

# FIRST-TIME CALLER



AUTHOR OF LOVELIGHT FARMS

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PAN BOOKS

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*For the hopeless romantics. And the reluctant ones too.*



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## CHAPTER 1

# AIDEN

L  
OVE IS A LIE.

At least, that's what the sign above the door tells me. It's written in large looping letters. Little hearts dotted along the edges and a lipstick mark in the bottom left corner. It looks like a sign that should be hanging crooked in the hallway of a high school, not boldly declaring the decline of humanity during the morning rush at a coffee shop.

There are streamers too. Red and white and dangling from the hanging baskets by the window. They twist back and forth violently every time someone slips in from the street, relaxing back to their sad, wilted loops as soon as the door shuts again.

I frown at a red balloon with an *X* drawn over it in Sharpie, scratching at the scruff along my jaw as I wait for Jackson to come back to our table. A woman with a satchel the size of a small country smacks into the back of my head and I cross my arms over my chest, kicking my legs out halfway into the aisle to protect my peace. If Jackson doesn't come back soon, I might start eating the saltshaker. I demanded a croissant, two bagels, and a coffee the size of my face as soon as we sat down. Payment for pulling me out of bed at this ungodly hour.

I'm usually too tired from a late-night shift to drag myself from bed any earlier than ten. But Jackson had insisted, and then switched to threats when his insistence didn't work. I'd been too shocked at his language to come up with an appropriate excuse. In our four years of working together at the radio station, I've never heard Jackson raise his voice, let alone threaten bodily harm if I

didn't agree to meet him at the tiny bookshop café two blocks from his house.

*Be at Skullduggery at eight, he said. Or I'm coming for you.*

I was so distracted by the underlying threat, I didn't bother to ask what sort of café has a name like Skullduggery. A pirate ship, maybe. Not a café.

Jackson elbows his way through the small crowd jostling for position at the counter and slides into the seat across from mine, a tray balanced in one hand. He's wearing a gray sweater over a plaid button-up, his sleeves rolled to his forearms. He's polished and put together, not a single hair out of place. I bet he was up at five, done with his workout by six, and making some of his hipster coffee by seven. Meanwhile, I'm wearing a sweatshirt I found draped over the edge of my bed. I'm pretty sure there's pasta sauce on it.

We managed to grab a booth as soon as we got here, though the overstuffed armchairs on the second floor look appealing, surrounded by shelves stacked floor to ceiling with used books. Not only does Skullduggery celebrate the downfall of love; it apparently has a robust collection of literature and the best cruffins in the city. Whatever a cruffin is.

Jackson hands me a cup of coffee, his face eager. "Did you see the sign?"

"You can't exactly miss it." I lift my eyes back to the sign above the door and the decorations floating around it. "The headless cupids are a nice touch."

He unloads the rest of the tray. "They celebrate anti- Valentine's Day every year. I thought you'd like it."

*Like* feels like a strong word for the demonic cupids dangling from the ceiling. I can't stop staring at the one closest to us. It somehow maintained its head in the massacre and its eyes keep following me. "Do people like . . . whatever this is?"

"I thought it suited your mood." He raises both eyebrows and nudges his glasses up his nose with his knuckles. "You know. Your shitty mood."

When Jackson started at 101.6 LITE FM, he never would have used the word *shitty* in casual conversation. I guess our spending

every night together for the past three years has made a lasting impact.

"Subtle," I grumble. I reach for a bagel, then change my mind and go for the croissant instead. "Is that why I'm here? You want to have a conversation about my attitude?"

"What else would this conversation be about?"

"I don't know." I poke at my baked good. "I thought you wanted to get breakfast. Catch up. Do things that friends do."

"It's convenient how you remember we're friends when you're trying to wiggle out of something."

"I'm not wiggling," I mutter, petulant.

"You're absolutely wiggling. And what I wanted was a cruffin, but they sold out an hour ago."

There's a heavy pause. An implication that if we had met at seven thirty like he suggested, he would happily be eating his baked good of choice. I clear my throat and tear my croissant in half. "Apologies for your lost cruffin."

"Accepted." Jackson snatches the discarded half of my croissant. "Now let's talk about why you sound like your soul is being sucked from your body every night between the hours of six and midnight when you're supposed to be handing out advice on love. My weather reports are suffering because of you."

"Your weather reports are doing just fine," I mumble. I'm pretty sure Jackson's hourly traffic and weather update is the most popular part of our show. "And I don't know what to tell you. I'm fresh out of advice." I'm a glorified answering machine. A sentient blob that listens to people vent. After six years of hosting *Heartstrings*, Baltimore's romance hotline, I've discovered people don't want to be told how to fix their lives or be held accountable. They just want to hear themselves talk and validate their own narcissism.

They also want to complain about their husband not loading the dishwasher correctly for twenty-six minutes and thirty-two seconds.

I sigh. "You're concerned about my attitude affecting the show."

Jackson frowns. Brand-new lines bracket either side of his mouth. I've aged him by ten years with one conversation.

"Oh, we are way past that, buddy. I know it's affecting the show.

This conversation is about you, Aiden. A bedrock of that friendship thing you like to allude to but very rarely bring into practice.” He pauses and scratches at his jaw. “Maggie also said if everyone kept tiptoeing around you and your delicate feelings, she’d kick your ass herself.”

Maggie, our boss at the station, has never been one to mince words. “The truth is revealed.” I sigh.

“Aiden.” Jackson leans forward, his frown dragging his whole face down. “You called someone a piece of shit in the middle of a live broadcast.”

“Because that guy was a piece of shit.” I dunk my croissant into my coffee. Some of it sloshes over the edge of my chipped mug to the weathered tabletop. I feel more emotionally connected to that spilled coffee than to any of the people who have called in to the radio station in the last three months. “He compared women to *cattle*, Jack.”

Jackson flinches. “I know. But you’ve had callers like that before.” I make a face and he throws up his hands in the universal gesture for *Chill the fuck out*. “I’m not saying he was right. He was a douche-canoe, obviously, but you’ve always been able to handle people like that, not—” Jackson leans closer, eyes darting over my shoulder to the people crowded around us. He lowers his voice. “Not launch into a very creative and descriptive diatribe about what they should do with their opinions. Maggie has been waiting for a call from the FCC. The only reason she thinks we might get away with it is because it was after ten p.m. And I interrupted halfway through with an emergency weather update.”

*Interrupted* is a polite way to describe how he burst into the booth, ripped the microphone from in front of me, and started talking about low-pressure systems.

I rub my hand over my jaw. “You said there were storms rolling in. There weren’t any storms.”

“Because I lied,” he whisper-yells. “You made me lie about the *weather*, Aiden.”

I try not to laugh. I know how seriously Jackson takes his job. He wanted to work for the National Weather Service but had to drop out

of his college program to take on full custody of his little sisters when his mom decided to join a traveling harmonica band. He stuck around for the girls. He said they deserved one permanent thing in their life.

Jackson stares at me. "What's going on with you?"

I keep dipping my croissant into my coffee. I don't know how to stop. "I don't know."

"You've been short-tempered."

"Yes."

"Irritated."

"Yup."

"Snappy and standoffish."

"That seems like an exaggeration, but sure."

Jackson raises both eyebrows as if to say, *You called someone a piece of shit, then hurled your coffee mug across the room like you were competing in an Olympic trial.* "Is something going on with your family?" he asks carefully. "Is your mom—"

"She's good," I interrupt. "She's fine. The cancer is in full remission. Everyone is good." *Good* felt like an impossibility six months ago. *Good* feels like too small a word for the balloon of relief that floats beneath my rib cage every time I think about how close I came to losing my mom. Again. How fucking terrible it was to watch her claw her way through a disease. Again.

I dig my knuckles into my temple and try to erase the image of her small body in a hospital bed, wires hooked up to her arms and a trembling smile on her face.

*Everything is fine, Aiden honey. I'm okay.*

I shake my head once. The cancer is gone. The doctors are hopeful. The cancer is *gone*. I clear my throat and glance at Jackson. "My mom and dad are doing a road-trip thing as a celebration. Up the coast. They planned it during her treatment and they're following through."

They keep sending me pictures of themselves in front of various state signs. Beaming on the beach in Delaware, wrapped in parkas. Matching threadbare baseball caps in New York. My mom clutching a bag of gummy worms to her chest in front of a half-bent sign in New

Jersey, a knit beanie over the hair that's just started to regrow. Their faces lined with untethered joy.

"And you're upset you're missing out? Is that why you've been a jackass?"

I shake my head. "Nah. I'm happy for them."

"Then what is it?" Jackson asks. "What's going on with you?"

I turn my coffee mug in one full circle. I'm a mess. Just as obstinate as Jackson thinks I am. I don't know how to explain the dread I feel every time I slide into the booth at the station. The thick, heavy feeling that sinks like a stone every time I tap the blinking red button that lets me talk to listeners. It's an ache. An absence. I don't know. If my parents are the picture of joy, then I am the portrait of existential dread. I used to love talking to people. Hearing their stories and sharing mine. It made me feel connected.

But now I'm just . . . exhausted.

"I don't know," I murmur. "I've been—" *Struggling*, I think, afraid to say the word out loud. Afraid to make it real. I've been struggling and I have no idea how to fix it. If it can even be fixed. I think I've—I think it's possible I've fallen out of love with love, burned by one too many lackluster calls. Burned by the shitty circumstances my family's been handed too. It feels like every time I get my hopes up for something good, reality comes out swinging. I don't know how to be a hopeful person anymore.

It's easier not to be.

I tear off a corner of my croissant. "Maybe I should think about doing something else."

A groove appears between Jackson's eyebrows. "You don't believe that."

I shrug. "I don't know, man. Kind of." I drop my elbows to the table. "You've heard Maggie in our staff meetings. Show numbers aren't great. Sponsorship packages are way down. We get half of the callers we used to and every one of them is—"

"Challenging?" Jackson offers.

"Miserable," I say instead. We are a romance hotline with zero romance.

He leans back in his chair. "I know, but . . . Maggie has ideas.

She's pitched a ton of new segments that have promise. And she launched the show as a podcast so people can listen whenever they want."

"The podcast has fourteen subscribers," I tell him. "One of them is my mom."

He snorts a laugh. "Three of them are my sisters."

*Heartstrings* hasn't pulled in a decent audience for months now. We're hanging on by the skin of our teeth.

The door to the café bangs open and a brisk wind tunnels through the tables. This close to the harbor, it's like sitting in the middle of a polar vortex. There's a chorus of complaints from the people closest to the door, and it slams shut again, the bells jingling their protest. The cupid with the demonic eyes glares at me, swinging back and forth wildly. Its bow and arrow points right between my eyebrows.

Poetic.

"Radio was never the long-term plan," I say slowly. "Maybe this is the universe telling me I should move on."

Jackson reaches across the table and snatches the rest of my croissant. I let him. "You believe in signs from the universe now? The guy who snorted when Maggie suggested he do a bit on horoscopes?"

"Well, horoscopes are ridiculous."

Jackson rolls his eyes. "Typical Taurus."

I ignore him. "Something needs to change."

I think it's me.

Someone jostles behind me for a place at the counter and their elbow sinks between my shoulder blades. I slip farther in the booth with a grunt. "Have you fulfilled your interrogation requirements for Maggie? Can I go get another croissant now?"

Jackson's lips flatten into a line. "Sure. I'll tell her you don't know what's going on, you don't know if you're going to stick with the show, and you don't know if you even really like people anymore despite hosting Baltimore's most popular late-night radio show."

"Formerly most popular," I grumble, tilting my half-empty coffee cup back and forth, hoping it might magically refill itself. "I think we

rank behind that public broadcasting show now. The one with the cats."

"*Primetime Pussycats?*"

"That's the one."

He looks confused. "It's actually about cats?"

I give him a look. "What else would it be about, Jack?"

"*Pussycat* is a weird term," he says defensively. "And they air late at night. Stop looking at me like that."

I snicker into the last pull of my coffee. The *Primetime Pussycats* play songs exclusively containing lyrics that make use of the word *cat*. The rest of their airtime is dedicated to litter comparisons and where to find the best catnip in the Baltimore area. It's oddly soothing.

I've seen their metrics. Their numbers are triple what ours are.

I sigh and collapse back in my seat, narrowly avoiding a handbag across the back of my head. It hasn't gotten any less crowded in this tiny shop since we arrived, more people packing in at the counter to escape the heavy clouds rolling in over the water. The loft space at the top of the stairs is crowded too, people settling for spots on the floor, books open in their laps.

"Consider your responsibilities fulfilled," I mutter, watching the sky turn gunmetal outside. February is a dreary month in Baltimore, and I don't think the headless dangling cupids are doing anyone any favors. "I have been properly chastised. Et cetera, et cetera."

"That wasn't the purpose of this conversation."

I know it wasn't, but I feel a lick of embarrassment as if it was. I didn't realize anyone else had noticed my deteriorating enthusiasm, though hurling a coffee mug across the booth in violent frustration isn't exactly subtle.

"I know," I say. Jackson is a friend, and he probably volunteered to check on me because he cares. The *friendship thing*, as he so aptly put it. "I'll try to be better. You're right. Maybe the podcast will do something for us. I'll brainstorm. See if I can come up with any new concepts."

"Maybe try meditation too," he suggests. "I have an app you can try."

He opens his mouth to say something else, but I'm saved from the details of his meditation routine by the sudden and jarring sound of a foghorn. Half the people in the café cringe; the other half cheer. Our table is an even split down the middle.

"What the hell is that?" I yell over the booming sound, my hands clapped over my ears.

"If they have to call someone's name for pickup more than twice, they break out the horn." Jackson continues stirring his tea like nothing out of the ordinary is happening. Like the obnoxious horn thing is a daily occurrence. Maybe it is. "Now that it's quiet, I'm sure the barista will yell the name again."

A blond head appears on the other side of the counter. Her face is twisted in fond exasperation, an extra-large iced coffee in her right hand. She lifts it above her head, narrowly missing a balding man with his nose buried in a paperback.

"Brooks Robinson," she bellows, her voice almost as loud as the foghorn. "I've got a café au lait for Brooks Robinson."

The crowd parts, shuffles, moves. The people hidden in the stacks in the loft peer over the edge. There's a murmur of interest. Brooks Robinson is an important name in Baltimore.

"Do you really think it's him?" Jackson asks. He twists in the booth to get a better look.

"I doubt the greatest third baseman of all time is getting a café au lait on a Tuesday morning at a bookstore that celebrates anti-Valentine's Day."

Jackson shrugs. "You never know."

I fold my arms over my chest. "If it is, let's ask him if he wants to be on Baltimore's formerly most popular late-night radio show."

Jackson turns back to me with a smile. "That's the spirit. With a little positive thinking, we can turn this ship around."

I don't respond. As far as I'm concerned, this ship is already at the bottom of the ocean.



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**AIDEN VALENTINE:** Do you ever wonder what the point of it all is?

**CALLER:** . . . What?

**AIDEN VALENTINE:** What's the point of all this? What are we doing?  
Are we just bumbling around? Hoping for the best?

[pause]

**CALLER:** I asked if I should bring my girlfriend flowers more often.

**AIDEN VALENTINE:** Flowers die. Everything dies.

**CALLER:** I thought this was a romance hotline.