

Emmaline Waters,  
THIS IS YOUR  
*Life*



A ROMANTIC COMEDY  
BY

*Maggie Bloom*

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THIS IS YOUR  
Life

Maggie Bloom

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For Pete  
(again)

## Chapter 1

“Okay . . . begin,” instructs the human-resources assistant—a clever-looking brunette with sculpted calves and a knee-strangling pencil skirt—a stopwatch the size of Manhattan cupped in her palm. With a click of her thumb, she gets the meter running.

Fifteen minutes. This is how much time my fellow applicants and I have to devour a mystery meal, judge its palatability, and draft a thoughtful critique worthy of printing in the Arts & Leisure section of the *Boston Sunday Times*. In my case, the task must be accomplished while holding my breath to the point of asphyxiation, thanks to the (very) little black dress I’ve worn for the occasion.

Before putting fork to plate, I scan the competition. There are six of us hunched around a conference table in a sterile, windowless room. We are the cream of the crop, the last men (four) and women (two) standing, the swimsuit portion of the competition complete, our fates resting on the interview.

*Good thing this isn’t a beauty pageant, I think. Or we’d be in a shitload of trouble.*

As a newly minted graduate of Boston University, I am the youngest contender by far. The other woman is midfortyish, with an I’ve-given-up-caring aura. The men have outlasted my father by a solid decade, at minimum.

I draw the deepest breath I can manage and concentrate on the plate in front of me, silverware clanging as my competitors get to work.

*Hmm . . . which of the three gummy masses shall I sample first?*

The greenish yellow lump looks interesting, in a regurgitated baby food sort of way. Or maybe the neon orange glob would taste better. I mean, it’s been a while since I’ve ingested nuclear waste.

In the end, the beige mound prevails, its neutrality screaming: *I will not send you to the emergency room at 3 a.m. with gut-twisting stomach pains.*

The assistant excuses herself, leaving the stopwatch faceup on the table, the seconds sneering as they zoom by. *Focus, Em*, I tell myself, dipping the tines of the fork into a foodstuff (suddenly, I understand that word: foodstuff equals not quite food) resembling chunky wallpaper paste. *You’ve got this. I mean, sure, you’re no gourmet connoisseur. Heck, you’re a New York mile away from being a foodie, even. Come to think of it, your favorite meal is SpaghettiOs with*



*hot dogs and, to jazz things up, extra hot dogs. But at least you've got that English degree to fall back on, and—*

*Shut the fuck up, self! I must taste! Think! Write!*

The fork is halfway to my lips when, out of the corner of my eye, I spot the spindly guy next to me fiddling with something under the table. *Please, God, don't let him be a sex pervert who gets aroused by pureed squash (I'm guessing that's what the neon orange glob is) and creamed spinach.*

He is not a sex pervert, however—as far as I can tell, anyway. He's something worse. *Much* worse.

"Ahem," I say out of the side of my mouth, shocked at what is going on in the man's lap, "what do you think you're doing?"

Unbelievably, he doesn't look up.

"Psst," I try, drawing a hairy eyeball from the woman, who is slumped in the uncomfortable plastic chair across from me, "we're not allowed to . . ."

The leggy assistant was quite clear on this point: no electronic devices, i.e. NO CHEATING!!!

The man pulls a confused face. "Huh?"

He's kidding, right? I can clearly see that he's accessed the *New York Times*' restaurant reviews on his phone. It can only be a matter of moments before he starts lifting passages verbatim, in an attempt to steal this job out from under my inexperienced fingertips.

I seethe with rage, but a glance at the stopwatch throws a wet blanket over me. I shake my head and, after a mouth-readying gulp, insert the first forkful of . . .

*Mmm.*

Beige is delicious, as it turns out. Much tastier than greenish yellow (or so I suspect). Delicious *what*, though? I can hardly pontificate on the merits of beige without specifying the food source from whence it sprang.

*Chicken*, I think. *Or duck. Maybe rabbit.* Whatever it is, it's bathed in the most heavenly gravy ever to grace a ladle.

Aha! I'll use that in the critique: the succulent chicken/duck/rabbit was bathed in the most heavenly gravy ever to grace a ladle! If I do say so myself, it's a good enough line to leave Cheater Dude's *New York Times* drivel in the dust.

Okay, back to work.

As much as I'd like another taste of the beige chicken (I'm now convinced it *is* chicken and not duck or rabbit), I have no choice but to forge ahead. And with only eleven minutes left on the clock, I'm going to have to move quickly.

The youngest of the four men—a stalker type with a crudely dyed beard, severe corrective lenses, and a concave chin—picks up his pencil and starts scribbling away. Of course, Cheater Dude is right behind him.

A huff/sigh squeezes out of my pursed lips. With effort, I refocus, giving both the greenish yellow and neon orange blobs a chance to wow me.

They don't.

Nine and a half minutes to go.

IneedthisjobIneedthisjobIneedthisjob. I mean, otherwise, what am I going to do? Sprout roots in Aunt GiGi's shagarific basement? *The offer's always there*, Mom tells me once a week, to ease her guilt over the fact that she and Dad can't put me up anymore, what would've been my room in their new brownstone occupied by my baby sister, Angeline. Mom's own baby sister, GiGi, lives twenty miles outside the city in a decrepit little bungalow she pried away from her ex-con husband in their rancorous divorce.

Ooh, rancorous! There must be a way to squeeze that into a sentence: the creamed spinach was a rancorous addition to the otherwise sublime mélange of earthy butternut squash and drool-inducing chicken piccata.

The stopwatch ticks below the eight-minute mark, and someone—the woman, I'm guessing, or maybe No-Chin Man—begins tapping their foot in a distracting fashion. "Do you mind?" I mumble, glaring across the table. "People are trying to think here." I wait for someone to back me up, but instead I get shushed—SHUSHED!!!—by the cheater beside me.

Brilliant.

The rat-a-tat-tat continues like some sort of Chinese water torture. What I wouldn't give for the grungy pink earbuds that are rolling around under the passenger seat of my new boyfriend Trent's Lexus.

*I bet he'll dump me if I don't get this job*, I think. Not because he's an asshole (I'm almost sure he isn't), but because a hotshot real estate mogul—which he's on track to becoming in the next few years, thanks to a generous five-million-dollar investment (ahem, gift) from his billionaire grandfather—cannot, in good conscience, hitch his star to the wagon of a woman who doesn't own so much as a matching pair of socks.

Cheater Dude gulps down the last of the water in his Dixie cup and promptly goes into a coughing fit. If he turns blue, I'll intervene—or at least get someone else to, my emergency medical skills a bit on the rusty side. Otherwise, I must concentrate.

And concentrate, I do. In the sevenish minutes remaining, I hammer out the first few paragraphs—they can't expect the critique to be *finished*, can they?—of what is sure to be the winning submission. I mean, I used the words *lugubrious*, *quiescent*, *feckless*, and *jejune*! All in the same sentence! Surely, no one has managed *that* before!

The woman, who has beaten me to the finish line by a mere thirty seconds (I know this because she slammed her pencil down to emphasize her temporal superiority), eyes me with contempt while I carefully—and quietly, like a normal person—place my No. 2 on the table, parallel to the junior-size legal pad on which I've recorded my masterpiece. I give her a smile that, I hope, conveys the message: *I am sorry that you are alone. Disappointed. A mere feline or two away from full-blown cat-lady nirvana. But don't expect me to roll over and hand you this job, because I am a human being too, and I have needs, and my needs are as valid as yours, and . . .*

The door swings open and in struts the human-resources assistant, a minute past “time.” Luckily, Cheater Dude has failed to disgorge a lung, and everyone else is on their night-before-Christmas behavior. “So,” the assistant says, already scooping up the notepads, “how was it?”

“Great!” I blurt, getting the jump on the competition where it counts: with the secretarial staff. “Was that food from Utopia? It tasted very familiar.” Dropping the name of Boston's trendiest restaurant can't hurt, I figure, even if I'd have to add a few zeroes to my net worth to afford a meal there.

Cat Lady rolls her eyes.

“I couldn't tell you if it was,” the assistant says with a laugh, “but the budget for all of this”—she flails an arm through the air—“was a hundred bucks. Take from that what you will.”

One of the two quiet guys—who look enough alike in their plaid button-downs and wire-rimmed glasses to be brothers—asks, “When will we hear back?”

The assistant tucks the notepads under her arm and cradles the dishes unevenly to her chest. “Oh, we're not done yet,” she says gleefully. “There are two more screenings: a language-mechanics test and a personality inventory. The editors should be done with your critiques by then.”

They're going to put us out of our misery today? “You mean, we'll know before we leave?” I ask, trying to tamp down the jitter in my voice.

She stops dead to inspect me, her pupils cutting through my sixty-dollar haircut (thanks, Mom), the fancy makeup job I've cribbed off YouTube, and, of course, the aforementioned little black dress. "The column's due Friday," she explains, "so the opening really is as 'immediate' as the ad professed."

Today is Wednesday. If my mouth weren't as dry as the Mojave Desert, I'd gulp.

With a perky shrug, the assistant exits to deliver our creative lambs to the editorial slaughter. While she's gone, I think about using a Jedi mind trick to encourage my competitors to *au revoir* right along with her.

Instead, I settle on a different tack.

"This is such an amazing opportunity!" I gush to no one in particular. "I mean, can you imagine? Being the food critic for the *Boston Sunday Times*? I've dreamed of this job since I was five years old." I scan the faces around me for evidence of pity but find only steely masks of indifference. "And it would mean so much—*so much*—to Uncle Phil, if he could live long enough to see me make it." I drop my voice to a whisper. "He's being eaten alive by a blood-borne pathogen. Ridiculosis, it's called. Nasty stuff."

Of course, there is no Uncle Phil. And ridiculosis is as dire as it sounds. But I'm feeling so upbeat about my fabrications—you *have quite the imagination, Em*, I hear my father's proud voice exclaiming—that, should the food-critic job fall through, I might just dust off that novel I've been penning since the seventh grade.

"She's coming," Cheater Dude warns.

My heart leaps into my throat.

The assistant bounces back through the doorway. "Here we go," she says, her voice competing with the muffled clack of her high heels on the carpet. She hands out the tests and, without bothering to go over the instructions, abandons us once again.

The six of us hunker down, the language-mechanics exam a pleasant surprise with its fill-in-the-blank homonyms, multiple-choice vocabulary, and open-ended sentence corrections. I am elated to be the first one done.

The personality inventory is another story, however. I mean, how should I know which adjectives people would use to describe me? And should I really run screaming to the nearest loony bin with a toothbrush in one hand and a comb in the other, just because I see myself as shy while others might label me as outgoing?

*Pull it together, Em*, I think, hoping to coach myself out of a panic attack that is poised to turn me into the puddle of crazy the personality inventory wants me to be.



I power through the last few questions and, with a literal sigh of relief, drop my head in my hands. What happens next is . . .

Idiotic.

And terrifying.

“Emmaline Waters?” a disembodied man’s voice calls from the hallway.

For no explicable reason, it escapes me that *I am Emmaline Waters* and, as such, I should respond.

I don’t.

“Emmaline?” the voice tries again, starting to sound stressed. “Miss Waters?”

A confused look volleys around the conference table. “What?” I say, feeling the heat of five simultaneous stare downs.

“Isn’t that you?” asks Plaid #1.

How would he know?

In a last-ditch-effort tone, the hallway voice pleads, “*Miss Emmaline Waters?*”

I spring to my feet and rush the door, coming out of a shoe in the process. A flash of uncertainty freezes me: should I backtrack and retrieve my footwear or press on uni-shoed? “Coming!” I yell, opting to salvage what remains of my dignity. When they inform me later that they’ve “chosen to go in another direction” with the food-critic position, at least I’ll be able to walk out of here fully shoed, with my head held high.

I grab the shoe out of Plaid #2’s hand (thank you very much, kind sir), pop it on, and lurch for the hallway, where I encounter the owner of the voice, an attractive male specimen with dark, brooding eyes, the physique of a gladiator, and the fashion sense of . . . well, whoever is considered fashionable nowadays. “Emmaline?” he says one last time, his eyes landing bracingly on mine.

What is it with this place and the penetrating peepers? “Uh, yeah.” I extend a hand. “I’m Em. Nice to meet you.”

His grip is firm. “So you prefer Em?” he asks, jotting a note on his legal pad.

“Yes,” I answer. “No one calls me Emmaline—except, well, my aunt GiGi.” I laugh nervously. “She never got the memo, I guess.”

“I’m Lance,” he says, taking off down the dingy corridor.

Of course, he is. “Hi, Lance,” I reply, hurrying after him. But even with two shoes, I struggle to keep up as he snakes around one corner, then another, and another still. Finally, he rears to a stop outside a glass-doored office. On the face of the door, in bold black letters with a hint of gold outlining, are decaled the words *Mitchell Heywood, Editor-in-Chief*.

Is this where dreams go to die? “Excuse me, but . . .” I say as Lance twists the knob and pushes the door open.

He motions at an enormous antique desk. “Have a seat. Mr. Heywood wants to meet you.” I’m about to register a weak protest when he adds, “Thanks for coming in today.”

*Thanks for coming in today?* If that isn’t the kiss of death, I don’t know what is. “Sure” is all I get out before Lance does an about-face and marches off, leaving me loitering hesitantly at the cusp of Mr. Heywood’s office.

Now what?

Within a second or two, a booming voice orders, “Come in! Come in!”

Apparently, Mr. Heywood is concealed somewhere in this mysterious lair, which, I note as I proceed cautiously inside, is adjoined by two other rooms—one on each end—to form a commanding editorial suite.

Nice.

The main office is empty, so I take a seat in an emerald-green leather armchair and wait with my back strait, my hair meticulously smoothed—well done, Pantene!—and my eyes . . . ready to fall out of my head over what I see teetering across the keyboard of an open laptop computer: my critique, zealously marked up with red pen, including several spots where the underlining—or crossing out, it’s hard to tell—has gone so awry it’s torn through the page, leaving feathery-looking holes behind. And don’t get me started on the exclamation points! Even the second coming of Christ wouldn’t elicit *this* many!

I push aside a mountain of disorganized paperwork and grab the critique, which I’m about to shove into my purse, when . . .

The unmistakable sound of footsteps.

I hasten the critique back into place and brace myself for humiliation. I mean, what made me think I was qualified—much less skilled enough—for a job like this? I should be happy to sling rum shooters (in another life, I’m a bartender), scribble down a bad poem every now and then, and pray that news of my incompetence falls short of reaching BU, lest they repossess the English degree that swelled my head in the first place.

The footsteps stop. I don’t dare look up.

“Emmaline Waters?”

“Um, yeah,” I mumble, folding in on myself.

A man’s hand reaches into my peripheral vision. “Mitch Heywood. Good to meet you.”

I give a limp, clammy shake, my gaze glued to his belt, a sturdy woven number partly obscured by a potbelly hangover. “Hi.”

His hand twirls excitedly through the air, as if he's whipping up a cyclone (though, apparently, he's only summoning a colleague to join us). Another set of footsteps clip-clops our way. I shift my focus sideways eight inches, to where someone—a woman, judging by the polka-dotted blouse and pin-tucked skirt—has assumed a Wonder Woman stance. “Oh my God, this is her?” she asks.

My stomach boils with nausea. I have been at the newspaper no more than ninety minutes, and already tales of my ineptitude are legendary?

Mr. Heywood reaches for my critique, and I make a command decision: I will look him in the eyes while he crushes me. “Honestly, I don't know where to begin,” he says.

My gaze crawls up his maroon-and-gray-striped shirt, skips over his scruffy chin, and comes to rest on the puffy bags under his eyes.

The woman, who hasn't bothered introducing herself (probably because we'll be in each other's rearview mirrors soon enough), pipes up with: “We've hired three food critics in the last year”—they have?—“and we've *never* seen anything like this before.” She stabs a purple-polished fingernail at my critique, so it's clear what—or whom—she's maligning.

“How on earth did you come up with this?” Mr. Heywood asks, leaning conspiratorially close to Wonder Woman. They share an inside glance that says: *Can you believe the amateur bullshit this flake tried to pass off as journalism?*

Wonder Woman takes my critique and starts reading it aloud, her voice like dull razor blades on my eardrums. My hearing goes in and out, catching only snatches of the performance, which unfolds between bouts of wild laughter from both Wonder Woman and Mr. Heywood.

I want to die.

“Listen, uh, this was all very last minute,” I say, unsure which version of “the dog ate my homework” to pull out. “I should've worn something different—I know I should have—because my dress is too tight, and I can barely breathe! And that stopwatch! It was like a bomb ticking down!” I puff my cheeks full of air and simulate an explosion. “You can't expect people to work under that kind of pressure! Then the guy next to me starts choking on his tongue, which was probably some kind of cosmic payback for all the cheating he was doing! I mean, the assistant specifically told us to PUT AWAY ALL ELECTRONIC DEVICES!!! She couldn't've been clearer, really, so . . .”

Instead of calming down and apologizing, my tormentors roar even louder.

“I'm sorry,” I hear myself saying, even though they don't deserve it. “But I have to . . .” I grab my purse, swing it over my shoulder, and dart for the door.

The cackling follows me into the hallway, but my tormentors' spasming lungs are no match for my fully shoed feet, which take me to the *Boston Sunday Times*' reception area, posthaste. I'm about to storm out the door in jilted-lover fashion when I remember that I've parked in the garage at a cost of ten dollars an hour. For the two hours I've been here, I'll owe a cool twenty I don't have to spare—unless, of course, I reduce myself to groveling for parking validation.

I fish the parking stub out of my purse and slap it down on the graffiti-laden counter. "Excuse me," I say to the receptionist, a rotund man with greasy blond hair and a pencil tucked comically—I mean, how cliché!—behind his ear. "Can you stamp this?"

He grumbles as he bats around in search of whatever office supply is required to save me from living off Ramen noodles and tap water for the next two weeks; meanwhile, I stare out the window, the sidewalk busy with pedestrians rushing to and from jobs more meaningful than anything I am ever likely to do. *What is taking this guy so long?* I wonder, the receptionist digging around with such determination that, if he's not careful, he might just unearth Jimmy Hoffa. I return to gazing at the street, where a tow truck is backing up to a flaming-red BMW. *Douchemobile*, I think, imagining the fake-tanned, hair-plugged, capped-teeth jerk who'd drive such a hideous, look-at-me symbol of materialism.

The receptionist clears his throat. "Here," he says, thrusting the parking stub at my palm.

It's none of my business, but . . . "Whoever owns that midlife crisis on wheels out there might want to move it."

"The Beemer?"

"That's the one," I confirm, forcing a smile. "It's about to be towed."

He scrambles for the phone. "Shit."

As much as I'd like to stick around and witness the douchebag melting down (the tow truck has already winched the car off the pavement, making a reversal of fortune unlikely), I have to be to work.

"See ya," I say to the receptionist.

He's too busy babbling into the phone to reply.

## Chapter 2

Despite the dismal state of my postcollege existence, I got lucky with one thing: my apartment, the cozy space above a two-car garage in a leafy neighborhood of wide streets, joggers, and recycling bins. My landlord is a cardiac surgeon who adorns his lab coat with a sheriff's badge—he's some sort of eccentric genius, apparently—and works up the street at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. The apartment I share with a grad student named Jung Lee, who spends twenty-four hours a day rotating among the various MIT libraries and/or slaving over research studies for her PhD.

I tuck my reliable little Chevy Prizm—twelve years old and still humming—into its spot between the garage and the stockade fence and, with my purse clamped under my elbow, shimmy out, my dress acquiring a lovely coat of grime as I hug the clapboard siding on my way to the mailbox.

*Why do I even bother?* I wonder as I sift through a stack of bills, credit card offers—yeah, right!—and a record number of scientific journals to which Jung subscribes in supplementation of her microbiology course load. Truth be told, I thought about grad school myself, but when I couldn't muster the energy to fill out the application, it seemed smarter to wait out my undergrad burnout by getting some on-the-job experience . . . *if* anyone would sink low enough to hire me, that is.

It's not exactly true that I'm unemployed, though. In fact, I'm stuck in a spectacular state of being known as underemployment, loosely defined as working a shit job (at a dive bar, in my case) for peanuts, while the student-loan police billy club your door down for the five hundred bucks a month you must now bleed out of your eyeballs to pay off that sparkly new degree you just HAD TO HAVE TO GET A DECENT JOB NOWADAYS!!!

I unlock the garage and plod upstairs to the second-floor landing, a four-by-four alcove with a generous window and a scraggly geranium (thanks again, Mom) that I have resurrected from the dead too many times to count.

I nudge my way inside, drop the mail in our “incoming” basket, and kick off my shoes. I'm about to shuffle into the kitchen, when . . .

Eeeek!!!

The ticklish feel of insect (or—oh, no!—arachnid) legs skips across my bare shoulder and, before I can react, scurries down my cleavage.

*Holy mother of God Jesus Mary Joseph . . . SOMEONE, please help me!!!*

Blindly, I slap at my stomach, my arms, my chest, hoping to head the critter off before it circles my belly button like it's a shower drain. *Please, oh please, don't let this disgusting creature sink its fangs into my terrified abdomen—or worse, my bikini line.*

I throw an arm behind my back and tug at the zipper of my dress, getting it momentarily stuck. Eventually, the teeth cooperate, allowing me to unzip to waist level and wiggle out, not a moment too soon.

SPIDER!!!

This is not happening. I am not standing—or, more accurately, hopping around—in the living room of my apartment in my bra and underwear, my feet bare, my hundred-dollar interview dress crumpled in a ball on the floor, its fabric smeared with filth and a GIGANTIC SPIDER scoping it out as a new home.

Of course, this is when my cell phone chooses to start ringing.

Kill me now.

I take a few steps backward, keeping one eye on the spider, my other eye roving for just the right annihilation device. Too bad the only things within reach are a pen, a pad of sticky notes, and a basketful of mail—unless I crouch down and reach around the corner, to where one of my high heels has landed. As ludicrous as I must look, I have no choice but to do it.

But now what? I mean, the smashing surface of a high heel is minimal. And a rough glance tells me it would only take five or six of these Incredible Hulk-size spiders to overwhelm my shoe-weapon.

Shit! The spider is on the move! IT'S MOOOVING!!!

I do a little freak-out dance, emit a scream only dogs can hear, and . . . smash!

I miss completely.

The spider scuttles dangerously close to my toes, then swings around the leg of a mosaic table I snagged a few months ago at Goodwill.

I have no idea where my purse ended up, but I wish it would smother that goddamn incessantly ringing phone! I chase the spider along the baseboard toward the kitchen, because the only thing worse than a steroidal arachnid in your dress is one loose in your home sweet home, plotting and scheming against you.

Slam!

Miss!



Slam!

Miss!

Slam!

Miss!

*Motherfucker*, why won't this bastard die?!

We're at a crossroads: either I splatter the thing before it hits the stove, or it will be forever lost, the cracks and crevices around our French-style cabinets the perfect spot for an army of diabolical spider-warriors to entrench.

I summon my courage and wait. And wait some more. I'll lumber around the apartment in my underwear all night if I have to, for the opportunity to squash this beast dead.

But I *don't* have to, because soon the spider abandons its tricky course behind our wobbly dining set in favor of a wide-open expanse of linoleum.

Jackpot!

I tiptoe in and, with a little mental geometry (based on the spider's current direction, the crumb distribution on the floor, and the inevitable reverberations of my footsteps), figure the exact spot to strike. When the beast wanders into "the zone," my arm is already in motion.

Bam!

IT'S A HIT!!!

IT'S!!!

A!!!

HIT!!!

Oh, fuck.

As I bring the shoe back up, *dozens* of baby spiders scatter. If I had the time to think—which I don't, if I've any hope of escaping Spidergeddon—I'd question whether that creamed spinach was laced with hallucinogenic mushrooms.

I drop the shoe and sprint for the bathroom, where, if need be, I can subsist for days on strawberry-flavored lip balm until Jung sees the need for a shower.

Huh, that's weird. The bathroom door is closed. Without a moment to spare, I fling the door open and lurch inside. I'm irrationally shoving the hook through the eye latch when the shower curtain ripples open.

Oh. My. God.

"Wha— Wha—" I stammer, the impending spider doom erased from my mind by the sight of my slippery, sudsy neighbor, Dex, who is STARK RAVING NAKED IN MY SHOWER!!!

He grabs a handful of rubber-ducky-printed fabric (the shower curtain was here when I moved in, I swear!) and covers his—how do the Brits say it?—naughty bits. “Oh, Em, what are you doing here?”

I need a cigarette.

“Me?” I ask, averting my gaze first to the foggy mirror, then to the pile of clothes Dex has shed on my bathroom floor. Eventually, my eyes have nowhere to go but to my own nearly nude self.

Bow-chicka-wow-wow. The porno script is practically writing itself. If Dex has a stranger hidden behind that curtain—preferably an Amazonian woman and her pouty-mouthed identical twin—we’ll be in business. “I wasn’t expecting . . .” he has the nerve to say, when he’s—and I can’t stress this enough—**NAKED!!! IN MY SHOWER!!! A SHOWER ON WHICH HE PAYS ZERO RENT AND IN WHICH HE HAS NO BUSINESS BEING!!!**

My arms reflexively hug my belly, in case he might notice those two extra donuts I inhaled this week. “Um, I live here. You on the other hand . . .”

He gestures at the floor. “Would you mind passing me my pants?”

As a matter of fact, I would. I mean, bending over in one’s underwear is among the most unflattering sights known to man. “You might want to turn off the water first,” I suggest with a laugh. I reach for the narrow closet beside the toilet. “How about a towel?” *Or not*, I think, remembering how shabby my selection of towels is. I flip through a couple of doozies until I find one that is marginally acceptable. “Here.”

He grins sheepishly, the shower controls whining as he shuts them down. “The leak’s fixed,” he reports. “Good as new.”

I push the towel into his hand. “Oh, so that’s why . . . ?” Now it makes sense: Jung reported that dripping faucet to Dr. Jacobs a good three weeks ago. He must’ve finally suckered Dex into checking it, though I’m not sure the job required a full-on test run—soap and all. “Thanks.”

“Is there a reason why”—he motions in my direction—“you’re wearing . . . *that*?”

The nerve of this guy. “Is there a reason why an otherwise normal twenty-five-year-old man allows a neurotic genius-surgeon—who’s loaded, by the way; he owns half of this block!—to pay him pennies on the dollar for grunt work that really should be done by a professional?”

He shakes his head. “The kindness of my heart?”

Man, he needs to towel off and get out of here. Trent (the new boyfriend) and I are “taking things slow,” meaning we haven’t had S-E-X yet. Not a problem for me, normally. Then again, I don’t normally have attractive naked men hanging out—literally—in my shower. “Aw,” I say,

trying to walk a line between sincere and snippy, “isn’t that sweet? Now, if you don’t mind, I have to get ready for work.” I toss him a we’re-done-here look and pivot for the door.

Two steps down the hallway, I hear: “It was nice seeing you.”

I bet.

*Nice seeing you too*, I want to respond, but I bite my tongue.

## Chapter 3

“You’re late,” Jimmy barks as I sweep into The Crowbar in the middle of the happy hour rush.

After twenty minutes of chasing spider babes around with a can of Raid, followed by an abbreviated shower to rinse the poison off my skin—not to mention the disastrous, career-ending-before-it’s-begun job interview of this morning—my mood is hovering somewhere between miffed and I’ll-bite-your-head-off-if-you-look-at-me-funny.

“No kidding,” I retort, though I probably shouldn’t be snapping at Jimmy, since his kindness keeps me in grilled cheese sandwiches and, on the occasions I’m feeling rich enough to afford them, mocha lattes.

I drop my purse under the bar and pull my hair into a ponytail; meanwhile, Jimmy pinches three Heinekens by their necks and serves them, sweaty and clanging, to a trio of women about my age who are huddled together whispering and giggling and acting more like carefree teenagers than the business professionals their chic, torn-out-of-the-pages-of-*Vogue* outfits imply.

An immature wave of jealousy hits me. These women are living the dream—or so I imagine: sophisticated cosmopolitan jobs with six-figure salaries, gorgeous Latin boyfriends who pick up the check (along with their dirty underwear), metabolisms of Olympic athletes without all the pesky calorie counting and early-morning jogs.

Me? In fifty years, they’ll probably haul my broke, bloated ass out of The Crowbar in a pine box.

But enough fantasizing . . .

The to-do list Jimmy has scrawled across a cocktail napkin takes me an hour to complete between the bursts of customers demanding bottles of sauvignon blanc and shots of ouzo. (Seriously? This is a beer joint, people! What’s next? Requests for virgin absinthe from the 18th-century French countryside?) I’m busy wiping the bar down—what the hell happened in here this afternoon, a tsunami?—when, on the heels of an old hippie couple, in saunters Trent.

The boyfriend.

To be honest, after three months of dating, I’m still getting used to the idea. “Hey,” I say, putting on an easy smile as he claims an open stool. “I thought you were working tonight.”

He leans in for a kiss. "I'm always working."

"Not here, okay?" I say, rebuffing him with a frown.

He lifts an eyebrow. "How about a UFO White, then?"

UFO White. Two years ago, I'd never heard of the stuff. Then every yuppie-hipster-foodie-wannabe on the planet started asking for it and acting bowled over when we came up empty. As much as Jimmy hates chasing trends, he eventually caved. Now it's one of my favorite beers, and Trent is beyond obsessed with it. "That I can do," I say. I duck over to the cooler and pull the UFO, plus a couple of Michelob Lights for the construction workers who are perched in front of the men's room like gargoyles.

Trent takes a long pull from the beer. "So?"

Ugh. How does one inform her on-his-way-to-über-success beau that she can't even land a crummy food-critic gig? (Okay, the job isn't exactly crummy, but referring to it as such—even in my bereft little mind—helps me deal with the rejection.) "Um . . . I haven't heard anything yet." A bright-eyed, cheery face. "We'll see." Another thing that helps me cope, obviously, is denial.

He cocks his head. "What kind of lame answer is that? Of course, you got the job."

"It's just that . . . you never know. The competition was brutal, and I don't have any experience, and it was a long shot in the first place, and . . ."

"What about your clips?" he asks, referring to a series of investigative articles I penned on restaurant cleanliness—or lack thereof—for BU's student newspaper, *The Daily Free Press*.

"You can't tell me they didn't love those."

"Well, they *were* food related, I guess."

"And brilliant."

"I wouldn't say . . ."

He gulps a third of the UFO at once, his Adam's apple bobbing. In the distance, a midthirties professorial type—in fact, the guy may have been *my* freshman humanities teacher at BU—rustles a twenty-dollar bill in the air. "Hang on," I tell Trent, holding up a finger. I get the professor and his boyfriend the microbrews they request, biting my tongue the whole time. I mean, if this guy really *is* a college instructor, he's playing the wardrobe way too literally. Tweed jackets with leather elbow patches and eyeglasses the size of the Hubble telescope belong one of two places: a dusty attic or the costume department of a Harry Potter film. I turn back to Trent. "So, you were saying . . .?"

He sighs. "The job is yours. Mark my words."

For a nanosecond, I believe him. "I hope you're right."

"I am," he says. "Next subject?"

Trent has a way of shutting down conversations, a personality trait I'm trying to think of as loveable and quirky. Even if it's not so lovable, though, his wavy blond hair, cleft chin, and sparkling ice-blue eyes more than make up for it. "How'd the zoning meeting go?" I remember to ask. He's trying to get a former fire station rezoned as a condo development.

"Fuckin' red tape," he mutters, staring at the sludge in the bottom of the UFO bottle. "Never start a business." He raps the bottle on the bar. "Can I get another?"

I notice Jimmy eyeing me, his cell phone—which doubles as The Crowbar's second line—clutched to his ear. "Yeah, sure," I say, "That'll be ten bucks."

Trent shoots me an incredulous squint before catching the my-boss-is-scrutinizing-us look plastered on my face. He goes into his pocket for the cash: ten dollars exactly; no tip. *That's okay*, I think, my mind wandering to a potential future in which I'm lounging on the deck of my and Trent's Martha's Vineyard beach house, the Kennedy clan tossing around a football on the lawn next door.

Drawing me out of my daydream, Trent asks, "So, how about zip-lining tomorrow?"

Oh, no. Not again. Every "date" we've had since that first meet-up-for-coffee-to-make-sure-neither-of-us-is-a-wacko has involved some sort of adrenaline-pumping activity designed to liquefy my nervous system.

"Where exactly does one zip-line in Boston?" I inquire, flashing on our most recent disaster-date: extreme mountain biking through the kind of inhospitable terrain that even the hardest Canadian Mountie would think twice about traversing, with or without his trusty steed.

He laughs. "Uh, no. We'll have to leave the city for that. It's about two"—he pauses, the math gears grinding—"two and a half hours, more or less, to . . ."

"No man's land?"

"Come on, it'll be a blast," he says. His grin morphs into a lurid smirk that dissolves my willpower. "I promise."

A throat clears behind me. "Em, can I see you for a sec?"

Dammit. There's a line of customers five deep by the cash register. How did I miss that? "Gotta go," I blurt. "Call you later?"

"Right," says Trent. "If I don't answer, leave a message."

Why wouldn't he answer? Am I so trivial that he'd screen my calls? "Okay," I say, rushing to Jimmy's rescue. Over my shoulder, I add, "Talk soon."



“Why are you dating that loser?” Jimmy asks eight hours later, while we’re shutting down the bar for the night.

The response that comes to mind is: What business is it of a barkeep who doesn’t always make payroll on time whether I’m involved with an up-and-coming real estate mogul with twice his charm and half his attitude? Then I remember that we’re talking about Jimmy, the king of unsolicited advice.

The Crowbar is one of those odd booze joints that closes before the legally mandated time of 2 a.m. At half past one, we’ve finally coaxed the last few stragglers out the door. “You’re a jerk,” I say. “You know that, don’t you?”

Jimmy has been buffing the same spot on the bar for so long that, if he’s not careful, he might just end up in Shanghai. “I’m just saying what everyone else is thinking,” he informs me, his gaze conveniently stuck on that imaginary imperfection. “He’s beneath you.”

If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was jealous, an idea that pings my creep radar. I mean, he’s not only my boss and, in my eyes, the big brother I never had. He’s also married. With kids. And his wife works at the bar. I finish unloading a rack of clean glasses and move on to flipping the chairs. “Who’s everyone?”

“People. They talk.”

“Like customers, you mean?” I ask, figuring the loose-lipped Crowbar regulars are the likeliest suspects to be dishing about my love life—behind my back, no less.

He shakes his head. “Yeah, some of them. And other people, too.”

In Trent’s defense, I say, “He’s a nice guy. And unless you have evidence to the contrary, I’d appreciate it if you’d bug off.”

He throws his hands in the air. “Okay, okay. Don’t shoot the messenger. Sheesh.” He kills the music, which has been chugging along at a murmur since last call. “How’d the interview go, anyway?”

An involuntary groan seeps out of me. “Disastrous.”

“Really? Because that guy—Luke or Lance, was it?—sounded sort of happy when he called.”

EXCUSE ME?!?!

“Who called? When?” I demand. AND WHY AM I JUST HEARING ABOUT THIS NOW?!?!

He grits his teeth. “Before you got here, some guy from the paper called. I assumed he got you on your cell.”

Oscar Wilde’s warning about assumptions springs to mind. I pat down my jeans for my phone and, holding my breath, power it on. There are six messages, three of them from the *Boston*

*Sunday Times*. Holy fuck. I think I'm going to vomit. I must've been either 1) fleeing an army of orphaned spider spawn or 2) halfheartedly ejecting a naked man from my shower when the calls (plural!) came in.

Dare I listen? I mean, what's the point? It's not like I can call back tonight anyway. "Yeah," I mumble to myself, "I guess they did call."

"And . . . ?"

"Like I said, the interview sucked."

"Sorry to hear that," he claims, immediately adding, "but not really." He rattles some bottles around under the bar. "Care to drown your sorrows?"

He's offering me liquor—and not just a twenty-dollar bottle of Jack Daniel's, either—at work? "I thought you were saving that for a special occasion," I say, motioning at the two-hundred-dollar bottle of cognac he picked up at a wine and spirits convention last spring and then flaunted around the bar for the next six weeks.

"This *is* a special occasion," he says with a wink. "I get to keep my Emmy. Sorry about the job, by the way. They're fools for letting you get away."

Aw, shucks. I direct a withering glare at my phone and bury it in my pocket. "You're quite persuasive, sir," I say, waving him over. "Now let's get to work."

## Chapter 4

**F**ive things an employee should never do with her boss:

1. Guzzle expensive cognac, ditching her inhibitions somewhere between a stripper pole and a reality-TV camera.
2. Use an old heating pipe *as* a stripper pole, acting out a scene from a music video her college boyfriend used to watch on REPEAT claiming it was “artsy.”
3. Actually strip.
4. Encourage her boss to do the same.
5. Forget everything that happened after #1-4.

SHUT THE FUCK UP!!! I would yell, if my head could take the slightest uptick in decibels without rupturing like the San Andreas Fault. Whoever is blowing up my phone at 7 a.m. should be burned at the stake, or stretched on the rack, or subjected to whatever form of Medieval torture will get them to LEAVE ME THE HELL ALONE!!!

I crack an eye open and realize that, thank God, I am in my own apartment. In my own bed. Even in my own underwear.

Okay, I’m wearing underwear. That’s a good sign, right?

With the most delicate movements possible, I begin unwinding the rumpled sheet that has somehow—I’m picturing feverish thrashing here—become coiled around my neck like a polka-dotted boa constrictor.

Tug.

Breathe.

Repress gag reflex.

Tug.

Breathe.

Throw up a little in mouth.

Breathe.

Breathe.

Tug.

Are there any scissors around here?

Tug.

Tug.

Picture own funeral.

Breathe.

Tug.

Tug.

Breathe.

Breathe.

Go back to sleep.

When I wake up again, there's a strange sight drifting by my bedroom window: SNOW!!! IN OCTOBER!!! Which—don't quote me on this—I'm pretty sure is a sign of the apocalypse. Plus, the drop in barometric pressure is no doubt contributing to the hammer-and-chisel combo that is tap, tap, tapping away at my forehead. I mean, I've been hungover before, but this is ridiculous.

"Em?" a familiar but fuzzy man's voice—I can't quite place him, but I've the distinct feeling he won't murder me—says from the vicinity of my bedroom door.

If I could roll a quarter turn to the right, I'd have a better idea what I'm dealing with, the worst-case scenario being that I've performed the mattress mambo with my forty-year-old boss, jeopardizing the crappy job I should consider myself lucky to have, not to mention pulverizing a rock of a marriage.

*Please don't let me be a gutter-tramp home wrecker*, I pray as I pitch left and then, harnessing my momentum, reverse course and throw my weight toward the door.

Dex, a.k.a. Shower Hottie, is leaning seductively against the doorjamb with a coy look on his face. "What are you doing here?" I find myself asking him for the second time in as many days.

He grins. "You drunk dialed me at four o'clock in the morning. I drove you home from the bar."

Nuh-uh.

I try to sit up, but the room does a full-on Tilt-A-Whirl. "I doubt it," I mutter, my head sinking back into the pillow. "I don't even have your number."

"What's this, then?" he asks, strutting toward me with a cell phone that is—I assume, since my eyes won't focus—displaying the call in question.

I squint and grimace.

"Not that I'm complaining," he says. "I'm usually up by five, anyway. I like to get a run in before class."

Well, that explains why he's wearing a shiny—and tiny—pair of athletic shorts, his quads mere inches from my drool-coated face. (To clarify, that's drunken sleep spittle, not drop-your-shorts-right-here-so-I-can-ravage-you foaming at the mouth.) "You're in med school, right?" I manage to ask, my conversational wherewithal on an egg timer. How I've culled this nugget of information from my mind is a mystery.

"Yup." A stealthy change of subject: "You know, your phone's rung about ten times in the last hour. I would've answered it, but . . ."

No kidding. "Probably telemarketers," I say. Which reminds me: if I ever recover from this alcohol-fueled stupor, I must add my number to the National Do Not Call Registry. "Can you pass me that water?" I ask, eyeing a glass that has miraculously appeared (okay, Dex probably put it there) on my nightstand, bendy straw and all.

"Not until you sit up."

"You're asking a lot." I sigh. "I hope you know that."

He lays a supportive hand on my back and I elbow my way upright, propping my head against the wall with a mess of blankets and pillows. He gives me a thorough once-over before deciding I'm capable of swallowing without ending my life. Still, he finds it necessary to hold the glass as I suckle from the straw like a helpless piglet.

Oh, well. It could be worse. At least he's good looking.

I take in as much water as my fiery pit of a stomach will allow. *Never again, I vow. From now on, even the suggestion of alcohol is forbidden. Chicken Marsala? Gone. Aunt GiGi's famous Christmas—and Easter and 4th of July—rum balls? A fond childhood memory. Freshburst Listerine? Sorry, I can't say I'm familiar with the product of which you speak.*

Now where were we? "You didn't miss school on my account, did you?" I ask, my head starting to clear.

"First time in seven years. They'll get over it."

"You can go." I smile reassuringly. "Thanks for everything, though. You're quite the gentleman."

"It's part of the Oath," Dex tells me. (I'm not sure whether he's referring to a code of chivalry or the pledge new doctors have to make.) No matter . . .

I ease my legs over the side of the bed. "So if I needed you to, say, hang around for another two minutes while I pee, you'd have no choice?" I hate to exploit his good nature, but I'm not so sure I won't face-plant on my way to/from the toilet.

He extends his run of positive karma by steadying me on my feet and, ever so gently, guiding me to the bathroom. I leave the door unlocked, in case I should bounce off the vanity on my way

to kissing the radiator. “All set,” I say as I rejoin him in the hall, my legs beginning to feel sea worthy again.

He responds by thrusting a cell phone at my face. “Here.”

“Huh?” I say, keeping my arms at my sides.

He shakes the phone. “Trust me.”

I relent. I mean, what’s the worst that could happen? “Hello?”

“Emmaline Waters?” a strange man’s voice asks.

“Um, yeah. This is her—I mean, she. I’m Emmaline.” I listen for telemarketing sounds in the background but hear nothing but dead air.

Dex stares at me expectantly.

“We’ve been trying to reach you since yesterday afternoon,” the voice informs me, shifting from a grating but professional tone to blatant annoyance.

I stumble along toward my bedroom. “Okay . . .” I say, collapsing in a bedside chair. “In regards to . . . ?”

A sigh. “The food-critic position. We’d like to offer you the job.”

It’s a good thing I’m already sitting down. “At the *Boston Sunday Times*?”

“Yes. Do you accept?”

What am I, an idiot? “Of course. Definitely. Thank you so much for—”

“Good. Deadline’s tomorrow at noon. Five hundred words. Send the copy to”—he rattles off an e-mail address I couldn’t catch with a mitt the size of left field—“and think up a snappy new title for the column. We want to do some rebranding.”

“Certainly. No problem at all.” I hate to ask this, but . . . “What should I be critiquing, though?”

“Anything. Whatever.” He huffs. “Just make sure it has a human-interest angle. *Veteran teacher quits job to become a Japanese culinary samurai*. That’s half of the review. The rest is the food. And plenty of those zingers you pulled out of your hat the other day? Got it?”

Not really.

“I think so. Yes,” I say, shooting Dex what might go down as the most confused, elated, terror-stricken look in history. “It’ll be done. Tomorrow. Twelve sharp.” My mouth moves faster than my brain, in an absurd direction. “I love you.” There’s a vacant pause on the line; meanwhile, Dex’s face goes soft and gooey. “I mean, thank you for the opportunity.”

The man, whose name I have yet to learn, clears his throat. “Turn in a good article. That’s how you thank me.” More dead air. “And, Miss Waters, answer your phone from now on. Every time.”



“I will, sir.”

“Jesus Christ, call me Mitch—or Mr. Heywood, if you must. That ‘sir’ shit’s for pompous douchebags and four-star generals. I am neither.”

I’ll take his word for the lack of military credentials, but his potential douchebaggery remains an open question. “Right, Mr. Heywood.”

“Welcome aboard, Miss Waters. Now get a move on.”

*Click.*

Okay, my editor just hung up on me. My EDITOR just hung up on me! MY (ADMITTEDLY RUDE) EDITOR JUST HUNG UP ON ME!!!

Hallelujah! I have arrived . . .

. . . at the cusp of vomiting? “Quick!” I blurt, praying Dex will read my mind and race for the mop bucket, “I’m going to—” But it’s too late. Whatever I ate last night—not that I remember eating anything—is on its way back up. “Go!” I squeal, gesturing wildly at the door. “Get out of here!”

Dex looks confused. And hurt. But he scurries off anyway, the neon green soles of his running shoes floating through the doorway as my innards unfurl on the floor. *Son of a bitch*, I think, dragging my arm across my face, *it’ll take a month of scrubbing with an electric toothbrush to erase one night of bad decisions from this floor.*

But I got the job!

I GOT THE JOB!!!

Now I just have to figure out how to do it.

## Chapter 5

I have twenty-three hours and approximately eight minutes to accomplish the following:

1. Recover from a hangover, defined as washing something (preferably my body, but my face will do), wearing something (in addition to the dingy underwear ensemble I've been sporting of late), and eating something (dry toast, possibly, but a banana could work in a pinch).
2. Find my car, which is God only knows where, since Dex drove me home last night.
3. Quit my job at The Crowbar without facing Jimmy, who will forevermore remember me as That Naked Girl.
4. Google everything there is to know about writing restaurant reviews, with a focus on quick and dirty methods, just to get me over this teeny-tiny hump in the road. (I'll buckle down soon, I swear!)
5. Select a restaurant worthy of the spotlight I intend to shine on it (because my writing persona will be more Glinda the Good Witch than Wicked Witch of the West).
6. Order (and taste) whatever on the menu is least likely to regurgle my guts.
7. Pull an all-nighter, if necessary, bleeding genius onto the page—or at least into a word processing document.
8. Relax and wait for the accolades to stream in.
9. Oh, yeah—and Trent. Aren't I supposed to contact him about some vaguely life-threatening adventure-date?

Whew, I need to sit down. And call my mommy.

"Hello?" Mom's startlingly perky voice answers on the third ring.

All I can do is whimper.

"Em, is that you?"

My mother is magical. If she were blindfolded in a maze full of whimperers, I wouldn't even have to wear a cheese necklace for her to find me. Also, she has caller ID.

Hoping to heighten my composure, I draw a full breath. But my lungs just lurch from whimper to sob.

Mom's tone stiffens. "You're scaring me, Em. What's going on? Are you all right?"

“My car . . . I don’t know where . . .”—sob—“AND IT’S SNOWING!!! IN OCTOBER!!!”—sob—“And Mr. Heywood wants . . . he wants me to . . .”—sob—“. . . by *tomorrow*! How can he expect . . . ?”—sob—“And I need new underwear! Jimmy must think . . .”

“Stop,” my mother says, her voice like liquid Xanax. “I’m coming over. Unlock the door and wait on the couch. I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“What about Angie?” I whine, feeling a stab of guilt for prying Mom away from the baby of the Waters clan. I mean, I’m a grown adult—albeit a hysterical, drool- and vomit-coated one—who should be able to run her life without Super Mommy swooping in to the rescue.

“I’ll bring her along,” Mom says brightly. “She’ll be fine. Now go unlock the door.”

I do as I’m told, and exactly ten minutes later—how is she so damn punctual? I certainly didn’t inherit *that* gene—the front door of the apartment springs open, the almost-four-year-old tornado of energy known as Angeline whirling to a stop beside me. A few steps behind her, Mom shuffles in. “Ignore the mess,” I say, noticing her gaze snagging on my little black interview dress, which is still crumpled on the living room floor. “It’s been a rough couple of days.”

Instead of ignoring the clutter, Mom ignores me. “Where are your hangers?” she asks, plucking the dress from the floor and smoothing it across her thigh. “Is Jung home?”

Angie twists her sandy-blond hair—jeez, it’s grown two inches since I last saw her—around her finger. “Hi, Emmawine,” she says, flashing a disarming mouthful of mini teeth.

I crawl out of the afghan I’ve been hibernating under and pat her head. “Hi, sweetie.” I turn to Mom. “Is Jung ever home?”

Mom chuckles. “Stupid question, huh?” She folds the dress into a neat rectangle and sets it on the coffee table. “So, what’s up?”

“Can you give me a ride to work?”

“Of course,” she says, snuggling in beside me on the couch. “Where’s the Green Goblin?”

Flashback to junior year of high school, when Dad and I toured every used-car dealership in the Greater Boston area in search of a safe, reliable ride that would get me out of his hair. Before the ink dried on the bill of sale, he’d christened my first—and only, thus far—car after his favorite Spider-Man villain. Who knew I’d still be ramming around town in the lovely beast all these years later? “I hope it’s in the lot,” I say, waiting for a reaction that doesn’t come. “Dex gave me a ride home.”

Mom raises an eyebrow. “I thought you were dating that guy . . . what’s-his-name? The one you met at the bookstore.”

“I am. And his name’s Trent,” I remind her, though she’s not to blame for the memory lapse, since I haven’t introduced Mr. Right Now to my family yet.

“Do you have cookies?” Angie asks with a sly grin. She’s so much like me it’s scary.

I glance toward the kitchen. “There’s half a bag of Oreos on the counter, I think. Help yourself.”

Mom rises and follows Angie; meanwhile, I seize the opportunity to smooth my hair and adjust the baggy jeans I’ve rescued from the hamper. “Hey, Mom,” I yell as I wait for the cookie feast to wrap up. “Are there any cool restaurants you’ve been wanting to try? Maybe we could get some lunch before we pick up the car.”

“I don’t know, Em,” she says, slipping back into the living room, her hands busy blotting crumbs off Angie’s face with a balled-up baby wipe. “I’m on a couple of tight deadlines right now. How about next Thursday?”

Mom used to work eighty hours a week at a big graphic design firm, but after Angie was born, she launched her own freelance venture—Creative Waters, LLC—a one-woman show she helms from her dining room. When I think of her, the phrase “busier than a one-armed paper hanger” comes to mind. I wish I could help more with Angie—and maybe someday I will—but so far it hasn’t panned out. “It’s just that . . . well, I have some news.” I put on a happy face that should tell her I’m not about to announce an unplanned pregnancy or submit a request for a loan. “You know that food-critic job I told you about?”

She looks caught. “Um, yes. The one at *The Herald*? Don’t you have an interview soon?”

I’m not going to lie; her lack of attention to the details of my life is a tad hurtful. “Actually, it was yesterday. At the *Boston Sunday Times*.” Angie wiggles up next to me and slings her arms around my waist. I give her a little squeeze.

“And . . . ?”

“Ta-da!” I blurt, triggering a recurrence of the brain-splitting migraine.

“You got it?” Mom asks, sounding surprised.

Now I’m insulted. “Supposedly,” I say, “as long as I don’t botch the first assignment. Which brings me back to lunch.” I haul out my puppy-dog eyes. “Any chance you’d reconsider? I need to review a restaurant, like yesterday.”

“I know the perfect spot,” Mom is suddenly willing to admit. “A quaint little Italian place a block away from school. Olga has just been raving about it.”

It takes me a second to figure out which “school” she’s referring to—has she started work on that master’s degree she’s been eyeing?—not to mention deduce the identity of this Olga character (Mom and Dad’s neighbor, as it turns out, who, like them, is parenting again in middle

age). “Red Light, Green Light, you mean?” I ask, proud of myself for remembering the name of Angie’s preschool.

Mom nods.

I consider inquiring into Olga’s health—she’s stricken with a bout of psoriasis, if I recall—but decide against it. Yet something makes me ask, “Why isn’t Angie in school today?”

“Because I don’t want to!” Angie squeals, her lips puckering. “That’s why!”

I’m speechless. Almost. “And you let her get away with that?”

Mom rolls her eyes. “She’s going tomorrow. It’s no big deal. Let me handle it, okay?”

I check the clock, but there’s no time to argue. I bend down and cup Angie’s hands in mine. “Do you know how many years I went to school for?” I ask.

She bites her lip and cocks a shoulder. “Nope.”

“Guess,” I say, in a tone that suggests she might win a stuffed pony for answering correctly.

She’s not so easily fooled, though. “I dunno.”

“Come on. Don’t you think I’m smart?”

She nods.

“How many years would a smart person like me have to spend in school?”

“Three?”

I swallow a laugh. Of course, she’d give an answer she can conceptualize. Either that or something outrageous, like fifty. “How about eighteen?” I say, watching her eyes widen.

“You’re old.”

With a wink, I say, “Don’t you want to be old and smart like me someday?”

Another nod.

Mom spins her watch around her wrist and frowns. “We should get going.”

“Then you’ve gotta promise to go to school every day,” I continue, “so when you’re all grown up, we can talk about all the fun, interesting stuff only smart girls know about, okay?”

She considers this for a moment. “Will you come visit me?” she asks, in a tiny, melancholy voice.

I am the biggest ratfink on earth. I’ve been so absorbed with postgrad drama—work, relationships, roommates, blood-sucking über debt—that I’ve neglected the people I love most. “Of course, I will,” I say, mussing her hair. “Just try and stop me.” But she won’t be able to. *Nothing will*, I vow. As soon as my life settles down—and with this new job in the bag, things should start humming along nicely now—I will reorder my priorities, top among them spending more time with Angie. After all, she deserves it. We both do.

## Chapter 6

I must thank Olga for pointing Mom—and, by extension, me—toward the white linen tablecloths and polished silver of Trattoria Saulino, which, though it's tucked away on a shabby side street a number of blocks from the nearest T station, more than lived up to the hype Mom piled on during the car ride over.

The other spot of good news is that the Green Goblin was intact, just where I left her. Furthermore, with the aid of a full pot of coffee, two sleeves of Ritz crackers, and a whole block of fatty cheddar cheese—I can feel my arteries slapping shut already!—I hammered out my *magnum opus*. Of course, I had to pull an all-nighter to do it, but *c'est la vie*. Who needs sleep, anyway?

With a couple of easy clicks, I attach my first article for the *Boston Sunday Times* to an e-mail I've been writing (and rewriting and *re-rewriting*) for the last forty minutes, my deadline almost up. Frankly, I'm surprised I found Mitch Heywood's contact information at all, most companies going out of their way to avoid even the most basic human-to-human interaction nowadays.

If I could settle on a title for my new column—I'm vacillating between Downtown Dish and Eating with Em—I could hit send and loose my talents on the world. "Eeny, meeny, miny, moe," I say, swaying a finger between the titles, which I've scratched on separate sticky notes.

While Downtown Dish has a snappy, upbeat sound, Eating with Em would put my name in lights. Then again, I have a feeling that anonymity is the *sine qua non* of this food-critic gig, though guidance in this area is sorely lacking.

I am not a narcissist, I decide. And fate agrees, my decision-making process—childish as it may be—taking Eating with Em off the table. I add a brief line about Downtown Dish and, with three minutes to spare, fire the e-mail Mitch Heywood's way.

Finally, I can breathe. Too bad sleep is still over the horizon.

I slam my laptop shut and wriggle off my bed, which, if I'm not careful, will soon qualify for disaster-relief funding from FEMA—or at least earn me a prime slot on the upcoming season of *Hoarding: Buried Alive*.

My cell phone is in the living room, on the coffee table, under a pile of those hideous journals that arrive daily for Jung but, as far as I can tell, serve little purpose beyond swatting the occasional fly or propping up the wobbly leg of our hand-me-down kitchen table.

I shove the journals aside and power on my phone for the first time in, oh, eighteen hours.

Zero messages? That can't be right, can it? I mean, nary a stray text? Not a living, breathing soul—or even a soulless robotic marketing app—has tried to contact me in the better part of a day? I turn the phone off and back on again, but the result is the same: I am a pariah.

Huh.

*Maybe Trent is mad at me*, I think. After all, I've been neglecting him since my dream job miraculously came through.

I'm due for orientation at 1 p.m. at *The Times* (from now on, I'll be dropping the "Boston Sunday" when referring to my new employer), according to an e-mail I received last night from someone named Sharon. Which leaves a few minutes for a quickie—phone call, that is—with my sex-deprived boyfriend. "Hey," I say when Trent picks up the phone. "Guess what?"

"Congratulations," he responds. "I knew you were a shoo-in."

"When someone says 'guess what' you're supposed to humor them," I complain, my excitement deflating faster than a sumo wrestler's bicycle tire.

"Sorry," he says. "Start over?"

I scuff to the bathroom and root around in the medicine cabinet for my toothbrush. Now that I have a real job, I should buy one of those pretty brushed-nickel toothbrush holders. "Guess what?" I mumble, my mouth full of Colgate foam.

"Um, gee . . . ?" he says playfully. "I don't know. Can I have a hint?"

I spit and rinse. "Where are you?" I ask, the squawk of a loudspeaker filling his end of the line.

"You're answering a question with a question?" He laughs. "Are you running for office or something?"

"Okay, I give." I check my teeth in the mirror. "They were crazy enough to hire me. Can you believe it?"

"Yes, I can. You're a knockout." Is he referring to my looks (dubious) or my resume (also doubtful)? Either way, the compliment is nice.

I can hardly focus with the ongoing din competing for his attention. "Where are you?" I repeat. "It sounds like . . . an airport?"

"Bingo," he says, a grin in his voice. "Granddad sent me on a last-minute scouting trip to Jersey."

My first thought is: What could he possibly be scouting in New Jersey? And secondarily: Shit, I was going to goad him into calling Jimmy and quitting The Crowbar on my behalf. “Oh,” I respond, trying to cover my surprise. “New Jersey, huh? What for?”

“We’re looking at putting up a nursing home north of Atlantic City. I’ve gotta check out the land before we make an offer.”

I pad back to my room, wondering if there really are enough decrepit gamblers clogging the Atlantic City Boardwalk to warrant such a venture. If so, how very sad. Before I can arrange these thoughts into a coherent, politically correct reply, though . . .

“Hey, uh, the plane’s about to board,” Trent says. “Can I call you in a day or two?”

Part of me is relieved at this separation, our relationship fraught with the uncertainty of newness. “I don’t know my schedule yet,” I tell him, “but it seems pretty open. So, yeah, call anytime.”

“Love you,” he says.

I am too shocked to answer. Before I recover, the phone goes dead. I stand there for a few moments, shuffling through my underwear drawer for the ribbed tights that complement my red-and-black houndstooth skirt. *He can’t love me yet*, I think. *It’s way too soon*.

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It’s already 1:15 when I break down and park in a handicapped spot on the second floor of the garage by work. If I had the time, I’d leave a note explaining my lack of human decency. Unfortunately, I am too behind schedule even for that.

After a dangerous hike through three inches of snow, I trudge into the holding pen of *The Times*. “Have a seat,” the greasy receptionist—a.k.a. Lawrence Wasserstein, according to the brass nameplate balanced precariously on the edge of the counter—tells me.

I smile flirtatiously. “Thank you. Sorry I’m late. The snow . . .”

He stares right through me.

For a midlevel or better (and my vote goes to better) news organization in one of America’s largest cities, you’d think *The Times* would have more luxurious chairs. I mean, these things look like they’re out of a ‘70s-era office-supply catalog—and they just might be, with their pilled avocado-green fabric seats and gouged blond-wood armrests.

The good news is that I’m only stuck shifting around uncomfortably for a few minutes before Sharon—or should I say Wonder Woman?—arrives to fetch me.

Frig.



“Hi,” I say, beaming sycophantically as she flips through a stack of papers. I clutch my purse to my stomach and pop out of the chair. “Good to see you again. I’m so excited to be here.” I extend a hand. “Thanks so much for the opportunity.”

“You got my message, didn’t you?” she asks without looking up. Or shaking my hand.

“Uh, yeah. There was an accident on Boylston,” I quickly invent. “The roads are atrocious.”

“I got here fine.”

I bet she did. “Well, I apologize. I’m never late. Truly.”

“Mitch is a stickler for promptness,” she tells me in a monotone. “Consider yourself warned.”

I should keep my big, sarcastic mouth shut, but . . . “I’ll make a note of it.”

“Please, do.”

With the pleasantries out of the way, we traipse through the maze of nondescript corridors to what I am dismayed to learn is my new “office.” To be honest, calling this dank cubbyhole—I mean, the speck of a dingy room is jammed between the restrooms and the soda machine—a closet would be stretching the English language beyond its limits. Referring to it as an office is outright hyperbole. “You’ll want to buy a lamp,” Sharon says at my back as I peek—head and shoulders only—into the cubby, which is double the width of a phone booth and two-thirds as tall.

*Obviously*, I want to say. Instead, I go with: “I’ve got the perfect one at home.” I’m thinking of a clip-on, goose-necked thing Mom and Dad bought for my dorm at BU. If memory serves, it’s in a tote at the back of my closet in its original packaging.

I spin around and find myself within kissing distance of Sharon’s surprised—and repellent—face. “Ooh, sorry,” I chirp, sidestepping embarrassedly.

She reacts with a muted eye roll. “Let’s get this paperwork done,” she says, guiding me by the arm down the hall.

Unlike the dungeon to which I’ve been assigned, Sharon’s office is a spectacular, airy suite overlooking a courtyard as idyllic as a Norman Rockwell painting with its fresh coating of snow. She sets the papers—all the standard tax forms, plus a plethora of company policies and procedures I can’t possibly be expected to read, much less memorize—in front of me on a cozy desk. “I’m gonna grab a quick bite,” she says. “Be back in ten minutes. Try to finish up by then.”

“Absolutely,” I say with yet another forced smile. If I plan on working here more than the ten minutes Wonder Woman will be gone, I’m going to have to perfect a middle-of-the-road expression that conveys interest and agreement, while maintaining a floor of dignity beneath which I shall not tread.

Nine and a half minutes later, while I'm massaging a cramp from the base of my thumb—seriously, how many times do I have to sign, date, and initial the same anti-sexual-harassment form with slightly different wording?—Mitch Heywood blows in. “What the hell were you thinking with that drivel?” he demands.

He can't be talking to me, can he? “Huh?”

“I thought you were going to be a breath of fresh air. A new perspective from Generation Y, or the Millennials, or whatever the fu—”—he taps his foot—“whatever the *heck* you twentysomethings go by nowadays.”

First of all, I don't “go by” anything. And, second of all, please don't fire me before I even get started. I mean, I'm still filling out the paperwork on this job. “Sorry?”

He clenches his teeth, a vein in his forehead pulsing. “You're sorry? Lotta good that's gonna do us. Listen, I'm running a reprint from the archives in place of that weak-ass crap you submitted. I mean, Downtown Dish? Really? Did you even bother Googling that? Hint: there are seventeen thousand restaurant-review blogs with that *same exact title*. And you gave Trattoria Saulino four stars? That place has been panned by every food critic on the Eastern Seaboard, which, again, you'd have known if you'd performed even the slightest bit of due diligence on this assignment.” He pulls in a breath, and I wilt.

*Do not cry, I order myself. Whatever you do, at least hold it together until you get out of this office. After that, all bets are off.*

“Was there anything good about the article?” I murmur, grasping for a flicker of positivity and some direction on how to proceed with the next—assuming there *is* a next—assignment.

“The punctuation was killer.”

On second thought, maybe I don't want to work here. “I'm sorry you didn't like it,” I say, my voice crackling with an ugly stew of anger, hurt, and frustration. “Maybe it would be best if I . . .” I shove the paperwork aside and rocket out of the chair. “Good luck finding someone in Boston who can write like Stephen King, read minds like The Amazing Kreskin, and—oh—pull in the twentysomething demographic like”—shit, I'm blanking on the name of an über-popular celebrity—“Lady Gaga,” I blurt, knowing the reference misses the mark. “Sounds like child's play, if you ask me.”

I don't know what has come over me—yes, I do: he used punctuation to ridicule me!—but my upset has given way to a euphoric sense of calm that I harness as I stride for the escape hatch, a.k.a. the door.

“Where do you think you're going?” Mitch barks as I breeze by.

“Starbucks, maybe.” (Oh, the horror! Coffee from a behemoth corporate chain?! That ought to send his mind reeling!)

Or not.

He goes into his pocket for a twenty-dollar bill, which he forces into my hand. “Get me a grande vanilla latte,” he says, “and bring back the change.”

“Excuse me?”

“Grande. Vanilla. Latte,” he repeats. “I’m dragging ass here. We’ll discuss your column for next week when you get back.” He snatches my employment paperwork off the desk, nearly crumpling it.

“Um, all right,” I say, even though, in defense of women everywhere, I should tell Mitch Heywood to piss off and, in a blaze of David-versus-Goliath glory, storm out of the *Boston Sunday Times* in protest.

But I want this job. I *really, really* do. And, apparently, I’m going to have to tolerate some pretty unsavory things—or people, actually—to make it work. Fetching coffee for a tyrant is as good a place as any to begin my spiral of moral decay, I figure. In fact, it’s so cliché it *must* be a stepping stone to greatness.

“Waters,” the boss says, snapping me out of my delusion, “get a move on.”

“Right away, sir.”

## Chapter 7

Until an hour ago, I had no intention of revisiting my job at The Crowbar. But with things on such rocky ground at *The Times*, it seems prudent to keep a foot in the door of my past, even if that means facing Jimmy.

For the first time in a long time, I'm early for my shift. But instead of marching into the bar and resolving things with my boss (as far as I'm concerned, whatever happened between us never really happened, since I wasn't in my right mind), I spend the extra five minutes sifting through the Prizm's glove box for a grimy packet of Tylenol. Although the pills are expired by more than two years, I force them down.

*Well, here goes nothing*, I think as I tug my coat on—it's flurrying again!—and head inside.

Kayla (the wife of the man I may or may not have seduced) is behind the bar when I enter, Jimmy curiously MIA. "Hi, Kay," I say, trying to sound nonchalant as I tuck my coat under the bar and, since the boss man's wife is on duty, actually don the apron I'm supposed to wear to "increase brand awareness"—or some such silliness Kayla picked up in her Wednesday-night marketing class at MassBay Community College.

Kayla swings a bar mop over her shoulder and sighs. "Am I glad to see you!"

I scan the vicinity for Jimmy but come up empty. "Why? What's up?"

"Aaron's got the flu," she says, referring to the oldest of her three boys. "Connor and Nate are at my Dad's. I've gotta pick them up on the way to the pharmacy."

"That stinks," I say. I step away to refill an empty pitcher for a couple of Crowbar regulars. "Is Jimmy home with Aaron?"

She whips her apron over her head and pushes a jangly ring of keys down the bar at me. "Yep. As soon as I get there to relieve him, he'll be in. Think you can hold down the fort until then? I wouldn't ask, but . . ."

"Yeah, sure," I say, surveying the sparsely populated seating area. "It doesn't look too busy."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" she cries. "You're a lifesaver. Remind me to give you a big Christmas bonus this year."

We both laugh. Six months a year, The Crowbar is in the red, making bonuses of any kind—regardless of what Jimmy and Kayla might like to offer—ridiculously unlikely. “I won’t book that trip to Tahiti quite yet,” I joke back. “Let’s see how Thanksgiving pans out first.”

“Deal,” she says, with the brightest, cutest smile. (God, if anything happened between Jimmy and me, I’m headed straight to hell!) With a twirly wave, she adds, “See you next week.”

In the humdrum hour and a half that follows, I serve a whopping three drinks: two Irish Car Bombs and a Buttery Nipple. As I’m clearing an inch-thick layer of grime off the window ledge—boredom has driven me insane, apparently—the most bizarre thing happens: Jung slinks into the bar on the arm of the sexiest man alive outside of Ryan Gosling and Channing Tatum.

What the hell? Since when does my mousy bookworm of a roommate socialize with, much less date—because that’s what this little outing looks like, Jung and the mystery man cozying up in a candlelit booth in the corner—genetically blessed super studs?

Not that I begrudge her. In fact, there’s probably nothing Jung needs more than a good, stiff . . . “Drink?” I say, waltzing up to the table with my mouth agape.

Jung smiles coquettishly at her companion, who responds with a rabid case of the goo-goo eyes.

I clear my throat. “Hey, roomie,” I say, taking our communication to a whole new level. (Most of the “talking” Jung and I do is by text, except for the time she walked in on me in the bathroom and apologized for an hour straight.) “What can I get you?”

Mr. Luscious goes old-school and orders for both of them—a matching pair of Fuzzy Navels—in a spine-tingling baritone that puts even his chiseled jaw to shame.

*How soon could Trent be back in Boston?* I wonder. Suddenly, I’m in favor of thrusting our relationship full steam ahead. “Coming right up,” I say brightly.

Jung has yet to make a peep.

I mix the drinks—peach schnapps, OJ, a splash each of vodka and grenadine—and ferry them to Romance Central. “Here we go. Anything else I can get you?” I ask, though, other than alcohol, The Crowbar’s offerings are limited to a bowl of shriveled peanuts or a bag of microwaved popcorn.

Without taking her eyes off her gorgeous date, Jung shakes her head.

“All right,” I say. I try to work up a smile, but it seems pointless. I might as well be invisible. “Enjoy.”

In the last few minutes, the handful of customers who’ve been keeping me company have vanished, leaving only Mr. Luscious, Jung, and me in the bar.

Ick.

Like I said: Go Jung. Rope that stallion. Just not under my nose. (Heck, even her bedroom at home would be better, since I'm sure she'd have the decency to close the door.)

I dig a scuzzy old pack of cigarettes out of my purse and, after a final check of the bar—the place will survive without me during a quick smoke break, I confirm—proceed outside. The weather is stuck in a holding pattern of weak flurries, coupled with temperatures that seem too warm for snow.

*Goddammit*, I think as I fire up my first cigarette in two weeks, *I wish Jimmy hadn't quit smoking—or at least hadn't kicked the weaker willed among us to the curb, literally, when he did.* Before he went health-nut crazy (a budding midlife crisis, I suspect) he'd sometimes join me for a little clandestine puffing in Kayla's office, providing she was off duty. Now when my resolve breaks down, I'm on the street—or, worse, in the alley, my venue of choice today for its umbrella-like awning.

And, wouldn't you know, I'm not three drags into the cigarette when the Tobacco Tyrant himself comes moseying down the sidewalk. I blow the smoke I've just inhaled out the side of my mouth and stub the cigarette on the brick wall behind me.

"Oh, Em," Jimmy says, as if he's surprised to see me. He pauses at the cusp of the alley, which is narrow but still wide enough for both of us. "What are you doing here?"

I don't know whether he means herein the specific sense (as in outside in the snow) or here in the general sense (as in at work, period). "Come again?" I say. (Okay, poor choice of words, considering what might have transpired between us during my naked, drunken blackout.)

He steps into the alley with me, his body heat—he's pumping out British thermal units at alarming levels—radiating through my Crowbar apron and down to my mismatched bra and panties. "Who's watching the bar?"

"It's dead in there." I gulp. "Are you sick or something?" I mean, the man *has* been home caring for a flu-ridden youngster all day, which could explain—please, God!—the feverish heat swirling around us.

He moves closer. Before I know it, his mouth is on mine.

I am paralyzed by 1) shock 2) guilt 3) the fact that, despite our fifteen-year age difference—not to mention that he's my boss—Jimmy is one helluva sexy kisser: lips, tongue, that ticklish little beard? He knows how to use them.

Only he shouldn't be using them on me.

I try to protest, but the effort comes out as a soft moan that, I fear, encourages him to escalate. Now, in addition to the facial probing, I'm the subject of an FAA-style pat down, his hands roving from my waist, to my hips, to my . . .

“No,” I manage to murmur, during a split-second window of opportunity (his teeth bumped mine, forcing him to recoil). “Don’t.”

He responds by jamming me against the wall, his overheated body—perhaps he’s delirious?—boring into mine.

*Get off me*, I should be saying. *Leave me alone. I’ll tell Kayla. Maybe even sting you with a sexual harassment lawsuit.* But for a few animalistic seconds, I can’t do anything but return his lust. Then my conscience gets the best of me. I move my hands from where they’ve been dangling like puppet limbs to his chest and press him away. “Jimmy, stop. We can’t do this. Think of your family.”

“It’s hard to think of anything but you since the other night.”

Holy fuck. I slept with him. This can’t be happening. “Listen, whatever we did,” I say, running a hand through my hair, “it was wrong. We shouldn’t have done it. You’re married. I have a boyfriend. You’re my boss. I’m sure you can see how this whole situation . . .”

He silences me with another toe-curling kiss, and instantly I know what I have to do. “Jimmy, stop!” I yell, shoving him hard enough to send him stumbling. I grope for my apron strings and hastily untie them, pull the apron off, and toss it in his face. “I can’t do this. I’m sorry; I quit.”

He looks so stunned (and, if I’m not mistaken, heartbroken) that I have a flash of regret. But only a flash before zooming back into The Crowbar—for the last time, I realize—clutching my belongings to my stomach, and making a mad, bawling rush for my car.

## Chapter 8

The steps to Mom and Dad's brownstone seem steeper than usual today. By the time I reach their black, lacquered front door, I'm winded enough to stop and rest. "Friggin' cigarettes," I mutter as I buzz for entry.

Moments later, the door drags ajar, Angie's beaming face filling the gap. (She must've run through the foyer to greet me.) "Hi, Emmy!" she yelps, the heavy old slab of wood putting up a fight.

I stroke her hair with one hand and give the door a shove with the other. "Hey there, pumpkin."

"Come on!" she squeals, grabbing my hand and tugging me toward the apartment. "We have waffles! With chocolate chips!"

"Hold on," I say, forcing the door closed with my foot.

She yanks harder, practically dislocating my shoulder. *Since when has she gotten so strong?* I wonder. Then I remind myself that she's almost four years old. It just doesn't seem possible.

Mom and Dad's unit is on the ground floor, a fact my lungs sorely (and sadly) appreciate. "Mmm, it smells good in here," I remark, the scents of scorched sugar—and do I smell pure maple syrup?—greeting me as I make my way inside. Angie releases my hand and gallops ahead for the kitchen. I don't bother trying to keep up—*though I could*, I tell myself. *Definitely, I could.*

In a comfy recliner by the window sits my father, a soft gray cardigan draped over his shoulders, his chin tucked to his chest, his vintage (read: ancient) tortoise-shell eyeglasses—known throughout my childhood as his "owl eyes"—poised to careen off the tip of his nose and plunge to their death on the slate fireplace hearth. I nudge his arm, hoping to rouse him. "Dad," I whisper. "It's Em. Wake up." I glance through the dining room, which is as cluttered as ever with Mom's graphic design work, to the kitchen, where Angie is teetering on a stepstool and helping Mom ladle batter into a waffle maker. "Breakfast is almost ready."

A gurgled sigh rumbles out of Dad's mouth. He shifts sideways and cracks an eye open.

"Dad," I repeat, unconvinced he's recognized me.



He gives a couple of milky-eyed blinks and, excruciatingly slowly, straightens up. Even though part of me wants to help him, I don't. (You know, teach a man to fish and all that.) "Emmaline," he says, his face sparking back to life. "You made it."

These Sunday-morning brunches were Dad's idea, a way to keep us united as a family and encourage a bond between Angie and me. "Of course, I'm here," I say, trying not to sound hurt. I mean, whether he knows it or not, these get-togethers are a crucial part of my mental-health program.

Dad grins and, as if he's developed a sudden, almost comical case of narcolepsy, nods back off to sleep.

Brilliant.

No matter, I decide. Mom is beckoning me to the kitchen anyway, a heaping plate of confectioner's-sugar-dusted waffles—hey, where's my share of that sweet Vermont maple—awaiting me.

Usually we make a show of eating at the dining room table, but with Mom's projects clogging up the works, we're stuck huddling around the island on the rickety barstools Dad rescued from our neighbors' lawn back in Brookline. It could be worse. I mean, at least the kitchen offers a more intimate setting in which to broach the subjects of my iffy employment and my recent foray into adultery.

On second thought, maybe I won't broach. As the saying goes: What you don't broach can't hurt you, right?

Wrong.

"So," Mom says, a gob of waffle batter splashing the counter as she returns the ladle to the mixing bowl, "how's that new job of yours?" She raises an eyebrow and puts on a silly face. "Are you in line for a Pulitzer yet?"

See, I come by delusions of grandeur naturally. "Sure," I say, dipping my pinkie in the bowl for a taste of raw batter. I drop onto one of the death stools. "The check's in the mail. I gave the selection committee your address. I hope that's okay."

Mom shakes her head. "Be serious. How's the job? I actually do want to know."

Really, she doesn't. "Eh, it's all right," I lie. "I'm still getting into the swing of things." A bright smile. "It should be old hat by, say, Christmas."

Mom's demeanor relaxes. The effect of my remark on Angie, however, is the opposite. "Christmas!" she's suddenly squealing. "I LOVE Christmas!!!"

Duh.

“I know,” I say, helping her peel the most recent—and nearly burnt—waffle off the griddle. “Christmas is fun, huh? Do you have a list yet?”

Mom shoots me a stifling glare, the reason for which I don’t grasp. I mean, she and Dad love spoiling Angie as much as Angie loves being spoiled. “This year, we’re going to focus less on presents and more on people,” Mom says in her imparting-pearls-of-wisdom voice.

Hmm. I agree with her in theory, but dialing back the gift giving for a four-year-old is a thorny proposition. “Well, um,” I say, trying to get Angie to focus on me and stop pouting, “that means you’ll have to really, really think about what you want. Is there a special present that’d make you happier than anything else in the whole wide world?”

Angie thrusts her lip out. “NO!”

Oh-oh. A temper tantrum is brewing, and it’s my responsibility to quash it. “What about those giggling monkeys?” I suggest. (All right, I admit it: I watched an online ad for stuffed baby monkeys that “play and cuddle like the real thing.”) “I bet you’d love one of those.”

“I HATE monkeys!” Angie screeches. She scrambles off the stepstool and starts running figure eights around the kitchen.

Duly noted.

“Maybe”—have I been duped by any other cutesy advertisements of late?—“a hugging Elmo, then?”

“Elmo’s dumb!” Angie declares, stomping off for the living room.

I turn to Mom and shrug. “Sorry. Has she been doing that a lot lately?”

“Doing what?” Mom replies distractedly.

Before I can answer, a racket erupts in the living room. I spin around to catch what looks like Dad backhanding Angie across the face. “Hey, HEY!!!” I spout, speeding to intervene. I rear to a stop beside Dad’s recliner and tuck Angie behind me for safekeeping. “What are you doing?!”

Dad looks as if he’s seen a ghost. “She poked me.”

My eyebrows pucker with incredulity. “So?”

“Did not!” proclaims Angie.

“Shh!” I hiss. I glance over my shoulder at Mom, who is hardly reacting to this shocking turn of events. I mean, have she and Dad taken to beating children in my absence? “Mom, can you come here, please?” I beg, unwilling to leave Angie alone with Dad after what I’ve just witnessed. “Ang, are you okay?”

Angie starts whimpering, and I know I’m going to lose it. “Mom! Here, please, now!”

Dad’s response is nothing if not bizarre. After a second or two of staring blankly at me, he nods back off to sleep.

Finally, Mom shows up. “All right, here I am. What’s the big kerfuffle?”

“Dad just . . . He . . .” I can’t bring myself to say the words. Ironically, having devoured every sappy coming-of-age movie of the past decade—and more than a few similar books—hasn’t prepared me for the watershed moment when you realize that your parents are mere mortals. Or worse.

“C’mon,” Mom tells Angie, drawing her away from me. “I need you to put some glitter on those postcards before I send them out.”

Gee, why didn’t I think of that? Angie *loves* anything sparkly. I should’ve suggested a disco ball as a Christmas gift. Then this whole disaster could’ve been averted.

Mom and Angie pad off toward the back of the brownstone, where Mom has an itty-bitty crafting room set up. (Really, I think it’s supposed to be a walk-in closet, but whatever.) When Mom returns, she’s alone. “I need to talk to you,” I tell her, trying to keep my voice steady, “in private.”

She glances around the brownstone, as if to say: *Good luck finding anywhere discreet in this hovel*. Still, she leads the way to her and Dad’s bedroom, where she shuts us in.

I shift around on my feet, uncertain what to do—or say—next. “Is something wrong with Dad?” I ask, the phrasing preferable to my kneejerk reaction, which involves a straitjacket and a vial of Thorazine.

Mom collapses on the unmade (!) bed and dissolves in a puddle of tears. “It’s bad,” she whines. “I don’t know *what* we’re going to do.”

*Think, Em*, I tell myself. *What could be so tragic that it has unraveled Mom to the point of incoherence?* “Are you guys in trouble? Financially?”

She sits up and wipes her eyes. “Well, of course. There’s always that.”

Is she talking in riddles on purpose? “Mom, whatever it is, you can tell me,” I say. “I’m not a kid anymore; I can handle things.” (Okay, maybe this is stretching the truth, but if it will get her to come clean, I’m up for just about anything.)

She sighs forebodingly. “I don’t think we can do it anymore. Angeline is getting so . . . *intense*. It’s more than we bargained for. And, well, there’s a medical situation that—”

“Angie’s sick?” I blurt, my chest seizing.

Mom waves the idea away. “No, of course not. She’s fine. If she weren’t, you’d be the first to know.”

I don’t have a leg to stand on in this conversation. I mean, when you entrust your child to someone else’s care—even if *the someone* is one (or both) of your magnificently wonderful

parents—you surrender the right to make decisions about her. “Good,” I say, feeling a surge of relief. “Who’s sick, then?”

“I wanted to tell you,” Mom says, “but your father wouldn’t hear of it. He’s got his pride, you know.”

“What’s wrong with him?” All I can think is *cancer, cancer, cancer*.

In a meek voice, she says, “Heart attacks. Three, so far. Plus, an arrhythmia.”

My head is spinning. “Dad?”

“I know. It’s the last thing we expected: No family history. Perfect cholesterol. Exercises five days a week.” Her eyes well up again. “He doesn’t deserve this.”

Something—a sense of normalcy, maybe?—crumbles within me. I snuggle in next to Mom on the bed. “Is he going to be okay?”

She shakes her head and dabs at the corners of her eyes. “He has to be, Em. I wouldn’t know what to do without—”

It dawns on me that I should offer to take responsibility for Angie now, instead of at some elusive point in the future, when I’m “established in my career” and “on solid financial ground.” “Sorry about Angie,” I say, knowing that somehow I’m to blame for my daughter’s wild-child nature. “I’ll talk to her about behaving better. And maybe I can take her more, to give you and Dad a break.” For the moment, I’ll forgo suggesting a change of custody. With Dad sick and he and Angie both acting out, it’s not the right time to cross that bridge. But someday soon it will be.

“That’d be great,” Mom says, a glimmer of hope in her voice, “especially during your dad’s appointments. Angie hasn’t been doing so well at the cardiologist, I’m afraid. And she’d be over the moon at the idea of hanging out with her big sis’.”

“Deal,” I say. And we seal it with a hug.

## Chapter 9

The best thing I can do for Mom, Dad, and Angie is succeed wildly at *The Times*. To this end, I am holed up in the modified telephone booth of an office Mitch Heywood has been so kind as to allot me, my head bent over a nearly defunct desktop computer. After much begging, cajoling, and outright praying, the screen fills with the James Beard Foundation Award-winning journalism of a former *Village Voice* food critic, work I hope to use as a model for launching my own star.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not talking about plagiarizing here. More like emulating. But first I have to deconstruct the original, which explains why I'm holding a green plastic ruler up to the screen and combing through the review line by line for inspiration. On a notepad by the computer, I'm in the process of sketching out a restaurant-review template and compiling a list of entertaining culinary adjectives for future use.

Thus far, I've arrived at the following formula for authoring topnotch food criticism:

1. Begin with a detailed yet pithy description of the food, aiming for the textual equivalent of a Warhol lithograph.
2. With equal doses of humor and charm, make the setting sparkle like a prom queen's eyelids.
3. Toss in a sassy, down-to-earth culinary history lesson that's as easy to swallow as a slug of hot buttered rum.
4. Ensnare criticism—no matter how sublime the eatery is, there must *always* be criticism!—in a metaphor so original it requires reading twice. And even those who go the extra mile still might not get it.
5. Accomplish all of the above while adopting the persona of a hyper-observant friend—preferably a cross between a savvy New Yorker and a forthright Southern belle—who tells it like it is, for the sake of the reader.

Piece of cake, I figure, considering the highbrow vocabulary I've been amassing. If Mitch Heywood was impressed by *lugubrious*, *quiescent*, *feckless*, and *jejune*, wait until he gets a load of *surfeit*, *antipodal*, *protean*, and *fecund*. Of course, like the spicing of a great meal, first-rate wordsmithing demands a restrained hand: sprinkle a *quotidian* here, drop a *puissant* there. And

slaughter every adverb in sight like it's a machine-gun-toting terrorist dripping in the blood of innocents.

"Hey, Waters," Mitch's perpetually irritated voice says behind me, interrupting my train of thought. "I've got your next assignment."

*Oh, goodie*, I want to say. Instead, I spring out of my chair, spin around, and go: "Great." A big smile. "What is it?"

"The Olive Branch. Grand opening's at five tomorrow." He passes me a wrinkled slip of paper with the address of the restaurant and the name Dominique LaChance scrawled beside the word *manager*.

"What kind of food is it?" I ask, cringing at how stupid I sound. I mean, *I'm* the food critic now. Shouldn't *I* be telling *him* these things?

"I don't know. Some kind of rustic European," he says. "The owner's a culinary savant who ran a bed-and-breakfast-slash-organic-farm-slash-riding-stable in Paris. Or Tuscany." He flails an arm through the air. "One of those romantic places you girls love to fantasize about."

Okay, that's insulting. And presumptuous. "A savant? Is that the shtick—or, um, the 'human-interest angle'?" (Shit, I forgot to include the "human-interest angle" in my template. Now I'm going to have to do a rewrite, and I haven't even penned a word of the critique yet!)

Mitch: "You tell me."

Me: "Right."

He turns on his heel. "I made a reservation for six o'clock; bring a date." As an afterthought, he adds, "And he pays for his own. We're not the United Way here."

Again, I say, "Right." But he's already gone.

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I thought about inviting Dad to The Olive Branch—I mean, the irony!—as a goodwill gesture following the slapping incident. But Mom is so concerned about his health that she's enacted a restaurant boycott in an attempt to wrestle the heart disease bull by the (cream) horns. Which leaves Trent as my default date. And even though the reservation is for two, we're bringing Angie along.

At the curb in front of Mom and Dad's brownstone, we're parked with the Lexus's engine running to keep us warm. Even though the snowy weather has (finally!) called it quits, the air is crisp with a fall chill, putting me in the mood for apple cider and anything—who am I kidding?—*everything* pumpkin flavored.

“So,” I say, my breath catching in my throat, “there’s something I should tell you before we go in there.”

Trent shoots me an easy smile; meanwhile, I search my mind for the least earth-shattering way to inform a twenty-four-year-old guy that, unbeknownst to him, his girlfriend of four months has a secret kid she hasn’t bothered telling him about.

“Okay . . . ?” he says, probably expecting me to brief him on my wacky Uncle Fred (I don’t have a wacky Uncle Fred) or some similarly cuckoo distant relative.

“Um, well,” I begin again, “you know how I told you about my sister, Angie?”

“Yeah,” he says. “You’re lucky. I wish I had a sister. Or a brother.”

Hmm. I quite enjoyed having Mom and Dad to myself. To each his own, though. “It’s just that . . . before she comes with us . . .” *Spit it out, Em*, I berate myself. *He’ll find out sooner or later, anyway*. “I don’t know how to . . .”

He rests a hand on my knee. “Is something wrong?”

I decide to fast-forward the story, hoping the news of Dad’s ill health will provide an opening to transition to the Angie bombshell. “Actually, yes,” I say. “My Dad is sick.”

A quiet, concerned pause. “Oh. Sorry to hear that.”

Isn’t he going to ask what Dad is sick of/from/with? Either he doesn’t care, or he’s just being polite. (I’m going to assume the latter.) “Thank you,” I say, letting out a tense breath. “Since he started having heart problems, he’s gotten—well, he’s gotten pretty irritable with Angie, I guess you could say. Which is one of the reasons we’re bringing her with us tonight: to give my parents a break.”

“Good idea.”

Jeez, he didn’t take the bait and ask about the other reason(s) for Angie tagging along? “Also, I want to spend more time with her,” I say vaguely. His clueless smile tells me that I’m going to have to haul out a sledgehammer instead of dropping a trail of breadcrumbs. “See, because, uh”—I pull my leg away, and his hand drifts to rest on the seat—“Angie’s not my sister.”

His face twists with confusion, and suddenly I can’t look at him. Not because I’m ashamed of Angie (I’m not), but because sharing something so intimate has left me feeling overexposed.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“I hope you don’t hate me for this,” I say. Come to think of it, dropping such heavy news on him twenty minutes before dinner is a mistake. Too late now, though. “Angie’s my daughter.”

He laughs, as if I’ve told a joke.

I don’t join him.

After a solid minute of awkward silence (I've never shocked anyone speechless before!), he says, "Really?"

He doesn't seem mad, I decide. In fact, if I'm reading him right, he sounds . . . excited. "Mmm-hmm. I had her freshman year of college."

Before he can respond, there's an abrupt knock on the passenger-side window. He glances past me and powers the window down. "Oh my God, what are you doing?" I ask Mom, who's dancing around on the sidewalk and hugging herself against the wind.

"Aren't you guys coming in?" she asks, her tone more demanding than inquisitive. "Angie's bouncing off the walls waiting for you." She peers at Trent. "Hello there, by the way. I'm Beth—the mother."

She did not just say that. "Um, yeah. We'll be right there," I blurt, flicking my wrist to shoo her off. "Tell Angie and Dad to put their nametags on."

Mom rolls her eyes. "Ha-ha."

Trent tries to say something, but I buzz the window shut. Luckily, Mom takes the hint and disappears back inside. "Are you all right?" I ask, although Trent is showing no signs of distress.

"Sure." He shrugs. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Frankly, his blasé attitude is unnerving. "Well, for one thing, your girlfriend just told you her sister is actually her daughter. Where I come from, that's pretty big news. You'd be forgiven for being out of sorts."

Another shrug. (Damn him!) "What can I say? I like kids."

"So that's how you're going to play it? Cool and charming?"

"It would appear so."

"I guess that's acceptable." I lean in and give him a peck on the cheek. "Let's go, then."



## Chapter 10

“You can drop us off here, if you want,” I say as Trent pulls the Lexus into a fire lane half a block past The Olive Branch.

“It might take me a few minutes to park,” he warns. “The traffic’s pretty insane.”

He’s right. If I didn’t know better—which, in fact, I don’t—I’d think a humongous movie star had shown up with an equally humongous entourage and a gaggle of paparazzi trailing along behind. I turn to Angie, who looks as darling as any chubby-cheeked, wavy-haired, sparkly dressed child beauty queen. “C’mon, sweetie,” I say, motioning toward her seatbelt. In unison, we unbuckle and exit the car.

Shivering, we rush down the sidewalk, Angie’s warm hand clasped around mine. Maybe someday I’ll feel like a mother, but tonight I’m the only thing my daughter has ever known me as: a *much* older sister (and one with an important assignment to complete).

The line for The Olive Branch is out the door. Angie and I queue up in the huddle, a fog of body heat enveloping us. “I’m hungry,” she complains, her face pressed to my side, her arms slung around my waist. By the way she acts toward me, I sometimes think she knows we’re more than sisters.

“Me too,” I say, raking my fingers through her hair.

As a member of the media, shouldn’t I be entitled to some sort of VIP status? I mean, I don’t expect to bypass all these ravenous diners—especially those who have reservations, like me. But couldn’t I at least give my name to the hostess, on the chance my table is on standby? I’d hate to let a primo spot go empty for even a moment longer than necessary.

By the time Trent rejoins us, Angie and I have moved thirty feet ahead in line. In fact, the pointy tip of my left shoe is solidly inside the vestibule. I can taste the goose-liver pate—or whatever the good folks of the European countryside salivate over—already.

With Angie snuggled to my hip and Trent’s arm draped around my shoulder, we wiggle forward as if we’re the unruly midsection of a giant paper dragon. “We’re next,” Trent whispers in my ear, the party in front of us—an elderly couple and a nun (or someone prematurely dressed as one for Halloween)—clearing out. “Are you excited?”

“Actually, I am,” I say. Not only is this my chance to prove myself to Mr. Jerk Extraordinaire, a.k.a. Mitch Heywood, it’s also a test run of my parenting skills—not to mention an expensive (and hopefully tasty enough to justify the cost) restaurant outing. All in all, things are looking up.

Trent breaks away from us to communicate with the hostess, an effortlessly beautiful woman with porcelain skin, a mess (in the I’ve-just-rolled-out-of-bed-but-look-fabulous sense) of dark, upswept hair, and the carriage of an unbroken filly. *Men must fall at her feet*, I think, feeling—I’m ashamed to admit—the slightest hint of unprovoked jealousy. I mean, Trent is holding his own; I have nothing to worry about.

Surprisingly, our table is ready. The hostess leads the way through the crowded dining room—the décor is old-world and natural: stone, metal, wood—to a cozy table by a roaring fire. As we take our seats I notice, perched on the hostess’s perfectly sized chest, a name badge that reads: MS. DOMINIQUE.

As in Dominique LaChance? The manager of The Olive Branch? For a second, I wonder if she’s also the chef-savant Mitch is so keen on. But that seems improbable. I mean, how talented could one supermodel-esque woman be? “I hope this is all right,” she says, gesturing at the fire.

“It’s great,” I reply, overly cheery (a transparent attempt at proving she doesn’t intimidate me, I’m afraid).

Unless I’m imagining things, Dominique shoots Trent a pity smile as she explains that our server, Veronica, will be over shortly with some wine. “Wine is gross,” Angie remarks. “Daddy let me try it once.” She sticks her tongue out. “It’s yucky.”

I am mortified, but Trent and Dominique just laugh. After Dominique begs off, I say, “This place is nice, huh?”

“Oh, yeah,” Trent agrees. “You shouldn’t have any trouble coming up with something to say about it.”

What’s that supposed to mean? He thinks I’m a moronic twit who needs a blatant head start to accomplish anything worthwhile?

I dig my handy recorder out of my purse and place it on the table, where it will remain within arm’s reach for capturing the nuggets of genius that are sure to occur to me as we indulge in this fine feast. As a test, I click the RECORD button and, into the pitiful little microphone, say, “October twenty-third. The Olive Branch. Six thirty p.m.” I’m tempted to play back my handiwork—or worse, record it again—but somehow I restrain myself. After all, if doctors can belt out their office notes in one shot with the patient sitting right there in their underwear, surely I can manage the same with my critique impressions. I mean, I have my flaws, but I am definitely not more neurotic than an MD.

Angie reaches for the recorder. “Can I say something?”

“Sure. Just press this,” I say, giving the RECORD button a click. I point out the microphone. “And talk into here.”

She delivers a rambling soliloquy about nail polish, bunnies, and her best friend, Fiona; meanwhile, Trent cups a hand to his mouth and, eyeing Angie, asks, “Does she know?”

Oh, no. I’ve forgotten to warn him to keep the truth about Angie hush-hush, especially from Angie herself. “No,” I half whisper, half hiss, “she doesn’t.”

“Doesn’t what?” Angie chirps beside me.

“Nothing, sweetheart.”

Trent saves the day by steering the conversation toward Halloween costumes—Angie wants to be a giraffe or a leprechaun this year—and soon Veronica is hovering over us with a bottle of house wine (cabernet sauvignon, I would note into the recorder, if I could pry it out of Angie’s hands) and a pitcher of ice water. My admittedly fragile ego is relieved to see that, unlike Dominique, Veronica is indeed a citizen of earth.

“Excuse me,” Trent says once we’re watered and wined, “but can we get some menus?”

“We don’t have menus,” Veronica informs us.

Hmm. No menus? *That* deserves a mention in my review. “Really?” I ask, feeling like we must be the butts of a practical joke.

“Yup. But I can tell you what we’re serving tonight, if that helps.”

I’m starting to dislike this place. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Well, first of all, you should know that we’re a family-style restaurant. The chef wants you to feel like you’re dining at home”—she motions at the other guests—“among loved ones.” Did she say *dining* or *dying*? Although I’m not buying her pitch, I mirror her exuberant grin.

“I’m hungry,” moans Angie.

Veronica plows ahead. “Good. Because our food is delicious!” Yet we still haven’t heard anything about said food. “Let me get you some fresh-out-of-the-oven rosemary focaccia, drizzled with our white-truffle-and-garlic-infused olive oil.”

Trent remarks, “Sounds wonderful.”

Veronica does an about-face for the kitchen, and I catch the strangest sight out of the corner of my eye: Jung (my ever-elusive roommate) and Dex (Naked Shower Hottie) floating into the dining room in Dominique’s wake.

What in the world? Has Jung tossed the third most gorgeous man on earth aside to sample our sexy, nice-guy neighbor? As Jung and Dex take seats adjacent to us, kitty-corner to the fire, my phone starts vibrating.

In the spirit of the early snow, I've worn a fuzzy, white cashmere sweater to dinner. I slip my hand into its convenient front pocket and retrieve my phone, which, by my own rules, I shouldn't answer at the table. But just this once . . .

*Or not*, I think, when I see who's trying to contact me: Jimmy. Since I quit The Crowbar, he's made quite the pest of himself. In fact, he's even had Kayla—the woman on whom he cheated with my blacked-out, drunken self—call!

"Who's that?" asks Trent.

I stuff the phone back in my pocket. "Oh, nobody."

Veronica arrives with the focaccia, which is every bit as scrumptious as described. Heck, even the ultra-picky Angie is all over it (and the dipping oil is all over *her*).

I scan the tables around us, trying to get a preview of the food while avoiding eye contact with Jung and/or Dex. Not that their cavorting is any of my business. (It's not.) I just don't want to ogle them while they're at it.

Too late.

"Hi," Dex says when he spots us, a giant grin blooming across his face.

With a nonchalant wave, I say, "Hey."

Jung acknowledges me with a slight head bob.

Suddenly, Trent is brandishing his cell phone. "I've gotta take this," he says. "Be right back." He threads his way through the crowd and—I assume, since I can't see around corners—out onto the sidewalk, where he might find a modicum of privacy. As soon as he's beyond view, the dinner dishes start arriving.

"This is the turnspit-roasted guinea hen," Veronica says, sliding a platter of tiny, headless chicken-y things across the table. "And"—she motions at another waitress, who is loitering in the wings—"these are the wood-oven-roasted mussels and the stuffed, fried olives with pickled-pepper mascarpone." Waitress #2 slips the second and third plates in front of Angie. "The hot, smoked salmon and the grilled, marinated hanger steak will be out in the next five minutes. Anything else I can get you?"

I glance at Angie, who's poking at one of the fried olives. "You don't have a kids' menu, do you?" I ask, though I'm not sure why. Menus seem to be anathema here.

"Nope," Veronica says. "But the chef is very accommodating. Is there something specific you had in mind? I'm sure he'll make it for you."

"Chicken fingers," spouts Angie, a devilish twinkle in her eyes. "And smashed potatoes."

A girl after my own heart. "Could you ask the chef for us?" I say apologetically. "It'd make our night." I'm sort of surprised when she agrees, even though the special request was her idea. I

mean, it *is* opening night of a highly anticipated—at least in Mitch Heywood’s view—new eatery, making it hard to believe that the chef, even if he’s the genius-savant he’s cracked up to be, is cooking off-the-cuff.

Veronica flits off, and I pop an olive in my mouth. One word: heaven. And I don’t even *like* olives, per se! Also, I’m going to have to muster more than a single descriptor for my critique. But it’s a start.

I reach for the recorder, but my phone starts buzzing again. Even though I’m sure it’s Jimmy, I can’t *not* check it.

Surprise (!): it’s Kayla. I feel a twinge of guilt for ignoring her, but there’s no delicate way of explaining why I’ve ditched The Crowbar. Better to let her assume I’m a heartless bitch than to reveal that her husband and I have engaged in drunken fornication.

Once again, I tuck the phone in my pocket. When I glance back up, Trent and Dex are on a collision course. If I had the time, I’d screech something like: *Watch out, knuckleheads!* Instead, I brace for impact as they bash into each other and (oh, shit!) come tumbling toward my lap?!

Thank God for Dex’s sure-footed athleticism, I guess. As he’s about to swipe the whole brood of guinea hens off the table with his backside, he pirouettes around my chair and lands palms-first against the brick fireplace surround. Trent, on the other hand, breaks his fall with a last-second grab of a nearby diner’s shoulder, followed by a hop, skip, and a leap into my personal space. He concludes with a dramatic flourish, splashing the last ounce of cabernet sauvignon out of my glass and across my fuzzy, white sweater. “Uh, sorry,” he’s saying as I blot the reddish purple liquid (which is already starting to stain, I’m afraid) off the tender fabric with a linen napkin.

Both Dex and Trent issue apologies of the it’s-his-fault-not-mine variety, though they’re smooth enough to avoid blaming each other outright. Then Dex settles back in with Jung, who has been as mute as ever since her arrival. Trent plops down across from me and slurps a mussel from its shell. “Wow,” he gurgles, the mussel sloshing around in his mouth, “these are awesome.”

I’m not a fan of gooey sea creatures, and Angie’s grimacing face suggests she agrees. “You can have all of those, if you want,” I say about the mussels. I give up on salvaging the sweater and lodge the discolored napkin under the edge of my plate. Any hope of resurrecting the garment now lies in the dry cleaner’s hands—or, well, his toxic soup of unpronounceable chemicals.

Trent sucks the remaining mussels from their shells, while I carve up a guinea hen for Angie. At this point, it's doubtful that the chef-savant is going to come through—and who could blame him, really?—with a Johnny-on-the-spot special order.

Out of nowhere, Trent asks, “Do you think you could”—his chin juts at Dex and Jung—“get a ride home with the roommate?”

I'm surprised he's recognized Jung, since they've met a grand total of once. “Huh?” I say, trying to cover my outrage. I mean, what kind of self-absorbed dirtbag ditches his girlfriend and her sister-daughter on such an important night?

I toss another olive in my mouth, and Trent sighs. “It's just that, uh . . .”

*Go on, please, I want to say. I'm dying to hear.*

“Grandfather's called an emergency meeting of the corporate officers,” he explains. “I've gotta put in an appearance.”

At 7 p.m. on a Thursday night? “That's unusual, isn't it?”

He makes a swirling gesture at the side of his head. “He's kind of . . . *you know*.”

Who *isn't* a few roses short of a dozen? “I guess I could call my mom,” I say, cutting a reluctant glance at the lovebirds—boy, Jung has the innocent schoolgirl act down to a science—who are so enamored of each other they've disappeared into an alternate universe. “She'd probably pick us up.”

Trent opens his mouth to reply but is interrupted by yet another waitress, who slides the smoked salmon, hanger steak, and—could it be?—chicken fingers and mashed potatoes into place in front of us. “Ooh!” Angie squeals, her plump little hand lunging for the food.

The waitress vanishes.

“That'd be great,” Trent says. He checks his watch and sections off a chunk of the hanger steak, which cuts like the proverbial butter. “Aren't you going to eat?”

“I had a couple of olives,” I say.

His eyes narrow. “Yeah, but . . .” He chuckles to himself. “That's not going to make much of an article, is it?”

I sense a burst of snarkiness coming on. “You'd be surprised at my talent for making mountains out of molehills.”

“If you say so.” He dabs the steak juice from the corners of his mouth, stands, and deposits the soiled napkin on his empty chair. After giving me a perfunctory peck on the cheek, he drops a hundred-dollar bill on the table and, over his shoulder, says, “I'll call you tomorrow.”

I won't be holding my breath.

For the next twenty minutes, Angie and I taste our way through the remaining food—she’s predictably gaga over the creamy potatoes, while I’m not so predictably wowed by the tender, flaky salmon. When the striking Ms. Dominique materializes beside me, I’m struggling to unzip the back of my skirt for some extra digesting room. “How was everything?” she asks, searching my face for clues to my level of satisfaction. She shoots me a Cheshire grin. “Good, I hope.”

“I lub these,” Angie says, holding up the last chicken finger. (Note to self: get Angie checked for a sinus infection and/or speech impediment.)

I smile, drain my water glass, and chime in with: “Wonderful, thank you.”

She claps a too-familiar hand over my shoulder. “Your daughter is darling.”

My throat seizes, my gaze darting to Angie, who is unfazed. “Oh, no,” I say. “She’s my sister.”

Dominique steps backward, looks us over, and purses her lips. “I can see that.”

This conversation is freaking me out. “Please, thank the chef for me,” I say, trying to change the subject, “for going above and beyond. We really appreciate it.”

A light bulb goes on over Dominique’s head. “You know, he’d be thrilled to hear that himself. Would you mind?”

She’s going to drag the chef-savant out here in person? Such a turn of events could only enhance my critique. “Absolutely not,” I say. “We’d love to meet him.” She U-turns for the kitchen; meanwhile, Angie starts wiggling around in her chair. “Are you okay?” I ask.

“I have to pee.”

I figured as much. “Can it wait a few minutes?”

She bites her lip and shakes her head.

“All right,” I say. I brush the focaccia crumbs off my skirt and stand up. Hand in hand, we weave our way to the restroom, the line for which is half as long as the meandering horde queued up outside for a seat. Eventually, we get a crack at the stalls—I might as well go too, since we’ve waited all this time. As Angie dries her hands in the futuristic, vertical dryer, I smooth her crumpled dress and, once again, comb my fingers through her snarled hair.

Back at our table, Dominique is milling about collecting napkins and plates, a dark-haired gentleman in chef’s whites—the savant, I assume—hanging patiently beside her. Angie and I prance to within ten feet of them before . . .

The chef turns, and my knees buckle. Dominique beams cluelessly as I sway from side to side, attempting to maintain my balance. If I end up fainting—an outcome that seems likelier by the second, given the shock I’ve just suffered—at least maybe the savant, a.k.a. Mark Loffel, will know to call my parents. Of course, that’s assuming he 1) remembers me and 2) recognizes me. I

mean, I've changed a lot since high school, a tragic period during which I lived in baggy sweatshirts, considered ponytails hair nirvana, and spackled enough makeup on my face to smooth the surface of the moon. He'd have to be an FBI profiler to pick me out of a lineup today.

"Emmaline?"

Fuck me.

I channel every ounce of energy I possess into breathing normally. "Hmm?"

He takes a step toward me and I recoil, our surroundings blurring in a kaleidoscope of colors and motion.

"Do you two know each other?" Dominique's curious voice probes.

That's one way of putting it.

From the vicinity of Mark's head (my senses are so wonky they can't be trusted) come the words: "It *is* you, isn't it, Em?"

This is all too familiar. And terrifying. "Oh, yeah. Brian, right?" I say, hoping giant sweat rings aren't pooling under my arms. "We had that econ class together sophomore year at BU?"

Dominique giggles. "Him? Study economics? You must be joking."

"You don't remember me?" Mark asks.

He can't be dumb enough to fall for such a blatant ruse, can he? "Sorry."

"Let me make the introductions," Dominique says, tugging Mark into hand-shaking—or, in another lifetime, kissing—territory. She gives a spokesmodel wave. "This is Mark Loffel, owner and executive chef of The Olive Branch." She pauses dramatically before adding, "And one of Boston's native sons."

Angie finds her way to my side, where she shyly studies Mark, whose nose, I can't help noticing, is shockingly similar to her own.

Dominique continues, "According to Mitchell Heywood of the *Boston Sunday Times*, this young lady is the next big star of the culinary journalism world."

Young lady? I am going to murder my new boss. "Actually, I'm a total neophyte," I say, cringing at how pompous I sound. Then again, maybe a stilted vocabulary will convince them I'm aloof and unapproachable, an outcome that would be all too welcome at this point in time.

Mark bends down and stares Angie in the eyes; meanwhile, my stomach flips inside out, my brain liquefies, and my skin burns with the stings of a thousand fire ants. "Hi there," he says, extending a hand. "What's your name?"

Double fuck me. "She's my sister, Angeline," I interject, tugging Angie toward our table and scooping up the recorder. "Nice to meet you." I withdraw a stack of twenties from my purse and



scatter them over the hundred-dollar bill Trent left behind. With a pert smile and a no-nonsense attitude, I conclude with: “Thanks for the delicious dinner. Look for my glowing review in the paper in a few days.” Honestly, I’d sell my column space by the inch to the highest bidder, assuming he or she could extract me and Angie from this meet and greet gone wrong.

“Well, um . . .” Dominique says, sounding both flummoxed and satisfied. I mean, I *have* promised to gild her lily—or olive branch, as it were—for the whole world to see.

“Is everything okay?” Mark asks as I steer Angie by the shoulders toward the exit. If we can just make it to the sidewalk, we can put this whole ugly mess behind us—literally.

“Fine,” I mutter. Until five minutes ago, I’d been pretending Mark Loffel was either a) dead or b) haunting the same Afghani caves that were rumored to have housed Osama bin Laden.

“Good to see you,” he counters.

A convoluted laugh/snort bursts out of my mouth/nose. If anything, Mark should be mad at me, instead of the other way around. And if he stays in Boston long enough, it’s inevitable that he’ll end up hating me—or worse, going to war with me over the custody of our daughter. But I can’t think about that now. For the sake of everyone involved, I buck up and, with a broad—if coerced—smile, say, “Have a nice night. And congratulations on the restaurant. It looks like a runaway success.”

Which is my cue to run the hell out, period.

## Chapter 11

“Sorry,” I tell Dex as Angie and I clamber into the back of his SUV. “I tried my mom, but she didn’t answer.”

“No problem,” he says, gingerly closing the door behind us. He hops in the driver’s seat and brings the engine to a roaring start. Beside him, Jung nestles against the door and props her (high-heeled?!) shoes on the dashboard.

“So, um . . .” I begin, unsure how to ask what’s on my mind, “are you two . . . ?” Right now, anything that distracts from the chaos of my personal life is a blessing.

Dex shoots me an over-the-shoulder smirk. “Enjoying a pleasant evening out together? Yes, we are.”

I’m starting to wonder if Jung has laryngitis when she says, “Dexter came over to check the shower—it’s working great, by the way—and I asked him to dinner. He was nice enough to agree.”

Something about this story isn’t jibing. “And you got a table? Just like that? On opening night?”

Jung chuckles. “Oh, no. I had a reservation,” she explains. “Dr. Beckett cancelled, and I didn’t want the table going to waste.”

So this “date” was a crime of opportunity, spawned by the rudeness of her PhD advisor? “That makes sense, I guess,” I reluctantly admit, though I’m still suspicious of Jung’s motives. I mean, the girl has gone from borderline agoraphobic nerd to insatiable man-eater overnight.

Angie puts her head in my lap and promptly drifts off to sleep, the SUV emitting a throaty purr as it transports us back to my and Jung’s apartment; meanwhile, my mind is transported—à la a cheesy sitcom flashback (think gentle harp music and a hazy, time-distorting glow)—to the last time I saw Mark Loffel.

We were drunk off our asses, which doesn’t excuse—but *does* explain—how two semi-acquaintances (our circles of friends overlapped, and I knew his name but little else) ended up skinny dipping in the police chief’s hot tub (at the invitation of the chief’s granddaughter, who threw a midwinter bash at his house while he sunbathed in the Florida Keys), followed by a feeble attempt at making naked snow angels (hint: ninety-eight-point-six degrees does not a

slippery, slide-y surface make), followed by the quickest sexual encounter known to woman (seriously, it was like: in and out, in and out and—congratulations!—you’re pregnant).

I thought about telling him when I found out, but the intel on Mark Loffel went something like this:

1. Sole physical, emotional, and financial supporter of his sick mother (Parkinson’s disease) since his father, a popular lobster fisherman, was lost at sea when Mark was twelve.
2. Superhard worker with as many as three jobs at once (dog walker, pizza deliveryman, and landscaper—circa 2010).
3. Gifted basketball player, with a full-boat scholarship to Purdue (and more than a passing interest from overseas recruiters—which might account for how the chef-savant ended up running a bed-and-breakfast-slash-whatever in Italy or France).

Given the aforementioned data, it should be no surprise that informing Mark Loffel he was about to be a proud papa was out of the question. I mean, Mom and Dad were cool with raising Angie while I did college, and once I graduated, I’d be equipped (or so the theory went) to take over my daughter’s care. Burdening an already taxed near saint with just-out-of-high-school parenthood seemed, by comparison, the greater of two evils (the lesser being my concealment of the truth).

But now . . .

Angie stirs in my lap, and I get a pang of guilt over what I’ve done. Even if my motives were pure, she’s become a casualty of the lie. And someday soon, she’ll discover that I’ve betrayed her. Before she learns the truth about Mark, though, she’ll have to come to terms with the truth about me.

We pull into the driveway, my mind reeling.

“Want me to carry her up?” Dex asks, Angie’s eyes fluttering at the sound of his voice.

I’d like to say I’ve got her, but the truth is, at nearly four years old, she’s heavier than I can handle. “Would you mind?”

He comes around to the back of the SUV, and I slide Angie into his arms, which, I can’t help noticing, are at least three times as muscular as any med student’s ought to be.

Jung stays in the vehicle, while the rest of us plod upstairs. Once inside, I ask Dex to rest Angie on my embarrassingly unmade bed. “Thanks again,” I say, tugging my bedroom door shut. He lingers in the hallway, and I get an out-of-the-blue urge to kiss him. So, I do. On the cheek.

If his ear-to-ear grin is any indication, he approves of my forwardness. “She’s a sweetheart,” he says about Angie.

I kiss him again, this time alarmingly close to—but not actually on—the lips. “Takes one to know one.” I’m not sure what has gotten into me, but someone should flog me with a wet noodle.

I have a boyfriend.

And Dex is currently—as in RIGHT NOW!—on a date with Jung.

Plus, thanks to Mark Loffel’s sudden reappearance, my life has turned as complex as the quadratic equation in Hebrew Braille.

The universe agrees that anything beyond friendship between Dex and me is ill-fated, as evidenced by the eruption of my cell phone at the precise moment his lips are poised to grope for mine. He falls back toward the living room, where I’ve stashed my now-screaming purse. “Shouldn’t you, uh, get that?” he asks.

I whizz by him. “Yes,” I say, grabbing my purse and rooting around for the phone, “I should.” Into the receiver, I mutter, “Hello?”

Mom’s voice is clipped. “Emmaline, where are you?”

An irrational wave of panic rolls over me. “I just got home.”

“To the apartment?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Angie’s still with you?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Why?”

She lets out a tense sigh. “Your father’s in the hospital. We both are.”

So my panic wasn’t crazy, after all? “Why?” I repeat. “What happened?” Please, God, let it be a case of indigestion run amok.

Dex recognizes my strain and guides me by the arm to the couch, where we sit.

“It’s not a heart attack,” Mom blurts. Before I can unclench my teeth, she adds, “His heart rhythm went a little haywire. They’re keeping him overnight for observation. If things don’t calm down, he might need surgery.”

Jeez, what’s worse: a heart that’s starved for blood or one that thinks it’s dancing the cha-cha? “Um, okay. What can I do?” I ask. I think desperately about rushing downstairs and haranguing Dr. Jacobs—the genius heart surgeon otherwise known as my landlord—into taking my father’s case. I mean, if anyone can fix him, this guy can.

“Can you keep Angie for the night?” Mom asks, sounding reticent. “I want to be here for your father, in case he needs anything.”

The request is so simple it catches me off guard. “Sure,” I say. “Absolutely. But don’t you want me to come to the hospital? What hospital are you at, anyway?”

She dismisses my offer, assuring me that, should anything significant transpire, she'll greenlight my mad dash to Beth Israel (as it turns out, my father is already tucked in bed at the medical center where my abnormally gifted landlord plies his trade).

After Mom and I have agreed to touch base at 7 a.m., Dex asks, "Is everything all right?"

Again, my gut reaction is to kiss him. In the time I've lived here, he's been nothing but supportive. And sexy. All things considered, he's doing a bang-up job compared to wily ol' Trent, who really should be here consoling me. "I'll be fine," I say with a snuffle that contradicts me. I blink back a well of tears. "You can go if you want." Even if he doesn't want to, there will be nothing happening (of the romantic variety, anyway) between Dex and me tonight. I learned my lesson with Jimmy, a mistake I'm in no hurry to repeat.

"Why don't I get Jung?" he asks.

The truth is, I prefer Dex's company to Jung's—or, well, I *think* I do, based on the lack of interaction between my roomie and me. "I guess," I say. "But I'm going to head to bed soon."

"I'll be right next door," he replies, which I take as an open invitation to bother him with my unsolvable life problems.

I squeeze his hand. "Thanks. That means a lot."

This time, *he* kisses *me*. On the forehead. "Get some sleep."

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Despite Dex's advice and Jung's hot tea—which I reluctantly sipped until it went cold—I've got a raging case of insomnia that, with my luck, will break at about 6 a.m.

Until then, though . . .

Angie has settled nicely in my bed, so I curl up on the floor and balance my laptop across my knees. If nothing else, I should get some work done. After all, my editor (I'm referring to Sharon, a.k.a. Wonder Woman, Mitch Heywood having built another layer of hierarchy between him and me) wants my article in her inbox by 1 p.m. Regardless of what I whip up, I'm sure she'll shred it. I mean, there's always that one woman who puffs herself up by demolishing every other female within reach of her tentacles. In my life, that woman is Sharon Fleming.

I resist the urge to check my social networks and, instead, open a new word processing document.

Big mistake.

As soon as my gaze falls upon that blank screen, my mind starts swirling with catastrophic thoughts, such as:

1. What if Dad doesn't make it?
2. What if Mark finds out about Angie and sues me for custody—and wins?
3. What if Angie learns I've lied to her and hates me forever?
4. What if, for the second time in as many weeks, my column flops, giving Mitch Heywood more than enough reason to fire me (not that he needs any reason at all)?
5. What if Jimmy won't take me back at The Crowbar (because, obviously, if I lose my job at *The Times*, I'll have to go groveling at his feet for another chance)?
6. What if I can't pay my student loans—or my rent—irreparably damaging my credit and forcing me to cram all my earthly possessions into the Green Goblin and call it home?
7. What if, while I'm running the Green Goblin to keep warm at night, carbon monoxide seeps inside and poisons me?
8. What if I die of carbon monoxide poisoning and a criminal finds my body and steals my belongings, but leaves me there to rot instead of calling the police?
9. What if I don't die of carbon monoxide poisoning, but just—JUST!!!—end up with severe brain damage, making me indistinguishable from a potted plant?
10. What if . . .

I need a Valium—or a talk with Aunt GiGi, which usually has the same soothing effect. With a sigh, I close the laptop and tuck it in the corner by my nightstand, then slip out to the living room and fetch my phone. Back at the foot of my bed, I hunker down and dial GiGi's number, even though it's, oh, about midnight.

"What's shakin', Miss Emmaline?" GiGi's voice squawks in my ear.

A smile creeps onto my lips. "Hi, Aunt GiGi," I say. Right now, I wish I had two specific superpowers: the ability to teleport and X-ray vision, which I'd use to pop onto GiGi's roof and sneak a peek at what a sassy sixtysomething like her is up to at this time of night. "Have you talked to Mom?"

"I speak with your mother all the time," she replies vaguely. "We have wonderful conversations."

"Okay, well, um . . ." I pick at the edge of my bedspread, unraveling one of its thick fringe cords. "Dad's in the hospital."

"Is he?" GiGi asks, her tone somewhere between nonplussed and disinterested.

"Yeah," I say, "his heart rhythm is acting up again."

"He'll be fine, Emmaline. Your father's a fighter." She chuckles. "Boy, the stories I could tell you."

"You're right," I say. "Think positive, huh?"

"That's the spirit." Under her breath, she mutters, "Get out of there, Minnie, you goddamn harebrained feline."

GiGi's cat must be twenty years old, at least. "How is Minnie, anyway?" I inquire. As crass as this sounds, I'd figured the cat had died already.

"Oh, who knows? One minute she's as playful as a kitten, the next minute she's tottering around here like—well, like she's older than me. Enough about her, though," she says. "What's up with my favorite niece?"

I don't bother pointing out that I'm her *only* niece, if you don't count Angie. "Something sort of"—hmm, what adjective best captures the effect of Mark Loffel's return to my life?—"big happened tonight. I could use a sounding board."

"Ooh, should I put on a pot of coffee?"

My pulse quickens at the mention of caffeine. "That's not a bad idea."

## Chapter 12

I was on the line with GiGi for over an hour before my phone died, right in the middle of one of her folksy nuggets of wisdom, which all boil down to the following two maxims:

1. Chicken noodle soup cures anything, including a broken bone—and a broken heart.
2. Never run out of chicken noodle soup.

Still, it was sixty minutes well spent, because even though her advice was less than helpful, her melodic voice lulled me into a trance, making the prospect of sleep plausible. The reality of sleep kicked in a short while later, lasting only long enough to see me through a vivid nightmare featuring a masked intruder who kidnapped Angie right out from under my nose.

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“Ouch!” I say, trying to muffle my voice as I stub my toe in the dark. Just because I’m up again doesn’t mean Angie has to be.

By feel, I locate my bedroom curtains and pull them aside, letting in enough moonlight to illuminate the corner where my laptop is stowed. After tucking the computer under my arm, I tiptoe into the hall, where I overhear the strangest thing—giggling of the preteen variety, it sounds like—leaking out from under Jung’s bedroom door.

Will the strangeness never end?

I shake my head and press on, first to the bathroom and then to the kitchen, where I raid the stash of Oreos Angie and Mom failed to finish last time they were here. With a double stack of Double Stufs, I set up shop on the kitchen table—it’s really more of a desk, anyway—the laptop resting (dangerously, in a fire-hazard sense) atop yet another pile of scientific journals Jung refuses to read and/or recycle.

Now what? I mean, I want to get my article done; I *need* to get my article done. And it should be simple. The restaurant has great atmosphere, great food, a great-looking chef who just so happens to be the father of my secret lovechild. A review of The Olive Branch could practically write itself. Yet nothing is coming to me, my mind as blank as the word processing document taunting me from the smudge-encrusted screen, my only source of 3 a.m. light.



Fuckin' writer's block. Of course, it would strike me now, at a time when—not to be dramatic or anything—my life depends on my ability to crank out five hundred decent (if not jaw-dropping) words.

But whatever.

I fritter away forty-five minutes Googling cures for writer's block (hint: there aren't any) before recognizing what must be done. The solution is obvious, really: I must pen a confession/apology letter to Mark Loffel, thereby emancipating my guilty conscience and emptying the writing queue in my brain, allowing The Olive Branch review to flow.

Deep breath. All right, here goes.

*Dear Mark*, I type. Then I stall out again. Because, really, should I be referring to him as “dear” anything?

I delete the offending salutation and stick with only his first name, which still feels a bit too familiar. What other choice do I have, though? Addressing him by his full name would be equally gauche, considering the fact that WE HAVE A CHILD TOGETHER!!!

*Focus, Em. You can do this*, I tell myself.

As it turns out, my pep talk isn't a lie. In the next twenty minutes, I hammer out a rough (okay, tree-bark bumpy) draft that, if a meteor were to streak through the sky and vaporize us all, could serve as an explanation of my misdeeds for posterity.

And it goes something like this:

*Mark,*

*Emmaline Waters here. Sorry to be contacting you this way, but I didn't know how else to broach the subject. What subject? you may be asking. Well, the subject of you and me and a hot, snowy night in the police chief's Jacuzzi. And the police chief's garden (though, to be fair, the roses were long dormant). And culminating in the police chief's very own heart-shaped bed.*

*To be clear, I'm not referring to the sex—which was fine, by the way. A little quick, maybe, but overall a solid B+.*

*The subject is more along the lines of what resulted from the sex (and, no, I don't mean syphilis or chlamydia—not that I have either of those).*

*Anyway, before I plunge headfirst into the subject, I should apologize for waiting so long to reach out to you. Believe me when I say I did it for your own good; I was trying to protect you. I mean, with everything you were already coping with, I just didn't think . . .*

*I will also admit that I didn't take some things into consideration—like your feelings, for example. I was so overwhelmed by doctor's appointments and homework and—I might as well cop to this too—abject terror that, for a number of months (nine, to be precise), I was pretty much all about me. For that self-centeredness, I am also sorry. (Whew, it feels good to get that off my chest!)*

*Seeing you at the restaurant was a gigantic shock. Honestly, I'm surprised I didn't faint. But I also think we crossed paths again for a reason. Something—the universe? God? kismet?—wants us to reconnect and do what's best for everyone involved. That's why I'm writing you this letter—to do what's best, not just for me but for you and, especially, for Angie.*

*Do you remember meeting Angie tonight? The adorable little girl with the glittery dress, wavy golden hair, and upturned button nose? (Thank you for that, by the way; it's one of her most endearing features.) Did she look familiar? I've always wondered if you'd recognize her on sight, the way I'm sure I would if she and I had never met.*

*I guess what I'm trying to say (lamely, at this point) is that, as crazy as this sounds, the one and only time you and I had sex—and, for the record, the only, only time I'd had it back then—produced a beautiful baby girl. (Yes, the rumors are true: a girl can get pregnant her first time!)*

*There's not much I can do to make up for the past; that ship has sailed, as they say. All I can do now is invite you to take part in our daughter's life, in whatever form such a relationship might take. (Note: first I'm going to have to break the news to Angie that I'm her mother and not her sister, as she's been led to believe all her life. Hopefully, that conversation will go swimmingly, and you'll be free to do your thing—if you want to, that is. No pressure. I have a boyfriend who's shaping up to be a great stand-in daddy—sort of a big brother/sweet uncle type—so if you want to pretend this never happened, that's okay too. Angie will get by just fine without you.)*

*In conclusion, I reiterate that I am sorry for keeping you out of the loop regarding our daughter's existence. It was a selfish, inconsiderate, panicked decision by an immature girl who was unprepared for motherhood. If I could take it back, I would. To right this wrong, I pledge to do whatever it takes to foster a positive relationship between you and Angie. Our daughter deserves all the love she can get in this world, and I'll do everything in my power to give it to her. I hope you will too (but, again, it's cool if you're not digging it. Totally fine. Just let me know, one way or the other.)*

*That about sums it up, I think.*

*Sincerely,*

*Em*

*(Oh, by the way, my number is 828-2128—in case you need to get in touch with me. If I don't answer, leave a message. I'm probably screening for politicians or telemarketers.)*

The sun is peeking over the horizon as I save the letter to my computer (because what are the chances I'll have the nerve to send the damn thing, anyway?). But at least I've written it. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step and blah, blah, blah.

Who knows? Maybe I *will* send the note careening for Mark's inbox. If not, I'm going to have to find another way to break the news, because with him back in Boston—as the owner of a shiny, new restaurant, no less—life is about to change. For all of us.

I've barely caught a breath when my phone rings with the early-morning call Mom and I have arranged. As exhausted as I am, I try not to let on. "Hello?" I answer, forcing an undercurrent of pep into my voice.

"Oh, good. You're up."

I've been up for twenty-plus hours, but who's counting? "How's Dad?"

"Better," Mom says, her voice sparkling with relief. "His heart rhythm's stabilized, so the surgery's on the back burner—for now. They're talking about discharging him in the next hour or two. Did Angie do all right last night?"

I should be insulted by this question, as in: Don't you think I can take care of my own child for twelve hours straight? But I know Mom only means well. "Yeah, she was pretty wiped out," I say. "She fell asleep on the ride home." I purposely don't mention the fact that Trent abandoned us and Dex, as he so often does, swept in to the rescue. Furthermore, I withhold the news about Mark Loffel, since information of that caliber is best delivered in person—if at all.

"That's good," Mom says offhand. "What time do you think you'll be bringing her home? She's got a playdate tomorrow with Olga's boy, Xander."

"Um, do you even want her back today? I mean, shouldn't Dad be resting? She can stay another night with me, if that's easier."

A long pause gives the impression that Mom is thinking the idea over. "What about her clothes? She can't wear that dress three days in a row. And her toothbrush? She won't use anything but that powered Barbie thingamajig we got her at Costco."

"You bought her a Barbie toothbrush? At Costco?" What in the world has happened to my progressive, shop-local-and-avoid-anything-that-smacks-of-consumerism parents?

"It's pink. She loves pink."

Well, then . . .

“I’ve got an extra toothbrush,” I claim, though this probably isn’t true. “I promise, her teeth will be squeaky clean. And she can wear one of my old BU T-shirts as a dress.”

Mom sighs. “It’s October, Emmaline. Halloween’s next week, for God’s sake.”

“It’s plenty warm in here,” I assure her. “And we’re not going anywhere. My article’s due today.”

“All right,” she relents. “Why don’t you bring her over in the morning, around seven? Your father should be settled in by then.”

She’s playing hardball with the crack-of-dawn drop-off, but I asked for it. “Sure. Give Dad a hug for me, okay?”

“Will do,” she agrees. “And tell Angie I love her.”

“Absolutely.”

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In search of something Angie can eat for breakfast, I shuffle through my and Jung’s shared food cupboard. “We’ve got half a bag of marshmallows,” I report, holding the blobs of sugar out for Angie’s inspection. “They’re rainbow colored too.”

She squeezes the bag and grimaces. “They’re hard. Yuck.”

Zero for one. “How about some butterscotch pudding?” I ask, jimmying a box of the instant stuff out from behind Jung’s protein bars.

Angie licks her lips. “Mmm. Butterscotch.”

It dawns on me that I don’t have any milk with which to transform the box of powder into a gooey cereal substitute, so I sneak it back onto the shelf and continue sifting through the cupboard’s meager contents—a jar of marinara sauce, two cans of tuna fish, a rubber-banded sleeve of crackers, and (hallelujah!) my old standby: SpaghettiOs. “How about this?” I ask, offering Angie the can. “I’ll even let you open it. Have you ever used a can opener before?”

“Uh-uh.”

I pull a chair over to the counter and help her up. For the first time, it strikes me that we’re having a mother-daughter moment, a normal interaction everyone on earth probably takes for granted. But not me. Maybe that’s the benefit of how things unfolded for Angie and me: we know what it’s like to be apart, so we’ll always treasure being together.

Or so I hope.

As it turns out, Angie is a whiz with an electric can opener. Once I get her situated at the table, I retreat to the living room to put the final touches on my article—the same article that,

once the letter to Mark Loffel was out of my head, gushed forth like Niagara Falls (and, if I do say so myself, turned out pretty smashing, though it's still no contender for that Pulitzer my mother has penciled in on her calendar).

But Mitch Heywood had better love—and I mean LOVE!!!—the pithy, humorous, down-to-earth spin I've put on my debut column, because I'm pretty sure I sprained a finger or two (I was on quite a roll for a while there) making it happen. I even thought of a new title for the whole shebang: Dishing with Em. It hits all the right notes, I think (unless, of course, Mr. "Grouchy Pants" Heywood vetoes it).

"Emmawine!" Angie abruptly calls from the kitchen.

I'm three sentences away from completing the last editing pass on my critique before cutting the cord and letting it go. "Just a sec!" I call back.

She cries, "But I *need* you."

Which is all *I* need to hear.

## Chapter 13

I'm not sure whom I like least at the moment: Trent, who has yet to call following his vanishing act in the middle of dinner, or Sharon "Wonder Woman" Fleming, who has sent my article boomeranging back to my inbox four times in the last two hours with corrections I'm supposed to implement, posthaste.

Her latest directive reads as follows:

*I don't know how I missed this before, but you confused "there" with "three" in the first sentence. Also, in ¶ 4, you used "through" for "though." And in ¶ 7, you reversed the error: "though" for "through." Seek and destroy. I changed my mind on the metaphors too. Cut all of them. We're waiting on you to put this issue to bed.*

She's claiming I have a typo in the first sentence (and that I made the mistake because I was "confused")?! Mark my words, there is no way—NO WAY!!!—I overlooked something so glaringly obvious. In fact, the suggestion is outlandish enough to make me doubt the veracity of her other editorial finds.

I steal a sideways glance at Angie, who is curled up on the living room floor with a stack of printer paper and every felt-tipped pen in the apartment. If she illustrates a storybook, I've promised her, we'll work together on crafting a narrative to go along with it. "How's the book coming?" I ask, partly to encourage her and partly to stall the inevitable: coming face-to-face with my own imperfections.

With a broad grin, she holds up a stick-figure drawing of . . . a dinosaur, maybe? "Wow, that's good. Show me another one."

She obliges, pinching a second sheet of paper—this sketch resembling a grassy plain with a number of lollipop "beings" shooting up from the ground—between her fingers. "Know what it is?" she asks, in a tone that suggests, if all goes well, I'll be too dumb to guess correctly.

I squint. "A herd of elephants?"

She giggles and rolls her eyes. "Nope." She crawls over to my side and dangles the picture in my face.

“Hmm . . .” I say. “Porcupines?”

“You’re silly,” she proclaims, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. “Want me to tell you?”

“I guess you’ll have to.”

“They’re sunflowers,” she says. “See?”

I should’ve known. After all, Mom and Dad have a perky little flower garden in their section of the brownstone’s backyard that prominently features the gargantuan things. “Are they alive?”

She tucks her lip under her teeth and nods.

“Do they talk?”

More nodding.

“Well, then, we’re gonna have a great story, aren’t we?”

“Yup.”

“Just let me finish this,” I say, motioning at my laptop, where the latest message from Sharon beckons. “Then we’ll get to work.”

She scampers back to her makeshift art studio and starts the next panel of what is shaping up to be a superhero-less comic book (though we could turn the sunflowers into SuperSuns—and maybe even color their stalks red, white, and blue—and send them off to rid the world of pesticides).

I force myself to open the attachment and, for the umpteenth time, scan my article for the errors that need correcting.

Dammit. Sharon was right. Not only is there a typo in the first sentence, it’s actually the first word. Let me repeat that: **THE FIRST WORD OF MY CRITIQUE IS A TYPO!!!**

I quit.

Not so fast, though. What if Sharon, in her infinite bitchiness, changed my article and inserted the typo herself. I mean, stranger things have happened, right? The only way to know for sure is to compare the source file to the Franken-attachment.

Easy enough—if my desktop weren’t such a jumbled mess, that is. Also, I should probably stop saving multiple versions of the same file under different names. I’ve got about eighteen windows open at once searching for the final draft of my article when my phone rings.

I shouldn’t answer it; I really shouldn’t. Then again, it could be an emergency about Dad’s health (please, no). Or Trent calling to grovel (please, yes—just not right now). I reach for the phone, which is near enough to be classified as an artificial appendage.

It’s Trent. Which is good, because maybe he’s sorry for being such a thoughtless cad. Plus, an apology would cheer me up at the moment, as I’ve just discovered that—AHA!!!—Sharon

*did* insert that typo, my original article clearly beginning with the word “there” and not “three,” as my back-stabbing editor has claimed.

They’re not paying me enough to deal with this bullshit.

“Hello?” I say, glad my voice sounds annoyed. After all, Trent should know I’m upset about how things went down last night. I mean, I get that he had an unexpected meeting, but he could’ve at least done the gentlemanly thing and offered to take Angie and me home first. If he’d displayed even a shred of human decency, I might not have crossed paths with Mark Loffel again.

*If.*

The first thing out of Trent’s mouth is: “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Sure,” I say, dialing back the edge in my voice. “Why?”

“Because, well, um . . . you don’t sound normal.”

“Who said I was normal?”

He chuckles uncomfortably. “Good point.”

“So, what’s up,” I ask, my attention consumed by the edits I still need to make (as it turns out, my original file *does* contain a number of the other errors Sharon has flagged).

“I’ve got a bag full of beignets from that bakery you like, Lucarelli’s.” He pauses. “Should I come over?”

My gaze drifts to Angie, who is elbows-deep in creativity, her forearms resembling a Jackson Pollock canvas. “I’m going to have to take a rain check,” I say. “Sorry.” Despite his nonchalance at the news of my parenthood (and in contradiction of what I’ve professed to Mark in the letter), I’m far from making my boyfriend a permanent fixture in my daughter’s life.

“Really?”

“I’m on a deadline,” I say. “My editor wants final copy ASAP.” All of which is technically true—heck, I’m editing as we speak—making the Angie situation secondary and, hence, irrelevant.

A sniffing sound fills Trent’s end of the line. “But they smell so good.”

He must want sex, I realize. He’s calling to bribe me into consummating our relationship, an act that is overdue, I think, in both our minds (though he should’ve selected something other than a greasy pastry as a copulation offering). “Jeez, you play hardball, don’t you?”

Did I honestly just say that? Leave it to me to mention hard balls when my boyfriend is in the throes of desire.

“I could drop them off,” he says. “I won’t even come inside.”

*Double entendre, anyone?*



“Yeah, um,” I say with a wince (this is not the right time for our first time, let alone a bang-zoom quickie), “I appreciate the thought, but I’m afraid I must decline.” He can’t ask for a politer rejection than that, can he?

“How about I leave them in your mailbox? I’m like a block away.”

“It’s pretty narrow,” I say about the mail receptacle. “Good luck fitting *a* beignet in there, let alone a bag full of them.”

He spends another minute pleading his case, which hinges on deliciousness and ease of delivery, while I finish my edits and attach the corrected file to the ongoing exchange between Sharon and me. Then I type a one-word reply: DONE. With a sigh of relief, I send the e-mail on its way. “So,” Trent is saying as I tune back in, “have I convinced you?”

“I tell you what: I’ll meet you downstairs. But, just so you know, I’m still in my pajamas.” Again, not good information to share if he’s hinting around for a roll in the hay.

“Is that supposed to dissuade me?”

Ooh, he used the word *dissuade* instead of *stop* or some other mundane quasi synonym. Maybe I *can* get past his narcissism, after all. “Absolutely not. Five minutes?”

“More like three,” he corrects. “But I don’t mind waiting.”

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The beignets were as tasty as advertised and made a nice calorie-laden midafternoon snack—or, well, lunch, since Angie and I somehow skipped that meal—once I got Trent to accept the fact that, no matter how hard he tried, he was not going to slither upstairs for a bout of naked anything.

Continuing the dinner-for-breakfast (and breakfast-for-lunch) theme, Angie and I turned our evening meal into a midnight snack, gorging on microwave popcorn (two full bags), spray cheese (and I call myself a food critic!), and the butterscotch pudding that eluded us this morning (compliments of Jung, whose half gallon of whole milk, I happily realized, was on the fast track to expiration destruction).

Midway through a showing of *Matilda*, my darling daughter drifted off to sleep, her head cradled in my arms, her tiny legs curled beneath her like a kitten’s. It wasn’t long before I began nodding off too, despite my fear that Angie would slip out of my arms and crash to the floor, proving that 1) I am a narcoleptic klutz who shouldn’t be trusted with so much as a football, let alone a human being and 2) I am—or would be, given half a chance—a terrible mother.

But then . . .

The ticklish terror of spider legs skittered over my hairline and advanced toward my eye. My reflex, of course, was to bang my head against the nearest hard surface, either 1) disabling the treacherous arachnid or 2) turning my brains into liquid Swiss cheese. Or maybe both, which would suit me just fine if I didn't have a daughter to live for.

Without an inkling of self-preservation, the spider traversed my nose, stopped and pivoted, as if he—or she, I suppose, though I've always cast spiders as serial killers, which are mostly male in *my* nightmares—was gearing up for a sprint over my trembling (and hastily retracting) lips.

I told myself: *Do. Not. Panic.*

Chalk it up to a mother's protective instincts, but I kept cool long enough to shift Angie off my lap, hop to my feet, and bash my head as if it were a Cinco de Mayo piñata. I'd like to say I was able to identify a few errant fragments of the spider's body as they drifted toward Jung's geometric area rug, but that would be a lie.

At least I kept Angie safe from the beastly vermin, though. As my daughter's belly rose and fell with sleep, it occurred to me that her wellbeing was all that mattered anymore—the way things should have been from the start.

## Chapter 14

**W**hen Angie and I arrive at the brownstone, I'm thrilled to find Dad mellowing by the fire, a mug of steaming tea on the table beside him. Before I can get the door closed behind us, Angie squeals, "Daddy!"

My heart sinks. Mark Loffel is her father, if not her "daddy" (through no fault of his own).

Clutching a dish towel in one hand and a rose-patterned plate in the other, Mom meanders over to join us, her gaze drawn (disapprovingly, if I'm reading her right) to Angie's dress—the same one she wore to The Olive Branch. "She just put that back on," I feel obligated to say in my defense. "Didn't you, Ang?"

Angie buries her face in Dad's chest, her arms hinging together behind his neck. Dad gives her a tender kiss on the top of the head. "Gee, I think I'll get sick more often, if this is what I've got to look forward to," he says with a chuckle.

I join the group hug. "Welcome home, Dad."

Mom hangs the dish towel over her shoulder and lays a hand on my back. "It's wonderful to have everyone here," she remarks, her voice wet with emotion.

Suddenly, Dad shudders, as if he's caught a chill. "That's enough," he announces. But he's not fooling me: what he can't stomach is the fawning.

Mom backs off and, eventually, Angie and I break away too. "You look good," I tell Dad after completing a meticulous once-over. "Your eyes are"—I tilt my head and squint—"sparkling. Maybe even dazzling."

I grin.

He grins back.

"Have you girls had breakfast yet?" he asks, adroitly changing the subject. "Your mother made a delicious veggie frittata."

On that appetizing note, we all—including Dad, who has apparently eaten already—head to the kitchen, where I devour (and Angie picks at) the aforementioned egg dish, which turns out to be even more scrumptious than Dad let on. "Is this a new recipe?" I ask with my mouth full.

"Actually, it's an old one," Mom responds. "From your Grammie Mae. I found a box of her stuff in the storage unit while I was searching for some insurance papers."

I raise my fork. “Kudos, Grammie Mae.”

“Can I have some lemonade?” asks Angie.

Dad shuffles to the fridge and pours a couple of freshly squeezed glasses, while I quash the urge to intercept him. I mean, if he thinks he’s up to a task, who am I to tell him otherwise?

I’m halfway through my lemonade when Mom ushers Angie off to the bathroom to “get cleaned up,” as if she’s been wrestling wild boars for the last thirty-plus hours. I seize the opportunity to probe Dad’s medical situation further. “So, when’s your next doctor’s appointment?” I ask, trying to sound casual.

He settles on a stool beside me. “A week from Thursday, I think. You’d have to ask your mother for sure, though. She’s the bureaucrat in this house.”

What Dad means is that Mom handles all the pesky paperwork and red tape of life. “Dr. Lucas doesn’t want to see you sooner?” I inquire.

“Watch your mouth, young lady.” He cracks a smile. “What’re you trying to do, hex me?”

“Of course not.”

Like an unexpected gust of wind, Mom’s voice blows into the kitchen. “Emmaline, come here, please!”

I shoot Dad an inside glance. “Oh-oh. Am I in trouble?”

“Stranger things have happened.”

“Thanks a lot,” I mutter as I move for the hallway. Outside the bathroom, Mom puts a finger to her lips. “What?” I whisper, furrowing my brow. Through the doorway, I glimpse Angie, neck-deep in a foamy bubble bath.

Mom pulls me by the arm to her side. “We need to have a little powwow.”

If she only knew. I mean, it’s high time I told someone about Mark Loffel. As far as my parents are concerned, Angie is the product of a drunken tryst (sort of true) between me and a man whose name I can’t remember (a lie that makes me look like a lowlife tramp, but has been an effective cover-up). “Okay . . .” I say. “What’s going on?”

“Oh, Em,” Mom says, the words coming out like a sigh. She squeezes my arm, and a bunch of Tasmanian devils start whirling around in my stomach.

“What is it?” I ask again, my eyes already stinging with tears.

She cranes her neck to check on Angie, who is having a splashing good time with her collection of pink, pinker, and pinkest—including another Barbie figurine?!—tub toys. “Sorry to do this here,” Mom says, gesturing at the bathroom, “but I didn’t want to get your father all riled up.” She pauses, but words escape me. “See, the thing is, we can’t pay for your apartment

anymore.” She cringes, as if the news that she and Dad are cutting the financial cord is physically painful—which it could be, for me.

I am dumbstruck.

Completely.

Struck.

Dumb.

I mean, it’s not like I expected them to support me forever, but a few months of forewarning would’ve been nice. As far as pay goes, the newspaper job is at the bottom of the barrel. Not that I’m complaining. Everyone has to start somewhere. I just figured I’d have a roof over my head while I was launching my ship into the current. “Um . . .”

“I’m sorry,” Mom says, frowning. “But our medical expenses are through the roof. We might even have to remortgage the brownstone.”

This does sound bad. Since Dad’s retired and Mom’s self-employed, I guess their insurance—and mine, since I’ve been piggybacking on them in that realm too—isn’t quite up to snuff. I want to tell her not to worry. That I’ll be fine. But the truth is, without Mom and Dad’s help, I can’t even afford my student loans (they have no idea how much I owe, my college-era spending habits more in line with those of a Rockefeller heiress than Ebenezer Scrooge), much less feed, clothe, and house myself—or Angie, as Mark Loffel’s surprise reappearance has led me to start dreaming about. Under the circumstances, my response is: “Oh.”

Mom puts on a cheery face. “Not to worry, though. Everything will work out. It always does.” With a chuckle, she adds, “What’s the worst that could happen? We all end up nestled in here, like the good old days?”

The horror.

Even though Mom is speaking metaphorically—and my childhood was, by most people’s standards, idyllic—I have no desire to repeat it with my daughter in tow.

Speaking of Angie . . . “Mom!” she’s suddenly yelling. “Help!”

My mother and I squeeze through the doorway simultaneously, in response to what turns out to be a Barbie-overboard emergency. Mom looks on proudly—and, if I’m not mistaken, a little nostalgically—as I scoop the doll off the bath mat and return it to Angie’s slippery hands.

“Disaster averted,” I say as we hit the hallway again.

Picking up where we left off, Mom asks, “So, do you think you can manage? We might be able to take care of your cell phone bill—or your Internet connection, maybe—but the rent is out of our reach right now. I hope you understand. Oh, and don’t bring this up with your father. It would shatter him to know how far we’ve fallen.”

Should I tell her the truth now or wait for cold, hard reality to slap me in the face? “Sure,” I say, trying to channel her optimism. “I think I’ll be all right.” In the back of my mind, I wonder how low I’ll have to sink—specifically, should I get on the phone with Jimmy ASAP and grovel for my old job back?—to cover my financial ass.

As easy as that, Mom believes me. Or maybe she just doesn’t want to know. “Great,” she says, plucking a towel from the linen closet and pushing the bathroom door open. “Want to help me braid Angie’s hair?”

Her offer stirs a warm, fuzzy feeling in me that (for the moment, anyway) eclipses the panic squiggling through my nervous system. “As a matter of fact, I do.”

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In no particular order, my reactions to learning that my life is about to unravel:

- smoking my last eight emergency cigarettes (all in about two hours)
- leaving a number (six or seven, I lost count) of irrational messages on Trent’s cell phone, even though he’s incommunicado, his job having once again taken him out of town—or was it out of the country?—for the weekend
- cleaning the apartment from stem to stern, as the saying goes, with emphasis on spider eradication and readying my room for the inevitable: my soon-to-be departure

My follow-up to all of the above? Passing out and sleeping for, oh, twenty hours, give or take. For some ungodly reason, I awaken to Jung standing over my bed with a concerned look on her face. Now if she talks to me . . .

“Oh, good, Emily. You’re getting up.”

*Motherfucker.* Did she really just call me Emily? I grind my knuckles into my eyes. “Hmm?”

“There’s been some kind of, uh, mix-up,” Jung’s quivering, disembodied head tells me. “I thought you’d want to know before . . .” The head stops bobbing and comes into focus, revealing Jung’s ashen—and lip-bitingly nervous—face.

What kind of mix-up could have my roommate rousing me out of bed at the crack of 4 p.m.? “Um . . . huh?”

In addition to gnawing her lip and adopting the complexion of a corpse, Jung is, I realize disconcertingly, wringing her hands. “I don’t know if anybody . . . But they must have, because it’s in the paper.”

I spring to a sitting position. “In the paper?” I say in a raspy version—thanks a lot, nicotine!—of my normal voice. “What’s in the paper?” It dawns on me that she might be referring to my article on The Olive Branch, which was set to hit the presses this morning.

“Oh, well, uh . . . just a . . .” On that illuminating note, she ducks out of my room to—what?—send me an e-mail instead of getting all tangled up in this face-to-bobble-head communication?

Or not.

Almost immediately, she reappears with a swath of newsprint—not the whole sheet, but an expertly snipped section the size of a famous person’s obituary—brandished in her trembling hand. She studies the floor and passes it to me, saying nothing.

As soon as I lay eyes on the thing, my mind starts shrieking (internally, of course, not out loud like some sort of freakish genetic party trick) at a pitch only dolphins—or seriously panicked women whose apology letters to their babies’ daddies have been printed in a major newspaper—can hear.

“Can I do anything?” Jung asks as I continue to stare bug eyed and slack jawed—I mean, they printed my phone number in the fucking newspaper?!—at what must be some sort of sick joke Sharon “Bitch Face” Fleming has decided to play on the newbie food critic. If this is the kind of welcome-to-journalism hazing I can expect, I shall collect my toys and exit the playground, posthaste.

Back to reality, though.

“Yeah,” I reply, my tone indignant. “You can tell me what the hell you’re doing with all these gorgeous men. I mean, you go however long we’ve been living together without a single date and then *bam!* You’re a sexual butterfly all of a sudden? How am I supposed to process that?”

Jung’s private life is none of my business, but since my dirty laundry is splashed from here to Timbuktu, I could use the miserable company. “Pardon me?” she replies, looking confused—or pissed. I can’t tell which, our emotional connection a casualty of our standoffishness.

“Forget it,” I say, shaking my head. “Don’t mind me. I’m just a little . . .” There’s no good way to describe the mixture of horror, relief, and embarrassment I’m feeling, so I don’t bother. Instead, I brush past her for the bathroom. “Thanks for trying to help, though. It really was nice of you.”

## Chapter 15

I slam the Green Goblin to a stop—literally—crunching the bumper of the flaming-red BMW that is once again parked in front of the newspaper building. Cue the Armageddon response: alarm bells, flashing lights, strangers rushing out of their offices to gawk at my misfortune.

One such cubicle deserter is Lawrence Wasserstein, the greasy receptionist from *The Times*, whom I ought to be referring to as Larry by now. Or even Lar. *Hey there, Lar*, I should be saying as he strides across the sidewalk in my direction, his face flushed and—is my imagination working overtime here?—steam billowing out of his ears like in a Saturday-morning cartoon?

He pulls up short beside the Green Goblin, which I’ve reluctantly exited amid the cacophony, and shouts, “What the hell are you doing?!”

I step around him. “Call me when the cops get here. I need to discuss something with Ms. Fleming.”

His jaw drops. “You’d better see Mitch”—he gestures at the newspaper building—“before he finds out about *this*.”

“What business is it of his?”

“Um, duh,” he says with a cluck. “You hit his car.”

It figures. Not that I care, really. No job is worth the trial-by-fire initiation my she-devil editor has cooked up for me. “If you ask me,” I say, “I did Mitch Heywood a favor.”

I leave Larry circling the boss man’s car and zoom for Sharon Fleming’s office with one thing—and one thing only—in mind: revenge. I mean, if my life has begun an inexorable spiral toward homelessness, joblessness, and complete and utter pariahdom, I might as well get a few digs in on my way down.

With Larry still outside, the reception area of *The Times* is empty, the multiline phone ringing with impunity. I can’t help laughing as I breeze by—hell, it’s not *my* job to answer!—and march straight for Sharon Fleming’s hoity-toity office. “Ahem,” I say from the doorway, to alert the devil-woman—who, for the record, is busy painting her nails instead of attending to the editorial duties for which *The Times* compensates her handsomely—to my presence.

She pretends not to hear me.



Which leaves me no choice but to storm right up to her desk. “Excuse me,” I say, my voice vibrating with rage, “but we need to talk.”

You’d think my tone would’ve stopped her polishing midfingernail, but you’d be wrong. Without looking up—and with irritation in her voice—she responds, “Whatever you want, it’ll have to go through Mitch. You’re his”—she clearly wants to say “problem” here, but catches herself—“*subordinate* from now on.”

“Mitch Heywood isn’t the one who sabotaged my article and printed a personal letter in the newspaper for the whole world to see. So I’d like . . . no, I demand—I DEMAND!!!—an apology. From *you*.” There. I’ve put my cards on the table. So why do I feel like a saber-toothed tiger is nipping at my ass?

Her face lifts. “You’re accusing me of . . . ? You think I’d bother to . . . ?” She laughs sardonically. “Sorry to disappoint you, but I’ve got more pressing things to attend to than backstabbing and petty office politics.” She blows on her freshly manicured nails and flashes me a mouthful of glistening teeth. “Is that all?”

“What did you think of my review?” I ask, hoping to bait her into an argument, my anger still roiling.

“It was adequate,” she says in a monotone, “for a first attempt.”

On second thought, it’s hard to argue with an opinion. And “adequate” might be high praise on Sharon Fleming’s perpetually-dissatisfied-bitch scale. “Oh. Glad to hear it.”

We lock eyes for a moment, me with my indignantly puckered eyebrows and haughty hand on my hip, her with that icy stare and unflappable confidence. “That letter was tragic, by the way,” she mews. “I felt a little sorry for you.”

My jaw must be grazing the floor. “Excuse me?”

The shoulders of her military-style blazer drift upward. “All that stuff about your daughter?” She grimaces. “Who wouldn’t feel a twinge of sympathy?”

“I don’t need anyone’s pity, thank you very much.” I huff. “My daughter and I are just fine.”

Her lips purse. “If you say so.”

“Well, I do.” Case closed. The fat lady may sing.

At my back, she says, “You know, you really *should* be thanking me.”

I shake my head. “How so?”

The wheels of her office chair screech as she rises. Before I know it, she’s beside me. “Printing that letter *was* a mistake,” she claims in a whisper. “But the publicity this story is going to get—is *already* getting—is a goldmine. Bill Gates couldn’t buy that kind of attention.”

I'm pretty sure Mr. Gates can buy anything (and everything) he damn well pleases, but whatever. "What kind of attention?" I ask, imagining the nutjob e-mails that must be flooding my inbox as we speak.

She shrugs. "You'd better talk to Mitch."

"Good idea," I respond with a chipper smile. Before I have the sense to reconsider, I zip out the door.

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"You. Are. Brilliant," Mitch Heywood's voice booms down the hallway, paving the way for his Paul Bunyan-esque frame. "I knew I hired you for a reason."

Is he talking to me? I look over my shoulder, in case the real object of his affection is rolling up behind me.

Negativo. It's just me and the Mitchmeister. "Um, hi," I respond warily.

He claps a meaty paw over my arm, his other hand swinging a rolled-up newspaper at my face. "You know, you could've told me you're a marketing genius. I wouldn't've held it against you." He clutches the newspaper to his chest. "I swear."

A nervous smile takes over my face. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"C'mon, Waters," he says, smirking. "This kind of headline-grabbing shit doesn't just happen."

In my universe, apparently it does. "Honestly, that was a mistake. I don't even know how . . . I mean, I sent the right copy; I *know* I did."

He steers me by the shoulder to his office, where, instead of intimidating me from behind that beastly desk, he saunters to the windows and waves me over.

"That's okay," I say, balking at the idea of overlooking the street, a.k.a. the scene of the crime I've just committed against his luxury automobile.

His arm churns the air like a propeller. "Come here, Waters," he insists. "I want to show you something."

My feet refuse to move. "I can see from here," I say (a complete and utter lie), getting on my tiptoes to convince him.

"Is something wrong with you?"

Isn't it obvious? "Um . . ." I begin, planning to launch some preemptive damage control by confessing to smashing the Beemer, then throwing myself on his mercy while he still holds me in high regard.

But then . . .

Good ol' Larry bursts in on us, shooting me a smug glare before sidling up to Mitch. He cups his hand to Mitch's ear and, presumably, ends my journalism career just as it was getting started.

I should slink out of here now and save Mitch the trouble of disemboweling me. I mean, my innards would definitely clash with the mellow tones of this oriental carpet.

Mitch cranes his neck and peers over the street, his face twisting with an incredulous scowl; meanwhile, Larry's self-satisfied gaze molests me. "Waters, get over here," Mitch orders, in a tone that makes disembowelment seem like a spin on the Coney Island Ferris wheel.

Again, my feet refuse him.

No matter. Soon he's closing the gap between us. I hunker down in the nearest armchair to endure the shit storm of cursing headed my way.

Larry winks—WINKS!!!—as he lopes for the door, his job as stool pigeon complete. As his baby-blue polyester slacks swish over the threshold, I get the urge to throw my arms around his legs and either 1) hitch a ride to freedom or 2) take him down with me.

Out of nowhere, Mitch thrusts a cell phone at my face. "Think fast," he says, laughing.

My hand betrays me by popping up and putting the device to my ear. "Hello?" I say, before realizing Mitch has dialed someone's number and, instead of talking, I should be listening to the ringing that is counting down the seconds of my employment at *The Times*.

It crosses my mind to go out in a blaze of glory, hurl the cell phone—still ringing, of course—into Mitch's colorful saltwater aquarium, blow him a kiss and, after a jubilant curtsy, trot my way out of this very disappointing chapter of Emmaline Waters's almost life.

If worse comes to worse, I could always belly up to The Crowbar again, pitch my morals—such as they are—down a rabbit hole, and become Jimmy's permanent side dish, wake up twenty years from now with a spare tire around my waist and a sucking, gnawing canyon where my soul used to be.

Or whatever.

I am so mired in self-pity that I nearly miss the voice—which would be a feat unto itself, considering its high-pitched, nasally tone—when it says, "Mitch? Mitchell Heywood? Is that you?"

Whoever Mitch has put on the line with me is female—or else a surgically neutered male. I shield the phone and plead, "Help!"

He laughs in my face. "That little hit and run you pulled out there is gonna cost you."

The nasally woman talks on—a mess of garbled syllables, wrapped in a cocoon of flirtation. I shrug at Mitch and, into the phone, say, "This is Emmaline Waters. Mr. Heywood is"—I want to

say “a gigantic horse’s ass,” but somehow restrain myself—“in a meeting. May I take a message?”

An audible gasp. “Emmaline Waters? *The Emmaline Waters*, from *Dishing with Em*?”

“Um, yeah,” I admit, caught off guard by the fact that a stranger knows my name, let alone the title of my fledgling column. “That’s me.”

“Brilliant! Give that grumbly old boss of yours a smooch for me, won’t you?”

Certainly not, even if my stomach weren’t lurching from the idea. “Come again?”

The nameless woman asks, “Should we do this over the phone or in person?”

I throw visual daggers at Mitch, who is grinning triumphantly from ear to ear. “I’m sorry, but—”

“Don’t you dare back out on me!” the woman blurts. “I’ve waited my whole life for a scoop like this.”

In what universe am *I* integral to a stranger’s lifelong ambitions? “Scoop?” I ask, trying to disguise my ignorance.

She cackles wildly. “You’re joking, right? You do realize you’re the number one ‘get’ at the moment, don’t you? I mean, you’re trending . . . well, everywhere worth trending.”

“So you want to . . . what? Interview me?”

“Ding, ding, ding.”

I search Mitch’s face for a hint of compassion, the slightest indication he’ll let me weasel out of the fender bender and—this is the imperative part—keep me employed, even if I eschew this woman’s intrusion into my personal life. Which I’m dead set on doing, until . . .

Mitch gives me a peppy thumbs-up, punctuated by the sleaziest wink I’ve ever seen. “Fire away,” I say, sinking so low into the cracked-leather seat that my DNA might swap places with that of the cow-donor of this fine swath of upholstery.

The phone lady takes me at my word, and off we prance toward the ultimate airing of my dirty laundry. I can only hope that Angie—and, more importantly, Mark Loffel, since he’s the one most likely to untangle my web of deceit—has settled in for a long winter’s nap that will last right through this hubbub over the relationship that never was. (I mean, I had sex with the guy once! Five years ago! Get over it, people!)

Yes, I tell myself. This whole ugly mess will blow over before it hits the radar of anyone important. If not, there’s always Canada. How cold can it be up there, anyway?

## Chapter 16

Thanks to Mitch Heywood, my life has gone from normal postcollege malaise to downright dreadful. And as soon as the exclusive interview I gave Brenda Bixby (news flash: she's Mitch's ex-girlfriend and the on-air talent for channel 4 at six o'clock) hits the airwaves, I might as well fake my death—and Angie's too, since she'll be going with me—and hop a freight train to a remote Mexican village, where my daughter and I will reinvent ourselves as Isabel and her doting aunt, Esperanza. . . .

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“There's a great natural foods store up ahead,” Trent says, flapping a hand toward the windshield. “We'll hit that for lunch, okay?”

I'm sure he doesn't actually want my opinion. “That's fine,” I reply, staring distractedly at the trees whizzing by and trying not to think about the fact that, ready or not, I'm going to have to have “the talk”—as in your parents aren't your real parents, sweetie—with Angie.

Make that “the talks.” Because I can't risk upending Angie's world until I know how Mark Loffel has taken the news of his sudden parenthood.

Oh, and I'd better get all this earth shattering done ASAP, because, within a matter of weeks, my energy will be otherwise engaged in the acts of avoiding starving and/or freezing to death on the mean streets of Boston, Jung and our apartment a hazy, blissful memory.

Speaking of which, I should give Dr. Jacobs my notice as soon as Trent and I return from this “bitchin' adventure” (his words, not mine)—assuming we survive the 300-foot drop, that is.

I shoot a glance at Trent, wondering how long it will take *him* to drop *me* once he realizes I'm even more of a screw-up than previously advertised.

He steers us into the parking lot of a hole-in-the-wall shop called—I kid you not—In the Raw (which would make an equally good name for a certain kind of adult novelty store, if you get my meaning).

I put on a small, wavering smile and follow him inside. The aisles are narrow and winding, the overhead lights exposed fluorescents that emit a dull hum. The low shelves, scuffed to bare metal at the edges, brim with all manner of obscure concoctions—a tin of cuttlefish in its own

ink; a silk pouch of soy-eucalyptus ear candles; even what claims to be (and feels like, I note, giving the thing a stiff squeeze) a brick of sprouted alfalfa-sunflower-maple-pine-nut bread.

Behind a quaint wooden counter at the back of the store hovers just the kind of person you'd expect to find running an off-the-wall place like this: a twentysomething dreadlocked redhead, clad in a vibrantly colored dashiki and a horrendously clashing peasant skirt.

My eyes want to bleed.

Trent, though, is exhibiting no such distress. "Hey," he says, striding right up to the woman. He grabs her by the shoulders and plants a sloppy kiss on her forehead.

I check the ceiling for a hidden camera. I mean, what else besides a practical joke could have my semi-uptight Donald Trump-in-training boyfriend cozying up to a random heathen?

The woman, who doesn't feel the need to mar a perfectly ghastly outfit with something as mundane as a nametag, nearly pulls Trent over the counter with an improvised bear hug. "Long time no see, cuz," she coos in his ear. Then to me: "Oh, hi." She releases Trent and heaves her arms my way. "You must be 'the one.' "

If I'm translating her slang correctly, Ms. Hippie 2014 is Trent's cousin (an admittedly bizarre pill to swallow). My arms dangle at my sides like dead fish as she barrels around the counter and smothers me in an awkward embrace. "Um, yeah," I respond uncertainly. I try to shrug, but she's clamped around me like a human straitjacket. "That's me, I guess."

Truth be told, I'd characterize my relationship with Trent as overwhelmingly casual, this trip more the result of my need to escape the publicity storm that has sprung up around Letter Gate—I mean, after the thousandth interview request in a two-hour period, I shoved my cell phone down the garbage disposal and minced it out of existence—than a classic romantic getaway.

I extricate myself from the Scissor Arms of Death and, as if it's a life raft in a churning sea, grab Trent's hand. He gives my fingers a gentle pump. "So, what do you think?" he asks, glancing back toward the disorganized and strangely stocked aisles.

"Interesting place," I remark, directing my response at his cousin. "Do you own it?"

"Can anyone really own anything?"

My face twists in confusion. "Well, um . . . I don't . . ."

"You've gotta try Whit's harvest muffins," Trent suddenly announces, tugging me toward a glass case in a spider-webby corner. "Right, Whit?"

Her name is Whit? As in Whitney? Or Whitley? Makes sense, I guess.

"Yeah," she agrees with a conspiratorial grin. "The harvest muffins are a must-have." She takes a shortcut to the bakery case, beating us there by a couple of steps. With a bare hand, she

plucks a giant, naked muffin—which, to be blunt, resembles an overbaked hunk of excrement—from the top shelf and thrusts it at me.

Shouldn't she at least offer me a bag to carry the thing in? I'm about to request such a convenience when a trio of young guys—probably farm kids from the surrounding wasteland of dilapidated barns and rusty silos—bursts through the door and begins pawing like hungry bears at the shelf of organic candy.

Whit appears nonplussed, the muffin still cupped in her itty-bitty hand (did I mention that the girl has the gravitas of a feather?). "Here," she says, shaking the mass of wholesomeness (read: *actual* tree bark would be preferable) at my face. "I made this special, just for you."

She did? Reluctantly, I accept, trying not to focus on the swarm of bohemian germs (I mean, free spirits aren't exactly known for their cleanliness, are they?) that have not only invaded the muffin but are now infesting my skin. "Thanks."

The farm boys finish rooting through the only edible fare in the place and head for the register, where Whit lazily cashes them out. From her lackadaisical attitude, I get the idea that customers are a rarity on par with Big Foot sightings at In the Raw. "How much do I owe you?" I ask, absorbing the recently vacated space in line.

Trent slings an arm over my shoulder. "No charge for family," he says, shooting his cousin a wink. "Speaking of which, have you got those sandwiches I ordered?" In my ear, he murmurs, "Tuna salad was the best I could do. Hope that's all right."

"Yeah, sure," I mumble, glad he's harangued Whit into making something familiar and, thus, comforting.

The three of us chat for a few minutes, then Whit disappears behind a translucent curtain to retrieve our lunch, which, I'm happy to report, is cool to the touch, suggesting it has been refrigerated. I wait until we get back on the road to pry further about his cousin. "So, what's her deal? Is she, like, adopted or something?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Trent staring at my lap. "Aren't you going to eat the muffin?" he asks dejectedly.

I've cocooned "the muffin" (if you can call it that) in a nest of paper napkins I've scavenged from the glove box. "It looks kind of gross," I admit. I make a show of sniffing the air. "And it smells funny, too."

"Oh, come on. You're a food critic. You can stomach anything, right?"

That's right; I *am* a food critic. And I'm quite critical of this muffin, indeed. But it's going to be a long trip if I don't at least taste the thing.

A nibble. That's all I intend to take until Trent hits a pothole, causing me to chomp off a section the size of North Dakota. Lo and behold, it's as disgusting as I feared. So hideous, in fact, that as hard as I try to force my mouth into action, it just won't chew.

Great. Now what? I could fake a choking fit and cough the thing into a napkin, I suppose. Then again, even though Trent's no Albert Einstein, he's sure to connect the dots of such a blatant ruse.

He moves his eyes from the road to my chipmunk cheeks. "So?"

I manage a slight nod, my nasal passages struggling to intake enough oxygen to keep me conscious. Should I slap my cheeks in hopes of spurring some jaw movement?

"It's good, huh?" he says obliviously.

*Why on earth is he so enamored of this muffin?*

My teeth finally get bored enough to saw through something rough and grainy (a gummy chunk of barley?), decreasing the odds that I'll actually be able to swallow.

"Can I have a bite?"

*Please, God, yes! I want to scream. Someone—anyone—take this wretched science-experiment-gone-awry off my hands.* I plop the wad of napkins in Trent's lap and, before the mouthful of goop liquefies any further, crane my neck and pretend to be enraptured with something outside the window, when I'm really spitting the remains of the muffin into a handy paper cup. (Thank you, Trent, for keeping a stash of empty Starbucks containers, a.k.a. hoarded garbage, under the seat of your car.)

He tosses a pinch of the muffin in his mouth. "I see what you mean," he says, his facial muscles contorting. "*It is a bit dry.*"

Technically, he's not wrong, though moisture—or lack thereof—is the least of the muffin's problems. "Sorry." I frown. "It's just not my thing. That sandwich sounds good, though. How much longer before we get there?" If I had to ballpark it, I'd say we've been on the road for two hours already.

"Did you like Whit?" he asks, ignoring my inquiry.

"Um, yeah. She seems nice. What's her deal, anyway? I mean, I never would've guessed that the two of you are related."

"Black sheep." He shakes his head. "She was born that way."

"Huh?"

"You know: pigheaded, defiant, full of piss and vinegar."

I'm liking her more by the minute. "And that's a bad thing?"

He sighs. "In this family? I'm afraid so."



I think I get it now: along with the über riches comes a laundry list of rules and regulations Trent (and, presumably, other relatives who hope to suckle at the familial teat) are bound to follow. Which somehow makes me more sympathetic to his plight.

I twist around, snag the sandwiches, and immediately dig in. “Sounds stressful,” I mumble through a wad of soggy bread and mayo. If there’s actual fish in this sandwich, it’s well hidden.

“It’s better than the alternative.”

“Like what? Being cut off?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” he says, “but the worst thing I can imagine doing is what you do.”

What the hell does that mean? “Excuse me?”

He cracks a smile. “See, you took it wrong.”

“Enlighten me, please,” I reply, copping the biggest attitude I dare given our lack of proximity to home. The rest of my aggression I take out on the sandwich, which is no match for my seriously ticked-off teeth.

Another sigh. “It’s not an insult—at least, I don’t mean it to be. But working for someone else? Punching a clock every day?” He shudders. “That’s my idea of hell.”

“We’re on the same page there,” I say with a laugh. “And, for the record, I work by the job—not on a clock.”

“Wouldn’t you rather *make* the rules?” he says, as if he’s my fairy godmother and can—poof!—spin my life around on a dime.

Before I can dream up a witty response, my eyes lock on the muffin, which he’s picked to bits in his lap, leaving a trail of muffin guts under his fingernails—not to mention a pretty crumbly mess strewn across the front of his pants.

Ick.

He continues, “I could use a partner like you. Someone to smooth out my rough edges. Represent me in the community.” He shakes his head. “God knows I’ve got a reputation for being out of touch sometimes. I’d like to change that.”

If I’m understanding him correctly, he wants me to run a public relations campaign on his behalf. “Okay . . . ?” For the right price, I may take him up on the offer. After all, working behind the scenes for my boyfriend would provide a lot more anonymity than the food-critic job. And with the glaring attention to my personal life of late, my top priority is blending into the scenery.

Out of nowhere, Trent pulls the car over to the side of the road and—what the hell?!—dangles a muffin-coated diamond ring (and a pretty gigantic one, at that!) in the air. “So, what do you say?”

What I say is: “Huh?”

He unbuckles his seatbelt and turns to face me, wide eyed and hopeful. “You were supposed to find it in the muffin,” he tells me. “Whit and I had it all planned out.”

My eyebrows pinch together. “But . . . what . . . ?”

His cheerful exterior falters. “Aren’t you excited?”

I can’t escape the feeling that I’ve entered a time warp. Or that I’m waking up from a months-long coma and suffering an extreme bout of amnesia. I mean, did I miss something here? Since when are we serious enough—keep in mind, we haven’t even done the deed yet!—to consider (gulp) tying the knot? “Um . . .”

He hangs his head. “Shit. I knew I should’ve done something bigger.” He palms the ring, and I get a pang of disappointment. “It’s not like I can’t afford it.”

Words escape me.

On one hand, I love the *idea* of marriage—especially to a guy who’s so far ahead of the curve in grownup milestones. (Not only does he have a luxury car, but he’s a homeowner—and a landowner too, his real estate business just beginning to take flight; who knows how high he’ll soar?) Such stability would be a godsend for Angie and me, considering my looming financial woes.

On the flipside, though: do I really love him? Not just in the passing fascination sense, but in the waking-up-beside-him-for-the-rest-of-my-life way? I’m not a hundred percent sure.

“Will you at least think about it?” he asks, pulling me out of my musings—and hauling the ring back out for another look-see.

It *is* beautiful, in a covered-in-gnarly-crumbs sort of way. “Can I hold it?” I ask, hoping that, like Cinderella and her slipper, this piece of jewelry and I will have a one-of-a-kind, made-for-each-other, lightening-strike connection.

His smile perks back up. He slips the ring over my pinkie, which I’ve extended for the trial instead of the real-deal wedding-ring finger. It’s loose, of course. And gummy. But it does have a certain subdued charm that promises: *I will be there for you. Always and forever.*

Yet, it’s not enough. “It’s lovely,” I tell him, admiring the way the (big, honking!) diamond catches the rays of sun filtering through the late-autumn sky. I mull over my words, searching for a phrase that will let him down easy. “I’m just not ready to get married yet.”

His smile remains steady. “You’ll think about it, then? That’s great. Take as long as you need.”

Shit. He’s misunderstood me. I meant to turn him down flat. “Uh . . .”

“In the meantime, I thought you could move in with me. I’ve got tons of extra space, and Angie can come too. It’ll be fun.”

The man is full of surprises, this one almost qualifying as a good idea. (Okay, if my living situation weren’t so precarious, I’d probably be tossing *this* notion overboard too. But sometimes life hands you lemons, and you just have to squeeze them.)

I sneak the ring back into his hand. “Let me talk to my parents,” I say, my guts starting to gurgle.

Please, let it be the tuna.

## Chapter 17

It wasn't the tuna. And by the time we got to Bungee Ridge, the only thing I felt like doing was swaddling myself in the hotel's scratchy bedspread and sleeping through what should've been the thrill of a lifetime—for Trent, anyway. In a rare show of gentlemanliness, he ditched the jump too, opting instead to search out some chicken noodle soup, which he used to lure me out of bed an hour past checkout time the next day.

When we got back to Boston—both of us tired and cranky—things plunged even further downhill, thanks to an errant nail that chose to flatten the Lexus's rear passenger tire. The can of Fix-A-Flat Trent deployed allowed us to limp the rest of the way to my parents' house before necessitating a tow truck. For twenty minutes, I waited with him on the curb, then thanked him for the trip and delivered a knockout kiss. (I mean, why not? The guy *did* ask me to marry him, after all!) Without the ring, I made my way inside to await Mom, Dad, and Angie, who'd spent the morning traipsing through pumpkin patches and corn mazes with Aunt GiGi in honor of Halloween.

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"Where's your car?" Mom asks as she breezes into the brownstone. "I didn't think you were here."

I lean into the entryway. "Trent dropped me off," I explain, catching sight of Dad, who looks exhausted—but not as wiped out as Angie—as he plods inside with my daughter draped over his shoulder, her eyes aflutter with sleep. "Should you be doing that?" I can't help asking.

Dad rolls his eyes and mutters, "Relax. I'm fine." He puts Angie down for a nap, then he and Mom corral me for a "sit down" (read: lecture) at the kitchen island.

Even though I knew it was coming (in fact, avoiding this discussion was part of the impetus for my spur-of-the-moment getaway with Trent), I bristle. "Listen," I say, toying with the salt shaker instead of looking them in the eyes, "I know what you're going to say."

Mom snorts. "I very much doubt that."

*Which is worse? I wonder. Mom's dismissive mocking or Dad's stony indifference?*

“I screwed up,” I say, hoping to stem the tide of upset headed my way. Not that I blame them for being mad. They *have* put aside their lives for the past four years to raise *my* child. “I should’ve told you guys the truth.”

Mom purses her lips. “Nice try, Emmaline. One of your quick apologies isn’t going to fix things this time around.”

Holy fuck, she’s—what’s a word for *much* pissier than pissed? I search Dad’s face for a hint of compassion but find only a glassy-eyed stare.

Honest to God, I didn’t plan it this way, but . . .

Cue the waterworks. (On the upside, though, my blubbering elicits a smidgeon of sympathy from Dad, who lays a supportive hand on my knee.)

I suck in a few deep, calming breaths before Mom continues with: “You know what the worst part of this whole situation is?”

My mouth hangs open, as if actual words might start popping out.

They don’t.

Still, I have a few good contenders for the “worst part” of this “situation,” namely:

1. I’ve betrayed the trust of my child, possibly scarring her for life (or, at the very least, giving her a heap of valid ammunition to use against me during her angst-ridden teen years).
2. I’ve duped my selfless-to-a-fault parents, who’ve never made a decision in my lifetime—or Angie’s—that wasn’t based on unconditional love.
3. I’ve stolen fatherhood—or the first four years of it, anyway—from a man who is, by all accounts, the good-hearted, standup kind of guy every little girl should have for a daddy.
4. I’ve done all of the above for my own self-centered reasons and, as if the misdeeds themselves weren’t enough, I’ve dragged my loved ones through the mud in front of anyone—and everyone—within viewing distance of a computer or a TV.

Is it just me, or is there a pattern here? When in doubt, blame Emmaline. Clearly, she deserves it.

“You should’ve trusted us,” Mom continues. “We could’ve helped you communicate with Mark. He’s very reasonable, you know. But instead you lied—*bald-faced lied!*—to us, just to . . .” Her face scrunches in puzzlement. “What *was* your reason for all of this, anyway?”

My vocal cords are paralyzed, but pathetic little sobs continue seeping out of my nose.

“Hmm?” Mom demands.

Dad shifts around in his chair. “That’s water under the bridge,” he says, drawing a sharp glance from Mom. “The question now is: What are we going to do about it?” He sighs. “I just

wish you'd thought more about Angeline. She's going to be devastated. But we can't very well tell Mark Loffel to buzz off. Not after everything you've put him through. He wants to know his daughter, and it's his right."

Why does Dad sound like he's not just guessing at Mark's reaction? And, also: "How do you know his name?"

Mom cackles wildly. "Honest to Jesus, Emmaline, you've got to get out of that bubble in your head and join the rest of us on planet earth."

Well, that was harsh. And evasive. "How do you know about Mark *Loffel*?" I repeat, picturing Mom with an old-school phone book, making cold calls to every poor sucker in the metro-Boston area so unlucky as to be named Mark.

"He's coming over," Dad announces. "We had a nice chat last night, when he called looking for you. He won't be seeing Angeline quite yet, though, of course."

"Is that why you guys invited me here?" I ask, feeling a wisp of the deceit my parents have suffered at my hands. "To ambush me?"

"Please don't ruin this for Angie," Mom says. "We want to get this new relationship off on the right foot."

I'm not sure to which "relationship" she's referring—mine and Mark's or Mark's and Angie's. My confusion becomes a moot point, though, when . . .

The doorbell sounds, signaling the end of life as I know it.

Mom and Dad simultaneously sprout to their feet. "I'll get it," Dad says, quickstepping for the hall.

Mom seizes the opportunity to hammer her point home. "Make this work, Emmaline. For your daughter. She didn't ask—"

The sight of Mark Loffel—as disheveled looking (and, yet, somehow tantalizingly sexy) as a wayward drifter—strolling into her kitchen shuts Mom up and, I'm ashamed to admit, piques my curiosity. The only thing I want to feel for the father of my child is cool indifference. So why can't I stop staring at and—I hope my imagination has run amok here!—drooling over his scruffy five o'clock shadow and sensitive hazel eyes?

"Hi," I say with a shy smile, *the eyes* landing on mine.

He smiles back, just as coyly. "Hey."

Is there a doctor in the house? Because I could use a sack of smelling salts right about now.

After a quick round of introductions, Dad ushers Mom off to the back of the brownstone for some "rest and relaxation"—or so he claims (more likely, though, they'll be engaging in a little clandestine eavesdropping).

Of course, I deserve nothing less than the full repertoire of meddling. “So, uh, wanna sit down?” I ask, gesturing at the island.

Mark doesn’t budge, his hands planted firmly in the pockets of a charcoal-gray waistcoat. (Did he pick up such refined fashion sense in Europe?) “That won’t be necessary.”

Ouch. I’m sensing some hostility here. It’s sad, really, considering how warm he was to Angie and me at The Olive Branch. Speaking of which . . . “How’s the restaurant?”

His nose does an adorable bunny twitch. “It’s good,” he says with a clipped nod, his smile drawing into a straight line. “Busier than we expected.”

“I liked it,” I reply. “I think I called it ‘a nibble of heaven’—or something like that, anyway, in my article.” My face flushes noticeably, though I’m not sure *he*’s noticing, his gaze skipping around the kitchen for a non-Emmaline resting place.

“You wanna get out of here?” he asks.

Like an ignoramus, I say, “Um . . . what?”

He bobs his head toward the door. “I’ve got some stuff to do back at the restaurant before we open for dinner. I thought it would be a nice, quiet place to talk.”

“Oh.” Should I really be riding off into the sunset with a man I barely know, even if he is the father of my child? I mean, it’s not outside the realm of possibility that he’s also a serial killer.

“So . . . ?”

I glance over my shoulder, thinking I should inform my parents of my whereabouts, in case the police need help finding my body. “Okay, yeah,” I agree, my voice coming out shaky. “Just let me, uh, grab”—I duck past the stove, to where my belongings are heaped on the counter—“my purse.”

“Don’t you need to tell someone where you’re going?” he asks, reading my mind.

“Eh, they’re fine,” I say. “Shall we?”

## Chapter 18

There's something magical about being the only one—or two, in the case of Mark and me—souls in an empty, dimly lit restaurant. (Heck, even the grungy old Crowbar gave me that Zen, at-peace-with-the-universe feeling after closing on a hectic night.)

And today is no exception.

Mark leads the way inside, turning locks and holding doors and illuminating lights here and there to fight the gloom playing across the dining room. At a cozy table by the fireplace—maybe even the same table Trent, Angie, and I occupied on opening night—he pulls out a chair.

I take the hint and sit, hoping he'll say something soon. (I mean, if there were a stray cricket in Boston this time of year, we would've heard him chirping loud and clear during the silent ride over in Mark's banged-up Fiat.)

"Can I get you something?" he asks, his coat still buttoned to the neck, where—correct me if I'm wrong—I think I spot a ripe hickey. "A drink of water? Or a glass of wine?"

*Who gave him a hickey?*

He undoes his coat, revealing another jaw-dropper: a ratty—as in faded, pock-marked, its fabric disintegrating faster than an ice cube in lava—AC/DC T-shirt that, no question about it, was his garment of choice the night we conceived Angie.

Which leads me to believe that 1) he's donned the thing today as some sort of homage to our night of passion and 2) his time in Europe hasn't quite smoothed the edges of his Boston, good ol' boy exterior.

"Um, water's fine," I say belatedly.

He grins. "Be right back."

While he's gone, I take a moment to compose my opening line, the discussion having yet to begin. If I can just get things off to the right start, maybe there's a dash of hope for Mark, Angie, and me.

Not at this rate, though. I've barely thought up (and discarded as banal or presumptuous) a few ghastly fragments and run-on sentences when he comes sauntering back in with a matching pair of lemon-studded glasses, full to the brims with icy water. He sets them on the table and takes the chair to my left.



*Is he trying to avoid facing me?*

After an uncomfortable pause, I jumpstart the repartee with: “Angie’s great. That’s the first thing you should know. If you had to get a surprise kid—which, apparently, you did—she’s the one you’d want. She’s smart, spunky . . . *precocious* is a good word, I think. I mean, honest to God”—I slap a hand over my heart—“she can hold a full-blown conversation at three—well, almost four—years old. She loves Barbie and anything pink—but, of course, what three-year-old girl doesn’t, you know? And she hates—I mean, HATES!!!—monkeys. What else . . . ?”

I gulp some air, but Mark stops me from launching into round two of the All-Angie Show by saying: “Sold!”

Is he being facetious? Or does he think he’s funny? “Seriously,” I say, “there’s a lot to know about raising a kid.” (Okay, my lecture is a bit ironic, considering how I’ve abdicated my parenting duties to Mom and Dad for the bulk of Angie’s life. But that arrangement is about to change.) “You don’t know what you’re in for.”

He *is* in for it, isn’t he?

“Can I ask you something?” he says.

My stomach buckles. “Um, yeah. Sure.” A contrived smile. “Ask away.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

He sure comes out swinging, doesn’t he? “You read the letter, right?”

His hand creeps across the table and picks up the glass closest to him. “If I didn’t, I’d be the only one.” He takes a sip and replaces the glass, continuing to cup it like a cool, slippery safety blanket. “That spot you did with Brenda Bixby was brutal, by the way. You sounded like you were gonna pass out.”

He caught the disaster in the newspaper *and* tuned in for my network television debut? Interesting . . . “I gave that interview under duress,” I explain. “My boss set it up.”

He shakes his head, a wave of mahogany hair sweeping over his eye. “Sounds like a jerk.”

“Well, he hasn’t fired me . . . yet.” I laugh nervously. “That’s something.”

“Want me to kick his ass? ’Cause I could make that happen.”

He’s joking, obviously, but the chivalrous offer turns my insides to mush. Maybe this guy isn’t as scary as I’ve cracked him up to be.

We drift into silence for a stretch, but eventually I take a risk and face him. “This is so weird, isn’t it? Me and you and . . . a daughter? *We have a daughter together*,” I repeat, the words (still!) not adding up. I can only imagine the shock Mark is experiencing.

Or not.

Without warning, his legs swing around, his knees crashing into mine, his hands groping for my lap. That's right: HIS hands! MY lap! I think I'll scream.

"You're prettier than I remembered," he murmurs, the air electrifying around us.

Oh, no. Not again. That silver tongue of his cooked our goose—or is it geese?—last time around.

I put on a demure smile; meanwhile, he leans in, his hands finding my hips, his mouth melting over mine.

And there's that tongue again.

If my arms weren't suddenly—and inexplicably, I swear!—winding around his neck, I'd cross myself and, for good measure, throw in a quick Hail Mary. Not that it would help. Not that anything—prayer or otherwise—would stop me from devouring a delectable specimen like Mark Loffel, who just so happens to be the other half of my child's DNA.

Speaking of DNA . . .

I have a sneaking suspicion—could it be the way his fingers are fumbling under my sweater for an inroad to my leggings, or how his razor stubble is scraping across my lips, making them feel like they've been stung by a thousand bees?—that we'll be combining our DNA again, ASAP.

Which would be excusable, maybe, if we'd swilled a bottle of merlot at 2 a.m. But, no: we're as sober as pall bearers. And it's midafternoon. And we've barely done any talking at all.

And he has a hickey.

And I (sort of) have a prefiancé.

But tell that to the hormones coursing through my veins like a runaway virus. Come to think of it, I *do* feel a little feverish. Maybe I'll just slip out of this sweater. . . .

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On the way home, I asked Mark to stop at a gas station for some snacks, but instead I bought 1) a liter of water and 2) a pack of the "lightest" cigarettes I could find, with the idea that, hopefully, they'd take longer to kill me.

In front of my apartment, we said an awkward goodbye, still avoiding the elephant in the Fiat—a.k.a. the fact that we had, once again, succumbed to temptation—even though we'd yet to hash out the ramifications of our *last* fateful tryst.

Needless to say, the walk of shame through Dr. Jacobs's browning front yard was extra shameful.

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“This came for you earlier,” says Jung, passing me a small FedEx box as I slink into the apartment.

Is it just me, or is she abnormally upbeat today? I give the box a shake and say, “Thanks.”

I’m about to disappear to my room to compile a list of excuses for my irresponsible behavior—top among them my powerlessness in the face of ancient biological drives, not to mention a wee bit of nostalgia for the wild night Mark and I made Angie—when Dex pops out of the kitchen. “I thought I heard your voice,” he says, shooting me a wide grin. “Welcome home.”

*Something is rotten in the state of Denmark*, as my old pal Shakespeare would say. “Um . . . huh?”

Jung grabs my arm and drags me down the hall. “We need to talk for a minute, okay?”

Apparently, I don’t have a choice in the matter. “What’s up?” I ask, plunking down on the edge of the bathtub. (We’ve nearly ended up in the shower, where, coincidentally, Dex does his best work.)

“Please, please don’t be mad.”

My eyebrows pull together. “About what?”

“Dexter is taking your room,” Jung says with a wince. “Sorry.”

She calls him “Dexter”? “What do you mean he’s ‘taking my room’?”

“Like, living here. His parents are moving to Florida,” she explains. “Dr. Jacobs said it was okay.”

Now that she mentions it, I remember seeing a for-sale sign on the lawn next door. “Where am *I* supposed to go?” I ask rhetorically.

“Can’t you stay with your Mom and Dad?”

How ironic. I was trying to figure out how to tell her I might have to vacate the apartment, and now she’s beaten me to the punch? “Maybe we could share *your* room,” I say, tugging at the edge of the FedEx box. “Dex could pay half of the rent, and we could split the other half.”

She grimaces. “I don’t know.”

Interesting. If I didn’t know better, I’d say she wants Dex(ter) all to herself. “Is there something going on between the two of you?” I ask.

She takes a seat on the toilet, and I continue picking absently at the FedEx box. “Can you keep a secret?” she asks.

Um, probably not. “Yeah, of course.” I smile reassuringly. “Bring it on.” To be honest, a glimpse of someone else’s drama might be just what I need at the moment.

Ask and ye shall receive. . . .

“Remember when I was at the bar?”

How could I forget? “With that”—hmm, how should I describe the hunk of burning mangasm she trotted under my nose at The Crowbar?—“really good-looking guy?”

“He’s an actor. Ned Brown.”

Now she’s boggled my mind. “Where’d you meet him?” I ask, wondering how such a hot guy ended up with such a travesty of a name.

“I hired him on Craigslist.”

Come again? “You *hired* him?” I repeat, barely noticing the flaps of the FedEx box springing open, allowing my fingers to drift inside.

“My parents are coming for Thanksgiving,” she says. “They think I’m married. I told them your name was George Clooney.”

I burst out laughing. “Um . . . what?”

“They don’t get cultural references,” she explains. “I thought it was funny.” She rests her elbows on her knees and cups her chin in her hands. “Anyway, none of the actors worked out, so Dexter agreed to be my . . .” She furrows her brow, searching for the right word.

“Beard?” I ask, not sure if the term fits this particular scenario.

“Husband for hire or something.” She tilts her head and stares at my lap. “What’s that?”

From the FedEx box, I’ve extracted a wrinkled slip of paper, which I’m just getting around to investigating. “A note?” I mutter, studying the unfamiliar handwriting, which reads: YOU FORGOT SOMETHING.

Well, that’s cryptic. And spooky. I’m about to summon a CSI team to vet the package when Jung holds out her hand and says, “Lemme see.”

Should I? I mean, I don’t want her getting vaporized on the eve of her big day.

She doesn’t seem all that concerned about the possibility of imminent death, though, so I let her have it. With the precision of a microsurgeon, she retrieves a small box within a box. “Oh my God! Is this . . . ?!”

The Tiffany-blue color gives it away, not to mention the size: solidly engagement-ring territory. My stomach twists.

Swept up in the moment, Jung lifts the cover off the box, revealing yet another box, this one soft and velvety. With the latest box enveloped in her palm, she unhinges its lid, displaying the hunk of compressed carbon Trent tried to force down my throat—literally—mere hours ago.

Jung’s gleeful face spikes my guilt to a whole new level. “I’ll take that,” I say, seizing the box and snapping it shut.

“Oh, okay.” She searches my eyes before hesitantly saying, “Congratulations?”

I cram the ring back in the FedEx box and affect an upbeat—or at least neutral—tone. “Yeah, thanks.”

## Chapter 19

“Are you sure you want to do this?” asks Mom as we load the last of my boxes into her Subaru. “Living with someone is a big step. We can always squeeze you in with Angie for a while, until you find a new place.”

As it turns out, Dex’s invasion of the apartment provided a good cover story for my vacating; now I can keep my parents in the dark about my financial woes indefinitely. “C’mon, Mom,” I say, perturbed by her umpteenth look-before-you-leap warning. “We’ve been over this a million times.” I give the stack of boxes a shove, lower the Subaru’s tailgate, and lean on it until it latches. “Trent’s a great guy. And this is only a trial. If it doesn’t work out, it’s no biggie. It’s all very casual.”

Truth be told, taking things to the next level—or, well, level jumping, actually, since Trent and I have yet to consummate our relationship—is more serious than I’ve let on. But Mom doesn’t need to know that (nor does she need to know about the Tiffany box wrapped in a ball of Kleenex and stuffed in the bottom of my purse).

“If you say so, Em,” she relents with a sigh. Gently, she kisses me on the cheek, then envelops me in the kind of tender hug we haven’t shared in a very long time. “Just take care of yourself, okay? Promise me that much.”

It’s entirely possible that, at any moment, I may dissolve in a puddle of tears. Until then, though . . . “I love you,” I say, returning Mom’s hug. “Don’t worry. Everything will be all right.”

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Trent was on a business trip to Arizona when Mom and I schlepped my meager possessions (most of the furniture in the apartment belongs to Jung, and I left my bed for Dex, since Trent and I will be sleeping together in his master suite) over to his luxury condo, a modern trilevel with a corkscrew staircase, sixteen-foot ceilings, and polished stainless-steel *everything*.

The place was a little sterile, I admit. So while Trent gallivanted around the Southwest, I injected a pop of color into his gray-on-gray living room with a couple of strategically placed throw pillows. Then I dressed up his barren windows—which was no easy feat, considering their panoramic view—with some tasteful, unobtrusive valances. I would’ve sprung for a pair of

chintzy floor lamps and maybe even a set of whimsical oven mitts too, if my bank account hadn't suffered a near-death experience. At least I'm not paying rent anymore, though. The thought alone drops my blood pressure twenty points.

Now if I can just select the perfect bouquet of fresh flowers from Trader Joe's (my post-decorating-spree budget has enough wiggle room for a few "essentials," including the aforementioned floral arrangement), I can beat Trent back to our place (gulp!) and leisurely await his arrival from Logan.

I settle on a nice bunch of daisies, tuck them under my arm, and jostle my way toward the registers. Before I can pick a checkout line, though, an out-of-control shopping cart cuts me off, pinning me against a display of sparkling cider. I'm about to unleash a tirade of four-letter expletives at the moronic pusher of said cart, when . . .

"Hey, Em," a familiar voice says, throwing me off my game. "How ya doin'?"

Oh, no. It's Jimmy.

"Um, good," I respond, averting my gaze. "Just picking up a few groceries." Jesus, won't he unjam that cart from my leg, so I can make a quick getaway?

Apparently not.

"That's good. You look good," he says, clearly stuck for conversational material. (I mean, my greasy hair is bunched in an unruly knot, and my jeans are so stretched out they're threatening to slip down and expose my granny panties.)

I laugh. "Yeah, okay."

"You do."

He should have his head examined—and not just for making delusional claims about my appearance. "Thanks," I say, hoping that agreeing with him will end this insanity. When I quit The Crowbar, I planned to live out my days in peaceful anonymity, never crossing paths with my former boss (and adultery partner) again.

"I saw your column." He shakes his head. "That was some letter. Everything turn out okay with that?"

I must be hearing things. He *cannot* be fishing for information about my personal life. I knee the cart sideways and take a liberating step. "Sorry, but, uh . . . I've gotta get going."

"We miss you at the bar," he blurts. "The new girl's all right, but she's no Emmy. If you ever need to make a few bucks, I could put you on a Saturday-night shift. Business has been real good lately."

He's trying to ease his guilt by lining my pockets? And I have to work for the payoff? No, thank you. "Listen, Jimmy," I say, getting an anger-fueled jolt of audacity, "we never should've

slept together. It was a mistake. So I'd appreciate it if, when you see me in the future"—even in a city the size of Boston, apparently I'm not going to be able to avoid him entirely—"you do an automatic about-face. No more of *this*," I say, waving a hand between us. "It's not fair to Kayla."

Having overheard our exchange, a number of shoppers mill about eavesdropping. "What?" Jimmy says, playing dumb.

I sigh. "You heard me." As did everyone else in the vicinity, I might add.

"We slept together?"

Wow, he deserves an Academy Award for this performance. "The night we drank the cognac," I remind him, as if he could forget. "Things got a little"—I drop my voice—"physical. I'd like to pretend it never happened, if you don't mind. Which, apparently, you don't, because—"

A big ol' grin blooms across his face. "You think we had sex?" he says, his tone incredulous. He scans the crowd, realizing, I assume, that our private business has morphed into a full-blown Trader Joe's soap opera.

I respond with a shrug. I mean, I *do* remember being naked in his presence. Everything after that is a blur.

He wrenches the basket out of my hand and deposits it on the floor. "Come here," he says, grabbing my arm and hauling me toward the exit, a number of rubberneckers following us with their beady little eyes (though, to be fair, they're probably just deciding whether or not to involve the cops in our domestic squabble).

It's bracingly cold outside, even for November. At the edge of the parking lot, Jimmy brings us to a jittery stop. "We didn't *do* anything," he informs me, his voice anxious. "Except for in the alley."

I hope he's referring to the day I resigned. Otherwise, I should scour the Internet for an embarrassing sex tape, the security cameras of the deli next door trained on the spot where the action went down. "The kissing, you mean?"

He nods.

Praise the Lord, he's NODDING!!! "So that night in the bar? Nothing happened?"

His face flushes. "I wouldn't call it nothing."

What *would* he call it, then? "Oh, come on," I say. "Don't get all macho on me. Did we have sex or not?"

"We could've," he says, his voice even more defensive. "You wanted to. That's why in the alley . . ."



Now I get it: the alley move was a test of whether I desired him in the sober light of day. In which case, I see why his pride is wounded. “I love you, Jimmy,” I say, feeling a sudden wave of gratitude; I am not a gutter-tramp home wrecker, after all. I sling my arms around his waist and give him a tight squeeze.

Will I never learn?

In addition to returning my embrace, he bends over and lands a forceful kiss on my bewildered lips. The urge to fight him off lasts only until I taste him: hot and honey sweet, with a tinge of nicotine. I haven’t had a cigarette in weeks, it seems. And we could consider this our (overly intimate) goodbye, our chummy relationship having died for no good reason in that alleyway.

*I’ll give him that much, I decide. A happy way to remember me.*

As my lips move against his, I wonder if I should bear some guilt. (I don’t.) And, if so, in the name of whom: Mark or Trent?

## Chapter 20

Only a handful of people have my new cell phone number, so when my phone rings, I'm caught off guard by the sight of an unknown caller. After Letter Gate—I mean, I had crackpots from Peoria to Poughkeepsie dialing me up for a little heart-to-heart—I'm admittedly gun-shy about answering.

But maybe it's important. "Hello?" I gasp, cradling the phone to my ear as I bump the Green Goblin's trunk shut with my elbow, my laptop bag swinging from my shoulder.

"Emmaline Waters?" a woman's voice asks.

"Yep." I hop the curb and scurry down the sidewalk, intent on putting in some face time at work, so Mitch has a reason to keep me employed—though, from the rumblings around the office, I have nothing to worry about. (Rumor has it that the media attention to the "story" of Mark, Angie, and me has increased the paper's online circulation by two whole percentage points!) "This is she."

"Stay away from Mark Loffel."

My mind skips a synapse. "Huh?"

The voice repeats, "Stay away from Mark Loffel."

Irrationally, I keep responding, instead of hanging up like a sane person would. "Who is this?" I ask. I wrestle my way through the revolving door, bashing an unsuspecting janitor in the ass with my bag as I exit the merry-go-round.

"Leave Mark Loffel alone," the voice demands, "or else."

I pause by the elevators, figuring the call must be some sort of prank by an amoral entity—a couple of rogue deejays, perhaps, or a desperate blogger looking for her fifteen minutes of fame. But as hard as I scan the area for camouflaged recording devices—like, say, a Rhododendron-come-lately—I hit a brick wall. "Ha-ha. Very funny."

The line goes silent for a few seconds, and just when I think the caller has hung up, I hear: "You've been warned."

This is ridiculous. I'm not going to let some random nutcase rattle me (though, to be fair, my heart has begun pumping like an oil rig off the coast of Qatar). "Mind your own business," I say, pressing the up arrow on the elevator-button panel. "If you call me again—"

*Click.*

Well, that was easy. I shake my head, give the phone a distrustful stare, and bury it in my coat pocket. After a sweaty, crowded (not to mention extraordinarily slow) climb to the second floor, I waltz into *The Times* with renewed energy, a positive attitude, and rocks in my shoes—which carry me (the shoes, not the rocks) all the way to my meager cubbyhole and two-thirds of the way through my inbox before . . .

A throat clears behind me, pulling me out of a daydream about Mark, whom I've seen neither hide nor hair of since we "reconnected" two weeks ago. "Yes?" I say without turning around.

Sharon Fleming's voice is not as shrill as usual when she announces, "I'm headed to Demi's. Care to join me?"

It's official: I am *definitely* being punked. "I just got here," I say, shimmying sideways and scanning the hallway for Ashton Kutcher or someone of his ilk. "I should probably get some work done." A neutral smile. "Sorry."

"Are you sure? My treat."

Nuh-uh. The evil shrew who haunts my nightmares is not offering to buy me a demitasse cupful (hence the name Demi's) of the finest espresso in Boston. The more I think about it, maybe *she's* the unknown caller and this out-of-character invite is an attempt at covering her tracks. In which case . . . "Oh, what the hell." I flip the laptop shut and reach for my coat. "I could use a midmorning pick-me-up."

"Excellent."

Is it, really? We shall see about that.

We trudge the eight and a half minutes to Demi's in cool—literally and figuratively—silence, the crisp November air making me appreciate the rocks in my shoes for the heat-friction they're creating.

When we reach our destination, Sharon holds the door (will wonders never cease?) and I slink inside, a blast of dry heat swirling up my nose. "Thanks," I say, nodding politely as she pulls up beside me and studies the dusty chalkboard of coffee and pastry specials.

"Do you know what you want?" she asks.

I fumble through my purse for a credit card that isn't maxed out, because even though she's offered to pay, I'd rather not owe a debt to the devil. I mean, who knows what psychotic torture she'll dream up for me once I've sampled her Turkish delight—or, in this case, sipped the sweet nectar of . . . "I'll have the Turkish coffee, please," I tell the distinctly un-Turkish-looking blue-eyed blonde behind the counter, slapping my VISA down.

"Make that two," Sharon says, not even bothering to crack open her clutch.

The barista cashes us out, my credit card taking a hit for around twenty bucks. I scratch an illegible version of my signature on the tiny receipt and join Sharon at a wrought iron table by the windows, where she's beaten me to the good seat, the sun warming her back instead of searing holes through her corneas. "Your column's really hitting a groove now, huh?" she comments while we uncomfortably—in more ways than one, the chairs stiffer than Aunt GiGi's peanut brittle—await our coffees.

"Um, yeah. I guess," I say, unsure whether she's making a statement, in which case my response is redundant, or asking my opinion, in which case my response is superfluous.

For some reason, she feels the need to make small talk. "I'm glad things are panning out," she says. "I suppose I can tell you this now, but I wasn't so sure about you in the beginning." She chuckles to herself. "But Mitch . . . Well, what can I say about Mitch Heywood? The man is a legend."

"He's all right."

"You don't like him?"

"I didn't say that."

"Has he hit on you?" she asks.

That's an odd question. "No." I fight a shudder. "I don't think so." Although it wouldn't be the first time—see the Jimmy Fiasco—I've been oblivious to a wayward advance. "Why? Has he, um"—I can't bring myself to say the words—"you know? With you?"

"Pfft. If only."

I'm not sure I've heard her correctly over the chattering gang of teenagers that has just invaded Demi's cramped seating area. "You're interested in Mitch Heywood?"

"God, no. Don't be ridiculous," she says, swatting the question away. "I'd just like to get—"

What? The chance to turn him down flat? A stockpile of evidence for a sexual harassment lawsuit?

Before she can put my curiosity to rest, a shaggy-haired guy appears tableside with a brass tray holding two tiny, long-handled copper pots and a pair of vibrantly colored cylindrical cups.

Forget the coffee. I'd pay twenty bucks to stare at these beautiful accoutrements, which look as if they belong in an antiquities museum instead of a scrubby—if expensive—caffeine den.

Sir Shaggy has other ideas, though. With a couple of quick turns of his wrist, he fills our cups and absconds with the glistening pots. Sharon and I get to sipping, our outing wearing thin—at least from where I sit. "Mmm. Good stuff," I say, marveling at the purity of the beverage, which hasn't been vulgarized with any of my usual additives, like sugar and milk.

"Have you been here before?" Sharon asks.

“Once,” I admit. “After a concert.” I leave out the fact that it was a Taylor Swift concert, as I suspect she’d mock any artist who’s popular with more than five people.

“I saw an interesting rockabilly-zydeco group last week.”

Suspicion confirmed. “Oh.”

“So, you must be wondering why I asked you here.”

I shrug.

She eases her coffee aside and shoots me a cat-that-ate-the-canary grin. “I should just come out and say it.” Her smile—which is already so big and white it reminds me of those fake, windup teeth that hop around chomping, chomping, chomping—somehow enlarges. “I’m a big fan of your work.”

I’ve been at this job too short a time to have fans, unless you count the e-mail brigade, some of whom are—ahem—of questionable mental fortitude. I mirror her smile, minus ninety percent of the wattage. “Thank you. That’s nice of you to say.”

“There’s nothing nice about it. You’re a good writer; that’s a fact. I pride myself on being able to spot talent and . . .”

What? Get it blitzed on caffeine while dangling unexpected compliments in its face?

She straightens up. “What would you say if I offered you a new position—a *better* position—as an advice columnist at the paper? Is that something you’d be interested in exploring?” She pauses expectantly, at which point I realize: oh, it’s *my* turn to speak.

Too bad she’s shocked me speechless.

She goes on: “It would be a pay raise, of course. And it would increase your visibility. Build your brand, so to speak. Plus, it’d set you up for a shot at something national—international, even—since New York, London, Tokyo . . . they’ve all been known to poach from us. So, what do you think?”

What I think is: Would this “pay raise” be enough to get me out of Trent’s place? (I doubt it.) Because the sex pressure I’m under as a live-in girlfriend is getting unbearable. “You’re offering me a promotion?”

“Not yet,” she says with a laugh. “This is all hypothetical, until I can secure approval from the Board. There’s quite a lot of finessing I’ll have to do before they’ll greenlight a change like this.”

I swallow the last of my coffee, leaving a smudge of congealed grinds in the bottom of the cup. “Why would you do all of that?” I ask, the idea of my writing an advice column sounding iffy, even without the red tape she’d have to cut through to make it happen.

“Do you know what I wanted to be when I grew up?”

The nun in charge of discipline at a Catholic school? “Um . . .”

“A romance novelist,” she says with an entirely straight face. “Sort of a modern-day Jane Austen with a twist of Danielle Steel.” She rolls her eyes. “You should see the stack of spiral notebooks under my bed.”

I get a sudden twinge of empathy. “You’ve gotta do it, then,” I say, not just in hopes of getting rid of her, but because I’m a sucker for anyone with the courage to chase a dream—even if that dream is feeble by most people’s standards. “It’s not too late.”

“Yes, it is. Trust me, I’m horrible.”

Is she baiting me for an argument? “Oh, come on,” I say. “You can’t be *that* bad.”

“Listen, I’m not looking for anyone to blow smoke up my ass. I know I suck. I’ve got no imagination. What I do have, however, is an eagle eye for editing. And I’ve never edited anyone quite like you.”

I’m starting to believe she does like my work. “Well, thanks again,” I say. “I’m doing my best under the circumstances.” Of course, by “the circumstances” I mean the embarrassing (to say the least) exposure of my personal life, which I’m still not convinced Ms. Fleming didn’t have a hand in.

“What about the advice column, though? Are you in or out? I need to know before I start campaigning.”

It would be wise of me to ask: “What kind of advice? I mean, I’m not sure I’m qualified to . . .”

She glares past me at the teenagers who, although they’ve settled down a bit, are still conversing loudly enough to be disruptive. “Relationship stuff,” she says. “Like that call girl who slept with the governor.”

“Excuse me?”

She rolls her eyes. “Relax. I’m not calling you a hooker. I’m just saying that, like Ashley what’s-her-name, you’ve got your fifteen minutes of fame. You should take advantage of them. If helping you do that advances my career in some small way, so be it.”

When opportunity knocks, huh? “You know, I really like what I’m doing now. I didn’t think food was my thing, but . . .”

She pushes her chair back. “Whatever. Let me know if you change your mind. I’d be willing to revisit the issue.” She checks her watch and grimaces. “Ready?”

## Chapter 21

I am becoming quite the liar. Or maybe I always had it in me, the identity of Angie's father a secret I kept for nearly five years, going all the way back to that party at the police chief's house.

"We'll be done around three o'clock," I tell Trent as I tie Angie's furry hat under her chin and tug her mittens on. "Maybe we can have chicken for dinner?"

Trent glances around the still-sterile kitchen (I never did hunt down those oven mitts), a look of panic crossing his face. "You want *me* to cook?"

Yes, I do. Because 1) he hasn't prepared a single meal in the three weeks I've been here and 2) it'll keep him distracted and, hence, oblivious to my deceit. "Yeah," I say, smiling encouragingly, "why not?"

"I'm hot," Angie whines, preparing to undo my mitten handiwork.

"No," I tell her, "keep those on. We're leaving."

"What kind of chicken?" asks Trent.

I check the clock and realize Angie and I are running late—ten minutes, at least—for the family date I've arranged with Mark. Trent, I'm ashamed to say, thinks we're headed to a playdate with Angie's friend, Xander.

"Surprise me," I say. I peck him on the cheek, grab Angie's hand, and, with a gutful of guilt, zoom out the door. Someday soon I will tell Trent everything. (He knows about Mark from all the press coverage, but he's in the dark about the current "goings-on" between the father of my child and me.) If he loves me enough to forgive me, I just might marry the guy.

---

"Remember what I told you?" I ask Angie as I yank the heavy glass door of the skating rink open. "We're going to meet a friend of M—"—oh, shit, I almost said "Mommy's"—"*mine* and do a little ice skating? Won't that be fun?"

Angie nods excitedly. Ever since Mom and Dad took her to see *Disney On Ice*, she's been smitten with anything cold-weather related.

Five paces ahead at a small rinkside table sits Mark, tapping away at his cell phone. *Probably some last-minute restaurant business*, I assure myself. I adjust my coat, squeeze Angie's hand, and march right up to him. "Hi," I say, then wait for him to finish a text message to . . .

Dammit.

He clears the screen before I get a chance to examine it for juicy tidbits of information to which, as the mother of his child, I should be privy. "Oh, hi," he says, standing to greet us. He wedges the phone in his pocket and kisses me gently on the side of the head.

Mother of God, not again. Why can't I tamp down my attraction to this man? "Have you been waiting long?" I ask.

"Eh, a few minutes."

During the pause that follows, I scan the rink and its surroundings. Truth be told, I am not an outdoor enthusiast. (Technically, we're *indoors*, but you'd never know it from the temperature of this building.) "I think we get our skates over there," I say, motioning at a rough-timber "box"—for lack of a better word—in the corner. A hand-painted sign above the box puts the price of rental skates at twelve dollars a pair.

Mark drops down to Angie's level. "Hey there," he says, smiling broadly, "what's your name?"

Didn't he use that line on her last time they met? Oh, well. At least he's consistent.

Angie goes pigeon-toed, dips her chin, and twirls her hair. "Angeline Brooke Waters." (For the record, I did not give my daughter a punny middle name on purpose; it was a flaky oversight on my part that I've now committed to liking.)

Mark extends a hand. "I'm Mark," he says. "Your big sis' and I are old friends." He winks at me, and I tense up. I mean, Angie is very perceptive. I don't want her picking up on anything until the time is right. "You think we can be friends too?"

Angie glances at me hesitantly.

"It's all right," I say.

In a small voice, she asks Mark, "Do you know how to ice skate?"

"Do I know how to ice skate?" he repeats, shaking his head and laughing. "Does a cow say moo?"

Angie's eyes widen.

"Does a pig oink?" He wrinkles his nose and snorts comically.

She giggles.



I feel two things at once: gratitude that Mark is gifted with children and a touch of irrational envy. If this kind of performance continues, he'll soon surpass me (not to mention Mom and Dad) as the parent of choice.

"We should get in line," I suggest, the cluster of people by the rental window swelling.

After a ten-minute wait, we're treated to the rattiest—and dullest, I suspect—skates on planet earth. But at least the rink owners have provided helmets (and knee and elbow pads, too) for those of us so unconcerned with our appearances as to not mind resembling dung beetles.

Mark laces Angie's skates while I pad her arms and legs and strap the helmet into place on her head. "Lookin' good," I say once she's as mummified as King Tut.

Mark and I suit up too, because, as Psychology 101 suggests, if we want Angie to exhibit safe behaviors in the future, we must first model them for her now. (See, I *did* get something out of college—other than a boatload of student-loan debt, I mean!)

We hobble our way to the ice, me guiding Angie by one hand and Mark supporting her by the other. At the last minute, he leans over and whispers, "You know what you're doing, right?"

"Like skating, you mean?"

He nods.

"How hard can it be?"

Why, oh why, do I say the most sexually charged, idiotic things around this man?

Instead of responding to my slip of the tongue with a *double entendre* of his own, he nods at the rink, where children smaller than Angie have perfected the art of remaining upright on two thin blades of steel. "Good point," he says. "*They* seem to be doing all right."

"Well, you're the expert," I answer, poking fun at his boast from earlier. "I'm sure you won't mind helping me if I face-plant into a third grader."

He laughs, and my heart does a little flip. Something about Mark Loffel is so easy. Relaxed. Carefree, but not careless. "I hope it's okay if I help the third grader first," he says with a wry smile.

"Of course."

At the edge of the rink, we pause and hatch a plan. "I'll go ahead," I say, steadying myself with the handrail and backing onto the ice. "Angie will be in the middle, and you can follow us."

"I wanna do it my own self," Angie proclaims. "Like the princesses."

I knew I hated princesses. "All right, all right," I relent. I roll my eyes, as if to say: *Can you believe this sassy daughter of ours?*

Mark's smirk replies: *I'll see your "sassy" and raise you an "adorable."*

“Put your foot here,” I tell Angie, motioning at the section of ice between me and the edge of the rink, “and grab this railing.”

“I’m right here,” Mark adds, “if you need me.”

But she doesn’t.

With the confidence of a future Olympian, she lurches onto the ice, determined to master the surface with the ease of Thumper (clearly, we’ve seen too many Disney flicks of late) instead of the clumsy—though endearing—ineptitude of Bambi.

“Oh my God!” I blurt, spinning around to follow her. “You’re doing it!” I can’t look back without risking a spill, but something tells me that Mark has successfully trailed us onto the ice.

The three of us close ranks.

*We’ve lost so much time together, I think, a mix of sadness and joy washing over me. I reach for Angie’s hand, and Mark takes mine. But that’s all in the past. Now we are a family—or something very much like one. And I must break the news to Trent.*

## Chapter 22

The scent of chicken blasts through my nostrils as I exit the elevator on Trent's floor, the chicken in me wanting to flap back to Mom and Dad's, where I've deposited Angie—exhausted and cranky after two hours of Roundabout the Rink—to avoid scarring her for life with my grownup problems.

“Oh, hi,” I say, surprised when Trent greets me at the door, a candy-cane-striped apron tied around his waist.

He steps aside and lets me pass. “Where's Angie?”

Should I launch right into the truth or let it seep out naturally? “She was really tired,” I say, frowning. “I decided to take her home early.” Since Trent and I have been living together, Angie has spent weekends in his second spare bedroom. (His first spare bedroom is on permanent reserve for his grandfather, who, I'm told, is fond of unannounced visits.)

“Well, that's unfortunate”—he ducks behind an island of cabinets and reappears with a cardboard box—“because I took the liberty of getting her a friend. I thought it would make her more comfortable around here.”

He did NOT just buy my daughter a puppy!!!

He pries the handles of the box apart and reaches inside, pulling out a fluffy white kitten that, I can predict with absolute certainty, Angie would've named Snowball. “What do you think?”

I think I'm going to throw up. “Can you return him?” I mumble. “I just don't . . .”

“Her. It's a girl,” he says, pushing the kitten at me.

I push it back. “She's cute.” An uneasy smile. “I'm sure Angie would love her, but . . .” I wander toward the living room. “Can we, uh, talk for a minute?”

Instead of stuffing the kitten back in the box, he brings her along, setting her on the sofa between us. “Sure. What's up?”

His tone is far too casual for the conversation we're about to have. “Dinner smells delicious,” I remark, at a loss for how to begin. “What is it?” The kitten snuggles up to my leg, and I start petting her.

“You requested chicken.”

“Do I smell wine?” I ask, testing my nose. I mean, I *am* a food critic; I should be able to identify dishes by their aromas alone at thirty paces.

“Very good.” He winks at me. “It’s Marsala.”

That explains the slight charred-sugar smell. “Listen, Trent, um . . . there’s something I need to tell you.”

He makes a douchey finger-gun and points it at me. “Shoot.”

Maybe this isn’t going to be so hard, after all. I pull the kitten onto my lap. “I haven’t been completely honest with you,” I admit, my gaze unable to meet his, “about Mark.”

His eyebrows pull together. “How so?”

“Well, uh, the truth is, I’ve seen him a couple of times behind your back.”

“*Behind my back?*”

“I didn’t plan it, I swear.”

“You’ve been seeing him? For what?”

That’s a thorny question. “Mostly for stuff to do with Angie,” I say, which is technically true. “But then something *else* happened.” Not to be insensitive or anything, but *boy was it something else!*

“Sex? Are you talking about sex?” Curiously, he doesn’t seem enraged, though he’s probably just saving his anger for after I confirm the deed, which I do with a reluctant nod.

“Sorry,” I say. “There’s no excuse. You deserve a lot better.” The kitten sinks her claws into my thigh, agreeing that I am morally bankrupt.

“Damn right I do. You’re giving it to him and not me? That’s pretty fucking unfair, don’t you think?”

“Unfair?” That’s a much milder word than I would’ve used.

“What’s wrong with *me*?” he asks, his jaw tightening.

“Nothing,” I say. “Nothing that I know of. I’m sure you’re very good. I mean, you’re in killer shape.”

He flexes his pecs, which are visible through his Egyptian-cotton polo shirt. “You want to go right now? I can put the chicken in the warming drawer.”

I must be hallucinating. “You want to have sex? With me? Now?”

He laughs. “Jesus Christ, I thought you’d never ask. You know, you’re the hardest nut I’ve ever cracked.”

Whoa, Nellie! Back away from the nutcracker! “You’re kidding, right? Didn’t you hear what I said? I cheated on you. You’re supposed to . . . You should . . .” I nudge the kitten off my lap and spring to my feet. “I cheated on you!”

“So?”

I’m starting to wonder if he has—I don’t know—smoked a fatty (or whatever the correct drug lingo is for taking in a large amount of marijuana) during my absence. I mean, what else could explain his unnerving level of calm? “You don’t care that I cheated on you?” I ask, the idea failing to register in my brain.

“Why should I? It’s not like we’re exclusive or anything. You’re entitled to yours.” He grins. “Live and let live, right?”

There’s no doubt about it: I have fallen down—*very, very* far down—a sexually twisted rabbit hole. “You asked me to marry you,” I say, scanning the condo for items I can shove into a garbage bag and toss over my shoulder when I make my now-imminent getaway.

“Absolutely. Why wouldn’t I? You’re perfect.” He reaches for my hand, but I recoil. “I’d be proud to have you as my wife.”

“But you’d still sleep with other people?” I ask, just to be sure I’m understanding him correctly.

“I don’t *have* to,” he explains. “I’m not some kind of sex deviant or whatever. But when an opportunity presents itself . . . And you weren’t into it yet, which was cool and everything, but you can’t expect a guy to wait forever.”

Gee, why didn’t I think of that? “So you’ve been sleeping with other people all along?” I ask, feeling rather indignant, even though I’ve done the same thing to him, albeit (presumably) on a smaller scale.

“It’s nothing to get upset over,” he says, hanging a disgusting paw over my shoulder.

I slip out of his grasp and head down the hall. “You know what?” I say as he trails me into the master suite. “Forget it. I’d rather not talk about this right now.”

He scopes out the bed. “So you just wanna do it?”

For the record, I do not want to “do it” with him. Not now, not ever. “Sure. Yeah,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady and upbeat. “Why don’t you get in the shower, and I’ll join you in a few minutes?” I put on an encouraging smile.

And he falls for it! “All right,” he says, untying his apron. “You’re on.” He turns and stalks off for the master bath.

As sick as this sounds, I think about following through on the deal for one last soaking in his gigantic, super-jet-powered shower—not to mention to give him a taste of what he’ll be missing once I justifiably kick him to the curb.

But I can't bring myself to stoop so low. Instead, I rummage through the closet for my junky old college suitcase, stuff it with a few must-have possessions, and prepare to put this unfortunate chapter of my life behind me.

Not before I do one last thing, though.

I peek around the corner to confirm that he is, in fact, sudsing up in anticipation of our humpfest. (He is.) Then I fish the trademark-blue Tiffany box out of the dresser and leave it open on the bed, the diamond ring sparkling in the glow of a thousand track lights. Beside the ring, I place a hastily scrawled note that reads: THANKS, BUT NO THANKS.

On my way out, I grab the cat.

## Chapter 23

There's nothing more demoralizing than landing on your parents' doorstep in the middle of the night, after driving aimlessly around the city for hours trying to analyze your wretched life. I mean, if I could only figure out where I went wrong, at least I could make new mistakes next time around. . . .

"It's up to you," says Mom, her eyes like slits, her voice gravelly with sleep. "The living room floor or Angie's trundle. We weren't expecting you, and the couch cushions are at the dry cleaner's."

I stand corrected.

At this point, I'm just glad she woke up to let me in before one of the neighbors either a) sicced their Rottweiler on me or b) alerted the police to my aggressive doorbell ringing.

"I'll take the trundle," I moan.

Luckily, Mom is too exhausted to bother grilling me tonight. Instead, she flips the hallway light on, pushes Angie's bedroom door ajar, and pads off for some much-needed shuteye.

I roll my luggage to a stop at the foot of Angie's bed and sigh.

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"We can't have a cat," Mom tells me the next morning over breakfast. "Your father's allergic."

I grimace. "Since when?"

She shushes me, as if Dad might come charging out of the bathroom and insert himself in our disagreement. "I'm sorry, but you're going to have to return it to Trent. Honestly, I don't know what he was thinking in the first place giving—"

"But I love him," Angie interjects, the kitten cradled in her lap.

Mom huffs. "See? Look what you've done."

"I'm gonna get a new place right away," I proclaim, though this "new place" might bear a striking resemblance to a cardboard box. "The cat can live with me."

"No, he can't!" Angie wails, squeezing the poor ball of fur to her chest. "I love him, and he's mine! And he's gotta stay with me!"

“Let me see her,” I say, hoping to pry the cat from Angie’s grip without triggering an international incident. “Just for a minute, okay?”

She thrusts her lip out and shakes her head.

“Please,” I say in the most sugary tone I can stomach.

The head shaking continues.

“What if I let you name her?” I ask. “And visit her whenever you want? You could be, like, her number one babysitter. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

My daughter is no dummy. “But if she lives here”—see, she’s even picked up on the kitten’s sex and switched pronouns—“I’ll see her always. All the time.”

This logic is hard to argue with, so I try another tack. “That’s right,” I say. “But taking care of a cat is a lot of work. If you keep her”—Mom shoots me an acidic glare—“*if* you keep her, you’ll be too busy for lots of other fun stuff, like going to the park, and visiting Aunt GiGi, and playing with Xander, and ice skating. . . .”

Her grip on the cat loosens. “I love ice skating.”

“Me too. We had fun, didn’t we?”

She nods. “Your friend is nice.”

My mouth goes dry. “Yes, he is,” I say. “Maybe we can talk him into skating again soon, as long as you don’t have to stay home and take care of the kitty.” I smile and hold out my hands and, reluctantly, she turns the cat over. “So what should we name her?”

She bites her lip and glances at the ceiling. After a few seconds of thinking, she suggests, “Snowball?”

I wholeheartedly agree.

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Since the train wreck formerly known as Trent, I am attempting to reevaluate my priorities—or at least nail them down to actionable goals, before my life unravels completely. To this end, I’ll be working the following plan for the foreseeable future:

1. Pay Mom and Dad rent for allowing me and Snowball to bunk in Angie’s room—thank God, they caved!—until I can find a rental in my price range (yeah, right!) that allows cats.
2. Accept Sharon Fleming’s offer to pimp me out as a relationship guru.
3. Pick up some shifts at The Crowbar, as Jimmy suggested, so I can cover my horrendous debt load and also eat.



4. Figure out what is going on between me and Mark. Is he into me? Am I into him? (Obviously, yes!) I mean, inquiring minds want to know.
5. Finally, *finally* tell Angie the truth, no matter how hard it may be. (With any luck, Mark will be holding my hand the whole way.)

I circle and boldly underline my Life Plan, which I've scribbled on a legal pad in my cubby at *The Times* in lieu of editing my most recent column, a lukewarm review of a Japanese steakhouse by the airport.

*Why hasn't Trent called?* I wonder. Even though I'm disgusted with him, I was sort of looking forward to his dejected groveling. Sadly, it wasn't meant to be, I guess.

Or was it?

Since I replaced my phone, I've been getting so many unsolicited text messages—whoever had this number before me must've been a shopping addict who tracked department store sales via text alerts—that I sometimes go a whole day without checking them, just to spare my brain the stress of weeding through so much useless garbage. Maybe Trent's gushing apologies have drowned in the flood.

I decide to look, even though the move is lame. And after a few moments of intense skimming, I net a solitary post-breakup communiqué that reads:

YOU LEFT YOUR PILLOWS.  
SENDING THEM FEDEX.

He must be referring to the throw pillows I bought to spruce up his living room, though I don't know why he's zeroed in on those when I've abandoned a number of other possessions too. Regardless, I will accept the pillows and move on.

I delete the text.

Whew, that felt good! Now to rid myself of the other, oh, seventy or so annoying intrusions on my digital life. I get through roughly twenty of the messages before spotting a burst of a dozen consecutive texts from the same number, a number I recognize as belonging to the weirdo who called to warn me off Mark.

Great. What the hell could these be about? A smart person would delete them without looking, but . . .

MESSAGE #1  
ARE YOU DEAF OR STUPID?

This lovely sentiment, I assume, is in response to the fact that I have not followed the caller's advice (read: threat) and kept my distance from the father of my child. (Also, I assume that the caller—now messenger—has run out of lithium and is awaiting a refill from the pharmacy.)

MESSAGE #2

HE'S USING YOU. JUST SO YOU KNOW.

Um, this one gets under my skin a bit more, because technically it could be true. Although Mark has been a willing co-parent and a voracious sex partner, he has yet to propose any sort of romantic entanglement.

Should I go on, or will the messages just get more bizarre? I'm a glutton for punishment, it appears. . . .

MESSAGE #3

YOU SHOULD REPLACE THAT UGLY PUSH-UP BRA. IT'S FALLING APART.

Okay, now I'm freaked out. How the hell does this nutjob know about my unmentionables?! (And how dare she *mention* them?!)

That's it. I'm done reading. Whatever else this freak has to say can be expressed through an attorney in a court of law. Until then, she—whoever she is—does not exist. Of course, I should probably turn these gems over to the police, on the chance that this woman is actually dangerous. *If she contacts me again, I vow, I'll do something about it. Otherwise, I'll bury my head in the sand and pray not to suffocate.*

## Chapter 24

I emptied my bank account to pay Mom and Dad a month's rent, leaving me sixty-two dollars to my name until I either 1) rake in some sweet tips (I called Jimmy, and he put me on the schedule tonight at The Crowbar) or 2) get my next paycheck from *The Times*, which will be for the same paltry amount as ever, Sharon Fleming suddenly in no hurry to campaign for my promotion—if at all.

Ten feet away from The Crowbar, I get a stomach-churning déjà vu feeling that stops me in my tracks. Can I really do this? Can I, a self-respecting (sometimes, anyway) college graduate and up-and-coming journalist, sink so low as to mix drinks for the huddled masses in exchange for whatever meager crumbs of compensation they deign to flick my way?

Yes, I can. And I will do it with a smile. A smile that is painted on my face when I breeze into the bar, Jimmy's head snapping around at the sight of me. "Woo-hoo, she's back!" he exclaims with a big, fat teasing grin.

I take a goofy bow and, deadpan, say, "Hell hath frozen over." I scan the bar. "This place looks about the same, though."

He shrugs. "I like to keep it consistent for the regulars."

"The regular dust mites, you mean?" I ask, running a finger along the edge of the bar. "You should get someone to clean this."

"Hello, Someone."

Our jabbing repartee continues until a gorgeous, young blonde—who, I can't help noticing, is clad in The Crowbar's apron of choice—whips in between us. "Two Buds and a Corona," she barks at Jimmy, sliding a damp serving tray across the bar. "I'm cutting that dipshit in the farmer pants"—she means overalls, I realize, following her spiky glare—"off after this. If he gives me any shit, it's on you."

"Gee, thanks," says Jimmy. "My favorite." He fills the beer order, and the blonde goes back to work.

"Is that my replacement?" I ask.

“Chloe?” He chuckles. “She’s all right. Her Dad does the grounds at Fenway. You’ve probably seen him in here before: big guy, red hair, hilarious. Name’s Rick. Or Rob. Something like that.”

This ancestry lesson is fascinating, but . . . “Has anything changed around here that I should know about?” I ask, slipping past him for the back of the bar. I rummage through a battered cardboard box for a spare apron, which I might as well wear to match Chloe.

Jimmy twists his lips. “Kayla’s pregnant again.”

Not what I meant. “Wow, congrats,” I say, feeling gladder than ever that Jimmy and I didn’t sleep together. “Four kids, huh? That’s crazy.”

“Yeah, a little.”

“Boy or girl?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” he says, glancing at the clock. I know from experience that he’ll be rushing out of here within the next five minutes, so Kayla can make her night class at MassBay. “I’m hoping for a boy, though.”

We have a friendly argument over the merits of sons versus daughters, which ends in our agreeing to disagree. Then, right on cue, he heads out the door.

I spend the next two hours refamiliarizing myself with bartending—it’s amazing how fast I’ve forgotten how to shake up a Cosmopolitan or garnish a Bloody Mary—and getting to know Chloe, who turns out to be as sweet as she is snarky. (In fact, for the first time in a while, I’m feeling like I’ve met a kindred spirit, most of my high school and college friends having fallen by the wayside.)

And just when I’m getting the hang of things again . . .

In flits Dominique, the otherworldly manager of The Olive Branch, her hair a tornado of black silk, her skin as dewy as a tropical beach after a rainstorm. If it’s possible (and it shouldn’t be, in my opinion) she’s even more beautiful than before. She slides into a corner booth, pulls a compact out of her purse—which appears to be designer, like everything else about her—and applies a fresh coat of glossy red lipstick to her unnaturally plump lips.

For no reason whatsoever, I want to pour a drink over her head. (Am I really so immature? And jealous? I mean, so what if the father of my child has to spend twelve hours a day in the presence of such a physically blessed female specimen?)

The good news is that I’m not flying solo, meaning Chloe is in charge of taking The Goddess’s drink order (though I *will* be filling it). I watch with morbid fascination as Dominique turns the laminated drink menu over (and over and over again), her indecision emphasized by the puckering of her perfectly arched eyebrows.

Chloe leans into Dominique's orbit and points out a few contenders for Nectar of the Gods. In response, Dominique says something requiring a hair flip and a dismissive wave of her hand. (How I wish I had supersonic hearing right now!)

"What was that all about?" I ask, feigning disinterest as Chloe sidles back up to the bar.

She rolls her eyes. "She wanted a French Sunrise; I told her it wasn't on the menu. Can you make a Pink Margarita, though? And a Jack and Coke for her fiancé?"

Fiancé? Dominique is engaged? Something inside me breathes a sigh of relief; she's not interested in Mark, after all.

"Coming right up." I mix the drinks, and Chloe delivers them to a still-stag Dominique. During the ensuing lull, I steal away to the restroom. When I return, my eyes are assaulted by the stuff of nightmares. . . .

Kitty-corner to Dominique in that cozy booth sits Mark, looking relaxed and happy with the Jack and Coke clutched in his big, strong hand (a hand that has done unspeakable things to me!).

Fiancé?

*Fiancé?*

*FIANCÉ?*

I think I'm going to vomit. Scratch that. I *know* I'm going to vomit. But first I have to stop hyperventilating.

Chloe notices my distress—what gave it away, the blood draining from my face or the beads of sweat pooling on my forehead?—and asks, "Are you okay?"

Um, no.

"Sorry, but . . ." I say, my knees threatening to buckle. "I've gotta . . ." Without further ado, I rush for the backroom—specifically, to Kayla's smidge of an office, which rivals my cubby at *The Times*. Once I've barricaded the door, I give myself permission to totally lose it. I mean, I could scream bloody murder in here and no one would know. Or kick a hole through the wall (but then I'd have to reimburse Jimmy for the damage). Maybe I should clear a spot on the disheveled desk and bash my head repeatedly.

With a defeated sigh, I plunk down on a rolling chair, causing it to lurch backward into a dusty coat rack, which promptly tips over and knocks me on the temple.

Mission accomplished.

I shove the coat rack against a mountain of boxes, drop my face in my hands, and begin to cry. *Why would Mark do this to me?* I think. *How can I ever trust him again around Angie?*

Obviously, I can't. Because he's untrustworthy. Not that he owes me an explanation. (He doesn't.) I just wish he'd had the decency to 1) tell me he was in a serious, committed

relationship with an exotic Siren and 2) refrain from seducing me when he had no intention of making our relationship official.

A round of loud banging on the door ends my pity party. “Hey, Em, what’s going on?” Chloe’s concerned voice asks. “I need you out here.”

I ram enough boxes aside to open the door a crack. “I don’t feel good,” I say, peeking out at her. “Can’t you handle things?”

“Not really.” She huffs. “I’m the waitress, not the bartender. You want me to call Jimmy back in?”

The sad truth is, I can’t afford to lose the tips I might make tonight, let alone risk Jimmy rethinking my comeback. I wipe my dripping nose on the shoulder of my shirt (gross, I know) and say, “Gimme a minute. I’ll be right out.”

Even though the sight of Mark and Dominique gives me the feeling of maggots breeding in my stomach, I keep my word and resume my post behind the bar. And, for a while, I’m able to force my eyes to remain unfocused enough—I mean, the lighting in The Crowbar is pretty dim to start with, so it’s not that big a feat—to pretend that the lovebirds are any other random couple of no consequence to me. But then Dominique breezes past me for the restroom, and all bets are off.

I have no idea what I’m going to say when I storm up to Mark’s table, but that doesn’t stop me from doing it. (Hell, it doesn’t even slow me down!) “You lied to me,” I say, planting my hands on my hips as I halt in front of him.

“Emmaline? What are you doing here?”

I gesture at the apron. “I’ll let you figure it out, Don Juan.” If he hasn’t noticed my acid tongue yet, he’s sure to pick up on it now.

“You work here?”

“I should’ve told you,” I say, “so you would’ve known not to parade your fiancée in here.”

He stands up and whispers, “Can we talk somewhere?”

“I’m on the clock.”

“C’mon, Em.” His gaze flies to the restroom. “Just for a minute.”

“A minute?” I snort. “It’s gonna take a lot longer than that to—”

“Let’s step outside, okay?” He takes my arm and practically drags me—hey, why should I make it easy for him?!—toward the door. If Chloe notices, she doesn’t bother intervening.

“Oh my God, it’s freezing out here,” I say, hugging myself as we hit the alley. “Hurry up and say whatever it is you’ve got to say.”

He sighs. “Don’t be like that, Em.”

“Me? *ME?* I’m in the wrong?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Well, you’d better say *something*.”

Sounding frustrated, he asks, “What do you want to hear?”

There’s no way on earth I should cut him a break after what he’s done, but . . . “I thought you cared about me.”

His hand gropes for mine, and I get a flashback of Jimmy pressing me against the jagged brick wall behind us. “Do I care about you?” he asks incredulously, his fingers tracing gentle circles around my palm. “It’s more than that.”

Suddenly, I’m sure I love him. “I broke up with Trent.”

Softly, he says, “Oh.” Then we both go silent.

“I should get back,” I say. “Chloe’s new and”—I can’t bring myself to say Dominique’s name—“*someone* will be looking for you.”

“Can you meet me tomorrow? At the restaurant?”

Strictly speaking, I can. I mean, it’s physically possible. And my schedule would allow it. If I were smart, though . . . “What time?”

“Ten o’clock? Nikki’s got a dentist’s appointment.”

He calls her “Nikki”? Eew. I bet she bleaches her teeth. “I guess,” I say. “But only to talk about Angie. We need to figure out how to tell her the truth.”

“Agreed.”

## Chapter 25

I'm a block away from The Olive Branch—and seriously regretting my lack of a backbone—when the most obvious thing in the world hits me: Dominique is the caller/texter who has been (justifiably, as it turns out) warning me away from her betrothed. If I squint, I can almost see her gorgeous, French-manicured fingernails pecking out my phone number.

How ironic. And twisted. Now I can't even be mad, because, technically, I'm the other woman. All the more reason to put a period on my affair with Mark.

The blinds are drawn at the restaurant when I arrive, so I rap on the door and wait. One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi . . .

What is taking him so long to answer? I mean, I've arrived fashionably late to give Dominique enough time to vacate the premises.

I'm about to call it quits, write off the morning, and drown my sorrows in a cup of Turkish coffee—damn you, Sharon Fleming, for hooking me on that deliciously expensive stuff!—when the door glides open and, into the gap, steps Mark, who looks as if he's been up all night negotiating the release of a plane full of hostages. “What's going on?” I ask, following along as he scuffs through the dining room and into the kitchen.

Nice digs, I must say. Fresh and clean, down to the gigantic pot rack suspended from the ceiling. “Want some coffee?” he asks, reading my mind—and already filling a cup.

I rephrase my question. “What *happened* to you?”

He slides the cup across the counter and pours another. “Nikki. I told her everything last night.”

I can't help staring at his face—or the side of his neck, actually—which looks like it's been mauled by a dozen angry squirrels. “Did she scratch you?” I ask, the marks seeming to intensify as I study them. I notice what appear to be human teeth prints behind his ear. “And bite you?” Maybe they just had wild sex, and he doesn't want to hurt my feelings by telling me they've made up.

“She can be a little . . . *passionate* sometimes,” he says. “European girls are like that, I guess.”



Passionate? I'm back to picturing them doing the deed and getting a stomachache (me, not them). "Well, that looks kind of bad," I say, gesturing at his neck. "You should wash it with antibacterial soap or something."

He replies with a shrug, so I take matters into my own hands and rip a paper towel from the dispenser, lather it, and blot away at his neck. He humors me for a few seconds before hitting a nearby light switch, throwing us into semidarkness.

Coffees in hand, we shuffle through the swinging door and claim the first table outside the kitchen. He stares at me until I ask, "What did you mean about telling Dominique"—sorry, I can't bring myself to call her "Nikki"—"everything?"

"Just what I said." He drops his head in his hands and sighs. "I told her she could keep the ring, but it's over."

"Oh." (Hey, it's more of a consolation prize than I got from Trent, not that I would've accepted his Tiffany's bribe anyway.) "Won't that be pretty uncomfortable?" I ask. "With her working here and everything?"

He laughs sardonically. "For me. Nikki can do whatever she wants. Her family holds the mortgage on this place."

"I thought you owned the restaurant."

"If by 'owning' you mean I'm obligated to pay the LaChances thousands of dollars a month or lose this place, then—yeah—it's all mine."

My throat tightens. "Jeez, that's awful."

He squeezes my hand. "I don't want you worrying about this. Let me handle it, okay?"

I'm not sure how I could help anyway, since I'm flat broke and Mom and Dad aren't far behind. If I'd stayed with Trent, I probably could've convinced him to invest in the restaurant, but . . . "I hope you didn't do all of this because of me."

"It's not your fault," he claims.

"It sort of is," I say. "If I hadn't . . ." I'm at a loss for where to begin enumerating my culpability.

"This has been coming for a while," he assures me. "Nikki and I were never right. The move back to Boston was a last-ditch effort to salvage things."

Then why did they hook up in the first place, besides the obvious chance to combine two stellar—physically, at least—sets of DNA? "It was like that for me and Trent too," I say. "We just—I don't know—were too different, I guess. Plus, he's a man-whore." A look of concern comes over Mark's face, and I realize he's probably tallying the diseases he thinks he's

contracted from me via my ex-slimeball. “I never slept with him,” I rush to clarify. “Just so you know.”

This is where, in my silly romantic fantasy, he’d tell me that his relationship with Dominique never went past second base, which, in some guys’ books, would probably still justify a multiyear time investment. “Hey, you know what I was thinking?” he asks instead.

That we should get hitched, move to Hawaii, and open a luau restaurant on the beach, where Angie could serve as our barefooted, bronze-skinned assistant? “No, what?”

“Why don’t we have Angie’s birthday party here this weekend?”

I never told him Angie’s birthday was coming up; he must’ve done the math. “Um, I think my parents are planning something at the Museum of Science,” I say, cringing. “Sorry.”

“When?”

“Saturday morning. You’re welcome to come.”

“We could do it Sunday, then,” he suggests, pressing the offer. (Maybe he’s afraid that, by this time next year, Dominique will be running The Olive Branch.) “Make it a two-day event. What do you think?”

I think he has wormed his way into my heart and, if his eyes smolder just a tad more, he’ll be worming his way somewhere else very soon (assuming Dominique needs a root canal or some equally time-consuming brand of dental torture, that is). “Sounds great,” I say. “Count me in.”

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I love my parents. I do. But I’m beginning to question their sanity—or at least their communication skills.

“I thought you said we were having a party,” I complain as I put the finishing touches on Angie’s hair, which I’ve crafted into a lovely fishtail braid thanks to a step-by-step online tutorial, “not just going to the museum.”

Mom sighs, something she’s been doing almost nonstop since I moved back in. “I hate to say it, Emmaline, but you’re sounding a bit ungrateful. Angie loves the museum. What could be more celebratory than a day of fun and learning?”

How about cake, for starters? Maybe some balloons? A couple of guests outside of the immediate family? (Even Aunt GiGi would do!) Gimme *something* to work with here. I mean, I’m going to look like quite the idiot when Mark shows up for this nonexistent birthday party. “You’re right,” I say begrudgingly. “I’m sure it’ll be great.”

Angie admires her hair in the bathroom mirror and beams, giving me a flush of satisfaction. Even if she won't be wearing the frilly dress I've picked out (too impractical for "hiking from exhibit to exhibit," Mom informed me), she'll still feel beautiful on her special day.

"Where's *your* mermaid's tail, Emmawine?" Angie asks.

I laugh. "Um, good question." The truth is, I'd love to dress up in cheesy, matching mother-and-daughter outfits with her, but since we're still posing as sisters, the idea seems ridiculous. "I don't think I can reach," I say, groping at the back of my head. "See."

"Mom can do it," Angie suggests, "like you did to me."

Out of nowhere, Dad appears in the doorway. "Are you girls about done? The museum's only open 'til five, you know."

I feel the urge to point out that it's only ten thirty, and we're right on track to meet Mark at eleven. Instead, I lift Angie off the counter, where she's been perched for the last twenty minutes in optimal braiding position. "Sorry, sweetie, but we've gotta get going. Maybe next time, okay?"

She hugs my legs. "Awright."

Mom recaps a mascara wand, tosses a crumpled tissue in the trash, and shoos us out of the bathroom.

Eighteen minutes later, following a tense car ride during which I was grilled like a Fourth of July wiener about Mark (news flash: I don't know every last nitpicky detail about the guy; also, wasn't he a wonder boy in my parents' eyes when he stopped by a few weeks ago?) we arrive at the museum to find Mark leaning against the building and, once again, tapping away at his phone. (God, I hope Dominique isn't launching a desperate campaign to rekindle their engagement!)

My parents and Mark swap a few stiff pleasantries, and I get a lightning bolt of understanding: they liked him when he was my adversary, but now that we've teamed up, it's me and Mark versus Mom and Dad in a battle for Angie's affections.

So my parents are capable of petty jealousy too, huh? I'm almost happy to hear it, since that means I'm not alone in my pathetic Neanderthalness (though hopefully they'll keep their aggression in check, so Angie can have the happy birthday she deserves).

Or not.

"So, Mark," Dad says while we wait in line to pay our admission fees, "how is it that you can take a Saturday off from work for Angeline's birthday?"

"I'm going in later," Mark says, playing along. "Not much gets done around the place without me, I'm afraid."

I am compelled to come to his rescue. “You’re only open for dinner, though, right?” I ask, as if I don’t already know the answer. “Plus, you must have, like, prep people who come in early to get things ready, don’t you?”

He fights an eye roll. “That would be correct.”

Mom picks at Angie’s braid, unraveling a thick tendril of hair. “The restaurant business is tough,” she remarks. “I read somewhere that eighty percent of new restaurants fail within the first five years.”

Way to be positive, Mom. “Well, The Olive Branch is definitely in the other twenty percent,” I counter, hoping to close the subject of Mark’s livelihood, which may be in danger not from the whims of the eating public but from his vindictive ex and her deep-pocketed family. “You read my review in *The Times*, didn’t you? The food is amazing.”

In a clipped tone, Mom says, “I’m sure it is.”

We reach the front of the line, and Dad digs out his wallet. Before he can organize his cash, though, Mark slaps a platinum credit card down on the counter.

The testosterone war is under way too, huh? Fabulous.

I expect Mom to make a snide comment about credit card use, but she just grasps Angie’s hand and guides her toward the ticket-taking line. Once inside, we regroup by the restrooms. “We should use the facilities now,” Mom says, “so we don’t have to leave in the middle of a presentation.”

Mark and I profess our bladder emptiness and remain stubbornly planted outside the restrooms as Mom, Dad, and Angie enter. “Your parents are kind of intense,” Mark tells me, his forehead dotted (adorably, if you ask me) with stress sweat.

I smile, lean in, and give him a friendly kiss on the lips. “I missed you.”

“Mmm,” he responds, his tongue finding mine. “Me too.”

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The good news is that my parents are old(ish), and their well of passive-aggressive snarking is easily depleted. By the time we work our way to the dinosaur exhibit, the five of us are getting along as famously as a mob of meerkats.

“Whew, I’ve gotta take a load off,” Dad announces, wandering toward an unoccupied bench along the wall. (I hate to say it, but his heart—and, consequently, his stamina—ain’t what it used to be.) Mom shadows him, leaving Mark, Angie, and me to explore on our own.

As usual, the dinosaurs are awesome, especially the nearly intact and—holy cow!—*real* triceratops skeleton named Cliff, which, despite its relatively small size, puts even the T.

rexmodel to shame. “What’s that for?” Angie asks, cocking her head and nibbling on her pinkie, her wide eyes tracing Cliff’s gargantuan belly.

Mark leans over and, softly in her ear, says, “See those rods?” He points out the steel undercarriage mimicking the dinosaur’s anatomy. “Those are helping him stand up. He’s really old, you know.”

With a grin, Angie says, “Oh.”

We marvel at the dinosaurs for a good ten minutes, pausing to read the plaques and fantasize about what life would’ve been like if the amazing—and terrifying!—beasts had roamed among us, before rejoining Mom and Dad, who’ve caught their second wind.

At Dad’s suggestion, we proceed to the Audiokinetic Sculpture—a giant, encased conglomeration of rolling balls and spinning wheels and undulating pendulums overlooking The Charles River. The array is dizzying (seriously, I should’ve packed some Dramamine) but—thank God!—Mom soon checks her watch and informs us that the lightning show is about to begin.

As fast as Angie’s legs will go, we speed past the Apollo Command Module—why is that exhibit always so mobbed, anyway?—and enter the Theater of Electricity, where, surprisingly, we find enough vacant seats for all of us.

“Are you sure she can handle this?” I ask Mom about Angie. Last I knew, we were keeping her out of this particular show on the grounds that it was too loud and frightening.

“She’ll be fine,” Dad interjects. “Isn’t that right, Angeline?”

“I’m four years old now,” Angie declares.

“Okay,” I relent. “But if you get scared, just say so and we’ll leave. We don’t want the thunder hurting your ears.”

The theater continues to fill up, and the lights dim. A peppy, clear-voiced woman not much older than me begins the presentation with an easy-to-digest lesson on the Van de Graaff generator—the enormous, double-globed structure rising before us like the Great Pyramid of Giza—and, after donning a chunky pair of headphones (and warning us to plug our ears), treats us to a few appetite-whetting zaps of lightning.

The display is enthralling, and despite the slight grimace on Angie’s face, she seems to be enjoying it. I reach behind her and grab for Mark’s fingers, which are conveniently dangling in wait. We swap conspiratorial smiles as we tickle each other’s palms, the presentation getting away from us. Eventually, we tune back in, catching the lightning-safety demonstrations (spoiler alert: rubber is not as good an insulator as you’d expect) and, a little while later, the electrical-storm grand finale.

On our way to lunch at the aptly named Riverview Café, I stop and admire a gorgeous installation of food-themed photographs. “Maybe your work will be up here someday,” I tell Mark (meaning his art on a plate).

He shrugs. “You never know, I guess.”

Mom and Dad stay mum on the subject, opting to take the high road instead of trampling (any more than they already have, anyway) a young man’s dreams.

Blame it on the food critic in me, but lunch is mostly forgettable, except for the hunk of devil’s food cake we delight in watching Angie devour. “All right, what next?” I ask as we drift out of the café.

Angie tugs at my shirt. “I wanna do that,” she says, pointing at an area where a number of children are rushing a wide staircase, a cacophony of music erupting around them.

My brain draws a blank—I mean, what *are* those kids doing?—but then it dawns on me: the Soundstairs. Before I can answer, though . . . “Oh, that’s fun,” Dad says, grabbing Angie’s hand and marching off with her.

The rest of us follow along, arriving in time to watch Dad and Angie soft-shoe a composition sounding strikingly similar to a mallet skipping over a xylophone. (In fact, I bet there’s an *actual* xylophone under the stairs that’s triggered by each footstep.)

With Mom’s encouragement, Angie, Mark, and I stomp out a rousing rendition of what is supposed to be “Row, Row, Row Your Boat,” but ends up sounding more like a tone-deaf monkey bludgeoning a piano.

Once the humiliation is over, Mark pulls a folded map out of his pocket. “Wanna check out the Hall of Human Life next?” he asks. “Upstairs?”

“On the escalator?” Angie squeaks, her eyes twinkling. “In the sky?”

Mom brushes a wisp of hair out of Angie’s face and sighs. “She loves those things.”

“Maybe you’re going to be a pilot someday,” I suggest.

“Or a bird,” Dad says with a chuckle.

With Mark in the lead, we form an orderly line and traipse back into the museum (technically, the café and the Soundstairs are outside the entry gate), where we board the escalator and float toward the upper level, Dad hoisting Angie up for a primo—and mesmerizing, by the astonished look on her face—view.

No offense to Mark, but the Hall of Human Life is a bit advanced for Angie, the first stretch of exhibits appealing more to health-conscious yuppies than antsy four-year-olds (though, to be fair, we had a blast rearranging the internal organs of a plastic dummy). Still, we venture deeper into the hall and, after fighting our way through a bottleneck of museumgoers, land in front of an

exhibit Angie can appreciate: a brain-to-brain comparison of the grey matter of a turkey, a cat, a monkey, and a human.

“Oh, look!” I chirp, pointing at the cat’s brain, which is about the size and shape of a jumbo walnut. “It’s Snowball!” Dad and Angie crack up, but Mom just shakes her head. Mark, on the other hand, squints confusedly. “Angie’s got a kitten,” I explain. “Guess what color she is.”

I’m being facetious, and Mark knows better than to respond. Instead, he pulls the map out again and starts puzzling over it. “Uh, wait a minute,” he says, spinning around. “We missed the bees and the chicks.”

Sounds like a ‘50s rock band. “The bees and the chicks?”

He scratches his chin. “That must be what everyone’s doing over there,” he says, nodding at the cluster of bodies we’ve just plowed through.

“I think I’ll sit this one out,” Mom says with an unnecessarily panicked look. I mean, I know she’s allergic to bees, but I’m sure the museum isn’t going to let one sting her.

“Me too,” Dad says, and, without further ado, they stride for the exit.

I hug Angie to my hip, and Mark closes in on us. As a unit, we hobble over to the throng of spectators encircling what turns out to be a baby-chick incubator.

As soon as Angie glimpses the chicks, she spouts, “Ooh, ooh! Can I hold one?”

Her question goes unanswered as I wedge myself between two robust grandmas for a better view of the fuzzy critters, which are hopping and pecking around inside a plastic bin lined with sawdust. A second bin contains a couple of newly hatched chicks—still slimy and wobbly on their feet—and a number of eggs on deck to pop.

It’s our lucky day, too, because there’s a hatching in progress, which, according to the sign on the exhibit, may take up to twenty-four hours to complete (and is probably the source of all this curiosity).

“I can’t see,” Angie whines and, in short order, Mark has hoisted her onto his shoulders, making me grateful for Mom’s insistence on Angie wearing pants.

As cute as the hatchlings are, all eyes are on the egg, which is cracked and pulsating, when—oh my God!—a tiny wing punches out!

“Whoa!” someone shouts.

Followed by an ecstatic: “It’s coming!”

A third voice coaxes: “One more push!”

I’m no ornithologist, but the chances of this baby breaking free as we huddle around ogling it seem dubious, though such a turn of events would be a cool birthday present for Angie.

As if to prove me wrong, the egg shimmies and rocks, the wing flapping about erratically, the shell splitting in half. Through the gap, I spy a mass of gooey, matted feathers.

“It’s coming!” someone yells again. “Look, look!”

I steal a glance at Angie and Mark who, like everyone around us, are wearing the sort of awestruck smiles you’d expect to find on the faces of the chosen ones at the rapture.

Despite its encouraging start, the egg goes still for a while. A few observers slough off, allowing Mark to move in and press his delectably warm front to my eager back. And that’s how we stay—stuck together like happy pancakes—until, with a sudden burst of energy, the chick’s backside comes tumbling out, its head and feet still concealed by the shell, which remains hinged together only by a thin membrane.

“She’s pink!” someone squeals. “I can see her skin!”

I’m not entirely sure, but I swear I hear the chick cheeping as it squirms for freedom.

And squirm, it does. “Hooooly . . .” someone drawls.

“I see the beak!” reports another voice.

Then: “He’s coming! He’s coming!”

The chick kicks away the rest of its shell, revealing a pair of comically large feet and a dazed, exhausted-looking—and, yes, cheeping!—face.

There’s an extended and unanimous: “Aaaaaawww.”

In the rush of feel-good excitement, Mark whispers in my ear, “I love you.”

If I weren’t about to cry, I’d return the favor. Instead, I reach up and stroke his arm, hoping he knows that, from this moment forward, I can’t imagine my life with anyone but him.



## Chapter 26

“We’re gonna be late,” I tell Mom, who’s doing pirouettes around the kitchen searching for whatever last-minute supplies she thinks we need for the party. “Mark’s got everything under control. I promise.”

“Have you fed the cat, Emmaline?”

“Well, no. I’ve been busy getting Angie ready.” And, if I do say so myself, I’ve done even more of a bang-up job than yesterday, my daughter’s ringlet curls cascading down her back like a golden mane, her lacy fuchsia dress the perfect complement to her sparkling hazel eyes and irrepressible grin.

I shuffle through the cabinet where, last I knew, Snowball’s kibble was stored. “Where’d you put the cat food?” I ask. Mom directs me to a drawer beside the refrigerator, and Angie and I get the kitty fed and watered. “All set. Can we go now?”

Mom ends her frantic rummaging and joins Angie and me in the foyer, bags full of presents swinging from her arms like spider monkeys. An hour ago, Dad headed over to the restaurant to help Mark set up.

At the curb out front, Mom’s Subaru is loaded to the roof with advertising materials for one of her local clients. “We can take my car if you want,” I offer.

She has little choice but to accept, and soon we’re putt-putting away to what seems like something much more significant than a four-year-old’s birthday party.

*This is what it feels like to be a grownup, I realize. And a parent. To have the weight of another human being’s life on your shoulders.* The sad thing is, I haven’t felt that weight until just this moment, a sign that maybe I’m finally ready to be the mother Angie deserves.

The party is not a surprise, but once we finagle our way into a parking spot, I get the bright idea to blindfold Angie. Mom’s not quite on board with the plan—*what if she trips?* she asks with a sour face—but I overrule her and, using a slightly crumby (as in dotted with actual remnants of food) pair of used tights, cover Angie’s eyes, careful not to disturb too much of my hairdressing handiwork.

As it turns out, Mom’s fear isn’t so farfetched, and I end up rescuing Angie from destruction no fewer than four times on the short walk to The Olive Branch. “You first,” I tell Mom, holding

Angie back for her grand entrance. Mom forges ahead, too tired (yes, I'm wearing her down!) to argue.

Once she's disappeared inside, I lean over and whisper in Angie's ear, "Okay, we're here. Are you ready for presents and cake and games and loads of people who"—I gulp, overcome by emotion—"love you?"

She nods, the makeshift blindfold rubbing away some of the "special big-girl makeup" (in reality, a slight dusting of pale pink blush) I've allowed her to borrow from her big sister's stash, just for today.

I've been holding her hand since we exited the car, but now I give it a hopeful squeeze. "Well, let's go, then!"

Nothing could prepare me for the perfection awaiting us inside, Dad and Mark (with the help of a small army of magical elves, it appears) having transformed the main dining room into every little girl's glittery pink princess fantasy.

And the people! Who knew a last-minute e-vite could summon so many bright, shiny faces? (A quick scan of the crowd reveals not only Aunt GiGi, Dex, and Jung, but also Jimmy, Kayla, and their three boys—plus Fiona, Xander, and a bunch of other kids from Red Light, Green Light, all clustered around a buffet table doing arts and crafts.)

My heart swells with appreciation. When my gaze finds Mark (he's loitering by the kitchen, as if he's a neutral observer instead of the golden-hearted father of a soon-to-be ecstatic four-year-old), I shoot him a wide grin and mouth: thank you.

He nods humbly.

This is it, I guess. Let the festivities begin. "Hi, everyone," I say, feeling like Angie and I are onstage at The Oscars. "Thanks for coming to Angie's very special, awesomely fantastic fourth birthday party!" A bunch of cell phone cameras shoot up as I unfurl the tights and step aside to watch my daughter's reaction.

Joy. Sheer, unadulterated joy. And who could blame her? I mean, the Barbie tent city alone would make any girl (and quite a few boys) weep on sight, not to mention the four—count 'em, *four*—disco balls throwing funky light shadows everywhere.

A chorus of birthday wishes fills the air. Angie tucks her chin to her chest and snuggles against my hip. "It's all right," I assure her. I pat her head and raise her chin. "Don't be nervous." I point out a stack of colorfully wrapped gifts in the corner by the fireplace. "Look at all those presents. Those are for you."

My instincts are right: nothing distracts a child like the promise of copious amounts of stuff.

Out of nowhere, someone taps my shoulder. “Excuse me,” a woman’s voice says, “is there anyone to seat us?”

To seat her? “Um, who are you?” I respond, forgetting my manners.

She surveys the dining room and grimaces. “Oh, is this a private party?”

I glance over my shoulder, realizing that 1) I’ve left the door open to the public and 2) the public, including this woman and (presumably) her two grown daughters, has drifted in. “Sorry,” I say, frowning. I usher the trio back toward the door. “We don’t open until five o’clock. You’re welcome to come back then.”

Luckily, the interlopers are understanding, because I’m not in the mood to bounce their asses to the curb like I’ve had to do to a drunken loser at The Crowbar every now and then.

I secure the door behind them. When I turn back to the party, Angie is gone, and Mark has taken her place. “So, what do you think?” he asks, gesturing at the still-stunning transformation. “Pretty cool, huh?”

That might be the understatement of the century. I peck him on the cheek and ask, “How’d you pull this off, anyway?”

“It came to me in a dream.”

A giggle slips out of my mouth. “You’re joking, right?”

He hangs an arm around my waist. “Actually, no. Why do you think I suggested the party in the first place?”

“The kindness of your heart?”

“Obviously,” he says.

From the corner of my eye, I catch GiGi staring at us. “Have you met my aunt?” I ask, assuming introductions are in order.

“The tall one in the yellow bird hat?”

I’m so accustomed to GiGi’s zany style that the nest of parakeets atop her head has escaped my attention. “Yep, that’s her.”

“Nice lady.”

“I think she wants to see us,” I say.

Angie has fallen in step with her friends at the crafting table, where Mom, Kayla, and a few of the other mothers are huddled around supervising the cutting and pasting, freeing Mark and me to circulate as if we’re greeting guests at our wedding. (A freaky thought, but one that has crossed my mind far too often of late.)

For the better part of ten minutes, we endure a cringe-worthy conversation—come to think of it, it was really more of a monologue—with GiGi and her date, an overly sun-tanned veterinarian

who wouldn't let up with the dog-neutering anecdotes. (I swear to God, if my mind flashes on canine testicles one more time, I can't be held responsible for my actions!) Once we've extracted ourselves from the onslaught, I announce, "I'm starving."

Mark chuckles. "After that? You must have a stomach of steel." He leads the way to an alcove by the windows, where a table of homemade kiddie appetizers—French fries, pizza bites, the same kind of chicken fingers he unknowingly made for Angie on opening night—has been noticeably picked over.

I tuck a couple of fries and a pizza bite into a sparkly napkin and nibble them as we mosey to Angie's side. As the swell of mommies envelops us, I say, to no one in particular (though I'm hoping Mom will chime in here, so I'll feel less guilty about cutting her out of the birthday planning): "Should we do cake or presents first?"

Mom takes the bait and declares, "Presents."

At the same exact time—I mean, they couldn't've synchronized it better with a couple of Olympic-quality stopwatches—Mark says, "Cake."

Good grief.

"Um . . ." Let me ponder this for a moment. "Presents and then cake?" I say, giving Mom the win. (After all, it makes sense for the guests to be rewarded with a sugary treat once they're done *not* getting any gifts of their own. Plus, if Mark plans on being with me for the long haul—and I hope he does—he's going to have to get used to being disappointed every once in a while.)

Mom smirks, and Mark concedes with a nod. The three of us round up the kids, some of whom have meandered as far as Mark's pristine kitchen and are on the verge of creating a whirlwind of chaos. With the little demons corralled by the fire, Angie gets to work ripping through the tower of presents, barely slowing down to follow Mom's instructions and thank each gift giver before moving on to the next crinkly wrapper-and-bow combination.

Midway through the teardown, Angie hits an aluminum-foil-clad box bearing a roughly fashioned paper tag. "That's mine," Mark says, grinning. As casually as she's picked it up, though, Angie pushes the box aside and grabs a much larger gift that I recognize as being from me.

"What's she doing?" I say.

Mark's shoulders slump. "That's all right. She'll get to it."

Not before she opens—and gets wildly distracted by, I predict—the My Little Pony Exclusive Deluxe Playset I've purchased at Dad's suggestion. "True," I say, holding my breath and hoping that, for Mark's sake, Angie's reaction is muted.

It's not.

“Eeeee!!!!” she squeals, shredding the polka-dotted wrapping paper.

For the umpteenth time, Mom repeats, “What do we say, Angeline?”

“THANK YOU, EMMAWINE!!!”

“You’re welcome.”

Mark’s hand settles on my hip, and I lean into him. “Oh, here we go,” I say, the foil-wrapped box making an encore appearance. “She’s gonna open it this time, I think.”

Angie turns the package over and picks at the corner of the wrapping.

“Can you see?” Mark asks, his voice brimming with excitement.

We move a little closer. “Now I can.”

Angie gets the wrapping off and fights through the thin cardboard packaging, eventually revealing a silver filigree jewelry box. “Thank you”—she passes the aluminum foil to Mom, who studies the tag and cups her hand to Angie’s ear—“Mark?”

Well, she knows her father’s name, at least—even if Mom had to prompt her.

Mark takes a step forward. “Open it. There’s something inside.” Too impatient to wait, he’s drops down on the floor. “It goes like this,” he says, helping her unhinge the lid.

Angie’s eyes shine. “A bracelet?” She traces the silver links, stopping to pinch a topaz charm between her fingers. “Pretty.”

“It’s your birthstone,” Mark explains. He takes the bracelet in his hand and points out an engraved, heart-shaped pendant. “And see? Your initials are right here: A-B-W. Angeline Brooke Waters.”

I am stunned.

Mark hooks the bracelet around Angie’s wrist and, for some dorky reason, I start clapping. Thank God, everyone else follows along.

The last few presents are quickly unwrapped, and we gather around the special dessert table Mark (or one of his magical flunkies) has set up by the hostess stand to display a gorgeous two-tiered, pink-frosted cake bearing the traditional *Happy Birthday!* slogan. Encircling the cake are a dozen or so matching cupcakes that look like ray-gun-shrunk versions of the original.

“Should we dim the lights?” I ask, even though it’s the middle of the day, “to make it more festive?”

Mark fights an eye roll. “It’s your rodeo,” he says, shooting me a sultry grin. He ducks away, returning with a culinary torch that looks like a cross between a hair dryer and a handgun.

“You’re not lighting the candles with *that*, are you?” I ask.

He shrugs.

I knew he was too good to be true. “Isn’t that kind of . . . overkill?” Where the hell is my purse? I know there’s a lighter in there somewhere, even if I haven’t fired up a cigarette in a dog’s age. “Does anyone have a less *aggressive* means of getting these”—I wag a hand at the candles—“lit?”

Jung pops up beside me with a small disposable lighter. “Ah, thanks,” I say. It’s hard to believe that, after our history as roomies, Jung and I know so little about each other. (Like, does she smoke? If so, I never saw any evidence of it.) “Here goes,” I say, sparking the first of four tall, rainbow-colored candles—another good choice by Mark—to life.

Mom and Dad shuffle Angie into place in front of the cake. Again, a bunch of cell phone cameras shoot up. I progress to the second candle, the third, the fourth. Mark and I lock eyes and, in unison, begin singing “Happy Birthday.”

Everyone else joins in, and Angie lights up—not just from the candle glow, which is flashing warm shadows across her face, but from the love coursing through the room like a common heartbeat.

I am happy—truly happy—for the first time in my life, which is why I should’ve known to be on the lookout for Murphy’s Law. Instead, I remain blissfully unaware as we move into the second verse of the song, our voices soaring like rockets, until . . .

An abrupt squeal cuts through the air, bringing the singing to a halt. A crashing sound is punctuated by a feral yowl. My head snaps around, searching for the source of the noise.

*No fucking way. This is not happening.*

Unfortunately, though, it is—the “it” being my boyfriend’s (yes, I’m referring to Mark as my better half now) ex-fiancée, who has, if my eyes do not deceive me, donned a wedding gown and crashed my daughter’s birthday party on a bright pink Vespa.

The scooter is crumpled in a heap on the sidewalk, The Olive Branch’s front door splintered—but somehow still locked—Dominique screeching like a macaw, her blotchy, mascara-streaked face peeking out from under a disheveled veil as she pounds her forearms on the restaurant’s front window.

I shoot a desperate glance at Mark. “What do we do?”

Without bothering to ask why a psychotic supermodel-type has splattered herself at an innocent little girl’s birthday party, Dex, whom I haven’t spoken to since he stole my room in Dr. Jacobs’s garage, says, “I’ll talk to her. You guys keep”—his hands tumble encouragingly through the air—“going.”

Angie glances up at me, her eyes filling with tears. I pat her head and restart the singing, watching Dex from the corner of my eye as he slips outside and into Dominique’s warpath.

We manage to finish the song, and Angie puffs her cheeks full of air, extinguishing the candles with a single breath. A number of guests hoot and holler, drowning out the yelling—and distracting from the crazed gesticulating—that is continuing to spout from Dominique.

Remind me to award Dex a gold star for superior ass-saving ability.

“All right, everyone,” Mark says, waving toward the dining room. “If you’ll have a seat, I’ll get the cake ready and bring it over.” He grins at Angie. “You’ll want the slice with the most frosting, right?”

She bites her lip. “Yes, please.”

The partygoers amble back to their tables, and Mom pulls me aside. “What’s going on?” she asks, her head jerking at the door.

*Mark’s beautiful but deranged ex has decided to unleash her neuroses at the most inopportune time*, I could explain. Instead, I go with: “She used to work here.”

“And?”

“She’s upset.”

“Was she fired?”

“I’m not sure,” I respond truthfully. “But she doesn’t look too happy.”

Mom’s eyes narrow. “Do you think she needs medical attention?”

“Maybe. That’s why Dex is out there,” I say. “He’s in his next-to-last year of medical school, I think.”

Mom gets an impressed look she usually reserves for buttering up clients. “Is he?”

“Yup.”

“He’s very attractive,” she says out of nowhere. “I’ve always thought that.”

Always? As in the two times she’s met the guy? “Oh, yeah?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“He’s with Jung,” I say, hoping to put her dreams of a doctor son-in-law out of commission.

“Is that right?”

“Yup. True love,” I add, my response having the desired effect of making Mom speechless.

I shoot a final glance outside and am relieved to find that Dex has calmed Dominique, who is now swaying gently in his arms, her makeup smearing across the shoulder of his otherwise pristine white dress shirt.

Satisfied, Mom and I turn for the dining room. But we get only a couple of steps beyond the hostess stand before Mark hijacks us for cake delivery. As Mom teeters off with her arms loaded to the elbows, I ask, “What’s she”—meaning Dominique—“doing here?”

“Isn’t it self-explanatory?” says Mark.

I may regret asking this, but . . . “Is that the dress she was going to marry you in?”

“I don’t know,” he says. He licks a gob of frosting off his finger. “She wouldn’t let me see it. Bad luck and all that.”

I joke, “She’s gotten over that particular suspicion, huh?”

He fills my arms with cake. “I wish she’d leave. This is getting embarrassing. I don’t want Angie being upset.”

“Dex seems to have things under control,” I say confidently. “I’m sure that by the time we—”  
Oh, shit.

The attack doesn’t register in my peripheral vision until it’s too late, but a flash of dread on Mark’s face suggests he had a moment of advance warning, not nearly enough time to escape the flailing—and shrieking, let’s not forget that—cyclone of Bridezilla spinning our way.

I freeze.

Mark freezes.

Dex lunges after Dominique as if she’s a crazed Pit Bull whose leash he’s lost control of. In the distance, the dining room percolates with curiosity.

For a second, I imagine I’m the object of Dominique’s hysterical wrath, but she just barrels past me, knocking a couple of pieces of cake from my arms and smashing the rest into my blouse.

“Whajjafuggin do ah,” she spews in Mark’s face, her voice as gin soaked (years of bartending experience tell me that she’s hopped up on Lime Rickeys) as the drunken stink following her around like Pig-Pen’s dust cloud, “mahressarah!” She beats her chest, which, I can’t help noticing, is shoved up to her neck and popping out of the gown. (I mean, where was she planning on getting married? The Bunny Ranch?)

“Calm down,” Mark says in a soothing tone. He reaches for her arm, but she socks him in the mouth.

Maybe she’s not as drunk as I think she is, her accuracy leaps and bounds better than any barroom-brawling guy’s—or gal’s—I’ve ever seen. I brush the cake off my shirt and risk saying, “Cut it out.”

She ignores me.

Mark drags a thumb across his lip, whisking away a trickle of blood; meanwhile, a number of partygoers appear on the periphery of the scene wearing concerned looks.

Dominique lets fly another unintelligible tirade, hocks a loogie in Mark’s face, stomps on his foot, and dashes for the dining room. By the time Dex and I (Mark’s too busy hopping around and cursing to be of any help) catch up with her, she’s tipped over the crafting table, flattened all



of the Barbie tents, and hurled a few of Angie's gifts into the fire. And now she's honing in on my daughter's confused little face.

I am overcome by the urge to claw her (Dominique's, not Angie's) eyes out, but I restrain myself, lest I encourage her to escalate. Slowly, I weave my way to Angie's side. From the opposite direction, Dominique matches my movements step for step.

"C'mon, sweetie," I say, keeping my voice upbeat—and definitely not alarmist—as I nudge Angie from her seat. "There's a surprise for you in the kitchen."

Angie and I back away from the table, Mark materializing beside us as Protector-in-Chief, despite his swollen lip and obvious limp. He cradles me in one arm and Angie in the other.

This, apparently, is the last straw for Dominique. As an anxious posse of do-gooders—including Dad, GiGi's veterinarian friend, and a couple of the Red Light, Green Light moms—closes in on her, she bolts sideways between two tables, snagging her dress but not slowing down. With her hands outstretched—does she plan on strangling us?—she begins another mumbling rant, this time two words clearly audible: *mommy* and *daddy*. As in me and Mark. With the haughty sneer of a Salem witch accuser, she points from Mark to me to Angie, making it as clear as any drunken goddess could that we are a family, a fact to which she vehemently objects.

The assault keeps coming—loud, sarcastic, comically animated: *mommy, daddy, mommy, daddy, mommy, daddy!* But all I hear is *witch, witch, witch!*

I check Angie's face—I mean, there's a chance she won't grasp what's happening—but am gutted to find a look of sudden comprehension.

As Mark, Angie, and I are poised to slip through the kitchen door and barricade ourselves inside with fifty-pound bags of potatoes, Dad lands a grip on Dominique's arm, stopping her midstep. Behind him, Jung punches away at a cell phone, presumably dialing 911.

The image of a rabid dog melds with Dominique's face in my mind.

Angie starts to cry.

Mark bends down and kisses her gently on the forehead. "Shh," he says, drawing her in for a hug. She buries her face in his chest, and he strokes her hair. "It's all right." He shoots me an inside glance. "Everything is going to be okay."

## Epilogue

The police took Dominique to the drunk tank for the afternoon, and once the guests dispersed, Mark and I—and Mom and Dad, though they mostly hung back and let us handle things—sat Angie down and told her everything.

She took the news well, all things considered, which made me wonder if maybe, in some subconscious way, she'd known the truth all along.

That same day, the four of us adults agreed that Angie would be in charge (yes, I know, dangerous power to give a four-year-old!) of deciding with whom to spend her time: Mom and Dad? Me and Mark? One of us? None of us? It was all okay.

For a while, she kept things as they'd always been: seven days a week with Mom and Dad (though she transitioned quickly to calling them Nana and Papa). I stayed on at the brownstone too, to give her the chance to know me as a mother, a process she seemed to relish as she tested me with all sorts of naughty—and some nice—behavior, just to watch me squirm.

Six weeks later, after a particularly enjoyable outing to the skating rink (Mark, Angie, and I have made this our regular thing, at least for the winter months), Angie had an emotional breakthrough—or a Freudian slip, depending on your point of view—and told Mark, “I love you, Daddy.” Only days earlier, I had been the lucky recipient of the mommy version of this heart-rending statement, so I knew exactly why his eyes pooled with tears.

By the time spring came, most of the drama with The Olive Branch had been sorted out. (In exchange for not pressing charges against Dominique—and she was facing a slew of them, including assault and battery on Mark—her family agreed to hold the note on the restaurant and, more importantly, keep Dominique in check back in France.) As a result, Mark transformed into an even more relaxed guy than he'd already been, opening the door for a bona fide relationship (not just sex this time, but trust and respect and serious feelings!) to bloom between us in a way I'd never thought possible, no matter what I'd secretly dreamed.

Moving in together was Mark's idea, around eight months post-Dominique. Even though the Trent catastrophe should've made me balk, I felt absolutely zero hesitation. I knew he would be good to me—and to Angie.

So I left the brownstone.

Angie visited us first for an afternoon, then for a weekend. Eventually, she brought Snowball along and never took her home. (The cat was a canary in the coal mine, I realized; if we could prove ourselves with her, maybe we could take care of Angie too.)

The canary survived, and soon Mark and I were sharing parenting duties fifty-fifty with Mom and Dad. (Medical appointments? Me and Mark. Anything school related? Mom's sovereign territory. Dad was the fun-and-games guy in this New World Order.)

I didn't want to push any harder, because things were about as close to perfect as I could imagine. But as the summer drew to a close, Dad's heart developed another hiccup, landing him in the hospital for a week and putting Angie in the sunny yellow bedroom we'd been busily redecorating.

During this time, preschool started back up again, and Angie slipped into an easy routine of checkered skirts, peanut butter sandwiches, and afternoon carpool. Mark and I talked—passionately and frequently—about her moving in with us for good; it just seemed right, like the sun rising and setting and rising again.

But we didn't want to step on Mom or Dad's toes.

So Snowball got bigger—and fatter.

Angie lost a tooth.

The Olive Branch began serving lunch.

Thanksgiving came and went, and no one made a peep about Angie returning to the brownstone. It was encouraging. And terrifying.

At Christmas, I held my breath. Mark did a lot of nervous talking. Angie was happier than I'd ever seen her before.

I sensed that Mom and Dad had made peace with the way things were, though they weren't ready to put that acceptance into words, let alone draft the legal paperwork required to officially transfer Angie into Mark's and my custody.

Then came the new year and, with it, a new willingness to move on. Mom and I had a teary-eyed heart-to-heart—I couldn't thank her enough for what she and Dad had done—and Dad took the subtle (but profound) step of boxing up all but a few of Angie's possessions and carting them over to our apartment.

The papers were filed, and life fell into a predictable rhythm. Mom expanded her business; Dad expanded his gardening skills; Mitch Heywood expanded my column space; and love expanded my heart.

## ALSO BY MAGGIE BLOOM

The Mrs.

Emmaline & Mark's story continues . . .  
sneak preview next page →

*and*

Any Red-Blooded Girl

Film at Eleven

Good Luck, Fatty?!

Love Over Matter

# The Mrs.

by

Maggie Bloom

Emmaline Waters has (almost) everything she never knew she wanted:

1. a supercool (if low paying) food-critic gig for the *Boston Sunday Times*, a job that could—fingers crossed!—launch her career into the stratosphere and beyond
2. an adorable (if moody) seven-year-old daughter, with whom she’s finally hit cruising altitude after a bumpy parenting takeoff
3. a sexy, doting (if slightly work-obsessed) boyfriend, who just so happens to be the father of her once-upon-a-time secret love child

To complete the package, Emmaline only needs a ring on her finger. But a skeleton in her boyfriend’s closet (or, well, a skeleton-like French bombshell known as his crazy ex) has other plans. . . .

## Chapter 1

It's amazing how long a girl can spend in a jewelry store on a Tuesday afternoon. Alone. Gazing fondly at engagement rings.

"Would you like to try that one?" asks an exceptionally patient saleswoman, as I nibble my pinkie down to the bone in front of yet another rambling glass case. She motions at a ring with a pear-shaped solitaire stone. "It'd be great on you."

I know she's only buttering me up for a sale, but I can't help myself. "Um, okay," I reply with a shrug. I mean, why not? It's not like I'm actually going to buy the thing.

She fumbles with a tiny key, gets it stuck in the lock and frowns. "Jeez, I wish they'd oil these things once in a while. You wouldn't believe how often . . ." She twists the key with both hands and . . .

*Snap!*

The universe is trying to tell me something, I fear. "Oops," I say, my hand covering my mouth.

She picks at the stub of the key. "Oh, heavens. That's not good," she says, waving at the next case over. "Maybe we should look at something else?"

My exit cue is flashing like a neon sign. "Um, I have to get back to work," I lie. "But my boyfriend has Saturday off. Maybe we can come back then." Forget the fact that said boyfriend hasn't the slightest inkling of my desire for lifelong wedded bliss. I smile reassuringly and, to seal the deal, ask, "Do you have a business card?"

Every three feet across the maze of countertops are sparkling silver business-card holders, making my question as transparent as the 3-D rectangle of glass between us. "The more I think about it," she says, ignoring my inquiry, "*that* ring"—the pear-shaped one, I assume she means—"wasn't right for you at all. You're a princess, if I ever saw one."

Me? A princess? That *does* sound right.

I follow along as she sashays to the princess case—I'm feeling rather royal already!—and gingerly turns a backup key. This time the lock pops open, allowing the security panel to glide away and her hand to drift inside. Like a mechanical claw, her fingers snap shut around my prize.

"Here we go," she says, projecting a *Good Housekeeping* cover-model smile. She slips the quite large (and way-out-of-my-price-range) ring over her finger and models it for me. "What do you think?"

"It's beautiful," I drone, unable to play it cool like a financially savvy consumer would. She offers me the ring and, with a flutter in my stomach, I slide it into place, my ears whooshing.

Mrs. Mark Loffel.

Mrs.

Mark.

Loffel.

If I could hear right now, these three words would be tumbling around in my brain like a drunken hamster.

The saleswoman holds an expectant pose. "So . . . ?"

Again, my emotions betray me. "I love it," I gush, tears spilling into my eyes. "It's perfect."

With a nod of agreement, she locks the case, the ring still fixed on my finger. "We have the matching bands over here, for you and the lucky groom," she says.

Groom? Mark hasn't even popped the question yet. "Actually, um, I think I should wait until my boyfriend . . ." I try tugging the ring off my finger, but—egads—it's stuck!

The saleswoman, who has a gleaming chrome nametag pinned to her blouse identifying her as "Imogene," pretends not to see my face morph from white to red to green at the thought of having my finger amputated (worst-case scenario) so that a giant diamond-mining corporation can rake in a tidy—I glance at the price tag jutting between my fingers—\$5,000?! from my obvious emotional insecurity.

Slyly, Imogene says, "He hasn't done it yet, has he?"

"Excuse me?"

She looks both pitying and hopeful. "Proposed."

"We've talked about it," I answer vaguely, which is technically true. Mark and I *have* discussed marriage, like when Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie tied the knot, and I said something like: "Wow, it's about time, huh?" And he responded with a resounding: "If you say so."

Imogene leans over the counter, and I try (inconspicuously, I swear!) lapping my finger, in hopes of loosening the sparkly bauble that has started to feel more like an orange jumpsuit than a symbol of eternal love. "*You* should ask *him*," she tells me in a reverent whisper. "After all, it's the twenty-first century now."

She can't be serious. *I* should propose to *Mark*? How desperate does she think I am? I give the ring a forceful twist. "I wouldn't want to steal his thunder," I say. "For all I know, he's planning something already. Maybe he's just waiting for the right time to do it."

Please, God, let this be true. Not just for me but for our darling daughter, Angie, who deserves a mommy and daddy bound together in every way possible, including legally.

"Yeah, maybe," Imogene replies, sounding iffy on the idea. "The nicest young man was in here this morning." She looks me up and down. "He was about your age, I'd say. Tall, rugged, with the kind of soft puppy-dog eyes that melt your heart."

She's telling me this why? "Okay . . ."

"He picked out that exact ring," she informs me, nodding at my hand, from which I've given up on trying to remove the offending jewelry. "That's some lucky lady, wouldn't you say?"

“Well, I’m sure *my* boyfriend . . .” I begin in a tone that, even to me, sounds defensive.

She flaps a hand through the air. “You’re right,” she says. “Your boyfriend probably has something fabulous arranged: a Times Square flash mob; a horse-drawn carriage through Bourbon Street; hot-air ballooning over the Sierra Nevada. . . .”

“Do people really do that stuff?” I ask.

“It depends on the couple.” She shrugs. “If you ask me, though, a simple, heartfelt proposal beats the razzle-dazzle every time. And if you don’t mind my saying so, you seem like just the right kind of person to pull off something sweet and thoughtful.”

“Really? I mean, thanks. I’ve always considered myself sort of a romantic.”

“See!” She slaps a hand on the counter. “What did I tell you?” she says, quickstepping for another case. She opens it and snatches out the most spectacular set of diamond wedding bands I’ve ever seen.

“Oh my God,” I say, my mouth gaping. “Those are unbelievable.”

“They go quite nicely with that,” she says, hawking my hand. “Don’t you think?”

My head is too full of chirping bluebirds and squirrel seamstresses to do anything resembling thinking at the moment. “Do you offer financing?” I find myself asking. “Or, like, a layaway plan?”

Her face flashes from pleasant, helpful professional to jackpot winner. (If I could read minds, I’m sure I’d catch a vision of her lounging on a tropical beach with a fruity umbrella drink.) “As a matter of fact, we do!”

At cheetah speed, my new best friend pulls together the financing paperwork and, in a blur of psychosis, I debit a five-hundred-dollar deposit and agree to fork over another five hundred per month for the next eighteen months, which I definitely cannot afford.

Yet I feel fantastic! Jubilant! On top of the world! “Erm, I’m going to need that back,” Imogene tells me, referring to the ring, which has yet to leave my finger and really doesn’t want to now that it’s mine.

“It won’t come off,” I admit sheepishly. “I tried to move it, but . . .”

“Oh, don’t worry,” she says. She ducks down and rifles through a low cupboard, popping back up with a tube of something called Orange Goop. She squeezes a mound of the stuff onto a paper towel and gestures for my hand.

“Is that, um, safe?” I ask. “Because my skin is sort of sensitive.”

She grimaces in a way that says I’ve worn out my welcome, a convenient turn of events considering that I’ve already swiped five hundred big ones from my bank account. “It’ll be fine,” she assures me. “This happens all the time.”

I have little choice but to turn over my hand, which she’s aggressively massaging with the Orange Goop, when . . .

Shit!

Mark saunters past the jewelry store on his way to . . . the food court, maybe? “That’s good!” I blurt, yanking my hand from her grasp. “I’m sure it’ll come off now.” I give the ring a sharp pull and—hallelujah!—it releases.



With the ring safely in Imogene's possession, I beat a hasty retreat, my hand still dripping with Orange Goop, my heart juddering around in my chest.

What I should do now is exit the building, burn the financing contract Imogene shoved in my bag on the way out the door and scour the Internet for get-rich-quick schemes that are more get rich quick than scheme-y.

But something is nagging at me, namely: Why is Mark cruising the mall, instead of hard at work behind the grill at The Olive Branch?

*I trust him*, I tell myself, trying to force my feet off his trail. *I do*.

So why am I traipsing after his rapidly vanishing silhouette?

One word: insecurity. And now that I've stalked him all the way to the cusp of—dat-da-da-da—the food court, I'm committed to seeing that insecurity through.

As I conceal myself behind a cluster of garbage cans, it dawns on me what Mark is doing here: ice cream. Truth be told, he's addicted to the stuff, especially anything from Ben & Jerry's, which just so happens to have a storefront across the way.

Yet . . .

He breezes past the ice cream stand and—please, God, let me be seeing things!—takes a seat across from a raven-haired beauty who, from my obstructed viewpoint, bears an uncanny resemblance to his ex-fiancée, Dominique.

But it can't be her, because (1) Dominique is thirty-five hundred miles away, clear across the Atlantic Ocean and (2) Mark would never keep something so monumental from me.

I watch transfixed as the woman greets him with a cordial handshake (definitely not a Dominique move) and then flips her hair flirtatiously (a Dominique trademark). Ugh. Can't this woman have to pee or something, making it necessary for her to pass my hiding spot?

Apparently not.

The woman reaches into a zebra-printed tote bag, withdraws some papers and sets them on the table in front of Mark. As she sips on what looks like a red-berry smoothie, I begin inching my way toward the scene of the crime. *Click. Clack. Click. Clack. Click. Clack.* Why the hell do my heels suddenly sound like ball-peen hammers? I switch to scuffing along—sort of sideways, with my head turned, in case Mark spots me—my peripheral vision scanning for the slightest hint of anything Dominique-esque (or a foggy clue as to why the father of my child is meeting a gorgeous stranger behind my back).

I'm almost at the right angle to solve the mystery, when my purse erupts with the *Pink Panther* ringtone my darling daughter has selected for my phone.

*Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.* Mark *cannot* catch me here, skulking around in the bushes—or, well, behind a bank of grungy garbage cans—stalking him like a psychotic . . .

I snatch the phone out of my purse and gasp, "Hello?" Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Mark looking up as I turn away.

Phew! I outfoxed him!

"Emmaline?" my boss's far-too-recognizable voice says in my ear.

“Yes, um, yeah,” I respond, scuttling out of the food court with a number of nosy eyes boring into me. “What’s up?”

Mitch sounds slightly less irritated than usual when he asks, “Where are you?”

Who does he think he is, the leisure police? “Just running some errands,” I say.

“Can you stop by the office?”

I check my watch and realize that—ugh—my built-in excuse (namely Angie’s many social engagements and after-school activities) is a bust for the next few hours, Mom and Dad having swept her off for dinner and a movie. “Sure,” I agree, my curiosity piqued. Since my fifteen minutes of fame expired, Mitch has hardly acknowledged my existence. And don’t get me started on my other boss, Sharon “Wonder Woman” Fleming, who promised me a promotion at the height of my notoriety and then never so much as mentioned the idea again. If I had any self-worth at all, I’d quit the food-critic gig at *The Times* and—I don’t know—start an organic farm or something. “How about twenty minutes?” I say.

“That’ll be fine.”

MAGGIE BLOOM grew up in the ‘80s, under the influence of acid-washed jeans, hair bands, leg warmers, and John Hughes films. She resides in coastal Maine with her family (and the world’s smartest cat, Twinkle). Visit her at <https://maggiebloomwrites.wordpress.com>.