

# EMILY HENRY

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
HAPPY PLACE



# FUNNY STORY

A NOVEL

## TITLES BY EMILY HENRY

*Funny Story*

*Happy Place*

*Book Lovers*

*People We Meet on Vacation*

*Beach Read*

# FUNNY STORY



EMILY HENRY

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*For Bri, who picked me up from the airport the night we first  
met and drove me through a snowstorm without ever looking  
back. I struck gold with you.*



WEDNESDAY, MAY 1<sup>ST</sup>

## 108 DAYS UNTIL I CAN LEAVE

SOME PEOPLE ARE natural storytellers. They know how to set the scene, find the right angle, when to pause for dramatic effect or breeze past inconvenient details.

I wouldn't have become a librarian if I didn't love stories, but I've never been great at telling my own.

If I had a penny for every time I interrupted my own anecdote to debate whether this actually *had* happened on a Tuesday, or if it had in fact been *Thursday*, then I'd have at least forty cents, and that's way too big a chunk of my life wasted for way too small of a payout.

Peter, on the other hand, would have zero cents and a rapt audience.

I especially loved the way he told *our* story, about the day we met.

It was late spring, three years ago. We lived in Richmond at the time, a mere five blocks separating his sleek apartment in a renovated Italianate from my shabby-not-quite-chic version of the same kind of place.

On my way home from work, I detoured through the park, which I never did, but the weather was perfect. And I was wearing a floppy-brimmed hat, which I never had, but Mom mailed it to me the week before, and I felt like I owed it to her to at least *try* it out. I was reading as I walked—which I'd vowed to stop doing because I'd nearly caused a bike accident doing so weeks earlier—when suddenly, a warm breeze caught the hat's brim. It lifted off my head and swooped over an azalea bush. Right to a tall, handsome blond man's feet.



Peter said this felt like an invitation. Laughed, almost self-deprecatingly, as he added, “I’d never believed in fate before that.”

If it *was* fate, then it’s reasonable to assume fate *a little bit* hates me, because when he bent to retrieve the hat, another gust swept it into the air, and I chased after it right into a trash can.

The metal kind, bolted to the ground.

My hat landed atop a pile of discarded lo mein, the lip of the can smashed into my rib cage, and I did a wheezing pratfall into the grass. Peter described this as “adorably clumsy.”

He left out the part where I screamed a string of expletives.

“I fell in love with Daphne the moment I looked up from her hat,” he’d say, no mention of the trash-noodles in my hair.

When he asked if I was okay, I said, “Did I kill a bicyclist?”

He thought I’d hit my head. (Nope, just bad at first impressions.)

Over the last three years, Peter dusted off Our Story every chance he got. I was sure he’d work it into both our vows *and* his wedding reception speech.

But then his bachelor party happened, and everything changed.

The story tipped onto its side. Found a fresh point of view. And in this new telling of it, I was no longer *the leading lady*, but instead the teensy complication that would forever be used to jazz up *their* story.

Daphne Vincent, the librarian that Peter plucked out of the trash, nearly married, then dumped the morning after his bachelor party for his “platonic” “best” “friend,” Petra Comer.

Then again, when would he even need to tell their story?

Everyone around Peter Collins and Petra Comer knew their history: How they’d met in third grade when forced into alphabetical seating, bonding over a shared love of Pokémon. How, soon after, their mothers became friends while chaperoning an aquarium field trip, with their fathers to follow suit.

For the last quarter of a century, the Collinses and the Comers vacationed together. They celebrated birthdays, ate Christmas brunches, decorated their homes with handmade picture frames from which Peter’s

and Petra's faces beamed out beneath some iteration of the phrase *BEST FRIENDS FOREVER*.

This, Peter told me, made him and the most gorgeous woman I'd ever met *more like cousins than friends*.

As a librarian, I really should've taken a moment to think about *Mansfield Park* or *Wuthering Heights*, all those love stories and twisted Gothics wherein two protagonists, raised side by side, reach adulthood and proclaim their undying love for each other.

But I didn't.

So now here I am, sitting in a tiny apartment, scrolling through Petra's public social media, seeing every detail of her new courtship with my ex-fiancé.

From the next room, Jamie O'Neal's rendition of "All By Myself" plays loudly enough to make the coffee table shiver. My next-door neighbor, Mr. Dorner, pounds on the wall.

I barely hear it, because I've just reached a picture of Peter and Petra, sandwiched between both sets of their parents, on the shore of Lake Michigan—six abnormally attractive people smiling abnormally white smiles over the caption, *The best things in life are worth waiting for*.

As if on cue, the music ratchets up.

I slam my computer shut and peel myself off the sofa. This apartment was built pre-global warming, when Northern Michiganders had no need for air-conditioning, but it's only May first and already the apartment turns into a brick oven around midday.

I cross to the bedroom hallway and knock on Miles's door. He doesn't hear me over Jamie. I escalate to pounding.

The music stops.

Footsteps shuffle closer. The door swings open, and a weed fog wafts out.

My roommate's dark brown eyes are ringed in pink, and he's in nothing but a pair of boxers and a funky knitted afghan wrapped around his shoulders like a very sad cape. Considering the overall climate of our hotbox apartment, I can only assume this is for modesty's sake. Seems like

overkill for a man who, just last night, forgot I lived with him long enough to take a whole-ass shower with the door wide open.

His chocolate-brown hair sticks up in every direction. His matching beard is pure chaos. He clears his throat. “What’s up.”

“Everything okay?” I ask, because while I’m used to a *disheveled* Miles, I’m less used to hearing him blast the saddest song in the world.

“Yep,” he says. “All good.”

“Could you turn the music down,” I say.

“I’m not listening to music,” he says, dead serious.

“Well, you paused it,” I say, in case he really is simply too high to remember more than three seconds back. “But it’s really loud.”

He scratches one eyebrow with the back of his knuckle, frowning. “I’m watching a movie,” he says. “But I can turn it down. Sorry.”

Without even meaning to, I’m peering over his shoulder to get a better look.

Unlike the rest of our apartment, which was perfectly tidy when I arrived and is still perfectly tidy, his room is disastrous. Half of his records are stacked atop the milk crates they ostensibly belong inside. His bed is unmade, a rumpled comforter and the sheet untucked all the way around. Two tattered flannel shirts hang out of his mostly closed dresser drawers, like little ghosts he’s pinned there, midscape.

In direct opposition to the creams and taupes of my room, his is a messy, cozy mix of rusts, mustards, seventies greens. Where my books are neatly organized along my bookcase and the shelf I installed above my window, his (very few) are face down, spines cracked, on the floor. Electronics manuals, loose tools, and an open bag of Sour Patch Kids are scattered across his desk, and on his windowsill, a stick of incense burns between a few surprisingly vivacious houseplants.

His TV, though, is what catches my eye. Onscreen is the image of a thirty-year-old Renée Zellweger, sporting red pajamas and belting a song into a rolled-up magazine.

“Oh my god, Miles,” I say.

“What?” he says.

“You’re watching *Bridget Jones’s Diary*?”

“It’s a good movie!” he cries, a little defensive.

“It’s a great movie,” I say, “but this scene is, like, one minute long.”

He sniffs. “So?”

“So why has it been playing for at least”—I check my phone—“the last eight minutes?”

His dark brows knit together. “Did you need something, Daphne?”

“Could you just turn it down?” I say. “All the plates are rattling in the cabinets and Mr. Dorner’s trying to bust down the living room wall.”

Another sniff. “You want to watch?” he offers.

In there?

Too big of a tetanus risk. An ungenerous thought, sure, but I have recently tapped out my supply of generosity. That’s what happens when your life partner leaves you for the nicest, sunniest, prettiest woman in the state of Michigan.

“I’m good,” I tell Miles.

We both just stand there. This is as much as we ever interact. I’m about to break the record. My throat tickles. My eyes burn. I add, “And could you please not smoke inside?”

I would’ve asked sooner, except that, technically, the apartment is his. He did me a huge favor letting me move in.

Then again, it’s not like he had many options. His girlfriend had just moved out.

Into *my* apartment.

With *my* fiancé.

He needed to replace Petra’s half of their shared rent. I needed a place to sleep. Did I say sleep? I meant weep.

But I’ve been here three weeks now, and I’m tired of showing up to work smelling like I came straight from the least famous of the Grateful Dead’s spin-off bands’ concerts.

“I stick my head out the window,” Miles says.

“What,” I say.

Immediately I picture a chocolate Labrador riding in a car, its mouth open and eyes squinting into the wind. The few times Miles and I met before all this, on awkward double dates with our now-partnered partners, that's what he'd reminded me of. Friendly and wiry with an upturned nose that made him look a bit impish, and teeth that were somehow *too* perfect in contrast to his scruffy face.

The toll of the last three weeks has given him a slightly feral edge—a Labrador bitten by a werewolf and dumped back at the pound. Relatable, honestly.

"I stick my head out the window when I smoke," he clarifies.

"Okay," I say. That's all I've got. I turn to go.

"You sure you don't want to watch the movie?" he says.

Oh, god.

The truth is, Miles seems like a nice guy. A really nice guy! And I imagine that what he's feeling right now must be comparable to my own total emotional decimation. I *could* take him up on his offer, go sit in his room on an unmade bed and watch a romantic comedy while absorbing fifteen hundred grams of weed smoke via my pores. Maybe it would be nice even, to pretend for a bit that we're friends rather than strangers trapped together in this nightmare of a breakup.

But there are better uses of my Wednesday night.

"Maybe some other time," I say, and go back to my computer to continue looking for new jobs, far away from Peter and Petra, and far away from Waning Bay, Michigan.

I wonder if Antarctica is in need of a children's librarian.

One hundred and eight days, and then I'm out of here.



BACK IN APRIL  
BEFORE I KNEW I NEEDED TO LEAVE

HERE'S HOW THE rest of the story goes, when I'm the one telling it: Peter Collins and I fell in love one day in the park, when the wind swept my hat from my head.

I am arguably the world's worst small-talker, but he didn't want to small-talk.

When I told him the hat was a gift from my mother, he wanted to know if we were close, where she lived now, what the gift was for, and by the way, *Happy birthday, are you a birthday person?* And when I told him, *Thank you, and yes, yes, I am*, he volunteered that he was too, that his family always treated birthdays like huge personal successes rather than markers of time. And when I told him that sounded beautiful, the birthdays and his family, he said, *They're the reason I've always wanted a big family of my own someday*, and at that point, I already would've been a goner, even if he hadn't asked me right then, as if there wasn't garbage sticking to my chestnut-brown hair, *What about you? Do you want a big family?*

Dating in my late twenties had been hell. This was the kind of question I'd usually ask right before the guy on the other end of the phone ghosted me. As if it had been a formal proposition: *Should we skip grabbing a drink and maybe freeze some embryos, just in case?*

Peter was different. Stable, steady, practical. The kind of person I could imagine trusting, which didn't come naturally to me.

Within five weeks, we'd moved in together, synced our lives, friend groups, and schedules. At the first over-the-top birthday party I ever threw him, Peter's and my respective best friends in Richmond, Cooper and Sadie, hit it off and started dating too.

Within a year, Peter proposed. I said yes.

A year later, while wedding planning, we started looking for a house to buy. His parents, two of the loveliest people I've ever met, sent him the listing for a gorgeous old house not far from them in the lakeside Michigan town he'd grown up in.

He'd always wanted to get back there, and now that his software development job had gone remote, nothing was stopping him.

My mom lived in Maryland by then. My dad, a title that really deserves to have scare quotes around it, was out in Southern California. Sadie and Cooper were toying with the possibility of moving to Denver.

And as much as I loved my job in Richmond, what I really wanted—what I'd *always* wanted—was to be a *children's* librarian, and lo and behold, the Waning Bay Public Library was looking to fill that exact position.

So we bought the house in Michigan.

Well, *he* bought it. I had terrible credit and slim savings. He covered the down payment *and* insisted on paying the mortgage.

He'd always been so generous, but it felt like too much. Sadie didn't understand my hang-ups—I *let Cooper pay for literally everything*, she'd say, *he makes a shit-ton more than me*—but Sadie hadn't been raised by Holly Vincent.

There was no way my badass, hyperindependent mother would approve of me relying on Peter so heavily, and so I didn't approve either.

He came up with a compromise: I'd furnish the place, add piecemeal to the assortment of furniture we'd brought from Richmond, while he covered the bills.

Most of his far-flung friends had cushy white-collar jobs and could afford to take a separate trip for his bachelor party. Whereas Sadie and the rest of my friends were mostly other librarians—or booksellers, or aspiring

writers—who couldn't afford two separate trips. Thus, she and Cooper would fly in a few days before the summer ceremony instead, and we'd do my bachelorette then.

So, three weeks ago, in early April, Peter trudged out for his Night on the Town and I stayed behind to read in our new butter-yellow Victorian. For the first few stops of the night, he texted me cute group shots. His brother, Ben, up from Grand Rapids, and his high school buddy Scott, with whom I'd *finally* managed to bond by reading the first four *Dune* novels, along with some other Richmond friends. They all had their arms slung around each other, Peter splitting center—in every picture—with his willowy, platinum-haired, cat-eyed goddess of a best friend, one Petra Collins.

Petra's boyfriend, Miles, had *not* been invited to the bachelor party. Peter didn't *hate* Miles. He just didn't think Miles was good enough for Petra, because Miles is a stoner without a college degree.

Petra is *also* a stoner without a college degree, but I guess it's different when you're a perfect ten with a picturesque family and well-padded bank account. Then you're not a stoner; you're a *free spirit*.

Another thing that must, despite my greatest wishes, be mentioned: Petra is preternaturally nice.

She's that woman who's instantly *familiar* with everyone, in a way that makes you feel chosen. Always grabbing your arm, laughing at your jokes, suggesting you try her lip gloss in the bathroom, then insisting you keep it because "it's better with your coloring."

I really didn't want to be jealous of her. It made sense that she went to his bachelor party. She was his best friend. It made sense that I *didn't* go. That's how this antiquated tradition works.

I'd hoped to stay awake long enough to shove a glass of water and some ibuprofen into Peter's drunken hand when he got home, but I drifted off on the couch.

When I jolted awake at the click of the front door, it was full bright in the living room, so I could see Peter's surprise at finding me there.



He looked, honestly, like he'd stumbled upon a woman who'd broken into his house and boiled his pet rabbit, rather than his loving fiancée curled on the sofa. But still the alarm bells didn't go off.

It was hard to feel too panicky with Peter nearby, looking like the very least inventive depiction of the archangel Michael. Six foot four, golden-blond hair, green eyes, and a strong Roman nose.

Not that I have any clue what a Roman nose is. But whenever a historical romance writer mentions one, I think of Peter's.

"You're back," I croaked and got up to greet him. He stiffened in my hug, and I pulled away, my hands still locked against the back of his neck. He took hold of my wrists and unwound them from him, holding them between our chests.

"Can we talk for a minute?" he asked.

"Of course?" I said it like a question. It was.

He walked me to the couch and sat me down. Then, as far as I could figure, a couple of tectonic plates must have smashed together, because the whole world lurched, and my ears started ringing so loudly I could only catch bits of what he was saying. None of it could be right. It didn't make sense.

*Too much to drink . . .*

*Everyone went home, but we stayed back to sober up . . .*

*One thing led to another and . . .*

*God, I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt you, but . . .*

"You cheated on me?" I finally squeaked out, while he was in the middle of yet another indecipherable sentence.

"No!" he said. "I mean, it wasn't like that. We're . . . She told me she's in love with me, Daphne. And I realized I am too. In love. With her. Fuck, I'm so sorry."

Some more sorries.

Some more ringing ears.

Some more platitudes.

No. No, he didn't cheat on me? No, he simply confessed his love to someone who was *not* me? I was trying to jam the pieces of the puzzle

together, but nothing fit. Every sentence he said was incompatible with the last.

Finally my hearing caught on something that seemed important, if only I could figure out the context: *a week*.

“A week?” I said.

He nodded. “She’s waiting for me now, so we can leave right away. Not be in your hair while you figure things out.”

“A *week*,” I repeated, still not understanding.

“I looked online.” He shifted forward on the couch to pull a folded piece of paper out of his back pocket, and handed it to me.

Some truly deluded part of me thought it would be an apology note, a love letter that made all of this . . . not *okay*, but maybe *salvageable*.

Instead it was a printout of local apartment listings.

“You’re moving out?” I choked.

A flush crept up his neck, his eyes darting toward the front door. “Well, no,” he said. “The house is in *my* name, so . . .”

He trailed off, expecting me to fill in the blank.

Finally, I did.

“Are you fucking kidding me, Peter?” I jumped up. I didn’t feel hurt then. That would come later. First it was all rage.

He stood too, brows shooting toward his perfect hairline. “We didn’t mean for this to happen.”

“Of course she fucking meant for this to happen, Peter! She had twenty-five years to tell you she was in love with you and chose *last night*!”

“She didn’t realize,” he said, defensive of her. Protecting *her* from the blast of this emotional fallout while I was here on my own. “Not until she was faced with *losing* me.”

“You brought me here!” I half screamed. At the end, it turned into a sort of deranged laugh. “I left my friends. My apartment. My job. My *entire life*.”

“I feel so terrible,” he said. “You have no idea.”

“I have no idea how bad *you* feel?” I demanded. “Where am I supposed to go?”

He gestured to the apartment listings, now on the ground. “Look,” he said. “We’re going out of town to give you space to figure things out. We won’t be back until next Sunday.”

*We.*

*Back.*

*Oh.*

*Oh, god.*

It wasn’t just that I was expected to move out.

She was moving in. After they got back from a sexy new-couple vacation that was being pitched to me like an act of kindness for my benefit. I almost asked where they were going, but the last thing I needed was a mental picture of them kissing in front of the Eiffel Tower.

(Wrong. I’d later learn they’d been kissing along the Amalfi Coast.)

“I’m really sorry, Daph,” he said, and leaned in to kiss my forehead like some benevolent father figure, regretfully shipping off for war to do his duty.

I shoved him away, and his eyes widened in shock for just a second. Then he nodded, somberly, and headed for the door, totally empty-handed. Like he had everything he needed and not a lick of it was in this house.

As the door fell shut, something snapped in me.

I grabbed one of the bulk containers of Jordan almonds Mrs. Collins had picked up on her last Costco trip, and ran outside, still in the silk pajamas Peter bought me last Christmas.

He cast a wild-eyed look over his shoulder at me as he hoisted himself into the passenger seat of Petra’s open-top Jeep. She kept her face decidedly pointed away.

“You are such a fucking asshole!” I hurled a handful of almonds at him.

He gave a yelp. I threw another handful at the tailgate. Petra started the car.

I chased them down the driveway, then threw the whole bucket at the Jeep. It hit a wheel and went skidding to the side of the road as they peeled off into the sunset.

Sunrise. Whatever.

“Where am I going to go?” I asked feebly as I sank onto the dew-damp grass of our—*their*—front yard.

I stayed there watching the road for probably ten minutes. Then I went back inside and cried so hard it might’ve made me vomit, if I hadn’t completely forgotten to eat the night before. I wasn’t much of a cook, and besides that, Peter was extremely careful with his diet. Low carbs, high protein. I dug around our understocked cabinets and started making Easy Mac.

Then someone started pounding on the door.

Fool that I am, my only guess was that Peter had come back. That he’d made it to the airport only for a burst of clarity to send him racing home to me.

But when I opened the door, I found Miles, red-eyed from either crying or smoking, and brandishing a three-sentence note that Petra had left him on their coffee table, as if it were a pitchfork or maybe a flag of surrender.

“Is she here?” he asked thickly.

“No.” Numbness settled over me. “I threw some almonds at them and they drove away.”

He nodded, the sorrow deepening across his face, as if he knew exactly what that meant, and it wasn’t good.

“Shit,” he rasped, slumping against the doorframe.

I swallowed a knot that felt like barbed wire. Or maybe it was a tangle of the Vincent family practicality I’d inherited from my mother, that old familiar ability to use those negative emotions as fuel to Get. Shit. Done.

“Miles,” I said.

He looked up, his expression wrecked but with a bit of hope lurking somewhere between his eyebrows. Like he thought I might announce this whole thing was an extremely fun and not sociopathic prank.

“How many bedrooms does your apartment have?” I asked.



SATURDAY, MAY 18<sup>TH</sup>

## 91 DAYS UNTIL I CAN LEAVE

HONESTLY, MILES NOWAK is a good roommate.

Aside from occasional invitations to watch a movie, or texts to ask whether I need anything from the market, he leaves me to my own devices. After my request that he only smoke outside, he really must have stopped merely *sticking his head out the window*, because weeks pass without me smelling weed in the hallway. There's no more mournful blasting of Jamie O'Neal either. In fact, he seems totally fine. I never would've guessed he was a man fresh off a horrible heartbreak if I hadn't seen his face six weeks ago, on the day it happened.

Without discussing it, we pretty easily figured out a bathroom schedule that works. He's a night owl, and I usually get up around six thirty or seven in the morning, regardless of whether I'm working the library's opening shift or not. And since he's rarely home, he never leaves stacks of dirty dishes "soaking" in the sink.

But the apartment itself is tiny. My bedroom is a glorified closet.

In fact, Petra used it as one, when she lived here.

A year ago, the meager dimensions wouldn't have been a problem.

As long as I could remember, I'd been a staunch minimalist. From the time my parents separated, Mom and I had moved around a lot, chasing promotions at the bank where she worked, and then, eventually, helping open new branches. We never had professional movers, just the help of

whichever guy was trying and failing to score a date with Mom at the time, so I learned to travel light.

I made a sport of figuring out the absolute least amount of things I needed. It helped that I was such a library kid and didn't have metric tons of annotated paperbacks. Books were the only thing I was gluttonous about, but I didn't care about owning them so much as absorbing their contents.

Once, before a move in high school, I convinced Mom to do a ceremonial burning of all the A+ tests and papers she'd been stockpiling on our fridge. We turned on the little gas fireplace in the living room—the *only* thing we both agreed we'd miss about that mildew-riddled apartment—and I started tossing things in.

It was the only time I'd seen her cry. She was my best friend and favorite person in the world, but she wasn't a *soft* woman. I'd always thought of her as completely invulnerable.

But that night, watching my old physics test blacken and curl, her eyes welled and she said in a thick voice, "Oh, Daph. Who am I going to be when you go off to college?"

I snuggled closer to her, and she wrapped her arms around my shoulders. "You're still going to be you," I told her. "The best mom on the planet."

She kissed me on the head, said, "Sometimes I wish I held on to a little bit more."

"It's just stuff," I reminded her, her own constant refrain.

Life, I'd learned, is a revolving door. Most things that come into it only stay awhile.

The men hell-bent on proving their feelings for Mom eventually gave up and moved on. The friends from the last school who promised to write faded from the rearview in a month or two. The boy who called you every day after one magical summer night outside the Whippy Dipper would return to school in the fall holding someone else's hand.

There was no point clinging to something that wasn't really yours. Mom was the only permanent thing in my life, the only thing that mattered.

When she put me on a plane to send me off to undergrad, neither of us cried. Instead we stood hugging each other so long and tight that later, I

found a bruise on my shoulder. My entire wardrobe of solid-colored basics fit into one suitcase, and we'd shipped the jute rug we'd found on clearance, along with a mug, bowl, set of silverware, and hot pot, which Mom joked would allow me to make all of my major food groups: tea, Easy Mac, and Top Ramen.

That was two states and five apartments ago. In all that time, I'd managed to accumulate very little clutter.

Then Peter and I moved into the Waning Bay house, with its wraparound porch. That day, he scooped me into his arms, carried me over the threshold, and said three magic words that changed my little minimalist heart forever.

*Welcome home, Daphne.*

Just like that, something in me relaxed, my gooiest parts oozing out beyond my heretofore carefully maintained boundaries.

Until that moment, I'd carried my life like a handkerchief knapsack at the end of a broom handle, something small and containable I could pick up and move at the drop of a hat. And I never knew what it was I was running from, or to, until he said it.

*Home.* The word stoked an ember in my chest. Here was the permanence I'd been waiting for. A place that would belong to us. And yes, our uneven financial situations complicated that ownership, but while he paid the bills, I could focus on cozying the place up.

My minimalism went out the window.

Now all that *stuff*—furniture intended for a three-bedroom house—was stuffed into Miles's guest room. Furniture wall to wall, all of it butting right up against each other, throw pillows utterly covering my bed, like I was some unhinged Stephen King villain who might handcuff you to the headboard and mother you to death.

I should've left all of this shit behind, but I felt too guilty about the money I'd spent, outfitting a home that wasn't even mine.

Then there was the wedding paraphernalia, shoved into every closet the apartment had, the overpriced dress hanging on the other side of a thin

lamine slider door—a telltale heart, a Dorian Gray portrait, a deep dark secret.

In theory, I'm going to sell the dress and the rest of it online, but doing so would require *thinking* about the wedding, and I'm not there yet.

In fact, I've spent the first seven hours of my Saturday morning shift pushing any thought of the Wedding That Never Was out of my mind.

Then my phone buzzes on my desk with a text from Miles: *ur working*

This is how he texts. With abbreviations, very little context, and no punctuation.

Is he asking me or telling me that I'm working? Neither makes sense. I have a detailed whiteboard calendar in the kitchen where he can clearly see exactly where I'm going to be and when. I check it against my phone calendar nightly, and I invited him to add his own schedule, but he's never taken me up on it.

Yep, I say.

Another text: *U want Thai*

I'm guessing that's another implied question mark, though it's unclear whether he's asking about ordering dinner or if it's more of an existential question.

I'm good, thanks, I write. Every day on my lunch break, I go to one of the three food trucks at the public beach across the street. Saturdays are a burrito day, so I'll be stuffed for hours.

K, Miles writes.

Then he types some more and stops. I wonder if he's fishing for an offer to pick up the aforementioned Thai on my way home.

Anything else? I write back.

He replies, *I'll just c u when u get home.*

Strange. On Saturdays, he's usually in his room or out for the night by the time I get back. My phone vibrates again, but it's just my ten-minute warning for Story Hour. I gather my supplies and head to the sunken-living-room-style Story Nook at the back of the library. Kids and their keepers are already gathering in the little pit, claiming carpet squares or heavily Lysoled gymnastic mats. Some of the older caretakers, grandparents and great-



grandparents, ease themselves into the scoop chairs arranged around the outer ring of the nook, the regulars greeting each other.

The library's back wall of windows bathes the nook in sunlight, and I can already tell who will be nodding off by book two.

Still, a chorus of ridiculous little voices rises as I approach, cries of "Miss Daffy!" and other adorable mispronunciations of my name. In my heart, it feels like little kernels are bursting into fluffy blossoms of popcorn.

One little girl announces, as I walk past, "I'm three!" and I tell her that's awesome, and ask how old she thinks I am.

After brief consideration, she tells me I'm a teenager.

Last week she said I was one hundred, so I'm taking this as a win. Before I can respond, a four-year-old named Arham I've literally never seen *not* in a Spider-Man costume flings himself at me, hugging my knees.

No matter how foul my mood, Story Hour always helps.

"Sweetie," Arham's mother, Huma, says, reaching to peel him away before we topple.

"Who here likes dragons?" I ask, to near-unanimous cheering.

There are a lot of sweet families who've become regulars since I started here a year ago, but Huma and Arham are two of my favorites. He's endlessly energetic and imaginative, and she rides that magical line of keeping firm rules without squashing his little weirdo spirit. Seeing them together always makes my heart ache a little bit.

Makes me miss my own mom.

Makes me miss the life I thought I'd have with Peter, and the rest of the Collinses.

I shake myself out of the cloud of melancholy and settle into my chair with the first of today's picture books in my lap. "What about tacos?" I ask the kids. "Does anyone like those?"

Somehow, the kids manage even more enthusiasm for tacos than they did for dragons. When I ask if they already knew that dragons love tacos, their shrieks of delight are earsplitting. Arham jumps up, the heels of his sneakers flashing red as he shouts, "Dragons eat people!"

I tell him that some maybe do, but others just eat tacos, and that's as good of a segue as I'm going to get into *Dragons Love Tacos* by Adam Rubin, illustrated by Daniel Salmieri.

No part of my week goes as fast as Story Hour does. I get so sucked into it that I usually only remember I'm at work when I close the last book of the day.

Just as I predicted, the energy that greeted me has fizzled, the kids mostly settling into pleasant sleepiness in time to pack it in and head home, except for one of the Fontana triplets, who's tired enough to devolve into a minor meltdown as her mom is trying to get her and her siblings out the door.

I wave goodbye to the last stragglers, then start tidying the nook, spraying the mats down, gathering trash, returning abandoned books to the front desk to be reshelved.

Ashleigh, the librarian responsible for our adult patrons and programming, slips out from the back office, her gigantic quilted purse slung over one shoulder and her raven topknot jutting slightly to the right.

Despite being a five-foot-tall hourglass of a woman with Disney Princess eyes, Ashleigh is the embodiment of the scary-librarian stereotype. Her voice has the force of a blunt object, and she once told me she "doesn't mind confrontation" in a tone that made me wonder if maybe we were already *in* one. She's the person that our septuagenarian branch manager, Harvey, deploys whenever a difficult patron needs a firm hand.

My first shift working alongside her, a middle-aged guy with a wad of dip in his cheek walked up, stared at her boobs, and said, "I've always had a thing for *exotic* girls."

Without even looking up from her computer, Ashleigh replied, "That's inappropriate, and if you speak to me like that again, we'll have to ban you. Would it be helpful if I printed you some literature about sexual harassment?"

All that to say, I admire and fear her in equal measure.

"You good to lock up?" she asks now, while texting. Another thing about Ashleigh: she's always late, and usually leaves a bit early. "I have to pick

up Mulder from tae kwon do,” she says.

Yes, her son is named after David Duchovny’s character from *The X-Files*.

Yes, every time I remember this, I inch closer to death.

I’m now old enough to have kids without anyone being scandalized by it.

Hell, I’m old enough to have a daughter named Renesmee on one of those U-5 soccer teams where the kids take turns kicking the ball the wrong way, then sitting down midfield to take off their shoes.

Instead, I’m single and unattached in a place where I only know my coworkers and my ex-fiancé’s inner circle.

“Daphne?” Ashleigh says. “You good?”

“Yep,” I tell her. “You go ahead.”

She nods in lieu of a goodbye. I circle the library one last time, flicking off the fluorescents as I go.

On the drive home, I call my mom on speakerphone. With how busy she is with CrossFit, her book club, and the stained-glass class she’s started taking, we’ve started opting for more, quicker calls these days, rather than twice-a-month hours-long catch-ups.

I tell her about how things are shaping up with planning the library’s end-of-summer fundraiser (ninety-one days to go). She tells me she can now deadlift one hundred and sixty pounds. I tell her about the seventy-year-old patron who asked me to go salsa dancing, and she tells me about the twenty-eight-year-old trainer who keeps trying to find reasons to exchange phone numbers.

“We lead such similar lives,” I muse, parking on the curb.

“I *wish*. I don’t think Kelvin had salsa dancing in mind or I might’ve said yes,” she says.

“Well, I’m happy to pass along this guy’s number to you, but you should know my coworker Ashleigh calls him *Handsy Stanley*.”

“You know what, I’m good,” she says. “And I’m also sending you pepper spray.”

“I still have the can you got me in college,” I say. “Unless it expires.”

“Probably just gets better with age,” she says. “I’m almost to book club. What about you?”

I open my car door. “Just got home. Same time Monday?”

“Sounds good,” she says.

“Love you,” I tell her.

“Love you more,” she says quickly, then hangs up before I can argue, a bit she’s done as long as I can remember.

Miles lives on the third floor of a renovated brick warehouse at the edge of Waning Bay, in a neighborhood called Butcher Town. I assume it used to be the city’s meatpacking district, but I’ve never Googled it, so I don’t know, maybe it’s named after an old-timey serial killer.

By the time I climb the stairs and reach the front door, I’m clammy with sweat, and inside I drop my tote and wrestle out of my cardigan before toeing off my loafers. Then I check my phone calendar against the whiteboard. The only thing that’s changed since last night is, I agreed to host the Thrills and Kills book club on Thursday while Landon, the patron services assistant who usually runs it, recovers from his root canal.

I scribble the book club onto the board, then grab a glass and fill it with cold water. As I chug, I amble toward the living room. In the corner of my eye, a sudden movement surprises me so badly I yelp and slosh half my glass onto the rug.

But it’s just Miles. Lying face down on the couch. He groans without so much as lifting his face out of the squashy cushion. His furniture is all comfort, no sex appeal.

“You looked dead,” I tell him, moving closer.

He grumbles something.

“What?” I ask.

“I said *I wish*,” he mumbles.

I eye the bottle of coconut rum on the table and the empty mug beside it. “Rough day?”

I’d been caught off guard by the *Bridget Jones* incident three weeks ago, but now it’s almost a relief to see him *looking* how I’ve spent the last month and a half feeling.

Without lifting his face, he feels around on the coffee table to grab a piece of paper, then holds it aloft.

I walk over and take the delicate square of off-white parchment from his hand. Instantly, he lets his arm flop down to his side. I start reading the elegant script slanting across it.

*Jerome & Melly Collins along with  
Nicholas & Antonia Comer joyfully invite  
you to celebrate the marriage of their children,  
Peter & P—*

“NO.” I fling the invitation away from me like it’s a live snake.

A live snake that must *also* be on fire, because suddenly I am so, so, so hot. I take a few steps, fanning myself with my hands. “No,” I say. “This can’t be real.”

Miles sits up. “Oh, it’s real. You got one too.”

“Why the *hell* would they invite us?” I demand. Of him, of them, of the universe.

He leans forward and tips more coconut rum into his mug, filling it to the brim. He holds it out in offering. When I shake my head, he throws it back and pours some more.

I grab the invitation again, half expecting to realize my brain had merely malfunctioned while I was reading a take-out menu.

It did not.

“This is Labor Day weekend!” I shriek, throwing it away from me again.

“I know,” Miles says. “They couldn’t stop at simply ruining our lives. They had to ruin a perfectly good holiday too. Probably won’t even decorate this year.”

“I mean, *this* Labor Day,” I say. “Like, only a month after *our* wedding.”

Miles looks up at me, genuine concern contorting his face. “Daphne,” he says. “I think that ship sailed when he fucked my girlfriend, then took her to Italy for a week so he didn’t have to help you pack.”

I'm hyperventilating now. "Why would they get married this fast? We had, like, a two-year engagement."

Miles shudders as he swallows more rum. "Maybe she's pregnant."

The apartment building sways. I sink onto the couch, right atop Miles's calves. He fills the mug again, and this time, when he holds it out for me, I down it in one gulp. "Oh my god," I say. "That's gross."

"I know," he says. "But it's the only hard liquor I had. Should we switch to wine?"

I look over at him. "I didn't have you pegged for a wine guy."

He stares at me.

"What?"

His tipsy-squinting eyes narrow further. "Can't tell if you're kidding."

"No?" I say.

"I work at a winery, Daphne," he says.

"Since *when*?" I say, disbelieving.

"For the last seven years," he says. "What did you *think* I did?"

"I don't know," I say. "I thought you were a delivery guy."

"Why?" He shakes his head. "Based on *what*?"

"I don't know!" I say. "Can I just have some wine?"

He pulls his legs out from under me and stands, crossing to the kitchen. Through the gap between the island and the upper cabinets, I watch him dig through a cupboard I'm realizing I've absolutely never opened. The slice of it that I can see from here is filled with elegant glass bottles: white wine, pink, orange, red. He grabs two, then comes back to flop down beside me, pulling a corkscrew key chain off his belt loop.

The windows are open, and it's starting to sprinkle, the day's humidity breaking as he pops the cork from one bottle and hands the whole thing to me.

"No glass?" I say.

"You think you'll need one?" he asks, working the other bottle's cork free.

My eyes wander toward the expensive card-stock invitation still lying on Miles's threadbare kilim rug. "Guess not."

He clinks his bottle to mine and takes a long drink. I do the same, then wipe a drip of wine from my chin with the back of my hand.

“You really didn’t know I worked at a winery?” he says.

“Zero idea,” I say. “Peter made it sound like you do a ton of odd jobs.”

“I do a few different things,” he says noncommittally. “In addition to working at a winery. Cherry Hill. You’ve never been?” He looks up at me.

I shake my head and take another sip.

The corners of his mouth twitch downward. “He never liked me, did he?”

“No,” I admit. “What about Petra? Did she hate my guts?”

He frowns at his wine bottle. “No. Petra pretty much likes everyone, and everyone likes Petra.”

“I don’t,” I say. “I don’t like Petra even one tiny bit.”

He looks up at me through a half-formed smile. “Fair.”

“She never . . .” I twist my feet down in between the bottom seat cushions and the back ones. “I don’t know, acted jealous of me? Did you have *any* idea she was . . . into him?”

Another wry, not-quite-happy smile as he turns in toward me. “I mean, yeah, sometimes I wondered. Of course. But they’d been best friends since they were *kids*. I couldn’t compete with that, so I left it alone and hoped it wouldn’t be a problem.”

Somehow, out of everything, *that’s* what does it: I start to cry.

“Hey.” Miles moves closer. “It’s okay. It’s . . . fuck.” He pulls me roughly into his chest, his wine bottle still hanging from his hand. He kisses the top of my head like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

In actuality, it’s the first time he’s touched me, period. I’ve never been super physically affectionate with even my close friends, but I have to admit that after weeks of exactly no physical contact, it feels nice to be held by a near-perfect stranger.

“It’s ridiculous,” he says. “It’s unbelievably fucked.” He smooths my hair back with his free hand as I cry into his T-shirt, which smells only very faintly of weed, and much more of something spicy and woody.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I should've thrown the invitation away. I don't know why I didn't."

"No." I draw back, wiping my eyes. "I get it. You didn't want to be alone with it."

His gaze drops guiltily. "I should've kept it to myself."

"I would've done the same thing," I say. "I promise."

"Still," he murmurs. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," I insist. "You're not the one marrying Petra instead of me."

He winces a little.

"Shit! Now *I'm* sorry," I say.

He shakes his head as he sits back from me. "I just need a minute," he says, avoiding my gaze. He turns his head to stare out the window.

Oh, god. He's crying now too. Or trying very hard not to. Shit, shit, shit.

"Miles!" I'm in a panic. It's been a while since I comforted someone.

"I just need a second," he repeats. "I'm fine."

"Hey!" I crawl across the couch toward him and take his face in my hands, proof that the wine has hit my bloodstream.

Miles looks up at me.

"They," I say, "*suck*."

"She's the love of my life," he says.

"The love of your life sucks," I tell him.

He fights a smile. There's something adorable about it, so puppyish that I find myself tempted to ruffle his already messy hair. When I do, his smile just barely slants up. The movement makes his dark eyes glimmer.

It's been six weeks since I last had sex—by no means a personal record—but at his expression, I feel a surprising *zing* of awareness between my thighs.

Miles is handsome, if not the kind of man to make your jaw drop and hands sweat on sight. That was Peter—*TV* handsome, Mom called it. The kind that knocks you off balance from the start.

Miles is the other kind. The kind that's disarming enough that you don't feel nervous talking to him, or like you need to show your best angle, until—wham! Suddenly, he's smiling at you with his messy hair and impish



smirk, and you realize his hotness has been boiling around you so slowly you missed it.

Also, he smells better than expected.

Counterpoint: he's my roommate and was just crying over the love of his life.

There are surely more pragmatic ways to take our minds off this mess. "Do you want to watch *Bridget Jones's Diary*?" I offer.

"No." He shakes his head and I release my hold on his face, surprised how my heart flags at the rejection, or maybe just the thought of shuffling to my bedroom to be alone with these feelings.

"We shouldn't mope," he goes on, with another shake of his head.

"But I'm getting so good at it," I whine.

"Let's go out," he says.

"Out?" It sounds like I've never even heard the word before. "Out where?"

Miles stands, stretching a hand out to me. "I know a place."



TWO HOURS AGO, I never would've guessed I'd end the night at a neighborhood bar called MEATLOCKER, but here I am, taking shots with my roommate and an old biker named Gill.

Gill had thoroughly approved when Miles started up "Witchy Woman" on the jukebox in the corner, and after drunkenly sidling up to us and making conversation, he'd wanted to know how we'd met, likely assuming we were a couple. Without any hesitation, Miles told him, "The love of my life ran off with her fiancé," and this had inspired much alcohol-based charity on Gill's part.

As we'd played a round of darts, two rounds of pool, and a drinking game whose rules were completely incomprehensible to me, I watched in awe as Miles expertly extracted Gill's life story from him.

Born in Detroit to a nurse and a maintenance tech injured on the job at an automobile manufacturer, Gill had fled the Midwest at sixteen via motorcycle. He'd followed a band on the road for a decade, then briefly joined a cult in California, done security for the stars, and wound up back here after some mysterious *trouble*, either with the law or possibly the mob—the only thing Miles couldn't get out of him.

For someone with the innate social charm of a mounted fish (me), watching Miles befriend this stranger felt like seeing Michelangelo paint the Sistine Chapel: impressive, but also dizzying. Like any second, he might fall off his ladder and splatter on the marble below.

Gill kept buying us drinks, except for when the bartender, a cute redhead with a nose ring and a literal MOM tattoo, bought all *three* of us drinks.

Now, when last call rolls around, Gill shoves a twenty-dollar bill at us. “For the cab ride home.”

“No, no, no,” Miles says, pushing the bill back toward him. “Keep your money, Gill. How else are you getting to Vegas?”

Vegas, we’d learned, was his next destination.

But Gill tucks the bill in the pocket on Miles’s shirt, then claps one leathery hand on each of our cheeks. “Stay strong, kids,” he says sagely, then turns, tosses his beat-up leather jacket over one shoulder, and literally *whistles* a goodbye to the bartender.

By the time we’ve finished our last round, the rain has stopped, and the night is pleasantly cool, so we decide to walk home in a drunken zigzag, Miles’s arm slung over my shoulder and mine around his waist like we’re two old friends rather than very drunk, newly minted allies. “Does that kind of thing happen to you often?” I ask.

“What kind of thing?” Miles says.

“Gill,” I say.

“There aren’t many Gills in the world,” Miles replies.

“The free drinks,” I clarify. “The hours of stimulating conversation about crimes he may or may not have witnessed.”

“I don’t know.” He shrugs. “Sometimes.”

“How often do you get free drinks, Miles?”

He casts a bemused look over at me. “It’s a friendly place.”

“MEATLOCKER?” I ask.

“Butcher Town,” he says.

I smack my forehead and he stops short in surprise. “*That’s* why it’s called MEATLOCKER,” I say. “I spent the whole night trying to figure out if it was a fetish bar or something.”

Miles tips his head back, laughing. “You thought I took you to a fetish bar?” He looks delighted. “Did Peter tell you I was into BDSM?”

“Wait, *are* you?” I ask.

“Not that I know of,” he says. “Why? Are you?”

“Probably not,” I say. “I think I’m pretty boring. In that realm.”

“What realm?”

“Sex Realm,” I say.

“Do you lie there and stare at the ceiling in silence?” he asks.

“Excuse you,” I say. “This is none of your business.”

“You brought it up, Daphne,” he reminds me.

“I don’t stare at the ceiling,” I say. We’ve reached our building. He opens the door for me, and we start up the stairs. “I just make utterly unblinking eye contact like any respectable woman.”

“See?” he says, gesturing for me to take the stairs ahead of him. “Not boring. Haunting, maybe. But not boring.”

“But *how* does that happen?” I ask, and Miles’s eyes widen, his mouth screwing up into something between a smile and a grimace.

“Well, when two people find each other attractive—”

“The free drinks,” I interrupt.

He shrugs. “I don’t know. It’s not like I set out for it.”

I must be making a disbelieving face, because he frowns. “You think I’m some kind of con artist?”

“I think you’re a very charming guy,” I say.

“As far as insults go,” he says, pausing halfway up the stairs, “that’s a new one for me.”

“I’m not insulting you,” I say, though truthfully, I’ve never trusted people who are too charming. My dad’s a charming guy. Doesn’t mean he actually means anything he says. “It’s just—look, I’m *terrible* with new people.”

“Gill loved you,” he argues.

“Because of osmosis,” I say. “Because you were there. I love talking to people I already know, but when I meet someone new, half the time my mind goes blank, and the other half of the time, I make a joke that absolutely no one realizes is a joke, or I ask something way too personal.”

He glances sidelong at me as we start climbing again. “You didn’t do that with me.”

“You may have noticed,” I say, “I’ve barely spoken to you before tonight.”

“That’s why?” he says, another quick flick of his eyes over to me. “And here I thought you just hated me.”

Heat flares through me, head to toe. “Of course I don’t hate you. You’re unhateable.” And then, because I’m wasted, I admit: “Maybe that makes me mistrust you a little bit.”

He looks aghast at this.

“I just mean,” I hurry on, my words slurring together, “I’ve always been more of a *few close friends* person. And when I meet people who like everyone, are liked by everyone, this alarm goes off in my brain. Like, *Okay, this person isn’t going to stick around, so don’t get attached.*”

Now he looks mortified. “That is,” he says, “so depressingly cynical.”

“No, no, no,” I say, searching for a better way to explain. “It’s fine! Unless your fiancé dumps you, and you spent the last year working to befriend *his* friends, and now you’re thirty-three and trying to remember how to even *make* friends. But who would ever find herself in that situation?”

“Making friends isn’t that complicated,” Miles says, which makes me scoff, which in turn makes him smirk. “I’m serious, Daphne. I just like talking to people. And as far as the free drinks, I’m a good tipper. So if I go to a place more than a couple of times, I tend to get discounts, because the staff knows I’ll make it up to them in tips. Plus I’m in the service industry, and I think bartenders can smell it on me. That I’m one of them.”

“Does it smell like gingersnaps?” The slur in my voice has worsened as we climbed the stairs.

Miles stops outside our front door, laughter gurgling out of him. “Gingersnaps?”

That’s what he smells like. Sweet and a little spicy. A natural earthy smell folded into a sugary baked good. I wave him off rather than answer, and try to get my key into our door’s lock. Unfortunately, it seems the door has grown three extra locks and I can’t seem to line the key up to the right one.

Through laughter, he bumps me aside, clumsily swiping the key from my hand to make his own attempt. “Shit!” he says as it glances off the lock.

We keep fighting for control of the doorknob, knocking each other out of the way in increasingly dramatic fashion, until he almost knocks me over and just barely manages to catch me by pinning me to the wall with his hips.

We're both laughing so hard we're crying when our elderly neighbor pops his head into the hallway to hiss, "*Some* of us are trying to sleep around here!"

"Sorry, Mr. Dorner," Miles says like a chastened schoolboy.

Mr. Dorner retreats.

I squint after him, confused. "Doesn't he usually have hair?"

Miles bursts into not-at-all-quiet laughter. I smush my hands over his mouth to shut him up. "You thought that hair was *real*?" he asks. "You have to be the most gullible person on the planet."

"I mean," I say, "despite my innate cynicism, I think the last six weeks have already proven that both of us are way, way too trusting."

A couple of hours ago, this might've tripped the *start crying ASAP* wire in my brain. Instead we're just back to cackling.

Mr. Dorner's lock rattles again. Miles spins away to get *our* door unlocked, yanking me inside before we have to face another scolding.

We slam ourselves against the door to shut it, catching our breath. "I feel like we're in *Jurassic Park*," he says, which makes me laugh harder.

"What," I gasp.

"Like we just slammed the door against a bunch of raptors," he explains.

"I don't think Dorner's teeth pose that kind of threat, Miles," I say. "I'm fairly sure he wasn't even wearing them."

"You know what I think?" he says.

"What?" I ask.

"I think we should just fucking do it," he says.

My heart spikes upward. My skin goes very hot, then very cold. "*What?*"

"Let's RSVP," he says. "Let's go to their wedding. And get wasted. Eat the cake before they've even cut it, and puke on the dance floor."

I laugh. "Okay."

"I'm serious," he says. "Let's go."

"No way," I say.

"Okay, fine," he replies. "Then let's just *say* we're going."

"Miles," I reply, "*why?*"

"To make them sweat," he says. "And pay ninety dollars a plate for dried-out chicken that no one's going to eat."

"Their parents will pay for that chicken," I say. "And I don't know about the Comers, but the Collinses are *lovely* people."

He flinches. I'm not sure at which part, but something I said definitely shifted his mood a bit. "They're also rich," he says. "Ninety dollars is nothing to them, and at least this way, they have to spend the next few months worrying that we'll show up and ruin their big day."

"Maybe they don't care," I say.

The smirk seeps from his face. "Shit," he says. "You're right. I guess that's why they invited us."

I snort. "You *know* why they invited us, Miles. Because they're both addicted to being universally loved. And they're good at it. Good enough that they don't realize you don't get to be loved by people whose hearts you completely fucking destroy. They think they're being the bigger people right now. But they don't *get* to be the bigger people. For the next few years, they have to live with being the assholes."

He seems unconvinced, but now I'm sure.

"We *should* RSVP," I say. "They're not the bigger people. Fuck that!"

"Fuck that!" he agrees.

"Fuck that!" I half shout.

Mr. Dorner pounds on the wall. Miles presses a pointer finger to my lips. "Fuck that," he whispers.

"Fuck that," I whisper back.

He watches my lips move against his finger. I feel another pleasant zing. "We should go to bed," I say.

And then, because it came out a little too low, I say, "I mean, *I* should get to bed."

He lets his hand fall away. "*After* we RSVP."



I AWAKE TO bright midday light and a walloping headache. Last night returns to me in bits and pieces, in no particular order.

A drunken walk home.

The tattered felt of a pool table.

A rough finger against my lips.

Laughing in the hallway.

And then Mr. Dorner? Was? There? For some reason? At some point?

Before that, or maybe after, Miles and I drank red wine straight from the bottle.

At some point, we were out on the street, walking with our arms around each other, his hand curled against my waist where my shirt had ridden up. My neck and face go hot.

I'm trying to fast-forward through the memories, to be sure I only did anything *mildly embarrassing* and nothing *irrevocably humiliating*.

The fast-forward doesn't help. I remember falling into bed, exhausted, only to realize I couldn't sleep, because I was *also* a little bit turned on.

Oh my god, did I cry at some point?

Wait. Did Miles cry? Surely not.

I feel around for my phone and find it tangled in my sheets. I guess I at least had the wherewithal to turn off my alarm. It's almost noon.

I never sleep this late.

I scroll through my texts, searching for incriminating evidence of my drunkenness. But I didn't send a single message after work.

There is, however, something else worrying on my home screen.

A new icon.

A dating app.

I have no recollection of downloading it. I don't really remember anything after the bar.

I clamber out of bed and wait for the pounding in my skull to subside before staggering out into the living room. I feel like I'm made of *nuclear waste*.



The apartment is quiet, but not clean. A half dozen half-drunk water glasses litter the coffee table, the counter, and the two-person breakfast table. The bottle of coconut rum is empty, and both wine bottles are down to dregs.

I feel like Hercule Poirot, stumbling on a murder mystery without any body or even blood, just the bothersome suspicion that *something* happened here. Something important.

And then my phone starts ringing in my hand.

I see his name onscreen.

All at once, I remember.

And I really, really wish I didn't.



SUNDAY, MAY 19<sup>TH</sup>

## 90 DAYS UNTIL I CAN LEAVE

I TRY TO gather myself, to catch my breath and clear my throat, so I won't have to answer in a dehydrated croak.

Of course, I don't *have* to answer.

But this is the first time I've heard from Peter in weeks, and the thought of *not* hearing what he has to say—of simply wondering, forever—makes me feel sick.

Just kidding, Gill's shots are doing that just fine.

The name Gill just occurred to me out of thin air, the image of his braided gray beard flashing across my mind.

I clamp my phone against my ear and beeline toward the window for fresh air. It's cool out, more spring than summer today.

"Hello!" I say, too loud, too forceful, and too cheery. A rare trifecta.

"Daphne?" Peter's soft voice fills my head like helium.

"Yes?" I say.

There's a pause. "You sound different."

"I feel different," I reply. No idea why that's what comes out.

"Oh." There's a silence on the other end.

"So," I say.

Another pause. "So, I got your RSVP?"

I dig the heel of my hand into my forehead and press, hard, against the throbbing there. "Yeah."

“And I guess I just . . .” He takes a breath. “I wanted to make sure everything was okay.”

“Okay?”

I feel like I’m back in high school calculus, random bits of equations and numbers drifting around me nonsensically: there’s some kind of meaning there, but I do *not* have the right brain to interpret it.

“Yeah, I mean . . .” A soft breath. “You don’t *have* to come, you know.”

My laugh sounds more like a cough.

“I mean, of course we’d love to have you,” he hurries on.

The sound of *we* alone is enough to make the contents of my stomach flip around like I chugged clam chowder, then hopped on a roller coaster. We used to be the *we* he talked about.

“I just wanted to make sure you knew there was no pressure on our end,” he says.

*Our. We.*

Let’s get all the most painful words out on the table and make sure each one positively drips with condescension.

The worst part is, even after all this, I’m not *positive* I don’t love him. I mean, not *this* version of him, but the part that remembered every important date, who brought home flowers just because he happened to be walking past a cart selling them, the Peter who had my favorite soup delivered to me every time I got sick.

The parts reserved for her now.

“We know how hard this must be for you,” he’s saying, and just like that, he snaps back into the other Peter. The one I hate. “And I just . . . I hate to think of you there, on your own . . .”

As if this whole thing isn’t humiliating enough, he’s called me to make sure I know he feels *bad* for me. I’m seeing red.

“I won’t be alone,” I say.

“I mean, without a date,” he clarifies, completely unnecessarily.

“I know,” I say. “I’m bringing my boyfriend.”

Even as I’m saying it, there’s a voice screeching in my brain, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

I face the window and pantomime a scream, one hand dragging down the side of my face. I wonder if this exact scenario inspired Edvard Munch's *The Scream*.

"Your *boyfriend*?" Peter's voice emanates sheer disbelief.

No, my brain says.

"Yes," my mouth says.

"But . . . you didn't RSVP for a plus-one."

I'm not usually a liar. In fact, I still sometimes lie awake thinking about a time in the sixth grade when I'd just switched schools and a girl struck up a conversation with me about my horse necklace, and in my desperation to make friends, some foul demon possessed me to tell the girl I loved horses and grew up going to horse-riding camp every summer.

I'd been horseback riding twice. I fell off the second time, if that matters.

After that conversation, I'd avoided that girl out of guilt. Lucky for me, we moved again six months later.

But apparently the demon has finally tracked me down again, because without thinking, without planning, a lie emerges from my mouth, fully formed: "I didn't need a plus-one. He got his own invitation."

The weighty silence tells me Peter is doing invisible calculus now. Only he's got the brain for it. "You can't mean . . ." His voice slides past disbelief straight into incredulity. "You're with *Miles*?"

No, no, no, the voice in my head screams.

"Yep!" my mouth chirps.

I am instantly back to silent Munch-screaming out the window.

The next silence extends too long. I'm incapable of breaking it, because the only thing I *can* think to say is, *I don't know why I said that—it's an outright lie*, but I also cannot. Cannot tell him that.

Peter clears his throat. "Well, the wedding's not for a few months."

"I know," I say. "Labor Day."

"A lot could change before then," he says.

My jaw drops. Is he really insinuating that my fake relationship won't survive three months to his wedding . . . when *his* relationship started just

over a month ago?

“We’ll be there,” I say.

*NO*, my brain screams.

“Okay,” Peter says.

I need to get off the phone before I involuntarily spring a fictional pregnancy on him. “I’ve got to go, Peter. Take care.”

“Yeah,” he says. “You t—”

I hang up.

I pace in front of the window for about five seconds, then go straight to Miles’s door, a sinner on her way to confession.

I knock. No answer.

I pound. “Miles? Are you up?”

I rattle the knob. Or I expect to, but it’s unlocked. So instead, I basically just fall into his room, catching myself against his dresser. The TV atop it wobbles, and as I steady it, a voice says from behind me, “Are you stealing my TV?”

I turn, expecting to find Miles sprawled out in his bed. Instead, he’s standing in the doorway, fully dressed with a grease-mottled paper bag in hand.

I release the TV. “I almost knocked it over,” I explain.

“Why?” he asks.

“I told Peter we were dating,” I say.

He stares at me for three seconds, then laughs. “What does that have to do with the TV?”

“Nothing,” I say.

He laughs again and turns back to the hallway.

“Where are you going?” I call.

“To get sriracha,” he says.

“Why,” I say, trailing him to the kitchen.

“For my breakfast sandwich.” He drops the bag on the counter on his way to the fridge.

“Did you hear what I said?” I ask.

“You told Peter we were dating,” he confirms, rifling around the fridge for the hot sauce.

“Aren’t you mad?” I say.

He spins back with the sriracha bottle and an unmarked jar of something dark and goopy. “Why would I be mad?”

“Because we aren’t dating,” I say.

“I’m aware.” He dumps the bag out onto the counter, and two yellow-paper-wrapped sandwiches fall out. He slides one toward me, then turns to the already full coffeepot.

“How long have you been up?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugs. “Hour or two.” He carries two steaming mugs back to the counter. He gives me a mug with Garfield the cat wearing a cowboy hat on it. “Cream? Sugar?”

I shake my head. I’m not much of a coffee drinker. I’ll just sip enough to take the edge off of this hangover.

Miles opens the jar and spoons a little probably-maple-syrup into his coffee. “Is that good?” I ask, leaning forward to watch.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Seems like it would be, though. Did you drunk-dial?”

“What?” I say.

“Did you call Peter drunk?” he says, unwrapping his sandwich, flipping it open, and absolutely slathering the egg and avocado inside with sriracha.

“No, he called me.”

He pauses with the sandwich halfway to his mouth. He lets out another laugh and lowers the sandwich. “Wait. Did we RSVP to their wedding last night?”

Hearing it said aloud, again, sends a full-body shudder through me. Groaning, I drop my face against my forearms on the counter.

“Wait, wait.” Miles presses his palm into my forehead and tips my face up so he can meet my eyes. “That’s why he called? Because he got the RSVP?”

I nod. “He called to tell me I don’t have to come. That he knows how hard it will be for me to be there, *all by my lonesome, so utterly shattered*

*and alone and lonely and unloved."*

Miles snorts. "Smug little prick."

"He's six four," I say.

"Smug giant douche," he amends. Then, after a minute, "Or, I don't know, maybe he genuinely thought he was being nice?"

"No, you were right the first time."

Miles unwraps my breakfast sandwich partway and shoves it toward my face. I take a bite, and then he sets it down in front of my chin.

"Wait!" He braces his hands against the counter, face brightening. "So he called to try to make you feel so pathetic you wouldn't come ruin his special day, and you told him we were dating?"

"I'm sorry," I say again.

"That fucking rules," he says. "How'd he take it?"

"Some silence, some scoffs of disbelief," I say. "A gentle reminder that the wedding's not for three months, and there's no way you and I will still be dating by then. Pretty perceptive of him, given that we're not dating now." I drop my face, groaning anew at the fresh round of hammering inside my brain.

"Eat something," Miles says. "It will help."

I pitch myself onto one of the mismatched wooden stools at the counter and slide the sandwich toward me, taking a forceful bite.

"Maybe we *should* date," Miles says.

I choke. He watches me coughing, an impish grin forming on his impish mouth. "Yes," I finally manage. "A shared cuckolding is the most fertile ground from which love could ever spring."

"Yeah, that," he says, "and it would piss them off."

"As you pointed out," I say. "They don't care. They're getting married, Miles."

"And six weeks ago, *you* were getting married," he says.

"Hey, if you're willing to keep reminding me of that daily, I can go ahead and rename my morning alarm something other than WAKE UP, YOU'VE BEEN JILTED, BITCH."

“No, I mean, a few weeks ago, you and Peter were engaged. And yet, he was jealous of *me*, and *you* were jealous of Petra.”

“Excuse you,” I say.

“I’m quoting you,” he says.

“From *when*?” I say.

“Halfway through the third time you put on ‘Witchy Woman’ last night.”

I narrow my gaze.

“You don’t remember anything that happened, do you?” He seems tickled at the thought.

“I remember Glenn,” I say.

“Gill,” he says.

“Right.”

“My point is, just because they’re engaged, it doesn’t mean they’re above jealousy.” He takes another sip of coffee. I reach feebly toward the maple syrup jar, and he nudges it closer to me.

I spoon some into my mug and take a sip.

“What do you think?” he asks, leaning forward.

“Pretty good,” I say. “Where’d it come from?”

“Oh, just one of my countless odd jobs,” he says.

My cheeks heat.

He laughs into another huge bite of his sandwich, which reminds me to eat mine. “We’re not going to their wedding as a fake couple,” I say.

He shrugs. “Okay.”

“You’re not going to convince me.”

“Fine,” he says.

“I’m serious,” I say.

“Does he still follow you on social media or did you block him?” he asks.

I squirm on the stool and busy myself with another sip. “I unfollowed him, but I didn’t block him.” Some very pathetic part of me didn’t want to close the door entirely. I wanted him to miss me, even a tiny fraction of the amount I missed him. I wanted him to regret losing me.

I have not made a single post since we broke up.



I go on: "I don't know if he still follows me or not."

"Yes, you do," Miles says.

"Okay, fine, as of yesterday, he did."

"Can I see your phone?" Miles asks.

"I don't *want* to block him," I say.

"I'm not going to," he promises.

I hand my phone over, and he sets down his sandwich, chewing as he taps around on the screen. Then he rounds the counter to stand behind me, holding the phone out in front of us, the selfie camera on. He hunches over, hooking his free arm around my collarbones and flashing a dimpled grin.

"What are you doing?" I ask, turning toward him, my nose grazing his cheekbone.

"Got it," he says, straightening up and pushing my phone back into my hand.

The picture he took is still onscreen. I'm midword, my lips practically on his face, and he's smiling, a slew of his disjointed sailor-style forearm tattoos draped across my chest in an easy yet vaguely suggestive way.

We look very much like a couple, if you ignore the fact that we also look like two people who'd have exactly nothing in common. Then again, I guess that's how straitlaced Peter and free-spirited Petra look side by side.

It's just that Petra wears the aesthetic like an edgy pop starlet, and Miles looks kind of like the guy from high school who intentionally failed his senior year to stick around for a while, then started selling bootleg cologne out of the trunk of his car in the mall parking lot.

Not that I look much better. There's a smear of avocado on my chin.

"What am I supposed to do with this," I say.

"Whatever you want." Miles crumples the paper sandwich sheath and tosses it into the trash.

"Meaning?"

"Daphne." He slumps forward on his elbows, raking a hand up through his hair. It stays put, defying gravity. His beard is likewise sticking out in dark tufts like he's a bedraggled and hungover young Wolverine. "You know what I'm getting at."

“You want me to post this so he’ll think we’re dating,” I say.

“No,” he says, bemused. “I personally want you to post it so Petra thinks we’re dating.”

“Why can’t *you* post it,” I say.

“Because I don’t have any social media,” he says.

“Right.” I remember Peter telling me this. I’d been scrolling through Petra’s—frankly, professional-grade influencer—feed and not only was Miles not *tagged* in any pictures, but his face wasn’t even in any. When I asked Peter about it, he rolled his eyes and said something cranky about Miles being *too good for social media*.

Just the thought of it now is enough to tip me over the edge.

I don’t write a caption. I just post the picture.

Miles grins and high-fives me.

“Are we evil or just immature?” he says.

“I think maybe just bitter,” I reply. “Hey, thanks for the breakfast sandwich, by the way.”

“Thanks for the pep talk last night,” he says.

“When did that happen?” I ask.

“Halfway through the *fourth* time we played ‘Witchy Woman,’ ” he says.

A fuzzy memory surfaces, just for a second, before submerging into the wine-and-liquor haze again: standing on a sticky floor, in the glow of a neon sign, holding on to either side of Miles’s face as I enunciated as clearly as I could manage: *It’s going to get easier. This time next year, you won’t even remember her name.*

*If we keep drinking like this,* he replied, *I’m not sure I’ll even remember my name.*

Miles grabs the sriracha, and twists the lid back onto the syrup jar. “I’ve got stuff to do, but if you hear from your ex, tell him I said . . .” He holds up his middle finger.

“If you hear from yours, tell her *thanks for the new boyfriend.*”

“Gladly,” he says, and turns to go.



FRIDAY, MAY 24<sup>TH</sup>

## 85 DAYS UNTIL I CAN LEAVE

THE FOLLOWING FRIDAY, I'm playing my least favorite kind of *Tetris* at the reference desk: choosing which fall releases to buy for our branch. Rearranging and reprioritizing them, cutting title after title until the moment the cost dips into our budget.

Every time I go to remove a book, a different face flashes in my mind, the kid or kids I specifically picked the book for.

A superhero picture book for Arham. An early reader about mermaids for eight-year-old Gabby Esteves. A dense upper-YA fantasy that reminded me of the first time I read Philip Pullman, for Maya, the braces-wearing preteen with a Smiths patch on her backpack and a reading level so far above her age that she's started giving *me* recommendations. She's shy enough that it took months to get her to really respond to my attempts at book-related small talk (the only kind I can do). But now she'll happily chat for forty minutes at a time about books we've both read and loved, an informal two-person book club. I've been working on convincing her to join one of the teen readers groups, but she's very politely informed me that she doesn't like "group activities" and is "more of an independent type."

Basically, she's me at twelve years old, if I'd been nine hundred times cooler. Right down to the fact of being the only child of an overworked but lovely single mother with a penchant for eighties British goth rock. During the school year, Maya walks the short distance from the junior high to the library, and her mom picks her up when she finishes her paralegal shift.

The new hardcover fantasy I handpicked for her is the most expensive book on the list, but I can't bear to cut it. Ordinarily, I talk this kind of thing over with Harvey, the branch manager, but he left early for his youngest daughter's med school graduation (the other two are already doctors; he's apparently created an army of high achievers).

Back in the office we all share, the adult librarian, Ashleigh Rahimi, is on the phone, the shut door reducing her words to a flat rumble.

On the desk, my own phone buzzes with a notification from Sadie. My gut rises expectantly, only to plummet when I see that, instead of a message or even a comment, she's simply Liked my most recent picture.

The one in which I appear to be milliseconds away from licking the side of Miles's face as he hangs over me, arm latched across my chest.

I tap over to Sadie's account and instantly regret it. She uses social media as infrequently as I do, which means there, right in the top row of images, three shots back, is a picture of her and Cooper with me and Peter at Chill Coast Brewing on their last visit—beer being the one thing Peter breaks his low-carb diet for.

I personally hate beer. Obviously Petra loves it. She's a walking fantasy, and I'm a librarian who actually does wear a lot of buttons and tweed.

From behind the office door comes a frustrated shriek-groan. Not an outright scream, but a sound loud enough to cause kids gaming at the computer bay to spin toward the desk in unison.

"It's fine, everything's fine!" I tell them with a wave.

Behind me, the door flings open and Ashleigh, five foot nothing with a topknot the size of a melon, storms out. "Never make friends with moms," she tells me before stomping over to her rolling chair.

"You're a mom," I point out.

She whips toward me. "I know!" she cries. "And that means I have basically one night, every two weeks, when I can do something fun with other adults, except all those other adults I *used* to call are *also* parents, and in many cases partners. So half the time, the plans fall through because someone's puking or fell off a trampoline or forgot they have to build a fucking volcano for science class by tomorrow!"

“Ashleigh!” I hiss, jerking my head toward the row of teenage gamers.

She follows my gaze and greets their stares with a blunt, “What?”

They spin back toward their screens.

“I want to get out,” she says. “I want to look hot in public and drink alcohol and talk about something other than *Dungeons & Dragons*.”

And as she’s saying it, I’m picturing myself at home, alone, watching happy couples shop for or renovate the homes of their dreams on HGTV, just like I did *last* Friday night, and the Friday night before that, and basically every night since the breakup, barring my drunken MEATLOCKER escapade with Miles.

Meanwhile, Peter’s and Petra’s social media feeds are an in-real-time documentation of her and Peter kissing, hugging, and selfie-ing their way through our old haunts, with our old friends in Arbor Park.

*His* haunts, I correct myself. *His* friends. Just like Arbor Park is *his* neighborhood.

I’d thought we were building something permanent together. Now I realize I’d just been slotting myself into *his* life, leaving me without my own.

I feel the words rushing up my throat, and then they’re splatting out between us: “*I’m* free tonight.”

Ashleigh stares, wide-eyed. Like I just threw up on her shoes. Or like I threw up a whole shoe.

I search for a graceful way to take it back.

I’ve landed on something along the lines of, *Oh, shoot, I forgot! I have plans to organize my e-reader*, when she gives an abrupt shrug and says, “Why not? Text me your address, and I’ll pick you up on the way to Chill Coast.”

“Chill Coast?” I’m sure my face just went from tomato red to milky white.

Luckily Ashleigh is looking at her phone. “It’s a brewery,” she says, typing. “In Arbor Park? My friend who just bailed said it’s super cute, has a big patio.”

There is absolutely no way I can go to Chill Coast. Waning Bay is small enough without me wandering directly into the heart of the Peterverse.

“Unless . . .” Ashleigh reads my hesitancy. “You had somewhere else in mind?”

Of course I don’t have somewhere else in mind. I don’t foresee Ashleigh loving MEATLOCKER.

But I have to say something, so I blurt the first place—the only place—that springs to mind: “Cherry Hill.”

Her dark brow lifts appraisingly.

“It’s a winery.”

“Is that the one with the hot drug-dealer bartender, or the one down the road from that one, where they only play Tom Petty?”

“Um,” I say. “I really only know . . . about the wine.”

In that I know they *have* wine.

After a protracted pause, she says, “Okay. Cherry Hill.”

“Great!” I say.

She goes back to scanning books in. “Are you going to dress like that?”

I look down at my brown high-necked button-up. “No?”



“A COWORKER AND I are going to stop by Cherry Hill tonight,” I tell Miles from the doorway as he’s brushing his teeth in our tiny, pink-tiled bathroom.

He meets my eyes in the mirror, toothpaste foam spilling out of his mouth. “Why did you say it like that?” he asks.

“Like what?”

“Menacingly.” He spits into the sink and knocks the faucet on. “Like, *Me and my friend are gonna pay you a little visit, and we might have a baseball bat with us.*”

“Because me and my friend are going to pay you a visit,” I say, “and we might have a baseball bat with us.”

He thrusts his head *into* the sink, under the running water, to rinse. When he straightens up, he grabs his towel from the rack and buries his whole face in it.

“I just thought it might be weird for me to show up without mentioning it,” I say.

He faces me, one hand and hip propped against the sink. “I’m flattered you remember where I work.”

“I needed somewhere cool, to impress Ashleigh, and it leapt out of my subconscious,” I admit.

“Was she impressed?” he asks. “Does she like our wine?”

“No idea,” I say. “But she thinks one of your bartenders is a drug dealer. Or plays a lot of Tom Petty.”

He frowns. “She must not have tried the pinot.”

I laugh in surprise. “Are you *offended*?”

“A little,” he admits, shrugging. “It’s a double gold winner. Make sure she tries it tonight.”

“I’ll do my best,” I say.

For a second, we just stand there.

He waves toward the doorway, which I’m blocking.

“Right!” I step aside, and he breezes past, his warm, vaguely spicy scent hitting me. “I’ll see you later,” I call over my shoulder, shutting myself in my room to continue my—so far unproductive—outfit selection.

Wool, tweed, satin posing as silk, every piece of it easily matched to every other piece, and all of it a bit stodgy professor, even my casual summer clothes. Sadie used to say my look sat at the intersection of Personal Style as a Statement About Personality and Don’t Look at My Body, which is essentially accurate.

A quick Google search of “what to wear to a winery” reveals a plethora of the kind of bright and airy clothes that could be plucked from an Elin Hilderbrand novel. My own wardrobe is mostly creams, tans, camels, browns. I could just go with a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, but I suspect that between showing up overdressed and underdressed, the latter would be the greater sin to Ashleigh, and I want to make a good impression.

So I swallow my pride, and put on the slinky backless black dress I bought for Peter's and my engagement party.

I haven't worn it since, which is stupid, because it cost *way* more than I would ordinarily spend (Peter bought it) and it's extremely flattering.

Fifteen minutes after seven, someone knocks on the door. I'm not surprised she's late. I *am* surprised she came to the door. I thought I'd have three flights of stairs to get over my *hanging out with someone new* nerves before I was face-to-face with her.

It's been years since I made a new friend. I mean, actually *made* a new friend, not just inherited one from Peter, or from Sadie, who's always been more of a social butterfly than me.

I smooth the front of my dress, a nervous sixteen-year-old about to find out whether she *really* scored a date to the prom, or if the other kids are about to dump pig's blood on her.

When I open the door, Ashleigh jumps a little, because she'd been looking at her phone.

"You didn't have to come up," I say. "You could've texted me from the car."

"I drank a Pedialyte on the way over here, and my bladder's bursting," she says. "Plus I know basically nothing about you, so this was a good chance to find out if your house is full of surveillance equipment."

I blink. "Surveillance equipment?"

"Landon and I have been taking bets on whether you're in the FBI," she provides helpfully.

I squint at her. "And you think I'm in the FBI because . . . ?"

"I don't," she says. "Landon does. *My* guess is witness protection."

There's being bad at small talk, and then there's being so reticent that your coworkers assume you've recently testified against a mob boss, and I never knew how thin the line between the two was.

In my defense, Landon is nineteen years old and nearly always listening to shoegaze in his AirPods at the decibel of a launching rocket, so it's not like there have been loads of opportunities to bond.

"Bathroom's this way," I say, leading her inside.



She gawks as she follows, apparently unbothered by the lack of surveillance equipment.

We pause in front of the entrance to the hallway, where Miles's room, the bathroom, and my room are tucked off of the living room. "Cute place," she says.

"Thanks," I say, though honestly, this is all pretty much Miles, a funky mix of thrift-store pieces from the fifties to seventies, Laurel Canyon chic.

She shuts herself in the bathroom—quite possibly, I think, to dig through my medicine cabinet—and I go back to the kitchen for another glass of water. In college, I really took the posters that littered our dorm rooms to heart: *ONE TO ONE, IF AT ALL*, they read, with an illustrated beer bottle beside an illustrated glass of water. The habit stuck.

From the kitchen I hear the bathroom door whine open, and I pad back into the living room, but Ashleigh isn't there.

"Do you *snowboard*?" she calls from around the corner, down the hallway.

"What?" I pass through the doorway and see her not on the right, in my room, but to the left, in Miles's. She's wandering through it like it's a museum, moving from the snowboard and battered hockey sticks in the corner to the plants and incense holders in the windowsill.

"This is my roommate's room," I tell her.

She's reading the tiny text around the edge of a framed show poster, but I'm fixated on the framed photograph of Miles and Petra on his dresser. They stand in front of the lake, her arms slung around his waist, a less scruffy version of him looking down at her adoringly. She's waifish and cute, and he's rangy and winsome, and it's impossible to hate this version of her, the one who made him so happy. Until it occurs to me that now she's making Peter this happy.

I'd always thought he and I were so good together. He was stable and reliable and driven. He had a five-year plan, and not in a boring way. We were going to go see the cherry blossoms in Japan together, visit Dubai, see the Eiffel Tower. But we were also going to put money into retirement and have monthly dinners with his family.

In short, Peter was the exact opposite of my dad, who was occasionally a *doting* father but rarely a *present* one.

It had taken a lot of therapy for me to stop gravitating toward emotionally unavailable men, the kind who'd get a matching tattoo with you one week, and be dating your upstairs neighbor the next. I'd been so relieved when I finally fell in love with someone who actually wanted to love me back.

A Relationship Guy, who craved the bond his parents had. Who liked routine, and texted back in a reasonable amount of time and shared his calendar with me.

Maybe if we'd never moved back here, we'd still be together.

Then again, maybe in five years, he still would've left me for Petra. Maybe they're every bit as *destined* as he's convinced. I'm nauseated by the thought that maybe she belongs there, in that home I'd thought was mine, while I belong nowhere.

Ashleigh points to the two and one half pairs of Crocs (yes, that's five individual Crocs) halfway in the closet. "Excuse me," she says. "How many Crocs does this man have?"

"Well," I say. "At least those and the ones I assume are on his feet at this very moment."

She stares at the clogs. "Service industry, nurse, or run-of-the-mill weirdo?"

"Service industry," I confirm; then, with a tickle of affection, "But also a weirdo. Which reminds me, we're supposed to try the pinot tonight."

"How did *that* remind you of pinot," she says, but as I turn to leave, I forget she asked.

My stomach flips at the sight of the wall behind Miles's headboard.

I've never noticed it before, because I've only been in here one other time.

Dozens of Polaroids are tacked in tidy columns. Tidier, I suspect, than Miles would have been. Likely they're a holdover from his Petra era.

Which makes sense, given that they very clearly tell the story of their relationship. Three years' worth of birthday cakes. Three years' worth of

tiny tinsel Christmas trees. Three years' worth of stand-up paddle-boarding, cliff jumping, sipping wine in front of a sunset, riding a share moped in front of what I assume to be the Mediterranean Sea. Three years' grinning into each other's mouths with their hands in each other's hair.

They look so happy.

It feels intrusive to see them like this, let alone to let my coworker gawk at the evidence of his failed relationship. "We should go," I say, quickly steering Ashleigh back into the hallway and closing the door behind us.

*Would he take her back?* I find myself wondering, before seamlessly transitioning into *Would I take Peter back?*

"Definitely not," I say aloud.

"What?" Ashleigh says.

"Nothing!" I say. "Let's go get wine."

Ashleigh follows me back to the front door, her head on a swivel. "Do you see ghosts or something?"

"Or something," I say.

"Well, Vince," she says. "You may not be FBI, but you're definitely more interesting than all that tweed lets on."

"My last name is Vincent," I tell her.

"See?" she says. "A whole syllable I knew nothing about. You're full of surprises."

"I hate surprises," I tell her.



CHERRY HILL, LIKE most local wineries, is on a peninsula that juts into the vast expanse of Lake Michigan's northernmost curve. The vineyards sprawl across gently rolling hills on either side of the long gravel road that brings us to the winery itself, all sleek glass, balsa wood, and corrugated metal. The parking lot is jammed, the gardens that encircle it bursting with colorful blooms, all tinted pinkish by the setting sun.

Out beyond the flowers and hedges, whitewashed tables dot a grassy stretch, customers milling from the bocce court on one end to a duck pond

at the other, delicately stemmed glasses in hand. Globe lights hang over the seating area, just waiting for the falling night to give them the cue to light up.

“This place is gorgeous,” I say, climbing out of Ashleigh’s beat-up hatchback. It’s cooled down and I’m regretting not grabbing a jacket.

She looks at me sidelong. “Haven’t you been here?”

I guess my blatant awe gave me away. “Peter wasn’t a wine guy.”

“Peter?” she says. “That’s your ex, right?”

I manage a “mm-hmm.”

Ashleigh swings her oversize bag onto her shoulder and tugs the hem of her miniskirt toward the tops of her suede knee-high boots as she starts toward the front doors. “What about your friends? None of them wine guys either?”

What I don’t say is, we had all the same friends.

What I don’t say is, technically, this means I had no friends. Even after all those Frank Herbert novels I read just so I’d have something to bond with Scott over.

“Guess not,” I say. “What about you? You’ve been here before, right?”

“Only twice,” she says. “Duke wasn’t a wine guy either.”

“And Duke is . . . ?” I pull the door open.

“A large horse,” she says. “What do you think, Daphne? He’s my ex-husband.”

“I suppose I could have guessed that,” I admit, and follow her inside.

A smell like burning cedar wafts toward us as we enter the dimly lit room. A sleek modern bar runs along the left wall, the wall behind it entirely smoked glass, massive wine casks stacked behind it and softly glowing in golden light. The other three walls are likewise glass, but these look out over the vineyards, a narrow wooden counter mounted along them so people can watch the sunset while they sip. High-tops are arranged in the middle of the room, and in the windowed wall opposite the bar, a huge slate fireplace reaches toward the vaulted ceiling, flames crackling and leaping within it.

Ashleigh grabs my arm. “Come on—looks like those people are leaving.” She steers me to the far corner of the bar, which takes some maneuvering, because, despite the temperate weather, the inside of this place is even busier than the lawn. She slides between two middle-aged men in golf shirts to claim one of the newly vacated stools, slamming her purse onto the other one and waving me over. She doesn’t move her bag until I’m practically sitting on it.

Underneath the hum of conversation, sexy music plays, a low, raspy voice that perfectly blends with the clatter of forks and delicate clink of glass.

There are two people working the bar, but then a door swings open to the room hidden by the wall of casks, and Miles ducks through, carrying a wooden tray lined with glasses.

It’s hypnotic, the intricate dance between him and the other bartenders, or sommeliers, or whatever they are. They communicate in quick phrases and subtle touches, moving aside so he can replenish their supply. One bartender swaps places with him, and, after a quick exchange, she nods and disappears through the same door Miles just emerged from.

Despite his somewhat threadbare and hole-ridden T-shirt and work pants, he looks completely at home here, the warm glow behind the bar casting him in more of an *artisanal* light than a *burned-out* one.

He leans across the counter to hear what a pretty redhead is saying, then laughs and grabs an open white wine from an ice bucket, twirling it a little as he pours her another glass.

“See?” Ashleigh says, leaning in to be heard. “Hot drug dealer.”

My gaze judders over to her, follows hers straight back to the far side of the bar. “Miles deals *drugs*?” I cry.

His gaze snaps sideways at the sound of his name. He lifts his chin in greeting, a smile pulling at one side of his mouth.

“Wait, you *know* him?” Ashleigh asks.

He drops the bottle back into the ice bucket and crosses toward us.

“Order the pinot,” I quickly tell Ashleigh.

“I’m really confused right now, Daphne. *Have* you been here or—”

Miles slides his forearms across the glossy wooden bar. “Well, well, well,” he says, just loud enough to be heard over the room’s ambient noise. “If it isn’t my adoring girlfriend.”



**"GIRLFRIEND?" ASHLEIGH KICKS** me underneath the bar.

I yelp and scoot away from her. "It's a *joke*. This is my roommate. Miles. Miles, Ashleigh."

He sticks his hand out to shake hers. "Nice to meet you."

"Charmed," she says, suddenly a Gilded Age heiress.

"What can I get you?" he asks.

Ashleigh props her chin in her hand and leans forward to be heard: "What do you recommend?"

He drags a paper menu out of a nearby cup and pushes it toward us. "Kitchen's out of a bunch of stuff, but we still have these." He marks three of the six small-plate options, then flips the menu and circles the wine flights, drawing scrappy little stars beside the one he recommends.

He looks to me for approval. I look to Ashleigh. She nods and half shouts, "Whatever Miles says!"

"I'll be right back," he promises, disappearing with the marked menu, stopping to murmur something to a bartender with curtain bangs before slipping through the door.

Ashleigh swivels toward me. "So what's this hilarious 'joke' about you being his girlfriend?"

"What's this about my roommate being a drug dealer?"

She waves a hand. "That's just what I call him in my mind, because of his aesthetic."

"His selling-prescription-bottles-under-the-bleachers aesthetic?"

"More like eight-plants-and-grow-light-in-his-apartment. But that was before I unknowingly wandered into his *bedroom* thirty minutes ago. Now I

have to revise his whole image in my brain castle.”

“Do you mean ‘memory palace’?” I ask.

“My turn to ask the questions.” Her eyes dance devilishly. I haven’t seen this mischievous side of Ashleigh before. It’s intimidating, feeling like I can’t escape her curiosity, but it also reminds me a little bit of Sadie, which sends a pang through my stomach. “Tell me about this joke, where you’re Hot Miles’s girlfriend.”

“Hello, ladies!” the curtain-fringed bartender says, making us both jump.

“Hi!” Ashleigh and I cheep in unison.

“Miles will be right back with your flight, but can I get you anything in the meantime?” She flips two water glasses onto the bar and fills them from a pitcher.

We shake our heads.

“Well, I’m Katya, if you need anything. Just shout.” She pats the bar and saunters off.

“So?” Ashleigh prods. “The joke?”

“It was just about this picture.”

She arches a brow, waiting. I give in, pull my phone out, and tap to the picture of Miles and me, avocado smeared on my face, our mouths suspiciously close. It’s more lascivious than I remembered. My stomach flutters uncomfortably.

Ashleigh stares at it, a divot forming in her chin. “What, because you look so much like a couple in this? That’s the whole joke?”

I grimace, debating how much more to divulge. This is my problem. I don’t know how to talk along the surface of things, but I also don’t want to unearth the ugly stuff, over and over again, for people who are just *passing through* my life. It’s depleting. Like every time I dole out a kernel of my history to someone who’s not going to become a fixture in my life, a piece of me gets carried away, somewhere I can never get it back.

You can’t untell someone your secrets. You can’t unsay those delicate truths once you learn you can’t trust the person you handed them to.

Ashleigh sets my phone aside. “Look. If you don’t want to be friends, I’m not going to *make* you. We’ve worked together for over a year, and I’ve



managed to learn startlingly little about you in that time, and I haven't pressed, because I can tell when someone's a closed book—"

"I'm not a closed book," I protest.

"—but what I can't figure out," she says, "is why ask me to hang out now? If this is just some *Good Samaritan* shtick, I would've rather stayed home than go on a pity outing."

"It's not a pity outing!" I say. "At least not on my end. And I'm sorry I didn't make more of an effort to get to know you up front. It wasn't you."

She gives me a pointed look.

"Okay, maybe it was a *little* bit you," I admit.

She lets out a guffaw of genuine laughter that makes me crack a smile. "What, you think I'm scary?"

"Well, yes," I say. "But in a good way! It's more that you're always late."

Another guffaw. "God, you're not from Michigan, are you?"

"No, why?" I say.

"This honesty thing," she says. "It's refreshing. So you didn't want to be friends with me because I'm always late to work."

"And you didn't want to be friends with me because of the gigantic stick up my ass?" I guess.

She chortles. "No, it actually wasn't that. It was more that you were so *happily coupled*. The divorce is still too fresh for me to be around someone who's got cartoon hearts in their eyes and baby birds carrying a long lace veil behind them."

I didn't *tell* anyone at work about the breakup, per se. But when you have three weeks scheduled off work for a honeymoon, then unceremoniously cancel the request, people talk.

"Well, even before my breakup," I tell her, "I didn't have either of those things."

"Because of the stick?" she jokes.

My own smile widens. "Because baby birds are never on time, and it may seem trite, but when people are always late, I don't expect them to be

reliable, and I definitely don't assume they're interested in being close with me."

She nods thoughtfully. "Fair. But for what it's worth, I'm always late because I have a kid. So I'd like to think my friends can rely on me, but if it comes down to it, yeah, I choose Mulder every time."

If I'm a closed book, bound in chains and kept under a padlock, Ashleigh Rahimi might've said the one thing that could function as the key.

"Also fair," I say.

"So," she says. "Have I earned the origin story of this 'joke'?"

"There's something I haven't told everyone at the library," I say, buying myself time. "About my breakup. Something . . . humiliating."

Her jaw drops. "You cheated with Miles."

"What? God! No!" I look around for eavesdroppers. If I'm going to utter this aloud one more time, I'd like it to stay in this room. "How do I know this story won't race through the stacks at work like wildfire?"

She has the grace to not look offended. Instead she purses her lips, considering. "Let me ask you this: Have I ever told you *anything* about Landon?"

"Other than that you two have a betting pool about what a freak I am?"

"Let's just say," she replies, "when you get him to pause his My Bloody Valentine album, you'll find how easy it would be to make a full *The Crown*-style television series about his family. And yet you know *nothing*. I'm good with secrets."

"You could be completely making this up," I point out.

"Sure," she says. "But I'm not. I'm a recent divorcée who spends most of her time with an eleven-year-old. I'm not out here telling people's secrets. I just enjoy hearing about drama! Sue me!"

"If you divulge what I'm about to tell you," I say, "I might."

"I've got it!" she cries, slapping both hands down on the bar. She swings her huge purse atop it and digs for her phone. "I currently have a horrible rash on my back. I'll send you a picture."

"Please don't," I say.

"It can be your collateral," she says.

“What if—and stay with me here—you just, like, tell me something about yourself?” I say.

“Hm.” She narrows her gaze. “Kind of an old-fashioned ‘actually getting to know each other’ approach.”

“Precisely,” I say.

“What do you want to know?”

“Whatever you want to tell me,” I say.

“Well.” She sighs, looking up at the exposed beams across the ceiling as she thinks. “My kid was conceived in a parked car behind a YMCA. Does that do the trick?”

A snort of laughter escapes me.

“Oh!” She scoots forward, more animated now than I’ve yet seen her. “In sixth grade, the tissue I’d stuffed in my bra fell out of my shirt while I was at the whiteboard.”

“Oh my god,” I say. “So you’re Dante. You went all the way to the ninth circle of the Inferno.”

“What else?” Her eyes tip toward the ceiling again. “Oh! When I first had Mulder, I had no idea what to do with him ninety percent of the time while Duke was at work. So I’d bring him to the library to this moms’ group, and I’d find the calmest parent in the bunch and ask if they could watch him while I went to the bathroom. Then I’d go lock myself inside, set a timer, and sob as hard as I could for five minutes.”

“Ashleigh! That’s heartbreaking!” I cry, but she’s laughing now too.

“It was terrible!” she agrees. “Every day I’d wake up and have, like, one second of peace. Then I’d remember, *Oh, shit, I’m someone’s mom*. I was a wreck, for like six months. But it did convince me to go back to school to become a librarian, *and* Mulder’s pretty much my best friend, so all worth it.”

My heart keens at the thought of my own mother. How, even with the long hours she pulled at work, she made time to hand-sew Halloween costumes and chaperone field trips and stumble her way through helping me with algebra. She worked so hard to give me the best life she could, and I don’t take any of it for granted.

I just always thought our family of two would grow, and someday I'd have a house full of little voices, deep laughter, endless love. I thought the Best Mom Ever would graduate to the World's Best Grandma, and I'd give someone new the love she gave me, but with a different kind of life. A full house, where they didn't spend most nights alone, waiting for their overworked mom to get home or a mostly absent father to deign to stop by.

"What do you think?" Ashleigh bats her eyelashes. "Have I earned some intel?"

I hold up a finger while I take a long sip of water.

"Oooh, she needs to hydrate," she says. "Must be juicy."

I set the glass down. "I'm going to say this fast, and I'd prefer not to dwell on it too long."

"Got it," she says.

"Peter dumped me for his childhood best friend, who happened to be Miles's girlfriend, and that's how we ended up living together," I say all in one breath.

Her jaw drops.

I take another sip. "And then I accidentally told Peter that Miles and I are dating now, so we took that picture to make the lie more convincing."

Ashleigh's mouth forms a perfect circle. "You're kidding."

I hide my face behind my hands. "I'm not."

"I *love* it," she cries. Volume, I'm realizing, is Ashleigh's primary indicator of emotion. That and the surprising bark-laugh that occasionally jumps out of her before she's even cracked a smile.

"What do we love?"

I open my eyes to find Miles arranging wineglasses in front of us.

"Your fake relationship," Ashleigh says.

"Well, *I* don't," I say. "Now there's no good way to get out of it. I mean, when we 'break up,' Peter will get to feel smug and superior about *that*."

"That's no problem," Miles says, pouring a taste of white wine for each of us. "All we have to do is get married, and then stay together until they split up. And if they have kids, just have *one more* than them. If they get a dog, we get a cuter dog. If they buy a new house, we get a mansion."

“A perfect plan,” I say. “Why didn’t I think of it?”

He pushes the wineglasses toward us. “Pinot blanc. It’s crisp and citrusy, with a little bit of pear, and it goes well with poultry and seafood. I’m kidding about the marriage, by the way.”

“You don’t say,” I reply, taking a sip.

“What do you think?” He leans forward, eager, focused.

I let the taste roll across my tongue before swallowing it. “It tastes like springtime.”

He smiles. “Exactly.”

“I think there’s something wrong with mine,” Ashleigh says. “It tastes like wine.”

“Here.” Miles pours more. “Try again.”

Ashleigh sips, then smacks her lips. “Oh, yeah. Big spring vibe.”

Katya, with the curtain fringe, calls for Miles then. He glances over his shoulder. A middle-aged guy with slicked-back hair, eyes disappearing into his face, is drunkenly leaning across the bar demanding *something* of the bartenders.

Miles pushes off the bar. “I’ll be right back.”

He beelines toward the drunk guy, a calm and polite smile fixed to his face though something about his eyes has flattened out, changed. Like he’s peering out from heavily tinted windows.

Ashleigh angles toward me. “Do you think if I keep being ignorant, he’ll keep pouring more, or was that a onetime thing?”

I watch him exchange a few words with the man. Miles nods, then bends his head toward Katya’s, the two of them quietly conferring, her hands braced lightly against his shoulders as she pushes up onto her tiptoes to reach his ear.

They both glance our way at the same time, and I spin back to Ashleigh, downing my drink. “I think you can just ask for more,” I say, “and he’ll probably give it to you.”

“I feel like a celeb,” she says. “I’ve never had this kind of *in* before.”

“Well, if having my heart shattered in the single most humiliating way imaginable can be of service to someone, I’ll take it.”

"I'm sorry, sweetie," Ashleigh says, swirling her glass, "but if Peter was going to break your heart now, he would've done it eventually."

"So, what?" I say. "Peter and Petra are soulmates, and it was going to happen sooner or later?"

"Soulmates?" She laughs. "No. I'm saying your ex is the little boy looking over someone else's shoulder, trying to figure out if the kid next to him has a better lunch. Only, the lunch box is shut, so even though he *knows* what *his* parents packed for him is pretty good, he'd still trade it just to open up that rusty little Batman lunch box."

"What is this metaphor, Ashleigh," I say.

"It makes perfect sense," she says. "He's a lunch swapper, and whether it was the rusty metal Batman lunch box or a *Cars 2* zip-up one that's filled with mold, at some point, he was going to trade in the sack lunch."

"Just to be clear, I'm the sack lunch here?" I say.

"It ain't about the bag, babe," she says. "It's what's inside."

"So I'm a paper sack with a heart of gold."

"You could be a three-course balanced meal with a cute little Hostess dessert, and it wouldn't matter. He *knows* you, and the lunch he *doesn't* know is going to catch his eye. I'm sorry, I just realized I'm really hungry, so that probably explains some of the—oh, *thank god*."

Miles is back, unloading our order in front of us: a board with three local cheeses, a variety of pickled vegetables, and some Waning Bay preserves, along with a basket of bread from a bakery in town.

"So," he says, "a bit of a snag."

"What, you ran out of grapes?" I say.

His eyes flick down as he lifts the next bottle from beneath the bar. "Katya, my coworker . . ." He clears his throat as he pours our next taste. "She heard from Petra. About my new girlfriend."

"Oh no," I say.

He grimaces. "I am . . . really sorry, Daphne."

"She just asked if it was me, didn't she," I say. "If I'm the new girlfriend."

He nods, the tea lights sprinkling the bar catching the flush creeping up his neck.

“And you said yes,” I say.

The flush deepens. “I don’t know what came over me.”

Ashleigh tips her head back and laughs. The man to her left turns at the sound and gives her a flirtatious body-scan, which she, in her delight, entirely misses. “I love this so much.” She claps to emphasize each word.

“I’m never lying again,” I say.

“Except if Katya walks up to you and says, *Hey, you’re sleeping with Miles, right?*” he jokes. “Because if you tell the truth, this will all be very embarrassing.”

“You told her we’re *sleeping* together?” I say.

“Yeah, she said, *Is that your girlfriend*, and I was like, *We have sex, and we’re in love. Someday, when we have a baby, we’re going to name her Sue Ellen after my mom.* No, Daphne. I didn’t *tell her* we’re sleeping together. Petra told her I’m living with my new girlfriend. I’m just guessing Katya might do some high-level deduction here. But if you want me to go *ask* whether she thinks we’re having sex, I can.”

“How soon until everyone in Waning Bay hears this lie,” I groan.

“I’m sure the paparazzi are gathering as we speak,” he replies. “This is the 2020 Chardonnay, by the way. People think they hate Chardonnay because they’ve mostly had shitty Chardonnay. It’s a misunderstood wine.”

“Aw,” Ashleigh coos, clutching her heart. “Misunderstood little wine.”

“Don’t feel too bad for it,” I mumble. “Sounds like it gets laid a *lot*.”

Miles gives me a teasingly admonishing look and goes on: “Ours is pretty restrained.”

“Okay, I take my last comment back,” I say.

“See, Daphne,” he says, meeting my heckling with over-the-top sobriety, “the Chardonnay grapes themselves are pretty neutral. That’s why they can take on too much oak for a lot of wine drinkers’ tastes. But ours has a nice peach nose, and this pinch of lemon zest, and a faint, warm oakiness, but not so much that the wine’s overpowered.”

“It really is a lovely nose,” Ashleigh says.

“Thanks, I think so too.” Miles angles himself back to me, clearly waiting for me to try it.

I make a big show of swirling it around and studying it from various angles, then very, very slowly lift it to my lips and take one tiny sip.

Still, that one sip makes the inside of my mouth feel sunlit. Like I’ve just *tasted* a day on the Michigan coast.

“Wow,” I say.

Miles straightens, grinning. “It’s good?”

“It’s good,” I answer.

A bright flash pops to our left and I glance over at Ashleigh, little colorful circles still dancing through my vision. “Aw,” she says, looking down at her phone. “Your first couples’ candid.”

The man behind her taps her shoulder. “If you want one of all three of you,” he shouts over the music, which has gotten louder as full night has fallen, “I’d be happy to take it.”

“That’s okay,” I try to shout back, but Ashleigh is nodding enthusiastically.

“I’m vetting my friend’s new boyfriend,” she tells him. “Aren’t they cute?”

“If anything,” I say to Miles, “*we’re* still vetting *her*.”

He looks over, smile deepening. “I say we keep her.”

“Who’s going to feed and walk her?” I say.

“I will,” he insists. “Every day. I promise.”

Ashleigh drags her stool around mine and pops back onto it, leaning in against my side as her suitor lines up her phone for the shot. Miles slides one elbow further over the bar, leaning in on my other side, his chin resting on my shoulder.

“Everyone say *wine*,” the man says with a wink. Under her breath, Ashleigh mumbles, “I can look past that.”





IN THE CORNER, Ashleigh and Greg-Craig (can't be sure which one he introduced himself as) are fully making out. They went over there to exchange numbers, roughly six minutes ago.

Everyone else in that corner of the tasting room has since fled. In Ashleigh and Greg-Craig's defense, that might have more to do with the fact that it's nine fifty-seven, and Cherry Hill closes at ten.

Sure, it's a Friday night, but this is a winery in Northern Michigan, not a rave in Ibiza, and all the customers probably need to be up bright and early for yoga, boating, or doing yoga *on* a boat.

"She okay to drive?"

I turn to find Miles slipping through a portion of the bar that lifts up, with his wallet, phone, and an apron clutched in one hand. "Oh, she's not drunk," I assure him. "She didn't have a sip of the last two pours. She's just horny."

He nods somberly. "Being single in the woods is rough."

At that moment, Ashleigh extricates her tongue from Greg-Craig's mouth and flounces our way. "So." With a furtive glance over her shoulder, she drops her voice. "What are the odds you can ride home with Miles?"

I look to him.

He flips his keys. "Fine with me."

"Thank god." Ashleigh gives me a brief, firm, yet vanilla-scented hug. "Don't make this weird at work, okay?"

"What, the fact that I've now seen someone lick your tonsils?" I say.

"It was bound to happen eventually! Get home safe, lovebirds." She's already on her way back to Greg-Craig. He slips a hand through hers and

waves as she steers him outside.

“So,” Miles says, “Craig’s friend wasn’t up to your standards?”

I’m embarrassed to realize Miles witnessed my painful attempt at conversation with Craig’s wingman, a guy in a V-neck so deep I caught a flash of belly button.

“I wasn’t up to *his* standards,” I say. “He got a pretty urgent work-related text and excused himself. Then I went to the bathroom, and when I passed him, he was playing solitaire on his phone at the far side of the bar.”

“What the fuck,” Miles says.

“In his defense,” I say, “I’m absolutely horrible at small talk with new people.”

“I don’t believe you, at all,” he says.

“Within three minutes,” I say, “I caught myself listing my food sensitivities. I think it’s like a self-sabotaging self-protective thing, where I try to bore new people away.”

Miles looks horrified. “You should have told me you had food sensitivities before I ordered for you.”

“It’s not, like, EpiPen serious,” I say, following him to the door.

“Still,” he says. “And if I’d known you needed help with the Solitaire King of Northern Michigan, I could’ve rustled up a pack of cards from the break room. You’d have been unstoppable.”

“I’m not sure I’m in the mood to be unstoppable, anyway.”

He holds the door open for me. “What about milkshakes?”

“What about them?” I say.

“Are you in the mood for one,” he says. “Because I’ve been thinking about Big Louie’s all night.”

“Who’s Big Louise,” I say, stepping out into the still night, “and does she know how much you think about her?”

“Big Louie’s Drive-In?” The string lights ringing the gravel lot softly illuminate his look of surprise. “You’ve never been to *Big Louie’s*?”

“No?” I say.

He stops short, looking at me with outright shock.

“Is it a burger place?” I ask.

He scoffs. “*Is it a burger place?*” He veers left toward his rust-edged truck.

“I don’t even know if that’s a yes or a no, Miles,” I say.

He manually unlocks the passenger door. “That’s a *Get in the car, Daphne; I’m not going to dignify that with an answer.*”

I hoist myself into the seat, leaning over to unlock the driver’s-side door as Miles rounds the hood.

As soon as he starts the car, “The Tracks of My Tears” by Smokey Robinson and the Miracles comes on full blast.

A deceptively happy-sounding song about being incredibly depressed.

I try and fail to swallow a laugh.

Miles gives a sheepish smile. “No idea how *that* got on.”

“This truck is probably haunted,” I agree.

“Exactly.” He pulls out along the gravel drive. “And if the soundtrack to *A Star Is Born* starts playing, just don’t be alarmed. Because the ghost likes that one too.”

“This ghost gets more tragic by the second,” I say.

“He’s perfectly fine, thank you,” Miles says.

“Thriving?” I ask.

“Thriving,” he agrees.

“Well, if he’s got any tips for the rest of us,” I say, “have him hit me up.”

“Daphne,” he says. “The first piece of advice *anyone* is going to give you for improving your situation is going to Big Louie’s. How is it possible you’ve lived here for . . .”

“Thirteen months,” I supply.

“*Thirteen entire months,*” he says, “and haven’t had their Petoskey fries.”

“What are Petoskey fries?” I ask.

He tuts. “No wonder you’re so depressed.”

“Is this place *in* Petoskey? Are we driving an hour and a half for fries?”

“No, they’re named after Petoskey stones.”

“Which are . . . ?”

The country road has reached a four-way stop, and he essentially pulls over to look at me. “Daphne.”

“Such an air of disappointment. Every time you say my name.”

“Was Peter keeping you locked inside a bunker?” he says.

“Just tell me about these rocks, Miles.”

“They’re fossilized coral,” he says, like this should be obvious. He eases off the brake and we roll through the empty intersection.

I say, “And this is connected to french fries . . . ?”

“Tenuously,” Miles answers. “But they’re amazing. The fries, I mean. They’re slathered in cheese and jalapeños.”

“Well, that explains why I’ve never had them,” I say. “Peter isn’t a big slatherer. He’s more of a wheatgrass-shot-and-lean-meat-after-leg-day kind of guy.”

“What?” Miles says, faintly amused. “You weren’t allowed to eat without Peter?”

I roll my eyes. “It wasn’t about ‘being allowed.’ I don’t know how to cook. He does.”

On our second date, he’d made me dinner. Salmon and asparagus and a keto-friendly pasta salad. I would’ve been less impressed to learn he was an Olympian. Cooking was the one thing Mom didn’t do while I was growing up. We lived on takeout, and weekly nacho nights. But Peter started every day with a green smoothie, and made dinner from scratch most nights. Peak domesticity, as far as I was concerned.

A couple months into living together, he’d tried teaching me the basics, but I always slowed things down too much, so I’d moved back to dishes duty.

“Wheatgrass.” Miles shakes his head. “You were a gym couple too, right?”

“I mean,” I say, “we were a couple with gym memberships.”

“And you went together,” he says. “On a regular schedule.”

We did. It was one of very few silver linings to our relationship ending that I no longer felt any guilt about *not* going. Peter was into pretty much every form of physical exercise, but I was slower and less coordinated than

him, so the few times we'd tried hiking or biking, it was more frustrating than rewarding. At the gym, we could do our own things, but still spend time together. With how busy his job kept him, that time was valuable.

"We're both really organized," I say. "We did *everything* on a regular schedule."

He gives me a look. The back of my neck prickles. "Fine, yes, we did that on a schedule too," I say.

"Nothing wrong with that," he says. "Life can get busy."

I stare at him, trying to work out if he actually believes this, or if he thinks I'm hilariously boring. Maybe Peter thought it was boring too.

Misreading my expression, Miles says, "No, we didn't have a schedule. But it could've been helpful. Sometimes, she and I fell into sort of living our own lives. But I'm not anti-schedule. Just anti-wheatgrass."

I accidentally snort, a little disbelieving pony.

Miles's eyes narrow on a grin. "I've never had wheatgrass in my life. With a knife to my throat, I'm not sure I could say what wheatgrass even *is*."

"*No one* could," I say. "But I'm talking about the calendar."

"The calendar?"

"Yes, the calendar."

He affects a look of innocent confusion. "Could you by chance be referring to the wall-sized whiteboard where you track your paychecks, your phone calls to your mom, and your menstrual cycle?"

"No," I say, "I'm talking about the one where I track your complete unwillingness to plan ahead and stick to a schedule. Thus indicating you are anti-schedule."

"I just didn't realize how important it was to you to know where I was," he teases. "Should I share my phone location with you?"

"No, it's fine. I wouldn't want to clip your wings, tether your spirit, all that."

"I'll put my stuff on the calendar," he says. "If it really matters."

I shrug. "It's fine. Just don't get mad if I come home while you're in the middle of entertaining a lady fr—oh my *god*. This song actually *is* from A

*Star Is Born!*”

“Is it?” he says blandly. “Strange.”

“So you haven’t moved on to the anger phase yet,” I say.

He shrugs. “I don’t know if I have that phase in me.”

“Really?” I say, surprised. “I’ve been camped out in mine for weeks . . .”

“Getting mad never fixes anything,” he says.

“Neither does *moping*.”

“I’m not moping. I just like sad music.”

Looking at him, I have to believe it. Minus a few rough days and *one* tense phone call I overheard through his bedroom door, Miles has seemed more or less totally fine, even cheery since the breakup. Whereas I’ve been living in a low-grade state of constant misery.

He turns off the road, toward the fluorescent glow of a drive-in burger joint.

On either side of the squat building, a row of parking slots nose up against menus mounted to speakers. Between the two rows, a handful of blue metal picnic tables are arranged in the cement courtyard. The place is hopping with suntanned, beach-waved teenagers, sitting atop tables and queuing at the optional walk-up window.

None of the food runners carrying the red plastic trays looks a day older than seventeen. I wonder if Peter and Scott and Petra hung out here in high school. The place has a distinctly *fifties* look, everything faded to suggest it’s always been here, the meeting point for the hungry, drunk, and horny since time immemorial.

Miles cranks his window down. “What do you want?”

“I’m a tourist here,” I say. “What do you recommend?”

“Chocolate-cherry milkshake and Petoskey fries,” he says.

I nod approval, and when the very crackly voice comes over the speaker, he orders the same thing for each of us.

“So what happened with the drunk guy at the bar,” I ask him.

He studies me for a few seconds. “Oh. Him,” he says when it clicks. “He was just trying to order another flight, despite no longer being able to stand. Happens all the time. Just needed to defuse it.”

“And how did you do that?” I ask.

“Told him if he got into the cab we’d called for him, we’d comp his last two drinks, and *not* ban him from the premises.”

“Wooow,” I say.

“Wow what?”

“You laid down the law,” I say, “without your smile ever cracking.”

“Things go smoother if you don’t let people get a rise out of you,” he says. “If you give them control over how you feel, they’ll always use it.”

“Finally, I see your cynical side,” I say.

He smiles, but his jaw is tight, and the smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “It’s not cynical. If you don’t give other people responsibility for your feelings, you can have a decent relationship with most of them.”

Honestly, that’s not far off from thoughts I’ve had. Only for me, it’s never been about controlling the feelings themselves. I wouldn’t know where to begin with that. It’s more, controlling the expectations you have for certain people.

If a person lets you down, it’s time to reconsider what you’re asking of them.

In the dining courtyard, the rowdy teenagers start gathering their things, shaking their trays into the trash before piling too many people into a couple of junkers parked side by side. A minute later, a girl in denim cutoffs and an *EAT AT BIG LOUIE’S* shirt comes out of the burger shack with a paper bag and two paper cups, little teal outlines of Michigan printed in a patterned row around them.

Miles watches my reaction to the first sip. After the initial hit of brain freeze, the taste registers and I let out a little moan. Only then does Miles take his own sip and stuff his milkshake into the cupholder. “You know what we should do?”

“I don’t want to sob to *Bridget Jones* together,” I say.

“At most, it was a slow trickle of tears,” he objects. “And that’s not what I was going to say, but if you’re going to just shut me down like that—”

“No, no!” I grab his elbow. “I’m sorry. Let’s hear it. What should we do?”

“We should go to the beach,” he says.

“Isn’t the beach closed after dark?” I say.

He squints. “Which beaches have *you* been going to?”

I shrug. “The one across from the library? With the food trucks and the ice cream pavilion and the sand volleyball courts.”

“That tiny little beach all the *fudgies* go to?” he says. “With the teal Adirondack chairs? That sand’s probably not even local. Bet it’s trucked in from Florida.”

“What’s a *fudgie*?” I ask.

“Daphne,” he tuts. “Daphne, Daphne, Daphne.”

“Let me guess: I’m a clueless fool,” I say.

He starts the car. “No, just a sweet, naive, beautiful little innocent, raised in captivity by a man who loves wheatgrass.”

“So the beach *doesn’t* close after dark?” I say.

He backs out of the craggy parking space. “Not any of the good ones.”





A *FUDGIE*, APPARENTLY, is an out-of-towner. A person who cruises north in the summer to buy fudge and use subpar beaches, then flees before autumn. It seems strange that Peter never introduced me to the term, but Miles points out that the Collinses are former fudgies themselves, having moved to their favorite vacation spot when Peter was in second grade.

We drive twenty minutes through the dark before Miles pulls to the dusty shoulder of a country lane, behind two parked SUVs. There's no sign of a lot, a sign, or a trailhead, just the cars and the woods.

"Is this private property?" I ask, hopping out to follow him into the moonlit forest, bag of fries in one hand and my milkshake in the other.

"It's national lakeshore," he replies. "Preserved federal land. There are better-known stretches of beach around here that get crowded, but the best spots are the ones you have to be told about to find."

"Oh, so it's *exclusive*," I joke.

"Northern Michigan's hottest club." He offers me his hand as he steps over a tree that's fallen across the makeshift path.

"Cherry Hill must be close behind it." I release my grip on him as I hop to the far side of the log. "That place was packed."

"We do pretty well all summer," he says. "We're still figuring the winters out." He casts a meaningful sidelong look at me. "So I take a lot of side jobs in the off season."

I feel myself blush, stop short in a puddle of moonlight.

He stills too.

"That was snobby," I say. "The comment about the odd jobs."

He shrugs. "You didn't mean anything by it."

I didn't. But Peter, I can now admit, definitely had.

We start walking again in silence.

"You don't need to justify what you do for work," I clarify, after a beat. "I guess I just wanted to believe Peter had good reasons to think you weren't good for Petra. Because if you were, like, some freeloading jerk, then Peter probably *was* just looking out for a friend. Instead of, you know . . ."

"In love with her?" Miles says evenly.

"Yeah." My own voice wobbles. It's cooler here, in the shadowed woods so close to shore. For some reason, it makes me feel all the more delicate talking about this, too exposed now that it's just the two of us.

"Hey." He bumps into me. "Good riddance, right?"

"I just," I say, "feel really stupid."

Miles stops walking. "You're not stupid."

I look at my feet, and his free hand closes over my elbow, sliding up and down my arm, rubbing warmth into it.

"He told you to trust him, and that's what you did," he insists. "That's what you're *supposed* to be able to do with people you love. They just don't always live up to it."

Miles ducks his head to peer into my eyes, a funny grin quirking his mouth. "Do you want to get into the car and listen to Adele?"

I laugh, wipe my damp eyes with the back of my forearm. "No, we already agreed: that won't do any good. Might as well just see this beach. Assuming there is a beach, and you're not just walking me off a cliff."

"Would you want me to tell you," he asks dryly, "or would that ruin the surprise?"

"I hate surprises."

He cracks a smile. "There's a beach."

We fall back into step. The earth goes sandy as we climb. The trees thin, until suddenly we reach the crest and we're overlooking the steep slope of a dune. At its foot, the dark lake rolls in on the sand, and across the expanse of beach, several bonfires blaze in the dark, several tents ringed around the most distant.

The *whoosh* and scrape of the tide against the shore dulls the voices and laughter of the other nighttime beachgoers, and it's easy to imagine that this random group of people might be the last on earth. *Station Eleven*-style nomads. Or maybe that we're on a different planet entirely, strangers in a strange land.

"Wow," I whisper.

"Second-best beach in town," he murmurs.

"*Second* best?" I turn. "You brought me to your *runner-up* beach?"

"No one knows about the other one," he jokes. "I can't just open the floodgates."

"Who am I going to tell?" I wave my arms out to my sides. "Everyone I know is either here, my mortal enemy, or a close friend or relative of a mortal enemy."

"Yeah, but your mortal enemy *just* cut you loose." He gently pushes my shoulder. "Who's to say I take you to Secret Beach today, and you don't bring that wheatgrass-loving asshole there next week?"

I shake my head. "I don't get back with exes. When someone proves who they are, that's it."

He studies me, head cocked to one side.

"What?" I say. "You disagree?"

"I've only had one other ex," he says. "We didn't get back together, but I'm not sure that's a personal *stance*."

"*One* ex?" I look back at him. "How old are you?"

"I'm not a huge relationship guy," he says, a little bashful. "Petra was the exception, not the rule, for me. So if she wanted to get back together? I don't know. But it's not worth thinking about, since she's engaged to your ex-boyfriend."

My stomach tightens. I turn and focus on the moonlight playing across the waves, listen to the crash and roar. "Seems louder than it does during the day."

"I've always loved that." He tips his head for me to follow him, and we make our way down the dune and to the left, out of the path of any foot traffic that may come up behind us. Then we sit and twist our cups into the

sand. Miles pulls the checkered paper fry trays out and sets them atop the flattened bag.

I catch him watching me as I take my first bite. “What,” I say, mouth full.

One shoulder lifts in tandem with the corner of his mouth. “Just waiting to see if you moan again.”

My face heats as I bite into a jalapeño. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The sound you made when you tried the milkshake,” he says. “I want to know if the fries live up to that.”

“Honestly,” I say, “my mouth is on fire right now.”

He grabs my milkshake and lifts it toward me. I lean over the straw and take a slurp. “Better?” he asks.

My teeth start chattering.

He laughs and unzips his sweatshirt, taking it off and tossing it in my direction. Less *to* me than *at* me.

“Thanks,” I say, pulling it off my face and then wrapping it around my shoulders and bare back. The smell of the woodsmoke from the winery’s fireplace engulfs me. “Now I know where your smell comes from.”

He balks. “I smell?”

“No,” I say. “I mean, I thought you smelled kind of like gingersnaps. But you just smell like the winery. It’s nice.”

He leans into me to inhale against the fabric on my shoulder. “Guess I’m too used to it to notice.”

“I mean, a lot of times, it’s hiding under the smell of weed,” I say.

He looks at me askance, teasing. “Is that *judgment*, Daphne?”

“Merely an observation,” I say.

He leans back against the sand, propped up on his forearms. “I’ve been going a little harder than usual.” He eyes me through his lashes. “Not sure if you’ve heard, but I got dumped.”

“Sounds vaguely familiar,” I concede.

“I’m cutting back,” he says.

At that precise moment, I bury my hands in the sweatshirt pockets and am met with a prerolled joint. I pull it out with a laugh.

"I've been looking for that." Miles plucks the joint from my fingers and pops it between his lips. "You gotta light."

"Sadly, no," I say.

"No, I mean, *you've got a light*," he says. "Other pocket."

"Ah." I withdraw the neon-orange plastic lighter and snap it open, blocking the wind until the flame catches. He leans in so I can light the end of the tiny joint. He takes a puff, then holds it out to me.

I hesitate, and his mouth splits into a wide smile. "Whatever those D.A.R.E. officers might have told you, I'm not going to force you. It's just an offer."

As a devoted fan of control, I never had a big weed phase, but annoyingly the voice in my head *reminding* me of that isn't my own; it's Peter's. And I don't want it there. It has no right to keep echoing through my skull.

For three years I've been eating like him, exercising like him, working tirelessly to befriend *his* friends and impress *his* family, going to his favorite breweries, and all along I thought it was my idea, *my* life. Only now, without him in the picture, absolutely none of the rest of the picture makes sense.

I'm not sure what parts of me are *him* and which parts are genuinely my own. And I want to know. I want to know myself, to test my edges and see where I stop and the rest of the world begins.

So I pluck the joint from between Miles's finger and thumb, and take a hefty pull on it, feeling the sensation spiral through me. When I pass it back to him, he takes one more hit, then stubs it out.

"Does this place have a name?" I ask.

Down by the nearest bonfire, a group in their late teens or early twenties are clinking their beer bottles and cans of hard seltzer together, howling up at the moon.

"I don't know," he says, "I've only ever heard people call it *the spot*."

“*The spot*,” I say, “sounds *exactly* like where high schoolers come to smoke weed.”

“True,” he says, “but I haven’t had any luck yet tracking down the stretch of beach where thirtysomethings go to smoke weed.”

“Oh, they’re all just vaping from their beds while watching HGTV.”

“Not us,” he says.

“No, we’re adventurous,” I say.

“Okay, tell me something, Daphne.” He tips his face toward the stars.

I lean back on my forearms. “What?”

He looks over, the left half of his face shadowed. “Where do you go when you’re not at home?”

“Like, other than work?”

“Other than work.” He nods. “Because despite your impressive commitment to the calendar, there actually *are* slots of time when you’re unaccounted for, but I never see you out. And you’d never been to Cherry Hill, or MEATLOCKER, or here. So where do you go?”

“Nowhere,” I say. “I’m boring.”

“You’re not boring,” he says. “You’re keeping secrets.”

What Ashleigh said comes back to me: *a closed book*.

There was a time when I was okay at making friends. But that was probably four or five relocations back. Eventually, it didn’t seem worth it anymore, cracking myself open to let someone in, only to have them violently extracted months later when Mom got transferred again.

“Honestly,” I say, “if I’m not at home or work, I’m usually just reading somewhere else. The beach—the *public* beach—or the Lone Horse Café on Mortimer Avenue. And if I’m not reading, I’m probably working on some program or another. Lots of trips to Meijer and Dollar Tree.”

His eyes shrink to accommodate his spreading smile.

“You’re thinking that all sounds pretty boring, aren’t you?” I say.

He laughs. “No,” he says, a little too vehemently. At the face I make, he relents. “Okay, a little bit. But just because that sounds boring to me doesn’t mean I think *you’re* boring.”

“Yeah, but you also held up your end of a fifteen-minute conversation with Craig about property taxes, so I think your social standards are exceptionally low.”

“He was a nice guy,” Miles says.

“I rest my case.”

“I like most people. Is that so bad?”

“It’s not bad at all,” I say. “It’s decidedly working in my favor. It just makes it hard for me to realistically gauge how big of a loser I am.”

“You’re not a loser at all,” he says, emphatic.

I roll my eyes. He sits up higher, his face earnest despite his visibly high pupils. “I’m serious. That asshole already took your house. Don’t let him take your self-esteem.”

“It wasn’t really my house,” I say. “It was in his name.”

“It was still your *home*,” he says.

That word doesn’t gut me quite so bad as usual.

The weed is filtering pleasantly through me, and the night sky is gorgeous, and the air smells like firs and smoke and fresh water, with that little snap of ginger. The truth feels more manageable. I *want* to manage it.

“That’s what I’m realizing, though,” I tell him, wrapping the sweatshirt more tightly around me. “It wasn’t ever my home. When you take Peter *off the schedule*, there isn’t really much left. Waning Bay doesn’t *belong* to me, like it does to him.”

“I’ll give him the house,” Miles says. “But he’s not taking this town.”

I cast a sidelong glance his way. “You’re just fine with knowing you could run into them at any point? Doesn’t it bother you that you could be buying toilet paper and Alka-Seltzer and come face-to-face with Petra’s parents?”

He shrugs. “That’d be fine.” He sits up. “Wait—are you thinking about leaving?”

“More like dreaming about it.” I check the American Library Association job portal daily.

“Would you go back to Richmond?” Miles asks.

There’s that little stab of pain that *home* didn’t summon.

It was my very first thought, when the dust settled. I could go back. To my old town, my old job, my old friendships.

Then, a few days after the big showdown, I finally pulled myself from the pit of despair long enough to answer one of Sadie's phone calls.

*I'm so angry with Peter I could honestly punch him in the face*, she told me.

She was apologetic, comforting. But then the unspoken became spoken: *You both matter to us so much. We're not choosing sides.*

Like it was a basketball game, and she and Cooper had decided not to make posters or sit in a specific section of bleachers. Like things needed to play out, and then someone would simply have won and someone else would have lost.

I told her I'd never *want* her to choose sides.

But honestly, I didn't want it to even feel like a choice. I wanted her to know where she stood. The problem was, she wasn't my best friend anymore. She and Cooper were *our best friends*.

They were a unit, and we were another, and that was how we'd fit.

I couldn't remember the last time we'd done something just the two of us.

And in those days when I was mourning in a puddle, Peter was doing damage control. So if our breakup wasn't a basketball game, maybe it was a race, and I was too slow.

Sadie and I have barely spoken since that call, and I grieved that loss as much as or more than the end of my romantic relationship.

"Not Richmond," I tell Miles. That might feel even worse than being here, which was saying something. "Maryland, hopefully."

Miles does that Labradoresque head tilt of his. "What's in Maryland?"

"My mom," I say.

"You're really close," he says, half observation, half question.

I pull my knees into my chest and loop my arms around them. "She and my dad split up when I was really young, so it's always been the two of us. Not in a sad way. She's the best. What about you? Are you close with your family?"



He scratches the back of his head and gazes out across the water. “My little sister, yeah. We text basically every day. She lives in Chicago.”

“And your parents?” I ask.

“An hour outside of Chicago.” He offers no more. It’s the first time I’ve felt like there’s something *he’d* rather not talk about.

I feel the tiniest bit disappointed. He makes it so easy to open up. I wish I knew how to do the same.

“Anyway,” he says, “I don’t think you should move to Maryland.”

“I won’t go until you find another roommate,” I say.

“It’s not about that,” he says. “You moved here because of Peter. Don’t let him make you move away too.”

“So you’re saying I should stay, out of spite,” I say.

“I just think it would be shitty to uproot your whole life for this guy twice,” he says.

“Miles,” I say. “I just recounted what my *whole life* looks like, and I watched a piece of your soul die behind your eyes.”

“That’s not what happened,” he says.

“It is,” I say.

“What about your job?”

The ember in my chest flares. “What about it?”

“You’re constantly, like, teaching kids to make bird feeders and running costume contests. It clearly means a lot to you.”

“It does mean a lot to me,” I allow. “Sometimes when I’m running Story Hour, I literally remember partway through that I’m getting paid to do something I love, and it feels like I’m dreaming. Like I might wake up and realize I’m late for my shift at the Dressbarn.”

“And there’s this girl Maya, who comes in once a week. Twelve or thirteen. Perfect little weirdo. She reads everything—goes through like five books a week. And we have an informal book club, where I pick something out I think she’ll like, and it goes in the stack, and then she comes back a week later and we just talk about it for an hour while I’m doing admin stuff. She’s supersmart. Has a hard time at school, but you can just tell she’s going to be some great novelist or, like, film director someday.”

"You love it," Miles says.

"I love it," I admit. It's the piece of my life that still feels right, even with Peter excised from the picture.

"Then don't give it up," Miles says. "Not for him."

"Of course, there are also days when I have to spend an hour on the phone with one of our regulars because he wants me to look up a love poem and spell every single word of it for him," I say.

"Why?" Miles says.

"Sometimes the job of a librarian is to simply *not ask*. Anyway, I'm keeping an eye out for job postings in other cities, but I can't leave for eighty-five days."

"That is . . . extremely specific," he says.

"It's when the Read-a-thon happens," I explain.

"Ah." He flashes a teasing grin. "Read-a-thon Prep Meeting: Tuesdays from two to three p.m."

"Do you have a photographic memory?" I ask.

"Sure," he says. "Also, it's been a standing appointment on your calendar since you moved in."

"You've been reading it," I say, unable to hide my glee.

"Of course I have. What's a Read-a-thon, anyway?"

"A fundraiser," I say. "An all-night reading thing for the kids, with contests and prizes and that kind of thing. Basically an event to fund *other* events, because we don't have any money. Waning Bay's never done one, but I went to one as a kid, and it was a lot of fun. I've basically been working on this since I got here."

His brow lifts. "And it's at the end of summer?"

"Mid-August," I confirm.

After a moment, he says, "Okay, here's what we're going to do. I'm going to be your tour guide."

"I'm not doing acid with you, Miles," I say.

"Good to know," he replies, "but not the kind of tour guide I'm talking about. I'm going to show you around Waning Bay. We can go out on

Sundays, when we both have work off. Starting next week. And then if, by the end of July, you still want to go play *Golden Girls* with your mom—”

“Do you even realize how cozy *Golden Girls* is?” I interject, reaching the giggly phase of being high. “If I could move to the set of *Golden Girls*, I would.”

“That’s what you say now,” Miles says, “but by the end of the summer, you’re going to be head over fucking heels for this place, Daphne. Just wait and see.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” I say.

“I’m serious,” he says.

“Oh, you’re *serious*?” I say. “You’re *serious* that you’re going to spend all summer ferrying a near-perfect stranger around so that she won’t move away?”

“You’re not a stranger.” He knocks his leg into mine. “You’re my serious, monogamous girlfriend, remember?”

I chortle, the high seeming to explode through my veins from the force of it.

His face remains deeply, painfully earnest. “I don’t want you to move away. I *like* you.”

“You like everyone,” I remind him. “I’m highly replaceable.”

He rolls his eyes. “You really think you have me figured out, don’t you?”

“Am I wrong?” I ask.

He holds my gaze, not quite smiling. We both flinch when his phone chimes in his pocket. He slides it out, his face lit as he reads the message onscreen, a divot etched between his brows.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

His teeth worry at his lower lip. “Petra.”

“Seriously?” I say. “You two still talk?”

“Not often.” He scratches his jaw.

I think about the tense call I overheard behind his bedroom door, wonder if it’s possible he was talking to her, and what Peter would make of that.

“Apparently Katya told her that we were together at Cherry Hill,” he says.

I shift uncomfortably. “And she messaged you about that?”

“She’s happy for us,” he says, voice quiet and flat.

“Well, that’s good,” I say. “Petra’s happiness has always been my utmost concern.”

He looks over at me, slowly starts to laugh.

The weed has my heart feeling like softened butter even while my *stomach* boils over with anger. At Petra and Peter both, not just on *my* behalf this time, but on Miles’s too. This ridiculously nice man who let me move into his place, no questions asked—didn’t even charge rent my first month—and comped my food tonight and bought me a milkshake and brought me to a beach I’d never been to and lent me his jacket.

Offered to parade me around all summer, just so I won’t move away.

After hanging out *twice*.

In general, I don’t put too much stock into a person’s charm, but I think he might be the rare real deal. A genuinely kind person who likes everyone and deserved better than a note on the counter and Petra’s room-sized closet cleared out.

I hold my hand out for his phone. He considers for a second, then plops it into my palm.

“Come here,” I say, opening the camera.

His eyebrows pinch in a bemused expression. “Come where?”

I move the remnants of our fries to my far side and pat the space between us.

“Oh, there?” he says. “One foot to my left?”

He doesn’t ask why, just holds my gaze and scoots until his side’s right up against me. “Here?”

My stomach flips at the closeness of his voice. “That’s good.”

I hold his phone in front of us, the camera’s flash turned on, and lean into him. He puts an arm around me and smiles sort of ruefully, unable to muster true joy. At the last second, on a whim, I turn and kiss his cheek as the picture finally snaps.

His face turns toward mine, our noses almost touching, pieces of his chin and cheeks hidden behind the flash's afterglow.

"Just thought we could make Petra *really* happy," I say.

"Really thoughtful of you," he says, the corners of his mouth curving.

"Yeah, well," I say, "I thought about taking a video of myself giving you a lap dance, but I don't have anything to mount your phone on, so this was the next best thing."

"I will happily go back into the woods, find some sticks, and build you a tripod, Daphne," he says.

I laugh, busy myself with another sip of milkshake, immediately shivering from the icy cold.

"Here." He draws me in against his chest, so that we're almost fitted together like we're on a sled, him in back, me in front, and his arms folded around mine, blocking the worst of the wind.

I shiver again as I nestle back against him, snapping a few more pictures.

Honestly, my head is swimming from all these unfamiliar sensations, and I'm not sure whether I'm still taking pictures for any reason other than not *quite* wanting to acknowledge how good it feels to be curled up against him. It's been so long since I've been curled up against *anyone*.

"You don't have to do this, you know," he says.

I lower the phone in front of me, and glance over my shoulder at him. "I know that."

"You were probably right," he says. "They're probably not even jealous. And even if she was, so what? As it turns out, it doesn't make me feel any less like shit."

"It makes *me* feel less like shit," I say.

His brow lifts skeptically. "Does it?"

"Okay, not exactly," I admit. "But it makes me mad that she, like, thinks you need her approval to move on, or something. If she was so in love with Peter, she never should've strung you along like that, but she did, and she dumped you in the worst possible way, and then for her to just *insist* that you view her kindly—to try to make you *not mad*, instead of just letting you move on . . . it's selfish.

“So maybe it’s immature and stupid. But it *does* make me feel a little better, to think that maybe she’ll see these pictures and remember that, even if she’s not *overall* an asshole, she was the asshole in this scenario, and she didn’t appreciate you, and she should have. Even if all that meant was letting you go *before* telling my boyfriend she was in love with him, instead of keeping you on the back burner in case Peter turned her down.

“It makes me feel a *teensy*, tiny bit better to think she could see a picture of me sitting in your lap and staring adoringly at you and remember that you deserved that all along.”

His smile unzips slowly, from one side of his mouth. After a long moment, he leans forward and presses a kiss to my temple. “Thank you,” he says, arms tightening around me.

My body warms as if I’d cannonballed into a heated pool. “It’s just the truth.” I turn my eyes to the water, my blood humming with nervous energy.

We’re done taking pictures, but neither of us moves. It feels too good, to be wrapped in someone’s arms, protected from the wind and listening to the lake’s easy rhythm, feeling Miles’s breath move through him until mine syncs up without even trying.

“This is nice,” I say, sort of dreamily and *entirely* unintentionally. The few times I’ve smoked weed, this has always been the primary effect: a feeling that the cord between my brain and mouth has been snipped, and I have no control over what I’m saying.

Miles nods against the side of my head. “It is,” he agrees.

“Miles,” I say.

“Hm?”

I—and the weed—tell him, “I think you might be the nicest person I’ve ever met.”

“I’m not being nice when I tell you not to move away,” he says. “I like hanging out with you. And you’re the best roommate I’ve ever had by a landslide.”

“You mean I’m clean,” I say.

“Learn to take a compliment,” he says.

“See?” I say.

“See what?” he asks.

I turn to look at him. “Even when you try to be mean, you’re nice.”

His eyes seem to spark when he smiles. “I’ll try harder.”

We go back to sitting there, touching, watching bonfires dance and the water roll.

SATURDAY, JUNE 1<sup>ST</sup>

## 77 DAYS UNTIL I CAN LEAVE

MILES AND I pass the next week without so much as brushing shoulders in the kitchen.

I don't think either of us is actively avoiding the other—it's more like, we both suddenly remember we don't know each other and have nothing in common beyond our hilariously bad breakups. We're back in the territory of polite nods, separate dinners, and conversation made via monosyllable.

When we got home, he made a big show of scribbling *WANING BAY TOURISM* on the calendar, drawing an arrow down the Sunday column, but since then, he hasn't added anything else.

By the time my Saturday morning shift rolls around, I'm convinced that his adamancy about showing me around was a by-product of the joint we shared.

I'm out the door before he's even up, the sun and birds out full force, though the air remains crisp. I'm early, as usual, so I decide to walk to work and even stop in at a whitewashed coffee shop overflowing with hanging plants to grab a hot chai.

It's strange; I've driven this way dozens of times, but on foot, I notice new things:

A Tudor house with a lush flower garden and a wooden sign advertising it as a Montessori school. A hobby shop called High Flyers, whose theme seems to be a mix of *kites* and *THC*. Then I turn down a residential street, reading the yard signs as I go: one about Bigfoot, another promoting an



upcoming arts fair, then a crooked For Sale sign in the shaggy, overgrown lawn of a taffy-green bungalow.

Its white picket fence is in disrepair, some slats entirely missing, and its diamond-paned windows are crawling with ivy. It looks like something from a storybook: magical and cozy, yet somehow wild, mysterious in that irresistible way of fairy-tale houses.

At work, I help Harvey swap out the programming corkboard for the week. Waning Bay Public Library is a small enough operation that it's usually all hands on deck. You do whatever needs doing, regardless of job title.

While pinning a flyer for Build Your Own Terrarium Night, Harvey says, "You've been in brighter spirits this week."

He bears more than a passing resemblance to Morgan Freeman, and his voice, although raspier and not quite so low, has the same kind of gravitas. It's a voice that makes you want to do him proud.

"Sorry," I say quickly. "I'll be better. About not bringing all of that into work."

Harvey harrumphs, pushes his gold wire-frame glasses up his nose. "It's a library, Daphne. If you can't be a human here, where can you?"

At his kindness, I feel a sting of guilt about my job search. About *knowing* there's a technical services librarian position open in Oklahoma, a place I know nothing about that can't be learned from the musical *Oklahoma!*

"We're lucky to have you," Harvey goes on, hanging the sign-up sheet for Friday's *Dungeons & Dragons* tournament. "Just keep bringing your whole heart in for those kids. That's all."

The sting redoubles.

Harvey pats the wall, then ambles back to the office, while I move on to dismantling the origami Dinosaur Day display to make room for the Pride Month display. Afterward, I help Ashleigh finish the Juneteenth and Loving Day displays, while she fills me in on her first *real* date with Craig, delivering each startling tidbit of information in a perfect monotone while I try not to pee myself from laughing.

(When they got to his house after dinner, he made her sit with him in the car for twenty unspeaking minutes while the Phish album he'd put on finished playing, then did the exact same thing after he drove her home.)

"I'm glad someone's enjoying this," she says, but I can tell she's enjoying telling it too. It's fun and a little thrilling, feeling like we're kind of, sort of real friends now.

When I get back to my desk, I field a few calls, after which I teach roughly five hundred kids how to sign in to an online game for the five hundredth time.

By then it's the peak of my workweek: Saturday Story Hour.

Bonus: it's a warm, cloudless day, so we can take this activity outside.

When we're settled in a ring in the grass out front, I ask, "Who's ready to hear a story?"

Hands go up around the circle. Shameless excitement. Open expressions of feelings.

It's funny: As a kid, I had no idea how to interact with other kids. I felt most at home with Mom and her friends. But as an adult, I find kids so much easier to understand.

They say how they feel, and they show it too. There are fewer ulterior motives and unwritten rules. Silences aren't unbearably awkward, and abrupt segues to different subjects are the norm. If you want to be friends with someone, you just ask, and if they don't want to, they'll probably just tell you.

I clear my throat and open *Snappsy the Alligator* to get us started, scanning my rapt audience as I begin to read.

Arham, of course, wears his trademark Spider-Man costume. A three-year-old, Lyla, has spaghetti sauce all over her face and dungarees. She's also sucking on a lemon wedge like it's a pacifier.

Basically, all is right with the world.

Halfway through our second story, I notice someone approaching from the parking lot, seemingly carried on a burst of summer air and sunshine. He's gazing at the covered breezeway to the front doors like he's never seen anything like it, possibly never seen a library, period.

His eyes slice sideways toward us, and I lose my place in the sentence. Miles's face lights with a grin. He lifts his chin in greeting and draws to a stop just beyond our little ring.

I clear my throat and glance down at the picture book in my hand, finding my place in the sentence to begin reading aloud again.

When I next look up, he's still there, looking enraptured.

By this story. About anthropomorphic mice. Learning to do gymnastics.

I wish I hadn't been *quite* so committed to doing voices for all of the characters before he showed up, because now I'm obliged to keep at it.

So I use my high-pitched squeak for the littlest mouse's dialogue, and my low grumble for the portly older mouse with the distinguished mustache. Every time I scan the crowd, Miles's smile is a little bigger, goofier. He keeps looking around at the kids, parents, and nannies, like, *Can you believe this shit? Wild!*

When I reach The End, the toddlers' caregivers give the mild applause appropriate for a late-afternoon library trip, whereas Miles sticks his fingers in his mouth and whistles, which somehow instantly turns all fifteen kids from sleepy angels into rowdy buccaneers, drunk on distilled-belowdecks rum. A couple of moms eye my scrubby, wolfish roommate curiously.

He is blissfully unaware, ambling toward me through the crowd as the other patrons gather their diaper bags and sticky-handed children to pull them toward the parking lot.

"I had no idea you could do that," he says.

"Oh, yeah," I say, starting back toward the front doors. They whoosh open and we enter the cool, musty quiet. "I've been reading since I was six. I'm getting pretty good."

"I mean the voices," he clarifies. "You were such a convincing elderly magician mouse."

"If that impressed you, you should see me do the old woman who lives in a shoe," I say.

"I'll clear my Saturdays," he says.

"I was kidding," I say.

He grins. "Not me."

I gesture toward the stacks. "Can I help you find something?"

"I was hoping you could spell out every word of a love poem to me," he deadpans.

"That guy already called today," Ashleigh pipes up from the reference desk.

"Yeah, I've hit my limit on daily X-rated flower metaphors, so that's the one thing I can't help you with," I tell him.

He shrugs. "I'll try again on Monday. Actually, I was on my way in to Cherry Hill and I just wanted to double-check we're still on for tomorrow. Would've texted, but I forgot my phone at home."

"Tomorrow?" Ashleigh looks up from the gel manicure she's giving herself, complete with a little light-up device plugged in between her computer and the printer. Harvey left already for his daughter's fortieth birthday and the front desk quickly descended into lawlessness. "What's tomorrow?"

"I wasn't planning to hold you to that," I tell Miles.

He scoffs. "It's on the calendar. It might as well be etched into the annals of history."

"It's pronounced *anals*," Ashleigh says.

Miles looks to me, brow lifting.

I shake my head. "It's definitely not. And you really don't have to ferry me around. I can just, like, buy a map."

He rolls his eyes, slumps forward on his forearms at the desk. "Just be ready at one p.m., okay?"

"Okay," I say.

He looks between me and Ashleigh. "Should I expect you at Cherry Hill tonight?"

"I've got Read-a-thon stuff I need to work on," I say.

"And my kid's having friends over to play video games," Ashleigh says. "So I'll be shoveling pizza rolls in and out of the oven until dawn. But he's at his dad's again next Sunday night, if you guys want to do something then."

“Should we expect Craig too,” Miles teases, leaning across the desk, vaguely flirtatiously.

Ashleigh shudders. “No, no, we should not. Daphne can fill you in on that. I can’t bring myself to utter it aloud again.”

“He had too much Phish,” I explain.

“Like an aquarium?” Miles says.

“Like posters upon posters of Phish. The band,” I say.

“What’s wrong with Phish?” he wants to know.

“Nothing, in moderation,” Ashleigh volunteers.

“But he also had commemorative mugs and action figures and cardboard cutouts. And . . . I want to say *sheets*?”

“Hand towels,” she corrects me. “I don’t begrudge a man a hobby, but if you’re forty and your apartment has a *theme*, I just don’t see it working out for us.”

“Well, shit,” Miles says. “That rules out pretty much everyone I know.”

“I’ve seen your place,” Ashleigh says. “I didn’t see a cohesive theme. Unless it was *major depressive episode*.”

“When did you see my room?” Miles asks.

“I picked Daphne up there,” she says, apparently happy to admit to her snooping.

“Actually, the theme is, you’re never invited over again,” I tell Ashleigh. Then, to Miles: “What time do you need to get into work?”

“Shit!” He pitches himself forward over the desk to check the time on my computer. His eyes flash back to mine, and he points for good measure, which really accentuates the Popeye-style anchor tattoo on his bicep. “Tomorrow. One o’clock. Don’t be late.”

“I never am,” I say.



MILES IS FIFTEEN minutes late.

I tell him this when he enters the apartment.

"I know," he says. "Sorry. I went to get coffee, and the line was really long." He holds out a paper cup to me. I recognize the stamp on it as being from Fika, the shop I stopped in to on my way to work yesterday.

"Thank you," I say.

He doesn't answer, just waits expectantly for me to take a sip, I guess.

"I don't really drink coffee," I say. "Unless I'm super tired, it makes me too jittery."

His brow furrows, his lips knitting together. "You had one of their cups on your desk yesterday, so I assumed . . ."

"Chai," I say.

He taps his temple, like he's nailing the information to his head.

"Should we go?" I ask.

Outside our building, the sudden daylight briefly scalds my retinas. I lose all sense of direction, somehow running directly *into* Miles when he was *just* beside me.

He catches my upper arms and turns me toward his truck, half a block up the street.

"So where are we going," I ask.

"Shopping."

"Really?" I turn toward him, the wind whipping my hair across my face. I catch a fistful and push it out of my eyes, pinning it to my forehead. "Are we doing a makeover montage?"

He looks down at himself. "Are you trying to tell me something here?"

"I mean, when you showed up at Story Hour yesterday, I caught Mrs. Dekuyper looking between you and a Big Bad Wolf picture book, like she was trying to spot the difference."

"Yeah, right," he says, "she thought I was hot."

"You don't even know which one Mrs. Dekuyper was," I point out.

"They all thought I was hot," he says. "Women of a certain age love me."

"You must remind them of when they were young," I say, "and Abraham Lincoln was *People's Sexiest Man Alive*."

He unlocks the passenger door of his truck and hauls it open with one hand, while he scratches his bearded jaw with the other. “You think I should shave it?”

“I think you should do whatever you want.” I climb onto the ripped seat.

“But you think the beard is bad.” He closes the door, the window rolled down between us.

“I think the beard is sheer chaos,” I say. “But not inherently *bad*. It’s your face, Miles. All that matters is how you feel about it.”

He sets his forearms atop the door. “Well, Daphne, I’m less sure how *I* feel about it since that snarky Big Bad Wolf comment.”

“Don’t take my opinion too seriously,” I say. “You already know I have terrible taste in men.” And honestly, the beard’s growing on me. Chaos suits him. “Where are we going shopping? Family Fare?”

“Better.” He pushes the lock down, then rounds the truck and gets in.

“Tom’s Food Market?” I say.

“Better,” he repeats.

“Oh, I know!” I cry. “Meijer.”

He looks over, the engine starting with a sputtering cough. “Do me a favor,” he says lightly, “and unlock your door.”

“Why?”

“So I can push you out as I peel out of this parking lot,” he says.

“You would never,” I say.

“I would never,” he admits, and pulls onto the road. He turns us away from town and the water, toward the countryside.

His heartbreak playlist is still in full effect.

Or maybe he’s just put it back on to amuse me, because he *does* seem a little more smirky than usual.

The traffic thins as we drive inland, away from the quaint downtown and the cotton-candy-colored Victorian- and Colonial Revival-style resorts that line the beach.

It’s easy to forget how secluded Waning Bay really is, when you’re inside of it, but within minutes, we’re winding into gloriously sunlit farmland.

Then, out of nowhere, we're pulling to the side of the road. Through the dusty windshield, I spot a green-painted farm stand on the shoulder, behind which two older ladies in work pants, floral tank tops, and matching visors are hawking asparagus.

"So to be clear," I say, "when you said *shopping*, you meant *for asparagus*."

Miles gives me a mildly offended look. "This," he says, "is just phase one."

I hop out, dirt kicking up under my sandals, and follow him to the stand.

"Well, hello there!" one of the ladies calls. "Back already?"

"Of course," Miles says. "Barb, Lenore, this is my friend Daphne Vincent. Daphne, this is Barb Satō and Lenore Pappas."

"Nice to meet you," I say.

"Daphne's newish to town," Miles goes on, "and she's never had your asparagus before."

"Is that so?" The smaller of the two women, Barb, perks up. She starts rustling through the crates. "Let me find you the best of the best."

"I'm sure there's no bad stalk to be had," I say.

"No, no, of course not," the other woman, a head taller than the first, says, "but Barb does have a knack for picking the best, and we want our first-timers to come back, so let her work her magic."

"I appreciate it," I say.

Lenore leans across the table. "How've you been holding up, honey?"

"Good," Miles says. "I'm good."

She squeezes his forearm. "You're a good boy, and you deserve to be happy. Don't you forget that."

"These are the ones for you." Barb lifts a bundle of asparagus that must contain at least twenty-seven stalks.

"Oh, yeah, those look good," Miles agrees, holding open the tote bag he brought from the truck. She drops the asparagus in, and he slides his wallet from his pocket.

"No, no, no," Barb says. "Your money's no good here."



He shoves the ten in his hand into their tip jar to much protestation. “It would be a crime not to pay for this.”

“Theft, technically,” I put in.

“You take care of our boy,” Lenore tells me sternly, but with a wink. “He’s one of the good ones.”

“I’ve been picking up on that,” I say.

They coo and fawn over him as we wave our farewells and trek back to the dirt-smeared truck, my cheeks aching from subconsciously matching their sunny smiles. As soon as we’re in the car, and out of earshot, I drop my voice to a murmur. “You weren’t kidding about that beard’s effect on our honored elders.”

He laughs. “No, *they* hate the beard. They just like me because I spend a fuck-ton on their asparagus. And their corn, later in the season.”

A guffaw rises out of me as we glide back onto the road. “Miles, I’m pretty sure they would’ve given you their entire surplus, *and* everything in the tip jar. How much corn can one man possibly eat to earn that kind of adoration?”

“It’s not one man,” he says.

“Damn,” I say. “A modern Walt Whitman.”

“No, I mean, we source from them.”

“We?” I ask.

“Cherry Hill,” he says. At my blank response, his eyes dart to the road, then to my face and back a couple more times. “I’m their buyer.”

“What does that mean,” I say.

“It means our chef, Martín, makes a few different menus every season, and I get the best stuff I can find for him. So I go to the butcher, and the farm stands, and the olive oil store, and the cheesemonger—”

“*Cheesemonger!*” I say. “You have a cheesemonger on speed dial?”

“Since it’s not 1998,” he says, “no, I don’t have her on speed dial. But we text whenever she’s got something special in.”

“Wow,” I say. “Who knew I was moving in with the most well-connected man this side of Lake Michigan?”

“Probably everyone that I’m connected to,” he replies. “So, like, half of Waning Bay?”

“So if I was in need of, like . . . strawberry preserves.”

“Reddy Family Farm,” he says. “But if they are low, Drake is good too.”

“And if I wanted butternut squash,” I say.

“Faith Hill Sustainable Farms,” he says. I open my mouth and he adds, “No connection to the country singer, sadly.”

I frown. “Too bad.”

“I know,” he says.

“What about if I needed green beans?” I ask.

“Ted Ganges Green Bean Farm,” he says.

“And if I needed to take out a hit on someone,” I say.

“Gill from MEATLOCKER,” he answers, not missing a beat.

At the look on my face, a laugh rockets out of him. “It’s a joke, Daphne. But Gill did mention he was looking for homes for a litter of kittens.”

“I’m not sure the Cherry Hill clientele is quite that culinarily adventurous,” I say.

“And lucky for them, Chef Martín isn’t either. I *have* been thinking about getting a cat, though,” he says.

“One more reason I should move to Maryland,” I say. “I’m allergic.”

“The cat’s out,” he says.

“Don’t give up your hypothetical cat for me, Miles,” I say. “Barb and Lenore will actually kill me if I rob you of that joy.”

“The cat was just a pipe dream,” he says. “After an infancy with Gill, there’s no way I’ll be able to give one of those kittens the life it’s accustomed to.”

“True. You don’t own enough leather *or* have a motorcycle with a tiny sidecar and helmet.”

“Oh my god, that would be so fucking cute,” he says, delight lighting up his deep brown eyes.

He puts on his blinker as we approach a cherry stand.

It’s essentially a repeat of our stop at the asparagus stand, except that Barb and Lenore are replaced by Robert Sr., a portly guy in his forties, and

Rob Jr., a gangly kid who's anywhere between eleven and twenty-two. This time, I insist on paying for the two bags of cherries, and when we climb back into the cab of the truck, Miles looks at me expectantly, his seat belt still undone and the engine off.

"Aren't you going to try one?"

"Is this some kind of kink for you?" I say.

A blush hits the tops of his cheekbones, the only part not hidden by his werewolf beard. "I just want to know if you think they're as good as I do."

"Okay, okay." I dig around for two plump, long-stemmed cherries and hand him one. As if there's some invisible countdown, we hold eye contact and pop the cherries in our mouths at the same second.

It's sweet without being overpowering. Tart without giving that biting-down-on-metal sensation. And juicy. Juicier than any cherry I've ever bought in a store. So juicy that when I bite into it, sticky pink sluices out between my lips and drips down my chin.

And even though *not two seconds ago* I had been determined not to make a sound, an enthusiastic *mm-mm* rolls through me, followed by a "wow."

Grinning, Miles grabs a Big Louie's-branded napkin from the center console and mops up my chin before I can get cherry juice everywhere. He crumples the napkin into an empty paper cup in the cupholder, then spits out the pit from his cherry and holds the cup up for me to do the same, a strangely intimate gesture that makes my insides feel like they've been baking in the sun just a few minutes too long and will char if they're not turned over soon.

"Best cherry you've ever had," Miles guesses.

"Honestly, I didn't even know I liked cherries until right now," I say.

He says, "They weren't my thing either until I moved here."

"Where are you from again?" I ask. "Sorry, I forget."

His eyes flash away from mine. "No, that's okay." He starts the car. "I'm from Illinois."

"And how'd you end up out here?" I ask.

He looks over his shoulder before merging onto the road. “Followed a girl.”

“Petra?” I say.

He shakes his head.

“Ooooh, the *other* girlfriend,” I say.

“Number one, of two,” he confirms. “Dani. She’s actually Chef Martín’s cousin. He and his husband started Cherry Hill, and he offered Dani a job in the tasting room. So she got me one too, and we moved from Chicago. Broke up a few months later. By then, I didn’t want to leave, and she did, so she moved back to the city.”

“So that’s why you don’t think I should leave?” I guess. “Because of the one percent chance that Petra and Peter will decide to go first?”

“I told you,” he says. “I don’t think you should leave because I don’t want you to leave. And my happiness is *very* important. You heard Barb and Lenore.”

“I did,” I say. “I remember that lyric from the second stanza of the ballad they sang about you.”

“That was nothing,” he says. “Wait until you meet Clarence from the lavender farm.”

“You are either the friendliest man on the planet,” I say, “or a world-class serial killer.”

“Why not both?”



**CLARENCE CAN'T BE** more than five years older than either of us, soft-spoken with curly red hair. He isn't a farmer himself, just the attendant for the little shop in the whitewashed cottage beyond the rows of vibrant purple flowers heavily populated by bumblebees.

They sell lavender *everything*.

Lavender room spray and lemon-lavender bars of hand soap. Tea towels with dainty lavender print on them, made by a local artisan, and a plush

robe with lavender embroidered on its pockets, made by a *different* local artisan.

But the real reason, I suspect, Miles brought me here is for the lavender shortbread and blueberry-lavender lemonade. Miles buys one cookie for each of us; Clarence deposits six into the bag.

“Maybe I should get something for Ashleigh,” I say. “Wait, maybe I should get *everything* for her, so she’s forced to have a lavender-themed home.”

“I don’t know why she was so freaked out by Craig’s Phish love,” he says, grabbing the pastry bag and his cup of lemonade and leading the way out to the patio overlooking the lavender fields. “The man clearly knows how to commit. That’s a *good* thing.” He stops and pulls a piece of shortbread out for me, then takes one for himself.

He looks away as I bite into the shortbread, and I wonder if I actually managed to embarrass him with the kink comment. A week ago, I would’ve thought him unembarrassable.

“Heavenly,” I say. He is so *obviously* pleased that I can’t help but feel a crush of affection for him.

It’s quickly snuffed out by a much bigger crushing sensation. Because, in the parking lot, a tall and lithely muscled man is emerging from a familiar BMW, the sun catching his neatly coiffed golden hair and sparkling emerald eyes.

They wander right past us to the shop as he trudges toward it, then backtrack abruptly right to me.

Our gazes latch.

The fluttery warmth in my stomach curdles.

Peter misses a step. For a second, it looks like he’s going to trip and skid across the sun-bleached gravel, face-first.

But he’s Peter. Nothing so ordinary as gravity could take him down.

Miles tracks my gaze, right as Peter starts across the lot again.

Under his breath, Miles says, “Shit.”

It’s bad enough that I’m running into Peter so soon, but to run into him *here*, in this place he never told me about, let alone *brought* me to, just feels

like a weirdly specific slap in the face.

Like a reminder that he was never that invested in whether I was happy here, whether I fell in love with this place. Like I should have been content with him and him alone, though *I* could never be enough for *him*.

He's peeling off from the path now. Striding purposefully toward us instead.

*Shit*, indeed.



SUNDAY, JUNE 2<sup>ND</sup>

## 76 DAYS UNTIL I CAN LEAVE

WHEN PETER REACHES us, there are two full seconds of silence, as if all three of us expect someone else to speak first.

“Hi,” Peter says finally.

“Hello,” I say.

Miles stays silent. Probably for the best. I think he’s too innately friendly to give Peter the chilly reception he deserves.

After a beat, Peter glances toward the propped-open shop doors, like he’s hoping someone might call out for him, or the building might spontaneously burst into flames and give him something other than the weather to remark on.

We so easily could’ve avoided each other, and it irritates me that he instead decided to march up to us.

But of course he wouldn’t want to seem rude.

“Good day for picking some lavender,” he offers.

Miles pipes up with: “Yeah.”

Peter ignores him. “I was wondering if we could talk for a second, Daphne.”

Miles leans into me protectively, a reminder that I don’t *have* to say yes; we can just book it to the truck and pretend this never happened. Go back to our apartment and weep-drink to some Celine Dion.

“I’ll meet you at the car?” I murmur to him.

Miles holds my gaze for a moment before nodding. He doesn't say anything else to Peter, just saunters back to the truck.

Another awkward beat of silence. I pinch the inside of my palm to keep myself from breaking it.

"So," Peter says. "How are you?"

I wonder if my jaw is hanging to my collarbones. "Seriously?"

Peter sniffs, glances over his shoulder toward the rusty truck and the man leaned against it. "Look," he says, voice gentling as he faces me. "I know how badly I hurt you. I know what I did was terrible—"

A laugh jumps out of me. "Wow, what an immense comfort to me."

I expect him to go haughty, superior, like he did during the breakup. To his credit, he doesn't.

His brow creases, the corners of his full lips twisting downward. "I deserve that, and whatever else you're not saying. I get that. But it doesn't change the fact that I care about you."

I wish I could laugh again, but it feels like a sheet of ice is spreading over my organs, making any movement impossible.

"And I know how much this all must suck for you," he says. "Being here, alone."

"I'm not alone," I say.

"I know," he says. "That's what I'm saying. It might seem easier to just . . . be with someone. But you deserve better than that."

I'm back to gawping.

"Look, all I'm saying is, be careful," he says. "That guy's a mess, and I don't want to see him drag you down."

As if there's so much lower for me to go.

"Do you know why he moved here?" he says. "Do you know his whole family doesn't even talk to him? That guy is such a loser, Daphne. You can do way better."

I'm caught off guard by that. A tiny bit of doubt sneaks in. Followed quickly by a wave of angry protectiveness.

Of course there's a ton I don't know about Miles. We've only been roommates for two months, friends for less than that. He doesn't owe me



his life story or unfiltered truth.

But *Peter*—Peter asked me to marry him.

Asked me to give up my whole life and glom on to his.

Asked me to accept his beautiful, straight, female best friend at face value because there was unequivocally *nothing going on there*, and I always said yes to everything he asked, because I trusted him. I *decided* to trust him. Promised to. A personal vow, taken long before our wedding.

And now he's looking at me, in this tortured mix of worry and hope, like he's thinking, *I did it! I've gotten through to her! I've saved her from ruin!*

"You know what, Peter," I say, "thank you for pulling me aside today."

His face brightens, relief flooding his features.

"It's always nice to be reminded that your ex really was as big of an asshole as you remember him being."

With that, I turn and power walk across the brilliantly sunlit parking lot to the guy slouched against the truck, the driver's-side door hanging open, waiting for him.

"You okay?" Miles asks, right as I pitch myself into his arms, wrapping mine around his neck. His brows shoot up in amused surprise.

"Is he looking?" I whisper.

Miles nods.

"Can I kiss you?"

A half-amused, half-scandalized smile overtakes his face. "Okay."

So I lean into him and lift my chin, and he ducks his forehead, and we have one of the top five worst kisses of my life, junior high included.

The problem is, I go in way too hot, whereas he's aiming for a chaste teenage-actors-doing-a-high-school-play kind of thing, so basically I end up biting his entire mouth, which makes him laugh into mine, which in turn makes *me* laugh, only by then, he's adjusted his approach to match mine, and the laugh dies in the back of my throat as he grips my hip in one hand, my jaw in the other, and kisses me *for real*.

Rough, impatient, but not *clumsy*.

His mouth is still cool from the lemonade, his breath tinged with hints of lavender, and his hand slides around to the small of my back, fisting into

my shirt. His other moves into my hair as he pulls me tight against him, my spine curving up until we're flush with each other.

His tongue slips into my mouth, experimentally, and then a little deeper, tangling with mine. A thrill shoots down the front of my rib cage as he turns us one hundred and eighty degrees, backing me into the side of the driver's seat, settling his hips in against mine.

I've read interviews with actors, about how filming sex scenes isn't sexy, how the performance of it is mechanical. A little awkward, but overall professional.

But that's not what's happening to me. What's happening is biological, not cursory.

My nipples are tightening against his chest, and heat is sinking lower in my stomach until it drops between my thighs, and when I feel him hardening against me, the shock of it almost instantly gives way to a frazzled, confusing want.

I don't remember moving my hands into his hair, but I feel it slip between my fingers, hear a small, needy sound in my throat at the brush of his tongue over my bottom lip.

He draws back slowly, the kiss settling like the tail end of a fast-moving storm, a tapering off rather than an abrupt stop.

My breath is shallow, and I can feel his heart racing.

"How was that?" he asks quietly.

"Yeah," I manage. "Good."

"Is he still looking?" Miles asks.

*Right.* Peter.

Since Miles turned us around, I'm the one facing the shop and its adjoining patio.

Peter's *not* watching. I'm not sure Peter's even still *here*.

He's either gone inside the store or gotten in his car and driven away. Without craning my neck to scan the parking lot conspicuously, I can't be sure which.

Heat blazes up my throat to my forehead. "No."

Miles's fingers graze clear of my jaw, his other hand relaxing against my back. "Should we head out?" he asks.

"Yep!" I squeak, and squeeze out from between him and the truck. It's a good thing we took his car: I'm in no condition to drive.



WE RINSE THE cherries and eat them while we grill the asparagus to mix into a massive salad for dinner.

Neither of us broaches the kiss, and I genuinely can't tell whether he's had a single thought about it since we left the lavender farm. Every time I zone out, though, a snippet replays in my mind, my skin warming from the memory.

On the one hand, it feels like maybe I just had a very vivid sex dream about him and need to act normal until a salacious dream about, like, Santa Claus overshadows it.

On the other hand, I'm *positive* it really happened, because if I'd had to *imagine* what kissing Miles would be like, it would've been sweet and playful and fun—maybe just a little bit sloppy. Because *he's* sweet, playful, fun, and a little bit sloppy.

But that's not at all what it was like.

Of course, maybe if the kiss had happened under less *vengeful* circumstances, it would've been different. Maybe that's just how he kisses when he's recently been confronted by the man his girlfriend left him for. With a vengeance.

"You okay?" he asks.

I look up from the cucumber and tomato I've been chopping on autopilot. "Yep!"

He frowns, his hips sinking back against the counter. "You want to talk about it?"

My head snaps back up.

"Whatever he said to upset you," Miles clarifies.

I carry the cutting board to the salad bowl and swipe the contents into it. “He was just being shitty.”

Miles turns back to the countertop grill and tongs the asparagus onto their other sides. “It’s fine if you don’t want to tell me.”

After several seconds, I say, “You were right that he’s still jealous. He really can’t stand the fact that anyone might like you. Thinks it’s, like, a direct condemnation of his character. And you know what? Maybe it is.”

Miles’s head cocks on a knowing smirk. “It’s not about *me*. It’s *you*. He wants you both. He’s with Petra, but he still wants you to be in love with him.”

“Right, because if I’m into someone who’s totally different than him, it’s a blow to his ego.” I backtrack immediately. “You know, if he *thinks* I’m dating someone who’s super different from him.”

Miles shakes his head. “I don’t think that’s it. He took a big leap, and now that the initial high is wearing off, he’s wondering if he did the right thing. And then seeing you with someone else reminds him what it was like to be with you.”

I catch myself worrying at my lower lip. When his gaze drops toward the motion, I stop. “He said something about you,” I blurt.

Instantly wish I could take it back.

Miles’s brow rises.

“He was just being shitty,” I repeat. “And it made me mad. And that’s why . . .”

He folds his arms, his face going neutral. His face is very rarely neutral. “What’d he say?”

There’s a lump in my throat. “First of all, keep in mind you don’t owe me *any* kind of explanation.”

“Daphne,” he says, like, *Cut to the chase*.

“He said your family doesn’t talk to you.”

The reaction is instantaneous and unsubtle. A flare of shock. Hurt.

He turns, messes with the asparagus again.

“He was acting like an asshole,” I say.

He nods without facing me, his shoulders tight, so unlike his usual lax and languid self.

I forge on: "Like I said, you don't owe me any explanation. He just brought it up to be a jerk, and it's none of my business."

He nods, still tense.

Shit. I played right into Peter's hands. He found a way to hurt Miles from afar, for having the *audacity* to love Peter's best friend, and then, allegedly, his ex.

I step up behind Miles and set my hands on his shoulders, gently easing them down. He lets out a deep, tired exhale. I resist an urge to push my face into the gap between his shoulder blades.

"Miles?" I say.

He looks over his shoulder at me, the light catching the streaks of dark brown in his eyes, lightening them to a maple-syrup amber.

"I'm sorry for saying anything," I say.

"Nah, it's fine."

He turns toward me, my hands skating over his back, coming to rest on his shoulders. He catches my wrists in light, loose circles, his gaze falling. "Sorry, I'm . . ." He takes a breath. "I guess I'm surprised Petra told him that. I just . . . I barely even talked about that stuff with her."

I press my palms against his trapezius muscles, trying to release the tension from them. His thumbs move back and forth on the sides of my wrists, restless. I get the sense he's trying to soothe and distract himself. It's doing the opposite to me.

"I'm sorry," I say again.

His head jerks slightly to one side. "It's true. I don't really have a relationship with my parents. It is what it is, and I can't change it. But so much of life's good. What's the point of dwelling on the shit that's not?"

"Wow. I couldn't relate less," I tease gently. "I'm a born complainer."

He smiles, just a bit. "You are not."

"Are you kidding?" I say. "My mom and I used to play this game we called Whiny Babies. We'd just take turns complaining about smaller and stupider things until we ran out. Like, the girl I sat next to in English lit

chewed her pencil really loudly. Whoever had the smallest complaint got to choose dinner.”

The corner of his mouth curls. “Sounds like a blast.”

“It was, actually,” I say. “Sometimes complaining about stuff, just having someone to empathize with you, takes the sting out of it.”

“There’s no sting,” Miles says. “It’s fine. I’ve got my sister. That’s my family.”

“I guess all families are complicated, one way or another.” I think of my empty driveway, of standing barefoot on the floor vent, letting the heat billow through my pajamas as I watched the window and waited. To be worth it, to be chosen.

The corner of Miles’s mouth hitches. “Petra’s was basically a Norman Rockwell painting.”

I sigh. “Yeah, Peter’s too.”

Miles looks up at me from under a slightly furrowed brow, his thumbs still gliding back and forth along my wrists. “Were you close?” he asks. “With Peter’s parents.”

My chest pinches. “Sort of. I mean, maybe not close. But they were always really nice. His mom came wedding dress shopping with me and my mom. And she got a monogrammed Christmas stocking made for me to match his and his brother’s. They’re the kind of family with a million traditions. Certain plates and specific desserts for each of their birthdays. Every single thing in their house was some kind of heirloom with some great story, and he and his brother, Ben, would argue over who’d inherit what someday, but in this jokey way. The whole extended family always comes here for New Year’s Eve and they do a white elephant gift exchange, and it’s all very . . . I don’t know. I just really wanted . . .”

“To be a part of it?” Miles guesses.

I nod.

“Yeah,” he says.

I hadn’t heard anything from any of Peter’s local friends after the breakup, not even Scott. But both his mom and his brother’s girlfriend,

Kiki, sent messages in those first couple weeks. Kiki told me to hit her up if I were ever in Grand Rapids, and I knew she meant it.

Mrs. Collins's message, however, had only read: thinking of you, with a little purple heart beside it.

"For what it's worth," I say, "what Peter said—it sounded like he didn't really know what he was talking about. Like he got the CliffsNotes from Petra and made the rest up. I doubt she was harping on you."

"Yeah, I know," he says. "She wouldn't."

There's a levity to his voice, but he looks uncommonly distant, halfway here with me and halfway deep inside his skull.

It's surprising, how powerful the urge to comfort him is, how comfortable it feels to let myself lean against him in one of only a handful of hugs to pass between us in the months we've lived together.

His hands slide down my arms to wrap across my back. We stand there for several seconds, tangled up together.

"Want to go egg his car?" I mumble into his chest.

"Seems like a waste of good eggs," he says.

"I agree," I say. "I just wish my gynecologist told me that sooner."

I'm joking, but Miles draws back enough to peer into my face. "You'd be a great mom."

It's the kind of thing everyone says to their friends, but I believe him when he says it, and I'm strangely touched. "What about you? You want kids?"

"I wouldn't know the first thing about being a dad." He smiles faintly, tucking my hair behind my ear. It makes me feel like a two-liter bottle of soda flipped upside down, all the bubbles suddenly rushing in the opposite direction. "Hey, tell me something."

"What?" I ask.

"Something about you," he says. "That has nothing to do with *him*."

"Well." I laugh. "I guess all you need to know is how blank my mind just went. That's how sure I am about 'who I am' these days."

"What about your family," he says. "Any siblings?"

"None that I know of," I say.

His head tilts.

“My dad’s had a *lot* of girlfriends over the years,” I say. “I wouldn’t be that surprised if I’ve got a few half siblings floating around.”

“Neither of your parents ever remarried?” he asks.

“My mom’s never even dated since my dad,” I say.

“Too brokenhearted?” he asks, which makes me actually laugh.

“Too busy. When I was a kid, she worked a lot to make ends meet, and she always said she’d rather spend her free time with me. I figured once I went to college, she’d give it a try. Instead she got really into CrossFit and made a ton of friends. She’s always basically either exercising with a lady named Pam or taking art classes with a woman named Jan, or drinking smoothies with both of them. She’s really happy, though. That’s what matters.”

Even as I say it, I feel a pang. I know she’s meant it every time she’s told me I could come stay with her, move into her tiny studio. But for the first time since I can remember, she actually has a full life, beyond just taking care of me.

The week Peter dumped me, it took a two-hour phone call to convince her to *not* cancel the five-day “backpacking journey” she had scheduled with Pam, to come nurse my broken heart. She’d spent too much of her life dropping everything for me, knowing it all fell to her.

I could just as easily weep in her arms at the end of the summer, during my scheduled post–Read-a-thon visit.

“CrossFit,” Miles says thoughtfully. “That explains it.”

“What could that possibly explain?” I ask.

“The screams and clanking metal I hear from the other room when you’re on speakerphone.”

“Oh, no,” I say, “that’s unrelated.”

“I don’t want any more information,” he plays along. “I feel totally uncurious.”

“My regularly scheduled calls with Christian Grey are completely mundane.”

His brows pinch. “Who?”



"It's from a book," I say. "Never mind."

"Ah," he says. "Not a big reader."

"I know that's a possibility," I say, "and yet I truly cannot fathom it."

"What do you like about it," he says.

"Everything," I say.

His mouth curls. "Fascinating."

"I like that it feels like I can live as many lives as I want," I say.

"What's wrong with this one?"

At my pointed expression, he snorts a laugh. "Okay. But we're more than just what happened in April. Let's focus on the other stuff."

"Like?"

"How did it start?" he asks. "The library thing."

I cast my mind back, to before grad school, before undergrad even, all the way to the first moment I *remember* loving a story. Feeling like I was living it. Being, even as a child, bowled over by how something imaginary could become real, could wring every emotion from me or make me homesick for places I'd never been.

"Narnia," I tell him.

"Now, that one I've heard of," he says.

"Ever since Mr. Tumnus showed up at that snowy lamppost, this world was never going to quite cut it for me."

"Who's Mr. Tumnus?" he asks.

"I thought you'd read it!" I cry.

"No, I've *heard* of it," he corrects me. "As a kid, I never read for fun. I'm dyslexic, and it took too long."

"What about audiobooks?" I say.

"Does that count?" he asks.

"Of course it counts," I say.

His eyes narrow. "Are you sure?"

"I'm a librarian," I say. "If anyone gets to decide whether it counts or not, it's me."

His smile parts, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

For a second, we're just standing there, a tiny bit too close. Or maybe it's a totally normal amount of space, but *the kiss* is suddenly buzzing through me, replaying again and again.

His hands sliding around me. Lemon and lavender on his tongue. Our spines curving together. Him going hard. I'm fairly certain I can see it replaying in *his* eyes too.

"Shit!" He flinches away from me. "The asparagus!" He tries to yank one smoking stalk off the grill but jerks his hand back with a hiss, fumbling for the tongs before his second attempt to move them to the plate.

Meanwhile, I'm standing there, waiting for the fizz to settle.



THURSDAY, JUNE 6<sup>TH</sup>  
72 DAYS UNTIL I CAN LEAVE

IN THE BEST of times, it's inadvisable to start lusting after your roommate, and we are nowhere near the best of times.

I try to push the memory of the kiss to the back of my brain, along with any residual Miles's mouth-based curiosity, but it's not easy.

On Thursday I go to grab a late-night glass of water at exactly the right time to find Miles filling his own glass in the unlit kitchen, wearing nothing but athletic shorts, the disjointed assortment of tattoos splashed across his chest reduced to dark blurs, pieces of him I've seen before but not *since the kiss*, and now I find myself insatiably curious.

About the perfectly balanced scales of Libra, the illustrated Man on the Moon, the somewhat wonky horseshoe, the little red piece of fruit . . . a strawberry maybe?

"Hey," he says, his voice scratchy with sleep. "You need something?"

I guiltily jerk my gaze back to his face. "Nope!" I've already spun back to my room before I realize that actually, yes, I needed the very water pitcher Miles was holding, but there's no way I'm going back in there now.

On Sunday, we drive out to Sleeping Bear Dunes and it's easier to be normal, because it's eye-scaldingly bright out *and* we're both fully dressed, and also this is possibly the most gorgeous stretch of turquoise shore I've ever seen—even if it's also where I'm going to die a premature death, because today Miles has decided we should rent a dune buggy.

"You'll be fine," he promises as he holds a helmet out to me.

“Anything you need a helmet to do,” I say, “you probably simply shouldn’t do.”

He steps closer, the breeze ruffling his hair, and pulls the helmet down over my head. “Or maybe,” he says, eyes crinkled against the sun, “everything worth doing comes with some risk.”

His winsome grin sends a thrill up my spine, a lit fuse shortening by the second, and I have no idea what happens when it burns to the end.

He tips his head toward the buggy. “I promise to go slow for you.”

The way he says it, low and teasing, sends my thoughts scattering like pool balls on a perfect break. I can’t think of a single reply. Silently, I climb into the buggy.

On the upside, the experience of rumbling over hills in a vehicle with no door or sides, wind ripping through my hair and sand stinging my skin, turns out to be a good distraction from staring at Miles’s mouth too long.

Downside: every time we hit a bump, I accidentally grab his right thigh with *both* hands, until finally, he slows to a crawl and sets one palm over mine, murmuring, “It’s okay. I’ve got you,” in a velvety tone I assume he means to be *soothing* rather than tantalizing.

Whenever we reach a new scenic view (which is almost constantly), he insists we stop to take a picture together, and I have to disconnect my brain to keep the feeling of his arms roped around me, chin tucked into my shoulder, from plunging me wholesale back into the memory of making out against his truck.

The next Sunday is a little better. We kick things off by driving three towns over to Miles’s favorite farmers’ market. We wander for hours and leave with what we need to make pizzas.

At home that night, we build a simple margherita (my contribution) as well as a goat-cheese, artichoke, pesto concoction (Miles’s). Then he keeps an eye on them in the oven while I seize the opportunity to take a much-needed shower.

When I get back, clad in my favorite silky pajamas, he’s setting the pizzas on the table.

“Perfect timing.” He glances up, then double-takes.

I track his gaze downward and, to my horror, realize I didn't dry off thoroughly enough before getting dressed. My top is damp, nearly translucent in several places, and—speaking of perfect timing—my nipples choose that instant to stand at attention, like eager little meerkats.

I cross my arms over my chest.

Miles's eyes snap back to my face.

"I'll grab plates!" I volunteer.

"I'll get drinks," he coughs out.

In the kitchen, I pull two mismatched floral plates down, then turn, immediately colliding with him, the plates flattened upright between our stomachs, and his hands—in their attempt to catch my forearms and prevent said collision—pressed to the outside edges of my collarbones.

"Sorry," we both say.

Or he says it. *I* yelp it.

We awkwardly sidestep in the same direction. Then he steps back, holding a hand out like, *After you*, and I scuttle to the table, leaving him to rummage in the kitchen. When he emerges, he's got two glasses of wine.

"Thank god," I accidentally say when he hands me one, a comment he mercifully ignores.

He dishes up a piece of each pizza for both of us and we pad into the living room, where we sit on opposite ends of the couch. I take a bite of the artichoke pizza first.

"There it is," Miles says.

I open my eyes. Because, as it turns out, I had closed them and also moaned a little. He's fighting a grin as he bites into his own artichoke slice.

"The signature Daphne moan," he says.

I flush. "It's been a long time since I've eaten pizza."

Miles smiles wryly. "Right, you were on the wheatgrass diet." His head tilts, eyes glimmering. "So what else should we do, now that you're single?"

I nearly choke even as a knot of heat slides down into my stomach.

I feel the phantom sensation of rough hands at the base of my spine, a stomach pressing into mine, cool lips that taste like lemon and lavender.

After a hearty cough, I ask, “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Miles says, “things your ex didn’t like. That you can do now.”  
Somehow, that sounds even dirtier.

“Like eating pizza,” I stammer, determined to prove I’m not reading into this.

“Right,” he says. “Or like . . . sunrise kayaking. I’ve always wanted to do that, and I haven’t.”

“Petra wasn’t into kayaking?” I say, disbelieving.

“She wasn’t into *morning*,” he says. “But we’re not talking about *them*. We’re talking about *us*.”

Just the word *us* triggers another blush. All the blood in my body might as well hang out in my upper third, because as soon as it leaves, it’s getting called right back. “Well, I’ve never been sunrise kayaking, but I’d try it. For one of our Sundays, if you want.”

“Really?” he says.

“I won’t be *good* at it,” I warn, “but I’ll try.”

“What else?” Miles murmurs, lightly squeezing my knee.

I ignore the bolt of lightning singing down my center. “I always wanted to learn to bake, but . . .”

“You were living with a serial killer,” he finishes.

I crack a smile, which makes him do the same. His hand is still resting on my knee and it feels like a parade of fire ants is crawling out from it in every direction. His gaze flickers toward my top button, then back to my face.

“What about you?” I blurt.

He looks away, teeth skimming his bottom lip as he thinks. “Action movies,” he says. “It’s probably been three years since I’ve seen an action movie.”

Peter didn’t like those either. “Me too.”

“So maybe we should,” he says.

“Maybe right now,” I say, because I need somewhere else to look, something else to think about.

He flashes a smile. “Maybe right now.”



"I'M SO HAPPY for you, honey," Mom says between gasps for oxygen. She called me on her walk home from CrossFit, and either she's still out of breath from the workout or—more likely—she's keeping her walking speed at five miles per hour.

I, meanwhile, am starfished on my cushy ivory rug, staring at the ceiling with a mug of chai at my hip. This is as close as I get to life on the edge: a milky tea and a near-white rug.

"Happy for me?" I echo. *I'm happy for you* isn't the reaction one expects to a story about her coworker having to temporarily ban a library patron who ripped a computer out of the wall.

"I mean, I'm glad you've become real friends with your coworker," she clarifies.

"Me too." I don't think I realized how lonely I was here, even prebreakup.

Ashleigh and I haven't had another big night out since our winery visit—Duke's an involved parent, but she's got primary custody and Mulder's schedule is packed with extracurriculars—but even just sharing our lunch breaks at the food truck park across from the library has made Waning Bay feel more like home.

"I'm just so happy you're putting yourself out there," Mom says. "Your life can be *totally* full without a romantic relationship. Take it from me."

She either has a much lower libido than I do, or she's managing to burn through it by throwing tires across a poured concrete floor.

Maybe she's onto something. Maybe I should join some kind of exercise class. Not CrossFit, but something with more lying on your back and staring at the ceiling. Yoga? I could *at least* start walking to work regularly, now that I live closer.

"You know, baby," Mom goes on, "there really is always room for you here."

On a purely spatial level, this is false. "Thanks, but I have to stay through the summer."

“Right, right,” Mom says. “The Read-a-thon.”

I haven’t mentioned the other thing. The one-man Waning Bay Tourism Bureau, in the bedroom across the hall. Mom’s too perceptive for me to talk about that without her picking up on my rebound crush, and giving that any oxygen will only let it live longer.

“And you’ve got enough for the rent in the meantime?” she asks.

“I’m not borrowing money from you, Mom.”

“I really don’t mind,” she says.

“I’m fine.” That’s the truth, but even if it weren’t, I wouldn’t take a cent from her. For years after their split, Dad treated her like an ATM, and she helped him out every time, until I turned eighteen. Like some kind of fucked-up reverse child support, where *he* was the child she was obligated to support.

She told me she couldn’t have my father out on his ass, that it wasn’t right. But a funny thing happened when she cut him off: he was fine.

Mom’s done enough caretaking for two lifetimes, and if my dad can scrape by without her help, I can too. When I move, it will be because I’ve found a good job and my own place, that I can afford with *my* money.

“I’ve got things under control,” I promise.

She’s stopped walking, catching her breath at her front door probably. “You’ve always had a backbone of steel.”

“Wonder where I get that from,” I say.

“No idea,” she deadpans.

We say our goodbyes, do our *I love you; I love you mores*, and I go back to reading the library’s galley copy of a new Goonies-esque chapter book.

After a minute, though, I pick up my phone and text Ashleigh: Do you know of a good beginners’ yoga class?

She sends back nothing but an ellipsis. I reply with a question mark. She says, I don’t believe in organized exercise.

I have no idea what that means.

She adds, Looking to get ripped?

Looking for a hobby, I say, because “more friends” sounds too desperate.



Does it have to be exercise? Ashleigh asks.

Nope. When I see her typing, I head her off. But I'm not interested in the knitting circle at the library.

I've got something better, she says. You free next Wednesday after work?

There's a knock at my bedroom door, and I set my phone aside, sitting up. "Come in."

The door whines open and Miles leans in, hair wet from a shower, beard sticking out in every direction. "Hey."

"Hey," I say; then, with a realization, "It's Friday."

"It is," he says.

"Shouldn't you be at work?" I say.

He half shrugs. "Katya needed more hours. You up for another *film*?"

We've watched a movie every night since Sunday. Specifically the over-the-top action-comedies I'd always assumed were strictly intended for viewing whilst high out of your fucking gourd. It turns out they're also pretty good when you're stone-cold sober and trying *not* to think about making out with your roommate.

Lying on the floor of my tiny bedroom, while he stands over me like this, for example, is less ideal.

I sit up abruptly and knock over my chai in the process. "Shit!"

Miles retreats and returns with a hand towel, throwing it at me. Not to. At. It hits my face.

"Great catch," he says.

"Thanks." I yank the towel down and mop up the spill. "When's showtime?"

"Whenever you want," he says.

"Give me two minutes," I say.

"I'll make popcorn," he says.

Five minutes later, we're settled in for our ritual.

The oddball pairings are so cliché, so expected. But then again, they *work*.

The huge guy and the tiny one.

The trained assassin and the everyday Joe who gets mixed up with him.

The serious one who gives good eyebrow and the wisecracking sidekick who is absolutely always Ryan Reynolds or someone nearly indistinguishable from Ryan Reynolds when you close your eyes.

“This man must make sixty of these a year,” I say.

“And Dwayne Johnson’s only in thirty of them,” Miles says, from the opposite end of the couch.

“I wish I could send them an Edible Arrangement to thank them for their service.” I sit up to grab another sour gummy worm from the Spread of Bad Decisions Miles arranged for us.

“There’s just something about a movie where shit gets blown up during a car chase,” he says, “that makes me feel like everything’s going to be okay.”

At my laugh, he looks over, stretches one leg out until his foot is pushing against my thigh. “Hey, that was a real one.”

I turn to face him, my back against the arm of the couch, and swing my legs up onto the cushions. “A real what?”

“A real laugh,” he says. “You’ve got your polite little chuckle, and then you’ve got that weird, deep chortle you do when you actually think I’m funny.”

“It’s not a polite laugh,” I say. “It’s a display of mild amusement. I’d never fake-laugh. I don’t fake anything.”

He gives me a look.

I go warm in several places.

“So if that’s the mild amusement laugh,” he says, “then the low chortle is reserved for . . .”

“When you’re actually funny,” I say.

Without warning, he grabs my ankles and yanks me down the couch, draping my legs across his lap, my butt resting against the side of his thigh so that his face hangs over me.

“Fine!” I say, heart trilling at this closeness. “You’re *actually funny* a lot of the time.”

The corner of his mouth ticks. “And the chortle is . . . ?”

“I think it’s when I’m really relaxed,” I say. “I’ve always been self-conscious about my laugh, but this immense amount of attention being drawn to it is definitely helping.”

At the sarcasm, his grin spreads. He takes hold of my wrists. “No, don’t be self-conscious,” he says. “It’s so fucking cute.”

“I can really tell from the way you described it,” I deadpan.

“I’m serious.” He lifts my wrists, planting my limp hands on the sides of his face, a grown and bearded version of Macaulay Culkin in *Home Alone*. “I never would’ve said anything about it if I didn’t think it was cute.”

This is the most we’ve touched in weeks. Every point of contact vibrates.

He gingerly sets my hands back down on my chest, crossing them like I’m lying in a coffin, and while his knuckles barely graze me, my nipples peak up against my shirt.

I see him notice.

The anesthetizing power of the action-comedy genre isn’t cutting it anymore. I’m a bundle of buzzing nerves and want.

His gaze lifts abruptly. “Shit, sorry,” he says. “I’m sorry.” He starts to straighten up, but I catch *his* wrists now, keep him from moving too far. “It’s fine,” I say. “Really. It doesn’t need to be weird.”

“I think it’s just because we kissed,” he says.

“I think so too,” I tell him.

Still neither of us moves.

“I’ve been trying not to think about it too much,” he says.

Realizing he’s been thinking about it at *all* is enough to raise my body temperature a few degrees.

“Same,” I get out.

It’s been almost three weeks, and instead of the kiss fading in the rearview, it feels like every day since, I’ve been sliding closer and closer to an invisible ledge, more and more desperate to know what lies beyond it.

He meets my eyes, jaw muscles working as he swallows. Heat unfurls over me, starting where my palms are ringed around his wrists, climbing up my center.

I need to let go of him.

Instead my hands scrape up his arms. They feel amazing. Not gym arms, just arms that get a fair amount of daily use. For such a scruffy man, his skin is smooth, the hairs on his forearms fine and soft. My fingers instinctively follow the ridges of his veins up to his biceps, the anchor tattoo on one and the old-school bird on the other. I follow the curve of his shoulders, carried by an unstoppable current.

When I reach the back of his neck, he folds over me, slowly, one of his hands coming to press lightly on my waist. There's a moment of hesitation as our mouths hover close.

I should say something, break this tension that's been building.

Instead my chin tips up to him.

The first brush of his lips is faint, not the fevered, vengeful kiss we had against his truck. Not at first. But then my hands glide down his back, and he's shifting to lower himself over me, and I think my nervous system might overload from the sensations: his hips heavy against mine, his chest pressing me flat, the low, hungry sound that emanates from him as the kiss deepens, more honest with our want.

He drags one of my knees up against his hip, and I see stars, little blips of color popping against my eyelids. My hips tip up to his, and my shyness disintegrates as his mouth skates down my jaw, his teeth scraping my neck.

There's no space to worry about what he's thinking or how I'm coming across. Because now I'm sure that he wants me, like I want him. Nothing else matters.

My hands move down to his ass and he licks the skin beneath my ear. I gasp, and he tilts his hips against mine, making me arch. This no longer feels like *just making out*. It's the prelude to something bigger.

"We really shouldn't have sex," I hiss.

"I know," he agrees, kissing my throat.

"I'm not ready for that," I say, more for my benefit than his.

"Way too soon," he agrees.

But we're not stopping either. His hand sails up from my hip bone, his fingertips catching the bottom edge of my breast. He keeps kissing me, his

fingers teasing the curve but not going higher.

Then his hand skates to the top button of my shirt. When he slips it free, a shiver passes through me. “Always so buttoned up,” he murmurs softly, teasingly. His fingers drag down my chest, and I lift under them, a wave being pulled by his tide. He undoes the next button and touches the sensitive skin there, tracing the crease of my sternum.

When I can’t take it anymore, I twist under him until his hand is over me, his grip tightening, his thumb running over my nipple.

“Thank fuck,” he says.

I grind myself against him. He hastily undoes the next button, kisses the space between my breasts, his hand still tight on me.

We try to shift, him going in toward the back of the couch, me sliding out toward the front. I almost fall off. He catches me and yanks me back against him, both of us laughing, vaguely hysterical. “I’m out of practice,” he says huskily. “Making out on couches.”

I don’t think he means it as an invitation, but it would be so easy to turn it into one. We’re twelve feet from either of our bedrooms.

If we go anywhere near a bed, I’m going to sleep with him.

I want so badly to sleep with him.

I only want to *not* completely destroy my living situation, like, one percent more.

*What am I doing?* I think.

Then he hauls me up on top of him, my knees straddling his hips, his eyes dark and glimmering and all over me, and the only thing I’m thinking about now is him.

The throw pillows have wound up under his neck, his head pushed up at a weird angle. I shift forward over him to pull two out from under his head, and he takes hold of my hips and lifts himself enough to kiss the lowest part of my chest he can get to with only the top buttons undone. The sound that comes out of me is borderline inhuman, but it only encourages him. He sweeps his mouth over me and draws my breast into his mouth, the heat of his tongue moving against me through the fabric, leaving it damp and clinging to my skin as he shifts to my other side.

I lean into the pressure, pitching my weight forward into my hands on either side of him. His palms scrape down me, and we rock together in slow, heavy waves. He pulls the open center of my shirt to one side so half of my chest is bared. “God, Daphne,” he says, dragging the open neckline back the other way, lifting himself enough to catch bare skin in his mouth this time.

I cry out from want. His cool hands climb my feverish skin under my shirt, his touch almost painfully light as his tongue moves over me more urgently. His hands slide down to squeeze my waist and he draws back, cold air stinging my skin. “You’re so sexy,” he rasps. Heat flushes from my hairline down to my thighs.

It’s not a word I’ve gotten much. Cute, pretty, *sometimes* beautiful. Never sexy.

“You are too,” I’m barely able to make myself whisper.

His eyes look inky and drunk as he lifts me a little, moves his hand between us, his palm between my thighs. My eyes flutter closed as he presses into me. I push myself into his touch, lean over him, bite into his neck. I feel like someone else, someone who does this all the time. Like it’s no big deal to straddle my roommate and let him lick and bite me.

His abdomen lifts and sinks on a breath. “Daphne?” he murmurs against my ear.

“Mm?” It comes out high-pitched, quivery.

He hums against my throat, his hand still moving slowly, heavily. “I know we said no sex, but can I touch you?”

I nod, throat too tight to speak. He draws his hand back up my stomach, before dipping inside my pajama shorts. “So sexy,” he whispers again, kissing my throat as his hand moves down me, his fingertips curling up and inward. I gasp, shift myself into him. His other hand falls down to my ass, gripping me, guiding me into his touch.

“I love the sounds you make,” he rasps.

I’m dimly aware that in another life, this would be unbearably embarrassing. In this one, all I can do is rock into his motion, and keep letting him coax whatever desperate noise he wants out of me. I fumble

with his jeans, and he reaches down to help me, and a second later, my hand is around him, his on me, and he's moaning too, and it's quite possibly the sexiest sound I've ever heard.

Then his phone starts buzzing on the coffee table.

We both glance toward it. I wait to see if he wants to stop.

He kisses me hard. I bite his lip. We're crazed now, moving wildly.

The phone rings out. Only to start ringing again.

He sits up and pulls me snug against him, kissing me fiercely, the way we kissed in the parking lot except with so much more touching, groping, gasping, more *privacy*, more *skin*, more everything. Every piece of him feels so good, so inviting.

In the background, our movie keeps playing. Someone is being snarky and disbelieving while someone else is being cool and unbothered, and meanwhile we're trying to get as close to each other as possible.

A part of me wants to slow down, make this last, but that part has already lost the battle. I'm tipping over the edge. My hands climb up the back of Miles's shirt to feel his smooth skin, one of his hands still between my thighs, edging me closer until I'm crying out, sinking nails into his skin, losing myself, losing any sense of the room, of the world, of anything other than this feeling.

Than the smell of ginger and woodsmoke.

The skin and muscle beneath my hands. The cool air kissing my chest. The needful pressure crashing over me in waves. A rough palm slipping behind my neck, lips grazing mine, guiding me through to the far side of the wave.

It's like emerging from water, the way everything else comes back into focus, but he's still clearest. His lips on mine, our tongues slipping together, the rasp of his beard on my jaw. His pulse thrums everywhere we're touching, and he's still hard, and despite all the pleasant heaviness seeping through my limbs, it sends a thrill of hunger through me.

I take hold of him again. His dusky eyes lift, glinting in the dim light, and he wraps his hand around mine.

His phone starts ringing. Again.

“Shit,” he says, voice scratchy. “I’m so sorry. I’ll just—” He leans over to turn the phone off. The word *JULIA* flashes onscreen.

“Shit!” he says again, but this time it’s clearly a *different* kind of *shit*.

Not *Shit, let me throw my phone into the sea so we can get back to this*, but *Shit, I really should’ve answered my phone the first time*.

“I’m sorry,” he says, sliding me gently from his lap.

“It’s okay!” It comes out too loud. The sudden absence of his heat, his humming blood, his eagerly beating heart makes me feel like hallucinogenic fumes are being whisked out a window.

He grabs the phone. “It’s my sister.”

Another jarring push back to reality, from the lust haze.

I manage an awkward “Ah.”

“She wouldn’t call this many times unless it was important,” he says.

“Of course, yeah.” I wave him off, *barely* meeting his eyes. I wonder if my cheeks, jaw, and throat are red. They sting from the scrape of his facial hair.

He flashes an apologetic smile, pinches my chin a little.

Even this little gesture is intensely hot to me.

The phone is still buzzing in his hand. His eyes are on me.

I clear my throat. “Take it,” I get out, already buttoning myself back up.





I'VE SWITCHED OVER to live TV in an attempt not to eavesdrop, but the floorboards creak as Miles paces in his room, and the indistinct murmur of his voice is tinged with something akin to frustration—at least, Miles's chill version of that.

Then, something less indistinct: “No, no, I mean, obviously I want you to. It's just . . .”

A pause. “Shit, Julia,” he says. “Just ask me next time. Don't pretend you're asking me when it's already a done deal.”

After a beat, he opens the bedroom door. “Okay,” he's saying. “See you then.” Another second and then, “Love you too.”

He takes a deep breath, then emerges from the hall, looking exhausted.

“Everything okay?” I mute the TV: another show about a perfect couple house-hunting in a nondescript suburb with a four-trillion-dollar budget.

Miles tosses his phone into the chair and rubs both hands over his face. “My sister can be kind of impulsive.”

I sit up further, pull a throw pillow into my lap. “Is she okay?”

He comes to sit on the couch, leaving a foot between us. With a sigh, he says, “She's at the airport. In Traverse City.”

The airport closest to us.

“What?” I say. “Why?”

He drops his face into his hands, massaging it for a second before meeting my eyes. “It's . . .” He laugh-huffs. “I don't know. She says she's here to ‘help me take my mind off everything.’ ”

Well, that's a sharp reminder of the state of things.

His jaw and forehead tense. “But something else is going on. Julia’s spontaneous, but she’s not *fly across state lines with no warning* spontaneous.”

He groans and massages his eyes again. “Sorry. This isn’t your problem. I just . . . She’s already here. So if it’s okay with you, I’m gonna go pick her up and bring her home. We don’t have to let her stay all week. Or if you don’t want her here at all, I can find her a hotel. I would’ve asked how you felt about it, if I’d known—”

“Miles, hey.” I grab his arm to get his attention. “Of course she can stay here. Unless you want me to say no, so that you don’t have to be the bad guy. In which case, absolutely the fuck not.”

He smiles. “She’s going to give me shit for the beard.”

“Oh, the *mourning* beard?” I tease. “The moving-to-the-woods-and-never-loving-again beard? Why would she have a problem with that?”

“Will you pretend to like it?” he asks.

My heart squeezes as I nod. It’s nice, feeling like we’re coconspirators.

“Anything else?” I ask. “You want me to pretend your bong is mine? Need to move your nudie mags under my bed?”

His head tips back on a bright laugh. “No nudie mags,” he says, “and for your information, I don’t have a bong.”

“What kind of a pothead doesn’t have a bong?” I ask.

“The kind who mostly uses weed when he needs to deep-clean the apartment, de-pill the couch, or watch *Prehistoric Planet*.”

“Okay, so the kind I’ve absolutely never met,” I say.

He points both thumbs at himself. “This guy.”

“You’re just one of a kind, aren’t you,” I say.

I was trying to be jokey, playful, but his face softens and he catches my hands in his, running his thumbs up mine, a frisson of want bolting through me. “If she gets to be too much and you need me to kick her out,” he says, “just say the word.”

My throat feels desert-dry. “What should the word be?”

“Ryan Reynolds,” he suggests.

My laugh breaks up some of the growing tension. “That’s two words, and also comes up *way* too often in casual conversation.”

“Okay, just scream *enough* at the top of your lungs and I’ll use context clues to figure it out.”

I ask, “Why are you so worried about this?”

“Well, for one thing,” he says, “she’s twenty-three.”

“Are you calling me old,” I ask.

“I’m calling you thirty-three,” he says.

“Rude,” I say.

“She’s the best,” he promises. “But she’s very much a little sister. She’s going to make herself completely at home. If your toothbrush goes missing, you’re going to want to just assume the worst and buy a new one.”

“I can’t even begin to imagine what the *worst* is in this scenario.”

“Whatever it is,” he says, “it’s bad. Probably just don’t leave anything you’re really attached to in the bathroom.”

Our gazes hold for a second too long.

“So—” I begin, right as he says, “We probably shouldn’t—”

He laughs. My abdomen feels like one of those water wiggler toys, the glitter and liquid inside bubbling furiously to the top as it flips. I’m sure I’m blushing.

“After you,” I say.

He rubs the side of his head with the heel of his hand. “That was a bad idea, right?” He’s looking at me closely, like it wasn’t a rhetorical question.

“I mean, we’re both just coming off of horrible breakups.”

He has a point. I’m not exactly myself right now. I don’t normally do things like this.

But the Daphne I’ve always been, the practical and intentional one, hasn’t exactly set me up for success. For a few minutes, I’d just wanted to give fun, casual Daphne a turn at the wheel.

She didn’t even run things when I was twenty-one, ferrying Sadie to frat parties and pulling her into the bushes when cops showed up to bust them. I was never the one *just* having fun. I was the one anticipating consequences.

It's not that I want to revert to a twenty-one-year-old, but my whole life has collapsed, and I've been trying new things, and whatever just happened, it was new and fun.

Miles is still looking at me closely, like he's making a decision. I feel my courage building, the words rising. Right when I'm about to tell him I *don't* think it was a mistake, or even if it was, I might like a break from smart decisions, he sighs heavily and goes on: "We live together. If things got messy . . ."

The carbonated feeling in my chest turns leaden.

If things got messy, he'd need a new roommate, and I'd need a new apartment. As ready as I've been to flee the state, I'm here until the library gets through the Read-a-thon, and I can't screw things up before then.

"Honestly," he says, "I'm not usually the guy to think things through. But I really like you, and the last thing I want right now is to fuck up this friendship. Or hurt you."

What exquisite timing for my identity crisis: he wants to do the smart thing, and I want to have reckless sex with him.

"I really like you too," I tell him. At his faint smile, I clear my throat and add, "You're a good friend. I don't want to mess this up either."

That part, at least, is still true. I just wish we could "not mess this up" in bed together.

"So," he says, his small smile somewhere between apologetic and bemused, "friends?"

I clear my throat. "Of course."

He stands, brow lifting on a smile. "And you'll have my back with Julia, about the beard."

"That's what friends are for," I deadpan.

His bemused smile splits open. "Wanna come to the airport with me?"

"No, go have some time with your sister, and I'll pick up here." My gaze dips and snaps back to his eyes, my face flushing.

"What?" he says.

"Nothing, you're just still . . . unzipped."

“Oh, shit,” he says calmly, putting himself to rights without an ounce of shame. Unfortunately, I now find even *this* incredibly sexy. “Anything else I’m forgetting?” he asks, holding his arms out to his sides.

He looks like exactly what he is: a man I was recently straddling.

“All good,” I chirp.

He smiles, pokes my chin one last time, then turns to leave without another look back.



WHEN I WAS a kid, my mom was an amazing host.

I’m not sure how she did it while working full-time, but *somehow* the house was clean when it needed to be, the fridge and pantry stocked with the *good stuff*—name-brand sugary cereals and chips, off-brand cookies that were better than the originals. She’d order us greasy pizza for dinner, and in the morning serve fruit salad and scrambled eggs, one of her few specialties.

Before the first move, she, Dad, and I lived in a tiny two-bedroom, one-bath. Our boxy, outdated TV sometimes had random bars of color fuzzing across the picture until you smacked the side, but our furniture was all broken-in-to-perfection comfort, and the house smelled like basil and lemon, all the time.

When Dad moved out, we couldn’t afford that place, so we moved to a one-bedroom on the far side of town. It was on the fourth floor, with brown carpet and walls that seemed hollow. Its major selling point was its tiny balcony, overlooking a brown man-made pond and facing hundreds of other identical balconies.

Even so, all through elementary school, that tiny apartment was *the* sleepover spot among my friends.

Then I got to junior high, and Mom was promoted from a teller at a local branch to an actual banker at one an hour and twenty minutes away.

For the first couple months, she’d drive me back on weekends, or my friend Lauren’s mom would bring Lo out on a Friday night and we’d take

her home Sunday.

But the trips, the phone calls, the texts tapered off as she found her footing in her new class and I made friends with some of the girls on the yearbook committee in mine.

Then we moved to St. Louis in eighth grade, so Mom could help open a branch there. It went so well they sent her to do the same thing in eastern Pennsylvania a year later. Junior year, we moved twice more, first to North Carolina, then to a suburb outside Alexandria.

The apartments got nicer, walls thick enough that you couldn't hear the neighbors fighting (or passionately making up), ceilings that were smooth instead of popcorned, yards with trees and wooden fences where before we'd had gravel and chain link. Mom started working to get licensed to become a loan officer, and with the coursework on top of her job, the housework fell to me.

By then, we rarely had guests. Mom had no time for a social life, and I pretty much gave up making friends. I didn't see the point. None of those friendships lasted beyond the next move.

A year later, I left for college in Columbus, where I met Sadie.

My heart keens when I picture her.

Petite, whip-smart Sadie. We sat next to each other, in an elective class that was more a semester-long Jane Austen book club, on our very first day of college. The professor had us go around and introduce ourselves, say which Austen character we most related to and why. Ninety percent of our classmates said some variation of "I'm a total Lizzie." The one boy among us declared, very boldly, that he was a Darcy. A couple of girls picked Elinor Dashwood, or Jane Bennet.

It was probably too honest for a stupid get-to-know-you game, but when it was my turn I said, "Unfortunately, I'm probably Charlotte Lucas."

She was the most practical character I could think of, even if her practicality did lead her to marry Mr. Collins.

Beside me, Sadie erupted into laughter. "Don't feel too bad. I'm probably Lydia."

After class, she asked me if I wanted to go get coffee with her on her way to her next class. I genuinely couldn't imagine just walking up to someone and starting a conversation, let alone asking them off the bat to hang out.

I tried that once, after the eighth-grade relocation. I believe the girl's response was, "Ew. Why?"

Sadie befriended pretty much everyone she met, but that day, I felt like she chose me, in a way I'd never felt chosen.

She took me to my first frat party. I took her to Cellar Cinema, a tiny theater in the basement of a bookstore that Mom and I had gone to during our campus visit the year before. Sadie got us into bars, despite our lack of drinking-age IDs, and I dragged her to a backyard poetry reading where a guy I liked performed a truly horrific homage to Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* that quickly resolved my crush on him.

We always joked that Sadie *would* have thrived as a lady in Regency England, because she embroidered and knitted, had a ballerina's posture, and spoke both Spanish and French fluently. We joked *I* would thrive in an apocalypse, because I was kind of scrappy, already used to living on noodles, and could probably be pretty happy talking to no one for days on end, if I had enough books around.

For the next four years, I rarely had to make my own friends or score my own invitations. But whenever Sadie organized group hangs or threw Halloween parties, *my* job was to channel my mother and play host.

So the second Miles leaves to scoop Julia up from the airport, muscle memory takes over.

I wipe the kitchen down, sweep the crumbs into one corner, and vacuum them up. I bring a couple of candles out of my room and light them, opening the windows to let in fresh air. With a deep, preparatory breath, I open the hall closet, ignoring the right-hand side and its excess of thrifted lace tablecloths, votives, and the Dreaded Dress for my canceled wedding, and dig around for clean sheets and fresh towels, which I stack on the couch.

I vacuum under the cushions, scrub the bathroom sink, and load the handful of dishes into the washer.

It occurs to me then how little food we have on hand, so I grab my bag and keys and head out to wander the fluorescent-lit, mostly empty aisles of Tom's.

I can't buy much produce here without devastating Miles's farm-stand-loving heart, but I grab a few apples and some broccoli, a loaf of bread, a jar of peanut butter, and a couple other essentials.

On my way to check out, I also detour to grab four new toothbrushes. Just in case.

I still make it home before them and have just finished putting everything away when two very loud voices move down the hallway, and the door swings open.

I see Miles first.

"Hey," he says, stopping short, grinning like he's pleasantly surprised to see me here. Like he forgot we lived together. I'm not sure if this is a compliment or an insult.

His sister barrels into the kitchen right behind him. She's tall. As tall or possibly taller than him, and string-bean skinny with the same impish nose, perfect teeth, and dark hair, though hers is chopped into a little wavy French Girl bob, complete with baby bangs.

"Hi!" she says brightly, hurling—*actually* throwing—her duffel bag in the general direction of the living room. "You must be the roommate, Daphne."

"And you must be the sister, Julia," I say.

"What gave it away?" She hooks an arm around Miles's neck and shoves the side of her face against his. "We look *nothing* alike."

"Total stab in the dark," I agree.

She pulls away from him, scratching her jaw. "You need to scrape that roadkill off your face," she says, beelining toward the fridge. "I think I just got fleas."

She opens the door and looks over her shoulder at me, though not in time to catch Miles mouthing something along the lines of *Told you*. "Have



you seen my brother without a beard?" Julia asks me. "He's adorable. Like a fifteen percent less hot version of me."

"I don't know, I kind of like the beard," I say.

She narrows her gaze on me. Then she straightens, lips pursing sourly as she considers me, like I'm a particularly tricky poker opponent. But I'm not. I'm terrible at lying, except when that one unhinged demon possessed me to make up a whole-ass boyfriend.

Suddenly, Julia spins toward Miles, pointing a finger in his face. "You fucking told her to say that!" she shouts, victorious.

He swats her hand out of the way. "Jules, *inside* voice. Our crotchety neighbor is going to come yell at us."

"Admit it," she cries, swatting *his* hand.

She spins toward me, face alight, a more extreme version of Miles's lit-from-within, delighted-by-everything grin. "I'll give you twenty bucks if you tell me the truth, Daphne."

"Daphne," Miles warns, trying to get past her. Julia puts her arms out to her sides, stance wide, a defensive guard keeping us from passing the deceit between us.

"Daphne!" she shrieks through laughter as Miles tries to push past. "Tell me the truth!"

"I already did!" I cry, running past both of them to the far side of the counter. "I like the beard! It's grown on me!"

"*Daphne.*" Julia straightens up, hands on her hips. "We're supposed to be a *team* here."

"You just met," Miles says, rounding the counter to stand beside me. "We've been living together for over two months."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Julia says, turning to resume digging through the fridge. "Holy shit, you have food in here. Like, not leftovers, I mean."

"We do?" Miles says right as I say, "We do."

He glances at me. "Thanks."

Julia snatches a grapefruit sparkling water and faces us as she pops the tab. "So how long have you guys been together?"

I choke on air. "What."

“We’re not,” Miles says, clearly a little embarrassed.

Julia’s dark brows flick upward as she sips, then slams her can on the counter. If he’s a Labrador, she’s more of a clumsy pit bull, thwacking into corners and swinging her head into coffee tables without batting an eye, completely unselfconscious. I like her immediately.

Julia’s head tilts. “That’s not what Petra said.”

“You talked to Petra?” Miles says.

“Not in a Judas Iscariot way,” she blurts. “I chewed her ass out over text a few weeks ago, and I never heard back. Then last week, she messaged me out of the blue, to say she’s *happy for you*.”

“How thoughtful,” I grumble.

Julia’s gaze wanders back to me. “Is there any particular reason she thinks you guys are sleeping together?”

I wonder if I have hives visibly forming on my neck.

I also wonder if I have bruises where Miles bit me.

“That’s my fault,” I tell Julia. “Long story, but Peter—my ex—called me, and I accidentally just . . .”

Her brow rises as she waits for me to go on. It’s an exact Miles Nowak expression, but somehow it’s so much sharper on her.

“I straight-up lied,” I finish.

She stares at me for a second, then bursts into laughter, hinging over her hips and resting her whole face and arms on the counter as she shakes with giggles. When she finally peels her face off the granite, she says, “That’s fucking amazing.”

Miles smiles faintly. “That was my reaction too.”

Julia drums her hands on the counter for a second. “So. Should we get drunk?”

I laugh.

“Daphne works in the morning,” Miles says. “She hosts Story Hour at the library on Saturdays. Does all the voices.”

I don’t think he’s trying to embarrass me; I think he genuinely believes this is an interesting and maybe even *impressive* tidbit to share with his ultrahip, ultraconfident little sister.

“Oh, hell yeah, we should go see that,” she says.

“You really don’t need to do that,” I say. “Tomorrow’s book is *The Stinky Cheese Man*.”

“You can’t talk me out of it.” She angles herself back toward Miles. “What about you? You want to rage tonight? I’m sure you could afford to blow off some steam, judging by the . . .” She gestures toward his jaw.

He grabs the edge of the counter and lets his hips sink away from it, stretching his back with a groan. “Julia,” he says. “I’m thirty-six. If I get drunk, I pay for it.”

“Oh, bullshit,” I tease. “Last time, you were up on a breakfast sandwich run while I was still shaking with the sweats in bed.”

“Ha!” Julia cries. “Gotcha.”

“I can manage that every once in a while,” he allows, “but we’re supposed to go out Sunday night with our friend Ashleigh.”

I’m surprised he remembers. Then I look over his shoulder and realize he’s added it to the calendar, right next to the long arrow through the Sunday column.

“You’ll like her,” Miles tells his sister. Then his forehead wrinkles. “Or you’ll hate her. I’m actually not sure.”

“Time will tell,” Julia replies with a shrug and a slurp of seltzer. “Should we order pizza?”

He chances a glance at me, his voice a teasing scrape: “I’m sure Daphne would love that.”

A whisper shivers down my backbone: *I love the sounds you make.*

“Actually, let’s do something else,” I say.

I try to think of the least sexy food I can come up with. Most food, I realize, is at least a *little* sexy.

“Nachos?” I say.



SATURDAY, JUNE 22<sup>ND</sup>

## 56 DAYS UNTIL I CAN LEAVE

UNFORTUNATELY, JULIA WAS serious about Story Hour.

They're late, of course, but just barely. I smell sun-warmed grass and the spicy kick of woodsmoke, and when I look up, they're there.

Julia picks her way through the concentric rings of parents, babysitters, and kids, with Miles whispering apologies in her wake.

He's shaved his beard. No doubt thanks to Julia's badgering, which had peppered our conversation until late into the night when she accepted my fifty-eighth attempt to go to bed.

Some people grow beards to hide or accentuate certain features, the way I switched my hair-part at nineteen and, when I saw how it balanced my slightly crooked nose, never looked back.

The thing, it would seem, Miles has been hiding all along is that he's diabolically handsome, with angular cheekbones and a jaw that sort of looks like it might cut you if you were to run a hand over it. Or your tongue. You know, whatever.

Fairly cruel timing, for us to have just agreed not to cross the platonic-friends boundary.

His eyes catch mine, and his mouth quirks—*that* part of him is still soft, playful, even with this new look. It makes me feel like I swallowed a sword *inside* of a helium balloon.

Under the best circumstances, surprises are *not* my thing. But if I *were* going to unexpectedly see the man I hooked up with the night prior, I would

at least prefer it not happen (a) while I'm reading aloud and (b) on a day *he* looks better than ever and *I* decided to walk to work, during which a surprise drizzle frizzed my hair and raccooned my mascara.

I did my best to clean myself up after I clocked in, and of course it *immediately* stopped raining, but we'd stuck to an inside Story Hour, just in case, and I'm sure the buzzing overhead lighting isn't exactly giving me a heavenly glow.

When I finally reach The End, Julia jumps onto her feet, clapping with extreme enthusiasm. Everyone else breaks into the polite applause I'm used to. After a chorus of squeaky voices saying *thank you* at their parents' urging, the crowd disperses, and Julia bounds up to me.

"Miles wasn't kidding," she says. "You're *really* good at the voices."

I peek over her shoulder to where her brother has paused to "give directions" to a mom who I'm pretty sure was *born* here. A *young* mom—it seems he was right about the beard's effect on the older ladies, because *they're* not the ones eyeing him this time.

Julia follows my gaze and guffaws. "Oh, look, he made a new friend. How novel."

"Has he always been like this?" I ask.

"As long as I've been around, yes," she replies. "God knows where he got it from. Definitely not our asshole parents."

I'm jarred by the casual mention of their parents. It's like turning over a locked box, only to realize there was a crack in the bottom all along.

"Miles once bumped into the high school band teacher at the grocery store and left with an invitation to her wedding," she tells me. "He wasn't even *in* band."

An image of crisp stationery, elegant typeface slanting across it, blossoms in my mind.

Julia's face softens. "Shit, sorry. He told me about the invitation thing."

"It's fine," I say.

Julia cocks her head, curious. "Really? *Fine*?"

"No," I say. "But I'm trying to complain less."

She catches me glancing toward Miles and snorts. “If you’re trying to emulate my brother, I wish you the best of luck. No one can repress negative emotions like him. He’s had too much practice.”

He looks, as ever, like human sunshine, totally engaged, completely interested in this stranger, and it makes my chest pinch. “I’d assumed the sunny disposition came naturally.”

“I mean,” she says, “we had the same upbringing and *I* didn’t turn out Chronically Fine, so I guess in a way, it’s natural. When I was a kid, and he’d moved to the city, he used to come back and pick me up every Saturday for breakfast at McDonald’s. I’d spend the whole time trying to get under his skin, because I was the worst. But I could never get a rise out of him. He’s excellent at ignoring the bad stuff.”

“What about you?” I ask.

Julia chokes over a laugh. “Oh, I invite the bad stuff to try to fuck with me.”

Having finally extricated himself from Hot Mom, Miles joins us. “What did I miss?”

“Nothing,” Julia says innocently, right as I say, “Your sister wants to get into a knife fight.”

“I’ll call Gill,” Miles says. “We can get her a kitten at the same time.”

“Am I missing something?” Julia asks.

Ashleigh sidles up then too. “Just one of their adorable *best friend* jokes,” she tells Julia. “You must be the sister.”

“You must be the friend I’m either going to love or hate,” Julia says.

Ashleigh’s shoulders wiggle, half shiver. “Intriguing.”

“Should be fun either way,” Julia says. “So should we all head to Cherry Hill, throw tiny pretzels at Miles while he’s working?”

“We don’t *serve* pretzels,” Miles says, audibly offended.

“As amazing as that sounds,” I say, “I need to get some promotional stuff finished for the Read-a-thon.”

“And I was thinking I’d do meal prep tonight, so I can be worry-free tomorrow—” Ashleigh interrupts herself with a gasp, looking to Miles. “I just figured out where we should go. We should take them to Barn.”

“Barn?” I say. “As in . . . a building on a farm?”

“As in a bar, in a barn,” Miles says. “On a farm.”

“There is no place on this earth,” I say, “like Waning Bay.”

“Barn has goats,” Ashleigh offers, peeling away from us to help a couple of patrons check out before we close for the day. “You’ll love it.”

Julia’s phone pings and she checks it. “Weren’t you supposed to be at work by four forty-five?” she asks Miles.

“Shit!” He moves toward the doors, Julia still texting as she shuffles after him. He turns over his shoulder and calls, “Sunrise is before six. Be ready at five thirty.”

“Five,” I counter. “Are you coming, Julia?”

“At five in the morning?” she says sunnily. “I’d rather eat aluminum foil. But you two have a blast.”



I CREEP OUT of my bedroom at four fifty-eight a.m., tiptoe past Julia, snoring on the sofa, to the kitchen, sandals in hand. I flick on the light beneath the mounted microwave and drink a glass of water while I wait for Miles to emerge from his room.

Five o’clock comes and goes.

Then five oh five.

Five eleven.

I’m trying not to be unreasonably grumpy, but this is fuck-everything early, even for me, and if there’s one thing I truly hate, it’s waiting on people.

Several dozen unhappy memories cycle through me, a *worst-of* film reel, and I’m too tired to adequately bat them away.

So while I’m yawning so hard my jaw pops, I’m also back in Mom’s and my first apartment without Dad, waiting by the front window, looking up every time a junker sputters past.

Waiting on the snowy curb outside my elementary school, dragging my boot toes through blackened slush, telling myself that if I count to one

hundred, Dad will be here. And if not, then by the time I reach two hundred and fifty. Counting and waiting until my mom pulled up, stressed out and still in her work heels, apologizing through the open car window, on his behalf: *Sorry, sorry, something came up, I guess.*

Waiting at the mailbox for birthday cards to show up.

Waiting for a phone call on Christmas.

Waiting.

Waiting.

Waiting, for someone who rarely came, feeling worse every time, until finally, I realized that the feelings wouldn't stop until the waiting did.

You can't force a person to show up, but you can learn a lesson when they don't.

*Trust people's actions, not their words.*

*Don't love anyone who isn't ready to love you back.*

*Let go of the people who don't hold on to you.*

*Don't wait on anyone who's in no rush to get to you.*

I consider crawling back into bed and finishing a polish on the upcoming Read-a-thon publicity blast. Then the front door clanks open, a slice of light pouring from the hall.

"Hey," Miles whispers, lifting the thermoses in his hands. "You ready?"

"Been ready since five," I tell him.

He leans forward and peers around the cupboard to see the oven clock. "Shit." He passes me one of the thermoses. "I gave myself an extra fifteen minutes, and there was no line, but then I got caught up talking to the barista and . . . anyway, I'm sorry, Daphne."

I shake my head, the grumpiness clearing. Miles is doing me the favor here. "It's fine." I slip my feet into my sandals. "Let's go."

It's cooler outside than in our apartment, the nip in the air making my arms and legs tingle. I can feel my leg hair growing and wonder why I bothered shaving last night.

*Because you have a crush on your roommate, my inner dialogue provides helpfully, and you want him to look at and touch and probably even lick your legs.*



No, I argue with myself. *It's because I want to wear a skirt to work tomorrow.*

I'm not buying it, though: the last time I wore a skirt at work, Handsy Stanley told me I was going to give him a heart attack.

The hem reached midcalf.

Luckily, Ashleigh walked past the desk at that exact moment, and a three-month ban was issued.

I'm so tired I'd be willing to drink jet fuel mixed with espresso, but to my surprise, when I sip from the thermos Miles gave me, it's spicy, sweet, creamy perfection. "This is chai," I say.

He unlocks the door and climbs in. "I thought that's what you wanted."

I get in too. "No, it is, I just—thank you."

"No problem." He jams the key in the ignition, and the engine grumbles, but the car doesn't start. He tries twice more before it catches, and then we're cruising away from our silent street, the sleeping city black and blue as a bruise.

At the kayak rental place, there's one other couple there already—both blond but comically disproportionate in height—and judging by the bright, chipper, full-volume conversation she's maintaining with the sleepy-eyed man, they're on a first date. Which also might *somehow* be an actual vacation?

She keeps up a steady line of questions that he parries swiftly about each other's jobs (finance and theme park management, respectively) and each other's pets (three cats, two German shepherds) from the register to the transport van to the boat launch.

Without discussing it, Miles and I both hang back and let them launch their kayaks, pretending to busy ourselves with packing the provided dry bags and getting our life vests on until they're a ways out.

"Remember when you said that I like everyone?" he asks me as we drag the first of our kayaks into the water.

"Yes," I say.

"I don't like them." He tips his chin toward our vanmates' backs, shrinking as they rapidly pump their paddles back and forth.

I suppress a smile. “Do you *know* them?”

“After that seven-hour van ride, I know enough,” he says.

I chortle. “It took us six minutes to get here.”

“They’re my enemies.” He steadies the kayak and gestures for me to get in.

“So all I need to do to stay in your good graces is *not* snort twenty-five Adderall before six a.m. Good to know.”

“Or get three cats and name all of them The Goddess,” he adds.

“Really? That was actually my favorite thing about Keith.”

“My favorite thing was when Gladys had that coughing fit and couldn’t talk for like eleven seconds.”

“It’s fun when you’re sassy,” I tell him, climbing into the kayak and dropping into the wet, slippery seat.

“Enjoy it,” he says. “I don’t plan on getting up this early ever again. I hate to admit it, but Petra was right.”

I lean over the side of the kayak and splash him, his eyes snapping wide.

“What the fuck!”

“That’s your Petra tax,” I say. “Talk about her again, and I’ll call Gladys and Keith back here and make this a kayak caravan situation.”

“Fine, fine,” he agrees, walking back up the shore to pull his own kayak into the water. “But if you mention Peter, I’m tipping you over.”

“Who?” I say innocently.

The truth is, within five minutes of pushing away from the shore, Peter has made his way to the forefront of my mind, because my arms and shoulders are already burning from exertion, and Miles can only paddle about twice before he has to pause and wait for me to catch up.

The dark horizon has only just started to soften as light bleeds along the top of the water, and I already know this was a huge mistake.

We’d been planning to do a six-mile loop around a small island in the bay, where the more adventurous locals—people like Miles and Petra probably—like to camp.

Tucked back in the bay like this, there’s no real current or waves to contend with, not like there would be in the lake proper, but I’m still

woefully underprepared.

“You can go ahead,” I call across the water.

Miles laughs. “Why would I do that?”

“Because I’m pretty sure I’m actually moving backwards,” I say.

“It’s water,” he points out. “In every direction. There’s nowhere to be. Unless you’re serious about catching up with Keith and Gladys.”

“I have neither the intention, nor the emotional capacity, to do that,” I say.

“Then let’s chill,” he says. “There’s no rush.”

“Well, if that changes, feel free to ditch me.”

“Yes, Daphne, if something changes, and I need to escape a freshwater shark, I’ll paddle my little heart out and leave you for dead.”

“Are there really sharks in the lake?” I ask.

“I’m offended you’d even ask that,” he says.

“Someone’s got to defend Lake Michigan’s honor, I guess,” I say.

“Why not me?” he agrees.

We paddle slowly, parallel to one another, the gradually lifting sun painting everything in pinks and golds.

“I know it’s a cliché,” he says after a minute, “but being on the water always does feel like what I imagine church is for some people.”

“I get that,” I say. “Out here, you’re small and there’s no one else around, but you’re not lonely. It’s like you’re connected to everyone and everything.”

“Exactly,” he says. “And you remember to marvel. It’s so easy to forget how incredible this planet is.”

I throw a glance his way. “I think you’re pretty good at the daily marvel.”

“Sometimes,” he says, then, “You are too.”

I snort. “I’m more of a cranky pessimist and we both know it.”

“You moan every time you eat,” he says. “I don’t think you’re as pessimistic as you think.”

I flush, reroute the conversation neatly: “I think as a kid, the library was the thing that made me *marvel*. I never felt lonely there. I felt so connected

to everyone. Honestly, I think it also made me feel connected to my dad.”

There it is, a hideously embarrassing truth dropped right into the middle of a conversation. A fact I’ve never admitted aloud.

It might be an oversimplification, but it’s the truth: “He’s why I love libraries.”

“Big reader?” Miles guesses.

I laugh. “No. He just never planned his visits ahead or had any money, so he’d blow into town and take me there to check out some books, or do an activity or whatever. So when I was little, I really associated them with him. It felt like ‘our thing.’ ”

“Are you close?” he asks.

“Not at all,” I tell him. “He’s lived in California for a long time now, and his visits are unpredictable. Doesn’t come when he says he will, shows up when you’re not expecting him. But he was a really *fun* dad when I was a kid. And the library trips felt like this amazing gift, specifically from him to me, you know?”

Like he alone had the key to anything I wanted to read.

“My mom never had time to get over there, and I was kind of terrified of the school librarian, so once I got old enough, I’d just walk over to the local branch after class and Mom would pick me up when she got off work.”

He grins. “A good librarian makes *all* the difference.”

I angle myself toward him. “You joke, but it’s true.”

“I’m *not* joking,” he says. “If you’d been my librarian, I would’ve read a lot more.”

“Because I would’ve told you audiobooks count?” I say.

“For starters,” he says. “Also I would’ve wanted to impress you.”

My face tingles. “Julia’s great,” I say.

“She is,” he agrees. “She’s the best.”

“Have you always been close?” I ask.

“Pretty much,” he says. “I mean, I was, like, thirteen when she was born, so I was out of the house a lot, but when I was home, she followed me like a puppy. Like literally just crawled around after me.”

I grin, picturing it. A brown-eyed, dark-haired baby Julia scooting along after a scrawny brown-eyed teenage Miles.

"She was only five when I moved to the city," he says. "But I tried to make it back to see her as much as I could."

"She said you visited every Saturday, took her out."

I catch a subtle grimace. "Just needed to get her out of the house every once in a while."

There it is again, that crack in the box. Just as quickly, though, it's flipped over, its contents hidden.

We fall back into silent paddling. Sweat rises along my hairline, drips down the seam of my rib cage and the ridge between my shoulder blades. "You can talk about it, you know," I finally tell him.

"Talk about what?" he says.

"Anything," I say. "Whatever's bothering you. I'm actually a better listener than talker."

"You're a great talker," he says. "But nothing's bothering me. I'm fine. I just need to figure out what she's running away from."

"Did she say she's *running* from something?" I've only just met her, but it's hard to imagine Julia running from *anything*. "Even if she stumbled upon that black bear who was addicted to cocaine, I picture her fighting back and faring pretty well."

"She keeps insisting she's here to 'be there' for me," he says.

"Well," I say, "maybe she is."

He gives me a look. "She never tells me when things are bad, but she's not good at hiding it either." He looks away, out toward the island, and shakes it off. "I'll figure it out. It's fine."

When he looks back, he's grinning, seemingly unbothered, though this time I'm not totally convinced. "You still good, or you want to turn back?" he asks, clearly done with the topic of Julia.

So I let it go. "I'm good."

When the sun is high enough for the water to settle into its usual brilliant crystal green, Miles stops paddling and takes off his sweatshirt and shirt in one move, dropping them into his lap. I hold out for another twenty minutes

until I can no longer stand the way my tank top sticks to me, then relent and peel it away from my bathing suit.

“It’s pretty amazing,” Miles says.

I pull my shirt off and glance over at him as I slip my life vest back on. He’s gazing toward the forested island, the last morning remnants of mist clinging to it, his kayak bumping into mine.

“It is,” I say, feeling the need to whisper it, for some reason.

He looks. “Thanks for coming with me.”

“Thanks for inviting me,” I say.

He tucks his chin, a teasing curve to his lips. “Even though you hate it?”

“I don’t hate it,” I say.

He seems unconvinced.

“I actually think I like it,” I say. “I’m just not good at it, and it stresses me out feeling like I’m making someone wait on me.”

“Why?” he says.

I shrug. “I don’t know.”

“But I don’t mind,” he says.

“You say that,” I reply.

“I’m not training for the Olympics, Daphne,” he says. “Why would I give a shit?”

“When we used to try to hike together, I’d get out of breath and Peter would—” I realize my mistake too late.

Miles probably would’ve missed the slipup, if not for the way my sentence screeches to a halt.

The corner of his mouth quirks as he reaches toward my kayak.

I shake my head, but he doesn’t slow his progress.

“No!” I shriek as he knocks me to one side. “I didn’t say it!”

“You one-hundred-percent said it,” he argues.

“Different Peter!” I cry, laughing as we struggle against each other for a minute. “Different Peter!”

“Should’ve called him Pete, then,” Miles says.

He gives the kayak one more hard shove, tipping me over into the cold water. It sloshes over my face for just a second before my life vest pops me

above the surface. "Are you kidding me?" I shriek, swimming toward him, grabbing the side of his boat now.

"I didn't break the rule," he argues.

"You dumped me in the lake," I say, trying and failing to tip him in. "That's so much worse."

"Fine, fine," he says. "I'm getting in." But as he says it, he's grabbing his paddle, slicing it into the water, trying to get away.

I grab hold of one side and yank as hard as I can.

It takes a few seconds of struggle, but in the end, I manage it.

Miles crashes into the lake. He resurfaces, soaked and sputtering, and slicks his hair out of his face, eyes crinkled against the sun. "Didn't even check if I could swim or not," he tuts, pretending to be aghast.

"I would've saved you," I say.

"You?" he says. "I'm, like, forty pounds heavier than you."

"First of all," I say, "you're absolutely not. And second of all, I have a life vest. We would've been fine."

He swims toward me, loops an arm around my back, my stomach lifting into my chest at the feeling of his skin on mine, his weight pulling us downward as my heart buoys into the back of my throat. "Your physics are off, Daphne," he says against my ear as we start to sink.

I wriggle around to face him, pushing away before anything can keep me there. "I knew you could swim, Miles."

"How?" he asks.

"One, everything about you," I say. "Two, I've seen pictures."

"When you and Ashleigh were snooping?" he teases.

"Yes, when we were snooping," I admit.

He nods, treading water in front of me. "Thought so."

"Have you ever snooped?" I ask.

"No," he says.

I study him until he laughs, glances toward the island again, then meets my eyes. "Fine, a couple of times when you've left your door open, I've *peeked* in. But it's not like I'm digging through your drawers."

“Excuse me,” I say. “I did not *dig* through your drawers. Not that I would have needed to, since they were all open.”

“You looked in them.” He swims closer.

“I didn’t,” I say.

“In case you were wondering,” he says, “your drawers have never been open while your door was.”

“I wasn’t wondering,” I say.

“It’s been spotless,” he says. “Not a single hint as to who you are.”

“Pretty boring of me,” I say.

“Mysterious,” he counters. “Like a puzzle.”

“Or a highly organized silverware tray,” I say.

Under the water, our calves brush against one another. A thrum travels straight up my thigh into my abdomen. “The same way you dress.”

“Like a silverware tray?” I say.

He shakes his head. Another graze of our legs, a little higher this time. “Like a secret.”

A heady rush of tension. To defuse it, I say, “Like I’m hiding an extra set of arms.”

“Think I would’ve noticed that,” he says.

Our hands brush under the water. The second time, our fingers slip together, knuckles briefly sliding against each other before we pull away.

I backstroke away from him, turning my face up toward the sun. When my pulse has settled, I ask, “Should we paddle a little longer?”

“If you want to,” he says.

I stare across the glistening turquoise water toward the shore of the island. It’s not as far as I thought. It feels possible now, that we could make it.

“I want to,” I tell him.





"I LOVE IT," I say.

"Told you!" Ashleigh bustles past me toward the light-strewn patio of BARn, which I now know is stylized as BARn. My hair is still damp from my post-kayak shower, my shoulders hurt where the straps of my dress rub into my sunburn, and my arm muscles feel like Jell-O. Mixed with wet concrete.

Miles and I didn't even make it *to* the island, let alone *around* it, before I accepted I couldn't go any further.

That was also when I realized my biggest mistake of the day. I'd saved absolutely no energy for the paddle back to shore. We'd had to stop every few strokes so I could gather my strength, while Miles paddled back and forth in a wide zigzag.

It would be a while before I kayaked again, before sunrise or not.

So far, BARn is much more my speed.

Julia and Miles pile out of the backseat of Ashleigh's hatchback into the grassy field-cum-parking lot. "Oh my god, a taco truck," Julia says, hurrying to catch up with Ashleigh as she strides toward the patio.

To the right of the parked taco truck, there's a dance floor and a stage, a cover band blaring out "The Boys of Summer." To the right sits a big red barn, its doors propped open, people filing in and out with booze-filled Mason jars and beer bottles clutched in hand. There's also a partially covered bar jutting out from the side of the barn, every inch packed.

"I've loved boyfriends less than I love this place!" Julia calls back to us as Miles is shutting the car door.

"That's just our attachment issues," he tells me.

“Oh?” I look over at him. “You share them? That’s nice.”

“She once dumped a guy because he thought *Mamma Mia 2* was better than the original,” he tells me.

“Wow, a die-hard fan,” I say.

“She hasn’t seen either movie,” he says. “She just thought having such a staunch opinion about it was a red flag.”

The infamous low chortle sneaks out of me, and his smile is so affectionate I wish I could roll myself up in it like a blanket.

“Well, if nothing else,” I say, “she and Ashleigh-the-Phish-Hater should have something to bond over.”

“Yeah, they’ll probably ditch us by the end of the night,” he agrees.

Our eyes catch. My blood hums. My body warms with phantom sensations, memories from two nights ago.

He brushes his fingertips over my bright-red shoulder. “This hurt?” he murmurs.

“A little,” I admit. “But that’s what I get for trying to be the cool, laid-back girl who doesn’t need to slather every inch of her body in sunblock every half hour.”

We’ve stopped moving, just barely out of reach of BARn’s twinkling lights, Julia and Ashleigh lost somewhere ahead in the crowd. “She might be cool and laid-back right now,” he says, “but she’ll feel less fancy-free when she’s taking monthly trips to a dermatologist.”

“Nah, cool, laid-back girls never face consequences for their spontaneity. It’s how they’re able to keep being cool and laid-back. They’re genetically predisposed to health. They’re not allergic to poison ivy or shellfish, and they never get migraines, even if they only sleep for three hours in a cold tent, and they never burn in the sun.”

“Huh,” he says.

“What?” I ask, right as I spot Julia in line at the food truck, waving us over.

“I just realized I’m a cool, laid-back girl,” Miles says.

I start toward Julia and Ashleigh, toward the safety of a buffer, calling over my shoulder, “I could’ve told you that.”



THE FOUR OF us eat fried fish tacos on one of the wooden picnic tables set up in front of the food truck. We order bourbon and sweet tea from the outdoor bar, briefly poke our heads inside before deciding it's way too packed. We wander around the back of the barn to the goat enclosure, where one is rubbing its face against the fence while the others are tucked away in a covered area inaccessible to bar patrons. We scratch the lone goat's head for a while, then pump our hands generously with the provided sanitizer before making our way back to the snap-lock dance floor.

The band cranks out country covers of hits through the decades, and we dance until my hair has dried all the way through, then until it's sweaty again.

At one point, Miles goes to get fresh beers—and a cider for me—and comes back wearing a handful of glow-stick necklaces, a sloppy pink lipstick mark on his cheek.

"Of *course*," Julia shouts over the music, not interrupting her dancing whatsoever and not even close to winded.

Oh, to be twenty-three.

She jerks her head toward Miles. "Leaves for a beer, comes back with a hickey!"

I think she must mean *figuratively*, but that doesn't stop me from scanning his throat as he's passing out our drinks. When he's doled them all out, he drops one of the glow necklaces around Ashleigh's neck, then gives Julia one, which she adjusts to be smaller so she can wear it like a tiara. Then he puts the last two around my neck.

"Thank you," I shout. The band's just started in on a cover of "Crimson and Clover," and half the audience is drunkenly singing along around us.

"My pleasure," he says.

"I *see* that." I flick his cheek just below the kiss mark. I hope that sounded friendly and jokey like I intended, and not incandescent with jealousy.

“Part of a bachelorette party scavenger hunt or something,” he explains. “Can you get it for me?”

I brush my fingers over the condensation on the outside of his beer bottle, then smudge the mark out of his skin. “Can’t take you anywhere.”

He leans in so I can hear him. “If I had a beard,” he shouts, “this never would’ve happened.”

“You could be in the ghost-face mask from *Scream* and this would still happen,” I say.

He turns in to me, his mouth nearly touching my ear, the spicy ginger and bready tang of beer hitting the back of my nose. “Are you jealous?” he teases.

I push up onto tiptoes, bracing a hand against his shoulder, tipsy enough to play along but *not* drunk enough to be honest: “It’d just be nice to earn my own glow sticks once in a while.”

He touches my waist. Heat unfurls over me, skull to toes. Automatically, I lean into the touch, and his fingers curl around my hip as he ducks his head again. “The bachelorette party’s still by the bar. I’m happy to introduce you.”

“And miss this song? Not enough glow sticks in the world.” I turn in to him, and my heart thumps, quick and sharp, at the way his dark eyes dilate, the way the corner of his mouth tips up in a wry smile.

Looking at his mouth, I forget what we were just talking about. I swallow a thorny knot and touch the scratchy corner of his jaw. “Beard’s almost back.”

His hand circles my wrist lightly, an electric frisson leaping from him to me. “Petra hated it too,” he says, his voice a buzz, half heard through the music.

My stomach gives a decisive downward jolt. “I don’t hate it,” I say. “It’s grown on me.”

The corner of his mouth ticks higher and his thumb runs along the side of my wrist. “So I should keep it?”

I clear my throat. “That’s up to you.”

“And I’m asking you,” he parries, his smile slightly mischievous but his gaze dark and heavy enough to pinion me to the spot.

The moment feels like a held breath, or a soap bubble, something that can’t last, that has to break one way or another.

And then it does. The song ends, and Julia barrels back toward us, baby bangs stuck to her forehead and mascara ringed around her eyes. “Who’s up for a shot?” she asks, and Miles steps back from me.

“I’ll get them,” he volunteers, and breaks away through the tightly packed crowd, casting one last glance over his shoulder, a hazy look that makes me feel like a Christmas present he’s one sleep from unwrapping.



“ARE YOU AND Miles sleeping together?” Ashleigh asks at the bao bun food truck on our lunch break on Monday.

I’d just taken a sip of lemonade and reached out to accept my receipt from the cashier, and I barely manage to avert my face before spit-taking.

“Ashleigh!” I chide, pulling her away from the counter.

“What?” she says. “That guy’s, like, sixty. I don’t think we’re going to surprise him.” She adds thoughtfully, “Unless of course he’s *also* sleeping with Miles.”

“I’m not sleeping with Miles,” I tell her.

“Okay, fine. I must’ve misread the signals.” Her tone makes it clear she doesn’t believe it.

The cashier calls our respective receipt numbers, and we grab our food from the counter, then walk toward the picnic tables on the grassy knoll overlooking the public beach.

“One time,” I admit. “Something happened, once.”

A smile spreads across Ashleigh’s pink-painted lips. “I knew it. Tell me everything.”

“There’s nothing to tell,” I say.

“That bad?”

“No,” I say a little too emphatically. At her smug grin, I add, “I just mean, I’m not even sure how it happened.”

“Well, you’re still ahead of me, because I don’t even know *what* happened.”

“We just made out a little bit,” I say.

“In what context,” she says.

“At home,” I say. “We were watching a movie and, I don’t know, it just happened.”

“What were you watching?” she asks.

“Does it matter?” I say.

“It sets the scene,” she says. “Honestly, Daphne, have you *never* had a close friend before?”

The last conversation I had with Sadie drifts through my mind like acrid smoke. But strangely, I also feel a slight lift in my stomach at Ashleigh’s implication that that’s what we’re becoming: *close friends*. “Not in a while, no,” I tell her.

She grabs my elbow. “You know it’s not like my social well is overflowing these days either. I just meant, it’s supposed to be *fun* to rehash all this, not embarrassing. This is a judgment-free space. We’re twenty yards from the library, for god’s sake. Yesterday I had to ask a guy to stop leading wild pigeons inside with a breadcrumb trail.”

“Again?” I say.

“Not Larry,” she replies. “Different guy.”

“Well, I didn’t have to entice Miles with breadcrumbs,” I say.

“Always a good sign,” she says.

“We were watching a *Fast & Furious* movie,” I spit out.

“Which one,” she asks immediately.

“I really couldn’t tell you. One with Vin Diesel in it.”

“Would make anyone horny,” she says. “And, what, it was weird?”

“No. It was . . .” I tamp my voice down, lest the food truck operator decide to lean in. “Weirdly *good*.”

“What’s weird about that?” Ashleigh says. “Miles is hot.”

“It’s weird because I haven’t kissed anyone but Peter in, like, five years, and I didn’t think when I finally *did*, it would be my ex-fiancé’s new fiancée’s ex-boyfriend.”

“When you put it like that . . .”

“Anyway, we agreed it was a huge mistake,” I say.

“Really?” she says. “Why?”

I shrug. “I mean, for every conceivable reason. We live together. We’re both just getting out of long-term relationships.”

She rolls her eyes. “You don’t have to dive into anything serious. I finalized my divorce over a year ago, and I have yet to make it to a third date with anyone.”

“No, I know that,” I say. “It couldn’t even be serious, since . . .”

Her eyebrow sharply arches. “Since?”

I heave a sigh. I wasn’t going to tell anyone from the library about this until things were more definite, but Ashleigh’s my friend now. I owe it to her. “I’m looking for a new job.”

She stares at me, like she doesn’t understand. “You’re obsessed with your job. Sometimes I catch you just staring at spreadsheets like they’re winning lottery tickets.”

“Okay, that’s a bit of an exaggeration,” I say, “but yes, I love my job. It’s the town I’m less sold on. I mean, I like it *as a town*. But I only moved here for Peter. My mom’s on the east coast, and . . . I don’t know. I’m just not sure I can hack it here. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner.”

She shakes her head, sets her bao bun down. “Look, I get it. We’re adults. We have to do what’s best for ourselves. It *sucks* for me, but I get it.”

“Thanks, Ash. Really.”

She shrugs, picks her bao bun back up, and takes a huge bite. Mouth full, she says, “But if you’re not sticking around, and you don’t want anything serious, then I really don’t see what the issue with Miles is.”

“The issue is,” I begin, “*he* said it shouldn’t happen again.”

“Huh,” she says.

“Huh, what?” I say, instantly panicking a little.

“Nothing,” she assures me. “That just surprises me. Last night there was a vibe.”

“I think Miles could be alone in a room with a paper bag and there’d still be a vibe,” I say, though, honestly, I’m relieved someone else picked up on it too. That it wasn’t just wishful thinking.

I shake it off. Vibe or not, the bottom line remains unchanged. I’m not going to have a one-night stand with my roommate.

“Can I ask . . .” I trail off, trying to decide how to phrase it. “Is it too soon for me to ask what happened? Between you and Duke?”

“Well, since you just told me about your clandestine roommate hookup,” she says, taking a huge bite of bao bun, “I think we’ve officially graduated from *work* friends to *real* friends.”

My heart pinches at the thought. I wish I’d made more of an effort to get to know her sooner. Even before the breakup, it would’ve been nice to have a friend like Ashleigh.

“Duke was my high school boyfriend,” she says, then pauses to chew for a second. “We broke up when we went to college. Then we both ended up back here. Eventually, we ran into each other at the YMCA, then *met up* at his car in the parking lot, as I mentioned.”

“Got it.”

“So nine months later, Mulder is born,” she says. “And Duke was great during the pregnancy. We weren’t really *together*, but he was present. And afterward, I think we were just like . . . drunk on our perfect newborn baby, so when he told me he wanted to marry me, I was like, Hell yeah, let’s do it! We’re already a family, you know?”

“And for, like, five years, things were good. Then Mulder started kindergarten, and I went full-time at the library. Mulder started taking karate, and gymnastics, and Duke joined a rec hockey team, and . . .” She shrugs. “I don’t know. We still worked okay. But our whole relationship revolved around our kid. Even the other couples we hung out with all had kids Mulder’s age. That’s how we chose our friends. It’s how we chose what shows we watched. It was all we talked about. And once our son got busier, the relationship just . . . stopped feeling like enough for me.”



“So we tried doing date nights, and that helped. Just having dedicated time for the two of us. But something was still off. It felt like . . . like we’d reached our final form. Like, I’d ask him to take a cooking class, and he’d say, *We don’t like cooking*, or I’d be like, *What if we moved to Portugal*, and he’d be like, *We don’t have jobs in Portugal*.”

“I mean . . . I hesitate to say this, but those seem like reasonable responses.”

“Oh, totally,” she agrees. “But the conversation just ended there, every time. There wasn’t a *What if we visit Portugal in the summer*. There wasn’t even a *Why do you suddenly want to move to Portugal?*”

“Why did you?” I ask.

“I didn’t,” she says, like this should be obvious. “I just wanted to feel less . . . settled.”

I snort. “We should’ve traded lives.”

Ashleigh shakes her head. “There’s *steadiness* and *dependability*, and those are great. But settling? Just deciding you already know everything you like and dislike on the entire planet, everything you’re good at, every friend you’re going to make, and every food you’re ever going to eat? The guy wouldn’t even let me repaint our bedroom! I wanted to know new parts of him, and I wanted to find new parts of myself. So I asked him to go to couples’ counseling.”

“And it didn’t work?” I say.

She smiles, but somehow it’s the first flash of sadness I’ve seen on her. “For me it did. But he wouldn’t go. He was willing to be good to me, but he wasn’t willing to be any *better*. I stuck it out as long as I could. Then one day I woke up, and I couldn’t anymore. So I told him. And a part of me expected him to finally get it. To say he’d do therapy, *try*. But he didn’t.”

“Shit,” I say. “I’m so sorry, Ashleigh.”

She gives a blasé shrug. “Sometimes it’s terrible, but this was my choice. I think a lot of my friends thought I was a selfish idiot, giving up a pretty good thing just for the hope of a *really* good thing. But how can I teach my kid not to settle if I’m not willing to fight for the life I want? I tried so hard to love the one I had, and if Duke had tried too, I would’ve held on. But

he's just one of those guys who doesn't believe in sharing his 'business' with a stranger, so therapy's out.

"He didn't even want me talking to our friends about it all, so when we separated, it seemed like it was out of nowhere. Everyone took his side, and honestly, even the ones who *didn't* still stopped inviting me to things. It's *awkward* to have one single person in a room full of couples, I guess."

A weight sinks through me.

I think about my last conversation with Sadie: *You both matter to us so much*. It had hurt, to be lumped in with him. But what hurt worse was, I didn't believe it.

If we both meant so much to her and Cooper, wouldn't she have called me at some point in the last two and a half months? She didn't want me anymore, not on my own.

"God." Ashleigh shakes her head. "Maybe that's why I'm so starved for gossip. I *never* felt like I could tell anyone what was going on with us. Damn, I think I've had a breakthrough, Vincent."

"Not to mention, you know my whole last name now," I say.

"See?" She takes another bite. "Official friends."

TUESDAY, JUNE 25<sup>TH</sup>

## 53 DAYS UNTIL I CAN LEAVE

MILES IS ON his way out the door when I get home, a piece of toast clamped in his mouth and his keys, phone, and water bottle clutched in one hand.

“Running late?” I guess, holding the door open so he can slip out.

He nods, plucks the toast from between his lips. “Had to give Julia a ride. To a *date*.”

“She’s been here, like, three days,” I marvel.

“I know. Guess she met him at BARn.”

A few seconds tick by in which neither of us seems to have anything at all to say. It’s the first time we’ve been alone in the apartment together since Julia showed up.

I break first: “Anyway! I’ll let you go.”

“Right. See you later.” He turns to go but almost immediately does an about-face. “I forgot to mention, I can’t do this Sunday.”

“Oh.” I try not to look crestfallen. I try not to *be* crestfallen. It’s honestly probably for the best if we spend a little less time together. “No worries.”

“The thing is,” he begins.

“Miles, really, it’s fine,” I promise.

“No, I know, it’s just . . .” He pauses. “I’m committed to this thing Saturday night.”

I nod eagerly, like I’m not only personally invested in but also thrilled by his having plans.

“But I have two tickets,” he says. “So I was thinking maybe you’d want to go with me?”

“Oh,” I say.

I must take too long to go on, because a slight smile tugs at his mouth, his eyes sparking with humor. “There’s no pressure, Daphne,” he says. “If you don’t want to—”

“No,” I say. “It’s not that.”

It is *exactly* that.

“I just might have to get some work done,” I say.

The work being, *not* finding myself alone with Miles Nowak on a Saturday night and incapable of maintaining the *friendly* boundaries we’ve established.

“Sorry,” I force out. “Maybe next time.”

He nods. “Sure,” he says. “I’ll see you later.”

I nod too. “See you.”

He pops the toast back between his lips and disappears into the stairwell at the end of the hall.

I shut myself into the apartment and wait for the full-body regret to simmer down.

It’s for the best. I’m stuck here for *at least* fifty-three more days, and I’m not going to blow up my life *again* in that window.

I drop my bag and shuffle deeper into the apartment. Julia’s shoes are in the front hall, her clothes everywhere in the living room and bedding still wadded on the sofa. The bathroom counter is smeared with makeup, and she’s left two separate hair tools plugged in.

Minus the fire hazard, I don’t mind. As a kid, I was so jealous of my friends who had siblings. My best memories were all of movie nights with Mom or our long Saturday morning wanders through kitsch shops and record stores, but so much of my childhood was sitting in an otherwise empty apartment, longing for the kind of noise, clutter, permanence that comes from having a family, rather than just one overworked mother.

Julia might be a slob, but having her stuff everywhere makes the empty apartment feel a little less lonely.

I unplug her flat iron and clean up a bit, then take a shower and make some Easy Mac. While I eat, I email potential sponsors along with a few higher-profile authors we hosted back at the Richmond library to ask whether they could record videos to air as we meet our fundraising goals throughout the night. Then I check my phone calendar against the wall calendar. To my surprise, Miles has added his winery shifts in blue, and Julia (I presume) has added in scratchy red, across this Thursday: *COMMIT MURDER*.

Underneath it, I scribble as small as I can: *Call FBI about Julia*.

Then I get in bed and try to read, without any success. Then I try to watch an action movie and quickly realize it's not fun to watch that sort of thing alone, so I take to scrolling social media, seeing college friends' summer pregnancy announcements, a Richmond coworker's recent trip to Thailand to see family, and then, without any warning, there she is, on my screen.

Petra.

And sure, that's jarring enough. But it's not what makes me fling my phone across the room, pulse racing.

It's who posted the picture. It's who else is *in* it.

The tiny woman with her, arms wrapped around Petra, both of them beaming in front of decimated plates of chocolate waffles on an orange-checked tablecloth.

I only saw the image for a second, but it's seared into my mind.

How could it not be, when I *recognize* the tablecloth, the waffles, and even Petra's beaming friend?

I crawl across the bed, heart in my throat, and brace myself before flipping the phone face up again.

Cooper posted the picture. I don't need the geotag—*RICHMOND, VIRGINIA*—to know where the shot was taken. It's our brunch spot. The one he, Sadie, Peter, and I used to go to most Saturdays.

Peter and Petra are visiting them.

I can't breathe. My clothes feel too tight, my skin hot and itchy. I stumble to the window and my arms have gone too weak to open it on the

first try. When I finally do, there's no breeze to break the heat, anyway.

It's one thing to be replaced by an ex. It's another to feel like your whole life has been handed over to someone else.

I think I might be sick. I even go into the bathroom, just in case.

*This is your fault*, a voice whispers from the back of my mind. *You're the one who built everything around him.*

Moved to *his* hometown. Let Sadie's and my relationship get absorbed by the four of us, our weekly girls' nights becoming double dates, our weekend trips replaced with couples' vacations, our conversations unfolding in our group chat instead of on long phone calls. I'm the one who put all my eggs in the incredibly awkward basket of willfully befriending Scott and the rest of Peter's Waning Bay buddies instead of making my own—never mind how hard it is to make headway into a group who's mostly interested in rehashing shared memories. Moved into a house that belonged only to Peter.

Miles was right. I need to stop fixating on how much I've lost, and focus on building something new. I already knew my old life was over. Sitting here and simmering in it won't do me any good.

I close the toilet and sit atop the lid, pulling up my messages with Ashleigh. You said you had a hobby I could borrow? I type.

Every fourth Wednesday of the month. AKA tomorrow, she writes. You in?

What is it? I ask. All you said is it isn't "organized exercise."

Still true, she replies. Don't show up in raggedy sweats.

Is it DISorganized exercise? I ask.

That's certainly closer, she says.

Great, I say, and then I text Miles too. Maybe it's a mistake, maybe it's not *smart*, but being "smart" hasn't paid off well for me thus far.

I'm in for Saturday, I tell him.



THIS IS NOT how I pictured Ashleigh's monthly poker night.

For one thing, the man who answers the door to the bilevel five miles outside town isn't a stranger.

He's a seventy-something-year-old dead ringer for Morgan Freeman, as long as you ignore the full Red Wings-branded sweatsuit and matching slippers, which don't strike me as a particularly Freemanesque sartorial choice.

"About time you showed up!" he greets us and steps aside to let us into his home.

"Harvey!" I say, too stunned to move.

"Sorry we're late." Ashleigh tips her head toward me. "Daphne's fault, obviously."

Harvey snorts. "I know I've got a youthful glow, but I wasn't born yesterday. Come in, come in. Shoes off. Everyone's back in the breakfast nook."

I slip my loafers off next to Ashleigh's knee-high boots and we follow Harvey down a narrow, wood-paneled wall toward the sound of smooth jazz and the potent smell of cigar smoke. Every inch of the walls is devoted to at least three generations of family photos, ranging from recent shots of his granddaughters' soccer tournaments all the way back to time-faded wedding portraits of him and his late wife.

"So how long has this poker night been going on?" I ask.

"Literally since I was born," Ashleigh says, "but I wasn't allowed to join until I was eighteen."

"You've known each other that long?" I say, surprised. They're friendly at work, but I've never once gotten the sense that they actually *know* each other.

"Since she was two feet tall," Harvey tells me now.

"So eighth grade," I say, and he hacks out a laugh.

"Harvey has this whole thing about 'not showing favoritism' at work." Ashleigh makes finger quotes. "He even made the district manager do my job interview rather than just hiring me."

"Wouldn't you hate wondering whether you'd really deserved it or not?" he asks.

“Not really, no,” she says.

Harvey moves out of the hallway, so we can slide into the breakfast nook after him. “Look who decided to finally show up,” he says, “and she brought us a new fifth!”

“Trial basis only,” Ashleigh says. “We’ll see if she can hold her own. This is Daphne. Daphne, this is—”

“Lenore!” I say, shocked anew to spot tall, gangly Lenore from the asparagus stand, tucked back in the chair closest to the room’s bay window. And right beside her, the final participant in poker night, tiny and dark-haired: “Barb!”

They’re both wearing the same visors as when I met them. Both have matching cigars hanging out of their mouths. Lenore yanks hers out from between her lips as she stands to greet me. “What a nice surprise!”

Ashleigh looks between us. “You know each other?”

“We’ve met,” I say, right as Barb chimes in, “She’s our friend Miles’s new girl!”

*Small towns.*

“How do you know Miles?” Ashleigh asks.

Right as I say, “Oh, we’re just friends.”

Right as Harvey says, “Who the hell is Miles?” and sinks into one of the cane-backed dining chairs. It’s the first time I’ve ever heard Harvey swear. Still less shocking than the Red Wings slippers.

Lenore asks Ashleigh, “How do *you* two know each other?”

“Daphne works with us at the library,” Ashleigh replies.

“Who’s this Miles fellow?” Harvey says.

“Miles is my roommate,” I clarify, at which Lenore and Barb exchange a knowing look.

Ashleigh slings her huge purse onto the floor and drops into the chair beside Harvey, leaving me to take the one next to Barb. Harvey plucks a cigar from a small wooden box in the center of the laminate table, then slides the box toward us.

“No, thanks,” I say. Ashleigh pops one right out, reaching for the cigar cutter in the box’s lid. “So how do all of *you* know each other?” I ask.



Harvey starts to shuffle. "Oh, we all go way back."

"Grace Episcopal." Lenore nods like, *You understand*.

I don't.

"My mom was the priest there," Ashleigh explains. "My stepmom, technically, but my dad died when I was tiny, and my mom married Adara when I was six, so she was a parent to me for basically as long as I can remember."

A sadness flutters through the room. Harvey sets his hand atop Ashleigh's and gives it a squeeze. "She was a good woman."

"The best." Lenore exhales a perfect ring of smoke toward the open bay window. "Great poker player too."

Before I can ask—or decide if I should—Ashleigh says curtly, "Stomach cancer. Five and a half years ago."

I think of my own mother and feel like my chest might crumple. "I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

"It's hard." She cups a hand around her cigar as she lights it. "When we lost Adara, Mom really needed to be somewhere new, so she moved out to Sedona, where her sister lives. Mulder and I miss both of them a lot, but at least without Mom and Adara in the game undercutting me, I can finally take these geezers for all they're worth."

Lenore scoffs. "Good luck."

"She taught me everything she knew," Ashleigh says, hands up, cigar dangling from the corner of her mouth like a Hunter S. Thompson character. "I'm the heir apparent here."

"Would've been," Barb replies, "if you'd been the kind of kid who listens to a damn word your elders say."

They ooh. They aah. They trash-talk. They keep accusing each other of putting off the inevitable, until finally we play the first round.

I quickly fold, nothing but a pair of twos in my hand. Harvey celebrates his winning royal flush by shuffling into the kitchen and coming back with a bottle of nice scotch. He pours a little for each of us and Barb puts a new record on.

"Round two," Lenore says, rubbing her hands together.

By the end of the night, I've lost forty bucks, won eleven of it back, smoked my first cigar, and promised to go to Harvey's seventy-fifth birthday party, which isn't until October—three and a half months from now—but for which planning has already commenced.

"We're going to rent a party bus and go down to the casino!" Barb tells me, eyes sparkling from laughing, drinking, smoking, and soundly kicking our asses at the card table.

"Assuming I don't kick the bucket before then," Harvey says.

"Oh, no, we'll still rent the party bus," Lenore puts in. "It'll just be a funeral instead of a birthday."

"Going out in style," Harvey says.

"Should we make sure you're wearing your signature look?" I ask, gesturing toward his getup. As soon as I've said it, I feel that familiar *oh shit* dip in my stomach, unsure whether the joke crossed an invisible line.

But Harvey's coughing out a laugh along with a cloud of smoke. "You can come back," Harvey tells me; then to Ashleigh, pointedly, "Bring her back." Then, to me again: "Just don't expect special treatment at work."

I cross my heart.

At the front door, we all exchange hugs farewell, then Ashleigh and I slip on our shoes and step out into the quiet cul-de-sac. Most of the other houses are either totally dark or have one lone bulb glowing beside their front doors, but if Ashleigh's to be believed, poker night is just getting started.

"Share a cab?" she asks, swaying slightly on the spot as she summons one on her phone.

Neither of us is fit to drive. "First a hobby, then a cab," I say. "What's next?"

"A deadly secret," Ashleigh deadpans.

At least I think it's a joke.

"That was really fun," I say. "I haven't been to a party since . . ." I think for a moment. "My engagement party, I guess."

"You thought that was a party?" she says. "We really do need to get you out more."

I shrug. "I've always been kind of a tagalong, I guess. Only lately I haven't had anyone to tag along after."

"You're not a tagalong," she says. "You're a we-girl."

"Like a *wee lass*?" I ask.

"No, like, *We love that restaurant. We always vacation there. We don't really like scary movies.* A woman who's more comfortable being a part of a whole, who never goes anywhere without a partner."

"Shit," I say. "You're right."

"Of course I'm right," she says. "I'm wise."

The first *we* was my mom and me, then it was Sadie and me, then Peter. I've always cleaved to the people I love, tried to orient my orbit around them. Maybe, I realize, I've been trying to make myself un-leave-able. But it hasn't worked.

"I don't want to just be a part of *we*," I say. "I want to be an *I*."

"You're already an *I*. It's just about how much you embrace it."

"I guess," I say.

Ashleigh appraises me. "You held your own tonight."

"Yeah, well, I have a feeling they went easy on me," I say.

"Oh, they treated you like you were made of glass," she agrees, her head cocked and gaze appraising. "But you're not so delicate, Vincent."

"I'm not." It feels true, at least right now. I'm not so delicate. Lonely, hurt, angry, a little bit whiny? Sure.

But not delicate.

Maybe I could handle staying here, where my life fell apart. Maybe I could start over, making something my own this time.

The cab pulls up.

"Ashleigh?" I say.

"Hm?" she says.

"Thank you," I say. "Really."

She rolls her eyes. "We needed a fifth."

I shake my head. "Not just that. For being my friend. For still giving me a chance, after the last year."

Her ever-blunt features soften. “You know,” she says, “I needed one too.”

“I’m glad it could be me,” I tell her.

“Right back at you.” The cabdriver flashes his lights at us, and with our arms slung over each other’s shoulders, we wobble down the driveway to meet him.

For reasons I don’t completely understand, I feel like I could cry.



SATURDAY, JUNE 29<sup>TH</sup>  
49 DAYS UNTIL I CAN LEAVE

"WHY DON'T YOU just tell me?" I ask Miles as I follow him into the kitchen.

"Because," he says, opening the fridge, "you already agreed to go."

"And you're afraid I'll back out once I know what it is?" I ask.

He pulls the water pitcher out, fills his glass, and drinks the whole thing, while smirking at me.

"Come on, Miles," I say. "I hate surprises."

"Then you should've asked questions *before* you said you'd go with me," he says.

"Are we skydiving?" I ask.

He refills the pitcher at the sink. "I doubt it."

"Does what we're doing involve heavy manual labor?" I ask.

He puts the pitcher back in the fridge. "Go put on something nice, Daphne. We have to leave soon." He squeezes past me to leave the kitchen.

"Funeral?" I call after him.

He pauses and looks back at me. "Closer."

"Please tell me that's a joke," I say.

His smirk splits into a grin. "You can wear red, if that's what you're asking."

"A funeral for someone you *hate*?" I say.

He laughs and ducks away. "Be ready in half an hour," he says, somewhere out of view.

In my bedroom, I put on the only really nice dress I have, the same backless black one I wore to my engagement party *and* to Cherry Hill with Ashleigh that first night. She and Julia are out at a local jazz club tonight, so I message them in a group chat: do either of you know where Miles and I are going?

Julia writes, he still hasn't told you?

Ashleigh says, lmao yes I do.

I send a bunch of question marks.

Julia says, oh my god she just told me

What is it, I ask.

Ashleigh only replies with a winky face. Julia adds, take lots of pics PLEASE.



*SENIOR PROM, READS* the silver banner. It's strung between the two columns that frame the baby-pink beachside resort's front doors, a bouquet of black and silver balloons on either side of it.

Miles's truck rumbles to a stop in front of them.

"What," I say.

"Don't worry." Miles puts the car in park. "It's going to get a lot weirder."

A teenage valet comes sprinting out of the hotel, and Miles gets out of the truck to hand over his car keys. I follow suit and he meets me at the front door.

"It's the middle of the summer," I say.

"June twenty-ninth," he agrees.

"We're, like, thirty-five years old," I point out next.

"Yes, we are," Miles says.

"How are we at a senior prom?" I ask.

"How are any of us anywhere?" he teases. "Come on." He sets a hand against the small of my back, a tingle leaping up my vertebrae as I let the light touch guide me into the hotel's opulent lobby.

Glossy tiled floors topped with thick floral rugs and boldly clashing geometric wallpaper, velvet chairs arranged in seating areas on either side of us, and a mounted sign straight ahead: *Waning Bay Historical Society Senior Prom*.

The arrow beneath it points left.

I glance at Miles, who looks delighted by my utter bafflement. He grabs my hand and leads me down the carpeted hallway, music swelling as we reach the propped-open double doors at the end.

We step through and pass beneath an arch of silver balloons into a ballroom bedecked in shimmering streamers and balloons filled with glitter. White-clothed tables topped with plump bouquets of white roses ring a glossy dance floor, beyond which a row of back doors sit open onto a veranda limned in twinkling lights, couples already standing around the high-top tables out there, chatting with cocktails in hand.

That's when I finally notice the guests themselves, all extravagantly dressed, some nearby *extravagantly perfumed*, most with one obvious trait in common.

"Oh my god." I spin toward Miles and drop my voice. "What is this?"

"It's a senior prom," he says, grinning down at me.

*Senior*, here, has a different connotation entirely. We're probably one of three couples here who don't remember the day of the first lunar landing.

He scoops two champagne flutes off the silver tray of a passing cater-waiter.

"This will help with the shock," Miles says, lifting one of the champagne flutes up to my lips.

I just barely manage to swallow my mouthful of wine instead of spewing it. "Please," I say, "explain this to me like I'm new to the planet."

"You're newish to Waning Bay," he says, "so the effect's the same."

"What school is this for?" I ask.

"No school," he says. "It's a fundraiser the historical society does every year. Tons of business owners here. I thought it could be a good place for you to meet sponsors. For the Read-a-thon."

I'm so weirdly touched by this that my whole body feels about twenty degrees warmer than it did a second ago. Then again, that could be the wine I just chugged.

"That's sweet," I tell him, "but it doesn't explain why *you're* here. You already had these tickets."

"Well, first of all . . ." He leans in close, drops his voice to a whisper against my ear. "I love old people."

"I *have* noticed you tend to do well with the over-seventy set," I allow. "Then again, you're not so bad with the under-seventy set."

He rolls his eyes, but he's smiling. "I guess it's nice being around people who've made it through shit, you know?" He shrugs. "Like probably all their worst mistakes are behind them, and they know who they are now, and how to be who they want to be."

I feel my smile falling, my heart softening. There's something wistful in his voice. And I'm not used to wistful Miles.

"Plus," he says, brightening, "Lenore's on the board for the society, and she badgered me into 'doing my part' and buying a couple seats." He touches my back, tipping his chin toward the mahogany bar across the ballroom. "Here, let's get a real drink."

As we make our way over and join the back of the mercifully short line, something dawns on me: "You said 'first of all.' "

Miles's brow wrinkles. "What?"

"You said, first of all, you love"—I silently mouth *old people*, so no one in line will hear it—"but you didn't buy two tickets for this just because of . . ."

I trail off as it hits me.

Well, partly I trail off because it hits me.

Mostly, I trail off because at the exact same *time* that it occurs to me why Miles might have two tickets to this event, the second reason why happens to walk through the balloon arch.

Blond, willowy, looking spectacular in seafoam green with one hand delicately crooked in the arm of her equally spectacular tux-wearing date.



Miles and I look at each other, mirroring each other's shock and horror, an endless loop of *Oh, god, anything but this*.

"I assumed she wouldn't come," Miles spits out.

"Uh-huh" is all I can manage. My brain is busy planning escape routes. With Peter and Petra still standing just inside the doorway, our best bet would be to sprint out onto the veranda, pitch ourselves over the railing, and belly flop hard onto the sandy beach below.

"I'm the one who bought the tickets," Miles is saying. "So I just assumed she wouldn't come."

"What do we do?" I ask him.

"I mean," Miles says, "we could say hi? Or just ignore them? It's a big room."

Suddenly, the entire state of Michigan doesn't feel large enough for all four of us.

I glance back to the doors. Peter and Petra have moved off along the wall, serpentine through the tables toward a group of people in the back corner.

"Granny Comer's here," Miles grunts.

"Granny Comer?" I repeat, aghast.

"Petra's grandmother," he helpfully supplies.

"No, I gathered that. I just can't believe that's what they call her. Do they secretly *hate* her?"

"No, they love her," he says. "It's me they secretly hated."

"So they have just as bad taste as Petra, then," I bite out.

He smiles, but it's quick; there, then gone. "Do you want to run?"

Obviously I do.

But I'm also thinking about the picture of Peter and Petra with Sadie and Cooper, about all those sacred places in Richmond that don't belong to me anymore, about the house that wasn't ever really mine, and about Petra bringing Peter here, even knowing Miles already had tickets.

"Ma'am?" the bartender calls toward us.

We've made it to the front of the line; she's waiting for us to order. I lock eyes with Miles. "If you need to, we can run," he says. "But . . ." His

head tips, eyes glimmering beneath his dark lashes.

“But?” I say.

“We could also stay,” Miles replies. “Drink. Dance. Have fun.”

“In a room with our exes,” I point out. “Who think we’re dating.”

Miles’s smile hitches up. “See?” he says. “Doesn’t that sound fun?”

“Ma’am?” the bartender says, more loudly this time.

We shouldn’t have to leave. If *they’re* uncomfortable, they can go.

I turn back to her. “Two shots of whiskey, please.”



AS USUAL, MILES knows everyone.

From the time we realize there's a banquet table covered in desserts out on the veranda and start toward it, we can't make it further than two yards at a time without being waylaid by another white-haired or gray-bearded Miles Nowak superfan.

My stomach is just empty enough to let the whiskey shot do the socializing, which is for the best, because when Lance the Hobby Shop Owner answers Miles's questions about how business is going ("So-so—kids these days don't like *building* like they used to"), Miles neatly pivots with, "I bet the library kids would love it. Have you thought about donating some DIY kits to the Read-a-thon?"

To which, of course, Lance replies, "What's a Read-a-thon," and Miles very gently nudges me forward, angling himself toward me with a little reassuring nod.

Ordinarily, I'd rather shave my legs with a broken beer bottle than give an impromptu verbal pitch, but he's teed me up so nicely, and I'm already in a ballroom with my ex-fiancé, so what's the worst that could happen?

"It's a fundraiser," I tell him.

And when I'm done telling him about the fundraiser, I find myself talking about the kids, about the staff, about our desperate need for an updated stock of kid lit, and by the end of our conversation, Lance has not only pledged ten kite-building sets for prizes but also offered to host a miniature-painting class for us in the fall.

By the time we actually make it to the dessert table, I've also met: Miles's favorite cheesemonger, the owner of Cherry City Cherry Goods,

Molly of Molly's Popcorn Emporium fame, and the guy who runs the walk-up ice cream place, Frosty Dips. I've also had an exceptionally brief conversation with Barb and Lenore, right before a volunteer ran up requiring their assistance "breaking up some necking" in the indoor pool room.

In the last hour, the Read-a-thon has racked up: a free charcuterie board for its volunteers, one hundred gift bags of chocolate-covered cherries, an assortment of popcorn, and one large (tax-free) cash donation.

I, meanwhile, have accumulated a surplus of both awe and hunger. As Miles and I hover over the dessert table, loading a shared plate up with cookies and cake slices and individual cups of chocolate ganache, I say, still half-dazed, "I don't understand how you just did that."

He hands me a pink macaron, which I put directly into my mouth. "I didn't do anything," he says. "People care about what you're doing."

"Maybe," I say, mouth full. "But I've been trying to get ahold of someone from Frosty Dips for a while."

"Well, Dillard from Frosty Dips's *brother* runs the hardware store slash barbershop I go to," Miles says.

"I've been here long enough to just accept that sentence," I say. "I also emailed Popcorn Emporium back in March."

Miles frowns at that, adds a light golden macaron to the plate. "I know this sucks, but sometimes people need to put a face on something before they're willing to help. An email doesn't do that."

"Thank you for being the face," I say.

He turns toward me. "You made them care, not me."

"Well, I think my being the fake girlfriend of the mayor of Waning Bay didn't hurt. So thanks. Really."

He turns toward me, smiling through the twinkling lights, and taps a lime-green macaron in between my lips. "Anytime," he says.

I manage not to moan, but it still feels too intimate. The veranda is almost entirely abandoned, and darker than the ballroom, and despite the breeze, I feel flushed.

I clear my throat. "Should we go inside?"

“If you want,” he hums.

“Let’s do it,” I say, and start forward.

But in choosing whether to stay out here in the electric dark alone with him or go back into a crowded room, I forgot to calculate for one important variable.

The one we nearly run smack into as soon as we get inside.

Petra’s aquamarine eyes flare, for a millisecond, before her expression melts into a warm smile and a throaty femme fatale purr of “Oh my god, it’s so good to see you guys.”

To which I say nothing, largely because she’s already wrapped me in a hug that smells like sandalwood, a glossy curtain of blond completely obscuring my vision until she pulls away.

She goes for Miles next, doesn’t hurl herself at him like she did me, but instead draws up onto her tiptoes and squeezes him to her.

One of his arms comes up across her back, his other hand setting the dessert plate down on the table next to us.

He manages his own, even “You too” to her, and I wish for the floor to open up and swallow me whole or the booze to knock me out cold.

“You look beautiful,” Petra says, squeezing my forearm.

“Thanks,” I force out. “You too.”

“I *love* this dress,” she says. “It’s so different! Your usual style is so . . . buttoned up.”

Ouch.

Miles touches my back, his hand skimming over to my far hip, pulling me into his side. “Like a secret,” he says.

I look up at him, the gratitude in my upper abdomen giving way to an ache, a want.

“Or a *librarian*,” Peter adds tartly, and even though I’m *ninety percent* sure he didn’t mean this as a dig at *me*, the wind still leaves my sails at being reminded of the disparity between me and the woman *both* men present have loved.

Miles’s hand slides forward from my hip around my stomach, drawing me into him so that my back is pressed to his front. “Yeah, I’ve always had

a thing about that,” he says.

“About what?” Petra says.

“Hot librarians,” he says, looking down at me with a faint grin that hits my heart like the first shock of a defibrillator.

“What about you, Daphne?” Peter says.

I flinch, look back at him. I don’t know if they realize they’re doing it, but Peter and Petra have drawn closer too, like this is some competitive *Dirty Dancing* situation.

He’s got an arm hooked around her waist, and she’s set a hand proprietarily on his chest. “You been harboring a secret bartender fantasy?” Peter asks dryly.

And once again, I’m mostly sure he’s not trying to be a dick to *me*, but I’m also sure he *does* mean to be a dick to Miles.

Judging from Petra’s gaping mouth and tight brow, she thinks so too.

And then there’s Miles, who I *feel* tense behind me, even though he’s still smiling, one hand still gently rubbing over my hip bone like he’s not bothered at all.

I am. I’m bothered.

“No,” I say firmly, turning in to Miles. I loop my own arms around his waist, basically propping my boobs up on his chest, and gazing into his eyes as I say, “But the roommate thing is pretty hot.”

Miles’s pupils flare as he takes the cue, one hand cupping my jaw, and kisses me.

And I’ve kissed Miles in front of Peter before—a kiss that was a move in a *game*—but this feels different.

This one is the prize.

Slow, soft, familiar. A *relief* of a kiss, and over way, way too soon, though from the way Petra is gawking at us, you’d think we’d just performed a handstanding sixty-nine in front of God and everyone.

Miles knots his hand through mine, his knuckles tightening as he clears his throat. “Excuse us,” he says. “I’ve been waiting all week to dance with Daphne.”

He tugs me away from them, and I follow, brain foggy but heart racing as it all replays.

The light, upward brush of his lips, the pressure of his tongue, the way his hand rolled back and forth across my hip bone while his other tilted my jaw to the perfect angle.

We draw to a stop near the center of the dance floor, the twinkling lights seeming to shimmer and dance across his face as the mirror ball twirls over us. “You okay?” he asks.

“Yeah, good,” I say, voice small.

“Good,” he says, and folds his fingers through mine again, drawing me in, already slightly swaying along to Neil Young’s “Harvest Moon.” He sets his other hand against my back, every motion so slow, so considered, every second engraving itself into my memory.

“I’m sorry,” I say. His brow furrows. “For what Peter said.”

“Ah.” His shoulder twitches toward a shrug. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not,” I say.

“It’s nothing I didn’t hear from Petra’s family for the last three years,” he replies.

My hand involuntarily clenches into the fabric of his shirt, like that will do any good, protect him from anyone who doesn’t understand what kind of gift he is.

“I thought you said they were nice,” I say.

“No, they were.” Another shrug, a sidelong dart of his eyes before they drop. “Every once in a while, though, there were comments. ‘Must be nice not to have to grow up.’ Things like that.”

“Miles. That’s *not* nice.”

“She always thought I was reading too much into it,” he says. “But I think they were worried I couldn’t give Petra everything they want for her.”

“Then they’re not only mean, they’re also stupid.”

“They had a point,” he says. “I’ve never been good under pressure. I would’ve fucked it up eventually.”

“Based on *what*?” I demand.

His smile is rueful. “History.”

For several seconds, neither of us speaks. We just slowly sway and turn with the music. “Thank you, by the way,” he murmurs. “For what you said to Peter.”

It takes me a second to remember what I said, and then the lava starts coursing through my face. “Sorry about that.”

Miles laughs. “No, don’t be embarrassed.” He touches my cheek for a second, then feels my blush with the backs of his fingers. “It was amazing. I think Peter’s soul left his body for a second.”

The flirty, nervous buzz in my chest dies at the mention of Peter. I know I’ve been a willing participant in this whole game, but the closer I get to Miles, the harder it is to tell what’s real.

“Well, what’s embarrassing about copping to a roommate sex fantasy right after your ex’s hot fiancée calls you dowdy?”

“She did *not* call you dowdy,” Miles says. He twirls me, pulls me back in closer, our bodies fitting snugly together, every point of friction its own little sun, heat and gravity and heat and gravity.

“Defend her all you want, Miles—”

“I’m not defending her,” he says. “I know she didn’t say that, because there’s no way she thinks that. I mean, obviously, you’re . . .” His eyes cascade down me.

“It’s fine,” I promise. “I’m fine with how I look, except when I have to stand next to my ex’s superhot girlfriend and really underscore the trade-up.”

Miles stops moving abruptly. “Don’t say that.”

“It’s true,” I say. “Something better always comes along. That’s my curse.”

“Daphne.” He gives a low, scraping laugh, but his eyes stay serious. “You can’t see him right now, but Peter is literally standing in a gap at the edge of the dance floor, watching your every move, and in a second, I’m going to turn you ninety degrees and kiss you again, and when I stop, I want you to look to your left and see his face. Then you can tell me if he thinks his new life, without you, is *something better*.”



And as soon as he says the last word, he does it. Moves us in a half-turn, drops his nose along mine, and it's like we picked up where that last kiss left off, everything already more urgent, intense from the jump.

And I'm not wondering what Peter thinks of all this when Miles parts my lips with his tongue, his hand sliding firmly down to the curve of my ass. And when Miles's other hand winds itself into my hair, and my spine arches up into him of its own accord, I'm thinking only of the spicy scent of ginger, the taste of espresso macaron in his mouth, the feeling of his erection between us.

For a few seconds, I'm nothing but a body seeking more of his.

I only regain awareness when a couple of old ladies in beaded mother-of-the-bride-type sets start hooting and clapping for us at a nearby table.

Miles touches my chin with his thumb as he sweeps one last kiss over my mouth. He straightens up. "Look left," he says scratchily.

But I don't. Instead, I step back. Then I turn and run.



I PLAN TO dart into a bathroom and catch my breath, convince my brain to quit spinning. But I don't *pass* a bathroom, so instead I find myself bursting through the front doors so forcefully that the valet yelps in surprise.

"Sorry!" I stammer, moving toward the dark parking lot.

"Daphne!" Miles calls, jogging after me. "Daphne?"

I slow to a stop and try to seem and *be* as normal as possible. "I'm okay," I say, facing him. "Just got a little dizzy."

"Shit." He comes closer, touches my waist as he hunches to peer into my eyes. "You're probably dehydrated. Let's sit down and I'll get you some water."

I shake my head. "No, it's fine. I think I should just head home."

"I'll get the keys from the valet," he says.

"No," I insist. "I'll grab a cab."

He studies me with the wary concern of a veterinarian examining a dog who just scarfed down a full espresso chocolate cake. "If you're leaving, I am too."

Oh, right.

Because while *my* brain was claustrophobically swirling with Miles, *he* hasn't forgotten that the love of his life is in there with another man.

"So you'll wait here?" He ducks his head again. "You won't run if I go get the keys?"

I shake my head. He lets go of my elbow and jogs back across the lot. By the time he gets back, I'm a little calmer.

He opens my door for me first, then goes to get in the driver's seat, starting the engine. "When did it start?"

“When did *what* start?” I say.

Creases rise from the insides of his brows. “The dizziness.”

It takes a second to remember what he’s talking about. “Oh. Just while we were dancing. I already feel a lot better.”

He studies me for a long moment, then nods and backs out of the parking space. We drive in silence for several minutes, winding down the curve of the peninsula toward town, and I keep my eyes fixed out the window on the moon, watching it sparkle and vanish behind the tree line before popping back into view.

The truck slows, drifting toward the dirt shoulder, and I face the windshield, expecting to find a deer blocking our way, but the road is empty, still.

Miles puts the truck into park. “Will you tell me what’s going on, Daphne?” he asks in a gravel.

“Nothing,” I say.

“It’s not nothing,” he says. “Did something happen? With Peter?”

“No,” I insist.

“You can tell me,” he says.

But I can’t. That claustrophobic feeling is back, embarrassment and want mixed together. I push open the truck door and stumble into the dark.

Miles climbs out too. “Where are you *going*?”

“I just need some air.” It’s the simplest version of the truth.

He rounds the hood of the car to stand in front of me. “Did I do something?”

“No.” I’ve never been a good liar.

“Daphne,” he says gently. “Please just tell me what I did.”

And despite every intention of keeping all these feelings a secret until the end of the summer, I blurt, “You *kissed* me.”

His brow shoots up. “I thought that was what you wanted. I thought that’s what we were doing.”

“No, I know.” I step back, my spine meeting the side of the bench seat. “We were. I just—it’s different now.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t want to play that game anymore,” I say. “I don’t want you to say things you don’t mean and do things you don’t want to do. It’s confusing.”

“Who says I did anything I don’t want to do?” he asks.

“*You* did,” I fire back. “You’re the one who told me you don’t want anything to happen between us—”

“I never said that,” he argues, stepping closer.

“—and I don’t want to be a prop to make your ex jealous, and I know I started it—”

“You’re not a *prop*,” he says, looking hurt.

“That’s exactly what I just was,” I counter. “You only want to kiss me when they’re there to see it. And I know *I* started it, but things are different now.”

Miles’s gaze drops on a hoarse laugh, a shake of his head. He steps in closer, our hips brushing.

Then he looks back up, takes my face in both hands, and kisses me again.

Rough, deep, messy, breathless.

With no one to see it.

Nothing to stop us.

His hips pin mine back to the side of the passenger seat. His hands move around to my back, spreading out over my bare spine, our chests pressing together, his heat cutting through the cold night. “I want to kiss you,” he murmurs, drawing back a mere inch, “every time you take a sip of something and make that sound.”

I pull him back to me, *that sound* slipping from my mouth into his. My hands climb into his hair. His scrape down over my sides, his thigh pushing in between mine. “I want to kiss you every time I walk past your bedroom and hear your laugh through the door,” he says, and his hands steal beneath the hem of my dress, all the way up to cradle my hips, my skin prickling like every cell wants to be a little bit closer to him.

I untuck his shirt from his waistband. My hands skim up over his back, greedily touching every warm curve I can get to.

“I want to kiss you every time I hear the shower turn on and know that you’re in there,” he rasps.

I touch his stomach, his chest, the muscles tightening as my fingertips brush over them, and he takes hold of my hips, lifting me up into the truck.

“I want to kiss you all the time, Daphne,” he says. “Sometimes it’s just easier to find an excuse.”

I pull him closer by the belt loops, his hands grazing over my thighs as he pushes in between them. The curves of our bodies melt together. His parted lips run along my neckline. I scoot deeper into the truck, drawing him in after me, then climbing across his lap.

His hands trace down my sides, his eyes dark. “Daphne,” he says, a throaty rumble.

I reach back and undo the clasp at my neck, let the front of my dress fall to my waist.

He groans, lightly cupping my breasts, lowering his mouth to lick me, then take me between his lips.

I gasp, grip the back of his neck, my body arching into his.

“What are we doing?” he murmurs against my skin.

“What do you want to do?” I ask.

A slow, testing thrust of his hips, the friction dividing my thoughts into fractals.

His mouth drags back up my throat, his breath hot. “I want,” he says raggedly, “to undress you. And taste you. I want to hear you come again, and feel it too.”

The fractals become fireworks, a kaleidoscope of sensations and needs.

Miles’s silky dark hair between my fingers.

His rough hands up under my dress, finding the lace of my underwear.

The pressure of his warm mouth on my chest, and the cool air kissing every other inch of exposed skin as the need and pleasure build together.

“Miles,” I gasp, moving myself against him.

His eyes slant up, his mouth still on me, his eyes nearly black. It’s an unbearably sexy image. “Tell me to stop,” he says.

“I don’t want you to stop,” I pant out. “I want to undress you. I want to taste you. I want to feel you come.”

“Fuck, Daphne.” He presses his forehead against my shoulder, his heart slamming into me, his hands braced lightly against my ribs, holding himself back from me. His low groan turns into a pained laugh.

He straightens up, redoes the clasp behind my neck, and lets his hands slide down to my thighs. “I’m not good at this,” he says roughly.

“Good at *what*?” I ask.

“When things get complicated,” he scratches out, “I panic and shut down, and I don’t want to do that right now. I can’t.”

My stomach sinks. “It doesn’t have to be complicated.”

“It already *is*,” he says.

“Because of Petra?” I ask.

“No,” he says, tenderly tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “Not just that.”

I slide out of his lap, blushing furiously.

“Hey.” He reaches out, takes my hand.

“It’s okay,” I say quietly. “You don’t owe me any kind of explanation.”

“Daphne,” he says, his voice heartbreakingly soft.

I look up and meet his eyes, all dark now, without any kind of glimmer.

“There’s a lot of shit I don’t like to talk about.” His voice splinters. “The thing is, I have a bad habit of letting down the people I care about. I don’t always think things through, and my feelings aren’t something I can trust.”

“What is there to trust?” I shake my head. “You feel however you feel.”

He looks down at our hands, folds his fingers into mine. After several seconds, he clears his throat, but his face stays torqued, his eyes hyperfocused on our hands.

“Growing up . . .” He hesitates for a long moment, visibly weighing his next words. “Our feelings—mine, Julia’s, my dad’s—those didn’t matter much.”

His jaw muscles flex as he swallows. His pulse speeds against my palm. “All that mattered was how it affected our mom,” he says. “If we made her look good, then she loved us. And if we didn’t, then we were ‘out to get

her.’ Once I had a stomach bug, and she was so *mad* at me for throwing up in the night. Said I was faking to get out of school, and if I kept pretending, I’d be grounded for a month, so I just went to class the next day, and every time I went to the bathroom, I threw up as quietly as I could. So the school wouldn’t make her come get me. Whenever I did anything that she thought made her look bad, it turned into this huge thing about how I must hate her, to try to hurt her like that. If I was upset, or anxious, or hungry, or even *sick*, she acted like it was something I was *doing* to her, and I believed it.”

“Holy shit, Miles.” I pull his hand into my lap, cup it between both of mine.

He drags his eyes up to mine. “It’s okay.”

“It’s *not*,” I say.

“That’s the thing, though,” he scratches out. “I need it to be okay. Because I need to be okay. As a kid, I just felt so fucking scared and powerless, all the time, and now I just *need* to be okay.” He shakes his head. “I honestly think that’s partly why Petra and I worked together. I’ve never met someone who was so . . . ‘in the moment,’ and that’s where I have to be, because if I think too much about the past or the future, I come apart. So I mostly just keep all of that stuff where I don’t have to think about it.”

I drop my eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m not trying to pry.”

His eyes come back to mine, his voice a scrape. “You’re not,” he says. “I want you to know. I just . . .”

“What?”

He looks over my shoulder. “I don’t want you to look at me like I’m broken.”

“Miles.” I touch the sides of his neck and pull his gaze back to mine. “You’re *not* broken. You’re okay. But what happened to you isn’t. It’s fucked up.”

“It’s over,” he says quietly, his hands ringing my wrists.

“That doesn’t mean you can’t still have feelings about it,” I tell him.

The corners of his lips flutter, for just a second. “That’s the problem, though. Whenever any of us had a negative emotion, it only made things worse. She turned it around on us, and we’d end up apologizing for being

hurt or angry or sad, and I never knew what was right or normal. I mean, everyone who met my mom loved her. Teachers, the other parents, my friends.

“If she wants to, she can make you feel like the center of the universe, like her *favorite*. I used to love having friends over, because she’d turn into this different person. This funny, warm mom who loved me.

“All I wanted was for *that* version of her to stay. So I stopped showing it when I was upset, just went along with whatever she said and did. And eventually, I just sort of . . . stopped getting upset. Stopped feeling the bad stuff. And things got better. For me, anyway.”

He looks down, his eyes dark and glossed.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, running my thumb over the hinge of his jaw. “I get why you didn’t want to talk about it.”

“It’s not just that. I mean, I do hate dwelling on this shit, but . . .” His Adam’s apple bobs. “I let her really fucking hurt Julia. And when Julia’s around, it’s hard not to hate myself. All those feelings, they just come back. And my mind starts to feel so loud, and dark. I just want to escape.”

A dagger spears through my heart. I wrap my arms around him and burrow my face into his chest. I don’t want to make him keep talking, but he is, like he’s been uncorked and now it’s all coming out.

I picture it spiraling down a drain, hope that’s what this confession is doing for him, rather than scraping at an old wound.

“She was way worse with Julia than she ever was with me. She’d compare Jules to our cousins, tell her who was prettier and smarter, or better behaved. She’d compare Jules to *herself* at that age, shit that probably wasn’t true.” His voice wavers. “She’d scream at her for the dumbest shit, as long as I can remember. And I let it all happen.”

I rear back. “What were you supposed to do?”

“Stop her,” he says immediately, like he’s thought this through, knows with certainty the right answer. “Stand up for Julia instead of shutting down. Not run away to the city the second I turned eighteen, and come back once a week like it made any fucking difference.”

“It *did* make a difference,” I say, “or she wouldn’t be here right now.”



“Maybe.” When he looks up at me, his eyes are stark, tired. “But I don’t even know *why* she’s here, because she won’t tell me. No matter how hard I try, I *always* make the wrong decision. I fuck it up and people get hurt.”

“Miles.” I grab his shoulders, turn his upper body toward me, and scoot in close, nearly into his lap. “She got out.”

“On her own.” He shakes his head. “She saw through the shit way before I did. Chose an out-of-state college, and when our mom tried to tell her she couldn’t go, she went anyway. Applied for her own loans, had me cosign, moved to Wisconsin. Mom stopped talking to her to punish her, which completely backfired, so then she did *her* version of an apology. *Sorry I wasn’t perfect, but you’ll understand when you’re a mother someday. You can’t do everything right, and your kids will hate you for it.*”

“God,” I say. “I’m so sorry. Is that when you stopped talking to her?”

He laughs coarsely. “No. I wanted everything to be okay so badly. So I tried to broker peace. Just one more bad decision. My mom kept trying to pit me against Julia, and it didn’t matter how many times I tried to set a boundary, she wouldn’t stop. Wouldn’t take any blame. Won’t say she’s sorry, or admit she did anything wrong, so eventually I had to cut her off too.”

“And your dad’s just *okay* with this?” I say.

“Not okay,” Miles says. “Just avoidant as fuck. Travels a lot for work.”

“So he left you guys to deal with all that on your own,” I say, “and you think *you’re* the bad guy for finding a way to survive. For ‘only’ going home once a week, to spirit Julia away to a McDonald’s?”

His brows draw together. “How’d you know it was McDonald’s?”

“Because she told me, Miles,” I say. “She told me you rescued her, and took her to a filthy play-place and let her be an obnoxious kid and were completely unflappable no matter how terrible she was.”

“I’m not unflappable.” His voice takes on a damp gravel. “Honestly, it’s hard to even look at her sometimes, because it makes me think about everything I should’ve done differently, all the shit I try not to think about, and I just start feeling like I’m about to self-destruct.”

“You weren’t the adult,” I say.

"I was what she had," he argues.

"And you did what you could," I tell him.

"That's the thing, though." He shakes his head. "I don't know if I did. I don't trust my perception of things. That's what my childhood did to me. Made my brain into a fucking fun house where I might *think* I'm standing on the floor, but really I'm stuck to a wall. I never know if I'm feeling the right thing, and I'm tired of fucking things up for the people I care about."

"I don't think there's a right way to feel," I say. "And you can't control it, anyway. Feelings are like weather. They just happen, and then they pass."

He rubs his face again. "I'm sorry. This is why I don't talk about it."

"Don't apologize." I wrap my arms around his waist, and his eyes lift back to mine. "I'm your friend. I want to know all this. I *want* to be there for you."

I knew it was true, but when I say it, some crank inside my abdomen is slowly turning, pulling my heart tight against my chest. That's what Miles needs right now. A friend.

And now I understand what he meant, how risky this really is, not just for me but for him too.

This isn't just a fun distraction or a rebound anymore. He matters to me, and if this thing between us blows up, there'll be nowhere for either of us to run right now.

"You should talk to your sister about all of this," I tell him. "Because I know you think you failed her, but from the outside, what I see is, something's going on with your sister, and she got on a plane straight to you. Didn't even ask first, because she knew you'd make space. *You're* where she ran when she needed to feel safe."

"Maybe she just didn't have anywhere else to go," he murmurs.

"Maybe," I allow. "But neither did I, and you took care of me too. That's who you are. If I had to be marooned, I'm glad it was with you."

"Me too," he says quietly, then after a second, "I don't want to fuck this up. Things are already a mess right now, for both of us."

"I don't want to mess it up either," I promise. This time, I mean it. Not just because now I know him so much better, care so much more about this

friendship. But also because I can admit what I couldn't before: I like Miles Nowak enough that he could really hurt me.

"So," he says, unsticking a strand of my hair from my eyebrow and tucking it behind my ear. "That was *my* complaint. What have you got?"

Despite the ache in it, my heart flutters at this piece of evidence that he knows me, that I matter to him like he does to me. "Are we playing Whiny Babies now?" I ask.

He nods. "Any grievances to air?"

"Well." I think for a beat. "I'm not a huge fan of global warming."

The corners of his eyes crinkle, my heart leaping in response. "I hear the Great Barrier Reef is in trouble," he says.

"The wealth gap is ridiculous," I return.

"And insurance is way too fucking expensive," he adds.

"Not to mention, all day long, my sock kept getting caught under my heel," I say.

He laughs a little, touches my chin. The moment feels like the meniscus of a glass, like any second it might spill over. "I guess we should go home."

I nod. His hand falls away. "Thank you," he says.

"For what?" I ask.

"Just, thank you."

THURSDAY, JULY 4<sup>TH</sup>44 DAYS UNTIL I COULD LEAVE (IF I STILL  
WANT TO)

MAYBE THINGS ARE complicated, but they're also good.

Julia decides to stick around a bit longer, and the apartment is never empty, rarely quiet. Miles drops off chai for me at the library on his way into work. Ashleigh tells me about school drop-off drama over smoothies at a juice bar. One night, she, Julia, and I hit up Cherry Hill and watch Miles dazzle his customers at the bar's far end. Every time he looks over, it's like the sun peeking out from behind a cloud, and I do my best to feel content, to be just another person at the edge of his glow.

On Thursday, he, Julia, and I go to Traverse City for the Fourth of July parade, then sit in a row on grass so cool it feels damp, to watch the fireworks pop and sparkle out over the bay. It's the kind of perfect summer night I can't remember having since I was a kid, not even this time last year, when Peter and I went to his parents' annual barbecue.

Because there, in their gorgeous, lightning bug-filled garden, with all of their longtime friends tipsy and flushed and happy in rattan patio chairs, a part of me had still ached.

Could feel that I was standing outside of things, waiting for the moment I would finally become a part of it.

Here, tonight, though, I'm in the center of everything. This moment, though fleeting, belongs to me too.

On Sunday, we go back to Traverse City with Ashleigh, for the end of the Cherry Festival. We wander the aisles of pop-up tents and food trucks, gorging ourselves on tarts and hand pies late into the night, and every time the Daphne Moan sneaks out, Miles's eyes and mine seek each other out, the quirk of his mouth my own personal lightning rod.

And then I look away, because this is good. We are friends.

When we can't stomach another bite, Julia demolishes us in a basketball carnival game, then talks us into riding the Spinning Cherries, from which we depart violently nauseous, cursing the cherry slushies we piled on top of everything else in our stomachs before boarding.

I check for job postings occasionally, but only for jobs I really think I might like now. Other children's librarian or programmer positions in cities I'm at least interested in.

Julia decides to stay another week, and we use our Sunday for an elaborate farmers' market shopping trip followed by a visit to an arcade bar, where once again she heartily and gleefully annihilates us, this time at *Ms. Pac-Man*.

Every night that week, we cook together—or *Miles* cooks, while Jules sits on the counter, curating a country playlist and singing along at top volume into whatever utensil her brother has most recently set down. I chop whatever he puts in front of me, wash whichever dishes he's done with.

Most nights we eat on the floor around the coffee table, all the windows thrown open, the buzz of crickets and cicadas around us and the smell of fir wafting in, but sometimes we sit in a row on the couch, eating while we watch a spy movie or one about a heist, my veins humming every time Miles leans across me to grab a handful of popcorn or the remote, my heart clenching whenever our eyes catch in the dark.

Sometimes at night, from the other room, he texts me live updates as he listens to the audiobook of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, things like i want to live w the beavers and wat is turkish delight and edmund needs 2 chill. Sometimes we text for an hour straight, like our doors aren't ten feet apart.

We're basically always together, but we're almost never alone, aside from once when he accidentally locked his keys in the truck and I had to bring his spare up to the winery.

I'm already in my pajamas, so he comes out to meet me in the lot, with a grin and a hug that smells like campfire and *feels* like a hook in my heart.

On Friday the nineteenth, I find out about the children's librarian job in Worcester County, Maryland.

A quick online search tells me the Ocean City Library is twenty minutes from my mother and looks like an adorable lighthouse filled with books.

I almost text my mom, but something holds me back. It seems too good to be true. There will probably be dozens of applications, and there's no point in getting my or her hopes up before I've even gotten an interview.

Still, I email them my cover letter and résumé on my lunch break, and check my email obsessively for the rest of my shift.

When I get home, I *know* Julia isn't there.

I feel it like a barometric shift. Probably because I typically *hear* Julia before I see her. Less clear is how my nervous system *knows* Miles is here, even though his Crocs aren't sitting next to the shoe rack, as is his custom, and it's Friday night, when he usually works.

I hang my bags on the hooks by the door, kick my loafers onto the rack, and round the corner into the kitchen. He's standing beside the stove, reading something on his phone with a divot between his brows as he waits for water to boil.

"So you finally shut your sister in the pantry," I say.

He looks up, breaking into a smile. "She's bringing up packages from the lobby."

I lean back to peer out of the kitchen, toward the living room. Three large cardboard boxes already sit stacked beside the coffee table.

I feel a flurry of panic that I might've forgotten to cancel some expensive order for the wedding, and thus Peter has forwarded it here. A life-size marble statue of us embracing, maybe.

No recollection of ordering that, but who knows? I was in a wedding fugue state.

The water in the pot starts to burble, and Miles dumps hand-rolled trofie noodles into it. In the food processor beside him, I see what appears to be fresh-made pesto, and my salivary glands kick into high gear. “You hungry?” he asks.

“I’m fine,” I say.

“You’re drooling,” he teases.

“Is there enough?” I ask.

“Of course,” he says.

“Don’t you work tonight?” I call over my shoulder as I wander out of the kitchen toward the packages.

“Heading in right after this is done,” he calls back.

I scan the mishmash of shipping labels and find the sender’s name: *Julia Nowak*. An address in Chicago.

Then the receiver’s name: *Julia Nowak*, but with our address.

I pad back into the kitchen. “What are all these boxes?”

“No idea,” Miles says.

On cue, the front door flings open, and Julia crashes into the room with more packages. “Hey, Daph,” she says, bustling past.

I follow her into the living room, and she sets the boxes down with a huff. “What you got there?” I ask.

She passes me on her way back to the kitchen. “Just the essentials.”

I peek my head back in as she’s grabbing a sparkling water from the fridge.

“Essential *what*?” Miles asks.

She’s already squeezing between us to leave the room again, her voice growing fainter as she retreats to the cardboard treasure trove at the far end of the apartment.

“Whatever I can’t live without,” she calls. “Paid my roommate to box it up. Once I find a place, I’ll go back for the rest.”

Miles’s head snaps up from the pasta pot.

Our eyes lock. He shakes his head, a general *I have no idea* pantomime.

“It’s okay,” I say under my breath.

He shakes his head, calls loud and clear, “Jules? Come here for a sec.”

She pops her head back into the kitchen. “Yeah?”

“Quick question,” he says. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

With doe-eyed innocence, she asks, “What do you mean?”

“Why do you need more stuff,” he says. “Your stuff is already swallowing the apartment.”

“I told you I was thinking about sticking around longer,” she replies.

“Thinking about staying another week,” he says. “That’s what you said. A week ago.”

“Exactly. I’m going to stay for another few days. Then fly back to Chicago to pack up the rest of my stuff and drive it out here. But I needed my *good* clothes for job interviews, so I had Riley mail some stuff.”

“Job interviews,” he says.

“I’ll need a new job,” she says. “I can’t live with you forever.”

He runs a hand down his face. “When did you decide all this?”

“When I got here and realized you were in total denial about what you’ve just been through and you obviously need me.”

“Julia, I’m—”

“—fine,” she finishes with an eye roll. “You’re always fine.”

“I’m going to just . . . go in the other room,” I say, creeping away.

“No, don’t,” Julia says cheerily, already backing toward the front door. “Ashleigh’s actually double-parked downstairs waiting for me, so I have to run!”

She whirls out the same way she whirled in.

After a beat of silence, Miles and I look at each other.

“I’ll get her a hotel,” he says. “Or I’ll get *you* a hotel.”

“First of all, any hotel that will have a summer vacancy this last minute is *not* one I’m going to stay in,” I say. “And second of all, I can handle one more week of flat irons in the sink and bronzer on the floor.”

His brow lifts. “You sure?”

“Positive,” I say. “But how do *you* feel?”

He clears his throat and turns back to the noodles, scooping one out with a fork to test it before carrying the pot to the strainer in the sink. “I don’t



know,” he says. “She’s still acting like everything’s normal, but I know my sister. She’s hiding from something, and she doesn’t usually hide.”

“Maybe she really is just worried about you,” I tell him.

He dumps the noodles back into the pot. “Why should she be worried about me?”

I stare at him.

“It was three and a half months ago,” he points out. “What does she need me to do to prove I’m okay? Get a tattoo that says *HAPPILY SINGLE* on my forehead?”

“That *would* scream ‘I’m okay,’ ” I say.

“You know what I mean.” He dumps the pesto in with the noodles and swirls the pot around. “I’m thirteen years older than her. I’ve been on my own since she was a kid. I don’t need my barely grown sister worrying about me. Especially when *worrying about me* mostly just consists of leaving her dirty clothes on the hallway floor, and setting her phone alarm to top volume, then snoozing it five hundred times.”

I get down a couple of bowls and some forks, and pass them to him to start dishing it up. “Do you want me to kick her out?”

He eyes me briefly, then goes back to scooping pasta into the bowls. “I can’t,” he says. “Not when I don’t know what’s going on.”

He adds a couple whole basil leaves to each bowl and passes me one.

I set mine aside and touch his shoulders, ease them down. “If you ever need to vent,” I say, “text me. You know I love complaining, and it’s no fun to be the only one.”

His jaw softens. He sets his pasta aside too and pulls me into a hug that makes my bones liquefy, his breath warm against my neck. I close my eyes and breathe him in, and it’s not complicated: I want him, I like him, and I care about him enough to push those first two thoughts aside.

The front door flings open, Ashleigh’s and Julia’s laughs competing for *Most Likely to Piss Off Mr. Dorner*, and we peel apart as they bound inside, loaded with Target totes.

“Smells like heaven,” Ashleigh says, whizzing past. Miles and I exchange a look, both apparently sensing *some* kind of mischief afoot.

We pick up our bowls and follow them to the living room, where they empty their totes onto the rug. An air mattress, a pump, a couple of vacuum-sealed pillows, a blue blazer, a gold chenille blanket, and two mini desktop fans fall out, followed by some toiletries and a belt.

“Are you planning a very specific heist?” I ask.

“I thought about buying a pullout to replace this garbage sofa,” Julia says, “but I didn’t want to be presumptuous.”

“Oh, yeah. You wouldn’t want to be *presumptuous*,” Miles deadpans.

“Hey, be nice,” Julia says. “It’s temporary. As soon as I get a job, I’ll start apartment hunting.”

He rubs his brow. “I have to get to work. We’ll talk later.”

“You know where to find me,” she says, leaning over the couch to gather her laundry.

Miles turns, shaking his head and still forking pesto into his mouth as he heads toward the front door.

I set my own bowl down on the coffee table. “Do you need help with that?”

“Nope,” Julia says. “Just looking for somewhere else to put this stuff. The living room’s getting a bit unwieldy.”

Ashleigh snorts. “A *bit*.”

Julia’s moving toward the closet. *The* closet. Where I keep *the* dress.

My heart rattles against my rib cage like one of those New Year’s Eve clappers. She reaches for the pocket doors, seemingly in slow motion.

“No, wait—” I lunge for her.

I don’t make it in time.

Not even close.

For the first time since the day Miles helped me haul my stuff over here, the closet door slides all the way open—from the wrong side. The side packed so *Tetris*-tight that the absence of the door triggers an avalanche of white, cream, ivory, blush.

Gift bags. Boxes of taper candles. Tea lights. A crate of biodegradable cutlery. Palm leaf plates. Organza, an ungodly amount of organza. The

amount you'd need to film a monster movie where the town predator was a sentient wedding dress, hell-bent on swallowing women whole.

Me. I am the woman who was supposed to be swallowed by that dress, and now it's cascading directly into Julia's face, a raging waterfall of my mistakes.

It takes several seconds, during which she's utterly frozen, for everything to come tumbling out. It's like something out of *I Love Lucy*, or *The Dick Van Dyke* show.

When it's finally over, we're all left staring.

"Oh, *honey*," Ashleigh says. "Tell me you didn't *keep* the dress."



"I JUST HAVEN'T had time to figure out what to do with it!" I cry, brushing past Julia to start stacking things back up.

"No!" Julia yelps, yanking a box of thrifted-and-laundered ivory cloth napkins out of my hand. "You can't just put this stuff back in there. Pandora's box has been opened, Daphne."

"And Pandora's contents aren't going to fit in this living room with your big-ass life raft," I say.

"You're going to have to get rid of it before you move anyway," Ashleigh points out.

Julia's eyes snap to me. "You're moving?"

"Possibly," I say. "But not until after the summer, at the earliest. I've got time to deal with this stuff."

Ashleigh faces Julia. "Maybe you could move into her room."

For Miles's sake, I'm relieved to see Julia scrunch her nose in dismay. "No way. Staying here is a short-term solution only."

Now that I have an in, I ask, "Why the sudden interest in moving here, anyway?"

Julia sucks her teeth for a second. "Can I tell you something *without* it getting back to Miles?"

"Ooh, gossip!" Ashleigh pantomimes zipping her lips.

"Fine," I say. "But if you can tell *me*, I'm sure you can tell him."

Julia snorts. "I love my brother more than anyone on the planet, but there are things it's better for him *not* to know."

"Such as?" Ashleigh presses.

"I've been *almost* moving here for years."

“Weren’t you in college, in Wisconsin?” I ask.

“I was miserable,” she says. “And I couldn’t tell Miles—he’d cosigned my loans.”

“He would’ve understood,” I insist.

“I know,” she says. “He babies me. And frankly, I’m not a huge fan of cleaning up my own messes. But the thing is, when I make one and Miles rushes in with a mop, he’s always leaving something behind.”

I shake my head. “I don’t understand.”

“When he graduated from high school,” she says, “he was supposed to move to Colorado with a couple of his friends. Last minute, he decided not to go. And I *know* it was because of me. Because I would’ve been stuck with my parents.

“He waited until I left for college to even leave the state. He moved out here and he *loved* it. So when school started sucking, I was going to come too. But then he started dating Petra.”

“Didn’t you two get along?” I ask, surprised.

“Petra gets along with everyone,” Julia retorts. “But she’s also so fucking flighty. And I say that as a flighty person. I get sick of jobs. I get sick of roommates. I get sick of having bangs, four days after getting them.”

Ashleigh says, “Well, that’s *everyone*.”

“But Petra—she’s next level. Once she and Miles took a trip to Iceland and decided just to stay indefinitely. For like two months. I’m not even sure if it was legal. And then last winter, their *two-week* trip to Uruguay lasted five.

“I didn’t want to move here if he didn’t really want to be *here*,” she explains. “Because I know him, and he’d feel stuck. But some things changed in my life recently, and now feels like the right time. But if something comes up—if Miles *wants* to move to Iceland, I just don’t want to be the reason he doesn’t. I can’t. He’s given up too much for me over the years.”

My heart keens. I know what it’s like to have all your family concentrated in one person, to want what’s best for them after they’ve given

you so much. But having heard Miles's side of things, I can't help but wish he knew how his sister felt.

To him, he's the brother who ran away. To her, he's the one who stays, even when he shouldn't.

"You should tell him how you feel," I say.

"Interesting sentiment." She grabs her water bottle for a long sip. "I can think of some other scenarios where it might apply."

Ashleigh rescues me with a firm clap. "Okay, back to the issue at hand. This *stuff*."

"Right," Julia says. "Here's what we do: we photograph and list everything we can online. Then I'll ship things out as they're bought. As a thank-you for letting me stay here."

"And I've got plenty of room for this stuff at my place in the meantime," Ashleigh volunteers. "So we catalog it, list it, and then I'll store it until it sells."

"Come on," Julia says, reading my hesitancy. "Wouldn't it feel good to just . . . let this stuff all go?"

I scan the stuff in question. What *am* I waiting for?

*This*, I think. *Them*. To not be alone. To have friends bear witness to the death of this dream.

I take the box from Julia. "I'm ready."

She claps. "I'll get the wine."

Ashleigh queues up a playlist she's titled *You're Divorced, Not Dead*, which has the urgency of a spin-class soundtrack. Julia pours us each a glass of sauvignon blanc, filling mine to the brim, and absolutely everything in the closet gets pulled out and laid across the living room floor.

We move lamps around to get good lighting, and snap pictures like every piece is an element of a crime scene.

I jot down quick descriptions, which Julia promises to post to a few different resale apps, and honestly, it's kind of fun.

Three glasses of wine and several hours later, we finally get to the dress itself.

"Well, obviously you have to try it on," Ashleigh says.

“Yes.” Julia claps again.

I shove the fabric at her. “You can, if you want.”

“She’s not the one who chose it,” Ashleigh cuts in. “*You* did. Don’t you want one last look at it?”

“More importantly,” Julia cuts in, “don’t you want *your friends* to see you looking drop-dead gorgeous in it before it’s Halloween and you’re driving past a frat house where some teenager in a Bride of Frankenstein wig is puking down the front of it?”

She has a point. No one’s ever seen me in the dress, except my mom and my ex-almost-mother-in-law. If I’m sending it off, I could at least give it some fanfare.

“Try. It. On,” Ashleigh chants. Julia immediately joins in. “Try. It. On! Try. It. On!”

“Okay! Fine!” I relent. “I’ll try it on!”

With a giddy squeal, Julia pushes the wadded-up dress back into my arms, and Ashleigh leans forward to top off my wine. “Atta girl,” she says.

I turn and stuff myself in the bathroom to shuck off my work clothes.

It takes a few tries to get the dress over my head, the layers of silk and organza twisting around me in increasingly nonsensical ways, until finally I manage to push my face through it like I’m clumsily hatching from a three-thousand-dollar egg.

I hadn’t even wanted a wedding gown. I’d planned to find a cream silk or satin dress for a couple hundred bucks. But Peter’s mom had wanted me to at least *try on* some wedding dresses, and surprisingly, my mom agreed. Both of them had flown out for a weekend, to Virginia, and the three of us—Mom, Melly, and I—spent six exhausting hours sipping our way through the free champagne and Perrier of Richmond’s finest bridal boutiques.

I’d been prepared to thank them both for their time and reassert my plans to just get a non-wedding dress, until our last stop of the day, a shop specializing in vintage dresses that Melly had read about online.

Mom helped me put the dress on, and when she’d finished with the button at my nape, we both looked into the mirror and fell silent. She

squeezed my shoulders and took a long, shuddering breath, her version of bursting into tears.

Then she said, in a quiet, unsteady voice, “You look like Grace Kelly.”

“I look nothing like Grace Kelly,” I whispered back.

“It’s the one,” Mom said. “Isn’t it?”

The dress was three thousand dollars, and I’d already—after much protestation—allowed Peter and the Collinses to pay for nearly everything. We would’ve had to have a courthouse wedding if Mom and I were footing the bill, and I was fine with that, but Peter’s family was traditional, and I wanted them to be happy.

“I think I’ll go with something simpler,” I said, a knot in my throat.

Mom sighed and pulled me in, resting her chin on my shoulder and holding my gaze in the mirror. “Let me do this.”

“You’ve already done everything,” I told her. “Absolutely everything. And you don’t even believe in all this.”

“Sweetie.” She smoothed my hair over my shoulder. “I believe in you. I believe you should and will have everything you’ve ever wanted, if you’re not too scared to go after it.”

It was the first time, one of very few, that I’d wondered whether Mom really *was* as happy on her own as she seemed to be.

“It’s the one,” she said again, kissing the side of my head. “You’re my one.”

“You’re mine too,” I said.

She smiled. “No, baby,” she said. “Now you’ve got two.”

There had been no *I always told you not to rely on men* from her when things came crashing down. There had been only kindness, comfort, scathing criticisms of Peter.

I still felt guilty about the dress, but whenever I brought up the possibility of paying her back, she joked that she actually *owed* me money, since I’d never needed her to bail me out of jail or replace a garage door I drove through “like a normal teen.”

The way my mom talked about “normal teens” made it clear that she’d been the kind they write movies about, who sneak out bedroom windows



and throw keggers in the woods.

As I'm getting the dress over my shoulders, Ashleigh knocks and shouts something that sounds like a question at me through the door, but it's unintelligible through the cocoon of fabric I'm fighting against. "Hold on!" I call back. "Give me a minute!" Another muffled reply.

I finally manage to shake out all the layers, and turn my back to the mirror to feel around for the zipper. It jams three times before I coax it to my shoulder blades.

Then I turn to examine the smooth silk bodice in the mirror over the sink. The high boatneck and bare arms. The flare of the skirt. The *pockets* the shop seamstress had added. I'd been so excited about the pockets.

For a second, I let myself feel the sadness.

I'm mourning the Victorian house with its porch, and the gorgeous new kitchen where Peter would cook me dinner. The kids we might've had, and the parents we would've become. The way that walking through the front door would feel like stepping into a warm hug.

But honestly, the dress itself doesn't have the same effect it used to. Possibly because it's now a size and a half too small, the seams straining, my cleavage pushed up like I'm a Tessa Dare heroine courting scandal. Except Tessa's cover models look sexy and courageous; I look baffled and ridiculous.

I let myself out of the bathroom and sweep into the living room with a dramatic "Ta-da!"

It's incredibly anticlimactic, wearing your skintight wedding gown into an empty room.

"Hello?" I creep toward the kitchen. It's empty, though Ashleigh's phone is on the counter, her playlist still blaring out "Love Is a Battlefield" via Bluetooth speaker.

I traipse back into the living room, but there's no sign of them. Behind me, the front door clanks open.

I turn and stop short. So does Miles.

"Hi," I say.

"Hi?" He says it like a question, a look akin to horror on his face.

Probably because I'm drifting around the apartment in a gown for a wedding that never happened while Pat Benatar serenades me from the kitchen.

"I'm not wearing this," I say quickly.

"Okay," he says.

"I mean, I *am* wearing this, but not by myself," I explain.

He looks around the empty apartment.

"Your sister and Ashleigh were here!" I *also* look around the empty apartment, searching for proof I'm not having a Miss Havisham moment and instead finding wedding supplies everywhere. "They wanted to see the dress, so I put it on, and now they're . . . somewhere."

He finally cracks a smile, takes off his sweatshirt, and tosses it over a chair. "I saw them getting into a cab downstairs. Apparently they needed milkshake supplies."

Which explained what Ashleigh was shouting at me when I was wrestling with the dress. "Ah." I cross my arms in front of myself.

"I'll pay you to wear that to Peter and Petra's wedding," he says.

"I'll pay you more," I say.

His grin splits wide. "It's a nice dress. You look nice."

I blush furiously. "I look like an overstuffed cannolo."

His head cocks. "What's a cannolo?"

"The singular version of cannoli," I say.

"So you look delicious," he says.

"It used to fit better. Or my vision's just getting better. Or maybe it's just, the longer this cuts off my oxygen, the prettier the hallucinations get."

"You look beautiful," he says, then, with a slight twitch at the corner of his mouth, "even *better* than an Italian pastry."

As his gaze tracks over me, I get an unadulterated hit of his spicy-sweet scent and lurch toward the bathroom. "I'm gonna go change."

Inside, I lock the door and face the mirror. Red splotches have spread from the neckline up my throat.

They basically spell out *I STILL WANT MILES NOWAK*.

I push aside thoughts of what happened between us in his truck and reach back between my shoulders for the zipper. It glides down a few inches, then snags. I turn my back to the mirror and look over my shoulder as I wrestle the zipper over the bump in the fabric. I manage to tug it back up the tracks an inch, but when I draw it down again, it snags even worse.

It won't budge, and the bodice feels tighter than it did a minute ago. The more I mess with the zipper, the more panicked I become.

My skin feels tender under the seams, my rib cage hurts, I can't get a good breath, and The Dress. Is. Stuck.



I BARREL OUT of the bathroom and smash into Miles, who's been waiting in the hallway like a nervous first-time father pacing the hospital floors.

"You're still in it," he says.

"It's stuck," I say. "I think I broke the zipper, and the dress is too tight, and I can't breathe, and it's *stuck*."

"It's okay."

"Oh, is it?" I say. "Then I feel better."

He's turning me by the elbow. "I'll get it. Just try to breathe." He gathers my hair off my neck so carefully his fingers never brush skin. "Can you hold this out of the way?"

I pin my hair against the back of my head, shoulders and arms throbbing as my heart pumps too much blood to my extremities.

Miles pinches the two sides of the fabric and wiggles the zipper until it gives. At midback, it catches. "Shit. Hold on."

More pinching, wiggling, straining. I close my eyes and focus on my breath.

The zipper goes up and glides down to the same snag.

"Try to stay still," he says.

"You keep pulling me off balance," I say.

"Do you have any ChapStick?" he asks.

"Can your mouth moisturization wait a minute?" I cry.

"Nah, not really—it's for the *zipper*, Daphne."

"In the medicine cabinet," I tell him. We shuffle together into the cramped bathroom, him holding up the back of my dress as we go. I hand

the tube to him and he does whatever it is he thinks he's going to do with it, then goes back to wrestling the zipper.

He loses purchase and smacks an elbow into the wall behind me with a grunt of pain. "It's too cramped in here."

We shuffle-step *back* into the hall. He tries again, his frustrated huff turning into a laugh.

"What?" I ask over my shoulder.

"Now I can't see anything." He drags me by the skirt through his bedroom door, bumping the lights on.

"Can you lean over the dresser?" he asks.

"Seriously?" I say.

"I need more leverage," he says, "and every time I pull, you come with me."

Dear god, what did I do to deserve this?

Oh, right. I lied about being in a relationship with this man, then jumped his bones at a lavender farm to upset my ex-fiancé. That could've done it.

I brace my hands against the top of his dresser. He sets one palm to my hip, holding me steady while he pulls again, gets the zipper to move for several blissful millimeters before it catches again, his grip on me tightening.

"Distract me," I say under my breath.

"I promise we'll get this off of you," he says.

Wrong kind of distraction.

"I'm feeling unbearably stupid right now, Miles, so you're going to have to do better than that. Tell me something awful."

He laughs. "Okay. What about this: when Petra and I got your save-the-date in the mail, she told me she didn't want to get married, and I was like, *Cool, no worries*. Because I thought she meant *in general*, not specifically that she didn't want to marry me."

I drop my face toward the dresser. My pained groan gives way to something more forceful, the emotion shaking through my shoulders.

"Shit," he says. "I'm sorry. Not helpful." Miles takes hold of both my hips. "*Hey*."

I straighten up, shaking my head as the laughter racks me, tears leaking from my eyes.

“Daphne,” he murmurs behind me, still tender and sweet, pulling me in, my back to his chest, and coiling his arms around my waist.

“Miles,” I finally manage, spinning in his grip. “What was the ChapStick for?” Another fit of laughter throttles my voice.

He registers it. His mouth opens and closes. “I thought it might smooth the track.”

“You lubed my zipper,” I say.

“Actually,” he says, “I very *specifically* asked about ChapStick so that neither of us would have to say that sentence.”

My forehead hits his collarbone as the giggles double me over. His hand slides up my back, goose bumps trailing along behind his touch, to rest at the base of my neck. His laugh hums through me too.

“You were just *ready* for that,” I say. “How many roommates have you had to do this for?”

“Dozens.” His arms loosen and he turns me again. “But you’re the first who had ChapStick.” He pinches the zipper and gives a soft tug.

After all that huffing and struggling and bracing, the zipper glides down to the small of my back, Miles’s knuckles dragging along my skin all the way.

I shiver at the sensation, prickle with full-body awareness of him.

He doesn’t pull away immediately, and I catch my weight shifting back into his touch. His fingers unfurl, his palm flattening against my low back.

The bodice of the dress is gaping loose, gravity pulling the straps down my arms as the weight of the skirt draws everything toward the ground.

I catch the bust against my chest, pinning it to me as I turn toward him. “Thanks.”

“Here.” He flinches away from me, avoids my eyes as he snatches a loose gray T-shirt from his open top drawer. When he pulls it over my head, his gingersnap smell engulfs me, and he tugs it down over the dress.

When I let go of the bust, the whole lacy concoction pools at my feet. I get my arms through the T-shirt sleeves, and Miles helps me step out of the

skirt, gently untucking my hair from the collar.

His eyes lift back to mine, and the room thrums. “Thank you,” I say again, this time a whisper.

“I’m going to need this back,” he teases quietly. “That’s been my favorite shirt since I was ten.”

I register the front of it for the first time: a crackly vinyl cartoon camel smoking a gigantic cigarette. Chortling, I meet his gaze. “This is your favorite shirt from childhood? A walking nicotine advertisement?”

His smile widens. His fingers move absently to my chin, and I feel myself being drawn into him, our stomachs connecting, his heart pattering through me. “It’s a *camel*, Daphne,” he says wryly. “In *sunglasses*.”

“I’ll change immediately,” I say, playing along.

“No, no,” he says. “Keep it as long as you want. What’s mine is yours.”

I suppress a grin. “See, this is why all these locals have added you to their wills.”

He frowns. “Sometimes you make it sound like I’m a snake-oil salesman.”

I grab his arm. “That’s not what I mean at *all*.”

“Then what do you mean,” he asks.

“I mean that you’re nice,” I say.

He laughs. “This again.”

“I mean,” I say, more fervently, “you’re probably the only person I’ve ever met who’s genuinely curious about everyone he meets. And makes them feel interesting and welcome, and like—like they should be confident in what they do. You make them feel like growing corn or making cherry salsa or recommending books is a superpower.”

“If you’re good at those things,” he says, “it is.”

“Exactly,” I murmur. “That’s how you *actually* feel.”

The only other person I’ve ever known with that particular skill wields it like a shield. Or a tax he’s paying you, a cut of him just big and bright enough to guarantee you won’t ask for more.

“I just think,” I say to Miles, “you like people almost as much as they like you. And it makes being around you feel like—like standing in

sunlight.”

His mouth softens. Briefly, he studies the space between our feet. “You feel like sunlight too.”

I snort. “No, I don’t.”

“No,” he agrees. “You don’t. You’re more like Lake Michigan.”

“Cold and bracing,” I say.

His voice drops: “Cool and refreshing.”

“Shocking and painful,” I say.

“Surprising and exciting,” he counters, now close enough that I smell the postshift glass of red wine on his breath. Close enough that I become the moth to his irresistible glow, trying to resist the pull to move closer.

I tip my head toward the living room, the mess, mine and Julia’s. I seize the opportunity for a distraction from this heady feeling. “Have you managed to talk to her? About what she’s really doing here?”

He exhales heavily with a half step back. “I’ve tried. She’s still pretending there’s no big reason other than scraping me up off the floor.” He forces a smile that makes my heart feel like it’s folding in half. “You ready to kick her out?”

“I like having her here,” I promise.

He nods.

“Can I do anything?” I ask.

Now his smile softens. He touches my chin again. “Nah,” he says. “This is enough.”

“I’m not doing anything,” I point out.

The corner of his mouth twitches. “Then why do I feel better?”

The moment swells. Now *I* step back, the floor chilly beneath my soles. “Thanks again,” I say, “for lubing my zipper.”

“Anytime,” he says.





WEDNESDAY, JULY 24<sup>TH</sup>

## 24 DAYS UNTIL THE READ-A-THON

ASIDE FROM THE radio silence about my Ocean City library application, I'm having a streak of uncommonly good luck.

On Sunday, Miles surprised me and (a less than thrilled) Julia with a drive down to a little town called North Bear Shores for a bookstore event with a romance writer Sadie had turned me on to years ago. After the signing, the shop owner and her geology professor wife ended up falling in love with Miles (obviously) and making a donation toward the Read-a-thon.

On Monday, two children's book authors agreed to send videos for Read-a-thon prizes, while a third offered to do a live video call with the kids.

Tuesday, our monthly Fortnite tournament kicked off with our highest turnout ever, and today, when Maya dropped by the desk to pick up her holds, I'd finally managed to convince her to come to next week's YA book club.

Mom screams with excitement when I tell her on our call as I walk home.

That or she accidentally drops some free weights close to her toes.

"That's great, honey," she says. "I know that kid's been a tough nut to crack."

"She's just so shy. But the other kids in the group are really sweet," I say. "And a couple are homeschooled, so she's probably never met them, which could be good. A clean slate."

“God, once, when you were having a hard time at a new school, I remember asking you if you wanted to be homeschooled,” Mom says.

I snort. “When would you have had time to *homeschool* me?”

“I wouldn’t have,” she says. “But you were so unhappy at school. I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to just rescue you from your misery. Do you remember what you said to me?”

“I never even remember homeschooling being on the table,” I say.

“You said you’d miss your teachers too much.” She bursts into breathless laughter, which turns into a groan of exertion, followed by the clank of weights hitting the floor. “You were shy, but you were brave.”

“I was a little nerd, you can say it,” I say.

“Back then they used to call it ‘a pleasure to have in class,’ ” she tells me.

My phone beeps and I step under an awning. “Hold on a second,” I tell her, blocking the glare to read the screen. “What the *hell*?”

“Is everything okay?” Mom asks.

“Yep!” I say too brightly.

Everything’s great except that my dad’s trying to call me, and it’s not two weeks after a major holiday, when I’d normally hear from him.

I fire a text his way: Sorry, on the phone.

He replies immediately, an extreme rarity: Gimme a call when you get a sec. Fun news.

Anxiety corkscrews through me. *Fun news*, in Jason Roberts Speak, is usually: *Hey, I’m dating a twenty-six-year-old!* (Not for long.)

Or, *I made a friend who owns a catamaran, so I’m going out of the country for a while. Send you a postcard when I hit dry land!* (He won’t.)

“Daphne?” Mom asks.

“Everything’s fine.” She and Dad aren’t mortal enemies or anything, but she stopped having contact with him pretty much the moment I turned eighteen, and as good as my mom is at empathizing, laughing through the shit storms in life, she’s always gone out of her way to *not* trash Dad. For my sake, I know, but sometimes I just want her to stop being supermom and

just agree with me that he's the worst. So mostly we just don't talk about him.

"Well, look," she says. "I'm happy for you, and I'm proud of you, and I love you."

"And you have to go?" I autofill.

"I do," she says. "I'm going to the beach tomorrow with some friends, but talk next week?"

"No problem," I tell her. "Love you."

"Love you more," she says, hanging up before I can argue.

When I pass the taffy-green fairy-tale cottage, the morning glories vining around the picket fence are in full bloom, little birds cheeping from the branches like one more good omen.

On a whim, I check the online listing. The price has recently dropped fifty thousand dollars, but it's still well beyond my real-life range. Still, it feels good to daydream.

To picture myself in a place like that. Hosting dinners and watching action movies. Grabbing chai from the café up the street and filling vases with fresh-cut lavender. Drinking wine out back with friends during lightning bug season.

I can almost see it. I can almost see a life here.



"**ANY BIG PLANS** for your birthday?" Harvey asks Ashleigh as we settle around the poker table several hours later with the others.

"It's your birthday?" I say. "When?"

She groans. "A week from Saturday. Forty-three. And *no* to big plans. It just so happens to fall on the weekend Mulder and I get back from visiting my mom in Sedona, so he'll be at his dad's place, and I'll be at home rotting my brain to the tune of Bravo reality TV."

"Why would you be home?" I say. "We should do something."

Around her cigar, Lenore says, "You're not gonna win this battle."

"I've always hated my birthday," Ashleigh explains. "It's just one more reminder of how little progress I've made. I'm in exactly the same spot I was this time last year. Looking at the same four walls in the same house in the same town, only minus a husband."

"Oh, sweetie, that's not true at all!" Barb pipes in. "You *left* a stagnant marriage. You started therapy. You got Mulder through a tough year, and now you've brought *Daphne* into our little circle!"

"And it's not a day to celebrate progress, anyway," I insist. "It's a day to celebrate *existence*. We have to do something."

"Aren't the roles a bit reversed here?" Her brow arches. "*I'm* the fun, take-charge one."

"You are," I agree. "But you can't *Ashleigh* yourself, so someone else has to."

"I don't want to go out." She sticks out her bottom lip.

"Then we won't go out," I relent. "What if I come over and we paint?"

Her face scrunches, an expression akin to disgust. "Like Bob Ross landscapes?"

"Like a room," I say. "In your house. You said Duke never wanted you to, right? And you're tired of looking at the same four walls. So pick a wall color, and I'll come help paint."

"I'm *terrible* at painting," she says. "I get too impatient and fuck up the 'cut-in.'"

"Well, you're in luck, because I'm *amazing* at the cut-in," I say.

She snorts. "You would be."

"I'm not insulted by that," I tell her.

She considers for a beat. "So you'll come do all the hard parts, and I'll pour the wine, *while* we watch the housewives throw drinks and scream 'just own it' at each other?"

"Sure," I say. "Anyone else want in?"

Lenore guffaws. "I'm good, but you girls enjoy yourselves." Harvey and Barb nod agreement.

"Okay, Vincent," Ashleigh says after a moment of consideration. "Saturday night after next. I'll pick a color. You wear your adorable

friendship-montage overalls.”

“I don’t have those,” I say.

“Well, you’ve got all week.”

“I know a great farm supply store,” Barb offers helpfully.

“Now, can we please get to the cards?” Harvey says. “I’m feeling lucky tonight.”

And he is pretty lucky that night. He wins six hands.

I win the game.



WE GET RAINED out on Sunday. Miles didn’t tell us *what* we were supposed to do, only that it requires good weather. “Think you could call off on Thursday?” he asks me as we’re making our respective tea and coffee in the kitchen. Ordinarily, I’d hate to call off, but with Ashleigh out all week, work’s been a little boring, and there isn’t much on the library’s calendar that day, so I give in.

I still wake up at seven, even without an alarm, and decide to ease into my day reading and sipping iced tea at one of Fika’s sidewalk tables. On a whim, I order matcha and like it more than I expected, but still decide to go back in for my usual before walking home.

The thoroughly facial-pierced barista looks up and calls brightly, “You’re back!”

“I am,” I say.

“Another matcha?” he says. “Or iced chai with milk?”

“Chai, please,” I say. “Plus an iced miel, and an iced hazelnut latte.”

“Big day?” he teases.

“For my roommates,” I say.

“Got it.” He’s scribbling my name on all three cups, without asking for it. I feel an embarrassing amount of pride at having become a regular someplace new, on my own.

“How much do I owe you?” I ask when he brings the finished drinks to me.

“On the house today,” he says.

“What? Are you sure?” I ask.

He looks around, then leans in. “My manager isn’t here, there’s no one in line behind you to demand their own free drinks, and you’re a good tipper. I’m sure.”

“Well, thanks.” I stuff the ten-dollar bill in my hand—part of last Wednesday night’s winnings—into the jar.

“Jonah,” he puts in, without me asking.

“Thanks, Jonah,” I say.

He beams. “Have a good day, Daphne.”

On my walk home, my dad tries to call me and I accidentally hang up. I forgot to call him back last week, which isn’t like me. But it’s not like him to call me, period.

At this point, we’re sustaining more of a *casual texts every few months* kind of relationship.

At a stoplight, I text him: Sorry, can I call you back in just a few? I’m terrible at multitasking even when the two tasks at hand aren’t as demanding as (a) navigating small talk with my semiestranged father and (b) navigating crowds of ice-cream-sandwich-carrying out-of-towners zigzagging in every direction.

No need, Dad replies. Just wanted to confirm the address your mom gave me.

So he’s mailing me something. Right when I’ve finally started clearing out the wedding junk.

If this surprise package is anything like Dad’s last few, I can look forward to an intriguing assortment of miracle-cure vitamins, essential oils, and weed gummies I *did not* ask for and likely are an actual crime to mail. For good measure, sometimes he throws in something vaguely nostalgic but ultimately misguided. Like a yellow snow hat he found in his attic and is convinced belonged to me as a kid.

In that case, I so thoroughly did not recognize the hat that the only logical explanation was: it belonged to whoever owned the house before Dad, and since he could only afford the place due to the fact that a *violent*

*crime* had been committed there, you'd better believe that hat went straight into the trash.

I did, however, briefly burn the sage he sent me, in the general vicinity of the trash can, before tossing it in after the snow cap. I figure we reached net-zero on that particular "gift."

Inside our apartment building, I check my phone again. The address Dad sent for confirmation is, in fact, Miles's place. Still, I dial his number as I'm trudging upstairs, determined to talk him out of sending me anything.

The call rings out. I try once more. A message prompts me to leave a voice mail as I reach our door.

After the beep, I say, "Hey, Dad." My key jams in the lock, and it takes some wiggling to get it to turn. "Sorry I missed you. Just give me a call back when—"

The door swings open.

*I* don't open it.

Someone on the other side does.

A middle-aged woman with a 1960s-esque beehive and cleavage to her chin.

She looks every bit as surprised to see *me* coming into my apartment as I am to see *her* already standing inside it.

"Daphne!" she shouts, with pure ecstasy.

"Hiiii," I say, trying furiously to place her and getting *nowhere*.

My dad steps out of the kitchen, into view, slipping one hand over the woman's shoulder. "Hey, kid," he says. "Surprise!"



THURSDAY, AUGUST 1<sup>ST</sup>  
16 DAYS UNTIL THE READ-A-THON

MY GUT INSTINCT is to step back into the hallway, close the door, and try again. See if anything else greets me.

Dad yanks me right into a hug, thwacking my back so heartily it makes me cough.

“You sick, kid?” He draws back, gripping my shoulders as his sparkling green eyes give me a quick survey.

“A little,” I say, because suddenly I *do* feel feverish.

“Come on in, come on in,” he says, like this isn’t *my* home. He spins me toward the kitchen. “You finally get to meet Starfire.”

A wordless squeal emanates from behind him. He sidesteps, presenting with a full-arm flourish the woman who opened my apartment door.

Several feet behind her, Miles hovers in the entryway, looking as flustered as I’ve seen him. Which is to say, technically not very. But for *Miles*, every bit like a man who was just forced to let two strangers into his apartment.

I barely have time to register Starfire’s bubblegum-pink lip gloss before she’s wrapping me in a bone-crunching hug that smells like the inside of a Bath & Body Works minutes after a gaggle of preteens rolled through hyped up on Frappuccinos.

“You. Are. Just. So. Cute!” She rocks me hard back and forth in time with her pronouncement.

“Oh,” I say. “Thanks.”



When she releases me, she keeps one of my hands in hers, her long, baby-blue fingernails slightly clawing into me. “*Finally*,” she says tearily. “At first I thought you were the tall one.” She jerks her head over her shoulder toward Julia, whose face plainly projects: *I have already been through what you are currently experiencing*.

My eyes flick toward Dad, trying to communicate that I have no idea who this woman is.

But my father and I never had the time to develop anything resembling an unspoken language.

He just beams. “You have no idea what it means to me to see my two girls together.”

For one second, I genuinely wonder whether *Starfire* is a half sister I never knew existed.

But whereas all Dad’s previous girlfriends easily *could* have fit that bill, *Starfire* has to be within a decade of Dad’s own age—though with the kind of filler and Botox that make it impossible to tell whether she’s ten years younger or ten years older than him.

“Should we go into the living room,” Miles pipes up, already guiding Dad down the hallway. “Daphne and I will grab some wine and snacks.”

“Sounds great!” Julia chimes in, dutifully looping an arm through *Starfire*’s.

*Starfire*, for her part, makes another wordless baby-talk coo in the back of her throat, and squeezes my cheek before she’s dragged off, a huge grin turned over her shoulder all the way, so that she keeps bumping into Julia and almost toppling over in her four-inch blue spike heels.

Miles ushers me into the kitchen, whispering, “They just showed up.”

“And you let them *in*,” I whisper back.

“He said he was your dad!” he hisses. “And that you were expecting him! I didn’t know what to do.”

“I mean, in the loosest interpretation of the word,” I say, “that’s my father, but I’m *never* expecting him.”

“And *Starfire*?” he asks.

“The missing sixth member of the Spice Girls,” I say.

“You’ve never met her,” he guesses.

“Never even heard of her,” I say.

Miles sighs and turns to open the wine cabinet. I grab a couple of glasses from the other cabinet. When I turn back, he’s laughing to himself, shaking his head. “Should we take bets on who shows up next?”

“At this rate,” I say, “I won’t be surprised if my dead great-aunt Mildred climbs through the window tonight.”

“Not even about the window part?” he says. “Was she a contortionist?”

“I’m just assuming ghosts have the Santa Claus effect, where they can turn into Jell-O and shimmy through tight spaces.”

“You ready for this?” he asks, and while I haven’t told him a ton about my dad, he’s clearly picked up on enough in the last three minutes.

“No,” I say. “But once I make it through the first bottle of wine, I’ll be better.”

He sniffs the air. “Am I . . . smelling . . .”

I nod. “That’s my dad. Hotboxing in our apartment.”

He winces. “Want me to ask him to stick his head out the window?”

“Be my guest,” I say. “In fifteen minutes, he’ll forget and light up again while he’s midsentence and you feel like you can’t interrupt him. The sentence will last twenty minutes.”

He touches my elbow. “Just text me if you need an out.”

My brow lifts. “You’ll cause a diversion?”

“If I have to.”

I turn toward the hall. “He never stays long. This is probably a thirty-minute interlude on their way somewhere better. We’ll get it over with. Or I will—you’re not obligated to—”

“I’ll stay,” he says. “Unless you don’t want me to?”

“No, I definitely want you to,” I admit. “It’s just that I absolutely do not expect you to endure this.”

He runs a hand over my elbow, and I do my best not to shiver: “Someone once told me I’m very good with strangers. Come on.”

As we walk into the living room, Dad blows out a puff of smoke. Julia’s stuff has all been moved into a tower in the corner, the air mattress three-

quarters deflated and balled up at the bottom, so that our guests can sit on the couch, two pairs of intensely white teeth floating against sun-bronzed skin.

“There she is!” Dad says, followed by a hacking cough.

“Here I am!” I set the wineglasses on the coffee table before perching on the very edge of the chair perpendicular to the couch. “And you. And Starfire.”

Starfire beams at me. Dad beams at Starfire. Miles and Julia exchange a bewildered glance.

“These are for you,” Dad says, scooting forward. He balances his joint on the corner of the coffee table and produces an—admittedly beautiful—bouquet from down on the rug. “We thought they looked just like you.”

“Your aura, of course,” Starfire puts in. “It’s hard to judge in pictures, but JayJay was drawn to these, and we compared them to the picture he keeps in his wallet.”

At my blank stare, Dad chimes in, “Your old senior photo!”

News to me that Dad has a copy of that. I’m pretty sure Mom and I agreed they were so bad it wasn’t worth getting any printed, and just sent the file for the *least* awkward one to my school to use.

“Thanks,” I say stiffly, leaning over to accept the bouquet.

“That’s something I loved about him right away,” Starfire says dreamily, looking up at Dad as if a halo floats above his head. I’ve seen that look on plenty of Girlfriends Past. “He never shows up empty-handed.”

As a kid, I loved that about him too.

Until I realized his gifts were consolation prizes: *Yes, I canceled our spring break visit, but my buddy gave us tickets to an amusement park!*

*I missed your choir concert, but isn’t this candy my chocolatier girlfriend makes amazing?*

I set the bouquet on the coffee table, and Julia jumps up. “I’ll put that in water,” she says, and flees the scene.

Miles, genius that he is, starts filling the wineglasses and asks, “So, how’d you two meet?” He sits back onto the other chair, mimicking my ready-to-run posture.

“Starfire is my life coach,” Dad says, after a gulp.

Starfire nods, a smile still stretched tight across her lips. “But we actually knew each other before that.”

“Apparently, we were married in a past life,” Dad says, like, *Can you believe that coincidence?*

Starfire nods. “Several times.”

“Oh,” Miles says. “Well. Congratulations.”

“I was an heiress on the *Titanic*,” Starfire explains. “And Jason was a handsome artist, but he was so, so poor. My social circles never would have approved. But we had a torrid affair, and he saved my *life*.” She goes back to nodding, a very earnest bobblehead.

Miles and I make eye contact. He looks like he’s trying so hard not to laugh he might throw up instead.

“So just,” I say, “exactly the plot of the movie, then.”

Starfire’s head cocks to one side. “What movie?”

“What brings you into town?” Miles, with the assist. “You live in California, right?”

“That’s right.” Dad relights his joint. “But we’re on our—”

“Excuse me,” Miles cuts in, smiling pleasantly. “Would you mind waiting to smoke until you’re outside?” He says it so warmly and naturally. He really does have a superpower.

Just as unflappably affable, Dad says, “Oh, sure! Of course,” and tucks the joint back in his T-shirt pocket.

“So, California?” Miles says.

“Right,” Dad says. “But we’re driving across the country to celebrate.”

“Celebrate what?” I ask.

“Oh, *Daffy*,” Starfire says, officially the first adult to ever abbreviate my two-syllable name that way. “Our union.”

Dad frowns, a vague look of hurt around his eyes. “Didn’t you get the card?”

“What card?” I say.

“The birthday card,” he says. “Where I told you we got married!”

“You told me in a birthday card?” I say.

“You didn’t see it?” he says again, still the injured party.

“When was your birthday?” Miles asks, brow furrowing.

“End of April,” I say.

He frowns at that, no doubt doing the math, realizing I was already living with him.

“I must’ve misplaced the card,” I tell Dad.

Actually, since his birthday cards rarely contain anything other than my name and his signature, when they come at all, I’d opted to put it exactly where I put the murder-house beanie he’d mailed me last year: in the trash.

The last thing I needed was another halfhearted gesture from a man who *sort of* loved me.

The other last thing I needed was a reminder that I was turning thirty-three and had no one at all to celebrate it with.

Starfire is still smiling like if she lets even the corners of her lips touch, the apocalypse might be triggered.

And after everything she endured on the *Titanic*, who can blame her for being so cautious?

“So you’re passing through,” I say. “Headed somewhere fun?”

“Well, eventually,” Dad says, “we’re going to Starfire’s family in Vermont. But we figured we’d stick around here until Monday, if you could stand to have us that long.”

My skin prickles. My blood runs cold. I wonder if this is how animals feel when a tornado is brewing.

I’d braced for this to be an offensively short pit stop. Now I realize it’s so much worse. We’re a free place to stay while they break up their transcontinental drive: *Here are some beautiful flowers that reminded me of you; can I sleep on your couch?*

This apartment is quickly becoming the set for a terrible sitcom.

Dad’s still talking, but I’m hearing his voice as the warble of Charlie Brown’s teacher.

“I’m sorry,” I finally get out. “What did you say?”

“We’re on no set schedule,” Starfire says. “So we can stay as long as you want!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Julia walking into the room, with the flowers in a vase. She, very smartly, turns and heads right back into the kitchen.

Dad says, “We’re so happy to be here, kid. Starfire’s cousin Sandra says we have to go see the dunes while we’re here.”

“She’s a psychic too,” Starfire tells me, nodding enthusiastically.

“Who?” I say.

“Sandra,” she says. “She’s got the gift.”

Too bad she didn’t warn them there was no space for them in our apartment.

“I’ve got a bit myself,” Starfire goes on. “My therapist says I’m an *expath*.”

“You mean empath?” I ask, momentarily distracted from my overall goal.

She shakes her head. “No, mine’s the other kind. I project *powerful* emotions.”

I take a beat to retrace my steps to where this conversation went off the rails. “We don’t have a guest room,” I tell Dad. “We don’t even really have a couch right now. Julia’s staying with us.” I wave feebly toward the tower of clothes, pillows, and bedding.

Dad’s dark blond brows knit together, a look of confusion, probably at being denied something he hasn’t even fully bothered to ask for yet. Then he lets out a laugh. “Oh, no,” he says, shaking his head. “We wouldn’t dream of imposing.”

*Since when?*

“No, no, I got us a motel room,” he says. “It’s a ways outside of town, but we don’t mind ferrying back and forth.”

This is a surprise indeed.

“Wait a second.” Starfire’s eyes widen. “I thought there were two bedrooms in here.”

“There . . . are?” Miles’s eyes narrow, like if he focuses, he might be able to see her logic drifting through the room.

“And you don’t use one as a guest room?” she asks.

“There are two of us,” I point out.

“You two don’t share a room?” Dad says, dismayed.

For the first time, Starfire’s smile falters. “Oh no.” She almost sounds like she’s going to cry. She looks between Miles and me. “Do you want to talk about it? We can be, like, your mentors. Your *love* mentors.”

“What,” I say, as Miles says, “Love?”

Starfire drops her voice to a whisper, like somehow that will keep the rest of us from hearing, and leans over to pat Miles’s knee. “You two will get through this.”

“Get through what?” Miles shakes his head, squinting again.

Unfortunately, I’m not as lost as he is. “We’re not together.”

He flinches when understanding hits.

“Oh *no*,” Starfire cries. “You broke *up*?” Her shoulders hitch. I genuinely think this woman I’ve never met is about to cry for a relationship that never happened.

“We’re friends!” Miles clarifies, a little *too* frantically. “Just friends. Separate rooms.”

“Oh, phew!” Dad eyes me and jerks a thumb at Miles. “I like this guy. Glad I don’t have to *dislike* him now. Especially after what happened with the last guy! So is anyone hungry? Would love to have a little belated birthday, kiddo.”

“Of course we don’t want to intrude.” Starfire drapes a manicured hand over the crook of Dad’s elbow. “Since you weren’t expecting us.”

“Definitely,” Dad says. “We’ll work around your schedule, take whatever time you can spare for a couple of old coots.”

Starfire scoffs and swats his arm. “Oh, you take that back, JayJay. You’re only as old as you feel.”

“This one feels about twenty-two most of the time,” Dad tells me, adoration sparkling in his eyes.

It triggers a confusing flurry of emotions in my chest.

A softening toward this new incarnation of him, the one with an age-appropriate partner and the foresight to book a motel room.

But also, a reawakening of the old hurt. The reminder that my father never found a person he couldn't love more than he'd ever loved me or Mom, a place he didn't want to be more than he wanted to be at home.

"What do you say, kid?" he asks. "You got time to play tour guide for your dad and stepmom?"

Miles shoots me a look, brow raised, waiting for me to signal, *Leap over the coffee table and light something on fire while I climb out the window!*

And maybe I should—maybe Dad's just setting a box of cupcakes atop a trou-de-loup booby trap.

But he's *here*. With a *wife*, and a room already booked, and for the first time I can remember, he's *asking* whether I'm free, rather than assuming I'll drop everything because he's deigned to show up.

"Is there room for two more in our plans?" I ask Miles.

His head cocks. I can tell he's waiting for more of a signal than that, so I add, "We could probably make it work, right?"

He holds my gaze for a second, giving me a chance to change my mind, to scream "Ryan Reynolds!" at the top of my lungs.

I don't.

He turns a tamped-down version of his impishly charming smile toward them. "You all bring bathing suits?"

Julia pokes her head back into the room without a hint of shame that she's obviously been eavesdropping from one foot out of sight. "I knew it! We're going on the boat, aren't we?"





"THE BOAT" IS an old pontoon that belongs to a friend of Miles's. The hardware store / barbershop owner where he gets his tools/haircuts. Miles has an open invitation to use the pontoon whenever it's available. I drive and Dad rides up front, with Miles, Julia, and Starfire wedged in my backseat, Miles giving verbal directions rather than using a GPS, because he doesn't remember the guy's address.

I'd assumed we'd be boating on Lake Michigan, but there are dozens of smaller lakes further inland from the twenty-two-thousand square miles of Lake Michigan. We're going to one of those, a *lake* in the more traditional sense of the word, with rustic cottages lining the water and reeds swaying in the shallows.

We park down a long wooded drive in front of a gorgeous A-frame that's either halfway through being built or halfway through being renovated. My guess, based on the overgrown grass around a parked camper trailer and old truck, is the latter. That this place belongs to a do-it-yourselfer who's taking their time. Exactly the kind of person who'd operate a hardware store / barbershop.

"You guys go ahead and get on the boat," Miles tells us as we get out into the buggy heat. "I'll grab the keys from inside."

"I thought your friend wasn't home," I say, but he's already bounding up to the back deck, sliding open a door that was, apparently, unlocked. Julia and I pull the cooler out of the trunk and carry it between us down the grassy hillside toward the water's edge.

"What a gorgeous day for this!" Starfire says brightly. She's said it seven times so far. I've been counting.

“Couldn’t have asked for better weather,” Julia agrees, for the fourth time. We’ve been taking turns, and by now, I *think* she’s caught on and is making a game out of it.

“Like Michigan rolled out the red-carpet treatment,” Dad says, clapping a hand on my shoulder right as Julia and I set foot on the short dock that juts into the reeds. I wobble, but luckily manage to regain my footing before falling off the narrow pier and taking the cooler and Julia with me.

It’s seen better days—one board is missing, with two others snapped in the middle—but the boat looks to be in good shape. Not that I know what makes a boat *in good shape*, but it’s not on fire or anything.

Dad kicks off his shoes, picks them up, and hops aboard, helping each of us down by the hand. He passes Starfire down last, and makes a big show of kissing her hand. She giggles and looks between me and Julia like, *Are you seeing this? What a guy!*

I try to look pleasant and vaguely encouraging: *Yes, I saw my dad Gomez Addams you, and I think it’s great!*

It is sweet, honestly. Again that weird mishmash of emotions swirls in my rib cage.

I like seeing him like this. I also resent it, wonder for the millionth time why Mom and I never inspired this kind of attention or commitment.

“Got it,” Miles calls, jogging down the dock. He unties the boat and jumps in, starting the engine, then pulling his shirt off.

Starfire gasps at the assortment of disjointed tattoos this reveals. My initial blush-and-avoid-looking tactic quickly dissolves into looking for a giant heart with Petra’s name in it, but apparently that’s not one of the many tattoo-related capital-C Choices he’s committed to.

I do, however, realize for the first time that in addition to his Popeye anchor, he also has a full-on Popeye on his calf. This does surprisingly little to dampen the impulse to cross the boat and run my tongue over his skin.

“What *beautiful* body art!” Starfire coos. “What’s this one mean?”

She touches his upper biceps as he’s starting to steer us deeper into the lake. He subdues his smile. “Well,” he says, “it’s a mermaid.”

She nods with wide-eyed intrigue. “And?”

“I liked how it looked,” he says.

“It’s gorgeous.” She gives it a firm pat.

The lake is surprisingly hopping. Over the roar of our motor, we catch snippets of radio hits blasting off the boats we pass: Taylor Swift’s “Cruel Summer” and Sheryl Crow’s “Soak Up the Sun” and Otis Redding’s “(Sittin’ On) The Dock of the Bay.”

After ten minutes of cruising, wind in our hair, motor rattling in our ears, we find a good spot to stop and relax. Miles turns on our radio, drops anchor, and passes out cans of seltzer and beer from the cooler to the rest of us. Julia and I slather ourselves in sunscreen, but Starfire wastes no time shucking her clothes off and jumping off the back of the boat, a blur of hot-pink one-piece and a *whoop!*

Dad whistles and applauds when she resurfaces. Julia peels off her shorts and jumps out after her.

“Is it cold?” I call to them.

“Sort of,” Julia shouts back, right as Starfire says joyfully, “It feels like rebirth!”

Within a few minutes of cajoling, Dad’s gotten in too, and then he’s badgering Miles and me from the water, while Starfire backstrokes with impressive grace.

“You getting in?” Miles asks me, shielding his eyes against the sun to peer at me. It makes the moment feel strangely private, intimate.

“How deep is it?” I ask him.

“Don’t be a chicken!” Dad calls, the illusion of privacy shattering.

Starfire makes a hyperrealistic chicken sound. She’s really in her element here.

“What exactly”—I step up to the gate at the back of the boat—“would I be afraid of in this scenario?”

“The fish!” Dad cries, like this should be obvious.

“The fish?” I repeat.

Dad affects a look of disbelief. “Are you kidding? You were terrified of them when you were a kid! Remember? I took you fishing and you had that meltdown?”

I don't remember ever going fishing in my life, but if I did, I'm guessing the meltdown had less to do with the fish and more with having to pull a metal hook from its mouth. "Are you sure that was me?"

He laughs. "I think I remember my own daughter! I took you fishing, and we forgot sunscreen, and I knew your mom would be mad, so we went to the grocery store and I got you this bright yellow sun hat. Matched your bathing suit. You looked like Tweety Bird," he says, shaking his head. "You were *obsessed* with that hat."

I think about the beanie he sent me, wonder if he conflated it with the hat from this memory.

Honestly, I wonder if it's even a real memory, or just some scene in a movie he overlaid my face onto after the fact.

"You really don't remember?" he says.

I shake my head. This clearly bothers him, but I can't think of anything comforting to say. The fact is, the most memorable parts of my childhood are the ones he missed, his absence exactly what gave them their weight.

"It was a really special day," he murmurs, treading water in place, mouth turned down in a frown.

I hate that I feel guilt right now. I don't want to feel like Dad can still trigger that in me. Like all I want is to make him happy, make him proud, earn his shine.

Miles catches my eyes, his smile gone, his hand cupped around his eyes against the sun, creating that illusion of seclusion again.

It's a look like, *You good?*

Or maybe like, *I'm here.*

And I know he won't be forever, or maybe even very long, but it helps knowing that right now he is. That can be enough.

I turn toward the water, pulling my dress over my shoulders, sun beating against them. "On the bright side," I say, "since I don't remember that, I'm definitely not afraid of fish."

I toss my dress at the bench, step through the open gate, and leap into the water.

The cold rushes over my head, needles through my every pore.

When I come up, when the sun hits the crown of my head and I see Miles standing at the back of the boat, Julia and Starfire and Dad swimming in lazy circles in the sparkling water, I think of what Starfire said.

It does feel like a rebirth.

*People can change*, I think.

I'm changing.



**WE EAT DINNER** at Jesse's Table, a farm-to-table spot with a deck overlooking the water. I'm pink-cheeked-and-nosed from the day in the sun, while Dad's, Julia's, and Miles's tans have only deepened. Starfire is bright red but unbothered. "It'll turn into a tan by tomorrow," she told me when I offered her aloe back at the apartment, between the boat ride and the restaurant.

As soon as we're seated, Dad sweet-talks the host into taking an order for a bottle of wine. When the server arrives a minute later, Dad asks for recommendations on appetizers, and she lists six or so. He orders one of each, "for the table."

I feel my first ping of anxiety in hours, imagining Dad nonchalantly telling our server to split the check evenly at the end of the night. I'm trying to do the math in my head to figure out whether I can cover Julia's and Miles's portion of these things they decidedly did not order.

But everyone's in a great mood, tipsy on the sunshine and wine and the barbershop quartet practicing on the gravel patio of the ice cream shop two doors down.

By the time we make it through the appetizers, we've polished off the pinot blanc. Dad slips off to use the restroom (*smoke in a stall*) and comes back announcing he's ordered champagne so we can toast my birthday along with his and Starfire's nuptials.

She's barely touched her first glass, instead devoting her full focus to peppering me with questions about my childhood. It strikes me that Miles is right, that the key to being able to talk to anyone might just be curiosity.

But it also takes a kind of fearlessness, to invite someone into your space and ask to be invited into theirs. I can, a little too easily, imagine hanging up a needlepoint encouraging me to *Be More Like Starfire*.

Even when her questions lead to yet more proof that my father wasn't actually around for my childhood, she shows no visible signs of disappointment, just shoots a follow-up question my way.

I try to ask her things too, and she answers easily—yes, *she grew up in Vermont, she was on the ski team at her school, she's been a vegetarian since birth, she has six siblings, all of them brothers*—but she ends every response with a new question for *me*.

Meanwhile our server, who clearly loves Dad, brings out three off-menu offerings from the chef. On the house.

While we're eating our main courses, Julia and Starfire compare their birth charts, and have the kind of conversation about *water signs* that's indecipherable to nonastrology people. Dad asks Miles about work, and excitedly pitches the idea of going for dinner tomorrow at the winery once I'm off work. "If you're not too sick of it," Dad says to me. "Don't know how often you eat there."

"We can go there if you want," I say.

"Oh! And we *have* to go see Daffy at the library," Starfire puts in.

"You should go on Saturday, so you can see Story Hour," Julia volunteers.

"What's Story Hour?" Dad asks.

"It's just when I read to a group of kids," I say.

"She does the voices," Julia adds.

"Does she?" Dad's eyes light up. "Like that one gal at the old library we used to go to! What was her name? Leanna?"

He definitely *should* know her name, since he briefly dated her. Afterward, I noticed we started frequenting a different branch.

"How did you get started at the library, anyway?" Starfire asks. "Did you always want to do that?"

I couldn't feel more exposed if I'd unzipped my skin and poured my innards onto the table.

“Bet I know the answer to that one,” Dad says.

I can’t decide if that makes it better or worse.

He sets his elbows on the table and leans forward. “When Daphne was little, she was a big-time reader. And I had this girlfriend who worked at a bookstore, got a huge discount. So I’d always bring books when I came to visit.

“But me and Holly—Daph’s mom—neither of us really had ‘disposable income,’ per se. So I always got in trouble with her. I’d get Daphne the first book in a series, or worse, the *second*, and then Holly would have to buy her the first. She finally told me she wanted me to stop bringing presents. Thought I was trying to buy Daphne off.”

He rolls his eyes as he says this, but also shoots Julia a wink. “Maybe a bit. Anyway, we compromised. I’d take Daph to the library every time I was in town instead. You’d think I’d brought her to Disneyland. Put this girl in a room full of books, and she’s happier than anyone I’ve met. Never understood it myself, but it was cute as hell to watch her stack up as many as she could carry and slide them onto a desk higher than her forehead to check them out.”

Starfire puts a hand over her heart at this.

My own is beating a little fast, uncomfortably.

His telling of it feels so different from my own memory. What loomed so large for me, bigger even than the magic of being surrounded by bright colors and free books, was being excited to show him what I’d found. Wandering the stacks in search of him. Finally spotting him flirting with a librarian, hardly aware of me there, waiting for his attention.

One of my earliest memories of joy, and one of the first times I realized I’d always come in second.

“Excuse me.” I push back from the table and stand. “I’ve got to use the restroom.”

I serpentine through the tables on the deck into the restaurant, adjusting to the dim Edison bulb chandeliers before cutting over to the bathroom hallway.

Both are occupied, but it's not that I needed to pee so much as I needed to breathe, while I wait out this confusing torrent of feelings. I lean against the gilded wallpaper and close my eyes, willing my heart to slow.

"You okay?" comes a soft voice.

I open my eyes. Miles steps uncertainly into the hallway.

"Yep. Mm-hmm. Fine!" I say. "Bathroom's in use."

He nods. "Then I'll leave you to it." He turns away, and I feel this desperation.

To let it out, or just to keep him here a moment longer. "I never know how to feel when he's around," I blurt.

Miles turns, considers for a moment. He walks back and leans into the wall beside me. "Somebody recently told me that feelings are like the weather. They just kind of happen."

I try to force a smile. "Sounds like she has no idea what she's talking about."

"She's very smart," he says. "And hot, if that's relevant."

The glow in my chest isn't strong enough to break up all the dark clouds churning in there. "He's being so nice," I say weakly.

Miles thinks about this for a second. "It seems like it, yeah."

"So why am I upset?" I say.

"Maybe because . . . when he's nice, it's hard to be mad at him." He takes my hand gingerly. "And you are, so then you feel bad about that."

"Maybe," I say. Then, "Maybe exactly."

He pulls me into his chest and winds his arms around me. Warm, friendly, familiar Miles, and it surprises me how much it hurts to be this close to him. How it only seems to underscore that I won't be any closer.

"We can run if you want," he murmurs.

"Dine and dash?" I say. "I'm appalled at you, Miles Nowak."

"More like, pay on the way out," he says, "and take a speed-limit-abiding cab somewhere they can't find us."

"We couldn't do that. Julia would end up along for the ride to Vermont. Next thing we'd know, she'd be taking steroids and training for the Women's Olympic Ski Team."



“She can hold her own,” he says.

“So can I,” I argue.

He draws back to look into my face. “I know,” he says. “I just don’t want you to have to.”

I look toward the deck, blinking back the rising emotion. “The truth is, he seems different.”

“Is that bad?”

I shake my head. “No. I just . . .”

I don’t want to trust him.

I don’t want to be disappointed.

“I made my peace with how things have always been between us,” I admit. “It took me a long time to stop expecting more than he’d give me.”

“That makes sense,” Miles says, tucking my hair behind my ear.

I don’t want to go back to feeling unsteady. I don’t want it to hurt every time he lets me down.

I already feel it again: the aching emptiness where my dad’s love should be. And this time, I don’t have my mom nearby, or Peter and the Collinses to fill the gaps.

And no matter how genuinely nice Starfire is, it doesn’t change the fact that she’s a woman who paid someone actual money to recount the plot of *Titanic* to her as a prophecy, and *she* is worthy of Dad’s love, when I never have been.

Just like Petra is worthy of Peter’s.

Just like Peter is worthy of the commitment of all those friends from whom I’d worked tirelessly to earn approval since we moved here. The ones who had no time for me since the breakup. Still worthy of Sadie’s love, after I’d stopped being so.

Life isn’t a competition, and neither is love, but I’m still the loser.

A frown creases Miles’s forehead as he cups my chin.

I shake my head. “I just want it to be real.”

“What?” he says.

“The memories he has of us,” I whisper. “This visit. I want to believe it all means something.”

“Maybe it does,” he says.

The bathroom door opens behind us, and his hand falls away as we press ourselves against the wall to let the emerging man slink past. As he goes, he finishes tucking his dress shirt back into his pants and eyes us with unbridled suspicion.

“He one-hundred-percent thinks we’re doing a drug deal,” I say.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he says. “He at least *fifty-percent* thinks we’re having an illicit affair.”

We both smile at our feet. “So where do you want to go,” he asks. “Back to the table, or out the front door?”

“Table.” I tip my head toward the open bathroom door. “Just give me a minute.”

“I’d give the *bathroom* a minute,” he says. “That guy had the face of someone who just did something ungodly.”



I CATCH OUR server on my way through the restaurant to the deck. “Could you make sure you put the shared plates on my tab?” I ask.

“Wish I could.” She’s holding her hands up in surrender. “The older gentleman already picked everything up.”

“Really?” I say. “You’re sure?”

“He was adamant the bill not make it to the table,” she replies.

I thank her and walk back to my seat, slightly dazed. As soon as I’ve sunk back into my chair, a crowd of servers files through the restaurant’s back door onto the deck, carrying a chocolate cake lit with a sparkler.

“Happy late birthday, honey,” Dad says, right before the staff begins to sing.

“Thanks, Dad,” I say, voice disappearing into the chorus of voices.

“It’s nothing,” he murmurs, squeezing my arm atop the table. But he looks relieved, or maybe pleased.

Like my happiness has made *him* happy. And suddenly my eyes are stinging and heat is rushing up the back of my nose. I focus on the blue-

gold sparks shooting off the cake so I won't crack.



AFTER DESSERT, WE pick our way down the deck stairs to the beach. Miles brought towels in a backpack, and we stretch out, waiting as the sky darkens, stars gradually pricking through it. Out on the water, someone has decided to shoot off fireworks from their boat.

A hum, a gasp, a sigh, ripple through the beach's stragglers. One streak of light pops, explodes into a shivering purple blossom. Two more quickly follow, on either side, pink and gold.

Kids shriek and squeal and run circles around their adults, Popsicles and ice cream cones melting down their wrists. Dad and Starfire strike up a conversation with a couple around their age standing near us, and Julia is down on the ground, taking selfies with a shaggy Great Pyrenees sprawling in the sand. Even with the sulfuric smell hanging in the air, I can still pick out the gingery kick of Miles beside me.

"Good night?" he asks, a fresh wave of fireworks making his face shimmer with greens and oranges.

"Great night."

He smiles and faces forward, the back of his hand brushing mine. My heart feels like a present unwrapped, my body relaxing.

For the first time, I let myself really imagine this lasting.

All of it.

Dad and Starfire. Ashleigh and Julia. Waning Bay.

Miles.

I could be happy here. I could belong.



I PLAN ON saying good night to Dad and Starfire at our apartment and sending them on their way. Then I make the mistake of Googling their motel.

“Dad!” I say. “This is forty minutes away, and the first *three* reviews mention bedbugs.”

“Everything closer to the water books up a year out, apparently,” he tells me.

I scroll down. The reviews that *don’t* mention bedbugs focus instead on cockroaches. Yet another reviewer complains that their room didn’t have a bed. “Just a rust-colored outline where the bed should’ve been,” I read aloud to them.

“I’m sure if they give us a room without a bed, they’ll let us move for free,” Starfire volunteers.

I shoot Miles a frantic look.

“Anyone want water?” he chimes in. “Daphne—wanna help me?”

We beeline for the kitchen, ignoring their protestations that they’re fine, it’s been hours since they drank that wine, they should get on the road, etc.

While Miles pulls glasses down, he says under his breath, “What do you want to do?”

“We can’t let them stay in that place,” I whisper back.

“We can,” he says. “But we don’t have to. It’s up to you.”

“What other option do we have?” I say.

“I could let them use the air mattress, and I take the couch?” Julia says, making me jump as she walks into the room. “Not ‘getting water,’ then?”

“Working on it,” Miles says; then, more quietly, “Just trying to figure out what to do about this. I don’t think we can ask two sixty-something-year-olds to sleep on an air mattress.”

“I’ll take the couch, Julia can stick with the inflatable, and they can take my room,” I say.

“No, don’t be ridiculous,” he says. “They can take my room, and I’ll take the couch.”

“How is that any less ridiculous?” I say. “They’re my parents. Or . . . my dad and my . . . Starfire.”

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?” he asks.

“For tonight,” I say. “Tomorrow we can look for a hotel that’s less . . .”

“Infested?” Julia finishes.

“That,” I agree.

“If you’re sure,” Miles says.

I haven’t been sure of much in the last few months. “Close enough,” I say.



WHILE MILES TAKES his turn in the bathroom queue, I get Dad and Starfire settled into my room with fresh bedding.

“Really appreciate this, kid,” Dad says. “We would’ve been okay at the motel.”

“Yeah, well, this way you don’t take bedbugs to Starfire’s family,” I say.

He gives me a hug good night, an awkward kiss atop my head, and when we separate, Starfire is waiting, arms out wide to reveal her baby-blue nightgown.

“Good night, Starfire,” I say, accepting her tight squeeze.

“Good night, sweetie,” she says. “And if you want, you can call me *Mom*.”

“Oh, that’s . . . I’ll stick with Starfire, but I hope you sleep well!”

I close the door behind me on my way out. Julia is in the process of dragging her air mattress toward Miles’s room, and I hurry over to help.

We agreed it made more sense to put her in *there*, because if we left the mattress in the cramped living room, there'd be no way for me to get off the couch without stepping on her.

Given how many times I can pee in one night, that seemed impractical.

We unroll the rumpled air mattress in front of Miles's closet doors, and while she gets the pump going, I bring her tangle of bedding in from the living room.

"Thanks for being up for this," I tell her, when she turns the pump off and we start making the bed.

"No problem," she says. "Honestly, I'm just taking this as a sign it's time for me to get back to Chicago and get the rest of my stuff and my car."

"Have you talked to Miles about it any more?" I say.

"What is there to talk about," she says.

I hesitate. "Did something . . . happen in Chicago?"

She flops down on her mattress and pulls the quilt up to her chin, her face steely. "Can you turn off the overhead on your way out?"

"Sure," I say. "Sleep tight."

In the dark living room, I make a nest on the couch. The bathroom door creaks open, tendrils of light reaching toward me. Miles steps out in a cloud of steam, his hair damp, the little wet spots around the collar of his camel T-shirt making the fabric cling to him in a vaguely suggestive way.

"I could've made it myself," he whispers, padding over.

I go back to tucking the blankets in. "Why would you make my bed?"

"Because it's not your bed, it's mine," he says.

"Says who," I say.

"Says the person who owns the couch," he says.

I stop what I'm doing and face him. The bathroom light licks at the right side of his face while shadow covers the left. "Take my bed," he says.

I grab a pillow and fluff it.

"You'd be doing me a favor," he says. "Julia and I have never shared a room in our lives, and for all I know, she yodels in her sleep."

He pulls the throw pillow out of my hands and steps closer. "Daphne," he says, "would you please do me the honor of sleeping in my bed?"

Every single one of my nerve endings prickle. I know he didn't mean it how it sounds.

So I respond, very naturally, "Starfire told me I could call her 'Mom.' "

Miles chokes over a laugh. "Does it make you feel better or worse that she said the same thing to me?"

"It makes me want to buy her a dictionary," I say.

He swallows a snort of laughter.

When it settles, all that's left is this pull between us, knitting us together.

Through the walls, Dad gives a hacking cough, the faint smell of weed seeping through the door, and the spell breaks.

Some invisible cloche lifts from around us. Reality rushes back in.

"Sleep well," I tell him.

He holds an arm out, gesturing me toward his room. "You too."

And I do.

I dream about fireworks, about cool hands, the rasp of a jaw, the taste of ginger and smell of woodsmoke.



**AFTER WORK ON** Friday, I meet Dad and Starfire at a brewery Miles told them about.

With Ashleigh recovering from her trip to Sedona, Julia having flown back to Chicago earlier that afternoon, and her brother already clocked in at Cherry Hill, it's just the three of us. I'm grateful that Miles recommended a place with giant Jenga and a bocce court on the patio so we have something to do other than stare directly into each other's eyes.

They fill me in on their day exploring the dunes, for which Starfire has donned a gauzy, dramatically patterned maxidress that makes her look like one of the Real Housewives on a desert vacation.

She shows me roughly two hundred pictures of sand, before Dad gently turns the conversation toward *my* day.

"It was pretty standard stuff," I say. "We had a Puzzle Swap this morning. One patron showed up with a custom puzzle she'd had made of

her thirty-year-old boudoir shots, and another tried to walk out with three *Star Wars* puzzles hidden inside his trench coat.”

“Sounds like you’ve got quite a cast of characters,” Dad says, tossing his final bocce ball of the round down the sandy lane.

“The library is, like, the single best cross section of humanity,” I tell him. “You meet all kinds of interesting people.”

“And here I thought you were in it for the free books,” Dad teases.

I’m surprised how normal this feels. How nice it is to imagine *this* version of my father—the one who asks questions about my work, who not only shows up for my birthday, but thinks to tell the server to bring a cake with a sparkler stuck in it—sticking around.

And yes, the attention from paid strangers, forced to sing on my behalf, is fairly far from any gift I’d ever *want*, but it strikes me as the kind of thing normal dads do. Year-round fathers, who measure their kids on doorjambs and teach them to ride bikes and drive them to their first E.R. visit.

He’s still the dad I’ve always known too: the one who managed, today at the dunes, to just “bump into” someone who owns an entire hotel on Mackinac Island and bond over a shared love of the Grateful Dead to the extent that the hotelier gave Dad his phone number and promised to hook him and Starfire up with free rooms anytime they wanted.

But he’s also asking, “What’s your favorite thing you do at the library?”

And he’s listening with interest as I tell him about the Read-a-thon, about the sponsorships I’ve gotten, about how happy Harvey was about the cash donations Miles has helped me rack up.

“Your passion!” Starfire says, hand to her heart. “Just like your father’s!”

And he’s giving her hand a squeeze, saying, “No, she’s way better than her old man. She’s always had *direction*.”

I don’t totally understand it, why his pride in me matters. But it does. It matters.

After dinner, he suggests we visit Miles at Cherry Hill, so we leave our car at the brewery to pick up later and take a cab up the peninsula.

The winery is bustling.



Miles waves at us from behind the bar, but he's too busy to come talk. He murmurs something to Katya, who flags us down at the very end of the bar, sliding an open bottle and three glasses over. "On the house," she shouts over the noise.

We take our bottle and glasses out to the circular tables on the lawn, the sky turning periwinkle at the edges while the sun holds on for a few more breaths.

I scan the lawn. "No open tables."

"Chairs are bad for you anyway," Starfire replies, a curious but confident pronouncement. She removes her bedazzled sandals and lowers herself to the ground. Dad and I follow suit. With the sitting, not the shoe removal, but the grass is so intoxicatingly cool that I don't blame her for wanting to feel it between her toes.

Dad pours the wine, then passes out our glasses, and there we watch the colors melt across the sky.

"I could see us here, Star," Dad says, and she sighs.

"Me too. We should ask Karen what she thinks."

"Karen?" I say.

"Our psychic," Starfire says.

"The one who told you about the *Titanic*?" I verify.

She nods. "That's why we were so surprised about you and Miles. Karen told us you and Miles would go the distance. She's never been wrong before."

Not sure how Starfire has confirmed that her past life was indeed an Oscar-winning film, but I let it go.

Even as the lawn clears and the tables empty and the sky goes dark, we stay half-reclined on the grass, watching the string lights pop on, listening to the occasional bat flap past.

When Miles clocks out, he brings us a half bottle of red left over from his shift, and pours each of us a small glass.

Dad proposes a toast: "To our gracious hosts."

Starfire adds, "To my beautiful new family."

I feel a twinge.

Of guilt? Like I'm betraying Mom if I let Dad back in?

Or maybe just fear. That I'm doing what I swore I never would: making space in my heart for someone whom experience has taught me not to trust.

*People change*, I think.

*I can.*

Dad can.

Miles shifts in the grass beside me, his knee brushing mine like a question. *Are you there? Are you okay?*

*I can be.*

I can be here, in the moment, instead of watching for smoke, ready to run.

I lift my glass into the ring we've formed. "To family."



SATURDAY, AUGUST 3<sup>RD</sup>

## 14 DAYS UNTIL THE READ-A-THON

**TWO THINGS HAPPEN** Saturday morning.

First, Ashleigh calls out sick and Landon has to fill in for her. Second, a storm rolls in, driving everyone in Waning Bay inside, and most, it would seem, of the under-eight crowd into the library.

I'm kept running right up until it's time to start gathering Story Hour supplies, at which point the automatic doors whoosh open, carrying a distant rumble of thunder and a sideways sheet of rain inside, along with Miles Nowak.

He stops on the mat inside the doors to rustle his wet hair, like a dog shaking out postbath, and I suppress a deeply charmed grin.

When he looks up and catches me watching him, though, he doesn't return the smile. Mine dissipates as he approaches and sets a cup on my desk. "Brought you tea."

"Thanks."

I can tell he's waiting, so I take a sip, the spicy sweetness zinging from the back of my tongue to the base of my spine.

"Delicious," I confirm. "Did you come all the way here to bring me this?"

He gives a flimsy grin. "I came all the way here to hear a story."

I lean around him, half expecting to see an ostrich-feather-clad Starfire and my Canadian-tuxedoed Dad in tow.

Miles glances down at his hands braced against the desk and clears his throat. “Ah. So.”

“They’re not coming,” I say. “Are they?”

He inhales slowly. My stomach’s sinking. I do my best to intercept it.

It’s not a big deal. If anything, it’s a relief. I always feel awkward being *observed* by nonlibrary people during Story Hour. Now I can finish my workday in peace and meet Dad and Starfire at the axe-throwing bar she was so excited about.

Miles is still looking at me like I’m a puppy whose paw he’s just accidentally stomped on.

“It’s fine,” I assure him. “I’m reading a book aloud to some kids. It’s not my Broadway debut.”

“No, I know, it’s . . .” His gaze cuts over my shoulder and back to me again. “You should probably go get set up, right?”

The way he says it, I can *feel* the gap where something *unsaid* hovers.

My heart speeds. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” he says. “It can wait.”

“You’re freaking me out,” I say.

“That’s not what I’m trying to do,” he says.

“But it’s what you’re doing,” I say. “Just tell me what’s going on, or I won’t be able to concentrate.”

He leans away from the desk, hands gripping the edge, and blows out a breath. “I didn’t think this through.”

“*Miles.*”

“They left, Daphne.”

“Left?” I say. “Who?”

“Your parents,” he says. “Your dad and Starfire. They got a last-minute invitation to meet some friends up in Mackinac.”

I glance toward my phone. It’s on the desk, face up. No new messages. No explanation.

Of course there isn’t. There never is. The explanation is implied: something better came along.

There is no reason for me to feel surprised. There is every reason to feel nothing. This is what I should have expected.

*Last-minute invitation*, Miles said.

*To meet some friends up in Mackinac.*

The “friend” he made yesterday, no doubt. Some guy who owns a hotel and likes the Grateful Dead. At least, that’s my guess, if I have to make one. And I do. Because Dad didn’t tell me himself.

Miles murmurs, “He left you a note.”

I flip my phone face down, searching for today’s Story Hour books among the mess, but my hands feel clumsy, like my brain’s just learning how to operate them.

“I told him to call,” Miles says.

I find the books, the smallest bit of relief seeping into me at the feeling of something solid in my grip. “Not his style.”

Miles reaches across the desk and curls one hand around my wrist, running his thumb over my veins. “I’m sorry. I should’ve waited to tell you.”

I can’t help a snort. “No, really, Miles. It’s better that I know now.”

Otherwise I would’ve kept waiting for him to show up.

*Waiting, waiting, waiting.*

“You should get to work,” I say.

I don’t want to be seen like this.

I want to be left alone with my embarrassment and hurt.

In the end, it was relatively easy to let go of Peter, to accept his actions as proof of the truth: that our relationship, our life together, his feelings for me were never quite what I’d thought they were.

And I stopped longing for him when I accepted this, because how could I miss someone who didn’t exist?

So why can’t I seem to do the same thing with my father? Why can’t I stop missing the dad I never had?

Why is he this constant dull ache in my heart?

I *knew* he wouldn’t change. But a part of me kept hoping *I* had changed enough that he couldn’t hurt me, or that this new iteration of me would be

the one worth sticking around for.

That I'd fixed whatever's so broken in me that I can't be loved.

I clear my throat. "Go to work, Miles. I'm okay."

*Fine.*

*Fine.*

*Fine.*

*You can be fine.*

His fingers loosen. He steps back. "I called off. I thought you'd . . ." he trails off.

"I don't need you to babysit me," I snap, then try to soften my voice: "Trust me, this isn't anything new. Please go."

He studies me for a long beat. Then he leans back from the desk, letting his hands slide clear of it. "Yeah. Got it."

And then he's gone.

At least this time, I was the one to say goodbye first.



WHEN I GET home, Miles is in his room on the phone, his voice raised in frustration, almost brittle.

"I don't care," he says. "You shouldn't have done that."

His voice drops to an indistinct murmur, then falls silent. I realize I've been stalled in the hallway, eavesdropping, only when his bedroom door swings open and I'm busted.

He draws up short.

My chest aches at the sight of him, so scruffy, so messy, so familiar. I want to hide from him, and I want to be held by him. I want to apologize for earlier and I want to never talk about it again.

"Hi," I scrape out.

"Hi," he says.

A laden moment passes.

"I still don't want to talk," I say.

He nods.

"I don't even want to think," I go on. What is there to think about? My dad is exactly who he's always been, and I'm who I've always been too.

For just one night, I'd like to pretend. I'd like to be someone else. Not the uptight one, or the damaged one, or the one who gets left.

Not the one waiting, or poring over Dad's note like it's an old treasure map and if I can just interpret the faded scribbles, everything will make sense.

I swallow hard. "Will you take me somewhere?"

Miles's brow lifts in surprise. "Where do you want to go?"

I swallow hard. "Just . . . somewhere I've never been."

Somewhere that won't remind me of Peter or my father or any other time that I wasn't enough.

I say, "If you're busy—"

Miles cuts across me: "I'll get my keys."

For the first few minutes in his truck, he takes my request not to talk literally.

I break first, my voice thick. "I'm sorry I was rude. It was nice of you, to rearrange your night to try to make me feel better."

At a red light, he looks over. He takes a breath, then closes his mouth, like he's just decided against saying something.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing," he lies.

"Come on," I urge him. "Tell me."

"It's just . . ." He shakes his head. "You always assume I'm being so selfless. Like it hasn't occurred to you I might *want* to hang out with you. So when you turn me down, I have to figure out if you just don't feel the same way, or if *you* think you're doing me some kind of favor. And I never can."

My heart feels rug-burned. My throat is full. I'm not sure what to say.

Behind us, someone honks, and Miles's eyes return to the road. The light's green. He drives through.



WE PULL OVER, a bend in the road shielding us from view, and forest hemming us in on the left and right. “Where are we?”

He opens his door. “Somewhere new.”

I climb out, try opening my map app on my phone. I don’t have service.

“This way.” Miles leads me into the woods, the ground sandy and pine-dusted. It’s a long walk, half an hour at least, before the trees give way and blue-green water appears ahead of us, stretching farther than I can see, a thin band of darker blue where the sky melts into the water at the horizon.

The sun hangs low and fiercely bright. I turn my head into the wind to look up the shore. In the distance, a pale outcropping of rock juts into the water, blocking this cove from view. Scraggly trees twist up from the stone at odd, whimsical angles, all of it as white as sand.

“Wow,” I breathe.

Miles hums agreement.

I turn the other way, my gaze following the beach until the woods curve out and cut anything else off from view on our right too.

No one. Just us, and a couple of time-bleached, hollowed-out pieces of driftwood strewn down the shore.

“This,” he says, “is my favorite beach.”

I touch my collarbone, a lump rising through my throat. The wind ruffles his hair, his beard thick again, and the light catching his dark eyes makes them spark.

My heart *thrashes*, like it’s trying to get itself up above a wave. Like I could drown in the sight of him.

I look away and start toward the gleaming water.

I undo the buttons on my top, step out of my shoes, and peel off my pants, leaving it all behind in a trail on the damp sand.

I step into the water, braced for cold, but after this morning’s storm moved off, the day was hot and it’s left the lake balmy. The tide rocks into my shins. I want to submerge myself completely, but there’s a sandbar here, so I break into a jog, the water slowing my progress, my thighs burning.

Miles stands at the water’s edge, shielding his eyes against the light. “Are you coming?” I shout back over the water’s roar.



I see him laugh but can't hear it, and I feel *robbed* of the sound.

He takes off his shirt and pants, and comes toward me in easy, lazy strides.

He picks up speed as he reaches me, water splashing up to my thighs and stomach as he catches me around the waist, hoists me off my feet. I shriek with surprised laughter, and he carries me deeper, my arms locked over his.

"Don't drop me," I say, voice fading into the crashing of the water.

He swings me into his arms, carrying me outright instead of simply hauling me along. "Never," he says.

With every step, the water splashes against us, and then we're in so deep that it's lapping at me, pouring over Miles's arms to thread across my stomach. He stops and sways me back and forth, my toes trailing over the warm surface.

I close my eyes, and every sensation amplifies: the sunbeams drenching my face, Miles's arms crooked beneath my back and knees, the way his breath presses his stomach against my side on every inhale, the lazy squawk of seagulls in the distance, and the grit of the sand on my feet, and a complete kind of safety.

Like being in a womb. Like lying on a quilt in the yard of our old house, the one we shared with Dad, on a summer day, legs tickling as a roly-poly climbed over the back of my calf. Like being tucked back in the library stacks with no one around and a good selection.

I let my eyes open, and now the sight of him—that messy hair, his sun-freckled face and scruffy jaw, those chocolate-brown eyes—it cuts through my veins, a thousand wakes from a thousand little boats with Miles on their sails, headed straight toward my heart. "Thanks for bringing me here," I murmur.

His eyes settle softly on me. "I already told you. I didn't do it to be nice."



WE DRIVE HOME with the windows open, pine thick in the air and wind howling.

At a red light, Miles looks across the dark cab, sets his hand on mine on the seat. My heart beats like a hummingbird at the back of my throat. I turn my palm up to his, let his fingers slide between mine.

We hold on to each other the whole way home, across the sidewalk to our building, up the stairs.

He gets the door unlocked, pulls me into the dark apartment, pushes me against the door.

Our breath is shallow. My heart is battering in my chest.

We're right up against the ledge we've been sliding toward all summer, and I'm still trying to talk myself down when he kisses me.

A rough, breathless kiss that turns my legs to liquid. A kiss that breaks through every last bit of willpower I had. My hands slip up the back of his neck into his still-damp hair, and his hips lock with mine, months of need thrumming between us.

The kiss deepens, his tongue in my mouth, his teeth on my lip, his groan slipping down my throat to curl up in my low belly. His hand slides down my chest to cup me through my damp shirt, and I have no more patience.

I reach for the buttons on his pants. He helps me undo them. I pull his shirt off. He does the same with mine, both cast on the floor. We crash back into one another, move into the kitchen. He walks me back against the counter, his rough hands sliding around me to undo my bra, pull it off me, then pin my hips back to the counter while he looks at me.

"Gorgeous," he says raggedly.

I pull him to me, gasp at the feeling of his chest flush against mine. He lifts me onto the counter and steps in closer, our bodies moving restlessly against each other, trying to find every last bit of friction, my thighs tight against his hips.

Kissing him is so different now that I know him. Now I understand that the breezy, carefree Miles I first met is only his topmost layer, that his nonchalant way of moving through the world is a product of self-control, but beneath that surface, he *wants*.

The last bite of cheesecake.

The final sip of wine.

The bracing cool of the lake.

To be kissed.

To be held.

To be protected.

He wants it all, even the things he'd never let himself ask for, or won't let himself have.

His hand sifts across the back of my head and winds into my hair as our kiss coarsens.

The thrills going through my belly make me feel lightweight, helium-filled. Our teeth clink. A breathless laugh, his or mine, and then a deeper kiss. My hands down his back, my nails scraping over his goose-bumped shoulders.

I *love* how his skin feels, how it's dry from exposure to the elements, and the smell of the winery never quite washes away.

I want him to know that I love it, so I tell him, in a whisper just beneath his ear, and he nuzzles into my throat, lets his hand graze down my chest, rolling against me until I can barely breathe.

Then he lowers himself between my knees, his hands light against my legs, his mouth warm and heavy on my low stomach, the crease of my hip, and then, eyes slanting up to mine, between my thighs. I lean back into my palms, breath quickening as he brushes my underwear aside, presses his mouth to me, murmurs my name in a low gravel that makes everything in me pull taut. I work my hips against him, his hands skating around to guide

my movement until I feel like I can't breathe, can't see, like my heart might crack through my ribs if I can't have more of him.

"Condoms?" I whisper.

His eyes slice to mine, dark and inky. "Do you want to?"

I know what he means: not *Do you want to use a condom* but *Do you want to do something that requires a condom*, and I almost laugh, because I can't imagine it being more obvious what I want.

"I do," I say, "as long as you do."

He stands, squeezing the back of my neck. "Stay here."

When he comes back, he tosses the strip of them on the counter and pulls me back to him, a fierce, hungry kiss as we scrabble with each other's pants. I get his off first, wrap a hand around him, and his head bows into my shoulder, his muscles going tight in a way that thrills me. I gently push him back by the shoulder, our eyes connecting as I slide off the counter, kneel in front of him.

"You don't have to," he murmurs.

"I want to," I tell him. And I do, like I never have before. His hand flutters into my hair as I take him in my mouth, a ragged sound scraping out of his throat. He moves with me, my hands climbing up his thighs, to his hips, guiding him.

"Daphne," he says gruffly, shaking his head. "No more."

Which is good, because hearing him this turned on is making it hard for me to keep going. He pulls me back up, our mouths melting together as his hands skim down me, peeling away my pants, then my underwear. For the first time we're entirely bare together, and it's exhilarating and terrifying and sensual having his arms wrapped around me, our thighs tangled together, feeling his pulse in so many different places as he bends to sweep a kiss along my trapezius, then another at my temple, then finally a soft kiss on my lips.

For several seconds, we're tender, delicate, but soon the need wins out. He turns me by the hips, pushes me against the counter, and wedges himself between my thighs, teasing me until I'm practically crying, pushing myself back against him, pleading with him.

I hear the tear of foil packaging, and strain eagerly back against him, and seconds later, *finally*, he's pushing slowly into me, and I *am* crying out, my whole back alive with goose bumps as his hands drag down me, settle at my hips, guiding me back to him feverishly. He slides one hand around my waist to nestle between my thighs as we move together.

The counter's edge digs in my waist. His fingertips score into my hip.

"*More*," I say. There's no such thing as enough.

He withdraws long enough to turn me back to him. We clamber back together for several dizzying, desperate seconds, and then we're on the kitchen floor, and he's biting me and I'm licking him, and my thighs are wound around his waist, our skin slick with sweat, his hips bucking into me. Like I've wanted. Like I've needed.

I realize I've said it aloud when he answers. "You have no idea how badly I've wanted this, Daphne. How much I've needed you."

"*Miles*," I beg. It feels like more than just my body that's about to come apart, like my heart is splitting at the seams, and it's a terrifying, vulnerable feeling to break in front of him in this way, to be so unexpectedly and wholly at his mercy.

His hands come up to cup my face, our bodies keeping pace. "I know," he whispers. "I've got you."

So I let go. I break, every last knot coming undone, and he bites down on my shoulder as he shudders into me too.

The waves of sensation roar through me, the sound of our breath rushing into my ears, and light dancing across the back of my eyelids.

The waves draw back, our hearts still thundering, and he slides off of me, pulls me into a curl against his chest as we catch our breath.

I fling an arm over my eyes as a ludicrous wave of laughter overtakes me.

"Daphne?" Miles says, voice hoarse with alarm. "What's wrong?"

He moves my arm down so he can meet my eyes.

"Nothing," I get out.

"Then why are you laughing?" he says, dubious.

I hardly understand my own reaction. "Because I'm happy, I guess."

His smile widens. He leans down to kiss me, a sweet brush of his lips that lingers. I'm smiling too, our teeth lightly clinking. He brushes my sweat-streaked hair away from my forehead.

"You're amazing," he says quietly, which makes me laugh again. He casts a sleepy smile sidelong at me. "What's so funny about that?"

I say, "You just make it sound like I did acrobatics."

"You might have," he says. "I blacked out for a few seconds in the middle there."

I turn my face into his chest, chortling. His hand sweeps down my spine and back up, tucking itself at the base of my neck, beneath my sweaty hair. "I actually did," he says.

"I think I did too," I admit.

"Why was it like that?" he says, which makes me laugh more, a heavy, relaxing hum of emotion through my heavy, relaxed limbs.

"I don't know," I say.

There's a long silence, his hand moving lazily over my hair, our breath in sync. Then he asks, "Are you hungry?"

For some reason, this makes my heart feel like it's about to burst. "Starving."



I TAKE A quick shower and put on pajamas while Miles starts making banana chocolate chip pancakes. When I'm done, I take over while he rinses off too, then pads back into the room in nothing but a pair of sweatpants and one new hickey I have no memory of giving him.

"Oh my god. I'm sorry," I say, touching the spot on his collarbone.

"Don't be." He takes the spatula from me with one hand and brushes the hair away from my neck with his other. "You're going to be wearing turtlenecks for weeks."

He flips the last couple of pancakes onto the waiting plates, and we eat them there, standing up. Then he slides his empty plate away onto the counter and asks, "Do you want to talk about it now?"

“Talk about what,” I say.

“Your dick dad,” he replies.

“Maybe you didn’t notice,” I say, “but that ‘dick’ is essentially universally loved.”

“By strangers,” Miles says. “By people who don’t know him or need anything from him. Excuse me if I don’t find that impressive.”

“Well, you wouldn’t,” I say. “Because everyone instantly loves you too. I’m the one here people don’t want around.”

He shakes his head, frowning. “Do you know how often you do that?”

“Do what?” I ask.

“Act like my opinion doesn’t matter to you,” he says.

My jaw drops. “Of course it matters.”

“Everything I say,” he replies, “it’s like, *Oh, of course you’d say that, Miles, you’re just nice. Or, You don’t get it, because you’re you, or, my new favorite, You’re just like my asshole dad.*”

“That’s not what I meant,” I say. “At all.”

“You said no one wants you around,” he replies. “What about me?”

“What about you?” I say.

“Me wanting you doesn’t count?” he asks, brows knitted together.

A fiery heat wave, a series of them, one after another.

*Me wanting you.*

*Me wanting you.*

*Me wanting you.*

“It counts,” I say. It’s terrifying how much it counts. I set my plate aside. “What about you?”

“Me?” he says.

“I heard your phone call,” I confess.

He’s quiet, thoughtful, for several seconds. “It was my dad.”

I start. “Your *dad*?”

“He’s been trying to call me nonstop,” he says, “from phone numbers that I *don’t* have blocked. So he could tell me to get *Julia* to call him back.”

I gawk. “I don’t understand.”

“Turns out they’ve been talking,” he says. “Which I’m guessing she didn’t tell me because she knew it would stress me out, waiting for him to fuck her over again. Which he did. He figured out where Jules worked, because she still lets him follow her on social media—which I *warned* her about—and he told our mom.

“She showed up at the restaurant. Upset Julia bad enough that she walked out. Got fired, blocked my dad, and got on an airplane here—not necessarily in that order—and now he’s harassing *me* to try to get *her* to forgive him.”

“Oh my god, Miles,” I say. “That’s terrible.”

“I’m sorry.” He rubs the bridge of his nose.

“Why?” I ask.

He shrugs. “I don’t want to dump this on you.”

“You’re not dumping it on me,” I promise.

“I’m used to keeping all of this separate. And nothing is, with you. You’re my roommate and my best friend and the woman I just slept with.”

My eyes burn. I try to blink away the feeling.

He’s looking at me like he’s trying to strain something out of me. “Daphne?”

“You’re my best friend too.” It comes out as a throaty whisper. “That’s why today was so hard, when my dad left.”

My throat twists, my voice wobbling: “Because *you* saw it. And it makes me feel pathetic. Even more so because the truth is, if he turned around and came right back here, I’d be thrilled. I’d forgive him again and again, just hoping that eventually I’d actually mean something to him. I’d call and *beg* him to come back, if I thought there was a chance he’d say yes. But I can’t, because I know he won’t. And I don’t want to hear that. I don’t want him to prove that I’m . . .”

I’m trying to find *alternate* words.

Because just saying these feels like codifying the truth into existence.

It’s painful to push them past the knot in my throat, but holding them in all these years hasn’t made me feel better, hasn’t made them less true, hasn’t stanch the bleeding or numbed the pain. “That I’m not worth it.”



“Hey.” Miles’s arms come around me, his heat and spicy ginger scent soaking into me.

“A part of me is just waiting,” I rasp, “for the moment when you see whatever it is that drives people away. And I don’t want that. I don’t want you to stop wanting me around. I think it might break my heart to be someone you don’t like.”

“Fuck. Daphne.” His hands come up to my face. “Do you want to know why your dad doesn’t stick around?”

Tears sting the back of my nose, but I nod. It’s the question I’ve never been able to stop asking, no matter how badly it hurts.

“Because you see him,” Miles says. “And he can’t stand it. And Peter’s the same shit with a different outfit, so bored with himself he convinced himself that being with someone like Petra would turn him into someone else, without, like, having to be brave enough to try acid.”

“He was bored with *me*, Miles,” I say.

“If it was about you,” he says, “he could’ve ended it. Instead he blew up his life. That’s about *him*. I’ve been that guy, a dozen times, with a dozen people I didn’t deserve. It’s easy to be loved by the ones who’ve never seen you fuck up. The ones you’ve never had to apologize to, and who still think all your ‘quirks’ are charming.

“It’s easy to be around people who don’t know you. But as soon as someone starts to figure you out—as soon as you can’t be *perfect*—it’s easier to move on. Find someone new to be the *cool, fun, laid-back* one with.”

“So that’s it?” My voice crackles. “I make people feel like their worst selves.”

“Daphne, *no*.” He pulls me in against him, his face buried in my neck. “God, no.” When he draws back, tense dimples have pricked his scruffy jaw. “Look, I’ve always *wanted* to be that fun, easy person with no baggage, even with Petra. But after a while, someone either finally sees you or they don’t, and either way it fucking sucks. Because if they see you, and it’s not what they signed up for, then they’re out of there. And if they never see you . . . it’s worse. Because you’re just alone.

“And I loved Petra,” he says, “but deep down I knew, as soon as things stopped being fun, she’d be gone. And she was. She found something *more* romantic, *more* perfect, just *more*. I think you’re the first person who’s really seen me. Past what I want people to see.

“You make the people you care about feel like . . .” He pauses. “Like you want *all* of them. Not just the good parts. And that’s terrifying to someone who’s spent a lifetime avoiding those other pieces of themselves.”

“I don’t *want* to scare people off,” I say, throat aching.

He shakes his head. “It’s worth being scared. Trust me. You’re worth it.”

He kisses the center of my palm. Heat gathers in my belly. It builds between us. Just standing here in the kitchen with him is in the top three most erotic moments of my life.

I lift my face, and he brushes his nose back and forth against mine. “You’re worth it, Daphne,” he says, hand soft on my jaw and eyes closed.

“Miles?” I whisper.

“Hm?”

“I do,” I say. “I do want all those parts of you.”

His eyes open, molten, warm. “Good,” he says. “They want you too.”

Then he kisses me. It’s perfect.

No, better than that. It’s every part of him, at once.

“My room or yours?” I ask him.

“Yours,” he says. “First, yours.”



SUNDAY, AUGUST 4<sup>TH</sup>

## 13 DAYS UNTIL THE READ-A-THON

I *SLEEP LATE* on Sunday, and when I do wake, Miles is still in my bed, one arm over me.

I stretch my sore limbs in every direction, and he stirs. Through a smile, one eye open, he croaks, “Hey.”

My heart flutters drunkenly. “Hey.”

He snuggles closer, setting his cheek against my stomach. “What time is it?”

“Noon,” I tell him.

“Shit.” He tips his face up to look at me. “Are you hungry?”

“Since I met you,” I say, “constantly.”



WE SPEND THE day in a dreamy daze. We drink our tea and coffee on the rug in front of the open windows, sunshine on our faces. When we finish, we make refills and do it again.

For lunch, we walk down the street to a sandwich shop, eat on a bench by the bike trail. Everything feels impossibly normal, easy between us.

We go to Miles’s favorite walk-up soft-serve place and get ice cream covered in roughly chopped candy bars, eat it as we wander to his truck. We drive to the Sunday farmers’ market and buy what we need to make cauliflower tacos. Or what *he* needs, rather, because I have no idea what

I'm doing, just following his directions while a very sad but hauntingly beautiful Glen Campbell song plays on his Bluetooth speaker, the windows still open, a breeze rustling through the apartment.

After we eat, he pulls me into his lap at the kitchen table and kisses me like he's in no rush, like we have all the time in the world.

And it feels true. Like there *is* no world, no passing time.

"Want to sleep over?" he teases, brushing his nose against mine.

"Am I invited?" I ask.

"Open invitation," he says. "Anytime you want."

In his room, we tangle in his woodsmoke-scented sheets, hands in hair, nails raving over skin. When he pushes into me at last, I accidentally gasp "wow," a new-to-me reaction to sex I expect to make him laugh.

Miles just nods as if agreeing, sneaks a hand under my neck, and kisses me again, so tenderly I could almost cry.

Then I'm a little bit worried I actually *am* going to cry, which is also a new experience, but my heart just feels so raw.

Like the whole day is catching up to me, or the last four months, or maybe longer. Decades of feeling *braced* against the world, and now I can't find that sensation, the layer between me and everyone else, and it's terrifying and freeing and intense.

We move slowly, heavily, and every time one of us reaches a tipping point, we turn. Rearrange. Find new ways to hold each other, to move together. Lying on our sides, him behind me, his arm draped over my hip and his hand tucked between my thighs, he murmurs my name, like it's an exclamation, the sound you make after a perfect sip of wine.

I knew being with him like this would be good, and fun, and maybe even funny, but I'm surprised how my chest keeps twinging like my *feelings* have too much weight, and my rib cage might crack under them. I keep catching myself just before the words can tip over my lips: *I love you*.

It's too soon. It's too complicated. For once, I don't want to be anywhere but in this moment, not thinking about what it all means or where it might go, and he makes that easy, this sunlit man.

Miles kisses my shoulder, my neck, my jaw as the intensity builds. He notices when I start to lose control, to move faster. He holds my hips tight and bucks to meet me hard and deep, and I've never felt anything quite like this before.

Like there's no boundary between us, like he's in my mind and heart and soul, and I want to keep him there even as I know this moment can't last.

We're cresting, and when we do, we'll float back down into reality, into our two separate bodies.

But right now, he's entirely mine and I'm his.



**IN THE NIGHT** I get up to pee, and when I come back, Miles is splayed out in the middle of the bed, arm outstretched like he'd been reaching for me in his sleep.

Seeing him there, lit by the moon, sends a crushing tenderness through me.

I tiptoe through the chilly room, climb into bed as gracefully as I can, but he still wakes enough to sleepily drape an arm around my waist and haul me into the warm nook of his body. "You were gone," he murmurs.

"Now I'm back," I whisper.

With a low, drowsy hum, he kisses my shoulder, and drifts back to sleep.



MONDAY, AUGUST 5TH  
12 DAYS UNTIL THE READ-A-THON

IN THE MORNING, I don't wake Miles.

As much as I would *like* to spend the morning making out, we were up late, and I'll see him when he picks me up from work anyway. He'd texted Katya last night to see if she wanted his shift, and she'd replied not at all but I need money so I'll take it, and so we'd decided to get dinner and drive up to a dark sky park.

While I'm dressing, I spot the note from Dad sitting on my dresser. When I was younger, I would've read it over and over, scouring for proof that he loved me, or clues about what I'd done to drive him off. Today, I just toss it into the trash on my way out.

I feel like Belle in the beginning of *Beauty and the Beast*, walking around with a shit-eating grin, greeting everyone like it's the first day of the rest of my life. I'd be *less* obvious wearing an *I've Had Great Sex* sandwich board.

I stop at Fika for tea and order Ashleigh a latte too. When Jonah hands it back to me, a realization hits like a gong, reverberating through my bones.

*Ashleigh.*

I was supposed to paint with Ashleigh.

On my way out the door, I open my calendar and scan for her birthday.

Only, I never *added* Ashleigh's birthday to my calendar. I've barely added anything in weeks, just like the whiteboard's gone to the wayside.

An icy fist presses against the bottom of my stomach. It was this past Saturday, I'm positive.

*She called in sick*, I remember then, which triggers another nauseating lurch in my gut. She was sick on her birthday and I didn't even check in on her.

How could I forget about her? How could I let this happen?

I practically run the rest of the way to work and get there right as Ashleigh's locking her hatchback.

As I jog toward her, something flashes in her eyes, too quickly to read, and my heart turns over painfully as her expression settles back into neutrality.

I come to a stop, choke out, "Hey."

When she doesn't say anything, I hold her coffee out to her. She looks at it, her hand tightening on her purse strap for a second, before grudgingly accepting it.

"I'm so sorry," I blurt out. "About Saturday. I just—my dad was in town, and then he left really abruptly, and I was completely distracted and Miles and I—god, I'm really sorry."

She snorts, shakes her head. "You know," she says. "It was *your* idea to do something for my birthday. You *insisted*. And weirdly, you even got me excited about it."

"I know," I say. "You shouldn't have been home sick alone on your birthday. I understand why you're upset with me."

"I wasn't sick," she says. "I took the day off."

"You never take the day off," I point out.

"Which is why I did, for my birthday. I stayed home and got ready to paint my bedroom a horrendous shade of pink, just because, and watch *Real Housewives* with my friend."

My face heats. "I'm so sorry, Ash. Why didn't you call me?"

She scoffs. "What, more than those *nine times*? Call me old-fashioned, but once I hit the double digits, I start to feel a tad desperate."

"Oh my god," I groan. "The beach! We didn't have service."

"We," she says.

My throat tightens. “I really can’t believe I missed it.”

“It’s fine,” she says.

“It’s obviously not,” I say. “It’s unbelievably shitty.”

“Seriously, Daphne, don’t worry about it,” she says. “I knew you were a *we-girl* and now you’ve got a *we*. As the internet likes to say, when someone tells you who they are, believe them.”

“Ashleigh!” I cry. “What are you *talking* about?”

“Miles,” she says. “That’s who you blew me off for, right?”

My heart feels like there’s a perforated line forming down its middle, a force tugging at each side. “I’m not a *we* with Miles. We’re not . . . that.”

“Maybe not,” she says. “But clearly something changed while I was in Sedona, and *whatever* it is that the two of you are doing now, you don’t need me anymore.”

Her words knock me back.

Is that what I did? Is that who I am?

A person who treats people like loosely penciled-in backup plans, in case nothing better comes along?

I feel sick.

Worse, I’m about to cry.

I try to rein it in, but my voice crackles: “You’re right. I treated you like a fallback, and that’s shitty. I’m sorry. That’s not what you are to me.”

She drops her eyes to the concrete. “Look, I’m trying to be on time to work, so if you don’t mind, I’m going to just . . .”

“Yeah,” I scratch out. “Of course.”

She walks away without looking back.

My heart breaks a little, and I have no one to blame but myself.



**AFTER WORK**, I stagger my departure so that Ashleigh—who barely said four words to me all day—isn’t walking out at the same time as me.

Miles isn’t here yet, so I pace along the curb, trying to burn off the cortisol flooding my system.



After a while, I go sit on the sun-hot bench and try to read. For once, I can't seem to escape into a book. My mind keeps going back to Ashleigh.

A part of me just wants the comfort of being wrapped up in Miles's arms, everything else temporarily obliterated. But then again, that's how I got here.

I let myself get absorbed, again.

Still, I'll feel better when he gets here. I'll figure out a way to make it up to Ashleigh, to prove I'm not that person. I won't let myself be.

I check the time. Twenty minutes late and no word yet. With how often Miles forgets his phone or lets it die, that's not a huge surprise.

I pull my laptop out and angle it against the sun. I'm still connected to the library's Wi-Fi, so I pull up my Read-a-thon checklist and keep working.

The parking lot empties. The streetlights pop on as the sun begins its slow plod toward sunset.

Forty minutes have passed, and a pit opens in my stomach.

I snap my computer shut and call Miles, trying not to picture him unconscious in a ditch on the side of the road, or in any other of a million worst-case scenarios.

The call rings out to voice mail.

I type *everything okay?* and hit send, then start pacing again.

*You're being ridiculous*, I tell myself. *He's fine*.

I check my phone.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Nine times.

Finally, on the tenth, my phone vibrates. I nearly throw it in my hurry to get it eye level.

shit day got away from me sorry but ya all good  
here u

I take it to mean, *All good here, you?*

Which begs the question, where is *here*?

At first, I'm just so relieved he's alive and well—or else kidnapped by someone who texts exactly like him—that I literally sit down in the middle of my pacing, right on the library's lawn, and say aloud, "Thank god."

But then, slowly, a new feeling simmers through me.

This is Miles, I remind myself. He'll have an explanation.

I'm backsliding toward the pit I've found myself in a hundred times before, waiting on someone I know in my gut isn't coming.

But in the length of our friendship, Miles has never stood me up.

The things he said the other night—about the men in my life not wanting to be seen, running as soon as they are—play back, like a siren, a warning I missed.

It doesn't make sense. I'm missing something.

I hammer out another text: I thought you were picking me up.

Miles types for a second, then stops without sending a message.

My body goes hot, my skin too tight. Suddenly I need to move. I need to get away. I can't stay here another second.

I grab my stuff and walk. Leave the parking lot. The sun has started setting, but I'll make it back before dark.

Except the idea of going home nauseates me.

In a temporary fit of deluded ambition, I pull my phone out to Google CrossFit gyms. Maybe I could burn off this anxiety by throwing tires, or whatever.

Miles is calling.

I try to answer, but I've just missed the last ring. A car honks, and I realize I've stopped in an intersection. I wave an apology and run across, dialing him back.

Straight to voice mail.

He must be leaving me a message. As I power walk, I eye the screen every few seconds, waiting for the message to buzz in. Instead I get a text alert: ya sorry something came up im really sorry

Three sorries deep and no closer to an explanation.

At this point, I feel stupid and a little angry.

I take a deep breath.

*Things come up. We don't owe each other anything,* I tell myself. We made no promises.

But the truth is, Miles made me feel so safe, and now I feel completely discarded.

*This is what you get,* a voice taunts in my mind.

When you make all the same mistakes again and again.

When you choose the wrong people to trust and let down the right ones.

When you let someone in who's *told you* in every conceivable way not to rely on them.

*Trust people's actions, not their words.*

*Don't love anyone who isn't ready to love you back.*

*Let go of the people who don't hold on to you.*

*Don't wait on people who don't hurry for you.*

Instantly, I feel so *tired*. Exhausted. As badly as I don't want to go home, there's nowhere else for me to go.

I've just started back toward the apartment when my phone rings again.

My heart soars in anticipation. He'll have an explanation, something that makes sense of all of this.

Except it's not him calling. It's an unknown number.

I answer, just in case, trying to sound cool, calm, collected, and overall diametrically opposite how I actually feel. "Hello?"

"Hi!" a chipper, feminine voice says. "Is this Daphne Vincent?"

"Um." I sniff, modulate my voice. "Who's this?"

"My name's Anika. I'm calling from the Ocean City Public Library."

It takes three full seconds for me to make sense of what she's saying.

"We were really impressed by your résumé," she goes on, "and we'd love to set up a virtual interview."

I press the heel of my hand to my forehead. The world keeps spinning.

This is what I've been waiting for, hoping for.

"Hello?" she says.

"Sorry," I stammer. "Yes, I'm here."

“Would you be available for an interview sometime in the next two weeks?” she says. “Assuming you’re still interested.”

It feels like I’m swallowing a rock.

“Of course I am,” I force out.

I’m not even sure which part I’m agreeing with—whether I’m available, whether I’m interested.

But it’s the only answer that could possibly make sense, right?

The escape hatch I’ve been waiting for, right when the whole house of cards is falling down, and I should feel happy, or at least relieved, but all I can feel is this whole-chest ache, yet another loss of someone, something, I didn’t even have to begin with.

“Fantastic!” she says. “Could you just send us your availability and we’ll set something up?”

I clear my throat. “I’ll check my calendar as soon as I get home.”

*Home.* I ignore the ping in my heart at that word.

It’s just an apartment. It’s never been mine.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 6<sup>TH</sup>

11 DAYS

MILES DOESN'T COME home that night.

I know because I don't sleep.

I'm not waiting for him, though. I'm thinking about Ashleigh. Mentally drafting and revising apologies. Wondering how I managed to do to her the exact thing I hate most. I always identified with my mom, but in this situation, I know who I've acted like, and it's not Holly Vincent.

I want to hide at home, skip work Tuesday, but there's too much going on, and I can't leave Ashleigh or Harvey in the lurch.

So I arrive a full twenty minutes before my shift starts, having ordered full-blown espresso from Fika, which has me moving at warp speed.

"You buy me a three-piece suit?" Harvey asks as he moseys through the fog to meet me at the locked front doors. He tips his head toward the oversize paper box in my arms.

"Pastéis de nata," I explain. "Portuguese custard tarts. For Ashleigh's birthday."

The idea came to me around two a.m. By four, I'd found a bakery that had them, forty minutes south of here. At five, I was on my way.

Harvey stares at me, concerned. "You do know Ashleigh's Persian, not Portuguese, right?"

"What? I know," I say. "She just told me she fantasized about moving to Portugal, so . . ."

He rears back. "What's in Portugal?"

“Pastéis de nata,” I say. “And beautiful beaches, I think.”

He shrugs to himself and unlocks the doors. “Well, I’m glad you remembered, because I forgot her doughnuts at home yesterday, and the grandkids ate them.”

Inside, I set the box on her side of the desk, then busy myself updating displays so I can miss her arrival.

All day, we manage to dodge each other, the box of pastries gradually emptying as she, Harvey, and a couple of her favorite regulars pick over them.

When I come back from lunch, she’s sitting at her computer, and flicks a glance my way. “Hi,” I say tentatively.

“Hello,” she replies.

I take my seat and try to focus, despite the noxious cloud of awkwardness. Eventually I settle into a rhythm, and then Landon arrives to relieve Ashleigh for the evening shift.

“Sweet! Goodies!” he says, one earbud already in, the other blasting from around his neck as he slips behind the desk.

“Daphne brought them,” Ashleigh says, gathering her things, “for my birthday.”

“A couple people went in on them,” I automatically say.

“Still can’t lie for shit,” she says, without averting her gaze from her computer.

“Can I have one?” Landon asks her.

“Of course,” she says. “I’m leaving them for the night crowd to finish off. Otherwise Mulder will eat all of them and turn into the Mask by bedtime.”

Landon leans over to pluck a pastel de nata from the center. “*The Mask?*”

“*Young people.*” Ashleigh grabs her green pleather bag and eyes me. “Thanks. For . . . whatever those things are.”

“Pastéis de nata,” I tell her. “Portugal’s famous breakfast treat.”

I can’t tell if she’s caught off guard in a good way, or just confused. Maybe she doesn’t even remember our conversation about Portugal.

“And it’s my pleasure,” I add.

She nods, an acknowledgment with no visible emotion attached to it, then jogs her bag higher and leaves.



AN EMPTY APARTMENT greets me, again.

All my life, this moment, this feeling has been a constant: doing homework at a kitchen table while Mom was at night class, planning programs on the rug while Peter took a client out for drinks, sitting on the bleachers at school while every other kid’s parent showed up to take them home, Dad already halfway to a *sound bath* that a Trader Joe’s cashier invited him to.

Maybe it’s time to just make peace with it. Maybe certain people are destined to be solitary creatures. Maybe no matter how hard I try, I’ll end up back here.

I drop my bag, kick off my shoes, and shuffle into the dining room. The apartment has been thoroughly cleaned since this morning.

The breakfast table is cleared of junk mail and water glasses and bags from the pharmacy. Now there’s just a small white box wrapped in gold twine, and beside it, a scrap of paper. In extraordinarily messy handwriting: *Sorry I missed you.*

A wave of *déjà vu* rocks me.

It was easy to toss Dad’s note in the trash. I knew exactly what to expect. With this, I can’t help hoping for something more.

I slide the twine off, pop the box open, and start to laugh.

Fudge.

A box of fudge. So underwhelming as to border on absurd: *Sorry I missed you, here’s some chocolate and condensed milk.*

But the funniest part is, I did the exact same thing to Ashleigh.

The hysteric laughter is about to tumble into outright crying, when, miracle of all ill-timed miracles, my phone rings with a call from Dad.

“Is this a joke?” I demand of the universe and/or empty apartment.

I don't want to talk to him.

I don't want to talk to *anyone*—I'd even rejected a call from Mom on the walk home, because I hadn't decided yet whether to tell her about the Maryland job or not. I told myself I didn't want to get her hopes up, but the truth is, I don't want to get *mine* any higher than they already are.

I just need to get through the interview and the Read-a-thon, and see how everything shakes out.

I send Dad's call to voice mail and pull up my Read-a-thon checklist, desperate for a distraction, and scan the list of supplies we still need.

Then I start dragging the remaining wedding stuff out of the closet, sorting out what I can repurpose for the fundraiser—napkins, plates, flameless tea lights—and what I should just donate. The rest—the dress and everything else sellable—is still at Ashleigh's, one more problem I can't think about right now.

I take a quick break to order dinner, then dive back into sorting and packing until I hear a pounding at the door, the dinner I have no appetite for.

"You can leave it there!" I shout, jumping up and sprinting down the hallway. I look around for a sweater I can pull on over my sports bra. "I already paid and tipped when I ordered!"

No answer.

Then the scrape of a throat being cleared.

"It's Peter."

I honestly almost blurt out *Peter who?* while pulling my cardigan off the coat hook and onto my body.

Then it clicks, like a bullet into a barrel.

*Peter.*

I open the door, half expecting to have my only workable theory disproven. There's no way Peter Collins is here, on my doorstep.

Except he is.

"Hi, Daphne," he says, with a woeful smile. "Can I come in?"

"Um . . ."

"Just for a minute," he promises, his green eyes glossy and brow furrowed in that contrite-yet-hurt way that used to make my kneecaps melt.



Not that he had much occasion to use it.

Peter had always been reliable. I always knew where he was, when to expect him. Between our synced calendars, our phones' location sharing, our rigid schedule, our unspoken agreement to send the *Leaving the bar now, see you soon* and *Ran to the store for more milk while you were in the shower* text messages, there wasn't much space for fights.

I never had to ask, *When are you coming home?* I never had to worry he wouldn't.

Until, of course, he didn't.

I'm too shocked to argue. I widen the door and he steps inside, looking around with abject wonder, like I'm leading him into an accursed ancient pyramid and not a small, eclectically decorated apartment inside a renovated meatpacking facility.

"It looks different," he says, "from the last time I was here."

I shoot him a look over my shoulder. Bold move, mentioning the last time he was here. To see his then-best-friend-now-fiancée.

I make a noncommittal sound and lead him to the living room.

The whole time, I'm kind of wishing I'd just started laughing in his face, refused to say a single word, and just kept laughing until he slunk away.

I gesture toward the less comfortable of our two chairs and he sits, waits for me to do the same. I don't.

His eyes wander over the trail of wedding detritus. "You still have so much stuff."

"Taking another load to the thrift store tomorrow," I lie.

He winces. I stare.

After several awkward seconds, he says, "You look great, Daph."

I do not. "I'm pretty busy, Peter."

The corners of his mouth twist. I see a question forming on his lips, but he shakes his head, apparently deciding to let it go.

Another few awkward seconds pass. His gaze meets mine, holds, smolders.

I turn to refold a couple of tablecloths. "I'm going to keep packing while you talk."

"I'm sorry, Daphne," he says.

"Yeah, you told me that," I say.

"No, I mean, I'm *sorry*."

The chair scrapes back. I turn to find him marching toward me. I still have an ivory table runner gripped in my hands when he grabs them and holds them between us. "I'm so sorry," he says. "I was stupid and shortsighted. It was all just about chasing a rush, and honestly . . . I think I was afraid of the commitment. Of marriage."

I half laugh. "So you got engaged to someone *else*?"

He shakes his head. "We're not together. We called it off."

For a moment, I'm speechless.

It feels a little like a low-grade earthquake just rumbled through the room.

"*She* called it off," I say.

He huffs. "It was mutual. We both realized how stupid we'd been. I think I knew within a week, honestly, but I'd already made such a wreck of things, I figured I needed to see it through."

Blood rushes through my ears, dimming his voice.

I feel dizzy. Plenty of physical sensations, but hardly any emotional ones.

"So you knew it was a mistake," I say, gathering my wits, "and you were going to . . . what? Just marry her anyway? You ripped up my life and then you were going to destroy hers too? For . . . for fucking *pride*?"

His jaw drops, hurt flooding his features. I've never talked to him like this. It's close to things I've screamed, in my darkest late-night fantasy speeches, but it doesn't actually feel good to say.

It doesn't feel good to hurt him.

Because truthfully, I don't feel hurt by him right now.

Wronged? Sure. Hurt? No. He's not capable of that anymore.

I step back. "I'm sorry. I don't want to be mean to you."

He shakes his head. "I deserve it."

"You do," I say. "But still, I don't want to treat you like that. I just . . . It's hard to take any of this seriously. It's hard to trust what you say now,

after all the lying.”

“Lying?” His brow scrunches. “I told you as soon as anything happened with Petra. I know I acted like scum, but I never lied.”

“You told me there was nothing between you,” I say. “For years. You insisted she was totally wrong for you—”

“She *was*,” he cuts in. “That’s my point.”

“—and that you could never be with her,” I go on.

“Daphne, that’s what I’m saying,” he counters. “I couldn’t. I can’t.”

“And that you’d never seen her like that,” I finish.

“I hadn’t,” he insists. “Not really. When I said all of that to you, I meant it. Every word. And now I *know* it’s true. It’s just . . . we were barreling toward our wedding, Daph. And I freaked out. And Petra freaked out too, because she knew the relationship between her and me was probably going to change. We got confused. And I know it makes no sense, because I was ready to *marry* you, so the time for that kind of confusion should have been way past. You have no idea how sorry I am. I’ll spend my whole life making it up to you. Trying to get back to how *perfect* we were together.”

“Peter, stop,” I say. “We weren’t perfect. Obviously. Or this couldn’t have happened.”

“Fine,” he says. “Maybe we weren’t. But *you* were. You were perfect for me, and I threw it away. I miss your cute little giggle, and I miss going to visit Cooper and Sadie with you and getting brunch at Hearth, and going to the gym together, and having dinner with my family. God, my *family*, Daphne. They miss you too.

“I was so deluded, I thought they’d be on board with the whole Petra thing. And her parents were thrilled, but mine . . . they know me better than all this. They knew it was a mistake right away. You’re part of my family, Daphne. You *belong* with me.”

As he’s saying it, I feel the telltale prickle behind my nose, the heat coursing into my cheeks. Tears are surfacing and I can’t stop them.

Taking this as encouragement, he moves closer. “We can get our life back,” he whispers. “It’s not too late.”

I can’t help but laugh a little as I dab my eyes with the table runner.

It is too late.

The life he's describing—it isn't one I want.

It's right in a general sense, and all wrong in the particulars.

A steady partner. A family. Good friends to take trips and share boozy brunches and throw Halloween parties with. A home.

But I don't want Peter's too-big house, whose mortgage doesn't have my name on it.

And I don't want Peter's friends, who don't care about me.

And as much as I'd dreamed of being a part of Peter's tight-knit family, I realize now I'd also never cried in front of them, never complained about work or opened up about how hard I found it to trust new people. I'd never even used a curse word in front of them. Their perfection hadn't *drawn me in*—it had intimidated me. I spent our whole relationship *auditioning*, the same way I always feel when I'm with Dad, praying I'm doing enough to make the cut.

And I'm not sure why I wasted all that time and energy, because when I think about *family*—that thing I'd always longed for—it's never been a Norman Rockwell painting that I picture.

It's me and Mom, on the couch, eating microwaved corn dogs while *Dial M for Murder* plays on TV. It's running out from the library at night to her car, a greasy box of Little Caesars pizza in the passenger seat, her joking, *I thought we'd do Italian*.

It's being pulled away from watching the frost melt on the living room window to make stovetop hot cocoa from a packet, and that last tight hug at the end of the airport security line, and packing up cardboard boxes, knowing I'll always have what I need, no matter how much I leave behind.

My life, five months ago, was picture perfect, but it wasn't the picture I wanted.

And I don't want *him*.

*I'm totally over him.*

If any part of me had wondered whether this thing with Miles was just a distraction, a rebound, or an act of vengeance, that part is brutally dispelled.

Because even now, in my misery, no part of me jumps at the chance to go back to how things were before.

“I’m sorry, Peter,” I say. “I don’t want that.”

His voice wobbles. “You can’t mean that, Daph.”

“I do,” I whisper.

The corners of his mouth twitch downward. I wonder if he’s thinking the same thing I am, that these are ironic last words for our relationship.

It takes him several seconds, several nods and throat-clears to regain control.

Then he starts toward the door. My hosting gene kicks in and I follow, walk him out of my home and life.

He opens the door and steps into the hallway, but he doesn’t leave. Instead he stands there, maybe considering a Hail Mary, or maybe a *fuck you*.

Finally, he faces me. “If you need someplace to stay, you can come home while you’re looking. I’ll take the couch.”

He reads the blank expression on my face, and I see a flicker of something like smugness in his not-quite-smile.

“They’ll get back together,” he says. “You know that, right?”

I stare at him, determined not to say anything, even as a sinkhole opens in my low belly, everything collapsing as it falls through.

“He already spent all day helping her move her shit out,” he says.

“What?” I don’t mean to give him the satisfaction; it just slips out. And he pounces on it, almost smiling.

“Yesterday,” he says. “Like five minutes after we ended things, he’s there, moving her out. You honestly think they’re done with each other, Daphne?”

I tuck my elbows against my sides to keep from shaking.

To hide that my insides feel like a hurricane. Not the calm eye of a storm, but the vicious edges, tearing everything to shreds.

He’s wrong. He has to be.

Even if he’s not, it doesn’t matter.

That's not why I'm *not* getting back with Peter, though I now understand that's what *he* thinks.

That I'd never turn him down unless there was someone else. That I'd always rather be with *someone* than by myself, even if that person is completely wrong for me.

Even in this bleak moment, I feel a spike of something cool and bright.

Hope, or relief, or a tiny tendril of joy, the thinnest silver lining of a jet-black cloud. Because he's wrong.

I don't want to be a part of the wrong *we*. I'd rather be on my own, even if it hurts right now.

Someday I'll be okay, someday.

"Goodbye, Peter."

I shut the door.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 7<sup>TH</sup>

10 DAYS

I SHOULD'VE CHECKED the weather before I left for work on Wednesday. But when I heard Miles moving around his room, I ran for the front door.

I didn't have the time or energy for a serious conversation.

So I left. Without car keys, or a jacket, or an umbrella.

At the library, things were a bit less *frosty* between me and Ashleigh. Her curt politeness feels even worse. We've fully reverted to coworkers.

And now I'm walking home in pouring rain, even though she *offered* me a ride, because I didn't want her to feel obligated.

I stop at an intersection, and a soft-top Jeep flashes its lights, signaling that I can cross.

I dart to the far side of the street, managing to stomp through three oily puddles in the process.

As I'm passing the car, it honks, and I jump, readying myself for a debaucherous catcall.

The window slides down and the driver leans across the passenger seat.

A messy head of dark hair. An upturned nose. A scruffy face that makes my heart feel like it's been double-bounced on a trampoline.

"Thought you might need a ride," Miles says.

All I can think to say is, "Did you get a new car?"

"Long story," he murmurs. "Tell you on the way?"

I don't want to be furious and devastated. I want to be indifferent and dignified. It's hard to be either with sewer rat hair and mascara streaks to your jaw.

"You can just take me to Cherry Hill and I'll get a cab," I say awkwardly, climbing in. "No need for you to be late to work."

My teeth instantly start chattering from the AC. Miles turns the heat knob all the way up, the windshield fogging at the edges where the wipers can't reach.

"They won't be slammed yet," he says. "It's fine."

"It's not worth getting in trouble," I say.

At a red light, he looks over at me. "I was trying to meet you at the library, but there was an accident on Tremaine."

I focus on the world of blue, green, gray outside the windows, keeping him safely in my periphery. "Thanks anyway."

"Daphne?"

"Hm?"

He pulls to the curb. "Can we talk for a minute?"

Our eyes tentatively meet. I look away, stomach dropping when I spot the taffy-green cottage two houses down, like a cruel joke: *You thought you could be different, want something different, but you're you.*

"Daphne," he says quietly. "Can you look at me? I want to apologize to you."

"For what?" My gaze judders back.

"You know what," he says.

"I don't," I say. "All I know is, I waited an hour for someone who didn't show up. The rest—why you totally disappeared for twenty-four hours—that's just a guess."

A guess loosely drawn by Peter, in the most painful way conceivable.

"So if you want to apologize for something," I say, trying to lean into the anger, away from the ache, "you're going to have to explain what it is, exactly, that you did."

"I panicked," he says.

There it is.



I'm still the woman with too many expectations, and Miles is the guy who panics when they're set on him.

"I didn't tattoo my name on you while you were sleeping," I say.

"I know that," he replies.

"So, what?" I ask. "You changed your mind, and instead of just texting me, you left the state?"

"I didn't leave the state," he says. "I woke up and—something came up. A friend needed help, and I lost track of time."

*Something came up.*

*A friend.*

Something better. Someone better.

He's not admitting who it was.

And it shouldn't matter, the same way whatever Dad wrote in that note doesn't make a difference. Miles telling me he ditched me for Petra won't change anything.

But I want him to say it. I want to push as hard as possible against all the bruises in my heart, until it changes me. Until I learn to stop fucking everything up.

"Who?" I ask.

He scrubs a hand up his forehead through his hair, shakes his head.

He'd be doing me a favor, putting me out of my misery, dropping a period at the end of this sentence. "Please," I plead.

He breathes out. "Petra."

Some part of me, I realize, was holding on to the possibility that Peter was misinformed, or outright lying. I didn't know it was there, that ember of hope, and I hate myself for it.

My throat closes off, my chest tightening. I nod. And nod and nod, trying to think of even one thing to say.

"She just needed to borrow my truck to move some stuff," Miles says, voice fraying. "And like I said, I got caught up."

*Caught up.* There will always be a Petra. Someone more interesting, someone more fun, someone who needs less, or offers more.

“And then I snapped out of it,” he says. “And I realized how badly I’d fucked up, and I left. Traded cars with her so she could use the truck and booked it—and I had this *big plan* for how to make it up to you. A surprise. But I couldn’t make it happen. I tried and I couldn’t, so I came home with this stupid fucking box of fudge, and I know it’s pathetic, and it’s not enough—”

“Miles.” I close my eyes, rubbing my heels against the sockets as I organize my thoughts. “I don’t need a better *apology present*.” My hands fall to my lap. “This is my fault.”

He balks. “What? No, it’s definitely not.”

“You did exactly what I should’ve expected,” I say.

He jerks back, as if I slapped him. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“I’m not trying to be hurtful,” I say quickly. “I’m saying you’re off the hook.”

“Off *what* hook, Daphne?” he demands.

“You told me you don’t do expectations or obligations,” I say.

“I said they make me panic,” Miles replies, sounding vaguely panicked *now* too.

I turn in my seat, the windshield wipers still squeaking against the glass, rain pattering the roof. “And you did panic. Even though you didn’t want to. And I *did* expect something, even though I tried not to.”

“Good!” he half shouts. “Expect something! You want to put me on a hook? Put me on the hook. I freaked out, Daphne, but that doesn’t mean I don’t love you.”

My stomach lurches, heart clenching like a fist. My skin goes from fiery hot to clammy and cold, and that word lodges itself between my ribs like a poison-tipped arrow.

I need it out, know the wound will gush when it’s gone, but don’t care.

“No,” I stammer.

“No?” Miles gives a hoarse laugh. “How is that a response to what I just said? I just told you I *love* you, Daphne.”

“And I’m telling you *no*.” I undo my seat belt with trembling hands. “You don’t get to say that to me. You don’t get to disappear, and then show up and buy me fucking fudge and pick me up from work, and tell me you love me—”

“I *do* love you,” he cries.

My breath comes fast. “You can’t just throw that out there like it makes everything better. I didn’t need an *I love you* or a box of fudge or whatever *big plan* you had to make it up to me. I don’t even *like* surprises! None of that stuff matters when you don’t show up for the little things, and if you loved me, you’d know that.”

I fumble with the lock on the car door, shove it open.

“What are you doing?” Miles asks, his voice wrenching upward.

“I’m getting out,” I stammer.

“Why?” he says.

It’s mostly stopped raining now. Even if it hadn’t, the storm wouldn’t have stopped me.

“You know the worst part?” I force out as I turn back to him on watery legs. “I wasn’t even worried when I walked out of work and you weren’t there. I didn’t worry for the first hour. And when I did, it was *for* you. That’s how much I trusted you.”

How safe I’d felt.

His lips part, the hard lines of his face going lax. “And, what?” he says, his voice so thin it’s nearly a whisper. “All of that’s just gone now?”

The softness in his eyes and voice makes me feel like something inside my rib cage is tearing. I don’t want to hurt him.

I just don’t want him to hurt me either.

I can’t let myself be absorbed into this.

“There’s a job,” I blurt. “Close to my mom. I’m interviewing, next week.”

His mouth falls open again, his eyes oily dark. He presses his lips together again, swallows. “So that’s it. You’re leaving.”

“That was always the plan.” The words quiver out of me. I steel myself to go on: “We knew this wouldn’t work. No matter how much fun we have

together.”

His features flash first with hurt, then acceptance. After a second, he says, “Got it.”

The clouds overhead are breaking up, and the tears are working their way down my face. “Storm’s over,” I whisper. “I’ll walk from here.”

He looks back to the steering wheel, and quickly wipes at the corner of his eye, which makes my heart feel like it’s shattering.

I shut the door and turn away, listening to his engine receding, unable to watch him disappear.

After a minute, I start to walk. The fairy-tale cottage’s drapes are open, its windows aglow.

Inside, three people amble past. A blazer-wearing woman slightly ahead of a young couple, arm in arm, laughing at something she said.

A Realtor selling a couple on the life they could have there.

The late nights binge-watching *The X-Files* on the couch they picked out together, the early mornings making toast while they’re still too tired to speak, the kids who will earn their first scars in the backyard and badly practice instruments at inconvenient times, and the way their favorite candle’s scent will gradually infuse the walls so that every time they come back from a trip, exhausted, and dump their bags inside the door, they’ll *smell* that they’re where they belong.

All those moments throughout the days, weeks, months that don’t get marked on calendars with hand-drawn stars or little stickers.

Those are the moments that make a life.

Not grand gestures, but mundane details that, over time, accumulate until you have a home, instead of a house.

The things that matter.

The things I can’t stop longing for.

There’s only one place that feeling exists for me, only one person with whom I belong.



"HONEY?" MOM ANSWERS right away. "What's up?"

"You're busy," I say.

"No, no, hold on a second." The voices fade, then cut out as she closes a door. "What's up?"

"Mom. You're clearly in the middle of something," I say.

"I'm never too busy for you," she says. "Tell me what's going on."

Where to start? "Dad came to visit."

"Oh, shit," she says. "That's what he wanted your address for? I thought he was just mailing you something."

"Same," I say. "But no, he was stopping by." I leave out the *with his new wife* part. He's out of her life, and she prefers it that way.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I should've asked you, but he just wanted to confirm the address. If I'd had any idea—"

"No, Mom, it's fine," I say. "I would've told you to give it to him."

She hesitates. "So, how was it?"

"Great," I admit. "And then terrible."

"So the usual," she says.

"Basically."

"He's always been great, for a while." She sighs. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I know it sucks."

"It does." Tears well in my eyes. "It sucks so much."

After a pause, she says, "You deserve a better dad. I wish I could give that to you."

"You did." I wipe my eyes dry, but my voice is tearier than ever. "You've always been my mom *and* my dad. And my best friend. You've always been absolutely everything for me."

"Oh, baby," she says softly. "I love you more than everything else on this planet combined. But no one person can be everything we need. Sometimes I couldn't even really do a good job at being your mother, let alone those other things."

"You were perfect," I say. "You were amazing."

"Amazing, maybe," she says. "But far from perfect. Do you know how many school recitals I fell asleep during?"

I sniff. "No."

"However many you had," she replies.

I chortle. "That's like drifting off to the tune of forty-five street cats in heat."

"I wouldn't know!" she says. "In my dreams, the fifth-grade class sang beautifully."

I sink onto my rug, face in my hands, quivering with laughter.

"If I could do it again," she says, after a second, "I wouldn't have moved you around so much either."

"You did what you had to," I say.

"I thought so at the time," she says. "But the truth is, I think we both could've been happier with less. We were, in that first apartment, just the two of us, remember?"

"I do." Warmth brims in my chest. That place had thin walls and leaky pipes, but Mom made it feel like an adventure we were setting out on. We were the kids camping out in the Met in *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, or the titular children from *The Boxcar Children* living in the titular boxcar.

"I was just so scared I couldn't really do it on my own," she goes on. "And so many decisions I made were based on the fear of what could go wrong, instead of my hopes for what might go right. Every time that fear got tripped, I picked you up and moved you away, rather than facing the possibility of discomfort. I never took any chances."

"You were a realist," I tell her.

"Honey." She laughs. "I'm a cynic. And a cynic is a romantic who's too scared to hope."

It feels like a nail driven into my sternum.

"Is that what *I* am?" I ask her.

"You?" she says. "You, my girl, are whoever you decide to be. But I hope you always keep some piece of that girl who sat by the window, hoping for the best. Life's short enough without us talking ourselves out of hope and trying to dodge every bad feeling. Sometimes you have to push through the discomfort, instead of running."

I know right then what I need to do. As badly as I want to run, this is my mess, and first I have to face it.

“Thanks, Mom,” I say.

“What did I do, exactly?” she asks.

“You’re here,” I say. “Whenever it counts, you’re here. When I grow up, I want to be you.”

She laughs. “Oh, god no. Just be you. The best you. The *most* you.”

When I get off the phone with her, I text Harvey right away: Think you can talk Ashleigh into an impromptu poker night next time Mulder’s with Duke?

FRIDAY, AUGUST 9<sup>TH</sup>

8 DAYS

ASHLEIGH BEATS ME into work on Friday.

She doesn't look up as I round the desk to take my spot, or when I pick up the paper *Fika*-stamped cup already by my mouse.

On its side, someone has written Ashleigh's name, though somehow spelled much more incorrectly than if the barista had simply gone with *Ashley*.

Out of the corner of her eye, she catches me sniffing it, and her pink-painted lips curl. "It's not poisoned, if that's what you're wondering."

"I was more worried about urine," I joke.

"Well, after you taste it, let me know if you think there's too much cardamom in my diet."

I take another sniff and a sip. Spicy-sweet perfection. "Thank you." I chance a look her way, but her eyes are glued to her monitor, nails clacking against her keyboard.

"A few of us went in on it," she deadpans.

"Give them my regards," I say.

She's not ready for more chitchat than that, it seems, so we fall into quietly working at our separate stations. Still, it's a start. From back in the office, Harvey gives me a knowing wink and a thumbs-up, confirming tomorrow night's plan is in motion.





ON SATURDAY, I wait two hours after our shift ends before punching Ashleigh's address into my GPS.

It leads me north up the peninsula, then toward the shore, the final right turn rapidly approaching.

I duck my head to peer out the passenger window and slam on my brakes as a break in the foliage reveals a low, squat house tucked back from the road.

The car behind me honks, and I put on my blinker as I ease onto the flagstone driveway. It curves back and down to a sleek midcentury pseudo-mansion.

Behind it, the bay glitters, the view uninterrupted apart from a few pine trees.

I'd assumed Ashleigh never wanted to hang out at her place because she preferred to keep her social life separate from her life as a mom. Now I wonder if she was just playing coy about being absolutely loaded.

I park in front of the bright orange double doors, each slotted with a stack of narrow rectangular windows, and motion-sensor lights flick on. Despite the little sign picketed into the planter, Harvey has assured me that Ashleigh doesn't actually have a security system.

In fact, he's pretty sure she found the sign in someone's trash after Duke moved out.

The spare key is exactly where he said it would be, under an empty pot around the side of the house.

Two nights ago, when we hatched this plan, Harvey and I were both so sure this would only delight Ashleigh. Now I'm less certain. I am, essentially, breaking and entering.

I step over the threshold, prepared to bolt if the alarm sounds. It doesn't.

I take off my shoes and wander deeper, the terrazzo entryway giving way to a hallway on the right, followed by a massive chef's kitchen with flush walnut cabinets and a Sputnik chandelier spanning the island. On the left, there's a sunken, seventies-style living room with a semicircular couch wound around a fireplace.

I follow the hallway to the first bedroom: a guest room, I'd guess, based on the bland pseudo-coastal decor. The next room is covered with RPG franchise posters and drawings of anime characters.

At the end of the hall, I reach a bedroom nearly the size of our apartment, complete with a walk-in closet that feeds into the en suite bathroom of my dreams.

If that weren't a clear enough indicator that this is Ashleigh's room, there's also the tarp, paint buckets, and paint rollers sitting in one corner, unused.

There isn't much else *in* the room. A bed, a dresser, a side table. I wonder whether Duke took most of the furniture with him. There's a sadness to this space that I didn't expect.

It feels like a place that *used* to be home.

I hope it can be again. Ashleigh deserves that.

I set my stuff down, grab the unopened roll of painter's tape, and get to work.



IT'S THERAPEUTIC, PAINTING along the baseboards and ceiling. And the Miles-inspired sad-girl playlist blaring from my phone gives the experience a cathartic edge too.

It takes an hour just to tape everything off. Then I do the first coat of the upper cut-in and step down from the step stool I found in the garage to admire my handiwork before starting the lower cut-in.

I'm nearly finished with the first coat when a throat clears behind me.

I whirl around, brandishing my paintbrush like it's a sword.

Ashleigh stands with her arms crossed, one jet-black brow sharply raised.

"You're back," I say.

"And *you're* listening to Adele's greatest and saddest," she replies.

I grab my phone from the step stool's cupholder and hit pause. Onscreen, I see the beginning of a text from Harvey: Sorry, I did my best

but . . .

“Is poker night over already?” I ask.

“The randomly scheduled poker night that suddenly *had* to be this Saturday, because every other night this month was booked, for everyone?” Ashleigh says. “*That* poker night?”

I grimace.

“I only went to see what the hell was going on,” she says. “Next time you want to keep a secret from me, you should know how terrible Harvey is at lying. And you. You were weird at work.”

She’s right. I should’ve seen this coming.

After a fraught silence, she says, “You look like shit.”

“Thank you?” I say.

She smiles. Pesky hope climbs my rib cage.

“If you hate it,” I say quickly, “I’ll paint it all back. And I don’t have to do it while you’re here, even. Or if you love it, I can finish it while you go watch *Real Housewives*, or while you’re out or whatever.”

Her razor-edged brow lifts again. “So this is penance.”

“This is me following through on what I said I’d do,” I say. “Late, obviously. And you’re not obligated to forgive me because of it. It’s not a trade. And I know an over-the-top gesture doesn’t make up for being generally shitty. I would love it if you forgave me, but if you don’t feel like you can, for whatever reason, I understand.”

Her tongue runs over her bottom teeth. Slowly, she saunters toward me, her green eyes sharp and lips pursed. She stops right in front of me, arms still crossed.

Then she grabs me. Hugs me. Uncomfortably tight, almost painful, ultimately perfect. “I’m sorry too,” she says.

“For what?!” I cry, alarmed.

“I may have overreacted,” she says. “It’s just, sometimes I feel like the whole last decade was a wash for me, minus Mulder. Like I’m starting over from scratch, and so everything needs to be exactly right as soon as possible to make up for lost time. I just got so excited to have a new, real friendship, and I put too much pressure on it.”

I shake my head. “I hurt you. I did the exact thing we literally bonded over hating. I don’t think you overreacted.”

She draws back. “You *did* do that, but I could’ve left you a voice mail, or texted you or something, when I realized it was happening. Instead . . .” She sighs. “Instead I waited to, like, bust you.”

Seemingly in a hard right turn, she says: “I told you I’d picked out a marriage counselor for me and Duke? Even though he wouldn’t agree to go to one?”

I nod.

“Well, by the time our first appointment rolled around, we’d split, but it was too late to cancel without paying a fee. So I went. And I thought I was showing up to, like, complain about him. Which I *definitely* did.”

“Of course,” I say.

“But I kept going. And I realized I had this tendency. To set up tests. Like, *How long can I be in the room before he looks up from his phone?* Or, *If I don’t say anything, will he ever do the laundry?* Or, *If I never suggest we get together with friends or do anything fun, will he be the one to make plans, or does it all fall on me?*

“Which made sense. I was tired of having the same conversations over and over again and never getting different results. So, yes, you went into the love-bubble slow-fade with Miles, but let he among us who’s never done that throw the first stone, or whatever. My point is, you’re not my ex-husband, and this wasn’t your four-hundred-and-twentieth strike. You blew me off. Big deal. It happens.”

“What happened to *When people tell you who they are, believe them?*” I say, still waiting for a trapdoor to open in the floor.

“All your actions told me,” she says, “is that you’re human. Which is good, because I don’t think I have it in me to be friends with someone who’s perfect. No more than I have it in me to be friends with someone who says one thing and does another ten times a month. I’m going to hurt you at some point too. I don’t want to, but it’ll happen. I have a kid! I have a whole life! Just like you.

“But I don’t want to lose this friendship over one fight, just because I’m scared it could happen again. You’re becoming kind of important to me, Daphne.”

“Kind of?” I squeak out.

“Kind of *really* important,” she amends.

I only realize I’m crying when I see the alarm splash across Ashleigh’s face. “Hey!” She grabs my arms, nails sinking into my biceps. “It’s okay! Really!”

“I don’t want to be a person who does that to people,” I say. “Maybe that’s what’s wrong. Maybe that’s why I can’t . . . I can’t—”

“Daphne. Chill for a second,” she says, somehow stern without being unkind. “Tell me what’s going on.”

I shake my head. “We’re talking about *us*. I can deal with the other stuff later.”

“Honey!” She tugs me over to sit at the foot of her velvet-upholstered bed. “Friends talk about the *other stuff*.”

When I meet her gaze, her brow is grooved with concern. I feel an intense crush of love for her then, and fresh shame that I could ever forget this person’s birthday, regret that I missed out on what, honestly, would’ve been an amazing Saturday night. After everything with Dad, I’d wanted so badly to escape myself, my life, that I forgot about all the beautiful little pieces of it I’ve been acquiring like sea glass these last few months. Things that no one can take from me.

I sniff. “It’s really okay. I feel better just having everything out in the open between us.”

“Hey,” she says. “Remember me? Ashleigh? I *always* want to talk about it. So back up. Is this or is it not about you shitting where you eat, with regard to Miles?”

“There was no shitting involved,” I say. “I’m not that adventurous.”

“Holy shit!” she cries, at the nonverbal confirmation. She scoots forward, dropping her voice. “It happened! How *was* it? Did he just stare lovingly into your eyes the whole time? He seems like a loving-starer.”

My cheeks heat. “No, we didn’t make unblinking eye contact for forty minutes straight.”

“Forty *minutes*?” she shrieks.

“Not all at once!” I hurry to add. “It was more like a very intense fifteen minutes, a cooldown period, and then a more well-paced thirty later.”

“Okay, now this surprises me,” she says.

“Trust me,” I say. “I’m well aware of how little sense he and I make.”

She scoffs. “No, you two make perfect sense. I just would’ve imagined Miles would be so overeager that he’d sail straight through to the finish line, with no decorum.”

“There was decorum,” I say.

“Hot, charming guys never learn how to work for it,” she muses.

“He worked for it.” Immediately I want to take it back.

I’ve never had this kind of friendship before, the sort you see women have in movies, where they spare each other none of the gory or lusty details, the best friend who teaches you how to put in a tampon at thirteen, or texts you from the bathroom the night she sleeps with someone for the first time.

Sadie was the closest to that I ever got, but she’d grown up with brothers and always had more guy friends than girls. She was talkative and funny, but never open about things like this.

And as close as I’ve gotten to Ashleigh, I’m also worried this is a betrayal. I don’t know how Miles would feel about me sharing this. I have the somewhat ludicrous thought that I should have asked him when we last talked.

Actually, it’s not ludicrous. I can easily imagine the conversation, how *not weird* it would feel to ask, *Can I tell Ashleigh?*

Which only makes me feel more emotionally hungover and confused. Every time I think of Miles, I think of what he *said*, and my heart starts racing, my whole body responding like I’m being hunted. No fight, *pure flight*.

“I shouldn’t be talking about this,” I say.

“Maybe,” she says gently, “you need to?”

I must look suspicious, because she adds, “I swear, I’m saying this as a friend, not the friendly neighborhood gossipmonger.”

“I need to talk about it,” I relent. “Just not about *it*. I feel like that should’ve stayed private.”

She pantomimes zipping her lips shut, but hasn’t even finished when she chimes in, “But for what it’s worth, everything you’ve said has only made me love and respect him more.”

“Miles is great,” I say. “I just don’t think Miles and I are great *for* each other.”

“Why?” Ashleigh asks. “You’re unbelievably happy when you’re around him. That’s kind of the main thing that matters.”

“I’m exactly the kind of person he can’t handle being with, and he’s exactly the kind who could destroy me,” I explain.

“*Honey*,” Ashleigh touches my hand. “That’s how it works. That’s love.”

“I get too swept up in him, Ash,” I say. “I almost let myself get absorbed again, and for what? I know better.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself,” she says.

“He ran, Ashleigh.” My voice breaks. “He was supposed to pick me up from work the next day, and he just . . . never came.”

Her mouth falls open as she takes in my meaning.

“I didn’t hear from him for hours. Until *I* texted *him*.”

“Oh, god, Miles, *no*,” she groans, like he’s here to reason with.

“And then, Peter came by,” I say.

“Holy fuck!” she yelps.

“He and Petra broke up.”

Another shocked gasp. “*No*,” she says, aghast. “Miles *didn’t* . . .”

“He says he was just helping her move her stuff out,” I say. “But Peter said they’re on the path to rekindling.”

“What in Satan’s *ball sack*?” she demands, then, thinking better of it, says, “Look, Peter’s bitter, and Miles is a nice guy. Of course he helped her move out.”

“I know,” I say. He wouldn’t tell me he loved me if he intended to get back together with Petra. Maybe it’s naive, but I really believe that. Or

maybe I just want to.

“That’s not the point,” I say.

“It’s certainly *a* point,” Ashleigh says, “if not *the* point.”

“There’s a job,” I blurt. “Near my mom. I think I have a real shot at getting it.”

She assesses me for a long beat. “Shit.”

“I wanted to tell you right away, but . . .”

She looks down at her hands. “I was icing you out.” She sighs and squeezes my hands. “When you move, just don’t forget about me, okay?”

“Trust me, I couldn’t,” I say tearily, and I mean it. “I could barely handle this last week without you. I don’t want to do that again.”

“Couldn’t agree more.” Her eyes drift up to the cut-in. “What a disgusting color.”

“It truly, truly is,” I say.

Her smile grows, eyes dropping to me. “Want to put on the TV and keep going?”

“Do *you*?” I ask.

“I think it’ll be fun to have an ugly room for a while,” she says. “Duke couldn’t abide ugliness. Or dogs.” She perks up. “Maybe I should get a dog.” She looks to me for feedback.

“I think you should do exactly what you want to do,” I tell her.

“Let’s rob a bank,” she says.

“I think you should get a dog.”



SATURDAY, AUGUST 10<sup>TH</sup>

7 DAYS

LATER, IN THE kitchen, picking over a plate of pizza rolls, Ashleigh invites me to stay with her until the Read-a-thon.

“I haven’t had a roommate other than Duke in a long time,” she says. “And this house is fucking huge. It’d be fun.”

“Speaking of the size of your house, you’ve never mentioned . . .” I trail off.

“That I live in a Bond villain lair?” Ashleigh says.

Which gives me permission to more openly call a spade a spade: “That you’re rich as fuck.”

She snorts. “I am not. Duke has cookie money.”

“Cookie money?” I repeat. “Like he knocked over a Girl Scouts truck and started a black-market operation?”

“Like, he’s the heir to a cookie fortune,” she says.

“I didn’t know cookies could *have* fortunes,” I say. “I mean . . . other than . . . fortune cookies.”

“Oh, yeah.” She pops another pizza roll in her mouth. “Anything can have a fortune if you’re greedy enough.”

At the look on my face, she adds, “I mean, obviously not Duke. He could’ve fought me for the house, and he didn’t. But I’m positive that if you go far enough back through his family tree, someone made a deal with the devil or, like, killed someone to get their hands on a secret recipe.”

“I look forward to their HBO drama,” I say.

She's quiet for a moment. "You should let Miles know you're staying here."

"It's not like that with us," I remind her.

"You don't want him charging into the FBI offices, claiming you've been taken, do you?" she asks.

"Taken?" I say. "Like kidnapped?"

"I don't know, whatever happens in those movies you two are obsessed with," she says. "Like, held at gunpoint and forced to rob a museum with your highly specialized skill set, or whatever."

"Right, I'm going to be 'taken' by someone who needs the inside scoop on children's literature."

"Just let him know you're staying here," she says.

"Fine," I groan.

Staying with Ash, I type out. He replies almost instantly, k.

"There," I tell her.

"Good." Ashleigh tips her head toward the back doors. "Now, let's watch something gory."

"*Real Housewives*?" I guess.

"This," she says, "must be what it's like to be a proud mother."

"Did you forget about Mulder?" I say.

"Just for a second," she says. "He's back now, though."



**ON MONDAY NIGHT**, while Miles is at work, I run back to the apartment to pack some clothes. Aside from our differences in personal style, Ashleigh's both shorter and curvier than I am, and even the slouchy jersey dress she lent me for work today managed to hang from my chest like two deflated balloons.

Tuesday, on our way in, we hit up a drive-through coffee kiosk near her house. She's not a morning person, and we barely speak until we get to work, at which point her first real words of the day are, "Wow! Maybe you should move in with me. I could be on time every day."

“We’re four minutes late,” I point out.

“Which is four minutes earlier than usual,” she says.

“If I moved in with you,” I say, “I don’t think our friendship would survive that.”

“I’m not sure *we* would even survive that,” she says. “It’d be like some deranged eighties sitcom, with a vaguely haunted laugh track.”

“What’s this about you moving in together?” Harvey asks, emerging from his office, mug in hand.

“We’re not,” Ashleigh and I both say.

“Relieved to hear that,” he says. “It’s manageable for one of you to be late every day, so long as the other is early.”

“And which of us is which?” Ashleigh asks, feigning ignorance.

After work, we grab burritos, then pick up Mulder from after-school band practice. “This is my friend Daphne,” she tells him as he climbs into the backseat of her hatchback with a trombone case nearly as big as he is. “Daphne, this is Mulder.”

“Hi!” I wave.

I expect a sulky preteen nonresponse, but despite his overall aesthetic projecting this, he nods politely and says, “Nice to meet you, Daphne.”

“You too!” I say.

“She’s staying with us for a couple of days,” Ashleigh tells him.

“Cool.” He pulls a handheld video game out of his backpack. She asks about his day, and he confirms it was “so boring he almost died” and also that “Ricky Landis puked in first period, and Tinsley G”—there are *two* Tinsleys in his first period—“was so grossed out, she threw up too.”

Then, without taking a breath, he asks what’s for dinner, and Ashleigh hoists the burrito bag into the air.

A minute later, he adds, “Aren’t you guys a little old for sleepovers?”

Ashleigh looks dismayed. I cackle, until she tells Mulder to guess how old I am.

Guilelessly, he says, “I don’t know. Forty-five?”

And then *she*’s cackling.

“That’s *older* than your mom,” I point out.

He just shrugs, goes back to playing his game.

On Wednesday, after work, I shut myself into the guest room to do a video interview with Anika and Clay, the Ocean City Library district manager and branch manager, respectively. “How soon could you be out here?” Anika asks with a sunny smile as we’re saying our goodbyes.

My heart shoots up into my throat, but my voice stays even. “As soon as I fulfill my two weeks’ notice.”

Anika and Clay exchange a smile. I’m rarely the most confident person in the room, but I’m ninety-nine percent sure I’ve got it when Clay says, “We’ll be in touch as soon as possible.”

When I leave the guest room, Ashleigh’s waiting for me in the hall with champagne.

“I don’t want you to go,” she says, “but I want you to be happy.”

By Thursday, I’m actually *ahead* of schedule for the Read-a-thon, but the school calls Ashleigh at work to come pick up Mulder early, because he’s finally caught the stomach bug that’s been going around.

The very last thing I need is to get sick right now, and I debate going back to the apartment for the next two days. Instead I double my handwashing.

By midday Friday, Mulder texts Ashleigh that he hasn’t gotten sick at all that day. So far, neither she nor I have any symptoms, so things are looking up.

Until I remember I forgot to grab a couple of bags of Target dollar-section prizes I’d been stockpiling under my bed.

I tell myself that Miles will already be at work when I get there, but the truth is, I cut it close, tempt fate.

If the universe wants us to run into each other, we’ll run into each other.

He’s not there, though.

He’s so thoroughly *not* there that I wonder if he’s been staying elsewhere, a thought I immediately regret, because now it’s bound to recur when I’m lying in the guest bed tonight.

Just because the apartment is spotless, no lamps on, no scent of weed whatsoever, doesn’t mean Miles has been sleeping somewhere else.

Peter's words echo through me: *They'll get back together. You know that, right?*

I refuse to let the thought take hold. Partly because I don't believe it, and partly because I have no mental space.

It's not dark out yet, but the shades are drawn, everything cast in shadow. I make my way into my room, not bothering with the lights, and dig the Target bags out from under the bedframe.

When I stand to go, something draws my eyes to the corner of my dresser, the part of it nearest to the door.

A small white box.

My heart lurches. I'm fairly sure it's the box of fudge, minus the note, but I open it just to be sure: chocolate.

I'm about to drop it in the trash when I catch sight of *Dad's* note crumpled there.

No part of me is itching to read it, but I'm also thinking about what Mom said, about not wasting time talking ourselves out of hope, and avoiding anything that might hurt.

I can see now how much time I've spent doing that.

I stopped trying to make friends I'd have to move away from. I let Sadie's and my friendship fade away rather than risk confronting her about it and learning, once and for all, that I didn't really matter.

When Peter dumped me, my life shrank, not just because of him but because of *me*. I didn't want to go anywhere I might run into him. I didn't want to be reminded of my broken heart.

And, not to excuse any of his shortcomings, but I hadn't known Dad was married because I hadn't even read my birthday card.

I think about Ashleigh too, and her ex, how he was fine with things being *just okay*, too scared to go deeper in search of *greatness* when it meant risking change.

I don't know whether I'll eat the fudge, or read my dad's letter, but I stuff both in the bag of Dollar Spot prizes to take back to Ashleigh's. Then I leave my room. I turn into the living room, and I collide with something hard enough that red scorches cross the backs of my eyelids.

Not something. Someone.

A shadowy figure.

I scream.

Then *they* scream.

There's a brief clumsy scuffle. Neither of us seems totally sure whether we're attacking or trying to get away. Then a voice yelps, "I'll fucking end you if you don't leave!"

Ordinarily, this is the last thing I'd want to hear from someone moving around in the dark in my apartment. In this instance, cool relief rushes from my head to my feet.

"Julia?!" I say.

"*Daphne?*" Julia cries.

I scuttle sideways and flick the lights on. "You're *back?*"

"*You're* back," she says.

"I didn't go anywhere," I say.

"Tell that to my brother," she says. Heat hits my cheeks and ears. A hand goes to Julia's hip. "Wait, I'm mad at you."

"He told you?" I ask.

"That he professed his love to you?" she says. "Might've mentioned it. What was more surprising, though, was hearing you didn't tell him you feel the same way. Which you do."

"Julia," I say. "It's complicated."

She squints, head cocking, the Nowak tilt. "Is it, though?"

An awkward silence unfurls.

Finally, she sighs. "I guess I also need to thank you."

"What? For what?" I say.

"Miles told me you'd been pushing him to be honest with me," she says. "About how he felt about me moving here."

"You guys talked about it?" I say.

"We did," she confirms.

"How was it?" I ask.

"Horrible," she says. "I was so upset. Crying. Mad. The whole thing."

I wince. "I'm sorry."

“And then we kept talking,” Julia continues, “and I understood. It’s exactly the same thing he did with you.”

“I’m not following.”

“I always thought it was amazing, how Miles managed to escape our childhood without becoming suspicious of everyone,” she says. “But then he was talking about what happened with you—how he messed up and it convinced him he couldn’t be who you need, *yadda, yadda, yadda*. And I realized, all that shit our parents did? It might not have made him mistrust *other* people, but it sure as hell made him mistrust himself.”

My heart tightens and twists.

“He can’t see himself clearly,” she says. “They made him feel like all he ever does is let people down.”

I’ve seen it, over and over again—that self-doubt, the mistrust of his own feelings, the fear of letting any bit of darkness out of himself.

“Here I am, keeping all my problems secret so he won’t rush in to fix them,” she says, “and he tells me he’s scared his childhood broke him. That because of it, he can’t be the brother, or friend, or *whatever* the people he loves deserve.”

I swallow hard. “What did you say?”

“I told him that, because of *my* childhood, I *know* he can. He always has.”

A lump of emotion climbs my esophagus.

“Anyway.” Her gaze falls. “I’m sure you’ve got a lot to do.”

I swallow. “Welcome back, Julia.”

“Thanks,” she says. “It’s good to be home.”

FRIDAY, AUGUST 16<sup>TH</sup>

1 DAY

I READ DAD'S note in the middle of the night.

*Hey, kiddo,*

*Sorry to take off like this—got a once-in-a-lifetime offer. Can't wait to tell you all about it on our way back through town! Will you be around in October? Would love to see what an Up North Fall looks like. Miss you already.*

*Love, Dad & Starfire*

He's the same dad as ever. The one who says one thing—*I love you; I miss you; we'll stick around as long as you'll have us*—but does another.

But that's not what bothers me about the letter.

What bothers me is one word—*October*—and the low, yearning ache I feel between my ribs when I read it.

I start to cry. And then, of course, I call my mom.

"Calm down," she says, when I start blabbering. "Tell me everything."

Finally, I do.





IT'S STILL DARK and damp when I meet Harvey at the front doors on Saturday morning. We're both dressed *down* in anticipation of the long day ahead. He's wearing a Howard sweatshirt and athletic pants (not the Red Wings ones), while I'm in stretchy knit pants and a baggy cardigan.

"You manage to get any sleep?" he asks, unlocking the automatic doors.

"A little," I say. "You?"

"Not much," he says, "but adrenaline will carry us through. And if not, we can take turns napping in the office."

Inside, the fluorescent lights take their sweet time flickering on.

I feel a pang of longing. Nostalgia, I guess, for every library I've ever loved, and the little girl who dreamed of this: being the first person in and the last out of a building brimming with books. And feeling like it belonged to me in a way, and I to it.

A home, when nowhere else felt right.

Harvey takes a deep breath. "Don't you love the way it smells?"

"So, so much," I say.

"That right there," he says, "is why I can't retire. If I could *live* in this feeling, I would."

"I know," I say. "The kids will be living my childhood dream tonight, staying over in a library."

He looks over. "You did well, Daphne. Really well."

I wonder if I'm glowing. Probably it's too early to glow. Probably I look like the ghost of a milk carton gone sour.

"Let's get to work."

The Fantasy team arrives first, ready to transform one corner of the library into a low-budget approximation of a castle with their prepainted butcher-paper backdrops and papier-mâché dragon, its sinuous body segmented into four little arc shapes, arranged in a row so that the floor looks like water the creature's swimming through.

It is, by nature of being made out of paper by an amateur, utterly and wonderfully horrifying. If this thing came to life, it would do so with gruesome screams at finding itself sentient yet anatomically improbable.

I love it so much. The kids are going to lose it. Even the ones old enough to roll their eyes, like Maya.

Once, in seventh grade, Mom took me to a midnight launch party for a fantasy series. They passed out “wands,” which were just sticks they probably found in the brush behind the library. It was silly. It was also magical. I chose a twig with pale green lichen crawling over it, and Mom chose one that was bone white. I felt like I was as close as I’d ever be to true magic.

That feeling of curiosity and awe and wonder. That was where I made my home every time we moved, a sensation that couldn’t be taken away.

Ashleigh shows up eight minutes late, breakfast burritos in hand for both me and Harvey. She keeps things running at the desk while he and I coordinate the waves of drop-offs and volunteer check-ins.

Around ten thirty, the Sci-Fi and Contemporary crews show up, quickly taking over their corners, hanging their tinfoil UFOs from the drop-tile and their painted quote and cover posters from R. J. Palacio, Jasmine Warga, Jacqueline Woodson, and Jeff Kinney over in the Contemporary area.

At one p.m., the Horror team arrives with faux cobwebs and lightly spooky haunted house paraphernalia. They piece together their set in one of the two community rooms, safely tucked away from the littlest readers.

Around three, the Picture Book volunteers descend on the Story Nook. One of them—a local seamstress—has made a giant stuffed Very Hungry Caterpillar to be won by the top reader of the under-six crowd, most of whom will go home before dark, while those with older siblings hang on a bit longer.

The day’s first crisis hits at three thirty-two, and it’s a doozy.

I’m out front, helping Shirley—the ever-sticky three-year-old Lyla’s grandmother—manage drop-offs, when Ashleigh comes bustling outside, sweaty from exertion, giant topknot wobbling. She gives me a look like, *We need to talk*, and I excuse myself to follow Ashleigh a few yards away from the covered walkway at the front of the library.

“So,” she says, keeping her voice low, “don’t freak out.”

“Three magical words,” I say.

“Landon caught it,” she says.

I shake my head. “Caught . . . ?”

“The stomach bug,” she says. “He can’t come tonight.”

“Okay.” I nod as my brain spins through its own version of the Read-a-thon Google Doc. Landon was going to be in the other community room, the one for refreshments. He was also supposed to go pick up a lot of those refreshments.

*And* be our “tech guy.” Set up the projector and screen, run the videos and live streams.

“That’s not all,” Ashleigh says.

My eyes snap back to her face. The corners of her mouth pull wide in an exaggerated grimace. “Three other volunteers have called in sick too.”

“Shit.”

I should have prepared for this.

In a way, I did. I didn’t put a cap on volunteers. The more, the better. But our version of *more* didn’t account for losing four people, three and a half hours before start time.

I’m trying to come up with a plan, buying myself time with an evenly spaced out “Okay . . . okay,” as if some brilliant solution is in the process of being birthed.

Back under the walkway, someone calls my name.

“I’m going to take care of it,” Ashleigh tells me.

“*How?*” I say.

“Don’t worry about it,” she tells me.

At my snort, she says, “Fine! Worry about it. But also trust me. I’ll figure it out. You go focus on the other nine million things you need to do.”

Another volunteer walks out the front doors, scans the lawn, and heads straight for me with a look of abject panic on his face.

“Go.” Ashleigh shoves me. “You put out your fires. I’ve got this one. Tonight will be amazing.”

“I need it to be,” I say.

She sets her hands on my shoulders and looks me in the eye. “Daphne. Remember who this is for.”

“That’s why I want to get it right.”

“I get that,” she says. “But if I’ve learned anything from parenting, it’s that it matters way more that you’re *present* than that you’re *perfect*. Just be here, really be here, and the kids will love it.”

My shoulders loosen. “I can do that.”

“Of course you can,” she says. “You’re Daphne Fucking Vincent.”

“Aww.” I touch my chest. “You know my last name *and* my middle name.”



TWENTY MINUTES UNTIL go time, from the comfort of a paper-lined toilet seat, I check my phone.

Dad has called three times in an hour.

My stomach plummets.

I don’t *want* to call him back, especially right now, but I’m more anxious about what might happen if I don’t.

I flush the toilet, wash my hands, leave the bathroom, and step outside to make the call.

The early-evening sky has a summery glow, the heat dense except when the breeze billows off the water. I sweep my hair off my neck into a bun and hit the call button.

“Heeeeey, kid,” Dad says.

I bypass my own *hello*. “Is everything okay?”

“What do you mean?” he says.

“Is there some kind of emergency?” Then, to his nonresponse, I say, “You called me three times. Were they pocket dials?”

“No, no, no,” he says. “I just wanted to wish you luck. Or break a leg, or whatever is apropos for this situation.”

“What situation?” I ask.

“Your big . . . thing tonight,” he says. “The library thing!”

I can’t think of a single thing to say.

“Sorry we had to hightail it out of there, by the way,” he says.

"It's fine," I say. "I didn't expect anything else."

Dad laughs. "That's what I tried to tell him. I said, I know my kid, and she doesn't get hung up on that kind of thing. He seems to think you're some kind of high-strung neurotic type. I mean, he must, or he wouldn't have—"

"Wait, wait," I say. "What are you talking about?"

"Your boyfriend," he says.

"*Peter?*"

"The *new* guy," he says. "Miles."

I massage my brow. "Dad, I already told you, Miles is just a friend."

"Well, that's what I thought," he says brightly, like I've just proved a point for him, or maybe won him a bet. "But the way he was talking—"

"Dad. I *still* don't know what you're talking about."

A moment of silence. "He didn't tell you?"

I have neither time nor energy to play Twenty Questions. "Tell me *what*."

"That he was driving up to see us," he says.

"Driving up to *see* you?" I repeat.

"Two weeks ago," he says. "After we left. I've been *trying* to get ahold of you since then."

I'm so lost. I guess I *am* going to play Twenty Questions. "Came up *where?*"

"The island," he says. "Mackinac. Guess he left me a voice mail first, but who checks those?"

Me, I think.

Mom.

Probably a huge percentage of the world.

"Anyway, he came up and chewed me out about us having to leave early," Dad says with a distinct air of *Can you believe that?*

It's a creative use of the phrase "having to leave."

As if he were driven out of town at gunpoint, or took an emergency flight home to be with a dying pet.

“Kid tried to guilt us into driving *all the way* back down to you before we headed out to meet Starfire’s family. Really upset her with the things he was saying about me, Daph. She didn’t talk to me for like half the next day. Caused all sorts of problems.”

“Wh-when did you say this happened?” I say, still reeling.

“Well, he showed up the Monday before last,” he says. “And missed the final ferry back, so we had to ask Christopher if he could stay the night. Pretty uncomfortable situation he put us in.”

“*Christopher?*” At this point, I really just need a buzzer to hit every time he says something that elicits a series of *????* from me.

“Our buddy!” Dad says. “The one we met at the dunes, who’s got this great house up there. And a hotel. House is putting it lightly, though. I don’t know if this guy is really an investor like he said or if that was code for mob don, but . . .” He whistles his amazement.

Well, if your dad’s going to ditch you for someone he just met, and there’s no hostage situation involved, he could at least have the decency to stay in a mansion paid for with cocaine and shakedowns.

“Dad, I have to go,” I say. “My event’s starting any minute.”

“Right, right, I won’t keep you,” he says. “Just wanted to tell you congrats and I love you. You already know that, though.”

If I had that buzzer, I might hit it now.

If I had more time, I might ask, *Do you? Do you really?*

Instead I push out a breathless “Yeah,” and end the call.

Monday night. That’s where Miles was. Monday night, and Tuesday morning.

That’s where Miles went. Unshakably cool, invariably well-liked, chronically fine Miles drove two hours to confront my father.

Suddenly the semi-pathetic box of fudge makes sense.

It was a consolation prize, just not in the way I thought.

He’d tried. I’d told him how I felt, how I wanted my dad to come back, and he’d tried to bring him.

And maybe I should be mad he overstepped. But I don’t feel mad. I feel raw. I feel like the boundary between me and the world is stretching thinner,

making me tender and vulnerable, a water balloon fit to burst.

*Why wouldn't he have just told me?*

But I know the answer.

I know Miles, and he knows me.

I look toward the road, the sparkling band of blue water, the scraggly beach trees blurring behind a wall of tears.

*He knows me.*

*He loves me.*

It wasn't just a pretty word, thrown out in a convenient moment. It was true. And it makes me feel brave, being loved by him. It makes me safe enough to do the thing I never could.

I wipe the tears away and redial Dad.

"You forget something?" he asks.

"I only have a minute," I say.

"Me too," he goes on. "Star and I are going golfing—met someone who owns a course!"

"I'm not trying to hurt you," I start. "I just haven't said this before and I don't think I will if I wait too long trying to figure out a better way of saying it."

I think Dad feels the seismic shift. He doesn't rush in with a joke. My last breath feels like the one you'd take before smashing a sledgehammer into a wall.

I'd tempered my expectations, packed them tight into bricks, built a fortress to protect me. But keeping every glimmer of hope out has isolated me too, and I want to be seen. I want to be loved. I want to live with the hope that things can get better, even if, in the end, they don't.

"You were a shitty dad," I tell him. "You were never there. I spent so much time just *waiting* for you. And when you did show up, it was never when you said. You never stuck around as long as you promised. And because of you, the whole world . . . my whole world felt totally fucking unpredictable. And maybe you really *do* love me. But I *don't* know that. How would I? I've never been your priority. I'm a pit stop.

“And that guy you think *doesn’t* know me”—I choke up here, need a second to force the emotion down—“he didn’t even tell me he tried to get you to come back for me. Because *he* knew it would kill me. And he wasn’t going to let you break what’s left of my heart. So now I get it. Why Mom used to make excuses for you. She wasn’t protecting you. She was protecting me. But I’m grown now. She can’t always guard me from you. It’s my job to protect myself. Not hide, not just try to stop feeling this . . . this *constant ache*. I can’t keep doing this. I don’t want to be a person who expects the worst. Something has to change. So the next time you come to town, ask me first. And if you want to leave, don’t be a coward. Don’t make the people who love me make your excuses. You can tell me to my face, or we can be done with this.”

Pin-drop silence.

Then, finally, he murmurs, “Oh, Daphne.”

The doors whisk open behind me and Ashleigh pops her head out. “You ready?”

“You have to understand—”

“I’ve got to go,” I tell him. “I’ll call you when it’s a good time for *me*.”

I hang up and square my shoulders. “Ready,” I say.





I STEP UP in front of the reference desk.

I've never heard the library like this, so raucous, humming with energy—and this is just our volunteers.

Ashleigh cups her hands around her mouth. "Listen up, people! This is our children's librarian, Daphne, and she's going to walk us through protocol before the kids get here."

The room quiets. I can only see the first several rows of volunteers, Huma and her husband among them.

I steady my office chair and climb onto it. "First of all, thank you all for being here."

Rowdy applause erupts from the back of the room, along with a high-pitched *whoop!*

I recognize Julia's voice before I spot her, standing just beyond the Story Nook, with a handful of other last-minute volunteers.

Elda, the cheesemonger Miles introduced me to at the prom, once again dressed like an eighties fairy godmother.

Barb and Lenore, in matching tracksuits (tiny Barb's pink, tall Lenore's lavender).

Katya, with the baby bangs, from Cherry Hill, and a person with a shaved head and septum ring who I recognize but haven't met.

And just behind them, a head of messy dark hair, soft brown eyes.

My heart seems to unzip.

Miles smiles tentatively, an apology of a smile: *Should I be here right now?*

*You should always be here,* my heart answers.

My nervous system agrees, a feeling like some stovetop-warmed caramel drizzled over me.

I wish I could take back everything I said to him.

I spent so much time accustoming myself to one kind of surprise—the kind hinging on disappointments, hurts, small abandonments, and emotional bartering—that I’d stopped considering there might be any other.

A surprise, it turns out, is different when it comes from someone who knows and loves you.

Beside me, Ashleigh coughs. I have no idea how long I’ve been staring at him, feeling like I might burst into confetti or tears.

“It means so much to me,” I say, voice already hoarse. I tear my gaze from him and sweep it over the audience. “To be part of a community like this. To me, libraries have always represented the best of humanity. The way we all share knowledge and space, and . . . and how we find ways to look after each other. It’s not a perfect system, but it’s powerful. I know there are a lot of other places you could be on a Saturday night.”

My throat constricts. “There aren’t words for how special this is. That you’ve shown up for the kids, and Waning Bay, and me.”

I let myself look at Miles, just for an instant. “It matters. So much.”

His lips part, his brow smoothing out.

For a moment, it’s just the two of us.

I clear my throat and pivot. “So, everyone signed up to work in registration, you’ll be over here with Ashleigh . . .”



**THIS IS HOW** time works.

The things you wait months for blink past, like the flash of a strobe, huge swaths lost in the dark beats between.

Elda runs our refreshments room, which—thanks to her last-minute donations—has moved from sleepover fare to a bizarre mix of cupcakes, potato chips, Mountain Dew, and top-tier charcuterie. The parents are thrilled.

The cheesemonger is thrilled.

But no one's more thrilled than Harvey.

At first I think it's a purely cheese-based joy Elda's inspired in him, but even as her supplies dwindle, he keeps doubling back to the community room. I watch them laughing together through the windows, and think again that sometimes the unexpected is better than what you plan.

The same universe that dispassionately takes things away can bring you things you weren't imaginative enough to dream up.

Every hour, on the hour, the kids line up for prizes, then skip and run and tumble back to their reading spots of choice, or else to the nook to watch a virtual author visit. In Landon's absence, Katya's friend Banks, the person with the shaved head and septum ring—who, it turns out, works part-time at Fika—runs tech.

Miles is ostensibly on trash-and-cleanup duty, though at one point I catch him in the Sci-Fi area, the Fontana triplets dangling off him like he's the rotating pillar at the center of a high-flying swing-set carousel.

Julia and another volunteer run the Picture Book circle for the not-yet-readers, and Huma helps kids in the Contemporary section choose their next reads.

Then there's Maya.

Tucked back in the Fantasy corner, on side-by-side beanbags with Ethan from the YA Backlist book club. They aren't speaking, just silently reading the same Alice Hoffman book, *The Rules of Magic*, while, over by the study tables, Maya's mom chats with Ethan's dads.

Maya's and my two-person book club might be coming to an end soon, I realize, and I'm tempted to feel a bit sad, but I'm also so proud of her, for stepping outside of her comfort zone.

And I'm proud of myself too, feel like I've honored the twelve-year-old girl I was. Like in a very small way, maybe I've made this already wonderful place just a tiny bit better. It's made *me* better.

The hum and din settle to the quiet contentment I most associate with the library, and most of the younger kids and their guardians siphon off by

midnight. The soda and chocolate cherries keep the preteens going strong until three.

At that point, I duck back into the office to power-nap under the desk, but the adrenaline won't let me sleep.

Occasional shrieks and giggles make their way to me, and I catch myself grinning at the underside of the desk.

I pull my phone out and open my messages with my mom. She sent one this morning—yesterday morning now, technically—that I haven't replied to yet.

Woke up thinking about you, she writes. Proud of you, my brave girl.

I feel even more sure about my decision than I did last night.

I love this library.

I love my coworkers, and I love the patrons. I love the lake and the farm stands and BARn and Ashleigh and Julia and Miles.

I love Miles.

And I also love my mother. A part of me will always be just a little bit homesick for her when we're apart. She's my constant, and I don't take that lightly.

I love you, I tell her.

Love you more, she says.

After tonight, I'll tell the others. For now I don't want to think about the future. I want to be wholly present.

I dust myself off and leave the office.

Take in the soft musk of books and the hint of pine and something I can't name but recognize like an old friend.

I feel a bittersweetness that this moment can't last, that time will pull us along soon. But for the first time in a while, I'm excited about the unknown.

I'm looking forward to the surprises.



IT'S STILL DARK at six forty, the crowd having majorly thinned. Mulder is fast asleep *atop* a table, next to a friend who's reading a manga with a flashlight, eyelids sagging every several seconds.

We've stayed busy enough that Miles and I haven't had a chance to exchange more than a cursory *How are you* and *Good, how are you* and *Thank you for being here*. I've been putting out small fires and, in one tragic situation, unclogging toilets, for long enough to become famished.

When I pop my head into the refreshment room, it looks like a powerful clan of Vikings with nut allergies has rolled through.

Elda the cheesemonger and Harvey don't even seem to notice me, just keep chatting in the far corner of the room, their uncomfortable wooden seats angled together.

I grab a brownie and cram it into my mouth as I leave the community room.

"Keep it PG, Vincent," Ashleigh teases. "Some of the kids are still awake." At my baffled look, she says, "You were doing your good-food moan."

"Sorry," I say, mouth full.

She and the rest of the cleanup crew have started gathering the final wave of flotsam and jetsam from the night. Over by the front doors, Miles is sorting the recycling, trash, and compost into bags.

"They're divine, aren't they?" she says, jutting her chin toward the brownie.

"Really, really good."

Ashleigh smiles. "Miles brought them. Did you know he bakes?"

I sneak another glance at him. He's turned away, stretching his arms over his head sleepily, a band of skin visible along his waist until his arms fall back to his sides.

Ashleigh cackles. "Now, that sound was *definitely* not PG."

I face her, cheeks burning. "I didn't make a sound."

From her smirk, I realize she's joking with me. She bumps her elbow against mine and jerks her chin toward Miles. "Go on."

"It's not over yet," I say.

She rolls her eyes. “Daphne. Look around. You’re welcome to stick around for ten more minutes if you’re dying to, but when the timer’s up, I’m going to sweep you off the stage like an amateur-night executioner, while the three remaining kids here boo and hurl chocolate cherries at your head.”

I’m still hesitant. “Shouldn’t I see this through to the end?”

She drops her trash bag at my feet and grabs my hands in hers. “You did. You made it through the summer. We pulled off the event of the year. The hard part’s over.”

A huge weight lifts from my chest. The knot beneath it loosens and unwinds. “We did it.”

I made it through.

We both laugh, slaphappy from lack of sleep.

She pulls me into a hug, and I squeeze her back, the trash bag now sitting at our feet like a puppy. “Not sure what the rules are about saying this at work,” I say, “but I love you.”

“I fucking love you too,” she says. “Now, go get your man.”



SUNDAY, AUGUST 18<sup>TH</sup>

FINALLY

"HI," I SAY, when I'm finally right in front of him, that last yard of silent eye contact having taken somewhere between eleven seconds and fourteen years.

He rubs the side of his head. "Hi."

Neither of us rushes to fill the pause.

My heart feels like a flame, burning higher, higher, higher.

I clear my throat. "Are you up for a walk?"

He seems surprised. "Are you?"

"Unless you just want to go collapse into bed, yeah." Ears suddenly fiery hot, I add, "If you need to sleep, I mean."

"I drank so much Red Bull I could sprint right now," he says. "But I also might have a heart attack."

"You're in luck," I tell him. "The library paid for me to get CPR certified."

He smiles. "Then what are we waiting for?"

Nothing, I guess.



THE AIR IS misty, the streets and sidewalks empty apart from the occasional spandex-clad jogger or bicyclist.

Out on the water, a couple of boats drift, but still, it feels like just the two of us in a world that's fast asleep.

We wander along the lake's edge, and the silence doesn't feel awkward. It's its own kind of conversation, a reintroduction after our time apart.

"Thank you for being there last night," I finally say.

"I was always going to be," he says. "Just so you know. No matter what, I would've been there."

I blink back the rising tears. "I know."

"Elda, Katya, and Banks, on the other hand," he says, "getting *them* to help took bartering."

"Well, Elda at least will probably let you off the hook," I say. "She and my boss were really hitting it off."

"They were cute," Miles agrees.

Another few minutes pass. We turn up a side street. My heart is vibrating. I take a deep breath, slowly release it. "I know you went to see my dad."

Miles's gaze slices toward me. He stops. "I'm sorry. I should have asked you before I did that. It was stupid."

"I understand why you didn't," I say. "Really."

The grooves at the inside corners of his brows soften. "The other night . . . I think you misunderstood me. I didn't wake up and panic. I woke up . . . *happy*. Happier than I can remember being."

He rubs the back of his head. "And then Petra called, and she was sobbing. So hard I couldn't understand her. I'd never seen her cry before. I honestly thought someone had died. She asked if I could come see her, and I said yes. Because I was worried. I still care about her."

"I know you do," I say thickly.

"I got to Peter's place and she was sitting out front . . ." He lets out an exasperated breath. His eyes cut up to me, watching for a reaction. "She told me they broke up."

I don't say anything.

"You don't seem surprised," he says.

"I'm not," I say. "Peter told me."



Something flashes across his face, too quick for me to read. “Right,” he says softly. He rubs the back of his head, nodding a few more times. He clears his throat, but it stays hoarse: “So you’ve talked.”

“He came by,” I say.

His gaze sweeps to our feet, and he nods again.

“Miles?”

His dark eyes lift to mine, faintly glossed.

“Shit, what’s wrong?” I can’t help it; I reach for him, slide my hands up to his shoulders.

“Nothing.” He forces a smile. “I’m happy for you.”

“Happy for me?” I say.

He flushes. “I mean, if you guys are . . .”

“If we’re what?”

His teeth scrape over his bottom lip.

“Oh my god!” Understanding clatters through me. “Miles, *no*. You don’t think that Peter and I are . . . Absolutely not.” I actually laugh. And then a horrible thought causes me a full-body twitch. “Wait—you and Petra aren’t —”

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “When I got over there, she was trying to tell me how the whole thing was a mistake. So I told her about you.”

“That we slept together?” I say, bewildered.

He gives a surprised laugh. “No, Daphne. That I love you.”

Hearing it again feels like swallowing a lit lightbulb. “Oh.”

“I didn’t mean to tell her first.” The tops of his cheeks redden. “That I’m in love with you.”

My eyes sting. My limbs go shivery and a heaviness presses in on my chest.

He *loves* me. Present tense.

And I love him. He knows me, and I see him.

“And when I told Petra . . .” He swallows. “I guess—she kind of got into my head. I mean, I was already in my head, but she said things that fucked with me.”

“What do you mean?” I say.

His expression verges on pained.

"You can tell me," I promise.

"It's just," he says, "Peter told her about your dad. And Petra started saying this stuff, about how you'd been through too much. That you weren't the kind of person who could deal with uncertainty. She and I are, but not you and Peter."

"And what, she's the expert on what I can and can't deal with?" I ask.

He smiles faintly. His hands circle my wrists, his thumbs running up and down my veins as his face softens. "They broke up because Petra decided she didn't want kids, and Peter did."

"Oh," I say.

His gaze drops, his touch stilling. "And she reminded me that's something that matters to you too. And I already knew that. It wasn't a surprise. But . . ." He chews on his bottom lip, his gaze so warm and fluid I feel like I could swan-dive into it, like it would rush up to meet me on every side.

"She pointed out that I'm not exactly equipped for that," he murmurs, "and all I could think about was *her* family, and what *they* thought of me. They were nice, but they never thought I was good enough. And then there's *my* family shit, and everything your dad's put you through. And I just thought . . ." His Adam's apple bobs. "Suddenly it seemed selfish of me. To love you."

At the tenderness in his face and touch, the need in his expression, my heart cracks.

"To try to be with you, when I know what you want," he says under his breath. "I can't give you a family like the Collinses or the Comers. I feel like . . . like there's so much space between who I am and who I want to be, and there's no one to show me how to get there. And it doesn't really make sense, but I thought . . . maybe if I could get through to your dad, if I could help *fix* that, then it would prove I'm capable. Of giving you everything you want."

"*Miles*," I begin.

“*That’s* why I freaked out,” he continues. “And as soon as I saw you again, I felt so stupid. Because I’d spent the last two days acting like you were *Petra*.”

“Because deep down, she always thought she was settling, and so I did too. I always felt like I was making up for something, or trying to win her. And I thought that made me *lucky*, to be with someone who chose me even though no one in her life ‘got it.’ ”

His voice thickens: “I didn’t learn what love was supposed to feel like. It doesn’t feel natural, or come easily to me, to let anyone close. But you—you make love so easy, Daphne. You make me think I already deserve it, exactly how I am.

“And I feel lucky every time you look at me. Not because I think I’ve managed to *earn* you, but because it feels like you don’t need me to. Like you just . . . like me.” He shakes his head, voice fraying as he corrects himself: “Like you *love* me. That’s how I feel with you.

“And I know I’m not who you pictured yourself with, but I think I could be, eventually. If you’ll let me. So don’t go. Because I don’t want you to. Because you’re my best friend, and I’m in love with you.”

“Miles,” I say again.

“I know we’re really different,” he says, “but I love all the things about you that aren’t like me. I *love* that you feel your feelings. I *love* that you know what you want. I *love* that you’re always where you say you’ll be, when you say you’ll be there.”

“*Miles*.” His brows pinch together, a mix of hope and fear on his face that I feel deep in my own gut. “Can I show you something?”

His features flatten. After a second, he nods.

I take his hand, his pulse thundering into my palm, as I lead him down the sidewalk. We turn right at the cross street and stop, at the house on the corner, facing the broken gate and crooked For Sale sign.

His eyes dart to the front door, then back to me.

“You’re right,” I say.

He blinks.

“When I moved here,” I say, “I had a picture in my head. I knew exactly what my house was going to look like, and who I’d spend the holidays with, and I knew who we’d go out with on the weekends, and I had an idea of how many kids I’d have and even what their names would be. I could basically picture every single day of the rest of my life.

“I’m not spontaneous,” I say. “Surprises make me nervous, and I’ve moved around too much to want to, like, live in a van, or backpack for months.”

“I don’t need that,” Miles rasps. “I don’t think I even want that anymore, if I ever did.”

“That’s my point,” I say.

He shakes his head once, brow knitted tight.

“I knew exactly what to expect for the rest of my life,” I explain, “and it was comforting to me. But then it blew up, and all I could think about was running, getting away from the mess. Then one day, after we started getting close, I was walking to work, and I saw this house.”

My voice goes husky. “It was the first time in a year that I wanted something new. When you told me how you felt”—I swallow that same glowing lightbulb down—“that you loved me, that’s why *I* panicked.”

He looks toward the run-down bungalow. “Because I don’t fit.”

My throat burns, like there’s too much pressure building in my chest, steam that needs to be let out.

“Because I could see it,” I say. “Right away. I could see a whole new life, all these new things to want, and that’s fucking terrifying, Miles.”

His hands fly up to cradle my jaw. “I won’t hurt you, Daphne.”

“You don’t know that,” I whisper.

“I know how hard I’ll try,” he says. “Just stay. I love you. I want you. *Stay.*”

My hands climb up to the back of his neck, another uncontrollable baring of my heart.

He swallows hard. “Come home. Please.”

“I can’t.” I shake my head. Before he can argue, I go on: “No matter what you said today, I’d already made up my mind.”

He draws back, a shadow passing over his face.

I wasn't intentionally obfuscating the point, but seeing his shattered look, I realize I've phrased this the worst way possible.

"No!" I say. "I mean, regardless of what happens between us, I'm not done here."

His head just barely cocks, a wave of love pummeling me at the familiar gesture.

"I'm getting my own place," I explain.

After a flicker of confusion, he looks sidelong toward the For Sale sign.

"Not that. I can't afford that. I found a one-bedroom. Close to Fika."

"I really don't understand, Daphne."

"You mean so much to me, Miles," I say. "So much. But you can't be everything. You were right that I'd love it here. I do. And you're a huge part of why I want to build a life here. But I can't build it around you. If this ends, I need to know that I don't just disappear. I need to have my own stuff that's not about anyone else. Whether it works out between us or not, I need that."

"I want it to work," he insists. "It *can*."

"I think so too," I promise. "I can't imagine ever meeting anyone more wonderful than you, so if it *doesn't* work, I'm going to stay single, go to a sperm bank, and get into CrossFit."

A goofy smile overtakes his face. "You really think so?"

"Not the CrossFit part. I'm incredibly lazy," I say. "But the rest of it. You're wonderful. You're the reason for the word *wonderful*. It really shouldn't be used for anything else. You make me want to see the best in everyone. You're the person I want to be with when everything's going wrong, instead of just wanting to skip over those times entirely. I love that you're so present that you always forget to keep track of your phone, and I love that when you're late, you never make excuses but you always have a good reason.

"You're the most generous person I've ever met, even to people who've given you no reason to be generous, and you *always* come through for the people you care about. I honestly can't totally figure out why someone as

*good* as you would love me, when I can be kind of a pessimistic asshole. But I do feel like the luckiest person in the world, to be who you want. Because I want you too. I love you too. I love you in a way that feels brand-new. You make every single thing that went wrong feel like it was just a step in the right direction, and it—it makes me excited. For life to keep surprising me.

“You *aren’t* what I pictured,” I say. “You are so, so, so much better than what my cynical little brain could’ve ever come up with.” My voice wavers and cracks at the end, and even if I knew what to say next, I don’t think I’d be able to get it out.

Miles studies me, his eyes soft now as I try to pull myself together. He tugs my hands up to his chest, holding them over his heart.

“That’s it?” he asks quietly. “That’s the speech?”

“It was longer than that, but I’ve slept like four hours in the last three days, so that’s what’s left in my brain,” I say scratchily. “You’re so nice and so hot and so fun and funny, and you smell really good, and the brownies you made for last night were amazing.”

“And you love me,” he says softly.

“So much,” I agree, “I feel like, why would anyone who can’t date *you* even bother dating? And somehow, you *like me*.”

“*Love*,” he corrects. “Somehow, you *love me*.”

“I do,” I tell him.

I do. I am. Right now. Every muscle in my body is busy loving him, on the sidewalk in front of my new dream house, the first rays of a new morning filtering across the street.

One of his hands pulls free from the tangle of our fingers and slides into my hair.

“Can we go home now?” he asks.

“Actually,” I say, “my apartment isn’t ready until next week.”

“In that case,” he says, “do you want to come back to my place?”

“Can we lock Julia out for a while?”

He laughs. “We’ll send her to Ashleigh’s for a bit.”

“Then yes.”

He crushes me to him, a deep kiss, full of feeling: joy and fear and need and hope. A rough, no-holds-barred kiss that prompts one car rolling past to honk its horn, the automobile equivalent of a wolf whistle, or maybe a scolding.

We pull back smiling, our foreheads resting together. We smile and breathe and touch one another and dream about the future without saying any of it aloud.

Summer turning into fall. Trips with Ashleigh and Mulder to the apple orchards an hour south. Bonfires with Julia as the air chills and the leaves blaze into color. Poker nights with cigar smoke thick in the air and long morning walks with hot chai from Fika in hand.

And even the hellish cold of winter. A new apartment, complete with gas fireplace. Bundled hikes through feet of snow, Miles and I slipping out of our clothes and under the sheets to warm each other.

And things I can't dream up too. The ways it will all go wrong, and the beauty that can only happen in the wake.

A second act I fell into, and the home that I chose, as much as it chose me.

I can't wait. I can't wait for this whole world I've invited to surprise me.



FRIDAY, OCTOBER 3<sup>RD</sup>

## 412 DAYS SINCE I STAYED

THROUGH THE DOOR, Celine Dion is bemoaning the fact that she doesn't want to be all by herself. The chime of the oven timer barely cuts through the song, and I flip on the interior light to check that the edges of the brownies have gone crispy, the top cracking in that mouthwatering way. I pull them out and set them atop the stove, eyeing the clock.

Of course *today* I would be running behind.

I jog to the shut-tight door and rap on it. He doesn't hear the first time, so I knock again. The music stops.

"Yeah?" Miles calls.

"You okay?" I ask.

A pause. "Yeah?"

That didn't inspire confidence. "Can I come in?"

The door swings open. He's standing there shirtless, shaving cream covering the lower half of his face, razor in hand.

"I thought I should shave," he says, by way of explanation. "Since your mom's coming."

I fight a smile. "You once told me that women of a certain age *love* the scruffy thing."

"Oh, they do." He leans against the sink. "I can't have your mom falling in love with me."

A ridiculous chortle jars out of me. I'd actually finally talked her into going on one date with a guy from her gym. It had gone surprisingly well,



but afterward she'd told me, "I think I'm too busy to date." The more important thing, though, was that she was too *happy* with the life she'd built for herself to change it for anyone who didn't set her world on fire. And I liked that for her. She deserved the life she'd worked so hard for.

"You know I think you're unbelievably hot," I tell Miles, "but I think Holly Vincent is safe from your charms."

His smile deepens. "I want to impress her."

"She already knows you, Miles," I say.

We'd gone to her place for Christmas last year, slept on the tiny pullout couch, and eaten Korean barbecue takeout while watching *It Happened on Fifth Avenue*, followed immediately by *Die Hard*.

"Yeah, but this will be the first time she sees us *here*." He waves toward our new (old) place.

Technically, it will be the first time *anyone's* seen us here, other than Ashleigh and Julia. The place is still a wreck, but the living room, one bathroom, and Miles's and my bedroom at least are functional at this point.

Even if one of the diamond-paned windows is literally being held together by packing tape, and the power goes out when we run more than one fan.

It will take years to fix up this eye-bleedingly orange cottage, two and a half blocks from the green one with the same floor plan. But I don't mind. I love it enough as it is that I'm happy to wait.

The doorbell rings, which is a surprise. It only works about every eighth time someone touches it.

"Shit," Miles says. "I'm late. Sorry." He grabs the towel off the rack to wipe off his shaving cream, thoughts of a smooth jaw abandoned.

"It's okay," I say. "Just put on a shirt and meet me in the living room. Or skip the shirt. I told everyone tonight's casual."

He doesn't even wait to finish laughing before kissing me, leaving foam behind on my face when we pull apart. He wipes my chin off with the towel. "Be right there," he promises.

I'm not worried about my mom, or tonight. I'm more nervous for next week.

Sadie's first visit to see me since we started really talking again.

For months after I decided to stay in Waning Bay, I waited for that splinter in my heart to push its way out, to stop missing her.

The night Miles and I decided to buy a house together, we went to dinner to celebrate, then walked home past a bookshop. Sadie's favorite writer, the one whose event Miles had taken me to all those months ago, had a new release sitting in the window. On a whim, I popped in and bought it. But I couldn't bring myself to read it, so it sat on a shelf for weeks, before finally I picked it up, devoured it in one sitting, and closed it with tears streaming down my cheeks.

The very first thing I did when I finished that book was reach to text her. An impulse, an instinct. And even though I *didn't* send the message, the feeling didn't go away either.

For another week, I moved through the world feeling like I'd forgotten something, like there was somewhere I should be, like there was someone I'd meant to call.

I was hurt and angry and confused by the distance in our relationship, but more than that, I missed my friend. I didn't *want* to write her off.

So I wrote her a letter. A letter seemed more *Sadie* than an email. Austenian, even. In college she'd had personalized stationery and a wax seal stamp, but I had to settle for a Pure Michigan sticker.

The day she got the letter, right after she read it, she'd called me right away, and even though I was terrified, I answered on the second ring.

We'd talked for hours. We'd both cried.

She'd been engaged for two months by then. "I wanted to tell you so badly," she said. "But I didn't think you wanted to hear from me. I thought—when you and Peter broke up, I thought you were pushing me away. Because of Cooper. Because as long as I'm with him, I'm kind of . . . *stuck with Peter*, you know?"

And I *did* know. Peter and Cooper were like family. The *real* kind, who will always love you, even when your decisions make no sense to them.

The decision, for her, had never been *me or Peter*. It was *her best friend or the love of her life*. And now that I understood, I realized I *didn't* need it

to feel like an easy choice after all.

Things were allowed to be complicated. They were allowed to be messy. We were allowed to disagree and argue and even hurt each other, on occasion, and it didn't mean it was time to let the revolving door of life carry us away from each other.

Sometimes things are hard. They just are.

That first phone call had been like a waterfall, but after that, our texts and calls had been slow and steady. We still aren't back to where we used to be—maybe we never will be—but we are *something*. We still love each other. We're still trying.

As for how she'll mesh with my new life and friends here, I have no idea. But I'm working on being *excited* instead of nervous about the unknown. So many of the most beautiful things in life are unexpected. Look at Dad and Starfire. It's not like he's suddenly a different person, but he's more settled, less restless. He's actually made it to *two* of our last three scheduled visits, and to be fair, he and Starfire won an all-expenses-paid trip to Switzerland (on a hot tip from their psychic) that overlapped with that third visit, so I can't really blame him for that one.

At the front door, I smooth down my skirt and swing it open. (Door, not skirt.)

"Hiiii!" Both women on the front step shriek. Ashleigh's sun-bronzed from her solo *Eat, Pray, Love*-style trip to Portugal—most of which she spent with a gorgeous local named Afonso who already has plane tickets to visit *her* next month.

"Happy housewarming!" she cries, shoving an enormous bottle of espumante toward me.

"That's from both of us," Julia says.

Ashleigh scoffs.

"I bought the bow," Julia says. "I'm a twenty-four-year-old barista, give me a break."

"I thought you were bringing a date," I say to Jules. "That guy you just went to Chicago with?"

"Ryan." She rolls her eyes. "He cut his fingernails on the bus ride."

“Ew,” Ashleigh and I say in unison.

Julia nods solemnly. “Flags so red, they veered toward maroon.”

“Come in, come in!”

Instead they pin me in a tight hug between the two of them. The heat is sticky against our skin, the buzz of insects in our overgrown front yard loud enough to dull the resumed singing of one Ms. Celine Dion.

“Okay,” Julia says, pulling back. “I’m taking control of the playlist.”

“I’ve never known a happier man who loves sad songs more,” Ashleigh muses.

Inside, Julia talks Miles into letting her take over the sound bar. He finishes making a batch of margaritas, and adds salt and pepper to the guacamole.

Barb and Lenore let themselves in a few minutes later, Barb’s arms loaded with bags of freshly picked apples and Lenore’s with a housewarming bouquet of lavender.

Mom’s cab from the airport shows up next. After giving me and Miles each a rib-cracking hug, she introduces herself to everyone without any hesitation.

We’d invited her to stay with us, said we’d camp in the living room so she could take the bed, but she’d insisted on booking an Airbnb with a home gym.

Harvey and Elda are the last to arrive. They knock, rather than ring, or else the bell just doesn’t work this time.

They make quite a pair: Harvey in his Red Wings sweatsuit, a box of cigars under his arm; Elsa with her pink disco ball earrings and elegant cheeseboard, wrapped in beeswax cloth.

Everyone’s here now. The family I didn’t expect, minus Mulder, who is strictly banned from poker night, due to strong language, smoking, gambling—take your pick, really. He’s not allowed to join until he’s eighteen, the same rule Ashleigh’s parents had for her.

I take Harvey and Elda back to the living room, and there’s one last round of introductions for Mom. She doesn’t drink often, so her few sips of

margarita must be hitting her: she tears up when she shakes Harvey's hand, and thanks him for "taking such good care of my girl."

"She's a great employee," he says, "and a wonderful friend. Terrible poker player, though."

Mom cackles. "She's always been too honest for her own good. Except that one time you told that girl you grew up on a horse farm. Remember that, Daphne?"

"I'd finally sort of forgotten," I say.

"And the time you told your ex-fiancé you were dating his *new* fiancée's ex-boyfriend," Julia puts in.

"What's this, now?" Elda sets the cheeseboard on the counter.

"Harvey didn't tell you?" Ashleigh says.

"I don't gossip about the staff," he says, with false and unconvincing sternness that doesn't hide his grin.

Miles slips his arms around my waist, the woodsmoke and ginger smell folding around me, my heart pattering at the feeling of him kissing the side of my neck. I let myself lean back into him, the best feeling in the world. At least, the best feeling that's appropriate to have in front of your mother.

"You really don't know this already?" I ask Elda.

She shakes her head.

"It's how Daphne and I got together." Miles's arms tighten around me.

Elda claps her hands together. "Oh, I *love* a good meet-cute. Let's hear it."

I crane my neck over my shoulder to look at him. His dimples sink into his beard, and it feels like my heart is unzipping, stepping out of its calloused skin, a glowing, sunlit thing.

"Funny story . . ." he says, but he doesn't go on, just watches me and waits.

He knows how much I love to tell it.

# Acknowledgments



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# About the Author



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