm proud of.”

To my surprise, that landed. Charlie blinked. “Fine.” Then he started nodding. “Fine. Okay. You want to write it for real? We'll write it for real.”

“I don't want to write it for real, Charlie. I want to go home.”

“Name your terms,” Charlie said then.

“What?”

“Anything. However you want to do it—that's how we'll do it.”

I let out a long sigh. “Why are you doing this, Charlie?”

Charlie squared his shoulders like he was steeling himself to say something true. “Because last night, when I was reading your stuff, I wanted to work with you. And I haven't wanted anything—anything *at all*—in a very, very long time.”

Ten

THE UBER DRIVER had just left us behind in Charlie’s driveway when my phone rang.

It was my dad and Sylvie on FaceTime.

My first thought wasn’t even a thought. It was just a stomach flip.

Did she give him the wrong medicine? Did he have a drop attack? Did he catch his walker on the carpet fringe again?

I answered right there in the yard, forgetting both my bags at my feet and Charlie standing beside me.

But as soon as the call started, it was just ordinary: my dad and Sylvie, heads together to squeeze into the frame, my dad playing “Good Morning” on the tin whistle, and Sylvie shaking his maraca as she sang the lyrics.

Panic gave way to relief, and I was so happy to see their faces that by the time the song ended, my dad leaned closer to peer at me, saying, “Sweetheart, what’s wrong?”

Oh, god—was I crying?

I touched my face. It was wet.

“Nothing!” I said, smacking at my cheeks. “I’m just happy to see you.”

I forced a big smile.

Nothing was technically wrong, right now, after all.

“And is that your writer?” my dad asked, pointing through the camera.

“*Dad,*” I said, like *Come on*. He wasn’t my writer.

But as I turned, I saw that Charlie was closer than I'd realized, and as he shifted his attention to my dad's face on the phone screen, I realized what he was shifting it *from* was me.

Had he been watching me cry?

Bad to worse.

"Hello, sir," Charlie said, flipping his charm switch. "I'm so happy to be working with your daughter. She's a heck of a writer."

"Well, she certainly thinks the same about you," my dad said, "judging from all the"—he frowned at Sylvie—"what do they call it?" Then he remembered: "Fangirling."

"Dad!" I protested.

"I'm telling you, young man," my dad continued, "if I had a nickel for every time this girl read a piece of your dialogue out loud to me over dinner, I'd have a whole hell of a lot of nickels."

Charlie's eyebrows went up, like he hadn't realized my admiration for him extended to *reading dialogue from his works aloud*.

I wasn't even sure how to protest that. I mean, it was true.

"Tell Charlie Yates about your tattoo of his face!" Sylvie called then.

Charlie's look of surprise contracted into a frown of concern—but I shook my head, like *Hell no*. "She's joking," I said. Then, to be clear, "I do *not* have a tattoo of your face."

"You do have a photo of him taped over your desk, though," Sylvie said.

I should have denied that, too. "But that's for *writing motivation only*."

"Sure it is," Sylvie said.

"How's the writing going?" my dad asked, like a proud parent.

"We haven't started yet," I said, grateful for the change of topic.

Charlie jumped in, "We're hammering out details."

I took the wheel of the conversation and turned the attention off myself. "How are you guys? How's everything there? What are Dad's sodium numbers?"

"I knew you'd ask!" Sylvie said, and then she held up a Post-it with the number 716 on it. "Grand total of milligrams from yesterday," she said, like *Boom!*, and then put her hand up in the frame for a high five.

I high-fived the phone.

“Stop worrying,” my dad said then. “We’re fine. Mrs. Otsuka’s having us over for dinner tonight.”

I pointed at my dad. “No soy sauce.”

My dad looked insulted I would even say it. “I wouldn’t dare.”

“We’re much more worried about *you*,” Sylvie said.

“I’m also fine,” I said then, not sure at all if that was true. And then, before I could decide, or god forbid *cry again*, a car pulled up in the driveway.

Logan’s Beemer.

“What the hell is he doing here?” I asked as Charlie and I stared at it.

That’s when my dad said, “We won’t keep you! You’ve got a fancy Hollywood life to lead.”

I blew kisses at the phone, and by the time I’d hung up, Charlie and Logan were staring each other down.

I walked up to them, and at the sight of my teary face, Logan said, “What did you do to her, man?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “My dad and Sylvie just called.”

“Is your dad okay?” Logan asked at once. He got it.

“All fine,” I said. “It just made me homesick.”

Logan got that, too. “Why didn’t you reply to my texts yesterday?”

“Because I was mad at you,” I said, like *Duh*.

“And what,” Logan said, looking back and forth between us like he sensed a newly formed alliance, “is going on here?”

Charlie let out a long sigh, and then conceded, “We’re working together.”

“What!” Logan whooped out a big laugh, and then he started pumping his fist in the air. “I knew it! I knew it!”

“That doesn’t make you forgiven,” I said.

“Uh, I think it absolutely makes me forgiven. I think the words you’re looking for are ‘Thank you.’ And to that”—Logan bowed—“I say, ‘You’re very welcome.’”

Charlie and I met eyes. Then Charlie said, “Your methods were extremely problematic.”

“Yeah, well. I’ve got two problematic clients,” Logan responded. Then he asked Charlie to confirm: “She’s doing the rewrite?”

Charlie nodded. “She is. Unless she changes her mind.”

Logan looked at me. “Do not change your mind. It just about killed me to make this happen.”

“I’m not planning to,” I said, lifting my hands. Then I added, “At the moment.”

“Okay, then,” Logan said. “Let’s go.”

Charlie frowned. “Go where?”

“To brunch,” Logan said. “To celebrate.” And then, when we hesitated, he added, “And to talk about the contract. Because there’ll be no writing—at all—happening here until we make this whole thing legal.”

★ ★ ★

WE WENT TO a fancy see-and-be-seen brunch place that Logan loved and Charlie hated (and that my airport-wear was hardly nice enough for), and the first thing I saw as the hostess led us in—and please just go ahead and take a deep breath right now to prepare yourself—was ...

Jack Stapleton.

I’m not joking.

Jack. Stapleton.

A-list actor, Jack Stapleton. Sexiest Man Alive, Jack Stapleton. The guy on the billboard right outside the restaurant, Jack Stapleton.

Looking somehow *better* in real life? Wearing slacks with no socks and an Oxford shirt that fit him like it was spun from silk. And having brunch—I’m so sorry: if you happen to be holding a can of supplemental oxygen, please take a puff—with Meryl Streep.

The real people, I swear. In a real restaurant. Eating real food.

I’ll give you a minute.

I needed a minute myself, to be honest, but before I’d even started to take it, Jack Stapleton looked up, saw Charlie, rose to his full height, and stepped over to positively *ensconce* Charlie in a full-immersion bear hug.

“Hey, buddy,” Jack said warmly as he clapped Charlie on the back without letting go.

The hug lasted so long that the rest of us found ourselves looking around, and that’s when I met eyes with Meryl Streep, still seated at her place.

“Hello,” she said to me, lifting her fork in some impossibly cool hybrid between a wave and a toast.

Was that the most badass fork-based greeting I’d ever witnessed in my life? No time to ponder—because before I could stop myself, I was launching one big burst of nonpunctuated words: “Hello Meryl Streep I adore all your work and I am madly in love with you.”

To which she said, “Thank you,” as if people said that exact thing to her every day.

Which they probably did, right? Who are we kidding?

The full Yates-Stapleton hug shifted next into a side clamp, with Jack Stapleton, only a few inches taller than Charlie, tucking his head to try to ask a few private questions, even though we were all baldly staring. Everything he asked seemed like a follow-up to some other conversation no one else was privy to.

“How you holding up, man?” Jack Stapleton asked.

“Hanging in there,” Charlie said.

“Everything still good?”

“Everything’s still good. Yeah.”

“You’re following all their rules?”

Charlie nodded. “Trying to.”

“How’s the writing?”

“It might be”—Charlie glanced in my direction—“getting better.”

“You know I’m here for you. Day or night.”

“Back atcha, pal. Anytime.”

Then another bear hug, more back clapping, and a totally surreal moment when Jack Stapleton turned to me, held out a hand, and looked straight into my eyes like electroshock therapy to say, “Great to meet you. I’m Jack.”

And then there was nothing to do but sit blankly at our brunch table while Logan waved his hand in front of my face, saying “Hello?” before finally turning to the waiter and saying, “We’re going to need another minute.”

I was further—emotionally, spiritually, movie-star-wise—from my little apartment at home than I could even comprehend. Jack Stapleton just *shook my hand like a colleague*. Meryl Streep just *wave-toasted me with a forkful of fruit tart*.

It was another universe. One with too little oxygen.

Or maybe too much.

When the waiter came back, I still hadn't glanced at the menu.

Logan just ordered for me. The Arabian buttered eggs.

Then Charlie turned to me and said, "You okay? Meeting Jack is a lot."

I could have corrected him on feminist principle and said I was equally incapacitated by *both* world-famous actors. But I had more pressing business. "Are you friends with Jack Stapleton?" I asked. "Real friends?"

Charlie nodded. "I am real friends with Jack Stapleton."

"But—why?"

Charlie shrugged. "I wrote *The Destroyers*. Which—"

"Launched his career," I finished. "I know. But do all screenwriters become close friends with the stars of their movies?"

Logan snorted into his brunch sangria at that.

"He wasn't a star when I met him," Charlie said. "He was a struggling actor trying not to fumble his big break."

"But how did you become friends?"

"How does anybody become friends? He went through some hard times, and I showed up for him—and then I went through some hard times, and he showed up for me." Then he added, "We both like playing Warhammer 40K." Then, in case that wasn't enough: "Also, he didn't have a car for a long time, so he needed lots of rides."

Unbelievable.

"Did that really just happen? Did we just bump casually into Jack Stapleton and Meryl Streep having brunch?"

"This is LA," Charlie said. "You're gonna have to get used to that."

"They're filming a movie together," Logan explained. "A romance about a younger guy who falls for—and goes on an erotic journey with—an older woman."

"I will watch the hell out of that movie," I said.

But Logan shook his head. "No you won't."

"Why not?" I said, like *Don't tell me what to obsess over*.

"She gets run over by a bus in the end."

I made a growl of disapproval. "How do you know that?"

"The writer's a client."

“Great. Then can you please ask that person to *not kill off Meryl Streep?*”

“He says it’s more realistic.”

“*Really?*” I demanded. “How many people do you know who’ve been run over by a bus?”

That’s when Charlie piped up. “Anyway, it’s not a romance.”

“What?” Logan said.

Charlie nodded, like *Yeah*. “Learned that yesterday,” he said, cocking his head at me. Then, looking mischievous, he said, “It’s not a romance unless everyone has an orgasm.”

“That’s not—” I started.

But Logan said, “Oh, I think that movie’s got plenty of orgasms.”

“If you don’t have a *happy ending*,” I corrected. Then I felt the need to stress: “An *emotionally* happy ending.” How was this conversation happening? To be extra clear: “An ending with the couple happily together. And Meryl Streep alive and well.”

“How old is Meryl Streep, anyway?” Logan pondered.

I sat up straighter and declared, “She is timeless.”

“The point is,” Charlie said, “if you murder Meryl Streep, it can’t be a romance—orgasms or no.”

Logan frowned, like *Huh*. Then he turned my way. “I’ll adjust my terminology. What is it, if not a romance?”

Were they teasing me? Either way, I stayed focused. “It’s a tragic love story. Or a tragic erotic journey. You’ve got to warn people, so they know what they’re getting going in.”

“Real life doesn’t come with warnings,” Logan argued, half-assedly.

“That’s why fiction,” I said, “is *better* than real life.”

We clinked brunch cocktails to that.

But just as we did, just as I was feeling a little bit valuable in the conversation, a guy in a backward baseball cap walked up to our table holding a Bloody Mary and raised it in a toast as he said, “Lo! Gan!” and then sloshed half a glass of tomato juice onto the white tablecloth.

Logan and Charlie glanced at each other, and somehow in that second, just from the vibe—and the backward baseball cap—I guessed who it was.

“Is this the girl?” Baseball Cap asked no one in particular, gesturing at me with that drink.

What was I? *Ten years old*? I waited for someone—Charlie? Logan? A waitress passing by?—to correct him with “woman,” but no one did.

Not even me.

Next, he leaned in my direction. “You must be Logan’s ex-girlfriend.”

So I said, “You must be Jablowmie.”

It was meant to be insulting, but he grinned. He swilled his drink, and then he raised the empty glass in another toast.

“Congrats on the new job! Isn’t nepotism great?”

This from the grandson of Christopher Heywood and the esteemed auteur of the Beer Tower series. I cocked my head. “You’d know best.”

He nodded, like *Touché*. Then he said, “I see you’re already busy ending Charlie Yates’s career.”

Was this happening?

“Great hat,” I said. “Where do you get those—with the brim on the back like that?”

“Okay, okay,” Logan said, in a tone like *Cut it out*.

I looked down, a tiny bit scolded, wondering if I should’ve taken a higher road, but then I felt Charlie looking at me, and when I glanced his way, his eyes were smiling.

But T.J. wasn’t quite done. “*This* is your romance expert?” he said to Logan. Then he looked me over. “No offense, but has she ever even been on a date?”

“That’s it,” Charlie said then, standing up and dropping his napkin on the table. “Knock it off.”

Was Charlie taller than I’d realized?

It felt nice to be defended. But T.J. was actually right. I *didn’t* have much experience with real-life romance. Even the quickest scan of my past made that painfully clear: The high school BFF I’d tried sex with for the first time—more like a science experiment than anything else—who later turned out to be gay. The fellow professor who I’d started seeing just as he left for a two-year sabbatical in Alaska—and who I got dumped by just as he returned home. A few attempts at dating that never got very far because I was always either tending to my dad, worrying about my dad, or on my way to the ER.

But that’s not to say I’d never been in love. I was not stingy with my crushes. I had a thing for the guy at the meat counter at the grocery store,

and the doc who'd stitched my dad up after his last fall, and a cute young maintenance guy who worked at our building.

I fell in love all the time. Just ... nobody fell in love with me back.

Fiction really kind of was all I had in the romance department.

But that wasn't a weakness. That was a strength.

I had a theory that we gravitate toward the stories we need in life. Whatever we're longing for—adventure, excitement, emotion, connection—we turn to stories that help us find it. Whatever questions we're struggling with—sometimes questions so deep, we don't even really know we're asking them—we look for answers in stories.

Love stories had lifted me up, delighted me, and educated me on the power of human kindness for years. I knew a lot about love. A lot more, I bet, than all the people who took it for granted.

So it was fine. I knew who I was.

And I was not someone who could be insulted by some dude-bro named T.J. on his third Bloody Mary.

Though I did love that Charlie had just stood up for me. Literally.

Logan was busy shutting T.J. down. "Your table is waiting for you, Teej."

T.J. turned to look and, sure enough, it was.

When he turned back, he looked right at me and said, "Welcome to Hollywood." And then, before he walked away, he added, "You're going to need to get that hair straightened."

★ ★ ★

IN THE WAKE of that moment, Logan and Charlie pointedly shifted back to normal life, discussing the writing project at hand as if nothing had happened.

"We're going to need a serious contract," Charlie said. "I don't trust you anymore. I should probably get a new manager."

"It worked, didn't it?" Logan said, totally unworried. "You finally read her stuff."

"But what if it hadn't worked?" Charlie gestured at me. "You'd have crushed her."

"You think I don't know you? You're not as mean as you pretend."

“It was a risk,” Charlie said.

“Everything’s a risk. She needed a push. And so did you. And if you think I was going to let what happened just stop you from writing forever, you haven’t been paying attention.”

“What happened?” I asked.

The two of them looked at me, then at each other.

So I prompted, “You said you weren’t going to let ‘what happened’ stop Charlie from writing. What was it that happened?”

Charlie frowned, like he didn’t want to talk about this now. Or ever.

“You should tell her, Charlie,” Logan said. “It explains a lot.”

“It’s not really brunch conversation,” Charlie said.

“I can tell her later, behind your back, if you prefer,” Logan said.

Charlie sighed. Then he turned to me. “I got sick a few years ago. And even though I really am completely—fully—better now, I haven’t done much writing in the wake of it.”

“Any writing,” Logan corrected, gently.

“Any writing,” Charlie conceded.

Logan leaned in, like he was sharing a dark diagnosis. “He’s got the yips.”

I frowned. “What’s ‘the yips’?”

Charlie grimaced like he didn’t love hearing the term applied to him. “It’s a sports term,” he said, “for when an experienced athlete has a sudden, unexplained—”

“Performance problem,” Logan completed.

Charlie looked aghast. “I do not have a performance problem.”

Logan corrected: “An abrupt absence of skills.”

“Oh,” I said, like we were just learning vocabulary. “So it’s like writers’ blo—”

But Charlie gave me a hard look, like *Don’t you dare*.

I stopped mid-word.

Logan jumped in to fill the void. “We don’t speak the words for the writer’s equivalent. We just say the yips.”

“I don’t have the yips,” Charlie said. “I’m just ... not writing.”

“Not writing *at all*?” I asked.

“I’ve written one thing since I got sick four years ago,” Charlie said, by way of an answer. Then he added: “The screenplay you’re here to fix.”

So ... not writing at all.

Charlie added, "Everything that's come out in the past few years has been old stuff."

"Is that why you're trying to get the Mafia thing going?" I asked next. "Because you don't have anything else?"

"I also love the Mafia thing," Charlie said.

"Is that why the rom-com is so unbelievably bad?" I asked then. "Because you ... forgot how to write?"

"It's bad because I didn't want to write it. And I don't like rom-coms."

"But you..." I scrolled mentally through a hundred different protests. "You can make *anything* good."

"Maybe," Charlie said. "But I have to believe in it."

Uh-oh. Please tell me I did not just agree to work on a rom-com with one of those men who do not believe in love. I almost couldn't ask. "Did you believe in cannibal robots when you wrote about them?"

He saw where I was headed. "No."

"What about aliens? Did you believe in those when you wrote *The Destroyers*?"

Now he was getting evasive. "I mean, the universe is a big place."

"I'm thinking of that one alien with the elephant trunk. Did you believe *that alien* might be out there somewhere, living its best life?"

Charlie took my point. "Not exactly, no."

"So what you're telling me is, you can take the imaginative leap to get on board with an alien from another galaxy that somehow managed to evolve a trunk that is functionally and visually identical to the elephants of earth, but you simply cannot fathom two ordinary humans falling in love with each other?"

I let us all sit with that for a second.

"It's just different," Charlie said.

Logan nodded to confirm. "He's lost his mojo."

"It's not lost," Charlie said, rapping on his sternum with his knuckles. "I just can't find it."

"Yeah," Logan said. "That's what 'lost' means."

"Right," Charlie said, "I was thinking of the 'dead' meaning of 'lost.' Like, 'lost at sea,' or 'I'm so sorry for your loss.'"

Logan shook his head and said, "Writers."

“Preaching to the choir,” I said, all deadpan and relaxed. But inside, I was on high alert. Charlie Yates had lost his mojo? How was that possible? This guy was the king of mojo. Was this a sign of the apocalypse?

That’s when I met Charlie’s eyes and asked, “You’re all better now health-wise, though, right?”

“Good as new,” Charlie said.

“What were you sick with?” I asked.

Charlie looked down, like there was something on his shoe he needed to check out, and then, glancing off in the distance like he might see someone he knew, in a beyond-casual tone, as if whatever came next was so boring it couldn’t even merit any follow-up questions ... he said, simply, “Soft tissue sarcoma.”

Eleven

GOING TO BRUNCH with Charlie Yates forced me to rapidly release the fantasy version of him I'd cherished for so long. Seconds after Charlie spoke the word "sarcoma," Logan had stepped away from the table to take a call, and the next thing I knew, Charlie was scooting his chair back and saying, "I'm gonna go take a leak."

Yeah. Exactly.

My *fantasy* Charlie Yates would never have said that.

Alone at the table, with no one to distract me, my heart decided to start doing that weird, violent thumping thing it was so into these days.

I tapped on my breastbone, as if to say, *Come on, buddy. You got this.*

But my heart was just insulted.

He definitely did not have this.

And neither did I.

Here I was—no thanks to Logan—in the fanciest brunch venue I'd ever seen, breathing the same air as Meryl Streep, with Jack Stapleton's ... I don't know, *palm energy* still coating my hand from that bonkers handshake, and I'd just ingested a brunch cocktail with an edible flower in it, and my all-time greatest writing hero had just been teasing me about orgasms.

I mean. *Come on.*

I felt a rising surge of impostor syndrome, and so I stood up, just to have something to do, and started making my way toward the bathroom—stopping a waiter on the way to explain that we were not dining and dashing, no worries, and we’d all be back at the table shortly once we’d finished taking important business calls and peeing.

The waiter gave a deadpan nod. “I’ll alert the staff.”

And then I entered—I kid you not—the most opulent restaurant bathroom in history, complete with a water feature *and* a fire feature as well as a long, trough-like sink filled with black onyx stones. I was washing my hands and wondering how on earth the janitorial service cleaned all those rocks—*one by one?*—when I suddenly heard Logan’s voice loud and clear, almost like he was in the bathroom with me.

“I knew you’d love her stuff,” Logan said.

I turned. Looked around the ladies’ room. Empty.

“I called it,” Logan went on, just as loud, “and I was right.”

“You called it,” Charlie’s voice agreed, “and you really were right.”

That’s when I realized that the trough of sink rocks wasn’t just for the ladies’ room. It was shared with the men’s room. Below the mirror in front of me, I could see water running from the faucets on the other side of the wall. And Logan’s hands, soaping themselves. And the pair of hands next to them that had to be Charlie’s.

“Her dialogue,” Charlie went on, “her verbal rhythm, her sense of structure. All amazing.”

Oh, my god. Was I eavesdropping on Charlie Yates saying nice things about me?

I should pull out my phone to voice-record this moment—but I was afraid to move. If I could see their hands, they could see mine.

“And she’s fucking funny,” Charlie said.

Impostor syndrome solved. Charlie Yates, screenwriting god, had just used *a curse word as a modifier* to describe how funny I was.

Was this the best moment of my life? Should I steal one of these sink rocks as a memento?

But then Charlie kept talking.

“I only have one problem—” he said.

No, Charlie! Don’t have a problem!

“The cheese.”

I frowned. *The cheese?*

Just as Logan said, “The cheese?” Like he was frowning, too.

“Yeah, man. These love stories. They’re so cheesy.”

Oh, no. Best day of my life canceled.

“And not even like a self-respecting kind of cheese,” Charlie went on, “like a Brie or a Gruyère. This is Velveeta. This is American slices in individually wrapped plastic sleeves. This is aerosol spray cheese.”

Oh, god.

“The men in these stories?” Charlie went on. “They keep *crying*.”

“Crying?” Logan asked.

“They cry a lot. Like, *a lot*. It’s so weird, right? Men don’t cry.”

“I cry sometimes,” Logan said.

“Do you?” Charlie said, like he was changing his opinion of Logan. “I can’t stand these guys. I’m like, *Pull it together, man. Go chop something with an axe.*”

“Crying is good for you,” Logan said. “It’s cleansing. There’s even a crying yoga now.”

Long silence.

“Anyway,” Charlie went on, shutting off his faucet. “I can’t take her seriously. Why would anyone write about that?”

“Why would anyone write about anything?” Logan countered.

“I just think,” Charlie said, “that our interests are ... fundamentally different.”

Logan sounded like he was frowning. “Does that mean you’re not going to work with her?”

I held my breath.

“No, I’m going to work with her,” Charlie said. “But only halfway.”

“Halfway?”

“She wants to work on this thing until it’s amazing. I want to work on this thing until it’s passable. She wants this movie to happen. I want this movie to *never happen*. I want to improve it just enough to get my Mafia thing out of mothballs. And then I’ll send her on her way.”

“But weren’t you both just telling me that you agreed to make it good?” Logan asked.

“Yeah, that’s what I *said*,” Charlie said, and then paused so Logan could mentally fill in *But that’s not what’s going to happen*.

“But that’s...” Logan said.

What? I thought. Lying? Cheating? Being a douchebag?

Logan went on, “That’s not what you promised.”

“I’ll wiggle out of it somehow,” Charlie said.

“You have to tell her,” Logan said.

“She won’t stay if I tell her.”

“Then I have to tell her.”

“You won’t be my manager anymore if you tell her.”

“But this is...” Logan started.

A horrible betrayal?

“Not cool,” Logan concluded. “Not cool at all.”

“There are a lot of things I can’t control about my life,” Charlie said. “I could live to a hundred, or I could be dead next year. But there’s one godforsaken truth I can guarantee you. The only thing I’m proud of is my career. And I will not frigging turn it into aerosol cheese by seriously writing a rom-com.”

I nodded to myself at those words. *Okay, I thought. All right.*

Guess I was quitting, after all.

Twelve

HERE, I JUST have to pause for a second and tell you something genuinely sad.

I apologize in advance.

I wish I could spare us all the heartache. I do.

I promise, if there were any way to skip it, I would.

But you have to know what happened first to understand what happened next.

Until you know the before, you can't grasp the after. Why leaving my dad was so excruciating for me. Or why I never went away to college—getting a bachelor's and a master's online instead. Or why I'd squandered so much promise, or why I was willing—even *preferred*—to give up so much for my sister, or what a big deal it was for me to attempt to start my writing career in earnest.

Not to mention why it was extra-douchey for Charlie to refer lightly to my “failed career” as if his hot take was the only possible read on it. As if a cursory glance at anything could ever be the whole story. As if my life—my sorrow, my grief, my sacrifices—was something some ill-informed casual observer had any right to judge.

I have to tell you the thing I've been putting off telling you.

Stick with me. We'll get through it—and we'll be stronger on the other side, as all of us always are, for facing hard things and finding ways to keep

going.

Plus: Bearing witness to the suffering of others? I don't know if there's anything kinder than that. And kindness is a form of emotional courage. And I'm not sure if this is common knowledge, but emotional courage is its own reward.

Lastly, I promise: everybody was okay now. Sort of. Mostly.

With obvious exceptions.

I was okay now, at least. Really. Honestly. Truly.

Okay *enough*, at least.

I'd had almost ten years to recover, after all.

Wow—had it really been that long?

Ten years since we took a family camping trip to Yosemite to celebrate my graduation from high school—and the writing scholarship I'd won to Smith College.

Ten years since the rockfall that ended our family as we knew it.

Ten years since I was sitting on an outcropping of rock while my dad belayed my mom, keeping the ropes on her harness tight while she worked her way up the rock face, and my sister, Sylvie, and I sunbathed—smacking on strawberry Fruit Roll-Ups as she begged me to tell her that seventh grade would be better than sixth.

But how stingy I was. “I can't promise that,” I said. “Middle school is supposed to suck.”

“Emma,” Sylvie said, pouting. “Come on.”

But I didn't give in. “Lean into the misery,” I told her, feeling wise and grown-up and cocky. “It's good for you. It bolsters your emotional immune system.”

So smug. So foolish.

That morning—the last morning of our normal lives—is weirdly vivid in my mind to this day. I can see the honeyed yellow sunlight falling across our legs. I can see the mismatched purple and pink socks poking out of Sylvie's hiking boots. I can see the frayed Band-Aid on her knee, and the Hello Kitty earrings I kept teasing her about, and the half-scratched-off hot-pink polish on her nails as she took a swig from her water bottle.

Such a goofy little kid.

I remember myself, too—that stranger I used to be. How the breeze was tickling my neck with escaped wisps from my ponytail. How I couldn't wait

for summer to end and college to start. How my high school boyfriend—Logan—had suggested we stay together even after leaving for opposite sides of the country for school, and I told him I'd "think about it." How eager I was to grow up.

More than anything, I remember that feeling I kept carrying like a sunrise in my body that my life was really, genuinely, at last, about to begin.

I can place myself in the moment of that morning in vivid 3-D, as if it's still happening somehow, over and over, on an endless loop—my dad still holding the belay rope, and my mom working her way ever higher on the rock face, the sound of the wind high above in the background like a rushing river nearby.

All of us totally fine. Better than fine. Happy.

If my life were a screenplay, I'd end the story right there and roll credits—and then maybe rewind and watch it again.

But real life's not a loop, is it? There's always another moment that follows.

What I remember best after that is *sounds*.

A series of clacks coming from high on the rock face almost like fireworks.

Then an unearthly *clump* sound right at the base of the rocks.

I didn't see her fall.

I didn't see the rock that hit my dad, either.

The rest of the memory is built only with the scaffolding we pieced together afterward: A patch of rocks came loose—like a mini-avalanche. One of those rocks hit my father on the head before he even knew anything was happening, knocking him unconscious. As he dropped to the ground, of course the belay rope swished upward, out of his hands. And how high up was my mother then? A hundred feet, maybe? Sometimes I look up at the rooflines of buildings and try to re-create it. Was it three stories she fell from? Four? *Five*?

I'm sure my dad knows. But I'll never ask.

I didn't see it in slow-mo, the way you might in a movie, even though I was right there. It was over before I knew what had happened. And then there was nothing to do but run to the spot where they both lay, bleeding, unconscious, twisted like no bodies should ever twist.

I was back at the rock where Sylvie was sitting before she'd even moved. "Don't go over," I said. "Stay right here." We were too high for cell service, so I said, "I'm going for help."

But she wasn't listening. "Mom?" Sylvie whispered, staring in that direction.

I took Sylvie's face between my hands and turned it to mine. "Don't move from this rock. Don't go over there. And don't touch them, okay? That could hurt them worse."

"Okay," Sylvie said, still whispering, her eyes glassy.

"I'll be right back," I said.

Then it hit her I was leaving. Her voice wavered with panic. "But what do I do?"

"Talk to them," I said. "Just keep talking. Say I'm going for help. Say I'll be right back. Say it's all going to be okay."

It wasn't all going to be okay. That much was already clear.

"Don't leave me," Sylvie pleaded.

"I have to," I said. "Be strong. And just keep talking."

What else could I possibly do? I left.

I ran down the trail. Fully sprinted—no pack or supplies or water. I tripped on a root at some point but scrambled up to keep going—only discovering later I'd sprained my ankle and never even felt it.

I have no idea how long it took to make it to the trailhead—no sense of time—but when I found a lady with a working cell phone I was almost too out of breath to speak. "There was a rockfall," I panted, pointing back up the trail. "My mom was climbing. My parents are hurt." And then, as she was dialing for help, I heard myself say the only thing left that I knew for sure. "It's bad. It's bad. It's bad."

★ ★ ★

HERE'S A TRUTH that never changes: My mom didn't survive the fall.

The rescue workers said she probably died on impact. By the time they arrived, she was already gone—and my dad was critical. A rescue team strapped my dad to a backboard and readied him for helicopter transport to the ER. Another team—a recovery team—stayed behind to collect my mother.

They sent Sylvie and me with my dad. Decisions had to be made.

Sylvie didn't want to leave our mom. She screamed—feral with panic—and tried to go to her.

She was so enraged with me for that. For leaving our mom behind. Alone.

I asked her about it once, years later—if she was still mad.

“I was never mad at you,” she said, like I was crazy.

“Yes, you were,” I said. “You scratched me on the face.”

Sylvie frowned, like that didn't sound like her. Then she said, “I don't remember anything about that day.”

Maybe that's a blessing. I wouldn't wish those memories on her. The sound of my mother hitting that cliff base still woke me up in the night.

And then I always got up and went to check on my sleeping dad in the other room.

My kindhearted dad, who lived.

★ ★ ★

BEFORE THE ROCKFALL, my parents were both musicians. They played in the symphony together. My father was a cellist, and my mom played clarinet. At work, they were friendly and professional. At home, they teased each other and played duets all the time.

My dad survived that day, yes—but he never played cello again.

After almost ten years, and more physical and occupational therapy than any of us can fathom, there were two lasting effects he couldn't overcome: the hemiplegia on his left side, which never resolved. He could use that side, but only with difficulty. He could walk, but only slowly and mostly with a walker. That whole side—including the fingers that used to work the frets on his cello—stayed tight and jerky and full of tremors.

But that wasn't the condition that held us hostage. It was the Ménière's disease that messed with his balance, and the sudden drop attacks that slammed him to the ground out of nowhere, that kept me on high alert.

When the drop attacks happened, he went down hard—sometimes hitting his head. But even just off days could put him out of commission. He had to lie on his bed all day holding on to the edges because he felt like he was on a tiny raft being tossed in a vast, stormy ocean. Some months

were worse than others, and sometimes he went long stretches when he felt fine. But he never knew when it would hit, which was why he didn't drive anymore, and he couldn't live alone.

He needed someone looking out for him 24–7, and—until I boarded that plane and flew to LA—that someone was always me.

The plan, as you've already heard Logan complain about, was for me to take the first ten years, and for Sylvie to take the second—and then to figure it out from there. Sylvie was twelve when we lost our mom, and the only thing I cared about in those early years—or maybe even my reason to keep going—was to give her the best childhood I could, despite it all.

To be as mom-ish as I could in our mom's stead.

I baked cookies. I drove her to parties. I took her for makeovers at the mall. I helped her fray her jeans. I supervised homework. I did laundry. I focused so hard on Sylvie and my dad that I almost forgot about myself. I just put my head down and kept going.

A relief, in a lot of ways.

I made my life about *Sylvie's* life.

Maybe staying so busy was a lifeline out of my own grief. But I willingly made myself a supporting character in my own story.

Sylvie was the star—and I was the dependable sister who helped her shine.

I wanted to shine, too, in my way. I didn't give up all my dreams. I kept writing, and kept studying stories, and kept fantasizing about some distant future where I would make it all happen. But I thought—and worried—much more about my Sylvie, and my dad, too, than I did about myself. And maybe, in a way, I started wanting my fantasies about the future to stay fantasies.

Right? Because if fantasies come true, they can't be fantasies anymore.

And then what do you have to fantasize about?

All to say, I got very comfortable living like that.

And everything that had happened since I came to LA? It was the opposite of comfortable. And it was certainly the opposite of fantasy.

Of course I should seize this opportunity. Of course I should be here and do this! Whatever "this" would turn out to be. There wasn't another reasonable choice. When you finally get your chance, you have to take it.

But it was one thing to live your dreams in theory—and it was absolutely another thing to clumsily, awkwardly, terrifiedly *do it for real*.

Thirteen

BACK AT CHARLIE'S house, I felt strangely elated.

I didn't have to do this. I could quit and go home.

Charlie wanted to get started at the table—but *one*, Logan had said not to do any writing until we had a written contract, and *two*, I was quitting.

I hadn't told Charlie that yet, of course.

Charlie sat down at his heavy, faux-farmhouse, designer dining room table, clearly thinking I would follow his lead.

But I didn't.

Instead, I walked around his living room, examining knickknacks and bookends and decorative ceramic bowls like I had all the time in the world. Which I did.

"Hey," Charlie said. "Can we focus?"

"This is a really nice house," I said. "You have great taste."

"It's not me. It's my wife. My *ex-wife*." Then a pause. "It wasn't even her, actually. It was her decorator."

"Well, then," I said. "My compliments to your ex-wife's decorator."

"Could you...?" Charlie started.

But now I was opening a drawer under his TV console. *Empty*.

"What are you doing?" Charlie asked.

"I'm exploring my new workplace." I slid open a second one. *Empty*.

"Can we just get started over here?" Charlie asked.

But that's when I opened a third drawer. And this one ...

This one ...

Was full of Oscars.

I froze. Stared.

So ... when Charlie had declared he had a "whole drawer of Oscars" ... that wasn't a figure of speech.

This was a literal whole drawer of Oscars.

And not just Oscars, actually—all kinds of statuettes, jumbled willy-nilly like booty in a pirate's chest. Like they hadn't been *placed* in there, but maybe *dumped*. Or *dropped*. Or *chucked*.

"What's this?" I asked, in a tone like he was a naughty child and I'd found his box of stolen candy.

"Just ... stuff," Charlie answered—*also* like he was a naughty child and I'd found his box of stolen candy.

I stared down at the contents of the drawer. Yes, there were actual Oscars—those unmistakable gold figurines. But also: the very recognizable Golden Globe awards that were literally miniature golden globes. Then, after that, a whole mishmash of silver and brass and crystal figurines engraved with words like HOLLYWOOD FOREIGN PRESS, NEW YORK FILM CRITICS CIRCLE, WRITERS GUILD OF AMERICA, HOLLYWOOD FILM FESTIVAL—that was just the top layer. Those were just the ones I could count.

I looked up. Charlie was watching me. "Are these your awards?" I asked.

Charlie nodded.

"Like, from the actual events? These are the awards you walked up onstage in a tuxedo and received from some world-famous actor?"

Charlie nodded again.

"What are they doing in here?"

Charlie shrugged.

"Charlie," I said, becoming more aghast by the second. "Why are the awards that most screenwriters would sell their organs for just piled in here like it's a junk drawer?"

"Just..." Charlie said, like he was trying to come up with an answer. "To keep them in one place?"

I shook my head. "In one place? This is the best you could come up with? How about a mantel? Or a bookshelf? Or an antique glass-fronted

cabinet? Or a safe? How about anywhere other than shoved like trash into a forgotten credenza drawer?"

Charlie didn't answer, so I looked back down. Then I pointed. "This Women's Film Critics Association award has lost her little wing!"

Charlie had the good sense to look cowed. But then he said, "Look—none of this stuff means anything."

All I could do was blink.

"It's all just theater," Charlie said.

"Are you telling me," I said, "that you don't care that you got all these awards?"

"I do care," he said. "I just don't care enough to display them in a trophy case like a douchebag."

"So you're just going to shove them out of sight and break off their wings?"

"You seem to be taking this kind of personally—" Charlie started.

"I do! I do take it personally! Do you have any idea what I would give for even one of these awards? And you're just treating them all like they're garbage? Look!" I picked up an Oscar and held it out toward him. It was surprisingly heavy. "Look how scratched this is!"

"It doesn't matter!" Charlie said.

"It doesn't matter? It doesn't matter that you've scratched up the statuette of the highest honor in your industry? These things are made of solid brass and plated in twenty-four-carat gold! I watched a whole documentary about it! You don't even have the tiniest inkling of how lucky you are. I will spend my whole life writing and striving and obsessing over movies and I'll never even get close to one of these, and you..." I looked back down at the drawer, and words failed me.

"You want it?" Charlie said then. "Just take it! It's yours, okay? Now we're even!"

"But we're *not* even. Because I didn't really win it!"

"Nobody really wins anything!"

"Tell that to your thousand-dollar coffee maker!"

Charlie frowned, like he'd never made that connection.

Which just made me madder.

How dare he take his life for granted? How dare he stand here in a mansion full of awards and act like nothing mattered! "You want me to take

it?” I said. “I’ll take it! And I’ll spray-paint it bubblegum pink and write my name on it in red Sharpie with little hearts! And then I’ll tell everybody I won an Academy Award for a rom-com so rom-commy it was called *The Rom-Commers!*”

I wanted so badly to finish with “I quit!” right then—to charge out, Oscar and all, and never come back.

But I guess I wanted a chance to write with Charlie more. Because, instead, I just dropped that Oscar back in with the others. And then I walked myself out Charlie’s back door without saying another word.

★ ★ ★

CHARLIE GAVE ME a minute—several, actually—to cool off. And then he quietly came outside, too, and stood beside me as I stared at his pool.

Finally, I said, “You’ve got a pool with a high diving board?” My tone was calmer now but still had insult-to-injury undertones.

“Yeah,” Charlie said. “It came with the house.”

“A *high dive* came with the house? Do they even make those anymore?”

“It’s vintage,” Charlie said. “This house used to belong to Esther Williams.”

I turned to face him. “*America’s mermaid*, Esther Williams?”

Charlie looked surprised that I knew who she was. “Yes. She lived here. In the fifties. And she put in that pool. You know who she is?”

“You could say that. I’ve seen every single one of her movies.”

“For your mermaid rom-com?”

Ugh. Now I remembered: He’d read it. He’d read it *and called it aerosol cheese*. He didn’t deserve to live in Esther Williams’s house.

But stepping outside was restorative. It was a warm day—and sunny.

Maybe we needed a change of activity.

“We should go for a swim,” I said next.

But Charlie shook his head. “I don’t swim.”

I turned. “Never?”

He shrugged, like he was about to tell me something fundamentally boring. “I had a near-drowning accident as a kid.”

“Why do you own a house with a pool if you don’t swim?”

“My wife wanted it. *Ex-wife*.”

“Did she swim?”

“She didn’t swim, either, to be honest.”

“Why did she want a pool, then?”

“She liked the idea of swimming,” Charlie said. “But she didn’t like to mess up her hair.”

I thought about my own hair—the fact that it was pre-messed up. Maybe that was a type of blessing.

I could feel Charlie looking at my curls, pulled back, as ever, in their little pom-pom ponytail. “I bet you don’t have that problem,” he said.

Was he complimenting me or insulting me?

“Swimming is my sport,” I said, moving on. “I swim every day at home. It’s the one thing I do for myself. Every morning at five A.M.—”

“Ouch,” Charlie said.

“—I swim sixty laps.”

“Every morning?” Charlie challenged, like I had to be exaggerating.

“Yep.”

“Even on weekends?”

“Yep.”

“Isn’t it tiring?”

I shrugged. “Life is tiring. Swimming is just swimming.”

Then I turned to head back inside.

“Where are you going?” Charlie asked.

I turned back. “To get my suit.”

“You brought a swimsuit?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“To swim.”

“How did you know I’d have a pool?”

“I didn’t even know I’d be staying here! But I knew I’d find a pool somewhere.”

“You can’t swim here,” Charlie said.

“Why not?”

“This pool’s off-limits.”

“Off-limits?” I asked.

“It’s not for swimming,” Charlie said.

“Your *pool* is not for swimming?”

“It hasn’t been cleaned in a while.”

I looked down at the water, sparkling like a mountain spring.

Charlie added, “And it’s not safe. You know? It’s not built to code. That diving board’s a death trap.”

“I think *Esther Williams* knew how to build a high dive,” I said.

“She was a professional.”

I sighed and put my hand on my hip. “Are you telling me I can’t ever swim in your pool?”

“Pretty much.”

“But why?”

“Because.”

Nothing about this conversation made sense. But the idea of me in that pool clearly made Charlie unhappy. And maybe I was still mad about his whole Velveeta-themed comedy routine back in the bathroom, but the more unhappy I made him, the happier I felt.

I started walking toward the diving board at the far end.

“What are you doing?” Charlie called after me.

“I’m checking out the high dive.”

“I already told you—no swimming.”

“I’m not going to swim,” I said. “I’m just going to bounce a little.”

“You’re going to *bounce a little*?” Charlie demanded, breaking into a jog to come after me.

But by the time he got close, I was halfway up the ladder to the platform. He grabbed at my ankles—but I kicked his hands away, and he stayed on the ground.

Once I’d passed his grasp, he said, “Come down from there. That’s off-limits, too.”

“I was a competitive swimmer in high school. I’m practically amphibious. Chill out.”

Charlie watched as I reached the top and then walked out to the end, fully clothed, sneakers on. “Come down,” he ordered.

But what could I say? That familiar bounce of the springboard always felt so good. Also, I really didn’t like being ordered around.

Instead, I positioned myself backward at the edge, just my toes, heels hovering over the water, and got a nice rhythm going.

Charlie was halfway up the ladder, craning around the rungs in horror. “Please don’t do that!”

“Why is this stressing you out? This doesn’t concern you.”

“Yes it does. Because if you fall in ... I can’t save you.”

“I’m not going to fall in.”

“You don’t know that. That board hasn’t been touched in a decade. It could snap like a toothpick.”

“It’s not going to snap,” I said. “And even if it did, I wouldn’t need you to save me.”

“Not if you hit the water wrong. I’ve researched this. If you hit from high enough at the wrong angle you can pop your internal organs.”

I kept bouncing. “Is that the technical term? ‘Popped organs’?”

“And *I don’t swim*,” Charlie went on. “So if that happens, I’ll just have to stand here and watch you drown. And I really don’t feel like doing that today.”

“If I pop my internal organs,” I said, “then I’ve got bigger problems than you not knowing how to swim.”

“I know *how* to swim,” Charlie corrected. “I just don’t swim.”

“Same difference.”

“Come down,” Charlie commanded.

“No.”

“It’s my pool.”

“They’re my internal organs.”

And that’s when I saw Charlie’s face adjust itself a little. “Fine,” he said with a shrug, like he’d made a sudden decision not to care anymore.

“Fine?” I asked.

“Whatever,” Charlie said now, almost like he’d shifted into a new character, and he started to walk back toward the house.

I didn’t know if it was because I’d read everything this man had ever written, or watched every YouTube interview in existence multiple times, or studied the structure of all his scripts like a Shakespearean scholar might obsess over iambic pentameter ... but bouncing there on Charlie’s high dive in all my clothes, looking down at his suddenly totally disinterested face ... an unbidden insight about Charlie Yates started rapping at my consciousness:

When Charlie Yates is scared of something, he pretends it doesn't matter.

I flipped back: He did it in his writing. His heroes were always unflappable, always totally unfazed by life's horrors—guys who'd show up for the battle, encounter the beleaguered company they were there to reinforce, be ordered by the captain to retreat, and say, "Retreat? Hell, we just got here."

His heroes were guys who got *cooler* in the face of fear.

He wrote guys like that, but he also *was* a guy like that. With reporters, for example, in interviews. If they got too close to a topic he didn't want to touch—his mother, for instance, asking for details about his parents splitting up when he was eight—he'd tilt his head with a half smile and say something totally blasé, like, "I must have been a pretty big pain in the ass."

He'd done it with his shrug just now when he'd talked about almost drowning, too, and he'd done it at brunch by looking at his sock when he casually mentioned *soft tissue sarcoma*.

Nonchalance as a weapon. Disinterest as a weapon. Aerosol cheese as a weapon.

Was I right? Had I just figured out something vital about Charlie Yates?

"Hey, Charlie!" I called.

He turned back, squinting up at me.

Right there, at the edge of the high dive, I sat down. Then I dangled my legs off the edge.

Charlie stared up, horrified. "What are you doing?"

"I'm sitting down."

"I can see that."

"I just want to ask you a question."

Charlie sighed. "What?"

I gave it a beat, and then I asked, "Why did your wife leave you?"

It was a hell of a question. The second I asked it, though, I knew I was right. His face shifted to extra indifferent. Then came the shrug. Then he said, "I guess she just got sick of my shit." Then he added, "And I don't blame her, either."

There it was.

Charlie Yates had a tell.

The things that he acted like mattered the least? Those were the things that mattered the most.

What would happen if I pushed past the nonchalance?

“Tell me about the day she left,” I said.

“No,” Charlie said. Then, “Why?”

“Because I’m not coming down until you do.”

“Maybe I should just walk away and leave you there.”

“Maybe you should. But then I will definitely do a swan dive off this thing. And maybe pop an organ or two.”

Charlie squinted up to study me. Then he finally asked, “It has to be that? I have to tell you about that? There’s no other way you’ll come down?”

It felt so mean, but I had to know if I was right. Slowly, like there was no room for negotiation, I nodded.

Charlie sighed.

Then he looked around like he was checking for escape routes.

Then he frowned, and looked up at this crazy woman swinging her feet from his diving board ... and then his face went extra nonchalant. He glanced off to the side like he was waiting for a bus or something, and then, in a tone like no one on earth had ever uttered a more boring statement, he said, “My wife left me on the day I found out I had cancer.”

Fourteen

THAT WAS HOW I decided to stay.

More specifically, that was how I decided to try to convert Charlie Yates into a fan of rom-coms. A tall order. Maybe too tall. But that little epiphany about him changed everything.

Suddenly, I was curious about him in a new way.

Curious enough to stay.

I could give up anytime, after all. I might as well hang out for a bit in Esther Williams's mansion.

And so I climbed back down that high-dive ladder and followed Charlie to the dining table and sat across from him to start negotiations in earnest—from the new power stance of being happy to go home, but also willing to stay, if he'd give me enough of what I wanted.

Here's what I wanted: to do the screenplay right.

And seeing how aggressively indifferent Charlie was to the whole project ... given his tell, I suspected that maybe, possibly, in some deep-down place he'd never admit to, he might want that, too.

And maybe—just maybe—in that same deep-down place we might find something more interesting and complex than just disdain. Something rich and nourishing enough to cure his yips. And jump-start my career in the process.

It was worth looking, anyway.

Was I dreaming too big? I knew too much about Charlie now to be overly optimistic. But I had a shot, at least. I'd just have to take it slow.

On the walk from the pool to the dining table, I'd decided on some long-term goals:

- Take Charlie on a journey of de-snobification about rom-coms.
- Write a kick-ass screenplay together.
- Watch it get made into a great movie that would bring laughs and hope to folks all over the world.
- Not be a failed writer anymore.

And how do you reach your long-terms goals? With short-term goals:

- Don't get fired.
- Micromanage Sylvie from afar so well that my father survived the duration.
- Completely overhaul that appalling screenplay from the ground up without giving Charlie a chance to stop me.

Easy.

★ ★ ★

IF YOU'LL ALLOW me to skip to the good part: The negotiations went well.

I told Charlie—with the confidence of someone who was ready to just *walk right out*—that I would stay only if he agreed to: *one*, change his deeply uninformed and insulting unhappy ending into a proper, joyful, satisfying one, and *two*, actually research the crazy stuff he'd thrown into that script—the skinny-dipping, the line dancing, the kiss.

“Fine,” Charlie said.

“Fine to what?”

“Fine to everything.”

“Fine to changing the ending?”

“You've converted me on that.”

“And fine to doing all that research?”

“Yes. Fine.”

“You realize that means actually *doing* those things. With me. For research.”

“I’m not going skinny-dipping with you,” Charlie said then, like this whole thing might be an elaborate plan to get him naked.

“I’m not going skinny-dipping with you, either,” I said.

“Good,” Charlie said, a little too disinterestedly.

“And you don’t have to swim,” I said, “but you do have to get in the pool.”

Charlie held still, like he was mentally scanning for an out.

“How long has it been?” I asked.

“Since I went swimming?”

“Since you got into any body of water at all. A bath, even?”

Charlie looked up, like he was calculating. Then he said, “Twenty-eight years. Give or take.”

I nodded, like *Exactly*. “You can’t write about being in the water if you can’t remember what it’s like.”

Charlie’s jaw tensed as he considered that.

I pushed on. “Rom-coms are about falling in love.”

“I know that.”

“And falling in love is about having feelings.”

“I don’t disagree.”

“And you can’t write about feelings—or help the audience feel them—if you can’t feel them yourself.” Note that I did not add, *You’re also going to have to rethink your toxic and unexamined views that love doesn’t exist.*

“I feel feelings,” Charlie said.

“Great,” I said. “Then this’ll be easy.”

In the end, Charlie agreed to all my demands—except for one. One that seemed like such a no-brainer I threw it in only at the end.

“And we have to change the title,” I said.

But that was where he drew his line.

“No can do,” Charlie said. “The title stays. That’s the mistress’s one requirement.”

I didn’t fight him. For now.

Logan had his lawyer draw up a simple, pretty standard contract—one that just basically said all I had to do was turn in a “finished work.” It didn’t

have to be good—it just had to be finished.

“What happens if we don’t finish?” I asked Logan.

“If you don’t finish for any reason—if you leave, or he fires you—then it’s a breach of contract.”

“And I don’t get paid?”

“And you don’t get paid.”

“That seems extreme. Given that he doesn’t even want me here.”

“It’s pretty standard, honestly. What’s extreme is Charlie.”

“So I don’t get paid until we’re finished—and if we don’t finish, I don’t get paid at all.”

Logan nodded. “Pretty simple.”

“Simple?” I asked.

“Not easy, but simple,” Logan said, with a shrug. “Just don’t break the contract.”

I wouldn’t be breaking it, that was for sure.

We had six weeks to write this thing. Could I *not get fired* for six weeks?

We were about to find out.

★ ★ ★

THAT NIGHT, I should have slept peacefully, nestled under Charlie’s ex-wife’s decorator’s million-thread-count bedsheets in his palatial guest quarters, with the new plan negotiated to my satisfaction.

But instead I woke up at two A.M.—shaken awake by my mattress.

Was it an earthquake? That was a thing in LA, wasn’t it? But what did you do in an earthquake? Get away from the windows? Hide in a doorway? Run outside—flapping your arms like a flightless bird?

I had no idea.

I pulled on my cotton printed robe over my T-shirt-and-yoga-pants PJs—stopping for some flip-flops in case we had to dash to safety—and stumbled at top speed toward Charlie’s wing of the house to wake him up and ask him.

But halfway there, in the dining room, there was Charlie. Awake. *Working*, from the looks of it. Not panicked at all—until he saw me, and then he closed his laptop a little too fast.

Okay. *That* got my attention.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Charlie said.

“Your vibe is suspicious,” I said.

“What are *you* doing?” Charlie asked then, bringing me back to the earthquake.

What *was* I doing? “I have a question.”

“What is it?”

“Are we—having an earthquake?”

“Having an earthquake?” Charlie echoed.

I looked around. “I woke up, and everything was ... shaking.”

But Charlie frowned. “No earthquake,” he said.

“No earthquake at all?” Maybe he was just used to them?

Charlie shook his head. “Nope. Nothing.”

How mortifying. “Got it,” I said, pointing at him like I was in on the joke. Though what that joke might be, I had no idea.

At that moment, I caught my reflection in the dark window—totally disheveled, robe askew, hair untied and undulating wild like some kind of angry jellyfish. My flip-flops, I now realized, were on the wrong feet.

“Maybe you dreamed it?” Charlie asked then.

We could go with that. “Sure,” I said. “Maybe.”

But that’s when I heard a little trilling sound and looked down to notice for the first time a barn-shaped plush object sitting on the table next to Charlie’s laptop.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“What’s what?” Charlie asked.

But I was walking closer now, following the trilling sound. And as I made it around to the barn doors, I saw a creature just inside. Looking out at me. A fuzzy little fluffball.

“What is that?” I asked.

“It’s a guinea pig,” Charlie said, like *Of course*.

But I wasn’t sure. “Is it?”

My cousin had a guinea pig when we were growing up. This critter looked ... different. And by *different*, I mean it looked like a dust mop. White and yellow with fur sprouting up and billowing down past its paws. Mostly fur, in fact. With two glossy brown eyes.

I stared at it.

“He’s a Peruvian long-hair,” Charlie said. “His name is Cuthbert.”

“Is he yours?” I asked, in a baffled tone that might also have been saying, *What is an adult man doing with a pet guinea pig named Cuthbert?*

“Kind of,” Charlie said. “Not really. Not anymore. He’s my wife’s. Ex-wife’s. She rescued him and his brother back when we were still married—kind of without asking me. Then she took them when she moved out. Though we technically have joint custody.”

I looked back and forth between Charlie and the guinea pig. “Has he been here this whole time?”

Charlie shook his head. “I’m pig-sitting. Just while my wife’s out of town.”

“Ex-wife,” I corrected. Then I said, “Why is he in a tiny little fabric barn?”

“They like to hang out in little hidey tents. My ex has a whole collection. A circus tent, an igloo, a beehive. Even one shaped like an Airstream.”

“But—doesn’t he escape?”

Charlie shook his head. “He’ll stay like that for hours.”

“Did you say he has a brother?” I asked, looking around.

“His brother just died,” Charlie said. “So he’s pretty depressed. They’re herd animals.”

I looked at Cuthbert, and Cuthbert looked at me.

“Can I pick him up?” I asked.

Charlie shook his head. “They don’t like the feeling of being lifted up,” he said. “It makes them feel like they’ve been snatched by an eagle.”

“How do you know how guinea pigs feel? About anything?”

That’s when Charlie Yates, divorced custody-sharing guinea pig sitter, said, “I know what I know.”

This was definitely a shocker. Charlie Yates with a pet.

But Charlie wasn’t shocked at all.

He watched me watch Cuthbert for a minute, and then said in a stage whisper, “It’s two in the morning. Go back to bed.”

★ ★ ★

BUT I DIDN'T go back to bed.

Instead, I went back to my room, studied my bride-of-Frankenstein reflection in the mirror, and then tried to de-humiliate myself by putting my hair up, and brushing my teeth, and retying my robe—attempting to retroactively make myself presentable.

Somewhere in all that, I realized that the earthquake was still happening.

Everything was still shaking, I mean.

Except it wasn't everything. It was just *me*.

More specifically, it was my heart. Doing that crazy new thumping thing again. I put my hand over it and felt it hurl itself against my palm over and over, like I'd trapped some magical beast in there—and it desperately wanted to get out.

Without much hesitation, I shuffled back to where Charlie was. Flip-flops on the correct feet this time.

Charlie stood this time as I showed up again—as if *one* random middle-of-the-night interruption was tolerable, but *two* was cause for alarm. He was in sweatpants, I now noticed, and a T-shirt with a Stephen King quote on it that said, THE ROAD TO HELL IS PAVED WITH ADVERBS.

Were those his pajamas? It was such an odd sight. But did I think he slept in an Oxford and corduroys?

"I'm so sorry," I said, making my way closer to him. "Can I ask you another question?"

"Sure," Charlie said.

I closed the distance between us—very glad now that I'd brushed my teeth and tied back my hair—and I looked up into Charlie's curious face.

I put my hand over my chest like I was about to start the Pledge of Allegiance. "Can you just put your hand here like this?"

Charlie nodded, and put his hand over his own heart.

"Not on yourself," I said. "On me." I clapped my hand against my chest to show him where.

Charlie's eyes widened a little. "You want me to put my hand..." His eyes dipped down. "There?"

"This is for medical purposes," I said. "I think I'm having a problem."

"Is it a problem we can use *words* for?"

“Yes,” I said. “But I also need a physical assessment. If you don’t mind.”

He did mind. He clearly minded.

But he did it anyway, bringing his hand toward me with the energy of someone who has to reach down to fish something out of a garbage disposal.

He slowed as he got closer, like he might chicken out, so I grabbed his hand, pulled it the rest of the way, pressed his palm against my chest, and held it there.

“Can you feel that?” I asked.

Charlie looked a little panicked. “Feel what?” he asked.

“You tell me.”

Charlie held still for a minute, his gaze resting on our two hands. Then he said, “Are we talking about your heart beating?”

Now we were getting somewhere. “Yes,” I said. “Exactly. This is what woke me up.”

“Your heart beating is what woke you up?”

I nodded, like *How crazy is that?* “It was beating so hard, it was shaking the bed.”

“That’s why you thought there was an earthquake?”

“But it’s still going. You feel it. Right?”

“I feel ... something.”

“Do you think I’m having a heart attack?”

“I don’t know much about heart attacks.”

“Can I feel yours?” I asked.

“Feel my what?”

“Your heart,” I said as I reached out to press my free hand against his chest.

Charlie blinked, like he couldn’t quite catch up to what was happening.

“Your heart’s beating, too,” I said.

“Yeah, well,” he said. “They do that.”

“But I mean, thumping. Pretty hard. Like mine is.” We couldn’t both be having heart attacks, could we? That seemed statistically ... improbable. Could we have been—I don’t know—*poisoned*? Or something?

“It’s thumping now,” Charlie agreed. “But it wasn’t. Before.”

“Before?” I asked.

“Before you came in here like this in your robe with all your ... hair, and—and put my hand on your chest. It wasn’t. Thumping.”

Oh.

“Just so you know,” he added. “For medical purposes.”

“I see,” I said.

We should probably stop touching each other’s chests now. That much was clear. But I couldn’t figure out how to make the transition.

“Could you google it for me?” I finally asked.

“Google it?”

“The symptoms of a heart attack. For women.”

I felt his lungs deflate with relief as he broke away to get his laptop. “Yes, of course.”

“I’m not allowed to google medical symptoms,” I said, to fill the silence as Charlie scrolled.

“Not allowed?” he asked, still scrolling.

“Back when my dad first got hurt, I developed a habit of frantically googling every tiny symptom that showed up. It kind of turned into a vicious cycle of hypochondria.”

Charlie looked over. “Hypochondria? But your dad really was hurt.”

“But I’d go down these rabbit holes. His shoulder would be aching, and I’d google ‘painful shoulder’ and two hours later I’d be convinced he had Parkinson’s. And MS. And shoulder cancer.”

“That’s not your fault,” Charlie said, going back to scrolling. “That’s just because you’re a writer.”

I hadn’t thought of that. “It is?”

“Believing in things that aren’t real? Making something out of nothing? Connecting dots that don’t need *or want* to be connected? That’s what all the best writers do.”

It felt weirdly good to hear Charlie Yates lump me in with *all the best writers*.

And it felt weirdly—unexpectedly—even better to know that I had just made his heart beat faster.

That’s when Charlie stood up with my diagnosis. “The internet doesn’t think you’re having a heart attack,” he said.

“It doesn’t?”

“It doesn’t. But it does think you’re having anxiety.”

“Ha!” I burst out. Then, at Charlie’s tilted head: “This is the least anxious I’ve been in ten years.”

No argument there.

“I’m a good person to talk to about this,” Charlie added, “because I coped with a lot of anxiety when I was sick.”

I frowned like he was bananas. “I don’t have anxiety. I just worry all the time.”

Charlie gave it a second and then said, “I’m just gonna let those words echo around the room.”

Fine. I saw his point. “But only because I have actual things to worry about.”

Charlie waved me off. “We don’t have to label it.”

“Thank you.”

“The point is,” he said, “the internet wants you to take slow breaths through your nose—five-point-five seconds in, and five-point-five seconds out.”

“Five-point-five?” I confirmed. “That’s what WebMD said to do?”

Charlie nodded.

“Can’t fight the internet, I guess.”

“True,” Charlie said. “Now start breathing.”

And then, after he’d watched me do a few breaths, he said, “The internet also wants you to ask me what I was hiding on my laptop when you walked in.”

That was unexpected. I frowned at Charlie. “You don’t have to—I don’t really—” Then, “Do you *want* me to ask you that?”

Charlie nodded. “I suspect you’ll like it.”

I suspected I wouldn’t. But okay. “What were you hiding?”

I edged around the dining table, and when he pulled a chair next to his and patted it, I sat beside him. Then he opened up his laptop and maximized the screen.

I peeked through squinted eyes, in case I needed to shut them again fast. But it was just an illustrated image of a backyard.

“What is this?” I asked.

“It’s a video game,” Charlie said, “where you power-wash things.”

Then he pressed some keys, and a jet of water started spraying in first-person point of view, as if he were holding a power hose.

Charlie turned the hose onto a dreary gray sidewalk, and as the water moved along, it left a bright clean section behind. The hose also made a deep, brown-noise shushing sound, and once all the dirt was gone, the game made a very satisfying *ding* sound and gave him some points.

“*This* is what you were doing when I walked in?”

“Yep.”

“You were playing a video game where you virtually power-wash a sidewalk?”

“Not just a sidewalk,” Charlie said, starting on the patio beside it. “The entire yard.”

“But...” I started. And then all I could think to say next was, “Why?”

Charlie nodded, like *Fair question*. Then he said, “Because it’s fun. And Cuthbert likes it.”

Charlie started up again so I could see how soothed the guinea pig was by it. But glancing between the screen and the pig, I could see no discernible difference. Cuthbert was sitting there like a fluffball before Charlie started power-washing the side of that virtual doghouse, and he was sitting there like the exact same fluffball after.

“Are you sure it’s Cuthbert who finds this comforting?” I asked.

“Does it matter?” Charlie asked, staying focused.

And before I knew it, I was hooked, too. I watched Charlie finish the patio, and then do the gutters, and then the wall behind the hedge, and then all the patio furniture ... until deep into the wee morning hours—without noticing the time pass. I listened to the shush of the spray, and I pointed out when he missed a spot, and I sat companionably mesmerized beside the world’s most beloved screenwriter while he finished off the whole rest of the yard and then leveled up.

That’s when Charlie turned and took in the sight of both Cuthbert and me watching him.

“Good news,” Charlie said then.

“What?” I asked.

“I think Cuthbert likes you.”

Fifteen

WHEN I FINALLY made it back to bed, my earthquake had settled, and I slept hard—until I woke up again, at five, with a start.

And a feeling of dread that my dad might not be okay.

I know that's a pretty nonspecific worry: a vague sense that someone might not be okay. But I'd done a lot of worrying about my dad over the past ten years. It was like my heart had been cramped into a tight, worried ball all this time, and now—even with nothing particular to worry about—it couldn't unclamp itself.

I had officially handed my worrying duties over to Sylvie. I knew she was competent and mature. I believed she could handle things. Mostly. Sort of. I just didn't know how to not be the person who always worried about my dad.

Maybe that's what my heart was up to these days with the thudding. Trying to untie its own knots.

Or maybe I was just dying.

Maybe I should let myself google it, just this once.

That's what I was wondering—in bed, in the dark, at five A.M.—when my phone rang. And it was Sylvie—FaceTiming me.

“I knew it!” I said, sitting up in bed. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing's wrong,” Sylvie said. There she was, inside the rectangle of my phone, her calm vibe validating her statement. She was in our room,

sitting on my bottom bunk, with her hair pulled neatly back like she'd just washed her face.

My hair, in contrast—I couldn't help but notice from my own smaller FaceTime rectangle—had wiggled its way out of the ponytail I'd gone to bed in, and the alarm on my face plus the wildness of my curls gave me the look of someone who'd just stuck her finger in an electric socket.

"Nothing's wrong?" I asked. "Then why are you calling?"

"To tell you that."

"People don't call to say nothing's wrong," I said.

"*Normal* people don't call to say that," Sylvie said, "but this is me and you."

She had a point. "But it's five in the morning."

"It's *seven* in the morning here."

Another good point. Sylvie was sounding more reasonable by the second.

"Can we *not* FaceTime at this hour?" I asked next. "I am not camera ready."

"But I want to see you!"

Before I could respond, another face squeezed into Sylvie's frame. The face of her boyfriend, Salvador, with his ponytail mussed like he'd just woken up, too.

"I think you look great," Salvador said.

I'd FaceTimed with Salvador several times. They'd been dating since their sophomore year. "Hi, Salvador," I said.

"Hey, sis," Salvador said.

Then, to Sylvie: "Salvador is there? At our place?"

Sylvie took a minute to wave as Salvador left to go take a shower. Then she said, "He's staying with us."

I didn't want to feel alarmed. I liked Salvador. He was a great boyfriend for Sylvie—mature and thoughtful and supportive. He'd carved her a pumpkin last Halloween with teeth that spelled out I LOVE YOU.

But boyfriends sleeping over at our apartment was not part of the plan.

"I thought he was spending the summer in Brazil with his grandma," I said.

"Change of plans."

"Since when?"

“Since he got into grad school here.”

“He’s starting grad school?”

“Not till August. But he’s taking prerequisites this summer.”

And then, with dread, I asked a question I could already *sense* the answer to. “He’s just staying there a day or two, right? Until he finds a place of his own?”

“Umm,” Sylvie said.

“He can’t stay with you there long term,” I said.

“The point is, we have an empty bed,” Sylvie said.

“That’s my bed,” I said.

“Yes. And as soon as you come back—whenever that is—we’ll kick him right out.”

But she was missing the point. I wasn’t worried about my bed. “Sylvie, he can’t be there,” I said.

“Why not? Dad is cool with it. He loves Salvador.”

“We *all* love Salvador,” I said. “That’s not the issue.”

“Then what *is* the issue?”

“He’s a distraction,” I said.

“He’s not a distraction,” Sylvie said. “He’s helping.”

“He’s too handsome to help.”

“Can I just remind you that the master’s he’s getting is to become a physician’s assistant? He’s a medical professional.”

“Not yet he isn’t.”

“The point is, he’s a good guy to have around.”

“Sylvie,” I said, aware that I had no real power beyond a stern voice, “Salvador can’t stay there. Dad is a full-time, round-the-clock, twenty-four seven job. You can’t *be in love* and do it right at the same time. Don’t you think if there were a way to do that I would’ve figured it out by now?”

“Fine,” Sylvie said.

I hadn’t expected her to give in that fast. “Fine?”

“Sure—fine. We’ll find Salvador another place. I mean, he’s been doing morning yoga with Dad, and folding all the laundry, and taking Dad down to help Mrs. Otsuka with the community garden, but it’s fine. Also he’s been babysitting Mrs. Otsuka’s grandson Kenji, who’s visiting for the summer and kind of shy—and *adorable*. But it’s no biggie. I’ll just kick Salvador out.”

“Good,” I said. Guilt trip not accepted.

“Fine,” Sylvie said.

“Great,” I said.

“Perfect,” Sylvie said.

Then, after a pause, to change the subject, she said, “I liked meeting your writer in real life yesterday.”

“FaceTime is not real life,” I said.

“It’s close enough.”

“And he’s not my writer, either,” I said.

But Sylvie ignored that. “He’s cute!” she said. “You should marry him and have little writer babies.”

“Sylvie!”

“They could smoke little pipes and wear tweed jackets and talk about metaphors.”

“Sylvie—”

“I just liked his vibe, you know? And there’s something about his face. A warmth. The way his eyes crinkle up at the corners.”

“Sylvie, we are coworkers. Please do not mentally matchmake us.”

“Too late,” Sylvie said.

Now Sylvie lay back on her pillow. “Tell me about Hollywood,” she said then.

“It’s been...” I said, finally settling on, “a journey.”

Then I filled her in on everything: Charlie not knowing I was coming, then not hiring me, then *taking notes* while I ripped his screenplay to shreds, then reading my stuff and accidentally liking it, then hiring me—but not exactly for real. I took her through every twist and turn, ending with the grand climax of shaking Jack Stapleton’s hand and then holding my own hand up to the phone for proof. Sylvie frowned and gasped and cheered about all of it—and when we got to the hand part, she said, “You need to get a palm tattoo that says ‘Jack Stapleton was here.’”

“Great idea,” I said.

Next question: “What’s it like living in Charlie Yates’s mansion?”

I thought about it. “Quiet,” I said. “Kind of lonely, maybe? I’m not used to all this space. And luxury. It’s like a hotel. I had to put on a background podcast just to fall asleep.”

“Tell me you’re not homesick.”

“I think I am a little,” I said. “No one sings show tunes here. Or plays the zither. Or reads out loud like a human audiobook to entertain me while I make dinner. The kitchen in this house looks like it’s never even been touched. It’s like a model kitchen in a showroom. It’s not...” I searched for a good word, and ultimately selected “fun.”

“Maybe you’ll just have to make your own fun,” Sylvie said.

“Writing the screenplay will be fun,” I said—but then I stopped. “Or a nightmare. I’m not actually sure which.”

“How could writing a script with your favorite writer be a nightmare?” Sylvie asked.

“Well,” I said, “it’s looking like he’s one of those guys who doesn’t believe in love.”

“Ugh,” Sylvie said.

“And based on everything I can gather, before we even have a shot at writing something decent, I have to force him to take line-dancing lessons, cure him of his water phobia, and convince him that human connection actually matters.”

“Piece of cake,” Sylvie said.

“All,” I added, “without his consent.”

“You were born to do this,” Sylvie said.

“Was I?”

“Just Sylvie him,” Sylvie said.

“*Sylvie* him?”

“Just act like you’re in charge. Like you always did with me.”

“That’s different,” I said. “With you, I *was* in charge.”

“But how did you get me to do all the things I didn’t want to do?”

“I just proceeded like there was no other option.”

“Exactly.”

“He’s not a kid, Sylvie. He’s a full-grown adult. I can’t just Jedi-mind-trick him into doing whatever I want.”

“Everybody’s a kid deep down,” Sylvie said. “Use your teacher voice. I bet you’ll be surprised.”

★ ★ ★

AND SO I decided to give it a try.

Why not? I didn't have any better ideas.

By the time I'd hung up with Sylvie, it was six A.M. I put on my swimsuit and tied up my hair—and then I switched into teacher mode, strode confidently toward Charlie's bedroom, and knocked loudly on his door.

Charlie opened it a few minutes later with one elastic cuff of his sweatpants up above his calf, his T-shirt on backward, his hair pointing up and out every direction, and one eye closed like a sea captain.

"What the hell are you wearing?" were the first words out of his mouth as he looked me up and down. "You're practically naked."

Teacher voice. Teacher voice. "I am not naked. I'm wearing a swimsuit. To go swimming."

"Under it, I mean. You're naked."

"That's not news. Everyone is naked under everything."

"I'm not complaining," Charlie said. "That's just—a lot of arms and legs."

"What am I supposed to wear? An eighteenth-century bathing costume?"

"Maybe just go back to bed? Problem solved."

"You can't be this skittish about a one-piece Speedo."

"I haven't been around a live woman in a long time."

"That's not my fault."

"But it is your fault that you're standing here right now."

"It's time to get up."

"Why?"

Confidence! Teacher voice! Sylvie him! "Because that's the schedule. I swim first thing in the morning."

"I'm still trying to figure out what that has to do with me."

"You're coming with me."

At that, Charlie made a break for the bed. But I caught him by the arm and dragged him out—through the living room, out the French doors, to the edge of the pool.

"What are we doing, again?" Charlie asked, like I might've already explained it.

"Exposure therapy."

Charlie eyed the pool. "I'm not getting in there," he said.

“Of course not,” I said. “*I* am. You’re just going to keep me company and make a note of the fact that I am not drowning.”

“What if you *are* drowning?”

“I’m not going to dignify that with a response,” I said. Then I patted the lip of the pool at the top of the steps. “Sit right here and put your feet on the top step.”

Charlie looked at me, then the pool, then me, then the pool. “Just the feet?”

“Just the feet.”

“And I’m doing this why?”

“Because you can’t spend your whole life afraid of swimming pools.”

“Afraid of *water*,” Charlie corrected. “Not swimming pools.”

“And also because you agreed to. When we negotiated our terms.”

“I did?”

Teacher voice. “You did.”

Charlie sighed. And then, to my utter surprise, he just ... *did it*. Pulled up his sweatpants, then stepped in. Maybe he was too sleepy to fight me.

“Sheesh, that’s cold,” he said, sitting down anyway.

“You’ll get used to it,” I said.

“I haven’t even had coffee yet,” Charlie said. “I haven’t even brushed my teeth.”

“After,” I said, not wanting to give him a chance to escape.

“I haven’t even peed!”

“Permission to pee in the bushes,” I said—and then I dove in before he could muster more objections.

Here’s the thing: it worked. He stayed. He sat there the whole time, feet in the water, while I did sixty laps freestyle.

By the time I was done, he had two eyes open—but not much else had changed.

When I got out, I said, “How was it?”

There was that nonchalant face again. “How was what?”

Must’ve been stressful. “Spending time in the pool.”

“I wouldn’t call that ‘in the pool.’”

“I bet your feet would disagree.”

Charlie looked at me like I was totally insane.

“Anyway,” I said, clapping the shoulder of his T-shirt with my wet hand. “Good job.”

Sixteen

AND SO, THAT first week, we settled into a routine: swimming first thing, then showering, then coffee, then sitting across from each other at Charlie's dining table with our laptops back to back, surrounded by our various favorite writing accoutrements and good-luck charms—trying to ignore each other but not entirely succeeding. We found a sharing feature in Final Draft, which neither of us had ever used, and we forced ourselves to get acquainted with it.

My hope at the start was that we could just work quietly, like we were both used to, and send changes and questions back and forth via the internet without ever having to adjust our normal way of doing things. But of course that's not how it happened.

I mean, there was a guinea pig on the dining table.

Every morning, like a ritual, Charlie brought Cuthbert out of his cage and loaded him into the barn, where he'd settle in and spend the day alternating between lounging and napping.

"I think I'm going to find the rodent distracting," I said, the first time it happened.

"Don't call him a rodent."

I frowned. "Isn't he ... a rodent?"

"The point is, he's going through a rough time right now."

But maybe Cuthbert was a nice mediator. Writing in the same room at the same time with another person was, for the record, not my normal way of doing things.

Not Charlie's, either. "I usually do this in complete human isolation," he said, at one point. "I always think that should be the title of my autobiography: *Alone Too Long*."

I nodded, like *Nice*. Then, wondering if all writers had a throwdown autobiography title, I went ahead and shared: "Mine is *Someday You'll Thank Me*."

Another human in the room. While I tried to write. So weird.

It felt a smidge vulnerable, for example, to pull out my lucky sweatshirt—which had a hood that made your head look like a big strawberry with little green leaves appliquéd at the top. When Charlie first saw it, he said, "That's—wow. That's really something."

"It's my lucky hoodie," I said, hoping he wouldn't point out that it hadn't brought me much luck. Then, quieter, I added: "My mom gave it to me."

"No judgment," Charlie said. "I have a lucky handkerchief myself."

I looked at his pocket, which was empty.

"For awards shows," Charlie explained, and touched the spot where I was looking. "My wife gave it to me before my first-ever nomination—and then I won. So I wore it again the next time, and I won again. And now I'm trapped. Every time I wear it, I win. So I have to keep wearing it."

"That's a powerful handkerchief," I said.

"Right?" Charlie agreed. "After she left, I thought I should get a different one—but I don't want to break my streak."

Other secret writerly behaviors that got exposed as we worked together: I feathered the corners of pages while reading. Charlie absentmindedly tapped his heel on the floor. Charlie wrote exclusively with Bic ballpoints, chewing on the caps and blowing through them, which—*who knew?*—makes a whistling noise.

Charlie turned out to be a blue-ink person, while I was exclusively black. FYI for nonwriters: blue versus black ink is an essential identity issue. Much like Coke versus Pepsi, or the Beatles versus the Stones, or college-ruled notebooks versus regular. You can be one kind of person or the other, but not both.

I couldn't help but judge Charlie a little—and I could feel him judging me right back.

I'll also add that he was a fine-point-pen person, while I had joined the bold-tip community years ago and never looked back.

One-point-six millimeters or bust, baby.

The idea that we might do all our writing in a sleek, virtual, digital, nonhuman way was not sustainable, looking back. It wasn't long before the dining table was covered with crumpled paper, marked-up printed scenes, snack wrappers, soda cans, spiral notebooks, water bottles, not one but two staplers, pencil pouches, a box of Kleenex, a printer attached to a long extension cord, various ChapSticks, highlighters, and old coffee cups—both paper and ceramic.

I personally liked it better that way. Visible signs of progress.

I got the feeling Charlie did, too.

And even though we both put headphones on, we pulled them off to talk almost constantly. I got to where I could sense Charlie pulling out his earbuds to ask a question or read a piece of dialogue. And can I just say? He had to really watch his pacing when he read to me out loud, because I'd get so caught up, if he slowed down too much, I'd jump in with what I imagined the next line should be.

And then Charlie would look up, and say, "No. But maybe that's better."

And then I'd wonder if I'd fallen asleep at the table or something. Because no writer ever thinks that what somebody else wrote *might be better*.

Astonishing.

The routine just evolved. We'd work all morning, and then sometime in the early afternoon, when we were both losing steam, I'd walk to the neighborhood coffee shop—just two blocks away, if you knew where to go—for a change of scenery and a little me time, and he'd field meetings and phone calls from a roster of Hollywood people that read like the invite list to the Oscars.

For the most part, we were surprisingly companionable. For a guy who didn't care at all about the project we were working on, he seemed to be enjoying himself quite well—enough to make me wonder if there might be

an overlap in the separate-circle Venn diagram of our lives: the joy of messing around with words.

Maybe the project didn't matter.

Maybe the act of writing was so fun he couldn't help but enjoy himself.

I was enjoying myself, too, to be honest.

Being away from home was not as hard as I'd feared.

To no one's surprise, Salvador never managed to find his own place, and he and Sylvie FaceTimed me in their pajamas first thing every morning with the Dad Report: daily sodium totals, updates on refills, visual proof of color and sticker charts faithfully filled in. Salvador was taking my dad to the gym down the street twice a week for weight training, and he'd perfected a low-sodium artisan bread. Salvador also played the guitar—which delighted my dad—so the three of them were having nightly after-dinner jam sessions with Sylvie on vocals and tambourine.

I was forced to admit, as the days went on and the good reports kept coming, that two people doing all that caretaking was probably better than just one. More fun, too, apparently. The three of them even ventured to the farmers market one Saturday, bought a whole basket of organic veggies, and made pasta primavera from scratch.

Sylvie sent a group selfie of them slurping linguine at our dining table.

Knowing that helped me worry less. A little. And the less I worried, the more I realized how good it felt not to be worried. It was astonishing how quickly I adjusted to my new life of luxury in Charlie Yates's mansion. I was fine, they were fine—everybody was fine.

How hard is it to adjust to that?

The one thing I missed at first was cooking. Charlie was—how to put it?—not a foodie.

My second day there, I got the shock of a lifetime when I opened up his fridge—and there was nothing inside it but ... luncheon meats.

Yep. Bags of shredded luncheon meats from the grocery deli.

I leaned against the open fridge door. "What's going on in here?" I asked, when Charlie looked over.

"In the fridge?" he asked.

"There's no food," I said.

"There is," Charlie said, walking a little closer. "There's pastrami. And corned beef. And Black Forest ham." He peered at the back. "And those are

cocktail olives.”

“You don’t have anything else? That’s it?”

“There’s some beer in the door.”

“But...” I just kept staring at all that meat. “What do you do with it?”

“I just eat it,” Charlie said matter-of-factly, like that was a thing people did.

“Straight?” I asked. “Like, just ... handfuls of meat?”

“*Forkfuls*,” Charlie corrected, like he was offended. “Though, I do mostly eat them right out of the bag, if I’m honest.”

“Charlie, this can’t be healthy for you.”

“It’s fine,” Charlie said. “The Maasai people of Kenya lived in perfect health for centuries on almost nothing but meat.”

“But not *pastrami*, right?”

“Fair enough.”

A pause.

“I also have cereal, if you want some,” Charlie offered, nodding toward a small pantry in the corner.

“You don’t have milk, though,” I said, checking the fridge again. “What do you put on it?”

“Water,” Charlie said. Like that made any sense.

I tilted my head. And then, trying to sound like his luncheon-meats-based lifestyle was just as valid as any other, I asked, “Do you mind if I—get some other foods?”

“Not at all,” Charlie said.

“I cook a lot at home...” I said then, still trying to normalize it.

Charlie nodded.

“So I’ll probably make dinner for myself in the evenings.”

Charlie shrugged, like that was reasonable.

“And I’m happy to share,” I added. “Unless you prefer—your ... piles of meat.”

And so that became another part of the routine—I started making dinner every night. And every night, Charlie hovered around, watching me, like *a person making dinner* was a total novelty. And he’d act all skeptical, adding commentary like “Don’t cut yourself,” and “I threw up after eating parsley once,” and “Are you crying right now, or is that just the onions?”

Then, when the food was actually ready, he'd set two places at the kitchen table by the window, and fill up glasses of ice water, and say yes to everything I offered, and then chow down—making little happy noises as he chewed and swallowed and served himself seconds—like a person who ...

Well, like a person who'd forgotten about the joy of the old-timey human ritual of *dinner*.

“You're an amazing cook!” Charlie would exclaim while chewing, over and over, like he just couldn't believe it.

It felt good to amaze him.

It felt good to do something that was so *appreciated*. My dad and Sylvie appreciated me, of course, and we all agreed that I could cook. But they were too used to me by now. The thrill was gone.

For Charlie, every bite was a novelty. Brand-new, and astonishing, and pure, gustatory bliss.

He took to accompanying me to the grocery store in the evenings, helping me find the things the recipes needed. And also purchasing little culinary delights for Cuthbert, like butter lettuce and bell peppers, to supplement his hay and pea pellets.

This Charlie was so different from the Charlie who I'd met on the first day—the one who'd so dismissively called me an amateur.

This Charlie was helpful. And eager. And grateful. And just—fun to pal around with. It got me thinking about how nice it was to do an ordinary thing like go to the market with someone and buy food for a meal you were about to eat together. The companionship and pleasant anticipation. The easy camaraderie. The incidental conversations about anything and nothing: songs on the speaker system, or the psychology of wine labels, or the social significance of Twinkies.

And can I just add? While I got dinner started, Charlie applied himself lovably and earnestly to the eternal project of trying to get Cuthbert to eat something.

Easier said than done. “He's off his food since losing his brother,” Charlie explained early on. “Guinea pigs are very sensitive.”

I looked at Cuthbert, perched under that unruly mop of fur like someone had dropped a toupee on him.

“He seems okay to me,” I said.

“He should be devouring this bell pepper,” Charlie said, and then we’d both look at the hunk of bell pepper sitting untouched in front of Cuthbert’s nose.

And then I’d casually glance over time and again to see Charlie cutting the bell pepper into a star shape, playing Pachelbel’s Canon through his phone speaker to get Cuthbert into an eating mood, and changing out plates because apparently the texture of Limoges versus Fiestaware can impact a guinea pig’s gustatory experience.

“Sensitive” didn’t start to cover it.

Sometimes I’d eavesdrop on their conversations. “I know you miss him, buddy,” Charlie would say. “It’s hard. I get it.”

On a really bad day, Charlie might slice a carrot into thin sheets on a mandoline and form it into an origami-style carrot flower. Or hum “Bohemian Rhapsody” a cappella while he waited for the nibbling to start. Or both.

“You’ve got a great voice,” I told Charlie.

Charlie shrugged. “He loves Freddie Mercury.”

I don’t want to sound insensitive, but at one point, I said to Charlie, “Won’t he eat if he gets hungry enough?”

Charlie shook his head, like *Common misconception*. “If he goes too long without eating, his health can start to fall apart. And the thing about guinea pigs is that they’re prey animals. So when they get sick, they hide it. Because the weakest of the herd are always the first to get picked off.”

“Cuthbert,” I said, in a tone of affectionate reprimand, “no one in this room is getting picked off.”

We both gazed at Cuthbert. Then Charlie said, “I don’t think he’s buying it.”

★ ★ ★

ONE NIGHT, WHEN I’d been there for more than two weeks and was feeling very at home, Charlie and I had just come back from another trip to the market when we heard the high beeps of Charlie’s front door disarming and then a woman’s voice calling, “Charlie?”

I’d been handing Charlie cans of crushed tomatoes to stack on a high shelf in the pantry—but at the moment her voice sounded, Charlie grabbed

me by the arm and yanked me in with him.

Then he pulled the door closed until the tongue caught in the latch.

“What are you—” I started.

But Charlie shook his head like crazy and lifted a finger to his lips.

It was not a large space. We were corralled tightly by shelves of food, with only room for about an inch between our bodies. Which made me suddenly both exquisitely aware of the electromagnetic energy around Charlie’s body ... and aware that Charlie was also suddenly aware of mine.

I shifted to a whisper. “Why are we hiding in the pantry?”

“That’s Margaux,” Charlie whispered back.

“Who’s Margaux?”

“My ex-wife.”

Of course. Margaux. They’d been quite the power couple for a brief moment in time, the year when his movie *Forty Miles to Hell* and her documentary *Women Aren’t Funny*—which was just an hour and a half of women stand-up comics being hilarious on the topic of that very thing—were both sweeping up prizes on the awards circuit.

I’d read a few features on her, in fact, over the years. My big takeaway—and please don’t be alarmed—was that she, and these are her words, “didn’t like fiction.”

I’ll give you a minute.

This lady, who was married to one of the most celebrated writers of fiction in the world, *didn’t like fiction*. If I recall, she’d said that she “just couldn’t get into fictional stories” because they “weren’t real.” One of the articles, in fact, ended with her rhetorical question: “It’s all made up. It’s all fake. How can it possibly matter?”

So, yeah. That marriage was probably doomed from Day One.

I don’t know if they make red flags bigger than that.

Anyway—now she was here. In Charlie’s house.

“What’s she doing here?” I asked. Weren’t they divorced?

“She’s here to pick up Cuthbert,” Charlie answered.

“She just comes into your house?” I asked.

“She still has the code.”

That raised more questions than it answered, but okay. “I thought you guys weren’t close.”

“We’re not.”

Next, Charlie heard a sound that I didn't, and he stood up straighter, eyes wide, like *Oh, god, she's coming this way.*

Sure enough, as I fell silent, we could hear her. She must have been talking to someone on the phone. "His car's here," she was saying, "but he's not answering."

Then she called again: "Charlie? Are you home?"

I looked at Charlie like *Maybe we should just turn ourselves in.*

And he looked at me like *Never surrender.*

I heard the ex-wife drop her keys on the kitchen counter and then wander off to another part of the house.

As her voice receded, I whispered, "Maybe we should make a break for it."

"To where?" Charlie whispered back. "She'll be back any second."

"Text her! Tell her you've gone out."

"Just randomly text her my whereabouts?" Charlie said. "I *never* text her."

"Are you saying she'll get a text from you and think, *That's funny. He never texts me. He must be hiding in the pantry?*"

"I'm just saying it's weird."

"This whole thing is weird!"

Charlie capitulated and reached into his pocket for his phone. But after digging around a minute, he shook his head.

"What?"

"I don't have it with me."

That's when we heard the ex coming back. "He's definitely avoiding me," she was saying. Then, a pause. "But it's strange. The place is a disaster. There's stuff all over the dining table—like maybe he's writing again. And dishes in the sink. And—ugh—a box of Twinkies. How's he supposed to stay healthy if he eats like a middle schooler?" Another pause. Then, "This doesn't even look like his stuff, honestly. There's a *bouquet of flowers* on the kitchen table."

Charlie and I held each other's gazes, and our breath—united in the act of hiding—as we listened to the sound of her gathering her keys off the counter, and then her footsteps walking away.

The second we heard the front door slam behind her, we burst out of the pantry at the same time like bucking broncos out of the gate, moving too

fast for anyone's good, and I'm not exactly sure how it happened, but somehow I managed to get caught in an overturned grocery sack on the floor just outside the door—one foot entangled in it, I think, and the other stepping *on* it?—just as Charlie turned back to ask me some question that will now be forever lost to history.

That's what I remember: Charlie turning around, just as I felt a sensation like someone had tied my shoelaces together—and I went jolting forward into his chest, knocking him backward.

And then we hit the ground.

Pretty hard, too.

I felt my knee knock the slate tiles like a hammer just as Charlie landed with a series of *oofs* and smacks.

And then he was rolling onto his side and pressing his hand on his tailbone, growling in misery.

I'd landed with my face in his armpit, so I hoisted up and over to get a look at his face.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

Charlie's face was red now, and his jugular was kind of pooching out, and all he could say was "Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuck that hurts."

"Oh, god. I'm so sorry! Did you land on your tailbone? I did that once in Girl Scouts. This floor is not soft, either, by the way. No give there at all." I smacked the floor for confirmation. "Do you think you broke it?"

"The floor?" Charlie croaked, like I was crazy.

"Your tailbone!" I said, like he was crazier. "Should I take you to the hospital? What do they even do for a broken tailbone—right? They can't exactly put it in a cast."

Charlie had gone back to growling.

"Ice," I decided then, and I scrambled over to the freezer, returning with a bag of frozen veggies and pressing it to Charlie's butt.

"What are you doing?" Charlie asked.

"Just—move your hand," I said.

"Are you trying to put frozen peas on my ass?"

"It's *julienned mixed vegetables*," I said, like *I beg your pardon*.

"Get them off," he said, grabbing at the bag.

"We have to ice the area!" I insisted.

"Emma—cut it out. I'm fine."

“You don’t sound fine.”

By that point, we were basically wrestling for access to Charlie’s butt, and I tried to snatch the bag away just as he got the bright idea to roll over to block me. The next thing I knew, we managed to rip the bag, scatter julienned vegetables across the kitchen floor, and, in the scuffle, I guess my elbow gave way because I collapsed on top of him—again.

In the wake of it, we waited a second—face-to-face, gazes locked, breaths intermingling, and expressions perfectly matched, like *Did that just happen—again?*

Then Charlie broke the silence. “You did all this on purpose, didn’t you?”

On purpose? “No, I—” I looked around. “I tripped on a grocery bag.”

I pointed at it, for evidence, but Charlie didn’t even look.

I was still square on top of him, my arm pinned under his side. Charlie closed his eyes. Then he opened them and looked straight into mine. “Or maybe you just wanted to prove that there’s nothing romantic about people falling on top of each other.”

I blinked. “I don’t have to prove that. It’s just empirically true. It doesn’t need proving.”

But as soon as I said it, in that instant, I became aware of all the physical contact we’d just muddled through with each other—and how I was still lying flat on top of him. And then I suddenly thought about what my body must feel like to him, draped over his own like that. And how, other than maybe games of Twister or freak skiing accidents, there weren’t too many situations in day-to-day life where people just lay on top of each other for no reason.

In any other situation, it would be a very different situation.

And once I’d thought *that*, I couldn’t unthink it.

And if I was reading the room right—Charlie, suddenly, wasn’t *not* thinking about that, either.

Questions started twinkling in my brain like stars. Did the room just go very still? Did my scraped knee just stop stinging? Was having our faces this close together causing some kind of chemical reaction in my body? And, maybe most important: Did Charlie Yates have the thickest, lushest eyelashes I’d ever seen on a man?

How had I never noticed those before?

Wait—

What was I thinking about?

Had I really been insisting all this time that there was nothing even remotely romantic about two people randomly falling on top of each other?

Because this was *working*.

Had I just proved myself wrong? In front of the Great Charlie Yates?

This was not going to end well.

And then my weird heart took that moment to start doing its thumping thing again.

“Is that you or me?” I asked.

“What?” Charlie asked.

“The thumping.”

“I’m not thumping,” Charlie said.

I put my hand on his chest. “Yes, you are.” Then, out of fairness, I shifted to my own. “But I’m thumping worse.”

Why did this keep happening?

For a second, I got caught up in the scientific question of it all—but then I looked down to see Charlie shaking his head at me like I was the most exasperating person on earth. “Emma?” he said.

“What?” I asked, like it might be something important.

“Can you get off me now?”

Oh, god! His broken tailbone! What was I *doing*?

But before I could scramble up, from across the kitchen, we heard a sound that pinned us in place a little longer. A woman’s voice like an irritated schoolmarm’s, demanding: “What the hell is happening in here?”

And in the one second that followed—that felt like ten hours—I didn’t even need to see the wry *Thank you so much for this moment* expression on Charlie’s face to know that this was, of course, his wife.

Sorry—*ex-wife*.

★ ★ ★

AS CHARLIE AND I scrambled up—Charlie notably *not* clutching his tailbone now—she watched us, arms crossed, like she’d just discovered a pair of naughty teenagers.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

I knew her face already, of course. I'd seen her in many red-carpet photos with Charlie—always dressed in black and wearing superhuman heels even though she was tall to begin with, the two of them smiling like nothing, not even an insurmountable height difference, could scare them. With her straight dark hair slicked habitually back into a low bun, she was always then, as she was right this minute, tall and sophisticated and sleek as a mink.

The opposite of me, is what I'm saying.

I wasn't short—but I definitely wasn't tall. And you'd probably come up with a thousand words for me before you landed on "sophisticated." And if there was one thing I'd never, ever be, it was "sleek." My curls would make sure of that.

"We were just"—Charlie glanced at me—"doing research."

She crossed her arms and looked at the scatter of vegetables. "Is that what they call it?"

What was that expression on Charlie's face? I hadn't seen it before. Was he embarrassed? Guilty? Something was going on between these two that I couldn't read.

The ex-wife looked at me and touched her collarbone. "I'm Margaux," she said, like that should explain everything.

"I'm—" I started.

But Charlie jumped in. "She's just a writer. Here to do some—writing."

Huh. That smarted a little. *Just a writer.*

Margaux tilted her head, like *If you say so*. Then: "We were supposed to have dinner when I came to get Cuthbert tonight, Charlie. Did you forget?"

"Of course not," Charlie said.

Um, I thought. *We* were supposed to have dinner tonight. What was Charlie talking about?

"We were just finishing up," Charlie explained to Margaux, like we'd been hard at work doing something important.

Margaux nodded, with a vibe like *I'll allow it*.

Then she looked Charlie up and down. "We're already late," she said then, "so..."

"Right," Charlie said. Then he looked at me like he'd forgotten I was there. "You probably need to get going. I know your car had that ... that ...

flat tire. Why don't you just take my Blazer and bring it back for our—working day tomorrow?"

I guess we were hiding the whole *living together* thing from the ex.

"I can just get an Uber," I said.

"No," Charlie jumped in—weirdly eager to get rid of me. "The Blazer's faster."

"Okay, then," I said.

Why was I feeling so rejected? Charlie had a right to go out to dinner with his ex-wife. It wasn't like we had real plans. We were just eating together by default. And he certainly didn't have to tell her about every detail of his life—and maybe I was one of those details he didn't feel like getting into. That was fine. That was fair. And technically, he hadn't even said anything wrong about me.

I *was* just a writer.

That's exactly what I was.

So why was *me getting kicked out* so that Charlie could hit the town with this tall, slender, straight-haired woman with a perfect pedicure and matching manicure disappointing me so hard?

Oh, well. I could puzzle over that later.

They were waiting for me to go.

"I'll just leave most of my writing stuff here," I said, trying not to overact my part. "Since we'll be doing more writing again when I return—tomorrow." This was terrible dialogue.

"The keys are on the front hall table," Charlie said.

I knew that. But I said, "Ah," like that was news. Then I gave a little vague wave in their direction, the way I imagined someone who was *not* suddenly the girl not chosen might, and said, "See ya later!" with such forced cheer that I accidentally added a tinge of madwoman.

I walked out to the car before realizing that I'd forgotten my purse—so I U-turned back into the house, and I was seconds from snagging it off the dining table when I heard Charlie and the terrifying Margaux, still in the kitchen. Talking about me.

And get this: Margaux was pressing a bag of frozen corn niblets to Charlie's tailbone.

And Charlie wasn't resisting.

Guess he was fine with his wife's frozen vegetables.

Ex-wife's.

"That was definitely more than research," Margaux was saying, a hint of teasing in her voice.

"What would you know about research?" Charlie said.

"You don't have to be a writer to read that situation."

Charlie put his hand over the frozen corn to take over, and he stepped back to rest against the counter. "Don't read the situation, okay? Don't read anything."

"I approve. She's enchanting. I love that crazy hair."

"Don't call her hair crazy."

"The fact that you're so grouchy is just proving me right."

"You don't get to be right—or wrong—about any of this, Margaux."

"Look, I'm just saying you clearly like her."

"I don't *like* her!" Charlie said.

But Margaux's voice dripped with teasing. "Are you sure about that?"

"She fell on me, okay? It happens! Sometimes objects in space collide with each other!"

"Do they ever," Margaux said, just *luxuriating* in innuendo, clearly enjoying this.

"I didn't do anything!" Charlie said. Clearly not.

"I support you," Margaux said. "It's past time you released the ghost of our relationship."

"There's no ghost—and there's nothing to support," Charlie insisted, like he'd never heard anything more ridiculous. "She's nobody. Just a writer. A failed writer, in fact. A person with a tragic past who Logan asked me to work with. Briefly. As a personal favor. She has no job, no money, and absolutely nothing going for her. She's leaving as soon as we're done, and I'll never see her again. So don't turn this into a whole thing, okay?"

I held very still.

The words were bad, but the tone of voice was worse.

So eye-rolly. So devoid of warmth. So authentically dismissive. As if there were truly no topic less interesting and less important than me.

There was a good writing lesson in there—that being dismissed is worse than being scorned. In a different frame of mind, I might have paused to think about it: Of course *not mattering* is worse. It means you didn't even

register. It means you're not even worth getting mad about. It means you're *literally nobody*.

Was this how Charlie really felt about me?

I thought about Charlie's tell—how good he was at pretending the things that mattered didn't matter.

I felt tempted to hope he was pretending.

But the thing was, he just didn't seem like he was.

More important: What was more likely—that I was important to Charlie? Or that I would engage in complex emotional gymnastics to wrongly convince myself that I was? Connecting dots that “didn't need, or want, to be connected.”

This wasn't the first time he'd said these things, after all. He'd voiced all of this to Logan when I first got here. Nothing here should be a surprise. But that was before he'd read my stuff and then asked me to stay. Before we'd worked together. And lived together. Before he'd revived me from fainting, and googled my heart attack, and used the word *dazzling*. Had nothing changed for him? Had nothing shifted at all?

Just a writer. A failed writer.

If he was acting, he'd missed his calling.

One thing was for sure. I wasn't going to wait around here to find out.

Seventeen

THE NEXT DAY was, of all things, my birthday.

I woke up feeling deeply homesick.

I'd driven around until midnight the night before, in that hostile way you embrace your independence after you've been rejected: *Fine. Whatever. I never cared, anyway.*

I cranked the music up too loud. I left the windows down. I burned all Charlie's gas and did not refill the tank. I kept my phone turned off so that if Charlie wanted to find me, I was plainly unavailable.

I didn't turn it back on until I was crawling into bed.

And then only to check for texts from Sylvie, or my dad, or anyone I actually cared about. Though I did happen to tangentially notice in the process that nothing had come in from Charlie, either.

Not that I was looking.

It was all so odd. Charlie's saying those things should not have smarted so much. Three weeks ago, I didn't even know this guy. My life had been fine then, and—for the record—it was still fine now. In the big picture: *better than fine*, in fact. My dad was in good health. Sylvie was performing her duties respectably. I was in LA living a personal dream I never thought I'd get anywhere close to.

I was KILL N IT, as Logan's license plate would say.

Whatever *it* was.

I should be grateful! I should be delighted! I should be happy!

But as the morning light squinted in at me, I was the opposite of those things.

If I'd been home, I would've woken up early and gone for a refreshing swim by myself. Then I would've come home and made canned-biscuit doughnuts—our family's standard birthday-morning fare—with homemade chocolate glaze and sprinkles. And my dad would play some nutty rendition of "Happy Birthday" on some random assortment of kooky instruments, and then we'd sing it together so we could do some crazy, improvised harmonies.

Like we did every year.

Not a big thing. Just a pleasant little way to start off a birthday—one I'd never fully appreciated until I was all alone in Charlie Yates's mansion.

All alone and *just a writer*.

Anyway, I wasn't going to wake up Charlie for pool time this morning. He'd actually made a lot of progress—moving down to sit on deeper and deeper steps every time, until he shifted to standing, and then walking. That's what he was up to now in the mornings—walking waist deep, in the shallow end, edge to edge, back and forth the whole time until I was done with my laps.

I didn't even mind him being there. Most days.

But not today. Today, my present to myself was a morning swim on my own. If he could go on a date alone with his terrifying ex, I could certainly take a morning swim alone without his bothering me. No grumpy, pool-phobic writers with cattywampus morning hair allowed.

★ ★ ★

ON MY WAY to the pool, the first thing I noticed was that Cuthbert's barn was not on the kitchen table. Margaux had indeed taken him back. Which made the day feel even sadder. It had been so weird at first that Charlie had a guinea pig at all—but now it felt weirder that he didn't.

Amazing how your perspective can shift.

The second thing I noticed was that Charlie wasn't sleeping in, like I'd assumed.

He was already awake.

And dressed.

And in the kitchen ... cooking something.

He had an apron on. And he was heating frying oil on the stove. And there was powdered sugar spilled all over the floor like he'd ripped the bag open with oven mitts on.

"What are you doing?" I asked, walking nearer.

That's when Charlie turned in my direction, and I realized he was holding a cylinder of canned biscuits.

You know what I mean by *canned biscuits*, right? They're not really in a can. They're wrapped in a cardboard tube that you pop open with the side of a spoon. You've seen those? I'm only asking because I always thought everybody had seen those—until I beheld Charlie: tube of biscuits in one hand ... and *a can opener* in the other.

A can opener—impaled in the metal lid of the biscuits.

When Charlie saw me staring, he held up the whole situation with both hands and looked at it, too. Then he nodded, like he was in full agreement. "Who designed these things, right?"

I tilted my head, like I just could not be seeing what I was seeing.

I mean, the instructions were *printed on the label*.

"I can get the tops off," Charlie went on, like he was truly befuddled, "but then I can't get the biscuits out." He turned to gesture to a counter's worth of biscuit corpses that he'd stabbed with forks and crushed with tongs—lying mutilated where they'd been slain.

"Is that biscuit dough on the pendant lamp?" I asked.

Charlie looked up somberly. "I had a leverage problem."

"It's a bigger problem than just leverage."

"There's gotta be a better way, right?" Charlie said—like a person who had no idea that, *yes*, there was, already, in fact, absolutely a far better way.

Reminder: this man had been on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. Twice.

He was frowning at the biscuit tube. "Maybe I should get an axe from the garage?"

"What's happening right now?" I asked.

Charlie paused. "I'm making you breakfast."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because it's your birthday," Charlie said.

"How do you even know that?"

“Your dad emailed me.”

“How does my dad have your email?” Nobody had Charlie’s email. *I* barely had it.

“He got it from Logan,” Charlie said.

“But—why?”

“To send me this recipe. For canned-biscuit doughnuts.”

Wait. Had my dad guilt-tripped Charlie Yates into making birthday doughnuts for me? Didn’t he know that I was *just a writer*?

I shook my head. “Oh, god. I’m sorry,” I said.

Charlie frowned as I stepped closer. “Sorry about what?”

“My dumb dad,” I said, my throat feeling a bit tight. “He shouldn’t have done that.”

“Shouldn’t have—?”

“Guilt-tripped you into making me doughnuts,” I said, taking the canister out of Charlie’s hand. “My dad just—loves me,” I said, “and he assumes everybody else does, too.”

I chucked the biscuits into the trash can. A three-pointer from across the kitchen.

“Hey!” Charlie said. “I’m doing something here!”

“Don’t do anything,” I said. “I’m shutting this down.”

“But I bought three bags of powdered sugar,” Charlie said, like that was some kind of counterpoint.

I was already walking away.

“Where are you going?” Charlie asked.

Um—I was in a swimsuit. Walking toward a swimming pool. But okay. “I’m going swimming,” I said. “Alone.” Then I gave the kitchen a quick glance, and said, “Just leave all this. I’ll clean it up when I’m done.”

★ ★ ★

CHARLIE DID NOT “just leave all this.”

When I came back in from my swim, bundled in my terry cloth robe, my hair towel-dried and pulled back in a damp bun, and far less refreshed than I wanted to be—the kitchen was *worse*: sprinkles all over the counter, cocoa powder everywhere like the container had exploded, open biscuit

cans and hunks of dough on every surface, and the remains of smoke in the air, as if Charlie might have set a thing or two on fire.

But on the little kitchen table, sure enough, there was a tidy plate of semi-successful doughnuts. With candles in them.

Mission accomplished.

When Charlie saw me walk in, he grabbed a box of matches and bounded over to light the candles—but I stopped him.

“Please tell me you didn’t fish those biscuits out of the trash can.”

“Nah,” Charlie said, stepping over to the fridge and opening the door. “I panic-bought, like, thirty tubes.”

Sure enough, lining the fridge shelves were enough cylinders of canned biscuits to keep us fed on doughnuts for possibly ever.

“Didn’t I tell you not to do this?” I asked.

Charlie paused and studied my face. “You don’t seem very happy. What’s the story? Do you secretly hate doughnuts but you can’t bring yourself to tell your dad and now it’s become a whole thing?”

“I love doughnuts,” I said, shaking my head.

“Is it *birthdays* you hate, then?”

“I love birthdays, too.”

“So what’s going on?”

“I just...” What to even say? “I just think we should get to work.”

Oh, god—were my eyes tearing up? Over Charlie Yates calling me “nobody”? That couldn’t be right. I had to be homesick. Or tired. Or maybe feeling the emotions that we all feel when we turn another year older and confront the relentless march of time and the inevitability of death. Right? This had to be just normal birthday weeping. Didn’t everybody cry involuntarily on their birthday?

I needed to go pull myself together.

I turned to walk away—but Charlie grabbed my wrist and stopped me.

“Hey—” he said.

I looked up to try to drain the tears back.

“Is this about—” he started, but then he changed his mind. “This couldn’t possibly be about ... meeting Margaux yesterday. Could it?”

“I think I’m just homesick,” I said, trying to gaslight us both.

But Charlie kept going, just in case. “Because that wasn’t a date or anything. That was a meeting. It was a check-in. She forces me to do them

every few months because she regrets how she left me—not *that* she left, but the timing. And she doesn't trust me to take care of myself and not get sick again—which is fair, actually. She shows up and drags me out and we sit at a table and she grills me to assess how well—if at all—I'm taking care of myself. She pulls out spreadsheets of health statistics and confirms that I've made all my checkup appointments. And none of it's about me. It's about her. Her guilt—and trying to find a way to feel better about her choices. I hate going. I dread going. My ex-wife and the fact that I got sick are the two last things I want to think about.

“But guess what?” Charlie went on. “Yesterday, for the first time, I didn't dread it.” He shook his head in wonder, like he was telling me something impossible. Then he said, “I completely forgot it was even happening. I was just hanging out with you, strolling around the grocery store and teasing you about never having eaten Frito pie—and then we were putting away canned goods in the pantry in that ordinary comfortable way, and I was just ... I don't know. Happy? I think I was happy. Then she showed up like the buzzkill of all buzzkills. *That's* why I yanked you into the pantry. *That's* why I hid. And when she came back in and found us, and I pretended like you were just some random coworker—it was only because I didn't want how I feel about you and how I feel about her to get mixed up with each other. Does that make sense?”

I wasn't sure. Did it?

Charlie nodded, like not getting it was valid. “I don't know how to explain it. But one thing's for sure. I'm not making you birthday doughnuts because your dad guilt-tripped me. I'm making you doughnuts because I'm grateful that you're here—for whatever you being here is doing to my life. And I genuinely want you to have a happy birthday.”

Ugh. One of those unwelcome tears of mine spilled over.

And Charlie, like a reflex, reached up and wiped it away. Like you might do for someone you cared about.

“Also,” Charlie said, “I burned a hundred canned biscuits before I got the hang of this, so these little guys really are miracles.”

I gave Charlie the wobbly smile that happens when you try to shift emotional gears.

Something was making me feel shaky. Maybe that I wasn't just a writer to him. Or that he was glad to have me in his life. Or that I was doing things

to him—just like he was doing things to me.

“You have to eat one,” Charlie said then, putting his arm around my shoulders and turning us both toward the waiting doughnuts. “So many canned biscuits gave their lives for this moment.”

And now I really smiled. Despite myself.

I sat down at the table. And I let Charlie sing me an off-key, caterwauling version of “Happy Birthday.” And I blew out the candles. But it wasn’t until I took a polite bite of one of the doughnuts that I really felt better ...

Because that doughnut ... was *good*.

“Charlie, this is perfect,” I said, mouth full, shaking my head in disbelief.

I wasn’t lying. The outside was crispy, and the inside was fluffy. It was the perfect mix of doughy and oily, soft and crunchy, sugary sweet and bready.

It was like taking a literal bite of comfort.

“Is it?” Charlie asked.

“How did you do this?” I asked.

Charlie looked just as surprised as I was. “Your dad said it was easy,” he said, “and after five hundred tries, it was.”

“You nailed it,” I said, taking another bite.

Charlie sat up straight and watched me chew, like he was very proud of himself. “This is the first thing I’ve ever cooked from scratch.”

I tilted my head. “That’s not what ‘from scratch’ means, but I’ll let it go.”

“Now you have to cook these for me on my birthday,” Charlie said.

“When’s your birthday?” I asked.

“October,” Charlie said.

I shrugged. “I’ll be long gone by then.”

Charlie nodded, like that was a good point. He looked me over for a moment, and then, like he was making a suggestion, he said, “I’ll be cured of cancer before you go.”

I tried to understand that. “You’ll be cured of cancer? Before I go?”

“A few days before you leave is the five-year anniversary of my last treatment,” Charlie said. “And that’s when I can officially call myself cured.”

“Oh,” I said, nodding. I hadn’t realized he wasn’t already cured. Five years is a long time.

“Better than a birthday, really,” Charlie went on. “Every time I go for a checkup, I keep expecting bad news—that it metastasized, that it’s back somehow. But I keep on being fine. It seemed impossible that I was sick then, and now it seems impossible that I’m well. That’s what Margaux was here for—to make sure I didn’t miss that final checkup.”

“You won’t, right?”

He shook his head. “I won’t. I’m ready. I’ve been thinking about how to mark it. Some people take vacations. Or plant a tree. One guy I know got a tattoo. I was wondering if I should do something really wild. Go cliff diving. Or bull running. Or shark-cage snorkeling.”

“That’s a lot of choices.”

He met my eyes. “But now I wonder if maybe I just want to hang out here. And eat homemade doughnuts.”

Were we still talking about doughnuts? Something about the way he was looking at me made it feel like he meant something else.

“Oh, god!” Charlie said then. “I forgot the whipped cream!”

He grabbed a can of Reddi-wip out of the fridge and shook it as he walked back to the table. “Your dad said this was essential.”

He popped the top off and brought the nose of the can over the plate of doughnuts.

“That’s not what that’s for,” I said.

Charlie paused and looked up.

I stood and took the can from him. Then I squirted a dollop of whipped cream on the back of my hand and set the can down. “It’s for doing this,” I said, and I brought the hand with the whipped cream up just as I smacked down on my wrist with the other hand. The dollop of cream launched up in the air, and I opened my mouth, positioned myself under it, and caught it as it came back down.

For a second, I swear, Charlie had a look on his face like I was the most amazing woman who ever lived.

And I kind of agreed.

Then he grabbed the can off the table and copied what I’d just done—launching the whipped cream just fine, but overshooting it so it blopped on his ceiling instead of coming back down.

“Softer,” I said.

He tried again and this time got a nice arc, but the cream missed his mouth and hit his cheek instead. He wiped it off and licked his finger.

“Keep your eyes on the puff at all times,” I said, sounding like a coach. “*Be the dollop!*”

Charlie tried again and missed again—hitting the floor, the counter, the tabletop, and somehow the window before getting close to his face again.

I did a few more demonstrations: “It’s all in the timing,” I said. “As soon as it launches, you need to be moving into position. Head back! No fear! You’re a champion!”

When Charlie finally got one, he was so excited, he hugged me. And then he offered to squirt some straight out of the can into my mouth.

An offer I graciously accepted.

We were sticky, the floor was sticky—even the ceiling was sticky. But we’d clean it all up later. Life felt suddenly impossibly bright—the kind of bright that feels like it’s going to stay that way forever.

It was my first birthday away from home. Charlie had made me doughnuts because *he was grateful I was here*. He was almost officially cured, and we were covered in whipped cream, and these doughnuts were so much more delicious than anything cooked by a man who thought you opened canned biscuits with a can opener had any right to be. And right there, in a moment of ebullience, with no sense at all that I might ever regret it, I said, “Why don’t we make a whole meal out of it?”

“A whole meal out of what?”

“Your cancer-free-iversary. Why don’t I make a big, fancy dinner to celebrate, and we can eat doughnuts for dessert?”

Charlie picked up his half-eaten doughnut for a toast. “It’s a date,” he said.

So I clinked my half-eaten doughnut to his, and said, “It’s a date.”

Eighteen

AFTER FOUR WEEKS of living with Charlie, day in and day out, I had to make it official: We were good together.

Good at writing together, and good at living together.

Given how everything started, I might've expected the whole rewrite process to be endless clashing, and arguing, and insulting each other. Charlie could so easily have chosen to be offended by some nobody from nowhere trying to tell him what to do. He could have dug in his heels and fought me on every single thing.

And yet—he didn't.

I had armored up for a field of battle—and somehow we wound up in a field of daisies instead. Having a picnic.

I worked out many theories to explain it. Maybe Charlie really did understand that his version of the script was bad. Maybe he truly had liked my honesty when I ripped it to shreds. Maybe he was telling the truth when he said he liked my writing. Maybe his ego wasn't as immutable as everyone claimed.

Maybe I'd fallen madly in love with his writing for a reason. Maybe we shared some kind of essential linguistic rhythm, or some comic outlook, or some moral framework that made it easier to be friends than enemies.

Or maybe we both just really loved writing—in the exact same way.

Maybe writing was our shared love language.

There's a joke that writers "don't like to write—they like having *written*," and that must be true of some writers. But it wasn't true of me or Charlie. We liked the process. We liked the words. We liked playing around and trying things. We liked syllables and consonants and syncopation. We liked deciding between em dashes and commas. We liked figuring out where the story needed to go and then helping it get there.

It wasn't easy, exactly—but it was fun.

It was work that felt like play.

Which is all to say that one day, when we should have been writing, Charlie wanted to take me to a farmers market off Mulholland Drive instead—and swore that we would definitely get work done by talking about the story nonstop there and back, and I believed it. That was absolutely what we would do.

Except we never made it to the farmers market.

The road was windy and breathtaking—built in the 1920s as a scenic drive and strung with the hidden driveways of world-famous people—and Charlie seemed more than happy to tool along it with the windows down and his shades on and the radio blasting 1970s music.

I, in contrast, was terrified.

I didn't know who designed this road—but it must have been before the invention of safety. *Or road shoulders*. This thing slalomed back and forth between a steep valley on one side and a low canyon on the other, and only at the most lethal points were there any guardrails. Over and over, we rounded curves where the edge of the road kissed hundred-foot drop-offs. I started gasping and wincing.

As we weaved along the two skinny lanes, I found myself getting motion sick. The ups, the downs, the side-to-sides. It was a lot for my inner ear to handle. Charlie drove it fearlessly—one hand slouching on the wheel—like he drove it all the time.

Which I guess he did.

When Charlie happened to glance over and see me bracing against the door in fear, he said, "You don't like the Hollywood Hills?"

"I come from a town that's elevation zero," I said.

"Don't worry. I drive here all the time."

"Why aren't there more ... guardrails?"

At the question, Charlie scanned the road and noticed its very weak guardrail game for what seemed like the first time.

“People are just careful, I guess,” he said in a tone like *Huh*.

We’d curve one way and get a glimpse of a deep ravine to the right, then curve the other way and see the LA valley on the left. Through it all, I braced against the dashboard and jammed my foot over and over on a nonexistent brake pedal.

“You’re a terrible passenger,” Charlie said.

“I’m a fine passenger,” I said. “On a normal road.”

“Try to enjoy the view. We just passed Jack Nicholson’s house.”

“I’ll enjoy it later. After we’ve survived.”

“You want to know why you shouldn’t be worried right now?”

“Why?”

“Because the bad thing you’re worried about is never the bad thing that happens.”

I took that in.

“It’s always some other bad thing you’re not expecting. Right? So the fact that you’re worried we’re going to plunge to our deaths off the side of this road means that there’ll definitely be an earthquake instead. Or a drone strike. Or Godzilla.”

“So you’re saying something terrible is a given.”

Charlie shrugged. “Pessimism’s always a safe bet.”

I was just about to argue with that when—right then—an orange cat scrambled full tilt out of some low bushes by the edge of the highway and shot across the road in front of us.

We were edging along a section of the drive that had a steep hill to our left, and, um—how to put it—*nothing at all* to the right. Just a curving road with no shoulder that dropped off so dramatically into a canyon that you couldn’t see any edge at all.

With only a laughably low aluminum guardrail to protect us.

The cat dropped out of nowhere from the hillside, skittered across the road, and shot under the guardrail to disappear. Charlie touched the brakes, but the cat was gone in a flash—but before we could even exhale, that’s when, from the exact same place in the exact same low bushes, another, much bigger animal leapt out.

I thought it was a dog at first. It was the size of a yellow lab.

But it wasn't a yellow lab.

Charlie hit the brakes for real this time—hard enough for me to slam forward against my seat belt like I'd been smacked with a wooden board.

And then the chaos started.

The second animal was gone as fast as the first one was—but it had been much bigger, and faster, and closer, and if Charlie hadn't jammed on the brakes, we would've hit it for sure.

Who knows—hitting it might've been worse.

But it was bad enough, either way.

We were on a curve so sharp that stopping short made the back wheels spin out. And then the whole lumbering seventies Blazer started fishtailing into a 360 across the pavement like we were on a carnival ride.

The worst carnival ride ever.

I remember Charlie and me—both screaming—as the world outside the car blurred past the windows and Charlie desperately worked the wheel to try to regain traction. I remember the exact pitch of the tires wailing across the asphalt. And I don't know if it was Charlie's maneuvering or just an accident of physics, but as the car straightened itself out, I realized we were now lurching toward the guardrail.

The measly, maybe two-foot-high, definitely not-to-code guardrail.

Which was the only thing standing between us and a deep ravine that dropped off to nothingness past the edge of the road.

Everything disappeared except for the rail itself, and it felt more like it was coming toward us than the other way around.

And then we hit it. Front wheels crossing the white line painted at the edge of the road head-on like a finish line—just as the snout of the Blazer hit the metal railing with unholy creaks and deep groans like thunder as the metal bent with the force of our impact.

The front axle of the Blazer went fully over the edge of a berm of dirt before we stopped.

And I immediately felt terrible for underestimating that poor guardrail.

It caught us. God bless it, it caught us.

We fully snapped two of the posts as we went over them, but the horizontal belt caught us like a muzzle and didn't let go.

In the silence that followed, with the wind whistling through the axle underneath us, I pieced together an understanding of our position: the back

tires were still on the road, the chassis of the Blazer was resting on the berm, and the two front wheels were fully over the edge.

In front of us, and all around, was only a vast empty sky, with a valley that I couldn't really see—and didn't dare to look for—down below.

As an aside, I'll mention that the view of the sky was breathtaking—electric blue with stippled white clouds.

“Did that just happen?” I whispered out loud.

“I guess the good news is,” Charlie said, “we didn't hit the dog.”

“That wasn't a dog, Charlie,” I said.

“It wasn't?” Charlie said. “I thought it was a Great Dane. Or maybe a deer.”

“It was a bit too *mountain lion shaped* to be a deer.”

“A mountain lion? That's crazy!”

“You're the one who told me about the mountain lions!”

“Yes—but I was just trying to scare you.”

“Mission accomplished.”

At that, the car shifted a little.

We both froze, holding each other's stares, like *Did we just imagine that?*

Then quietly, in a whisper, Charlie said, “I think we must be teetering on the axle.”

“Let's get out,” I whispered back. “Can we get out?”

Almost imperceptibly, Charlie shook his head. “There's no getting out. We have to call for help.”

“Where's your phone?” I whispered.

In slow-mo, Charlie reached up to slide it out of the breast pocket of his Oxford and dial 911—and I listened, frozen still, while he calmly explained all of our details to the dispatcher.

After Charlie hung up, he said, “Ten minutes or so,” in a non-whisper that I suspected was meant to signal somehow that we were okay enough for full volume. Then, when I didn't say anything, he added, “Lucky for that guardrail.”

“Charlie,” I said, also making the choice to not whisper, but not 100 percent sure that the vibration of my vocal cords wouldn't be enough to shift our position. “That thing could give way at any second.”

“All we have to do,” Charlie said, keeping his voice as smooth as chocolate milk, “is wait for help.”

But that’s when, as if to undermine all his efforts, Charlie coughed. And then he coughed again.

I wasn’t sure if the coughing was rocking the car or if it was just my imagination, but I said, “Don’t cough, Charlie.”

In response, Charlie coughed again.

“Hey,” I said. “Are you trying to get us killed?”

“It’s allergies,” Charlie said.

“What are you allergic to? Plunging to our deaths?”

“We’re not going to plunge,” Charlie said, like I was being far more ridiculous than I actually was. “And we’re not going to die.”

But in the silence as we waited for him to cough again, I wondered.

Finally, I said, “I have this worried feeling like I might freak out.”

“Freak out in a *still* way?” Charlie asked. “Or in a way that will rock the car?”

“Unclear,” I said. “But the waiting is definitely getting to me.”

Charlie studied me for a second. And then he said, out of nowhere, “My first kiss was in the seventh grade. Did you know that?”

I frowned, like *How would I know that?* And then, additionally, *How is this relevant?*

“She was a friend of my sister’s, at her birthday sleepover,” he said, and then in a tone like just speaking the name conjured up a whole world: “Mary Marino. She had, and I say this with so much reverence, *legendary* boobs.”

“Why are we talking about this?”

“She left the party,” Charlie went on, “and asked me to take a walk, which I did. And we made our way to an empty park and sat side by side on a bench and talked, but I have no idea what we talked about. All I remember is that she kept leaning close to me, and looking at me, and kind of puckering up her lips. I was not getting the message. I kept wondering if her braces were bothering her. Finally she turned to face me like I was the biggest pain in the ass in the world and said, ‘Are you going to kiss me or not?’”

“I love this kid,” I said. “She’s a role model for us all.”

“So I kissed her,” Charlie said. “And then she said, ‘That’s it?’ And I could tell she was disappointed, but I had no idea how to do anything differently. And while I was thinking, she told me she was going back—and to wait ten minutes so nobody would catch on.”

“Did you ever figure out what you did wrong?”

“I think I just kissed her like you’d kiss your grandma.”

“Oof.”

“What was your first kiss?” Charlie asked.

“Second grade,” I said. “The boy across the street. I made him climb up onto the top shelf of my bedroom closet with me, pecked him on the cheek, and then swore him to secrecy forever.”

“And? Did he keep the secret?”

“Does it count if he forgot about it entirely?”

“Okay. Next question,” Charlie said. “Ask me something interesting enough to keep us distracted.”

And so I just said, “Tell me about your cancer.”

It was a wildly inappropriate question. One I never would have asked if we hadn’t been teetering above our deaths.

“Sure,” Charlie said, extracasual. “What do you want to know?”

“What happened?”

“I had a lump on my forearm, which seemed like an odd place for a lump. I asked the doc about it at a checkup—but more just making conversation than anything else. I still had that thing back at that age where you think you’re invincible. But just from his frown as he started looking at it, I knew.”

“You knew you had cancer?”

“Yeah. I’m a pessimist, though, so I didn’t trust myself, either. I always start with death in every situation and work my way backward.”

“Are you starting with death now?” I asked.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re here. And you’re gonna be fine. And if you’re gonna be fine, then I’m gonna be fine. So it’s not even a question.”

“That’s the worst logic I’ve ever heard.”

“The point is, I thought for sure I was only worried because that’s just what I do. Not because there was actually something to worry about.”

“But then you turned out to be right?”

Charlie nodded. “The biopsy came back malignant. So starting with death turned out to be the right approach.”

“But you didn’t die.”

“Not yet. Give me time.”

“And that’s when your wife left you?”

“Yeah,” Charlie said. “On the day I got the biopsy results. But she’d been planning it for weeks, if that makes it less bad.”

“She was planning to leave you while you waited for biopsy results?”

“In her defense, I didn’t tell her about the biopsy.”

“You didn’t tell her anything? Not even about the lump? Or that you’d gone to the doctor?”

“Nothing,” Charlie said.

“Why not?”

“It just felt ... personal.”

“But wouldn’t a wife be someone you’re supposed to share personal things with?”

“This tells you a lot about our relationship.”

“Were you not close?”

“Our lives just didn’t intersect as much as they should’ve.”

“Isn’t that the point of being married, though? So you can intersect?”

“I guess that’s why we’re not married anymore.”

“So—” I was still trying to wrap my head around it. “You told her you had cancer, and she told you she wanted a divorce?”

“Kind of. But not in that order. When she got home that night, I said, ‘I have something to tell you,’ and she said, ‘I have something to tell you,’ and then we did a ‘you go first; no, you go first’ thing for a while, and then finally we decided to just say our things at the same time. So I said, ‘I have cancer,’ just as she said, ‘I want a divorce.’”

I swallowed. “Brutal.”

“Yeah.”

“She tried to take it back after that, but I said, ‘You can’t take it back. It’s already out there.’”

“So you just—went through everything alone?”

“My sister came to stay a couple of times, but my dad’s not in great health and couldn’t make the trip. Logan helped out. And Jack and I played

a lot of video games.”

“What about your mom?”

“She left when I was a kid.” And then, like he was putting something together for the first time, he frowned and said, “When I was sick, actually.”

“When you were *sick*?”

“I never talk about this.”

“Why?”

“Because it makes my mom sound so awful, what she did. But my dad wasn’t exactly a dream, either.”

“You don’t have to tell me.”

Charlie looked at me like he was deciding. “I’ll tell you. Just don’t, like, retell it in an interview.”

“Nobody’s interviewing me, Charlie.”

Charlie tilted his head. “Yet,” he said. Then he said, “I was eight, and I was obsessed with Harry Houdini. I’d seen that movie about him—you know the one where he unties all the ropes underwater?”

I nodded.

“My sister and I were making a kid version of that movie on our dad’s camcorder, and I was going to do that trick, and she was going to film it. We’d studied the scene and taken notes, and I’d practiced untying the knots like five hundred times with a stopwatch. And so one night we tied my hands and feet and I jumped into the pool, but we’d used the wrong rope, and it plumped up once it got wet, and I couldn’t get the knots undone. My sister had a timer, and when I hadn’t surfaced in twenty seconds, she ran to get our dad—but our parents were having this epic fight, which they did sometimes, and she couldn’t get their attention right away. By the time our dad pulled me out, I’d inhaled a bunch of water and I was pretty hysterical.”

“Wow,” I said. “No wonder you don’t swim.”

“After a few minutes, I was okay, and they put me to bed, but later that night I woke up and couldn’t stop throwing up, and it turned out I had this thing called ‘secondary drowning’ where your lungs have kind of a delayed reaction, and I had to spend the night in the pediatric ICU getting fluids and supplemental oxygen. But the thing was, my parents weren’t just fighting that night. They were breaking up. My mom was leaving. And so when I woke up that night, and only my dad was there, I kind of knew.”

I felt a wave of indignation. “Wait! Your mom left your dad *on the night her child almost drowned?*”

“In her defense, my timing wasn’t great.”

“But ... how *could* she?” I protested, as if that moment had been written wrong and we needed to revise it.

But Charlie was coming to a bigger realization. “Maybe that’s why I didn’t want to tell Margaux I was sick.” Charlie looked at me, frowning. “Could that be it?”

“Uh, yeah. Hello. That is textbook subconscious nonsense. Didn’t you take psych in college?”

“So...” Charlie said, still snapping the pieces into place. “My mom left when I was sick, and my wife left when I was sick.”

“But now you’re *dying*,” I said, gesturing at the valley below with my eyes. “And another woman in your life”—I pointed at myself—“is not going anywhere.”

I lifted my eyebrows, like *How ’bout that?* Like by breaking the pattern, I’d fixed him.

But then Charlie said, “Only because you can’t get out.”

“You don’t know that.”

I gave Charlie a minute to process. This had been a very productive near-death experience so far.

Then, to keep the distractions going, I said, “I don’t have a mom, either.”

Charlie met my eyes. “She left you?”

“She died,” I said. “In the same camping accident that injured my dad.”

“Oh,” Charlie said then, his voice low and soft like a hum. “I’m sorry.”

“You know what?” I said. “It’s okay. I’m okay. I remember my dad saying, over and over in the years after she died, ‘We’re going to be okay. We know how to do this.’ And he wasn’t wrong.”

“How to ... grieve?”

“How to let go.”

“That’s not easy.”

“No. And it takes a long time. My dad kept promising that grieving was a natural process—part of being human—and that we’d be okay in the end. I didn’t believe him at first. But he was right. It’s okay now. It doesn’t make

me sad to remember her now. I miss her, but in a way that doesn't hurt. You do get there, eventually."

"Your dad sounds very wise."

I nodded—just barely. "I won the dad lottery, for sure." Then I added something that I'd never said out loud before—something that was so scary to verbalize that it made my feelings about the situation we were currently in—teetering above a vast valley below us, held only by a ribbon of guardrail metal—seem almost cute. "The camping trip was my choice," I confessed to Charlie then. "Everybody else, my mom included, voted to go to the beach."

Nineteen

IT FELT LIKE ten hours before the first fire engine got there—but it was only ten minutes.

Nothing like perching above your imminent death to bend the space-time continuum.

Once the firefighters arrived, they talked to us through our open windows, explaining that they were going to stabilize the Blazer by running cables around the axle at each back wheel and winching it to the engine. Once it was stable, they promised, they'd get us harnessed and help us climb out.

All in all, once the professionals took over—things got pretty easy. We didn't have to make any decisions after that. We just had to follow instructions.

Which we did. Gratefully.

Minutes later, we were out of the car, safe and sound.

The Blazer was pretty unscathed, considering—but a wrecker still hauled it off to a body shop to get checked out. The cops gave us a ride back to their station, where we could call a ride to pick us up.

Once we were officially not dead, I felt a gale-force euphoria that had me thanking everyone, and shaking hands, and giving hugs.

It happened. We lived. And now we had a story to tell.

But Charlie didn't bounce back so fast.

He'd been so personable in the car trying to keep me calm. But once we were rescued, he got all quiet and frowny and didn't want to talk. He stayed like that all afternoon, and after we got home, and all during dinner.

He kept coughing after that, too—like it was his new thing.

Which felt a bit stubborn.

All I wanted was to feel better—and all Charlie wanted, apparently, was to feel worse.

I kept trying to talk and joke around and just kind of celebrate the fact that we hadn't died.

It was a safe bet that he'd forgotten we had signed up to do research at a line-dancing class across town tonight, and in his current mood, I wasn't sure how to remind him.

Finally, I just decided to pretend we were all on board.

“Come on,” I said to Charlie after dinner.

Charlie was clearing plates from the table. He read my body language. “Come on where?”

“It's line-dancing class tonight,” I said.

“Line-dancing class?”

“For the script.”

But Charlie shook his head. “Nope,” he said.

“Yep,” I countered. “I put it on the digital calendar.”

“We are not going to line-dancing class tonight,” Charlie said.

“Why not?”

“Because we almost died today!”

“Yeah, okay,” I said. “But we didn't. And it's not as easy to find line-dancing classes around here as it should be.”

I waited for Charlie to capitulate. But he didn't.

So I added, “And it starts in an hour, so we probably should have left already.”

I tapped my wrist to emphasize the time pressure.

But Charlie didn't get swept up in my momentum. He gave me a look. “I'm not going to line-dancing class,” Charlie said.

Dammit.

“Why not?” I asked. Classic tactical mistake: giving him a chance to solidify his objection.

But he didn't take it. “Because.”

“Why are you so mad right now?”

“Because I almost killed you today!”

“That’s not my fault!”

“You’re not the person I’m mad at!”

“Look,” I said. “It’s over. We lived. Let’s celebrate and go dancing.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“What? Ever again?”

“I mean—give me a day or two.”

“But the class is *tonight*.”

“I don’t care.”

“You have to go!”

“I don’t have to do anything.”

“But that line-dancing scene sucks.”

“You’re forgetting that this project is never going to go.”

“You’re forgetting that you promised you’d make it good, anyway.”

“It’s good enough.”

Was he really going to refuse?

I pointed at him. “Are you a—” I couldn’t find the term I needed, so I had to make one up: “A *promise breaker*? Is that what you are? You said you would do research.”

“I can watch videos on the internet for research.”

“Watching videos is not the same thing.”

“It’s close enough.”

“Why are you fighting this? You love immersion research. You’ve done it for every script you’ve written. You did a cattle drive in Montana for *The Last Gunslinger*! You lived in a bunker for three months when you were writing *Forty Miles to Hell*! You got so nauseated doing zero-gravity training for *The Destroyers* that you threw up three times!”

Charlie looked impressed that I knew all that. “Three times *that you know of*.”

“That’s exactly my point!”

But Charlie shook his head. “Those were all different.”

“Why?”

“Because those movies mattered.”

That smarted, I’ll admit.

I would've expected a comment like that back when I first got here. But we'd been working on this thing for weeks. Talking about these characters like they were real people. Writing scenes that were genuinely funny. Having fun. The scene where they fall on each other that we'd rewritten *after we actually fell on each other* that now incorporated frozen veggies? Pure delight.

Doesn't delight matter?

I guess not.

I sighed. "This, right here, is why your screenplay sucks."

"Because I don't want to go line dancing?"

"Because you don't believe in love."

Charlie snorted a laugh. "Do *you* believe in love?"

"Of course I believe in love. It's the best thing humans ever invented. There are *books* about this." And then, like books weren't enough: "There are TED Talks!"

"If you really believe that," Charlie said, "shouldn't you be married with like ten kids right now?"

That was so low. "I have to take care of my dad. I *can't* get married and have ten kids."

He clearly wanted to win—and settle this once and for all. "But doesn't love conquer all? Doesn't love find a way? Shouldn't some cartoon woodland animals show up and help you find your Happily Ever After?"

My eyes flashed. "Don't use a romance term against me!"

"You're the one who taught it to me!"

"Are you really this cynical?" I asked. "Do you really think that love doesn't exist? Or are you just saying dialogue that sounds good? Because if you really think love is something Hallmark made up to sell greeting cards, then we should just burn this screenplay right now. The last thing the world needs is another shitty rom-com. Produced or unproduced."

"I believe *hormones* exist," Charlie said then. "And I believe kindness exists. And affection. And altruism, sometimes. And longing. And I believe that every now and then those things can show up at once and knock you out of your senses for a while. But it's random. It's like the weather. It's not something we all should be aspiring to. Or counting on. It comes and it goes, whether you like it or not. And then one day, you tell your wife the results of your biopsy, and she tells you she wants a divorce."

Oof.

“So you’re bitter,” I said.

“Yes. Absolutely. But I’m also realistic.”

“And you’re lonely.”

“No argument there. But I’m also honest. And I’m not going to get out there and spin cotton-candy fantasies for gullible people who don’t know that’s not how life works.”

“How does life work?”

“People love you for a little while—when it’s convenient for them—and then they move on.”

“Not everybody’s like that.”

“But there are no guarantees.”

“There are no guarantees for anything!” I said. “Would you rather cancel hope altogether than risk the possibility of being disappointed?”

“The *certainty* of being disappointed,” Charlie corrected.

I sighed. “But don’t you see how if you decide that’s the way it is, then it can’t be any other way?”

“I don’t make the rules.”

“We all make the rules—all the time.”

“I just can’t make myself believe in a total fiction like that.”

I felt so baffled. “But you’re—*a fiction writer.*”

“Not that kind of fiction, I guess.”

“Then you should write something else.”

“I can’t write something else! I can’t write anything at all.”

“That’s your problem, right there.”

“Don’t tell me what my problem is.”

“*Your problem,*” I said, “is that you can’t say no to everything,” I went on, “and say yes at the same time. You can’t cancel one emotion without canceling them all. You can’t *hate love*—not without hating every other feeling, too. Stories exist *for the emotions they create*—and you can’t write them if you can’t feel them. This screenplay is a chance for you. You can make *anything* good”—I was almost pleading now—“but you can’t make it good without believing in it. You can’t bring this story to life without coming to life yourself.”

This was my bid. This was my shot.

But I missed.

Charlie refused to take my meaning. His response just off-gassed disdain. “And you want me to come to life by *line dancing*?”

Why was contempt so hard to counter?

All I knew was that had been my best, most heartfelt argument.

If Charlie couldn't hear *that*, then there was nothing left to say.

“Fine,” I said. And looked down. And sighed.

Charlie watched me.

“You don't have to go,” I said. “You can stay here and ... do whatever it is you do in this big mansion all alone. But *I'm* going.” And then, on the off chance that it might make him even the tiniest bit unhappy, I added, “I'm going. And maybe I'll find a six-foot cowboy—with a horseshoe belt buckle and one of those perfect square man-chins with a little dimple in it—and let him buy me beers all night. And maybe he'll even have a big, crazy Sam Elliott mustache and a whole tragic past full of heartache, and maybe the two of us will just comfort each other all night long till the sun comes up.”

Weirdly, it worked.

Charlie's eyes went dark. “Don't you dare.”

“Try and stop me,” I said, striding toward the front door. Then, over my shoulder, grabbing a set of keys off the key hook: “And I'm taking a random car out of your garage. And I'll see you tomorrow. Maybe.”

But I hadn't even made it to the entryway when I heard Charlie's footsteps clomping after me, fast and hard. Then he blew right past me, grabbing the keys out of my hand as he went, spinning back to glare in triumph as he raised them high above his head.

I jumped for them but couldn't reach.

“You're an asshole,” I said, shifting tactics to open-palm smacking at his shoulder. “Give me the keys!”

I smacked him a few more times, and then when he didn't budge—and when hitting him also didn't make me feel any better—I gave it up.

I pulled out my phone in defeat. “Fine, I'll get an Uber.”

But that's when Charlie let his arm down, and I looked up to see him holding the keys out—also in defeat.

“I'll go,” he said then, in a quieter voice that sounded like surrender.

But the change was so sudden, I had to ask for confirmation. “Go where?”

He closed his eyes like he was sealing both our fates and said, “Line dancing.”

And then, before I could decide if I should thank him or hit him again, he opened his eyes, leaned in close, pointed at me, and said, “No six-foot cowboys for you.”

Twenty

THE INSTRUCTOR TURNED out to be a six-foot cowboy.

When Charlie saw him on the tiny stage at the back of the bar—in Wranglers and boots with an actual straw Stetson hat—I heard him say, out loud, “Oh, god. He’s a hillbilly.”

“I don’t think he’s a hillbilly,” I said. “I got propositioned by a hillbilly at a wedding once, and he had a very different vibe.”

Charlie eyed me. “Did you?”

“A groomsman,” I confirmed, with a nod. “Want to know what he said?”

Charlie squinted. “Do I?”

“He invited me to his hotel room and said, ‘Red in the head—fire in the bed.’”

“Please tell me that didn’t work.”

I gave Charlie a look like *Come on*. “I politely said, ‘No, thank you.’ And then he shrugged like it was my loss and said, ‘You’re missin’ out on the ride of your life.’”

“I bet you really were,” Charlie said.

“Not in a good way.”

“You’ve got to admire his optimism, though,” Charlie said.

“He also passed out in the women’s restroom that night,” I added. “And got into a fistfight at a bowling alley. And propositioned the bride’s

mother.”

“You *do* have experience with hillbillies,” Charlie said.

After we signed in at the bar, got informed of the two-drink minimum, and knocked back two shots called Silver Bullets, we made our way to the crowded dance floor.

The instructor was getting ready to start, messing with the sound system and wearing his Wranglers like they were shrink-wrapped.

If this guy was a hillbilly—I looked around the room—at least we could all agree he was a *hot* hillbilly. Possibly an out-of-work-actor hillbilly just waiting for his big line-dancing break. Which I suddenly realized might actually be *me and Charlie*.

I elbowed Charlie. “We should cast this guy in the line-dancing scenes.”

Charlie, whose face was busy personifying misery, said, “Writers don’t cast actors in movies. That’s what *casting agents* are for.”

“I bet *you* could, though,” I said, “if you wanted to.”

“This guy’s not an actor,” Charlie said. “He’s somebody’s inbred cousin.”

“Chalk one up for inbreeding, then,” I said, letting my eyes float back in the instructor’s direction.

“Are you ogling him?” Charlie asked.

Yes. Yes, I was.

“Unbelievable,” Charlie said. “Didn’t we just agree *no cowboys*?”

“Look,” I said. “I didn’t *request* a...” I glanced back to the instructor for reference and then got stuck. “A six-foot-three backwoodsman with a butt like a quarterback wearing a longhorn belt buckle and ostrich boots. But it happened. What am I supposed to do?”

“My opinion of you is plummeting,” Charlie said. “*This* is your type?”

“I have lots of types, thank you. Sexy cowboys. Sexy lumberjacks. Sexy werewolves with tragic pasts. Sexy ghosts.”

“Sexy *ghosts*?”

“That’s the only kind of ghost I like.”

“What about sexy hicks?” Charlie said, tilting his head at the instructor. “Or sexy corn-cob-pipe smokers? Or sexy mouth breathers?”

“That man can breathe all he wants,” I said.

But this was really bothering Charlie. “This guy,” he said, “is not sexy. He drove to LA on a riding lawnmower eating fried butter and squirrel

nuggets.”

“I don’t think you can knock his food choices, pastrami man.”

“Have some respect for yourself,” Charlie said.

I glanced back at those Wranglers. “I think I’m respecting myself just fine.”

That’s when our instructor, ready at last, adjusted his headset mic and turned to face the audience. And then he started speaking. And it turned out he wasn’t a hillbilly at all.

He was Italian.

“*Ciao a tutti*,” the instructor said.

Charlie and I looked at each other, like *What!*

Then we both peered over at the easel with the class poster. It had the instructor’s picture. His name was Lorenzo Ferrari. And he was from Venezia, Italy.

“Did he just get *handsomer*?” I asked, looking around at all the women in the room who were asking themselves the same question.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Charlie said.

But this really was a game changer. Our instructor wasn’t a hillbilly. He was a gorgeous Italian dreamboat *cosplaying* as a hillbilly.

“Welcome,” Lorenzo said next, in a perfectly delicious accent.

And then, even as he launched into explaining the class, and how we’d learn three simple dances tonight—he’d do a “teach” first, and then he’d turn on the music and we’d do it for real—I couldn’t concentrate. His voice was like a deep-tissue massage.

Had I brought Charlie all the way here to prove to him that line dancing wasn’t sexy?

Can’t win for losing, I guess.

I blame Italy.

“Try to focus,” Charlie said, punching my shoulder to break my trance.

But I’ll tell ya: Line dancing is not as easy as it looks.

I’d always kind of harbored a suspicion that I might be a secret dancing savant. Not *line dancing* per se, but just—from all the moves I’d busted in the kitchen while cooking over the years—I’d nursed a secret fantasy that maybe, if I ever *really* tried to dance, I’d astonish us all.

Ten minutes into that chance, I stood corrected.

I was not secretly awesome.

I was terrible.

We'd need a more humiliating word for terrible.

As Lorenzo led us through the steps of the first dance, I could follow pretty well as long as I could see him—but as soon as we all turned to face the next wall, which happens a lot in line dancing, I forgot everything. My mind went blank. I'd wind up craning my neck over my shoulder to try to keep him in my sights.

Which didn't work too well.

I'd get all pretzeled up, and then I'd step on my own feet, and then I'd slam into Charlie. Sometimes hard enough to get him coughing again.

"Don't keep looking backward," Charlie said.

"I'm a visual learner."

"Just watch me. I'm right here."

"But he's the *instructor*," I said. "And he's Italian."

We were learning a dance called the Canadian Stomp, which started out easy—a heel touch, a toe touch, and then a very satisfying stomp—but then devolved into lots of fluttery grapevine-ing that flummoxed me. And also forced me to confront that I'd never fully mastered my left from my right.

Was I the worst person in the room?

By a mile.

I was like a bumper car gone rogue, colliding into everybody—especially Charlie.

Every time I slammed into him, he said, "Oof."

"Sorry," I'd say, and pat him at the place of impact.

I was bad enough that Lorenzo himself eventually came down from the stage to help me. But having that face and those shoulders and that belt buckle in close proximity only made me worse.

"It's a scuff with a quarter turn into the jazz box," Lorenzo said pleasantly, like he was clearing things up.

I'd have to google "jazz box." "My legs keep getting tangled," I said.

At that, Lorenzo—*good god!*—looked down at my legs.

I held very still.

Then he said, "You should tie your shoelaces," in a voice that made me feel pretty certain I'd never think about shoelaces in the same way again.

For a half second, I wondered if Lorenzo Ferrari, line-dancing Adonis, might actually kneel down and tie them for me.

But that's when I looked down to realize Charlie was already there.

Charlie Yates. Had dropped down on one knee. In front of me. On the floor of a honky-tonk. And was now tying my sneaker laces in double knots with gruff but unmistakable affection.

Not gonna lie. As much as our instructor was objectively, legitimately, inescapably sexy, and as much as I'd enjoyed teasing Charlie about it ... No amount of ogling Lorenzo Ferrari did even a fraction of the things to me that the sight of Charlie Yates tying my shoes did.

Right there, for a second, it felt like the music disappeared, and Lorenzo disappeared, and all the other dancers did, too, as Charlie held my gaze and I held his right back, and something happened in my chest that was the opposite of all the thumping and thrashing my heart had been doing lately.

Something, instead, that was like ... a sigh.

Like my heart itself might be letting out a five-point-five-second breath.

Something that was absolutely, undeniably romantic.

Even though what he was doing was completely obvious, I said, "What are you doing?"

I expected some brush-off response, like, "Tying your shoes, dummy." But instead, he said, "I'm apologizing."

"For what?"

He tilted his head back in the direction of his house. "For being a dick before."

"You're apologizing? In a honky-tonk bar?"

This was the moment we'd come here to find. This was the real moment that would bring the fictional one to life. This was the difference between imaginary things and real ones.

Case closed: we'd have to put this in the screenplay.

Just as soon as I could figure out how to explain that to Charlie without completely confessing what he'd just done to me.

As Lorenzo moved on to the next waiting female who wanted help, Charlie stood back up, shook his head at me, and said, "Double knots—not just bunny ears." As if he gave me shoe-tying tips all the time—but I never listened.

He bent at the waist and pulled up his pant legs to show me his own laces, with their own double knots, as examples to strive for.

I peered down, and that's when I realized we were both wearing the same shoes. Black Converse low-tops. "We match!" I said.

"You're not very observant," Charlie said. "We've been matching this whole time."

"Have we?" I asked, feeling absurdly charmed by that fact—like it was some kind of fate.

But then a woman in a fringe pearl-snap blouse leaned in and pointed at our feet. "You can't spin in those," she said.

We both looked up.

"The rubber soles," she explained. "It'll twist your knees."

"Do we need different shoes?" I asked her, strangely dismayed at the prospect of no longer matching.

But the woman shook her head. "Just cut up some old socks," she said, "and stretch them over the balls of your feet like leg warmers."

I turned to Charlie, like *Brilliant*. "Shoe leg warmers!" I said, holding up my hand for a high five.

But no high five from Charlie. He just shook his head.

"I'll do this research," he said then, "and I'll let you slam into me a hundred times, and I'll watch you ogle that Italian guy, and I'll double-knot your laces all night long..."

Just then, someone behind jostled us into each other, and Charlie's eyes roamed my face for a minute, adjusting to the closer distance, before he finished: "But I will never"—he paused for emphasis—"ever put leg warmers on my sneakers."

★ ★ ★

HALFWAY THROUGH THE lesson, Lorenzo gave us a break, and Charlie and I found ourselves at the bar.

"So what's the verdict?" Charlie asked. "Is it?"

"Is it what?" I asked.

"Is line dancing romantic? Now that we're actually doing it. Is it?"

"What do *you* think?" I asked.

"I don't know. I'm not sure I know what that word means."

"You don't know what *romantic* means?" I asked. "Be serious."

"I think I am being serious. It's like I can't quite remember it."

“You can’t remember *the feeling of love*?”

“You know how you can have a sense memory? Like if you try to imagine what it feels like to put a spoonful of ice cream in your mouth, you can summon up a mental experience of that feeling?”

“Yeah.”

“Can you do that for love?”

“Of course you can!”

“But—how?”

Was this a real question? “Just...” How did you do it? “Just think of someone you love, and you ... feel it.”

“What does it feel like?”

“Are you asking me what *love* feels like?”

“I’m just wondering if it’s the same for you as it is for me.”

He looked earnest—like it was a real question. I could have shamed him for even attempting to write a romantic comedy *if he couldn’t remember what love felt like*.

But I decided to be earnest back.

I imagined my dad and Sylvie and Salvador sitting at our dinette table, and then I just took in the sight in my head. “It feels warm,” I said, eyes closed. “It feels hopeful and kind. Sunshiny. And soothing.” And then, knowing there was a chance he’d scoff at me for talking about “the heart” and call it a cliché, I went ahead and said: “It feels like your heart is glowing.”

Because that’s true. That *is* what it feels like.

Sometimes clichés are clichés for a reason.

I waited to hear something cynical from him.

But when I opened my eyes, Charlie was shaking his head. “I can’t feel my heart.”

And then, maybe because it was the only response I could think of, I lifted my hand and pressed it against his chest. “Can you feel it now?”

“Yes,” Charlie said. “But it’s not glowing.”

“What’s it doing?” I asked.

Charlie let his eyes drop, like he was really thinking. “You know when birds commit suicide?”

I frowned. “I don’t think—that’s a thing?”

Charlie regrouped. “You know. When a bird sees its reflection in a window and thinks it’s another bird and so it dive-bombs the window over and over, trying to attack, until it injures itself so badly it dies?”

Ah. Huh. “Kind of?”

Charlie nodded. “I think my heart is doing that.”

Twenty-One

IT'S SO HUMILIATING to admit this, but the next afternoon, when Charlie had a meeting with the mistress we were doing this screenplay for and he told me to make myself scarce, there was no mistaking it—I was oddly jealous.

“I can’t stay for it?” I asked.

“Trust me, you don’t want to stay.”

“You don’t know that.”

“This woman would eat you alive,” Charlie said.

“She doesn’t eat *you* alive.”

“No,” Charlie agreed, “but she flirts with me. Which is weirdly similar.”

We were entering our sixth and final week of writing—which meant I’d only known Charlie for five. Five puny weeks out of my whole lifetime. Why did the idea of some mistress flirting with Charlie bug me so much?

“It seems like we should both be here,” I said.

“The thing is,” Charlie said then, “there’s another issue.”

“What?”

“The mistress,” Charlie said, with an apologetic shrug, “happens to be T.J. Heywood’s stepmother.”

I frowned. “The mistress—?”

Charlie nodded. “—is married to T.J.’s dad and cheating on him with this United Pictures executive.”

I took it in. “The mistress is Mrs. Jablowmie?”

“Mrs. Jablowmie *Senior*,” Charlie corrected. “There is no current Mrs. T.J. Jablowmie.”

“Shocker.”

And then I couldn’t help it. I pulled out my phone and googled T.J.’s father “+ wife”—and got a thousand photos of a woman who looked like she might still be in high school.

“How old is she?” I asked.

“She’s younger than T.J., actually. He brings it up a lot.”

“Wow,” I said. “No wonder he hates women.”

“Does he?”

“Doesn’t he?”

Charlie thought about it. “Yeah. I guess that’s right.”

“So...” I said, still processing. “This teenager is married to the directing legend and very middle-aged Chris Heywood, but she’s also sleeping with this even *more* middle-aged executive who wants to make your Mafia thing—at the same time?”

Charlie nodded. “That’s pretty much it.”

“And everybody’s fine with it?”

“As fine as it gets in this town.”

I nodded. “She must be a hell of a multitasker.”

“So that’s the hesitation,” Charlie said. “It’s possible T.J. might show up at the meeting.”

“Ah,” I said. And suddenly, Charlie was right. I didn’t need to stay. “But why do you have to meet in person? Can’t you just email?”

Charlie shrugged. “She wants to come by the house,” he said, like that was that.

It bothered me. A lot. “She’s not going to try to seduce you, is she?”

“What!” The very notion prompted a coughing fit. “No!” When he recovered, Charlie said, “Turn off your brain, and go down to the coffee shop. Maybe you’ll run into Spielberg.”

The first time I’d ever gone there, Charlie had said, “That place is crawling with industry people,” and every time I’d gone since, I’d expected to see somebody, *anybody*.

It had become a little joke. “Who’d you see?” Charlie would say whenever I came home.

“Alfred Hitchcock,” I’d say. Or Robert Altman. Or Fellini.

And we were so deadpan, we didn’t even laugh.

In truth, I’d never seen even one industry person there—and I’d wondered if Charlie had made it all up.

But it turned out, Charlie was right.

That day, while Charlie was hobnobbing with Mistress Jablowmie—and possibly even Teej himself—and I was at the café, working on my laptop and quietly demolishing a banana muffin, who should walk in but the reigning queen of all industry people ... the one and only Donna Cole.

I’m not kidding. Donna Cole!

Donna Cole. Director of *Time of My Life*. And *The Lovers*. And *Can’t Win for Losing*.

Donna Cole, whose most famous wise quote—“The most vital thing you can learn to do is tell your own story”—was the centerpiece of my vision board back home. Right next to the iconic red carpet photo of her in a white Wayman + Micah gown with her natural Afro high and bold and stunning like she was the patron saint of fashion and wisdom and rom-coms all rolled into one.

I’d loved her so long—and so madly—from afar.

And now here she was. Up close.

Very up close.

So up close that I stopped breathing when I saw her and didn’t remember to start up again until I began to feel woozy.

To be honest, my number one fantasy about coming to LA was that I might run into her by pure, nonstalkery accident, get to pleasantly chatting, give her the elevator pitch for *The Accidental Mermaid*, and then, when she looked intrigued, just happen to have a copy of it in my bag.

This is a common fantasy for aspiring screenwriters on the outside of the industry: running into their own personal Spielberg by accident. Common, but also impossible. A moment like that would absolutely never happen.

But ... what if it did?

It wouldn’t. It couldn’t.

But that didn't mean I hadn't carried a copy of that ninety-three-page script in my backpack with me everywhere I went ever since the day I'd finished it—just in case it happened anyway. Like impossible things were more than welcome to do.

The worst-case scenario, I'd decided early on, wouldn't be me carrying the script everywhere like a deranged hope junkie for years without ever getting the chance to hand it over. The worst-case scenario would be me *actually running into Donna Cole* but not having my screenplay with me because I'd given up too soon ...

And then missing my chance.

Holding out hope for too long was one thing.

Giving up too soon was quite another.

You know what an elevator pitch is, right? It's the one-line description of your screenplay that you prepare in case you ever run into your dream director in an elevator.

I wasn't sure how many elevator pitches actually happened—in elevators, or anywhere else—but I did know they were crucial to write. And memorize. There were whole chapters devoted to them in screenwriting books.

I mean, if *you* couldn't sum up your screenplay, who the heck could?

Here was my elevator pitch for *The Accidental Mermaid*: A woman doesn't know she's a mermaid until she falls off her mean new boss's boat and sprouts a tail; now she must navigate her new identity, keep her dream job, and get her boss to fall in love with her before time runs out and her legs disappear forever.

You'd watch that, wouldn't you? As long as I could guarantee that no Meryl Streeps would be harmed?

And Donna Cole could make that movie *in her sleep*. Pop Jack Stapleton into a slim-fit business suit and slap a tail on Katie Palmer—and Wah-lah! Your next summer blockbuster.

Actually, it's mostly only Marvel movies that are blockbusters these days.

Maybe better to say: Wah-lah! Your next low-budget, moderately successful, character-driven comedy beloved by a not-small half of the population.

That wasn't dreaming too big, was it?

Maybe it was.

Because even after all that vigilant, relentless, almost masochistically deranged hope I'd refused to let go of for so long ... on the day I actually got my impossible chance?

I'd left my backpack at Charlie's.

I forced myself to take a five-point-five-second breath.

Donna Cole.

She was here. I guess the impossible made its own rules.

I'd cried my face off watching *My Beloved Stranger*. And I'd practically memorized *Good as Gone*. And I adored her sexy remake of *The Best of Things*—damn all those snooty critics.

And *here she was* in the real world. Shorter and yet somehow so much taller than I'd ever thought possible, otherworldly and yet totally normal, divine and yet so human—and wearing a casual-yet-classy Dior wrap dress and surrounded, of course, by a gaggle of important-looking people.

What was my elevator pitch again? I'd practiced it so much, it was practically tattooed on my brain.

I rummaged through my memory. But the pitch was just ... gone.

Time to think fast.

I pulled out my phone, nice and slow, keeping an eye on Donna Cole at all times like a wildlife photographer might track a rare bird that could flap away at any minute.

HEY, I texted Charlie. You busy?

His reply came right away.

What's up?

Emergency

What's wrong???

Need my backpack—Can you bring? URGENT

Where are you?

Coffee shop

And then ... nothing.

Had he gotten another phone call? Lost interest? Fallen victim to Mrs. Jablowmie's predatory behaviors?

Was his meeting over—and now he was coming? Or was the meeting still going—so I should try to sprint to his place and back here before Donna Cole escaped?

I closed my laptop and capped my pen. And then I hesitated—not sure what to do.

Minutes went by. Donna Cole ordered at the counter, then took a seat at a banquette around the corner.

More minutes went by.

Then more.

Maybe Charlie wasn't coming. Who knew what the mistress might be doing to him by now.

I stood up. I couldn't stand it. I had to do something.

But that's when the coffee shop door swung open—and it was Charlie. Hair wild, shirt untucked, my backpack over his shoulder, out of breath like he'd been running. He scanned the room until he saw me, and then ran—*ran!*—over. “Here,” he said, shoving it at me. “Does it have”—he shook his head—“an inhaler or something? What's going on? What do you need? Are you hurt?”

Ah. He'd thought I was having a *medical* emergency.

Oops.

“Nothing like that,” I said, waving my hands to help him regroup. “It's just got my screenplay in it.”

Charlie coughed at that. “Your what?”

“My mermaid screenplay.”

He shook his head. “*That's* your emergency?”

“Yeah.” I pulled the zipper and yanked it out.

“I thought you were...” Charlie said, still breathing hard. “Hurt or sick or something.”

At the thought of that, Charlie coughed some more.

“Shh,” I said, glancing Donna Cole's way. “What is it with you and the coughing?”

“I'm not doing it on purpose,” Charlie said.

“It feels performative.”

“This from the woman who just made me abandon my meeting to sprint over here.”

That felt oddly touching. “You abandoned your meeting?”

“I thought you were dying. I was picturing you like a fish flopping around on dry land.”

I tilted my head, like *Odd visual*. Then I said, “I’m fine.”

“Clearly.”

I glanced Donna Cole’s way again. I could explain all this later. Then, real quick: “How do I look?”

Charlie shifted from puzzled to baffled. “How do you *look*?”

I patted around on my head. “Is everything—battened down? Pom-pom all in order?”

“You look,” Charlie started, and then he reached out to tuck a little curlicue behind my ear before finishing with “lovely, actually.”

“I will settle for *not crazy*. But ‘lovely, actually’ works, too.”

I targeted the banquette like an action hero. Time to do this.

“Thanks again so much, Charlie,” I said, and then, in my excitement, I accidentally bounced up on my toes and kissed him on the cheek—only realizing halfway across the café that it might not’ve been appropriate. “Sorry,” I called back then, giving him a *scratch that* wave as he stood blinking after me. “That was an accident.”

And then I rounded the corner and landed smack in the legendary presence of Donna Cole—and a table of industry people. When had all these other folks showed up? The memory’s a bit of a blur, but Katie Palmer was there. And that girl who starred in that thing about the trapeze artist. And that actress who always played the wisecracking best friend in everything. Dammit—what was her name? I loved her!

That’s when I noticed, nestled in among them, of all people: T.J. Heywood. Backward baseball cap and all.

How *dare* he sit at a table with my favorite director?

Something about the sight of him with his big dude-bro energy smacked me with reality like a board.

Oh, shit.

This was not some fantasy version of my life. T.J. Heywood could never even get a bit part in that. This had to be reality—where T.J. got to go wherever he wanted.

What could this group possibly be meeting about? Making an all-female, beach-bikini *Beer Tower III*?

No. Donna Cole would *never* let that happen.

One thing was clear, though. These people were all really here. At a table together. A table that T.J. Heywood had clearance to join. And I did not.

I froze.

Miscalculation.

I want to point out that, with the exception of T.J.'s hat, no one here was doing anything wrong. These people were just having coffee.

I was the one in the wrong.

In that moment, I switched sides.

All the glee I'd been feeling one second before just disappeared into the realization that, yes, Donna Cole was here in this café, and yes, I was *also* here in this café—but I had zero actual reason to talk to her. She had no idea who I was—nor would she care if she did—and, like everyone else at the table, had no interest in being accosted by a sad and desperate writer.

Ugh. Who did that pathetic writer think she was?

Wasn't there a famous story of a nine-months-pregnant Amy Poehler falling asleep on the subway and waking up to an unsolicited screenplay teetering on her belly?

Oh, god. Was I that subway person?

I couldn't be that subway person.

But I couldn't let Donna Cole just walk out of my life, either.

There was an awkward grace period while the whole table ignored the figure standing cringily beside them with a screenplay in her hand. A moment when I should have spun a 180 on my heel and escaped.

But this is true: my feet couldn't move. It was like they'd been soldered to the floor with a blowtorch.

Then, the grace period expired. The conversation stopped. And this veritable party bus of Hollywood royalty all just turned my way and waited, like a silent chorus of *Who the hell are you?*

A burning humiliation that started at my feet filled my body. My clothes felt hot. My collar got damp.

Time to say something—anything.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt," I said.

Then I faltered as I caught a fleeting glimpse of Donna Cole's expression, perhaps best described as: *Seriously? What the hell?* And I saw Katie Palmer with a similar one. And then I saw T.J. indulge in a little triumphant smile, anticipating how satisfyingly this moment was going to confirm every mean thought he had.

No way out but through. I pushed on. "I just wanted to..."

But what *did* I want to do? Foist my unwanted screenplay on Donna Cole? Beg her to love me? Burst into tears? Dissolve into fumes of shame? *Perish?*

"I just wanted to—" I tried again. Then, "I really don't mean to—"

"Do you need something?" Donna Cole asked.

Oh, god. Oh, god. What had I been thinking, coming over here? Humiliation clutched at my neck. My lungs withered.

Eject! Eject!

I so badly wanted to turn and sprint out of there, leaving only cartoon streaks of shame behind. But my feet still wouldn't move. And I was just wondering if my only option was to drop to the floor and crawl out on my hands and knees ... when Donna Cole's gaze shifted to the side and her face broke into a smile.

I turned, and there was Charlie. Hands in his pockets, hair pointing in ten different directions, demeanor all *aw-shucks*—but smiling big, like he knew exactly how cute he was.

"Charlie!" Donna Cole said, standing and reaching out for a hug.

"Donna," Charlie said, leaning in to kiss both of her cheeks. "Radiant as ever."

"Aren't I?" she said, shrugging with pleasure. She took in the sight of him. "You look adorable."

Charlie nodded. "I've taken up line dancing."

"I love it," she said. Then, leaning closer, she said, "What are you writing these days?"

"I'm writing a rom-com," Charlie announced, loud and proud.

"What!" Donna Cole gasped—total surprise with a splash of delight.

Charlie nodded to confirm, like *Yep*. And then, god bless him, he yanked me sideways, put his solid, nothing-can-ever-hurt-you-again arm over my shoulders, and said, "Under the tutelage of this one."

Charlie, I could kiss you. Wait—oops. I already did.

I felt all eyes shift to me, now under the loyal protection of Charlie Yates's arm.

"But," Charlie went on, "I guess you already know each other."

Donna Cole looked me over with new eyes. "We were just ... meeting."

"Great!" Charlie said, making everything okay with his big we're-all-impressive-people-here energy. "Emma Wheeler, meet the legendary Donna Cole. Donna Cole, meet my new favorite writer, Emma Wheeler."

Donna Cole tilted her head. "Your new favorite writer, huh?"

I did *not* glance over at Jablowmie for his reaction to that pronouncement.

Charlie gave Donna Cole a lifted-eyebrow nod, like *You better believe it*. Then he said, like this was not an opinion, but a fact: "She's good."

Donna Cole looked back and forth between us. "Is she?"

Another nod from Charlie. Then, "Like I haven't seen in—" He stopped and thought a second. "Nope. That's it. Like I haven't seen."

Donna Cole looked at me, like *Interesting*. Then she scooted over at the banquette and patted the seat next to her. "Join us."

"Nope," Charlie said, clamping me tighter. "She's mine today. But Logan Scott can set you up."

Donna Cole squinted in approval. "Good to know."

"Anyway," Charlie said, looking around the table. "Great to see all of you."

And then a funny thing happened: T.J. stood up, clearly wanting to emphasize his only-other-bro-in-the-group status, and leaned across the table in a burst for a fist bump—but he lost his balance and it turned into something Charlie had to dodge.

As the fist flailed toward his face, Charlie jerked away to the side and wound up smacking his forehead into my cheekbone.

Not that hard. But, yes—it hurt.

I made some kind of *oh* noise and dropped my face to my hands as Charlie turned toward me.

"Whoa—whoa—whoa—are you okay?"

Charlie was peering in now, touching at my hands, nudging them to move so he could get a better look.

"I'm fine," I said, head down. "It's fine."

“Show me,” Charlie said, his voice soft, like there was no one else there.

I let him move my hands away so he could get in close for an inspection as T.J., who had just jostled and spilled every coffee on the table, went around apologizing and mopping up the table with paper napkins.

When the crisis was over, Charlie made his next and final move. He took my screenplay out of my hand and tucked it under his arm possessively, like it was something precious and thrilling and intended for him only—and he’d been waiting in agonized anticipation all day to get his hands on it.

Next, he pointed at me with impatience: “Did you say that quick thing you wanted to say?”

The question was like telepathy. I got exactly what Charlie was telling me. It was, I suddenly knew, *not* okay to hand Donna Cole a script out of nowhere, but it was fully okay—extremely okay, in fact—to tell her that you loved her work. Later, I’d thank Charlie a hundred times for helping me find my voice in that moment.

Of course, of course: it made so much sense.

Your first meeting with someone should never be an *ask*. It should be a *give*.

There wasn’t much I could give Donna Cole but admiration. But I genuinely had that in spades. I met her eyes. “I just wanted to say that I’m a wild, adoring fan of your work.” Then I added, “The peanut butter sandwich scene in *The Lovers* is the best thing that ever happened to me.”

I was right. Donna smiled at that. Her first real, non-Charlie-related smile this whole time.

And then, as Charlie started to steer us away, Donna put her hand on my arm. “Stay behind for one quick second?”

I looked at Charlie, like *Do you mind?*

And he nodded, like *Go ahead*. Then he glanced over toward my table and said, “I’ll be waiting over there.”

Take that, Hollywood. I was someone Charlie Yates would wait for.

Donna Cole waited until Charlie was out of earshot. And then she said, “Quick question.”

I nodded. “Of course. Anything.”

Then she tilted her head and said, “Is Charlie Yates in love with you?”

“What?!”

Donna Cole just watched me, like *We both just saw the way he touched your cheekbone*, and waited.

“No!” I finally said. “We’re just—just—writing colleagues. Doing—writing stuff together.”

She nodded, like *Got it*. But then she said, “I’ve just never seen him touch a woman like that, or look at a woman like that, or *rescue* a woman like that.” Then she thought about it. “Actually, I’ve never seen him rescue *anyone*. In any way. For any reason.”

“We’re not—” I said. “We’re just—”

Donna looked around the table. “You heard her, folks. No rumors.”

But of course nothing creates rumors like saying “No rumors.”

Judging from the way the table was smiling at me now, being the rumored love interest of Charlie Yates might not be a bad thing—if you weren’t too fastidious about it not being true.

“Okay, then,” I said. “Well. It’s so great to meet you.”

She reached out and took one of my hands in both of hers. “It’s actually great to meet you, too,” she said. “Any friend of Charlie’s truly is a friend of mine.” And then, before she let go, she gave my hand a warm squeeze, pulled me close for a kiss on the cheek, and whispered, “Don’t break his heart, okay? He’s much sweeter than he seems.”

Twenty-Two

“**WHAT,**” **CHARLIE WANTED** to know on the walk back to the house, “could you possibly have been thinking?” He was ahead of me, calling back his questions in astonishment. “What the hell was going on in there?”

I didn’t know how to answer.

“Donna Cole,” he went on, “is brilliant, and accomplished, and at the top of her game—and she also won’t think twice about ripping out your beating heart and squeezing it like a sponge in front of you before you die.”

“Really?” I said. She’d always seemed so supportive in the red carpet photo on my vision board.

“Not really. But she’s not someone to mess around with, either.”

“I wasn’t messing around.”

“You weren’t messing around?” Charlie challenged, slowing to let me catch up. “You walked over there on a whim—manuscript in hand—with no plan, no strategy, no forethought, and no idea that T.J. Heywood Jablowmie the Third might be sitting at her table, and then you lingered beside her like a lunatic stalker—and that *wasn’t* messing around?”

By the end, we were face-to-face. “You sound kind of mad at me,” I said.

Charlie tilted his head like he hadn’t noticed. Then he started walking again. “I guess I am kind of mad at you.”

“I was trying to seize the moment,” I said.

“That is not how you seize the moment,” Charlie said.

“That’s not how *you* seize the moment,” I said back.

“You can’t accost Donna Cole in a coffee shop, Emma. That’s not how that works.”

“I couldn’t do nothing,” I said.

“Yes, you could.”

“I had to take a shot,” I said.

“But that’s not how it’s done.”

“It’s not how it’s done *for you*,” I said. “You’re famous, and dashing, and beloved.”

“Did you just call me *dashing*?”

“The point is, there are people walking around this town right now wearing T-shirts with your dialogue on it. You have directors begging you for scripts. Donna Cole lights up like a marquee when she sees you. You’re on easy street—and you have been from the very beginning. Do you know how lucky you are that a script you wrote *in college* took off? Or that *The Destroyers* catapulted you to screenwriter stardom? Nobody has it that easy! You’re a damned unicorn. We don’t play by the same set of rules. I can’t just have my people call other people’s people and say *c’est la vie* if it doesn’t work out. Nothing has ever been easy for me. I have to hustle. I have to wrench something out of every opportunity.”

“But you don’t.”

“I beg your pardon.”

“You got that Warner Bros. internship and you didn’t even go.”

“I didn’t not go because I didn’t know how to hustle,” I said. “I *couldn’t* go. Because we found out right after I won that my dad needed another surgery that nobody had seen coming, and there was no one else to look after him.”

Charlie looked down then, and I could see him regretting assumptions he’d made about me. I wished I could send a little snippet of this moment to the me from weeks ago, freshly arrived in LA, trapped in Charlie Yates’s car as he berated me for not wanting success badly enough.

“Ah,” Charlie said, humbled in a satisfying way. “I didn’t know that.”

“Of course not. How would you? You were too busy stuffing awards into that awards drawer of yours.”

Charlie gave me a look.

“The point is, you’ve had it too easy. I heard you once took a phone call onstage—at an awards ceremony—while receiving an award!”

“That was a really important call.”

I glared at him.

“It was also an accident,” Charlie said. “I left the ringer on.”

“But you *answered!*”

He gave a half shrug, like *Fair point*. “That might have been a questionable decision.”

“I’ll say. And that didn’t even surprise me. Because I saw that interview you did with Terry Gross at the Kennedy Center where you were drinking a smoothie the whole time.”

“Should I have been hangry instead?”

“You should have respected the audience! And Terry Gross, for that matter!”

“I offered her a sip,” Charlie said.

I let out a growl of frustration.

“The audience thought it was funny! And so did Terry Gross, by the way. You can get away with anything if everybody has already decided to like you. People love it when you break the rules.”

“Everything you’re saying here is validating my point.”

Charlie decided to get us back on track. “What I don’t understand about that whole Donna Cole debacle back there is why you didn’t just ask me to introduce you.”

I paused.

Now Charlie had to listen to *my* silence.

That idea had never occurred to me.

Finally, I said, “I didn’t realize that was an option.”

“Why wouldn’t it be an option?” Charlie asked.

“I guess I’m used to just—going it alone.”

“But you’re not alone,” Charlie said.

I shrugged. “Maybe not right here, right now. But in general, in life, I am.”

“You have your dad,” Charlie said.

“My dad’s not a writer.”

“The point is, I was standing right there.”

This seemed like such an odd thing to be irritated about. “Look,” I said, “I’m just hoping you don’t fire me before we finish rewriting the script that you keep insisting doesn’t matter.”

Charlie frowned at that.

“We’re done next week, anyway,” I said then.

“You think we’re done next week and then we’re . . . just done?”

“Of course,” I said.

“How could you think that?”

“Well,” I said, “for one thing, I overheard you in the bathroom.”

Charlie frowned. “Whatever that means, it can’t be good.”

“Back on the first day—at brunch with Logan. Through that weird lava-rock sink basin. You said this screenplay was doomed from the start. I know what happens once we’re done here. You give the new version to the mistress, she green-lights your Mafia thing, the world adds one more movie with seventies mobsters in tan bell-bottoms to the pantheon, and I take the express train back to obscurity.”

Charlie frowned, like he wasn’t sure which part of all that to object to. Finally, he said, “You heard that—but you stayed, anyway?”

“Yes.”

“But—why?”

I shrugged. There was no other answer. “Because I just—love you.”

Oh, god! That came out wrong!

“Not *you!*” I corrected fast, my voice pitching up with panic. “Not you—like *you* you. *You* meaning *your writing*. You—like what you *do*. Your work. Stories! Your genius. Not *you!* Obviously! Of course!” And right about here, I gave up and let my voice drop into a sigh of defeat. “You know what I mean.”

“I get it,” Charlie said. “Don’t worry.”

“Also,” I added, just to shift topics, “I was hoping I could change your mind.”

“About what?”

Um—about all of it! Hope! Love! Human kindness! “About rom-coms,” I said.

Charlie didn’t respond to that. Just kept walking. Our feet were exactly in sync now, tapping the asphalt at the exact same time, and Charlie’s place

was in sight. But next, before we reached the house, Charlie said something so odd, I'd wind up thinking about it for days.

Charlie said, apropos of nothing, "I heard what Donna Cole asked you, by the way."

"What Donna Cole asked me?"

"Right at the end. When she asked if I was in love with you."

"Ah. Yes. That was awkward."

"Don't worry. It means she liked you."

"It does?"

"Yeah. It was on purpose. She was making the whole table curious about you. Making you a person of interest. Turning you into a bit of a mystery to solve."

"Huh," I said.

"She was doing you a favor. Status-wise."

"I thought she was just messing with me."

"Maybe a bit of that, too."

In front of his house now, Charlie kicked a rock and watched it skitter down the road.

"I'm not, by the way," he added.

"Not what?"

"In love with you."

"Oh," I said. Then, in case my voice sounded weird, I added, "Of course not!"

"I googled it," Charlie continued, "and I'm not."

"You googled whether or not you're in love with me?"

"I googled how long it takes to fall in love."

"And?" I asked. "How long does it take?"

"Eighty-eight days," Charlie answered, definitively. "And we've only known each other for thirty-one. So. Problem solved."

Why was Charlie googling this? And what nutty professor came up with that number? And what problem, exactly, were we solving?

"I wish I'd known that back at the coffee shop," I said then. "That would've been a great comeback."

★ ★ ★

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, we made it to Act Three, and there were only two—huge, insurmountable—things wrong with Act Three: The ending was 100 percent wrong, and the kiss was terrible.

We were almost done with the rewrite. In a week, I'd pack up all my office supplies and head home. We were galloping toward the finish line now. But I'd saved the hardest part for last.

And by “the hardest part” I meant *the kissing*. All the physical stuff, really. Charlie had done it so wrong, it felt like there was no way to explain to him how to do it right.

“It’s fine,” Charlie kept saying.

“It’s not fine,” I kept insisting. “All you wrote is, ‘He storms in. They kiss.’ That’s it.”

“That’s plenty.”

“It’s really not.”

“I’m not telling the director what to do.”

“I get that it’s not our job to get in there with blocking. But you have to give them something.” He knew this already. A good screenplay had to make readers see it in their minds. And a good rom-com screenplay had to make readers feel it, too.

I grabbed my laptop and plunked it down in front of him.

“What are you doing?” Charlie started, but then he saw all my open tabs up top with rom-com after rom-com. “Are these—?” he started.

“Compilations of movie kisses,” I answered, like *Of course*.

“Where did you find these?” Charlie asked.

“On YouTube,” I said, like *Duh*.

But Charlie shook his head.

“You know—best-of compilations,” I prompted. “‘Best Movie Kisses Ever’? ‘Swooniest Kisses in Movie History’? ‘Most Rewatchable Kisses of All Time’?”

“Rewatchable?” Charlie asked, like he couldn’t fathom what that meant.

“The kisses that you rewatch over and over.”

Charlie just frowned.

“Kisses so good, you’ll watch the movie again just for the kiss.”

Charlie shook his head.

“Kisses so good, you’ll rewind them a few times before you even finish the movie.”

Now Charlie looked at me like I was fully bananas. “Nobody does that.”

“Hello? *Everybody* does that.”

“I have never rewatched a kiss.”

“That’s because you refuse to let yourself be happy.”

Charlie sighed.

“This is important,” I said.

Charlie narrowed his eyes. “Is it?”

“There is exactly *one kiss* in your screenplay as it stands, and it’s the tragic Charlie Brown Christmas tree of movie kisses.”

Did I have a full, curated collection of dramatic kissing clips from around the world bookmarked on YouTube?

Yeah. Doesn’t everyone?

I don’t want to show off or anything, but if these clips had been artworks, I could have started my own very impressive museum.

I had clips from all over the world: Turkey and Japan and Azerbaijan and Iceland. It was almost an anthropology project—curating the best human efforts at kissing. I’d subdivided them into categories of style, too: Accidental, Gentle, Drunk, First, Pretend, Angry, Practice, Stolen, Forgotten, and Goodbye. Not to mention Kisses on Horseback, Rooftop Kisses, and Wall-slams.

Through it all, Charlie sat very still, like a captive.

“Why are you fighting me on this?” I asked.

“I’m not fighting you,” Charlie said. “I’m just not writing a whole, big, ten-page love scene.”

“*One* page,” I said.

“You do it,” he said.

“We’re supposed to do it together.”

“I’ll rewrite the ending at the wedding,” Charlie said, like he could escape.

“Uh,” I said, “that’s *also* going to have a kiss in it.”

Charlie dropped his shoulders, like *Seriously?*

“Yeah,” I said. “This first kiss gives us a sense of what’s possible—but they don’t get their happy ending until they get their happy ending.”

Charlie shook his head.

“Just pay attention, okay?” I said. “You might learn something.”

I pulled up a chair next to him and made him watch them all. The waterfall kiss in *Enchanted Forest*. The in-front-of-a-whole-stadium kiss in *Can't Win for Losing*. The rooftop kiss in Donna Cole's magnum opus, *The Lovers*. We watched the scenes on my laptop while I physically leaned up against Charlie, trying to pin him in place. We watched people kiss in lakes, in snowstorms, in burning buildings, and while transforming into werewolves. We watched lens flares and misty mornings and pouring rain. We watched slow, tender kisses that felt like melting candle wax and passionate wall-slams that felt like possession. We watched mouths and hands and tilted-back throats.

Then, for a grand finale, I made him do a close read with me of Ji Chang Wook executing a perfect Korean drama cool-guy kiss—slowing the clip down frame by frame and pausing to point out “nuances, subtext, and emotional body language of the kiss journey.”

By this point, Charlie was too exhausted to fight me. “First he pretends to tease her,” I said. “Then he puts his hands in his pockets and strikes a conversational yet masculine pose. Then she steps closer, and then he steps closer. And the whole time, he's acting like he's not all that interested. But now look: he's stepped so close that his thighs are touching hers, and his torso is touching hers—but the genius is that his hands are still in his pockets.”

Charlie looked at me like *Why could that possibly matter?*

“There is nothing sexier than a man starting a kiss with his hands in his pockets,” I said, like *Hello?*

Charlie frowned.

“The snug turtleneck also helps.”

“Ah,” Charlie said—sarcastically.

But I had the moral high ground here. I was saving the world one kiss at a time. “Look at how he leans in,” I said, as Ji Chang Wook bent his head lower. “Pretty sure that's the exact geometrical angle of maximum yearning.”

“How many times have you watched this clip?”

But this wasn't about me. This was about the craft of writing—capturing human emotion. Did Charlie *not care about craft?*

“Do we need to watch it again?” I asked.

“Nope,” Charlie said. “I think I got it.”

But he clearly didn’t.

Because if he *got it*, he wouldn’t have argued with me when I said we should use a pocket’s kiss for the grand finale.

“It’s not our job,” Charlie kept saying, “to tell the director how to block the scene.”

“We won’t tell him *or her* what to do,” I kept saying. “We’ll just write it so vividly that she, or he, will naturally do it right.”

“You don’t understand how movies work.”

“Well, you don’t understand how kisses work.”

We wound up arguing about it all through the end of the writing day, all the way through our trip to the grocery store to get ingredients for dinner, and all the way home. We argued while we cooked, Charlie standing next to me, bringing up counterpoint after counterpoint like he was never going to give in.

It was like he liked teasing me. Like he liked getting me worked up.

Like maybe he didn’t even *want* to finish the screenplay.

“You know what you need?” I finally said as I peeked into the oven to check the readiness of the roasting chicken with herbes de Provence. “You need to kiss someone.”

“What?” Charlie recoiled physically like he had to dodge the words.

“Yes,” I said, clanking the oven door closed. I liked the notion more spoken out loud. “You need to remind yourself what kissing is.”

“I know what kissing is,” Charlie said, now shifting from offense to defense.

“What it *feels* like,” I said, feeling more and more pleased with how right I was. “Of course you can’t write a totally immersive kissing scene! Not if your heart is a suicidal bird.”

“Now I’m regretting telling you that.”

“Who can you call?” I asked then, raising myself up to sit on the island countertop, ready to get to work on this idea.

But Charlie just took in the sight of me sitting on his kitchen island. “Margaux never let anyone sit on the counter.”

I nodded like this was good. “We’re breaking all the rules tonight, Charlie. We’re leaving our old limitations behind. Now give me some

names.”

“Names of what?”

“Of people you could kiss.”

Charlie blinked. “People I could—?”

“Kiss, kiss,” I said, in a tone like *Get with the program*. “There have to be women in your life who could help you with this. Friends from high school. Divorcées. Or—what about some of the actresses I’ve seen you with on the red carpet?”

Charlie was totally aghast. “You want me to kiss real people—in real life?”

“All you need is one. What about Liza McGee? She’s cute.”

Charlie could not disguise his horror. “She’s, like, nineteen!”

I shrugged. “That’s legal enough.”

“You can’t be serious. I *work* with these people.”

“Charlie, this *is* work. This is research.” Then, before he could brook another protest, I said, “What about Brooklyn Garcia?”

“She just had a baby! And she hates me.”

I saw a pad of paper at the far end of the island and stretched way over to grab it.

“What are you doing?” Charlie said.

“Making a list,” I said.

“Of women for me to proposition?” he said.

“Of potential sources,” I said, like this was Woodward-and-Bernstein-level stuff.

I wrote down BROOKLYN GARCIA and LIZA MCGEE and then crossed them out. Then I held my pen to the pad. “Let’s brainstorm some potentials.”

“I’m not doing this,” Charlie said. “I’m not going to call up random women and ask them to kiss me.”

“For *research!*” I said, like that made it better.

“It’s creepy.”

“It’s for the sake of art.”

“This script is hardly art.”

“It could be. If you would take it seriously.” Then I had an idea. “What about your ex-wife?”

“What!”

“You’ve kissed her before,” I said, like *No big deal*.

“You have lost your mind.”

“I’m just trying to get you past this mental block.”

“This is not the way to do it. I’m not going to proposition random actresses, or—god forbid—my ex-wife, to do something that literally nobody on earth could possibly even start to understand except for another writer.”

It was meant to end the argument.

But as soon as he said that, we both knew who my next suggestion would be.

“That settles it, then,” I said.

“Settles what?” Charlie asked. “How?”

“Me,” I said, without even stopping to think.

“You?” Charlie asked.

“I’m another writer.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“You just said nobody would understand this except for another writer. And I think you already know this, but, just in case”—I pointed at myself—“*I am another writer.*”

If I’d paused to think it through for any length of time, I would never—never—have suggested it. But I was caught up in the momentum. We’d been arguing all afternoon. He’d been pooh-poohing kissing, and me, and *love itself* all day. I wanted to get past this. I wanted to shake him out of that stubborn head of his. My kissing-for-research idea was a good one—though I could also see how, for anyone else in the world, it might seem a bit bananas.

In truth, I *was* kind of the ideal person for this job. I did a ton of research. I understood how important it was. Plus, this circumvented the whole creepily-propositioning-a-random-woman issue. *I was propositioning him.*

This was the perfect answer.

If the last person Charlie had kissed was the wife who’d left him when he got cancer, maybe he needed something—anything—else to replace that last association. I was no pinup dream girl, fine. But I had to be better than cancer.

I would’ve told him to go find a girlfriend—but we didn’t have time for that.

I could do in a pinch.

“This is a great idea,” I said to Charlie.

“Absolutely not.”

“This is the breakthrough you need.”

“I don’t need a breakthrough.”

“Yes, you do.”

Charlie was backing up now. “Emma, this is nuts. We work together.”

“Exactly,” I said. “That’s why it’s perfect.”

“This doesn’t—” Charlie said, shaking his head. “This isn’t—”

“I can do this. I took two weeks of scuba-diving lessons to write my mermaid screenplay with a very handsy instructor named Karl. Five minutes of kissing is nothing.”

“*Five minutes of kissing?*” Charlie said, like I’d just proposed we run a marathon.

“The point is, you’re right.”

“I’m right?”

“I really am the best person for this job. And I’m fine with it. So let’s go.”

But Charlie was shaking his head with a frantic *no way in hell* vibe.

“It’s not a big deal,” I said.

“We can’t,” Charlie said.

“We *can*.”

I took a step toward him, but he took a step backward. Then I stepped closer, and he stepped back. “Emma? Don’t. Hey—this is a bad idea. Hey! I’m serious.”

At that, Charlie reached for a pair of tongs on the counter, and he held them up like a weapon.

A weapon of self-defense.

Something about that visual stopped me.

I suddenly saw the scene from a different vantage point: a predatory female writer advancing on her coworker as he defended himself with kitchen utensils.

Wow. He wasn’t kidding. This guy *really* didn’t want to kiss me.

Like, at all.

To the point where he would brandish a pair of kitchen tongs.

The sting of rejection hit me, and I held still for a second, not sure how to respond.

I dropped my eyes. Then, to the floor, I said, “You really are horrified by this idea.”

“Not horrified—”

“Repulsed, then, I guess.”

“No, I—”

I couldn’t meet his eyes. I squinted at the window, instead. “I had no idea that I was such a revolting option.”

“Come on, Emma. That’s not it.”

But it really did seem like it *was* it. At least, it felt that way.

“Okay,” I said, feeling everything in reverberations. “That’s fine.”

I turned around and started walking away.

I didn’t even know where I was going, to be honest.

Hell of a rejection, huh?

Charlie didn’t even want to kiss me for research.

How unappealing are you, exactly, to not even qualify for a research kiss?

How stomach-turning must you be for a man to take up arms against you?

I could dwell on feminist-y questions like why the hell Charlie Yates of all people got to be the *arbiter of my personal appeal* later. Right now, only one thing was clear: I’d been fully willing to kiss him. And Charlie Yates—most definitely, most emphatically—had *not* been even the tiniest bit willing to kiss me.

Fine. Fine.

The rejection descended into a burning humiliation. All I could think of to stop it was to flat-out flee the room. I wanted to pretend that I didn’t care—but I felt so rejected, I couldn’t even do that.

“Emma,” Charlie said, following me.

“I get it. It’s cool,” I said, walking faster. “I’ve just gotta—I just need to—” But my mind was jumbled. What did I need to do? What out-of-nowhere pressing issue could serve as the pretend reason I was leaving?

There was nothing. Nothing convincing, anyway.

“Emma,” Charlie said, with a tone like *Don’t*.

Don’t what? Don’t get your feelings hurt? Don’t overreact?

Don't walk away?

Charlie was gaining on me, and I wasn't sure what I would do when he caught up.

I just needed a minute to regroup and hide all my feelings behind a mask of indifference—a minute that Charlie wasn't giving me.

Which seemed wildly impolite.

A minute to hide! Was that so much to ask for?

But that's when Charlie caught my arm and tugged it.

I stopped and let him turn me around.

I could have ripped out of his grasp and taken off sprinting, I guess. But the game was already up. I was a writer, not an actor. My hurt and disappointment and infinite vulnerabilities were plain to see in every possible way.

The sight of my face just confirmed it all for Charlie.

I watched him reading me in real time.

“Did I—disappoint you just then?” Charlie asked.

I looked down. “No,” I said. But it was an obvious *yes*.

“Did I hurt you?”

I shook my head, but I didn't meet his eyes.

“Did you *want* to do that research kiss?”

“No.” Not convincing.

“Emma...” Charlie said, taking in all this new information.

Finally, I brought my eyes up.

Charlie was leaning in with concern. And intensity. And maybe a whole new understanding of who he had become to me.

He took a step forward—and then it was my turn to take a step back.

“Are you pitying me right now?” I asked.

He took another step closer, and this time, I backed into the kitchen doorjamb.

“It's fine,” I insisted. “I don't care.” But I was such a bad liar.

When he took a final step, there was nowhere for me to go.

He closed the gap and leaned in closer. “I didn't want to kiss you—” he started.

“Yeah. I got that. Thank you.”

But Charlie gave a sharp headshake, like I hadn't let him finish. “For research.”

I held very still.

“I didn’t want to kiss you *for research*,” Charlie said again, watching me to see if I got it.

Did I get it?

Neither of us was sure.

Charlie gave it another second—waiting for my expression to shift into understanding.

But I was afraid to understand. What if I got it wrong?

So Charlie gave up on the waiting.

Instead, he cradled my face in his hands and tilted me up to meet his eyes.

Then he shifted his gaze from my eyes to my mouth, and he wasn’t just looking, he was *seeing*. It was like he was taking in everything about my mouth—from color, to texture, to shape. It was physical, like it had a force, and I swear I could feel it, like he was brushing the skin of my lips with nothing but the intensity of his gaze.

And then he leaned in closer, staying laser-focused on this one place right in front of him.

The anticipation was excruciating.

I watched his mouth as he leaned closer.

And then, just as we touched, he brought his hand into my hair to hold me close.

And I stretched my arms up around his neck.

And the kiss just took over.

His mouth felt smooth and firm and soft all at once, and the warmth and tenderness of it all swirled together with my dawning understanding that *this was happening—Charlie Yates was kissing me*. And a dreamy euphoria hijacked all my senses, and I felt like long grass billowed by the wind.

I was just sinking into it when Charlie pulled back a little and opened his eyes to check my reaction, like *Was that okay?*

Um. Was that even a question? We’d need a better word for okay.

I reached up behind Charlie’s neck to pull him back.

Had I been ragging on Charlie for forgetting what kissing was like?

Because I’m not sure I ever knew in the first place.

There’s something about a kiss that brings all the opposites together. The wanting and the getting. The longing and the having. All those

cacophonous emotions that usually collide against one another teaming up at last into a rare and exquisite harmony.

I remember pressing my mouth to his, and plunging into a feeling of being lost—submerged in touch and closeness. I remember our arms wreathing and entwining around each other, and pulling tighter and exploring. I remember how my palms wanted to feel everything they could find: the sandpaper stubble on his neck, the muscles across his shoulders, and his solid torso under his T-shirt.

He felt real.

But more than that: he made me feel real.

The kiss lit a warmth that spread through me like honey, softening everything tense, and soothing everything hurt, and enveloping everything lonely.

I'd dated other people before. I'd had a few mild relationships. But I'd never felt anything like this.

And then a thought hit me: *This might be love.*

Oh, god. This really might be love.

But then, before I could decide if that was a good thing or a disaster, the oven timer for dinner went off.

Loud. Off-key. Insistent.

We ignored it until we couldn't ignore it anymore, and then we broke apart—him looking exactly as disheveled as I felt.

I walked over to the stove, but then it took me a second to find the oven mitts that were on the counter right in front of me. I pulled dinner out, and set it on the stovetop for a second while I tried to pull myself together.

I guessed Charlie was doing the same.

Because just as I turned to him, unsure of how to shift gears from *whatever that just was* to doing an ordinary thing like eating dinner ... Charlie said, with a slow nod, "I get it now."

"Get what?" I asked.

Charlie met my eyes. "Why we're rewriting this story."

Twenty-Three

THE NEXT MORNING, on FaceTime, Sylvie and Salvador were a little dismayed.

“You had a totally epic kiss,” Sylvie asked, more than once, “and then you just ate roasted chicken?”

“With herbes de Provence,” I said, in our defense.

“You didn’t ... I don’t know—confess a bunch of feelings?” Sylvie asked.

“Or have a night of passion?” Salvador suggested.

“No!” I said. “No. It was a first kiss!”

But Sylvie was calling bullshit on that. “You’ve been living together for weeks.”

“But as professional colleagues.”

“So...” Sylvie said. “Was the kiss real? Or was it research?”

“It was real,” I said.

Sylvie and Salvador looked at each other like I was some kind of love weakling. “Are you sure?”

“It was real for me,” I said. “And for him, too—I think. Just based on nonverbal cues.”

Sylvie frowned.

“He said he didn’t want to kiss me for research—and then he kissed me. So that implies it wasn’t research.”

But Sylvie kept frowning.

“What?”

“Could that have been part of the research, though?” she asked. “To pretend it wasn’t research?”

“No!” I said. “That’s crazy!” But was it also a good point?

Now we were overthinking it.

“This is ridiculous,” Sylvie said at last. “Just go ask him.”

“Ask him?!” I gasped in horror. “I will never ask him!”

“You don’t want to know?”

“I desperately want to know,” I said. “But I will just privately obsess over it, like a normal person.”

“Why can’t you just have a conversation? Tell him you like him and see if he likes you?”

“Please,” I said. “If human relationships worked like that, I’d be out of a job.”

Sylvie thought it over for a minute before saying, “Guess it’s time for Plan B.”

“What’s Plan B?”

“I’m FedExing you my slinkiest slinky dress and my strappiest strappy sandals.”

“For what?”

Sylvie leaned into the FaceTime camera, like *Duh*. “Put them on and see what happens.”

“Just put on a slinky dress for no reason and walk around his house like a lunatic?”

“Like a *sexy* lunatic,” Sylvie corrected. “It’s a maxi dress with a plunging V-neck made of silky fabric printed with giant tropical leaves. You’ve never worn anything like this in your life. You’re going to discover a whole new side of yourself.”

“What possible excuse would I have for wearing something like that?” I demanded.

“You’re a writer,” Sylvie said. “Make something up.”

★ ★ ★

UGH. LEAVE IT to me and Sylvie to overthink that lovely kiss and drain its afterglow with overprocessing.

Had it just been research?

I hadn't thought so at the time. But the fact that it hadn't led to anything else seemed to refute that view. We had a mad kiss—and then ate dinner. It hadn't seemed strange at the time, but the more I overthought it, the less sure I felt.

Maybe I didn't really want to know.

I sent Charlie an overly cheerful text that said, Day off from swimming today! Enjoy sleeping in!

And then I took a shower and did the best I could with my hair and put on just a hint of eyeliner and lipstick—enough to try to look better without looking like I was trying. And then I tried on ten different outfits to wear before deciding to go with my usual writerly duds under my usual strawberry hoodie so that if that life-ruining kiss last night had, after all, only been research on Charlie's end, I had plausible deniability.

It hadn't been research for me.

But I would never, ever admit that—unless it hadn't been research for Charlie, either.

I showed up at the writing table and couldn't decide if Charlie had put product in his hair—or if it was just wet. If he was wearing aftershave—or if that was just his deodorant. If he was glancing my way more than usual—or just the regular amount.

One thing was for sure: There was a bouquet of peonies on the table.

“Nice flowers,” I said, sitting down.

Charlie looked over, like he hadn't noticed them. “Yeah.”

“Were they there yesterday?”

“Don't think so.”

“Any idea how they got there?”

Charlie nodded. “We were out of coffee this morning, so I had to hit the store.”

“Peonies are my favorite flower.”

Charlie looked up at that. “Are they? I wondered.”

“You wondered?”

“Yeah. Because you always look at them longingly when we're at the market, but then you never buy them.”

I wrinkled my nose. “They’re like nine dollars a stem.”

“So you want to buy them, but they’re too expensive?”

“They’re just not the kind of flowers you buy for yourself.”

Charlie was quiet a second, and I realized he was suppressing a smile. “I’m glad I bought them for you, then.”

★ ★ ★

WE WORKED ALL day, and I can’t vouch for Charlie, but I had a buzzy feeling of anticipation the whole time. The kiss yesterday, the peonies, the way he kept glancing at me over his laptop screen—these things fluttered around my consciousness like butterflies of hope.

All signs pointed to *not research*.

It’s a wonder I could concentrate at all.

But then, in the late afternoon, Charlie got a phone call.

His phone started ringing, and he looked down at it for a second before he answered.

“This is Charlie,” Charlie said.

And then, I swear, he’d been listening only a few seconds when, in response to whatever he was hearing, he launched into a massive, hacking coughing fit—almost like a reverse spit take.

He had to set the phone down—that’s how all-encompassing it was.

“Sorry,” Charlie said, when he’d calmed down enough to bring the phone back to his ear. “Could you repeat that?”

Then he listened for a good minute—and as he did, his face went grayer and grayer, and I found myself at full attention, trying to figure out what the caller was saying. But nothing on Charlie’s end gave me any solid clues. “Yes, I did,” Charlie said, standing up now and starting to pace. “It was just for—” he started, and then followed that with “That’s right.” Then his whole body seemed to sink before he said, “You’re kidding me, right? Please tell me you’re kidding.” And then he made his way toward the French doors and—there’s no other way to describe it—hurled himself out to the yard.

I didn’t dare follow—just watched from inside.

I was engulfed in curiosity about what was going on, but he’d gone to the far side of the pool to pace, so I couldn’t hear anything. All I could do

was watch his body language and try to read his lips.

Neither of which yielded results.

Was he arguing with someone? Trying to talk someone out of something? Working very hard to stay calm—but not succeeding?

More important: What was it all about? Was it the exec's mistress saying she no longer wanted the screenplay? Was it the producer himself saying the Mafia thing was off? Was it Charlie's ex-wife? His accountant? Some relative with bad family news?

I'd never seen Charlie act remotely like this.

The more he paced and argued, the more he coughed—as his breaths caught on each other and tripped over themselves. When the phone call finally ended, and he dropped his arm and let the phone fall away from his ear, he stood there, churning in the aftermath ... and then he took his top-of-the-line phone and fully pelted it across the yard.

Then he paced the side of the pool again, grabbing his hair and letting it go, turning one way and then turning back, not seeming to see anything around him.

Whatever it was, it wasn't good.

And just as I'd made up my mind to go outside and ask if he was okay, Charlie came crashing back into the house, plowed straight over to the liquor cabinet, poured himself the biggest glass of whiskey I'd ever seen, and downed the whole thing.

"Charlie?" I said. "Are you okay?"

What a question. He was not.

Charlie turned at the sound of my voice, like he'd forgotten I even existed, and then came straight at me so fast I took a few steps backward, before he grabbed hold of me in a suffocating hug—and held on and didn't let go for a long time, pulling in big breaths and pushing them out—that felt more like he was clinging to me for dear life than anything else.

And that's when I suddenly wondered: Was he sick again?

Before I could ask, he'd gone back for another drink.

"What's going on, Charlie?" I asked then, from across the room. "Is it—Are you sick? Is that what it is?"

This question really pissed him off. "I *told* you," Charlie growled. "It's *just allergies*."

"No," I said. "I mean *sick sick*."

Sometimes you intuit a thing on impulse and you turn out to be right.

This was not one of those times.

Charlie gave me an Olympic-level eye roll that involved not just his face, but his neck and shoulders, too. Then he said, “Not everybody is dying all the time, Emma.”

There was a bitterness to his voice I hadn’t heard before. “I know. I just —”

“Let’s not add your paranoid hypochondria to this situation, okay? It’s bad enough without you backing up a whole dump truck of crazy.”

I blinked.

This wasn’t about me, of course. I’d just walked into Charlie’s own personal mysterious bad moment and suffered some collateral damage. But the meanness still stung. I withdrew a bit, and then I said, “I just want to know if you’re okay.”

“Guess what? You don’t have to know everything. Yes, you’re living in my house, and yes, we’re spending a lot of time together, and yes, we get along almost stupidly well—but that doesn’t give you the right to pry into every nook and cranny of my existence. Sometimes I’m going to have shit to deal with that’s none of your damn business.”

“Fine,” I said.

“Great,” Charlie said.

“Don’t tell me, then,” I said.

“I’m not going to.”

“I just wanted to help.”

“There it is, right there,” Charlie said. “I don’t need your help, and I sure as hell don’t want it. So why don’t you just back off?”

★ ★ ★

HE MARCHED OUT after that, and I didn’t see him again until after midnight.

I spent the day “working,” but was totally unable to concentrate, walking to the front door every time I heard a car go by. He’d left without his car, and he’d also left his cell phone in the backyard, and I just couldn’t imagine how a phoneless, carless person could be gone so long in LA.

If it wasn’t that he was sick again—what was it?

I called Logan, but he didn't know. I called Sylvie to process, but we were just like loony birds trading nutty theories. Could he have a secret love child? Could he have been falsely accused of murder? Could his financial advisors have stolen all his money?

"My bet's on the ex-wife getting remarried," Sylvie said.

But I wrinkled my nose. "He doesn't even like her. I'm telling you this was something big. Something *catastrophic*." But what?

★ ★ ★

I WAS ASLEEP on the sofa when Charlie finally got home—and rang the bell twenty times.

I heard the sound in my dream for a minute before realizing it was real. Then I shuffled to the door and opened it.

I think he kept ringing the bell even after I'd answered, but all I remember was the sight of his face—covered in blood. One swollen purple eye, a split lip, and a veritable goatee of blood that had gushed from a recently punched nose.

"Charlie!" I gasped at the sight. "What the hell happened?"

But Charlie just squinted at me. "What happened to what?"

"To your face! You look like somebody beat you with a two-by-four."

Charlie touched it, like he needed to jog his memory. "Oh," he said. "Bar fight."

"Bar fight?!" I demanded, like nothing could be more ridiculous. Writers *imagined* bar fights. They didn't actually *do* them.

"Why aren't you sleeping?" Charlie asked then.

"Because you just woke me up."

He turned around like he was looking for himself. "I did?"

I sighed. "Yes. When you rang the bell for ten minutes straight."

"I'm the worst," Charlie said, remembering. "Another reason to stay away from me."

"Who gets into a bar fight?" I demanded. "That's a TV thing. That's not a real thing that real people do."

Charlie shrugged. "Some guy called Jack Stapleton an overpaid hack."

"So you just *hit* him?"

“I meant to *verbally spar* with him,” Charlie said, “but he wasn’t much of a wordsmith.”

“You tried for a battle of wits in a bar.”

“It escalated quickly.”

“Charlie,” I said. “You’re such a dummy.”

Charlie nodded in agreement. “It’s possible I was spoiling for a fight.”

“You’re way too famous to be getting into bar fights,” I said.

“This wasn’t a paparazzi kind of place.”

Charlie had wedged himself against the doorframe while he was ringing the bell—and as soon as he tried to un wedge himself to come inside, he stumbled forward, attempted to catch himself, and wound up draping himself over me and collapsing.

“Hey!” I said, buckling under his weight. “Get off!”

From the crook of my neck, he tried to bargain with me in a muffled voice: “Thirty seconds.” Then he lifted his head to check my reaction. “Okay?”

He was looking at me intensely, waiting for an answer.

Or maybe it wasn’t intensity. Maybe he was just trying to focus his eyes.

“Let’s go in, Charlie,” I said. “We need to figure out what to do with your face.”

But Charlie didn’t move. “You always say people falling on each other isn’t romantic—but then it always is.”

His bloody face. His puffy eye. The scrapes on his cheek. The smell of liquor and other people’s cigarettes. “Nothing about this is romantic,” I said.

But I wasn’t sure if I was telling the truth.

“That’s debatable,” Charlie said, tripping a little over the syllables.

I shifted into action, strapping my arm around his rib cage to haul him toward the kitchen, but as soon as I did, he started coughing deep, heavy coughs—and I wondered if he’d broken a rib.

I made him work on drinking a bottle of water while I pressed all around on his torso to see if anything felt broken or tender. “I’m fine,” Charlie kept saying. “Nothing’s broken.”

Next, I went through like a whole roll of paper towels to clean the blood off his face. He watched me the whole time.

“Sorry that this is gross,” he said.

“I’m wondering if we should take you to the hospital.”

“Over my dead body,” Charlie said.

“That’s the whole question,” I said.

“I hate hospitals,” Charlie said.

“That’s not relevant,” I said.

“It looks worse than it is.”

So I googled “How to know when to take someone to the hospital after a bar fight” and discovered that many of the symptoms for a worrying head injury are the same as just being stupidly drunk.

“I’m not going, anyway,” Charlie said. “This is gratuitous googling.”

“I’ll decide if you’re going,” I said, busting out my in-charge voice.

“I’ll do that thing where protestors lie down on the road—and then you’ll have to drag my two-hundred-pound ass the whole way.”

“Maybe I will.”

“Yeah, good luck.”

I’d dragged my dad many places for many reasons. “I’m stronger than I look.”

“Actually,” Charlie said, his voice softening, “I believe that.”

★ ★ ★

BY THE TIME I was done cleaning up his face, Charlie looked a lot better. He had a cut on his swollen eye where the other guy’s fist had popped the skin. I leaned in close to peer at it. “You should get stitches for this.”

“Nope.”

“It might leave a scar.”

“There are no words for how much I don’t care.”

I sighed. And then I just kind of gave up. Yes, I’d helped my dad many times—but my dad had *wanted* me to help him. It was one thing to drag an incapacitated man to the hospital. It was quite another to drag an unwilling one.

“Drink,” I urged, filling Charlie’s water glass.

To my relief, he did—big, sloppy gulps that sloshed out and ran down his neck.

I found some Neosporin and a Band-Aid. Then, while I took my time applying both, I asked, “What was that phone call, Charlie?”

When Charlie didn’t respond, I prompted: “Earlier today? The phone call?”

Charlie shook his head. “I can’t tell you.”

“You can, though. You really can.”

But he shook his head again. “That’s need-to-know info.”

“Why?”

“Because it’ll ruin your life.”

“It’ll *ruin my life*?” Just how drunk was this guy?

“Or maybe it’s *my* life it’ll ruin. But you won’t be too pleased about it, either.”

Once the Band-Aid was on, I shoved myself up under his armpit like a crutch, then half walked, half dragged him toward his bedroom.

At his bed, he collapsed backward across the comforter.

“Do you want to put on pajamas?” I asked.

Charlie kept his eyes closed and shook his head.

His feet were still flat on the floor, so I knelt down to untie his shoes and take them off.

When I finished, Charlie was sitting up—and looking down at me.

“I think,” he said, surprisingly lucid for a moment, “that you’re my favorite person I’ve ever met.”

“Oh,” I said, looking back down. “That’s very nice of you.”

“And I’ve met”—and here, less lucid, he made a big, drunk gesture—“everybody. In the world. And you’re my favorite. Out of all seven billion.”

What did words like that mean coming from a person in this state?

I had no idea.

“How crazy is that?” Charlie asked, leaning closer to study my face, like he might find the answer there. “I’ve known you six weeks, and I already can’t imagine my life without you.”

“Six weeks can be a long time,” I said.

“Not quite six weeks,” Charlie corrected then. “Thirty-seven days.”

“How do you know that?”

“I just know.”

“You’re weirdly good at counting, for a writer.”

But Charlie didn't respond. He just let his gaze travel from my eyes to my chin to my cheekbones to my mouth and back again, taking in the sight of me like he might never see it again.

For a second, I wondered if he might kiss me.

But then, instead, he clutched me to him in a tight hug.

And before he let go, he whispered, "What am I going to do, Emma? You're going to hate me so much tomorrow."

Twenty-Four

CHARLIE WAS RIGHT.

By the end of the next day, I really would hate him.

But I didn't believe that at the start.

At the start, I couldn't even imagine not liking him. In forty-eight hours he'd kissed me madly like I'd never been kissed before, and bought me peonies, and then gazed at me longingly in a drunken state. Other than the whole mystery phone call—followed by the storming out and the bar fight—all signs were good.

All signs about me, anyway.

So when Charlie finally emerged from his room the next day around noon, I had already resolved to talk to him.

I'd expected to find him looking rough. There was no way he wouldn't have a brutal hangover. But he showed up at the dining table shaved, showered, and as neat and tidy as writers ever get. Looking quite dashing, in fact—aside from that shiner on his right eye and the little Band-Aid trying to cover the cut. Even his split lip managed to look rosy. How could he look so good today—after yesterday?

I walked closer and intercepted him at his chair before he could sit down.

“Can I talk to you?” I asked.

Maybe the slight wince that crossed his face should have been a red flag. And maybe it's never a great idea to proposition a hungover man. But I'd been up since six, and I'd changed outfits three times, and put on mascara, and I was nervous and ready to get it over with.

Timing was never my thing, anyway.

"What is it?" Charlie asked, not meeting my eyes.

"I woke up thinking about how you told me last night that I was your favorite person—" I began.

"Did I?" Charlie interrupted.

That threw me a little. Did he not ... remember? "Yeah," I said, peering closer for a sign of recognition. "You told me I was your favorite person. In the entire world."

"That doesn't sound like me," Charlie said.

"Well..." I said. "You said it."

"If you say so."

This conversation was already off the rails, but I was so focused on the plan I'd been formulating all morning that I couldn't seem to shift. I just kept churning forward on the thing I'd decided to do. Which was to confess to Charlie that I liked him.

"Anyway," I said, "I keep thinking about how much I've loved getting to be here with you, and work with you. But it's not even just the working. It's everything—you know? The grocery shopping, the morning swims, the..." I was starting to lose my nerve. "The shenanigans."

Charlie frowned like he didn't love my word choice. "The shenanigans?"

I nodded. "And the thing is, when you kissed me the other day—I was just flooded—just overtaken, really—with this feeling of infatuation. At first I thought it might just be hormones or, you know, just a chemical reaction to being kissed after"—I hesitated, and then finished with—"kind of an epic dry spell in the love department."

The *love department*? Oh, god. This was not the elegant soliloquy I'd written in my head.

"But the thing is," I went on, taking a breath. "The thing is ... it didn't go away."

Charlie shook his head. "What didn't?"

I took a deep breath for courage, and I held his gaze. "The infatuation."

Charlie's shoulders dropped.

Which didn't seem like a good sign.

But I'd started this, and apparently I was going to finish it.

I went on. "I seem to have—kind of—developed a thing for you. A strong thing. A distracting, preoccupied, swoony, crush-like thing."

Charlie closed his eyes, like *Fuck*.

Up until I'd started confessing, I'd felt strangely sure that he had a thing of his own for me. But as I stood there, in real time, I could feel that hope blowing away like dandelion seeds on the wind.

But I kept going. "Over and over, since you showed up in my life, you've helped me and looked after me and been a genuine source of strength. And I don't know what happened on the phone yesterday, but I do know one thing for sure. I want to be a person who does that for you, too."

Charlie dropped his head and pressed it against his hand, like I'd just said the last thing he wanted to hear.

"Whatever's going on," I said, "I want to help."

At that, Charlie lifted his head back up, and he had a new expression: a combination of determined and stoic and fully uninterested. "That's not a good idea."

"It's not an *idea*," I said, like maybe I could win with a rhetorical technique. "It's a feeling."

But Charlie just shook his head. "Emma, you can't."

I shook my head back. "I can't?"

"We're not going to have that kind of relationship."

"But," I said, "the"—I wasn't sure how to describe it, but I finally went with—"kissing thing that happened?"

Charlie straightened his shoulders. "That was a bad call."

A bad call? What was he—a referee?

I felt like I needed to stand up for that best-kiss-of-my-life kiss. "I thought it was a good call."

His voice was a monotone. "I shouldn't have done that."

I really wasn't following. "Why not?"

"Because we"—he gestured between us—"can't start anything."

"Too late!" I said. "It's already started."

"Then it needs to stop."

"What if I don't want to stop?"

“That’s not relevant.”

“It is to me!”

“I’m sorry,” Charlie said. But he didn’t sound sorry.

Was this a version of his tell? Was he pretending not to care *because he cared so much*? But why would he do that? There was no reason to.

“Charlie,” I said, meeting his eyes and taking a step closer. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Charlie said. “I just—don’t like you like that.”

I could feel my throat tightening with disappointment. “You don’t?”

“I don’t.”

“Not ... at all? Nothing?”

Charlie just watched me.

“Okay,” I said. “But ... so ... why does it feel like you *do* like me like that?”

Charlie shook his head. “Maybe it’s because we’ve been living together. Maybe it’s because we found a great writing groove. Maybe you’ve been alone too long.”

“I’ve been ... *alone too long*?” That was *his* autobiography—not mine.

“I don’t know, Emma!” Charlie said, like something had just snapped. “It was a mistake. It was a fucking mistake!”

At that—at Charlie Yates *using the f-word* against our beautiful, ethereal, life-changing kiss—I stepped back.

But Charlie was worked up now. “We don’t know what’s happening! We don’t know the future! All you want is answers—but I don’t have any! I could move to Alaska tomorrow! I could sail around the world!” Charlie threw his hands up, like *Who knows?* “I could get back together with my ex-wife.”

At that, I started coughing for no reason. As soon as I’d recovered enough to talk, I said, “Who did you just say you’re getting back together with?”

“*Could*,” he corrected, like that was an important point.

“Get back together with—?”

“My ex-wife,” Charlie said, without blinking.

“The mean one?” I said, like there might be other choices.

Charlie nodded, but he said, “She’s not actually mean.”

“The ex-wife who left you on the day you got cancer?”

He gave me a look. “Yes, but—”

“The ex-wife you don’t even like?”

Charlie made a weak protest: “It’s complicated.”

“You hid from her in a kitchen pantry like she was some kind of banshee!”

“That happens in a marriage sometimes,” Charlie said.

“You’re not even married!”

What was happening? What was going on? I was so confused. Ten minutes ago I’d been floating on an afterglow of a kiss for the history books from a guy I was 99 percent sure was exactly as into me as I was into him ... and now he was *thinking of* getting remarried—to a person he couldn’t stand?

Unbelievable! But maybe I just didn’t want to believe it.

Maybe I really had been alone too long.

“Are you dating her?”

“Who?”

“The mean ex-wife.”

“Not yet,” Charlie said. “But we could start. Any day now.”

What?

“I’ve heard a lot of crazy things in my life,” I said then, “but this is the craziest.”

Charlie nodded like he agreed. Like we were *both* baffled.

But I guess the takeaway here was that Charlie had said no. Charlie had said he wasn’t interested. Charlie had said it was a *bad call*.

That wasn’t confusing. That was simple.

I felt things for Charlie, but Charlie—apparently—felt nothing for me.

So that just had to be the end of that.

Twenty-Five

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT—AFTER a famous writer has given you a hard pass in his dining room at the start of your writing day together?

You, uh ...

You just, uh ...

You just get back to work.

You nod for a few seconds, blankly, letting it all register ... and then you take a long, slow walk back around to your own side of the table, sit primly in front of your own laptop, and place your fingers on your keyboard.

Did I want to storm out of the house and never come back—possibly swiping one of his drawer awards on the way out?

I did.

But I stayed. For the contract.

Going through all this and then forfeiting the money at the end would just be bad to worse. If I had to stay until the end to get paid, then I'd stay till the end to get paid.

A display of strength, if nothing else.

A decent person would prorate my pay. I'd gladly leave for 90 percent of the total. I'd give up 10 percent in a heartbeat to get out of here.

But *was* Charlie a decent person?

I honestly wasn't sure. About anything.

Three more days. We had three days and a good chunk of Act Three left before we were done. I wouldn't leave. I'd finish my work here like a non-crazy professional, and then coolly collect my check and go home.

The best thing to do after a person flat-out rejects you is, of course, to never, ever see that person again. But since that wasn't an option, I had to figure out how to cope.

With Charlie "Bad Call" Yates.

It was the imbalance I hated: we both now knew for sure that I thought he was special, and desirable, and lovable—and that he did *not* feel those things about me. Lots of people didn't think those things about me, I pep-talked myself, and it was fine. And I'd had unrequited crushes before, too, and survived them. But it was the combination that was so lethal. Him knowing that I liked him—and still not liking me back.

Charlie had rejected me—and that was a fact. Nothing could change that.

But how I responded to it? That was my choice.

I could let it totally destroy me—sit across the table all day, staring forlornly at Charlie with tears dripping off my face. Or I could pretend it wasn't a big deal.

It *was* a big deal.

To me, anyway.

But if the last ten years had taught me anything about myself, it was that I could survive anything. Or at least—I could survive being rejected by a man who couldn't remember what love felt like.

But how was I supposed to work like that?

That was the question I couldn't answer. How could I think about dialogue and commas and character arcs now? How could anything going on with imaginary people even compare to the humiliation that had suffused my entire emotional landscape like a fog? And how, exactly, was I supposed to craft the last thing on my to-do list for the screenplay: the *happy frigging ending*?

I'm glad you asked, because I googled it, and now I have many tips for how to transition from a soul-crushing rejection right on over to a productive writing day with a coworker: Make eye contact, because that's what alphas do. Stand up tall, because it summons a sense of pride. Keep your movements simple and direct to show that you aren't flustered. Lift

your eyebrows so you look unconcerned. Take deep breaths because they inflate your chest and hide your collapsing soul.

I wrote down a cryptic list to remind myself: Stand up. Lift. Breathe. Inflate.

And then, past the crux of it, I gave quiet thanks for how disappointment so easily gives rise to contempt.

Really? *This guy?*

I snuck a look at him as we got to work. His hair part was all zigzaggy, like no one ever taught him how to do that. His collar was half-flipped, he'd missed a button, and that Oxford was redefining the maximum limits of ruffled. And while I'd always seen Charlie's can't-be-bothered-to-do-laundry vibe before as proof positive that he got to make his own rules, today it just seemed pathetic. *Really, dude? You're in your thirties and you can't iron a shirt?* Also—his shoe was untied, his fingernails were chewed, and he'd never learned to type. For real. He hunted and pecked. Remarkably quickly, but still: If you're going to be a writer, shouldn't you at least learn to type? Wasn't that the bare minimum?

See? He wasn't so great.

I was fine.

This was freeing, in a way.

I could go home with no attachments when this was all over and return to all the many, many delightful activities I did back at home.

Whatever they were.

Maybe I'd take up line dancing for real and astonish us all by getting so good that I went to the Olympics.

Did they have an Olympics for line dancing?

Maybe I'd start one.

Point being: only three more days.

Be strong, I told myself. *You're fine*.

But my eyes betrayed me. Every other part of my body was being utterly obedient: my body was neat and composed, my fingers were typing busily—even if only the *asdf jkl;* keys over and over—and my heart was trudging along numbly but steadily. Only my rebellious eyes were acting out—so much that I had to pretend to sneeze over and over so I could wipe them.

“Allergies,” I told Charlie.

“The worst,” Charlie agreed.
Eyebrows up. Sit tall. Deep breath.
Don’t collapse. Don’t collapse. Don’t collapse.

★ ★ ★

WE WORKED ALL day, and after a while, in that way that stories can save you—it started tugging me along like a little paper boat in a stream. The pull of that familiar current helped a lot.

Here’s another tip for being okay when trapped in a small space with the man who rejected you: Play loud music in your earbuds like an angry teenager.

Loud, *cool* music—because you are a cool person and no guy who doesn’t appreciate you can touch that.

I had a playlist called “Coolness,” in fact, and I just let it rip. The bands were cool, the songs were cool, I was cool for listening to it—and Charlie Yates could go to hell.

Needless to say, there was not much reading aloud of dialogue today.

No sharing snacks, no chatting, no collaborating.

I never took my headphones out—worked for six straight hours without touching them. Even wore them to the bathroom.

As we worked, I vacillated over whether or not to cancel the dinner I’d promised to cook Charlie—*tonight*—for his five-year-iversary of being cancer-free.

On the one hand, why on earth should I cook for him? I should leave him alone with his meat bags and go out to a fancy restaurant by myself.

But on the other hand: I *was* a very good cook. Reminding Charlie of all the endless culinary delights he’d given up by having no interest in me seemed like a good idea.

Also: he was officially cured of cancer. That was bigger than my feelings about some petty rejection. Whatever Charlie Yates might mean to me personally in this moment—I could appreciate the bigger picture of what he meant to the world in general.

Yes, I detested him. But I was still *glad he was alive*.

Maybe “glad” was a bit strong.

I broadly supported the concept of him continuing to exist.

Also? Sylvie really had FedExed her tropical-print spaghetti-strap maxi dress and her strappy sandals to Charlie Yates's mansion. The package arrived while we were working, along with a note from Sylvie with no greeting or signature that said, simply: "Make him regret he was ever born."

I liked the look of those words.

I liked them so much, they answered my question for me.

I'd make Charlie dinner tonight, and I'd wear that crazy tropical dress, and I'd celebrate his good health like a virtuous person, and I'd save face at last by cooking something so delicious, it would haunt him for the rest of his life.

And through it all?

I would wear that dress.

★ ★ ★

WHEN CHARLIE HEADED out in the late afternoon, I was so relieved that I didn't ask him where he was going because I officially didn't care.

Nor did I check in with him about what time he'd be back.

Yes. Objectively, on a night when you're cooking dinner for someone, it is helpful to know what time that dinner should be served.

But asking seemed ... needy.

Who cared, right? *Whatever.*

We usually ate around seven, so I just planned for that.

I went to the store alone and bought the ingredients for a beef Wellington—which was, everyone in my family at home agreed, the most mouthwatering, buttery, comforting, life-altering entrée in my very large repertoire—as well as vegetables for roasting and a bottle of real champagne from the actual French region of Champagne.

Also, I abandoned the doughnuts-for-dessert concept—trading it out for a snazzy lemon and rosemary tart, instead.

While the beef Wellington was in the oven, I dressed with a distinct *getting ready for prom* energy. I even googled a tutorial for an "Inside-Out Ponytail Updo" and tried to wrangle my hair into submission. I FaceTimed Sylvie so she could walk me through the process of putting on eye shadow—and voilà: three attempts later, I had eyes that were, both Sylvie and Salvador agreed, "at least ten percent sexier than usual." The sandals were

half a size too big, but it was fine. I wasn't going hiking in them. And then, the dress: miles of voluminous, foliage-printed fabric from the empire waist down—and almost nothing from the string-bikini-style top up. The spaghetti straps held up two simple triangles and then crossed over a nakedly open back.

Basically, the top would've been racy even on a Saint-Tropez beach, and the bottom was like I was wearing one of Maria von Trapp's curtains—*as a curtain*.

But somehow it worked?

Did it feel soul-tinglingly vulnerable to wear a garment that left whole sections of my body exposed to the open air? It did. But was it also kind of a power move to be so fearless that I didn't even need clothes?

Weirdly, yes.

Let's just say it was a far cry from my strawberry hoodie.

Sylvie made me send a mirror selfie to our group chat—and when she saw it, she texted immediately back: That's a life-ruiner.

Perfect. Exactly perfect.

I wasn't trying to change Charlie's mind about me.

I just wanted to ruin his life a little.

And so I set the patio table with his ex-wife's decorator's fanciest cloth napkins, and a little army of candles for mood lighting, and I figured out how to work his stereo system for a little background music, and I got everything ready just in time for the sun to set and Charlie to come home and find it all waiting for him like a glorious gift that he could not keep.

I took the beef Wellington out of the oven to rest and took off my apron, and I sat down at the patio table, struck a pose of nonchalance like I wore tropical-foliage-print maxi dresses all the time, and waited.

And waited.

Seven o'clock came and went.

By seven thirty, I was feeling pathetic enough to open the champagne as a gesture of defiance—so that when Charlie got home, at least I'd be doing something fun.

I was pleased to discover that I'd accidentally bought a sweet champagne.

It was, in a word, yummy.

Too yummy. By nine o'clock, I'd accidentally imbibed the entire bottle.

Oops.

I'll note that I wasn't a big drinker, and I hadn't touched any food all evening, so a full bottle of champagne on that empty stomach was—*how to put it?*—way too much.

By the time I realized I'd emptied the bottle, it was too late.

The world looped and undulated, and my limbs felt rubbery. I remember thinking I had to be careful with Sylvie's favorite dress—but then I couldn't quite remember exactly what “careful” meant.

It hit me that *I was drunk* right around the same time it hit me that *I'd been stood up*.

Stood up by Charlie Yates.

Stood up for a dinner that I'd prepared only for revenge.

As the minutes had crawled past, I hadn't texted Charlie on principle. I refused to seem like I cared. Whatever, whatever. He could show up or not—it was all the same to me.

Though, of course, it wasn't.

I had needed a triumph tonight. That's why I'd gone to all this trouble. To prove to the world—and mostly myself—that despite everything, I was still awesome.

But this wasn't a triumph. It was the opposite.

And somehow, just as I was thinking that, I noticed the high diving board watching me from across the pool.

I was weaving toward it before I'd even made a decision. My brain was so far behind my body that I think I was halfway up the ladder before I realized what I was on my way to do.

A swan dive.

Charlie had said I couldn't. And so now, to punish us all, I would.

There was nothing more awesome than a swan dive.

I'd done them all the time in high school. Not usually in a backless dress and strappy heels after a bottle of champagne, but still. This was in my skill set. Charlie had forbidden me to dive off that board—*forbidden!*—but Charlie wasn't here now, was he? If he really wanted to keep me off it, maybe he should show up for dinner.

It was just the rebellion I needed.

And I was just thinking that as I reached the top of the ladder and stepped onto the board to see Charlie stepping out onto the back patio,

gawking up at me as he took in what was happening.

“Emma, what are you doing?” Charlie called up—raw panic in his voice as he moved closer.

“I’m swan diving,” I said, my lips feeling a little useless.

Charlie made it to the edge of the pool, staring up. “Emma, come down.”

“I don’t want to,” I said.

But Charlie started moving now—reaching the ladder and starting to climb.

“You stood me up!” I shouted toward the sky.

“I stood you up?” Charlie answered from the ladder.

I turned around to face the ladder and wait for him. “For your five-year-iversary dinner. Your cancer-free-abration. Your perfect-health blowout bash. Your not-sick-anymore jubilee.”

When Charlie reached the top, he said, “I didn’t know that was still happening.”

“Why wouldn’t it happen? We put it on our digital calendars!”

“Yeah,” Charlie said, “but that was before.”

“Before what?”

“Before the whole thing about me possibly getting back with Margaux.”

“You think I’m that petty?” For the record, I was totally that petty.

“No, I—”

“You think just because I like you—*liked* you—and you have absolutely zero interest in me at all that I can’t be happy that *you’re not sick with cancer?*”

“I guess I just—”

“Where were you?” I demanded.

“I was visiting Cuthbert.”

I gave it a beat so we could all take that in. “You stood me up for a guinea pig?”

But Charlie refused to be cowed. “He’s off his food again.”

“So?”

“So Margaux asked me to sing to him.”

Seriously? I was all for humane treatment of animals, but *come on*. I flared my nostrils at Charlie. “I’ve been waiting for you for three hours while you were serenading a rodent.”

“That’s an unfair spin.”

Fine. Whatever. “I made you a beef Wellington!” I shouted. “Do you have any idea how much those cost?”

“Let’s go eat it,” Charlie said, clearly hoping to inspire me to come down. “Let’s eat it right now.”

“It’s cold now,” I said. Then, “It’s ruined.”

“Cold beef is a delicacy,” Charlie said, reaching his hand out like I might take it. “People eat cold beef all the time.”

“Feed it to Cuthbert,” I said, bouncing on the board.

“I don’t— That’s not—”

“The point is,” I said, turning back to face the pool, “I’ve moved on.”

“Emma, come back this way—*please*,” Charlie said, and I could hear genuine fear in his voice. Of course, that didn’t mean much. I’d heard plenty of things in his voice.

“The beef Wellington was going to be my swan dive...” I said.

“Do you mean ‘swan song’?”

I gave him a look, like *Don’t tell me words*. Then I ignored him. “But now I guess the swan dive will have to be a real swan dive.”

“Emma—do *not* do a swan dive!”

“Charlie—do *not* tell me what to do!”

“Emma, I’m begging you. Come here. You look very unsteady.”

“It’s the shoes. They’re too big.”

“It’s not the shoes. It’s the wine.”

“Champagne,” I corrected.

But, just then, Charlie took a step out onto the board. I felt his weight register.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m coming to get you.”

“Don’t do that, Charlie. You’re afraid of this thing.”

“I’m more afraid of you falling off it.”

“I’m not going to fall.”

Charlie started edging his way toward me.

“Cut it out!” I said. “You’re scared of heights.”

“I’m not scared of heights. I’m scared of water.”

I pointed down at the pool. “What do you think that is?”

“I can’t just leave you up here. I have to come get you.”

“That’s ridiculous! You can’t even swim.”

“I *can* swim. I just *don’t* swim.”

“Get down,” I told him. “Leave this to the professionals.”

“The *drunk* professionals? In evening gowns?”

The evening gown. I’d almost forgotten. Then, just because I suspected he’d say anything I wanted him to right now, I said, “Don’t I look amazing in this thing?”

And then Charlie surprised me by saying, “You look fucking incredible.”

Wow. Okay. That was better than I’d hoped for.

“Emma,” Charlie said. “Please come here. You’re so drunk.”

“I’m not drunk,” I said. “I just drank too much.”

“That’s the literal definition of being drunk.”

“Why are you so argumentative?”

“Why won’t you come here?”

“Because,” I said. “I don’t want to.”

It felt good to defy him. And upset him. And worry him. Was this what all the parenting books I’d read while raising Sylvie had meant by “attention-getting behaviors”? I never understood it until now. It did feel good to have someone’s full attention—good or bad. Especially someone who already had yours.

I wouldn’t notice this until I thought about it later, but that thing Charlie was so good at where he pretended like things didn’t matter? He wasn’t doing that right now.

He was the opposite of nonchalant.

He wasn’t pretending not to care. He was openly caring. Very much.

Maybe I liked that, too.

Charlie had made it halfway out on the board—to the part where the side rails ended. He was clutching the railing with white knuckles as he stretched his other hand out to me. I looked at it. It was trembling.

Huh.

I could scare the hell out of him on a high dive.

Maybe that was enough for me. Or maybe I’d sobered up a little. Or maybe I just didn’t want to ruin Sylvie’s dress. But I decided to come down.

“Fine,” I said. “No swan dive.”

I *felt* the sigh exit Charlie's body. "Thank you," he said, leaning farther out.

But why did walking back feel so much harder than walking out had been?

Maybe because I'd realized Charlie was right.

I *was* more drunk than any person on a high dive had any right to be.

This *was* a bad idea.

Bad ideas are a lot scarier once you realize how bad they are.

I took a step, and then bent my knees to absorb the bounce of the board.

I took another step, and did it again.

And then I took a third step ... and it was probably the alcohol, but the too-big shoes certainly weren't helping: the board under me bounced a little, and I guess it pushed the heel sideways as it came up, and the too-big sandal was loose enough that the whole shoe rotated under my foot ... and then, to sum up: I tripped.

And fell. Into the pool.

Twenty-Six

IT WAS BASICALLY a belly flop—but onto my side.

I tripped on that crazy shoe—and then I went over. Not gracefully.

Whatever I did on the way down, it was—I think we can all agree—*not* a swan dive.

The specifics are a bit blurry, but there was flailing involved. And thrashing. And screaming. And then a shatter like a shotgun as the side of my body smacked the surface of the water so hard that it popped the side seam of my sister’s maxi dress.

It hurt like hell. And it knocked the wind out of me, too. And all I could do was sink downward for a minute, hopelessly tangled in Maria von Trapp’s curtains.

In that moment, I felt so bad for what I’d just done to Charlie.

Poor, aquaphobic Charlie. He’d shimmy back down the ladder as fast as he could and then call 911 as he paced back and forth at the edge, watching me undulate beneath the surface—helpless to save me.

Oh, god. I was a goner. They’d never get here in time.

This was it. I’d die in Esther Williams’s pool and become a footnote on her Wikipedia page: **A failed screenwriter drowned in the pool of her second mansion after getting stood up by a man who couldn’t swim. Her last words were: “Cold beef Wellington is not a delicacy!”*

What *were* my last words? Were they guinea-pig related?

Now we'd never know.

A fitting end for me, in a way. Maybe my mermaid screenplay would sell now—with the macabre addition of a real-life aquatic tragedy to the story.

No matter what, Charlie would carry the crushing guilt of this moment for the rest of his life. I'd wanted revenge, yes—but not this much.

Poor guy.

But then, before I had the chance to list any more regrets, or feel thankful for my blessings, or start writing my mental obituary, something clamped around my waist and started yanking and tugging me up toward the surface.

Charlie.

Charlie's arm, to be specific. Clasped tight around my waist as all his other limbs propelled us through the water.

Huh.

Charlie was not panicking at the pool's edge. He was underwater with me.

He really could swim.

As soon as we reached the surface, I coughed and sputtered and gasped, and Charlie rotated me onto my back and tugged me by the shoulders, his legs scissoring beneath us, to the steps at the shallow end.

He propped me on the second-to-top step and I draped over the pool rim, both of us breathing and coughing as Charlie clapped his hand on my wet shoulder, lacking any other way to help. We stayed like that for a few minutes, just trying to regulate our breathing. My side was stinging like hell from ankle to shoulder where I'd hit the water's surface.

Heck of a way to sober up.

But I was alive. I should be good-and-drowned right now, not suddenly hyperaware of the wet smacks of Charlie's bare palm as he patted my naked shoulder.

"Are you okay?" Charlie asked then.

I turned toward him. "I'm okay," I said. "Are *you* okay?"

In response, Charlie coughed some more.

"Oh, god," I said. "You're half-drowned."

But Charlie shook his head. "I'm fine." As he settled, he turned to inspect my body. "But you really belly-flopped."

“I *side* belly-flopped,” I pointed out, like that was better.

“You can break a rib hitting water from that height. You can—”

“I know, I know. Explode your internal organs. You told me.”

Charlie met my eyes. “Did anything explode?”

“Just my dignity.”

“Well,” Charlie said, a microscopic glint of affection in his eyes. “That’s nonessential.”

“Tell me about it.”

We kept breathing for another minute before Charlie said, “I knew this was going to happen.”

“Did you? I didn’t.”

Charlie tried to shake some water out of his ear. “I knew from the very first day you came here that some way, somehow, you’d make me go off that high dive.”

I frowned. “Did you go off the high dive?”

Charlie nodded.

“Just now? You jumped in after me? That’s how you wound up in the water?”

Charlie nodded again.

Why was that so touching? “I’m very impressed, Charlie,” I said. “High dives are scary even if you *aren’t* afraid of water.”

“I agree.”

“But you jumped in, anyway.”

Charlie was looking into my eyes now.

“That was genuinely courageous,” I went on. “You saved my life. You performed a *water rescue*.”

There was something electric about it all. The way he was leaning in close, and examining me, and dripping wet—but somehow so aware of me he didn’t even seem to notice. Focused on me like he couldn’t see anything else.

“Thank you,” I said, and I really meant it.

But it was all too intense. Charlie had to break the moment. “Couldn’t you have tried to die in, like, *any* other way?”

I wrinkled my nose. “I prefer the worst possible way. That’s just my style.”

Charlie shook his head at me. “Anything except water next time, if you don’t mind.”

“But,” I pointed out, “I did give you a chance to conquer your aquaphobia.”

Charlie smiled and looked down. “You’re such a pain in the ass.”

“What I’m hearing,” I said, “is ‘thank you.’”

At that, a breeze came through the yard and Charlie saw the shivers on my arms. “You’re cold,” he said.

He looked a little blue himself. “So are you.”

“Come on,” he said.

“Where?”

“Inside. To dry off.”

As he said it, he brought his arms around to gather me up and hoist me out of the water like he was some drenched, bedraggled, corduroy-clad superhero.

“This feels like something we should be writing about, not doing,” I said into Charlie’s neck as he carried me up the steps and back to dry land.

But Charlie just said, “I wouldn’t even know where to begin.”

Charlie carried me straight to his room, wrapped me in a towel as big as a sheet, and sat me on his bed while he rifled through his chest of drawers to find us some dry clothes. I was genuinely shivering now, so I just held very still and waited.

“I’m going to change first real quick,” he said from behind me, “and then we’ll deal with you.”

“Okay,” I said, teeth chattering a bit.

“Don’t look,” Charlie said. He was just feet away—in easy looking distance.

“You don’t have to tell me that,” I said, squeezing my eyes tight.

And then there was a notable silence where I heard brushes and slaps and squelches as Charlie—presumably—stripped down out of his sopping clothes, toweled off, and replaced them with dry ones.

I wasn’t looking. I would never have looked.

At first.

But then there was this moment when I guess Charlie must have been closing a drawer and he pinched a finger, maybe—because next, I heard

him yelp, and when I looked over, he was hopping around and shaking his hand.

Shirtless.

He'd achieved full pants status ... but he hadn't even started on the shirt.

It was a bit of a shock, to be honest.

We'd done lots of swimming together, of course, and so I'd seen his chest and his shoulders and his whole ... upper half before. Maybe it was the context this time—in his bedroom, me still somewhere south of sober, him *very recently naked*.

"You *looked!*" Charlie said, like I was a cheater.

"You *yelped!*" I countered, like he was a troublemaker.

"I was fine."

"I didn't know that."

"Close your eyes again," Charlie commanded.

"Put your shirt on," I commanded back.

But I closed them. And waited. Poutily.

By the time Charlie arrived in front of me with a set of sweats for me to use, I was semi-determined to never open them again.

"It's fine now," Charlie said.

"I don't trust you."

By the time I finally peered out through my lashes, Charlie was wearing a hooded sweatshirt printed with the words I'D RATHER BE WITH MY IMAGINARY FRIENDS.

"Who's that quote by?" I asked, dropping all pretense and frowning.

"Me, actually," Charlie said. "I said it to my sister at a family dinner once, and she got it printed on a hoodie."

Then he held up the one he'd grabbed for me: WRITERS DO IT ON THE PAGE.

I met his eyes, like *Seriously?*

Charlie shrugged. "My sister keeps giving me writer-themed workout gear."

"That one is ... humiliating," I said.

"I agree," Charlie said, pulling me up into a standing position so we could get started. "But it's fleece-lined."

I was shivering too much to argue. "Fine."

“Here,” he said, holding out the set.

But I shook my head. “I’m too cold.”

“You won’t warm up until you’re dry,” Charlie said.

I *was* shaking. That much I knew for sure.

Charlie must have looked at this wet, shaking, still-drunk human in front of him and decided we had nothing more than a medical situation on our hands. He didn’t hesitate. “I’m going to help you, okay?” he said.

“Help me do what?”

“Change.”

“What! No!”

“Look,” Charlie said. “You can’t stay like this.”

“I’ll do it,” I said, reaching out a shaky arm for the hoodie.

But then, I dropped it. We both looked down at where it landed.

“Somebody’s got to get you into some dry clothes,” Charlie said, picking it back up. “Just pretend I’m a doctor.”

“But you’re not a doctor.”

“You should’ve thought of that before you catapulted off my diving board.”

I really was quite cold.

“Fine,” I said, not seeing a viable way to argue. “But you have to close your eyes.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“Echolocate,” I said. “Like a bat.”

“Emma,” Charlie said. “That’s not—”

“There’s no way in hell I’m letting you *see me naked*,” I said, in a tone like I would gladly die of hypothermia before I ever let that happen. “And I don’t think that mean ex-wife girlfriend of yours would be too thrilled about you doing that, either.”

“Fine,” Charlie said. “I’ll close my eyes.”

“Fine,” I said. “Don’t peek.”

Had I been thinking that Charlie seeing my shivering, wet, quasi-hypothermic, goose-pimpled naked body would be too erotic for either of us to handle?

Because whatever I’d just insisted on was worse.

Charlie did close his eyes—and I never saw him try to cheat—but that meant he had to put his hands all over me to figure out how to peel that wet,

tangled maxi dress off.

“I think it ripped when I fell,” I said.

“It definitely did.”

“How can you tell?”

“You don’t want to know.”

Oh, god. What had Charlie seen?

At least for now, he wasn’t looking.

But since he couldn’t *see* me, he had to *feel* me. All over. In places I’d never even really noticed or thought about before—from the inside of my elbow, to the crown of my hip, the soft pooch below my belly button, to my ... withers. And everywhere else, too. I’m telling you, those hands were *omnipresent*—as he untangled knotted wet cloth, and moved limbs for better positioning, relentlessly feathering accidental brushes and strokes in unexpected places that gave me a whole different kind of shivers.

I clutched the loose sweatpants and sweatshirt to guard my front like a protective barrier between us. But it was no match for the touching.

I was too cold to enjoy it, of course.

Mostly.

Once the dress was in a sopping pile on Charlie’s floor, he had to come back up halfway with his hands to find my underwear elastic on my hips and then roll those down to my ankles so I could step out of them. And then he had to come back up and reach around behind my waist to unhook the low-back strapless bra, the mechanics of which totally threw him.

I guess he could have turned me around to work on the hooks. But he didn’t. He just encircled me with his arms, and I shivered nakedly there while he tugged and yanked at the hooks, the stubble of his jaw brushing against my cheek as he made almost imperceptible breaths of frustration into my ear. What did he smell like? Some kind of classic barbershop shaving cream, maybe? Sweet, and a little salty, too. Whatever it was, I wished I could steal some to take back to Texas.

“I hate this contraption,” Charlie said, in apology for taking so long.

I really was freezing. “Push and *then* pull,” I said, through trembling lips.

Once every wet thing was off, I handed Charlie the sweatpants while retaining the sweatshirt—carefully positioned in front of my torso like a

polyblend shield. He bent down and arranged the sweatpants so I could step into them and then worked them up my legs to my waist.

“Better?” he asked.

“Getting there,” I said.

Then, eyes still closed, he held the sweatshirt open like an O so I could slide into that, too.

As soon as I was in, Charlie opened his eyes.

“Hey,” I said. “I didn’t say you could open your eyes.”

“You need socks,” Charlie said, all business. He grabbed a thick pair from his drawer and squatted down by my feet to put them on. I braced myself against his shoulder for balance.

As he finished with the socks, he looked down at the wet, empty dress as if that, of all things, was stumping him.

“Just throw it away,” I said.

“It’s a hell of a dress,” Charlie said, in protest.

“It’s ruined now,” I said. In more ways than one.

Charlie didn’t fight me. He tossed it toward his trash can, but missed.

“I can’t believe you just made me do that,” Charlie said then.

“What?” I asked. “Throw away my dress?”

“Change your clothes with my bare hands.”

“Stop complaining,” I said. “You’re fine.”

But Charlie wasn’t about to stop complaining. “Classic Emma,” he said. “Everything that you say is not romantic *is* romantic. You said it’s not romantic for people to fall on each other, but then you fell on me and it was. You said line dancing isn’t romantic, but then we went there and you ogled that Italian guy and I thought I was going to lose my mind. And here you are telling me to strip you down naked with my eyes closed, like if I can’t see you it’ll be PG-13, but instead I’m having to put my hands all over you—and it’s not better, it’s *so much worse*.”

By the time he was finished, he’d stood back up and was face-to-face with me.

His eyes were dark, and he looked kind of mad.

“Are you mad at me?” I asked.

“No,” Charlie said, still looking mad.

“I thought you didn’t feel feelings like that,” I said. “I thought your heart was a suicidal bird.”

“I feel feelings, okay?”

“Yeah, but not *those* feelings. Remember? I had to explain to you what love feels like. And you don’t even like me like that, as you’ve explained in very clear terms. And you’re getting back together with your mean ex-wife. Nothing about any of this should be a problem for you. There should be nothing going on here but mechanics and knitwear.”

Charlie was frowning hard now, like he had fifty different things he wanted to say but couldn’t decide between them.

I waited. Frowning back.

Finally he said, “I’m not getting back with Margaux, okay? That’s not happening. That was never going to happen.”

“You said it was.”

“I said it *might*.”

“Are we parsing verbs now?”

“The point is—” Charlie started, but then he stopped himself.

I gave it a second, then I said, “What? What is the point?”

His voice quieted. “The point is, we should find you a blanket. And dry your hair.”

“I’m not cold anymore,” I said.

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

Charlie dropped his gaze to my mouth. “Your lips are blue.”

I dropped my gaze to his. “So? Yours are, too.”

“I’m not the person who was just shivering too much to put on my own clothes.”

“Well, I’m not the person who’s super mad about nothing.”

At that, we stared each other down. What were we even fighting about?

I looked at his bluish lips again, and he looked at mine.

And then there was only one thing to do.

I grabbed a fistful of his sweatshirt right at the neck, and pulled him closer into a kiss.

For the record, he kissed me back.

With enthusiasm.

The second our mouths met, he was clutching me to him, and I was clutching back and we were devouring each other like hungry animals. Maybe it was all just physical. Maybe this kind of thing was bound to

happen if you made any man peel off your wet dress and slide you limb by limb into a set of his own fleece-lined sweats.

But I didn't care.

He didn't like me like that—but I didn't care.

I was leaving in two days—but I didn't care.

His heart could only attack its own reflection—but I didn't care.

This moment, right here—no matter where it came from, or what it meant, or what it would or wouldn't lead to—was worth it.

He clutched me tight with his arms, and I ran my palms over his jaw and into his hair. There were so many questions whirling through my head that I couldn't even pay attention. Was this kiss ruining all other kisses that had ever existed—or *would ever exist*? Was there some way to crawl inside his body? How, exactly, could I make this go on forever?

I wasn't cold anymore, that was for sure.

I took a step back toward the bed, not breaking the kiss, and Charlie followed.

Then I took another step, and he followed that one, too.

Then, when the backs of my calves touched the bed frame, I tightened my arms around his neck to hold on as I climbed up onto the bed—never breaking the kiss—and tried to pull him there after me.

But as soon as Charlie realized what I was doing, he pulled back and broke away—leaving me kneeling there alone.

He took a second to collect himself, breathing hard. Then he said, “Emma, we can't.”

“Sure we can.”

“We already said we weren't starting anything.”

“But we seem to keep doing it anyway.”

“Emma, we agreed.”

“*You* agreed,” I said.

But now he was returning to his senses.

He shook his head. “We have to stop.”

“Why?”

“You've been drinking, for one.”

“I am totally sober.”

“That's exactly what a drunk person would say.”

“The belly flop sobered me up.”

“That’s not how that works.”

“Maybe it’s the hypothermia—”

“You do not have hypothermia.”

“—or maybe it’s the adrenaline. Who knows what kinds of chemical reactions go on inside the human body? But I’m fine.” I touched my pointer finger to my nose a couple of times for proof. “See? Easy! We’re good. I could walk a straight line right now. I could do a cartwheel. I could take the SAT.”

“Emma,” Charlie said, “there’s an empty champagne bottle lying on its side in the flower bed.”

“I admit that’s a large quantity of alcohol,” I said, trying to sound extra sober. “But I drank it slowly and responsibly over a long period of time. Like a grown-up.” Then, for added panache: “Like a *French* grown-up.”

“Emma...” Charlie said, shaking his head. “You are not in a state to give consent—to anything.”

Ugh. Now he was throwing *consent* at me?

How was I supposed to argue with that?

Maybe I could use my feminine wiles.

Did I *have* feminine wiles?

I decided to find out.

“Come here,” I said, waving him closer.

Charlie leaned cautiously in.

“I’m leaving in a few days,” I said conspiratorially. “We’ll never have to see each other again. And so I’m wondering if you’d be willing—just real quick”—and I still can’t believe I suggested this—“to go to bed with me.”

“What!” Charlie yelped, pulling back.

“I think it’s a great idea,” I said, refusing to participate in his drama.

“Emma,” Charlie said, shaking his head. “Do I have to explain what consent is to you?”

“I won’t tell anyone,” I stage-whispered.

“There will be nothing to tell,” Charlie stage-whispered back.

“Look,” I said, changing tack, “I have never in my whole life had the chance to sleep with someone who I really, really wanted to sleep with.” To be clear, “really, really wanted to sleep with” was a euphemism for “was hopelessly half in love with.”

Maybe more than half.

But that was need-to-know information.

“And,” I went on, “I would really, really like to sleep with you. Specifically.”

Charlie closed his eyes with a *What a nightmare* sigh.

But I kept going. This was my shot, and I was taking it. “I don’t live a life where chances like this come along very often. I may never get a shot like this again. So you’d really be doing me a favor. I’m not saying we should date—or even stay in contact. Just for fun, huh? Just a little treat. All the good stuff, and none of the angst. My life doesn’t have time for real romance anyway. My schedule’s too booked with”—I couldn’t think of what it was booked with, and somehow I finished with—“worry and stress.”

There it was. That was my pitch.

For a tiny second, Charlie held very still—and I wondered if he was tempted.

I studied his earnest, writerly face and felt a little buzz of hope.

But that’s when Charlie said, “Absolutely not. No way in hell.”

I gave him a second to change his mind.

Then, when he didn’t, I asked, “Charlie?”

“What?”

“Why don’t you like me back?”

Charlie blinked, like he never in a million years saw that coming.

“Is it my hair?” I asked, already agreeing. “Is it the frizz?”

“No!” Charlie said. Like he was offended by the question.

“Is it the color?” I pulled one of the corkscrews straight to take an appraising look. “I get it. The way it scratches the backs of your eyeballs. It’s a lot.”

Charlie shook his head. “No,” he said. “I love your hair.”

Huh. Okay. “Is it my strawberry writing hoodie?” I asked. “I know it’s crazy. But my”—my breath caught unexpectedly here—“my mom gave it to me.”

“Your strawberry writing hoodie is adorable,” Charlie said, his voice softer now.

But I was searching for an answer. “Is it how I ripped your screenplay apart when I first came here? That couldn’t have been fun for you. Or how I

mocked you so much for trying to open biscuits with a can opener? Or how I keep rolling my eyes at your Mafia movie? I could revise my opinion on that. Maybe I haven't been giving leather bell-bottoms a fair shot. Am I too chatty—is that it? Too opinionated? Too direct? Maybe if you tell me what it is, I could try to fix it.”

“Stop talking,” Charlie said. “You're making me mad.”

“So it's ... not fixable. Is that what you're saying?”

“You don't need fixing,” Charlie said. “I'm the one that needs fixing.”

There was such impossible finality in his voice.

“You're asking me what's wrong with you,” Charlie went on, “but you should be telling me what's wrong with *me*. I am not a catch, Emma. I'm an insomniac. I'm a misanthrope. I like imaginary people better than real ones. I haven't folded laundry in, like, four years. This isn't a rejection for you. It's a lucky escape.”

What was he doing? Trying to argue me out of liking him?

None of those things were deal-breakers, but okay.

None of those things were deal-breakers ... but maybe *the fact that he was listing them* was. How fully, incontrovertibly, utterly uninterested in me must he be to construct a whole case against himself like that—to my face?

I took a five-point-five-second breath.

“Okay,” I said, nodding.

“Okay, what?”

“Okay, I get it.”

“You do?”

I nodded. “You really don't like me.” I nodded some more. “I'll stop bothering you. I got carried away. I've never had a writing partner before. Or lived with a guy. I must have”—and here I quoted him again—“connected dots that didn't need or want to be connected.”

Charlie glanced away.

“I kept thinking we must be having a misunderstanding. But there is no misunderstanding. Is that right?”

Charlie nodded and met my eyes again. “There is no misunderstanding.”

“You know I like you, and you know I am *propositioning* you,” I said. “And any feeling I keep having that you like me, too, is just wishful

thinking bending my perceptions—because you are clearly, plainly saying no.”

Charlie nodded, like he was really sorry about it.

Then he said, “I am clearly, plainly saying no.”

Twenty-Seven

I NEVER GOT the chance to wake up—as I should’ve—just *marinating* in humiliation.

I never got the chance to open my eyes and feel horrified beyond description that I had drunkenly fallen off of Charlie Yates’s high dive, and then drunkenly forced him to rescue me, and then drunkenly tried to coerce him—a man who was clearly *so not interested*—into bed.

It was enough to keep my head churning shame like butter for years.

But there was no time to even begin.

Because before my alarm went off, I got a call from Sylvie.

Not one of her fun FaceTime calls. A real, old-fashioned, middle-of-the-night emergency call.

At three thirty A.M.

“Sylvie?” I said, as I fumbled with the phone in the dark.

“It’s Dad,” she said, and the panic in her voice told me everything. “He fell down the stairs.”

“Which stairs?”

“To our apartment.”

“The *concrete* stairs?”

“He’s in the ICU right now. He won’t wake up. It’s bad.”

“How bad?” I demanded.

“Emma. You need to come home.”

My mind ground like it was in first gear on the freeway. “Okay,” I said. “I’ll—I’ll change my ticket.”

“No,” Sylvie said. “There’s no time. Send me your flight info. Salvador’s mom works for Southwest.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, opening my laptop and looking for the confirmation email. I forwarded it, and then I said, “Done. Now what?”

“Now go to the airport,” Sylvie said. “Right now.”

★ ★ ★

I DIDN’T EVEN shower—or change out of Charlie’s WRITERS DO IT ON THE PAGE sweatshirt. I brushed my teeth, raked my hair into its pom-pom, stuffed everything I owned into my suitcase and still-broken rolling carry-on, ordered an Uber, and left.

No time for a note, even.

Charlie was still asleep, of course.

As I climbed into the back of the Uber, Sylvie was calling me with an update. “We got the flight switched,” she said. “How fast can you get there?”

“How fast can we get to the airport?” I asked the driver.

“Hour and fifteen,” he said, “on a good day.”

“This flight’s at six,” Sylvie said.

“That’s not enough time,” I said.

“Just try,” Sylvie said. “There’s not another open seat until the red-eye.”

She did not say, *And by then it might be too late.*

Then, feeling semi-ridiculous, I said to the driver, “I’m so sorry, but do you happen to know any shortcuts for getting there faster?”

He kept his eyes on the road. “Not really.”

“I’m cutting it very close for my flight,” I said, like we might team up for a Formula One–style race against the clock.

“They know you’re coming,” Sylvie said. “Maybe they’ll hold the plane for you.”

“Airlines don’t hold planes for people, Sylvie,” I said. “They have regulations. And rules. And requirements. And other passengers!”

“But maybe,” Sylvie went on, unfazed by reality, “given the whole situation—”

“What *is* the whole situation? I have no idea what’s going on.”

Now that we had a minute, Sylvie took a deep breath. “He had a drop attack on the apartment stairs and took a very hard fall.”

“He knows not to take those stairs!” I said in protest.

“The elevator was out of service,” Sylvie said. “He must have thought, *It’s only one flight*. He must have thought, *What are the odds?* But it happened. He fell all the way to the landing. His face is all cut up and swollen, and he had to get stitches on his forehead, and he doesn’t even look like himself. I took a picture at the ER, but I can’t even bring myself to send it to you. If I could unsee it, I would.” Sylvie’s breath sounded ragged. “He lost consciousness when he hit the landing, and he hasn’t woken up. Mrs. Otsuka’s seven-year-old grandson called 911 right away, and they stayed with him the whole time.”

“The *seven-year-old grandson* called 911?”

“He’s very mature.”

I sent a silent thank-you to Mrs. Otsuka’s grandson.

Sylvie went on. “The scan of Dad’s brain showed a subdural hematoma, which is bleeding between the brain and the skull. But the skull doesn’t have any give. So when bleeds happen there, there’s nowhere for the blood to go. If the pressure builds up too much, it can cause brain damage or even death.”

“How bad is Dad’s bleed?”

“It’s...” Sylvie hesitated. “It’s not good. They showed us the CAT scan of his brain, and the blood is pushing his entire brain off-center. I mean, the doctor circled the pool of blood on the image with his pen and said, ‘This is the blood,’ and I was like, ‘Dude, even I can see that.’”

“So what do they do? How do they get it out of there?”

“Surgery,” Sylvie said, giving the short answer. “He’s in right now. Basically, as soon as they saw the scan, they rushed him to the OR. It’s called”—I heard paper flipping like she was checking her notes—“a ‘burr hole.’” Now she sounded like she was reading: “They drill a small hole in the skull to siphon out the blood.”

“He’s in emergency surgery right now?”

“There wasn’t time to wait.”

“Are you in the waiting room?”

“I stepped outside. Salvador says that thing about cell phones messing with hospital equipment is real.”

I had so many questions, I didn’t know where to start. The biggest, loudest question, of course, was *Will Dad be okay?*

But Sylvie didn’t have the answer to that question.

So I went with the next one that came to mind: “Why was it Mrs. Otsuka’s grandson?”

“What?” Sylvie asked.

“Why was Mrs. Otsuka’s grandson the one who called 911—not you or Salvador?”

A weird pause.

“Sylvie?”

Then a quiet answer. “Because we ... weren’t home.”

“What!” I shouted—so loud the driver swerved. Then, quieter: “Where were you?”

“We were at the beach,” Sylvie said. “On a date.”

Worse and worse.

It’s pretty rare for me to be totally speechless. But I was.

When I finally found some words, all I could do was repeat: “You were *at the beach? On a date?*”

At that, Sylvie burst into tears—her voice thick and trembling. “Dad *told* us to go! He *insisted* we go! He practically forced us!”

“So you left his life *in the hands of a seven-year-old?*”

Sylvie couldn’t deny it.

I went on. “You can’t go to the beach when you’re Dad’s caregiver! You can’t go *anywhere!* Why do you think I haven’t had any fun in ten years? Do you think I just have a bad personality? That I don’t like fun? What part of all the medicines and the charts and the hemiplegia and the five books I handed you on Ménière’s disease gave you the idea that you could just take off for the beach? Would you like to know how many times I went to the beach in all these years? Zero! Zero times! You’ve been at it six weeks—and you decided to just *take a vacation?*”

“We weren’t taking a vacation,” Sylvie said. “We were getting engaged.”

I stopped.

Then I said, “Engaged? Like, to be married?”

“To be married,” Sylvie confirmed. “Salvador asked Dad’s permission last week, and then the two of them cooked up this whole scheme—and they were so excited about it. Totally in cahoots. And Dad was having so much fun and really bonding—not that they needed to bond. They’re already like BFFs. Dad’s teaching Salvador how to play the harmonica, and they’ve set up a dartboard in the living room—”

“That can’t be a good idea—”

“—and Salvador loves Dad, and he’s so good at looking after people—just such a nurturer—and so he’s got this whole dream for us that we’ll get married and build our lives around Dad, and family, and being the best caregivers ever, and so that’s what we were trying to do: just take another step forward into our lives together and making it all happen.”

“And then you went to the beach,” I said, in a tone that clearly sounded much more like *And then you killed our dad*.

Which—granted—was maybe a bit harsh.

Sylvie descended into sobs.

But I didn’t care.

For maybe the first time ever, I wasn’t on Sylvie’s side first.

I wanted to empathize with her, I really did.

Objectively, their little fantasy was lovely. Who wouldn’t get excited about building a little health-and-wellness-themed life with Salvador—kids running around and trips to the farmers market and cutting-edge therapies to help our dad live his best possible life?

In another frame of mind, I might have jumped on board, too.

But as it was—in traffic while rushing to the airport with our dad in emergency surgery, still wearing Charlie’s humiliating fleece-lined sweatshirt—I was having trouble accentuating the positive. All I could see in Sylvie and Salvador’s plan was selfishness. Selfishness and hubris. They wanted to *go to the beach*? How dare they?

Didn’t they know that if there was some way to make life with Dad *charming and delightful* I would have found it already?

“You left him,” I said, feeling a howl in my chest that I now recognize as ten years of unspoken resentment. “To go to the beach! And he fell down the stairs. And now he’s on the brink of death getting a hole drilled in his head. That’s all there is to it. Did you think what I’ve been doing all these

years was easy? Did you think I just hadn't been creative enough in my approach? Did you think I didn't go to the beach because I didn't want to?"

Sylvie didn't answer.

"I *love* the damn beach!" I half shouted.

Sylvie was still crying, but I didn't care.

"I would've given *anything* to go to the beach! But I didn't! Because I knew that I—I alone—was the only thing standing between the only parent we've got left and this exact situation! You knew that, too. You couldn't have not known. But I must've ruined you. I killed myself to give you everything you ever wanted and I guess I taught you that's how life is. But I was lying the whole time. That's the opposite of how life is. You don't get everything you want! You get a few tiny, broken pieces of what you thought you wanted and you tell yourself over and over it's more than enough!"

"I'm sorry," Sylvie whispered.

But I was revved up now. "It's so tempting to blame myself," I went on. "That I set you up for failing me by never asking you to sacrifice anything or think about anyone else, *ever*, other than yourself. I'm so tempted to say *That's on me*, like I always do. But you know what, Sylvie? This one is really on you. This wasn't complicated. This wasn't confusing. You were told what to do! Never let Dad out of your sight! Simple! Not *easy*, but simple! I did it day in and day out for ten years—and all I needed from you was six pathetic weeks. But I guess I can't have them. You can give up your internship and act all self-sacrificing and do this grand gesture of telling me to go off and live my dreams—but if you can't do the job right, then I can't really do it, can I? If you leave Dad alone and he winds up in the ICU and I have to race home to Texas at the crack of dawn without even telling Charlie what happened and I wind up breaching our contract and not even getting paid—that's the same thing as not letting me go at all!"

But as soon as I heard those words, I had to correct them. "No! Wait!" I went on, my voice starting to tremble. "It's *worse*! Because you got my hopes up. And it's so much more agonizing to hope for something and not get it than to never even hope at all."

"I'm sorry," Sylvie rasped out.

But I was so angry I didn't care. "I don't even know what to do right now," I said. "But I know one thing for sure. If Dad dies? If your *trip to the beach* kills our father? You will never see me again—guaranteed."

But I guess Sylvie had had enough of being called a murderer for now.

There was a funny half pause. And then Sylvie said, “If my trip to the beach kills our father,” Sylvie said, “we’ll be even. Because your trip to the mountains killed our mom.”

★ ★ ★

“**OOOF,**” **THE UBER** driver said as the line went dead. “That was harsh.”

Guess we’d been on speaker. And in the long, disconnected silence that followed, I wondered if I’d ever forgive her.

Even with family—people you’re presumably trapped with for life—there are deal-breakers. I’d loved Sylvie all her life unconditionally. But I guess there were some conditions I hadn’t thought of. Because I never could have even imagined her saying what she just said.

But she’d said it. She spoke my worst fear about my life out loud.

And now I wanted to punish her by never speaking to her again.

I let that stand as my tentative plan: We were done—forever.

But I also gave myself permission to recant. Because yes, cutting Sylvie off forever would punish her. But it would punish me, too.

I was mulling that over when the driver hit the brakes so hard that my phone flew off my lap and smacked the seat back in front of me—and then we came to a full stop on the highway. A full stop at the start of what looked like miles and miles of traffic ahead.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Looks like some traffic,” he said.

“I see that,” I said. “But what’s causing it?”

“Not sure,” he said.

“Don’t you have...” I started, but then I wasn’t sure what he might have. “A walkie-talkie or something?”

“A *walkie-talkie*?” he asked, giving me a look in the mirror.

“Or—some way to get the inside scoop?”

He shook his head as we both looked at all the red, glowing brake lights. “This is the only scoop I’ve got.”

“Is there—some way around it?”

The driver scratched his ear. “Probably not.”

“Can we drive on the shoulder or something?”

“That’s illegal,” he said, like *Case closed*.

“I have to get to the airport,” I said. “Urgently. My flight takes off in less than an hour.”

He sucked in a judgmental hiss. “That’s really cutting it close.”

“Yes,” I said, like *I know*. “I have an emergency. A medical emergency.”

Why was I explaining all this? He was just as powerless as I was.

“It’ll probably clear up soon,” the driver said then, like that might cheer me up.

But it didn’t.

We made it to the airport with twenty minutes until takeoff, and my flight was already boarding. I got my boarding pass, checked the suitcase, and took off running at a full sprint, dragging my squealing carry-on behind me, for the TSA line.

When I got there, the first line—to show your ID—wasn’t too bad. But the second line—to get scanned—was worse than the freeway traffic. An infinite number of miserable people and squirming children, coughing and staring into dead space in a purgatory-like queue that seemed to fold endlessly in on itself like an Escher drawing.

I’d never make it.

But what else was there to do? I got in line.

And then I took off my shoes. Like being five seconds ahead of the game might make the difference.

And then I waited in line to wait in the next line.

I craned my neck around the endless room for someone who looked official—someone human I could talk to. Someone who might—bless them—solve all, or even *any*, of my problems.

But in this giant, overflowing room of people, no one seemed human, somehow.

My hope was eclipsing.

I was going to miss this flight. And then not get home until late tonight. And by then—and I hated myself for even having this thought—it might be too late.

I was panting—hyperventilating, really. How long was a breath supposed to be? Five-point-five seconds? I couldn’t even make it to one.

My father might be dying—and that was the only thing that mattered.

But all around that one solitary horror was a cacophony of other losses: I was bruised where I'd hit the pool water, I was hungover, I was still wearing Charlie's sweatshirt. I was alone in a feedlot of soulless travelers with a broken bag and no chance to make my flight. I'd broken my contract with Charlie, and given up all the money I'd worked so hard for, not to mention any chance I had of reaching my potential. My baby sister whom I'd sacrificed everything for had just said the meanest thing anyone had ever said to me, besides myself, and I was so incandescently angry that I couldn't imagine ever feeling anything but anger again. And I was still cringing in shame at the memory of begging my writing hero and desperate crush to take me to bed ... and receiving the hardest of hard passes.

That's when the tears came.

Are tears supposed to make things better?

Because these definitely made things worse.

People started turning around to look at me. Children started pointing. A teenager lifted her phone and took a video. And *no one* offered to help.

Not that there was any help to offer.

This was the real world. This wasn't some Richard Scarry picture book of police dogs riding motorcycles. Mister Rogers wasn't going to step out from behind a kiosk with his zippered cardigan and help me out.

I already knew how this would end.

I'd miss my flight. No one would care. And all that perky, chirpy, optimism-themed nonsense I'd always clung to would come back to bite me in my contemptibly naive ass.

★ ★ ★

BY THE TIME I made it to the ID check, my diaphragm was absolutely spasming with sobs. Still, I stepped up to the booth at my turn—still barefoot—and slid my ID through the window. A lady agent picked it up and peered at it. Then she peered at me. Then she grabbed her handheld radio, pressed a button, and said into the receiver, "TSA to command. Requesting the supervisor."

Oh, no. No, no. I didn't have time for a supervisor. Was my license expired? Had I broken some unknown rule? Was sobbing in the TSA line a security red flag?

“I’m sorry—” I started, but she held up a finger to quiet me.

Was I in trouble?

I didn’t have room for any more trouble today. I was over capacity as it was.

A stocky Black TSA officer with no-nonsense dad energy showed up, and the agent held out my ID for him to inspect.

“Emma Wheeler?” he asked, comparing me to the license photo. “Flight 2401 to Houston?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“I’m the supervisor. Please come with me.”

“Sir, I’m—I’m very late for my flight. They’re taking off any minute —”

But he was already walking away.

I had no choice but to follow, my bare feet slapping along the industrial floor and the squealing wheels of my carry-on bewailing our plight.

We rounded the mosh pit of travelers, and he took me to a room with an AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY sign.

This couldn’t be good.

I’d managed to snuff out my active bawling on the walk over, but now I wondered if I’d have to start up again. Had things just gone from bad to worse?

But once we stepped inside, I saw a bag scanner there, with a female agent standing at attention behind it. Once the supervisor closed the door behind me, he put my carry-on on the conveyor belt. Then he ushered me to stand on a spot marked with two footprints, requested I hold my arms out, and while he checked me with the wand, said, “We got a call from Southwest. The pilot’s holding your plane.”

Did I just hear that? “He’s—what?”

The supervisor did not choose to help me with my verbal double take. He went on, “But he can’t hold it long. No longer than time he can make up in-flight.”

I was still back at: “The pilot is holding the plane?”

“So once you’re clear,” he went on, “I’m going to need you to run to the gate.”

Run to the gate? My brain tried to catch up.

“Got it?” he asked, standing straight to meet my eyes. “When I say run, I mean ‘sprint.’”

I wasn’t sure. But I said, “*Sprint*. Got it.”

“It’s Gate 30, at the farthest end of the concourse,” he said. “So I hope you’re in shape.”

“I hope I am, too,” I said.

The female agent handed me my bag, and the supervisor opened a far door on the concourse side, and as I passed through it, I met his eyes and said, “Thank you, sir”—hoping he could see how very much I meant it.

“You’re welcome,” the supervisor said, with a voice so gruff it verged on tender. Then he said, “Now get moving.”

So I did. I clutched my shoes to my chest, clamped a death grip onto my banshee of a carry-on, and sprinted.

Barefoot.

Past the Brookstone and the Dunkin’ Donuts and the Starbucks. Past burger joints and taquerias, bookstores and duty free, fast food and hipster bars—dodging my way around strolling passengers and moms with toddlers and grandparents in wheelchairs. My legs pumping, the soles of my feet slapping, my breath tearing in and out of my lungs—and my screeching wheel turning every head I passed.

The first thing I saw as I approached the gate, gasping like a person who’d forgotten how breathing worked—was the digital sign with my flight number and the word DEPARTED.

I slowed.

Did I miss it?

Did I run this far this hard—and miss it?

But that’s when I saw a pilot—straight out of Central Casting, with a salt-and-pepper mustache, a crisp white shirt with epaulets, and a captain’s hat—round the gate kiosk and take an at-ease position to wait for me.

I picked my speed back up, and as I got closer, he said, “Emma Wheeler?”

There was nowhere near enough air in my lungs for talking, but I forced out, “That’s me.”

The captain nodded and said, “Let’s get you on board.”

“Thank you so much, sir. I thought for sure I was too late.”

He looked up at the DEPARTED sign, and then glanced out at the waiting plane on the runway. Then he passed my scourge of a carry-on bag to a waiting gate agent, gave me a nod, and said, “They weren’t taking off without me. And I wasn’t taking off without you.”

Twenty-Eight

MY FATHER DIDN'T die.

Maybe that's a spoiler—but we've all been through a lot so far. If you were anywhere near as worried as I was, I thought you might need some good news as soon as possible.

The surgery was successful, and once the pressure in his skull was relieved, he made a brisk recovery—all things considered. All signs indicated he'd be back to his old self in fairly good time. Or as much of his old self as he could be with a hole in his head.

We owed it all to Mrs. Otsuka's grandson's quick thinking and calm presence of mind.

What a blessing of a next-door neighbor.

If they hadn't shown up when they did—if we'd lost any more time than we had—I might be telling a very different story.

I said this to my dad over Jell-O in his room that evening, when he'd been out of recovery several hours. Sylvie was in the room, too, and I averted my eyes from her presence so relentlessly that she finally excused herself to go look for a cup of coffee.

My dad's sweet face was bruised and swollen and cut, and his head was bandaged and partially shaved, and it was hard to look him in the face. Instead I just kept squeezing his hand and thinking about how I'd know it anywhere.

He had a fuzzy blue blanket Salvador had brought from home on his lap, and he said, “I’m so sorry I scared you, sweetheart.”

“Thank god Mrs. Otsuka found you.”

“Mrs. Otsuka didn’t find me, she was *with* me.”

“I thought she discovered you just after you fell.”

My dad shook his head. “She was beside me when I fell. We were taking the stairs together.”

This seemed like a pretty fine point, but okay.

“You know those bedraggled teachers on the first floor who have eight kids?”

“I think they have *three* kids—but okay.”

“Kenji was with us because we were dropping him off to watch cartoons at their place for the evening while we went for a bite of dinner.”

I nodded agreeably, like that was a pleasant but not super-relevant detail.

But then my dad gave me a funny little smile that flipped all the lights on in my brain.

“Wait!” I gasped—raising both hands to my mouth. “Were you—?”

My dad didn’t say anything, but his eyes twinkled.

“Hold on! You’re saying—?”

This time, a pleased-with-himself shrug.

“You?” I asked. “And Mrs. Otsuka?”

My dad tapped his nose, like *Bingo*.

“You were going on a *date*?” I asked. “With each other?”

“Yep.”

“You’re dating? You’re, like, boyfriend-and-girlfriend?”

“More like late-in-life companions,” he said, “but that’s the basic gist.”

“When did this happen?”

My dad kept wrestling with insuppressible smiles. “Well,” he said, “you know. She lost her husband a few years back.”

“Yes,” I said. “I know.” Then, for proof: “Mr. Otsuka.”

“Exactly,” my dad said. “And ever since then—over a respectful time frame, of course—we just kind of developed a little flirtation.”

The pieces snapped together in my mind. “Is that why you’ve been teaching Kenji how to play the harmonica?”

“He’s been a little homesick.”

“And that’s why she kept having everyone over for dinner?”

“She’s a phenomenal cook.”

“And that’s why she kept stopping by with flowers from the community garden?”

Now the smile he’d been suppressing broke through. “It’s not her fault,” he said. “I’m just so irresistible.”

“Dad!” I said, nodding. “I’m very impressed.”

“Still got it,” he said, with a little wink.

“I love this for you,” I said. And I did.

“You know what I keep thinking?” my dad said then.

“What?”

“Your mom would love her.”

My eyes sprung with tears.

Then he added, “And Kenji, too. He’s a great kid. He wants to be a magician.”

“She would love them both,” I said. “And she’d be happy for you.”

“I think so, too,” my dad said, nodding like he’d given it some thought. “Good people have to stick together.”

★ ★ ★

IT’S HARD TO maintain the silent treatment with your sister when you’re the joint guardians of a parent in the ICU, but I was up to the challenge.

I directed all my questions to Salvador, like he was my translator, and whenever Sylvie was in the room, I averted my eyes. Through Salvador, we agreed to trade off nights at the hospital until our dad was ready to transfer to rehab. I insisted on taking the first shift that first night—still unshowered, and still in my WRITERS DO IT ON THE PAGE ensemble, which allowed me to extend the enjoyable feeling of having been wronged. Not only was Sylvie guilty of attempted patricide *and* saying the meanest-thing-ever to me, she *also* wouldn’t let me go home to take a shower.

What a monster.

The next day, after Sylvie relieved me of my shift, I was heading home to change clothes after more hours than I cared to count, when I arrived at our apartment door to see someone sitting beside it, elbows resting on knees, head bent, like he’d been there a while.

Charlie.

As soon as he saw me, he scrambled to his feet and came as close to me as he dared, an intense, just-flew-to-Texas-without-telling-you-and-showed-up-on-your-doorstep expression on his face.

My first horrified thought was that I was still wearing his ridiculous sweatshirt. And I hadn't showered. And I still had no underwear on. And my hair probably looked like I'd been electrocuted.

How humiliating.

But my second, more forceful thought was: *Wait a minute. Who cares?*

"Hey," Charlie said then, with a little wave like he was striking up a conversation.

We were *not* striking up a conversation. "What are you doing here, Charlie?"

He looked at me like there were a hundred things he desperately wanted to say—but he couldn't say any of them. He hadn't shaved. His hair was mussed at its maximum level. He was also—I now realized—still wearing his same sweats from the last time we saw each other.

It was a basic question, but he couldn't answer.

It's kind of excruciating to watch words fail a writer.

But I let it play out.

Finally, Charlie bent down to unzip the backpack by his feet. He rifled through it, pulling out my strawberry hoodie. Then he stood and stepped closer.

"You forgot this," he said, handing it to me.

Why was the sight of that red, fuzzy old friend so comforting? I took it, of course. But I said, "You came here to bring me my lucky hoodie?"

"I thought you might want it."

He thought I might want it? So he flew halfway across the country? Wasn't that why they invented FedEx?

"Why are you really here, Charlie?" I asked.

"When I woke up and found the house empty, I thought you'd left. *Left left*—for real. But then I heard from Logan about your dad."

"I meant to text you," I said—trying to stay explanatory instead of apologetic—"but things have been really crazy."

"Of course—of course," Charlie said. "I get it. I was just worried about you."

“You were worried about me, so you flew to Texas?”

Charlie nodded, like *Yeah*. “You weren’t answering your phone.”

Of course not. “I was at the hospital.”

“How is your dad?”

“He’s fine,” I said. Depending on how you defined *fine*. But that was my story, and I was sticking to it. “He’s fine, I’m fine, everybody’s fine,” I said. Then: “I don’t understand why you’re here.”

“I just wanted to—check in.”

“Ah,” I said, in a tone like flying halfway across the country to check in like this was patently bananas. “Well, then. Mission accomplished.”

“More than that,” Charlie corrected. “I wanted to comfort you.”

“Comfort me?”

Charlie nodded.

“You can’t.”

Charlie frowned. “I can’t? That’s it?”

I shrugged. “That’s it.”

“But you’re having a tough time,” Charlie said.

“I’m aware of that.”

“I can’t just let you go through all this alone.”

“Sure you can.”

“But,” Charlie said, “I don’t want to.”

“Look,” I said, too tired to help him work through his thoughts on this—but somehow forced to do it, anyway. “I said I liked you, and you said no. I blatantly propositioned you, and you said no. At every chance, you’ve made it clear that you want to remain work colleagues *at best* with me. That’s fine. I’m not fighting you. But work colleagues *work* together. They aren’t friends, and they aren’t confidants—and they sure as hell don’t fly across the country to bring each other sweatshirts. We’re not in a relationship where we fly anywhere for each other. And we’re not in a relationship like that”—I paused for effect—“because *that’s the way you wanted it.*”

“But that was before your dad got sick.”

“Why does that change things?”

“I don’t want to not be there for you.”

“That’s a heck of a double negative.”

“I hate the thought that you’re suffering.”

“People suffer all the time, Charlie.”

“But it’s *you*,” he said, like I was something special.

“Sure. Fine. It’s me.”

“There has to be something I can do.”

“Yes,” I said. “You can leave.”

But Charlie shook his head at that. “I can’t. I don’t think I can.”

I met his eyes. “You have to.”

“But don’t you—need someone right now?”

“Of course! Obviously! Anyone—and everyone! Just not you.”

Charlie frowned, like that made no sense. “Why isn’t *someone* better than *no one*?”

I sighed. Did I really have to explain this, too?

Apparently so.

“I really liked you,” I said. “And you hard-core rejected me. So seeing you doesn’t make me feel better. It makes me feel *worse*.”

I watched the understanding overtake him.

“There’s nothing I can do for you.” Charlie said, trying on that idea for size.

“Nothing,” I confirmed.

“Nothing,” Charlie agreed. “Not even”—and here he cringed a little, anticipating my answer—“a hug?”

I gave him a look. “To quote a famous writer we both know: ‘Absolutely not. No way in hell.’”

Charlie nodded, like *Got it*.

But he was still lingering there. Like despite it all, he couldn’t bear to leave.

To be honest, I lingered, too.

Would I have liked Charlie to stay? Could I have used that hug? Was I tempted beyond description to just bring him inside and swaddle myself in his arms? Did I wish like hell that I could still feel about him the way I did before I knew how he felt about me?

All yes.

But there was no misunderstanding. I had fully, unabashedly offered myself to him, and he had clearly, plainly said no.

“The only thing you can do for me,” I said then, “is to get out of my sight and stay there.”

★ ★ ★

AND SO CHARLIE left.

He left, and I got back to my life.

Almost—*almost*—as if those surreal weeks in LA had never happened.

Back at home, in our apartment, with my dad to look after, and Sylvie to ignore, and Salvador still living with us (now banished to the couch), and a whole new relationship to begin with Mrs. Otsuka, I was able to keep busy.

LA started to feel more like something I'd dreamed.

My dad spent a full ten days in the hospital, and—yes, I can hear how odd this sounds—it was a surprisingly pleasant time. That hospital was really a remarkable place. We got a surprise upgrade to a VIP room, for example, because my dad's surgery was the ten-thousandth one they'd performed. And that room was part of some ongoing study about the impact of foliage on surgery outcomes, and so his windowsill was filled edge to edge with jade plants, and aloe vera, and bromeliads and prayer plants. Not to mention a gorgeous leafy shrublike beauty that exactly matched the fabric of Sylvie's tropical maxi dress called *Monstera deliciosa*.

They asked us to keep them watered, so I got a little misting bottle and made one of my signature sticker charts.

And I guess this is VIP life, but the nurse's station brought in astonishing, delicious food for lunch every day and insisted that we share with them. "It's too much," they insisted. "It'll go to waste." And so we were forced out of politeness to down steaming bowls of gourmet ramen, crunchy catfish po'boys, juicy gourmet burgers, gyros dripping with aioli.

I'm telling you, this hospital ward ate like takeout food *royalty*.

"Isn't this expensive?" I kept asking.

"It's the administrators." The nurses would shrug. "They pamper us so bad."

And who was I to argue?

My dad and I had spent a hell of a lot of time in various hospitals over the years. I could describe some of them down to the ceiling tiles. But we'd never seen anything like this before. Plants? In a hospital room? Free-roaming massage therapists in the hallways? Ice cream delivery on a three-wheeled scooter?

Insane.

But we sure as heck weren't complaining.

Mrs. Otsuka stayed for hours every day, fussing over my dad, and reading to him from his new book on Norse mythology, while Kenji and I made origami animals to put on the shelves among the plants—frogs, foxes, whales, pigs. He had a whole zoo's worth memorized, and he patiently walked me through the folds—his turning out like something you'd see in an instructional tutorial, and mine a bit more like wadded-up gum wrappers.

Even still, he kept saying, "You're definitely getting it," and I let myself feel encouraged—though I didn't care too much about being terrible at origami. What I cared about was the companionable feeling that sitting together making things gave me. Comforting in the way that having a project with someone is comforting. Safe in the way that gathering with others always makes you feel safe. The way that being together was just, on some fundamental level, always better than being alone.

It was the most family-like vibe I'd felt in years.

Not to mention, there are conversations that happen sometimes when you're waiting around that would never happen if you were just scurrying from errand to errand like we all do most of the time. There are conversations that can happen only after waiting has slowed things down.

One night, late, after a nurse had checked my dad's surgical dressing and his vitals and then left the two of us alone, I had the bright idea to show my dad the video of us that Logan had sent to Charlie, way back when all this started. I thought at first that we'd find it funny, and we did—me and my dad doing our handstands, Sylvie's little chipmunk voice, my mom scolding Logan—but by the time we'd finished laughing, all we were left with was tears.

"I'm sorry," I said, as we both pawed at our cheeks. "Maybe that was better left unexcavated."

"No, no," my dad said, his chin still trembling a bit. "I'm glad I got to see it."

I put my phone away.

Next, my dad reached up to touch the bandage on his head. "This wasn't Sylvie's fault, you know."

He was looking for emphatic agreement. But ... I mean, it kind of *was*.

When I didn't answer, he turned to meet my eyes.

“It wasn’t her fault,” he said, leaning forward a bit for my full attention, “any more than the rockfall was yours.”

My eyes stung at that, and I looked down at my lap.

“Things happen, Emma,” my dad said, reaching for my hand. “Nobody can see the future.”

I kept my eyes down. “But—” I said. I felt a tightness rising in my throat, and then, without, of course, needing to specify who *she* was, I spoke out loud the one little sentence that had been haunting me in whispers for ten years: “But she wanted to go to the beach.”

This was the thought that woke me in the night. If I hadn’t been selfish—if I’d just given my mom what *she* wanted instead of being all about me—she’d have been on a striped beach towel with a book at the shore a thousand miles away on the day that rockfall happened. She’d have been nowhere even close. Our lives would’ve continued blithely on. Everything would’ve been different.

She wanted to go to the beach.

My dad squeezed my hand.

“I want to ask for your forgiveness,” I said to my dad then.

He looked at me. “You can’t have it.”

“What?”

“I won’t forgive you,” he said. “You only forgive people who’ve done something wrong.” He tugged my hand a little closer and shook his head at me. “Emma. *You never did anything wrong.*”

But I argued with him. “Sylvie said I killed her.” Was I trying to get her in trouble?

“When did she say that?”

“As I was racing to the airport.”

My dad studied me. “And you’re going to hold her to it, huh?”

He had a point. Was I going to clutch onto something mean she’d said in a moment of panic forever? What would be the point? It didn’t seem like a choice that would benefit anyone. And yet: She’d said it, and I’d heard it.

I wasn’t sure where to go from there.

I lowered my voice. “She’s not wrong, though.” And then I said the thing we’d all been thinking all along. “I wanted to go rock climbing. I *insisted* on going. If it hadn’t been for me, we’d have been nowhere near that rockfall. If it hadn’t been for me, she wouldn’t have died.”

But maybe it wasn't the thing we'd all been thinking—because my dad sighed like he couldn't even follow my reasoning. “That makes no sense, Emma,” he said. “Mom could have gone to the beach instead and drowned in a riptide. Or been run over by a drunk driver on the seawall. Or hit by a stray firecracker. Or bitten by a snake near the dunes.”

I frowned.

“There is absolutely no way to predict the infinite random forces in the world any of our choices will expose us to. How paralyzing would it be to even try?”

And then there was a seismic shift—for both of us—in our thinking about me.

Was that what I'd been doing? Trying desperately to predict the unpredictable and avoid the unavoidable? Was that why I'd been so willing—or, if I'm really honest, *relieved*—to stay home all this time? Had I decided in some place deep below my consciousness that the best way to avoid disaster was to just never do anything?

“You can't live like that, Em,” my dad said.

I could have denied it, I guess. But it was late. And quiet. And we were already telling truths.

“I don't know how *not to*,” I said.

He studied me. “I think California was a start. In more ways than one.”

At that, I let down the bed railing so I could scoot closer and lean in to rest my head on my dad's chest. I could hear his heart beating a soothing rhythm, and I listened for a minute before I said, “How do you do it?”

“Do what?” my dad asked, his voice muffled through his ribs.

“How do you find a way to be okay?”

“Well,” my dad said, frowning. “I had to be, didn't I?”

He squeezed my hand.

Then he said, “Things were very dark for me after Mom died. But I knew you and Sylvie needed me to find the light somehow.”

“I didn't know things got dark for you. You always seemed ... okay.”

“It was my job to seem okay.”

“You didn't want to talk to me about it?”

“You were a kid.”

“Sylvie was a kid,” I said. “I was—”

“A girl who'd just lost her mom.”

Okay. That wasn't wrong.

"I decided that if I just held on, things would get better. I wasn't sure how much better, but better. And when you've seen *worse*, better is good enough."

"But how? How did you hold on?"

"I just got up every day, and went to bed every night, and tried to be a good person in between."

"That can't be all there is to it," I said.

My dad took a slow breath, and then he said, "Somewhere during that time, I got very lucky and I accidentally figured something out."

"What?"

"Whatever story you tell yourself about your life, that's the one that'll be true."

I lifted my head to give that idea my full attention.

My dad went on, "So if I say, 'This terrible thing happened, and it ruined my life'—then that's true. But if I say, 'This terrible thing happened, but, as crazy as it sounds, it made me better,' then *that's* what's true."

"You believe you're better? Since the rockfall?"

"I know I am," my dad said, with so much conviction I had to believe him. "I'm wiser, I'm kinder, I'm funnier, I'm more compassionate. I can play at least ten instruments one-handed." He held up his good hand for us both to look at. "I'm more aware of how fragile and precious it all is. I'm more thankful, too—for every little blessing. A ladybug on the windowsill. A succulent sprouting a flower. A pear so ripe it just dissolves into juicy sweetness in your mouth."

Maybe this wasn't polite, but I really wanted to understand him. "But don't you miss Mom?"

My dad gave me a sad smile. "I do. Of course. And would I give up *all* this personal growth to see her again for even an hour and just clamp her into my arms? In a second. But that's not a choice. All we have is what we have."

"I miss her, too," I whispered.

My dad squeezed my hand. "It's okay," he said then. "Here's another thing I accidentally figured out: happiness is always better with a little bit of sadness."



BY THE TIME my dad was in a pretty stable place with his postsurgical health, Sylvie and Salvador decided to make an announcement: they were getting married.

A surprise express elopement. In twenty-four hours. *In Dad's hospital room.*

"We're eloping," Salvador explained.

"But we're just doing it here," Sylvie added.

"We don't want to wait," Salvador said.

"We just want to start our lives together," Sylvie said.

"Sooner—not later."

Of course they did.

"Works for me," my dad said.

I wasn't sure if it worked for me. And I was just wondering if there were a way for me to call in sick to this particular family event ... when Sylvie asked me to be her maid of honor.

"What?" I said, as she dragged me out of the room to the hallway.

"You have to let me apologize to you," Sylvie said then.

"You've already apologized like ten times."

"But you never accept it!"

She wasn't wrong.

That's when Sylvie burst into tears. "I don't know what else to do," she said now, her face getting blotchy and her voice starting to rasp. "I didn't mean to say it. I was just—I don't know—scared and exhausted and trying to defend myself. I don't think that. Nobody thinks that. It just popped into my head and I said it—more because it was mean than because it was true."

"Does that make it better?" I asked.

"I regretted the words even as I was saying them. There's no excuse. I don't know how to make it right. But I'm begging you to forgive me. Please, please! You're my favorite person. You're my hero! Please tell me that I didn't ruin our relationship forever in one stupid moment."

I mean, I had figured I'd have to forgive her at some point. I just thought I'd give myself a few years.

But now she was suddenly getting married. Tomorrow. And if I didn't let this all go, we'd spend the rest of our lives knowing that I was mad at

her *at her wedding*.

What choice did I have, really?

“Fine,” I said. “I forgive you.” And as soon as I said the words, I felt them.

Sylvie threw her arms around me.

“But if you ever say anything like that to me again, I’m moving to Alaska. And I’m taking Dad.”

It was that easy.

Because she was the only baby sister I had.

Anyway, we had a sudden surprise wedding to plan.

It gave us a project, honestly. Twenty-four hours to hang some twinkle lights and fluff some tissue-paper roses. Mrs. Otsuka offered to make Sylvie’s bouquet with zinnias from the community garden, and Sylvie cried and hugged her.

We got grocery-store cupcakes and sparkling cider and asked my dad to play “Here Comes the Bride” on his harmonica.

Sylvie wore the dress our mother had worn at our parents’ wedding—not a wedding gown per se, but a simple white dress she’d loved—along with her favorite cowgirl boots. Salvador wore a ruby-red tux they’d found while thrifting. We got Dad a little tweed driving cap to cover his surgical dressing, and he put a gray jacket over his hospital gown and tied a silk scarf like an ascot. Kenji arrived in a little suit and clip-on tie with an origami flower pinned to his lapel for a boutonniere, and Mrs. Otsuka wore a salmon-colored pantsuit that was the exact color of love. And I let Sylvie put me in a chiffon bridesmaid’s dress with bell sleeves she’d found for three dollars at the Salvation Army.

The hospital chaplain performed the ceremony—which was mercifully short and very sweet—and we lit a candle beside a photo of our mom on the hospital tray table. Our dad “walked” Sylvie down the aisle by joining the couple’s two hands together. Sylvie and Salvador wrote their own vows, and read them aloud . . . and I didn’t even judge them.

I just took the high road right past all those mixed metaphors and clichés.

Love is love, after all.

Even for nonwriters.

And as those two kids kissed each other and pledged an astonishing, gorgeous, hope-filled promise to take care of each other *for the rest of their lives* ... even though I never cried at weddings, I wept like a deluge. I wept because it was all too much—but in the best way. I wept with gratitude and grief and joy all at once—and because my mom would have done the same, if only she could've been here. I wept because my sister had found a genuinely good-hearted man, and because Mrs. Otsuka sensed halfway through that my dad was thirsty and slipped over to bring him some water. I wept because there was nothing cuter than my dad in his jaunty little cap—smiling through his bruises like a man who'd never seen a day of sorrow. I wept because halfway through the vows, Kenji slid his hand into mine in that sweet, unselfconscious way that little boys do. I wept because the nurses were all weeping, and because it was such a miracle to have something to celebrate, and because we were at a wedding right now instead of a funeral. I wept for luck and for beauty and for kindness—and for the magic of being alive.

And then we had a dance party.

Right there in the hospital room.

It was all just starting to wind down when one of the nurses stepped out into the hallway—and started shrieking like a teenager at a Beatles concert.

And we all rushed out ...

And I know you'll never believe me ...

But there, looking around the empty nurses' station—in a pair of Levi's 501s and a T-shirt that could just as easily have been body paint—was Jack Stapleton.

The guy on the billboard outside the hospital. *That* Jack Stapleton.

I knew, like everybody knew, that Jack Stapleton lived on a ranch outside of town. And he had a well-publicized history of randomly showing up to serenade healthcare workers of all kinds in gratitude for the good work they do in the world. So it wasn't an utterly impossible coincidence.

No more impossible than other impossible things, anyway.

Jack Stapleton randomly showed up at my sister's last-minute hospital elopement. And then he stayed. He sang karaoke with every single person there, and he toasted the bride and groom, and he took a hundred selfies—even one with me.

He didn't seem to remember me, but it was fine.

He might not've been quite as starstruck to meet me that day in LA as I had been to meet him.

And then, after Jack Stapleton had taken off, leaving a trail of swooning nurses in his wake, and after Mrs. Otsuka had taken Kenji home for bedtime, and after the bride and groom had waved and hugged their way down the hallway ... just as my dad was about to turn in for the night, he squeezed my hand.

"That was fun," he said. "Who's next?"

"Not it," I said.

"How's your writer doing?"

"He's fine," I said. And then amended: "I assume he's fine."

"Not still in touch with the writer?"

I shrugged. "He turned out to be disappointing."

My dad nodded. "Most people are."

"I liked him," I clarified. "But he didn't like me back."

My dad was appalled on my behalf. "Then he's much worse than disappointing! He's *a dolt*."

I'd never really appreciated the world *dolt* before. "Thanks, Dad."

"We'll find you somebody good, sweetheart," my dad said.

"We definitely will," I said, not believing it at all.

And then my adorably out-of-touch-with-pop-culture dad gestured with his thumb at the door that Jack Stapleton had walked out of not fifteen minutes before and said, "How about that Jake Singleton guy? He's not bad looking. I think he's got a future."

Twenty-Nine

TWO WEEKS WENT by.

Sylvie and Salvador took a forty-eight-hour mini honeymoon on Galveston Island.

Kenji started a marine biology summer camp at the science museum.

My dad left the hospital for a stint at an inpatient physical therapy rehab to strengthen his limbs.

And I ...

I didn't do much. I'd taken the summer off from teaching when I got the Charlie Yates gig. So, when I wasn't visiting and fussing over my dad ... I binge-watched TV. I ate scoops of peanut butter straight out of the jar. I slumped by the window like an unwatered houseplant.

Any day now, I'd start figuring out my life. Any day, I'd start feeling better and come up with a future I could get excited about.

I was a little disappointed in myself, to be honest.

Was all this hopelessness really necessary?

I'd had an adventure. I'd seen a bit of the world. Experienced a little heartache. And now it was time to learn from it and move on.

But if I'm honest? Really honest? Honest in the way you can only be when you know for sure the person you're telling won't judge you?

(Don't judge me, by the way.)

I missed Charlie.

I knew it was pathetic. I knew it was indefensible. I knew that moping over a man who didn't appreciate me was ridiculous. I didn't *want* to miss him.

Wasn't that the number one rule of standing up for yourself?

Don't like people who don't like you.

It wasn't complicated, I told myself over and over.

It was just hard.

Because everything had been better with him somehow. Swimming had been more fun when he was sitting grumpily on the steps. Writing had been more fun when I was sparring with him about love. Grocery shopping had been more fun when he was making me watch him juggle oranges. He just ... lit me up.

And I missed that light so much.

But I guess this was a teachable moment.

If you wait for other people to light you up, then I guess you're at the mercy of darkness.

★ ★ ★

I WAS LYING on the living room floor of our apartment, watching the ceiling fan blades spin and avoiding cleaning the bathroom, when I got a call from Logan.

"Are you sitting down?" Logan said.

"Even better," I said. "I am *lying* down."

"Brilliant," Logan said. "Brace yourself."

I flattened my arms against the floor. "I'm braced."

"Donna Cole," Logan said, "wants your screenplay."

I sat up. *My screenplay? What screenplay? "The Accidental Mermaid?"* I asked. I never even gave it to her.

"*The Rom-Commers*," Logan said.

"Okay, there's been a mistake," I said. "I haven't written a screenplay called *The Rom-Commers*."

"Yes, you have."

"How? In my sleep? I'm telling you, I didn't."

"It's the one you wrote with Charlie."

"But that's not called *The Rom-Commers*. It's called—"

“He changed the title,” Logan said.

“But—”

“And the plot.”

“Apparently.”

“Now,” Logan said, “it’s about two screenwriters who write a script together and fall wildly in love.”

I ignored the funny flutter those words prompted in my chest. “That’s crazy,” I said—though, actually, it was kind of a great idea.

“And guess what?” Logan said. “It’s good.”

“Of course it is. It’s Charlie Yates.”

“Spoken like a person who called his last rom-com ‘a crime against humanity.’”

“Everybody deserves a mulligan.”

“I love your loyalty.”

“Charlie Yates *the human* is complicated,” I said. “But Charlie Yates *the writer* is the love of my life.”

“You say that like they’re not the same guy.”

“When did he have time to do this?”

“After you kicked him out of Texas.”

“That was fast.”

“He’s fast when he’s obsessed,” Logan said. “And thank you for your service, by the way.”

“For my service?”

“You cured him of the yips.”

Did I?

“He’s the opposite of blocked now,” Logan went on. Then, like he was reading a marquee: “Charlie Yates is back.”

My heart stung at that. Charlie Yates was back.

“I’m sending it to you,” Logan said. “Read it. You will lose your mind with joy. It’s a love letter to fun. And to love. And to you, I think.”

“It’s definitely not a love letter to me,” I said. “That much I know for sure.”

“Guess who it’s written by?”

“Is this a trick question?”

“Check your texts,” Logan said.

A picture came in of a title page. There, in classic screenplay Courier font:

THE ROM-COMMERS

WRITTEN BY

EMMA WHEELER & CHARLIE YATES

“But I shouldn’t have a credit,” I said. “I was the ghostwriter.”

“Stop talking,” Logan advised. “Let yourself have this.”

I stared at the photo.

“Charlie finished it and sent it to Donna Cole that same day, with a note that said, ‘Present for you!’—and she texted him within the hour and said, ‘I want it.’”

“She wants it?”

“And she wants to meet with you both. In LA. On Thursday.”

“In LA?” I echoed. “On Thursday?”

Guess I was going to LA.

So much for never seeing Charlie again.

Thirty

THE MEETING IN LA with Donna Cole went very well.

And by “very well,” I mean: I sat nervously in an original Mies van der Rohe chrome-and-leather chair next to Logan while an icon of modern filmmaking rhapsodized for an hour about a surprise screenplay I barely knew I’d written—and then offered me six figures to buy the rights.

That kind of “very well.”

Her office was bigger than my family’s entire apartment, by the way. And she had a Georgia O’Keeffe painting—an original painting, not a poster from a museum store—on the wall behind her desk. And she was terrifying.

Terrifying in the most fantastic way.

I didn’t wind up seeing Charlie, though. Donna Cole is an exceptionally busy woman, and the only hole in her schedule happened to be just when Charlie was headed to the Biltmore hotel to receive a screenwriting award.

Another one. He was gonna need a bigger drawer.

Oh, well. So much for the crown braid, mani-pedi, and new moisturizer I’d invested in before leaving town. Not to mention the three different outfits I’d panic-bought—settling on a crisp blue shirtdress and some sandals that actually fit—for nothing.

His loss, I guess.

At the end of the meeting, as Donna was dismissing us, she gave a pretend pout: “I can’t believe Charlie Yates picked getting another award over seeing me.”

“Lunacy,” Logan agreed, as Donna air-kissed him goodbye.

Then she turned her attention to me, and said, “Don’t ever let Charlie write anything again without you.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” I said, feeling like a liar.

Her assistant was waiting for her, but Donna stopped us at the door.

“I almost forgot,” she said.

Logan and I turned back.

“It’s not official, but we’ve got Jack Stapleton attached to star.”

“Jack Stapleton?” I asked. “Attached? To star?”

Logan was smiling like this wasn’t news to him.

“That was all Charlie,” Donna said.

“But,” I said, and this I’d learned from Charlie himself, “I thought only casting directors chose the actors for movies.”

Donna gave a nod like *Of course* as she said, “Unless the writer and the star happen to be in cahoots.”

“Are they?”

“Jack will do anything for Charlie,” Donna said, nodding at Logan for confirmation. “Didn’t he just go to a hospital in Texas to serenade an old man?”

Logan did not meet my eyes.

Donna was still trying to remember the details. “The man was very sick—just out of the ICU. And Charlie couldn’t stop worrying about him, so Jack offered to pop in randomly—like he’s famous for.”

I looked at Logan.

He looked at Donna.

“And then,” Donna went on, squinting at Logan, like he would probably know, “didn’t he take the nurses aside afterward to say, ‘Please take extra-special care of my dear friend’?”

Finally, Logan glanced my way. “Something like that,” Logan answered. “Yeah.”

★ ★ ★

THE SECOND WE were in Logan's car, I said, "Was she talking about my dad just now?"

Logan pretended to be busy with his seat belt.

"The old man in Texas? That had to be my dad, right?"

"I'm not at liberty to say," Logan said, starting the car.

"Logan," I said, dropping my voice. "You were *my* friend first."

Logan considered that as we pulled out of the garage. "Fine. Yes. He asked Jack to pop in and make it look random."

"Jack Stapleton didn't *pop in*. He can't *pop in* anywhere. It was total mayhem. One of the nurses fainted."

"Wouldn't you?"

"The point is, you're making it sound like it wasn't a big deal when it definitely *was* a big deal."

Logan nodded for a minute, and then he said, "Charlie wanted to look after you, but you sent him away."

"This is my fault now?"

"Look," Logan said. "Charlie agreed with you. He didn't think you should have to see his face, either. So he worked from behind the scenes."

"Worked to do what?"

Logan steeled himself to break a confidence. "To do nice things for you."

"Like what? What kind of nice things?"

"You know," Logan said. "Like upgrading your dad's room."

Now I turned to really look at him. "They said we won that upgrade! They were celebrating their ten-thousandth surgery."

"I can't believe you fell for that."

"He told the hospital to lie to us? And they just did it?"

"He also made a sizable donation."

This was an outrage. "He tricked us into being upgraded? I thought we'd won that VIP room randomly—like decent people."

"Also," Logan went on, "all those fancy lunches every day."

"That was Charlie? That wasn't just ... life on the VIP wing?"

Logan shook his head. "That was all Charlie. He got a hotel room after you told him to get out of your sight, and he stayed close by until he knew your dad was okay."

"Why would he do that?"

“Why do you think?”

“I honestly have no idea.”

“He also did the whole thing with the plants.”

“The *plants*?” I demanded, like now this had gone too far.

“Why are you so mad about this? Those plant studies are real. Charlie can recite the statistics all day.”

“It wasn’t his place to do that stuff.”

“It wasn’t his place?”

“Yes,” I said, doubling down. “That’s totally inappropriate behavior. Would you secretly upgrade a work colleague’s father to a VIP room?”

“If I were in love with her, I would.”

I blinked. “He’s not in love with me,” I said. “He told me he wasn’t.”

But as we pulled up to the Biltmore valet, Logan just said, “I can’t believe you fell for that, either.”

★ ★ ★

I THOUGHT LOGAN was just dropping me off at the Biltmore, but as I got out—still a little dazed—he handed his keys to the valet.

“You’re—coming in?” I asked.

Logan nodded. “I’m headed to the ballroom.”

I frowned. “What’s in the ballroom?”

Logan met my eyes. “Charlie.”

“Oh,” I said. “This is where the awards ceremony is?”

Logan nodded.

“Did you know Charlie would be here tonight when you booked a room for me in this hotel?”

Logan nodded again.

“Are you tricking me into going to the ceremony?” I asked.

“Not unless you want me to,” Logan said.

“I don’t want you to,” I said.

“Even after finding out about the VIP upgrade?”

“I didn’t ask him to do that,” I said. “I asked him to leave me alone.”

“You should come with me,” Logan said, gesturing at the ballroom. “It would mean a lot to Charlie.”

I flared my nostrils. “Charlie doesn’t care about me—or awards. Don’t you know he keeps them all in a drawer?”

“Yeah. But that’s only because he smashed the glass-front antique he used to keep them in.”

“What do you mean, *smashed* it?”

“He pushed it over, and it shattered,” Logan said. “On the night his wife left him.”

I took that in.

“He does care about those awards,” Logan said. “And he cares about you, too, by the way.”

But it all felt like too much. “I’m going to pass.”

Logan nodded, like *Fair enough*. Then he said, “I’m going to send you a three-minute video now, and I want you to watch it right away.”

Logan had a checkered past with sending videos. “What kind of video?”

“A video that I wanted to send sooner.”

“That’s not really an answer.”

“I don’t actually have permission to send it even now,” Logan said.

“That’s never stopped you before.”

Logan ignored me. “It’s got some information on it I think you should have. I’ve been hesitating, with your dad being sick. I know you’re going through a lot. But I think you’d rather know than not know.”

“I’d rather know than not know what?”

“It’s a video for you. *To* you. From Charlie.”

“For me?”

“It’s a video he sent me to send to you—but not yet. Only later.”

“Only later when?”

“Later...” Logan said—and then finished: “After he’s dead.”

Dead? “Logan!” I said, like *What the hell?* “What are you talking about?”

“Just watch it,” Logan said. “Go up to your room right now and watch it. And when you’re done, I suspect you’ll have a change of heart. I suspect you’ll want to see Charlie, after all. If I’m right, come down to the ballroom. I’ll save you a seat.”

★ ★ ★

WHAT ELSE COULD I do? I went up to watch it.

I sat at my hotel room desk, opened my laptop, double-clicked the file. And there, on my screen, appeared a video of Charlie. The second I saw it, I knew from his beat-up face exactly when he'd filmed it: it was the night he'd had that bar brawl and come home completely pummeled. The same day he'd gotten that mysterious phone call he'd never explained. He was seated, hunched, on the side of his bed, filming into his phone, rumpled as ever, and exactly as many sheets to the wind as I remembered.

"Emma," Charlie said into the phone. "If you're seeing this right now—if Logan sent it to you to watch—then I'm..." Charlie shook his head, like he couldn't believe the words. "It sounds like the worst kind of bad movie dialogue ... but if you're watching this, then I'm already dead."

He nodded, like he was letting the idea sink in. "I don't know why it's so weird to say that. Everybody winds up dead eventually. What's actually weird is the way we all think we're gonna last forever." Charlie looked up at the ceiling like he was blinking back tears. "I would have liked some more time, though. To be honest. I barely found you. I *just* found you. Right?" Charlie closed his eyes and made a fist in his hair before going on. "So ... it's late. And you just cleaned up my face and tried to tuck me into bed. But I can't sleep. I can't sleep until I say this." Charlie took a deep breath. "At my well checkup this week ... I got a positive screening for metastasized lung cancer."

Charlie grabbed a fistful of hair and squeezed his eyes closed for a second.

"There are more tests to do and questions to answer," he went on. "But I've been down this road before. And no matter how I turn it around in my mind, the only good place for you ... is *as far as possible* from me."

He looked away, sucked in a deep breath, held it, then pushed it back out—and as he did, he started coughing.

Hold on—was that why he'd been coughing so much? Not allergies—but *lung cancer*?

"You're not going to believe this," Charlie went on, "but I knew on that first day that I was going to fall for you. You hadn't been yelling at Logan in my front yard for even sixty seconds before I knew. I felt it. I called it! It was so predictable."

He took a minute to rub his eyes. Then he went on, “I like you like crazy, Emma. I didn’t even know it was possible to like another person this much.” He shook his head. “And up until today, I wanted nothing more than to make you like me, too.” He frowned, like he was thinking. “Maybe this is my punishment. Maybe you were right about self-fulfilling prophecies. All I know is, I really don’t want to die. And the reason I don’t want to die is because I just want more time with you.”

Charlie paused to cough again.

Then he went on. “That’s the only thing I want. That’s the only thing I can *think about* wanting. But guess what? I’m going to rise above that. I’m not going to ruin your life. For once, I’m going to put someone else first.” He grabbed another fistful of hair. “I can’t believe your life. You’ve spent ten years taking care of your dad—and you gave up everything to do it. All this time, you’ve kept a lid on that Spindletop of talent you’ve got. It’s so wrong that it happened.”

Charlie slid down to sit beside the bed.

“I lied to you today,” he went on. “And I’m going to keep lying to you. I’ll never tell you about any of this. I’m going to push you away for your own good while I’m still strong enough to do it. And you know why—and you know I’m right. If I don’t, you’ll take care of me just like you did with your dad—and I refuse to be another thing that stops you. You need somebody in your life who lifts you up—not drags you down. Trust me on this. I’ve been through it all before. It’s shitty, I know. But every option I have is shitty. At least this one sets you free.”

Charlie stopped talking, and put his head in his hand, but the camera kept filming.

When he looked up again, he peered straight into the lens.

“I’m so sorry, Emma,” he said then. “I would write a hundred happy endings for us if I could.”

Thirty-One

I SHOT DOWN to the ballroom so fast after that, I don't completely remember how I got there. I mostly remember crying. Crying in the elevator—riding eight floors down with two kids who faced backward and stared at me the whole time. Crying while giving my name at the sign-in table. Crying as I slipped through the closed door at the back of the room.

My thoughts somersaulted unintelligibly around in my head—mainly denial-themed, if I recall. Charlie was sick? But he didn't look sick. I'd seen plenty of sick people. He looked great! He looked healthy! This was unacceptable! He'd just had his five-year-iversary! Hadn't he been through enough? This couldn't be right! He was *Charlie*!

The ballroom was dark and the crowd was on its feet, cheering as Charlie took the stage. The sight of him captured my attention—and the crying trickled to a stop.

He was here. He was alive. He was just across the room.

Charlie, you astonishing dummy. How could you ever think that pushing me away was a good idea?

I wanted to run right over to him so bad—and wrap my arms around him and refuse to let go—but I held myself still and just focused on him in the spotlight. He walked up to a clear podium and squinted out at the audience.

Charlie, in a tux.

Someone had done his hair so it was all spiking up in the same direction. He was as close to picture perfect as I'd ever seen him. Until I noticed his green-and-white pocket square.

It wasn't in the square shape he usually wore—but a fanlike triangle.

It wasn't hemmed, but ripped at the edge.

And it wasn't even a handkerchief, it was—oh, god.

I held my breath.

It was a piece of that green-and-white fabric from the tropical-print dress I'd almost drowned in. As if maybe, instead of throwing it away, Charlie—without even bothering to find scissors—had ripped a piece of it free with his bare hands, folded it, and declared it to be a handkerchief.

But the effect was oddly charming—almost like he had a pocket full of greenery.

Maybe he'd start a trend.

The crowd settled down and took their seats. I looked around for Logan and saw that he had, in fact, saved a seat for me. But T.J. was sitting on his other side.

Was T.J. wearing a backward baseball cap in the ballroom?

I think you can guess the answer to that. But in the interest of journalistic integrity, I'll just go ahead and say yes. Yes, he was.

I decided to pass on the saved seat and just stand at the back of the room.

Up onstage, Charlie cleared his throat.

Just when we thought he'd start his speech, he pulled his cell phone out of his pants pocket. Then, flipping on the ringer at the side, he leaned into the microphone and his voice filled the room. "I'm expecting an important call," he said, and the crowd melted into warm laughter.

I thought about Charlie saying, "You can get away with so much when people have already decided to like you."

Had I already decided to like him?

I had.

"I'm serious," he said to the crowd, setting the phone smack in the middle of the podium. "I've been waiting on this call all day. And if I miss it now, I'll have to wait until morning. And I'm just not gonna do that."

More warm laughter.

“It’s not going to ring, of course,” he said. “It hasn’t rung all day, and I’ll be up here—what?—twenty minutes? Thirty if it’s going well?” The crowd watched, still not sure if he was joking. “But if it does ring,” Charlie said, eyeing the audience like he meant business, “I’m answering.” He checked his watch. “They’re open late on Thursdays, so I’ve still got an hour.”

More laughter.

With that, Charlie settled in, repositioned the phone on the podium one last time, bent the mic closer, put his hands in his pants pockets, and then peered into the stage lights.

We all waited for whatever might be next.

He sure knew how to command a room.

“I had a whole different talk planned,” Charlie began at last. “But I lost interest in that talk. Tonight, the only thing I want to talk about is the very maligned, highly ridiculed, generally dismissed concept of love.”

The crowd felt his vibe and waited.

“Eight weeks ago, I was one of those douchey guys who thought love was made up by Hallmark to sell greeting cards. I thought it was an emotional Ponzi scheme. I thought it was a fiction we’d been tricked into believing by the animators at Disney. And I thought our only hope of escape was to unplug from the Love Matrix and see our true dystopic loveless hellscape for exactly what it was.”

Charlie looked around while the room waited.

“And then,” he went on, “I met a woman who disagreed. Really disagreed. Loudly—and often. Like, she made me watch a TED Talk about it.”

The crowd chuckled agreeably.

“She argued with me,” Charlie went on, “and she made fun of me, and she told me I was wrong so relentlessly ... that of course I had no choice but to fall in love with her.”

More chuckles.

“Her name is Emma Wheeler, by the way. And she’s about to be a very successful screenwriter. And before I met her, I thought the only stories worth telling were the realistic ones. You know—like ones about zombies.”

A good rumble of laughter from the crowd.

“I don’t know how I let myself get so cynical,” Charlie went on. “I’ve been wondering about that a lot. All I can figure is this: it hurts to be disappointed. It hurts so much, we’d rather never get our hopes up. And it’s humiliating, too—right? How foolish are you to hope for the best? How pathetic is it to try to win after you’ve already lost? How naive must you be if you don’t know that humanity is dark and vicious and totally irredeemable? But the argument Emma’s been making this whole time—and I’m paraphrasing here—is this: If those are the only stories we tell about ourselves, then those are the only stories we have.”

Nods and murmurs from the crowd.

“And that’s kind of where I’ve landed, after taking her crash course in why love matters. Humanity at its worst is an easy story to tell—but it’s not the only story. Because the more we can imagine our better selves, the more we can become them.” Charlie nodded, like he was really siding with himself now. “It’s cooler to be jaded. It’s more badass to not care. But I just can’t stop thinking that it’s kind of chicken, too. If you try to write stories about love and kindness, you really are risking being ridiculed. Which might be the worst form of social death. But my friend Emma kept insisting that it was really important to be brave and try. And I’m here to say, after arguing with her from every single angle, I’ve decided at last that she’s right.”

Was this a whole speech about how I was right?

I would have thought, *Popcorn, please*, if I hadn’t started crying again.

But then, before Charlie could go on—his phone started ringing.

He looked down.

“Oh, god,” he said. “There it is. That’s the call.” Then he looked up at the crowd. “I’m so sorry,” he said, holding up a finger. “I wasn’t kidding. I really do have to take this.”

And then, in front of three hundred dinner guests, he picked up the phone, and, without thinking to step away from the podium—or the mic—put it to his ear and said, “Hello?”

Then: “This is Charlie Yates. Yes.”

Then a pause while he listened.

Then: “Oh, god. How is that—”

Then: “You’re saying—three weeks ago—?”

Then: “I understand. Yes. Okay. Thank you.”

And then Charlie turned off his phone, dropped it back into his pocket, put his head down on the podium, and cried.

For a good while.

Charlie Men-Don't-Cry Yates ... *cried*. At a podium. In a tuxedo. In front of three hundred people. Hands clutching either side of the dais, shoulders shaking, breaths and chokes and cries finding their way straight into the microphone and filling the room with the amplified sounds—making it feel strangely like it was happening to all of us, too.

Like we were all crying, in a way. But only one of us knew why.

I took a few steps closer to where Charlie was, entering an aisle between the tables that gave me a straight path to the podium.

But I stopped when he finally lifted his head, remembered the crowd, rubbed the many tears off his face with his tuxedo sleeve, and then took a deep breath to say, “I have an announcement to make.”

The whole room braced itself. Something real was happening here.

“I, apparently...” Charlie said, taking in another deep breath, “had bronchitis three weeks ago.”

The crowd burst into laughter and applause, like this had to be a punch line. And Charlie was laughing, too—but he also kept frowning and wiping at his eyes like he was still quite shaken.

“To be clear,” Charlie went on, “up until three minutes ago, I thought I had metastatic lung cancer.”

A murmur from the crowd as the laughter receded.

And then, still watching, a bit hypnotized by everything that was happening in front of me, I took a few steps toward him down that center aisle.

“But it was just bronchitis,” Charlie said next, shaking his head. “And now it’s already gone. Hell of a twist.”

The room chuckled. I took a few more steps.

“Turns out,” Charlie went on, “on a screening test, it’s hard to tell the difference between a ‘concerning mass’ in your lungs and plain old everyday congestion. That’s the news I just got. Better imaging gives a much clearer picture. But my second test with better imaging got postponed because, like a genius, I went to Texas, instead. I skipped my follow-up. Which was worth it, by the way.”

He nodded as he thought about it.

“Bronchitis,” he said next, shaking his head. “I’m not dying, after all.”

Charlie took a deep, five-point-five-second breath.

“And now I can’t even remember why I’m up on this stage. Or what I was talking about. Was it about how we should tell ourselves better stories about who we are? About how we shouldn’t rob ourselves of hope and possibility? About how light matters just as much as darkness—maybe more? Or was I maybe just rambling on about Emma Wheeler? Because, honestly, she’s—”

Right then, I stepped into the reflected stage lights—close enough that he could see me.

Our eyes met.

And Charlie lost his train of thought.

Charlie just stood there staring down at me, and I just stood there staring up right back.

“Because, honestly, she’s...” he tried again, quieter, like he wasn’t even listening to himself anymore—his eyes fixed on me like I might disappear.

“Because,” he tried again, “honestly, unless I’m hallucinating right now ... she’s here in this room.”

The crowd all craned to look.

“Are you really here?” Charlie asked into the mic then, his voice low and private, like we were the only two people around.

I nodded.

And then Charlie looked up and seemed to remember where he was. He lifted his award statuette off the podium. And then he said, without pauses or punctuation, “Thank you for this incredible award I’m more honored than I can say and I’ll never forget this night.”

Then he walked straight to the front of the stage, and, without ever taking his eyes off me, he jumped right down.

It took him about ten strides to reach me, and when he got there, he let his award hang forgotten in one hand, like the coolest of cool guys.

The whole room was watching, and now flashes were going off.

I glanced down at the award. “Another award for the drawer?”

But Charlie, never taking his eyes off mine, shook his head. “There is no more awards drawer.”

I waited for clarification.

“I took them all out, one by one, and polished them, and apologized to them, and put them on a shelf, like a person determined to be grateful for his blessings. And I even glued the angel’s broken wing back on.”

I kept my face deadpan. “The Women’s Film Critics Association will be very pleased.”

“Did you hear that just now?” Charlie asked, tilting his head to gesture back at the stage without breaking eye contact.

I nodded, and stepped closer.

“All of it?” he asked.

I nodded again, and took another step.

“Specifically the part about how I’m not dying?”

One more nod. “So that cough that you thought was allergies—it was actually bronchitis?”

“That’s right.”

“So you were sick when you had your screening test? But by the time you went back for the real test, you were well?”

“Exactly.”

“So,” I said, “just to confirm: You’re not dying?”

Charlie nodded in awe, like he could barely believe it himself. “Not at the moment.”

I let that sink in.

“What do you think?” Charlie asked next.

“I think you’d rather feed my heart into a wood chipper than tell me you were sick again.”

“Correct. And I’d do it again, too. Because I was *not* going to be another person ruining your life.”

“You really don’t understand how life-ruining works, do you?”

“You can’t be trusted to do the right thing for yourself.”

“For the record, I would never have left you because you got sick.”

“I know that. That’s why I had to leave you first.”

But I shook my head. “Logan sent me your video. The one I wasn’t supposed to see until you were dead. And I came down here ready to force you to let me be with you—no matter what.”

“That’s a hell of a decision.”

“That was a hell of a video.”

“But I’m not sick. So it doesn’t matter now.”

“It matters that you lied to me,” I said.

“I misled you,” Charlie said, like that was different.

“You said I was a hypochondriac.”

“You *are* a hypochondriac.”

“But you said it in a mean way.”

Charlie lowered his head. “I’m sorry.”

“You shut things down with me. You said there was no misunderstanding.”

“There *was* no misunderstanding. Not on my end, anyway.”

“You said you didn’t care about me.”

Charlie took exception to that. “I *never* said I didn’t care about you.”

“You said, and I quote: ‘Absolutely not. No way in hell.’”

“I was trying to do you a favor.”

“That’s a shitty favor.”

“It was a shitty situation.”

“But it’s better now.”

“Yes,” Charlie said, frowning like he still couldn’t believe it. “It’s better now.”

“More proof for my theory,” I said.

“What theory?”

“Sometimes things get better.”

Charlie nodded like that was a bit of a revelation. “I guess sometimes they do.”

Then he leaned down to set his award respectfully on the floor and stood back up to meet my eyes.

“Did you hear the other thing I said up there, too?”

“What other thing?”

“The part about how I’m in love with you.”

“That does sound familiar.”

“Is that okay?”

I nodded. “It’s okay.” Then I added, “Better than okay, in fact. Because now we’re even.”

At that, Charlie put both of his hands in his pockets.

I looked down at one, then the other, then back up. “Are you Ji Chang Wook—ing me right now?”

“I don’t know who that is.”

“The guy in the turtleneck. Who perfected the pockets kiss.”

Charlie smiled in that way that made his nostrils dimple. “Then I guess I must be.”

“Did I ever tell you,” I said then before I could stop myself, “that I really love your nostrils?”

Oh, god. It had to happen, I guess. A Chekhov’s gun moment: You can’t forbid yourself from mentioning someone’s nostrils in Act One without finally doing it by Act Three.

Or wait. Maybe *this* was Act One—and we were only just getting started?

As if to answer, Charlie stepped closer, hands still in his pockets like a champion, and completely closed the gap between us—pressing his thighs to my thighs, and his chest to my chest. Then he tilted his head until his mouth was just breaths away from mine.

“How’s my angle?” he asked, like he really wanted to know.

“You’re a remarkable student,” I said.

“Are you kidding me?” Charlie said. “I’m the best.”

And then he pressed his mouth to mine, and as he did, he slid his hands out of his pockets so they could skim around my waist to hold me right there.

Not that I was trying to escape.

I think the whole ballroom broke into applause—but I can’t say for sure. And I feel like a live camera fed the moment to the jumbotron up front—but I’m not positive about that, either. All I remember for certain was the feeling of my heart unfolding to its full wingspan in my chest, like a bird that had decided to stretch out wide at last and absolutely soar.

Was this a happy ending?

Of course. And also only a beginning. In the way that beginnings and endings are always kind of the same thing.

I had no idea where we’d go from here, or how we’d manage it all, or where the future would take us. But it was okay. We don’t get to know the whole story all at once. And where we’re headed matters so much less than how we get there.

Charlie was here right now. And I was here, too.

And that was enough for now.

“I’m so in love with you,” Charlie said then, his breath against my ear.
“It’s terrible.”

And so I said, “We’re gonna need a better word for terrible.”

Epilogue

SO MY DAD was right, in the end.

We all really did manage to be okay.

And it only took us ten years.

But what does *okay* even mean? Life is always full of worries and struggles, losses and disappointments, late-night googling of bizarre symptoms—all tumbling endlessly over one another like clothes in the dryer. It's not like any of us ever gets to a place where we've solved everything forever and we never have another problem.

That's not how life works.

But that's not what a happily ever after is, anyway.

Poor happy endings. They're so aggressively misunderstood. We act like “and they lived happily ever after” is trying to con us into thinking that nothing bad ever happened to anyone ever again.

But that's never the way I read those words. I read them as “and they built a life together, and looked after each other, and made the absolute best of their lives.”

That's possible, right?

That's not ridiculous.

Tragedy is a given. There is no version of human life that doesn't involve reams of it.

The question is what we do in the face of it all.

★ ★ ★

AND WHAT DID we do, our little family?

We did the only thing we *could* do. We made the best of things.

Sylvie and Salvador both wound up working in medicine—him as a physician’s assistant, and her as a nurse anesthetist. They stayed with my dad in his apartment for two years after their elopement before Mrs. Otsuka got the bright idea that maybe my dad should come live next door with her.

My dad loved that idea—but he said they should get married first.

Which Mrs. Otsuka was happy to do.

And so they had a little ceremony in the community garden, and then Salvador helped my dad move all his instruments next door—and Mrs. Otsuka didn’t even have to put foam cushions on her sharp corners, because by that point, my dad had been spending so much time at her place that she’d already done it.

She took on a lot of caregiving, marrying my dad. But she told me once that it’s worth it. He cures her loneliness. He shines light on her shadows. He makes her laugh all day long and into the night. That’s how she sees it: she takes care of him, but he takes care of her, too. And it’s so plain to see that they have much more fun together than they’d ever have apart.

My dad started learning Japanese, by the way. Turns out, he has a knack for languages.

And he also has a great tutor.

Sylvie and Salvador turned my dad’s old room into a guest room. Sylvie also decided to redecorate the apartment in her spare time—dismantling our childhood bunk beds, and wallpapering an accent wall with tropical flowers, and filling up the windowsill with succulents in bright painted pots. She made a Pinterest page and everything.

Now Sylvie and Salvador are working hard, and saving up, and hoping to buy a house big enough for all of them, and a gaggle of kids, at some point. Sylvie even googled our sunny, rambling childhood home to see if that might be an option—but it had been bulldozed to make way for a megamansion.

“Maybe it’s better this way,” I said as Sylvie ranted about it on the phone. “Maybe life is telling us to keep moving forward.”

Kenji continues to come visit every summer and go to camps at the science museum. And it turned out, he has twin younger sisters, who started joining him when they got old enough. My dad loves it when all the kids show up at the apartment and fill it with life and scampering and giggling, and he's taught them all how to play the harmonica.

"It's a *lot* of harmonicas," Sylvie says. "They could start a Bob Dylan tribute band."

★ ★ ★

AND ME? WHAT became of me?

I moved to LA and kept writing.

I got my own tiny apartment for a while, right above a tattoo parlor.

It did just happen to be walking distance from Charlie's place, but I swear that was a coincidence. Mostly.

It was my first time living alone in my life, and I did some hard-core nesting—amassing a block-printed cloth napkin collection, stocking up on kooky coffee mugs, and diving full-immersion into a throw-pillow lifestyle.

"What is it with women and throw pillows?" Charlie asked when my bed got so laden with them, it was hard to find the mattress.

"I think the words you're looking for are 'thank you,'" I said.

Charlie fully supported my commitment to independence.

But, even still, every single day ... he asked me to marry him.

Which I loved.

Even though, every day, I also evaded the question.

A smile would take over my face, and I'd say, "You don't have to be married to be happy."

And Charlie wouldn't disagree.

"I just want to belong to you," he'd say. "And I want you to belong to me."

And then I'd push him down into all those throw pillows in a way that left no doubt about who belonged to whom.

But I still resisted saying yes—in that way you can when absolutely everybody knows you *want* to say yes. And you *will* say yes—eventually.

And anticipation is half the fun.

One great thing about being writers is that our jobs are portable. So we spend summers in Houston, in Sylvie and Salvador's guest room. It's a total circus: Sylvie, Salvador, their two golden retrievers, our dad, Mrs. Otsuka (who, once we were family, encouraged us all to call her by her first name, Mitsuko), all three of her grandkids, and Charlie and me. All of us just back and forth between apartments, and sharing food, and babysitting, and helping out, and working in the community garden, and buzzing with kinetic energy in that cheery, noisy way that happens sometimes when families are piled into close quarters.

Sometimes we even add Jack Stapleton and his cute wife, Hannah, into the mix, and we all squeeze in around the dining table, grandkids on various knees, and have little impromptu sing-alongs after dinner.

Though my dad has never stopped calling Jack "Jake Singleton."

And Jack never corrects him.

★ ★ ★

DID CHARLIE AND I wind up going to the Olympics for line dancing and taking the gold for the USA?

Well, since there is no line dancing at the Olympics, and since it's much more cooperative than competitive, and since it's not exactly a thing you can win—unless you count just *being there* as winning—and since I just recently pulled a muscle while executing a sailor step into a coaster step ...

Not exactly.

But we did keep going to lessons.

Though, in an effort to minimize any and all six-foot cowboys, we signed up at the senior center nearby, where eighty-year-olds danced circles around us. The instructor herself was eighty-six—and still going strong in a pair of red rhinestone boots and a fringe jacket. We went every week, faithfully. Charlie was universally adored, and I was routinely pitied—but with a warmth and compassion that made it okay.

"Oh, sweetheart," they'd say. "That's not a rumba step."

And then they'd show me. Again.

It's fine. A little humiliation gets you laughing like nothing else can.

And I have begun to master *right* versus *left*.

And, for the record, I never mind having a reason to bump into Charlie.

★ ★ ★

DID CHARLIE AND I keep writing together? We did.

And did writing “lady movies” tank Charlie’s career, as Jablowmie had prophesized? Would Charlie have been better off lending his talents to the string-bikini reboot of *Beer Tower III*—or whatever project T.J. was meeting Donna Cole about at the coffee shop that day? A project she declined to work on, by the way. Which wasn’t my fault—though T.J. still insists that it was.

“You sabotaged me,” he said in a lowered voice the last time I saw him at an awards show—just as Charlie broke in with “You sabotaged yourself,” and steered me off to visit with someone else.

I won’t name-drop who the *someone else* was ...

But let’s just say her name rhymes with Sheryl Sheep.

Was that enough comeuppance for T.J.? Not getting what he wanted *one time*?

Probably not. But it’s a start.

If you’re wondering how *The Rom-Commers* did, I’ll let the legendary box office numbers answer that. And all the headlines that included the term “surprise blockbuster.” And also that piece in *The Atlantic*, “How Charlie Yates and His Writing Partner Are Resuscitating the Rom-com.” True, my name is missing from the headline. But the full-page photo is of me, filling up most of the frame, with my curly hair puffed out to maximum dramatic capacity by a makeup artist who also does shoots for *Vogue* and who made me look a thousand percent cooler than I am in real life. And Charlie, in profile and half out of frame, gazes at me admiringly.

When I saw the photo, I said, “This is the only time I’ve ever liked my hair.”

And Charlie said, “That’s okay. I like it enough for both of us.”

Also: During the interview for that piece, Charlie deferred to me at every question, and then, when the writer turned for his response, just nodded and said, “What she said.” Every time. Making sure, in his friendly way, that I was quoted—heavily.

All to say: Charlie’s doing just fine.

As am I.

I did eventually give in and marry Charlie, by the way. And I did transfer my mug collection to his mansion. But I am still, to this day, not allowed to touch the coffee maker.

★ ★ ★

AND THAT'S HOW this story comes to an end: with a total of not one, not two, but three weddings.

Do you have to get married in life to be happy? Of course not.

But it's certainly one way to go.

My dad got certified as a reverend online for thirty-five dollars, insisted we all start calling him Reverend Dad, and then served as our officiant. We all gathered once again in the community garden, surrounded by a bumper crop of Mitsuko's dragon's egg cucumbers—just a year to the week after my dad's own wedding in the same spot.

I carried a bouquet of marigolds, which were my mom's favorite flower, and which the lovely Mitsuko had planted and grown in anticipation of the big day. We also pinned them to the guys' white guayabera shirts—it was far too hot in June for jackets—as boutonnieres.

This time, in his official capacity, my dad had some things to say. Leaning on his walker, he told us the smartest thing he knew about being married:

“People say ‘marriage is hard’ all the time.” He looked around the small crowd—which included our family, Jack Stapleton and Hannah, Logan and his husband, Nico, Mitsuko's family, in town for the summer drop-off, and all the members of the community garden.

My dad went on, “But I disagree. I don't think marriage is hard. I think, in fact, if you do it right, marriage is the thing that makes everything else easier.”

My dad let that sink in.

He went on. “Now you're wondering how to do it right—right?”

We nodded.

“Well, you're lucky. Because love is something you can learn. Love is something you can practice. It's something you can choose to get good at. And here's how you do it.” He let go of his walker to signal he meant business: “Appreciate your person.”

He looked around.

“That’s it,” he said, like we were done. Then he added, “Well—first, be sure to choose a good person.” He evaluated the crowd to make sure we’d done that. Then he said, “But we’re all good people here.”

Bashful smiles all around.

He went on: “Choose a good, imperfect person who leaves the cap off the toothpaste, and puts the toilet paper roll on upside down, and loads the dishwasher like a ferret on steroids—and then appreciate the hell out of that person. Train yourself to see their best, most delightful, most charming qualities. Focus on everything they’re getting right. Be grateful—all the time—and laugh the rest off.”

My dad smiled at us, and then put a hand back on his walker.

“And that goes for kids, too, by the way—and pets, and waiters, and even our own selves,” he said. “There it is. The whole trick to life. Be aggressively, loudly, unapologetically grateful.”

My dad nodded at us then, like *You’re welcome*.

Then he concluded with, “Now let’s get these two kids hitched.”

★ ★ ★

ALL TO SAY ... yes. This *was* and *is* a happily ever after.

Even though I still—always—miss my mom. Even though my dad continues to struggle with his balance, and just got seven stitches after slipping in the shower, and still keeps his unplayed cello in a corner of the room where he can see it. Even though Sylvie and Salvador have been trying for a baby for two years and haven’t had much success. Even though I still google “elbow cancer” in the middle of the night, and I don’t make it home nearly as often as I’d like to, and feel, honestly, a little jealous of Sylvie sometimes, now that she’s taken over. Life has no shortage of disappointments. Mistress Jablowmie got vengeful when she didn’t get her screenplay from Charlie, and now his Mafia movie may never see the light of day. T.J. Heywood continues to menace me every chance he gets—stubbornly refusing a redemption arc. The lovely Mitsuko has an irritating new neighbor who keeps spraying insecticide on the butterfly weed she planted as food for the monarch caterpillars. And Cuthbert the guinea pig

never did conquer his melancholia—and eventually followed his brother across the rainbow bridge.

That's just life.

Tragedy really is a given.

There are endless human stories, but they all end the same way.

So it can't be *where you're going* that matters. It has to be *how you get there*.

That's what I've decided.

It's all about the details you notice. And the joys you savor. And the hope you refuse to give up on.

It's all about writing the very best story of your life.

Not just how you live it—but how you choose to tell it.

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I always panic when it comes time to write acknowledgments because I'm always terrified of leaving important people out, and then I always do. Whoever you are, thank you—and I'm so sorry I forgot you!

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ALSO BY KATHERINE CENTER

Hello Stranger

The Bodyguard

What You Wish For

Things You Save in a Fire

How to Walk Away

Happiness for Beginners

The Lost Husband

Get Lucky

Everyone Is Beautiful

The Bright Side of Disaster

About the Author



Skyilar Reeves Photography

Katherine Center is the *New York Times* bestselling author of eleven novels, including *Hello Stranger*, *The Bodyguard*, *Things You Save in a Fire*, and her newest, *The Rom-Commers*. Katherine writes “deep rom-coms”—laugh-and-cry books about how life knocks us down, and how we get back up. The movie adaptation of Katherine’s novel *Happiness for Beginners*, starring Ellie Kemper and Luke Grimes, became a Netflix movie in 2023 and hit the Global Top 10 in 81 countries around the world, and the movie of her novel *The Lost Husband* hit #1 on Netflix in 2020. Katherine lives in her hometown of Houston, Texas, with her husband, two kids, and their fluffy-but-fierce dog. Join her mailing list at KatherineCenter.com!, or sign up for email updates [here](#).



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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